Populism and the Will of the People: how Mathematics shows Populism to be **meaningless**

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Motivation and argument

In recent years, populists across many countries have claimed to represent the 'true' will of the people. They argue that only they know what this will is, and that no one else, particularly so-called morally corrupt elites, ought to have a right to offer a political alternative. Using mathematical and logical arguments from social choice theory, I show that this claim I call 'moral populism' is **meaningless**.

Two notions of 'populist democracy'

To do so, I compare two differently motivated notions of populism, due to i. Riker (1982), a pioneer in applying social choice theory to the study of democracy and ii. Müller (2016), a contemporary democratic theorist.

i. **Aggregative populism:** government by the will of the people which is revealed through aggregating individual preferences in society.
ii. **Moral populism:** representation of the 'true' - i.e. anti-elitist, morally pure - will of the people.

To clarify, what 'the will of the people' means, I pose two questions:

i. **Ontological question:** does the 'will of the people' *exist*?
ii. **Epistemological question:** if it exists, do we *know* what it is?

Both notions depend on the notion of the 'will of the people', but a group of mathematical results show that the will of the people may either (i) not exist or (ii) may be hard, if not impossible, to discover in most real-world political situations.

1. Condorcet's Paradox: rational man, irrational society

Suppose three voters can vote for three parties - Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats - and rank these parties in order of preference as follows (specific parties are for illustration, they could be replaced by *x, y, z*):

Voter 1: Conservative ≻ Labour ≻ Liberal Democrats
Voter 2: Labour ≻ Liberal Democrats ≻ Conservative
Voter 3: Liberal Democrats ≻ Conservative ≻ Labour

We use majority rule: one option beats another option if a majority, i.e. in this case at minimum two people, prefer it to that option. Society 'has a preference' for one option if a majority prefers that option to the other options.

We see that Conservative beats Labour, Labour beats Lib Dem, Lib Dem beats Conservative, and so no option beats any other two! The social preference is *cyclical:*

Conservative ≻ Labour ≻ Liberal Democrats ≻ Conservative [...].

It should be visible that it is not at all clear which party society prefers. This problem was first noted by 18th century mathematician Nicolas de Condorcet. It suggested that, despite all individuals having clearly defined 'rational' preferences over the parties, society's preference could be random and thus be 'irrational'.

2. Arrow's theorem

If there are more than two options from which voters can choose, no democratic voting rule mutually satisfies the five axioms of the theorem. Granted that all axioms are intuitive criteria any democratic voting rule should satisfy, we cannot guarantee that the social preference is 'rational', and thus that the will of the people is clearly defined.

Meaningless populist democracy

If, on the basis of these arguments, we accept that for most political decision situations the will of the people is meaningless, aggregative populism must be a meaningless democratic ideal since it crucially depends on voting revealing the general will. Further, this argument entails a rejection of moral populism: crudely put, if the general will does not exist, we cannot identify any kind of 'true', morally pure, will of the people. It seems that both notions of populism are meaningless, and thus that any form of democracy that relies on the will of the people is unfounded.

Deliberative democracy: a defence of the will of the people and aggregative populism

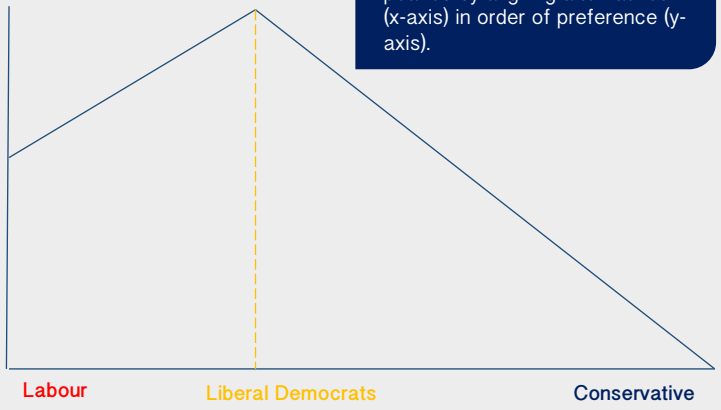
List et al. (2013), however, show that there is an 'escape-route' out of Arrow's theorem that can defend the general will as a meaningful democratic concept.

If a sufficiently large fraction of individual preferences are single-peaked, meaning the alternatives can be ranked according to one peak, from, say, an ideological left to right scale (see graph to the right), no cycles can occur, and thus the social preference is rational.

Empirically, List et al. have shown that under certain institutional conditions **deliberation** among voters can induce *'meta-agreement'*, a shared understanding of the *structure* of the alternatives, leading to proximity to single-peakedness, and therewith a higher probability of a rational social preference and a *defined* will of the people.

Therefore: aggregative populism is meaningful if preference aggregation, preceded by deliberation, successfully reveals the general will.

The graph shows how a voter's preference profile can be single-peaked by aligning alternatives (x-axis) in order of preference (y-axis).



Moral populism is *truly* meaningless

Note, however, that moral populism precludes any form of constructive deliberation by claiming that only populists know what the 'true' general will is.

Therefore, while aggregative populism can potentially be meaningful if deliberation induces single-peakedness, moral populism *must* (unconditionally) be meaningless because it depends on a logically unfounded notion of the 'true' will of the people. Moral populism is **truly meaningless!**