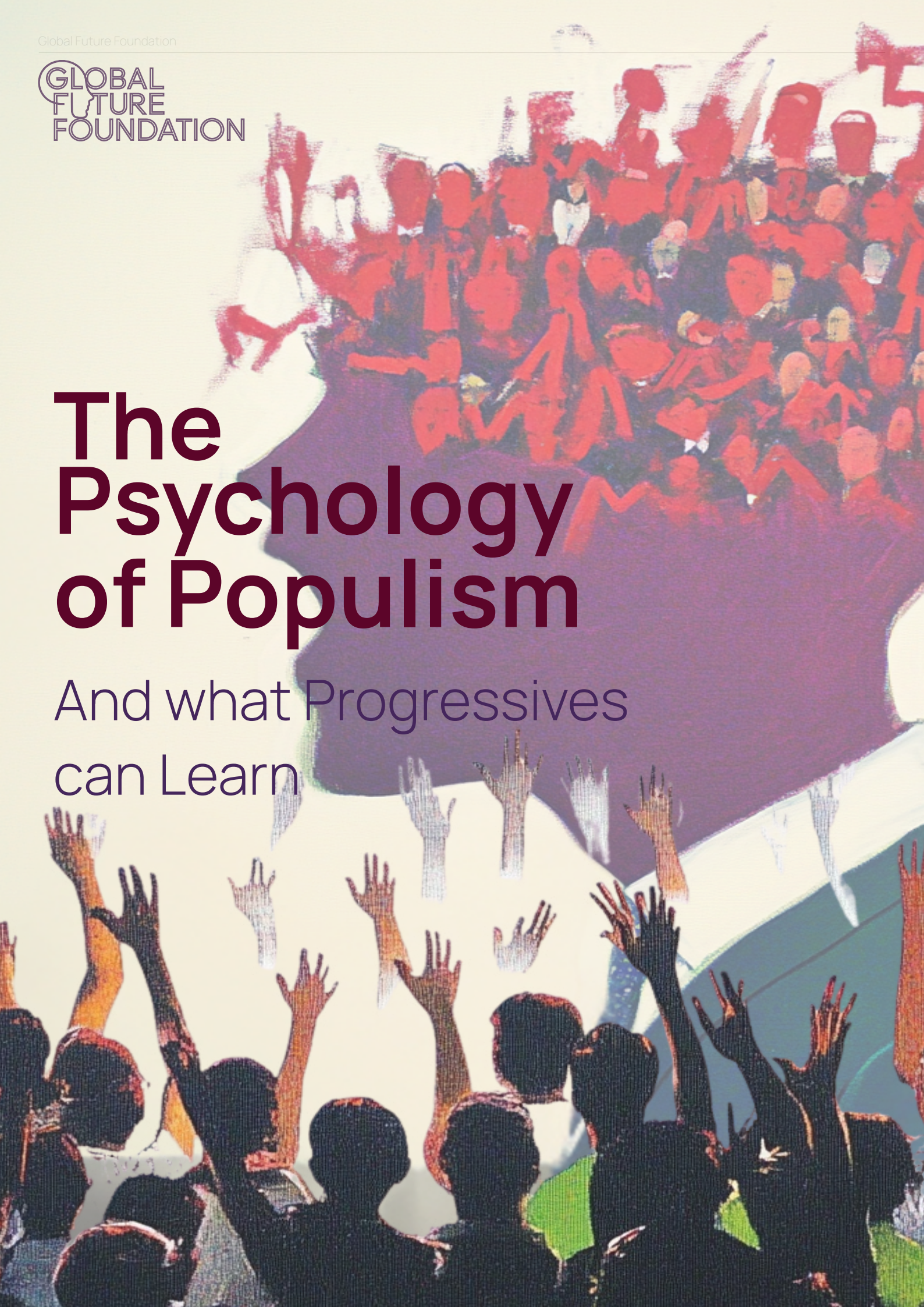


The Psychology of Populism

And what Progressives
can Learn



About Us

Global Future is a think tank dedicated to using psychology to provide fearless and original insight into the challenges of our times. We aim to guide leaders – from businesses to politics, arts and civil society – to ask bigger, deeper questions about how we can best serve our communities.

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The Foundation is supported by Global Future Partners, which is a consulting firm advising organisations on Purpose Driven Culture Change, Leadership and Talent.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Global Future Partners for their insights and support with this report.

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Foreword

Jovan Owusu-Nepaul

Parliamentary Candidate for Labour against
Nigel Farage in 2024

I've seen how frustration, distrust and political shortcomings have shaped the political landscape. I saw that first hand in Clacton. The constituency that elected the populist Reform UK leader, Nigel Farage to Parliament.

Despite the febrile atmosphere we're in, the rise of right-wing populism is not inevitable. To confront it we must first understand why people are drawn to these movements - and this report does exactly that, providing the insights needed to re-engage people in progressive politics.

Populism is no longer a fringe phenomenon; we are in a period of its renaissance. From surprising electoral wins in the US and Europe, to the rise of Reform in the UK, over the past decade far-right populism has had a profound impact on public and political life.

This emergence is dangerous. Primarily because populism rests upon an oppositional discourse. It fuels division and distrust - misdirecting anger towards those in power and framing our neighbours as 'other'. It is deepening social fragmentation, driving polarisation, and eroding our politics.

Thomas Paine, quite eloquently put it - government 'is altogether a trust, in right of those by whom that trust is delegated, and by whom it is always resumable. It has of itself no rights; they are altogether duties.'

So, for those of us committed to fairness, equality and openness, the task is not only to oppose far-right populism - but to understand it. Only by grasping why so many are drawn to these parties, and addressing the root causes, can we



build a movement that represents the people.

Indeed, there are real and legitimate reasons why people want change. Why people are tired of the status quo. Of feeling overlooked or looked down upon by those in the deemed 'political elite'. Therefore, what we need is a politics that addresses people's needs - both the material and the emotional.

This doesn't mean repeating populist rhetoric. We won't beat them by becoming them. Because those who share their values will always choose the real deal. And more than that, because their appeal lies not in the truth of their policies but the tone of their promises.

That is where this report offers a timely intervention, examining how populism appeals to people's emotional instincts and offering lessons for progressive leaders to connect with voters' psychological needs. It argues that to address the widespread frustration and anger, we need leaders who can provide narratives of hope, belonging and pride.

Moreover, we need leaders who do not speak in abstract terms, but make people feel seen. Who reach out and communicate their messages simply, with emotion and empathy. Who can be trusted as authentic representatives.

In this climate of uncertainty, we need progressive leaders to neither look left or right. But rather to look forward, leading the people - with confidence, compassion and conviction.

Introduction

This report examines the psychological appeal of populism, exploring how its core narratives tap into voters' emotional needs and cognitive biases. Here, we take in turn six key populist framings including: anti-establishment and anti-immigration rhetoric, patriotism, nostalgia, authenticity and emotion-oriented messaging. Bringing insights from our team of expert psychologists and leadership consultants, we draw together psychological theory and political research to examine how each of these discursive framings are used to inspire support, and in each section offer practical recommendations to help progressive leaders craft more compelling narratives.

The Rising Tide of Populism

Populism is, almost by definition, popular. But that popularity is growing. From the US to the UK, from Argentina to India – right-wing populist movements have been gaining traction across the globe¹. Recent studies have examined these emerging trends and across the board research shows that inequality is a driving force – with income inequality² and perceived social status³ being strong predictors of support for populist parties. Further, one study finds that a one-unit rise in the Gini coefficient (a standard measure of inequality) increases support for demagogues by 1%⁴, while another shows that austerity boosts

support for the radical right in economically vulnerable regions⁵. Against a backdrop of rising inequality and economic stagnation, the surge of populism is perhaps unsurprising. Indeed, it's clear that tackling inequality is a foundational part of resisting populism. But we also know that economics isn't the only thing determining the changing political tides. To understand (and ultimately counter) the rise of right-wing populism, we need to understand what the movement is 'getting right', we need to appreciate – at a psychological level, why populist messaging resonates with so many voters.

Defining populism

Populism is a movement that cannot be singularly defined⁶, in-part because it does not conform to a traditional left-right political spectrum⁷. That being said, this report will focus on right-wing populism, as it represents the fastest growing movement – with populist radical right parties ranking among the top three political forces in one-third of European countries⁸.

In essence, this populism may be best understood as a strategic discursive framing that pits the virtuous masses against the malevolent elites^{9, 10}. It is defined by a relentless claim to represent and defend the 'common people' against the corrupt, self-interested in power¹¹.

1. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-Understanding-Global-Rise-of-Populism.pdf>

2. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2021.1981981#abstract>

3. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0147596724000052>

4. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2021.1981981>

5. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.12865>

6. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/trump-populism-le-pen/523491/>

7. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12768>

8. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02685809241297547>

9. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populism-persistent-republicanism-and-declinism-an-empirical-analysis-of-populism-as-a-thin-ideology/ADC5EA1FE232EA07018D6CA2E277FCA2>

10. <https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/populists-power-around-world>

11. <https://counterpoint.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Responding-to-Populist-Rhetoric-A-Guide.pdf>

The psychological appeal of populist framings

Populist framings are psychologically appealing, because they offer people a sense of pride and belonging. Populism provides the structure for a compelling story, allowing supporters to see themselves as part of 'the people' fighting to preserve what is good from the corrupt elite and perceived outsiders¹².

Numerous studies have found that these framings are particularly appealing to those who feel socially and economically marginalised. In the UK, support for Reform peaks among voters who rate their life satisfaction as 0 out of 10. Reform supporters are also the most likely group to say they feel disconnected from society¹³. More broadly, those drawn to right-wing populist narratives tend to be those with weaker ties to the job market¹⁴, those who feel resentful of the establishment, who feel excluded from the benefits of globalisation^{15, 16}.

Indeed, in a world that promises to be meritocratic but cannot be defined as such – those who have not succeeded in meritocratic terms not only feel socially marginalised and left behind, but also deceived, disparaged and disregarded. In this way, populism offers important psychological reassurance, it offers an explanation for personal setbacks that preserve people's self-worth. Here, Markovits argues that 'populism has to be seen not simply as a spontaneous eruption of malevolent resentment,

but as a natural and even apt reaction to extreme meritocratic inequality – in status as well as in material wellbeing'¹⁷.

The problem, and an important thing to note here – is that while populist leaders promise to be of the people and for the people, historic analysis shows that their policies often result in worse material outcomes for the majority¹⁸.

Despite this track record, populist framings remain compelling because they offer psychological reassurance and reward. Even when policies fail to improve people's lives, populism can still make supporters feel relatively better off. By reinforcing in-group versus out-group distinctions, populist discourse creates the sense that "our side" is winning – even if overall conditions stagnate or decline. Henri Tajfel's influential studies of Nazi populism in Germany illustrate this dynamic: finding that people derive satisfaction not only from their own progress, but also from seeing their group fare better than others¹⁹. In this way, populism sustains support by delivering relative status and reassurance, by using emotionally charged language that harnesses affect and strikes a chord with disillusioned voters²⁰.

12. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12768>

13. <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/p3wlq2v0/from-protest-to-power-mic-ukice.pdf>

14. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329329344_Who_are_the_losers_of_the_economic_crisis_Explaining_the_vote_for_rightwing_populist_parties_in_Europe_after_the_Great_Recession

15. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/psychologylse/2022/05/03/the-psychology-of-populism-why-are-europe-and-the-west-moving-to-the-right/>

16. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0010414021997175>

17. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/working-paper/meritocracy-and-its-problems/>

18. <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/kiel-focus/the-economic-consequences-of-populism/>

19. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/apr/16/the-sinister-psychology-at-the-heart-of-populism>

20. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32674061/>

The dangers of populist rhetoric

While representing 'the people', is a longstanding virtue of the liberal tradition, the concern with populist rhetoric is that it relies on a divisive Manichean worldview that pits 'the people' – vertically against the 'political elite' and horizontally against so-defined 'outsiders'²¹. This oppositional discourse is dangerous because it undermines social cohesion and trust.

The difficulty is, there are valid reasons to feel distrustful of the elite. We live in a society marked by inequality and exploitation. There are systems that have failed 'the people', that should be held to account. In fact, challenging exploitative systems and corrupt elites should be a core part of democracy – whether it's holding tech giants or oligarchs to account, or leading public enquiries about scandal, corruption or misconduct – resistance is healthy. The danger of populism therefore lies not in mobilising anger, but in directing generalized anger towards all political institutions designed to maintain democratic order. The problem comes when populist leaders scapegoat 'outsiders' for their personal political gain. Here, what progressive leaders need to do is resist generalized oppositional framings and replace blanket distrust with legitimate criticism. Further, they need to pursue policies that do not divide communities, but bring people up and bring people together.

Resisting populism and representing the people

With this report, we identify six core populist framings – analysing how these narratives appeal to people's psychological tendencies. In each of these sections, we offer associated 'lessons' to help progressive leaders build more resonant, compelling campaigns. We believe that to effectively challenge populism, progressive leaders must engage with voters' psychological and moral senses. This means hearing people's frustrations, holding power to account where appropriate, and healing the forces that divide us.

Here, it's important to clarify that engaging with the psychology of populism does not mean repeating its message or adopting its policies. Experience across Europe shows that when mainstream parties have attempted to borrow from hard-right rhetoric – from Austria to the UK to the Netherlands – the result has not been to win voters back, but to legitimise and normalise a dangerous discourse. Once these ideas are mainstreamed, those sympathetic to them tend to turn to the 'real deal'. As Jean-Marie Le Pen observed nearly fifty years ago, 'people prefer the original over the copy'.²² The task, then, is not mimicry but distinction: offering a hopeful, credible alternative that speaks to people's deeper psychological needs without reinforcing the forces we seek to resist.

21. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352250X20301056>

22. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jun/04/dont-blame-voters-for-a-far-right-surge-in-europe-blame-the-far-rights-mainstream-copycats>

Section 1: (Re)direct Reactance

Framing

Populists tell a simple yet powerful story: the establishment is corrupt; the elite are out of touch and bent on exploiting pure, hard working people. Politicians, political parties and traditional media institutions are collectively condemned as a force working to protect one-another at the expense of 'the people'. In this framing, the populists are the underdogs, the outsiders come to expose the truth and save the oppressed masses.

This message resonates particularly with communities that have faced economic hardship and social neglect. In this way, Andrés Rodríguez-Pose describes the rise of populism as 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' explaining that it is inhabitants of places that have suffered long-term economic and industrial decline, often alongside employment and demographic losses who are voting to express their discontent, resentment and anger with a system that they feel offers them no future²³. Logically, it is these groups, that are drawn toward anti-establishments narratives, to simple promises of removing corruption and restoring prosperity to the people.

Psychological appeal

Reactance theory - which explains people's psychological desire to resist perceived threats from above - might help to explain the

popularity of this anti-establishment rhetoric. When populists claim that 'the establishment' - meaning mainstream media, politicians or intellectuals - are trying to silence them, it activates a powerful emotional response of defiance. The more voices in the mainstream media push back, the more supporters double down, feeling as if they are resisting a controlling elite.

Reactance theory explains why counterstrategies, like fact-checking, so often backfire- it comes across as patronising, as if the elite need to 'correct' people's beliefs. When people then believe their views are under attack, they feel resentful, clinging more fiercely to their beliefs, using confirmation bias to reject information that contradicts their worldview. Populist leaders harness these biases, framing themselves as the underdogs - fighting against the oppressor, fighting for the people and the truth.

Lessons

Firstly, to disarm people's tendency for reactance, the 'political elite' should **be more open to critique and reform**. Our institutions are not perfect, there are examples of inefficiency, mis-spending and corruption. Being defensive of the status quo where people

23. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/273989/1/1821249542.pdf>

see fault, will only fuel reactance. Instead, politicians would do well to approach critiques with transparency, honesty and openness. This authenticity will not only reduce reactance and win votes but allow 'the establishment' to improve – restoring faith in democracy.

Another approach is to **humanise 'the establishment'**. While populists paint an image of all-powerful, oppressive and monolithic institutions, political institutions are made up of people. Here, politicians would do well to show face and speak to people directly – as we know, while people may hate politicians, they tend to love their own MP.

Further, it would help to **ensure politicians actually represent a microcosm of society**. It's much easier to view 'the elites' as a distant, self-serving class when they look fundamentally different from you. To rebuild trust in institutions and leaders, we must encourage and support a far more diverse range of people – across race, class, gender, age and background – to become politicians. When leadership reflects the diversity of the nation, the narrative of a separate, self-interested elite becomes harder to sustain.

Simultaneously, responding to people's reactive instinct, politicians would do well to **give people a fair and appropriate enemy to fight against**. People, especially those who are struggling, want someone to blame. The problem is political institutions are not the enemy. 'The enemies' driving exploitation and inequality are the billionaires, the tech giants and the oligarchs. To harness reactance, leaders on the left should unite people behind these figures who are already widely resented.

Finally, while populist leaders like to present themselves as the underdogs or outsiders, come to rid the establishment of corruption, the left would do well to **hold up the mirror**. There is significant evidence of corruption surrounding many populist parties. Trump is closely allied with the world's richest man – Elon Musk, and investigative watchdogs have found significant evidence of corruption in his past and present presidencies²⁴. Additionally, Reform UK receives two thirds of its funding from multi-millionaires²⁵. Both are associated with corruption scandals. If there is a psychological appetite for reactance against corruption, progressive leaders should redirect attention towards the populist elite.

24. <https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/crew-is-tracking-trumps-unprecedented-corruption-again/>

25. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/69620/who-funds-reform>

Section 2: Restore Control

Framing

Within the Manichean framing of populist discourse, the country's 'true people' are often juxtaposed with the 'other', the 'outsider'... the immigrant. The resonance of these narratives has seen immigration become one of the most salient political issues, dominating elections in the US, the UK and across Europe²⁶.

To cultivate this anti-immigration sentiment, populists tend to use alarmist language. They paint the nation as the 'home' and the migrant as the unwelcome intruder, fortifying the in-group as distinct from the out-group. Here, they use powerful metaphors that denote a state of emergency, that describe an out-of-control natural disaster, a 'flood', 'wave', or 'swarm' of migrants coming to 'invade' the nation. This image of environmental catastrophe brings-up feelings of fear and insecurity that reinforce anti-immigration sentiments^{27, 28}.

Accordingly, research shows that when people lack a sense of personal agency – perhaps due to economic decline, social fragmentation or political uncertainty – they become more inclined to rely on compensatory mechanisms that promise order in an uncertain world²⁹. Here, by framing the borders as 'out of control', and promising to 'take back control', populists create a psychologically compelling narrative, tapping into people's primal fear of disorder.

We can see these processes in action in the UK, where the channel crossing has become a potent symbol for anti-immigration rhetoric. Despite the fact that only a tiny fraction of migrants arrive this way, the image of small boats landing on British shores evokes a vivid sense of crisis. Ultimately, by repeatedly referring to the invasion of 'small boats'³⁰, populists strengthen the neural association between migration and chaos – harnessing anxiety and playing on the human desire for control.

Psychological appeal

At their core, anti-immigration framings tap into the psychological need for control. Indeed, humans have an instinctive, evolutionary tendency to seek certainty and have influence over their environment.

Lessons

Progressives must do more to **resist 'crisis' language**. Primarily, adopting alarmist anti-immigration rhetoric is likely to backfire. It will alienate core progressive voters and is unlikely to win over those who staunchly oppose

26. <https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/51684-eurotrack-publics-across-western-europe-are-unhappy-with-immigration>

27. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jan/09/elon-musk-donald-trump-usa-bully-on-loose?utm_source=instagramstories&utm_campaign=guardian_igstories&fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAaZbLY1CcyLHjzG4XhGyjfMK9nWhYzlpbMgbG8M4HkokStujWovNBwH_WF8_aem_4Y1YMQYNw-4Y-8M2M2clMg

28. <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/453962/doppelganger-by-klein-naomi/9781802061956>

29. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18605849/>

30. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches-invasion-rhetoric-and-the-anti-asylum-discourse-in-boriss-britain>

immigration, who will see it as weaker and less authentic than the populist 'real deal'³¹. Further, co-opting crisis language or allowing populists to frame the narrative risks normalising harmful rhetoric. Instead, progressives should shape their own principled policy agenda that addresses concerns with competence and fairness rather than reactionary fear.

processing and fairly enforcing the law – leaders can avoid inflammatory rhetoric and demonstrate that the system is working. One option, might be for leaders to introduce a target number for immigration. Where people consistently overestimate migration numbers, even a fairly high cap may seem reasonable, and provide the craved sense of control.

Progressives should focus on **fostering a sense of control**. As a recent More in Common poll recently found – Reform supporters' concerns about immigration are primarily about sensing a lack of control³². On this, psychological research on the importance of control shows that people are willing to endure greater pain or discomfort if they believe they are in control³³. This evidence is given not to suggest that migration can be compared to physical pain (in fact studies consistently show that migration has a net-positive net impact on the economy), but to demonstrate the importance of agency. Indeed, where public 'concern' over immigration doesn't track actual levels of immigration, but aligns almost exactly with tabloid media coverage of immigration, we can appreciate the primary importance of framing and language³⁴. People's anxieties and discomforts are more about a lost sense of control, than the actual numbers of arrivals.

With this in mind, we urge progressives to use calm, measured **language and outline clear policies that restore a sense of agency**. By setting realistic and achievable migration targets, establishing safe and legal routes for arrival, improving the efficiency of asylum

31. https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/104640/1/FES_FINAL.pdf

32. <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/p3wlq2v0/from-protest-to-power-mic-ukice.pdf>

33. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17079679/>

34. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/patrick-galey-8158b01b_your-regular-reminder-that-public-concern-activity-7369687625038860288-vYIV?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAAB8dg9lBbiMNvpD5xopShBYLONbNziSA1hQ

Section 3:

Patriotism and Pride

Framing:

Populism is a nationalistic and patriotic discourse. This patriotism is powerful, primarily because it brings people together. Psychologically, it unites people by delineating clear boundaries between us and them, between the in-group and the outgroup. Further, populist discourses are compelling because they define 'the people' as 'the repositories of soul of the nation', and create an important sense of place and pride³⁵.

In this way, populist leaders play to the strings of national pride, mobilising people around campaigns to put your country 'first'. Indeed, populism is widely understood as a movement that seeks to prioritise the interests and concerns of the national group first, against what it perceives as a neglectful and distant elite. In periods of sustained national decline this framing is particularly appealing to communities that feel left behind, who want leaders to invest at home before turning abroad. Further, this framing is particularly attractive in the context of globalisation where people's sense of national identity and belonging has deteriorated. Where globalisation and unrestrained neoliberalism are considered to have eroded traditional values, serving the interests of the elites while creating more instability and danger for the masses, populism's patriotic framing provides a narrative of collective greatness. Here, patriotism offers a powerful antidote to the uncertainty and dislocation of the modern world.

Psychological appeal:

Humans are inherently social beings, wired to seek connection and belonging, and nothing offers collective identity quite like the nation.

Broadly, patriotism is emotionally appealing because it taps into people's primal desire to belong. Patriotism creates a 'we' that makes people feel good. In this way, while populist calls to 'the people' may appear generic, it is powerfully unifying because it taps into our psychological desire for a positive identity to coalesce around³⁶. Here, patriotism addresses the basic desire to feel like we are part of something that is larger than ourselves.

Further, the need for attachment and safety in groups is deeply ingrained in our psychology. In this way, Bader suggests that people are drawn toward the nation like children are drawn toward the family – because both provide a sense of security and attachment³⁷. Accordingly, at an individual level, patriotism has the strongest pull for individuals who feel isolated and insecure³⁸. Those who are less able to base their ego on things they have attained are more inclined to seek their identity or self worth in collective affiliations like their religious or national identity. With this, patriotic identity offers a psychological refuge – a way to feel anchored and empowered in the face of social dislocation.

35. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-Understanding-Global-Rise-of-Populism.pdf>

36. https://www.routledge.com/The-Psychology-of-Populism-The-Tribal-Challenge-to-Liberal-Democracy/Forgas-Crano-Fiedler/p/book/9780367523817?srsltid=Afm-BOoofdIU65gYw_8dVeeEnxy5PrQ9bhNkQH5vucJYN0U-Qs0e0_oLe

37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20442088>

38. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/out-the-darkness/202012/the-psychology-nationalism>

Lessons:

The worry with patriotism, is that establishing the 'us' often becomes entangled with diminishing the 'them'. The challenge for progressive leaders lies in creating **a message which says, 'we are good and strong', without implying 'they are lesser than us'**. Indeed, it is important that leaders put their country, and their people first, it's what they are elected to do. But this should not mean putting others down, it cannot become part of a rhetoric that devalues the rights or lives of others. Leaders should promote British interests and celebrate British pride in a way that does not infringe on the protection of others, that acknowledges the value and strength of international collaboration.

Rather than abandoning patriotism, progressive leaders need to **reclaim and reframe the idea of 'the nation'**³⁹. This is possible, because nations are simply 'imagined communities'⁴⁰. Indeed, patriotism can be an open identity that welcomes others. Nations can be reimagined as diverse spaces that unite people with a shared civic identity. Indeed, this may be a more apt description of patriotism in a world defined by global migration – in a world where people have multiple identities and may be simultaneously patriotic of their national heritage and the nation in which they live. And, there is appetite for this-

a recent survey found that more people now take an inclusive approach to who can call themselves British. A majority have a primarily 'civic', inclusive understanding of British identity⁴¹.

Ultimately, leaders, particularly those on the left, need to re-embrace patriotism⁴². Rather than swerving the subject, leaders should **galvanise pride around British values and institutions, around British diversity and cultural richness**. Here, we might learn some things from the Cool Britannia campaign of the late 90s and early 2010s, where the government drove investment in the arts to boost a celebration of British culture. We can think back to the story told by Danny Boyle at London's 2012 Olympic opening ceremony⁴³ - which emphasized that the strength and beauty of Britain lie in the ordinary people, in the melting pot of cultural diversity. Further, we can think of the recent example - where British artists led a campaign to reclaim the St George's flag with a message of inclusivity, responding to the unwelcome message of 'raise the colours'. It's time for more such campaigns that celebrate and champion all of Britain's cultural richness.

39. <https://jacobin.com/2024/09/patriotism-left-wing-nationalist-politics>

40. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Imagined-Communities-Benedict-Anderson/dp/B0028LE6MW>

41. <https://natcen.ac.uk/news/more-people-now-take-inclusive-approach-who-can-call-themselves-british>

42. <https://www.middleburycampus.com/article/2024/10/its-time-for-the-left-to-re-embrace-patriotism>

43. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/jul/16/danny-boyle-2012-london-olympic-opening-ceremony-feelgood-factor>

Section 4: Nostalgia

Framing

Populists generally like to reminisce on times of the past. By evoking rose-tinted memories of safer, more prosperous times, populists effectively draw in disenchanted voters who feel we are living in a period of decline. These nostalgic narratives can be heard in calls to 'Make America Great Again', or 'To Take Back Control'. Indeed, in these now iconic phrases, we can see how right-wing populists position themselves as the last defenders of the nation's fading greatness, promising to restore an unruined picture of the past in the future to come⁴⁴.

Further, at a time where there has been a growing movement, compelling countries in the West to repent for their history of colonial exploitation, populists give people a reason not to feel shame. In the context of 'postcolonial' melancholia populist leaders reassure people that they can feel proud of their country's culture, history and tradition⁴⁵.

By offering the return to a 'paradise lost', they play into widespread nostalgia, providing reasons for hope and pride in the face of disillusionment.

Psychological Appeal

These nostalgic messages resonate, because they tap into the psychological principle of loss aversion – the tendency for people to feel the

emotional impact of a loss much more intensely than the joy of an equivalent gain. Rooted in evolutionary survival mechanisms, loss aversion compels us to avoid risk and protect what we already have⁴⁶. This makes the idea of a lost golden age particularly potent. When populists describe the present as a period of decline and deterioration, they emphasize the loss of something once proud and precious. The emotional sting of this perceived loss makes the promise of restoration all the more appealing.

Simultaneously, by contrasting the precarious and potentially perilous present with the prosperous past, populists capture the human tendency to look back through rose-tinted glasses. Indeed, nostalgia is effective because when we think about the past, to prioritise emotional recovery our brains tend to filter out or downplay negative experiences, while preserving positive or meaningful moments more vividly.

Finally, our minds are chemically attuned to nostalgic retrospection. When we reflect on good times of the past it releases dopamine, it is comforting and pleasurable⁴⁷. This mechanism is built into our biology, because positive reminiscing can build our emotional resilience, the reminders of good times and connections helped our ancestors continue through challenging and uncertain times⁴⁸. With this, when people are forced to compare their visceral experience of the present struggles with the mythologized memories of better times, it's unsurprising that they are drawn to the past.

44. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629822000221#fn10>

45. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629822000221#bib17>

46. <https://excen.gsu.edu/fur2012/fullpapers/mlevy.pdf>

47. <https://www.apa.org/topics/mental-health/nostalgia-boosts-well-being>

48. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4927028/>

Lessons

While our memories of the past may not always be accurate, they are clearly compelling. Indeed, whilst we should be cautious to gloss over the importance of honestly recounting the problems of history, **there is nothing intrinsically wrong with harnessing nostalgia**. In fact, when used thoughtfully, it can be a powerful tool for inspiring hope and driving positive change.

Here, progressives might **mobilise nostalgia to build support for specific policy-changes**. Movements to protect British values and democratic institutions might inspire pride around Britain's historic role forging the pillars of democracy⁴⁹. Drives to reinvest in public services might highlight the deterioration brought by austerity and inspire British pride about the virtue of the NHS.

While the left often looks to the future, without reference to the past their visions can feel abstract. To resonate more deeply, **progressive leaders should root their visions in emotionally powerful traditions from Britain's own history**. Here, leaders might look to the Levelers, the Chartists or the resistance movement to the enclosure of common land. Each of these movements stood for fairness, community and democracy – values that progressives still champions today.

The Labour party's policy framing – 'To get Britain's future back' is on the right track⁵⁰, but progressive leaders could do more to focus political campaigns around nostalgic messaging, drawing on examples of 'better times' to inspire change. Where populism is on the rise – fragmenting and polarizing society – **there's no shortage of better times to draw on**.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly – to resist the impulse of nostalgia progressive leaders need to implement policies that deliver real change, that **improve people's material circumstances at present**. If, for example – the economy is growing, the cost of living crisis is subsiding or NHS wait times are going down – people will see better times as something in the future, not something of the past. If people feel like they're on the up, like things around them improving, they won't be so attracted by nostalgic messages.

49. <https://medium.com/@darkenergyarticles/the-magna-carta-forging-the-pillars-of-democracy-and-english-history-208b6c500b65>

50. <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/10-labour-policies-to-change-britain/>

Section 5: Simple and Authentic

Framing

Populists succeed, in part, because they sound human. Distinct from the sterile and scripted tone of traditional politics – they tend to use simple conversational language. In a world where people are constantly confronted with complexity, they are comforted by populist promises to ‘tell it like it is’. When the world feels chaotic and unstable – to avoid the psychological weight of uncertainty – people are drawn to those who claim to have the answers⁵¹. In this way, simplicity is compelling because it makes the world feel understandable and safe.

Additionally, where simple messages are delivered with clarity and conviction, populist leaders are seen as authentic, winning the attention and trust of voters⁵². Here, Fische argued that authenticity is the ‘secret element of populism’ – it is a tool used to reinforce their Manichean view that casts the political elite as untrustworthy, while aligning themselves as ‘at one’ with the people. Further, at a time where over three quarters of the public report low or no trust in MPs⁵³ – and where distrustful citizens are especially drawn to perceived authenticity⁵⁴, the political value of appearing authentic becomes strikingly clear.

Psychological appeal

Psychological research confirms humans’ innate preference for simple explanations. A study across several experiments found that when presented with both simple and complex explanations, participants consistently found the simpler options more satisfying⁵⁵. Additionally, our minds are drawn to definitive unambiguous answers that provide cognitive closure⁵⁶. Populists harness this bias, using clear, decisive language that makes the world feel understandable.

As sociable beings that want to trust others – we are psychologically drawn to authenticity. Here, there are various cues we look for when judging if someone is authentic⁵⁷.

Primarily we tend to read consistency as a sign of authenticity – of someone being true to their ‘inner self’. Authentic leaders are seen as those who remain committed to their principles, despite criticism or changing public opinion. For instance, Farage’s belief in Brexit appears authentic as he has remained unwavering in spite of clear evidence of its detrimental impacts and despite the fact that a majority now agree it was wrong for the UK to leave the EU⁵⁸. While people may no longer like the policy, they feel they can trust him. Meanwhile, people have become cautious of Starmer who has, for

51. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/pops.12768>

52. <https://eufactcheck.eu/blogpost/populism-unpacked-why-simple-messages-thrive-in-complex-times/>

53. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PB-0066/POST-PB-0066.pdf>

54. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0032321720928257>

55. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39378788/>

56. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1996-01742-003>

57. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19401612231221802>

58. <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/51484-how-do-britons-feel-about-brexit-five-years-on>

example, alienated many voters by failing to take a firm or clear position on issues such as Israel-Palestine⁵⁹. Ultimately, when people think they don't know what you stand for, they lose faith in your leadership.

Secondly, people see spontaneity and imperfection as markers of authenticity, providing a glimpse of the persons' true and unfiltered self. Here, mistakes and slip ups can make leaders appear more human, more relatable. Indeed, Trump – whose tweets are notorious for their erratic nature and spelling

mistakes – reinforces this belief, telling voters they can't know a candidate's real personality if they're reading from a script.

Lastly, performances of ordinariness are often used to cultivate authenticity, as people tend to trust those who seem like them. Here we've seen leaders trying to mirror everyday life – whether it's Trump serving food at McDonald's or Farage photographed drinking pints at the pub. These staged moments of 'normality' are strategically employed to help leaders (who are anything but ordinary) appear authentic and relatable.

Lessons

Progressive leaders must learn to be incisive, to cut through complex issues and **communicate their messages in ways that are simple and directly relevant to individuals**. For example, while leaders should draw on detailed analysis, they need to communicate their policies in everyday terms. Rather than talking in terms of abstract theory, leaders should – for example – relate their policies to people having more money to pay rent or buy groceries. It is paramount that leaders are able to talk to 'the people' in a way that conveys principles in material terms that speak directly to people's needs.

To re-establish trust and authenticity, progressive leaders must campaign with **consistency and conviction, staying true to their core principles and policies**. Research shows there is significant risk in parroting the politics of other parties – it erodes credibility rather than broadening appeal. Further, in times of uncertainty, people look for clarity and strength, not caution. Leaders who appear

hesitant or overly reactive to the public mood lose trust quickly. Here, progressives can find strength in consistent commitment to long-held values of fairness, inclusion, and opportunity for all. Because authenticity – and trust – come to those who communicate clearly, confidently, and consistently about what they stand for. What's more, where support for populism thrives when people feel like the mainstream parties are 'all the same', progressive leaders need to be bold – and commit to progressive values that remain broadly popular.

Further, progressive leaders should be careful to **cut the jargon and provide answers that feel authentic and honest**. When politicians use excessively complicated language, it can fuel the belief that they are intentionally obscuring some truth. People value authenticity and want to feel that politicians are being honest. People do not want manicured or robotic leaders; they want a leader that is open about their flaws and their intentions, a person they can relate to.

59. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk-politics/2025/08/keir-starmer-alienates-left-and-right-on-gaza>

Section 6: Harness Emotion, Mobilise Hope

Framing

A final part of the populist appeal lies in its emotion-oriented messaging. Populist messaging hits both sides of the emotional spectrum. Their framings are grounded in a bleak portrayal of the present and a hopeful image of the future. The appetite for this kind of messaging is particularly pronounced in a population where 64% of adults believe that life for the majority of children today is worse than it was for previous generations⁶⁰. People resonate with populist messaging – because it reflects the anger they feel toward the challenges they face at present. But also, because they want to believe they're on a positive path, they want to believe the promise that populism will improve their lot.

Further, optimistic framings are particularly appealing to those who feel overlooked or left behind, those who currently experience low social status. Indeed, populist support is high among those who feel let down by meritocracy⁶¹. Here, in a system that claims to reward hard work and talent, those who fail to reap the benefits of their labour- are drawn to populist promises that harness people's anger and satiates their need for status and optimism.

Psychological Appeal

Fundamentally, we know that emotions play a significant role in our decision-making. While we all like to believe we apply reason and rationality to our judgements, in practice most of us put our hearts over our heads. There is growing evidence to show that emotion is an equal or more powerful predictor of voting behaviour than economic indicators. Indeed, one study finds that negative affect is a strong predictor of populist support⁶². When voters are regularly experiencing significant negative emotions – like sadness, anger and fear – there is fertile ground for populists to make electoral gains, because they effectively mobilise popular frustrations with present injustices.

Further, populism's appeal rests on its dual ability to mobilise hope. Here, the 'framing effect' can help us understand the psychological appeal of populism's positive future outlook. It explains how our decision-making is driven as much by rational reasoning as how the information is presented. Ultimately, it's not just what you say but how you say it.

This truth is known to all in marketing and sales. Our choices are shaped by how options are presented – through specific wording,

60. <https://youngov.co.uk/topics/society/trackers/do-brits-believe-it-is-better-or-worse-for-children-growing-up-in-the-world-today>

61. <https://media.ukandeu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Meritocracy-and-its-problems.pdf>

. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/jenniferlerner/files/emotion_and_decision_making.pdf

62. <https://wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-role-of-negative-affect-in-shaping-populist-support-converging-field-evidence-from-across-the-globe/>

reference points and emphasis. Here, effective communicators use framing to mobilise other heuristics: they tap into loss aversion by emphasizing opportunity over risk; they leverage the availability bias making messages simple and memorable; they harness the affect heuristic, appealing to people's emotions with humour. The danger of the framing effect is that it can

lead people to overvalue how a message is delivered and undervalue what is being said. Where subtle changes to the problem framing can significantly alter people's interpretation, attitudes, emotions and behaviours⁶³, there is a risk that people choose a worse option that is well-framed, over a better option that is poorly presented.

Lessons

In times of hardship, progressives must **lead with hope**. While caution can feel like the safer bet, difficult periods demand leaders who are bold, confident and inspiring. Take Kier Starmer in the UK: he undoubtedly inherited a challenging situation - after decades of Conservative control, public services were in crisis and budgets stretched thin. But where people longed to channel their outrage and be inspired by a vision for renewal, he offered only measured messages of restraint. The message has been - the present is hard, and the future will be too. By contrast, Clement Attlee's Labour government, which took power after the war, amid immense economic and social challenges, rejected austerity in favour of investment and egalitarianism⁶⁴. Attlee mobilised the public behind a tangible vision - building the welfare state and the NHS - so compelling that people accepted continued sacrifice because they could see what they were building. Playing it safe may feel prudent, but in moments of struggle, it is boldness and hope that people desire.

Further, progressive leaders need to provide a compelling story with a clear **vision and**

direction. Populists understand that people respond not just to facts, but to dreams. As Moisés Naím and Quico Toro note, this is why charlatans 'speak in the language of our dreams', because they know that when people hear their aspirations reflected back, they react instinctively⁶⁵. Reform UK's 2024 manifesto illustrates this principle, with each of its five pledges began with the word 'imagine'⁶⁶ they create a mobilising story that invites people to picture a different future. Here, the lesson for progressives is not that empty promises are the way forward, but that articulating a compelling vision of what change could look like is necessary to inspire action. To lead effectively, it's not enough to be clear about what you oppose; you must be explicit about what you **stand for**.

Lastly, to build a movement people can truly believe in, hope must be matched by tangible progress. To restore trust, and build momentum, progressive leaders need to do more to **celebrate their wins**, highlight where progress is being made and demonstrate that the path of change is underway.

63. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756223/obo-9780199756223-0269.xml>

64. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/69311/caroline-lucas-who-benefits-from-labours-lack-of-radicalism-reform-and-farage>

65. <https://www.thenewworld.co.uk/mois-es-na-im-quico-toro-age-of-the-charlatans/>

66. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/reformuk/pages/253/attachments/original/1718625371/Reform_UK_Our_Contract_with_You.pdf?1718625371

Conclusion

Examining the rising tide of populism through this psychological lens, in this report we argue that the appeal of populism in-part lies in its ability to tell clear, emotional, identity-affirming narratives that help people make sense of the injustice they feel. While progressive leaders should be cautious of parroting populist policies – there are things in the strategic framing that may help leaders build a better opposition. Indeed, important lessons lie in the way populist leaders do not shy away from emotion; they amplify it. In the way they don't dodge blame; they direct it. The way they promise purpose, pride and belonging.

To respond to this political turn, progressives need to embrace a more emotionally intelligent politics. This does not mean abandoning progressive values – it means bringing them to life with clarity and conviction. It means understanding voter psychology not to manipulate it, but to better engage it. It means replacing divisive rhetoric with openness, technocratic jargon with human language, and caution with courage.

It is time to stop seeing populism as something to 'resist', and start seeing it as a mirror – one that reflects the vulnerabilities and injustices in society, as well as people's emotional needs. If progressive leaders can learn from its emotional power while rejecting its divisive and regressive rhetoric, they may build a political movement that is democratically restorative – that encourages positive political engagement.

What's more, beyond language and framing, restoring trust and countering populism ultimately depends on delivering real, tangible change. If people continue to feel overlooked, disconnected, and see no improvement in their material circumstances, they will keep voting in protest. While progressives may never win over the core populist base, visible and meaningful action can win back those who have turned to populism out of frustration. The rise of populism, after all, is not inevitable.

Ultimately, through the recommendations in this report, we call on progressive leaders to act – to channel these insights into a politics that earns trust, inspires belief, and unites rather than divides.