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Welfare-Consequentialism: An Antidote for Populism?

By Noel Semple¹

Populists have scored a series of remarkable victories in Europe and the Americas since 2015. They have done significant harm – not only in countries such as the United States, Brazil, and Hungary where they have won elections and referenda, but also in other places where they have influenced government from outside it. Their favoured public policies include attacks on immigrants, climate change apathy, and assaults on independent democratic institutions.^{2 3} The common threads are short-sightedness, narrow-mindedness, and vindictiveness. Where the populist policy agenda is implemented, it makes life worse than it would otherwise be – not only for its proclaimed enemies but also for those it purports to serve.

Populism is an ever-present threat to good public policy within democracies. Like influenza it persists in the shadows from generation to generation, periodically mutating into a deadly pandemic.⁴ Indeed, by sidelining the United States federal government from global fight

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² https://www.conferenceboard.ca/press/speech_oped/2018/07/12/the-unintended-consequences-of-economic-populism : “Another marker of populist economics is a preference for so-called [managed or fair trade](#). Under this narrative, trade deficits are a sign of national weakness, so governments seek to block as many imports as possible while encouraging exports. Populist governments are often suspicious of free-trade agreements, and ready to introduce barriers such as tariffs and negotiated trade levels to try to benefit domestic industries. They focus on trade in traditional manufactured goods and pay little heed to economic integration, global value chains or services trade.

The Trump administration offers the most prominent example of a populist protectionist trade agenda. But Italy’s new populist government is balking at ratifying the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement because of concerns about lack of protection for Italian specialty foods.”

³ {Friedman, 2019 #7167} “Almost a defining feature of economic populism is protectionism”

⁴ Populism = “something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril”

against climate change at a critical moment, populism may have already condemned billions of individuals to dramatically worse lives.

How can the infection be cured, and future outbreaks minimized? The current populist moment has generated a great deal of scholarly interest, some of which is normative in nature. Economic remedies are endorsed by most who have taken up this question: more income equality, broader distribution of economic opportunity, and a more robust social safety net.⁵ Others suggest that moving money is not enough. Amitai Etzioni, for example, would strengthen local communities as shelters from the pervasive anxiety that leads to populist support. Yascha Mounk argues for better civic education, and a more inclusive form of patriotism.⁶

These persuasive prescriptions are consistent with a bigger idea – a political ideology – that may be an antidote to populism. Welfare-consequentialism holds that government should implement the policies that are objectively most likely to make individuals' lives go best for them. Welfare-consequentialist government pursues universal progress through evidence-based policymaking designed to maximize aggregate individual welfare, measured quantitatively. Adopting the ancient metaphor of the body politic, I argue here that, throughout the organism, welfare-consequentialism can prevent the populist poison from taking hold.

This article begins by summarizing these two rival ideologies. Part 2 looks into the head of the body politic. Populism offers intellectually cogent answers to three key questions about government, but welfare-consequentialism offers alternative responses to all three questions. This makes it a coherent intellectual alternative to populism. Populism succeeds not just because

⁵ Luce,

⁶ ntd

it makes a sort of sense, but also because people have an appetite for it. Part 3 (In the Stomach) reviews the literature showing that pessimism and distrust of government lead people to crave populist leadership. Welfare-consequentialism, I argue, can suppress both of these appetites. Successful ideologies speak not only to the head and the stomach, but also to the heart. Part 4 claims that welfare-consequentialism offers the emotionally resonant idea of *progress*, a compelling alternative of populism's dark and pessimistic narrative.

1 Two Ideologies

1.1.1 Populism : The Ideational Conception

Populism is more than just a campaign style (Moffitt 2019) or an approach to governing (Muller 2016 at 4). It is an ideology : a belief system including a wide range of opinions that cohere together with its abstract conceptualizations.⁷ Cas Mudde's influential definition is as follows:

Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017 at 6; Mudde 2004).

As Part 2 explains, the populist ideology offers answers to central questions about the purpose of government, and these are reflected in certain characteristic policy tendencies of populist governments. However the phrase "thin-centered," in Mudde's definition, means that this ideology does not purport to answer all of the questions of public policy. Instead, politicians marry populism with neoliberalism, socialism, or some another ideology offering substantive

⁷ Gerring 1997, paraphrasing Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent*, pp. 206-61. London: Free Press of Glencoe.

policy prescriptions.⁸ Most of the currently ascendant populist movements are right-wing, but left-wing populism also has also scored victories – most recently in countries such as Spain and Greece.

1.2 Welfare-Consequentialism

“Welfare,” or well-being, is how well an individual’s life goes for them (Sumner 1996).

“Consequentialism” is the idea that the goodness of any act is a function of the goodness of its expected outcomes (Freeman 2011; Adler 2019). Combining these two ideas, welfare-consequentialism means that one should act so as to make it as likely as possible that individuals’ lives will go as well as possible for them. For government, this requires attending, as much as possible, to all of the individual welfare gains and losses that a policy is likely to produce (Kaplow and Shavell 2006). Almost all policy options will reduce the welfare of some individuals even as they increase the welfare of others. Expected welfare benefits, net of expected welfare costs, is the measure of a policy option under welfare-consequentialism.

Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism was the first well-known version of welfare-consequentialism in the Western canon. Bentham argued that increasing happiness, while minimizing pain, is the appropriate goal for all legislation and government action.⁹ Philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer have used utilitarianism to make forceful public policy arguments.¹⁰ These often work by recognizing the welfare impacts of public policies on

⁸ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018, {Canovan, 1999 #7168} at 4, {Nandy, 2019 #7172}}

⁹ ntd

¹⁰ ntd

previously disregarded individuals, including women, unborn individuals, and non-human animals.¹¹

Utilitarianism insists that everyone's welfare must count equally to policy-makers, regardless of how much welfare different individuals have (Nussbaum 2013 at 51; Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014 at 341). Thus, a utilitarian must endorse a policy reform that creates an extra 2 units of welfare for a person who already has 7 units, at a cost of 1 welfare unit lost by someone who has only 4. This is unappealing to many people. Alternative versions of welfare-consequentialism therefore hold that the distribution of welfare among individuals is morally relevant to the desirability of an outcome (e.g. Parfit 1995).

Formal welfare-consequentialist inquiry has footholds in certain public policy niches. Cost-benefit analysis is legally mandatory for all regulatory decisions taken by the United States government (Sunstein 2018). Federal agencies are required to design regulations so as to maximize net benefits after aggregating (in dollar terms) the regulations' costs and the benefits for Americans.¹² Cost effectiveness analysis, another welfare-consequentialist technique, is used by the UK government's National Institute for Health Care and Excellence (NICE). This agency compares medical therapies according to their expected consequences for the welfare of patients, using the quality-adjusted life year (QALY) as a measure of individual welfare. NICE identifies and recommends the therapies which are expected to be most effective, per pound

¹¹ (Brülde and Bykvist 2010)

¹² (The White House (United States of America) 2011) A similar requirement exists in Canada: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2018.

spent, in improving patient welfare (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (United Kingdom) 2013 at 1.4.2.).

It is increasingly possible to objectively identify the policies that are most effective in making lives better in the long run. The work of UK economist Richard Layard and his colleagues is a leading example (Layard and Clark 2013; Layard and O'Donnell 2015; Fleche and Layard 2017). Their book *The Origins of Happiness* is a landmark effort to objectively identify the social spending areas likely to deliver the biggest welfare benefits per dollar spent (Clark et al. 2018). A major policy payoff from this work has been the shift in UK healthcare spending toward mental health interventions, which are very effective in improving subjective well-being.

The social welfare function, whose foremost modern proponent is Matthew Adler (Adler 2012; Adler 2019), is an especially sophisticated and flexible welfare-consequentialist technique. The SWF Approach lets a policy maker evaluate the likely outcomes of a policy decision in terms of aggregate welfare, while mathematically giving priority to worse-off individuals relative to better-off ones. The uncertainty of a policy's consequences can also be mathematically incorporated in the analysis (Adler 2019). The SWF approach relies on interpersonal comparisons of welfare: claims that individual X has a quantifiably better life than individual Y, or that individual Z would have a quantifiably better life under Policy A than she would under Policy B (Adler 2017). Twentieth-century skepticism about the legitimacy of such comparisons has given way to increasing enthusiasm for policy-ready techniques to measure individual welfare (Adler and Fleurbaey 2016). A leading example is the life-evaluation survey, which asks each

respondents how satisfied he or she is with their life on a scale of 0-10.¹³ Between 2012 and 2018, the average life-evaluation reported by UK residents increased from 7.42 to 7.69 (out of 10).¹⁴ Measurable welfare improvements of this nature are the goal of welfare-consequentialism¹⁵¹⁶

Welfare-consequentialism holds that the most significant policy controversies of our time-- such as the appropriate levels of redistribution, state involvement in the economy, and climate change mitigation – can be resolved objectively and rationally. Government should predict the effects of the alternatives on aggregate welfare, and choose the option that leads to the highest expected “score.” Small government decisions, e.g. about infrastructure construction, can also, of course, be made objectively based on expected net welfare consequences.

1.2.1.1 Ethical Variables in Welfare-Consequentialism

Welfare-consequentialism’s promise to objectively identify ideal policy requires a certain level of agreement regarding a small number of ethical variables. These include (i) how individual welfare is to be defined and measured, (ii) the degree of priority that should be given to the welfare of the less well-off relative to the better-off, and (iii) the class of individuals whose welfare should matter to a certain decision-maker (ntd Semple 2019a).

¹³

¹⁴ {{Office for National Statistics (UK), 2018 #6841}}

¹⁵ Provisos re whether this proves uk govt successful: gegw

¹⁶ Life evaluation questions quantify individual welfare by asking a question such as “on a scale of 0-10, how satisfied are you with your life overall these days?” If maximizing happiness, measured in this way, is accepted as the goal of government then many specific policy recommendations follow: Clark et al. 2018. Policies can then be objectively evaluated in terms of their expected effects on aggregate welfare measured in this way.

People who agree in principle about welfare-consequentialism but disagree on these values may reach different conclusions on particular policies. For example, a welfare-consequentialist who weighs the effects of policy on foreigners might recommend a higher level of immigration than a welfare-consequentialist who considers only welfare effects on a policy-maker's domestic constituents. However, complete agreement on precise ethical variables is certainly not necessary to operationalize welfare-consequentialism. For example, the welfare-consequentialist argument for rapid decarbonization to avert climate change works with a very wide range of ethical variables.

2 In The Head

Populism's opponents underestimate it at their peril. It has succeeded, among other reasons, because it is a coherent system of thought that answers real questions about government. Fortunately welfare-consequentialism offers other, better answers to the same questions. In this way, it offers an intellectual antidote to populism.

2.1 Who Counts?

Whose interests should government seek to advance? The populists' response is simple: "the people." The use of the singular definite article is important.¹⁷ "They speak and act," as Jan-Werner Müller puts the point, "as if the people were one." Any apparent differences within "the people" are, from the populist point of view, irrelevant.¹⁸ The ideology is *holistic*, insisting that "political society should be a unity and... divisions are morally unwholesome and politically fatal."¹⁹

¹⁷ (Rooduijn 2014 at 575; Crick 2005 at 626, {Canovan, 1999 #7168} at 4)

¹⁸ (Comaroff 2011 at 104-5)

¹⁹ (Rosenblum 2008 at 22)

Under welfare-consequentialism, by contrast, there is no “people;” there are only individuals (Vos 2012). As Jeremy Bentham wrote,

The community is a fictitious body, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its members. The interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it (Bentham 1789).

While social aggregations can have powerful positive and negative effects on individual welfare, they have no intrinsic moral value under welfare-consequentialism.²⁰ Each individual affected by a policy choice is a “distinct locus of value,”²¹ and a policy decision must strive to take account of its effect on all individuals.²²

The populist “people” is geographically, and often ethnically bounded.²³ It is, for example, ‘the people of the UK’ or ‘the Serbian people.’ Those who oppose the populist cause, even if they are indubitably members of the geographic or ethnic group, are denounced as “not properly part of the people at all.” (Muller 2016) As Donald Trump put the point, “the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don’t mean anything” (Goldberg 2018).

While populists would confine the state’s attention to a sharply-constrained “people,” welfare-consequentialists since Bentham have tried to push outwards the “circle of concern” -- the set of individuals upon whom the welfare effects of policy should be considered (Singer 2011). Nineteenth century utilitarianism deployed this logic in favour of the women’s suffrage

²⁰ (Sumner 1996)

²¹ (Goodin 1995)

²² (Fleurbaey and Maniquet 2011)

²³ ({Canovan, 1999 #7168} at 5)

movement. Peter Singer has argued persuasively for animal rights and for attention to the welfare of the world's poor. Although current welfare-consequentialist policy applications (e.g. cost-benefit analysis in US federal regulation, and the UK's NICE healthcare-funding recommendations) do not always consider welfare effects on foreigners, they have engaged with the welfare of unborn generations. There are ways to include individuals who are dissimilar from the policy-maker within the circle of concern without asserting that every public policy-maker must always try to predict and maximize welfare consequences for *all* affected individuals of any species, nationality, or future birth date (ntd Semple 2019a). In any case, the inclination of welfare-consequentialism to expand the circle of concern as much as possible is clearly incompatible with populism.

2.2 What makes policy good?

Populism not only holds that there is one people to which the government should attend, but also that there is a "general will" of this people, which public policy should carry out. Mudde adopts Rousseau's phrase "*volonté générale*" (general will) within his definition of populism. The idea here is that, if the pure people are freed from corrupting influences, they will all agree on what is to be done (Crick 2005). Although there is some ambiguity in Rousseau's writings on this point (Bertram 2012), it seems that a government that follows the general will would necessarily also be making the lives of the people better. Margaret Canovan notes that a "characteristic strategy" in populist attacks on incumbents is "to highlight those issues where strongly held popular views have been neglected by decision-makers." (Canovan, 2002 #7170).

Welfare-consequentialism, on the other hand, assumes that because different individuals have very different life situations (as well as different tastes and inclinations), a particular public

policy will usually have very different welfare effects on different people. Except in the rare case where a pareto-optimal reform (making everyone better off and no-one worse off) is possible, a policy must therefore be analyzed by comparing its benefits for those who would gain from it against its costs for those who would lose from it.

Populists allege a “singular common good” which is readily apparent to the people on the basis of common sense alone.²⁴ Using broad public support as a mark of policy legitimacy encourages populists to endorse the straightforward measures that are most likely to attract such support. The simplicity of populist policy responses to complex problems has been observed by scholars writing in this field.²⁵ One way that populists simplify policy discourse is by focusing attention on the most immediate effects of policy, and disregarding the more remote effects. For example, Ontario’s premier Doug Ford launched a populist campaign against the federal government’s carbon tax. Ford’s campaign emphasizes the immediate pocketbook impact of the tax on people buying fossil fuels, and denies longer-term and indirect welfare benefits created by carbon pricing. Populist policies tend to disregard the welfare interests of individuals who are “distant” in one way or another – e.g. foreigners and the unborn.

For welfare-consequentialism, by contrast, evidence rather than public opinion is the test of good policy. In a complex world, the “sense” supporting policy will often be far from “common.” A prime example is the reality that carbon -- a ubiquitous, natural, apparently harmless substance -- is actually the single gravest threat to human welfare.

²⁴ (Muller 2016 at 25; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017 at 18)

²⁵ (Crick 2005 at 627; Muller 2016 at 26; Mounk 2018 at 7, {Canovan, 1999 #7168} at 5-6.)

Another logical consequence of the “general will” idea is populists’ enthusiasm for direct democracy measures, such as referenda and initiatives.²⁶ However, populist support for direct democracy may also be contingent and strategic. The populist leader, legitimized by an electoral mandate, is often presented as the person who can identify and voice the general will. If a majority appears to oppose him that fact can be explained away (Muller 2016 at 77). A memorable example is Trump’s unsubstantiated claim that his loss of the popular vote in the 2016 election was a consequence of voting by illegal aliens and convicts.

Under welfare-consequentialism, even if there were a general will, it would have no inherent moral relevance to policy-making. Nor would the oracular vision of a leader. What is ultimately relevant is not what policies individuals want, but rather what policies will be good for them. Welfare-consequentialist government is always *for* people (or, more accurately, for individuals, some of whom may not be human). The extent to which government should also be *by* the people is an empirical question, based on what is most likely to work.

2.3 The Role of Experts in Policy Formation

Attitude towards expertise in government creates a third key contrast between populism and welfare-consequentialism. Populism lumps experts in with the elites who are the antagonists of the people. Welfare-consequentialism would base policy decisions on outcome predictions, which usually necessitates expertise.

2.3.1 “The Corrupt Elite”

Hostility to elites is central to the leading definitions of populism (Rooduijn 2014 at 575; Muller 2016 at 2), and apparent in populist language ((See e.g. Bickerton and Accetti 2015) .

²⁶ (Rooduijn 2014 at 576; Bickerton 2018, {Friedman, 2019 #7167})

Corrupt elites are said to have usurped the people’s power,²⁷ and to have made things worse than they were at some vaguely-defined point in the past.²⁸

The elites targeted by populists can be defined on the basis of socioeconomic class, cultural tastes, or some other form of privilege.²⁹ However knowledge elites – experts – are also firmly within it. (Diletti 2019).³⁰ Populist leaders such as Nigel Farage and Donald Trump often explicitly proclaim their distrust of, or refusal to rely upon, experts.³¹ Naturally, experts who directly confront or oppose the populist agenda, such as judges upholding constitutional rights,³² come in for the most hostility. For the populist leader himself, “amateurism and lack of political experience actually become recommendations.” (Canovan, 1999 #7168}).

2.3.2 Evidence-Based Policy and Welfare-Consequentialism

Again, welfare-consequentialism’s answer to the question could not be more different. What policy can be expected to make individuals’ lives go best for them is a factual inquiry, solvable (with more or less certainty) with evidence and reason.³³ The ideology of welfare-consequentialism is technocratic in that seeks to depoliticize and, to the extent possible given the bounds of human knowledge, identify *correct* answers to policy questions.³⁴ For example,

²⁷ (Canovan, 2002 #7170}

²⁸ {Berman, 2018 #7174} Populism peddles a politics of fear—of crime, terrorism, unemployment, economic decline, the loss of national values and tradition—and asserts that other parties are leading their countries to disaster

²⁹ (Rooduijn 2014 at 575; {Canovan, 1999 #7168} at 3)

³⁰ {Davies, 2018 #7173}

³¹ ({Bienkov, 2017 #6996;Friedman, 2019 #7167}; Fisher 2016)

³² Judicial oversight and entrenched constitutions, which populists despise {Friedman, 2019 #7167}:: “Another constitutional area that populisms are keen to bring into the ambit of their disprovable is the law. Populists are often less than fully committed to upholding the ‘rule of law’, particularly constitutional law. Populists do not like having their political initiatives scrutinized or thwarted by courts and judges. This is particularly true of higher courts or those supra-national bodies that adjudicate on human rights issues. These judges are part of the despised liberal elite.”

³³ Within the bounds of agreement regarding ethical variables: see page 3, above.

³⁴ (Feitsma 2018; Clarence 2002)

under regulatory cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis, the permissible quantity of lead in paint, or the choice between government funding for Drug A and Drug B, should not depend on the opinions either of voters or of elected officials. Rather, such decisions should hinge on what the best available evidence says about the net welfare effects (including health effects and economic effects) of the available policy options. Welfare-consequentialism, in principle, would apply this approach to all public policy decisions. Given the complexity of the world in which policy intervenes, evidence-based policy-making inevitably relies on experts (Mounk 2018 at 95). Populism's rejection of these "intellectual elites," is also, effectively, a rejection of evidence-based policy.

That being said, a sceptical and humble approach to evidence-based policy claims remains compatible with – indeed essential for -- welfare-consequentialism. Welfare-consequentialism does not require a scientist faith that all of the right answers can be found in peer-reviewed publications. A policy-maker who exclusively seeks to improve individuals' welfare must remain cognizant of the cognitive biases and limitations that afflict expert knowledge (Parkhurst 2016), not to mention pecuniary bias given the frequency with which experts receive money from those with a vested interest in policy outcomes (Ryan 2018). As Section 3.2 will argue, welfare-consequentialism provides an accountability mechanism for expertise-driven government.

The wisdom of the crowd revealed through voting, and the wisdom of the ages embodied in political tradition, can be valuable methods of identifying welfare-maximizing policy. They outperform science in certain contexts. Welfare-consequentialism takes human beings as they are, which rules out faith in autocratic philosopher-monarchs. Compared to other forms of government, democracies with universal adult suffrage have the best record of creating welfare-

maximizing public policy. Compromises and reconciliations between democracy and technocracy are most likely to maximize aggregate welfare in the long run.

3 In the Stomach

It is important to rebut populism's intellectual claims. However, the cogency of these claims is not the primary reason why so many people have succumbed to populism's allure. There is an *appetite* for populism in the stomach of the body politic. Although anyone can vote populist, recent research has made it clear that people with certain attributes are much more likely than others to do so. Welfare-consequentialist government can reduce the prevalence of two of these attributes: social pessimism and distrust of government.

3.1 From Pessimism to Optimism

Social pessimism is an individual's belief that things are getting worse, and will continue to get worse, for the society in which that individual lives. Social pessimism is one of the personal attributes that best predicts support for right-wing populist parties.³⁵ The characteristic nostalgia of populist message (e.g. "Make America Great *Again*") responds to this belief, by promising to arrest the supposed decline and return to something better.³⁶

For many populist voters, there is plenty to actually be pessimistic about. According to large-scale surveys in the United States, residents of counties that swung from Obama to Trump scored below average on personal welfare measures such as life satisfaction, health, and

³⁵ {Steenvoorden, 2017 #7175}; https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/19/populist-views-in-europe-its-not-just-the-economy/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=3fe59d8b20-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_07_19_03_49&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-3fe59d8b20-400431161 ; Pinker 2018 at 432

³⁶ {Steenvoorden, 2017 #7175} at 29

employment trends.^{37 38} Robert MacNeil argues that anxiety and insecurity in wealthy anglophone countries have fostered receptiveness to anti-tax populist candidates (MacNeil 2016).

In terms of economic status, there is evidence that while a person's actual wealth or income does not correlate with populist support, their expectations regarding the future (and the future of their children) do so.³⁹ In Europe as in the U.S.A., it appears that *changes* in unemployment levels, as opposed to the actual levels of unemployment, which are most influential in driving populism.⁴⁰ Communities confronted with sudden economic decline are highly vulnerable.

At least within wealthy countries, it is well within the power of the state to guarantee everyone a substantial measure of security from proven happiness-destroyers like unemployment, ill health, and child poverty. With international cooperation, climate change is equally solvable. The challenge for democracies is to take these obvious (but often politically difficult) public policy steps, without choking off the free market's own welfare-creating power. It is a plausible hypothesis that doing so will not only create better lives for a large majority but also help immunize electorates from populist infection.

³⁷ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0193401>

³⁸ https://go-gale-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ps/i.do?p=CPI&u=utoronto_main&id=GALE%7CA470492855&v=2.1&it=r&sid=su mmon

³⁹ Mounk, Chapter 8. {Friedman, 2005 #6689} Page: 93
Aspirations and fears of this kind can be especially powerful when people contemplate prospects for their children... even those who see little prospect for any significant improvement in their own economic circumstances may nonetheless harbor quite different ambitions—and, more strongly, anxieties—for their children.

⁴⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/algantextfa17bpea.pdf>

If welfare-consequentialism succeeds in making life better, there will be less for people to be pessimistic about.⁴¹ However societal pessimism is ultimately a matter of perception, which may or may not be grounded in reality. Some, like Winnie the Pooh's friend Eeyore, can remain pessimistic no matter how well things are actually going. Fortunately, as an ideology, welfare-consequentialism is not merely an approach to policy-making, but also a public discourse about government. It can reassure people that government will do whatever it can to make things better.

3.2 Distrust in Government

Distrust in government also whets the appetite for populism.⁴² Surveys have recorded a troubling erosion in the extent to which people trust that government in general, or particular government actors, are genuinely pursuing the public interest. Only 17% of Americans trust the federal government to do the right thing most of the time, down from over 70% in the 1950s and

⁴¹ It should be acknowledged that, under many variants of welfare-consequentialism, voters are not the only beneficiaries of the state's welfare-promotion efforts. The welfare of unborn individuals and non-human animals is also relevant under most accounts: ntd Singer, Stenman.

However, many welfare-consequentialists would include non-human animals and unborn

⁴² {Steenvoorden, 2017 #7175}: "Another approach stresses the protest element of a PRR vote. This explanation holds that some voters express their discontent with the political system by voting for a populist party of whatever colour. Such parties usually emphasise charismatic leadership, which succeeds in mobilising voters against the elite. Indeed, PRR voters have been shown to have higher levels of distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system (Lubbers et al. 2002; McGann and Kitschelt 2005). The protest sentiment bears similarity to the negative perception inherent in societal pessimism. However, societal pessimism is a more diffuse concern about society overall, including but not restricted to concerns about the (political) elite."

Lubbers, Marcel, Mérove Gijsberts and Peer Scheepers (2002). 'Extreme Right-Wing Voting in Western Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 41:3, 345–78.

McGann, Anthony J., and Herbert Kitschelt (2005). 'The Radical Right in the Alps Evolution of Support for the Swiss SVP and Austrian FPÖ', *Party Politics*, 11:2, 147–71.

60s.⁴³ Elsewhere, the situation is only modestly better,⁴⁴ with 42% of OECD citizens expressed trust in their national governments in 2016.⁴⁵

A person who distrusts government is likely to respond well to populism's anti-elitism. Measures of distrust have been correlated with populist support in several studies.⁴⁶ Even after populist candidates take office, they can continue to stoke distrust with regard to other branches of government, or to the "deep state."

Welfare-consequentialism can rebuild trust in government by facilitating accountability for government actors. If it is widely accepted that government should always do whatever is most likely to make life go best, then the behaviour of individual policy-makers can be judged against this yardstick. Even if the average voter cannot personally assess whether her government's approach to trade or taxation is more likely to maximize aggregate welfare than alternative policies, experts *can* do so if there is a sufficiently robust welfare-consequentialist consensus. The voter can then reasonably trust that the entire political and policy-generation system is pursuing a goal that she accepts.

This can be understood as a professionalization of public policy. Every other modern profession enjoys more trust than politicians do. Doctors lead, being considered trustworthy by 56% of people, and untrustworthy by only 14%.⁴⁷ Government ministers are considered

⁴³ <https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/>

⁴⁴ Mounk 2018; Savoie 2015 at 34-5; Luce 2017

⁴⁵ https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/gov_glance-2017-76-en.pdf?expires=1578076322&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=15EF72DB0D790CC5C20F6760A507F657

⁴⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0032321719842768>

⁴⁷ {Davies, 2018 #7173}: "at a point in history where trust in politicians, journalists, and – in some countries – the judiciary is falling across most of the Western world, it is useful to note some striking exceptions to this trend: doctors and, above all, nurses are respected and trusted to an extent that cuts across all other political and cultural divides."

trustworthy by 12%, and untrustworthy by 67%.⁴⁸ Welfare-consequentialism might import the professional model of science-based trust to the realm of public policy, and thereby suppress the appetite for populism.

Professions apply esoteric knowledge to practical problems, in pursuit of agreed-upon goals.⁴⁹ They enjoy the trust of laypeople not because their decisions are directed by those laypeople, but rather because they are accountable to others within the professional community. I cannot personally hold my doctor accountable for the drug he prescribed, nor can I personally hold an engineer accountable for the design of the bridge upon which I must travel. I cannot personally understand or second-guess why they made the decisions they did. Nevertheless, I trust them, because there are accountability mechanisms for these professionals based in the sciences of medicine and engineering. They are required to follow evidence-based best practices, on pain of discipline or expulsion from their respective professions by their peers.

Welfare-consequentialism offers, for public policy, what human health is for medicine or structural integrity is for mechanical engineering: a goal that everyone can accept. This is what distinguishes it from mere technocracy, which has a theory of how policy goals should be pursued but no account of what the overriding goal should be or of how tradeoffs between sub-goals should be made. As Jonathan Wolff argues, formal welfare-consequentialism

provide[s] a means of making decisions rooted in an analysis which can be scrutinised, questioned in public, attacked and defended. Bias and abuse of power can be detected by those scrutinising the calculations. In other words it provides public accountability (Wolff 2006 at 7).

⁴⁸ <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-09/global-trust-in-professions-trust-worthiness-index-2019.pdf>

⁴⁹ ntd

If welfare-consequentialism is ascendant, and bad policy is as reliably rooted out as medical quackery now is, then trust in government can flourish again.

3.3 Conquering Cravings for Populism

Social pessimism and distrust in government feed the appetite for populism. Even if a majority is content, a populist minority can swing an electoral outcome, due to the large number of non-populists who fail to vote. Only 26% of Americans who were legally entitled to vote in 2016 voted for Donald Trump.⁵⁰ Thus, in order to secure its own long-term electoral durability, welfare-consequentialist government may have to focus great effort on preventing the build-up of disaffected constituencies “left behind” by progress. If welfare-consequentialism is concerned with its own sustainability as a governing ideology, (as it must by definition be), 26% of the adult population is too many to leave behind.

This Part has argued that welfare-consequentialism can help suppress the appetite for populism in the body politic. The point should not be overstated. Some of the things that make people more likely to vote populist, such as desire to have one’s own privileged ethnic group retain that privilege,⁵¹ will not be addressed by successful welfare-consequentialist public policy. Nevertheless, the ideology does plausibly suppress to the societal pessimism and distrust of government which help make populism appetizing.

4 In the Heart

Part 2 argued that welfare-consequentialism can coherently rebut populism’s claims about government; Part 3 suggested that it can suppress people’s appetite for populism. This,

⁵⁰ <https://mises.org/wire/26-percent-eligible-voters-voted-trump>

⁵¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/existential-anxiety-not-poverty-motivates-trump-support/558674/>

however, is not enough. As Margaret Canovan observes, “the emotional charge implicit in ideological concepts and their capacity to inspire faith and commitment” are essential to their power.⁵² Like all successful ideologies, the populist poison works not only in people’s heads and stomachs but also in their hearts.⁵³ However, welfare-consequentialism’s progress narrative can successfully compete with populism on this emotional level.

4.1 The Progress Narrative

Populism weaves a compelling story, using the threads of fear,⁵⁴ nostalgia, and the promise of revenge.^{55 56 57} A compelling counter-narrative is necessary, but populism’s opponents have struggled in this regard. As Beppe Severgnini said regarding the populist Brexit vote:

People voted for nostalgia, for a mythical Britain that wasn’t there anymore, they voted from frustration about immigration—there was a narrative. The only people who spoke with passion about Europe were the enemies of Europe. No one was offering a counter-narrative.⁵⁸

Progress is the theme of the welfare-consequentialism’s own compelling story. This narrative is about the power of human knowledge and collective action to make life better for everyone. The story has no villains. It is inherently optimistic, but its optimism is realistic. The

⁵² {Canovan, 2002 #7170}

⁵³ William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*: popm “as an emotion-laden stance,” based on disappointment, frustration, fear, and resentment. (<https://link.springer-com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/article/10.1007%2Fs12115-019-00367-4>)

⁵⁴ {Berman, 2018 #7174} Populism peddles a politics of fear—of crime, terrorism, unemployment, economic decline, the loss of national values and tradition—and asserts that other parties are leading their countries to disaster

⁵⁵ {Nandy, 2019 #7172} “Populists have found ways to connect people in common cause, using hate and fear.”

⁵⁶ “If a purpose that brings us together is not made available, a purpose that divides us surely will be. Willing populists don’t seem too hard to find.” (Struck and Tippet 2019)

⁵⁷ “Populists almost never succeed because they offer great policies. They offer two things: a way to vent out frustration, and an outlet for people’s desire for revenge.” (<https://promarket.org/defeat-populist-plutocrats-build-counter-narrative/>)

⁵⁸ <https://promarket.org/defeat-populist-plutocrats-build-counter-narrative/>

reality is that, for the past 200 years, life has been getting better on almost every measure, for the overwhelming majority of the human race.⁵⁹ Good government deserves a healthy share of credit for this progress, and good government will be essential if progress is to continue.

To the extent that things are actually getting better, our leaders should not be shy in reminding us of the fact. Steven Pinker suggests that “obliviousness to the scope of human progress can ... make people cynical about the Enlightenment-inspired institutions that are securing this progress, such as liberal democracy and organizations of international cooperation, and turn them toward atavistic alternatives.” (Pinker 2018 at 227.)

Explicitly welfare-consequentialist policy, that genuinely makes things better for people and also convinces them that it has done so, could replace the populists’ pessimistic narratives with an equally compelling narrative of optimism and progress. This ideology will succeed, like others, by “offering a redemptive vision, promising salvation through politics by pointing the way to a better world.”⁶⁰

5 Conclusion

A powerful ideology like populism works simultaneously in the head and the stomach and the heart. An equally powerful antidote is needed, offering similarly widespread effects in the body politic. In the head, welfare-consequentialism rebuts populism’s distinctive claims about government. In the stomach, the pessimism and distrust that make people crave populism can be satiated by successful welfare-consequentialist government. In the heart, welfare-

⁵⁹ Pinker, hauer,

⁶⁰ {Canovan, 2002 #7170}.

consequentialism's sunny narrative of progress is plausibly just as compelling as populism's dark story.

Liberal democracy is the political ideology most often contrasted to populism, and most often looked to as a champion against it.⁶¹ However the author's view is that welfare-consequentialism is more powerful in this respect. A better life is a more universally appealing promise than having the freedom to do certain things, or having the right to vote. Political liberalism and democracy, within bounds, certainly seem to be instrumentally valuable in making life better over the long run. However welfare-consequentialism holds that only welfare itself is *inherently* valuable as a goal for public policy. It is this idea, and the fruits it can bear, that seem so promising in the face of the populist threat.

⁶¹ ntd