

The Era of Disruptive Populism

di Walter Russell Mead

[Keir Starmer](#), like Joe Biden, wanted to restore what the center-left sees as normalcy in politics after years of disruption. Like Mr. Biden, the beleaguered British prime minister has discovered that political normalcy has gone the way of the dodo.

When a narrow majority of Britons defied the leaders of the three major parties by voting to exit the European Union in 2016, one of the world's oldest parliamentary democracies entered a new era of disruptive populism. As a succession of Tory prime ministers rotated through Downing Street, the public soured on Brexit. Increasingly large majorities told pollsters that leaving the EU had been a mistake.

Eight roller-coaster years after the Brexit referendum, promising an end to the “desperate era of gestures and gimmicks,” Mr. Starmer's Labour party won a massive parliamentary majority. “Britain needs stability, not more chaos,” the Labour leader said at the launch of his victorious 2024 campaign.

Just under two years later voters still don't like Brexit—but they've grown tired of Mr. Starmer's stability as well. Last week's local elections came as close as the phlegmatic Brits come to delivering a revolutionary message. Labour lost almost 1,500 seats on local governing councils, losing control of 38 councils. The Tories lost hundreds of seats. Nigel Farage's upstart Reform UK Party bested both the Labour and Conservative parties and gained more than 1,400 new seats. Labour lost votes to the left, as the previously marginal Green Party gained hundreds of seats with a sharply anti-Israel message. It also lost seats to Reform on the right.

The news from Wales was even worse. Labour has dominated Welsh politics for a century; it fell into third place behind Reform and the pro-independence Plaid Cymru. The result is that Britain's once-stable two-party system has collapsed into a multiparty competition in which centrist parties are no longer necessarily the largest

or the most powerful. If this had been a parliamentary election, the result would have been a so-called hung Parliament, in which no single party had a majority. Mr. Farage's Reform would have the largest number of seats.

Britain is not alone. Establishment politicians and EU bureaucrats may be celebrating Péter Magyar's victory over Hungary's Viktor Orbán, but the ground is quivering under the feet of centrist politicians in both Germany and France. After a year in office, Friedrich Merz has the lowest approval rating of any German chancellor in modern times. Recent French polls show only about 20% of voters expressing confidence in President Emmanuel Macron.

The new direction in politics seems less firmly aligned with either the left or the right than with antiestablishment and identity-based politics. Many white British voters were motivated by anti-immigrant nativism to vote right; identity politics also motivated many Muslim voters to support members of their own community.

The new politics isn't always about good government. Even when, as in both the U.S. and Britain, populist votes lead to chaotic disruption, voters don't appear to be yearning for a return to the "technocratic competence" that both center-left and center-right establishments claim to provide. Mr. Biden promised to restore stability following four disruptive years of [Donald Trump](#) and Covid. Four years later, the voters put Mr. Trump back in the White House and sent the Democrats into the political wilderness.

Some may find this regrettable, but it shouldn't be surprising. Populism is about self-government. It isn't only in postcolonial countries that many people prefer being governed by people who share their values, culture and economic interests, even if their style of governance is less polished or professional.

From a foreign-policy point of view, this is bad news. The world is a dangerous place, and leaders from democratic countries need to work together. That is hard to do when politicians everywhere must play aggressively to the peanut gallery to survive.

Mr. Trump owes much of his political success to his "America First" rhetoric and his ability to ridicule allies. This has helped the president at home but it makes him and the country he leads loathed abroad. The fastest way for foreign leaders to shore up

their sagging poll numbers is to distance themselves from the American president. Opposition to Mr. Trump is a unifying force in North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries from Denmark to Spain. That makes it politically costly for allies to support U.S. policy initiatives in the Middle East and beyond.

The British electorate's message to the world is sobering. Whether it was a flawed project from the beginning or poorly executed, Brexit exacerbated many of Britain's underlying economic and social problems. But the result isn't a chastened population returning abashedly to the tutelage of the experts they rejected in 2016. It is an appetite for new and perhaps even more forms of radical and disruptive political action.

History grows more interesting by the day.