



Anarchy in the UK (and everywhere else)

By Mirko Draca and Carlo Schwarz

In political terms, we are living in the midst of the proverbial ‘interesting times’. The election of Donald Trump and the UK’s Brexit referendum in 2016 are being seen as turning points in modern democratic politics. As further evidence, new political forces seem to be at play, with fresh citizen movements – ranging from France’s ‘Yellow Vests’ to the UK’s ‘Extinction Rebellion’ – emerging quickly and decisively. Politics appears to be dramatically more polarised, with movements based on populist messages being seen as key agents of this polarisation.

But is this perception of increased polarisation supported by the data, and is it actually a *new* pattern? While research has shown that political elites have become more polarised (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Gentzkow et al., 2019) the evidence on polarisation amongst the general public is less clear. We tackle this question from the perspective of polarisation in the *political ideologies* of citizens (Draca and Schwarz, 2018).

We define ‘ideologies’ as clusters of political opinions, for example, the tendency for positions (such as pro-immigrant views, low trust in major companies and preferences

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for more government intervention) to co-occur amongst particular groups of people. Our analysis uses a set of consistently defined questions from the World Values Survey (WVS) across 17 countries in North America and Western Europe. We identify clusters of similar political opinions using unsupervised machine learning methods. The advantage of these particular methods is that they allow for the ‘mixed membership’ of ideologies among individuals. For example, we’re able to characterise people as being ‘mostly conservative but a bit liberal too’, thereby providing a good reflection of how people think in practice. ▶

Two main findings stand out from our research. Firstly, while there is a clear 'Left-Right' dimension to the structure of the ideologies in the data, there is also another critical dimension at play. This is apparent in two ideological clusters that are defined by low confidence in societal institutions such as parliaments, major companies and the press. This can be seen in Table 1, where we report the top ten opinions or 'issue-positions' that define the ideologies in our main model (which consists of four ideological types).

Based on their low trust in institutions we label these types as 'anarchists'. Interestingly, they additionally split into Left Anarchist and Right Anarchist types that are differentiated by their positions on social issues. While these two types appear to be natural bases of

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support for different left and right wing populist movements, we prefer the label 'anarchist' as a descriptor. In part, this is because alternative terms such as 'populist' have been

gaining pejorative connotations (e.g. Murray, 2016), or, in the case of 'anti-establishment', are over-used as part of polemical debates (Hume, 2017; and Jones 2014). But more specifically, while the term anarchist is often associated with a particular strand of syndicalist politics, we argue that, in our context, it accurately conveys the questioning of existing institutions that is characteristic of current populist politics.

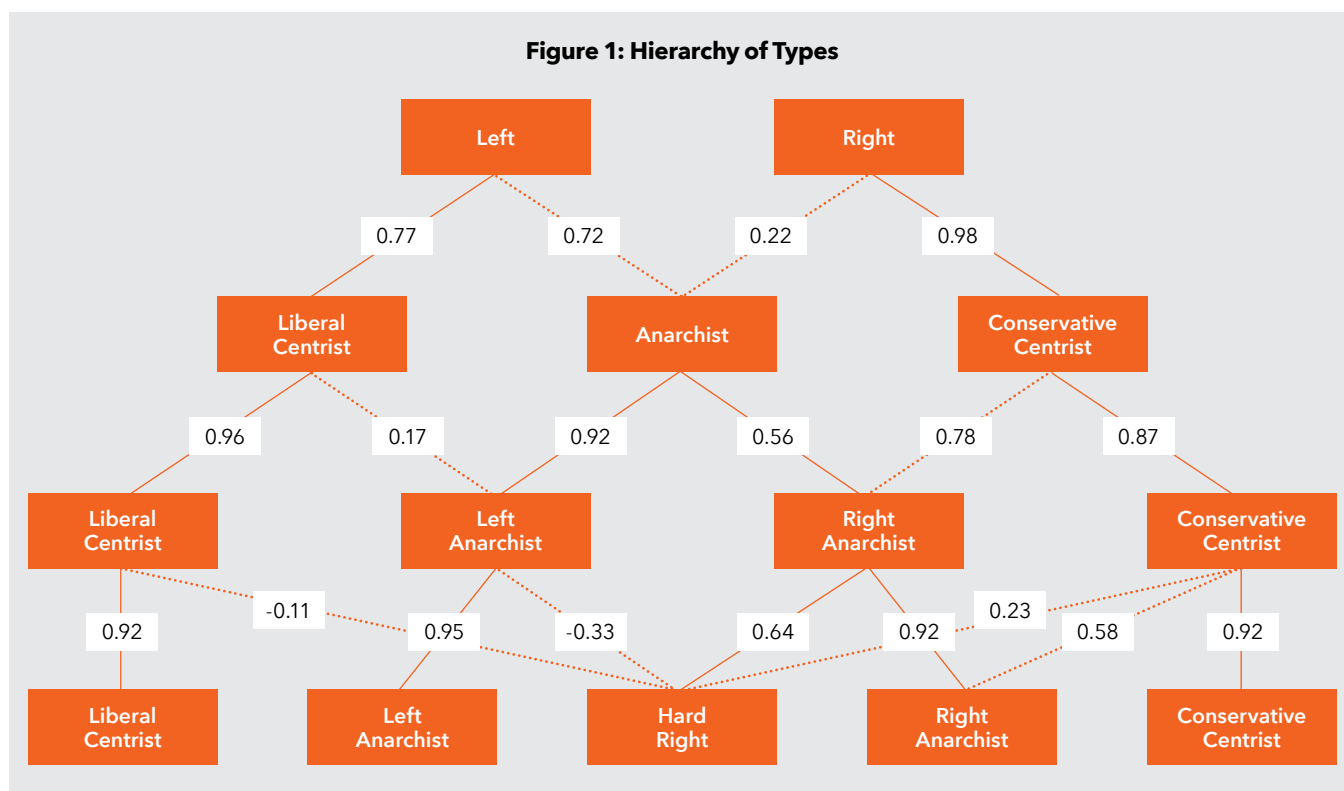
We contrast our Left and Right Anarchist types with alternative Liberal Centrist and Conservative Centrist types that are more supportive of societal institutions. In figure 1, we illustrate how the hierarchy of ideologies evolves as we allow the algorithm to identify more clusters in the data. The anarchist type emerges as soon as three clusters are allowed to be identified. The share

Table 1: 4 Type Model

Liberal Centrist	Left Anarchist
Confidence: Police	No confidence: Churches
No problem neighbours: Homosexuals	Justifiable: Divorce
No problem neighbours: People different race	No problem neighbours: Homosexuals
Justifiable: Divorce	No problem neighbours: People AIDS
Proud of nationality	No problem neighbours: People different race
No problem neighbours: People AIDS	No problem neighbours: Immigrants/foreign workers
Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe	No confidence: Parliament
No problem neighbours: Immigrants/foreign workers	Justifiable: Homosexuality
Not justifiable: Claiming government benefits	No confidence: Armed Forces
Confidence: Justice System/Courts	No confidence: Major companies
Conservative Centrist	Right Anarchist
Confidence: Police	No confidence: Parliament
Confidence: Churches	No confidence: Civil Services
Confidence: Armed Forces	No confidence: Justice System/Courts
Not justifiable: Suicide	No confidence: The Press
Not justifiable: Prostitution	No confidence: Labour Unions
Not justifiable: Abortion	No confidence: Major companies
Proud of nationality	Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe
Confidence: Justice System/Courts	Not justifiable: Claiming government benefits
Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe	Not justifiable: Avoiding a fare on public transport
Confidence: The Civil Services	Not justifiable: Cheating on taxes

Notes: This table lists, in order, the 10 most important issue positions for the 4 main ideological types identified in the World Value Survey Data. Highlighted text draws out those issue positions that distinguish anarchist from centrist types.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Types



Notes: This figure shows the hierarchy of types as created by Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) for different numbers of ideological types. The values reported amongst the lines connecting the boxes record the similarity of types based on the correlation in the issue-position probability vectors across types.

of anarchist views in the population is considerable, with cross-national averages of 17% for the Left Anarchist type and 27% for the Right.

This leads to our second finding, namely that there is limited evidence of strong trends in the *growth* of anarchist ideologies. The Left and Right Anarchist types of are strongly present in our data from its beginning in the late 1980s. While there is some notable growth in both anarchist types in the US from the mid-2000s, the trend is muted for most countries. If we think of the anarchist ideologies as the natural support base for populist movements, then the important point to note is that this base has been latently present for decades.

How, then, have populist movements activated themselves so strongly now, even though the pre-conditions for their emergence have been in place for so long? One possibility is that technology has facilitated the entry of new political movements that tap into anarchist sentiment. Another is that economic

shocks – specifically, the financial crisis and associated austerity policies – triggered the populist mobilisation (Fetzer, 2019). Realistically, a combination of these two factors (and others) is likely to be at play. However, our analysis strongly suggests that declining trust in institutions is a crucial driver of the current turmoil in democratic politics, making reforms that rebuild trust a major priority across all types of political parties and movements. ◀

About the authors

Mirko Draca is the incoming Director of CAGE, Associate Professor at the University of Warwick and Research Associate at the Centre for Economic Performance. **Carlo Schwarz** is a doctoral student at CAGE.

Further reading

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