

Seven Learnings to Stem the Populist Tide

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winningagainstpopulists.com

The populist challenge to democracy has intensified, moving beyond a recurring threat to an acute emergency in many nations. Despite determined efforts, the tide often continues to rise.

This work confronts the stark reality: anti-populist forces are struggling to gain ground. Building on our earlier analysis, “Seven Lessons for Winning Elections Against Populists”, this volume delves deeper, examining not only successes but, critically, the lessons learned from failures and setbacks in the fight against populism.

Leveraging decades of strategic communication expertise, David Cowan and Sir Chris Powell analyse recent electoral contests - drawing extensively on unparalleled data from the US alongside global examples - to extract urgent, actionable insights for a more challenging era.

It moves beyond identifying ‘what works’ to dissecting ‘what fails’ and why. This is essential reading for political leaders, strategists, campaigners, and all those committed to navigating the turbulent waters of contemporary democracy and pushing back against the populist surge.

Executive Summary

Recent electoral results across the globe demonstrate that the populist threat to democracy is not receding but **intensifying, demanding an urgent reassessment of anti-populist strategy**. The following summary distils seven critical learnings from an analysis of recent campaigns, offering practical and sometimes uncomfortable insights for mainstream political forces. These learnings cover the **necessary mindset** for the fight, the qualities of effective **leadership**, the **prioritisation of key issues**, proven **campaign models** for both challengers and incumbents, the non-negotiable need to master the **new media** landscape and a plan to **build relationships and trust** through hyper-local action.

Learning 1: The Populist Threat is Existential to Democracy - Anti-populists Must Do Whatever It Takes

The populist challenge is no longer a conventional political contest but an **existential threat to democratic institutions**, as seen in the US, Hungary, and elsewhere. This creates a fundamental asymmetry: **populists operate without regard for truth or ethical norms**, treating politics as warfare, while their opponents often adhere to high-minded principles that lead to electoral defeat. To survive, anti-populist forces must **adopt a more ruthless mindset** while remaining within democratic bounds. This means aggressively pursuing legal accountability for populist malfeasance, as in Brazil and potentially France, and being willing to **fight “fire with fire” on messaging**, even if it feels uncomfortable. Prioritising institutional niceties or being temperamentally resistant to bare-knuckle politics is a self-defeating luxury when the alternative is democratic erosion. Winning requires acknowledging the gravity of the threat and **developing the resolve to match the opponent’s ferocity**.

Learning 2: Leadership - Authenticity, Empathy, and Fighting on the Voters’ Side

In the fight against populism, leadership is paramount. While parties must prioritise electability, existing leaders can win by adopting a specific posture. Voters are angry and feel the system is broken; **leaders must connect with this emotion**. The most effective approach is to **embody the “angry moderate”** - authentically channelling voter frustration about real-world problems like immigration, healthcare or crime, while simultaneously rejecting simplistic populist fixes and offering credible, practical solutions. This demonstrates empathy and **strips populists of their monopoly on anger**. Furthermore, with nearly 40% of people avoiding news, leaders must **reach disengaged voters through authentic, long-form conversations on non-political platforms** like popular podcasts. Ultimately, voters need to believe their leader is **unequivocally on their side**, using empathetic language and taking tangible actions, like Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear, to prove they are fighting for them, not for the political establishment.

Learning 3: Address, Early and Hard, the Issues That Will Win the Election

There is a **critical distinction between a governing agenda and a winning election strategy**. The 2024 US election is a devastating case study: the Biden administration focused on its long-term infrastructure achievements while **voters were consumed by the immediate pain of the cost of living and unmanaged immigration**. The opposition ruthlessly exploited this gap, creating a powerful narrative of national decline. The administration's actions on these critical fronts came too late and were perceived as incremental, allowing the perception of failure to become entrenched. The learning is stark: incumbents must **correctly identify the one or two issues that pose an existential electoral threat**. Once identified, these threats must be **addressed with overwhelming force, urgency, and relentless communication from early in the electoral cycle**. Waiting until an election year to tackle the electorate's primary sources of anxiety is a recipe for defeat.

Learning 4: The Psychologically Powerful Model that Dislodges Populists

Successful anti-populist challengers often use the same psychologically potent framework their opponents deploy: **Diagnose the Pain → Name the Culprit → Offer Deliverance**. Lula's 2022 victory in Brazil focused on the pain of hunger, named Bolsonaro as the culprit, and offered a return to prosperity. Similarly, India's opposition weaponised the pain of losing constitutional rights, naming Modi as the threat. Mainstream parties frequently lose by **abandoning this model for abstract, values-based campaigns** (e.g. Clinton 2016, Harris 2024). This failure stems from an institutional and psychological **aversion to emotional, "negative" messaging**. However, naming a culprit is not about populist-style demonisation; it is about **holding an opponent accountable for their specific actions and policy failures**. Anti-populists have the strategic capability, as shown in US mid-terms, but must overcome their inhibitions to use it in high-stakes national elections.

Learning 5: The Incumbent Strategy to Stem the Populist Tide

Incumbents cannot use the challenger's "pain-culprit" model, yet their standard strategies - focusing on values or competence - are **consistently failing to stop populist gains** across Europe. A more effective, offensive framework is required: **Identify Progress-in-Jeopardy → Name the Saboteur → Secure the Future**. This model, used effectively by Barack Obama in 2012, acknowledges achievements but injects urgency by **framing the opponent as a "saboteur" who would wreck that progress**. It transforms a generic warning into a pointed attack on the challenger's competence and character. It is a powerful alternative to the **weak "Choice Election" playbook**, where incumbents offer a set of features and ask voters to make a rational comparison. This flawed approach fails because **it sells features, not the emotional benefit of solving voters' pain**, thereby ceding the persuasive advantage to the populist challenger.

Learning 6: Mainstream Parties Will Lose if They Do Not Radically Up Their New Media Game

A **fundamental, structural asymmetry** defines the modern media landscape. The populist right operates a **coordinated, emotionally-driven media machine** across social platforms, podcasts, and influencers, setting the narrative and reaching millions of disengaged voters who avoid traditional news. In contrast, the mainstream left's ecosystem is **fragmented, reactive, and constrained by an outdated, 20th-century broadcast mentality**. This is not merely a tactical gap but a systemic failure. To compete, mainstream parties need a two-front strategy. First, an immediate tactical response: create semi-autonomous, creatively independent **"Digital Narrative Units"** to wage the daily battle for attention on platforms like TikTok and YouTube. Second, a **long-term cultural overhaul**: transform parties to identify, recruit, and elevate a new generation of leaders who are natural, authentic communicators skilled in the grammar of the new media ecosystem.

Learning 7: Win the Ground War by Building Permanent, Voter Focused, Hyper-Local Organisations

Populism is fuelled by voters' **profound sense of being disrespected by a distant elite**. To counter this, parties must first **heal this emotional wound before policy messages can be heard**. This requires shifting from a national media 'air war' to a **permanent, hyper-local 'ground war'** focused on building relationships and earning trust through action. Evidence from successful campaigns in Istanbul, Georgia, and Pennsylvania shows this model works by **establishing a constant, service-oriented community presence**, not just asking for votes at election time. The proposed solution is a voter focused **'Local Action Network'**, over and above the local party, as a permanent organising infrastructure. Its mission is to **'Listen, Act, and Communicate'** - identifying local problems, launching campaigns to fix them, and publicising every small win. This approach tangibly demonstrates a party is on the voters' side, **rebuilding trust and proving its value one community at a time**.

Introduction

It seems scarcely a week passes without news of another populist surge, another established political order under threat somewhere in the world. A year or so ago there was a hope, perhaps fragile even then, that the populist tide might be receding but this has proved unfounded. Instead, the challenge has intensified, reaching what can only be described as an emergency footing. The political upheaval wrought by Donald Trump in the United States serves as a stark, ongoing illustration - an attempt not merely at policy change, but at a cultural and constitutional revolution aiming to completely overthrow the existing order. This is no longer just about winning elections; for many democracies, it is becoming **a fight for survival**.

Just over a year ago, we published *7 Lessons for Winning Elections Against Populists*⁽¹⁾, drawing on global evidence to identify strategies that had proven effective. The aim was to equip democratic forces with actionable insights. However, the intervening period - marked by critical elections from Europe to India to the United States - demands a **sobering reassessment**. While some battles have been won, the **hard truth is that efforts to comprehensively stem the populist tide have often fallen short**. This realisation compels this new analysis. It is not merely an update, but a **necessary confrontation with the difficult learnings emerging from setbacks and the escalating nature of the threat**.

4 It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss the populist appeal as entirely baseless. Often, they tap into **genuine and deep-seated grievances** held by significant portions of the electorate⁽²⁾. Decades of globalisation have indeed left behind communities hollowed out by industrial decline⁽³⁾, while cultural shifts have generated anxiety and a sense of loss for others⁽⁴⁾. The devastating impact of crises like the opioid epidemic further fuels a sense of abandonment and betrayal⁽⁵⁾. Populists excel at channelling this legitimate pain and anger for electoral gain. And **AI is going to make things worse**. Yet, the cruel irony is that their powerful election-winning strategies rarely translate into effective governance that genuinely aids the people they claim to champion. Hungary, often lauded as a populist model, ranks among the poorest EU nations, hampered by cronyism and corruption that stifle development⁽⁶⁾. Studies across South America show that even left-wing populist regimes often fail to deliver greater redistribution than their non-populist counterparts⁽⁷⁾. The unfulfilled promises of the Brexit campaign - a stronger NHS, lower taxes, higher wages⁽⁸⁾ - serve as a stark reminder. Unfortunately, when populist governance fails to deliver, it does not necessarily discredit the populist approach; tragically, it can breed further disillusionment, allowing the **cycle of grievance and populist surges to continue**.

Populism, as we noted previously, operates fundamentally as a political strategy, adept at dividing societies into **'us' versus 'them'** and weaponising grievance. But understanding how it campaigns is insufficient without grasping why it resonates so powerfully today. A persistent reservoir of voter discontent, fed by a complex mix of economic insecurity, cultural anxieties, and a sense of elite detachment, provides fertile ground. Its strength ebbs and flows with the prevailing environment, but it is an enduring feature of modern politics.

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While the most prominent current threats in Western democracies often stem from right-wing populism, it is crucial to acknowledge its left-wing variants. Though ideological goals differ, the tactics of division, the anti-establishment posture, and the potential abuses of power share commonalities. Consequently, many learnings regarding electoral strategy against populism hold regardless of its specific ideological flavour.

In seeking evidence-based learnings, we draw from diverse global contexts. However, the **sheer volume and granularity of data emerging from recent US electoral cycles** - encompassing extensive polling, campaign analysis, and voter behaviour studies - provide an unparalleled depth of insight. Consequently, while the principles aim for broad applicability, many specific examples and analyses within these pages are significantly informed by the American experience. Our commitment remains to identify what works, but crucially, this now includes a **rigorous examination of what fails and why**. Sometimes the factors identified have been pivotal for others contributory combining with fair or ill political winds that have also played a part. **Learning from strategic missteps and understanding the reasons for anti-populist defeats is now as vital as replicating successes.**

The urgency outlined above demands more than theoretical discussion; it requires practical, albeit sometimes uncomfortable, strategies. The seven learnings presented here reflect this new reality. They delve into the existential nature of the threat, the evolving demands on leadership, the necessity of predicting the contours of the electoral battlefield well in advance, powerful election strategies that can match the populist's and a bottom-up plan to build relationships and trust. They are offered as a contribution to the vital, ongoing effort to **defend democratic norms against a challenge that shows no sign of abating.**

Learning 1: The Populist Threat is Existential to Democracy - Anti-Populists Must Do Whatever it Takes

The stakes could not be higher. Witness the **sustained assault on democratic institutions and norms** in the United States following the 2024 election. Observe the **societal fractures deepened** in Israel under its most right-wing, populist-influenced government. Consider the **democratic backsliding** in Hungary and Türkiye, or the **pressures on minority rights** in India - all consequences of populist victories, some secured a decade or more ago⁽⁹⁾. These are not abstract risks; they are the lived realities when the line against populism fails to hold. Are anti-populist forces truly awake to this **existential danger**? Are their strategies, tactics, and mindset commensurate with the precariousness of the situation? Are they prepared, individually and collectively, to **do whatever it takes** within the bounds of democratic competition to win?

Recent history suggests a troubling answer: **often, no.**

The 2024 US election provided a stark illustration. A pivotal moment occurred when Vice President Harris, asked if she would have done anything differently from President Biden, replied: "There is not a thing that comes to mind... I've been a part of most of the decisions" ⁽¹⁰⁾. This, in an election where **73% of voters said they were angry or dissatisfied with the way things were going in the country** ⁽¹¹⁾. Post-election conversation with the Harris team revealed that her rationale for this position was rooted in loyalty to Biden and concern for the precedent that disagreement between president and vice-president might set⁽¹²⁾. While perhaps principled in isolation, in the face of an opponent like Trump - whose threat Harris herself frequently articulated - **prioritising such institutional niceties over a clear signal of necessary change proved disastrous**. It telegraphed continuity when the electorate screamed for a different direction.

This highlights a **fundamental asymmetry**. Populists, particularly on the right, often **operate entirely unburdened by traditional political ethics or even basic truthfulness**⁽¹³⁾. They readily deploy division, scapegoating, outright lies, and conspiracy theories as standard tools. They are convinced the **ends justify the means - an attitude that leaves nothing off the table**⁽¹⁴⁾. Populist actors disproportionately hail from backgrounds - business, the military - where competitive aggression and dominance are ingrained⁽¹⁵⁾.

In contrast, anti-populist movements, particularly on the centre-left, often draw leaders and activists from 'helping' professions - education, social work, public service⁽¹⁶⁾. These backgrounds foster valuable qualities like empathy and collaboration, but can leave them ill-equipped for, and perhaps temperamentally resistant to, the **brutal, no-holds-barred nature of combating unscrupulous opponents**. They are often reasonable people attempting to engage truthfully with opponents for whom truth is merely instrumental.

anti-populists cannot afford to bring debating society rules to a knife-fight

Facing opponents who view the political contest as akin to warfare, anti-populists cannot afford to **bring debating society rules to a knife fight**. In the US, **twice as many state legislatures are gerrymandered to favour Republicans**⁽¹⁶⁾. Democrats are more likely to push for independent redistricting commissions and voting rights expansions. **High-minded principles that lead to electoral defeat become self-defeating luxuries**. The barbarians are no longer at the gates; as the Trump victory demonstrated, they are inside the citadel. Winning requires acknowledging this reality and developing the necessary resolve.

When populists break the law, they must be pursued. Not prosecuting Donald Trump for his attempted insurrection until it was too late was a **huge mistake**⁽¹⁷⁾. The removal of Calin Georgescu from May's ballot in Romania for alleged Russian interference proved effective; there was not a large enough backlash to deliver the populists the presidency⁽¹⁸⁾. And, in the cases of Jair Bolsonaro and Marine Le Pen, there is a good chance that justice will be done⁽¹⁹⁾. However, prosecuting can solidify support around the victim, it is no panacea, it is more likely to succeed if it **disqualifies the populist from running** not simply delivering a verdict for malfeasance as it did with Trump and Stormy Daniels in 2024.

Anti-populists may also need to **embrace tactics that feel uncomfortable**. Consider the recent discussion between commentators David Frum and Bill Kristol regarding soaring egg prices in the US, caused by avian flu⁽²⁰⁾. Should Democrats blame Republicans, knowing it is not directly their fault? Frum recalled how Trump's campaign readily blamed Biden for rising beef prices during Covid, despite complex causes like supply chain issues and drought. Their conclusion? In a political environment where one side weaponises simple narratives regardless of strict accuracy, the other side must be prepared to respond in kind, or **fight at a permanent disadvantage**. Blaming Trump for egg prices, they argued, was a necessary, if minor, infraction in this context.

Perhaps the left is learning. In 2010 George Osborne blamed the outgoing New Labour government for the financial crisis. In 2024 the incoming Labour government copied Osborne and relentlessly blamed the Tories for a 22bn budget black hole. **In neither case were the charges entirely true**.

In terms of post-truth, populists are in a class of their own. While each specific case requires judgement, the broader point stands: while maintaining their principles, anti-populists must be prepared to **fight fire with fire**, strategically and ruthlessly, when the alternative is **democratic erosion or destruction**.

Driving Down the Populist Vote Share is Non-Negotiable

For years, the primary strategy for keeping dominant populists from power, especially in multi-party systems, has been cooperation among fragmented opponents - **the cordon sanitaire**. This has yielded temporary successes: Le Pen denied the French presidency (though her party gains ground), for the moment PiS ousted in Poland, Modi denied an outright majority in India, fragile anti-populist coalitions formed in Germany and Austria.

However, this strategy is **inherently fragile and time-limited**. Coalitions struggle to agree and act decisively, often fuelling the very frustration that feeds populism⁽²¹⁾. As the **populist vote share inexorably rises**, maintaining the cordon sanitaire becomes harder, both practically and democratically. Excluding the largest party, even when their share of the vote is low, feeds their narrative of elite stitch-ups and deepens grievance, potentially boosting their support further⁽²²⁾. In first-past-the-post systems, once they become the largest party, the **game is often over**.

Therefore, **containment is not enough**. Circling the wagons offers temporary shelter, but the walls eventually crumble if the attacking force keeps growing. The strategic imperative must shift from merely blocking populists to **actively reducing their electoral vote share**. The subject of this paper.

Confronting the Immigration Nexus: The Danish Proof of Concept

Across the globe, **immigration consistently ranks as a top voter concern and a potent weapon for populists**⁽²³⁾. Right-wing populists in Europe centre their campaigns on it. It was **pivotal for Trump voters**⁽²⁴⁾. Even in contexts like Taiwan and South Africa, anxieties about immigration (from China and Zimbabwe, respectively) featured prominently in recent elections⁽²⁵⁾.

If anti-populists cannot credibly address voter concerns about immigration, they leave a **gaping vulnerability for populists to exploit**. Is it possible to neutralise this issue? Denmark offers a compelling, if controversial, **proof of concept**⁽²⁶⁾.

Facing a surge in asylum seekers in 2015 and the dramatic rise of the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party (DF), the Social Democrats, after losing power, underwent a **radical strategic shift** under leader Mette Frederiksen. They adopted significantly stricter immigration policies: replacing permanent residency with temporary protection, mandating integration measures, and actively preventing the formation of 'parallel societies'⁽²⁶⁾. Simultaneously, they championed progressive social policies specifically targeted at their traditional working-class base: an early retirement programme for manual labourers ("Fair Retirement"), rent controls targeting private equity speculation, and ambitious climate policies like a livestock carbon tax⁽²⁶⁾.

The **results were striking**. In 2019, the Social Democrats regained power, while the DF's vote collapsed. They won again in 2022, maintaining their dual approach⁽²⁶⁾. Internationally, the crackdown drew criticism from the left⁽²⁷⁾. Domestically, however, the Social Democrats framed it as a **moral necessity**, arguing that uncontrolled immigration threatened the sustainability of Denmark's generous welfare state - a system primarily benefiting the citizens the government has a duty to protect⁽²⁶⁾.

They argued that failure to manage immigration disproportionately harms lower-income areas through pressure on wages and public services⁽²⁶⁾. **They made a moral case for controlling immigration**.

A Difficult Lesson: Tough Choices are Unavoidable

The Danish model may not be directly transferable everywhere. Its specific policies might be unpalatable to many within traditional centre-left coalitions. Yet, it demonstrates conceptually that **combining credible control over immigration with left-wing social policies can dramatically curtail the appeal of right-wing populism**.

It also serves as a warning. In countries like Germany and Austria, recent coalition formations have seen left-leaning parties successfully dilute the tougher immigration stances of their centre-right partners⁽²⁸⁾. While potentially seen as an internal victory for progressive values, if this failure to deliver on widely held voter concerns about migration leads to further populist gains in the future, it will prove a **pyrrhic victory indeed**. Defeating populism requires facing **uncomfortable truths and making difficult, sometimes divisive, choices** - because the alternative is demonstrably worse.

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Learning 2: Leadership - Authenticity, Empathy, and Fighting on the Voters' Side

Our previous analysis, *7 Lessons for Winning Elections Against Populist*, highlighted a consistent pattern: **successful campaigns against populists** were often spearheaded by attractive, charismatic leaders. Figures like Emmanuel Macron in his 2017 victory, Ekrem İmamoğlu in Istanbul, or Robert Golob in Slovenia, presented as clean skins - **dynamic, with minimal political baggage, offering clear visions, and embodying a sense of future-oriented leadership**⁽⁹⁾. They stood in stark contrast to the often bombastic, yet compelling, populist figures they faced.

The perils of failing to prioritise electability were starkly demonstrated last year. In Türkiye, the unpopular and elderly leader of the CHP party, elevated through opaque back-room deals, led a broad coalition to a predictable defeat, a particularly galling outcome given the availability of more charismatic alternatives⁽²⁹⁾. Similarly, in the US, the Democratic Party's delayed recognition that the unpopular and aged incumbent, President Biden, needed to be replaced proved a fatal miscalculation⁽³⁰⁾. These examples underscore a brutal truth: in the high-stakes battle against populism, **selecting the most electable leader is not just preferable, it is vital**. Political parties must be prepared to make whatever difficult internal choices are necessary to elevate such individuals.

However, the reality of politics is that campaigns are often fought with the leader's parties already have. The critical question then becomes: **how should these leaders behave to maximise their chances against a populist opponent, especially when voter sentiment is one of frustration and anger?**

Focus groups and canvassing reports paint a consistent picture: **voters are fed up, often angry**, and perceive a pervasive stagnation where nothing truly changes for the better⁽³¹⁾. Economic pain dominates in some regions, cultural anxieties in others, but a unifying thread is the feeling that **the system is broken** - or, for populist sympathisers, that it is specifically broken for them. Populists masterfully tap into this. Their stridency and anger are not mere affectations; they are a **core component of their appeal**. They validate voter pain, offer superficially attractive (though often simplistic) solutions, and by mirroring voter anger, make the ignored feel seen and understood. This powerful positioning - **"I am on your side, I feel what you feel"** - builds a formidable allegiance, one that can excuse almost any transgression, as seen with Trump's supporters who readily overlook lies, bullying, and dishonesty⁽³²⁾.

Anti-populists often find themselves at a disadvantage, attempting to counter these emotionally charged narratives with reason and facts, a contest they frequently lose. The 2014 Brexit debates between Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage serve as a classic illustration: **Farage's emotive appeals to national identity and fear of immigration resonated far more strongly than Clegg's fact-based economic warnings**, with polls showing Farage winning decisively⁽³³⁾. To compete, those opposing populism must learn to appropriate a key element of the populist 'secret sauce': **emotion**.

One potent way to channel emotion is by embodying the “angry moderate”

The Power of the “Angry Moderate”

One potent way to channel emotion is by embodying the “**angry moderate**”. This means **authentically expressing anger on behalf of voters**: anger that healthcare is not good enough, that wages are not rising, that illegal immigration feels unmanaged. It is about **validating voter frustrations** (“You’re right to be mad about X”) using **simple, direct, emotional language**, while simultaneously **rejecting false populist solutions** (“Here’s why Y won’t work, but here’s what we can do that will”). This approach fights emotion with emotion, but grounds it in practical, common-sense responses.

This is a powerful strategy because it **acknowledges the legitimate grievances that populists exploit**, thereby stripping them of their unique claim to represent “the people”. By saying, “You’re right to be angry”, the angry moderate forges an emotional connection with voters, demonstrating empathy and shared frustration. This validation is a critical first step, as it disarms the populist argument that the establishment is out of touch or dismissive of ordinary peoples’ struggles. However, the angry moderate’s key move is to **pivot from shared anger to practical, achievable solutions**. Unlike the populist, who often offers simplistic or impossible fixes, the angry moderate provides a clear-eyed plan. This dual approach - **validating emotion while offering rational solutions** - is what allows the angry moderate to successfully co-opt the emotional energy of populism and direct it toward a more constructive, mainstream political agenda.

Emmanuel Macron: The French Reformer

Emmanuel Macron’s 2017 and 2022 presidential campaigns against Marine Le Pen **exemplify the angry moderate strategy**⁽³⁴⁾. Le Pen’s populism thrives on French voters’ anger about globalisation, economic decline, and immigration. Instead of dismissing these emotions, **Macron validated the underlying frustration**, acknowledging that the traditional political system had failed many people. He presented himself as a new kind of leader who would break with the past.

However, he sharply **rejected Le Pen’s populist solutions**. He directly confronted her proposals to leave the Eurozone and impose protectionist tariffs, explaining why these would harm the French economy and isolate the country⁽³⁴⁾. Macron’s counter-argument was not to ignore the anger but to channel it into a pragmatic, reformist agenda. He proposed a vision for a stronger France within a reformed European Union, focusing on labour market reforms and economic investment⁽³⁴⁾. By offering a practical, forward-looking plan, he showed voters that their anger could be addressed constructively, not just exploited for political gain.

Authenticity and Reaching the Disengaged

If there is one thing that today’s voters agree about, it is their dislike for the always on-message and evasive typical politician. They want to feel an **authentic emotional connection**. The disengaged, especially, have a keen radar for artifice. **A significant factor in Trump’s 2024 victory was his margin amongst voters who do not regularly follow politics or news**⁽³⁵⁾. And this demographic is growing worldwide. We discuss this further in Learning 6 on media. These voters are unlikely to be reached through traditional political media. Instead, they consume content on platforms like non-political podcasts (sports, gaming, lifestyle). **Trump astutely leveraged this, appearing**

on numerous major podcast shows, thriving in casual, often friendly “bro-like” settings where he could connect informally and largely avoid accountability⁽³⁷⁾. In contrast, Vice President Harris declined an invitation to the high-profile Joe Rogan Experience, citing scheduling conflicts, but raising questions about the ability, or willingness, of mainstream leaders to engage in such long-form, less controlled environments. Emphasising their importance, Edison research reports **19 percent of regular podcast listeners were undecided voters**⁽³⁸⁾. Anti-populist leaders must develop the capacity and willingness to **step outside traditional media bubbles, speak in everyday language, and demonstrate a human, relatable side on platforms where disengaged voters actually spend their time.**

Being Unequivocally on the Voters’ Side

Beyond emotional resonance and authenticity, voters need to believe their leader is **unequivocally fighting for them**. Andy Beshear, the Democratic Governor of deep-red Kentucky (a +26% Republican state), **exemplifies this brilliantly**⁽³⁹⁾. His rhetoric is relentlessly focused on economic dignity - **jobs, roads, schools, healthcare costs - the bread-and-butter issues impacting daily lives**. He acknowledges divisive cultural issues but consistently pivots back to shared economic priorities. His language is conversational, empathetic, and deliberately anti-establishment in tone. He positions Democrats as the party battling for working families against a distracted, out-of-touch political class, echoing populist “us vs. them” framing but without the destructive divisiveness.

Consider the contrast:

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- **Typical Politician (e.g. UK Minister style) on NHS waiting lists:** “Well, we’ve invested record funding into the NHS, and it’s important to recognise the pandemic’s impact. The opposition has no plan”. (Result: **Defensive, abstract, partisan**).
- **Beshear-Style (on the same issue):** “Let’s talk about what that number really means. **It means a mum in Bradford waiting in pain for a hip replacement... That’s unacceptable... We’ve hired 5,000 more nurses... but you shouldn’t have to live near a big city to get fast care. So next month, we’re rolling out pop-up surgeries ... Is it fixed yet? No. But we’re not just talking about funding - we’re talking about your time, your pain, and getting you back to your life**”. (Result: **Empathetic, concrete, solution-oriented, voter-focused**).

This is not just about rhetoric; it is about **demonstrable commitment**. Cory Booker, now senator Booker, when he first became Mayor of Newark, faced a city plagued by crime⁽⁴⁰⁾. His team identified the highest-crime area. **Booker did not just issue statements; he moved into that neighbourhood and went out on night patrols with the police**. This was a powerful, tangible demonstration of a leader literally putting himself on the line, fighting alongside and for his constituents.

Such leadership - **authentic, emotionally intelligent, and visibly dedicated to the peoples’ concerns** - is not just an asset; in the age of populism, it is a fundamental requirement for those who seek to defend democratic values. Being angry on voters’ behalf fits well with the psychological models discussed in Learnings 4 & 5. Of course, anger is not enough, it has to be seen to be translating into improved lives for voters. **Voters have to feel that things are getting better in the areas of their lives that are most important to them.**

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Learning 3: Address, Early and Hard, the Issues that Will Decide the Next Election

There is a fundamental, often painful, distinction between a **governing strategy** and an **election-winning strategy**. Governments naturally focus on implementing their policy agenda, addressing long-term challenges, and building a record they believe demonstrates competence and vision. They often assume this record will be the basis of their re-election campaign. However, **electoral battlegrounds are frequently determined by immediate, visceral voter concerns** that may differ significantly from the government's chosen priorities. Failing to recognise this divergence and proactively shape the narrative on the issues that will decide the election, rather than those one wishes would decide it, can be fatal. **The US 2024 election serves as a devastating case study.**

President Joe Biden entered office aiming to restore normalcy and competence, with a governing strategy centred on ambitious, bipartisan legislative achievements. His focus was on long-term investments in infrastructure - roads, bridges, broadband - and tackling climate change. These were significant goals, central to his vision for the country's future. However, they were also initiatives whose tangible benefits for most voters lay years down the line. Furthermore, they were funded significantly through borrowing, arguably adding fuel to the inflationary fire that was already beginning to ignite. Biden was understandably proud of these legislative wins, viewing them as the cornerstone of his intended legacy. Yet, as the election cycle unfolded, it became brutally clear that **voters were judging him not on future infrastructure projects, but on the immediate pain of the cost of living and the perceived chaos at the southern border.**

While the Biden administration grappled with the complex realities of post-pandemic recovery, global supply chain disruptions, and the inflationary impact of the war in Ukraine, the Republican opposition executed a relentless and highly effective **"doom-mongering" campaign**⁽⁴¹⁾. Fox News and conservative media constructed a narrative of "Biden's America" as a failing state⁽⁴²⁾. Soaring gas and food prices, driven by global factors, were framed as uniquely Biden's fault. Positive economic news, like low unemployment, was dismissed as "smoke and mirrors" or statistical manipulation⁽⁴³⁾. Record border crossings were presented as an unmitigated disaster directly caused by Biden's policies, relentlessly linked to crime waves despite data showing no such causal connection⁽⁴⁴⁾. Trump's rallies painted a picture of "a cesspool of crime and economic ruin"⁽⁴⁵⁾. Compounding this were endless stories amplifying Hunter Biden's business dealings, insinuating presidential corruption without evidence, and the constant circulation of edited clips portraying Biden as frail and mentally unfit⁽⁴⁶⁾. The objective was simple and devastatingly achieved: **create an overwhelming impression of a nation in decline, led by an incompetent incumbent.**

Against this backdrop, the Biden administration faced critical setbacks and missed crucial opportunities on the very issues that would come to dominate the election. In 2021, the ambitious Build Back Better bill, which contained significant measures to help families with childcare, healthcare, and housing costs - directly addressing the

cost-of-living pressures - **failed to pass due to two Democratic senators who would not vote for it**⁽⁴⁷⁾. What survived was primarily the infrastructure spending, **leaving a major gap in the administration's ability to offer immediate financial relief to millions.**

Simultaneously, **surging numbers at the southern border created a potent political vulnerability**. A significant missed opportunity occurred in 2022 when a bipartisan Senate deal, supported by Biden and key Republicans, offered a chance to implement stricter border controls and potentially neutralise the issue⁽⁴⁸⁾. However, **the deal collapsed, largely due to progressives within the Democratic party insisting on provisions unacceptable to Republicans**⁽⁴⁹⁾. Biden, perhaps wary of a backlash from his left flank, did not exert maximum pressure to force the deal through at a time when Trump was less able to torpedo such efforts.

Thus, two years out from the election, the administration found itself politically stymied on the two fronts causing voters' the most anxiety: **cost of living and immigration**. While various subsequent efforts were made, they were often perceived as half-hearted or ineffective. As the 2024 election loomed, a sense of panic seemed to set in. Last-minute executive orders targeting "shrinkflation" and "junk fees" lacked real enforcement teeth - **no major companies faced significant fines or public lawsuits**⁽⁴⁹⁾. Vice President Harris threatened action against price gouging, but without concrete follow-through, it appeared largely symbolic⁽⁵⁰⁾. On immigration, despite daily crossings hitting critical levels, decisive action only came four months before the election when Biden finally issued executive orders closing the border under certain conditions and increasing deportations. While crossings dropped significantly, **the damage was done; the perception of failure on the border was deeply entrenched.**

What are the hard learnings here? This painful episode underscores, yet again, the **existential threat that uncontrolled inflation, cost-of-living crises, and unmanaged immigration pose to incumbent governments**. These issues tap into deep anxieties about economic security and societal stability, and populists are masters at exploiting the resulting anger and frustration.

But could the Democrats have navigated this differently? Hindsight suggests that while the administration recognised the political damage from inflation and immigration, these issues were never given the absolute, **overriding priority** their electoral significance demanded. The actions taken were **too incremental, too late**. Had the administration truly internalised the scale of the danger early on, a radically different approach was conceivable.

Imagine, for instance, if Biden had declared war on inflation from 2022 onwards, adopting a **"Profiteers vs. the People"** campaign footing. Armed with data, such as the Economic Policy Institute finding that over half of inflation stemmed from increased corporate profit margins⁽⁵¹⁾, he could have relentlessly named and shamed companies perceived to be price gouging, initiated high-profile antitrust actions, and credibly threatened regulatory breakups. Such aggressive tactics have historical precedents, from FDR⁽⁵²⁾ to Lula in Brazil. Similarly, adopting a "whatever it takes" attitude towards the border crisis much earlier, as the late executive orders ultimately demonstrated was possible, could have significantly mitigated the political damage.

The overarching learning is stark: **political survival demands correctly identifying, well in advance, the issues that pose an existential threat in the upcoming election**, not just those aligned with a preferred governing narrative. Once identified, these threats must be addressed with overwhelming force and urgency, early in the electoral cycle. **Procrastination, incrementalism, or hoping the problem resolves itself is a recipe for defeat.** Waiting until the last minute is almost always fatal. **Governments must be prepared to pivot their focus and resources ruthlessly towards neutralising the threats that truly matter to voters**, even if it means deprioritising other cherished goals. Failure to do so creates the vacuum that populists are so adept at filling.

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Learning 4: The Psychologically Powerful Model that Dislodges Populists

Populists, as is well understood, are adept at tapping into public dissatisfaction. They often frame their campaigns around a simple, potent structure: they identify a **source of pain or grievance** prevalent within a segment of the electorate, **name a clear culprit** (often elites, minorities, or external forces), and **offer a redemptive vision**, typically a return to a perceived better past. Marine Le Pen's 2017 campaign, for instance, vividly illustrated this by focusing on fears around immigration, terrorism, and loss of French identity (the pain), blaming "Parisian elites" and a "Germany-dominated EU" (the culprits), and promising a restoration of national sovereignty (the deliverance)⁽⁶³⁾.

This fundamental framework is well known to election strategists and has been used by them with decisive effect to successfully push back against populists. In other words, **many successful anti-populist campaigns have used** the very same psychological model their opponents deploy:

Diagnose the Pain → Name the Culprit → Offer Deliverance

- **Lula da Silva's 2022 victory over Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil** provides a compelling illustration. Lula clearly identified a **profound pain: widespread hunger**. Bolsonaro had dismantled Lula's famed Bolsa Familia cash transfer programme and slashed school meal budgets, leading to widespread food insecurity - an estimated 55% of the population suffered from it⁽⁶⁴⁾. The culprit was unequivocally Bolsonaro, though his total mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the tragic loss of countless lives, and his assault on the Amazon rainforest, which made Brazil an international pariah and a source of national shame for many, also significantly contributed to public anger. The Deliverance Lula offered was **"Zero Hunger", a restoration of vital benefits, and a return to the "happy times"** of his previous, highly popular presidency (he left office with an 87% approval rating)⁽⁶⁵⁾. While Lula also campaigned on Bolsonaro's threat to democracy, the **core of his successful appeal**, powerfully amplified by the visible impact of hunger, lay in this clear pain-culprit-deliverance framework.

- **The INDIA coalition's 2024 campaign** in India is another sophisticated example, executing two parallel Pain/Culprit/Deliverance strategies.

1. **Modi's Hubris and the Constitutional Threat:** During the campaign, Modi's BJP boasted that they would win 400+ seats, gaining a super-majority that would allow them to change the constitution⁽⁶⁶⁾. The INDIA alliance weaponised this perfectly, executing a narrative targeted with **surgical precision at Dalits and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)** who were concerned that their privileges under the constitution might end.

- **Pain:** "You are about to lose your constitutional protections and affirmative action privileges". This is a terrifying, existential pain for lower-caste voters.

- **Culprit:** **Narendra Modi**, whose hubris and ideology make him a direct threat to your way of life.
- **Deliverance:** "Vote for us. We will **protect the constitution and your rights within it**".

Support for the BJP and the NDA (Modi's coalition) among **Dalits declined by 5 percentage points** nationally, while **EBC support dropped by 10 points or more** in key northern states. In contrast, **upper-caste Hindus remained broadly supportive**, showing only minimal declines overall⁽⁶⁷⁾.

2. **Inflation and Cost of Living:** This was the second narrative, aimed at the broader population⁽⁶⁸⁾.

- **Pain:** "The price of food and fuel is crushing your family".
- **Culprit:** **Narendra Modi**, whose economic policies favour a few billionaire cronies (the Adani connection was hammered relentlessly) at the expense of ordinary people.
- **Deliverance:** "We will focus on jobs and wealth distribution to help the many, not just the few".

Rahul Gandhi's Role

His campaign evolved. **He did not just speak about "democracy" in the abstract; he made it tangible. At every rally, he would hold up a copy of the constitution**⁽⁶⁹⁾. He successfully linked the abstract concept of "democracy" to the concrete fear of losing constitutional protections. This was the **most effective messaging of his career because he finally learned to connect a systemic threat to a personal pain**.

Of course, the INDIA coalition did not win. It **lacked a clear, singular leader and struggled to offer a unified, positive vision for the future**⁽⁶⁰⁾. The lack of a clear answer to the question "If not Modi, then who and what?" likely cost them votes among uncommitted voters who feared instability.

Nevertheless, the Indian election is a sophisticated example of a successful challenger campaign that **diagnosed multiple pains, named Modi as the common culprit, and offered specific deliverances**. It is a model to be emulated.

Election strategists have used this model in other victories over populists, such as the defeat of Benjamin Netanyahu in 2021. Large parts of the Israeli electorate were frustrated with **Netanyahu's prolonged governance, internal conflicts, and corruption**. He was effectively portrayed as the culprit responsible for political dysfunction. The diverse coalition promised deliverance through unity, the restoration of democratic values, and a more stable government⁽⁷⁾. The same pattern is visible in the Czech Republic (Babi defeat, 2021), Bulgaria (Borisov's defeat, 2021), and the moral victory of the opposition in Venezuela (2024).

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campaigns have
used

Diagnose the pain



Name the Culprit



Offer Deliverance

The model works because **addressing the genuine pain of the electorate is fundamental**, and explicitly naming a culprit provides voters with an identifiable agent to hold accountable. This act of naming can arouse powerful emotions - anger, frustration, even rage - thereby providing a strong stimulus to vote. Crucially, it allows anti-populist campaigns to **connect emotionally, something they notoriously fail to do**. The promise of deliverance then offers a hopeful path forward.

While the successful application of the “Diagnose the Pain → Name the Culprit → Offer Deliverance” model offers a compelling explanation for these outcomes, it is crucial to acknowledge that complex electoral victories are rarely attributable to a single factor. Nevertheless, this framework, often recognised as a core principle in effective political communication and marketing strategies, has **consistently proven its power to mobilise voters by creating a clear, emotionally resonant narrative**, that addresses felt grievances and offers a tangible path to resolution.

Why Mainstream Parties Choose to Lose

Mainstream parties often deploy **weak strategies and lose critically important elections by failing to adopt this model**.

- **Türkiye (2023)**: The Turkish people were in pain, suffering from **hyperinflation and the recent deaths of 53,000 people in an earthquake⁽⁶¹⁾**. Erdogan was a clear culprit for **both the economic mismanagement and the deaths due to corruptly failing to enforce building regulations⁽⁶²⁾**. All the elements for a powerful “Pain → Culprit → Salvation” campaign were present but were **not wholeheartedly grasped and deliverance ruthlessly pursued**.
- **United States (2004, 2016, 2024)**: In the unsuccessful campaigns of John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, and Kamala Harris, there was **plenty of pain and credible culprits who were not held to account**.
 - In 2004, the pain was the **Iraq quagmire and the mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina**. Kerry ran on “competence and his biography”, which was brutally demolished⁽⁶³⁾.
 - In 2016, a huge segment of the electorate felt a **deep economic and cultural abandonment**. Clinton ran on competence (“I’m the most qualified candidate”) and a values-based theme (“Stronger Together”). She chose **not to diagnose the specific pain of the voters she needed to win⁽⁶⁴⁾**.
 - Kamala Harris’s closing argument **was a values-based one - Democracy - not on how she would address the high cost of living pain⁽⁶⁵⁾**.

A Revealing Contradiction: The Mid-Term Successes

This pattern of choosing weaker, abstract strategies for presidential races is especially puzzling because the same political actors have proven they can execute powerful P/C/D campaigns in other contexts. In the 2018 and 2022 US mid-term elections, for example, the **Democrats ran highly effective campaigns that were textbook examples of this model.**

- In 2018, the pain was the **potential loss of healthcare protections**. The culprit was a Republican party that had repeatedly tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act. The deliverance was to vote Democrat to protect your coverage⁽⁶⁶⁾.

In 2022, after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, the pain was the **tangible loss of reproductive rights**. The culprit was the “extremist” Republican party that enabled it. The deliverance was a vote for Democrats to codify abortion rights⁽⁶⁷⁾.

So, the strategic capability clearly exists. Why, then, does it seem to vanish during a presidential election? The difference appears to be contextual. Mid-term elections are **inherently referendums on the party in power, providing a natural and easy-to-name culprit**. Individual candidates are also freer from the perceived need to adopt a “presidential”, unifying posture.

This contrast suggests the problem is not a lack of knowledge, but that the **unique pressures of a presidential contest** - the demand to be a leader for all, the national media scrutiny, and the temptation to frame the election as a grand “Choice” between two visions (a concept we explore in Learning 5) - **activate the deep-seated psychological and institutional barriers that lead them to abandon a winning strategy. Understanding these barriers is therefore critical.**

Before exploring these barriers, we need to mention that there are other cases where the right strategic form is adopted, but the **wrong pain is chosen**.

- **Hungary (2022):** The united opposition had a huge opportunity to depose Viktor Orban. Hungary has declined to become one of the poorest countries in the EU⁽⁶⁸⁾ due to cronyism and corruption⁽⁶⁹⁾. And with inflation running at 25%⁽⁷⁰⁾ his was fertile ground for a **P/C/D strategy**.
 - **The Campaign They Could Have Run:** A relentless, gut-level campaign focused entirely on the pain of economic immiseration. Every day, the message could have been: “The price of your food is higher because of Orban’s cronies. Your hospital is crumbling because Orban’s friends stole the money.
 - **The Campaign They Actually Ran:** A high-minded, elite-focused campaign cantered on the pain of democratic decline. Their dominant message was abstract: “Save the rule of law”, “Restore democracy”. They mentioned corruption, but framed it as a procedural sin, not as a direct cause of kitchen-table pain⁽⁷¹⁾.

They lost because they chose the wrong ‘pain.’ It is a classic example of a **mainstream party believing an appeal to abstract principles is more persuasive than an appeal to raw, personal economic interest.**

The Psychological and Institutional Barriers

Why do mainstream parties so often fail to adopt this powerful model in presidential elections?

Drew Westen, a professor of psychology, wrote the seminal book on this subject, *The Political Brain*⁽⁷²⁾. His central thesis is that Democrats (and by extension, many mainstream parties) **consistently lose elections they should win because they believe elections are won in the “political marketplace of ideas”, while Republicans know elections are won in the “political marketplace of emotions”.**

Westen argues that **Democrats are uncomfortable with emotional narratives, viewing them as crude and manipulative.**

“The primary currency of the political marketplace is not policy but feeling... **The Democratic party has become the party of the head, and as a result it has lost its heart and its gut - and with them, much of its voice**”⁽⁷²⁾.

Beyond ideology, the very structure of mainstream parties **works against a clean P/C/D narrative.**

- **Coalition Management:** They are “big-tent” parties. A sharp message that excites young progressives might alienate the suburban moderates and other coalition partners. To avoid offending anyone, **they sand down the sharp edges of their message, resulting in a bland campaign.**
- **The “Government-in-Waiting” Posture:** Even as challengers, they feel a need to appear “serious” and “responsible”. This leads them to **produce complex position papers that kill the emotional momentum of a simple P/C/D message.**

But as stated in Learning 1, the **Populist Threat is Existential. Anti-populists must be prepared to do what it takes to win.**

Systemic vs. Personal Culprits

Sometimes, populists are defeated by a P/C/D campaign where **the culprit is a system rather than an individual.**

- **Emmanuel Macron (2017):** Campaigning as an outsider, Macron tapped into the pain of voter exhaustion with traditional left-right politics amongst the young and urban middle class. He identified the culprit not as a person, but as the entire **“political establishment” and its “failed, divisive policies”**. His deliverance was a new, “neither left nor right” movement promising national renewal⁽⁷³⁾. Macron had the good fortune of President Hollande deciding not to run and a scandal involving the right-wing candidate. However, analysts noted that his “neither left nor right” framing - **portraying himself as a fresh alternative against discredited parties - was central to his first-round breakthrough and ultimately to his victory over Marine Le Pen**^(73a).
- **Barack Obama (2008):** His “Hope and Change” campaign identified a systemic culprit. He framed his campaign as a **rejection not only of the failed policies of the Bush years, but of the same old politics that had dominated Washington for decades**. He argued that America’s problems could not be solved by repeating the worn-out ideas and politics of the past, and called for a new kind of politics to meet the challenges of the future⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Analysts and campaign insiders alike emphasise that Hope and Change was not cosmetic branding but the **strategic linchpin of Obama's 2008 victory**. The New Yorker reports that David Axelrod and David Plouffe deliberately positioned Obama against the Bush administration, casting him as a true change agent. This narrative was reinforced consistently across speeches, where Change featured as a dominant motif - second only to the economy. Together, these communications choices helped convert widespread frustration with the status quo into a compelling movement that carried Obama to victory^(74a).

These two examples illustrate how powerful naming an abstract system as culprit can be, but it is important **not to always lean on the abstract to the exclusion of naming an individual culprit**.

However, there is a danger that the liberal's distaste for confrontation can lead them to prefer a systemic culprit when they should be holding their adversary accountable. When the campaign says the culprit is: "our broken politics", we must ask: "is this a strategic 'tell' that the campaign is pulling its punches?" Is a fear of "going low" or negative campaigning a sign that they are unwilling to say: **the culprit is my opponent who has broken our politics**.

There is a profound moral distinction between holding an opponent to account and engaging in populist-style attacks.

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Accountability, Not Annihilation

It is not naming an enemy as populists do; it is naming an opponent and holding them to account. **The difference lies in attacking actions versus attacking a person's being.**

The Populist Approach to Naming a Culprit

Focuses on "Being" and Identity
Attacks who the opponent is: a traitor, an enemy of the people, a member of a despised group, unpatriotic, physically weak, inherently evil.

Rhetoric of Dehumanisation
Uses language designed to cast the opponent outside the circle of legitimate citizenship: "vermin", "terrorists", "puppets", "enemies".

Goal: Annihilation
Aims to permanently delegitimise the opponent and their voters as a political force.

The Reputable Anti-Populist Approach

Focuses on Actions and Consequences
Attacks what the opponent has done: their policies, their broken promises, their record of corruption, their incompetence, their damaging decisions.

Rhetoric of Accountability
Uses language designed to hold the opponent to account: "failed", "corrupt", "irresponsible", "incompetent", "harmful".

Goal: Defeat
Aims to defeat the opponent in an election. It accepts that the opponent's voters are fellow citizens who have been misled.

Contrasting Campaign Behaviours: Poland 2023

The behaviour of Jarosław Kaczyński's PiS party provides a textbook example of the populist approach. The campaign relentlessly sought to frame Donald Tusk not as a political opponent, but as an **illegitimate national enemy, using dehumanising and conspiratorial language, labelling Tusk as a German agent and pure evil**⁽⁷⁵⁾. The attack was on his identity and patriotism.

In stark contrast, **Donald Tusk's winning strategy focused on holding Kaczyński and the PiS government accountable for their specific actions and failures.** He named PiS as the culprit for the tangible pain of high inflation, the erosion of women's rights, and the loss of billions in EU funds⁽⁷⁶⁾. **He weaponised their record, not their identity.**

The story is the same for the successful anti-populist challengers like Lula in Brazil and Robert Golob in Slovenia who effectively neutralised populist opponents not through identity attacks, but by **holding them accountable for consequential policy failures.** Lula blamed Bolsonaro for soaring food costs, hunger, and poverty⁽⁷⁷⁾.

In Slovenia, Golob highlighted how Janša's government undermined democratic institutions and press freedoms⁽⁷⁸⁾. He held them **culpable for their record, not their identity.**

What About Biden in 2020?

Biden's 2020 win was achieved in unusual circumstances. He ran a low-energy, "competence and stability" campaign that would have struggled in normal circumstances. **What made victory more certain was the unique situation, it created the P/C/D narrative for him**⁽⁹⁸⁾.

- **The Pain was Universal and Overwhelming:** The chaos of the Trump presidency, amplified by his inept handling of the COVID crisis⁽⁷⁹⁾.
- **The Culprit was Self-Evident: Donald Trump made himself the unavoidable villain.**
- **The Deliverance was Passive but Perfect: In a moment of extreme chaos, the most powerful deliverance was a simple promise of a Return to Normalcy. "Not being Trump" was the winning message.**

Biden's 2020 victory was the result of a unique national emergency. It is **not a replicable model** for normal political times.

In summary to dislodge populist incumbents or defeat them in elections, anti-populists must adopt a model they are already familiar with but quite often fail to use the psychologically powerful challenger's strategy: **Diagnose the Pain → Name the Culprit → Offer Deliverance.** Sometimes the culprit can be systemic, but where necessary, they must name the populist leader and hold them accountable for their actions. **Holding a populist to account is not demonising them or "going low".** The deep-seated attitudinal and institutional barriers that lead to weak strategies must be overcome.

Learning 5: The Incumbent Strategy to Stem the Populist Tide

The Pain/Culprit/Deliverance model is a challenger's tool. An incumbent government cannot easily say, "things are terrible" (pain), and "it's someone else's fault" (culprit). **If things are terrible, the incumbent is, by definition, at least partially the culprit.**

So, what approach should be used by incumbents? We analysed the strategies used in the last parliamentary elections in all 27 EU countries. In these countries, **12 were mainstream governments defending against major populist challengers.** These included many of the largest states (Germany, France, Spain).

Four Common Strategies

The strategies adopted by these 12 governments fall into four groups:

- **Values-based Confrontation (6 cases): The most frequent strategy.** Directly confronting the populist challenger on issues of democratic values, rule of law, and tolerance.
- **Policy Adoption (2 cases):** Adopting some of the populists' key policy positions, particularly on immigration, to win back voters. **The 2023 Netherlands General Election is a sobering case of this approach backfiring badly.**
- **The Cordon Sanitaire (2 cases): Maintaining a strict firewall, refusing to govern with populist parties.** This is the German strategy against the AfD and the Belgian one against Vlaams Belang.
- **Focus on Competence and Stability (2 cases): A technocratic appeal, highlighting the incumbent's experience and economic management.**

These strategies are not working, the populists keep gaining share

The Alarming Trend

The problem is that, in most cases, these strategies are not working.

As our table below shows, in the majority of cases, the populist parties keep gaining share.

Country (Election Year)	Populist Challenger	Incumbent Strategy Used	Populist Previous Election %	Latest Election %	Change	Populist Result
Netherlands (2023)	PVV (right-wing)	Adoption	10.8% (2021)	23.5%	+12.7	Major Gain
Austria (2024)	FPÖ (right-wing)	Competence	16.2% (2019)	28.8%	+12.6	Major Gain
Portugal (2024)	Chega (right-wing)	Competence	7.3% (2022)	18.1%	+10.8	Major Gain
Bulgaria (2023)	Revival (right-wing)	Values-based	4.8% (Nov '21)	13.9%	+9.1	Major Gain
France (2022)	RN (right-wing)	Values-based	33.9% (2017)	41.5%	+7.6	Major Gain
Finland (2023)	Finns Party (right-wing)	Values-based	17.5% (2019)	20.1%	+2.6	Gain
Sweden (2022)	Sweden Dems (right-wing)	Competence	17.5% (2018)	20.5%	+3.0	Gain
Belgium (2024)	Vlaams Belang (right-wing)	Cordon Sanitaire	12.0% (2019)	13.8%	+1.8	Gain
Denmark (2022)	Populist Right Bloc	Adoption (success)	~15% (2019)	~15%	~0	Held
Spain (2023)	Vox (right-wing)	Values-based	15.1% (Nov '19)	12.4%	-2.7	Loss
Ireland (2024)	Sinn Féin (left-wing)	Values-based	24.5% (2020)	19%	-5.5	Major Loss
Greece (2023)	Syriza (left-wing)	Competence/ Saboteur	31.5% (2019)	20.1%	-11.4	Major Loss

In most cases, these strategies are **failing because they do not address voters’ core pain**.

- Unlike 2017, Macron (2022) took a very different approach and campaigned on “grand, abstract themes” like the future of Europe, while Le Pen **masterfully diagnosed the pain of inflation** and talked about “the price of petrol”⁽⁸⁰⁾.
- The Dutch VVD’s policy adoption on immigration was “a tactical, short term, campaign-season lurch to the right... **transparently opportunistic**”⁽⁸¹⁾. In contrast, the successful Danish Social Democrats’ approach was “a strategic, long-term, ideological realignment” that **neutralised the issue years in advance**.
- In Sweden (2022), the Prime Minister campaigned on benefits while ignoring crime. The populist Sweden Democrats vowed **to keep Swedes safe** and became the second-largest party⁽⁸²⁾.

“**Values-Based Confrontation**” manifests in various forms. It can be a direct call to **defend democracy and the rule of law** against perceived authoritarian threats. Other expressions include championing fairness and justice, advocating for inclusivity and unity over division, or upholding civility and decency against aggressive rhetoric. It can take a broader, perhaps more subtle, shape, such as appealing to a shared sense of national character. While musing on the how UK’s Reform party might be confronted the political strategist Alistair Campbell said that the election might be framed as a fundamental choice about “**what sort of country we want to be**”, implicitly contrasting the incumbent’s vision of an inclusive, respectful, and open society with the populist’s often extreme divisive or insular agenda. This is a **Values-Based Confrontation**.

The Way Forward: From Defence to Offence

From our study the rare exceptions where populists were thwarted are instructive. Some were due to happenstance - scandals, windfalls (Ireland). Others succeeded by leveraging a national emergency, like a war (Estonia) or a pandemic (New Zealand 2020), where a “competence” message becomes powerful.

However, Greece in 2023⁽⁸³⁾ stands as a **compelling exception - offering a replicable model for politics**. The governing New Democracy party took the initiative, crafting a forward-looking campaign under the banner **Steady, Boldly, Forward** that emphasised economic success - **500,000 jobs created, 50 taxes cut, rising wages and investment** - and painted the prior Syriza years as a period of chaos and instability from which the citizens suffered. Their message was unmistakable: **“Trust us - we’ve delivered stability and growth; don’t return to turmoil; stick with us to secure Greece’s future’**. That **offensive framing resonated with voters** - a resounding electoral mandate in June saw them win ~40 % of the vote and a strong majority.

This model weaponises Danny Finkelstein's observation of three election types

This is an example of a powerful incumbent framework:

Identify Progress-in-Jeopardy → Name the Saboteur → Secure the Future

This model **weaponises the political analyst Danny Finkelstein's** observation of three election types: “steady as she goes”, “**We're on the right track/Don't Turn Back**”, and “time for change”⁽⁸⁴⁾. The above model is the active, **high-energy version of the first two**. It injects urgency. The “Saboteur” concept gives the “Don't Turn Back” warning a **face, a name, and malicious intent**.

Obama's 2012 campaign is a perfect example⁽⁸⁵⁾.

- **Progress-in-Jeopardy:** “We rescued the auto industry... but this recovery is fragile”.
- **The Saboteur:** The campaign relentlessly defined Mitt Romney as the saboteur who would “Let Detroit Go Bankrupt” and wreck the recovery.
- **Secure the Future:** The slogan was simply “Forward”. The message: **do not change course now**.

Rejecting the Flawed “Choice Election” Playbook

Why do mainstream parties so often default to weak strategies like “Values” or “Competence” that only work against populists in a crisis? One reason is a **deeply flawed strategic playbook** they consistently follow: framing the contest as a “Choice Election”.

A “Choice Election” is when a party presents itself as a package deal (The Leader, The Values, The Policies) and asks voters to make a rational comparison. This strategy is an **abrogation of the core principles of persuasion**.

1. **It Ignores the “Need” (The Pain):** It starts with the party's platform, not the voters' anxiety.
2. **It Sells “Features”, Not “Benefits”** (The Deliverance): It presents a long list of policies (features) but **fails to translate them into a clear, emotional “benefit” for the voter**. It forces the voter to do the hard work of connecting a policy to their own life.

Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign is the ultimate case study. Trump ran a pure Pain/Culprit/Deliverance campaign. Clinton ran a “Choice” campaign, presenting her features (experience, values, detailed policies)⁽⁸⁶⁾ and asking voters to make a rational choice. She presented a product features list; he sold an emotional cure for their pain.

Why are Incumbents Not Using the Jeopardy Strategy?

This choice election habit may be one reason but is it this alone? Are there other reasons why only one, out of the twelve populist facing elections we analysed, employed the potent Jeopardy strategy? While we were not privy to the strategic deliberations within these campaigns, we can hypothesise about the factors that steer mainstream incumbents away from this more offensive approach.

One compelling reason might be a **lack of perceived progress on issues truly salient to voters**. The Jeopardy model fundamentally requires an incumbent to identify tangible “Progress-in-Jeopardy” - concrete achievements or improvements that voters recognise and value. If mainstream governments, despite their efforts, have not **demonstrably delivered enough on the cost of living, immigration, crime, or other issues deeply felt by the electorate**, then they simply lack the foundation upon which to build a credible “progress” narrative. In such cases, the prerequisite for the Jeopardy strategy is absent, highlighting a critical lesson: **incumbents must not only deliver but forcefully and visibly deliver on voters’ priorities well in advance of an election** (as explored in Learning 3).

Secondly, there is a strong argument that mainstream parties fall into a **psychological trap driven by their legitimate outrage**. Faced with populists who often disregard democratic norms, engage in divisive rhetoric, and challenge established institutions, many in the mainstream feel a passionate obligation to defend core democratic values, the rule of law, and tolerance.

This deeply held belief can, ironically, force them into the seemingly defensive “Values-Based Confrontation” strategy. This approach, while morally understandable and often heartfelt, assumes that voters will prioritise these abstract ideals above their immediate, personal concerns like economic hardship or security. As our analysis suggests, **this is rarely the case outside of exceptional circumstances** where these values are under a direct, tangible threat that directly impacts voters’ daily lives.

Therefore, the infrequent use of the Jeopardy strategy appears to be a combination of two factors: a potential deficit in delivering visible progress on salient voter issues, and a **psychological gravitational pull towards a “Values-Based Confrontation”** driven by understandable, but electorally risky, outrage. These factors, coupled with the ingrained habit of relying on the flawed “Choice Election” playbook, create a difficult landscape for incumbents seeking to stem the populist tide.

An Alternative Path : The Swedish Case

A wiser course for the Swedish Social Democrats in 2022 would have been to **seize the issue on crime at least eighteen months before the election**, validating voters’ fears and demonstrating action. They could have reframed the enemy from “immigrants” to **“Organised Criminal Gangs”** and offered a solution that was both “tough” (more police) and “smart” (addressing root causes).

With this groundwork laid, the campaign could have deployed our incumbent model:

- **Progress-in-Jeopardy:** “We have launched a comprehensive plan to fight gang crime... but it is fragile”.
- **The Saboteurs:** “The SD’s only answer is to divide our country. Their rhetoric and budget cuts would destroy community trust and defund the very programs that prevent crime”.
- **Secure the Future:** Frame the choice as a **serious plan versus the dangerous chaos of the wreckers**.

This would have **transformed their greatest vulnerability into a source of strength**.

In **summary** to stem the populist tide, incumbent leaders need to **identify and address what is salient and important to voters well before an election** (Learning 3). With that foundation, they can deploy the psychologically powerful **Progress-in-Jeopardy→ Name the Saboteur→ Secure the Future** framework. The weak **“Choice Election”** playbook, which focuses on features instead of benefits, must be firmly rejected.

The weak “Choice Election” playbook... must be firmly rejected

Learning 6: Mainstream Parties Will Lose if They Do Not Radically Up Their New Media Game

Mainstream parties are **completely outcompeted** in the new media ecosystem, and unless they can adapt, they will not be able to stem, never mind reverse the populist tide.

It is not even a fair fight at the moment. There is not just a marginal advantage for populists; it is a **fundamental, a structural advantage** that shapes the entire electoral battlefield.

The Right-Wing Media Machine: Coordination and Emotional Firepower

The right-wing media ecosystem operates like a disciplined army, with a clear chain of command and a playbook optimised for emotional resonance and rapid deployment⁽⁸⁷⁾. At its centre sits the leader - Trump in the US, comparable figures elsewhere - who sets the daily narrative through direct channels (e.g. Truth Social). This message is instantly amplified by a tightly coordinated network: surrogates like Tucker Carlson or Steve Bannon translate it into polemical segments; meme factories distil it into shareable outrage or humour; and grass-roots groups (Turning Point USA, Moms for Liberty) push it into local communities. The system thrives on repetition and saturation - when Trump claims election fraud, Fox News debates it, influencers meme it, and podcasts dissect it for days, creating an inescapable narrative. Crucially, the right exploits platform algorithms by prioritising emotionally charged content (anger, fear, tribal loyalty), which platforms reward with greater reach⁽⁸⁸⁾. The result is a **self-reinforcing cycle that dominates attention and shapes voter perceptions** before critics can respond.

And it is the same elsewhere

Across Europe, the populist and far-right parties have similarly mastered a disciplined digital strategy, leveraging social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly cultivate their base. In the UK, figures like Nigel Farage, through platforms like TikTok and GB News, craft highly shareable, often provocative content that simplifies complex issues into clear, “us vs. them” narratives, relentlessly amplifying messages on immigration and national sovereignty. In Germany, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) effectively uses social media, particularly Telegram, YouTube and TikTok to disseminate anti-establishment and anti-immigrant messages, often employing satire and emotionally charged framing to spread their agenda and circumvent mainstream media scrutiny⁽⁸⁹⁾. In France, Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (RN) and its allied digital ecosystem consistently push themes of national identity and security, utilising direct social media engagement and a network of online influencers to build a loyal following and dominate discussions, particularly on issues of immigration and cultural change⁽⁹⁰⁾. These movements prioritise content that triggers strong emotions like anger, fear, or national pride, which algorithms favour, creating a **self-reinforcing cycle of attention and narrative dominance**.

Globally almost
four in ten people...
actively avoid the
news... they are
unreachable by
traditional means

The Left's Dispersed and Defensive Struggle

In contrast, the left's media ecosystem resembles a **loose coalition of independent actors** - progressive activists, institutional NGOs, and mainstream outlets like MSNBC - often working at cross-purposes⁽⁹¹⁾. Without a unifying leader or centralised messaging, narratives fracture along ideological lines (e.g. AOC's Green New Deal vs. Biden's incrementalism). While right-wing media attacks with unified themes, the left often defaults to fact-checking or policy nuance, which struggles to compete for attention in an engagement-driven landscape. For example, during the 2020 US election, Trump's Stop the Steal lie spread globally within hours via coordinated amplification, while Democratic rebuttals were delayed by internal debates over tone and prioritisation⁽⁹²⁾. The left's reliance on traditional media (e.g. CNN's sober panels) and aversion to meme culture further cedes the digital battlefield. Even successful progressive influencers often focus on issue-based activism (climate, racial justice) rather than the relentless, personality-driven narrative warfare that mobilises populist bases.

The mainstream left and centre-left parties across Europe frequently exhibit a similar pattern of **fragmentation and reactivity** to their US counterparts. In the UK, the Labour Party, despite having official social media channels, often struggles to break through with consistent, emotionally resonant digital narratives, frequently relying on policy announcements or responding to attacks rather than proactively shaping the agenda with compelling long-form content or viral short-form videos⁽⁹³⁾. This reliance on traditional communication norms and a cautious approach to digital virality cedes significant ground in the online narrative war.

The Populist's Advantage is Structural

Today's situation is not merely a gap in tactics but a fundamental asymmetry. The right's ecosystem is built for offensive messaging, while the mainstream is reactive and institutionally constrained. Until mainstream parties adopt similar coordination - unifying leaders, rapid-response meme teams, and emotional storytelling - they will remain outgunned in the attention economy.

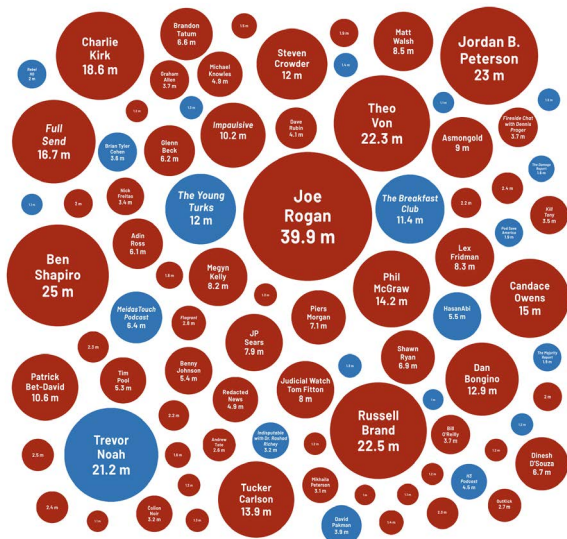
The Electoral Advantage of this New Media Dominance

The electoral advantage of new dominance extends even to low-engagement voters. Crucially, **Trump won among first-time or infrequent voters - those who had skipped the 2020 election but voted in 2024 - by 12 points**. This difference underscores how voters not regularly tuned into news or politics can become decisive swing voters⁽⁹⁴⁾.

Globally almost four in ten people (39%) now sometimes or often actively avoid the news, up from 29% in 2017⁽⁹⁵⁾. So, they are **unreachable by traditional means**⁽⁹⁵⁾. They do not watch the Sunday morning political shows, they do not read the policy section of newspapers, and they do not follow mainstream political accounts. But they are reached through ambient exposure on entertainment platforms. They are on TikTok which now has **1.5 to 1.6 billion monthly active users** worldwide⁽⁹⁶⁾, on Instagram for lifestyle content, and listening to podcasts like Joe Rogan for interesting conversations⁽⁹⁷⁾. As the chart on the left shows, in the US right-wing podcasts are totally dominant^(97a) and **populist content is injected into this entertainment stream seamlessly**. A clip of Farage being "commonsensical" or a charismatic populist talking about a simple, relatable problem (like the price of groceries) does not feel like

“politics”. It feels like authentic, interesting content. As the election grows closer populist politicians are invited onto these right-leaning shows where they are given easy unchallenging interviews and can appear normal and relatable⁽³⁸⁾

Total following of top U.S. right-leaning and left-leaning online shows



From a study of 320 online shows with a right-leaning or left-leaning ideological bent. Each circle represents a show with a total following more than 1 million, with circle size proportional to total following as determined with subscriber and follower data collected on February 3, 2025, from YouTube, Spotify, Rumble, Twitch, Kick, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

On the other side of this ambient exposure there is a **Democratic Void**. When these voters scroll and watch or listen to right wing shows they absorb engaging populist content and then... nothing from the other side. The absence of a compelling counter-narrative means the populist message is absorbed by default, without opposition.

Beyond the apolitical, their dominance provides the critical advantages of **agenda setting power, enthusiasm and narrative immunity.**

Because they dominate the platforms where conversation happens, amongst the swing group of uninvolved voters they decide what the election is about for this group. They can make immigration, “wokeness”, or a specific cultural grievance the **central issue of the campaign**, forcing mainstream parties to constantly play defence on their turf.

The emotional, high-arousal content of populist media fires up their base in a way that a policy paper never can. This creates a significant “**enthusiasm gap**”, which directly translates into higher turnout among their supporters, more small-denomination donations, and more volunteers⁽³⁹⁾.

The ecosystem insulates individuals within the bubble. They receive a **one-sided and hence distorted understanding of the world** around them, and they can be oblivious to government actions that they would otherwise find troubling. Experiments have shown that when voters within the right-wing ecosystem are exposed to alternative points of view, their opinions change¹⁰⁰.

The pattern is the same everywhere: **populist and far-right parties embrace the new media with enthusiasm, while mainstream parties are suspicious and lack fluency.**

The Origins of the Right-Wing Media Machine

The right's media dominance did not appear overnight; it is the **culmination of a decades-long strategy**. In the United States, a powerful conservative movement, convinced that the mainstream media was irredeemably biased against it, began building a parallel information ecosystem from the ground up. This project started with newsletters and partisan magazines in the mid-20th century, evolved with the rise of shock-jock radio hosts in the 1980s, and cemented itself with the launch of Fox News in 1996⁽¹⁰¹⁾. This network was designed to not just report news, but to actively shape a right-wing narrative and provide a consistent, ideological home for its audience. This model has since been replicated globally, with similar partisan news channels emerging in other countries⁽¹⁰²⁾. Crucially, in recent years, this legacy media infrastructure has seamlessly integrated with a new wave of digital platforms, including a network of popular podcasts, influencers, and algorithmic channels like TikTok and YouTube, which they have mastered to bypass traditional media entirely.

The Mainstream's Muted and Outdated Response

In stark contrast, mainstream parties have operated with a “muscle memory” developed during the 20th-century broadcast era. In government their central media strategy revolves around carefully managing the legacy media, much like Alastair Campbell’s “Grid” for New Labour, which meticulously planned messaging for newspapers and terrestrial television⁽¹⁰³⁾. This approach prioritised media discipline, agenda setting, and a centralised control of the narrative, and it proved highly effective at the time. Later when the new media ecosystem began to emerge with social media and podcasts, the initial reaction has been to largely ignore it, viewing it as a separate, ancillary space for youth outreach rather than the central arena of political combat it has become. While mainstream parties, including the Democrats under Obama, pioneered the use of digital tools for electoral success, they treated them as campaign tactics rather than as a new, foundational way of communicating. Obama’s groundbreaking digital infrastructure, which leveraged Facebook and other platforms for grass-roots organising and fundraising, was largely dismantled after his victories⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. The Democratic Party and its mainstream counterparts in Europe reverted to their established “muscle memory” of Alastair Campbell-style media management, focusing on traditional news outlets during governance and only ramping up digital engagement for “tried-and-true” legacy media carpet-bombing campaigns during elections. They have made some attempts to compete in the new space, but these were often reactive, lacking a cohesive strategy and continuous engagement required to build their own ecosystems of podcasters and influencers, leaving them ill-equipped to compete in the new, fast-moving digital environment.

The populist right, however, viewed the same platforms not as temporary tools, but as a **permanent, always-on platform for direct engagement, narrative-building, and community mobilisation**. They used the years between elections to build their digital ecosystems of podcasters and influencers, ensuring they had a structural advantage.

Why this Asymmetry Has Occurred: A Paradigm Shift in Politics

The asymmetry is not merely a gap in tactics, but a **crisis of institutional inertia**. The situation is reminiscent of Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts in science⁽¹⁰⁵⁾. When a new scientific paradigm emerges, the old guard often fails to adapt, clinging to the outdated model until a new generation of scientists takes over. In politics, we are in a similar moment. The old paradigm of broadcast-era communication has been overthrown by a new, digital reality. However, unlike science, where change can happen "one funeral at a time", politics does not afford us this luxury. The rise of populists, who lie and cheat their way into power, presents an **existential threat to democratic norms**, making a slow, generational shift impossible. The survival of deliberative politics demands an immediate and radical transformation.

This resistance to change is rooted in the very core of mainstream political culture. There is a deep ideological and psychological mismatch. Deliberative politics prizes nuance, complexity, and evidence, creating an **"allergy to simplicity"** that is philosophically hostile to the short-form, emotionally-driven language the new ecosystem rewards. This is compounded by a **"dignity trap"**, where leaders feel that engaging in informal, sometimes playful, online culture is beneath their office. This fear is not baseless; leaders like Bill Clinton, who was criticised for playing the saxophone on late-night TV, faced a backlash that demonstrated the public's former expectation of a more formal, "presidential" demeanour⁽¹⁰⁶⁾.

Crucially, this resistance is reinforced by a **paralysing fear of their own highly online activist base**, which is often the first to attack them for any perceived misstep or ideological impurity. At the heart of this opposition is a belief that to use media in similar ways to populists would be to "become them" - to adopt the same disreputable tactics of lying, peddling conspiracy theories, and demonising opponents. We are not suggesting mainstream parties do any of this; rather, the thrust of this analysis is to **hold them accountable for their failure to compete on the same playing field**.

Taken together, these barriers create a lethal combination: a political class trained for a bygone era, leading organisations built to avoid risk, and psychologically trapped between a desire for decorum and a fear of their own supporters. It is a systemic failure, and populists have built their entire strategy around exploiting it.

What Can Be Done? A Two-Front Strategy for a New Era

Acknowledging the asymmetry and its causes is the necessary first step. The second is to act. While we note that some parties are beginning to take small steps, such as the Labour party inviting influencers to Downing Street, this is a beginning much more is needed. The challenge cannot be solved with a single new policy or a better communications director; it requires a **fundamental, two-front strategy**. First, an immediate, tactical response to compete in the daily battle for attention. Second, a long-term cultural and structural overhaul to rebuild our parties for an entirely new political reality.

The Short-Term Imperative: The Digital Narrative Unit

We are currently ceding the entire digital battlefield to our opponents between election cycles. To fix this, mainstream parties need to immediately establish and fund a semi-autonomous, creatively independent content division. Forget the stale term "digital comms" - think of it as a **Digital Narrative Unit (DNU)**. Its sole mission is to wage and win the daily war for attention on the platforms where voters actually live.

This unit cannot be run by the existing party bureaucracy, which is too slow and risk-averse. It must be staffed by a **new breed of political operative**:

- **The Platform Producers:** Young, digitally native creators who understand the grammar of TikTok and Reels instinctively. They know the trending sounds, the video editing styles, and the "vibe" that separates authentic content from a cringeworthy corporate imitation.
- **The Story Miners:** Empathetic journalists and documentarians who go out into the country with a camera. Their job is not to film the party leader cutting a ribbon, but to find the human stories that make policy real. They execute the "listening as broadcasting" model used so effectively by Zohran Mamdani in New York's recent primary⁽¹⁰⁷⁾.
- **The Creative Strategists:** The bridge between core party strategy and daily content. They are fluent in both policy and memes, tasked with translating big-picture goals into compelling, 15-second video concepts.

The DNU's Strategic Playbook:

The unit's output would not be random. It would be relentlessly disciplined, applying a consistent strategic framework to the chaos of the daily news cycle. The core strategy is to ensure every piece of content is coded for voter concerns, not for "politics". A video about crumbling schools is not political messaging; it is a story about community and our children's future. This is how you reach the apolitical majority.

This strategy is then adapted depending on whether they are in government or opposition.

The DNU's content will follow the **Diagnose the Pain / Name the Culprit / Offer Deliverance** model.

- **Diagnose the Pain:** A Story Miner's video shows a local resident pointing to overflowing bins on their street or a closed-down youth centre. The video has high energy, uses a trending, anxious-sounding audio clip, and feels raw and immediate.
- **Name the Culprit:** A simple text overlay reads, "Reform promised you lower council tax but it went up, and services got worse". This is followed by a quick, damning clip of a populist councillor making a grandiose promise that has clearly been broken.
- **Offer Deliverance:** The video ends on a hopeful note, with a clip of a dynamic local candidate promising a concrete, simple fix, like "a dedicated team to fix our streets". The music shifts to something more optimistic.

A Digital Narrative Unit... to wage and win the daily war for attention

The model becomes **Progress in Jeopardy** / **Name the Saboteur** / **Secure the Future**.

- **Progress in Jeopardy:** A slick, fast-paced video showcases tangible government achievements - new apprenticeship programme, a new factory opening, lower energy bills for families. It's a visual story of positive momentum.
- **Name the Saboteur:** The video quick-cuts to a parliamentary voting record showing the populist party voting against the funding for that very programme, or a clip of their leader dismissing it.
- **Secure the Future:** The video ends with a clear, forward-looking message and call to action: "We're building a better Britain. Don't let the wreckers drag us backward".

This “always-on” campaign of targeted, emotionally resonant, and strategically-coded content closes the dangerous vacuum that populists currently exploit. It ensures that when a voter scrolls through their feed, the populist narrative is no longer the only one they hear. It is also important to note that this model does not necessarily require a single, charismatic leader at its front. In Germany, the AfD's digital success is driven more by a highly organised, decentralised network of content creators and influencers than by the personal charisma of Alice Weidel⁽¹⁰⁸⁾. This proves that a sophisticated DNU, not just a charismatic leader, is a viable path to digital dominance.

The Long-Term Solution: From Buying Attention to Earning it

The DNU is a necessary patch, but it does not solve the underlying disease. The long-term, generational project is to transform our parties from organisations that buy attention to ones that can **earn it**. This requires fundamentally changing who we recruit and what skills we value.

For decades, the ideal mainstream candidate was someone who was good at managing internal party tensions and was “safe” - a good fundraiser, a solid policy analyst, and disciplined enough to stick to the focus-grouped message. In the new environment, these are no longer the most valuable skills. The process that elevates leaders like Hillary Clinton and Friedrich Merz is a product of this old system, rewarding those who excel at consensus and caution over authenticity and digital dexterity.

We must begin a systemic effort to identify, recruit, and elevate candidates who possess the innate skills of modern communication:

- **Authentic Charisma (“Rizz”):** A natural ease and relatability on camera and in person.
- **A Compelling Voice:** Not just the ability to debate, but the ability to tell a story and connect with an audience on an emotional level.
- **Intellectual Courage:** The confidence to engage in long-form, unscripted conversations (like on a podcast) and to lead their own activist base, rather than be led by it. They are not afraid to be clear, even if it means not pleasing everyone.

While this cultural shift is generational, existing leaders can be helped. The suggestion to cultivate a more public-facing private persona, as mentioned in “The Rest is Politics” about Keir Starmer, is an idea of general application. A coaching programme focused on authenticity, not just message discipline, could help leaders break free from the “dignity trap” and connect with voters on a more human level.

This is a **cultural revolution**. It means party leadership needs to actively create pathways to power for these new communicators, even if they do not fit the traditional mould. It means training programmes must evolve from teaching politicians how to avoid gaffes to teaching them how to find their authentic voice. And it means changing the internal incentives, rewarding candidates who can build a genuine audience and drive a narrative, not just those who can dial for donations.

Only by pursuing both of these tracks - the immediate tactical fight and the long-term cultural transformation - can we hope to **re-establish a competitive footing and ensure that deliberative, reality-based politics has a future**.

Learning 7: Win the Ground War by Building Permanent, Voter Focused, Hyper-Local Organisations

The Problem - Healing the Wound of Disrespect

Populism does not spring from a spreadsheet of economic grievances alone; it ignites in the furnace of emotional injury. Across the globe, a recurring theme among populist voters is a profound sense of being **ignored, patronised, and disrespected by a distant, condescending elite**. As the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild found in her five years with Tea Party supporters, they feel like “**strangers in their own land**”, left behind by economic shifts and looked down upon by a culture that seems to mock their values, their work, and their way of life⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. Amongst this base the feeling of **humiliation** - by dismissive labels like “deplorables” or “chumps” - is the emotional fuel that demagogues like Donald Trump masterfully channel. When he roars at his rallies, his supporters roar back not just in political agreement, but in a cathartic release of injured pride. He makes them feel seen, respected, and powerful.

This is not a uniquely American phenomenon. In Türkiye, it’s the disdain for the religiously observant⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. In Britain, it’s the sneering at the “**white van man**” or the “**gammon**”. In France, it’s the Parisian elite’s contempt for *la France périphérique*. To win back these voters, anti-populists cannot simply present a better policy platform. **They must first heal this deep emotional wound**. Policy ideas will only be heard after people feel they have been respected. This requires a fundamental shift from broadcasting messages at voters to building relationships with them. It means moving beyond the national “air war” of media and advertising and engaging in a **persistent, empathetic, and hyper-local “ground war”, fought block by block, street by street**.

The Evidence - How the Ground War is Won

Victories against populism in wildly different contexts reveal a common thread: **success came not from the top down**, but from the ground up. Instead of turning up every four years and asking for the citizens’ vote, the strategy was to build a **permanent, authentic, service-oriented presence** in communities, earning trust through action, not rhetoric.

A decade of patient work in Georgia, USA, shows how this model can transform an entire political landscape. The victories of 2020 and 2021 were not a sudden miracle; they were the harvest of a strategy led by Stacey Abrams that treated organising as a **permanent, not temporary, activity**⁽¹¹⁰⁾. It was a major effort - a network of more than 15,000 volunteers. The psychological insight was to connect the dots between voters’ daily pain - underfunded schools, a lack of healthcare, crumbling infrastructure - and the power of their vote. Organisers didn’t lead with “You should vote for the Democrats”. They led with “**Tell me what’s not working on your street**”. By framing political participation as the most effective tool for fixing local problems, they transformed voting from an abstract civic duty into a **concrete act of community empowerment**. **This built agency and overcame the cynicism that populism feeds on**.

They led with:
“Tell me what’s
not working on
your street”

In 2019, Ekrem İmamoğlu’s win in Istanbul hinged less on a door-to-door army and more on **symbolism and tone: the CHP’s Radical Love playbook explicitly instructed candidates to avoid insult, show respect in conservative districts, and de-escalate culture-war confrontations**. İmamoğlu coupled that with gestures that signalled comfort with religious/conservative milieus - campaigning across working-class, AKP-leaning districts and drawing on his Black Sea, religiously literate persona - to broaden appeal beyond the secular core⁽¹¹¹⁾.

After taking office, the municipality built more durable community touchpoints through **Mahalle Evleri (Neighbourhood Houses)** - small, local hubs offering workshops, counselling and service - which began opening in 2020-21 and now operate across multiple districts. By 2023/24, IBB had scaled a wider package of social-support policies (e.g. Mother-Card, dorms and scholarships), and several post-election analyses argue that this **performance-and-welfare record underpinned İmamoğlu’s 2024 re-election and the CHP’s broader municipal surge**⁽¹¹²⁾.

The Plan - The “Local Action Network”

To systematise these successes, anti-populist parties need to build their own **permanent, service-oriented organising infrastructure**. This cannot be the factional, party-centric model of the past (like the perception of Corbyn’s Community Organising Unit) or a simple rebranding of existing get-out-the-vote efforts. It must be a new entity with a clear, community-first mission: **the Local Action Network**.

The Network’s purpose is not to “build the party” but to “**make our community better**”. It is a force multiplier for local democratic leaders - the MP and Councillors - not a challenge to them. Led by them, and run day-to-day by a professional organiser, its job is to translate public frustration into tangible progress. The model is a **continuous loop: Listen, Act, Communicate**. First, systematically listen to identify the top tractable local issues. Second, launch visible campaigns to fix them, from getting a dangerous road crossing installed to cleaning up a neglected park. Third, relentlessly communicate every small win, proving that your team delivers.

This approach elegantly solves the key challenges. In areas where the party holds local power, it demonstrates competence. Where it doesn’t, the MP becomes a powerful Community Champion, leading accountability campaigns against a failing council. While there’s a cost to hiring an organiser, the **ROI is far higher** than on ephemeral election advertising, as it builds lasting political capital. The Network also provides the perfect bridge between local and national concerns. When voters raise national issues like the cost of living or the small boats, the MP can validate their anger, connect it to local action, and use it as a mandate for their work in Parliament, proving they are the **community’s champion at every level**.

Crucially, this is where the “ground war” fuses with the “air war” (Learning 6). The Local Action Network becomes a **content-generating engine for the party’s digital channels**. Every community clean-up, every successful petition, every resident helped becomes an authentic story for a TikTok video or Facebook post. This is how a party tangibly demonstrates it is “**unequivocally on the voters’ side**” (Learning 2). It stops telling people it cares and starts showing them, **healing the wounds of disrespect one small, meaningful victory at a time**.

The Network's
purpose is not to
“build the party”
but to “make our
community better”

Conclusion

In an era defined by **populist challenges to democratic norms**, the urgency for a **recalibrated strategy is paramount**. While each of the seven learnings presented here holds individual merit, **their true power lies in their collective application**. This framework is not a menu from which to choose, but **a comprehensive action plan for mainstream parties**. The **single most critical component**, as demonstrated by successful campaigns, is **a leader who can authentically connect with voters, demonstrating empathy for their frustrations and a tangible commitment to addressing the issues that matter most to them**. By integrating all seven of these learnings, mainstream parties can move beyond merely reacting to populist threats and instead proactively rebuild the trust and connection with the electorate necessary to secure a more stable democratic future.

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About the authors.

From 1985 until 1997 Sir Chris Powell advised the Labour Party on election strategy.

He was knighted in 2011 for services to advertising. He was a founder of an advertising agency that grew to be the second largest in the UK and regarded as the most influential.

David Cowan worked alongside Chris as Director of Strategy, pioneering a way of integrating quantitative and qualitative consumer data into advertising strategy and development; later generalised to develop strategies for organic business growth.

Both Chris Powell and David Cowan were core members of the team that built the agency (Boase Massimi Pollitt) up and launched it on the London Stock Exchange.

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