Populist politics and organisational leadership

Supervisors: <u>Prof Emma Bell</u>, <u>Dr Alexandra Bristow</u> and <u>Dr Owain Smolović Jones</u>, Department for People and Organisations, The Open University Business School

Project description:

The focus of this project is on understanding the effects of populism and populist politics on leadership in the context of business organisations. Populist politics claim to represent the interests of 'the people' against oppression by the privileged 'elites'. Recent years have seen a rise of populism in many parts of the world. Populist politics have become associated, in particular, with Brexit, Trumpism, a questioning of the role of experts and (although populism can be employed across the full spectrum of political parties), a resurgence of the Far Right (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; De Cleen et al, 2018). It is important for organisational scholars to make sense of how these developments shape organisations, and conversely, to understand the role that organisations play in the rise of populism across the world.

The study will contribute to understanding how organisations shape their environment. Previous research has shown that corporations systematically build institutional fields that enable them to influence state-level political and policy agendas (Barley, 2010). However, there is limited understanding of the role of organisational leadership in these processes. The ability of organisational leaders to influence populist politics is likely to arise when individual leaders have a high public profile or a celebrity status that extends far beyond the organization that they are appointed to lead. In such cases the ability to influence political and policy agendas is related to the individual leaders' credibility and authenticity in the businesses they have led (Guthey and Jackson, 2005).

One potential way of exploring this issue could be to focus on how organisational leaders use populist language, articulate populist values and engage in populist practices to engage followers. A key question that may be addressed concerns the type of leadership that is enabled by these practices – including through charismatic or transformational leadership. A key aspect of the study would be to consider potentially negative effects associated with such leadership as a consequence of learned dependency on the leader and denial of possibilities for dissent (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002) An alternative, and potentially related, aspect of study could be to investigate how organizational leaders use their institutional position to influence populist politics, by seeking to challenge or endorse populist politics.

We envisage a qualitative or potentially mixed methods approach being adopted in the proposed study which may involve, for example, media content analysis, e.g. based on datasets comprising social media and news media coverage. There may also be an historical element to the project. Analytical skills in these areas would therefore be an advantage.

References/readings:

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