

Welfare-Consequentialism: The Opposite of Populism?

By Noel Semple¹

Populist candidates and causes have scored a series of remarkable victories in Europe and the Americas since 2015. It is too soon to say whether we are living in a populist “moment,” or at the dawn of a new populist age. It is not, however, too soon to think carefully about the consequences of populism for public policy. Nor is it too soon to consider policy decisions by *non-populist* governments today that might affect the likelihood that this will be only a moment and not an age.

This paper considers the relationship between two ideologies: welfare-consequentialism and populism. Welfare-consequentialism, reviewed in Part 1, holds that governments should always try to adopt the policies that are most likely to make individuals’ lives go best. Part 2 juxtaposes it with populism, defined as the view that (i) society is divided into a pure people and a corrupt elite, and (ii) public policy should give effect to the general will of the pure people (Mudde 2004). The paper then argues that welfare-consequentialism and populism are diametrically opposed ideologies. They are fundamentally incompatible in their representations of “the people,” and in the weight they give to public opinion. Populism’s anti-elitism may sometimes be reconciled with welfare-consequentialism, but not in the many cases where it takes the form of anti-intellectualism. Part 3 concludes by asking whether, in the long-term, welfare-consequentialism makes a polity more or less vulnerable to populism.

Welfare-Consequentialism

Welfare-consequentialism is a normative theory of public policy: a theory of what government should do. “Welfare,” or well-being, is defined as how well someone’s life goes for them (Sumner 1996. “Consequentialism” is the idea that the goodness of an act is a function of the goodness of its expected outcomes (Freeman 2011; Adler 2019). A policy-maker following

¹ J.D., Ph.D. Associate Professor, University of Windsor Faculty of Law. www.noelsemple.ca

this path makes choices rationally calculated to make it as likely as possible that individuals' lives will go as well as possible.

Welfare-consequentialism relies on interpersonal comparisons of welfare: conclusions that individual X has a quantifiably better life than individual Y, or that individual Z would have a quantifiably better life under Policy A than she would under Policy B (Adler 2017). Twentieth-century skepticism about the legitimacy of such comparisons has given way to increasing enthusiasm for techniques to measure welfare such as the life-evaluation survey (Layard and O'Donnell 2015).² Evaluating a policy option requires attending, as much as possible, to *all* of the individual welfare gains and losses that it might produce (Kaplow and Shavell 2006). Almost all policy options reduce the welfare of some individuals even as they increase the welfare of others. Expected welfare benefits, net of expected welfare costs, are the measure of a policy option.

This principle has a number of variants. Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism was the first well-known version of welfare-consequentialism in the Western tradition. Bentham argued that increasing happiness, while minimizing pain, is the appropriate goal for all legislation and government action. Philosophers such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer have used utilitarianism to make forceful public policy arguments. These often work by recognizing the welfare impacts of public policies on previously disregarded individuals, including women, unborn individuals, and non-human animals (Brülde and Bykvist 2010).

One aspect of utilitarianism that engendered principled opposition was its insistence that everyone's welfare must count equally to policy-makers, regardless of how much welfare different individuals have (Nussbaum 2013 at 51; Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014 at 341). Thus, a utilitarian must endorse a policy reform that creates an extra 2 units of welfare for a person who already has 7 units, with a cost of 1 welfare unit to someone who has only 4.

The social welfare function is a version of welfare-consequentialism which is not bound by this commitment, and which can therefore prioritize policies that help those with low welfare.

² These questions quantify individual welfare by asking a question such as "on a scale of 0-10, how satisfied are you with your life overall these days?" If maximizing happiness, measured in this way, is accepted as the goal of government then many specific policy recommendations follow: Clark et al. 2018.

The social welfare function, whose foremost modern proponent is Matthew Adler (Adler 2012; Adler and Fleurbaey 2016;), lets a policy maker evaluate the likely outcomes of a policy decision in terms of aggregate welfare, while mathematically giving priority to the worst-off. The uncertainty of a policy's consequences can also be mathematically incorporated in a social welfare function's policy advice (Adler 2019).

Explicit welfare-consequentialism is not presently a popular or powerful ideology of government, compared to heavy-hitters such as liberalism and conservatism. However, it has footholds in certain public policy niches. Cost-benefit analysis is legally mandatory for all regulatory decisions taken by the United States government (Sunstein 2018). Federal agencies are required to design regulations so as to "maximize net benefits" after aggregating (in dollar terms) the regulations' costs and the benefits for Americans (The White House (United States of America) 2011). The UK's National Institute for Health Care and Excellence (NICE) compares medical therapies according to their likely consequences for the welfare of patients (using the quality-adjusted life year as a welfare measure). NICE recommends that the UK government fund the therapies which are expected to be most effective, per pound spent, in improving patient welfare (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (United Kingdom) 2013 at 1.4.2.).

[Ethical Variables in Welfare-Consequentialism](#)

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

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

consequentialist argument for rapid decarbonization to avert climate change works with a very wide range of ethical variables.

Populism : The Ideational Conception

The “ideational” definition proposed by Cas Mudde has broad support in the scholarship. Populism, he proposes, is a

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

Under this definition, populism is more than just a campaign style (Moffitt 2019) or an approach to governing (Muller 2016 at 4). It is an *ideology* : a belief system including a wide range of opinions that cohere together with its abstract conceptualizations.³ The phrase “thin-centered” means that populism itself does not purport to answer all of the questions of public policy. Instead, a candidate or party will marry populism with neoliberalism, socialism, or another ideology offering substantive policy prescriptions (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Most of the currently ascendant populist movements are described as right-wing, but left-wing populism also has also scored victories in countries such as South America, Spain, and Greece. Despite populism’s promiscuity, I will suggest that welfare-consequentialism is one ideology with which it cannot mate. This section explicates three crucial terms in Mudde’s definition and demonstrates their incompatibility with welfare-consequentialism.

“The Pure People”

Populists often refer to “people” with the singular definite article (Rooduijn 2014 at 575; Crick 2005 at 626). “They speak and act,” as Muller puts the point, “as if the people were one.” The relevance of apparent differences within the people is denied (Comaroff 2011 at 104-5). The ideology is *holistic*, insisting that “political society should be a unity and... divisions are morally unwholesome and politically fatal” (Rosenblum 2008 at 22).

³ Gerring 1997, paraphrasing Converse, Philip E. 1964. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent*, pp. 206-61. London: Free Press of Glencoe.

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

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

While aggregations (such as communities) can have powerful positive and negative effects on individual welfare, they have no intrinsic moral value under welfare-consequentialism (Sumner 1996). Each individual affected by a policy choice is a “distinct locus of value,” (Goodin 1995)and a policy decision must strive to take account of its effect on all individuals (Fleurbaey and Maniquet 2011).

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

While populists would confine the state’s attention to a sharply-constrained “people,” welfare-consequentialists since Bentham have tried to push outwards the “circle of concern” -- the set of individuals for whom the welfare effects of policy should be considered (Singer 2011). 19th century utilitarianism deployed this logic in favour of the women’s suffrage movement. Peter Singer has recently argued persuasively for animal rights and for attention to the welfare of the world’s poor. Although current welfare-consequentialist policy applications (e.g. cost-benefit analysis in US federal regulation, and the UK’s NICE healthcare-funding recommendations) do not always consider welfare effects on foreigners, they have engaged with the welfare of unborn generations. “Discounting” the welfare of foreigners, non-human animals, and the unborn within a social welfare function is one way to include them within the circle of concern without adopting the position, which might be politically impossible, that all sentient individuals must count equally to the policy-maker (Semple 2019). In any case, the tendency of welfare-

consequentialism to count each individual, and expand the circle of concern is clearly incompatible with populism.

“The General Will” which Should Be Enacted as Policy

Populism not only holds that there is one people to which the government should attend, but also that there is a “general will” of this people, which policy should carry out. Mudde adopts Rousseau’s phrase “*volonté générale*” (general will) within his definition of populism. The idea here is that, if the pure people are freed from corrupting influences, they will all agree on what is to be done (Crick 2005). Although there is some ambiguity in Rousseau’s writings on this point (Bertram 2012), it seems that the general will would reflect the common *interest* of all those within the polity.

Welfare-consequentialism, on the other hand, assumes that because different individuals have very different life situations (as well as different tastes and inclinations), public policy will usually have very different welfare effects on different people. Except in the rare case where a pareto-optimal reform (making everyone better off and no-one worse off) is possible, a policy must therefore be analyzed by comparing its benefits for those who would gain from it against its costs for those who would lose from it.

Populists allege a “singular common good” which is readily apparent to the people on the basis of common sense alone (Muller, 2016 #6612} at 25; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017 at 18). Using broad public support as a mark of policy legitimacy encourages populists to endorse the straightforward measures that are most likely to attract such support. The simplicity of populist policy responses to complex problems has been observed by scholars writing in this field (Crick 2005 at 627; Muller 2016 at 26; Mounk 2018 at 7.). One way that populists simplify policy discourse is by focusing attention on the most immediate effects of policy, and disregarding the more remote effects. For example, Ontario’s populist premier Doug Ford has launched a campaign against the federal government’s carbon tax. Ford’s campaign emphasizes the immediate pocketbook impact of the tax on people buying fossil fuels, and denies longer-term and indirect welfare benefits created by the policy. Populist policies also tend to disregard the welfare interests of individuals who are “distant” in one way or another – e.g. foreigners and the unborn.

For welfare-consequentialism, by contrast, science rather than public opinion is the source of good policy. In a complex world, the “sense” supporting policy will often be far from “common.” The prime example is the reality that carbon -- a ubiquitous, apparently harmless substance -- is actually the single gravest threat to human welfare, given its capacity to change the climate.

Another logical consequence of the “general will” idea is populists’ enthusiasm for direct democracy measures, such as referenda (Rooduijn 2014 at 576; Chris Bickerton 2018). However, populist support for direct democracy may also be merely contingent and strategic. The populist leader, legitimized by an electoral mandate, is often presented as the person who can identify and voice the general will. The populist leader purports to voice the general will, and if a majority appears to oppose him that fact can be explained away (Muller 2016 at 77). A memorable example is Trump’s unsubstantiated claim that his loss of the popular vote in the 2016 election was a consequence of voting by illegal aliens and convicts.

Under welfare-consequentialism, even if there were a general will, it would have no inherent moral relevance to policy-making. Nor would the oracular vision of a leader. What is ultimately relevant is not what policies individuals want, but rather what policies will be good for them. That being said, expressions of public opinion (e.g. referenda or elections) may be instrumentally valuable in helping a government understand and carry out welfare-maximizing policies. Compared to other forms of government, universal suffrage democracies seem to have the best record of creating welfare-maximizing public policy. Welfare-consequentialism does not require a scientist faith that all of the right answers can be found in peer-reviewed science.

“The Corrupt Elite”

Finally, hostility to elites is central to the leading definitions of populism (Rooduijn 2014 at 575; Muller 2016 at 2), and apparent in populist language ((See e.g. Christopher Bickerton and Accetti 2015) . Corrupt elites are often blamed by populists for having made things worse than they were at some vaguely-defined point in the past. (Pessimism predicts populist voting behaviour in several jurisdictions: Steenvoorden and Hartevelt 2018; Pinker 2018 at 432.)

The elite might be defined on the basis of socioeconomic class, cultural tastes, or some other form of privilege (Rooduijn 2014 at 575). Here, populism's incompatibility with welfare-consequentialism is less complete. The latter ideology is not inherently elitist. Welfarist policy analysts may in fact be "underdogs, arguing for sensible policies in the face of elite irrationality." (Gilley 2017 at 14). In jurisdictions where a self-serving economic elite uses public policy to protect itself at the expense of everyone else's welfare, a populist attack on those elites may yield welfare benefits. Jean Comaroff argues that

a certain populist radicalism--an opposition to the dictatorship and doxa of elites, whether they be the ancien régime, tsarist autocracy, the capitalist classes, colonial rulers, the established church, or intellectual vanguards--is a necessary, if not a sufficient condition for mass movements in all times and places. Such populist mobilization forces a clear line between "the people" and those who oppose their interests; it shatters the thrall of regnant ideologies and endorses popular experience as a basis for valid knowledge, desire, and intention. It can also serve to debunk pious cant and sophistry, and to unmask self-serving ideologies and illegitimate representations (Comaroff 2011).

Evidence-Based Policy and Welfare-Consequentialism

However, populist anti-elitism becomes impossible to reconcile with welfare-consequentialism when it lumps those with policy-relevant expertise within the elites whom it opposes (Diletti 2019). Populist leaders such as Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, often explicitly proclaim their distrust of, or refusal to rely upon, experts (Bienkov 2017; Fisher 2016). Populists are not merely skeptically attentive to the limitations of the social and natural sciences. They tend to reject evidence completely when it contradicts the *volonté générale* or the leader's version thereof.

Deference to evidence is an inevitable feature of welfare-consequentialism. The question of what policy can be expected make individuals' lives go best for them is a factual inquiry, solvable (with more or less certainty) with evidence from the natural and social sciences. Welfare-consequentialist ideology is technocratic in the sense of depoliticizing and offering "one right answer" to policy questions (Feitsma 2018; Clarence 2002). For example, regulatory cost-benefit analysis and the work of NICE propose that the permissible quantity of lead in paint, or

the choice between funding Drug A and Drug B, should not depend on the opinions either of voters or of elected officials. Rather, they should depend on what the best available evidence says regarding the net welfare effects (including health effects and economic effects) of the available policy options. Welfare-consequentialism, in principle, would apply this approach to *all* public policy decisions.

Given the complexity of the world in which policy intervenes, it seems inevitable that evidence-based policy-making will empower technical experts (Mounk 2018 at 95.). If populism rejects intellectual elites, therefore, it also rejects evidence-based policy and thus rejects welfare-consequentialism. That being said, a sceptical and humble approach to evidence-based policy claims remains compatible with welfare-consequentialism. A policy-maker who exclusively seeks to improve individuals' welfare would need to remain cognizant of the cognitive biases and limitations that afflict expert knowledge (Parkhurst 2016). Even if scientific findings bearing on a policy question were flawless, the capacity of human policy-makers to use it to craft welfare-maximizing policies is imperfect.

Welfare-Consequentialism: Precursor for, or Antidote to Populism?

This paper has suggested that welfare-consequentialism and populism are incompatible ideologies. Populism's notion of "the people" and the weight it ascribes to the people's notional "general will" are simply impossible to reconcile with the normative individualism and results-orientation of welfare-consequentialism. Populist confrontation of *economic* elites might support welfare-maximizing policy reform in some places and times. However, the experts whose evidence is essential to welfare-consequentialist policy making are often denounced as well in populist discourses.

This argument has proceeded on the level of political theory, by comparing the axiomatic claims of the two ideologies. An empirical study of the same question could compare the policy processes and outcomes of populist and non-populist governments, in terms of conformity to welfare-consequentialism. That, obviously, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that the one policy reform that many welfare-consequentialists would rank as most important today – rapidly decarbonizing the world economy to ensure that climate change

doesn't render future generations' lives dramatically worse than our own – has been abandoned by many populist governments.

Most (although not all) scholarly normative assessments of populism are negative. One need not be a welfare-consequentialist to oppose it. Those who are focused on equality or human rights also find little to like. It is therefore worthwhile to ask how welfare-consequentialist government might affect the political viability of populism in the middle to long-term. Some suggest that this sort of approach to government creates fertile soil for populist weeds. If populist sentiment feeds on a perception that political elites are disregarding public opinion (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017 at 99), welfare-consequentialism will obviously lend credence to that perception. Scholars such as Yascha Mounk and Peter Mair see a backlash against technocratic elites contributing to populism (Mounk 2018 at 59; {Mair, 2013 #6976}).

On the other hand, there are two reasons why welfare-consequentialism might be an antidote to populism. First, if welfare-consequentialist policy *conspicuously succeeds* in making lives better, it will engender optimism, which in turn undermines populism. As noted above, people who are pessimistic about their polity are much more prone to support populist candidates. Steven Pinker suggests that “obliviousness to the scope of human progress can ... make people cynical about the Enlightenment-inspired institutions that are securing this progress, such as liberal democracy and organizations of international cooperation, and turn them toward atavistic alternatives.” ({Pinker, 2018 #6670} at 227.) An explicitly welfare-consequentialist policy, that genuinely makes things better for people and also shows them convincingly that it has done so, could undermine the dark narrative of the populists.

There is a second way in which welfare-consequentialism might be an antidote to populism. A transparent commitment to adopting the policies most likely to make lives better might foster *trust* in policy-making elites. If X *trusts* that Y has relevant expertise, and is acting in X's best interest, then X is not likely to be bothered by the fact that Y attaches little or no weight to X's opinion about what should be done. This is the foundation of professional-client relationships, for example in medical practice. Notwithstanding well-publicized but rare exceptions such as the anti-vaccination movement, the overwhelming majority of people accept advice from medical professionals. If people placed the same trust in policy analysts that they do

in doctors, then populism's day would be done. Unfortunately, public trust in government is eroding in many Western countries. (Mounk 2018; Savoie 2015 at 34-5; Luce 2017).

Welfare-consequentialism might help rebuild that trust. It explicitly commits policy-makers to a simple goal with broad public resonance: making individuals' lives better. This is what distinguishes welfare-consequentialism from mere technocracy, which has a theory of how a public policy goal should be pursued but no account of what the overriding goal should be. The goal of maximizing welfare can plausibly succeed as an overarching consensus conception of what government is for – unlike freedom, equality, or prosperity which are ultimately only instrumental to welfare.

Not coincidentally, the goal of making individuals' lives better is very similar to the overarching goal of the medical profession, a profession whose trustworthiness and authority policy-makers should seek to match. Welfare-consequentialism facilitates accountability of policy-makers, by establishing expected aggregate welfare effects as a yardstick to objectively evaluate their choices. Doctors are trusted, in part, because their diagnoses and prescriptions can be checked against the clear, evidence-based best practices established by medical science. An explicit dedication to welfarist goals might give policy-makers the same accountability for their actions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that welfare-consequentialism and populism are opposite ideologies. Their core commitments -- regarding the purpose of the government, the nature of the "people," and the moral significance of public opinion – are incompatible. The populist account of elites is also, usually, impossible to reconcile with welfare-consequentialism. This conclusion is probably not controversial.

However the probable consequences of welfare-consequentialist government for populism's viability are more difficult to predict. The backlash hypothesis – that welfare-consequentialism will set the stage for populism -- cannot be decisively rejected. However it is at least as likely that welfare-consequentialist policy-making will reinforce the bond of trust between citizen and state and bring the current populist moment to a timely end.

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