

# Brexit, Hong Kong and the Arab Spring: Voices of the People

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## Brexit, Hong Kong and the Arab Spring: Voices of the People

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Who and what are the 'voices of the people'? Regarding the 'who', this refers to the people discussed in this article: citizens who want more say in what their rulers do and are not content with current political arrangements – whether in the context of an existing democracy, such as we find in the countries of Europe, in democratically unfree environments, such as the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa, and in Hong Kong, a political environment marked by both democratic and undemocratic characteristics. The voices we examine in this article are linked to popular protests. They are not new; instead, they have been an issue of politics and international relations for centuries. An early example was the French Revolution of 1789 when the old order was overturned and replaced, at least for a while, with a popular, revolutionary government. Today, popular movements, seeking to express 'the voices of the people' seem to be growing in frequency and importance.

When considered alongside the availability of instant communication via the internet, the phenomenon of ordinary people mobilising to seek meaningful – and often urgent – political changes raises important questions for politics and IR: how does change occur at the domestic level and what are its wider implications in domestic, regional and global levels? A new development in recent times was the emergence of a new type of political actor in Europe and elsewhere: populist movements and parties, whose main purpose is to challenge those in power who are regarded as being distant from the mass of ordinary people and unconcerned with their hopes, fears and aspirations. Finally, the article also examines both people in democratic political environments demanding more from those in power and also those who live in politically unfree countries demanding a more representative and responsive government.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section looks at the impact of globalisation on popular demands for fundamental political and economic changes in many countries. The second section discusses a key manifestation of such demands for change: the rise of the attractiveness of populist leaders and movements in the context of what many see as a crisis of government. The third section is divided into a trio of case studies. Each is a representation of the voices of the people which were raised in three contexts: the Arab Spring and its aftermath, the anti-China popular protests in Hong Kong, and the Brexit referendum in the UK. While each of the case studies raises different issues, which are reflective of the especial concerns of each expression of popular protest, what they have in common is similar in each case: a sustained attack on the status quo and a consistent demand for fundamental reforms to improve people's lives.

### Change in a globalising world

In today's world there are numerous examples of popular demand for major political and economic changes. Often, the two are closely linked. Such demands generally arise at a time when politicians seem unable to deliver on their promises. Take, for example, the year 2008 – described by Amartya Sen (2009) as 'a year of crises'. First, there was a food crisis that impacted on poorer consumers, especially across African states, as the staples of their diet often became unaffordable. Second, there was a spike in oil prices that raised the cost of fuel and petroleum products globally. Finally, in the autumn of 2008, there was an economic crisis in the United States that quickly spread, compounding prior issues, and the global economy faltered. What does economic downturn have to do with the 'voices of the people'? The answer lies in the interconnected nature of our world.

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For many people today, especially in the richer, developed countries, daily life is characterised by easy and speedy communications. Of course, many areas of the developing world still suffer from poverty and infrastructure issues and so lack the benefits of global communications. That said, it is now very common to find smartphones, which are ever cheaper, proliferating in the poorest regions of the world – such as across sub-Saharan Africa. Improved communications are a fundamental aspect of a wider phenomenon: globalisation. Globalisation enables many of us, via the communications revolution, to learn quickly and consistently about events all over the world, almost as soon as they happen. Globalisation has in a real sense shrunk the world and made it interactive. As a result, when something happens in one country, it can quickly affect others. We are concerned in this article with a worldwide phenomenon: the voices of the people demanding better and more responsive governments via expressions of popular protest whether via the ballot or on the streets.

Deepening and sustained globalisation coincides with global events following the end of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s it gave way to a range of newly independent post-communist states that redrew the map from central Europe to central Asia. Fifteen new states were created, including Russia. It also initiated a dynamic phase of globalisation which affected our understanding of politics and international relations in a number of ways. First, the end of the Cold War threw the study of both politics and international relations into a state of flux. Soon after the Cold War ended, there was talk of a new international order. This reflected a widespread optimism that there could be improved international co-operation and a fresh commitment to strengthening key international organisations, especially the United Nations. The aim was to achieve various key goals, including better, more equitable development; reduction of gender inequalities; resolution and settlement of armed conflicts; fewer human rights abuses, and the ability to tackle environmental degradation and destruction, including the deleterious effects of climate change. In short, the goal was to manage multiple global interdependencies by the improvement of processes of bargaining, negotiation and consensus-seeking, involving both states and various non-state actors, including the United Nations (Haynes, 2005).

It soon became clear, however, that there was a lack of workable or well-supported ideas as to how the desired improvements might be achieved. During the 1990s there were serious outbreaks of national and international conflict. Many were political, with the demand for democracy being clearly expressed. Others were religious, ethnic or nationalist conflicts. Many spilled over into neighbouring states. When these events occurred, local or national issues quickly spiralled into regional or international crises. Examples of these include conflicts in Africa – in Burundi, Haiti, Rwanda and Somalia – and also Europe, where Yugoslavia tore itself apart during the 1990s, eventually splitting into seven states. All these led to serious, and in many cases still unresolved, humanitarian crises requiring external intervention. These conflicts showed how difficult it is proving to move from the problems of the old international order that had characterised the Cold War to a new era marked by international peace, prosperity and cooperation (Haynes, Hough, Malik and Pettiford, 2017).

The 2010s saw both widespread political dissatisfaction and the emergence in many Western democracies of a novel phenomenon: populism. Populism is the championing of ordinary people's by political leaders who make it their business to portray themselves as men or women of the people, willing and capable to address popular concerns when those in power seem to ignore them or fail to address them adequately. This article addresses the issue of the voices of the people in part by examining the emergence and development of populist political leaders and movements in Europe and the USA.

## **The rise of populism and the crisis of government**

Recent times have seen growing popular concern with the state of politics, the economy and society in many countries, including Western democratic states. Populist politicians have recently enjoyed electoral success not only in many European countries but also in the USA. What is populism and what do populist politicians seek to achieve? The first goal of populist politicians is to overturn the political order by getting rid of the old ruling elites and replacing them with themselves. Populist politicians claim to be the only authentic political voices who are not afraid to tell the truth and tell things as they really are. This leads to the second goal of the populist politician: defend the mass of ordinary people against those in power who have different goals to those of the ordinary citizen. Third, populists claim to champion the rights of the 'ordinary people' against those who they claim wish to benefit at their expense.

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It is no coincidence that populist politicians and parties have emerged in recent years in various parts of the world, including Europe and the USA. Economic shocks which followed the 2008 global economic crisis were followed by a serious and sustained questioning of the relevance and capacity of existing political orders. What is the point of democracy, some asked, if it cannot protect us from economic catastrophe as was the case in 2008? Is it time to try something else? Until the early 2000s, many believed that democracy was the best and most desirable political system, not least because it enabled the mass of ordinary people to have a say in who governed them and how they were governed. The last decade or so has seen a widespread questioning of the notion that the best achievable form of government is a democratically elected one. Even in long established democracies like the United States, there is growing support for the idea of a non-democratic, unelected, 'strong' government to get the country back on track. In 2015, nearly a third of Americans would have been happy to see a military takeover (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/11/military-coup-some-americans-would-vote-yes>).

Why has the value of representative democracy been called into question even in countries like the USA which has had a democratic system in place for decades? It is sometimes claimed that around the world, not only in existing democracies, many citizens are becoming increasingly angry and frustrated at the idea of 'business as usual' and instead look for alternatives which would reflect more accurately their political, economic, cultural and social preferences. The 'system', many feel, is 'broken'. What to do about a perceived growing gap between elected politicians and the citizens who vote for them? One response, claims Richard Youngs (2019) is a new wave of 'civic activism', which he calls 'civic activism unleashed'. What he means by this is that in many parts of the world – including, Europe, the USA, the Arab world, and Hong Kong – mass organisation of citizens, often led by young people, are central components of new civic movements, which typically employ novel forms of direct action against their governments often by taking to the streets to protest. Sometimes, they seem to operate without clear leaders and may even lack a well-defined set of objectives. What, we may ask, does this have to do with democracy? Does this new type of civic movement support democracy, or does it undermine it? The answer is unclear: some examples of 'civic activism' are in pursuit of 'more democracy' (or, 'less repression') – for example, in Hong Kong. Elsewhere, as in the Arab countries of the Middle East, beset since 2011 by periodic, sometimes prolonged, political and economic upheavals and anti-government demonstrations, there are sustained popular demands for 'more freedom' and better living standards. In the United Kingdom, a June 2016 referendum led to Britain leaving the European Union in early 2020, a demand fanned by popular protests against immigration and the UK's alleged control by an external body, the EU.

What each of these examples underlines is that many people believe that their rulers, whether democratically elected or not, have failed them in some important ways. The result is that around the world, millions of people have in recent years taken to the streets to protest about something that they do not like and which they believe their governments could address promptly and effectively but choose not to do so. Most are examples of what we referred to above as 'new' civic activism. They nearly always focus on local or national concerns, rather than international issues. A second common factor is the lack of institutionalisation of the 'new' civic activism. That is, they are typically spontaneous eruptions, often organised via the internet. An example here is the *gilets jaunes* movement in France. In recent times, the country saw a sharp fall in the satisfaction rating of President Macron, reflected in the rise of the popular opposition movement, the *gilets jaunes*. It was not however that clear precisely what the *gilets* wanted, although it was easy to discern how unhappy they were with the status quo and sought fundamental changes to the existing order (Wilkin, 2020).

Beyond France, many European countries have also seen the rise of populist politicians and movements. While each has a national focus, the wider context among populists in Europe is a common one: dissatisfaction with the status quo, including, in some cases such as the UK with Brexit, whose result reflected widespread popular concern at perceived over-control by the European Union (EU), of a range of local and national issues. Many voices of the people raised in populist protest in European countries are concerned with what they see as uncontrolled immigration. Many European citizens, not only in the UK but also in, among other places, Germany, Italy and Sweden, believe that their own governments are unwilling or unable to control immigration sufficiently and that membership of the EU may be a barrier to 'taking back control' so as to get a handle on the issue.

Like Europe, the USA has also recently seen the rise of populist leaders. Like Europe, the USA has long been

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regarded as a pioneer and bastion of liberal democracy. The USA's founding philosophy, values and political culture are generally perceived to be indelibly rooted in liberal democratic beliefs and values, an interpretation of the world which sees no other ideological approach to politics and living as acceptable, valid or necessary. What, if anything, has changed in the last few years?

Numerous words have been written since November 2016 on the unexpected election of Donald Trump as president. While the US constitution and political framework and processes do not identify the presidency as an institution with sole or absolute power, conventionally the American political system is one in which the president is regarded as much more than a mere figurehead; qualitatively, the president is more powerful than any other political entity. Theoretically, the election of Trump was 'just another' accession to power by a new chief executive, the 45th president of the USA. However, Trump's election and presidency turned out to be quite controversial.

As Trump's presidency has developed, it has emerged that America is today ideologically polarised between often strong supporters of the president and his sometimes vociferous opponents. While ideological polarisation has been developing for years in the USA, marked, for example, by the rise of the right-wing populist Tea Party in the early 2000s, such division is not traditionally present in America. This is because the USA was long seen as a nation with an expansive, wide-ranging political centre, where all mainstream politicians – that is, the vast majority – compete for political favour and votes from citizens in regular, free and fair, elections. Traditionally, in the USA politicians seeking public office fashion their appeals to voters and express and justify their policy ideas, by appealing to the political centre ground, that is, to the ordinary voter.

DiMaggio (2019) contends that big business dictates political (and economic) outcomes in the USA. As a result, he asserts, the country's democratic foundations and political culture have been systematically undermined over time by the rise of corporate power. Di Maggio (2019) claims that big business controls both of the two main political parties in the USA: Democratic and Republican. Where political polarisation comes in, is in the way that the division between big business – focused entirely on profit enhancement, it would appear – and the interests of many 'ordinary' people who are concerned with 'quality of life' issues, is politically expressed. DiMaggio (2019) contends that this is in the form of 'business for Trump,' on the one hand, and a radical 'anti-Trump' movement, on the other.

## **The Arab Spring and its aftermath**

The difficulties of people working purposively together even when they objectively share the same interests and concerns is underlined by the decade-long trajectory of the Arab Spring, also referred to as the Arab Uprisings. The Arab Spring/Uprisings began in late 2010 in Tunisia. Now, a decade later there is a renewed wave of civic discontent across many Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East. As in the Arab Spring events, popular concerns focus on universal problems: a perceived lack of democracy, few economic opportunities, especially for young people, what some see as a lack of equality for women compared to men. Together, such concerns add up to a situation where many people, especially among the young, see little hope for a satisfactory future. Frustration and disappointment sometimes boil over and, in the lack of what are widely seen as legitimate political avenues to express discontent, people take to the streets and demonstrate their concerns in that way.

From 2011, many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (that is, what is commonly referred to as 'the Arab world') saw political stability undermined as a consequence of such protests, which had both political and economic causes. The targets of popular anger were typically political leaders, often regarded as both corrupt and undemocratic. While Arab peoples live in very different political states, the protesters were united by a feeling of alienation from political power. Despite this, the decade since the Arab Spring began has not seen clear progress towards a more democratic picture in any of the countries of the region, except perhaps for Tunisia, which is a functioning democracy. There has been no uniformity in what has subsequently occurred, no blanket return to deep authoritarian regimes, as demands for fundamental change will not be cowed. In some cases, old dictators remain in power, while in others new undemocratic leaders acquired power via the ballot box. Some regional countries, such as Egypt, saw the ousting of the old authoritarian leaders, a brief spell of democracy, and then a new group of authoritarians took over. What is clear is that a decade of sill-simmering rebellion has reshaped much of North Africa and the Middle East more generally. What is however unclear is what will eventually be the result in terms of political

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and economic outcomes. In Libya, the long-running regime of Muammar Gaddafi regime was overthrown by rebels in 2011 aided by international intervention in the form of a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) bombing campaign. But a decade on, the country is still ungoverned and seemingly ungovernable, fragmented into numerous, sometimes mutually hostile, statelets and fiefdoms. As a result, the prospect of a recreated nation state seems very far away. In Libya's neighbour, Syria, the country's civil war shows no sign of ending after a decade of conflict. In addition, in Yemen, a long-running war rumbles on.

What does a decade of political instability and upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa tell us about the voices of the people? On the one hand, it indicates that many people in numerous regional countries are not content with the status quo, and seek to express discontent in both 'legitimate' (the ballot box) and 'illegitimate' (demonstrations and riots) ways. Second, the post-Arab Spring upheavals highlights how many regional regimes have managed to overcome popular demands for change, stay in power and in many cases continue to rule in ways which have not fundamentally changed. The lack of success of the voices of the people to bring about fundamental changes highlights both the capacity of incumbent regimes to remain in power despite popular opposition and a continuing demand for more democracy and economic reforms in order to address the often pressing need which many 'ordinary' citizens feel for political, economic and social improvements. A persistent question is whether governments have the ability or desire to deal with the challenge of fast-growing populations' demands for more jobs, improved welfare and democracy? Such concerns animate tens of thousands of people in the Middle East and North Africa to continue to demand fundamental changes in order to improve their lives and future prospects. Such people – like their counterparts in many other parts of the world – expect and demand governments to bring about multifaceted improvements to their lives (Haynes, 2020).

Events in North Africa and the Middle East since the Arab Spring events of the early 2010s also provide evidence that on their own the voices of the people raised in protests against what are often seen as fundamental political and economic injustices do not necessarily prevail in the face of determined resistance from rulers very anxious to stay put and not give in to such demands. In power, governments frequently have effective means at their disposal to curb, undermine or defeat citizen-led activists. We shall see this in the following case study of Hong Kong.

## **Hong Kong**

Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution' erupted in 2014, an outbreak of civic activism which sought to stress the desire of many Hongkongers to live in a recognisably democratic political environment, unlike big brother next door: The People's Republic of China. Use of the term 'umbrella' in the protests referred to the fact that many activists held umbrellas as a symbol of protest during the events. Hong Kong is a semi-autonomous island territory and a former British colony. It passed from British to Chinese control in 1997 and part of the deal was that China would allow at least a measure of democracy to continue. China, of course, is ruled by a Communist government and is a one-party state that strictly limits political competition. Protesters believed that the Chinese government was going back on an agreement to allow Hong Kong to have open elections and was progressively governing Hong Kong more like mainland China. There were also underlying economic issues, with Hong Kong's citizens experiencing some of the highest levels of wealth and income inequality in the world. For several weeks, Hong Kong's ultra-modern business centre was transformed into a conflict zone, with up to 200,000 protestors confronted by police in riot gear. The protests eventually fizzled out, with the protesters not only failing to persuade the government of China to accede to their demands but also experiencing dwindling support as people grew tired of the disruption to their lives. As was the case in some Central and Eastern European countries, this highlights the ability of entrenched rulers to stay in power without making significant concessions. Yet it was also clear that the protests have had an impact on how many Hong Kong citizens view their political future. This turned to be significant for later events during which many of those who took to the streets to demand more and better democracy students and other young people (Wassenstrom, 2020).

The 'Umbrella Revolution' did not succeed, as China maintained a strong grip on Hong Kong, but without resolving the problems that had led to the protests in the first place. Chief among these was a wide sense of citizens' disconnection from those in power. When this was matched by an ability for people to use their voice to influence political and economic outcomes, mass action can quickly follow. Here, we can see the double-edged impact of

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globalisation at work. On the one hand, the end of the Cold War unleashed the forces of democratisation and economic reform that many authoritarian elites did their best to prevent – sometimes with success. On the other hand, ideas set free by the end of the Cold War found resonance in diverse cultural contexts and expression in the form of street protests that reflected the power of the voice of the people. In fact, so extensive was the spread of such thinking that even established democracies in the West were affected.

Five years later, in 2019, new anti-government protests shook Hong Kong, and for months things did not return to normal. The new wave of protests began in June. They were initially directed against plans to allow extradition to mainland China under some circumstances. Opponents said this risked exposing Hongkongers to unfair trials and violent treatment. They also argued the bill would give China greater influence over Hong Kong and could be used to target activists and journalists. Later, protests widened and deepened, escalating into a wide-ranging demand for enhanced democracy and distancing of Hong Kong politically from China.

Many Hongkongers were concerned that extradition to China would both weaken the independence of Hong Kong's judges and endanger the city's numerous political dissidents by being sent to mainland China where they might expect serious consequences from judges who worked in a non-democratic political environment dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. The roots of the unstable political situation in Hong Kong and the wave of civic activism which appeared post-2014 can be traced to the fact that Hong Kong was a colony of Britain for over a century until China reasserted its control in the late 1990s. Many in Hong Kong were uncomfortable about being under the increasing control of China, which they feared would diminish their political independence. Under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement which was a feature of the 1997 handover of power from Britain to China, Hong Kong was enabled to have a measure of political and administrative autonomy, and its people some continuing political rights.

Following extensive protests, the extradition bill was withdrawn in September 2019 by Hong Kong's leader, Carrie Lam. Yet, demonstrations not only continued but expanded their focus; activists were now demanding 'full' democracy and an inquiry into what were widely regarded as often brutal police actions. As time went on, clashes between police and activists become progressively more violent, with police firing live bullets and protesters attacking officers and throwing petrol bombs. Things came to a head on 1 October, a symbolic day, when China was supposed to be celebrating 70 years of Communist Party rule. On the day of supposed celebration, Hong Kong underwent one of its most violent and chaotic days since the 2019 protests began. A teenage protester was shot in the chest with a live bullet as protesters fought officers with poles, petrol bombs and other projectiles. The government responded by banning the wearing of face masks by protesters. Soon after, in early November, a pro-China government legislator was stabbed by a man pretending to be a supporter. A week after that, a protester was shot by a police officer as activists sought to establish a road block in defiance of police orders. Later the same day another man was set on fire by anti-government protesters. Finally, November also witnessed a siege of Hong Kong's Polytechnic University by police, where protesters were holed up with the authorities massed outside. Towards the end of the month, the territory held local council elections that were seen as a barometer of public opinion: it was landslide for anti-Beijing activists, as 17 of 18 local councils were henceforward to be controlled by pro-democracy councillors. Nothing however was resolved: China would not give ground and the protesters were not willing to give up.

Some among the protesters adopted a slogan: 'Five demands, not one less!' The demands were as follows:

- For the protests not to be characterised as a 'riot'
- Amnesty for arrested protesters
- An independent inquiry into alleged police brutality
- Implementation of complete universal suffrage

The fifth demand, the withdrawal of the bill, has already been met. None, except for the fifth, were forthcoming and the stand-off between government (backed by China) and the activists has continued. Internationally, the protests supporting the Hong Kong movement have spread across the globe, with rallies taking place in the UK, France, the USA, Canada and Australia. In many cases, people supporting the demonstrators were confronted by pro-Beijing rallies. Chinese president Xi Jinping warned ominously against separatism, saying any attempt to divide China would

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end in 'bodies smashed and bones ground to powder' (Wassenstrom, 2020).

The Chinese government showed that it meant business in May 2020 when it effectively took away Hong Kong's autonomy by introducing a law effectively removing Hong Kong's erstwhile special status. This enabled the Chinese government legally to take over control of the territory, away from Hong Kong's elected government. This change came on the back of months of protest led by opposition figures and young leaders, backed by sometimes huge popular demonstrations involving people of all ages and backgrounds, which in effect was a popular demand for Hong Kong's independence – or at least a high degree of autonomy – away from China. Many believed this necessary in order to protect the territory's democratic framework from what were widely perceived as heavy-handed attempts by China to take it away. The US government responded by proclaiming that because in effect Hong Kong was no longer an autonomous entity, as decreed by the 1997 agreement which saw the British government cede control of Hong Kong to its Chinese counterpart after more than 150 years of colonial control, then the advantageous trading relations between the USA and Hong Kong would henceforward cease. This was bad news for the people of Hong Kong, as they had thrived in the context of the trading arrangement with the USA, and unwelcome to the government of China that had long derived a substantial proportion of its foreign currency income from Hong Kong's trade with the rest of the world.

## **Brexit**

As China regained control of Hong Kong in May 2020, so the United Kingdom (UK) made highly significant steps to assert its position as a fully independent country. This occurred in the context of the ramifications of the June 2016 referendum in the UK on the issue of should the country remain in or leave the EU. There were many reasons for the unexpected outcome of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. Two in particular stand out. The first was a fear expressed by many people of the results of what some saw as 'uncontrolled' immigration and the second was a lack of willingness to have the UK's ability to make independent policy constrained by membership of the EU.

The fear expressed by many in Britain about what they saw as uncontrolled immigration was also replicated in other European countries. Eurobarometer data from 2018 identify high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment among citizens of the then 27 European Union member states ('EU27'). Evidence for this comes from responses to several questions asked by Eurobarometer: the 'fight against terrorism' was seen as the most important issue in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, with an average of 49 percent in the EU27 claiming that it was the most important issue. The second most important concern was 'combatting youth employment' (48 percent). 'Immigration' (45 percent) was the third most important issue to EU27 voters and the fourth was the 'economy and growth' (42 percent). It is probably safe to assume that for many Europeans, both 'terrorism' and 'immigration' are primarily associated with the presence of growing numbers of Muslims in many European countries, including the UK. This was reflected in the Brexit campaign prior to the June 2016 referendum. A key issue highlighted by the 'leave EU' campaign was, it alleged, that the UK would be compelled to open its borders to Turks, that is, some 80 million people, most of whom are Muslims. In addition, several European countries, including Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, the Netherlands and Italy, had election campaigns in the late 2010s in which Muslim immigration was a significant electoral issue. In addition to fears of 'uncontrolled' immigration was rising fears of economic insecurity in many countries. Significant numbers of people believed that growing numbers of immigrants would inevitably reduce wage levels of indigenous workers by immigrants; being more willing to accept employment at relatively low wages, compared to their indigenous counterparts (Haynes 2017). Thus, in relation to the June 2016 referendum in the UK, the voices of the people were often raised in support of Britain leaving the EU because of fears of unwelcome changes which many believed were linked to Britain's continued membership of the EU.

Voices of the people expressed in the context of the UK's 2016 referendum also underline a wider point of greater relevance. Despite widely observed and continuing effects of globalisation on national sovereignty, governments in Europe and elsewhere still seek to portray themselves as being in control, able to shape events and not just to respond (Haynes, 2005). Yet, recent events affecting Europe and its constituent governments indicate that such claims are not always plausible. The raising of the voices of the people in Europe, for example, in support of populist politicians and their parties may reflect some of the unwelcome ramifications of globalisation, for many people linked

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to the long-term effects of the 2008 global economic crisis and its impact on many people's economic security and wellbeing. In the case of Britain and the 2016 'Brexit' referendum there was also the perceived economic, cultural and social impact of what was sometimes portrayed as 'uncontrolled' immigration which for some people in the UK appeared to threaten the country's stability and wellbeing. It was not however only in the UK that such fears were expressed, raised in the voices of the people. We have already mentioned the *gilets jaunes* in France whose opposition to President Macron was a factor in a reduction in the scope and nature of France's economic reforms. Beyond France, hitherto apparently stable and secure countries, such as German and, the Netherland, saw increased support for populist leaders and their parties in response to widespread fears a declining economic and social environment. While the UK did not see the rise to prolonged significance of a populist party as a manifestation of popular opposition to the status quo, several of its neighbouring countries did, including Germany and Italy. , it is the case that the issue was dominated by topics which are common to right-wing populists in many parts of Europe and elsewhere (Haynes, 2019: 158-60).

## Overall conclusion

The aim of this article was to identify the characteristics and political importance of the 'voices of the people' in relation to widespread demands for often fundamental changes to both political and economic arrangements. We saw that the voices were not raised in only non-democratic contexts, such as the countries of the Arab World. We also noted that in countries that do have democratically elected governments, such as the UK, the voices of the people were raised in opposition to policies which many did not like and which many believed their governments were capable of addressing adequately. A third area of the concerns of the people raised in the article were the long-running and persistent popular protests in Hong Kong which focused on both the territory's government's apparent failure to protect the human rights of Hongkongers and the increasing power and control of the government of China on Hong Kong.

The 'people' referred to in this article are not a specific group. Indeed, it is clear that the citizens referred in this article are not easily identifiable in terms of age, class or gender. What they do have in common is the desire to have more say in decisions that their rulers make. It is not as though having a formally democratic political environment is necessarily the solution to popular frustration and anger. We have seen that even in existing democracies, such as the UK, popular protests were capable of overturning long-established government policy in relation to Britain's membership of the EU, leading to the unexpected result of the June 2016 referendum which saw the UK leaving the EU to usher in a period of change and potential prolonged instability.

It is important to bear in mind that the kind of popular protests that we have discussed in this article have been a feature of politics in many countries for a very long time. Nearly 250 years ago, the French Revolution of 1789 expressed popular frustration at the iniquities of the status quo, and as a result the old political, social and economic order was overturned never to return. The article has detailed how the failure of governments, whether elected or not, to deal adequately with popular political or economic concerns may lead to an outburst of citizens' anger, whether expressed in voices alone or via direct action on the streets. Today, it seems that such popular movements are not only growing in frequency but also in importance. Each of the three case studies presented in this article – the Arab Spring, Hong Kong and Brexit – underline how difficult it is both to address coherently what many believe are legitimate concerns and to come up with new policies which are qualitatively better than what were in place before.

Why this is the case is linked to the fact that the voices of the people are never speaking as one; instead, voices of the people are inevitably expressions of opposition, whose concerns not all share. Most obviously, this includes those who are already in power and would have the most to lose from a fundamental reorganisation of political and economic arrangements. Not only are the voices of the people identified and discussed in this article popular expressions of demands for change they are also often populist vehicles. Recall that populism is an ideology which sees elites with power as the main problem of and obstacle to change. In this context, it is easy to see why populist leaders and parties in the USA, Europe and elsewhere have seen major political successes via the ballot box. Their main goal is to challenge those in power, which the populists portray as hopelessly distant from the mass of ordinary people and unconcerned with their hopes, fears and aspirations. Finally, popular and populist demands for change – whether on the streets or via the ballot box – underline how people living in both democratic and non-democratic



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political environments are widely demanding more from those in power and will not be content with keeping silent in their quest to bring about often fundamental changes to their lives.

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## About the author:

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