

New ‘Witches’, Old Tricks

Using data spanning more than 500 years, Peter Leeson, George Mason University, shows that hunting witches would seem to be a long-standing strategy for shoring up political or religious market share in the face of heightened competition. In Donald Trump’s America, the strategy lives on.

THERE’S AN OLD TRICK FOR DEALING WITH RIVALS. As the adage goes, ‘If you can’t beat ’em, hunt witches’. Okay, so that’s not quite how the adage goes—but it should be. For nearly half a millennium, public authorities have hunted witches, figurative and literal, to get a leg up against competitors.

Donald Trump’s witch hunts

To find the most recent incarnation of this phenomenon, look no further than the politics section of an American newspaper — or at President Donald J Trump’s Twitter feed — where, on any given day, you’ll likely find the President or one of his surrogates slamming Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into ‘Russian collusion’ regarding the 2016 election as a ‘witch hunt’. Trump’s charge: his opponents are angry they lost political power and, desiring but unable at this juncture to impeach him, have resorted to digging for phantom crimes committed by him or his associates.

Differing views of the Special Counsel investigation’s desirability aside, the political strategy of Trump’s rivals seems clear: Whether hunting for ‘Russian witches’ delivers evidence of Trump malfeasance or not, at least the electorate will know that Democratic leaders are committed to ‘rooting out evil’, perhaps persuading some to vote for Democrats and against Republicans in the next election.

Surprisingly, similar logic may have driven the hunt for literal witches in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, which prosecuted more than 80,000 people for witchcraft and claimed the lives of half of them. In a new study published in the *Economic Journal*, Jacob Russ and I identify competition between Catholicism and Protestantism for churchgoers in post-Reformation Christendom as a central source of Europe’s ‘witch craze’ (Leeson and Russ 2018).

The witch as a threat

For the first time in history, the Reformation presented large numbers of Christians with a religious choice: stick with the old Church or switch to a new one. And when churchgoers have religious choice, churches must compete.

The Church tried to deal with Protestant competition by criminalizing the new faith. But not unlike the early efforts of some of Trump’s opponents aimed at delegit-

imizing his presidency (‘But he lost the popular vote!’), this strategy flopped. In a handful of Catholic strongholds, such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal, rulers were willing and able to prosecute Protestants with inquisitions. However, within a couple years of Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*, many European rulers and citizens had become Protestants, and they weren’t about to lead inquisitions against themselves.

The Church thus had to take another tack. Given the then-popular belief in witches, the one it took is unsurprising and was quickly emulated by its Protestant rivals: In an effort to woo the faithful, competing confessions advertised their superior ability to protect citizens against worldly manifestations of Satan’s evil by prosecuting suspected witches. Similar to how contemporary Republicans and Democrats focus campaign activity in political battlegrounds during elections to attract the loyalty of undecided voters, historical Catholic and Protestant officials focused witch trial activity in religious battlegrounds during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation to attract the loyalty of undecided Christians.

Using data that contain more than 40,000 suspected witches, whose trials span 21 European countries over the course of more than half a millennium (1300-1850), our study analyzes the relationship between confessional competition and witch trial activity. It finds that when and where confessional competition, as measured by confessional warfare, was more intense, witch trial activity was more intense too. Factors traditionally blamed for Europe’s witch craze, such as bad weather and weak government, have no relationship with witch trial activity.

Religious rivalry and the witch hunt

Geographically, our data reveal that witch trial activity was most intense where Catholic-Protestant rivalry was strongest, and vice versa. Germany alone, which was ground zero for the Reformation, laid claim to nearly 40 per cent of all witchcraft prosecutions in Europe. In contrast, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Ireland — each of which remained loyal to the Church after the Reformation and never saw serious competition from Protestantism — collectively accounted for just six per cent of Europeans tried for witchcraft.

Temporally, our data reveal that the witch craze began

only after the Protestant Reformation in 1517, following the new faith's rapid spread. Witch-hunting reached its zenith between c.1555 and c.1650, years coextensive with peak competition for Christian consumers, evidenced by the Catholic Counter-Reformation, during which Catholic officials aggressively pushed back against Protestant successes in converting Christians throughout much of Europe. Then, c.1650, the witch craze began its precipitous decline, prosecutions for witchcraft virtually vanishing by 1700.

The end of the rivalry

The reason for this decline? The Peace of Westphalia, a treaty entered in 1648, which ended decades of European religious warfare and much of the confessional competition that motivated it by creating permanent territorial monopolies for Catholics and Protestants—regions of exclusive control, wherein one confession was protected from the competition of the other.

In the Western world, at least, hunting witches would seem to be a long-standing strategy for shoring up political or religious market share in the face of heightened competition. Indeed, the very existence of 'witches' seems to hinge largely on competition. Not only did the Catholic Church mostly avoid prosecuting witches until it faced significant religious market competition in the sixteenth century, until the turn of the fifteenth century, it denied there was such a thing. Perhaps similarly, the Democratic Party, which is now certain that 'Russian witches' are casting spells on American politics, decried Joseph McCarthy's 'witch hunt' in the 1950s and denied the existence of 'red witches'.

Reference:

Leeson, Peter T, and Jacob W Russ. 2018. 'Witch Trials'" *Economic Journal* 128: 2066-2105.

Brexit's deep roots in confusion on democracy and statistics

In the last few days before we went to press the possibility of a second referendum on leaving the EU began to look a possibility, albeit still an unlikely one. Until then, UK politicians of all persuasions had treated the first vote as sacrosanct — a democratic expression of preference that could not be gainsaid. As Thomas Colignatus¹ points out, this reverence overlooked the fact that there was little, if any, useful information in the first vote.

Let us look beyond Brexit and determine some deeper implications for conventional thinking. Namely, the UK seems quite confused on democracy and statistics, with a big problem in the vocabulary.

UK democracy has two formal instruments to get information about voter preferences for collective decision making, namely the House of Commons, using district representation (DR), and the occasional referendum. Currently we see that both the Referendum of 2016 and the General Election of 2017 fail to provide adequate information on voter preferences. The situation can be seen as chaotic. The debate continues while the very lack of proper information is neglected. Instead it is better to stop the debate and to concentrate on the real problem: why doesn't the UK model of democracy generate the required information about voter preferences ?

To start with: What does the UK electorate really want w.r.t. Brexit or Bremain ? The answer is: we don't know. The 2016 Referendum Question concerned the legal issue of Leave or Remain. The policy options were left to the polls. The very Referendum Question fails the criteria for a decent statistical enquiry. I am surprised that the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) did not protest. The question of Leave or Remain is a binary legal issue but the true issue

are the policy options. It took some time to analyse this, but with the help of Anthony Wells of YouGov.com I managed to dissect this, in an earlier *Newsletter* (177, October 2017). Some 17 percent of voters ranked Remain between different options for Leave, which implies a grand game of guessing what to vote for strategically. The Referendum failed in the expression of preferences.

The political parties in the House of Commons are split on both direction and options as well. It is rather damning for a claimed democracy that its two formal instruments do not result in clarity on this basic issue. Remarkably, politicians across the board agree that the electorate would have voted to leave and that this would constitute an expression of the 'popular will' that must be respected at all costs. This however fails to recognise that the Referendum Question precisely did not generate the required information for policy decisions. The politicians look for a policy conditional on the outcome of the Referendum, but the outcome of the Referendum was conditional on guessing the policy. There is far too little awareness that the policy issue better is reconsidered when more details of the exit attain clarity.

The instructive question is why the UK had the referendum in the first place. Holland since 1917 has a system of equal