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Quo Vadis? Identity, policy and the future of the European Union

Edited by Thorsten Beck and Geoffrey Underhill

A VoxEU.org Book

CEPR Press

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8 A future EU: An inevitably emotional party animal

Gijs Schumacher
University of Amsterdam

2016 gave us Brexit and Trump. What will 2017 have in store for us? *Madame Président* Le Pen? Prime Minister Wilders? A resurgence of the radical right in Germany? The media speak of 'populist revolutions' across the democratic world. Populism is probably the most abused concept of 2016. Often people label demagoguery, political opportunism, and immigrant bashing as 'populist'. Supporters of these populists are often branded as misguided, or as protest voters. In particular, the popular 'angry (poor) white men' explanation of Brexit and Trump characterises populist supporters as overly emotional and unreasoned. I disagree with this view. Not because these voters *are* rational, but because emotion and reason are not two separate processes that we can turn on and off. We are in fact wired in such a way that emotions always precede and influence reason (Damasio 1995). By consequence, all politics is emotional. This chapter illustrates that psychological aspects such as emotion and personality play a pervasive, but underestimated role in politics – in particular regarding the role of populists in politics.

All politics is emotional

Was it education, income, religion, racism, sexism, geography, authoritarianism, or something else? The weeks after Trump's election saw a steady bombardment of plots demonstrating how one vital – overlooked – variable explained Trump's victory. These analyses mostly left out the single most important predictor: partisanship. Most Americans identify with either the Democrat or the Republican Party. Party identification triggers immediate emotional responses that influence all our subsequent reasoning.

We search for and quickly agree with arguments in line with our world view, and reject those arguments against our world view (Taber and Lodge 2006). This explains how many Republicans supported Trump. Thinking that Republicans are good and Democrats are bad, Republican partisans ignored Trump's sexist and racist remarks, while quickly agreeing with negative characterisations of Hillary Clinton. The fact that Clinton had more policy ideas, and had better reasoning to support them, was electorally irrelevant as Republicans were not listening.

In Europe we tend to think of this as less of a problem, because fewer people identify with a party in Europe than in America. Recent research demonstrates this is not the case, and that also in Europe more than seven out of ten people identify with a party (Bankert *et al*. 2016). In sum, it is not only populist supporters that let emotions influence their political decision making; almost everybody does it. What is particularly important about populism is that it can make and break new partisan identities.

Populism breaks old identities

Academics generally agree that populism is a 'thin ideology' that combines anti-establishment appeals with demands that the interests of the people should be (more) central in politics. These components are then always combined with some host ideology (Mudde 2004). Today that host ideology is mostly anti-European and anti-immigration. But there is also left-wing populism (Podemos in Spain) or populism without a clear host ideology (the Five Star Movement in Italy).

Populism works because people are very sensitive to anti-establishment appeals. Anthropological accounts of human behaviour in hunter-gatherer societies demonstrate that we are invested with strong anti-big man feelings (Boehm 2001). We share a general resentment towards leadership, especially if that leadership is evaluated as undeserving due to self-interested behaviour and self-importance (Smith *et al.* 2007). By framing the elite as harming the people's interests, populists set the elite apart as an 'outgroup' to be feared. It has been suggested that this is an effective strategy to craft new political identities (Brewer 2007). In a recent experiment that I conducted with Paul Marx, we found that people are willing to accept any policy proposal regarding tax and welfare, as long as it is not a career politician proposing it.

In fact, our results show that people would love to have construction workers as politicians.

Not everybody is open to anti-establishment appeals. Some recent experiments I conducted with Bert Bakker and Matthijs Rooduijn demonstrate that 'low agreeable' or discordant people – who are generally egoistic, distrustful and uncooperative – were particularly motivated by Trumps's spitting on the establishment.[1] Elsewhere, we demonstrated that low agreeableness is a general feature of populist voters in Western Europe and the US (Bakker *et al.* 2016).

Agreeableness is a personality trait (Mondak 2010). These traits are generally stable. Language and policies can be crafted in such a way as to appeal to people with specific personality traits. As noted above, anti-establishment rhetoric appeals to 'low-agreeable' people. Politicians can achieve a 'functional match' between people's personality traits and their language and policy ideas (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004, Jost *et al.* 2009). But there are many ways to do this. The experiment with Bakker and Rooduijn mentioned in the previous section also demonstrated that authoritarians, a personality trait indicating preference for social order and hierarchy, are particularly triggered by fears of immigrants. This is the second route to Trump and similar EU-populist support. Importantly, the authoritarians are different Trumpistas from the low-agreeable Trumpistas. The authoritarian aspect of Trump support is likely to be similar to the populist parties in Europe that have anti-immigration as their host ideology, but not to those populist parties (Podemos, Five Star Movement) who lack this host ideology.

Is populism dangerous?

Populism is dangerous because it can sway people who do not naturally support the host ideology of the party. That is the anti-establishment route to populist support, particularly attractive to low agreeable people. Is it dangerous? If the host ideology is, then yes populism is dangerous.

1 See http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/09/02/donald-trumps-support-comes-from-two-distinct-groups-authoritarians-who-oppose-immigration-and-anti-establishment-voters/

Also, the people-centric aspect of populism can be dangerous. Calls for the unmediated expression of the people quickly turn into the gradual demolition of liberal democracy, as is taking place in Hungary.

Bonnie Meguid (2005) demonstrates that accommodating populist parties (in contrast to ignoring or opposing them) is the best strategy to undercut their electoral support.[2] For example, Flemish Interest (formerly Flemish Bloc) was almost annihilated by the New Flemish Alliance's accommodation of their policies. The obvious downside is that while the populist challenger is destroyed, the mainstream has radicalised.

Can the mainstream be(come) populist? We typically equate populism with radicalism, but this need not be the case. Populism, in fact, should be seen as a scale rather than a category. Parties vary in the degree to which they are populist. Findings from text analysis or expert surveys demonstrate that, strictly speaking, 'populist' parties do not have a monopoly on populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, Polk *et al*. 2017, Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011); mainstream parties also use it. Think of Matteo Renzi, the former (and future?) prime minister of Italy, who called himself the political caste breaker. Also, parties vary in their level of populism over time, depending on their integration into the party system. In fact, many parties strike populist chords in their formative stages. They seem to lose this over time, which may in fact be one of the problems.

What to do about populism?

My suggestion would be to accommodate not the policies – i.e. the host ideology – but the anti-establishment aspect of populism. Many populist claims are simply not all that absurd. Is it really controversial in South Europe to claim that the political elite is corrupt? No, even the European Commission would agree to that. Do politicians feel self-important? Yes, immensely. Is there a back-room deal-making political class? Of course. Many European opposition parties have missed an opportunity to propose a radical break with the existing political elite. They have themselves become too much part of it.

2 Meguid analyses niche parties. By her definition most populist parties fall into this category. However, not all niche parties are populist.

Instead, many of them used the economic crisis to try and demonstrate their responsibility and their readiness to govern.

This managerial and technocratic response to the crisis was perhaps the proper policy, but it is – in my view - rather ineffective in crafting and maintaining political identities. It underestimates the psychology of voters. This chapter has illustrated this by summarising some of my recent findings regarding the link between personality and voting, and between emotions and politics.

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About the author

Dr. Gijs Schumacher is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. He is interested in what politicians say, why they do it and how people respond to political communication. He has published on party organisation, mass-elite linkages, party change, the radical right, social democratic parties, emotions, personality and welfare policies. His work has appeared in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Party Politics*, *West European Politics*, *Electoral Studies* and *Political Psychology*. He is also a co-founder and commentator on **stukroodvlees.nl**, a Dutch politial science blog. His dissertation *"Modernize or Die?" Social Democrats, Welfare State Retrenchment and the Choice between Office and Policy* was awarded the Jaarprijs Politicologie 2013, a prize for the best dissertation written by a Dutch or Flemish researcher abroad or a researcher at a Dutch or Belgian university. He is also an alummnus of the University of Amsterdam, University of Hong Kong and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The aim of this eBook is to focus on the post-crisis 'socio-economic policy' identity of the European Union in the post-crisis period. The emphasis is not on where the EU has come from but where it appears to be going, where it should be going and what sorts of difficulties this might imply for the success of the EU and its various major policy domains. This is perhaps best understood by focusing on the EU's economic policy 'identity markers' prior to the crisis and what has emerged in the aftermath.

The policy identity of the EU has evolved a long way from its 1990s emphasis on solidarity, a budding social Europe, and a broadening of competencies. Electorates and governments alike have long forgot the war-torn origins of the beast. Instead, members vote to leave. An identity based on self-insurance, stagnation, decision-making inefficiency and introspection would excite populism and extremism in any one country and is doing so across the EU. The notion that politics and discretionary policy counts and can deliver (never mind redistribution) appears to have been abandoned. If this redistributional identity and machinery remains moribund and the decision-making machinery paralysed, Brexit will generate imitators in the wings and may be doing so now.

So, where does the EU go from here? This volume is all about the re-launch and presents a wide range of, often clashing, ideas about and policy solutions to the dilemmas we face. What common-good dilemmas should the European Union address and how should it do so; including climate change, security against terrorist threats, youth unemployment? What should be the balance between subsidiarity and solidarity principles? This question has been complicated by the election of Donald Trump and the surge of populist-nationalist parties across Europe. Trends towards more nationalist and protectionist policy agendas might make any further integration in Europe difficult. By including columns from both economists and political scientists, we aim to provide as broad a perspective as possible and have as broad an impact as possible, as a start to conversation on a sustainable future for Europe.

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