Simply studying populism is no longer enough

Sociologist **Matthijs Rooduijn** *explains why the darkening political mood must force academics to step up and choose sides.*

Research on the political phenomenon of populism was traditionally a topic for historians. But in the past two or three decades, the academic field has grown to include political scientists, sociologists, communication scientists and psychologists. And we populism scholars have never been so popular. Since the US election, I have been inundated with requests from the media to talk about populism and why it seems to be catching on.

One of the most common questions is whether history is repeating itself — if the current situation resembles the political strife of the 1930s. I don't think so. This is new. Of course, there are some similarities, but there are also very large differences. Most importantly, fascists and national socialists are no populists, because they are not democratic. Populists are.

Right-wing politicians in the crop currently making headlines are populists in that they want the will of the people to be the point of departure for political decision-making. This 'general will' should, according to their populist message, be translated as directly as possible into actual political decisions. All institutions, rules and procedures that stand in the way of such a direct expression of the general will are conceived of as liabilities that should be removed as quickly as possible. Minority rights? They hamper the direct expression of the will of the people. Checks and balances? They delay the decision-making process. Political compromises? They lead to the dilution of policy proposals and therefore to a lack of decisiveness. Free media? It only represents the interests of the 'established order'.

A little bit of populism can act as a force for good by recognizing discontent and broadening the political agenda. But current right-wing populists go further: they infuse their populism with nativism, which argues that the nation is being threatened by 'dangerous others', such as immigrants or people of a non-majority race or religion. Populism and nativism are frequently confused and combined, but they are separate and distinct.

Initially I took the view that academics investigating these parties and politicians should approach their study as objectively as possible: they should try to be neutral observers who focus on understanding the causes and consequences of the rise of these political actors, without making moral judgements about the empirical patterns that they encounter.

As such, when I finished presentations on the causes and consequences of the rise of populist parties with an analysis of the relationship between populism and liberal democracy and the positive and negative sides of populism, my conclusion was always quite relaxed. In Europe, I used to say, we have strong liberal institutions, there is no all-pervasive populist zeitgeist and if populists manage to make it into government it is usually as part of a junior coalition party.

However, things have changed. Populists in Hungary and Poland seriously challenge liberal institutions, populist discourse has become more widespread and, when in government, populists are no longer merely junior partners.

Most disturbingly, mainstream parties in Europe seem to have incorporated elements of populism's illiberalism. In France, for instance, the enduring state of emergency established after last year's terrorist attacks in Paris has led to abusive raids and infringements of people's rights. Many mainstream parties in Western European countries are choosing security over liberty — probably because they feel the radical-right populists breathing down their necks.

So I have changed my mind and my approach. I will remain as neutral as possible in my academic work, but I increasingly feel obliged to take part in the public debate about this topic, and to warn in the media of the increasing tension between populism and liberal democracy.

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More academics must speak out and warn about where we are heading. Part of this is immediate self-interest. There is no reason to expect that academia will be immune to the kind of populist interferences that we are now seeing in Hungary and Poland. Populist attacks on checks and balances and media freedom might well spill over into attacks on academia as well. After all, populists not only attack political and economic elites; they also target 'snobby intellectuals' in academia. In fact, such attacks on academics are happening in Turkey right now.

Academics also have a moral obligation to protect liberal democracy. By promoting social and political pluralism, the system produces the circumstances under which researchers can do their jobs and science can flourish. Researchers depend on it.

Events this year have been worrying. And the first big test of 2017 comes uncomfortably close to home for me. The populist Geert Wilders of the Dutch Party for Freedom is leading the opinion polls in the build-up to the national elections in March. He might well win, but it's highly unlikely that he will become the next prime minister. He will have to form a government coalition if he does not get more than 50% of the seats. Most other parties have already ruled out collaboration with him, so I think it is very unlikely that he will govern. However, with four or more mainstream parties forming a coalition, Wilders's message that the political establishment is colourless and all the same might become even more popular. ■

Matthijs Rooduijn *is an assistant professor in the department of sociology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.*
e-mail: m.rooduijn@uu.nl