



A
TOOLBOX
— AGAINST —
POPULISM

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— THE ‘SUPER ELECTION YEAR 2017’ AND ITS LESSONS —

INPUT FOR A TOOLBOX AGAINST POPULISM

BY CAROLINE HAURY & LYUBOMIRA RAEVA

Populists are experts at inciting public emotions, be it against the EU, migrants, LGBTQ people, the mainstream media or international trade. Their success is no longer a problem confined to a small group of countries, but rather something which has had an imprint on the political landscape throughout Europe.

At the end of the “Super Election Year 2017”, we look back with mixed feelings. On the one hand, we marvel at those election campaigns which served a blow to populists, notably the campaign of Mark Rutte’s VVD in the Netherlands, which juxtaposed an optimistic worldview to the populists’ campaign of apocalyptic doom. We also look to France and Emmanuel Macron’s campaign with his newly founded La République En Marche, centered wholly around the idea of positive change.

Yet we cannot help but take note of an ever-strong Viktor Orbán in Hungary and a highly popular populist government in Poland, who are eroding fundamental rights and the rule of law. In Germany, whilst the Liberals have secured an impressive comeback, the rightwing populist party AfD has entered the German Bundestag for the first time and has become the third strongest group. In Austria, the populists will likely be the junior partner in the next coalition government.

It’s time for Liberals to take stock of what this election year has taught us and collect our experiences in a “Toolbox against Populism” – ready to be used when the next campaign calls us.

Let us not forget that warding off the populist challenge is just one side of the coin. How do we effectively and continuously communicate our messages and visions to citizens – online and offline? Is there some-

thing we can “learn” from populists when it comes to successful communication? Which strategic steps are necessary for liberal parties and movements to win back the upper hand in societal debates?

As part of an ELF workshop series entitled “We want you to stand up to Populism!”, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, NEOS Lab, Haya van Someren Stichting/VVD International, ALDE Party, Liberaal Kenniscentrum and LYMEC brought together communication and campaign experts from liberal parties and movements from across Europe to brainstorm answers to these questions.

This publication showcases some of the most important findings of these workshops.

In his contribution “Populism as a foreign policy tool”, [Máté Szalai](#) provides an answer to the paramount question of what actually constitutes populism. He then goes on to outline how populist parties and governments change political culture and decision-making processes and how Liberals should react to these populist challenges on a strategic level.

One of the main ingredients for the success of populist parties is the use of emotions. And while populists are mostly known for inciting fears, they have also managed to portray their leaders as trustworthy, hard-working men and women. In her contribution “Emotions lead to Action”, [Grace Parry](#) sheds light on the importance of emotions to generate political engagement and explains how Liberals can tap into the potential of emotional campaigning without having to compromise on rational thinking and evidence-based policy proposals.

Building further on the notion that emotions lead to action and political engagement, [Mark Putnam](#), a world-class producer of campaign advertisement, shares his

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experience of “How to create compelling campaign content” and speaks about the art of storytelling.

One party which was hugely successful at creating such campaign content was the Dutch VVD in their campaign for the 2017 general elections. [Mark Thiessen](#), VVD’s former Director of Online Strategy, explains how to campaign in times of populism – using tried and tested methods of offline engagement as well as the latest online tools.

If there was one unifying message coming out of our workshop series, it was this: Liberals should embrace the optimism that is inherent to their political movement – and show it. After all, this election year has shown the power of positive messaging and a warm and personal approach to citizens’ concerns.

Enjoy the read, and stand up against populism with us!

— CAROLINE HAURY —



— LYUBOMIRA RAEVA —



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A CRITICAL VIEW ON THE DISCOURSE ON POPULISM

BY MÁTÉ SZALAI

“One might wonder why we use a concept so boundless so often.” is an observation made on populism by David van Reybrouck.¹ The Belgian author did not stop at this statement in his book “A Plea for Populism”, he also added that “the success lies exactly in the unclarified substance [of the concept]. The [term] populism is used at every turn because it can be interpreted differently in each situation”.² What van Reybrouck argued is basically that the concept refers to an existing phenomenon, which is used by political actors – whether they are labelled as “populists” or not – to pursue their political interests in the domestic political sphere.

My article follows and builds upon this notion, but projects the discussion to the European and international level. The basic argument for this article is that populism serves as a foreign policy tool for “populists” and “non-populists” alike. Firstly, a populist foreign policy can create or contribute to the emergence of the circumstances in which the populist parties thrive. Secondly, other states can use “populism” as a label to discredit their opponents, thus questioning both their intentions and the quality of their arguments. As a matter of fact, the two processes reinforce each other.

1. CONCEPTUALISING POPULISM

While van Reybrouck was right to say that populism is not fully defined, some advancement have been made in the academic field in this regard. There are three major ways in which the term is conceptualised. First, Cas

Mudde – perhaps the most prominent scholar on the study of populism – identified the term as “an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and that holds that politics should be an expression of ‘the general will’ of the people.”³ In this way, the concept is built on a binary understanding of society, where the interests of a specific group are being neglected in favour of the “establishment”. This way, “populists claim to represent a neglected majority by defying an undeserving but powerful minority”.⁴



THE TERM POPULISM IS USED AT EVERY TURN BECAUSE IT CAN BE INTERPRETED DIFFERENTLY IN EACH SITUATION

Separating society into two general groups and picturing oneself as a saviour of the neglected one does not represent a well-defined worldview, so one can conclude that populism is a “thin ideology” whose substance is highly elusive, depending on national and regional circumstances. The common point is not a common ideological framework but rather the way in which tensions between groups are articulated for political power. As a consequence, some argue that populism is more like a political strategy capitalising on social grievances using harsh rhetoric and professional propagand

1 David van Reybrouck (2010): Peidooi voor populisme. Hungarian edition. Robinco Nyomda, Budapest, p. 11.

2 Ibid

3 Cas Mudde (2016): Europe's populist surge. A long time in the making. Foreign Affairs, 95/6, 25-26.

4 Shannon K. O'Neil (2016): Latin America's populist hangover. What to do when the people's party ends. Foreign Affairs, 95/6, 32.

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da.⁵ I believe that in this case the different interpretations of populism as either an ideology or strategy are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the question captures the very essence of populism itself.

Secondly, while the binary approach of Mudde is widely accepted and used, many articulate a critical approach to this mainstream discourse on populism. Another way to conceptualise it is as a “label” – Francis Fukuyama, for example, argues that the term is basically what “political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don’t like”.⁶ Accordingly, one can argue that a politician or intellectual calls another populist if 1) he or she does not agree with the other’s opinion and 2) the other politician or intellectual is more popular. This way, one can seek to discredit the other without any substantive response.

2. HOW IS POPULISM CONNECTED TO EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS?

While populism is usually considered as a domestic political notion, the phenomenon is definitely connected to international politics in two ways. First, when one analyses the causes of the phenomenon, we can find several originating external developments. Therefore, while populism in the United States, Hungary or France might seem locally originated, it is highly connected to European developments as well. Secondly, populism affects political decision-making as well as how a “populist government” is perceived by others, so it definitely affects interstate relations.

5 The Economist: What is populism? December 19, 2016, www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18.

6 Francis Fukuyama (2016): American Political Decay or Renewal? The Meaning of the 2016 Elections. *Foreign Affairs*, 95/4, 68.

When it comes to international causes of the rise of populism, several have been identified by literature on the topic.

‘WINNERS’ AND ‘LOSERS’ OF GLOBALISATION

Many argue that the phenomenon is highly connected to globalisation – as a result of technological evolution and increasing interactions between societies, cultures and civilisations – and many feel that their traditional way of life is threatened and their culture is under attack.

What is of utmost importance in understanding European populism is the fact that the emerging divide between the “winners” and “losers” of globalisation within our countries is constructed through subjective perceptions, and not objective circumstances. It does not necessarily matter if a society is, aggregately, the beneficiary of globalisation – the cause of fear is not necessarily material, but rather change itself.



POPULISM IN THE UNITED STATES, HUNGARY OR FRANCE MIGHT SEEM LOCALLY ORIGINATED, IT IS HIGHLY CONNECTED TO EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENTS

Moreover, in Central Europe the transformation to market economies, pluralistic democracies, and integrating into the European economy (i.e. globalisation) have all had tangible negative effects on society (through, for example, the rise of unemployment, the fall in real wages in some sectors as well as pensions). According to Peter Rutland, approximately 10–15% of the population are losers of this processes in absolute terms, while the upper 10–15% constitute the winners. For the middle section (60–80%), relative impoverishment could have

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happened.⁷ As mainstream political parties and politicians carried out these processes, they can be easily blamed for it, which is why new parties have been able to emerge.

A second major pattern in the support for populism is that it is driven by relative – not absolute – impoverishment. The voters of these parties “are people who might have objectively profited from globalisation, but who feel (often correctly) that they haven’t profited as much as others. They are actually correct: in the past decades, a small minority (sometimes referred to as “the 1%”) has profited disproportionately from the globalised economy”.⁸ That is why it is not a contradiction that while Europe is a leading economic power in the globalised world, Europeans are rising up against the order which their countries are benefiting from. In June 2008, Pew research found “increasing signs of economic anxiety among the wealthy nations of the West”,⁹ which shows that Western societies’ lack of confidence about their economic outlook is not temporary, but rather a long-lasting tendency.

MIGRATION

This argument also shows us the logic behind the timing of the populist surge in the West, which is connected to two factors. Firstly, the acceleration of migration, the “final frontier of globalisation”.¹⁰ While the exchange of goods, services and information does not threaten

cultural communities to a great extent, the physical appearance of “them” in “our” society can be frightening to many communities. Again, this is not just a temporary phenomenon – ten years before the migration crisis, the aforementioned Pew research showed that the majority of people in 44 of the 47 countries examined wanted stronger regulations for immigration.¹¹ Migration is one of the clearest manifestations of globalisation, which is why almost all political forces considered to be populist treat migration as a top priority for example in Hungary, Poland, France or the United States.



MIGRATION IS ONE OF THE CLEAREST MANIFESTATIONS OF GLOBALISATION, WHICH IS WHY ALMOST ALL POPOULISTS TREAT MIGRATION AS A TOP PRIORITY

QUESTIONING THE GLOBAL LIBERAL ORDER

Secondly, the rise of populism is also connected to another phenomenon, which is the emergence of openly revisionist tendencies in international politics.¹² According to this idea, the international liberal order – created after 1945 and strengthened severely in the 1990s – came under dual pressure by the second decade of the 21st century: the bottom-up challenge of populism and the top-down challenge of Russia (and other minor players) both openly questioned the basic fundamentals of the global order. The two phenomena reinforce each other, but we can also clearly see a tendency in which revisionist states and Western populists can work

7 Peter Rutland (1995): Introductory observations: Globalization and the transition in Eastern Europe. *Macalaster International*, 2/7, 25.

8 Cas Mudde (2016): The revenge of the losers of globalization? Brexit, Trump, and globalization. *The Huffington Post Blog*, September 8, www.huffingtonpost.com/cas-mudde/the-revenge-of-the-losers_b_11407468.html.

9 Andrew Kohut (2008): Assessing globalization. Benefits and drawbacks of trade and integration. *Pew Research Center*, June 24, www.pewglobal.org/2008/06/24/assessing-globalization

10 Fareed Zakaria (2016): Populism on the march. Why the West is in trouble. *Foreign Affairs*, 95/6, 15.

11 Kohut, op. cit.

12 Robin Niblett (2017): Liberalism in retreat. The demise of a dream. *Foreign Affairs*, 96/1, 17-24.

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hand in hand with each other to defeat (mainstream) European and American governments.

While many tend to overemphasise the role of Russia in the European populist surge, the existence of some form of cooperation between Russia and populism is undeniable. Vladimir Putin became a symbol of the fight against the mainstream elite, which is why many Europeans support him, from Italy to Hungary. The case is very similar to that of the Islamic State – the supporters of the terrorist organisation are not necessarily Jihadists or radical religious zealots, but rather ordinary people who see a lack of care from their own government, community and national elites.

HOW POPULISTS INFLUENCE POLITICAL CULTURE AND POLICY AIMS

On the output side, the rise of populism affects foreign policy through its effects on decision-making processes. Since a few Western states have already witnessed the ascension of populist political forces to public power, academics can now investigate the situation from a scientific point of view. Stefan Lehne¹³ identified six major effects of populism on political culture and decision-making:

1. Due to the binary worldview, there is a lack of political desire to make compromises with the other side, which corrupts the culture of domestic political cooperation.
2. The quality of rational political and economic debates also deteriorates, as populist leaders tend to use emotional arguments.

3. As a result of the prominent role of the “populist leader”, there tends to be less demand from the inside for accountability and transparency, which can lead to deeper corruption.
4. Populist political forces usually criticise the bodies of representative democracy as a system based on moral corruption and a symbol of the elite neglecting the needs of the wider society.
5. Achieving and maintaining maximum national sovereignty is considered as a fundamental aim of not just foreign but also domestic policies.
6. As a result of the fifth point, transnational threats (e.g. global warming) are considered to be suspicious, an attempt to undermine national sovereignty, and are therefore usually neglected or questioned.

While the first four points affect foreign policy directly,¹⁴ the fifth and the sixth ones are indirectly connected with foreign policy. Maximum national sovereignty and the neglect of transnational issues contribute to a potential crisis of international multilateral frameworks, setbacks in different areas of global governance (e.g. environmental protection), the intention to minimise the effects of globalisation or even slow it down, protectionist policies and all in all the emergence of a zero-sum culture in international politics. This makes the possibility of reaching a compromise less likely (see the ongoing and seemingly never-ending debate on the proper refugee allocation system in Europe), which can easily be perceived as a weakness by the populists.

13 Stefan Lehne (2017): Populism: The risks and impacts on European states. Carnegie Endowment, June 6, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/06/06/populism-risks-and-impact-on-european-states-pub-71170>.

14 For example through the rise of corruption in foreign trade deals, bribery, hostile rhetoric, etc.

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SUBORDINATION OF FOREIGN POLICY AIMS TO DOMESTIC AIMS

Another important effect of populism is the subordination of foreign policy to domestic political aims. This phenomenon, by itself, is nothing new. As a result of globalisation, the visibility of foreign policy rose significantly, a process which is usually called internationalisation. With a populist party in government, compliance between the domestic and international sphere is far less likely, as external expectations do not mean much for the populist leader.

In these circumstances, every foreign policy act should be viewed in the context of domestic political competition. The populist does not want to be liked by foreign actors. The Hungarian government gains support and sympathy of its voters by engaging in a debate with the European Commission and does not actually wish to win the argument. Criticising Polish legislation only makes a good argument for the leading parties to appeal to the electorate. Mocking Trump only serves to help him to act as the defender of national interests, even when facing the “enemy”.

UNPREDICTABLE BEHAVIOUR OF THE POPULIST STATE

This eventually leads to unpredictable behaviour by the populist state. Again, Trump is the best example for this phenomenon. First of all, the usual rules and expectations governing international relations do not apply to populist governments. They play a different game, in which winning the next election is the only aim. Secondly, without a proper knowledge of the internal political dynamics of the populist state, its partners cannot foresee the government’s interests, as they are not necessarily rooted in international politics. Thirdly, the traditional models which scholars use to conceptualise international politics (balance of power, bandwagoning/balancing, etc.) are also useless in many occasions when it comes to interpreting the populist state’s acts. That

is why uncertainty is the most tangible, and sometimes the only effect of the rise of populism, even if the given state does not change its behaviour to any extent.



EVERY FOREIGN POLICY ACT SHOULD BE VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL COMPETITION

3. POPULISM AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL

I now turn to the usage of populism as a foreign policy tool. My main argument is that “populism” is a two-fold tool in foreign policy; first by those who are called populist and second by those who are calling others populist. I analyse them in a separate manner.

CREATING ENEMIES ABROAD HELPS TO SCORE WINS AT HOME

When it comes to the populist state, the most important goal of the government is to maintain its dominance in the domestic sphere and also to maximise national sovereignty. For this, it uses international political events and interstate relations primarily to play for the audience at home. By projecting the binary logic used in the domestic framework (the corrupt elite versus the general people), the populist state pictures international politics as a fight with those who try to undermine national interest. In this case, the intensification of rhetorical tensions with others – be they international organisations, the EU, the United States or something else – is actually beneficial for populists, as they can show proof of the ultimate normative war fought for national interests and picture themselves as the sole guarantors of

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national pride. So, from the side of the populist state, populist behaviour in international politics also serves as a provocation for others to rhetorically attack them and the country they represent.

The main reason for this phenomenon is that populism works better in a conflictual situation. After defeating internal opponents and gaining the right to govern, it is especially crucial to find new enemies of the people. In peaceful times, it is quite hard to find the necessary reasons for harsh political methods. Therefore, provoking others to criticise the populist state is a great way to get new enemies and new tensions from which the conflictual rhetoric in the domestic political theatre can be upheld.

The enemies of the populist states are all tangible manifestations of different aspects of globalisation: the European Commission (a supranational organisation whose task is actually to govern globalisation in Europe), George Soros (a winner of globalisation) and the transnational network of NGOs (the actual advocates of globalisation) and everyone who criticises the populist state (threats to national sovereignty) etc. The criticism levelled at these actors is only partly aimed at their actual activities but more at what they symbolise. From this perspective, the feelings of the relative losers of globalisation are not unfounded and should not be dismissed – if they were baseless, populist parties would not have gained so much strength recently.

ATTACKING THE OTHER HELPS BOTH SIDES

Naturally, the strategy works only if other actors fall for the provocation and start to express their displeasure with the populist state. Unfortunately, using the label “populist” is in the interest of non-populist governments for several reasons. First of all, just like in domestic politics, identifying your opponent as a populist can help you to portray yourself as the sane and reasonable side. The Dutch government in April was more than happy to have a confrontation with Erdogan’s Turkey in order

to uphold its prestige and status as a “clever small state”. Secondly, by using this strategy, one can easily neglect otherwise reasonable demands by populist states, such as in the case of the debates surrounding the migration and refugee crisis. It is much easier to call Hungary and Slovakia populists than to actually respond to their legitimate critiques about the refugee allocation system.

As a result, both sides are interested in the discourse, a phenomenon which we can call the vicious circle of populism. The populist, by being attacked rhetorically, can strengthen its domestic popularity by exacerbating the conflict and picturing himself as the true defender of the national interests. On the other hand, others which use the label populist can also strengthen their image as the reasonable actors and can avoid sensitive political debates.



PROVOKING OTHERS TO CRITICISE THE POPULIST STATE IS A GREAT WAY TO GET NEW ENEMIES AND NEW TENSIONS FROM WHICH THE CONFLICTUAL RHETORIC IN THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL THEATRE CAN BE UPHELD

4. CONCLUSION: HOW TO RESPOND TO POPULISM

The rise of populism in the West has undoubtedly affected international politics. The phenomenon is considered as a problem to be dealt with, as a threat to economic and political freedom, and the “fight” against populist forces is on the agenda of universities, political parties and research institutions.

However, I suggest that the narrative in which populism is the ultimate enemy is a false and counterproductive narrative. Populist governments are the ones which bene-

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fit the most from such a conflictual environment as they can continue the fight they fought against the “establishment” in their countries. Problematically enough, many of the non-populist governments are also interested in upholding this narrative for their own political interests.

Rejecting this narrative, nonetheless, is not enough to tackle the problem. I suggest the following steps to be taken by both political and academic institutions:

FOCUS ON THE PROBLEM, NOT ON ITS CONSEQUENCE.

The rise of populist forces is often only a result of bad governance, economic hardship and social grievances. If populist forces are defeated, these problems will not go away. Instead of attacking those who pronounce the problems (and present a bad solution), we have to provide useful and honest ways to tackle these challenges.

IDENTIFY THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF GLOBALISATION AND THOSE MOST VULNERABLE TO IT, AND OFFER REAL SOLUTIONS.

While globalisation generates growth aggregately, it does not affect all social groups in the same way. While for example the rise of the sharing economy in different sectors has positive effects, it can cause serious problems for others. It is not surprising that people who cannot enjoy the benefits of globalisation but suffer the bad consequences are voting for populist parties. Free trade and free movement should be cherished but their negative consequences should be tackled.

ACCEPT SOCIETIES' FEAR OF MIGRATION AND BE OPEN FOR DISCUSSION.

The debate over the impact of migration in Central Europe was won by “populists” not just because of their successful communication techniques but because the opposite side did not acknowledge the legitimate reservations of societies about the uncontrolled influx of migrants and refugees. These debates cannot be won by dismissing the other side’s arguments as “populist”.

DO NOT ANSWER TO THE PROVOCATION OF POPULISTS.

Conflict is essential for populist political forces to uphold their momentum. That is why attacking them internationally and criticising them directly (instead of their argument) contributes to the environment in which they can thrive. The most important aim is to maintain the atmosphere of free and peaceful dialogue and do not provide them with an opportunity to cry “double standards”.

STOP USING POPULISM AS A BAD LABEL.

Labelling someone populist does not serve any purpose outside academia and direct political competition – in the public discourse, the usage of populism as a bad label does not help to reach a solution. Focusing too much on populists strengthens the already existing perception that the mainstream political parties and media do not really care about the problems which helped populists come to power.

— MÁTÉ SZALAI —



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— EMOTIONS LEAD TO ACTION —

BY GRACE PARDY

One side of our campaigning world today looks like this: In the USA, Barack Obama revolutionised political campaigning, especially on social media. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who ran for the third time, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau showed the world that Liberals can win election campaigns and push back the force of extreme right wing populists. In Germany, Christian Lindner secured a successful comeback for the FDP. In France, Emmanuel Macron made the seemingly impossible happen and led his new movement to victory in the 2017 elections.

There is also Donald Trump, who excelled with his data-driven, focused campaign. And most recently, there is the example of Sebastian Kurz, the 31-year-old who won the parliamentary elections in Austria with a significant gain for his conservative party, moving a party that was on its way into irrelevance into the chancellery.

And there is the other hemisphere of the campaigning world: Prime Minister Theresa May who enjoyed a lead in the polls yet almost lost it on Election Day, or Martin Schulz, the “Messiah” tasked to bring back the German Social Democrats to their former strength suffered an all-time loss in the recent German elections. Finally, the Green party in Austria, who was at an impressive 12% in 2013, did not reach the threshold of 4% to enter parliament in October 2017.

There are, in fact, two opposite worlds when it comes to political campaigning and we need to ask ourselves: Why are winners winners, and why are others losers?

The first message I have for those who have read this far: Using nice visual language in your election campaign will no longer guarantee you an up-swing. Those times are over. You either commit yourself and the entire party organisation to a different way of campaigning that is steered towards a significant win, or you will

likely face a difficult time in matching previous good results.

Why? There are 4 essential shifts that have taken place and play a significant role. You must change your campaigning mindset.

1. CHANGE, CHANGE, CHANGE

Societies, especially in Europe and in the United States, have undergone a series of major crises in a very short period of time over the past decade, and people have formed new groups based on new moral norms.

> *You need in-depth understanding of what's going on in your society, who your voters are and what they believe in.*

2. DIGITALISATION HAS CHANGED THE MEDIA STRATEGIES OF CAMPAIGNS

Digitalisation has not only provided people with more access to information, but also provided them with a strong voice and thus power towards authorities. Activism has emerged. It has completely changed the way people want political leaders to engage with them and how they are viewed and talked about.

Websites have become irrelevant unless they provide a form of engagement tool that is perceived as added value. Media strategies need to be crafted differently in this ever-changing media landscape. A strong billboard campaign is no longer sufficient to win elections.

> *The “brand” of your political leader must shift from policy to engagement, from persuasion to admiration to trust.*

> *You need a multi-target media strategy.*

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3. THE FRENZIES OF 24/7 NEWS

That media consumption has changed is not necessarily new. However the clutter of news overload has a consequence, namely that we see more and more “headline” consumers during the week, i.e. people who engage with not much more than the headline of any post or article.

The discussion of fake news is an important one as well, and very concerning as it emerged as a strategic tool in the political campaigns of Donald Trump and others after him: The user of the fake news strategy blames others for creating fake news. As a consequence, this has also led to a much more aggressive and professional “dirty campaigning”.

> *Making a message stick with people emotionally so that it is remembered takes skillful campaigning to cut through the clutter.*

4. WHO AND WHAT ARE YOU?

More and more new parties emerge on the political landscape because citizens (with or without political experience) decide to form movements. Hence, we are going to see a stronger fragmentation in the fight for votes. It becomes thus even more important to differentiate and anchor the brand of your party and your leader.

> *You have to answer voters’ key questions: what is your purpose? Why should I trust your leader? Is the party’s culture open and transparent? What pain are you relieving from me and what gains are you offering?*

In essence, all of the above boils down to Trust. It should be our mission to gain trust and win elections that way.

Our starting point is to understand the brain, where we have two operating systems: System One is fast, intuitive, and effortless; it is geared towards emotions. System Two is slow, constructing our thoughts, rationalising; it is geared towards reason.

Why is this important? Daniel Kahnemann and Adam Tversky, the scientists who discovered these two operating systems of our brain, came to a revolutionary conclusion: the “Homo Economicus”, the rational decision-maker, does not exist. On the contrary, 95 % of our decisions are driven by System One.



IT SHOULD BE OUR MISSION TO GAIN TRUST
AND WIN ELECTIONS THAT WAY

Past campaigns have been approached with the mindset of presenting facts and complex policy constructs. The expectation was that this would lead to higher success in an election campaign. But this has proven to be wrong!

This wrong approach also led to significant investments being made in understanding the 5% cognitive part of the brain, but none in gaining insights into how emotions drive our decision-making.

At the heart of today’s modern campaigning should be to measure emotions and cognition.

With our system “EmoLogictm” my company *made2-matter* has developed a solution for robust insights into the key areas of how societies tick, who to target, what matters to people emotionally and which messages appeal to which micro community.

— EMOTIONS LEAD TO ACTION —

Sometimes we are asked why we do not simply ask people cognitively what they feel and who they trust. Our answer for this important question is very simple: emotions are sub-conscious most of the time and people cognitively provide socially accepted answers.

How do we measure emotions? Our questionnaire has two parts: an emotional and a cognitive one. We capture how people feel by using intuitive image associations for 27 emotions.

EXAMPLE

Previous study results show that only 7% of people claim to trust a respected party and 9% trust their leader. However, emotional reach of trust is actually 19% for the leader and 27% for the party. This is untapped potential and understanding the how and why of this are insights that will help in defining both actual voter goals and messages more precisely.

That way, we understand better which emotions are essential to building trusted leadership.

We had a great time running multiple campaigns for Liberals in Europe based on our insight and strategy approach. We can conclude:

- People make their voting decision based on emotions. They only use rationality for the conclusions.
- Quantitative data insights can show us how people in society tick, where their pressure points are, which purposes matter to them and what converts potential votes into real votes. By understanding our voters better, we can deliver frames that are emotionally appealing and – naturally – a party that delivers on promises.
- It is important to align the culture and experience you portray to the outside with your party's internal culture on the new campaigning path.
- Focus on impact via mini campaigns to make messages stick. Storytelling, a consistent message delivery and creating experiences all mobilise people for action – and voting.



AT THE HEART OF TODAY'S MODERN
CAMPAIGNING SHOULD BE TO MEASURE
EMOTIONS AND COGNITION

— GRACE PARDY —



— HOW TO PRODUCE COMPELLING CAMPAIGN ADS —

BY MARK PUTNAM

In a society with 'round the clock exposure to audiovisual material both on TV and social media, compelling campaign ads play a central role in every political campaign and in political communications more generally. All the while, campaigners have to jump different hurdles in order to produce campaigning material that sticks with and persuades voters: cynicism among voters and strong skepticism towards political communications may spark active resistance to campaign material. That is, if you catch the voter at all: proliferation of TV channels and social media make it more difficult to reach viewers as they chose between numerous offers at different times of the day.

A general tenet for campaign ads is the fact that people vote for people, not for a party acronym. Building trust by showcasing an authentic, likeable candidate is paramount to successful campaign ads.

SEVERAL GUIDELINES MAY HELP TO PRODUCE BETTER, TARGETED, SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN ADS:

STORYTELLING

When producing campaign ads, find the emotional compelling story that a candidate can tell about themselves, their families, their town or the people they represent. Storytelling greatly increases the feeling of authenticity. Don't just write a script from your head. Instead, find out where your candidate grew up, meet their families, see where they went to school and became the persons they are today; get a feeling for what drives them. Literally everyone has a story to tell. In a series of videos make sure your material tells a story over the entire length of the campaign.

GET THE VIEWERS' ATTENTION

Offer voters something unexpected, something they want to watch and pass on to others. When people see political ads, the use of emotion, humor, drama, or even just high production values can help your advertisement stand out from the crowd. The creative device should always be believable and not try too hard just to be different. Creativity just for the sake of creativity is not enough – the messaging of your advertisement should be driven by your campaign's research.



LITERALLY EVERYONE HAS A STORY TO TELL

Try finding a unique way of translating a candidate's experience or proposals into images. The best place to start is to use a metaphor for your message: Your candidate warns of further cuts to health care? Nothing underlines that point as drastically as the image of an ambulance being crushed in a junk press.

Make sure to keep the viewer's cultural context in mind. Do they come from a region that is famous for something, e.g. a sport? Aim to frame your message in these terms and speak to the cultural context of your audience. If you speak about the past, something as simple as black-and-white photos or home videos can spark emotions and a feeling of identification.

Most voters are skeptical of political advertising and are eager to change the channel or close the web page. So the first few seconds of any video are vital to keep the viewer watching. You want to hook the viewer so that they watch the entire video.

— HOW TO PRODUCE COMPELLING CAMPAIGN ADS —

SOUND

The brain has a logical side and an emotional side. The facts and substance of your advertisement speaks to the logical side, while music helps reinforce the emotional appeal of your message. The best political messaging uses both sides of the brain, and experience shows that original music, devised for the specific campaign ad, can make all the difference.

Using the original voice of the candidate rather than the so-called “voice of god” of an anonymous narrator makes it easier to bridge the distance between viewer and candidate. Make sure your candidate doesn’t just memorize the words but feels them. This might mean taking 20 takes of the same scene. It’s worth it! If your candidate speaks in the video, let her or him speak to the camera directly as if they were striking up a conversation with the viewer. Focus group research has shown that news-style interview techniques where the candidate talks to an unseen interviewer off to one side of the camera inevitably leads voters to wonder why the candidate isn’t speaking directly to them.

SIMPLICITY

The best advertisements only make one main point. Don’t overwhelm people with too much content. Give them time to process what they are seeing. Don’t try to say too much in one video. Make sparse use of script in your videos. A picture can be worth a thousand words.

WATCH YOUR COMPETITORS

While so-called “negative campaigning” plays a much smaller role in European election campaigns than in American ones, it may be a useful tool. If your competitor makes an outrageous remark, in some instances it can be powerful to simply use your competitor’s audio and fill in the visual side of the advertisement with images that illustrate how wrong the opponent is. As an example, if your opponent ridicules working class people, show those working class people in their everyday lives while the viewer hears the opponent ridiculing them. Negative

campaigning doesn’t mean you need to slash your competitor. Voters find that to be a turnoff. Always remember that you are invading a voter’s home or personal time on their computer with your advertisement. If it’s too harsh, it won’t be believable. The tone makes all the difference.

REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT

To make the message stick, repeat it throughout the entire campaign. If you have a candidate with a powerful personal biography, just because you make one biography advertisement doesn’t mean you don’t need to tell that story again. Find ways to reference the biography over and over again. Voters won’t remember an advertisement that you aired weeks or even months earlier – so you should repeat the elements of your candidate’s story that you want voters to remember.

AD TESTING

Always make sure to test your ad to see if it reaches the desired effect and gets across the right feelings and message. You can use focus groups which have small sample sizes on online testing where it is a much larger sample size to see which of your advertisements work the best with your target voters.



IDEAS AND PARTY PLATFORMS ARE NOT ENOUGH TO WIN – IF THEY WERE, LIBERAL PARTIES WOULD BE FAR MORE DOMINANT

PARLIAMENTARY CAMPAIGNS

Just because it’s a parliamentary campaign doesn’t mean you shouldn’t tell the individual stories of your candidates and, in particular, your party leader. People don’t vote for parties – they vote for people they like and who they believe understand the challenges in their lives. Ideas and

— HOW TO PRODUCE COMPELLING CAMPAIGN ADS —

party platforms are not enough to win – if they were, liberal parties would be far more dominant. Conservative and authoritarian parties and candidates win by appealing to fear. The best antidote is to showcase your party leaders with optimistic messages and life stories that show they understand working people.

WHO IS THE HERO?

It is always important to remember that the candidate is not the hero, the people are the heroes. In your advertising and your party platform, even if you have a leader with an incredible personal story, it's still important to remember that the people are the ultimate heroes and that the candidate is motivated by wanting to help those people. Turning a candidate into a deity is not the objective. Instead, the goal should be to have the candidate become an instrument of the people's will.

COMPELLING CAMPAIGN CONTENT – IN PRACTICE!

While one can spend hours of talking about the theory behind creating compelling campaign content, one of the most crucial parts of any such presentation is the discussion of concrete examples. For this, a portfolio of recent campaign videos was shared with the participants of the ELF seminar. This included campaign videos of candidates for American local, regional, national, and presidential elections. The overview of the ads can be found here:



[Click Screen for Putnam Partners' Campaigns](#)

For every guideline discussed before, a number of videos exemplify the points taken. On the issue of storytelling, a video from Mark Begich's campaign for US Senate serves as a good example. The video recounts the life of Begich's father, a politician himself, who died during one of his flights into an Alaskan constituency. Not only is the story of Begich's death something an entire generation of Alaskans remembers so that the video taps into an existing cultural context. The video also allows for an intimate view on Mark Begich, his life and career today.



IF CANDIDATES AND THEIR PARTIES WANT TO WIN ELECTIONS, THERE'S NO WAY AROUND RAISING TRUST BY TELLING COMPELLING, TRUTHFUL STORIES ABOUT THE PEOPLE STANDING IN ELECTIONS

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The elements of surprise and humor are showcased in Carl Sciortino’s campaign ad as Democratic representative for the U.S. Congress. It shows him in a conversation with his father, a follower of the Tea Party Movement, who opposes his son – politically and with a good portion of humor.

A striking example of how a candidate’s voice can be the most powerful sound of an ad combined with a rather minimalist production style is the video produced for the Draft Biden campaign that sought to persuade then Vice-President Joe Biden to run in the Democratic Primaries. Here, one of Biden’s speeches about his childhood is coupled with black-and-white photographs of Americans going through similar struggles.

Finally, for successful negative campaigning, the ad “47 Percent” is a strong case in point. This award-winning ad uses the original comment of Mitt Romney in which he blames 47% of Americans as “dependent on government” and calls them “victims,” who believe they are

“entitled to health care, to food, to housing” and would never take personal responsibility. The campaign contrasts his voice with pictures of a single-mother, veterans, workers and other Americans, who are likely part of the 47% of people and in need to access government services to be able to care for their families.

To conclude, in a world in which people spend more and more time consuming audiovisual material each day, campaign videos are a vital tool of political campaigns. Because people vote for people, building a connection between the candidate and the viewer is of utmost importance in any ad production. Different strategies and approaches can help make the video more appealing to the audience, using, first and foremost, the art of storytelling. Research and experience shows: emotions lead to action. If candidates and their parties want to win elections, there’s no way around raising trust by telling compelling, truthful stories about the people standing in elections.

— MARK PUTNAM —



— CAMPAIGNING ONLINE AND OFFLINE: IT ALL STARTS WITH BEING A GOOD PERSON —

BY MARK THIESSEN

During the general elections in the Netherlands in 2017, we witnessed a big show-down between an important, leading, liberal party, VVD, and a populist challenger, PVV. Some of the big battlegrounds were online: on Facebook, Twitter and so on. Are there lessons to be learned for liberals across Europe?

In our liberal world, the debate about fighting populism has become increasingly important in the past few years. The discussion seems to focus on what is wrong with our populist competition, and on finding ways to convince our electorates to support the policies of our more mainstream liberal parties. I would argue that to be truly successful, we should focus more on what we can do better, than on what populists are doing wrong. And on what we have been doing wrong, instead of on what we assume that other people have not correctly understood about us.

First of all, the term populist confuses me. In the liberal world, we very often use it to describe the rise of far right or far left parties in the past two decades. These parties play on the feelings of one part of the electorate, and are very successful at it, to a degree. Defining them as purely populist, does not, however, feel right. If we think of populism as being close to the people, and in touch with what they desire and feel, then populism is not inherently bad. On the contrary: if, as a politician in a democracy, you are not in touch with the people, that makes you irrelevant. As a representative of the people, you should understand and voice their concerns. Populism in itself is not a bad thing, it is a good thing.

What parties such as PVV do is what was termed by VVD leader Mark Rutte as “bad populism”. Rooted in post-truth identity politics, these politicians play purely on fear. They thrive on chaos, which they also try to create themselves.

A GOOD CAMPAIGN STARTS WITH A GOOD CANDIDATE

One of the key lessons the Dutch election has shown is that if you want to fight this bad populism, you should be more concerned with yourself than with them in the first place. This lesson should play an important role in how you involve yourself in politics and political campaigns.

Personally, I have learned a number of important lessons about online campaigning in politics and how to deal with the rise of bad populism. These are some of them. Surprisingly, most of them are about just being a good person.



IF YOU WANT TO FIGHT THIS BAD POPULISM,
YOU SHOULD BE MORE CONCERNED WITH
YOURSELF THAN WITH THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE

REAL

If a campaign is not real, it will not be successful. By real, I mean that you should only show people and things that are really you; if you are not an optimist, don't pose as an optimist. If you are not funny, do not try to be funny. And the other way around; if you are an optimist, show yourself as being the optimist. If you are funny, be funny. People will sense if you're trying to act like something you're not. And they will like it if you show yourself as who you really are. Also, it's much more fun just being who you really are.

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Check out how VVD ministers make fun of themselves in this great video, made right after the old government switched to the new government, where the former ministers have to leave the WhatsApp group to make room for their successors:



[Click Screen for VVD's Facebook account](#)

Or the Dutch PM riding his bike to the royal palace to update the King on coalition talks:



[Click Screen for article in Cycling Weekly](#)

SINCERE

If a campaign is not sincere, people will not believe it. Only talk about the things that you really care about and that other people care about as well. Only say something if you mean it. If you apologise, do it sincerely. If you propose something that will change people's lives, do it with sincerity for all of them. If you don't agree with a voter, don't beat around the bush but just plainly tell it like it is. It's ok to disagree.

This also means: do not lie. Lying is the worst thing you can do if you want to beat populists. They thrive on lying politicians – which is funny, since they often have a flawed relationship with the truth themselves. Be honest all of the time. You will show people that you are not one of those lying politicians. That you can be trusted. You will show them that you are in fact more honest than the supposedly honest – but actually lying – bad populists.



RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE BEST WAY
TO GET SOMEONE'S TRUST AND VOTE IS TO HAVE
A CONVERSATION WITH HIM OR HER – DIGITAL
CAMPAIGNING PROVIDES A FANTASTIC TOOL FOR THAT

PERSONAL

Online campaigning is a very personal affair. We have the opportunity to reach so many people personally, through all the digital channels. This is the way that you should use them. Use them to get into a conversation. Research shows that the best way to get someone's trust and vote is to have a conversation with him or her. Digital campaigning provides a fantastic tool for that. Try to get people to engage with your message – which in turn also has to be personal – and try to get them into a conversation with you.

— CAMPAIGNING ONLINE AND OFFLINE: IT ALL STARTS WITH BEING A GOOD PERSON —

Check out how VVD does Facebook Live sessions with voters, often with Prime Minister Rutte himself:



[Click Screen for VVD's Facebook account](#)

Not just because it works, but also because it is extremely important for a politician to have these conversations. It is your job to talk to people and learn about their concerns.

Do it in a personal way. Not with political language, but with normal language. Just like you would talk to your parents, wife, husband or friends. Not with pictures or topics that interest you, but with things that interest your voter. Also: make sure it's real and sincere. Don't pretend to be interested in what people have to say, BE interested in what people have to say. Try to reach as many people as you can personally.

HAVE NO FEAR

Do not let yourself be bullied by bad populism. If they lie, call them out. If they attack you, don't complain about how dishonest it is. Don't complain about their style or tactics. Just be strong.

There is a delicate approach needed here. Because not everything that populists throw at you should be thrown back. They will try to shock you, scare you, or insult you at every possible moment. They will not back up their attacks with facts. Their attacks will be about emotions, not about rationality. So don't respond with rationality. If an attack is based on emotions, respond with an emotional appeal. Which is, of course, always based on rational arguments. That way, we make a clear difference.

See how the Dutch Greens turn the narrative of fear into a narrative of hope in their video "Nothing to fear but fear itself":



[Click Screen for GroenLinks on YouTube](#)

GET OUT OF YOUR BALLOON

Liberals like to talk about things that are not necessarily at the top of voters' priority lists. Be careful with this. You can compare it to being in a hot air balloon with your liberal colleagues. You're trying to give a speech to the people who are on the ground. Every time you talk about the single market, human rights, free trade or even populism, hot air will be pumped into your balloon and you will fly up a little higher. Until finally, your

— CAMPAIGNING ONLINE AND OFFLINE: IT ALL STARTS WITH BEING A GOOD PERSON —

balloon will be so high in the sky that the people down below will not hear you anymore. Talk about the things that interest your voters: about safety for their children, about concerns for their job, about their fear of immigration. Do this so you can stay on the same level as the people you represent. This lesson is not mine: I learnt it from an Irish liberal colleague from Fianna Fail. It truly transcends borders.

TREAT YOUR VOTERS WITH THE RESPECT THEY DESERVE

This is a lot like the factors “real” and “sincere” above. Your voters deserve good and decent politicians. They deserve respect. Treat them accordingly. Don’t lie. Don’t cheat. Don’t think that you’re smarter than they are or that you know better. If you do something wrong, don’t try to get out of it. Admit it sincerely.

My most important lesson is very simple. It’s not so much about fighting populism, as it is about fighting

yourself. Populism feeds on bad mainstream politicians. It thrives on politicians who lie, cheat, enrich themselves and ignore their electorate. So if you want to beat populism? Be the perfect politician. Don’t give populism any ground to thrive on. The solution is often in your own behaviour. Be the politician that you want your family and friends to be represented by. Act with integrity. Winning an election starts with being a good person.



THE SOLUTION IS OFTEN IN YOUR OWN
BEHAVIOUR – BE THE POLITICIAN THAT YOU WANT
YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS TO BE REPRESENTED BY

— MARK THIESSEN —



— OUTRO —
CONCLUSION

— LESSONS LEARNT —

BY CAROLINE HAJRY & LYUBOMIRA RAEVA

When we set out organising this series of workshops, one big question overshadowed all the others: What should our toolbox against populism help us to fix?

After all, there are uncountable facets to the phenomenon of populism and how it influences politics and our societies. We quickly realised that if we want people to stand up to populism together with us, it's not so much about the populists themselves, but rather about us and what we, as Liberals, offer as an alternative.

How can we better communicate our visions? How can we make people feel that we care about them and their problems? These are some of the questions we decided to seek an answer for.

For this publication, we asked four of our speakers to share their views on these issues with our readers.

Máté Szalai helps us understand the term populism as a “thin ideology”, rather than an ideology based on substance, and as a “label”. He draws our attention to the fact that economic anxiety and fear of migration are not new developments. Rather, they have existed for at least a decade, but populists have recently been more successful at exploiting them – and Liberals have fallen into their trap by attacking the populists, thereby creating an environment in which they thrive. Rather than sustaining this conflict, Szalai proposes that Liberals acknowledge the (sometimes perceived) economic hardship or social grievances of voters and develop solutions to present viable alternatives to what is put forward by the populists.

In her article “Emotions lead to Action” **Grace Pardy** also emphasises the need to develop an understanding for the dynamics of our modern societies and their citizens, their values and their needs. She points out that most of us make decisions based on how we feel rather than

how we think. Thus, once we understand who our voters are and how they feel, we can develop the right messages and frames to reach them – and come up with effective ways to cut through the content clutter that digitalisation has produced.

Mark Putnam follows this line of argumentation. He underlines the need to produce campaign material that can persuade voters despite their skepticism towards political communications, and the difficulty of reaching voters in a fragmented (social) media environment. In a world in which people spend more and more time consuming audiovisual material each day, campaign videos are a vital tool of political campaigns. He outlines different strategies that help make the videos more appealing to the audience, first and foremost the art of storytelling. He concludes that if candidates and their parties want to win elections, they need to raise trust by telling compelling, truthful stories about their candidates.



LET'S MAKE IT A SUCCESS AND
STAND UP AGAINST POPULISTS TOGETHER

As someone who has managed one of those winning campaigns for the Dutch VVD, **Mark Thiessen** shares some valuable experience with us. For him, having a sincere candidate who reveals who he or she really is and what he or she cares about is the starting point for any good campaign. He further underlines that the best way to get someone's trust and their vote is to have a conversation with that person. Digital tools, for example on social media, provide good opportunities for that. He makes clear, however, that this engagement should not be pursued for the sole sake of getting votes. Rather, he states, it is the essence of the job of any politician to talk to people and learn about their concerns.

— LESSONS LEARNT —

We have produced this toolbox against populism to collect these wise experiences and hands-on advice and hope you will use these tools as often as possible from now on: staying real and honest; engaging in meaningful conversations with your friends, neighbours, voters; and developing an understanding of not only their diverse opinions, but also how they feel.

If we Liberals learn our lessons from what this Super Election Year 2017 has taught us, we will have great tools to hand for the next big challenge, the European elections in May 2019.

Let's make it a success and stand up against populists together!

[Caroline Haury & Lyubomira Raeva](#)

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Máté Szalai is an assistant lecturer at the Corvinus University of Budapest and an external partner of the Hungarian think tank Integrity Lab. He obtained his BA and MA degrees in international relations and is now a doctoral candidate. His primary areas of research include small state foreign policy, international relations theory and Middle Eastern affairs.

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Grace Pardy is the Managing Director and Founder of *Made2Matter, the Real-Time Marketing Bureau*. Before starting-up with her own consultancy, Grace directed NEOS' election campaign for the Austrian general elections of 2013. Her work has been paramount to building the party brand of NEOS, but also corporate brands such as Coca Cola, Levi's and Reebok. Her credo is best expressed by her company's name: make it matter to people.

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Mark Putnam is the founding partner of Putnam Partners, a campaign and advertising consultancy. Mark has been a national political media consultant and marketing strategist for over two decades. His work bridges the political and non-political worlds, serving as one of President Obama's lead media consultants, as well as helping elect 10 governors, nine U.S. senators, and dozens of members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

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Mark Thiessen is an expert for online and offline campaigning. As Digital Strategy Director at VVD, Mark led the VVD online campaign in the Dutch general elections of 2017. He has also been responsible for the campaign strategies in the Dutch municipal elections of 2014 and the European elections of the same year. Mark founded his own consultancy, Meute, in September 2017, striving to share his experience on how to create genuine, sincere, and personal campaigns.

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