

## Scientific report – Short Term Scientific Meeting

### Introduction

Across Europe, populist parties such as Dutch Freedom Party or Germany’s *Die Linke* experience electoral success. These parties differ in terms of ideology. Some are pro-gay marriage but others oppose it. Some support the free market, while others support the welfare state. The anti-establishment message – which portrays the political elite as evil, working for their own gain, and disinterested in the common people (Mudde 2004) – is the common denominators of populist parties (Rooduijn, 2014), which they combine with a ‘host’ ideology.

The question arises why do citizens vote for populist parties? Among other aspects, ideological proximity (van der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2005) and political cynicism (Bergh, 2004) are identified as explanatory factors of populist voting. Political psychology has shown that ideology and cynicism are rooted in personality (Bakker & De Vreese, 2016; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). The ‘elective affinity model’, assumes that the association between personality traits and political attitudes is a ‘functional match’ between the symbolic nature of a political issue and the goals and motives of personality traits (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). I theorize that a person is drawn to a populist party when the anti-establishment message of this party resonates with one’s personality. The populist anti-establishment message – accusing the political elite of incompetence, insubordination and profiteering at the expense of the common people – matches with a distrusting, though-minded, cynical and intolerance rooted in the personality trait Agreeableness (Costa, McCrae, & Dye, 1991). I have reported preliminary evidence that support for populist parties in the United States, the Netherlands and Germany is associated with low levels of Agreeableness (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2015b). This Short Term Scientific Meeting aimed to further develop my research agenda addressing the question **whether the interplay between populist communication and personality traits of voters explain support for populist parties.**

### Objectives and outcomes

As part of the STSM I have visited the department of Political Science of the University of Zurich from June 1 until June 5. In this document I will describe the work that is carried out, the results obtained and the outcomes that I have achieved.

#### 1. *Discuss experimental design.*

Persuasive appeals are especially effective when the message resonates with psychological dispositions such as personality (Hirsh, Kang, & Bodenhausen, 2012; Lavine et al., 1999). The central premise of the here outlined research agenda is that the populist anti-establishment message resonates with the low levels of Agreeableness. The current state-of-the-art in the research on populism has only started to disentangle the psychological roots of populism (Bakker et al., 2015b). Before coming to Zurich, I have developed the design of a survey-experiment to test whether the anti-establishment message indeed *causes* support for populist parties among low agreeable voters. At the University of Zurich, I aimed to discuss the design of the experiments with scholars at the Political Science and Communication Science departments.

*Outcome.* Friday June 5, Professor Steenbergen organized a small workshop with colleagues from the Department of Communication Science. The workshop aimed to discuss our ongoing research

projects. First, during the workshop, I have presented my experimental design. I received feedback on the design of our study. Based upon the improvements in the design, I have adjusted the design of our study. Specifically, based upon the discussion in Zurich, I have decided to run the experiment as a conjoint experiment which makes it possible to test our argument in the best way possible (see for instance, Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014).

*Second*, during the workshop I learned about the research projects that are ongoing at the University of Zurich. The PhD students Dominique Wirz and Anne Schultz gave a very elaborate introduction to the research project that is part of the National Center of Competence in Research project on *Challenges to Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In this workshop I have received a thorough insight in the research design of the study as well as the first results of the different studies. This is important because it gives me insights about the current frontiers in the discipline. Running our experiment, I will include the battery of populist attitudes that were developed as part of the project in Zurich. Moreover, I was capable to provide feedback to their research projects.

2. *Discuss and develop the emerging research agenda focusing upon the psychological roots of populism.*

I aimed to present two working papers with Professor Steenbergen. Before coming to Zurich, I prepared two working papers that are of relevance for the research on the psychological roots of populism. The first study, co-authored with Yphtach Lelkes (Bakker & Lelkes, 2015) addresses the importance of the measurement properties of Big Five personality traits in the study of politics. This is an important paper because more and more studies, also addressing the psychological roots of populism, rely upon brief measures of personality (see for instance, Bakker et al., 2015b; Dunn, 2013). The second study, co-authored with Matthijs Rooduijn and Gijs Schumacher (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2015a) asks the question whether attitudes cause voting for a populist parties or whether the act of voting for a populist party actually causes change in attitudes.

*Outcome:* I have discussed both papers with Professor Steenbergen. Professor Steenbergen provided extensive feedback on both papers. The discussion of the measurement paper (Bakker & Lelkes, 2015), led to improvements of the framing of the paper, the presentation of the results as well as the inclusion of some additional analyses. During the week in Zurich, I have incorporated these changes so that the paper is now almost ready for submission. Professor Steenbergen also provided advice on where to submit the paper, namely *Political Psychology*.

The second paper (Bakker et al., 2015a) also improved significantly from discussions with Professor Steenbergen. First, I changed the analyses from a difference-in-difference design to a fixed-effects regression. Second, Professor Steenbergen provided ideas on how to deal with alternative theoretical explanations and I have incorporated these accordingly. Third, Professor Steenbergen pointed out areas where I could improve the framing of the manuscript by focusing more upon the identification strategy. Based upon these changes the paper is now almost ready to be submitted to *Political Science Research and Methods*.

Aside from the improvements of the papers, the discussion with Professor Steenbergen also helped me to disseminate these studies at an early point in time. In doing so, scholars such as Professor Steenbergen are aware of the ongoing project addressing the psychological roots of populism. Accordingly, the research agenda will develop in a faster pace.

3. *Establish a network of researchers interested in the interplay between populist communication and psychology.*

Professor Steenbergen is one of the leading political psychologists in Europe. Moreover, Professor Steenbergen is involved in a long term project focused upon populism. The STSM allowed me to establish a long term working relationship with Professor Steenbergen.

*Outcome:* My STSM helped me to establish a long term working relationship with Professor Steenbergen. Professor Steenbergen was very accessible during the week in Zurich. We spend a lot of time discussing research over lunch, dinner and a series of one-on-one meetings. In the future it will be very easy for me to send my working papers to Professor Steenbergen and receive feedback. Moreover, Professor Steenbergen and I will maintain in contact about ongoing projects and possibilities to collaborate in joint projects. Aside from the working relationship with Professor Steenbergen, I have also created a good working relationship with scholars at the Department of Communication Science. For instance, Dominique Wirz and Anne Schultz will visit Amsterdam early spring 2016. During this visit I will organize a small workshop for scholars at the Departments of Communication Science and Political Science where they can present their work.

To conclude, I think the STSM has expanded my network and established close working relationships with scholars at the University of Zurich.

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Short Term Scientific Meeting: “The Psychological Roots of Populism”  
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