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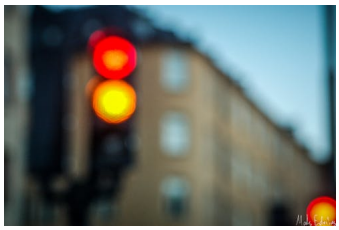

Voters might be quite rational in refusing to give the green light to those who wield power and benefit from the status quo. Mats Edenius/flickr , CC BY-NC

This article is part of the Democracy Futures series, a joint global initiative between The Conversation and the Sydney Democracy Network . The project aims to stimulate fresh thinking about the many challenges facing democracies in the 21st century.

This is the fourth in a series, After Populism , about the challenges populism poses for democracy. It comes from a talk at the Populism: What’s Next for Democracy? symposium hosted by the Institute for Governance & Policy Analysis at the University of Canberra in collaboration with Sydney Democracy Network .

The flipside of the populism coin is voter ambivalence about “democracy” as we know it.

Though much of the reporting of last year’s US presidential race focused on the “angry” American voter, it has been observed that perhaps the most striking feature of the campaign that led to the election of Donald Trump was not so much that people were angry, as “ambivalent”.

In another surprising 2016 election, in the Philippines, observers also reflected that a shared “ambivalence” about democratic government must in large part have led many middle-class voters to support the firebrand Rodrigo Duterte.

And in France, people explained the record low turnout in June's parliamentary elections by pointing to the " ambivalent base ".
Despite Emmanuel Macron's election, the
new president had
"yet to convince many French voters that his ideas and legislative program will make their lives better".

This French voter isn't easily won over.radiowood/flickr

These examples suggest political ambivalence is everywhere on the rise , and that these are anxious times politically.

If the appeal of leaders like Trump and Duterte is anything to go on, despite or perhaps because of their peddling of a violent and exclusionary rhetoric, widespread ambivalence among citizens of democracies has potentially dangerous consequences.

A wilful, rational response

We often equate ambivalence with indecision or indifference. But it's a more complex and more spirited idea than that. Ambivalence reflects our capacity to say both "yes" and "no" about a person or an object at the same time.

Eugen Bleuler, the Swiss psychiatrist who coined the term in 1910 , wrote :

In the dreams of healthy persons, affective as well as intellectual ambivalence is a common phenomenon.

Freud soon picked up the term to describe our capacity to love and hate a person all at once.

We needn't be Freudians to see that ambivalence reflects our common " inner experience ". While we cannot physically be in two places at once, in our minds it is not only possible but likely that dualities and conflicting ideas or beliefs co-exist at the same time. Think of Hamlet's soliloquy:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them…

The point is that, rather than reflecting some psychological deficiency or cognitive dissonance, ambivalence is an active and wilful position to take.

Ambivalence is even rational, in that it requires an awareness of mutually exclusive choices and a refusal to choose; just as wanting a bit of both is also rational.

Is this a dangerous development?

When it comes to politics, we often hold conflicting, even mutually exclusive visions, of the sort of society we want.

In the Philippines, the middle-class voters I interviewed in 2015 wanted the civil liberties that democracy provides. At the same time, they were concerned that too much freedom was causing social and political chaos.

The two ideas, though contradictory, co-existed in people's minds. This type of ambivalence at least partly explains why urban middle-class voters came out in numbers to elect someone like Duterte.

As ambivalence is often linked to the victories of populists, there is a general sense that our ambivalence is destabilising, dangerous and needs to be purged. Ambivalent citizens, the reasoning goes, place a heavy burden on their country's democracy, as by questioning the status quo of the modern democratic state they undermine its very legitimacy.

The failure to reach clarity implies a failed agency on the part of the ambivalent citizen; it is they who carry the burden of resolving their own feelings and returning to a place of undivided certainty.

Commentary after the US election spoke of not letting the ambivalent Trump-voting middle class (who should have known better) " off the hook ".

Yet, as Zygmunt Bauman noted , the more we try to eradicate ambivalence by calling it ignorance and "mere opinion", the more the opposite is likely to occur.

Furthermore, people who have been reduced to decision-takers will be more likely to see radical, revolutionary, even destructive change as the only way to resolve their ambivalence.

threatening populist office holder often view ambivalence on the streets as socially toxic or

Ambivalence can be a check on power

Democracy and ambivalence, rather than being antithetical, may be strange bedfellows. At the heart of the democratic idea is a notion of “the people” as both the source and guardians of power.

Consider the way Ernesto Laclau sees the political as always in conflict, inherent in conflicting identities struggling for dominance.

While the collective identity of “the people” claims to accommodate difference, this is impossible without the constitutive exclusion of “ the other ”.

If this is the case, democracy should stimulate our scepticism. Who is being excluded in the name of “the people”? And who has gained the power to constitute their particular identity as a unified whole?

Ideally, representative democracy seeks not only to recognise but to institutionalise this scepticism, and to manage our disappointment with democracy. It is our ability to withdraw our support and give it elsewhere that means our contested visions of society don’t lead to its destruction.

The trouble is that the 21st-century democratic state has little tolerance of our scepticism about power. Citizens are pressured to turn their trust over to a bureau-technocratic order led by “experts” in order to deal with complex, contemporary problems. The role of voters is transformed into that of passive bystanders, prone to chaos and irrationality, and not to be trusted.

Matters are made worse by extreme concentration of wealth and income inequality. Thomas Piketty correctly warned that extreme inequality would threaten the democratic order.

Despite observing (and experiencing) the undermining of basic social protections and equity principles, people are expected to stay in their place. It is as if ordinary citizens are not trusted to make their own judgements, unless those judgements endorse the path of little or no change.

Their ambivalence, which may be a purposive response to their evaluation of how democracy is actually working, is deemed toxic and socially useless.

No doubt such widespread ambivalence, as well as this denial of the valid expression of unmet aspirations, has provided fertile ground for populist politicians.

The likes of Trump and Duterte appeal to people's desire not to be fixed into pre-determined standards of how to think and behave. And in claiming to fill a gap as "true" representatives of "the people", they enable what often turns out to be a radical expression of voter ambivalence.

Rodrigo Duterte poses with the Philippines military and boxer and senator Manny Pacquiao in 2017.Rene Lumawag/Republic of the Philippines Presidential Communications Office

A chance to rethink the status quo

Political ambivalence is more than a flawed tension of opposites. Neither is it a temporary deviance. It is deeply rooted, and likely here to stay.

The more we dismiss and disparage it, rebuking voters who "should know better", the more we

risk its manifestation in destructive ways.

A more constructive first step for managing ambivalence as a society would be to recognise it – even embrace it – as a chance to reflect critically on the status quo.

Kenneth Weisbrode likened ambivalence to a yellow traffic light, the one that exasperates us at the time, but in fact helps us avoid fatal collisions:

… a yellow light that tells us to pause before going forward pell-mell with green, or paralysing ourselves with red.

If we heed his advice, the presence of widespread ambivalence should prompt us to pause and look around.

This is more radical than it may sound. Slowing down, and contemplating how our democracy is working for us as a community, potentially limits the power of those who benefit from the status quo.

It could even be seen as one of democracy's internal safety mechanisms, since being sceptical about the exercise of power and keeping in check those who benefit from it, is what keeps democracy alive.

Bauman wrote :

The world is ambivalent, though its colonisers and rulers do not like it to be such and by hook and by crook try to pass it off for one that is not.

Ambivalence may be the most rational response to the fact that, in 2017, the notion of democracy as a politics of self-government and collectively made choices has, in many respects, become a lullaby, mere rhetoric that serves the interests of those who benefit from the persistence of a shared yet elusive ideal.

If not the populist figures, who or what else in our democracies today is claiming to represent “the people”? A living democracy hinges upon this type of circumspection. It could even usher in a new era of democracy.

Adele Webb does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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