



Develop Liberal Statecraft

Abstract This chapter presents a fourth kind of counterstrategy against populism. I argue that a liberal statecraft should be developed that not only promote a liberal economy but also a civil and open society, and perhaps most importantly the liberal spirit. All the strategies presented in earlier chapters should be included. Its success requires the conquering of the idea arena, the promotion of liberal policy entrepreneurs, and the investment in power resources that can change institutions and policies. To embrace and promote the liberal spirit as a collective legitimizing identity is a central task for liberal statecraft.

Keywords Counterstrategy against populism · Liberal statecraft · Policy entrepreneurs · Polycentric effort · Power resources

The last kind of counterstrategy against populism I wish to advance is to develop liberal statecraft. Liberal statecraft can be defined as the art of governing a country well, i.e., successfully promoting liberal institutions and policies that are welfare-enhancing and make society freer (Karlson, 2018). It is a statecraft that promotes not only a liberal economy but just as important a civil and open society, and perhaps most importantly the liberal spirit. Liberal statecraft thus concerns the long-term institutional development of society, not short-term electoral or parliamentary tactics.

Populism, as should be obvious, is the opposite of statecraft however one wants to define it. To promote unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems to get elected cannot be considered a case of statesmanship or policy improvement in a welfare-enhancing direction. Neither can the deliberate polarization of society through populist rhetorical and discourse framing, demonizing opponents, etc.

Liberal statecraft, to promote institutional change in a liberal direction, requires the ability to conquer the idea arena, the promotion of liberal policy entrepreneurs, and the investment in power resources that actually can change institutions and policies.

The strategies necessary to achieve this, as argued in the previous chapters, include:

- the exposure of the populist strategies and consequences,
- the defense and development of liberal institutions,
- the improvement of liberal literacy,
- the securing of a strong, limited, and decent state,
- the support of federalism and decentralization,
- the stimulation of social mobility,
- the implementation of high-quality basic education,
- the strengthening of integration,
- the restoration of public discourse,
- the embracement and promotion of the liberal spirit, and
- the creation of liberal narratives.

Importantly, these strategies not only involve rational argumentation but also arguments that appeal to emotions and arguments about the ethos or spirit of a liberal society. They are not only about enrichment, but also about emancipation, meaning, community, virtue, and human flourishing. Obviously, the demanding work of policy improvement must be done, just as the liberal institutions must be defended and explained. A strong, limited, and decent state is what is required, including the promotion of social mobility, the implementation of high-quality basic education to all, the strengthening of integration, and the restoration of public discourse, as well as reforms in other areas. Let me also emphasize all these reforms to a considerable extent need to be adapted to the local conditions in the relevant societies and polities in question. And the

spontaneous orders in markets and civil society need to be explained and communicated.

But as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, one of the key factors behind the rise of populism is a cultural backlash that appeals to the identity of people. Therefore, it is not enough for liberals to appeal to interests, they also must appeal to the identity of people. It is necessary to formulate and advance a liberal politics of recognition and respect. Such an appeal could be based on the importance of human flourishing and the liberal spirit, as explained above. Civil society, with families, voluntary organizations, clubs, etc., the market economy, and an open, pluralistic society provide better opportunities for this than any alternative system. This must be explained and communicated in such a way that voters and ordinary people can feel respect and pride in their choices. Here liberal narratives, also supporting a liberal collective legitimizing identity, have important roles. To embrace and promote the liberal spirit as a collective legitimizing identity is a central task for liberal statecraft.

Liberal statecraft as described above cannot be limited to the activities of a single person, as in populist charismatic leadership. Liberal statecraft concerns the broader process, where different actors with distinct roles in different spheres of society contribute to the process. Liberal statecraft is a “polycentric” effort where many different actors and policy entrepreneurs need to be involved. Intensive public discourse and “polycentric” learning are likely to be required to develop liberal ideas (Karlson, 2018).

To successfully implement these kinds of strategies requires a broad spectrum of skills, skills, broader than those held by economists or other typical experts. For example, it is not so surprising that the successful presidents Ronald Reagan in the US and Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine both have a background in television and the movie industry. Reagan had appeared in more than 50 movies before he entered a political career (Reagan, 2011). Zelensky, a political novice, had made a career as a director, entertainer, and comedian on both television and in movies with a significant online following before he entered the presidential race in Ukraine in 2019 (Britannica, 2022). While surely having good analytical and rational skills, both the rhetorical use of pathos and ethos came naturally. The same is true for Churchill, with a long-term background as a journalist and author of history. It is also interesting to note that all three advanced an agenda of hope, despite the harsh times they faced (see e.g., White, 2008). And they all appealed to the efforts of ordinary

citizens in an effort to revive liberty, prosperity, and human flourishing. They flaunted the ‘virtuous’, in harsh contrast to today’s populists.

Note, moreover, that they all faced serious external threats, in the latter two cases virtually existential threats, which they used to mobilize the support they needed to promote liberal policies. In most cases, however, such “help” is not available since the threat from populists most often comes from within one’s society. This means that leadership of the kind the three examples give are the exception. In most democracies, liberal statecraft will be a process in which many different actors with different skills will have to participate. It is a collaborative and virtuous effort that requires courage and fortitude. And it is a task that requires substantial resources in terms of skills, people, and money, an investment with huge future returns.

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