



Expose the Populist Strategies and Their Consequences

Abstract In this short chapter the first counterstrategy to fight back against populists, both on the left and on the right, is presented. I argue that many supporters of populism are neither aware of the deliberate manipulation that lies behind the strategies used by populists, nor the negative consequences that follow for society at large, for democracy, and in the end for the supporters of the populists themselves. Hence, it is necessary to expose the populist strategies and to explain their consequences.

Keyword Counterstrategy against populism · Consequences of populism · Polarization · Manipulation

A first important counterstrategy to fight back against populists, both on the left and on the right, is to expose the deliberate strategies of polarization they use to gain power and change the institutional structure of society in an autocratic direction.

While apparently attractive to voters in many democracies—partly due to latent tribal minds and a media logic enhanced by social media—it is reasonable to think that many supporters of populism are neither aware of the deliberate manipulation that lies behind the strategies used by populists, nor the negative consequences that follow for society at

large, for democracy, and in the end for the supporters of the populists themselves.

The core idea, as explained in earlier chapters, is to construct a conflict between friends and enemies using the rhetorical style and discourse frame of the ‘us-versus-them’ logic. The ‘we’—the people, who are considered to have a unified will, the *volonté general*—are just as the ‘them’—the elites and the others—deliberately constructed to make the threat deeply existential. The ‘we’ is good, while the ‘them’ is evil and corrupt. Often a crisis or major economic and social changes are used to expose the failure of the enemies. The demonization of opponents, attacks on media and science, and intolerant and ruthless behavior serve the same purpose. Narratives and emotional arguments demand respect for and recognition of the ‘people’. Rational arguments are dismissed, and conspiracies are supported. To the left, the populist narratives blame “neoliberalism”, while on the right the narratives focus on immigration, multiculturalism, and political correctness, as the causes of all evil. Both sides use similar populist strategies to deliberately promote the polarization of politics and society. In many cases, they indirectly strengthen each other in a symbiotic way.

There is empirical evidence showing, at least in the US, that polarization among the elites is stronger than among the public. Mass polarization also came later (McCarty, 2019). In fact, there are indications that voters dislike polarization. In a PEW survey in 2021, one interesting result was that while the US turned out to be one of the most polarized countries, overwhelming majorities of both Trump (86%) and Biden (89%) supporters surveyed said that their preferred candidate, if elected, should focus on addressing the needs of all Americans, “even if it means disappointing some of his supporters.” (Dimock & Wike, 2021). Voters also generally dislike politicians that lie and disregard facts (Janezic & Gallego, 2020). An indication of this, based on European data, is that political participation decreases in more polarized polities (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021).

In general, there is a great need to explain that the populist strategies are undermining democracies themselves in the longer run. The creeping autocratization that populists favor in the name of the majority of the ‘true’ people, with restrictions on the freedom of the press and the independence of the courts, means no less than the end of constitutional or liberal democracy and the open society.

Thus, exposing and explaining how populists deliberately promote the polarization of society, and the risk of autocratization that follows, could potentially be an important strategy for how to fight back against populism. Such a strategy should also be attractive to the more established political parties, rather than falling into the populist rhetorical trap themselves.

However, just as important is probably to expose the economic and social consequences of populist policies. The unserious and ill-founded policies the populists commonly advocate may seem to be attractive in the short run, but in the long run, the opposite is generally the case, as was explained in Chapter 2, also for those groups they are said to favor. In addition, as argued in Chapter 5, the collectivistic identity politics of populism is also likely to undermine social norms and individual virtues, and the sense of belonging that populism may appear to offer. This brings us over to the next counterstrategy.

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