

**POLLING
STATION**

Repackaging the Concept of Liberty

Abstract

Highlighting the historical foundation of liberty as a cornerstone of European democracy, this article examines how disillusionment with the communication of traditional liberal values has fueled the rise of populist movements worldwide. It critiques the role of echo chambers, technological advancements, and disinformation in reshaping voter behavior while emphasizing the need for liberals to reconnect with citizens through practical solutions and emotional engagement. The paper presents a roadmap for liberal parties to reclaim their influence and reignite public trust in democracy.



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Introduction

Europe was built on the ideals of liberty. From the sixteenth century onwards, the concept of freedom gradually became embedded in European thought. In the seventeenth century, philosophers developed the liberal democratic model based on the idea of liberty, laying the foundations for the modern European economic and social systems that enabled innovation, and, not least, the Industrial Revolution. In contrast to the Middle Ages, the 'founding fathers' began to place far greater emphasis on establishing individual rights in addition to the freedoms of the community. Throughout the history of liberalism, community and individual liberties have complemented each other rather than being adversaries. There have been periods when one was more prominent than the other, such as during the national revolutions of the nineteenth century, when the freedoms of specific communities were emphasised or when the focus shifted to individual rights. But liberalism has succeeded in countries where a balance between these two perspectives was maintained, avoiding extreme shifts in either direction.


A similar dynamic is observed in politics. The majority of voters rarely align with the extremes, even though there are times when extreme parties gain significant public support (Pfeifer, 2024). Many liberal voters have grown disillusioned with traditional parties, such as Germany's FDP (Free Democratic Party), due to perceived compromises and policy shifts. The AfD (Alternative for Germany) has capitalised on this sentiment by positioning itself as a defender of liberal economic values, thereby attracting voters seeking an alternative to the established political landscape. Although AfD is often associated with conservative social policies, it has also advocated for individual liberties and personal freedoms in certain contexts. This nuanced position has appealed to some liberal voters who prioritise civil liberties but do not feel they are represented by the other parties.

Such instances indicate that something within society has gone awry. Responsible political parties have a duty to investigate what might have caused these disruptions and determine what changes are necessary.

We need to get these voters back. They need to be offered viable solutions on issues that can improve their lives and that are linked to freedom. These include solving the migration issue using Australia as an example, promoting the use of cryptocurrencies, and removing ideological issues from electromobility.

Liberty and political choices

Community freedom remains vitally important. We know that disadvantaged or segregated social groups need support and empowerment. However, liberal politics over the past two decades has increasingly overlooked individuals – voters who periodically cast their ballots as a demonstration of trust or, conversely, dissatisfaction. For most citizens, individual interests, especially smaller-scale freedoms, outweigh a commitment to the community. Voters make rational decisions based on their sociocultural contexts and criteria.



There are no ‘stupid’ voters or people who willingly vote against their own interests. If individual decisions appear politically inexplicable, we must examine their underlying causes and then draw our conclusions. We must also assess why the political messages we take for granted have failed to reach voters and whether other political forces have convinced people that they represent these values better than liberals do.

For a political analyst, Maslow’s (1954) pyramid of needs is a fundamental framework for evaluating political messages. It allows political advisers to assess how effectively these messages resonate within the social environment of the targeted electorate and what voting outcomes they can achieve. Liberty, while fundamentally an abstract concept, has a unique ability to evoke emotions across all layers of society. Values such as physical freedom, personal safety, and freedom of speech are ideals to which voters can form strong emotional attachments (Taylor, 2021; NeuroLaunch, 2024). It may well be the only concept capable of achieving this. Let us examine how the philosophy of liberty manifests in today’s modern, post-truth world, where the artificially constructed realities of populist parties prevail.

In recent years, populist parties across the globe have achieved growth previously thought unimaginable. Several factors have contributed to this trend, including Russian and Chinese support, the algorithms of social media platforms, and the

liberal elite retreating into its own comfortable echo chambers or ivory towers. However, the most significant issue, in my view, is that the idea of personal freedom has been co-opted by far-right populist politics worldwide.

In the 2024 European elections, support for liberal political forces significantly declined. The largest drop in the number of seats in Parliament affected the Renew group, and the trend seems to be continuing, for example, in the German state elections, affecting the FDP. The most recent shock for European liberals came on 24 November 2024, when Romanian presidential candidate Calin Georgescu, who campaigned exclusively on TikTok, won the first round of the elections. Although the Romanian courts have found massive Russian interference and postponed the election after all, it is worth looking into the behaviour of the electorate. According to analyses, he primarily won the votes of younger generations, those societal groups that had previously supported liberal, freedom-focused candidates. While the idea of freedom remains at the top of their priority list, their faith in democracy has drastically diminished in recent years, and anti-establishment parties and candidates have gained their trust.

It is these parties that have championed the concept of personal choice, particularly in debates on migration. Their messaging was straightforward and devoid of complexity, making it easy for voters to understand: 'You are at liberty to decide whom you want to live with in your society – don't let others decide for you!' In Germany, the AfD shifted in 2015 from a simplistic and crude anti-Islam stance to a message that was easier for voters to grasp, focusing not solely on Muslims but more broadly on migrants and refugees. Buoyed by their success, they expanded this approach to other areas.

They vehemently opposed Green Deal policies, winning the votes of those who disagreed with the rapid push for electrification in the automotive industry. This was also the case with regard to COVID vaccinations. The far right's campaign message was: 'You decide whether you want the vaccine.' These were all messages centred on the emphasis on individual freedom.

Paradigm shift: A more direct communication strategy

Liberal parties, not only in Europe but across the globe, must now focus on reclaiming the voters lost to populist right-wing movements and parties and re-establishing themselves as significant political forces. To achieve this, the liberal brand must be repackaged, and the emotional connection to the ideal of freedom must be reignited among voters.

(1) Acknowledging the voter's decision.

The first step is to recognise that the voter is always right. A politician has no right

to criticise or condemn the voter's decision, as they are the ones whose trust must be earned. Voters must never be looked down upon. The hubris that has emerged, particularly among liberal, urban, and educated demographics – where anyone who disagrees with you is labelled ignorant, foolish, or irresponsible – has alienated the majority of society. This has significantly contributed to the rise of anti-elite and anti-establishment sentiment, making such politics popular globally and sparking a revolutionary feeling among voters. They feel this is their chance to make history by voting against those who have belittled them. This sentiment became increasingly pronounced in the development of Donald Trump's voter base. By 2024, it was no longer confined to the hard core but had been adopted by the majority of American voters.

(2) Breaking free from echo chambers.

Politicians must not operate within echo chambers. The American election demonstrated how easy and convenient it is for politicians to communicate solely with their own voter base. The Democratic Party and its leading politicians (and campaign advisors) showed the world exactly how not to campaign against populist opponents. Simply doing the opposite of what the populists do will not yield results. If the populists say 'A' and the liberals respond with the exact opposite, they will not convince anyone. While this approach might please their existing base, it will fail to win new voters and may even alienate undecided or wavering voters, as it comes across as merely reactive. In politics, the initiative lies with those who set the agenda, allowing them to dominate public discourse. The most effective antidote to populism is debate. It is no coincidence that populist politicians avoid opportunities for debate. Trump refused to participate in further debates with Kamala Harris, and an even starker example is Viktor Orbán, who has governed Hungary for 14 consecutive years without engaging in a political debate since 2006. Engaging in debates within one's own echo chamber is inefficient. For instance, Harris made a significant misstep by declining Joe Rogan's invitation to appear on his podcast. A liberal democrat must always strive to create or force opportunities for debate with their political opponents.

(3) The role of media in political echo chambers.

Politicians are not solely to blame for the rise of political echo chambers; social media also bears significant responsibility. This phenomenon has been extensively studied, with Yuval Noah Harari (2018, 2024) most recently discussing the segmentation of the information society in his latest book, attributing much of the responsibility to algorithms and software rather than humans. However, traditional media is equally culpable for the harmful proliferation of political echo chambers. In the fast-paced online world, established media outlets have struggled, and their only means of retaining readers has been to align themselves with specific ideological bubbles. By doing so, they have managed to maintain subscribers but at the cost of fostering division. For example, Jeff Bezos's announcement that the Washington Post would not endorse either candidate for president led to 200,000 subscribers cancelling their subscriptions. These readers

preferred to remain in their comfortable ideological bubble. Yet the media has a responsibility not to create such bubbles. By doing so, trust in traditional media outlets has significantly declined worldwide. A politician, in turn, cannot afford to campaign exclusively within their own bubble.

(4) Taking the initiative on social media.

On social media, it is essential to take the initiative. The concept of 'liberty' is one of the most relatable and universally appealing ideas, capable of engaging the broadest segments of society. It is crucial to demonstrate how the average voter benefits from liberty – how it enables personal advancement in their own lives when they are free to make decisions about their lives and participation in societal matters, for example, choosing what car to drive to work or to take their children to school or sports practice. The state or any other authority should not dictate what they can and cannot do. They may offer guidance, but the final decision should rest with the individual. Local governments, the EU, or other legislatures should not have the power to, for instance, ban a person's car from a city overnight, nor should the state dictate what source of energy people resort to.

The issue of migration also falls under this principle. Individuals want the freedom to decide whom they live alongside in society. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of society does not oppose migrants as a whole; instead, they fear the influx of criminals, unskilled workers, or religious extremists into the EU instead of engineers, doctors, and scientists – people who could contribute positively to their country.

(5) Voters always decide rationally.

Voters always make rational decisions, but the environment in which they make those decisions is critical. It is vital not to ignore one of the greatest threats facing Western societies today, a threat that is deliberately engineered to create chaos: disinformation originating from the East. Thus far, we must admit, we have failed to effectively combat this phenomenon. Persuasion is only successful at times because Russian, Chinese, and Iranian campaigns are well crafted and psychologically designed. Their goal is not to support one political side or the other but to incite tensions within Western societies, thereby weakening social cohesion.

Disinformation often supports opposing sides simultaneously, as seen in 2016 when Russian hacker groups supplied fake news to both Black Lives Matter activists and far-right white nationalists, fuelling conflict between them. For liberals, any authoritarian regime that suppresses individual freedom is the enemy. Emphasising this point is essential. The real adversary is not the citizen who votes for the far right but the St Petersburg troll farms, criminal hacker groups, and the states and intelligence services that direct them.

(6) The populist right's adaptation to modern technologies

The populist right has adapted to modern technologies far more efficiently than the mainstream. Globally, blockchain technology and the practical applications of decentralised networks have captured widespread interest. Populists quickly identified the opportunities in this space and used them to promote their 'revolutionary' ideas, embracing crypto and other blockchain-based organisations and projects.

On the night of the American elections, cryptocurrency values surged, highlighting the significant financial capital supporting these movements. Ordinary citizens, private investors, and institutions are increasingly invested in the success of this technology. However, we often overlook its potential political impact. Technologies such as blockchain can play a significant role in politics, particularly through concepts such as 'Liquid Democracy' and 'Direct Democracy', which are closely aligned with the philosophy of individual liberty (Ul Hassan et al. 2021).

Conclusion

We must acknowledge that liberalism has become disconnected from ordinary people and their problems. Moreover, it has failed to adapt to the challenges of the modern era. However, liberalism is not dead – it is merely at a crossroads where its future depends on its ability to reconnect with the electorate.

This reconnection requires a profound shift in how the ideals of liberty are communicated, packaged, and practised. The principles of freedom must be translated into benefits that resonate with people's everyday lives. It is not enough to champion liberty as an ideal; it must be demonstrated as a practical force that improves the quality of life, safeguards individual rights, and promotes personal and societal progress.

This begins with acknowledging voters' frustrations and understanding the rationale behind their choices rather than dismissing them as misguided or irrational. It is imperative that liberal parties step out of their comfort zones, leaving behind ideological bubbles and echo chambers. They must engage in meaningful dialogue, not just with their core supporters but also with those who feel left out, disillusioned, or misled by populists. This entails entering debates, embracing diverse viewpoints, and addressing the fears and aspirations of the electorate.

What is more, the liberal movement must look at technology not only as a tool for campaigning but also as a means of democratising participation and decentralising power. From blockchain technologies to social media platforms, modern innovations hold huge potential for empowering individuals and fostering direct engagement with political processes. By harnessing these tools,

liberals can reinvigorate their message and appeal to a tech-savvy generation increasingly sceptical of traditional politics.

Simultaneously, liberalism must confront the challenges of disinformation. It must defend truth and transparency, actively countering the divisive narratives propagated by authoritarian regimes and their digital strategies. This fight is not just about preserving liberalism but also about protecting the integrity of liberal democracy itself.

Ultimately, the revival of liberalism hinges on its ability to repackage its message, reignite emotional connections to the idea of freedom, and reclaim the narrative of choice and opportunity. It must go beyond slogans and offer a convincing vision of the future. By addressing voters' immediate concerns – whether migration, economic security, or technological advancement – liberalism can once again emerge as a beacon of hope and progress.

The task is immense, but the stakes are high. As history has shown, the concept of liberty has the power to unite and inspire. Liberal leaders and thinkers must now adapt this timeless ideal to the needs of the twenty-first century and present it as a viable, vibrant, and inclusive path forward. ■

Author bio

Zoltán Kész is a former member of the Hungarian Parliament. Before he entered politics, he co-founded the Hungarian Free Market Foundation. In 2015, he ran in a by-election as an independent and defeated the Fidesz candidate, thus depriving Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of his supermajority for the next three years. After his years in Parliament, he worked for think tanks as a political consultant. He is now the Government Affairs Manager at the Consumer Choice Center

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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