

the Globalist

Rethinking Europe

From Trump to Brexit: Bipolar Nature of Modern Politics

Populists movements will continue to win elections because there is something profoundly wrong with modern capitalism.

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By [Mircea Geoana](#), May 10, 2017



The U.S. elections and the Brexit campaign are not a divorce from democracy as many fear. Rather, they were the expression of the very bipolar nature of modern politics, reflecting the turbulent changes in our societies.

In America, in Britain, in France or in Romania for that matter, the public is deeply divided along the fundamental fault line of modern societies.

There is a deep fracture between the conservative and the liberal view of the world. Between the winners and losers of modern capitalism and globalization. Between the tribal nature of social media and the antiquated role of mainstream media.

Between the huge differences in the level of education of our public and the level of cultural and professional readiness necessary to face the unstoppable, turbocharged nature of the fourth industrial revolution.

These dislocations in democratic societies have found the traditional standard bearers lacking.

To be successful in politics

Traditional, centrist Left or Right parties, along with their preference for incremental policy solutions are unequipped to deal with the sudden surge of fear, angst, frustration as well as a growing sense of the unfulfilled dreams of large swaths of our societies.

In order to be successful in modern politics, one has one of two options:

1. You decide to embrace brazen populism and build your success on surfing these anxieties and offer NO solutions. (The situation of the Brexit camp after winning the referendum is illustrative.)
2. Alternatively, you propose policies that might look good in soothing these concerns in election time. These include promising more social security despite growing fiscal deficits and repatriating illusory jobs from foregone industries.

They also include pretending to change the fiscal system to make it work for the poor and the middle class or punishing the multinationals, the financial sharks and the tech giants. (This is implausible when your main donors are the large corporations and financial institutions.) The list goes on.

The truth behind the second approach

Perplexingly, proponents of the second course tend to know that nobody can simply unplug their national economy from the global economic value chain, innovation and technology transfers and financing your economy through banks and capital markets.

The Eastern European version of Trump's "America First" doctrine and the general cross-contamination of populism and economic nationalism is already hard at work in Hungary and Poland.

It is no accident that this policy mix actually accelerates illiberalism, rather than counteracting it. It also achieves very little of substance for the people, other than giving them a temporary, rhetorical sugar rush of warm feelings.

What makes modern politics bipolar in character is that few, if any of the mainstream politicians or firebrand populists that opt for such promises seriously believes that their solutions can really work in today's and tomorrow's world. They just want to get elected.

They know, even if they don't say so, that technological progress and the disruptions it causes are essentially unstoppable. There is no practical solution to oppose such structural trends (other than massively investing in education and life-long learning). But this is a long-term investment with little immediate reward.

As much as we don't like it, global (financial) capitalism and globalization itself have inequity and polarization built into their DNA.

Creating a sense of hope

We also know, even if we don't like it, that immigration tends to be good and not bad for the economy (it certainly made the UK a more productive country than what the native population achieved by itself).

We also realize that social media and instant communications make the work of governments (even the decent and/or good ones) appear as if they are always behind the curve of meeting the growing needs (real or perceived) of our citizens.

Meanwhile, the technocratic and incremental solutions in governance that we experiment with, or are practicing, often end up deepening the divide between politics, governments and modern societies.

Hillary Clinton lost this election for this very reason. She occupied the tough spot of a centrist, incrementalist, policy-driven, seasoned leader. Her "mistake" was that she and her team didn't understand the bipolar way in which modern politics work.

That the desire for change is emotionally irrepressible and dominates every campaign. And that you have to give and communicate to the people either hope or fear, but not policy solutions as the combustion to one's campaign.

Staging an illusionary return to a romanticized past

It is next to impossible for a well-established politician to run a campaign in that manner. Their past track record will always trip them up.

And even if a seasoned politician somehow managed to do that, in the real world of governing a country or a city, he or she knows that the "fundamental" change you professed in the campaign will not come about, despite your best and hardest efforts.

There is no doubt that the combination of the cultural shifts and the dislocations and inequities of globalization alienate large parts of our publics.

And that the pace and acceleration of these changes bring about a natural backlash and a need for an illusionary return to the certainties of a romanticized past.

It is also inevitable that this negative energy finds a political expression in populist and radical movements and leaders.

As a young Italian lawyer representing the Cinque Stelle (Five Star) Movement was telling us at an Aspen Italia conversation after Brexit:

Who is to blame? Us, the new political movements that surge on the disillusionment of the public with the traditional establishment or the establishment itself, that produces this ample anger and discontent?"

Need for a shake-up of traditional politics

There is no viable substitute to democracy. In today's world, the real competition is for talent and talent cannot flourish in illiberal and authoritarian societies.

Populists and radical movements will probably continue to win elections because there is something profoundly wrong with modern capitalism and something rotten in the political elites.

But the way out of the current conundrum is not illiberalism or authoritarian rule. The shake-up of traditional politics in America and Europe is a necessity and not a threat.

This shake-up may well lead to the rise of lots of false prophets, who will burn out and vanish in the process. What then is my answer to the more fundamental question on the nature of our societies in the 4.0 era?

Conclusion

There is a genuine need for a renegotiation of the rules of engagement and of the distribution of economic and political power between the elites and the citizens, between governments and the ordinary people.

This must be tried and done for one simple reason: Illiberalism and inequity go hand in hand. They condition one another and, as such, are the major source of political frustration, alienation and discontent.

But there is also a non-negotiable part of this new grand bargain, the very foundation of our democratic societies: representative and participatory democracy, the rule of law, the freedom to speak up your mind, to be different and express your political or personal views without being afraid of the consequences.

This is where the bipolar nature of modern politics should end and the reconstruction of inclusive, liberal thinking should commence.

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