

Post-consensus trap

BY PIALUISA BIANCO

Politics in Western democracies are changing again, and the change will require a new kind of governance. So it is no accident that the United States and Europe are simultaneously experiencing a political breakdown. This is because we live in a dangerous time in which structural change – the necessary medicine – can easily poison the entire system. The danger in question stems from the recent emergence of a political attitude – a contempt for consensus – which threatens our democracies' very foundations. We are thus at a historical crossroads. How we govern ourselves in the coming decades will shape the 21st century.



The mismatch between the growing demand for good governance and its shrinking supply is one of the gravest challenges facing the West today. Much hinges on our ability to recognize and respect variety while responding to the demands for greater participation in the political process. Our ability to manage such conflicting needs will make the difference between dynamic societies and those that have stalled, and it will determine whether conflict or cooperation emerges as the global modus operandi.

All political parties must pay attention to how this widening gap has altered the very notion of popular support, which of course is the basis for any representative democracy. By contrast, the race to gain segments of the electorate often involves the danger of caving in on issues of principle. The crux of the matter is that traditional parties can no longer harness the current turmoil. They have grown up with a deep commitment, intellectually and emotionally, to the idea that decision-making is a consensual and continual give-and-take; but they are now being sucked away from society's urgent needs by the centrifugal force of the populists and have wound up aping them. More often they incline to favor the zeal of its voters without the ability to channel it into an organized political framework. In the US and in most EU countries, the inability to forge consensus out of disorder is taking the form of a paralyzing polarization.

If the government shutdown in the US has shown us anything, it's that a discontented minority faction may be at the vanguard of a new

post-consensus politics. Perhaps this minority within a minority is only a "suicide caucus," as Charles Krauthammer has called the combative group among Republicans, because it antagonized a majority of the public. Nevertheless, its influence is similar to the Occupy Wall Street crowd shaking up the Democratic Party. And an analogous dynamic is visible throughout Europe. As such, the problem for all political parties is how to break the stranglehold that a belligerent, destructive cast of mind has on collective interests.

The strength of Western democracy is that everyone has a voice and can contend for power. However, the formal accountability mechanism of one-person-one-vote elections and the alternating bi-partisan system have degenerated into partisan rancor and divided the public against itself. In this atmosphere of resentful confrontation and mutual delegitimization, the short-term mentality prevails. What went wrong?

Democracies, like financial markets, tend toward disequilibrium rather than equilibrium. Nimble and responsive when their electorates are content, democracies turn clumsy and sluggish when their citizens are downcast. Globalization was supposed to have played to the advantage of liberal societies, which were presumably best suited to capitalize on the fast and fluid global marketplace. But instead, for the better part of two decades, middle class wages in the world's leading democracies have been stagnant and economic inequality has risen sharply. Representative governments have proved far better at distributing benefits than at apportioning sacrifice. Rather than speaking straightforwardly about the need for shared belt-tightening, vulnerable politicians have been catering to party bases, fail-

ing to make the tough choices needed to restore economic solvency. And so, the political families and parties that support governments have all too often generated public debt to win the consensus of voters.

Contemporary politics is now compelled to reinvent itself and come up with ways of mitigating economic and social disparities without hurting economic growth. To do so it must steal ideas from both sides. Such cross-pollination (as has always happened when democracies reached a full functioning maturity) will be a sign of change, but politicians on both sides have a long way to go. The right's instincts tend to make government smaller rather than better. The putatively egalitarian left's failure is more fundamental. In the rich world welfare states are running out of money, growth is slowing and inequality rising. Yet the left's only answer is higher taxes on wealth creators. The issue isn't whether the left believes in social justice. The issue is: do their policies fulfill that mission?

As diversity grows among cultures and nations, it is also growing within societies. The face of standardized industrial society has changed in the space of half a century. The fluid, uncontrollable and elusive "mass" that stirred up anguished fears among the middle classes at the beginning of the 20th century has been replaced by a widespread self-centered feeling which prevents people from identifying with any system of common values, making them reluctant to believe in anything that doesn't offer immediate gratification and susceptible to personal idiosyncratic interests. These changes of great social and political import are directed toward the disintegration of mass society into ever more plural niches and identities because of the decentralizing im-

pact of information technology – especially social media. Greater diversity along with cultural and political awakening is part and parcel of the transition underway.

Changing demographics would seem to strengthen the appeal of anti-government and post-consensus movements. As the West becomes more diverse, another segment of the population has come to the fore: the alienated and disenchanted. These people have embraced a radical and anarchic outlook and have little use for what they see as the sinful, impure and compromised politics. But democracy comes from endless compromise reached by each side making concessions. Everywhere – from the Tea Party and Occupy movements to the Indignados and 5SM – people are resentfully demanding a quantum of self-affirmation in the way their lives are governed. The hallowed idea of negotiating consensus and the ambition to build a majority have given way to a strategy of survival reliant on political apartheid and ghettoization. This mood guiding today's self-centered minorities only causes them to rally their likeminded friends.

All of it is the consequence of a serious reversal in Western politics. When elected leaders – in order to be reelected – allow themselves to be tugged in various directions according to the voters' whims and feel beholden to please or merely survive rather than govern effectively, the very goal of the democratic election is undermined. In a democracy consensus legitimizes power. It is the source, the means, not the end. Paradoxically, the new politics of post-consensus indignation exacerbate that reversal.

This presents a double challenge to governance: to accommodate the demand for participation, power must devolve downward, toward the grassroots. At the same time, reining in society's ever-accelerating dispersion requires more consensus-building skills. The failure to find an institutional response to this double challenge will result in a crisis of legitimacy for any governing system.

The fitful scattering of the social order has pushed many away from traditional politics of delegated power and toward an implicit rejection of the representative system.

Democracy in the West is by no means self-correcting. Without reforms to strengthen consensus-building institutions – foremost among them, political parties at the service of the people – democracy will falter.

