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Closing the representation gap

Centre-left parties have become too bourgeois. The ensuing representation gap lies at the heart of democratic dissatisfaction

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Over the past decades dissatisfaction with democracy has risen dramatically. The most recent Global Satisfaction with Democracy report, for example, notes: 'In the mid-1990s, a majority of citizens ... were satisfied with the performance of their democracies. Since then, the share of individuals who are "dissatisfied" with democracy has risen ... from 47.9 to 57.5%. This is the highest level of global dissatisfaction since the start of the series in 1995.'

Perhaps the most common way of understanding democratic dissatisfaction is 'bottom-up' — examining citizens' economic and/or socio-cultural grievances. But it is also necessary to examine the 'top-down' sources—those stemming from the nature or functioning of democratic institutions themselves.

Perhaps the most influential modern statement of this perspective is Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies.* Huntington argued that political decay and disorder was the result of a gap between citizens' demands and the willingness or ability of political institutions to respond to them. Although *Political Order* focused on developing countries during the post-war period, its framework can help us understand democratic dissatisfaction in Europe today.

Over recent decades a representation gap has emerged in Europe — a disjuncture between voters' preferences and the policy profiles and political appeals of mainstream parties. And, as Huntington would predict, when citizens view political institutions as unwilling or unable to respond to them, dissatisfaction, and along with it political disorder and decay, is the likely result.

Shifted profiles

Mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties in Europe have shifted their policy profiles and political appeals in ways that have moved them away from the preferences of many voters. The shift on the part of centre-left parties is well-known.

During the post-war period, European centre-left parties had relatively clear economic profiles, based on the view that it was the job of democratic governments to protect citizens from the negative consequences of capitalism. Concretely, this entailed championing the welfare state, market regulation, full-employment policies and so on. Although centre-left parties tried to capture additional votes outside the traditional working class, their identities and appeals remained class-based.

In the late 20th century this began to change, as centre-left parties moved to the centre economically, offering a watered-down or 'kindler, gentler' version of the policies peddled by their centre-right competitors. By the late 1990s, as one study put it, 'Social Democracy ... had more in common with its main competitors than with its own positions roughly three decades earlier'. As centre-left parties diluted their economic-policy positions, they also began de-emphasising class in their appeals and their leaders increasingly came not from blue-collar ranks but from a highly educated elite.

Although less pronounced and universal, at around the same time as centre-left parties moved to the centre economically, many centre-right parties moderated their positions on important social and cultural issues, including 'traditional' values, immigration and other concerns related to national identity.

In short, while examining changing economic, social and technological conditions and the grievances they have generated is crucial for understanding democracy's contemporary problems, it is also necessary to explore why

Centre-right parties had generally taken conservative stances on these issues. Christian-democratic parties, for example, had viewed religious values as well as traditional views on gender and sexuality as crucial to their identity. In addition, many of these parties understood national identity in cultural or even ethnic terms and were suspicious of immigration and multiculturalism. But during the late 20th and early 21st centuries many shifted to the centre on national-identity issues, tempering or abandoning the communitarian appeals they had made previously.

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Cumulatively, these shifts by centre-left and centre-right parties left many voters, particularly those with left-wing economic and moderate to conservative preferences on immigration and so on, without a party representing their interests. Such voters were heavily concentrated among the less well-educated and the working class, comprising about 20-25 per cent of the electorate in Europe (as well as in the United States).

Representation gap

To use categories popularised by Albert Hirschman, when a representation gap emerges and voters are dissatisfied with the political choices offered to them, they have two options: exit and voice. And indeed, over recent decades, less-educated and working-class voters have increasingly exited by abstaining from voting and other forms of political participation or exerted voice by shifting their votes to right-wing populist parties. They did so because these parties shifted their profiles as well, offering a mix of welfare chauvinism, conservative social and cultural policies and a promise to give voice to the 'voiceless'—precisely to appeal to them.

The French writer Édouard Louis described how his uneducated, working-class father's dissatisfaction with mainstream parties, and in particular with the traditional left, led him down this path:

'What elections [came to mean for] my father was a chance to fight his sense of invisibility … My father had felt abandoned by the political left since the 1980s, when it began adopting the language and thinking of the free market … [and no longer] spoke of social class, injustice and poverty, of suffering, pain and exhaustion … My father would complain, "Whatever—left, right, now, they're all the same." That "whatever" distilled all of his disappointment in those who, in his mind, should have been standing up for him but weren't.'

'By contrast, the National Front railed against poor working conditions and unemployment, laying all the blame on immigration or the European Union. In the absence of any attempt by the left to discuss his suffering, my father latched on to the false explanations offered by the far right. Unlike the ruling class, he didn't have the privilege of voting for a political program. Voting, for him, was a desperate attempt to exist in the eyes of others.'

In short, while examining changing economic, social and technological conditions and the grievances they have generated is crucial for understanding democracy's contemporary problems, it is also necessary to explore why existing democratic institutions have not responded to many citizens' concerns. A defining feature of democracy, after all, is that government is supposed to be responsive to citizens. This implies some correspondence between what voters want and what politicians and parties actually do.

In particular, when a representation gap emerges—when a significant section of the population feels its interests are no longer represented by traditional politicians and parties — we should expect dissatisfaction and support for anti-establishment politicians and parties to rise. Avoiding this requires closing the representation gap — which means either traditional parties will need to shift back towards voters or they will have to convince voters to shift towards them.

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