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In Search of the Center - The Beginning of the End of Political Extremism?

by Anthony Silberfeld

As the U.S. presidential candidates limp toward the finish line, dragging a disillusioned electorate along with them, many have reflected on the long-term damage of Trumpism to the Republican Party, or whether those who were “feeling the Bern” will hold their noses and cast a vote for Hillary Clinton on November 8. The primary season always brings out party activists who tend to gravitate toward the more extreme edges of their respective camps, but the general election typically forces candidates to pivot to the center in search of those ever-elusive undecided or swing voters. This election campaign, however, has bucked decades of conventional wisdom.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, “Extremes to the right and to the left of any political dispute are always wrong,” and yet that is where the politics of the United States are firmly entrenched at the moment. But the U.S. is not alone. Across the European continent, nations are flirting with extreme ideological movements on the right and the left, fueling the flames of nationalism and xenophobia. The prevailing narrative that has taken hold in recent years on both sides of the Atlantic is that economic stagnation and changing demographics have pushed voters to the fringes, so it is unsurprising that extremist parties are on the rise. These explanations have clearly contributed to the current environment, but it doesn’t tell the full story. Perhaps all is not as grim as it seems.

Clowns to the Left...

While divisiveness prevails in both Europe and the U.S., the American case has its own distinctive features. The hyper-polarization of the American political system didn’t arrive with the emergence of Donald Trump, though he certainly is the cherry on top of a tainted sundae that has been years in the making. Three main factors have contributed to the toxic climate that currently dominates politics in Washington. First, the gerrymandering of Congressional districts has reduced the number of truly competitive constituencies across the U.S. Blue districts are getting bluer and red districts are getting redder, so there is simply less space in which a moderate (or purple) candidate can operate. It also forces incumbents to reorient their views to the outer edges of the party in order to avoid an intra-party primary battle from the left flank in the case of Democrats or the right in the case of Republicans.

Second, the 24-hour news cycle has effectively served up partisan fare to American consumers in a manner that has been great for ratings, but not for constructive political dialogue. From the right-wing powerhouse of Fox News to no less partisan MSNBC on the liberal end of the spectrum, there are plenty of opportunities to give the true believers plenty of red meat, but very few occasions to challenge the party line. Compare cable news to public broadcast networks, and you will find the quintessential style versus substance debate. In today’s media landscape, style will always prevail. According to the American Press Institute, twice as many Americans get their political news from cable television than from mainstream newspapers.¹ If one adds this trend to the spike in the number of Americans who get their political news in 140 character bursts or on Facebook, you quickly have a recipe for micro-targeted messaging and political breakdown.

Finally, American campaigns have participated in the continual erosion of civility in political discourse, with each iteration plunging to new depths of invectiveness. The 2016 Trump campaign is particularly egregious, and may have sounded the death knell for basic decency in politics. No longer does one's opponent distort the truth; he or she is now a "liar." Alleged corruption requires no investigation, but according to Trump, the perpetrator should be thrown in jail. And if one is dissatisfied with the outcome of the election, he can ignore both the result and more than two centuries of American democratic tradition.

Jokers to the Right

Unfortunately, extremist politics have not been confined to the 50 states, but have found fertile ground in Europe as well. Though capitalizing primarily on economic hardship, European fringe parties have built on voter frustration by stoking a fear of new migrants, and offering solace in the form of old-fashioned nationalism. These messages resonate and can now be found in most corners of the continent.

In the United Kingdom, Jeremy Corbyn has abandoned the centrist orientation of New Labour under Tony Blair and has ushered his party to the far left of British politics. On the far right, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) capitalized on anti-migrant sentiment, leading Britons to seek a divorce from the European Union. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Front has put a gentler face on her father's xenophobic party, but its nationalistic roots remain firmly intact. At the opposite end of the French political spectrum, socialist President Francois Hollande has adjusted his policy positions in order to preempt an attack from his left flank in next year's primary contest from Arnaud Montebourg. Likewise, Germany has not managed to escape the allure of a party promising a return to a utopian time that never actually existed. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has managed to make inroads by using campaign rhetoric not seen since the election of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s, and has captured more than 20 percent of the vote in recent state elections in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

So with the U.S. and Europe seemingly under the spell of extremist political movements, is it time to panic?

Stuck in the Middle

Although the current trajectory of far-right and far-left movements in the U.S. and Europe is cause for concern, there is still time for mainstream political parties to course-correct. According to a 2015 Gallup survey, 60 percent of Americans from the Republican and Democratic parties self-identify as moderates.² In the 2015 UK parliamentary election, UKIP earned just 12.6 percent³ of the vote and Corbyn-era Labour Party saw its share of the vote erode by 13 percent compared to the centrist-oriented Labour support in 1997.⁴ Despite leading in current French polls,⁵ Le Pen maintains just 28 percent of support from the electorate; insufficient to withstand an anti-National Front vote in the second round of the French presidential contest next year. And though the AfD is making strides at the state level, a sizable share of German voters remains in the political center, either to the immediate left with the Social Democrats or right with Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats.

In a time of uncertainty and volatility at home and abroad, the center of the political spectrum in the U.S. and Europe needs to step forward and reassert the influence that provided relative stability for decades. Perhaps reasonable leaders on both sides of the Atlantic have become too complacent and assumed that the political center could withstand any eventuality. But this is a new era, and moderate forces need to use all tools available to ensure that they can compete on an increasingly crowded playing field. Fringe movements have capitalized on the use of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. Centrist politicians must match these tactics every step of the way. Instead of sounding the alarm, let this moment serve as a wake-up call.

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- ¹ <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/personal-news-cycle/>
 - ² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/188129/conservatives-hang-ideology-lead-thread.aspx>
 - ³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results>
 - ⁴ <http://www.ukpolitical.info/>
 - ⁵ http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2016/06/01/presidentielle-hollande-ne-recueille-que-14-des-intentions-de-vote_4930246_4854003.html