

Democracy transfer

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To meet the challenges of the 21st century, progressives need to learn how to delegate democracy to the local, regional and global level

Social democrats face a major dilemma. In much of their analysis of the current global challenges the roles of independent bodies or supranational institutions are seen as part of the solution. However, much of the centre-left seems resigned to the fact that advocating for a transfer of decision-making power does not win the popular argument and hence elections. As a result, the gap between analysis, rhetoric and actual policies is constantly widening, raising questions in particular over the centre-left's ability to effectively meet today's challenges. How can progressives begin to close this gap?

Due to the democratic nature of our political systems, politics is prone to short-termism. At best, the horizon of most politicians is the next election date and this only when his or her party or government is not in crisis. As people rightly expect policymakers to be capable of addressing their basic problems and concerns, those rarely fall short of presenting new initiatives and ideas which are supposed to do exactly this. Quick fixes in tax and social policies are the orders of the day.

In the 20th century, when most European countries enjoyed guaranteed and stable growth over long periods and the primary task was to ensure a just distribution of wealth and life-chances, this mode of politics within the national realm sufficiently fulfilled its duty. Yet in the 21st century with its unprecedented and previously underestimated challenges of energy security, international terrorism, migration, the global financial crises and climate change, the reliance on short-term, domestic political engineering has certainly reached its limits.

To put it bluntly, many conservative and rightwing politicians do not really have a problem with this. They do not believe in the virtues of (state) intervention and regulation but have more confidence in the self-healing forces of the market. They are also more sceptical about the role of international institutions and an international order which is based on multilateral principles. In fact, their politics is often quite consistent with their electoral promises inasmuch as they do not pretend to have an all-encompassing answer to the current socio-economic unease or the injustice felt by large parts of our population. Rather, they intend to restore order and meritocracy through national policies which ultimately favour the "winners" in our societies.

The progressive centre-left, instead, has got stuck in a quandary. Having come to terms with the market and abandoned class war in order to champion programmes which are supposed to appeal to both the disadvantaged and advantaged, it finds it increasingly difficult to define popular and effective policies which can meet this standard. In light of the new inequalities its proposals to advance social justice for all by increasing investment in public services are often perceived as half-hearted or insufficient. Even worse, never have so many people felt that the level of state expense in relation to actual outcomes is so disproportionate as nowadays. To some extent this also explains

the polarising rifts within many European social democratic parties, where “traditionalists” and “modernisers” are seen to be in fierce opposition about the right course.

All of this is not to imply that national governments are powerless in the face of the current global challenges or that national redistributive policies have become entirely obsolete socio-economic reform and innovation can still make a big difference as, for example, most Nordic countries continue to demonstrate. But rather that it may be increasingly necessary to pursue a political strategy of multi-tiered governance in which power is redistributed between different levels of the state in pursuit of collective action at the local, national, regional and global level. In addition, short-termism must give way to long-term solutions if we are to successfully tackle some of the big challenges, such as changing demography.

Yet if this understanding is shared among the progressive centre-left, why is it not adequately translated into politics? It is because any such approach would inevitably lead to delegating more decision-making power to other institutions. It would require politicians to admit that they cannot influence certain developments and outcomes with the use of traditional domestic instruments. Ceding power and/or sovereignty, however, is hardly seen as a recipe for electoral success in a democracy where voters (apparently) look for quick and comprehensive solutions to their daily worries.

For those who reject populist policies, whether from the extreme left or the right, confronting this dilemma constitutes a formidable mission. At the same time, defining a coherent and consistent approach to the challenges of the 21st century which strikes the right balance between different levels of governance might even provide an important component for a new progressive centre-left project. At its heart, it would construct a new policy framework which addresses not only the consequences of structural change but also the causes of the more problematic developments, such as the financial market turbulences, exchange rate volatility, or the geo-politics of energy trade.

As a precondition, the centre-left would have to figure out how independent and supranational institutions can actually help advance government’s policy objectives and help making commitments to certain policies more credible. And to recognise that the delegation of democracy can often be an appropriate means to fight vested interest and powerful lobbies. Yet, most importantly, in order to apply such an argumentation in the political arena of a western liberal democracy, the very process of delegation needs to be politicised. It is about exposing the limits of state interventions on the one hand, and the repercussions of laissez-faire on the other. It is about defining a broader concept of social, economic and political freedoms which can only be expanded through provisions at the national, regional and global level. In short, it is about entering into 21st century realities where size, power, resources and access to information matter a great deal.

The role of the European Union is crucial in this respect. Making it fit for the purpose in the global age will help all member states maintain their prosperity. But this also requires a more profound understanding and a thought-through political strategy of the actual objectives the EU is supposed to achieve. For the centre-left, the Union should be seen as an indispensable tool for bridging the gap between aspirations and outcomes. Only then can progressives convincingly portray themselves as a force for progress in the face of the rapid social, economic and political transformations that are the hallmarks of life in the 21st century.

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