Changing our political culture: how to make politics great (again)

LSE **blogs.lse.ac.uk**/politicsandpolicy/how-to-make-politics-great/

Drawing on some of the factors that led to support for Brexit and Trump – outcomes many would have considered impossible a few months back – **Sylvia Merler** *and* **Giuseppe Porcaro** *offer their views on how politicians, voters, and institutions must redefine and rebuild politics.*

If there's just one sure thing about 2016 is that we will remember it for a long time. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are two events that a majority of people would have previously dismissed as impossible – yet they happened, and societies have to cope with the consequences. One obvious message stemming from these events is that our framework for identifying what is "thinkable" needs major revision. Our current reference framework failed to predict these developments because we were at the same time failing to understand the underlying reasons of discontent, as well as the potential for mobilisation they carried.

Populism is by no means a 2016 phenomenon: even without considering historical populist waves, the political forces that we identify as "populist" today have been at work at least since the 2008 financial crisis. They have since had the time to perfection their appeal, to become entrenched and grow. For example, in Italy the 5 Star Movement scored more than 25.5 per cent of votes at its first national electoral appearance in 2013. Golden Dawn in Greece started with a mere 0.6 per cent in 1996 and ranked as the third political force in the last two general elections. And UKIP has been a shaping force in most of recent political events in the UK.

It would be wrong to say that nobody was paying attention, but too many dismissed new populism as a niche phenomenon that would resonate with a majority of people. Again, this was "unthinkable" before 2016. So blaming it on "populism" without acknowledging the shortcomings of its critics would be as inconclusive as it would be hypocritical.

We instead sketch a rough roadmap to restore faith in politics and democracy.

Tear down echo chambers

What often happens on both sides of a debate – be it in the media, in parliament, in public forums – is the creation of echo chambers. We no longer see a proper exchange of ideas, but rather a solidification of one's already formed mindset. One consequence of this is that extremist positions can thrive more easily than they used to. The preferred source of information and communication for many people exacerbates this polarisation: the substitutions of personal with virtual interaction have allowed a radicalisation in the tone of discourse, with news and debates on social networks aimed at matching, rather than challenging the users' views.

We need to rebuild the political ground and acknowledge that it is now composed of discordant voices. The idea that the 'annihilation' of the other as the desired outcome of political competition is simply not working. This does not mean that we should consider all positions as equally acceptable. It means that we should give them equal intellectual standing. By dismissing it as irrelevant, we relegate populism into a sort of intellectually isolated *ghetto.* If our aim is to demystify with facts the most extremist position, then we need to first allow it into a common space of discussion where it can be intellectually challenged in a serious way.

Regain trust by bringing evidence to the ground

One key lesson from both Brexit and the recent US election is that facts do not seem to matter to voters. There is not just one single reason for this. Statistics are a flexible tool: slightly changing the definition or the computation of something can produce very different conclusions. This creates confusion and makes people doubt facts, because it really looks like facts are "fluid". In this sense, *facts* are no more trustworthy than *claims.* And since anything can be claimed, anything can be believed.

Another reason why facts are losing importance is that the incredible amount of data that we have access to forces us to choose what facts to present. In a world where information is instantaneous – and so is the attention span of the reader – most will probably opt for more impactful, attention-grabbing headlines, which are not necessarily true.

Often the way facts and evidence have been put together has not been satisfactory for non-specialists. As far as economics is concerned, this is very clear in the contrast between the macro picture and its micro implication. Voters in the American rust belt or in some areas of Britain probably don't grasp why in a local community people are losing jobs while "the economy" is doing better. Similarly, individual voters may fail to understand what the benefits of our EU membership are when the institutional processes concerned are obscure.

Analysis of macro aggregates falls in a "fallacy of the average": it tells us what is going on "on average" but this average fails to resonate with individuals, and it's these individuals who vote. This is much deeper than just a communication issue: analysts and researchers should refocus their attention on how the macro affects the micro sphere. Geography should be king; territorial effects should be priority for policy action, not just a fixed effects of statistical models. There is currently a vacuum in explaining all this accurately and accessibly, and in providing policy solutions that work in practice. Populist promises have been filling this vacuum.

Nurture democracy

Politics should be the space where the battle of ideas allows dialectics between different political positions. We saw in the past years the rise of identity politics as a simplistic answer to complex problems. But there is more to offer. It is important to start crafting new and competing political projects. Citizens have seen a constant convergence in policies implemented by politically opposing coalitions. A return to politics means also the possibility to offer more viable policy alternatives for citizens to chose from – rooted in sound and factual analysis.

Appeal emotionally by creating a vision

Until the early 1990s, the post-war period had been strongly ideological. The end of the war left a marked division between two ideological spheres that were forced to co-exist in a Cold War. By the 21st century, this ideological division disappeared and the world seems to have become ideologically flat.

The actual concept of ideology has become a taboo for political discussion. Unfortunately, it seemed that the death of ideology also corresponded to the death of idealism. The problem with this became clear when the economic crisis hit the economic prosperity that was taken for granted until 2008, and the only thing left appeared to be a disillusionment towards the future.

If we can't imagine a better future in these cynical times, how do we expect to build one? We propose to consider utopias as a methodological tool, rather than end-goals. In the political sphere, the success of most of the populist and neo-nationalist movements comes from the emotional appeal they have on citizens that are disillusioned about the future and they find the only grip in the promise of a past that was never really true, neither great. Let's project politics in the future again.

Organise for action

The above is a set of theoretical steps. Organisation is key to realising them. We believe that one of the most flawed ideas of the past thirty years has been that citizens did not need to organise, as they could be reached directly by policymakers.

It's true, new forms of organisation are needed. The old way of setting up and running a party is no longer adequate. But the demise of public support to intermediary bodies and civil society organisations has led to an ever-increasing weakness of citizens' initiative. What populists have understood well before others, is that the model of citizens as *consumers* of politics should be replaced with a model of citizens as *producers* of politics. This should become an institutional priority, by providing necessary resources to breed independent movements. Reinvest in strengthening associations, collective grassroots initiatives, but also a clear support for political participation, starting with its prioritisation within the education system.

To conclude, the Brexit vote and the Trump vote should warrant a reflection on the nature and modalities of politics, with the aim of fighting the extremist and populist views in a constructive way. We highlighted five pillars around which this should be done.

Our call for increased idealism would be void if not met by action. This reflection also has important implications for how we envision the policy-making process. Policy-making tends to be an incremental process. As a result, progress can sometimes be so marginally small, hence hard for citizens to appreciate. To regain trust, policymakers should act accordingly. It's not a time for marginal improvements, but a time for positive policy shock.

The specific fields of urgent action will differ across countries. As far as the EU is concerned, urgent action is needed to rebuild trust in the effectiveness of economic policy-making. The economic crisis has changed the meaning of the EU in the eyes of its citizens, with more and more people associating the EU with unemployment and bureaucracy. Rebuilding a positive and idealistic meaning for the European project in the eyes of Europeans will be vital.

What needs to be shown now is that traditional institutions – which so many voters see as a negative "establishment" – are still able to be courageous and make major steps forward, both in terms of visions and policies.

––––

About the Authors

Silvia Merler is Affiliate Fellow at Bruegel and PhD Candidate in European Studies at the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Affairs. Her main research interests include international macro and financial economics, central banking and EU institutions and policymaking. She holds a BA in Economics and Social Sciences from Bocconi University in Milan. She tweets from @SMerler

Giuseppe Porcaro is Head of Communications at the think tank Bruegel and holds a PhD in Geography of Development from the University of Naples L'Orientale. He was Secretary General of the European Youth Forum between 2009 and 2014 and previously worked at the World Bank in Kosovo and Paris as well as the European Office of the World Organisation of the Scout Movement. He tweets from @porcarorama