

The Demise of Incumbents: Resurgence of the Far Right, Absence of the “Consequential Left”

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Incumbent politicians and parties, both center-left and right, have suffered serious defeats in recent elections. The principal beneficiary has been the extreme right. Nowhere did the ‘consequential left’ register a victory, although in a few instances it marginally increased its vote. The one major exception has been Turkey, where the incumbent Erdogan regime scored a ‘victory’ on November 1, 2015 by resorting to widespread violence during the general election campaign to intimidate and silence his opposition after having suffered a sharp (and surprise) defeat five months earlier in June 2015 when secular civil groups, leftists and Kurdish linked parties upset Erdogan’s parliamentary majority.

During the recent campaign, Erdogan resumed bombing of Kurdish regions, both inside Turkey and across the border in Syria and Iraq. He shut down opposition newspapers and TV stations, and imprisoned hundreds of secular, leftist activists. Scores of opposition party regional offices were firebombed and wrecked. Most ominously, Erdogan and Turkish intelligence operatives have been implicated in the horrific massacre of scores of opposition peace marchers, leftists, trade unionists and Kurdish political party activists in the capital Ankara on October 10 and elsewhere. In other words, Erdogan prevented the electoral decline of his incumbent right-wing regime through terror, purges and mob violence. Washington and the EU promptly congratulated the Erdogan regime for its blood-stained ‘victory’.

This essay will address the reasons why incumbents lost worldwide. We will examine social policies, economic crises, personalities, corruption scandals, commodity cycles and growing class inequalities – and a combination of all of the above.

Secondly, we will discuss why the alternatives oscillate between the ‘center-left’ and the hard right and not the ‘consequential left (for lack of a better term)’ – the CL.

Thirdly, we will explore the historical and external and internal contemporary factors limiting the CL’s growth, and why the Left does not attract the mass of voters as an alternative to the Right and Center-left.

Center-Left and Right Incumbents *in Retreat*

This year, center-left and rightwing incumbents have suffered major defeats in elections in Poland, Canada, Portugal, Ukraine, Turkey, Spain, Colombia, Argentina and France. According to reliable polls, incumbent regimes in Venezuela and Brazil are expected to suffer serious losses in coming elections.

Moreover, center-left incumbents in Bolivia, Ecuador, Greece and El Salvador have secured their re-election by shifting to the right. For example, Bolivia's President Evo Morales asked the Financial Times to organize a meeting on Wall Street inviting the CEO'S from 130 of the biggest multi-nationals. In this imperial 'love-fest', Evo offered every kind of economic inducement imaginable – outperforming the most openly neo-liberal client rulers. Across the 'pond', Greek Prime Minister Tsipras turned over his nation's sovereignty to the financiers of the European Union, promising to 'privatize' \$50 billion worth of valuable public assets, while cutting salaries and pensions and ending state subsidies for family farmers.

Why Do Incumbents Lose?

What is striking about the near universal defeat of center-left and rightwing incumbents across the political spectrum is the fact that their regimes have identical policies which have worsened inequalities, reversed 70 years of social welfare legislation, concentrated wealth and imposed regressive class-based "*austerity*" on their populations.

Having weakened trade unions and undermined collective action, wage and salaried workers can only protest by voting out the incumbents. However, as class-based struggles decline, so does class-consciousness. As a result, '*alternatives*', which are only minimally different from the incumbents, are elected.

Voters have another option: abstention from the polls. Voter turnout has plummeted. The uncounted '*none of the above*' vote has increased significantly across the globe with few political consequences.

Impoverishment and growing popular discontent is exacerbated by the world economic crisis, the sharp decline in commodity prices (especially in agro-mineral export countries) and the regressive fiscal policies and cutbacks adopted by incumbents.

Most workers, especially those employed in the more vulnerable private sectors, are rarely organized or politically conscious. The loss of stable wage employment results in the growth of self-employment (street vendors, domestic servants and private contractors) and the loss of collective organizations. This makes them especially prone to the appeal of clientelistic politics from the right and center-left.

Moreover, EU dominance of its '*vassal-members*' has awakened '*nationalist*' political consciousness rather than class-consciousness, with the result that the alternative to neo-liberal regimes is increasingly the hard nationalist-paternalistic right.

The paradox is that, the worse the capitalist crisis grows, the weaker the collective response from working class organizations and the more severe the austerity measures imposed by international financial-capital, the more likely the hard nationalist right will emerge as the principle alternative.

Intensification and Spread of Class Struggle... from Above: 'Austerity'

The reason for the growth of the hard right is clear: '*Austerity*', a misnomer on all counts. First and foremost, the primary purpose of '*austerity*' is to advance bourgeois class warfare in every sense of the word. Regressive economic policies grew out of a series of successful legislation designed to dismantle the legal and organizational institutions of the working class (portrayed as 'flexibility' and 'labor reforms'). '*Austerity*', the next phase in class warfare, encompasses far more than regressive socio-economic policies. It involves

wholesale changes facilitating (1) capitalist firing of workers arbitrarily; (2) drastic changes in labor contracts including multi-tiered wages and the replacement of long-term employees with short-term contingent workers, (3) elimination of severance pay; (4) the power to 'fire on the spot'; (5) and rotating employment.

'Austerity' measures are designed to undermine collective organization and encourage divisive competition among workers for jobs and scarce benefits.

Austerity leads to the replacement of senior, stable, class-experienced workers in favor of young vulnerable workers, refugees, and immigrants who are willing to work long hours, for lower pay with fewer benefits, while tolerating outright theft of their wages and other illegal practices.

The class warfare provisions accompanying '*austerity*' are the essential political foundations for implementing these regressive socio-economic measures.

Since both center-left and rightwing regimes impose *austerity* policies, the working class, which has been weakened, threatened and fragmented, lacks a political basis for launching a class-wide offensive. Instead we find occasional instances of local direct action and, more rarely, national one-day protests.

Why the Consequential Left is Not an Alternative

The defeat and decay of incumbent regimes of both the neo-liberal right and center-left should have benefited the 'consequential left' (CL) — by which we mean political leaders and parties, which have been consistently opposed to capitalism and imperialism in all of its forms and structures.

That has not happened for several obvious reasons, which need to be examined in some detail. First of all, the CL has given '*critical support*' to the center-left in various campaigns and, in the process, surrendered its identity, restrained the class struggle and, in some cases, even accepted 'decorative' positions (like 'Secretary for Cultural Affairs') within center-left regimes.

As a result, the CL provided a left veneer for the center-left regime in power and has not been able to capitalize on its demise in subsequent elections.

Secondly, where the CL managed to retain its independence and engage in frontal attacks on the center-left, it often happened in the context of a center-left regime still enjoying popular credibility based on 'redistributive' policies and anti-neo-liberal rhetoric. As a result the CL was not able to attract the mass following that brought the center-left to power.

Thirdly, the CL was badly hit by the regressive socio-economic changes that the rightwing regimes implemented. The loss of trade union rights, the changes in labor contracts and the growth of temporary workers weakened the social base for the CL and undermined its capacity for direct action and class struggle – essential elements in building grassroots organization.

In contrast to the CL, the center-left relies on election appeals to discontented voters and attracts their votes through the political mass media without needing to organize them in any collective movement.

When the incumbent neo-liberal right or center-left regimes fall from power, they leave in place a political, social and economic framework, which inhibits collective organization and struggle.

The neo-liberal right consistently dismantles working class organizations, whereas the 'hard right' diverts the working class to nationalist-chauvinist and anti-immigrant consciousness.

Beyond these external factors weakening the CL, there is the problem of the social composition of its leadership, which is 'top-heavy' with academics and 'intellectuals' – journalists, lawyers and professionals.

These leaders are the most vehement critics of capitalism when they are in opposition, but they are submissive, impotent and incapable of confronting the hard right and the international financial institutions of the neo-liberal right when they occupy positions of power.

Moreover the intellectual left is used to addressing self-generating 'socialist forums', writing for small journals produced by and for the same intellectuals, and have no experience in direct face-to-face long-term, large-scale worker education.

Most have engaged, at some point, in student academic struggles – but have episodic or no experience in working class or community organizations. In many cases, their idea of 'class struggle' is linking up with the center-left and providing a 'radical' rationale, justifying co-habitation between the CL in '*critical*' opposition and the center-left in power.

Over time the academic left is either absorbed by the center-left or they are marginalized, expelled, or defect when the center-left moves right. The academic left intellectuals, well situated in comfortable life-time academic or institutional appointments, have no direct contact or intimate knowledge or existential awareness of the political explosiveness of unemployed and contract workers, low paid, immigrant and female workers.

If and when the struggle turns militant, with a hard right crackdown, they fashion elaborate ideological justifications for retiring to academia.

Strong academic and professional class representation among the CL ensures its isolation from mass struggle; perpetuates internal "conversations", paralyzes direct action and relies on unintelligible '*narratives*' to insure popular incomprehension and discredit.

The Right Surges; the Left Recedes

In contrast, the hard right has gained mass support by relying on plebian language, direct action, popular nationalism, opposition to oligarchical international organizations and ethno-clerical chauvinism.

The single most important insight, which the hard right exploits, is the fear, loathing and resentment accompanying the real and clearly perceived downward mobility of vast sectors of the working and lower middle class.

Neo-liberalism has not only smashed the trade unions but it has severely torn the social safety net for unorganized workers and employees. The hard right has no truck for trade unions, but is deeply involved in restoring a vision of a 'safety-net' via corporatist social organizations involving employer, employees and state social pacts.

The hard right has gained influence by opposing the neo-liberal policies that raised the retirement age, reduced health coverage, undermined job security and block social advancement (blaming these losses on 'immigrants and minorities'). They blame the neo-liberal immigration policies, which have increased the reserve army of unemployed and underemployed workers.

The hard right responds by launching racist attacks on the immigrants, and not on the capitalists who hire and exploit immigrant workers to increase profits. As multi-national corporations close factories and move to off-shore, cheap labor, low corporate tax sites, the hard right denounces globalization and calls for a national industrial policy. While the trade unions march in protest and shop delegates confront bosses, the far right reaps the electoral votes.

The hard right in France, Poland, Greece, Hungary, Austria and elsewhere has captured the support of discontented workers by attacking the neo-liberal right and center-left. They take advantage of the self-marginalized left. They have pre-empted class polarization by a kind of ersatz 'nationalist polarization'. Their opposition to the EU, IMF and WTO is directed against the economic dominance of blatant *neo-liberalism* not capitalism, against the European Union, but not against US-dominated NATO militarism (which has exacerbated the flood of refugees and migrants).

The decline of the center-left throughout Latin America, namely in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Ecuador, is partly due to the corruption of high officials, which alienates the middle class as well as high inflation and unemployment, which erode living standards of the non-unionized majority of workers and informal sector self-employed. The center-left's embrace of an agro-mineral export strategy and its recent collapse with the '*end of the commodity boom*', has provoked mass discontent. State concessions to extractive capital (including the shredding of environmental protections laws) have alienated progressives, ecologists and indigenous communities. The neo-liberal right, in opposition, has gained the mass anti-incumbent vote by denouncing and mass organizing against corruption and by disguising their regressive socio-economic agenda.

The neo-liberal right has capitalized on the pervasive corruption among top center-left politicians in Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela to win back the middle class. Its promise to reduce inflation wins popular support. Its free market and pro-imperialist policies attract large-scale financial and media backing.

The consequential left, marginalized or embedded within the center-left regimes, is discredited. When it joins the attacks on the center-left, the right is in the best position to harvest the votes.

Sectors of the popular classes who want to preserve their hard-won gains and resent inflation-induced downward mobility have turned to the right.

Middle class resentment at the loss of their status does not augur well for solidarity with marginal groups, indigenous peoples, immigrants and the dispossessed and displaced from the countryside.

Declining living standards and rising inequality, economic crisis and the end of the commodity cycle, in the present conjuncture, has radicalized popular sectors – but not in a leftward direction.

Rightwing demagogies link phony populist critiques of liberalism with militarist tub thumping and increased prerogatives for capitalism.

Eventually this rightwing turn will end in further mass disenchantment and a new round of mass protests. However, unless the left takes the lead, sheds its 'professional' mentors and engages in direct action, the pendulum may return the center-left to power once again!

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