THE RISE OF THE RIGHT WING AND THE PARADOX OF THE
GLOBAL ANTI-ELITIST WAR

David P
University of Kerala

ABSTRACT

The global financial crisis and its political response and the resurgence of right-wing politics across the world’s democracies have been two fundamental political developments of the past decades. This paper attempts to analyse the correlation between the two developments and also the paradox in how democratic electorates responded to such interrelations.

Keyword: Political Science

1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world people are up in arms against the elites and the establishments. Political energies are being channelised to overthrow the elites and establish people’s rule, the real and ideal objective of democracy. The chauffer of these global anti elite crusade seems to be the political Right wing, cashing in electoral dividends from this pan world sentiment and the global pattern of this 21st century political movement more or less remains the same across nations and democracies. Two fundamental questions regarding this Right-wing populism rooted in an anti-elitist sentiment needs to be answered. Who exactly is this elite and did the Right wing create this anti-elite movement on its own or is the global Right wing just cashing in on a golden opportunity?

2. IS POPULISM INHERENTLY BAD?

If you take the help of political theory in addressing the first question you will find out that this anti elitism or populism as it is called in academic parlance traditionally always had an economic component attached to it, the traditional rich vs poor narrative. And its due to the economic assertion of the poor that at least some political scholars have had a positive view towards populism particularly the kind of inclusive populism seen in Latin America. Inclusive populism was an integral part of the Latin American pink wave and its associated initiatives like Bolsa Familia in Brazil, oportunidades in Mexico all stressed upon the economic aspect of populism. Populism always needs a narrative of us vs them and when it came to socialist populist movements they were ideologically predisposed to tap into the already existing and ideologically aligned cleavage of society, economic inequality. This is in stark difference to the right wing who were never ideologically predisposed for an us vs them debate on an economic variable and thus had to manifest new social cleavages by rupturing the social fabric. And this process of rupturing the social fabric to manifest an us vs them debate is what ends up as hate oriented divisive and polarising politics that is associated with the Right-wing populist movements across the world.

The Right wing neo populism clearly fails the economic test of populist theory. Though there has been rhetoric’s about economic reforms we are yet to see any fundamental change in any of the states were Right Wing wields power. On the contrary one of the prominent figures of the Global right-wing populism is himself a multimillionaire who doesn’t pay taxes, show off his wealth and is also proud of not paying taxes. In Brazil a Right-Wing government that had caused large scale economic misery still continues to enjoy popular support.

3. THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL CRISIS IN THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL RIGHT WING

Searching for the origins of this global network fuelled by hatred and polarising politics one cannot overlook the most defining watershed event of the global political economy of our times the 2008 financial crisis. The financial crisis and the way governments responded to it had considerably eroded the legitimacy of the nation state. The state as an institution seemed to be less and less powerful vis a vis its corporate counterparts. States were seen as weak and
bending easily to the corporate clamour and becoming more and more blind towards public opinion. Across the world people began to associate this weak state with the political establishment and ruling class of its times. This anger was in particular directed towards the liberal political establishment which was in power in most democracies during the crisis era, moreover it was the liberal political faction and philosophy that closely associated itself with democracy itself. People disgruntled by their economic woes and the resultant insecurity began to search for a strong assertive and authoritarian alternative which did not belong to what they believed and perceived to be a politico business nexus which brought about the financial crisis in the first in the first place. A brief analysis of global political history across nations and societies clearly shows whenever and wherever people suffer from economic insecurity they began to assert their social identities to feel secure. Even at the cost of stretching such identities to the verge of divisiveness and animosity on the contrary the divisive nature of identity politics helps them to accomplish the secure feeling that they lost on the economic front. Now we have a scenario where there is a rise in anti-establishment sentiment and also a rise in identity rooted politics a combo that easily serves the likes of a Donald Trump who asserts his White American identity and also his credentials for being an anti-establishment crusader.

4. THE NON-CONVENTIONAL POLITICIAN

The global anti elite war thus essentially became a war against the political establishment and the political elite and also a movement to reassert social identities in the wake of an economically and socially insecure world. It’s no coincidence that the leaders of these global phenomenon are mostly individuals who fit outside the image of a traditional politician this holds true for Trump in USA Modi in India and Bolsonaro in Brazil. And a major theme of these leaders’ electoral campaign was their apparent disconnection with the traditional political establishment of their respective countries. If an expertise in active politics and a history of a conventional role in political establishments were seen as an advantage to a leader come Post financial crisis and being associated with conventional politics and establishments began to become more and more of a baggage and that was how politics changed fundamentally in the post financial crisis era and this is not a standalone political development but history repeating itself. The same happened with the 1929 great depression which fuelled a right-wing populist wave across Europe and lead towards the rise of such leaders who were considered to be not falling within the definitions of conventional politicians of their times. The 20th century great depression and the resultant economic insecurity and people relying on their social identities to hold things together leading towards social and political polarisation is a theme that also seems so much familiar to the 21st century political world.

In all of the above-mentioned democracies the Right wing was successful in fixating a face for the political elite. In India if it was the Nehru Gandhi family in the US it was the Clintons and in Brazil Lula and his associates were identified as rallying points of an anti-establishment campaign. And in the campaigns that lead up to the elections in all the three states corruption and the politician business nexus played an important role over and above the Right-wing rhetoric that we witness now. Politics which are ‘anti’ oriented cannot be vague in its definition of who and what the ‘anti’ is because the ‘anti’ is its only ideological basis and without the ‘anti’ the whole movement falls over. So, such politics have always tried to pin point an imagery of what they are opposed to and that imagery is used to mobilise the masses the Dynasties, The Clintons, Lula and his corruption scandals all served very good posters for the anti-establishment imagery.

5. THE POLITICAL PARADOX OF THE ANTI-ELITE MOVEMENT

But the paradox of these anti-establishment political mobilisation becomes evident when one analyses the ideology and class composition of the political forces that replaced the elitist political establishment. In the quest to replace the political elite across the globe people have brought the traditional elites of the ancien regime of their respective societies back to power. The traditional elites cashed in on the anti-establishment sentiment to recapture the political power that they lost to the process of democratization.

The Hindu nationalist BJP in its ideological depth represent upper caste Brahminism an ideology and caste that dominated political discourse in the pre democratisation era. In USA Trump’s political
ideology and voter base at its core is the white supremacist class the traditional cultural elites of US society. In its desperation to replace the political elite across the world people have brought back the elitist forces of pre democratisation era. As the buffer of the political elite vanished traditional elites who once wielded political authority in all these societies began to return and usurp power in most democracies under the veil of fighting the establishment and representing the masses. Therein lies the paradox of the 21st century Right wing populism people in essential are reinstating a class and ideology while fighting against that same class and ideology itself. It’s also the reason for the electoral might of these groups as their electoral pool comprises political forces who are ideologically pitted against each other making them electorally invincible. Those who oppose elitism, the concentration of power in few hands and the elites come together to support the same political dispensation. While the Italian Political theorist Vilfredo Pareto postulated a theory of circulation of elites in all established democracies the phenomenon of the elites and anti-elitists ending up on the same side of the political spectrum is rather new.

While the anti-elites identified the political elites of our times alone as belonging to the elite establishment the traditional elites rode to power on this anti-elitist wave and also creating a formidable electoral combo in the process. Wanting to replace the political elites which had caused them misery, failed to live up to their expectations and compromised the interests of their nation states people instead of moving forward to the unknown and uncertain fell back to the pre-existing centres of power and authority. This explains the diverse and opposing nature of the Right-wing populist electorate which comprises the elite and the anti-elites, the exploiters and the exploited, the oppressing class as well as the oppressed class.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

To overcome this paradoxical politics, it’s imperative that societies and communities gather the courage to move forward into the political unknown. Insecure societies would seldom have that strength to do so and the political project that aims to take on the Right-Wing should focus on co-opting and healing these insecurities economic, social and cultural so that every time there is a socio-political crisis people don’t have to fall back between elites. Such a process for sure is not going to happen overnight it has to be a long-term agenda and whether people will be willing to overlook the paradox of their political narrative would depend so much upon the success of such an agenda of securitisation or as prominent Indian scholar Amartya Sen puts it ‘the freedom from fear’.

REFERENCES

Books

[1] Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky “How democracies die” 2018