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In Defense of Left/Right Ideology

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Abstract

Contemporary symptoms of political malaise—such as the decline of political parties, the obsolescence of established leadership, and rising voter abstention—raise profound concerns regarding the state and future of liberal democracy. It is likely that the ideals of democracy cannot be realized unless citizens genuinely appropriate its values and actively contribute to its functioning. This necessitates a more thorough understanding of the personal determinants of political preferences and participation, as well as a careful assessment of the value of ideological frameworks in bridging citizens' needs and aspirations with political offerings and public policies. To this end, the left/right dichotomy has served as ideological cleavage for organizing and channeling citizen consensus and politicians' commitment to the realization of democratic values. Although this has occurred only in part and predominantly within the domain of Western democracies, mounting criticism of its limitations should not lead one to lose sight of its distinctive features and functions in intercepting and articulating citizens' political aspirations. Ultimately, one should take care not to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Keywords: Political Orientation; Democracy; Participation; Left/Right Ideology

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Introduction

The Malaise of Democracy

I belong to a generation—that of the baby boomers in Western Europe—who grew up and matured taking for granted that liberal democracy was the political system most conducive to human development, owing to its superior progress in scientific knowledge and technological innovation, its protection of human rights, and its enhancement of citizens' quality of life, in comparison to previous and alternative forms of polity. The current crisis afflicting many established liberal democracies, together with the rise and achievements of alternative forms of governance, however, calls into question the extent to which those aspirations were illusory and whether the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, solidarity, and justice can genuinely remain within citizens' reach.

One cannot ignore the symptoms of unrest in our democracies, manifested through the lack of active participation by large sectors of the citizenry, the decline in political trust in leaders, and the costs of skepticism and disenchantment when they lead to negative emotions such as resentment, disillusionment and powerlessness, as these emotions undermine critical judgement and cause citizens to lose sight of their common obligations and objectives in democratic coexistence. The risks become even more serious when the interests of a few, through the combined force of misinformation and corruption, foster resentment and resignation to the detriment of collective interests. It is alarming how attractive strong leaders with highly reprehensible personal characteristics such as narcissism, cynicism and Machiavellianism can be (Applebaum, 2020; Nai & Maier,2024)

Appealing to the ideals of democracy and invoking its defense is insufficient to dispel the shadows that threaten it today if we do not understand the psychological mechanisms that hinder its functioning and those that, conversely, can promote the moral investment and collective mobilization it requires. In all likelihood, the realization of democracy does not rest solely upon wishes and deliberations; it is more than merely a set of norms and rules for the management of power—it is also a matter of shared worldviews, habits, and sustained efforts. This is especially the case when modern democratic ideals—asserting the equal right of all individuals to be treated with justice and respect and to be afforded proper opportunities to realize their full humanity—depend as much upon the effectiveness of institutions as upon the determination of citizens. This necessitates placing the citizen and their personality at the center of political analysis—namely, the totality of habits, beliefs, and motivations that account for their engagement. Indeed, democracy may be the form of government most suited to human nature insofar as it is capable of fostering in citizens the will and the ability to choose and act responsibly in accordance with shared principles, mutual respect, and fairness. This constitutes a moral challenge that calls for profound reflection on the means by which the citizens' appropriation of democratic values can be promoted and the broadest possible participation fostered (Caprara, 2022a,b).To this end, in what follows, I intend to revisit some of my previous arguments concerning the extent to which the left/right ideological framework may still represent a useful device for enabling citizens to navigate politics, with particular attention to the Italian situation.

Left and Right

There has long been debate over whether the grand ideologies that shaped ideological discourse and defined political confrontation in the modern era (Bell, 1960) still retain their meaning, and whether even less encompassing versions of ideology, such as the left/right distinction, can still serve as the determining factors of political preferences and affiliations (Revelli, 2007).

In reality, for over a century, the categories of left and right have served to politically orient the electorate of our country, as well as that of other democracies, enabling the articulation of interests and aspirations within the political sphere while simultaneously satisfying important personal needs for identity and belonging, and ultimately taking root in particular attitudes and lifestyles that attest to more than a mere association between personality and political preferences (Caprara and Vecchione, 2018; Jost, 2021; Jost, Federico, and Napier, 2009). Left and right, in fact, derive their meaning from a shared history and from an idea of democracy characteristic of European politics over the past two centuries, and represent the culmination of a debate that has set opposing attitudes—such as those favoring change and those favoring conservation—against one another, along with values frequently in tension, such as liberty, equality, and solidarity.

Most scholars concur in tracing the origins of the left/right distinction to the positions and aims held by the various constituencies at the National Constituent Assembly in Paris in July 1789. Those seated to the left represented a compound of interests drawn from the lower and emerging new classes, endorsed the ideals of the Enlightenment with regard to the primacy of reason and the universal right to freedom, and advocated profound change in the governance of society. Those seated to the right, by contrast, represented the interests of the aristocracy and the higher clergy and were primarily concerned with the defense of the Ancien Régime. When "liberté, égalité, fraternité" were proclaimed, the priorities and interrelations among the three principles remained unclear amid the various positions in the Constituent Assembly that pitted supporters of change against those of conservation.

And it was above all around the principles of liberty and equality that the subsequent political debate developed—a debate that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ultimately led to the recognition of merit and the consolidation of the first modern liberal democracies. In light of this development, it is likely that freedom and equality played different roles—as distinguishing factors and ideological guiding principles—in European democracies compared to those of the New World, and in particular the United States of America (Caprara, 2020b).

Only at the end of the nineteenth century did the left achieve, in several European countries, the distinctive identity that it maintained over most of the twentieth century, coinciding with the extension of suffrage and with the profound transformations of the economy and the organization of labor.

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the cleavage between left and right substantially mirrored the tensions between capital and labor, and the competing interests of those who benefited from the privileges of rent and the profits of industry and the free market versus those who subsisted by their own activity in the employ of others.

In Europe, initially, it was primarily social standing and ambition that set those with an interest in preserving the privileges and entitlements associated with their birth against those who sought to change the existing order in order to fully realize their talents and attain the success promised to ingenuity and enterprise by an increasingly open and dynamic conception of society. The impetus for transforming the political order came primarily from the demands for freedom articulated by a bourgeois class that was already suffering most acutely from its constraints and foresaw the advantages of its expansion. The emergence of the proletarian vanguards, however, revealed the limitations of bourgeois freedoms and brought the principles of equality to the forefront. With the consolidation of trade unions, demands for equality exerted a pervasive influence on the economy, culture, and governance of society and ultimately came to mark the principal dividing line between left and right.

Marxism exerted a major influence over the left by uniting rural and industrial workers, intellectuals, and various strata of the petite bourgeoisie under the broad umbrella of socialism, while the right continued to command the allegiance of landowners and those who derived the greatest profits from industry and the free market (Eley, 2002; Sassoon, 2014).

In the United States, the greater availability of resources, higher social mobility, continuous migratory inflows, and the unresolved legacies of the abolition of slavery and racial segregation served to mitigate the conflict between economic classes and kept the primacy of freedom at the center of political debate, albeit in accordance with distinct visions in the economic and social spheres. Left and right held little meaning in the United States among the general public. Despite the iniquities in the living and working conditions of large segments of the population, there was no nostalgia for aristocratic privileges and feudal rents, and the tensions between capital and labor never achieved the levels of conflict or the mass support necessary to transform workers' protest into substantial political change. Despite the growing sympathy for socialist ideals among the working class and intellectuals of various persuasions in the early decades of the twentieth century, the ideas of class struggle were scarcely compatible with the American Ethos and Dream. Left-wing and socialist ideals became even more suspect and difficult for the American public to countenance during the Cold War.

The 1960s and 1970s were the decades in which the left achieved its peak capacity to steer and mobilize the political action of large segments of the citizenry, coinciding with the extension of welfare policies across established Western European democracies such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the Scandinavian countries. Those were the years in which the liberal/conservative divide in the United States performed functions parallel to those that the left/right distinction had performed in Europe since the end of the Second World War, as a result of convergent efforts by the media and political commentators to engage the broader public and to align its preferences with the Democratic and Republican platforms (Gerring, 1998; Noel, 2013).

Despite several commonalities, however, the attributes and objectives of liberals and conservatives in the United States were far from identical to those of the left and right in most European democracies, and they continue to diverge significantly. The disputes between liberals and conservatives in the United States focused traditionally on liberty in the economic and, increasingly in the last decades, in the moral sphere (Hunter, 1991). [31] The disputes between left and right in Europe, by contrast, revolved around Equality (Bobbio, 1994;Piketty,2020).

Although one cannot doubt that, over time, the positions of the traditional European left and American liberals have converged on several issues—such as public expenditure on education and healthcare—while endorsing similar values in favor of the extension of civil liberties and human rights, divergences should not be overlooked, and similarities should not be overstated.

When voters sampled from comparable segments of the population across several democracies—including Australia, Brazil, Chile, Finland, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States—were asked to locate themselves on both the left/right continuum and the liberal/conservative continuum, the correlation coefficients between the two ideological self-placement measures varied significantly, ranging from .76 in the United Kingdom to .07 in Ukraine (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017).

Likewise, the correlation coefficients of the two ideological self-placements with voting varied across democracies, with left and right most strongly associated with voting (in order) in Israel, Italy, Spain, Chile, Finland, Germany, Greece, Turkey, Australia, Brazil, and Slovakia, whereas liberal and conservative were more strongly associated with voting in the United States and Poland. Only in the United Kingdom were both ideological cleavages found to be highly associated with voting, thereby attesting to both the similarity of the two ideological divides and voters' familiarity with both.

In most European countries, the left/right divide accounted for the greater part of the variance in voting, considerably more so than education, age, and socioeconomic conditions, whereas the liberal/conservative divide demonstrated the same explanatory power in the United States. Moreover, both divides mediated the influence that personality features—such as traits, basic values, and political attitudes—exert on political preference, further attesting to the value of ideology as a major organizer of political thought and choice.

The principal differences between left and right did not concern fundamental principles such as equality and liberty, which were regarded as highly important by voters on both sides; rather, they pertained to the policies aimed at their achievement in accordance with the resources of different countries and the competing interests of their social constituencies. These were the policies designed to regulate markets and pursue a more equitable distribution of wealth, to promote investment in health, education, and innovation, to protect the environment, and to achieve the optimal functioning of public institutions.

Thus, it is not uncommon that, when addressing specific issues, the same measures may find equal endorsement in both left-wing and right-wing programs.

In light of the associations between individual differences in traits, values, and attitudes on the one hand, and individual differences in left- and right-wing political preferences on the other, one may ask whether people are predisposed from birth to adopt different stances on freedom, equality, and equity, or whether they are instead indifferently inclined toward any political option and only later—through experience, socialization, and the internalization of values—become more inclined toward change than toward preservation, more or less tolerant of inequalities, and more or less receptive to hospitality and solidarity. In this regard, one cannot exclude the possibility that political preferences are also remotely influenced by genetic factors, as are many other human phenotypes; however, they are in practice contingent upon the experiences that have marked individuals' life courses and upon the historical vicissitudes that have made possible the transmission, from one generation to the next, of particular correspondences between dispositions, beliefs, and political preferences.

It is striking that the same associations between voting preferences for the left and for the right and individual differences in the domain of traits and values have been observed across diverse political systems—systems that have nonetheless followed a similar trajectory toward parliamentarism and universal suffrage, and in which the distinctions and dialectic between left and right have shaped political confrontation and debate to the point of becoming embedded in shared mental representations of politics, in media narratives, and in everyday discourse. It is likely that time has served to establish and consolidate connections, resonances, and affinities between personal dispositions and political offerings in democracies where left and right have gained a foothold in citizens' minds, in the form of modes of thinking, preferences, and alignments between attitudes and political programs, which the act of voting itself has helped to reinforce.

Ultimately, by channeling the contribution of traits, needs, values, and attitudes toward political choices, left and right have facilitated the encounter between citizens and politics, the expression of their individualities, and the establishment of conditions for combining their talents and actions in the service of collective endeavors (Caprara and Vecchione, 2018). Where this process did not occur, it is unsurprising that the left/right divide carries little significance.

The Italian Case

Even at the beginning of this century, voters' self-identification along the left/right political spectrum was a better predictor of their voting choices than age, gender, education, and income—capable of summarizing and representing a wide variety of personal positions on issues across the political agenda in the spheres of rights, the economy, security, and well-being, and capable of channeling and integrating behavioral dispositions, values, and political attitudes, in Italy as in other Western democracies (Caprara and Vecchione, 2018). Even today, one need only open a newspaper or listen to the news to appreciate how difficult it is to dispense with the categories of left and right in order to recognize, distinguish, and thus navigate among the various political proposals. Nevertheless, there are many critical voices that question whether left and right can still play any meaningful role in supporting democracy, socialization, and guidance; in orienting preferences and organizing consensus; and in motivating, mobilizing, and fostering self-governance among citizens.

In reality, it is difficult to determine when and to what extent left and right have actually performed this role of attracting and organizing consensus in Italy since its unification. It was not until 1912 that the right to vote was extended to all adult men, and only in 1919, with the introduction of the proportional representation system, was the effective possibility offered to align oneself with the right or the left by voting for "liberali", "popolari", and "socialisti".

Finally, it was not until 1946 that the right to vote was extended to women as well, with the restoration of democratic freedoms and the broadening of the political spectrum following the long fascist interlude from 1925 to 1943, during which the possibility of free political choice had been drastically suspended.

Thus it is likely that left-wing and right wing ideologies did not reach the masses until the end of the nineteenth century, and that the ideological debate that could develop through open discourse with significant public participation—prior to the end of the Second World War spanned no more than two generations.

In fact, it was with the 1948 general elections and during the subsequent Cold War period that the conditions were established for the development of a political debate capable of inspiring, motivating, and dividing—one that involved broad segments of the population, which regarded political parties as the custodians of left-wing and right wing ideologies and the primary agents of socialization, education, and political formation, and which found in the mass media the principal vehicles for the dissemination and transmission of ideas, programs, and lifestyles from generation to generation.

The 1948 elections witnessed high voter turnout, with over 90% of eligible voters participating. The same level of participation was recorded in subsequent elections and remained high, exceeding 85% of the electorate, until the 1994 general elections, which confirmed the crisis of the traditional parties that had theretofore dominated the Italian political scene and marked the transition from the First to the Second Republic. In reality, even prior to that juncture, changes in labor and employment, increased levels of education, and the expansion of the welfare state had already signaled the decline of traditional class distinctions and brought about profound changes in the parties' platforms and identities, coinciding with shifts in citizens' lifestyles, aspirations, and expectations regarding politics.

The need to align the political supply with a broad moderate electorate, combined with the imperatives of governability, has gradually tempered the original polarizations and reduced the initial distances between left and right, thereby fostering centre-left and centre-right coalition governments in which ideological oppositions were ultimately greatly diluted.

Moreover the exigencies of governability under regimes of economic austerity have severely tested the coherence of policy

measures with the promises of political parties on fundamental issues such as health, education and employment. Endorsing the thesis of the decline of left and right has often served to justify changes of programs and shifts of political alignment .

Nevertheless, up until the 2008 general election, voter turnout exceeding 80% of eligible voters reflected a relatively high level of participation among Western democracies, and the left and right continued to play an important role in Italy as attractors and organizers of consensus, reconciling diverse interests, maximizing the potential for convergence in the realm of values, and channeling motivational forces toward specific political platforms. This was likely made possible by the connections that, over time, were established between these ideological orientations and the attitudes and values of citizens, and it was the outcome of a protracted process of constructing and transmitting meaning in the domain of political judgement and preferences—a process facilitated by the convergence of various factors that, to varying degrees, contributed to imbuing the vote for the left and the right with profound symbolic significance.

The baby boomers—who were in their early twenties during the youth protests of the late 1960s and not yet fifty when the Berlin Wall fell—constituted the generation that lived through the era most conducive to left/right ideology. The baby boomer generation, in fact, was the one that came of age during a period marked by the country's democratic revival and economic resurgence, the rise of major mass-based political parties, increased trade union activity, and the growing participation of women in the workforce and in an ever-expanding political sphere. It was the generation that benefited most from the idealistic momentum of the preceding generations, which were leaving fascism behind and could envision the construction of a better world. Voting finally meant having a voice, the recognition of a right and of personal dignity, and acknowledging oneself as an actor and part of entities that can only truly matter when united.

In this context, identifying and aligning oneself with the left or the right could serve multiple expressive and symbolic functions, operate as builders of meaning, strengthen personal identities, and affirm various affiliations.

When the generation succeeding the baby boomers (1965–1980) began voting, there were fewer and fewer standard-bearers of the ideology that had shaped the previous generation, and an increasing number who raised reasonable doubts about its continued relevance (Giddens, 1994). Throughout the 1990s and with the advent of the new millennium, the demands of governance, combined with the necessity of addressing economic crises and international upheaval, had progressively diminished the ideological divisions of an era when the political landscape was dominated by two superpowers; it became increasingly difficult for parties to align their political platforms with voters' priorities and sentiments, and for voters, it became increasingly difficult to discern, navigate, and place their trust.

And it is in the new millennium that one observes a rapid and significant rise in abstention, culminating in the 2022 elections, which reveal a decline in active participation of nearly thirty percentage points compared to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The novel finding was that non-voters were not merely the impoverished, the marginalized, the excluded, or the indifferent, but increasingly the dissatisfied and disillusioned—ideological orphans—those who remained committed to the left and the right and those who abstained from a political choice that was entirely alien to their aspirations (Caprara, Vecchione & Schwartz, 2012).

Among the many factors that may account for the continuous decline in electoral participation since the beginning of the new century, one may point to the disappearance of the parties and of a substantial portion of the voters who, since 1948, had sustained high voter turnout as well as the new electoral law that, in 2005, transferred the drafting of candidate lists to the parties and diminished voters' capacity to designate their representatives,

Among the most noteworthy events, one must acknowledge the rise and trajectory of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) and the unforeseen achievements of the right party Fratelli d'Italia.

The Five Star Movement entered Parliament following the 2013 general elections and emerged as the most voted party in those of 2018, on the basis of a platform of rupture with the traditional political establishment , a program that called for greater direct citizen participation, proclaimed the limitation of terms of office, and rejected the traditional ideological cleavage between left and right. Following its electoral success, the Movement first led a coalition government with a right-leaning party, the League (*Lega*), and subsequently with the principal left-leaning party, the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*). In the ensuing elections, its electorate was more than halved, rendering it the third party of the legislature. The change of leadership and the shift toward positions closely aligned with those of the traditional left-wing parties lend themselves to various speculations concerning the volatility of both leadership and the electorate.

Fratelli d'Italia was founded in 2012 as a splinter from the centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi and gathered within its ranks various exponents of the traditional Italian right. Entered Parliament in the 2013 general elections with a vote share that did not reach 2%, but which doubled in 2014 and attained 26% in 2022, thereby becoming the leading national party, to which fell the responsibility of heading a centre-right coalition government under the undisputed leadership of a politician, Giorgia Meloni, the first woman serving as Head of Government in the history of Republic, who proudly declares herself to be of the right.

About values

Progress of knowledge in genetics, epigenetics and brain functioning suggests that humans carry great potential to grow and to develop capacities enabling the exertion of considerable influence over their existence. This is due to unique properties like conscience, self-reflection, self-regulation and self-determination that ultimately leave a significant degree of freedom to individuals to chart their course of life (Caprara & Cervone, 2000).

However, the actualization of this potential through the enactment of these properties requires propitious conditions

of growth and life which are largely conditional upon the social and cultural environments that individuals encounter. The lack of proper nurturing environments, in fact, still deprive many people of the opportunity to benefit from the potentials they have been endowed with by nature, and to fully realize their humanity. Evidence leaves no doubt about the pervasive and negative outcomes of poverty, exclusion and conflict even in advanced economies.

The convergences regarding the primary importance of values like liberty and equality that we have observed among the majority of voters in many countries offer grounds for hope for the future of democracy, yet they do not compensate for the profound divisions and intolerances that we still record in the sphere of civil liberties, nor for the intolerable inequalities persisting in the economic sphere. In this regard, psychological research leaves little doubt as to the difficulties of arriving at the conviction that one's own liberty must find its limit in the liberty of others, being this equitable and necessary, and not entailing any restriction upon one's own development and the expression of one's own personality. This can occur only when the limitation of one's own liberty is experienced as a choice of responsibility and reflects a genuine capacity for self-regulation, whereby each individual has all the more reason to feel free the more capable he or she feels — and is inclined — to govern oneself in conformity with respect for the freedom and welfare of all.

It is therefore inevitable that the expansion of liberty carries with it, inescapably, a demand for equality and solidarity under the conviction that the good of others is worth as much as one's own, and that, for this reason, it is necessary to ensure for all equal opportunities to express their own humanity. In all likelihood, equality of respect and equality of opportunity are the forms of equality that it is reasonable to pursue, consistently with human diversity and without entering into conflict with freedom. Yet neither the one nor the other is guaranteed for a large portion of the population, even in the most socio-economically advanced societies. In reality, even in the most advanced societies and under the regimes most attentive to the protection of rights, to respect for diversity, and to the valorization of talents, the tensions between freedom and equality prove irreducible unless justice, solidarity, and the responsibility of each individual for the common good come to their aid.

For this reason, I believe that it is above all through the comparison of programs and strategies capable of remedying inequalities and promoting solidarity that left and right can recover a decisive role in providing direction and motivation for democratic engagement.

Conclusions

Despite growing criticism regarding the function that the left/right divide may still perform in providing cognitive maps and heuristics for navigating politics, I maintain that the reasons for preserving these categories outnumber those that point to their limitations in enabling scholars and citizens to comprehend and manage the complexity and continuous transformations of political environments. Furthermore, I contend that they may still contribute to strengthening individuals' personal and social identities by binding citizens together in the pursuit of common goals (Caprara & Vecchione, 2018). This, however, can occur only where historical distinctions have established the conditions for forging stable connections between left and right on the one hand and particular visions of how societies should function and be governed on the other, accompanied by citizens' endorsement and intergenerational transmission of those visions through beliefs, values, and habits.

As this process has unfolded differently across political contexts, close attention is required first to ascertain whether, when, and how left and right acquired political meaning, and then to examine the distinctive features across contexts and issues, with particular regard to their socio-psychological underpinnings.

In recent years, much has been debated regarding the complexity of political ideology and the oversimplification inherent in the left/right divide, with a number of scholars recommending the distinction of two dimensions—an economic and a cultural one—capable of reflecting the different socio-psychological forces whose combinations may account for political preferences more effectively than a single binary dimension (Federico & Malka, 2018; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Kriesi et al.2006). Yet I do not view a multifaceted conceptualization of political preferences as incompatible with the use of the left/right divide as a satisficing device for mapping political parties and for aligning citizens' political preferences with their aspirations, while accommodating significant variations between and within individuals across time and issues.

For this reason, even today I perceive no genuine alternatives to left and right, in several western democracies like Italy, as instruments of orientation that history has imprinted in people's minds to help them navigate the unfamiliar waters of politics. Certainly, the demands and platforms of the left and of the right are no longer what they once were, but the priorities they may endorse about the value of change and of conservation and the roles they may play are even more necessary.

In bringing values of liberty, equality and solidarity into the political arena they can facilitate their appropriation on behalf of citizen and ensure that their representatives align their actions with those values. The left and the right, in fact, not only enable people to express themselves, recognize one another, and distinguish themselves collectively—thereby multiplying the force of their arguments and aspirations—but also afford voters significant oversight over the actions of politicians.

In a virtuous system, the competition between the arguments of the left and the right and their alternation in government and opposition can yield the most effective policies, upholding shared fundamental values and serving the cause of democracy.

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