

Theoretical Discussions about Concepts “Left” And “Right”

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Abstract. Many political scientists argue that dualism left/right is historical, logical and natural. In this perspective, dualism is considered as part of citizen attitudes. This is confirmed by the numerous surveys where most of the respondents prefer to be identified politically in view of these criteria. However, semantic and historical analyses of dualism right/left do not hide its fundamental ambiguity.

It is quite understandable that the reality is more diverse than this simple scheme. However, this scheme is built based of two criteria. Although these two criteria are essential and combined between them, the scheme tries to maintain the difference between the right and the left. At the same time, it answer the objection according to which, in the left or in the right, non-uniform doctrines and movements, such as communism and social democracy on the left, fascism conservatism on the right, are treated together.

1. Introduction

Many political scientists argue that dualism left/right is historical, logical and natural. Rene Remond (1) highlights the permanent presence of these trends in the political life. Electoral sociology findings confirm the conclusions of the historical analysis of Frederic Bon (2), who made the balance of electoral developments in France and as a result showed the dualistic structure deeply embedded in the voters' behavior.

In this perspective, dualism is considered as part of citizen attitudes. “This is confirmed by the numerous surveys where most of the respondents prefer to be identified politically in view of these criteria.” (3) Actually, this encourages researchers to agree on according a certain existence to this duality.(4) However, semantic and historical analyses of dualism right/left do not hide its fundamental ambiguity.

Political science scholars agree with the content and nature of ideological competition. Further, they are of the opinion that some ideological frameworks serve organizing the political discourse. Typically, these orientations are often discussed and summarized in terms of philosophies: left/right or liberal/conservative.

For Raymond Boudon (5), this point needs to be clarified. Citizens might show left or right preferences, but this does not mean that they have a sophisticated conceptual framework or theoretical dogma. For many individuals, left / right positions taken by them are a summary of their positions on political issues of great interest. From the sociological point of view, some of the concepts are rooted during a long socialization process and over time acquire the status of a social

fact. For the author in question, this social fact is illustrated in their attitudes and judgments.

Jean Blonde (6), a well-known researcher in the field of political doctrines, includes these major political issues in six ideological families to be listed from left to right, as follows: At the extreme left, he puts simultaneously doctrines of egalitarian and authoritarian movements, out of which Jacobinism can be taken as the most important historical example since it has become an abstract category implemented in different historical periods and situations. The center-left specter contains doctrines, egalitarian and liberal movements, which are nowadays referred to as “liberal socialism”. The latter includes all social-democratic parties, despite different practices pursued by them. Doctrines, movements of political actors, both libertarian and non-egalitarian ones - among which the conservative parties - are included in the center-right. And the extreme right includes doctrines and anti-liberal and anti-egalitarian movements such as Fascism and Nazism.

It is quite understandable that the reality is more diverse than this simple scheme (7). However, this scheme is built based of two criteria. Although these two criteria are essential and combined between them, the scheme tries to maintain the difference between the right and the left. At the same time, it answer the objection according to which, in the left or in the right, non-uniform doctrines and movements, such as communism and social democracy on the left, fascism conservatism on the right, are treated together (8).

Other authors contradict this simplistic analysis, arguing that in a complex political universe, where the parties are numerous and have such convergences and divergences with each other, in order to enable the most varied combinations, there is no chance for the problem to appear in the form of opposites: “either right or left”. Following this logic, “the new political realities dictate the need to replace the old duality.” (9)

Another reason to consider the overcoming of the old dyad and therefore its negation, is related to the ascertainment that it has lost most of its descriptive value, because the ongoing transformation of society and the appearance of new political problems Norris & Inglehart (10) have led to the emergence of movements that are not included in the traditional scheme of confrontation between the right and Left. Recently, the most interesting case is the green movement.

This observation, Bobbio (11) explains, is accurate, but is not crucial. The difference between the right and the left does not exclude at all, even in ordinary language, the existence of an uninterrupted line on which between the initial left and the ending right - or what is the same thing – between the initial right and the ending left. In fact, they occupy intermediate positions which fill in the central spaces between the two extremes. This line is well known and is called the “center”.

2. Concepts “left” and “right” from postmodernist perspectives

However, in '60 and '80, there is an increasing the number of skeptics who devalue designations “left” and “right”. Daniel Bell (12) was one of them. He supported the thesis that political ideas were not any longer existent. Increase of technical and economic complexity, expansion of the middle class and materialistic culture dictate that politicians demonstrate pragmatic behavior at the expense of old ideologies. Also, Francis Fukuyama (13), in a more moderate form, reinforces the idea that the triumph of capitalism brings about exhaustion of ideological alternatives. Sociologist Anthony Giddens (14) follows the same logic as he argues that the right and left specter become unnecessary in a society characterized by globalization.

Referring to developments of these years, it is noticed that old divisions are weakening, but on the other hand, other forms of political divisions come up. In this context, there is a shift of the contents of ideological competition, and not an elimination of divisions. Ronald Inglehart et al (15) argue that new kinds of “post-materialist” issues re-polarize western society, fueling new conflicts on the environment quality, gender equality and choice of lifestyle. Increased number of Green Parties and other social movements inject new ideological debates in the politics of advanced industrial democracies. Recently, a new reaction on human rights has further polarized contemporary politics.

Ronald Inglehart agrees with the findings of Bell that the traditional bases of social stratification as well as the domination of economic values have fragmented the foundation of former classic divisions: “left / right”. However, recent political controversies over issues of lifestyle, quality of life, have dictated the need for a new content of the “left” and the “right” in these societies.

More specifically, previously, the left lay emphasis on the necessity of social programs, protection of the poor stratum as well as the increasing role of trade unions, while the right supported the ideas of limited government, protection of business interests, development of middle class, etc. Current context offers other matters that do not affect the traditional ideological basis, but simply enrich it. Today, the left is in opposition to nuclear energy, support for gender equality, globalist orientation, multicultural coexistence etc, while on the other side the right implies a preference for traditional lifestyle, moral values, the importance of protecting national identity, etc. Public opinion polls conducted in many countries demonstrate the existence of these two dimensions (16).

3. Conclusion

In summary, post-materialist hypothesis that divisions between left and right no longer exist, becomes invalid, as the sociological data “confirm the opposite i.e. ideologies have not come to an end, but their content has changed along with the modernization of the society.” (17)

A good part of political discussions of these past years among political scientists and politicians themselves, not without reason, are focused on the questions: “Where is the left?” or “Where is the right?” Terms such as “parliamentary right-wing”, “parliamentary left-wing”, “right-wing government” or “left-wing government” have not at all lost their expressive force. In addition, different currents (or fractions) within the party, which become competitive within them, with the intention to take over the leadership of the party, under specific time and historical circumstances, usually call themselves liberal, conservative, social- democrats, etc. Norberto Bobbio (18) also shares the same opinion. He says that ideologies are not extinct, but – in the contrary - they are more dynamic than ever. Despite that ideologies are not the same as those of previous periods when these differences arose and despite that from one decade to another they have changed so much as nowadays for some scholars they might appear anachronistic and inappropriate, this does not mean that ideologies have lost their significance in practice.

An evident paradox cannot escape one’s analytical eye. On the one hand, there is an increasing number of works, which for different reasons, as viewed in the preceding paragraphs, demonstrate that ideologies are put into discussion, are rejected or are often ironized, and on the other hand, analyzes for political behaviors and programs are further developed referring to elements bearing above-mentioned ideologies.

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