The need to reduce political polarization: new social contract or consensus on specific policies?

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Latin America and the Caribbean face multiple challenges. At the structural level, these include climate change, the scientific-technical revolution, inequality, diversification for productive development, migratory flows, problems of citizen security and organized crime, and the need to strengthen democratic institutions. In addition, at the current juncture, there are economic challenges such as inflation, the increase in informality and indebtedness, and social challenges such as dissatisfaction with democracy, protests and potential conflict. These challenges are related to external shocks and uncertainties that the region faces with multiple vulnerabilities[2] and building resilience becomes a necessity.

The development of resilience capacities requires investment, and investors will not invest if uncertainty is high. This is another vicious circle in which the region is embedded, and one that can be broken. The formula is as obvious as it is difficult. The obviousness is that in a framework of uncertainty, the political system must offer predictability. The difficulty is that the political systems in the region are sick of polarization.

The stability and credibility of economic and political institutions requires reducing political polarization in order to build consensus and common identity. And that is difficult these days, but not impossible. Reducing political polarization makes it possible to build and develop governance, which in turn improves the capacity to deliver public goods and services that generate social returns to attract investment and build resilience.

Reducing political polarization is not easy because it also reproduces itself in vicious circles through ***mirror effects:***

- The polarization between political leaders is reflected in their politicized followers, who are polarized in the social networks.
- The media reflects the polarization of the leaders and the networks and in this way it is massified, reaching the non-politicized people, with more or less strength.
- Politicians then reinforce polarization because their base and non-politicized people ask them to.

This type of mirror effect is typical of affective affiliation in politics. Politics is transformed not into a struggle of ideas but into a struggle of affections, of emotions of attraction and repulsion: them against us. The common collective identity is lost and identity polarization is produced.

This polarization breaks with two unwritten rules of democratic coexistence: respect and tolerance for those who think differently and respect for those who think differently in the application of the rules.[3] Mutual respect becomes a necessary condition for democratic coexistence. Otherwise, the mirror effects mentioned above end up hindering governability and the failures of governance end up triggering indignation and conflict.

Social networks encourage the bias of group behavior and everything is seen through the color of the lens of each group, of each identity, everything is politicized and **everything is polarized to the extent that there are no bridges between the poles.[4]**

Homogenization is produced, which ends up turning the masses into a community susceptible to be manipulated through emotional attractions and rejections towards each ideological identity. The homogenization[5] breaks the bridges between the poles, the mass absorbs the diversities and the exchanges between those who think differently reproduce the polarization of their leaders and generates the rejection and moral punishment to those who try to dialogue with the other.

A recent study[6] shows that by fostering a feeling of closeness between the poles through incidental similarities, a convergence of views can be achieved. Non-politicized third parties are particularly relevant in this process.

This is a clue to reduce the ideological polarization of identity on the basis of the convergence of opinions on certain specific issues. Incidental similarities involving non-politicized actors could break the process of homogenization that polarization entails.

Another paper[7] agrees with this point, identifying three mechanisms to avoid polarization, among which the incentive of non-extremist policies stands out.

These findings lead us to question whether the call for a new social contract in the countries of the region is the shortest way to reduce polarization. New social contracts are important to face the challenges of the region, but it is difficult to advance on that path in a scenario of polarization.

Another path is more urgent and just as important: to identify policies that align the interests of the different poles because it does not question their identity. Policies that make it possible to satisfy substantial needs for the development of capacities in the population in which the different ideologies can reach consensus, temper their actions and reactions, limiting the influence of radicalizers, while fostering tolerance and mutual respect.

The question is whether those options exist.

A few weeks ago, in a conversation with a Senator from a country in the region, some examples came up. If governments of different colors have passed and the problems of security or education have not been solved, isn't it time to accept that each ideological identity by itself cannot solve these problems?

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[3] Affective polarization in Spain: ideological blocs at odds with each other (esade.edu)
[4] Op-Ed: Polarization Matters Less Than Bridges (oas.org)
[5] Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity, Mason (uchicago.edu)
[6] Want to reduce political polarization? Start by looking beyond politics | Penn Today (upenn.edu)
[7] Preventing extreme polarization of political attitudes | PNAS

What is needed is self-criticism and recognition of the need to work together with other political parties on problems that none of them has solved alone.

What is happening in that country is common to other countries. Identifying these problems, identifying the actors involved, as far as possible non-politicized, promoting dialogue roundtables inviting academia, identifying common interests and designing governance mechanisms for the implementation of specific policies, may be the way to reduce political polarization.

It is not easy, but as Bebe Sendic used to say, if we argue about our differences we will be arguing all our lives, if on the contrary we work together on what we agree on, we will be working together all our lives.

Let's identify policies that unite us.