Rebuilding Democratic Consensus at Home and Abroad

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As regular attendees at the Estoril Political Forum may recall, I often like to approach subjects by first focusing on the words we use to describe them. So let me begin with some reflections on the title of this panel, which is also that of the conference as a whole: *Rebuilding Democratic Consensus at Home and Abroad.*

The key term in this title is *Consensus*. The English word comes from the Latin *Consensus,* which is spelled the same way and is usually translated into English as "agreement" or "accord." *Consensus* is also the Latin term that would be used to render the English word *consent.* As far as I can discern, the English words *Consensus* and *Consent* differ in just one respect: *Consensus* is used solely in reference to an agreement among a sizable group of people, while *consent* can also signify agreement or acceptance by one or more individuals. Indeed, the adjectives consensual and consenting are probably most often used today in the context of sexual relations.

The first entry for *Consensus* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "agreement in opinion, feeling, or purpose among a group of people, especially in the context of decision-making." But the *Dictionary* then immediately adds a second definition: "Also: the collective unanimous

opinion of a number of people." The difference between these two otherwise similar definitions points to a significant ambiguity, for it suggests that *consensus* can refer either to full unanimity of opinion or merely to a prevailing or preponderant sentiment. The salience of this distinction was notable in recent debates about the origins and the treatment of Covid-19, in which participants frequently invoked—or challenged--the "consensus of the scientific community."

The English word *Consensus* is used much more often today, especially in political contexts, than it was in past eras. To my knowledge, the term is not found at all in classic works of political philosophy. In this respect, of course, its fate diverged from that of the cognate word *Consent*, which has occupied an absolutely central role in the history of modern political thought.

The U.S. Declaration of Independence famously holds that governments "[derive] their just powers from the *consent* of the governed." In Locke's *Second Treatise of Government,* the seminal text in the liberal tradition, the word c*onsent* occurs 111 times*,* more often than "freedom" or "liberty" or "property*."* Clearly, the idea that political rule can be just and legitimate only if it enjoys popular consent is essential to the doctrines of natural rights and the social contract that provided the intellectual foundations of modern liberal democracy.

The idea of individual rights is based on the notion that all men are by nature free and equal. Indeed, they are naturally free *because* they are naturally equal. Since nature does not establish any relations of "subordination or subjection" among men, Locke argues, "no one can be . . . subjected to the political power of another without his own consent." It is only by agreeing with a number of their fellows to form a body politic that men can create a just basis for the exercise of political power. This social contract requires that all its members affirm their willingness to obey the laws that the polity legitimately adopts. Those who do not wish to become part of the political body are free to remain outside. But if they choose not to join, they are not entitled to the security and protection (for themselves and for their property) that government provides.

The consensus on the formation of the body politic is the sole agreement that requires unanimity among its members. In fact, by agreeing to join and to accept the obligations as well as benefits of membership, they also accept that they will be guided in all other political matters by the determination of the majority. Locke very explicitly asserts the impossibility of making the community rely on the principle of unanimity for anything beyond its initial establishment. Other questions can be decided by popular majorities or by whatever other rules for decision the polity establishes.

When we think about rebuilding consensus at home in our liberal democratic societies, we must be careful not to be either too ambitious or too lax. A healthy liberal democracy needs robust and open debate on political issues and a free competition of ideas. To some supporters of liberal democracy, the goal of building consensus might seem to smack of illiberalism or even authoritarianism. We cannot and do not expect all citizens to agree on the many matters with which their government deals. We want them to be able to debate policy issues and to argue in favor of their own views about moral and political matters. But this kind of open and democratic discussion is difficult to sustain if there is not an underlying agreement on certain basic rules of the game.

Some of these rules are essential to all civilized societies—obeying and respecting the law and refraining from the use of political violence. Others are more specific to liberal democracy--accepting the verdicts of free elections and respecting the rights of others to enjoy such individual freedoms as those of speech, worship, and assembly. I would say that until about a decade ago a near-unanimous consensus on basic political principles did exist, at least in the United States. Yes, people worried about polarization during the Clinton/Gingrich years and again during the divisions over the Iraq war. Yet while this polarization may have seemed a mile wide, it was barely an inch deep. Everyone who

counted politically still revered the Constitution and was willing to play by the democratic rules of the game.

In recent years, however, these rules have increasingly been challenged in some of our liberal democracies. Today there is a widespread feeling that these rules and the norms that have grown up around them are showing disturbing signs of frailty. There is good reason for this concern. Hence the need for rebuilding or restoring democratic consensus, as heralded by the title of our meeting.

It is easy to recommend that we strengthen adherence to the democratic rules of the game, but to achieve this goal will be hard. Liberal democracy has lost some of its allure over the past decade. This is partly because of the growing power of its authoritarian rivals, especially the People's Republic of China. But it also reflects the unhappiness of many democratic citizens with their own governments and the emergence of a cohort of populist leaders.

Not long ago it would have been unthinkable for the leader of a democratic country openly to endorse illiberalism or to praise some of the world's most tyrannical rulers. Today it is all too common. Similarly, it has become newly fashionable among many academics and intellectuals to call into question basic liberal democratic principles. One of the leaders of the so-called post-liberal right, Notre Dame

political scientist Patrick Deneen, has even entitled his newly published book *Regime Change*.

These kinds of developments, I fear, are beginning to affect the wider population and their attachment to the democratic order. In 1838 Abraham Lincoln, then 28 years old, gave a speech to a debating society in Springfield, Illinois, called the Young Men's Lyceum. Responding to several outbreaks of mob violence and lynchings in various parts of the United States, Lincoln chose as his subject "the perpetuation of our political institutions." Discounting any threat from abroad, he cites as the gravest danger to American freedom the "mobocratic spirit" that threatens to destroy "the strongest bulwark of any government, . . .the attachment of the people." Recurring lawlessness, he contends, will alienate the affections of the citizenry and render them unwilling or unable to defend the institutions of self-government .

How can this threat be countered? Lincoln's answer is that all Americans must be urged—within the family, in schools and colleges, and from the pulpit--to revere the Constitution and the laws. This call is accompanied by invocations of the patriots of 1776 and culminates with an appeal to the legacy of George Washington. But Lincoln also recognizes that, a half-century after the Revolutionary War, the passions that it kindled and the democratic consensus that it helped foster are

fading. As he puts it, the “silent artillery of time” has eroded the hold of these passions on the popular imagination. Lincoln concludes that it is now reason rather than passion that must be relied upon to rebuild support for democratic institutions. Yet reason proved unable to prevent a terrible Civil War less than a quarter-century later.

It is useful to keep in mind the respective roles of reason and of passion when thinking about what needs to be done to rebuild democratic consensus today. The intellectual case for liberal democracy remains strong. Although authoritarians abroad and some populist or illiberal forces at home regularly attack its shortcomings, they rarely put forward a coherent positive account of the kind of government they would prefer. Nor do they attract many fellow travelers elsewhere. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy, the intellectual opposition to it is perhaps weaker than ever before.

Yet until recently, the passion animating democratic forces appeared to be waning, and the notion that democracy is in an irreversible crisis was beginning to take hold. If that slide seems to have been at least partly arrested of late, I would argue that the primary cause is Ukraine’s resistance to Russia’s brutal 2022 invasion. The bravery of Ukrainians and their resolve to defend not only their land but also their fledgling democratic institutions have inspired defenders of freedom

everywhere. They have renewed the sense that democracy is not just a worthy form of government but also makes possible a way of life worth fighting for. President Zelensky has demonstrated that democracy still can give birth to statesmanlike and eloquent leaders, capable of stirring and elevating the passions of their people.

Some have criticized the Ukrainians for their encouragement of nationalist feelings. I think this criticism is largely misplaced. First of all, it is hard to see how any democratic nation at war can avoid an appeal to nationalism. Second, Ukrainian nationalism has mostly taken a civic rather than an ethnic form. The patriotic passions spurred by the war are more likely to bolster than to undermine Ukraine's ability to build a democratic future. Like any other democracy, Ukraine will need to cultivate the attachment of its citizens, and the memories of its fight for freedom and independence should make that attachment all the tighter.

I should conclude with a few words about the reference in our title to rebuilding democratic consensus abroad. Even among democracies, alliances of independent countries cannot be expected to attain or even to aspire to the degree of consensus that is possible within individual countries. That is why intergovernmental organizations like NATO require unanimity in their decision-making. Still, the Ukraine war has

heightened cooperation and comity among NATO countries and the democracies of East Asia and Oceania. Most of these are countries that define themselves as members of the democratic world, and they have rallied around the goal of defending democracy. This has not been the case, however, in what nowadays is called the Global South, where some key countries have taken an equivocal stance toward Russia's aggression against Ukraine. While this lack of a global consensus among democracies is disappointing, I fear that it is something we will have to learn to live with, at least for a while.

In the near term, the prospects for rebuilding democratic consensus will depend on developments on the battlefield. A victory for Russia would have a devastating effect on the morale of the democracies and encourage aggression by other authoritarian powers. Conversely, a Ukrainian victory would give an enormous boost to democracy's self-confidence and discourage aggression elsewhere by the authoritarians. The effects of a mixed outcome of the war are much harder to foresee. What is clear, however, is that the most urgent task for those seeking to rebuild democratic consensus both at home and abroad is to help Ukraine beat back Putin's war of aggression.