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# When protest voting turns dangerous

WE HAVE just witnessed the electoral triumph of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and his neo-fascists in Russia.

Last year Ross Perot, the millionaire outsider, took almost 20 per cent of the United States presidential vote. Mussolini's granddaughter scored impressively in the first round of the Naples mayoral election. The right-wing Republikaners seem poised to enter the German parliament next year. In Canada, right-wing and separatist parties decimated the Conservatives, who had held power for nine years. And Jean-Marie Le Pen's xenophobic National Front has been a fixture in French politics for years.

It is tempting to conclude that this is all one big ball of wax rolling across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok. But is this really the case?

There are, to be sure, at least two common denominators. First, from Canada to Russia, people are turning their ballot papers into bullets of protest. The target is invariably the political establishment. Ross Perot took votes both from the Republicans and the Democrats, demoting Bill Clinton to a minority president.

In Italy the neo-fascists and the neo-communists ran strongly because the country is fed up with the party cartel which has kept the Christian Democrats in power since the Second World War, breeding corruption and crime in places high and low.

In the municipal elections of November, the traditional four-party oligopoly managed a bare 14 per cent, down from almost 50 per cent in the national contest in April 1992.

In Canada the west is fed up with the east, and Quebec with the unitary state. The Republikaners in Germany and Le Pen's henchmen in France are children of protest both against immigrants and the assault of the world market – indeed, against change and modernity as such.

The second common factor is the worldwide growth of a no-name party: the party of the non-voters.

In Germany this group is the fastest-growing political force, with voters deciding to abandon the Christian

Political establishments are under fire everywhere, but protest voting can be an affirmation of democracy, writes **Josef Joffe**

Democrats and Social Democrats in droves.

In Russia, almost one half of the electorate didn't even bother to go to the polls, even though this was the first free parliamentary election in the history of the country. Only the United States has nothing new to report: in the world's largest democracy, 60 per cent voting participation in presidential contests has been, and remains, top of the polling tree.

These facts cannot be ignored. They betray indifference – or worse, alienation from politics and revulsion against business as usual. But what is the significance of all this?

Probably not much. Take Mr 20 Per Cent, Ross Perot, who decided to test his muscle in November when he sought to bring down the North American Free Trade Association (Nafta), the trade agreement between the US, Canada and Mexico. Yet when President Clinton finally came around to exercising real leadership, meeting his tormentors head-on, he turned impending defeat into an unexpected and resounding victory in Congress.

Alessandra Mussolini, would-be political heiress to Big Benito, foundered in the run-off in Naples. And in spite of the decimation suffered by the Canadian Conservatives, power in Ottawa did not go to the separatists and rightists but to Jean Chrétien, the boss of the Liberals and a pillar of the Establishment.

In Germany it is by no means clear that the right-wing Republikaners will actually make it into parliament next year. They continue to hover around the five-per-cent barrier which any party must scale before it makes it into the Bundestag. In France Le Pen could not prevent the established centre-right from amassing a huge majority in the National Assembly last March.

The moral of the story is that protest does not a revolution make. Germany,

Italy, France, Canada *et al* are nothing like the Weimar Republic, which in 1933 spewed forth a chancellor called Hitler. For Weimar, to happen, a critical test must be met.

Alienation, protest and revulsion must be directed not at persons or policies but against the system, against the constitution, against the core values of politics, against basic freedoms and rights. In Weimar, the Nazis could acquire power because enough people either hated or shrugged off democracy in Germany. They were fed up not only with parties, policies and politicians, but with the very rules of the game. And they did not think that the Weimar Republic was worth defending.

By this yardstick, the West is light years away from Weimar. There is indifference and disgust with politics as usual, but not with democracy. Voters are quick to punish those who are in power, but in the end Neapolitans did not elect Mussolini and Americans did not take Perot's anti-Nafta tirades as the gospel truth.

Indeed, Italy's revolt against the postwar power cartel should be seen as a reaffirmation of the democratic spirit, not as a revolt.

But what about Russia, where Zhirinovskiy's cynically mislabelled Liberal Democrats came in first in the parliamentary elections? He fits the Weimar test perfectly. He hawks the full-scale rejection of democracy. He would like to turn Russia into an intolerant and imperialist authoritarian state. He would like to be the Stalin of the far-right.

Russia is the odd-man-out in this tale. Like Weimar, it has never enjoyed democracy. Like Weimar, it is beset by economic chaos, cynicism and despair. Would that Russia had the problems of Italy, Germany or France. Russia, it must be said, can re-enact Weimar. There are too many gloomy parallels.

Shall we draw those lines westward to Paris and Peoria? Pundits might love to play this game as they face the political discontent of the West. But these analogies are not only facile – they are plain wrong.

Josef Joffe is foreign editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*