

The Stockholm Progressive Summit

The origins of progressive governance

Progressive governance philosophy, also known as the third way, is often defined by what it is not: traditional socialism or traditional conservatism. Progressive governance attempts to reconcile market-driven economic growth with equal opportunity for all, in other words, a market economy but not a market society.

Early advocates of this philosophy argued that the traditional post-war social and economic policies needed transformation since they would not prepare people for the challenges posed by globalization. The issue was one of making government relevant and compassionate at a time when both global and domestic pressures were restraining social spending and dictating flexible labour markets.

Proponents of progressive governance argued that governments must find mechanisms to encourage individual initiative and responsibility. Public resources would be used to help people meet these challenges through investments in human and social capital while continuing to shield those unable to adapt. Welfare would not be abolished, but would be altered to involve retraining and work experience — with the goal of encouraging initiative, creativity and readiness to take on new challenges. The traditional dilemma between more government services and lower taxes would be overcome through more efficient, targeted use of tax revenues.

The third way philosophy has been described as resting on three cornerstones: the idea that government should promote equal opportunity for all while granting special privilege to none; an ethic of mutual responsibility that rejects equally the politics of entitlement and the politics of social abandonment; and a new approach to governing that empowers citizens to act for themselves.

The third way concept is associated most closely with former U.S. President Bill Clinton, and with U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, who first began an informal dialogue on the approaches to modern governance (dubbed the “Third Way”) in 1997. In April 1999, these informal discussions were expanded to include the leaders of Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy at a meeting in Washington. A November 1999 meeting in Florence included France and Brazil as well.

The next meeting of leaders, in Berlin in June 2000, united the leaders of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, South Africa, Sweden, and the United States. The communiqué from that meeting reflected the leaders’ discussions on the new economy, modernizing government, and the role of civil society.