CHAPTER 12

Political and Ethical Challenges of 2025: Utopian and Dystopian Views

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter designs contrasting utopian and dystopian scenarios about the future (Windsor 2018b) and a median voter perspective to examine political and ethical challenges of 2025 affecting corporate sustainability. Each citizen chooses a political and ethical stance in light of their expectations about the future and capacity to influence that future. The situation has strong implications for business managers assessing the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of businesses and political criticism of capitalism and wealth as aspects of corporate sustainability. Citizens are stakeholders of specific businesses. Business managers are citizens facing the same challenges in private life as well as in their management responsibilities.

The utopian or optimistic view is designed to be progressive and globalizing in orientation. Governments and global markets both function effectively, and global economic growth continues. This view presumes that sustainable development is feasible politically and economically and that technological advances will ameliorate and reverse climate change damages. The view rests on an implicit assumption of aggregate positive-sum changes. The dystopian or pessimistic view is conservative and increasingly nationalistic and populist in orientation. This view presumes that coming changes are adverse to national and popular interests. Governments and global markets begin to function less effectively toward 2025. There could be persistent trade wars between key
economic actors, such as the US and China or the European Union (EU). The view rests on an implicit assumption of zero-sum changes: what one country or interest gains, another country or interest loses. Zero-sum invokes a lifeboat ethics condition concerning other countries and refugees (Hardin 1974).

This chapter relates to the overall project of Business 2025 corporate sustainability in the digital age as follows. The project call for papers identifies 2025 (see Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity 2019; Lipman and Petrov 2013; Gerhold and Steinmüller 2018) as possibly a “point of no return” for various problems. The dystopian scenario corresponds to this concern. The implication is that there must be changes in individual and business behaviors as well as in public policy. The utopian scenario corresponds to positive effects of desirable changes, but must function effectively now to avoid a possible “point of no return.”

Contrasting narratives for utopian and dystopian scenarios examine what happens if on the one hand viable solutions are quickly found and behavioral and public policy changes do occur quickly enough, or if on the other hand such solutions are not quickly found and behavioral and public policy changes do not occur quickly enough. Businesses cannot decide what actions to take without considering the political chaos that seems to be unfolding in the US and the EU, in the EU due to Brexit and increasing immigration, and the combined political and ethical challenges facing the citizens of democratic societies. The emphasis in this chapter is on the implications of the call’s “social, demographic, technological, and managerial trends by 2025” as viewed by the median voter citizen and the business manager. These trends constitute the business environment shaping corporate sustainability.

The importance of the topic coverage is that this chapter addresses the difficulty of understanding the dynamics of political and ethical choices. If 2025 in reality proves to be a “point of no return,” then individuals, organizations, and institutions have amazingly little time to identify key problems and decide how to proceed. A utopian narrative anticipates success. A dystopian narrative anticipates failure. Each narrative in effect advises differently on what may happen and how to decide what to do in each year from 2020 through 2025.

The chapter structures specific objectives as follows. The second section explains the context and background for the scenario approach in terms of a perfect storm for corporate sustainability. The section identifies a first list of the most important political and ethical challenges expected in 2025. The year 2025 suggests a relatively short time horizon over which to identify potential solutions and make choices. The ethical problem for citizens and managers takes the form in a perfect storm of Hardin’s (1974) lifeboat ethics. The third section explains the constructed utopian and dystopian scenarios. The section sharpens differences between utopian and dystopian narratives to emphasize political and ethical choices facing citizens and business executives and directors. The scenarios constitute a dialogue. The fourth section links these scenarios to a median voter perspective in which the median voter is politically neutral but ethically concerned without embracing Hardin’s lifeboat ethics.
The chapter links the proposed scenarios to the median voter perspective and then to business sustainability issues of CSR and political criticism of capitalism and wealth. Because 2025 is coming up quickly, references must emphasize current topics, used simply to illustrate arguments. The chapter also seeks to link these topical references to an academic literature. The left extreme emphasizes the utopian scenario. The right extreme emphasizes the dystopian scenario. The political center party of median voters may disappear toward the left and right extremes. The fifth section addresses two key corporate sustainability issues within the framework generated by the scenarios and the median voter perspective. These two issues are corporate social responsibility (CSR) and political criticism of capitalism and wealth.

**A Perfect Storm for Corporate Sustainability**

A brewing perfect storm involves multiple challenges occurring simultaneously, more or less, and interacting viciously to undermine governments, markets, businesses, and citizen confidence and understanding.

**Key Challenges**

A list of the most important challenges includes the following in no particular order of importance. The combination of challenges is the perfect storm. Changes listed here, and possibly others such as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, present profound political and ethical challenges for business and governmental leaders and individual citizens. The chapter does not take a position on the merits of any particular challenge. Contrasting references seek to provide dialogue about pro and con views on key challenges.

1. Rising nationalism and populism negatively affect international trade, investment, and cooperation (Windsor 2019b). Brexit and Catalan independence movements are symptomatic. The Trump Administration is not a fan of the Paris Accord 2015 and is trying to redesign key trade arrangements through threat of trade wars if necessary. Nationalism and populism (Waisbord 2018; Wimmer 2019), Brexit (Dixon 2018; Jenkins 2016), the Paris Accord (Duke 2019; Novak 2017), and trade war threats (Benson 2019; Krugman 2019) have advocates and critics.

2. Population movements ignore national border controls and are driven by various factors, such as economic preference, climate change, military conflict, and internal conflict. There are advocates (Bove and Elia 2017) and critics (Foster 2014) of mass population movements. The 2019 Finland election reveals a deeply divided population in a small, relatively homogeneous, and highly democratic society (OZY 2019). Some reports cite immigration concerns as a driver of populism (Leicester 2017) and Brexit (Adam and Booth 2018).
3. Climate change effects such as global warming, melting glaciers and polar caps, and rising sea levels are arguably accelerating: technological innovations may (or may not) offset these effects (Borenstein 2019). Some prominent companies, illustrated by Amazon and Duke Energy, have recently undertaken pledges to reduce carbon pollution (Martin 2019; Pisani and Sapra 2019). Senator Mitt Romney (Republican, Utah) has cautioned that climate change effects might result in “the disruption of the whole political order of the world” and that effective action in Washington, DC will depend on “wins for both parties” rather than “a victory for one party” (Osborne 2019).

4. There is a potential ideological shift away from capitalism and toward socialism (Economic Report 2019; Newport 2018): this shift involves concerns over inequality (Semuels 2019; Telford 2019; Tomlinson 2019) and health care access (Schatzker 2019). These concerns lead to demands for higher taxes, universal basic income, and universal Medicare Access promoted by progressives—whose financing scheme is higher taxes beginning with the wealthiest and working downwards. Senators Bernie Sanders (Democrat, Vermont) and Elizabeth Warren (Democrat, Massachusetts) have advanced various proposals (Rappeport and Kaplan 2019; Sanders n.d.; Stein 2019; Windsor 2019a). Senator Sanders has stated: “There should be no billionaires. We are going to tax their extreme wealth and invest in working people” (Cillizza 2019).

5. There is risk of permanent winning coalitions driven by identity politics (Boettke and Thompson 2019) or some other kind of anti-compromise politics that can destroy democratic governance by establishing one-party states that are unavoidably dictatorial (although majoritarian) rather than constitutional (featuring checks and balances and electoral competition) (Mainwaring 2001; Traub 2013).

6. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are aggressive regional military powers that seek to gain regional hegemony and threaten neighbors (Sciutto 2019). Iran and North Korea have nuclear weapons development programs. Regional aggression may force arms race and regional conflicts (Arnon and Guzansky 2018). Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged (or arguably not) in an undeclared war in Yemen (Bednarz et al. 2015).

7. Pervasive corruption is widespread in many countries, including Brazil and India as well as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Advanced economies with democratic regimes are not immune to corruption (Hall et al. 2020). Corruption undermines public confidence in institutions (Clausen et al. 2011). Multinational enterprises may play a crucial role in providing bribes to public officials (Windsor 2019c). A variant of corruption involves the multiple business scandals that undermine public confidence in capitalism (Lombardi et al. 2019).
Hardin’s Lifeboat Ethics

Hardin’s (1974) lifeboat ethics model illustrates ethical challenges for citizens and managers in a perfect storm. Climate change may increase both internation and intra-nation inequality effects (Diffenbaugh and Burke 2019). In a proposed model of lifeboat ethics, Hardin makes an argument for not helping the poor of the world. An interpretation of the argument is as follows. The advanced economies possess a lifeboat capable of holding their own population. The developing countries—holding most of the world’s growing population—do not have such lifeboats. The advanced economies cannot save the rest of the world without being swamped. This argument generates present debates concerning refugee policies and sanctuary zones in the US and the EU. The policy of the EU has been that if a refugee can touch some part of the EU, then the refugee is automatically admitted. A “progressive” position favors admission; a “conservative” position favors exclusion.

The lifeboat model raises a profound question about personal ethics for citizens and business managers. In the setting of using Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR) for genetic modification of humans, George Church (Professor of Genetics, Harvard Medical School) argues: “I believe we have an ethical obligation to maximize benefits and minimize harm” (Hall 2019: 15). Dov Seidman, CEO of the ethics and compliance consulting business LRN, states: “Moral leadership means truly putting people first and making whatever sacrifices that entails” (Friedman 2018).

Utopian and Dystopian Scenarios

A scenario is simply a description of a possible future. Contrasting scenarios may thus be an informative dialogue. A scenario may be qualitative (i.e., a narrative) or quantitative (i.e., a mathematical model). Narratives are the most common approach. Scenarios may prove useful for dialogue (Gerhold and Steinmüller 2018) and addressing “wicked problems” (Wright et al. 2019).

This chapter does not undertake to make specific predictions. Scenarios have equal likelihood. For instance, the Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity (2019) looks at four scenarios for 2025. An optimistic (or utopian) Scenario 1 “Quantum Leap” expects quantum computing to be successful and important. A pessimistic (or dystopian) Scenario 2 “The New Wiggle Room” is a “poisoned chalice” in which there is too much information and knowledge. Scenario 3 “Barlow’s Revenge” shifts cybersecurity to government or by delegation to big business (Barlow 1996) and Scenario 4 “Trust Us” shifts cybersecurity to an artificial intelligence (AI) “SafetyNet” trusted to function correctly. The Center for Long-Term Cybersecurity (2019: 6) characterizes the scenario approach as follows:

The Cybersecurity Futures 2025 scenarios (like all scenarios) are not predictions. They are logical narratives that tell stories about how forces of change from a
variety of sources … may overlap and combine to create a set of cybersecurity problems in 2025 that are different from those encountered today.

Figure 12.1 depicts two contrasting scenarios for the future, adapted from Windsor (2018a). One scenario is utopian or positive. The contrasting scenario is dystopian or negative. These two scenarios are extreme and opposing narratives about the possible future. Sustainable development (a “Brave New World” invoking Huxley 1932) and environmental catastrophe (“1984” invoking Orwell 1949) here describe positive and negative outcomes in perhaps the year 2100.

An essential difference across time horizons is that “While a near future is represented in practical terms and concerned with forming expectations and goals under conditions of uncertainty, a distant future is represented in stylized terms and concerned with imagining possibilities under conditions of ambiguity” (Augustine et al. 2019: 1930). Because scenarios are not predictions but narratives about possibilities, it is important not to treat a scenario as in any sense a reality. Individuals may tend to believe scenarios. Augustine et al. (2019: 1930) in a study of proposed geoengineering planetary-scale technologies for addressing climate change caution:

Geoengineering has increasingly been treated as if it were a reality, despite continued controversy and in the absence of any implementation. We find that societal-level imaginaries that were built on deeply-held moral bases and cosmologies underpinned the conception of geoengineering, and that a dialectic process of discursive attempts to reconcile oppositional imaginaries increased the concreteness and credibility of geoengineering so that it increasingly has been treated as an ‘as-if’ reality.
Table 12.1 Utopian and Dystopian scenarios

| Dimension                              | Utopia                                                                 | Dystopia                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A Median Voter Assesses Two Competing Scenarios | “Brave New World” (Huxley, 1932): the future will be positive through replacement of capitalism by socialism | “1984” (Orwell, 1949): the future will be negative due to replacement of capitalism by socialism |
| Political orientation                  | Progressive                                                             | Conservative                                                            |
| Ethical orientation                    | Social welfare                                                          | Lifeboat ethics (Hardin, 1974)                                          |
| Nationalism orientation                | Global                                                                  | Nationalism and populism                                                |
| Expectation beyond 2025                | Sustainable development                                                | Environmental catastrophe                                               |
| Technological forecast                 | Technological solutions for climate change appear                       | Technological solutions ineffective or delayed                         |
| Climate change policies                | Paris Accord effective                                                  | Paris Accord ineffective                                                |
| Social institutions                    | Resilient and innovative                                               | Inadequate                                                             |
| Leading democracies                    | Continue to be successful                                              | Increasingly ineffective                                                |
| Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics | Complementary to human labor increasing employment                     | Substitute for human labor decreasing employment                        |
| Economic prescription                  | Socialism                                                               | Capitalism                                                             |

A business manager assesses CSR and political criticism of capitalism and wealth

Source: Author’s creation drawing in part on Huxley (1932), Orwell (1949), and Hardin (1974)

Table 12.1 provides a comparison of proposed utopian and dystopian scenarios on key dimensions. These scenarios are constructed narratives and not specific forecasts. The constructed narratives may include some apparent inconsistencies or elements that arguably might serve better in the opposed narrative. The scenario labels are metaphors. The essential feature of future utopia is that society solves all key problems to everyone’s benefit: the scenario is optimistic. The essence of future dystopia is that key problems overwhelm society’s ability to handle: the scenario is pessimistic. These two narratives are intentionally extreme opposites. Reality to 2025 and beyond may well prove to be some mix of positive and negative dimensions. While the two scenarios do strongly emphasis sustainable development versus environmental catastrophe, the scenarios are not restricted to environmental matters: political, ethical, and value orientations, political outcomes, and AI outcomes are also included. The scenarios present the median voter and business managers with conflicting narratives about the future. A progressive party may threaten that environmental catastrophe must result from a conservative party and promise that utopia will follow from socialism. A conservative party may threaten that socialism will result in dystopia and promise that capitalism is the path to wealth. But in
A Utopian Scenario

“Brave New World” is an ironic twist on Huxley’s (1932) dystopian view of the technological future. Huxley envisioned that technology would enslave mankind—here as a twist technological solution to climate change free mankind. The intended sense of the scenario is that the future will be good, and especially under the guidance of a progressive political party moving toward socialism. Four major improvements occur. One improvement is that technological solutions for climate change problems do appear. That is, independently of political and institutional developments, technological innovation will begin to reverse environmental damages. It may be 2050 before such technologies must be operating, but there must be convincing evidence of practicality by 2025 to provide citizen confidence. A second improvement is that there will be institutional arrangements for addressing climate change problems. In particular, something like the Paris Accord will function effectively. A step in this direction by 2025 might be that the US rejoins and implements the Paris Accord. A third improvement is that social institutions at various levels will prove more resilient and innovative than predicted (Windsor 2018b). A fourth improvement is that the leading democracies—especially the US concerning attempted one-party impeachment of President Donald J. Trump and the UK decision concerning Brexit—resolve amicably and satisfactorily present internal political dissensions. In this utopian scenario, AI and humans can be complementary and AI investment increases human employment (Windsor in press).

Some scenarios in the literature are positive concerning the future (Whittington 2019; Xing et al. 2019). Schanes, Jäger, and Drummond (2019) feature three possible scenarios for reaching a more resource-efficient economy in Europe. Each of the three scenarios-labeled as—Global Cooperation, Europe Goes Ahead, and Civil Society Leads—while quite different leads to greater resource efficiency. Global Cooperation relies on top-down agreements. Europe Goes Ahead emphasizes market mechanisms that drive technological solutions. Civil Society Leads relies on bottom-up changes in behavior through community-based initiatives. The best path forward is then a combination of the three scenarios or approaches. A study by Yu, Zheng, Li, and Li (2018) explains alternatives for peaking carbon dioxide emissions in China before 2025. The comparison approach of adjusting the present energy-intensive heavy and chemical industrial structure cannot meet the 2030 target date (see also Zhang et al. 2019).
A Dystopian Scenario

“1984” takes its label from Orwell (1949) (Zuboff 2019), in which totalitarian systems of competing ideologies have control of key societies. The intended sense is that the future is dim, and especially if capitalism is abandoned in favor of big government socialism. A dystopian scenario is the opposite of a utopian scenario on each of the key dimensions. First, technological solutions either do not exist or will be substantially delayed in effective operational implementation. In either case, citizen confidence will be undermined in the period between 2019 and 2025 as climate conditions deteriorate and perhaps accelerate in speed of deterioration. Alternatively, a problem is that as environmental activists (scientists or otherwise) emphasize accelerating speed of climate deterioration in order to marshal support and resources for action and thus keep moving the timing of disaster to the present, it is possible that citizens will lose confidence in the predictions. Alarmism may undermine credibility. Second, the Paris Accord proves hopelessly inadequate collectively to handle climate deterioration in the absence of technological solutions. Third, social institutions at various levels do prove inadequate to handle climate change effects. Fourth, between 2019 and 2025, internal political dissensions result in considerable social damage in the US and the UK. In this dystopian scenario, AI and humans are substitutes and AI investment decreases human employment (Windsor in press). Substitution possibly could place increasing stress on government action to handle the effects of mass or increasing unemployment.

Identity politics may tend to undermine democratic governance through promotion of tribal violence: the problem embedded in identity politics is that there will be “permanent winning coalitions” preventing compromise across policy issues (Boettke and Thompson 2019: 1). It is possible that identity politics may be offset by existence of multiple value configurations. A study (Midgley et al. 2019) reclassifies 83,526 respondents from 60 countries (in Wave Six of the World Values Survey) into five global archetypes of different value configurations. Countries vary, perhaps markedly, by proportions of populations falling into each archetype.

A MEDIAN VOTER PERSPECTIVE

The median voter chooses between political party proposals. The progressive stance is that environmental catastrophe must be tackled by government and that socialism will create utopia. The conservative stance is that socialism is even worse and that capitalism is the path to utopia and avoidance of environmental catastrophe. Citizens are stakeholders of businesses and business managers are voting citizens. The fundamental political consideration is whether in democratic societies the party system maintains the center or deteriorates toward the more extreme postures of progressive and conservative parties. In this chapter’s utopian scenario, the median voter model is working and political choices gravitate to the center. In this chapter’s dystopian scenario, the median
A median voter perspective appears more significant now for the US and the UK than in the previous decades since 1945. The reason is accelerating movement of the parties toward their extremes and increased pressure on centrists to go one way or the other. The concern is not strictly new (Binder 1996; Schofield and Sened 2005), but relevant to 2025 and may be intensifying recently. Senator Sanders to the left and President Trump to the right arguably illustrate the trend (Olmstead 2018).

A split may be temporary. The Brexit referendum on June 23, 2016 was not a strong majority outcome (BBC 2016). The overall vote in the UK was 51.9% leave and 48.1% remain. The difference was about one million votes. The country was closely divided, with key regional differences. After more than three years of failed negotiations over Brexit terms and calls for a second referendum, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party obtained an absolute majority in late 2019. In January 2020, the House of Commons voted Brexit legislation (330 for and 231 against).

Or the split may be longer lasting: socialism seems to be gaining favor in the US, and the US House of Representatives has adopted partisan (not bipartisan) articles of impeachment of President Trump. Unless a compelling impeachment case is developed, sufficient to pass the US Senate by two-thirds majority, a predictable outcome is a roughly 50–50 split in the US electorate (Polls 2019). For studying political and ethical challenges to corporate sustainability, a median voter perspective is quite useful and particularly so from 2020 toward 2025. A permanent split encourages the dystopian scenario and Orwell’s 1984 may unfold.

**A Median Voter Model**

The median voter assesses the dialogue created by the two competing narratives. The essential feature of a median voter model as a predictive theorem is that “a majority rule voting system will select the outcome most preferred by the median voter” (Holcombe 2006: 155). In effect, outcomes move toward the centrist position on any policy question. Consider a simple version of the median voter model, in which there are three voters on any decision and the two-voter majority wins with the peaceful acceptance of the third voter. Two-thirds of the electorate is a strong majority. The voters agree to the voting rule in advance. One voter wants to spend $X, another voter wants to spend $2X, and the median voter wants to spend $X+2. The voting outcome will be $X+2. The idea, however, is that the winning coalitions vary across issues. The median voter model may be applicable to both electorates (voting in referenda or for representatives) and elected representatives (voting in legislatures).

There are two potential defects in the median voter model. One defect is that there is no centrist position, but simply two competing positions. It is easier to see this defect with four voters. Two voters prefer X and two voters prefer 2X. If the voters agree to the voting rule in advance, the median voter will want to spend $X+2. If the voters do not agree to the voting rule in advance and vote on the issue at hand, then there may be an equilibrium in which the X and 2X voters agree to continue the X-versus-2X discussion indefinitely.
prefer not-X: there is no solution. The two voters concur and a third voter accepts the outcome serves to conceal this defect. In practice, the majority in favor of a policy may be very thin and not reflect a centrist position. It is also possible that a center is quite thin, meaning that policy choices rest on a relatively small proportion of centrists in a deeply divided electorate. The other defect is that relative to either thin center or two competing positions in deadlock, the more radical wings draw the political parties (in control of nominations to elected representative positions) away from the center and toward more radical postures, whether progressive or conservative (Pitts 2019).

There are awkward decision problems of the following form. One voter wants X; another voter wants not-X (the exact opposite policy). The median voter, in between, decides the outcome as X or not-X. For instance, X is pro-abortion and not-X is anti-abortion: the positions are irreconcilable. The median voter must choose (or find a compromise solution satisfactory to the X and not-X voters). But the vote, in a large electorate, may be very close.

The median voter model may or may not be too simple for political complexity. The favorable case is that simple models are “engines of analysis that allow a variety of hypotheses about more complex phenomena to be developed” and that “simple models that extract the essential from the observed will serve us well” (Congleton 2004: 707). On the other hand, a different study reports that legislators are most constrained by median voter preferences in homogeneous districts: heterogeneity frees the legislator (Gerber and Lewis 2004).

The median voter may proceed on any of three bases. First, the median voter simply prefers X or not-X. That is, there are only two positions (or political parties) and the median voter adheres to one of them at the outset of voting. This basis is the simplest version of the median voter model. Second, the median voter has no policy preference but acts on self-interest only. That is, the median voter calculates what is in her or his interest regardless of effects on others (Downs 1965). Third, the median voter is neutral and weighs the merits and consequences of X or not-X in order to decide what to do. Each one of these bases is a different political decision-making process. In a civil discourse setting, the median voter listens to X and to not-X before deciding which alternative to select based on the merits of the positions. The median voter must consider the ethics of best policy concerning social welfare (or the public interest).

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**An Immigration Illustration**

Social division over immigration is a good illustration. The progressive view encourages immigration as part of the path to Huxley’s Brave New World; the conservative view discourages immigration as part of the path to Orwell’s 1984.

Immigration is a decision problem involving two dimensions (Epstein and Herz 2019). One dimension is the aging of the population in developed countries. The native population needs, or wants, tax base linked (in the absence of
increased automation investment) to imported labor. Increased immigration addresses this need or want. The other dimension is that the immigrants may be different in “social norms and culture” that alters the country in ways that the natives do not approve. This second dimension may serve as a constraint on the first dimension. The conflict in dimensions may be exacerbated by the acquisition of voting rights by the immigrants or their descendants. Suppose, for instance, that immigrant voters prefer to reduce their taxes and thus pension payments to native retirees.

Evidence from Switzerland suggests that direct democracy tends to oppose naturalization of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2019). Previously in Switzerland, naturalization requests were subject typically to municipal referendums. Federal Court rulings then forced municipalities to transfer naturalization decisions to elected municipality councils. Over the period 1991–2009 for about 1400 municipalities, Hainmueller and Hangartner found that naturalization rates increased by 60% when handled by progressive representative democracy rather than conservative direct democracy. The municipal councils had to justify rejection decisions formally and potentially subject to judicial review. While it is true that citizens may be more xenophobic and less impressed with judicial review than are elected representatives, this interpretation unavoidably sidesteps the question of whether naturalization of immigrants is socially desirable or not. The citizens express different preferences than do representatives constrained by the Federal Court rulings.

Application to a Proposed Three-Party Interpretation

Analysis can scale from the median voter model at the individual citizen or manager level to aggregating political parties by imagining an abstractly defined three-party democracy. Each political party attracts individual voters through a set of policy positions on key issues of rights, entitlements, taxation, immigration, and social norms. There are left, center, and right parties. In this imaginary three-party democracy, the left party is “progressive” on key issues. The right party is “conservative” on key issues. The left and right positions are essentially ideological: for socialism versus capitalism, with expectations about whether there are likely to be technological solutions preventing environmental catastrophe. The left party ideology views lifeboat ethics as inhumane and immoral. The right party ideology views lifeboat ethics as moral necessity in a perfect storm. The “centrist” party lies in between the progressive and conservative parties and attracts any ideologically “independent” voters who are neither progressive nor conservative systematically. This centrist party independently must decide what it thinks on each key issue.

In the imagined three-party democracy, a progressive party increases individual rights (including abortion) and entitlements (including transfers to poorer citizens). The transfer component leads to higher taxes for redistribution. This party can be more global in value orientation and thus other-regarding concerning other countries and cultures, which are to be treated
with respect accorded to the country’s own citizens. A progressive party expands the government sector through higher taxes on wealth and is welcoming to immigrants. A progressive party may tend to be anti-capitalism and pro-government expansion. A progressive party tends to emphasize that policies will create a utopian future for citizens.

A “conservative” party emphasizes individual responsibilities. A conservative party seeks to reduce taxes and is less welcoming to immigrants, especially those who are likely to draw on public welfare benefits and to vote for the progressive party. This party may be more nationalistic in value orientation and thus self-regarding concerning other countries and cultures, so that the test of international policy is at least no cost and preferably increased benefits to the country’s own citizens. A conservative party tends to be pro-capitalism and anti-government expansion. A conservative party tends to emphasize dangers of a dystopian future arising from undesirable government expansion.

The centrist party becomes critically important when progressives and conservatives are roughly balanced in voting power (whether in the electorate or in the legislature). Assume, for instance, that there are 100 progressives, 100 conservatives, and 10 centrists. These numbers can be scaled up and down. The 10 centrists determine policy outcomes in a pure referendum context. The centrist party thus corresponds to the median voter. Alternatively, in a US-style two-party system, centrists can comprise both independents and center-oriented members of progressive and conservative parties. In either interpretation, there are three positions. This three-party political system, in either configuration, faces a set of real policy challenges. Political crisis may result from the center disappearing and the progressive and conservative parties moving their policy positions to the extreme opposites.

Abstraction means that the imaginary democracy does not correspond in detail to any specific national political system. Much more detail is necessary to match to a particular system such as the US or the UK. The actual content of “progressivism” and “conservatism” may take different forms in various countries. American variants may be quite different from European variants. The party definitions are therefore as abstract as possible to the analysis purpose, but some detail is necessary to the party definitions. The author thinks the party descriptions reasonably match the US 2020 presidential nominations process and the prolonged Brexit crisis in the UK resulting in a late 2019 strong Conservative Party majority for Prime Minister Johnson, committed to Brexit.

**Two Key Corporate Sustainability Issues**

Within conditions captured by the two scenarios confronting a median voter as a progressive–conservative dialogue, business managers must make judgments about key business issues in a perfect storm. For illustration, this chapter focuses on CSR and political criticism of capitalism and wealth as relevant to corporate sustainability.
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR is a conception of the relationship between business and society (Aguinis and Glavas 2012). Matten and Moon (in press) theorizes practical need to establish legitimacy with core stakeholders, societies, and regulators. Those authors place this practical need within the configuration of such influences. The utopian scenario increases the role of the regulators. The dystopian scenario throws businesses into more chaotic conditions.

The present author’s conception is different (Windsor 2013): each business should undertake feasible actions to improve society independently of the purely economic performance of that business. This conception can separate into three kinds of actions: (1) voluntarily obey laws and governmental policies, (2) do not cause any harm to stakeholders through unethical conduct not fully regulated by government, and (3) do try to generate some good for stakeholders through corporate citizenship conduct. In this conception, society has the meaning of any stakeholders of a business who receive harms or benefits. Such actions arguably meet the practical need stated by Matten and Moon. However, a business might improve its profitability through intentional evasion of laws and policies, which require effective government enforcement. The German company Siemens operated a top-down global bribery scheme until caught in 2006 by US and German authorities (Berghoff 2018). A business might improve its profitability through unethical conduct not fully regulated by the government (Ingram n.d.). Ingram cites labor practices, environmental concerns, marketing practices, and business impacts on society. A business might improve its profitability by not engaging in corporate citizenship conduct and especially philanthropy or alternatively might find that donations help contribute to shareholder value (Liang and Renneboog 2016). CSR is sometimes conceptualized in terms of triple bottom-line performance defined as economic, environmental, and social effects (Slaper and Hall 2011).

The literature on CSR divides into two general approaches. An approach based on market economics theory (Kitzmueller and Shimshack 2012) restricts CSR to a combination of (1) legal compliance and (2) ethical compliance only, to the exclusion of citizenship activities. In this restricted approach, there is a tendency also to minimize the content of laws and ethics to a set supportive of business economic performance. An economics-based approach emphasizes profit seeking in a capitalist market economy as the best path to improving social welfare. There is an effort to identify win-win solutions in which the business does social good and financially well (Aguinis 2011). An approach based on ethics broadens CSR to encourage citizenship activities and also to expand the content of laws and ethics (Carroll 2000). An ethics-based approach tends to constrain profit seeking through increased duties (negative and positive) to a broad set of stakeholders. Political CSR (Scherer and Palazzo 2011) encourages businesses to foster democracy and to provide public goods in instances of governmental incapacity: the utopian scenario encourages such a transformation in corporate conduct.
As with the utopian and dystopian scenarios, economic CSR and ethical CSR are opposed approaches. An intermediate position between economics and ethics is that there can be a good business (or strategic) case for CSR (Carroll and Shabana 2010). The business case for addressing multiple social issues is subject to criticism (Kaplan in press).

The utopian scenario, as associated with the progressive left in this chapter, envisions government increasing CSR through laws and policies in place of voluntarism. The scenario, as formulated in this chapter, is highly critical of capitalism and wealth. Business can anticipate increasing government substitution for CSR activities. The dystopian scenario, as associated with the conservative right in this chapter, envisions leaving CSR other than strictly limited legal compliance to business as a voluntary decision. Business can anticipate increasingly difficult conditions for profitability.

The political and ethical uncertainty of the business environment through 2025 reflects in the most recent Shell Scenarios concerning energy futures. Royal Dutch Shell has long developed scenarios of energy futures. These scenarios are “what if?” questions for Shell executives. The most recent effort provides three scenarios in which the process of economic globalization may unfold on three very different pathways to 2025. Each scenario also has different international relations and international cooperation concerning “peace, international security, and economic development.” The three scenarios are labeled “Low Trust Globalisation” and “Open Doors” and “Flags” to identify “different combinations of market, geopolitical and social forces” (Shell Scenarios n.d.). The scenario labels are reasonably clear: low trust prevails, open borders facilitate globalization, and national interests impede globalization. Open borders match a utopian scenario; low trust and national interests match a dystopian scenario.

The conventional view of corporations is that agent-managers of publicly traded enterprises do and should seek to obtain as much profit as possible for shareowners. Privately owned businesses may act more altruistically as a matter of choice. The Business Roundtable (2019) in a statement signed by 181 CEOs (of 193 members) in August 2019 adopted a different stance. The statement recommends five objectives defined in terms of primary stakeholders: value delivery for customers, investment in employees, fair and ethical dealing with suppliers, support for communities in which operating, and long-term value creation for shareholders. The last one is both fifth in the sequence and the only one explicitly regarded as oriented toward long-term value.

**Political Criticism of Capitalism and Wealth**

The majority voting approach (Rice 1985) may arguably lead to expansion of the government sector (Husted and Kenny 1997). The median voter can tax wealthier citizens and transfer wealth to both poorer citizens and herself or himself. An empirical analysis of 79 household budget surveys from 24
democracies concludes that greater inequality of factor income redistributes more wealth to the poor (Milanovic 2000).

There is rising criticism of capitalism and excess wealth concentration (Dorning 2019; Schatzker 2019). There are proposals to break up the big technology corporations as too powerful and too wealthy (Timberg 2019). Historically, there have been real experiments with laissez-faire capitalism and socialism. The nineteenth century was arguably the high point of unregulated or laissez-faire capitalism. The twentieth century was arguably the high point of socialism (essentially Marxism). The historical record is that both approaches proved highly defective (Thomas 2019). That is, critiques of both unregulated capitalism and full-blown socialism have merit, even separating democratic socialism away from totalitarian communism to look at economic performance isolated from political regime. The argument thus always becomes that next time the experiment will work better because the advocate says so.

Margaret Thatcher, subsequently UK Prime Minister, stated the essence of the decision problem for the median voter: “Socialism started by saying it was going to tax the rich, very rapidly it was taxing the middle income groups. Now, it’s taxing people quite highly with incomes way below average and pensioners with incomes way below average” (Thatcher 1976). The question for the median voter is whether to trust a pledge to tax the extremely wealthy only. The pledge might be sincere or a ploy to gain office.

The US presidential nomination process for 2020 appears to have the effect of leading prominent Democratic Party candidates toward socialism defined practically rather than ideologically as the marked expansion of government. The question for the median voter is whether a pledge to be a democratic socialist and not a socialist (much less a communist) is valid, leaving aside the issue of whether there can be a substantive difference in practice between socialism and democratic socialism (or social democracy), arguably as practiced for instance in Scandinavia.

Senator Sanders has proposed increased taxation of the very wealthy and corporate taxation based on the difference in pay between CEOs and employees. The corporate taxation proposal is that taxes would increase on a corporation in which the highest paid employee (typically the CEO) received more than 50 times the pay of the average employee. This proposal is restricted to corporations of more than $100 million annual revenue (Stein 2019).

Senator Sanders’ wealth taxation proposal is to increase taxes on the top 0.1%, estimated at about 180,000 households (Sanders n.d.). “The revenue raised under this plan would be used to fund Bernie’s affordable housing plan, universal childcare and would help fund Medicare for All” (Sanders n.d.). Cillizza (2019) points out that the details of the proposed taxation do not amount to elimination of billionaires but rather cutting the wealth of present billionaires in half over 15 years. There would be a 1% tax on net worth over $32 million (married couples), rising with net worth in percent steps (2%, 3%, and so forth) to 8% on net worth over $10 billion (married couples). All brackets would be halved for single-person households (so $16 billion to $5 billion)
(Cillizza 2019; Sanders n.d.). Senator Warren’s similar proposal is restricted to a smaller set of households and begins at $50 million net worth with a 2% tax that rises to 3% tax above $1 billion (Rappeport and Kaplan 2019).

Such a wealth transfer may be appealing to poorer households, who would benefit at no cost. The median voter, who presumably falls below the top 0.1% of the wealth distribution, should have no objection as the transfer is from the wealthier to the poorer. The median voter might be attracted by some of the specific benefits (such as Medicare for All) promised at no cost. However, the median voter must weigh the prospect that this excess wealth tax is (whether intentionally or by foreseeable evolution) simply the first step in increased taxation down to the median voter in order to fund all kinds of government projects such as the “New Green Deal” on climate change.

CONCLUSIONS

The citizen and the business manager face a set of political and ethical choices about difficult problems. This set of problems has important implications for corporate sustainability through and beyond 2025. A first list of these problems includes rising nationalism and populism, population movements across borders, climate change, ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism, possible collapse of traditional democratic governance, aggressive authoritarian regimes possessing or seeking nuclear weapons, and pervasive corruption. The lifeboat model raises profound ethical issues for citizens and business managers. The chapter explains two contrasting scenarios, utopian (or optimistic) versus dystopian (or pessimistic), concerning how these problems unfold through 2025. The scenarios provide a dialogue in narrative form: Huxley’s Brave New World versus Orwell’s 1984. The chapter links these scenarios to judgments required of the median voter and the business manager.

For academia and policy makers, the recommendations include careful examination of these issues and their implications for corporate sustainability and citizens. For academia and educational institutions, the vital issue is whether research and teaching are addressing the constellation of problems and effects in ways that are useful for citizens and business managers. For policy makers, the vital issue is whether they understand both the big picture and the details of what may be unfolding to 2025. Both the US and the UK exhibit signs of policy deadlock that may undermine confidence in democracy and capitalism. There are increasing signals of policy stress in other countries such as Finland.

A fundamental concern going forward to 2025 is whether “democracy” is increasingly perceived to be beginning to fail and fracture in the US and the UK. Policy deadlock on Brexit in the UK and gun control in the US can be interpreted as signaling the political systems are no longer working effectively (Dionne 2019). “The United States retreated from its traditional role as both a champion and an exemplar of democracy amid an accelerating decline in American political rights and civil liberties” (Freedom House 2019). Such
opinions (or judgments) might be viewed as an “early warning indicator” (Goldberg 2019).

A development is the arguably increasing tendency to subject political and policy disagreements to criminal investigation or to civil litigation as a feature of Orwell’s 1984. Many policy initiatives of the Trump Administration have been subjected to civil litigation in the courts. One feature of the 2017 US tax law change was a $10,000 cap (SALT) on federal deductibility of state and local taxes. Four of the high tax states—Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, and New York—sued in federal court on the ground that the cap unconstitutionally infringed on state sovereignty to adopt progressive taxation and effectively raise public service cost per household in their states. On September 30, 2019, a US district court (Manhattan, New York) ruled against the plaintiffs, holding that the US Congress has broad power to levy taxes (Casselman 2019). The matter must properly be resolved at the federal election ballot box and not in the federal courts. The median voter is the key to the election process. Either the center determines election outcomes, or the center disappears as the progressive and conservative extremes dominate the election process. A progressive domination promises Huxley’s Brave New World; a conservative domination cautions against Orwell’s 1984.

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