



# Campaigns and regimes: party characteristics, political transformations and the outcomes of populist governments

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Accepted: 5 October 2022 / Published online: 18 March 2023  
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## Abstract

The growing success of populist parties in western democracies has generated lively academic debate surrounding the changes this populist wave has created in various political systems. These parties have demonstrated their ability to shift from protest to governing parties, consequently shifting experts' attention toward the effects of populism in power on democratic institutions. In light of examples in South America and Easter Europe, scholarly debate has centered on concerns that populist governments will deform democracy and democratic institutions, limit institutions and reduce both checks and balances and pluralism. Here we argue that in the context of a consolidated western democracy, populist governments identify themselves with government 'as usual', and that the populist ascent produces a greater impact on the political system as a vehicle for protest than it does on institutions once in power. We analyze the three examples of populism represented by the 5 Star Movement, Podemos and La République En March in order to examine the transformations produced by their successes in their relative political systems and their various effects on institutions once in government.

**Keywords** Populists · Government · Democracy · Decartelization · New parties

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## Introduction

The 2008 economic crisis acted as a political catalyst, accelerating certain changes and expanding the scope of their effects. It was also echoed by a crisis of legitimacy among parties and traditional representatives. This twofold crisis, economic and of representative politics, formed the principal element of the causal framework for the historic break with bi-partite or bipolar arrangements that occurred in many contexts. In Mediterranean Europe in particular, we witnessed a rapid decartelization of national political systems due to the ascendance of outsider parties such as Podemos, La République En March (LREM) and the 5 Star Movement (5SM). The combination of the economic crisis and the ineffective policies enacted by institutional actors in response provoked electorates into profound frustration with institutional politics and distrust of the political parties that had historically upheld those institutions.

These parties then went through a crisis of social legitimacy in which they became less and less accepted as vectors of representation while facing increasingly hostile societies (Dalton et. al. 2011; Daalder 2002), and which challenged not only political actors but ultimately ended up tearing down both the mechanisms of mediation as well as the concept of representation itself (Bianchi and Raniolo 2017). In the resulting void of representation, voter disillusionment and distancing from the traditional social bases of historic parties reduced both electoral and political participation (visible as increased abstentionism and electoral volatility and reduced party membership, for example). New subjects (*new parties*) stepped into the gap, finding fertile ground for their vigorous critiques of the traditional political classes and channels of representation and championing a populist vision of radical change to the existing party system as approached through a single discrediting lens (caste, political elite, old guard) specific to each context. These new parties' use of aggressive discursive registers, verticalization, personalization and appeals to the people with the intent of monopolizing representation, was concerning to observing scholars, who saw populism as a threat to constitutional democracy and representative institutions (Martinelli 2013; Müller 2017). In this article, we undertake two main tasks:

1. To qualitatively analyze the characteristics of three of the many parties found under the populist umbrella;
2. To examine the effects of these subjects' ascension to power on the political context and subsequently on democratic and institutional regime once in governments.

The three case studies selected share a Euro-Mediterranean political context, have all been able to rapidly impose themselves upon the electoral landscape such that they have risen to government, and are new parties in the literal sense of genuinely new (Bartolini and Mair 1990, Sikk 2005), that is, parties that emerged *ex novo* and are not traceable to the fusion or schism of any pre-existing parties. The peculiarities of the French semi-presidential system allowed the rapid ascent of LREM to coincide with its leader's conquest of the Presidency of the Republic, while in



the Spanish and Italian contexts, the road to power was lengthened by the need to cement alliances with other political forces. For the first part of our analysis, we will compare the three parties in order to isolate and describe the populist elements in their organizational, communications, rhetorical and ideological strategies as well as understand the instruments they employed in order to effectively attract the anti-traditional party electorate. Then, we will investigate the effects their ascensions to power have had on the political systems and processes of decartelization, and lastly, we will attempt to either prove or disprove those hypotheses that maintain that populism in power is fundamentally a threat to democracy *tout court* (Pappas 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Müller 2017), an illiberal political deviation (Zakaria 1997; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013), or an internal outlier (the outskirts, if you will, Ardit 2004) of democracy (or its most extreme version, Urbinati 2019). This final part of our analysis will be carried out using a quali-quantitative methodology aimed at examining the activities of government in order to determine their impact on institutions and democracy.

### Who are they? Three types of populism: parallels and distinctions

Despite the ideological differences between LREM, Podemos and the 5SM, the three share many characteristics. In its first national election in 2013, the 5SM made history, becoming the primary Italian party with 8.7 million votes: never in the history of the Italian Republic (or in the rest of Europe) had a party managed such a result in their first election cycle. In the French case, Emmanuel Macron's successful claim on his party's leadership was certainly influenced by the semi-presidentialist political system, which calls for run-off elections between the two leading parties. After having obtained 24.5% of the vote in the first round, placing him squarely in the lead with respect to the other ten candidates, in the second round he routed his main opponent, Marine Le Pen, winning a 66.1% consensus and assuring himself entrance to the Elysée Palace. In Spain, Podemos was one of the *new parties* that came to prominence in the 2014 elections, after which its initial electoral consensus diminished over time. However, astute alliances allowed them to eventually become the governing party. In order to better understand the parallels and distinctions between these three cases, we will analyze and compare their respective active ideological/discursive frameworks and organizations. In order to compare these different elements, we will adopt a multidimensional definition of populism, which considers its vague ideology (Mudde 2004), the discursive register it uses (Taguieff 1997) and the leaderly organizational form it promotes to establish its relationship with the electorate (Weyland 2017), not as mutually exclusive elements, but passably as features that can unify into a combination of ideas, styles, and organizational aspects that populist parties and actors can make their own (Roodujin 2013). Choosing to examine these three parties, excluding others with which these actors coexist and form a populist configuration in the three contexts investigated (specifically Vox in Spain, the League in Italy, and La France Insoumise and Rassemblement National in France), is practical in nature: with the exception of the League, in fact, the three parties we considered are the only ones that have managed to reach, after the first



phase of political emergence and establishment, governmental positions in the different contexts. With respect to the League, after its shift in a precisely populist sense that occurred with the establishment of Matteo Salvini's leadership in 2013, whose experience in government lasted little more than a year during the first Conte government, a time that we considered too limited to be useful for the comparison proposed in this study.

### **Ideologies and discursive styles**

The 5SM constructed a large part of its consensus by asserting itself as the staunchest, most unforgiving critic of a delegitimated party system, taking aim at the supposed privileges and obsolete mechanisms of representative democracy. From an ideological and communications perspective, the 5SM feeds on and into a Manichean symbolic universe (Caruso 2015; Tarchi 2015) characterized by, "a war between two worlds, two distinct conceptions of reality" (Grillo and Casaleggio 2011, p. 3): two universes of meaning that represent antagonistic and irreconcilable poles, one negative and one positive. At the positive pole we find a triptych composed of "the citizen," the subject at the center of political interest, the "web" as a tool for democratic renewal, and "the new" (in policies, development and participation) as the distinguishing mark of the Grillino political message. At the negative pole, the "caste" is the signifier that identifies a series of enemies, such as proxy government "delegation" (that is, the delegation of power itself, referred to as "la delega" in Grillino rhetoric) and its protagonists (parties, unions), which have been rendered obsolete and easily surpassed by the web, or the "old" the collection of practices, subjects and rules that fall outside the lines of the Movement's vision.<sup>1</sup> Parties are the mouthpieces of the old logic of proxy government, blamed for having robbed the citizenry of its sovereignty (Biorcio 2015) in order to perpetuate their own privileges while the people languish. The notion of a democratic renewal or regeneration, effected using the infrastructures and potentialities of the web, is central to the rhetorical articulation of the 5SM. The web is an instrument capable of realizing the prophecy of a direct and at last "disintermediated" democracy in which "one person equals one vote" and all citizens can participate in the life of institutions through committees and local movements rather than parties (Gualmini and Corbetta 2013). With its emphasis on certain elements typical of depoliticization (De Nardis 2017), such as the exaltation of non-partisan, technical and classless politics, and its explicit conception of the people as an organic whole that rejects any potential threats to its unity or integrity, the Movement's rhetoric is markedly post-ideological. The 5SM configures itself as a transitory instrument for citizen participation with the goal of conquering the government in the name of transparency, radical democracy and technological advancement. Its political program includes both elements clearly drawn from the repertoire of the libertarian new left and next generation capitalist imagery: on the one hand, we see strengthened systems of direct

<sup>1</sup> [https://dait.interno.gov.it/documenti/trasparenza/politiche2018/Doc/4/4\\_Prog\\_Elettorale.pdf](https://dait.interno.gov.it/documenti/trasparenza/politiche2018/Doc/4/4_Prog_Elettorale.pdf).



democracy, universal basic income, opposition to projects such as TAV and TAP and a series of ecological production reconversions; on the other, we see the centrality of new models of accumulation (Caruso 2017), including measures supporting small and medium businesses (i.e., reducing the tax wedge). However, the 5SM's defining measures share a commitment to radically cut the costs of politics and policymaking. The Movement's competitive strategy excluded the possibility of any alliance whatsoever with other local or national political forces both before and after the elections. In 2018, however, the Movement became the fulcrum of any potential government and was therefore forced into alliance first with the League and then with the PD.

In contrast to the radicalism of many of the other subjects populating the French political landscape, LREM promotes a new centrist moderatism that manages to fascinate both the moderate left and right electorates. Its principal objective is to embody a total break from the past, thus enabling it to present itself as completely outside the political class of the country.<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to specify that, unlike the 5SM, defined by Tarchi (2014) as an archetypal example of populism, the placement of En Marche among populist parties remains a highly argued issue. If according to several studies (Hamdaoui 2021) LREM and Macron represent a restriction to the spread of other populist parties (in particular, the reference is to La France Insoumise and Rassemblement National), other scholars have defined it as "electoral populism" (Fougère and Barthold 2020) or "technocratic populism" (Perottino and Guasti 2020). Having adopted a multidimensional definition of populism in this work and having established that this new party and its leader have adopted a discursive style and a political approach in the growth phase and in the electoral propaganda that envelops disparate populist components, such as the use of the pure people/corrupt elite dichotomy, the accentuation of personalization, and repeated appeals to the generalized will of the people as a whole (Urbinati 2019), we have joined the branch of research that places it in the diverse landscape of populist actors.

The image of a neophyte politician (Zanon 2017), excluded from the games of the powerful, played a key role in the 2017 presidential contest. Macron's attempt to overcome competition between the traditional left and right blocs along with his goals of attracting a transversal swathe of the French electorate and of reaffirming presidential dominion over the parties of the legislative assembly called to mind shades of De Gaulle's third way (Evans 2017). This strategy, in combination with party fragmentation, was effective both in establishing LREM as the primary political force in the first round of elections and gathering the support of former challengers under the banner of opposition to Le Pen in the second round (Strudel 2017). Macron was thus able to make full use of the *second-best* mechanism typical of the French two-round electoral system. His post-ideological orientation made him and LREM much more attractive in the second round compared to the Rassemblement

<sup>2</sup> While addressing democratic renewal in its program, the party refers to the entire political class in the following way: *Year after year, our view of our political class deteriorates steadily (...), our representatives seem inadequate to our eyes.* See: <https://en-marche.fr/emmanuel-macron/le-programme>.



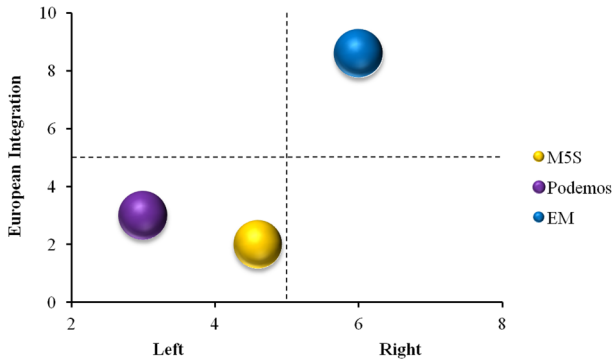
National's right-wing extremism. Of the eleven first-round candidates, Macron was the only one to openly declare himself a Europeanist, albeit one that proposed radical changes to the European structure in order to favor greater social growth and fiscal consonance. Macron's success was the major surprise of the electoral cycle, considering his campaign's political foundation a year earlier upon his resignation from the Ministry of the Economy and Finance and its liberal (and liberalist) program, which focused on economic reforms, debt reduction, cuts to public spending and greater employment contract flexibility.<sup>3</sup> LREM's platform was characterized by a notable fusion of contrasting ideologies in which a right-leaning approach to economic questions is joined to more progressive stances on civil and (some) social issues. By contextualizing its rescue of France's ethical and moral rectitude from the predations of both consociationalism and conservative extremism and walking a programmatic line between economic neoliberalism and civil, social and environmental social-democratic progressiveness, LREM was able to assume an outsider role despite its origins within the system. It therefore captured that important portion of the anti-establishment electorate, including many of Marine Le Pen's former supporters.

The party's calls for political renewal in the name of the Nation (its official name is "*Association pour le renouvellement de la vie politique*"), its transversal appeals to citizens on both the left and right, the charismatic leader who embodied the values of the movement, anti-establishment political rhetoric and use of the Manichean division between the old and the new outlined a populist rhetorical articulation aimed at promoting a revival of liberal/liberalist paradigms and eroding the ever-widening support for sovereignist political actors on both sides of the political spectrum. During the 2017 presidential elections, those forces pushing the discourse right (FN) or left (FI) caused the French party system to take on a resemblance to the fourth French republic or the first Italian republic. Macron's centrist position can thus be best understood if placed within the context of the party system's growing polarization. In that sense, LREM played a similar role to that of the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*) in Italy (Sartori 1976 in Evans 2017).

An analysis of Podemos' discursive style and ideology must make a distinction between the two principal stages of the party's life: the first stage was characterized by its successful entry into the party system and the second by its increased stability and consolidation of power. Initially, Podemos reflected its close ties to the Indignados movement (Lobera 2015; Subirats 2015) in its strong leadership and aggressive denunciation of caste privilege, corruption and inequality. The rhetorical and ideological tension it displayed toward participative democracy fed into a discursive style that centered the need for a renewal of democratic values. Podemos' key words largely coincided with the "*master frame*" (De Nardis 2006) seen in the cycle of Spanish social movements (Della Porta et al. 2017; Martin 2015): the fight against corruption and inequality; an end to austerity and precarious employment; an emphasis on human rights and a vision of radical democracy that would move beyond Spanish bipolarism and its

<sup>3</sup> <https://en-marche.fr/emmanuel-macron/le-programme>.





**Fig. 1** Placement of the three parties along the left–right axis and with regards to European integration. *Source:* database «*Comparative Manifestos Project*», based on the «*RiLe*» index developed by Laver and Budge (1992). Graphical representation designed by the authors

protagonists (the Pp and Psoe). Podemos declared itself a tool through which citizens would take center stage and ordinary people could participate in political life, styling itself as the representatives of “*los de abajo*” against “*los de arriba*” (those at the bottom against those at the top). Podemos’ antagonist ‘caste’ is the signifier (Laclau 2005) at the center of an ecosystem of phenomena and subjects, including the “old” two-party system and its protagonists, corruption, the markets, finance, the European Union of the banks, etc. While its political program and participation in the GUE (the radical left group in the European Parliament) clearly placed Podemos on the left, the party preferred to locate itself along the fault lines of a break between old and new politics (Della Porta 2017). Nor did it disdain antipolitical and post-ideological rhetoric, often divorcing itself from a radical left accused of pertaining to “old politics”, hence its relegation to ever-narrower electoral straits. Rather than leaning on the classic left/right division, Podemos encapsulated a multitude of threads that metaphorically articulate the contrast between old and new politics in terms of *abajo/alto*, *people/caste* and *pueblo/élites* dichotomies.

From an ideological and communications perspective, Podemos’ use of Manichean rhetorical tools, proposed democratic renewal and return to popular sovereignty, and adoption of divisions that reconfigure (rather than reject) the left/right cleavage through the prism of other signifiers in its first stage of life describe an almost paradigmatic populism. However, it is a leftist populism, one which adopts a social rather than ethnic Manichean division that invokes a “class of the people” (Mény and Surel 2002) and pursues a competitive strategy dismissive of alliances. In its second stage, the party’s new openness to alliances and its recognition of the plurality of relevant actors reframed the populism of its discourse, reducing it to a tactical approach that exploited public mistrust of politics to unlock the gates of the party system (Fig. 1).





## Organization and the role of the leadership

Within the 5SM's organization, participative tension, critiques of the party-format and the exaltation of direct democracy coexist with an internal distribution of resources that is strongly in favor of a top-down leadership operation without checks and balances. In its first incarnation (from its birth to September 2014), the Movement identified with the "reputational capital" of its leader, Beppe Grillo (Colloca and Corbetta 2015; Biorcio 2015). He wielded immense political and strategic power, while the Movement's base organized itself through the Meet-up internet platform. In its second phase, the tension between the plebiscitary element and structural realities increased markedly: the growth of the Movement coupled with the increased importance of new institutional figures led to greater internal organization (at least at the top of the power structure). Collective forms of management were charged with working alongside the party leadership, a directorate formed by Alessandro Di Battista, Luigi Di Maio, Roberto Fico, Carla Ruocco and Carlo Sibilia, despite not having clearly established, *rules designed to guarantee the periodic contestability of the party leadership* (Chiapponi 2017). Only in 2017 would a reform to the party statute mandate the election of a "capo politico," the formal designation in the statute for the political leader of the party. The subsequent election of Luigi Di Maio, rising from within the parliamentary ranks, gave the party a more institutionalized profile that contrasted sharply with Grillo's self-presentation. Grillo himself was relegated to a role described in the party materials as "guarantor of the Movement."

Despite instituting a more detailed online platform with expanded functionality (such as selection of candidates and party officials, policy formation and courses for institutional actors) and the evocative name of "Rousseau," the absence of spaces for interaction between the various levels of the party (party/institutions; local/national, Corbetta 2017) and the weakness of the "party of the ground" remained defining characteristics in the wake of the "post-party" notion (Mancini 2015). The contradictory nature of the party's organizational elements has led to a plethora of interpretations as to the nature of the Movement, each of which emphasizes different particulars. The Movement has been defined a "franchise party" (Carty 2004), a "personal party" (Calise 2011), a "techno-populist party" (Bickerton 2018) and a "party-movement" (Della Porta 2017). The strong leadership seems to confirm the reciprocal bond between the personalization of politics and populist discourse. Distrust of the classic party format leads to adopting light organizational structures that skew power in favor of the party elite, which is then legitimated by the deliberative, plebiscitarian tools of the web 2.0.

LREM Presents itself as a syncretic, catch-all party (Bambeger 2017) born from the center of the system and embracing a radial expansion of consensus and influence. The movement embodies the transformation of modern representative democracies into "leader democracies (Calise 2016)", showing the features of a personal party which favors disintermediation and follows a strong, charismatic leader espousing a post-ideological rhetoric. Macron's political past was perfectly integrated with the party dynamics of recent years: he came from the Socialist Party, was deputy secretary to the president of the Republic from 2012 to 2014 and Minister





of the Economy and Finance in the second Valls government, from which post he resigned less than a year before the 2017 presidential elections. Nonetheless, he and thus his Movement were able to frame their advance as a victory for new forces, reflecting a Europeanist optimism and positioning himself as the only alternative to the sovereignist threat. Macron aimed toward a renewal of public democracy through the combined action of a ‘light’ party structure and a new political program that was able to attract a heterogeneous electorate both tired of mainstream parties and unconvinced by Le Pen’s extremism (Brizzi and Lazar 2017). As well, the party’s fluid policy stances, neatly divorced from ideological connotations, allowed it to attract support from such disparate sources as the protest vote and major economic and financial groups, while remaining moderate enough to still gain the consensus of the party leaders (and consequent voters) that were eliminated in the first round.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of its organization, LREM is structured along the lines of pyramidal business models and includes various managing directors and their adjuncts, managers of different departments, including public relations, and an executive committee of division managers responsible for, “maintaining relations with external actors in their respective sectors and fostering networks of influence and ideas within their thematic area<sup>5</sup>”. The organizational structure also establishes a minimal territorial extension via territorial representatives of the Movement at the departmental level, who coordinate local committees in their departments, and the employees of the central office, who function as the representatives of the Movement at headquarters. These latter are each responsible for a different branch of activity within the Movement, establishing the party line in specific fields (communications, finance, innovation, etc.). As well, LREM has three associated bodies that constantly engage with the party: the youth movement “*Jeunes Avec Macron*”, which seeks to increase youth participation in politics, encourage emerging talent and renew the face of political life; the educational institute “*Tous Politique*”, which focuses on the professional development of activists, managers and elected officials and supports them throughout their mandates, and the coordinating body “*La République Ensemble*”, which structures and federates current and former elected officials and functions as a channel for sharing local information between national institutions and elected officials (Perottino and Guasti 2020).

Podemos’ success is inseparable from leader Pablo Iglesias’ popularity. A political scientist from the Universidad Complutense, he became famous for hosting informational political shows and as a regular guest on the television talk show circuit. Organizationally, Podemos represents a balance between contradictory trends: strongly verticalized leadership contrasts with a profound participative tension guaranteed by deliberative consultations on policy, alliances, candidates and party officials. Podemos’ use of rhetorical elements pertaining to democratic renewal is reinforced by organizational “incremental innovations” (Raniolo and Tarditi 2020) which use the web 2.0 to strengthen direct

<sup>4</sup> Immediately after their defeat in the first round both Fillon and Hamon expressed the intention to vote for Macron.

<sup>5</sup> <https://en-marche.fr/le-mouvement/notre-organisation>.



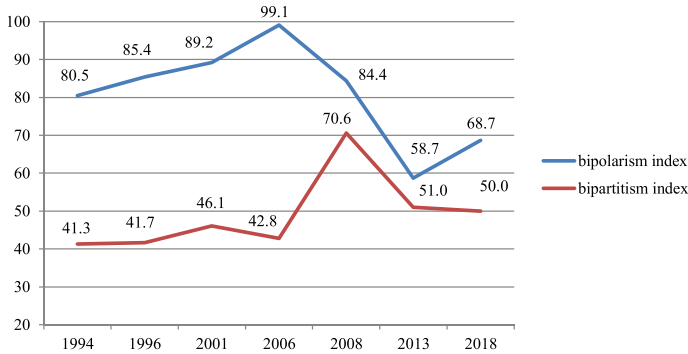
participation and innovate on the traditional party structure. To join Podemos, one must create a free account on the advanced online platform which serves as the deliberative space for major decisions.

The multiplicity of factors that characterize Podemos' experience have led to numerous definitions with various different emphases. Its organizational structure and ties to the Spanish social movement has led some to call it a "movement-party" (Martin 2015; Subirats 2015), while others focus on the tension between the leadership style and the push for web-mediated participation, using the terms "digital party" (Gerbaudo 2019) or "virtual party" (Raniolo and Tarditi 2020) to highlight the role of technological innovation. Others still emphasize the party's Manichean and populist rhetoric, openly naming it leftist populism (Caruso 2017; Formenti 2016). Frankly, we see elements of truth in each of the above definitions. After its initial phase in which surpassing the Psoe became a real possibility and national (but not local) alliances were out of the question, Podemos did contract an alliance with the Psoe at the national level. Its competitive strategy changed over time, but potential partners for political alliances were nonetheless limited to the radical left (Izquierda Unida and territorial leftist formations) in the build up to elections and the Psoe post-election.

## Effects on party systems

The crisis fed a series of similar effects across the political systems of the Western Europe, though these effects evinced different degrees of intensity and impact. In particular, the level of instability grew with unprecedented rapidity, such that a third of the "electoral innovation" which occurred between 1945 and the present day was concentrated into the years following 2010 (Emanuele and Chiaromonte 2018) due to the increased fragmentation and radicalization of party systems (Morlino and Raniolo 2018; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Hobolt and Tilley 2016). According to Kriesi (2014), all three of the case study contexts discussed here show some of the political formations typical of populist mobilizations, including the appearance and success of outsider parties, the spread of anti-party discourse, and, in the Italian and Spanish contexts, diffuse social mobilizations. Initially we will concentrate exclusively on party competition, measuring the degree of renewal in each party system using the electoral volatility index, which records the net aggregate change between two successive elections by adding up the differences in percentages of votes won by a given party in each, and the indices of bipartitism and party polarization (in the Italian case), which records the prevalence of pre-electoral coalitions. The values of these two indices show the degree of decartelization and fragmentation present in party systems. Successively, as a function of this first variable, we will analyze the variation in competitive strategies of other party actors following the success of the new parties discussed here. Lastly, we will examine the greater or lesser stability of the three political systems within which the three case studies operate by analyzing their respective processes of executive formation.





**Fig. 2** Change in bipartitism and polarization indices, Italy. *Source:* Ministry of the Interior

### Decartelization and executive instability

In the Italian and Spanish cases, the success of new parties favored decartelization and made establishing a government more difficult, whereas the particularly French semi-presidential conformation allowed it to avoid decartelization's politically destabilizing effects. The 2013 elections in Italy saw the 5SM's electoral success as well as a significant increase in abstention (voter turnout maxed out at 72.5% compared to 80.5% in 2008) and an electoral retreat on the part of the two principal coalitions. The center-right lost a little over seven million votes, equivalent to 42% of their base in 2008, going from 46.8 to 29.2% percent of the vote. The center-left lost more than three and a half million votes (27% of their 2008 numbers), going from 37% in 2008 to 25.5% in 2013. The two principal coalitions went from winning 84.4% of the valid votes in 2008 to 58.7% in 2013: in the intervening time, the Italian party system entered a destructuring phase defined by increasing electoral volatility (D'Alimonte and Maggini 2013). In fact, with respect to 2008, 2013 saw electoral volatility quadrupled to 39.1, a level higher even than the 1994 elections which marked the transition from the first to the second Republic (Emanuele and Chiamonte 2013). It was in this context that the 5SM became the primary party in Italy, obtaining eight and a half million votes corresponding to 26.6% and contributing to ending a two-party system that had maintained itself since 1994 (Fig. 2).

The reasons behind the 5SM's success and the parallel removal of the public's faith in traditional parties can certainly be sought in long-term phenomena, but more immediate, short-term variables can also shed some light. The populist, anti-caste atmosphere pervading Italy; the ruling classes' inability to effect solutions in the face of the rampaging economic crisis; the harsh impact of the austerity measures imposed by the Monti government and the bipartisan support of mainstream parties for those same measures certainly contributed to spreading the blame across both the right and left and strengthening interest in an alternative to the traditional government/opposition dynamic. The lack of forward motion on the part of the two traditional poles and the growing importance of the web for spreading disruptive counter-narratives against the political order facilitated the explosive growth of protest

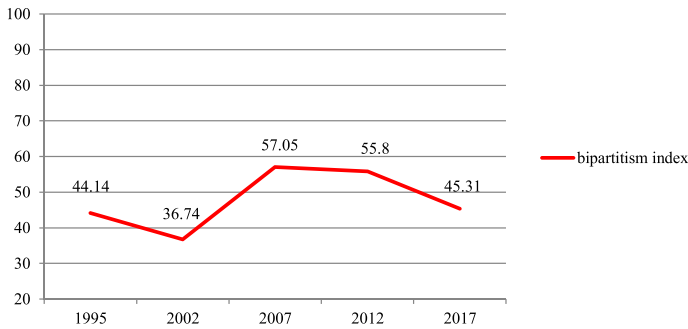


votes against the traditional parties. From 2013 to 2018, through highs and lows and with a few internal changes, the 5SM became the main alternative in the political landscape, taking on the role of the opposition. After having disrupted the bipolar (borderline bi-partitic) system for good in 2008, its 2018 electoral success shifted the political landscape yet again, transforming it from a two-and-a-half pole system into proper tripolarity. The 2018 elections were conducted under 2017's new electoral legislation, popularly known as the *Rosatellum bis*, which introduced a mixed system of 2/3 proportional and slightly more than 1/3 first past the post allocation. In this new system, the 5SM won almost 10 million votes or circa 33%, giving them not only transversal consensus but also equally divided support from urban centers and small towns alike. In effect, the 5SM had managed to embody the characteristics of an "all around" (Emanuele and Chiamonte 2013) party capable of gaining consensus across the country: its success was particularly notable in.

By comparing the 2013 and 2018 electoral data, we can see that protest votes hurt both the traditional poles but do more damage to the party that was in government prior to the election cycle: while the center-right lost the most votes in 2013, in 2018 it was the center-left that gave up most of its base to other parties. The mechanism of the party system seemed to consolidate the trends that emerged from 2013, confirming and reinforcing the tripolar party configuration (Liberi e Uguali was the only other party to win a total of 18 seats). However, the power dynamics between the three poles and between the players within each pole changed. Salvini's League became the most representative force within the center-right, approaching 18%, while Forza Italia reached 14%. Electoral volatility dropped 10 points but nonetheless remained at 26.7% despite the consolidation of the poles precisely because there were important shifts in the votes accrued by already existing parties. The sharp drop in votes for the center-left raised the polarization index since the two main poles (5SM and the center-right) recorded totals that were higher than those of the center-right and center-left in 2013. In comparing the results of the most recent elections with those of 2008, the last before the economic crisis became a political crisis that delegitimated those forces that were the linchpins of Italian bipolarity since 1994, we see a drastic drop in moderate votes and a parallel increase in votes for radical and/or protest parties. The center-left lost 6.698.670 votes, while the center-right lost 9.020.891 and the center itself completely disappeared, going from 2.050.229 votes to 0. In this case the 5SM, after declaring its willingness more than once during its campaign, demonstrated a different approach to alliances and ultimately joined forces first with the right (Northern League) and then with the center-left (Democratic Party) to form two consecutive governments.

In the French context, Macron's victory in the 2017 presidential elections reinforced the already existing decartelization of the party system. After coming in first out of the eleven first round candidates with 24.5%, Macron soundly defeated Marine Le Pen in the second round, winning entrance to the Elysee with 66.1% of the vote. The 2017 elections marked a profound break from the past: neither of the two traditional parties, the socialists and the republicans, made it to the second round for the first time in the history of the fifth Republic. This break touched off the destructuring/restructuring of the party system and the critical shifts in the balance between the forces in play (Pasquino 2018). While in both 2007 and 2012





**Fig. 3** Change in bipartitism index, France. *Source of data:* Ministère de l'Intér

the traditionally alternating republican and socialist parties together had around 20 million votes in total, in 2017 they failed to win even 10 million. That loss of more than half of their previous base made space for other actors to grow. In fact, the traditional subjects that alternated in power gave way to both new subjects (LREM) constructed around new cleavages and renewed subjects (Rassemblement National, France Insoumise) with sharpened critiques of globalization and the European Union.

Rassemblement National grew from winning 3 million 800 thousand votes in 2007 to 6 million 400 thousand in 2012, with even greater growth in 2017 when it reached 7 million 680 thousand. Benoit Hamon, the PS candidate, managed 6.36% while the radical left Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise) obtained 19.58%: the latter's growth from 3 to 7 million votes redrew the lines of power within the leftist bloc. The volatility index for the first round of the 2017 presidential elections is an extremely high 44.01% as a result of both the drastic decrease in support for the socialist and republican parties and the steep ascent of La France Insoumise, Rassemblement National and LREM, which last managed to immediately become the top party in France. All this highlights the instability of the French party system, including its destructuring, the historical impact of the changes that occurred and their effects on the party system. Except for the 2002 presidential elections, the fifth French Republic had always been bipolar and substantively bi-partitic: republicans and socialist acted as fulcrums for the respective center-right and center-left blocs and would end up fighting out run-off second rounds for the Elysée.

The convergence between LREM's rise, the success of the Rassemblement National, the redistribution of hegemonic positions within the blocs and the attempt to win over the moderate electorate by emphasizing the contrast between responsible politics and extremist/populist souverainism highlights a shift toward breaking with the tripolar party arrangement and the traditional oppositional schema to begin a new phase of discontinuity. In order to analyze the impact of the new party (LREM) on the political system, we compared the first round of French presidential elections in 1997 (the last year preceding the first run offs without the PS on the list) to the present day, both in terms of the shifting



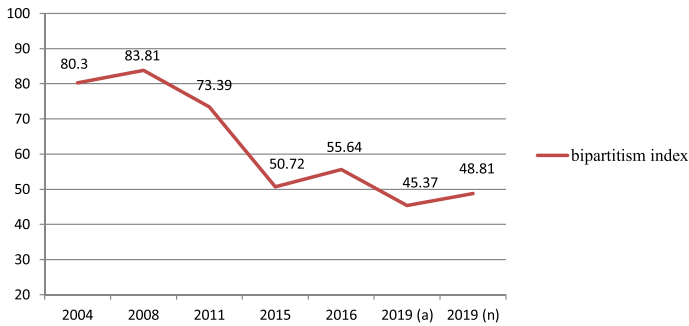


Fig. 4 Change in bipartitism index, Spain. Data source: Ministerio de Interior

equilibriums of power between the actors and in terms of fragmentation. This choice allowed us to consider the “identity” vote as well as avoid preference distortions caused by second round run offs and the aftermath of legislative elections (Fig. 3).

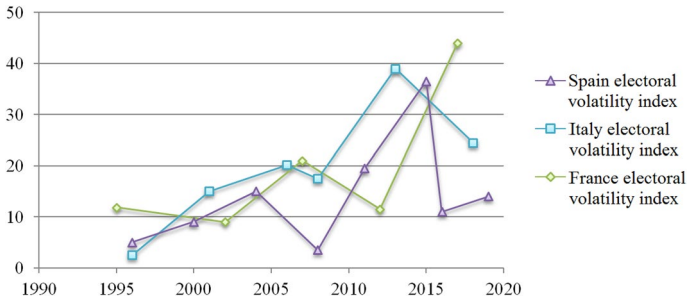
As can be seen above, in 1997 the bipolarity index was particularly low due to Chirac (RPR) and Balladur (UDF) dividing the right, while in 2002 it dropped further in response to the success of the FN. In 2007, the Socialist Party and the Republicans served as a counterbalance to fragmentary forces. Following the 2008 crisis, however, the index resumed its downward trend due to the FN’s growth in 2012 and the quadripolar division in 2017. The semi-presidential format precludes the possibility of failing to form a government even in moments of increased fragmentation.

Spain’s extremely complex party system reflects a multitude of historically rooted conflicts that have crystalized into political fault lines, creating similar trends. The Spanish context evinces both an important left/right fracture and a fundamental center/periphery break, thus placing the left–right cleavage and the territorial representatives of various nationalist parties on a shared structural level.

The Spanish system’s bipolar equilibrium had always depended on certain nationalist forces’ support of the national government, regardless of whether that government was formed by the Pp or Psoe. However, the post-crisis era in Spain witnessed both radical social and economic effects and the principal parties’ (Psoe and Pp) struggle to manage those same effects, creating electoral opportunities for new actors. The success of those new actors ended the era of “*limited pluralism and bi-partisan dynamics*” (Raniolo 2013, p. 72) and inaugurated a “quadripolarism” based on four parties/coalitions (Psoe, Podemos, Pp, Ciudadanos), each with more or less equal electoral pull.

The social crisis engendered by extreme cuts to public spending opened the doors to a political crisis that undermined the Zapatero government. Decartelization began to manifest within the political system during the 2011 administrative elections: the Psoe suffered a vertiginous decline compared to the 2008 elections (from 43.7 to 27.79%) compounded by declining voter turnout (from 73.85% in 2008 to 68.94% in 2011). All this gave Mariano Rajoy and the Partido Popular (Pp) an advantage, forcing Zapatero to call for early elections and





**Fig. 5** Electoral volatility indices in France, Italy and Spain. *Source:* Ministries of the Interior (FR, IT, SP)

ultimately setting the stage for a long cycle of Mariano Rajoy's Pp governments from 2011 to 2018. The Pp's domination was only interrupted by the political crisis following the 2015 elections. The Psoe's state of disarray and growing disillusionment toward the political system (Lobera 2015) fueled Podemos as the Pp's principal opposition, a role also given weight by Podemos' symbolic and political connection to the 15-M movement. From 2014 to 2015, Podemos operated outside of parliament, but later it took on the opposition within the parliamentary hemicycle as well. The 2014 European elections already evinced the initial decay of bipolarism: for the first time, the sum of consensus for the two principal parties was below 50% because of the increased fracturing both between the right and left and within the radical left. The latter managed to win almost 18% consensus between Podemos and Izquierda Plural's results (10%) (Fig. 4).

After the 2014 elections, Podemos' ascent seemed unstoppable. Within a few months, it was consistently showing over 20% support in polls and even being described as the primary political force by some institutes. Turnout returned to 2008 levels in the December 2015 political elections (73%), touching off a political earthquake. Its results confirmed the transformation of the Spanish party system into a multipolar arrangement characterized by multiple elements: the Psoe had the worst election in its history with 22%, losing a million and a half votes (7 million to 5 and a half million) in absolute value; Podemos reached 20.6% with 5 million votes and Ciudadanos 14%, while the Partido Popolare remained the first party by a reduced margin, obtaining only 28.7% and losing almost 4 million votes. None of the political forces in play achieved an absolute majority and the extremely polarized context prevented the formation of any government, such that the country returned to the polls six months later for the first time in the history of the Spanish democracy. The following June 26, 2016, elections touched off a quadripolar formation composed of two right parties (Pp and Ciudadanos), the Psoe and the new option of Unidos Podemos, a radical left coalition between Podemos, Izquierda Unida and other territorial subjects, formed to beat the Psoe. In the two 2019 elections, fragmentation on the right increased thanks to the success of Vox, lowering the bipolarism index despite better outcomes for the Psoe.





In this second go-around, electoral turnout dropped from 73 to 68%, conferring an advantage to the Pp with 33% of the vote. Despite only increasing its consensus by 500 thousand votes, it confirmed its relative majority by 33% and managed to form a government thanks to the abstentions of the Psoe and Ciudadanos. The Rajoy government was characterized by two main elements: the growing importance of the center/periphery fracture caused by the Catalunya issue and the corruption scandals involving both the party (the Pp) and Rajoy himself. Both of these were decisive factors in bringing down the popular government as well as in the creation of an alternative majority via a vote of no confidence on June 5, 2018, presented by the Psoe and seconded by Unidos Podemos alongside the Pnv, Erc, PDeCAT and Bildu. The cycle of Rajoy governments (2011–2018) ended with the election of an executive led by socialist Pedro Sanchez and the subsequent formation of a Psoe-Unidas Podemos coalition government (Fig. 5).

### Effects on other actors

Podemos' results provoked a wave of organizational, rhetorical and leadership changes in the other actors. Each of the leaders that emerged from this long cycle took an anti-establishment position that was functional both for intra- and inter-party competition. All the parties underwent leadership changes and began to exploit the communications potential of the web 2.0. Outsider Pedro Sanchez emerged victorious from the Psoe primaries despite the opposition of the party apparatus and proceeded to radicalize the party's discourse, aiming to create dialog with Podemos within a competitive/cooperative dynamic. Sanchez sought to distance the party from its image as a representative of the 'old' politics. On the right, Ciudadanos gained support thanks to the leadership of the young, aggressive Albert Rivera. He called upon the notions of the old/new divide and the fight against bipartitism and corruption to place the party within the post-ideological camp. Izquierda Unida also gets revamped under the leadership of the young Alberto Garzon, despite teetering on the brink of a definitive electoral decline caused by Podemos' exponential growth within and beyond their shared electorate.

Similarly, the 5SM's success in Italy allowed for a change in the Democratic Party leadership: the young and charismatic Matteo Renzi took over from Bersani as national secretary following a congressional campaign focused on the need for a change of the guard within the party. With Renzi at the helm, the Democratic Party went on to win 40% of the vote in the 2014 European elections by attracting some of the 5SM's populist base. The same dynamic occurred on the right, where the 5SM's entrance to the political field of competition allowed the League to take a populist turn fled by Matteo Salvini.

In France, the pre-election polls in 2017 placed outgoing President François Hollande behind both Le Pen and Macron. Hollande was the first outgoing president in the French fifth Republic to not run for a second term. The ex-Minister of Education Benoit Hamon, an exponent of the left branch of the party, prevailed over moderate ex-Prime Minister Manuëll Valls to become the party's presidential candidate. The Socialist Party's choice of presidential candidate was influenced by the presence of



multiple centrist candidates in the running (Fillon and Macron) alongside the pressure exerted by the left due to Jean-Luc Mélenchon's candidature.

In all three cases under analysis, a decisive recourse on primaries seems to have represented, for mainstream parties, an attempt to respond to the populist challenge selecting new candidates in order to strengthen pre-election links between the party leadership and the electorate. The primaries also served to strengthen pre-electoral connections between the party leadership and the electorate. Traditional parties responded to the pressure created by the new parties by strategically opening their candidate selection processes to the public, seeking to recoup their decreasing popularity. The chosen candidates were the most radical in terms of content or the most representative of a break with the past: it is not coincidental that all the candidates in the cases studied here were younger than their predecessors. It is important to note, however, that in these candidates, radicality should be interpreted not as ideological but rather as stemming from their populist positioning vis a vis the old/new divide.

### Political instability

The 5SM's success and disinclination to make alliances gave rise to a period of instability in the political system, which responded with a PD government with transversal support under first Enrico Letta and then Matteo Renzi. The 5SM was therefore able to monopolize the opposition role against a government that was easy to represent as an undivided "caste" of the political class, held together more by shared interests than ideology (Mosca 2015). The 5SM's growth made it necessary to form a government: neither of the two traditional poles (center-left and center-right) had the consensus to form governments on their own. Thanks to its transversal appeal, the 5SM had become highly competitive in electoral terms. The center-left and center-right hemorrhaged votes, leading to a redefined electoral landscape and a shift from a bipolar party system to a functionally quadripolar (or three and a half pole) system. Three parties were getting over 20% support, the center-left and center-right coalitions both hovered around 30% and the center coalition led by ex-Prime Minister Mario Monti was only capturing 10% of votes. This distribution made it almost impossible to form a government, a situation that was only resolved by the so-called "patto del Nazareno" (Nazareno agreement, from the street address of the PD headquarters) between Matteo Renzi, at the helm of the Democratic Party, and Silvio Berlusconi.

The 2008 crisis also touched off a departure from the traditional alternation between two parties in France, with protest votes favoring new subjects (LREM) or boosting radical subjects (such as Rassemblement National and France Insoumise) that were excluded from the network of mainstream coalitions. Between them, LREM, La France Insoumise (*new parties*) and Rassemblement National (a revamped party) received almost 65% of the total votes in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, a clear indication of the impact new parties had on the traditional cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995) in the French context as well (Brizzi and Lazar 2017). The subsequent legislative elections confirmed the results of the presidential elections, albeit with less dramatic margins: LREM and the Democratic



Movement's centrist allies won 350 seats in total, of which 314 were attributable to LREM. While this was fewer than the predicted 400 seats, it was still sufficiently higher than the 288 seats required for a majority and plenty to assure Macron a solid parliamentary majority. The center-right coalition formed by the Republicans, the Democratic Union, Independents and *Divers droite* won 136 seats, while Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National managed to win only 8 parliamentary seats. France's hyper-majoritarian electoral law (single-member, two round majoritarian) and record levels of abstention (around 56%) caused the largest coalitions to be over-represented while minor coalitions and single-party lists were under-represented, to the detriment of both the Rassemblement National and La France Insoumise. Macron's strategic decision to nominate Edouard Philippe as Prime Minister was clearly intended to intensify the crisis within Les Républicains and gain further support in Parliament from the "*juppéistes*", centrist republicans that has supported Alain Juppé in the primaries before his defeat by Fillon. The combination of electoral law, semi-presidential political system and the various strategies employed by the actors allowed a strong executive in line with French tradition to come to the fore, supported by a solid parliamentary majority.

The disarticulation of the Spanish bipolar dynamic began with the assertion of a new/old cleavage and the principal parties (Psoe, Pp) losing consensus as a result. Unidos Podemos' unwillingness to support a government in which it was not involved led to repeated elections and the current Spanish political system's bipolar structure of center-left and center-right coalitions, with the nationalist parties nonetheless playing a fundamental role. The party system has stabilized into a quadripolar structure, though Rajoy's decline might allow for a return to a bipolar dynamic through alliances between the principal actors in the system. On the one hand, the collaboration between Unidas Podemos and the Psoe could represent an opportunity for Podemos to create an alliance along the lines of the Portuguese model, integrating part of the autonomist forces and opening the door to institutional modification of the Spanish center/periphery model. On the other hand, the election of Pablo Casado, the youngest and most right-leaning candidate in the primaries, to lead the Pp seems a favorable sign for a Pp and Ciudadanos alliance based on opposition to the Sanchez government and defense of Spanish national integrity.

## Populists in government

The three case studies described here clearly represent three different systems of government. In the semi-presidential French context, Macron helms a strong executive branch and enjoys a large majority in the National Assembly with the support of both his movement and a portion of the Republicans in parliament. In Italy, the 5SM's ample relative majority is inadequate for forming a government. The party's difficulty in coalition-building, stemming from their radical, against-the-system reputation, led to a difficult negotiation phase that was resolved by the formation of a minimum winning coalition (Sartori 1976) with the League, another anti-system party (albeit one on the extreme right). After a year of tensions between the two parties, particularly surrounding environmental policy, the executive branch fell and a



new minimum distance coalition was established between the 5SM and the parties of the center-left. These disparate forces were united by their shared fear of a center-right victory in upcoming elections. In Spain, Podemos initially sustained the Psoe's minority government, then entered into a coalition with the Psoe to form minority government together. This latter had parliamentary support from parts of the Catalan and Basque nationalist parties.

Considering the above situations, the differing durations of the three executives and the peculiarities of the COVID-19 health emergency, we can nonetheless empirically analyze the three executives' ideological and democratic profiles, establishing the nature of their ideologies and contextualizing their actions within the democratic/liberal dimension. For the ideological analysis, we will examine both the three governments' alliances in terms of composition and their economic, social (the market/distribution issue), civil and political rights (libertarian/authoritarian), and institutional reform policies. For the democratic dimension, we will analyze any institutional reforms that might alter the systems' checks and balances and the use of decrees (Table 1).

Macron's leadership of the executive branch has undoubtedly engendered conflicting opinions in the populace. His labor reforms gave greater power to companies by decentralizing contracting in what can be considered an extension of the Hollande government's *Loi travail*, which included pension reforms, a privatization law (*Loi Pacte*, see Zecca 2019) and incentives for businesses such as greater contractual flexibility. These reforms caused social unrest culminating in massive protests. At the other extreme, the law on the moralization of political life abolished second terms at the national and local levels and put limits on the expenses of parliamentary staff, garnering wide public support and attracting support from Le Pen's anti-political base (Ignazi 2017). At the European level, the campaign promises of a single federal budget and possible creation of a Ministry for Europe gave way to a more realistic approach that focused on relaunching the country in the European context and guaranteeing the protection of national interests. While Macron's approach pays homage to France's long statist tradition, it also shifts it away from Europhobia (Cazzullo 1998), instead connecting the notion of a stronger France to the success of the European project. The Macron government has been characterized over time by the synthesis of a social-progressive approach to civil rights and an accentuation of the technocratic pro-market trajectory in economic policy. The latter stands out for the lack of robust social protections to balance liberist economic reforms, in contrast to the program outlined in the electoral campaign. The combination of a humanist, progressive vision for civil rights and economic liberalism places the Macron government within the camp Nancy Fraser (2017) defines as "progressive neoliberalism". In seeking a difficult synthesis of left and right, Macron's government has less overcome those categories rather than established an equilibrium between a more *républicain* approach to economic policy and a tendentially socialist approach to civil rights and political ethics (Ignazi 2017).

The importance of antipolitical rhetoric in the 5SM's discourse allowed it to form two ideologically opposed coalitions with the Movement as the linchpin rather than in an extremist, anti-system role. The 5SM-League government oscillated between supporting partial redistribution on the economic front (the "decreto dignità" and



**Table 1** Concise table of the principal reforms proposed and/or approved by the executive actor in the French, Italian and Spanish contexts

Executive	Social rights	Civil rights	Institutional reforms
Macron	New labor laws; Norms regarding the moralization of politics; Interventions in favor of free enterprise; Educational reforms for primary schools and beyond; Privatizations; Reforms to the Contributions Sociales Généralisées, taxes that finance social services (pensions by retirees)	Reform across the national education system that mandates the use of “parent 1” and “parent 2” in schools; Reduction of the waiting period prior to assessing asylum requests and lengthening of administrative detentions; Extension of the assisted reproduction law to cover same-sex couples and single women	Reduced examination time for new laws; Electoral reform; Reduction in the number of MPs; Reform of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary
Sanchez (Podemos/Psoe)	Raise of the minimum monthly wage to 950 euro; Attualizzazione delle pensioni al costo della vita; Minimum living wage; “Google” tax; 4 year moratorium on evictions	Legislation on euthanasia; Legislation against sexual assault; Legislation against climate change	
Conte 1 (5 Star Movement / League)	Universal income; Quota 100 (Pension reform)	Security decree bis; Pillon decree (not approved due to collapse of government)	Constitutional reform to reduce the number of MPs
Conte 2 (5 Star Movement / Pd)		Eco-bonus; Sisma bonus	Constitutional reform to reduce the number of MPs



citizenship income) and an authoritarian position on immigration, defense and civil rights policy, in a mix of left and right approaches (Giannetti et al. 2020). Within the coalition, the Movement took on the redistributive role while the League took on the authoritarian role. The predominance of the immigration issue in the coalition's discourse shifted support toward the League, while both parties shared a Eurosceptic slant. The government collapsed after fourteen months due to disagreements on environmental and immigration issues as well as the League's ambitions after its success in the European elections. In its second experience in government, the Movement was instead in alliance with the Democratic Party and other smaller center-left players, in which it minimized the redistributive economic discourse in favor of taking on a stronger Eurosceptic role. In a sort of mirroring act aimed at attracting the League's electorate, the 5SM assumed an authoritarian stance on civil rights and immigration issues, opposing the abolition of the existing defense decrees.

In Spain, the Unidas Podemos-Psoe coalition government encouraged some trends. From an ideological perspective, Unidas Podemos has confirmed its leftist placement by engaging only with parties that share its ideological area and constituting an executive branch via a *minimum distance* coalition. The success of Unidas Podemos has contributed to a general polarization of the Spanish political system and a pluralization of actors with the potential exert influence, marking a sea change from the prior bipartitism. This pluralization reinforces the power of parliament and has made a coalition government necessary for the first time in the (admittedly short) history of Spanish democracy. Conflicts within the coalition have mostly regarded the redistributive question, with Unidas Podemos proposing more radical measures that interpret government accords more expansively and seeking support for these among the nationalist left parties in Parliament. At the same time, the Psoe has tried to cover the centrist position. Both parties' search for support from leftist or centrist MPs has given new importance to Parliament.

Within the democratic dimension, none of the three cases under analysis have proposed organic institutional reforms. The 5SM pushed Italy's Prime Minister Conte into proposing a constitutional reform intended to reduce the number of members of parliament, which, while questionable, does not appear to pose any dangers to constitutional checks and balances and is in line with constitutional reforms proposed by previous administrations. The immigration policies pursued by the first Conte government raised serious concerns about their constitutionality in terms of their impact on individual rights and liberties. However, these concerns were mostly regarding the government's partly authoritarian stance on immigration and liberty and can therefore be traced to the left/right divide. In the Spanish context, Unidas Podemos' republican position hints at a possible constitutional shift toward republican models, though there have been no changes proposed. Nonetheless, the possibility feeds internal conflict with the head of state.

The state of emergency created by the COVID-19 health crisis has of course inflated the use of decrees, but prior to that in the Italian case, the number of decrees made by the first and second Conte governments was in line with (if not less than) that of the preceding ones. The weakness of Spain's minority government led to a greater use of decrees, a marked increase from the numbers of past executives. None



of the three cases show a turn toward authoritarianism nor a shift of power toward the executive branch. Instead, the latter seems to have been weakened by the polarization and pluralization of the parliament, as in the Spanish case. In France, the President proposed a package of reforms to Parliament on May 9, 2018 (the vote was however delayed until after the summer) containing certain measures at the constitutional level as well as organic and ordinary laws. The first consisted of a series of interventions to the constitutional protocols on legislative procedure, designed to reduce the timeframe for examination of proposed laws as well as limit the number of amendments possible for a given legislative act (the latter drew so much criticism that it was withdrawn). The organic law proposals included a 30% reduction in members of parliament and senators (from 348 to 244 senators and 577 to 404 MPs), while the ordinary laws proposed enacting term limits and proportional correction in elections to the national Assembly (Casella 2018). Macron's hyper-presidential approach is visible both in the turbulent relations between executive and parliament and the difficult rapport between the President and republican Premier Edouard Philippe, which culminated in the latter's resignation on July 1, 2020. This coincided with LREM's defeat at the hands of the environmentalist party in various cities. The push to move beyond traditional forms of mediation and its decided personalization have shaped conciliatory and mediatory practices with both political and social subjects difficult for the French executive branch.

## Conclusions

The three cases examined here present similar characteristics that confirm their populist natures, even taking into account their ideological differences. All three show strong, personalized leadership and online forms of consultation and deliberation due to their use of specific online platforms, rendering all three digital parties (Gerbaudo 2019). From a rhetorical perspective, all three cases use a dichotomous and Manichean discursive register, presenting themselves as the representatives of the majority of a unified people. However, the notion of 'the people' invoked in each case takes on different guises according to the corresponding ideological differences.

It is important to note that despite ideological differences, all three cases use a similar organizational model and demonstrate a strong anti-politics component in their constitutive rhetoric. They all sought to place themselves outside of and beyond the right and left, and all heavily criticized parties, politicians and their associated privileges. These elements grew more definitive in the subjects with a stronger ideological character (Podemos). The populist digital party model, with its anti-political rhetorical flourishes, seems to be an efficient tool for breaking into electoral competitions in contexts dominated by distrust of the political system.

Despite the differences in context, the success of these three new parties in their respective political systems produces similar results, confirming the literature on the subject (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2019; Morlino and Raniolo 2018). The first effect is an increase in the polarization and fragmentation of the party system that overwhelms the existing bi-partite or bipolar context. The second effect is the increased difficulty of forming an executive branch due to





the increase of subjects capable of exerting influence. Governmental instability increases, even in the French semi-presidential system as it seems after the result of the legislative elections of June 2022 who gave only a relative majority of deputies to the President Macron at the National Assembly. In Spain this instability leads to the first coalition government in its recent democratic history. It must be said that in the process of institutionalization (Biancalana and Colloca 2018), the Italian and Spanish party systems appear to return to a bipolar arrangement with greater electoral stability between the subjects at the two poles and a restructuring of the principal parties.

Despite the differences in electoral law and in the intensity of their crises, all three cases demonstrate a radical increase in the electoral volatility index and decreases in the bipolarity and bipartitism indices. In all three contexts, the above shifts reach their maximum distortion during the first elections that affirm each new party's success. It is interesting to note that the French context seems the most affected by this transformation; in Italy and Spain, the following election reverses the trend, with the bipartitism and bipolarity indices rising while the electoral volatility index drops. This reversal would seem to indicate a partial increase in stability. The higher values in the French semi-presidential system could be explained by its institutional capacity to guarantee a certain stability even in the face of a fragmenting party system, but the result of the elections for the parliament in June 2022 opens a new period in which the governmental stability could be threatened. Italy and Spain's difficulty in forming stable executive branches translates to a gradual decrease in the stability index and concomitant increase in the bipolarity and bipartitism indices, indicating an ongoing process of institutionalization of the party system. As well, the French electoral system appears to favor a government formed by outside parties because a simple relative majority in the first round can allow a party to form a government. From an ideological perspective, the actions of the executive branch clearly place the Spanish case within the left, whereas empirical analysis shows a combination of left and right approaches to the issues in the Italian and French cases.

In terms of democratic positioning, the executive manifestations of populist parties do not seem to reflect fears of dangerous authoritarian tendencies nor distort the checks and balances typical of liberal democracies. In fact, the institutional reforms proposed by these populist executives follow the general line established by previous executives with different ideological stances. While the feared negative effects may not be forthcoming, there is also distinct lack of executive follow-through on the promises to regenerate democracy in a more direct and participative mold which characterize populist electoral campaigns. The effects of populists on government seem vastly inferior to the effects on party systems. Contrary to the concerns of various analysts (Martinelli 2013; Müller 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Pappas 2019), the populist executive's impact on democracy seems limited, at least in these three Western Euro- Mediterranean democracies. Setting aside political and value judgements on specific topics and policies, the populist executives in question have persevered with government as usual. The difficulties encountered in the Spanish and Italian contexts, both in forming and maintaining stable executive branches, demonstrates that ideological weakness, a light organization and idiosyncratic attitudes toward other political forces are only strengths in the initial phases of electoral



conquest. These traits become weaknesses in the subsequent project of forming and leading a government.

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