


Does the monocratic trend in southern Europe continue? A comparison between Spain and Italy

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ENG Abstract. The text will show the development of a monocratic trend in Spain and Italy thanks to the use of variables such as fragmentation and polarisation, the legislative initiative and the use of government decrees. These aspects are analysed within the framework of double personalisation, which sees this phenomenon as interpenetrating both the institutional and civil society fronts. The conclusion is that the more fragmented and polarised the legislative assemblies become, the more the executive, and in particular its president, gains primacy. A paradigm shift in which the "monocratic" principle now seems to prevail over the "collegial" principle

Keywords: double personalization, fragmentation, polarization, monocratic government, Spain, Italy.

Summary: 1. Introduction; 2. The dual personalization of politics: a new theoretical framework; 3. The legislating government; 4. Conclusions; 5. Bibliography

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1.Introduction

Many scholars have pointed to the rise of disenchantment with politics and the deteriorating public image of parties in advanced industrial democracies (Ferrin and Kriesi, 2016). There are several pieces of evidence of this trend: the declining voter turnout (Dassonneville and Hooghe, 2017), lower party identity, and less trust in parties (Montero, Gunther, and Torcal, 1997; Montero, Zmerli, and Newton, 2008; Bargsted and Torcal, 2015). Also, and above all an increase in the relevance of individual leaders, both in political organizations and in democratic institutions (Musella and Webb, 2015).

The trend towards the presidentialization of political regimes consists mainly in a progressive and seemingly irresistible displacement the traditional working modes of

Contemporary democracies, even beyond structural-formal aspects (such as the appointment of cabinet ministers), seem to follow a logic that focuses on the role of leaders, starting from the media and electoral processes (Blondel and Thiebault, 2009; Pinto, Cotta and Almeida, 2018)¹. This trend is reinforced by processes of internationalization of the political and economic sphere (Johansson and Raunio, 2010; Johansson and Tallberg, 2010) and by the decline of the organizational strength of parties (mainstream), related to the fall of trust in politics (Blondel and Cotta, 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). With the end of the era identifiable as party politics, in other words, the end of the predominance of collective actors as autonomous and monopolistic organizations extending their influence in all areas of a community's life, it is much more difficult to make people and power coexist in a stable, functional, and "happy" equilibrium (Musella, 2022). While political leaders have gained a central place in the democratic scene, there has been a process of fragmentation at the masses level where political parties play their traditional role with difficulty. Thus, there is a double personalization on the political scene, one at the institutional and governmental level and one in society. On the one hand, the personalization of politics with a focus on candidates and leaders, and on the other hand a personalization of the masses with the consequent atomization and fragmentation of the social and political spheres.

With regard to the last and most incisive steps along this path, the concept of monocratic government has been defined (Musella 2022) in order to point out the dialectical result of two processes that have laid the foundations of personalization:

- a) The development of a direct - non-party-mediated and often emotional - relationship between the leader and the masses is increasingly a fact that has been extensively documented in the reference literature (Calise and Musella, 2019; Garzia, 2019; McAllister, 2007). A consequence of the centrality of the individual is social fragmentation, the process of atomisation that drastically reduces collective identifications and affiliations and, on the contrary, favours an "integral" process of personalisation of politics, which is evident on the side of political demand, precisely in civil society, among voters.
- b) At the same time, the process of increasing fragmentation of collective actors, such as parliament and political parties, which have traditionally been responsible for controlling and, if necessary, counteracting the power of political leaders, leaves room for the gradual expansion of government and the use of unilateral and often emergency legislative powers by political leaders, as was clearly evident during the pandemic phase.

This type of double personalization goes hand in hand with the claim of a monocratic principle of political action so that the leader tends to become the real centre of the party organization, controlling also the governmental activities. To follow and analyse these trends in the Italian and Spanish cases, we formulate some hypotheses regarding the first two decades of the 21st century:

H1) We believe that there is a growing fragmentation, with a greater number of new parties and a bigger actual number of parties.

¹ The role of government and political leaders in general has progressively grown in several countries beyond formal (constitutional) and administrative-structural changes. On the subject, with reference to the general trend: Poguntke and Webb (2005); Webb, Poguntke, Kolodny (2012); Musella and Webb (2015); Helms (2005); Foley (1993); Heffernan (2003), and to the Spanish case: Pérez Francesch (2000); Vidal Prado (2001); Van Biezen, Hopkin (2005); Ramírez (1998); Fittipaldi (2020). On the Italian case - individually or in comparison (also with the Spanish case), see mainly: Calise (2000; 2006; 2016); Musella (2020a; 2020b). Finally, on the role of leadership in crisis situations, see, among others, the contribution of Boin, t'Hart, Van Esch (2012).

H2) Suppose that a greater fragmentation of intermediate and collective bodies corresponds to an increasing number of governmental acts, both in terms of decrees and legislative initiatives.

Of course, the fragmentation of the electorate highlights what is meant by a high degree of electoral mobility and change of opinion on specific issues. Very often, voters' preferences change rapidly on political issues. And leaders become the most attractive reference points. As a crucial part of the theory of reflexive modernity, the thesis of individualism and its processes has replaced the reflection on collective actors (Beck, 1992; Lash, 1979). And the situation created by the pandemic crisis has accelerated this trend. The early stages of the pandemic highlight the role of multi-level personal politics in crisis management and the institutional face of the phenomenon of personalisation (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenhav, 2014). Already in the early stages of the emergency, Italy and Spain showed a deep concentration of power on the executive (Musella, 2020a; Fittipaldi, 2021).

2. The double personalization of politics: a new theoretical framework

Personalization is one of the most widespread and relevant phenomenon in contemporary politics. The decline of the party as a collective body coincides with the transformation of its organizational structures. With the rise of the personal party model (Calise, 2000), parties are not abandoning the political scene, but now their weight and relevance depend -increasingly- on their leaders. While personal politics has been strongly associated with a pre-democratic or anti-democratic realm of politics, it has also proven to be compatible with the routines, discourse, and limits of liberal regimes (Calise, 2011: 1860; Duverger, 1974). And when the process of personalization meets that of digitization of politics, mass personalization is the necessary outcome (Calise and Musella, 2019). In the transition from the modern to the postmodern, of course, a crucial role in the emergence of personal leadership is played by the electronic media, television and the Internet in particular. In addition, social networks and the intensive use of digital data analysis and micro-targeting represent an important link in the field of decision-making in which the opinions and reactions of followers' weigh (McGregor, 2020; Bracciale, Andretta and Martella, 2021). Within a process of individualization of social life (Bauman, 2001) and high fragmentation of web audiences, political leaders can monitor constituents and continuously react to their demands, thus taking advantage of a highly personal and even emotional relationship with citizens, with large opportunities for them to control, and often manipulate, users' perceptions and opinions. Following this perspective and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004), congruence between leaders and voters is a basic issue for consensus and electoral success: people tend to like more those politicians whose personality traits coincide more closely with their own traits (Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004). Thus, on the one hand, leaders have gained a central place, concerning political communication, due to the effects of the technological innovations in the media and the organizational change which allow by the development of a direct relationship with citizens. On the other hand, the citizens (and even more the "militants" of the party) are at the centre of this direct relationship with the political vertex, given that they are privileged recipients of its messages. Therefore, micro-targeting, i.e., political profiling based on the personal media diet of everyone, is now the basis for (political) consensus building.²

Of course, and as a rich literature has been documenting (Karvonen, 2010; Costa Lobo and Curtice, 2014; Rahat and Kenig, 2018), the concentration of power in the hands of monocratic figures in several countries is a key element in such a process. Leaders are increasingly visible and therefore subject to constant public scrutiny. One of the main consequences of the process is the perception of leaders as individuals, favouring their private faces (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2011). In this sense, the closeness between the leaders and the masses has become a *conditio sine qua non* for the electoral success of the former.

If the personalisation of politics is "a process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., the political party) decreases" (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007: 65), it can be argued that a dual personalisation framework emerges. Both on the supply side of politics (personal or increasingly personalized parties, with campaigns focused on candidates and top leaders) and on the demand side (citizen-voters). Thus, the individual is the center of gravity of the new politics and there are several empirical evidences that individual political actors are more prominent and popular with respect to parties, collective identities and the institutions they

² The example of Donald Trump is illuminating on this point. Trump has equipped himself with a hyper-professional organisational machine, with a strong external corporate component and skills related more to business and economic affairs and less to politics. See: Musella, 2020c.

represent (Musella and Webb, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2019). The personalization of politics³, within the change of the cultural and economic bases of society and the assumption of a reality in which the individualization of identities dominates, pushes the parties towards a profound functional transformation. From agencies of socialization to politics, aimed at integrating the masses into the State, the parties are transformed into organizational machines and separate themselves from society, entrenching themselves in the institutions and thus limiting themselves to the functions of government, at the service of personal leadership whose entry into politics represents the real novelty of the end of the century (Calise, 2000).

Also, during the coronavirus emergency, the activism of leaders in social networks has been very evident. Most heads of government have communicated day by day their decisions in press conferences held on social media pages, such as Twitter or Instagram⁴. Early studies in this field show that world leaders have widely used social networks as a powerful tool to communicate quickly with citizens during public health crises: to inform, raise morale, and even politicize, resulting in broadly viral effects on the spread of their message⁵(Rufai and Bunce, 2020). However, the high level of personalization of politics during the crisis has raised doubts about the balance of power in several consolidated democracies, as classical democratic institutions, such as parliaments, are weakening with respect to their traditional role (Cormacain and Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020).

In the following two sections, we will test our two hypotheses.

3. Political fragmentation

The erosion of collective belonging, defined by class or religious divisions, has reduced the more stable and long-term consensus based on a worldview rather than trust in a candidate. The process of fragmentation of the old social classes and the push for individualisation of orientations and behaviours have strengthened personalisation. At the same time, the spread of the media - especially television and, more recently, digital communication via the Internet - has accompanied the weakening of traditional social belonging

In recent decades, parties have undergone profound transformations that are both a cause and a consequence of personalization. The widespread erosion of party loyalties found in almost all advanced industrial democracies - party dealignment – makes necessary the readaptation of mass parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Franklin, Mackie, Valen, 1992). The interaction between the consequent organizational changes in political parties and technological innovations led to the centrality of individual actors and party leaders in particular. The weakening of the main divisions/fractures that structured traditional party systems results in high - unprecedented - levels of party volatility and a "wave of deinstitutionalization of the party system" (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2017) that will inevitably have consequences on governance systems in terms of the relevance of monocratic actors.

The Spanish and Italian party systems were structured in a complex manner along religious, class, regional, and ideological fault lines. Throughout the course of the two Republics, fragmentation grew even more, thus weakening the traditional party system. Therefore, increasingly fragmented politics led to the stagnation of parliamentary politics - of public policymaking - thus contributing to a shift in the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches, reinforcing the trends of "de-parliamentarization" and "monocratization" noted above (Barber and McCarty, 2015). As shown in the following graph, there is an increasing trend in the effective number of political parties in Spain. At the base of the birth of new political parties⁶ is the growing votability of the electorate who, no longer bound by strong identity ties, represent an increase in the number of floating voters that feeds electoral volatility and ends up being the breeding ground for the emergence of new political experiences and organized formations (Hernández Lafuente and Laiz Castro, 2017). The emergence of first Ciudadanos and then Podemos changes the political scenario. First of all,

3For an interesting analysis of the use of the terms personalisation and presidentialisation and the consequent perspectives of study, see: Elgie and Passarelli (2019).

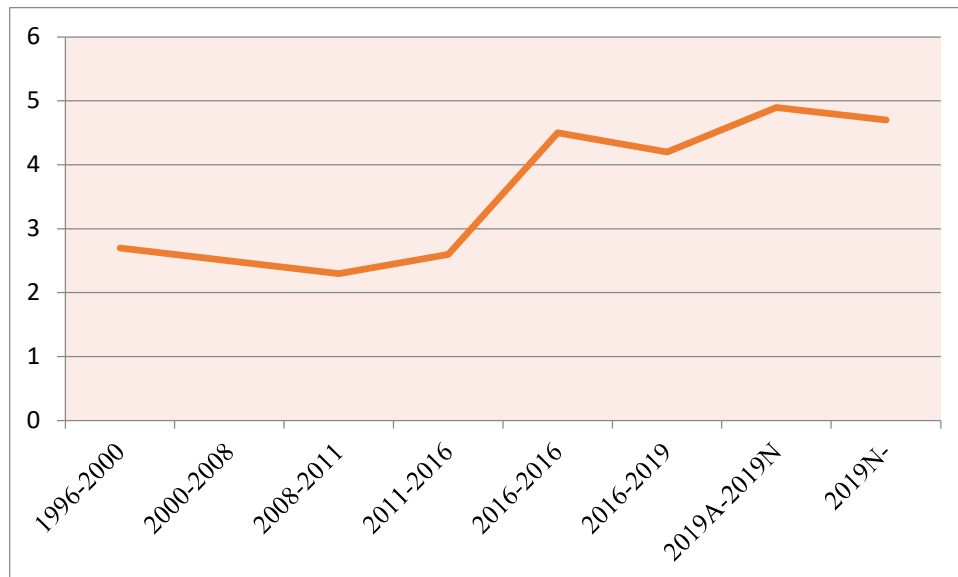
4For example, President Trump's communications during the pandemic (COVID-19) were very high on social media (Hatcher, 2020). In addition to the paradigmatic US case, parliamentary regimes such as Italy also show a high level of personalisation of communication. Giuseppe Conte's considerable presence in the media (from his persuasive speeches and messages) makes clear the centrality of the President of the Council (Ventura, 2021).

5 An example of the change in communication modes brought about by the pandemic was proposed by Italian Prime Minister Conte, who announced several decrees on his personal Facebook page before they were published in the Official Gazette.

6 Data related to the number of new parties point to a considerable increase right at the time of the crisis, the Great Recession, through 2016 and 2018.

the scene is reorganized after a gap between the traditional and the new parties, between the old and the new politics. Secondly, the political culture of the new parties makes it clear that the two fractures (capital/work and centre/periphery) embodied by the ideas of "red Spain" and "broken Spain" continue to be in force. The emergence of these parties and the electoral strength they have achieved have shown that the so-called "system of '78" has not been so stable and definitive (Pérez-Agote, 2017) and has added more fractures -transversal ones- in Spanish society.

Figure 1: Evolution of the effective number of parties in Spain (2000-2020)

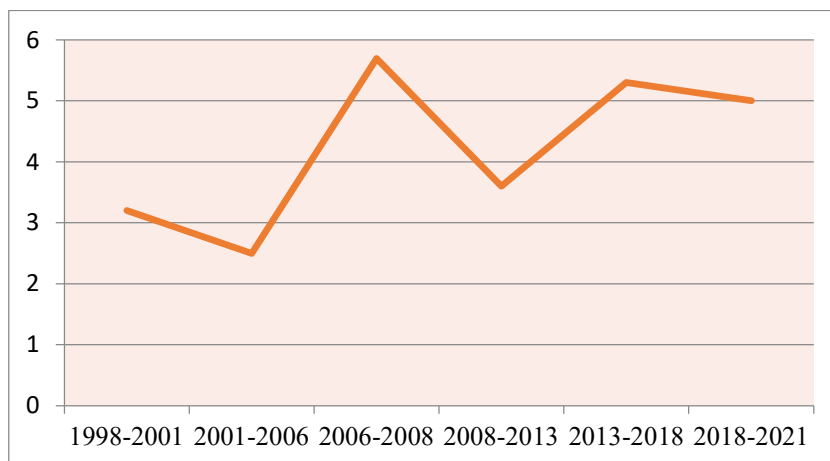


Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from "WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond", PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu. Casal Bértoa (2021).

Although Italy, more than Spain, is a country accustomed to governmental instability, the effective number of parties is constantly growing. Already in the 1990s the existing party system was destabilised and the old parties lost credibility or were not strong enough to succeed (e.g. the Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS). This gave rise to new parties¹² (e.g. on the right and centre-right of the continuum: Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Lega) which, however, did not disrupt the political scene, still exploiting the classic social cleavages. But the first decade of 2000 also saw the birth of the Five Star Movement, which changed the balance of a system frozen since 1994 (Lanzone, 2015)

This analysis is supported by the data on new parties. In both countries the number of new parties increases from one period to the next. New parties have to overcome many hurdles before they can win a seat in parliament and a share of government power. In most party systems, only a few new parties achieve (electoral) success. Beyond the factors identified as causal for the emergence of new parties¹⁶, in both Spain and Italy the number of parties gaining votes has increased in recent years with the entry into the political system of so-called anti-establishment parties, which are not only new (original) parties, but also new in terms of opposition and policy proposals.

Figure 2: Evolution of the effective number of parties in Italy (2000-2020)



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from "WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond", PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu. Casal Bértoa (2021).

In fact, also in countries where a sort of Continental Westminster model had been established, as in Spain, with an alternation of government between socialist and popular parties and with executives of a single colour as well as with the coincidence between government and party leadership positions, this disappeared in the face of the birth of new parties and to the multiplication of governments (Musella, 2018; Sola, Rendueles, 2018; Vittori, 2020). Among the new parties, the *challenger* parties, in an anti-establishment perspective, have won many votes and seats in parliament and, in the two countries considered here, have also (partially) won the government⁷. These new parties, mainly Podemos and the Five Star Movement, not only challenged the dominant parties, considerably weakening the iron law of bipartism (Cordero, Montero, 2015), but also proposed, on the political scene, new (charismatic) leaders whose media visibility functioned as a political consensus machine, capable of challenging even the most consolidated leaderships of the traditional parties that until then had also fulfilled the leadership of government in a fairly automatic manner. These parties present themselves as an alternative not in terms of policy, but rather in terms of *modus operandi* (Ignazi, 2020). And, in this sense, the category of "*challenger*" party refers to those new parties that have presented an opposition to all mainstream parties (Hino, 2012; Hernández and Kriesi, 2016).

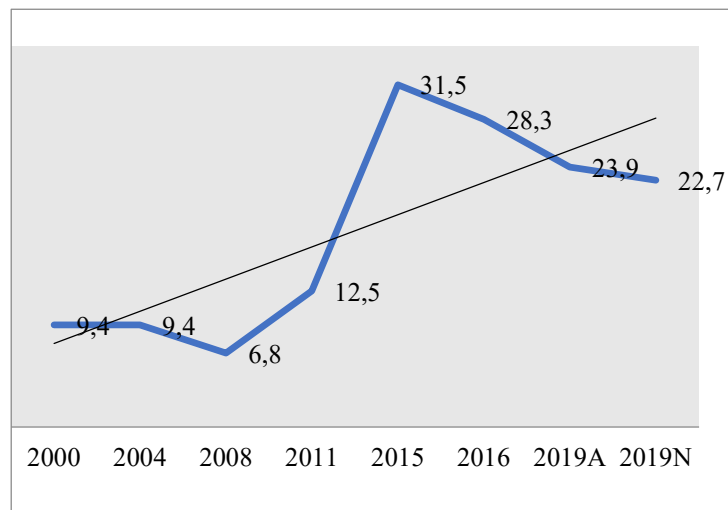
This situation outlines a broader political offer, where the emergence and success of these challenger parties may paradoxically imply a reduction of radical anti-party and anti-systemic sentiments⁸. But a broader political offer implies greater fragmentation above all (Dalton, 2021). And when fragmentation in the party system has increased and the first party has obtained lower percentages of votes than in the past, the help of electoral mechanisms has no longer served to facilitate the formation of stable and/or lasting governments. Thus, along these lines, if by polarisation⁹ we mean the general ideological distance between the most extreme parties (Casal Bértoa and Rama, 2021), we note that, in our two countries, this is growing along with fragmentation. Political scientists converge on one point about democratic political systems: clearly fragmented, they have tended to become more polarised. Polarisation is negatively related to the efficiency and stability of democracy and to the functioning and dynamics of the party system (Wang, 2014).

7 Here we refer to the cases of Podemos and Movimiento Cinco Estrellas. The purple party (Podemos), after a strong instability of governments and unclear results at the polls, has made a government pact with the socialists winning the vice-presidency of the government (2020), while the M5S, gaining much support, but facing a country divided at the polls, came to government by agreement first with the Lega (2018) and then with the Partito Democratico (2019).

8 Indeed, according to some scholars, these political actors can solve the legitimacy crisis of political parties. See: Cerruto y Facello, 2014.

9 Polarisation can be calculated by taking into account the percentage of votes won by the "anti-establishment" parties. These are understood as anti-establishment if the party: a) perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment; b) asserts that there is a fundamental divide between the political establishment and the people; c) challenges the status quo in terms of policy issues and political system issues.

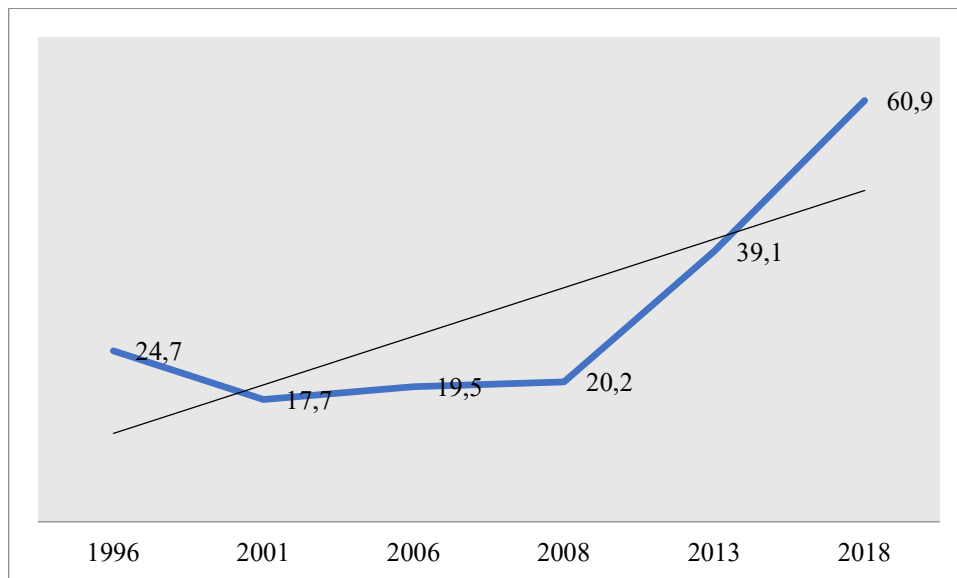
Figure 3: Polarisation in Spain



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from "WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond", PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu. Casal Bértoa (2021).

As we can see in Figures 3 and 4, thanks to the trend line, polarisation is a relevant fact in both countries. And, on the other hand, we also know that the vote for the main mainstream parties has decreased with a consequent increase in electoral volatility (Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Spain, 2015; Anduiza, Bosch, Orriols and Rico, 2014; Valbruzzi 2019).

Figure 4: Polarisation in Italy



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from "WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond", PSGo. Available at: whogoverns.eu. Casal Bértoa (2021).

Similarly, the process of fragmentation is closely related to the instability of political systems. Most studies on the relationship between party fragmentation in the electorate and the (voting) behaviour of party representatives in the legislative arena (Bowler, 2000; Thies, 2000; Hazan, 2003) confirm that the combination of electoral volatility and polarisation results in a more undisciplined legislature. Indeed, the weakening of stable party identification results in more individualistic behaviour on behalf of representatives, which very often tends to undermine the cohesion and discipline of the majority. More personalised legislatures are

formed as a consequence of more individualised societies. As a result, parliaments represent a chaotic environment for law-making, which encourages political leaders to find alternative and autonomous channels for legislation. Several studies investigating the relationship between the executive and parliament have emphasised that high parliamentary fragmentation drastically reduces ordinary legislation in favour of government decrees and legislation "protected" through votes of confidence or other similar tools (Laver, Laver and Shepsle, 1996; De Micheli and Fragnelli, 2019; De Micheli, 2020; Musella, 2020).

This has also been proposed as the origin of the 'temptation' for presidents to expand their powers to overcome legislative stalemates or slowdowns (Carmines and Fowler, 2017). The pandemic crisis caused by the emergence and rapid spread of Covid-19 has also facilitated the reduction of the parliamentary role. Although Spain opted for remote voting, making it one of the countries with at least one 'hybrid chamber' (Ibrido, 2020), the role of the legislative body was no more relevant than in Italy. Indeed, as during the first period of the state of emergency the parliament mainly passed decree-laws that had already been approved by the executive and resolutions to extend the state of emergency, and "governing by decree" seems to be a consolidated practice adopted by governments of different political origins (de la Iglesia, 1997; Fittipaldi, 2020), it is not surprising, therefore, that the Covid-19 crisis was dealt with by executive acts.

Spain and Italy are facing an electoral scenario characterised by the punishment of the governing parties and the emergence or strengthening of new anti-establishment competitors that challenge the canons of traditional politics. These elements, albeit with national differences and peculiarities, have characterised southern European countries (including Greece and Portugal) since the 2011 elections¹⁰. Fragmentation and political polarisation mirror a divided society and thus lead to a less central role of collective bodies and instead to a stronger role of leaders, especially party leaders who have the responsibility to govern (Morlino and Raniolo 2018). And therefore make the two countries more exposed to what we call the double trend of personalisation.

4. The legislating government

As political fragmentation and polarisation increase, the sceptre passes into the hands of the government in the strict sense of the word. Fragmentation in the parliamentary arena often leads to legislative paralysis and makes the representative body less effective²³. There are two main consequences: first, the electoral body becomes even more heterogeneous in the face of a divided and fragmented political offer; second, it is the executive that takes over the entire decision-making process. This is all the more true in times of crisis. And as recent pandemic events show, emergence has become a permanent condition of democracies beyond the crises themselves, paving the way for the expansion of the role of government in recent decades²⁴ (Ginsburg and Versteeg, 2020; Musella, 2020a; 2022).

The expansion of government is one of the clearest trends in modern politics, as the abundance of analysis and research on the subject makes evident. In general, this expansion was justified by the increased responsibilities (political and market ones) that executives acquired both domestically and internationally. However, to paraphrase Lowi (1979), the old justification for expansion had little to say beyond the need for expansion itself.

In Spain, the executive is, by the very will of the constituents and by the capacity for collaboration between the two main parties, PSOE and UCD/AP/PP¹¹, predominant over the parliament and, within this collective body, the centralisation of power in the figure of the president of the government¹² is also very evident (Musella, 2020; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020; Fittipaldi, 2020). The Italian case, on the other hand, shows a different trend where, since the 1980s, "the figure of the chief executive has evolved over time within a material form of government" (Criscitiello 2020, 47, our translation). While the stability of the Spanish government and, therefore, its primacy over the representative body was guaranteed precisely by the limited and circumscribed role of the parties, in Italy it is the process of personalisation, since the 1990s, which has characterised the new direction of politics, giving a less relevant role to the collective bodies (parties and parliament) and the new political system.

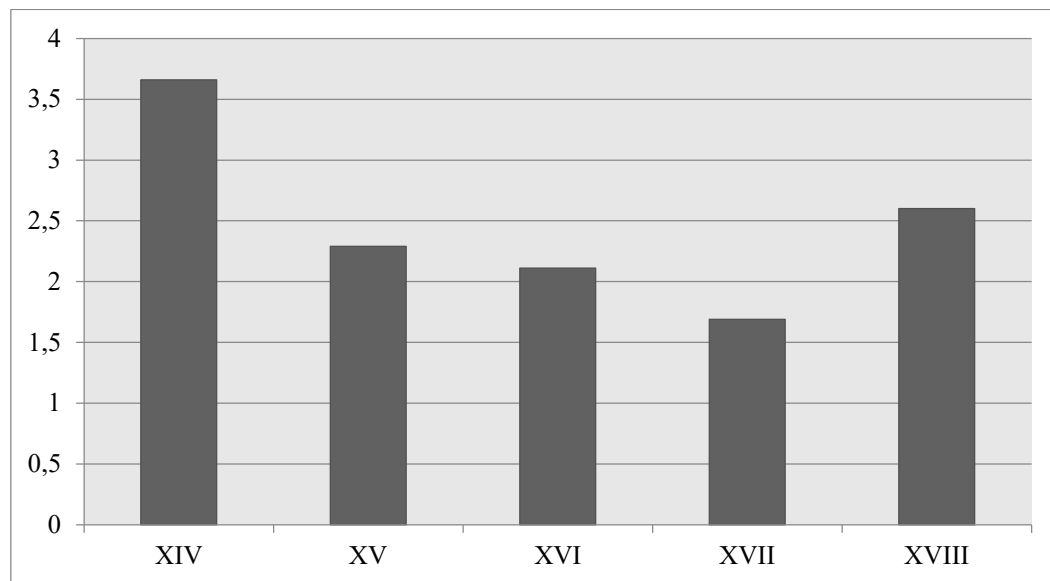
10 This trend has led to talk about a kind of syndrome, an "electoral epidemic", which has common roots in the management of the financial and debt crisis (Bosco and Verney 2012). In this vein, Peter Mair (2013) speaks of "ruling the void", referring to the decline in voter turnout and party affiliation as well as the reduction of party loyalties. The electorates are leaving the political arena while the elites represent an even more professional and homogenous class.

11 In the Transition, the expression "consensus" was used to underline the understanding between the two main political parties, one in government and the other in opposition.

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The key variable in understanding the strengthening of government in recent decades refers to what is referred to as a transfer of power from the legislative to the executive branch (Pérez Francesch, 2020). Therefore, an important way of assessing the delegation of power is to look at the legislative flow. As scholars have noted, this trend shows the growing influence of government over the agenda-setting process (Tsebelis and Rasch, 2011). And, as we pointed out above, parallel to the strengthening of the government as an executive body, we can observe a progressive weakening of the representative body, beyond the legislative function, still in the functions of control and guidance (Pastore, 2020; Griglio, 2020).

Figure 5: Evolution of standardised decree-laws during months of legislature in Italy



Source: own elaboration based on data from <https://www.normattiva.it/>

As we can see in graph 5, the Italian case does not show a linear growth trend in the use of decrees. As is evident, the fourteenth legislature, which coincides with the governments of Berlusconi II and III, is the most productive in these terms, as Berlusconi II's government was the longest in the history of the Italian Republic. But the trend of government expansion is reinforced by the existence and considerable recourse to the Decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (Dpcm). The following table shows the Dpcm data for the first two decades of 2000 and their relative monthly average. The trend sees a remarkable use of this administrative tool. 2020 is, in this sense, the year of explosion of the Dpcm given the large use of this administrative source for the management of the pandemic. "Governing by decree" and "governing by dpcm" is not an innovative line in Italian politics, but they have now become the common thread of the executive of the pandemic phase, and this especially in the initial stages under the government of Giuseppe Conte (Criscitiello, 2020; Frosini, 2019).

Table 1: Number of decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers in Italy and monthly average

Year	Dpcm number	Monthly average
2000	12	1
2001	12	1
2002	7	0,58
2003	2	0,17
2004	5	0,42
2005	4	0,33
2006	7	0,58
2007	3	0,25
2008	2	0,17
2009	10	0,83
2010	14	1,17
2011	16	1,33
2012	3	0,25
2013	7	0,58
2014	11	0,92
2015	7	0,58
2016	6	0,5
2017	11	0,92
2018	9	0,75
2019	19	1,58
2020	27	2,25

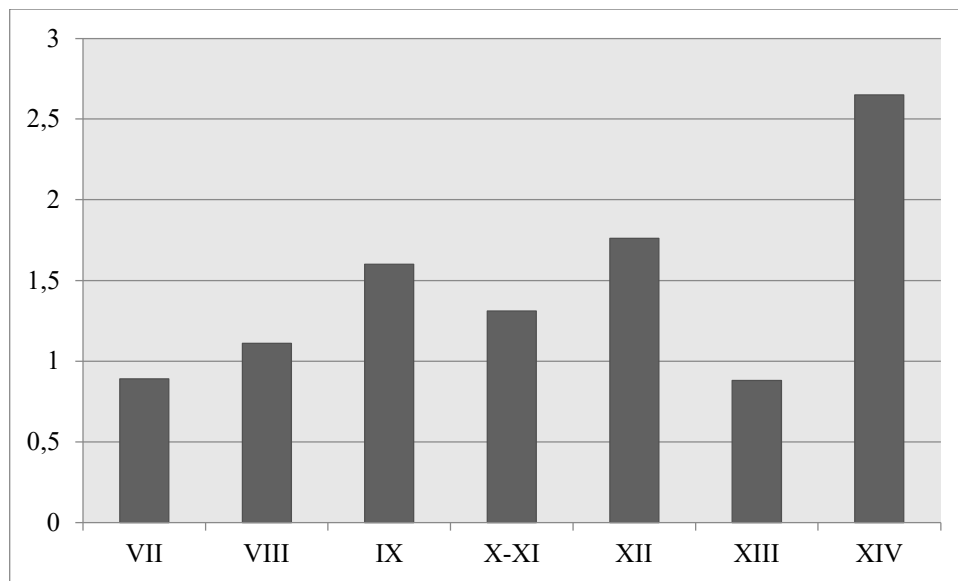
Source: Official website of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

As is evident, in this context, the use of governmental and presidential decrees is not only increasing in presidential regimes, such as the United States, but parliamentary governments where there are tendencies to transfer important prerogatives from the legislature to the executive and, within the executive, to the President (Musella, forthcoming)¹³. In this sense, we also know that, although there is evidence of a process of centralisation of decision-making at the central level, with the reinforcement of the role of the executive, the protagonism of regional political leaders, i.e., the Presidents of the regions¹⁴, must be also taken into account. As has been observed, crisis contingencies pose similar decision-making and communication challenges for those - actors at different levels of governance - acting on behalf of the state (Stern and Sundelius, 2002; Boin et al., 2021).

¹³ For a reflection on the American model and the modern doctrine of separation of powers, see: Pious, 1979; Lowi, 1985; Fabbrini, 1993; Musella, 2012; Ackerman, 2000.

¹⁴ For a comparison between Italy and Spain on the relevance of executive and presidential bodies during the pandemic, see: Fittipaldi, 2021.

Figure 6: Evolution of standardised decree laws for months of legislature in Spain.



Source: Prepared by the authors based on data from the Official State Gazette (BOE), <https://www.boe.es/>.

Figure 6¹⁵ indicates a considerable use of governmental decree in Spain that sees peaks especially in conjunction with critical phases for Iberian politics, as is evident in the years of the so-called Great Recession (IX-XII legislatures) and the crisis pandemic (XIV legislature). In this sense, researchers see policy formulation by decree as an usurpation of power, a way of circumventing a hostile parliament. Of course, it has been noticed that "almost everywhere, there has been a monocentric trend that sees the executive as the main actor in legislative activity" (Fabbrini y Vassallo, 1999: 126, our translation). However, it is in the critical phases that this tendency is most evident. Although from a theoretical point of view we need to speak of emergency acts at the onset of specific contingencies, the expansion of governmental emergency decrees/draft laws (even beyond the initial and truly emergency phases) emphasises that their use is no longer exceptional but essential in today's policy practice. Indeed, political executives have increasingly resorted to emergency legislation as part of their autonomous action, along with the tendency to take control of the legislative agenda (Musella, 2018; Pomed Sanchez, 2020)¹⁶. As we have shown, mainly due to the high fragmentation of the party system and, thus, the difficult law-making in divided assemblies, "emergency stabilisation" has become a new source of political stability in most democracies¹⁷. Moreover, the more recent process of personalisation of politics has transformed emergency bills into the most effective tools to ensure that heads of government make decisions effectively and have a strong impact on the media. Recent pandemic events have shown that both Spain and Italy have had a media diet heavily centred on the figure of the prime minister/president of the government (Fittipaldi, 2021; Amoretti, Fittipaldi, Santaniello, forthcoming; Rullo and Nunziata, forthcoming).

As recent debates have shown, executive-legislative relations in parliamentary democracies are undergoing significant changes (Petrov 2020). Scholars continue to point to the growing influence of the government in the agenda-setting process (Tsebelis and Rasch 2011). A useful indicator in this regard is the government's legislative initiatives. Of course, the strengthening of the executive has been particularly evident in the legislative sphere, where expansion at the expense of Parliament/Congress has been achieved through a growing array of instruments. Our two cases suggest that there is evidence of an ongoing

¹⁵ We have grouped legislatures X and XI in our analysis because of the short period of time involved.

¹⁶ The expression "Government by decree" (used in both Spain and Italy) represents a style of government in which the legislative function, constitutionally attributed to Parliament, is often exercised by the executive body, beyond the formally recognised prerogatives.. For an analysis of the two countries see: de la Iglesia Chamorro, 1997; Celotto, 1997.

¹⁷ Rule by decree has long been a peculiar feature of some geographical areas (Sartori 1994) and, in this framework, individual leaders have also dominated - and dominate - law-making, especially in particular contexts such as the post-Soviet world (Protsyk 2004) or Latin America (Ferreira Rubio and Goretti 1998).

shift in executive policy with regard to legislative activity.

Therefore, in Italy¹⁸ there is a rather increasing trend of government legislative initiative, with a remarkable increase between 2006 and 2008, and with an average government legislative initiative of 75% in the period considered. In Spain¹⁹, apart from the free fall of the 13th legislature (mainly due to the fact that it lasted only a few months), the government's legislative initiative rate is also quite high with an average of 68% in the period considered. However, on average, in both countries, the majority of legislative initiatives come from the executive despite the fact that we are dealing with parliamentary systems. Such a situation leads to talk of "marginalisation of parliament" (Lupo, 2020), especially in crisis situations when rapid intervention is required and the executive is therefore the main (and quickest and most direct) channel for legislation. This was even more noticeable during the pandemic, when in both Italy and Spain most of the acts designed to manage the health, economic and social crisis were executive and presidential (Fittipaldi, 2021; Staiano, 2020; Dell'Atti and Naglieri, 2020).

As is clear, the data confirm the idea of an "executive domain" (Lijphart, 1999) and help scholars to go beyond the definitions of the classical literature on regime types, i.e. that it is not only institutional characteristics that determine the actual decision-making process and political agenda-setting power.

4. Conclusions

The thesis of monocacy and the one of the double personalisation of policy finds support in the data used here. Increasingly, the electoral success and functioning of governments depends on their leaders. If, until recently, collective actors were the vehicles of mass participation, in more recent times monocratic powers are asserting themselves, with important consequences for the organisation and change of representative regimes. In this area, the web has pushed the idea of a party system based on market competition, focused on elections and, increasingly, on the role of individual candidates.

Political fragmentation thus becomes the distinguishing feature of legislatures and society in a difficult dialectical relationship where the indication of the causal element cannot always be taken for granted. With respect to our first hypothesis, both Spain and Italy have a very high and growing effective number of parties in elections. And if we look at the "pure" number of new parties, the data also show a growth in the variable. Voters, more independent and less loyal towards traditional party affiliations, are progressively expressing themselves with a leader-oriented vote that seems to suggest a high rate of individualism, as it involves an increasingly personalised conception of the representative mandate.

In recent years, in many contemporary democracies, there has been a clear change of course with the transfer of competences and powers to the government. A path of progressive weakening of legislative and representative assemblies²⁰ takes place until parliaments, in fact, lose their centrality in political systems (Griglio, 2020), starting with the reduction of the law-making function. A process that, as we have seen, with reference to the second hypothesis introduced in this paper, has empirical evidence: in Spain there is an increasing trend in governmental decrees, while in Italy, the high but less clear rates of decrees are reinforced by the high use of decrees by the President of the Council of Ministers. However, with reference to legislative initiative, both in Italy and Spain there is a high degree of legislative initiative by the government. Thus, government legislative initiatives are many and account for the majority of total laws in both countries. The data analysed thus support our initial considerations.

Thanks to the analysis carried out, we can define some trends that contribute to explaining the processes in which contemporary democracies are immersed. The fragmentation of the public sphere does not facilitate the construction and identification of clear identities and, in this sense, technological development, unpredictable reality, the speed of changes in the social and economic context are, without a doubt, elements of "context" that cannot be ignored. For some time now, analysis of the political party as an organisation has highlighted the growth in importance and political role of the party's apexes (Katz and Mair, 1993). The spread of a plebiscitary conception of democracy (Calise, 2000) helps this process even more favoured by digitalisation: leaders become direct interlocutors of the citizens or, better, of the fragmented and atomised masses. And it is precisely this link and this reference to the leader

¹⁸ According to the Italian Constitution (Articles 71 and 87), the Executive can propose a law and, in fact, most legislative acts are government initiatives. Data source: own elaboration based on official data from the Italian Parliament: www.camera.it.

¹⁹ The Spanish Constitution (Articles 87 and 88) foresees the existence of governmental legislative initiatives. Source: own elaboration based on official data from the Spanish congress: www.congreso.es

²⁰ To borrow Theodore Lowi's fortunate expression, we could define this process as "legicide".

that makes the electorate itself increasingly fragmented. The phenomenon of the personal party outlined this trend and, on the one hand, highlights the process of organisational "restructuring" of parties and, on the other, the transformations of political representation (Elia, 1970; 2006).

The 20th century and its precise geometries of social and political identities are over. And, as we have seen, political fragmentation also has an eminently legislative face: as fragmentation increases, so does the polarisation of legislatures, which often means that the main functions of the representative body (policy-making) are slowed or blocked. The sceptre thus passes from body to body. The executive, and especially its president, are also gaining primacy on the legislative front. The system of sources is an obvious element of the paradigm shift in which today the "monocratic principle" seems to prevail over the "collegial principle". From society to politics and from politics to society. Fragmentation and verticalisation are flip sides of the same coin.

5. Bibliography

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