

## Anti-Austerity Parties Ten Years Later: A Framework for Analysis

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**Abstract.** In the aftermath of the Great Recession, new (or, at that time, fringe) parties made inroads into Southern Europe, a region particularly affected by the sovereign debt crisis and austerity measures. The shared ambition of such challenger parties was to represent excluded sections of the population, or even the “99%”, or the “people”, and was in most cases accompanied by a discourse of democratic regeneration, also through innovative organizational practices.

Ten years later, what remains of those parties in the five main countries of the area (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, as well as France, where there was also the irruption of a left-wing populist party)? What were their systemic impacts? Is it possible to systematically explain the reasons for extremely divergent outcomes?

The paper, after a controlled comparison, proposes a framework for analyzing the varying trajectories of the main political movements of our interest: the Portuguese radical left, Podemos, La France Insoumise, the 5 Star Movement and Syriza. The paper argues that at least three factors are central to understanding their different evolution. First: electoral success and participation in government. Evidence shows that, without exception, the latter has been detrimental to the parties’ electoral fortunes. Second: their ideology and organization. These can be considered as factors that can facilitate or hinder the adaptation of the party to different political contexts, and, more remarkably, the return of the centrality of the left-right axis. Thirdly, the strategic reactions of mainstream political actors, particularly the traditional centre-left parties.

It is possible to outline three scenarios: a scenario of substantial continuity (Portugal) or “return to the past” (i.e. to the “pre-populist” phase: Spain); a “mainstreaming” scenario, with a centripetal drift and loss of capacity to preside over the contestation space (Greece); a scenario of consolidation as a “populist leftist” actor, in opposition (France) or alternative (Italy) to the mainstream centre or centre-left parties.

**Keywords:** Anti-Austerity; Party System; Populism; Radical Left; Southern Europe.

### [es] Partidos anti-austeridad diez años después: un marco para el análisis

**Resumen.** Tras la Gran Recesión, partidos nuevos (o, en ese momento, marginales) lograron avances en el sur de Europa, una región particularmente afectada por la crisis de la deuda soberana y las medidas de austeridad. La ambición común de dichos partidos desafiantes era representar a sectores excluidos de la población, o incluso al “99%” o al “pueblo”, y en la mayoría de los casos, esto iba acompañado de un discurso de regeneración democrática, también a través de prácticas organizativas innovadoras. Diez años después, ¿qué queda de esos partidos en los cinco principales países de la región (Portugal, España, Italia, Grecia, así como Francia, donde también irrumpió un partido populista de izquierda)? ¿Cuáles fueron sus impactos sistémicos? ¿es posible explicar sistemáticamente las razones de los resultados extremadamente divergentes?

El artículo, después de una comparación controlada, propone un marco para analizar las diversas trayectorias de los principales movimientos políticos de nuestro interés: la izquierda radical portuguesa, Podemos, La France Insoumise, el Movimiento 5 Estrellas y Syriza. El artículo argumenta que al menos tres factores son centrales para comprender su diferente evolución. Primero: el éxito electoral y la participación en el gobierno. Las evidencias muestran que, sin excepción, esta última ha sido perjudicial para la suerte electoral de los partidos. Segundo: su ideología y organización. Estos pueden considerarse factores que pueden facilitar o dificultar la adaptación del partido a diferentes contextos políticos y, de manera más notable, el regreso de la centralidad del eje izquierda-derecha. En tercer lugar, las reacciones estratégicas de los actores políticos tradicionales, particularmente los partidos tradicionales de centroizquierda.

Es posible delinear tres escenarios: un escenario de continuidad sustancial (Portugal) o de “retorno al pasado” (es decir, a la fase “pre-populista”: España); un escenario de “normalización”, con una deriva centripeta y

pérdida de capacidad para presidir el espacio de la contestación (Grecia); un escenario de consolidación como un actor “populista de izquierda”, en oposición (Francia) o alternativo (Italia) a los partidos tradicionales de centro o centroizquierda.

**Palabras clave:** anti-austeridad; sistema de partidos; populismo; izquierda radical, Europa del Sur.

**Resumen.** Introduction: The puzzle. 1. The rise (and fall) of anti-austerity parties in Southern Europe. 2. Anti-austerity parties ten years later: dimensions for explaining different trajectories. 3. Empirical Analysis. Concluding Remarks: A comprehensive framework. Bibliography.

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## Introduction: The puzzle

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, new (or, at that time, fringe) parties made inroads into Southern Europe, a region particularly affected by the sovereign debt crisis and austerity measures. The shared ambition of such challenger parties was to represent excluded sections of the population, or even the “99%”, or the “people”, and was in most cases accompanied by a discourse of democratic regeneration, also through innovative organizational practices.

Ten years later, what remains of those parties in the five main countries of the area (Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, as well as France, where there was also the irruption of a left-wing populist party)? What were their systemic impacts? Is it possible to systematically explain the reasons for extremely divergent outcomes?

The paper, after a controlled comparison, proposes a framework for analysing the varying trajectories of the main political movements of our interest: the Portuguese radical left, Podemos, La France Insoumise, the 5 Star Movement and Syriza. The paper argues that at least three factors are central to understanding their different evolution. First: electoral success and participation in government. Evidence shows that, without exception, the latter has been detrimental to the parties’ electoral fortunes. Second: their ideology and organization. These can be considered as factors that can facilitate or hinder the adaptation of the party to different political contexts, and, more remarkably, the return of the centrality of the left-right axis. Thirdly, the strategic reactions of mainstream political actors, particularly the traditional centre-left parties.

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## 1. The rise (and fall) of anti-austerity parties in Southern Europe

The Great Recession and its consequences shook more than just the economies of Southern Europe. Austerity measures, promoted as remedies for the struggling economies, fed discontent that blossomed into calls for an end to the restrictive

measures and for “real” democracy to supersede the will of domestic and supranational elites. New parties – many populist – made important electoral breakthroughs in 2012 (Syriza, in Greece), 2013 (the Five Star Movement [M5S], in Italy) and 2014 (Podemos, in Spain). In Portugal, apparent stability coexisted with a turn to the left in both electoral and (more remarkably) institutional terms, with the formation in 2015 of an original coalition (*Geringonça*) between the Socialist Party and the two Radical Left parties, the orthodox Communists (PCP) and the “New Left” *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE).

A recent study<sup>1</sup> has highlighted how the immediate success of genuinely new parties, such as M5S and Podemos, or the spectacular growth of long-marginalised niche parties within the party system, like Syriza, are rare and generally unlikely phenomena. On the other hand, new parties founded by seasoned politicians – such as LFI – have a higher likelihood of achieving a breakthrough. Hutter and Kriesi<sup>2</sup> authoritatively spoke of a “restructuration” of national party systems in the broad SE region, mostly due to the appearing of (left-wing) populist parties. Caiani and Graziano<sup>3</sup> proposed their “three crisis framework” to summarize factors opening big windows of opportunity to different “varieties of populisms”. Economic, cultural/migration-related and political (i.e. related to strong tendencies towards political trust decline) crises lead to (and are reproduced by<sup>4</sup>) a “populist wave” in Europe (and beyond). At least in the first half of the decade, the reaction against austerity measures (i.e. the “economic crisis”, in the Caiani and Graziano’s framework) paved the way for the emergence of forms of “inclusive populisms”<sup>5</sup> across the most hit countries, particularly in SE region.

<sup>1</sup> R. Wieringa and M. Meijers, “New kids on the ballot: The party-level determinants of new party success”, *Party Politics* 28, 2022, pp.137-148, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820966573>.

<sup>2</sup> S. Hutter and H.P. Kriesi (eds.), *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> M. Caiani and P. Graziano, “Varieties of Populism: Insights from the Italian Case”, *Italian Political Science Review* 46, 2016, pp. 243-267. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2016.6>.

<sup>4</sup> B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> C. Mudde and C. Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America”, *Government & Opposition* 48, 2013, pp. 147-174. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11>.

As Padoan shows<sup>6</sup>, by relying on Kenneth Roberts' analysis<sup>7</sup> of party system restructuration in Latin America after the crisis of the Washington Consensus and the consequent rise of new challengers from the Left, left-wing populist strategy proved to be particularly successful where mainstream centre-left parties happened to impose market-friendly measures and thus were in a difficult position when the neoliberal model fell discredited and under social and political attack. In countries as Venezuela, Argentina and Bolivia, centripetal convergence between traditional parties from the left and the right in terms of implementation and defense of neoliberal and austerity measures – even under structural constraints – opened the perfect window of opportunity for the triumph of left-wing populist projects (such as Chavism, Kirchnerism as well as Evo Morales' MAS-IPSP party) thanks to major political (linked to the lack of "responsiveness"<sup>8</sup>) and economic crises. Instead, in countries such as Uruguay and Brazil, where major left-of-centre parties stood in the opposition during the Washington Consensus era, Frente Amplio and the Workers' Party inaugurated a long cycle as ruling parties in those countries. Something similar occurred in Southern Europe after the Great Recession: in Italy and Spain populist newcomers (or, as in Greece, niche parties adopting a populist strategy<sup>9</sup>) successfully targeted mainstream centre-left parties for their centripetal strategy, and more recently the same occurred in France, while in Portugal – where Socialists happened to be in opposition during the implementation of harsh austerity measures under Troika's pressures – conditions for a turn to the Left were set without the rise of new inclusive populist actors.

To what extent is it possible to compare these anti-austerity parties and place them in the same party family? Party families are commonly identified by their origins and social bases, transnational links, policy and ideology, and party name<sup>10</sup>. Origins, policies and ideologies, and more recently transnational links seem to point towards quite a coherent group of parties. Regarding their origins, at least three of the mentioned parties emerged in response to the shock caused by the Great Recession and austerity measures: M5S, Podemos, and to a large extent, La France Insoumise, founded in 2016 but essentially an evolution of the Parti de Gauche, created by

<sup>6</sup> E. Padoan, *Anti-Neoliberal Populisms in Comparative Perspective. A Latin-Americanization of Southern Europe?*, London, Routledge, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> K. Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America: Party Systems in the Neoliberal Era*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> P. Mair, *On Parties, Party Systems and Democracy: Selected Writings of Peter Mair*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> G. Katsambekis, "Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power", *Constellations* 23(3), 2016, pp. 391-403, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12234>.

<sup>10</sup> L. Ensser, "The homogeneity of West European party families: The radical right in comparative perspective", *Party Politics* 18(2), 2010, pp. 151-171, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810382936>; P. Mair and C. Mudde, "The party family and its study", *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, 1998, pp. 211-229, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.211>.

Mélenchon in 2009. Syriza's adoption of a left-wing populist strategy was also a consequence of its reading of the economic, political, and social situation in Greece following the Great Recession. The exception, as explained above, is represented by the Portuguese left.

In terms of transnational links, all the anti-austerity parties of Southern Europe are currently gathered within the GUE/NGL in the European Parliament. Until a few months ago, the only exception was the Five Star Movement, undoubtedly the party with the most distinctly populist ideology, which for years had been defined as "polyvalent"<sup>11</sup> or "syncretic"<sup>12</sup> – mainly due to its rather rigid stance on migration policies – or considered an example of "valence populism"<sup>13</sup> for its primary focus on the issue of corruption.

In the four Southern European countries that were the most affected by the Great Recession, electoral results for anti-austerity parties were initially impressive. Between 2012 and 2015, we witnessed the triumph of Syriza (achieving governmental position in 2015 with the 36 percent of the votes), the Five Stars Movement (27 percent in 2013 – in its first appearance in a national election – and an astonishing 33 percent in 2018, securing the formation of a coalition government as a major partner), and Podemos (reaching more than 20 percent in both 2015 and 2016, and finally entering government as a junior partner of the Socialists in 2019). In addition, the Portuguese Radical Left parties won 19 percent of the votes jointly in 2015. The PCP and the BE were the only political actors (together with the French LFI) who have not directly assumed governmental responsibility insofar, although they decisively approved the formation of the Socialist government in 2015 (thus creating the so-called *Geringonça* – "contraption", to capture the "non-natural" and in any case unprecedented alliance between the Portuguese moderate and radical Lefts).

However, all the aforementioned parties are now far from their electoral peaks (see Table 1). Syriza remains the second-largest party in Greece, but its support fell to 21% at the end of its time in government (2019) and dropped further to 17% in the latest elections (2024), which confirmed the dominance of the traditional centre-right party. The Five Star Movement, after five years in government across three different cabinets, secured 15% of the vote in 2022 – and only 9.9% in the recent European elections. It has lost nearly all governmental responsibilities at the local level (whereas in 2018, it still governed cities like Rome and Turin alone) and is now almost irrelevant in subnational elections.

The Portuguese radical left has not reached double-digit support for two consecutive national elections. Podemos, from an electoral standpoint,

<sup>11</sup> A. Pirro, "The polyvalent populism of the 5 Star Movement", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 26(4), 2018, pp. 443-458, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2018.1519484>.

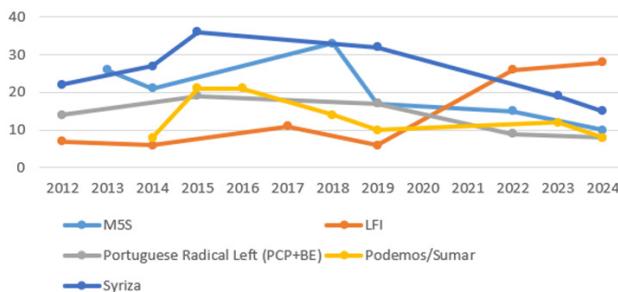
<sup>12</sup> D. Vittori, *Il valore di uno. Il Movimento 5 Stelle e l'esperimento della democrazia diretta*, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> M. Zulianello, "Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-the-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries", *Government and Opposition* 55(2), 2020, pp. 327-347, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2019.21>.

has nearly ceased to exist. The party founded by Pablo Iglesias was already in decline (or at least had *lost its momentum*) when it chose to enter government alongside the Socialists (November 2019); subsequently, its electoral space was nearly entirely taken over by Sumar, the new political project led by former Labour Minister Yolanda Díaz (who comes from the traditional radical left). Podemos fully broke away from Sumar a few months ago. In the latest Spanish national elections, Sumar secured 12% of the vote.

Table 1. National and (in 2014, 2019, 2024) European

National/European Parliamentary Election Results



Parliamentary Election Results, in percentage.

Legend: LFI as Parti de Gauche in 2012 and 2014, as NUPES in 2022, as NUP in 2024. Podemos as Unidas Podemos in 2016, 2018 and 2019; as Sumar Coalition in 2023; as Podemos and Sumar in 2024.

## 2. Anti-austerity parties ten years later: dimensions for explaining different trajectories

To what extent can we speak of a *decline* when describing the trajectories of parties that have nonetheless had a lasting and still visible impact on their respective national party systems? Parties that, therefore, cannot simply be dismissed as *flash parties*?

Mazzolini and Borriello<sup>14</sup> focused on the case of Podemos – at a time when Iglesias's party still held government positions and had not yet been effectively replaced by Sumar as the main political force to the left of the PSOE. The two authors defined *normalisation* as the evolutionary process undergone by anti-austerity parties that pursued a *left-populist* strategy – with explicit reference to both Podemos and Syriza.

This process is summarised in four key points:

(1) the partial institutionalization of party structures and loss of touch with social movements, (2) the repudiation of the initial alterity vis-à-vis the rest of the party system [routinization], and the rescaling of their ambitions, be them electoral or governmental (3) the relative stabilization/decline of electoral performances beneath their stated aspirations, and

<sup>14</sup> S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, "The normalization of left populism? The paradigmatic case of Podemos", *European Politics and Society* 23(3), 2022, pp. 285-300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1868849>.

(4) the repositioning into a more classic position on the left-right divide<sup>15</sup>.

If this process of normalisation is also perfectly applicable to the case of the M5S<sup>16</sup>, the causal mechanisms that led to this outcome still need to be explored. In their analysis of Podemos, Mazzolini and Borriello focused on factors operating at the *macro level* and on *meso-level* factors, concerning certain strategic and organisational characteristics of the party.

In particular, they pointed to the drawbacks of the strategy defined by the party's first ideologue, Íñigo Errejón, aimed at building an "electoral war machine" – a lean, centrally commanded structure designed to execute aggressive political communication and maximize electoral results in a context of political and economic crisis, marked by high volatility. However, in the medium term, internal ruptures further weakened the party's already fragile ability to build a more deeply rooted organization – one capable of functioning as a vehicle for social and political integration for activists (the construction of a solid "party on the ground"<sup>17</sup>). This also included social movements with which Podemos had initially positioned itself as a privileged interlocutor, if not as their direct representative. The causal relation between lack of social rootedness and factionalism can also work in the opposite direction, in the sense that an excessive autonomy of the party elite (*vis à vis* a weak party base) ends up incentivizing personalisms and factionalisms, as well as dramatic strategic turnarounds<sup>18</sup>.

Additionally, the party's strong media-driven personalisation turned into a disadvantage: "the dependence on the leader was not counterbalanced by the presence of relatively strong party structures and regional baronies. In these conditions, any mistake of the party's leader inevitably rebounds on the party as a whole"<sup>19</sup>. Already, Bolleyer and Bytzek<sup>20</sup> had demonstrated that "externally created parties" (*partis de création externe*<sup>21</sup>) – those emerging from pre-existing social organisations and thus already structured before their electoral debut – not only had a higher chance of achieving immediate electoral success but also greater potential for long-term consolidation<sup>22</sup>.

At the *macro level*, Mazzolini and Borriello focused on the transformation of the *populist moment*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 288.

<sup>16</sup> E. Padoan, *Populismo vs Sinistra. Il M5S da Beppe Grillo a Giuseppe Conte in prospettiva comparata*, Milano, Mimesis, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> R. Katz and P. Mair, "Changing models of party organization and party democracy: the emergence of cartel party", *Party Politics* 1(1), 1995, p. 5-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001001001>.

<sup>18</sup> J. Brown, "Trajectories and Legacies of Outsider Party-Building: The Rise and Fall of Spain's Podemos", *Critical Sociology*, 2024, pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205241302752>.

<sup>19</sup> S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> N. Bolleyer and E. Bytzek, "Origins of party formation and new party success in advanced democracies", *European Journal of Political Research* 52, 2013, pp. 773-796. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12013>.

<sup>21</sup> M. Duverger, *Les partis politiques*, París, A. Colin, 1951.

<sup>22</sup> J. Brown, *op. cit.*

The political-economic crisis was compounded by a “cultural crisis”<sup>23</sup> or “cultural backlash”<sup>24</sup>, exacerbated by the migration crisis. This political context undoubtedly facilitated the rise of radical right populism<sup>25</sup>. Indirectly, it also led the progressive electorate to rally against these right-wing adversaries rather than challenge the “centripetal turn” of traditional socialist parties<sup>26</sup>.

Furthermore, other issues – more effectively leveraged by nationalist right-wing parties – gained prominence, such as the Catalan question, which significantly contributed to VOX’s rise<sup>27</sup>, and the dispute over the name of the Republic of North Macedonia, which severely damaged Syriza while it was in government at the time of the Prespes Agreement<sup>28</sup>.

In general, the end of the populist moment – at least the one that had favored anti-austerity parties – coincided with the renewed centrality of the traditional left-right divide. As a result, anti-austerity parties had to adapt, often (but not always) positioning themselves definitively to the left of the socialists, thereby abandoning any aspiration to “transversality”, to use Errejón’s term.

The concept of normalisation has the merit of including processes such as “institutionalization” and “routinisation” of challenger parties, vastly described

by the literature<sup>29</sup>. However, such normalisation can be considered (and, in fact, is considered by Mazzolini and Borriello) as a *constant*, i.e. as a process which has touched all the parties considered in this article – with the partial exception of Portuguese parties, which have much a longer history than the rest. A constant cannot explain, *per se*, different outcomes. However, anti-austerity parties may have resisted or passed through this process in different ways (see Table 2). For sure, as evidence suggests (Table 1), the assumption of governmental responsibilities by anti-austerity parties played a crucial role in accelerating (or starting) the process of “normalisation”.

Furthermore, at the meso (agential) level, different parties may have pursued different strategies to adapt (or resist) to normalisation. These strategies were also influenced by both “genetic” and conjunctural conditions involving ideological, identitarian and sociological factors. Put it plainly: if the process of normalisation entails routinisation (i.e. the vanishment of an identitarian alterity *vis-à-vis* the rest of the party system), challenger parties, particularly when accepting to take part into governmental coalitions, can opt for either fully accepting or trying to resist to routinisation, with several combinations in the middle. Keeping a distinctive profile can be easier when challengers have been able to represent an electorate that is quite different, in sociological terms, than the electorate of mainstream parties: in this case, the creation of a sociological and political cleavage guarantees challengers from full normalisation. Keeping a distinctive profile is nearly always compelling for challenger parties to be normalised (and neutralised) by “the system”. The only exception may occur when challengers have been particularly successful in their challenge, and thus were able to undoubtedly position themselves as main actors in the party system, by clearly defeating (and substituting) at least one of the traditional actors in the main stage.

All of this entails the need for adopting a “relational” approach, i.e. focused on the strategic interplays between challengers and mainstream parties. This leads us to an additional (and key) factor mentioned in Mazzolini and Borriello’s study that could be considered midway between the macro and meso levels and it is very relevant for our discussion: “the importance of interactive factors, i.e., the accommodative or adversarial reaction of mainstream parties with regard agenda is decisive for these challengers’ electoral fortunes”<sup>30</sup>. Specifically, as put by Meguid<sup>31</sup>, mainstream parties’ adoption of *accommodative* strategies (incorporating these new issues into their own political platforms) or *dismissive* strategies (avoiding taking a stance on these new

<sup>23</sup> M. Caiani and P. Graziano, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> R. Inglehart and P. Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Not and Cultural Backlash”, *Perspectives on Politics* 15(2), 2017, pp. 443-454, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2818659>.

<sup>25</sup> L. Pieroni, M. Rosselló Roig and L. Salmasi, “Italy: Immigration and the evolution of populism”, *European Journal of Political Economy* 76, 2023, pp. 1-25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoloco.2022.102260>; N. Mechitishvili, “Rise of Populist Parties in the Era of Migration Crisis”, in O. Abegunrin and S.O. Abidde (eds.), *African Migrants and the Refugee Crisis*, Cham, Springer, 2021, pp. 175-186, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56642-5\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56642-5_9); T.J. Allen, “All in the party family? Comparing far right voters in Western and Post-Communist Europe”, *Party Politics* 23(3), 2017, pp. 274-285, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815593457>; T. Abou-Chadi, “Niche Party Success and Mainstream Party Policy Shifts—How Green and Radical-right parties Differ in Their Impact”, *British Journal of Political Science* 46(2), 2016, pp. 417-436, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123414000155>; J. Muis and T. Immerzeel, “Causes and consequences of the rise of populist radical right parties and movements in Europe”, *Current Sociology* 65(6), 2017, pp. 909-930, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001139211771294>.

<sup>26</sup> G. Moschonas, “When institutions matter: the EU and the identity of social democracy”, *Renewal* 17(2), 2009, pp. 11-20.

<sup>27</sup> J. Rama et al., *Vox. The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right*, New York, Routledge, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049227>; S. Turnbull-Dugarte, “Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox”, *Research & Politics* 6(2), 2019, pp. 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680>; S. Turnbull-Dugarte, J. Rama and A. Santana, “The Baskerville’s dog suddenly started barking: Voting for VOX in the 2019 Spanish general elections”, *Political Research Exchange* 2(1), 2020, pp. 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1781543>; D. Vampa, “Competing forms of populism and territorial politics: The cases of Vox and Podemos in Spain”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 28(3), 2020, pp. 304-321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1727866>.

<sup>28</sup> M.A. Karyotakis, “The use of the Macedonian name dispute on the candidates’ websites in Northern Greece’s regional and municipal elections of 2019”, *Mediterranean Politics* 30(1), 2023, pp. 27-52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2240122>.

<sup>29</sup> P. Ignazi, P., “The failure of mainstream parties and the impact of new challenger parties in France, Italy and Spain”, *Italian Political Science Review*, 51(1), 2021, pp. 100-116, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2020.26>.

<sup>30</sup> S. Mazzolini and A. Borriello, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

<sup>31</sup> B. Meguid, “Competition between Unequals: The Role of Mainstream Party Strategy in Niche Party Success”, *The American Political Science Review* 99(3), 2005, pp. 347-359, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051701>; B. Meguid, *Party Competition between Unequals. Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Table 2. A Framework for Explaining the Evolution of Anti-Austerity Parties

<b>Participation in Government</b>	Yes		<b>Higher Risk of Normalisation</b> (electoral losses; hard to keep moral and ideological alterity vis-à-vis “the system”)
	No		<b>Lower Risk of Normalisation</b>
<b>Party Profile</b>	<b>Sociological</b>	Similar to mainstream left-of-centre party (typically: progressive middle-class)	<b>Higher Risk of Normalisation</b> (stronger competition with other parties when “alterity” and newness vanish)
		Different profile (capable to attract to disillusioned voters, popular classes)	<b>Lower Risk of Normalisation</b> (voting encapsulation)
	<b>Ideological</b>	Radical (either New or Old) Left	<b>Higher Risk of Normalisation</b> (exposed to Left Turns by mainstream parties [i.e. accommodation])
		Populist/Transversal	<b>Lower Risk of Normalisation</b> (creation of new political identity; however: need to keep “alterity” in order to be credible)
<b>Strategy of Centre-Left Parties</b>	Accommodative (“Left Turn”; available for alliances)		<b>Higher Risk of Normalisation</b> (competition on the same ideological electorate; “alterity” potentially jeopardised)
	Adversarial (centripetal; refusing alliances)		<b>Lower Risk of Normalisation</b> (reproduction of political and possibly sociological cleavages)

Source: Author's Elaboration.

issues and attempting to minimise their relevance) is far more effective in limiting challengers’ success compared to *adversarial* strategies, which seek to demonise them – such as through *cordons sanitaires*.

### 3. Empirical Analysis

In the cases under examination, a *dismissive* strategy by traditional centre-left parties was clearly impractical. The political and economic consequences of austerity, as well as the broader political crisis caused by a lack of responsiveness<sup>32</sup>, were central and unavoidable issues – especially in a context marked by widespread political and social mobilisation. These new parties successfully engaged with and, to some extent, represented such movements, particularly in Spain<sup>33</sup>, Greece<sup>34</sup>, Portugal<sup>35</sup>, and – several years later – France<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> P. Mair, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> L. de Nadal, “On populism and social movements: from the Indignados to Podemos”, *Social Movement Studies* 20(1), 2020, pp. 36-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2020.1722626>.

<sup>34</sup> K. Kanellopoulos and K. Kostopoulos, “Alliance building in the Greek anti-austerity campaign 2010-12”, text presented at the 7th ECPR General Conference, 4-7 September 2013, Sciences Po, Burdeos; H. Kouki and J.F. González, “Syriza, Podemos and Mobilizations Against Austerity: Movements, Parties or Movement-Parties?”, in J. Roose, M. Sommer and F. Scholl (eds.), *Europas Zivilgesellschaft in der Wirtschafts- und Finanzkrise*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> B. Baumgarten, “Geração à Rasca and beyond: Mobilizations in Portugal After 12 March 2011”, *Current Sociology* 61(4), 2013, pp. 457-473, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113479745>; G. Accornero and P. Ramos Pinto, ““Mild Mannered”? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal Under Austerity, 2010-2013”, *West European Politics* 38(3), 2015, pp. 491-515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.937587>; T. Carvalho, *Contesting Austerity. Social Movements and the Left in Portugal and Spain (2008-2015)*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> J. Harsin, “The Nuit Debout Movement: Communication, Poli-

This left mainstream parties with a choice between *accommodative* and *adversarial* strategies. Meguid's framework is especially relevant here because it analyses not only cases where a challenger acts as a “blackmailing party”<sup>37</sup> – positioning itself at one end of the political spectrum and aiming to erode the mainstream party's voter base (as was the case with Syriza and the Portuguese radical left, which sought to attract socialist voters) – but also cases where a challenger seeks to contest both traditional parties through issue ownership.

This was clearly the case for the M5S and, at least in its early phase before normalisation, for Podemos. In both instances, the electoral success of anti-austerity parties was initially constrained by *accommodative* strategies adopted by right-of-centre parties, though in different ways. Podemos suffered from the rise of Ciudadanos, a centrist party that, for a time, competed with Iglesias' party for dominance in challenging the political establishment<sup>38</sup>. The M5S, meanwhile, saw its support among conservative voters eroded by the rapid rise of Salvini's Lega during the “yellow-green government”<sup>39</sup>.

In both cases, the anti-austerity party ultimately found itself unable to maintain a heterogeneous and ideologically diverse electorate that was hostile to mainstream parties – either because of the emergence of another alternative actor (in Spain) or

tics, and the Counter-Production of “Everynight Life”, *International Journal of Communication* 12, 2018, pp. 1819-1839.

<sup>37</sup> G. Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

<sup>38</sup> J. Rodríguez Teruel and A. Barrio, “Going National: Ciudadanos from Catalonia to Spain”, *South European Society and Politics* 21(4), 2015, pp. 587-607, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2015.1119646>.

<sup>39</sup> E. Jones and M. Matthijs, “Italy and the European Elections of 2019”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 58(S1), 2020, pp. 69-79, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13079>.

due to the presence of a more credible competitor among ultraconservative voters (in Italy). Moreover, Salvini's Lega successfully shifted the national political agenda from economic and political crises (previously owned by the M5S) to the migration crisis<sup>40</sup>.

Beyond the Spanish and Italian cases – where Podemos and M5S pursued ambitious strategies aimed at transcending the left-right divide (through Errejón's transversality or, more successfully in the case of M5S, by positioning itself as a “post-ideological party”) – anti-austerity parties in other Euro-Mediterranean countries generally positioned themselves firmly on the left from the outset, effectively acting as blackmailing parties toward national socialist, social democratic, or progressive parties.

However, while Portugal's Socialist Party (PS) under António Costa's leadership (since 2014) adopted an accommodative strategy toward its radical left rivals, the reactions of their French and Greek competitors toward LFI and Syriza were markedly different.

### 3.1 Portugal

In Portugal, the Socialist Party (PS) under António Costa sought to bridge the divide between traditional socialists, communists, and the Bloco de Esquerda (BE) in order to overcome the traditional<sup>41</sup> political fragmentation of the Left. The Bloco's goal was to renew the Left by appealing to voters disillusioned with the PS's centrist turn and the stagnation of the Communist Party (PCP). In 2009, under José Sócrates, the PS formed a minority government<sup>42</sup>, continuing to exclude the PCP and BE<sup>43</sup>, and implemented austerity measures due to EU pressure<sup>44</sup>. These austerity packages sparked massive protests, and Sócrates resigned in 2011 after a fourth austerity plan was rejected by parliament. The subsequent period (2011-2015) saw the leftist parties in opposition, and

there was a gradual push for rapprochement, with even parts of the PS joining protests<sup>45</sup>.

In 2012, the PS began adopting a more confrontational stance toward the neoliberal government, and by 2014, Costa, who represented the left wing of the PS, won the leadership of the party with 68% of the vote<sup>46</sup>. His victory rejuvenated the PS, setting the stage for potential collaboration with the radical left. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the centre-right coalition won a relative majority, while the PS received 32% of the vote. Costa, despite resistance within his party, chose not to ally with the centre-right and instead negotiated with the PCP and BE, leading to the creation of the *Geringonça* (a form of “weak contract parliamentarism”<sup>47</sup>) that aimed to increase workers’ and pensioners’ incomes, halt privatizations, and increase welfare spending<sup>48</sup>. The PCP and BE provided external support but did not join the government.

The *Geringonça* government, despite being criticized by the Radical Left for not fully dismantling austerity measures<sup>49</sup>, was able to deliver on key promises, such as increasing pensions, reducing working hours, and lowering VAT rates for certain sectors. In the 2019 elections, the PS secured a plurality, but not an absolute majority, and the Left Bloc, while still performing well, failed to secure a coalition with the PS. The PCP, disillusioned with the *Geringonça* experiment, considered it over. The PS, now in a stronger position, no longer needed to accommodate the radical left<sup>50</sup>, having demonstrated the credibility of its left turn through its (partial) reversal of austerity policies<sup>51</sup>.

In the 2022 elections, after the radical left parties rejected the government's budget, the PS gained an absolute majority, while the BE and PCP saw their support fall drastically, with both parties falling below 5%. In a consensual political phase, particularly due to the decision of the main centre-right party (the PSD) to support the choices of Costa's second government during the pandemic, the maximalist positions of the radical left parties were strongly penalised by voters<sup>52</sup>. The previous accommodative

<sup>40</sup> D. Giannetti, K. Umansky and I. Sened, “The Entry of the M5S and the Reshaping of Party Politics in Italy (2008-2018)”, *Government and Opposition* 59(2), 2024, pp. 464-481, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.38>.

<sup>41</sup> C. Jalali, *Partidos e Democracia em Portugal, 1974-2005: Da Revolução ao Bipartidarismo*, Lisboa, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2007; M. Costa Lobo, “Bringing the Past Back in: How Attitudes Towards the Democratic Transition Influence the Portuguese Voter”, *South European Society and Politics* 21(2), 2016, pp. 181-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1144249>.

<sup>42</sup> A. Freire, “A New Era in Democratic Portugal? The 2009 European, Legislative and Local Elections”, *South European Society and Politics* 15(4), 2010, pp. 593-613, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2010.521637>.

<sup>43</sup> R. Dunphy and T. Bale, “The Radical Left in Coalition Government: Towards a Comparative Measurement of Success and Failure”, *Party Politics* 17(4), 2011, pp. 488-504, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811400524>.

<sup>44</sup> P. González and A. Figueiredo, “The European Social Model in a Context of Crisis and Austerity in Portugal”, in D. Vaughan-Whitehead (ed.), *The European Social Model in Crisis. Is Europe Losing Its Soul?*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2015, pp. 386-450; T. Fernandes, “Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents: The Case of Portugal”, in D. Della Porta, M. Andretta, T. Fernandes, F. O’Connor, E. Romanos and M. Vogiatzoglou (eds.), *Late Neoliberalism and Its Discontents in the Economic Crisis. Comparing Social Movements in the European Periphery*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 169-200.

<sup>45</sup> G. Accornero and P. Ramos Pinto, *op. cit.*; M. Lisi, “U-Turn: The Portuguese Radical Left from Marginality to Government Support”, *South European Society and Politics* 21(4), 2016, pp. 541-560, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1225331>.

<sup>46</sup> M. Lisi, *op. cit.*; E. De Giorgi, and J. Pereira, “The 2015 Portuguese Legislative Election: Widening the Coalitional Space and Bringing the Extreme Left In”, *South European Society and Politics* 21 (4), 2016, p. 451-468, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1181862>

<sup>47</sup> Fernandes, J.M., Magalhães, P. C. y Santana-Pereira, J., “Portugal's Leftist Government: From Sick Man to Poster Boy?”, *South European Society and Politics* 23 (4), 2018, pp. 503-524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2018.1525914>

<sup>48</sup> M. Lisi, *op. cit.*, p. 553.

<sup>49</sup> J.M. Fernandes and P.C. Magalhães, “The 2019 Portuguese General Elections”, *West European Politics* 43(4), 2020, pp. 1038-1050, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1702301>.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> C. Jalali, J. Moniz and P. Silva, “In the Shadow of the “Government of the Left”: The 2019 Legislative Elections in Portugal”, *South European Society and Politics* 25(2), 2020, p. 229-255, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2020.1868702>.

<sup>52</sup> J. Santana-Pereira and E. De Giorgi, “Your Luck is Our Luck: Covid-19, the Radical Right and Low Polarisation in the 2022

strategy employed by the PS successfully neutralised the radical left, making it harder for them to challenge the mainstream party. The *Geringonça* experiment, while no longer in practice, forced leftist parties to cooperate in ways that had previously been unthinkable<sup>53</sup>, diminishing the radical left's ability to operate independently or engage in political blackmail against the PS.

### 3.2 Greece

On the other hand, an adversarial strategy by mainstream progressive parties against anti-austerity parties ended up strengthening the latter in all the examined countries. At least initially, this strategy was adopted everywhere: PASOK, PSOE, PD, and the French PS flaunted their "responsibility" over the "responsiveness" celebrated by their challengers (to use Mair's distinction<sup>54</sup>). They did so with mixed success. The Greek and French Socialists came close to political extinction: PASOK was clearly replaced by Syriza as the main representative of the Greek left and opted to maintain a centrist profile that only became relatively electorally appealing after the disappointing experience of the Tsipras government<sup>55</sup> and Syriza's internal turmoil. The party has increasingly transformed – especially since the beginning of Stefanos Kassidakis' leadership – into a "progressive" party<sup>56</sup>, but one incapable of maintaining its image as an anti-neoliberal party and thus of securely holding the radical left space. As evidenced by the recent European elections, where Syriza fell to 14 percent (just two points above PASOK), this space could once again become primarily occupied by the Greek Communists, who surpassed 9 percent – their highest result in the last 35 years.

### 3.3 France

In France, Emmanuel Macron's centrist project (La République en Marche – LREM), founded in 2016 and still the cornerstone of the recent Ensemble coalition, first absorbed much of the right-wing faction of the Socialists, then successfully targeted the PS electorate. The opportunity to clearly occupy the Euroist political space in contrast to the "opposing

sovereignties"<sup>57</sup> marked Macron's success, while the PS—already depleted of Mélenchon's faction since 2011—was clearly overtaken on the left by La France Insoumise as early as the 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections (when candidate Benoît Hamon and the party received only 6 and 9 percent of the votes, respectively<sup>58</sup>).

In practice, the PS – despite maintaining a strong presence at the local administration level, which both LREM and LFI have criticised as a "baronial system", using this argument to justify a plebiscitary organizational structure<sup>59</sup> – underwent a process of "Pasokization" for several years. However, unlike the Greek case, in France, a "three or four poles" system has emerged<sup>60</sup>. These poles include the left led by Mélenchon, the Macronist centre (which incorporates moderate right-wing forces), and Marine Le Pen's radical right. This has led to a polarised pluralist system in which an adversarial strategy against the extreme poles has essentially become a defining feature of Macron's project: indeed, Sartori, who elaborated the very definition of polarised pluralist system, stressed<sup>61</sup> that this kind of system – highly risky for institutions' stability – tends to emerge when "the centre" is durably occupied by a party.

In this context, Mélenchon easily positioned himself as the left's presidential candidate for the 2022 elections, announcing his candidacy two years in advance and leveraging the concept of "useful voting" while focusing on economic and social issues<sup>62</sup>. In terms of communication, Mélenchon reaffirmed his left-wing patriotism (already central in 2017<sup>63</sup>) while also softening certain aspects of his Euroscepticism to prepare, from a position of strength, for a convergence with the Socialists. The

<sup>57</sup> C.M. Gil, "Spatial analysis of La République En Marche and French Parties, 2002–2017", *French Politics* 17, 2019, pp. 184–210, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-018-0073-x>.

<sup>58</sup> M. Lorimer and L.E. Herman, "The French Elections of 2022: Macron's Half Victory in a Changing Political Landscape", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, 2023, pp. 80–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13528>.

<sup>59</sup> R. Lefebvre, "Vers une dé-démocratisation partisane? Une approche comparée de la France insoumise et de la République en Marche", *Politique et Sociétés* 41(2), 2022, pp. 179–205, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088649ar>.

<sup>60</sup> A. Knapp, "France's party system in 2022", *Modern & Contemporary France* 30(4), 2022, pp. 495–515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2022.2134849>; E. Chabal, M. Behrent and M. Van Renterghem, "Historical perspectives on the 2022 electoral cycle in France", *French History* 20, 2023, pp. 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fh/crac070>; E. Chabal and M. Behrent, "Between neo-liberalism and the nation: France's political landscape in 2022", *Modern & Contemporary France* 30(4), 2022, pp. 517–533, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2022.2134327>.

<sup>61</sup> G. Sartori, "Il pluralismo polarizzato. Critiche e repliche", *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienze Politiche* 12(1), 1982, pp. 3–44, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048840200001155>.

<sup>62</sup> M. Lorimer and L.E. Herman, "The French Elections of 2022: Macron's Half Victory in a Changing Political Landscape", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, 2023, pp. 80–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13528>.

<sup>63</sup> C. Alexander, A. Bristielle and L. Chazel, "From The Front de gauche to La France insoumise: Causes and Consequences of the Conversion of the French Radical Left to Populism", *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 14(1), 2021, pp. 933–953, <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v14i2p933>.

<sup>53</sup> C. Jalali and J. Moniz, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>54</sup> P. Mair, *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup> A. Al Nouar, "The Duality of SYRIZA: An Evaluation of the Fracture in Party Rhetoric Between Opposition and Power", *Juncture*, March 2021, pp. 62–73.

<sup>56</sup> A. Kyriazi, *Parliamentary Elections in Greece, May–June 2023*, 2024, pp. 1–8, available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4940214> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4940214>; S. Vasilopoulou, "Economic Malaise and Political Discontent: An Analysis of the 2024 European Parliament Election in Greece", in G. Ivaldi and E. Zankina (eds.), *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*, European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2024, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0072>.

result was the creation of NUPES (New Ecological and Social People's Union), an electoral alliance for the parliamentary elections composed of LFI, Socialists, Communists, and Greens. This alliance secured 153 seats – half of which went to LFI<sup>64</sup>.

NUPES, however, proved to be fragile, mainly due to bilateral conflicts between LFI and the other coalition members, who sought to defend their identities and survival. The alliance effectively dissolved after the PS withdrew over the Israeli-Palestinian issue. However, Macron's decision to call early elections in June-July 2024 led to a revival of the alliance in the form of NFP (New Popular Front), clearly inspired by the 20th-century Popular Fronts and securing open support from trade unions and associations<sup>65</sup>. The NFP not only played a crucial role in stopping the advance of radical right-wing forces, but also gained 30 more seats compared to NUPES. However, this distribution was more advantageous to the PS, while LFI managed to maintain its number of seats, barely holding on to its status as the alliance's largest party.

### 3.4 Spain

Thus, in France, a left-wing alliance emerged under radical leadership (although the PS appears to be recovering, as confirmed by the 2024 European elections), with a party like LFI capable of building an electorate that is both more working-class and more educated than average and performing well even in peripheral urban areas<sup>66</sup>. This electorate share some similarities with the "historical" one built by Podemos in Spain (urban, younger, better educated than average, albeit – differently from LFI – not particularly affected by economic grievances<sup>67</sup>), though Podemos' fortunes have been much less favourable in the past few years. For example, one need only observe how Podemos' leadership reacted with a sigh of relief – and as a sign of a favourable trend – to the result of the latest European elections: 3.3 percent. This was far from the 10 percent achieved five years earlier and even further from the 21 percent obtained in the 2015 parliamentary elections.

In addition to the previously mentioned reasons (the long-term negative consequences of a short-term successful strategic-organizational choice, namely the creation of an "electoral war machine",

as well as the centrality of the Catalan issue, which overshadowed any other narrative based on the people-elite conflict), it is essential to consider, first and foremost, the strategic shift of the PSOE, which moved from an adversarial to an accommodative stance.

However, the PSOE's accommodation was not in terms of coalition strategies. In fact, the PSOE only reluctantly accepted forming the first coalition government in post-Francoist Spain with Podemos, and only after repeated electoral deadlocks in April and November 2019. Instead, the accommodation strategy consisted of a turn to the left in terms of political positioning, within an operation – led and personified by Pedro Sánchez – that also had an organisational and renewal dimension aimed against the traditional socialist political class (the so-called "barons"<sup>68</sup>). Sánchez, therefore, was able to appropriate the discourse on the renewal of the left, which was undoubtedly one of the key strengths that Podemos initially boasted. Today, however, the situation of the radical left in Spain appears problematic: despite still having a larger electoral base compared to the pre-2008 crisis period, the political landscape is fragmented by the rift between Podemos – far from being perceived as a party identified with "renewal" – and Sumar, another personalist project that is not far from being, in the words of García Agustín<sup>69</sup>, "a leftist faction of the PSOE".

This division has made it difficult for the radical left to capitalise on social discontent and translate potential support into a cohesive and effective political force. Furthermore, Sánchez's PSOE has managed to position itself as a progressive governing force, capable of attracting votes from sectors that in the past would have been more inclined to support Podemos or similar formations. In this context, the risk for the alternative left is to become trapped in a cycle of internal conflicts and short-term strategies, without being able to build a truly transformative political proposal.

### 3.5 Italy

In Italy, in contrast, a very different situation has emerged in terms of strategies and relations between the "mainstream" and "challenger" parties, namely between the Democratic Party (PD) and the Five Star Movement (M5S). From the birth of the M5S until the most recent legislative elections in 2022, the PD has consistently maintained a decidedly adversarial strategy toward the M5S, with only one partial exception: the second Conte government, throughout the pandemic emergency. Particularly in the 2018 and 2022 elections, the PD's ultra-centrist tendencies (under the "Macronian" leadership of Matteo Renzi<sup>70</sup> and the "technocratic" Enrico Letta)

<sup>64</sup> A. Durovic, "Rising Electoral Fragmentation and Abstention: The French Elections of 2022", *West European Politics* 46(3), 2023, pp. 614–629, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.123095>; N. Hewlett and R. Kuhn, "Reflections on the 2022 elections in France", *Modern & Contemporary France* 30(4), 2022, pp. 393–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2022.2134325>.

<sup>65</sup> F. Gouyou, "The 2024 French legislative elections: maintaining elections, political crisis", *West European Politics* 48(3), 2025, pp. 723–737, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.411665>.

<sup>66</sup> A. Knapp, *op. cit.*; C. Alexander, A. Bristielle and L. Chazel, *op. cit.*

<sup>67</sup> L. Orriols and G. Cordero, "The Breakdown of the Spanish Two-Party System: The Upsurge of Podemos and Ciudadanos in the 2015 General Election", *South European Society and Politics* 21(4), 2016, pp. 469–492, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1198454>; J. Rama, G. Cordero and P. Zagórski, "Three Is a Crowd? Podemos, Ciudadanos, and Vox: The End of Bipartisanship in Spain", *Frontiers in Political Science* 3, 2021, pp. 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpol.2021.688130>.

<sup>68</sup> P. Simón, "The Challenges of the New Spanish Multipartism: Government Formation Failure and the 2016 General Election", *South European Society and Politics* 21(4), 2016, pp. 493–517, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2016.1268292>.

<sup>69</sup> Ó. García Agustín, "Podemos, Sumar and the return of Euro-communism: the real, the radical and the populist left", *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 86(1), 2024, pp. 20–38.

<sup>70</sup> G. Pasquino, "Renzi: the government, the party, the future of Italian politics", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 21, 2016, pp.

reached their peak – and, not coincidentally, coincided with significant electoral successes for the M5S.

In 2018, Beppe Grillo's party, led by Luigi Di Maio – at the height of its populist, sovereigntist, and ideologically transversal strategy – triumphed with 32% of the vote. In 2022, the party led by Giuseppe Conte managed to defy polls that had predicted a deep crisis for the M5S due to its puzzling participation in Mario Draghi's technocratic government. Instead, it recovered enough to surpass 15% of the vote, maintaining its electoral stronghold in the southern regions while simultaneously positioning itself clearly to the left of the PD, despite having a sociologically very different (and much more popular) electorate from the Democratic Party's<sup>71</sup>.

For a party whose history has been consistently and strongly marked by an identity-based antagonism toward the PD<sup>72</sup>, the current phase – marked by the albeit fragile leftward shift under the new PD secretary Elly Schlein – now represents a threat to the M5S's electoral stability. This was evident in the party's collapse in the most recent 2024 European elections, where it fell below the 10% threshold. Giuseppe Conte now faces the challenge of balancing the need to reaffirm his party's distinctiveness from the PD while also finding a way to coexist with it in order to challenge the dominant national-conservative ruling coalition led by Giorgia Meloni.

In any case, the M5S – while maintaining several of its historic features associated with populism (anti-elitism, sovereigntism, and a focus on social issues) – appears, despite its many significant weaknesses (particularly in terms of organisation, as seen in subnational elections where it remains an entirely irrelevant force), to be able to retain an independent position vis-à-vis the PD – a *conditio sine qua non* for its electoral survival.

## Concluding Remarks: A comprehensive framework

The fates of anti-austerity parties in Southern Europe have been affected by several factors identified by the literature. At the macro-level, new issues emerged: migration, sovereignty conflicts (e.g. the Catalonian or the Northern Macedonian questions), the pandemic, the wars, the “cultural backlash”, the environment. Most of them have theoretically and empirically pushed for the recomposition of the left-right traditional axis, particularly strengthening right-wing actors. At the meso-level, all the anti-austerity parties have been weakened – in the medium term – by excessive leaderism and insufficient rootedness. Many of them ended up relying on their “newish” characteristics and on (inherently fragile) opinion voting. In any case, all these aforementioned factors can be considered as constants and thus hardly explain divergent evolutions of anti-austerity parties – in terms of electoral success and of political positionings.

This article aims at showing, through a focused comparison of the selected cases, how Southern European anti-austerity parties' evolutions have been shaped by three specific factors (see Table 3). First, their eventual assumption of governmental responsibility (everywhere detrimental for their electoral support). Second, the (either “accommodative” or “adversarial”) strategy adopted by traditional left-of-centre parties to confront to the challengers (“accommodation” being the most effective strategy to limit the strength of anti-austerity parties). Third, anti-austerity parties' ability to maintain a distinctive profile, in terms of electoral sociology and of ability of presenting as a real political alternative.

Table 3. The Evolution of Anti-Austerity Parties.

Country	Party	Have participated in government?	Strategy of Centre-Left parties	Party's profile	Current Scenario
Italy	M5S	Yes	Centripetal (until 2023)	Popular; populist	Opposition; “Resisting subalternity” to traditional Left
Spain	Podemos and then Sumar	Yes	Left turn	New Left	Return to pre-austerity phase: Radical Left as satellite of traditional Left
Greece	Syriza	Yes	Centripetal (following “pasokization”)	Advanced ideological moderation; substitution of the PASOK as main referent of centre-left electorate	Mainstream party (challenged by both left and centre)
Portugal	BE and PCP	No (but: parliamentary support)	Left turn (until 2019)	Continuity (New and Old Left); both parties suffered the rupture of <i>Geringonça</i>	Return to pre-austerity phase: New and Old Left at the fringe
France	LFI	No	PS' (temporary) “pasokization”, growth of centrist LREM	Popular; radical	Opposition; main pillar of the left-of-centre coalition

Source: Author's elaboration.

389-398, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2016.1169883>.

<sup>71</sup> F. Bloise, D. Chironi and M. Pianta, “Inequality and voting in Italy's regions”, *Territory, Politics, Governance* 9(3), 2020, pp. 365-390, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1837219>

<sup>72</sup> E. Padoan, *Populismo vs Sinistra*, *op. cit.*

This framework allows to highlight both the electoral difficulties faced by all the parties after their assumption of governmental (or quasi-governmental, as in Portugal) responsibilities. The loss of their credibility as anti-system challengers<sup>73</sup> proved to be detrimental not only because their "betrayal" to the eyes of the part of electorate looking for a "real alternative": it also made their eventual choice of retreating from the coalition as a move favouring the mounting radical right-wing wave. Said otherwise, positioning as an anti-systemic challenger is electorally rewarding at the beginning but it is not a strategy that can be easily re-adopted once having entered "the system".

This seems clear for both the Portuguese and the Spanish cases. The case of the Italian M5S seems different, in the sense that its choice (in 2022) of re-branding itself as a populist challenger after five years of coalition governments allowed the party to recover. However, the exception is only apparent and, at a closer look, confirms the general argument. Italian 2022 elections in fact confirmed the centrality of the second factor mentioned in our framework, that is, the beneficial effects for anti-austerity parties brought by adversarial strategies followed by the traditional centre-left. In fact, the recent "turn to the Left" laboriously followed by the PD's leader Schlein again imposed to the M5S the necessity of reconsidering its relationship with the moderate Left, in order to effectively counteract Meloni's government. The poor results of the M5S in the 2024 European elections confirmed the perils of a purely antagonistic strategy for a party which is not "new" anymore and has fully entered in the left-right dynamics as an actor positioned to the left of the centre-left. However, in contrast to the Portuguese and (particularly) the Spanish anti-austerity parties, Conte's party has kept a distinctive sociological (popular) profile contributing to defend its autonomy vis-à-vis the Democrats.

Similarly, the framework also allows to explain the success of French LFI – the only anti-austerity party that has never assumed governmental responsibilities, and which was, moreover, able to exploit the vacuum left in the progressive camp by the success of Macronian project – as well as the challenges that LFI will face in the near future due to the "re-birth" of the Socialists. Here, the difficulties faced by LFI – as well as all the other new anti-austerity parties – in building its own rooted organisational structure reveal their importance. Finally, the Greek case is quite an unicum: Syriza's initial and unmatched success opened the way for the most advanced process of "normalisation" ending with the positioning of the party as the main (and mainstream) Greek left-of-centre party, currently challenged from the Left (by the Communists, as always occurred in the recent Greek democratic history) but also competing with the (centrist, "responsible") PASOK.

This article thus highlights the importance to take into consideration structural (namely, electoral sociology) and – mostly – the dynamics at the party system level (namely, the strategic moves

of the traditional social-democratic parties) to understand constraints and opportunities for anti-austerity parties. Several questions remain to be answered. The current evolution of global politics – and, more notably, Trumpism and its relationship with the EU and the ongoing rise of the radical right – opens a number of challenges and opportunities for the European Lefts, and for the parties analysed through our framework. Centripetal politics in the age of political polarisation seems very outdated and unpromising, but also a purely confrontational strategy (putting in the same box the radical right as well as moderate left), as pursued in the aftermath of the Great Recession, looks like a risky move for anti-austerity parties. A hegemonic struggle to impose more radical *mots d'ordre* – thus forcing the moderate Left to an accommodative strategy – may be a viable, if difficult (and depending on power relationship) – option.

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