

# **The Impact of Populism on the Party System**

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Edited by Jiří Kocian,  
Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík

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The Experience of European Democracies (2000–2020)

**Edited by Jiří Kocian, Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík**

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KAROLINUM PRESS Karolinum Press is a publishing department of Charles University

Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic

[www.karolinum.cz](http://www.karolinum.cz)

© Edited by Jiří Kocian, Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík, 2026

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Cover and layout by Jan Šerých

Copyediting by Megan Bedell

Set in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press

First edition

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of the Czech Republic.

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe).

This publication was issued by the Democracy Today – Forms, Transformations, and Challenges research center at the Institute of International Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University.

This work was supported by the Charles University Research Center UNCE24/SSH/018 "Peace Research Center Prague II."

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ISBN 978-80-246-6143-8

ISBN 978-80-246-6170-4 (pdf)

<https://doi.org/10.14712/9788024661704>

The original manuscript was reviewed by Vladimír Handl (Charles University), Vlastimil Havlík (Masaryk University), Roberto De Rosa (Università degli Studi Niccolò Cusano).



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# Introduction

Jiří Kocian, Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík

The twenty-first century has been marked by populism, which has become the main political and political science topic of its time. The implications are both social and social scientific. While the social science implications can be understood positively in the sense of the significant development of research on populism, which has made the concept more familiar and better understood, the social implications are hazardous. Moreover, they are accompanied by severe crisis phenomena. First was the financial crisis in 2008, followed by the migration crisis, which came to a head in 2015. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in full force, resulting in global containment measures to prevent the spread of the disease. In 2022, Russia launched an offensive war against Ukraine; in 2023, the Israel-Hamas war began, and these events are constantly reshaping the landscape. We are witnessing growing international tensions. All these political, social, military, and health crises have significantly impacted the internal politics of (not only) European democracies. They have become systemic risks to democracy that are not easy to face. All these crises have become perfectly intertwined with populism, have become, to a greater extent, its breeding ground, and have initiated and reinforced it. We have seen the rise of populist political parties and movements. Yet political parties (and party systems) are the main political factors affecting the functioning of democracy. A stable, moderate, and well-functioning party system strengthens democracy, while an unstable, fragmented, polarized, and poorly functioning party system damages democracy.

This book explores the relationship between populism and party systems in selected European countries. The analysis seeks to test the following hypotheses: representation gap hypothesis (populist parties pursue a strategy that is designed to exploit gaps of representation by

means of emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts); contagion hypothesis (the rise of populist parties is accompanied by an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties); polarization hypothesis (the rise of populist parties makes party systems more acutely polarized); elective affinity coalition hypothesis (populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties if the latter also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, anti-establishment, Eurosceptic themes).

We present the results from eight case studies (Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Spain) reflecting all the significant changes in those party systems. Considering all the varied cases, it proved fruitful in capturing the main trends.

Our analysis begins with providing a theoretical starting point for our study of the influence of populist parties on the party systems of selected countries. The basic hypothesis is, as mentioned above, that parties and party systems directly influence the form and function, and sometimes the disfunction, of a democracy. To address the issue, we must first devise an appropriate typology of party systems and define each type, paying attention to the potential that each one has for contributing to better or worse conditions for democracy. We can then analyze the role of populist parties and assess the degree to which they can influence a party system and cause it to change from one type to another based on case studies of selected countries.

The theoretical framework is based on the typology of party systems devised by Giovanni Sartori and elaborated by Steven B. Wolinetz. Sartori's interest in political parties and party systems focused mainly on the practical context, whether the democracies in which they operated functioned or failed to function. He was concerned primarily with his native Italy (Beyme 2019: 69; Pasquino 2009: 172), and his theory of parties and party systems, to some extent, is based on this national context (exceedingly polarized pluralism). Sartori (1987a; 1987b) was an essential theoretician of competitive democracy, which cannot function without political parties: "Sartori's ideal of democracy was a 'democracy of parties', built on the awareness that parties are essential to democracy (...)" (Pasquino 2019: 17).

A collection of case studies, a set of detailed descriptive analyses of the party systems chosen as a research subject, served as an empirical basis for this publication and aimed at providing a better understanding of the relationship between populism and the development of the party system.

It considers the overall framework of party systems – political context, classification of party system following the typology of Giovanni Sartori, and the role of populist parties in the party system. Those interpretative case studies, owing to a more profound interest in the cases examined, introduce theoretical notions or constructs to the analysis. While referring to existing hypotheses or theories, they can also be regarded as applied science studies because they are concerned with interpreting or applying a generalization to a specific case to analyse it better (Morlino 2018, 51–52).

We used a threefold criterion of increase, relative stability, or decline of support for populist parties between two-time points, 2000 and 2020 (based on the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, EPICENTER-NETWORK 2025). We thus discern four clusters of European democracies in which the support for populists varied as follows (case selection based on typical examples):

- a) Democracies in which the support for populist parties increased dramatically between 2000 and 2020, resulting in the rise of populist parties to government: Hungary, Greece, and Poland.
- b) Democracies in which the support for populist parties increased between 2000 and 2020 (but not as dramatically as in the above case): Czechia, Germany, and Spain.
- c) Democracies in which the support for populist parties was stable in 2020 compared to 2000 (and such support was far from trivial): France.

The authors of the party systems studies were tasked to maintain a specific research structure based on the theory of party systems. First, they introduced the political context of the country in question, focusing on the relevance of populist parties within the political field and their performance (electoral results and seats in parliaments, presence in government coalitions or opposition), thus analysing what role populists play in the political life of the country, to what extent they are successful and for how long populists' elements are present in the political arena. Second, they tackled four hypotheses:

- H1: Representation gap hypothesis – populist parties pursue a strategy to exploit representation gaps by emphasizing new or re-vitalizing old conflicts.
- H2: Contagion hypothesis – a rise of populist parties is accompanied by an overall diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of non-populist parties.

H3: Polarization hypothesis – a rise of populist parties makes party systems more acutely polarized.

H4: Elective affinity coalition hypothesis – populist parties enter governing coalitions with other populist parties and also with non-populist parties, and if the latter also employ at least one of the typical themes of populist discourse, e.g., nationalist, nativist, ant-establishment, Eurosceptic themes.

Third, the authors concentrated on the impact of populist parties on changes in the political system. They identified types of party systems following the typology of Giovanni Sartori (2005) and Steven B. Wolinetz (2004, 2006), described in detail in the first part of this analysis. The authors also analysed how the rise of populist parties changed those party systems and how they changed their functioning.

We chose the relatively long period from 2000 to 2020 as a time framework for the party systems studies. It allowed us to focus on the long-term development and changes in analysed party systems without being too reductive. Thus, we could avoid short-term changes caused by the economic crisis in 2008 or the migrant situation in 2015. However, we have decided not to include recent political developments in the analysed countries (thus framing it by spring 2020) for the same reason – one election could skew the results, not to mention the current pandemic situation.

Regarding the case selection, as mentioned above, we used the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index to identify four clusters of European democracies – 1) As cases of countries with dramatically increased populist support, we selected Hungary (as an example of radical right-wing “illiberal” populism which has been present in government already for one decade); Poland (where social conservative populists also decisively influenced the party system in recent years); and Greece (as a country with the strongest left-wing populist party and the only case in Europe where left-wing populists were a leading governmental party). 2) As cases of countries in which the support for populist parties also increased but not as dramatically, we selected Germany (as an example of a traditionally “populist proof” country which has, however, experienced a steady rise in populism in the examined years); Spain (as a country in which populist parties are not playing the pivotal role in the political system, but the economic crises caused the rise of left-wing populism, which in turn led to the emergence of radical right-wing populism), Czechia (a borderline case between the first two clusters – populist parties did not get the same level of electoral support as in Hungary or Poland; however, the technocratic “entrepreneurial” populism of Andrej Babiš has

proven to be effective in maintaining a strong governmental presence). 3) Countries in which the support for populist parties has been similar during the investigated period – we found one case for this category, and that is France (the National Front has been an essential actor in the French political system since the early 2000s; the same is valid also for the left-wing populist actors in France).

In the first chapter, Gábor Dobos identifies Hungary as a country with a particular form of a predominant party system, in which the dominant governing party (Fidesz) is a populist party, as is one of the strongest opposition parties (Jobbik). The two parties have held around 80% of the parliamentary mandates in the last decade. The author pointed out the 2010 general elections as a crucial event regarding the rise of populism in Hungarian politics: Fidesz gained two-thirds of the mandates, and Jobbik entered parliament. The chapter also shows that Hungarian populist parties had an undeniable impact on the party system: 1) They are bringing new themes into the political agenda, creating new and re-vitalizing old conflicts, primarily by feeding the ignorance and xenophobia of Hungarian society; 2) with the rise of populist parties, the polarization of the Hungarian political system has increased – this change can be traced both in the voters' and the parties' ideological positions. Dobos concludes that even though populism has no direct impact on the policy agenda of non-populist parties, an idea transfer can be observed between the two parties; more precisely, Fidesz does not shy away from importing radical elements of Jobbik's politics.

The next chapter, written by Artur Lipiński, focuses on the impact of populism on the party system in Poland. According to the author, the Polish party system exhibits features of limited pluralism with intense polarization between the Law and Justice (resorting to populism at the discourse and agenda level) and the oppositional liberal Civic Platform. The competition between these parties had already determined the structure and content of the political competition since 2005. Law and Justice then imposed the new division between social and liberal Poland, replacing post-communist cleavage. It also proved its skill in using the media (including social media) to disseminate the agenda of radical polity reform, the necessity of elite replacement, and performing a crisis. Lipiński concludes that PiS contributed strongly to the high level of polarization, introducing reforms that limit, if not destroy, the system of checks and balances and curtail civic freedoms.

The case study by Manos Tsatsanis and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos deals with the Greek party system. According to them, the Greek party system

changed dramatically because of the rise of populist parties of the Right and the Left. While populists were important also in the recent past (in 1981–1989, when Pasok had first ruled), it was mainly after the eruption of the Greek economic crisis that they held centre stage in the party system. The performance of the populist government coalition in power (the Syriza/ANEL coalition in 2015–2019) at times bordered on intolerance and hostility towards critical media and the justice system. However, checks and balances against the populist government did not reach a breaking point. The authors conclude that Greek democracy was affected by the rise of populism, although it did not succumb to pressures emerging from different sides of the political spectrum. Despite the grave economic crisis of 2010 and the rise of populist parties in Greek politics, Greek democracy survived and withstood all economic and political blows, even though the social cost of unemployment and poverty was very extensive.

The following chapter, written by Hendrik Hüning, is devoted to the specific case of the German party system. The author focuses primarily on the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its impact on the party system – since the AfD is the only relevant populist player in Germany. The AfD was able to fill two presentation gaps by representing Eurosceptic voters and voters with xenophobic and nativist positions, which explains its rapid success. The widening cultural dimension of policy issues and the AfD's wilful provocation of communication and social media strategy increased polarization in the German party system. However, the AfD's influence on the party system is, at least for the moment, somewhat limited because of the strict exclusion by other parties to form coalitions, inner tensions, and scandals within the AfD that weaken its current standing in the system of parties, and competition for voters that only elected the AfD temporarily for protest reasons.

The case study by Jaume Magre, Lluís Medir, and Esther Pano focuses on the party system in Spain and its changes after the recent emergence of two leading populist parties – VOX and Unidas Podemos. Two Spanish populist formations emerged in 2014 due to the severe and protracted economic crisis endured by broad layers of Spanish society and to the observation that the traditional parties were incapable of channelling the indignation of the citizens. The appearance of the two populist parties has entailed a more significant fragmentation of the party system, an increase in electoral volatility, and, above all, a notable increase in political polarization. The polarization has been channelled, especially by VOX, by reintroducing classic issues that have divided Spanish society. They are unresolved issues, many popular among the most radical right-

wing. The authors conclude that although the Spanish populist parties have been able to reintroduce the problems onto the agenda that have polarized political debate, the citizen's perception of the positions on the left-right axis has not become polarized. In this respect, they fail to modify the parties' position in the system in a centrifugal sense.

The following chapter by Michal Kubát analyses the Czech party system and its shift from quasi-polarized to genuine polarized pluralism. In the analysed period, populism significantly increased party polarization and the country's centrifugal tendencies of party competition. This mainly concerns the ANO movement of Andrej Babiš, which represents a specific variant of "technocratic" or "managerial" populism. Accompanied by other types of populism, represented by the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), ANO managed to impose some degree of populism on other parties, considered as "traditional". The rise of the SPD and the relative electoral stability of the KSČM brought the country closer to the existence of a dangerous bilateral anti-system opposition. The Czech party system, which was close to polarized pluralism even before, has become genuinely polarized. In other words, it has transformed from extended multipartyism with a bipolar degree of competition to extended multipartyism with a multipolar degree of competition. The author pointed out that the decisive factor in the Czech case is the polarization or ideological distance between the parties, in which populism has increased unprecedentedly.

Martin Baloge and Nicolas Hubé deal with the populist parties in the French party system and their structural effect on the Fifth French Republic. They pointed out that the party system in France is characterized by the force of inertia that the National Rally exerts on other political organizations. As a result of presidentialism, the French party system is very polarized between an extreme left and an extreme right whose only point of convergence is the criticism of the elites. However, although polarized, these parties do not have the same force of attraction or electoral dynamics. By making the National Rally its designated enemy while adopting similar positions on specific issues, Emmanuel Macron has contributed to shifting and attenuating political lines of division. In a sense, populist rhetoric is becoming an electoral tool for catch-all parties, especially in France, where the Front National has been an essential political actor in the political arena since the 1990s. Its role in the structure of the field contributes to reshaping the common political agenda. The French party system, therefore, faces many challenges. The

very high level of political mistrust political parties encounter is evidence of a deep institutional crisis. Political parties are mainly in the last place in polls on confidence in political institutions and organizations. Neither the rise of populism nor the strategies of mainstream parties seem to have limited this mistrust.

# Theoretical Framework

Michal Kubát

## Introduction

Parties and party systems are integral to democracy and directly impact its form and functioning. In this context, it is no coincidence that one of the most important political scientists of all time, Giovanni Sartori (1924–2017), combined research on democracy and political parties. Sartori (1987a; 1987b) was a prominent theorist of (liberal) democracy, which he argued cannot function without political parties: “Sartori’s ideal of democracy was a ‘democracy of parties’, built on the awareness that parties are the essential to democracy (...)” (Pasquino 2019, 17).

With Maurice Duverger, Sartori became the most influential theorist of political parties and party systems, and his interest in parties and party systems focused primarily on the practical context, i.e., how they affect the functioning of democracy or democratic regimes. He was mainly concerned with his native Italy (Beyme 2019, 69, Pasquino 2009, 172), and this specific national context somewhat forms his theory of parties and party systems. In particular, it is a conceptualization of polarized pluralism that has universal relevance. Polarized pluralism is a type of party system that does not contribute to the smooth functioning of democracy. It is at this nexus that the space for analysing the influence of populist parties on party systems opens up, as populist parties or populism itself is most often associated with authoritarianism and nativism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), doctrines that have little in common with liberal democracy. Populist parties can be assumed to be authoritarian, radical extremist, or even anti-system, and as such, will polarize the party system and contribute to the dysfunction of democracy.

Steven B. Wolinetz (2004) built directly on Sartori's theory and developed a newer typology of party systems that, in his words, considers more recent trends in their development. He refers to Peter Mair (2006, 63), who argued that: "there had been a shift from polarized pluralism to moderate pluralism (...)"<sup>1</sup> At the outset, the case studies in this book show that further developments do not support this view. The rise of populist parties in recent years has significantly increased the polarization of party systems.

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical framework for analysing the influence of populist parties on party systems in selected countries. We first present basic classifications and typologies of party systems and discuss the main approaches to classifying them that have been adopted. In the second part, we closely revisit the aforementioned Sartori's classification and typology and the typology of party systems devised by Wolinetz, which elaborates on the former. Following that, we shift focus to the party system type known as polarized pluralism (initially proposed by Sartori), which is shown to be the most relevant to our study. This thought is led by the key element of polarized pluralism, the phenomenon of anti-system parties. We deal with this concept from a close perspective and discuss later definitions and applications by Giovanni Capoccia and Mattia Zulianello. The chapter concludes with a summary of the interrelationships among polarization, anti-systemness, party system typologies, and democracy, representing a key quadrille that shapes our argumentation in this book.

## **Party Systems and Their Typologies**

Political parties and party systems are the keys to understanding what modern democratic regimes are and how they function – or, in some cases, do not function. That is the premise on which the classic studies of political parties by Maurice Duverger are based. Duverger (1951, 288) identified specific types of party systems while distinguishing between various political regimes. He was the first modern author to create a complex theory of parties and party systems, including an extensive and sophisticated typology of party systems (Duverger 1951, 1960, 1966). Unfortunately, Duverger's typology is not well known (some of his essential texts remain

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1 Wolinetz referred to Mair in a 2004 text, while Mair published it only in 2006. This is because Wolinetz was referring to Mair's yet-to-be-published text.

untranslated from their original French). Only his simple classification of party systems, based on one criterion, the number of parties, is generally recognized. This classification reflected the commonly accepted simple distinction between single-party systems, two-party systems, and multi-party systems, and when limited to democracies, between two-party systems and multi-party systems only (Mair 1997, 200–202). Nevertheless, this very basic classification has gained a central role in the study of party systems because it provides a starting point for other typologies that consider criteria other than the number of parties.

Simply put, the other typologies of party systems have advanced in two directions. In the first case, the criterion of the number of parties was supplemented by the criteria of their strength, electoral (how many votes) or parliamentary (how many seats), and their position on the spectrum of the party system. The classic example of this approach was Jean Blondel (1968, 184–189), who distinguished between 1) a two-party system, 2) a two-and-a-half-party system, 3) a multi-party system with a dominant party, and 4) a multi-party system without a dominant party. “Modern” authors who followed Blondel’s lead include Gordon Smith (1986), Alan J. Ware (1996), and especially Alan Siaroff (2000, 2003, 2006).

The second approach to creating a typology of party systems adds the element of polarization, the ideological distance between parties, to that of the number of parties. This is the direction taken by the second most crucial modern theoretician of parties and party systems after Duverger — Giovanni Sartori (1976)<sup>2</sup> — who was later followed by Steven B. Wolinetz (2004, 2006), as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter. While Duverger’s sophisticated typology of party systems is not, as we have mentioned above, very well-known today, “Sartori’s imposing construction” (*l’imposant édifice de Sartori*; Duverger 1981, 8) has become the most reputable typology of party systems ever. Until now, it has not been surpassed; according to some authors, it never will be (Pasquino 2005, 2009).

## **Classes and Types of Party Systems According to Giovanni Sartori and Steven B. Wolinetz**

Sartori’s theory of party systems is one of the most well-known and most influential of any that he wrote. The classification and typology of party

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2 First published in 1976. In this text, we use the 2005 edition (Sartori 2005).

systems occupy a central position in it. They are not the same: “A classification is an ordering based on mutually exclusive classes established by the principle, or criterion, chosen for that classification. A typology is a more complex matter: it is an ordering of ‘attribute compounds’, i.e., an ordering resulting from more than one criterion” (Sartori 2005, 110).

What does that mean when applied to the classification and typology of party systems? The key thing is distinguishing between “format” and “mechanics”. A format is a static variable or snapshot of the number of parties in a system: how many are there?<sup>3</sup> Mechanics is a dynamic variable (how the system works) that expresses the influence of ideology. Here, it is necessary to differentiate between democracies and dictatorships. In a dictatorship, the *intensity* of a ruling undemocratic ideology is essential, while in a democracy, it is *polarization*, that is, the ideological distance between parties. The classification of party systems is based only on the format and the number of parties, leading to the identification of *classes*. By contrast, the typology of a party system is based on a combination of format (the number of parties) and mechanics (the intensity of ideology or polarization), which leads to the identification of *types*. Sartori (2005, 110) identified seven classes of party systems: 1) one party, 2) hegemonic party, 3) predominant party, 4) two-party, 5) limited pluralism, 6) extreme pluralism, and 7) atomized. While the first two classes are noncompetitive (monocentric), the others are competitive (pluralistic) party systems.

The two classes of noncompetitive party systems can be differentiated as follows, based on the intensity of ideology (from the greatest to the least): the one-party system can produce a) a type with one totalitarian party, b) a type with one authoritarian party, or c) a type with one pragmatic party. Similarly, depending on the intensity of ideology, a hegemonic-party system can be of two types: a) a type with a hegemonic ideological party or b) a type with a hegemonic pragmatic party (Sartori 2005, 254).

As far as competitive (pluralistic) party systems are concerned, Sartori expressly differentiates between class and type only in the cases of limited and extreme pluralism, as shown in the following schematic diagram:

---

3 At first glance, this concept does not seem very important, and we could ask: “Which ones belong there?” Not all existing parties in a given system are equally important, but they play some role. Sartori solves this problem with the concept of “relevant parties”. A party is relevant and thus “belongs there” when it holds one of two kinds of potential — coalition (i.e., it is not isolated) or blackmail (i.e., it is isolated, but its existence has an influence on the tactics employed in party competition) (Sartori 2005, 107–110).

**Diagram No. 1:** Classes and Types of Pluralism According to Sartori

<b>Format</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>Type</b>
few parties	> limited pluralism	+ low polarization	> moderate pluralism
many parties	> extreme pluralism	+ high polarization	> polarized pluralism

**Source:** (Bankowicz and Kubát 2025, 80).

We could treat the other classes (predominant-party systems, two-party systems, and atomized systems) as “types” as well. Sartori never states this directly, but it can be inferred from his “typology of party politics” (Sartori 2005, 252–254), and it is also implicit in the characteristics of those party systems. This is especially true of two-party systems (twopartism). Twopartism, as Sartori conceives it, presumes the existence of a two-party format and bipolar mechanics. If twopartism results in the regular alternation of two parties in power, then we can assume there is a centripetal tendency in politics, that is, a low degree of polarization. In every case, twopartism is simultaneously a class and a type of party system. One can also think about systems with a predominant party and atomized systems similarly, although, of course, with different formats and mechanics.

Steven B. Wolinetz (2004, 2006) built upon Sartori’s typology of party systems by adding a new criterium to the criteria of fragmentation (corresponding to Sartori’s format) and polarization (resp. mechanics), which is a form of competition (i.e., a dimensional scale of competition among the parties in the system). He also distinguished degrees of polarization according to its intensity. Wolinetz conceived the forms of competition as 1) unimodal, 2) bipolar, or 3) multipolar, and the degree of polarization as 1) minimal, 2) moderate, 3) greater, or 4) extreme.

Suppose we combine the criteria of fragmentation and degree of polarization (see Table no. 1 below). In that case, we derive three basic types of democratic party systems: 1) two-party systems, 2) limited multipartyism, and 3) extended multipartyism. A two-party system and limited multipartyism can demonstrate minimal, moderate, or greater polarization (but not extreme polarization, for which Wolinetz presents no example). Extended multipartyism can demonstrate all the degrees of polarization, although minimal polarization would be a rather exceptional phenomenon.

Suppose we add the form of competition to the fragmentation and degree of polarization. In that case, we can distinguish five subtypes of limited multipartyism and extended multipartyism (see Table no. 2).

**Table No. 1** – Fragmentation and Degree of Polarization

		Two-party system	Limited multipartyism	Extended multipartyism
Degree of polarization	Minimal	x	x	x
	Moderate	x	x	x
	Greater	x	x	x
	Extreme	–	–	x

**Source:** Derived from (Wolinetz 2004, 21–22).

Limited multipartyism can appear in two variants with either unimodal or bipolar competition, and extended multipartyism in three variants, with unimodal, bipolar, or multipolar competition. In other words, limited multipartyism does not exhibit multipolar competition (in no case). Likewise, Wolinetz assumes that none of the five subtypes of limited and extended multipartyism will show a minimal degree of polarization (and he gives no example). A moderate degree of polarization is possible for all five subtypes, as is a greater degree of polarization except for an extended multipartyism with unimodal competition. An extreme degree of polarization will be found only in an extended multipartyism with multipolar competition.

**Table No. 2** – Fragmentation, Degree of Polarization and Form of Competition

		Limited Multipartyism		Extended Multipartyism		
Form of Competition		Unimodal	Bipolar	Unimodal	Bipolar	Multipolar
Degree of Polarization	Minimal	–	–	–	–	–
	Moderate	x	x	x	x	x
	Greater	x	x	–	x	x
	Extreme	–	–	–	–	x

**Source:** Derived from (Wolinetz 2004, 21–22).

## Polarized Pluralism

Many authors consider the type of polarized pluralism to be the most interesting and original of all the system types proposed by Sartori's theory of party systems. (Daalder 1983, Hanning 1984, Sani 2005, Ventura 2016, Vitiello 1981). According to Wolinetz's typology of party systems, exten-

ded multipartyism with extreme polarization and a multipolar form of competition best correlates with Sartori's polarized pluralism.<sup>4</sup>

In its earliest conception, polarized pluralism was characterized by three main elements: 1) a multipolar (specifically, tripolar) arrangement of parties, 2) centrifugal party competition, and 3) polarized (as opposed to moderate) politics (Sartori 1966). In later versions of his work, Sartori outlined eight main characteristics of polarized pluralism: 1) presence of relevant anti-system parties, 2) existence of opposition parties at each end of the ideological spectrum (bilateral oppositions), 3) a central ideological position occupied by one party or a group of parties, 4) high polarization (ideological distance between parties), 5) prevalence of centrifugal drivers over centripetal ones, 6) ideological patterning, 7) presence of irresponsible oppositions, 8) a politics in which parties attempt to outbid each other in pursuit of voters' favour (Sartori 2005, 117–123).

Polarized pluralism is thus a type of party system characterized by many relevant political parties (more than five or six; six to eight, according to Wolinetz) and a high degree of polarization (ideological distance between parties). A centrifugal tendency in politics can be presumed in that case. That arises from anti-system parties and "bilateral oppositions" (two anti-system parties standing on either side of the left-right scale against pro-system parties). In contrast, pro-system parties occupy the centre of the left-right spectrum. Therefore, an alternation of pro-system leftist and pro-system rightist parties cannot happen. The bipolarity of the party system is disrupted, and it becomes multipolar.

In contrast, moderate pluralism is characterized by 1) a lower number of relevant parties (less than five or six; three to five according to Wolinetz), 2) a relatively small ideological distance between relevant parties, that is, a low degree of polarization, 3) bipolar coalition governments, and 4) centripetal competition (Sartori 2005, 159).

The key to understanding polarized pluralism is the concept of the anti-system party. This concept has drawn the most criticism (see Beyme 1987, Keren 2000, Smith 1987) and has been little defended or reconceptualized (see Capoccia 2002, Zulianello 2018). Giovanni Sartori distinguishes between broad and strict (narrow) definitions of antisystem parties. In the broader conception, he views them as parties that are

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4 "Polarized pluralism is, in the terms we have been using, a case of extended multipartyism characterized by extreme polarization. It is defined not so much by the number of parties, but also by the degree of polarization, and the centrifugal character of competition. As such, it is different from less polarized and less centrifugal instances of extended multipartyism" (Wolinetz 2004, 19).

characterized by a broad spectrum of dissenting political positions: from “alienation” from and total refusal of the system to “protest” (Sartori 2005, 117). On the other hand, in the narrow conception, the definition of an antisystem party is founded on ideological factors. This means that an antisystem party upholds a dissident or alienated ideology, “a belief system that does not share the values of the political order in which it operates” (Sartori 2005, 118). The objective of a party so conceived is not a change of government but the change of the entire political system in accord with its alienated ideology.

This is, therefore, a much more steady and intensive rejection of the existing system than in the first case. Without regard to this distinction, anti-system parties, whether in the broader or narrower sense, have one thing in common: a delegitimizing influence. That means they question the legitimacy of the political system they oppose and undermine its foundations. The tactics adopted by an anti-system party are not particularly important. It does not have to be a revolutionary party, at least not in the strict sense of that word. An anti-system party can be truly revolutionary in that it is preparing a revolution or some coup against the state to overthrow the existing regime, or it can be “revolutionary” only in its rhetoric, meaning that it talks about a revolution, but that is all. Sartori, of course, equates this revolutionary rhetoric with a delegitimizing influence. A difference between anti-system parties and truly revolutionary parties flows from that. A genuinely revolutionary party “is surely anti-system, but the obverse is not true” (Sartori 2005, 118). It is not essential whether the party’s goal (which can be a revolution) is realizable because the existence of its goal and the difficulty or absolute impossibility of attaining it are two different things. It is enough that the party’s goal about the system is delegitimizing it: if so, it is an anti-system party.

We can mention two authors who have tried to develop Sartori’s concept of the antisystem party. Giovanni Capoccia (2002) differentiated between relational anti-systemness and ideological anti-systemness. Ideological anti-systemness more or less corresponds to Sartori’s strict definition of an anti-system party. Relational anti-systemness heightens polarization, carries little potential for forming coalitions, and manifests by populist and delegitimizing tactics in electoral contests. Capoccia (2002, 24) states that the “typical anti-system party” is characterized by both of the two types of anti-systemness, while a party that exhibits only relational and not ideological anti-systemness is said to be “polarizing”.

Mattia Zulianello (2018) applies two criteria for identifying anti-system parties, as does Capoccia, but somewhat different ones. The first is an ideological orientation towards established metapolicies, and the second is systemic integration. The former concept more or less corresponds to Sartori's strict definition of an anti-system party and Capoccia's ideological anti-systemness. The second criterion generally corresponds to Capoccia's relational anti-systemness, but it is conceived of less in terms of ideology and more in terms of institutions. Simply put, this means that a party integrated into the system has coalition potential because Sartori uses the term (see footnote 2). It is not isolated and has various relationships with pro-system parties. According to Zulianello (2018), an anti-system party rejects established metapolicies and is not integrated into the system. A party that rejects established metapolicies and is integrated into the system is a "halfway house party".

If we compare Capoccia's and Zulianello's concepts with those of Sartori, we do not see any movement away from Sartori's original conception. If Capoccia says that relational anti-systemness reduces a party's coalition potential and increases polarization, that does not differ in any way from Sartori. In the same way, the absence of systemic integration of Zulianello's anti-system parties corresponds in principle to Sartori's presumption that anti-system parties do not have coalitional but only blackmail potential (see footnote 2). They are isolated from the pro-system parties even if, as he also said, an anti-system party can operate within the system. To be "within the system", however, does not imply cooperation with pro-system parties; instead, anti-system parties "are currently playing their games within the system, and according to most of its rules" (Sartori 2005, 118). That is, they are not necessarily revolutionary or violent.

## **Conclusion**

Polarized and moderate pluralism, like other types of party systems identified by Sartori, are Weberian "ideal types" (Sartori 2005, 128). Therefore, we cannot assume that actual party systems will correspond exactly to a given type. They will be more or less close to it. The important thing is that the degree to which a party system approximates polarized or moderate pluralism will influence its functioning and the functioning of the entire democracy. The deciding factor in this case is polarization, that is, the ideological distance between parties: "[t]he single best explanatory

variable for stable versus unstable, functioning versus non-functioning, successful versus immobile, and easy versus difficult democracy is polarization” (Sani and Sartori 1982, 337).

The foundation of a well-functioning democracy is the existence of moderate pluralism (limited multipartyism), and polarized pluralism (extended multipartyism) hampers its functioning. In extreme instances, strong bilateral anti-system oppositions can threaten democracy, as the most famous case, the Weimar Republic, shows. The role of populist parties is significant here. Suppose populist parties increase the polarization of the party system, even to the extent of transforming it from moderate pluralism to polarized pluralism. In that case, the consequence can be a deterioration in the quality and functionality of democracy. Thus, the analysis of the impact of populist parties on the degree of polarization of party systems automatically shows their impact not only on the party systems themselves but on democracy as a whole, thereby putting the role of populism in a new perspective.

# **Hungary: In the Name of Two Mainstream Populist Parties**

Gábor Dobos

## **Introduction**

Regarding populist parties, Hungarian politics is a special case: its party system had two mainstream populist parties (Fidesz and Jobbik); one was the dominant governing force, and the other was the leading opposition party between 2010 and 2020.

In the following text, I analyse the populist parties of the Hungarian party system. First, I will briefly describe the Hungarian politics of the two decades of interest; then, I will introduce the two mainstream populist parties of the party system and their political career path as populist parties. I will argue that both parties are characterized by ideological populism, i.e., they best fit the ideational approach to populism research (Mudde 2017). I will present how Fidesz and Jobbik followed opposite trajectories: Fidesz's politics became more radical in the last decade. Jobbik discarded several populist elements of its politics to move to a centrist position from its earlier right-wing radical stance. In the next section, I will test the four hypotheses (representation gap, contagion, polarization, elective affinity coalition) about the populist parties' impact on the party system. Finally, I use Sartori's typology to describe the Hungarian party system, arguing that it is a predominant party system with high polarization and low fragmentation levels.

## **Political Context**

Hungarian national politics in the 2000s could be characterized as a "two-bloc" system in which the competition took place between party

alliances: a social democratic liberal left-wing bloc led by the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), and a conservative right-wing bloc led by Fidesz. Following the political (2006) and economic (2008) crises, the left-wing bloc collapsed and disintegrated into several parties (MSZP, Democratic Coalition, Together), while new parties emerged (Jobbik and Politics Can Be Different in 2009, Dialogue for Hungary in 2013 and Momentum in 2017). After the collapse of the left-wing bloc, Fidesz could become the dominant political party, winning three consecutive parliamentary elections with a two-thirds majority (2010, 2014, 2018).

With its constitutive power, the party restructured the political system. It implemented comprehensive reforms in every segment of the political system (see Körösenyi et al. 2020) – including the electoral system. The new system hinders the fragmented opposition to cooperate in candidate nomination. Since 2010, opposition parties have tried to forge unity and form a viable alliance against the governing party.<sup>5</sup> In 2010–2018, their main question was whether the left-wing parties should form a common front against Fidesz with the (formerly radical) right-wing Jobbik.

As Mudde (2016: 26) points out, Hungary offers a unique case for populism since the governing party, Fidesz, and Jobbik, the main opposition party, could have been considered populist for the past 10–15 years. However, as for the content of their populism, the two parties have followed opposite trajectories since the mid-2000s.

Fidesz was established as a liberal party during the democratic transition in 1989–1990 and gradually shifted into a right-wing conservative populist position (see Körösenyi 2017). After its 2002 electoral defeat, the party took a populist turn; it started to use populist mobilization techniques and tried to establish a connection with its voters through astroturf/top-down movements. In opposition, Fidesz used anti-elitist and materialist rhetoric (e.g., its 2006 electoral campaign slogan was: “We live worse off than 4 years ago”), then continued to use this approach as a governing party from 2010 (e.g., with price regulation on utility costs and with extra taxes on multinational corporations). Although, regarding the anti-elitism, Fidesz’s post-2010 populism does not entirely fit into the establishment versus the people dichotomy: rhetoric does not contrast the interests of the Hungarian people with those of the Hungarian elite but pits the Hungarian community against a constantly changing

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5 The first relative success of this venture (after three lost general elections and two local electoral defeats) were the local elections in 2019.

group of elites (the political elite of the European Union, international financial organizations, György Soros, multinational and foreign companies, NGOs, etc. – and their local representatives, the cosmopolitan, foreign-minded leftists and liberals).

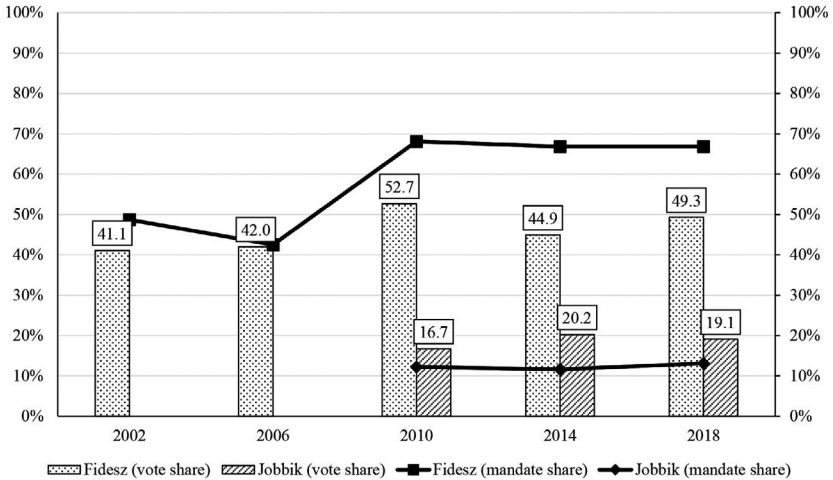
Jobbik was established as a radical conservative-nationalist party in 2003 and quickly showed populist features in its politics. In its first 10 years, the party was an ultra-nationalist and xenophobic actor in Hungarian politics, pursuing a strong anti-Roma agenda and law and order rhetoric. After 2014, Jobbik tried to shift its position to a more centrist one and eased its radical tone, partly because Fidesz took its agenda with the thematization of the migration crisis. In 2015, Fidesz became a more radical nationalist party, while Jobbik turned to a materialist, anti-elitist populism targeted at Viktor Orbán's government. Following the migration crisis in 2015, Jobbik turned away from racist discourse as the governing party, Fidesz, adopted and took over its xenophobic rhetoric (Palonen 2018, 317). Jobbik tried to shift its ideological position to a more centrist direction and to transform Jobbik into a catch-all party. The right-wing Jobbik was willing to form an electoral association with the left-wing opposition parties to beat Fidesz at the next election. In the 2018 general election campaign, Jobbik still used anti-elitist rhetoric (e.g., one of its slogans was: "You are working, they [Fidesz] are stealing") but eased its nationalist and anti-Roma attitudes. After the 2018 electoral loss, Jobbik could not hold its centrist position and lost its direction.

In sum, Fidesz and Jobbik can be characterized as populist parties in an ideological approach. Their ideological profiles show overlaps (nationalism, paternalism, conservatism). The main difference between these two parties is that Fidesz built a catch-all party upon these ideologies. At the same time, Jobbik was able to be successful only until it tried to reach the more radical right-wing voters. Their different positions in the party system result in different manifestations of populism. As a governing party, Fidesz cannot be anti-elitist in a conventional sense. Still, it managed to project its anti-elitism to foreign actors (EU, Soros) and its Hungarian agents (the opposition parties), while Jobbik tried to use anti-elitism against the government.

Analysing Fidesz and Jobbik's electoral performance (Figure 1), one can argue that populist parties are successful in Hungarian politics. After its populist turn following the 2002 electoral defeat, Fidesz could maintain its vote share level in 2006 (although the disproportionality of the electoral system caused a mandate share loss). In the 2006–2010 period,

Fidesz’s strategy was to blame the left-wing parties for the country’s state (even for the effects of the 2008 economic crisis) and to promise to hold the left-wing political elite to account. After its collapse, the left-wing parties could not stabilize their positions, and Fidesz won the 2010 general election with a two-thirds majority. Since then, the populist Fidesz has been Hungary’s most dominant political party.

**Figure No. 1 – Populist Parties’ Vote and Mandate Share at Parliamentary Elections (%)**



**Note:** Given the electoral reform in 2013, vote shares are counted as shares of territorial lists for the 2002–2010 elections and as shares of national lists for the 2014–2018 elections.

**Source:** Own calculation based on the data of the National Election Office, NVI 2025.

Jobbik ran for parliamentary seats first in 2006, but it was the minor party of the electoral alliance consisting of Jobbik and the right-wing radical, ultranationalist MIÉP. The coalition failed to obtain 5% of the votes and could not get any mandates. Still, in the next electoral cycle, Jobbik could become the unquestionable leader of the radical side, which practically eliminated MIÉP. In 2010, Jobbik became the second-largest opposition party in the parliament. Thus, circa 80% of the parliamentary mandates were held by populist parties in 2010–2020. Although Fidesz still had the two-thirds majority and Jobbik still had roughly one-fifth of the mandates in the parliament following the 2018 election, Jobbik can be characterized as a populist party to a lesser extent after that. This shift can be explained either as Jobbik had to take a turn to a less radical rhetoric to be compatible with the other opposition parties (to form

a common front against Fidesz) or as Fidesz could take over the radical rhetoric and the radical voters of Jobbik.

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

In the case of Jobbik, the representation gap hypothesis fits. Jobbik's good electoral performance is undoubtedly connected to the fact that the party was able to thematize the Roma issue. Although anti-Roma sentiments were apparent in Hungarian politics even in the Communist era, mainstream parties of democratic Hungary did not try to thematize the question, even though ca. 20% of the parties' voters showed xenophobic attitudes in the 1990s (Csepeli et al. 1998). The only exception could be MIÉP, but on the one hand, this party could be considered instead as an anti-Semitic party. On the other hand, it could never gain more than 3.6% of the parliamentary seats (in 1998). Karácsony and Róna (2010) argue that the secret of Jobbik's success was that the party could bring the Roma question into the political agenda. While the mainstream media avoided the issue, Jobbik could reach the radical right voters on alternative platforms (social media, video platforms, radical news portals). Jobbik was so successful in this venture that the term "gypsy crime" reached even the consumers of the mainstream media. Karácsony and Róna (2010) point out that Jobbik's effort, paired with the relatively high level of prejudice in Hungarian society, resulted in increasing support for the party by 2009.

In the case of Fidesz, the thematization of the migrant crisis can be considered as the exploitation of the representation gap. In 2015, refugees from the Middle East arrived in the European Union – one of the main access points was the Serbian-Hungarian border. Although the crisis ended mainly in 2017, Fidesz forged political capital from the events. The Orbán government quickly created a link between migration and terrorism, unemployment, and crime and tried to strengthen the xenophobic attitudes of the Hungarian society by using the term "economic/illegal migrants" instead of "asylum seekers" (Barna and Koltai 2019). As the crisis caused conflicts between the leaders of the European Union, Fidesz used this issue as a tool of its anti-EU (more precisely, anti-Brussels) politics: according to the party's communication, György Soros has a plan to settle migrants in Hungary, and the aim of his agents (the opposition parties and even the European Union's elite) is to carry out this plan. Although the migration crisis is no longer a visible threat in Hungary, Fidesz has maintained its narrative since then, which helped

the party achieve its third national election victory in 2018 with a two-thirds majority in the parliament. Migration is still the key element of Fidesz's political strategy, even during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the way Fidesz handles the question of migration is an example of re-vitalizing the xenophobic attitudes of Hungarian society.

In terms of the contagion hypothesis, in the Hungarian case, the spread of populist ideas can be described instead as a process between populist parties. While non-populist parties did not adopt the law and order, anti-elitist, or xenophobic (either anti-Roma or anti-migrant) rhetoric of the populist parties, an "idea transfer" can be observed from Jobbik to Fidesz. Jobbik's electoral success in 2010 showed that many voters are receptive to xenophobic ideas. This could be an example for Fidesz to thematize the migrant crisis, knowing that the fear of "non-Hungarians" can mobilize the voters. Ultimately, this idea transfer can be why Jobbik does not fit into the "populist" category (see above).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Fidesz attempted in early 2020 to take over Jobbik's law and order rhetoric and anti-Roma attitudes. In 2019, the dominance of Fidesz somewhat weakened with the relative success of the joint opposition at the local elections, so the governing party sought new elements for its agenda. Thus, the Orbán government announced in February 2020 that a new national consultation<sup>7</sup> would be held about the "alleged" segregation of Roma children, judicial corruption, and the "unblushingly" high compensation of convicts (for the poor prison conditions). However, this agenda-setting attempt was quickly dropped with the emergence of the pandemic.

Although a clear causal connection cannot be drawn between them, the rise of populist parties is accompanied by increased polarization when reflecting on the third hypothesis. The latter phenomenon can be observed at the party and voter levels. To measure polarization, I use the left-right division of parties and voters. Figure 2 shows the party polarization based on the electoral manifestos of parliamentary parties (collected and coded by the Manifesto project).<sup>8</sup> While the average left-right position varies

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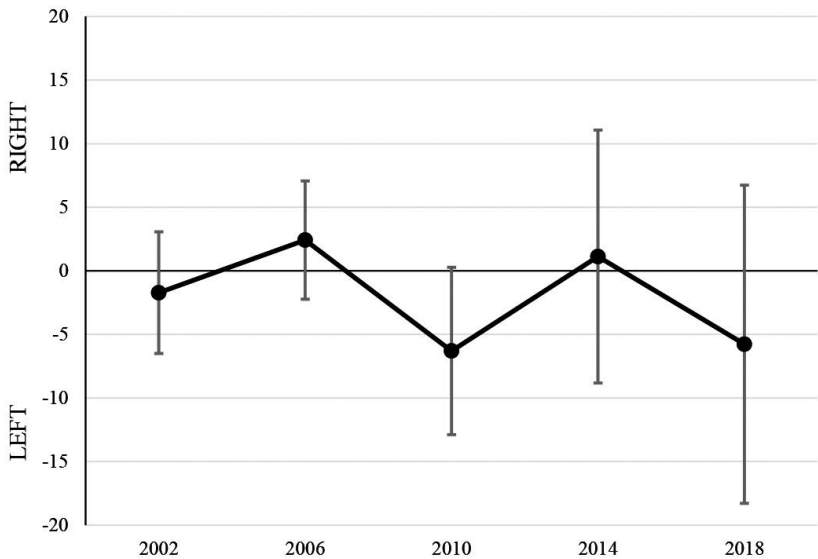
6 In its communication, Fidesz tried to connect the problems of migration and the pandemic, claiming that migrants would bring the virus to Hungary.

7 The instrument of national consultation ("nemzeti konzultáció") is the populist mobilization technique of the Orbán government. The national consultations consist of a 'personal' letter from Viktor Orbán and (often leading) questions about the Orbán cabinet's policies and reforms. In 2010–2020, Fidesz engaged citizens through national consultations in several prominent cases (Körösiényi 2017, 20).

8 Since 2010, Fidesz has not issued a party manifesto; thus, for 2014 and 2018, the coders used Orbán speeches and interviews to identify Fidesz's position on the left-right spectrum.

around the zero value (following the composition changes of the parliament), the constant increase of standard deviation (i.e., how the polarization values of the parties spread out) is remarkable. The polarization level of the parliament increased from 9.6 to 25.0 between 2002 and 2018, and the increase was especially high in the period (2010–2018) when Fidesz was the dominant party and Jobbik became a parliamentary party.

**Figure No. 2** – Polarization at Party Level (Parliamentary Parties)



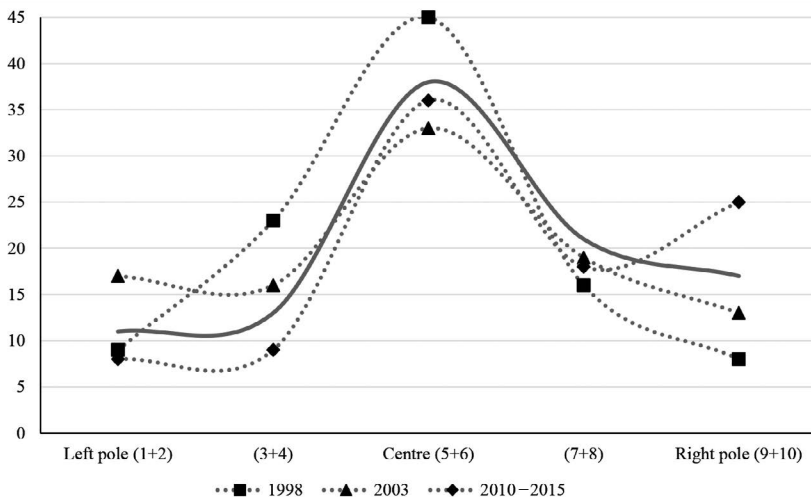
**Standard deviation values:** 9.6 (2002); 9.3 (2006); 13.2 (2010); 19.9 (2014); 25.0 (2018).

**Source:** The author's calculation based on the data produced by the Manifesto Project, MP 2025.

At the level of voters, a similar trend can be observed based on the results of surveys (Figure 3). In a non-polarized society, most citizens would be in the centrum, and only a few would be at the two ends of the left-right spectrum (i.e., the curve would be steep). The data of Figure 3 reveal two tendencies of the Hungarian voters: 1) There is a shift towards the right pole in the whole society, and the share of the voters on the right end grew over time (it reached its zenith in 2010); 2) the curve became flatter, meaning that the share of citizens in the centre has decreased and the share of citizens at the two ends of the spectrum has increased.

In sum, polarization shows similar tendencies at the voter and the party level. With these tendencies, Hungary became one of the most polarized countries in Europe (Patkós 2019, 49).

**Figure No. 3 – Polarization at Voter Level (%)**



**Source:** (Angelusz and Tardos 2011, Szabó and Gerő 2015).

Following the 2002 election (and the populist turn of the party), Fidesz did not form an electoral alliance with other parties. Formally, the party ran in a coalition with the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP) in all four elections between 2006 and 2018. Still, KDNP needs to be considered instead as a religious wing of Fidesz than as an individual party. Consequently, the Fidesz-KDNP government should not be regarded as a coalition government. Considering the Fidesz-KDNP as one political entity, the “elective affinity coalition” hypothesis needs to be rejected in the case of Hungary.

At the dawn of its political career, Jobbik formed an electoral alliance with the radical right-wing MIÉP (in 2006), then ran alone for mandates at the next two elections. Although Jobbik became a joint opposition member in 2018, this resulted from the party’s consolidation and shift into a centrist position.

### **Populist Parties and the Type of Party System**

Hungary presents the classic case of Sartori’s predominant party system, meeting every criterion of this typology: the predominant party wins three consecutive legislative majorities with the absolute majority of the parliamentary seats. In contrast, other parties exist as legitimate compe-

titors of the predominant party (Sartori 2005, 176-177). In the 2010–2018 period, Fidesz was inarguably the dominant party of the Hungarian party system, gaining the absolute majority of the seats and achieving constitutive power with two-thirds of the parliamentary mandates. Although one could argue that altering the electoral system significantly hinders the opposition parties from being effective challengers, the Hungarian situation still fits Sartori’s typology. He notes that opposition parties of a predominant system always have a realistic opportunity to defeat the dominant party (Sartori 2005, 178). However, the equality of opportunity is always relative, and equal opportunities do not mean equal resources. Still, the predominant party system is a competitive system in which the parties “enjoy an equality of opportunity unheard of in, and unknown to, the minor parties of the hegemonic systems” (Sartori 2005, 178).

It is important to emphasize that the predominant party system is a type (not a class); it can arise from a two-party and fragmented format (Sartori 2005: 177).<sup>9</sup> As Nwokora and Pelizzo (2014, 826) point out, neither fragmentation nor polarization come into play in Sartori’s predominant system definition; they are substituted with the potential for power alternation. Moreover, they argue that “polarization is a blunt tool for four of Sartori’s six categories (one-party, hegemonic, predominant, two-party)” (Nwokora and Pelizzo 2014, 833).

The theoretical framework of Wolinetz’s (2004) party system typology also offers limited toolsets to categorize predominant party systems based on their polarization and fragmentation levels. Nevertheless, Hungary has a predominant party system with high polarization and low fragmentation levels. As I presented above, the polarization of the Hungarian party system has increased over time in the analysed period (see Figure 2).

To measure the fragmentation of the Hungarian party system, I use two indicators: the effective number of parliamentary parties (Laakso a-Taagepera index) and the mandate share of the two strongest parties in the parliament. Table 1 shows that despite the political changes (2006–2010) and the electoral system reform (effective from 2014), the fragmentation level of the party system remained relatively stable. The race for parliamentary seats in 2010 can be considered a critical election (see Evans and Norris 1999, Róbert and Papp 2012) since it dramatically changed the party system: traditional parties (that were active during

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9 At the presentation of his overall framework of party system typology, Sartori uses the term: “whatever format” (Sartori 2005, 258).

the time of democratic transition – SZDSZ and MDF) failed to gain any mandates (and shortly ceased to exist), while new parties (the left-green LMP and Jobbik) emerged. Still, the effective number of (parliamentary) parties did not change significantly and remained roughly the same as in the “two-bloc” period (2002–2010) of Hungarian politics. Although the number of parliamentary parties increased with the 2018 election, the number of effective parties showed the presence of two hypothetical, equal-size parties in the parliament. The combined mandate share of the two strongest parties indicates that the concentration of the party system has somewhat decreased: Fidesz won two-thirds of the mandates, and there has been no clear leader on the opposition side since 2010, as Jobbik and MSZP show similar strength.

**Table No. 1** – Fragmentation of the Hungarian Party System

	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Number of parliamentary parties	4	4	4	4	6
Effective number of parliamentary parties	2.20	2.36	1.98	2.01	2.09
Combined mandate share of the two strongest parties	94.9%	91.5%	83.4%	78.4%	79.9%

**Source:** Own calculation.

## Conclusion

The Hungarian parties formed a predominant party system in which the dominant governing party is a populist party, the same as one of the strongest opposition parties. The two parties held around 80% of the parliamentary mandates in the last decade. Regarding populism, the 2010 general election was a crucial event in Hungarian politics: Fidesz gained two-thirds of the mandates, and Jobbik became a member of the parliament.

The analysis showed that Hungarian populist parties had an undeniable impact on the party system: 1) They are bringing new themes into the political agenda, creating new and re-vitalizing old conflicts, primarily by feeding the ignorance and xenophobia of Hungarian society; 2) with the rise of populist parties, the polarization of the Hungarian political system has increased – this change can be traced both in the voters’ and the parties’ ideological positions. Although populism has no direct im-

pact on the policy agenda of non-populist parties, an idea transfer could be observed between the two parties; more precisely, Fidesz did not shy away from importing radical elements of Jobbik's politics.

# **Poland: Changing Institutions Through Populist Discourse**

Artur Lipiński

## **Introduction**

Poland constitutes a particularly salient example of right-wing populism, with the Law and Justice (PiS) party being in power twice in the period under scrutiny and, since 2015, continuously maintaining the majoritarian status as the incumbent actor until the end of the observed period. Moreover, the volatility and instability of the party system provided an opportunity for fringe political actors to exploit anti-establishment attitudes and capitalize on the status of newness. In most cases, these actors ideologically represented radical right populisms striving to outmanoeuvre PiS from the right flank.

The chapter aims to provide evidence of the impact of populist parties in the Polish political system. In the following parts of the paper, the theoretical framework presented in the first chapter of this book will be applied. First, it briefly analyses Polish politics, focusing on populist actors from 2000 until 2020. This section will highlight PiS's gradual shift from a relatively traditional conservative position to a more radical and populist right. Additionally, the successful albeit short-lived fringe political projects will be depicted, including Confederation as the most recent one, the grouping that passed the electoral threshold and secured seats in Sejm, the lower chamber of the Polish parliament. Secondly, the relevance of the four hypotheses (representation gap, contagion, polarization, elective affinity coalition) explaining the impact of populist parties on the party system shall be depicted. In the remaining parts of the text, Sartori's typology will be referred to in order to categorize and discuss the type of the Polish party system.

## **Political Context**

Populism, particularly at the discursive level, has been an inherent part of Polish politics marked strongly by the historical legacy of division between “we” – the people and they, “the communists”. Accordingly, party politics from 1989 onwards was based on the bipolar structure of political competition. Moreover, in the period under consideration (2000–2020), one can observe the growing political relevance of the populist actors, including PiS, which gradually shifted towards populism before the 2005 elections.

PiS started in 2001 as a conservative party strongly defined by the personality of its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński. The genesis of PiS should be linked to the decomposition of the Solidarity Electoral Action (in Polish: Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność, AWS), a large right-wing coalition which defeated post-communist Democratic Left Alliance in parliamentary elections 1997 under the slogans of “finishing Solidarity’s revolution” (Wencel 1998). In the elections on 23 September 2001, the voters decided to grant power to the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (41%), promising to end the internal struggles of the right-wing coalition and portraying itself as much more competent. However, it is essential to notice that a significant number of votes went to newly founded right-wing parties: Civic Platform (PO; 12.68%) and PiS (9.5%), which entered parliament by resorting to an anti-corruption, anti-political and anti-establishment agenda. Moreover, two other actors with populist profiles crossed the electoral threshold: Self-Defence (SRP; 10.2%) and the League of Polish Families (LPR; 7.87%). The core of their agenda was based on anti-establishment slogans and disenchantment, with the whole transformational political order portrayed as corrupted and representing merely the interests of political and social elites (Kucharczyk and Wysocka 2008). SRP was more concerned with socio-economic issues. LPR, which emerged from a nationalistic milieu, stressed moral-cultural issues portraying Western countries as a “civilization of death” alien to the Polish culture based on Christian values (Markowski 2006, Szczerbiak 2007).

The mood of growing political radicalism dominated the period between 2001–2005; post-communist incumbents’ numerous scandals and corruption practices, tough accession negotiation talks with the European Union, and economic problems fuelled references to populism and nationalism. Although all the oppositional parties (PiS, PO, SO, LPR) resorted more or less strongly to the ideas of cleansing the country of

corruption, anti-communist slogans of lustration and decommunization, anti-elitism, a critique of the post-communist transformation and the necessity to introduce a moral revolution, it was PiS which gained the most significant electoral support in the double, presidential and parliamentary elections of 2005.

The results of the double elections revealed the ability of PiS to impose a new divide between social vs. liberal Poland, which overshadowed the old “post-communist divide” between those favourable to the ancient regime and its legacy and its critics. A new divide was underpinned to a larger extent by the economic issues and reflected the tension between “transition losers” and “transition winners”. PiS won 26.99% of the vote and 155 (out of 460) seats, ahead of PO with 24.14% and 133 seats (Szczerbiak 2007, 214). Notably, the radical-populist parties, SRP (11.41% and 56 seats) and LPR (7.97% and 34 seats) could maintain the degree of social support from 2001. In the presidential elections, PiS’s candidate was first in the second round with 54.04% compared to PO’s candidate, Donald Tusk, finishing the campaign with 45.96%.

PiS, unable to govern as a minority government, formed a right-wing coalition with the social populist SRP and nationalist LPR in May 2006. The coalition’s agenda reflected, to a large extent, the Fourth Republic agenda. It portrayed the social, political, and cultural reality as a deep crisis needing multi-dimensional reform. Anti-elitism and anti-corruption slogans were the main drivers of the policy decisions. PiS reluctantly entered the coalition with populist radicals. They legitimized it by claiming that SRP’s and LPR’s agenda aligned with a program of deep reforms labelled by PiS as a Fourth Republic (Kucharczyk and Wysocka 2008, 85). It mainstreamed the radical populist agenda and captured the radical rhetoric of its allies.

In the 2007 parliamentary elections, liberal PO transformed the campaign into a plebiscite on the PiS’s antagonistic style of governance and won 41.5% of votes and 209 seats in Sejm. After the elections, a coalition government was created, with agrarian PSL and Tusk as prime ministers. PiS received 32.1% of votes and 166 seats. Interestingly, in absolute figures, PiS increased its share of votes (almost 2 million more) due to its ability to capture the agenda of its radical populist allies, who did not cross the parliamentary threshold. The 2007 elections confirmed the stabilization of the new divide between those parts of the electorate that support PiS and its anti-corruption and anti-establishment agenda, as well as the sympathizers of PO. Additionally, for both SRP and LPR, the result of the elections sealed their future fate; these parties did not

manage to return to parliament and maintain their organizational structure. It happened mainly because of PiS's ability to capture the elements of the agenda and the populist and nationalist discourse of these parties.

In the subsequent years, dominated by the conflict between PiS and PO, Jarosław Kaczyński continued to employ populist division between the nation and the establishment. The repeatedly used phrase "Tusk's system" was designed to define the situation radically negatively as a comeback of the Third Republic understood as a system of dirty pacts between various social networks with roots in the communist regime. As he claimed, the Tusk government aimed to disintegrate the Polish nation (Kaczyński 2008). The populist structure of PiS's agenda was bolstered by the Smolensk catastrophe of April 2010. The party's political discourse attempted to inscribe the crash into Polish history and interpreted the nature of the event through references to the division between true patriots and collaborators (Koczanowicz 2012).

The result of the 2015 presidential election was victorious for PiS's candidate, Andrzej Duda, and as such, it added momentum to the PiS campaign. Before the parliamentary elections in 2015, PiS decided to withdraw or background its most controversial politicians. The personal changes did not attenuate; however, the highly negative problem definition and diagnosis of reality were disseminated through the electoral messages. According to them, Poland was a country "in ruins," governed by oligarchy, based on significant economic inequalities and dependent on Russia and Germany at the international level (Kaczyński 2015, Szczerski 2015) At the heart of the PiS strategy, however, lay a positive list of costly social and economic promises: reversing the PO government's unpopular decision to increase the retirement age, the introduction of additional child benefits for poorer and larger families, and raising tax-free income thresholds. The campaign took a new turn when the refugee crisis broke out in September 2015. The PiS treated it as an opportunity to strengthen its right-wing credentials and play on the fears of the majority, particularly young Poles. Another significant result of the double elections was Paweł Kukiz's position and grouping. Kukiz was a newcomer, previously better known as a rock star than a political activist. He entered the Polish political scene in 2015 and came in third in the Polish presidential elections (with 20.8% of the votes). His political movement, Kukiz'15, received 8.81% of the votes in the 2015 parliamentary elections. He criticized the allegedly "partocratic" and "oligarchic" features of the Polish political system. He called for changing the current list-based proportional electoral system to UK-style single-member

constituencies and a wider use of referenda to express the citizens' will. Frequently employed anti-communist themes and occasional references to conservative values supplemented his right-wing profile.

In the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections and in the subsequent parliamentary elections later that year, PiS and its junior coalition partners (the United Right) secured a dominant position (45.4% of votes and 43.59% of votes with 235 seats, accordingly) thanks to a campaign filled with homophobic slogans and criticisms of “gender ideology”, assisted by generous social spending framed as a people-oriented “revolution of dignity”. This was not, however, an out-and-out victory as PiS lost its majority in the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament with the power to slow down the legislative process. The loss of the Senate increased the importance of the presidential elections planned for May 2020 and the necessity to secure the re-election of Andrzej Duda. Otherwise, challenged by the Senate and a president with veto power, PiS could not continue its radical policies. At this time, the ruling camp's political efforts and the public's attention seemed to be entirely focused on this task in the forthcoming months. The emergence of COVID-19 and its potentially adverse outcomes for the incumbents only raised the stakes of the elections and determined PiS's resistance to delaying the election date.

Another significant result of the October 2019 elections was the relative success of Confederation, a radical right-wing party founded at the beginning of 2019 on the eve of an electoral campaign for the European and national parliaments, with 11 seats won in the latter (6.81% of votes). The party showed its ability to surpass PiS from the right flank, forcing PiS to radicalize its message. Confederation's anti-systemic agenda makes it similar to many small and short-lived parties that appeared in Poland after 1989, using presidential elections as an opportunity to promote a radical message and relying on their “newness” as an essential symbolic resource (Sikk 2012). In general, Confederation is a coalition of economic libertarians linked to the eccentric Janusz Korwin-Mikke and nationalists from the National Movement. The alliance was broadened during the 2019 EP elections to include anti-vaccine and pro-life activists. The populist strategy of provocation was articulated through anti-Semitic slogans related to the alleged Jewish wartime reparation claims enabled by the American JUST Act of 2017. Moreover, the campaign resorted to anti-Semitic and Eurosceptic slogans to accuse PiS of undermining Poland's sovereignty by becoming servile towards the US and EU. After failing to reach the 5% parliamentary representation threshold for par-

ties (they only received 4.6% of the votes), Confederation decided to moderate its public image significantly. In the subsequent parliamentary elections in October 2019, they presented themselves as the only integral right-wing force, compared to PiS, which was shown to lack a real right-wing identity. Consequently, Confederation's focus on anti-establishment messages, tax reductions, and other free market slogans, coupled with careful avoidance of more controversial issues, brought them eleven parliamentary seats.

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

Regarding the representation gap hypothesis, the populist parties were actively pursuing strategies that would allow them to find segments of the electorate whose support would maximize their chances for success. In the initial phase, PiS based its agenda on penal populism, exploiting the popular sentiments present in Polish society at that time. During the 2005 electoral campaign, the party skilfully imposed the new division between so-called social and liberal Poland, which overshadowed the dominant until that time, post-communist cleavage. It offered a new narration based on ideational elements drawn from post-communist cleavage and supplemented it with a socio-economic dimension. In other words, the idea of the collusion of the post-communist and liberal elites was combined with references to the conflict of interests between transition winners and transition losers. Accordingly, the transformation was conceived as apparent and fake and aimed mainly at securing the interests of elites against the ordinary people. The crisis narrative consistently promoted by PiS represented the elites as capturing and corrupting the state (the political dimension), economically privileged and exploiting the people (the economic dimension), and careless about national identity and sovereignty (the cultural dimension). PiS aimed to represent Poland B, the eastern part of the country occupied by more traditional, religious, less educated, and older people. Indeed, according to the analyses of the PiS electorate, there is an above-average number of voters aged 45 and over. Moreover, PiS is supported more often by those with elementary vocational education and by inhabitants of rural areas. In recent years, the party gained slightly among inhabitants of small towns (up to 19,999 inhabitants). At the same time, it lost relatively few voters in the largest cities with populations of 500 thousand or more (CBOS 2017). In the subsequent years, PiS consistently shifted towards

more populist strategies, resorting to antagonistic, emotional discourse and raising issues that allowed them to compete with the radical and extreme right milieus. After the Smolensk catastrophe, the party disseminated various conspiracy theories suggesting that the Polish government had been involved. In 2015, during the refugee crisis, PiS decided to use the problem as a campaign issue, resorting to the xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse (Lipiński 2020). Similarly, during the 2019 electoral campaigns, it systematically resorted to anti-LGBTQ+ slogans and spread homophobic propaganda, counting on support from the radical segments of the electorate.

Other populist parties attempted to exploit gaps in representation as well. Paweł Kukiz provides another spectacular example. Its anti-establishment slogans and self-presentation as a mere voice from outside the “partocratic system”, coupled with the rock star image and intense use of social media, paid off, particularly among the youngest groups of the electorate. A significant percentage of Kukiz voters were from the youngest cohort. In contrast, the oldest cohort of voters (over 60) hardly supported these candidates and instead supported Andrzej Duda of PiS or Bronisław Komorowski of PO. According to the data, the group from 18 to 29 constituted 20.6% of the Kukiz’15 voters.

The relative openness of the party system to the new parties and the dissatisfaction of some parts of the electorate with the domination of the two biggest parties, PiS and PO, was exploited by the radical Confederation in the 2019 and 2020 presidential elections. It based its agenda on the combination of radical and moderate strategies resorting to anti-Semitic, nationalistic, and homophobic slogans together with radically free market liberalism targeting and the skilful, intensive use of social media to address young, well-educated people usually inhabiting big cities (Kunert 2019).

Reflecting on the contagion hypothesis, one must take into account that populism in Poland is confined to the circumscribed set of political parties rather than being a style of communication of PiS as the most significant right-wing party and new fringe, mainly right-wing parties which systematically appear in the relatively open party system. According to the research of party manifestos and parliamentary speeches conducted by Przyłęcki (2012), although all of the parties in the period 2001–2009 employed some populist strategies, the percentage of populist expressions was higher in the discourse of LPR and SRP, and smaller in the case of other parliamentary parties. A high level of polarization and antagonism between the two biggest parties prevents

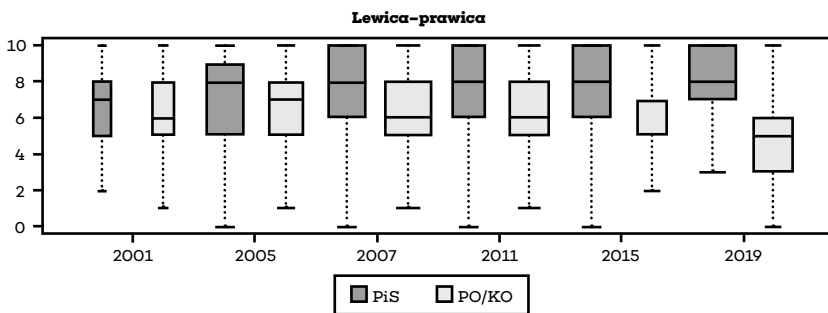
the diffusion of populist ideas to the policy agenda of non-populist parties. Accordingly, the agenda, discourse, and identity of the anti-PiS liberal opposition is based on the representation of PiS as populist and radical and its own self-identity as rational, moderate, and anti-populist (Komorowski 2015).

The competition over radical segments of the electorate between PiS and more radical, fringe parties is typical for the Polish political system. Skilful manoeuvring of PiS between moderate and radical positions allows it to attract the core electorate of the radical parties. A striking example of that was PiS's ability to capture the issues promoted by LPR and SRP, which eventually led to the disappearance of the parties from the political scene. Importantly, it is even easier with the electorate of the populist radical right as it does not see them as different enough from more centrally positioned parties (Stanley, Markowski and Cześniak 2021, 55). Accordingly, the contagion hypothesis is not confirmed as PiS, but to maintain its majoritarian status, it must exert much effort to avoid outbidding from the right flank. Moreover, and somewhat paradoxical in the light of academic literature, PiS represents higher levels of populism while being in power, moderating its image as an oppositional party in the periods between elections (Stanley 2015).

When considering the polarization hypothesis, we observe that a strong bipolar division between “us” and “them”, which can be dated back to the communist era, was articulated in the first decade of transformation through so-called “post-communist cleavage” (Grabowska 2004). PiS skilfully reframed the cleavage into the division between social and liberal Poland, not only maintaining but even strengthening the existing polarization (Szczerbiak 2007). Since 2005, it has advanced the antagonistic style of politics combined with the radical criticism directed against various institutions of the liberal democratic state (for example, the Supreme Court or the Constitutional Tribunal). In the years that followed the failed 2007 parliamentary elections, PiS, as a significant oppositional party, promoted radical criticism of the PO government, portraying Poland as a country in crisis requiring profound changes at the elite and institutional levels. In 2005 and 2010, the party prepared two drafts of an entirely new constitution that would centralize the president's power, elevate Catholicism to the level of official state axiology, and significantly limit the system of checks and balances (Rodzik 2017). These ideas provided a programmatic basis for the 2015 electoral campaign and subsequent, partially successful attempts to undermine the liberal democratic system after taking power in 2015.

According to Tworzecki (2019, 103), the polarization of Poland was asymmetric. Whereas PiS moved towards more radical positions, liberal PO remained a centrist mainstream party. Moreover, the polarization at the social level cannot be explained by the complex socio-economic factors but rather by the PiS's ability to impose its narrative and distribute it through the public and private media dependent on state-sponsored advertising revenues. According to the sociological analyses, a clear polarizing trend can be observed; the positions of the two electorates on the left-right axis have gradually diverged. During the 2019 elections, the voters of the two largest parties, PiS and PO, differed much more than in previous years (figure 1).

**Figure No. 1** – Polarization of the Polish Party System after 2001



Source: (Czeźnik, Mišta and Żerkowska-Balas 2020).

The Polish case confirms the elective affinity hypothesis. During the first PiS government (2005–2007), besides the very beginning, PiS governed in a coalition with two more radical parties, SRP and LPR, promoting nationalism, nativism, and Euroscepticism. Importantly, shortly after entering the alliance, PiS radicalized its agenda and made efforts to neutralize these parties and capture their electorates. The situation was different after the 2015 and 2019 elections when PiS gained the ability to form a one-party government. One must remember, however, that organizationally, PiS was a coalition consisting of PiS proper and two junior partners: Solidarity Poland (SP), led by Zbigniew Ziobro, minister of justice, and Agreement, led by Jarosław Gowin, deputy prime minister. Both parties increased their seats in the 2019 elections, providing them with potential for the blackmail that had already been used in the 2015–2019 term. Such a situation occasionally leads to ideological outbidding between parties (particularly PiS and SP) over populism, radicalism, and right-wing credentials.

## Populist Parties and the Type of Party System

Poland represents the case of Sartorian limited pluralism with the bipolar structure of party competition (Casal Bértoa and Guerra 2018). According to Wolinetz's typology, Poland constitutes an example of limited pluralism with bipolar competition and a high level of polarization between the most prominent parties representing two blocks. Populist parties affected the parameters of the party system, particularly during the 2005 elections with the increase of the effective number of parties and change of the content (but not bipolar) structure of party competition with the post-communist divide superseded by the division between social and liberal Poland (see Table 1).

**Table No 1 – Fragmentation of the Polish Party System**

	1991	1993	1997	2001	2005	2007	2011	2015	2019
Fractionalization	0.93	0.9	0.78	0.78	0.83	0.7	0.73	0.78	0.71
Number of Effective Parties (voters)	13.86	9.8	4.59	4.5	5.86	3.32	3.74	4.45	3.42
Number of Effective Parties (seats)	10.45	3.88	2.95	3.6	4.63	2.82	3	2.75	2.76
Disproportionality	4.14	15.74	9.75	4.42	5.61	4.39	5.67	10.55	6.58
Wasted votes (%)	8.37	34.44	12.1	9.37	10.93	4.12	4.12	16.61	0.92
Sum of the two biggest parties (votes; %)	24.31	35.81	60.96	53.72	51.13	73.62	69.07	61.67	70.99
Sum of the two biggest parties (seats; %)	26.52	65.87	79.35	61.09	61.96	81.52	79.13	81.09	80.22
Biggest to the second party ratio (votes)	1.03	1.32	1.25	3.24	1.12	1.29	1.31	1.56	1.59
Biggest to the second party ratio (seats)	1.03	1.29	1.22	2.32	1.14	1.26	1.32	1.7	1.75

Source: (Markowski 2020, 1514).

In general, the system is and has always been open to new parties due to the lack of organizational loyalties at the level of political elites and, to a large degree, the effect of high levels of electoral volatility (Markowski 2020). The perfect example of that was the very good electoral result of the Kukiz'15 in the 2015 elections and a high percentage of votes gained by the KORWIN party (radical right, radically free market, EU-rejectionist grouping). The latter entered the newly founded Confederation and crossed the electoral threshold in the 2019 elections. In all these cases, the electoral success resulted from (mostly) disappointed young people with strong anti-establishment sentiments willing to reject the polarized competition between the two most prominent actors that have dominated the political scene since 2005. This is very well indicated by the combined mandate share of the two biggest parties, which, since 2007, have occupied 80% of the seats in Parliament.

## **Conclusion**

The Polish party system exhibited features of limited pluralism with intense polarization between PiS resorting to populism at the discourse and agenda level and the oppositional liberal PO. The competition between these parties determined the structure and content of the political competition between 2005 and 2020. PiS imposed a new division between social and liberal Poland, which replaced the post-communist cleavage. It also proved its skilfulness in using the media (including social media) to disseminate the agenda of radical polity reform, the necessity of elite replacement, and performing a crisis (Moffit 2016). As such, it contributed enormously to the high level of polarization, introducing reforms that limit, if not destroy, the system of checks and balances and curtail civic freedoms. There was also an additional source of dynamic competition between parties, the one on the radical right flank of PiS, motivating the party to adopt a radical agenda to prevent competition from the right side. On the other hand, the competition over radicalism and right-wing credentials prevented the populist from spreading to non-populist parties, which built their political identities on being “anti-PiS”.

# **Greece: Economic Crisis and the Upsurge of Left-wing Populism**

Manos Tsatsanis and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos

## **Introduction**

In the wake of the post-2008 economic crisis, which almost strangled the Greek economy, a major shift occurred in the Greek political party system. After 2012, a long-established two-party system collapsed and was replaced by a volatile, fragmented, and polarized multi-party system, while a pattern of coalition governments emerged in the place of traditional single-majority party governments that had ruled from 1974–2012. The shift lasted at least until 2019 (the most recent elections), when a new single-party government was formed.

Compared to other countries in the Southern European periphery, Greece underwent the most severe economic crisis in the 2010s (the state budget deficit had reached -16% of the GDP by 2009). Austerity economic policies, which the country's creditors imposed as a solution to avoid sovereign default, gave rise to dormant populist reactions, which combined with Eurosceptic and radical political discourse on the Right and the Left.

What followed was the emergence or strengthening of populist parties on the Left and the Right, the adoption of populism as political discourse by an otherwise radical left-wing party (Syriza), and its rise to power in 2015 on the wave of social reactions to austerity policies. As a result, the party system was dramatically altered.

In the remainder of this chapter, we first sketch the political context of Greece, including patterns of the party system, political traditions, and political culture. We then highlight the role of populist parties in the Greek party system, discussing themes of representation, contagion, polarization, and elective affinity. We continue with an analysis of how

the rise of populist parties has altered the Greek party system, and we draw our conclusions, reiterating the main themes of this chapter.

## **Political Context**

As is well known, a grave economic crisis erupted in Greece in 2009–2010. The then-Greek government could not manage it, and the country was on the brink of becoming insolvent. In the following years, policymaking in Greece took place under international supervision, as specified in three Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed between Greek authorities and the country's creditors in 2010, 2012, and 2015. The MoUs laid out austerity economic packages lasting almost nine years (May 2010–August 2018), during which Greece received conditional financial support to pay for its public debt. The fulfilment of conditions was made under the close supervision of representatives of three institutions: the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), also known as “the Troika”. Externally imposed reforms included fiscal consolidation measures and regulating the production and distribution of goods and services and market access, starting in 2010.

While sovereign default was avoided, the economic austerity policies provoked a dip in economic growth and a hike in adverse social effects. The rate of unemployment soared to 27% in 2013, poverty became extensive, access to public health care and social welfare services was curtailed, and approximately half a million of the most skilled workers exited the country (“brain-drain”).

The dramatic economic situation sparked frequent and violent social protests, while consultation with social partners on public policies ceased. The centre-left Pasok and the centre-right New Democracy, the two mainstream parties who governed in the first phase of the crisis (2009–2014), were cornered by the rapidly radicalized opposition formed around two vocal poles of resistance to austerity. On the Right, there was the far-right populist neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn and the populist nationalist party of “Independent Greeks”, composed of a faction that split off from the New Democracy party. On the Left, there was the populist radical left party Syriza, the traditional orthodox Communist Party (the KKE), and smaller parties of the extra-parliamentary Left. Regarding votes, the New Democracy haemorrhaged to its right, while Pasok was to its left. A small centrist, pro-European party, the “River” (To Potami),

also emerged in 2014 but was short-lived (2014–2015), while on the Left, the small, moderate Democratic Left Party (Dimar) eventually split, and its leader joined Syriza.

In other words, after the onset of the economic crisis, the Greek party system experienced both polarization and fragmentation. The turning point for these party system developments was the year 2012. In two successive parliamentary elections in 2012, the change in the Greek party system amounted to an “electoral earthquake” (Voulgaris and Nikolakopoulos 2012), as shown in Table 1.

**Table No. 1** – Political Parties in Greece: Percentage Share of the Vote Obtained by Populist Parties and the Largest Mainstream Parties (New Democracy, Pasok) in 1989–2019

	June 1989	Nov 1989	April 1990	1993	1996	2000	2004	2007	2009	May 2012	June 2012	Jan. 2015	Sept 2015	2019
New Democracy	44.3	46.2	46.9	39.3	38.1	42.7	45.4	41.8	33.5	18.9	29.7	27.8	28.1	39.9
Pasok	39.1	40.7	38.6	46.9	41.5	43.8	40.6	38.1	43.9	13.2	12.3	4.7	6.3	8.1
SYN/Syriza	13.1	11.0	10.3	2.9	5.1	3.2	3.3	5.0	4.6	16.8	26.9	36.3	35.5	31.5
Laos	–	–	–	–	–	–	2.2	3.8	5.6	2.9	1.6	1.0	–	–
Anel	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	10.6	7.5	4.8	3.7	–
Golden Dawn	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.3	7.0	6.9	6.3	7.0	2.9
Greek Solution	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	3.7

**Source:** Official results of parliamentary elections.

The election years, shown above, start from the first year the Coalition of the Left (SYN, later renamed to Syriza) participated in national elections. Until 1990, that party included the traditional, orthodox communist party (KKE), which split off from SYN. Before 2009, the Golden Dawn party used to obtain a trivial share of votes. In 2019, the Anel party dissolved, while in 2020, the leadership of the Golden Dawn party was convicted of imprisonment.

While the economic crisis was the catalyst that brought about the aforementioned shifts in the party system, the political-historical context was also important. There have been long historical legacies in Greece of political clientelism (or patronage) and populism. Citizens and social groups were integrated into Greece’s political system in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through political patronage networks and the populist mobilization of the masses (Mouzelis 1986). More specifically, after the

1974 transition from the Colonels’ authoritarian regime to democracy, conservative party rule under the New Democracy party was replaced by populist/socialist party rule under the Greek socialist party, Pasok. The latter won the elections of 1981, led by the charismatic populist leader Andreas Papandreou (Sotiropoulos 1996).

Authors have claimed that Greek politics in the whole era between the rise of Pasok to power in 1981 and today can be interpreted through the prism of populism (Pappas 2013). While this is very debatable, the populist themes of the 1980s have indeed been part and parcel of contemporary Greece’s political culture (Doxiadis and Matsaganis 2013, Kalpadakis and Sotiropoulos 2007). Political parties, mass media, and a large share of the general population have subscribed to a conflictual, dichotomic, interpretative scheme of public policy choices and a xenophobic understanding of immigration and Greece’s place in the world.

Since the late 1970s, Greek voters have perceived politics regarding the Left-Right cleavage and a dualistic, Manichean discourse (Diamandouros 1994). Pasok’s outright rejection of the establishment, domestic and foreign monopolies, the USA, and even European social democracy in the early 1980s set the stage for the astonishingly popular conceptualization of the Greek crisis of the early 2010s by the radical left Syriza party. The latter grew in terms of popularity in 2010–2014 and rose to the government in 2015 by continuously employing contrasts such as a clash between “the people” vs. “Brussels”, the “new” vs. the “old” (political system), “us” vs. “them”.

**Table No. 2** – Shifts in the Greek Party System in the Wake of the Economic Crisis, 2009–2015

	Pre-crisis elections (2009)	First elections during the crisis (2011–2012)	Second elections during the crisis (2015) (two elections in Greece, June and September 2015)
Greek elections, winner party	Pasok	New Democracy	Syriza
Parties who came 2n, 3d and 4th in Greek elections	New Democracy, KKE, Laos	Syriza, Pasok, Anel	New Democracy, Golden Dawn, Potami (Pasok came 4th in Sept. 2015)

**Source:** The authors.

To summarize this section, as Table 2 shows, the Greek party system underwent a tremendous change in 2012–2019, owing to the challenges

posed by populist parties. Moreover, the presence of populist parties in Greece has been long-term. Current mainstream parties, such as Pasok, used to be populist in past decades (1974–1989). Centre-left and radical-left populists have made successful bids for power several times (Pasok in 1981 and 1985, Syriza twice in June 2015 and September 2015). Other, usually small, populist parties have risen on the Right. These parties (discussed in the section below) were the Laos party, which also participated in a short-term coalition government in 2011–2012; the Anel party, which lasted between 2012–2019; and the Greek Solution party, which won parliamentary representation in 2019.

In sum, in the 2010s, the emergence of populist parties and the rise of two of them (Syriza, Anel) to power in Greece may be interpreted along the following lines: despite traditions of political culture, the gravity and long duration of the recent economic crisis were a catalyst for the sea change in the Greek party system.

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

After 2010, a vast cleavage was opened in the Greek party system between the mainstream parties (Pasok and New Democracy) and various populist parties. Interaction between these two sides was severed early in 2010 on almost all institutional and policy matters. Defenders of austerity policy were not on speaking terms with those who rejected such policy. The parties on either side did not borrow ideas from the policy agenda of the opposite side. In other words, the contagion and diffusion of populist ideas were hard to come by (the contagion hypothesis was not confirmed in the case of the Greek party system). The opposing ideas of the two sides and the electoral strategies of the many different populist parties, outlined below, may explain this lack of contagion.

On the Right, as briefly discussed below, there were several populist parties, namely the Laos party (Laos being an abbreviation for the “Popular Orthodox Rally”), the Golden Dawn Party, the Anel party, and the Greek Solution Party. Except for the Golden Dawn, none of these four parties can be characterized as purely anti-systemic or ideologically anti-systemic. In other words, three of these four populist parties mostly played the game within the boundaries set by the system and according to its rules (see the theoretical chapter).

The Laos party was founded in 2000 by a right-wing populist journalist, television producer, and MP of the New Democracy party. The

party invoked traditional ideas of the Greek Christian Orthodox Church, nationalist ideas, and strong anti-immigrant ideas, winning a solid following in the late 2000s. The party's discourse constantly pitted the traditional Greeks against foreigners, including migrants and refugees, as well as against foreign powers and the EU. Antisemitism was not absent from the party's discourse either. After the eruption of the economic crisis in 2009–2010, the party assumed a more pragmatic stance. It supported the economic austerity packages instead of adopting positions hostile to the EU's intervention in Greece's economic policy. It even participated in the coalition of parties (New Democracy, Pasok, and Laos), which for a short while supported a caretaker technocratic government in 2011–2012. The Laos party paid the political cost of such a pragmatic shift, as its voters fled to the rest of the populist parties that flourished in the Greek political scene in the early 2010s.

The Golden Dawn party was initially a neo-Nazi organization founded in 1985. From 1985 to 2009, the party obtained a negligible percentage share of votes but managed to become the 3d largest party in the Greek parliament in the two elections in 2015 (both in the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections). As shown in Table 1, the party increased its share of the total vote from 0.3% in 2009 to 7% in the elections of 2012 and 2015. It even elected 3 MEPs to the European Parliament in 2014 and 2 MEPs in 2019. However, Golden Dawn's electoral influence declined in the national parliamentary elections of 2019, as the party leadership was implicated in (and eventually convicted in 2020) the assassination of a Greek radical left rap singer in 2013. The political discourse of Golden Dawn was far-right and populist, replete with illiberal, anti-elite, anti-Semitic, and anti-EU themes (Ellinas 2013, Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015, Dinas, Georgiadou and Konstantinidis 2016).

In 2012, a group of MPs split off from the New Democracy party and formed the right-wing, strongly nationalist/populist party Anel (abbreviation for "Independent Greeks"). Anel obtained 11% of the vote in the parliamentary elections 2012 but declined to 3% in the European Parliament elections in 2014 and 4% in 2015. For the reasons explained below, Syriza invited Anel to share power in 2015–2019 as a junior government coalition partner. However, the performance of the Syriza/Anel coalition in government was detrimental to both coalition partners and certainly to Anel, which obtained less than 1% of the vote in the European Parliament elections of 2019. Soon, the party suspended its participation in the national elections in July of the same year and ceased to exist. The surprising choice of Syriza to invite the right-wing nationalists on

board to form a government coalition in 2015–2019 may be interpreted by their common ideological ground. The radical left Syriza shared with the nationalist right Anel common populist themes in their discourse, including anti-elite and Eurosceptic themes. Another theme, common to both government coalition partners, was the outright rejection of the austerity economic package, which the post-crisis Pasok and New Democracy-led governments had followed in 2009. Research has highlighted the congruent anti-austerity and Eurosceptic opinions of MPs of the Syriza and Anel parties (Tsirbas and Sotiropoulos 2016) and the relatively small distance of views of the voters of the two parties on economic policy issues (Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2017; confirmation of the elective affinity hypothesis presented in the theoretical chapter by Michal Kubát).

Finally, the Greek Solution party was established in 2016 and was a newcomer to Greek politics. It emerged after the electoral decline of the Golden Dawn and Anel parties in the second half of the 2010s. Led by a populist journalist and television producer, the Greek Solution treated the well-known path of nationalism, Euroscepticism, and traditionalism (regarding family and religious values) that its populist predecessors had done since the late 2000s. Thus, it was compensated in the parliamentary elections with almost 4% of the total vote. Unpredictable in its policy choices and personalistic in terms of party structure, the Greek Solution voted with the New Democracy parliamentary majority on various bills of law submitted to parliament in 2019–2021. The Greek Solution has steered away from the military-like type of right-wing activism that had set apart the Golden Dawn party from all the rest of the parties of the Greek system from 2009 to 2019.

On the Left, the Greek crisis offered a small radical left party, Syriza, an unprecedented opportunity to rise to government and to rule in 2015–2019 after it had adopted a populist profile, albeit a left-wing one (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014, Katsambekis 2016, Tsakatika 2017). While in opposition, Syriza had few ties to traditional social interest groups, such as workers and farmers. It was strongly represented in the student, anti-globalization, and various human rights movements. After 2010, the party's influence grew among the victims of the economic crisis, namely, the young, the unemployed, artisans and craftsmen, and even liberal professions. This resulted from Syriza's strategy to indiscriminately support all anti-austerity protests in a typically populist fashion that hid all social cleavages except the cleavage between the elites and the masses. Syriza took up the cause of many different groups, who, throughout 2010–2014, in the face of austerity and reforms in the economic produc-

tion and distribution systems, defended their market niches (niches of pharmacists, taxi owners, commercial truck owners, and others). Syriza also won extensive support from public sector employees, as it sought to fight salary and pension cuts and all public sector organizational reforms of the 2010–2014 period.

In short, Syriza drew votes from employees and pensioners of the public and private sectors and small businessmen and professionals. The party promised the former a restoration of their pre-crisis salaries and pensions and, to the latter, a return to the pre-crisis production and market regulations suitable to their business interests. Syriza did not necessarily re-vitalize old conflicts, although, as discussed below in this text, the Left-Right cleavage was never overshadowed in the Greek party system. Syriza achieved prime status in representing the population categories and social strata adversely affected by the economic crisis after 2010. Disaffected social groups felt that they were no longer defined by the two mainstream parties, New Democracy and Pasok, which in 2010–2014 implemented the economic austerity policies required to avoid Greece's sovereign default, and they resorted to Syriza for political representation (confirmation of the representation gap hypothesis).

## **Populist Parties and Type of Party System**

The party system that emerged after the onset of the economic crisis 2010 and the double elections of 2012 bore little resemblance to the one that had existed since the early 1980s and up to the 2010s. The stable and relatively moderate (especially since the mid-1990s) two-party system had been replaced by a volatile, fragmented, and polarized multi-party system (Sartori 1976). For the first time since the return of democracy, seven parties could send representatives to the Greek parliament in 2012. The number of parties stayed the same between the election of May and the election of June 2012 despite the staggering amount of vote switching that occurred between the two trips to the polls just six weeks apart. Elections in 2012 and 2015 were followed by negotiations to achieve workable governing coalitions, going against decades of political practice and an entrenched majoritarian political culture in the Greek party system and despite an electoral system that awarded a 50-seat bonus to the first party expressly designed to facilitate the formation of single-party majority governments.

In this period, up to the two elections of 2015, the logic of coalition government formation was dictated by political party stances towards

the aforementioned economic austerity packages. It did not follow the logic of connected minimal winning coalitions (at least about the left-right axis of competition). Nothing exemplifies this trend better than the two consecutive coalition governments formed by Syriza and Anel. The two parties had vast programmatic differences in terms of economic and, particularly, cultural and social issues. Still, their shared rejection of financial austerity and their common critique of high-level corruption and vested interests connected to the two former major parties had made them behave as potential coalition partners for months in advance (Tsatsanis and Teperoglou 2016, 7).

The centripetal tendencies that existed in the Greek party system since at least the mid-1990s were replaced by powerful centrifugal forces, aided by the rise of Golden Dawn, arguably the most extreme anti-system party that enjoyed representation in the parliament of a European country. Even though polarization along the left-right axis increased, this measure most probably still underestimates the overall increase in polarization in the Greek political system since 2009. The reason is that the ideological left-right dimension only partially captures the dimensions of party competition in Greece since 2009. It fails to accurately represent the polarization on new issues and the divides that emerged and were related to austerity and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs) and, as an extension, attitudes towards the EU and the euro.

In other words, the rise of populists in the Greek party system altered the lines of political polarization and made them more acute (confirmation of the polarization hypothesis). However, left-right polarization remained important, as exemplified by the fact that even during the crisis, most of the aggregate electoral volatility continued to be intra-bloc volatility and not inter-bloc (Tsatsanis 2018). The elections of 2019 signalled in many ways the end of the period of party system fragmentation and fluidity in the Greek party system. New Democracy was able to win about two-fifths of the vote and form a single-party government, a result reminiscent of the patterns that existed in the pre-crisis party system with the significant difference that Syriza had replaced Pasok as the major left-of-centre party in Greece.

## **Conclusion**

The Greek party system changed dramatically because of the rise of populist parties of the Right and the Left. While populists were important

also in the recent past (in 1981–1989, when Pasok had first ruled), it was mainly after the eruption of the Greek economic crisis that they held centre stage in the party system. Along with the rise of a left-wing populist party in government (Syriza, in 2015–2019), the Greek party system also witnessed the emergence of small right-wing populist parties, one among them, Golden Dawn, which subscribed to neo-Nazism.

It looked as if Greek democracy was pulled apart from two opposite poles, but eventually, government turnover took place smoothly on all occasions while political and civil liberties were preserved. The performance of the populist government coalition in power (the Syriza/ANEL coalition in 2015–2019) at times bordered on intolerance and hostility towards critical media and the justice system (Sotiropoulos 2018), but checks and balances against the populist government did not reach a breaking point. In brief, Greek democracy was affected by the rise of populism, although it did not succumb to pressures emerging from different sides of the political spectrum. Despite the economic crisis of 2010 and the rise of populist parties in Greek politics, Greek democracy survived and withstood all economic and political blows, even though the social cost of unemployment and poverty rates was pervasive.

# **Germany: AfD Filling Two Representation Gaps in the Electorate but Standing Apart in Parliament**

Hendrik Hüning

## **Introduction**

This chapter examines the influence of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) on the German party system between 2013 and 2020, when it quickly gained electoral support, both at local and federal levels. Scholars and the media describe and perceive the AfD as a populist party with nativist appeal. The main arguments of this chapter are as follows: The AfD was able to fill in two presentation gaps, i.e., an initial gap attracting voters with Euro-sceptic attitudes and, after a shift of the AfD's policy positions to the far right, a second gap representing voters with xenophobic and nativist attitudes. Moreover, the AfD widened the spectrum of cultural positions within the German political system, increasing polarization regarding the policy issues discussed. A heightened degree of polarization can also be identified concerning how these issues are discussed, i.e., rhetoric and style of discourse.

Although AfD officials and its leadership had difficulties distancing themselves from the far-right nationalists and extremist parties and engaged in delegitimizing tactics and rhetoric, the AfD can only be broadly defined as an anti-system party. The internal tensions between the moderates and the right-wing demonstrated different degrees of acceptance of the current political system. Due to this inability to separate itself from the far-right extremist parties, the AfD finds itself an isolated opposition party in parliament.

## **Political Context**

A party with strong populist appeal is a relatively new phenomenon in the German political landscape. The AfD, founded by the former party

members of the Christian Democrats (CDU) Konrad Adam, Bernd Lucke, and Alexander Gauland in February 2013, quickly gained attraction across different social classes of the electorate. The AfD started as a single-issue party, criticizing the CDU's handling of the Euro crisis, and therefore attracted Euro sceptics. The party subsequently absorbed supporters with strong nationalist and nativist views and experienced a strong surge in electoral support between 2015 and 2019 (ZEIT 2020a; DAWUM 2025).

By the end of 2020, the AfD held seats in all 16 German state parliaments. It received vote shares of between 5.9% (Schleswig-Holstein) and 27.5% (Saxony). This corresponded in effect to several seats between three and 38 (STATISTA 2025a; STATISTA 2025b). On the federal level, the AfD held 89 seats in the German Bundestag (BUNDESTAG 2025). Despite its success in establishing itself on almost all levels of the German political system, the AfD found itself isolated in parliaments. Not only did the AfD not form a government in a coalition with other parties, something that all other parties strictly exclude, but also, in opposition, the party is standing apart from other opposition parties. The AfD chose the role of a "provocateur" in state and federal parliaments, which helped the AfD to distance itself from established parties (Schroeder et al. 2020), making parliamentary collaboration with other parties even more difficult. The official "calls to order" in parliament have increased in recent years, and two-thirds of these are due to misconduct by the AfD (N-TV 2025).

Besides its (self-)isolation tendencies within parliament, the AfD has engaged in internal conflicts, especially among its leadership and political currents since its foundation. Most prominently, the public confrontation between the economic wing around Bernd Lucke and Frauke Petry (belonging to the national-conservative wing) in 2015 finally made Lucke leave the party. Following that, the moderate wing, led by AfD national chair Jörg Meuthen, and the right-wing ("der Flügel") were publicly infighting. This was well documented in statements and speeches in which the two camps attacked each other (FAZ 2020).

Overall, although the support for the AfD increased steadily between 2013 and 2019 in local and federal elections, the support has settled at a moderate level. One reason was that migration, a central policy issue of the AfD, lost its importance after 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to hurt the AfD's support in the electorate because people initially had faith in the government's response to the pandemic (HANDELSBLATT 2025). Moreover, at the onset of the crisis, people more often consumed

traditional media outlets to inform themselves about the pandemic's current situation, making it less easy for AfD to set an agenda and social media strategy against those same outlets (DEUTSCHLANDFUNK 2025).

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

The theoretical chapter provides four hypotheses on how a populist party rises and affects the party system: the representation gap hypothesis, contagion hypothesis, polarization hypothesis, and the elective affinity coalition hypothesis. In the following, we will argue and provide empirical evidence on which hypotheses apply to the AfD and its role in the German party system.

First, we will consider the representation gap hypothesis and how it applies to the emergence of the AfD. A representation gap may unfold in the following ways. A salience gap might initiate a representation gap, where established parties ignore the most important problems for the electorate. This initial gap widens the more voters' policy preferences deviate from those of the political leaders. Moreover, a communicative gap amplifies the representation gap when political leaders "fail to sufficiently explain their policy choices to the general public" (Kortmann et al. 2019, Reher 2015, Golder and Stramski 2010).

As noted earlier, the AfD started as a single-issue party and attracted Eurosceptic voters. Thus, the AfD filled in the representation gap for those voters in favour of the dissolution of the Eurozone and felt misrepresented by established parties concerning these policy issues (Schmitt-Beck 2017). More interestingly, however, the AfD quickly filled in a second representation gap by attracting voters with nativist preferences. Since the departure of Bernd Lucke and the marginalization of the economic wing, the AfD effectively only filled in this second gap of representation at the far right of the political spectrum during the examined period. It is important, however, to distinguish these two phases of the AfD's success and two gaps in representation. The "economic-issue" gap generated a "middle-class-conservative" image that helped build the foundation for the absorption of more nativist positions.

Concerning the second representation gap that the AfD could fill, Kortmann et al. (2019) investigated party manifestos with textual methods. They revealed that established parties had largely neglected the topic of (Muslim) immigration to Germany for a long time. Since 2015, all major parties have increased their attention to the topic, which signif-

icantly happened even before the advent of the AfD. The AfD, however, was most attentive to this topic. Moreover, matching the corresponding demand in the electorate, the AfD was exclusively critical, i.e., it expressed negative sentiment towards the topic. Kortmann et al. (2019) did not find a representation gap concerning the policy issue of immigration itself. However, they find more radical positions towards immigration by the AfD concerning the style of *how* the topic is communicated. The AfD was able to bring the critical aspects of immigration and refugees to the political agenda with harsh rhetoric, giving voice to a share of the electorate that felt poorly represented concerning this issue. Thus, the gap in representation stems more from the form of style than the form of content (Kortmann et al. 2019).

Consistent with this finding, Schwarzbözl and Fatke (2016) analysed data from the German National Election Study and found that AfD voters united the dissatisfaction with established parties. Moreover, the AfD's electorate seems to be a homogenous group regarding its policy positions, which are structurally different from the voters of other parties. Rippl and Seipel (2018) state that their data at least partly support the hypothesis that the AfD's electorate consists of "modernization losers" because their income (per capita) is slightly below average. They also state that results are mixed, and overall, the AfD constituency should be seen as a rather heterogeneous group regarding their background. Supporting the hypothesis of modernization losers, a recent study of Mercator Forum Migration finds that German regions that experienced stronger emigration after 2000, i.e., young (well-educated) people leaving the region, have more support for the AfD in elections (ZEIT 2020b; STIFTUNG-MERCATOR 2025). The authors explain the finding with a feeling of loss in social infrastructure and frustration of those being left behind.

Finally, Steiner and Landwehr (2018) find that voters who have a "populistic democracy understanding" are more likely to vote for the AfD, indicating that the representation gap regards at least partly those who feel less represented by the established democratic system and have a different perception of democracy. On the other hand, the AfD's success in the election in 2017 had a short-term satisfaction effect with democracy and the political system on their voters. However, they remain the most dissatisfied voter group (Reinl and Schäfer 2020).

Concerning the contagion hypothesis, there is no empirical evidence that the rise of the AfD led to a diffusion of populist ideas in the policy agenda of established parties. More generally, Jankowski et al. (2019)

provide empirical evidence that established parties accommodate their policy positions towards that of the AfD. Applying scaling techniques to the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), the authors find evidence that almost all parties shifted to the right concerning their cultural left-right dimension since 2013, i.e., the advent of the AfD. This finding, however, does not mean that established parties take on populist ideas more often or apply populist rhetoric. More work on the diffusion of populist positions from the AfD to other parties is needed to evaluate if the Contagion Hypothesis is justified in the case of the AfD.

Regarding the polarization hypothesis, one has to distinguish two dimensions of polarization. First, polarization concerns content, i.e., policy and ideological positions; second, polarization concerns party communication. Since the advent of the AfD, the German party system became more polarized between 2014 and 2017 (Korte et al. 2018). The AfD primarily increased the range of cultural positions, i.e., increased the polarization in the cultural dimension of policy issues, e.g., migration (Diermeier 2020).

Moreover, there is empirical evidence that polarization also takes place concerning communication and discourse. As Darius and Stephany (2019) show by investigating the communication of political parties on Twitter (now X), AfD politicians frequently engaged in “Hashjacking”, i.e., AfD politicians not only used their party hashtags, but also “hashtags” of other (established) parties. This finding suggests that polarization is not only “passively” occurring due to a broader range of the cultural positions represented in the political system but also is intended and actively managed by the AfD and its social media strategy. Moreover, the polarization effect appears to be more in the form and style of discourse than in the content of the discussion (Schünemann et al. 2018). Concerning the polarization within the electorate, Shahrezaye et al. (2019) find that endorsement of Facebook posts polarized as well during the course of 2017, i.e., there is an increase of endorsement of posts that entail a user’s political view and a decrease in endorsement of posts that entail the opposite political view.

Overall, the appearance of the AfD in the German political arena led to slightly higher polarization within the party system because, on the one hand, the AfD actively engages in a polarizing communication and social media strategy and, on the other hand, widens the cultural dimensions of policy issues.

Finally, the elective affinity coalition hypothesis does not apply to the AfD. The party has not yet engaged in (governing) coalitions with other

populist or non-populist parties that employ populist discourse schemes. The AfD has not yet formed any alliance, either at the federal or state level, mainly because other parties have strictly rejected it.

## **Populist Parties and the Type of Party System**

Following the concepts introduced in the theoretical chapter (Satori 2005, Wolinetz 2006), two criteria have to be considered for the definition of the type of the German party system: On one hand, the degree of competition, i.e., the number of dominant parties in the German party system, and on the other hand the degree of polarization. The former can be either unimodal, bipolar, or multipolar. The latter can be either minimal, moderate, greater, or extreme.

In the past decades, the German party system has been dominated by two large parties, i.e., the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU), together with two smaller parties. This is also called a “two-and-a-half” party system (Blondel 1968). Several developments in the last decade, such as the weaker and weaker performance of the SPD in federal and state elections (Niedermayer 2010), as well as the surge in support for the Green party, transformed Germany into a multipolar party system (FES 2025). Regarding the degree of polarization, defined as “the ideological distance between parties” (compare theoretical chapter), the German party system can be classified as moderately polarized. The weakness of the Liberals (FDP) and the appearance of the AfD made the German party system more polarized (BLOGS 2013). Taken together, we can classify the German political system as limited multipartyism with moderate but increasing polarization.

There are two reasons for increased polarization in the German party system during the second decade after the millennium. First, a “representation vacuum” appeared on the “centre-right” of the political spectrum due to the coalition formations of the last legislative periods that formed the “Great Coalition” (*Große Koalition*), where the two larger German parties (SPD and CDU) form the government. This leads the CDU to become less conservative and be pushed more to the centre of the left-right spectrum due to political compromises with the SPD. Second, the appearance of the AfD, filling in the vacuum on the right, acts as a “provocateur” on the political scene, and takes more substantial ideological positions to the right, thus increasing the political polarization in the German landscape.

As outlined in the theoretical chapter, an additional feature that leads to polarized pluralism is the phenomenon of anti-system parties. Satori formulates a broader and narrow definition of an anti-system party. The former is characterized by either an “alienation” position towards the system, a “refusal” of the system, or a “protest” against it. The latter defines an anti-system party as not sharing any of the values of the political order in which it operates. Capoccia’s (2002) definition of relational anti-systemness stresses the party’s effect on polarization, its inability to form coalitions, and populist and delegitimizing tactics. The failure to form coalitions reflects Zulianello’s (2018) “system integration” criterion.

Considering these definitions and criteria, the AfD can be defined as an anti-system party only broadly, following Satori’s broader definition or being characterized by relational anti-systemness (Capoccia 2002). This can be justified as follows:

While at the very beginning, the AfD presented itself as the “conservative conscience” of the CDU (Dilling 2018), the AfD quickly changed to the image of an “Anti-Party Party” (Bieber et al. 2018), thus, as an “alternative” to the established parties (as its name already suggests). Moreover, the AfD has not integrated into the German political system. All other parties in parliament strictly excluded coalitions with the AfD because of the AfD’s inability or reluctance to distance itself from the extreme right.

The overall party, however, can only partly be characterized as an anti-systemic party because of the two political currents that it entails. While the moderate wing wants to strengthen the AfD’s economic positions and start governing coalitions, AfD members around Alexander Gauland and Frauke Petry “envisioned the AfD as a populist radical right and relational anti-system party” (Franzmann 2016, Dilling 2018). While the former has weakened in recent years, both tendencies remain within the AfD.

Besides the distinction between the more moderate current and the radical wing within the AfD, it can be stated that the AfD expressed its anti-system stance in two directions. First, protesting against political procedures and institutions, as documented by the AfD’s behaviour in state parliaments (Schroeder et al. 2017), and second, by its delegitimizing rhetoric (Isemann and Walter 2019) that erodes acceptance of political institutions within (at least) the AfD’s electorate. Overall, the AfD had a delegitimizing influence on the German party system.

Overall, the AfD only shows tendencies of anti-systemness, which finally led to a rather moderately polarized German party system. It is,

therefore, difficult to evaluate whether this shift to more polarization led to a considerably worse functioning of the German party system. On the one hand, the AfD's protesting stance impairs the functioning of parliamentary procedures and slows decisions. On the other hand, the AfD's influence was limited as all other parties, even other opposition parties, strictly excluded any collaboration and coalition with the AfD.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the AfD's electoral success and representation in all state and federal parliaments, the AfD still has the (self-chosen) role of a provocateur that fuels its social media strategy of being the victim of established parties and its narrative of fighting against the current political system. Due to the rejection of other parties to form coalitions with the AfD, the AfD is isolated within the party system.

The AfD was able to fill two gaps in presentation, namely by representing Euro-sceptic voters and voters with xenophobic and nativist positions, which explains its rapid success. The widening cultural dimension of policy issues and the AfD's wilfully provocative communication and social media strategy increased polarization in the German party system. Due to moderate and radical currents within the AfD, it can only be broadly defined as an anti-system party. The AfD has, however, engaged in delegitimizing rhetoric. The AfD's influence on the party system was, at least during the researched period, somewhat limited because of the strict exclusion by other parties to form coalitions, inner tensions and scandals within the AfD that weakened its standing in the system of parties, and competition for voters that not only elected the AfD temporarily for protest reasons.

# **Spain: The Party System After the Populist Explosion**

Jaume Magre, Lluís Medir, and Esther Pano

## **Introduction**

The emergence of the two leading populist parties in Spain, VOX and Unidas Podemos (UP), in election contests led to a historical record in the effective number of parties in Spain, considerable electoral volatility, and, above all, an exponential increase in political polarization, measured using the Dalton index. This situation, partly owing to the lack of institutionalization of the new party system inaugurated in 2015, has not succeeded during the investigated period in forcing a centrifugal movement of political parties away from the political centre to attract the more radicalized electorate.

These two political organizations had different strategies concerning the role that they should play in the party system and the political pressure mechanisms that they used. UP, focused on a left-wing agenda and stripped of the populist content it professed at its creation, prioritizes joining coalition governments, especially with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). On the other hand, VOX reintroduced into the public debate an agenda of issues strategically geared toward polarizing Spanish society and forcing the conservative political parties, fundamentally the People's Party (PP), to reposition themselves on the ideological axis.

## **Political Context**

The two main Spanish populist forces, UP and VOX, came onto the scene in 2014. The fact that they both appeared simultaneously is mainly due

to the severe and protracted economic crisis endured by broad layers of Spanish society and to the observation that the traditional mechanisms of political representation were incapable of channelling the demands and indignation of the citizens. The prolonged economic crisis was incredibly intense in the countries of southern Europe, and its management by the political establishment acted as a catalyst for a series of attitudinal changes that broke with the classic description of Spanish political culture, especially lacking in political effectiveness or, more specifically, in political competence (Cordero and Montero 2015). Indeed, since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis, dissatisfaction with democracy and disaffection toward politics in general have increased to unprecedented levels. The mixture of high doses of cognitive competence – internal political effectiveness – and greater impotence in the face of the system’s operation are essential arguments for understanding the growing atmosphere of disaffection toward institutional politics perceived in Spanish society.

To a certain extent, the origin of both political organizations marks their subsequent development. For a long time, UP has been the institutionalized expression of the different social movements that appeared during the first decade of the 2000s. This position entails contradictions that have become clear over these years: from the tension between the horizontal nature of a movement and the hierarchy required by a political organization to the difficulty in seeking harmony between clearly left-wing positions and the cross-cutting nature of any populist formula. On the other hand, VOX is the result of a division of the most radical sector of the centre-right of the People’s Party, highly critical of the immigration policies of the PP government itself, and with a classic party structure.

The electoral history of the two parties is, therefore, very recent. It begins with the 2014 European election. The time series of the general elections in which the two populist forces have participated shows two divergent paths. As regards UP, after a successful start in the elections, the subsequent trend has been downwards, so much so that its electoral support has decreased by over one million votes and three percentage points in less than five years. The weakness of the UP’s origins (Torreblanca 2015, Galindo 2015) and the difficulties represented by the territorial structure of a multilevel country reveal the obstacles to institutionalizing a party with these characteristics (Rodríguez-Teruel 2016). VOX, on the other hand, experienced an explosive electoral evolution, going from 57,000 votes in 2015 to becoming, four years later, the third most significant political force in Spain with over three and a half million votes and 52 deputies in the Congress. It obtained good results in the

elections of specific autonomous communities, such as Andalusia and Valencia, where it has always received more than 20% of the vote.

**Table No. 1 – VOX and UP's Election Results (2014–2019)**

Year	Election	VOX		PODEMOS	
		Votes	%	Votes	%
2014	European	244,929	1.6	1253837	7.9
2015	Municipal	64,385	0.3		
2015	General	58,114	0.2	3198584	12.7
2016	General	47,182	0.2	3227123	13.4
2019	General (April)	2,688,092	10.3	2897419	11.1
2019	General (November)	3,656,979	15.1	2381960	9.8
2019	European	1,388,681	6.2	2258857	10.1
2019	Municipal	659,736	2.9	366594	1.6

**Source:** Ministry of the Interior.

This same evolution can be seen in the distribution of seats in the last four general elections. The translation of votes into seats shows that UP's parliamentary representation decreased by almost half in just a few years. VOX has gone from having no parliamentary representation to being the chamber's third most significant political force. Although the electoral system plays a vital role in the distribution of seats for the two forces, it is also true that, at present, one party is on the rise (VOX) while another's decline is levelling off (UP).

**Table No. 2 – VOX and UP's Seats/Councillors (2014–2019)**

Year	Election	VOX	PODEMOS
2014	European	0	5
2015	Municipal	22	
2015	General	0	42
2016	General	0	45
2019	General (April)	24	33
2019	General (November)	52	26
2019	European	3	6
2019	Municipal	530	481

**Source:** Ministry of the Interior.

For UP, the parliamentary results did not represent a vital negotiating position until the last general election in which, after reaching an agreement with the winner of the election, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, it entered the Spanish government with a ministerial presence which exceeds the election result obtained by this political force. As regards VOX, at the end of the second decade after the millennium, Santiago Abascal's formation became the key for the People's Party and Citizens to be able to govern in specific autonomous communities like Madrid, Andalusia, and Murcia, and some Spanish municipalities. Their strategy consisted of not forming part of coalition governments but, on the other hand, facilitating the investiture of right-wing candidates – especially from the PP – in exchange for agreeing on policies in line with the ideology of VOX. Thus, a series of issues have reappeared on the political agenda that had practically disappeared from political debate.

These include all the concerns of the far right: the warning against immigration as a security problem, referring primarily to “Islamic fundamentalism”; the promotion of state-subsidized private Catholic schools, and of education segregated by gender and the right of parents to veto their children's education when it questions their beliefs; the defence of the family as the central pillar of society; the questioning of abortion; contempt for the LGBTQ+ movement; the rejection of historical memory; and the exaltation of traditions. The primary victory of VOX was thus the ability to make the political debate more tense and the attempt to force the People's Party to reposition itself with more extreme ideological values. Without the parliamentary strength achieved by VOX in the general election 2019, the PP would not have followed this political strategy. The 2020 COVID pandemic and the tough lockdowns experienced by the Spanish population played a significant role in this strategy of tension in the public agenda of VOX. Throughout this period, VOX appears to have sought to become a sort of “national opposition”, monopolizing the protest of the executive. The objective was thus to fight for the ideological hegemony of the Spanish right wing and to influence the political course of the People's Party.

The biographical description of the leading populist organizations in Spain coincides with one of the most turbulent social and political periods of recent times, including especially the political upheaval caused by the judgment of the leaders of the pro-independence movement in Catalonia, which concentrated a good part of the public debate on the territorial unity of Spain. The situation was further complicated since this debate needed to be resolved in the context of political fragmentation of

the party system, which was much more significant than usual in Spanish tradition and had an essential degree of electoral volatility.

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

When considering the representation gap hypothesis, one of the keys to understanding polarization in Spain during the investigated period is that it resulted from identity differences (party, ideological, and territorial) and not differences concerning public policies on which there was a particular public consensus. The high fragmentation of the party system and the electoral volatility were linked to an increase in the ideological distance between the parties and to the greater territorial polarization between blocks in respective years. It should be considered that, unlike other countries, the identity division has a special relationship with the positions on the ideological axis. There are historical roots that link peripheral nationalism to the left in Spain and which connect the right with centrist positions (Simón 2020).

Despite this general description, the examples for which we have a time series show that polarization concerning some policies was also growing rapidly (Miller 2020), in many cases fostered by the political party elites, thus reducing possible spaces for agreement. The most obvious case is VOX, which reintroduces classic issues that polarized Spanish society. They are unresolved issues popular among the most radical right-wing: the territorial unity of Spain, immigration, political corruption, the LGBTQ+ movement, and the free choice of schools. This political organization's strategy is thus to reintroduce an agenda of issues.

On the contrary, the left-wing organization UP introduced an agenda of issues closely linked to the populist universe, which defined it at its public appearance in 2015. This includes the failure of the 1978 Spanish transition, the unclosed issue of historical memory, and the crisis of representation. This agenda gradually disappeared from public debate, and UP's populist content decreased with time. Over these years, UP has gradually shed populist positions and highlighted the left-wing content of its proposals.

As for the contagion hypothesis, the degree of influence of the two populist parties on the other political forces concerning issues is determined by the authentic populist content of the two political organizations we are studying. Indeed, we should not forget that VOX is a radical right-wing party that can be considered populist mainly due to its

nativism. It is thus logical that there are notable contact points with the other conservative forces regarding issues. These range from family and freedom of choice concerning education to liberal positions relating to fiscal policy. In other spheres (historical memory, gender violence), the capacity of VOX to create tension has made the PP lean toward positions that go beyond what political logic would recommend. The strategic tension with the other conservative parties is, however, most striking in the two thematic areas that define VOX: the unity of Spain and immigration. These different formations could not take these arguments to the same extreme as VOX since they were government parties and, therefore, had to avoid “verbal radicalism”. VOX was not burdened with the responsibility of being in government and could maximize its benefit from these issues since the defence of the Spanish nation and rejection of immigration is its *raison d’être*.

The tension of the public debate should not deceive us. An analysis of the election manifestos of the political forces in the 2019 general elections shows that the PP highlighted the state of autonomous regions as one of the pillars of consensus in Spanish democracy. About immigration, it did not invoke the lack of concern – or even the complicity – of the political elites with this phenomenon or the nativist preference for nationals. Therefore, VOX’s two primary ideological weapons did not appear in the PP’s election manifesto.

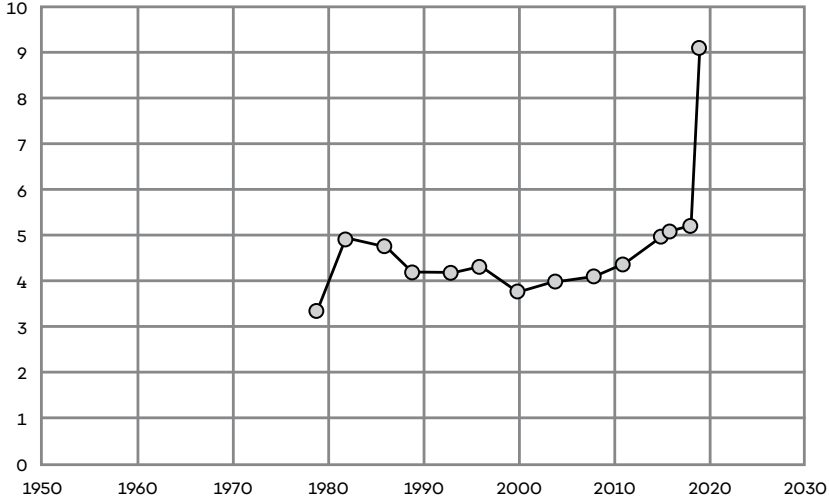
UP was, in 2020, a left-wing political party since it gradually discarded its populist content with the passing of the years. There were logical differences between this organization and the PSOE between a social democratic party and another one slightly further to the left on the ideological spectrum. The populist ideology of Podemos – the betrayal of the elites of the 1978 regime, an idea of the people linked to social rights and criticism of Europe as the cause of the neoliberal shift leading to the economic degradation of Spain – has disappeared from public debate and did not ultimately represent any pressure on Spain’s left-wing parties.

Evaluating the polarization hypothesis, the 2019 general elections were held in a context of fragmentation (substantially higher in the right-wing than in the left-wing political block), electoral volatility, and polarization. Even though this latter dynamic has increased constantly over the decade, it was closely linked to the October 2017 Catalan territorial crisis and the arrival of Pedro Sánchez’s government following a vote of no confidence in May 2018. Despite all this, the main reasons for the increase in polarization were the appearance of the new radical right-wing party, VOX, and creating a system of two blocks in which the

differences between the left and the right interacted with the territorial conflict. The fragmentation and electoral volatility are closely linked to the increase in ideological differentiation both on a territorial level and on the left-right axis (Simón 2020).

Historically, the Dalton index (Dalton 2008) had always been around five, and starting in 2018, it increased to nine out of 10, representing maximum dissent. The opposition to the blocks became polarized following the collapse of Citizens and its replacement by VOX, positioned by the majority of voters on the far right of the ideological scale. To a large extent, this explains the growth in the polarization index.

**Figure No. 1** – Level of Party Polarization (0–10; Dalton Index)



**Source:** (Rodríguez-Teruel 2020).

The rise of VOX placed severe restrictions on the recovery of the two-party system, requiring broad consensus to end government instability. VOX could become the tribune for a more authoritarian Spanish intransigent with the left and the peripheral nationalisms, acting as a shadow veto player and discouraging the PP from moving too close to the PSOE. These factors petrified Spain’s polarization by the end of the decade since the new multi-party system, which arose in 2015, did not represent a stable balance, and the new parties, UP and VOX, were not yet sufficiently institutionalized. The different players, therefore, had many incentives to distinguish themselves from the rival parties within

the same ideological block and even across ideological blocks (Simón 2020).

While reflecting on the elective affinity coalition hypothesis, it is easier to explain the influence of the populist discourse on the formation of the government and the coalition options of the political parties through a spatial focus than an ideational approach. Spain's two main populist political forces adapted to the spatial theories of the left-right dimension. They reached agreements with parties that were ideologically close to them: UP mainly with the PSOE, VOX with the PP, and, to a lesser extent, with Citizens. The pact strategy was valid for both municipal and regional elections.

The main difference lay in the strategy the two political organizations followed to confront post-election pacts and the possibility of forming part of coalition governments. In this respect, VOX prioritized parliamentary stability pacts with the PP and Citizens to remove the left wing from institutions. The issues that it has placed on the table to reach agreements coincide fully with its discourse and campaign proposals: the repeal of "gender laws" and LGBTQ+ rights, the defence of the unity of Spain, tax reductions and support for business initiatives, the struggle against illegal immigration and the protection of traditional culture. VOX has very rarely decided to form part of a coalition government. Until 2020, the strategy has been to agree upon a certain government program in exchange for institutional stability, facilitating the investiture of the conservative candidate. Its parliamentary intervention was thus decisive in the autonomous regions of Madrid, Andalusia, and Murcia.

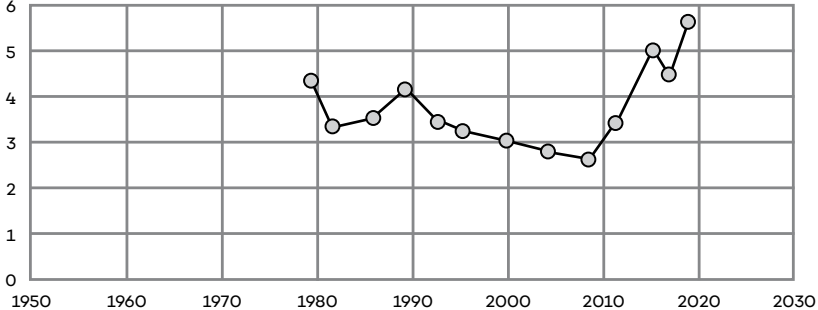
On the contrary, Unidas Podemos has preferred to form coalition governments, generally with the PSOE, starting from a government program. This strategy was aided by the fact that UP has lost an essential part of the populist content that it had initially been and has emphasized its left-wing ideological nature. This explains the state coalition government, which was considered the most progressive in Spain's history according to the UP's leaders.

## **Populist Parties and the Type of Party System**

The general elections in 2019 left one of the most unstable and fragmented political scenarios since the 1978 transition. The effective number of parties was the highest in Spain's election history (around six). At the

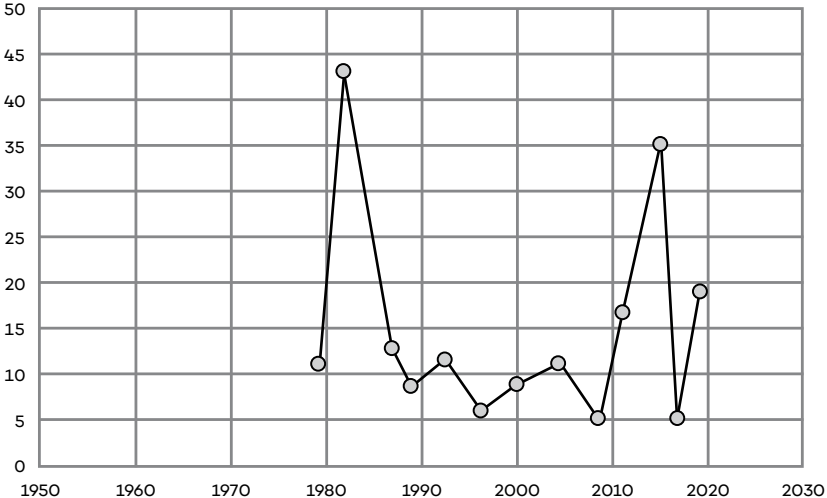
same time, the aggregate vote transfer levels (electoral volatility) were also somewhat unusual for the Spanish party system. The emergence of two new populist parties and the enormous popular support achieved by VOX explain the tension of the new multi-party system in 2015.

**Figure No. 2 – Effective Number of Parties**



Source: The author.

**Figure No. 3 – Electoral Volatility**



Source: The author.

As seen in the time series of the Dalton index, the fragmentation and volatility are accompanied by a marked increase in polarization between parties. The policy of outbidding becomes essential in this situation of polarization. This has already begun in the Spanish case. On the one hand, problems that should generate a consensus solution, such as gen-

der violence or immigration, divide the electorate. On the other hand, many traditional parties have already become involved in the game of radical formations, which, driven by the media, monopolize political debate (Casal and Rama 2019). This was the primary victory of the populist parties, especially VOX. It polarized the political agenda and attracted big parties to this public debate.

This strategy did not ultimately generate the centrifugal competition of the majority parties, fleeing the centre and seeking to compete for the extremes of the ideological spectrum where the voters adopt more radical ideological positions. This would be the first negative consequence for the party system and the democratic system as a whole, as warned by Giovanni Sartori.

Table 3 shows the ideological position of the leading Spanish parties according to the voters, measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is the position farthest to the left. The time series results show that UP is situated by the voters in a left-wing position, starting from its creation as a political organization. To a certain extent, it is not perceived as a party with an extreme ideological base, although it is not seen as a cross-cutting formation. On the other hand, the radical nature of the VOX discourse means that many Spaniards consider it a far-right party, placing it in an average position of 9.5 out of 10 on the ideological axis.

The time series moreover shows two interesting elements. First, UP's capacity to influence the position of the PSOE has been minor. There may be a relative change in the PSOE's position following the government pact with UP as of 2020. Second, the position of the PP on the ideological axis was very stable until the emergence of VOX. From then on, this organization's extreme position transformed the PP into an organization closer to the centre than it had ever been.

**Table No. 3** – Position of the Political Parties (2013–2020)

	2013	2014	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020
PSOE	4.42	4.62	4.38	4.27	4.27	4.2	3.9
PP	8.17	8.2	8.26	8.26	8.24	7.8	7.9
Citizens			6.18	6.56	7.06	7.1	6.9
IU	2.67	2.65	2.46	2.08	2.15	2.1	2.2
Podemos			2.09	2.15	2.28	2.4	2.4
VOX						9.4	9.5

**Source:** Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

## **Conclusion**

Two Spanish populist formations emerged in 2014 due to the severe and protracted economic crisis endured by broad layers of Spanish society and to the observation that the traditional parties were incapable of channelling the indignation of the citizens. Although they shared the exact origin, UP was the institutionalized expression of the different social movements during those years. VOX resulted from a split by the most radical sector of the right in the People's Party.

Therefore, the electoral history of the two parties was limited to five years in the period we investigated. The time series of the general elections in which they have participated shows two divergent paths: one party whose decline is levelling off (UP) and the other clearly on the rise (VOX), which, in the general election in 2019, obtained the popular support of over 3,500,000 voters and 52 deputies in the Congress.

The appearance of the two populist parties entailed a more significant fragmentation of the party system, an increase in electoral volatility, and, above all, a notable increase in political polarization, visible in the time series of the Dalton index. This abrupt growth results from the enormous electoral support achieved by VOX and the extreme ideological position in which the voters place this political force.

The polarization was channelled, especially by VOX, by reintroducing classic issues that have divided Spanish society. They are unresolved issues, many popular among the most radical right-wing supporters. This is not the case for UP, which emphasized its proposals' left-wing content and gradually relinquished populist positions. The abandonment by UP of populist devices aided its negotiating capacity, and this formation's strategy was to form part of coalition governments, especially with the PSOE. On the contrary, VOX agreed on a particular government program in exchange for institutional stability, facilitating the investiture of the conservative candidates.

Although the populist parties were able to reintroduce issues onto the agenda that have polarized political debate, the citizens' perception of the parties' position on the left-right axis has not become polarized. In this respect, they did not modify the parties' position in a centrifugal sense in the said period.

# **Czechia: From Quasi-Polarized to True Polarized Pluralism<sup>10</sup>**

Michal Kubát

## **Introduction**

This chapter examines Czech party politics, and while situated in the years 2000–2020, it closely looks at the last decade. There are several reasons for how this chapter is structured and what questions it raises, the most crucial being when the new types of parties appeared. While these new parties can be described as “populist” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), Czech populism is specific, at least in Central European comparison, because of its “technocratic” or “managerial” variant (Havlík 2019). Despite or perhaps because of this variation, populism became the political mainstream in Czechia (Císař and Štětka 2017). While describing the context of how this happened, my chapter also examines the ways and the extent to which populism influenced the entire Czech party politics, moving the party system from quasi-polarized pluralism to genuine polarized pluralism.

This chapter proceeds as follows: I begin by outlining the development of the Czech party system and characterizing the main Czech populist parties during the investigated period. In the second section, I explain how populist parties influenced other parties’ policies, especially the party competition in terms of its polarization (ideological distance between parties), which is the key factor in the functioning or malfunctioning of the party system (Sani and Sartori 1982). In the third and final section, I deal with the type of party system and its change based on Sartori’s (1976) and Wolinetz’s (2004, 2006) typologies of party systems.

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10 Some passages of this text are based on my earlier publications (see Císař and Kubát 2021a, 2021b).

## Political Context<sup>11</sup>

The Czech party system was relatively stable and predictable from the 1990s until the 2010 and 2013 parliamentary elections. The main parties included the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the conservative-liberal Civic Democratic Party (ODS). To the left of the ČSSD was the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). In the middle of the left-right scale operated the Christian Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL). The only long-term unstable element of the Czech party system was the small right/centre-right wing liberal parties moving close to the ODS. First, it was the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), later the Union of Freedom (US), then briefly the Green Party<sup>12</sup>, and finally, TOP 09. All these parties enjoyed more or less stable electoral support. The ČSSD and the ODS each won about 30% of the vote in the general elections, the Communists won about 15% of the vote, the KDU-ČSL about 10% of the vote, and the right-wing parties near the ODS each won about 10% of the vote.

The first signs of what turned out to be profound structural changes in the Czech party system appeared in the 2010 parliamentary elections. While both main parties, the ČSSD, and the ODS, remained at the head of the peloton, they received significantly lower support – ČSSD 22% and ODS 20%. For the first time, KDU-ČSL did not get into parliament. TOP 09 won a record 17% of the vote. Notably, however, an entirely new type of party emerged, the populist business-firm party Public Affairs (VV), which won 11% of the vote.

An abrupt change in the party system occurred after the snap parliamentary elections in 2013. The only party that remained in its own right was the KSČM, which won 15% of the vote. KDU-ČSL returned to parliament with 7% of the vote. TOP 09 fell to 13% of the vote. VV fell apart and did not get into parliament. Although the ČSSD won the election, it repeated the weak result of 20% of the vote. The ODS dropped dramatically to 8% due to corruption scandals. The populist far-right party, the Dawn of Direct Democracy (ÚPD), entered parliament with 7% of the vote. While the ČSSD remained the formal winner of the election, the real winner was the completely new ANO 2011 (ANO), with 19% of the vote.

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11 All data (election results) given in this section come from the dedicated website of the Czech statistical office (VOLBY 2025c).

12 Despite the name and European trends, the Green Party was temporarily a right-wing liberal party after 2006 (Čaloud et al. 2006, 25).

While the trend started in 2010 and 2013, it was fully confirmed with the 2017 parliamentary elections. ANO won overwhelmingly this time, gaining 30% of the vote. In second place was the ODS (11%). Two new parties followed: the Czech Pirate Party (11%) and the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD; 11%), formally a new party but was indeed the successor of ÚPD with the same leader, Tomio Okamura. KSČM weakened (8%), and the ČSSD fell to only 7% of the vote. KDU-ČSL came back to the parliament with 6% of the vote. TOP 09 almost didn't get it with 5% of the vote. The new centrist party Mayors and Independents (STAN) tightly entered parliament with 5% of the vote.

**Table No. 1** – Elections in Czechia (2010–2017)

Political party	2017		2013		2010	
	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)
ANO	29.64	39	18.65	23.5	-	-
ODS	11.32	12.5	7.72	8	20.22	26.5
ČPS	10.79	11	2.66	-	0,8	-
SPD	10.64	11	6.88*	7*	-	-
KSČM	7.76	7.5	14.91	16.5	11.27	13
ČSSD	7.27	7.5	20.45	25	22.08	28
KDU-ČSL	5.80	5	6.78	7	4.39	-
TOP 09	5.31	3.5	11.99	13	16.7	20.5
STAN	5.18	3	-	-	-	-
VV	-	-	-	-	10.88	12

\*These data refer to the ÚPD, the predecessor of the SPD.

**Source:** (VOLBY 2025c).

What needs to be stressed is that a change in the party system may not automatically result from a political crisis. Development is a natural part of politics. However, this is not the case in Czechia. The Czech party system changed structurally after 2010, resulting not only in the rise of new parties but primarily in new *types* of parties.

The most successful Czech populist party has been the ANO party. It was established in 2011–2012 and enjoyed a fair amount of success from early on. Following the 2013 elections, ANO became part of the government with ČSSD, in which its founder, sponsor, and unquestioned leader, billionaire entrepreneur Andrej Babiš, became the Minister of Finance.

ANO won the subsequent 2017 parliamentary elections and became the dominant party, with Andrej Babiš becoming the Prime Minister.

The second populist party – the SPD – was formed in 2015. It was founded by a Czech-Japanese businessman, Tomio Okamura, who had previously disbanded his first party, ÚPD. To some extent, Okamura established his second movement “just in time”, in that the migrant crisis had just started to flare up, and that mobilized not only the SPD but the whole populist political scene (Císař and Navrátil 2019). The SPD was in opposition, occasionally (but not systematically) supporting the Babiš cabinet in the parliament.

What binds and differentiates these two populist parties? ANO is an “extreme form of a business-firm party” (Kopeček 2016), which is heavily dependent on its leader (Kubát and Hartliński 2019). It was established at the initiative of its leader as a kind of “personal vehicle” (Lucardie 2000) that serves the leader as a means of fulfilling his ambitions and needs. SPD could have also been considered a business-firm party, not to the extent of ANO. Both parties presented themselves as anti-establishment and anti-elitist and focused on the alleged ubiquitousness of political corruption. While they have many shared features, the two parties are not identical. While ANO represented, at that time, an anti-political (rejecting “traditional corrupted parties”) and technocratic-managerial form of populism (“experts” should rule instead of “incompetent politicians”), SPD was professing far-right nationalism and xenophobia (Balík et al. 2019, Císař and Navrátil 2019, Havlík 2019, Kopeček et al. 2018).

The populism of ANO was more sophisticated and, at first glance, less radical than the populism of the SPD. In reality, however, it was a “thin” or “thin-centred” ideology (Stanley 2008, Mudde 2004), one that is, in essence, anti-party, anti-parliamentary, and consequently anti-democratic.

ANO and SPD (formerly VV and ÚPD) are examples of “exclusively populist parties”, i.e., parties that are populist by their very nature. Other cases are “non-exclusively populist parties” in which populism is accompanied by another clear set of ideological preferences (Havlík and Pinková 2012, 29).

A particular type of non-exclusively populist party was at that time represented by KSČM, both in terms of how the party was established and evolved and its political identity and orientation. KSČM is the direct successor of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), founded in 1921 and, from 1948 to 1989, was the ruling hegemonic party in Czech-

oslovakia. After the fall of communism in 1989, the party changed its name but, in the end, failed to shed its Marxist-Leninist identity. It never became a non-communist socialist or social democratic party (Kunštát 2013). Nevertheless, KSČM was the most stable Czech political party since 1989 until 2020. KSČM has never directly participated in any governmental coalition since 1989; however, following the 2017 elections, it has become part of a pro-government parliamentary alliance.

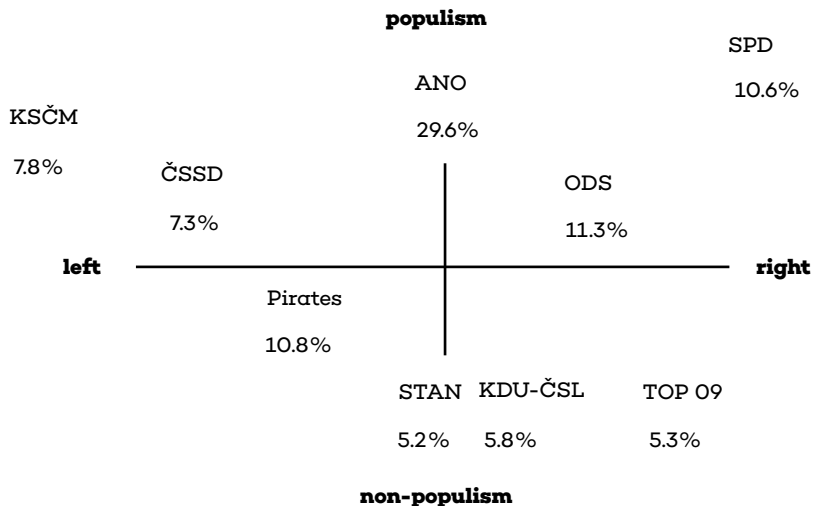
KSČM was a typical “non-exclusively populist party”, in which populism is accompanied by vulgar though dogmatic Marxism-Leninism, nostalgic for the *ancient régime*. According to Sartori’s (1976, 138) narrow definition of the concept, it was an anti-system party. But could it be classified as a populist party? While KSČM did not fulfil all the defining features of populism, from a longitudinal perspective, we could detect strong social populism in its program (Císař and Štětka 2019, Havlík 2012) and that populism was linked to nationalism. It represented a combination of social and national protest (Kubát 2016).

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

The populism (including nationalism) of the KSČM was, for historical reasons, an essentially integral part of the party and its Marxist-Leninist ideology. In Czechia, however, there were parties where we would not suspect populism. This concerns the two formerly largest Czech parties, the ODS and the ČSSD. Facing a decline in electoral support in the 2013 and 2017 elections, these parties sought to answer how to deal with growing populism. The answer was simple: an attempt to also become a little populist. In the case of the ODS, it was primarily Euroscepticism, firmly rooted in the party resistance to the “evil” Brussels, which was, to some extent, the legacy of the party’s founder and its long-time leader, Václav Klaus. This was complemented by anti-immigration rhetoric and a kind of fear of not very clearly defined “liberal progressivism”. In the case of the ČSSD, it was a combination of anti-immigration attitudes and social populism in the form of wasteful social policies that did not consider fiscal reality.

Let’s take a comparative look at the exclusively and non-exclusively populist parties of the investigated period and other parties in the system. We find that except for a few small parties, populism more or less affected the entire party system with strong electoral support, as shown in Figure 1, after the 2017 parliamentary elections.

**Figure No. 1 – Czech Party System After 2017 Elections**



**Source:** The author; for electoral results see: (VOLBY 2025b).

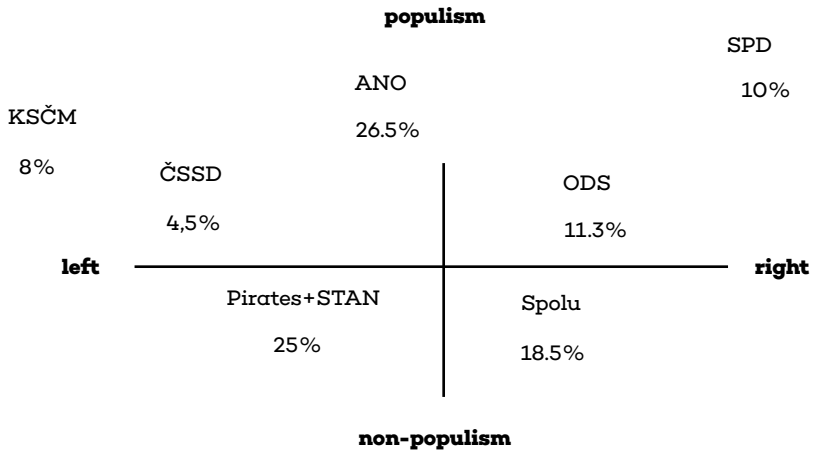
After the 2017 elections, the coalition of ANO and the ČSSD started to govern with the support of the KSČM. However, the political situation changed after the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Czechia in March 2020. While the first wave of the epidemic was mild, Czechia became one of the world’s most affected countries, and the government failed to face the outbreak effectively. This changed society’s political mood and caused shifts in the political scene.

Generally speaking, parties in the government or which officially support it stagnate or weaken slightly. The pandemic crisis amplified this effect. ANO, as of February 2021, retained the support of 26.5%. Its coalitional partners ČSSD and KSČM maintained their support of 4.5%, resp. 8%. Support for the far-right SPD was 10%.<sup>13</sup>

Above all, however, the opposition parties were merged into electoral coalitions. The Pirate party and STAN joined a coalition, whose support in the February of 2021 climbed to 25%. ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP09 formed a coalition called Together (*Spolu*), whose support was slightly lower but reached 18.5% (MEDIAN 2021). The opposition subsequently overthrew the hitherto dominant ANO in the 2021 (October) elections.

<sup>13</sup> Both KSČM and ČSSD disappeared from the parliamentary scene completely after the 2021 elections. (MEDIAN 2021).

**Figure No. 2 – Czech Party System in February 2021**



**Source:** The author; for support for the parties see: (MEDIAN 2021).

Looking at the development of the Czech party system after 2017, we can ask to what extent populism is still the mainstream of Czech politics and how it has changed in terms of its polarization. At first glance, there is a significant rise of non-populist parties (Figure 2). That is true. However, the pandemic did not alleviate exclusive and non-exclusive Czech populist parties (Čísař and Kubát 2021a). Even if we say that populism was at the end of 2020 no longer the dominant mainstream of Czech politics after the 2017 elections, we still have to consider it an integral and non-weakening part of it.

Something similar can be said about the polarization of the party system. At first glance, the polarization (and fragmentation) of the party system has decreased due to the cooperation of opposition parties. But this applied only to this part of the political spectrum. Polarization has increased throughout the party system in two ways. First, inter-party relations deteriorated, and the ideological distance between the governmental and pro-government parties, i.e., ANO, the ČSSD, and the KSČM, increased. Second, we observed the same negative trend in relations between government and pro-government parties on the one side and the opposition on the other. The overall view of the party system shows that regardless of the merging of the opposition into two electoral coalitions, the polarization of the *entire* party system increased considerably.

## **Populist Parties and the Type of Party System**

The question of what type of the Czech party system existed in the country from the mid-1990s until new types of parties emerged in 2010 and 2013 cannot be answered unequivocally. According to some authors, it was characterized by moderate pluralism (Balík and Hloušek 2019, 97); for others, it was a system between moderate and polarized pluralism (Novák 2004, 288). In my opinion, the latter view is more correct. This being said, I believe the party system was closer to polarized than moderate pluralism, as understood by Sartori (1976). Let's look in detail at Sartori's concept of polarized pluralism. It is true that his most important defining feature, which surpasses others, is the presence of anti-system opposition. This was precisely the case of the Czech party system, which was characterized since the 1990s by the presence of a relevant anti-system party, the KSČM (see above). The Czech political scientist Miroslav Novák (2004, 288) correctly stated in 2004 that if the KSČM remained at least as ideologically dogmatic as before, then it could be "considered a move towards Sartori's 'polarized pluralism.'" Not only did the KSČM remain as ideologically dogmatic as before, but it instead strengthened its Marxist-Leninist dogmatism in the following years. However, not all of Sartori's defining features of polarized pluralism were indeed met in the case of the Czech party system, so it cannot be described as a pure type of polarized pluralism but rather as quasi-polarized pluralism. This system was, however, very close to polarized pluralism. Taking Wolinetz's (2004; 2006) typology of party systems as a conceptual basis, the Czech party system would correspond to extended multipartyism with a bipolar form of competition.

The rise of populist parties in 2010 and 2013 shifted the Czech party system towards polarized pluralism. The reason is the increased polarization, the prevalence of centrifugal tendencies in political competition, and the approaching phenomenon of bilateral opposition in the existence of two anti-system parties on opposite poles of the party spectrum. The KSČM represented one pole; the SPD occupied the other pole. But can we consider the SPD to be an anti-system party? Probably not in Sartori's (1976, 132–133) narrow definition of the concept, but certainly in its broad meaning. Suppose we use other concepts of the anti-system party presented in the theoretical chapter. In that case, the SPD would more or less correspond to a "polarizing anti-system party" (Capoccia 2002) or a "halfway house party" (Zulianello 2018). In my view, bilateral opposition in the true sense of the word presupposes the existence of two

anti-system parties in Sartori's narrow definition of the concept. This was probably not the case in Czechia because the SPD had no such coherent alienated ideology as the KSČM. However, the Czech party system was quite close to the existence of bilateral opposition. According to some Czech political scientists, the entire Czech party system became a genuinely polarized pluralism by 2020 (Balík and Hloušek 2019, 97), which was probably the correct application of this definition. Wolinetz's (2004, 2006) typology of party systems also offers the possibility of understanding a shift of the Czech party system from extended multipartyism with a bipolar degree of competition to extended multipartyism with a multipolar degree of competition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the characteristics and the role of populism in contemporary Czech politics. The first populist parties appeared between 2010 and 2013 and have achieved phenomenal success. This mainly concerns ANO, which has become the dominant party in the Czech party system. Looking at the country and its politics from a Central European perspective, it is interesting that the ANO party represented, at that time, a specific variant of "technocratic" or "managerial" populism. Accompanied by other types of populism, represented by the SPD and the KSČM, ANO imposed some degree of populism on other parties, considered "traditional", mainly the ČSSD and the ODS. Populism thus became mainstream in Czech politics, at least after the 2017 parliamentary elections, in which ANO overwhelmingly won and formed a government with the ČSSD, supported by the KSČM. Although non-populist opposition parties have integrated into electoral coalitions in recent months and increased their support in society, populism remains an influential and undiminished component of Czech party politics.

It is noteworthy that the challenging course of the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and the inability of Prime Minister Babiš's government to deal effectively with the epidemic did not significantly weaken the support of his ANO party.

Populism significantly shaped the Czech party system between 2010 and 2020. It considerably increased party polarization and the centrifugal tendencies of party competition. The rise of the SPD and the relative stability of the KSČM brought the country closer to a dangerous bilateral anti-system opposition. The Czech party system, which, even before the

emergence of exclusively populist parties, hinted at polarized pluralism, has since then become a genuine polarized pluralism according to the definitions presented in the theoretical chapter. In other words, it has transformed from extended multipartyism with a bipolar degree of competition to extended multipartyism with a multipolar degree of competition. This is (or should not be) not just another academic debate about the typology of the party system. Whether the party system is closer to polarized or moderate pluralism will affect its functioning or malfunctioning, and therefore, the functioning or malfunctioning of the liberal democratic regime. The decisive factor here is precisely the polarization or ideological distance between the parties (Sani and Sartori 1982, 337), in which populism has increased unprecedentedly.

# **France: Polarization or the Structural Effect of the Fifth Republic? Populist Parties in the Party System**

Martin Baloge, Nicolas Hubé

## **Introduction**

France is often mentioned as an early breeding ground for populism. The National Rally (RN) (previously National Front, FN) is the “prototypical populist radical right party” and the oldest institutionalized far-right party in Europe; and the new left-populist France Unbowed (LFI), created during this “new momentum to left-wing populism” of the euro-crisis (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 34, 37). During the last decade, both parties have contributed to the general changes in the French party system, in which all political competitors used anti-elitism and media criticism from Sarkozy’s presidency in 2007 (Haegel 2011) to the current French President Emmanuel Macron (Cole 2019, Gougou and Persico 2017).

The preceding two political decades have been particularly tumultuous, especially since Jean-Marie Le Pen’s presidential run-off election in 2002. It is, therefore, imperative to understand how these parties influence other French political organizations ideologically, strategically, and electorally. Indeed, we show that the French case is characterized by its complexity. Although the two so-called populist parties were positioned at the two extremes of the political spectrum, their ideas have spread, weakening the polarization of the party system. We will, therefore, first focus on the French political context to underline the extent to which the struggles between populist parties and the presidential majority structure the political landscape. Then, we will analyse how populists influence political competition within the party system. Finally, we will show that this situation makes classifying the French party system difficult. In conclusion, we will underline the theoretical challenges raised by the French case.

## Political Context

At the end of the second decade of the new millennium, populist parties took part in the “electoral earthquake” (Cole 2019) of the presidential elections in 2017. Four candidates concentrated 84.9% of the votes during the first round. Emmanuel Macron (LREM) ended 2.7% ahead (with 24.01%) of Marine Le Pen (FN) (21.3%). The difference between the second and the fourth place of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI) (19.6%) was only 618,540 votes from the overall 31,381,603 French voters. The conservative François Fillon (LR) finished in third place with 20.01%. Due to the electoral system in France, the results were worse in the general elections one month later (see Table 1). The presidential campaign has been the occasion of loud anti-elitism, pronounced by all these four candidates.

However, in the two decades of our interest, RN/FN and LFI have not always had the same electoral success. After Jean-Marie Le Pen’s qualification to the second stage of the presidential election in 2002 (16.9%), the party landed in the fourth position in 2007 (10.4%), losing voters in favour of Nicolas Sarkozy, and the decade was not a successful one. However, since the 2012 Presidential election (17.9%, third position), the party maintained high voter support, finishing first during the 2015 regional and 2019 European elections. Here lies the main difference with LFI, whose success was – for the moment – only the presidential election, losing more than 5.6 million voters within the two years between 2017 and 2019.

The FN (now RN) has typical extreme-right roots, anchored in the traditional anti-Semitic, anti-communist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative, and/or fascist traditions, but succeeded in moving “from pariah to republican democratic contender” (Mondon 2014, Surel 2019). In 2011, in preparation for the 2012 elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen (83 years old) made room for his second daughter, Marine. With the help of PR managers and technocrats, she framed her arrival as a sign of the party’s “normalization” and “respectability”, even if she was simultaneously a member of the party’s hard line. Following the same de-demonisation narrative, the party changed its name in 2018 and became the RN. Due to the peculiarities of the French electoral system, the party only counted a few elected members: in 2019, twenty European MPs, six MPs, and one Senator; and, since the end of June 2020, ten mayors (but only one in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants) and five additional mayors close to the party without having been official members.

The story of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his party is very different, starting as the left wing of the mainstream Socialist Party (PS). After the 2002 defeat against Le Pen, his analysis of the phenomenon was that the party should be shifted further to the left. After the second presidential defeat in 2007, he left the PS in 2008, along with others, to found a new left-wing party inspired by the German example of Oscar Lafontaine’s Die Linke in 2007. This small party allied with the communist party, and another minor party formed the Left Front coalition. Mélenchon participated in the presidential elections 2012 and the 2009 and 2014 European Parliament elections. After 2012, he radicalized the discourse with more provocative populist tones, inspired by Podemos, Syriza, and Bernie Sanders (Castaño 2018) and theorized by the philosopher Chantal Mouffe. In 2016, LFI was created as an eco-socialist movement, an electoral vehicle based on horizontal hierarchy. Formally, it was a movement and not a party. In 2019, the party had seventeen MPs, two Senators, and five European MPs.

**Table No. 1** – Main French Parties in the 2017 and 2019 Elections

Political party	2017 general election		2019 European election	
	Vote shares (%)	Seats	Vote shares (%)	Seats
In power				
The Republic on the Move (LREM)	43.1	306	22.4	23
Modem	6.1	42		
Union of Democrats and Independents (UDI)	3	17		
In opposition				
France Unbowed (LFI)	4.9	17	6.3	6
Socialist Party (PS)	5.7	30	6.2	6
Greens	0.1	1	13.5	13
The Republicans (LR)	22	112	8.5	8
National Rally/ National Front (RN/FN)	8.8	8	23.3	23

**Source:** The authors.

Finally, it should be noted that by the end of 2020, French political competition was already looking towards the presidential election 2022. Halfway through his mandate, president Macron has made Marine le Pen his primary opponent. In 2019, he declared, “You have only one

opponent on the ground: the Rassemblement National. This opposition must be accepted because the French have chosen it.” On February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Macron’s Interior Minister debated with Marine Le Pen on TV and accused the latter of being unprepared for the coming Presidential elections. The French political context at the end of the observed period was thus marked by this duel, with the other parties trying to find legitimate and popular candidates to counter the realization of this scenario.

## **The Role of Populist Parties in the Party System**

When evaluating the representation gap hypothesis, we conclude that, paradoxically, our knowledge of populism’s effect on citizens in France is not systematic, and there are only a few studies on the media and campaigning effects in a broad sense (Gerstlé and Piar 2008, Piar 2012, 2013). Media coverage of political campaigns is primarily framed by negativity and confrontation (Gerstlé and Nai 2019). But it is also undoubtedly the result of a direct opposition between the columnists and the candidates. Editorialists do not hesitate to use populist rhetoric criticizing the political elites (Hubé and Ruffio 2020).

For thirty years, the social sciences mainly focused on the FN (see Mayer et al. 1989, Mayer 2002), which was seen as a far-right, authoritarian, xenophobic, and racist party based on a strong ideology. The FN was not typically analysed through the populist lens. The researchers have produced two kinds of related publications. The first type, from a working group of scholars (mainly affiliated with Sciences Po, Paris), is based on a systematic, annual, quantitative database on racism and xenophobia among French citizens. Each year, this research group publishes new studies widely used by other scholars studying racism (for the more recent studies: Brechon, Gonthier and Astor 2019). A second group of researchers focuses on the sociology of FN voters and, more generally, French voters. Scholars are working along the left-right scale, wondering whether there is continuity between the conservative and the National Front voters. For a long time, FN voters have been considered an independent third group, standing apart from the traditional left and right cleavage. However, various studies show that the 2017 elections were marked by a redistribution of votes in favour of the Rassemblement national, particularly within the French right, compared to the 2007 elections (Tiberj 2017). Other researchers studied working-class voters and class/religion as variables (Michelat and Simon 2004). Some articles

insist on social and racial issues as explanations for populist party votes, focusing on the FN – not because it is populist *per se*, but because of the problems it deals with (Mondon 2013).

Other more recent research was less interested in ideology and class; instead, it insists on a socio-geographical variable – for example, voters living in semi-rural suburbs (Gombin 2013, Lambert 2013) – to understand the RN/FN and LFI support. Jean Rivière offers a stimulating analysis of Marine Le Pen’s and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s votes by studying their electoral and social geography in pericentral and peripheral voting (Rivière 2018). The Yellow Vest movement represented another proof of this social representation crisis in France (Grossman 2019). Although these studies are systematic and quantitative, they have little to say about populism. In other words, the question of any correlation between FN voters and the influence of populist messages is not answered by these investigations.

The next point to be dealt with is the contagion hypothesis. Hanspeter Kriesi (2015) links the rise of populism in Europe to long-term trends in political representation and the changes in party divides. Populism, like Euroscepticism a decade earlier, is one political field position among others (Neumayer 2008, Hubé and Rambour 2010). These positions are becoming more mainstream (Conti 2018) and have a growing impact on national and European political structures without being a homogeneous phenomenon. To Collovald (2004), it is even a “misinterpretation” to call the FN populist. Her thesis is that the elites consider the FN a populist party and try to discredit it, selectively redefining political legitimacy. The “new National Front” under Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter, Marine, is analysed and presents itself as a “normalized” party. In this self-presentation and common acceptance of the FN, the lesser populist dimension – that is, the softer strategy of leader personalization, the more technocratic racist claims such as the focus on “laïcité” (secularism) instead of “Islam”, electoral success, and so on – opens the following questions: Is the FN still populist? (Crépon, Dézé, and Mayer 2015).

The change in the FN is closely related to the new strategy of the conservative party (UMP, since June 2015, “the Republicans”) and its leader, Sarkozy. The “droitisation” – the right-wing strategy – of the conservative campaigning shall open the populist box. Some scholars analyse Sarkozy as a populist or a wishful populist. So did Haegel (2012) in her recent study, but in it, she does not conclude the terminological debate on populism; she is reluctant to use the term “populism,” even though she describes a discourse that other authors would qualify as populist.

She prefers a relational analysis of the party (see also Ellinas 2010). Recalling the categorizations of Jagers and Walgrave (2007), the UMP could be considered a case of *excluding populism* (references and appeals to the people, and exclusion of outgroups but no systematic anti-elitism) since 2007. More generally, according to Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) sole systematic analysis and categories, populism (especially the empty type) is a broad tool in French politics. Even if the FN is the party using the populist style the most, all parties broadly use what could be called a populist style, at least during the European elections.

The rejection of the elites seemed common to all parties by the end of the observed period and could be considered a sign of the ideological impact that the LFI and the FN/RN had on the French party system. It is also found in editorials of French quality papers (Hubé and Ruffio 2020). The anti-media-system discourse has also become commonplace in French politics, from the mainstream to the radical parties and the Yellow Vest movement. Sarkozy's 2012 and Fillon's 2017 supporters insulted journalists and sometimes attacked them during meetings. Macron's party organization was founded on the same "movement" rhetoric (Rosanvallon, 2020). Macron's *marcheurs* (walkers) were recruited like Melenchon's *insoumis*: over from the distrusted old parties, on the internet, and with low turnout expectations (Greffet and Wojcik 2018).

Understanding the political system's internal dynamics also helps answer the polarisation hypothesis. This shift has to do with the French institutional and political party system. The French institutional system's main characteristics are semi-presidentialism and the two-round legislative electoral system, in which majority parties are over-represented, and minority parties do not endanger the balance of power among parliamentary forces. These minority parties are small but with coalition potential at the regional and local levels. Either moderate or radical, depending on the time, they can be in government, in the opposition, or in the parliamentary majority without holding any governmental office. They can be "important" at the regional level and have to be cherished or have a large base in the electorate without having a strong position in the assemblies, as was the case for the FN/RN at the said time. Furthermore, given that they never have control of the government and, therefore, never take full responsibility for its performance, the FN/RN and, more recently, LFI may be less interested in the government-opposition dynamics than the major parties.

Undeniably, we can observe that the French party system became very polarized and that the two populist parties were mutually "repulsive",

thus representing intense polarization. However, both the hypothesis of polarization and that of contagion must be studied carefully. The explanation for this polarization is instead found in the structural functioning of the political field and the institutions of the Fifth Republic. The political game is organized around a presidential election that favours a very strong division of the party system between large families (left, right, extreme right). Moreover, it contributes to a high personalization of media life (Van Aelst et al. 2017) and politics around a party leader.

This phenomenon has been strengthened by several institutional reforms (Rosanvallon 2018). First, the inversion of the electoral timeframe between the presidential and legislative elections and the shortening of the term of office of the President of the Republic from seven to five years in 2002 significantly impacted the electoral competition. From then on, the president's term of office is identical to that of MPs, and the presidential election is the one that determines the parliamentary majority: the winning president always has a win-win effect in the legislative election that follows the succeeding month. This phenomenon was subsequently enhanced by the installation of primary elections in 2012, first within the Socialist Party and then among the Conservatives. Following the example of the US system, this practice contributes to the process of personalization and the polarization of debates between candidates to differentiate themselves from each other. This influenced the strategy of Jean-Luc Melenchon: he campaigned outside the traditional leftist forces to rally them around his person as the only one capable of winning for the left given the presidential elections in 2017. Since the failure of the Socialist Party in 2017, the Greens were also confronted with this same temptation. The success of Macron's presidential campaign in 2017 was the expression of this search for polarization between a new radicality of technocratic "good government" against the "old-world" elite system on the one hand, and on the other hand, in its head-on opposition between cosmopolitanism and Europeanism and Marine Le Pen National Front's nationalism and parochialism (Cole 2019, Gougou and Persico 2017, Rosanvallon 2020).

Last but not least, the French semi-presidential system does not favour parliamentary coalition governments, which already partly answers the validity of the elective affinity coalition hypothesis. Populist or radical parties have few parliamentarians and have little accurate claim to central positions in the government. Since the 2002 elections, Presidents Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande, and Macron have had relatively overwhelming majority formations around their parties. The small coalition parties

were rather centre-right for Chirac, Sarkozy, and Macron or centre-left (the Greens) for François Hollande. On the other hand, local and regional elections are more favourable to coalition governments. France Unbowed (LFI) may have been in coalition at the regional or local level (as is the case in Marseille or Paris).

However, the coalition's possibilities were different for the National Front. In the first years of the party's existence, the National Front had been considered a local coalition partner for the conservatives. During the 1983 local elections, Le Pen won 11.3% in Paris, and the joint RPR-FN list managed to win the Parisian suburb of Dreux. In 1986, the party entered the National Assembly after the introduction of the proportional vote and featured a large group of 35 MPs. Their strategy was to build coalitions with the conservative parties (RPR and UDF). During the 1988 legislative, and the 1992 and 1998 regional elections, the conservatives accepted the FN, made coalition lists, and/or won certain regions with the support of FN regional MPs. In exchange for this support, some regions made FN MPs vice-presidents. This was the case in Haute-Normandie and Franche-Comté (in 1992, for example). It was the first step in the long process of "de-demonization" that ended with the 1998 split in the party and the 2002 elections. The standard political position was that of a Republican Front against the National Front. But since the last decade and the implementation of the *droitisation* strategy by some conservatives, this position formed a new cleavage between the partisans of this Republican Front (now in the Macron camp, like previous Prime Minister Edouard Philippe) and those seeking some coalition based on the issues like laïcité, anti-Islam terror, nativism, etc.

## **Populist Parties and the Type of Party System**

The French case is characterized by many parties playing an essential role in the country's political life. Two parties came to dominate this system by the end of the 2010s on a national scale by setting the issue agenda: LREM, the party of Emmanuel Macron, and the National Rally of Marine Le Pen. The French party system is multiparty. However, the degree of polarization is more challenging to determine. As we have seen, the ideas of the Rassemblement National were irrigated on many subjects by the other parties of the centre and the French right. In this part of the political spectrum, the most dominant parties turned out to be concentrated (except the Greens in the 2019 European elections). As a result, the typo-

logy proposed by Giovanni Sartori seems to be limited to classifying the French case. From an electoral point of view, France could be considered a type of polarized pluralism. LREM and RN constituted the two major political forces, but their electorates differed, and the links between the two parties were non-existent. However, during the European or local elections, the resilience of the old mainstream parties (conservative and socialist parties) and the strength of the Greens were apparent.

An analysis of polarization proposed by Sartori in terms of ideological polarization leads to a hybrid form of pluralism. On specific issues, the French system could be described as polarized multipartyism (European or environmental issues, for example) and on others as moderate pluralism (criticism of elites, issues on secularism, Islam, refugees). On issues related to Islam and secularism, the Minister of the Interior of the presidential majority (LREM) thus declared to Marine Le Pen: “You are softer than we can be.” Based on Wolinetz’s work, we can also qualify the French regime as “extended multipartyism” with a greater degree of polarization if we consider the whole political spectrum. However, considering the role and ideological weight of the two main parties (LREM and RN), the French party system can be described as a *moderately polarized extended multiparty system*.

The emergence of French populist parties seems to have had little influence on the transformations of multipartyism. Since the end of World War II, France has been characterized by a multi-party system. By the 1970s, the political spectrum was very broad, with the Communists at one end and the National Front at the other. The rise in power of the FN and then the RN weakened the ideological polarization due to the spread of its ideas to the right and the centre-right. It is, therefore, the recent strategies of capturing the electorate and ideas of the extreme right by mainstream parties (the Republicans and, more recently, LREM) that seem to us to be decisive. In this respect, it cannot be concluded that these transformations had an influence.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the party system during the period of this study was characterized by the force of inertia that the Rassemblement National exerts on other political organizations. As a result of presidentialism, the French political system was very polarized between an extreme left and an extreme right, whose only point of convergence seemed to be criticism of the

elites (shared by all the political forces). However, although polarized, these parties do not have the same force of attraction or electoral dynamics. By making the National Rally its designated enemy while adopting similar positions on specific issues, LREM contributed to shifting and attenuating political lines of division. In a sense, in France, populist rhetoric became an electoral tool for catch-all parties, especially in France, where the National Front has been an essential political actor in the political field since the 90s. For sure, its role in the structure of the field contributes to a reshaping of the common political agenda. However, this contagion hypothesis has to be analysed carefully: it is a general shift to right-wing arguments and relatively recent broad anti-elitist discourse that is not the property of the populist parties. The French party system, therefore, faced many challenges. The very high level of political mistrust political parties encounter is evidence of a deep institutional crisis. Political parties are essentially in last place in polls on confidence in political institutions and organizations, with only 13% trust (Cevipof 2020). Neither the rise of populism nor the strategies of mainstream parties seem to have any effect on alleviating this mistrust.

# Conclusion

Jiří Kocian, Michal Kubát, Martin Mejstřík

The analyses of selected European party systems presented in this book have shown similar patterns in which populists moved into the political arena and how they further affected it between 2000 and 2020. This has been proved by testing the four above-mentioned hypotheses in different clusters, as shown in Table 1, which we would like to summarize.

**Table No. 1** – Party Systems in Eight European Countries

	Representation gap	Contagion	Polarization	Elective affinity
Hungary	Yes	No	Yes	No
Poland	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Greece	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Germany	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Spain	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Czech Rep.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
France	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Source: The authors.

Testing of the Representation gap hypothesis, populist parties in all of the democracy clusters pursued a strategy exploiting gaps of representation by bringing up new issues or re-inventing old ones. In Hungary, for example, Jobbik thematized the Roma question, and Fidesz similarly exploited the migrant issue. Polish Law and Justice aimed to use socioeconomic differences in Poland and seek to represent so-called Poland B (the more traditional, more religious eastern part of the country). In Greece, Syriza appealed to social groups dissatisfied with economic austerity policies. In Spain, VOX exploited the gap in

nativist topics (migration, territorial unity), and Podemos sought to use the socioeconomic consequences of the economic crisis (however, their populist content gradually decreased). The German AfD was filling the representation gap by attracting voters with Eurosceptic nativist and extremist rhetoric.

Concerning the second hypothesis (contagion), the results showed more differences among the studied countries. The cluster of party systems with the most substantial populist presence shows that their position was so strong and polarizing that it impeded further contagion to non-populist actors. In Hungary, the diffusion of populist ideas could be described instead as a process between populist parties but not with non-populist actors. The Polish case study demonstrated similar conclusions – PiS competed with more radical fringe parties but not their non-populist adversaries. In Greece, defenders of austerity policies were not on speaking terms, literally, with those who rejected such a policy. Parties of either side thus did not borrow ideas in the policy agenda from the opposite side, so contagion and diffusion of populist ideas were complex to come by.

In the second, less populist-dominated cluster, the situation was different. In Spain, VOX had notable contact points with other conservative forces regarding topics such as family, freedom of choice concerning education, liberal positions relating to fiscal policy, and the approach toward historical memory. On the other hand, Podemos failed in spreading their original criticism of Europe as the cause of the neoliberal shift leading to the economic degradation of Spain). In Germany, the AfD forced almost all established parties to shift to the right regarding their cultural left-right dimension. In the Czech case, the two former largest establishment parties even partially adopted populist rhetoric – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) mimicked populist attitudes on topics such as Euroscepticism or the refusal of not clearly defined “liberal progressivism”; the Czech Social Democratic Party, on the other side of the political spectrum, combined anti-immigration attitudes and social populism.

France has a long history of adopting populist styles and rhetoric in the political mainstream. During the period of our interest, it became noticeable in the anti-media discourse or in the rejection of the elites, which seemed to be familiar to all French political parties and could be considered a sign of the ideological impact that the LFI and the FN/RN had on the French party system.

As for the polarization hypothesis, all party systems manifested an increase in polarization. In all selected case studies, the polarization

level of the parliament has increased quite significantly in some cases, like in Hungary, according to the studies at hand. In Poland, intense polarization has been caused by so-called “post-communist cleavage” – PiS skilfully reframed the cleavage into the division between social and liberal Poland, not only maintaining but strengthening the existing polarization. In Spain, the leading cause for an acute increase in polarization was the appearance of the new radical right-wing party, VOX, and creating a system of two blocks in which the differences between the left and the right interacted with the Catalan territorial crisis. In Czechia, another feature of populism contributed to increased polarization – the growing ideological distance between the governmental (populist) parties and the opposition. In France, the ever-increasing polarization was connected more to the form of government of the Fifth Republic – a semi-presidential regime together with a voting system that overrepresented establishment parties and put extreme and populist parties in constant opposition, which led to increasing levels of polarization that in turn influenced the whole party system.

The last hypothesis, coalition elective affinity, produced mixed results. These were based on political contexts, voting systems, and the relative strength of populist actors. Where populists were used to governing alone, and the voting system allowed them to obtain the majority, they did not need to seek a coalition partner; they showed very low elective affinity (in the case of Fidesz in Hungary). In Poland, Law and Justice was also relatively strong but shy of an absolute majority. The Polish political system was based on a coalition government. In this context, ideological outbidding between coalition parties over populism and right-wing credentials tended to happen occasionally, thus increasing the level of polarization. A similar situation was also valid for Greece and Spain. The Spanish case is interesting due to its long-term experience with stable bipartisanship – only after the emergence of new populist parties did Spain’s two main populist political forces adapt to the spatial theories of the left-right dimension and reach agreements with parties that were ideologically close to them (Podemos with PSOE and VOX with PP and Ciudadanos). In the Czech case, the technocratic aspect of the ANO movement helped Andrej Babiš to form a coalition government twice. However, his coalition potential was gradually declining in the later years with rising polarization.

AfD in Germany manifested a very low level of elective affinity. The party did not engage in coalitions with other non-populist parties, even those employing populist discourse schemes. The AfD has been unable

to form any coalition yet, neither at the federal nor state level, mainly because other parties have strictly rejected it and built around the AfD an effective *cordon sanitaire*. The French party system showed a similar level of elective affinity for populist actors as the German one but for entirely different reasons. As explained above, the French voting system did not favour parliamentary coalitions. Thus, political parties were not forced to collaborate (local and regional elections, conversely, were more favourable to coalition governments).

Overall, the multidimensional approach toward seeing the impact of populism on the party systems has proved fruitful, as testing the four hypotheses produced complex answers yet provided us with new insights. We cannot utter a single, simple, straightforward statement about the direct causal effects a “populism” can have on a “party system”. As the authors of the chapters presented in detail, there is too great of a variety in populism and variables that the systemic setting produces to make a general conclusion. However, as discussed above, we can see that the specific case study background generated a pattern of “behaviour” and interaction, which was, to a degree, shared by clusters of cases or sometimes even across the board. When looking at the other side of the imaginary equation, i.e., what happened to the party systems, we concluded that the presence of populist parties has, if not caused, then at least, importantly, affected, the growing polarization within the party systems. Following that, we can claim that the presence and influence of political parties represent a risk-increasing factor endangering the democratic system in the sense that the theoretical chapter posited.

In conclusion, the research period we outlined for our analysis served as a much better narrative device than anyone at the beginning of 2020 could have expected. There was no way to predict the COVID-19 pandemic, its effect, and its longevity, and, on a similar note, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These significant events posed utterly new challenges to the states on a national and transnational level. They deepened pre-existent or even opened dormant societal and, thus, political cleavages. There already is a body of literature examining the effects of those on politics in Europe. However, a study analogical to the one we present still must find the right time to emerge and enlighten us on where European democracies are heading in this new context. Until then, our study will hopefully serve to its readers as a picture of an era, which is by some in hindsight regarded as the time of imagined “normalcy” before these new challenges arose, a time when populism was the most debated topic in the political arena.

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