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# What's Left? Far-left Parties Changing in Contemporary Europe

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## Abstract

Since the fall of communism far-left parties have begun a long process of change, which has transformed their position in the European political systems. Indeed, far-left parties are now important actors in most of the E.U. However, they present different characteristics than in the past. Communist parties have almost disappeared from parliamentary arenas, and, in many countries, new forms of far-left parties have emerged (i.e. social-populist and populist-socialist parties). The aim of this article is to describe the ideological framework of far-left parties in Europe. More specifically, it aims to examine both the demand-side and supply-side factors on which scholars focused in the attempt to explain the birth of these parties and the interactions that led to the development of specific forms of far-left parties. This article concludes with an analysis of three national cases, namely Spain, Portugal and Italy. The three countries belong to a similar context characterised by a profound economic crisis. However, despite many common features, in the three cases different forms of far-left parties have developed.

**Keywords:** Political parties, radical left, far-left, party change.

## Introduction

Almost thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, far-left parties are a common presence in European political systems. Although the fall of communism has undermined the group of far-left parties, the so-called “retreating army”<sup>2</sup> survived and progressively re-gained strength. After the 2007

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<sup>2</sup> The expression was coined by Marc Lazar, who said that far-left parties during the 1980s were looking like a “retreating army”. Marc Lazar, “Communism in Western Europe in the 1980s”, *Journal of Communist Studies*, vol. 4, 1988, pp. 243–257.

economic crisis, far-left parties have generally strengthened their presence on the European stage. As illustrated by March and Mudde,<sup>3</sup> during the post-Soviet Union era, the far-left parties have radically changed their profile. Though they survived on local or extra parliamentary level, communist parties have almost disappeared from the national political arena and social populist parties have gained power in many of their former feuds.<sup>4</sup> In the 2015 Spanish general election, *Podemos* became the third largest party, immediately after the historical People's Party (PPE) and the Socialists (PSOE). Two years later, in the 2017 French presidential elections, the candidate of *La France Insoumise*, a newly created far-left party, has received only a few percentage points less than Emmanuel Macron, the elected president. However, despite their shared goal of opposing the usual way of doing politics and placing the topic of inclusion high on their agendas, contemporary far-left parties cannot be considered as a traditional party-family. Differences can be identified with regard to their origins, policy-agenda and, last but not least, ideology.

On this ground, in these last years, scholars have demonstrated a renewed interest in studying the group of far-left parties. To wit, scholars have analysed the differences between parties and the determinants of their most recent electoral successes.<sup>5</sup> In line with this renewed interest in the literature, this analysis aims to identify the makeup of the far-left group of parties by examining the interaction between the demand-side and the supply-side. Demand-side explanations focus on those bottom-up pressures that facilitated the far left in mobilising electoral support, whereas supply-side explanations focus on the political opportunity structure in which these parties act. In addition, I propose an empirical-focused analysis based on three different national cases, treated as most similar cases. The focus on Spain, Portugal and Italy allows us to test the theoretically based observations and to use new insights in order to uncover the mechanisms behind the electoral appeal of far left. Despite shared features with regard to economic, political and social arenas, while in Spain and Portugal far-left parties have reached electoral relevance in recent years, in Italy, they have remained on the fringe side, with significantly lower levels of consent.

The analysis is organised as follows. In the first part, I examine the literature on far-left parties, their ideological framework and their electoral evolution since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The second part investigates how the demand side and supply side factors can be used as explicative elements for the

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<sup>3</sup> Luke March and Cas Mudde, "What's left of the radical left? The European radical left after 1989: Decline and mutation", *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2005, pp. 23–49.

<sup>4</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe*, Abingon, Routledge, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, "Out of left field? Explaining the variable electoral success of European radical left parties" *Party Politics*, vol. 21, 2012, pp. 40 – 53.

success of the far-left parties. In the third section, the focus is on the importance of analysing the interaction between the supply-side and the demand-side. The fourth part presents the empirical analysis, while the final section concludes and discusses the general aspects of the analysis.

### The Definition of Far-Left Parties

Defining what is the ideological framework of the far-left party family is not an easy task. It is not unusual to find the descriptive adjectives “radical”, “extremist”, “hard” or “transformative”<sup>6</sup> used in reference to these parties. It is hence important, before discussing the nature of their ideological framework, to identify the use of the term “far-left.”<sup>7</sup>

According to the literature, the group of far-left parties is divided into “radical left parties” and “extremist left parties”. Although the two attributes are sometimes used interchangeably, the literature lays emphasis on major differences between “radicalism” and “extremism.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, while “radicalism” is defined as an orientation that demands radical changes in contemporary liberal-democratic systems without placing itself outside the democratic consensus, “extremism” is used in reference to an opposition to the constitutional order and democracy itself.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on Mudde’s analysis on the radical right populisms,<sup>10</sup> Luke March further specifies that radicalism refers to a “radicalization of mainstream belief.”<sup>11</sup> From this point of view, far-left “radical” parties are defined with regard to a shared endeavour towards a radical reform of capitalism and neo-liberal society, and the promotion of a radicalized version of the *systemic* left values (i.e. equality, integration, state intervention, etc.). On a similar vein, the sub-group of extremist radical left parties refer to those parties which include anti-democratic elements in both their rhetoric and their actions. Beyond the theoretical elements, it is however difficult to make a clear distinction between radical and extremist left parties when it comes to empirics. On the one hand, as March himself says, sometimes centre-left parties have voluntarily maintained a radical rhetoric. On the other hand, extremist far left parties often hide their anti-democratic purpose with a democratic twist (i.e.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Dunphy, *Contesting Capitalism? Left Parties and European Integration*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Luke March, “*Radical left in Europe*” ... cit., p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Cas Mudde (eds.), “*Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe*”, London, Routledge, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Cas Mudde, “The populist radical right: a pathological normalcy”, *West European Politics*, vol. 33, 2010, pp. 1167–1186.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, p. 1168.

emphasis on hyper-democracy).<sup>12</sup> Thus, for the purpose of the current analysis, I acknowledge the difficulty in making an operational distinction between radical and extremist parties.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in my understanding, the use of the term “far-left” covers both “radical” and “extremist”.

Having defined the concept of reference, it is now possible to focus on the distinctive traits and ideological features of the far left. As stated above, this is not an easy task either. Due to a tortuous historical evolution,<sup>14</sup> the far-left party family exhibits a heterogeneous ideological profile. Note should be taken that with regard to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most successful far-left parties were, with no doubt, the communist parties. In various forms and with different degrees of electoral success, these parties were present in almost all European countries. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismantlement of the U.S.S.R., their position became more complicated. Thus, beyond the birth of new challengers, expressions of the so-called “New Left”, several communist parties changed their names and their political identity. Some of them moved towards the centre of the political spectrum and openly became centre-left parties. It is the case of the Italian Communist Party. Others changed their name and accepted their new political position by advocating for new issues such as ecology or feminism. It is the case of the German *Die Linke*. Others, while maintaining the communist identity, accepted on their agenda stances endorsed by new social actors (i.e. anti-globalization and civil rights movements).<sup>15</sup> In addition, far-left parties exhibit a great variability of stances on economic aspects. In this context it is hard to define a common ideological framework.

In the past years scholars concentrated their attention mostly on communist and post-communist parties.<sup>16</sup> After the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the literature focused the attention on the complex changes made by the far-left. In

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<sup>12</sup> Luke March, *Radical left in Europe ... cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Cas Mudde, “The war of words: Defining the extreme right party family”, *West European Politics*, vol. 19, 1996, pp. 225–248, Cas Mudde, “Anti-system politics” in Paul M. Heywood, Erik Jones, Martin Rhodes and Ulrich Sedelmeier (eds.), *Developments in European Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006, pp. 178–195.

<sup>14</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> In his volume *Radical left parties in Europe*, Luke March identifies six different strategies applied by communist parties after the Fall of Berlin Wall. Several parties renamed and reorganised their identity as non-communist far-left parties. Others transformed into social democratic parties. Especially in the Eastern Europe, different parties became socialist populist parties with a nationalist twist. Other parties diluted their ideology in electoral coalitions with a broad democratic or socialist orientation. A fifth group refers to those parties that dissolved themselves into coalition of various ideologies. The sixth group refers to those parties that maintained their name and their ideology. For more details see Luke March, *Radical left in Europe ... cit.*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>16</sup> Joan Botella and Luis Ramiro (eds.), *The Crisis of Communism and Party Change: The Evolution of West European Communist and Post-Communist Parties*, Barcelona, Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, 2003.

this context, Backes and Moreau<sup>17</sup> made a classification of far-left parties based on their origins. They distinguish between (1) traditional communist parties, those who conserved their communist identity, (2) reformed communist parties, those who remained faithful to the Communist's orthodoxy, and (3) "new left" or "red-green" parties, a category that includes non-communist parties, with an agenda focused on supports typical new left issues (i.e. ecology, gender equality and minority rights). However, a classification based on party origins tend to underestimate the effects of party change over time, changes that may lead to very different types of far-left.<sup>18</sup> Despite this difficulty, within the literature, several scholars have tried to classify the group of far-left parties with regard to their ideology.<sup>19</sup> This line of analysis is illustrated by the distinction between traditional Communist parties and the New Left.<sup>20</sup> On a similar ground proceeded Escalona and Vieira. Drawing on Botella and Ramiro,<sup>21</sup> the two scholars delineate a typology of the far-left by taking into account (1) the relationship between the party identity and the communist identity and (2) the political space occupied by the party at a national level. On this basis, Escalona and Vieira identified four different types of far-left parties: the orthodox communists, the social democratic left, the red-green left and the revolutionary left. This typology applies exclusively to Western Europe, as knowledge by the two scholars themselves. It has limited heuristic capacity when applied to recent phenomena such as *Podemos* and *France Insoumise*.

More recently, in his work on radical left parties, March<sup>22</sup> made a distinction based on the parties' ideological framework. He identified four groups: far-left parties, communist, democratic socialist, social populist and populist socialist. Despite weaknesses due to overlapping between radicalism and extremism, this classification provides important innovative aspects. According to March, the communists refer to those parties which openly refer to the "traditional" ideological framework of the communist movements. It is an extremely heterogeneous group composed for the most part by tiny revolutionary niche parties, "conservative" communists and "reform" communist parties. According to March, the "conservative" communists differ from the group of the "reformed" ones with regard to their adherence to the

<sup>17</sup> Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau (eds.), *Communist and Post-Communist Parties in Europe*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*, Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe: Institutions, Parties and Governments*, Boston, McGraw Hill, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe: Institutions, Parties and Governments ... cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Fabien Escalona and Mathieu Vieira, "The Radical Left in Europe: Thoughts About the Emergence of a Family", *Fondation Jean-Jaurès / Observatoire de la vie politique*, 19 November 2013, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*, pp. 94-98.

Soviet model and the degree of openness to the New Left agenda.<sup>23</sup> Conservative communists maintain an uncritical position towards the Soviet experience and generally exhibit a traditional, highly hierarchical organisational model. It is the case of the democratic centralism that characterises the Portuguese Communist Party. The reformed communist left is more open to New Left stances, in particular ecology, pacifism and democratic participation. It is the case of the Italian Party of Communist Refoundation.<sup>24</sup>

In March's analysis, democratic socialist parties refer to those formations defining themselves in opposition both to the totalitarian communist experience and to modern social democracy. In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and, more specifically, in a context of a right-turn among many historical social democratic parties<sup>25</sup> – tantamount to the full endorsement of neoliberal principles - democratic socialist parties are those parties positioned themselves to the left of the mainstream social-democrats. The group of the democratic socialists is characterized by a combination of socialist economic positions, the rejection of neoliberal policies coupled with the defence of the state's role in the economy) and several new left issues (i.e. stances in favour of ethnic minorities, environmentalism and participatory democracy). Within this type it is possible to quote examples such as: the "Nordic Green Left", far-left parties in Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland.

The last two groups identified by March are the populist socialist and the social populist parties. According to March, the populist socialist parties are a subgroup of democratic socialist parties rather than a real and autonomous type. Populist socialists share the ideological core of the democratic socialist parties. They exhibit socialist identity grafted with numerous new left issues. However, in opposition to the democratic socialists, they have a more eclectic ideological portrayal. Not only do they include traditional left-wing issues on their agenda, but also, they lay strong emphasis on identity a, coupled with anti-establishment and anti-elites appeals.<sup>26</sup>

The last group identified by March refers to social populist parties. The parties included in this category resemble the Latin America populist movements. Their main characteristics are: weak party organisations, charismatic leadership and incoherent ideology. Their programmes mingle left-wing and right-wing issues in line with their strong anti-establishment appeal.<sup>27</sup>

On this ground, it is possible to proceed with the explanations provided by the literature for the electoral success/failure of the different parties included in this wide category of far-left and focus on demand-side and supply-side factors.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

## Explaining Electoral Success: the Demand Side and the Supply Side.

Far-left parties are not only a heterogeneous family with different ideological portrayals and different intensities of radicalism or extremism, their electoral performances are very different also. In this part, I intend to map those factors identified as major determinants of their electoral results.<sup>28</sup> I shall distinguish between the demand-side and the supply-side factors. The demand-side factors focus on socio-economic and cultural aspects such as the unemployment rate, gender, education, etc. Supply-side explanation, instead, concentrate on the political opportunity offered by the political systems (i.e. party organisation, communication strategies, alliances, etc.). Clearly, this cannot be a full review of the elements that are supposed to determine the success of far-left parties. The recent development of the literature on far-left parties necessarily implies the possibility of excluding some relevant factors.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, not all parties have the same objectives, thus maximization of the electoral support cannot be considered as the main goal for all far-left parties.<sup>30</sup> In other words, not all the demand-side or supply-side factors can be useful in understanding the dynamics of the electoral results. Considering this caveat, I shall proceed with a brief review of the main determinants identified by the literature. The basic assumption is that the understanding of what these factors are about and how they interact among them might provide a more accurate analysis of the far-left parties in contemporary Europe, why they register relevant successes in certain countries and why they fail to mobilise in others.

### *The demand-side factors*

Political scientists often use demand-side factors as an explanation of a party's electoral success. These include those socio-economic factors that can make far-left parties more appealing for the electorate. In this analysis I shall

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<sup>28</sup> Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, *Out of left field? ... cit.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>30</sup> Following the literature, there are three different ideal-typical goals to which parties can aim: winning the election or maximizing the electoral support (vote goals), implementing their identity (policy goals) and maximizing political power (office seeking goals). So, Vote-goals are not necessarily the first goals to which a party can aspire. Wolfgang C. Müller and Kaare Strøm (eds.), *Policy, Office, or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions*, London, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Kaare Strøm, "A Behavioural Theory of Competitive Political Parties", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 34, 1990, pp. 565-598.



focus on economic grievances, modernization grievances, attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and party age.

The first group of determinants on the demand-side refers to the economy. Several social scientists related party electoral success to economic grievances, and this in particular in times of economic scarcity. The underlying assumption is that at the basis of politics there is a competition among social groups with opposing material interests and clashing interests with regard to the limited available resources.<sup>31</sup> In the past, arguments based on economic grievances have been used to explain the electoral success of far-left parties.<sup>32</sup> Scholars often rely on two different indicators in order to assess the role of economy on electoral behaviour: the unemployment rate and the GDP rate. These two indicators, even if extremely important, seem to be insufficient in order to understand the way economic conditions have shaped the electoral dynamics of far-left parties. It is important to note that far-left parties often advocate for more equality and for increased state intervention. Therefore, it might be interesting to analyse how indicators such as income inequality, the structure of the labour market or the degree of public intervention can influence their electoral success.<sup>33</sup>

The grievances related to a modernization crisis are one of the most traditional factors used to explain the electoral success of a party family. In recent years this factor has prevalently been linked to the success of far-right parties and new right populist parties.<sup>34</sup> However, in some cases, the modernization crisis has been connected to the success of far-left parties also.<sup>35</sup> The assumption behind is that changes in society related to the process of modernisation can create new cleavages or even change old ones. This reorganisation can be translated into a mobilisation for new political issues and, more specifically, an opposition to the old establishment.<sup>36</sup> To this point,

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<sup>31</sup> Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Martin Paldam, "Economic Voting: An Introduction", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 19, 2000, pp. 113-121.

<sup>32</sup> Stefano Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1860-1980*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; Benjamin T. Bowyer and Mark I. Vaill, "Economic Insecurity, the Social Market Economy, and Support for the German Left", *West European politics*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2011, pp. 683-705.

<sup>33</sup> Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, *Out of left field? ... cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Piero Ignazi, "The silent counter-revolution: Hypotheses on the emergence of extreme right-wing parties in Europe", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 22, 1992, pp. 3-34; Paul Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe", *West European Politics*, vol. 18, 1995, pp. 34-51.

<sup>35</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right Populism in Western Europe*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1994; Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995; Michael Minkenberg, "The renewal of the radical right: Between modernity and antimodernity", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 35, 2000, pp. 170-188.

Inglehart<sup>37</sup> argues that the transition to a post-modern society produces a so-called “silent revolution”, linked to a radical transformation of citizens’ values. Mainstream materialistic values prioritizing citizens’ materialist needs clash with the diffusion of post-materialistic values prioritizing individual freedom, environmentalism and gender equality. This process has been associated to the emergence of Green parties, which, at their origins, had a strong anti-establishment position. It is also the case of left libertarian parties.<sup>38</sup> However, the effects on the far-left seem to be uncertain. On the one hand, not all far-left parties can be connected to new issues and/or an emerging cleavage. Several far-left parties are still enrooted in the communist tradition, with a strong Marxist ideological programme and low or absent references to the new left agenda. On the other hand, strong orthodox communist parties are now quite rare and most of the far-left parties in Western Europe have become open to the new left issues. All in all, it can be extremely rewarding to understand how modernization grievances factors have influenced the development of democratic socialist and social populist far-left parties, those two sub-groups which share weaker linkages to the communist ideology and privileged instead an anti-establishment position.

The attitude towards the EU is another important issue that can influence the success of far-left parties. Some of these parties have shown an extremely critical stand toward the European integration process. The far-left parties’ stances on the E.U. are various and heterogeneous; some of them aim at a radical withdrawal from the E.U., while some others promote a radical reform of the E.U. institutions from within the European context.<sup>39</sup> However, all these parties endorse a radical reform of the E.U. and feature among the parties regularly framed as euro-sceptic.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, different analyses have underlined that radical and extreme parties on both left and right side of the political spectrum are among the most Eurosceptic voices in Europe. Yet it is not clear if a strong Eurosceptic position privileges the far-right vis-a-vis the far-left.<sup>41</sup> As in the case of far-right parties, far-left parties have used criticisms towards the E.U. as a marker of identity, an opposition to “mainstream” politics, especially their differences with regard to the social democratic and centre-left parties. However, far-left Euroscepticism is clearly different from the far-right one. If far-left parties are Eurosceptic in the name of their national identity and national

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<sup>37</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977.

<sup>38</sup> Herbert Kitschelt, “Left-libertarian parties: explaining innovation in competitive party systems”, *World Politics*, vol. 50, 1988, pp. 194–234.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Dunphy, *Contesting Capitalism? ...* cit.

<sup>40</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ...* cit.; Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, *Out of left field? ...* cit.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine E. de Vries and Erica E. Edwards, “Taking Europe to its extremes: Extremist parties and public Euroscepticism”, *Party Politics*, vol. 15, 2009, pp. 5–28.

sovereignty, far-left parties justify their Eurosceptic stances in the name of the opposition to the neoliberal market agenda.

According to the literature, another element that is supposed to influence the electoral success of a party is its historical support in the past.<sup>42</sup> A party electoral results are directly or indirectly influenced by the performance in past elections. According to this line of analysis, the higher the consensus of a party has been historically, the more likely it is to obtain good results in recent elections. Several long-lasting cultural and political mobilisers can provide an electoral advantage in the long run.<sup>43</sup> Some far-left parties are long-standing organisations founded during the early years of Nineteen centuries, so they can be influenced in their electoral results by their party age. More specifically, this variable refers to the duration of their presence on the ground and the intensity of the socialisation.<sup>44</sup>

### *The supply-side factors*

The previous overview has illustrated that the literature recognizes that a wide range of demand-side factors can determine the electoral success – and implicitly the failures – of the far-left group of parties. However, most studies acknowledge (jointly or in isolation from the demand-side) the relevance of the supply-side factors. As in the case of the group of radical right parties, this focus is explained by a basic observation: factors connected to economic grievances, modernization challenges or legacies do not vary enough across cases or even within cases in order to (fully) account for differences in far-left support. Consequently, the literature emphasised the importance of having a favourable supply-side either in terms of individual party strategy or the structure of party competition, without neglecting the institutional arena. As in the case of the demand side factors, the benchmark remains the literature on far-right parties. Scholars belonging to this area of research agree on the need to identify within the macro-category of supply-side factors a distinction between “internal supply-side” and “external supply-side” elements.<sup>45</sup> Internal supply-side elements refer to those factors that are linked to the agency at the party level, to the dynamics of their internal life. In this area, scholars focus on aspects such as party strategy, the relevance of a particular charismatic

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<sup>42</sup> Amir Abedi, “Challenges to established parties: The effects of party system features on the electoral fortunes of anti-political-establishment parties”, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 41, 2002 pp. 551–583.

<sup>43</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>45</sup> Pippa Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe ... cit.*

leadership, etc. When it comes to external supply-side factors, scholars refer to meso-level aspects such as political and institutional settings, party-system opportunities, the existence of institutional incentives (i.e. party laws), etc. With regard to the topic of interest of this article, scholars tend to concentrate on the external dimension of the supply-side factors. The reasons behind are linked to the easier access to data and increased comparability. Although several scholars emphasised the importance of internal factors in understanding the success of far-left parties,<sup>46</sup> most of the literature examines the external supply side factors. More specifically, two main dimensions are taken into account: the political opportunity structures and the parties' organisations.

The political opportunity structure is generally defined in reference to the exogenous elements that induce a system to be more or less open to political (individual or collective) entrepreneurship. More specifically, it refers to the set of institutions that shape the dynamics of the political competition.<sup>47</sup> Note that the degree of openness of a political system is considered to be an important factor that can lead to the electoral success of a party. Several aspects can be connected to the composition of the political opportunity structure (e.g. the electoral laws, the degree of (dis)proportionality, the unitary or federal institutional setting, the structure of party competition). On this ground, the electoral laws are considered to be elements of major relevance. The impact of the electoral law in structuring countries' political opportunities has been a consensual element in the literature since the 1950s. According to Maurice Duverger's famous laws,<sup>48</sup> new and small parties are penalised in non-permissive electoral system by both mechanical and psychological effects of the electoral laws. From a mechanical point of view, the higher the disproportionality of a system, the more difficult for new and small parties is to enter/remain in the system. This mechanical effect impacts upon a psychological effect according to which the electorate strategically adapts to the degree of disproportionality. More specifically, a voter is incentivized to cast a strategic preference and choose one of the major parties.<sup>49</sup> Different scholars fine-tuned the initial Duverger's laws and, with regard to the group of the far-left parties, have illustrated that a proportional system has a slight effect on the success of far-left parties.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, there is increasing new empirical evidence that far left parties can overcome both the mechanical and

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<sup>46</sup> Manès Weisskircher, "The Electoral Success of the Radical Left: Explaining the Least Likely Case of the Communist Party in Graz", *Government and Opposition*, 2017, pp. 1-22.

<sup>47</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics.*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Duverger, M. *Les partis politiques*, Paris, A. Colin, 1951.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>50</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe ... cit.*

psychological effects of disproportional systems, as it is the case of far-left parties in France and Spain.

Another institutional factor influencing the openness of a political system is the presence/the dimension of the threshold of representation. While for part of the literature there is no strong evidence in favour of a relationship between threshold and the birth and success of new parties,<sup>51</sup> several scholars illustrated the negative effects of high threshold on the electoral success of small parties.<sup>52</sup> Note should be taken that the effect of the electoral thresholds is connected not only to the “legally codified dimensions” but also to its implicit impact (i.e. see the majoritarian effect of the Spanish proportional law). All in all, according to the literature, proportional systems are the most diffused electoral formulae in Western Europe and the role of the electoral threshold is increasingly acknowledged as being fundamental in assessing the openness of a political system.

Another major aspect taken into account by the literature refers to the distribution of powers within the polity (i.e. centre vs. periphery). To this point, March argued that federal institutions influence positively the electoral success of anti-establishment parties.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, a strong presence in the local government (regional or municipal) tends to help far-left parties to compete for national representation. This observation goes against previous evidences. Indeed, in the past, communist parties displayed better electoral performances in unitary states than in federal ones.<sup>54</sup> Note that the March argument in favour of positive impact of the federal institutions is far from being consensual. Several scholars have argued that there is not significant evidence for this assumption and invited to more caution.<sup>55</sup>

Several studies focused on the patterns of party competition in order to explain far left successes. Intuitively, it can be said that a political environment characterised by a low degree of competition is a more favourable for the affirmation of far-left parties. Following the above-mentioned considerations with regard to the ideological determinants, several studies linked far left limited success or even failure to (in)direct competition of the green parties, in particular on issues regarding modernization grievances and post material values.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the existence of strong competitors on the far-right hampers

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<sup>51</sup> Simon Hug, “Studying the electoral success of new political parties – A methodological note”, *Party Politics*, vol.6, 2000, pp. 187–197.

<sup>52</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe* ... cit.; Müller-Rommel, F. ‘Explaining the electoral success of green parties: A cross-national analysis’, *Environmental Politics*, 7, 1998, pp. 145–154.

<sup>53</sup> Luke March, *Radical left parties in Europe* ... cit.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Dunphy, *Contesting Capitalism?* ... cit.

far-left success. Both groups compete for protest voters and advocate against the establishment and the mainstream politics.<sup>57</sup>

Considering the shared origins and, at least partially, the ideological goals, the far left most direct competitors comes from the centre-left and/or social-democratic parties. Far-left parties traditionally competed with social-democratic for popular support.<sup>58</sup> Intuitively, the weaker the social democratic party, the higher the chances for a far-left party to compete for political relevance. In recent years, several scholars have argued that the social democrats' neoliberal stances increased the space of manoeuvre for far-left parties.<sup>59</sup> How the neoliberal position of left parties helps far-left is, however, not easy to assess.<sup>60</sup>

The government's political colour is an additional factor, which is supposed to impact upon the far-left. When a right-wing government is in power, centre-left parties can more easily exploit dissent and disappointment. In this case, far-left retrench on anti-establishment stances. When a centre-left party/coalition is in power, far-left parties tend to exploit the disappointment against the government and mobilise voters attracted by a social-economic agenda.<sup>61</sup> However, in their research on the far-left, March and Rommerskirchen argued that far-left parties seem to better mobilize the protest against a right-wing government than when a leftist coalition is in power.<sup>62</sup> Once again, the evidence is mixed and the literature pinpoints to contradictory interpretations. In parallel, the literature on extremist and radical parties found empirical evidence in favour of the positive effect of the convergence of mainstream parties towards the centre. This convergence facilitates smaller parties to mobilize the protest against the establishment and politics as usual.<sup>63</sup> However, other researchers<sup>64</sup> found no significant impact on far-left parties. Once again, we believe further inquiry is needed.

Moreover, most of the literature on party electoral success focused on the external supply side factors and on political opportunity structures. However, in line with the traditional assumption, party politics is first and foremost about party organisation. As widely analysed by the literature, party

<sup>57</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* ... cit.

<sup>58</sup> R. Neal Tannahill, *The Communist Parties of Western Europe: A Comparative Study*, Westport, Greenwood, 1978.

<sup>59</sup> Benjamin T. Bowyer and Mark I. Vail, *Economic Insecurity* ... cit.

<sup>60</sup> Clearly, the weakness and the neoliberal position of social democratic parties are two different factors. One party can be strong and neoliberal or weak and non-neoliberal at the same time.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert P. Kitschelt, "Left-libertarian parties: explaining innovation in competitive party systems", *World Politics*, vol. 50, 1988, pp. 194–234.

<sup>62</sup> Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, *Out of left field?* ... cit.

<sup>63</sup> Pippa Norris, *Radical Right:* ... cit.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*.

organisational strength depends on the number of activists, local branches and their capacity of mobilisation.<sup>65</sup> A strong network of local branches and high numbers of activists become an asset for local politics and useful tool for party central leadership. Beyond the general knowledge, there are relatively few comparative studies on how the far-left is organised. Based on the limited comparative evidence, far left parties go back to their social roots and increasingly invest in a strong relationship with society.<sup>66</sup> Numerous far left parties involved activists and even voters in their internal life. Far left also reinforced the (in)formal relationship with social groups, civic committees and movements.<sup>67</sup> The many ideological faces of the far-left explain the variety of organisational models. In the European context, orthodox communist parties tend to have different organizational models than democratic socialist or social populist. And different organizational structures or different environmental and participatory linkages can become an important factor in understanding the electoral success of far-left parties.

Clearly, there are numerous, complex and intertwined supply-side factors that can influence the electoral success of a party. The literature on other party families, in particular the far-right ones, can be useful, because some of these factors can be relevant for far-left party family too. Factors like a charismatic leadership, the role of the media, a party's strategy and ideology can be important factors in determining the electoral fortune of the far-left party family.

### *The interaction between the supply-side and the demand-side*

The theoretical literature has focused on how both the demand-side and the supply-side can be important in determining the electoral success of a far-left party. However, a single party's electoral fortune is not related only to the

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<sup>65</sup> Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (eds.), *How Parties Organize: Change and Adaptation in Party Organizations in Western Democracies*, London, Sage, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Poguntke, "Parties without firm social roots? Party organizational linkage", in Kurt Luther and Ferdinand Müller-Rommel (eds.), *Political Parties in the New Europe: Political and Analytical Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 43–62; Susan E. Scarrow, "Political activism and party members", in Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Behaviour*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 636–654.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Poguntke, "Political parties and other organizations", in Richard S Katz and William J Crotty (eds.), *Handbook of Party Politics*, London, Sage, 2006, pp. 396–405; Myrto Tsakatika and Marco Lisi, "Zippin' up My Boots, Goin' Back to My Roots': Radical Left Parties in Southern Europe", *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 18, 2013, pp. 1-19; Marco Lisi, "Rediscovering Civil Society? Renewal and Continuity in the Portuguese Radical Left", *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 18, 2013, pp. 21-39.

effect of demand-side and supply-side factors. Interactions between these factors are important to assess. Single factors can influence the party performance both in positive and negative way, but it is out of the interaction among factors together that parties make their success or failure. Factors like economic grievances create a favourable context for far-left parties. A good party strategy or an open structure of the opportunity trigger the far-left electoral success.

Nonetheless, the group of far-left parties is very heterogeneous. Understanding how the interaction between the supply-side and the demand-side influence the electoral success of far-left parties can be particularly useful in understanding different electoral results across time and space. A fruitful example is provided by the electoral fortune of far-left parties in “Southern Europe”. Italy, Spain, and to a lesser extent Portugal, share different features with regard to their political environment. In all the three cases, similar demand-side and supply-side factors are present.<sup>68</sup> Still, the extent of the far-left electoral success differs, in particular after the 2008 general elections. In synthesis, the Italian far-left has obtained much lower results compared to its Spanish and Portuguese counterparts.<sup>69</sup> This explain the case selection for the following in-depth analysis.

### Far-left Parties in Italy, Spain and Portugal

The Italian, Spanish or Portuguese social-economic contexts are rather similar and, on paper, particularly fertile for a far-left positive development. Yet, if we take into account the electoral results (Figure 1), far-left parties perform rather differently. In the remaining of the article, I shall illustrate why and how the interaction between the demand-side and the supply-side factors is the most successful strategy of inquiry in this field (See Figure 1).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the electoral results of the Spanish, Portuguese and Italian far left parties followed a similar path, at least for a while. From 1989 until the beginning of the economic crisis in 2007/2008, far-left parties have been stable elements in the political and parliamentary system. They benefitted from a relatively high share of votes. A partial exception was Portugal where the far-left parties remained fringe parties, with a limited electoral success. In the post-2008 period, the paths diversify. In line with the

<sup>68</sup> For a summary of the demand-side and supply-side factors in contemporary Europe, Luke March *Contemporary Far-left Parties in Europe from Marxism to the Mainstream?*, Friederich Ebert Stiftung 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Marco Damiani, *La sinistra radicale in Europa*, Roma, Donzelli, 2014; Marco Lisi, “U-Turn: The Portuguese Radical Left from Marginality to Government Support”, *South European Society and Politics*, vol. 21, 2016, pp., 541-560.



literature, Spain, Italy and Portugal were supposed to provide equally favourable contexts for the development of far-left parties. This scenario is clearly defined by March.<sup>70</sup> Back to 2008, March identified ten factors (with regard to both of demand and supply-side)<sup>71</sup> in favour of his thesis. These positive elements were connected to socioeconomic grievances (i.e. high unemployment rates, losses of GDP), modernization and EU-focused grievances (i.e. diffused anxiety with regard to globalisation and increased dissatisfaction with both EU and national democracy), and, last but not least, with the openness of the political system (i.e. the absence of main competitors like the greens or far-right parties).

More in-depth, March assessed how many among the 10 dimensions were present in each European country on a period from 1990 to 2008. According to his analysis, in Spain and Italy figured six out of the ten factors, Portugal totalizing only four. On this ground, according to March, the Italian and Spanish socio-political environments were considered to be among the most favourable for the development of the far-left. Only Germany and Finland scored higher. Portugal appeared to be the case with the lowest number of factors positively connected to the far left. However, a simple glance to the aggregated figure from fig. 1 tells a rather different story. Spain and Italy far left parties have the lowest electoral result. In Italy, far-left parties registered the lowest electoral results at the 2008 general election. For the first time in the post-WWII period, they were excluded from the parliamentary representation.<sup>72</sup> Understanding these differences can be explained in terms of the interaction between the country-specific demand and the supply-side factors.

As illustrated in Figure 1, both in Italy and Spain there is a significant discontinuity in the far-left electoral success, in particular starting with the 2011/2012 elections, the peak of the economic crisis and the launching of austerity measures. For the sake of clarity, the economic crisis refers to a period of economic retrenchment, with losses in terms of GDP coupled with increasing unemployment rates. At a EU-28 level, the effects of the economic crisis were extremely harsh in all the three countries under scrutiny. In the middle of the economic crisis (2009-2015), the unemployment rate was of 26% in Spain, 16% in Portugal and 13% in Italy. On average, each country had lost 2% of its GDP.<sup>73</sup> However, while in Spain and Portugal, far left registers an electoral

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<sup>70</sup> Luke March, *Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe ...* cit.

<sup>71</sup> The factors identified by March are: pre-existing far-left parties, federalism/devolution, convergent party system, high unemployment, low GDP growth, low satisfaction with national democracy, low EU support, high globalisation anxiety, no significant green party and no significant right party.

<sup>72</sup> Marco Damiani, *La sinistra radicale in Europa ...* cit.

<sup>73</sup> Source: [www.oecd.org](http://www.oecd.org)

growth, with significant differences between the two countries, in Italy far-left parties vote shares remained low. (See Table 1).

In order to explain the differences, I have updated the 10 dimensions used by March in his research, covering the period from 2009 to 2010. The data gathered in Table 1 does not pinpoint to any relevant differences with regard to the supply-side and demand-side.<sup>74</sup> We believe, explanations are to be found elsewhere.

Although the crisis impacted upon relevant demand side factors (i.e. economic grievances in terms of high unemployment and the attitude toward globalisation), in the three countries the socio-political environment did not radically change. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence (Figure 1) indicates important changes. The main change is found in Spain with the breakthrough of *Podemos* at the 2016 general election. A new party, *Podemos* initially defined itself as beyond right and left and only recently assumed a radical left movement identity.<sup>75</sup> In Portugal far-left parties have progressively increased their vote shares since the 1990s. The distribution of votes among the different parties changed significantly. At the 2015 general election the Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda*, BE), a radical-left formation founded in 1999, obtained much more votes than the traditional far-left coalition, the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU) formed by the Portuguese Communist Party and the Ecologist Party (10,20% for the BE and 8,20% for the CDU).<sup>76</sup> Against the initial forecasts, Spain and Portugal behaved similarly. In both countries, far-left parties reached a relevant percentage of electoral mobilisation. In both countries, this mobilisation went in favour of non-traditional parties, although rather different parties if one considers the origins, the content and the results of *Podemos* and the Portuguese Left Bloc. In both cases, part of the explanation is connected to the organizational patterns and the strong relations with social movements. These supply-side elements provided the parties with an important advantage in the electoral competition.<sup>77</sup>

Despite March's expectations, Italy behaves in a rather unexpected way. After the 2008 general elections, no far-left party has entered Parliament. Both at the 2013 and 2018 general elections, the far-left reached less than 5 %

<sup>74</sup> I considered high unemployment when the mean annual unemployment was under 8 %, low GDP rate when GDP growth is under 2%, a high globalisation anxiety when the mean sum of the response "globalisation is a threat for the economy" is over 50 %, low satisfaction on national democracy when the mean annual sum of the response "not very satisfied" and "not at all satisfied" are over 60 % and there is low European support when the mean annual sum of which declared "fairly attached" and "very attached" was under 40 %. Sources: www.oecd.com, the Eurobarometer.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>76</sup> Marco Lisi, *Rediscovering civil society?*... cit.

<sup>77</sup> Marco Lisi, *Rediscovering civil society?* ... cit. and Loris Caruso, "Reinventare la sinistra. Le basi politiche, culturali e organizzative di Podemos" in *Comunicazione Politica*, 1/2017, Il Mulino, pp. 31-54.

of votes, much less than in the other countries. In this case it can be asserted that to a favourable socio-political environment (a high presence of demand-side determinants) did not correspond to an adequate supply. Although further inquiry is needed, it seems that the parties' strategy and organisations were not suitable to intercept the diffused support. Moreover, the Italian far left suffered from the competition of others political forces, such as that of the Movement Five Stars.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusions

Far-left parties do not seem as a retreating army anymore as they are present in almost all European political systems, often with a relevant presence in parliament, and, in some cases, even in government. In recent years, scholars have also shown a renewed interest in analysing far-left parties. Still, the topic remains peripheral if compared to other lines of research, in particular to the literature on the far right. Drawing on the relatively limited literature available, this contribution aimed to provide an updated overview of the far-left characteristics and determinants of success. If before the fall of the Berlin Wall the most successful far-left parties in Europe had been communist parties, after the fall of the USSR, the far-left ideological features changed significantly. Beside the traditional communist parties, new types of far-left parties emerged (i.e. democratic socialist or far-left populist parties).

Drawing upon the literature used to explain the electoral success of far-right parties, the literature on the far left took into account both the demand and supply-side in order to explain the different electoral evolutions. On this ground, this analysis considered that, beyond mapping the demand and supply-side factors, it is extremely important to analyse the interaction between them. It is only in this perspective that it is possible to understand how the patterns of interaction in a specific context can lead to success or failure in a political system.

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<sup>78</sup> In the 2013 Italian general elections two forces presented candidates, The Left Ecology and Freedom (*Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà*) and the coalition Civil Revolution; in the 2018 general elections there were two different forces, the coalition Free and Equals (*Liberi e Uguali*, formed by Left Ecology and Freedom and Article One, some dissidents of the Democratic Party, and Power to the People), Marco Damiani, *La sinistra radicale in Europa ... cit.*

## Annexes

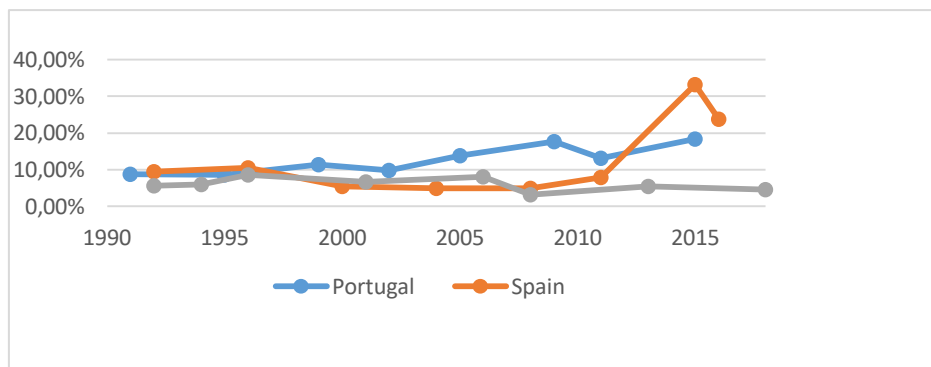


Figure 1. The electoral success of far-left parties in Italy, Spain and Portugal 1990-2018

Note: In this figure are considered those far-left parties, which reached at least 2% of the vote share in at least one general election.

Source: [www.parties-and-elections.eu](http://www.parties-and-elections.eu) (Accessed 5 December 2018).

Table 1. The political environment of far-left parties in Spain, Italy and Portugal 2009-2018

Factors	Spain	Italy	Portugal
Historical legacy	+	+	+
Convergent party system	-	+	-
High decentralised system	+	-	-
No significant green party	+	+	+
No significant right party	+	-	+
Low GDP rate	-	+	+
High Unemployment	+	+	-
Low European support	-	+	-
High globalisation anxiety	-	+	+
Low satisfaction with national democracy	-	+	-
SUM	5	8	5

Source: Author's elaboration based on Luke March, *Contemporary far-left parties in Europe*, ... cit.