CHAPTER 10

POPULISM IN SOUTHERN EUROPE

Belén Fernández-García and Ángel Valencia-Sáiz

Introduction

It has been argued that populism, whether from the left or the right, shares a popular conception of democracy that emphasizes majority rule and popular will (see Chapter 2). In this chapter, we ask whether populist parties in Southern Europe hold a common democratic agenda or, on the contrary, left-right ideological differences tend to prevail.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, we analyze the evolution of the ideological orientation of populism in the region, discussing the main national and regional factors that explain the rise of these actors. We argue that the rise of populism in Southern Europe largely responds to a crisis of representation and dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, especially in the context of the Great Recession

(Fernández-García and Luengo 2019; Valencia 2021). In this regard, populist parties that emerged during the double economic and political crisis of 2012–2015 in the region did so with ambitious programs of democratic regeneration. However, the European context following the Great Recession, as well as other domestic factors, has favored the rise of the populist radical right in the region, which is more concerned with sociocultural issues such as national identity, security, and immigration.

Second, we compare the proposals and statements of the main populist parties in Southern Europe on democratic matters. The analysis shows that, while there are certain similarities, such as a common agenda of restoring trust in political representatives, the democratic proposals of Southern European populist parties are largely determined by the host ideologies of these actors as well as by contextual factors.

The rise and evolution of populism in Southern Europe

Between 2012 and 2015, Southern European countries simultaneously faced a double economic and political crisis that had both domestic and European components (Della Porta et al. 2017; Hutter et al. 2018). This resulted in the political space revolving around two main conflicts, an economic one, which put austerity policies at the center of the debate, and a political one, centered on political renewal and democratic regeneration (Hutter et al. 2018). In the main countries of the region (namely, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal), austerity policies were agreed and implemented by both center-right and center-left mainstream parties, largely contradicting the latter's

electoral programs (e.g., on public social spending). This was interpreted as a betrayal of left-wing voters that, coupled with the lack of a real political and economic alternative and widespread corruption in the region, contributed to a crisis of representation (Della Porta et al. 2017). Moreover, the fact that the response to the economic crisis was led by supranational bodies, considered undemocratic and far removed from the interests of ordinary citizens, as well as by the German government was perceived as a violation of the sovereignty of southern countries. It is not surprising, then, that the driving forces of political change in the region were political parties that combined opposition to austerity policies with political programs of democratic regeneration and against the privileges of the political class.

In Greece, "the populist rupture" was led by SYRIZA (Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras), a coalition of left-wing parties and groups that was founded in 2004 and that managed to establish close links with the citizens' protests against austerity policies (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2019). One of the main features of SYRIZA's populist discourse was the identification of the national political elites with the country's international lenders (i.e., IMF, European Commission, and European Central Bank). In the 2015 elections, SYRIZA was the first political force in votes and seats, which allowed it to form a government together with the national-populist ANEL (Anexartitoi Ellinesnosi). This populist alliance—at the time, unique in Europe–was made possible by the restructuring of the Greek political space around support for or opposition to the supranational bodies that had taken control of the economic crisis and their austerity policies.

In Italy, the discontent generated by the economic crisis and political corruption was channeled through the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle; M5S). The party emerged with a strong populist discourse, trying to overcome the classic left/right divisions. It also had a marked Eurosceptic and anti-austerity agenda, proposing a left-oriented and protectionist economic program. It also sought to amend the dominant way of doing politics in the country by promoting the direct participation of citizens in the decisions of the "party movement." In the 2013 elections, the M5S burst onto the scene with 25.6% of the vote, becoming the leading electoral force in the country.

In Spain, Podemos emerged from the social movements and citizens' protests that took place in those years and that demanded an end not only to austerity policies but also to the excesses and privileges of the political class. Podemos focused its attacks on national rather than European elites, developing a less Eurosceptic discourse than its Greek and Italian counterparts. The party, following a populist logic, claimed to represent the social majority against the political caste, represented by the country's two major parties, severely affected by corruption scandals (Vallespín and Bascuñán 2018). In the 2015 elections, Podemos became the third party in terms of votes and seats in the country, with 20.7% of the votes.

During this period, although there was no populist rupture equivalent to that of the other countries, Portugal would witness the rise of two political formations that are very opposed to austerity policies, with intense antiestablishment and anti-corruption rhetoric and a strong Eurosceptic discourse: the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda; BE) and the Unitary Democratic Coalition (Coligação Democrática Unitária; CDU).

We can, therefore, say that the political space in Southern Europe was restructured in this electoral stage due to the rise of populist anti-austerity parties and the decline of the center-left mainstream parties, especially in Greece, Italy, and Spain. In this regard, the orientation toward the economic left and progressivism on sociocultural issues, combined with an intense agenda of democratic regeneration and an anti-corruption rhetoric, will be specific features of populism in this region in the context of the Great Recession; this is in contrast to the exclusionary populism dominant in Europe.

This peculiarity of Southern European populism faded in the elections held between 2018 and 2022. This electoral stage is characterized by two fundamental aspects: first, the institutionalization and electoral decline of the populist left and, second, the rise of the populist radical right, except for in Greece. To understand the main changes occurring in this period, it is necessary to consider, in addition to certain national factors, the European context that has taken shape since 2015. In this regard, although it is true that economic recovery was slow in coming in the region, the drastic increase in migratory flows since 2015, especially through the Mediterranean, meant that migration and border security issues were overshadowing economic issues—until the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, between 2015 and 2017, Europe experienced a wave of attacks linked to jihadist terrorism, which favored the radical right-wing discourse linking multiculturalism and immigration with national insecurity.

On the one hand, the rise of the radical right in Italy has been the strongest in the region: first with the electoral resurgence of the transformed Lega in 2018 and, later, with the rise of the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia; FDI) in 2022. Under the new

leadership of Matteo Salvini, the central defining theme of the Lega will no longer be the autonomy of Northern Italy, but a nativist and protectionist agenda aimed at the entire Italian nation (Albertazzi et al. 2018), thus connecting with the new crisis scenario in Europe. With Salvini's transformation, the Lega increased its support significantly in 2018 (from 4.1% of the vote to 17.4%). The results of the 2018 elections, in which the two populist parties, the Lega and the M5S, reached 50% of the vote, led to the formation of a short-lived populist coalition government. After the fall of the populist government, Conte formed a coalition government with the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico; PD) which fell a year and a half later for lack of parliamentary support. In the midst of the health crisis, a government of national unity led by Mario Draghi was formed, bringing together the country's major parties, with the exception of the Brothers of Italy. The latter political party, representative of Italian post-fascism (Chiaramonte et al. 2018), clearly benefited from being the only party in opposition. The success of the right-wing alliance of the FDI, Lega, and Forza Italia in the 2022 elections as well as the decline of M5S suggest that the populist/anti-populist divide has succumbed to the left-right divide in the country.

The other country where the populist radical right will emerge strongly is Spain. The weakening of the Popular Party (Partido Popular; PP) after Mariano Rajoy's government, with the management of the territorial crisis following the Catalan referendum and the declaration of independence as well as the judicial conviction of the party for illegal financing in 2018 will open the political space on the right to new competitors. In this context, Vox, a party founded by former members of the PP that holds a strong centralizing nationalist agenda, authoritarian and anti-immigration

stances, and a very belligerent attitude toward the feminist and LGTBI movements, has burst onto the Spanish political scene. Vox broke through in the 2018 Andalusian elections, and it became the third largest political force (15.1%) in the 2019 general elections, ousting Podemos, which fell to 12.8% of the votes (see Chapter 5). In this regard, although Podemos gains institutional power with its participation in the coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PSOE) from 2019 onwards, it has suffered an intense electoral decline since then, aggravated by the split promoted by one of the founders of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón, in Más País.

Portugal has also witnessed the emergence of a populist radical right party, Chega (CH), a split from the Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata; PSD). In the 2021 presidential and 2022 parliamentary elections, Chega has become the third largest national political force with 11.9% and 7.2% of the vote respectively. The emergence of this political party is related to the electoral decline of the center-right and right-wing parties since 2015, worn out by the management of the economic crisis and the economic moderation of the PSD (Carvalho 2022). Furthermore, although Portugal is a country where immigration is not a relevant issue, in recent years there has been a greater politicization of the country's racial diversity, reflected in the citizen demonstrations against the latent racism in Portuguese society. In response, Chega is mobilizing those who consider that "Portugal is not racist," thus polarizing the racial debate. Ideologically, Chega is an ultra-conservative, nationalist, economically neoliberal party with a strong anti-statist and anti-left discourse—a profile that brings it very close to that of Vox. The party also maintains a populist discourse directed

against the national political class and the "globalist elites." As far as the Portuguese radical left is concerned, both the BE and the CDU have suffered a sharp decline (4.4% and 4.3% respectively) because of the recovery of António Costa's Socialist Party (Partido Socialista; PS).

In Greece, the worsening living conditions of the Greek working classes and high youth unemployment, among other factors, undermined SYRIZA's popularity in government, leading to a change in government in favor of New Democracy (Nea Dimokratia; ND). As for the radical right, Greece will follow a different trend from that shown in the other three countries. Golden Dawn (Laikos Syndesmos-Chrysi Avyi; XA) was left out of Parliament after failing to pass the 3% threshold in the 2019 elections. The party is currently considered a criminal organization and is out of the electoral competition after its leadership, including the national leader, was sentenced to prison for possession of weapons and for planning and ordering violent assaults. At present, the only more or less relevant party in this ideological space is the Greek Solution (Elliniki Lisi; EL), which obtained 3.7% of the vote in the last elections and is around 5% in the poll (as of October 2022). This party holds a nationalist, Eurosceptic, conservative, and nativist agenda, and like Golden Dawn, it has a left-wing economic orientation.

Summing up, in this second electoral stage we observe how the populist left parties are losing electoral strength. This may be explained by the participation of these actors in the executive institutions, as well as by the displacement of economic issues from the center of public debate in favor of others more linked to cultural identity, security, and national unity, which are enabling the rise of populist radical right parties

in the region, except for Greece. Likewise, the populist/anti-populist—old/new political divide—that formed during the Great Recession appears to be fading in favor of greater left/right ideological polarization.

The democratic agenda of Southern European populist parties

As Canovan argues (2002, 25), populism is characterized by a political appeal to the people as opposed to the elite "and a claim to legitimacy that rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule." Thus, it is argued that, at least from the theoretical point of view, populism is essentially democratic, in the sense that it seeks to radicalize the government of the popular majority, although it is ambivalent toward the liberal character of contemporary democracies (e.g., Bonikowski et al. 2019; Canovan 2002; Mudde 2007). This tension toward liberal democracy, explained in detail in Chapter 2 of this book, has to do with the monist ideology of populism by which it appeals to a homogeneous people and an unequivocal popular will against the pluralistic conceptions of liberal democracy that admits and protects the diversity of interests and identities in society.

According to Mudde (2007), populist democracy is based on plebiscitary politics, the personalization of power, and the primacy of the political. That is, direct expression of the popular will through instruments of direct democracy, simplification of the structures of representation around a strong executive elected directly by the people, and the supremacy of the popular will over other institutional centers of power other than the people, including the judiciary. According to this idea of democracy, the

general will of the people cannot be limited by anything, not even by constitutional mechanisms that seek to protect minority rights. Populism is thus considered incompatible with the "liberal pillar" of contemporary democracies because it is hostile to those mechanisms that seek to prevent the "tyranny of the majority" (Bonikowski et al. 2019). The latter idea connects with the most common position on the impact of populism in democratic politics: the one that considers that populism leads to authoritarianism (e.g., Halikiopoulou, in Bonikowski et al. 2019) as discussed in Chapter 2.

However, it is also argued that populist actors are not only characterized by their populist agenda but are also, and primarily, defined by their host ideology. In this regard, the left and right ideological orientation of populist parties is expected to determine certain positions toward liberal democracy, such as the protection of minority rights. As Bonikowski (2019) points out, the hostility toward liberal democracy is particularly marked in the politics of the radical right that combines populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. In this line, the study of Huber and Schimpf (2017) shows that the populist radical right is associated with lower levels of quality of liberal democracy than the populist center and the populist left, especially when it comes to minority rights.

Populist parties in Southern Europe are no different in this respect: left-oriented parties (e.g., Podemos and the BE; the M5S is more ambiguous) have a more inclusive conception of the people, while right-wing parties hold a more exclusionary view of it. In this regard, in addition to defending the usual fundamental rights and freedoms (e.g., freedom of the press, freedom of expression, etc.), both Podemos and the BE seek to

protect the rights of migrants, ethnic and racial minorities, women, and LGTBI groups, among others. Together with the M5S, they also hold a broader conception of rights, which is not limited to civil and political ones but also extends to various social, economic, and cultural aspects (e.g., housing, access to drinking water, information, digital rights, etc.). Therefore, when examining the relationship between populism and democracy, populism should not be considered as a phenomenon that is isolated from the ideology that accompanies it.

While these differences between the populist right and the populist left are well known (e.g., Ivaldi et al. 2017), in this section we will focus on the more procedural and institutional aspects of democracy. Figure 10.1 shows the salience of democracy and direct democracy in the 2018–2019 electoral programs of the main populist right and populist left parties in Southern Europe.[1] As can be seen, except for the Portuguese parties, left-wing parties (including M5S) pay more attention to democratic issues than the right-wing ones, especially in relation to direct democracy (Brothers of Italy does not include any mention of democracy in their 2018 manifesto). The main measures proposed by the parties in democratic matters are detailed below.

Figure 10.1 Favorable mentions of democracy and direct democracy in the election manifestos of 2018–2019.

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[1] Greece is not included because we seek to compare the positions of populist left and populist right in each country. In this regard, the Greek Solution is not included in the Manifesto Project yet. In the case of Portugal, we have selected the Left Bloc, a political force more assimilable to contemporary populist left than the Unitary Democratic Coalition, more linked to the traditional left.
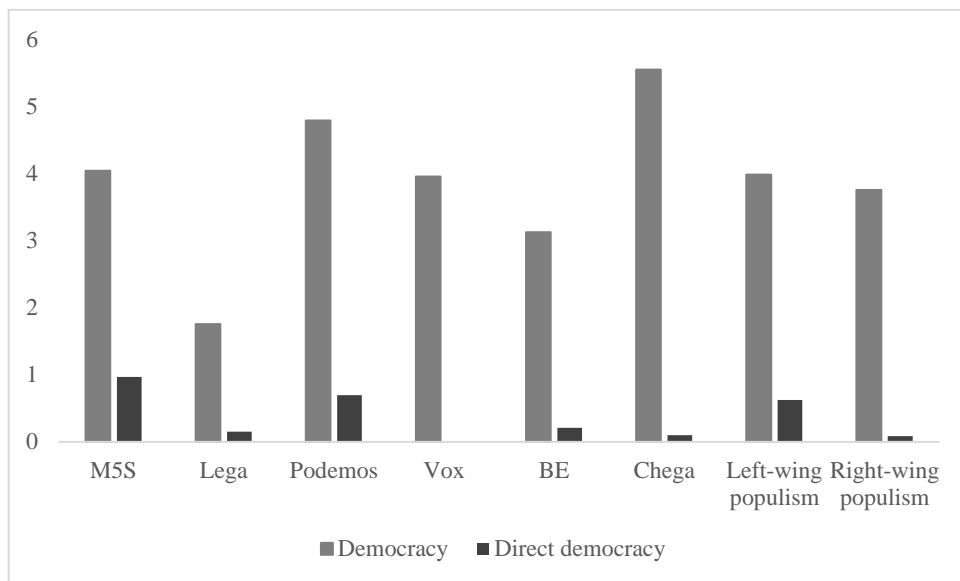
Source: data from the Manifesto Project.

The democratic agenda of populism in Italy

Five Star Movement

The institutional reform proposed by the M5S (2018 election program) aims to "defend the values of the Constitution against the antidemocratic attacks that seek to overthrow it" (2018: 2), such as the processes of globalization in its most neoliberal vision and the antidemocratic practices of the political class. To this end, it advocates direct and participatory democracy; the improvement of the relationship between citizens and institutions; as well as transparency, meritocracy, and the fight against waste, conflicts of interest, and privileges that distance the state from solving society's needs.

Regarding the relationship between representatives and citizens, it proposes that this should be more direct and closer, undertaking various reforms to reestablish

citizens' trust in their political representatives. It proposes, for example, limiting parliamentary salaries and reimbursements, as well as returning to the pension system that applies to ordinary citizens; restricting parliamentarians' mandates to two terms to avoid the professionalization of politics; and amending parliamentary rules so that parliamentary groups can be formed only by those political forces that have actually stood for election, thus putting an end to "shirt-switching" in Parliament and "betrayals" of the will of the voters. Furthermore, to improve the representativeness of Parliament, the M5S proposes lowering the voting age to 16, as well as the age for running for the Senate (in this case, it does not specify at what age).

In relation to the electoral system, the M5S denounces the complicity of the other political forces in the approval of "illegitimate electoral systems" that have undermined the representativeness and political legitimacy of the Parliament. It proposes an electoral reform, the "Democratellum", to improve the representativeness of the system and to ensure the governability of the country by discouraging the fragmentation of political forces and the creation of fictitious coalitions that are formed for purely electoral purposes. The reform would set up a proportional system with medium-sized constituencies and a variable electoral threshold of around 5%. It also promises to reduce the size of the Parliament. This measure was promoted by the Conte government and finally approved in a popular referendum in 2020 with almost 70% of the votes. A drastic reduction in the size of both chambers was undertaken, from 630 to 400 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and from 315 to 200 elected seats in the Senate.

As far as the direct expression of popular will is concerned, the M5S is undoubtedly the party in the region that most clearly defends direct democracy and

plebiscitary politics ("We believe in direct democracy!") (2018, 3). On the one hand, the party seeks to strengthen the "abrogative referendum" already provided for in Article 75 of the Constitution by eliminating the quorum currently required, which has been abused by political parties to ensure "most of the referendums of the last twenty years fail" (2018, 6). On the other hand, the party proposes the introduction of a "revolutionary" direct democracy tool, the "proactive referendum," whereby popular legislative initiatives supported by at least 500,000 voters would be submitted to a popular referendum if, within 18 months, the Parliament has not approved them or has done so with purely formal changes. This proposal, in the form of a constitutional bill, was passed by the lower house in February 2019 but was stopped when it reached the Senate. These measures seek to put an end to "the arrogance of the political class" that governs behind the backs of the people. The M5S illustrates this idea with the European integration, whereby quotas of sovereignty have been gradually ceded to the European institutions without considering the opinion of Italian citizens (according to the party). It, therefore, calls for any amendments to the treaties governing Italian participation in the EU to be submitted to a mandatory popular referendum. Finally, information and communication technologies also play a fundamental role in its model of direct democracy. In this regard, the party sets itself as an example of how to apply online direct democracy to elaborate its political program through the Rousseau platform.

In addition to reinforcing the plebiscitary elements of Italian democracy, the M5S also seeks to revolutionize the way politics is exercised, bringing decision-making closer to the citizenry. In this sense, it calls for the establishment of mechanisms for citizen control in the implementation of public policies; systems that encourage

dialogue with citizens and the exchange of options to reach the best decisions; as well as decentralization in favor of the regions and local authorities as a way of bringing the adoption and implementation of public policies closer to the citizens.

In relation to the liberal or constitutional pillar, the M5S denounces the unequal access to justice in Italy. It criticizes that the Italian parties have never done anything because it benefits them that justice should be "weak with the strong and strong with the weak" (2018, 338). To reverse this situation, the party proposes strengthening economic and human resources to speed up judicial processes as well as lowering costs to make justice more accessible. Furthermore, to make equality before the law effective, it calls for the intervention of those parliamentary prerogatives that prevent political representatives from being subject to the same rules and processes as ordinary citizens. The party also called for no contamination of any kind between justice and politics, demanding the incompatibility of holding political office and returning to the judiciary.

The party also proposes the establishment of parliamentary oversight mechanisms for the government's implementation of public policies through the creation of a Parliamentary Oversight Committee. It also supports the work of independent administrative authorities such as the Antitrust Agency, the Energy Authority, the Anti-Corruption Authority, and the like in the appointment of which citizens or civic associations should be involved. However, the most important aspect of the M5S program in this regard is that of transparency as a way of controlling executive power. In this sense, one of the main objectives of the M5S program is the achievement of a transparent public sector at the service of the citizen, where meritocracy and citizen participation and scrutiny prevail, avoiding the interference of

partisan interests, conflicts of interest, corruption, and arbitrariness of the public authorities.

Lega

The Lega's 2018 program for institutional reform begins by noting that "Democracy means government by the people. Its essence consists in the participation of the people in the government of the community" (2018, 20). The Italian party's reform, therefore, originates from a popular conception of democracy, the essence of which is clearly sculpted by Article 1 of the Italian Constitution according to Lega, which states, "Sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution."

According to the party, the sovereignty of the people is threatened by the technocratic model of Europe that often imposes its decisions on the member states; by international institutions such as the UN and the WTO; by "the gigantic sovereign wealth funds that manipulate and affect national economies"; and by "the tendency of judges to take the place of the legislator" (2018, 20). To combat these threats, the party proposes a new balance of power and a strengthening of direct democracy, conceived as a corrective to possible distortions of representative democracy. Among these distortions, the constant parliamentary transformations that the M5S also denounces stand out. In this sense, the party proposes a constitutional reform that would introduce a "mandate obligation" to avoid such "betrayals" of the electorate.

It also seeks to strengthen the more plebiscitary character of Italian democracy by facilitating the holding of popular referendums (e.g., by eliminating the quorum requirement for referendums) and by forcing the Parliament to pronounce on popular initiative bills. The power of the people would also be strengthened by the direct election of the new head of the executive. In this sense, the Lega calls for the existence of "a strong chief executive" (2018, 21) that is directly elected by the people, "without having to pass through the confidence of the parliamentary chambers." The President of the Republic would combine the current powers of the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic, except for the presidency of the Superior Council of the Judiciary.

In relation to the powers of Parliament, the Lega maintains a somewhat negative position. In addition to reducing its size (it proposes the same reduction as the M5S), it also limits the Parliament's powers to legislative production, for example, when it says that "Parliament should make laws, if possible few, simple and clear" (2018, 21), questioning its function of control over the government (right after that, it points out that the head of the executive must not depend on the confidence of Parliament). It is also highly critical of the activity of the judiciary, identified, as mentioned above, as one of the threats to Italian democracy. In particular, the Lega criticizes judges for overstepping their functions, who "must apply the law, not create it" (2018, 21). In this sense, it proposes sanctioning judges who interpret laws in a manner contrary to that of the legislator.

Finally, as part of this new balance of powers, the Lega proposes to boost decentralization in favor of regions and municipalities. In this respect, it denounces how

the space of the institutions closest to the territories has been restricted—for example, by limiting their funding and weakening the role of the regions. This is a negation of the principle of subsidiarity, which for the Lega is a necessary complement to popular sovereignty.

The Lega's program is more concise when it comes to the liberal or constitutional pillar of democracy. It defends, for example, the principle of equality before the law; however, it does so keeping in mind the party's need to protect its nativist agenda. In particular, the party points out that religious freedom is conditional on respect for the law, which must be equal for all citizens, with special mention of the Muslim population (it calls for "strict observance and application of the law to Muslims") (2018, 8). It also demands the independence and impartiality of the judiciary with respect to political interests, for example, when it proposes the incompatibility between remaining in the judiciary and holding political office. It proposes to change the way in which the Superior Council of the Judiciary is elected (but it is not specified in what sense) as well as to fix its tasks "in an imperative way" to prevent this body from exceeding its functions in addition to the creation of an external disciplinary commission to control the activity of judges. This hostility toward the judiciary has been reaffirmed with the Lega's participation in the Italian government. Salvini has, on numerous occasions, attacked the impartiality of judges who have overturned some of his policies on migration and security (e.g., red zones in cities).

The democratic agenda of populism in Spain

Podemos

Podemos' democratic program (2019 election program) begins by denouncing the collusion of the major economic powers with the main democratic institutions as well as with the media and political parties. It points out that the change people want to see is viable only if "we get rid of the corrupt and their control over public institutions" who capture the institutions "so that they can decide in favor of a few and against the majority" (2019, 47). Based on this populist diagnosis, the party proposes several measures aimed at empowering the people such as by making democratic institutions more representative and the management of public affairs more transparent and democratic.

On the one hand, the party proposes to improve the representativeness of the political system by lowering the voting age to 16; increasing the proportionality of the electoral system by changing the method of allocating seats; and reforming electoral regulations to facilitate voting abroad and to create a constituency for Spanish emigrants. It also proposes to end the "revolving doors" of political office, which leads politicians "to act against the people and in favour of the few" (2019, 50); to eliminate "the privileges of elected officials" (e.g., reduction of salaries and pensions) (2019, 52); to democratize electoral campaigns, establishing a minimum number of electoral debates per elections; and to democratize political parties, making primary elections mandatory for party executive positions as well as gender parity on electoral lists. To

prevent the influence of financial interests on political representatives, it also wants to prohibit banks from financing the election campaigns of political parties.

On the other hand, the party advocates strengthening the plebiscitary elements of Spanish democracy, facilitating the presentation of popular initiatives; normalizing popular consultations on issues of national importance (e.g., military operations); subjecting the adoption of international treaties to parliamentary control and binding referendum; and eliminating the need for government authorization for local referendums. Podemos is the only party among those analyzed that proposes to introduce the power of citizens' revocation in the political system. Specifically, it proposes that citizens can initiate a recall process when 15% of the electoral roll considers that "the government has turned its back on it" (2019, 54), culminating in the holding of a referendum in which a binding decision is taken on whether the president of the government should remain in office and whether new elections need to be called. It is noteworthy, however, that these measures are absent from its agenda as a governing party.

Podemos also proposes opening new participatory spaces for citizen deliberation—for example, in the elaboration, management, and control of public policies—as well as promoting participatory budgets and favoring participation in legislative processes in the Parliament. Finally, Podemos' program seeks to democratize different processes and institutions such as international governance, with the creation of a democratically elected UN Parliamentary Assembly, the international financial system, public service broadcasting, and university governance.

The rest of the democratic measures are aimed at strengthening the liberal and constitutional pillar of Spanish democracy. A large part of the program in this area seeks to reduce political corruption (e.g., the creation of a National Anti-Corruption Plan), prevent the interference of economic powers in democratic institutions, and guarantee the independence of certain institutions and actors as mechanisms to strengthen democracy. For example, it proposes various transparency measures, such as regulating the activity of lobbies by making public the meetings they hold with political representatives or public administration officials. The party also proposes to guarantee the independence of the media from economic powers by prohibiting banks and other funds from owning media outlets.

The party also promises to reinforce the principle of equality before the law, abolishing "privileged jurisdiction" [*aforamientos*] of elected officials, the proliferation of which did not so much seek to protect public representatives from reprisals and threats from the most powerful but rather to offer judicial privileges to the political class, according to the party. It also calls for the abolition of the absence of accountability of the King, as well as to "the archaic formula" of administering justice "in the name of the King," when "justice in fact emanates from the people" (2019, 52). The party also promises to improve the quality and access to justice by reforming, for example, the law on court fees.

Podemos also proposes to strengthen the independence of the judiciary by reforming the system of election of its governing body, namely, the General Council of the Judiciary. To this end, it proposes a system of direct election by citizens, but until this measure is adopted, which requires constitutional reform, the party proposes to

improve the system of parliamentary elections by increasing the plurality and transparency of the election of this body, including the possibility of proposals endorsed by citizens. The promise to strengthen plurality clashes with the proposal made by the government of which Podemos forms part. Faced with the blockade in the renewal of the judicial body, the government proposed lowering the majorities required for the appointment of the council members, which was criticized by the European Commission and judges' organizations. The proposal was finally withdrawn by the Ministry of Justice (led by the PSOE), a decision that was criticized by Podemos. In relation to the Constitutional Court, Podemos calls for depoliticizing this institution by "establishing a system of appointments in which consensus and not party quotas prevail" but does not specify based on what mechanisms.

Finally, Podemos proposes working on the country's democratic memory in accordance with the principles of human rights, making reparations to the victims of Francoism, judging the crimes against humanity of fascism, and withdrawing decorations from the torturers of Francoism. It also seeks to place Spain at the forefront of human rights protection in the world.

Vox

The Vox electoral program for the 2019 elections is headed by the section "Spain, unity and sovereignty," which establishes national unity as the supreme value and the main purpose of the political organization. The party criticizes the design of the Spanish political system for allowing the government to depend on political forces whose

"explicit purpose is to liquidate national unity" (2019, 2). In this sense, among the first proposals is the outlawing of parties, associations, or NGOs "that pursue the destruction of the territorial unity of the nation and its sovereignty" (2019, 2). This measure shows that for Vox, the principle of political pluralism is subordinate to the preservation of national unity and that its model of democracy revolves around this principle.

Vox's democratic agenda is rather short and focused on the lack of representativeness of the Spanish political system. In this sense, the party proposes to establish a direct link between the representatives and the represented, based on "a truly representative unicameral Parliament" (2019, 5) (it proposes to eliminate the Senate, the country's chamber of territorial representation). To this end, it wants to reform the electoral system, which it blames "for the huge disconnection between citizens and parliament" (2019, 5). It proposes that part of the deputies should be elected in a single national district so that the vote of all Spaniards is worth the same. This measure can be interpreted in the case of Vox as an attempt to reduce the weight of peripheral nationalist parties in the Congress of Deputies by reducing provincial representation in that institution. As the party points out, this reform would also serve to make MPs "answer to the voters and not so much to the political parties." An anti-party rhetoric is thus identified, denouncing in this sense how "the constitutional state has degenerated into a state of parties that defend their own interests more than those of all Spaniards" (2019, 26). This kind of rhetoric expresses the antiestablishment character of the organization, but the title that heads this section, "Spain above the parties," also warns of the party's anti-pluralism, positioning the Spanish nation above the diversity of interests and political identities in the country. In this regard, the party proposes to end

public subsidies to political parties and their foundations, trade unions, employers' organizations, and other "ideological proselytizing" organizations. To improve the representativeness of the system, it also proposes to strengthen the rules on incompatibilities of politicians after leaving political office and the control over politicians during their mandates.

It is also noteworthy that at no point does Vox's program appeal to popular sovereignty or people's power (it only refers to national sovereignty). Nor does it propose to improve the more participatory or plebiscitary aspect of Spanish democracy. The remaining measures refer to the liberal or constitutional pillar of democracy. In particular, the independence of the judiciary, for which it calls for the introduction of the necessary human and material resources as well as effective procedures. A reform of the method of appointing the members of the Supreme Court and the General Council of the Judiciary is also proposed so that they would be elected by and from among judges. Regarding the Constitutional Court, the party proposes to abolish it, with the Supreme Court taking over its functions. It also links the territorial model of the state with the inequality of rights and freedoms of Spaniards, proposing to transform it "into a unitary state based on the rule of law that promotes equality and solidarity instead of privileges and division" (2019, 3).

Finally, in contrast to Podemos, Vox proposes the immediate repeal of the Law of Historical Memory. First, it denies the legitimacy of Parliament "to define our past" and, second, it proposes paying joint tribute "to all those who, from different historical perspectives, fought for Spain" (2019, 4). That is, it also proposes to pay homage to

those who fought on the side that later installed a dictatorial regime—a measure that has been codified as antidemocratic by the Manifesto Project.

The democratic agenda of populism in Portugal

Left Bloc

The Left Bloc's program (2019 election program) on democratic reform begins by commemorating the popular struggles that overthrew the fascist dictatorship of the Estado Novo and paved the way for the construction of a democratic country. The party points out that the current role of the left is the democratization of the Portuguese political system and the qualification of the tools for citizen participation. Toward this, it proposes to improve the representativeness of the system by making it easier for Portuguese citizens abroad to exercise their right to vote and by reducing the voting age to 16; in addition, it opposes any possible reforms aimed at reducing the representativeness and proportionality of the electoral system. It also wants to improve citizens' representation by establishing a regime of exclusivity for elected officials and banning "revolving doors." The party also proposes several measures to increase political participation and deepen the more plebiscitary aspects of Portuguese democracy, such as reducing the number of signatures required to present popular legislative initiatives and citizens' initiatives for referendums. The Bloc also calls for participatory processes to involve citizens in the formulation and control of public policies as well as to democratize the regional level. This party considers democracy as a cross-cutting value that should guide the management of different public affairs, such

as public education as well as access to scientific knowledge, the media, and new information and communication technologies. It also proposes democratizing the economy and access to energy. In this regard, the socialist orientation of the Bloc is highly evident in its concept of "sovereign democracy," defended against the big economic interests and the neoliberal dynamics of the European Union that limit Portugal's economic sovereignty.

In relation to the liberal or constitutional pillar of democracy, the party criticizes that the current system makes "justice a good of access reserved for those who have the means to pay" (2019, 111), thus undermining the principle of equality before the law. To correct this situation, it proposes the creation of a national justice service whose main principles will be free access and territorial proximity. The party also promises to democratize the administration of justice by expanding citizen participation through popular juries and calling for democratic scrutiny of the application of justice— although it does not specify what this would consist of. The party also wants to strengthen the rule of law in the country, proposing various measures to fight corruption as well as to establish a policy of absolute transparency whereby all assets and income of political representatives and high-ranking state officials are monitored. It also links the formation of absolute majorities in Parliament with corruption, opacity, abuse of power, and other practices that "atrophy democracy" (2019, 125).

Finally, the Left Bloc is the party with the strongest emphasis on media independence. The party dissociates itself from populism by pointing out that populists "organize themselves in the shadow of disinformation campaigns" (2019, 114). In the face of this threat, the Bloc points out that the existence of "serious and rigorous

journalism is fundamental to safeguarding democracy itself," advocating state intervention to ensure the sustainability and the independence of the media from political and economic powers.

Chega

In contrast to the Bloc's view of the Portuguese democratic transition, Chega denounces (2019 election program) that the country lives in a limited democracy "as it is not based on a freely voted constitution" (2019, 7). In this regard, the party identifies a vice of origin in Portugal's democracy whereby the "left establishment" controlled the constituent process. Therefore, one of the Chega's main measures is the adoption of an "ideologically neutral constitution" that allows any government to exercise the power granted to it in free and democratic elections. Chega's democratic reform measures are also aimed at reducing the size of institutions and limiting the scope for state intervention in line with his neoliberal orientation. The party's guiding principles in this area are "representative democracy, the primacy of the rule of law, the limitation of state intervention and the separation of powers" (2019, 4).

In relation to the popular pillar of democracy, the party proposes several measures to improve the representativeness of the system, such as limiting the terms of office of representatives to two consecutive terms and abolishing any privileges of the political class. The party also proposes reforming the electoral system to mitigate the effect of the "useful vote" thereby allowing for the parliamentary representation of minor parties and reducing the "wasted votes" produced by the D'Hondt method. The

party wants to reduce the number of constituencies from 22 to 14, as well as the number of MPs to a total of 100. It also proposes the extension of the legislature and municipal mandates to five years, as well as the presidentialization of the regime, with the powers currently attributed to the prime minister being accumulated in the figure of the "President of the Republic" (this measure disappears, however, in the 2022 electoral program).

As for popular sovereignty, Chega makes a single reference to the expression of popular will in the context of the constitutional reform it wants to carry out. The party considers that the current constitution was the result of the imposition of left-wing parties in collusion with the military and "not a genuine product of the sovereign will of the people," and therefore calls for a new constitutional text to be approved by popular referendum. We are therefore dealing with an organization that expressly defends representative democracy and in which the ideas of participatory and plebiscitary democracy are absent. In this sense, the concept of sovereignty is conceived in Chega's program in its national, not popular, conception, claiming it above all in the face of various external threats (e.g., globalization).

Finally, Chega develops numerous measures and appeals for the rule of law against arbitrariness and abuse of power. For this party, the role of the state is to guarantee the equal rights and duties of citizens and not to defend the interests and privileges of corporations. In this sense, it shows strong hostility toward civil society organizations, opposing state subsidies to foundations, associations, trade unions, and "ideological proselytizing" organizations. It also points out that the state should be subject to the same laws and judicial procedures as citizens and promises to make

justice more accessible to citizens, lowering judicial costs, decentralizing the judicial map, and improving the functioning of the system. In relation to the judiciary, the party proposes a reform of the judicial system to guarantee the true independence of judges from political power (e.g., that members of the Supreme Court be elected on merit by and from among those who are part of the judicial community).

Conclusion

This chapter seeks to answer whether populist parties in Southern Europe maintain a common democratic reform agenda or not. The analysis shows that, while there are certain commonalities, the democratic agendas of Southern European populist parties are largely determined by the host ideologies of these actors as well as by national contextual factors.

There is, in general, a common agenda that seeks to reestablish trust in political representatives, highlighting the antiestablishment character shared by these actors. All parties denounce the lack of representativeness of the political systems in their countries due to the institutional design (e.g., electoral system) but, above all, to the abuses of the political class (professionalization of politics, privileges, corruption, etc.). They propose abolishing the procedural and economic privileges of the political class, reforming electoral systems to make them more proportional and representative, and, in some cases, reducing the size of legislative institutions (Lega, M5S, and Chega). However, there are also national particularities, such as the "mandate obligation"

proposed by the Lega and M5S in the face of the continuous transformations of Italian parliamentary groups.

It is also common for populist actors to denounce the lack of independence of the judiciary and obstacles to access to justice. Except for the Bloc and the M5S, populist parties in Southern Europe propose to modify the appointment systems of the main judicial bodies, although they differ in the methods: while Podemos proposes that they be elected by popular vote, the right-wing parties propose that they be elected by and among judges (except Lega, which does not specify it). Even though all populist actors advocate judicial independence, we have seen how some who have come to power have questioned the legitimacy of judges (e.g., the Lega) or proposed methods that are not very pluralistic for the election of judicial bodies (e.g., Podemos). In this regard, questioning the independence of the judiciary can be the preliminary step to undermine its legitimacy once in government.

In relation to direct democracy, Italian parties are the only ones that speak openly in favor of this model of democracy, conceived as a corrective to the distortions produced by representative democracy, with the M5S being the party that most clearly defends it. Podemos and the BE also propose to extend the use of different tools of direct democracy (e.g., reducing the number of signatures needed to present popular initiatives or making popular consultations or referendums compulsory for certain topics). The Lega is the exception among the radical right parties analyzed, coming closer to the proposals of left-wing parties. In this sense, neither Vox nor Chega propose to intensify the plebiscitary character of democracy.

The left-wing parties and the M5S, for their part, go beyond this plebiscitary vision of democracy, proposing various mechanisms to ensure citizens' participation in decision-making and in the control of public policies, as well as the democratization of the management of different public affairs. This greater emphasis on participatory democracy is not only due to the ideological orientation of these organizations to the new left, which emphasizes grassroots democracy and new channels of direct participation and deliberation, but also because of the context in which these parties emerged of widespread discontent toward the functioning of democracy, expressed in various forms of protests and social mobilization. Finally, only Lega and Chega (although in the latter it disappears from the 2022 election program) propose the presidentialization of the political systems of their countries, so that the President of the Republic, who assumes the functions of the Prime Minister, is directly elected by the citizens.

By country, Italian populist parties are undoubtedly the ones that most converge on democratic issues, which explains the government agreement they reached after the 2018 elections. Both parties seek to reinforce the plebiscitary character of Italian democracy and defend a popular conception of democracy. They share many appeals against the political class and propose, in both cases, a drastic reduction in the size of the Italian Parliament. They also advocate decentralization as a way of bringing institutions closer to citizens and encouraging participation. The main differences are the M5S's defense of a truly participatory democracy, with a strong electronic component and an emphasis on transparency as a guiding principle in politics and administrative actions. In the case of the Lega, it proposes a rebalancing of the three

branches of government, with the power of the executive taking precedence over the rest. Thereby, the Lega is the party that comes closest to the ideal of populist democracy referred to by Mudde (2007) in the sense that it combines plebiscitary politics, personalization of politics through a strong chief executive who does not depend on Parliament, and strong criticism of the judiciary for contradicting the will of democratically elected institutions. The democratic agenda of Italian populist parties can be explained by some contextual factors, such as a greater tradition of direct democracy, the normalization of populism after years in the institutions, as well as a deep distrust of Italians toward the political class.

By contrast, the democratic programs of populist left and populist right parties in Spain and Portugal differ greatly, as do their views on their countries' authoritarian past and democratic transition. This, together with strong ideological differences in the sociocultural and economic dimensions, makes any possibility of cooperation in the institutions unfeasible. They only agree on the need to enhance the representativeness of the system, improve the independence of the judiciary, and facilitate citizens' access to justice, but they hold very different conceptions of democracy. While Podemos and the BE hold a popular conception of democracy, proposing to strengthen those mechanisms that allow the direct expression of the popular will, Chega defends a more conservative vision of democracy in its representative version, while Vox, subordinates it to national unity. These two parties also display an anti-pluralist conception of democracy when they propose outlawing or withdrawing public support for certain organizations on ideological grounds. The fact that neither Chega nor Vox appeals to popular sovereignty makes us question the role that populism plays in these parties. The

results suggest, in line with other research, that populism is used more as a discursive framework at the service of their nationalist agendas and as a strategy to break into politics than as an ideological principle guiding their programs (Fernández-García and Valencia 2022).

To recapitulate, in this chapter, we have shown that populist parties in Southern Europe coincide in their promises to improve the representativeness of the system but differ in their conceptions of democracy. While left-wing parties (including the M5S) defend participatory democracy and promise to reinforce its plebiscitary character (especially M5S and Podemos, but also the Left Bloc), radical right parties in Spain and Portugal maintain a more representative vision of democracy, based on national sovereignty and professing a certain hostility toward pluralism and civil society. The Lega is the political party that comes closest to the ideal of populist democracy, combining plebiscitary politics, personalization of politics, and hostility toward the judiciary.

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