

# SAVING REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACIES? INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND POPULIST AGENDA

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## INTRODUCTION

The extensive bibliography on the rise of populism in advanced democracies agrees that under the emergence of populist forces lies a common ground, namely the crisis of political representation. Populist forces perceive traditional political parties as auto-referential actors, whose primary aim is to keep power and to exclude potential challengers or newcomers. Furthermore, representative institutions are regarded as a distant arena of political decision-making no longer representative of societal interests and often enslaved to economic elites or foreign constraints.

As a reaction to this state of things, populist actors – from both the left and the right of the ideological spectrum – demand radical reforms in order to improve the functioning of contemporary democracies. In more radical cases, populist forces even defend the need for a ‘constituent power’, i.e. a revolutionary force that ought to be permanently activated to found again from scratch all the corrupt political institutions. Therefore, they politicise the constitution and present to the electorate election manifestos that include a number of political reforms, by strengthening accountability, participation and the input from common citizens, social movements and other actors of civil society.

Studies focusing on populist parties have mainly dealt with specific reforms, especially with regard to socio-economic or cultural policies. There is also an interesting strand of research that focuses on democratic innovations with regard to party organisations. In this regard, recent

## ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative research design, we analyse party manifestos and classify institutional reforms according to different dimensions and categories. The results show that populist proposals are not merely anti-politician but also defend important and substantial changes to representative democracies. Findings also reveal that these measures concern mostly reforms of the electoral system and parliamentary rules, as well as the adoption of direct democracy mechanisms. In addition, the populist agenda on institutional reforms does not substantially vary according to types of populism, party size, ideology or institutional status. From this standpoint, the present study contributes to better qualifying the distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary populism and to identifying the core dimensions of what an ideal ‘populist democracy’ is supposed to be.

Keywords: Populism; Institutional reforms; Party manifestos; Representation.

## RESUMO

**SALVAR AS DEMOCRACIAS REPRESENTATIVAS? REFORMAS INSTITUCIONAIS E AGENDA POPULISTA**

Com base numa análise comparada, analisamos os manifestos partidários e classificamos as reformas institucionais de acordo com diferentes dimensões e categorias. Os resultados mostram que as propostas populistas não são meramente anti-políticas, mas defendem também mudanças importantes e substanciais para as democracias representativas. Os resultados revelam também que estas medidas dizem respeito sobretudo a reformas do sistema eleitoral e das regras parlamentares, bem como à adoção de mecanismos de democracia direta. Por outro lado, a agenda populista sobre reformas institucionais não varia substancialmente de acordo com os tipos de populismo, dimensão partidária, ideologia ou estatuto institucional. Deste ponto de vista, o presente estudo contribui para melhor qualificar a distinção entre populismo de exclusão e de inclusão e para identificar as dimensões centrais do que é suposto ser uma "democracia populista" ideal.

*Palavras-chave:* Populismo; reformas institucionais; manifestos partidários; representação.

studies have examined how populist forces have used digital tools to strengthen voter-leader linkages and to implement intra-party democracy. Yet this is only one side of the story, as populist actors also aim to shape the formal rules regulating the functioning of democracies. This is an equally interesting aspect that the scholarship on populism has failed to investigate empirically and from a comparative perspective.

Addressing this shortcoming, we seek to innovate existing works by focusing on the institutional reforms proposed by populist parties in different political settings, with the aim of shedding more light on this neglected area of research. Thus, this work brings several novel elements to the study of populism. First, it inquires into how populist parties attempt to heal the failures of political representation through the analysis of electoral manifestos. Second, it adopts a comparative approach, which is more suited to gauge the diversity of populist response. Empirical evidence is therefore based on four distinct parties clearly associated with populist discourse although differing in terms of their ideology, size and coalition potential – namely, *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement, M5S), *Front Nationale* (National Front, FN), *Podemos* (We Can, P) and *Chega* (Enough, CH).

This introduction is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and the main concepts employed in examining the agenda of populist parties on institutional reforms. In the next section we present the data, the operationalisation and methodology. In sections four and five, we examine empirically populist electoral manifestos and discuss the main findings. The final section highlights the content of populist institutional reforms and concludes with the implications of this study and some avenues for future research.

## **POPULISM AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS**

The fast-growing literature on populism provides many different definitions of this phenomenon. Although it is not our purpose to discuss this scholarship, it is important to identify the main elements associated with this concept. One of the most often used definition of populism is based on the ideational approach, which defines populist forces as a political platform of grievances that divides society between an overwhelming majority of 'pure people' and a 'corrupt elite', demanding the restoration of popular sovereignty. In this viewpoint, populism is seen as a 'thin ideology' concerning the role that the people and the elite should play in politics.

The rise of radical and populist alternatives has been seen primarily as a consequence of the unprecedented challenges that representative democracies have faced in the last decades. Mair has masterly summarised this evolution by stressing that citizens have progressively withdrawn from democracy, leading to a ‘notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped from its popular component – easing away from the demos’. Political parties experience a crisis of legitimacy, as they are becoming increasingly distant from civil society by strengthening their position in central office and not fulfilling their intermediating role. In particular, decreasing turnout, higher levels of volatility or growing scepticism towards parties parallels the greater policy constraints enjoyed by political elites, reducing their capacity to achieve significant policy outcomes. The shortcomings of party democracy seem to be at the origin of populist criticism. Given the antagonistic view that opposes the people to the political elite, one common theme in populist ideas is that democratic failures are linked to systematic malfeasances by traditional politicians. This malfeasance can manifest itself through widespread corruption (i.e. politicians’ abuse of public office for private gains), or through elite collusion, aiming at keeping issues off the public agenda. Be it as it may, populist forces argue that this drift from the public interest produces gaps in democratic representation. From this viewpoint, populists emphasise the redemptive (concerning political mobilisation through an ideal) sides of a democracy which bends to the latter to the detriment of the pragmatic (regarding minimal and common goals to all society). The constitutional and liberal pillar of democracy is placed in a constant tension with the popular one, and is unable to provide enough responsiveness to the individuals’ demands, leading the populists to defy democracy in the name of democracy itself.

It is important to note that the ‘populist mode of representation’ is different from the idea of pure democracy advocated by populist parties. The first term denotes the direct links between citizens and their representatives, often associated with the new media democracy (*audience democracy*) based on a direct style of communication with no

THE MOST COMMON MEANS ADVOCATED BY POPULIST PARTIES TO REFORM DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEMS IS THE USE OF TOOLS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY, FOR EXAMPLE THROUGH THE EXPANSION OF REFERENDUMS OR POPULAR INITIATIVES

intermediation. It also takes a non-pluralist form, setting its legitimacy in the will of the people and plebiscitary strategies. The concept of disintermediation then plays a great role here, put forward by Biancalana as a ‘weakening of party intermediate organization’ that may happen externally or internally (with greater power to the leader or the basis). On the other hand, pure democracy claims that the will of the people is singular and that it can be captured and represented directly by the populist party and imposed on society as a whole even at the expense of the individual freedom of parts of the citizenry.

The most common means advocated by populist parties to reform democratic political systems is the use of tools of direct democracy, for example through the expansion of

referendums or popular initiatives, despite their instrumental use to legitimise the leaders' decisions. It is also common to find in populist platforms the replacement of mechanisms of horizontal accountability by other branches of government with variants of vertical accountability, through elections, referendums or plebiscites. Finally, some political reforms advocated by populist actors are simply 'anti-politician' and do not aim at genuinely improving the functioning of a given system but are meant only to discredit the political elite. One example of this latter approach is the abolition of the Seanad in Ireland or the reduction of the number of MPs endorsed in different countries after the onset of the Great Recession.

However, not all populist parties share the same view on how representative democracies should be reformed. From this viewpoint, it is useful to distinguish between exclusionary vs inclusionary populism. The first approach aims to marginalise specific socio-economic, cultural or ethnic groups. On the other hand, inclusionary populism is mainly situated on the left side of the ideological spectrum and prioritises equality, political participation (especially of lower classes) and a deeper integration in the political system of groups that are permanently excluded from decision-making processes (ethnic minorities, immigrants, unemployed or people with lower education).

This distinction is also important when we consider the agenda presented by these parties in terms of institutional reforms. On the one hand, inclusive populist parties

tend to defend further participation and deliberation in the functioning of contemporary democracies. On the other, exclusionary populist parties focus on 'constitutional identity, majoritarian-partisan political dominance, restriction of minority rights, and top-down reform'.

Populist politics can prioritise immediate

identification between leaders and those they represent, thus strengthening the translation of popular will directly into governance. As such, direct political representation can also be channelled through deep identification with a leader and the decisiveness of that leader.

What populist forces emphasise in election campaigns or the media is not just a strategic tool and an unfulfilled promise, but also consequential in terms of their action and behaviour. Indeed, there is evidence that when controlling the executive, populist forces seek to diminish the power of established elites and incorporate excluded sectors. For example, in some Latin American countries, populists have tried to translate formal and descriptive representation into substantive representation, notably by expanding the role of women through constitutional reforms. On the other hand, there are examples in Europe where populist forces have tried to strengthen the power of the executive, altering the traditional equilibrium between executive and legislative that

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should characterise parliamentary regimes. For instance, the Polish party PiS (Law and Justice) is very critical of the Third Republic and advocates a strong state, both internally and externally. What is more, during its governmental experience, it defended a populist democracy (against the liberal model), according to which the democratic legitimacy of parliament stands above everything else and is incompatible with the interference of the judiciary or the media. This means to progressively dismantle the system of checks and balances between the legislative, executive and judicial branches.

Although the quest for radical populist reform is rooted in the long-term trend of democratic decline, populist criticism towards party democracy has been boosted by the Great Recession. The austerity policies implemented after the 2008 economic crisis have contributed to further eroding the popular support for mainstream parties, as well as to boosting the mobilisation of new actors who tried to advocate for and represent those social groups most affected by the crisis. On the one hand, the Great Recession and its related economic constraints and deprivations strengthened citizens' negative perceptions regarding corruption and maladministration. This phenomenon has increased anti-system feelings and a growing dissatisfaction of citizens with elite behaviour and the poor performance of democratic institutions. On the other, the crisis created a tension between responsibility and responsiveness, i.e. between 'parties which claim to represent, but not to deliver, and those which deliver, but are no longer seen to represent'. This was due to the fact that the crisis determined a shift from distributive arenas at the national level to regulatory external agencies (mostly at the European level). This implied a more diffuse open demand for more democracy, namely the request for stronger direct democracy with the enlargement of the space for participation and a growing demand for accountability and transparency.

While there is extensive evidence regarding the debate and actual practice of institutional reforms, there is a shortage of studies addressing populist agendas on the topic. As some theoretical works suggest, the combination of both strands of research is not only a relevant aspect in the understanding of the challenges of contemporary democracies, but also a promising one, especially when addressed from an empirical and comparative perspective. The present research aims to fill this gap, as detailed in the next section.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Camille Bedock defines institutional reforms as 'only one of the tools at political parties' disposal that enables them to react to and shape their environments'. Even though most studies present it according to a rational choice model that benefits the actor himself, we envisage it as a reaction towards the legitimacy crisis of political institutions, as suggested by the cultural approach of Pippa Norris. Institutional reforms are thus perceived as part of a policy-making cycle that emphasises proposals as the party's policy agenda.

Party manifestos constitute the basis of our empirical analysis, as they express the party policy at a certain point in time and are comparable across countries. Our unit of analysis are the political statements - different from each individual paragraph - that contain concrete measures to reform the democratic system and not simply mere ideas that cannot be directly transposed into practice. For each party, we analyse its programme for the last general election and specifically the chapters concerning institutional reforms - i.e., we excluded every chapter that relates to economic, cultural, social or other types of policies.

In order to systematically examine institutional reforms advanced by populist parties, we rely on four different frameworks that can be used to classify and compare populist agendas on this domain. The first approach follows Renwick and Pilet's work, which distinguishes two ideal types of reform, namely constructive and populist. While the former entails reforms that 'are reasonably expected to improve the operation of the democratic system', populist reforms are 'anti-politician' and do not have the goal to advance improvements in the functioning of representative democracies.

Although this might be a good starting point because it highlights the (predictable) outcome of the reforms, it is not clear enough to elucidate the content of these changes. Therefore, we also rely on the categorisation elaborated by Bedock et al., in which they take the following seven areas of reform into consideration: electoral system, parli-

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mentary, federal or state decentralisation, financing of political parties, direct election of executive offices, direct democracy mechanisms (e.g. referendums or citizens initiatives) and regulations of access to suffrage. We add an eighth category concerning state reforms, i.e. related to the administrative structure.

Furthermore, we hope to introduce a novel angle of research, by distinguishing and making *democracy* and *representation* as autonomous variables, as the latter is usually an understudied concept within the literature on (populist) institutional reforms. As Vieira and Runciman put it, democracy is based on some representative principle and representation is suitable for some kind of democracy, therefore 'the question is how we want to see the fit between democracy and representation'. In this way, we take Hanna Pitkin's typology as reference with its formalistic (divided into authorisation and accountability), descriptive, symbolic and substantive approaches. Operationalising them is not a straightforward task, though. Hence, we classify as formalistic any proposal that concerns the state's institutional and electoral design regulating the selection, sanction and removal of representatives (e.g. the electoral system and the parliament's dimension, amongst others). Descriptive representation is measured by the social and demographic representation of social and functional groups

(through group quotas, for example). Lastly, substantive representation regards the policy responsiveness and is usually associated with direct and deliberative procedures, such as referendums, petitions or participatory budgets. We purportedly leave symbolic representation apart, due to its existential and ex-post nature - this dimension is not independent from the others, as it concerns a final evaluation of the representative.

The fourth framework to classify institutional reforms aims to link populist agenda with the model of democracy. As several authors have noticed, there are different (and sometimes conflicting) visions of democratic regimes, which entail distinct principles of legitimacy, accountability and responsiveness. This article takes V-Dem categorisation into account and characterises reforms as privileging an electoral, liberal, deliberative, participatory and egalitarian democracy model. As on some occasions the indicators overlap, we may qualify proposals with more than one category. Their theoretical impact on the Dahlian dimensions of participation and public contestation is also analysed for each reform.

As far as case selection is concerned, the four parties in the current study - M5S, FN, Podemos and CH - are purported to present a variety of contextual factors (see Table 1). Hence, besides centring our analysis in four different Western European countries, we compare parties with distinct institutional status and ideology: FN and CH as right-wing populist parties; Podemos as a left-wing one; and M5S a valence populist party. The M5S occupies an area created by the economic and representation crisis which is fuelled by a subsequent protest vote and marked by a post-ideological, ambiguous character. At the same time, it proposes a very specific concept of representation, based on internal direct democracy and citizens' centrality. Although the M5S presents post-ideological stances on many issues and does not fit neatly into the exclusive or inclusive labels, most of its economic and cultural proposals are left-orientated. With this caveat in mind, we ascribe to it the inclusionary type of populism.

The FN is the oldest party in our analysis - it was founded in 1972 - and may be described as the prototype of the populist radical right party, with its authoritarian and nativist features. FN also builds on the political discontent on which it bases the party's ethnocentric, xenophobic and anti-immigration discourse. Internally, the use of direct democracy tools is mostly understood from a plebiscitarian point of view, rather than a form of democratic inclusion.

On the contrary, a radical vision of democracy is also one of the main hallmarks of Podemos (P), as they encourage the direct participation of the members in candidate selection and decision-making. Together with SYRIZA (Greece), the party founded by Pablo Iglesias in 2014 is one of the great flags of left-wing populism in Europe. Similar to M5S, it arises as a consequence of the economic crises and is perceived as the institutional follow-up of the 15M Movement.

Finally, the idea that Portugal was immune to radical right populism was demystified when *Chega* emerged in 2019. This new force was founded by André Ventura, a dissident

member of the main centre-right party (PPD/PSD), and, despite its early age, we may see some top-down traits in the party's structure. Ventura's political discourse is mostly based on an anti-establishment message challenging a corrupt elite. CH also emphasises a xenophobic feature, especially against the Roma people, as a basis for the party's law and order agenda.

The empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we briefly present, for each case study, the main institutional reforms presented in the last legislative elections. Second, we discuss similarities and differences across the distinct parties surveyed in this study using the aforementioned frameworks.

**Table 1** > Populist parties: contextual features

Party	Founding year	Votes (% , last election)	Seats (% , last election)	Institutional status (2020)	Type of populism
M5S	2009	33.3% (2018)	36.0%	Government	Inclusionary populism
FN	1972	13.2% (2017)	1.4%	Opposition	Exclusionary populism
Podemos	2014	9.8% (2019)	7.4%	Government	Inclusionary populism
Chega	2019	1.4% (2019)	0.4%	Opposition	Exclusionary populism

Source: Own elaboration.

## EXAMINING POPULIST AGENDA ON INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS: ANALYSIS

### 5 STAR MOVEMENT (M5S)

Criticisms of traditional representative democracy and the defence of direct democratic expression through digital participation on the Internet in its various forms were two key issues politicised by the M5S. The movement, launched in 2005 and popularised by the figure of Beppe Grillo, was born with a view to overcome the 'dead bipolarism' while promoting direct democracy, the suppression of the parties and the creation of deliberative referendums without quorum.

The reform of the Italian political system is one of the key issues advocated by the M5S. Indeed, this topic appears at the beginning of its electoral programme presented in the 2018 legislative elections. The overall aim is 'to increase citizens' participation in public life and, at the same time, to have a more efficient and transparent administration'. The principles steering the reforms of the political system are based on participatory and direct democracy, the improvement of the relations between citizens and politicians, higher transparency and increasing accountability.

The strengthening of direct democracy is key for the reform of the Italian political system envisaged by the M5S. From this standpoint, this populist force aims to introduce mandatory referendums concerning changes in the European treaties. This means that citizens must approve any reform to European treaties before Parliament's ratification.



The Movement also stipulates the introduction of propositional referendums and the abolishment of the participation quorum.

Proposals to cut the costs of politics have a central place in the M5S electoral programme. This populist party is clearly opposed to the privileges of the political elites ('the cast') and the professionalisation of politics. As a consequence, it prescribes the introduction of two-term limits for MPs and the reduction of the size of the Parliament. In order to increase representatives' accountability, the M5S proposes to change parliamentary rules so as to limit the possibility of MPs changing parliamentary groups after the election.

Another set of proposals to improve the functioning of the political system is based on public administration reforms. For example, the electoral programme states that it is time to abolish the National Council for Economics and Labour, as well as all the non-economic entities that before the end of the Second Republic were used mostly as a tool for party patronage and to satisfy the pressure from below.

It is worth noting that institutional reforms in Italy have a long tradition and that the M5S played a crucial role in the last cycle of reforms. After Matteo Renzi (leader of

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the left-wing Democratic Party, PD) became prime minister in 2014, the government decided to implement a constitutional reform whose main aim was to significantly alter the composition and functions of the Senate. The M5S was clearly against the reform, and during the campaign on the 2016 referendum attacked the prime minister for strengthening centralisation of power and 'erasing the voice of citizens and weakening their participation in democratic and political life'. 5SM's opposition to the constitutional reform proposed by the left-wing government was crucial not only to determine the failure of the referendum, but also to open a new phase in the Italian political life, with Renzi's withdrawal from the government and PD leadership.

The proposal to reform the constitution was again endorsed when the populist party came into power after the 2018 elections. Indeed, direct democracy and cuts in the 'costs of politics' were two of the concepts dear to the M5S included in the coalition agreement with the populist right-wing party Liga. While it has not been possible until now to reach an agreement regarding the new electoral law, two types of reforms have been implemented. The first concerns the reduction of the costs of politics and the end of unjustified privileges of elected representatives. The Movement was able to reach a compromise with coalition partners to approve some of its main proposals, such as MPs' salary reduction, total deletion of annuities of all types of elected representatives and abolishment of electoral reimbursements for political parties. The second reform concerns the reduction of MPs from 630 to 400. After parliamentary approval, the proposal had to be subjected to a popular referendum, which was held in September of

2019. The majority of voters approved the cut, which was interpreted by the M5S as an important victory and a reflection of the wide support for substantially reforming the Italian political system.

#### NATIONAL FRONT (FN)

Institutional reforms have always featured quite prominently in the FN election manifestos. Traditionally, this right-wing populist party has defended the strengthening of presidential prerogatives and several proposals to end the corrupted French political systems. Besides electoral system reform, FN's proposals included, for instance, setting the electoral term for a president back to seven years and cutting politicians and parties' funding and privileges.

The electoral programme put forth by Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential elections includes several institutional reforms. The first section of the programme is symbolically entitled 'to give the voice to the people and to establish a democracy of proximity'. The overarching proposal is to revise the French Constitution and to approve the new text through a national referendum. One key concern of this reform is to expand article 11, which sets the legal framework for the calling of referendum. This reform would give the president far greater leeway to consult the electorate directly, through a referendum and without referral to parliament. In particular, the proposal aims to create a 'truly' popular referendum, that is, a referendum based on people's initiative (subscribed by

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a minimum of 500,000 voters). Another important measure, based on the reform of the electoral system, advocates the adoption of a proportional system for all kinds of elections with a majority bonus of 30% of seats for the party that comes first at elections and a threshold of 5% of the votes.

This proposal is complemented by the reduction of parliamentary seats (from 577 to 300 for the Assembly and from 348 to 200 seats for the Senate) and the administrative reform, with the objective to give more powers to the state by abolishing France's regions, but reinforcing at the same time the powers of local officials (in particular mayors). The modification of article 72 of the French Constitution implies the abolishment of three levels of decentralised government created in the course of the last 40 years of administrative devolution. This reform would have the effect of limiting potential veto powers for the central government, leading to a hyper-centralisation of territorial administration.

According to the electoral programme presented at the 2017 presidential elections, institutional reforms should be oriented by an overarching principle which is to reinforce national identity and sovereignty. Reforms are therefore linked to a traditional and nationalistic conception of the political system. In this regard, it is worth mentio-

ning that the presidential candidate (Marine Le Pen) also defends the abolishment of the XV title of the Constitution, which is dedicated to the European Union, with the aim to allow the State greater freedom to set international constraints and to establish the superiority of national law.

## PODEMOS

Generally speaking, Spain can be considered as a case of limited use of institutional engineering from a European perspective, with institutional reforms tending to focus on specific dimensions, mainly decentralisation and the granting of increased powers to local authorities. Yet this is not to say that citizens' support for the way democracy works and their institutional trust has been high. Spain has displayed relatively low levels of systemic support, and this was an issue politicised during the Great Recession with the emergence of new partisan actors.

Podemos relies on a maximalist conception of democracy, aiming to increase representation and participation, as well as to reduce social inequalities. Its watermark of social justice is therefore visible in the party's political programme, since its institutional section also approaches social, cultural, and economic topics by drawing attention to some underprivileged groups, such as the LGBT+ community, ethnical minorities or migrants. Moreover, the breadth of this programmatic section is patent in that it encompasses measures concerning the financial and banking system, external policy and justice, with a special focus on democratisation, transparency and anti-corruption policies.

Concerning institutional proposals, *stricto sensu*, the party underlines its electoral law reform with the main goal of increasing the system's proportionality, representativeness and electoral turnout. Firstly, Podemos intends to change the electoral formula: in the Congress of Deputies, the D'Hondt method would be substituted by the Sainte-Laguë; in the Senate, the majoritarian system would be replaced by a proportional one. Secondly, Podemos aims to increase political participation by ensuring an easier process of remote voting and creating a foreign electoral constituency. The party's main emphasis, however, rests on their proposal to lower the age of voting to 16, which is seen as a form of political involvement that complements non-conventional mobilisation. Furthermore, one other relevant reform pertains to the constitution of electoral lists and the proposal to make the rule of zipped lists universal (also applied to parties' internal procedures) to ensure women's representation.

Another main focus of Podemos' programme falls back on the party's idea of extra-electoral participation and the enhancement of direct democracy methods. Thus, the party aims to constitutionalise the right of citizens to present legislative initiatives and the normalisation of consultation procedures that create participatory and deliberative arenas, which include the democratisation of local popular consultations, in order to extend the 'design, management and control of public policies'. In addition, it considers

the introduction of a recall mechanism through a referendum initiated by 15% of the electorate that may decide the need for new elections. Citizens' participation is also supported through the constitution of a Citizens' Observatory for the Evaluation of Public Policies and Accountability.

Since the party's discourse relies on the opposition between *la gente* and *la casta*, Podemos proposes - in line with other populist parties - the ceasing of privileges for public offices and limiting MP's wages. In order to stress its people-centred message, the party established that no remuneration should be higher than those of civil servants, besides introducing more controlling methods. Additionally, a proposal is made to ban the financing of parties through bank loans, in order to prevent its dependency on private banking.

### CHEGA

During the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century a number of reforms were implemented in Portugal. These have focused on different aspects of the political system, such as the use of direct democracy, parliamentary rules and decentralisation. Extensive and regular debate has also taken place with regard to the electoral system, especially due to the extremely low turnout levels. Yet no consensus has been achieved among the main players in order to implement this reform.

While the Great Recession had important economic, social and political effects in Portugal, demands for institutional reforms were not politicised until new actors gained parliamentary representation. The title of the institutional section of Chega's manifesto presents a suggestive title: 'Towards the 4th Republic: Re-centring the regime, refunding the system'. As it opposes the Constitution in force, claiming it to be ideologically biased with a left-wing tone, the party reflects its halfway house approach to the system, i.e. its core ideology contests the system's legitimacy. Yet, this has not prevented the party from acquiring coalition potential. The party introduces itself as a moral representative of the people by demanding a Constitution that is neutral and impartial. Thus, its first proposal is precisely to hold a referendum for the Constitution, with an emphasis on changing the nature of the regime. Chega proposes the 'presidentialisation' of the regime, by accumulating the competences of the president of the republic and the prime-minister and extinguishing the figure of the latter. This institutional change would give the president greater political autonomy, resources and a personalised leadership, with potential implications in terms of election campaigning and voting behaviour. Another big flag in the party's manifesto is the reduction of the number of MPs from 230 to 100. This proposal echoes the anti-elitist brand and its main criticism of the ineffectiveness of political institutions, as it downgrades the role of parliament. Following the same rationale, Chega's manifesto emphasises the need to downsize the number of cabinet members and ceasing all the benefits conceded to politicians as well. The anti-elitist feature is also present in the two-term limit to all public offices, whose length

should be increased up to five years (as in the case of the President of the Republic). These measures are intended to promote greater efficiency, ‘congruence, moralisation and transparency’ within the system.

Furthermore, the party proposes a reduction in the number of electoral districts (from 22 to 14) and the elimination of constituencies that elect less than four members. Chega’s electoral system reform establishes a three-fold representation of territory based on multi-member districts, single-member districts and a national district. The aim of this proposal is to increase the representativeness of the electorate and to diminish the propensity to tactical voting. Simultaneously, it also introduces an innovative proposal to allocate vacant seats in parliament to blank ballot papers.

Finally, the party’s proposals also include some participatory and deliberative measures. On the one hand, it supports the reorganisation and decentralisation of competences from the central to the local administration; on the other, it seeks to promote competitions for the best ideas regarding the country’s political organisation.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, we systematically examine institutional reforms advocated by populist parties from a comparative perspective, using the analytical categories mentioned in the data section. This empirical analysis has two main objectives. First, we aim to identify core reforms that are part of a specific institutional design and its representative and democratic attributes shared by populist forces. The second is to examine differences both across countries and between parties.

The first interesting aspect worthy of consideration is that the proposals of populist parties are not merely anti-politician, but also offer potential improvements to the way democracies work. Indeed, approximately half of the reforms (26 out of 49) can be considered ‘constructive’ (Table 2). A closer look at the content of these proposals enables us to better qualify populist agenda. Eight categories have been considered in the classification of the type of institutional reforms. The general picture confirms the strong predilection for direct democracy reforms, which entail approximately 25% of the overall reforms. However, around half of the proposals are related to changes in formal rules of representation, namely in the electoral system (28.6%) and parliament (24.5%). As Lijphart noted, there is often a strong connection between electoral system laws and the functioning of the parliament. This connection is also visible in our data, as electoral reforms go hand in hand with changes in parliamentary rules. This focus on parliamentary reforms is reinforced by the anti-elitist contestation of populist parties, since most of these reforms aim at reducing the privileges and incomes of parliamentary elites, limiting the length of terms and improving transparency and the control and accountability of elected politicians. There are only four cases associated with decentralisation reforms (put forth by CH and the M5S), while three reforms are related to state administrative structure. We would also expect Podemos to present a posi-

tion on state territorial organisation, as it is a hot topic in Spanish politics and Podemos is pro-autonomy and a strong supporter of decentralisation and regionalism. As a matter of fact, in 2015 Podemos even campaigned for the opening of a constituent process in Catalonia and the entire territory. Yet this issue was not voiced in the 2019 electoral platform, as the party did not put a great focus on autonomy neither in its constitutional nor in its territorial programmatic chapters. This was possibly due to strategic reasons since it was one of the main conflictual topics opposing Podemos and the Socialists.

The differences across parties in terms of reform type are minimal and do not follow a clear pattern. Podemos is certainly the party that presents the more encompassing bundle of reforms, with a wider variety that includes regulations of access to suffrage, the direct election of the head of government and the reform of public subsidies to parties. While we may not be surprised to see Podemos' high emphasis on reforms that enhance direct democracy procedures, M5S's records might be seen as relatively odd as it is deemed a connective party with a strong component of intra-party democracy. Additionally, FN also deserves to be highlighted at this point. The use of referendums by the French party puts into practice its rhetoric of restoring and strengthening popular sovereignty. However, the theoretical inclusiveness of these reforms – such as extending the constitutional scope of referendums or exclusively entrusting the citizens with the constituent power by these means – hides the strategic, authoritarian purpose of bypassing the role of Parliament and nullifying the Constitutional Council. However, most of the party's reforms on referendums and citizens initiatives are constructive ones. Despite the ideological proximity to FN, Chega has only one proposal that concerns citizens initiatives and concentrates most of its proposals in the parliamentary and electoral system categories. In contrast to FN's discourse of reconquering popular sovereignty, Chega's focus on these policies may relate to the party's narrative on creating a new regime, the IV Republic. Thus, the party's position vis-à-vis the system springs primarily from their anti-establishment criticism and ideological bias, and not exactly the need to give a voice to the unity of people.

Nonetheless, electoral system reforms illustrate a major difference between inclusionary and exclusionary populist parties. By focusing on the theoretical impact of these proposals on participation and public contestation, a pattern emerges: M5S and Podemos show no reform proposals with an expected negative impact on both dimensions, while FN and Chega present a small number of proposals with (potentially) opposite outcomes. However, when we look at parliamentary reforms, the pattern is slightly different as the M5S also proposes a reform (reducing the number of MPs) with a negative impact on both dimensions. While this is a cross-sectional populist reform, exclusionary populist parties stand out by also undermining the system's proportionality as they propose to manipulate the system's formula – in the case of FN, with an electoral threshold and a majority bonus; in the case of Chega, with the capacity of attributing seats to blank

ballot papers. Exclusionary populist parties are also the only ones advocating the need to hold a referendum on their respective constitutions. In fact, populist parties approach the constitution of their own country from an opportunistic angle, rejecting them when contrary to the party's ideals. Hence, the constitution is perceived as a way of institutionalising the populist morality and the idea of national sovereignty, which includes reducing the institutional role of the EU.

**Table 2** > Type and content of populist institutional reforms

	CH	FN	M5S	Podemos	Total
<b>Type of institutional reform</b>					
Constructive	6	6	6	8	26
Populist	4	4	10	5	23
Total	10	10	16	13	49
<b>Content of populist institutional reforms</b>					
Direct election of the executive head or president at the national or local level	1	0	0	0	1
Parliamentary reform	2	3	6	1	12
Electoral system reform	5	2	2	5	14
Federal reform or state decentralisation	1	0	3	0	4
Referendums and citizens initiatives at national level	1	4	2	5	12
State reform	0	1	2	0	3
Direct public subsidies to political parties	0	0	0	1	1
Regulations of access to suffrage	0	0	1	1	2
Total	10	10	16	13	49

**Source:** Own elaboration based on electoral manifestos.

As far as the mode of representation is concerned, it appears that most of the reforms address a formalist dimension, in accordance with theoretical expectations, in our analysis of party proposals concerning the broad institutional architecture (Table 3). In fact, if we take Schwandt-Bayer and Mischler's integrated model of representation into account, formalist representation is conceived as the basis for every other angle, with indirect effects on descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Nonetheless, M5S stands out as the only party in this study that puts a greater emphasis on reforms that promote a substantive angle of representation. Usually, substantive proposals come in the form of participatory and deliberative mechanisms, as mirrored by the general focus on referendums, but M5S particularly extends this scope to a broader

notion of responsiveness. From this viewpoint, the abolition of the balanced budget is certainly the main innovative reform, but proposals related to greater autonomy to the local levels of administration and the creation of a committee to monitor the legislative activity have also relevant and substantive implications.

The second more interesting insight that can be drawn from this analysis is that few proposals address descriptive representation. In the case of gender, for instance, one would expect to find differences between inclusive and exclusive populist parties. While former actors are supposed to adopt inclusive positions regarding the role of women in politics, populist radical right parties are associated with a gender gap based on authoritarian antifeminist orientations. In fact, Podemos – the only party that considers this angle of representation – defends an electoral system proposal that ensures women’s representation with a requirement of zipped lists in all institutional processes. Moreover, Podemos intends to institutionalise the gender parity rule at the party level. Besides gender, the party equally promotes a descriptive sense of representation by creating an external electoral constituency.

Regarding the model of democracy, a natural association is patent between the formalist type of representation and the electoral and liberal models. These two models are represented in approximately two thirds of the overall reforms, as the remaining is categorised by the participatory model. Despite the overlap between this model and direct democracy proposals, which explains the higher scores of Podemos and FN, participatory democracy purportedly has a greater representative range, as it significantly applies to formalist, substantive and even descriptive types of representation. Once more, the expectation of verifying the distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary populism – i.e. inclusionary populism as favouring a participatory model – is not entirely accomplished, as M5S depreciates this model in favour of a liberal one. Institutional proposals are thus at odds with the expected populist relationship with the models of democracy, as one would expect to see a greater decoupling from the electoral and liberal models. There is no record of proposals involving a deliberative or egalitarian model of democracy.

**Table 3** > Modes of representation and model of democracy\*

	CH	FN	M5S	Podemos	Total
<i>Modes of representation</i>					
Formalist	9	7	10	8	34
Substantive	1	3	6	2	12
Descriptive	0	0	0	3	3
Total	10	10	16	13	49



[cont.]

Model of democracy					
Electoral	7	5	4	5	21
Liberal	1	2	9	4	16
Participatory	2	4	4	7	17
Deliberative	0	0	0	0	0
Egalitarian	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	11	17	16	54

Source: Own elaboration based on electoral manifestos.

\* Since the indicators may overlap, the total sum for the models of democracy is not identical as we have occasionally qualified proposals with more than one category.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is wide disillusionment with the functioning of contemporary democracies and the role performed by representative institutions. Public confidence in politicians, political parties and parliaments is at rock bottom. Governments seem unable to produce effective policies and to ensure policy responsiveness to the majority of voters. Although these problems have deep and long-standing roots, populist parties have embraced an anti-system discourse to promise to cure these pathologies through the enactment of radical institutional reforms. We have therefore investigated what are the main proposals put forth by populist parties by means of a comparative analysis and a systematic categorisation of institutional reforms.

Our results have shown that one of the main concerns of populist parties is to deeply reform formal rules that shape the functioning of parliamentary democracies. These reforms focus mostly on electoral system reforms, the parliamentary system and the introduction of direct democracy mechanisms. The rationale behind this agenda is not only associated to populist rhetoric - namely the emphasis on 'anti-politician' reforms, but there are also concerns involving the improvement of representative democracies. Indeed, more than half the proposals of populist parties are constructive and strive for establishing better representation, for example by increasing the proportionality of the electoral system and strengthening the connection between MPs and citizens. From this viewpoint, while there is certainly a strategic interest behind certain proposals, some reforms endeavour to speak to a broader audience and have the potential to be backed by other forces. Such was the case, for instance, with the Italian referendum held in September 2020 to slash size of the parliament by a third, a proposal strongly pushed by the M5S but also backed by the centre-left Democratic Party, as well as two opposition parties (the Leagues and Brothers of Italy) on the right and extreme right of the political spectrum.

Our comparative research design sought to shed light on the variation of populist reforms. Overall, the results suggest that the distinction between inclusive vs exclusive

populism is not all that useful to account for the distinct reforms proposed by populist forces, even though it may be visible in terms of modes of representation and the model of democracy. Although the selected parties are virtually unanimous about the need to increase participation and facilitate inclusion of the wider population, inclusionary populism tends to place more emphasis on descriptive representation and participatory democracy. All in all, variation in the content of institutional reforms is to be found mostly at the national level, as some measures for improving the political system are related to idiosyncratic features or pathologies peculiar to specific democracies. For example, state reform is advocated more strongly in Italy, given the complex functioning of multilevel governance. The need to reform public subsidies is an important concern in Podemos' platform, but it is not addressed by other parties (at least at the level of election platforms). Given the substantial homogeneity of populist proposals for institutional change, it is not surprising to find that party-related variables (e.g. ideology, size, etc.) are inconsequential for explaining the populist quest for institutional reforms. This finding may also be related to the fact that, in every country, pleas for political renewal have been widespread, and many public opinion indicators signal a diffuse popular discontentment regarding the way representative democracies work and the output they deliver.

The lesson that we are in a position to draw from this analysis is that populist parties do not advance institutional reforms only for strategic purposes (i.e. vote maximisation); they do indeed address some failures of contemporary democracies, such as the increasing incapacity of traditional parties to represent voters, the growing importance of new modes of participation and the interplay between new digital communication tools and actors of representation. This also means that the relationship between populism and constitutionalism is a complex one and that there can be both democratic and authoritarian forms of populism. Liberal and democratic convictions are not necessarily at odds with populism, whereas anti-establishment discourse can be found within the constraints of democratic institutions. To this regard, our analysis complements and supports those works stressing the importance of anti-system and protest attitudes as major drivers of populist voting. On the one hand, most people in affluent democracies appear to demand, or at least approve of, direct citizen influence over policy decisions. On the other, recent studies have found that individuals who display higher scores on populist attitudes also demonstrate support for alternatives to current political systems, namely more direct (i.e. referendums) and more deliberative forms of political participation (Geurkink et al., 2020; Zaslove et al., 2020).

Given that this research focuses on a relatively unexplored topic, there is plenty room for future research. One important pathway for progressing research would be to analyse a wider range of documents, such as parliamentary debates, proposals and party documents. An alternative option would be to strengthen the comparative approach by including more parties and inquiring more systematically into proposals for institutio-

nal reforms. It would be interesting to explore how traditional and governing parties react to populist proposals and to what extent citizens share and approve concerns regarding the implementation of deep reforms in the political system. Finally, the analysis of media debate - that is, how (new and old) media platforms frame and echo populist claims to adopt institutional reforms - is another potential issue to explore in future studies. Be it as it may, the quest for populist reforms will remain a hot topic in the political agenda, not only because of the enduring political discontent of voters, but also because this is one of the key features contributing to differentiate populist parties and mainstream forces. ■

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