

Article

After the Cartel Party: ‘Extra-Party’ and ‘Intra-Party’ Techno-Populism

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Abstract

This article reads the restructuring of European party systems in the 2010s as a transition from cartel to techno-populist parties, with a specific focus on left-populist challengers. Adopting a historical-institutionalist perspective, it demonstrates how a long-term cartelization and particular mode of crisis management after 2008 drove the gradual replacement of the party cartel with a cohabitation of populism and technocratic politics: techno-populism. Although this techno-populist template has been deployed for parties such as Five Star Movement and some right-wing populist outfits, it has usually been left aside for left-wing variants. This article investigates two techno-populist subtypes from the left: Corbynism in the United Kingdom and Podemos in Spain. The former took place within a cartel party (‘intra-party’), while the latter occurred from outside the party cartel (‘extra-party’). Although such party cartelization cuts across cases, the rise of Corbynism and Podemos took place under different institutional conditions: different electoral systems, different European Union membership and different dynamics of party competition on the left. The article concludes with the observation that rather than an anomaly, the presence of techno-populist tropes in and outside of parties and across institutional settings indicates the pervasiveness of these logics in contemporary European party politics.

Keywords

cartelization; Labour Party; party politics; Podemos; populism; technocracy; technopopulism

Issue

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1. Introduction

The aftermath of the 2008 crisis saw the reintroduction of a curious term into the English lexicon: ‘techno-populism.’ Launched by political scientists Chris Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi in 2018, the term was previously deployed in the early 1990s by the political scientist Carlos de la Torre to characterise a series of Latin American politicians (de la Torre, 2013). In 2020, however, the term was meant to denote the increasing cohabitation of technocratic and populist elements in the same political camps, from the Italian Five Star Movement to the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FVD) to Macron’s En Marche (Bickerton & Invernizzi, 2017,

2018). The term’s relaunch in the late 2010s also came as no surprise.

At the close of the 2010s, upheavals from both left, right and centre reconfigured party systems across Europe and marginalised existing traditional parties. Two terms—‘populism’ and ‘technocracy’—have proven particularly apt at capturing these shifts. Both indicate the decline of classical party politics and the rise of new models of political organization across the ideological spectrum. Both are also typically conceived as opposites. While populism celebrates the wisdom of the ‘people,’ technocrats plead for expertise and seek to insulate policy-making from partisan interference. This dichotomy has steadily settled into mainstream politi-

cal science, with populist and technocratic styles of governance now regularly contrasted in comparative work (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Urbinati, 2020; Weyland, 2017). Other studies, however, have hinted at the surprising degree of convergence between both political currents. Rather than a stark opposition, technocracy and populism seem to share an essential ‘complementarity’ in their rejection of party mediation (Bickerton & Invernizzi, in press; Caramani, 2017). Both exhibit a refusal to filter collective wills through intermediary bodies and an antagonism towards social pluralism. As Bickerton and Invernizzi note, “populist and technocratic forms of discourse can be considered as two sides of the same coin” (Bickerton & Invernizzi, 2017, p. 16).

Techno-populist manifestations are often considered to be confined to new, less partisan formations or separate from the respective left-wing parties. However, additional ground can be explored regarding the co-existence of these two logics upon different party families and their wider effects on party systems. In this regard, recent work on populism has introduced a helpful distinction between ‘extra-party’ and ‘intra-party’ populism (Bale & Watts, 2018). The former occurs when novel populist parties compete with established parties, while the latter denotes the strengthening of populist forces within established parties and the reordering of these parties from the inside. Working with and through this distinction, this article applies the ‘internal–external’ motif to two populist cases on the left: Corbynism in the United Kingdom (UK) and Podemos in Spain. Both can be typified as ‘left-populist’ movements that arose in response to a similar set of processes: a short-term austerity consensus taken up by established social democratic parties during the 2008 crisis and a deeper process of party system cartelization. The Corbynite movement and Podemos also adopted, both by choice and necessity, a political model anchored on expertise and technical competence, thus representing a particular ‘techno-populist’ subtype of left-populism.

Corbynism and Podemos took place in different institutional contexts, which inflicted the distinct mode in which ‘left techno-populism’ arose in both countries: *inside* and *outside* the existing parties. Table 1 summarises the commonalities and institutional differences that created the conditions for the rise of Podemos and Corbynism in Spain and the UK. Such institutional differences spanned: (i) electoral systems—first-past-the-post

vs. proportional representation; (ii) type of European Union membership—euro-out vs. euro-in; and (iii) competitive dynamics within the left—monopolistic in the UK vs. more fragmented in Spain. In the UK, in turn, the opening of the Labour Party’s list to external voters with semi-open primaries proved a crucial catalyst for the rise of Corbynism.

Scholars have put forward a flurry of explanations for the rise of populist contenders (Bickerton & Invernizzi, 2017; Eichengreen, 2018; Goodwin & Eatwell, 2018; Hopkin & Blyth, 2019; Manow, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rodrik, 2018). Although not necessarily compatible with each other, these explanations have contributed to a better understanding of the complex interplay of social, political and economic changes behind the re-emergence of populism in established democracies. While we do not engage with all of these explanations, we argue that the cartelization of parties and party systems operates as a relevant meso-level factor, especially for sociological and institutional accounts. In deploying a historical-institutionalist approach, the article offers a historical overview of recent left-populist experiments whilst mapping the changing institutional environment in which party politics takes place.

The first section of the present article investigates the concept of ‘cartelization’ as theorised by an earlier generation of party politics scholars. The article specifically offers a theory of how different institutional conditions facilitate both intra- and extra-party changes after the passing of the cartel party. It then provides a short primer on ‘techno-populism’ as a compound of two separate but complementary political logics. The article then argues for an extension of this hybrid techno-populist logic to specific left-populist cases. The second half of the paper tests the concepts of ‘cartelization’ and ‘techno-populism’ for the cases of Corbynism and Podemos, arising in both intra- and extra-party contexts. The results are instructive: The presence of techno-populist tropes in and outside of parties, including a newly oppositional left, indicates the *pervasiveness* rather than marginality of these logics, and signals a deeper change in Europe’s party democracy (Bickerton & Invernizzi, in press).

2. Cartelization, ‘Intra-Party’ and ‘Extra-Party’ Change

‘Cartelization’ has flourished as a subfield of political science during the last three decades. Chiefly driven by

Table 1. ‘Intra-party’ and ‘extra-party’ techno-populism: Commonality and institutional differences.

	UK	Spain
Commonality	Party cartelization Fiscal response to the 2008 crisis	
Institutional Differences	‘Intra-party’	‘Extra-party’
Electoral System	Majoritarian ‘first-past-the-post’	Proportional representation
EU Membership	Euro-out	Euro-in
Left Competition Dynamics	Hegemonic	Fragmented

political scientists Peter Mair and Richard Katz, the ‘cartel party thesis’ aimed to make sense of wide-ranging developments taking place within political parties and the party systems of advanced capitalist states (Blyth & Katz, 2005; Hopkin & Blyth, 2019; Katz & Mair, 1995, 2009, 2018; Kitschelt, 2000; Koole, 1996). The cartel thesis was able to spotlight many changes of its contemporary political landscape, emphasising the increasing retreat of parties into the state, declining party membership, the increasing programmatic convergence between parties and the growing influence of technocrats on policy-making.

Cartel theorists thus drew attention to changes occurring between and within political parties. More precisely, at the systemic level, the thesis tracked a pattern of inter-party competition characterised by collusion between relevant parties; a collusion that was largely driven by shifts in the institutional environment where these political parties operate. Meanwhile, at the level of party organisation, the thesis posited the emergence of a new type of party distinct from the catch-all party. This cartel form of party was likely to emerge in democracies characterised by “the interpenetration of party and state and by a tendency towards inter-party collusion” (Katz & Mair, 2009, p. 755). Though analytically distinct, both notions—the party cartel at the systemic level and the cartel party at the organisational level—remained closely intertwined (Katz & Mair, 2009, p. 757).

The transition from ‘catch-all’ politics to cartelization was not linear but occurred in many Western European party systems. Cartelization was already visible in Switzerland, Austria and the Netherlands as early as the 1960s, emerging in Italy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and by the late 1990s had become the norm in most established democracies (Bickerton & Invernizzi, *in press*; Katz & Mair, 2018, pp. 133–134). Importantly, the re-emergence of ‘anti-party’ parties in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis has been posited as a direct reaction to cartelization; as an antithesis to post-catch-all, cartel politics (Hopkin & Blyth, 2019; Katz & Mair, 2018, p. 151; Roberts, 2017, p. 292). This dialectical logic of party development has been modelled as an “endless series of thesis-antithesis-synthesis” whereby each new party form stimulates an adaptation by its opposition (Katz & Mair, 2018, p. 151). Thus, our central argument concerning the role of cartelization upon the rise of left-wing populism has a clear affinity with those put forward by Katz and Mair (2018) and Hopkin and Blyth (2019).

Post-cartel politics have taken shape under various institutional conditions. In this article, we highlight three: diverse electoral systems, different types of EU membership, and contrasting competitive dynamics between parties on the left. First, electoral systems establish certain structural conditions for the success of political entrepreneurship. For instance, electoral barriers for new parties tend to be higher in majoritarian systems than in proportional representation (PR) systems. A relevant factor is the so-called ‘break-even point,’ i.e., the

percentage of votes beyond which a party obtains a relative advantage in terms of seats per votes (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989). Typically, this threshold is higher in the British first-past-the-post than in PR systems such as the Spanish, making it more difficult for third parties in the UK to translate votes into seats.

We can therefore speculate that, in an environment of high electoral barriers, the chances of success of a populist alternative increase if it takes place within an electorally dominant party rather than as an ‘extra-party’ alternative. Under more benign electoral conditions, however, the cost of presenting an extra-party alternative to the party cartel decreases. A case in point is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) which in the 2015 general election won 12.6% of the vote and only secured one MP. By contrast, in the 2015 Spanish general election, Podemos won 12.6% of the vote and secured 42 MPs. Whilst these parties received identical vote share, they differ significantly in terms of seats and political influence. In our comparison of Corbynism and Podemos, this factor is relevant because it will shed light on the different extra- and intra-party manifestations of political entrepreneurship from the left.

The second relevant institutional condition we raise concerns whether a country is a member of a common currency area. Membership of these areas determines how governing parties can respond to an economic crisis, especially how monetary and fiscal responses can be coordinated. In the European Union, governments in the euro area (‘euro-in’) face greater policy constraints to coordinate these responses than non-euro area governments (‘euro-out’). During the 2010–2012 sovereign debt crisis, for instance, a number of ‘euro-in’ governments had to implement a fiscal adjustment mainly focused on expenditure cuts as a condition for EU external and monetary support. To the extent that the party cartels accepted the fiscal orthodoxy attached to this support, contesting this orthodoxy from inside these parties was more difficult than challenging it from the outside. The cases of the Italian Five Star Movement, the Greek Syriza and the Spanish Podemos illustrate such a predicament well (Bickerton & Invernizzi, 2018).

Conversely, challenging the policy orthodoxy from within the party cartel is likely to be less costly when a party’s defence of austerity is not associated with its political stance on EU membership, nor with the country’s structural position as a member of the euro. Within the Labour Party, for instance, anti-austerity views could be dissociated from the party’s views on EU membership (cf. Bremer & McDaniel, 2020), unlike in Spain, Greece, Italy or Portugal, where a radical critique of austerity from within the party cartel would almost necessarily entail questioning support for euro membership. More generally, therefore, we can posit that euro membership makes it less likely that an anti-austerity populist insurgency would emerge from within the cartel party. Instead, such populist insurgency is more likely to be ‘extra-party.’

The third and final relevant institutional condition we will raise regards contrasting competitive dynamics between parties. The patterns of party competition in a given ideological camp is likely to influence how party changes may occur within this camp. Specifically, radical left politics may find different institutional avenues depending on whether the competition between left-wing parties is monopolised by a hegemonic party or fragmented between moderate and radical left parties and factions.

The Spanish case provides a helpful example. For decades, the centre-left Socialist Party (PSOE) has been the leading party of the Spanish left, but various political forces have always coexisted to the left of the PSOE. In 1986, following a series of bad electoral results and organisational crisis, the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) formed Izquierda Unida (IU, United Left), an electoral coalition made up of seven smaller parties. By 2014, when Podemos was founded, IU remained electorally unsuccessful and relatively traditional in ideological terms (Ramiro & Gomez, 2017, p. 111). The successive electoral failures of the radical left, together with the internal factionalism and ideological purism of the IU (cf. Ramiro & Verge, 2013) are two relevant factors to understand why the founders of Podemos decided to create a new populist ('extra-party') alternative, instead of seeking the internal route through the pre-existing Communist left.

Contrastingly, party competition on the left has followed a different pattern in the UK. With only minor exceptions (e.g., the creation of the Social Democratic Party in 1981), the British left has been the exclusive dominion of the Labour Party, strengthened by its ties to established unions and the persistence of the first-past-the-post system. This hegemonic position reduced the space of manoeuvre for left-populist challengers in the 2010s. However, following the adoption of a partial primary system in 2014 under the leadership of Ed Miliband, an intra-party space was opened up for a left-populist takeover in the Labour Party.

From these comparative historical experiences, we posit that a radical alternative to the party cartel is more likely to adopt an extra-party character under conditions of fragmented party competition. Although not sufficient in itself, this factor is necessary to explain the different intra-party and extra-party characters of Corbynism and Podemos. While there are additional contextual and individual-level factors that would provide an even more detailed explanation, we argue that the three conditions outlined here (the dynamics of party competition, type of EU membership and electoral barriers) offer a minimal institutionalist account for the 'internal-external' modes of populism in our two cases.

3. Varieties of Populism

Any study of populism must be situated—as Kenneth M. Roberts suggests—in the larger domain of political

representation. In this sense, populism is necessarily intertwined with the study of party politics (Roberts, 2017, p. 287). Mainstream definitions of populism have focused on its ideological and discursive tendencies. Following an interpretation of populism as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde, 2004), most recent scholars see populism as an ideology which divides the population into two opposing and homogeneous camps: 'people' and 'elite.' As a political discourse, populism is predicated on a fundamentally moral conflict between the corrupt elite and the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Thus, the 'moralisation' of politics stands out as the defining feature of populist discourse, along with the idea that political sovereignty belongs and should be exercised only by the 'people' (Pappas, 2016).

Although not necessarily compatible with other definitions, Mudde's hegemonic interpretation overlaps with discursive and strategic currents, which see populism as a 'people-centric' strategy or a discourse seeking to gain power from an existing power bloc (Laclau, 2005; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2013; Weyland, 2017). Ideational definitions have been faulted, nonetheless, for their overtly normative overtones (Moffitt, 2020). These and other conceptual concerns have led some scholars to prefer the term 'anti-establishment' or 'anti-system' parties (Fernández-Albertos, 2018; Hopkin, 2020; Sartori, 2005; cf. Zulianello, 2019). Yet such formulations lack references to the kind of *representation* inherent to populism, which includes references to the 'people' above all and relies on a different type of political mediation than that exercised by classical parties.

A more descriptive approach has recently become available in the party politics literature. This approach investigates the ongoing transformations of European party systems and distances itself from normative judgments on the dangers of populism and its purportedly 'democratic' or 'anti-democratic' nature. Instead, this approach focuses on how the mechanisms of representation associated with populism interact with changing party systems. This method ties together parties from the Five Star Movement to Podemos to the British Conservative Party as partaking in the same shift from party-based representation to a different kind of representative regime, thereby contrasting two distinct modes of democracy. Here, populism can be conceived as a political *logic* specific to late modern party democracies which sees the replacement of party mediation with more direct forms of political representation (Bickerton & Invernizzi, in press).

3.1. On 'Techno-Populism'

Populist parties rarely appear in pure versions and often combine their claims with different left and right ideologies. Recently, Zulianello (2020) has qualified and expanded previous typologies of populist parties in contemporary Europe (March, 2011; Mudde, 2004). Beyond the general categories of left- and right-wing populism,

Zulianello identifies a separate category of ‘valence populism.’ This type of populism would define parties that predominantly compete on non-positional issues such as competence and performance. Valence populism would thus be neither right or left, nor exclusionary or inclusionary. In such a categorisation, all other ideological elements are diluted or non-existent, forming a new category rather than a subtype of right-wing or left-wing populism. Unlike this categorisation, however, we are interested in identifying a populism that is ideologically anchored on the left but also displays technocratic traits, a subtype that does not clearly fit under Zulianello’s typology.

While technocracy is commonly singled out as the polar opposite of populism, a closer examination of both logics reveals some abiding similarities. Both technocracy and populism share a difficult relationship to ‘indirect’ or ‘mediated’ representation (Caramani, 2017). In opposing mediation, they also share a conflicting relationship to intermediary bodies which organise social life and individuals’ relationships to states, such as parties, unions and traditional media. This compatibility in part warrants the term ‘techno-populism.’ In this constellation, technocratic and populist themes are unified to combine a double attack on mediation.

From this perspective, technocratic elitism is not necessarily inimical to populism (Pappas, 2016). There are historical instances that bear out this compatibility. Populist and technocratic forms of politics have been combined in Latin American politics. Notably, the former Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, who won three presidential elections as a left-of-centre politician with a populist platform that had a curiously elitist and technocratic bent (de la Torre, 2013, p. 33). In North America, the Canadian Social Credit movement became one of the most successful (populist) movements and argued for a largely technocratic regime (Mudde, 2004, p. 547). In Europe, several examples of this mixture became visible throughout the 2000s. Figures such as Pim Fortuyn hoped to replace the Dutch government with an ‘administration of experts’ while installing monthly referenda (Pels, 2005). Thierry Baudet has similarly railed against the Dutch ‘party cartel,’ seeking to replace the current government with a ‘business cabinet.’ Fortuyn and Baudet were preceded by Belgian politicians such as Guy Verhofstadt, who proposed the introduction of an American-style Supreme Court in Belgium in the early 1990s coupled with periodic referenda (Elchardus, 2002). As mentioned, this mixture is less paradoxical than it might seem. It is in the void left behind by the decline of party democracy in which *both* ‘technocracy’ and ‘populism’ thrive (Mair, 2011), occasionally coagulating into the ‘techno-populist’ hybrid.

Our study focuses on two historically and geographically specific manifestations of left-wing techno-populism, emerging in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis in Spain and the UK. An application of the term ‘techno-populism’ to Podemos and Corbynism might

seem counterintuitive at first. We stress that there is no need to call these parties ‘techno-populist’ monoliths since they display other residual ideological elements, ranging from socialist to syndicalist traditions. In the post-cartel era, however, ‘technocratic’ and ‘populist’ elements have found their ways into these new formations—both out of choice and of necessity. Rather than as a full-blown ‘techno-populist’ party, these variants are best understood as instantiating *subtypes* of their broader left-populist tendency.

The technocratic traits of Corbynism and Podemos are visible in the adoption of a language of expertise and technical competence and their enthusiasm for what Paulo Gerbaudo has styled the ‘digital party’ (Gerbaudo, 2018) Furthermore, de la Torre (2013) identifies a figure that is apt to capture the technocratic nature of both political projects: the ‘post-neoliberal expert.’ As their neoliberal counterparts on the right, post-neoliberal experts see themselves as transcending particularistic criteria in order to act in society’s best interest (de la Torre, 2013, p. 39). Both the neoliberal and post-neoliberal experts respond to a similar ideology of method (Centeno, 1993; Pastorella, 2016), though they lean towards different methods (see, e.g., Silva, 1991, pp. 390–394). Post-neoliberal experts are situated within think-tanks and academia and they uniformly reject the neoliberal economic order and its emphasis on unfettered markets. To the extent that post-neoliberal experts claim to possess a specific competence for the conduct of policy affairs, we can think of the partisan use of this expertise as technocratic. As we emphasize in our analysis, these experts have played an influential advisory role in both movements. Finally, the ‘techno-populist’ subtype exemplified by Corbynism and Podemos was necessitated by systemic pressures. The need to pose as ‘competent’ competitors of established political forces, which had advocated for technical competence as an electoral quality and delegated more policy-making powers to independent bodies (e.g., central banks, fiscal councils), compelled the leadership of these parties to compete according to a technocratic logic.

4. ‘Intra-Party’ and ‘Extra-Party’ Techno-Populism

4.1. Intra-Party: Corbynism

Few movements have enjoyed such unlikely success as the Corbynite movement of the British Labour Party of the last five years (Bolton & Pitts, 2018; Seymour, 2016). Put forward for merely tactical reasons by party leaders in 2015, the democratisation of the leadership contest led to an influx of external party members. In 2017, it vied for power in an election with Theresa May and achieved 40% of the vote, the largest voting increase for Labour in the post-war period. Three years later, Corbyn was out of power and a new group of moderates reclaimed the saddle. What had happened and what drove the Corbynite insurgency? Like its counterpart

Podemos, the rise of Corbynism requires understanding on a double timeline, the first one long-term—the increasing intra-party cartelization of the British Labour Party—and one short-term, relating to the fallout of the 2008 credit crisis.

In answering these questions, the sense in which Corbynism qualifies as ‘populist’ will also become clearer. Taken on its basic colloquial level, application of the term ‘populist’ seems perhaps unwarranted. Applied in an organisational and ideological sense, however, the populist character of Corbynism becomes more understandable (Bale & Watts, 2018; Mouffe, 2018). Corbyn invoked the older Blairite slogan ‘the many against the few’ and saw itself as representing a forgotten ‘people’ in British politics distinct from the Tory coalition. The institutional legacy of a British form of cartelization played a paramount role here. Blair steadily cut ties with the remaining union influence and his commitment to scrapping Clause IV exemplified a broader ideological shift, centralising power around him inside the party while decreasing parliamentary supremacy in Britain as a whole. As Peter Mair noted, this led to a peculiar adoption of consociational ideas for a country whose political culture hardly had such precedents (Mair, 2000). Blair introduced regional assemblies for Wales and granted Scottish autonomy. Furthermore, although never a supporter of the euro, Blair remained a participant in European unification efforts through the Lisbon and Nice treaties. Central bank independence was one of Blairism’s most hallowed goals. Driven by Ed Balls, New Labour looked at the Bank of England as a powerful counterforce to inflation thanks to its status as an unelected power (Keegan, 2004). Together with the increasing influx of non-party members into its administration, from experts in ‘quangos’ to spin-doctors, Labour engaged in a specifically British cartelization within a bipartisan, parliamentary system with a strongly technocratic basis in the civil service (Mair, 2000, 2005).

At the same time, populist elements ran through the New Labour project from the beginning. Rather than going through classical party channels, Blair sought direct connection with electorates outside of the party and relied on Public Relations means. He also switched an older language of ‘class’ to that of the ‘people,’ exemplified by his Diana elegy. By 2008, Blair had completed the techno-populist hybrid. Worried by Labour’s lack of support in middle-class sectors, Blair promised decreasing union militancy and expanded homeownership, consolidating the financialisation of the economy ushered in by the Thatcher era. Since working class voters had ‘nowhere else to go,’ Labour retained a broader coalition between propertied middle classes and post-industrial working classes.

The 2008 crisis ripped apart the fractious social contract which had tied this Labour coalition together. Austerity shrunk public sectors across the country, pushing a large part of the domestic working class into destitution. Its impact was also generationally skewed. Younger

citizens now faced an economy with declining investment in long-term jobs and increasing precarity. While fighting the central banking crisis saved a financial sector, it also resulted in ushering further rentiership through the backdoor. As investments were drawn out of the real economy, capital increasingly flowed into asset-holding. This drove up rent prices in many central cities, where many young Britons ended up after their university studies. The confluence of these factors proved incendiary, driving younger voters into a Labour Party still dedicated to austerity but unable to cater for a new urban electorate.

Three main factors explain the internal nature of Corbyn’s populist revolt. As discussed above, unlike the Spanish case, the majoritarian aspect of the British electoral system made external party success more difficult. The case of UKIP winning 12.6% of the vote in 2015 but only securing one MP exemplifies the limits of constructing a viable left-wing alternative to Labour in the Commons. In 2013, filmmaker Ken Loach and a group of Socialist Workers Party-affiliated activists tried to field candidates for exactly such an alternative. These options quickly faced a stark electoral ceiling, however, and found it difficult to make inroads in established Labour constituencies. When Corbyn ascended to the position of leader in 2015, the group duly supported Labour again. Here, internal radicalism had solved the problem of an alternative; there were no competing arguments on the left.

Although a powerful driver, the first-past-the-post system is not sufficient to fully explain Corbynism’s intra-party nature. As Corbyn himself acknowledged in 2015, a strong second factor was the ideological presence of an Old Labour tradition within Labour itself (Seymour, 2016). In the 1970s, Corbyn already allied himself with Bennite currents in Labour and continued to oppose EU membership for the party (Medhurst, 2014; Rentoul, 2013). Throughout the Blair years from 1998 to 2010, Corbyn remained a recalcitrant backbencher and defied party whips several times. His commitment to anti-imperialist positions and vocal opposition to the Iraq War distinguished him from mainstream party opinion in the 2000s. Added to the restrictions of first-past-the-post, this maintenance of an alternative tradition within the Labour party also made intra-party populism a more viable alternative than extra-party intervention.

A final driving factor was a consequence of ‘latent popularisation’—Ed Milliband’s opening of the party list to external voters (Atkins & Gaffney, 2017). Milliband introduced American-style primaries to Labour and made it possible for non-members to vote on party members on the condition that they would pay a small fee. This reform radically lowered the threshold for a populist overhaul.

One way of gauging the co-existence of technocratic and populist registers in Corbynism is purely ideological. In its emphasis on technological innovation and automation, Corbyn enjoyed a momentum centred around technical expertise. Yet there also was a strongly

organisational legacy on this techno-populist front. The Labour-supporting grassroots organisation Momentum, for instance, combined focused electoral campaigning with digital outreach, in which members could consult online and vote on policy platforms. Such emphases on digital democracy were coupled with discourses celebrating full automation and a new jobless economy. Continuities with Blair's techno-populism went beyond the merely rhetorical, however. Sociologically, Corbynism also seemed to draw on the same bases as the Blairite coalition—an urban precariat and middle class—and lived by a 'hyper-urbanism.' By bringing in think-tanks and side-lining unions, Corbynism combined an appeal to a popular subject with emphases on technical expertise and digital democracy. Except for its personalism ('no Corbynism without Corbyn'), Corbynism thus saw itself as the representative of a non-class-based majority which could rely on technocratic assistance to achieve social justice.

One sign of this technocratic bent was an increasing reliance on think-tanks and economic experts within the Corbynite party administration. Exemplified by figures such as James Meadway, Ann Pettifor, Joe Guinan, Mariana Mazzucato, Anastasia Nesvetailova or David Blanchflower, Corbyn's Labour Party saw its own proposals to end austerity as part of 'economic commonsense' and politically rational. Together with Momentum's reliance on online outreach and the construction of a 'digital party,' the specifically technocratic nature of Corbyn's left-populism came to the fore (Gerbaudo, 2018). As with Podemos, however, the origin of these technocratic elements was more external than internal. Previous Labour cabinets (both shadow and in office) had been suspicious that their party would not enjoy trust as a deliverer of policy; consequently, Corbynites sought to counter these suspicions by presenting their own programmes as "sound policy" and "sensible politics" (Bolton & Pitts, 2018). Both on the level of policy and politics, Corbyn combined these 'technocratic' and 'populist' elements while also remaining rooted in an older left-wing tradition.

4.2. Extra-Party: Podemos

4.2.1. The Long Cartelization

From 1982 to 2015, the centre-left Socialist Party (PSOE) and the centre-right Popular Party (PP) dominated Spanish politics. Over time, this dominance created the equivalent of a party cartel. The cartelization of the Spanish party system started in the late-1980s and peaked in the mid-2000s. This process was characterised by the growing dependence of the dominant parties on the state, a pattern of inter-party collusion and 'constrained policy competition.' Over the long run, this cartelization set the conditions for the rise of techno-populism as an 'extra-party' intervention after the Great Recession.

Between 1989 and 2008, the PSOE and PP moved decisively towards the state. As these parties alternated in power, they both recognised a 'shared' interest in minimizing the costs of electoral defeats. One 'risk minimization' strategy was political patronage: appointments of party officials to high-level public positions, access to well-paid destinations in EU institutions for former politicians and privileged employment in privatised companies. Internally, this patronage also served as a leadership tool to defuse intra-party pressures, turning party activism into an attractive vehicle for individual careerism. In the mid-1980s, for example, the PSOE had offered activists the possibility of holding no fewer than 25,000 political positions in the public administration (Gillespie, 1989, pp. 131–132). By 1988, 70% of PSOE's congress delegates were already on government payroll (Ban, 2016, p. 51). As the privilege of appointing party representatives to public institutions at all levels of government was enshrined in law, catch-all party politics was gradually replaced by the politics of a cartel (cf. Katz & Mair, 2009, p. 757). The two parties increasingly tied themselves to the state apparatus, while moving away from their bases and society at large (cf. Mair, 2011).

However, the excessively close relationship of the parties with the state bordered on the corrupt in the semi-public banking sector. Here, cartelization was equated more clearly with 'rent-seeking,' i.e., the extraction of revenues higher than those that would be allowed by competition between non-cartel parties (cf. Katz & Mair, 2018, pp. 138–139). Prior to the crisis of 2008, the involvement of the main parties in the (mis)management of the regional savings banks (*Cajas de ahorros*) reveals a crucial instance of inter-party collusion. Formally, the 45 savings banks were private deposit institutions, but local governments could regulate and control them; over time, many *Cajas* ended up being run by politicians with no previous banking experience (Cuñat & Garicano, 2010). These institutions ended up in the financial epicentre of the brick-and-mortar bubble of the 2000s. When the housing bubble burst in 2008, the symbiosis between the political parties and the *Cajas* had slipped into nepotism. In 2012, the nationalisation of Bankia triggered Spain's request of an EU-backed financial bailout. Amidst ruinous investments and corruption scandals, public cynicism towards the main parties increased.

4.2.2. The Great Recession and the Cartel Breakdown

The fallout of the 2008 crash set the conditions for the breakdown of a hyper-cartelized party system. Between 2008 and 2014, Spain experienced a financial crisis while going through two consecutive recessions. The financial crisis turned into a sovereign debt crisis in 2012 that worsened in the wake of the balance-of-payment crisis. By early 2014, when the first signs of economic recovery arose, the Spanish economy had been in recession since the second half of 2008, one-quarter of the Spanish work-

force had been out of work and youth unemployment had surpassed 50%.

The party cartel did not break up overnight though. The PSOE, in government during the first stage of the crisis, was punished in the 2011 general election, when it lost about 20% of the vote share. It was replaced by the PP, which obtained the second largest majority in the democratic era. In the first year of government, however, the PP had already lost half of its electorate (Orriols & Cordero, 2016, p. 475). From May 2010 onwards, the programmatic differences between the Socialists and the Conservatives faded away. At the height of the euro crisis, Spain almost lost access to international bond markets. To regain market credibility, the two governments implemented drastic fiscal adjustments. In 2011, pressured by the European Central Bank and Northern eurozone governments, the main parties rushed to constitutionalise the prevailing fiscal orthodoxy in the eurozone: Budgetary balance and the absolute priority for debt repayment. This constitutional reform did not prevent the government from having to rescue the financial sector in 2012 with EU support; a financial rescue that was followed by further cuts in public expenditure and tax increases. Thus, the central question of whether it makes a difference who wins the election, as Katz and Mair would put it (2009, p. 757), was unequivocally answered in the Spanish case. Despite the alternation in power, it hardly made a difference in terms of policies.

Over the past two decades, the narrowest gap in the economic left/right axis between the PP and the PSOE, as perceived by country experts (Bakker et al., 2020), has been observed in 1999 and 2014—the two periods coinciding with Spain’s accession to the euro and the euro crisis. At critical junctures, therefore, party competition became less about offering meaningful economic alternatives than about ‘constraining’ the policy space. In the wake of the 2008 crisis, both parties accepted that fiscal austerity has turned into a macroeconomic imperative for a debtor country. The cartel’s firm commitment to euro membership foreclosed the possibility of an intra-party challenge to this consensus. In 2015, this sense of ‘choiceless’ competition will be exploited by Podemos (cf. Errejón & Mouffe, 2016, p. 65).

4.2.3. The Rise of ‘Extra-Party’ Techno-Populism

While the economic crisis was a sufficient condition to destabilise the two-party cartel, actors’ agency is a necessary condition for party system change. If a few university lecturers had not decided to create Podemos in 2014, the two-party system might have been weakened but still survive the crisis. In the 2015 general election, the cartel model of ‘constrained competition’ reached its limits. Support for the two main parties collapsed. For the past two decades, the two parties have obtained more than 80% of the seats; in 2015 they only managed 61% (Orriols & Cordero, 2016, p. 470). The Parliament fragmented: The effective number of electoral parties (ENEP)

rose from 3.3 in 2011 to 5.0 in 2015 (Orriols & Cordero, 2016, p. 479). Podemos became the third largest parliamentary force with 20.7% of the vote. Podemos concentrated a large part of the protest vote against the cartel parties, but its parliamentary rise was also facilitated by institutional electoral factors. Spain’s proportional system is less punitive with third parties than the British majoritarian system. And so, despite having lost votes and seats since 2016, Podemos has still managed to maintain its relevance in Spanish politics.

Podemos is an ideological hybrid, blending populist and technocratic traits while remaining firmly rooted on the left (Bickerton & Invernizzi, in press). As a political project, it displayed an unusual combination of deep theoretical reflection on Laclau’s populism (Laclau, 2005) and direct involvement with left-wing populism in Latin America (Kioupiolis, 2016). In the Spanish context, this ‘reflexive praxis’ was translated on a ‘populist hypothesis’: “the traditional ideological categories of ‘left’ and ‘right’ have become historically exhausted” and a new dimension of political confrontation ought to be created between ‘the people’ or ‘democracy,’ and ‘elites’ or ‘la casta’ (Bickerton & Invernizzi, in press).

Such populist hypothesis interpreted political struggles almost exclusively in discursive terms, accepting that political preferences are not predetermined by positions in the social structure (contra Lipset & Rokkan, 1967): “[The thesis] was that politics is construction of meaning and that therefore discourse is not a ‘garment’ of political positions pre-determined elsewhere (economy, geography, history) but the fundamental battleground for...changing the balances of forces in a society” (Errejón, 2016). Central to the party’s populist discourse was the notion of ‘la casta’ (Kioupiolis, 2016, p. 5), which captures a recognisable aspect of the old party cartel. *La casta* refers to a distant and corrupt elite operating in a (cartelized) system where parties collude for their own gain at the expense of ‘ordinary people.’ “The old political parties,” the leading founder of Podemos observed, “appear to the citizens as little more than machines for getting access to the state administration by electoral means” (Iglesias, 2015, p. 20). The new party constructed a frontier between the ‘people’ and the ‘oligarchy’ by proclaiming a ‘regime crisis’: the “exhaustion of the political and social system that emerged from the post-Franco transition” (Iglesias, 2015, p. 10).

In comparison to its populism, Podemos’ technocratic features are less obvious. Podemos was created almost exclusively by a few university lecturers, most of whom were political scientists. All the founding members—Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero, Carolina Bescansa, Luis Alegre and Íñigo Errejón—shared a similar academic background, the same judgement of the ‘Bolivarian’ experiences in Latin America and, in several cases, the common experience of working as advisors for various Latin American governments through the think-tank Fundación Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales (CEPS). Podemos does not fit the model of a porous organiza-

tion, nor one created by plural and diverse personalities, but one led by a small group of experts with almost identical backgrounds who claim to have a special knowledge of politics and whose offering is predicated on a binary, absolute and moralistic understanding of politics: the many and the few, the decent and the corrupt, right and wrong policies. This sociology of the party's leadership gave rise to a particular form of *left-wing elitism*, which fits with the kind of post-neoliberal expertise that Carlos de la Torre associated with Rafael Correa's techno-populism in Ecuador (cf. de la Torre, 2013).

Other observers have highlighted a different technopolitical aspect of Podemos; namely, its adoption of digital media in a hybrid party structure that shows characteristics of digital networks and social movements (Kioupkiolis & Perez, 2019, p. 28; cf. della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017). Like Corbynism, Podemos' use of social media and new digital technologies has challenged the traditional role of media in the construction of political discourse. While this interpretation of techno-politics equates the 'techno-' with the use of new technologies in political communication, it relates to our broader understanding of techno-populism in one crucial respect. The preference for digital technologies to communicate directly with the people, while bypassing and criticising the intermediary role of the media, dispense with the functions of *political mediation* in a democracy, advocating instead for more direct and less pluralistic practices of political representation.

Podemos' technocratic traits arose also from external or systemic pressure. Against the backdrop of collusion and institutional capture by the two major parties, Podemos accepted the need to appeal to expertise as a precondition for governing in post-crisis Spain. By 2014, the idea that experts should take more decisions in public office had become a popular proposition among Spaniards, as consistently shown by public opinion surveys (cf. Fernández-Albertos, 2018, pp. 91–93). In government, Podemos has insisted on this idea to justify, for example, the appointment of the renowned sociologist Manuel Castells as the Minister of Universities.

Furthermore, the party has accepted to govern under the supervision of all independent and specialist bodies created after the 2008 financial crisis. Not because Podemos has turned sympathetic towards unelected power, but because the party has accommodated its political offer to the prevailing technocratic logic; a logic that increasingly forces political parties to appeal to expertise and to govern along with the actors who reportedly possess it. It is in this precise sense that we claim that the transition from cartel to techno-populist parties is taking place both out of choice and of necessity.

4.2.4. The Aftermath: Adaptation, Crisis and Government

New parties cannot define all the relevant dimensions of political competition by themselves, even when they

claim otherwise. In post-crisis Spain, the left/right divide has proven very resilient (Vidal, 2018). As voters, the media and other parties consistently placed Podemos on the far left, the party ended up competing more explicitly from the left. In the May 2016 general election, Podemos ran in coalition with IU and other left-wing forces. This coalition became the third largest force in the Parliament, only 14 seats behind the PSOE. At that time, the leaders of Podemos were still waiting for the 'Pasokization' of the PSOE in the hope of overtaking it as the main opposition party.

However, this strategy was not fully endorsed inside the party. The internal division in Podemos was most bitterly expressed in the disagreement between two of the leading founders, Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón. According to Errejón (2020), "it was clear that there are not five million communists in Spain." The party should aim to consolidate a more ideologically diverse coalition. To this end, the populist strategy seemed more effective. But at the second Party Congress in February 2017 (Vistalegre II), the more leftist theses defended by Iglesias prevailed over the 'populist-transversal' vision championed by Errejón. In 2019, Errejón abandoned Podemos to create a new political platform (Mas Madrid/Mas País).

After the fourth general election in as many years, Podemos entered a coalition government with the PSOE in December 2019. Only two months later, the Covid-19 crisis hit the world. In 2015, Podemos had entered the Spanish parliament reclaiming the power of the people, for the people and against 'la casta.' It has ended up co-managing a global pandemic at the behest of experts and, reportedly, on the basis of scientific knowledge. Thus, if there is one recent European experience where extra-party techno-populism is being put to the test, it is undoubtedly the Spanish one. While it is too early to assess the political legacy of the Covid-19 crisis, there is now less doubt about the analytical utility of understanding Podemos from the perspective of techno-populism.

5. Conclusion

This article has emphasized the complementarity of populism and technocracy through a comparative study of two recent techno-populist experiences: Podemos and Corbynism. Firmly anchored on a left populist platform, neither Podemos nor Corbynism moved into the openly 'techno-populist' territory of parties such as the Five Star Movement. But the integration of distinctly technocratic elements is evidenced by their reliance on 'post-neoliberal experts' and the preference for unmediated forms of communication through the use of digital technologies. Their technocratic traits are also the result of systemic pressures, arising from electoral contexts shaped by claims to competence and policy environments dominated by the influence of independent, non-partisan and expert institutions. These factors are not exclusive to Podemos and Corbynism but com-

mon to most political parties in the post-2008 era. The Covid-19 crisis only seems to have exacerbated the pervasiveness of this technocratic logic in contemporary European politics.

In our two cases, the long-term party cartelization and the fiscal response to the global financial crisis cut across other institutional differences in Spain and the UK. But these institutional differences set the conditions for the distinct ‘intra-’ and ‘extra-party’ manifestations of techno-populism. Three factors need highlighting in our comparison. The first is the persistent *creativity* of populist logics across party and electoral systems; whether in two-party or multi-party systems, majoritarian or proportional representation systems, populism will adapt to given ecosystems by opting for intra-party or extra-party strategies. What might drive the occurrence of such intra- or extra-party manifestation has been the main question driving this paper. The second factor, however, is the sheer *contingency* of the populist success story. For instance, if in the 2017 general election Corbyn had won the same votes under a Spanish-like electoral system, the balance sheet on left-populist success would have looked different. Therefore, the main conclusion pertains to the *institutional contingency* of populism’s success, which often relies on a slim set of institutional factors. Finally, there is no need to homogenise different populist experiences. Cartelization did express itself as a cross-national phenomenon but never took on a perfectly homogeneous form. Researchers will have to insist on national and historical particularities in each case. The same holds for its ongoing techno-populist reaction, which is adapting itself to different party landscapes and institutional parameters.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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