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The Impact of Populist Parties on Political Stability in Europe. Constitutional Perspectives in Three Parliamentary Systems

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Introduction

The 2008 crisis, the EU's subsequent austerity policies and the inability of traditional parties in many Western European countries to defend welfare, have created an institutional short circle that has undermined the institutions of representative and participatory democracy: parliaments and traditional parties.

These events have raised strong indignation in the public opinion and have seen the birth of new political formations oriented to challenge a political and economic system perceived as strongly unjust.

Thus, on this framework there's been a revival of populism, challenging the establishment under the traditional rhetoric of "the true people versus the corrupt elite". This basical populist rhetoric has been declined, in many European countries, by players of many political shades, in accordance with the conclusions of several political scientists that populism is a "thin–centred ideology", "moralistic rather than programmatic", which can be combined with other classical –and different– "full ideologies" (ex multis Muddle 2004, p. 544).

The specific aim of this paper is to analyse the effects of the electoral results of populist parties on the process of government formation in three European parliamentary systems: Germany, Italy and Spain.

The parliamentary form of government is the most widespread in European constitutions. Moreover, compared to presidential and hybrid forms, it is more flexible: since it is based not on the separation but on the integration of legislative and executive powers, it is structurally predisposed to modification and twisting as a result of certain events or changes in the political phase. The process of forming a government, in particular, represents the genesis of the confidence relationship between parliament and government, which explains the integrated and coordinated production of the political agenda shared by the two powers.

It is also known that the actual shape of the form of government, especially in parliamentary systems, depends not only on the constitutional provisions governing it, but also on other factors –not always legal– and, in particular, the electoral system and the structure of the party system.

The choice of analysing Germany, Italy and Spain depends on two considerations: a) these are three parliamentary systems in some respects paradigmatic, since they have their own peculiarities in terms of comparative analysis; b) all the considered Countries seen the emergence of populist parties/movements, which had effects on the party system and, following, on the constitutional system as a whole.

Under (a), the German parliamentary system is based on the Chancellor *(Kanzlerdemocratie)* whose stability and strength lies in the fact that he is elected by the Bundestag and has the power to appoint and dismiss ministers. The same applies to the President of the Government in Spain. The two constitutions also share the confidence of the lower house only and constructive no–confidence vote *(konstruktives Misstrauensvotum; moción de censura constructiva)*, which greatly strengthen the executive and ensure the premier's role as a 'primus supra pares'. In Italy, on the other hand, both houses have a vote of confidence, there is no constructive no–confidence vote and the Prime Minister is appointed by the President of the Republic, who at some moments has a real power of choice (e.g. technical governments). Moreover, the Prime Minister does not appoint ministers but proposes their appointment to the President and cannot dismiss them: a 'primus inter pares'.

Yet, it is necessary to consider the evolution of the parties in the three countries in order to see clear differences between Germany and Spain, which are very similar –as we have seen– with regard to the constitutional structure of the executive power. Spain, since the end of Francoism and the democratic transition, has experienced a long period of alternation between the Socialist Party and the Popular Party, made possible by the simplified, essentially two–party system. Germany, on the other hand, though has had long periods of alternation, is notable for the long–lasting experience of the Große Koalition in which the major parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) have often held government together on a stable basis. Finally, Italy, which has always been characterised by a multi–party system, has experienced two phases: the first with the central role of the Christian Democrats, who have almost always led coalition governments, and the permanent exclusion of the Communist Party from the government

(1953–1994); the second, marked by the alternation between centre–right and centre–left (1994–2011). Yet, the bipolar shift in the second phase did not really simplify the party structure, governments remained coalition governments and coalitions remained weak and internally heterogeneous.

With this context in mind, it is interesting to investigate point b): the consequences on the process of government formation of three populist parties in the three considered systems. This is the main topic of the analysis carried out in the following paragraphs:); in Italy, after the 2018 Italian general elections, the Five Star Movement (M5S) became the pivot of two very different governments coalitions: the first with Salvini's League; the second with the centre–left Democratic Party (PD) (par. 2); in Germany, the need to marginalize the "Alternative for Germany" far–right party resulted in a reaffirmation of the Große Koalition between CDU–CSU and SPD (par. 3); in Spain, a coalition government between the traditional socialist party (PSOE) and a left–wing populist one (Podemos) was formed after a long period of political crisis marked by two unsuccessful rounds of general elections (par. 4).

Through this country–by–country analysis we will argue in the conclusions that the different outcomes of the rise of populist parties in the considered countries are connected with a) the populist parties' political leanings and b) the country's constitutional, party, and electoral system (par. 5).

Neither right nor left: the M5S in the Italian government

The M5S won its first parliamentary seats in 2013 thanks to a large number of votes (24 percent) as a consequence of two different –but partially overlapping– processes: the 2011 referendums on public water, atomic energy and justice, and the widespread popular discontent caused by the 2008 crisis and the austerity policies of the cabinet led by Mario Monti –a technical government supported by a large majority.

Under a methodological point of view, the M5S was born as a classic populist party very critical of the traditional political and economic establishment, accused of corruption and of being disconnected from the people's problem. Another typical populist feature observed in the Movement is the rhetoric on the need to put the people back at the centre of decision–making process. With this aim, the M5S stressed on direct democracy web instruments: the possibilities offered by the web to provide for direct, broad and continuous participation in decision–making process are useful to the populist rhetoric of restoring power to the people, albeit in innovative ways, available thanks to the technological development. This feature is common to many local, national and European populist parties/movements, but in M5S –it has been argued– the online consultations carried out on the Rousseau platform have a great influence on the final decision of the party leaders (see the report 'Prospects for e–democracy in Europe' by Directorate–General for Parliamentary Research Services of the European Parliament–Technology Assessment Group, February 2018).

With regard to M5S's programmatic platform and consensus building, it is difficult to define a clear political affiliation: its constituency is very broad in terms of geography, age and class. For this reason it has been written that M5S is very close to a catch–all–party (Emanuele & Maggini 2015). On the other hand, by observing its classical political agenda, it has been written that M5S is rather an electoral aggregation of many single–issue–parties (Biorcio & Natale 2018). However, it is quite hard to say whether the Movement is more right–wing or left–wing. This consideration is perhaps less true after the experience of government with the League (2018–19) and the 2019 European elections, which saw a shift in consensus from the M5S towards the League and laid the ground for a progressive alliance between the Movement and the centre–left.

Finally, it should be noted that over time the M5S has become 'institutionalised': its entry into parliament in the 2013 elections and its entry into government in the 2018 elections brought the party to a necessary compromise. About the method, online direct democracy –first assumed to replace representative democracy– has been downsized, becoming the internal method of taking some decisions. About the contents, the broad nature of the constituency and the political agenda of the M5S allowed it to make alliances with very different parties: first the far right League, then the Democratic Party –the heir to the great communist and christian–social traditions, but which over time has become a classic social–democratic and social–liberal party.

The Italian Constitution lacks in detail dealing with the procedure for forming the government, as it only provides that: the Prime Minister is appointed by the President of the Republic, who also appoints the ministers on the proposal of the Prime Minister (Article 92, paragraph 2); within the next ten days the Government goes to the Houses to explain its agenda and ask for a vote of confidence (Article 94).

Therefore, the Italian form of government is 'weakly rationalised' (Elia 1970): the Constitution leaves many gaps that are completed by constitutional conventions – unwritten rules born in practice and yet binding since they are accepted and perceived as mandatory by the political and constitutional players (Spadaro, 2018). The most important convention is the so–called consultations, carried out by the President of the Republic: he receives the leaders of the parliamentary parties with the aim of verifying the possibility of forming a parliamentary majority and identifying the person who is able to form the government (Cavaggion 2020).

If we also consider the multi–party structure of the Italian political system, we can assume that the government must be a coalition government (Ferrara 1973). Therefore, during the formation of the cabinet, a fundamental step is the stipulation of the government agreement between the parties making up the parliamentary majority, which concerns the political agenda and the allocation of ministries. It follows that the parties have a considerable power in the formation of the government, to the detriment of the Prime Minister, who only plays the roles of arbiter of the majority parties and guarantor of the government agreement (Martucci 2002).

During the so–called First Republic (1953–1994), in which the electoral law was proportional, coalitions were always formed after the elections and always had the Christian Democrats as unquestioned centre, while the 'conventio ad excludendum' always left the Communists out of the government. In the 1990s, the collapse of the traditional parties and the passing of a majoritarian electoral system pushed the Italian form of government towards the system of alternative democracy. But this was only a partial twist. In fact, the first–past–the–post system worked on the coalition, not on the single party; the party system became two–poles, not two–party; it was only apparently simplified and, indeed, the number of parties increased (Sani & Segatti 2002). Moreover, governments remained coalition governments, coalitions heterogeneous within themselves and cabinets of short duration (Bartolini et al. 2002). Nor would the situation have changed with the electoral law passed in 2005, which was based on a proportional formula corrected with a majority bonus for the most voted coalition.

The rise of the M5S on the political arena has swept away the mythology of majority rule and alternative two–poles system condensed into the mantra 'winner–take–all'. Indeed, in the 2013 general elections, the success of the M5S prevented both traditional coalitions from gaining the majority of parliamentary seats. The claimed isolation of the M5S from both camps and its refusal to support a centre–left government led by Pierluigi Bersani forced the traditional parties to support together a 'broad alliances cabinet' led by Enrico Letta. After Letta resigned, two other cabinets followed during the legislature, led by the PD with the significant support of several centre groups and former centre–right leaders.

Then, in the 2018 general elections, the M5S became the relative majority party, therefore essential for the formation of all the cabinets of the legislature: two cabinets led by Giuseppe Conte and one, currently in office, led by Mario Draghi.

It is to be noted the diversity in the political formula of the three cabinets. The first cabinet – the so–called yellow–green government – was supported by an alliance between the M5S and the far–right Lega. This cabinet passed anti–migrant measures (the so–called security decrees) but also some very popular measures such as the basic income and a pension reform that led to a considerable turnover in the civil service, and adopted an overall eurosceptic attitude towards European institutions. After the resignation of the cabinet (August 2019), the M5S allied itself with the centre–left, composed of the traditional PD, a new liberal centre party (Italia Viva) and a coagulation of left–wing forces (Liberi e Uguali): the so–called yellow–red government reformed the security decrees and changed its attitude towards the EU, leading the Movement to vote for the von der Leyen Commission in the European Parliament. Finally, after Conte's resignation, the M5S gave the green light to a technical government led by Mario Draghi supported by almost the entire parliamentary arc. President Mattarella's decision to appoint a technician as Prime Minister –in addition to the emergency's reasons linked to the evolution of the CoVid–19 pandemic– shows the difficulty of defining a parliamentary majority based on a homogeneous political–programmatic platform. This difficulty is due to the fragmentation

of the party system; in particular to the internal disagreements between the two traditional poles of the centre–left and centre–right and to the presence of a 'third pole' –the M5S– with many parliamentary seats but many souls within it.

In short, we can say that in 2013 the 'populist method' linked to the M5S's mistrust of the traditional party system made it a sort of 'third pole', putting an end to the logic of the alternation between centre–right and centre–left; on the other hand, by paradox, in 2018 the transversality of the M5S's agenda and constituency has allowed it to form and support governments with very different political formulas, both conservative and progressive.

With reference to the process of government formation, this situation led to a return to the past: the multi–polar party structure means that the government is no longer formed 'in the ballots' but during consultations and then in Parliament; that the Prime Minister cannot be the leader of the relative majority pole (Dell'Atti 2020); that the composition of the cabinet and it's political agenda are established after the elections by the parties that manage to reach a deal (Volpi 2018).

The rise of AfD, a new multipolarism and the revival of the Große Koalition

The German Basic Law *(Gründgesetz)* adopts a parliamentary form of government with chancellorship, a peculiarity of the Bonn constitutional system and then introduced in several other countries, first of all the Kingdom of Spain, in 1978.

What stands out in this form of government is the figure of the Chancellor, head of the federal government, holding the power to appoint and dismiss ministers. The Chancellor must be elected directly by the lower house *(Bundestag),* on the proposal of the *Bundespräsident*. In the first ballot, the Constitution requires an absolute majority of the Bundestag, while, if the candidate is not elected, the House will have 14 days to elect –by an absolute or relative majority– the same or another candidate. Should the person elected to the Chancellery receive only a relative majority of the votes cast, it will be up to the Federal President to choose between the formal appointment of the person elected or the dissolution of the Bundestag and the subsequent calling of new elections (Bermbach 1970).

Historically, the danger of the dissolution of the lower house has always led the political forces in parliament to an election with an absolute majority. This tendency of government stability is due to two elements: a) the power to declare unconstitutionality and consequently dissolve the so-called 'anti-system parties' attributed to the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*. This power was exercised for the dissolution, first in 1952, of the Sozialistiche Reichspartei (neo-Nazi formation) and later, in 1956, of the Komunistische Partei Deutschlands. The result was a very simplified party system, even further in a bipolar sense; b) the ability of the two major parties of the parliamentary right and left (SPD and CDU-CSU) to reach, in phases characterized by a particular political-

parliamentary fragmentation and difficulty in forming single-party governments, the negotiation of grand coalition formulas. This happened in the period between 1966 and 1969 and, again, 2005-2009, 2013-2017 and, as will be seen below, it happens today with the fourth government of the Große Koalition formed in 2018 (Lehmbruch 2003).

In this state of things, have intervened the populist AfD party, putting the entire party system in crisis with its rise, eroding the consensus of the parties of moderate right parties, without being able at the same time to present itself as a government partner for them, due to the distance in positions and the distrust of the former towards the latter.

The political parabola of Alternative fur Detuschland (AfD), from 4.7 percent in the 2013 federal elections –which had prevented it from passing the *Sperrklausel* and entering the Bundestag– to 12.6 percent of the vote in 2017, is, after all, a large part of the story of German politics (Arzheimer 2015) over the past decade: the party of the German ultra-right that has been described by many as populist, euroskeptic, and nationalist (Schmitt-Beck 2017) has in fact become the stone guest of German politics, and the events following the Bundestag elections of September 24, 2017 are the most fitting example of this.

The CDU-CSU-SPD coalition government that only came into being in March 2018, following the September 2017 federal elections, represents the government that has taken the longest to form in recent German history (Siefken 2018).

There are several reasons for the slow and complex path to the fourth grand coalition government in united Germany: first of all, the great electoral success of AfD, which obtained 94 seats, partly impacting the electoral result of CDU and CSU, which lost 50 seats, together with the return to parliament of the liberal formation Freie Demokraten (FDP) after the debacle of 2013, the year in which it had lost all representation in the Bundestag due to the failure to pass the *Sperrklausel*. Still, the SPD obtained one of its worst electoral results since 2009, losing 40 seats and gaining only 153.

Faced with the position of resistance to a new Große Koalition taken on the day after the elections by SPD leader Martin Shultz, and given the numerous declarations of refusal of any agreement with AfD by SPD, CDU-CSU and other parties, Chancellor Merkel began negotiations for the formation of a ‘Jamaica Coalition’, i.e. an agreement between CDU-CSU, Freie Demokraten and Grüne, hence the colors black, yellow and green, indicative of their respective parties, this being the only alternative to keep the populist party of the ultra-right populist party on the sidelines. However, this attempt at negotiation failed a few weeks after its inception, due to the great distance between the three parties on issues such as climate change and immigration.

The only viable option to keep AfD on the sidelines and form a government with an absolute majority remained a grand coalition between CDU-CSU and SPD. In this sense, the intervention of the Bundesprëzident, Frank Walter Steinmeier, historical member of

the SPD and vice-chancellor of the Merkel government until his election, will be decisive. He plays a key role in shifting the SPD's position towards the grand coalition.

Thus, after months of negotiations, in March 2018 the members of the Socialist Party approve, with 66 percent of the votes, the government agreement negotiated between CDU-CSU and SPD, allowing, on March 14, the election of Angel Merkel as Chancellor by an absolute majority of the Bundestag.

Some considerations must be made in analyzing the peculiar path of negotiation of the government agreement. First of all, the role of the president of the republic should be highlighted: in holding an important soft power such as the power to choose discretionary whether to dissolve the Bundestag or appoint a chancellor elected by a relative majority in the second vote, he exercises a very significant influence on the positions of the parties; this power is very close to the attributions of the president of the republic in the Italian form of Government, while the Crown in the Spanish system does not exercise discretionary powers, but dissolves the chambers on the sole assumption of the unsuccessful completion of an investiture of a candidate for president of the government within a period of two months.

The solution of a large coalition, in addition to being functional to the marginalization of the populist party AfD also lies in the need to avoid new elections and with it minimize the 'risk' felt by the parties of the constitutional arc of a further rise of populism.

Ultimately, it should be noted that AfD's rise at the national level has challenged the renewed bipolar tendencies of the majority parties: the SPD's decision to undergo 'opposition care' after its decline in popularity is tested to the point of reconsideration; the aspirations of the CDU and CSU to continue to govern alone are waning, to the point that they find themselves having to negotiate with two different parties to form the same coalition they abandoned in 2013.

Therefore, the party system has certainly found an arrangement that allows it to remain in equilibrium, but it is undeniable that this is a temporary equilibrium, which the parties will sooner or later have to abandon in order to return to confronting each other, otherwise they would look the same even on the public opinion front, a circumstance that even more risks favoring the populist ultra-right.

Out of the political deadlock through a new multi-party bipolarism: the Spanish experience of the coalition government

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 adopted a parliamentary form of government very close to the German Chancellorship, since it places the President of the Government at the center of the Government of the Nation. He is elected, according to article 99 of the

Constitution, on the proposal of the King, by the Congress of Deputies. Like Germany, it is the head of the government who proposes and revokes the ministers. Since Spain is a monarchy, the figure of the King in the process of formation of the government has been greatly weakened by the Constitution of 1978: the King does not possess, in the Spanish system, the same incisive powers as the President of the Republic in Germany (Echavarria 2017). The flexible procedure provided for by the GG is replaced here by a more rigid system of terms set by the Constitution itself. Congress must place its confidence in a President of the Government (by an absolute or simple majority) within two months of its first convocation, or otherwise the Chambers are automatic dissolved. The Constitution also provides for the instrument of the motion of censure, which, like the German version, is characterized by its constructive nature: the motion must indicate the person who will be invested with the confidence of the Congress in the event of its approval (Aguiar de Luque 1980).

All of the above elements, as will be seen, have been relevant in the long process of rapprochement between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the young Podemos party that culminated in the formation of the coalition government in 2020.

Podemos, defined by most as a populist party with ideological positions (Kioupkiolis 2016) close to anti-capitalism, has become, since its bursting rise on the political scene in the European elections of 2014, a central formation in Spanish politics, coming to form, in January 2020, the first coalition government of democratic Spain, together with the PSOE.

It is undeniable how the birth of Podemos marked a first step towards the fragmentation of the post-1978 party system, which tends to be bipolar, breaking the hegemony of the PSOE within the parliamentary left (Rodon & Hierro 2016). This fragmentation, which also occurred in the right-wing camp with the emergence of the centrist Ciudadanos party (Rodríguez-Teruel & Barrio 2015), has, at first, put the system in crisis (Alcaide-Lara 2019): in the negotiations following the 2015 and 2016 elections, it became clear that the vote of Ciudadanos and Podemos MPs (32 and 71 respectively in the XII legislature) was essential, in their respective fields, to the formation of a government, albeit a minority one (Simon 2016). The crisis of the system in the face of this rapid rise is plastically demonstrated by the duration of the government *'en funciones'* of Mariano Rajoy, dating back to the X legislature, which remained in office for a good 314 days.

After such (perhaps tragic) moments of crisis (Orriols & Cordero 2016), the system gradually understood how, faced with a change in the party framework, it was necessary to rethink electoral dynamics, to return to a bipolar structure based, however, on coalitions (Reniu Vilamala 2016). In fact, in the governments that have emerged from the electoral cycles at the national and local level following the 2018 motion of no confidence against President Mariano Rajoy (autonomous and local elections of 2018 and 2019, general elections of April and November 2019) there are coalitions both between the Popular Party and Ciudadanos (with, in some circumstances, the abstention of the newborn populist party of the ultra-right VoX) and between PSOE and Podemos. Among

these, as already mentioned, the most relevant is the PSOE-UP coalition that led to the second Sanchez government in the current XIV legislature, the first coalition government in forty years of democracy.

The intention to form a coalition government between PSOE and Podemos, in fact, does not date back to 2019, since Pablo Iglesias, secretary general of Podemos, proposed it to Pedro Sanchez back in 2016, before the general elections in June. Between this proposal and the formation of the government, more than four years have passed, characterized by the economic consequences of the 2011 crisis, the cuts in the public deficit, the economic and labor reforms of the PP, towards which both the PSOE and Podemos have shown strong criticism. These four years have also been characterized by: the success of the motion of censure thanks above all to the collaboration between the two parties; a significant increase in the popularity of President Sanchez and in general in the preferences for the Socialist Party; a steady decline of Podemos, due to internal divisions (emblematic in this sense is the exit of the co-founder and political secretary Iñigo Errejón precisely in controversy with the failure of negotiations with the PSOE for the formation of the coalition government in the XIII legislature); the loss of innovative drive and controversial issues (raised mostly by a journalism close to the right) related to internal democracy and forms of financing. These electoral dynamics have, in some ways, made the attitude of Unidas Podemos more conciliatory and favored the rapprochement and dialogue between it and PSOE, lowering the tone of the confrontation between the two parties.

In short, we can say that, process of rapprochement between PSOE and Unidas Podemos that culminates in the formation of the government in 2019 is the result of particular contingencies: a) the strong increase in preferences for the socialist party after its success in the 2018 censure motion; b) the collapse of the Popular Party in the 2019 elections in light of numerous scandals dating back to the recent government experience; and c) the thud in the electoral results of the Ciudadanos party.

Conclusions

As we have shown, in each of the examined Countries, the electoral consensus achieved by certain populist parties/movements has created mismatches in the practices developed over time by the respective political systems and forms of government. A very useful point of view of these dynamics has been, in our review, the process of government formation.

It is now appropriate, in conclusion, to summarise the results obtained from the separate country–by–country analysis and to highlight peculiarities and future perspectives.

In Germany, the need to keep the right–wing populist AfD out of government was an obstacle to the system's evolution towards a two–party trend by recalling the constitutional necessity of the alliance between the two traditional parties, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats; such an alliance had been radically ruled out by both parties at the dawn of the 2017 elections.

In Spain, the initial strongly anti–establishment rhetoric of Podemos has softened over time, partly due to its loss of support and, at the same time, the electoral growth of the PSOE, accompanied by a collapse of Populars and Ciudadanos. These circumstances have changed the positions of the populist left–wing Podemos, making them more conciliatory towards a government alliance with the left traditional party.

In Italy, the 5 Star Movement was from the outset a broadly transversal party from an electoral and programmatic point of view but also, initially, equally opposed to both the classical poles of centre–left and centre–right. This has led to two phases: in the first, after the 2013 elections, the reluctance of the M5S to govern with anyone, forced a so–called 'broad understandings government'; the second, after the 2018 elections, saw the M5S the first party with a large number of MPs that made it the inevitable pivot (foremost for numerical reasons) of all the cabinets of the legislature, allowing it to ally both with the far right Lega and with the centre–left and, finally, to vote for a technical government supported by almost the whole parliamentary arc.

Therefore, it is clear that the populist parties examined have created considerable imbalances in the three parliamentary systems, with different consequences –due to two factors– analyzed in detail in the previous paragraphs: the political affiliation of each populist party and the broader working of the political–constitutional system of each country.

As for future prospects, it is conceivable that populist parties will continue to have a vivid impact on political stability in the three countries.

In Germany, AfD has determined the revival of the Gross Koalition formula, preventing the system from tending towards an approach closer to alternative democracy. It is likely to think that the permanence of AfD in the political landscape will lead to the persistence of the veto position of CDU–CSU towards hypothetical alliances with the populist party, continuing to favor the creation of bypartisan coalitions, given that AfD, according to the latest polls, would retain a considerable 12 percent of seats in the Bundestag and given also that the leaders of the two major parties have radically excluded agreements with AfD.

In Spain, the consensus obtained by the two 'new' parties Podemos and Ciudadanos has broken the bypartisan and alternating tradition, making necessary, after four years of deadlock, repeated electoral rounds and minority governments, for the first time the formula of the coalition government. However, the circumstances that led to the formation of the PSOE–UP coalition government are certainly contingencies: one year after the

birth of the second Sanchez cabinet, the elections in the Region of Madrid of 2021 show how much the disappearance of Ciudadanos from the political scene would favor the Popular Party, which could aspire, with a condescending attitude towards the formation of the ultra–right VoX, to return to power. If we add to this the drop in consensus that the experience of government in pandemic has brought to the two parties of the coalition, the consequences are soon said.

In Italy, the M5S has undermined the bipolar tendencies that had shaped the party system since 1994, taking the place of a 'third pole' that first rejected any alliance with the two classical poles and then managed to govern with both. On the other hand, it is conceivable that this scenario –which has brought much instability to governments and their respective political formulas– is set to change towards a new bipolar twist of the system: already in the 2019 European elections, the M5S lost about a third of the consensus it had in the previous year's general elections and current polls confirm a fairly stable trend that sees the Movement settling at around 20 percent. Moreover, while the first Conte cabinet was characterised by strong disagreements between the coalition partners, the second one saw greater compatibility between the political positions of the M5S and the PD. It is therefore supposed –also because of Giuseppe Conte's candidacy as leader of the Movement– that in the future the alliance with the PD will be stabilised, running, as an alternative to the centre–right, to rule the country right from the electoral phase.

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