

9 On movement parties and democratic quality

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How have the interactions between citizens, social movements, and so-called movement parties influenced democracy in Europe? This book has sought to answer this question and chart a new pathway toward a fuller understanding of how changing party political practices and shifting divisions in citizens' values, ideologies and attitudes have affected democratic quality in Europe. It has done so by focusing on what we term the *triple interaction* between these three sets of actors that have been taking place across both the protest and institutional arenas. We have considered three main dimensions of democratic quality, in terms of *participation*, *competition* and *responsiveness*. The overarching argument of the book is that an understanding of democratic quality in contemporary societies, in all its forms, requires more careful consideration of extra-institutional participation. Relative to the transmission of traditional representative politics, we argue that protests and their associated movements (as well as the novel "movement parties") have developed a substantial degree of influence in relation to democratic quality in Europe. In this concluding chapter we outline the findings of the empirical chapters in the book, before discussing broader implications and policy recommendations.

Summary of findings from chapters

Santos and Mercea's chapter explored the patterns of voter support for movement parties, considering ideological orientations across four distinct categories: green/left-libertarian, far-right, eclectic and centrist. Through an analysis of nationally representative survey data from six European countries, the chapter revealed that while movement party voters share a common belief in the capacity of protests to influence the state of the country, the characteristics of movement party voters with different ideologies diverge significantly on most other bases. Green/left-libertarian supporters are distinguished by their youth and education, along with a strong commitment to democracy and online political engagement. In contrast, far-right voters tend to express discontent with democratic institutions and political elites, reflecting conservative values and skepticism toward rapid societal changes. Eclectic and centrist movement party backers exhibit greater support for

democratic values but dissatisfaction with the current democratic system and engage in diverse political actions to seek alternatives. While the authors argue that movement parties represent a genuine innovation in how party organizations are structured, which allows these parties to have a closer connection with societal dynamics, this chapter also calls for caution when using the movement party concept to understand electoral behavior. The heterogeneity of movement party supporters, as well as research that points at ideology as a main driver of movement party vote (Mercea and Santos, 2024), suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to analyzing their electorates can be misleading (see also Santos and Mercea, 2024). Movement parties of different ideological orientations attract voters with distinct motivations, political practices and attitudes toward democracy and societal change. Therefore, it is essential to consider these nuances to avoid oversimplifying the complex reality of movement party voters.

The next chapter, authored by Trif, Mărgărit and Burean, analyzed the discourses of progressive movement parties. In contrast with the recent surge of populist parties, these progressive entities have built anti-establishment narratives on pro-European and pro-democratic principles. The research presents a comparative study of three such parties: The Alternative (Denmark), Momentum (Hungary) and USR, formerly known as USRPLUS (Romania), representing Western, Central and Eastern Europe respectively. It focuses on the specific and transnational discursive strategies used in social and political mobilization. The analysis of programmatic documents released by the parties from 2017 to 2020 examines two types of narratives: perceptions of self/other/self & other, and the meanings of four empty signifiers – democracy, equality, freedom and inclusiveness. In all three cases, perceptions of self and others resulted from overlapping political references to both domestic and international actors. The parties employed an antagonistic argumentative strategy, contrasting domestic political faults with a promising new political approach that balanced domestic and European elements. This narrative indirectly addressed the increasing backlash against transnational European institutionalism. Through a poststructuralist lens, the chapter reveals that socioeconomic and cultural inclusiveness did not necessarily depend on the parties' ideological backgrounds. All three parties promoted improved citizen participation by giving voice to the voiceless and innovating with alternative civic engagement instruments. This explains their close ties with civic movements and, in some cases, their leadership in grassroots campaigns using mobilization strategies and discursive frames similar to social movements. Despite ideological diversity ranging from left-green to center-right, all three parties employed narratives of “political rejuvenation”, critiquing mainstream parties and transcending the traditional left/right divide.

The subsequent chapter from Mosca and Paxton analyzed the evolving relationships between movement parties and traditional media outlets. Despite the substantial political influence that newspapers continue to wield, their interactions with movement parties have been so far overlooked in the

literature. This chapter sought to address this notable gap and asked two research questions: first, how have the relations between movement parties and traditional media evolved over time, and, second, to what extent do the distinctive characteristics of these parties help us to understand similarities in the evolution of these relations across different contexts. Focusing on an ideologically diverse sample of movement parties in Denmark, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, the authors employ a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with both movement party representatives and journalists. Initially, relations between movement parties and the media tended to be mutually hostile, although interpretations of the causes differ between the two sides. Over time, as the parties became more established in the political system, their relations with traditional media outlets underwent significant changes. The dynamic interactions in each case were shaped by the characteristic traits of movement parties. The chapter identifies two primary features shared by movement parties that contribute to similarities in their relations with the media: informal organizational structures and a reliance on digital media. Despite significant ideological variation among the parties analyzed, therefore, the authors argue that there are some commonalities in how movement parties approach the media and their resulting media relations, along with significant contrasts due to contextual differences.

In the next chapter, Hoffmann and Neumayer deepen the inspection of movement parties' usage of social media. They use digital public communication data from both movement parties' and traditional parties' official accounts to probe the conceptualization of movement parties at the intersection of institutional or extra-institutional politics, or, in other words, the protest and the electoral arenas. They parse different trajectories in the positioning and re-positioning of movement parties toward traditional parties (and vice versa) through the referencing patterns in digital public spheres. They find that electoral success and failure correspond to distinct patterns of movement parties as outsiders, institutionalized challengers, or incumbents. Crucially, these trajectories are not linear toward further institutionalization and integration into the polity, but movement parties may revert back to outsider status. Second, the chapter discussed how movement parties signal their interaction with the protest arena, by mentioning protest events in their social media communication. Our findings suggest that movement parties, as members of the polity, are indeed more engaged with issues of protest than traditional parties. Finally, through a qualitative reading of protest images in movement parties' communication, the chapter highlights several visual narratives. These support the transitional nature of movement parties, whose visual language tends to de-radicalize with growing institutionalization, but may revert back to more radical narratives that emphasize ties to protesters and social movement organizations.

Finally, the chapter by Wagemann, Glukhova and Geyer examines how movement parties translate policy demands from their associated social movements into their own agendas and broader political institutions. The

authors investigated various pathways through which movement parties can channel policy demands to achieve policy success, while also identifying episodes of policy failure. The chapter highlights that electoral success does not automatically translate into policy success and that some types of policy achievements may not be sustainable in the long run. Movement parties can influence policy-making, regardless of whether they are in government or opposition, but their success is not guaranteed by good electoral results alone. Cooperation or alignment on specific policy issues with protest movements or other political parties can ensure more enduring success. Direct policymaking from a coalition government position can yield significant policy results, but without agreement on the policy direction with several political parties, these policies are prone to reversal with shifts in governing coalitions. Therefore, forming government coalitions with ideologically aligned parties that share at least a basic agreement on the major issues is crucial for lasting policy achievements of movement parties. The chapter also discusses the evolution of movement parties into established political actors or government entities, noting that this transition often leads to changes in policy preferences. Although initially advocating for similar demands as their associated social movements, movement parties are prone to depart from these demands when they occupy government positions due to the need for political compromises or expediency. Interestingly, even low to moderate levels of electoral success can yield significant policy influence, an encouraging insight for newly emerging movement parties. Even with limited parliamentary representation, these parties may help to achieve important policy goals for their associated movements in the early stages. However, as movement parties become more integrated into the political establishment, they tend to prioritize their role as political parties over their movement origins, recognizing that real decisions and legislation occur within these formal institutional frameworks. Thus, while movement parties can be an effective means for social movements to articulate their demands, their integration into the political establishment often leads to a shift toward party politics at the expense of movement ideals.

Implications and policy recommendations

In the light of the aforementioned empirical findings, there are several implications for future research that we will outline subsequently, along with concrete recommendations to policy-makers. These policy recommendations are intended to help with sustaining and improving democratic quality in Europe, across three main areas.

First, regarding institutional interventions to address low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions. Research shows that, with few exceptions across Europe, there are concerningly low levels of satisfaction with democracy (Santos and Mercea, n.d.). In southern and eastern European countries, trust in democratic institutions is also low, and there is an increasing proportion of the population that does not share the

belief that democracy is the best system of government. Moreover, new anti-mainstream parties that seek to improve democracy by stimulating inclusiveness and political engagement, such as the Alternative in Denmark, Momentum in Hungary and USR in Romania have failed to convince voters and performed poorly in elections. Our research has shown that when citizens are more concerned about democratic quality, they are less willing to participate in politics. More specifically, they are less willing to join political parties and civil society organizations, to participate in demonstrations, and instead more likely to stop participating in politics altogether. This means that institutions cannot stay passive in the face of democratic decline, hoping for citizens to react and demand greater democratic quality. There needs to be decisive action to reverse the cycle of democratic deterioration and foster greater political participation. Notably, in countries with particularly low levels of trust in national institutions (Romania, Italy and Hungary), the level of trust toward the EU is higher. This presents an opportunity for EU institutions to take advantage of their more trustworthy reputation and take action to improve citizens' attitudes toward democracy and promote democratic quality. It is paramount that interventions are made to foster greater political participation to confront attempts to erode democratic principles and to demand necessary institutional reforms.

Second, regarding measures to target widening inequalities in democratic participation. Declining democratic quality has the effect to also deepening already existing social inequalities. When presented with the notion that democracy suffers from multiple problems (for example, unresponsive governments, difficulties in participating in elections or demonstrations), the political participation of women and low-income groups is more heavily hampered than that of men and higher-income people (Santos and Mercea, n.d.). Thus, when made aware of an erosion of democratic quality, women are more likely than men to say that they will not vote in the next election and that they are not willing to participate in demonstrations. When it comes to low-income groups, their exposure to problems with democracy leads to them being less willing to join a political party, to vote in the next election and join civil society organizations, in comparison with higher-income citizens. Consequently, beyond the institutional problems that are created by the deterioration of democratic quality, such an erosion is also likely to discourage women and low-income citizens even further in their attempts to participate politically to redress social inequalities.

To remedy these inequalities, institutions should implement measures aimed at fostering the participation of women and low-income groups. National and European institutions should target these groups through dedicated campaigns aimed at restoring their confidence in European democracy and the value of participation. In addition to such electorally centered campaigns, representatives should also facilitate participation in non-electoral activities. Academic research convincingly shows that participation in protests and social movements is an effective tool for empowering groups

underrepresented in politics (McAdam, 2010; Santos, 2024). However, scholars have also pointed out that these groups are more risk-averse when it comes to participating in politics (Grasso and Smith, 2022). Institutions need to make participation in demonstrations and social movements safer, to encourage wider political engagement by women and low-income groups. This objective requires significant reforms to the policing of demonstrations and social movements, decreasing the number of instances when police agents crack down on these groups during non-violent activities.

Third, regarding initiatives to safeguard a media environment conducive to free and fair electoral competition, we suggest actions from news media organizations and regulatory bodies. We recommend that established parties and media institutions carefully review their stance toward challenger parties in digital communicative arenas. While some movement parties have promoted democratic measures, others on the radical right side of the political spectrum have sought to use the media arena to advance ideas more challenging to democratic norms (Paxton, 2024). In response, established parties and media institutions may seek to co-operate and form “cordon sanitaire” to contain anti-democratic forces and avoid steering attention toward their narratives. The effectiveness of a successful *cordon sanitaire* has been demonstrated in the case of the Belgian region of Wallonia where the populist radical right is extremely weak, contrasting with the neighboring Flanders that lacks such a measure and where such parties are highly popular (De Jonge, 2021). However, on the other hand, withholding recognition from challengers to the establishment might lead to (further) alienation of their supporters from institutional politics. Citizens in Spain, where the radical right Vox party has recently risen to prominence, tend to oppose the idea of such strategic exclusion and prefer for Vox to be treated like any other party (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2024). A careful balancing act must be maintained between defending democracy from threatening forces and preserving political pluralism.

Turning to social media, we also support the use of platform regulations to effectively contain the development of anti-democratic content and networks. As we have observed, social media is a crucial venue for movement parties to signal their alliances with social movements and to interact with established parties (Hoffmann and Neumayer, 2024a, 2024b). Thus, movement parties from outside the democratic spectrum might use social media to legitimize organizations and their claims that target democratic norms. Hence, effective monitoring of anti-democratic accounts and pages can severely limit the capacity to (publicly) network between civil society organizations and movement parties. While networking activities among far-right parties and civil society organizations may still take place on less visible and recognized social media platforms, effective regulations on major social media platforms can help to contain the spread of anti-democratic content. It is therefore crucial that online content is actively moderated in accordance with EU regulations to restrict the spread of anti-democratic content in the public sphere.

In conclusion, while trust in democracy in Europe appears to be shaken, our research has generated several evidence-based recommendations for politicians and civil society organizations to work toward remedying the situation. Following these steps will help to repair the “bridge” between citizens and their elected representatives and so to restore confidence in a strengthened European democracy.

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