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Abstentionism, populism, and the crisis of democracy

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Introduction

Political parties are currently going through a period of deep malaise, both in European democratic countries and in other areas of the world. They in fact seem to be largely disconnected from society, unable to fulfil many of their traditional functions and even their role in bridging the social sphere and the sphere of political power. Thus, if, according to some scholars, political parties have undergone profound changes over time, others have highlighted their redundancy, and others again have even predicted their demise[1].

As noted by Peter Mair in his posthumous book, the current downfall and crisis of political parties are caused by a process of mutual withdrawal or abandonment, which involves both citizens and the political parties themselves. This process is the symptom of a more general and growing indifference towards politics that is shared by both sides of the political system, that is, voters and the political class[2].

Many indicators point to growing civic disengagement from conventional politics and a consequent retreat into private life: first, the increase in abstentionism, that seems to affect almost all European democracies – and not just those; but also the rise in electoral volatility, the erosion of a sense of belonging and identification with political parties, and finally the fall in party membership. Political parties, in short, are no longer capable of engaging citizens in the political life of their own countries; furthermore, citizens' withdrawal from conventional politics weakens, in turn, the political parties themselves. As a result, politics (and democracy) becomes a sort of external reality for citizens, who interact with it as simple spectators[3].

On the one hand, political parties seem to be increasingly unable to perform those representative functions that are a relevant factor of social

cohesion. Currently, the articulation of unprecedented particularistic interests is in fact largely carried out by non-political agencies, such as professional bodies, consumer associations, and other interest groups of various types (NIMBY or LGBTQI groups, for instance). On the other hand, parties have maintained and even enhanced their procedural functions, such as the recruitment of government officials and the formation of government, through negotiation and compromises when they enter a ruling coalition.

Like citizens, political parties and their leaders are also moving away from the political space and civil society and retreating into their «private sphere», represented by the state and government institutions. Parties, in other words, increasingly orient themselves to their involvement in the parliamentary process and, above all, to the occupation of public office. As highlighted by Katz and Mair[4], this entails a shift in the balance of power between the three organisational faces of party: the party on the ground (formed by members, activists and supporters) and the party in central office (the organisational apparatus) are withering away, whereas the party in public office – the elected representatives – has acquired a greater relevance.

Many factors have contributed to triggering this change: the introduction of different forms of public financing of the political parties, the enactment of state laws and regulations that codify many formal aspects of their organisations, and the fact that obtaining offices in state and government institutions represents the main objective of political parties[5].

The process of mutual withdrawal and disengagement of citizens and political parties from conventional politics has brought a weakening, if not the exhaustion, of party democracy and especially of the traditional arena it offers for the interaction between voters and the political class. As a result, elections lose their former relevance, becoming a secondary, if not simply decorative, element of democracy, given the low levels of popular involvement, citizens' inability to control political decision-making, and the growing similarities between the parties that compete in elections.

All this deeply weakens party democracy, if not yet inducing its final disappearance, which in turn produces, in Mair's words[6], a «democratic void».

It is this void that two different challenges to party democracy – technocracy and populism – try to fill. Both these forms of political representation and legitimation uphold a monolithic conception of society as a homogeneous unit, and both maintain that this whole can express a general, common interest. For technocrats, the common interest, as well

as the means for achieving it, can be identified by experts through rational speculation, whereas for populists, it can be identified by the unconstrained will of the people. Technocracy, therefore, represents a trustee/fiduciary model of representation, given that it calls for voters to entrust authority to experts who are responsible for acting exclusively in the best interests of society. Populism, by contrast, promotes a delegated or fully mandated model of representation. It does not emphasise *responsibility* but *responsiveness*. Populist leaders must respond to a putative will of the people, as expressed by voters' preferences, which they try to embody[7].

This study addresses two of the main issues mentioned above: abstentionism and populism. On the one hand, we hold that it is very important to analyse, however briefly, the extent and the principal characteristics of abstentionism. In doing so, we therefore focus on one side of the process of mutual withdrawal from conventional politics (§ 1). On the other hand, we will reflect on what we consider the most compelling challenge to party democracy, that of populism (§ 2). The two points, which are strictly intertwined with each other, will be addressed with reference to European democracies. In the third section we consider how and why the two pehnomena are intertwined. The final section concludes.

1. Abstention

The following analysis focusses on the 27 EU member states plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and the UK.

From Table 1 we can see that abstention has increased in all 31 of the countries with the exception of Norway and Hungary. Across the 31, the rate of abstention has increased by 72.1% or by 14.2 percentage points, up from 19.7% to 33.9% on average. In other words, over one third of those with the right to vote now fail to exercise that right across the countries concerned.

If abstention is an indicator of an inability on the part of political parties to engage citizens in the political lives of their countries, and therefore of citizens' withdrawal from conventional politics, then it is apparent that the parties are struggling more in some countries than in others. On the one hand, Luxemburg maintains a relatively low rate of abstention, well below the average and indeed below the average for the first post-war elections, while in Romania, at the other end of the spectrum, over two thirds failed to participate in the most recent elections. All of the Scandinavian countries, with the exception of Finland, are in

the top one third of countries with the lowest rates of abstention, while of the 11 former-communist states, six are in the bottom third of countries with the highest rates of abstention while eight are in the bottom half.

The relatively high rates of electoral participation in Scandinavian countries can be attributed to a combination of several factors. They have a strong tradition of civic engagement and a culture that values political participation. There is a general belief in the importance of democracy and active citizenship, which encourages individuals to participate in the electoral process[8]. Scandinavian societies tend to have high levels of social trust, meaning that citizens trust each other and institutions. This trust extends to the electoral system, fostering a sense of confidence and legitimacy in the political process, which in turn encourages voter turnout[9]. The presence of comprehensive welfare states in Scandinavian countries has resulted in lower socio-economic disparities as compared with the rest of the Europe[10], which in turn has resulted in higher levels of political engagement among citizens – this through several linking mechanisms. For example, when socioeconomic disparities are reduced, individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds have a greater sense of empowerment and agency. Meanwhile, more people have access to the resources, the time, and the confidence required to participate in political activities, such as voting. Scandinavian countries often practice consensual politics, characterized by broad-based cooperation among political parties and a focus on consensus-building[11]. This has arguably led to greater satisfaction with the political system[12], and to a belief that voting can make a difference, thereby motivating citizens to participate. Finally, Scandinavian countries typically have well-established systems that facilitate voting, such as convenient polling locations, flexible voting options (including early voting and postal voting), and efficient voter registration processes. These factors remove barriers to participation and make it easier for citizens to exercise their right to vote.

Tab. 1 – Changes in rates of abstention at parliamentary elections in 31 European countries since 1945

	Abstention at first post-WW2 election	*Abstention at most recent election*	*Mean abstention%*	*Mean Δ in abstention*
Luxembourg	8.1	10.3	9.99	0.15
Belgium	9.7	11.6	8.02	0.09
Malta	5.0	14.4	6.01	0.94
Sweden	8.2	15.8	13.67	0.58

	Abstention at first post-WW2 election	*Abstention at most recent election*	*Mean abstention%*	*Mean Δ in abstention*
Denmark	13.7	15.8	14.00	0.08
Iceland	12.6	19.9	12.66	0.33
Netherlands	6.9	21.3	15.23	0.65
Norway	23.6	22.8	20.32	-0.04
Germany	22.2	23.4	23.26	0.15
Austria	4.1	24.4	13.14	1.07
Spain	23.0	28.2	26.87	0.40
Slovenia	26.3	29.0	36.41	0.39
Hungary	34.9	30.4	33.93	-0.56
Finland	25.1	31.3	26.19	0.31
UK	16.4	32.5	27.25	0.89
Slovakia	15.3	34.2	31.93	2.36
Cyprus	14.7	34.3	14.82	2.18
Czech Republic	23.7	34.6	34.9	1.56
Italy	7.8	36.2	14.41	1.67
Estonia	32.2	36.3	36.8	0.59
Ireland	24.7	37.2	28.88	0.69
Poland	37.9	38.3	49.25	0.04
Latvia	10.1	40.6	33.71	3.39
Portugal	16.7	42.0	32.15	1.69
Greece	20.4	42.2	25.22	1.68
Lithuania	24.8	52.2	45.98	3.91
Croatia	31.2	53.1	39.88	3.12
France	22.8	53.5	32.19	2.05
Switzerland	43.1	54.9	52.32	0.98
Bulgaria	24.8	62.0	44.36	4.13
Romania	20.3	68.2	43.73	5.99
Mean	**19.7**	**33.9**	**27.34**	**1.34**

Source: authors' elaboration of data made available by the IDEA International voter turnout database (www.idea.int).

When we turn our attention to the former-communist states of Eastern Europe we find that the mean abstention rate at the most recent parliamentary elections was 43.5% as compared with 33.9% for the group of 31 countries all together.

The lower election turnouts observed in the former-communist states of Eastern Europe can be attributed to a combination of historical,

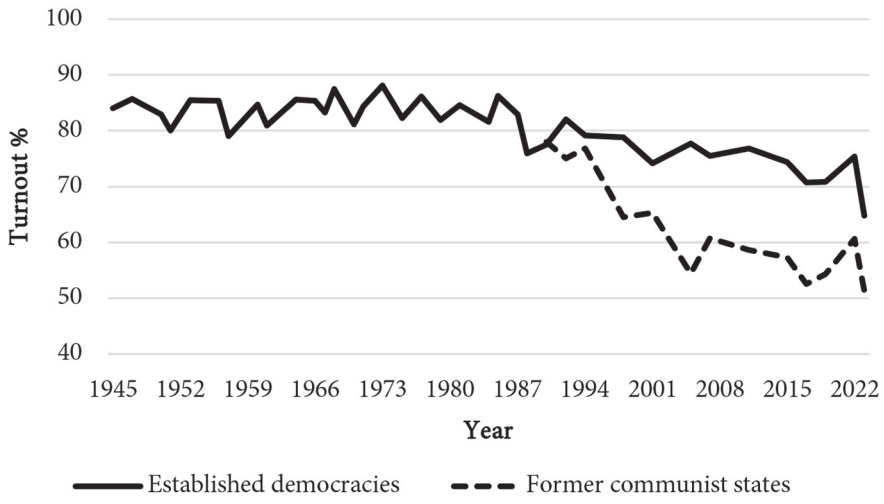
political, and socio-economic factors. First, following the collapse of communism, many Eastern European countries underwent a challenging process of democratic transition. The transition period was characterised by political instability, economic hardship and social changes, which may have affected citizens' trust and participation in the political system. And indeed, the mean score for satisfaction with how the political system is functioning, referred to in note 12 above, is, at 4.4, lower for the 11 post-communist states than the 5.1 mean score for our group of countries all together. Second, decades of authoritarian rule under communist regimes created a culture of political apathy and cynicism among citizens[13]. The lack of political freedoms and meaningful participation during the communist era may have resulted in a carryover effect, with some people being less inclined to engage in political processes after the transition. Third, Eastern European countries experienced significant economic transformations during the transition to market economies. The transition often resulted in economic inequalities, unemployment, and social dislocation. These economic challenges may have influenced citizens' priorities and reduced their motivation to participate in elections.

However, it is important to note that (notwithstanding democratic backsliding in some of the countries, notably, Hungary and Poland) democratic consolidation and socio-economic stabilisation is likely to have worked in the opposite direction, as is generational turnover. Increasingly, the populations of these countries have come to be composed of people born after the fall of communism and they may exhibit higher levels of trust and enthusiasm for the political process than those born earlier[14]. Moreover, the above-mentioned factors are complex and vary across countries in Eastern Europe. Thus, as Table 1 reveals, some countries in the region (e.g. Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia and Poland) have witnessed rates of increase in abstention far below the average, whereas others (e.g. Bulgaria and Romania) have seen rates of increase far above the average.

Turning, then, to changes in abstention over time, Figure 1 shows how turnout has declined in the established democracies since 1945, and in the group of 11 post-communist states. It confirms the earlier finding[15] of a large difference in the rate of decline since 1990, with the latter group of countries showing a much steeper decline as compared to the former. Whereas turnout in the established democracies has declined by 12.8 percentage points on average since the beginning of the 1990s (from 77.6% to 64.8%) in the post-communist states, it has declined by more than double that (i.e. by 26.7 percentage points, from 78.0% to 51.3%).

In terms of how to account for this dramatic decline, worth mentioning are the studies by Kostadinova[16] and by Kostadinova and Power[17]. They advanced the hypothesis that voter turnout is higher in the first post-Communist parliamentary elections than in subsequent elections because, on the one hand, the process of transition away from authoritarianism raises interest in politics and encourages the open expression of demands. On the other hand, with the establishment of the new order, «[t]he initial enthusiasm and impatience gradually calm down»[18]. One would therefore expect – as was in fact true of most of our cases as well as those of Kostadinova – that over the second, third and fourth post-transition elections, turnout would decline. However, these elections only take us up to the early 2000s and it seems implausible that the so-called «founding elections hypothesis»[19] can account for the at-least-as-steep decline since then.

Fig. 1 - Voter turnout in Europe 1945-2023



Source: authors' elaboration of data made available by the IDEA International voter turnout database (www.idea.int).

Attempts to grapple with this conundrum have largely focussed on the idea of disenchantment with democracy and the suggestion that citizens in post-Communist societies are likely to distrust democratic institutions and/or to be dissatisfied with democratic performance[20]. Karp and Milazzo[21], for example, find that citizens of Eastern Europe are more likely to express doubts about democracy and to be unhappy with the way it works than their counterparts in Western Europe, and that these

attitudes do affect turnout. However, they also find that the attitudes cannot *fully* account for the differences between East and West in this respect. And even more importantly, from our point of view, their findings cannot explain the *decline* in turnout, much less, why it has been steeper than in the West – unless we assume that negative attitudes concerning democracy/democratic performance (and whatever else causes turnout to be lower in the East) have spread more rapidly there. Declining voter turnout in post-Communist Europe is, therefore, as Solijonov notes, «yet to be properly understood»[22].

2. Populism

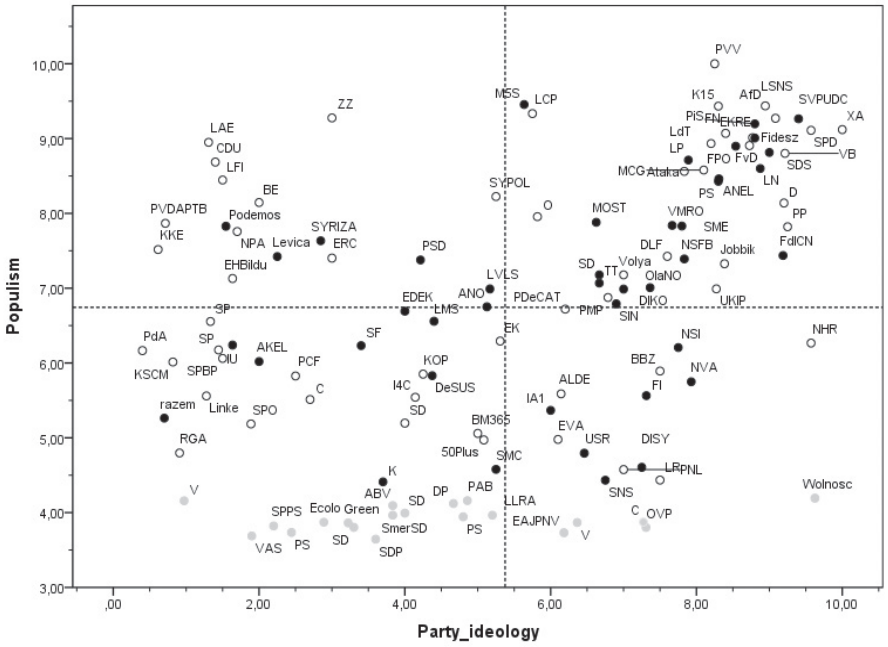
Of the two challenges to party democracy highlighted in the introduction, namely, technocracy and populism, the latter is certainly the most compelling. Although technocracy is currently acquiring increasing relevance in contemporary societies, it does not seem to be as widespread as one might expect. In this respect, Marco Valbruzzi noted that in the EU-28, from the end of World War II to December 2018, 28 cases of technocratic-led governments could be identified; only seven of them, however, could be classified as fully technocratic. They were the governments led by Ljuben Berov (1992-94, BG), Nicolae Vacaroiu (1992-94, first term, RO), Lamberto Dini (1995-96, IT), Jan Fischer (2009-10, CZ), Gordon Bajnai (2009-10, HU), Mario Monti (2011-13, IT), and Dacian Cioloș (2015-16, RO)[23].

In analysing the electoral results of populist parties and movements, many studies have in contrast pointed out the growing support they have attained over the past few years, especially in Europe, and, moreover, the considerable notoriety achieved by leaders who adopt populist rhetoric and styles of communication[24].

Using the *Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey* (POPPA) dataset, which is based on 28 European countries[25], 118 parties (those with a value higher than the median, equal to 3.64, on a scale from 0 to 10) out of a total of 250 can be identified as populist. Of the 118, 20 (with a value higher than the median but lower than the mean, equal to 4.39) can be considered borderline or ambiguous cases of populist parties. Of the remaining 98 cases (39.2 percent of the total), 43 have participated in government coalitions.

Figure 2 shows how the 118 populist parties are located along two dimensions: ideology (on a scale ranging from 0 – left – to 10 – right) and

Fig. 1 – Populist parties



Notes: ● = Borderline/ambiguous cases of populist parties; ● = Parties which participated in government coalition; o = Parties which have not participated in government coalition AU: Freedom Party (FPÖ), Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). BE: New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA-PBT), Flemish Interest (VB), Francophone Ecologists (Ecolo), People's Party (PP), Socialist Party (PS). BU: Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), Attack (Ataka), Reload Bulgaria (BBZ), National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NSFB), Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), Will (Volya). CR: Milan Brandic 365 (BM 365), Bridge of Independent Lists (Most), Independents for Croatia (NHR), Human Shield (ZZ). CY: Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL), Democratic Party (DICO), Democratic Rally (DISY), Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK), Ecological and Environmental Movement (KOP), Citizen's Alliance (SYPOL). CZ: Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), Party of Civic Rights (SPO). DK: Conservative People's Party (C), The New Right (D), Danish People's Party (O), Red-Green Alliance (RGA), Social Democrats (SD), Venstre, Denmark's Liberal Party (V). ES: Conservative People's Party (EKRE), Free Party (EVA), Estonian Greens (Green), Estonian Centre Party (K). FI: Finns Party (PS), Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP), Blue Reform (SIN), Left Alliance (VAS). FR: France Arise (DLF), National Rally (FN), Unbowed France (LFI), The Patriots (LP), The Republicans (LR), New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), French Communist Party (PCF). GE: Alternative for Germany (AfD), The Left (Linke). GR: Independent Greeks (ANEL), Union of Centrists (EK), Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Popular Unity (LAE), Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRI-

ZA), Golden Dawn (XA). HU: Fidesz, Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz), Jobbik Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik). IR: Independents 4 Change (I4C), Independent Alliance (IA1), Social Democrats (SD), Sinn Fein (SF), Socialist Party (SP), Solidarity, People Before Profit (SPBP). IT: Brothers of Italy (FdI-CN), Go Italy (FI), League (LN), Five Star Movement (M5S). LI: Labour Party (DP), Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP), Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (LLRA), Lithuanian Peasant and Greens Union (LVLS), Order and Justice (TT). NL: 50 Plus, Forum for Democracy (FvD), Party for Freedom (PVV), Socialist Party (SP). PL: Kukiz'15 (K15), Law and Justice (PiS), Together Party (razem), Liberty (Wolnosc). PT: Bloc of the Left (BE), Unified Democratic Coalition (CDU), Socialist Party (PS). RO: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE), People's Movement Party (PMP), National Liberal Party (PNL), Social Democratic Party (PSD), Save Romania Union (USR). SK: People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OlaNO), We are Family (SME), Direction, Social Democracy (SmerSD), Slovak National Party (SNS). SI: Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DeSUS), The Left (Levica), Marjan Sarec List (LMS), New Slovenia-Christian Democrats (NSI), Party of Alenka Bratusek (PAB), Social Democrats (SD), Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), Party of Miro Cerar (SMC). SP: Compromise (C), Basque Nationalist Party (EAJPNV), Basque Country Unite (EHBildu), Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), United Left (IU), Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), We Can (Podemos). SE: Sweden Democrats (SD), Left Party (V). CH: Ticino League (LdT), Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG), Swiss Party of Labour (PdA), Social Democratic Party (SPPS), Swiss People's Party (SVPDUC). UK: United Kingdom Independent Party (Ukip).

populism (on a scale ranging from 3.64 – the median value – to 10 – full populism). The vertical line represents the median value for ideology, which is 5.37 (which matches with the mean of 5.34), the horizontal line, the third quartile (i.e., 75th percentile) for the level of populism, which is 6.74. The most significant result shown in Figure 2 is that most populist parties (42 out of 98) are positioned in the upper-right quadrant, representing centre or rightist and strongly populist parties. Furthermore, approximately half of them have participated in government coalitions. This confirms what has long been known: see, for example, Cas Mudde's study of the features and successes achieved by radical-right populist parties in Europe[26].

It must also be noted that the moderately populist centre-left parties, placed in the lower-left quadrant (25) are more numerous than the strongly populist centre-left parties (17), placed in the upper-left quadrant[27].

As previously stated, populism represents one of the most compelling challenges to party democracy. Such a challenge has arisen in response to

the withdrawal of the mainstream parties from conventional politics and their retreat to the state and government institutions, that is, in response to their transformation from «mass» to «cartel» parties. Citizens' indifference towards politics soon turns into feelings and open attitudes of hostility towards the political class and parties. The latter are portrayed as incapable of representing the people, as out of touch with their problems and needs, unresponsive to their demands, and merely interested in gaining public office. These feelings are especially strong during periods of economic or political crisis – which make it difficult for political action to achieve tangible positive results – or in the wake of corruption scandals[28].

It is precisely these feelings and attitudes that populist parties try to take advantage of to achieve growing electoral support. These parties, in fact, maintain that political action must be an expression of the unconstrained will of the people and demand that the political system becomes responsive to citizens again. Populism, in other words, arises when the gap between the people and governing leaders becomes too wide, when the political establishment merely complies with formal rules and procedures, and when the general will of the people is not taken into account as much as it deserves to be[29].

In the next section we return to the point made in the introduction, that abstentionism and populism are alternative responses to the same phenomenon constituted by the weakening of democracy and the emergence of Mair's «democratic void». This being the case, it is pertinent to ask about the broad processes of economic, social and political change over the past fifty years that have led to the opening up of that void in the early twenty-first century. Before that, however, it will assist the argument that follows to elaborate on the connection between abstentionism and populism in a way that adds a bit of colour to the quantitative evidence considered so far.

3. The demand- and supply-side explanations of abstention and populism

An additional element of understanding lacking in the field of voter turnout trends stems from the relative absence of ethnographic research into the meaning and significance of abstaining – especially for the social category most likely to abstain, namely, the poor and underprivileged (see the article by Tuorto in this issue). For these people, economic hardship often means a withdrawal from politics to concentrate on meeting basic

needs and, sometimes, a lack of the basic education that would enable them to understand the impact of their vote on the direction of government policy in the first place. Lisa McKenzie's research[30], carried out around the time of the UK Brexit referendum, illustrates this point in a rather striking fashion, while revealing how, for her respondents, the *self-same* factors that normally lead them to be politically disengaged, drive them to embrace with enthusiasm the populism of the «Leave» campaign.

McKenzie's respondents are very deprived voters living in the East End of London and in the ex-mining towns of Nottinghamshire. They are aware of two things. The first is that they are «invisible» in the sense that they are socially excluded and largely ignored by mainstream politicians and media outlets. The second, therefore, is that there is no point in voting because it doesn't change anything:

> Lisa: «So are you going to vote?»
> Brian: «No! (laughing). Round here? You're having a laugh!»

Otherwise put: McKenzie's interviewees don't vote because the feeling of powerlessness (and therefore of the irrelevance of politics to their daily struggle to get by), is simply too overwhelming: they do not see any «connection between themselves, their political and social position and the general election»[31]. McKenzie then notes that her respondents are, however, considerably more animated by the 2016 Brexit referendum. They are aware that, unlike parliamentary elections where most seats are safe for one party or the other, it presents them, *for the first time*, with an opportunity to take action that will have real governmental consequences. It is an opportunity they seize to vote «Leave» precisely *because* they are aware that «most politicians, mainstream media outlets, and the wider middle class electorate wanted to "remain"»:

> Sally said, in relation to the *Guardian* social media commentators: «We don't exist to them do we?» Anne looked at Sally and said «well that's a shame for them because all us fuckers who don't exist are voting out tomorrow»[32].

The results of McKenzie's research are reflected in those of Bromley-Davenport's study of deprived working-class men in Sunderland:

> As Jim, an 85-year-old ex-fisherman, commented «Tories come left and Labour gone right. They're one and the same now», while Bertie,

> a 71-year-old ex-docker remarked,… «They're all the same these politicians. Don't trust any of them» [… Meanwhile] Frank said, «working class lads, coalminers and shipyard builders, they've lost confidence. They're disillusioned by Labour and so what they done was, they voted for UKIP»[33].

In short, both abstention and populism can be understood, for at least some sections of the electorate, as a form of *rebellion*, expressive of anger and resentment against perceived injustices.

This being the case, we think that at least *part* of the explanation for the dramatic decline in voter turnout in Europe, East and West, since the beginning of the 1990s needs to refer to the economic, social and political changes that have led to a growth, in recent decades, in the numbers belonging to this category of angry and resentful citizens. We offer the following suggestion, which is organised in terms of changes on the «demand» side of politics – i.e. economic and social changes responsible for what we referred to in the introduction as the withdrawal of *citizens* from politics – and changes on the «supply» side – having to do with the withdrawal of *parties and the political class*.

On the demand side, the period from round about the mid-1970s in the West has been one characterised by a decline in Fordist manufacturing systems that had been designed to produce large quantities of low-cost, standardised, products to be sold in protected domestic markets sustained by high wages and Keynesian demand management, making possible rising productivity and broadly shared prosperity. In their place has come a «post-Fordist», regime of capital accumulation. This is one based on the production of small batches of less homogeneous, more diverse products – all made possible by the emergence of computer technology, by the deregulation of international markets and by the emergence of global supply chains. Instead of the unskilled manual worker of the Fordist economy, the ideal-typical employee of the post-Fordist firm is a highly-skilled, flexible, white-collar employee.

What we have therefore seen is the emergence of a growing division between the so-called «winners and losers» of globalisation[34]. The «winners» are those who are well-educated, able to use their education credentials to engage in practices of «social closure»[35]. They are therefore able to live in situations of relative material security, typically in urban areas where they are exposed to cosmopolitan influences. Winners, comfortable with the economic and cultural consequences of post-Fordist globalisation, have therefore by and large continued to vote. Often, in

doing so, they have supported mainstream parties of the left as these parties' equality concerns have come increasingly to be defined in terms of *social* rather than *economic* equality – in terms of matters such as the rights of women and the rights of the LGBTQI community etc.– to which winners – children of the so-called «silent revolution»[36] and the growth of «identity politics» – remain sensitive. «Losers» on the other hand – semi-skilled and unskilled workers experiencing unemployment and falling incomes thanks to the aforementioned industrial restructuring and growing regional disparities – have found themselves at a double disadvantage, first because of their lack of qualifications; second because any alternative jobs are likely to be located far away from where they live. For the new, knowledge-intensive, high-technology industries have tended to develop in urbanised and metropolitan centres where the scientific and technical knowledge is most strongly present – with knock-on effects for the rest of the local economy.

On the supply side, the period in question has been characterised by two fundamental developments responsible for the disengagement of parties from their task of «bridging» politics and society. On the one hand, the decline of traditional social cleavages – e.g. of religion and class – and the corresponding decline of parties of mass integration has been linked with the well-known emergence of the cartel party[37] and the personal party[38]. Running increasingly centralised, professionalised and capital-intensive media campaigns focussing more and more «on the provision of spectacle, image, and theater»[39], these parties have become less and less about aggregating and conveying demands, from the bottom up, from civil society to the state, and more and more about exploiting their positions, within the state, to manipulate people from the top down. Voters, from having been to various degrees actively engaged in political life (especially if party members) have become more or less passive spectators in what Bernard Manin has called «audience democracy»[40]. They are, therefore, less and less attached: less likely to vote automatically for their chosen party because they see in it the representatives of the social group to which they themselves belong – but more critically, dependent on «their evaluations of past party performance and their confidence in future performance»[41]. On the other hand, neo-liberal globalisation has increased the requirement for labour mobility across national borders[42] (through such mechanisms as the European single market) while undermining the capacity of the nation-state to guarantee traditional social and economic citizenship rights. From having been effectively sovereign, states have become negotiators with multi-national corporations and interna-

tional and supranational institutions (as illustrated most dramatically in the case of the radical-left Syriza government in Greece).

What we have therefore seen is a two-fold process. On the one hand, there has been a decline in the capacity of mainstream parties of the left to distinguish themselves from their competitors on the right, accelerating their long-term electoral decline by making it increasingly difficult for their traditional followers among globalisation's losers to discern the parties' relevance to the furtherance of their interests. On the other hand, as these voters have become increasingly disenchanted with their governments, the latter have turned increasingly to bordering, to securitisation discourses and to welfare chauvinism as means of maintaining support. Thereby they have provided fertile ground for the new, xenophobic, populist parties able to offer up immigrants as a focus for the anger and resentment of «losers». These, who would once have been among the core supporters of parties of the left, are now increasingly attracted either by the right-wing populists or, as an alternative, by the option of abstaining altogether.

Conclusion

In short, both growing abstention and the increasing success of populist parties must be seen as causes and consequences of the growing democratic malaise. Abstention undermines the quality of democracy insofar as it reduces the incentive on politicians to be responsive to the needs of the groups most likely to abstain, with further increases in abstention in a vicious circle. Populism, meanwhile, is a threat to democracy because it rejects pluralism. By claiming to be the only authentic representatives of «the people», populists implicitly deny that their opponents are legitimate contenders for government. And by questioning the legitimacy of constitutional constraints on the will of majorities, they reject the idea that the views of opponents and the interests of minorities have to be respected. Both populism and abstentionism are the result of large-scale economic, social and political changes that have overtaken Western democracies in the last fifty years – changes that have undermined the capacity of political parties to act as effective bridges between civil society and the state and led to the emergence of a growing «democratic void». The decline in voter turnout and the rise of populism are both manifestations of this democratic void. Populist parties capitalise on citizens' growing disillusionment with mainstream parties, claiming to represent the true will of

the people and promoting a distrust of political institutions. Abstention, meanwhile, becomes a form of rebellion for some citizens who feel politically powerless and alienated. Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of the factors driving citizens' disengagement and the development of strategies to restore trust and responsiveness in political parties and institutions.

Note

[1] See, on this, H. DAALDER, *A Crisis of Party?*, in «Scandinavian Political Studies», vol. 15, issue 4, 1992, pp. 269-288, P. IGNAZI, *The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties*, in «Party Politics», vol. 2, issue 4, 1996, pp. 549-566, P. MANCINI, *Il post partito. La fine delle grandi narrazioni*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2015.

[2] P. MAIR, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso, London, 2013.

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[4] R.S. KATZ, P. MAIR, *The ascendency of party in public office: party organizational change in twentieth-century democracies*, in R. GUNTHER, J.R. MONTERO and J.J. LINZ (eds.), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, pp. 113-135.

[5] P. MAIR, *op. cit.*

[6] *Ibidem*.

[7] C. BICKERTON, C. INVERNIZZI ACCETTI, *Populism and technocracy: opposites or complements?*, in «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», vol. 20, issue 2, 2017, pp. 186-206; D. CARAMANI, *Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government*, in «American Political Science Review», vol. 111, issue 1, 2017, pp. 54-67; D. CARAMANI, *Introduction. The technocratic challenge to democracy*, in E. BERTSOU, D. CARAMANI (eds.), *The Technocratic Challenge to Democracy*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2020, pp. 1-26.

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[9] L. KARVONEN, E. KESTILÄ-KEKKONEN, *Social Capital and Political Participation in Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, in «European Journal of Political Research», vol. 53, issue 3, 2014, pp. 559-575.

[10] See the World Bank «Inequality and Shared Prosperity» data available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/isp. Using the latest available Gini coefficients published as part of this data set gives a mean coefficient for the Scandinavian countries (including Finland and Iceland) of 27.5 – as compared with a mean across the remaining 26 countries of 31.3. The correlation coefficient

between inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) and abstention at the latest election for our group of countries is moderate at 0.51.

[11] D. ARTER, *Democracy in Scandinavia: Consensual, Majoritarian or Mixed?* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006.

[12] See the World Values Survey data, wave 7 (https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp) which includes a question asking respondents to indicate on a 1 to 10 scale how satisfied they are «with how the political system is functioning in [their] country these days». Mean scores were available for 27 of our countries. The mean for Sweden, Norway and Denmark was 6.72 as compared with 4.94 for the remaining 24 countries. There is a moderately strong negative correlation between mean satisfaction, and abstention, for our group of countries of 0.53.

[13] A. ROBERTS, *The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

[14] See e.g. A. NEUNDORF, *Democracy in Transition: A Micro Perspective on System Change in Post-Soviet Societies*, in «Journal of Politics», vol. 72, issue 4, 2010, pp. 1096-1108.

[15] A. SOLIJONOV, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World*, International IDEA, Stockholm, 2016, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf.

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[18] T. KOSTADINOVA, *op. cit.*, p. 743.

[19] A. SOLIJONOV, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

[20] See e.g. J.A. KARP, C. MILAZZO, *Democratic scepticism and political participation in Europe*, in «Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties», vol. 25 issue 1, 2015, pp. 97-110.

[21] *Ibidem.*

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[23] M. VALBRUZZI, *Technocratic cabinets*, in E. BERTSOU, D. CARAMANI (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 113-130.

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Xenophobia in Europe, in C. DE LA TORRE (ed.), *Handbook on Global Populism*, Routledge, London, 2018, pp. 201-215.

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[29] Cfr. D. ALBERTAZZI, D. MCDONNELL (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2008; C. MUDDE, C.R. KALTWASSER (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2012; G. BARBIERI, *The Fifth Cleavage. Genealogy of the Populist Ideology and Parties*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2021.

[30] L. MCKENZIE, «*Its not ideal*»*: Reconsidering* «*anger*» *and* «*apathy*» *in the Brexit vote among an invisible working class*, in «Competition and Change», vol. 21 issue 3, 2017, pp. 199-210.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] H. BROMLEY-DAVENPORT, J. MACLEAVY, D. MANLEY, *Brexit in Sunderland: The production of difference and division in the UK referendum on European Union membership*, in «Politics and Space», volume 37, issue 5, 2019, pp. 804, 805.

[34] H. KRIESI *et al.*, *Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared*, in «European Journal of Political Research», vol. 45, 2006, pp. 921-956.

[35] That is, they are able to claim for themselves larger shares of material resources than those available to people lower down the class structure. See F. PARKIN, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1979.

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[39] R.S. KATZ, P. MAIR, 2009, *op. cit.*

[40] B. MANIN, *op. cit.*

[41] P. IGNAZI, *The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties*, in «Party Politics», vol. 2, issue 4, 1996, p. 550.

[42] For example, in its 2018 Country Report on Italy, the European Commission noted that the old age dependency ratio stood at 34.3% and was forecast to exceed 60% by 2045 as the country's fertility rate was set to remain low. Meanwhile, thanks to the «brain drain», net immigration had been declining and in the poorer southern regions was negative – all of which pointed to the conclusion that immigration was essential to helping Italy to overcome its economic problems, especially to ensure the sustainability of the pensions system, since immigrants are on average younger than Italians and have a higher fertility rate.