

BOOK REVIEW

Absorbing the Blow: Populist Parties and their Impact on Parties and Party Systems

Edited by Steven Wolinetz and Andrej Zaslove. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International. 2018. vi+340pp. £24.95, pb. ISBN 978-1-78661-314-1

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(Received 11 December 2019; accepted 13 December 2019; first published online 14 January 2020)

Populism has fascinated scholars around the world for generations. In Europe, the progressive rise of populist actors since the 1990s – defined by Cas Mudde as the *populist zeitgeist* (2004) – resulted in a flourishing scholarship that has explored the determinants of populists' success, their programmatic and organizational features, and their policy impact. At the same time, it has shaped a heated debate over what populism, a highly contested concept, is and how it can be defined.

Within this expanding field of study, a central topic has been under researched – if not neglected: the populist impact on party systems and, potentially, on party system change. The volume edited by Steven Wolinetz and Andrej Zaslove aims to fill this gap. In doing so, it also operates a paradigmatic shift, analysing populism as an independent variable and employing it as an *explanans* rather than as the target of the investigation. The volume aims to assess the impact of populist parties on European party system through an in-depth and rich analyses of nine European countries, selected in order to maximize their variance on three partially overlapping criteria: (i) their geographic location, (ii) the size of the party system, and (iii) the overarching logic of political competition (e.g. bipolar or consensual). Thus, the case selection results in two groups of countries: one composed by simple and extended multi-party systems (Austria, Switzerland, Netherlands, Scandinavia, and Finland); and the other formed by bipolar and post-communist party systems (France, Italy, Poland, and Hungary). The editors follow a well-established tradition of collective books, initiated with the seminal book by Peter Mair and Gordon Smith (1989), exploring the transformations of main party system parameters (e.g. volatility, polarization, and patterns of government competition).

The authors share the ideational approach of Cas Mudde, in which populist parties are characterized by a 'thin-centered ideologies that combine a Manichean view of elites who are deaf to what the people really want with diverse points of view' (p. 12). After clarifying their position within the relevant literature, the two editors use the introduction to set a very parsimonious theoretical framework for the analysis of party systems change, distinguishing two analytical dimensions, that is the competition for votes and the competition for governments. According to the authors' expectations, populist parties alter the *competition for votes* among parties. They do so by increasing the salience of certain issues that are previously marginal, thus forcing parties at the core of the system to adopt an ideologically charged position. Second, the presence of increasingly relevant populist parties can change the geometry of potential governing coalitions, both expanding or limiting the usual range of candidates involved in government formation.

The single case studies offer a rich and very well-crafted analysis of European party systems' transformation. The high quality of the chapters and the abundance of illustrative, up-to-date

data constitute the main added value of the current volume. The findings largely support the editors' premise that 'populist parties in many countries have grown large enough to affect competition for votes and competition for government' (p. 275). Also, the decision to include very different case studies makes it easier to assess the *varying* impact of populist parties on party systems dynamics. For example, the authors show the limited impact that populist parties have had in the Swiss case, and they attribute it to the resilience of the consociational structure, peculiar of the Swiss system (pp. 96–97).

The *fil-rouge* of the volume rests on a functional conceptualization of populist parties within their national party system. Indeed, populist parties are conceived as: 'newcomers [that] might arrive and behave differently enough that they alter the group dynamic' (p. 3). This logic is further spelled out in the dense analytical conclusion offered by Steven Wolinetz, which builds on the results of the empirical chapters to construct a more general model of populists' impact on party systems. Borrowing from Smith (1989), the editor conceptualizes party systems as formed by: (i) a group of core parties, alternating in government and establishing the alignments of the system; (ii) the outsiders, who are challenging the core parties dominance and who will never govern, and (iii) an intermediate zone composed by 'parties that could govern or represent but don't do so often' (p. 284). Smith's framework introduced a dynamic logic in the analysis of the impact of outsiders within their party system. However, the editor's assimilation of populist and outsider parties limits the explanatory power of the theoretical framework. On one hand, Wolinetz admits the existence of 'populist insiders' – such as the Swiss SVP, the Italian FI, the Polish PiS, and the Hungarian FIDESZ – which somewhat contradicts the premises of the framework. On the other hand, the editor clusters together as outsiders a group of populist parties characterized by a quite different degree of integration within their national party systems ranging from parties never participating in governments (e.g. FN), parties offering a parliamentary support to minority governments (e.g. DF), and parties with previous governmental experiences (e.g. LN, FrP, and FPO). Moreover, the devil is in the details – or better – in the definitions and categorizations: Wolinetz's inclusion of PiS and FIDESZ within the populist category is even rejected (Casal Bertoa and Guerra, 2018, Ch. 9) or allowed with a number of caveats (Enyedi and Rona, 2018, Ch. 10) in the volume's case studies. Adding a side note on the issue of definitions, the book exclusively focuses on the populist radical right, excluding from the discussion how left-wing populism impacts on the structuring of party systems.

The interest towards a systemic approach in framing the new challenges of party competition had – recently – regained popularity in the analysis of party competition. The efforts to conceptualize the challenges brought-in by populist parties observing the transformation occurring at the core of a party system represents a very welcomed innovation on the analysis a party system change. However, the task of identifying the very meaning of what constitutes an outsider – and the strategy adopted to operationalize the concept – is not achieved by the current volume and this represents both a missed opportunity and the main weakness of a research whose main strength is the richness of the empirical data. Nowadays, populist parties spread in and out the governmental arena leaving the readers – despite the authors' efforts – with a central and unsolved question: how can we assess the transformation of their *outsiderness*?

In sum, the volume represents a mandatory reference for scholars interested in populism – especially for those who are interested in the consequences of populism. The analysis will undoubtedly stimulate further researches aiming at exploring the causal dynamics enabling the penetration of the outsider parties within the core of their national party system.

References

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