


BOOK REVIEW

## Anti-System Parties. From Parliamentary Breakthrough to Government

Edited by Mattia Zulianello, London and New York: Routledge, 2019.  
xiv+297p. GBP 115.00 hardback, eBook, GBP 33.29

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(Received 28 May 2019; accepted 5 June 2019; first published online 25 July 2019)

The study of the opposition parties in contemporary democracies has taken on a particular meaning, since Giovanni Sartori proposed the distinction between competitive and non-competitive party systems. The former are based on the rotation in power between parties with a ‘majoritarian vocation’ and with a significant experience as government incumbents. The latter, on the other hand, are often characterized by the absence of ‘efficient competition’ and by the presence of a party or coalition of parties in a dominant position, which in fact makes the alternation in power hardly possible. In this second context, it is very likely that some opposition parties will become ‘anti-system’. They are in fact not willing to accept the ‘rules of the game’, which they consider unfair, and in various ways they can push their opposition to the extreme limits of delegitimizing the political system. Zulianello’s book offers a first and extensive survey of 64 anti-system parties in 18 Western European countries over the period 1968–2017. Although Sartori applied his concept of ‘anti-system’ to the democracies of the post-WWII and Cold War period, Zulianello’s research applies it fruitfully to contemporary politics. The emergence of new populist parties raises the question whether the concept of ‘anti-system’ can be applied to them. Moreover, since the post-WWII party alignments are disintegrating everywhere and the so-called mainstream parties no longer represent the marginal sectors of society, or even the new middle class, populist parties have become a major challenge to the liberal conception of democracy. Anti-system parties are no longer the prerogative of the ‘non-competitive’ democracies, but now also appear in democracies with efficient competition.

After having clarified that ‘anti-system’ does not necessarily coincide with ‘anti-democratic’ (pp. 17–18), Zulianello tackles the problem of the identification of the anti-system parties along two dimensions. Firstly, an anti-system party is not simply an ‘anti-incumbent and policy-oriented opposition’, but it also questions ‘one or more established metapolitics’. Secondly, ‘it has not taken part in very visible cooperative interactions at the systemic level’ (p. 29). Therefore, an anti-system party is both ideologically antagonistic and non-integrated at the systemic level. The extensive research presented is an endeavour to answer three major questions: Why are the new antisystem parties able to achieve electoral sustainability? (Q1); What factors explain their evolution in terms of interaction at the systemic level? (Q2); Why do they lose electoral support transiting from anti-system status to government? (Q3) (p. 5).

The answer to Q1 is provided in Chapter 3. Electoral sustainability is operationalized as ability to maintain and consolidate a certain level of support over time, which is established at the threshold of ‘7 per cent of the votes in two general elections after breakthrough’ (p. 60). Zulianello introduces a set of variables to test the causal conditions, among which party ideology (‘prophetic’), party origin (degree of rooting of the party), and the level of intra-party conflict (the

lower the better). Findings point out that electoral sustainability of the new anti-system parties is explained by different paths including both party features (i.e. organization and ideology) and contextual conditions (i.e. electoral volatility).

Q2 is answered in Chapter 4, where Zulianello distinguishes among ‘positive integration, negative integration, or radical disembedding’ (p. 115). Positive integration (i.e. the German Greens) changes an anti-system formation into ‘a fully-fledged pro-system party’ (p. 168). Negative integration (i.e. the Danish People’s Party, DF) occurs when an anti-system party never takes part ‘directly in government, instead preferring a role as support partner’ (p. 169). Finally, radical disembedding (i.e. the Dutch Party for Freedom, PVV) is connected to ‘a path of ideological radicalization and isolationism’ (p. 170).

Q3 is tackled in Chapter 5. Are antisystem parties which transit to government ‘more vulnerable to incur in high-electoral costs?’ (p. 183). Zulianello recalls the surprising decline of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) which lost 16.9 per cent of its vote in 2002 after participation in a coalition government with the mainstream centre-right Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). Similar is the case of the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, such a setback is not generalized among the new anti-system parties which have passed the executive threshold. Syriza in Greece and National Alliance (AN), and the Northern League in Italy have not suffered similar electoral losses. The results of Zulianello’s analysis are not conducive to a univocal answer on this matter. Among the factors taken in consideration (‘consistent post-incumbency election campaign’, ‘institutional rules’, ‘type of ruling coalition’, and ‘party’s status within the coalition’), no single factor can be considered a necessary condition for a positive electoral asset after participation in government. Nonetheless, two ‘main messages’ can be drawn by this investigation: ‘First, all the parties that failed to conduct a consistent post-incumbency campaign experienced considerable electoral losses’[...]. Second, a ‘pure’ message does not explain the cases in which governing turns into electoral asset, either, [...] ‘if the party is not able to “exploit the competitive incentives set by the broader context”’ (p. 227). Indeed, other factors need to be taken into account, such as the party status in the government and the ‘environmental pressures’ which may reduce the electoral perspectives of these parties.

Zulianello’s extensive analysis deserves serious consideration both for its methodological solutions and for its conceptual insights. From the methodological point of view, Zulianello adopts ‘a mixed-methodology combining the two-major approaches to causal complexity: qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and in-depth case studies’ (p. 5). QCA is the way in which the researcher tries to solve one of the most complex puzzles of social sciences, namely the conversion of data and qualitative series into quantitative series. The basic solution to this puzzle is to build measurement scales based on a given ranking of qualitative values. For example, Zulianello treats the qualitative variable ‘level of intra-party conflict’ using a scale in which 0 = very low, 1 = considerable level, and 2 = disrupting level (Tab. 3.5, pp. 67–70, and p. 74). Nonetheless, this treatment poses two problems, which can only be briefly outlined: How are the data relating to the levels of intra-party conflict obtained? How are intermediate cases placed between the two extremes, or between any two points of the scale? Normally, the data are gathered resorting to secondary *qualitative* sources (literature and previous research studies), whose results the researcher has to judge and to evaluate. At the most, the scales are ordinal rather than cardinal, which is definitely a good achievement but not a very refined measurement. Moreover, the researcher places the cases on the continuum according to her/his own judgment. This type of problem is implicit in any research design in the field of the social sciences, because of the difficulties inherent to measurement and to generate ‘objective’ data set. However, the analysis of the logical causal conditions through Boolean algebra and logic strengthens the comparison and increases the formal rigor of its conclusions.

Also on a theoretical level, Zulianello’s book deals with some central challenges in the analysis of party systems, with innovative and stimulating solutions. The most relevant question is that of the definition of ‘anti-system’. The critical points in Zulianello’s perspective are the

operationalization of the variables and the study of their condition of relative independence. Following Maurizio Cotta, 'metapolicies' are defined as 'crucial values and/or practices of the political, social, or economic system that are enshrined by the existing order, and are so salient that play a powerful role in the structuring political competition' (p. 31). Zulianello makes it clear that parties that 'question specific policies for tactical reasons at specific points in time' are not taken into consideration, but those 'for which such an antagonistic orientation is a consistent and long-standing feature' (ibid.) are. Zulianello is aware that this option presents ambiguities for the implication of different levels of analysis, so he argues that it is preferable 'to focus on the core ideological concepts of a party' (ibid.). The critical point here, however, is that policies and ideology are two different things. A party can have a distinctly antagonistic attitude in terms of policies and a perfectly 'systemic' ideology. Conversely, another party could have an attitude to compromise and to cooperate at the policy-making level but be inspired by a totally 'anti-system' ideology (i.e. the Italian Communist Party in the early post WWII phase). Furthermore, referral to the ideological dimension is problematic in the case of populist parties, since populism is not a codified ideological doctrine.

These aspects cast shadows on the assumption that 'ideological orientation towards established metapolicies' and 'systemic integration' are independent typological dimensions (see p. 38). In fact, the degree of 'antagonism' of a party acts on the propensity of the other parties to seek cooperation with it, therefore on the possibility of its systemic integration. Moreover, systemic integration evidently depends on the relations of power and force between parties, that is, on the dynamics of the party system. If the mainstream parties are sufficiently strong to oppose the anti-system parties, their integration can be postponed, regardless of the 'ideological orientation' of these anti-system parties themselves. Conversely, if the mainstream parties are weak and do not control a parliamentary majority, it is probable that they will be forced to seek dialogue with the anti-system parties, thus facilitating their integration and forcing them to 'ideological revision' or at least to accommodation over policies.

Zulianello's research constitutes an excellent example of combining theoretical reflection and the methods of comparative politics. The book opens up new cognitive horizons and introduces brilliant interpretations that can constitute a reference point for future studies on contemporary party systems.