

## **Populism in power from the Left: Impact on welfare state development in Southern Europe**

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The 2007-8 financial shock, with the subsequent wave of austerity measures and socioeconomic crisis, brought to the fore, with renewed harshness, the long-standing challenges of Southern European welfare states. After 2008, the rise of precariousness, unemployment, poverty and social exclusion occurred in a landscape of increased political discontent and electoral volatility. In this context, Southern European party systems experienced the rise of new, or until then only marginal, challenger parties from the Left that presented themselves as alternatives to social-democracy and were characterized by marked populist traits. While this type of parties emerged across different European regions, only in the Southern one they reached relevant policy-making positions at the parliamentary and executive level: Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy were (and still are, as in the case of Podemos) all part of governmental coalitions. Given the centrality they attributed to the protection of social rights and their critique of the welfare approaches pursued by the mainstream Left, the paper investigates the following question: what policies have these parties proposed to address the contingent and structural welfare state challenges in their respective countries? The analysis also includes the case of the Left Bloc in Portugal during the ‘Geringonça’ period (2015-19) of parliamentary support to the socialist minority government. The inclusion of the Portuguese ‘negative’ (non-populist) case, while contributing to the comparative assessment of the evolution of Southern European welfare states, allows a more robust evaluation of the role played by the populist dimension for the other parties.

The paper relies on a chiefly qualitatively (but not exclusively) research design that combines the following methods: a qualitative content analysis of programmatic documents and materials retrieved from parties’ official websites, to assess what policy discourse they developed around welfare and what social risks they highlighted as most relevant; a quantitative content analysis of electoral manifestos, coded by areas of intervention (income maintenance measures and labour regulations vis-à-vis activation and social investment policies) and by policy beneficiaries (“insiders” vis-à-vis “outsiders”); finally, semi-structured interviews conducted with party elites at the parliamentary and governmental level who were involved in welfare policy-making. The parties’ programmatic positions are then compared to the policies they eventually promoted once in power. The timespan of the analysis covers the period between the outbreak of the crisis in 2008 (or the parties’ foundation, in

the cases of Podemos and the Five Star Movement) and the legislatures in which they acted as governmental partners or parliamentary allies of governing parties.

The paper finds that, despite cross-case and diachronic variation, all four parties recognized in their agenda the need to adapt existing welfare schemes to current socioeconomic challenges and new forms of social risks. At the level of concrete policy measures, albeit operating in highly constrained policy-making contexts (due to supranational or party competition factors), the bulk of their interventions focused on strengthening income maintenance schemes and standard working rights while also extending coverage to precarious and unprotected categories. While the parties' populist dimension appears connected with preferences for policy innovation, inclusiveness towards "outsiders" was common to the policy agenda of all four parties, including the non-populist Left Bloc.