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"Political Opposition":
Towards a Renewed Research Agenda

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Abstract

Despite the centrality of political opposition in democracy, limited theoretical research has been conducted on this issue since the 1970s. However, the previous context of conceptualizing has dramatically changed. This article offers a new perspective on political opposition in contemporary democracies. After a critical review of the classic and contemporary literature on the subject, it proposes a renewed definition of opposition that better grasps the complexity of political opposition in democracies. In addition, the article proposes setting a new agenda for future research on political opposition.

As Schapiro put it in one of his famous works, "it is perhaps too obvious to require stating that the process of government must be studied not only in the light of what those with power under their control try to do and actually achieve; but also with regard to those who oppose those aims, or whose interests and resistance have to be conciliated before those in power can act" (Schapiro 1966: 2). Indeed, one of the fundamental bases for the development of democracy is the recognition of rights for political and social actors to publicly criticize and challenge the government, its actions, and policies (Helms 2008 a: 6-19). In this perspective, whoever is interested in studying democracy is compelled to tackle, in one way or another, the question of political opposition (Zellentin 1967: 416-435), which one of the greatest political theorists of our times has defined as the first axis constituting polyarchies, alongside the inclusion/participation axis (Dahl 1971). Hence, it is not surprising that the topic has drawn the attention of numerous scholars who have dealt with the question from different perspectives.[1]

However, despite the very wide range of studies dealing with the notion of opposition, it also appears strikingly that, since the seminal works of Dahl (1966), Ionescu and de Madariaga (1968), and Schapiro (1972) in the late sixties and early seventies, political opposition has generally "been studied within a larger framework: as a co-subject, usually included in the study of power, government, parliaments, parties, social movements" (De Giorgi 2007: 7). Forty years later, the remark of Ionescu and de Madariaga (1968: 2) still holds true: "very few works have ever dealt with [opposition] specifically and exclusively". This lack of studies is even more blatant when it comes to theoretical contributions (Neunreither 1998: 423). Except for the chapters of Blondel (1997: 462-486) and Helms (1997) most of the works on opposition have indeed been case studies lacking theoretical inference and Dahl and Ionescu's works remain the benchmark in comparative studies on the subject (Pulzer 1987). This observation, which is already as such an incentive to reconsider the question from a

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[1] We can roughly distinguish five branches of the literature that focused on the topic: political theory –e.g. Dahl (1966), Sartori (1966); Schapiro (1972) ; Ionescu and De Madariaga (1968); comparative politics –see Blondel (1997); Helms (2004); transition theories –Stepan (1997); Spence (2007) and case studies on non-democratic regimes – Schapiro (1967); Mutalib (2000); Carbone (2003); Barber (1997) ; Franklin (2002); Leca (1997); Hlavacek and J. Holzer (2009); and social movements literature - see Weigle and Butterfield (1992); Kolinsky (1987).

theoretical perspective, is reinforced by the fact that the context, in which opposition had originally been conceptualized—Western democracies based on strong political parties acting in a supposedly powerful political arena—has changed in dramatic ways. The democratization of ex-authoritarian states, the regionalization of unitarian states, the development of a supranational structure at the European level, and changes both in the executive-legislative relationships (Andeweg 1992; Copeland and Patterson 1994; Costa et al 2002; Norton 1990) and in the roles performed by parties (Katz and Mair 1995; Ignazi, Farrell and Römmele 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2007) are important reasons to consider new theoretical questioning on opposition.

Finally, as shown in this article, most of the studies on opposition have tended to focus on limited dimensions of opposition and have used constricted approaches, hence engendering a narrow perspective (generally neo-institutionalist or functionalist) on the question of opposition as well as very restrictive range of research questions.

Starting from these observations, this article aims to offer a new perspective on political opposition. This article starts with a critical assessment of classical and contemporary literature on opposition. We argue that various dimensions, actors and types of relations have been neglected, due to three main biases: a normative definition of the opposition and its roles; a restricted definition of the actors seen as opposition actors; and finally, a narrow definition of the locus of opposition that is usually studied. In the second part, we propose a new definition of opposition and identify some fruitful avenues for future research.

This article does not cover all the aspects of "opposition" but rather focuses on the notion of "political opposition", hence including actors other than political parties but excluding non-organized actors as well as discontent expressed by individual actors outside the public sphere. Moreover, the aim is not to address the full issue of checks and balances in democracy. Indeed, limiting the research object is a prerequisite if we want to provide a new definition and reflections on opposition. Finally, although we focus here on democratic regimes where the freedom of speech for opposition actors is recognized, we deliberately make some links with non-democratic regimes. The definition we propose could work both for democratic and non-democratic regimes and the research agenda could be useful for the study of democracies but also of the democratization process.

A critical state of the art: rethinking the notion of opposition

This section highlights the limits of existing literature on opposition. A first step (1.1.) is to focus on the way the "classic literature" studied the concept of opposition as this literature still constitutes the fundamental theoretical reference for contemporary scholars. The following parts show both the legacy of the classic literature to contemporary studies, and the most important biases which the latter has engendered: a normative and a restrictive approach to opposition, in terms of actors (1.2.) and the opposition's action repertoires (1.3.) that are studied as well as the sites of opposition considered by the literature (1.4.)

The contribution of classic literature

The concept of political opposition has rarely been rigorously defined. A study of classic literature on opposition provides a quite nebulous and extensive definition. Sometimes assimilated to checks and balances, to institutionalized conflicts, or to minority parties, opposition is not easily determined. Most often, the notion is used as a relative term, referring to a relationship: "standing in some form of disagreement to another body" (Norton, 2008:236). And indeed, Dahl defines it in a very simple way: there is opposition when B is opposed to the conduct of government A (Dahl 1966: 18), whereas Ionescu and de Madariaga (1968: 1) see it as "logically and morphologically…., the dialectic counterpart of power". However, despite this very broad and inclusive definition, the majority of classic scholars have tended to comprehend opposition in a rather restrictive and normative way.

On the one hand, when classifying and studying political opposition in a more empirical way, classic authors have generally attributed more emphasis to one specific kind of political opposition, namely the parliamentary opposition, which was presented by Ionescu and de Madariaga (1968: 9) as the "most advanced and institutionalized form of political conflict". On the other hand, historically and culturally embedded in the specific post-second World War context and that of the Cold War, this literature holds quite a normative dimension when discussing the "roles" or "functions" of opposition. Indeed, many classical scholars more or less implicitly differentiated a "normal" form of opposition, understood as "an organized political group, or groups,

of which the aim is to oust the government in power and to replace it by one of its own choosing" (Schapiro 1967), from its would be "deviant form". Kirchheimer (1964) for instance distinguished three different modes of opposition:

"classic" or "loyal" opposition, offering alternatives to the chosen policies while recognizing the government's right to govern and the constitutional system in place;

"principled" opposition, opposing both the policies of the government and the constitutional requirements of the political system; and finally,

"elimination of opposition" where the minority group competes with the incumbent for power but cease to present alternative projects.

During the same period, Sartori (1966) constructed an axis of opposition with a "real opposition" on one end of it and an anti-system form of opposition on the other. Following his words, the first one "presupposes consent on fundamentals, that is, consent at the community and regime level", opposes "the government, not the political system as such" (Sartori 1966: 151) and acts quietly and constructively, by opposing but not obstructing. In contrast, the anti-system opposition challenges the very legitimacy of the regime as it is and acts "irresponsibly" for it has no chance to be called to power and to exercise it.

This perspective has clearly left its mark on the contemporary studies on opposition. A first consequence has been that most scholars have integrated a very limited range of actors under the label of "political opposition". The second consequence has been to presume that opposition actors only have very specific roles or functions and strictly defined objectives –taking power-, leading to a restrictive vision of the activities of the opposition. Thirdly, the definitions provided by the classic literature have led studies to envisage the first (and only) locus of opposition as being the parliament, hence narrowing the scope of analysis. These dimensions have engendered a limited questioning in terms of research, which was further reinforced by the neo-institutionalist turn after the 1980s.

Excluding actors from the study of opposition.

Starting from the classic premises that the opposition's major and specific function would be to form an alternative government and to offer alternative legislation, the literature on opposition has excluded a range of oppositional actors from the analysis.

First of all, a majority of studies consider opposition as

quasi-homogeneously composed of the minority parliamentary actors who failed to join the government (Helms 2008 a; Surel 2004: 163). This posture seems however very questionable. On the one hand, it seems insufficient to consider opposition only as a minority-majority relation within the parliament, for many more possibilities of political opposition actors and relations can be envisaged. As Andeweg (1992) and Norton (2008: 244-246) have shown, drawing on King's typologies, the relation of political opposition can indeed include a wide scope of situations: the opposition mode, which is the one where the majority opposes the minority; the inter-party mode which refers to an opposition from a party in the coalition; the intra-party mode, which is an opposition within a party against a policy, or put in other words, a "competitive factionalism" (Boucek 2009); the non-party mode that involves different actors who unit independently from their party affiliation against a government policy; the cross-party mode, which refers to the processes or loci where political parties in opposition achieve consensus over specific policies. In that perspective, opposition includes much more than the sole relation between the minority and the government.

On the other hand, an analysis restricted to the parties excluded from the government appears to be biased as the opposition is not only the government's counterpart. It is for instance very difficult to distinguish in a traditional approach the majority and the so-called "minority excluded from power" in the Nordic countries, where minority governments rely on opposition support (on an ad-hoc or more permanent basis) or in Switzerland, where opposition parties tend to be co-opted (Christiansen and Damgaard 2010; Kerr 1978: 52). Similarly, the government-opposition divide does not appear within the EU system, where the parliamentary opposition structured around the pro/anti-integration dimension cannot pretend to come into power (Brack 2010; Mair 2007: Neunreither 1998). This configuration is of course absent in non-democratic regimes where the impossibility to take power does not preclude the apparition of opposition forces (Carbone 2003).

Secondly, following and simplifying classical typologies—especially that of Sartori—the literature on opposition has quasi systematically differentiated regular and legitimate opposition from the so-called anti-system parties. This has progressively led to the establishment of two separate and very rarely connected fields of studies: on the one hand, that on mainstream parties acting as opposition parties in the parliament, and on

the other, that on "anti-system" parties, usually considered as protest actors using different modes of action in the political arena, and outside the parliament. For instance, on the basis of the classic premises on opposition, Norton contends that two broad categories of opposition exist: accepting the legitimacy of the state and agreeing to work in the structures provided by the constitution and not accepting the legitimacy of the state and opposing to it (Norton 2008: 236), hence crystallizing the barrier between the supposed two existing types of opposition.

This *a priori* distinction between both types of actors seems inconsistent in many respects. From a purely theoretical perspective, we need to admit both the normativity and relativity of discriminating between "constitutional" and "unconstitutional" groups or between system and anti-system actors. As Dahl himself highlighted in 1973, when writing on the perception of opposition in hegemonic regimes: "if all opposition are treated as dangerous and subject to repression, opposition that would be loyal if it were tolerated becomes disloyal because it is not tolerated" (1973:13). This relativity but also the impact of the majority's behaviour on these political forces was more recently further investigated and confirmed by Kaufman (2011), who showed how the majority in Israel had contributed through its discourse and institutional tactics to establish Israeli Arab parties as "anti-system" actors. On the same issue, Pizzorno (1997) also showed the relative aspect of the labelling as anti-system, by demonstrating that a party (in this case, the Italian Communist Party) may be seen as seeking to obstruct the government, while the party defines itself as working within the system. Hence, a political actor cannot be considered as objectively anti-system and what rather counts is whether these parties "are treated in practice, as 'outsiders'. … regarded by the other parties in the system as unacceptable allies"(Mair 1996: 93).

From an empirical perspective, there is no justification either for including these opposition forces in a category labelled as "anti-system". Mair showed that in the case of the European Union, parties may be pushed to adopt an anti-system rhetoric due to a lack of rights to organize opposition within the system: "following Kirchheimer, in other words, we either submit and hence we accept the elimination of opposition, or we mobilize an opposition of principle" (Mair 2007: 7). In addition. Ionescu and de Madariaga already pointed out in 1968, we observe that parties which have a very critical rhetorical appeal against the system as a whole, in fact

tend to compete in elections and, when elected, to "accept the rules of the game" (Ionescu and de Madariaga 1968: 83). This was for instance the case of the French and the Italian communist parties, which despite their status of an "anti-system" party, contributed to the passing of many laws after the 1970s, amongst which constitutional reforms and the transformation of economic structures (Pizzorno 1997: 649) This is also the case of regionalist parties that often play the democratic game and de-radicalize their agenda once they are represented in parliament (Elias 2009), or of some eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament that use the same modes of action as the other opposition parties (Bomberg and Carter 2006; Brack 2010). Consequently, without denying the relevance of studying these actors per se, it seems problematic when it leads to the creation of a conceptual barrier between these supposed outsiders and the actors considered as the "real legitimate and institutionalized" opposition.

A narrow perspective on the opposition's action repertoires

The influence of the opposition classical definition has also regularly engendered a restrictive and normative conception of the objectives and strategies of the opposition and hence of its activities. In the narrowest perspective, opposition has been defined as highly institutionalized, with a clearly defined and recognized status and whose role or "function" is to be the opposite of the government (Norton 2008: 237). The classical example is the Westminster model where the loyal Opposition in the House of Commons takes its role as an alternative government, "complete with shadow ministers, a shadow cabinet and at least the shadow of a legislative program" (Milnor and Franklin 1973: 423). In a less restrictive approach, authors have conceived opposition as the parties excluded from the government, whose primary function is to prepare an alternative government and whose two major objectives would be conquering power (King 1976 cited in Norton 2008: 238) in the long run and influencing the legislative agenda in the short term.

These basic assumptions first seem biased because of their normativity and their functionalist tendency to ask questions in terms of roles and functions. They are also empirically problematic as they lead scholars to focus on the influence of the opposition on the legislative agenda at the expense of the study of other strategies and modes of opposition action (Special issue

of the Journal of Legislative Studies 2008; Mujica and Sanchez-Cuenca 2006). As more recent works underlined, opposition groups can have a multiplicity of objectives besides preparing for another government and offering alternative policies. For instance, in compound societies, the wish to channel the peripheral groups' voice and concerns can surpass the willingness of the opposition to conquer power or to influence the legislative process as such (Parry 1997). Opposition forces can also wish to play the role of a "safety valve" (Sartori 1966: 150) by making the majority and the government responsive and accountable before the parliament and the people.[2]Instead of offering alternative policies, an opposition can also choose to collaborate with the majority to reform the system or to legitimize itself in the public sphere (Mujica and Sanchez-Cuenca 2006). For instance, authors noted in the case of the Netherlands, the tendency of opposition parties to oppose only a small proportion of the government's proposals due to their capacity to influence the bills before the final vote (Andeweg and Irwin 2002). It can also act in order to politicize a contentious question, to give prominence to certain values and ideologies or to raise awareness within the public on a specific question. Finally, in some occasions, opposition actors can prefer, for ideological or tactical reasons, to stay outside the executive or even the parliament, in order to provide the citizens with an alternative vision of the regime. Hence, and depending on their long-terms and short-terms goals, opposition actors can mobilize a whole range of action repertoires, which should be taken into account.

A closed arena: the parliament as the mainstay of opposition

A third consequence of the normative stance vis-à-vis opposition is the very obvious focus of the literature on one particular site of opposition: the parliament. On this topic, Giulj (1980, 1981) went as far as to assert that "the development of an extra-parliamentary opposition, if it prolongs over a long period, is a sign of dysfunction, which can jeopardize the whole system". Recently, several authors like Blondel (1997) have encouraged researchers to look at the extra-parliamentary dimension of political opposition but, except some rare

exceptions (Kramm 1986; Dubrow and Tomescu 2004), most of the studies have continued to focus on the minority-majority relation within the national legislative arena, on the impact of institutional constraints on this relation and on the importance of these constraints on the participation in the legislative process (Holzhacker 2005; Kopecky and Spirova 2008). However, if the parliament is the privileged locus for the institutionalization of political action in our contemporary democracies, it seems very limiting to consider the parliament as the sole place of political opposition action.

Firstly, because the role and structure of the legislature are not the same across countries and the strategies of parliamentary opposition might vary according to the relative strength and functioning of the institution. In some cases, the codes and norms of conduct foreclose the expression of opposition within the chamber but these constraints set into motion various oppositions outside the parliament (Kerr 1978: 53). This element is especially relevant, in a context of multi-level governance (regionalization and supranationationalization), in which there are multiple institutionalized sites of opposition and centres of decision. This indeed affects the government and the opposition as well as their relations and dynamics (Friedrich 1996).

Secondly, political parties and political actors in general also act as opponents outside the assembly. On the one hand, as has already been mentioned, opposition parties represented in the parliament can act as an opposition force through extra-parliamentary tools besides the parliamentary ones. Consequently, as Kerr stressed (1978: 53), "an accurate portrayal of the patterns of conflicts and consensus within parliamentary arena must be sensitive to the patterns of political opposition generated by political activity outside Parliament". On the other hand, political forces that do not succeed in being elected in the national arena can nonetheless continue to carry out oppositional activities. This is for instance the case for small or niche political parties, which fail in passing the electoral threshold or which compete only at one level of representation in multi-level systems, or for parties that deliberately choose to remain outside of the parliament. Despite their absence from the assembly, they are still able to use the above-mentioned extra-parliamentary tools at their disposal to oppose the elites, the government and its policies or the regime.

Thirdly, with the crisis of representation and participation, we can assume that political actors do not have the monopoly on the perception of being the sole "legitimate representatives" of those opposing the gov-

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2   Lavau for instance developed the notion of a 'tribune function' (fonction tribunitienne) for the French Communist party: it can fuel the debate on some issues and make the citizens aware of some policies, through the use of the media although the party as such can not oppose or influence the governmental policy. See Lavau (1981) (in particular 342-356) and Lavau (1968).

ernment. As Parry (1997) briefly mentioned, multiple oppositions can be found in lobbies and civil society. If the latter has been much analyzed as an actor of opposition in democratization studies (Stepan 1997; Kopecky and Spirova 2008), we should not overlook it in democratic regimes.

Toward a renewed framework for the study of opposition

Without denying the relevance and the importance of the previous studies of political opposition, the mainstream perspective seems, nevertheless, too restrictive for the above-mentioned reasons. In this part of the article, we offer a new framework for the analysis of opposition. First we provide a renewed definition of the concept of political opposition. Afterwards, potential paths for new research questions are developed.

Rethinking opposition: a new definition

In order to both overcome the normative biases and the restrictive perspective on opposition, it is first necessary to go back to the essence of the concept. On the basis of Dahl's (1966, 1973) and Ionescu's (1968) definitions, there is opposition when actor A opposes actor B in government. We offer a definition of opposition that departs from its fundamental characteristic—i.e. its position towards the government. Taking the positioning (rather than the type of actors, the functions, or the supposed locus) of opposition as a criterion should allow us to adopt a renewed and more neutral vision of opposition which would not exclude activities, actors, or sites.

From these premises, we offer the following definition of political opposition:
a disagreement with the government or its policies, the political elite, or the political regime as a whole, expressed in public sphere, by an organized actor through different modes of action

We deliberately choose an inclusive definition of the concept of political opposition that remains relational but is not based on its functions, targets or objectives. Following the ladder of abstraction of Sartori (1970), this extensive definition allows a more inclusive and general concept from which configurative conceptualizations can be found by decreasing its extension and increasing its intension. To reflect on this perspective, the unit of analysis of this contribution will not be referred to as

"opposition" in the singular anymore but rather as "oppositions", hence implying a much wider spectrum of possibilities in terms of actors, relations and eventually, sites of action.

Towards a New Research Agenda on political oppositions

Starting from this broader definition of oppositions, we offer new research questions that should be able to overcome previous limitations: the barrier between the studies of anti-system and "normal" oppositions; the restricted view on the opposition action repertoires and modalities of action, and the sole focus on the parliament as a site of opposition.

Firstly, in order to overcome the pre-cited normative postulate which takes for granted the existence of a "normal" form and of "normal" objectives of the opposition, we decompartmentalize the literature on opposition and on anti-system actors and we claim that the study of opposition should focus more on dynamic analysis. In contrast to the usual perspective that has led scholars to study anti-system actors as deviant ones, we offer a new track in the study of these actors. More precisely, along with Mair's (1996: 93) claim that "'anti-systemness', like beauty, [here] lies in the eyes of the beholder" we argue for the need to further analyze the precise effects of perceptions induced by labelling processes on opposition actors in general and on so-called anti-system actors in particular. Building upon existing studies, we argue that being labelled as either "pro-system" or "system-rejective" (Shtromas 1981) by actors such as the political majority, the legislation, the courts, or the media. may have major consequences on these actors. Amongst these can be: a direct (de-) legitimizations process of these actors vis-à-vis the public (Mutz 2007); a consequent process of self-redefinition of these actors; and finally, the resort to specific strategies and modalities of action. Indeed, Bale (2007) for instance demonstrated that the quasi-institutional exclusion of extreme rights parties through the establishment of a "cordon sanitaire" had tended to produce unintended consequences such as the adoption by these actors of a martyr rhetoric and image, which in turn reinforced their anti-establishment posture. These findings confirm the very relational dimension of the "anti-system" form of opposition already stressed by Dahl (1966, 1973) and Mair (1996) amongst others but also emphasize the importance of perceptions and self-perceptions on the stances, modalities of action and strategies—including amongst others rhetorical strate-

gies (Trenz and De Wilde 2009)—that are resorted to by opposition actors. These insights should encourage further research on the impact of labeling, perceptions, and self-perceptions on the oppositions.

Secondly, to better grasp all kinds of oppositions, their modalities and sites of action, it is necessary to consider the parliament as a site with permeable borders involved in social dynamics and likely to build on extra-parliamentary forces and vice versa. Some recent works have indeed demonstrated that in the context of de-pillarization, non-parliamentary oppositions could turn into competitors of parliamentary oppositions or have an impact on the parliamentary chain of governance (Andeweg et al 2010: 84; Christiansen and Damgaard 2010: 50), underlying the interdependence between parliamentary and non-parliamentary oppositions. More substantial to our questioning, other studies have enlightened that opposition coalitions could very be well formed between parties and extra-parliamentary forces like social movements (Crespy 2010a; Tarrow 1994).

Drawing on these insights, we encourage studying to what extent parliamentary and extra-parliamentary oppositions have complementary or competitive strategies; how they collaborate and to what extent one type of actors build on other opposition actors (for instance, how parliamentary forces mobilize citizens and vice versa), or tools in order to make its claims heard. In this perspective, the focus on language and rhetoric is one possible path to follow. One of the main characteristics of democratic politics is indeed its distinctive medium of decision-making: deliberation, which implies that decisions are taken through a process of contradictory discussions and debates (Rousselier 1997: 17-19; Schelder 1996). Whereas the literature on anti-politics and populist actors pays attention to language and rhetoric, it has generally been overlooked by studies on opposition. However, a more systematic and thorough analysis of language and rhetoric could lead to a better understanding of oppositions, including their strategies and modalities of action. Acknowledging the importance of language, Crespy (2010b) for instance showed on the basis of discursive institutionalism, how the frame of "democracy" and "social Europe" played the role of common denominator, which rendered possible an opposition alliance against the Bolkestein Directive between parties in the parliament together with social movements. This kind of studies would be worth being developed further.

Another possibility would be to grant more attention to the nature and the saliency of the issues debated in the political arena. Several authors indeed demonstrated the relevance of issues as a key variable for the study of opposition in the parliament. Kerr for instance, categorized oppositions along issues, showing in the Swiss case that they can lead to different types of opposition (Kerr 1978). De Giorgi (2007), Mujica and Sanchez-Cuenca (2006) for their part, showed empirically how parliamentary oppositions can behave and react differently in their votes and collaboration with the majority depending on the nature of the issues that are debated. Holzhacher (2002:472), studying the case of the Netherlands, finally displayed the presence of temporary "floating coalitions" between some parties of the government and members of the opposition in parliament to change the government proposals, notably on European issues. It would be relevant to further develop this perspective to question the impact of issues on the emergence of political oppositions within and outside the parliament, on the alliances between oppositions, and on the repertoires of action.

A last possible track of research, which could help go over the parliamentary boundaries and better grasp the interconnections with the extra-parliamentary sphere would be to focus on the ways in which oppositions mobilize parliamentary and extra-parliamentary tools, channels and actors. For instance, the interrelation of opposition forces with organizations outside the parliament or with the media, which can constitute a powerful agent in agenda-setting (McCombs 2004; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006), should deserve more attention. However, the way demonstrations or referenda are used to oppose specific government policies would also deserve more attention. Direct democracy tools have indeed been used by opposition actors in order to mobilize the population against the government on specific policies such as European issues, environment or ethics (Andeweg, De Winter and Müller 2002; Bomberg 2001; Papadopoulos 2001). Developing these topics could provide us with a more in-depth comprehension of oppositional strategies. The reverse question could also be asked, i.e., how do extra-parliamentary actors resort to parliamentary opposition means. This question requires further research and study.

Finally, the context in which opposition has been theorized has significantly evolved and one notable change affecting oppositions deals with multilevel governance. In order to better grasp the range of oppositions' modalities of actions, following Friedrich (1996) we argue

that the effects induced by federalism and multi-level governance on opposition forces should be considered. Despite the seemingly narrow interest in political parties, broad spectrums of questions arise from the different levels of power and opposition. For example, in the case of incongruent coalitions, where a party is governing at one level and opposing at another, the impact of this configuration on opposition can be analysed. Indeed, as has been shown in the case of political parties in multilayered political systems, the existence of different levels of power can lead to different choices of strategies of representation (Deschouwer 2005). In the same perspective, the analysis can show whether depending on the level of power, different spheres of decisions (supra or infra-national) lead to differentiated strategies, opposition coalitions, routes of influence (Braghiroli 2008; Raunio 2000), discourses, or perceptions by the public.

Conclusion

Despite the very common use of the notion of "opposition", few articles have concentrated on this topic specifically since the 1970s and even less articles have provided a theoretical reflection on the notion. Moreover, most of the recent articles on opposition have analyzed it from a strict perspective, usually with a (neo-) institutional focus. Starting from this notable observation, this article offered a critical state of the literature on opposition in order to rethink the way this subject has been studied. A first step was to look at the classical research on opposition to assess its impact on the way contemporary scholars have analyzed this topic. We highlighted three frequent biases both present in classical and contemporary literature: a restrictive view on the actors understood as opposition forces; a normative and limited view of the opposition's repertoires of action; and a restrained a priori on its locus of mobilization.

Without denying neither the relevance nor the importance of studying the parliamentary opposition forces and its relations with the majority in power, such focus is on the one hand too constraining, especially in light of the developments that have taken place in the last decades and, on the other hand, often too normative being based on the allegedly "normal" functions that an opposition should fulfil.

We offered a broader definition of opposition in order to better grasp its different components and dimensions in terms of actors, sites of action and roles. In this perspective, the notion of opposition should be understood as a stance of disagreement expressed in the public sphere by mobilized actors, through different modes of action, the target of discontent being the government or its policies,the political elite, or the political regime as a whole. The broadening of the definition of this concept should allow overcoming the biases mentioned in the first section of this paper.

Finally, on the basis of the proposed definition, new research questions have been offered, which take into account the critiques that we raised. Hence, we suggest opening reflections on the role and impact of labeling and discourses on opposition actors, in order to get a more dynamic perspective on oppositions; on the elements (issues, representation of issues etc.) engendering possible coalitions of oppositions crossing the parliamentary borders; and finally on the multiplicity of "opposition levels". These new questions and perspectives may help overcome the underlined flaws of the literature and widen its scope to better grasp the complexity and multiple dimensions of contemporary oppositions.

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