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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TIMES OF CRISIS: SUCCESS OR DECLINE OF THE LEFT?

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ABSTRACT: The crisis that especially since the 2008 has shown the deep weakness of the capitalistic economic model induces to reflect on the role of the radical left parties and on their capacity to propose alternative policies, interpreting the citizens' demands. Starting from these premises this article analyses three parties of the radical left party family- United Left, Left Freedom and Ecology and Syriza- that act respectively in Spain, Italy and Greece, three of the European democracies most affected by the social consequences of the crisis. The article proposes a diachronic comparison of the three parties' policy proposals, organizational model and strategies in order to explain their greater or lesser ability to attract consensus in the last years.

KEYWORDS: Economic crisis; radical Left; United Left; Syriza; Left, Freedom and Ecology.

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1. Introduction

Faced with the economic crisis that in recent years has involved almost all European countries, most of the governments of advanced democracies, whether they are centre-right or centre-left, have responded by introducing austerity policies aimed to maintain an economic model that, more than in the past, has shown profound weaknesses. In this context what has been the reaction of the radical left parties? From a

theoretical point of view precisely radical left parties (RLPs) should be among those political forces able to offer an economic and social programme alternative to the contemporary and diffused austerity trend. Indeed «they reject the underlying socio-economic structures of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices; they advocate alternative economic and power structures involving a major redistribution of resources from existing political elites» and finally they identify «the economic inequality as the basis of existing political and social arrangements» espousing «collective economic and social rights as their principal agenda» (March 2011, 8-9). Consequently, in conjunction of one of the most deep economic crisis of capitalism, have RLPs been able to intercept from the society the requests of social and economic equality expressed very clearly through large and widespread mobilizations in many European countries?

In order to answer these questions, we propose a comparison of the three parties belonging to the radical left, United Left (Izquierda Unida, IU), Left, Ecology and Freedom (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, SEL) and Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza), respectively active in Spain, Italy and Greece, some of the European democracies most affected by the consequences of the economic crisis. In the light of the recent economic decline and the growing public distrust in politics in all three democracies, a diachronic comparison is proposed, through the party documents and the sectorial literature, of policy proposals, organizational characteristics and strategies adopted by political parties. The main research aim is to identify the similarities and the differences between the three parties that explain their different electoral trend in the last years: the rapid political success of Syriza, the electoral recovery of IU and the progressive marginalization of SEL.

2. Mediterranean Democracies between economic crisis and distrust in politics

Greece, Spain and Italy are among those European countries most affected by the consequences of the international economic crisis started in 2008¹. In the three democracies the crisis has taken on different characteristics and variable intensities depending both on their domestic political and structural economic characteristics and on the period considered.

¹ In this study we did not consider the case of Portugal mainly because in this country there are not recent relevant changes in relation to the radical left.

In Greece the economic decline started since the 2008, after a decade characterized by 3.9% average annual increase of GDP and a progressive reduction of the official unemployment rate (from 12% in 1999 to 8.3% in 2007) (Pagoulatos and Triantopoulos 2009, 36). At the end of 2009, with the intensification of the financial crisis and after the revelation of the real condition of the national public finances (the budget deficit was 15.7% decisively higher than that declared by the previous Greek government and the national debt was over 112% of GDP) Greece suffered the downgrading of its sovereign credit rating to junk status (Bosco and Verney 2012; Lavdas, Litsas and Skiadas 2013). In 2011, after the intervention of the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund) and the consequent austerity measures, Greece continued to experience negative growth (-7.1%); the unemployment rate was 17.9%, becoming 27.5% in 2013; the public debt rose up to 170.6% of GDP and, after a temporary reduction in 2012, it reached 174.9% of GDP in 2013; between 2011-2013 the budget deficit was over 8.5% of GDP (Eurostat data).

From 1995 to 2007 also the Spanish economy was growing registering 3.6% average annual increase of GDP (Field and Botti 2013, 4). However in 2009, with the convergence of the international economic crisis and the real estate market bubble-burst, the GDP dropped to -3.8% and, despite a slight recovery in 2011, it remained negative in the next two years. Similarly the unemployment rate passed from 8.2% in 2007 to 21.4% in 2011 and 26.1% in 2013. The budget deficit as a percentage of GDP was 4.5% in 2008, reached its peak in 2009 (11.2%), decreasing slightly in the next two years and growing up to 10.3% in 2012. The public debt passed from 40.2% of GDP in 2008 to 92.1% of GDP in 2013 (Eurostat data).

Finally Italy, although being the fourth largest economy in the EU, in the decade prior to 2008 had an annual average growth of 1.5%. With the beginning of the crisis, the economy slowed down further, recovering temporarily in 2010 (1.7% of GDP) (Verney and Bosco 2013, 400-401). However the fear of a Greek default evidenced the Italian unresolved problem of public debt (from 2007 to 2012 it went from 103.3% of GDP to 127% of GDP), making more urgent structural reforms and austerity measures and prevented expansive policies necessary to counteract the negative effects on the real economy (Bosco and Verney 2012). In 2012 the economy shrank by 2.5% and in 2013 by 1.9, while the unemployment rate went from 6.7% in 2008 to 12.2% in 2013 (Eurostat data).

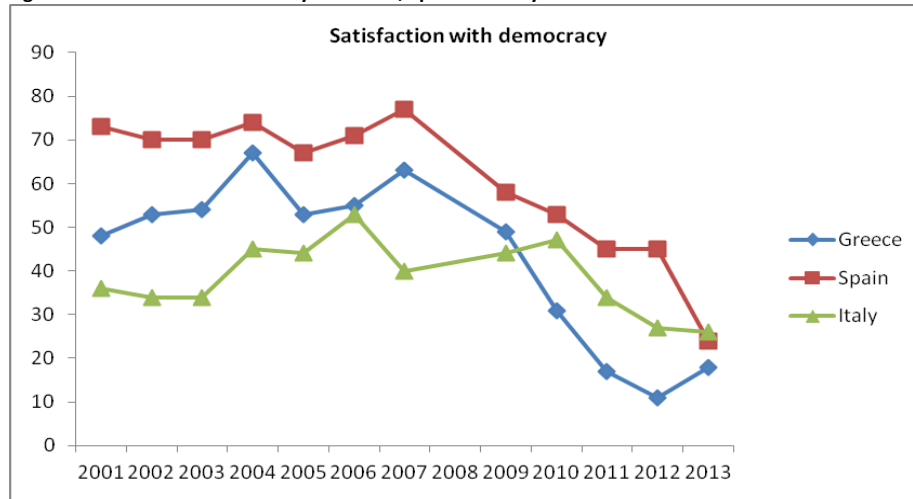
Despite the necessary differentiations, in all three democracies the economic and social difficulties have not been without consequences on the domestic political dynamics and party systems. Indeed, according to the literature on «economic voting», voters evaluate in retrospect the government parties, punishing them when the econ-

omy and their previous performance in this sector are perceived as negative (Kramer 1983; Lewis Beck and Stegmaier 2007). More generally, citizens' perception of both economic decline and lack of political responsiveness to the social and economic consequences can also contribute to reduce the public institutional trust (Torcal 2014), widening the distance between citizens and representatives and threatening, in the most extreme cases, the legitimacy of the political and economic system (Roth, Nowak Lehemann and Otter 2011). Disaffected voters may support the established opposition party, nurture resentment against all mainstream parties and turn to populist, peripheral or radical challengers, or still they may protest through no institutional channels, external to the electoral arena (Kriesi 2012, 519).

In all three democracies the consequences on political dynamics became manifest in 2011 with the worsening of the crisis: in Spain the early elections of 2011 decreed the crushing defeat of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) in favour of the Popular Party (PP), the main opposition party; in Italy and Greece, the extreme weakness of the government majority and the growing impatience of the public opinion led to the formation of new governments, supported by alternative majorities already present in their respective Parliaments (Bosco and Verney 2012).

In the three countries between 2008 and 2013 the citizens' trust in government declined sharply: in Spain it went from 55% to 8%; in Greece it dropped from 34% to 9%, with an increase in 2009 (44%), and in Italy from 15% to 11%, increasing temporary to 25% in 2009-2010. In the previous five years in Spain and Greece the percentage had never been lower than 40%, while in Italy it had oscillated between 34% and 23%. Furthermore also the low confidence of Spaniards, Greeks and Italians in national parties recently sloped down further: in Greece it went from 25% of 2006 to 17% in 2008 and 4% in 2013; In Italy it passed from 26% in 2006 to 13% in 2008 and 7% in 2013; in Spain the rate was traditionally higher than in the other two countries (with a peak of 40% in 2008) but it also collapsed to 5% in 2013 (EB series 2003-2013). In general, observing the data on the citizens' satisfaction with democracy in the three countries during the last decade (Fig. 1), it is possible to see a common significant decline since the last few years. In Spain and Greece it started since 2009 and in Italy, where the percentage was already lower, shortly after. Since 2011 this dissatisfaction has led to the emergence of large and intense protests, the increase of abstention, or the formation of new political forces, often anti-party and sometimes characterized by extreme right and racist ideology (Bosco and Verney 2012).

Fig. 1 Satisfaction with democracy in Greece, Spain and Italy 2001-2013



Source: Eurobarometer series

If the far-right parties have been and continue to be extensively studied, less attention has been devoted to the analysis of those belonging to the radical left. The RLPs pursue systemic change of capitalism and, although often labelled by their political opponents as extremist forces, accept the rules of representative democracy, participating in electoral contests and appearing often in coalition with the centre-left political forces. At the same time they are interpreters of a broader concept of direct democracy based on participation and inclusion of marginalized social groups within the political system. RLPs oppose the neo-liberal economic model of development, proposing a system where the political intervention is aimed to limit the social inequalities produced by the market and where the redistribution of resources is necessary and inevitable (March 2008, 3). They are contrary to the processes of globalization, express reservations about European integration focused solely on the unification of markets, and often politicize post-materialistic themes (Olsen, Kob and Hough 2010, 7). In front of one of the most intense crises of capitalism that has taken place in the course of history, were these parties able to intercept the protest and dissatisfaction of citizens by increasing their political consensus? In order to answer this question, this article will focus on the analysis of three RLPs: United Left (IU) in Spain, SYRIZA in Greece and Left, Ecology and Freedom (SEL) in Italy.

3. The radical left in times of crisis

IU, SYRIZA and SEL have solid leftish political traditions, but they have established themselves as autonomous organizations just recently and in different periods. IU emerged in 1986 as a coalition of parties, with a dominant component of the old Communist Party of Spain (PCE) (Stefuriuc and Verge, 2008); SYRIZA was born in 2004, also as an alliance between several parties led by the Coalition of the Left, ecology and social movements (SYN), and then transformed in 2013 in a unitary party (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013); SEL established itself in 2009 from the split of the former Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC) (Bordandini 2013a).

Despite the obvious differences, however, all three parties converge in terms of ideology and political programmes, indicating social justice, equality, freedom, anti-capitalism, feminism and environmentalism as their core principles and themes. In the European elections of 2014 they were gathered around a political platform in support of the candidacy for President of the European Commission Alexis Tzipras, leader of SYRIZA, opposing the austerity policies and what they termed as the resulting «regression of democracy» at the European and domestic level. They supported the need to promote an alternative development based on social equality, the centrality of work, the ecological conversion of production, the introduction of new immigration policies and the peaceful resolution of international conflicts (European Left 2014).

From a theoretical point of view the three parties should benefit in terms of political consensus from the economic situation. In fact, one of the main factors in determining the support for RLPs, together with those of a socio-demographic and ideological orientation, is precisely the considerations of the electorate about the economic policies. According to the thesis of the «crisis of modernization» they are part of those political forces capable of intercepting the protest arising from the uncertainties produced by the post-industrial economy and globalization. Moreover, it is in conjunction with difficult economic situations and the consequent intensification of public fears of social inequality that these parties tend to establish and expand their political support (March 2008; Bowyer and Vail 2011; March and Rommerskirchen 2015). As can be seen in Table 1, in recent years Spanish, Italian and Greek citizens have expressed particular concern about the economic situation and the unemployment rate in their respective states.

Furthermore in all three countries, almost the entire population (the percentages recorded between 2011 and 2014, almost always exceed 90%) defined as totally negative the national economic situation (Standard Eurobarometer 2011-2014). Despite this, observing the electoral performance of the three parties in the last few years

there is no consistent trend (Tab 2-4). Only SYRIZA has experienced considerable success, becoming the second national political force with 26.9% of the vote in 2012 Greek elections and the first Greek party at the 2014 European elections obtaining 21.9% of the vote. The situation in the other two cases seems to be very different. IU, after a long period of decline, in the general election of 2011 got 6.9% of the vote compared to 3.8% in 2008, while SEL, which initially appeared to be a political force able to grow rapidly, in the Italian elections of 2013 received only 3.2% of the vote. Both IU and SEL showed in the recent European consultations significantly lower levels of consensus towards their Greek ally. In fact, the formation of Izquierda Plural made up by IU and other minor parties got 10% of the vote, while the Tsipras List in Italy, supported by SEL, the PRC and by civil society movements and organizations arrived at 4%.

It would seem that of the three parties, only SYRIZA and partly IU (even if the results were much more limited) have been able to capitalize on the "opportunities" arising from a growing social dissatisfaction generated by one of the worst crises of the capitalist economic system. How can we explain these differences? Are there other factors that help to explain the success or failure of the three political parties at this stage? In order to answer these questions, we propose a diachronic comparison of the evolution of the three cases, which highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the parties themselves, as well as those systemic and electoral factors that contributed to their success or conversely, to their decline.

Tab. 1 The two main concerns of Greek, Spanish and Italian citizens

	What do you think are the two most important issues facing (our) country at the moment?																			
	2014		2013		2012		2011		2010		2009		2008		2007		2006			
	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.	E.	U.		
GR	46	60	52	65	55	58	75	61	68	53	60	46	51	35	33	42	41	56		
ES	36	78	48	74	55	78	65	81	60	79	55	66	44	45	9	21	10	18		
I	37	60	42	56	45	51	61	47	40	48	41	45	39	27	25	27	33	30		

*percentual data

Source: Eurobarometer series

Tab.2 IU results at the general and European elections

General Elections	Votes %	Seats	European elections	Votes%	Seats
1986	4.6	7	1987	5.2	3
1989	9.1	17	1989	6.1	4
1993	9.6	18	1994	13.4	9
1996	10.5	21	1999	5.8	4
2000	5.4	8	2004	4.1	2
2004	4.9	5	2009	3.7	2
2008	3.8	2	2014	10.0	6
2011	6.9	11			

Source: Ministerio del Interior

Tab. 3 RC and SEL results at the general and European elections

General Elections	Votes %	Seats	European elections	Votes%	Seats
1992	5.6	35	1994	6.1	5
1994	6.0	39	1999	4.3	4
1996	8.6	35	2004	6.1	5
2001	5.0	11	2009	3.1	0
2006	5.8	41	2014	4.0	3
2008	3.1	-			
2013	3.2	37			

Source: Ministero dell'Interno. Notes: The 1992-2006 general election and 1994-2004 European election results refer to RC. The 2008 general election results refer to the Rainbow Left coalition. The 2009 and 2014 European election results refer respectively to Left and Freedom and to the list The other Europe with Tsipras.

Tab. 4 SYN/Syriza results at the general and European elections

General Elections	Votes %	Seats	European Elections	Votes %	Seats
1993	2.9	0	1994	6.3	2
1996	5.1	10	1999	5.2	2
2000	3.2	6	2004	4.1	1
2004	3.3	6	2009	4.7	1
2007	5	14	2014	21.9	6
2009	4.6	13			
2012 (M)	16.8	52			
2012 (G)	26.9	71			

Source: Greek Minister of Interior

Notes: The 1993, 1996, 2000 general and 1994, 1999 European election results refer to SYN.

3.1 Theoretical and analytical overview

There are several «organizational problems» that the parties, as groups more or less structured and stable, have to face if they want to survive and adapt to the changing environment in which they act. These problems were classified by Raniolo (2013) in terms of: the collective action problem or internal participation, which refers to the role of the membership, and relationships between leaders and members; the problem of coordination or institutionalization, which concerns the structure of the organization and the conformation of the dominant coalition; the problem of mobilization of resources and the autonomy of the organization; the strategic problem and the action that is aimed at research of the primary objectives - votes, office and policy - and relations with the outside environment. It is about the way the parties meet these organizational challenges and the consequences resulting from it, often unintended, that it is possible to define the identity, organization and strategic characteristics of the parties themselves, understanding their most significant changes that occur in time. With re-

gard to this issue, according to March (2008), the most successful RLPs are those which have dealt with the «organizational problems», changing in line with the transformations recently occurred in the Western democracies. In particular, one of the factors that appears to affect their success is the ability to resize the references to the doctrine and ideological slogans, incorporating those groups and organizations united mainly by the opposition to neo-liberalism. In these cases, the parties present themselves as «campaigning» organizations and tend to include in their speeches new issues such as, for example, environmentalism and feminism. Moreover, their leaders are well away from the «dogmatic 'democratically centralised' personalities of the traditional communist parties» and they rather appear «media-savvy performers» with charismatic aspects (March 2008, 10). In addition, these parties are by definition closely related to the concept of representation and social integration. Therefore, those RLPs which are away from the logic of electoralist parties, tend to strengthen their internal participatory ties, encouraging practices of democracy and participation in their organizations, and opening up to society through the establishment of «environmental linkages» with the movements and other organizations, tend to be more successful (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013, 2; Ramiro and Verge, 2013, 42; Bordandini 2013b, 22).

In addition to the strict organizational issues, the ability to deal with the «strategic problem» (Raniolo 2013) is essential to each party. Their ability to solve this problem, however, depends not only on their strategies, but also on the competitive environment and their direct competitors. In particular, some studies have shown as a favourable factor to the emergence and consolidation of the RLPs the absence of direct protest party competitors and the existence of party systems in which the main parties of the centre-left and centre-right converge. The moderation of the social-democratic parties, their distance from social issues and their progressive similarity with the forces of the centre-right can indeed create a free space on the left (March 2008). In the latter case, it is exactly those RLPs that adopt «strategies of opposition» (Panebianco 1982) that benefit.

It is starting from these theoretical premises, retracing the evolution of our three parties - IU, SEL and SYRIZA - that we are going to highlight their greater or lesser capacity to deal with organizational problems, losing or gaining consensus in a particularly delicate phase of history. In order to understand why between the three parties only SYRIZA has been able to obtain a surprising result in the past European and political competitions, it is necessary to rebuild their stories, highlighting their "state of health" in recent years. The credibility of a party and therefore its attractiveness depends not only on the policy proposals (as outlined above for our three cases, the programmes

are quite similar), but also from its past, from what has been, from its original identity, from which aims it has pursued and the strategies that it has fielded.

Of the three parties taken into account in this study, IU is the one that has the oldest history and perhaps even more problematic, SEL and SYRIZA have a much shorter story, but not less relevant. Precisely for this reason, we are going to focus the discussion on key issues related to organizational problems, comparing the organizational model and the leadership of the three parties, as well as their ability to establish links with organizations and outside groups.

To conclude, we are going to examine their strategies towards the primary objectives (votes, office and policy) and their main competitors, in the light of the constraints of electoral and party systems, focusing particularly on the latest national and European competitions celebrated in conjunction with the economic crisis.

4. Three Model in comparison

4.1 United Left (1986 to 2014): network party prey to factionalism

IU was born in 1986 as an electoral coalition formed by the PCE and other minor left-wing political forces as well as independent adherents. At the first party conference in 1989 IU proposed itself as «a social and political movement» aimed at encouraging the participation of both political forces and citizens (IU 1989, 11). At the same time it was endowed with an organizational structure made up of different organs hierarchically ordered - Federal Assembly, Federal Policy Conference, Federal Policy Commission and the Presidency- and of territorial grassroots organizations as well as thematic working groups, the so-called *áreas*. Compared to 1986, in the first meeting, only three parties were present at national level - the PASOC (Party of Socialist Action), IR (Republican Left) and the PCE - to which had joined the group of independents. Until 1992, their presence in the organs of IU were organized according to a quota system (Ramiro 2000).

Although initially within IU there seemed to prevail a «cooperative factionalism» aimed to strengthen the organization and to achieve balance between the various internal forces, there would soon emerge a battle for power management and political and strategic guidance, progressing gradually towards a «competitive factionalism», sometimes tending to a «degenerative» one (Boucek 2009). In the early nineties the dominant coalition, which was polyarchic but dominated by the PCE, found itself torn between the so-called *renovadores* and *conservadores* in respect to several issues: the

possible dissolution of the PCE in favour of the institutionalization of IU, the level of radicalism policy proposals and the strategy to be adopted in respect to the PSOE (Bosco 2000; Ramiro Fernández 2006; Damiani 2013a). It was only after 1992 that an agreement was reached: the PCE yielded some features in favour of the institutionalization of IU as a federation but not as a party; factions were allowed and the quota system was substituted by proportional representation (Bosco 2000). The organizational model was similar to the party network, an organization with a centre but able to recognize a certain level of autonomy in local and regional units (Damiani 2013a).

Despite the emergence of other internal conflicts, often linked to the political and electoral strategy, until the mid-nineties IU had recorded high acclaim (Tab. 2), especially thanks to the leader Anguita, the so-called *califa rojo*, a charismatic personality and widely appreciated by the electorate and civil society so much so as to receive better evaluations than Gonzales and Aznar, then leaders respectively of the PSOE and PP (CIS Barometer 1994-1995). It was after 2000 that the differences would become more acute. The leadership of the PCE and IU found themselves divided about the election of the Anguita's successor. The first was for the election of Francisco Frutos, in favour of a collective but centralized leadership formed by a dozen people representing the parties. The second supported Gaspar Llamazares, oriented towards a post-communist and eco-socialist evolution and a decentralized organization (Del Alcazar 2000, 6-7). Following the victory of Llamazares, attested by just one vote, the phase of «asymmetrical bicefalia» started (Martínez Fuetes 2005): Llamazares obtained the majority in IU but not in the PCE, while Frutos had the support of PCE but not by IU (Damiani, 2013a, 9). In subsequent years, the PCE therefore acted in opposition to the dominant coalition of IU (Ramiro and Verge, 2013, 46), extending its presence at the federal level and succeeding in 2008 to elect its exponent, Cayo Lara, through a far from linear process (Gómez and Verge 2009). The internal differences would not vanish causing the withdrawal of some prominent figures (Martín and Urquizu-Sancho 2012, 354) and in 2012 Llamazares turned the faction Open Left into a real party like the PCE.

In addition to factionalism, another problem of IU was the difficulties of ensuring effective internal participation. Firstly, the membership has always been low and fluctuating (Tab. 5), secondly, the primaries, introduced in 1992, have been used in a discretionary manner, remaining a widespread practice mostly at the local level and often in open opposition with the ruling class. Finally, the *áreas* grew very slowly, often with low participation, and the party's decisions have been generally adopted through a top-down process (Ramiro and Verge 2013).

We must recognize that IU, while not creating collateral organizations and losing the hegemony that the PCE had in the past towards the trade union and feminist move-

ments, has always tried to establish informal links with the outside world, taking part in various social mobilizations. However, as evidenced by Ramiro and Verge (2013), these efforts, both for the internal problems of the party and other factors related to inter-party competition, have almost never produced a return in terms of electoral support. Thus in 2008, following the disappointing results recorded in national elections (Tab. 2), IU started a process of «re-foundation» aimed to strengthen participatory and environmental linkages. The party attempted to embrace the Indignados protest that broke out in Spain in 2011, proposing to develop an «Alternative Program» open to all those who opposed the neo-liberal model and giving the chance to the movement to get parliamentary representation by participating directly in its electoral lists. Despite this, and although some studies have shown that in the elections of 2011, a high percentage of IU voters engaged in activities related to the movement (Cis n. 7711 quot. in Martín and Urquizu-Sancho 2012, 356), in 2013 it was precisely the same movement that publicly denounced the attempt of the parties and especially the IU to «cannibalise» the citizens' protest for electoral purposes (ecodiario2013). Finally the 2014 European elections seem to have set the new formation Podemos as political representative of the movement.

Tab. 5 Membership United Left 1986-2012

Year	Members enrolled
1986	70.000
1989	49.730
1992	57.303 (44.775)
1993	57.303
1996	65.099 (34.704)
1997	71.578 (35.000)
1999	69.000 (26.553)
2000	65.000
2004	67.802
2008	50.801
2012	30.000

**the data in parentheses refers to PCE membership*

Sources: Ramiro and Verge 2013, 46; Linz, Montero and Ruiz 2005.

In conclusion, the history of IU is characterized by divisions, conflicts and difficulties in implementing its objectives and principles. These internal organizational factors, as recognized by IU itself (IU 2012), prevented the party to comply with its original ambition of acting as a social and political movement, limiting its capacity to establish solid links with society, attracting a wider consensus.

4.2 Left, Ecology and freedom (2009-2014): between movement party and personal party

The origins of SEL date back to the defeat in the general elections of 2008 of the electoral cartel Rainbow Left that had collected all the forces of the Italian left - the Communist Refoundation, (RC), Italian Communists (PDCI), Democratic Left (SD) - and the Greens, who presented themselves as an alternative to the left of the Democratic Party (PD) (De Luca, Pala and Sozzi 2014). The PD, after the failure of the 2006 coalition government together with RC, decided to participate at the 2008 elections avoiding political agreements with the radical left. The crushing defeat (Table 3), which established for the first time the absence in Parliament of all the RLPs, had led to the resignation of Bertinotti, leader of the RC, paving the way for his succession. The election as new party secretary of the orthodox Ferrero, pushed Nichi Vendola, until then the right arm of Bertinotti and member of one of the greatest RC factions, to leave the party and found the Movement for the Left. In view of the European elections of 2009 Vendola, together with those who had abandoned the previous organizations, gave birth to the Left and Freedom, an electoral aggregation open to organizations, groups and movements to the left of the PD. This was none other than the direct precedent of SEL, born as a movement at the end of 2009, from the aggregation of minority force parties of RC, PDCI, Greens and DS, and turned into a party, structured with national organs (National Assembly, National Presidency and National Coordination), regional federation and territorial and thematic circles, on the occasion of the first congress of 2010 (Bordandini 2013b, 17-18).

Despite the similarity with the structures of the traditional parties SEL was initially characterized by two features: a charismatic leadership and a similarity with the movement party (Damiani 2013b). The first congress sanctioned the election to President of Vendola who had played a key role in the process of aggregation of the various forces of the left, gaining some visibility thanks to the victory of the centre-left primary elections for the region of Puglia in both 2005 (when still militant in the RC) and in 2010, when he was re-elected local governor. But what most helps to explain the centrality of the leadership by Vendola has always been his communication strategy based on: the elaboration of a learned political discourse, inspired to social, ethical and libertarian values and a project oriented to modernizing and unifying the left; the use of both the traditional tools of mass communication and the new social media, useful to establish direct links with his electorate (Bordandini 2013b; Damiani 2013b).

As well explained by Damiani (2013b), the process of «leederalization» evident in the Italian domestic politics, especially in the period between 2009 and 2011, did bring

benefits to both the party and Vendola. According to opinion polls conducted in those years, Vendola gained high approval rating, especially among the younger population, above all for his charismatic leadership and the innovative character of his political action (Demopolis Polls 2011, Ipsos 2011 quot. in Damiani 2013b, 315-316). Similarly in 2010 47% of the national SEL delegates indicated the «charismatic leadership by Vendola» as the most important feature of his own party, followed by 24% who classified this factor as the second distinguishing element, 61% of them attributed the success of their party to its leader (Bordandini 2013b, 37-38). In this case it can be argued, that rather than being in a situation in which the leader strategically uses the organizational resources, we are faced with a case in which the leader is both a resource and «a crucial factor in the genesis and action of a movement or a party» (Raniolo 2013, 98-99).

The second factor that positively characterized SEL resided in some "movement" features of the party. It seemed an original formation in the Italian political landscape, becoming a tool to renew and connect organized and not-organized leftish forces in order to achieve a large project that, once completed, would have meant the demise of the party itself. As part of this project was the fundamental experiment of the so-called «Nichi factories», originally born as an evolution of the electoral committees to support the candidacy of the leader in the Puglia regional elections of 2010, that quickly became, in different areas of the peninsula, open forums for discussion and an instrument of mobilization from below, in which forms of direct communication via the web and social networks were predominant.

As of the end of 2011 it is possible to identify the beginning of a second phase in the evolution of SEL. Between 2011 and 2012, the party, after winning the municipal primary coalition of the centre-left, was able to elect the mayors of three major Italian cities, Pisapia to the municipality of Milan, Zedda to that of Cagliari and Doria to Genova's. It is also did not fail the commitment of the members of SEL in civil society, as for example during the mobilizations of the referendums in June 2011 on common goods and nuclear power.

However, compared to the two previous years, SEL lost the innovative power, ending the period of "effervescence" that had characterized the early stages: the number of members in 2010 stood at 45,530, in 2011 it dropped to 36,373 (Bordandini, 2013b, 24) and in 2012 was 34,300 (Marchianò 2014). Secondly, the project of the Nichi factories was largely shelved, becoming these bodies places of top-down political choices communication (Damiani 2013b). Finally Vendola, while continuing to appear as a charismatic leader, lost some of the initial visibility, unable to avoid the emergence of the first internal differences also linked to the organizational model to pursue. Indeed in 2012 many SEL leading figures promoted the cause of encouraging more transparent

internal participation and in 2014 the internal divergences in the strategies of competing with the PD led to the withdrawal from the party by 12 deputies, including the group leader in the Chamber of Deputies, Migliore.

4.3 SYRIZA (2004 to 2014): an organization open to the society

Similarly to the other two parties SYRIZA was formally born in the occasion of the Greek elections of 2004 as a political and electoral coalition, consisting of SYN and a number of smaller parties and movements of the extra-parliamentary left: KOE (Communist Organization of Greece), AKOA (Renewalist, and Communist Ecological Left), DEA (Internationalist Workers' Left), and several other smaller parties, as well as independents (Eleftheriou 2009). It was formed as a party only in 2012, celebrating its first congress in 2013.

However the history of SYRIZA cannot be treated separately from SYN's, that at least until 2012 held a dominant position within the coalition, being the larger party and from whence at least 80% of cadres, voters and activists of SYRIZA came from (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013). SYN was founded in 1992 mostly by members from the Greek Left (EAR), a large group of dissidents of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and independents, small groups of the extra-parliamentary left and ecological movements, presenting itself as a pluralistic party in favour of democratic socialism and the new post-materialist issues (ibidem). The party was divided in two main factions: the first was for a left post-communist and pro-European orientations; the second showed a more left-radical tendency and a eurocritical attitude. The latter faction prevailed since the 2000s, establishing closer relations with the anti-globalization movements and protests and other left-wing parties, leading to the formation of SYRIZA, pursuing the main objective of «empowering the powerless» (Spourdalakis, 2013, 102; Eleftheriou 2009). Through SYRIZA, the party was able to stop the decline in membership and attract new younger adherents. In addition the youth organization SYN/Youth played a liaison role between the party and the new social movements, actively participating in major mobilization in Greece (anti-war movements, the Greek social Forum, European Social Forum) (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013). The involvement of the younger generation within SYN/SYRIZA became manifest when the thirty year old Alexis Tsipras was candidate in the municipal elections of Athens, then elected in 2007 to the presidency of SYN. Internal conflicts in SYN ended in 2010, when the Renewal Wing faction (later transformed into Democratic Left, DIMAR), that was against the maintenance of SYRIZA and the adopted party's strategy, finally left the party, paving the way for the preva-

lence of the leadership by Alexis Tsipras both within the party and SYRIZA (Ibidem 2013).

If in the past the decision adopted by SYN/SYRIZA to back the anti-authoritarian movement, founded in 2008 after the killing by the Greek police of the young student Alexis Grigoropoulos, may have penalized the party in the 2009 European elections, because the critics coming from other political forces and the national media (Spourdalakis, 2013, 103), more successful there has been its full involvement in the protest of the Indignant Greeks, which began in 2011. Participation and openness to society rewarded SYRIZA, which in 2012 was transformed into a party, including SYN and many other parties and movements with Marxist, social-democratic and ecological orientations. Alexis Tsipras, who was elected party's president in the 2013 first party's congress, gave great visibility to SYRIZA especially at the last European elections, when he launched the challenge to build a European left, carrying on an internationalist orientation and not solely on domestic issues.

On the occasion of the first congress SYRIZA defined itself as: «a unified, democratic, multi-tendency mass party of the contemporary Left» aimed at the working and popular classes, the middle class of the towns and rural areas, open to the socially and economically excluded. The party still continues to coordinate with social movements and the demands of the population in order to support a multi-tendency mass movement (SYRIZA 2013). The main party's organ is the Central Commission, responsible for implementing the policy established by Congress (held every three years) and to appoint the Political Secretariat. At the territorial level SYRIZA is divided into regional committees that have the task of coordinating the activities of the central and local units (SYRIZA founding charter, quot. in Borreca 2014, 13). Finally the youth organization, SYRIZA Youth, was also set up in order to give a voice to the younger generation, among the hardest hit by the adverse effects of the economic and social crisis. Ever since 2012 SYRIZA is approaching more closely to the trade union movement, succeeding where SYN had failed (Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, 2013).

In conclusion an element appears to be the main strength of SYRIZA: the ability to be in contact and involve the citizens and protest movements. Indeed, it is primarily from active participation in social mobilizations that the party which originated from SYN drew its strength, greatly extending the consensus of its predecessor (Table 4). Certainly, it is still too early to say how SYRIZA will evolve, considering that as a party it is in its first phase of institutionalization. The main risk is that it will run into the same mistakes that incurred in IU and SEL, or even its predecessor SYN, that pluralism and dialogue between the various internal components become difficult to manage, highlighting

conflicts between those who advocate a strategy of more radical opposition and those more inclined to the compromise necessary to govern.

5. The competitive strategies by IU, SEL and SYRIZA

5.1 The decline of the PSOE and the slow ascent by IU

The proportional electoral system, but the majoritarian outcomes and the prevailing bipolar mechanism of the Spanish party system, historically have not benefited IU. However, in its evolution, the party has also experienced moments of unexpected electoral growth seizing its own space on the left. As can be seen from the data presented in the table 2, three phases can be identified in its electoral history: between 1986 and 1996, IU progressively affirmed, reaching its historic peak between 1994 and 1996; from 1999 to 2009 the party registered a disastrous decline; finally from 2011 it started a slow electoral recovery (Damiani 2013a). These three phases correspond to two different strategies adopted by the party in the competition towards its main challenger, the PSOE. In the nineties, while the PSOE of Gonzalez was experiencing a lot of difficulties, a strategy of opposition prevailed, expression of the theory «de las dos orillas», elaborated by the leader Anguita to indicate the need to oppose both the PSOE and PP, acting as a left alternative able to dominate the progressive space. In this period, the party recorded its best electoral results but was never able to overtake the PSOE (Hidalgo-Redondo 2008; Damiani 2013a). However, at the end of the nineties its slow decline began. On one hand, the opposition to the PSOE had paradoxically led IU to come closer to the position of the PP, on the other hand, the resignation of Anguita increased internal factionalism. So it was in 1999, after the disappointing European elections and in view of the national election of 2000, that IU attitude changed, starting to adopt a «strategy of cooperation» with the PSOE against the PP. In the following decade, however, this strategic reversal, reinforced even more by Llamazares, greatly damaged the party, favouring the strengthening of the PSOE which, led by Zapatero, appeared to the electorate as the only leftish force able to replace the PP, going on to win the Spanish elections of 2004 and 2008.

The IU itself, following the disappointing results of the 2008 elections, concluded that it was the decision to support the Zapatero government that had «diluted its own political profile» projecting the image of a party subordinate to the political strategy of the government (IU 2008). It was only with the election of 2011 that IU started to grow again, and its success is closely linked to the decline of the PSOE, determined mainly by the effects of «economic voting». In fact, the PSOE, which led the government from

2004 until 2011, was severely punished by the electorate (in the elections of 2011 it recorded its worst election result with 29% of votes) for two main reasons: for having initially denied the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 and having subsequently adopted ineffective austerity measures, following pressure from the international and European institutions (Martín and Urquizu-Sancho 2012). At the 2011 elections IU returned again to its opposition strategy to the PSOE, advancing proposals contrary to the austerity and oriented to respond to social needs, becoming a true left alternative, obtaining as much as 7% of the votes from the electorate disappointed with the PSOE (Ibidem). This strategy was later confirmed in the 2014 European elections when IU joined the Tsipras project, aimed at building a European left that can give centrality to social issues within European integration.

The change of direction made by the party produced positive results in both elections (Table 2). However, its rise was limited by the presence of many other small parties, not just the traditional regionalist forces, but also new players as, for example, the Union Progress and Democracy (UPyD) and the Equo Commitment-Q. The first party was born in 2007 and led by Rosa Diaz, former member of the PSOE, presented itself as a «progressive force» intercepting at the 2011 elections 4% of the votes of disappointed with socialist policies; the second one, formed by leftists, ecologists and Valencian nationalists, has been joined by many exiles of IU (Martín and Urquizu-Sancho 2012). In addition, during the 2014 European elections, the political force that most of all attracted general attention was certainly Podemos (We can) which received 8% of the vote. This political formation, led by Pablo Iglesias and founded in 2014 in view of the European elections, is certainly one of the main IU challengers, considering that it is a new political force, far from the logic of the traditional parties, linked to the movement of Indignados and placed precisely in the radical left.

5.2 SEL and strategic ambiguity

If the IU strategy is closely linked to the PSOE, that of SEL cannot be analysed without considering the relationship with the PD and the divisions between the radical left organizations. Following the failure of the governmental experiment that RC had experienced in the Prodi government in 2006, Vendola wanted to re-establish and join forces of the left by overcoming the distinction between radical and reformist, in order to give life to a leftist party capable of governing. This original aspiration would have influenced constantly the strategy of SEL, its relationship with the PD and the other RLPs, particularly the Left Federation, the other heir of RC. In particular, the search for the

maximization of the votes and the fear of not appearing as a reliable partner in a coalition of centre-left have repeatedly revealed the discrepancies between the narrative of Vendola and a "wait and see" strategy often subordinate to the goals and decisions of the PD.

The contradictions between the «logic of identity» and the «strategic logic» have emerged mainly since the autumn of 2011 following the resignation of Berlusconi's government, the end of «fragmented or polarized bipartisanship» and the beginning of the phase of «stabilization from the top», with the formation of the Monti Government (Piana and Raniolo 2013). Compared to the government, SEL stood in opposition, criticizing the economic policies as being too liberal and an expression of the prevalence of technocracy on politics. At the same time, however, the party has always tried to maintain and make deals with the PD, at the time one of the main actors of government majority together with the centre-right (Damiani 2013b). It is precisely because of this ambiguity in that period, despite the cartelization of the major parties, the departure of PD from a social-democratic project, that SEL has failed to occupy the empty space to the left.

It is with the general election of 2013 that we witnessed the failure of the entire radical left, divided by personalisms and the inability to reach an agreement on a common program. In fact, although in 2013 more than 15% of Italian voters placed themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum (in 2008 they were just over 10%) (Segatti 2013), SEL got 3.2%, gaining access to the Parliament only because it was in coalition with the PD, while the Left Federation was left without representation. Also in this occasion SEL tried to present itself as different from the other parties and in favour of «good policy», focused on the direct and widespread participation of citizens and the sobriety of politics (Sel 2013). However, its participation in the coalition of centre-left and the proximity to the old parties, perceived by the electorate as an expression of the First Republic (Segatti, 2013), have pre-empted the renewal program of the party. This in light of a new political challenger, the Five Star Movement, which placed itself as a real alternative to the cast and the "partitocrazia", focusing its own policy proposals on direct participation and getting votes by both the output array of the right and the left (ibidem), arriving at obtaining 25.5% of the vote.

Once the 2013 Legislature started, SEL moved to the opposition of the government led by the PD, first by Letta and later by Renzi, next to the 5 Star Movement and the Northern League. The reasons for the conversion strategy are to be found according to the party in the continuity of the governments of the broad agreements, in which the centre-left and centre-right again converge, with the previous experience of the technicians and the European austerity trend (Sel 2014). However once again, in a period

dominated by the de-politicization of the competition and with political agendas shared by both the centre-right and the centre-left, SEL lost the opportunity to act as the representative of the left, falling in internal strategic divisions. The internal disputes became evident in occasion of the 2014 European elections when in front of the decision of the majority of SEL delegates to participate in the Tsipras List, some members abandoned the party because inclined to support the European Socialist Party and to tighten the cooperation with the PD that, led by Renzi, obtained 40.1% of votes (Marchianò 2014).

On this basis, it is possible to draw a reflection. Unlike IU which over the years has alternated between two strategies against the PSOE: opposition and collaboration, SEL has never been able to adopt a clear and unambiguous strategy, fighting between an original identity tending to the pole of the radical left and a cooperation strategy with the PD needed to occupy government positions. However, it is precisely the uncertainty in the choice and adaptation to the political line of the PD that has prevented SEL from becoming the main contact for the left in recent years.

5.3 SYRIZA and the antagonist project

From 1981 until 2012 the Greek party system functioned according to bipartisan mechanics, in which two parties – Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) for the centre-left and New Democracy (ND) for the centre-right - alternated in government. However with the 2012 elections there was a reversal of the political balance and the subsequent formation of a «polarized two-partism» that SYRIZA became a key player (Dinas and Rori 2013). The electoral surge of SYRIZA was determined mainly by two factors: the decline of PASOK and the ability of the party itself to formulate an antagonist policy, according to a strategy of opposition to the dominant parties.

The beginning of the decline of PASOK came shortly after the start of its government following the early elections of 2009, when the crisis of the Greek economy became public knowledge, causing the intervention of the Troika and the imposition of the austerity measures aimed to reduce the public debt according to the so-called Memorandum. The loss of legitimacy and the increasing criticism of other parties and protests of citizenship were caused by different factors: the inability of the socialist government to address the crisis and to limit the disastrous social consequences; the difficulty in implementing the austerity measures; the distance between the programme presented during the election campaign of 2009, focused on expansionary policies; and the risk feared by the main European leaders of the exit of Greece from the Eurozone (Dinas

and Rori 2013; Kosmidis 2013). So as a result of two government reshuffles and failed attempts to create a coalition government with ND, the Socialist Prime Minister Papandreou resigned, paving the way for a government led by former ECB vice-president Papademos, supported this time also by ND.

This would last until 2012. In these elections SYRIZA campaigned in favour of the public debt renegotiation and opposition to the Memorandum and to the main political parties, PASOK and ND, united on the need to implement reforms imposed by the EU and basically the perpetrators of irresponsible management of the country. The programme presented by the party stood out for presenting concrete alternatives to the policies already implemented, focusing on the need to respect the «dignity» of the Greek people. It is no coincidence that 38% of the voters of SYRIZA claimed to have voted for it because it «expresses the demands for change» (Spourdalakis 2013).

In both elections of May 2012 and those held soon after in June 2012, SYRIZA received many votes of disillusioned Socialist party voters, beating the latter also in many of its traditional strongholds, recording the best results in the cities (Borreca 2014).

The advantage of SYRIZA over the KKE, which is also contrary to the policies of austerity and previous governments, was its greater ability to connect with the social movements and protest and with the younger generation (the party received the consent of 45% of the electorate between 18 and 24 years) (Spourdalakis 2013), avoiding an hard Euroscepticism, and formulating a critical speech aimed to a radical change of the integration process (Borreca 2014). This internationalist orientation was then led by the party in the European elections of 2014, when Tsipras tried to mobilize all the radical left forces in European countries, gaining international exposure.

It must be said, that these achievements are the result of a work that the party has led since 2004 when, as we have seen in the previous section, it became representative of the dissatisfaction and impatience of the Greek population. Already in the general election of 2007, SYRIZA had increased its electoral support going from 3.3% in 2004 to 5%, benefiting even then from the crisis that had hit PASOK. This latter, in fact, over years moved away from the social representation, coming closer to an electoralist model (Vernardakis 2012).

6. Concluding remarks

At the end of the comparison between IU, SEL and SYRIZA it is possible to offer some concluding remarks. The three parties have submitted rather similar proposals to overcome the economic crisis and all of them were born as organi-

zations open to internal participation and oriented to establish strong links with the society. However, in pursuing these purposes, each of them has adopted various strategies that have given rise to different organizational structures and more or less positive results in terms of internal cohesion, political consensus, roots in society and in the territory, especially in terms of capacity of attraction during the recent anti-austerity protests.

IU has approached the model of the network parties encountering however many obstacles resulting from internal conflicts and the difficulty in establishing solid links with the outside world; SEL despite being born as a movement party led by a charismatic leader, with the passing of years, reduced its ability to mobilize, falling in internal divisions; SYRIZA, despite coming from an earlier party, has been able to connect with the needs of society, establishing itself as a mass movement party and enjoying the guidance of a media-attractive leader.

In addition the comparison between the three cases has shown that these parties were able to achieve better results when, in front of the weakness of the main social democratic parties, they have adopted strategies of opposition by presenting themselves as antagonistic forces, featuring a well-defined identity of the left. Over the last few years, IU has stopped its decline, opposing itself to bipartisanship and distancing itself from the policies adopted by previous governments led by PSOE; SYRIZA has become the second political force in Greece by proposing an alternative plan to the austerity measures adopted by Socialist and coalition governments; SEL instead, has been shown to receive popular support when, while cooperating with the PD, it has tried to distinguish itself through a renovation project of the Left (eg. Primaries in some municipalities). Certainly the presence of antagonistic forces such as Podemos or Commitment-Q in Spain, and the 5 Star Movement in Italy, may weaken their ability to act as the main reference for the resistance to the crisis. However, it is well to remember that IU, SEL and SYRIZA, compared with new movements or protest parties have an identity based on some ideological principles that, in some ways, keep them away from a populist drift.

In conclusion, in this phase of economic decline, characterized by the emergence of deep social inequalities, there are good prospects for a radical left which is able to propose brave and alternative projects to the dominant model,

connecting with the needs and social demands, performing their main function, the social representation.

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