ANTI-EUROPEANISM, POPULISM AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Edited by
Andrea Guiso and Daniele Pasquinucci

Anti-Europeanism, Populism and European Integration in a Historical Perspective

This book explores the long-term origins of populist Euroscepticism.

Taking a historical perspective to move beyond explaining present-day expressions of opposition to the European Union in isolation, this book reveals the historical sedimentation of the several ways and forms taken over decades by opposition towards European integration. As such, this approach – with contributions from across disciplines – explains not just the past of Euroscepticism, but also its current nature and future prospects.

This book will be of key interest to scholars and students of European History, European Politics and Studies and more broadly to Political Science, International Relations, the Humanities and Social Sciences.

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Introduction

Contesting Europe: the origins of populist anti-Europeanism

Andrea Guiso and Daniele Pasquinucci

The many crises experienced by the European Union over the past 15 years (the financial disaster of 2007–2008 triggered by US mortgage-backed securities, so aptly described by Adam Tooze[1], followed by the Eurozone turmoil, the migration and refugee crisis, Brexit, the pandemic and, more recently, the war in Ukraine) have given rise to a new phenomenon: the partial but substantial overlap between anti-Europeanism and contemporary populism.

However, populist anti-Europeanism did not arise overnight, mushroom-like, as the sole result of the polycrisis[2], where disparate crises interact in such a way that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of the individual parts[3]. On the contrary, anti-Europeanism and contemporary populism have long-term origins. Hence, they cannot be understood by relying on research agenda focused exclusively, or mostly, on questions whose elucidation offers a direct contribution in explaining the present-day European Union's problems or situation. Current expressions of criticism of the European Union are always the result of the historical sedimentation of the several ways and forms taken over decades by opposition towards the European integration[4]. For these reasons, historical research can help explain not just the past of populist anti-Europeanism, but also its nature and prospects.

By tracing the distinct (but converging over time) historical trajectories of contemporary populism and anti-Europeanism, this book pursues a twofold objective: first, to highlight their many common features (economic protectionism, xenophobia, opposition to globalisation, etc.)[5]; second, to examine the path that led to their convergence.

However, analysing populism and anti-Europeanism as related phenomena implies some methodological and interpretive premises.

To begin with, we need to reject the idea – advanced by some political theorists – that populism is "a concept without history" and that history itself plays, at best, a minor role in illustrating a theory[6]. Within the wide literature on anti-European populism, three main (often intertwined) analytical categories can be singled-out: first, the sociological analysis of the electoral trends of the populist parties. Second, the investigation on their languages and communication strategies. In this frame, emphasis is given on the impact of new media on the populist political and electoral offer. Finally, the comparative insights of populist phenomenology. Several authors address national case studies, especially those of Eastern

and Central European countries. Many scholars propose an effective distinction between regimes (such as the case of Hungary) and anti-European populist movements and political parties[7]. The British case too has been extensively treated in the literature, with a relevant openness to the historical perspective, as if to emphasise a direct link of Brexit with previous British anti-European attitudes[8]. Nonetheless, as some chapters in this book demonstrate, this conclusion deserves further investigation and empirical analysis based on the historical approach.

Euroscepticism is one of the most debated topics among political and social scientists. However, these scholars tend to prefer a short- to medium-term perspective, with few forays into the less recent past. Their theoretical approach is often based on a functionalist paradigm. It assumes the existence of a direct link between the multifaceted anti-European protests and the "performative" limits of the European Union. Within this framework, mistrust towards the EU is mainly seen as a consequence of the shortcomings of EU governance in terms of accountability, representativeness, coordination of sectoral policies in the areas of monetary, fiscal, financial, welfare, social protection and regulation of migration flows. The absence of a long-term perspective leads to describe the EU as a mere vehicle for the tensions and problems of post-modern democracy, plagued by "universal" phenomena and processes: growing social inequalities, downgrading of the middle class, segmentation of power, disintermediation between governing elites and citizens, the "technicalisation" of politics, etc.

We do not deny the impact these processes have had in fostering a sense of hostility towards the European project. But we do believe that anti-Europeanism is a product of history. Most of the salient features of contemporary anti-Europeanism (such as Germanophobia, criticism of European integration as an elite-driven process, democratic deficit, etc.) date back to the beginning of the European communities in the 1950s. Some scholars go so far as to argue that "anti-Europeanism" originated before the start of the European integration process[9]. In the words of a scholar of Euroscepticism and the history of European organisations, "it can (…) be asserted that Euroscepticism has been a part of the process of European integration from the beginning of the discussions on the European idea"[10].

The relevance of history for the understanding of populism and the existence of distant forerunners of anti-Europeanism require placing the analysis of the two phenomena in a long-term and comparative perspective. Such an approach provides a crucial theoretical-methodological background for framing the crisis of European governance and reassessing the process of legitimising democracy in post-war Europe. It is within this framework that populism – as a response to social expectations of revitalising the democratic project – finds its fundamental raison d'être.

Indeed, we are dealing with multifaceted forms of opposition to a new democratic order, that of the European Union, which presents peculiar characteristics. On the one hand, the EU's political system is not based on the axiomatic intertwining of democracy and the nation-state; on the other, it is gradually being absorbed into a depoliticised and technocratic environment. We subscribe to the hypothesis that this new model of democracy did not emerge from a pre-arranged project.

Rather, it arose from the pragmatism of narrow political and intellectual circles. They reacted to the changing role of the European nation-state brought about by an unprecedented geopolitical and economic context. Such a context was shaped by the multilateral governance stemming from the external strategic security constraints due to the Cold War, economic interdependence and – from the 1970s onwards – the "hyperglobalisation" unleashed by the free movement of capital and open-door policy. Anti-European populism is inextricably linked to the European project as a postmodern democratic utopia. In a way, we could say that it represents an ideal type. One of the aims of this book is to analyse this paradigm, through the lens of history, in concrete and specific national cases. We are firmly persuaded that this is the only way to fully grasp the meaning of such a topical issue.

This book is divided into five parts.

The first one provides a historical insight on anti-Europeanism and contemporary populism. The authors (Daniele Pasquinucci, Andrea Guiso and Antonio Varsori) argue that these two movements found a point of convergence in the opposition to the European Union, its institutions, politics and values. The reasons for their entanglement are to be found in a long-term process. On the one hand, anti-Europeanism is as old as European integration. As already mentioned, almost all the arguments of contemporary criticism against the EU originate with the foundation of the first Communities; on the other hand, historical analysis of populist motives makes it possible to understand why the EU has been an optimal environment for the spread of populism and its overlapping with anti-Europeanism. Anti-elitism is at odds with an elite-driven process such as European integration; direct democracy is a too-much complex system of government at the European level; the symbiotic relationship between the governed and the governors advocated by populists is incompatible with "hyper-mediated" political representation in the EU.

The second section is devoted to the long-term roots of Brexit – a cornerstone in the history of criticism against Brussels. The authors reconstruct the historical course of British anti-Europeanism and its interconnections with populism. To this end, a crucial question is whether the British withdrawal from the EU can be seen as a legacy of Thatcherism (which is widely believed to be a trigger for anti-Europeanism), or rather a consequence of longer-standing political and cultural reasons – including those fuelling the "populist revolt" recently described by David Goodhart[11]. According to Laura Chiara Cecchi and Domenico Maria Bruni, Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly played a role in laying the conceptual foundations of Euroscepticism, but a closer look at the results of the 2016 referendum and its aftermath highlights a more nuanced political reality that cannot be explained by reference to Thatcher's political legacy alone. This remark is fully consistent with Mark Gilbert's valuable assertion that any serious study of Britain's relationship with the EU should begin with a historical investigation of the ideas and prejudices of British opponents to the European project. At the same time, as William King points out in his chapter, one should not underestimate the fundamental component parts of populism, such as the many references to "the people", sovereignty and political power, and the different manifestations and representations of the "elite".

There is no need to emphasise how important the role played by France and Germany in the European integration process has been (and still is). This is why the third section is specifically dedicated to Franco-German populist Euroscepticism. Martial Libera, in his thoughtful analysis of the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC, 1950–1954), further reminds us of the remote origins of Anti-Europeanism. No less important, he shows how the opponents of the EDC expressed a kind of "opportunist class populism" that pitted genuine French patriots against a coalition of cosmopolitan elites. The French communists (at the forefront against the EDC) thus exploited the sources of contemporary populism. The link between past and present emerges clearly in Nicola Genga's essay on the French Rassemblement National (RN). Its propaganda is focused on the distinction between globalists and nationalists (or patriots). This juxtaposition, in Marine Le Pen's words quoted by Genga, echoes the conflict between cosmopolitan elites and the people, between "the citizens of the world, who are citizens of nowhere […] the globalists, who understand the world as nomads" and the French patriots. The alleged hegemonic role played (reluctantly)[12] by Germany is challenged not only by its EU partners but also by German Populist euroscepticism, which poses a crucial challenge to the entire supranational political system. In his chapter, Federico Niglia deals with Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which he sees as an outcome of German history and politics. At the same time, the rise of the AfD should be placed within the "shift to the right" and the spread of populism that has occurred recently in Europe. This tendency explains the radical turn made by AfD after 2017, when every proposal aimed at rethinking German Europeanism was rejected to make way for an uncompromising anti-European attitude.

The fourth section highlights some crucial national case studies, namely the Netherlands, Spain and the four members of the Visegrád group, i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. All these countries are telling examples of the role that history (and its instrumental reading) can play in shaping opposition to the EU and forging populism. In his chapter, Robin de Bruin shows how, over the past decade, Dutch far-right political parties have succeeded in presenting their populist Euroscepticism as the expression of a well-rooted national political and cultural tradition. The Spanish case, examined by Maria Elena Cavallaro and Giorgia Priorelli, reveals the weight that opposition to Europe has had in the advent of populism, which has identified the defence of Spanish borders and national sovereignty as two of its main goals, firmly advocating the return of a "Europe of nations" – a well-known Gaullist formula. Joanna Sondel-Cedarmas examines some key features of the narratives promoted by populist Eurosceptics in the Polish public sphere in the years 1998–2019. Their arguments are nothing new, but that does not make them any less interesting. They call for a "Europe of nations" (a recurring expression) as an alternative to the Euro federal model and self-represent themselves as the defenders of national interests before the "European elite" and the EU institutions, which they claim are distant from the common people. Moreover, they reject "the rule of Brussels", and point out the right of each nation to self-determination and the defence of national identities. Marco Morini and Peter Plenta adopt a different perspective to explore populist anti-Europeanism in Hungary, the

Czech Republic and Slovakia. In these three countries, public attitudes towards the EU are mostly determined by economic interests. There is little room for a narrative of the European Union as an actor promoting peace, democracy and common values. What matters are (perceived) prosperity and EU funds. This utilitarian conception, as the authors argue, has fostered a populist and Eurosceptic narrative that portrays Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (and all Central and Eastern European countries) as the "losers of European integration".

The fifth section deals with the Italian case. Why does Italy deserve a specific investigation? Following the general elections held in March 2018 Italy was the first Western European democracy to be ruled by a Eurosceptic and populist government (led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and based on a coalition consisting of the Five-star movement and the League). This outcome definitively enshrined Italy's shift from a country at the forefront of the pro-European camp to an EU "disenchanted partner". Apparently, the rapidity with which Italian pro-Europeanism dissolved can be explained by events linked to current affairs (economic crisis and migration flows, above all). Nevertheless, in their respective chapters, Gerardo Nicolosi, Lucrezia Ranieri and Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe provide remarkable insights into how populist Euroscepticism in Italy was smouldering under the ashes. While keeping an eye on the Peninsula, Marc Lazar provides a different perspective for examining populist Euroscepticism. After clarifying some concepts (including that of "populism", often misused in public and academic debates), he ponders on the attitude towards the EU of the current Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her political party, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy). Within this analytical framework, Lazar put forward a different vantage point to deal with hostility towards the EU, one that leads to investigating the transformative (or corrective in a pro-European sense) pressure that the democratic system and the EU itself can exert on the government in Rome and the main Italian political party. This is a very promising approach. On the one hand, it might prompt scholars to delve into the dialectical relations between Europeanism and its opponents. On the other, it confirms the heuristic hypothesis that guided the authors of this book: the past has forged the common traits of populism and anti-Europeanism. Their convergence was boosted by the specific form historically assumed by the European communities, later the European Union, that gradually emerged as an increasingly crucial political and economic actor.

Notes

1 A. Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crisis Changed the World*, London, Allen Lane, 2018.
2 E. Morin and A. B. Kern, *Homeland Earth: A Manifesto for the New Millenium. Advances in Systems, Theory, Complexity, and the Human Sciences*, Cresskill, Hampton Press, 1999.
3 World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2023, 18th Edition, Insight Report*, Geneva, 2023, p. 9, in https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Global_Risks_Report_2023.pdf, (accessed 31 August 2023).
4 M. Gilbert and D. Pasquinucci (eds.), *Euroscepticisms. The Historical Roots of a Political Challenge*, Boston-Leiden, Brill, 2020, p. 4.

5 See K. Jones, *Populism and Trade: The Challenge to the Global Trading System*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.

6 F. Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017, p. 126.

7 For all these issues, see C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, and P. Ostiguy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; and P. Rosanvallon, *Le Siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique*, Paris, Seuil, 2020.

8 Cf. A. S. Roe-Crines, 'Margaret Thatcher and the Rhetorical Road to Brexit', in A. Mullen, S. Farrall, and D. Jeffery (eds.), *Thatcherism in the 21st Century. The Social and Cultural Legacy*, Basingstoke, Springer, 2020, pp. 185–207.

9 Cfr. M. Bitsch, 'Préface', in B. Wassenberg, F. Clavert, and P. Hamman (dir.), *Contre l'Europe? Anti-européisme, euroscepticisme et alter-européisme dans la construction européenne de 1945 à nos jours, I: Les concepts,* Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010, pp. 19–21.

10 B. Wassemberg, 'Challenging the origins of Euroscepticism. A historical perspective', *Historia y Política*, vol. 44, julio-diciembre 2020, p. 61.

11 D. Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*, London, Hurst and Co., 2017.

12 S. Bulmer and W. E. Paterson, 'Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon? Of economic strength and political constraints', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 20, no. 10, 2013, pp. 1387–1405.

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Part 1

Historicising populist Euroscepticism

1 Distinct but converging

Historicising populist Euroscepticism

Daniele Pasquinucci

In June 2016, the majority of the British decided by referendum to leave the European Union (EU) forty-three years after their country's hard-won entry into what was then the European Economic Community. The referendum campaign of the Brexiteers, led by Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), was an incitement to the "populist revolt" against Brussels[1]. In his effort to convince the British to leave the European Union, Farage received the explicit support of the then US presidential candidate Donald Trump. In the aftermath of the referendum, when he was in Scotland, Trump observed with satisfaction that the British "took back their country". After all, he thought, this was a predictable and obviously favourable outcome: "They're angry over borders. They're angry over people coming into the country and taking over, and nobody even knows who they are"[2].

Shortly after that, the race to the US presidency got serious. Farage returned the favour and campaigned for Trump. Moreover, while participating in a rally in Mississippi, Farage said that there was a clear parallel between Brexit and the American election. Just like the "leave" victory, Trump's success would mean the triumph of "ordinary, decent people", "the real people" or even "the little people", over the forces of globalisation and "global corporations"[3]. This was, so to speak, the populist affinity between the two. As for Euroscepticism, Farage could find its conceptual (and rhetorical) foundations in the fight Trump launched against immigration, in his commitment to get the United States out of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and finally in his promise to make America "great again". The last was a similar goal to the one set by Brexiteers: restore Great Britain, freed of the chains of Brussels, to its status as a global power. Once he took office in the White House, Trump didn't disappoint his British admirer. He was instated as a president who believed in "a direct relation between the leader and those in society whom the leader defines as the 'right' or 'good' people (…)"[4]. No less significantly, from the beginning of his term, Trump pushed his administration in an anti-European Union direction[5].

After Trump's victory, another call to vote in Europe seemed to confirm the strength of the anti-Europeans and the "enemies of the elites". In France, Marine Le Pen – a supporter of Frexit – even managed to get on the second ballot against Emmanuel Macron in the presidential election that took place in 2017. Le Pen

lost soundly. Her defeat was welcomed with relief by everyone who cared about the fate of the European Union. But the spread of Eurosceptic populism in France could not be considered a fluke: in the first round, the distance between La République en Marche and the Front National was only three percentage points.

Finally, in 2018, for the first time a populist force that supported direct democracy, the Five Star Movement (5SM), broadly won the political elections in a Western European country, Italy. The least that can be said about the Movement's attitude towards the European Union is that it was ambivalent. After the elections, the 5SM formed a coalition government (presided over by Giuseppe Conte) with Matteo Salvini's Lega, which at the time expressed Europhobic and populist leanings[6]. Italy therefore appeared ready to align itself with the positions of two Euro-sceptical, populist governments, the Hungarian one headed by Viktor Orbán and the Polish one led by Mateusz Morawiecki.

Populism and Euroscepticism were moving forward hand in hand. They seemed unstoppable. Or at least they were on the rise. This is what drew the increased attention of scholars[7]. Naturally, this does not mean that research on those two movements was neglected in the past. On the contrary, populism (which has a longer history) in particular has generated a substantial body of scientific literature. Much of it has adopted a theoretical approach, with a view to building models and ideal types. Nonetheless, as has been pointed out rather recently, "we simply do not have anything like a theory of populism"[8]. From a historical perspective, we might wonder whether this lack is particularly serious. One Italian scholar has observed how attempts to create general categories in which to insert the *different kinds of populism* underestimate how the latter, whether they are "of a national or social, territorial or ideological, ethnic or religious nature" or members "of the fascist totalitarian or communist families", are inherently unique and unrepeatable[9].

Similar observations can be made about the Euroscepticism typified by political scientists. That category draws attention to two limitations. The first is its interpretive narrowness, which makes it impossible to account for the complexity and multifaceted nature of criticism of Europeanism. The second, even more relevant limitation lies in the fact that the origins of Euroscepticism are traced back to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's reluctant (when not openly hostile) attitude towards the EC and to criticism of the Maastricht Treaty[10]. But in reality, opposition to the process of European integration emerged together with the birth of the first European Community in the 1950s. Several of its *tòpoi* are actually from even earlier: Germanophobia is a good example[11].

The prevailing concern with defining populism, perhaps reducing it "to a single sentence"[12], and with conceptualising and measuring Euroscepticism, has indirectly contributed to their mutual separation as objects of study. In this way, the reasons for their growing overlap (which of course does not signify complete symbiosis) remain insufficiently explored[13] – although there is no shortage of exceptions[14]. I believe that the overcoming of this deficiency requires the adoption of the historical method, rather than the application of scientific approaches that compress the past within ahistorical, all-encompassing categories. In other words, the

convergence between populism and Euroscepticism must be studied by connecting facts and interpretations, and especially by giving due value to general context and chronology.

It is necessary to be clear that *Eurosceptic populism* is the result of long-term processes: it does not spring up, mushroom-like, overnight. However, this aware-ness alone is not sufficient. Method must be combined with the right analytical perspective. What we know of populism and Euroscepticism is enough to under-stand how their mutual affinities can lead to their confluence. But in order to grasp what allowed this potential to become reality, we need to relate the qualifying traits of this pair with the context in which it was formed and operates: the European Community and then the European Union created in Maastricht. Those formed an ideal setting – once the time was ripe – for convergence to be achieved. On the one hand, such convergence follows from the fact that several qualifying elements of populism are destined to clash with the pro-European ideal. On the other, it arises from the specific and peculiar political-institutional structure in which the Euro-pean project was set up – and which is the product of a historical process. Obvi-ously, I do not intend to claim the existence of a direct and exclusive causal link between the European Union, its institutions, and the way in which they work, on one side, and its opponents, on the other. If anything, I believe that several features of the EU have contributed to ensuring the success of the movements and parties that oppose it. In this context, to study Eurosceptic populism it is necessary to look within Europeanism and its history, and not only outside it.

Let us begin by saying that most of the elements that have shaped opposition to the European Community since the 1950s are distinctive features of today's popu-list propaganda. This assertion can be fit into an intuitive and easy-to-understand scheme. It is well known that one of the main propaganda themes of the "enemies of Europe" has always been the identification of the EEC/EU with the political and social establishment. More generally, supranational integration is (and has always been) condemned by its opponents as a "creation from above"[15], dominated by omnipotent, shadowy technocrats who cannot be controlled by the citizens, by the *people*. It is important to see how this argument fed anti-European polemic (or at least distrust of the process of European integration) of political players very dis-tant from each other ideologically speaking. British Prime Minister Clement Attlee labelled the High Authority of the ECSC, which came into force in 1952, as "an irresponsible body appointed by no one and responsible to no one"[16]. In Septem-ber 1965, Charles De Gaulle stifled the federalist ambitions of Walter Hallstein, ascribing the European Commission over which the latter presided the nature of "some technocratic, Stateless and irresponsible Areopagus"[17]. It is only seemingly a paradox that federalist Europeans aligned themselves, on this issue, with the Eu-roscepticism of Labour supporters and Gaullists. At the Hague Conference of 1969, the representatives of the European Federalist Movement protested against the transformation of the European Community into a "technocratic superstructure" and demanded direct elections to the European Parliament[18]. Their criticism had antithetical aims with respect to those pursued by Attlee and De Gaulle: namely,

to increase the Community's degree of supranationality. But it followed from the same observation: the technocratic and politically irresponsible character of common European institutions.

As already mentioned, populism is a phenomenon that still awaits a definition shared by the academic community[19]. During the wait, almost everyone has agreed, albeit with varying emphasis, to identify stigma against the elites – and the corresponding valorisation of the people as exclusive holder of virtuous, special, and enduring values – as one of its key features. To those who argue that it was not inevitable that European integration must be an elite-driven process, we might respond that all key concepts of modern political history were formulated by intellectual and political elites. Even the idea of a united, peaceful Europe capable of playing a meaningful role in the global geopolitical scene arose in – and was promoted by – rather narrow political and intellectual circles. According to Jean Monnet, the main architect of the ECSC, elitism was an unavoidable choice: it would have been an error "to consult the peoples of Europe about the structure of a Community of which they had no practical experience"[20]. Again in 1992, future European Commissioner and Director-General of the World Trade Organisation Pascal Lamy observed that Europe was built according to Monnet's approach: "The people weren't ready to agree to integration, so you had to get on without telling them too much about what was happening". But, he admitted, this method "can't work when you have to face democratic opinion"[21].

But was a truly different method ever applied? At least with regard to public perception, the answer seems to be negative. To date the main reason for citizens' uneasiness about the European Union is the belief that they have "very little influence on decisions made at the EU level"[22]. This leads us directly to the *vexata quaestio* of the "democratic deficit" of the European Union. Some scholars tend to downplay it, with fairly persuasive arguments[23]. But the point, for those with a sceptical vision of European integration, is the very possibility of being able to establish a supranational democracy:

> Democracy is tightly linked to the nation-state. The nation-state is the only context in which, representative, parliamentary democracy, based on debate, can work. Europe is not democratic. The European Parliament does not produce democracy. We have no European public sphere in which we can seriously debate in a democratic way[24].

The words by Ralf Dahrendorf quoted above did not consider the possibility of correcting the "democratic deficit". This attitude has deep historical roots and is a defining feature of the diverse Eurosceptical scene. According to Michel Debré, for example, the call of the first European elections in 1979 would not have bridged the distance between citizens and common institutions. If anything, it would have jeopardised the cohesion of the member States. Indeed, the Gaullist ex-Prime Minister thought that the tensions provoked by electoral competition could be exclusively absorbed into the national context. The solidarity mechanisms capable of fixing the fragmentation produced by voting – or rather, by the expression of popular