

**Opposition parties in Europe under pressure.  
Far from power, close to citizens?**

This research project aims to analyse an important political-institutional aspect of democratic systems, namely parliamentary opposition. Revisiting previous research with fresh data is one of the most important improvements that can be brought to the scientific understanding of politics. Regrettably, although opposition is such a fundamental aspect of democratic systems, it has not been adequately explored in literature. My research agenda is consequently justified by the general lack of systemic research on opposition both in terms of data collection and common approaches. I do not pledge to resolve the “theory resistance” of opposition studies (Helms 2008), but I do aim to broaden the scope of parliamentary opposition studies and explore the dimensions which have not been given due consideration.

I believe that, now more than ever, the role and functions of parliamentary opposition deserve renewed attention given the substantial changes in European politics triggered by both political transformations and economic hardships. I try to broaden the classical approaches (Duverger 1951; Dahl 1966; Sartori 1966; Pulzer 1987) along two main dimensions: the first relates to the transformation of the party context and the growing divide between parties that govern but are no longer considered capable of representing, and parties that represent but never govern (Mair 2011). The second concerns the political consequences of the global financial crisis, as the opposition’s choice between conflict and cooperation has different and more profound implications in hard times (Moury and De Giorgi 2015).

The project has both interpretative and theoretical objectives. In fact, I seek to understand the extent to which the transformations occurred at national and supranational level have changed the role and concrete behaviour of the opposition actors in national legislative arenas. Moreover, as the study of opposition falls into the broader issue of how democracy works (Pasquino 1990), understanding how opposition has developed over the years allows me to shed light on the changes and evolution of representative democracy. The research design departs from two different but interrelated studies that I have made/coordinated: one focusing on the evolution of parliamentary opposition in Italy from a comparative perspective (De Giorgi 2016); the other exploring the government-opposition dynamics in Portugal as compared to the other Southern European countries during the economic crisis (De Giorgi and Moury 2015). The present research follows the path already traced by these two projects. On one hand, I continue the work on the Italian and Portuguese case in a more systematic way; on the other, I extend the comparative analysis to other empirical cases – notably, countries from Northern, Central and Eastern Europe – and investigate which institutional and political factors affect the role and functions of the opposition actors in selected legislatures in normal and hard times, and how. In contrast to the existing literature, which typically focuses on a single country or specific group of countries and concentrates on the period of crisis, this project aims to understand the long-term changes in the government-opposition dynamics in the European democracies, the impact of the crisis and its implications on the post-crisis politics.

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