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**Defending Democracy:
Strategies of Reaction to Political Extremism
in Inter-war Europe**

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Abstract

While the strategies of political actors and institutions have been largely analyzed with reference to cases of democratic breakdown in inter-war Europe and other contexts, democratic survival has often been viewed as a consequence of socio-economic and cultural “preconditions”. The analysis of successful reactions to strong extremist challenges in three cases of democratic survival (Czechoslovakia, Finland and Belgium in the inter-war period) against the background of two cases of breakdown in the same historical context (Italy and the Weimar Republic) is a useful complement to this view. The analysis of the selected cases shows how a stable coalition of democratic forces can effectively protect the democratic system from dangerous extremist attacks by enacting both repressive and inclusive strategies.

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Defending Democracy: Strategies of reaction to political extremism in inter-war Europe

Introduction

Are there political and institutional strategies that democratic rulers can use to react against strong extremist challenges that formally “play the democratic game”? Under what conditions can such strategies be successful in making the regime survive? This article addresses these issues —rarely analyzed in the comparative politics literature— in relation to selected cases among the inter-war European democracies. In fact, if the most famous cases of democratic breakdown of the ‘20s and ‘30s have already been object of comparative analysis (Linz & Stepan 1978), with rare exceptions the cases of survival have not been analyzed comparatively, if not with a strong emphasis on the so-called social and cultural “prerequisites” of democracy.¹ On the contrary, the problem of short-term reactions against extremists and the institutional defense of democracy has mainly been dealt with in political theory and constitutional law literature —for a review of this literature, see Boventer (1985a)— less so in the political science one.²

The importance of social and cultural factors in making democracy stable cannot of course be denied, but —as Linz rightly notes— the predominant focus on these leads to a lack of temporal perspective (Linz 1978). While social and cultural prerequisites can be crucial for the long-term stability of a democracy, they cannot offer a satisfactory explanation for the solution of political crises in the short term. More specifically, in this perspective, institutions and actors’ behavior would not make a difference, and on the contrary, they would suffer from a paradox. If its societal basis is what makes a democracy persist, then institutional reactions and

¹ The reference here is not much to the long tradition of studies on the “prerequisites” of democracy — for a general review, see Diamond (1992)— although the basic assumptions and findings of this literature are echoed in the analyses mentioned below. More specifically on inter-war Europe, Luebbert (1991) adopts a fully structure-driven explanation of regime outcomes. A “sociological bias” is often present in the studies that deal precisely with the topic of institutional protection of democracy in specific countries, such as the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) —see for example Lameyer (1978). Boventer concludes his comparative analysis of democratic protection in FRG, France and the USA with the following statement: “Democratic self-defense is first of all a matter of competence of the citizen and his political commitment. This liberal (*freiheitlich*) ethos is the best and most effective protection against the ‘totalitarian challenge’ ” (Boventer 1985a).

² A notable exception to this rule is the recent comparative study of inter-war European democracies by Berg-Schlosser and Mitchell (1999) (see also (Berg-Schlosser & De Meur 1994), and (Berg-Schlosser 1998) for a summary of the overall findings), which incorporates in a complex analytical framework the impact of both “structural” and actor-based variables. The inclusion of 18 countries and many

short-term political strategies will only be effective when the extremists against whom these are directed are weak, which however makes these useless at the same time. When extremists are strong, none of these strategies can reach its proposed aim. Thus, institutional and political reactions to extremism in the short term would oscillate, in this view, between triviality and impossibility. If one focuses on the short-term perspective, on the contrary, the question that becomes important is the following: under what conditions are short-term political and institutional reactions against extremists possible? It goes without saying that the stronger the challenge is, the more difficult it will be to “defend” the democratic regime, and beyond certain limits, even impossible. But how strong is “strong”? What are these limits?

Defending democracy: The problem of short-term reactions to political extremism

The idea of “defending democracy” goes back to the eternal dilemma of democratic rule, that of “tolerance for the intolerant”. Rather than exploring the normative implications of this dilemma, however, this article focuses on some of its empirical aspects. By “defending democracy” I mean here the elaboration and enactment of short-term political strategies³ that can have either an inclusive or a repressive nature and are explicitly aimed at reacting against those political forces that exploit the rights and guarantees of democracy in order to undermine its fundamental bases.

Reflecting the normative dilemma mentioned above, the most important characteristic of democratic defense is its being delicately balanced between two opposing threats to democracy: on the one hand, the discrimination against a certain political actor for political or ideological reasons represents a serious restriction of civil and political rights that, if pushed “too far”, can give rise to authoritarian tendencies. On the other hand, tolerating an anti-democratic (extremist) actor might lead the system to collapse in a time of crisis. This dilemma is particularly urgent when extremist actors have a strong support. It is in cases such as these, when the defense of democracy is most needed, that it would be most difficult to achieve.

variables in this remarkable analysis, however, cannot but leave the more detailed aspects of the strategies of political actors in political crises unexplored.

³ In principle, democracy can be also “defended” by strategies with long-term goals, such as those aiming at promoting a democratic culture through education, or democratic propaganda etc. These strategies are very important in the present phenomenon of “protection and promotion” of democracy in the newly democratizing states, but out of the picture of the present analysis (Schmitter & Brouwer 1999).

In the following sections, through the analysis of cases in which the democratic regime survived strong extremist challenges, and their comparison with cases of breakdown, I highlight the role of the most important political actors in democratic defense, what strategies they used, and under what political conditions could such strategies be successful. More specifically, I first select the most adequate cases for the analysis, on the basis of objective criteria; then, I discuss the effectiveness and limits of “militant democracy” when confronted with strong extremist challenges; afterwards, I identify the main political and institutional actors of democratic defense and analyze their strategies, first within the theoretical framework of Sartori’s party systems analysis, and then in greater detail in each of the selected cases. The last section of the article is devoted to a summary investigation of the “inclusive” strategies of democratic defense adopted in the selected countries, important complements of anti-extremist repression. The article will come to the conclusion that, although there can be different paths to democratic persistence, short-term reactions against strong extremist challenges are indeed possible in “difficult” democracies (borrowing this label from Sani & Sartori 1983: 337) and should be taken into account more systematically in the comparative analysis of democratic survivals and breakdowns.

Challenges to democracy in inter-war Europe

For the purpose of case selection, I operationalize the strength of the challenge to a democratic regime as the highest percentage of seats held by extremist parties in the Lower Chamber in the period under analysis here. This operationalization is driven by the very nature of the enterprise. In fact, although important challenges to the democratic system can obviously be brought about by political actors other than political parties (such as interest groups, the army etc.), when extremism takes the form of a political party, it brings the challenge into “the heart” of the system. Parliament, in fact, is the main arena where political majorities are formed to support reaction against extremists, should this consist in the passing of special legislative measures or simply in backing the executive in its actions to this purpose. In conditions in which extremist parties enjoy significant parliamentary representation, it is reasonable to expect that they would perceive themselves as future victims of such reactions, and would therefore use their influence on the parliamentary proceedings and the political interplay in order to render difficult for the democratically minded

political forces to achieve the necessary unity to coordinate on a deliberate strategy of democratic defense. In general, one extremist party will constitute the main challenge in different moments, but all other extremist formations, although possibly very far ideologically from the main challenger, will constitute a political constraint for democratic forces to reach an agreement on a common defensive strategy. This is the reason why I have chosen the total number of seats of all extremist parties in the operationalization. The Lower Chamber is chosen because it is normally more important than the Upper Chamber, as well as for reasons of parsimony. Finally, I consider as “extremist” parties those formations that on the basis of their “controlling goals” (Dahl 1966) are against either the fundamentals of pluralist democracy or the territorial unity of the state, or both. This basically restricts the field of such formations to Nazi, fascist or authoritarian parties, communist parties, and secessionist-irredentist parties.⁴

Focusing on those European countries that enjoyed a certain democratic continuity during the inter-war years,⁵ figure 1 ranks eleven cases (ten survived democracies, and the Weimar Republic) on the basis of the “peak” percentage of seats reached by extremist parties in the Lower Chamber between 1919 and 1939. The peaks represent moments of crisis, in which the democratic system underwent considerable strain and was in serious danger of breakdown.

{FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE}

The case of Germany is well known (the bar represents the situation after the elections of November 1932), but it can be noticed that three of the countries that

⁴ It goes without saying that secessionist and anti-democratic parties constitute two completely different challenges for a democratic system, and should be considered separately. However, both share an interest in bringing the system down, although for different reasons, and might constitute a political constraint for democratic forces to achieve the necessary coordination for a common defensive strategy (Capoccia, in progress).

⁵ These cases (with the addition of Italy) are those in which there was a struggle between democratic forces in the government and extremist forces in the opposition, confronting democratic rulers with the double danger of suspending democracy from above and giving up the system to an anti-democratic opposition, which used the democratic rights and guarantees to take over the system. Starting with the whole set of European democracies between the wars, I exclude from the analysis those that have been “terminated from above”, that is, suspended after a *coup* by the government itself, the King or the military. In those cases, which include a large majority of the new democracies that emerged in Eastern Europe after WWI (as well as Portugal and other cases), the struggle between democratic and non-democratic forces assumed a completely different logic. In Spain, the struggle degenerated into a Civil War. The Austrian case, in which the first “defensive” measures against the Nazi and the Communists were followed by the legal elimination of all political opposition, highlights a further aspect of this problematic: the possible instability of militant legislation, leading from some restrictions on some

survived had in fact to face very strong challenges. In Czechoslovakia after the 1935 elections, and in Finland in 1930-1931, extremist parties had about one third of the parliamentary seats of the most important Chamber, while in Belgium (1936-1939) this percentage was slightly below one fourth. These three cases⁶ therefore present themselves as critical ones for the assessment of the possibilities of enactment and success of democratic defense strategies. In these, in fact, the political conditions for the coordination of democratic forces on a common strategy were worse than in any other case of survival, according to my conceptualization, and attention must therefore be focused on them. Prior to that, though, it is necessary to single out the main actors and strategies of democratic defense. I do so by first addressing the assets and liabilities of the so-called “militant democracy”.

Shifting the Boundaries of Legality: Effectiveness and Limits of Legislative Responses to Extremism

Reinforcing the legislative apparatus for repression against extremists was a strategy to which most European democracies resorted to in the period under analysis here to respond to the internal challenges to their existence. This phenomenon is largely understudied in political science, so much so that it is necessary to go back in time of several decades to find comparative analyses of it. In a series of articles published in the late thirties, Karl Loewenstein coined the term “militant democracy”, to define what he considered as a natural politico-constitutional development of democracies in those years, responding with special legislation to the necessity of fighting especially Fascist and Nazi tendencies (Loewenstein 1937a and 1937b; see also Friedrich (1957: 108 ff.). Although, according to his view, militant democracy includes both a political and a legislative dimension, his real focus is on “anti-extremist legislation”, essential to make democracy invulnerable to the Fascist “technique of power takeover” (Loewenstein 1937a and 1938a).

{TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE}

opposition parties to the outright elimination of pluralism ((Loewenstein 1935a and 1935b). In none of the cases included in figure 1 has this happened.

⁶ Data on France, representing the strength of the Communists and the right-wing “independents” in the last Parliament of the III Republic, probably overestimates to some extent the strength of the extremist challenge, since not all “independents” could be considered extremists. Precise historical research on the matter is still lacking, and it is impossible to determine exactly the political belonging of all the MP classified in this group (Le Béguet 1992).

The special legislation against political extremism passed in the various European democracies is very complex and covers a very broad ground. In table 1 such legislation is classified on the basis of its object. The first cluster of anti-extremist legislation includes the rules of reinforcing the “core” of the state institutional machinery. These regard two important areas of legislation: the special norms conferring the cabinet or the Head of State with extraordinary powers to face emergency situations,⁷ and the norms aimed at protecting the bureaucratic-military structures of the state from extremist influences, in order to guarantee their loyalty. In the second cluster I have inserted the special legislation setting limits to political pluralism, enabling the government to ban or temporarily suspend parties or associations considered threatening to some fundamental feature of the system. This is in principle the most “visible” governmental weapon to defend the system from extremist challenges. The third cluster groups together the pieces of special legislation limiting political propaganda on certain issues. Basically, this kind of legislation is aimed at reducing the capability of extremists to delegitimise and discredit the democratic system in the eyes of the electorate. Examples include explicitly prohibiting discrediting democratic institutions, or democratic leaders, or holders of high offices in the state, sharpening sanctions and widening the scope of political libel cases, or prohibiting glorifying political crime, or spreading false news. Other provisions that fall in this category include a general tightening of censorship on press and other means of public expression, and limitations on foreign political propaganda. Lastly, the fourth cluster includes special legislation aimed at the protection of public order. This kind of legislation aims to maintain public peace and ensure a “correct” development of the democratic dialectic. Unlike legislation protecting core institutions, which defends the state from direct “military” attacks by extremists, this type of anti-extremist legislation has a more indirect character. To put it simply, it restricts the choice of strategies for the extremist actors, preventing them from using illegal and unconventional behavior to delegitimize the democratic procedures of conflict-solving, and therefore gain support for their alternative proposals.

The analysis of the existence and passing of anti-extremist legislation in the eleven countries included in fig. 1 reveals a mixed picture (Capoccia, in progress). On the one hand, exactly Czechoslovakia and Finland, which survived the worst political

⁷ The inclusion of these norms in the realm of “militant democracy” is contested, since virtually all

crises, possessed the most elaborate systems of protection against extremism, with strong legislative restrictions in virtually all areas listed in table 1. A large part of this legislation, in both countries, did not pre-exist the advent of the gravest political crises, but was adopted during or after the critical phase, and it must therefore be seen as a conscious reaction of the democratic elites to the rise of extremist actors (Capoccia 1999a). Comparatively less important, although not irrelevant, was the role played by the reinforcement of ad hoc legislation in the overall defensive strategy of the Belgian democratic elites against the challenge of the Rexist Party.

On the other hand, special anti-extremist legislation was also present in the Weimar Republic, where a “law for the protection of the Republic”, passed in 1923 and reiterated—in a partially weakened form—in 1930 provided for restrictions to extremists’ activities in several areas. More importantly, several presidential decrees in 1931-1932 provided for severe legal restrictions especially for the protection of public order and the limitation of extremist political propaganda (Jasper 1963). What differentiated Czechoslovakia and Finland from Germany was the persistence, during the crisis, of a democratic coalition that was sufficiently strong to devise and enact a coherent *political* strategy against extremists.⁸ Of such a strategy, the reinforcement of special legislation can be an important part, as it endows the government with stronger repressive weapons that can make the democratic game much more difficult and even impossible to play for the extremists, but the crucial factor is the *politics* of democratic defense. It is therefore necessary to move to a closer analysis of the political actors enacting defensive strategies and the conditions for the success of their actions.

Actors of Democratic Defense

The main institutional actors in the short-term defense of democracy are the government and the Head of State. The crucial factor for a democratic government attempting to act effectively against extremists is the stability of the political coalition on which it is founded. In political systems where extremist parties are strong, as in the cases under analysis here, the crucial element for this stability is the political

constitutional states have them, in some form (Boventer 1985b).

⁸ This is the basic argument of the well-documented study on the constitutional protection of democracy in the Weimar republic by Gusy, in which the author carries out a formal analysis of the legal means and possibilities of defending the Republic against the extremists, which were not implemented due to the lack of the political will to do so (Gusy 1991)..

strategy of those components of the coalition that border ideologically with the extremists. Sartori's analysis of polarized party systems shows that in such systems there is an in-built tendency to "centrifugal competition", since extremist parties compete in such a way to force all others, and in particular those bordering with them along that space, towards extreme positions. Extremist parties, by using "outbidding" propaganda tactics, attract electors from the center and especially from the moderate wings, which I call here "border" parties. The systemic propensities of the party competition, thus, push the border parties towards the extremes, in order to regain the electors that they have lost, thus nurturing the overall polarizing trend (Sartori 1976).

Answering his critics, Sartori reaffirmed that his model identifying systemic propensities in different types of party systems does not have any deterministic nature: although polarization and centrifugal competition push the system towards breakdown, they only identify some "inertial systemic tendencies", and do not pre-constitute a specific regime outcome. Between the systemic propensities and the regime outcome there are the political actors, who can stop or even counteract these propensities, and therefore have an impact on the final outcome (Sartori 1982). In general, depending on the historical and geographical context, various actors and as many strategies can successfully counteract the centrifugal tendencies of a polarized party system. In the cases analyzed here, the decisive (re-)actions against extremists mainly came from the leadership of the border parties, the government and the Head of State.

Focusing first on the border parties and the government, it can be expected that the centrifugal tendencies identified by Sartori's analysis in the electoral arena give rise to "defectionist" tendencies in the parliamentary arena (fig. 2). In polarized systems, the government is normally supported by a center-based coalition. By definition, the stronger the parliamentary representation of extremists is, the more likely it will be that the border parties will be part, in one form or another, of the governmental majority, and possibly a numerically necessary part of it. A further consequence is that the government majority will also be heterogeneous, which on the one hand makes governmental paralysis likely, and, on the other, makes border parties uncomfortable.

{ FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE }

In other words, we can say that border parties generally face a choice: either they abide by “systemic” considerations, and make a common front against the extremist party, perceived as a common enemy; or they put their immediate electoral and political interests first, and defect from the governmental alliance. In other words, they might choose to defect from the center either in order to get back the votes that they are losing to the extremists, or to create the political conditions for a different governing majority in which they will have more power, their policy preferences will prevail, and their constituency will be more rewarded. Border parties’ decisions during crisis’ times is the crucial factor in making democratic defense in the short-term possible or impossible in the face of the challenge of strong extremist parties (Capoccia 1999a). This causal process is described in table 2: the cooperation of the border parties, by stabilizing the governmental majority, puts the government in conditions to react against the extremists, which increase the probability of a decline in the latter’s popular support. Defection of border parties, on the contrary, triggers the opposite causal process, leading to the increase of centrifugal tendencies in the party system and ultimately to democratic breakdown, either in the form of extremist takeover or of suspension of democratic rule by a government that can no longer count on a political majority.

{TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE}

Another crucial actor in short-term defense mechanisms is the Head of State. While the effectiveness of the government to act against extremists is largely conditioned by the strategies of border parties, the Head of State can generally act with a greater degree of independence. This is not to say that they can ignore the equilibrium between the political forces when making choices, especially in critical political junctures, but they can nonetheless be decisive in using personal prestige and political influence to channel the crisis towards a certain outcome. Generally speaking, the Head of State can intervene in all the intermediate steps of the causal process described in table 2, by influencing the party interplay and the coalition-formation process, by supporting the government and its strategies in front of public opinion, and in some cases by exerting influence on the policy choices of the cabinet. Moreover, they can exert independent powers in exceptional situations, where the legal prerequisites for this exist.

Reactions to Political Crises

Table 3 shows the opposite patterns of survived and collapsed democracies in the strategies of border parties, the government and the Head of State. In what follows, I concentrate the analysis on the three cases of democratic survival and not waste too many words on the quite well-known stories of the breakdown in Italy and the Weimar Republic (Farneti 1978; Lepsius 1978). Generally speaking, one of the main factors precipitating the political crisis in both Italy and Germany was that border parties or important sectors of these decided to defect from the political “center” and to pursue a different political alliance that, at one stage or another, would have foreseen the inclusion of the extremists. In pursuing this project, they were mainly driven by the wrong belief that in such alliance they would have the leading role. In fact, large sectors of the Italian Liberals and Conservatives formed an alliance with the emerging Fascists in 1921, and repeated it in 1924, when Mussolini was already in power but political pluralism had not yet been completely eliminated. In the Weimar Republic, the National Conservatives (DNVP) also moved to the extreme after 1928. After the fall of the Great Coalition following the break between the centrist forces and the Social Democratic Party in 1930, the former relied on the support of President Hindenburg to govern by decree. The landslide electoral victory of the Nazi party in September of the same year following an unpropitious dissolution of the *Reichstag* rendered the re-creation of a democratic coalition increasingly difficult —after 1932 even numerically impossible (Matthias & Morsey 1979)— and progressively brought the issue of the inclusion of the NSDAP in government on the political agenda. In all three cases of survival analyzed here, similar political projects were present, but were defeated.⁹

{TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE}

The same contrasting patterns of behavior between cases of survival and breakdown can be seen in the political strategies and actions of the Heads of State in critical moments. The actions of President Pehr Evind Svinhufvud in the exertion of emergency powers against the Lapua insurrection in 1932, the political activism of President Edvard Beneš in Czechoslovakia after 1935, and the determination of King

⁹ See, on the pursuit of this strategy by the Italian Liberal leader Giolitti, (De Felice 1966; Candeloro 1978). On the strategies of the German conservatives and parts of the moderate political forces in this sense, see Bracher (1953 and 1974). The various trends and political perspectives on the German political scene in 1930-1933 are well portrayed in Winkler (1992).

Leopold III in Belgium in solving the political deadlock of a hyper-fragmented party system were decisive at key junctures of the political crises in the respective countries. By contrast, the decision of Victor Emmanuel III in Italy not to oppose the Fascist insurrection of 1922, and especially those of Hindenburg and his advisors between 1930 and 1933 in Germany, were crucial in favoring an anti-democratic outcome of the crises (Dorpalen 1964; Candeloro 1978).

Finland

An important feature of the Finnish case is the particular timing of its defense against a bilateral challenge. In the '20s the government repressed the challenge of the Communist Party mainly with police action, and with a wide use of the intelligence services. Many Communist militants and leaders were charged with treason or sedition, and the party's organization, both overt and secret, was repeatedly disbanded during those years (Hodgson 1967; Upton 1973; Mäkelä 1987). Although the object of continuous repression, and politically isolated —the Social Democratic Party constantly kept its distance from them (Felak 1990)— the Communists remained in the public sphere: constantly changing organizational form, the party managed to stay in the political arena, and to participate into elections until 1929. The decisive factor for the eradication of Communism from Finland in the inter-war period was the emergence, at the end of 1929, of a strong extreme right-wing movement (the Lapua Movement), which will itself turn into a danger for Finnish democracy. Backed by large and influential parts of the Finnish establishment, this movement unleashed an unprecedented wave of political violence throughout the country and forced the parliament to pass a very elaborate apparatus of anti-extremist legislation and implement it against the Communists, canceling them from public life in 1930-31 (Micheles Dean, Bailey, Graham, & Wertheimer 1934).

Shortly afterwards, though, the same legislation was used against the Lapua Movement: Svinhufvud, the President of the Republic, used the exceptional power that the new laws conferred on him to react against an armed uprising by Lapua in early 1932, and then outlawed the movement. While Svinhufvud's prompt reaction (and the support given to it by the Chief of Staff Aarne Sihvo, who resisted strong pressure from within the army) was certainly of a crucial importance, such a strategy was helped by the increasing political isolation of Lapua after 1931. While in a first phase large sectors of the bourgeois establishment gave their support to the Lapua

Movement, after 1931, most bourgeois parties clearly distanced themselves from it. The political trajectory of the Agrarian Party, the most important centrist party in those years, is crucial, in this respect. Once the Communist challenge had been eradicated, it was no longer necessary for the moderate parties to tolerate Lapua's outright political violence, as well as its increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic positions (Rintala 1962).

Czechoslovakia

In the First Czechoslovak Republic (1920-1938), the Communist and Fascist challenges were of limited importance. The main challenge to the regime came from German ethnic parties (about one fourth of the population of Czechoslovakia was German-speaking and concentrated in border regions). The political expression of this ethnic cleavage had two faces: a moderate one, expressed by the German bourgeois and Social Democratic parties, which decided quite early (1921-22) to cooperate with the newly-born Czechoslovak State, and were fully integrated politically within a few years (Brügel 1968). The other "face" of German ethnic political representation was extremist and nationalist, both secessionist and anti-democratic, and was represented by the DNP (German Nationalist Party) and the DNSAP (German National Socialist Workers' Party). These two parties had little significance in the '20s, when the regime was stable and they were politically entirely isolated. They became a reason for concern, however, after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933.

The Czechoslovak government's first reaction was to ban these two formations in October 1933, and to reinforce anti-extremist legislation in several areas. In 1933-34 several special laws were passed limiting political propaganda, introducing the political screening of public employees, and allowing the ban of extremist parties (Hartmann 1933; Sander 1935).¹⁰ Most members of the two dissolved parties, however, were substituted by a follow-up organization called Sudeten German Home Front (SGHF), which constituted, for the remaining years of the Republic, the fifth column of Nazi Germany within democratic Czechoslovakia. The government did not ban this organization, which soon profiled itself as a political party, although the legal prerequisites for this existed and had actually just been reinforced. Why? Before the political elections of May 1935, the forces represented in the Czechoslovak

government (a large coalition of socialist and moderate forces, both Czech and Sudeten German) were divided on the strategy to be adopted in front of the skilful tactics of political camouflage adopted by the SGHF.¹¹ While the two socialist parties were in favor of banning the party, and had the support in this of the influential foreign minister Beneš, the internal right wing of the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party, the main government party, vetoed the strategy. The strategy of influential sectors of the Agrarian Party (in particular the Moravian Agrarians) was to let the SGHF obtain “about fifteen or twenty seats” in order to form a new coalition that would exclude the Socialist parties from government, and shift the political equilibrium to the right, including both the SGHF and the tiny Czech fascist party NOF (Wiskemann 1967) (Hapala 1968) (Mamatey 1973).

The Agrarian Prime Minister Jan Malypetr, given the disagreement within the cabinet on this issue, adopted a neutral position, and transferred the decision to the hands of the President of the Republic Thomas Masaryk. The orientation of the President and his advisors (the “Castle”, in the political jargon of the time), was that of banning the SGHF and at the same time reinforcing the good relations with the moderate German parties. However, to insist on this course of action would have certainly jeopardized the stability of the government. The discussion over whether the SGHF should be banned went on for the whole of 1934, and as late as a few weeks before the general elections, it was still by no means clear whether that party would be able to participate in them. In the end, Masaryk decided against the forced dissolution of the party, thinking that the SGHF would be “parliamentarised” after the elections—in other words, that its mere entry in parliament would have led it to adopt moderate positions. Then, if the need arose, the party could be dissolved anyway (Mamatey 1973).¹² Thus, the SGHF was finally admitted into the electoral arena. As a last possible hindrance to it, the SGHF was however forced to change its name, since

¹⁰ This legislation was also implemented against Slovak nationalists, which were growing more extremist in those years: the party newspaper of the HSLS (Slovak party) was suspended, and one of the party’s main leader was arrested and convicted for treason (Mikus 1963; Jelínek 1980; Felak 1994).

¹¹ The leaders of SGHF, in particular Konrad Henlein, took extreme care in formally abiding to democratic rhetoric and institutions in public, and developing revolutionary strategies in close contact with Berlin behind the scenes (Brügel 1973).

¹² Again, the decision of the Head of State on such a delicate matter could not be entirely independent from the position of the different parties on it. In this respect, the closer the elections came, the feebler the position of the forces pushing for the party’s dissolution became. In fact, a necessary counterweight of such a decision would have been that of making generous concessions to the moderate German parties and to the German minority in general, which no Czech party was willing to do just before the

the expression "Front" could not be accepted in a democracy. It renamed itself as *Sudetendeutsche Partei* (Sudeten German Party — SDP).

After the elections of May 1935, banning the SDP became more difficult than before. The party, in fact, turned out to be the strongest party in Czechoslovakia in terms of votes (about two thirds of the Sudeten Germans voted for it), and was overcome by the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party in parliament just by one seat. Moreover, the international situation was growing increasingly unstable: Hitler's repeated successful challenges to the Locarno system of alliances, which was also supposed to guarantee the security of Czechoslovakia, exposed the country to a greater danger, and suggested caution in dealing with the Sudeten German minority.

However, the governing parties and the President of the Republic devised a three-pillar defensive strategy against the SDP. First of all, they gave a strong impulse to rearmament, and to the construction of military fortifications at the Western boundaries, which was undertaken at a tremendous pace. The second pillar of the strategy was to equip the state with the legal means necessary to cope with internal and international emergencies, and this was done by passing of the 1936 law on the "defense of the State". With reason, this piece of legislation has been defined as the most elaborate self-defense provision ever enacted in a democratic system in times of peace (Loewenstein 1938a). It gave the government the legal possibility to declare military rule and govern by decree the whole national territory or large portions of it (Kier 1936; Sander 1937). Lastly, the executive pursued the nationality policy towards the German minority with a firmer hand, sensibly increasing the concessions to it in several areas. This articulated strategy managed to keep the SDP at bay, although obviously it could not avoid the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia decided in Munich in 1938 by the European powers, and its subsequent military conquest by Germany in 1939 (Wiskemann 1967).

Belgium

Belgian democracy faced a dangerous challenge in 1936-39, with the emergence and rise of the Rexist party, an authoritarian right-wing catholic formation. In the elections of May 1936, Rex, created only a few months earlier, obtained about 11% of the seats in parliament, while the Flemish nationalist and authoritarian *Vlaamse Nationaal Verbond* (Flemish National League — VNV), and the Communist Party

elections. Thus, Masaryk's decision was probably based on a miscalculation, but at the moment in which it was taken it was too difficult to decide otherwise.

also reported a large victory and obtained a further 12% ca in total. Thus, in 1936, almost one fourth of the Belgian parliament was composed of anti-democratic parties.

The Rexist challenge, the most aggressive and dangerous of the three, was counteracted quickly and effectively, thanks to the prompt reaction of the establishment. In particular, the strategy of the Catholic Party, which had been the biggest loser to Rex in 1936, deserves attention since it was decisive in allowing an effective defense.

The Rexist Party came from within the Catholic political area, and its young leader, Leon Degrelle, was director of a Catholic publishing house. After the constitution of Rex as an independent political party in February 1936, and Degrelle's strong propaganda attacks of against the Catholic leaders, the Catholic Party reacted promptly by officially severing all contacts with Rex (Beaufays 1973). Moreover, internal organizational reforms —ongoing since 1935— were accelerated to make the party and its leadership less vulnerable to aggressive Rexist propaganda and to achieve stricter central control over the loosely-connected peripheral Catholic political organizations. In the campaign for the May 1936 elections, the new Catholic leader Hubert Pierlot made specific moves aimed at capturing the vote of the younger generations of Catholics, largely attracted by Degrelle's oratory (Conway 1994). The formation of new groups of young Catholics was sponsored and supported, with this precise goal (Gérard 1985). This was not enough to avoid the electoral defeat of the Catholic Party in those elections, where virtually all of the Rexist Party's votes came from the ranks of the Catholic electorate. Degrelle's campaign strategy was primarily that of attacking the traditional parties and the Catholics, mainly by denouncing cases of corruption and politico-financial collusion widespread at that time (Étienne 1968).

After the elections, the main danger for Belgian democracy came not so much from the increasing popular successes of Degrelle, but rather from the presence of a sector of the Catholic Party itself that was in favor of a political alliance with Rex in a "bloc d'ordre". Needless to say, this political project would have made Rex's chances of taking power much higher. The Catholic Party was in disarray, and Pierlot's frantic attempts at internal reforms encountered unconcealed internal opposition from various sectors of the party. The prospect of a split, or even disintegration, of the Catholic Party would not have been unlikely, had a far right-wing alliance been formed

(Gérard 1985).¹³ Despite these centrifugal tendencies, the leadership of the party managed to keep a firm route towards a centrist alliance with the Liberals and the Socialists, and to resist the various attempts of the internal traditionalist wing to move the whole party to the right. This gave the government the political strength to react effectively to Rex's open challenge.

The Belgian King Leopold III was also important in channeling the political crisis following the 1936 elections towards a democratic solution, in particular by intervening actively to "force" the three traditional parties to agree to form a government. The coalition-forming process had always been difficult in Belgium, given the extreme internal fractionalization of the Catholic, Liberal and Socialist parties, which dominated the political scene. Every governmental coalition had to achieve a difficult balance between the internal factions of the three formations, and therefore the cabinet crises would normally be solved after long negotiations.¹⁴ After the 1936 elections, the same happened: several attempts to form a government failed, and the country was left without a government for a month; during which time there were big Communist-led strikes, blocking several industrial sites, and Rex continued to ride the wave of its political success. After the resignation of several *formateurs*, Leopold III intervened directly, summoning the leaders of the internal factions of the three parties (all politically necessary for a government) and asked them to give the go-ahead to a tripartite coalition. The decisiveness of this intervention is demonstrated by the fact that the new government, led by the Catholic-leaning technocrat Paul Van Zeeland, saw the light only two days later (Höjer 1946).

Once formed, the Van Zeeland government decided to react against the continuous challenges from Degrelle and Rex: it prohibited a Rexist mass demonstration in Brussels, it denied Degrelle access to the State radio for a propaganda speech, there were arrests of some Rexist journalists and militants, the trials under way against Rexist members were sped up etc. The government also took up the most overt and symbolically loaded challenge that Rex put forward against the

¹³ This was a very real possibility if one bears in mind the presence of advanced projects of reorganization of the Catholic bloc in Flanders going on in those years, which included the VNV (Gérard 1985).

¹⁴ The three parties, and in particular the Catholics and the Liberals, had a variety of internal divisions: right vs. left, generational, Flemish vs. Walloon, Chamber vs. Senate members, etc. To this one should add the importance of the various organizations representing the different areas of the Catholic world and referring to the Catholic Party, and the intra-party cliques gathering around certain personalities. Moreover, often the appointed Prime Minister should also pay attention to include in the cabinet a minister from each of the biggest Belgian cities (Höjer 1946).

regime: a by-election, tactically provoked by Degrelle in April 1937, in which the Rexist leader would stand in person. The majority supporting the government responded by passing an *ad hoc* law forbidding, in the future, “frivolous” by-elections, and then by making the Prime Minister in person stand against the Rexist leader. Van Zeeland, supported by all the traditional parties and even by the Communists, who decided not to put forward a candidate, defeated Degrelle severely, marking the beginning of his decline and that of Rex (Étienne 1968).¹⁵

The “Inclusive” Mechanisms of Democratic Defense

As the Italian and the German cases show, “including” a totalitarian party might be dangerous, yet successful short-term reactions against political extremism are not confined to political exclusion and legal repression. On the contrary, they are normally accompanied by explicit attempts by the democratic establishment to include *specific sectors* of the extremist challenge. Apart from the attempts of border parties to appeal to the electors supporting the extremist formations, inclusive strategies can be developed and enacted by institutional actors too. In fact, the government and the Head of State can develop inclusive strategies aimed at “integrating” the extremist rank and file, or sectors of the extremists’ elites. Table 4 summarizes the use of these mechanisms in the three analyzed cases.

{TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE}

The resort to repressive provisions, particularly strong in Finland and Czechoslovakia, has already been analyzed in the previous sections. The defensive strategies labeled as the “integration of rank and file” aim at reducing the electoral appeal of the extremist party. Into this category fall the explicit appeals to public opinion against the extremists, a course of action to which both the Belgian and the Czechoslovak government resorted. Under the label of “appeals to public opinion” I include the public speeches, meetings, conferences etc. held by important political

¹⁵ Explicitly using Hitler’s electoral landslide as his model, Degrelle was convinced that the best tactic to increase Rex’s power and its image as the political force that was going to take over the “rotten” Belgian parliamentary system was to score growing results in a series of closely scheduled elections. He thus provoked the resignation of one of the Rexist MPs elected in Brussels, and of all the substitutes, and stood personally in the by-election. A success in this by-election, or at least a good result, higher than the quota of votes obtained ten months earlier by Rex and the VNV together (the two parties supporting Degrelle in the by-election) would have allowed Degrelle to claim that the people supported his fight against the *ancien régime*. Further strategically provoked by-elections would have probably continued the same strategy, until a general election was forced, in which Rex would have struck the final blow to the regime (Étienne 1968).

figures (the Head of State, the Prime Minister, democratic leaders etc.) and explicitly aimed at alerting the electorate to the danger represented by a specific extremist challenge, and at enlarging the legitimacy of the system. More specifically, I only refer to those appeals explicitly conceived by their authors as part of a strategic reaction against the extremist challenge, as was the case in both the countries mentioned.

In Belgium, the Van Zeeland government decided to react without hesitation against Rex's increasingly aggressive propaganda, with the Prime Minister taking an active role.¹⁶ A program of public meetings and speeches by the Prime Minister and several ministers and democratic leaders was planned, in which they warned the population, and in particular the Catholic electorate, about the danger represented by Rex. Several defensive actions undertaken by the Czechoslovak democratic political elite after 1935-36 also aimed to "regain" the support of the electorate who voted for the extremists. In Czechoslovakia, the most active figure in addressing public opinion in order to undermine support for the extremists was Beneš, who had succeeded Masaryk at the Presidency of the Republic in December 1935. He had been clearly designated by the latter as his successor, which gave him particular prestige. In 1936-1937 he traveled incessantly in the German-inhabited regions of Czechoslovakia, holding conferences where he addressed the problem of national minorities and highlighted the government's willingness to meet all reasonable requests for equal treatment for all citizens. To give substance to this effort, he instructed several cabinet ministries to allocate their budgets to German-inhabited areas in proportion to their population. The government independently followed the same line, both in allocating public expenditure, and in accepting the requests of the German moderate parties, which needed support to restore their credibility with the Sudeten community after the landslide victory of the SDP. The government and these parties reached an agreement on further concessions to the German minority, which was formalized in February 1937. The agreement in question included guidelines for increasing German representation in the civil service, the German share of welfare and cultural

¹⁶ One of the main arguments of the Rexist campaign were the attacks against the corruption of the Belgian traditional politicians (*les pourris* — "the rotten ones", in the words of Degrelle), revealed by several recent scandals. Van Zeeland was not a traditional politician, being rather a technocrat (before 1935 he was Vice-President of the Central Bank), and had an immaculate image. Thus, he represented in this sense a political resource against Rex for the traditional parties (Höjer 1946). Van Zeeland himself, however, fell victim in October 1937 of a scandal that forced him to resign (Étienne 1968). However, at that point the political battle against Rex was largely won.

expenditures, the allocation of public contracts to German firms with German workers, and increased the use of the German language for public communications (Wiskemann 1967).

The second set of inclusive strategies is directed at the elite of the extremist challenge with the aim of integrating at least its more moderate sectors into the democratic process, by meeting some of the extremists' demands without however questioning the fundamentals of the democratic regime. An attempt to integrate both the rank and file and part of the extremist elite was made by the Finnish President Svinhufvud after outlawing the Lapua Movement. The difficult situation following the repression of the Lapua Movement, and his profound personal aversion towards Marxism in any form led Svinhufvud to try to recreate an all-inclusive, new right-wing movement under his control, which would continue the work of the Lapua Movement without endangering public order. Emphasis was to be put, in his opinion, on educational means: "even though they take more time, they will certainly lead in the end to definite results" (quoted in Rintala 1962: 221). These were the ideals that were originally at the base of the People's Patriotic Movement (IKL). However, this attempt failed: less than one month after the founding convention, held in April 1932, Svinhufvud's collaborators found themselves sidetracked and outnumbered, having completely lost control of their "creature", and left the IKL shortly afterwards.¹⁷

In Czechoslovakia, the government led by the Agrarian politician Milan Hodža, while seeking an agreement with the moderate Sudeten German parties, also embarked in negotiations with the SDP. These negotiations failed,¹⁸ and, given also the international situation, it seems that no hope to attract part of the SDP elite towards more moderate positions could be realistically nurtured by the Czechoslovak government. Thus, this road was attempted probably with the "tactical" aim of gaining time, while other defensive measures were being enacted.

Be the inclusive strategies successful or not, their presence in the toolbox of short-term democratic defense shows that democratic elites clearly perceived the

¹⁷ The leadership of the new movement decided to constitute a political party with totalitarian and Nazi-like orientations. After a phase in which this party managed to exert control on the conservative party National Coalition, the IKL was isolated and did not constitute a serious danger for Finnish democracy (Rintala 1962).

¹⁸ The demands of the SDP leader Konrad Henlein, if accepted, would have meant the end of a unitary Czechoslovak State. The requests of the SDP were articulated in eight points. Without going into detail, it will be enough to mention that one of these was the creation of a "national census" after which

insufficiency of mere repression to effectively respond to a dangerous extremist challenge. Repression is necessary, but so is gaining back to systemic loyalty as much of the extremist challenge as possible, as this reduces the costs of democratic defense and the risk of authoritarian involution.

Conclusions

In conclusion, not all strong extremist challenges to democracy in inter-war Europe led to democratic breakdown. In Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland the political elite managed to effectively react against extremist threats that constituted a serious danger to the persistence of the democratic system, by isolating the extremists and using both repressive and inclusive strategies. The high degree of “intolerance” against the extremists reached generally in these democracies was in fact accompanied by parallel attempts to “integrate” back in the system some sectors of the extremists. The political developments in the cases of breakdown in Italy and Germany, on the one hand, as well as the centrifugal propensities of electoral competition in systems where relevant extremist actors are present (Sartori 1976), on the other, highlight at the same time the non-obvious nature and the political importance of the political choices of the “democratic defenders” in Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Finland. On these bases, maintaining that different decisions of those same actors in crucial moments would both have been possible and have led those democratic systems much closer to breakdown seem to be plausible counterfactuals (Fearon 1991; Tetlock & Belkin 1996).

Obviously, the causal path identified in the analysis—involving exclusively internal actors, necessarily presuming the overt contraposition of a democratic and an extremist front, and the enactment of inclusive mechanisms being only targeted on the rank and file or on a part of the extremist elites—can only partially be generalized beyond the context analyzed here. Other “difficult democracies”, in different historical and geographical contexts, may find a different path to survival than that of the countries analyzed in this article. At the present political conjuncture, the recent literature on consensus democracy and power-sharing stresses rather the integration of “extraneous” forces (via institutional engineering, or other mechanisms) as well as the diffusion of democratic culture and practices, as best strategies to achieve democratic

each individual would have belonged to one ethnic community and be governed in full by an ethnically-based government (Lipscher 1979: 172-174).

stability. The involvement of international or supranational actors in the enterprise, and the decline of totalitarian ideologies now render these strategies certainly more viable and rewarding than repression in most of the cases.

Yet, constitutional or statutory provisions that limit in some ways the possibility of existence and/or to act of anti-democratic and/or secessionist parties or groups can be found –albeit largely with a preventive aim- in many democracies (Tomuschat 1992). Just to give a few examples, anti-extremist norms have been recently passed in the UK (special legislation on Northern Ireland of 1991), and are in force in the USA (the famous –or infamous- anti-Communist legislation), Canada, France, etc. The Federal Republic of Germany is well known to possess one of the most articulate and efficient systems of “protection of democracy”, which has been used until very recently against a few extremist right-wing groups and associations (Jaschke 1991; Canu 1996). The problem of banning extremist parties was recently posed in the public debate in Israel (Gordon 1987). Many new democracies of Eastern Europe have included in their constitutions norms that deny political legitimacy to ideologically extremist or ethnic-based parties: this is the case of Croatia, Poland, Lithuania, and Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria (Fox & Nolte 1995). Moreover, as some recent political crises in democratizing countries (for example, in Algeria in the early ‘90s) and political developments in Europe (the recent entry into government of the Austrian FPÖ, and more generally the rise of the so-called “new” extreme right wing parties) show, the decline of totalitarian ideologies has not rendered democracy safe. In the present political conjuncture we witness a growing importance of the international context in shaping internal political outcomes; yet, the strategies by which internal political and institutional actors react to political extremism have not become irrelevant.

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Table 1. Clusters of special anti-extremist legislation

Type	Legislation on:	Specific areas of special legislation include:	Main objective
I	Institutional protection	Rules on the state of siege Rules on treason and treasonable acts Legislation against incitement to disaffection among the armed forces Legislation against disloyalty of public officials	To ensure loyalty of the state apparatus
II	Party and association ban	Legislation on suppression/suspension of political parties Legislation on suppression/suspension of political associations	To eliminate “enemy” parties and groups from the political scene
III	Anti-propaganda	Legislation protecting democratic institutions Legislation for the protection of personal honor Legislation against glorification of political crime Legislation against false news Legislative restrictions on the freedom of the press (newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, books) Legislation against infiltration of foreign propaganda	To curb the possibility of launching delegitimising messages to the electorate
IV	Anti-extremist forms of behavior	Legislation against party uniforms (symbols etc.) Legislation against party militias Legislation against military training of members of private associations Legislation against the wearing of arms Legislation restricting the freedom of assembly	To preserve public order

Table 2: Process from centrifugal tendencies to regime outcome

Nature of the variables	Contextual variable	Explanatory variable	Intervening variable	Intervening variable	Intervening variable	Dependent Variable
Variables building the process	Systemic propensities: Polarizing tendencies	Border parties' strategies	Stability of governmental majority	Possibility of defensive measures	Decline in popular support for the extremist actor	Regime Outcome
Statuses leading to survival		Cooperation	High	Yes	Yes	Survival
Statuses leading to breakdown		Defection	Low	No	No	Breakdown

Table 3: Defensive actions of the Head of State and the Government

Country	Belgium	Finland	Czechoslovakia	Italy	Weimar
Challenge	Rexists (1936-1939)	Lapua Movement/NC (1929-1932)	SDP (1933-1938)	PNF (1919-1925)	NSDAP (1928-1933)
Actor					
Head of State	(Leopold III) Interventions on coalition-making process to solve deadlocks. Constant exclusion of Rex.	(Svinhufvud) Orders military reaction against armed insurrection of Lapua. Outlaws movement afterwards	(Beneš) Appeals to public opinion; Influence on governmental policies in favor of moderate German parties	(Victor Emmanuel III) Vetoes state of siege proposed by government against Fascist insurrection (Oct. 1922). Appoints Mussolini as PM thereafter	(Hindenburg) Suspends parliamentary rule after break of Grand Coalition in March 1930. Destabilizing influence on cabinet thereafter
Border Parties	(Catholic Party) No defection. Prompt reaction at organizational and propaganda levels.	(Agrarian Party) Defection until early 1931. No defection afterwards	(Agrarian Party) Defects until 1935, and delays defense No defection afterwards.	Large sectors of the liberals prefer an alliance with the Fascists in 1921 and in 1924 to a center-based alliance	Extremization of National Conservatives after 1928. Move to the right of centrist parties after 1930.
Government (majority)	Administrative provisions against Rex. Some ad hoc legislation. Appeals to public opinion.	Implementation of “anti-Communist” legislation against Lapua	Policy concessions (to moderate German parties). Strong anti-extremist legislation	Negotiations with Fascists to stop political violence fail	Scarcely autonomous from the Presidency after 1930 (presidential decrees)

Table 4. Mechanisms of democratic defense (Finland, Belgium, First Czechoslovak Republic)

Country	Belgium	Finland	Czechoslovakia
Extremist Actor	Rexists (1936-1939)	Lapua Movement/NC (1929-1932)	SDP (1933-1938)
Strategy			
Repression	Medium	Strong	Strong
Integration of rank and file	Appeals to public opinion	Attempt to create a new organization	Appeals to public opinion; strategic policy concessions to German moderate parties
Integration of sectors of the elite	No	Attempt to create a new organization	Negotiations with SDP

Fig. 1: Peak results of extremist parties 1919-1939

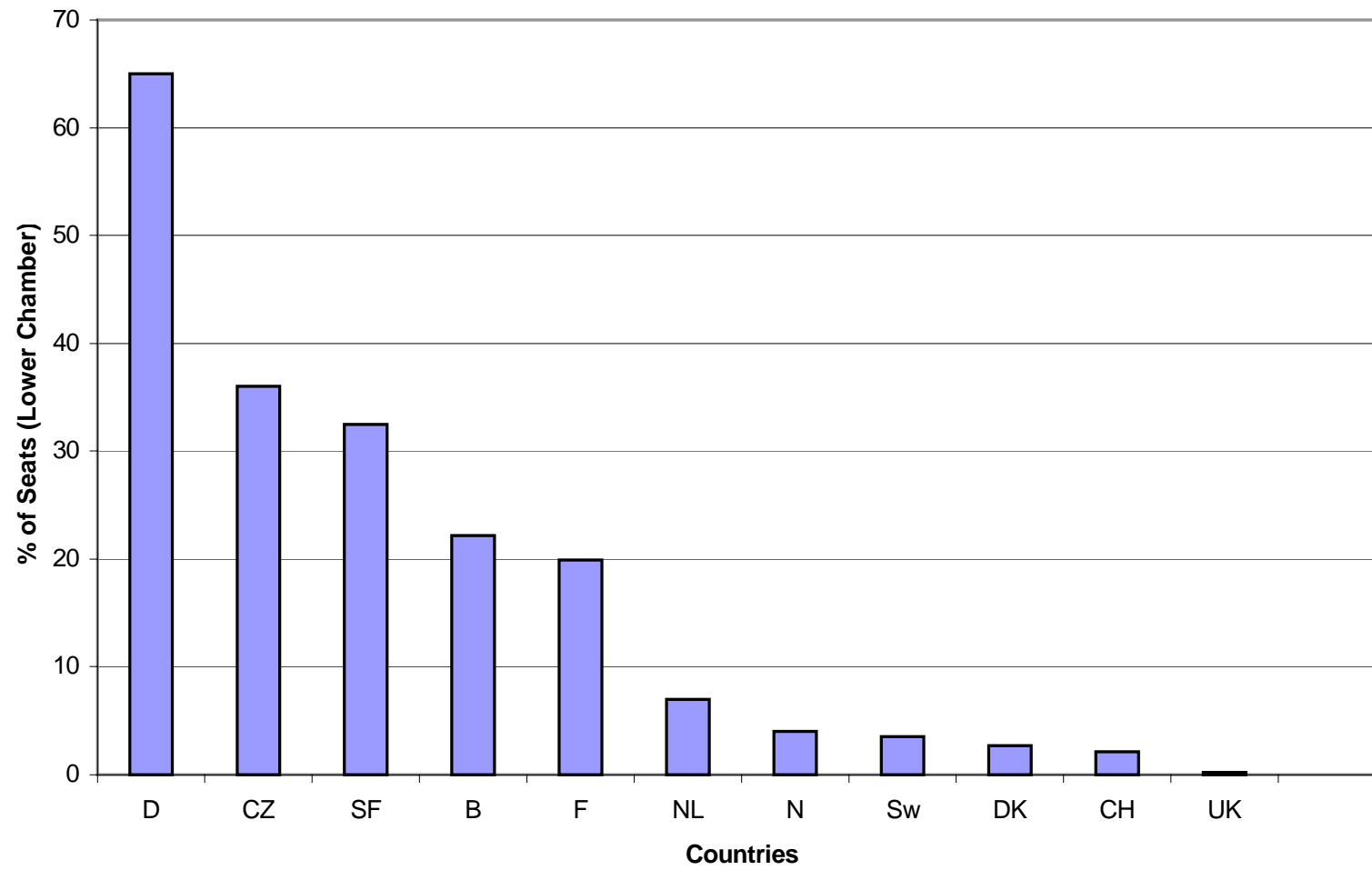
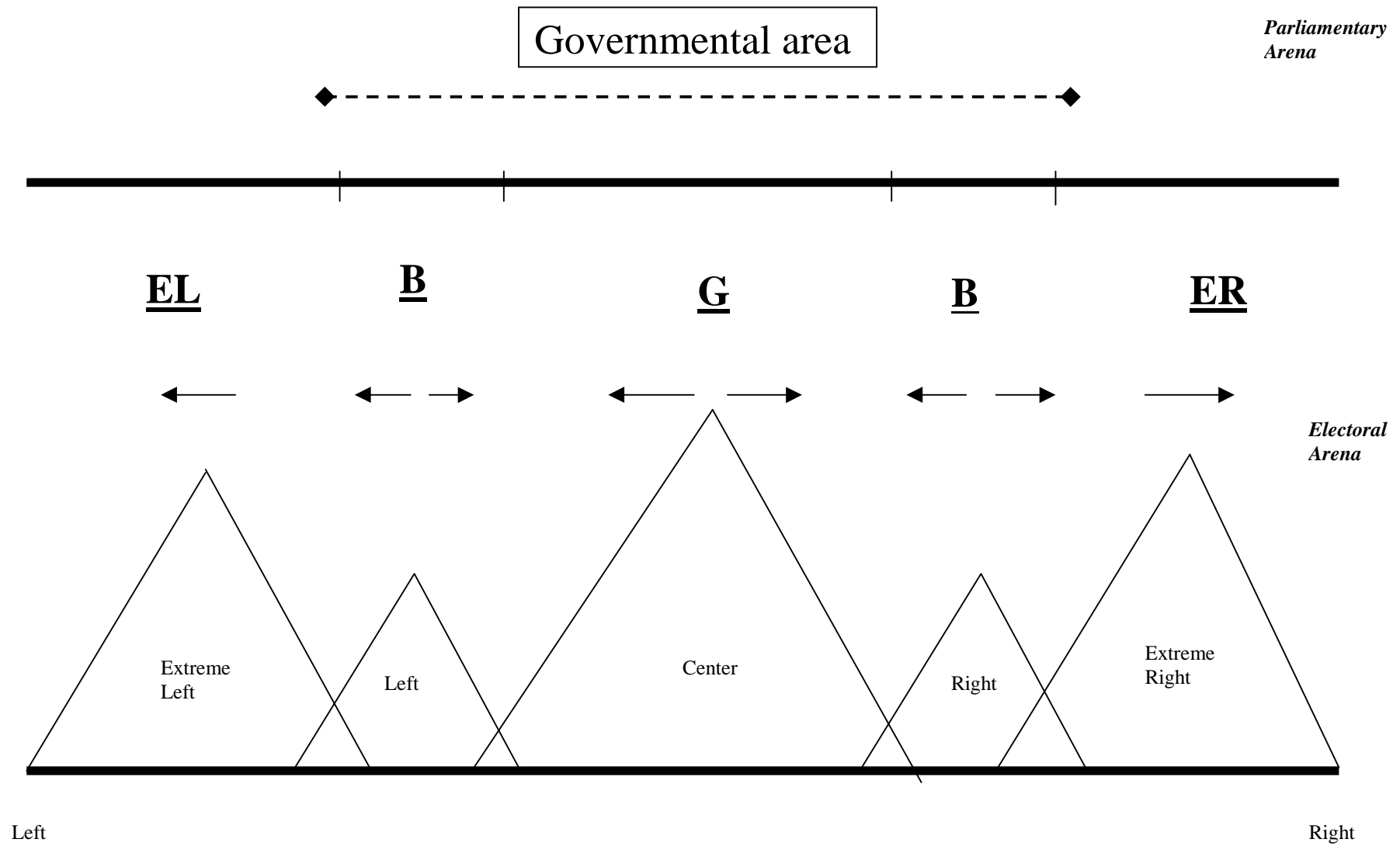


Fig. 2. Party system propensities in the electoral and parliamentary arena (adjusted from Sartori 1976)



KEY: ER: extreme right; EL: extreme left; B: border parties; G: government's core