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Movers and shakers

Political movements like En Marche and Podemos are great at engaging young people. But they're not always that democratic

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Many people expected the big political story of 2017 to be the triumph of populism in Europe. But things didn't turn out that way. Instead, the biggest story was about self-styled 'movements' upending or replacing traditional political parties.

Consider French President Emmanuel Macron's La République En Marche! which swept the country's presidential and parliamentary elections. Or how 31-year-old Sebastian Kurz, now Austria's Chancellor, refashioned the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) in his own image.

Across Europe, voters have come to see mainstream political parties as self-interested and power-hungry. In the developing world, parties with well-established pedigrees such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa are widely regarded as corrupt.

In many cases, traditional parties have become 'cartels': they use state resources to stay in power and work together to keep out challengers – regardless of policy differences.

Young voters in particular seem bored by traditional party politics. As Oscar Wilde famously quipped, the problem with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings. So it's hardly surprising that Europe's most innovative political experiments of late have emerged from street protests and mass assemblies that eschew the hierarchy of mainstream politics.

Spain's left-wing Podemos was formed after mass demonstrations by the indignados in 2011. Italy's populist Five Star Movement (M5S) – which topped Italy's 2013 parliamentary elections and will likely do well again in 2018 – emerged from rallies organised by comedian Beppe Grillo. He

rails against 'la casta' – the country's ruling caste of professional politicians and journalists.

Yet something happened between the original street protests and these movements' success at the ballot box. While they claim to reject hierarchy and promote participatory democracy, their charismatic leaders are concentrating ever more power in their own hands.

Podemos Secretary-General Pablo Iglesias has drawn criticism for his 'hyper-leadership' and 'online Leninism'.

Grillo holds no official position in M5S, which bills itself as a 'non-association'. But he owns the blog that's been key to the movement's success, as well as the copyright to its official symbol. And those running for office under the M5S banner must sign a contract promising to pay fines if they violate party principles.

Of course, political movements are not always populist in nature. As the Green and feminist movements have shown, a movement can contest traditional forms of politics without claiming to represent 'the real people' or the 'silent majority.'

But today's political movements also tend to be less pluralistic than the large parties that have dominated post-war European politics. This makes sense, given that 'movement' implies not just dynamism, but also a presumption that all members are in complete agreement about the path forward.

The problem is that when everyone supposedly already agrees on where they are going, there seems to be no need for extensive democratic deliberation. The movements that have emerged in Europe in recent years – on both the left and the right – have focused on strengthening their respective individual leaders, rather than empowering the rank-and-file.

Both Macron and Kurz have tapped into the sense of dynamism and purpose that usually marks single-issue politics.

Kurz has bent the entire ÖVP to his will. As well as giving it a new name, he has reorganised its internal structures and changed its official colour from black to turquoise. But the party's conservative policies have hardly changed. Kurz has simply devised a better marketing strategy and asserted his personal authority.

Podemos, La République En Marche!, and Momentum – left-wing

Corbynites within the British Labour Party – are important not for their 'movement' status, but because they provide more political choices for citizens, especially those who are frustrated by politics being dominated by the same old parties.

In Corbyn's case, movement politics could re-establish Labour's progressive credentials, and reverse what many saw as an embrace of neoliberal policies under former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

But it would be naive to think that movements alone will make European politics more democratic. If anything, they could operate even less democratically than traditional parties, owing to their strong plebiscitary forms of leadership.

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