

**Defending Democracy: Reactions to political extremism in inter-war
Europe**

**Giovanni Capoccia
European University Institute (Florence)**

5 March, 2026

Mailing address:

Department of Political and Social Sciences
European University Institute
Via dei Roccettini, 9
50016 San Domenico di Fiesole
Florence
ITALY

Tel. (work): +39 (055) 4685.432
Tel. (home) +39 (055) 541180
Fax (work): +39 (055) 599887 or +39 (055) 4685.201
Email: capoccia@datacomm.iue.it

Defending Democracy: Reactions to political extremism in inter-war Europe

Abstract

While the strategies of political actors and institutions have been largely analyzed with reference to cases of democratic breakdown, 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.

Acknowledgements

I thank Stefano Bartolini, Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair, Philippe Schmitter, and the anonymous referees of the EJPR for commenting on previous versions of this article. I am also indebted to the participants into the ECPR Workshop “Competing Conceptions of Democracy in the Practice of Politics” (Copenhagen, 14-19 April 2000), to which a preliminary version of this article was presented, for their useful remarks. The usual disclaimer applies.

Defending Democracy: Reactions 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 1920s and 1930s 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. In a structure-driven political world, 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 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 instead, the question that becomes important is the following: under what conditions are 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.

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. I first select the most adequate cases for the analysis; 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 Sartori’s theoretical framework for 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 (Sani & Sartori 1983) and should be taken into account more systematically in the comparative analysis of democratic survivals and breakdowns.

Challenges to democracy in inter-war Europe

The experience of those democracies in which very strong extremist challenges were present and were successfully counteracted is the most interesting for an analysis of the conditions and consequences of short-term reactions against extremism. 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 one of the most important—if not *the* most important—decisional arenas. In most democracies, in fact, the parliament 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 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 definition 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 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 inter-war years to respond to internal challenges. Although country-based studies on this field are not infrequent —see, for example Backes & Jesse (1996) and Jesse (1985) on the German case— this phenomenon is largely understudied in a comparative perspective.⁷ 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). Although, according to his view, militant democracy includes both a political and a legislative dimension, his real focus is on anti-extremist legislation, essential in his opinion to make democracy invulnerable to the “Fascist technique of power takeover” (Loewenstein 1937a, 1938a and b)

{TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE}

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,⁸ 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 non-violent development of the political 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 2000). On the one hand, exactly Czechoslovakia and Finland, which survived the worst political 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 1999b). 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 introduced restrictions to extremists’ activities in several areas. Furthermore, 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.⁹ 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

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}

the Head of State is also a crucial actor in short-term democratic defense. While the effectiveness of the government in acting against extremists is largely conditioned by the strategies of border parties, the Head of State can generally operate with a greater degree of independence. This is certainly the case in semi-presidential systems in which the Head of State has a prominent position in the executive (such as in the Weimar Republic and in Finland), but it is true also of cases in which, although formally endowed with limited competencies, the Head of State enjoys a great personal prestige. To be sure, in no case could they 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 other countries, similar political projects were present, but were defeated, which was decisive for the survival of the democratic system.¹⁰

{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 Per 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 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 1920s 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—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 itself later turned 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. 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, but 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, and an extremist one. The former was that of 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 both nationalist-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 1920s, 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 1933.¹¹

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).¹² Most members of the two dissolved parties, however, were substituted by a follow-up organization called Sudeten German Home Front (SHF), which constituted, for the remaining years of the Republic, the fifth column of Nazi Germany within democratic Czechoslovakia.

Although the legal prerequisites for this existed, and the majority of the governing parties were in favor of banning the SHF before the elections, the

government did not take this decision.¹³ The discussion over whether the SHF 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.

The Agrarian Prime Minister Jan Malypetr, given the disagreement on this issue within the cabinet, transferred the decision to the hands of the President of the Republic Thomas Masaryk. The President and his advisors (the “Castle”) were in principle favorable to the ban, but it was clear that to insist on this course of action would have jeopardized the stability of the government. In the end, Masaryk decided against the dissolution of the SHF, thinking that the party would be “parliamentarised” after the elections —that is, its entry in parliament would have led it to adopt more moderate positions. Then, if the need arose, the party could be dissolved anyway (Mamatey 1973).¹⁴ This decision was based on a gross miscalculation, but did not have many alternatives when it was taken. A necessary counterweight of banning the SHF would have been that of making generous concessions to the German minority in general, which no Czech party was willing to do on the eve of the elections. Thus, the closer the elections came, the feebler the position of the forces pushing for the party’s dissolution became, and the scenario of a ban increasingly lost credibility.¹⁵

In other words, the real reasons for this “non-decision”, rather than in a political mistake by Masaryk, have to be looked for in the strategies of important political groups, notably the two Agrarian parties members of the government coalition. In Czechoslovakia like in other countries, in fact, the emergence of a new extremist actor had triggered plans for political re-aggregation, offering to some members of the democratic coalition the possibility to improve their political dividends.

The first actor to react in this way to the emergence of the SHF was the German Agrarian Party (*Bund der Landwirte* — BdL). Feeling threatened in their countryside strongholds by the dynamism of Henlein’s party, which already shortly after its foundation had gathered more members than the sum of those of the dissolved DNP and DNSAP, the BdL first tried to reach an agreement with the SHF, and started negotiations in that sense that went on for most of 1934. On the basis of this agreement, the BdL would aim its propaganda at the countryside areas, while the SHF would address its campaign efforts towards the urban districts, so that the two parties would not compete for the same electors. In the negotiations, hints were made at a

programmatic platform including a corporatist reorganization of the economy and the state (Brügel 1967).

The project of the German Agrarians soon became part of a more comprehensive political plan of the right-wing internal circles of the Czechoslovak Agrarians, the largest party of the country, whose leaders aimed at a general shift of the equilibrium of the national government towards the right.¹⁶ More specifically, their project was to re-align the forces in the political spectrum and form a new coalition that excluded the Social Democratic formations, and could elect a new President of the Republic more sensitive to their political orientations than Masaryk was. To this aim, the SHF should form an electoral alliance with the BdL, in which the former should obtain “fifteen or twenty seats”, and reinforce the new majority (Brügel 1967). The role of the BdL in this scenario—in which also the Czech Conservatives and Fascists would be included in the new alliance— would be that of guaranteeing for and at the same time controlling the SHF, thereby ensuring the new majority a sufficient electoral basis in the Sudeten German regions.

Most active in pursuing this project were Agrarian leaders such as Viktor Stoupal and especially Rudolf Beran, who was elected to the presidency of the party in 1935, but had *de facto* been the party’s most influential figure as of 1929¹⁷. Their incentives, and those of their political circles, did not have an electoral nature, but were rather linked to their policy preferences, and most of all to their share of governmental power, both heavily constrained in a coalition in which the moderate working class parties played a major role and had also traditionally enjoyed the political support of a powerful and charismatic Head of State (Mamatey 1973).

The large electoral victory of the SHF (renamed as SdP) in the elections of 1935, rendered this project more difficult to realize. The SdP 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. In these conditions, it became obvious that the SdP was not easily amenable to play a servant role in someone else’s political plans. In particular the German Agrarians assumed a more confrontational attitude, while the right-wing circles of the Czechoslovak Agrarians still displayed, although less continuously, defectionist tendencies.

In any case, the main factor leading to the substantial defeat of the project of the right-wing Agrarians was the timely political alliance formed between Masaryk and

Benes (and the Social Democratic forces influenced by them) and the leader of the Slovak wing of the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party Milan Hodža, very influential within the party, and appointed Prime Minister after the 1935 elections. This alliance proved decisive in stabilizing the political situation in several occasions in which, also after the elections, the right-wing Agrarian circles defected from the majority (Brügel 1967 Mamatey 1973).

Thanks especially to the political alliance formed between the “Castle” and Milan Hodža, leader of the Slovak wing of the Agrarians, and very influential on a large minority of the party, this project failed to achieve its proposed goals. However, it had the result of vetoing the ban of the SHF before 1935, and also rendered the implementation of an effective defense against Henlein’s party more difficult afterwards.

Although in difficult internal and international conditions,¹⁸ the governing parties and the President of the Republic devised a three-pillar defensive strategy against the SdP in 1935-1938. 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 (Hauner 1986). 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 Wiskemann 1967). 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, resorting to two courses of action: first, the cabinet, also under the influence of the new President of the Republic Edvard Beneš, increased sensibly the concessions to the German minority in several areas; secondly, the President himself embarked in an intensive program of appeals to public opinions, concentrating on the Sudeten German regions and supporting the cause of coexistence and fair cooperation between Czechs and Germans. 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.

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 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. Moreover, the Catholic Party also had to confront the challenge of the VNV in the Flanders, where the party had lost about 100,000 votes, many of which had gone to the VNV (Rex had been more successful in Wallonia). The political orientation of the VNV, authoritarian and corporatist, as well as Flemish nationalist, was in fact markedly Catholic.¹⁹ This situation posed to the Catholic Party the additional problem of devising an appropriate strategy in Flanders too.

After the elections of 1936, in fact, several projects of regrouping the Flemish Catholics in different coalitions emerged, and were discussed in an innumerable series of reserved meeting and public interventions by various personalities of the Catholic world (see Gerard 1985 for a detailed account of these developments). A further problem for the Catholic Party was the political alliance that Degrelle and the leader of the VNV Staf De Clercq signed in October 1936, in which a fusion between the Flemish sector of Rex and the VNV was foreseen. The leadership of the Catholic Party reacted to this difficult situation by changing its internal organization and giving more visibility to its Flemish component. In October 1936 it was established that the leading body of the party, a directorium endowed with full powers, should be divided into two separate wings —called *Parti Social Chretien* (PCS) and *Katholieke Vlaamse Volkspartij* (KVV)— that should be responsible for the activities of the Party in Wallonie and Flanders respectively, (Gerard 1985; Mabilie 1986).

This change strengthened the position of the Flemish leaders of the Catholic Party: Verbist, the leader of the KVV, started negotiations with the VNV, which ended in an agreement of principle between the two parties in December 1936. Although this agreement did not lead to concrete developments, and actually met with the opposition of the Christian Labor Union and the bishops (Gerard 1985: 477-478), it had the effect of providing a partial counter-force to the tendencies towards an inclusion of Rex and VNV in a right-wing catholic front. It must be kept in mind that the agreement in question was signed under very unfavorable conditions, especially for the Catholic Party: the party was in crisis after the defeat, undergoing a process of internal restructuring, torn by centrifugal tendencies for the political dynamism of Rex, and senior partner in a government coalition whose members were attacking in their propaganda not only Rex, but also the VNV.²⁰

In the difficult conditions described above, the prospect of a split, or even disintegration, of the Catholic Party would not have been unlikely, had one of the projects for a broader right-wing alliance been materialized (Gérard 1985). 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.²¹ 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 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).²²

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 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.²³ 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 (See Brügel (1967), and a selection of texts reported in Beneš (1937). 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 expenditures, the allocation of public contracts to German firms with German workers, and increased the use of the German language for public communications (Brügel 1967; Wiskemann 1967).

Ad hoc inclusive strategies can also be directed at the elite of the extremist challenge with the aim of integrating at least its more moderate sectors into the democratic process,²⁴ 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.²⁵

In Czechoslovakia, the government led by the Agrarian politician Milan Hodža, after seeking an agreement with the moderate Sudeten German parties, also had repeated contacts with Henlein. Although these never evolved into an articulate negotiation²⁶ and probably came too late to attract part of the SdP elite towards more moderate positions, their existence show that the attitude of the Czechoslovak government, although certainly uncompromising, was not of total closure towards the Sudeten German nationalists.

Be the inclusive strategies successful or not, their presence in the toolbox of short-term democratic defense shows that democratic elites clearly perceived the 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 serious anti-democratic threats by isolating the extremists and using both repressive and inclusive strategies. The high degree of political intolerance against the extremists generally reached in these democracies was in fact accompanied by parallel attempts to integrate back in the system some sectors of the extremists. The opposite political developments in the cases of breakdown in Italy and Germany, on the one hand, and 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 (on this, see Fearon (1991) and 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 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, 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 has also been 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 (see, for a comparative analysis of recent developments in

this respect in five Western European countries, van Donselaar (1995). 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.

References

- Backes, U. & Jesse, E. (1996). *Politischer Extremismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
- Beaufays, J. (1973). *Les partis catholiques en Belgique et aux Pays-Bas, 1918-1958*. Bruxelles: E. Bruylant.
- Beneš, E. (1937). *Gedanken und Tat. Aus den Schriften und reden von E. Beneš*. Prague.
- Berg-Schlosser, D.(1998). Conditions of authoritarianism, fascism and democracy in inter-war Europe. A cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 39: 335-77
- Berg-Schlosser, D. & De Meur, G.(1994). Conditions of democracy in interwar Europe. A Boolean test of major hypotheses. *Comparative Politics* : 253-79
- Berg-Schlosser D. & Mitchell J. eds. (1999). *Conditions of democracy in Europe 1919-1939. Systematic case studies*, Vols. 1. London: Macmillan.
- Boventer, G. P. (1985a). *Grenzen politischer Freiheit in demokratischen Staat*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- Boventer, G. P.(1985b). Das Konzept der streitbaren Demokratie im internationalen Vergleich. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*: 33-44
- Bracher, K.-D. (1953). *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik*. Villingen: Ring Verlag.
- Bracher, K.-D. (1974). Stufen der Machtergreifung. In Bracher, K.-D., Schulz & Sauer *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung. Studien zur Errichtung der totalitären Herrschaftssystems in Deutschland 1933/34* Frankfurt am Main - Berlin - Vienna: Ullstein.
- Brügel, J. W. (1967). *Tschechen und Deutsche 1918-1938*. Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung.
- Brügel, J. W. (1968). The entry of German parties into the Czechoslovak government. In Rechcigl, M. Jr. (ed.) *Czechoslovakia. Past and present* (pp. 49-64). Den Haag - Paris: Mouton.
- Brügel J.W. (1973). *Czechoslovakia before Munich. The German minority and British appeasement policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Caneloro, G. (1978). *Storia dell' Italia moderna. Volume ottavo: La prima guerra mondiale. Il dopoguerra. L' avvento del fascismo*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Canu, I. (1996). *Der Schutz der Demokratie in Deutschland und Frankreich*. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Capoccia, G. (1999a). *Challenge, prevention and response: Game-theoretical perspectives on breakdown and survival of democracy*. European University Institute , Working Papers of the Department of Social and Political Sciences 11/99.
- Capoccia, G. (1999b). *Between Weimar and Algiers: The Genesis and Political Importance of Anti-Extremist Legislation in Difficult Democracies. The Case of the First Czechoslovak Republic 1920-1938*. Paper presented in the ECPR Workshop "Designing Institutions" -- 27th ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops - Mannheim (Germany), 1999b.
- Capoccia, G. (2000). *Defending Democracy: Reactions to extremist parties in inter-war European democracies*. Ph.D. Dissertation. European University Institute - Department of Political and Social Sciences.
- Conway, M. (1994). Explications pour un échec. In Balace, F.et al. (eds.) *De l' avant à l' après guerre. L' extrême droite en Belgique francophone* (pp. 79-106).

- Brussels: DeBoeck.
- Dahl R.A. ed. (1966). *Political opposition in western Democracies*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- De Felice, R. (1966). *Mussolini il fascista. La conquista del potere 1921-1925*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Diamond, L.(1992). Economic development and democracy reconsidered. *American behavioral scientist* 35: 450-99
- Dorpalen, A. (1964). *Hindenburg and the politics of the Weimar Republic*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Étienne, J.-M. (1968). *Le mouvement rexiste jusqu'en 1940*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Farneti, P. (1978). Social conflict, parliamentary fragmentation, institutional shift, and the rise of Fascism: Italy. In Linz, J. J. & Stepan, A. (eds) *The breakdown of democratic regimes: Europe* (pp. 3-33). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fearon, J.(1991). Counterfactuals and hypothesis testing in political science. *World Politics* 43: 169-95
- Felak, J. R. (1994). *At the price of the Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, 1929-1938*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Fox, G. H. & Nolte, G.(1995). Intolerant democracies. *Harvard International Law Review* 36: 1-70
- Friedrich, C. J. (1957). *Constitutional reason of State. The survival of the constitutional order*. Providence (R.I.): Brown University Press.
- Gérard, E. (1985). *De katholieke partij in crisis: Partijpolitiek leven in Belgie (1918-1940)*. Leuven: Kritak.
- Gordon, D.(1987). Limits on extremist political parties: A comparison of Israeli jurisprudence with that of the United States and West Germany. *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 10: 347-400
- Gusy, C. (1991). *Weimar - die wehrlose Republik? Verfassungsschutzrecht und Verfassungsschutz in der Weimarer Republik*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Hartmann, P.(1933). Das Gesetz gegen die politische Parteien. *Prager Archiv für Gesetzgebung und Rechtsprechung* 15: 1235-55
- Hauner, M. (1986). Military budgets and the armament industry. In Kaser, M. C. & Radice, E. A. (eds) *The economic history of Eastern Europe 1919-1975* (pp. 49-116). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Heumos, P. (1979). Die Entwicklung organisierter agrarischen Interessen in den böhmischen Ländern und in der CSR. Zur Entstehung und Machtstellung der Agrarpartei 1873-1938. In Bosl, K. (ed.) *Die erste Tschechoslowakische Republik als multinationaler Parteienstaat* (pp. 323-376). München and Wien: R. Oldenbourg Verlag.
- Hodgson, J. H. (1967). *Communism in Finland. A history and interpretation*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Höjer, C.-H. (1946). *Le régime parlementaire belge de 1918 à 1940*. Bruxelles and Uppsala: Centre de Recherche et d' Information Socio-Politiques - C.R.I.S.P. - Statsvetenskapliga föreningen.
- Jaschke, H.-G. (1991). *Streitbare Demokratie und innere Sicherheit: Grundlagen, Praxis und Kritik*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Jasper, G. (1963). *Der Schutz der Republik. Studien zur staatlichen Sicherung der Demokratie in der Weimarer Republik*. Tuebingen: Mohr.
- Jelínek, Y. (1980). Clergy and fascism: The Hlinka Party in Slovakia and the Croatian Ustasha movement. In Ugelvik Larsen, S., Hagtvet, B. & Myklebust, J. P. (eds)

- Who were the Fascists. Social roots of European fascism* (pp. 367-378). Bergen -- Oslo-- Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget.
- Jesse, E. (1985). *Streitbare Demokratie*. Bonn: Institut fuer politische Bildung.
- Kier, H.(1936). Das tschechoslovakische Staatsverteidigungsgesetz. *Zeitschrift für ausländisches öffentliches Recht* 6: 803-28
- Lameyer, J. (1978). *Streitbare Demokratie: eine verfassungshermeneutische Untersuchung*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- Le Béguet, G. (1992). Le parti. In Sirinelli, J.-F. (ed) *Histoire des droites en France* (pp. 13-61). Paris: Gallimard.
- Lepsius, M. R. (1978). From fragmented party democracy to government by emergency decree and National Socialist takeover. In Linz, J. J. & Stepan, A. (eds) *The breakdown of democratic regimes: Europe* (pp. 34-79). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Linz, J. J. (1978). Crisis, breakdown and reequilibration. In Linz, J. J. & Stepan, A. (eds) *The breakdown of democratic regimes* (pp. 3-124). Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Linz J.J. & Stepan A. eds. (1978). *The breakdown of democratic regimes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lipscher, L. (1979). *Verfassung und politische Verwaltung in der Tschechoslowakei 1918-1939*. München and Wien: Oldenbourg Verlag.
- Loewenstein, K.(1935a). Autocracy versus democracy in contemporary Europe I. *American Political Science Review* 29: 571-93
- Loewenstein, K.(1935b). Autocracy versus democracy in contemporary Europe II. *American Political Science Review* 29: 755-84
- Loewenstein, K.(1937a). Militant democracy and fundamental rights. *American Political Science Review* 31: 417-32
- Loewenstein, K.(1937b). Militant democracy and fundamental rights II. *American Political Science Review* 31: 638-58
- Loewenstein, K.(1938a). Legislative control of political extremism in European democracies I. *Columbia Law Review* 38: 591-622
- Loewenstein, K.(1938b). Legislative control of political extremism in European democracies II. *Columbia Law Review* 38: 725-74
- Luebbert, G. M. (1991). *Liberalism, Fascism, and Social Democracy. Social classes and the political origins of regimes in interwar Europe*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mabille, X. (1986). *Histoire politique de la Belgique. Facteurs et acteurs de changement*. Bruxelles: CRISP.
- Mäkelä, J. (1987). The radical left and the Communist Party in Finnish politics. In Mylly, J. & Berry, M. (eds.) *Political parties in Finland - essays in history and politics* (pp. 153-186). Turku: University of Turku.
- Mamatey, V. S. (1973). The development of Czechoslovak democracy, 1920-1938. In Mamatey, V. S. & Luza, R. (eds) *A history of the Czechoslovak Republic* (pp. 99-166). Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Matthias E. & Morsey R. eds. (1979). *Das Ende der Parteien 1933. Darstellungen und Dokumente*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag.
- Micheles Dean, V.et al. (1934). *New governments in Europe. The trend towards dictatorship*. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- Mikus, J. A. (1963). *Slovakia: A political history: 1918-1950*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Miller, D. E. (1999). *Forging political compromise. Antonin Svehla and the*

- Czechoslovak Republican Party 1918-1933*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Rintala, M. (1962). *Three generations. The extreme right wing in Finnish politics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Sander, F. (1935). *Die politische Gesetzgebung der Tschechoslowakischen Republik in den Jahren 1932-1934. Ergänzungsband zu der Epsteinischen Studienausgabe der Verfassungsgesetze der Tschechoslowakischen Republik*. Reichenberg: Stiepel.
- Sander, F. (1937). *Das Staatsverteidigungsgesetz und die Verfassungsurkunde der tschechoslowakischen Republik. Eine rechtsdogmatische Untersuchung*. Brünn: Rohrer.
- Sani, G. & Sartori, G. (1983). Polarization, fragmentation and competition in Western democracies. In Daalder, H. & Mair, P. (eds) *Western European party systems. Continuity and change* (pp. 307-340). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Sartori, G. (1976). *Parties and party systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Sartori, G. (1982). *Teoria dei partiti e caso italiano*. Milan: SugarCo.
- Schmitter, P. & Brouwer, I. (1999). *Conceptualizing, researching and evaluating democracy promotion and protection*. European University Institute, Working Paper Department of Social and Political Science 7/99.
- Tetlock P.E. & Belkin A. eds. (1996). *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics. Logical, methodological and psychological perspectives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Tomuschat, C. (1992). Democratic pluralism: the right to political opposition. In Rosas, A. & Helgesen, J. (eds.) *The strength of diversity: human rights and pluralist democracy* (pp. 27-48). Dordrecht: Nijhoff.
- Upton, A. F. (1973). The Communist Party of Finland. In Upton, A. F. (ed.) *The Communist parties of Scandinavia and Finland* (pp. 105-352). London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.
- van Donselaar, J. (1995). *De staat paraat? De bestrijding van extreem-rechts in West-Europa*. Amsterdam: Babylon-De Geus.
- Winkler H.A. ed. (1992). *Die deutsche Staatskrise 1930-1933*. Munich: Oldenbourg.
- Wiskemann E. (1967). *Czechs and Germans. A study of the struggle in the historic provinces of Bohemia and Moravia*. London - Melbourne - Toronto and New York: Macmillan and St.Martin's Press.
- Witte, E. & Craeybeckx, J. (1987). *Le belgique politique de 1830 a nos jours. Les tensions d'une democratie bourgeoise*. Brussel: Labor.
- Zimmermann, E.(1993). Political breakdown and the process of national consensus formation: On the collapse of the Weimar republic in comparative perspective. *Research on Democracy and Society* 1: 267-97
- Zimmermann, E. & Saalfeld, T.(1988). Economic and political reactions to the world economic crisis of the 1930s in six European countries. *International Studies Quarterly* 32: 305-34

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	Yes	Cooperation	High	Yes	Yes	Survival
Statuses leading to breakdown	Yes	Defection	Low	No	No	Breakdown

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

Country	Belgium	Finland	Czechoslovakia	Italy	Weimar
Challenge Actor	Rexists (1936-1939)	Lapua Movement/NC (1929-1932)	SdP (1933-1938)	PNF (1919-1925)	NSDAP (1928-1933)
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) Internal right wing defects consistently before 1935, and sporadically later. Countered by an alliance of rest of the party with Socialists and Presidency	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 <i>ad hoc</i> 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; sector organizations of the Catholic Party created for electoral appeals	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	(Sterile) contacts with SdP

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

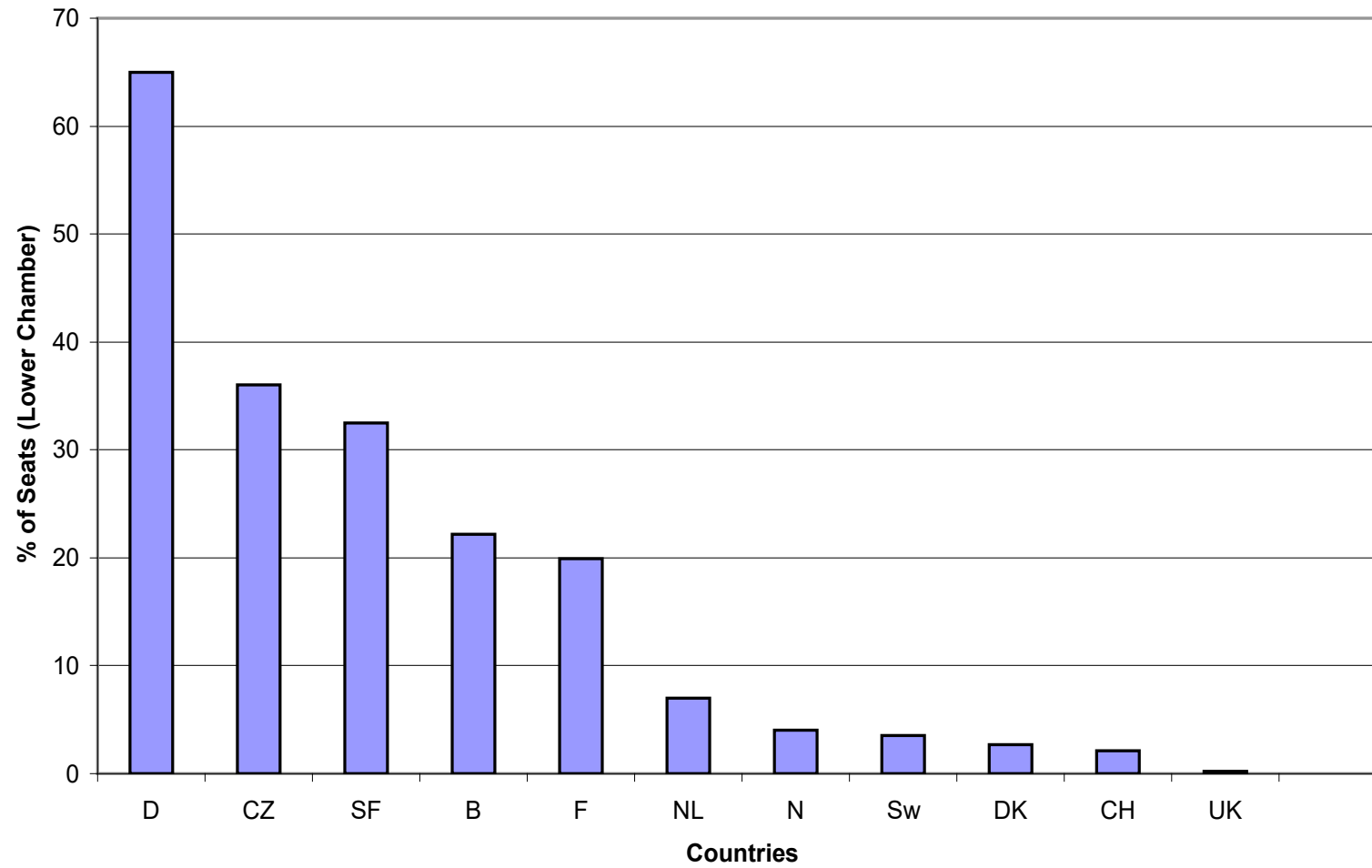
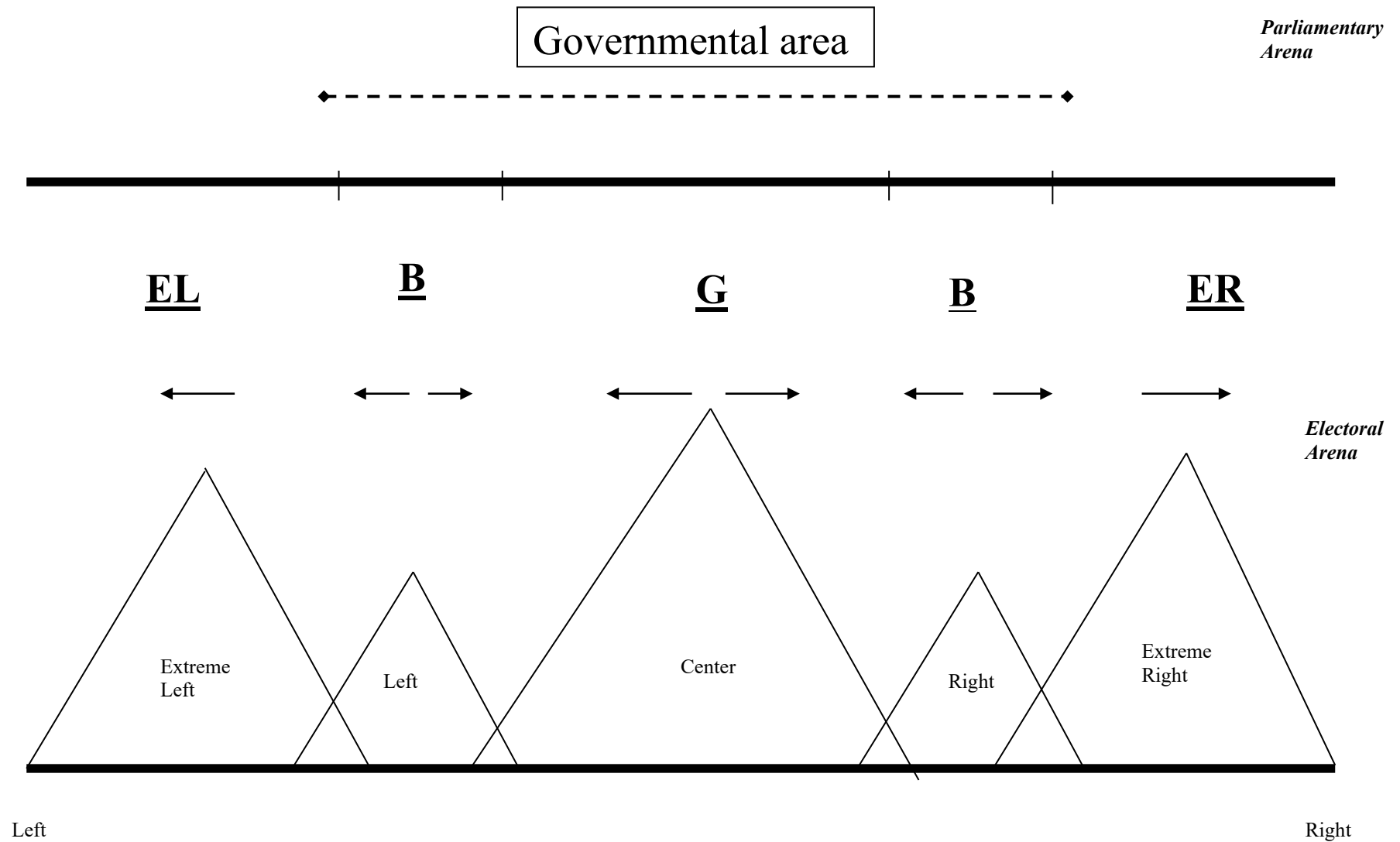


Fig. 2. Party system propensities in the electoral and parliamentary arena (adjusted from Sartori 1976)



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

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 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 represented by the recent research project on the comparative study of inter-war European democracies led by Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Jeremy Mitchell (Berg-Schlosser & 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 on the regime outcome. The inclusion of 18 countries and many variables in this interesting analysis, however, cannot but leave the more detailed aspects of the strategies of political actors in political crises unexplored. For an actor-based analysis of the political reactions to the socio-economic consequences of the Great Depression in some European democracies, see the analysis by Zimmermann and Saalfeld, who however do not deepen the analysis of the eminently political reactions (Zimmermann & Saalfeld 1988). More focused on political strategies is instead a more recent piece by Zimmermann (Zimmermann 1993), where most of the attention is devoted to the Weimar case.

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 the “protection and promotion” of democracy in newly democratizing states, but out of the picture of the present analysis (Schmitter & Brouwer 1999).

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 2000).

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 opposition parties to the outright elimination of pluralism (Loewenstein 1935a and b). 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 MP reported as “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).

⁷ The recent interesting work by van Donselaar is an exception to this rule (van Donselaar 1995).

⁸ The inclusion of these norms in the realm of “militant democracy” is contested, since virtually all constitutional states have them, in some form (Boventer 1985b).

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ The Sudeten German nationalists were not the only extremist challenge that the new Czechoslovak Republic had to confront. Apart from the mentioned Communists and Fascists, a serious threat for the Republic also came from the Slovak autonomists of the Slovak People's Party (HSL'S). However, for reasons of space as well as of clarity of the analysis, I have preferred to concentrate on the governmental response to the most dangerous extremist challenge. It is however important to keep in mind that other challenges were also present and constituted further constraints on the action of the democratic forces in defense of the regime.

¹² This legislation was also implemented against Slovak nationalists, which were growing more extremist in those years: the party newspaper of the HSL'S was suspended, and one of the party's main leader was arrested and convicted for treason (Mikus 1963; Jelínek 1980; Felak 1994).

¹³ The government was supported by a coalition including the Czechoslovak and German Social Democrats, the Czechoslovak National Socialists (a party of moderate socialist orientation), the Czech People's Party, and the Czechoslovak and German Agrarians. The Socialist-oriented forces supported the ban, while the Agrarians were against it.

¹⁴ As a last possible hindrance to it, the SHF was however forced to change its name before being admitted into the electoral competition, since the expression "Front" was not acceptable in a democracy. It renamed itself as *Sudetendeutsche Partei* (Sudeten German Party — SdP).

¹⁵ It must be also kept in mind that the leaders of the SHF, and in particular Konrad Henlein, took extreme care in formally abiding to democratic rhetoric and institutions in public, while developing revolutionary strategies in close contact with Berlin behind the scenes (Brügel 1967).

¹⁶ The right wing of the Czechoslovak Agrarians had also tampered with the Czech extreme right in the preceding years, even financing Fascist groups, although these tendencies never went so far as to endanger the country's democratic stability.

¹⁷ In 1930 the historical Agrarian leader Antonin Svehla was appointed at the chairmanship of the Agrarian Party, but his lead was weak and little more than formal, since Svehla was old and ill. Beran, as of 1929, was the party's General Secretary, supported by a very strong faction. Svehla died in 1933, and for two years the chairman seat was left vacant, until in 1935 Beran himself was appointed in compensation for the appointment of Hodža at the Premiership. See Heumos (1979, 371 ff.). On the figure of Svehla, see Miller (1999).

¹⁸ 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 .

¹⁹ The problem of minority rights for the Flemish had already found political expression in the 1920s with the *Frontpartij* (Front Party), and had already elicited some legislative reactions to improve the conditions (especially as regards the use of the Flemish language) of the Flemish. New laws were also passed during the 1930s about the use of Flemish in the bureaucracy, the educational system, the justice administration, and the army. However, the implementation of these laws was slow and partial, and far from offering a satisfactory solution to the problem for the Flemish minority (Witte & Craeybeckx 1987).

²⁰ In the elections of 1939 the Catholic Party managed to recover about 4% of the votes, while the VNV, exploiting the collapse of Rex, increased its share of votes by 1.5% in the region. The war then radically changed the situation.

²¹ 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).

²² 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).

²³ 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.

²⁴ In the last convulse months of the Weimar Republic, a major effort was made by some parts of the conservative establishment (notably General Kurt von Schleicher) to split the NSDAP by intense contacts with a wing of that party opposing Hitler. The goal was that of integrating that fraction of the NSDAP, led by Gregor Strasser, into the government and isolating Hitler. The political setting of Weimar at the end of 1932 can hardly be defined “democratic”, but the logic of the strategy is the same: weakening the adversary by attracting the sectors that are ideologically closer and isolating the most radical ones.

²⁵ 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).

²⁶ 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 each individual would have belonged to one ethnic community and be governed in full by an ethnically-based government (Lipscher 1979).