The Decline and Fall of Three Hegemonic Christian Democratic Parties in Europe

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The purpose of this paper is to explore why Christian Democratic parties lost their hegemonic influence in three countries in rapid succession – Italy (1994), the Netherlands (1994) and Belgium (1999). Where once Christian Democrats attracted the lion's share of the electorate and played a role in virtually every governing coalition, suddenly they found themselves in opposition and facing the prospect of a long period in the political wilderness (if not oblivion).

The explanation draws on two factors. One is the decline in religious devotion and ideological competition, coupled with the rise of new values and political movements. This explanation is well known in the literature and it has a lot to offer in terms of accounting for variation in the electoral performance of Christian Democratic parties over time.[1] The second factor is the broad network of linkages between Christian Democratic elites and other parts of civil society. This factor is less widely acknowledged in the literature – at least outside the narrow group of experts on *partitocrazia* and consociational democracy.[2] Christian Democrats lost power, at least in part, because the electorate grew to distrust the way Christian Democrats do business via informal networks rather than in a more transparent manner.

The two factors are overlapping and complementary. The decline in religious devotion created space for greater questioning of the authority (and infallibility) of the Church.[3] Meanwhile, the change in popular values placed greater emphasis on transparency in public policymaking as well as stricter boundaries between the public and the private – at least in terms of processes if not politicians (who rapidly lost anything resembling a private life).[4]

Importantly, however, the two factors are not redundant. Church doctrine can evolve and electorates can grow nostalgic for the cultural aspects of confessional belief. In other words, the effects of declining devotion and value change can recede, at least in part, as Christian Democratic parties modernize their message to the electorate. The engagement, entanglement, and implication of Christian Democratic politicians in wider and more diffuse networks are a different matter. This inter-penetration of politics and civil society cannot be made more modern without evolving into an arms-length relationship. Hence, where Christian Democratic parties have been able to sever (or at least diminish) their links with the rest of civil society, they have been able to recover more rapidly even if only temporarily. Where Christian Democrats have not escaped the stigma associated with the manipulation of informal networks of power, they have had much greater difficulty recapturing what they lost.

This argument has five parts. The first looks at the establishment of Christian Democratic hegemony in all three countries as a result of popular devotion, ideological competition, and comprehensive mobilization. This is where I introduce the importance of links between political elites and the rest of civil society in the wider context of Christian Democracy. The second sketches the long slow decline in confessional devotion and ideological contestation and its effects on support

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[1] See, for example, Kees van Kersbergen, 'Contemporary Christian Democracy and the Demise of the Politics of Mediation,' in Herbert Kitscheldt, Peter Lange, Gary Marks, and John D. Stephens, eds. *Continuity and Change in Contemporary Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 347-351.

[2] Van Kersbergen, op.cit., is a notable exception and this contribution is largely inspired by his political economy approach to the demise of Christian Democracy in Europe.

[3] Wolfgang Jagodzinski and Karel Dobbelaere, 'Secularization and Church Religiosity,' in Jan W. van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough, eds. *The Impact of Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 76-119.

[4] Here the inspiration comes from the many volumes on 'value change' that have been produced by Ronald Inglehart over the years. See, for example, Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

for Christian Democrats in Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium. This allows me to rehearse the argument about value change and electoral de-alignment that is already familiar to most students of political science. The third section returns to the links between Christian Democratic politicians and elites in other parts of civil society, this time in a more negative light. Here is where I pick up on the agenda of political reform – called 'depillarization' in Belgium and the Netherlands. In Italy, the pattern is somewhat different as the Christian Democrats taught other political groups how to manipulate their own informal networks first through the opening to the left and then more broadly in the *pentapartito*. The fourth stage looks at the collapse of Christian Democratic hegemony as it unfolded in sequence across the three countries. The fifth looks at how Christian Democrats in each of the three countries used their time in opposition and the strategies they deployed to return to power and concludes with the paradox that the broad social networks that made Christian Democracy so powerful initially have become one of Christian Democracy's greatest sources of weakness.

The Centrality of Christian Democracy

The comparison between the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium starts with the observation that Christian Democrats were in government in each of these countries for long uninterrupted periods of time. The Dutch Christian Democrats participated in every government between 1918 and 1994, first as the General League of Roman Catholic Caucuses, then as the Roman Catholic State Party, the Catholic People's Party, and finally as the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) – which is the same formation we see today. The first three groups were strictly Catholic; the CDA formed in 1977 as a union of Catholics and like-minded Protestants. A number of isolationist protestant groups continued to stand for election on their own.

The Christian Democrats in Italy spent slightly less time in government, in large part due to the monopolization of political representation during the Fascist period. The Christian Democratic Italian People's Party (PPI) was outlawed by Mussolini. After the Second World War, it re-emerged as 'Christian Democracy' (DC) and immediately won representation in the 1946 elections. Representatives of the DC served in every Italian government from 1946 to 1994; former Christian Democrats can be found in every government since then as well, only they were elected through political parties without a clear Christian Democratic identity.

The Belgian Christian Democrats had the shortest period of continuous representation despite a much longer period of hegemonic influence. They emerged as a Catholic Party in the late 19th Century, became a Catholic Union after the First World War, and a Catholic Block on the eve of the Second World War. In each of these configurations, the movement tied itself closely to the Church in Rome and commanded a predominant share of the electorate. After the Second World War, the Belgian Christian Democrats severed their official links with Rome and rebranded themselves as a Christian Social Party in the francophone parts of the country and a Christian People's Party in the Flemish-speaking north. They served in alternate post-war governments until 1958, when they captured control over the electoral centre and so managed to remain in power for the next four decades.

The road to hegemony was different for each of the three Christian Democratic movements. The Catholics in the Netherlands are not a natural majority; the country has a strong Protestant tradition as well, particularly in the prosperous Randstad region that encompasses Rotterdam, The Hague, Amsterdam and Utrecht. What made the Catholics so influential was their relative size and cohesiveness. They were the essential partner in any coalition government. The geographic distribution of Catholic votes also played a role. To leave the Catholics out of power in a centralized state like the Netherlands would be to deny representation to significant parts of the country's southern and western provinces. The Second World War also played a role. The Catholic parts of the

Netherlands were the first to be liberated from occupation by allied forces, giving Catholic politicians a head start in efforts to restore Dutch democracy both in terms of positioning themselves for office and in their efforts to de-legitimate other forms of resistance to the Nazis, particularly among the Communists.[5]

The Italian situation is not unlike the Dutch. Although the Catholic share of the Italian population is significantly larger, it is neither so compact nor so cohesive. The 1946 elections gave the DC only slightly more than one-third of the vote. This made them the largest party in the Italian Constituent Assembly but it also meant they drew less support than the Socialists and Communists combined; the rest of the vote divided among liberals, populists, republicans, and a host of smaller parties. The United States had an influence in the ascension of the Christian Democrats in Italy as well. It was much more overt and explicit than in the Netherlands. The US government made it clear that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) would not be welcome in the government formed after then 1948 elections. US secret services – meaning both the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) before 1947 and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) afterward – played a role in financing opposition to the Italian communists, including among the Christian Democrats. This remained US policy through the 1980s and arguably until the end of the Cold War; the PCI disappeared not many years before the Italian Christian Democrats fell from power.[6]

The Belgian situation is more complicated than either of the first two cases because of the way that religious devotion correlates with ethnicity and language. Belgium is a predominantly Catholic country and yet the francophone population in Wallonia and Flanders is more open to non-confessional ideologies including a strongly anti-clerical form of liberalism, socialism, and communism. The Catholics could claim a majority of the electorate but only at the risk of igniting deep social conflict that would divide the north and south of the country. This is what happened in 1950, when the Flemish Catholics sought to return the king to power and to constitute a single-party coalition. Both efforts ignited massive protest. Ultimately the king had to abdicate in favour of his son and the Belgian Christian Democrats faced off against a united opposition. This explains the alternation between confessional and non-confessional governments throughout the 1950s. That alternation only ended in 1958 once the Belgian Christian Democrats admitted that they could only rule in cooperation with a non-confessional political partner.[7]

These different patterns of consolidation drew on different modes of engaging with civil society. The Christian Democrats in all three countries relied on churches to help mobilize voters. They expanded this mobilization potential through church affiliated social groups or functional organizations as well. What is distinctive is the way in which they consolidated these networks into power resources that could be used not just to win elections but also to exercise political control between electoral contests.

The Dutch case is the easiest to illustrate because it is the basis for a standard political science model called 'consociational democracy' or consociationalism.[8] Consociational democracy is a framework for the organization of deeply divided societies around isolated, institutionalized and hierarchical sub-national political cultures (or 'pillars'). Each of these pillars has the whole panoply of self-contained public institutions, including hospitals, schools, trade unions, employers' associations,

[5] Frank E. Huggett, *The Modern Netherlands* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972) pp. 110-120.
[6] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990) pp. 72-120.
[7] Xavier Mabille, *Histoire politique de la Belgique* (Brussels: CRISP, 1986) pp. 305-320; Els Witte, 'Tussen restauratie en vernieuwing (1944-1950)' and 'Conflicten en conflictbeheersing in de levensbeschouwelijke sfeer,' in Els Witte, Jan Craeybeckx, and Alain Meynen, eds. *Politieke Geschiedenis van Belgie: Van 1830 to Heden* (Brussels: VUB Press, 1990) pp. 227-278.
[8] Lijphart, Arendt, 'Consociational Democracy,' *World Politics* 21:2, pp. 207-225.

insurance providers, media, and political parties. These institutions serve to isolate members of the group from outsides so that they can live separate lives while sharing the same geographic space. Moreover, the groups are hierarchical in order to maintain discipline and cohesion. This is important to empower political elites to negotiate across groups and to make compromises in the interests of social harmony.

What this meant in the Netherlands in practice is that the Catholic political leadership – like the Protestant or non-confessional leaders – could call upon the support of any of these ancillary organizations in civil society and expect them to play a role in the formation and implementation of government policy. This proved particularly useful in the aftermath of the Second World War when Dutch political leaders needed the trade unions to exercise wage restraint and employers to hold down the rate of price inflation. Politicians could not simply issue orders; they had to negotiate with elites in charge of other institutions like the trade unions and employers' associations. But the politicians could (and did) threaten to exclude other elites from participating in these deliberations and so convince them of the importance of arriving at some kind of consensual decision once the negotiations have dragged on long enough.[9]

The Italian Christian Democrats had a different relationship with civil society. The reason is that the real opposition was not external to the DC as a political movement, it was between rival factions inside the party elite. This kind of competition creates a very different imperative. Where the Dutch sought to isolate the Catholic community from other influences in their society, the Italians sought to exploit divisions among different Catholic groups in order to wrestle control over key resources both in society and within the Church itself. As in the Dutch case, the political party sits at the apex of political and social organization. The term in Italian political science is *partitocrazia*, which is a form of politics dominated by political parties. Unlike the Dutch case, however, Italian Catholics owed their loyalty to different currents and individuals rather than to the principle of party leadership. This made for a much more fluid and less clearly institutionalized pattern of negotiation among elites. It also fostered more informal patterns of influence. The net effect, however, was much the same. Catholic elites in Italy could use their influence over civil society to exert authority between elections as well as to urge voters to show up at the polls.[10]

The Belgian Christian Democrats showed elements of both the Dutch and the Italian cases. Ostensibly, Belgium is a consociational democracy with the same pillarized structure found in the Netherlands only organized in terms of Catholics, Liberals and Socialists rather than (as in the Dutch case) Catholics, Protestants, and non-confessional groups. What distinguishes the Belgian case from the Dutch is the fact that the different groups are socially and geographically more isolated, with the Socialists predominating in the francophone south, the Liberals having disproportionate influence in Brussels, and the Catholics predominating in the Flemish-speaking north of the country. This overlapping structure of ideological, geographic, and linguistic cleavages means that the main political parties look more like the Italian Christian Democrats at the regional level than the Dutch Catholics at the national level. Hence they are more prone to internal divisions and more easily dominated by competing informal networks. Belgian Christian Democrats relied on negotiation and consensus-building to govern using their influence over civil society, but they could also display occasional bloody-mindedness. This explains why the Belgian Christian Democrats were so quick to

[9] Ken Gladdish, *Governing from the Center: Politics and Policymaking in the Netherlands* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991) pp. 33-49.

[10] Frederic Spotts and Theodor Wieser, *Italy: A Difficult Democracy, A Survey of Italian Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 20-40; Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, *op.cit*, pp. 141-185.

try to govern alone at the start of the 1950s; it also explains why the change of tack at the end of the 1950s also coincided with a transformation in party leadership.[11]

The Decline of Christian Democratic Hegemony

Christian Democratic parties in the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium were hegemonic and controlling but they were also deliberative and consensual. At times, they could be divisive as well. Moreover, the period of Christian Democratic hegemony was a mix of stability and instability. The Christian Democratic parties predominated and yet coalition governments and political leaders changed with increasing frequency. Almost from the outset, however, the Christian Democratic parties lost electoral support (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here.

The mechanism behind this loss of support is counter-intuitive. Economic theories of democracy rest on the assumption that politicians will be rewarded by the voters for good public policy. By contrast, Christian Democracy in the Netherlands, Italy, and Belgium foundered by dint of its own success. The Christian Democrats managed to stabilize the political arena and to bolster economic performance. The result was a 'miraculous' industrialization of the Netherlands, Italy, and the north of Belgium. The southern provinces of Belgium fared less well, being the first industrialized region of Europe and so heavily dependent upon mature industries, but voters in those provinces were more inclined to vote Socialist than Christian Democrat in any event. Rather than cementing support for Christian Democracy, however, the effect of rising economic prosperity was to foster a shift in underlying social values away toward greater personal freedom and gender equality and away from the more traditional family values and sexual mores advocated by the Catholic Church.

This shift change in social values as a result of rising economic prosperity is hardly unique to countries dominated by Christian Democrats. As Ronald Inglehart has documented through analysis of comparable cross-country public opinion polling data, value change is a ubiquitous feature in the process of modernization.[12] Nevertheless, value change is destabilizing for Christian Democratic parties. Christian Democrats have a hard time updating their message to the voters, even when they have severed formal ties with the Church in Rome. So long as local churches play a role in political mobilization, Christian Democratic parties face a choice between maintaining their appeal to the declining numbers of active worshippers and crafting a new message for those who stop or reduce their attendance at religious services. The clergy is also important both as a source of mobilization and as a potential source of elite criticism. Finally, Christian Democrats must navigate divisions within the Church itself. The Second Vatican Council not only loosened the ideological moorings for the Dutch Christian Democrats, but also fuelled new and deep divisions within the Christian Democratic parties in Italy and Belgium.

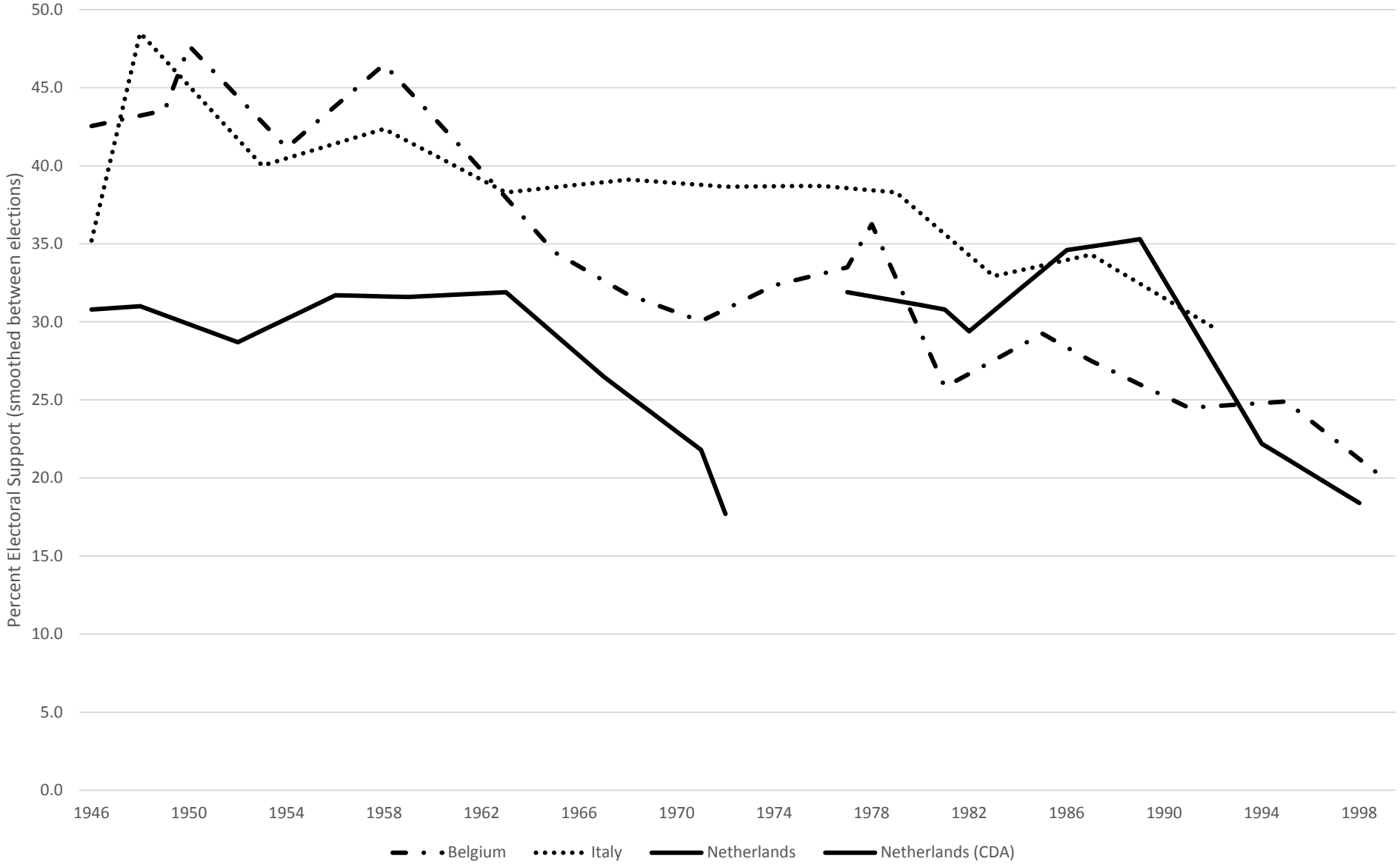
The impact in terms of electoral performance was gradual but it was also punctuated by periods of rapidly accelerating decline. Support for the Dutch Catholic People's Party collapsed in the 1960s even as Dutch Catholics embraced a more modern interpretation of Church doctrine on the margins of Vatican II.[13] The impact was so great that the Catholics ceased to stand alone as a political party after the 1972 elections. Support for Christian Democrats declined in Belgium at the same time even as the Church itself retained a more conservative view. In contrast to the Netherlands, the Belgian Catholics divided into different political parties at the end of the 1960s; from 1971, Catholics campaigned in a separate Christian People's Party in Flanders and a Christian Social Party for

[11] Erik Jones, 'From Depillarization to Decentralization and Beyond: The Gatherin Storm in Belgium,' *Dutch Crossing* 22:1 (Summer 1998) pp. 140-142.

[12] See, e.g., Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization*, *op.cit*.

[13] For the change in Dutch Catholic doctrine, see Jan van Putten, *Politieke Stromingen* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Het Spectrum, 1990) pp. 207-223.

Figure 1: Declining Support for Christian Democratic Parties



Wallonia. Bi-lingual Brussels retained a vestige of the old unified list for the 1971 elections but even that disappeared with the two linguistic wings of the Christian Democratic movement formally divorced in 1972.

The losses for the Italian Christian Democrats were both earlier and later. By the start of the 1960s, the DC lacked support to govern alone; by the early 1970s it looked set to lose control over the state altogether. These two Italian episodes serve as a reminder that votes lost to one party must go elsewhere – particularly since the relevant numbers are often cast in percentage terms rather than absolute numbers. In the Italian case, those votes went to the Communist and non-communist left. In the early 1960s, this meant that the DC had to make an opening to the non-communist left in order to retain sufficient control over the legislature. By the 1970s, that opening to the left was insufficient to stabilize a DC-led government and so the Christian Democrats had to negotiate a 'historic compromise' with the Communists.[14]

Such changes in party strategy – not just in Italy, but also Belgium and the Netherlands – only intensified the struggles within the Christian Democrats even as they loosened the sense of attachment felt by the electorate. Within the party, the conflict centred on whether it is better to align to the right or the left of the political spectrum trading off cultural conservatism for economic redistribution, both of which are traditional Christian Democratic projects. In Italy, a further tension was over how far the Communists could be trusted and also the extent to which it was possible to deal with an overtly atheistic ideology (even if Communist leaders like Enrico Berlinguer were clearly open to dealing with Catholics).

The Liberals in Belgium offered a similarly poisoned chalice for the Christian Democrats. The polarization of Belgian politics ended in 1958 when the Liberal party broke ranks with the Socialists and accepted to work with the Christian Democrats. This was a major opening for the historically anti-clerical Belgian Liberals. However, it was also an opportunistic gamble. By agreeing to work with the Catholics, the Liberals hoped to pull away traditionally Catholic voters who disagreed with the centre-left of the Christian Democratic Party on economic matters and who felt under-represented by the Christian Democrats in Brussels or the francophone south. This ploy worked and the Liberal party gradually siphoned away traditional Christian Democratic supporters.

At a deeper level, however, the efforts of the Christian Democrats to use ever more diverse coalitions to maintain their grip on power only underscored the opacity of elite politics in all three countries. Voters were well aware that the Christian Democrats could exercise leverage in other parts of civil society but they could be reasonably confident on the general ideological direction of government. Now that Christian Democratic politicians were compromising across ideological groups as well – and, indeed, using their links to civil society to fight with each other as well as to implement policy – the whole pattern of politics began to look decidedly undemocratic. Moreover, the value change mentioned earlier added further fuel to the fire by nurturing aspirations for more direct participation in government. The deference for elites that is a characterization of consociational democracy or *partitocrazia* gave way to more elite-challenging behaviour including popular protest.[15]

The juxtaposition of these factors offered fertile ground for the emergence of new political movements looking to reform the political process. These movements had many different programs. Some, like the Dutch Democrats '66 (D66), sought to change the nature of democratic politics in order to foster more grass-roots participation; some, like the Italian *Lotta Continua* sought to throw

[14] Patrick McCarthy, *The Crisis of the Italian State: From the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) pp. 103-122.
[15] See, for example, Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

out a corrupt and out-of-touch elite; and some, like the Flemish *Volksunie*, hoped to redraw territorial boundaries. Critically, these movements could be either on the left or the right of the political spectrum. Indeed they opened up a new cleavage for political contestation. And within this new cleavage, the Christian Democrats were no longer at the political centre.

Depillarization, Regionalism, and the Crisis of Governability

The response of Christian Democratic parties to the emergence of these new political challenges was different from one country to the next. The Dutch Christian Democrats severed their links with the trade union movement and moved to the centre right. The Italian Christian Democrats stepped back from their historic compromise with the Communists and accepted to partner with as many non-communist groups as necessary into order to remain in power. And the Belgian Christian Democrats became ever more divided across linguistic boundaries and so focused on improving the situation in Flanders. Moreover, these responses played out against a backdrop of economic turmoil in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This backdrop is important because it meant that politicians had to deliver economic stability as well as maintaining control.

The Belgians were the first to square the circle and so it is useful to reorder the presentation of the country cases – going from Belgium to the Netherlands to Italy. The division of the Belgian Christian Democrats along linguistic lines has already been mentioned; it started in the late 1960s and culminated in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, the two wings of the Christian Democratic Party caucused together and joined governing coalitions only on a parity basis – either both would participate in the national government or neither would. The same pattern applied to the two other traditional political families, the Liberals and the Socialists, and by the end of the 1970s Belgium had effectively two parallel party systems – one francophone and the other Flemish-speaking. This parallelism was reflected in state structures as well. Although Belgium remained a unitary state, it devolved power in a unique kind of personalized federalism within which different linguistic communities acquired exclusive competences even within a shared geographic space.[16]

The linguistic division of Belgium was painful and uneven. Substantial French speaking minorities exist in geographically Flemish regions and yet the reverse is not the case (apart from Brussels – which is officially bilingual). Moreover, linguistic divisions tend to coincide with ideological commitments as mentioned earlier. Hence any disagreement over border regions tends to exacerbate the tensions between Christian Democrats and Socialists. This was particularly the case in the early 1980s as Belgium began to move toward a more geographical form of federalism. And the resulting tension made it all but impossible for politicians to agree on a common economic program.[17]

The solution devised by Christian Democratic Prime Minister Wilfried Martens was to plan and execute economic policy in secret. He formed a select group of top Flemish Christian Democrats would could represent the labour movement, business concerns, and in-house economic expertise. He used that group to devise a plan to trade off wage moderation for job-creating investment. And he relied on enabling legislation coupled with the tacit support of the Flemish Catholic unions and employers in order to implement the policy. The francophone Socialists were in opposition at the time and systematically excluded from the conversation. The (predominantly francophone) Socialist unions tried to disrupt the policy but failed without solidarity from the (predominantly Flemish-speaking) Christian Democrats. Hence the policy was a 'success'. The only qualification is that the

[16] Kris Deschouwer, 'Falling Apart Together: The Changing Nature of Belgian Consociationalism,' *Acta Politica* 37 (Spring/Summer 2002) pp. 68-85.

[17] John Fitzmaurice, *The Politics of Belgium: A Unique Federalism* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996) pp. 121-144.

advantages were heavily skewed toward Flanders and away from Wallonia. The francophone Christian Democrats would not soon forget the inequity in this distribution of benefits.[18]

The story in the Netherlands is similar to that in Belgium but more transparent. Christian Democratic Minister President Ruud Lubbers came into office in the early 1980s facing a similarly dire economic situation. He decided to respond using a combination of wage compression and job-creating investment. Unlike in Belgium, however, he no longer had a Christian Democratic trade union to rely upon as a partner. Hence he had to pressure the joint federation of labour – which combined by confessional and non-confessional unions – into negotiating with business as a superior alternative to a statutory price-incomes policy. The head of the unions, a social democrat named Wim Kok, reluctantly accepted and so agreed to impose self-discipline in wage bargaining in exchange for concessions.[19] This was a success for the Dutch economy but a disaster for the trade unions which saw the most dramatic decline in membership in West European experience.[20]

The Dutch Party of Labour accepted the logic behind the economics argument but they disliked the politics. The challenge for the Party of Labour was to come up with some alternative while at the same time avoiding the appearance of having sold out the trade union movement. Finding this alternative became even more imperative when the Party of Labour moved into coalition with the Christian Democrats at the end of the 1980s. Such a grand coalition only fuelled the arguments made by those who object to consociational democracy and who criticise the informal relationships between political elites and other powerful organizations in civil society.[21]

The Italian case represents the other extreme from the Dutch, being even more secretive and opaque than the Belgian example. Successive five-party coalitions ruled Italian politics through the 1980s under the generic name pentapartito. The crucial relationship within these coalitions was between the Christian Democrats and Bettino Craxi's Italian Socialist Party. In turn, those parties relied on informal links to other social groups to finance their political movements, mobilize voters, and 'facilitate' public sector contracts. This was a period of deferred response to the global economic crisis, widening fiscal deficits, and mounting public debt. As a consequence, Italian politicians had to look outside Italy in order to find bulwarks for economic self-discipline. They found these in the form of competition within the European common market and nominal anchors in the European monetary system.[22]

The Italian Communist Party continued to serve in opposition. However, with the death of Berlinguer and the fall of the Berlin Wall it was unable to offer a credible and coherent alternative to the five-party coalition. New voices had to emerge in order to upset the negative equilibrium.[23] Some of these, like the satirist Beppe Grillo, would mature only in decades. Others, like the regional populist Umberto Bossi, would rise more quickly to prominence. In the meantime, however, the only effective opposition to the pentapartito could be found in extra parliamentary institutions. Of these, the judiciary turned out to be most important.

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[18] Erik Jones, 'Consociationalism, Corporatism, and the Fate of Belgium,' *Acta Politica* 37 (Spring/Summer 2002) pp. 86-103.

[19] Frans Nypels and Kees Tamboer, *Wim Kok: Vijftien Jaar Vakbeweging* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Raamgracht, 1985) pp. 113-122.

[20] Jelle Visser and Anton Hemerijck, *'A Dutch Miracle': Job Growth, Welfare Reform, and Corporatism in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1997) pp. 81-116.

[21] Ruud Koole and Hans Daalder, 'The Consociational Democracy Model and the Netherlands: Ambivalent Allies?' *Acta Politica* 37 (Spring/Summer 2002) pp. 33-34.

[22] Paul Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents, 1980-2001* (London: Penguin, 2001) pp. 137-178.

[23] Joseph LaPalombara, *Democracy Italian Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) pp. 197-228.

Clean Hands, Technocracy, and the Colour Purple

The judicial overthrow of the Italian political class is well-known story that touches deeply on the informal networks that connect Christian Democratic politicians to other actors in civil society.[24] In presenting this story, however, it is important to note that the Christian Democrats were not the only politicians who relied on such vast informal networks and neither were they the ostensible targets of judicial investigation. Hence this is as much a matter of guilt-by-association as it is an implicit allegation. The point is that the perception of corruption – and the distrust that engenders – touched every prominent politician and so led directly to the demise of the unified Christian Democratic Party.

The Italian story hinges on two different sets of investigations, one called 'Clean Hands' involving political corruption in Milan, which is a stronghold for Craxi's Socialist Party, and the other focusing on organized crime in Sicily, which also happens to vote Christian Democrat. The Milan investigation revealed a systematic pattern of corruption at all levels of government that was regarded by actors in the private sector as 'the cost of doing business' and by politicians as a necessary means to fund electoral campaigns and party offices. This investigation metastasized for two reasons. The first is that the Socialists were so rapacious and the second is that they were so necessary for the coalition government. Each new line of investigation uncovered new possible cases and so spread the web of guilt-by-association until it engulfed essentially every prominent politician.

The mafia investigations were important because of the impact they had on the tolerance of the public. The mafia is a long-standing feature of Italian political and economic life that only began to unravel in the 1970s when a number of prominent mafia turncoats began testifying against different parts of the organization. By the 1980s, prominent magistrates were able to build cases against whole crime families. These mega-cases (or *maxi-processi*) also fuelled allegations of guilt-by-association among prominent politicians, not the least of whom was Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti. More important, perhaps, they provoked the mafia to violence. The murder of two prominent magistrates, their escorts, and members of their family galvanized public attention and led to widespread expressions of disgust for organized crime and hence also for any associated politicians. The Christian Democrats survived the 1992 elections and yet were critically wounded. The big winners were Umberto Bossi's populist and anti-elite (anti-Rome) Northern League.

The solution to the problem represented by the Clean Hands investigation and underscored by mafia violence was to change the Italian electoral system in order to create a clear alternation in government. This solution was devised by a technocratic cabinet appointed to represent the Italian people beyond the political parties. It would give voters more ability to sanction politicians who abused their offices. It would also make it more challenging for parties to run from the centre of the political spectrum. Within this context, Christian Democrats had to choose to stand on the right or on the left. Such choices divided prominent political families. And while a small group continued to campaign under the name of Christian Democracy, it meant that the old DC would no longer exist. The 1994 elections were the first held under the new system and they were won by Silvio Berlusconi who ran as an anti-establishment populist and who subsequently formed a coalition government with the National Alliance and the Northern League.

The situation in Belgium is very similar to the Italian case and again it is worth emphasizing that the Christian Democrats were not alone in facing allegations of impropriety. If anything, the Socialist Parties – both francophone and Flemish-speaking – were more deeply implicated in corruption scandals centring on the usual mix of kickbacks, public procurement, and party financing.

[24] For a range of views, see Vittorio Bufacchi and Simon Burgess, eds. *Italy Since 1989: Events and Interpretations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). For a detailed journalistic account, see Gianni Barbacetto, Peter Gomez, and Marco Travaglio, *Mani Pulite: La vera storia, 20 anni dopo* (Milan: Chiarelettere editore, srl, 2012).

What hurt the Christian Democrats was not so much the stigma of corruption as the perception of abuse of power and influence. In 1991, an investigative journalist named Dirk De Ridder published a deathbed interview with the trade union leader who had brokered economic policy with Prime Minister Martens in the early 1980s.[25] That interview revealed the extent to which leading Christian Democrats had manipulated their influence over the trade unions in order to foster an adjustment strategy that transferred income from labour to capital and that benefited Flanders more than Wallonia.

The result was immediate. The Catholic unions distanced themselves from the Flemish Christian Democrats; the francophone Christian Democrats also disavowed the policy in order to escape responsibility for a range of measures that offered their own voters few benefits. Most important, perhaps, the Flemish Liberal party perceived a window of opportunity in its decades-old strategy to steal support from the Christian Democrats. The new Flemish liberal leader Guy Verhofstadt announced his intention to stand against Martens in his district in Ghent by running a campaign based on the rejection of consociational democracy. Verhofstadt did not succeed in ousting the Christian Democrats from power, but he did manage to defeat Martens, who handed over his party leadership and later moved to the European Parliament.

Verhofstadt followed the 1991 elections with a series of reforms that would constitute an even greater threat to Christian Democratic hegemony.[26] He changed the name of his Flemish-speaking liberal party to include an explicit reference to the Flemish region, he democratized the selection of party leaders by giving a vote to the whole of the membership, and he made it clear that he would no longer abide by the old rules of consensus politics. Following that, Verhofstadt began poaching not only Christian Democratic voters but also party elites. He was aided by a further round of constitutional reforms that greatly strengthened the power of regional government – thus consolidating the division of the country into two parallel policy systems and reducing the need to maintain parity of representation in national governments. The culmination of this strategy came not in the next round of national elections, but in the round held thereafter. By 1999, Verhofstadt was ready to push the Christian Democrats from power for the first time in more than four decades and to make himself Prime Minister of a national coalition government.[27]

The Dutch Christian Democrats had already been out of power five years by the time the Belgian Christian Democrats surrendered office. Given the length of time that the Christian Democrats had dominated Dutch politics, their collapse in the 1994 elections was dramatic. Nevertheless, it is the simplest of the three stories to tell and so also the least remarkable. The Dutch Christian Democrats had already severed much of their relationship to civil society organizations by the early 1990s and so relied more on habit or cultural identity than institutional power to maintain the affections of the electorate. Despite the fact that the Dutch economy had turned the corner and the interventions organized by Lubbers would soon be celebrated as a new consensual model for macroeconomic adjustment, affection for Christian Democrats and for consociational democracy more generally had worn thin.

The voters turned away from both the Christian Democrats and the Party of Labour. Of the two, however, the Christian Democrats lost more votes. Moreover, the biggest winning parties of the 1994 elections – the more traditional liberals on the right and the more post-materialist D66 on the centre left – were more eager to work with the Party of Labour than to trust the Christian Democrats. D66 was particularly eager to extend reforms to provincial and local government in

[25] The article soon became part of a best-selling book. See Hugo de Ridder, *Omtrent Wilfried Martens* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1991) pp. 145-164.
[26] Jos. Bouveroux, *De Partij van de Burger* (Antwerp: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1992).
[27] Jos. Bouveroux, *Van Zwarte Zondag tot Paars Groen* (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 2003).

order to begin loosening the hold of Christian Democrats of key political appointments. The new 'purple' coalition of red Labour and blue liberals did not have a new economic policy agenda. They cared primarily about changing the style of Dutch politics. In doing so, they succeeded in consigning the Christian Democrats to eight years in the wilderness. They also opened the door for the populist outburst led by Pim Fortuyn.[28]

Three Attempts to Escape the Wilderness: Centrist, Rightist, and Nationalist/Humanist

Since their fall from power in the 1990s, the Christian Democrats have attempted to return to office using a number of different formulas. The Italians who have continued to campaign under a Christian Democratic banner have remained at the centre of the political spectrum and relied on their connections to more powerful centre-right or centre-left wing parties in order to form coalitions. The Dutch Christian Democrats have moved decisively to the centre-right and have arrayed themselves as the alternative to the Party of Labour. The Christian Democrats in the Flemish-speaking parts of Belgium have embraced regional nationalism, rebranding themselves in 2001 as 'Christian Democrats and Flanders' (CD&V) and, after 2003, forging an electoral pact with the secular New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). For their part, the Christian Democrats in francophone Belgium stopped identifying overtly with Christian Democracy in 2002 and campaign under the banner of 'Humanist Democratic Center' (CdH) instead.

The Italian formula has been the least successful. Italian Christian Democrats continue to wield influence and three centre-left prime ministers – Romano Prodi, Enrico Letta, and Matteo Renzi – have roots in the old Christian Democratic party. On the centre-right, Pier Ferdinando Casini was able to play a role in the second coalition government headed by Silvio Berlusconi by offering the support of his centrist Union of Christian Democrats (UDC). Meanwhile Enrico Letta's uncle, Gianni Letta, has been Berlusconi's principal advisor ever since the media mogul made his first foray into politics. Indeed, Gianni Letta played a crucial role in brokering the grand coalition agreement that brought Enrico Letta into the premiership.

Despite these obvious channels of influence, however, there is little or no support within the Italian electorate to see a Christian Democratic party return to a hegemonic role at the centre of Italian Democracy. On the contrary, much of the debate about electoral reform that has waged off and on since 2005 has been about how to engineer an appropriate system in order to avoid that fate. Meanwhile Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement has garnered support from those who distrust the political elites who survived the Clean Hands investigations of the early 1990s; in their view, politics has already slipped back into old patterns, if indeed it ever abandoned them.[29]

By contrast, the Dutch formula has been only slightly more effective. Christian Democratic leader Jan-Peter Balkenende was the clear winner in the dramatic May 2002 elections that followed the rise and murder of Pim Fortuyn. Balkenende managed to hold onto power through October 2010. He did so in alliance with all parts of the political spectrum across four different coalition governments. With each successive election, his electoral support diminished and his ideological position on the centre-right became more compact.[30] Support for the CDA peaked in 2003 at 28.6 percent. It fell by 2 percentage points to 26.5 percent in 2006 and then collapsed to just half that number in 2010. Two years after Balkenende left office, his successor received only 8 percent of the

[28] Koole and Daalder, 'The Consociational Democracy Model', *op.cit*, pp. 34-35.

[29] Caterina Paolucci, 'Il centro e il centro destra in evoluzione,' in Carlo Fusaro and Amie Kreppel, eds. *Politica in Italia, Edizione 2014* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014) pp. 113-131.

[30] Tom van der MJeer, Rozemarijn Lube, Erika van Elsas, Martin Elff, and Wouter van der Brug, 'Bounded Volatility in the Dutch Electoral Battlefield: A Panel Study of the Structure of Changing Vote Intentions in the Netherlands During 2006-2010,' *Acta Politica* 47:4 (October 2012) pp. 333-355.

votes making the CDA the fifth-largest party in the Dutch parliament. This is more than the UDC gets it Italy, but not by much.

The Flemish case provides a cautionary tale. When the Christian Democrats formed an electoral pact with the New Flemish Alliance, the smaller nationalist group was new to the scene and attracted little support. By contrast, Christian Democratic leader Yves Leterme received almost 800,000 preference votes in the June 2007 elections and his joint CD&V/N-VA electoral list was the largest both in Flanders and nationally. Soon thereafter, however, N-VA leader Bart De Wever tired of the electoral alliance with the Christian Democrats and decided to campaign on a more aggressive platform of reforming the country. In 2010, the N-VA garnered 100,000 more votes on its own than the union of CD&V/N-VA did in 2007. The N-VA picked up another 200,000 votes in the 2014 contest. By contrast, the CD&V has been relegated to being the second party at the regional level and the third – behind N-VA and the francophone Socialists – across the country as a whole. Having legitimated the N-VA as a potential party of government, the CD&V created its own alternative without any of the baggage of its hegemonic past.[31]

The irony in these three cases is that the close links to civil society that made it easy for Christian Democrats to mobilize voters in the early and middle decades of the 20th Century have become a source of suspicion and unease for voters at the start of the 21st. Given the alternatives, voters would rather opt for a clear division between left and right; if pushed they would be willing to consider a new populist alternative. Indeed, this may be true irrespective of church attendance or adherence to traditional Christian values. Silvio Berlusconi was able to redefine Italian politics following the demise of Christian Democracy in that country, only to add fuel to the fire lit by Beppe Grillo in his efforts to overturn the ruling class – a fire Matteo Renzi hopes to harness with his promise to throw the old traditions (and practitioners) of Italian politics onto the scrap heap. Pim Fortuyn had less an impact and yet nevertheless started a wave of turbulence that has shaken up Dutch politics beyond all recognition. Guy Verhofstadt set the stage in Belgium for the fusion of Christian Democracy and Flemish nationalism, which in turn made it possible for Bart De Wever to pursue his Flemish nationalist agenda without the trappings of Christian Democracy. In this sense, the decline and fall of three Christian Democratic parties is revealing of a revolution in European politics as a result of which hegemonic parties are much less likely to emerge and politicians will have to exercise power more transparently if they hope to retain support.

[31] This is not to say that the CD&V created Flemish nationalism; they simply unleashed it. See Niels Matheve, 'Nihil novi sub sole? De historische wortels van het naoorlogse Vlaams-nationalisme en hun invloed op de hedendaagse politiek,' *Res Publica* 56:1 (January-March 2014) pp. 95-110.