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FROM STAGES
TO SQUARES:
REPRESENTATION BY
THE NICHE PARTIES
AND THE POLITICAL
PRESENCE (ROLE OF
PERFORMATIVITY?)

Contents

1	<i>Introduction</i>	5
2	<i>Theoretical Framework</i>	7
2.1	<i>Literatur Analysis and Current Debates</i>	7
2.2	<i>Methodology and Research Question</i>	8
3	<i>Niche Representation</i>	11
3.1	<i>Prologue to [H1]: Niche party support as a protest vote</i>	12
3.2	<i>Prologue to [H2]: Representational Deprivation and Protest Culture</i>	13
3.3	<i>Prologue to [H3]: Protests continue despite the success?</i>	14
4	<i>Fair and Square: Corners on the open fields of representation</i>	15
4.1	<i>Protest as Square: Claim-Making in Motion</i>	16
4.2	<i>From Digital Forums to Constituency Corners</i>	17
4.3	<i>Vertical Illusions, Horizontal Realities</i>	17
5	<i>Performative Squares and the Claim Construction</i>	19
5.1	<i>Co-presence and the representative feedback loop: The Case of Bloco de Esquerda of Portugal</i>	19
5.1.1	<i>[H1, H2] From Protest to Embodied Representation</i>	21
5.1.2	<i>[H3] Disillusionment and the Downfall of Niche Parties</i>	21
6	<i>Conclusion</i>	23

Introduction

The rise of niche parties across Europe, from green movements to anti-austerity coalitions, marks a tectonic shift in how citizens engage with representative democracy. While mainstream parties cling to institutional legitimacy, niche parties thrive in the liminal spaces between protest and governance, redefining political representation as a dynamic, embodied practice. This project interrogates analyses of the increasing support for the niche parties from the perspective of their constituencies. Are these voters merely protesting systemic failures, expressing their dissatisfaction with the incumbents, sticking to their rigidly defined ideological stance or policy preferences, or are they demanding a fundamentally different mode of representation, one that transcends the transactional logic of ballots and policy trade-offs?

Traditional scholarship frames niche parties through a binary lens. For some, they are policy entrepreneurs capitalizing on owned issues neglected by mainstream competitors (Meguid 2005). For others, they channel protest votes from citizens disillusioned by representational deprivation (Nonnemacher 2023). Yet such accounts might be reducing representation to a static contract, overlooking its *performative* dimension. Does the support for niche parties relate to the specifications of the process how the representative claims shaped (Saward 2010)? Drawing on Saward's concept of *the Square*, a space of mutual vulnerability where representatives and constituents negotiate claims in co-presence (Saward 2024, p. 5), this study argues that niche parties succeed not by perfecting policy platforms but by transforming representation into a lived, participatory practice.

This study attempts to change the perspective grievance-based explanations of niche party support, particularly reflecting on Nonnemacher's (2023) framework, which interprets niche party supporters' protest activity as a reaction to government participation. While coalition compromises may contribute to disillusionment, I argue that protest grounds themselves function as a *performative act of represen-*

tation, a co-present way of structuring the representative claims with the interactions between the supporters and party formation.

Niche party supporters do not only *respond* to the current political occasions; they are also in a search for different approaches for representation itself, expressing their deep dissatisfaction with the unidirectional production of the representative claims by the mainstream actors. Within the framework of Saward's Square (Saward 2024) , I argue those grounds are the cradles of birth and differentiation for the niche parties where they form their constituencies and party formations through a co-present collaboration. Finally, this project integrates theoretical analysis of performative representation with an empirical case study of Bloco de Esquerda (BE) of Portugal, assessing how niche parties navigate the tension between institutional pragmatism and representational novelty.

Theoretical Framework

Political representation is often imagined as a linear process: voters elect representatives, who then act on their behalf. Yet this model fails to capture the dynamic, performative nature of representation in practice. As Saward (2010) argues, representation is a *claim-making process*, where legitimacy is negotiated through iterative interactions. This chapter develops a framework for understanding how niche, parties often dismissed as protest vehicles or policy entrepreneurs, reconfigure representation through performative practices and co-presence in spaces like Saward's Square.

The framework critiques traditional theories of niche party support, which frame voters as either policy-driven or protest-oriented (Meguid 2005; Nonnemacher 2023). This paper aims at analysing if these perspectives overlook the *embodied* dimension of representation: the ways in which representative claims, as well as, representational process are enacted through co-presence, participatory, interactive performativity and engagement. Drawing on Saward's concept of *the Square*, a *space of mutual vulnerability* where claims are negotiated in real-time (Saward 2024, p. 5), the chapter initiates the theoretical ground to examine if niche parties perform representation as a lived practice, challenging the hierarchical logic of their mainstream counterparts and what kind of a role this mechanism plays among their supporters. This framework also sets the stage for analyzing Bloco de Esquerda (BE) in Portugal as a subject of research.

2.1 *Literatur Analysis and Current Debates*

The debate over niche party support pivots on two dominant explanations: policy-driven spatial voting and protest-driven dissatisfaction. Stiers (2024) offers the most robust empirical resolution, analyzing 61 national elections (2001–2020) to demonstrate that niche voting primarily reflects ideological alignment with parties' core issues (e.g., environmentalism for Greens) rather than anti-establishment sen-

timent. Using multilevel modeling of voter surveys and manifesto data, Stiers shows that proximity to niche parties' left-right positions and prioritization of their signature issues outweigh generalized dissatisfaction with government performance (Stiers 2024, pp. 5–6). This reframes niche success as a rational, policy-driven choice akin to mainstream voting, challenging protest-centric narratives.

Nonnemacher (2023)'s representational deprivation thesis counters this view, arguing that niche supporters protest when their parties fail to deliver policy gains in coalition governments. Analyzing European Social Survey data, Nonnemacher finds that niche voters experience deprivation when their parties compromise as junior coalition partners, leading to disillusionment and extra-institutional protest (ibid., p. 31). While Stiers acknowledges dissatisfaction's marginal role, his data reveal durable niche voter loyalty even in government (Stiers 2024, p. 10), exposing a tension: is niche support reactive (Nonnemacher) or rooted in stable commitments (Stiers)?

Both frameworks share a transactional view of representation; Stiers through spatial policy alignment, Nonnemacher through principal-agent accountability. Neither engages with how niche parties might reconfigure representation itself through performative practices or might be filling a gap in representation voters are dissatisfied of. This gap motivates our intervention. Building on Saward (2024)'s concept of the Square—spaces where representatives and constituents co-construct claims through bodily co-presence—we argue niche parties thrive by transforming representation from a static mandate into a lived, participatory process. Stiers' finding of young, educated voters' support for niche parties (Stiers 2024, p. 7) hints at this dynamic: these demographics increasingly reject hierarchical delegation, seeking instead what Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff (2024) terms horizontality in claim-making.

2.2 Methodology and Research Question

This research is using a theoretical approach starting with a discourse analysis of different empirical research on niche party support focusing on the voter's motivation, followed by a theoretical synthesis mainly incorporating Saward's concept of the Square (Saward 2024), and finally a case analysis through a niche party, namely Bloco de Esquerda of Portugal to observe and analyse the argumentation set throughout the paper. The research question that leads the examination is as follows:

How do niche parties transform political representation through performative engagement in co-present spaces (Squares), and what does this reveal about voter motivations beyond policy alignment or protest?

Despite the theoretical approach the main argumentation lines are articulated into individual hypotheses as formulated below.

1. **H1, Grounded Support for Niche Parties:** Niche party support arises from dissatisfaction with the functioning of representation in the current electoral system. ¹
2. **H2, Protest Culture as a Structural Feature, Not a Reaction:** The protest-oriented culture of niche parties stems from their direct, grassroots engagement with constituents, rather than being a mere reaction against incumbents. ²
3. **H3, Disillusionment with Niche Parties in Coalition:** Supporters become disillusioned with niche parties once they enter coalitions because these parties begin to operate similarly to mainstream parties. ³

¹ Although Stiers 2024 focuses on this issue, the dissatisfaction is presented as a simple annoyance towards the current political structure. The strong gains by the niche parties in the last decades show that this is, at the very least for a significant number of people, a search for an alternative to the unidirectional representative claims and operations.

² Contrary to Nonnemacher 2023's argument that niche party supporters are just more inclined to participate in protests.

³ Contrary to *ibid.*'s argument that this disappointment is purely caused by the compromises niche parties must make when in a coalition with a mainstream party.

3

Niche Representation

What is a niche party? The definition of niche parties is far from standardized. While research on niche parties often shows differences in the selection of subsets of parties (e.g., between Adams et al. 2006; Nonnemacher 2023), niche parties in the past can also become mainstream in the future. The debate around a precise definition is ongoing, but there is general agreement that niche parties emphasize specific, often non-economic and/or non-prioritized issues that are largely ignored by mainstream counterparts (Nonnemacher 2023, see 30 and Stiers 2024, p. 1). Much like their supporters, their characteristic issues are unaddressed or deprioritised. The rise of niche parties in Western democracies poses a fundamental challenge to conventional theories of political representation. While mainstream parties adapt their platforms to shifting public opinion, niche parties, defined by their adherence to extreme or noncentrist ideological positions, defy this logic through remarkable policy stability. Drawing on Adams et al. (2006)'s analysis, we operationalise niche parties as those in a way "prisoners of their ideologies": Communist, Green, and extreme nationalist parties that refuse (or not able) to moderate their positions despite electoral incentives to do so. Traditional spatial models struggle to explain this phenomenon. If voters penalize niche parties for policy moderation, then their electoral success must derive from sources beyond conventional policy responsiveness. This chapter tries to shine a light on different understandings of the perspective of the voters supporting niche parties.

[...] the assembly of bodies has another even more fundamentally performative function, for what we are seeing when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other public venues is the exercise—one might call it performative—of the right to appear, a bodily demand for a more liveable set of lives. This 'right to appear' is worth highlighting insofar as the right to appear enacts the right to be recognized on one's own terms. [...] In order to appear in a meaningful way, the performed subjectivity must appear in an intelligible manner—and if it does not, it will be in a precarious position.

- Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, p. 7

The research on the niche parties mainly focuses on their ideological and organisational structures and their drastic differences to the mainstream parties (see e.g. Adams et al. 2006 and Meguid 2005). The specifications that often associated these parties rely on their rigid policy positions and often radical ideological positions. Their connection to their constituencies are more often than not explained through those questions. However, the research on the voters of the niche parties are on a much more thinner side (Stiers 2024, p. 2), only a few publications reflect on the issue from this perspective in the past (Nonnemacher 2023, pp. 26–27). 2 leading publications in the recent years namely the ones from Nonnemacher (*ibid.*) and Stiers (2024) are trying to shed light on how the *niche bodies* are formed and what explanation there might be for their support for the niche parties. While these research are much more complex in the nature, this chapter will be dealing only the relevant parts relating to the hypotheses of this study.

3.1 Prologue to [H1]: Niche party support as a protest vote

Stiers (*ibid.*) focuses on the explanation of the niche party vote as a protest form against the mainstream/incumbent parties (*ibid.*, p. 2). This argumentation is already relatively well established in the literature. As much as the claims that niche party vote might be also explained from a purely ideological perspective. Stiers' quantitative analysis examines both perspectives and ultimately challenges the notion that niche party support is primarily an expression of frustration with mainstream politics. His findings indicate that voters choosing niche parties are not simply casting protest votes but are actively prioritizing specific issues and aligning with parties that reflect their ideological preferences. While dissatisfaction with the political system or the current government may play a role, it appears to be a secondary factor rather than the primary driver of niche voting behavior (*ibid.*, see 6-9).

While Stiers' study relates to the both of the issues in depth, especially since the dissatisfaction is only measured with a narrow set of variables,¹ the question remains that what kind of dissatisfaction is exactly examined and is it possible to rely on the magnitude estimated. Although a general dissatisfaction with democracy can be an indication, a dissatisfaction with the how the voters are represented or in a more abstract sense how the representational mechanism works might not be covered under both general dissatisfaction with democracy or with the incumbent. I argue that the key issue is

¹ Namely with the variables 'Dissatisfaction Democracy' and 'Dissatisfaction Performance' (*ibid.*, see 5-6).

not just the failure of traditional democratic structures nor a simple protest against mainstream parties, but the deeper search for new representative forms which niche parties either intentionally or unintentionally capitalize on, which aligns with Saward's concept of *the Square* (Saward (2024), see next chapter).

3.2 *Prologue to [H2]: Representational Deprivation and Protest Culture*

Nonnemacher (2023) emphasises the tendency among niche protest voters towards a protest culture. He especially focuses on the protest culture among the niche party supporters, his argumentation relies on the role of this protest culture in reactions to the niche party performance (*ibid.*, see 25-26). He argues that niche party supporters engage in political protest due to *representational deprivation*. This argument is mainly formed around the assumption that niche party support is caused by a *build-up* of representational deprivation leading to political protests (*ibid.*, see 30). The claim is that the protest culture is a reactive way to the dissatisfaction with the incumbent or mainstream parties.

However, this argument assumes that niche party support is primarily driven by a *reactive* protest orientation, neglecting the possibility that these voters are not merely responding to deprivation but they might be *actively seeking* alternative modes of representation in the very *protest culture*. Is the niche vote simply a protest vote against mainstream parties (see Hong 2015; Nonnemacher 2023; Stiers 2024), or is there a deeper dissatisfaction or search for a different alternative in terms of political representation? Saying in a different way, do protest culture might have a productive nature, or is it a mere reaction?

Thus, while Nonnemacher's framework helps explain why niche party supporters are more prone to protest, I argue that their behavior is better understood through the lens of performative representation. Rather than viewing niche party support as a symptom of democratic dissatisfaction, it should be analyzed as part of a broader transformation in how political representation is enacted. This perspective shifts the focus from deprivation to agency, highlighting how niche party supporters are not just reacting to exclusion but actively shaping new political spaces that challenge traditional representative structures.

3.3 *Prologue to [H3]: Protests continue despite the success?*

In his framework, Nonnemacher also attempts to tackle the question why the protest culture often continues even if the niche party finds a place in the coalition (Nonnemacher 2023, pp. 34–38). Nonnemacher's framework yields that when niche parties in the coalition often diverge away from the position of the prime minister's party. Be it because of the rigid ideological structures niche parties might often hold or their constant adjustment to find a strategic position in the opposition, the results show as the distance gets greater there is a higher likelihood that niche party supporters continue protesting (*ibid.*, pp. 36–37).

Nonnemacher's (*ibid.*) focus on deprivation risks reducing niche parties to protest vehicles. Yet, as Stiers 2024 notes, niche voters often exhibit long-term loyalty even when their parties enter government. This suggests that their support is not merely reactive but rooted in a sustained commitment to alternative modes of political presence. However, I launch the question what other compromises niche parties are likely making if we assume that the main driver of the niche party voters' motivations is their dissatisfaction with how they are being represented. Wouldn't also be likely for them to sway away from the niche party as well once the approaches at representation starts to change when the party's involvement in the parliament gets deeper? Or can the compromises niche parties have to accept also lead them to a less interactive form of representation in the long run? Are their supporters simply become disillusioned and turn to extra-institutional forms of participation, such as protests once again?

I claim niche party support is not a binary choice between policy alignment (Meguid 2005) or protest (Nonnemacher 2023). Instead, it reflects a deeper dissatisfaction with how mainstream politics *embodies* representation. Niche bodies reject the abstraction of electoral mandates, seeking instead to perform representation through direct, iterative engagement. The next chapter will explore how these *niche bodies* operationalize their demands through performative spaces—sites where representation is negotiated through co-presence rather than delegated authority.

Fair and Square: Corners on the open fields of representation

There should be no presumption that a Square is a democratic or democratizing space, or a hierarchical or non-hierarchical space. Squares may be devised, created or generated for purposes of empowered inclusion or marginalization.

Saward 2024, p. 11

The constructivist turn (Disch 2015) reminds us of the multidirectional nature of representation, but where is this other direction located? From a performativity perspective, how do the represented act on representative claims? As Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024 asks, *is a representative claim accepted and reproduced by those addressed?* (ibid., p. 4). I claim that behind the increasing support for the niche parties, there is an unnamed variable playing the pivot role. Niche parties more often than not (either intentionally, unintentionally, genuinely, or for the sake of populism) deliver the constituencies what they cannot get from the mainstream parties; an actual interactive representative claim construction process by delivering platforms, co-presence, and nearness on a flatter hierarchical structure. And Saward (2024) recent conceptualisation of the concept of *Square* deploys a definition for this underexplored effect.

Saward's introduction of the Square gives us a hint about what the productive interaction between the claim-maker and object (or audience), as well as the audience, looks like in a co-presence setting. Saward's *Square* is a conceptual space, physical or symbolic, where political representation is reconfigured through **co-presence**: a setting where representatives and constituents interact, negotiating claims in real time. Although Saward delivers an explicit definition of its material specifications as well, Squares need not be literal; they

encompass any arena (digital forums, protest camps, party conventions) that enables direct, vis-a-vis approach of claim-making process. Instead of a predefined relationship between representatives and the represented, what takes shape is a dynamic field of discursive interactions where legitimacy is constantly at stake. Representation, in this view, unfolds through a process of iterative positioning, where claims to speak for others are subject to ongoing scrutiny, negotiation, and at times, outright refusal. The act of representation is thus neither inherently stable nor unidirectional; rather, it emerges through a relational and contested interplay between those who articulate claims and those who encounter, accept, or reject them (Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, see 6). Unlike institutionalized politics, the Square rejects pre-delegated authority, privileging **mutual vulnerability**—the recognition that both parties risk rejection, revision, or reinterpretation of their claims. It is neither inherently democratic nor hierarchical; its power lies in unsettling fixed roles, transforming representation from a static “claim” into a dynamic “performance” (Saward 2024, pp. 5, 11). For niche parties, the Square becomes both a birthplace (e.g., protest cultures) and a methodology (e.g., participatory assemblies), enabling constituents to co-create representation rather than passively consent to it.

4.1 *Protest as Square: Claim-Making in Motion*

Nonnemacher’s focus on *representational deprivation* (Nonnemacher 2023) captures niche supporters’ disillusionment but overlooks how protest itself functions as a Square—a site of claim co-creation. When niche parties mobilize supporters in strikes or marches, they are not merely channeling grievances but constructing representation through **bidirectional interaction**. For instance, during climate protests, Green Party members often revise policy drafts based on real-time feedback from activists, embodying Saward’s emphasis on audiences “reading back” claims through contestation, Squares force claim makers the engagement with the actual group while making representative claims (Saward 2024, see 7). These interactions may lead to rejection (e.g., activists vetoing party compromises), but the process itself—a messy, iterative negotiation, is where legitimacy is performatively enacted. As Kim notes, protest puts the Square in motion while the groups exercise their “right to appear” (Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, p. 10). This bidirectional process doesn’t have to end up in a negotiated form of representation, it can also very well lead to an “unrepresentative claim” (Hayat 2022, 2024), as the Yellow Vest Movement completely denied any kind of representation from any parties or individuals for that matter (Hayat 2022,

pp. 1038–1039). Even this seemingly unproductive process in terms of claim-making created figures, and enhanced some parties involved without explicitly making any representative claim like La France Insoumise with the undirect affiliation of one of the prominent figures in the movement, Jérôme Rodrigues, although he constantly reminded he was there as an independent person (*ibid.*, p. 1043).

4.2 *From Digital Forums to Constituency Corners*

Niche parties operationalize Squares across mediums. Pirate Parties use encrypted platforms for members to amend manifestos collaboratively, while regionalist factions host “constituency corners” (weekly town halls) where representatives defend policies face-to-face. These practices contrast starkly with mainstream parties’ “claim-and-forget” model, which Saward critiques as “post-electoral monologue[s]” (Saward 2024, p. 8). Even niche parties not born from protests (e.g., single-issue groups) leverage Squares: Nordic left-libertarians draft manifestos through consensus workshops, turning policy creation into a ritual of co-presence.

4.3 *Vertical Illusions, Horizontal Realities*

Mainstream parties mimic Squares superficially—televised town halls, scripted social media Q&As—but retain vertical control. These are “staged claims” (Saward) where audiences lack power to “talk back”, which renders them to mere Stages instead (*ibid.*, pp. 8–9). Niche parties, conversely, institutionalize dissent: the German Greens’ “rotating spokespersons” model cyclically shifts leadership roles, performatively enacting Butler’s “right to appear” (Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, p. 7). Similarly, radical left factions mandate delegate recall votes, creating what Kim terms “discursive friction”—spaces where claims are stress-tested through debate (*ibid.*, p. 12).

As a core synthesis from the theoretical approach so far, I argue supporters of the niche parties do not merely *occupy* Squares—they *are* Squares. They are not going onto the protests just to react to the mainstream parties, they do not engage with the niche parties through the squares as a byproduct of this reaction. Niche party supporters are in a deep dissatisfaction with the representation forms they are subjected to. While the abundance of representative claims them are getting overwhelming, the voters have little role other than becoming residual data in an election analysis. By privileging co-presence/creation/constructing over delegation, they redefine representation as a process of mutual vulnerability: representatives risk

rejection, constituents embrace responsibility. This inversion—from “acting for” to “acting with”—explains their resilience despite institutional marginalization. Nonnemacher’s *deprivation* thesis, while valid, misses this transformative potential: protest is not a symptom of failure but a Square where democracy is remade. The operation of the niche parties differ on the Squares, some born in those movements, some actively engage in some, some create squares, some benefit from acting like they are engaging, some initiate illusion of a square by initiating populist social media presence with AI-generated memes, but they do realise how they are asked to operate. *Representation is not something external to its performance* (Saward 2010, p. 302).

The Square represents spaces where representative claims are not just asserted from above but dynamically negotiated in co-presence with constituents. Niche parties, rather than simply channeling protest, actively create and engage with such alternative spaces, where political legitimacy is performed rather than delegated. In this view, niche parties do not merely exploit dissatisfaction with mainstream politics; they provide sites where representation is reconstituted through participation.

Performative Squares and the Claim Construction

This chapter examines how niche parties like Bloco de Esquerda (BE) in Portugal operationalize *performative Squares* to construct and deconstruct representative claims. These Squares ¹ are spaces of **co-presence** where the representation is not inherited but performed. Drawing on Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, I analyse how BE's dual engagement in institutional politics and grassroots activism exemplifies the transformative potential of Squares: a refusal to let representation ossify into bureaucratic ritual.

¹ In BE's case literal protest camps, digital forums, or hybrid assemblies.

5.1 Co-presence and the representative feedback loop: The Case of Bloco de Esquerda of Portugal

The selection of Portugal for the demonstration of a rise (and fall for that matter) is not coincidental. Albeit being a proportional democracy, Portugal is not an easy environment for a small niche party to grow, especially the left-leaning ones. The two main reasons leading to this result are, first, that Portugal's electoral system is constituted by a high number of small districts leading to the favoring of the two mainstream parties, and second, the threshold is kept high for parties to enter parliament (especially between 1975-2005) (Lisi 2009, see 129). Nonetheless, the support for Bloco de Esquerda (BE) turned itself from around 1.79% to 10.2% in the elections between 2009-2015 and around 10% in the different elections for the European Parliament, leading to up to 19/230 seats in opposition and presence in the European Parliament under The Left, only to fall back to approximately half of the votes they were getting in recent years (ibid., see 131 and Wikipedia 2025).

BE exemplifies how niche parties straddle Squares and institutions. BE was born in Portugal's leftist protest grounds, in its humble beginnings, it was not much distinguishable in between other similarly oriented organisations in its environment. Despite the slightly changing policy orientation from more orthodox socialist orientation



to libertarian leftist adjustment, the organisational operation stayed straight-forward in their first decade, a decentralised, non-hierarchical operation was central to the BE. However, on top of the flattened hierarchy, BE introduced several main approaches to address the crisis they have identified about the mainstream political representation;

- participatory decision making,
- political activism,
- and the refusal of party professionalisation (Lisi 2009, p. 132).

Especially characterised anti-austerity movements (2011–2015) (Príncipe 2017), BE institutionalized protest energy into a hybrid model: parliamentary interventions paired with street mobilizations, therefore the organisation was often seen as *a political movement than a political party* (Lisi 2009, p. 133). During the 2015 debt crisis, BE activists occupied Lisbon's Rossio Square, drafting policy proposals through consensus-based assemblies (Magazine 2011). These proposals—ranging from rent control to healthcare expansion—were later introduced in parliament, blurring the line between *protest* and *governance* especially after not establishing control or filters regarding party membership but putting emphasis on the proportional descriptive representation of the minorities and marginalised groups among the party members, as well as, going for a polyarchic leadership without defining a head of the whole party (Lisi 2009, p. 133). Surprisingly, in the accumulation of the party, the majority of the party members were from white collar areas, and highly educated members like professors and teachers whereas the workers only constituted 10% of the participants in the conventions (*ibid.*, p. 133). This constellation brought the party to difficult ideological position, in comparison with the other communist parties there was a diverse range of political spectrum established among the party members and the voter base. BE institutionalized protest energy into a hybrid model: parliamentary interventions paired with street mobilizations. During the 2015 debt crisis, BE activists occupied Lisbon's Rossio Square, drafting policy proposals through consensus-based assemblies (Príncipe 2017). These proposals, ranging from rent control to healthcare expansion, were later introduced in parliament, blurring the line between *protest* and *governance*. edefined political representation by bringing **claim-making processes** into the **Squares**, fostering a dynamic, participatory relationship with its supporter base. Unlike traditional parties, BE's success was rooted in its ability to merge grassroots activism with institutional politics, creating a hybrid model where legitimacy was performatively enacted through co-presence and iterative engagement.

BE strategically competed with both against mainstream right parties and the mainstream **Socialist Party (PS)** throughout their journey. Especially against PS, BE built its defense by monopolizing post-materialist issues neglected by the PS, such as abortion rights, environmental protection, and LGBTQ+ equality. While the PS dominated economic discourse, BE carved out a niche by emphasizing **participatory democracy** and **social justice**, appealing to young, urban, and educated voters. BE's 2015 electoral manifesto framed austerity as a moral failure, advocating for progressive taxation and welfare expansion (Lisi 2016, p. 3). This contrasted sharply with the PS's centrist austerity-lite platform, enabling BE to position itself as the authentic left alternative. BE's shift from radical left-wing positions to a **ecosocialist** platform (2015–2016) reflected strategic adaptation to coalition politics (Lisi 2009, p. 136). Despite tensions over centralization, BE's hybrid structure allowed it to balance institutional pragmatism with activist energy. When the PS minority government sought support in 2015, BE leveraged its Squares to negotiate policy gains (e.g., rent control, minimum wage increases) while avoiding full coalition integration (Lisi 2016, p. 15).

5.1.1 [H1, H2] *From Protest to Embodied Representation*

Niche parties thrive by transforming their supporters from passive voters into *performative bodies*. Drawing on Kim, Karavasilis, and Nonhoff 2024, these “niche bodies” are physical and symbolic assemblies that enact representation through collective presence. When supporters gather in protests, conventions, or digital forums, they exercise what Butler terms the “right to appear”—a demand for recognition that transcends policy outcomes. This performative act destabilizes the traditional voter-representative hierarchy, positioning supporters as co-creators of political claims rather than mere recipients.

BE's origins lie in a protest culture. It was not a reaction that led to the party's formation; rather, the protest culture itself was its foundation. The BE constituency was deeply dissatisfied with various socio-political issues in the country; yet, I argue that the most significant factor (if not the most prominent) was disillusionment with mainstream parties' representative structures. The fact that a radical left party could attract such a diverse support base indicates how BE's claim-making process was embraced across different sectors of society.

5.1.2 [H3] *Disillusionment and the Downfall of Niche Parties*

For the longest time, BE successfully maintained the “Square format” of the party; both its representative operations and decision-making

system functioned within this framework. However, one might ask: what led to the decline in their electoral support in recent years?

Following the formation of a minority government with PS, BE's operational structure became overloaded, particularly due to the austerity measures the government was forced to reintroduce (Lisi 2016, see 17). This period brought significant changes to the party's internal structure. I argue that the centralization, increasing hierarchy, and detachment from BE's novel representative mechanisms led to the disillusionment of its supporters—especially those who had been engaged precisely because of the party's Square-based operational and representative structure. This challenge is one that niche parties frequently encounter.

Conclusion

This study aimed to reflect on the increasing support for the niche parties by focusing on the significance of how their representative claims are constructed by focusing on their supporter bases. The rise of niche parties is not merely a symptom of political dissatisfaction but the result of a search for the reconfiguration of representative processes themselves. Saward's Square offers a useful framework for understanding how legitimacy emerges not from policy outcomes alone but from co-presence, where voters and representatives engage in ongoing claim-making.

Ultimately, niche parties are not anomalies within democracy but their constituencies signal where the evolution of the representation should be going. Their challenge lies in maintaining participatory legitimacy without succumbing to the constraints of institutionalization. As voters increasingly demand presence over delegation, the Square emerges not just as a theoretical model but as a democratic imperative one that invites both niche and mainstream parties to rethink how representation is enacted in practice.

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