

Party Competition and Political Representation in Crisis: An Introductory Note

Nicolò Conti, Swen Hutter, and Kyriaki Nanou

Abstract

The aim of the special issue is to investigate through a comparative lens the impact of the recent economic crisis and consequent austerity measures on party competition and political representation in Europe. All six contributions focus on the substance of political conflict and provide new insights about the impact of the crisis on (a) the policy agendas of political parties, (b) the relationship between government and opposition parties, and (c) on how citizens' preferences are represented by political parties. Theoretically, the contributions link the literatures on party competition, responsiveness, agenda-setting, and social movements. Empirically, they provide new empirical material, in particular on the countries in Southern Europe which were hard hit by the crisis. This introduction briefly discusses the rationale of the special issue and summarizes the focus and findings of the six contributions.

Keywords: *Economic crisis, party competition, political representation, Europe, Southern Europe*

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Rationale and scope of the special issue

This special issue of *Party Politics* examines whether and how party competition and political representation in Europe have been affected by the Great Recession and the subsequent Euro crisis. We define political representation as the relationship between political demand and supply aimed at transferring popular preferences, including grievances, to the upper levels of the political system (Denters et al. 2011). Overall, the special issue provides new arguments and empirical evidence on the changes in the representative linkages between citizens' preferences and the policy proposals of parties in times of economic crisis. More specifically, the individual contributions offer important insights on three broad research questions:

- What is the impact of the crisis on the policy agendas of parties? Has the crisis reduced the policy alternatives on offer to citizens?
- Has the crisis changed the relationship between government and opposition parties both during elections and in parliament?
- Are citizens' preferences represented by political parties? How did citizens perceive and respond to the crisis of representation?

The contributions pay special attention to the countries in Southern Europe (in particular, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) which have found themselves at the 'eye of the storm'. In our opinion, studying Southern Europe is like looking at the impact of the crisis with a magnifying glass. However, the research presented in this special issue is inclusive of countries in other parts of Europe as to locate the findings in a broader perspective and to assess potential similarities and differences with the situation in Southern Europe.

As is well documented, almost all European countries experienced the first shock of the Great Recession, but the subsequent Euro crisis and its political repercussions were most pronounced in the South (on the development of the crisis, see Copelovitch et al. 2016). The Southern European countries under scrutiny ended up facing several political challenges because of the crisis and the politics of austerity prescribed by their international lenders (e.g., Morlino and Raniolo 2017; Freire et al. 2014). These measures had a constraining impact on the policy agendas of national governments and incumbent parties seemed ever more caught between responsibility in terms of fulfilling commitments to their EU partners and responsiveness to an increasingly-distant public opinion (on this tension, see Mair 2013; Bardi et al. 2014). As foreseen by the economic voting literature, these dynamics translated into massive losses of incumbents (e.g., Giuliani and Massari 2017; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Bartels 2014). Yet, mainly in the first crisis elections, they translated into a landslide for the main opposition parties. By contrast, the voters in the hard-hit countries tended to punish all mainstream parties at later stages and turned to alternative offers (e.g., Hobolt and Tilley 2016). In Greece, Italy, and Spain new parties made their way onto the scene, mostly (but not only) carrying a new anti-elite and anti-European populist agenda (e.g., Bosco and Verney 2016; Bosch and Duràn 2017; della Porta et al. 2017; Vidal 2017). These processes were accompanied by growing public disaffection with national and European institutions (e.g., Braun and Tausendpfund 2014; Clements et al. 2014), a contraction of the political agenda (e.g., Singer 2013; Traber et al. 2017), wider political protest in the streets (e.g., della Porta 2015; Grasso and Giugni 2015), and intensified conflicts over the future of European integration (e.g., Hooghe and Marks 2017; Hutter et al. 2016).

The Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the changing political supply and demand since the onset of the Great Recession in fall 2008. Most importantly, Figure 1 highlights that the *supply* in the electoral arena has not only become more volatile and fragmented in Southern Europe during the crisis but we also observe increasingly polarized conflicts over a more contracted political agenda (the latter is indicated by the ever more homogenous partisan supply regarding the issues being emphasized).

Figure 2 indicates related trends for the political *demand* side. While we observe no general polarizing trend for the public opinion, the plot on the most important issues that the countries face highlight that, again, we observe the most pronounced trends for Southern Europe where the respondents became increasingly concerned with economic issues which ultimately crowd out other concerns. At the same time, trust in key actors and institutions of representative democracy, political parties and national parliaments, decreased substantially. These motivating figures should mainly highlight that both aspects of representation (demand and supply) are in flux and that we should pay attention to the content or substance of the conflicts at stake.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

The scope of the special issue adds to the burgeoning ‘crisis literature’ as it innovates in at least four ways: *First*, the special issue covers different, often disconnected strands of the political representation literature by focusing on party politics, public opinion, social movements and legislative behavior. In addition, past studies have tended to focus either on the demand- or the supply-side of political representation in the context of the crisis (Auel and Hoenig 2014, Lewis-Beck, Costa Lobo and Bellucci 2012, Magalhães 2014, Zamora-Kapoor and Coller 2014). This special issue examines both sides as well as their interactions. *Second*, in theoretical terms, the contributions highlight how certain “taken-for-granted” assumptions on the structure and dynamics of party competition and on political representation are affected by a crisis situation. By doing so, the contributions take up Robert’s (2017) call for comparative work on the diverging political fallout of the crisis considering trends which were underway long before the crisis came about. *Third*, the special issue systematically takes into account what Laffan (2016) labelled “multi-level politics”, i.e., the close connections between political conflict dynamics across domestic arenas and on the European level. *Fourth*, the focus of all papers is comparative which allows moving beyond the prevalent focus

on single-case studies, particularly prevalent for studies on Southern Europe (see, e.g., Lewis-Beck et al. 2012; Magalhães 2014; Bosco and Verney 2012, 2013). To do so, the individual contributions have invested a lot in combining important existing datasets and generating newly collected sources of data that allows systematic comparisons across the countries of Southern Europe and beyond, ranging from updated data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR), the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), elite and mass surveys but also original mass media data on election campaigns and protest events.

Individual contributions: Focus and main findings

The special issue covers six individual contributions. Three contributions address the question of parties' programmatic responses during the crisis, moving beyond the traditional left-right dimension. The article by *Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal* examines the emerging structuring of political conflict in four Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) during the Euro crisis. To understand the changing political spaces, they argue that one needs to consider that the countries in the South of Europe simultaneously faced an economic and a political crisis. Based on their original media data, the authors show that all four countries under scrutiny saw increasingly salient conflicts over both austerity and 'old-vs.-new' politics. Moreover, the two types of economic and political conflicts tend to align in the emerging political spaces, and this alignment is strongest when the mainstream left is in opposition. In government, the mainstream left was forced to implement austerity policies, whereas it attempted to adopt economically more left-wing positions and capitalize on the issues of political renewal when in opposition.

Bremer's article focuses on the differentiated programmatic response of the mainstream left to the economic crisis in fifteen Western European countries. Although the long-term consequences of the crisis are yet to fully emerge, the mainstream left has certainly lost support across Europe and been thrown into a deep identity crisis. To understand these dynamics, the paper empirically examines

whether and to what extent social democratic parties changed their economic policy positions. Based on the same type of data as Hutter et al., the article shows that social democratic parties shifted their general positions towards the left during the crisis. However, this is only part of the story. While they defended the welfare state and opposed economic liberalism after the start of the financial crisis, they simultaneously supported budgetary rigor. This highlights the increasing tensions within the programmatic platforms of social democratic parties and is symptomatic of their reinforced identity crisis. Social democratic parties assembled policy packages at national elections containing specific and diverging proposals on economic policy that did not align neatly on a single left-right dimension.

In their article, *Charalambous, Conti, and Pedrazzani* examine parties' programmatic responses on another crucial issue, namely, European integration. Their point of departure is the expectation that when crisis-like macro-economic changes occur, they can affect party positions very seriously as they alter the nexus of opportunities and constraints in the domestic political environment. In Southern Europe, the EU played the role of chief manager of the Euro crisis and of the main agent imposing austerity, so the authors have analyzed whether party stances on the EU have changed after the Great Recession. Based on expert and elite surveys for Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, the article indicates that shifts in party positions are more pronounced where short-term vote-seeking logics prevail, but less visible among elected party officials who serve in public office. It shows that the crisis has heightened the divisions within parties, i.e., divisions between those party officials who are closer to Europe's elite and those who are closer to a party's electoral base. As a result, the well-known elite-mass divide on the EU is also reflected inside political parties, a phenomenon that has become more acute during the economic crisis.

The article by *Clements, Nanou and Real-Dato*, a large-N study of EU member states, focuses on the changing nature of party-voter linkages during the economic crisis. More specifically, the contribution focuses on party responsiveness on the left-right dimension between 2002-2015. Based on party manifesto and European Social Survey data, it investigates whether party shifts are a direct

response to the pressures of economic conditions or are more affected by changes in the preferences of the median voter. The authors find that the economic crisis has made parties in Europe *less* responsive to public opinion on the left-right dimension. Moreover, this effect is more pronounced for incumbent parties. These parties have, in effect, been caught between the conflicting demands for responsiveness to citizens' preferences and the responsibility to reform and retrench as demanded by external institutions and actors. The contribution shows that conditions of prolonged and severe economic crisis do severely affect the nature of party-voter linkages over left-right politics.

The last two articles complement the broad picture of party-voter linkages by Clements et al. and the focus on the programmatic response of parties by looking more closely at the dynamics of representation in-between elections. The article by *Borghetto and Russo* focuses on party representation between elections by looking at parliamentary activities in Italy, Portugal, and Spain in the crisis years. Combining data on party manifestos, Eurobarometer surveys and parliamentary questions, the authors find support for the claim that both manifestos and citizens' priorities are relevant predictors of how parties distribute attention across issues in-between elections. Furthermore, the authors show that when citizens' priorities get more focused on the economy because of the economic downturn, parties become more responsive to citizens' priorities in their parliamentary activities. This finding holds for parties belonging to the majority or opposition camp, albeit the latter are generally more responsive to public opinion than the former.

The final article by *Altiparmakis and Lorenzini* examines yet another crucial arena where political demands are articulated in-between elections, i.e., the protest arena. More specifically, it traces the ups and downs in protest mobilization in four Southern Europe countries (again, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain). Based on a new semi-automated protest event dataset, the authors highlight that the beginning of the Euro crisis saw protest waves of differing intensity in all four countries which were triggered by widespread dissatisfaction with austerity. Thus, the rhythm of protest does not simply follow economic trends but is rather triggered by specific institutional events.

In other words, bailouts and domestic austerity bills were the focal events around which protest was organized. In addition, the article shows an important link between patterns of opposition in the protest and the electoral arena as national elections acted as protest deflators in cases where an anti-austerity partisan alternative emerged, partially solving the emerging crisis of representation.

Lessons on political representation

Over time, economic liberalization and European integration – gradually shifting more power and policy-making influence to actors beyond the nation-state – have impacted on and constrained the policy agendas of government, the programs of parties, and the choices available to voters. The European economic crisis – particularly severe in its impact and protracted in its duration in Southern Europe – was an exogenous shock that intensified and made more acute these external constraints on political parties' ability to formulate, compete on and implement policies situated within broader left-right conflict. For political parties and citizens in the Eurozone and in the EU more generally, the crisis brought to the surface the realization that parties within member states are constrained as policy actors. Within the economic crisis, this realization tended to focus on the austerity politics and structural reforms imposed on and enacted within countries of the Eurozone, but it provided a more general compelling example of the effects of the incremental process of European integration – across an ever-increasing range of policies - on the (in)ability of political parties to offer meaningful choices to citizens at national elections.

Considering the severe challenges to democratic representation induced by the economic crisis, the contributions to the special issue highlight that parties have proved to be adaptive actors which have attempted to accommodate their strategies to the pressures originating from this exogenous shock. The political situation in those countries most severely affected by the economic crisis appears far from stable, but at the same time the capacity of national political systems to absorb the stress caused by the crisis should not be underestimated. During the crisis, parties have been

severely tested but have been critical vehicles of shock absorption, and expectations about their adaptive capacity appears vindicated in these critical years (Panebianco 1988). As Dalton et al. noted: ‘Parties are nothing if not survivors’ (2011: 230). Furthermore, they have a great capacity for adaptation – to new challenges and new conditions. Dalton et al. rightly observe that parties ‘are strategic actors, surveying the political landscape, evaluating threats, and responding in such a way as to resolve them’ (p. 231). During the crisis, more broadly, party systems showed their adaptive qualities through the role of new and older challenger parties vying to channel citizens’ protest within democratic representation, as well as through strategic adaptation of the policy programs by mainstream parties.

Nonetheless, the contributions also underline that mainstream parties, especially those in office during the crisis, tended to prioritize the business of governing – that is, being responsible – by setting out and implementing austerity and structural reforms in response to external constraints. The challenger parties, in contrast, focused on expressing political opposition to austerity politics, unresponsive national elites and to the role played by external actors in managing the policy response to the crisis. As Mair (2011) has observed, this broad division of functions between parties played out in Irish politics under conditions of crisis. This has also been replicated, to a greater or lesser degree, in the countries in Southern Europe to which the special issue paid most attention. The crisis also put to the test the longstanding commitment of many mainstream parties – on both the center-left and center-right – to the project of European integration, at a time of sustained pressure on the EU’s internal cohesion and unity and declining public support for the supranational project (Hobolt, 2015). The crisis also brings into sharper relief existing debates over the EU’s democratic credentials, in particular how citizens can participate – as Føllesdal and Hix (2006) note – in meaningful and recurring contestation over the direction and content of EU policies.

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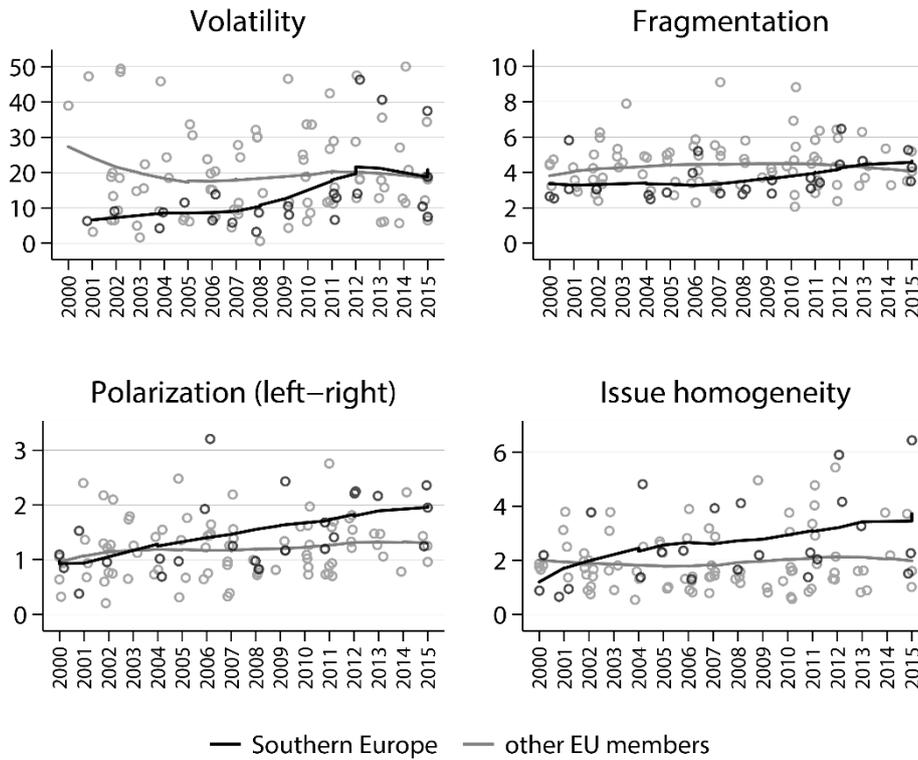
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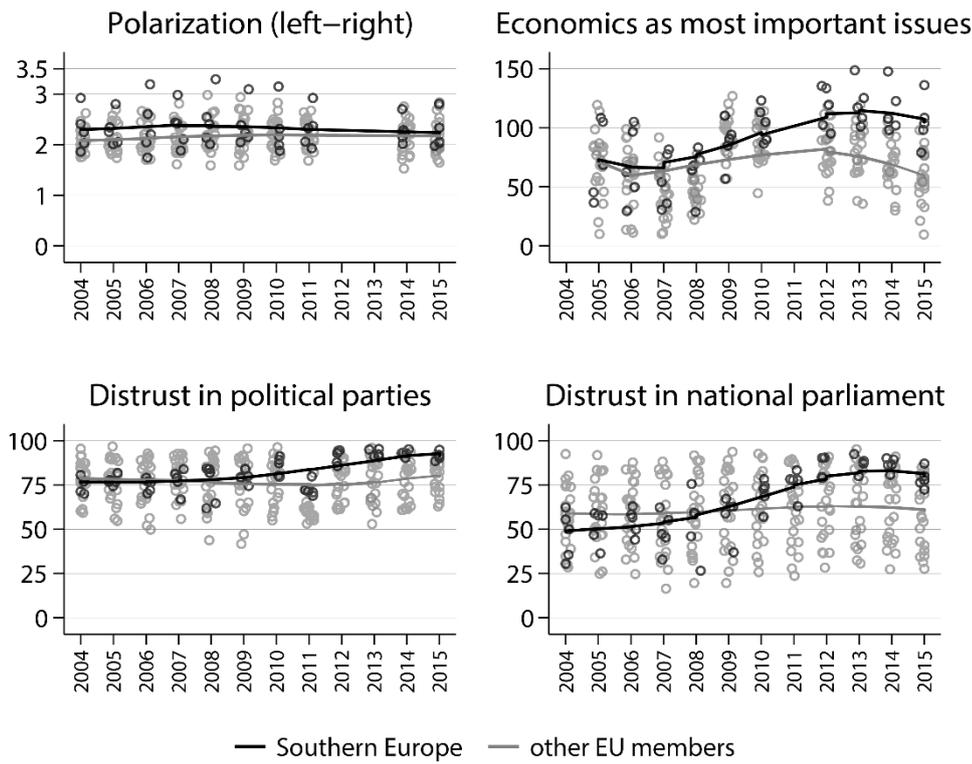
Figures

Figure 1: The changing partisan supply in times of crisis (party system features)



Note: The figure shows how volatility, fragmentation and issue competition have developed on the political supply side of Southern Europe and all other EU member states from 2000 to 2015. The solid trend lines are based on locally weighted smoothing (LOWESS) for the two groups of countries. Volatility refers to the total volatility and is based on the dataset by Hernández and Kriesi (2016). Fragmentation is measured by the effective number of parties (vote shares) and is based on the values in the comparative manifesto dataset (CMP/MARPOR). Issue polarization and homogeneity are also measured based on the CMP/MARPOR data. Polarization is calculated based on the rule left-right scale and Dalton's (2008) formula; homogeneity refers to the overlap in issue emphases across the parties and is based on the formula introduced by Franzmann (2008).

Figure 2: The changing public demand in times of crisis (public opinion)



Note: The figure shows how polarization, salience, and trust levels have developed on the political demand side in Southern Europe and all other EU member states from 2004 to 2015. The solid trend lines are based on locally weighted smoothing (LOWESS) for the two groups of countries. All data except those that derive from the most important issue question are based on an integrated dataset of the Eurobarometer produced by the POLCON project. The most important issue information was compiled by the authors from the Eurobarometer Interactive website: <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/index>. Polarization is measured as the standard deviation in left-right self-placements on a ten point-scale (missing for 2012/13). Salience is measured by the answers to the most important issues facing the country (maximum two answers) (missing for 2011). We show the sum of respondents that declared that the economic situation and/or unemployment were the most important issues (scale from 0 to 200 percent). Distrust refers to the share of respondents that tend to distrust political parties and the national parliament, respectively.