Conclusions: Great Recession, Great Cooperation?

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Contributions to this study clearly support our initial hypotheses. It is observed, as expected, that the economic crisis has considerably decreased consensual behaviour in parliament. However, the nature of parties constitutes a crucial variable in order to explain the conduct of the opposition in the legislative arena better: since the outbreak of the crisis, radical parties have turned even more adversarial than before; whereas mainstream parties – who want to appear as a credible alternative to the government in office – have drifted towards more cooperative behaviour. Given the growing influence of the European Union on the legislation approved in response to the crisis, it was also expected (and demonstrated) that the traditionally pro-European parties would be more likely to cooperate on socio-economic issues than Eurosceptic parties. Finally, it has also been shown that timing also plays an important role in the opposition's decision either to support or to oppose the government: with opposition parties more inclined to contest the government's proposals when their chances of getting into power are higher, and vice versa.

Keywords*: parliamentary opposition; political parties; economic crisis.*

In national legislatures, MPs from the opposition are often torn between the desire to dissent from the government in order to present themselves to the electorate as an attractive alternative, and the will to collaborate with the incumbents so as to get a chance to influence the content of legislation. In normal times, the latter prevails: opposition parties often cooperate with the majority. In the European Parliament (EP), there is clearly a similar trend towards cooperation, and a *grand coalition* composed of the three major parties is the most frequent combination of votes. Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, however, conflicting pressures on opposition MPs both to cooperate and to distance themselves from the governments in office have intensified considerably. The opposition has had to choose between cooperating with the majority for the nation's sake in order to influence the direction of far-reaching socio-economic changes, and going against an already fragile government so as possibly to get into power itself. For the members of the EP (MEPs) similar pressures can be observed: party groups have incentives to cooperate with each other in order to increase the EP's influence at a time when decisions are often taken outside the EU institutional structure; but they also have more reasons than before to split across

ideological and territorial lines. This issue has explored how the opposition parties in southern European legislatures and political parties in the EP responded to this dilemma.

In the Introduction to this issue, we made three broad assumptions with regard to this question. First, we hypothesised a decrease in the level of consensus in parliament in the aftermath of the crisis. This was so because much of the legislation presented in parliament in past years is salient and deals with economic and social aspects: both characteristics that have been proved to favour dissension. Our second hypothesis assumed a different legislative behaviour in accordance with the type of party. We posited that the mainstream parties, which usually alternate in government and opposition, are more likely to be led by a sense of responsibility and consequently vote for (or let pass) measures that, no matter how unpopular, could help save the country from the worst effects of the crisis. Moreover, as most of the socio-economic policy proposals follow the requirements of the European Commission (EC) – in some cases, also in collaboration with the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – we also expected parties' attitudes towards European integration to be an important factor in explaining their collaboration with the government (or lack thereof). One last hypothesis was related to the shift in time, within the national contexts. Austerity measures are by their nature unpopular, as is the government that has to implement them. Therefore, we posited that, following the start of a financial crisis, the opposition behaves in a more conflictual way when the government's incumbency is at risk, for instance when it lacks a majority of seats in parliament or its popularity declines dramatically, and in a less conflictual way when it is not, that being when elections have just been held or technocratic governments, rather than true political competitors, are in charge.

Contributions to this issue clearly support our hypotheses and give additional crucial insights into the behaviour of the opposition parties in times of crisis. First, we observe that the crisis has led to a considerable decrease in the consensual behaviour in parliament. The works on Spain and Portugal testify to a significant decline of favourable votes or abstentions from the opposition benches. The main reason for this decline, as we posited, is the rising number of socio-economic and salient policies voted on in parliament. In Italy and Greece, the crisis has not only led to more adversarial behaviour of the opposition, but also produced visible dissension within the party (or coalition of parties) supporting the government. Marangoni and Verzichelli illustrate how the Monti government was obliged to ask for a vote of confidence in parliament on many occasions to ensure passage of its legislation, and was forced to resign a few months before the end of its term when the main centre-right party, People of Freedom Party (PDL) – which had been part of the majority until that time – decided to withdraw its support of the executive. And after the 2013 general election, the mutual veto of the main parties blocked the formation of a new executive for two whole months. In the contribution on Greece, Gemenis and Nezi remind us that the Panhellenic Socialist Party was the only party to support both the first bailout package and the

midterm plan, while Prime Minister Papandreou was often challenged by his own MPs. Consensus politics emerged only during the talks for the coalition government, but these only started after the EU put pressure on the Greek political parties, and did not last long. The cases of Italy and Greece also show us another indirect impact of the crisis on parliamentary dynamics: the sudden polarisation and fragmentation of the party system. In Italy, a new political force – the Five Star Movement – led by the famous blogger Beppe Grillo, made a spectacular entrance into parliament in February 2013 when it got more than 25 per cent of votes. In Greece, an even more important fragmentation of the party system was observed. The 2012 elections were extremely volatile and led to a doubling of the effective number of parties in parliament (from two to four). In the EP, Braghiroli finally observed a fall in consensus in crisis-related votes (as compared with all votes and all economic votes), putting members and non-members of the eurozone and those from southern and central eastern Europe and continental and northern Europe against each other.

Our second hypothesis derives from the existing literature asserting that the nature of parties constitutes a crucial variable explaining the behaviour of the opposition in parliament. In particular, we expected radical parties to be even more adversarial following the outbreak of the crisis, and mainstream parties – which usually want to appear to the electorate to be a credible alternative to the government in office – to drift towards cooperation. Given the growing influence of the EU on the legislation approved in response to the crisis, we also expected the traditionally pro-European parties to be more likely to cooperate on those measures than Eurosceptic parties. This hypothesis was clearly supported by our case studies as well. In Portugal, in particular, both the qualitative and quantitative analyses carried out by De Giorgi, Moury, and Ruivo demonstrate how the net effect of the crisis varies strongly across parties. While mainstream and traditionally pro-European parties (first the Social Democrats in opposition and then the Socialists) are less adversarial than they would be in normal times, the exact opposite is true for the Communists (PCP) and Greens (PEV), two radical left and Eurosceptic parties. Exactly as we expected, the Conservative CDS-PP – which is less pro-European than the other mainstream parties – appeared less cooperative. On the other hand, the other radical left party (BE) – which is less Eurosceptic than PCP and PEV – was found to be less controversial than its radical left counterpart.

Similarly, Marangoni and Verzichelli observe a clear association in the Italian case between a 'core European' party family and the loyalty to the proposals of the Monti government. Alternatively, they note that the Eurosceptic parties, notably the Northern League, adopted a less cooperative stance on the socio-economic legislation proposed by the EU institutions. In Spain, where none of the parties could be qualified as Eurosceptic, this hypothesis is harder to test. However, Chaqués-Bonafont, Muñoz Márquez, and Palau observe that the radical left party IU, which had never governed and had been more critical than its counterparts towards the Maastricht and Constitutional treaties, is the

parliamentary group that opposes the most EU-related legislation. In Greece, the pro/anti-European dimension is proved not only to affect the voting behaviour of opposition parties, but also to be a very powerful explanatory factor for understanding the implosion of the party system. Gemenis and Nezi demonstrate how the economic crisis has increased the importance of European integration to the national party system; and how this dimension accounts for many of the fissures and shifts witnessed between 2010 and 2012. Another indicator of the significance of the EU was evident during the talks for the coalition agreement, which started only after the EU put pressure on the political parties to collaborate with each other so that Greece could enact an emergency funding package. Finally, in the EP, Braghiroli has shown how the decline of consensus in crisis-related votes is much more important for the EFD (the populist radical right group) and GUE (the extreme left) than for the other party families.

Finally, according to our third hypothesis, we expected that timing would play a key role in the opposition's decision either to support or to contest the government, with parties more inclined to oppose when their chances to get into power increase, and vice versa. This is clearly demonstrated in our analyses on Spain and Portugal. In Portugal, De Giorgi, Moury and Ruivo show how both the PSD and the PS changed their voting behaviour from cooperative to conflictual when the electorate's voting intentions moved in their favour. Similarly, statistical regression in the Spanish contribution illustrates that the opposition behaves less consensually when the popularity of the government decreases. In Greece, opportunistic behaviour also prevailed: at times of high volatility, none of the opposition parties agreed to support the first bailout package or the midterm plan. Consensus politics emerged only during the talks for the coalition government, but stopped as soon as the political actors who supported the government discovered the electoral costs of their collaboration. In Italy, after Silvio Berlusconi's resignation in November 2011, a coalition formed by the centre-left PD and centre-right PDL decided to support the new technocratic government led by Mario Monti, together with some minor moderate parties from the centre. But, as noted above, the support for the government was always at risk: long negotiations and votes of confidence were often required in order to assure the passage of relevant legislation given the low level of party cohesiveness, notably within the centre-right. What is more, the PDL decided to withdraw strategically its support of the executive at the end of 2012, probably in view of the approaching general election. In sum, all contributions to this issue show that, although a sense of responsibility and pro-European attitudes might induce mainstream parties to cooperate with the government for the country's sake, party self-interest would always prevail eventually.

Thus, we do observe marked similarities across our cases regarding the impact of the economic crisis on the legislative behaviour of political actors. In all four cases, the crisis lowered the level of consensus. While mainstream parties are more likely to act responsibly – unless their chances to get into power increase significantly – radical parties clearly have behaved in a more

adversarial way since the beginning of the crisis. The inclusion of the EP in this study demonstrates how hypotheses based on the literature on national legislatures also apply to the supranational context.

We did, however, observe fundamental differences across countries as well. In the course of 2011, the prime minister of each of the four countries under analysis resigned and the government was replaced. But this outcome was reached in two different ways: through the call for new elections and the victory of the parties that were previously in opposition in Portugal and Spain; and through the formation of a new parliamentary majority supporting the government without going to the polls in Greece and Italy. Moreover, the crisis led to an overhaul of the party system in the latter two cases. On the one hand, Italy saw the return of technical governments as in the 1990s and then the rise of anti-party sentiment, which brought success to the Five Star Movement. In Greece, the new executive led by Papademos lasted only a few months and was followed by two general elections in rapid succession (in May and June 2012). Moreover, the party system was completely split on the grounds of a latent pro-integration dimension. By contrast, Portugal and Spain seem to have reached greater political stability following the elections of 2011. Thus, the stability of the electoral and party system – rather than the seriousness of the crisis or the external interventions – seems to be a fundamental factor in explaining the intensity of the impact of the crisis on parliamentary dynamics.

In the present issue, we have focused exclusively on the opposition in parliament. However, alternative strategies of dissent obviously exist. Southern European countries actually put in place a variety of alternative strategies outside parliament. In Italy, the relative ease with which the government managed to pass the extremely ambitious reforms is striking: protests had been quite modest, probably due to the fact that the technocratic government was perceived by public opinion as the only solution to prevent economic collapse and a consequent bailout. The same could be said for Portugal, where the population has been relatively quiet despite very harsh measures (with the exception of the demonstration of September 2012, which mobilised around 1.5 million people in several cities). But many alternative strategies emerged in Greece and Spain: such as referendums, street demonstrations and occupation of town squares. The movement of the so-called *Indignados*, for instance, was born spontaneously in Spain but then spread all over Europe. This was certainly one further consequence of the strong intervention of international external actors in the economic and political situation of the nation states and in the decisions taken by national governments. The role of parliament and, above all, of the opposition parties, was perceived as very limited, and citizens – as well as some of the opposition parties themselves, notably the more radical ones – opted for arenas other than parliament and different strategies in order to pursue their objectives. This only demonstrates more clearly that opposition MPs have no easy answer when they have to choose between collaborating with, or opposing, the government.

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