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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Turning to the right? The impact of the “long crisis decade” (2008-2019) on right-wing populist vote and attitudes in Europe

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ABSTRACT: This paper questions the thesis that transformations in European politics after the financial, eurozone, and migrant crises have been led by populist radical right (PRR) and left (PRL) parties and attitudes in Northwestern (NWE) and Southern (SE) Europe, respectively. Contrary to most of the literature, we claim that, although the populist radical left has grown in SE, the more significant outcome of the crises has been to push PRR parties to a similar (high) consensus in SE and NWE. We also argue that the crises facilitated the growth of PRR forces in SE more than NWE. To test this perspective, we analysed elections and citizens' orientations towards the key issues of populism - immigration, European integration, “authoritarianism versus liberal democracy” and “state versus market” - in five NWE and four SE countries. Findings show that during the “long crisis decade” (2008-2019) there has been an alignment on right-wing populism between European regions.

KEYWORDS: Cleavage Theory, European Party Systems, Great Recession, Left Populism, Right Populism.

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1. Introduction

This paper theoretically and empirically challenges the rarely contested notion that there has been a structural difference in the evolution of Northwestern (NWE) and Southern (SE) European party systems after the Great Recession of 2008 (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018; Hutter and

Kriesi 2019). It criticises the perspective that in NWE countries, the greater impact of the migrant crisis when compared to the economic one would have led to the full development of nativist right-wing populism, activated on the theme of border defence and against Islamisation and immigration, both of which are perceived as threats to the integrity of the national community (De Wilde *et al.* 2019; Kriesi and Pappas 2015), whereas in SE, the harsh economic crisis would have stimulated the emergence of a populist left, which was oriented towards protests against the austerity policies of the European Union (Katsambekis 2016; Kotroyannos *et al.* 2018; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

This “mainstream narrative” can be summarised thus. In NWE countries, a new cleavage “based on values” (Kriesi 2010), that is, the “integration-demarcation cleavage” between “winners” and “losers” of globalisation (Kriesi *et al.* 2006), has been shaping political systems for decades. This cleavage first led to a great salience of cultural issues – above all European integration and immigration – in party competition. Second, it fostered the rise of those political formations that are most capable of politicising these issues, namely the populist radical right (PRR) parties (Mudde 2007). Thus, NWE has often been considered the region of radical right populism, or has been associated with the largely overlapping label of “exclusionary populism” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Owing to the pervasiveness of the integration-demarcation cleavage, the Great Recession and subsequent crises may have prompted resistance to the European Union, and more generally to the “elites”, in cultural-identarian terms (Hutter and Kriesi 2019). Therefore, from 2008 onwards, the same PRR parties may have gained strength and led the transformation of the politics in this region. The scenario would be different for SE. The impact of the integration-demarcation cleavage in SE countries before the Great Recession was moderate. The cultural dimension of the political conflict was seemingly not dominated by European integration and immigration at the time, and the political space was fundamentally bipolar, where the centre-left was opposed to the centre-right, whereas challengers from the radical left or right were almost absent. As a consequence of both the lack of strength of the integration-demarcation cleavage and the severity of the euro crisis, resistance to the European Union and alleged “elites” would have been expressed in economic terms. This would have created fertile ground for the rise of a new radical and populist left, or for parties that take “inclusionary populist” stances (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2018; Lisi, Llamazares and Tsakatika 2019; Roberts 2019; Font, Graziano and Tsakatika 2021). Furthermore, according to research centred on the supply side of politics, there would be historical-cultural hindrances to the growth of the populist right in SE (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018,14; Hutter and Kriesi 2019, 15; Roberts 2019).

Against this backdrop, we present an original alternative interpretation that criticises the “mainstream narrative” by focusing on both the supply and demand sides of politics. We claim that by considering the whole “long crisis decade” (2008-2019), instead of the immediate post-2008 period alone, we need to highlight the convergence, more than the divergence, between the two European regions. Although the PRR has surged in SE after the economic crisis, the even more significant outcome of the multiple European crises has been to push the PRR to a similarly high consensus in SE and NWE. Without denying the existence and strength of left-wing populist parties in SE, we emphasise the limitations of the “mainstream narrative” in reading the evolution of the interactions among new social, economic, and cultural dynamics of globalisation and the development of populism in European political systems. Although historical-institutional variables may have hampered the development of radical right-wing parties in more recently democratised SE countries, it is possible to see how, in the long decade after the Great Recession, the relationship between the crisis of liberal-democratic representation and advanced modernisation processes presents a coherent structure for all parts of Europe, with the gradual emergence of PRR parties politicising the integration-demarcation cleavage in SE as well. This contemporary radical right differs from the heir of totalitarian nationalism (Eatwell 2004), but also from the right of the first phase of the silent counter-

revolution of the 1980s (Ignazi 2003), precisely because of its hybridisation with populism, understood as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde 2004), whose core is people-centrism (Heinisch 2003, 92), combined with both anti-elitism and anti-pluralism (Mudde 2004, Müller 2016). By effectively merging with populism thanks to the “thin-centredness” or the chameleonic nature (Taggart 2000) of populism itself, the contemporary radical right makes specific reference to differential nativism and finds the instrument for the politicisation of the losers of globalisation in identity politics.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 deals with the theoretical framework. We critically review the literature on cleavage politics and populism in European democracies, and clarify our position within this literature further. We then delineate the research design for empirical analysis in support of our thesis of convergence of European regions towards radical right populism in Section 3. The analysis takes place in two steps. First, in Section 4, we explore the electoral results. We emphasise that the more recent elections have witnessed the growth of the PRR and the setback of the PRL parties in SE; that over the 2010s, PRR parties have gained far more strength in SE than in NWE; and that NWE countries have reacted to the crises in heterogeneous ways. Second, in Section 5, we rely on the European Values Study (EVS) to verify whether, even before the rise of right-wing populism in SE, citizens from NWE and SE already shared similar orientations on four issues, namely immigration, European integration, “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy”, and “State vs market”. We consider whether, during the long crisis decade, there has been an alignment between Northwestern and Southern Europeans on these four issues. The conclusion summarises the implications of the joint analysis of the electoral behaviour and evolution of voters’ values.

2. Cleavage politics and populism in NWE and SE democracies

Questioning the impact that the Great Recession of 2008 and the subsequent crises had on the shape of political conflict and representative democracies in NWE and SE calls into question the entire process of the revision of cleavage politics, as it emerged in the course of the socio-political transformation following the de-freezing of political systems in the second half of the 20th century. The process intensified in the 1990s and led to changes in the structure of political opportunities, particularly with globalisation, international terrorism, the international economic crisis, and the escalation of migration.

The caution in identifying rigid connections between types of crises and the activation of radical right- and left-wing populist responses corresponds to a bias that is activated by the reiteration of an interpretation of social conflicts anchored to the structure of traditional cleavages, especially class cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1970). To understand the evolution of new radical and populist parties in European democracies, it is necessary to frame the additional transformations that have affected the salience of social and political dividing lines and how these have been politicised from the perspective of identities and social reference groups (Veugelers and Magnan 2005; Rydgren 2007). The crisis triggered by the Great Recession was welded with the increasing relevance of the variable of cultural change and the crisis of political representation in liberal democracies (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018).

Based on this socio-political perspective, assuming a direct and univocal correspondence between the greater impact of the economic crisis and the reaction to the austerity policies introduced by the European Union to the member states with respect to the development of a populist left-wing radicalism seems misleading, as it tends to reintroduce a viscosity of the classical theory of cleavages and their politicisation. We propose the rise of cultural essentialism as an alternative interpretation (Reckwitz 2020) in the redefinition of European cleavage politics as part of a process of re-directing subjectivity towards new dimensions of communitarianism, based on cultural similarity and not on socio-economic status, with the

widening of opportunities for a strongly exclusionary identity politics of an ethnic, sovereign, and populist nature (Kaufmann 2018).

The re-politicisation of political conflict comprises a new polarisation between winners and losers of the new social processes at a global scale (Kriesi *et al.* 2012), with the growing relevance of issues such as immigration, European integration, and socio-cultural sense of loss. Winners and losers are not defined by the location of employment relationships or the simple political transposition of income levels. Instead, the impact of a more general dynamic that relates to the social anomie generated in the processes of globalised modernisation, in which losers grapple with feelings of relative deprivation, with the growing incongruity of status, with the anxiety of being left behind compared to subjects who put their own security at risk, plays a role (Gidron and Hall 2017). The targets of the mistrust, resentment, and anger of the losers are winners of globalisation: and not the “rich”, but those who take advantage of new opportunities and engage with the values of cosmopolitan universalism (Koopmans and Zürn 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

The socio-economic dimension remains an integral and relevant part of the political conflict, but the cultural component is more important in the politicisation of new constituencies by the political parties. Progressively, at right angles to the traditional left-right axis of political conflict, a new polarity of conflict has emerged between a Green-Alternative-Libertarian (GAL) left and a Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (TAN) right (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002). This polarity relates to the cleavage between winners and losers, and has been labelled as the “integration-demarcation cleavage” (Kriesi *et al.* 2006, 2012), “transnational cleavage” (Hooghe and Marks 2018), cleavage between “libertarian-universalistic” and “traditionalist-communitarian” values (Bornschieer 2010), and “cosmopolitan-communitarian cleavage” (De Wilde *et al.* 2019).

The relationship between new cleavage politics, the delegitimisation of mainstream parties, and the development of new radical parties is related to the emergence of populism and populist parties across the European left-right continuum (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017). The relevant literature on populism has highlighted the possibility of its interpretation mainly according to either an ideational (Mudde 2004, 2017), a political-strategic (Weyland 2001, 2017), or a socio-cultural approach (Ostiguy 2017), thus emphasising either the “thin-centred” populist ideology, the populist organisational (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016) and political strategy to seek or exercise government power (Weyland 2001, 14), or the populist style assumed in politicising the resentment towards the traditional political elite. Personalistic, unmediated and charismatic leadership has also been considered a key characteristic of the populist phenomenon (Taggart 2000; Weyland 2001; Viviani 2017), although not all scholars agree in considering it a necessary populist prerogative. In this study, we deem it more appropriate and proficuous to assume the common characteristics that emerge from different analyses, rather than engage in the debate between the different perspectives. In fact, beyond the diverse declinations of the concept, populism comprises an appeal to the people, an opposition to the establishment, and a rejection of pluralism (Kriesi 2018; Meny and Surel 2002; Mudde 2004).

Possibilities have been advanced for the development of populism in both soft and hard terms, as a gradation of different parties and leaderships with reference to the style of political discourse (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016; Meijers and Zaslove 2021). In some cases, this may produce a conceptual stretch such that populism becomes adaptable to most mainstream and anti-establishment parties. Instead, we prefer to identify populist parties from a perspective that does not trace their nature to a sole mobilisation strategy or a mere political-communicative style, but that highlights the firm interplay between the ideational component (Mudde 2004, 2017) and the politicisation of the integration-demarcation cleavage (Kriesi *et al.* 2006, 2012). Narrowing the field of populism down allows us to focus on the trajectories of development of such parties by highlighting how the 2008-2019 decade has progressively led to the establishment and fading away of right- and left-wing populism, respectively.

Following this theoretical frame, in Section 3, we specify on the countries, periods, and parties on which our empirical analysis is built, and the data we use. We then delineate our research hypotheses.

3. Research design

3.1 Countries, period, and parties

In NWE, we surveyed five member countries of the EU to which Kriesi *et al.* (2006) originally applied their conceptualisation of the integration-demarcation cleavage namely Austria, Germany, France, the UK, and the Netherlands. According to the “mainstream narrative” we outlined, the political trajectory of these countries over the last decade may have been different from that of the SE countries we consider, namely Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. NWE would have been caught by populist radical right-wing parties and sentiments, and SE by the populist radical left.

Table 1 - List of populist parties in Northwestern Europe (Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom) and Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) during the “long crisis-decade” (2008-2019)

Country	PRR parties	PRL parties
Austria	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	
	Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ)	
France	Front National (FN)	
	Debout la république / Debout la France (DLR)	La France insoumise (FI)
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	Die Linke (Linke)
Netherlands	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	Socialistische Partij (SP)
	Forum voor Democratie (FvD)	
United Kingdom	United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	
	British National Party (BNP)	
	Brexit Party (BP)	
Greece	Λαϊκός Ορθόδοξος Συναγερμός (LAOS)	Συνασπισμός της Αριστεράς των Κινημάτων και της Οικολογίας (SYN)
	Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες (ANEL)	Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς - Προοδευτική Συμμαχία (SYRIZA)
	Λαϊκός Σύνδεσμος – Χρυσή Αυγή (XA)	Μέτωπο Ευρωπαϊκής Ρεαλιστικής Ανυπακοής (MR25)
	Ελληνική Λύση (EL)	
Italy	Lega Nord / Lega Salvini Premier (LN)	Potere al Popolo (PaP)
	Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	
Spain	Vox	Podemos / Unidos Podemos / Unidas Podemos (UP)
Portugal	Chega! (CH)	Bloco de Esquerda (BE)

This picture, as we show, holds up only in the first phase of the “long crisis decade” of 2008 to 2019. We examine the periodisation of the selected time frame. For analytical purposes, we divided the decade into two watersheds: October 2008, the month of the great financial crisis that divided the pre-crisis European politics from the post-crisis one; and around 2013, by which time, two other crises had hit the old continent, namely the euro crisis that began in 2010 and the migrant crisis triggered by the long-term consequences of the Arab Spring. We place the “crisis crystallisation” in around 2013. From that point onward, no further critical events overlapped the triple (financial, euro, and migrant) crisis (at least until the Covid-19 outbreak, which started the new decade with new social and political changes). If anything, the European institutions were unable to address these crises, which ended up merging in the collective imagination. Thus, a criticism of European institutions and the aversion towards migrants have become increasingly associated. From that point onward, PRR parties grew in SE.

Having clarified the “where” and “when”, we must specify the “who”, namely the parties. Following our theoretical frame, we selected PRR and PRL parties in continuity with the reconstruction of populist parties collected in the “PopuList” (Rooduijn *et al.* 2019), which mainly builds on the “ideational approach” to populism. The PopuList is a reliable list of European populist, far right, far left, and Eurosceptic parties, approved by more than 80 established academics across several countries. We included only two “borderline” parties that did not appear as populists in the PopuList, although they were often associated with populism, namely the Golden Dawn (which the PopuList labels as a far right-wing party, but not a populist one) and *Bloco de Esquerda* (which the PopuList classifies as a far left-wing party, but not a populist one)¹. Our sample included the 18 PRR and the 9 PRL parties reported in Table 1.

3.2 Research steps, data, and hypotheses

We analysed the electoral results of PRR and PRL parties during the long crisis decade in both regions. We considered only the first-order national elections and only those forces that gained at least 1% of the votes cast. The two watersheds we mentioned, namely the Great Recession and the crisis crystallisation, guided our study, in identifying four electoral phases: (1) the pre-crisis phase (pre-2008); (2) the first election held after October 2008; (3) the election held around the crisis crystallisation (2012-13); and (4) the last election of the long crisis decade².

Following the electoral analysis, we examined European voters’ orientations. We relied on the two most recent waves of the EVS, namely the ones in 2008-10 and 2017-20, to investigate the orientations of citizens from NWE and SE at the outbreak of the Great Recession, and how they changed. Beyond being suitable for comparing the situation at both the beginning and end of the long crisis decade, both surveys comprised a very large sample of respondents per country (between 1400 and approximately 3800).

In examining the orientations of NWE and SE, we focused on four issues: immigration, European integration, “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy”, and “market vs State”. These are the most relevant issues in the political conflict on which, according to the literature, the trajectory of NWE and SE socio-political systems can be distinguished. NWE has been indicated as the region of radical right or exclusionary populism. This leads to the assumption that Northwestern Europeans have been more anti-immigration, more Eurosceptic, less supportive of liberal democracy, and less in favour of inclusive welfare. On the other hand, attaching the category of radical left or inclusionary populism to SE implies that Southern Europeans have

¹ We included two minor parties that were not considered in the PopuList: The British National Party and *Potere al Popolo*.

² Like all periodizations for analytical purposes, ours also involves forcing. For instance, in some countries, the crisis crystallisation election coincided with the first post-Great Recession election.

been less opposed to immigration, less Eurosceptic, and more in favour of both liberal democracy and extended and inclusive welfare. Some studies have reiterated that there would be hindrances to the development of the populist right in SE, such as the authoritarian legacy, the fact that immigration has become politically relevant only in recent times, and the essentially positive orientation towards European integration (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018, 14; Hutter and Kriesi 2019, 15). These arguments suggest that Southern Europeans have held substantially different orientations than their Northwestern counterparts with respect to the four issues. However, is this really so? The first hypothesis we framed is as follows:

H1: Southern Europeans were not significantly more in favour of immigration, European integration, liberal democracy, and statism than were Northwestern Europeans at the outbreak of the Great Recession.

Confirming this would mean that at least on the demand side, the alleged barriers to the rise of the populist right in SE had already collapsed at the beginning of the long crisis decade.

The second hypothesis concerns the reasons behind the convergence of the populist right towards a similar consensus between both European regions. We want to verify whether this convergence reflects further rapprochement of both Northwestern and Southern Europeans on the four issues.

H2: At the end of the “long crisis decade”, the orientations of Northwestern and Southern Europeans on the four issues have become more similar.

Two sub-hypotheses that are not necessarily alternative, follow.

H2a: Northwestern Europeans have become less opposed to immigration, European integration, liberal democracy and extended welfare.

H2b: Southern Europeans have become more opposed to immigration, European integration, liberal democracy and extended welfare.

We tested these hypotheses through descriptive statistics and logistic regression models. The process is presented in Section 5.

4. The electoral strength of PRR and PRL parties during the “long crisis decade”

4.1 Northwestern Europe

Although NWE has been a breeding ground for PRR parties for at least two decades now, at the end of the long crisis decade, there were two more PRR parties when compared to the pre-crisis phase, and electoral support for these forces increased by 5.1 percentage points (14.4 as against 9.3).

Therefore, it is true that, on average, PRR parties grew in NWE. However, this general observation hides important variations both over time and between countries. After the surge recorded in the first post-crisis elections (+3.5), the consensus for PRR parties continued to grow, but in far smaller proportions until the point of crisis crystallisation (+1.4). Finally, from 2013 to the end of the decade, the situation remained almost unchanged (+0.2). Thus, in this macro-region, the peak of PRR strength was reached at a point where the refugee crisis overlapped the previous financial and eurozone crises. Thereafter, there was general stability. We also registered great heterogeneity among countries. Compared to an average increase for PRR parties of 5.1, the Coefficient of Variation was 2.2.

In 2019, the main Austrian PRR party, the FPÖ, collapsed from 26 to 16.2 percent, whereas the other PRR party, the BZÖ, disappeared gradually. The strength of PRR parties in Austria went from 28.2 percent in 2008 to 16.2 percent in 2019. Another country that experienced a decline in PRR forces during the long crisis decade was the UK. In this case, however, the percentages were far lower: from 2.2% for UKIP in 2005 to 2% for BP in 2019 (-0.2). This suggests that the fate of the populist right in the UK is strongly linked

to the question of EU membership. Thus, after the impressive 2015 surge – UKIP at 12.6% - and after Brexit, the populist right began fading in national elections.

Table 2 - Electoral results of PRR and PRL parties in NWE and SE during the “long crisis-decade” (avg. % and Coefficients of Variation)

		Pre-crisis (pre-08)	I post-crisis (post-08)	Crisis crystallisation (2012-13)	End of the decade (2019)	End of the decade - pre-crisis
PRR	NWE	9.3	12.8 (+3.5)	14.2 (+1.4)	14.4 (+0.2)	+5.1
	cv	1.2	0.8 (1.7)	0.5 (3.6)	0.6 (54.2)	2.2
	SE	3.0	2.9 (-0.1)	5.6 (+2.6)	11.2 (+5.7)	+8.2
	cv	1.3	1.2 (16)	1.4 (2.0)	0.8 (2.1)	0.9
	EU	6.5	8.4 (+1.9)	10.4 (+2.0)	13.0 (+2.6)	+6.5
	cv	1.4	1.1 (2.5)	0.8 (2.5)	0.6 (3.8)	1.4
PRL	NWE	5.1	4.4 (-0.7)	3.7 (-0.7)	7.6 (+3.9)	+2.5
	cv	1.5	1.4 (5.1)	1.4 (2.1)	1.1 (2.2)	4.0
	SE	2.9	3.6 (+0.7)	14.6 (+11)	14.7 (+0.1)	+11.8
	cv	1.2	1.3 (2.4)	0.8 (1.1)	1.0 (37.1)	1.1
	EU	4.1	4.0 (-0.1)	8.5 (+4.5)	10.8 (+2.3)	+6.7
	cv	1.4	1.3 (29)	1.2 (2.2)	1.0 (3.4)	1.8

The real growth of PRR parties took place only in the other three NWE countries, namely the Netherlands, France, and Germany. In the Netherlands, the PRR went from 5.9% gained by the PVV in 2006, to 14.9% as represented by the sum of the votes for the PVV and the FvD in 2017 (+9). However, even in this case, the peak in consensus for PRR parties had been reached earlier (15.5% in 2010). In contrast, the increase in the most “ancient” European PRR party – the FN – was linear. Under Marine Le Pen’s leadership, the party rose from 10.4% in the pre-crisis phase to 21.3% in 2017, passing through 17.9% in 2013. Added to this was the birth of the DLR (DLF from 2014), which reached 4.8% in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. Overall, the share of PRR parties in France during this election was 26.1% (+15.7 compared to the pre-crisis phase). Finally, a PRR party, the AFD, appeared in the German party system. After winning 4.7% in the 2013 election, the AFD almost tripled its support in 2017 and reached 12.6%.

The PRL continues to be almost absent in NWE. It is true that the comparison between the end of the long crisis decade and the pre-crisis period gives us an average increase of PRL parties of +2.5 (Table 2). But this figure is strongly conditioned by the remarkable performance of the FI in the 2017 French presidential election (19.6%). Before this, the average electoral strength of PRL parties in NWE was 3.7% (1.4 points less than in the pre-crisis phase). There are no PRL parties in Austria and in the UK.

NWE continues to be fertile ground for PRR parties more than for PRL ones. PRR parties have gained overall from 2008 to the end of the long crisis decade and the gap between PRR and PRL parties at the regional level has increased from 4.2 to 6.8.

The common idea of a homogeneous impact of the triple crisis in this region must be denied. Next to a country where the PRR arose for the first time (Germany) and two in which it grew considerably (France and the Netherlands), there are two countries in which its electoral consensus in 2019 was even lower than before the Great Recession (the UK and especially Austria).

4.2 Southern Europe

The long crisis decade has had a greater transformative impact on SE party systems than on NWE ones, leading to the proliferation of both PRR and PRL parties in all four SE countries. Electoral support for PRL parties, as emphasised by the literature, has increased significantly. It went from 2.9% in the pre-crisis phase to 14.7% at the end of the decade (+11.8) (Table 2). However, even this figure does not account for the important differences both over time and between countries. The real surge in PRL parties was recorded in the years ranging from the first post-crisis election to the crisis crystallisation (2008-2013). These are the years of the financial and euro crises, which hit SE hard, leading to great upheavals in Italy and even more so in Greece, with the two shocking elections of 2012, which saw SYRIZA at 26.9%. PRL parties in SE reached 14.6% in the crisis crystallisation phase (+11 when compared to the first post-crisis election). From then onward, they remained stable (14.7% in 2019). As observed for PRR parties in NWE, the upward trend in PRL parties in SE also seems to be closely connected to the early years of the long crisis decade.

Against an average increase of 11.8 points for PRL parties over the decade, we observe a CV of 1.1, which means that there has been some variability in how the strength of PRL parties has changed across countries. No country has seen a negative change. However, there were both very low increases, such as in Italy (+1.1) and Portugal (+3.6), and considerable growth in Spain (+12.9) because of the birth of *Podemos*, and in Greece, owing to the impressive rise of SYRIZA (+26.5), whose consensus, added to that of the new-born MR25, implies that PRL parties in Greece obtained almost 30 points more in 2019 than in the pre-crisis period. Therefore, the idea that the crisis has provided opportunities for the growth of the populist and radical left in SE is also confirmed by adopting the longer-term perspective of the long crisis decade. The aggregate result is strongly conditioned by the experience of SYRIZA in Greece, which was unmatched in any other SE country. From the crisis crystallisation period onwards, the rise of the radical left had suffered a setback, aggravated by the non-reconfirmation of the SYRIZA government in 2019, or even a real retreat in Spain (-7.8 for *Podemos* in 2019 when compared to 2015).

Coming to the PRR, the most recent developments disprove the notion that the crisis had not given these organisations a boost in SE. Their aggregate consensus grew by 8.2 points (from 3% to 11.2%). A lower growth than that of the PRL, but still remarkable, especially if we consider the fact that when compared to that of PRL parties, this growth was more homogeneous among various SE countries. In relation to the average increase for PRR parties, the CV was 0.9 (Table 2). There was no country in which the PRR had increased by more than 25 points (as was the case for the radical left with SYRIZA). However, it had grown little in two countries, namely Portugal (1.4) and Greece (2.8), and considerably in two countries, namely Italy (13.5) and Spain (15.1). This growth seems even more important considering that in Italy, the League formed an entirely populist government in 2018 along with the M5S and, in Spain, a radical right-wing party, Vox, appeared for the first time since the end of Francoism and established itself as the third party in the most recent election.

We can conclude by talking about confirmations and denials with respect to what has been argued in the literature thus far. The most important confirmation concerns the growth of the radical and populist left as a whole, which has been considerable and greater in aggregate than that of the right, although extremely driven by the parable of SYRIZA. There are two denials that are linked. The first relates to the belief that it was the euro crisis, and not the migrant one, that most influenced the electoral fortunes of SE countries. This is true if we limit ourselves to the 2008-2013 period. However, if the entire decade of crisis is taken into account, crisis crystallisation represents an equally relevant watershed appropriately. From 2013 onward, with the increasingly important migration crisis in frontier countries like those of SE, and with European institutions unable to provide a joint response to the economic and refugee crisis, PRL and PRR parties met opposite

destinies: the consensus for the former remained unchanged, the aggregate vote for the latter doubled. This led the populist radical right in SE to shares that were analogous to both those of the PRL in the same region and of other PRR parties in NWE.

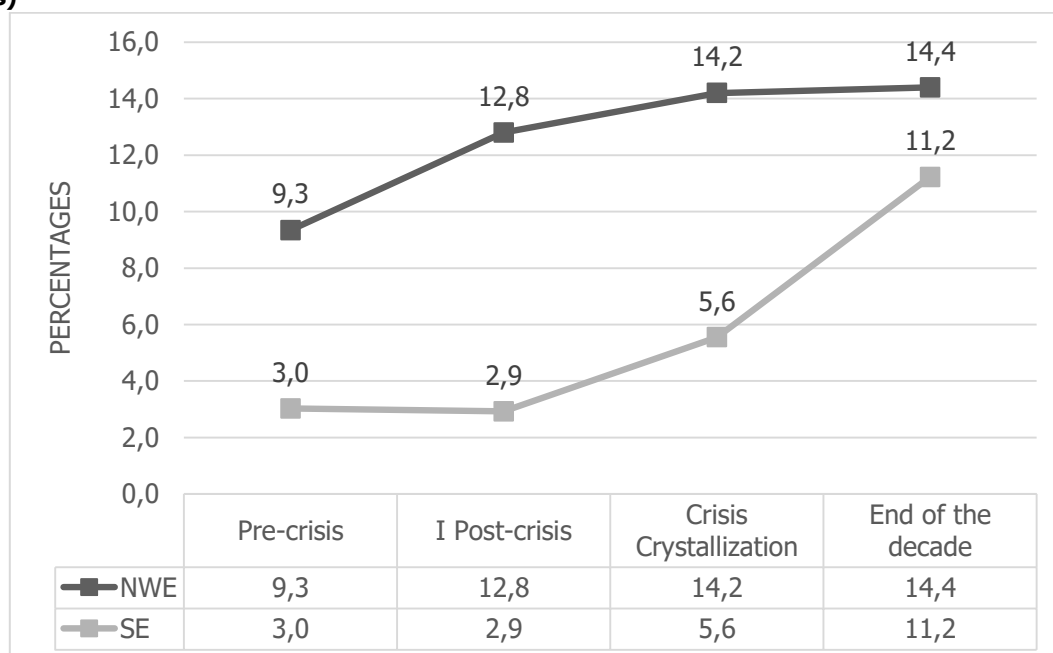
4.3 A convergence towards radical right populism

What conclusions can we draw from the comparison of the two European regions? First, during the long crisis decade, the PRR has grown significantly more in SE than in NWE (+8.2 points in SE versus +5.1 points in NWE). Before the crisis, the vote for the PRR was more than triple in NWE than in SE (9.3% versus 3%). By the end of the decade, the gap between both regions became narrow: 14.4% in NWE versus 11.2% in SE. All this goes against the common belief that the PRR benefited from the crisis more in NWE. In contrast, especially during crisis crystallisation, the PRR rode the electoral consensus in SE.

Two other observations support the thesis of European convergence towards radical right populism. First, there is now at least one PRR party in all the countries analysed here, irrespective of whether they are in NWE or SE. The same is not true for PRL parties. Second, the range of variation in PRR parties' results fell from 28.2 in the pre-crisis phase (the maximum value of 28.2 was found in Austria, and the minimum value of 0 was found in Spain, Portugal, and Germany) to 24.7 in the last electoral round (the maximum value of 26.1 was found in France, and the minimum value of 1.4 was found in Portugal). The strongest PRR party – the League – is in a SE country. Support for the PRR over the decade has varied more within NWE than in Europe as a whole. For NWE, the Coefficient of Variation related to the increase in support for PRR parties was 2.2. For all of Europe, it was 1.4.

Following this, we must shed light on two questions. Was it not possible to foresee this convergence between NWE and SE towards radical right populism? What changes in the orientations of Northwestern and Southern European citizens may have favoured this dynamic?

Figure 1 - Electoral results of PRR parties in NWE and SE during the “long crisis-decade” (National Elections)



5. Northwestern and Southern Europeans: Did and do they diverge on the most relevant issues?

We selected 13 questions from among those present in both the 2008-10 and the 2017-20 EVS questionnaires. Five concerned immigration, two European integration, three the “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” continuum, and three the “market vs State” divide. We merged the questions to create an indicator for each of the four issues under investigation. The immigration indicator was divided into three sub-indicators: “immigrants as a threat to society”, “immigrants as a threat to national culture”, and “immigrants as a threat to the economy”. This is useful because, by virtue of its nativism (Mudde 2007), it is in presenting immigrants as a threat to national culture, even more than to the economy, that the appeal of the PRR is particularly effective. We recoded the scale of each question so that, for each, low values correspond to “demarcationist” or “exclusionary” positions (anti-immigration, anti-EU, anti-liberal democracy, and anti-State) and high values to “integrationist” or “inclusionary” positions (pro-immigration, pro-EU, pro-liberal democracy, and pro-State). Finally, we normalised the variables, so that they range from 0 (most highly “demarcationist” position) to 1 (most highly “integrationist” position).

We started by testing our first hypothesis through a simple comparison of means (H1: Southern Europeans were not significantly more in favour of immigration, EU, liberal democracy, and statism at the outbreak of the recession). By comparing the averages of the 2008-10 EVS questionnaire, we noted that H1 was supported with respect to immigration, “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy”, and “market vs State”, whereas it was not with respect to European integration.

Table 3 - NWE and SE orientations: comparison between the 2008-10 and the 2017-20 EVS survey averages

ISSUE	A. 2008-10			B. 2017-20			B-A (%)		
	NWE	SE	SE-NWE (%)	NWE	SE	SE-NWE (%)	NWE	SE	SE-NWE(%): B/A
IMMIGRATION	2.55	2.61	2.35	2.83	2.68	-5.30	10.98	2.68	2.26
as threat to society	1.22	1.25	2.46	1.31	1.26	-3.82	7.38	0.80	1.55
as threat to culture	0.55	0.48	-12.73	0.55	0.47	-14.55	0.00	-2.08	1.14
as threat to economy	0.78	0.88	12.82	0.97	0.95	-2.06	24.36	7.95	0.16
EUROPEAN UNION	0.78	0.98	25.64	0.81	0.89	9.88	3.85	-9.18	0.39
AUTHORITARIANISM VS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY	2.39	2.51	5.02	2.47	2.40	-2.83	3.35	-4.38	0.56
MARKET VS STATE	1.38	1.47	6.52	1.39	1.43	2.88	0.72	-2.72	0.44
TOTAL	7.1	7.57	6.62	7.5	7.4	-1.33	5.63	-2.25	0.2

Southern Europeans were less opposed to immigration than were Northwestern Europeans only by 2.35%. Both had almost the same score in the “immigrants as a threat to society” indicator, whereas on the other two sub-indicators, there was a noteworthy difference. Southern Europeans perceived immigrants as a threat to the national economy much less than Northwestern Europeans (percentage difference of 12.82%). Conversely, as regards the sub-issue “immigrants as a threat to national culture”, SE was already far more “demarcationist” than was NWE (-12.73%).

A comparison of the “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” indicator also reveals that SE was not as evidently more in favour of liberal democracy. The percentage difference between SE and NWE was 5.02%, but support for liberal democracy was high in both regions. However, it is worth focusing on individual

national cases to capture something even more interesting. Two of the three SE countries that emerged later from the authoritarian experience, Portugal and Greece, are the ones that had the furthest positions on this indicator. Portugal recorded the lowest average on all three “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” variables and offered the lowest support for liberal democracy. Greece was very much supportive of democracy, having had the highest average in two out of three variables of this indicator. Sharing a recent authoritarian past did not produce a similar immunisation in SE countries. In contrast, these countries diverged most in their degree of support for liberal democracy.

The distance between SE and NWE was slightly greater with respect to the contrast between the market and State, with SE being more favourable to State intervention by 6.52%. When compared to NWE, SE was far more inclined to assign the responsibility of providing for the livelihood of citizens to the State. Conversely, on increasing private instead of government ownership and on wage equalisation the two stances were quite similar.

As for the last indicator, at the outbreak of the Great Recession, Southern Europeans were significantly more pro-EU than were Northwestern ones. The percentage difference between both regions was 25.64%. In both EU variables, one NWE country recorded the lowest average (UK), whereas two SE countries had the highest average.

Overall, NWE was more “demarcationist” than SE by 6.62%. We also conducted independent group t-tests to compare the difference between the means of the orientations of Southern and Northwestern Europeans. The t-tests confirmed that the average position of SE was statistically significantly more in favour of all EU-related questions when compared to the average position of NWE. On the other three issues, instead, there was at least one question on which the hypothesis that the SE average was statistically significantly higher (i.e. more “integrationist”) was rejected.

In the 2017-20 EVS questionnaire, a very different scenario was seen (Table 3). SE countries are now more against immigration (-5.30%), and the distance on the question of “immigrants as a threat to national culture” has grown further (-14.55%). Therefore, a position that is clearly more opposed to immigration by SE emerged precisely on the issue most politicised by PRR parties. Southern Europeans are still clearly more pro-EU than Northwestern ones, but their distance has considerably shrunk (the percentage difference is now 9.88%).

The position of the two regions on the “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” and the “market vs State” indicators has become even more indistinct. Southern Europeans continue to be overall more in favour of statism in the case of the latter, but the difference has narrowed (+2.88%). In the case of the former, SE is now slightly more sceptical of liberal democracy (percentage difference of -2.83). Overall, SE is now more “demarcationist” than NWE (-1.33%). The reversal is confirmed by the t-tests. The hypothesis that the SE average is statistically significantly higher is now rejected for most variables.

The rightmost part of Table 3 helps test the remaining hypotheses (H2, H2a, and H2b) more appropriately, by comparing the situations in 2008-10 and 2017-20. Southern and Northwestern Europeans’ orientations have become more similar with respect to European integration, support for liberal democracy, and State intervention in the economy. This is because, on the one hand, NWE is less Eurosceptic, more positive towards liberal democracy, and slightly more in favour of State interventionism. SE is far more Eurosceptic and less supportive of both liberal democracy and State interventionism. Therefore, H2, H2a, and H2b were confirmed.

Interpreting the results concerning immigration is more complex. The unexpected outcome is that, despite years of the migrant crisis and the flare-up in radical right-wing populism in both regions, both NWE and SE were overall less opposed to immigrants than in 2008-10. The decrease in aversion to immigrants recorded in NWE (10.98%) is remarkable. The distance between both regions has more than doubled, and this is not

because SE has become more averse to immigrants, but rather because, although SE has become less opposed to immigrants, it has done so to a far lesser extent than NWE. Thus, H2 and H2b are rejected here.

SE became a little more “demarcationist” than NWE (-1.33%) because, whereas SE’s overall score dropped slightly (7.57 in 2008-10 and 7.4 in 2017-20), NWE’s score grew significantly (from 7.1 to 7.5). This supports H2a. The broader hypothesis on the convergence of orientations between both regions (H2) is confirmed, as the overall distance between NWE and SE, in addition to having changed its sign, decreased by 80%.

Despite the unexpected result with respect to immigration, there was an alignment of orientations between NWE and SE, which led the latter to positions that were more inclined to those supported by the PRR on European integration and the “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” issue. NWE seemed to have moved away from its aversion to immigration, Euroscepticism, its distrust of liberal democracy, and economic liberalism. All this mirrors what we observed in the electoral analysis.

Table 4 - Results of the ordered logit models: comparison between the 2008-10 and the 2017-20 EVS surveys. Entries are the odds ratios and the coefficients (between parentheses)

EU region as indep. var. (0=NWE; 1=SE)			
Dep. Var.	Question	2008-10	2017-20
Immig1	Don't like immigrants/foreign workers as neighbors	1.448*** (0.37)	0.9** (-0.105)
Immig2	Immigrants increase crime problems or not	1.103*** (0.098)	0.91*** (-0.095)
Immig3	Better if immigrants maintain their own customs/adopt the customs of the country	0.655*** (-0.423)	0.625*** (-0.469)
Immig4	Immigrants take jobs away from natives in a country or not	1.124*** (0.117)	0.7*** (-0.356)
Immig5	Immigrants are a strain on a country's welfare system or not	2.164*** (0.772)	1.249*** (0.222)
EU1	How much confidence do you have in the EU?	2.496*** (0.915)	1.161*** (0.149)
EU2	The EU enlargement should go further or it has already gone too far	1.820*** (0.599)	1.311*** (0.271)
AvsLD1	Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament/elections: bad or good?	1.487*** (0.397)	1.022 (0.022)
AvsLD2	Having the army rule the country: bad or good?	0.745*** (-0.295)	0.558*** (-0.584)
AvsLD3	Having a democratic political system: bad or good?	2.029*** (0.708)	1.465*** (0.382)
MvsS1	Individuals or the State should take more responsibility for providing	1.895*** (0.639)	1.494*** (0.401)
MvsS2	Greater incentives for individual effort or equalise incomes	0.763*** (-0.271)	0.844*** (-0.169)
MvsS3	Private or government ownership should be increased?	1.165*** (0.153)	1.06** (0.058)

*** $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$

To validate these reflections, we applied an ordered logit model aimed at verifying whether being a Southern instead of Northwestern European increased the probability of having a more “integrationist” position. The 13 variables pertaining to immigration, EU, “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy”, and “market vs State” were dependent, whereas geographical belonging (0=NWE and 1=SE) was independent. A

set of sociodemographic variables – sex, age, educational level, and occupational status – was also included as control (although they are not displayed in Table 4 for the sake of synthesis). Table 4 presents the results of the ordered logit regressions. An odds ratio equal to 1 implies that being a citizen from NWE rather than from SE did not change the probability of having a more “integrationist” stance. An odds ratio greater than 1 implies that being a Southern European increased the probability of having a more “integrationist” position, whereas that less than 1 implies the opposite.

In 2008-10, the odds ratio was greater than 1 for almost all dependent variables. In 2017-20, there were equal numbers of variables with odds ratios less than and greater than 1. Even on those issues where the odds ratio remained greater than 1 (e.g. EU-related questions), it decreased significantly. For all issues except “MvsS2”, the odds ratio was lower at the end of the decade than in 2008-10. Therefore, compared to the beginning of the long crisis decade, it had become less probable that a Southern European had more “integrationist” stances.

6. Discussion and conclusions: Convergence in electoral results as a sign of change in voters’ orientations

In this paper, we critically reviewed and challenged the “mainstream narrative” on the trajectories of radical right and left populism across Europe during the last decade. Our analysis of the electoral results of the PRR and PRL parties in Europe, combined with the investigation of how the attitudes of Northwestern and Southern Europeans have evolved over the long crisis decade (2008-2019), supported our hypothesis of European convergence toward radical right populism, but also highlighted some surprising findings.

For instance, compared to the massive increase in support for the PRR right (in both regions, but above all in SE) and the PRL (only in SE), the orientations of both Northwestern and Southern Europeans on the four issues – immigration, EU, “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy”, and “market vs State” – have not changed significantly. The only exceptions are the stance of Northwestern Europeans with respect to immigration (clearly less adverse) and that of Southern Europeans concerning the EU (far more Eurosceptic). The first result may seem counter-intuitive and appear to disprove a substantial part of the mainstream literature that now takes for granted that the Great Recession and subsequent crises had a decisive impact in spreading radical and populist sentiments among Europeans. A key achievement of our study is that despite the enduring migrant crisis, Europeans were less averse to immigration at the end of the 2010s than they were a decade earlier. This has considerable implications for future research on the dynamics of populism in Europe. To date, only a few scholars who focus on the demand side of politics have questioned the notion that the advancement of the populist right has been accompanied by an equal wave of populist sentiments. Bartels (2017) used data from the European Social Survey, and concluded thus:

“Anyone tracking European attitudes over the past 15 years would have a hard time guessing that anything at all had happened. Anti-immigrant sentiment actually declined slightly, despite millions of new immigrants (...) If right-wing populist parties are gaining support, that must be because ‘populist views have been growing’ (...). In reality, the populist views were there long before the current populist ‘wave’ made them salient”.

It is necessary to abandon the idea that there is a sharp division in the manner in which the party systems of NWE and SE have overcome the triple crisis. We highlighted how the new cleavage politics and the role of cultural and political variables – over and above the economic ones – play in this process of politicising crises are crucial. Populism in Europe mainly takes on the character of a sovereign challenge that welds the integration-demarcation cleavage with the perception of relative deprivation, loss of status, and betrayal by the “elites” of liberal democracies.

Therefore, if the mainstream literature has emphasised on the consolidation of the PRR or of the exclusionary populism in NWE and the rise of the PRL or inclusionary populism in SE, we believe that it is appropriate to shift the focus to the convergence of both regions towards a similar consensus for PRR parties. Since 2013, the populist right has stopped growing in NWE and the populist left has stopped growing in SE. Conversely, there has been a massive increase in the electoral results of PRR parties in SE, especially in Spain and Italy, which suggests that, from a long-term perspective, speaking of clear geographical divisions in the manner in which the party systems of the EU countries have reacted to the hurdles of the 2010s may be inaccurate, just as it may be improper to speak of “left populism” as a category of new challenger parties that are more typical of SE. The concept of left-wing populism needs research to verify whether, unlike in Latin American contexts, the so-called left populism in Europe, apart from the genetic moment of its affirmation, assumes, especially once in government, the character of a new radical left devoid of populist connotations.

Our electoral analysis requires questioning the idea that there are still obstacles to the affirmation of the populist right in Southern Europe, such as the only recent politicisation of immigration; the historically positive opinion towards European integration; and the authoritarian legacy (Hutter, Kriesi and Vidal 2018, 14; Hutter and Kriesi 2019, 15). With the aim of problematising this belief and linking the comment on the electoral results with the actual attitudes of European voters, we verified whether the orientations of Northwestern and Southern Europeans on the four issues diverged at the outbreak of the Great Recession. Our analysis showed that Southern Europeans were clearly more pro-EU, and held substantially similar positions on the other three issues. As early as in 2008-10, Southern Europeans showed a greater propensity to demarcate and ghettoise immigrants than Northwestern Europeans, who were more in favour of the cultural integration of immigrants. Precisely on this issue, which is particularly dear to the PRR, the electoral demands of Southern Europeans was already more in line with the supply of PRR parties. With respect to the attitudes on the “authoritarianism vs liberal democracy” issue, Portugal, one of the SE countries that emerged later from the authoritarian experience, registered the lowest support for liberal democracy. Thus, sharing a recent authoritarian past does not appear to have produced similar antibodies in these countries. Ultimately, the only real barrier to the rise of a PRR in SE seemed to be less marked opposition to European integration, whereas there were no antibodies against aversion to immigrants and scepticism towards liberal democracy.

Finally, by examining the surveys, we also verified whether the convergence of both regions towards radical right-wing populism has mirrored an alignment of Northwestern and Southern Europeans on the four issues. Excluding immigration, there has been an alignment among the orientations between Northwestern and Southern Europeans because of the reversal of the values in both regions. On the one hand, NWE is less Eurosceptic, more positive towards liberal democracy, and slightly more in favour of state interventionism. On the other hand, SE is far more Eurosceptic and less supportive of both liberal democracy and statism. SE is now more “demarcationist” or “exclusionary” with respect to immigration and less supportive of liberal democracy. Our final score reveals a change: in 2008-10 it was NWE that had positions closer to those promoted by the PRR. As of 2017-2020 it was SE. This reflects the emergence of a “demarcationist” and sovereign right-wing populism in SE that politicises the “closed” orientation with respect to immigration, and a greater contestation of mainstream parties.

In conclusion, the alignment of orientations between NWE and SE has made the former more distant and brought the latter closer to the positions that were usually held by the PRR. Future research may first clarify the only paradoxical outcome, namely that both NWE and SE have become less opposed to immigration. It may also shed light on the convergence of NWE and SE towards radical right populism and consequently gauge whether that of radical left populism in SE was a temporary phase contingent on the euro crisis and doomed to rapid alignment with the social and political dynamics of right-wing populism in Europe. Finally, we were interested here in a comparison between European macro-regions. However, another fruitful line of

research may be to investigate patterns of appearance, growth and crisis of right and/or left populist parties in diverse contexts, depending on contextual variables such as the political system, the electoral law, the health of traditional socialist and conservative parties, the national or regional political culture.

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