

**ELECTIONS IN EUROPE IN A TIME OF CRISIS:
LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA**

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Abstract

Although there are strong parallels between the economic crisis that Europe is facing today and the one that Latin America experienced during the 1980s and 1990s, there have been few scholarly comparative efforts. There is, however, a vast body of literature on the impact that not only the debt crisis of the 1980s but also the free market reforms of the 1990s have had on the political systems across the Latin American region. To what extent can this scholarship help us to shed light on contemporary Europe and the political future of those nations that are most affected by the current crisis? Addressing this question, this paper aims to contribute to filling the research gap on a comparison that has become more pertinent than ever. Particular emphasis will be given to the analytical value of certain arguments advanced in the Latin American context when it comes to trying to understand the ways in which the Great Recession is affecting and might transform the political system of European countries.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing academic and public interest in the Great Recession and its impact on the political systems across Europe. Scholars and pundits alike debate whether the current economic crisis will lead to the rise of far-right parties and the resurgence of radical leftist forces. Moreover, not few observers maintain that those European countries most affected by the Great Recession are experiencing a crisis of democracy and some even argue that the possibility of an authoritarian backlash has become a real threat. Interestingly, similar questions have been raised in Latin America in the past. This region suffered a severe economic crisis in the 1980s, which had a major impact on its political systems. With different pace and zeal, all Latin American countries implemented market-friendly reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. These reforms were sponsored by foreign institutions and reshaped the way in which politics were structured (Panizza 2009). As González (2013) has observed, the Latin American experience with the debt crisis of the 1980s shows that major economic recessions can trigger a political process of ‘creative destruction’: old actors decay, new emerge and the political systems undergo a major reorganisation. To what extent will Europe see a similar pattern of ‘creative destruction’? This question is at the core of my paper.

This paper, which is a theory-driven contribution, is divided in two main sections. The first section summarizes the main arguments of the existing literature on the impact of economic crises and free market reforms on the Latin American political systems. Special emphasis is given to four clusters of arguments: 1) democratic persistence amidst economic shocks and rampant inequality; 2) fiscal discipline of national governments despite the resurgence of the left; 3) market reforms and party system (in)stability; and 4) crisis of democratic representation and party system collapse. Based on this overview, the second section of the article discusses the tentative lessons that can be drawn from the Latin American experience of economic crisis with the aim of engaging with the ongoing debate on contemporary Europe. Here I maintain that four arguments advanced in the Latin American context ‘travel’ well, and thus contribute to shed light on the present and future of Europe: 1) rather than the democratic regime in itself, what it is at stake is the quality of democracy; 2) there is space for a potential repoliticization of material values; 3) the implementation of harsh austerity reforms puts at risk the stability of the party systems; 4) whether the established political parties are able to weather the storm depends mainly on their capacity to enact reforms in a way that does not dramatically affect their core constituencies and ideological profile.

1. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC CRISES ON THE POLITICAL SYSTEM? THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

At the beginning of the 1980s Latin America faced a harsh economic crisis with deep political consequences. To begin with, most countries of the region were governed by the military at that period of time and there is little doubt that the economic crisis facilitated the collapse of authoritarian regimes (Peeler 2009). Due to economic hardship, many actors started to protest and demand the reinstatement of democracy, generating an ever increasing pressure which led to the implementation of so-called foundational elections in many places (e.g. Brazil and Uruguay). Even in those few cases where the authoritarian regime was able to survive the economic crisis (e.g. Chile and Mexico), political reforms were implemented and paved the way for the emergence of democratic rule later on.

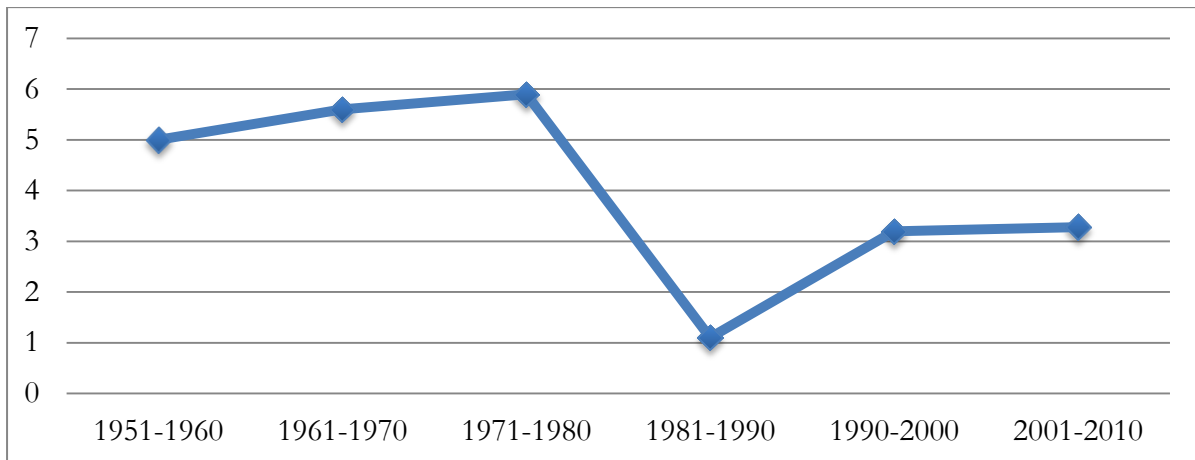
The economic crisis of the 1980s also had deep socioeconomic consequences. Not by coincidence, the 1980s is usually named ‘the lost decade’ because of the poor economic results of most countries of the region, something that the following two figures illustrate.

Figure 1: Economic growth of the national gross product in selected countries of Latin America, 1951-2010 (average annual growth rate)

	1951-1960	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1990-2000	2001-2010
Argentina	2.8	4.3	2.8	-1.9	4.1	4.6
Bolivia	0.4	5.6	4	0.5	3.8	3.8
Brazil	6.8	6.1	8.6	1.6	2.6	3.6
Chile	4	4.2	2.5	2.4	5.9	3.9
Colombia	4.6	5.2	5.7	5.3	2.5	4.1
Ecuador	4.9	4.7	8.9	1.8	1.8	4.4
Mexico	6.1	7	6.7	1.7	3.5	1.9
Peru	5.5	5	3.9	-2.1	4	5.7
Uruguay	2.1	1.5	3	0.4	2.9	3.5
Venezuela	7.6	6	1.8	0.4	2.4	3.5
Latin America	5	5.6	5.9	1.1	3.2	3.3

Source: own calculations on the basis of the data provided by the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Figure 2: Economic growth of Latin America, 1951-2010 (average annual growth rate in %)



Source: own calculations on the basis of the data provided by the Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

The social costs of the ‘lost decade’ cannot be emphasised enough. High levels of unemployment increase of poverty and the creation of a greater gap between the rich and poor became the characteristic indicators of this period. Under these circumstances, the return to democracy was marked by a demand for not only economic and political stability, but also more socioeconomic equality. Scholars and pundits alike were worried that excessive expectations could result in a generalized disappointment with democratic rule, the rise of political actors demanding radical transformations and the inauguration of a new wave of authoritarianism (e.g. O’Donnell 1986). Given that not few Latin American countries had undergone a similar pattern in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the main question became whether democracy would survive this time. To the surprise of many observers, the reinstatement of democracy that Latin America experienced in the 1980s and 1990s has proven to be quite resilient (Bruhn 2011). With the exception of Peru under Fujimori (1990-2000), no country of the region has suffered an authoritarian backlash since the third wave of democratization¹. Even a country like Argentina, which has an erratic democratic history, was able to handle the collapse of its economy in 2001-2 without an authoritarian reversal (Levitsky 2007).

¹ However, some scholars argue that the rise of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia marks a tipping point as these three regimes should be seen as examples of competitive authoritarianism (e.g. Levitsky and Loxton 2012; Weyland 2013).

Seen in this light, the commentaries on the contemporary Great Recession depicting catastrophic scenarios à la Weimar for the future of European democracies seem to be exaggerated. Recent Latin American history tells us that despite problems of severe financial downturns, a weakened state capacity, and failures in horizontal accountability, democracy can prosper. However, the mere avoidance of authoritarian breakdowns does not mean that democracy is in a healthy shape. One reason for this is that deep economic recessions and poor economic performance have an impact on the social fabric and thus the political order. In the following pages I offer an overview of the four main clusters of arguments advanced in the scholarly debate regarding the ways in which the Latin American political systems have been affected by economic crises since the return to democracy in the 1980s and 1990s.

1.1. Democratic persistence amidst economic shocks and rampant inequality

As it was previously noted, many observers found the survival of democracy in Latin America to be puzzling. Because of the high levels of socioeconomic inequality that are prevalent in the region, scholars feared that the transition to democracy would involve growing protests in favour of redistribution, which could lead to an insurmountable cycle of political instability and the comeback of authoritarian rule (Weyland 1999). Recent arguments have also pointed in this direction. For instance, relying on the median voter theorem and the rational choice approach, the influential work of Boix (2003) postulates that “[d]emocratic breakdowns are more likely in unequal societies [... and that...] transitions to democracy occur only in countries with low Gini indexes” (139). Nevertheless, these predictions are not supported by the recent history of Latin America. Although the rise of democracy has not been translated into any significant socio-economic redistribution, almost no country of the region has experienced a democratic breakdown. This way, as Bermeo (2009) states, persistent economic inequality does not, in itself, constitute an insurmountable barrier to democratic durability.

In broad strokes, three main accounts have been advanced to explain the resiliency of democracy in Latin America. The first line of argument refers to economic globalization and draws on Boix’s framework (2003). His work emphasizes that the fate of political regimes ultimately hinges upon the type of economic assets that characterizes a country. Where there are low levels of capital mobility (e.g. economies based on agriculture or natural resources), the emergence and survival of democracy is at risk as voters have a high incentive to impose heavy taxes on capital and this leads to insoluble struggles about redistribution. Under these circumstances, the elites

spare no effort in protecting their privileges, even if this implies supporting an authoritarian regime. By contrast, in countries with high levels of capital mobility (e.g. based on industrial production and especially, on service economies), democracy has a better prospect for the simple reason that elites can move their capital if voters do not moderate their redistributive demands. Put shortly, capital mobility enhances the likelihood of democratic transition and survival because it moderates the conflict over the taxation of the rich. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) have expanded this argument by studying the ways in which economic globalization has contributed to democratization. Their central idea is that thanks to international financial integration, capital owners can more easily take their money out of a given country, making the taxation of elites by democratically elected governments more difficult. Certainly, there is enough evidence of this for the case of Latin America. As Campello (2013) has shown recently, the moderation of leftist presidents is usually linked to their necessity to attract financial capital and calm the markets.

The second account highlights the impact of external influences. In a similar way to the previously mentioned body of literature, it is argued that political regimes do not operate in a vacuum, but rather in a regional and international context that imposes constraints and provides opportunities. Just as outside pressure can influence the adoption of specific economic policies, it can also have an effect on regime change and stability. Indeed, this was the case of the introduction of the neoliberal model in the region as well as the defense of human rights in the 1980s and 1990s. While economists and technocrats supported the implementation of market reforms, lawyers and activists took the lead in denouncing the abuses of authoritarian regimes and backing pro-democracy actors in different places of the world (Dezalay and Garth 2002). The engagement of Western countries facilitated the work of civil society organizations struggling for democracy and the implementation of free and fair elections. In this way, external influences played a central role in the process of democratization in Latin America (Stoner and McFaul 2013). Moreover, scholars have shown that democratic neighbors substantially increase the likelihood of democratic transition and survival (e.g. Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan 2013).

The third and last account to explain the durability of democracy in Latin America alludes to ideological moderation. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, radical left-wing forces in Latin America not only lost an important source of funding, but also the appeal of the model of economic and political development that they had been promoting. At the same time, many Latin American

leftist actors were in exile in Western countries during the 1970s and 1980s. This experience triggered a learning process, whereby key leftist actors and parties across the region ended up adopting economic policies compatible with capitalism, promoting political moderation and supporting liberal democracy (Castañeda 1992; Lechner 1990; Roberts 1998). Against this backdrop, economic elites and conservative parties began to lose the fear of the coming into power of the left. However, although it is true that a better understanding between right-wing and left-wing actors has contributed to the installation and survival of democratic rule, it is important to highlight that the actors of each side of the political spectrum are inclined to endorse very different concepts of democracy. While the former has a preference for a minimalist concept centered on the realization of free and fair elections, the latter backs a thicker conceptualization that includes the provision of social rights (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014).

1.2. The resurgence of the Left and its commitment to fiscal discipline

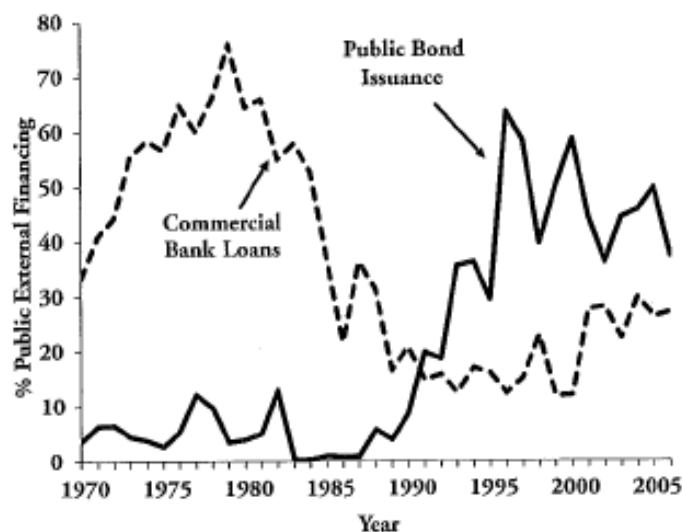
Although several factors explain the financial downturn that Latin America underwent at the beginning of the 1980s, there is little doubt that one of the main reasons lies in the huge amount of debt amassed by the countries of the region due to the influx of money coming from the first and second oil crises (González 2012: 123). As soon as Mexico declared that it was unable to pay its foreign debt in August 1982, a domino effect occurred across the region and almost all countries were forced to implement austerity reforms. Key supporters of these reforms were international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). Following the neoliberal ideas en vogue at the moment, these organizations maintained that there was no future for the import substitution model and that the time had come to undertake a major reorganization of the economy. The new paradigm promoted by the IMF and WB was encapsulated in the so-called Washington Consensus, a set of market-friendly policy prescriptions, such as privatization of state enterprises, trade liberalization and deregulation of the job market (Panizza 2009).

While not all countries of the region adopted the agenda of the Washington Consensus with the same pace and zeal, all of them ended up implementing significant economic reforms in order to control inflation and achieve stability. Fiscal policy discipline became one of the main doctrines of Latin American governments, even after the economic difficulties had been overcome. This has changed little in the last decade, in spite of the emergence of left-wing administrations of different types across the region (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2009). With the partial exception of

Venezuela (and Argentina to a certain extent), Latin American countries present today a balanced budget and relatively low levels of public debt. In fact, an important commonality of current left-of-centre forces is their fiscal prudence (Macdonald and Ruckert 2009). This represents an important achievement for a region that historically had experienced serious problems of budget discipline. How can we explain this significant development?

The first explicative factor is related to the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the growing relevance of economic globalization. In this scenario, politicians were pressed to adapt to a new international regime, in which macroeconomic stability is considered to be a top government priority. As Kaplan (2013) has persuasively argued, the fiscal prudence of most contemporary Latin American governments is directly related to a major change in the way in which they obtain money from international creditors. Whereas commercial bank loans was the main mechanism used *before* the debt crisis of the 1980s, public bond issuance became the predominant method *after* the debt crisis (see figure 3). This transformation of the structure of lending and creditor-debtor relations has translated into tighter macroeconomic constraints. Bondholders are able to enforce conditionality agreements because they exercise a strong capital exit threat: if governments do not create a market-friendly environment, they can halt financial flows and put the economy of the ‘undisciplined’ country in great economic difficulties.

Figure 3: Bond issuance supplants bank lending (16 Latin American countries, aggregate)



Source: Kaplan (2013: 32)

By contrast, commercial bank lending is characterized by a small and centralized pool of creditors, who usually help highly indebted borrowers by offering new financing instead of pushing for the enactment of harsh austerity measures. According to Kaplan, the logic behind this is ‘defensive lending’: given that commercial banks have to safeguard their own balances, they prefer to reschedule old debts in order to improve the debtors’ financial health and avoid a massive default. Although it is true that new loans are normally given with some level of conditionality (e.g. fiscal discipline and financial assistance by the IMF), the capital exit threat of commercial banks is limited due to their large stake in borrowers’ solvency. In other words, “[t]he shift from long-term banking to short-term speculative investment altered Latin America’s political economy. When countries became more indebted to global markets, they also became more vulnerable to severe credit shocks that stifled their economic autonomy” (Kaplan 2013: 11).

While the external influences described above are relevant to understand the fiscal discipline of Latin American governments, internal influences have also played an important role. During the severe financial downturns experienced in the region in the 1980s, many countries experimented with various sets of heterodox policies that often ended up aggravating rather than alleviating the economic situation. There is no better example of this than the hyperinflationary periods that countries like Argentina, Brazil and Peru underwent at the end of 1980s. This hyperinflation was generated by administrations that intended to address the consequences of the 1982 debt crisis without carrying out an economic restructuring. In effect, by maintaining the pillars of the import substitution model and avoiding the application of structural adjustments, the governments of Alfonsín in Argentina (1983-89), Sarney in Brazil (1985-90) and García in Peru (1985-90) implemented erratic and rather disastrous economic programs, which left the economy in a critical situation. As a consequence, inflation went out of control and the national economy had almost no access to international credits.

In this context, the electorate was often prepared to accept harsh measures if these promised to have the capacity to restore economic stability (González 2012). Indeed, not in few countries the implementation of market-friendly reforms with high social costs was made possible by the desperation of voters with the existing levels of inflation. In this sense, it is exaggerated to assert that neoliberal reforms were *uniformly* opposed by Latin American citizens. Given that these reforms usually contributed to control inflation, achieve economic stability and obtain a higher foreign investment, large sections of the electorate accepted to swallow the bitter pill, i.e. an

increase in economic hardship in the short run with the hope that the implemented policies would bring about an improvement in citizens' economic conditions in the near future (Weyland 1998). Once the reforms generated macroeconomic stability and low inflation, the popular support for the policies of the Washington Consensus increased.

Moreover, it is worth indicating that the neoliberal reforms brought benefits for some social groups: trade liberalization and consumer credit made imported consumer goods available to ordinary middle-class consumers (Panizza 2009: 69). As Baker (2010) has analysed in detail, Latin American citizens are in favour of free trade and foreign investment, but they are sceptical about privatization in general and pension privatization in particular. The reason for this is that the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s have facilitated the rise of consumer-based interests. After all, the dismantlement of the import substitution model has led to a wider availability of less expensive but higher-quality goods, and thus citizens are willing to have low inflation levels and free trade. Hence, "Latin American governments have not implemented a wholesale reversal of market reforms because their citizens have not called for one. Latin American governments and even the new Left have followed and been constrained by the mandate that voters have granted them: maintain free trade but curb privatization" (Baker 2010: 262-3).

1.3. Market reforms and party system (in)stability

The economic crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent market reforms also had an important impact on the party system. This is a relevant topic because the resilience of Latin American democracies does *not* go hand in hand with party system stability. In fact, the implementation of the policies of the Washington Consensus produced significant modifications of the partisan competition in many countries of the region. Given that these reforms had profound socioeconomic costs, many political actors were against them and tried to offer alternative policy proposals. Whereas worker unions and leftist parties were among the frontrunners of the opposition to neoliberalism, most right-wing parties and business elites supported the enactment of a market-based economic adjustment. This pattern of partisan preferences is predictable as it mirrors the underpinnings of the left-right cleavage. However, some countries saw the rise of political actors who preferred to oppose the policies of the Washington Consensus during their electoral campaign and ended up enacting neoliberal reforms once in power.

In sum, then, Latin American parties followed three different paths to deal with the consequences of debt crisis of 1980s in Latin America. First, left-wing parties that were against the enactment of market-based economic adjustments sought to advance alternative solutions (e.g. the political forces against Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile). Second, right-wing politicians that were in favour of the neoliberal reforms presented them as the socially costly but necessary policy package to bring economic development to Latin America (e.g. Salinas de Gortari in Mexico). The third and last path was that of populist actors or labour-based political parties that employed a bait-and-switch strategy (e.g. Fujimori in Peru and Pérez in Venezuela). Otherwise stated, they presented themselves as opponents to market-friendly reforms during the electoral campaign and once elected they opted to change course and ended up imposing neoliberal economic policies (Stokes 2001).

As Roberts (2013; forthcoming) convincingly argues, these three approaches had a varying impact on the party systems in the region. Drawing on the historical institutionalist framework, he suggests that the economic crisis and market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s should be seen as a critical juncture marking the transition from the import substitution industrialization to a neoliberal economic model. This transformation affected the political system deeply because the market-based structural adjustments not only undermined the labour movement and their affiliated mass party organisations, but also generated a growing informal sector that it is extremely difficult to organise, making thus the politicization of class cleavages much more difficult (Roberts 2002). At the same time, technocratic cadres became highly influential as they were in charge of the implementation of structural reforms promoted by international financial institutions and successive US governments (Centeno 2004; Centeno and Silva 1998; Silva 1996).

Moreover, Roberts maintains that it is crucial to examine *who* was responsible for the market reforms, since the way in which the neoliberal critical juncture was handled affected the party system as a whole. Put shortly, he contends that the three approaches indicated above resulted in two divergent political legacies: programmatic alignment vs. programmatic de-alignment of partisan competition. His argument is that when conservative political actors adopted market reforms and established left-wing parties opposed them, the main historical inheritance was programmatic alignment. In this case, the party system became structured around the market-state divide, allowing voters to elect parties that offer well-defined policy proposals. Paradigmatic examples in this regard are the evolution of the party system in Brazil, Chile and Mexico. All these countries have seen the emergence of a durable new institutional equilibrium, which is the

product of a political legacy marked by the relatively clear stances of the political parties regarding the process of market liberalization.

By contrast, programmatic de-alignment happened when established left-wing political parties, or populist actors who campaigned against structural adjustment policies, played a major role in the implementation of market reforms. In this case, a violation of the electoral mandate occurred and political parties lost their reliability. The corollary of this development is the absence of a consistent programmatic divide which organises the electoral competition and that voters have lost confidence in the existing political parties. Thus, the competition between parties is shaped by personalistic appeals, clientelist rewards and the defence of valence issues such as economic growth or public security. Examples of this pattern include Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela. These three cases are indeed characterized by a highly unstable political pattern, which is directly related to the bait-and-switch strategy of reform pursued by different political actors during the neoliberal critical juncture.

1.4. Crisis of democratic representation and party system collapse

Not surprisingly, those Latin American nations that underwent a process of programmatic de-alignment were much more in danger of suffering a crisis of democratic representation. This concept was coined by Mainwaring et al. (2006) to analyse the serious democratic malaise that unfolded in several countries of the region in the 1990s and 2000s. According to these authors, this phenomenon goes much beyond the growing political disaffection and the weakening of political parties that has been experienced in the advanced industrial democracies analysed by Dalton (2008) as well as Pharr and Puntam (2000), amongst others. To understand this difference, Mainwaring et al. (2006) provide a clear definition and operationalization of the concept in question. Assuming that the legitimacy of democratic representation is a continuous variable, crisis of democratic representation refers to the end of this continuum, where citizens do not believe they are properly represented. In empirical terms, this concept is composed of a subjective and a behavioural dimension.

The first dimension of a crisis of democratic representation is subjective: it involves the perception of voters. Citizens are dissatisfied with the way in which politics is working, have low trust in the existing political parties and other institutions that are pivotal components of the political system. Therefore, they believe that elected representatives are acting in their own

benefit rather than on behalf of their constituencies or of some vision of the common good. The second dimension of a crisis of democratic representation is attitudinal: because of their political dissatisfaction, citizens behave in an anti-systemic way. Rejecting the existing mechanisms of democratic representation is the key indicator of this behaviour. By way of illustration, citizens can refrain from electoral participation, back new parties (particularly if they rely on an populist discourse), vote for political outsiders or support popular mobilizations with an anti-establishment systemic character.

What is interesting about this conceptualization of a crisis of democratic representation is that alludes to a very specific situation, in which we not only observe that large numbers of citizens are disappointed with political parties and other basic institutions of representative democracy, but also detect that voters adopt specific actions. “Even if there were widespread citizen dissatisfaction with existing agents of democratic representation, we would be reluctant to affirm that a crisis existed unless there were behavioural indications of repudiation of those agents” (Mainwaring et al. 2006: 15). If both perceptions and behaviours mark that a crisis of democratic representation is taking place, the following question begs for an answer: which is the cut point that enables one to categorize a case as an instance of a crisis of democratic representation? Even though the authors offer extensive data (e.g. citizen trust in representative institutions, confidence in parties and parliament, electoral volatility, voter turnout, support for outsider candidates, etc.) to demonstrate that the countries of the Andean region fit the proposed definition, they do not clarify how to draw the line. According to them, this is because crisis of democratic representation should be thought of as continuum rather than a dichotomy.

Other authors have conducted similar research to understand how the economic crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent market reforms intensified problems of democratic representation in many Latin American countries. In this regard, the path-breaking work of Morgan (2011) deserves special mention as she has developed a theoretical and empirical approach that is focused on one specific failure that had a devastating impact on democracy: party system collapse. In contrast with the notion of crisis of democratic representation, party system collapse is conceived of as a dichotomous variable. It is worth noting that this concept alludes to both party deterioration and transformation in system structure. Therefore, two are the necessary and sufficient conditions that permit one to detect a party system collapse: “the system must simultaneously experience 1) a significant decline in its major component parties and 2) a transformation in the established system structure” (18). In empirical terms, she looks at two

indicators. On the one hand, to operationalize the first condition, she considers if the joint seat share of the major component parties drops below a simple majority, e.g. whether in a country like the UK, the conservative, labour and liberal parties together would obtain less than fifty per cent of the legislative seats. On the other hand, based on an adaptation of Sartori's classic approach, she proposes a five-category typology of party systems (predominant party, two-party, 2.5-party, moderate multiparty and extended multiparty) through which it is possible to operationalize the second condition. Relying on this definition and operationalization, she identifies instances of party system collapse in all democratically elected legislatures in Latin America and Western Europe from 1975 to 2005, coming to the conclusion that only four of these instances can be recognized: Bolivia in 2005, Colombia in 2002, Italy in 1994 and Venezuela in 1998.

But the strength of Morgan's work lies not only in offering a crystal clear cut point to determine if a party system collapse has taken place, but also in the development of a theory that clarifies why we should care about this phenomenon and how we can explain that this occurs. Political parties are the backbone of modern representative democracy. Their main task consists in providing a linkage between society and the state. If parties have growing difficulties to fulfil this task, democracy is under stress as representatives become unable to govern on behalf of the represented and the common good. When a party system collapses, personalistic political leaders emerge who have little interest in constructing a political party and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with liberal democracy – just think about the cases of Morales in Bolivia, Uribe in Colombia, Berlusconi in Italy, and Chávez in Venezuela. As Morgan observes, “[w]ithout party organizations to check leaders, the risk of excessive power concentrated in one person is amplified. Politics is easily subjected to a leader's whims, allowing erratic changes in policy or in the rules of the game. [...] These fluctuations create uncertainty for voters and parties, making political calculations difficult and ordinary strategies irrelevant. As parties come and go, voters must learn anew what each stands for, and they face ambiguity about how new groups will perform” (288-9).

Drawing on Kitschelt's (2000) work, Morgan further develops an interesting theory to explain the causes of party system collapse. She proposes that party systems normally exhibit complex linkages portfolios as individual parties can employ three different types of linkage: programmatic representation, interest incorporation and clientelism. Each of these types of linkage can be challenged in different ways. For instance, a major economic crisis has an impact

not only on clientelism due to the decline of state resources that can be used by incumbents, but also on programmatic representation because economic limitations can influence all established parties to adopt the same policy approach and thus no meaningful alternatives are offered to the electorate. At the same time, interest incorporation can be threatened by changes in the cleavage structure and the emergence of new concerns, since growing sectors of society will feel that existing organizations (e.g. labour unions) that influence parties are unable to channel citizens' concerns (e.g. anti-immigration attitudes).

Accordingly, an episode of party system collapse occurs when threats to linkages emerge and constraints impede appropriate adaptation. "Systems that rely on one type of linkage fail if that form is exhausted, unless the system can develop other linkage strategies to replace what was lost. Systems with mixed linkages portfolios must experience the decay of all their strategies in order for the system to collapse" (68). A basic premise behind this explanation is that party system collapses are *not* something inevitable. While economic crises and environmental constraints can instigate linkage failure, political actors and parties play an important role in either exacerbating or managing the problems posed by these crises and constraints. Otherwise stated, there are cases in which party systems have survived in spite of the emergence of serious challenges to the provision of linkage. Key examples are Argentina and Uruguay in the 1990s.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT RECESSION ON THE POLITICAL SYSTEM: TENTATIVE IDEAS FROM THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

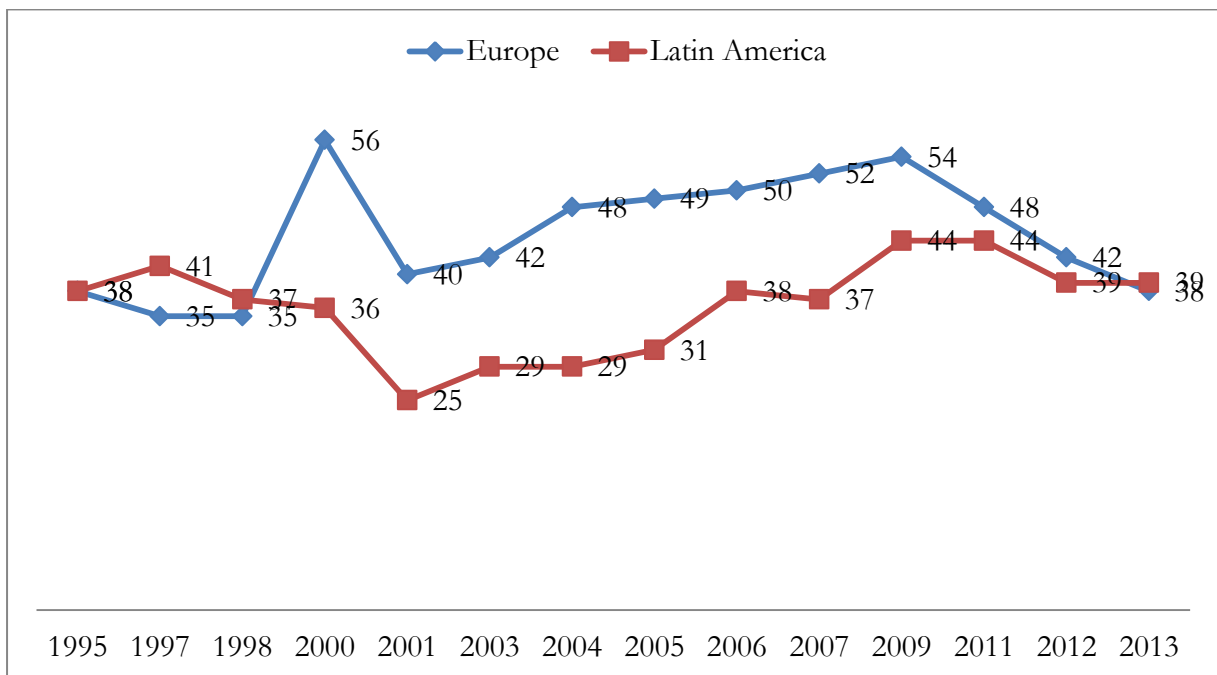
After having examined the main arguments of the existing literature on the impact of economic crises and free market reforms on the Latin American political system, the aim of this section is to discuss the lessons we can extract to analyse the Great Recession. To what extent does the reviewed literature on Latin America illuminate the ways in which the Great Recession is affecting and might transform the political system of the European countries? To address this question, in the following I will return to the four clusters of arguments discussed above and use them to suggest a research agenda about the current and future European political scenario.

2.1. What it is at stake in Europe is the defence of *liberal* democracy

To be sure, despite the troubles faced by some European democracies, it is exaggerated to assert that they are on the brink of suffering an authoritarian reversal. The Great Recession is certainly

producing dramatic socioeconomic consequences, which in turn affect the social fabric of European societies. Given that the latter are characterized by the combination of democratic institutions and extensive welfare provision, it is not a coincidence that the implementation of austerity measures generates anxiety and frustration. Not surprisingly, data from the Eurobarometer shows that a growing number of European citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with their country’s democratic system. But data from the Latinobarometer also reveals that an important amount of Latin American citizens are not very satisfied with the way in which democracy is functioning in their countries. Though this negative assessment is highly dependent on the socioeconomic conditions of respondents, it is also true that voters often act as critical citizens: while they express strong adherence to democratic values and reject authoritarian tendencies, they are disappointed with the democratic performance of their national governments (Norris 2011).

Figure 4: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (our country)” (percentage of those who say “very satisfied” and “fairly satisfied” in Europe and Latin America).



Source: Own calculations on the basis of the data provided by Eurobarometer and Latinobarometer

Although the reasons for the resilience of democracy in Europe are not very different than the ones discussed for Latin America, an important contrast lies in the role that the European Union plays in promoting and sustaining democracy across the region. There is no doubt that the EU has been a crucial actor in the transition to democracy in both Southern and Eastern Europe (Linz and Stephan 1996). To use Levitsky and Way's (2010) terminology, the density of ties and cross-border flows between countries and the EU (i.e. linkage) and states' vulnerability to the EU's democratising pressure (i.e. leverage) are the two main factors that explain why the process of democratisation has succeeded in this region. At the same, though, the Great Recession puts pressure on the EU as an institution in favour of democracy because it also plays an important role in supporting the implementation of austerity measures, which are opposed by a majority of the population.

Nevertheless, what it is more worrying is that recent trends have shown that the EU is not well prepared to deal with countries that are *already* member states and embark on institutional reforms, which eventually can lead to deteriorations in the rule of law. In this regard, the clearest example is probably contemporary Hungary (Jenne and Mudde 2012). As Jan-Werner Müller (2013) has argued, Viktor Orban's constitutional change is highly problematic as it curtails the autonomy of key institutions of the liberal democratic regime (e.g. the central bank and the constitutional court). But even for a strong detractor of Orban's reforms such as Müller, Hungary is not moving toward authoritarianism; the country is suffering a process of democratic erosion. Similar to what has been the case with certain Latin American countries, what it is a stake in many European is the quality of the democratic regime rather than the regime in itself.

This is not to say that there are no reasons to worry about the current state of democracy and the ways in which the Great Recession has an impact on the democratic regime. My point is that there should be less focus on the chances of an authoritarian backlash and more debate on the toolkit that supranational institutions have for dealing with the rise of political actors whose actions can eventually lead to deteriorations of the rule of law, and thus a process of de-democratisation. Looking at new developments in Greece (i.e. jailing of the main leaders of Golden Dawn), it is not far-fetched to argue that the EU is ill-equipped to try to defend *liberal* democracy. Enacting the very idea of "militant democracy" is anything but simple (Müller 2012). It requires clear guidelines regarding how, when and who has to decide if political actors should be banned. In the absence of these guidelines, which need to be agreed on with certain level of

consensus, the involvement of outside actors with democratically elected governments inevitably will raise suspicion of the existence of a partisan agenda (Carothers 2010).

2.2. Pressures for fiscal discipline and the potential (re)politicization of material demands in Europe

There is a growing body of literature indicating an important transformation of the political landscape in Europe. By and large this literature suggests that the rise of post-material values has paved the way for the formation of a new political cleavage, which brings to the fore identity politics and has facilitated the emergence of two new party families, namely, the Greens and the populist radical right (Bornschieer 2010; Ignazi 1992, Kriesi et al. 2008; Mudde 2007). Whereas the former is a staunch defender of multiculturalism and environmentalism, the latter supports welfare chauvinism and xenophobic attitudes. Interestingly, the very formation of this new political cleavage implies that some topics have lost preponderance while others have been gaining saliency. Outstanding among the latter is immigration and the populist radical right has been in charge of politicizing this issue.

Despite important differences in the ever growing literature on the formation of a new political cleavage in Europe, scholars usually agree that the classic class cleavage is not the only one that structures the political game. The rise of post-materialism is part of the explanation. Equally relevant is the decline of ideological divisions between parties regarding how to manage the economy. After the fall of communism, almost no European party is against the market. However, in contrast to Latin America and the United States, radical versions of neoliberalism have found little echo in Europe (the United Kingdom represents a clear exception in this regard). Although the Great Recession is bringing to the fore the question of which are the best policies to address the crisis, the solutions offered by European governments are neither radical nor very innovative. As Bermeo and Pontusson have recently indicated, “[t]he menu of policy options that governments considered in 2008 to 2010 appears to have been much narrower than the menu considered during the crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s” (2012: 8). Similar to what happened in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing relevance of financial integration has meant that national governments in contemporary Europe have a restricted set of options when it comes to dealing with the growing pressure for fiscal responsibility. This is particular evident in the case of Southern Europe (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012).

This does not mean, however, that European voters are indifferent to the implementation of austerity policies. Not few governments have been arguing that the time has come to enact painful reforms in order to save the country, at the same time as we have seen the rise of various waves of protest in several European countries. One expression of this conflict is the increasing electoral weight of radical leftist forces in countries such as Greece (SYRIZA) and Spain (United Left). The rise of these forces has shown that there is growing space for the *repoliticization* of issues, which are part of the materialist rather than the post-materialist political agenda. Seen in this light, the classic class cleavage might gain traction in the coming years. Nevertheless, it is too early to develop a prognosis about the chances of an electoral comeback of radical leftist parties in Europe. As previously contended, the Latin American experience tells us that the electorate might be able to accept harsh measures if these help to restore economic stability, and in consequence, one could think that the times are not ripe (yet) for the resurgence of the radical left in Europe.

There is something else that the Latin American experience reveals: a fundamental critique against the free market and the implementation of austerity reforms transformed into a viable electoral option relatively late after the period of economic difficulties (Roberts 2008). In other words, once the economy was stable again and the electorate realized that many of the promises of the Washington Consensus were not fulfilled, voters started to voice their anger more vehemently and political actors were able to develop enough organisational resources to mobilize citizens (Silva 2009). In this way, in the case of Latin America there was a significant time lag between the implementation of austerity reforms and the electoral triumph of more radical leftist forces. To what extent voters call for more socioeconomic redistribution is not self-evident, but rather related to the capacity of social actors to (re)politicize the existing levels of inequality and mobilize the electorate around this topic (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). Instead of assuming that European voters will demand more redistribution in the near future and thus be inclined to support leftist radical forces, it would be more fruitful to analyse which factors favour or hinder the framing of inequality and redistribution (relative to other alternative issues) as a central cleavage for political debate and policy-making.

2.3. Austerity reforms and party system (in)stability in the EU

Without doubts, one of the major problems for European political parties is how to cope with the crisis. This is particular true for social-democratic parties and centre-left parties because their

core constituencies are at odds with the implementation of austerity reforms. By contrast, right-wing parties have less trouble in enacting this kind of policies, although they have to convince voters about the necessity of the reforms and show that better times will come after their implementation. Yet right-wing parties do not have absolute leeway. Cutting welfare can strengthen existing, or support the formation of new, “latent coalitions for egalitarianism”. David Brady (2009) has coined this concept alludes to diffuse and often accidental groups of diverse citizens who come together to support redistributive policies and who become especially visible when political actors try to implement reforms that are at odds with normative expectations about alleviating poverty and establishing social equality. In other words, whether European political parties will be able to weather the storm depends mainly on their capacity to enact reforms in a way that does not dramatically affect their core constituencies and ideological profile. Nevertheless, the academic literature on European politics “has not given systematic attention to the question of how recessions or economic crises affect the role of partisanship in policy-making” (Bermeo and Pontusson 2012: 20).

The Latin American experience summarized above indicates that a challenging scenario for Europe would consist in the coming into power of centre-left forces, which promote anti-austerity measures during the elections and end up applying harsh economic measures due to international constraints. Under these circumstances, a process of political de-alignment with dramatic consequences for the party system could take place. This might be occurring in some places of Europe such as Greece. There the socialist party (PASOK) won the elections in 2009 by promoting fiscal stimulus but just after a couple of months after assuming office, it faced no other alternative than accepting the policy package supported by the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012: 169). As it is well-known, Prime Minister George Papandreou was not able to handle the critical situation of the country and had to renounce at the end of 2011. In the 2012 elections his party obtained approx. 13% of the votes, which signified a loss of approx. 30% of the votes compared to the 2009 elections.

As the Latin American experience reveals, the type of actors who is responsible for the implementation of austerity reforms tends to have a long term impact on the life of political parties. From this perspective, European social-democratic and left-wing parties should avoid the temptation of over-adapting. This means, to accept that austerity measures is the only way out of the crisis and avert the proposition of alternative policies. If they blur the boundaries between their own agenda and the agenda of right-of-centre parties there is a fertile soil for the

formation of a representation gap, i.e., that many voters feel that their ideas and interests are not taken into account. Despite the fact that the Great Recession undoubtedly is linked to the growing deregulation of the economy promoted by neoliberals, the resilience of their ideas in policy and political debates across Europe is surprising (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). Hence, social-democratic and left-wing parties should spare no effort in offering programmatic answers to the crisis. This involves going beyond ordinary policy-making and searching for innovative solutions. In the case of Latin America, technocrats *and* actors working in transnational advocacy networks have played a key role in the process of fostering programmatic adaptation of left-wing parties and generating effective policy outputs once they have conquered power (e.g. the so-called conditional cash transfer programmes). Without their contributions, Latin American countries would not be moving beyond the Washington Consensus today (Rovira Kaltwasser 2011).

2.4. Will some European countries suffer a crisis of democratic representation and the collapse of the party system?

There is an intense debate about the declining trust of European citizens in key institutions, such as political parties, the parliament and the European Union. The declining of trust is a worrying sign and could be worsened if political actors, governments and international institutions are not able to ameliorate the negative effects of the Great Recession. However, it is also true that a healthy democracy needs critical citizens: people that support the democratic regime, but at the same time demand political responsiveness and expect that governments should be able to manage the economy. In the words of Pippa Norris (2011: 110), we should be sceptical about “any over-simple claims about a uniform erosion of systems support experienced across older liberal democracies in recent decades – or indeed more widely around the world. Ideas of a democratic crisis should be rejected as an oversimplification of more complex developments”.

Accordingly, the declining trust in certain institutions is not necessarily the most disturbing warning. What it would be more troubling is that if this declining trust translates into a major change in voters' behaviour and they start to back en masse political outsiders and parties with a populist discourse. As it was stated above when discussing the experience of Latin America, only when subjective judgments are negative *and* there are clear behavioural indications of repudiation of the political system can we talk about a crisis of democratic representation as such. Although political outsiders and populist parties have been gaining electoral power in some European

countries in the last few years, no trend toward an increase or decrease of this kind of political forces can be identified. Furthermore, it is worth indicating that populism has the potential of working well as a safety valve for linkage maintenance given that it gives voice to groups who feel that their ideas and interests are not being heard by the political establishment (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

Moreover, the rise of populist forces does not necessarily imply that established political parties are destined to decay. The relevant question is thus how to deal with the Great Recession in a way that avoids the collapse of the party system? We know that external constraints give little room of manoeuvre to national governments in Europe to develop responses to the sovereign debt crisis. As a consequence, one could think that the solution could lie in the proposition of a major agreement between the most electorally relevant parties in order to show commitment and willingness to implement unpopular measures with the aim of calming the markets. While this solution is appealing, it has a significant drawback: inter-party agreements of this kind could exacerbate the bad reputation of political parties and facilitate the occurrence of a party system collapse. As Jana Morgan (2011) argues in the conclusion of her book, “parties should not respond to major crisis by closing ranks and working together. [...] If the parties cooperate and fail to provide an adequate policy response, then voters are left with no viable alternative to the status quo, and people become frustrated with the entire system and look elsewhere for representation”. Non-governing political parties should present alternative policy proposals and maintain their own profile.

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