

The Economic Crisis (2009 to 2013) and Electoral Support for the Radical Right – Some new and unexpected findings

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Abstract:

This article evaluates the influence of the economic crisis (2009 to 2013) on the vote of the radical right in Western European regions. I ask two questions: (1) has the radical right electorally benefited from the recession that has hit Western Europe in the aftermath of the US and European stock market crisis in 2008/2009? (2) Has it performed particularly well in areas that have been very hard hit by the crisis? I evaluate both questions in a longitudinal and multivariate framework; covering more than 150 regions in 17 European countries from 1990 to 2013. My pooled time series analysis, in which I control of immigration, the education level of the region and population density provides interesting results. For one, I find that the 2009 to 2013 economic crisis has merely triggered a very moderate increase of 1 percentage point in the aggregate average regional vote share of the radical right. In addition, with the exception of the regions in Greece and France the radical right has had the strongest electoral gains in regions and countries (e.g. regions in Finland and the Netherlands) that have been relatively spared from the gust of the crisis.

Key Words: radical right, electoral success, economic crisis

## Introduction

An economic crisis fosters the electoral success of far-right wing parties. Since the rise of the NSDAP in the Weimar Republic and Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, the economic crisis – right-wing extremism theorem has remained one of the most influential paradigms in social science (Berg Schlosser and Mitchell, 2000; Fukayama, 2012). In this article, I want to evaluate if this paradigm still bears salience. More precisely, I ask the question, whether western European far right-wing parties have benefited from the economic crisis that has hit Europe between 2009 and 2013 and whether the severity of the crisis has had an additional influence on these parties' vote share. The highly publicized electoral breakthrough of Golden Dawn in Greece in 2012 and the electoral comeback of Marine Le Pen's Front National in France in the same year seem to support this claim. In the context of a severe recession during which Greece's economic output shrunk by 18.6 percent, Golden Dawn multiplied its electoral support by a factor of 20 increasing its vote share from a mere .29 per cent in 2009 to 6.97 per cent in May 2012 (Ellinas, 2013). In fact, the economic crisis has allowed or facilitated an openly Neo-Nazi party to enter parliament for the first time in any Western European country, since Hitler's access to power in 1933. The second example, the French National Front, rose to new heights in the presidential and legislative elections in 2012, after years of mediocre electoral performances (Dézé, 2012). More precisely, Marine Le Pen's party garnered 17 percent of the vote in the presidential elections and around 14 percent in the legislative elections in the context of an economic recession with unemployment rates upwards 10 percent.

However despite these two salient examples, there is no unanimous pattern between the onset of an economic crisis and increased support for the radical right. Rather a first glance at the development of the vote of radical right-wing parties throughout Europe after 2009 provides a nuanced picture. While some of the economically hardest hit countries (e.g. Greece and France) have seen a spectacular rise in the vote share of far right-wing parties, others including Ireland, Portugal and Spain have not (Mudde 2013). Hence it is an open question, whether and to what degree, economic degradation provides a breeding ground for the spread of radical right-wing ideologies in the electorate. In this research, I will answer these questions adopting a regional level focus. In more detail, I will test whether the economic crisis has had an impact on the vote share of the radical right in European regions and, even more importantly, if the severity of the crisis influenced aggregate individuals' propensity to vote for parties like the French Front National, the Flemish Vlaams Belang, or the Italian Lega Nord. I test these two stipulations in both a multivariate and longitudinal framework, covering all Nuts 2 regions in 17 Western European countries from 1990 to 2013.

Through descriptive and multivariate analysis, I highlight that the crisis has moderately boosted the electoral success of the radical right in Europe between 2009 and 2013. However, contrary to my initial expectations, I also find that the radical right has tended to have the highest increases in its vote share in regions, which have been relatively spared from the gust of the crisis (for example regions in the Nordic countries). This finding puts a new twist on the long

held hypothesis that economic crisis boosts the radical right. Except for some exceptions (i.e. many regions in Greece and France) the hypothesis that the stronger the economic crisis the more the radical right benefits is wrong. Rather it seems that in a crisis situation, those areas that are only moderately or slightly hit see the biggest increase in their vote share for the radical right.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section will review the literature that talks about the link between the economy and support for the radical right. Part three, will then define and operationalize our main variables of interest economic crisis and electoral support for the radical right. The following forth section, will present the control variables, data and methods. The second to last part, will thoroughly discuss the results. The final section will then conclude and provide some avenues for future research.

### Existing literature

Since the takeover of the Nazi Party in 1933, the theory that economic downturn or recession increases the electoral benefits for radical right-wing parties has been widespread. Proponents of this theory (e.g. Frey and Weck, 1983; Payne, 1996) point to several arguments that could explain why citizens turn to the radical-right in situations of economic hardship. First, according to the classical relative deprivation approach, dire economic conditions can lead to feelings of frustrations, which might be a prerequisite for citizens to abandon mainstream parties in favour of the radical right. This approach postulates that feelings of relative deprivation result from perceived discrepancies between individuals' value expectations and their value capabilities (Runciman 1966, Gurr 1970). Whenever, value expectations – the goods and feelings individuals feel entitled to – do not match with peoples' value capabilities – the conditions in life people think they are capable of obtaining and keeping – citizens may develop frustrations, which might be directed against a culprit (Tyler and Smith, 1998). The radical right offers such a culprit for economic degradation, namely foreigners or immigrants. Implicit in this argument is that immigration actually does not have to cause unemployment or economic suffering; just that people have to believe that it does (Golder 2003, p. 438).

The second argument, while related, focuses more on policy. It states that some long lasting economic downturn undermines the credibility and trust into the government. This applies the more the government is or appears unable to tackle the crisis effectively. The prime example is the final years of the Weimar Republic. Faced with rampant unemployment, negative growth, and a social situation in the country that was degrading by the minute, chancellor Brüning's deflationary politics did not sit well with the German population in the early 1930s. The deflationary overkill, which partly reflected Brüning own policy convictions, but which was also imposed on Germany by international lenders and the dictate of the Versailles treaty, eroded individuals' trust in his moderate government, and contributed to the Nazi party's rise to power (Borchert, 1991). Beyond this famous example, Saalfeld (2002) argues more generally that a sound and pro-active policy is necessary to prevent the ascent of more radical parties. He further argues that in cases, where this pro-active anti-crisis policy is absent or not possible (e.g.

Germany in the early 1930s or Greece in the aftermath of the 2009 economic crisis) radical right-wing parties can rise to new heights.

The third argument is related to the second one, but focuses more on macro-level policy. It argues that long lasting recessions can take a big toll on the dominant party system; a situation from which radical right-wing parties might profit (Norris 2005, p. 224)). For example, in Greece the two major parties (i.e. the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement and New Democracy) have averaged upwards 80 percent of the vote in the elections in the 30 years prior to the 2009 economic crisis. However, at the crisis elections in May and June 2012, their vote share dropped to a combined 32 and 42 percent, respectively. Hence, in Greece, these crisis elections triggered a strong realignment of the electorate away from the moderate mainstream parties and towards more extreme parties such as Golden Dawn (Ellinas, 2013).

The empirical evidence in favour of the thesis that economic crisis fosters support for the radical right is widespread. For example, Leggewie (1989) as well as Loch and Heitmeyer (2001) highlight that support for right-wing parties throughout Europe is a function of negative views of one's present and future economic situation. More indirectly and using Germany in the 1990s as a case, Clark and Legge (1997) argue that voters in the most vulnerable economic positions or voters who are irritated with their economic status would be the least sympathetic to national policies that promote immigration and multi-culturalism. More macro-level studies (Betz, 1994; Givens, 2005), which operationalise economic crisis by macro-level unemployment, find that there is a positive relationship between high levels of unemployment and increased support for radical right-wing parties such as the French National Front. Moreover, Jackman and Volpert (1996), as well as Arzheimer (2009) find support for the thesis that high unemployment is beneficial for the radical right in their pan-European studies covering more than one dozen countries. In another analysis, Rydgren and Ruth (2011) study the voting patterns of Swedes across various regions and report that the unemployment level of a particular region is negatively correlated to the radical right-wing party's level of support regardless of the number of immigrants in the region

However, the list of studies that finds no relationship between economic crisis, in general, or high unemployment, in particular and increased support for the radical right, is as long as the list of studies that reports a positive association (e.g. Eatwell, 2000; Swank and Betz, 2003; Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir, 2007). For example, testing the hypothesis that during economic downturn voters realign with the radical right, using the Danish and Norwegian *Progress* parties' as examples, Anderson (1996) argues that the correlation between the economy and the support for these parties is weak at best and that unemployment does not exert any significant impact on the level of support for the radical right party. Even more pronounced, by merging data from 24 national elections surveys with aggregate information, Arzheimer and Carter (2006) report a negative correlation between unemployment and vote share for the radical right; that is these two scholars find that high unemployment actually hurts the radical right. More indirectly, Eatwell (2000, p. 418) points out that the recent success of radical right parties in Austria (FPÖ) and

Switzerland (SVP) has occurred in the context of a booming economy characterized by low unemployment rates.

Several explanations have been put forward to explain why the radical right supposedly does not profit from economic crises. For example, Knigge (1998) advances the argument that since its breakthrough the radical-right has never had a comprehensive plan to combat unemployment. Instead of providing a comprehensive solution, the parties' message is frequently limited to scapegoating foreigners and immigrants for their economic problems; a situation which does not attract a lot of electoral support (see also Anderson 2000). In a different study, Ivarsflaten (2005) introduces the economic division hypothesis which proposes that the "coalition voting for the populist right strongly disagrees on taxes, welfare provisions, and the desirable size of the public sector" (466). Using the two parties, France's *Front National* and Denmark's *Progress* to test whether blue-collar workers and small business owners – the two groups that are overrepresented in the support of the radical right – disagree over the economy yet still support the same political party, Ivarsflaten (2005) discredits the realignment hypothesis. Instead of economic factors, she states that other mainly cultural factors unit these two groups of voters.

Finally, Bloom (2012) introduces the shared pain hypothesis. He states that the "[t]he *absolute* pain of an economic slowdown is arguably felt by all groups in a society, even if the relative costs are often distributed unequally across these groups" (167). According to this hypothesis, economic downturn would impact all "economic losers" (167) to a similar degree irrespective of race and ethnicity. Bloom (2012) further states that it is individuals rather than ethnic groups that become unemployed or seek work below their qualifications. As a result he argues that politicians and parties that adopt specific economic frames have an advantage over nationalist right-wing parties who scapegoat minorities for economic problems. Studying Latvia as a case, Bloom (2013) discovers that Latvian nationalism has declined during periods of economic decline (e.g. electoral support for the TB/LNNK right-wing alliance has shrunk by more than half from more than 7 percent in 2005 and to only 3.6 percent in 2009 in Latvia's nine most populous localities). Bloom (2012; 2013) concludes that a downturn in the economy does not have a positive impact on the vote share for the radical right and as a result further discounts the economic argument behind the rise of the radical right.

Given the contradictory evidence in the literature it is important to revisit the economic crisis - support for the radical right paradigm. The economic recession that crippled Europe in the aftermath of the 2008/ 2009 banking and mortgage crisis, as the largest economic crisis since the Great Recession (1929 – 1933), provides the ideal case to evaluate whether the radical right benefits from severe economic downturn. I ask two research questions: (1) is there an increase in the vote share of European radical right-wing parties in the period 2009 to 2013 and (2) does the severity of the crisis in any given territorial unit influences possible electoral gains for the radical right. Contrary to most prior research (e.g. Golder 2003; Arzheimer 2009). I employ a regional focus to evaluate my two research questions. The use of regional data has three advantages, two

empirical and one methodological. First, the impact of the economic crisis has differed tremendously within Europe not only between countries but also between regions of the same country. For example, at the time of the Portuguese 2009 general elections annual growth rates differed by more than 4 percentage points within the country (i.e. between -5.4 for the Algarve region and -1.2 for Lisbon). Even more pronounced, regional annual growth rates differed by more than 10 percentage points in Greece at the time of the 2012 parliamentary elections (i.e. from -7.7 percent for West Macedonia to 2.7 percent for Crete). Only a more fine grained analysis at the regional level can capture this variation (Rydgren 2007, 250). The second argument is related but more practical. It is based on the postulate that citizens are more likely impacted by their close rather than their far environment. This implies that if the economic crises, in particular, and economic downturn, more generally, have an influence on aggregate vote shares for the radical right; they should have the largest influence in areas that are hardest hit (i.e. regions with high negative growth and high unemployment). A study at the regional level allows me to evaluate this conditional argument. The third argument is methodological. Adopting a regional focus not only increases the variation in the data, it also tremendously increases the degrees of freedom. Instead of comparing the radical right-wing vote share across 17 countries, I can evaluate the success of the radical right across more than 150 regions. I will do so in a multivariate setting. However, before presenting the control variables, data and methods, I must introduce and operationalize the two main concepts, the radical right and the economic crisis that has hit Europe from 2009 to 2013.

## **Dependent and independent variable**

### *The Radical Right*

What constitutes a radical right-wing party? Unfortunately, the measurement of the term is not as easy as it seems and the literature is characterized by many operationalisations.<sup>1</sup> For example, one strand of scholars (e.g. Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2005; Hainsworth 2008) uses a one dimensional definition labelling anti-immigration or xenophobia as the defining feature of the radical-right. Another group of scholars (e.g. Ignazi 2003 and Klanderman's and Mayer, 2006) uses a relative definition and considers the most right-wing party in the country as radical right. I deem both definitions inadequate. The first definition is too simplistic; as it does not capture the multiplicity of themes, which parties like the Austrian Freedom Party or the Danish Progress Party adhere to. These themes include, among others, anti-Europeanism, anti-Islam, cultural monism, economic nationalism, populism and anti-immigration (Mudde 2010). The second definition is relative. In fact, there is no evident criterion to distinguish a radical right-wing party from a conservative, but fully democratic party. For example, a party can be the most right-ward in any given country, but still not radical. For example, in Ireland, Fianna Fail is probably the party most to the right, but this party is anything but extreme. In addition, one country can have two or more radical right-wing parties. A prominent case would be Austria with the FPÖ and BZÖ.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Fennema (1997, p. 474) counts 26 definitions including 58 different features to characterize the radical right.

To render definitional matters even more complex, scholars (e.g. Mudde, 2010; 2012) distinguish between less radical and more radical far right-wing parties. The former normally operate within the constitutional arena of any given country, and accept, democratic institutions and procedures, but oppose liberal features, such as guarantees for minority rights, checks on executive authority, social equality and the acceptance of multiculturalism. The latter are more extreme in their party positions. These most rightist parties frequently embrace neo-Nazism, as well as historical revisionism and frequently condone the use of violence (Rydgren, 2007, 243). While in theory Mudde's (2010; 2012) differentiation nicely captures variation within the family of radical right-wing parties, in reality it is not as clear cut as it seems. First, even moderate radical right-wing parties have radical elements (for example, in 1988, the then leader of the French National Front called the Holocaust a detail of history). Second, it is very difficult where to draw the cut-off points between these two types of radical right-wing parties. To take the two examples, the German Peoples' Union (DVU) and the British National Front (BNF), it is unclear whether these two parties have more radical or moderate elements.

Given these caveats it is impossible to design an ideal definition. For the purpose of this paper, I use Mudde (1996) definition, which comprises three features authoritarianism, populism and the issue ownership of national identity against foreign influences. Nearly by definition other features of the radical right such as xenophobia or strong anti-immigrant rhetoric, anti-pluralism, (strong) nationalism, (strong) anti-European rhetoric, anti-Islamism, cultural monism, and anti-egalitarianism follow from this definition (Art, 2011, Balent 2012). The use of Mudde's (1996) definition also guarantees the inclusion of the same radical right-wing parties, past research (e.g. Rydgren 2005; Arzheimer 2009) has identified as such. In the analysis, I include into the analysis the combined vote share for radical right-wing parties obtained in national parliamentary elections at the regional level (For a list of the radical right-wing parties included in the analysis, please see table 1 in the appendix).

—Insert table here—

### *The Economic Crisis*

I include five macro-economic variables to determine whether economic crisis in particular, or economic hardship, more generally, impact the vote share of radical right-wing parties in Western Europe. First, I include a dummy variable for the years 2009 to 2013 into the dataset. This dummy variable should capture the economic downturn that has characterized Europe in the aftermath of the banking crisis and stock market crash in 2008/ 2009. Whether or not the country has been strongly hit (e.g. Greece and Spain), or only moderately hit (e.g. Germany or Denmark) by economic turmoil, the crisis has dominated national headlines in any Western European country post 2009. As such it might have had a real or psychological influence or both on voters in European regions. Second, I follow previous research (Knigge 1998; Steininger and Rotte, 2009) and include two commonly used economic performance indicators – the per capita GDP growth rate and unemployment rates. These two proxy variables for economic performance should indicate if poor economic performance in any European region between 1990 and 2013 has triggered higher support for the radical right. I also include an interaction term between the crisis dummy variable and the two economic performance indicators. These two interaction terms should measure if regions that have been especially hard hit by the 2009 to 2013 economic

crisis see an additional boost in the vote share of the radical right, as compared to those regions that have been relatively spared from the gust of the crisis.

## **Control Variables**

### *Immigration*

Ethnicity and immigration are at the center of party programs, slogans and propaganda put forward by the radical right. The literature (van der Bruck, Fennema, Tillie 2005, Koopmans et al. 2005) has established at least two mechanisms for why targeting and scapegoating foreigners might be successful. The first hypothesis is the ethnic competition hypothesis. It states that citizens vote for radical right parties because they want to reduce competition from immigrants over economic and social resources, such as employment, housing, and welfare state benefits (Rydgren, 2007, p. 250). The second hypothesis, the group position hypothesis, places ethnicity and immigration at the center of its argument. It argues that xenophobia and prejudice arise from a perceived threat to the ethnic national group position and the group identity posed by the increase in immigrants in citizens immediate social surrounding. (717). Both the ethnic competition hypothesis and the group position hypothesis can lead to “symbolic racism”; forms of racism where voters do not directly express their racism through direct actions or campaigns, but rather symbolically through their support for radical right-wing parties (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012). Supporting at least one of the two hypotheses there is rather strong empirical support in the literature that the vote share of radical right-wing parties augments with increases in the immigrant population (Golder 2003; Koopmans et al 2005). For example, Rydgren and Ruth (2011) find that that the largest proportion of voters for the Swedish Democrats occurred in high-immigrant areas. As it is a standard in studies on the radical right-wing vote, I operationalize immigrations by the percentage of foreigners per region.

### *Macro-level education levels*

Studies over studies (Falter and Schumann, 1988, p. 103; Mudde, 2010; LaMontagne and Stockemer 2010), report that the radical-right wing vote is strongly linked to citizens’ education levels. For example, Arzheimer and Carter (2006) conclude that someone’s education level is one of the strongest predictors of somebody’s vote propensity for the radical right. More recently, Stockemer (2012) suggests that aside from political socialisation low education is the strongest determinant of the vote share of the Swiss Peoples’ Party. For the study at hand, I extrapolate from the micro- to the macro level and hypothesize that regions with a highly educated citizenry should be relatively immune to the radical right-wing vote. I operationalize macro-level education levels by the percentage of the adult population, which own at least a university degree.

### *Urbanisation*

I expect the vote for radical right-wing parties to be lower in urban centers as compared to rural areas. This assumption is closely linked to modernization theory. I believe that the processes of modernization such as more cosmopolitan or gender equality values should have happened more pronounced in cities as compared to the countryside (see Inglehart (1990; 1997). Hence, leftist parties such as Green Parties or Social Democratic Parties that support new and modern forms of



living, environmental protection and multiculturalism are likely to have an edge over the radical right in urban areas. In contrast, in the countryside, where traditional values and beliefs are more pronounced, radical right-wing parties might perform well (Ignazi 2003). There is also direct and indirect evidence for this stipulation in the literature. For instance, Bornschier (2008, p. 33) explains that right-wing populist parties have succeeded in capitalizing the potentials of the “new cultural divide” between the cities and the countryside, whereby established parties have not addressed issues relating to the defence of tradition and opposition against multiculturalism. More indirectly, Falter and Schumann (1988, p. 104) find that “the older the people are, the more right-wing they seem to be.”<sup>2</sup> Since the ratio between older individuals to younger individuals is higher in the countryside than in the city, these demographics might further contribute to the relative electoral success of radical right-wing parties in the countryside.

## Data and Methods

This study evaluates the impact of the 2009 to 2013 economic crisis in particular, and economic hardship more generally on the vote share of radical right-wing parties throughout more than 160 regions across 17 Western European countries from 1990 to 2013. I analyse all Nuts 2 regions (the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) in these 17 countries.<sup>3</sup> The fact that these regions tremendously differ in size, social composition and economic performance allows me evaluate the influence of the five proxy variables for, economic crisis, and the three control variables on the dependent variable the radical right-wing vote share. The data for all variables comes from a multitude of sources such as the European Election Database, the Eurostat Regional Database, but also national sources (i.e. national statistical offices and national ministries such as the Ministry of Labor). In total, I have used more than 100 sources that are summarized in a codebook comprising more than 150 pages.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, I had to calculate the indicators from raw sources. For example it happened frequently that I could retrieve the absolute number of inhabitants in a country and the region size, which then allowed me to calculate the population density.

To evaluate the influence of the 2009 to 2013 economic crisis and economic hardship more generally, I use two types of methods. First, I present some descriptive statistics to highlight whether the 2009 to 2013 economic crisis has triggered an increase in the vote share of the radical right throughout European regions. I also present some graphs to illustrate whether high unemployment and negative growth trigger a boost for parties like the Austrian Freedom Party or the True Finns. Second, and more importantly, I present the results of two multivariate regression models. The first model includes the crisis dummy, unemployment rates, and growth rates, as well as the three control variables on the right hand side. On left hand side of the equation is the vote share of the radical right. The second model includes the same variables as model 1, but also includes two interactions terms (i.e. one interaction term between the economic crisis dummy variable and the economic growth rate and one interaction term between the

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<sup>2</sup> In applying the modernization loser thesis, the authors suggest that older citizens’ affinity for the radical right may be associated with growing concerns about health conditions or other uncertainties about the future (2007, p. 105).

<sup>3</sup> The 17 Western European countries included in this analysis are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

<sup>4</sup> I will be happy to share the dataset and codebook with anybody interested. Just send me an e-mail at: dstockem@uottawa.ca

economic crisis dummy and unemployment rates). This second model gauges whether the severity of the crisis has an additional influence on the vote share of radical right-wing parties. In other words, these two interaction terms gauge whether regions that are especially hard hit by the crisis see an additional boost in the vote share of parties like the French Front National or the British National Front. To control for national differences in the radical right-wing vote, as well as national tides including institutions (e.g. a proportional versus a majoritarian systems), national laws (e.g. laws on immigration and the granting of citizenship) and policy regimes (e.g. welfare state regimes), I include country dummy variables into the equation with Austria serving as the reference category.

The two models violate two assumptions of the classical linear regression model, non-correlated error terms and homoscedastic variances. For one, I find that observations within one country are not independent of each other. Rather regions that tend to display above average support for the radical right, have a propensity to show above average support for the radical right for the 23 year period covered in this research. I control for this error non-independence through the use of an autoregressive one model (AR 1), which removes the influence prior values of the dependent variable have on subsequent values of the dependent variable (Wooldridge 2010). Second, I find that the variances across observations are heteroscedastic or not similar. To smooth out these differences in the error terms of observations, I use Huber White Standard Errors (White 1980), which down-weight outliers and influential points.

Model 1 is calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Percentage of the radical right-wing vote share} = & \beta_{0j} + \beta_1*(D\_economic\ Crisis\ 2009-2013) + \\ & \beta_2*(unemployment\ rate) + \beta_3*(economic\ growth\ rates) + \beta_4*(immigrant\ population) + \\ & \beta_5*(citizens\ with\ a\ college\ degree) + \beta_6*(population\ density) + \beta_7 - \beta_{24}*(Country\ dummies) + e \end{aligned}$$

## **Results:**

Table 2 displays the development of the radical right-wing vote in Western European from 1990 to 2013. The table illustrates that the vote for the radical right has nearly doubled between the early 1990s and the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, the table displays that the increase in these parties vote share has been most pronounced between 2004 and 2008. In contrast, during the economic crisis or in the years 2009 to 2013, the radical right has merely gained a moderate 1.2 percentage point of the vote. This indicates that overall the crisis has only had a small influence on voters and their propensity to support a party at the far right of the ideological spectrum. In addition, the bivariate relationship between the two performance indicator – unemployment rates and economic growth rates, on the one hand, and the radical right-wing vote share on the other hand, does not support the hypothesized relationship of increased vote shares for the radical right in situations of severe economic difficulties. Rather contrary, figures 1 and 2, illustrate that economic hardship is not a driver in the vote share for the radical right. Rather figures 1 and 2 illustrate that there is no clear cut relationship between the two economic performance indicators, economic growth rates and unemployment and the radical right-wing vote. At first glance, this indicates that the radical right neither benefits nor suffers from high or low percentages of the population without work. The same applies for positive or negative economic growth.

—Insert table 2 about here—

—Insert figures 1 to 2 about here—

The multivariate regression models mainly confirm the results from the descriptive statistics. Model 1 indicates that the vote share of radical right-wing parties has increased by 1.2 percentage point between 2009 and 2013. This implies that the radical right has, if at all, only moderately benefited from the economic and social hardship that has swept over many of the European regions in the years 2009 to 2013. In fact, its vote share has increased less than in the 3 years prior to the crisis, which throughout Europe have been characterized by relative economic prosperity. Equation 1 also confirms that unemployment and economic growth have little to no influence on the vote share of the radical right. For the first of the two indicators, unemployment, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, but its substantive influence is tiny. The model predicts that a gap of 10 percentage points in unemployment trigger a mere one percentage point gap in electoral support for the radical right. The influence of the second economic performance indicator is nil. Hence, it appears from model 1 that economic factors only very moderately matter when it comes to explaining and predicting the vote of parties like the British National Front, the Danish Progress Party or the Italian Liga Nord. However, based on the evidence from model 2, this first impression is only partly correct. Equation 2 indicates that during the economic recession from 2009 to 2013, the radical right has had the largest electoral gains in areas that have been relatively spared from the crisis. Both interaction terms have a reversed than expected sign (i.e. the interaction between the economic crisis and unemployment is negative and the interaction term between economic crisis and economic growth is positive). In this sense, the model predicts that regions with high unemployment during the crisis have actually seen declining support for the radical right, whereas regions with still relatively low unemployment rates during the economic crisis have likely seen its vote share increase. For economic growth, the predicted relationship is analogous; regions which have maintained relatively high growth rates during the crisis have seen the strongest support for the radical right.

To highlight this (unexpected) relationship, I compare two hypothetical regions. Let us assume region one has been relatively spared from the crisis. In 2010, it has an unemployment rate of 8 percent and a positive growth rate of .5. In contrast, region two is hardly hit by the crisis, with an unemployment rate of 20 percent and a negative growth rate of 3 percent. Further assuming that the regions are in Belgium, have 10 percent foreigners and 30 percent college educated individuals in its population, as well as a population density of 500, we obtain the following predicted values in the vote of the radical right in the two regions: 10.46 percent of the vote for the region that has been relatively spared by the crisis and 6.87 percent of the vote for the region that has been hard hit. The raw data rather supports these conclusions. For example, 4 of the 5 economically hardest hit countries (i.e. Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Iceland) in the time span 2009 to 2013 have not seen the emergence of the radical right. Other countries that have suffered strongly have seen their vote share for the radical right-decrease. For example, in Italy the main radical right-wing party the Liga Nord lost more than half of its vote between 2008 where the party garnered 8.3 percent of the vote to 2013, where it received a mere 4.08 percent of the popular vote. In contrast, countries, which have been relatively immune to the crisis or recession that has started in 2009 such as the Netherlands and Finland have seen an

tremendous increase in the vote for the radical right. For example, in the Netherlands the Party for Freedom and Democracy (PVV) nearly tripled its vote share during the economic crisis from 5.89 percent obtained in 2006 to 15.45 percent obtained in 2010. The True Finn's, the Finnish radical right-wing party, had an even more stunning success. The party increased its vote share by more than 4 times from 4.05 percent in 2007 to 19.04 percent in 2011. Many regional examples confirm this pattern. For instance, in Switzerland, the two regions with the highest unemployment rate and second and third lowest growth rate, respectively, the Lemaneque Region and Ticino have had the lowest support for the Swiss Freedom Party in the country's 2011 general elections.

In sum, rather clear results come to the fore from this research. For all Western Europe, it seems that the radical right has benefited moderately from the economic hardship that swept through Europe between 2009 and 2013. However, these benefits have not been highest in areas hardest hit by the crisis. Rather contrary the radical right has benefited the most from the economic recession in countries and regions that have been spared by the gust of the crisis. For theory, it appears that it is more the "fear from the economic crises" than a real economic crisis that fosters increased support for the radical right. Consequently, it seems that the crisis rhetoric, which parties like the True Finns employ, can prove successful in attracting voters in among others, the Nordic countries or the Netherlands, in a setting where citizens are afraid that the same crisis that hit Spain, Greece or Ireland could hit their own country. However, there are two countries that are exceptions to the rule, Greece and France. As already noted, Greece as probably the hardest hit country by the economic crisis, has seen the upsurge of a Neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, which attracted 7 percent in 2012 and the consolidation of the vote of approximately 15 percent of another radical right-wing party, the Popular Orthodox Rally. In France, which has also been relatively hard hit after 2009 (with increased unemployment of upwards 10 percent and trailing or negative growth rates over the past 4 years), the Front National could double its vote share from 7 percent obtained in the 2007 legislative election to 14 percent received 5 years later. In both Greece and France, we also find that regions hardest hit by economic hardship (i.e. Central Macedonia in Greece and Nord-Pas-de-Calais in France) are frontrunners in radical right wing support. Future research should evaluate why Greece and France do not follow the pattern discovered in this research.

Out of the control variables, only one indicator, education or the percentage of citizens' with a college degree, seems to influence the radical right-wing vote. Both equations 1 and 2 predict that per every 5 percentage points a region has more university educated citizens, the vote for the radical right increases by 1 percentage point. This finding is surprising as it indicates highly educated areas have higher support for the radical right in the aggregate. However, many highly educated countries (e.g. Switzerland, Norway and Austria) are characterized by a high vote share of parties like the Swiss Peoples Party or the Norwegian Progress Party. The same applies for many highly educated regions in one country (e.g. the Northern Regions in Italy). However, while I can establish aggregate trends, I cannot establish who in these regions votes for the radical right. It is still highly possible or even likely that citizens with a low education support the radical right in these areas. In contrast, both the size of the immigrant population as well as the level of urbanism per region seem not to influence the vote share of the radical right. Hence, it appears that it is not immigration per se that causes people to support the radical right, but rather the belief that immigrants (regardless of whether there are many or few in a territorial

unit) can cause social, cultural and economic problems (Golder 2003, 438). It also seems that the radical right does not have a rural base. Rather the results of this study indicate that radical right-wing parties can do well in urban and rural areas

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have tested the “economic crisis breeds extremism” thesis in the framework of the 2009 to 2013 economic recession. I only find lukewarm evidence for the hypothesis that the radical right benefits from a severe economic recession. For one, I find that aggregate level regional support for European radical right-wing parties has only very moderately increased between 2009 and 2013. Even more importantly, and in contrast to conventional wisdom, my results indicate that it is not the hardest hit countries and regions that see the strongest increase in the vote share of parties like the True Finns or the Swiss Peoples’ Party, but those, which are the least or only moderately hit. Hence, the economic crisis has had more of psychological than a real material impact. As such it is likely that the simplistic propaganda put forward by the radical right blaming the European Union, mass immigration and the corrupted elites for present or future economic suffering increase fears within the population in still relatively well-off regions and countries. Inhabitants there might fear that if they do not do anything now, their economic situation might be degrading to levels experienced in Greece, Spain or Portugal. In contrast, in many of the hardest hit countries, the radical right does not seem to be an option (e.g. Ireland, Spain) or is declining in influence (e.g. Italy). However, there are exceptions to the rule. These two exceptions are Greece and France, both of which are hard hit by the post 2009 recession and both of which have seen an upsurge in the radical right-wing vote. In these two countries, the hardest hit regions are also those with the highest vote share for the radical right. Future research could evaluate why there is such a discrepancy between Greece and France and the rest of Western Europe.

More generally future studies should evaluate the tremendous increase in the radical right’s vote shares in the Netherlands and Finland, and to a lesser degree, in Sweden and the UK. What is the causal role the 2009 to 2013 economic recession has played in this accession? How has the radical right framed the crisis and why has this framing been successful there but not elsewhere? Equally importantly, future studies could evaluate the reasons for which a radical right-wing party had not emerged in Iceland, Spain or Portugal. Finally, more work needs to be done to look at other crises (e.g. leadership crises, social crises or cultural crises) and their influence on the radical right-wing vote. Maybe several high scale corruption scandals, societal clashes between natives and immigrants, a cultural void or the feeling of no longer knowing where one belongs to could be the type of crises the radical right profits more from than it does profit from an economic crisis.

## Appendix:

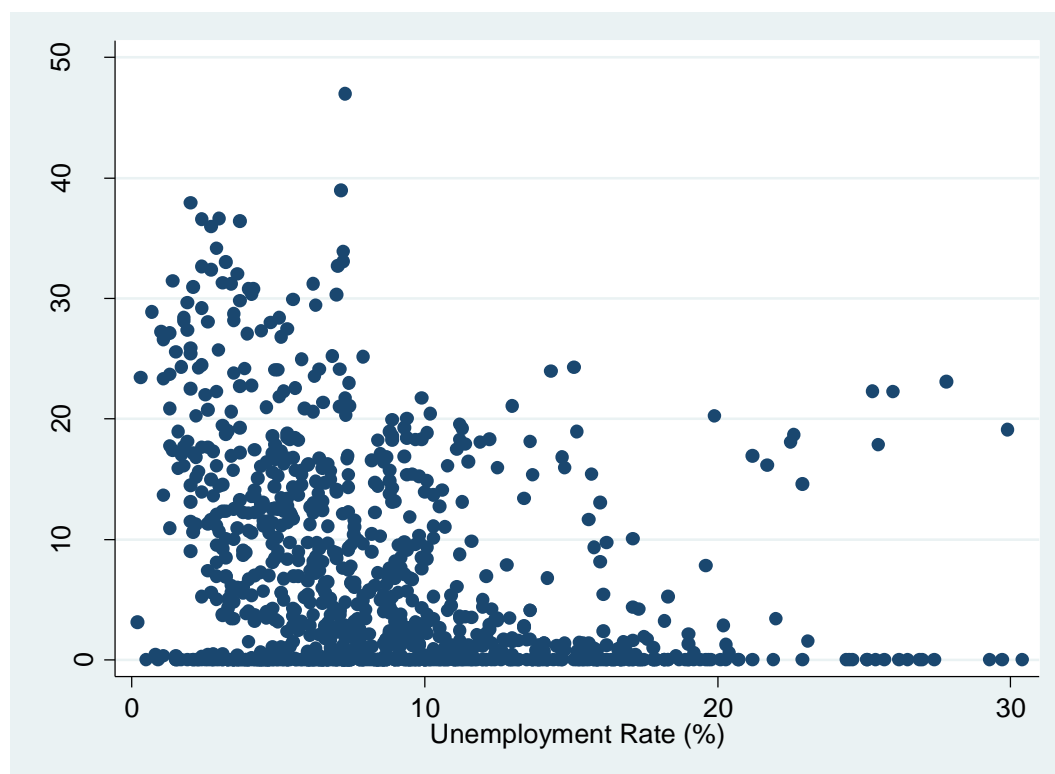
**Table 1: List of all parties coded as radical right**

Country	Party	Party acronym
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	FPO
	Alliance for the Future of Austria	BZO
Belgium	Flemish Block	VB
	Flemish Interest	VB
Denmark	Danish People's Party	DF
	Progress Party	FP
Finland	Perus True Finns	PS
	Alliance for Free Finland	VSL
France	Front National (National Front)	FN
	Mouvement pour la France (Movement for France)	MPPF
Germany	The Republicans (Die Republikaner)	REP
	National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands)	NPD
	Deutsche Volksunion	DVU
Greece	Popular Orthodox Rally(Laïkós Orthódoxos Synagermós)	LA.O.S
	Golden Dawn (Politiki Anixi)	ANOIX
Iceland	-	
Ireland	-	SF
Italy	Italian Social Movement - National Right (Movimento Sociale Italiano -Destra Nazionale)	MSI-DN
	LOMBARDA - Northern (Lombardy) League (Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania)	LEGA
	North League (Lega Nord)	LN
Netherlands	Party for Freedom - Group Wilders (Groep Wilders / Partij voor de Vrijheid)	PVV
	List Pim Fortuyn (Lijst Pim Fortuyn)	LPF
Norway	Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)	FRP
Portugal	People's Monarchist Party (Partido Popular Monárquico)	PPM
	National Renovator Party (Partido Nacional Renovador)	PNR
Spain	-	
Sweden	Swedish Democrats	SD
Switzerland	Freedom Party of Switzerland (Freiheits-Partei der Schweiz / Parti suisse de la liberté )	FPS/PSL
	Tessinian League (Lega dei Ticinesi )	Lega
	Swiss Democrats	SD/DS
	Federal Democratic Union (Eidgenössische Demokratische Union / Union Démocratique Fédérale)	EDU/UDF
United-Kingdom	British National Party	BNP

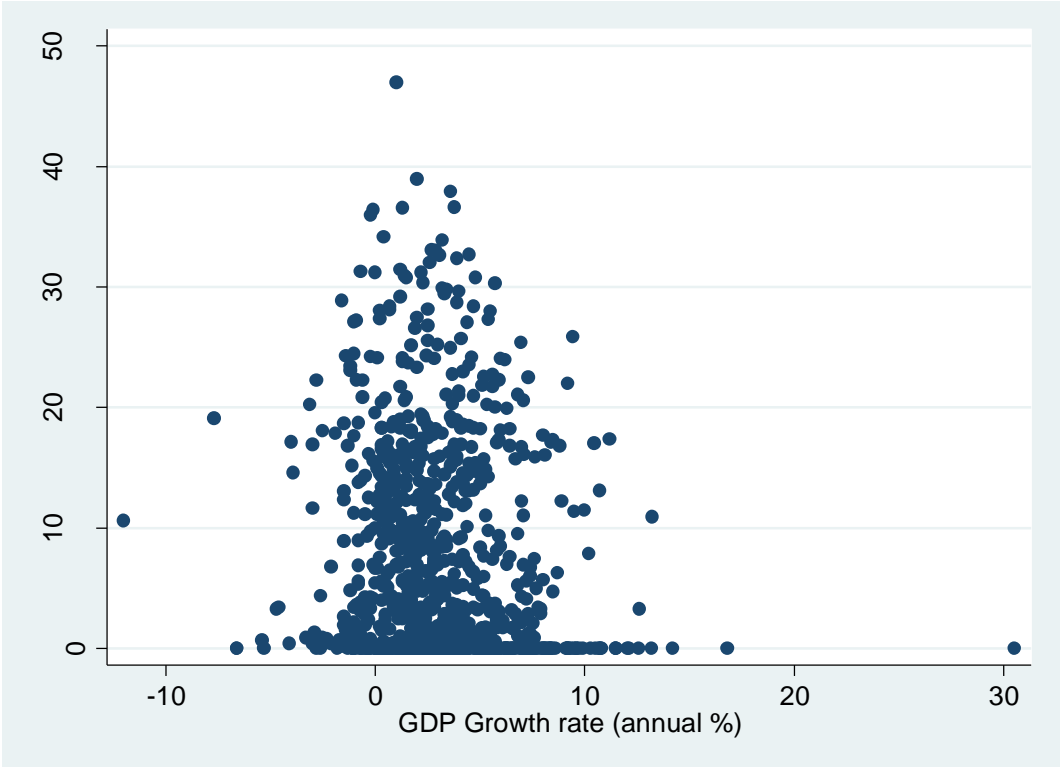
**Table 2: Development of the vote share for radical right-wing parties (1990 to 2013)**

Period	The radical rights average regional vote share	N
1990 - 1994	5.70 percent	333
1995 - 1999	6.70 percent	217
2000 - 2004	7.00 percent	284
2008 - 2008	9.11 percent	212
2009 - 2013	10.37 percent	265

**Figure 1: The relationship between regional unemployment and the radical right-wing vote**



**Figure 2: The relationship between regional economic growth and the radical right-wing vote**





**Table 3: The results of the two multivariate regression models**

	<b>Model 1</b>		<b>Model 2</b>	
	<i>Beta Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>Beta Coefficient</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
D_Crisis	1.19**	.55	3.80***	.89
Unemployment Rate	.10**	.05	.17***	.05
Economic Growth	-.002	.05	-.10**	.05
Interact-Crisis-Unemployment			-.40***	.07
Interact-Crisis-Growth			.47***	.17
Immigrant Population	-.01	.04	.03	.04
Citizens with University Degree	.19***	.04	.17***	.04
Population Density	-.0001	.0002	-.0003	.0002
D_Belgium	-15.73***	1.43	-15.87***	1.41
D_Denmark	-11.82***	1.23	-11.84***	1.21
D_Finland	-20.54***	1.55	-20.23***	1.52
D_France	-11.86***	1.38	-11.72***	1.34
D_Germany	-21.59***	1.16	-21.90***	1.15
D_Greece	-18.10***	1.14	-18.25***	1.12
D_Iceland	-23.89***	1.39	-23.30***	1.36
D_Ireland	-23.19***	1.15	-22.37***	1.10
D_Italy	-16.93***	1.54	-16.84***	1.52
D_Norway	-7.69***	1.56	-7.50***	1.51
D_Portugal	-22.17***	1.14	-21.19***	1.12
D_Spain	-25.88***	1.46	-24.85***	1.40
D_Sweden	-22.93***	1.19	-23.31***	1.18
D_Switzerland	.89	1.86	.46	1.88
D_UK	-24.20	1.29	-24.00***	1.25
Constant	19.85***	1.19	19.53***	1.18

Rsquared .69, N=1024,  
\* p < 0.1 \*\* p < 0.5 \*\*\* p < 0.1

Rsquared .71, N=1024  
\* p < 0.1 \*\* p < 0.5 \*\*\* p < 0.1

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