Great recession, great cooperation?
Conflict and Consensus in Parliament during the financial crisis.
An introduction

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Government-opposition dynamics in southern European countries during the financial crisis

FIRST DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION
Introduction

The international financial crisis has hit Europe, especially its ‘periphery’, remarkably hard, with deep consequences at economic and political level. A series of works have explored and explained the public policy reforms undertaken\(^1\); others have examined the electoral costs of such a difficult situation\(^2\). An important aspect that has not been addressed in literature, despite its importance in empirical and theoretical terms, is the impact of the crisis on the level of consensus in Parliament. The lack of cooperation between parliamentary party groups and the government has significant consequences in terms of bills’ passage and legitimacy, and even in terms of government survival in case of technical or minority governments. The impact of the crisis on the consensus in Parliament offers an interesting theoretical puzzle: there is no intuitive or easy answer. On the one hand, governments are proposing a series of unpopular measures to which opposition parties – and sometimes even members of the majority – have little interest to be associated with. On the other hand, due to the increasingly alarming financial situation, several appeals on behalf of the nation have been launched by the governments of all European democracies calling for the opposition parties’ cooperation, especially from 2011 onwards.

Furthermore, the European Commission influence has grown considerably in the countries most in jeopardy. As already pointed out by the extant literature a few years ago, “virtually every policy area is now affected to a greater or lesser extent by the EU. [...] National elections are still contested on the basis of policy choices, but policy choices are substantially decided in Brussels” (Bulmer and Radaelli 2004, pp. 2-3).

In this period of crisis, this dynamic has been stressed even further. Especially in those countries most acutely hit by the crisis, the European Union has acquired a key influence also on the socio-economic policy areas and has started recommending the measures that are to be approved by the national governments. This has happened in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain, where countries and banks have been bailed out and in which the international lenders – the European Central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Commission (EC) – have set conditions for the loan; but also in Italy and more recently in Cyprus. Recommendations go in the direction of an extremely quick reduction of public debt or deficit, but also indicate a whole series of structural reforms. Even in countries which had not been bailed out, the influence of the EC on the budget draft is undoubtedly substantial. Thus a clear trend has been registered: an increase of the European influence over (or even a europeanisation of) the usually controversial sectors of social and economic policy. And such a trend might bring to a stronger collaboration among the mainstream parties, in government and opposition, for reasons of commitment with the EU and responsibility.

\(^1\) See for example Matsaganis 2011; Matsaganis 2012; Navarro 2012, Royo 2012.

As a consequence, parties in Parliament (especially those in opposition) have found themselves faced with a dilemma: choosing between the need to cooperate with the government, in order to overcome the crisis and show the international actors a responsible behaviour, and the opportunity provided by a weakened government to stress their adversarial position, to be more easily re-elected and possibly get into power. The present paper introduces a collection of essays exploring this dilemma in Southern European countries. We will first examine this question through a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the opposition voting behaviour on socio-economic issues, in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In doing this, we will try to understand not only what kind of impact the crisis has had on the consensus in Parliament in these four countries, but also whether something has changed in the government-opposition dynamics since the resignation of the Prime Minister (PM) and the appointment of a new government – which occurred in all of the four cases, in the course of 2011 – and whether there has been any difference between these dynamics in the two countries where new general elections took place immediately after the PM’s resignation and in the two where they did not.

Finally, we will focus on the European Parliament (EP). As we know, there is not a clear government-opposition division across the EP. However, studies have shown that MPs behave differently when their national party is ‘in government’ in the EU Council and Commission. In other words, government-opposition conflicts at the European level reflect themselves in the European Parliament (Hix and al. 2006). This is particularly true for very relevant legislation or political deals, for which leaders in the Council or Commission pressure ‘their’ MEPs to support those deals. More generally MEPs also find themselves – as their counterparts in national parliaments – under two contrasting pressures, induced by the crisis. On the one hand, there is a pressure for cohesion, led by the same sense of responsibility and state of emergency felt by national opposition parties. On the other, the financial crisis has also had the potential to widen the drift between parties and, above all, between countries. Therefore, given its multi-national and multi-dimensional nature, the EP represents a perfect laboratory to capture the consequences of the financial crisis on the parliamentarians’ behaviour from a wider European perspective. We therefore wish to explore the effects of the financial crisis in both a national and a supranational context.

Consensus, the crisis and the opposition’s choice

The degree of consensus in Parliament is the result of two contrasting pressures. One comes from the need of opposition parties to mark their position as distinct from that of other parties. This is a pressure towards conflict and pushes political parties to signal their distance from the government policy positions. The other is a pressure towards cooperation and comes from the need of government to ensure a large support to their policies, echoed by the opposition’s wish to take part in the decision-making and influence policy decisions. In sum, consensus in Parliament is given by the balance between a tendency towards conflict and
towards cooperation. As a rule, the latter prevails: an extremely high level of consensus in the law-making process has been found in almost all the European parliamentary democracies (Andeweg et al., 2008; Christiansen and Damgaard, 2008; Cowley and Stuart, 2005; Giuliani, 2008; Kaiser, 2008; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006), to such an extent that we can affirm that parties generally are “in opposition, in the sense of being out of government, but not necessarily in disagreement on a continuing basis with government” (Norton 2008, p. 241). Within the EP, a similar pressure to choose amongst conflict and cooperation across parties is visible. On the one hand, MEP’s have incentives to act cohesively to maximise their chances of being influential. On the other, party lines, nationalities and government-opposition dynamics are motors that drive towards conflict. As observed in national parliaments, however, cooperation prevails as well in the EP: in the average, about two thirds of legislation is passed with the consensus of a ‘grand coalition’ composed of the European Popular Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Liberals.

With the financial crisis the usual opposition parties’ dilemma between conflict and cooperation has become particularly complex. At the national level, the difficulty of borrowing for most European countries – and for some, the conditions set by the ECB, IMF and EC for the loan – forces governments to make radical changes in their policies, notably in areas such as taxation, pensions, labour policy, etc. Austerity measures are by their very nature unpopular and, as stated by the classical economic voting theory, in bad economic times voters are much more likely to withdraw their support for the government (Lewis-Beck, 1988). This ‘golden rule’ has not been disconfirmed by the current crisis: in 2011 we witnessed the fall of the incumbents in all four countries of Southern Europe. As noted by Bosco and Verney (2012), in this critical situations governments are always ‘wrong’. “The economic storm that has broken out in Southern Europe has shown that when incumbents are ‘responsible’ – abiding by the agreements with the external actors – they end up neglecting their voters’ demands. [...] On the other hand, when incumbents avoid being ‘responsible’ and/or try to be primarily responsive to their voters, they lose international credibility, with dangerous consequences for the management of national sovereign debt and hence for the economic health of the country” (2012, p. 133). These two extremes are well represented by the cases of Zapatero in Spain, on the one side, and Berlusconi in Italy, on the other. The first fell because his voters felt betrayed, the second had to resign because he hadn’t acted enough responsibly in order to ensure the required financial stability for his country.

Political opportunities of opposition parties in such a critical scenario are conflicting: they have a choice between the need to cooperate with the majority to influence the direction of far-reaching socio-economic changes, in order to overcome the crisis, and the chance to weaken a fragile government even further and

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3 Source: VoteWatch.eu for the 7th legislature.
4 Only in Spain elections would have normally been called just four months later, while the Portuguese, Greek and Italian governments were all close to their mid-term point (the parliamentary term is five years in Italy, while it is four years in Portugal, Greece and Spain).
possibly get into power if elections were held. While the executive has to act responsibly, deepening the tension between its representative and governing function in favour of the latter, the opposition parties often can grant themselves the luxury not to.

As their colleagues in national legislatures, the financial crisis put also the MEPs under two contrasting stresses. On the one hand, there is a pressure towards cooperation. The decisions taken at the EU level following the crisis are of extreme importance, relatively urgent and are the results of difficult negotiations at the Member States level. Many of these decisions, moreover, have been passed at an inter-governmental level, out of the traditional legislative procedure. As the literature shows, the EP has in many cases acted as a competence maximiser (see, for example, Farrell and Héritier 2007, Héritier et al. 2013, Moury 2007), in the sense that it wants to maximise its influence on the decision-making process. All these factors strengthen the need for the EP to act cohesively, in order to, out of responsibility, ensure a quick and safe passage of these measures and/or to increase its influence on them. On the other hand, the crisis also induces a strong pressure towards conflict, for two obvious reasons. First, the measures mentioned above are very ideological by nature and also entail considerable delegation to the EU level. As a consequence, they are likely to split the EP across party lines (left/right and pro/anti-EU integration). Second, the recent socio-economic measures entail very different costs and benefits for Member States according to whether they are creditors or lenders, or whether they belong to the Euro-zone or not. This would promote new divisions within the EP also along geographical lines.

Some (preliminary) research hypotheses

Little is said by the existing literature about the possible conduct of the parliamentary parties given such an extreme quandary. Traditionally, consensus in Parliament has been thought to be affected by the features of the political system in which it operates, such as type of government, type of parties and party competition, institutional resources (Duverger 1951; Oberreuter 1975; Pulzer 1987; Sartori 1966). Typologies based on the mentioned systemic factors are still functional and effective, yet they rely on models based on an ideal image of democracy that still exists in theory, but no longer corresponds to the actual performance of political actors (Andeweg et al. 2008; Cowley and Stuart 2005; Giuliani 2008; Kaiser 2008; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca 2006). Consensus in Parliament has been proved to be affected also by non-systemic variables such as the type of legislation and policy area under discussion (De Giorgi, 2011; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Jenkins, 2010; Rose, 1984; Tsebelis, 2002).

In particular, the opposition parties’ behaviour in Parliament is likely to be more adversarial on economic and social policies, since parties are expected to represent different socio-economic interests; on the other hand, the highest level of consensus is usually expected on matters of national interest commonly affecting the whole electorate, such as foreign affairs and defence (Rose, 1984). The idea that ‘policy determines
politics', i.e., the nature of issues entails distinct patterns of cooperation and conflict (Lowi, 1972; Wilson, 1980) points to the relevance of issue-voting, which has an established tradition among scholars of decision-making and roll call voting (Clausen, 1973; Erikson, 1978; Francis, 1967; Kuklinski, 1978; Miller and Stokes, 1963). Furthermore, the saliency that parties give to different issues has an impact on their voting behaviour in parliament (Carammia and De Giorgi, 2011; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006; Stecker, 2011): low issue salience suggests lack of attention from the public, hence lower incentives for political parties to compete. In contrast, the more a party (and its electorate) assigns relevance to an issue, the more costly it will be to behave consensually.

Although the legislation presented by the governments to save their country from the worst effects of the financial crisis might be considered as related to national interests, it is also clearly related to socio-economic issues and innately salient. Hence, what we hypothesise and will try to verify through the present comparative work is that, due to the financial crisis, the controversy in Parliament towards the government legislation increases: since the beginning of the crisis, we expect the level of consensus between the government and opposition parties to decrease as the number of socio-economic and salient policies discussed in parliament increase.

However, as pointed out by the existing literature, the nature of parties and the type of party competition constitute a crucial variable explaining the behaviour of the opposition in parliament (Duverger 1951, Sartori 1966, Flanagan 2001). In particular, we expect to find a great difference between those political parties proposing extreme societal changes, the so-called radical parties, which are usually permanently in opposition, and those with a more moderate stance, the mainstream parties, which usually alternate in government. We expect this difference between permanent and alternative opposition to play a crucial role in the choice to either support or contrast the economic measures proposed by the governments. As a result, in our opinion we will have two different kinds of opposition: the one carried out by the mainstream parties – that is, those parties with government aspirations, which expect to be called to replace the government in office in the near future – will behave in a more cooperative way; while the one represented by those parties that are permanently excluded from power – the more radical – will radicalise their positions in the legislative arena even further.

As pointed out by Mair (2011), it seems that “governing capacity and vocation” have become characteristic of one more or less restricted group of parties which belong to the mainstream of the party system and are able to offer voters a choice of government. On the other hand, the capacity of “representation”, or expression of the people voice, when it hasn’t moved completely outside the legislative arena, has become the characteristic of a different group of parties. These parties constitute the “new opposition”. They rarely govern, they are usually distinguished by a strong populist rhetoric and, even if not equal to the anti-system parties of Sartori (1976), they share with those parties a kind of “semi-responsible”, if not completely “irresponsible”, opposition. “In other words, it is possible to speak of a growing divide in European party systems between parties which claim to represent, but don’t deliver, and those which deliver, but are no longer seen to represent” (p. 14). This divide is crucial for understanding the changing behaviour of parliamentary opposition in European democracies, and certainly deserves an in depth empirical investigation.
In a similar vein, many scholars have already worked on the impact of euro-scepticism – and conversely of pro-European attitudes – on the national government-opposition dynamics and party competition (Hooghe et al. 2004, Sitter 2001 and 2002, Szcerbiak and Taggart 2003) and on the voting behaviour in the EP (Hix and al. 2007). Given the important influence of the EU on the measures taken in response to the crisis, we thus expect the traditionally pro-European parties to be more likely to cooperate than before on socio-economic measures, because those follow the European Union recommendations/orders. Alternatively, we expect the more euro-sceptic parties to have fewer incentives than before to collaborate, when the EU is influencing legislation.

Thus, although we expect a general decrease in the level of consensus after the onset of the crisis (due to the rising number of salient and socio-economic policy decisions), we expect the net impact of the crisis on the opposition parties’ behaviour to significantly vary from one party to another. Since the onset of the crisis, the mainstream and pro-European parties which usually alternate in government are expected to behave more consensually than they would have done for similar policies in other circumstances. We expect the contrary to be true for the radical parties. Obviously, these two hypotheses are closely related, as parties that are permanently out of government tend to be more euro-sceptic (Taggart 1998, Sitter 2001).6

While the first three hypotheses apply to both national and European parliament, an additional hypothesis relate to the shift in time of national opposition parties. As stated above, austerity measures are by their nature unpopular and so it is the government that has to implement them. In other words, during the financial crisis the major opposition parties have a better chance of replacing the incumbents in case of new elections. This idea is consistent with the literature that economic and financial crises tend to lead to government instability and termination (Browne et al. 1986)7. The current crisis makes no exception. On the contrary, the incumbent punishment seems to have become the rule of nearly all the elections run in Southern Europe since 2011. Of all the national elections held in the last two years in the four countries under analysis, just one has witnessed the victory of the incumbent: the Portuguese presidential election in early 2011.8 The impact of the economic crisis on the political developments of Southern Europe was clear and undoubtedly negative for the incumbents, although this did not always mean a clear victory of the main opposition parties. In several of the last elections, in fact, the incumbent parties’ loss did not coincide, as would normally have been expected, with the official opposition’s gain. In Greece the electoral results

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6 It is actually so hard to combine euro-sceptic stances with government ambitions, that euro-sceptic parties that want to become credible coalition partners frequently moderate their hostility to Europe (Conti and De Giorgi 2011, Costa Lobo and Magalhães 2011).

7 This argument is clearly supported in Portugal, which had already experienced two financial crises that pushed the country into asking for international financial assistance from the IMF in 1978-1979 and in 1983-1985. Those interventions, like the current one, triggered political instability and early elections.

8 It has to be noted that, although according to the Constitution the Portuguese presidents would potentially have quite a strong set of powers, in practice the Portuguese presidents have tended not to use them. So, since they do not play a direct role in the government of the country, they are less likely to be held responsible for its bad status by the voters.
were so confused that one further election had to be called soon after that of May 2012. In Spain, despite the 15.1 per cent of the total vote lost by the Spanish Socialist Party, the People’s Party increased its own support by only 4.7 per cent (Bosco and Verney 2012). In Italy, the same happened to the centre left coalition which was expected to easily win the election held in February 2013. Only in Portugal the vote increase for the centre right PSD, at the last general election in 2011, exceeded the incumbent socialists’ loss. However, even given this variegated picture, since the outbreak of the crisis, the opposition’s opportunities in case of elections are certainly higher than in normal times. Therefore, our fourth research hypothesis relates to variation in time and across cases, within the same period of crisis. We expect that the more the government is in jeopardy, the greater the opposition’s incentives to fight rather than to support the executive. Hence, we posit that, once the financial crisis has begun, the opposition behaves in a more conflictual way when the government’s incumbency is at risk – for instance, when it lacks a majority of seats in parliament or its popularity declines – and in a less conflictual way when it is not – i.e., when elections have just been held or technocratic governments, rather than true political competitors, are in charge. The empirical cases under investigation, given the political differences mentioned above, will allow us to test this hypothesis accurately.

The (economic and political) crisis in Southern Europe

In this special issue, we would like to test our argument in Southern European countries, which experienced the greatest pressure from the crisis. Apart from their geographic proximity, as asserted by Bellucci, Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck, these systems actually share controversial features at both political and economic level. The sarcastic acronym PIGS – i.e., Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain⁹ – was in fact created to identify those national systems characterised by economic and political weaknesses in Europe. “On the political side, they have often been portrayed as systems characterized by weakly institutionalised party systems, whose electorates nevertheless show restricted electoral volatility, along with ideological voting and extended political patronage. On the economic side, their structures appear weaker than their Northern European counterparts, with uneven economic developments typical of dual economies, large state economic involvement and reduced social mobility” (2012, p. 470). In the last years, those common features actually brought to nearly the same political and economic outcomes: all of the four countries were dramatically hit by the international economic crisis and had to face, at the same time, a period of political instability.

Beside these general similarities, there are important differences among the four though. As we said above, in the course of 2011 the Prime Minister resigned and the government was replaced in all of the four

⁹ In the beginning, the first ‘I’ referred to Italy, then it has been linked to Ireland, and since that time sometimes a second ‘I’ has been added: PI(I)GS.
countries under analysis. However, this outcome was reached in two different ways: through the call of new elections and the victory of the parties which were previously in opposition in Portugal and Spain; and through the replacement of the PM thanks to the formation of a new parliamentary majority supporting the government without going to the polls, in Greece and Italy. But the latter two governments had different destinies: on the one hand, the new Greek executive led by Lucas Papademos lasted only a few months and was followed by two general elections in rapid succession (in May and June 2012), because the results of the first one did not allow the formation of a stable government. On the other hand, the new Italian executive led by the former EU Commissioner Mario Monti almost completed its parliamentary term. Monti resigned in December 2012 and a new general election was held in February 2013, opening a new (critical) political scenario which is still in progress.

On the economic side, Greece was the first EU member-state to accept the bailout package, which was agreed with the ECB, IMF and EC in April 2010. The implications of this agreement were both economic and political. The vote to approve the bailout package and the consequent austerity measures put the cohesion of most parliamentary party groups to a serious test. Many Members of Parliament (MPs) who voted against the party whip, belonging to both the government party (PASOK) and the opposition parties, were expelled. As the economic crisis continued to worsen and the government support kept declining, the opposition parties had fewer and fewer incentives to support the government proposals. When the mid-term fiscal plan was presented to the parliament in June 2011, it was supported only by the PASOK. After a try of cabinet reshuffle, the disastrous PM’s announcement of a referendum on the measures to approve and his final resignation, a new coalition was formed among the PASOK, the main opposition conservative ND and the radical right LAOS, at the end of 2011. But this solution wasn’t enough to avoid going back to the polls for too long. As we said, the new executive lasted only a few months and was followed by two general elections, since the electoral results of the first one had not permitted the formation of a stable government. Since June 2012, Antonis Samaras has been leading a coalition government supported by a composite majority with PASOK, the left-wing DIMAR and the conservative ND (with a limited role in government).

Although the last few weeks seem to recall the political impasse that Greece had to face between May and June 2012, the situation in Italy was different. Bosco and Verney had actually predicted that “the electoral epidemic spreading in Southern Europe” would have included “the growth of abstention, increasing parliamentary fragmentation and the emergence of new political forces, notably those expressing anti-party, extreme right-wing or even racist positions” (2012, p.150). In the case of Italy, it was mainly the anti-party sentiment that led to the fall of both the centre right and centre left coalition at the election held in February 2013 and brought to the rise of the Five Stars Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle), founded a few years ago by the famous comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo, whose list got more than the 25 per cent of the votes. This has caused the absence of a clear majority in the Senate, with the consequent difficulty of
appointing a new coalition government soon. From an economic point of view, Italy has never had to ask for a real bailout, although it has been clear since the beginning that the executive led by Mario Monti, after the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi, had to follow an exact plan agreed at European level, in order to overcome the economic crisis which was seriously threatening the country.

Although the economic situation was (and still is) worse than that in Italy, Portugal and Spain seem to have reached more stability at political level, after the elections of 2011. In Portugal, after the rejection of an austerity package – the fourth in less than one year – by the parliament, the Socialist PM José Sócrates resigned and the international lenders were called to the rescue in April 2011. After that, the centre right PSD and the right wing CDS obtained an absolute majority at the general election held in June. Since that time, however, the new government led by Pedro Passos Coelho had to act according to the rules agreed with the ECB, IMF and EC at the time of the bailout, since the agreement was negotiated by the three main parties in parliament (the PS, PSD and CDS) and, as it had already happened in the other countries rescued by the international lenders, that committed the nation rather than a particular government (Mair 2011).

This raises the issue of the interference of international external actors in the economic and political situation of the nation states and in the decisions taken by national governments: an issue that is even more significant in our case, because it limits even further the role of the opposition parties which – no matter whether they are involved in the negotiate or not – will never be allowed to re-discuss the terms of a bailout, even in case of getting in power. This might become even worse for those parties that are permanently excluded from power, the more radical, which might respond to this situation by radicalising their positions in the legislative arena and/or opting for other arenas than the parliament (such as the squares or the media) and other strategies (public opinion mobilisations, referendum campaigns, etc.) in order to pursue their objectives. Spain is a relevant example of the just mentioned situation. Since the outbreak of the crisis, in fact, many alternative strategies have emerged here, such as referenda, street demonstrations and occupation of town squares. The movement of the so-called Indignados was spontaneously born in Spain and then spread all over Europe. The Spanish case is particularly relevant also because its situation dramatically shifted from high economic growth to recession in an unexpected short time. As a result, government and opposition have had to face tough decisions, in some cases against their own ideologies and electoral promises. On the one hand, the Socialist government implemented the biggest redefinition of the Welfare State, including public servant wage cuts, freezing pensions and limiting public debt at both state and regional level. On the other hand, the new Popular Party’s government, which was appointed after the resignation of the Socialist PM José Luis Zapatero and the new general election that followed, implemented policies that contradicted as well its own ideological claims by raising the income taxes. In both cases, the political costs were very high.

Having said all that, how have the opposition parties reacted to this dramatic situation? Have they “responsibly” behaved by trying to cooperate with the government in office or rather have they stressed
their adversarial position and tried to benefit from the difficulties and low popularity of the leading parties? In this comparative work we will try to verify our research hypotheses about the possible behaviour of the opposition in such a critical economic and political scenario. Alongside our descriptive aim, in fact, the project aspires to elaborate valid explanations of the mentioned dynamics and highlight the principal theories proposed in political science in order to verify the possibility to apply them to the elaborate hypotheses, on the one hand, and investigate the specific aspects related to the political contexts of each country under analysis, on the other.

And in the European Parliament

As we know, there are not, *strictu sensu*, one government and one opposition at the EP level. Yet, including the EP in this special issue allows us to further study the impact of the crisis on the parliamentary cohesion and consensus. As a matter of fact, involving the EP represents a formidable challenge, again in empirical and theoretical perspective. Empirically, the measures taken at the EU level – fiscal compact, six-pack financial regulations, measures such as the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – are absolutely innovative in terms of policy relevance, but also in terms of the process which led to the decision. Analysing the way in which the EP has passed these extraordinary measures and the manner in which it was able to act cohesively to held the EU Council and Commission accountable, when the measures needed no passage in Parliament, is thus of fundamental importance to understand the EU democratic functioning and resilience when faced with an unprecedented crisis.

Analysing the impact of the crisis on the EP cohesion matters also from a theoretical point of view. Many EU scholars (see Hix et al. 2007, Hix and Noury 2009) have observed that a large majority of the votes in the EP can be read in the light of MEPs’ group affiliation, while only a minority of votes can be explained along national lines. The same authors also observeda shift from consensus to greater division across ideological party lines, in the last decade. As a result, the question that arises is whether the crisis has strengthened this process of ‘ideologisation’ of the EP, as the measures passed are clearly ideologically marked. On the other hand, as written above, those measures offer different constrains and opportunities to the Member States depending on whether or not they belong to the Eurozone, or whether they are creditors or lenders. In other words, there might be a new driving force towards a divide across geographical lines next to that along party lines.

But more than an enlightening exercise for EU scholars, the inclusion of the EP in this study enable us to check whether the hypotheses made above, based on the literature on national legislatures, could apply to the EP too. As Hix noted, the EU is a political system and hence it makes great sense to apply the literature developed at the national level to the EU. As a matter of fact, the decisions to save the EU from the worst effect of the crisis are of considerable importance, and hence MEPs – particularly those from mainstream
parties – might be triggered by the same sense of responsibility and commitment as their national counterparts; while, radical and eurosceptic parties might have incentives to take even more the distance from the decisions taken by the mainstream parties in government. In that perspective, the last contribution of this special issue considers the MEPs as under similar pressures as their counterparts in national legislatures.

This special issue will examine the preliminary hypotheses posited above through the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the voting behaviour of the opposition parties on the socio-economic policy issues, in the four European democracies most acutely hit by the crisis: Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, and in the EP. Each article will propose a combination of empirical data analysis and qualitative process-tracking, in order to test the hypotheses and/or check for alternative explanations as well as to understand the shift from consensus to dissent, or vice versa, in the opposition behaviour.
References


