"Representative institutions and young people in Southern Europe"

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Abstract

Since the start of the financial crisis, young people have become one of the most affected social groups in Southern Europe. However, whether there have been changes in the relationship between young people and representative institutions during the years of the crisis is yet to be investigated. As a first step in this direction, in this paper we propose to compare different aspects of the relationship of young people in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain with politics. More specifically, this study will therefore allow us to examine whether the financial crisis in this region has contributed to the appearance of a “generational cleavage” in political engagement. This point will be addressed using European Social Survey. In future versions we will analyse whether this divide affects representative institutions in particular.

Introduction

Since the end of the 1990s there has been growing concern for young people’s relationship to politics. Young people today vote less (Franklin, 2004; Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007), belong less to political parties (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012), and protest more (Norris, 2004). The reasons for the changes observed so far in young people’s political behaviour vary according to different authors. Some blame it on the rise of postmaterialism (Inglehart, 1999) or cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984). Others focus on the emphasis of neoliberalism on self-interested individualism and market efficiency, which have discouraged participation in politics and the public sphere (Stoker, 2006). The preoccupation about what is going on with young people and politics is based on the belief that it is a generational phenomenon that will define this group for the rest of their lives. If that is the case, those characteristics will become more present in society as today’s younger generations gradually replace the older ones, and long lasting changes in society may appear in the near future. More recently there has been growing

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1 Nova University of Lisbon, Autonomous University of Madrid, European University Institute and National Kapodistrian University of Athens, respectively.

2 Others point to the lower level of political interest and civic duty amongst young people (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007). However, these explanations are often tautological, as they often do not point to explanations for that development in the first place.
debate as to whether those developments may even imply a loss of support for democracy as a form of government (Foa and Mounk, 2016).

On the other hand, some authors claim that there is not that much to worry about. According to this view, young people are not distancing themselves from politics, nor becoming less democratic, but just reinventing political participation and switching from a concept of citizenship based on civic duty to one based on engagement (Norris 2002; Inglehart, 1999; Dalton, 2008). In a similar line, others claim that “depoliticisation” refers only to a certain kind of engagement based on input politics based on pre-defined political actors, ideologies and classes as well as on an abstract idea of democracy. However, they point that this phenomenon runs in parallel with a “repoliticisation” based on political involvement, governance and specific outputs (Fawcett and Marsh, 2014:182).

Almost two decades after this debate gained prominence, it has not been settled yet. There are some reasons to think that the problem of a democratic backlash is being overstated (Voeten, 2016); that the differences with adults are not always that evident and that changes are taking place across all age groups (Kiisel, Leppik, & Seppel, 2015; Schnaudt and Weinhardt, 2018); that it may not be a generational change, but the result of a delay in the transition to adulthood (Garcia-Albacete, 2014); and that there is no such general phenomenon, as trends are quite heterogeneous in different countries (Sloam, 2016a; 2016b; Wattenberg, 2002).

In the midst of this debate, analysing what has been happening with yang people in some of the countries most affected by the crisis seems like a relevant task. The political culture of the countries of Southern Europe has been analysed as sharing several common traits which can be useful as a reference. The region has a historical unstable relationship with democracy, and its citizens have shown to have a difficult relationship with political parties, as well as low levels of political interest (Montero, Gunther and Torcal, 1997; Torcal, Gunther and Montero, 2002; Torcal, 2006; Torcal and Magalhaes, 2010). These aspects of the political culture could make the region especially vulnerable in a context of economic instability, to which they have been particularly exposed. Even more, the impact of the crisis on political attitudes and behaviours could be especially relevant in the case of the youth who have been socialized into politics during this period. Not only because they are in a moment of their life-cycle in which they are more likely to be “impressed” - according to the idea of the “impressionable years” first introduced by Mannheim (1928/1952) -, but also because they have been one of the most clearly affected

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3 Some think that the very fact that there is a move away from institutional politics is something to worry about, even if there is a substitution by other forms of political participation (Hay, 2014).
social groups in terms of bearing the brunt of austerity in public spending and of the rise of unemployment.

In this context, it would not be unlikely if the financial crisis had affected young South European’s attitudes towards politics in general, and towards representative democracy in particular. In fact, we know that during the crisis, protest amongst young Europeans has increased (Sloam, 2014b; Zamponi and Fernández, 2017). There are also signs that young Europeans are increasingly attracted by new, populist and radical parties (Mounk, 2018; Riera and Rousso, 2016). The cases of the UK (Labour), France (France Insoumise and FN), Germany (AfD), Spain (Podemos), Greece (Golden Dawn), and Italy (M5S) are the most evident ones but Sweden (Sweden Democrats), Austria (FPÖ), Finland (Finns Party), Hungary (Jobbik), US (Sanders) can also be added to the group. But the relationship between a greater impact of the economic crisis and a weaker support for democracy is by no means an evident one. As some authors have already shown, citizens’ support for democracy is greater in bailed-out countries. What is even more interesting, it is the more critical citizens and those less satisfied with the outputs of democracy that are the stronger advocates of democracy (Cordero and Simón, 2016; Kriesi, 2018).

Besides finding out which of these developments find empirical proof, it is important to assess whether the impact – if any - will be long lasting (cohort effect), or just temporary (life-cycle or period effect)? Are the new generations in the South European region, socialized in democratic times, becoming more similar to their European counterparts than the older ones, socialized in/close to, non-democratic periods? Or, do they still reflect their parents’ political culture (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Sloam, 2016)? Also, while trying to answer these questions, it is important to have in mind the possibility that there have been changes affecting the young generations that date from a period prior to the financial crisis. Lisi (2015), for example, has shown that the post-democracy generations in Southern Europe were less identified with any political party already before the crisis and that this phenomenon had been taking place for a decade. Finally, it is essential to differentiate between those young people more affected by the crisis and those less affected. A study comparing the UK, Germany and the US concludes that, in general, the forms of engagement practiced by young people are more unequal than voting and are “heavily structured in favour of highly educated and well-off citizens” (Sloam, 2013 and 2014). If this is the case, greater social inequalities developed during

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4 There is an important debate on whether the attraction of young people by these parties reflects a backslide of democracy amongst the new generations, or whether it is the result of a new way to mobilize (see Foa and Mounk and their critics in the Journal of Democracy, 2016).
the crisis could have led to growing political inequalities in political participation and attitudes. A study based on the case of Spain shows that, amongst young people, being unemployed negatively affects the levels of trust in political parties, identification with political parties, and the tendency to vote and to sign petitions. This relationship is not found amongst older groups (Garcia Albacete, Lorente and Martin, 2015).

This debate should also be linked to the one about the surge and nature of “critical citizens” (Norris, 1999, 2002). In the Introduction to her widely quoted book, Pippa Norris claims that “in most countries support for the community and for democratic principles remains overwhelming (...). But public support for the core institutions of representative government, - including parties, parliaments and governments - has fallen in many established and newer democracies. Moreover, in newer democracies support for the current regime and for representative institutions often remains remarkably shallow, which may create serious problems for the stability of these systems during the consolidation process” (1999). As the author says herself, this may be seen as a worrisome symptom or, on the contrary, “these trends may prove a more positive development which will ultimately strengthen democratic government if this signifies the growth of more critical citizens who are dissatisfied with established authorities and traditional hierarchical institutions, who feel that existing channels for participation fall short of democratic ideals, and who want to improve and reform the institutional mechanisms of representative democracy”. This more positive interpretation depends, according to the author, on whether criticism implies disengagement (Norris, 1999; see also Geissel, 2008).

In sum, our aim is to analyse how young citizens in Southern Europe stand in the light of the above mentioned debates. In the current version of the paper we focus on the evolution of critical citizens amongst young South Europeans and we try to identify what exactly has happened during this crucial period in the four countries, with the aim of finding any possible commonalities and long lasting changes.

**Theoretical hypotheses**

The literature reviewed so far allows us to put forward a set of expectations to be empirically tested. Following Torcal and Montero (2006), it is important to distinguish between two distinct dimensions of political culture. The first dimension concerns attitudes towards institutions and the extent to which citizens trust and display a positive orientation towards the democratic regime, in both diffuse and concrete terms. The other dimension deals with the extent to which
individuals engage with politics. The two dimensions can be evaluated using different types of indicators, and by interacting them with each other it is possible to get a more nuanced understanding of whether critical citizens are involved, or not (Norris, 1999; 2011).

Based on this disaggregation of the relationship between individuals and their polities we can thus develop a two-by-two typology of citizenship. We can briefly describe our four categories as follows. “Allegiant” citizens are those who display high levels of political trust in representative institutions and also high levels of engagement. “Mobilized” citizens are also inclined to get engaged in politics, but they nevertheless exhibit lower levels of trust in democratic institutions. These would be the equivalent to what we have referred to above as “critical citizens”. “Passive” citizens trust political institutions but do not engage in politics. “Alienated” citizens, finally, are neither politically engaged nor trust the political institutions. A typology such as this seems particularly helpful when studying the changes of young people in a critical juncture like the crisis.

The first hypothesis is a general one in the sense that it addresses developments in society writ large and not specifically among young people. In order to test the validity of our typology as a helpful device to monitor the evolution of the relationship between Southern Europeans and their political systems we start by employing it to map the changes in the population as a whole. Specifically, we can expect the distribution of respondents within the various categories to shift over time.

H1) In Southern Europe as a whole, the share of passive and allegiant citizens (with higher levels of political trust) decreased during the period of the crisis, as the amount of mobilized and alienated (lower in political trust) citizens grew.

Our second hypothesis addresses young people, the segment of the population that is the focus of this paper. As previously mentioned, the period of the crisis constituted a major influence over young people for two main reasons. On the one hand, it has been widely documented that young people were particularly affected by the crisis in Southern Europe, especially in terms of economic security and integration in the labour market. On the other hand, as young people face the crisis in a period in which they are more “impressionable”, it can be expected that the effect will hold for a long time. For this reason, we expect that the trend sketched in the previous hypothesis will be particularly visible in this age group.

H2) The growth in the share of mobilized and alienated citizens affected in particular young people, as they were more likely to be directly affected by the events of the crisis, therefore, to distrust politics to a greater extent, and to develop one of two extreme attitudes: either
engage in politics to try to change things, or to pull out from politics completely not engaging at all.

While Southern Europe offers a meaningful category of analysis, there remains nevertheless significant intra-variation within it. The four countries under analysis were not all equally affected by the crisis (Della Porta et al 2017). Regarding differences between countries, we can expect that where the crisis affected young people more disproportionately vis-à-vis the population as a whole, there was an intensification of the effects predicted in the previous hypotheses.

H3) The changes depicted in the previous hypotheses were particularly salient in the contexts where the crisis was more intense, most notably the bailed-out countries (Greece and Portugal).

If we combine hypotheses 2 and 3, we would expect that in those countries where the crisis was deepest, young people will have deviated further from other age groups.

H4) In Greece and Portugal, where the crisis was more intense, young people have become even more alienated or mobilized compared to other age groups, when compared to the countries where the crisis was milder.

Research design

Data

We test our expectations using a pooling of the 8 rounds of the European Social Survey for Greece, Italy Portugal and Spain. The ESS is a high quality repeated cross-sectional survey which includes items on political participation and attitudes which ranges from 2002 to 2017. Unfortunately, survey data have not been collected in all countries with the same frequency. In fact, while for Portugal and Spain the available rounds are 8, for Italy and Greece are 4. Nevertheless, the ESS is the only survey which allows us to consider a relatively long-time span and to look at how attitudes and political engagement changes across time and age groups in Southern Europe, also taking into account years before and after the economic crisis. We use 24 surveys in total, selecting respondents between 18 and 85 years old, yielding to a sample including 44,576 respondents.
**Dependent variable**

The dependent variable is bi-dimensional typology of respondents which classifies them according to their level of political trust and political engagement. We use a scale of political trust including quasi-cardinal items measuring the extent to which respondents trust the national parliament and trust politicians of a scale ranging from 0 (no trust) to 10 (full trust). The scale is additive and has mean 0 and standard deviation 1. We also use a scale of political engagement built using the scores of a 2-PL IRT model including the following dichotomous items measuring whether the respondent is interested in politics, has contacted politicians, has displayed a badge, has worked for parties, has boycotted products, has signed petitions and has attended demonstrations. The scale, as the one measuring trust, has a mean 0 and a standard deviation 1. Therefore, we use the mean as the threshold for inclusion in the four types: a) if the respondent shows low engagement and low trust we label her as “Alienated”; b) if the respondent shows low engagement and high trust we label her as “passive”; c) if the respondent shows high engagement and low trust we label her as “mobilized”; and d) if the respondent shows high engagement and high trust we label her as “allegiant”. Table 1 shows the typology and its distribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political engagement</th>
<th>Political trust</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Mobilized (21%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Alienated (29%)</td>
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Table 1: The typology of respondents.

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5 Another variable measuring trust in parties is available only from the second round of the ESS onwards, so we had to exclude it from the overall scale of political trust.
Independent variables

The independent variables of interest are age, time and the country of the respondents. Age is measured using a categorical variable distinguishing respondents in three groups (18-35, 36-65, 65+). Time is the year in which the survey data was collected, while country dummies capture the each of the four countries of interest.

We also include a number of controls: gender, education in years, left-right position recoded in four categories (as don’t know/missing, left (0-3), centre (4-6) and right (7-10)), feeling about household income, employment status and whether the respondent is still in the education system.

Models

As the dependent variable is a categorical variable with unordered categories we use a number of multinomial models to predict the probability of belonging to each of the four types. At first, we estimate a baseline model including all the independent variables. This model will allow us to find how the four types are distributed across age groups, countries and years. The latter two variables will therefore act as time and country fixed-effects. Then, we estimate three models including two-way interactions, respectively between age and years, age and country dummies, and country and years. These models will allow us to analyze how the effect of age varies by country and years, and whether time trends in the four types have country specificities. Eventually, we estimate a model including a three-way interaction between age, year and countries to assess all sources of heterogeneities in the four types simultaneously. As estimates from multinomial models are quite complex to interpret, in particular in presence of interaction terms (see Karaca-Mandic et al., 2012), we use graphical summaries showing predicted probabilities (see Long 1997). Estimates are not reported, but are available on request.

Findings

Firstly, focusing on the relationship between age and our dependent variable aggregating all four countries, it is apparent that belonging to the youngest age group is associated with a high probability of being alienated, i.e. having low trust and low political engagement, and of being passive, i.e. having high political trust but low political engagement (Figure 1a). On the other hand, belonging to the middle age group (36-65 years of age), means higher probability of
mobilization, namely high engagement and low trust. Expectedly, the probability of someone being allegiant, i.e. having both high political engagement and high political trust, is at its lowest amongst young people and increases with age, with those having more than 65 years of age being the most probable to belong to this specific category (Figure 1a).

**Figure 1**: The association between (a) age, (b) country and (c) time and the probability of being an alienated, passive, mobilized or allegiant respondent in Southern Europe, with 95% confidence intervals.
Turning to the relationship between our dependent variable and respondents’ country, Greece is mostly associated with alienation and mobilization, the attitudes which share low political trust as a common characteristic (Figure 1b). Italy is mostly associated with alienation and passiveness, namely the attitudes which have low political engagement in common. Portugal is mainly characterized by the two opposite extreme attitudes, i.e. allegiance and alienation. Finally, Spain is mostly associated with allegiance and passiveness, the two attitudes which contain relatively higher political trust as a common characteristic (figure 1b). Consecutively, we could primarily associate Greece with low political trust, Italy with low political engagement, Portugal with the two groups with coherent attitudes (trust and engagement usually having the same direction), and Spain with higher political trust than the other three countries.

Regarding the development of these attitudes across time for all four countries considered as a whole, the years before the crisis were mostly characterized by allegiance and passiveness, i.e. political trust combined either with high or low political engagement respectively (Figure 1c). Nevertheless, after the outburst of the crisis, alienation and mobilization became the most prominent attitudes or, in other words, low political trust became the common feature (Figure 1c). Hence, the economic crisis seems to have brought about mainly a shift in political trust, confirming, this way, our hypothesis 1. In recent years, however, when the economic crisis and the effects thereof have become either soother or more institutionalized, allegiance and passiveness are on the rise again (Figure 1c). This image is retained when examining each age category separately. The above described between-categories relationship is not altered in the course of time but, rather, all age groups experience similar fluctuations (Figure 2). This finding is an indication that any effect that the crisis had to respondents’ relationship to politics was not
particularly limited to young people. Despite this evidence of a period effect affecting all cohorts, young people in Southern Europe seem to have become especially alienated in 2011 and in 2015. This is a rather limited confirmation of our hypothesis 2. It is limited, not only because the phenomenon becomes evident in just two moments in time, but also because we do not find, as expected, a similar trend in the group of the mobilized.

**Figure 2:** The association between age and the probability of being an alienated, passive, mobilized or allegiant respondent by time in Southern Europe, with 95% confidence intervals.

Despite the fact that the aggregate image possesses the above-mentioned coherent features, it should always be born in mind that major political developments did not unfold synchronously in each of the four south European countries under investigation. Thus a clear pattern pertaining to all four countries should not be expected; each country’s own political cycle is important. In other words, there has not been a single South European crisis, but a Greek one, an Italian one, a Portuguese one and a Spanish one. The same holds for the respective country-specific responses to the crisis. Moreover, each country did not enter the crisis from the same starting point. Hence, country-level analyses are also necessary. However, if we focus on the young, we can say that in all four countries they are the most alienated – with the exception of Italy - and the least allegiant. However, the young are not different from the other two groups in their levels of passivity and of mobilization (Figure 3a).
Figure 3: The association between (a) age and (b) time and the probability of being an alienated, passive, mobilized or allegiant respondent by country in Southern Europe, with 95% confidence intervals.

The evolution of these groups in each country follows some commonalities (Figure 3b): between 2008 and 2012, alienation has been on the rise in all countries in the population at large. During a similar period, passivity declined and mobilization increased, and allegiance became weaker. These trends seem to have changed after 2013, indicating that they are a “period effect” related to the crisis. However, beyond the trends, we can see that alienation grew clearly further in
Greece, followed by Portugal, and least so in Spain. This is quite in line with our Hypothesis 3 which led us to expect different developments according to the gravity of the crisis. A similar trend takes place with Passivity, which declines most intensely in Greece, Portugal and Italy, and least so in Spain. Finally, allegiance suffers the greatest decline in the case of Greece.

Finally, the association between age and our dependent variable by country reveals some interesting patterns across time. After the onset of the crisis, the probability of being alienated followed different trends in each country: it clearly rose in Greece and, to a lesser degree, also in Italy. But Portugal and Spain followed different patterns: in Portugal it was unstable and finally declined, and in Spain it remained quite steady. All age groups moved in a similar direction but we should highlight the case of young Greeks, were this trend was especially accentuated. This is the only case that partially confirms our Hypothesis 4.

The probability of being allegiant also presents a different image between the four countries. It dropped in Greece and, less so, in Italy right after the outburst of the crisis and it initially dropped and then rose again in Portugal and Spain (Figure 4)6. In all cases, all age groups followed a similar pattern.

On the contrary, passivity and mobilization demonstrate the same pattern in every country for almost all age groups. Passivity first declined and has increased in recent years. The exact opposite image is portrayed regarding mobilization, with an initial increase right after the crisis and a decline in more recent years, for every south European country (Figure 4).

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6 If relevant data were available however, Greece would probably demonstrate the same pattern as Portugal and Spain because the rise of SYRIZA to power in 2015 was met by an unprecedented rise in all relevant indicators. For instance, trust in government more than doubled between 2014 and 2015 (Eurobarometer No 81; Eurobarometer No 83).
Conclusion

Going back to our hypotheses, we can affirm the following:

H1: This hypothesis is confirmed, as alienation and mobilization grew during the period of the crisis.

H2: This hypothesis is only partially confirmed. Young people in Southern Europe were not more affected by the crisis in general. However, we do see that in two specific moments, 2011 and 2015, their levels of alienation were clearly above those of the rest of the society.

H3: Also in this case we find only partial confirmation of our hypothesis. Alienation in society grew further in Greece, followed by Portugal, which were the two countries that suffered the crises more intensely. However, we do not find a general growth in mobilized/critical citizens in the two countries where the crisis was toughest.

H4: Again, this hypothesis is partially confirmed. There has been a greater increase of alienation amongst young people in Greece compared to other age groups and to the other countries. However, where the crisis has been more intense, the effect on the young is not clearly reflected in a greater mobilization. Also, a special impact on the young is not that evident in the Portuguese case, as it is in the Greek one.

From these rather exploratory analyses we have both bad and good news. The bad news are that the crisis does not seem to have produced more young critical (mobilized) citizens. On the
contrary, the changes have more to do with the increase in young people’s alienation, that is, low political trust, and low political engagement.

The good news, though, is that young people do not seem to have been that much “impressed” by the crisis, or at least not in a longlasting way. The crisis has had an effect on citizens relationship to politics. In most cases it has seems to have been a period effect. The only exception could be Greece, where young people became even more alienated than the rest of society. However, the scarcity of comparable data available for this case for the period of the crisis leads us to be cautious about whether this could become a longlasting phenomenon, or just a temporal one. Given the political developments in the country, it would not be unreasonable to think it has been of the first kind.

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