

Sickness or Symptom? The Crisis of Representative Democracy and the Rise of Anti-political-establishment Parties

Political parties in the age of populism, University of Birmingham

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Traditional political parties are in a depth crisis and representative democracy might be gasping its last breath (Mair, 2013; Przeworski, 2018). Not in vain, support for anti-establishment political parties has been on the rise, especially since the beginning of the 2008 Great Recession (Inglehart and Norris, 2015; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Wolinetz and Zaslove, 2018). Only during the last year (2017), radical parties like the Freedom Party (FPÖ), Alternative for Germany (AfD), the National Front (FN) or the Party for Freedom (PVV) have managed to shake the foundations of otherwise very stable, at least until recently, democracies in Austria, Germany, France or The Netherlands. Similarly, in post-communist countries like Hungary, Latvia or Czechia, anti-systemic parties have managed to attract the support of more than a quarter of the electorate during the most recent elections.

At the same time, extreme-right or extreme-left political parties have managed to access government only in a handful of European countries (e.g. Norway, Czechia, Belgium). In most cases, however, they have done so only as junior coalition partners (e.g. Austria, Finland, Bulgaria). In the last few years, Greece has been the only Western European democracy ruled by an entirely populist coalition government. This seems to put into question, to a certain extent, some of the most pessimist analyses recently made not only by scholars and/or practitioners, but also journalists and/or politicians. Either way, it seems clear that Western European electorates are more polarized than they were a decade ago, with the implications this might have for the future development of democracy.

Ever since the publication of Sartori's (1976) seminal work polarization has constituted a central concept in the study of political parties, party systems and elections. Traditionally, polarization has been considered to have important consequences, both economic and politically. In terms of the former, polarization has been considered to have- mostly negative - effects on fiscal policy, capital investment, or the general development of the economy (Song, 2012; Azzimonti, 2011; Frye, 2002). In terms of the latter, polarization has been traditionally associated with executive fragility, mass rioting, systemic instability and democratic breakdown (Powell, 1981; Lane and Ersson, 1994; Linz, 1978). More recently, Enyedi (2016) has also shown how polarization can lead to "democratic backsliding" and illiberalism by incentivizing "parties to develop populist strategies".

Given the current context of political crisis, and the possible negative consequences polarization might have for the future of Western European democracies,

the current paper draws on a new comparative dataset, which looks at all European democracies since 1848, to provide an explanation for the rise of electoral polarization, understood as increase in electoral support for anti-political-establishment parties, in this part of the European continent. In particular, our analyses examine two alternative explanations put forward in the literature. On the one hand, scholars like Brückner and Grüner (2010), Funke et al. (2015), Hernández and Kriesi (2016), inspired by arguments taking from the “economic retrospective voting” school (Stegmaier and Beck, 2000), put the blame on the hardships resulting from the 2008 Great Recession. On the other hand, scholars like Biezen, either with Kopecký (2016) and Poguntke (2016), Kitschelt and McGann (1995) or Abedi (2002) inspired by Katz and Mair’s (1995) “cartelization” thesis, consider that it is political parties themselves, rather than the economic situation, which should be blamed for the process of de-alignment experienced in many Western European democracies and, consequently, the rise of support for anti-political-establishment parties.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section discusses the concept and measurement of polarization, and shows to what extent Western European electorates have been polarized over time. The second section looks at the literature on the determinants of polarization, formulating various hypotheses. The dataset and the methodology are introduced in section three, while the fourth section presents the findings of our analyses. The article concludes with a summary of our contribution and some reflections on its implications for the future development of Western European democracies.

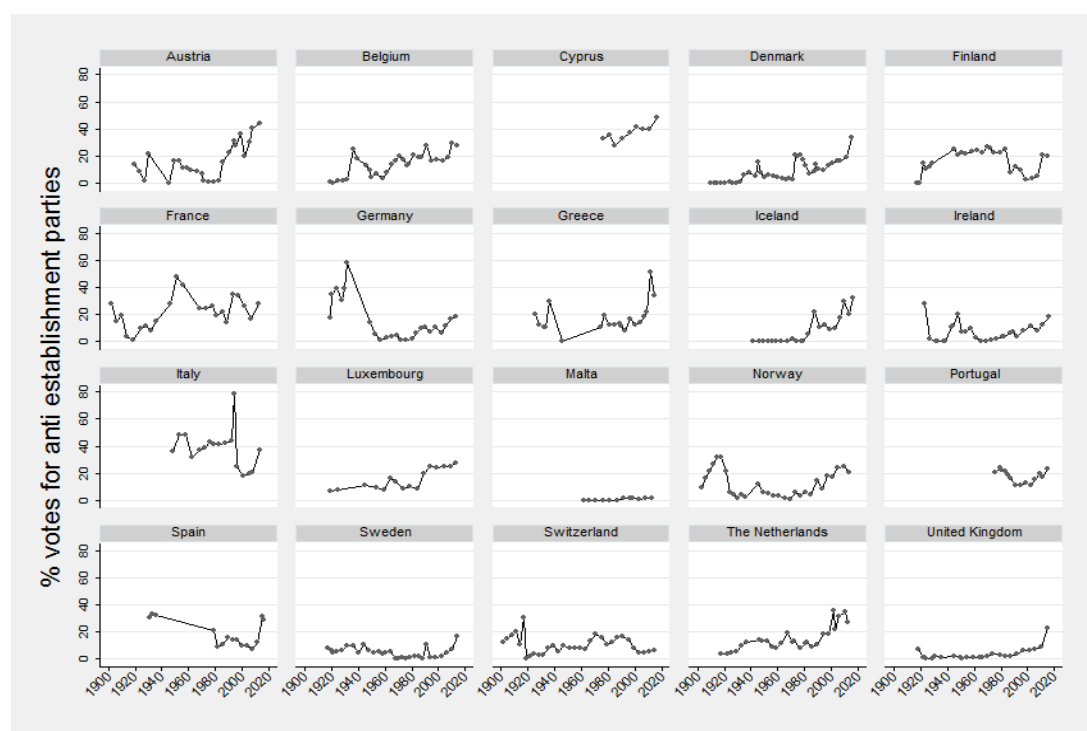
Electoral polarization: Concept and measures

In the literature, the notion of polarization has multiple acceptations. The most popular one is that of *ideological* or *programmatic* polarization which, according to Sani and Sartori (1983), refers to the ideological or programmatic distance among the parties in the political spectrum. The idea is that the higher the ideological or programmatic discrepancies, the higher the polarization. Other scholars prefer to talk about *social* (Scully, 1992) and *political* (Valenzuela, 1978) polarization. More recently, Enyedi has introduced the concept of *populist* polarization, defined as the “the combination of the intense and aggressive competition between party blocs, the

concomitant rejection of the division of power, the focus on the question of who the “people” are, and the central role of relatively stable and strong parties” (2016: 8).

In the current paper, and influenced by Sartori’s (1976) and Dodd’s (1976) theorizing about the negative impact of anti-systemic parties, we look at *electoral* polarization, measured as the percentage of votes obtained by “anti-political-establishment” parties (Karvonen and Quenter, 2003; 142; Powell 1982; Casal Bértoa and Weber, forthcoming).¹ The latter (APEp from now on) are understood as those fulfilling “all of the following criteria: (1) it perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment; (2) it asserts that a fundamental divide exists between the political establishment and the people (implying that all establishment parties, be they in government or in opposition, are essentially the same); and (3) it challenges the status quo in terms of major policy issues and political system issues” (Abedi 2004: 12).²

Figure 1. Percentage of votes for anti-political-establishment parties in Western Europe, 1900-2016



Source: Casal Bértoa (2018)

¹ According to Schedler, who introduced the concept as early as 1996, the term APEp is not so frequently used as others (e.g. populist, anti-mainstream or anti-party parties), but it is much more precise (292).

² A list of all parties coded as anti-establishment is available at <https://whogoverns.eu/party-systems/polarization/>.

Figure 1 shows the levels of electoral polarization in 20 Western European democracies since the beginning of the 20th century. In agreement with the most recent literature, support for APEp is on the rise (Hanley and Sikk, 2014; Mesežnikov et al, 2013). As it follows from the figure above, this is clear in the majority of European countries, although there are important exceptions: namely, Malta, Switzerland, Finland and, to a lesser extent, also Italy. Furthermore, and following the conventional wisdom (see above), most of the more polarized cases are those affected by the (1) immigration (i.e. Austria, France and The Netherlands, although not Germany or Switzerland), and (2) economic crisis (i.e. Cyprus, Greece, Iceland, Italy and Spain – although not Ireland or Portugal).

On average, during the last sixteen years the percentage of votes for APEp has exponentially increased: from around 17 per cent during the previous two decades to almost a quarter of the Western European electorate. 48 per cent of the elections with record levels of electoral polarization have taken place only during the same period.

However, it is also important to note that in an important number of countries (i.e. Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, Portugal and Spain), the election with the highest percentage of votes for AEPs took place before the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, in figure 1 it is also possible to observe that in most consolidated European democracies the current levels of electoral support for APEp are lower than during, for instance, the interwar period (1918-1939).

For all these reasons, and given the cross-national and cross-temporal variation, it is important that we address what are the causes of electoral polarization in Western Europe, in order to learn how to tackle the spectre that is currently haunting Europe.

The causes of electoral polarization: Hypotheses

The rise of support for APEp experienced during the last decade (see above), and especially in those countries mostly affected by the 2008 Great Recession (e.g. Greece, Spain), have favoured the view that economic conditions are the ones responsible for the high levels of electoral polarization observed in most Western European democracies. Based on the literature that shows how voters reward parties in government when economic conditions are favourable and punish them, boosting the opposition, when the economic performs poorly (Bartels, 2013; Brug *et al.*, 2007), recent scholarship suggests a clear positive relationship between negative

macroeconomic factors and support for APEp.

Although an early study conducted by Abedi (2004) did not find solid evidence of a relationship between economic deprivation and increase in the vote share for APEp,³ Brückner and Grüner, employing data from 16 OECD countries during the 1970-2002 period, showed a moderate positive relationship between economic slowdown and support for extreme political platforms, although – they concluded – “it is unlikely that even strong recessions can change political outcomes” (2010: 16).

More recently, Funke *et al.*, using a larger sample of countries and a longer time period (1870-2014), clearly showed that “policy uncertainty rises strongly after financial crises as government majorities shrink and polarization rises” (2015: 1). In particular, they found that immediately after an economic crisis, the level of support for extreme-right parties exponentially increases. The fact that, as they show, far-right parties managed to increase their vote share by 30 per cent following the Great Recession is a clear example.

Dalio *et al.*, in a recent study looking at the period between 1900 and 2016, also find that “populism has surged in recent years and is currently at its highest level since the late 1930s” (2017: 1), suggesting a clear correlation between support for anti-political/populist parties and downturns in the economic conditions.

This is also the central point of Kriesi and Pappas’ (2015) edited volume which, adopting a case-study approach and looking at the sources of populism in several European countries, conclude that the 2008 economic crisis has led to an increase in the level of support for populist (both left and right) parties. Kriesi, now together with Hernández (2016), not only confirmed the previous argument, but also pointed out that parallel to the decrease of support for established political parties, economic hardship mostly benefits radical-left, radical-right, but also other non-mainstream (e.g. Green) parties. Even at the individual level, Hobolt and Tilley (2016) show that those most affected by the Great Recession were more prone to support challenger parties.

Overall, we then expect negative economic conditions to increase the level of polarization, as voters reach to APEp for alternatives that could solve their economic hardships:

H1: Poor economic development/performance increases electoral polarization.

³ He found, however, a positive relationship between unemployment and support for non-mainstream parties (2004: 88).

Notwithstanding what has been said, and although the idea of a positive relationship between economic downturns and support for extreme/radical/populist parties sound intuitive, the fact that in many countries not affected by the hardships of the 2008 economic crisis (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, Poland) AEPp also obtained excellent electoral results point to other (non-economic) explanations (Mudde, 2005: 206).

Some scholars like Inglehart and Norris (2016) or Mols and Jetten (2016) point to *cultural* and *psychological* explanations, respectively. Even others, like Magalhaes (2014), point to the interaction of political events and economic hardships. For him it was not only the economic conditions, but also the response of traditional political parties to the crisis (e.g. bailout) that conditioned changes in the dynamics of competition. More recently, Hooghe and Marks (2017) have shown how the response of a party system to serious exogenous shocks (e.g. economic crisis) take the form of challenging, rather than reformed, political parties.

In his posthumous study, Mair (2013) showed how Western European democracies were hollowing due to the mutual withdrawal of voters and political parties from the electoral arena. Thus, not only traditional parties were losing their grip on voters, as party membership and identification were at their lowest since the end of WWII; but voters themselves, previously extremely loyal (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini and Mair, 1990), had decided to abandon them. To the point that, as confirmed by Hernández and Kriesi's (2016) analysis, the decline in support for mainstream parties goes beyond the rise of support for "populist radical right, radical left and non-mainstream parties" (2016: 203). A brief look at the last Dutch legislative elections is very illustrative. Thus, whereas at the beginning of the 1980s three political parties (i.e. the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, the Christian Democratic Appeal, and the centre-left Labour Party) managed to obtain more than 80 per cent of the votes, during the 2017 legislative elections, the very same three parties did not even reach 40 per cent. And the same could be said in Greece, Spain, but also in France or Germany where traditional parties have lost a significant share of electoral support, especially since the Great Recession.

Indeed, and as it follows from the "cartel party" thesis (Katz and Mair, 1995), the "collusion" of traditional political parties will lead to an increase in the support for APEp for two reasons. On the one hand, it is the increasing difficulty of voters to programmatically differentiate among the different traditional (e.g. conservative,

social-democratic, liberal) parties that makes them more susceptible to be attracted to the markedly different policies put forward by APEp (Abedi: 2002: 553; Morgan, 2013). In other words, the lack of clearly different governing alternatives fosters a process of re-alignment that clearly favours all non-mainstream parties. On the other hand, the convergence of traditional parties towards the centre of the political spectrum leaves space at the margins for the APEp to occupy. Thus, and as Kitschelt and McGann put it some years ago “where moderate left and right parties have converged toward centrist positions and may even have cooperated in government coalitions”, the chances for ‘populist antistatist parties’ as well as parties of the ‘New Radical Right’ to be electorally successful rise considerably (1995: 17, 20–23, 48), making the party system more polarised. As a result, we would expect that

H2: The more severe the withdrawal of parties/voters, the higher the electoral polarization.

However, and notwithstanding what has been said, it is possible that the abovementioned withdrawal is not (1) mutual, (2) taking place at the same time, or even (3) at the same pace, to the point that only one of them (parties or voters) is to be blamed for the high levels of electoral polarization observed. Of course, it is not the same if only parties (de-alignment) or only voters (re-alignment) are to be blamed for the APEp’s recent success in European elections, because the antidote to the so-called “populist illness” might need to be very different. As a result, our model will contain two sub-hypotheses trying to specify the “mutual withdrawal” argument (Müller, Rommel, 2016: 4-5). The first one simply reinforces the argument made by the “pessimistic” European school led by the late Mair on the direct effect of party crisis (de-alignment) on electoral polarization. This can be expressed with the following hypothesis:

H2a: The higher the electoral fragmentation in a party system, the more polarize the electorate will be.

The second looks more at voters, rather than parties and, following the more optimistic vision of the American school led by Dalton think of electoral polarization as the result of a re-alignment in the party system. As a result, we would expect:

H2b: The higher the volatility of the electorate, the higher its polarization.

Most of the literature reviewed so far point to the multiplicative effects particular economic events (i.e. Great crises) have on the structure of inter-party competition in general, and on the rise of support for APEp in particular. The idea is

that under particular critical economic junctures (e.g. in 1929 and 2008), both economic and political resentment will benefit parties fighting the *status quo*:

there is no doubt that major economic events such as the Great Depression and the Great Recession have important political consequences; the question is: What are those consequences? (Lindvall 2014, 748)

Trying to answer this question, Hernández and Kriesi (2016) have shown that unlike what happens under normal economic circumstances, in elections taking place under the context of the 2008 Great Recession economic voting theories lose explanatory power in favour of more long-term (systemic change) approaches. In their view, big economic crises do accelerate pre-existing de-alignment (as voters perceive that establish parties do not represent their interests) and re-alignment (as new social divides gain relevance in order to determine vote choices) processes. Thus,

in contexts like the Great Recession, punishment of the incumbents by the voters is not only likely to occur in much greater proportions, but its consequences are also likely to be longer-lasting than the shifts of the voters to the mainstream opposition parties (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016:204).

In the same sense, but in the Latin American context, Roberts (2017: 222) points out that the recent economic crisis could have accelerated the programmatic structuring (or de-structuring) partisan competition.

More recently, in a study of the relationship between the three most critical “economic” junctures in European history (i.e. 1929, 1973 and 2008) and change at the electoral, parliamentary and government arenas, Casal Bértoa and Weber found that “economic crises tend to disturb party systems”. However, while big economic crises hinder the structure of competition in “restrained” (i.e. institutionalized) party systems by increasing fragmentation, volatility, polarization and reducing governmental closure; they have a positive (consolidating) effect on complex (i.e. unstable) ones (forthcoming).

Our model contains then two more hypotheses that reinforce the effects of economic crises on polarization. The first one is a simple specification of the basic economic argument: The more severe the impact of a crisis on a certain economy, the larger should also be its impact on electoral polarization. This can be expressed as a moderator effect regarding the expectations formulated in our first hypothesis:

H3: *The more severe the crisis, the more pronounced are the effects in H1.*

Our second moderating hypothesis looks at the impact of economic crises on party system. On the basis of our theoretical considerations regarding parties' and voters' behavior, we expect that economic crises will increase electoral polarization in more fragmented and volatile party systems. Again, this expectation can be expressed as a moderator effect regarding our second hypotheses:

H4: *The more severe the crisis, the more pronounced are the effects in H2a and H2b.*

Following Lindvall (2014), as well as evidence from figure 1, which shows how support for APEp increased in many European countries mostly after 1929 (e.g. Belgium, Greece, Germany, Spain) and 2008 (e.g. Denmark, Greece, Iceland, Spain), but not so much after 1973 (Italy and Denmark are perhaps the only exceptions), we will then limit our comparison to the first two (e.g. Great Depression and Great Recession) crises.

Economic, electoral and control variables: operationalization

Our explanatory variables can be clustered in four different groups: economic, electoral, institutional and socio-temporal. As it is standard practice, we use the election year observation, except for economic factors – in these cases we use data from a previous year ($t - 1$) –. Table A1 in the Appendix presents descriptive statistics (number of observations, mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum) for all of the variables mentioned in this paper.

Economic variables

In order to test for the effect of economic development on the level of electoral polarization we use GDP as well as GDP growth, both due to data availability and due to the central role of these two indicators when measuring, respectively, economic welfare and performance (Kayser and Wlezien, 2011). Specifically, for each election we use the level of GDP pc PPP (lagged) as well as the average yearly growth in GDP pc PPP since the year preceding the crisis. GDP data are from *Gapminder* (2016).⁴

For examining to what extent “big economic events” moderate the impact of economic development as well as partisan or electoral crisis on the level of support for APEp, we created two dummies corresponding to each of the two great moments of the

⁴ For a partial replication using the inflation (1960-2016) and unemployment (1990-2016) rate, indicators that may matter more “directly”, see Model 1 in Table A2 in the Appendix.

economic hardship in European history: namely, the Great Depression (1929) and the Great Recession (2008).⁵

Electoral variables

Sartori (1976) was the first one to connect the format of the party system (i.e. number of parties) with their mechanics (i.e. polarization). As mentioned above, in the current paper we explore the relationship between the two and, in particular, the extent to which the crisis of traditional parties, expressed in the increase of systemic fragmentation in most European democracies, has led to the rise in support for APEp. In order to measure electoral fragmentation, we will employ Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) standard "effective number of electoral parties" (ENEP). In particular, this index measures how many parties are in a party system in a given election, weighted according to size.⁶

Electoral re-alignment or the abandonment of traditional political parties by voters is measured here by the classic Pedersen's (1979) index of electoral volatility (TEV), which captures "the net change within the electoral party system resulting from individual vote transfers".⁷ In our model, ENEP represents the crisis of representative democracy from the parties' point of view, while TEV looks at the voters' perspective. In both cases, the data comes from Casal Bértoa (2018).

Institutional variables

Because we expect a positive relationship between electoral fragmentation and polarization, we also control the disproportionality of the electoral system, calculated on the basis of Gallagher's (1991) "least square index" (LSq.). The idea is that because more proportional electoral systems will allow more parties into the party system (Duverger, 1954; Lijphart, 1994), including those with an anti-establishment character and/or at the extremes of the political spectrum, electoral polarization will be higher the less the disproportionality of the electoral system.⁸

⁵ According to Lindvall (2014: 751), both emerged in the USA, later spreading to Europe, beginning as financial crisis to later turn into full-blown macroeconomic ones.

⁶ $ENEP = 1 / \sum v_i^2$, where v_i is the vote share of party i .

⁷ $TEV = \frac{1}{2} \sum |v_{i,t} - v_{i,t-1}|$, where $v_{i,t}$ is the vote share of party i at election t preceded by election $t-1$.

⁸ Following Rae (1967) or Taagepera and Shugart (1993), we have also used average district magnitude as an alternative indicator. Even if with a lower number of cases - given data restrictions - the findings, however, do not change. (see Model 2 in Table A2 in the Appendix).

Ever since the publication of Linz’s seminal work on the perils of presidentialism (1990a) and the virtues of parliamentarism (1990b) non-parliamentary regimes have been considered to have negative implications for the healthy functioning of democracy, including increasing the level of polarization. The idea is that while in parliamentary regimes the head of state is either hereditary or (s)elected either by a super-powerful government, which already assembles the qualified majority usually required for this type of (s)election, or by a compromise with the opposition, in (semi-)presidential regimes the “double electoral process” gives APEp the possibility to win office or, at least, get the necessary publicity to express their grievances against the establishment. The most recent 2017 French presidential elections, which constituted a boost for Le Pen’s Front National or Melenchon’s Unbowed France, constitute a clear example.⁹ We operationalize parliamentary regimes as 1 and (semi-)presidential regimes as 0.¹⁰

Sociological and temporal

We also control for sociological and temporal factors. Regarding the former, and using Alesina *et al.*’s (2003) classic dataset, we introduce time invariant variables that capture the level of sociological fractionalization presented in a particular country: namely, linguistic, ethnic and religious (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The logic behind this control is double. On the one hand, scholars have shown again and again the positive relationship between sociological fractionalization and electoral fragmentation (Cox, 1997; Geys, 2006) as well as the negative association between the former and electoral volatility (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Bernhard and Karakoc, 2011). On the other hand, we expect higher sociological diversity to foster electoral polarization directly, given the nativist and anti-immigration character of most APEp (Boomgaarden and Vliengenthart, 2007; Jesuit and Mahler, 2004).

We also control for the years of democracy (YoD) as we expect more consolidated democracies to be vaccinated against anti-political-establishment discourses threatening the democratic system in comparison to new ones, where traditional parties and voters are assumed to have experienced the “APEp’s challenge” less often.

⁹ In Poland, for example, presidential elections have continuously been the source of APEp: for instance, Party X (Partia X) in 1990, Self-Defence (Samobrona) in 2005, or Kukiz’15 in 2015.

¹⁰ The only two European presidential regimes have been Portugal (in 1918) and Cyprus.

Data and method

The dataset that we use to test our hypotheses comprises Western European party systems under democratic conditions. We consider a country to be democratic when (1) it has a score of ≥ 6 in the Polity IV index, (2) universal (male) suffrage elections have been held at least once, and (3) governments are formed with (and rely on) parliamentary support, rather than on the exclusive will of the head of state (Casal Bértoa, 2018). Some countries, like for example France or Finland, comprise different periods according to the Republic in question. Other countries, like Austria or Germany, refer to two different party systems (1st and 2nd Republic or the Weimar and Bonn Republics). Some democracies had to be excluded given the lack of data on electoral results.¹¹ The end result is a new dataset with 20 Western European democracies, comprising more than 470 elections between 1848 and 2016 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Time period and number of elections for the selected countries.

Country	Period	Number elections
Austria	1920-2013	25
Belgium	1919-2014	29
Cyprus	1976-2016	9
Denmark	1910-2015	38
Finland	1917-2015	26
France	1849-2012	31
Germany	1919-2013	24
Greece	1926-2015	20
Iceland	1942-2016	22
Ireland	1923-2016	27
Italy	1948-2013	17
Luxembourg	1919-2013	16
Malta	1962-2013	12
Norway	1903-2013	30
Portugal	1976-2015	14
Spain	1931-2016	15
Sweden	1917-2014	30
Switzerland	1896-2015	34
The Netherlands	1918-2012	27
United Kingdom	1918-2015	25

Source: Casal Bértoa (2018)

Because this is an unbalanced time-series cross-section (TSCS) dataset (Beck and Katz, 1995), containing an average of 24 elections by country (minimum 9 for Cyprus and maximum 34 for Switzerland), we make use of panel data with elections

¹¹ These are Portugal's 1st Republic (1911-1926), Spain's Restoration (1899-1923) and pre-WWI Greece (1875-1915).

nested in countries, which limits substantially the set of methods for the analysis. In order to solve these problems, we estimate various kinds of regressions with different clusters and specifications that will be presented step by step in the next section.

Findings

Although we are mainly interested on the impact of economic and electoral variables on the levels of polarization, and hence in within-country effects of these variables, we know, however, that other country-specific and time-unvarying (e.g. years of democracy, type of regime) factors could also affect electoral polarization. Thus, and in order to control for those and other country-specific effects, we have opted for the estimation of various models using different statistical techniques.

Table 2 shows all the different models. The first one is an ordinary lineal regression model (OLS) with country dummies and year dummies (both not shown). Theoretically this model suggests that the levels of dependent variable as well as the effects of the economic, sociological and institutional variables are country-specific and time-specific. The second one, a lineal regression with fixed effects (FE) estimates the impact of our control and independent variables in the dependent variable. Following Beck (2001:283) this is the best method to model unbalanced TSCS data. Nevertheless, and taking into consideration that fixed effects drop time-invariant variables, underestimate quasi-time invariant factors (we have both examples of variables in our models) and remove the unit level (country) variance, we have opted for employing also two more Random Effects (RE) models. This kind of statistical techniques are considered to be more appropriate for panel data with temporally correlated errors and with a large number of observations. In the fourth model, in order to deal with heterostedasticity, we add estimators with robust standard errors.

The last two models employ generalized least squares (GLS) and Prais-Winsten Regression, respectively. Given a certain degree of correlation between observations in our dataset, we use GLS in model 5. Moreover, and in order to correct for the violation of temporal correlation, model 6 presents the results of a Prais-Winsten regression with country-fixed effects, with first order autocorrelation (AR1) specified (see, for example, Dassonneville and Hooghe, 2016). Finally, we add country-fixed effects to the model with the aim of controlling for any omitted variables in the analyses.

Table 2. Explaining electoral polarization in Western Europe (1848–2016)¹²

	Model 1 Lineal Regression	Model 2 Fixed Effect	Model 3 Random Effect	Model 4 Random effect, rob	Model 5 GLS	Model 6 Prais Regression
GDP	0.000381** (3.00)	0.0000956* (2.27)	0.0000867* (2.09)	0.0000867 (1.00)	0.0000401 (0.89)	0.0000930* (2.18)
ΔGDP	0.0420 (0.43)	-0.0880 (-1.27)	-0.0933 (-1.35)	-0.0933 (-1.72)	-0.101 (-1.19)	-0.0778 (-1.13)
ENEP	3.242*** (7.49)	1.792*** (4.68)	1.829*** (4.83)	1.829** (2.60)	2.460*** (6.41)	1.920*** (5.01)
Lsq	-0.459** (-2.78)	0.0378 (0.29)	0.0220 (0.17)	0.0220 (0.06)	0.0903 (0.75)	0.0331 (0.28)
TOR	-6.778*** (-3.34)	-5.926** (-3.06)	-5.635** (-3.06)	-5.635 (-1.31)	-2.303+ (-1.80)	-6.675** (-3.25)
TEV	0.427*** (5.38)	0.413*** (5.64)	0.424*** (5.84)	0.424*** (4.48)	0.501*** (6.08)	0.323*** (5.03)
Religious	-3.516 (-0.33)	-	1.447 (0.13)	1.447 (0.25)	2.131 (0.83)	-27.43** (-2.67)
Linguistic	-6.857 (-0.97)	-	5.043 (0.45)	5.043 (0.73)	3.308 (1.13)	13.76* (2.09)
YoD	0.120** (2.66)	-0.0306 (-0.85)	-0.00924 (-0.27)	-0.00924 (-0.15)	0.115*** (5.14)	-0.0461 (-1.25)
Constant	-178.7* (-2.06)	63.31 (0.90)	21.63 (0.32)	21.63 (0.18)	-224.5*** (-5.14)	106.9 (1.48)
N elections	441	441	441	441	441	441
N countries	20	20	20	20	20	20
R ²	0.761	0.272				0.591
R ² adjusted	0.649	0.226				0.566

t statistics in parentheses * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Following the most recent scholarship, we expected poor economic development and/or performance to foster electoral polarization (H1). Table 2 clearly rejects this hypothesis. On the one hand, there is no relationship between the variable GDP growth and electoral polarization. And this is consistent for all of the models displayed above. On the other hand, the impact of GDP per capita, even if statistically significant (at 95 per cent) in four of our six models, is not only extremely weak, but presents the wrong sign. Interestingly enough, none of our control (institutional, sociological and temporal), with the exception of type of regime,¹³ seems to be significantly related to our dependent variable.

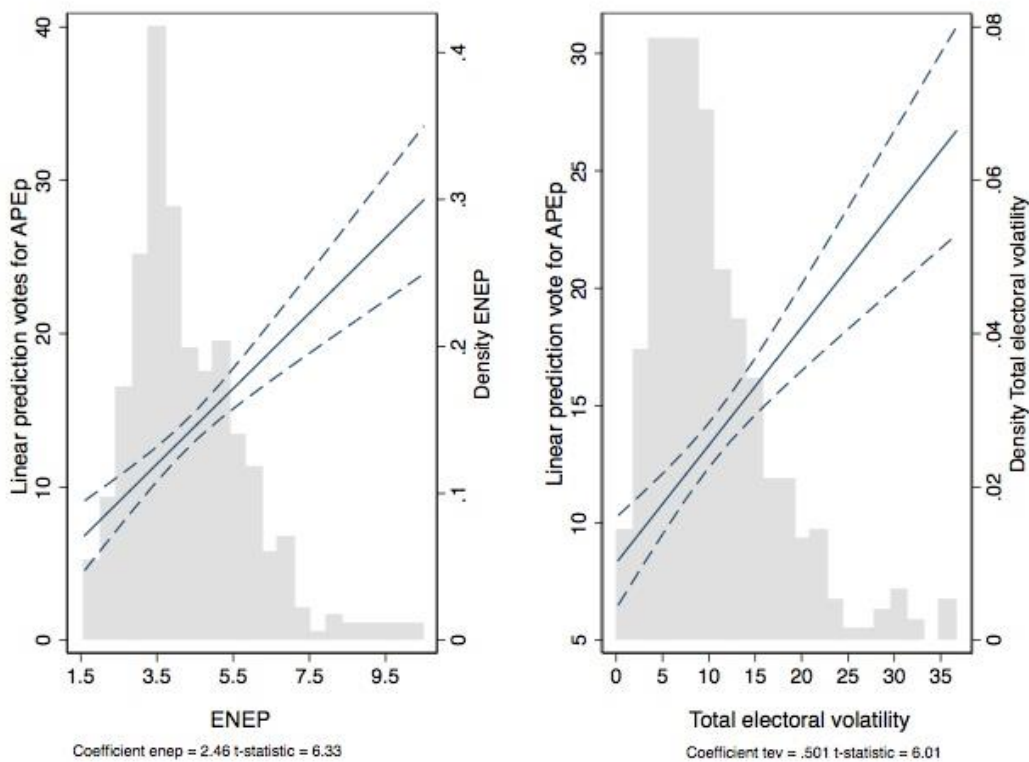
In clear contrast, both the ENEP and TEV have a significant (at 0.001) and positive impact on electoral polarization in all of the models, suggesting that it has been the crisis of both political parties (H2a) and voters (H2b) which have fostered the rise

¹² Because of the high correlation between ethnic and linguistic fractionalization, and in order to avoid collinearity problems, we opt for not introducing the former in our statistical models. Model 3 in Table A2 (see Appendix) examine the impact ethnic fractionalization have on electoral polarization, instead. Needless to say, the results do not change.

¹³ Confirming Linz's (1990a, 1990b) worse fears regarding the perils of direct presidential elections.

of support for APEp. Figure 2, which shows the linear prediction of electoral polarization as a function of fragmentation (left) and volatility (right) clearly illustrates this relationship. Thus, the increment in one unity of ENEP consequently generates an increment on more than a 3 per cent of votes for APE parties. And the direction is the same in the case of electoral volatility: an increment in a one per cent of TEV means an increment on 0.43 per cent of votes for APEp.¹⁴

Figure 2. Linear prediction anti-political establishment parties as a function of electoral fragmentation and electoral volatility



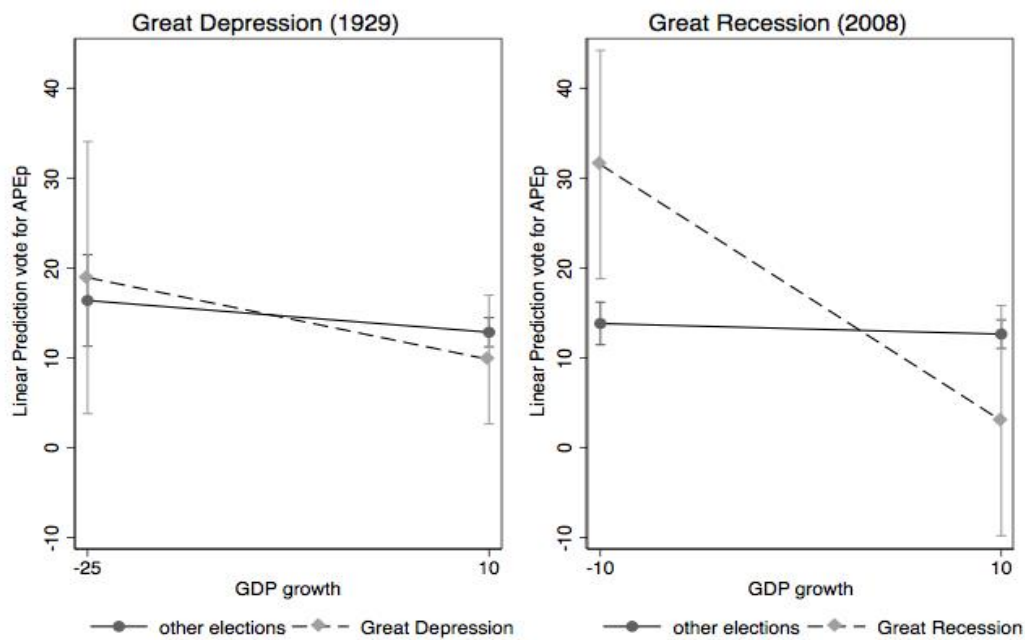
Does all this mean that, contrary to most of the “economic voting” literature, both economic development and performance are totally unrelated to electoral polarization? Could it be the case that only under very specific - and extreme - circumstances (e.g. global economic/financial disaster) economic stagnation contributes to the electoral success of APEp? At the end of the day, and as it has been

¹⁴ Thanks to the MARHIS command developed by Enrique Hernández (2017), we can plot the linear prediction for our dependent variable as a function of our key explanatory independent variable and, at the same time, draw the distribution and density of the independent variable. Link: <https://ideas.repec.org/c/boc/bocode/s458145.html>

shown elsewhere (Achen and Bartels, 2016), voters’ punishment of incumbents might be determined by particular uncontrollable events like shark attacks, droughts or floods. In this context, it is plausible also to think that the kind of shock caused by severe (and global) crisis - like the Great Depression in 1929 or the Great Recession in 2008 - might lead stressed citizens to behave “irrationally”, and support an alternative party. Not in vain, Bermeo and Bartels (2014: 20) in the introduction of the influential *Mass Politics in Tough Times*, already show how valence considerations - rather than ideology - determined voters’ choice at the time of the 2008 Great Recession.

In order to examine to what extent a big (uncontrollable) economic event leads voters to support alternative (i.e. anti-establishment) political formations and punish traditional (i.e. mainstream) parties (H3), we interact GDP growth with each of the most disastrous economic crisis in the history of humanity: namely, the Great Depression on the left and the Great Recession on the right (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Interaction between big economic events (1929, 2008) and GDP growth

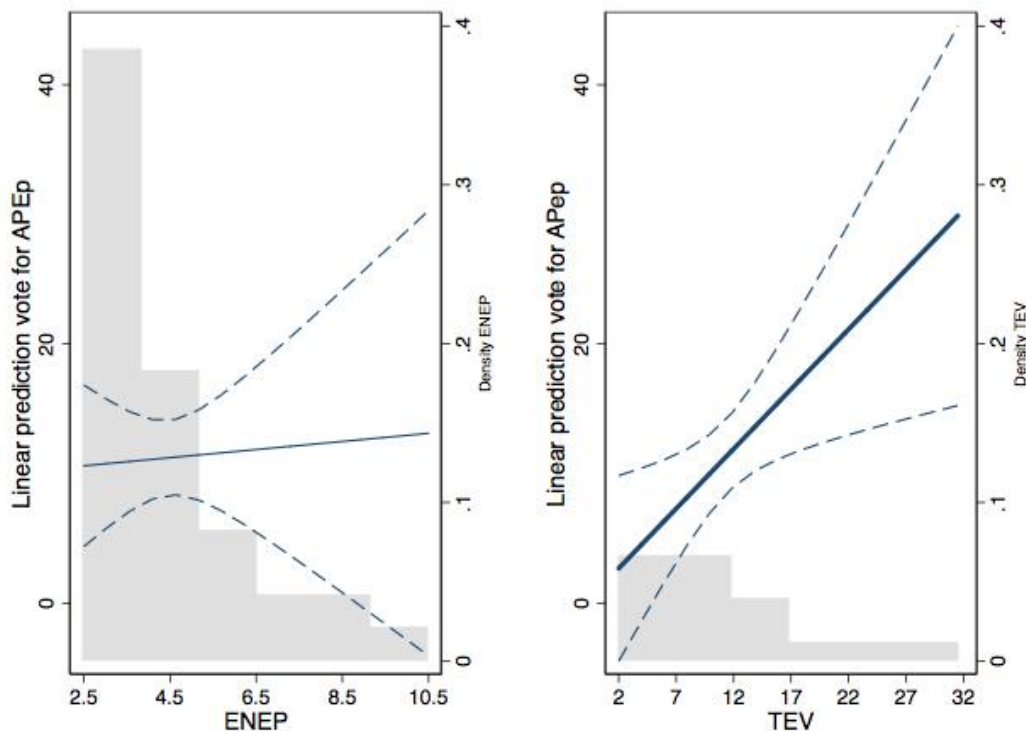


As shown in the figure above, economic performance and support for APEp only have a significant relationship during the Great Recession, but not at the time of the Great Depression.¹⁵ Contrary to all the literature on the effects of the “1929 Crack”, the rise of anti-systemic parties and the collapse of democracy during the inter-war

¹⁵ See Table A3 in the Appendix for all the statistical models.

period, figure 3 shows that the Great Depression did not lead voters' to behave irrationally. In fact, figure 4 illustrates a non significant relationship between electoral fragmentation and support for APE parties, but a positive effect of TEV in electoral polarization –the increment in one per cent of the volatility consequently generates an increment in more than 0.9 per cent of votes for APE parties (see Model 1 in Table A4). Thus, Western European voters during the inter-war period did not turn to new parties, but instead simply held their governments accountable, turning to the opposition which in some countries like Germany or Greece was made of APEp, but in others like the UK or Norway was not.

Figure 4. Relationship between fragmentation/volatility and polarization during the Great Depression



What figure 3, and by extension figure 4, are suggesting is that while the Great Depression was exclusively an economic, even if severe, crisis (Berman, 2006), the (current) Great Recession has also an important political component. In fact, and as Rovira and Zanotti have already pointed out “the Great Recession has amplified pre-existing electoral trends” (2017: 8). In other words, the 2008 global economic and financial crisis has just augmented the process of electoral de-alignment, caused by a severe political crisis (i.e. of traditional parties and party government), that the

“European school” led by Mair (2013) had been warning about. Thus, and given the abovementioned process of de-alignment as well as the harsh economic conditions experienced by millions of citizens across most Western European democracies, their voters - feeling abandoned by traditional parties which, independently of their ideological position, have been mercilessly adopting austerity policies alike - have decided to look for an alternative, switching their support to (mostly new) APEp (Roberts, 2013, 2015).

Figure 5. Relationship between fragmentation/volatility (Type A and B) and polarization during the Great Recession

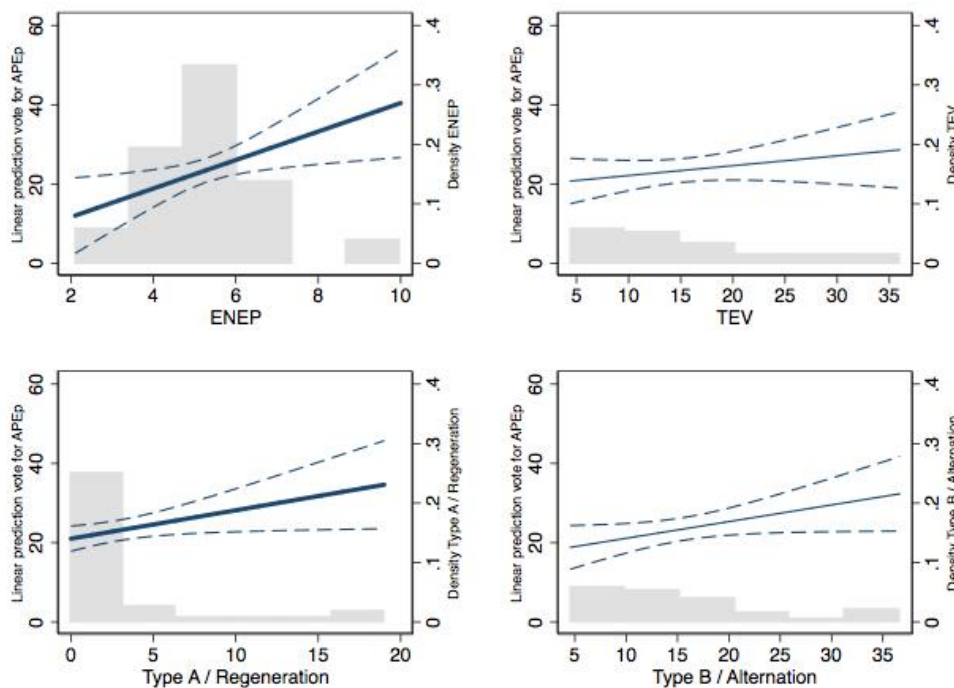


Figure 5, which looks at the relationship between both fragmentation as well as volatility and electoral polarization, confirms the idea that the recent (after 2008) electoral success of APEp rather than the result of a process of electoral re-alignment, like in the 1930s, is the fruit of a process of electoral de-alignment, caused by the crisis of traditional (mainstream) parties. Thus, as it can be seen in the upper left figure, for each increment in electoral fragmentation the percentage of votes for APEp increases in more than 3.5 units (see Model 2 in Table A4). This is clearly not the case with electoral volatility (upper right), suggesting that it has been the failure of traditional political parties to represent the interests of the electorate, and particularly to solve the problems created and/or exacerbated by the 2008 crisis (e.g. unemployment,

immigration, etc.), that have left voters with no other alternative than to support many of the new APEp created in the shade of the abovementioned political-economic crisis (e.g. Podemos, 5 Star Movement, Alternative for Germany). This is what follows also from the two bottom figures above.¹⁶

Using data from Emanuele (2015), the figure on the bottom left looks at the relationship between Type A volatility (Powell and Tucker, 2014) or volatility by regeneration (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2015), which measures the change in the percentage of votes for new and traditional parties between elections, and electoral polarization. The figure on the bottom left simply replaces Type A/Regeneration volatility with Type B or alternation volatility, which captures the change in electoral support among traditional parties between elections (Powell and Tucker, 2014; Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2015).¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, and given the abovementioned process of electoral de-alignment, only Type A/regeneration volatility is significantly and positively related to polarization, to the point that for each increment in Type A volatility the support for APE parties increases in more than 0.7 per cent of votes (see Model 2a in Tabl3 A4). All in all, figure 5 clearly suggests that the rise of APEp, at least after 2008, is the fruit of traditional parties' failure to represent and/or deliver (e.g. anti-austerity policies), rather than merit of APEp themselves.

Conclusions

Support for APEp is on the rise. Never since the turbulent inter-war period APEp managed to be so successful, not only at electoral level, but also in the governmental arena. Thus, and especially since the Great Recession, APEp like the True Finns (SP), the Freedom Party (ÖVP), the Progress Party (FrP), or the New Flemish Alliance (NV-A) Belgium have managed to get access to executive office as junior coalition parties in Finland, Austria, Norway and Belgium, respectively. In other countries (Denmark, Portugal), minority cabinets are currently sustained thanks to the APEp's parliamentary support. In Greece, two APEp (i.e. Syriza and the Independent

¹⁶ See also Table A4 in the Appendix.

¹⁷In order to prevent collinearity among our independent variables we have computed their correlations. While the threshold is usually considered to be 0.70 and as TEV, Type A and Type B are highly correlated, we opt for introducing each variable in different statistical models (Model 2, 2a and 2b in Table A4, respectively).

Greeks) have governed since January 2015. This has led many scholars, journalists and practitioners to blame the 2008 global economic crisis for APEp's success.

In the current paper, we looked into this causal relationship, but found no support. Using a new and original database comprising more than 470 elections between 1848 and 2016 in 20 consolidated democracies, we clearly show that the current polarization of Western European electorates, measured by the percentage of votes for APEp, has not been the consequence of any economic downturn, but rather fostered by the mutual withdrawal of both political parties and voters from the electoral arena (Mair, 2013).

In particular, we find that the combination of both a political and economic crisis during the Great Recession is behind the rise in support for APEp. Moreover, and notwithstanding many similarities between the 1929 Great Depression and the 2008 Great Recession (Lindvall, 2014), we observed that while during the former voters did not turn to new APEp parties for solutions, but rather to the opposition (re-alignment), that has not been the case during the latter. Thus, it is traditional parties that have to be blamed for rise of support for APEp after the Great Recession. In other words, the current levels of electoral polarization observed in Western Europe are not so much "merit" of APEp themselves, but the product of the crisis of traditional parties which, with the "cartel style" attitudes, have led voters either to seek refuge at the arms of APEp or abandon once and for all the political arena (Morgan, 2013).

All in all, what we have discovered is that while the 2008 Great Recession might have exacerbated the conditions for the grow in electoral polarization, the latter has a political, rather than an economic cause. Thus, APE's electoral success is not the sickness *per se*, but just the symptom of the crisis of representative democracy in general, and traditional political parties in particular. This is certainly an important point that we need to remember when trying to find a cure. Because if populism, extremism and polarization are just the tumours of a carcinogenic democratic system, characterised by disenchantment of citizens with traditional political parties, then the antidote we choose should not be neither surgery (i.e. bans) nor chemotherapy (i.e. *cordon sanitaire*), but a new diet leading to the revitalisation of the cells (i.e. parties) at the core of the democratic body.

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Appendix

Table A1. Description of variables

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
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Polarization	471	13.7	12.26	0	78.4
TOR	505	0.77	0.4210589	0	1
GDP	504	15570.83	11678.3	1424	69702
Δ GDP	504	2.42	6.798	-54.7	67.7
ENEP	471	4.28	1.52	1.6	10.5
Lsq	471	4.8	4.45	.1	26.8
Type A Volatility	330	1.46	2.53	0	19
Ethnic	505	0.186	0.17	.0414	.5554
Religion	505	0.338	0.196	.0911	.7222
Linguistic	505	0.215	0.1966	.0198	.644
District magnitude	344	15.97	33.04	1	150
Unemployment	137	7.76	4.5	1.8	26.5
Inflation	271	5.738	6.6	-2.1	51
TEV	442	10.358	6.5	.2	36.7
YOD	505	1925.69	26.4	1848	1978
Great Recession	501	0.0798403	0.27	0	1
Great Depression	505	0.0752475	0.26	0	1

Table A2. Explaining electoral polarization in Western Europe, replication

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
GDP	0.000191 (0.58)	0.000499*** (4.01)	0.000381** (3.00)
Δ GDP	-0.0429	0.0239	0.0420

	(-0.12)	(0.22)	(0.43)
ENEP	6.471***	3.213***	3.242***
	(6.63)	(6.45)	(7.49)
Lsq	0.490	-0.481*	-0.459**
	(1.21)	(-2.49)	(-2.78)
TOR	-5.742	-3.735	-6.778***
	(-0.90)	(-0.81)	(-3.34)
TEV	0.280*	0.351***	0.427***
	(2.37)	(4.35)	(5.38)
Religious	11.79	-81.62**	-10.73
	(1.07)	(-2.85)	(-1.14)
Ethnic			188.6
			(0.97)
YOD	0.808***	-0.658*	0.120**
	(3.70)	(-2.05)	(2.66)
District Magnitude		-0.00427	
		(-0.05)	
Linguistic	11.87	-0.317	
	(0.68)	(-0.01)	
Unemployment	-0.259		
	(-0.96)		
Inflation	0.350		
	(0.98)		
Constant	-1586.1***	1312.4*	-196.9*
	(-3.73)	(2.07)	(-2.14)
N elections	135	334	441
N countries	20	20	20
R ²	0.872	0.809	0.761
R ² adjusted	0.791	0.730	0.649

t statistics in parentheses * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table A3. Interaction between big events and GDP growth in WEC

	Model 0 Additive	Model 1 Great Recession	Model 2 Great Depression
GDP	0.000381** (3.00)	-0.0000113 (-0.23)	0.0000311 (0.64)

Δ GDP	0.0420 (0.43)	-0.0592 (-0.69)	-0.1010358 (-1.11)
ENEP	3.242*** (7.49)	2.467*** (6.37)	2.468*** (6.32)
Lsq	-0.459** (-2.78)	0.0795 (0.65)	0.0833 (0.68)
TOR	-6.778*** (-3.34)	-2.194+ (-1.70)	-2.228+ (-1.72)
TEV	0.427*** (5.38)	0.463*** (5.50)	0.500*** (5.95)
Religious	-3.516 (-0.33)	2.130 (0.82)	2.086 (0.80)
Linguistic	-6.857 (-0.97)	3.593 (1.22)	3.197 (1.07)
YOD	0.120** (2.66)	0.111*** (4.86)	0.113*** (5.00)
Great Recession* Δ GDP		-1.365* (-2.17)	
Great Depression* Δ GDP			-0.159 (-0.50)
Constant	-178.7* (-2.06)	-215.4*** (-4.84)	-221.3*** (-4.98)
N observations	441	437	441
R ²	0.761	0.322	0.313
R ² _adjusted	0.649	0.305	0.295

t statistics in parentheses * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table A4. Explaining APEp support in the two big crisis

	Model 1 Great Depression	Model 2 Great Recession	Model 2a Great Recession	Model 2b Great Recession
GDP	-0.000639	0.000309	0.000492*	0.000272

	(-0.38)	(1.19)	(2.14)	(1.09)
Δ GDP	-0.279	-1.104	-0.793	-1.177
	(-0.86)	(-1.76)	(-1.46)	(-1.95)
ENEP	0.314	3.592*	4.355***	3.030*
	(0.23)	(2.58)	(3.72)	(2.27)
Lsq	-0.663	-0.0849	-0.0930	-0.204
	(-1.40)	(-0.21)	(-0.27)	(-0.52)
TOR	-21.17**	1.807	2.821	1.014
	(-3.27)	(0.49)	(0.81)	(0.29)
TEV	0.923*	0.249		
	(2.67)	(1.15)		
Religious	6.294	3.059	5.824	2.579
	(0.57)	(0.33)	(0.74)	(0.29)
Linguistic	5.889	-7.898	-18.92	-4.476
	(0.52)	(-0.66)	(-1.77)	(-0.39)
YOD	0.0278	0.233*	0.237*	0.202
	(0.19)	(2.23)	(2.60)	(2.00)
Type A			0.716*	
			(2.20)	
Type B				0.421
				(2.02)
Constant	-31.18	-461.3*	-478.3*	-399.4
	(-0.11)	(-2.17)	(-2.56)	(-1.94)
N observations	37	39	38	39
R ²	0.685	0.456	0.596	0.501
R ² adjusted	0.580	0.287	0.467	0.347

t statistics in parentheses * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001