



Partecipazione e Conflitto

** The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 10(3) 2017: 983-1004

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v10i3p983

Published in November 15, 2017

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE HOPELESS FORECAST UNDER THE GLOOMY SKY

"Crisis" of political legitimacy and role of future perspective in hard times

Pasquale Colloca

University of Bologna

ABSTRACT: This study analyses the extent to which the recent economic crisis influences the political attitudes that are fundamental to legitimacy of a democratic system of government. The article focuses on two questions: how much does crisis exposure affect democratic legitimacy attitudes? And what is the role played by social mobility perspective on this effect?

The findings, based on a sample of the Life in Transition Survey II, show that economic crisis exposure significantly affects political legitimacy attitudes. The results confirm that higher crisis exposure is associated with lower legitimacy. Additionally, the present research rules out the possibility that crisis exposure affects attitudes in a specific way, depending on the expected mobility valence. While replicating previous evidence supporting the negative democratic effect of adverse economic changes, the current research sheds light on the critical role that the future perspective plays in determining this effect.

KEYWORDS: Economic crisis, political attitudes, political legitimacy, expected mobility

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Pasquale Colloca, email: pasquale.colloca@unibo.it

1. Introduction

The Great recession in Europe since 2008 has affected (and it is still affecting) the lives of millions of people, exacerbating social exclusion, unemployment, poverty and inequality (OECD 2013), with relevant consequences detected at the individual level. In fact, in the last years, many research have pointed out its individual consequences and its negative impact on people's well-being: for example, poor self-rated health (Zavras, Tsiantou, Pavi, Mylona, and Kyriopoulos 2012), unhappiness (Gudmundsdottir 2013), anger and depression (Ragnarsdóttir, Bernburg, and Olafsdottir 2013), as well as anxiety (Gili, Roca, Basu, McKee, and Stuckler 2012).

However, in addition to the psychological consequences, evaluating also whether and how the recent crisis influences different attitudes related to the quality of democracy (e.g., political trust, support for democracy) has yet received little attention (Bermeo and Bartels 2014). In fact, in times of crisis, the diffusion of negative orientations can be determinant to undermine the order and the social stability of some countries (e.g., Bermeo 2003; Rothermund 1996), in which the economic systems are already highly stressed by the crisis since 2008. In particular, in the affluent countries of Europe a prolonged period of economic growth preceded the recent economic crisis, and research points out that a crisis is particularly conducive to frustration if it occurs suddenly after a prolonged period of increasing prosperity (Davies 1962).

Additionally, to date, there are few studies that provide empirical evidence on potential moderators of the impact of crises on political attitudes (e.g., see Polavieja 2013; Torcal 2014). In this study it is argued that more attention than is usually given should be paid to the role of the expected social mobility to account for the strength of attitudinal consequences of the crisis exposure. The rationale for this prediction is mainly based on more general sociological approaches to "relative deprivation" theory (Runciman 1966; Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2013), emphasizing the important role of subjective comparison processes in distress during an economic collapse, with a generalized objective downgrading of material conditions. Specifically, competition feeling may generate hostility toward the politics and the democratic system mostly when a perspective of downward mobility is present; to experience a process of social downgrading may elicit a perception of unfair disadvantage, facilitating the attribution of responsibility to the inefficiency of politics and political system.

The present study aims to address these gaps in the empirical literature by (1) exploring the individual differences in the democratic legitimacy attitudes due to crisis exposure in

some Eurozone countries, and (2) examining whether these attitudinal differences are moderated by relative mobility.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, a brief literature review on political impact of economic shocks, with an emphasis on potential moderating role of relative mobility, is provided. Database, variables and empirical model are described in the methods section. The next section reports the results of the empirical tests. The final section concludes with a summary of empirical findings and discusses their implications, briefly exploring possible future research perspectives.

2. Economic downturn and “crisis” of political legitimacy

Political legitimacy can be defined as the quality of “oughtness” that is perceived by the public to inhere in a political regime (Merelman, 1966). More specifically, following Lipset (1960), the political *“legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society”*. Starting from this concept of political legitimacy, the assumed positive relationship between economic condition and political legitimacy can be traced back to the well-known debates about economic development as a prerequisite of a participant and democratic society (Lipset, 1959; Smith, 1972). Specifically, in order to explain the beginning of the democratization process, the classical thesis of modernization (Lipset, 1960) argues that democracy and its legitimacy are favoured by the economic development, so much so that it is argued that dictatorships have more difficulties to politically survive when economic growth is high (Dahl, 1971: 78). Not surprisingly, when economic well-being and existential security increase in societies, daily life experiences of individuals change, bringing them to give greater weight to democratic goals that were previously given low priority, such as freedom of expression (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Friedman, 2005).

As well as virtuous, the circle can be vicious. Friedman highlights the potential civic consequences of a negative economic performance: *“Many countries with highly developed economies, including America, have experienced alternating eras of economic growth and stagnation in which their democratic values have strengthened or weakened accordingly”* (Friedman, 2005: 5). Such as economic growth promotes optimism, greater openness, tolerance and democracy, at the same time economic deterioration can adversely reshape the democratic culture of a community, making a democracy more deficient in terms of political legitimacy. According to this view, several studies have investigated the civic and democratic impact of sudden and unexpected material deteriorations, such as those resulting

from an economic crisis. It is reported that a popular reaction to an economic crisis can become dramatic and significant (Lindvall, 2013). In times of crisis, people could turn their backs to democracy (Bermeo, 2003) and the economic distress generated by crises may produce “combustible potential” (Achen and Bartels, 2005: 34) capable of triggering socio-political change. Several studies investigated political attitudes, confirming that these macroeconomic events may affect political interest and political trust (McAllister, 1999; Mishler and Rose, 2001). The economic insecurity affects the same perceptions that people have about the social impact of the crisis, influencing also their trust in political institutions and incumbent government (Ross and Escobar-Lemmon, 2009), and generating anti-democratic consequences (Cordova and Seligson, 2009; Graham and Sukhtankar, 2004). In this regard, it is also argued that the rise of the totalitarian regimes antecedents to World War II are connected directly to the legitimacy crisis of democracies, triggered by the global economic depression of 1929: in that period, a global public opinion change was sparked, favouring European fascism and Latin America populism (Rothermund, 1996).

In sum, the literature review set forth here indicates that most of the previous studies suggest potential democratic legitimacy risks due to the economic shocks. Most of these studies focused on South American and Asian countries, who experienced significant economic recessions in more remote years (e.g. Remmer, 1991; Davis and Langley, 1995; Hayo, 2005; Turner and Carballo, 2005). However, the relevance of this research question is becoming increasingly important also in established Western democracies, who have experienced high levels of income and well-being before the onset of the recent economic crisis (e.g., Bermeo and Bartels, 2014). In recent years, this interest is even more evident by the presence of different projects financed by EU and focused on citizens’ attitudes and participation in relation to the crisis (e.g., “Livewhat”, “POLCON” or “REScEU” projects).

Additionally, literature shows that the political legitimacy is best understood as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Norris, 2001; Easton, 1965), ranging from the most generalized confidence and trust in the regime and its institutions, down to specific approval of particular authorities and leaders. Following this literature, this study aims to evaluate the political legitimacy in terms of attitudes by investigating at two distinguishable and independent levels: at both specific and general levels. In particular, the political systems obtain legitimacy in so far as the public supports a system’s concrete institutions as well as the system as a totality (Easton, 1965); it is essential for the efficiency and functioning of democratic system that citizens have confidence in political institutions and prefer democracy to any alternative system of government (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Newton and Norris, 2000). As a consequence, it is empirically important in this study to distinguish these two levels:

on the one hand, the satisfaction and confidence in democratic institutions, on the other hand, the detachment from democratic values and democracy as political system.

Therefore, it can be expected that *the crisis exposure significantly affects the democratic legitimacy attitudes, both specific and general ones, in addition to the main socio-demographic and status characteristics; in particular, individuals who experience higher crisis exposure are more likely to delegitimise political institutions and democratic system (Hp1).*

3. How much does the future perspective matter in hard times?

Little is known about the effects of the recent economic crisis on political legitimacy attitudes, but the mechanisms through which the crisis may more specifically influence those attitudes remain even more unexplored. This study hypothesizes that the way in which individuals evaluate their future social trajectory, may be the crucial mechanism underlying a potential democratic “recession”.

This argument is supported by more general sociological approaches to “relative deprivation”, which claim that the subjective reality of individuals is more significant to them than their objective reality (Runciman, 1966). More specifically, how people perceive their situations in comparison to salient reference points may create feelings of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, and Bialosiewicz 2011), influencing the effects of objective economic hardship on attitudes. Moreover, in times of crisis, in presence of a generalized objective downgrading of material conditions, subjective comparisons may become even more significant (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2013).

In fact, with reference to expected social mobility, there are at least two potential ways to react to crisis exposure. On the one hand, though a person does experience objectively downward material change, he may view it as a temporary situation because of private knowledge about skills and plans that will improve his situation in the future. At the same time, he may perceive his material worsening as a common condition in times of crisis, to the point of not evaluate his social positioning as decreasing, but stable or even increasing. In those cases, regardless of the current position, upward expected mobility and the perception of abundant opportunities lessen frustration and the feelings of injustice, diminishing the attribution of responsibility to the inefficiency of political institutions and system (Wegener, 1991).

On the other hand, the emergence of a generalized feeling of economic insecurity may become fear of social downgrading, leading individuals to evaluate that the crisis harms

them more than other members of the society. This framework of competitive pressure is rooted in a perspective of downward expected mobility and in a consequent perception of unfair disadvantage due to inefficiency of politics and system of government. In this case, crisis exposure could lead to hostility toward political institutions as well as the system as a totality.

Consistently, literature also stresses the significant role of valence of social mobility (upward vs. downward) in terms of legitimacy toward the system. For example, building on relative deprivation theory, Krahn and Harrison (1992) find that people who perceive a social downgrading during a recession indicate more support for government redistribution, triggering grievance toward the social order. At the same time, people who experience upward mobility are less likely to justify anticivic behaviour, as tax evasion (Daude and Melguizo, 2011), and tend to legitimize the system that will allow them to move ahead (Scalon and Cano, 2008). It is also shown that the experience and expectation of upward mobility may contribute to the social and political stability (Zhiming, 2013) developing generalized political trust.

Consequently, expected social mobility may then reflect processes that explain its influence on the issue of how crisis exposure comes to be translated into risks to political legitimacy and stability. For individuals who are more heavily exposed to the crisis, but predict upward mobility, a better perspective for the future may help to cope with the sense of unfairness or the anger toward the political institutions. At the same time, individuals who failed to improve their lot may be democratically vulnerable when they expect also to experience downward mobility.

Consequently, it is hypothesized that *expected mobility significantly interacts with crisis exposure to influence democratic legitimacy attitudes, and that the effect of crisis exposure on attitudes critically depends on the expected mobility. In particular, it is expected that those who experience downward mobility are more likely to report political dissatisfaction as a consequence of the level of crisis exposure. On the contrary, the perception of upward mobility is likely to have a compensatory effect, significantly neutralizing the negative attitudinal impact generated by crisis exposure* (Hp2).

4. Data and methods

The aim of the study is to understand the impact of material change generated by crisis exposure on democratic legitimacy attitudes, and the role played by expected social mobility on this impact. As previously seen, many studies investigated how economic and materi-

al conditions may influence beliefs and attitudes. This rapidly expanding empirical literature, however, has so far treated the economic status mostly from a static perspective and failed to consider the effects of dynamic changes in one's status, either realized or anticipated. In fact, changes in economic conditions might be more relevant than absolute levels of economic status with regard to understanding of political attitudes. This dynamic formulation is particularly useful in times of economic crisis, when severe shocks can suddenly affect personal as well as national economic conditions. Following this logic, a marginal pre-crisis social position could remain constant without changing political attitudes, and it is only if sudden changes in economic conditions occur that attitudes change (Billiet, Meuleman, and De Witte 2014).

A strict test of this dynamic argument would ideally require analysing longitudinal survey data during the crisis. Unfortunately, such data sources are unavailable at present. This study adopts a different approach, confining itself to the analysis of data from a single time point (namely the 2010 round of the LiTS) and using retrospective and perspective measurements that record individual changes in socio-economic conditions. Thereby, the approach of this study allows to examine relative changes rather than absolute levels of material condition, studying the latter as the result of *social trajectories*, realized (crisis exposure) and anticipated (expected mobility).

Data

The hypotheses are tested using data of Life in Transition Survey II (LiTS II). LiTS II, conducted jointly by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank in 2010, surveyed almost 39.000 households in 34 countries (mainly in the former communist East) to assess public attitudes, well-being and the impacts of economic and political change. The survey provides vivid evidence of precisely how lives are affected by the global economic crisis and its aftermath. The joint sample (N = 3.100) of the three participating Eurozone countries is selected (France, Germany, Italy) for two main reasons. Firstly, as previously reported, this study assumes particular relevance in the context of affluent European countries because they have experienced high levels of economic growth and increasing prosperity before the recent economic recession, with high expectations internalized by people about their economic future. Secondly, the choice to focus on specific Eurozone countries also guarantees a sample composed of a relatively homogeneous group of countries, distinguishable from the other ones surveyed in reference to both the similar initial impact of the economic crisis and the level of democratic and civic maturity.

Dependent variables

This study uses two main dimensions to define and measure the attitudinal components of democratic legitimacy, distinguishing between specific (or institutional) and general (or systemic) approach. As previously stressed, both such approaches follow the tradition of political culture school (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), emphasizing that a broader set of civic attitudes and values are important for the efficiency and functioning of democratic system. The political systems obtain legitimacy in so far as the public supports a system's concrete institutions (specific approach) as well as the system as a totality (general approach).

Specific legitimacy approach. Following the specific legitimacy dimension, the political impact of economic crisis may be evaluated by its influence on two attitudes toward political institutions: government dissatisfaction and political distrust. For the first dimension, the following sentence is used: "Please rate the overall performance of national government" (from "very bad" = 1, to "very good" = 5). To calculate the final score (0-10), the item is reversed scored, with the higher scores reflecting maximum dissatisfaction.

Beyond the government dissatisfaction, public confidence in institutions is the attitudinal indicator more reliable to measure the absence of political legitimacy at a specific level. In order to measure political distrust, respondents are asked about their level of trust toward some democratic institutions (Parliament, political parties, Presidency, Government/Cabinet of Ministers)¹: "To what extent do you trust the following institutions?" (1 = complete distrust, 5 = complete trust). The final index ($\alpha = .81$) is rescaled, with the higher scores reflecting maximum political distrust (0-10).

General legitimacy approach. Compared to specific approach, the general one does stress the political importance of attitudes that have a strong linkage with liberty aspirations and support for democracy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Consequently, the effects of crisis exposure are evaluated using two further indexes: anti-libertarian tendency and detachment from democracy as political system.

Anti-libertarian tendency gauges the tendency of respondents to give up political liberties. By doing this, respondents are asked the following dichotomous question: "Now I am going to switch and ask you a different kind of question. It will be and hypothetical question. Imagine you could choose between living in two countries, Country A and Country B. Country A has few political liberties but strong economic growth. Country B has full political

¹ The four institutions were selected from a larger battery of seven institutions (Presidency, Government/Cabinet of Ministers, Parliament, courts, political parties, armed forces, police). A preliminary principal-components factor analysis (oblimin rotation) yielded a two-factor solution (Pearson's $r = .39$), showing that the four political institutions adequately capture one single factor of conceptual interest for this study (the factor accounted the 51% of the variance), distinguishing by the institutions maintaining control and social order (the second factor accounted for 16%).

liberties but weak economic growth. Which country would you rather live in?" (Country A = 1; Country B = 0).

Anti-democracy attitude is based on one item assessing respondents' views about the democracy as form of political system. Following Klingemann (1999), arguing that support for democracy should be measured in relation to support for alternative regimes, it is used as a preference for democracy item. Specifically, interviewees are asked the following question: "With which one of the following three statements do you agree most?". Three statements included are: A) "Democracy is preferable to any other form of political system", B) "Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic one", C) "For people like me, it does not matter whether a government is democratic or authoritarian". Considering that the objective of the present analysis is to measure the detachment from democracy (independently by type of detachment), this categorical variable has been dichotomized: preference for democracy (0) vs anti-democratic alternatives (1).

Independent variable

Crisis exposure. The crisis exposure is assessed by using the responses to the following question included in the section of the LiTS questionnaire entitled "Impact of the crisis": "In the past two years, have you or anyone else in your household had to take any of the following measures as the result of a decline in income or other economic difficulty?". This is followed by a battery of 16 behaviours (e.g., "Reduced use of car", "Reduced vacations"), in which exploratory factor analysis shows the presence of several factors (e.g., payment default, reduced consumption of basic goods and services, etc.). However, the goal is not to assess the role played by different types of hardship, but to quantify the extent of the material lifestyle change because of limited economic resources. Consequently, also considering that the final reliability index does not vary even when the less-correlated items are omitted, all the listed items are included. The composite index is operationalized as frequency of carried-out behaviours, measuring not a static material status but a fundamentally dynamic lifestyle change².

Moderating variable

Expected mobility. In order to measure the expected mobility, as potential moderator and resource to avoid negative effects of crisis exposure, it is used a composite index. Peo-

² Each behaviour may have a specific subjective value and may be perceived as more or less depriving than other behaviours; however, this information (the perceived importance) is not asked in the questionnaire.

ple are considered subjectively mobile if they perceive their own future place in society as higher or lower than the current one.

Two self-placement questions are used to construct a composite index. The first question asks the respondents to assess their current socioeconomic position with respect to the people in their country: "Please imagine a ten-step ladder where on the bottom, the first step, stand the poorest 10% people in our country, and on the highest step, the tenth, stand the richest 10% of people in our country. On which step of the ten is your household today?". The second question measures their expectation about future position: "And where on the ladder do you believe your household will be 4 years from now?". The difference between the second answer and the first one does reflect the balance of expected mobility in the near future (a positive score means a more ascendant mobility, a negative score means a more descendant mobility).

Control variables

Models are assessed using linear regression analyses and controlling for potentially confounding variables: gender, age, educational level, occupational status and country. Gender is a dummy variable with the value 0 for women and 1 for men. Participants are categorized by age into three groups: young adults (ages 18-34 years), middle-aged adults (ages 35-54 years) and older adults (aged older 54). Educational level is trichotomized into primary or lower secondary level, upper secondary level and tertiary or more level. Occupational status is recoded into three categories: employed, unemployed, other (not working category that includes students, homemakers and retired persons).

The empirical model

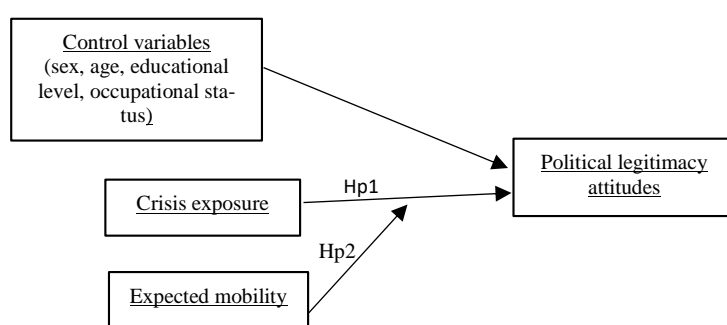
The empirical model is summarized in Figure 1. The general hypothesis (Hp1) states that life conditions worsening (level of crisis exposure) may increase anti-democratic legitimacy attitudes: political distrust, government dissatisfaction, anti-libertarian tendency, detachment from democracy.

These effects are tested by controlling some sociodemographic and social status characteristics potentially related to the level of crisis exposure.

Further, it is hypothesized that expected mobility may play a compensatory role in moderating the effects of crisis exposure on democratic legitimacy attitudes (Hp2). Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) model of moderation, in a second step attitude is regressed on crisis exposure (the predictor) and expected mobility (the moderator), followed by their interaction term (crisis exposure by expected mobility). A moderator effect is present if the

interaction between moderator variable and predictor variable is significant while the independent effect of each is statistically controlled (Baron and Kenny, 1986). To test such a moderation prediction and to validate the model's reliability, the same regression analyses are performed on each of four political attitudes.

Figure 1. The empirical model used to test the hypotheses



Additionally, to control for variation across countries, standard errors of the models are clustered by country, becoming robust to heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation³. After a few years from the start of the crisis, it is widely known that European countries have experienced specific economic dynamics, different enough to identify more types of crises in Europe also in relation to the public discourse (Zamponi and Bosi, 2016). However, the empirical generalizability of the hypothesized model could be considered valid for the three surveyed countries for two main reasons.

Firstly, OECD data showed that the arrival of the crisis had led to a generalized decline in GDP in 2009 in Europe, affecting the various euro area countries analysed and their common currency. In fact, the economic performances of the three countries began to significantly differentiate only from 2010 onwards: in 2011 France and Germany registered slow growth trend, while Italy remained at negative values. The LiTS II survey was conduct-

³ When the number of country cases is large, the use of mixed models or multilevel modelling is an effective way to assess contextual variation and how it decreases as country variables are added. With only three countries, however, such models do not provide reliable estimates. As a result, the analyses are based on a series of fixed-effects generalized linear models. Preliminary models were also fitted, including a set of country dummy regressors and specifying interactions between country and various explanatory variables. None of the interaction effects were substantively large, however, so they were removed from the reported models in order to simplify interpretation.

ed in 2010, as a consequence it could be expected that the crisis event has not yet created significant differentiation among the analysed countries.

Secondly, the predictive model described above identifies the crisis exposure using an individual-level measure (intended as personal lifestyle change). According to the literature reviewed, there is no reason to suppose that in 2010 the individual crisis exposure elicits different attitudinal reactions among people living in countries similarly affected by a common external event. In fact, it is hypothesized that people who are more crisis exposed have those hypothesized reactions compared to those less exposed, both in Germany, as well as in France and Italy. In any case, as already stressed, once the standard errors are clusterized to control a potential country effect, it will be possible to generalize to all three countries.

5. Results

Specific legitimacy approach

As indicated in the methods section, following a specific political legitimacy approach, institutional distrust and citizens' dissatisfaction with the way government works represent two fundamental attitudes that can weaken the political legitimacy (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Table 1 presents the results of the linear regression models. In the two models 1, the predictors include both the key-independent variable (level of crisis exposure) and the control variables (sex, age, education, and occupational status). Given the hypothesis regarding the impact of material deteriorating on political attitudes (Hp1), the main interest is on crisis exposure, whilst the other variables are considered as controls.

In support of the hypothesis, results indicate an effect of crisis exposure such that more crisis exposure is associated with lower political legitimacy. As shows table 1, controlling the sociodemographic and social status characteristics, crisis exposure is significant in each one of the two models 1 ($\beta = .20$ and $p < .001$ for government dissatisfaction, $\beta = .15$ and $p < .001$ for political distrust). In particular, increases in crisis exposure are associated with increases in government dissatisfaction and political distrust.

Further, some of the control variables are significantly related to political attitudes. Beyond the crisis exposure level, higher government dissatisfaction is reported by unemployed as well as higher distrust is perceived by lower educated and unemployed.

Table 1. Specific legitimacy approach: effects of crisis exposure on political attitudes (model 1) and moderating role of upward mobility (model 2). Linear regressions (standardized coefficients).

	Government dissatisfaction		Political distrust	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender (ref: Male)	0.03	0.07	-0.10	-0.07
Age (ref: Over 54)				
18-34	0.12	0.38*	-0.09	0.12
35-54	0.24°	0.37**	-0.07	0.03
Education (ref: Tertiary)				
Primary or lower secondary	0.46***	0.42**	0.21°	0.15
Upper secondary	0.34**	0.31*	-0.01	-0.07
Occupational status (ref: Employed)				
Unemployed	0.24*	0.21°	0.49***	0.42***
Other	0.05	0.01	0.01	-0.05
Crisis exposure	0.20***	0.38***	0.15***	0.27**
Upward mobility		-0.25**		-0.27***
Crisis exposure by Upward mobility		-0.05**		-0.04*
Constant	5.16***	6.41***	5.78***	7.16***
Adj R-squared	4,0%	6,6%	3,5%	5,6%
(N)	(2,483)	(2,337)	(2,539)	(2,378)

Note: The sample includes all the three Eurozone Western countries surveyed: France, Germany, Italy (LiTS II, 2010). Standard errors are clustered by country and are robust to heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation. *** = $p < 0.001$; ** = $p < 0.01$; * = $p < 0.05$; ° = $p < 0.1$

Most importantly, it is hypothesized that expected mobility would moderate the impact of crisis exposure on political attitudes. For this reason, the crisis exposure by expected mobility interaction for each attitude are introduced in models 2 (also including the main effect of expected mobility). Table 1 shows that the interaction effect is significant both on government satisfaction ($\beta = -.05$ and $p < .01$) and political distrust ($\beta = -.04$ and $p < .05$). For both dimensions, the addition of the interaction term to the model yields a significant contribution to the regression equation ($p < .05$). This finding indicates that expected mobility is a moderator of the crisis-political legitimacy relationship.

The direction of the regression coefficient for the interaction term is negative and shows that, as expected mobility increases in ascendant terms, the strength of the crisis-legitimacy relation significantly weakens.

As regards the specific legitimacy approach, these findings are in line with the expectations, which means that both hypotheses Hp1 and Hp2 are confirmed by the data.

General legitimacy approach

Following a general legitimacy approach, low levels of confidence in political institutions do not necessarily also involve a threat to democracy, if a general preference for democracy as system of government is also largely diffused (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Newton and Norris 2000). Using the general legitimacy indexes, are the predicted effects significant as well? General detachment from democracy is measured through two additional indexes: anti-libertarian tendency and anti-democracy attitude.

Regarding the anti-libertarian tendency, the analysis presents results that are similar to those shown earlier. Reference may be made to table 2 showing the same tests presented in table 1, except using logistic regressions. In particular, controlling the sociodemographic and social status characteristics, increases in crisis exposure are found to be associated with increases in anti-libertarian tendency ($b = .06$ and $p < .01$). In model 2, the crisis exposure by expected mobility interaction term is significant ($b = -.04$ and $p = .05$). Also in this case, the negative valence of the interaction coefficient shows that, as upward mobility increases, the strength of the crisis effect on the attitude weakens. Finally, regarding the anti-democracy attitude, crisis exposure has no effect on the attitude in model 1 ($b = .03$ and $p > .10$), and the crisis-mobility interaction results significant ($b = -.04$ and $p = .05$).

In summary, results confirm the hypotheses using a specific legitimacy approach, but they are not fully confirmed using a general legitimacy approach. However, to better interpret the interaction effect, a categorical index is used to distinguish respondents into three mobility groups: no mobility (a future positioning identical to the present one), ascendant mobility (a future positioning higher than the present one) and descendant mobility (a future positioning lower than the present one).

In figure 2 are plotted the predicted margins of political attitudes by crisis exposure and type of mobility, while controlling for sociodemographic and social status variables.

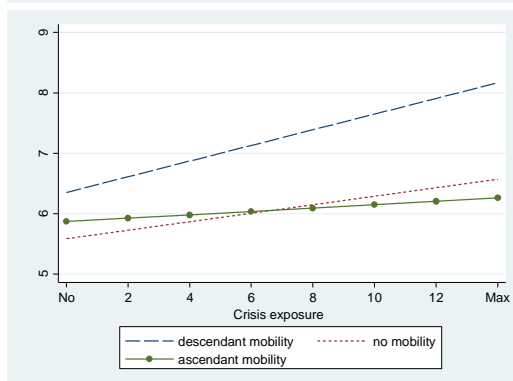
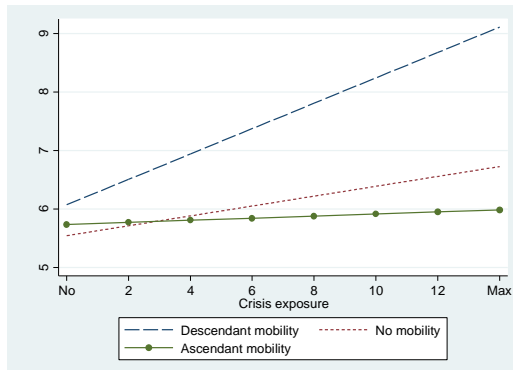
These graphs show in detail how crisis exposure is more predictive of political attitudes to the extent that expected mobility is descendant. As the citizens evaluate future mobility as worsening, their political legitimacy attitudes significantly decrease in relation to the crisis exposure level. In other words, people exposed to the crisis show lower levels of political legitimacy, mostly when the perspective of social downgrading is also present. The graphs show that the effect of the social downgrading does appear to be present on each of four attitudes, even though the crisis-legitimacy interaction is only marginally significant on general legitimacy attitudes. At the same time, when citizens prospectively evaluate their future mobility as ascendant, their political legitimacy attitudes tend to be independent of the crisis exposure level. Consequently, this result is consistent with the idea that the prospective of upward mobility does play a *compensatory* role in attenuating the risks of crisis exposure on political attitudes.

Table 2. General legitimacy approach: effects of crisis exposure on political attitudes (model 1) and moderating role of upward mobility (model 2). Logistic regressions (unstandardized coefficients and standard errors in parentheses).

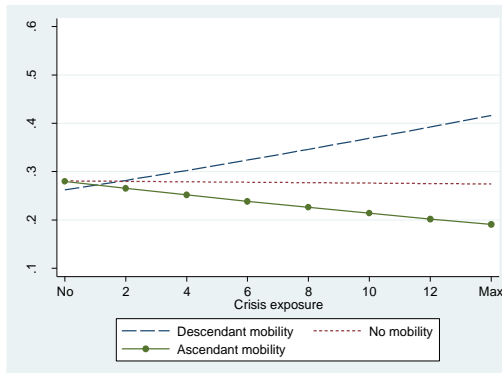
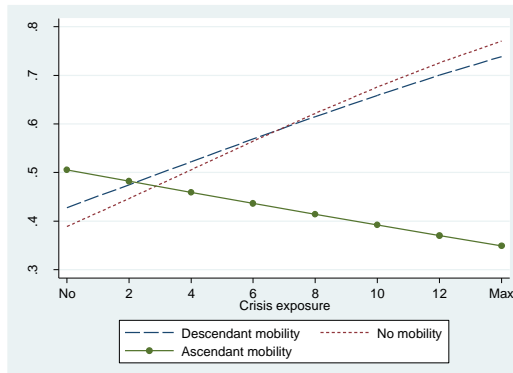
	Anti-libertarian tendency (0=full liberties, 1=few liberties)		Anti-democracy attitude (0=pro-democracy, 1=anti-democracy)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Gender (ref: Male)	0.25** (0.085)	0.28** (0.088)	0.13 (0.094)	0.13 (0.097)
Age (ref: Over 54)				
18-34	0.35** (0.132)	0.26° (0.141)	0.21 (0.143)	0.23 (0.154)
35-54	0.19 (0.116)	0.14 (0.121)	-0.04 (0.127)	-0.04 (0.132)
Education (ref: Tertiary)				
Primary or lower secon.	1.04*** (0.124)	1.05*** (0.128)	1.24*** (0.153)	1.25*** (0.158)
Upper secondary	0.76*** (0.120)	0.77*** (0.124)	0.94*** (0.151)	0.94*** (0.156)
Occupational status (ref: Employed)				
Unemployed	0.10 (0.110)	0.12 (0.115)	0.16 (0.118)	0.13 (0.123)
Other	0.03 (0.117)	0.03 (0.121)	-0.09 (0.129)	-0.15 (0.134)
Crisis exposure	0.06** (0.023)	0.24* (0.094)	0.03 (0.024)	0.18* (0.090)
Upward mobility		0.08 (0.069)		0.02 (0.074)
Crisis exposure by Upward mobility		-0.04* (0.020)		-0.04* (0.020)
Constant	1.30*** (0.169)	-1.67*** (0.367)	2.00*** (0.179)	-2.07*** (0.401)
Pseudo R-squared	3,3%	3,6%	3,1%	3,5%
(N)	(2,424)	(2,278)	(2,483)	(2,334)

Note: The sample includes all the three Eurozone Western countries surveyed: France, Germany, Italy (LiTS II, 2010). Standard errors are clustered by country and are robust to heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation. *** = p < 0.001; ** = p < 0.01; * = p < 0.05; ° = p < 0.1

Figure 2. Predictive margins of democratic legitimacy attitudes by crisis exposure and expected mobility.
SPECIFIC LEGITIMACY APPROACH



GENERAL LEGITIMACY APPROACH



Note: calculations are based on Models 2 (Tables 1 and 2); all other included covariates are set to their means.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In line with the previous empirical evidence stressing the presence of democratic deficit in times of crisis (e.g., Bermeo 2003; Turner and Carballo, 2005; Remmer, 1991), the results of this study shows that the recent economic crisis is able to provoke an attitudinal “crisis” of political legitimacy in the European countries surveyed. Specifically, consistent effects are observed in three of four attitudes evaluated: increases in crisis exposure are found to be associated with increases in government dissatisfaction, political distrust and anti-libertarian tendency. Consistent with previous literature, the rationale for this result is that the material worsening generated by the crisis may increase the sense of dissatisfaction toward political institutions, producing also a disruption in political values that are central to democracy itself. In particular, a material shock may have destructive effects on political legitimacy when future risks and costs related to the shock are not perceived as equally distributed. In relation to this point, a significant level of crisis exposure may not be enough in order to trigger consequences on political legitimacy, if it is not also accompanied by perception of substantive social unfairness.

The results show that these effects are relatively strong for the specific legitimacy approach and weaker for the general one, confirming that lack of confidence in the political institutions is much more unstable and sensitive to contextual factors (e.g., Torcal and Montero, 2006) compared to questioning of political regime. After all, the literature on collective action that look at political legitimacy attitudes (Gamson, 1968; Norris, 2001; Tilly, 2007) shows us that extent of political disaffection could not manifest itself in “democratic deficits”. On the contrary, a fall in political trust in the public institutions of mature liberal democracies could also favour new forms of democratic governance (della Porta, 2013) and critical citizens can be considered as better democrats than deferential ones as they tended to choose voice over exit, in line with a need for more democracy (Norris, 2001).

Secondly, it was expected that future mobility would moderate the impact of the crisis on attitudes. The analyses provide clear, albeit preliminary, support for the moderation hypothesis, showing that expected relative mobility influences the strength of the crisis-legitimacy relationship. Results then confirm that expected mobility may become a key factor in times of crisis (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2013): when actual material conditions become worse than in the past, future perspective plays a role even more significant on the attribution of responsibility to political system.

The impact of the crisis appears to be particularly high for people with downward mobility, with the coefficient associated with political attitudes always statistically significant. This indicates that a democratic “recession” may also occur among those who do not belong to civically marginal groups, in the event that they are uncertain and afraid of their fu-

ture social position. By contrast, such impact is not significant in people that expect upward mobility. The perspective of upward mobility works as a protective barrier from the fraying of democratic fabric generated by the economic crisis. As a consequence, no matter how dramatic and intense the crisis exposure may be, because it is not only important what you get today than yesterday, but also where you think you might end up tomorrow compared to others. Even a large drop in the standard of living may not trigger much political hostility and sense of unfairness toward institutions and democracy, if individuals think that the crisis in perspective harms them less than most others. Conversely, even a small drop in the standard of living may create risks of political legitimacy if individuals perceive that the crisis has an unequal impact, worsening their own future social positioning more than one of the others.

The findings may provide a clue as to why economic crises sometimes have only weak civic effects. Beyond individual differences due to personality traits (pessimism, fear, etc.), evidence relating to expected mobility suggests that the impact of the crisis on political attitudes can be context specific. When the economy stagnates and material goods become scarcer, the perception that those goods are locked in a zero-sum game becomes more intense, leading to intensify levels of social competition, as if to say: “*Mors tua, vita mea*”. Future perspective may then depend on the duration and severity of the economic recession, and consequently by the type of austerity measures and by significant social protection schemes introduced by the government. Policy, raising the income of the population in relatively smaller extent, but continuously and providing new opportunities for individuals, may induce higher expectations of mobility. A large but single raising in income without future prospects of further increase generates less decrease in uncertainty than the smaller, but permanent, income raising with prospects confirming future improvements.

However, the current study has some limitations that need acknowledgment. Firstly, by performing empirical analysis using four different attitudes, this study provides a robust assessment of the relationship between crisis exposure and political legitimacy. Although the replication of our findings across a range of different attitudes is a strength of this research, a complete replication of this study with more multi-item scales would be desirable.

Additionally, material change generated by the crisis is measured not by using longitudinal data but retrospective questions. Future research should establish the generality of the results reported in the current investigation by conducting within-participants studies.

Further, these empirical findings may initiate a careful reassessment of risks of political legitimacy in economically more prosperous contexts in future research on determinants of political attitudes. The large sample of this study, including all the Eurozone countries surveyed in the LiTS II dataset, provides a robust evidence base in relation to the recent eco-

conomic crisis, moving beyond single-country studies. However, it remains to be confirmed whether this empirical evidence is a distinctive feature of the Eurozone - and of countries that already have high incomes and established democracies - or whether the relationship between economic crisis and political legitimacy is a general empirical fact also in economically less developed and politically less stable countries. At the same time, it may be further interesting to distinguish European countries in relation to future prospects of economic growth, in order to investigate whether the political impact of the recent economic crisis is more significant in Southern than Northern countries, eliciting a sort of "democratic divide".

References

- Achen CH and Bartels LM (2005) *Partisan hearts and gall bladders: retrospection and realignment in the wake of the Great Depression*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 7-9 April.
- Alcántara C, Chen C and Alegría M (2014) Do post-migration perceptions of social mobility matter for Latino immigrant health? *Social Science & Medicine* 101: 94-106.
- Baron RM and Kenny DA (1986) The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51: 1173-1182.
- Bermeo NG (2003) *Ordinary people in extraordinary times: the citizenry and the breakdown of democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bermeo N and Bartels L (eds) (2014) *Mass politics in tough times: opinions, votes and protest in the Great recession*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Besser T, Recker N and Agnitsch K (2008) The impact of economic shocks on quality of life and social capital in small towns. *Rural Sociology* 73(4): 580-604.
- Billiet J, Meuleman B and De Witte H (2014) The relationship between ethnic threat and economic insecurity in times of economic crisis: analysis of European Social Survey data. *Migration Studies* 2(2): 135-161.
- Cordova A and Seligson M (2009) Economic crisis and democracy in Latin America. *Political Science and Politics* 42(4): 673-678.
- Crosby F (1976) A model of egoistical relative deprivation. *Psychological Review* 83: 85-113.
- Dahl RA (1971) *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Daude C and Melguizo A (2011) Taxation and democracy in Latin America. In: Dayton-Johnson J and Santiso J (eds.) *Handbook on Latin American political economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies JC (1962) Toward a theory of revolution. *American Sociological Review* 27: 5-19.
- Davis CL and Langley RE (1995) Presidential popularity in a context of economic crisis and political change: the case of Mexico. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 30(3): 24-48.
- Delhey J and Newton K (2005) Predicting cross-national levels of social trust: global pattern or Nordic exceptionalism? *European Sociological Review* 21(4): 311-327.

- Della Porta D (2013) *Can Democracy Be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Easton D (1965) *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Fetzer JS (2000) *Public attitudes toward immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Friedman BM (2005) *The moral consequences of economic growth*. New York: Vintage.
- Gamson WA (1968) *Power and discontent*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- Gelissen J, van Oorschot W and Finsveen E (2012) How does the welfare state influence individual social capital? *European Societies* 14(3): 416-440.
- Gili M, Roca M, Basu S, McKee M and Stuckler D (2012) The mental health risks of economic crisis in Spain: evidence from primary care centres, 2006 and 2010. *European Journal of Public Health* 23 (1) 103-108.
- Graham C and Sukhtankar S (2004) Does economic crisis reduce support for markets and democracy in Latin America? Some evidence from surveys of public opinion and well-being. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 36(2): 349-377.
- Gudmundsdottir DG (2013) The impact of economic crisis on happiness. *Social Indicators Research*, 110 (3): 1083-1101.
- Hayo B (2005) Mass attitudes toward financial crisis and economic reform in Korea. *Socio-Economic Review* 3: 491-515.
- Helliwell JF, Huang H and Wang S (2014) Social capital and well-being in times of crises. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15(1): 145-162.
- Iglic H (2014) The crumbling or strengthening of social capital? The economic crisis' impact on social networks and interpersonal trust in Slovenia. *Družboslovne Razprave* 30(77): 7-26.
- Inglehart R and Welzel C (2005) *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kehrberg JE (2007) Public opinion on immigration in Western Europe: economics, tolerance, and exposure. *Comparative European Politics* 5: 264-281.
- Klingemann HD (1999) Mapping political support in the 1990s: A global analysis. In: Norris P (ed.) *Critical citizens: global support for democratic government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 31-56.
- Knack S and Keefer P (1997) Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112(4): 1251-88.
- Knack S and Zak PJ (2002) Building trust: public policy, interpersonal trust, and economic development. *Supreme Court Economic Review* 10: 91-107.
- Krauze T and Slomczynsky KM (1986) Social Mobility. *International Journal of Sociology* 16(1-2): 174-189.
- Layard R. (2005) *Happiness: lessons from a new science*. London: Penguin Books.
- Lindvall J (2013) Economic crises as political opportunities. In: Benner M. (ed.) *Before and beyond the global economic crisis*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 132-150.
- Lipset SM (1959) Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review* 53(1): 69-105.
- Lipset SM (1960) *Political man. The social bases of politics*. New York: Doubleday.
- McAllister I (1999) The economic performance of governments. In: Norris P (ed.) *Critical citizens: global support for democratic governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 188-203.
- Merelman RM (1966) Learning and legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review* 60 (3): 548-561.

- Miller B (2012) Exploring the economic determinants of immigration attitudes. *Poverty & Public Policy* 4(2): 1-19.
- Mishler W and Rose R (2001) What are the origins of political trust? Testing institutional and cultural theories in post-communist societies. *Comparative Political Studies* 34(1): 30-62.
- Newton K. and Norris P. (2000) Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture, or Performance? In: Pharr S and Putnam R (eds.) *Disaffected Democracies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- OECD (2013) *Crisis squeezes income and puts pressure on inequality and poverty. New results from the OECD Income Distribution Database*, www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm.
- Polavieja J (2013) Economic crisis, political legitimacy, and social cohesion. In: Gallie, D. (Ed.), *Economic crisis, quality of work and social integration: The European experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 256-278.
- Putnam RD (2000) *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Touchstone Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam RD, Leonardi R and Nanetti RY (1993) *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ragnarsdóttir BH, Bernburg JG and Olafsdóttir S (2013) The global financial crisis and individual distress: the role of subjective comparisons after the collapse of the Icelandic economy. *Sociology* 47(4): 755-775.
- Remmer KL (1991) The political impact of economic crisis in Latin America in the 1980s. *American Political Science Review* 85(3): 777-800.
- Ross A and Escobar-Lemmon M (2009) *The conditioning effect of economic crisis on trust in political institutions: evidence from five Latin American countries, 1995-2001*. Paper presented to the conference "The Politics of Economic Crisis in Europe and Beyond". Texas, A&M University, 1-2 May.
- Rothermund D (1996) *The global impact of Great Depression 1929-1939*. London: Routledge.
- Rothstein B and Uslaner E (2005) All for all: equality, corruption, and social trust. *World Politics* 58: 41-72.
- Runciman WG (1966) *Relative deprivation and social justice*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Scalon MC and Cano I (2008) Legitimization and acceptance: how Brazilians survive inequalities. In: Mario EG and Woolcock M (eds.) *Social exclusion and mobility in Brazil*. Washington DC: The World Bank.
- Smith DH (1972) Modernization and the emergence of volunteer organizations. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 13: 113-134.
- Smith HJ, Pettigrew TF, Pippin GM and Bialosiewicz S (2011) Relative deprivation: A theoretical and meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(3): 203-232.
- Tilly (2007) *Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Torcal M (2014) The decline of political trust in Spain and Portugal: economic performance or political responsiveness? *American Behavioral Scientist* 58 (12): 1542-1567.
- Torcal M and Montero JR (2014) *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Turner F and Carballo M (2005) Argentina: economic disaster and the rejection of the political class. *Comparative Sociology* 4(1-2): 175-206.
- Wegener B (1991) Relative deprivation and social mobility: structural constraints on distributive justice judgments. *European Sociological Review* 7(1): 3-18.
- Zak PJ and Knack S (2001) Trust and growth. *Economic Journal* 111(470): 295-321.

- Zamponi L and Bosi L (2016) Which Crisis? European Crisis and National Contexts in Public Discourse. *Politics & Policy* 44(3): 400-426.
- Zavras D, Tsiantou V, Pavi E, Mylona K and Kyriopoulos J (2012) Impact of economic crisis and other demographic and socio-economic factors on self-rated health in Greece. *European Journal of Public Health* 23 (2): 206-210.
- Zhiming S (2013) Social mobility and political trust: an empirical study based on CGSS2006. *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 33(4): 35-59.
- Zolberg AR (1991) Bounded states in a global market: the uses of international labour migrations. In: Bourdieu P and Coleman JS (eds) *Social theory for a changing society*. Boulder: Westview Press.

AUTHOR'S INFORMATION

Pasquale Colloca is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Bologna. His current research interests are focused on the role of old and new cleavages on civic culture and political attitudes. On the issue of social impact of the economic crisis, he has recently published *La "recessione" civica* (Il Mulino, 2016) and *The impact of economic crisis on civic attitudes* (International Journal of Sociology & Social Policy, *in press*).