



Partecipazione e Conflitto

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

An assessment of the relationship

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the relationship between the economy and electoral participation. Specifically, it aims to address the following question: *what is the effect of the current economic crisis on European electoral turnout?* According to the literature, economic reasons play an important role in both electoral participation and people's party choices. The effects of a severe economic downturn, as the one experienced in Europe during the last decade, are however only partially known. Does the economic crisis *mobilize or weaken* electoral participation? Does it have any impact at all? In order to assess the role of the economy, this work will employ the last three waves of the *European Election Studies* datasets and combine them with national economic indicators. Findings from competing multilevel models confirm a limited effect of the economic crisis at the personal, national and attitudinal level, particularly for the 2014 elections of the European Parliament.

KEYWORDS: economic crisis, electoral participation, European Union, vote, voting turnout

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the effects of the recent financial and economic crisis on voting turnout during European elections. The analysis of electoral participation is a common topic in the social sciences, but it is still an unsolved puzzle. Why do people vote and what are the key factors explaining voting turnout? Those questions are the main point of a large number of works, at any level of governance in democratic regimes. As long as the economy is concerned, scholars argued that economic conditions may have concurring effects such as ‘mobilization’, ‘withdrawal’ or ‘no effects’ (Rosenstone 1982). Were any of those connected to the European elections during the recent financial and economic crisis?

The financial economic downturn has been going on since 2008, and it strongly affected European states, with negative consequences (see LeDuc and Pammet 2013, to better understand the different stages of the crisis and political consequences). Throughout this crisis two waves of European elections (in 2009 and 2014) have been held. *Has the economic crisis affected electoral turnout during those EP elections waves?* This inquiry is probably more important for the EU: a “giant” peculiar system with problems of democratic legitimation. This is indeed an institutional system born mainly for economic growth and based on personal and socio-tropic benefits (see for instance Gabel, 1998), with a vision of the EU as the engine of growth and prosperity. Therefore, along with a solid economic condition, there is also awareness that the state of the economy may play a significant role in support of the EU and voting participation. Some scholars, in particular, underlined a direct effect of EU citizens’ economic perceptions on support for EU policies and EU institutions as a whole during the recent crisis (Fraile and Di Mauro 2010; Di Mauro and Serricchio 2015; Di Mauro and Fraile 2011; Serricchio, Tsakatika and Quaglia 2013). All in all, people concerned about the economic situation tended to oppose the EU as a whole, and its economic policies.

Those results suggest bringing the analysis a step forward, moving from the attitudinal to the behavioral sphere, observing whether economic perceptions may affect turnout in EP elections, along with personal and national economic indicators.

After this Introduction, the article is divided into five more sections. The first two sections concern the theoretical origins of voting turnout, drawing the links with economic factors. In particular, the second section presents a theoretical framework within which four hypotheses emerge. The third section will then describe the methodology, data sources and models of analysis. The findings demonstrate that the economic crisis has had an effect on turnout in European elections at the personal, national and attitudinal level. Finally, the conclusions summarize the most relevant results.

2. Individual and systemic explanations of voting turnout

Most experts distinguish between *individual* and *systemic* explanations of electoral turnout rates (Mattila, 2003). The first group of factors considers individual characteristics, values, attitudes, as well as social and economic conditions. Those variables - such as age, education, level of political knowledge, etc. - are related to turnout rates both in national and European elections (Bhatti and Hansen 2012; Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell 2007). Other individual aspects affecting the decision to vote (or not) regard the attitudes to institutions. Although some studies do not agree on this point (see Schmitt and Mannheim 1991), some academics observed that people who trust the institutions and the political system tend to show a higher level of participation during the European Parliament (EP) elections (Blondel Sinnott, and Svensson 1997). Other issues concern the sphere of utilitarianism. From a personal economic situation (i.e. whether people have a higher or lower social status/income) or a socio-tropic perspective, individuals receive different benefits from voting.

Along with *individual* personal and socio-tropic factors, scholars demonstrated the influence of *systemic* factors on voting turnout. The first type is *compulsory voting* and, in general, all the regulations and laws that discourage citizens to not participate in elections (see Smith, 1999, Franklin, van der Eijk, and Oppenhuis 1996; Franklin 1999). Other norms and *practices* were developed to increase participation or, at least, to overcome practical problems related to the “costs” to go to the polls. This is the case of practices such as the scheduling of elections during weekends, or to make simultaneous elections (at the national, regional, and local levels). In this last case, people are motivated to participate because their participation may affect different levels of governance (Smith 1999; Franklin et al. 1996). Other systemic factors are connected to the institutional “structure” of the political system where citizens live. Some of those factors are the electoral system (whether it is proportional or not, see Chen 2011), the parliamentary institutional structure (whether there is more than one chamber), the party system (two or more main concurring parties), and the existence of veto players (Jackman 1987; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Carlin and Love 2013). Finally, the political context has a strong influence on voting choices and, broadly, on voting participation. Due to a particular situation, important issues can make a difference in voting preferences and in the choice to participate or not to the electoral process (see Franklin 2001, 2007).

The electoral system for the European Parliament has the same basic principles of national and local elections of western democracies. At the same time, it is important to point out that, since the European Union is a *unique* institutional setting (for a more

detailed discussion see Fossum and Menéndez 2011), European elections have some specific characteristics that should be considered. The most important is their nature of “second order elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980). According to this theoretical perspective, the national political contexts strongly affect the way people participate in European elections (the decision to attend the polls as well as voting choices) or the way they perceive them (less important). The institutional structure of the EU may also affect voting participation. The European Union still appears, for the majority of its citizens, a complicate “creature”, difficult to understand and too far away from everyday life.

Overall, both theoretical and empirical analyses support the idea that EP elections should be compared and studied like other democratic elections. However, the peculiarities of the EU system should be taken into account when explaining electoral participation.

3. Economic factors and voting turnout

The economy is conventionally one of the main explanations of voting choice in national elections (see for instance Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, 2007). Perceived benefits affect people’s choices to go to the polls and vote for a specific party/candidate. As far as the EP parliamentary elections are concerned, there are at least three kinds of perceived benefits: the individual/personal, the social/class, and the socio-tropic/country. In the last case, particularly related to supranational institutions like the EU, voting participation may be affected by the way people perceive a benefit for their own country in terms of decisional “power” within EU institutions. The awareness of “benefits” from voting is a complex concept: it may depend upon the will to affect the outcome, the behavior of other individuals (actors), or simply information (see Dhillon and Peralta 2002 for a comprehensive review).

Those statements represent a general theoretical frame for economic influence in voting turnout, but there is no agreement about the effect of economic conditions on voting participation (see for instance Blais 2000, 2006). Moreover, what happens during economic downturns?

As the economic situation could suddenly change, people’s conditions and knowledge could change as well, just like their interests at different levels (personal, social, socio-tropic). On the other hand, people also modify their attitudes and behavior during elections. With reference to different studies from the Seventies (for instance Schlozman and Verba 1979), Rosenstone (1982) argues that the bond between

the economic crisis and voting turnout can be described in three different alternatives. The first one is *mobilization*: an increase in participation as a reaction to a dangerous situation that activates citizens to protect their interests and/or punish the incumbent (among others see Kernell 1977). The second scenario is a *withdrawal* from active participation during elections. This result may be due to the fact that people suffering economically are “stressed” and spend most of their resources (time, interest, etc.) in finding solutions to their material problems (see Rosenstone 1982, 26; for a test about European states see Gallego 2008)¹. Besides, economic adversity may increase a feeling of disenchantment and distrust towards institutions and the political system as a whole. In this case, vote for anti-system parties (or Eurosceptic) and rejection of the political system may represent a ‘radical exit hypothesis’ (Kriesi 2012)². The third possibility involved economic shocks that do not produce any substantial difference in voting (among others see Schlozman and Verba 1979; Blais 2000, 2006; Fiorina 1978). This phenomenon could be explained in different ways: 1) people consider themselves (and not political institutions) directly responsible for their economic suffering; 2) welfare policies can moderate the pressure of a bad economic situation; 3) abstention is the result of different factors not necessarily related to the economy. In addition, problems might not cause effects by themselves, but produce different behavior as a consequence of the fact that some actors (mainly the parties) activate them during the electoral campaign.

Other authors add complexity to this picture by considering different economic (level of economic development) and institutional (democracies or not) contexts. Radcliff (1992) concludes that ‘the economic effect in the first world is withdrawal, while in the developing world it is mobilization’ (Radcliff 1992, 445). More importantly, this relationship is linked to (or generated by) the level of social shield: it is not just a matter of economic fluctuations and does not describe a linear relationship (see also Pacek and Radcliff 1995). Another intervening variable highlighted by empirical studies is the support to the incumbent: the economy affects turnout in different ways depending on the support to the incumbent party (Stevens 2006).

By considering those theoretical arguments and empirical findings, I will test whether the economic crisis has had an effect (*mobilize, withdrawal, or no effect*) on turnout in the last three EP elections waves (2004, 2009 and 2014). The tests will be showed at three levels of analysis: 1) at the personal level (H1), by including indicators of respondents’ economic condition/employment; 2) at the national level (H2), by pooling

¹ Galbraith and Hale (2008) show that income inequalities decrease voting turnout.

² For specific case studies during the crisis see Freire and Santana-Pereira (2012) and Passarelli and Tuorto (2014).

data with national economic indicators; 3) at the attitudinal level (H3), by including into the models the perceptions of the current and future economic situation. Moreover, I will also test whether blaming Europe for the economic crisis has an effect on turnout (H4).

Along with those variables I will include into the models several indicators to control for most of the attitudinal, behavioral, socio-trophic and systemic factors highlighted in the previous section. These variables will provide additional empirical evidence of their effects and they will control for any significant relationship between the economy and voting turnout.

4. Method

I used data from the European Election Studies (ESS) of the three most recent European elections (2004, 2009 and 2014) to build different models.³ The dependent variable is voting turnout⁴, based upon the respondents' declarations of vote (or not) during the observed EP elections waves.

Explanatory variables include all the socio-demographic measures such as age⁵, education⁶, gender⁷ and type of area where people live⁸. As far as those variables are con-

³ I would like to thank the researchers at the EES project for sharing their data. For further information on those datasets see: EES (2014), European Election Study 2014, Voter Study, Advance Release, 1/1/2015, (<http://eeshomepage.net/voter-study-2014/>); Schmitt, Hermann, Sara B. Hobolt and Sebastian Adrian Popa. "Does Campaign Personalization Increase Turnout? 'Spitzenkandidaten' in the 2014 European Parliament Elections." Paper presented at the ECPR General Conference, UK, Glasgow, September 3-6 2014; EES (2009), European Parliament Election Study 2009, Voter Study, Advance Release, 7/4/2010, (www.piredeu.eu); Marcel H. van Egmond, Eliyahu V. Sapir, Wouter van der Brug, Sara B. Hobolt, Mark N. Franklin (2010) EES 2009 Voter Study Advance Release Notes Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

⁴ The exact question is: 'A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of [DATE], while others voted. Did you cast your vote?' (2004 and 2009); 'European Parliament elections were held on the (DATE). For one reason or another, some people in (OUR COUNTRY) did not vote in these elections. Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections?' (2014). I assigned a 0 for not voting and 1 for voting.

⁵ The questions are 'How old are you?' (2014) and 'What year were you born?' (2009 and 2004), I computed age (the sum of respondents' years at time of the interview) as a continuous variable.

⁶ 'How old were you when you stopped full-time education?'. It was coded as: no full time and until 15 years old=1; 16-19 years old=2; 20 and more=3; still studying= redistributed on categories 1 to 3 according to the declared age.

⁷ Female coded as 0, male coded as 1.

cerned, I chose indicators having equal (or very similar) questions in the three EES waves in order to make the same models for the EP elections. According to this principle I chose the variables concerning political attitudes, both generally speaking and specifically on EU elections and institutions.

Indicators of attitudes towards the European Union included in the models are: trust⁹, evaluation of EU membership¹⁰ and attitudes towards unification¹¹. Indicators of attitudes towards politics are: interest in politics¹², approval of government¹³, knowledge¹⁴, left-right self-positioning and nationalism¹⁵. Other variables are behaviors and attitudes during elections. Those variables report whether respondents were informed about the European elections and participated to the electoral campaign¹⁶;

⁸ The exact question for 2004 and 2009 is 'Would you say you live in a...?' (rural, small village, large town, etc.). Town size for 2014 has been coded according to the population of the place where respondents live. The final code is 1=small (2014), rural; 2= small or middle size; 3=large town; Dk=missing.

⁹ The exact question for 2004 is 'Please tell me on a score of 1-10 [0-10 in Spain and Sweden] how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 1 means that you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust [the European Parliament]. The questions selected for 2009 and 2014 are: 'for each of the following propositions, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements: You trust the institutions of the European Union'; 'For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion: You trust the institutions of the EU'.

¹⁰ 'Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the EU is...?', 1=a good thing; -1=a bad thing; 0=neither a good thing nor a bad thing.

¹¹ The exact question is: 'Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means unification "has already gone too far" and '10' means it "should be pushed further". What number on this scale best describes your position?'

¹² Questions are: 'To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?' (2004 and 2009); For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion: You are very interested in politics (2014). They have been coded as binary variables where 1 represents all the 'interested' and 0 all the 'not interested'.

¹³ The exact question is: 'Do you approve or disapprove of ...? The (NATIONALITY) government's record to date'. I coded it as a binary variable.

¹⁴ Knowledge index includes correct answers to three questions (Switzerland is a member of the EU; Each Member State elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament; There are (150% OF CORRECT NUMBER) members in the lower house of national parliament. The index ranges from 3 (all answers are right) to 0 (no right answers). This variable is missing for 2004.

¹⁵ Identity has been measured with three questions: 'You feel you are a citizen of the EU' (2014); 'Do you ever think of yourself not only as a [country] citizen, but also as a citizen of the European Union?' (2004); 'Do you see yourself as... ("Moreno Question", 2009)'. Nationalism (coded as a binary predictor) results from the answers indicating only national identity.

¹⁶ The exact questions are: 'How often did you do any of the following during the four weeks before the recent European elections? Watch a program about the European elections on television; Talk to friends or

whether they voted in the past national elections and supported ('closeness') a specific party¹⁷.

Another set of variables includes elements of each country's own political system that some studies indicate as possible explanatory factors of voting turnout. According to the short review made in the second part, I selected eight main contextual variables: 1) the number of seats assigned to each country¹⁸, 2) the number of lists competing in each EU election, 3) the number of constituencies of each member state, 4) the presence of compulsory voting (binary variable), 5) the fact that national elections were held simultaneously with the European elections in some countries (binary variable), 6) the time frame (in years) from the last national election in each country, 7) the electoral system adopted¹⁹ and 8) the fact of being a newcomer in the EU (binary).

Economic explanatory factors included into the models concern the work situation, specific economic indicators for each country and the perceptions of the economic situation. The work situation describes the status of unemployment and self-employment²⁰. Perceptions of the economy are measured by looking both at the present economic situation and the future one (for the next 12 months)²¹. Variables measuring the state of the economy in each country are: GDP growth²², Inflation

family about the European elections; Attend a public meeting or rally about the European elections; Read about the European elections in a newspaper; Read about the European elections on the Internet'. Answers have been recoded as binary variables (1=often, sometimes; 0=never).

¹⁷ The exact question is: 'Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party? If so, which party do you feel close to?'. Coded as binary: 0=no party mentioned and 1=name of the party.

¹⁸ This variable measures the total number of seats assigned in the European Parliament to each country. Data were collected from 'distribution of seats in European parliament after European elections, enlargements and Lisbon treaty', European and national elections figured out, Nov. 2014, www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/elections_results/review.pdf

¹⁹ This variable classifies the electoral systems according to 6 categories: 1=Proportional with preferential vote D'Hondt; 2=Proportional with closed lists D'Hondt; 3=Proportional – STV; 4= Proportional with preferential vote Hare-Niemeyer; 5= Proportional with closed lists, Sainte-Laguë/Schepers; 6=Proportional preferential vote, Hagenbach-Bischoff.

²⁰ 'What is your current work situation?' I coded dummies for unemployed and self-employed.

²¹ The exact questions are: 'What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the general economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY) ...?'; 'And over the next 12 months, how do you think the general economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY) will be? Will it...?'. They have been coded as binary variables where worse conditions/expectations are equal to 1, better and same conditions are equal to 0.

²² 'Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Aggregates are based on constant 2005 U.S. dollars. GDP is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products. It is calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources.' Source: World Bank.

Rate²³, Country Growth Rate²⁴ and Unemployment Rate²⁵. Those indicators have been collected and assigned accordingly for the three years considered. They have been included in four types of multilevel models for each election wave (for a total of 12 models). The first one includes all the attitudinal and systemic variables along with the respondents' work situation. In the second model I added the economic indicators at the country level (GDP growth, inflation rate, Unemployment rate and Growth rate). The third and fourth types of models include respectively concern for the present and future economic situations. Models are weighted for the real value of turnout in each country.²⁶ This procedure aims to limit the overestimation of turnout usually present in surveys, and mostly due to self-selection of respondents (see Bernstein, Chadha and Montjoy 2001; Karp and Brockington 2005; Bhatti and Hansen 2012).

5. Empirical results

EP elections show in fact different levels of participation among EU countries and in a diachronic perspective as well. Turnout in EP elections describes a decreasing trend especially after 1999. As figure 1 shows, during the first three EP elections, turnout (on average) was close to 60 percent of the electorate. It dropped ten points in 1999 and kept going down, until the 2014 elections (42.5 percent). It is interesting to note that the 2009 and 2014 elections have a similar percentage of voting.

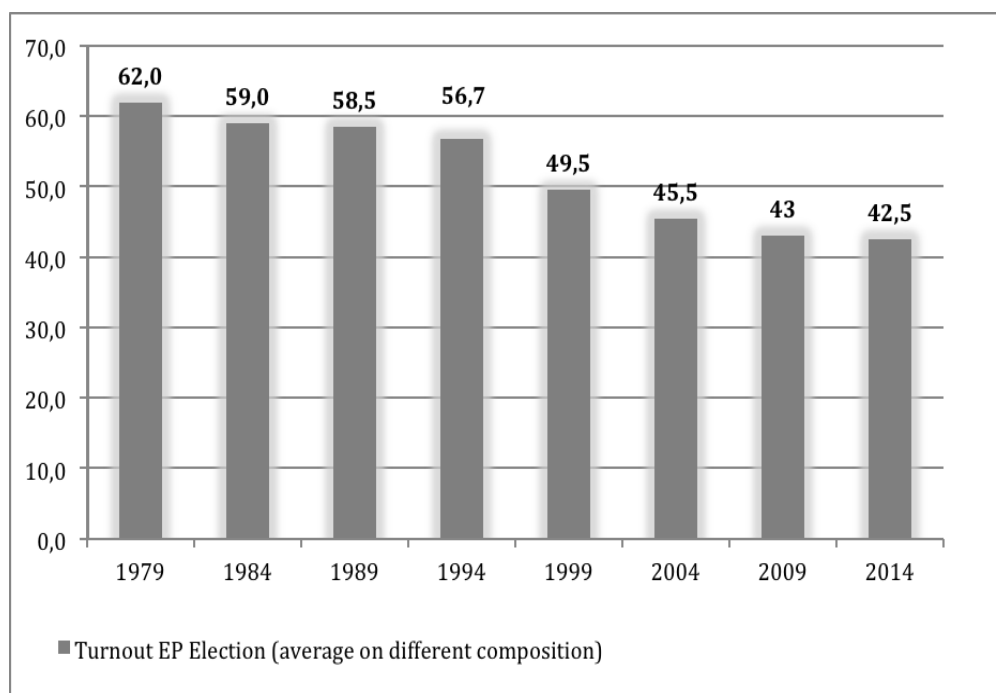
²³ 'Inflation as measured by the consumer price index reflects the annual percentage change in the cost to the average consumer of acquiring a basket of goods and services that may be fixed or changed at specified intervals, such as yearly. The Laspeyres formula is generally used.' Source: World Bank.

²⁴ 'Average annual growth rate in money and quasi money. Money and quasi money comprise the sum of currency outside banks, demand deposits other than those of the central government, and the time, savings, and foreign currency deposits of resident sectors other than the central government. This definition is frequently called M2; it corresponds to lines 34 and 35 in the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) International Financial Statistics (IFS). The change in the money supply is measured as the difference in end-of-year totals relative to the level of M2 in the preceding year.' Source: World Bank.

²⁵ Unemployment refers to the share of the labor force that is without work but available for and seeking employment. Sources: World Bank and Eurostat.

²⁶ This weight is the result of real turnout for each country/turnout of the sample. Real turnout values have been collected by using the official data of the EU parliament at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html> (last access September 2015).

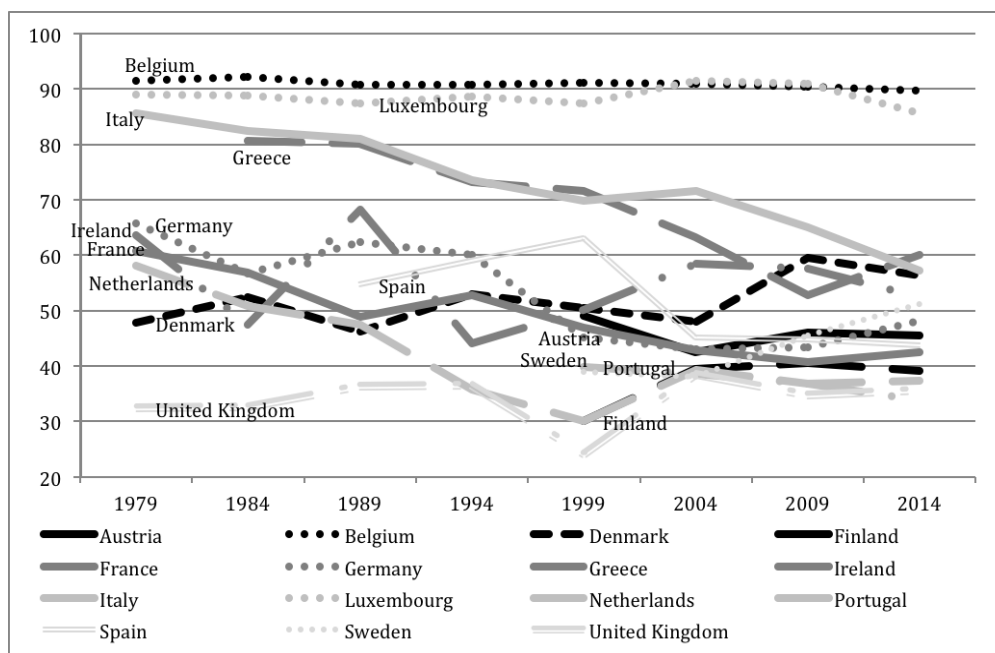
Figure 1. Percentages of voting participation in EP elections.



Source: Author's elaboration on European Parliament data.

Looking at the EU member states it is possible to identify big variations of turnout in each country. Figure 2 shows the trend of turnout in European Elections for the EU15 countries. At the top of the figure, Belgium and Luxemburg show the highest level of participation: almost steady at 90 percent of the electorate. On the opposite side, the UK is generally above the 30 percent. Other countries show a stronger drop. In Italy turnout for EP elections declined from 1979 by almost 30 percentage points. Particularly in 2014, this country registered the lowest level of participation (57 percent) in the history of its membership. Turnout in Germany was around 60 percent, but decreased during the 2000s (45 percent). A similar situation occurred in France, where turnout shifted from an average of 55 percent between 1979 and 1994, to a mean value of 43 percent since 1999. In Spain, since 2004 the turnout is (on average) 15 percent less than the values of previous EP elections. Otherwise, Sweden and Denmark show an increase in turnout especially in the last two EP elections. All in all, the average turnout of the EU Western states shows a strong decrease since 1999 (Figure 3), when the turnout falls to 52 percent and remains basically stable until 2014.

Figure 2. Percentages of voting in EP elections by country, EU15 .

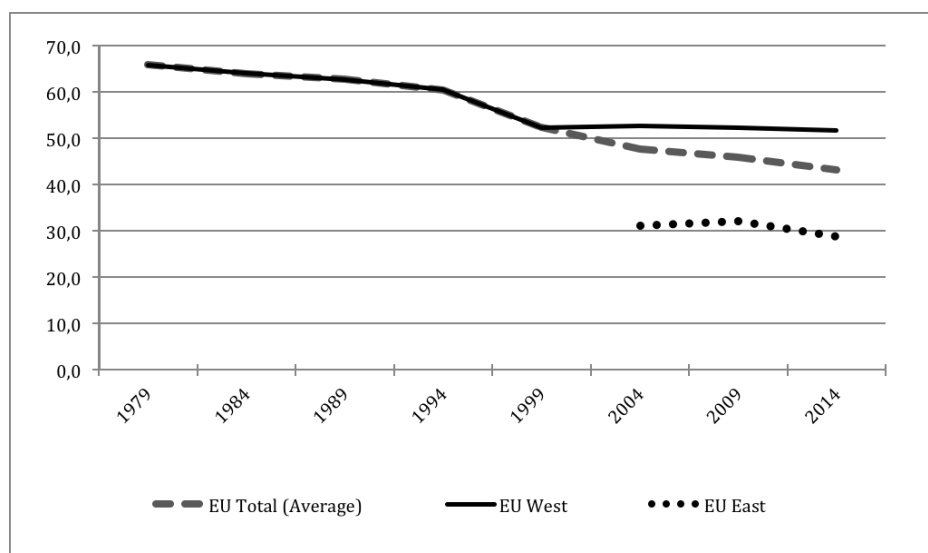


Source: Author's elaboration on European Parliament data.

Compared to EU15 the “new” member states show lower levels of turnout. Most Eastern European countries are below 40 percent with a very small participation in Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Romania (Figure 3). This difference between East and West has been at the core of a recent literature (see for instance Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier 2008; Auers 2005) and represents a phenomenon to take into account when analyzing turnout in EP elections.

The entrance of Eastern states clearly dropped the EU average levels of turnout in EP elections after 2004. At the same time, both EU Western and Eastern states presents very similar within-group average values (respectively around 52 percent and 32 percent) during the last three elections (Figure 3). Turnout in Eastern states decreased on average by 3.5 percent during the 2014 elections, and around 3 percent for the rest of the EU. A first descriptive analysis demonstrates that no external shock affected the turnout level strongly during the last three election waves. On the contrary, most important differences occurred within specific countries.

Figure 3. Percentages of voting in EP elections by group of countries: West²⁷ vs. East²⁸.



Source: Author's elaboration on European Parliament data.

Table 1 summarizes the results of the first model. Overall, the demographic variables highlight different results for each election wave observed, except for *age* that is positive and significant for all the three waves, consistent with the previous literature (see for instance Fieldhouse, Tranmer and Russell 2007).²⁹ The size of the area of residence is a significant indicator in 2004 and 2014: people living in smaller towns (or rural areas) are more likely to attend the polls. Attitudes towards the European Union are basically significant and positively associated to turnout³⁰, while government approval is

²⁷ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

²⁸ Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

²⁹ Coefficients for males are negative in the three elections, but not significant in 2009. Males are less likely to vote than females in 2004 and 2014, but not during the EP elections of 2009. Surprisingly, education is not significant for $p < .1$ for all the three waves analyzed: turnout does not seem linked to the educational level of voters.

³⁰ Trust and positive evaluation of EU membership significantly increase the probability to go to the polls. Attitudes towards unification show, however, a different pattern since it is significant only in 2014: in this case, people pushing for more unification are more likely to vote.

not significant³¹. Left-right self-positioning is basically significant only in 2014. Particularly, during this election, ideology changed sign (from positive to negative) and turned significant for $p < .1$. People on the left of the scale tend to vote more than people on the right.

Political interest confirms to be positively (and significantly) related to turnout: the higher the interest in politics is, the higher the probability to go to the polls is. Nationalism, on the other side, has the opposite sign, remarking that exclusive national identity (i.e. the denial of any form/level of European identity) decreases the chances to vote.

Knowledge, as expected, is significant and positive: the more the knowledge, the higher the probability to vote. This result, along with the significance for information, supports the argument that cognitive mobilization increases turnout at the EU level. Knowledge and information, both on the whole and about the electoral campaign, are positively associated to vote. People following the electoral campaign (both on TV shows and online) show a positive relationship with turnout. Other individual factors rising electoral participation are socialization (political)³², voting in previous elections³³, and 'closeness' to a specific party³⁴. In brief, political attitudes are the best predictors of voting turnout in the observed elections waves.

Variables regarding electoral rules and the political system as a whole show a more complex scenario: basically the increase of party lists (except for 2009), along with the number of constituencies and distance from the last election, do not reveal any significant result. Compulsory voting is significantly, and positively, related to turnout in the 2014 elections³⁵ as well as simultaneous elections and the proportional system with open (personal) list. New member states confirm to have a different probability to vote in EP elections. Most of them are Eastern countries and, as we saw in the descriptive

³¹ At the EU level, turnout seems independent from voters' judgments about their own government, separating in fact both performance and ideology from electoral participation. This could be indicated as an unexpected result according to economic voting, since people tend to punish incumbent government during economic downturns. As a result, it is possible to argue that, at the European level, government responsibility is not relevant to assess punishment, at least, for voting turnout. However, in 2014 people indicating the government as responsible for the crisis tended to abstain.

³² Talking with family/friends and participating in meetings significantly increase turnout in all the waves analyzed, proving that socialization rises electoral participation.

³³ Vote in previous elections confirms to be a strong predictor of turnout in EP elections. As expected, voting in national elections is positively and significantly related to turnout in EP elections.

³⁴ Closeness to a specific party shows similar results: people declaring to be close to a specific political party are more likely to vote in the European elections (all the waves).

³⁵ Data for 2004, however, do not include Belgium, since the data were not available. The country is one of the most important cases of compulsory voting.

analysis, they start from different levels of turnout, significantly below the EU average from the western members.

Table 1. Multilevel Analysis, individual and systemic factors affecting turnout in EP Elections 2004, 2009 and 2014

Variables	2004			2009			2014		
	OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE	
Trust EU	1.272	.057	***	1.167	.053	**	1.591	.041	***
Nationalism	.884	.058	*	.816	.064	*	.623	.017	***
Political Interest	1.409	.057	***	1.397	.065	***	1.474	.018	***
EU membership	1.218	.058	***	1.194	.074	**	1.163	.022	***
Follow Elections on TV	1.357	.092	***	1.508	.124	***	1.535	.039	***
Talk with Family/Friends about Elections	1.609	.110	***	1.503	.131	***	1.638	.040	***
Participate to Meetings During Elections	1.727	.208	***	2.544	.403	***	2.160	.087	***
Follow Elections on news	1.369	.093	***	1.405	.117	***	1.188	.032	***
Economy to address at EU level	.999	.074		1.054	.085		.982	.004	***
Voted in National Elections	3.612	.329	***	3.904	.401	***	3.699	.102	***
Crisis: responsibility of government				.997	.015		.979	.004	***
Crisis: responsibility of EU				1.014	.015		1.028	.004	***
left-right	1.020	.012		1.005	.013		.980	.004	***
Support More Unification	1.012	.012		1.007	.013		1.026	.003	***
Approval of Government	.934	.058		1.055	.083		1.004	.024	
Close to a Party	1.412	.087	***	1.496	.114	***	1.830	.038	***
Knowledge Index				1.185	.052	***	1.220	.018	***
Age	1.020	.002	***	1.017	.002	***	1.020	.001	***
Male	.833	.048	**	.928	.066		.881	.019	***
Education	1.035	.053		1.044	.066		1.004	.018	

Size of Town of Residence	.939	.035 *	.994	.031	.852	.011 ***
Self-employed	1.085	.102	.974	.118	1.020	.043
Unemployed	.972	.110	1.035	.150	.758	.017 ***
Seats in EU Parliament	.988	.008	.998	.009	.993	.002 **
Compulsory Voting	2.287	1.316	1.852	.802	1.540	.248 *
N. of Lists	1.308	.335	.691	.149 *	1.024	.019
N. of Constituencies	.985	.048	1.001	.051	1.016	.014
Simultaneous Elections	1.533	.571	1.565	.500	2.512	.264 ***
Distance (years) from Past National Elections	1.249	.186	1.065	.131	.983	.028
Type of Electoral System	1.038	.093	.988	.076	.927	.020 **
New States (since 2004)	.559	.171 *	.746	.227	.645	.048 ***
N. of Observations	10045		10344		12541	

p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001

Note: OR=odds ratio; SE= Standard Errors.

Source: Author's own elaboration on EES data.

As far as H1 is concerned, employment status (unemployment and self-employment) does not seem to affect voting turnout, except for 2014. Results about this wave underline indeed that unemployed people are less likely to vote. This result partially confirms the *withdrawal* option in hypothesis 1, by demonstrating that people who live a difficult economic condition are less likely to participate. The fact that unemployment has no effect in 2009 could be due to the delayed effects of the crisis on unemployment. Countries like Italy, Greece, France, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands (etc.) experienced indeed an increase of unemployment rate after 2009³⁶.

The second type of models (Table 2) includes measures of economic indicators for each country. Their significance changes for different election waves. GDP growth is significant before the crisis (2004) and in 2014, while it does not show a significant coefficient in 2009. At the same time, the sign of its coefficient is different for 2004 (positive) and 2014 (negative). In 2004 people living in states with higher GDP growth were

³⁶ Although this is not the case for most of the Eastern countries.

more likely to go to the polls. The opposite occurred in 2014. Finally, growth rate is not significant in any of the three elections waves taken into account.

Table 2. Multilevel Analysis, Economic Indicators affecting turnout in EP Elections 2004, 2009 and 2014

Variables	2004			2009			2014		
	OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE	
Trust EU	1.273	.057	***	1.175	.054	**	1.593	.042	***
Nationalism	.884	.058	*	.826	.068	**	.618	.017	***
Political Interest	1.406	.057	***	1.383	.066	***	1.478	.018	***
EU membership	1.218	.058	***	1.191	.076	**	1.165	.022	***
Follow Elections on TV	1.349	.091	***	1.560	.131	***	1.535	.040	***
Talk with Family/Friends about Elections	1.603	.109	***	1.527	.135	***	1.634	.040	***
Participate to Meetings During Elections	1.729	.208	***	2.477	.402	***	2.128	.086	***
Follow Elections on news	1.369	.093	***	1.406	.121	***	1.198	.032	***
Economy to address at EU level	.989	.073		1.020	.084		.981	.004	***
Voted in National Elections	3.623	.330	***	3.878	.419	***	3.650	.101	***
Crisis: responsibility of government				.992	.015		.978	.004	***
Crisis: responsibility of EU				1.021	.015		1.027	.004	***
left-right	1.020	.012		1.005	.013		.980	.004	***
Support More Unification	1.013	.012		1.008	.013		1.025	.003	***
Approval of Government	.943	.059		1.054	.084		1.017	.024	
Close to a Party	1.418	.088	***	1.461	.115	***	1.827	.038	***
Knowledge Index				1.207	.055	***	1.219	.018	***
Age	1.020	.002	***	1.016	.002	***	1.021	.001	***
Male	.834	.048	**	.903	.067		.882	.019	***
Education	1.044	.053		1.028	.067		1.002	.018	
Size of Town of Residence	.940	.035	*	1.002	.032		.858	.011	***
Self-employed	1.091	.102		.996	.125		1.012	.043	
Unemployed	.969	.110		1.048	.161		.754	.017	***
Seats in EU Parliament	.993	.006		1.014	.010		.993	.002	***
Compulsory Voting	1.154	.526		3.404	1.708	**	.947	.158	
N. of Lists	2.026	.512	**	.482	.123	**	.871	.044	**
N. of Constituencies	.907	.034	**	.996	.047		1.048	.013	***

Simultaneous Elections	1.109	.269		.742	.339		2.912	.291	***
Distance (years) from Past National Elections	1.175	.136		.966	.117		.903	.026	***
Type of Electoral System	1.191	.102	**	1.022	.081		.930	.021	**
New States (since 2004)	.244	.104	**	1.137	.406		.588	.056	***
GDP Growth	1.182	.099	**	1.002	.043		.925	.026	**
Inflation	1.191	.107	*	.808	.083	**	.724	.049	***
Growth rate	.998	.004		.994	.007		.996	.004	
Unemployment Rate	.827	.039	***	.976	.042		1.008	.009	
N. of Observations	10045			9763			11988		

p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001

Note: OR=odds ratio; SE= Standard Errors.

Source: Author's own elaboration on EES data.

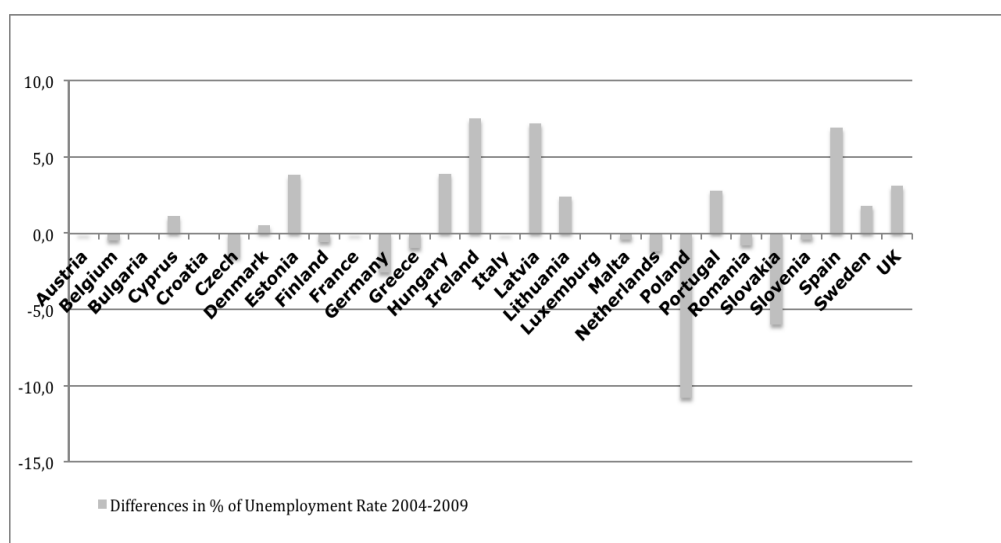
Inflation has a significant effect on turnout for all the waves, but with different signs. In 2004 the increase of inflation increases the probability to go to the polls; the opposite occurs during the crisis, both in 2009 and 2014. In those cases, a higher inflation leads to a lower probability to vote. Unemployment rate has a significant and negative effect on turnout in the 2004 elections: people living in countries with higher level of unemployment are less likely to vote. Otherwise the crisis seems to have broken this relationship. If we look at the differences between unemployment rate in 2004 and 2009 it is possible to see only small changes (Figure 4). In countries where the unemployment rate rose in 2009 turnout did not drop, as expected, but instead increased: this is the case of Latvia (from 41 percent to 53 percent) and Estonia (from 27 percent to 44 percent), while in countries such as Ireland and Spain it remained stable. Those cases show that results are different when the focus of the analysis shifts from the personal to the national effects of unemployment on turnout. Regardless of whether the status of unemployment produces withdrawal because of opportunity costs or because of disagreement, the effect on turnout is produced at the personal level (not at the national level) during the crisis.

Finally, growth rate is not significant in any of the three elections waves taken into account.

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the third group of models, including economic expectations for the three waves. Coefficients for the control variables are mostly consistent with the first type of models in Table 1. Pessimistic views about the current economic situation (situation 'a little worse' and 'a lot worse' than 12 months before elections) do not reveal significant results for 2004 and 2009 (Table 3). In 2014 pessimism significantly affects voting turnout. This relationship is negative, such that people concerned about the current situation are less likely

to vote in EP elections. People “exit” from the electoral process as a consequence of a threatening (economic) situation. An effect is present also for perceptions of the economic situation in the future (Table 4). It is significant only in 2014, but in this case, the coefficient is positive. People foreseeing a bad economy in their own country are more likely to vote in EP elections. Citizens who are concerned about the future want to participate and affect politics with their vote.

Figure 4. Differences in percentage of Unemployment Rate 2004-2009



Source: Author’s own elaboration on World Bank data.

Table 3. Multilevel Analysis, Concern for the Economy (present) affecting turnout in EP Elections 2004, 2009 and 2014.

Variables	2004		2009		2014	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Trust EU	1.268	.057 ***	1.163	.053 **	1.608	.042 ***
Nationalism	.893	.059 *	.819	.065 **	.627	.017 ***
Political Interest	1.405	.057 ***	1.398	.065 ***	1.465	.018 ***
EU membership	1.220	.058 ***	1.191	.074 **	1.157	.022 ***
Follow Elections on TV	1.359	.093 ***	1.516	.125 ***	1.527	.039 ***
Talk with Family/Friends about Elections	1.626	.112 ***	1.503	.131 ***	1.636	.040 ***
Participate to Meetings During Elections	1.740	.211 ***	2.588	.413 ***	2.160	.087 ***
Follow Elections on news	1.361	.093 ***	1.397	.117 ***	1.185	.032 ***
Economy to address at EU level	.990	.074	1.059	.085	.982	.004 ***

Voted in National Elections	3.637	.334 ***	3.916	.403 ***	3.707	.103 ***
Crisis: responsibility of government			.997	.015	.980	.004 ***
Crisis: responsibility of EU left-right	1.021	.012 *	1.012	.015	1.029	.004 ***
Support More Unification	1.014	.013	1.003	.013	.980	.004 ***
Approval of Government	.934	.060	1.041	.083	.983	.024
Close to a Party	1.419	.088 ***	1.495	.114 ***	1.838	.038 ***
Knowledge Index			1.191	.053 ***	1.220	.018 ***
Age	1.020	.002 ***	1.017	.002 ***	1.020	.001 ***
Male	.840	.049 **	.928	.067	.884	.019 ***
Education	1.040	.054	1.043	.066	1.004	.018
Size of Town of Residence	.942	.035	.994	.031	.851	.011 ***
Self-employed	1.086	.102	.966	.118	1.013	.043
Unemployed	.972	.111	1.033	.150	.754	.017 ***
Seats in EU Parliament	.988	.008	.998	.009	.993	.002 **
Compulsory Voting	2.288	1.333	1.836	.805	1.571	.253 **
N. of Lists	1.307	.338	.684	.150 *	1.033	.019 *
N. of Constituencies	.985	.049	1.002	.052	1.016	.014
Simultaneous Elections	1.517	.571	1.554	.503	2.508	.264 ***
Distance (years) from Previous National Election	1.242	.187	1.060	.133	.985	.028
Type of Electoral System	1.039	.094	.989	.077	.923	.020 ***
New EU States (since 2004)	.561	.174 *	.751	.231	.652	.049 ***
Concern for Economic Situation (present)	.967	.062	.952	.087	.919	.021 ***
N. of Observations	9928		10311		12463	

p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001

Note: OR=odds ratio; SE= Standard Errors.

Source: Author's own elaboration on EES data.

Variables reporting whether the responsibility of the crisis is attributed to the national government or to the European Union are not significant in 2009, but have a significant effect in 2014 (Tables 1 to 4)³⁷. In this case, coefficients have opposite signs: people who blame the government for the crisis have less probability to vote, while people indicating the EU as responsible for the crisis are more likely to vote in EP elec-

³⁷ The exact question is: 'Now I would like to ask you some questions about how much responsibility the different institutions have in the current economic situation in (OUR COUNTRY). Please use a scale from 0 to 10, where '0' means that you think they have "no responsibility" and '10' means that they have "full responsibility". About where would you place the following institutions on this scale? I selected answers for National government and European Union.

tions. Responsibilities of the crisis reveal a kind of economic voting effect on turnout. People blaming the EU mobilize, maybe engaged by Eurosceptic parties³⁸, or by parties criticizing the ongoing EU economic politics. In contrast, blame for the national government generates withdrawal. This result has been found in some national contexts during recent elections (see Passarelli and Tuorto 2014; Freire and Santana-Pereira 2012). Those studies highlighted the fact that voting during the crisis may punish the incumbent, but also lead to abstention. This “indirect” opposition brings delegitimation and non-participation, while “direct” opposition to the EU brings action. However, more tests and empirical results need to be conducted in order to test those explanations.

Table 4. Multilevel Analysis, Concern for the Economy (future) affecting turnout in EP Elections 2004, 2009 and 2014

Variables	2004			2009			2014		
	OR	SE		OR	SE		OR	SE	
Trust EU	1.280	.058	***	1.159	.053	**	1.603	.042	***
Nationalism	.884	.059	*	.804	.064	**	.637	.017	***
Political Interest	1.407	.058	***	1.400	.065	***	1.461	.018	***
EU membership	1.211	.058	***	1.187	.074	**	1.193	.023	***
Follow Elections on TV	1.335	.092	***	1.521	.126	***	1.533	.040	***
Talk with Family/Friends about Elections	1.605	.111	***	1.503	.132	***	1.611	.040	***
Participate to Meetings During Elections	1.730	.211	***	2.560	.409	***	2.171	.087	***
Follow Elections on news	1.379	.095	***	1.404	.118	***	1.202	.033	***
Economy to address at EU level	.987	.074		1.060	.086		.982	.004	***
Voted in National Elections	3.708	.344	***	3.927	.407	***	3.869	.109	***
Crisis: responsibility of government				.993	.015		.980	.004	***
Crisis: responsibility of EU				1.014	.015		1.030	.004	***
left-right	1.020	.013		1.004	.013		.978	.004	***
Support More Unification	1.012	.013		1.008	.013		1.029	.003	***
Approval of Government	.930	.060		1.048	.084		1.065	.026	**
Close to a Party	1.421	.089	***	1.488	.114	***	1.875	.039	***
Knowledge Index				1.182	.052	***	1.203	.018	***
Age	1.020	.002	***	1.017	.002	***	1.020	.001	***
Male	.835	.049	**	.919	.066		.889	.019	***
Education	1.037	.054		1.039	.067		1.000	.018	
Size of Town of Residence	.939	.035	*	.990	.031		.836	.011	***
Self-employed	1.115	.106		.975	.119		1.010	.043	
Unemployed	.976	.113		1.032	.150		.765	.018	***

³⁸ On the success of Eurosceptic parties in the 2014 EP elections see Treib (2014).

Seats in EU Parliament	.988	.008	.998	.009	.993	.002	**
Compulsory Voting	2.480	1.412	1.870	.815	1.430	.226	**
N. of Lists	1.285	.324	.694	.151	1.013	.018	
N. of Constituencies	.985	.048	1.000	.051	1.017	.014	
Simultaneous Elections	1.570	.574	1.582	.509	2.524	.261	***
Distance (years) from Previous National Election	1.237	.182	1.064	.132	.974	.027	
Type of Electoral System	1.042	.092	.988	.077	.928	.020	***
New EU States (since 2004)	.568	.171	.742	.227	.627	.045	***
Concern for Economic Situation (future)	.911	.061	1.000	.076	1.346	.032	***
N. of Observations	9760		10165		12249		

p<.1 **p<.05 ***p<.001

Note: OR=odds ratio; SE= Standard Errors.

Source: Author's own elaboration on EES data.

6. Conclusions

This article has employed multilevel models with variables at the individual and country levels, to test the effects of different theoretical approaches on voting turnout. Most of the results confirm previous findings. Particularly, socio-demographic variables (such as age) and political attitudes towards the EU are very consistent with previous analyses. Voting confirms to be first of all a political matter, linked to the relationship between individuals, institutions and the society as a whole. As an element of politics and a legitimization of political institutions, voting is strongly affected by how people live and perceive their role in politics and society. Coherently, the relationship between turnout in the EP elections and voting in previous elections and party proximity strongly confirms this point. Even being involved with the electoral campaign shows this effect.

However, other elements at the country level confirmed a relationship with turnout. Rules (such as compulsory voting, constituencies, seats), practices (simultaneous elections) and electoral competition (number of lists, etc.) have revealed more complex links to turnout. Their effects may vary across different election waves, obtaining different meanings. As contextual factors, their influence can be reduced (or increased) by other elements of the context.

Going back to the main question of this article, the results confirm the impact economic factors have on voting turnout, especially in the 2014 elections. During this last

wave the effects of the crisis seem to increase alienation from voting participation and proved to be significant at the personal, national and attitudinal levels. The economic crisis affects voting turnout at the personal status level (H1). Data show that in 2014 the unemployed were more likely to abstain from voting, confirming the *withdrawal* hypothesis (Rosenstone 1982) for EU elections as well. Moreover, the economic crisis affected voting turnout also at the country level (H2). National economic indicators tell us that economic conditions are not related to turnout as before the crisis. As far as attitudes are concerned (hypothesis 3), models testing the effects of concern for the economic situation show that a higher level of concern at election time increases the probability to abstain. At the same time, people blaming the EU for the crisis in 2014 tended to vote more than people not identifying Europe as the origin of the crisis (hypothesis 4).

In this case, it will be interesting to look at the party positions since Eurosceptic parties can attract consensus and increase participation of people willing to punish Europe (see Traig 2014). Concern for the economy, on the contrary, has not been successfully coopted by Eurosceptic parties. The negative signs seem in fact to indicate that people are completely disenchanted about the possibility to affect political decisions (see Di Mauro and Memoli 2016). In contrast, citizens who have worse expectations for the economy, develop a higher probability to vote. Concern for the present tends to increase alienation, while “punishment” relates to a future negative perspective.

Although the findings prove the influence of the crisis on turnout at different levels, it is worth mentioning that those relationships are particularly current in 2014 and less relevant in 2009. On this point, Kriesi (2012) seems to have anticipated this scenario when he argued that ‘The truly critical elections for the exit-hypothesis might only be those following up on the first post-crisis elections, when the voters have come to realize that the parties replacing the punished government were not able to do any better than their predecessors’ (Kriesi 2012, 522).

Moreover, the economic crisis does not only produce effects by itself, but as the consequence of political competition and discussion on fundamental issues. As Treib (2014) points out, the EP elections in 2014 has not only (or not mostly) been the elections of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (see Schmitt, Hobolt and Popa, 2015), but also the event that marked the success of Eurosceptic parties. Issues like immigration and economic austerity have gained a central position during the campaign and within the political discourses of parties. As a result, the economic crisis acquired a very important role during the 2014 elections. Some people concerned about those issues tended to vote for a Eurosceptic party. At the same time, other people completely exited from electoral participation, as a sign of deep disillusion towards the capacity of EU politics to

address their grievances. Those people seem to have anticipated the Treib's conclusions, when he argues that the reverse side of the coin of the *Spitzenkandidaten* scenario is a kind of exclusion of the 28 percent of the EP members (the Eurosceptic) from EU main decisions, leaving unheard the protests of many EU citizens.

Once again, political factors, rather than pure economic indicators play a major role in turnout. Further studies on the topic could shed light on this peculiarity from the 2014 EP elections by including the context of the electoral campaign within explanatory factors of turnout. This step forward might also be able to explain why similar repercussions of the crisis activated citizens towards Euroscepticism or, on the contrary, brought them to give-up to their chance to vote.

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