

New political parties can mobilise dissatisfied voters who share populist attitudes

With the economic crisis in 2008, 'new parties' emerged across European societies. Hugo Marcos-Marne, Carolina Plaza-Colodro and Tina Freyburg show that next to citizens' economic assessments, voting for new parties also depends on populist attitudes. Their work underpins the importance of a deepening crisis of representation, amid which new parties are able to set links with the electorate that go beyond pure economic concerns.



The 2008 economic crisis profoundly affected party systems in Europe. Among its most visible consequences, new parties entered electoral competition challenging the traditional mainstream parties. Across Europe, the centre-left social democrats and centre-right Christian democrats, who have dominated national politics for about 60 years, are in [decline](#). How can this support for new political parties in times of economic crisis be explained?

Not only economic voting! Populist attitudes matter too

At first glance, the basic patterns of electoral behaviour in countries such as Spain, Ireland, and Portugal, may appear to support the [economic voting-theorem](#). Voters who perceive their own economic situation, and especially their states' economy to be worsening, will tend to punish the incumbent party by [voting for alternatives](#), be they opposition parties or previously marginal/new forces, or by abstaining.

Yet, we argue, it is the ideologically framed perception of the economic situation (rather than the objective state of the economy) that best explains the vote against mainstream and incumbent parties. Then, post-crisis electoral behaviour is not a straightforward response to changes in the economy; political ideology matters too. While existing studies view this ideological determinant in terms of individuals' left/right positions (i.e., a 'thick' understanding of political ideology), we focus on voters' attitudes toward populism, which is considered a 'thin' ideology.

The [widespread definition of populism](#) is that it considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and it argues politics should be an expression of the general will of 'the people'. In line with this approach, populism can [present itself](#) in combination with both left- and right-wing electoral platforms, or no specific ideologically defined platform. Individuals' populist attitudes are further understood as latent; they can be activated by political actors with a populist discourse that make them electorally effective.

Our focus on populist attitudes is motivated by the observation that while some disappointed or alienated citizens abstain from voting, others, notably the politically motivated, go to the polls but often look for alternatives to the mainstream parties. In times when economic crisis catalyses a deepening crisis of democratic representation, individuals with populist attitudes may find new political parties electorally appealing.

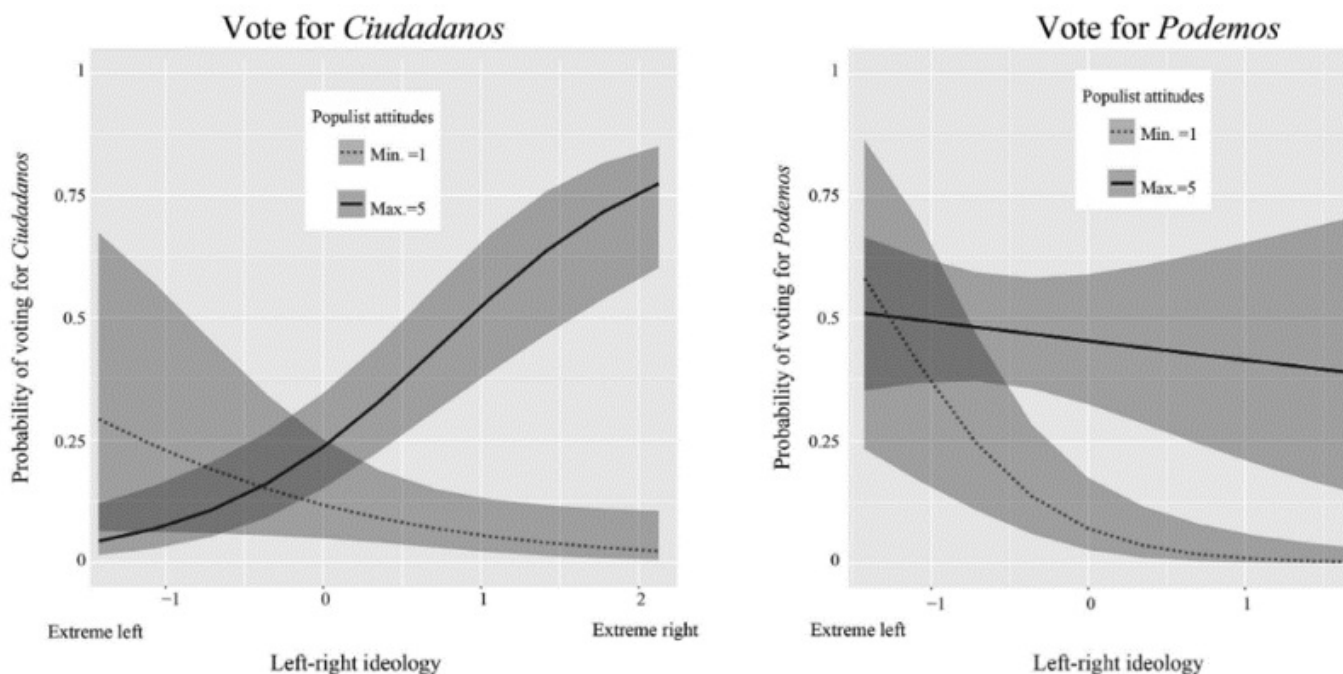
Studies have shown that populist attitudes in voters are good predictors of support for populist parties. However, not all new parties that emerged in the wake of the financial and economic crisis are populist. Still, any new parties might have benefited from the votes of citizens with populist attitudes. While not necessarily being populist, new parties surely strive to present themselves as able to break with existing political power relations (at least rhetorically). This might explain the attractiveness of new parties for voters with populist attitudes.

New parties and populist attitudes in Spain

We explore our argument by looking at the emergence of new parties in post-crisis Spain. In the 2011 national elections, the incumbent Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) was first voted out of office in favour of the conservative People's Party (PP). In the following [2015 elections](#), and after the incumbent PP had implemented an austerity programme, the electorate punished both established parties with [historically low percentages of votes](#) and turned toward two newcomers, Ciudadanos and Podemos. The two new parties distinguish themselves with their critical attitude towards the Spanish political establishment; at the same time, they differ substantially in [left-right ideology](#), with Ciudadanos being a centre-right party and Podemos a radical left-wing one.

Using data from a representative survey, our [research](#) finds that voters with strong populist attitudes are more likely to intend to vote for a new party, regardless of whether it sustains a populist discourse. This suggests that new parties offer a viable electoral alternative to voters with populist attitudes. Had the new parties not offered any alternative to the voters who have turned away from traditional parties, then these individuals with populist attitudes would [probably have renounced going to the polls entirely](#).

Figure: Predicted intention of voting for Ciudadanos and Podemos



Note: For more information, see the authors' accompanying article in [West European Politics](#)

The figure shows how populist attitudes influence vote intentions for new parties in interaction with left-right ideology. It concentrates on the strongest and the lowest level of populist attitudes. It turns out that the probability of left- and right-leaning individuals with strong populist attitudes intending to vote for Podemos is about the same. Populist new parties seem able to attract populist voters that do not fully share their thick-ideological positioning on economic concerns.

Conversely, respondents with strong populist attitudes are less likely to intend to vote for right-wing Ciudadanos if they place themselves on the left side of the ideological scale. The more respondents move to the right, the greater the influence exerted by populist attitudes on the likelihood of voting for Ciudadanos. Political-ideological congruence thus plays an important role in explaining why some populist individuals intend to vote for a non-populist new political party.

Conclusions

New knowledge about post-crisis electoral behaviour is likely to refine our understanding of the motives behind the weakening of traditional parties in favour of new ones. Post-crisis Spain, in common with other European countries, has been witnessing an increasing fragmentation of votes, instability and political polarisation. Knowledge about the causes of these dynamics can help to better understand the [trends shaping the development of democratic politics](#) in the [near future](#).

Overall, our study suggests that the establishment and survival of new political parties does not only depend on the pure economic situation in a democracy. Rather, the success of new parties reflects the far-reaching structural transformations that are taking place in West European political systems, which are catalysed by the Great Recession. Therefore, new parties might survive even in times of economic prosperity, although new challenges may appear in the form of institutionalisation problems or their ability to maintain populist attitudes electorally activated.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. For a longer discussion of this topic, see the authors' recent article in [West European Politics](#)

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