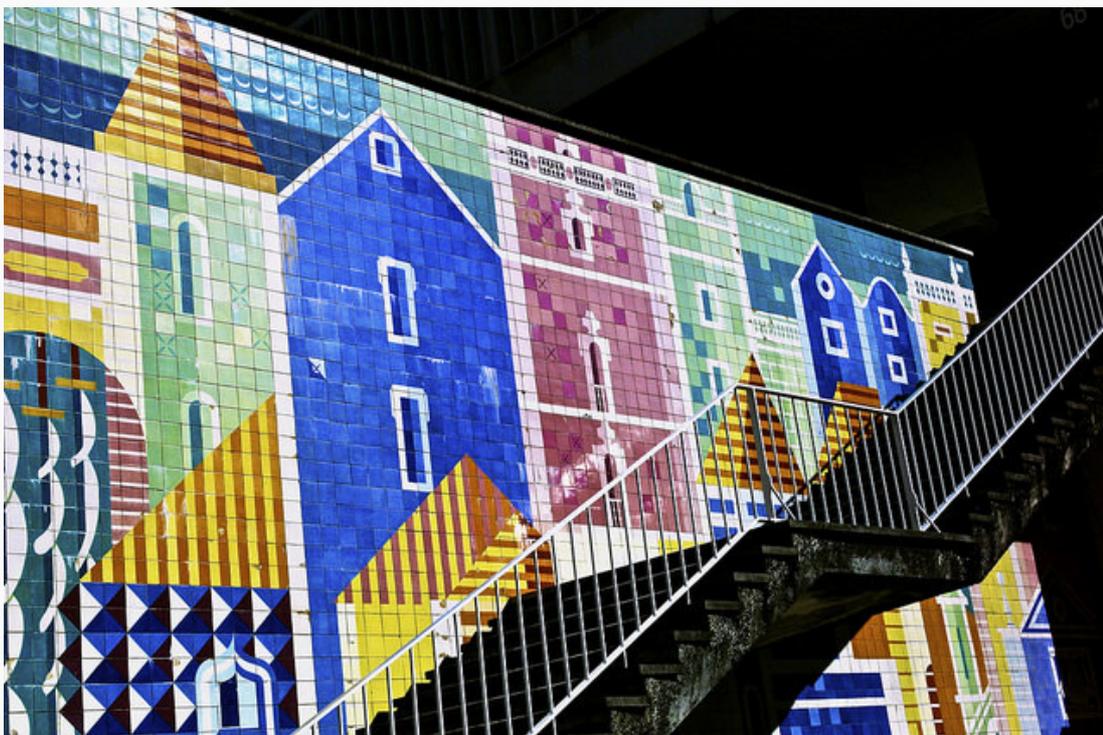


Fierce but short-lived: How does economic crisis affect political participation?

By Democratic Audit UK

*The Great Recession that hit Europe in 2008 led to the loss of millions of jobs and soaring levels of unemployment. In a [recent study](#), **Anna Kern**, **Sofie Marien** and **Marc Hooghe** investigate whether the recent crisis depresses or boosts levels of political participation in Europe. They find that economic growth is positively associated with elite challenging forms of political participation such as protests or boycotts when investigating a longer period (2002-2010) but that crises such as between 2008 and 2010 rising unemployment came along with rising levels of such acts of political participation.*



Lisbon, Portugal, where the financial crisis was felt strongly (Credit: [Pedro Ribeiro Simoes, CC BY 2.0](#))

Of the French Revolution, Saint Just famously stated that it is the miserable masses who constitute the power of the earth and the idea that grievances cause political action remains up-to-date to this day. However, when we compare a larger set of countries, political participation tends to be highest in economically advanced democracies. The recent economic and financial crisis provides a unique setting to investigate what happens to political participation when a number of economically advanced democracies are confronted with a substantial and profound economic shock.

Recently, massive protests erupted in those southern European countries worst hit by the crisis, as governments and the European Union were held responsible for their lack of determination to address the crisis and its consequences. In Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy, demonstrators have taken to the streets in their hordes to express their frustration with the way their governments have reacted to the crisis. Such a reaction seems logical, following the “grievance argument” which claims that threatened economic interests function as a major incentive for political engagement. Following this idea, dissatisfaction with important aspects of life such as living standard, income, or employment stimulates political participation and particularly protest behaviour.

Yet, we also know from a large number of studies that actors require resources to be able to participate politically. Following this “resource argument” we would expect a positive relationship between having access to meaningful

material resources and levels of political activity. Assuming that the financial and economic crisis led to depleting material resources, it should depress levels of political engagement. Consequently, the “grievance argument” and the “resource argument” lead to contrasting expectations about the impact of the crisis on political participation.

Using cumulative data from the European Social Survey (2002-2010) and economic indicators from the World Bank, we tested these “grievance” versus “resource arguments”. By using a multilevel analysis we can examine whether the effects of economic crisis on political participation differ for the 26 European countries while also taking the individual situation of the respondents into account.

Thereby, we distinguish between two broad categories of political participation; institutionalised forms of political participation which are related to the electoral process and organised by the political system on the one hand, and non-institutionalised forms of political participation which represent potentially elite-challenging forms of political engagement on the other hand. Given that the “grievance argument” has predominantly been associated with protest behaviour, we expect that economic downturn mainly comes along with an increase in non-institutionalised forms of political participation.

The results of the multilevel analysis show that when investigating the 2002-2010 period, countries’ rising prosperity levels were associated with higher levels of non-institutionalised political participation, which corresponds with the “resource argument”. The finding is supported on both the country as well as on the individual level. However, the financial crisis which developed from 2008 onwards can be considered as highly exceptional, therefore we investigated, in a second step, the changes in participation levels that occurred right after the crisis had hit in 2008.

In 2010, numerous European societies were confronted with rapidly rising unemployment levels. Indeed, if we only look at the 2010 figures, the results are not in line with what we find for the overall observation period; In 2010 rising unemployment levels are strongly related to increasing levels of non-institutionalised political participation. Rapidly growing unemployment levels, therefore, seems to be associated with a wave of protest behaviour. While this result seems difficult to understand from the perspective of the “resource argument”, it can be explained based on the “grievance argument”: As citizens clearly felt deprived they want to convey a message about their grievance to national and supra-national political decision-makers even though the pool of resources shrank.

While this study was set up as a test between two alternative arguments, the results of the analysis reveal a more complex reality. An analysis covering a longer period of time provides strong support for “resource argument”, while a more specific analysis of the period after the crisis had emerged, tends to be more in line with “grievance argument”. Yet, we argue that it is possible to reconcile these seemingly contradicting findings if we consider the “resource argument” as a baseline model for the explanation of long term trends in levels of political engagement: Generally, those that are well off have more resources that they can use to participate.

This seems to hold at the individual level, as we show that those with high educational credentials and those who are more satisfied with their income tend to participate more intensively, while the unemployed tend to be more passive. With higher participation levels in the wealthy countries of Europe compared to those with a lower GDP/capita level, this finding also holds at the country level. The exception to this pattern is that citizens who are less satisfied with the state of the economy are more likely to become involved in non-institutionalized manners. Engaged citizens were found to be characterized by a combination of resources and dissatisfaction.

However, when focussing on the period right after the economic crisis hit Europe, a different picture emerges as now the “grievance argument” is supported. It has to be remembered, however, that in this time period the rise in unemployment was highly exceptional and for some countries even historically unprecedented. Public opinion seems to react rather strongly to these shock experiences, and this can lead to more protest, as could be observed in countries like Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. This kind of dramatic and sudden changes can lead to the occurrence of “suddenly imposed grievances” and they are able to overcome the baseline model of a positive relation between resources and participatory behaviour. Yet highly unusual levels of grievances are required to boost participation levels. Hence, these suddenly imposed grievances will most likely not lead to long term periods of enduring mobilisation and high participation levels.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of Democratic Audit UK, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

Marc Hooghe is professor of political science at the University of Leuven

Anna Kern is an academic at the Centre for Citizenship and Democracy at the University of Leuven in Belgium.

Sofie Marien is assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam and senior researcher at the Centre for Citizenship and Democracy in Belgium.