

Review

**Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds):
*European party politics in times of crisis***

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Most observers would agree that the financial and economic recession of the late 2000s has left a lasting imprint on European politics. Yet, few researchers have attempted to investigate systematically how large that imprint has been. *European party politics in times of crisis*, edited by Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi, aims to do exactly that. Based on both detailed case studies of fifteen countries and broader comparisons of more general patterns, the volume reaches nuanced and plausible conclusions about the ways the crisis has shaped party competition across the continent.

The book starts by theorizing that the crisis might have transformed the nature of party competition, but that the extent of this transformation in any particular country likely depends both on long-term structural changes that have shaped the party system in the first place and on the severity of the crisis and the response of political actors. It then outlines its methodological approach, consisting primarily of measuring party competition by the way that the positions of political parties on a range of issues (economic, political, cultural) are portrayed in national newspapers. After eleven chapters with thorough descriptions of the experience in different countries, two comparative chapters draw out the general findings. Overall, the authors conclude that the effect of the recession has been rather variable. They find the largest effect in Southern Europe, where it triggered the rise of radical left parties and brought dissatisfaction with the traditional political parties to a climax. In North West Europe, they argue the crisis intensified a trend of increasing politicization of cultural issues. For example, the chapter on Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland documents that populist anti-immigrant parties were already successful before the crisis occurred, but that afterwards these parties were even better able to structure party competition around topics such as immigration. And they observe a similar development in Central and Eastern Europe, where amidst a series of political scandals the crisis made cultural issues more central to the structuring of party competition. One of the most surprising findings is that, on the whole, the crisis did not seem to bring economic issues to the forefront of European party competition.

The timeliness and empirical richness make the book an invaluable contribution, which should be of interest to any student or scholar of European politics. It maintains an excellent balance between sensitivity to context and an interest in generalizations. Equally impressive is that each of the country chapters presents a clear central argument while still following the same master framework. Unlike other edited volumes, therefore, *European party politics in times of crisis* maintains a coherent and consistent narrative from cover to cover. At the same time, and for partly understandable reasons, some of the conclusions remain a little speculative, and the reader might be left wondering about the overall take-away. More specifically, while the theoretical framework at the

beginning of the book is plausible, the empirical investigation that follows does not seem to test it systematically. Four issues seem most important.

First, while the authors convincingly point at several factors that might influence the way the crisis affects party competition in a specific country, such as how hard the crisis had hit its economic system, how institutionalized the party system was beforehand, and whether the country was a net contributor to the European Union, the investigations do not test the effect of these factors systematically. Instead, much of the research relies on grouping countries together by 'region' (North West Europe, Southern Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe). The assumption appears to be that the relevant factors are similar within each region, but that seems difficult to maintain (and indeed, in one of the chapters it leads the authors to treat Ireland as a Southern European country because of the severity of its economic crisis). As a result, the book is likely to convince readers that the recession has had the most dramatic effect in Southern Europe, but it is less compelling when explaining why that might be.

Something similar can be said about the case selection. While the breadth of cases is an undeniable strength, their selection does not seem primarily driven by theoretical considerations. To properly measure the effect of EU membership, for example, it seems necessary to include more than one non-EU country and to include countries with varying levels of integration in the European market. Similarly, considering the theoretical attention to the severity of the crisis, the omission of the dramatic case of Iceland, where the crisis led to the largest banking collapse in economic history and massive social and political turmoil, seems curious. And while the authors discuss some of the relevant differences between their cases in chapter two, the remainder of the text does not systematically investigate how those differences matter.

Third, one might wonder about the decision to measure party competition by coding every instance in which a newspaper ascribes a position on a policy issue to a political party. On the one hand, it is an innovative strategy that avoids some of the pitfalls alternative strategies might run into: for example, campaign manifestoes are often short and vague, legislative behavior tends to be driven by dynamics between the opposition and government, and perceptions of voters can be incorrect and are rarely measured frequently enough to trace the kinds of trends in which the authors are interested. On the other hand, this methodology is not without its problems either. It assumes that political parties are in full control of how newspapers describe their position (indeed, the text frequently describes the newspaper data as measuring political actors' 'positioning' or 'strategy'). This does not always seem to be the case: sometimes newspapers might ascribe positions based on actions that political parties have taken reluctantly (for example, government parties in Greece have had little choice but

to accept the austerity measures that were imposed upon them, but that does not make them 'pro-austerity'), and some newspapers might have a political agenda of their own (for example, in Hungary a Media Council that is dominated by the party which has been in power since 2010 oversees all coverage). Moreover, the methodological approach appears unable to recognize that party competition can revolve around something other than policy issues (as was the case, for example, in Italy, when much of the competition revolved around people's views of Silvio Berlusconi), or that some statements are more important than others (if I understand the methodology correctly, if newspapers mention 500 times that party A wants to increase welfare levels by one percent and one time that party B wants to increase welfare levels by 50 percent, it would score party A as ten times as pro-welfare as party B). And indeed, some of the party positions seem a little surprising (such as the classification of the green and social democratic parties in the Netherlands as right-of-center on economic issues [276], the categorization of the far-right Jobbik in Hungary as left-wing on cultural issues [180], or the classification of the Eurosceptic Five Star Movement in Italy as more pro-Europe in 2013 than the party of Mario Monti, who oversaw the implementation of the EU's austerity program [135]).

Finally, some of the conclusions seem a little sweeping considering that most chapters rely on an analysis of only three or four elections. Of course, we can hardly criticize the authors for not incorporating developments that have taken place after they conducted their investigations. But we can question whether the evidence in the book warrants causal claims such as "the Great Recession triggered an acceleration of ... an increasing politicisation of cultural issues" (352) and "the Great Recession served as a catalyst for party-system change" (361). Especially because the developments in some of the country chapters continue trends that had been initiated before the recession took place, and because the recession coincided with political scandals and other crisis developments in most countries under investigation, such causal arguments do not seem entirely substantiated. In other words, based on only two elections since the beginning of the recession, we cannot really be sure that much has changed, and even if we could be certain, it is difficult to demonstrate that it is because of the recession that those changes occurred. Again, the analysis could probably be strengthened by zooming in on some of the specific factors the opening theoretical chapter identifies, and systematically investigating the consequences of their differences both over time and across the countries under study.

All in all, *European party politics in times of crisis* is a novel and detailed investigation of the clearly important and understudied question of how the recession shaped party politics in Europe. And while not all its theoretical

assertions are tested and substantiated, this thought-provoking and informative volume is bound to fascinate anyone with an interest in European politics.

About the reviewer

Edward Koning is associate professor of political science at the University of Guelph (Ontario, Canada). Most of his research investigates the politics of immigration, specifically in North West Europe and North America. He is the author of *Immigration and the politics of welfare exclusion* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), and has published in leading academic journals (e.g., *Comparative European Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Journal of Public Policy*) on a variety of related issues, including anti-immigrant politics, institutionalist theory, public opinion on immigration, and citizenship policy.

