

# No Country For Old Cleavages: Political attitudes and beliefs amidst the Greek debt crisis

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*The Greek youth enters in their formative period amidst a period of a severe debt crisis that has been having unforeseeable implications to the established party system. How do these new political developments affect the attitudes, beliefs and the repertoire of political actions of this generation? What is the role of old cleavages and traditional division lines in this ever-changing political setting? Drawing on a novel sample from university students, the paper assesses the impact of the crisis on young people's political beliefs. The findings suggest that the classic left-right division is not adequate to represent the much more nuanced and complex divisions generated as a result of the crisis. Some of the information provided in this survey helps to explore the role of new seemingly important division lines in helping us understand the dynamics of party competition and public opinion.*

## **Introduction**

In what has probably been one of the most controversial Academy Award winner for Best Picture and Best Director, the Coen Brothers, drawing on the notorious novel of Cormac McCarthy, “shoot” three of the seemingly exemplary archetypes of the American society: a welder and hunter Vietnam veteran in rural Texas, a soon to be retired laconic Sheriff, and a seemingly gifted ex-Special Forces officer. Each one of them faces at some point, the “beast”, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), an unemotional killer with a unique murder weapon at his disposal. There is no mystery in how the psychopathic killer finally wins, apart from the fact that he uses his weapon to dispassionately murder nearly every rival, bystander and even employer in his pursuit of his quarry and the money. As the farmer desperately attempts to keep one step ahead, the blood from this hunt begins to flow behind him with relentlessly growing intensity as Chigurh closes in. In the meantime, the otherwise – but not in this move – bound to win in the final scene old Sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones) starts to reflect on how America he was used to, had gradually changed.

Having entered since May 2009 the rescue mechanism, monitored and supported by the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the country has been already bailed out twice, con-

tinuing to face a hardly sustainable debt crisis, accompanied by a seemingly endless series of austerity measures that have been affecting all sectors of the society. “The Beast” this time is simply the sheer financial reality. And, even if slowly, it starts to threaten various long-standing archetypes of the Greek culture (Dinas 2010). For some, these archetypes are all symptoms of an inward-looking “underdog” culture that can be traced in the process of national integration (Diamantouros 1983). For others, they are simply the product of a Mafia-like constellation of corporatist interests, coupled by a supportive populist party system (Pappas 2011).

As is often the case, the ever-approaching financial disaster has been accompanied by an unprecedented lack of support for the political system, its political and institutional representatives and both EU- and IMF-related actors. Often in violent forms, this upheaval has been manifested with massive riots and rallies in an almost weekly basis. This setting comes in contrast to what was often deemed to be a polarized partisan electorate, largely attached to one of the two main political parties that have been holding office since the country’s democratic transition in 1974, namely the incumbent Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and the right-wing Nea Demokratia (New Democracy, ND). In the current setting, in which the average level of confidence to the political parties is 1.6 in a 0 to 10 scale (in 1985 the equivalent figure was 6.1), it is interesting to see what has remained from the political lessons of the family. 2009 is not very far from 2004, when the successful hosting of the Olympic games in conjunction with other national sport triumphs amidst an era of plasmatic financial prosperity gave room to increased ties with the political system and the parties in particular. In less than five years this ideal image has been replaced by overwhelming pessimism about the economic and political situation in the country, matched with almost unanimous disapproval of the government for the way in which it has been managing the crisis as well as all previous governments and leading political and institutional figures for their responsibility in bringing the country on the verge of bankruptcy.

Young cohorts have found themselves at the heart of these developments. Drawing on a sample targeted to university students, the aim of this paper is to explore the impact of this turbulent period of political turmoil on young people’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. To do so, however, it is first essential to briefly highlight the political cues disseminated during this period.

### *The Greek Crisis and the transmission of political attitudes*

Although Greek political culture since the mid 1990s has been characterized by high levels of political cynicism (Demertzis and Kafetzis 2006; Nikolako-

poulos 2005), political views and evaluations about the political parties and the political personnel of the country have worsened dramatically the last years. The entrance of the country in the auspices of the IMF/ECB/EU mechanism in March 2010 marked a period of continuously escalating public discontent, starting at the aftermath of the 2007 election, and manifesting itself in a violent form with the December 2008 riots all over the country. Being the first EU-member state that resorts to an IMF loan to avoid official bankruptcy, the news of March 2010 came as the ultimate piece of evidence suggesting that the political and economic elites during the last decades failed to address the long-term deficiencies of the country's economy. Soon after the first bailout package was secured, a series of austerity measures was proposed. During this period, two different types of reactions emerged. On the one hand, public intellectuals criticized what they perceived as a long-standing culture of corruption and clientelism. However, this "looking-at-the-mirror" pseudo-psychoanalytic inspection to the paradoxes of the Greek public sector and the Greek socioeconomic structure in general failed to dominate the public debate. An aggressive wave of populism, backed up by almost all opposition parties and most of the media, deviated the discussion from the origins of the crisis to the errors made by the current government in handling the situation. The result of this explosive blend was that public opinion not only targeted invariably politicians and political parties within the country but it also channeled its anger abroad, mainly focusing on key actors of the EU, condemning them for their reluctance to help the country escape the crisis. In a political environment in which the status of the economy monopolized public and media attention for over than a year, key players in the negotiation processes, such as Germany and its Chancellor, Angela Merkel, were often portrayed as equally responsible for this freefall as Greek political elites. The reproduction of populist opinion articles, full of stereotypes about the "Greek laziness", coming from German magazines and newspapers boosted the stigmatization of Germany, the EU and the IMF as evils trying to take advantage of the current situation in Greece, mainly by aspiring to buy at a low cost many of the state's assets.

The most interesting aspect of these developments relates to the way in which opinions about the Memorandum that was signed between the EU/IMF, the European Central Bank and Greece cross-cut prior ideological and other divisions both at the party level and the level of the electorate. For the left, opposition to the IMF was mainly driven by ideological motivations, since the policies advocated by this institution are typically characterized as neo-liberal. Argentina, for example, having recently passed through the experience of IMF surveillance, has never been referred to so frequently in the news or public debates as it has been referred to by the Greek left since 2009. The reaction from the right was mainly funneled by the perception that this project

would fail to provide a long-term viable perspective for the Greek economy. For many supporters of both ideological camps however, important part of this discontent stemmed from what they perceived as a wound of national pride: signing the Memorandum was deemed to constitute an act of national betrayal, giving the authority to external actors to rule the economic and political decisions within the country. Accordingly, for a large part of the electorate public dissent soon shifted against the incumbent party and its leader and Prime Minister George Papandreou.

The overarching character of dissent was manifested in various instances during the last year. Massive rallies, strikes and riots were not new to Greece but until now they were mainly directed and largely controlled by trade unions and political parties. In these last months, Greek political elites have witnessed a widespread wave of political expressions of disobedience. Examples of this tendency are two movements, which gradually converged, one boycotting the increase of the ticket price in Athens' metro and other means of public transport and the other reacting to the imposition of new tolls in national highways. During the same period, politicians from the two major parties were harassed or even persecuted by Greek citizens both inside the country and abroad. The pick of this movement took place only recently when thousands of people started gathering every day for more than two months in front of the parliament demonstrating their discontent with the political system and aiming to prevent, often by physically threatening them, MPs from voting in favor of the new austerity plan, a precondition for the second bail-out that was decided in May 2011. These rallies, initially inspired by the Spanish "*indignados*", were the first ones that managed to attract so many participants without any partisan or other institutional label. Also as a consequence of this, this was a very heterogeneous group, where extreme left coexisted with the extreme right on the grounds of their disapproval towards the current political regime. It is for example indicative that by 1994, the correlation between left-right self-placement and satisfaction with democracy was  $-.35$ . In 2009 the equivalent figure was  $-.03$ . By the same token, prior partisan ties do not help much in the categorization of different repertoires of reactions against the political system.

In this new political context, where prior partisan identities have waned and ties with ideological and political benchmarks have broken, young adults are called to form their political opinions and establish their policy and partisan preferences (Stoker and Jennings 2009). It is hard to deny that the period in which they enter in their early adulthood bears no resemblance to the equivalent formative period experienced by their parents. In a period where the political stream changes so radically from one generation to the next, what remains from the shadow of the past in young people's attitudinal profiles? To

what extent are long-established ideological cleavages still useful in absorbing the newly emerging division lines?

By delving into the relationship between ideological orientations and attitudes towards the crisis and its outcomes, we aim to portray the repertoire of reactions against what is perceived as a failing political system. How do citizens react in the light of recurring signals of public policy failure? To explore this question, it is necessary to delve into the interchange between attitudes and beliefs about the new economic and political conditions as the immediate aftermath of the crisis.

### *Data and measurement*

The data come from a small study implemented in two small Greek universities (University of Thrace and University of Western Macedonia) with random selection of courses (proportional to the number of registered participants) and random selection of individuals within each course during the exam day of this course in June 2011. Given limitations in the amount of resources, only 500 individuals were targeted, resulting in a total number of approximately 360 cases. Needless to say, the small number of observations and the fact that only two universities are examined creates generalizability concerns regarding the findings presented in this study. Although there is not much that can be done to address this problem, it is at least somewhat reassuring that marginal distributions in various questions of interest are very similar when compared to equivalent distributions of university students representing a small part of a nation-wide study all over Greece during approximately the same period (April 2011).<sup>1</sup>

The main variables used in the analysis relate to people's attitudes towards the agreement signed between Greece and the IMF/EU/ECB mechanism, what will be referred to as the Memorandum. The memorandum constitutes the locus of hearted discussions both by the media, the parties and public opinion and has become the key word summarizing the crisis. It represents the series austerity measures taken by the government during the last three years

<sup>1</sup> During the same period, a nation-wide telephone survey with more than 5,000 respondents took place with a different research agenda. That said, some questions were common. In total, there were 300 students included in this survey. Their average level of confidence to the parliament is identical (1.6) to what was found here. The mean score of sympathy towards PASOK and ND were also very similar (1.63 and 1.49 in the telephone survey; 1.64 and 1.55 in this pilot study, all paired sample t-tests easily fail to reject the null of difference in the means between the two surveys. All Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests also suggest that the two pairs of distributions are equally skewed).

and serves to depict the new division between those supporting an “exit” solution and those advocating compliance with the package and the agreements to ensure the permanence of the country within the European Union. In total, six measures are used. All of them are framed by using the typical 1-5 Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Respondents had to indicate their level of agreement with respect to the following statements: “The Memorandum 1) will make things worse; 2) is bad but necessary; 3) will aid the country’s economic recovery; 4) was imposed by the EU and Germany in particular to serve their own interests; 5) means loss of sovereignty”; and “Other ways to confront the crisis should have been chosen.”

Other items that will be discussed in the next section relate to the attribution of responsibility for the crisis. A long list of names was presented, including politicians, institutions and other stimuli, both of national and international character. Respondents had to give a score from 1 (not at all responsible for the crisis) to 4 (very responsible for the crisis). More details about each of these questions are given in the next section and the accompanying figures.

The last part of the empirical analysis is devoted to the examination of young people’s attitudes towards instances and collective expressions of civic disobedience. Given that the questionnaire was administered and that the fieldwork period was over before the emergence of the “*Syntagma square-Indignados*” movement, there is no available question for this period. The only two available items ask people to give their opinion about the “not-paying” movement and the instances of prosecution of politicians by citizens either in Greece or abroad. Again, two 1-5 agree/disagree scales have been used for each of these two indicators.

## Results

Figure 1 presents the mean levels of anti-memorandum sentiments using the survey items described above. Irrespective of which item is used a common picture emerges. The average scores lean clearly towards the anti-memorandum extreme. Interestingly, the item that most unequivocally evokes anti-memorandum attitudes is the one that asks respondents whether they agree with the argument that the bail-out plan was imposed by the European Union and Germany in particular in order to serve their interests.

Ever since the country’s democratic transition, the left-right division has been an excellent predictor of partisan attitudes and political preferences (Kalyvas 1998; Moschonas 1995; Nikolakopoulos 2005). How well does knowledge on left-right self placement help us predict people’s attitudes to this issue?

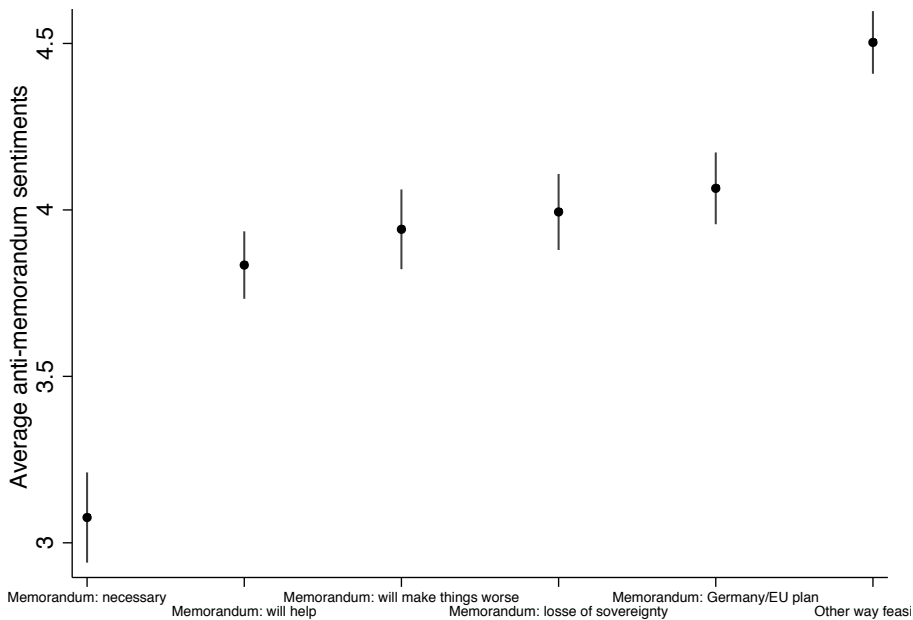
Figure 1. Average scores in each item denoting attitudes towards the Memorandum.<sup>2</sup>

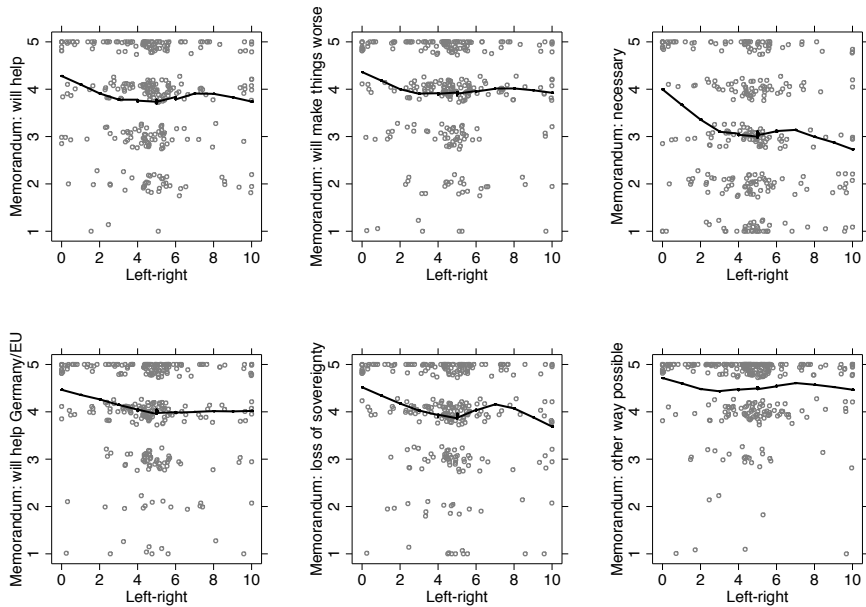
Figure 2 shows the local average score in each item about the memorandum, across the LR scale. The evidence is quite straightforward. There seems to be no association between left-right and people's views on the bail-out scheme. A rather flat pattern is found, revealing hardly any relationship between LR and memorandum. In a couple of cases, a negligible downward trend can be discerned, indicating that those located at the left are somewhat more strongly opposed to the bail-out package, is not statistically significant.<sup>3</sup>

Let us now move to the question about who is to be held responsible for the debt crisis. Responses could range between 1 ("Not responsible") to 4 ("Very Responsible"). The list of items includes various stimuli from both domestic and international politics. Various previous Prime Ministers, Greek political parties (the two major ones that had been in power since 1974), the previous generation as a whole, the immigrants (constituting the second most salient debate in Greece after the crisis), the financial system, Greek banks, Germany,

<sup>2</sup> Dots denote mean scores, spikes indicate the 97% confidence intervals of these mean estimates, as taken with 1000 bootstrapped samples. Each item ranges from 1 (most pro-Memorandum option) to 5 (most anti-Memorandum option).

<sup>3</sup> The only case in which this trend approaches levels of statistical significance is with the item that asks respondents if they agree that the memorandum is bad but essential. This is the only item that does not seem to share significant portion of its variance with the other items, as shown by a factor analytic solution including all these items.

Figure 2. Recovering the relationship between left-right and attitudes towards the Memorandum.<sup>4</sup>

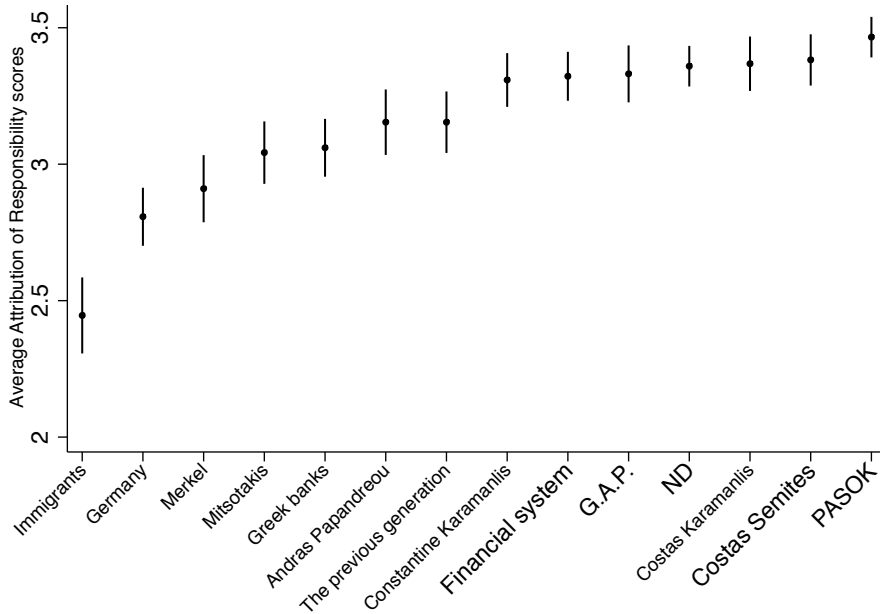


and the current German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Figure 3 sorts all items from the lowest (low attribution of responsibility) to the highest (high attribution of responsibility) average scores. Quite unexpectedly, average scores are high: no item is given an average score less than two and the average value is only below 2.5 in the question about immigrants. More importantly, stimuli not directly related to the Greek political system (immigrants, banks, Germany, Merkel) are held less responsible on average than even old politicians who once played an important role in the economic and political setting but have no active role in Greek politics during the last years. Taking into account that for some of these Prime Ministers were active until the period of early childhood for most of the respondents, this pattern is telling in that it highlights how the crisis has been seen by Greek public opinion. Rather than signaling the outcome of wrong-doing of the last government, it has evoked a more general and encompassing feeling of malfunctioning of the Greek political system, tracing its roots in the very early years of the post-transition period. In other words, it is hard to deny that at least for the Greek youth, the source of

<sup>4</sup> The solid curves present the local average scores in each of the items measuring attitudes towards the memorandum, conditional on people's left-right placement. A local regression curve (bandwidth .7) is fitted into the scatterplot between LR and memorandum.



Figure 3. Attributing responsibility for the crisis to parties, politicians and institutions.<sup>5</sup>



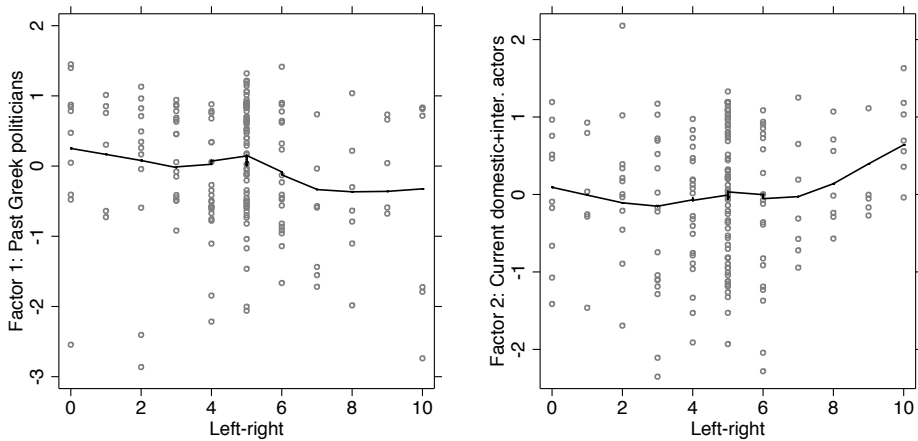
the problem lies in the structural deficiencies of the political system, as it was formed and developed since 1974 and until today.

Let us now focus on the possible variation in the way attribution of responsibility has been expressed by our respondents. Are young people likely to distinguish between the two different parties (and their Prime Ministers) or do they think they are both responsible for the crisis? Moreover, is there a distinction between factors and key players in the post-2009 period and important actors of the past? Last but not least, do people distinguish between domestic and international factors? Are there, that is, two groups, one priming the role of domestic actors, whereas the other attributing more responsibility to non-Greek institutions?

<sup>5</sup> Dots denote the mean level of responsibility attached to each of the stimuli mentioned in the horizontal axis. Spikes present the 95% bootstrapped standard errors. Some explanations about these names: Mitsotakis: leader of ND and Prime Minister, 1990-1993; Andreas Papandreou: Founder and leader of PASOK, 1974-1996, Prime Minister 1981-1989, 1993-1996; Constantine Karamanlis: Founder and leader of ND, 1974-1980, Prime Minister (after the transition): 1974-1980; Costas Karamanlis (nephew of ND's founder): Prime Minister with the ND: 2004-2009; Costas Semites: Prime Minister with PASOK: 1996-2004. G.A.P. stands for George Andrea Papandreou, son of PASOK's founder and Prime Minister with the same party 2009-2011.

<sup>6</sup> A local regression line is fitted into the scatterplot of left-right orientations with each of the two factors extracted from the items measuring attribution of responsibility.

Figure 4. Exploring the relationship between attribution of responsibility and left-right.<sup>6</sup>

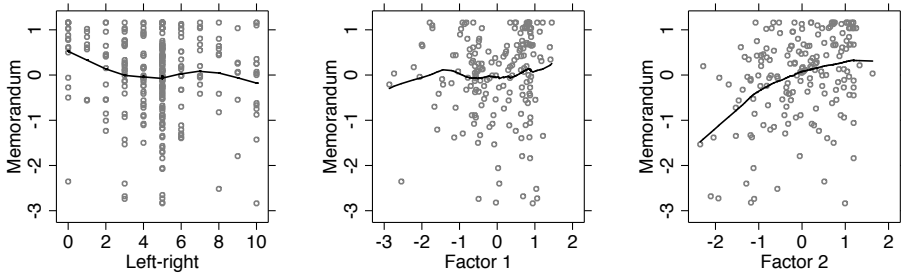


To see whether this is the case, all these items are factor analyzed (iterative principal factors), trying to explore whether any of these possible patterns described above can be revealed from the data. The findings, not shown to save space, indicate that all these items seem to cluster in two latent dimensions (rotated solutions). The first dimension reveals attitudes towards the 2007-2009 government, New Democracy in general, and most of the old Prime Ministers. The second latent factor groups responses with regard to current actors in the debt crisis, i.e. PASOK, the ex-Prime Minister George Papandreou, the immigrants, Germany and Angela Merkel. Attitudes towards financial institutions seem to load poorly in both solutions. Hence, a rather straightforward distinction emerges. Responses tend to be divided between those looking at the crisis as the outcome of a long-standing and structural deficiencies of the political system and those attributing more responsibility to current actors related to the post-2009 period. This is what brings Merkel and Papandreou in the same dimension.

Another indication about the transformation of the current political setting as a result of the crisis is that there seems to be no role in the left right dimension in this distinction. Figure 4 shows that none of the two factors seems to encompass a left-right division. People's scores in each of the two new variables seem unrelated to their left-right self-placement.

<sup>7</sup> A local regression line is fitted into the scatterplot of attitudes towards the Memorandum (summarized through a with left-right orientations and each of the two factors extracted from the items measuring attribution of responsibility).

Figure 5. Exploring the relationship between attribution of responsibility, left-right and expressions attitudes towards the memorandum.<sup>7</sup>

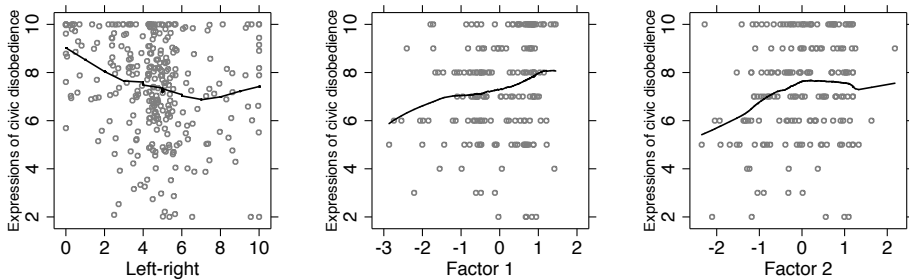


The next task now should be to see whether people's views on the memorandum are in some way related to their opinions about who is to be blamed for the crisis. A factor analytic solution easily gives only one factor for all the items shown in Figure 1, confirming that all these items capture the same underlying dimension, i.e. attitudes towards the bail-out plan. Figure 5 compares the performance of the left-right division and the two factors described above in helping us predict people's views about the memorandum. The pattern is quite straightforward. We only find a clear monotonic relationship between the second factor, representing attitudes towards the current political agents dealing with the crisis, and attitudes towards the memorandum. Neither the left-right self placement or people's scores in the first factor seem to share variance with the way our young respondents perceive the memorandum.

A last pattern that needs to be highlighted relates to the new expressions of political discontent. Two such instances were mentioned above, namely the "I don't pay" movement with regard to increases in the prices of the metro in Athens and in the tolls of the national highways, and the incidents of politicians being persecuted either in Greece or abroad. Let us first see whether support for these forms of protest relates to the classic left-right division. Figure 6 shows that this is hardly the case and only when it comes to the second form of protest. In general, however, the left-right distinction seems to be of little help in our understanding of the degree of support for these new forms of political expression.

How do the two latent factors perform in this task? Figure 6 shows the relationship between people's scores in each of the two factors (higher values denote higher levels of attribution of responsibility) and their local average levels of support for the two movements of political discontent. We combine the two respective items into a common encompassing civic disobedience scale. What we find is a positive and monotonic relationship between

Figure 6: Exploring the relationship between attribution of responsibility, left-right and expressions of civic disobedience.<sup>7</sup>



each of the two factors and this scale. There is also a weak negative relationship between left-right placement but the trend is much more evident when using the two latent dimensions described above. When regressing the resulting scale of civic disobedience with all three items presented in the horizontal axes of the graphs shown in Figure 6, we only find a significant relationship for the two latent factors measuring responsibility attribution to either past or current political actors. Recoding these two factors so that they also range from 0 to 10, their OLS coefficients are 08 (.02) and 05 (.02) respectively.<sup>9</sup> The equivalent figure for left0right is .03 (.02). Once again, there seems to be clear evidence that attitudes towards modes of political protest are better explained by new frames, as they are generated as a result of the political crisis.

### Conclusion

This research note aimed to demonstrate and highlight an important development in Greek political culture, a direct consequence of the financial crisis. Historical examples where crises were followed by recurrent populist waves are affluent. Greece was not an exception. The elusiveness of the rescue plan, which has been criticized even by the strongest supporters of economic reforms, reinforces the feeling of despair. A continuous flow of political information provides endless cues in what has been a period of unprecedented

<sup>8</sup> A local regression line is fitted into the scatterplot of expressions of civic disobedience with left-right orientations and each of the two factors extracted from the items measuring attribution of responsibility.

<sup>9</sup> Robust standard errors into parentheses.

political polarization. Political interest exceeds that of the early 1980s, which was far higher than the European average (Martín 2004). It is in this labyrinth of economic uncertainty and political rage that young people form and crystallize their political views. In front of these dramatic developments, where otherwise pervasive ideological cleavages wax and wane, what should our expectations be about young people's predispositions towards the crisis?

Hirschman's exit-voice-loyalty framework (1970) seems to be a valid theoretical tool to address this question in a more systematic way. Following this model, future research could draw on a classification of what constitutes an essentially heterogeneous group into three categories: for some young Greeks, attitudinal updating in the light of this new information implies increasing sentiments of political apathy. For others, the crisis signals the failure of the existing party system and the need to engage in new forms of political involvement. Finally, a part of this group sees the country's entrance in the EU-IMF mechanism of support as a loss of sovereignty, which in turn reinforces latent populist sentiments, evolving around what students of Greek politics call a defensive (or underdog) culture. It is probably useful to examine the level of overlap in this trichotomy, as well as its partisan socialization roots. Does it embed more profound dissimilarities related to the socialization processes of the Greek youth? What is the role of parental politicization in the formation of political preferences and how is this inheritance questioned, if not completely abandoned, in front of the storming political and economic developments? How durable can parental political lessons be for a generation that experiences a deadlock of economic recession and skyrocketing unemployment? It seems that one of the factors to which future research should pay pride of place is the process of parental transmission of political attitudes and beliefs and the role of parental politicization.

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