

SEISMIC WAVE OR TSUNAMI?

ASSESSING PARTY SYSTEM CHANGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Introduction

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of...party system change! After the last elections in most European democracies the patterns of inter-party competition seem to have changed in one country after the other. Italy and The Netherlands have seen the emergence of “great coalitions”, new parties have managed to get access to office in Norway or Luxembourg, innovative coalitions have been formed in Greece or the United Kingdom, traditional parties have electorally collapsed in Ireland or the Czech Republic, and the prospects of instability in traditionally institutionalized party systems (e.g. Spain or Portugal) are obvious.

This paper constitutes an attempt to assess party system development in the continent since 2008, trying to examine to what extent the abovementioned transformations are to be considered part of a global process of party system change caused by the global financial and economic crisis that have battered the European costs for the last five years or, on the contrary, are part of a process of general process of re-alignment that may end in the re-emergence of traditional patterns and political forces.

In order to do so, the current paper compares how European party systems have evolved during the current crisis with other previous instances of global crisis (e.g. 1929 and 1973). For that a new dataset comprising 30 European democracies, 248 elections and roughly 1000 cases of government formation will be used. The idea is to examine to what extent the current political developments have been due to the global crisis and to what degree this crisis has triggered systemic change, differing (or not) from previous historical experiences.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section looks at the concept of party system change and how it should be studied in different arenas of competition. The second section deals with the different indicators of party system change: namely, volatility, fragmentation and closure. The third part briefly reviews the literature on the relationship between economy (and its crisis) and party system stabilization/change. The dataset is present in section four, which also summarizes the main goals of the paper. Section five looks at the ways in which different economic crises (1929, 1973,

2008) have affected party system development (and change) in Europe. The final section summarizes the findings in a more comparative manner. The paper ends with some reflexions on the way forward.

Party System Change: Conceptualization

Departing from Sartori's (1976: 44) classical definition of party system as "the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition", and bearing in mind "how parties compete with one another at one level of the polity may well be different from how they compete at another level" (Bardi and Mair, 2008: 161), I suggest that any patterns of change should be drawn by observing the parties' behaviour in all three major political terrains – electoral, parliamentary and governmental (Smith, 1989: 195): and in particular, in respective reference to voters, parties and cabinets.

Regarding the voters preferences and the electoral arena, and rather than exclusively looking at increasing or decreasing tendencies, I consider party system change to take place when the level of electoral volatility fluctuates in 5 per cent or more and/or when the level of voters' instability reaches the "dangerous threshold" of 15 per cent.¹

In terms of the format of the party system (i.e. the number of electoral parties), which in itself determines the number of possible interactions reflecting at the same time the balance of inter-party power (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, 2011), party system change basically involves the replacement of one class by another. Thus, and using Sartori's (1976) classical categories, a party system is considered to have experienced a change when it goes from two-parties to two-and-a-half, or from the this to limited pluralism, or from the latter to extreme pluralism. In order to know when this is the case, and paraphrasing Mainwaring and Scully, I consider that

[m]ost party systems with an ENEP between 2.8 and 3.4 approximate the logic of two-party systems. With an ENEP between 3.5 and 3.9, what Blondel calls two-and-a-half party pattern usually prevails . . . Systems with an ENEP between 4.0 and 4.9 usually correspond to Sartori's category of limited pluralism, while those with an ENEP of 5.0 or higher usually correspond to the category of extreme pluralism. (1995: 31–2).

¹ According to most scholars (Pedersen, 1979), "earthquake elections" take place when the total level of electoral volatility reaches 15 percent.

Finally, and looking at the regularity and predictability of coalition-making, which itself captures an important aspect of elite strategy but it also has the potential to influence the behaviour of voters, I follow Mair when considering that

a party system changes when there is a change in the pattern of alternation, when a new governing alternative emerges, and/or when a new party or alliance gains access to office for the first time (2006: 66).

Because these three elements/arenas of party system change do not necessarily evolve accordingly, although they tend to run together, it is important that they are considered independently. As a result, and rather than looking of party system change as a wholesale phenomenon, I clearly separate partial (in one or two of those areas) from total change and, therefore, systemic collapse.

Party System Change: Operationalization

One of the main problems when dealing with the phenomenon of party system change is that of finding appropriate operationalizations. Here I turn to three of the most traditional indicators: namely, TEV, ENEP and iPSC. But let's examine now how each of them is calculated.

Electoral volatility is calculated using Pedersen's (1979) classic index, which measures 'the net change within the electoral party system resulting from individual vote transfers' according to the following formula:

$$TEV = \sum |v_{i,t} - v_{i,t-1}| / 2$$

in which TEV is the total electoral volatility, $v_{i,t}$ is the vote share for a party i at a given election t and $v_{i,t-1}$ is the vote share of the same party i th at the previous elections ($t-1$). In my model, TEV scores represent primarily the electoral aspect of party system stabilization.

In order to capture the degree of electoral fragmentation, I will employ here Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) 'effective number of electoral parties' (ENEP), by now a long-standing indicator (Lijphart 1994: 70). In particular, this index measures how many parties are in a party system in a given election, weighted according to size:

$$ENEP = 1 / \sum v_i^2$$

where v_i is the proportion of seats of the i^{th} party.

The operationalisation of closure is the most complicated. As mentioned above, Mair (1997) identifies three three different, although clearly related, factors:

a) *Government alternation* or how completely the partisan composition of successive cabinets has changed at each new period of government formation.

b) *Governing formulae* or the extent to which successive competing cabinets are composed of the same line-up of parties each time they participate in the executive.

c) *Access to government* or the degree to which all political parties within the system have the chance to enjoy the spoils of office over time (1997: 207-211).

Putting them all together, Mair considers party systems to be close if (1) alternations of governments are either total or none, (2) governing alternatives are stable over a long period of time, and (3) some parties (“outsiders”) are permanently excluded from participation in national government. Conversely, open party systems are to be characterised by (1) partial alternations of governments, (2) no stable compositions of governing alternatives and (3) access to government granted to all relevant parties (1997: 211-214; see also Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, 2011: 120-122).

In order to minimize subjective judgements and opinions in the measurement of party system closure, I quantitatively operationalize each of the factors suggested above. First of all, the degree to which governing alternations of political parties are wholesale is captured by the so-called Index of Government Alternation (IGA), which simply adapts Pedersen’s (1979) well-known index of electoral volatility to the measurement of a nation’s ministerial volatility (MV). In particular, the latter is calculated by adding the net change in percentage of ministers (including the prime minister) gained and lost by each party from one government to the next, and then dividing by two. However, and because wholesale alternation (both total and none) can be reflected by scores at both extremes of the MV scale (both 100 and 0, respectively), if the MV initial score obtained according to the formula described above is lower than 50 (i.e. perfect partial alternation), the former figure will be subtracted from 100. If MV is higher than 50, the IGA will be equal to the initial MV score (Casal Bértoa and Mair, 2012).

The second criterion, based on assessing whether or not the party or combination of parties has governed before in that particular format, is captured by the Index of Familiar alternation (IFA), which measures the percentage of ministries belonging to familiar combinations of parties with the caveats signalled in table 1. Finally, and in clear contrast to the previous two factors, access to government is easily measured by the Index of Closure (IC) which simply takes into consideration the percentages of ministries belonging to “old governing parties” (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2010).

Because time is particularly important when trying to measure the level of party system closure in a country (Mair, 1997), I also take into consideration all the years a particular cabinet has lasted, understanding that if there have been two or more cabinets

in one year, then the averages of the scores for the different above-cited government features are considered to characterize the year better than any of such individual factors. The average of the latter three into one composite index (iPSC) will represent the ultimate degree of systemic closure (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2010: 20).

It is the Economy, Stupid!

The level of economic development has long been seen to shape the process of party system stabilization in both new and old democracies (Remmer, 1991; Madrid, 2005; Mainwaring, 1999; Roberts and Wibbels, 1999, Tavits, 2005).

As it follows from the literature, economic hardship is hypothesized to lead to party system instability as parties move away from incumbents, are held responsible for the course of the economy, and try to find new political alternatives, either in the traditional opposition or at the fringes of the political spectrum (Duch, 2001; Fidrmuc, 2000; Pacek, 1994; Tucker, 2006). In this sense, negative economic performance is expected to undermine “existing party loyalties, or, more relevant in the case of young democracies, prevent[...] these loyalties from emerging” (Tavits, 2005: 286-287; Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007).

The idea then is that under conditions of profound economic crisis voters tend to shift their support more frequently in search for a leader or political party capable of putting an end to the unfavourable economic situation. As a result, and mainly due to this unpredictable swing of electoral support, parties will find it very difficult to behave in a stable and predictable manner. Moreover, in times of economic adversity, and notwithstanding a preference for total over partial alternations, citizens will favour the access to governing for new governing parties as well as the formation of innovative governing coalitions, hindering the process of systemic institutionalization. This is not to say, however, that the contrary holds: namely that higher economic development leads to more systemic stability (Mainwaring, 1999; Tavits, 2005). In fact, as Roberts and Wibbels (1999: 586) found for Latin American new democracies good economic performance does not necessarily increase stabilization. In sum, as Mainwaring put it some ten years ago, “economic crisis makes it more difficult for a nascent party system to institutionalize, [...although] it does not inevitably bring about the deinstitutionalization of an established party system” (1999: 241).²

² Although their conclusions should be taken with caution due to methodological problems – recognized by the authors themselves, it is important to note that this statement has been recently refuted by Birnir (2007: 100) and Spirova (2007: 159).

Goals of the empirical analysis and data-set

The empirical analysis in the following two sections serves three main purposes. The first goal is to establish to what extent European party systems have changed since the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008. The second task is to learn about the relationship between economic crisis and party system change not only after 2008, but also in two other previous cases (1929 and 1973). Last but not least, the third purpose of the exercise is to make cross-temporal and cross-regional comparisons trying to capture to what extent the current economic crisis differs from previous ones, at least in the way in which it has affected party system development in Europe. In order to achieve these three goals we rely on a new data-set that covers party systems in European democracies between 1919 and 2013 (Casal Bértoa, 2014).

The dataset comprises European party systems under democratic conditions. We consider a country to be democratic when (1) it has obtained a score of 2 or less in the Freedom House Index or, and only for the inter-war period, (2) a score of 6 or more in the Polity IV index. Countries with less than 1 million inhabitants (so-called “micro-states”) are excluded from the analysis.³ The only exception is Luxembourg which, despite being a micro-state, has been included for comparative purposes: namely, Luxembourg is one of the few European continuous democracies since 1919. Some countries like for example France or Finland comprise, respectively, four and two different periods according to the Republic in question. Some countries, like Austria or Germany, refer to two different party systems (1st and 2nd Republic or the Weimar and the Bonn Republics). Some democracies have been excluded from the analysis as they collapsed/were established before/after economic crisis took place.⁴

The dataset contains information on electoral volatility, the “effective” number of electoral parties, the partisan composition of cabinets and the number of ministers belonging to each governmental party. The end result is a dataset with 30 countries, divided into 38 party systems, comprising 248 elections, and roughly 1000 cases of government formation.

Party System Change in Time of Crisis: an Assessment

Before starting with the analysis of the relationship between economic crisis and party system change, it is important to note here than when available I will be

³ These include Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Montenegro and San Marino.

⁴ These are inter-war Poland, Portugal and Spain. Post-WWII Greece is also not included in the analysis.

comparing the averages for the three elections prior to, and after, the beginning of the economic crisis, under the assumption that one-election change may be conjunctural (i.e. determined by *ad hoc* and short-lived factors) and, therefore, neither reflect party system change nor capture the gradual impact economy is considered to have on the latter.

Global Financial Crisis (2008-2013)

Table 1 looks at the different indicators of party system change before and after the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008. In particular, table 1 compares the level of electoral volatility (TEV) and electoral fragmentation (ENEP) in a similar number of elections (two in most cases) before and after 2008. The PSC score, on the other hand, looks at the level of party system closure in 2007 in comparison to that in 2013.⁵

When trying to analyse how much party systems have changed and, if this is the case, how such change is related to the current economic and financial crisis, it is important to make a distinction between traditionally institutionalized party systems in the West and weakly institutionalized party systems in the East (Casal Bértoa, 2013). The idea is to avoid conflating change in rather stable (Western European) party systems with the continuous change in stabilizing (post-communist) party systems.

A first glance at table 1 clearly shows that at the end of 2013 post-communist party systems continued to be much less stable than their Eastern European counterparts. Thus, most of the post-communist party systems are extremely fragmented ($ENEP \geq 4$), have very volatile electorates ($TEV \geq 15$) and present rather unpredictable structures of competition ($PSC < 90$). However, and notwithstanding the latter, the pattern observed since 2008 is one of increasing stabilization. Thus, and despite the fact that most indicators still correspond to quite un-structured party systems, electoral volatility and fragmentation have decreased while party system closure increased in 6 out of 13 cases. Estonia and Poland, where the economic crisis has been milder, are particular examples. This is not to say, however, that post-communist party systems do not continue to change or that the global financial crisis has not had an impact on such process of change. The Czech party system, once one of the most stable in the region (Casal Bértoa, 2012), clearly illustrates this point. Here not only electoral volatility has increased in more than 15 per cent, but the structure of competition for government has

⁵ In order to avoid faulty comparisons, the PSC has been calculated here only since 1990. That is, the stability of the structure of competition is calculated using the cabinet in power on January 1990 as the starting point. The idea is to avoid giving an artificial advantage to Western European democracies, which could profit from previous years of democratic experience.

become more and more unpredictable, mainly due to the formation of new parties. Thus, political formations like TOP09, Public Affairs (VV) or, more recently, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO2011) has managed to dynamite the once stable structure of interaction pitting the conservative ODS against the socialist CSSD, with the Christian-Democratic KDU/CSL as a hinge party. In fact, the continuous appearance of new parties with an anti-corruption agenda, the already mentioned TOP09, VV, ANO, but also Dawn of Direct Democracy (*Úsvit*) or the Party of Free Citizens (*Sbovodní*) has converted the traditionally moderately pluralist Czech party system into an extremely pluralist one.

Other three post-communist countries specially affected by the 2008 crisis, Hungary, Latvia and to a lesser extent Slovenia, have also experienced an exponential de-stabilization at both electoral and governmental levels, despite a parallel process of concentration at the party level. But while the Hungarian structure of competition has been affected by the disappearance of traditional parties as the liberal SZDSZ, the Christian-Democratic MDF or the agrarian FKgP, both the Latvian and Slovenian party systems have experienced the invasion of extremely popular new political formations with immediate coalition potential like the Civic Union (PS), the Society for Other Politics (SCP), Zatlers' Reform Party (ZRS) or Gregor Virant's Civic List (DLGV) or Zares.

Such levels of unpredictability in the patterns of inter-party competition for government continue to be the norm in the other post-communist democracies, even in those where the number of parties has experienced a decrease parallel to stabilization of the electorate. Thus, while newly formed parties managed to be electorally successful and enter government in Bulgaria (GERB), Lithuania (LRLS and TPP) or Slovakia (SaS and Most); both Romania and Serbia experienced a systemic earthquake when liberals (PNL) and socialists (SPS) finally changed sides allying with their respective arch-enemies (PSD and SNS).

In clear contrast, and despite the fact that most Western European party systems continue to be more stable than their Eastern European counterparts, electorates have become more volatile and fragmented, even if traditional parties seem to continue to dominate the process of government formation.

At the electoral level there has been an explosion of volatility in Finland, France, Germany, Greece and Ireland. Here electoral volatility has double (first three) or even triplicated (last two). In other four increasingly volatile countries (Austria, Belgium,

Italy and the Netherlands), the TEV has surpassed the 15 percent threshold. This certainly signals a clear de-structuration of their party systems, at least at electoral level. Not surprisingly, in almost all these cases (with the exception of Italy) the number of parties has also increased changing from two-and-a-half (Austria and Greece) or moderately pluralist (France, Germany or Ireland) party systems into extremely pluralist ones.

What is certainly more interesting and clearly contrast with what can be observed in the East, Western European elites seems to be more resistant to change than their electorates or even their post-communist counterparts. Indeed, while more than eighty percent of the Western European party systems have experienced an increase in both electoral volatility and fragmentation since the beginning of the crisis in 2008, only five have changed their structure of competition. Thus, and since the end of WWII, a Luxembourgish government will not be formed by the Christian Democratic Party (CSV) but by the opposition, including The Greens (DG) for the first time. In the United Kingdom a coalition government was formed for the first time since 1935 with the entry of the Liberal Democrats in Cameron's conservative cabinet. In Norway, the Conservative Party (H) recently concluded a coalition government with the populist Progress Party (FrP) until then treated as a pariah party by most political forces. In Greece, and after a one-year "expert cabinet" with Papademos as premier, the New Democracy finally managed to form a government with the parliamentary support of the socialists (PASOK) and the Democratic Left (DIMAR). Finally, the Netherlands where the liberals and the socialists formed an exclusively dominated "great coalition" in 2012, after the experiment with the liberals, the Christian democrats and the extreme-right Freedom Party (PVV) had totally failed.⁶ In the rest of the countries, and despite the terrible impact produced by the global financial crisis in some (e.g. Ireland, Portugal or Spain), party politics has continued to be dominated by the traditional parties.

The Great Depression (1929-1933)

Notwithstanding the consequences the 1929 crisis is considered to have had for the collapse of European democracies during the inter-war period and, therefore, for the beginning of the Second World War (WWII), it follows from table 2 that its impact on party system (development and) change limited, at least at the electoral level. And in

⁶ One could also add Italy, as from February 2014 the Democratic Party is in government with its former enemies: namely, Monti, Casini and Fini's Civic Choice (SC) and Forza Italy's splinter New Centre Right (NCD).

any case, and contrary to what could have been expected, it seems to have not reached the impact levels attributed to the current global crisis (see above).

Although the effects of the Great Depression clearly impacted the general population with a previously unseen fierceness, only half of the inter-war democracies experienced an increase in the volatility of electoral preferences. Moreover, and what is more important, only in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Finland and Switzerland the TEV increased substantially (i.e. ≥ 5). Indeed, it doubled in the first two countries, while it tripled in Switzerland, although only in Austria and Czechoslovakia it reached the dangerous threshold of 15 percent. This in clear contrast to what could be seen after 2008, when up to 9 (out of 16) Western European democracies⁷ experienced “earthquake” elections once the crisis started.

However, where the contrast is even clearer is when we look at the degree of electoral fragmentation during the inter-war period. Indeed, and while with very few exceptions (Austria, Belgium, Sweden and the United Kingdom)⁸ most party systems where of the moderate or extreme pluralist type, the number of electoral parties did not suffer an spectacular increase with the economic crisis. In fact, and contrary to what one would have thought, the ENEP decreased in most cases with the exception of Switzerland, France, Latvia and Austria. Although it was only in the latter country that an increase in the number of parties brought with it a change of party system type: from a two-party system to a two-and-a-half one, with the rise of both the Rural Federation (LB) and the political appearance of the Homeland Bloc (HB).⁹

Notwithstanding this rather feeble impact both on TEV and ENEP, the 1929 economic crisis seems to have hit the structure of competition in almost half of the countries under-studied. The effects of the Great Depression at the government level are even higher if we take into consideration that three Scandinavian democracies (i.e. Denmark, Norway and Sweden) were mostly not affected by it or only at a later stage.

As we have already seen the crisis in Austria boosted the politisation of the Heimwehr (Home Guard), a nationalist and initially paramilitary group formed in the later 1920s and opposing both parliamentary democracy and the Versailles settlement. The political arm of this anti-establishment group briefly (less than 2 months) managed

⁷ The number of Eastern European democracies with levels of TEV higher than 15% was also nine (out of 13), but they had already displayed similar “risky” levels before 2008.

⁸ While both Austria (until 1929) and the UK were mostly two-party systems, both Belgium and Sweden could be classified within the two-and-a-half category.

⁹ The Latvian party system, where the ENEP passed from 9.8 to 12.3, continued to be an extreme pluralist one.

to enter government in September 1930 altering the previous structure of competition pitting the Christian Social Party (CVS) and its associates (GDVP and LB) on the right and the Social Democratic Party (SDAPÖ) on the left.¹⁰ In France the economic crisis fostered the electoral support for socialist parties which entered government for the first time in 1932 (PSF), 1933 (PSdF) and, most notably, in 1936 (SFIO), changing the existing pattern of interaction which opposed the Radical and Republican parties on the left and the conservatives (mainly the Democratic Alliance and the Republican Federation) on the right. In Ireland the economic crisis eased the path to government of Fianna Fail (1932), while in Switzerland it allowed the agrarians (BGB) to be incorporated into the “magic formula” preventing the Socialists, the most voted party at the time, from taking office.¹¹ In Latvia the party system became even more unstructured with the participation in government of many small parties (KSB, LgKZKF, LJSP, etc.).

However, it was in The Netherlands and the United Kingdom that the crisis exerted a greater impact on the structure of competition. On the one hand, Dutch political leaders of the traditional parties (RKSP, ARP and CHU) tried to face the crisis by incorporating into the, until then, “confessional” executive the two Dutch liberal parties (LSP and VDB). On the other, the perfect British bipartidism was ended in 1931 with the formation of five consecutive coalition governments uniting the Conservatives and the National Labourists (a splinter from the Labour Party) with the Liberals (in August 1931) or with the Liberal Nationalists¹² (in both 1932 and 1935) or with both in November 1931.

The Oil Crisis (1973-1974)

A first look at table 3, which reports party system change scores for all European democracies before and after the 1973 oil crisis, suggests a mixed impact at all levels. Indeed, while only half of the countries saw an increase in terms of electoral volatility and fragmentation after the economic crisis broke out, only five of the thirteen countries under analysis seem to have experienced any kind of change in their structure of competition for government. But let’s examine each of the different arenas in turn.

In clear contrast to the previous pattern of electoral stability, the 1970s in general and the period after 1973 in particular brought a wave of electoral de-

¹⁰ A coalition government without the GDVP took place for the first time only after 1929.

¹¹ Until almost the end of WWII (January 1944).

¹² It split from the Liberal Party in 1931.

structuration without match in Europe (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Not in vain it was the 1973 election in Denmark and the ones what would follow in Norway, United Kingdom, etc. that encourage Mogens Pedersen to elaborate his popular, now classic, index (1979). As it has been explained elsewhere (Bille, 1990), the irruption of the anti-establishment Progress Party in Denmark (FP) constitutes one of the most important shocks in the history of the Danish party system. Thus electoral volatility passed from just 9.6 percent in 1971 to more than 21 percent two years later, doubling the average TEV of the last three elections (see table 3). But a similar thing could be said of Norway or the United Kingdom when the level of electoral instability displayed double figures for the first time since the end of WWII. France and Luxembourg had already had rather volatility elections, but it was only after 1973 that up to three consecutive elections managed to shackle double figures. Out of all these five cases the only country to keep an average rate of TEV over 15 was Denmark.

Denmark is also one of the four countries in which a change in terms of the party system class can be seen after 1973. Thus, while the Danish party system before 1973 could be classified as a moderate pluralist one, the irruption of the FP made it more extreme pluralist. Thanks to the electoral revival of the Liberal Party in 1974, the British party system passed from a pure two-party system to a two-and-a-half one. The German party system also move closer to a moderate type, but it was the Luxembourgish party system which suffered the greatest impact in terms of parties going from a two-and-a-half party system (CSV, LSAP and DP) to a moderate pluralist party system, with the irruption of the Social Democratic Party already in 1974 and The Greens (DG) later on. In Belgium the “effective” number of electoral parties also experienced an important increase after the 1974 elections, and especially after the 1977 and 1978 elections with the split of most Belgium parties into Flemish and Wallonian organizations, into which the economic crisis which mostly affected Wallonia played an important role. Still, it is not possible to talk of “real” party system change in the Belgium case as the electoral arena was enough fragmented before 1973 ($ENEP \geq 5$) to be considered of the extreme pluralist class.

Interestingly enough, and at the governmental level, it follows from the last column in table 3 that only five party systems experienced a decline in their level of closure. First of all Belgium, where the implosion of the party system led also to the appearance of totally new parties (e.g RW, FDF, VU, etc.) which immediately gain access to govern, altering the previously existing structure of competition dominated by

the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal Parties. Luxembourg also saw the first non-CSV cabinet in 1974 when the Democratic Party managed to forge a coalition with the Socialist Party ousting the Christian Social People's Party from the executive for the first time since 1926. In France the Gaullist-led coalition accepts the radicals into the coalition government for the first time, while the structure of competition changes again in 1978 with irruption of Giscard d'Estaing in 1978. The Netherlands also saw a change to the pre-existing patterns of partisan competition with the irruption of D66 in 1973 and the first "great coalition" between CDA and PVdA in 1981. Finally, Sweden saw the end of the Socialist-hegemonic party system in 1976 with the formation of the first non-socialist-led government since 1936. This was clearly followed by a rather long period of systemic (governmental) re-structuring (until October 1982), in which a monocolour cabinet of the Liberal People's Party (FPL) was followed by a coalition of the latter with the Moderate Party (M) and the Agrarians (C), followed in turn by a two-party coalition (C and FPL).

Economic Crisis and Party System Change in Comparative Perspective

In the previous section I have examined the relationship between economic crisis and party system change in Europe at the time of three different crises: namely, the "Great Depression", the "Oil Crisis", and the current "Global Financial Crisis". At first sight, it seems clear that (1) economic crises have affected European party systems in different ways, and (2) party system change has taken place (when it did) at different rates. However, it seems clear from what has been said above that (1) not all economic crises had the same impact on party system change, and (2) some indicators of party system change can be considered to be more prone to be affected by economic crises than others.

[Table 4 around here]

Trying to illustrative the abovementioned statements table 4 summarizes the level to which each of the indicators of party system change can be considered to have been influenced by each one of the most relevant economic crisis. A first look at the table above would suggest that out of the three crises here analysed, it has been the last (and current) the one to have a greater impact on the development of European party systems. Moreover, simply looking at the cases of party system change would suggest an increasing effect in terms of the impact economic crises have had over European party systems: from rather minimal in 1929, to medium in 1973 to rather vast in 2008.

However, and taking into consideration that we are not dealing with the same number of democratic countries in different historical periods,¹³ it is more convenient to look at the percentage of cases experiencing change in each of the periods under study. The results are more mixed here. Thus, while the global financial crisis seems to have caused an explosion of electoral volatility and, therefore, cause an important degree of voter de-structuration, it was the 1973 oil crisis that had a great impact on the party system format by boosting the formation of new parties, especially Green parties (Müller Rommel and Poguntke, 2002). Contrary to what could have been expected, for the Great Depression's macro- (WWII) and micro- (chronic impoverishment) consequences, the 1929 crisis vaguely impacted political parties or the electorate in general. It mainly influenced the elite level by changing the pre-existing patterns of competition at the time of government formation. In this context, and as it has been observed above, the 1929 crisis opened the gate to the participation in government of parties which were anything but new to the political system. That is, and contrary to the other two crises, the Great Depression allowed to what could be called "a revolution from above", rather than the "revolution from below" observed in the last five years with the increasing question of the system of party government by the electorate in general, and the populist parties and anti-system social movements in particular.

That this is the case – i.e. party system change in Europe's long-lived democracies is currently taken place at the electoral rather than the governmental level – clearly follows from the data displayed in the last two columns of table 4. Thus, while in Eastern Europe party systems seem to be constantly changing (in all arenas), in Western Europe the bulk of the change has taken place mostly at the electoral level. In other words, while the above-cited findings regarding the impact of the 2008 crisis on both the electorate and the political parties would remain the same no matter which part of the European continent we take into consideration (either East or West). What would, however, differ is our conclusion about the huge impact of the crisis on party system closure. Indeed, and as it follows from the last two columns in table 4, the high figure shown in column three is mainly determined by the high degree of party system openness in post-communist democracies. There, with very few exceptions (e.g. Hungary), party systems continued to be characterized by partial alternations, innovative formulae and open access. Conversely, Western European party systems,

¹³ While the first two periods (1929 and 1973) are more comparable, the democratic boom experienced after the so-called "Third Wave" exponentially increased the number of cases after 2008.

notwithstanding cases where change has taken place at the government level (e.g. Norway, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, etc.), the structure of inter-party competition continues to be more predictable than either in their post-communist counterparts or even during previous economic crises. In other words, and as the “cartel thesis” would have predicted (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2009), the cake of executive continues to be divided by the same parties, with rather similar ideological leanings. That is, new (sometimes anti-establishment) parties may have entered the electoral and parliamentary arenas (Mudde, 2014), but the doors to the executive still remain closed, in clear contrast to what could be observed during previous crisis (e.g. anti-system parties in 1929, Green parties in 1973).

Conclusions

Although “the flavor of the day” in political science in the 1980s and 1990s (Mair, 1997), the importance of party system change in the party politics literature decreased at the turn of the century. Still, the current changes in otherwise consolidated (e.g. Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Italy) and not so consolidated (e.g. Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania, etc.) democracies point to the need to bring systemic change back in.

The current paper tries to perform such task in three different ways. First of all, it adopts a multidimensional notion of party system change with takes into consideration change at the level of voters (electoral arena), parties (legislative arena) and elites (governmental arena). In this context, it looks at various indicators across a rather long period of time (6 elections), rather than making inferences from just a unique measurement at one point in time. Secondly, it adopts a stricter conceptualization of systemic change which, rather than looking at minor changes or tendencies, requires important thresholds to be crossed. Thirdly, it examines the relationship between economic crisis and party system development/change in three different periods, making a clear distinction between consolidated and non-consolidated democracies.

The main finding is that while, as expected, economic crises have a substantial negative effect on the stabilization of party systems, boosting in many cases important changes, mainly at the electoral and governmental arenas; the evidence here displayed is that party system stability, at least in the most consolidated Western European democracies, continues to be the norm. In other words, and in spite of the economic and financial disasters observed in 1929, 1973 and 2008 the “inertia towards stability” that

Bartolini and Mair (1990) talked about twenty-five years ago still prevails. Another important finding is that while European party systems after 2008 have changed to a larger extent than during previous economic crises, the contrast should not be exaggerated. At the end of the day, and notwithstanding the “revolution from below” caused by the current global financial crisis, most of the systemic instability observed in nowadays Europe can be located in the East. Last but not least, it seems clear that different economic crises have affected different systemic elements, with a preference for the elites in 1929, the political parties in 1973 and the electorate in 2008.

Even if more sophisticated analyses need to be undertaken, either methodologically (e.g. treatment of other independent variable, etc.) or analytically (e.g. effects on cabinet stability, etc.), this study suggest that economic crises are detrimental for party system stability, although its pernicious effects differ depending on the region and the time period considered.

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Table 1. Party system change in 30 European democracies (2000s)

Countries (n. of elections*)	Before the crisis (...-2008)			After the crisis (2008-2013)		
	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>
Austria (2)	14.4	3.4	90.1	17.6	5	92.6
Belgium (1)	12.1	9	92	15.2	10	93.2
Bulgaria (2)	39.9	4.9	87.5	37.9	4.9	87.3
Croatia (1)	14.9	4.2	85	13.1	4.6	84.6
Czech Republic (2)	17.4	4.4	89.8	34.6	7.2	87.3
Denmark (1)	10.6	5.4	93.9	11.7	5.7	94.3
Estonia (1)	18.6	5	81.4	13.5	4.8	84.2
Finland (1)	7.1	5.9	87.8	15.1	6.5	88.5
France (1)	13.5	4.3	91.4	24.1	5.3	92.5
Germany (2)	7	4.3	93.1	15	5.2	92.4
Greece (3)	6.1	2.8	96.1	20.7	6	96.8
Hungary (1)	4.8	2.8	91.8	33.7	2.8	89.3
Ireland (1)	6.2	3.8	89.9	29.7	4.8	91.4
Italy (2)	15.6	6	84.9	23.2	4.6	86.4
Latvia (2)	27.6	7.2	76.8	30.3	4.8	75.2
Lithuania (2)	43.2	6.5	78.6	27.5	8.3	81.8
Luxembourg (2)	7.8	4.5	93.8	6.2	4.6	92.5
The Netherlands (2)	18.2	5.4	87.2	19.8	6.4	86.8
Norway (2)	17.1	5.6	92.2	10.7	4.7	92.2
Poland (1)	23.7	3.3	74.9	7.7	3.7	79.9
Portugal (2)	10.9	3.1	93.8	11	3.7	95
Romania (2)	23.6	4.6	91.4	19.4	3.2	87.9
Serbia (2)	26.4	6	82.1	13	5.1	81.9
Slovakia (2)	20	7.5	85.3	21	5	86.9
Slovenia (2)	23.7	5.6	88.3	31.9	5.3	88.4
Spain (2)	10.2	3.1	96.1	10.7	3.1	96.8
Sweden (1)	15.9	4.7	96.1	8.9	4.8	96.7
Switzerland (1)	6.7	5.6	100	7.8	6.4	98.5
Ukraine (1)	12.5	3.9	83.1	32.5	4.9	88.6
United Kingdom (1)	6.3	3.6	96.1	7.3	3.7	94.6

* In brackets the number of elections (before and after the crisis) compared.

Sources: For the ENEP, see Gallagher (2014). My own calculations for TEV and iPSC.

Table 2. Party system change in 16 European democracies (1920s and 1930s)

Countries (n. of elections*)	Before the crisis (...-1929)			After the crisis (1929-1939)		
	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>
Austria (1)	7.8	2.4	87.2	15.8	3.1	87
Belgium (2)	5.2	3.3	86.7	5.5	3.3	92.8
Czechoslovakia (1)	12.4	11.4	84	20.4	10.1	88.5
Denmark (3)	4.8	3.7	93.3	6.1	3.4	94.1
Estonia (2)	19.2	8	68	7.1	5.2	72.3
Finland (3)	4.8	5.3	75.1	9.2	4.5	76.9
France (2)	17.2	5.1	87.8	10.7	5.2	85.2
Germany (3)	16.7	6.9	71.4	16.5	5.5	74.9
Ireland (2)	18.7	4.6	100	12.3	2.9	95.5
Latvia (1)	21	9.8	79.7	14.2	12.3	78.1
Luxembourg (n/a) ¹⁴	n/a	n/a	79.7	n/a	n/a	89.9
The Netherlands (2)	8.9	6.1	100	7	6	95.8
Norway (3)	9.5	4.8	90.9	9.3	4	91.2
Sweden (3)	8.2	3.8	85.6	9.6	3.4	87.9
Switzerland (3)	3	4.7	98.6	8.2	4.8	98.1
United Kingdom (3)	9.4	3.1	93.9	12.4	2.7	93.7

* In brackets the number of elections (before and after the crisis) compared.

Sources: For most of the TEV, see Bartolini and Mair (1990). For the rest. own calculations.

¹⁴ There were only partial elections after 1925.

Table 3. Party system change in 14 European democracies (1960s and 1970s)

Countries (n. of elections*)	Before the crisis (...-1973)			After the crisis (1973-)		
	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>	<i>TEV</i>	<i>ENEP</i>	<i>iPSC</i>
Austria (3)	4.6	2.3	97.2	2.1	2.3	97.7
Belgium (3)	10.3	5.1	89.7	4.6	6.4	89.5
Denmark (3)	10	4.4	95	19.1	6	95.4
Finland (3)	9	5.8	85.8	7.8	5.7	86.1
France (3)	8.8	4.9	93.9	12.2	4.6	91.8
Germany (3)	6.5	2.7	89.1	5.6	3	92.3
Ireland (3)	5	2.8	97.5	6.7	2.8	97.9
Italy (3)	7.2	4.1	88.8	7.6	4	89.5
Luxembourg (3)	8.7	3.4	92.2	13	4	92.2
The Netherlands (3)	11.7	6.7	92.1	10.3	4.3	91.2
Norway (3)	9.3	4.1	95.5	10.3	3.8	95.8
Sweden (3)	7.1	3.4	94.5	5.8	3.5	93.4
Switzerland (3)	5.1	5.6	98.7	5.5	5.8	98.9
United Kingdom (3)	5.5	2.5	98	9	3.1	98.2

* In brackets the number of elections (before and after the crisis) compared.

Sources: For the TEV, see Bartolini and Mair (1990). For the ENEP, see Gallagher (2014). For the iPSC, own calculations.

Table 4. Party system change in comparative perspective (1929, 1973, 2008): cases (and percentage) of change

Indicators	Great Depression (1929)	Oil Crisis (1973)	Global Financial Crisis (2008)		2008 (West)	2008 (East)
<i>TEV</i>	4 (25)	4 (30.8)	12 (40)		8 (47.1)	4 (30.8)
<i>ENEP</i>	1 (6.3)	4 (30.8)	7 (23.3)		5 (29.4)	2 (15.4)
<i>iPSC</i>	7 (43.8)	5 (38.5)	13 (43.3)		6 (35.3)	7 (53.8)

Source: Own calculations.