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## Electoral Punishment and Protest Politics in Times of Crisis

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## 10 Electoral Punishment and Protest Politics in Times of Crisis

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*Björn Bremer, Swen Hutter, and Hanspeter Kriesi*

### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter links the political consequences of the Great Recession in the electoral arena and the protest arena. Integrated research on the two types of responses is important because, in democratic regimes, the citizens' response to the crisis might, first of all, be an electoral one. However, contentious reactions in the protest arena are another, often closely related way for the people to express their discontent especially in periods of economic and political crises. Unfortunately, electoral research tends to ignore the connections between the dynamics of opposition in the two arenas of mass politics (e.g., Hutter 2014b; McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 2013). This is unfortunate because these connections may trigger profound changes in the dynamics and structure of political conflict – as exemplified by the recent waves of protest and the rise of so-called movement parties in southern Europe (e.g., Altiparmakis and Lorenzini 2018; della Porta et al. 2017).

The chapter presents yet another step to further advance our understanding of the link between protest and electoral politics. It focuses on aggregate shifts in voting behaviour and protest politics across the thirty countries covered by this volume. More specifically, we examine the relationship between the two arenas in two steps. First, we ask whether electoral and protest politics are driven by the same kind of economic and political factors. Then, we ask whether protest mobilization influences the extent of the economic vote.

To derive our expectations, we combine the literature on economic voting with social movement research. As shown in previous chapters, the link between economic factors and protest politics varies depending on the type of economic grievances and features of the political context. In this chapter, we draw on economic voting literature to discuss electoral punishment in times of crisis, and on the social movement literature to highlight that even if there are no opportunities for immediate electoral punishment, the electoral cycle is embedded in an ongoing process of political mobilization that

interacts with elections in complex ways. More precisely, we emphasize the role of protests in politicizing economic grievances: We argue that protests act as a ‘signalling mechanism’ by attributing blame to decision-makers and by highlighting the political dimension of deteriorating economic conditions. Ultimately, massive protest mobilization should, therefore, amplify the impact of economic hardship on electoral punishment.

For the empirical analysis, we combine our protest event data with data on electoral outcomes in the thirty European countries covered by the study. The electoral dataset builds on the one used by Hernández and Kriesi (2016) in their study on the electoral consequences of the Great Recession. We updated this dataset so that it includes all national parliamentary elections in the thirty countries from January 2000 to December 2015. Overall, the data cover 118 elections. The first election included in the dataset is the Romanian election in November 2000; the last election included in the dataset is the Spanish election in December 2015. A key ambition of the chapter is to make the results for electoral and protest politics as comparable as possible. Therefore, we aim to standardize the units of analysis and measures across the two arenas.<sup>1</sup>

## **10.2 Economic Crisis, Political Context, and Citizens’ Responses in Electoral and Protest Politics**

In contrast to the literature on economic voting, social movement studies have neglected the role of economic conditions as an explanatory factor for increasing or declining protest levels for several decades. This changed with the onset of the Great Recession which brought questions of economic strains, deprivation, and capitalism back to the study of social movements (e.g. Beissinger and Sasse 2014; della Porta 2015; Galais and Lorenzini 2017; Grasso and Giugni 2016; Klandermans and van Stekelenburg 2016; Muñoz et al. 2014; Quaranta 2016; Vráblíková 2017). Following this line of research, the previous chapters of this volume have also reconsidered the effects of economic grievances and their interactions with political factors on protest mobilization

<sup>1</sup> The chapter is based on a revised and shortened version of our article Dynamics of Protest and Electoral Politics in the Great Recession published by the European Journal of Political Research, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12375>. In this chapter, we rely on an alternative measure for the dynamics of protest mobilization which emphasizes within-country variations. Interested readers should consult the journal article and its online appendix because they offer additional robustness checks and descriptive information.

(in particular, Chapters 7–9). In what follows we scan the economic voting literature to highlight its very similar expectations with regard to the effects of economic trends on electoral politics.

Like the explanatory model introduced in Chapter 1 of this volume, the economic voting literature starts with the *economic context*. That is, it assumes instrumentally rational voters, who reward or punish the incumbents with their vote depending on the economic conditions. It thus adopts a simple reward–punishment mechanism (e.g. Duch and Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). Empirical research based on the idea shows that economic voting is pervasive both in ‘normal’ and ‘crisis’ periods. Increasing work also documents how strongly incumbents were punished in the Great Recession and that the punishment varies in line with the predictions of the economic voting literature, i.e. according to how hard the economic crisis hit individual countries (e.g. Bartels 2014; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Kriesi 2014; Talving 2017, 2018).

The pervasiveness of the effects in times of crisis is far from obvious given that the economic voting literature has also highlighted that the extent of electoral punishment is conditioned by the *political context*. Since Powell and Whitten’s (1993) landmark study, the concept ‘clarity of political responsibility’ has been used to describe the finding that the voters’ assessment of the government’s economic performance plays a stronger role, if the institutional context allows the voters to clearly attribute the responsibility for the economic performance to the government (see also Duch and Stevenson 2008). In times of increasing economic globalization and authority shifts to supra- and international institutions, scholars have documented that voters are less likely to punish national governments in bad economic periods because they perceive the constraints of national governments’ influence on economic developments (e.g., Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hellwig 2010; Hellwig and Samuels 2007; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

As the current economic crisis brought to the fore the strong economic and political interdependencies in Europe, the previous arguments would let us expect that the impact of economic conditions on the punishment of incumbents should be weaker – or at least not stronger – in the Great Recession. This is also what some empirical studies show (e.g. Magalhães 2014; Talving 2017). However, other scholars in the economic voting field suggest that we should be cautious here. For example, Lobo and Lewis-Beck (2017: 616f.) emphasize that some of the negative findings might simply be methodological artefacts. That is, studies based on individual-level cross-sectional

data are not able to grasp the effects of the economic vote because of restricted variance. In a context of a profound economic crisis, a large part of society – regardless of partisan attachments – acknowledges the economic problems.<sup>2</sup>

Following Hernández and Kriesi (2016), there is yet another reason for why scholars might have found differing results of the crisis on the economic vote, namely *timing*. The current economic crisis in Europe unfolded in stages that unleashed dramatic political dynamics in some of the hardest-hit countries. However, it is important to keep in mind that while the initial economic shock affected almost all European countries, the economic prospects of most, but not all, improved fairly quickly thereafter (see Chapter 1). Thus, the voters in the countries where the economy continued to stagnate or even experienced a pronounced double-dip recession are likely to have perceived the incumbents' failure as particularly serious, not only compared to their pre-2008 situation, but also compared to other countries (on the role of benchmarking, see Kayser and Peress 2012).

Moreover, the diverging economic trends have become most pronounced within the eurozone and the political processes to cope with the situation involved above all the EU's intergovernmental channel (e.g. Laffan 2016). Ultimately, countries that needed assistance to bail out their financial and public institutions had to accept strong conditions by their international creditors. While this might again have diffused political responsibility, it may also have strengthened the role of national governments in the public debate and their perceived (in-)ability to successfully negotiate internationally (Hutter et al. 2016). As Marsh and Mikhaylov's (2012) study on the Irish case convincingly illustrates, the national governments' decisions on how to cope with the crisis and mounting pressures from international institutions and financial markets has been decisive for their electoral punishment rather than the sheer size of the economic decline.

Overall, the arguments on the conditional effects of the economic context on electoral losses of incumbents resemble the effects on protest mobilization that we have uncovered in the previous chapters. In other words, both electoral losses and protest mobilization seem to be

<sup>2</sup> Thus, one needs to rely on other types of research designs: Focus either on aggregate electoral outcomes in a large-N setting (e.g. Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2014; Hernández and Kriesi 2016) or on a pooled design of several surveys (e.g. Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2014), or structural equation modelling with individual-level panel data (e.g. Chzhén et al. 2014). Such designs indicate that the economic vote is stronger in a crisis situation.

driven by poor economic performance, especially in later stages of the crisis and under conditions of external political constraints. In the present chapter we shall document the parallel effects of the economic crisis on protest and electoral politics in a more systematic way.

### 10.3 The Signalling Function of Protest Politics

Establishing whether the same economic and political forces drive the ups and downs in electoral losses and protest mobilization can only be a first step, however. Given that the electoral arena is embedded in an ongoing process of political mobilization, the present chapter also seeks to analyse whether and how protests might have aggravated electoral losses of incumbents in the Great Recession. More specifically, we emphasize the role of protest as a ‘signalling mechanism’ that attributes blame to decision-makers and highlights the *political* dimension of deteriorating economic conditions.

Regarding the dynamics of electoral and protest politics, we start by observing, as we have already done in Chapter 8, that, in democratic societies, citizens have the right to vote and they have the opportunity to express their grievances as voters. In democracies, grievances are first expressed in the voting booth simply because, as Piven and Cloward (1977: 15) have pointed out, ‘whether defiant or not, people have been socialized within a political culture that defines voting as the mechanism through which political change can and should properly occur’. Accordingly, one of the first signs of popular discontent are sharp shifts in the voting patterns. However, the movement literature emphasizes also that, in the absence of immediately available options in the institutionalized arenas, discontented groups of citizens are likely to resort to the protest arena, and try to force political concessions from political elites by directly appealing to the general public. This is Schattschneider’s (1960) idea of the ‘expansion of conflict’. Such a view of political conflict is most prominent in the agenda-setting literature, and recent contributions from that tradition emphasize the power of protest to signal discontent and raise the salience of certain issues and concerns in more institutionalized arenas (e.g. Vliegthart et al. 2016).

The pressure from below tends to strengthen the opposition and other allies of the protesting groups in the political system, which may be the main reason why opposition parties support or even create such protest in the first place. The controversial public debates that result from the expansion of conflict by protest mobilization increase the legitimacy of speakers and allies of protest movements with journalists

and decision-makers, who tend to closely follow the public debates (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 288). Wolfsfeld's (1997: 47) 'principle of political resonance' formulates this relationship in a concise way: Challengers who succeed in producing events which resonate with the professional and political culture of important news media can compete with much more powerful adversaries. As the literature on movement outcomes highlights, the stronger the pressure exerted from below, the more likely it is that the government will be forced to make some concessions (for a recent overview, see Bosi et al. 2016).

For our argument, it is important that such protest actions may set in motion contentious episodes involving a sequence of interactions between the government and its challengers (see McAdam et al. 2001). In these sequences, the protest mobilization puts pressure on the governing elites to make some concessions and, most importantly, it attributes responsibility to these elites for deteriorating economic conditions. Thus, protest serves as a signal that points to the political dimension of the problem at stake. The protest campaigns that have emerged in the context of the Great Recession and that opposed austerity and called for democratic renewal are telling examples of these dynamics. As the previous chapters in this volume have shown, the public's response in the protest arena had a clear message – a message that emphasized the responsibility of both national and European elites for mismanaging the economic crisis and for exacerbating problems of democratic representation (see also Altiparmakis and Lorenzini 2018; della Porta 2015).

To accommodate the pressure from the streets, incumbent parties have above all resorted to procedural concessions: changes in leadership, reshuffles of the cabinet composition, calls for early elections or ceding responsibility to a care-taker government composed of technocrats (which will manage the consequences of the crisis until the regularly scheduled elections). In the Great Recession, these were all reoccurring strategies used by incumbents. The most important case is clearly Greece, where all these elements occurred in an exceptionally short period (e.g. Verney 2014). Procedural concessions were more likely than substantive ones, given the general predicament of European governments today. As a result of the financial and economic crisis, the governments all over Europe found themselves between the proverbial rock (international pressure) and a hard place (domestic expectations) (Mair 2013). The situation of governments in the countries that were hardest hit by the crisis proved to be particularly uncomfortable in this respect. Not only were they likely to be exposed to domestic pressure in the streets, but they also faced international pressure by a series of

international stakeholders, who expected them to act responsibly, i.e. to execute the measures deemed necessary by the 'market'.

Against the background of these observations, the interaction between protest and electoral punishment likely played out in scenario like this: At the first possible occasion, the voters punish the incumbents as predicted by the economic voter approach. In countries most severely hit by the crisis, the discontented groups mobilize against austerity measures even before the first elections, in an active attempt to signal their discontent to the incumbents, or to bring them down (in the next national elections). In response to the protest mobilizations, the incumbents make some procedural concessions, but they do not succeed in satisfying the discontented voters, who severely punish them in the first national elections after the beginning of the crisis. In these elections, voters will vote into office the established opposition parties. Once in charge of the government, the former opposition however, is hardly able to adopt any other policy than the previous government, given the economic constraints imposed by the legacy of the former government, the conditions imposed by the rescuers (International Monetary Fund [IMF] and EU), and by the 'markets'. Such a situation is likely to further boost protest in the streets, which emphasizes the responsibility of the government for the economic situation and therefore increases electoral punishment in follow-up crisis elections. Partly as a result of the protests, the voters are bound to notice that the new government is forced to take just the same measures as its predecessors, whom they had voted out of office, and they may resort to punishing the mainstream parties as a whole in the following elections – by turning to new challengers or by exiting from the established electoral channel altogether. Thus, the result may be an even more profound destabilization of party systems (see Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Roberts 2014, 2017).

While the punishment of mainstream parties might concern parties from all ideological camps, there are at least two reasons why the mainstream left might be in a particularly uncomfortable situation. On the one hand, the left's traditional policy programs are even more at odds with the recommended austerity policies and structural reforms that governments in most countries implemented after 2010. Therefore, as illustrated by the Latin American experience (Lupu 2014; Roberts 2014, 2017), the mainstream left in power risks an even stronger brand dilution and alienation of its support base than the mainstream right when it adopts and implements austerity. On the other hand, the traditionally close alliances between political parties from the left and social movements (Kriesi 1995; Maguire 1995)



might further erode in the context of the current crisis and backfire in terms of electoral support. That is, the challengers in the streets might be particularly adversarial towards their former allies while voters of mainstream left parties might be particularly receptive to the signalling mechanism of protests.

In this chapter, we do not study the proposed sequences in detail, but we develop several important expectations about the impact of protest mobilization on electoral punishment in the Great Recession. First, we expect that deteriorating economic conditions lead to electoral punishment and protest mobilization, especially in later periods of the crisis and under conditions of external political constraints. Second, we expect that protests play an important role in attributing responsibility for the economic decline and the growing cross-national disparities to the national and European elites. Thus, massive protests should amplify the connections between economic misery and the punishment of governments in national elections. We suggest calling this the ‘signalling mechanism’ of protest and, empirically, we expect to find that economic voting is stronger in contexts of high protest mobilization. Third, protest mobilization should intensify the feeling among voters that there is a more fundamental ‘crisis of representation’ as a change in government may not result in a change of policy. Thus, we expect that protest mobilization may act as an important trigger of the destabilization of European party systems by highlighting that mainstream parties (both in opposition and in government) no longer fulfil their representative functions. Finally, the effect of protest on the punishment of incumbents might be particularly severe for the mainstream left.

To sum up, we formulate the following hypotheses:

- H1: The same economic and political factors influence the electoral losses of incumbents and the strength of protest mobilization (*equivalence hypothesis*).
- H2: The impact of economic misery on electoral losses of the incumbent should be amplified by protest mobilization (*signalling hypothesis*).
- H3: The positive effect of protest on electoral losses holds for all mainstream parties in both government and opposition (*party system destabilization hypothesis*).
- H4: The positive effect of protest on electoral losses of the incumbents is stronger when the political left is in power (*left-wing punishment hypothesis*).

## 10.4 Measuring Shifts in Electoral and Protest Politics

To make the measures for the aggregate shifts in protest and electoral politics as comparable as possible, we focus on electoral changes and protests in a given legislative period. For this purpose, we calculate two key variables from our electoral dataset. First, we calculate the electoral loss of the prime minister's party in a given country as the change in the vote share of that party between a given election at time  $t$  and  $t-1$ . Second, we calculate the electoral losses for individual parties as the change in the vote share for each party between a given election at time  $t$  and  $t-1$ . The two variables allow us to focus on the electoral support of the chief executive (the key indicator of most economic voting studies) and of all types of parties. From our protest dataset we calculate one key variable. Specifically, we focus on public economic protests and compute the relative number of protest events per legislative period in every country. This number is calculated by comparing the number of events in a given legislative period in a given country to the average (or normal) level of protest in that country. Specifically, it is calculated in the following way:

$$\text{Relative Number of Protest Events} = \frac{\sum PP_{LP}}{M_{LP}} - \overline{\sum PP_{m,c}}$$

where  $\sum PP_{LP}$  is the sum of all protest events in a given legislative period,  $M_{LP}$  is the number of months in a given legislative period, and  $\overline{\sum PP_{m,c}}$  is the average number of protest events per month in a given country.<sup>3</sup> The measure indicates up- or downward deviations from the 'normal' flow of protest in a given country. Moreover, the focus on the legislative periods reflects the practice in the economic voting literature and takes into account more sustained upward trends over a longer period of time. We combine the information about the relative number of protest

<sup>3</sup> For this analysis, we follow the other chapters and weigh protest participation by the sampling probability (applied on the document level), the log of population size, and the agency weight. Please see Bremer et al. (2020) for an analysis with a simpler dependent variable and extensive robustness checks.

events with the first dataset on electoral outcomes and, finally, we standardize all our dependent and continuous independent variables in order to make them more easily comparable.

### **10.5 Economic Misery, Timing, and Bailouts as Drivers of Electoral and Protest Politics**

Following the literature on economic voting, we start our analysis by assessing the importance of the economic context on both electoral losses and protest mobilization. In contrast to the previous chapters, we study changes in protest over longer units of time, i.e. legislative periods. Therefore, we can rely on three different economic indicators to measure the change in economic conditions in a given country at a given time: (1) change in the unemployment rate between the election at time  $t - 1$  and  $t$ ; (2) change in the gross domestic product (GDP) between the election at time  $t - 1$  and  $t$ ; (3) and change in the level of government debt (as a percentage of GDP) between the election at time  $t - 1$  and  $t$ . We combine these three indicators to create a summary measure of a country's 'economic misery' because we expect that citizens should respond more strongly to general economic trends than evolution of specific macroeconomic indicators, such as unemployment. An exploratory factor analysis indicates that all three indicators load strongly on a single dimension and thus we estimate a misery index based on the factor scores. This index increases as economic conditions worsen.

In the first step of our analysis we compare the factors that drive punishment in electoral and protest politics. To that end, we use simple ordinary least square (OLS) regression analysis with the electoral loss of the prime minister's party and the relative number of protest events in a given legislative period as two dependent variables in separate analyses. Table 10.1 presents the results for both electoral and protest politics. As predicted, a higher level of economic misery is related to higher electoral losses in the bivariate model shown in the first column of the table: A one standard deviation increase in misery will lead to a 0.34 standard deviation increase in electoral loss of the incumbent. Turning to protest, we find a similar pattern and confirm the results of previous chapters: A higher level of economic misery is related to a higher level of protest mobilization. This effect is a little bit smaller than the one for electoral politics, but still significant: A one standard deviation increase in misery will lead to a 0.31 standard deviation increase in the number of protests. Disaggregating the economic misery index in its individual components shows that all components are correlated with electoral and protest punishment (results not shown). However, in a

Table 10.1. *Electoral loss and protest*

	(1) Elect.	(2) Protest	(3) Elect.	(4) Protest	(5) Elect.	(6) Protest
Misery	0.34*** (3.86)	0.31*** (3.78)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (-0.07)	0.06 (0.35)	-0.01 (-0.04)
1st Crisis Elect.			0.30 (1.26)	0.17 (0.84)	0.18 (0.77)	0.16 (0.79)
Later-Crisis Elect.			0.17 (0.72)	-0.17 (-0.85)	-0.05 (-0.22)	-0.18 (-0.86)
1st Crisis Elect. # Misery			0.32 (1.44)	0.13 (0.72)	0.22 (1.01)	0.13 (0.68)
Later-Crisis Elect. # Misery			0.70* (2.47)	1.41*** (5.97)	0.49+ (1.74)	1.39*** (5.70)
Bailout = 1					0.73** (2.87)	0.04 (0.19)
Constant	0.00 (0.00)	0.04 (0.44)	-0.23 (-1.56)	-0.11 (-0.87)	-0.23 (-1.60)	-0.11 (-0.86)
Observations	118	118	118	118	118	118
R <sup>2</sup>	0.11	0.11	0.17	0.35	0.22	0.35

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

joint model, only unemployment has a statistically significant effect on electoral punishment, whereas both rising unemployment and public debt significantly affect protest mobilization.

To test whether timing plays a role for both protest and electoral politics, we created a variable that indicates whether an election was a pre-crisis election, a first-crisis election, or a later-crisis election. For elections that have occurred after the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, we distinguish between ‘first’ and ‘later-crisis elections’: In each country, the first election that took place after October 2008 is coded as ‘first-crisis election’, while all later elections are coded as ‘later-crisis elections’.<sup>4</sup>

Our expectation is also supported by the results presented in Table 10.1. Models 3 and 4 indicate that both the electoral punishment of the incumbent and protests were greater during the Great Recession

<sup>4</sup> Overall, the analysis covers fifty-nine pre-crisis elections, thirty first-crisis elections, and twenty-nine later-crisis elections. Austria had an election in September 2008 two weeks after the collapse of Lehman Brothers. We consider this crisis still as a pre-crisis election as it was not really fought in the shadow of the financial crisis.

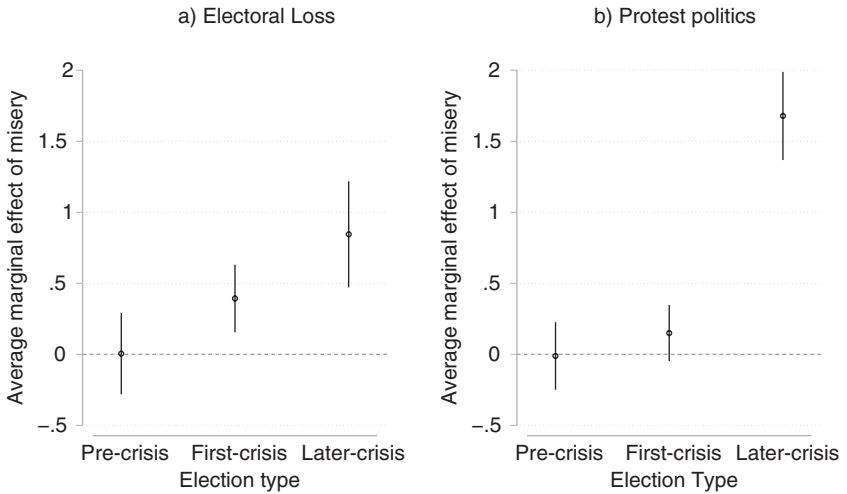


Figure 10.1 Average marginal effect of misery on electoral loss and protest – the importance of the crisis. (a) Electoral loss and (b) protest politics.

*Note:* Figures based on models 3 and 4 of Table 10.1, respectively.

than prior to it, but the results are not statistically significant. However, to test the timing argument, we need to consider the interaction effect of economic misery and our timing variable. As shown in models 3 and 4, the interaction between economic misery and both electoral losses and protests is positive and statistically significant in later-crisis elections. That is, in later-crisis elections, economic misery increases electoral losses and protests more than it did in previous elections. These interactions are also shown in Figure 10.1, which plots the average marginal effect of economic misery by election type. Figure 10.1a suggests that citizens perceived the worsening economic conditions as a greater failure of the incumbent party during later-crisis elections than in first-crisis elections. As the crisis progressed, governments that failed to address the economic situations of their countries were more severely punished than parties that were in office at the beginning of the crisis. Figure 10.1b shows the same pattern for protest. It indicates that in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, citizens did not increasingly voice their discontent in the streets as the economic conditions worsened. However, there is a strong positive effect of economic misery on the level of protest during later stages of the economic crisis.

Finally, we look at the associations between bailouts and citizens' responses in the two arenas. Here, we rely on a variable that indicates whether a country was bailed out by the IMF or the European Stability Mechanism, implying external political constraints (see Chapter 9). According to the results of models 5 and 6 in Table 10.1, bailouts are associated only with higher electoral punishment but not protest punishment. Although the coefficient in model 6 is also positive, it is not statistically significant. It indicates that international bailouts did not systematically increase the number of people that protested during our period of study, at least not when we use legislative periods as the unit of analysis (for a more fine-grained analysis of this question, see Chapter 9).

Overall, we interpret these results as supporting our *equivalence hypothesis* (H1). We find very similar effects of economic misery on the electoral support of incumbents and on the level of economic protests. Moreover, these effects tend to become stronger in 'later-crisis elections' when the economic situation in Europe diverged ever more and voters already had a chance to punish their governments at the ballot box. However, when focusing on legislative periods, we cannot detect a statistically significant and positive effect of bailouts on the level of protest mobilization, whereas we observe such an effect for the electoral performance of the ruling party.

## 10.6 Protest, the Economic Vote, and the Signalling Mechanism

However, as suggested earlier, it is misleading to treat the two arenas of mass politics as independent. Instead, both are interwoven with national and international political dynamics and there is reason to believe that protest politics and electoral politics are closely related. Consequently, we move beyond the existing economic voting model and test the importance of protest mobilization as an explanatory variable for electoral punishment. To that end, we test the influence of protest on electoral punishment. Using OLS regression analysis, we repeat the analysis from the first step with electoral punishment as the dependent variable, but we now include protest mobilization in the legislative period before the election as an independent variable. To test our signalling hypothesis, we include an interaction between protest mobilization and the economic misery indicator. Otherwise this analysis mirrors the analysis in the first step.

Table 10.2 presents the results from this exercise. The first column indicates that the bivariate relationship between protest and electoral

Table 10.2. *Electoral loss: Protest as an independent variable*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	All countries			Western Europe		
	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.
Protest	0.32** (3.36)	0.22* (2.29)	0.14 (1.10)	0.28*** (4.05)	0.14* (2.23)	0.02 (0.27)
Misery		0.27** (2.95)	0.26** (2.77)		0.42*** (5.48)	0.39*** (5.08)
Protest # Misery			0.05 (0.87)			0.08* (2.04)
Constant	-0.01 (-0.13)	-0.01 (-0.09)	-0.02 (-0.25)	-0.21** (-2.69)	-0.27*** (-3.94)	-0.29*** (-4.33)
Observations	118	118	118	77	77	77
R <sup>2</sup>	0.09	0.15	0.16	0.18	0.42	0.45

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\**p* < 0.1; \*\**p* < 0.05; \*\*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

punishment is positive and statistically significant: A 1 standard deviation increase in protest is associated with a 0.32 standard deviation increase in economic voting. However, when controlling for misery (model 2), this effect becomes smaller. Moreover, contrary to our expectations, there seems to be no interaction effect between economic misery and protest (model 3): Instead the bivariate relationship between electoral and protest punishment is mostly driven by a third factor, namely economic misery. However, when repeating the same analysis for western Europe only (models 4–6), the results change. Importantly, there is now a positive and statistically significant interaction effect of protest and economic misery in model 6, which indicates that in western Europe the impact of economic misery on electoral punishment can be amplified by protest punishment (which supports the *signalling hypothesis H2*). This effect is also shown in Figure 10.2, which plots the average marginal effect of misery on the electoral loss of the incumbent across different levels of protest for western Europe. It shows that in western Europe this effect is substantial: When there is little protest, economic misery is not associated with electoral losses for incumbents; only when there are large protests, the effect of misery becomes important.

The regional differences in this analysis confirm findings from the previous chapters and existing research. For eastern Europe, where party systems are less institutionalised, Hernández and Kriesi (2016)

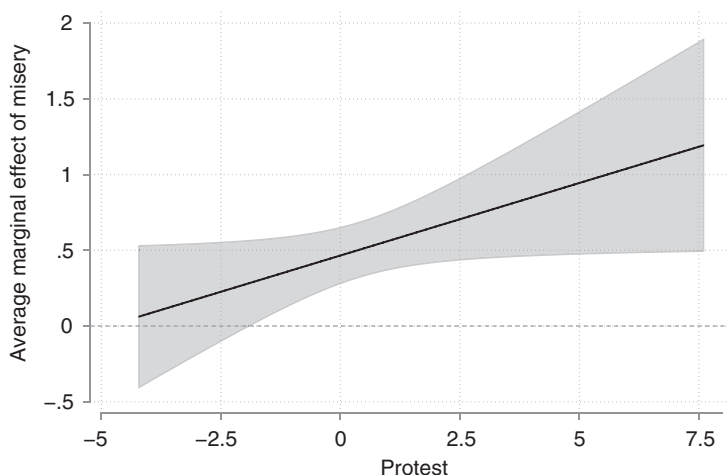


Figure 10.2 Average marginal effect of misery on electoral loss at different levels of protest.

Note: Figure based on model 6 of Table 10.2.

already showed that voters punish governments less for worsening economic conditions than in western Europe.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that we do not find a signalling effect of protest on electoral punishment for eastern Europe, either. Moreover, as Chapter 4 emphasized, protest during the Great Recession was to a large extent a phenomenon in the southern Europe. Since we cannot test our models for southern Europe only because of the small number of observations, we aimed to detect the effect of influential cases on our regressions. More specifically, we calculated the Cook's distance for each observation used in model 6 in Table 10.2 to allow us to identify influential observations. The analysis indicates that there are three observations with a relatively large Cook's distance in our western European sample: Ireland 2002 and 2011 and Greece 2012. Only one of these observations stems from southern Europe, indicating that the Greek election in May 2012 is an influential case in our analysis. Prior to this election, there were especially large and numerous protests that were followed by an electoral realignment related to the breakthrough of the challenger party Syriza and the almost-collapse of the former ruling party Pasok. However, the

<sup>5</sup> Instead, incumbents are more punished for increasing corruption, which we do not expect to be related to *economic* protest that we analyse in this paper.



other observations from Greece and, more generally, southern Europe are not influential observations, which indicates that our results are not systematically driven by the experience of southern Europe during the Great Recession. Moreover, no observation in our sample has a Cook's distance greater than 1, which is a common cut-off used to identify highly influential observations.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the results do not change when we estimate a robust regression instead of a OLS regression.

In the spirit of a 'placebo' test, we repeated the foregoing analysis but used the number of protest events on cultural issues as our key dependent variable (results not shown). For these non-economic protests, economic misery and the crisis did not systematically affect the number of protests. In other words, only economic protests are positively correlated with economic misery and the crisis, which increases our confidence that the relationship between misery and economic protests that we identified is, indeed, meaningful.

### **10.7 Protest, the Economic Vote, and the Decline of Mainstream Parties**

We now turn to a more careful analysis of whether certain types of parties systematically suffered or benefited from the instability that the Great Recession brought about. First, we classify parties as mainstream versus non-mainstream parties according to their party family, as indicated by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al. 2015): Parties from the conservative, Christian democratic, social democratic, and liberal party families are classified as mainstream, whereas parties from all other party families are classified as non-mainstream. Second, we classify parties as left-wing parties as opposed to all other political parties.

Given our results so far, we restrict our analysis to western Europe only.<sup>7</sup> To assess the gains and losses of the different types of parties, we first analyse the impact of the economic crisis on the change in the vote share from election at time  $t$  and  $t - 1$ . In the first step, we are interested in testing whether the crisis has accelerated the pre-existing long-term

<sup>6</sup> There are different cut-off values for spotting influential cases. Some suggest the simple guideline of  $D > 1$ ; others suggest going for  $4/N$  (=number of observations), which in our case is 0.05. The three cases in our analysis resulted in the following values (listed in descending order): Ireland 2011 with a Cook's Distance of 0.25, Greece 2012 with 0.25, Ireland 2002 with 0.11.

<sup>7</sup> The countries included in this part of the analysis are the following: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

decline of mainstream parties and how this decline is related to political contestation in the arena of protest politics. Therefore, we again resort to a simple OLS regression using the electoral punishment of individual parties as our dependent variable. We use the same independent variables as in the previous steps of the analysis. Following the literature on economic voting we also include two dummy variables that capture whether a party was in government and whether the prime minister was from that party during the legislative period between election at time  $t$  and  $t - 1$ . Moreover, in the baseline model we include a dummy for mainstream parties and we then test the differential effect of economic misery and protest punishment on mainstream versus non-mainstream parties by including interaction effects with this dummy. Similarly, in a second step, we repeat the analysis and evaluate the differential effect of economic misery and protest punishment on left-wing parties in separate models.<sup>8</sup>

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 10.3. The results confirm our earlier finding that governing is costly for parties in electoral terms. Parties that are in government are punished more consistently at elections than other parties and parties that are leading the government (i.e. the prime minister's party) are punished even more. In general, there is no negative effect for mainstream parties, though. These parties are not punished more consistently during our period of study, shedding some doubt on the general thesis of the long-term decline of mainstream parties. Yet, model 1 suggests that the electoral fortune of mainstream parties is related to the relative level of protest in a given legislative period. The interaction effect between mainstream parties and protest is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the electoral losses of mainstream parties increase as protest increases. To interpret this interaction effect, it is useful to plot the average marginal effects of protest on electoral loss by party type. The results shown in Figure 10.3 are clear: On average, mainstream parties lose from protest over economic issues, while non-mainstream parties benefit from heightened levels of protest (i.e. they 'lose less'). This reinforces the long-term decline of established mainstream parties and supports our *party system destabilization hypothesis (H3)*.

Model 2 in Table 10.2 investigates whether the signalling effect of protest also holds at the level of individual parties and contributes to

<sup>8</sup> In total our dataset includes 548 observations, including observation for 276 mainstream parties and 272 observations for non-mainstream parties. Similarly, our dataset includes 296 observations for left-wing parties and 252 observations for parties that are not left-wing.

Table 10.3. *Electoral loss of mainstream and left parties in western Europe*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Mainstream		Left-wing	
	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.	Elect.
PM = 1	0.23*	0.23*	0.22*	0.20*
	(2.28)	(2.26)	(2.15)	(1.99)
Government = 1	0.48***	0.49***	0.48***	0.49***
	(6.47)	(6.56)	(6.58)	(6.62)
Protest	-0.08**	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02
	(-2.84)	(-0.41)	(-0.79)	(-0.33)
Mainstream party	-0.04	-0.10		
	(-0.71)	(-1.61)		
Mainstream party # Protest	0.23***	0.04		
	(4.86)	(0.61)		
Misery	-0.00	-0.10*	-0.00	0.05
	(-0.06)	(-2.02)	(-0.11)	(1.09)
Protest # Misery		-0.02		-0.01
		(-0.95)		(-0.57)
Mainstream party # Misery		0.16*		
		(2.48)		
Mainstream party # Protest # Misery		0.08*		
		(2.38)		
Left party			0.02	0.02
			(0.27)	(0.27)
Left party # Protest			0.05	0.02
			(1.10)	(0.28)
Left party # Misery				-0.13+
				(-1.89)
Left party # Protest # Misery				0.04
				(1.26)
Constant	-0.15***	-0.12**	-0.18***	-0.18***
	(-3.71)	(-2.95)	(-4.30)	(-4.24)
Observations	548	548	548	548
R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.21	0.15	0.16

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

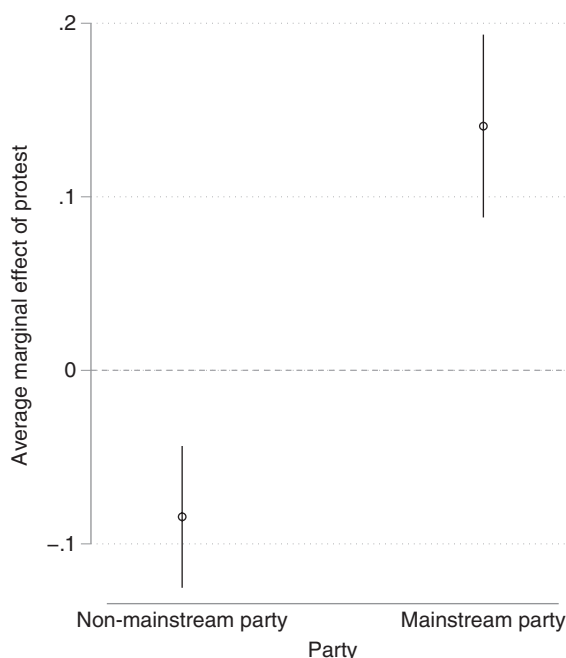


Figure 10.3 Average marginal effect of protest on electoral loss of mainstream versus challenger parties.

*Note:* Figure based on model 1 from Table 10.3.

the restructuring of the party system in western Europe. It includes a three-way interaction between party type, protest punishment, and economic misery in order to test whether the impact of economic misery on the electoral support for mainstream parties is amplified by protest. This three-way interaction term is positive and statistically significant, which indicates that political protest indeed strengthens the effect of economic misery on the punishment of mainstream parties. This is also shown in Figure 10.4, which shows the marginal effect of misery on the electoral performance of mainstream parties across different levels of protest. It suggests that the average marginal effect of misery increases with protest for mainstream parties, while it decreases for non-mainstream parties. This suggests that the relationship between protest and the electoral losses of mainstream parties is not direct. Instead, citizens are more likely to defect from mainstream parties when the economic conditions worsen and this effect becomes

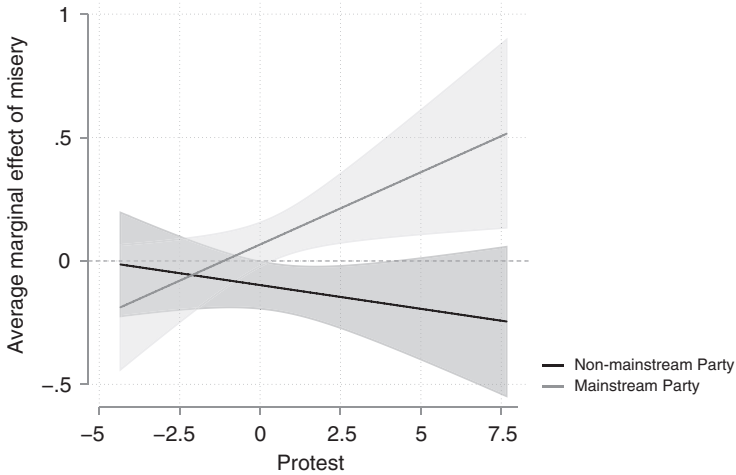


Figure 10.4 Average marginal effect of economic misery on electoral loss of mainstream versus challenger parties at different levels of protest.  
*Note:* Figure based on model 2 from Table 10.3.

stronger when there is a relatively large amount of economic protest. This effect still exists even when we control for possible crisis-effects (results not shown). Therefore, the signalling effect of protest does not seem only to be a phenomenon of the Great Recession. Instead, protest increases the likelihood that mainstream parties are attributed responsibility for declining economic performance throughout our period of investigation.

Going one step further, we repeat the analysis but now we distinguish between left-wing and other parties. The results are shown in models 3 and 4 in Table 10.3. They indicate that there are no significant effects between protest politics and the electoral fortunes of left-wing parties, which does not support the more general idea that there is a close alliances between social movements and parties from the left in Europe (see Kriesi 1995; Maguire 1995).<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the destabilization of the party system during the Great Recession and the effect of protest on its restructuration did not swing in one direction or the other in terms of the traditional left–right spectrum. Although the Great Recession and the resulting economic misery led to heightened contestation in the protest

<sup>9</sup> We do not find that protests have an effect on the electoral fortune of far-left parties only (results not shown), either.

Table 10.4. *Electoral loss of left parties in western Europe by government status*

	(1) Elect.	(2) Elect.
PM = 1	0.22* (2.12)	0.24* (2.46)
Government = 1	0.43*** (4.97)	0.41*** (4.90)
Left party	-0.03 (-0.47)	-0.04 (-0.54)
Protest	-0.00 (-0.09)	-0.10** (-2.69)
Misery	-0.00 (-0.08)	-0.00 (-0.12)
Government = 1 # Left party	0.16 (1.27)	0.17 (1.42)
Government = 1 # Protest		0.23*** (3.65)
Left party # Protest		0.03 (0.51)
Government = 1 # Left party # Protest		0.20* (1.99)
Constant	-0.16*** (-3.62)	-0.16*** (-3.71)
Observations	548	548
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	0.22

*t* statistics in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

and the electoral arena, this contestation has not (yet) been resolved in a systematic way across western Europe. This reflects the earlier analysis by Bartels (2014), who could not find clear-cut ideological shifts to the left or right in the electoral arena during the Great Recession.

Interestingly, while we cannot detect a general swing to the left or the right under conditions of protest mobilization in the previous analysis, our more detailed results on the role of government participation do support the claim that the mainstream left in power has more to lose when it is targeted by mobilization in the streets (supporting our *left-wing punishment hypothesis H4*). Table 10.4 shows the importance of government status and protest for left-wing parties. According to

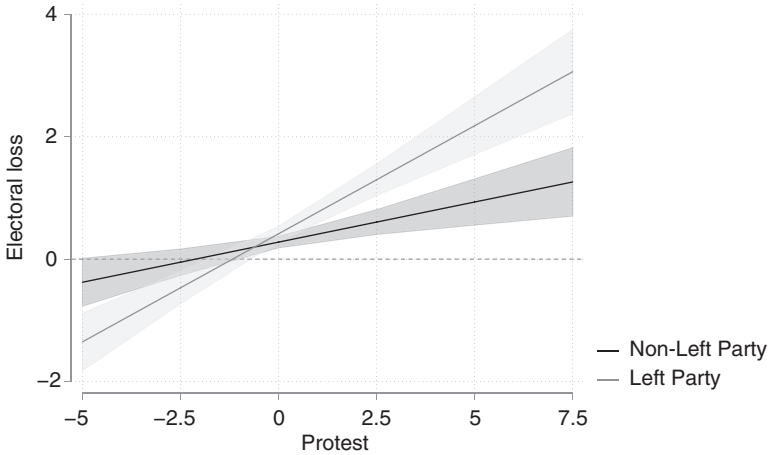


Figure 10.5 Marginal effect of protest on electoral loss of left parties vs. non-left parties in government.

*Note:* Figure based on model 2 from Table 10.4.

model 1, there is no statistically significant effect of being in government for left-wing parties. In other words, all parties independent of partisan colour are, on average, punished for being in government in our sample. However, model 2 shows the three-way interaction between being in government, left-wing parties, and protest. The results of this effect are again best interpreted with the help of a marginal effect plots, shown in Figure 10.5.<sup>10</sup> They indicate that all parties in government tend to lose more under conditions of high protest. However, this effect is especially pronounced for left-wing parties. Thus, the traditional allies of social movements seem to suffer most if economic protests target their activities in government.

## 10.8 Conclusions

In the Great Recession, incumbents were heavily punished in the electoral arena. However, this punishment has not been limited to the electoral arena and, instead, citizens have also opposed governments by voicing their grievances in the street. By and large our

<sup>10</sup> The figure shows the effect of protest on the punishment of left-wing parties versus all other parties for parties that were in government prior to a given election only. The marginal effects for opposition parties are not shown.

analyses show electoral punishment and protests are both driven by poor economic performance of a given country, confirming the economic voting model. This relationship between economic conditions and economic voting as well as protests, respectively, is particularly strong in later stages of the crisis, as the economic fate of countries in Europe diverged and citizens mobilized against governments in countries that continued to be stuck in the economic recession. Moreover, electoral punishment was higher in countries that relied on international bailouts, which further increased the perception that national governments failed to steer their countries out of the crisis. However, surprisingly based on analysing legislative periods, we do not find similar effects for protest politics (see Chapter 9 for a more detailed analysis).

Still, it is misleading to treat punishment in the electoral arena and protests as independent from each other. In Europe, the citizens' response to the economic crisis was first of all an electoral one, but people also expressed their discontent through protest as shown in previous chapters of this volume. The analyses in this chapter show that these protests were coupled with electoral punishment in the sense that larger protests were also associated with stronger electoral punishment of incumbents. We present evidence that protests can amplify the importance of economic conditions for electoral punishment: By attributing responsibility, mobilizing citizens, and channelling their grievances into the electoral arena, protests increase the importance of economic conditions for the next general election. The 'placebo test' with cultural protests underlines that this is driven by economic protests that target public policies and institutions.

In addition, our findings show that the signalling effect of protest is not only limited to the punishment of incumbent, but it extends to all mainstream parties: As economic conditions worsen, citizens are more likely to defect from mainstream parties when there is a relatively large amount of protests. The beneficiaries of this destabilization of the party existing system are non-mainstream parties in general. They feed off the discontent that citizens voice in protest politics and following large protest, irrespective of the economic conditions, they are likely to win more votes in the next general election. In sum, our analyses point to a destabilizing effect of the Great Recession on political competition in Europe but this destabilization has not been resolved in one way or another: The political system across Europe has not systematically swung in one direction or the other, as different parties have benefited in different regions. Importantly, we do not observe a close connection between the electoral fortunes of the



political left and economic protests in general, although it is the political left that gets punished most heavily when in government under conditions of high protest mobilization.

The next chapter will again take up the question of how electoral and protest politics are connected to each other in times of crisis, but it will zoom in on political parties' activities in the streets of Europe. The result from this chapter suggests that especially parties in opposition might have a lot to gain from realigning with actors in the streets.

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