

**Fleeing the Centre:**  
**The Rise of Challenger Parties in the Aftermath of the Euro Crisis**

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## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

The Eurozone crisis has altered the party political landscape across Europe. The most visible effect is the rise of challenger parties. The crisis not only caused economic hardship, but also placed considerable fiscal constraints upon many national governments. Many voters have reacted to this by turning their back on the traditional parties and opting instead for new, or reinvigorated, challenger parties that reject the mainstream consensus of austerity and European integration. This article argues that both sanctioning and selection mechanisms can help to explain this flight from the centre to challenger parties. First, voters who were economically adversely affected by the crisis punish mainstream parties by voting for challenger parties. Second, the choice of specific challenger party is shaped by preferences on three issues that directly flow from the Euro crisis: EU integration, austerity and immigration. Analysing both aggregate-level and individual-level survey data from all 17 Western EU member states, this article finds strong support for both propositions and shows how the crisis has reshaped the nature of party competition in Europe.

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‘There is No Alternative’ was the recurring refrain from many national governments during the Eurozone crisis, referring to the necessity of austerity and structural reforms. The consequences of the sovereign debt crisis that followed the global financial crisis of 2008 have been felt acutely in many European countries, whereas others were less severely affected. Unemployment levels reached post-war highs in a number of countries, with youth unemployment reaching over 20 per cent on average across the European Union (EU). Yet, in most of Europe, the policy responses by the mainstream on both the left and right focused on tackling debt rather than reducing unemployment. What is more, the external constraints on national governments’ room to manoeuvre have never been more obvious, especially in the countries facing a sovereign debt crisis. Governments of debtor states were asked to impose severe spending cuts and structural reforms in return for bail-outs from the European Union and the IMF. The emergency politics of the crisis dramatically limited the political choices available to citizens (Scharpf 2011; Cramme and Hobolt 2014; Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Laffan 2014).

Voters have reacted by rejecting the traditional parties and turning instead to challenger parties that do not endorse the mainstream consensus. We define challenger parties as those parties that do not ordinarily enter government. They are thus unconstrained by the responsibilities of government and are often found on the political extremes (van der Wardt et al. 2014). There are multiple examples of the success of challengers in the aftermath of the Euro crisis. These include both the emergence of new successful challenger parties, such as the Alternative for Germany, the Five Star Movement (Italy) and Podemos (Spain), the surge in support for the established radical right parties across Northern Europe, and notably the election of a radical leftwing Syriza-led government in Greece in 2015.

The question that this raises is why did certain voters defect from mainstream political parties and opt for challenger parties in the aftermath of the crisis? We offer two explanations. The first is rooted in the classic theory of retrospective voting, where voters punish incumbents for poor economic performance. The expectation is that voters will “throw out the rascals” in government when the economy performs poorly. However, given the perception that mainstream parties, whether currently in government or not, were responsible for the economic woes, we expect the sanctioning to extend beyond government parties to all mainstream parties. We thus hypothesize that voters negatively affected by the crisis, e.g. through job loss or reduced earnings, will punish mainstream parties and turn to challenger parties instead.

This retrospective model of economic voting helps to explain the electoral punishment of governing parties during the crisis, but it cannot be the full story. Not all challenger parties offer the same solutions to the problem. Our second explanation thus focuses on the specific appeal of different challenger parties. Our argument is that defectors choose challenger parties because they offer a rejection of, and an alternative to, the mainstream response to the crisis. Whereas the mainstream left and right have converged on a policy of austerity and an adherence to the fiscal policy-making guidelines of the European Union, successful challenger parties have sought to offer clear alternatives. On the left, challenger parties reject the austerity agenda and are critical of the EU’s insistence of reduced government welfare spending. On the right, the focus is on the desire to reclaim national sovereignty, specifically to control immigration and repatriate powers from the EU. In both cases, challenger parties reject the “there is no alternative” argument and instead claim that national governments can control their own destiny and offer distinct policies.

To test these propositions we examine who defected from mainstream West European parties after the onset of the crisis. First, we track the changes in the success of challenger parties since the beginning of the crisis and show that there has been a sharp increase in support across Western Europe after 2010. Then we use the 2014 European Election Study to see what shapes people's decisions to defect from the mainstream to challenger parties. We show that retrospective economic voting matters: people who were personally adversely affected by the crisis are more likely to defect. We also show that defectors are people that look increasingly disconnected from mainstream party policy, not least regarding three issues that are closely tied to the EU and the Euro crisis: EU integration, austerity measures and immigration. We conclude by discussing whether the rise of challenger parties is likely to be a temporary blip due to the crisis or a more permanent feature of West European politics.

### **Fleeing the centre**

The financial crisis that erupted in late 2008 vividly demonstrated both the interconnectedness of financial markets and the increasingly limited power of national governments. As the financial turmoil travelled from the US to Europe, it evolved into a sovereign debt crisis. By 2012, eight out of 28 EU member states had received some form of financial bailout (Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Romania and Spain). In return for these credit arrangements by the EU, jointly with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the debtor countries had to engage in significant fiscal retrenchment and structural reforms, mainly to social welfare programmes. The economic and social consequences of the crisis within the EU have been far-reaching. High levels of unemployment and low levels of growth are endemic. This situation is worst in debtor countries in Southern Europe, notably in

Greece, Spain and Portugal, where a quarter of the workforce were unable to find a job in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

The pressure on the EU to reduce unemployment has been only exacerbated by the divergence in the economic performance of individual countries. Germany in 2013, for instance, not only enjoyed a considerable current account surplus, but also the lowest level of youth unemployment in the EU. The contrast with the reluctantly provided rescue credit to debtor states under rigid ‘conditionalities’ formulated by the EU/IMF/ECB ‘Troika’ is stark (Scharpf 2014). Looming over these unpopular decisions by certain national governments were the constraints that European integration has imposed. Even in areas at the very heart of state power, namely fiscal policy-making, national governments looked impotent (Laffan 2014). In 2012, for example, the Greek Prime Minister at the time Antonis Samaras, warned that the country could be forced out of the Eurozone if parliament failed to approve a new round of reform measures required by creditors: “We must save the country from catastrophe ... if we fail to stay in the euro nothing will make sense” (*The Guardian*, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2012). When the radical left party Syriza was elected to power in 2015 on a promise to offer an alternative path to austerity, other European leaders and Greek mainstream parties repeated this message to Greece. In the words of Donald Tusk, the European Council president: “It is not political blackmail when we repeat day after day that we are very close to the day when the game is over” (*Financial Times*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2015).

Unsurprisingly, there has been a political backlash. The most notable sign of this reaction has been the rise of challenger parties; anti-establishment, populist parties that reject the mainstream consensus. Challenger parties highlight issues such as European integration and

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Eurostat (seasonally adjusted figures from May 2014).

immigration that have often been downplayed by the mainstream, and foster new linkages with voters that feel left behind by established parties (van der Wardt et al. 2014). We thus distinguish between mainstream parties and challenger parties.

Mainstream parties are those parties that frequently alternate between government and opposition. Their policy platforms are likely to be affected by both their past experience in office and their desire to enter office again. In the eyes of voters, such parties find it difficult to escape responsibility for prolonged crises, such as the Eurozone crisis. By their very nature, mainstream parties, in opposition and in office, are also more cautious in mobilizing around new issues or adopting positions far from other parties, since both would make it more difficult to enter into coalition government (Tavits 2008; van der Wardt et al. 2014; Hobolt and de Vries 2015).

By contrast, challenger parties are untarnished by office. While these parties are not necessarily new, they have not formed part of government. Rather they have instead sought to reshape the political landscape by putting new issues on the agenda (De Vries and Hobolt 2012).<sup>3</sup> Successful challenger parties include Front National in France, Podemos in Spain, and the Five Star Movement in Italy. Such parties have changed the nature of party competition and restructured the political agenda, in most cases without ever setting foot in

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<sup>3</sup> Many of these challenger parties are so-called “niche parties” (parties that reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics and raise new issues that do not coincide with existing lines of political division, see Meguid 2008) or “populist parties” (parties that subscribe to a populist ideology that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people, see Mudde 2007). However, in this article we focus specifically on government experience as the distinguishing factor, since this affects whether such parties can be held to account by voters and also their ability to challenge the mainstream policy consensus (van der Wardt et al. 2014). Table A2 in the Appendix lists all parties (in 2014) included in this category.

government. Indeed their appeal is partially based on the fact that they are not tainted by holding office in the last few decades when the seeds of the crisis were sown. Moreover, their lack of government experience and limited incentive, and opportunity, to join future governments enables them to adopt more risky political platforms. This allows challenger parties to offer a clear alternative narrative to the mainstream consensus. Challenger parties on the left reject the notion that austerity politics is a necessary evil. On the right, challenger parties argue that powers should be repatriated from the EU to national government and parliaments, and that they can stem the threat of globalization (especially foreign immigrant labour).

In this paper we examine the causes of the rise of these challenger parties, focusing on the individual-level motivations of voters. Since the very notion of challenger parties assumes that there is an established party system to defy, our empirical focus is West European members of the EU that have established party systems.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate the change that has occurred since the onset of the crisis, Figure 1 plots the vote shares of mainstream and challenger parties across the 17 West European members of the EU between 2004 and 2015. We define three types of challenger party. All three types are parties that were not part of any national-level government in the 30 years preceding the Euro crisis (1970-2010).<sup>5</sup> We also use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to distinguish between right-wing and left-wing

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<sup>4</sup> Although party systems and party competition are beginning to stabilize in Central and Eastern Europe, these political systems are still characterized by high volatility which makes it difficult to clearly identify “mainstream parties” (Bakke and Sitter 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Any cut-off point in terms of government experience to determine when a party is, or is not, a challenger party is somewhat arbitrary. However, this operationalization offers both parsimony and captures parties without any recent government experience. Using a slightly different operationalization that looks at post-war participation in government yields very similar results.



challenger parties (Bakker et al 2015), using the general left-right question in CHES: “Please tick the box that best describes each party's overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right)”. Parties scoring more than 5 are classified as right-wing and parties scoring less than 5 are classified as left-wing.<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The left-hand figure clearly demonstrates the decline in the vote shares of mainstream parties. In 2004 mainstream parties on the left and right dominated West European party systems with 86 per cent of the total vote share. This declined by 14 percentage points to 72 per cent in 2015. Mainstream parties on the centre-left and on the centre-right saw similar falls in their vote share, around 7 percentage points, over the 11 year period. In the right-hand figure, we observe a corresponding increase in support for challenger parties on both the left and the right, while green challenger parties have experienced less change. Overall challenger parties have increased their vote share from around 10 to 23 per cent during the period.<sup>7</sup> On the right, these include the Finns Party in Finland, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden and the Danish People’s Party in Denmark, whereas on the left these include the Red-Green Alliance in Denmark, Syriza in Greece (although in government after the crisis) and Die Linke in Germany.

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<sup>6</sup> For parties scoring 5, we classify them on the basis of coalition partners or their membership of European Parliament political groups. Green parties are those parties whose ideology centres on the principles of green politics and environmentalism. The full list of challenger and mainstream parties can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that not 100% of vote shares were allocated, since only parties with over 1% of the vote (or at least one MP) were classified. This estimate of challenger parties is therefore conservative, since most of these very small parties and candidates are likely to belong to the challenger party category.

Of course, different shades of populist politics have unsettled Europe long before the onset of the sovereign debt crisis, as parties like the Front National in France, the Northern League in Italy, or Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands successfully exploited popular anxieties about migration, globalization, Islam and European integration. Could the success of challenger parties simply be a product of the secular decline of the mainstream left and right parties, or what some have called the end of the "age of party democracy" (Mair 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000)? Our aggregate data suggests not, in that most of the change is more recent. After all in 2004 only 10 per cent of voters supported challengers. Nonetheless aggregate data cannot tell us whether the rise of challenger parties is linked to people's experiences during the crisis. To answer this question, we need to examine the motivations of voters who defected from the mainstream to challenger parties over the last few years.

We argue this type of defection is, at least in part, determined by the economic crisis, and the governmental response to the crisis. The choice to defect to a challenger party is about *sanctioning* and *selection* (Banks and Sundaram, 1993; Fearon 1999). If we understand elections as mechanisms for political accountability, then they must function as a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981; Manin 1997; Powell 2000). This is the core intuition of the economic voting model, which suggests that voters punish governments for bad economic performance and reward them for good performance (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Nannestad and Paldam 1994). In times of crisis, we would thus expect governments to be more likely to be thrown out of office. Bartels' (2013) aggregate level analysis of the "Great Recession" has shown that this pattern holds. Citizens punished incumbent governments for slow economic growth during the crisis. Yet, other studies have shown that in Southern Europe, heightened

perception of European Union economic responsibility reduced the magnitude of the national economic vote coefficient (Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012).

Most empirical studies of economic voting use either macro-level indicators of the economy (e.g. unemployment and inflation) or survey data on people's view of economic change as an indicator of macro-economic performance (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, 2007 for overviews). These studies have shown a strong relationship between the economy and incumbent performance. There are, however, reasons why we may want to focus on people's direct experience with the crisis, rather than indicators of macro-economic change. First, country-level studies using aggregate data make it difficult to disentangle the individual-level motivations for defection. Second, although perceptions of the economy are normally highly correlated with party choice, there is increasing concern that the direction of causality is actually from party support to economic evaluations (Evans and Anderson 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010). By focusing on personal experiences, and what is known as the pocketbook model of economic voting, we circumvent many of these problems. There is also increasing evidence that personal economic circumstances, such as declining wages, benefit cuts or unemployment, are important determinants of voting behaviour (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011; Margalit 2011; Richter 2006). In the context of the crisis, we expect that people who experienced a deterioration in their personal financial situation, e.g. through job loss or reduced income, will be more likely to defect from mainstream parties.

However, the pocketbook voting model does not in and of itself explain why voters turn to challenger parties rather than to other mainstream parties in opposition. Voters do not see elections as simply sanctioning devices, but also as opportunities to choose a political representative with the right set of preferences and qualities (Besley, 2005; Fearon, 1999;

Herreros, 2006). This is about the prospective *selection* of specific parties, rather than retrospective *sanctioning* of the government. Our argument is that the convergence among mainstream parties during the crisis has led to defection to challenger parties from people who are dissatisfied with that consensus. In the crisis, the most crucial aspects of the mainstream consensus on how to respond to the crisis was based on a shared acceptance of policies of austerity and fiscal responsibility as well as the acceptance of the discretionary authority of the European Union (Scharpf 2014; White 2014). While challenger parties are united in the fact that they offer an alternative to established mainstream policies, they differ significantly in their focus. Challenger parties on the right focus on the loss of sovereignty to the European Union and emphasize the repatriation of powers and restrictive immigration policies, whereas parties on the left focus on the neoliberal character of the responses to the crisis and oppose austerity politics, which undermine the national welfare state. We thus expect that individuals who reject a pro-European mainstream consensus are more likely to defect to challenger parties on the right, while those opposed to neo-liberal economics and austerity are more likely to turn to challenger parties on the left. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: People who were adversely economically affected by the economic crisis were more likely to defect from mainstream parties to challenger parties.

H2a: People who are Eurosceptic and more opposed to immigration are more likely to defect from mainstream parties to a right wing challenger party.

H2b: People who strongly favour more economic redistribution are more likely to defect from mainstream parties to a left wing challenger party.

## **Explaining defection from the mainstream**

As Figure 1 showed challenger parties have become increasingly important components of party systems across Western Europe. As they have become more electorally successful, so have the fortunes of mainstream parties declined, and importantly much of this decline has been in the aftermath of the crisis. Our analysis here focuses on the questions of why some people have defected from mainstream parties, of left and right, and lent their support to these various challenger parties. To do this we analyse the 2014 European Election Study, which is ideally suited to examine individual level motivations for defection as it asks identical questions of vote intention, vote recall, financial situation and policy preferences of representative samples of voters all EU member states (Schmitt et al. 2015).<sup>8</sup> We focus on why certain individuals have switched support between parties over the electoral cycle in different countries in Western Europe. Specifically we look at people that previously cast a vote for a mainstream party in the last national election, but by 2014 supported a challenger party. Before looking at the reasons behind defection, it is important to note how defection from the mainstream has been crucial to challenger parties on both the left and right.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows how people in the seventeen Western European member states said they voted in the previous national election and how they would choose to vote in June 2014 when they were interviewed. It is noteworthy that the pattern of change that we see here matches the

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<sup>8</sup> Approximately 1,100 respondents were interviewed in each EU member country, totalling 30,064 respondents. Our analysis only focuses on the 17 West European member states. The EES 2014 was carried out by TNS Opinion between the 30<sup>th</sup> May and 27<sup>th</sup> June 2014. All the interviews were carried out face to face. More information can be found here: <http://eeshomepage.net/voter-study-2014/>, where the EES questionnaire can also be found.

aggregate data shown in Figure 1. Both mainstream right and left parties have fewer people supporting them in 2014 than they did in the previous national election. Who benefits from these defections? Challenger left and challenger right parties benefit roughly equally. Both increase their support by about half again, and challenger green parties also see a more modest rise in vote share.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 shows more clearly the flow of voters. The figures are the percentages of current supporters as a proportion of previous support. Loyal supporters, those who previously supported a particular party type and continue to do so, are shown on the diagonal. That means that 83 per cent of current mainstream right party supporters previously supported a mainstream right party. 8 out of 10 supporters of both mainstream right and left parties are loyalists. While there is some switching between left and right, overall to the benefit of the left, and some mobilisation from previous non-voters, the overwhelming picture is of stability. The makeup of challenger party support is very different to mainstream party support. All three types of challenger party have barely half of supporters that are loyalists. All three types of party pick up support from the mainstream, about a quarter of challenger party supporters are defectors from the mainstream. Moreover these parties also mobilise more non-voters than mainstream parties. Nearly a fifth of their supporters were previously non-voters.

Almost half of support for challenger parties is due to defection from the mainstream or mobilisation from non-voting. At the same time, that does not mean that defection is necessarily that common. After all challenger parties still receive less than 30 per cent of the

vote overall and their vote share has gone up by only 9 percentage points. Not that many people switch. For example most of the 4 per cent increase in right challenger party support is due to 5 per cent of mainstream right supporters and 3 per cent of mainstream left party supporters parties defecting to the challenger right. In total about 9 per cent of people who voted previously and now express a vote intention switch from the mainstream to the challengers (there are only 1 per cent that switch the other way). While that is not a huge proportion of the electorate, it is a proportion that has transformed challenger parties from insignificant to significant players. That raises the question of what makes those people switch. Why has a tenth of the electorate turned their back on mainstream parties?

As discussed above there are two major drivers of electoral behaviour: sanctioning and selection. Our argument is that both sanctioning on the basis of economic experiences determines and selection on the basis of policy preferences determines whether people defect. Our dependent variable is thus defection. We restrict our analysis to those individuals who supported mainstream parties in the previous national election and we see what factors made people more or less likely to defect, in terms of supporting a different party today, to challenger parties.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> One issue is the coding of non-voters. We have excluded all people that refused to answer the previous vote question (9 per cent of respondents) but included ‘don’t knows’ (2 per cent of respondents) as non-voters along with the 23 per cent of people who stated that they did not vote previously. In terms of current party support, we include anyone who did not give a party name as a non-voter. This necessarily includes people who answered ‘don’t know’, did not give an answer, and people who specifically said that they would not vote. In total this includes 32 per cent of respondents. The only difference we make in terms of coding challenger party support is to categorise support of very minor parties that fail to make the 1 per cent threshold that we applied to the aggregate data. These have been categorised using CHES scores, coalition partners, membership of European Parliament political groups or expert judgement.

To capture sanctioning and selection, we use two sets of independent variables. Economic sanctioning is modelled by including a measure that captures how the crisis affected individuals financially. This consists of two questions. The first asks whether the respondent, or someone in their household, lost their job over the last two years. The second asks whether the respondent's household saw a decrease in income over the last two years. We add up the number of adverse impacts, so people who said their income decreased and someone lost their job score 2, people that just mention one adverse impact score 1 and people that mention neither score zero. 48 per cent of people in the 17 Western European states score zero, 32 per cent score 1 and 20 per cent score 2.

To capture selection based on policy preferences, we use a series of 11 point policy scales. These concern the redistribution of wealth, raising taxes to spend more on public services, restricting immigration, furthering European integration and the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth.<sup>10</sup> We have recoded these so that the more 'right-wing' responses are higher numbers. This means that high scores indicate that a person is against redistribution, against increasing taxes, against further European integration, and favours economic growth over environmental protection.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Respondents were asked on the extent to which they agreed/ disagreed with the following statements on an 11-point scale: 'You are fully in favour of the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor'; 'You are fully in favour of raising taxes to increase public services'; 'You are fully in favour of a restrictive policy on immigration', 'The EU should have more authority over the EU Member States' economic and budgetary policies'; 'Environmental protection should always take priority even at the cost of economic growth'.

<sup>11</sup> We have also recoded 'don't know' responses to the mid points of the scale (6) in order to maximise the number of cases included in the models. Don't knows make up 4-5 per cent of the responses, and including them in this way makes no material difference to the results.



We include a number of demographic variables in the models: age, occupational social class, religiosity, sex, education, citizenship and trade union membership.<sup>12</sup> We also include political interest as an important control when looking at switches to non-voting, this is measured on a 1-4 scale from not interested to very interested. Finally, we include a series of dummy variables for each country (fixed-effects) to control for country effects.

Table 3 shows the first two models that test hypothesis 1: does sanctioning happen and does it affect all mainstream parties? Because the sanctioning model is focused on the punishment of governments, we separate out those who previously voted for a mainstream party in government from those who previously voted for a mainstream party outside government. According to the classic model of economic voting, we would only expect it to affect governing parties. However, if voters are sanctioning the mainstream consensus then we should expect it to affect all mainstream parties. The two models presented here are thus multinomial logit models which compare either 1) defection from mainstream governing parties to challengers or non-voting or 2) defection from mainstream opposition parties to challengers or non-voting. We group all challenger parties together.

Included in this model are the measures of the economic impact of the crisis on individuals, political interest and demographic controls mentioned earlier, although we just show the

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<sup>12</sup> The occupational social class categories are self-employed, managerial, professional, white-collar worker, skilled manual worker, unskilled manual worker, student, unemployed and out of the labour force. Education is based on terminal age of education and consists of three categories: education finished before 16, education finished before 19, education finished at 20 or over. Religiosity is measured using church attendance divided into four categories: weekly, monthly, yearly and never. Age is measured in years, trade union members are distinguished from non-members and citizens are distinguished from non-citizens.

coefficients for economic impacts and political interest in the table. In the main, the effect of any of the social characteristics is small, with the exception of age. Older people are generally less likely to switch away from mainstream parties, no doubt because they have stronger partisan loyalties built up over many years (Tilley 2003).

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

A clear story emerges from these results. People who defected from mainstream parties to challengers are those disproportionately affected by negative economic factors in their own lives. Crucially this is true whether the mainstream party they previously voted for is currently in government or not. People are not simply punishing governing parties, they are voting against mainstream parties as a whole. In fact, people in poor economic circumstances are actually more likely to defect to challengers from mainstream parties outside government than from mainstream parties within government. Hence, in line with our first hypothesis we find that those who experience economic hardship during the crisis are more likely to turn their backs on all mainstream parties. Figure 2 shows the rates of defection from mainstream parties in government and in opposition for people who experienced no negative economic effects compared to those in households that experienced both unemployment and declining income. Positive numbers indicate that parties gain more voters from people negatively affected by the crisis.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The left hand figure shows how defection rates differ by economic circumstance for people who previously supported a governing party. There is clearly an effect of poor economic

circumstances on defection to mainstream opposition parties, they get more defectors from those severely affected by the crisis. But so do challenger parties. In fact the effect on defection to challengers is greater. More importantly though, the right hand figure shows defection from mainstream *opposition* parties given different economic experiences. In contrast to classic economic voting models, we find that adverse experiences generate more defection to challengers from people who previously voted for mainstream opposition parties even though those mainstream parties are not in government. These are fairly sizable effects as well. The average defection rate from both mainstream governing and opposition parties to challengers is about 25 per cent (given the specific type of person described in the figures). Moving from good to poor economic experiences thus makes a substantial difference to the possibility of defection.

Hence, there is evidence of economic sanctioning, but on what basis do voters decide which party to select? Table 4 shows the coefficients from a multinomial logit model that predict defection from mainstream parties (both in government and in opposition) to the three different types of challenger party and also to non-voting. It is first worth noting that all four types of defector are more likely to have directly experienced economic problems. Interestingly, the question of which specific party they defected to is not affected by the impact of the economic crisis; the size of the economic effect is rather similar across all four types of defector. How do we explain which specific party these defectors turn to?

In line with our second set of hypotheses, table 4 shows that there is significant variation in the ideological profile of defectors to different parties. People who left the mainstream to join the challenger right parties are much more anti-immigration and anti-EU than mainstream loyalists, but they differ very little in terms of their views on the environment and

redistribution, and are only very slightly more in favour of restricting government spending. Defectors to the challenger left are a little more anti-EU and a little more pro-environment and immigration than mainstream party loyalists, but these are not big differences. The big difference between loyalists and defectors to the challenger left is attitudes towards redistribution. Those in favour of greater redistribution are much more likely to defect to challenger left parties. This is also the case for challenger green parties, but unsurprisingly the best policy predictor is support for environmental protection. Finally the best predictor of people that become non-voters is not ideology, but political interest. While political interest appears to have little effect on defection from mainstream to challenger parties, it is the politically uninterested that leave mainstream parties and exit the system altogether.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

These effects are not trivial. Figure 3 shows how a two standard deviation move (from a position of one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean) on the three most important policy scales affects rates of defection. These are clearly substantial effects given the relative rarity of defection. Challenger right parties get substantially more defectors from those who are opposed to EU integration and immigration, and challenger left parties get substantially more defectors from those in favour of redistribution. Mainstream parties hang on to supporters who are more in tune with the mainstream party consensus on EU integration, immigration and redistribution. It is rejection

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<sup>13</sup> Table A1 in the appendix shows similar models that look at mobilisation from non-voting to voting for the different party types. The results here echo, albeit more weakly, the same processes that we see for defection from mainstream parties. Moreover, as we might expect mobilised voters are more politically interested than those that stay non-voters, but there are no real differences in how political interest affects mobilisation to different types of party.

of this mainstream consensus, in any of its forms, that motivates people to leave the embrace of mainstream parties, but the policy area that is being rejected is a crucial predictor of which challenger party will benefit from that defection.

## **Conclusion**

Challenger parties are the political success story of the aftermath of the Euro crisis. Both on the left and the right it is parties that have never been in government, and often have very little prospect of being in government, that have benefitted from the exodus of voters from mainstream parties. The decline in the vote shares of mainstream parties since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008 is around 12 percentage points. With the exception of Greece, mainstream parties have remained the dominant actors in government in Western Europe, yet those defections have nonetheless transformed challenger parties from often very marginal political players to repositories of a substantial proportion of people's votes.

Why has this happened? We have argued that the classic model of elections as mechanisms for sanctioning and selection offers a helpful framework to understand defection from mainstream to challenger parties. Starting with sanctioning, defection is clearly linked to the economic crisis. People who were subject to declining economic fortunes due to the economic crisis are more likely to desert mainstream parties, whether in government or opposition. Voters are not simply reacting to the perceived failures of mainstream parties however. They are also choosing challenger parties on the basis of policy. Challengers on the right gain voters from the mainstream who disagree with the mainstream consensus on immigration and EU integration. Challengers on the left gain voters from the mainstream who disagree with the consensus on fiscal policy. Thus, both sanctioning and ideological selection matter in how challenger parties convert mainstream party voters.

While the majority of people remain loyal to the mainstream, the increasing proportion of voters that opt for challenger parties is likely to have a significant impact on party systems and European democracy. First, voters are often attracted to challenger parties because of their stances on issues such as European integration and immigration. The more Eurosceptic position adopted by most challenger parties has put pressure on national governments and made it more difficult to reach agreement on political issues, not least the recent Mediterranean immigration crisis. Second, the success of challenger parties has influenced the stability of governments. Since challenger parties tend to stay in opposition, the formation, and maintenance, of stable coalitions has become more and more difficult. It has also meant the rise of 'grand coalition' governments spanning left and right mainstream parties, which have, ironically, strengthened the claims of challenger parties that all mainstream parties offer the same policies.

This raises the question of whether the success of challenger parties is a fleeting phenomenon that will dissipate as the economy improves, or whether it is the beginning of a new type of party politics in Western Europe. The crisis, and the mainstream party response to it, has facilitated the success of challenger parties, but it is not clear that the demand for such parties will simply disappear as economic conditions improve. Voters are less partisan than they were and more disillusioned with the established political class and this will continue to add to the appeal of challenger parties. Nonetheless, much will depend on how parties, both mainstream and challenger, respond to the changing political landscape. Some successful challenger parties choose to eventually enter government. If such stints in office are more than passing, these parties are likely to be held to account for the decisions and compromises taken in office, and this is likely to diminish their appeal to many of their current supporters.

Such challenger parties may cease to be “challengers” and become part of the mainstream. The example of the Tsipras-led government in Greece shows how government responsibility can force challenger parties closer to the mainstream consensus. Equally, much of the appeal of challenger parties during the crisis was that mainstream parties were perceived to offer very similar positions on important issues relating to the economy, Europe and immigration. Hence, the continued success of challenger parties will also depend on the policy choices offered by the mainstream.

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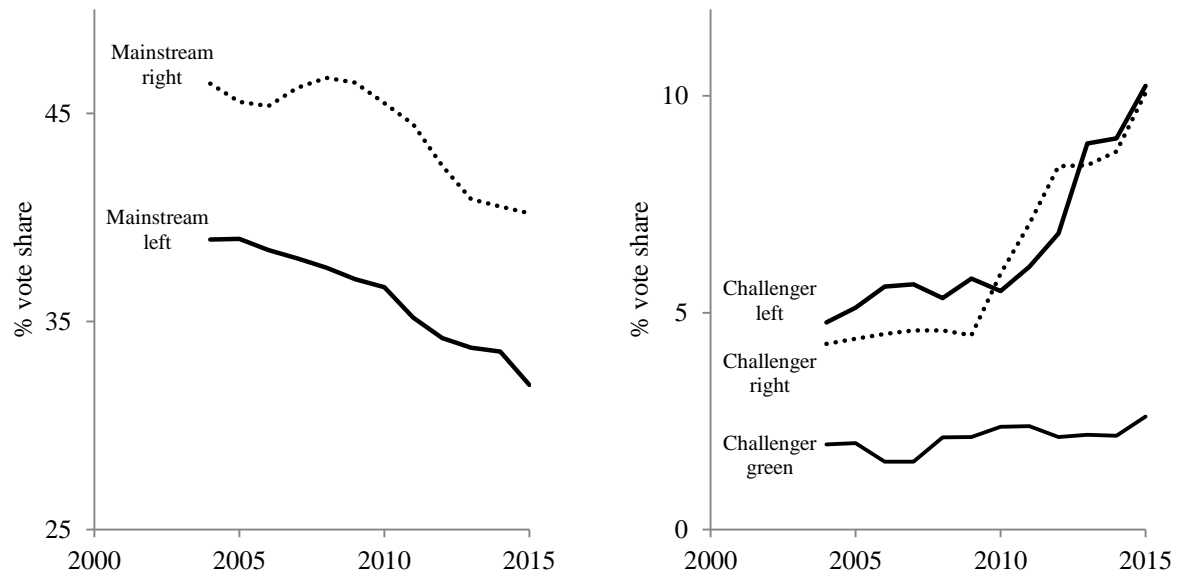
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Figure 1: Vote shares of different types of parties in Western Europe, 2004-2015



*Note:* These graphs show the mean vote share in national general elections holding vote share constant between elections.

Table 1: Percentage vote for different types of parties (2014)

<i>Party type</i>	<i>Previous vote</i>	<i>Vote intention</i>	<i>Change</i>
Mainstream right	42%	36%	-6%
Mainstream left	37%	33%	-3%
Challenger right	8%	12%	+4%
Challenger left	10%	14%	+3%
Challenger green	4%	5%	+1%
All	100%	100%	
(N)	11,424	11,614	

*Note:* Non-voters and people that said don't know or refused to give their vote choice are not shown here.

*Source:* EES 2014

Table 2: Percentage vote for different types of parties as a percentage of previous party type vote share (2014)

		Party type intending to vote for					
		Mainstream right	Mainstream left	Challenger right	Challenger left	Challenger green	None
% vote share	Mainstream right	83%	6%	18%	8%	9%	12%
	Mainstream left	3%	78%	9%	14%	17%	9%
	Challenger right	1%	-	50%	2%	2%	2%
	Challenger left	-	1%	3%	56%	2%	2%
	Challenger green	-	-	1%	3%	54%	-
	None	12%	13%	20%	18%	17%	74%
	All	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(N)	4,110	3,858	1,385	1,566	569	5,515

*Note:* Percentages less than 1% are not shown here. The ‘None’ category includes people who said they did not vote, or were not intending to vote, people that didn’t know how they voted, or how they were intending to vote, and people who refused to give a response to the question.

*Source:* EES 2014

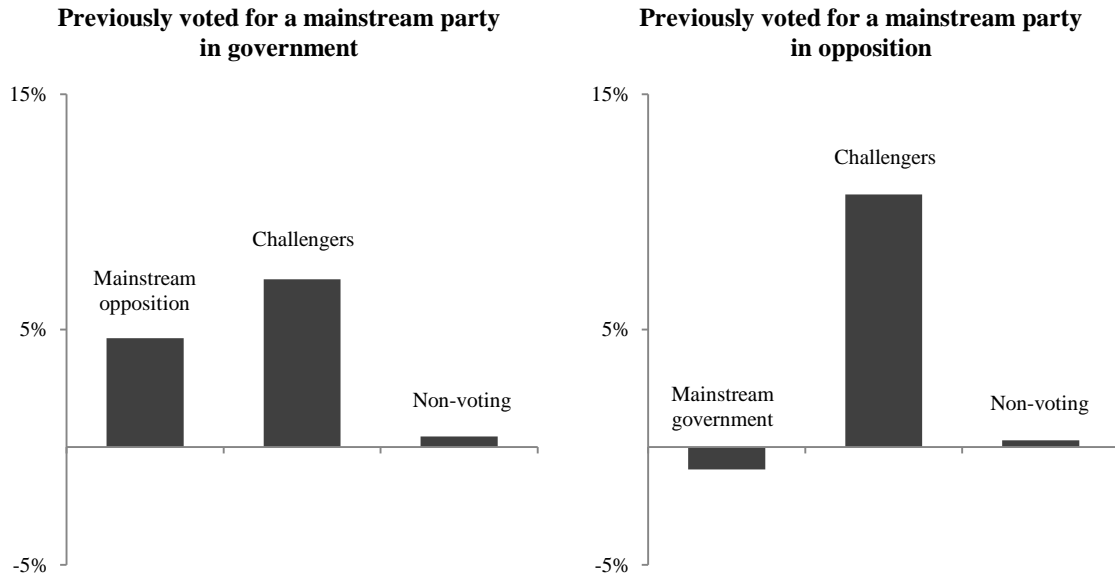
Table 3: Multinomial logit model predicting defection from mainstream parties

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Defection from government mainstream			Defection from opposition mainstream		
	Opposition	Challenger	Non-voter	Government	Challenger	Non-voter
	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Affected by crisis	0.30**	0.24**	0.15*	-0.19	0.30**	0.10
Political interest	-0.08	-0.07	-0.40**	0.13	0.00	-0.34**
Constant	-2.62**	-0.93*	-0.60	-18.4	-2.59**	-2.03**
Pseudo R-square	0.13			0.15		
N	5,814			2,989		

*Note:* \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Reference category for model 1 is vote intention for mainstream governing party, reference category for model 2 is vote intention for mainstream opposition party. Only people who previously voted for a mainstream government party are included in model 1, and only people who voted for a mainstream opposition party are included in model 2. Other control variables are included in both models, but not shown above. These are fixed effects for country, and individual level control variables of age, occupational social class, religiosity, sex, education, citizenship and trade union membership.

*Source:* EES 2014

Figure 2: Changes in the predicted probability of defection/ loyalty for those who experience two economic impacts compared to those who experience none



*Note:* These probabilities come from models 1 and 2 in table 3. They represent the difference between people who score 2 on the economic impact scale and those who score 0 on the scale in the probability of defection/loyalty. The predicted probabilities are for a Dutch man with a white collar job, low education, not in a trade union with the mean age and mean political interest of someone who voted for a mainstream party in the last national election.

*Source:* EES 2014

Table 4: Multinomial logit model predicting defection from mainstream parties to challenger parties and non-voting

		Challenger right	Challenger left	Challenger green	Non-voter
		<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Policy position (high scores = against)	Immigration	0.16**	-0.02	-0.08*	0.00
	EU	0.14**	0.04	-0.07*	0.03*
	Environment	0.01	-0.03	-0.24**	-0.02
	Redistribution	0.02	-0.18**	-0.09*	-0.01
	Govt spending	0.07**	-0.00	-0.06	0.02
Affected by crisis		0.18*	0.19*	0.21	0.11*
Political interest		-0.11	0.04	-0.13	-0.36**
Constant		-5.02**	-2.74*	-0.53	-1.47**

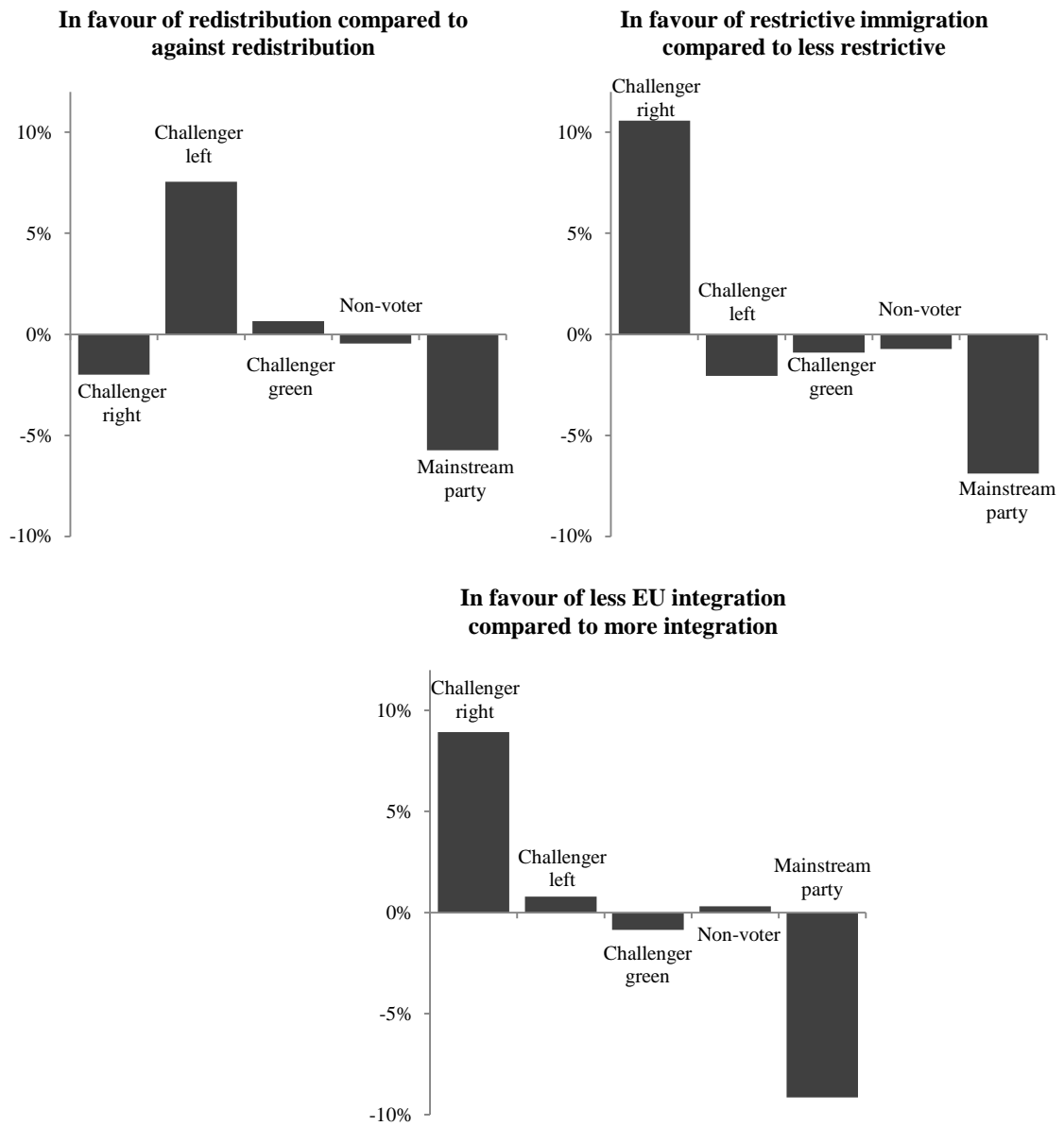
N=8,680. Pseudo R-square = 0.15

*Note:* \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$ . Reference category is vote intention for mainstream party. Only people who previously voted for a mainstream party are included in the model. Policy position is measured on a 0-10 scale for each of the five policy areas. Other control variables are included in the model, but not shown above. These are fixed effects for country, and individual level control variables of age, occupational social class, religiosity, sex, education, citizenship and trade union membership.

*Source:* EES 2014



Figure 3: Changes in the predicted probability of defection/ loyalty when changing policy position on the three policy scales



*Note:* These probabilities come from the model in table 4. They represent the difference between people who score one standard deviation below the mean on the policy scale compared to those who score one standard deviation above the mean on the policy scale. The predicted probabilities are for a Dutch man with a skilled manual job, low education, not in a trade union with the mean age, mean political interest and mean policy positions on the other four scales of someone who voted for a mainstream party in the last national election.

*Source:* EES 2014

## Appendix

*Table A1:* Multinomial logit model predicting mobilisation from non-voting to mainstream party and challenger party voting

		Challenger right	Challenger left	Challenger green	Mainstream
		<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>B</i>
Policy position (high scores = against)	Immigration	0.14**	-0.03	-0.07*	-0.03
	EU	0.07*	0.03	-0.08	-0.02
	Environment	0.00	-0.03	-0.14**	0.01
	Redistribution	0.04	-0.12**	-0.11*	0.01
	Govt spending	0.05	-0.05	-0.04	0.00
Affected by crisis		0.25**	0.11	-0.09	-0.05
Political interest		0.42**	0.59**	0.67**	0.52**
Constant		-5.29**	-2.18**	-1.03	-2.45**

N=4,054. Pseudo R-square = 0.15

*Note:* \* p<0.1 \*\*p<0.05. Reference category is vote intention for no party. Only people who previously did not vote are included in the model. Other control variables are included in the model, but not shown above. These are fixed effects for country, and individual level control variables of age, occupational social class, religiosity, sex, education, citizenship and trade union membership.

*Source:* EES 2014

Table A2:

## Categorization of Parties

**Austria**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Austrian People's Party	Austrian Social Democratic Party	Citizens' Forum Austria	Pirate Party of Austria	The Greens
Austrian Freedom Party		NEOS - The New Austria and Liberal Forum		
Alliance for the Future of Austria		Liberal Forum		
		The Change		

**Belgium**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Christian Democratic and Flemish Party	Workers Party of Belgium	New Flemish Alliance		Green!
Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats	Socialist Party Different	Flemish Interest		
Reform Movement	Pirate Party	ProDG		
The Right	People's Party	People's Party		
Francophone Democratic Federalists	Ecologists			
	Workers Party of Belgium	Party for Freedom and Progress		

**Cyprus**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Democratic Coalition	Social Democrats' Movement	National Popular Front	Citizens' Alliance	Ecological and Environmental Movement (Cyprus Green Party)
Democratic Party	Progressive Party of the Working People	European Party (Cyprus)		

### **Germany**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Christian Democratic Union	Social Democratic Party	Alternative for Germany	Pirates	Human Environmental Animal Protection
Christian Social Union	Alliance 90 / The Greens	National Democratic Party of Germany	The Left	
Free Democratic Party		The Republicans		
		Ecological Democratic Party		
		Party of Bible-abiding Christians		
		Family Party of Germany		

### **Denmark**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Liberals	Social Democratic Party	Danish People's Party	Red-Green Unity List	
Radical Party	Socialist People's Party			
Liberal Alliance				
Christian Democrats				
Conservative People's Party				

### **Greece**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
New Democracy	Panhellenic Socialist Movement	Independent Greeks	Coalition of the Radical Left	Ecologist Greens
Popular Orthodox Rally		Golden Dawn	Democratic Left	
		The River (Greece)	Communist Party of Greece	
			Recreate Greece!	

### **Spain**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Popular Party	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Convergence and Union	United Left	Initiative for Catalonia Greens
		Union, Progress	Amaiur	Equo

	and Democracy	
	Basque Nationalist Party	Catalan Republican Left
	Galician Nationalist Bloc	Commitment / Compromise for Galicia
	Canarian Coalition	Galician Left Alternative
	Forum Asturias	Citizens - Party of the Citizenry
	Future Yes	Podemos (We Can)
	Citizens - Party of the Citizenry	Commitment Coalition
	Voice	Anova-Nationalist Brotherhood
	Democratic Convergence of Catalonia	New Left Catalan
	Democratic Union of Catalonia	Basque Country Unite

### ***Finland***

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
National Coalition	Finnish Social Democrats	Finns Party	Pirate Party of Finland	
Christian Democrats in Finland	Green Union	Freedom Party - Finland's Future	Communist Party of Finland	
Finnish Centre	Left Wing Alliance			
Swedish People's Party	Communist Workers' Party - For Peace and Socialism			
	For the Poor			

### ***France***

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Union for a Popular Movement	Socialist Party	National Front	Miscellaneous Left	
New Centre	Europe Ecology - The Greens	Miscellaneous Right	New Anticapitalist Party	
Arise the Republic	Left Radical Party		Workers' Struggle	
Democratic Movement	Left Front		Alliance of Regionalists, Ecologists and Progressives of Overseas regions and Peoples' Solidarity	
Centrist Alliance			New Deal	
Union of Democrats and			Regionalists	

Independents –  
UDI + MoDem  
Radical Party

### ***Ireland***

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Family of the Irish (Fine Gael)	Labour Party	Christian Solidarity (CS)	Ourselves Alone (Sinn Fein)	New Vision (Fis Nua)
Soldiers of Destiny (Fianna Fail)	Green Party		Socialist Party	
			People Before Profit Alliance (PBP)	
			South Kerry Independent Alliance (SKIA)	
			Worker's Party (WP)	
			United Left Alliance	
			Non Party/People's Convention (PC)	

### ***Italy***

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
People of Freedom	Democratic Party	South Tyrol People's Party	Left Ecology Movement	
Northern League	Civil Revolution	Civic Choice	Five Star Movement	
Brothers of Italy - National Centre-right	List di Pietro Italy of Values			
Great South-Movement for the Autonomies				
Union for Christian and Center Democrats				
Go Italy				
New Centre-Right				
Populares for Italy				

### ***Luxembourg***

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Democratic Party	Christian Social People's Party	Alternative Democratic Reform Party	Pirate Party of Luxembourg	The Greens
	Socialist Workers' Party	Party for Full Democracy	The Left	

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Communist Party

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**Malta**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Nationalist Party	Labour Party			Democratic Alternative

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**The Netherlands**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	Labour Party	Party of Freedom	Socialist Party	Green Left
Christian Democratic Appeal	Democrats '66	Reformed Political Party	Pirate Party of the Netherlands	
Christian Union		50Plus		
Party for the Animals		Coalition CU - SGP		

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**Portugal**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Social Democratic Party	Socialist Party	Popular Monarchist Party	Unified Democratic Coalition	Party for Animals and Nature
Social Democratic Center-Popular Party			Left Bloc	
Earth Party			Portuguese Workers' Communist Party/Reorganized Movement of the Party of the Proletariat	
Coalition (Partido Social Democrata + Centro Democrático Social/Partido Popular) (Coal. (PSD + CDS-PP))			Challenger Left Party	

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Ecologist Party

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	'The Greens'
	Partido Comunista Português (PCP)

**Sweden**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Moderate Coalition Party	Social Democratic Labour Party	Sweden Democrats	Left Party	Green Ecology Party
Liberal People's Party			Feminist Initiative	
Centre Party			Pirate Party	
Christian Democrats				

**United Kingdom**

<b>Mainstream Right</b>	<b>Mainstream Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Right</b>	<b>Challenger Party Left</b>	<b>Challenger Party Green</b>
Conservative Party	Labour Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	Scottish National Party	Green Party
	Liberal Democrats	British National Party	Party of Wales (Plaid Cymru)	
		Christian Party	Socialist Labour Party	
		English Democrats		