

PhD in POLITICAL THEORY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION

Are critical citizens a threat to democracy? Political trust and economic crisis in Europe.

The work aims at investigating the cross-national determinants of system support and democratic responsiveness, conceived as “the capacity of government to satisfy the governed by executing its policies in a way that corresponds to their demands” (Morlino, 2011, p. 208) with a focus upon representative institutions (political parties, parliaments, politicians). The research is focused on well-established European democracies before and after the economic crisis (2004-2014) and applies a *most similar systems design* (MSSD) with a quantitative methodology based on European Social Survey data (ESS 2004-2014). In particular, the work firstly explores the association between trust in political institutions (Norris 2011), conceived as a function of policy performance, economic satisfaction and cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 2007).

The results of the models seem to confirm the theoretical hypothesis about the relevance of economic determinants, with individual economic perception as a stronger predictor of system support, especially in countries free from EU conditionality and with higher performances on public expenditures and lower deficits. Moreover, cultural determinants related to political sophistication and closeness to political parties seem to have a role in predicting support for democratic system, independently of the implementation of conditionality measures. In addition, the work tests for interaction terms of economic satisfaction and political closeness with the EU crisis. The results might suggest that the economic crisis had a role in exacerbating the role of evaluative indicators (such as economic evaluation) on trust in representative institutions. Conversely, cultural and political determinants (such as political interest and party closeness) seem to be less relevant in time of economic hardship.

Furthermore, the work analyses the relationship between political trust and political behaviour, with a focus upon vote for anti-EU parties in times of Economic recession. The chapter shows how, following Mair’s prevision, the diffusion of anti-European populist parties in the

European public sphere affected both the key defining features of party systems, and namely format and mechanics, according to a *political opportunity structure* approach.

More specifically, the work shows how the likelihood to vote for an anti-EU party is related to the party-system supply: the levels of party polarization and the effective number of electoral parties proved in fact their relevance in defining the mechanism of “voice” (Hirschman, 1970) of *critical citizens* in times of economic hardship, by channelling back into the electoral arena social instances and arising issues, related to a new cleavage between “winners” and “losers” of economic integration.