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What if it Kicked in More Strongly? A Counterfactual Analysis of Protest Voting's Electoral Consequences in Greece, Italy and Spain

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ABSTRACT

Within the framework of the current democratic crisis, the electoral success of the so-called anti-establishment parties has been repeatedly and often associated with protest voting. Several scholars have tried to deal with this topic in the past, focusing particularly on the psychological dimension of the matter, i.e. on whether individual support for these actors was actually characterised by protest motivations. Yet, in so doing, they have almost completely overlooked the issue of how protest actually contributes to the electoral performance of apparent protest actors. The aim of this paper is precisely to fill this gap. Indeed, by looking at three Southern European countries (i.e. Greece, Italy and Spain), it aims to test the common-sense hypothesis that a higher strength of protest motivations in voters' minds implies an increasing success of anti-establishment parties at the electoral level. Methodologically, this is accomplished by a series of counterfactual regression models on data from the 2014 European Election Voter Study (EES).

KEYWORDS

Electoral behaviour; protest voting; anti-establishment parties; political dissatisfaction; democracy

Introduction

As part of the multiple and composite pressures currently faced by European liberal democracies, this special issue looks at electoral dynamics, particularly the role that protest messages play. This mainly consists of expressions of discontent and/or disaffection with the way political systems work. So far, the existence of an electoral protest has been generally inferred by specific dynamics at the macro level, such as electoral earthquakes and shocks in the morphology of the party systems. This was true, for example, in the 2000s, when a substantive growth of radical right parties in Europe was interpreted by some scholars as the expression of increasing political discontent and unease within specific sectors of society (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2006). The same applies to the recent rise of the so-called anti-establishment parties, i.e. parties sharing 'resentment against the establishment, the elites, the power block' (see also Abedi, 2004; Schedler, 1996, p. 292), whose electoral success is indeed often understood as the outcome of *protest voting*, i.e. casting a vote with the main aim to frighten or punish the whole political system and/or elite (Van

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der Brug, Fennema, & Tillie, 2000; see also Van der Eijk, Franklin, & Marsh, 1996a). Yet, as long as such claim is not supported by clear voter-level evidence, alternative explanations might hold as well. For instance, citizens might vote for these parties not just in order to scare their established competitors, but also because they might truly support their policy platform and/or because they identify with them, either ideologically or psychologically.

Many scholars have already devoted attention to testing the effect of protest motivations *vis-à-vis* alternative factors to explain vote choice for various forms of anti-establishment parties (e.g. Eirlingsson & Persson, 2011; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018; Van der Brug et al., 2000). However, the strong focus of these contributions on the dimension of individual voting behaviour has paradoxically had the effect of leaving an alternative (but still relevant) issue unanswered: to what extent does protest actually foster the electoral success of apparent ‘protest’ actors, namely anti-establishment parties? The aim of this contribution is to investigate that question. By means of a tailored counterfactual approach, indeed, it seeks to empirically test whether stronger protest motivations in voters’ minds would actually translate into a better performance of anti-establishment parties in the aggregate, compared to baseline conditions. Specifically, this is achieved through a comparative analysis of Greece, Italy and Spain, i.e. three countries where the electoral consequences of the European debt crisis have appeared more tangible and were this more explicitly understood as protest-related in public and scientific debate (e.g. Altiparmakis & Lorenzini, 2018; Verney & Bosco, 2014). To a large extent, this was due to both the unrivalled levels of electoral volatility reached in such contexts and to the huge success of ‘third’ non-established parties, which many experts interpreted as the outcome of voters’ protest against an ineffective political class (see also Cordero & Montero, 2015; Vidal, 2018).

In order to test such common-sense assumption, the analysis I propose relies on individual-level data from the 2014 European Election Voter Study (EES) (Schmitt, Braun, Popa, Mikhaylov, & Dwinger, 2016), combined with party-level information from the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Polk et al., 2017), used to categorise anti-establishment parties on the basis their anti-elite and anti-corruption scores determined by international political experts. The reason behind this choice is European Parliament (EP) Elections have all it takes to represent privileged observation points for studying protest voting dynamics. Indeed, thanks to their second-order nature, they are generally regarded as a quintessential protest arena, where minor parties tend to perform well (e.g. Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011) and where dissatisfaction toward the elites structures party preferences more strongly than in national elections (e.g. Hobolt, 2015), alongside with other subjective considerations (Weber & Franklin, 2017). In addition, one should also consider the specific character of this 2014 EP Election, i.e. the largest electoral competition ever held in Europe until then, characterised by an unprecedented surge of anti-establishment parties (e.g. Treib, 2014).

In view of the foregoing, the article intends to offer both an innovative approach to the study of protest voting while also shedding light on a key issue underpinning this special issue, i.e. the dynamics underlying the electoral rise of agents of democratic stress across a few key European countries.

The Protest Vote in the Literature: A Brief Assessment

In order to analyse protest electoral dynamics, it is essential to begin by clarifying the concept of protest voting itself. As already summarised elsewhere (see Camatarri, 2019),

a first option in this respect is to rely on party-based approach, i.e. assuming that a protest voter is a someone who votes for an apparent protest party (e.g. Betz & Immerfal, 1998; Svensson, 1996; Van der Brug & Fennema, 2003). Other authors, however, maintain that deriving the anti-elite character of an electoral choice from the rhetorical and/or programmatic features of the party (or candidate) (s)he voted for would be simply inappropriate, as protest motivations pertain – first and foremost – to the very individual sphere of the voter (e.g. Bergh, 2004).

Building upon this argument, Van der Brug et al. (2000) conceptualised protest voting according to a voter-based approach, i.e. as casting a vote in order ‘to express disenchantment with the political system or with the political elite’ (p. 83). To elaborate, what they meant by that was that a protest vote – if any – should be characterised by two main elements. First, ‘discontent with the ruling parties and politicians’ (Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007, p. 479), both in the form of long-term considerations about the fairness and trustworthiness of the political system and of short-term evaluations of day-to-day government parties’ performance (e.g. Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018). Second, a low explanatory relevance of political attitudes, such as ideology and policy positions, on party preferences (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2000). Indeed, as also other authors pointed out before, ‘protest votes’, to be conceptually meaningful, shall be understood as qualitatively different from ‘policy votes’ or ‘ideological votes’ (see Van der Brug & Fennema, 2003).

Van der Brug et al. (2000) tried to test such expectations on radical right (anti-immigration) parties. However, they had to conclude that votes for these political forces could not be considered as protest votes, as they appeared to be motivated by the same ideological and pragmatic considerations characterising support to all other parties. Such a conclusion generated reactions from several scholars. Norris (2005), for example, although in agreement with Van der Brug et al., criticised this attempt for failing ‘to consider any direct evidence for or against protest voting, such as indicators of political disaffection, trust and alienation among radical right supporters’ (p. 151).¹ For the record, a first effort in this direction had been already developed by Bergh (2004). By distinguishing between two levels of political trust, i.e. trust in political institutions and trust in political elites (cf. Easton, 1965; Norris, 1999), he found that, net of several policies and ideological orientations, there is a significant effect of indicators of elite distrust on voting for parties with a protest profile (see also Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; cf. Bélanger & Aarts, 2006). To be precise, these conclusions were based on the analyses of three countries: Austria, Denmark and Norway. Other contributions have also emphasised that issue and ideological considerations are not mutually exclusive *vis-à-vis* protest considerations in determining the decision to cast a protest vote for populist parties (e.g. Billiet & De Witte, 1995; Hosch-Dayican, 2011). For the record, however, only a few of these studies are based on extensive cross-country analyses (e.g. Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Hernández, 2018).

Disentangling Protest Voting: Towards a Research Hypothesis

As one can guess from the review above, protest voting is still a quite underdeveloped topic in electoral research. Indeed, scholars not only disagree on how to define it, but also on the empirical approaches that should be used to assess it. For the specific purposes of this analysis, however, Van der Brug et al.’s (2000) conceptualisation of protest voting

appears the most appropriate solution, for at least two reasons. First, unlike cases focusing on the nature of party voted for, it properly defines protest votes as objects concerning the individual dimension of the voter. Second, it brings about a clear conceptual distinction between protest votes and other types of votes, such as ‘policy’, ‘ideological’ and/or ‘strategic’ votes (see also Van der Brug & Fennema, 2009).²

On this basis, and drawing upon some previous attempts to operationalise the concept, here I assume protest motivations as comprising two underlying components (e.g. Bergh, 2004; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018). The first has to do with a sense of *policy performance failure*, i.e. the perception of parties’ inability to deal effectively with daily problems regarded by citizens as important (see also Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Lijsthaug, 2007; Curini, Jou, & Memoli, 2012). The second regards a sense of *political system failure*, which relates to a more general feeling of estrangement from politics due to a perceived lack of transparency and fairness of institutional processes and outputs (e.g. Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2013; see also Di Palma, 1970; Montero & Torcal, 2006).

In line with Van der Brug et al.’s definition of protest voting (2000), I will assume that the incidence of protest voting in an election can be inferred from the strength of both these components in explaining voting behaviour compared to ideological, policy and/or other types of individual considerations. In this respect, the exclusive focus of this work on anti-establishment parties does not necessarily mean that protest voting cannot have to do also with alternative options, such as third parties in general, abstention, blank votes, spoilt ballots, etc. And indeed, this is something that the literature on the topic has taken into account (e.g. Bélanger, 2004; Bélanger & Nadeau, 2005; Cohen, 2018; Kang, 2004; Kouba & Lysek, 2019). Yet, the popular *cliché* that the electoral performance of anti-establishment forces somehow resembles the strength of protest sentiments in an election (e.g. Hartleb, 2015; Serazio, 2016) is still waiting to be tested. In my view, that is enough to devote some *ad-hoc* attention to the subject.

In light of this, this contribution aims to test such widespread common-sense assumption on a counterfactual basis, i.e. investigating whether vote shares of anti-establishment competitors in Greece, Italy and Spain would actually increase (or decrease) depending on a higher (or lower) strength of protest motivations as drivers of individual vote choice, compared to baseline conditions. Details about the technical procedure used for this purpose follow in the next section.

Data and Analytical Strategy

I already pointed out the empirical test presented on data from the 2014 EES Voter Study. The main advantage of this statistical source is that it includes simultaneous information about electoral behaviour in each of the three countries of discussion, which is particularly fitting for the comparative purposes of this work and more generally of the special issue in which it is set. Secondly, as already mentioned before, the survey provides a cross-section of an electoral event, i.e. the 2014 European Election, whose results have been repeatedly associated with potential protest dynamics. And indeed, when could protest voting reasonably occur if not within the context of a second-order competition, when the electoral effects of the economic crisis apparently began to emerge in the form of aggregate anti-establishment support (e.g. De Sio, Emanuele, & Maggini, 2014; see also Hobolt & Tilley, 2016)?

Moving on to the operationalisation strategy used in this study, the first step is to define the character of my dependent variable, i.e. party choice at the 2014 EP Election. In a conventional research framework, a first reasonable approach would be to characterise this latter as binary, i.e. contrasting the party voted for to all the other parties, as if the choice for these parties can be studied independently from the preference for other parties. However, if this argument fits quite well in those cases where only two parties (or two candidates) compete for public office, this is definitely not the case for Western European multi-party systems, where voters notoriously develop and weigh multiple preferences across multiple competitors (Van der Eijk, 2016).

In light of this, the strategy I adopt here is to reshape the data into the so-called stacked form (e.g. Oppenhuis, 1995; Stimson, 1985; Van der Eijk, Franklin, & Oppenhuis, 1996b). Similarly to other contributions, in my stacked matrix each respondent is represented by as many cases as the number of relevant parties (s)he was asked to choose among in the vote choice question (e.g. Garzia & De Angelis, 2016; see also Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006). This means that the resulting party choice variable concerns not only the type of party voted for (e.g. established versus non-established options) but also all the parties that have not been voted for by a respondent. Moreover, appropriate identifiers allow variables characterising the relationship between such parties and individual respondents (e.g. ideological and/or policy issue distance, psychological closeness, etc.) to be added as potential predictors. In the end, what one gets by doing so is the possibility to enquire into the global effect of specific considerations on electoral decision-making in general in multi-party systems (see also Van der Eijk, 2017) by means of mainstream techniques, such as regression analysis.

Amongst other things, a stacked data environment is also ideal for the construction of counterfactual electoral scenarios such as those at the core of this contribution (Van der Eijk, 2002). In this respect, the empirical strategy that I implement involves manipulating the size of the obtained regressions' coefficients so as to observe consequent variations in predicted vote shares of anti-establishment actors across several counterfactual scenarios (see also Van der Brug, Van der Eijk, & Franklin, 2007; Walter & Van der Eijk, 2016). More specifically, such procedure relies on several steps. First, a series of baseline models explaining voters' choices in the three countries under analysis are estimated. These are standard logistic regressions to be computed separately for each country in the stacked dataset. Secondly, the estimated regression coefficients derived from the first step are used to calculate voters' probability to vote for each party in different scenarios, in which the burden of protest voting in an election (i.e. the preponderance of protest motivations in driving party choice over other attitudes, as specified previously) increases. Thirdly, predicted probabilities are transformed into counterfactual individual votes, by selecting as expected vote choice the party obtaining the highest predicted probability to be voted for by individual respondents. Afterwards, these votes are aggregated into counterfactual vote shares.³

Importantly, the outcome of the first step alone, i.e. regression coefficients, would not be enough to answer to the research question being dealt with here. Indeed, what coefficients only provide is individual-level information about the effects that a set of variables has on party choice. Yet, the aim of this analysis is to dig into the cross-level effect that higher (or lower) protest motivations have on the aggregate performance of anti-establishment parties. The two following steps (i.e. coefficient manipulation

and aggregation of predicted votes per party) have been specifically designed for this purpose.

This being cleared up, another key point to clarify concerns identifying anti-establishment parties within this context. In principle, they could be assessed by looking at different aspects: e.g. an office-seeking dimension, defining them as parties having or not having a significant chance of participating in government (e.g. De Vries & Hobolt, 2012); a policy-seeking dimension, describing them as parties focusing on marginal issues (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Wagner, 2011); and, finally, an organisational dimension, emphasising their newness and smallness. Indeed, both these elements have an anti-establishment appeal, as they both entail innocence *vis-à-vis* much more experienced political organisations (Schedler, 1996; see also Sikk, 2012). For reasons of simplicity, however, here I refer to the only discursive dimension. In particular, I define anti-establishment parties as those parties that make use of an intensive anti-elite tone, according to the most recent CHES expert survey. Basically, adding up two scales from 0 to 10, on which parties have been positioned according to their emphasis in 2014 on anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetorics respectively, I selected only those parties scoring on the whole more than 15 points as anti-establishment. For the sake of understanding, I provided a list of these actors in the final Appendix. Interestingly, if one looks at CHES experts' average judgements about party ideologies (see rightmost column), both left and right-wing actors appear therein.

Having said that, the next step is to introduce the independent variables in the equation to predict EP party choice, and how these are treated in the stacked matrix. The first is party identification, i.e. a measure of psychological closeness to a party built by using two variables of the original dataset, the first one indicating whether the respondent has a party identification or not, and the second one measuring the strength of this feeling. The final variable employed is a combination of these two, which assumes a value of 0 when the subject is not identified with the stacked party and goes up to the value of 3 for increasing levels of identification.

A second predictor is ideological proximity to a party, i.e. the subjectively perceived distance between a voter and the respective party in the data matrix on a left-right continuum (e.g. Downs, 1957). The questionnaire contains a battery of items in which respondents were asked to indicate their own position as well as that of each political party on a 10-point scale of which the extremes were labelled 'left' and 'right'. From these responses, perceived left-right distances have been computed as the difference between one's own self-placement and the position attributed to each party. The stronger the effect of perceived left-right proximity on vote choice, the stronger the extent of ideological voting.

Thirdly, we have several policy-related predictors. In this regard, seven of the issues provided by the 2014 EES Voter Study are considered: EU integration, state of the economy, redistribution of resources, services versus taxes, same-sex marriages, immigration and environment. All are measured with batteries of statements to which respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed. Since the survey lacks information about perceived party positions on these same topics, an alternative procedure is used in order to estimate the contribution of such attitudes to voting behaviour. Basically, for each of the parties separately, series of bivariate regressions including EP party choice as dependent variable and each attitude in turn as predictor are performed. The resulting predicted probabilities of these regressions are then saved and inserted into the stacked data matrix. As these values are simply linear transformations of the original variable,

they may, therefore, be used again as a proxy measure of closeness to a party, so as to assess how well each attitude predicts vote choice for the different parties.⁴

The same procedure is applied in order to operationalise the two dimensions that are considered to be at the basis of protest voting, i.e. attitudes towards the performance of ruling parties and towards the political system as a whole. Concerning the first, I make use of government (dis)approval, i.e. a dichotomous variable assuming value 1 when the respondent disapproves the current government's record. Concerning the second, I instead refer to general attitudes towards the political system, represented by two indicators of external political (in)efficacy and by a variable measuring public confidence in national parliaments. Specifically, to estimate the effect of these elements on vote choice, predicted probabilities are computed by running two separate regressions, one for the item of the first dimension (government disapproval) and one for the three items of detachment from the political system at once. In this way, it becomes possible to explore the extent to which the assumed attitudinal clusters at the base of protest voting predict vote choice for the different parties under analysis in each country.

Last but not least, a single socio-structural factor has been added in order to account for the effect of socio-economic and demographic characteristics on vote choice. To be precise, such factor summarises the impact of the following variables: gender, age, age ending full-time education (in five categories), living area (rural versus urban), a dummy for religiosity (believer versus non-believer), a 7-point scale of church attendance, a dummy for belonging to a union membership, occupation (in 8 categories) and perceived position in society on an 11-point scale (0 = lowest level; 10 = highest level). For further details, refer to the descriptive statistics in the final Appendix.

Analysis

As explained above, to ascertain counterfactually whether the aggregate performance of anti-establishment parties at the ballot boxes is actually amenable to the strength of protest motivations in an election, the first step is to implement a baseline model of individual voting behaviour at the 2014 EP Election in each of the three national sub-samples. For the sake of understanding, Table 1 provides a comprehensive account of the obtained results. A figure which is worth noticing in this respect is that, once controlling for all other factors, variables summarising perceptions of policy and political system performance appear to affect voters' decision-making in all the three countries under analysis.

Although enquiring into the individual and contextual sources of such differences would definitely be an interesting deal of research, such effort would not help to answer to the research question at stake. In order to do so, the obtained regression outcomes should rather be manipulated so as to simulate an increasing incidence of protest motivations in the explanation of voting behaviour, *vis-à-vis* all other factors, in line with Van der Brug et al.'s (2000) definition of a protest vote. Operationally, this is accomplished by three successive steps, in which the effect of attitudes towards party and political system performance are doubled at every turn, while those regarding all other variables (i.e. party identification, ideology, issues positions and socio-structural elements) are divided by two. The result of this are three distinct counterfactual scenarios describing the vote shares that anti-establishment parties would obtain if voting decisions were increasingly protest-based in the three countries.⁵ For the record, in a stacked framework the

Table 1. Factors explaining EP vote choice (Logit regressions).

VARIABLES	Greece	Italy	Spain
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	2.521*** (0.133)	3.140*** (0.184)	2.235*** (0.211)
LEFT-RIGHT PROXIMITY TO PARTY	0.555*** (0.0583)	0.526*** (0.0660)	0.339*** (0.0676)
EU INTEGRATION	0.167 (1.124)	3.063*** (1.128)	3.981 (5.528)
IMMIGRATION	3.323*** (1.063)	−0.240 (0.769)	1.666 (1.528)
ENVIRONMENT	2.572* (1.519)	1.140 (1.120)	0.297 (1.749)
SAME-SEX MARRIAGE	2.216*** (0.840)	−0.307 (0.720)	0.428 (1.003)
REDISTRIBUTION	−0.0468 (0.860)	−1.735 (1.204)	1.608 (1.319)
SERVICES VERSUS TAXES	1.821 (1.503)	0.436 (1.057)	2.404 (3.349)
MARKET REGULATION	1.496 (1.159)	0.618 (1.345)	1.131 (3.139)
POLITICAL SYSTEM PERFORMANCE	1.405*** (0.537)	1.796*** (0.631)	2.656*** (0.686)
PARTIES' POLICY PERFORMANCE	1.418** (0.602)	1.648** (0.676)	1.821*** (0.693)
SOCIAL STRUCTURE	1.092** (0.509)	1.206** (0.513)	3.103*** (0.579)
Constant	−15.36*** (1.699)	−11.30*** (1.328)	−15.12*** (3.848)
Observations	3528	2354	1271
Pseudo <i>R</i> -squared	0.631	0.660	0.531

Source: Own elaboration on 2014 European Election Voter Study.

Regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

relationship between dependent and independent variables is not directionally specific (e.g. Van der Brug & Fennema, 2009). Therefore, to make sure that the increasing coefficients imply stronger protest motivations, manipulations of baseline vote functions have been exclusively applied to respondents with bad attitudes and opinions towards the performance of the political system. Specifically, such individuals are here operationalised as those who disapprove their current government's record and whose scores across the three items of *political system failure* (i.e. about political inefficacy and distrust in the National Parliament) are all positive.

Table 2 represents the output of this procedure, consisting in the predicted electoral outcomes of the anti-establishment parties included in the 2014 EES Voter Study under the baseline condition (first row) and under each counterfactual condition (second to fourth row) in the three countries. Surprisingly, a first look at the data already suggests that the common-sense hypothesis, according to which anti-establishment actors would electorally benefit from higher protest considerations in an election, is only partially met. But first things first. Protest-based accounts of anti-establishment success definitely hold in the case of the Greek Communist Party, whose vote percentage shifts from 7.6% under baseline conditions up almost to 24.08% in a scenario where the impact of protest motivations is basically 8 times bigger. The same can apparently be said about Golden Dawn, which gains approximately 11 percentage points along the same sequence. However, as soon as one looks at other Greek national competitors, i.e. Syriza and the

Table 2. Anti-establishment parties' vote shares under different counterfactual conditions (%) – Greece, Italy and Spain.

Scenarios	GREECE				ITALY		SPAIN
	<i>Greek Com. Party</i>	<i>Syriza</i>	<i>Ind. Greeks</i>	<i>Golden Dawn</i>	<i>North League</i>	<i>5 Star Movement</i>	<i>Podemos</i>
Baseline model	7.55 (5.52–10.26)	36.73 (32.57–41.11)	5.71 (3.97–8.16)	11.22 (8.71–14.34)	6.74 (4.59–9.79)	17.79 (14.21–22.03)	22.84 (17.87–28.72)
Counterfactual 1	10.00 (7.63–13.00)	36.32 (32.17–40.69)	4.49 (2.97–6.73)	12.24 (9.62–15.46)	8.09 (5.70–11.34)	17.25 (13.73–21.45)	24.14 (19.04–30.09)
Counterfactual 2	15.71 (12.75–19.22)	27.55 (23.76–31.69)	4.49 (2.97–6.73)	16.32 (13.30–19.88)	7.82 (5.48–11.03)	14.29 (11.07–18.24)	26.29 (21.00–32.37)
Counterfactual 3	24.08 (12.85–18.34)	13.67 (10.90–17.02)	1.43 (0.68–2.97)	22.04 (18.58–25.94)	14.02 (10.83–17.95)	11.86 (8.94–15.58)	27.59 (22.19–33.72)

Note: 95% CI in parentheses.

Source: Own elaboration on 2014 European Election Voter Study.

Independent Greeks, such an initial picture becomes less clear. Indeed, both these parties end up losing a huge part of their electoral support in the case of highest protest motivations (cf. Public Issue, 2012). Such loss would equate to approximately 63% and 75% of their overall vote share under baseline conditions. In Italy, the situation is just as ambivalent. More specifically, while the Five Star Movement seems surprisingly penalised by protest voting at the individual-level (its vote share falls by almost 6 percentage points along the varying counterfactuals), the North League would more than double its fortunes along the four scenarios (from 6.7% to 14%, be exact). In Spain, to conclude, the newcomer Podemos appears to conform to the protest voting hypothesis. Indeed, its vote share tends to increase as political system and policy performance failure considerations get more prominent in the electorate, although not as strongly as in the other cases.

In light of these findings, the main conclusion that one can draw is that, at least concerning the three countries explored here, higher protest motivations do not necessarily boost the electoral score of anti-establishment parties. Rather, this turns out to happen only in a few heterogeneous cases, ideologically speaking, i.e. the Northern League in Italy, the Communist Party and Golden Dawn in Greece and somehow Podemos in Spain.

Most probably, this happens because the other parties, i.e. Syriza, 5 Star Movement and Independent Greeks, despite being persistently understood as anti-establishment actors in public debate (and by external observers) are likely to be more advantaged when voters choose based on considerations other than pure protest, e.g. perceived proximity on ideology and/or policy issues.

The fact that also this second set of parties is ideologically diverse (this is confirmed also by CHES expert judgements as reported in Appendix) is definitely worthy of attention. Previous research has indeed demonstrated that pure protest voters tend to have stronger affinities with right-wing than they have with left-wing anti-establishment parties (e.g. Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). In this sense, one should reasonably expect that outstandingly prominent protest motivations behind vote choices in an election (as those I simulated in the third scenario of each country) should be breeding ground especially for the first ones. Yet, the results of this analysis seem to suggest a more mixed picture, where counterfactual bonuses (or deficits) incurred by political parties do not appear to align to either ideological camp. Of course, only additional explorations in space and time will confirm or deny this tendency on a larger scale. For now, suffice it to say that the common-sense expectation that stronger protest motivations would necessarily boost the electoral fortunes of anti-establishment parties at large is at least partially overstated.

Concluding Remarks

Accounts of the current democratic crisis refer to the success of so-called anti-establishment parties as one of its main electoral expressions. Yet, the common assumption that the electoral rise of these agents of democratic stress can be mainly traced back to citizens' will to express a purely protest message against their elites and political systems had never received a proper empirical test so far. In light of that, this article sought to implement a counterfactual empirical strategy tailored to understanding whether a higher incidence of protest-related attitudes in electoral decisions (compared to real-world conditions) would actually improve the vote shares of anti-establishment parties in Greece, Italy and Spain.

As mentioned, the obtained results show that only two of the anti-establishment parties concerned would benefit from an increasing power of protest motivations in an election, while for all the others the situation would either remain the same or even get worse. Such findings are of relevance for the purposes of this special issue, as they suggest that the causal process underlying the rise of pivotal agents of democratic stress in a few key European countries is most probably not as intuitive as it is generally thought to be. In analytical terms, however, this achievement is only the first step towards the creation of a unified and comprehensive framework on protest in elections. To achieve this, further progress should be made in different directions. First, the robustness of these findings should be checked by extending the analysis to other European countries and compared with the electoral results of alternative party types. This would allow us to observe whether a clear pattern of protest voting for anti-establishment parties arises or not. Secondly, a consideration of the possible triggering factors, especially on the political supply side, should be seriously considered. In particular, the question about what makes one party, rather than another, voted on the basis of protest considerations still has to find the space it deserves in electoral research.

More generally, the results presented here suggest that further attention should be given to how electoral results are understood from an external perspective. As a matter of fact, if parties usually believed to strongly base their success on protest votes actually do not, the risk of a misunderstanding of their voters' motivations, as well as of misguided reactions by political actors, could be rather likely. In this sense, future research should also focus on the extent to which elections actually work as an effective channel of protest messages between voters and elites (see also Converse, 1975) and on what happens if they do not. For example, would miscommunications lead to more frustration among the voters? Or to changing motivations, or to apathy and non-voting? Moreover, what are the consequences for parties of being seen in public discourse as protest parties or not?

Detailed analyses on all these matters would be definitely beneficial for an even more comprehensive understanding of protest electoral dynamics, as well as of their actual contribution to contemporary democratic stress in modern democracies.

Notes

1. As Van der Brug and Fennema (2007) themselves later explained, the empirical remedy she put in place consisted in estimating a positive relationship between voting for a radical right party and institutional trust, as well as a negative correlation between satisfaction with the government and voting for a radical right party, arguing they could be a sign of protest voting.
2. According to some, this way of understanding the role of protest in elections could be too restrictive (see also Hainsworth, 2000). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the desire to show discontent toward the elites does not necessarily exclude a concurrent role of ideological or issue considerations in driving vote choice for an alleged protest party and vice versa (see also Hernández & Kriesi, 2016). Yet, this finding is basically inconclusive about the concept of protest voting as it is usually conceived, i.e. an issueless choice cast 'against' the political establishment, rather than 'in favour of' any programmatic platform' (e.g. Van der Brug & Fennema 2007; see also Kitschelt 1995).
3. Following Van der Brug et al. (2007), I did not use election results of anti-establishment parties as baseline vote shares here, as this would negatively affect comparisons between reality and counterfactual situations. This is due to the fact that estimated models always

embed a certain amount of error that is not present in actual values. Therefore, exclusively referring to predicted values (both under baseline and counterfactual conditions) ensures that the resulting differences in electoral outcomes are only due to coefficient manipulation, since the estimates are all affected by the same amount of error.

4. The actual variable which is added to the stacked matrix is not the predicted probability, but the deviation of this latter from their mean for each party (e.g. Van der Eijk, Franklin & Oppenhuis, 1996b). For a more detailed discussion, see Franklin & De Sio (2011).
5. The reason why I limit myself to estimating three counterfactual scenarios only is that, as in any simulative approach in the social sciences, the manipulation of real world conditions should never exceed a certain threshold in order to preserve the overall plausibility of the resulting outcomes (see also Sapir et al., 2011).

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Appendices

Table A1. List of anti-establishment parties in Greece, Italy and Spain in 2014.

COUNTRY	Party Label	Party Name (English)	Average position on ideological scale (Extreme Left = 0; Extreme Right = 10)
GREECE	AE	Independent Greeks	8.8
	KKE	Communist Party of Greece	0.7
	SYRIZA	Coalition for The Radical Left	2
	CA	Golden Dawn	9.9
ITALY	LN	North League	8.9
	M5S	Five Star Movement	4.7
	RC*	Communist Refoundation Party*	0.3
SPAIN	PODEMOS	We Can	1.6

Source: 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey.

*Not present in the EES 2014 dataset.

Table A2. Descriptive statistics of independent variables.

	Greece			Italy			Spain		
	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Left-right proximity to stack party	6.80	2.45	6733	6.88	2.60	5786	7.07	2.54	6141
Party identification with stack party	0.17	0.60	7136	0.17	0.57	6696	0.12	0.44	6137
Proximity to stack party on EU issue	0.50	0.08	4960	0.50	0.10	4224	0.50	0.03	2792
Proximity to stack party on immigration issue	0.50	0.09	5104	0.50	0.15	4448	0.50	0.09	3040
Proximity to stack party on environmental issue	0.50	0.06	5104	0.50	0.10	4320	0.50	0.07	3000
Proximity to stack party on same-sex marriage issue	0.50	0.11	5064	0.50	0.17	4376	0.50	0.12	2968
Proximity to stack party on redistribution issue	0.50	0.11	5104	0.50	0.10	4384	0.50	0.09	3016
Proximity to stack party on services versus taxes issue	0.50	0.07	4872	0.50	0.11	4264	0.50	0.04	2960
Proximity to stack party market regulation issue	0.50	0.09	5064	0.50	0.09	4128	0.50	0.04	2800
Perception of political system performance	0.50	0.19	5024	0.50	0.18	3856	0.50	0.18	2768
Perception of parties' policy performance	0.50	0.16	5152	0.50	0.16	4504	0.50	0.19	3056
Socio-structural characteristics	0.51	0.18	4743	0.51	0.21	3557	0.51	0.24	2712

Source: 2014 European Election Study.