Exploring the political efficacy of citizens under conditions of austerity

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Conference Session: 5.5.2 Political attitudes and voting

Abstract
Since on the onset of the 2008 financial crisis the political and economic context in many contemporary European democracies has been radically transformed generating much scholarly attention. Much of the analysis has focused on the policy responses of nation states which can be broadly characterised as the rolling out of tough austerity measures underpinned by public spending cuts, rising taxes and the privatisation of state assets. Several scholars have argued that the widespread adoption of austerity measures essentially represents more neoliberalism to fix a neoliberal crisis. More importantly however, is the fact that such policy responses signify a shift towards ‘deepening neoliberalism’ as they have mainly been imposed by large scale institutional arrangements which are working to frame the activities of actors and institutions within specific neoliberalised politico-institutional parameters (e.g. IMF, EU, WTO etc.). In the current crisis, responsiveness to citizens demand has being replaced by responsiveness to the demands of the international lending bodies such as the IMF, EU and European Central Bank. While the socio-economic manifestations of austerity measures have been well documented less consideration has been given to the effects of deepening neoliberalism and austerity on the attitudes of individual citizens regarding a) their perceived ability to influence the political sphere – internal efficacy and b) ability of the system to meet / respond to their demands – external efficacy. This is important due to the link between internal efficacy and political engagement / activism and between external efficacy and support for democracy. This paper seeks to redress this gap and to explore whether the political efficacy of individual citizens has been eroded as policy decisions are increasingly imposed by external actors. More specifically, using Ireland as a case study, the analysis seeks to identify whether feelings of powerlessness over individuals’ ability to influence politics has become more pronounced in countries that have struggled to retain more sovereignty over their regulatory and policy responses to the crisis than others. We find that feelings of powerlessness are growing amongst citizenry in states whose room for manoeuvre has been restricted by external institutions like the Troika, but detect a small positive impact of economic recovery on these issues.

Keywords: austerity; political efficacy; political participation; political trust; ESS.
1. Introduction

While the socio-economic manifestations of austerity measures have been well documented (see e.g. de Sousa et al., 2014), less consideration has been given to the effects of deepening neoliberalism and austerity on the attitudes of individual citizens regarding a) their perceived ability to influence the political sphere – internal efficacy and b) ability of the system to respond to their demands – external efficacy. This is important due to the link between internal efficacy and political engagement / activisms and between external efficacy and support for democracy. This paper seeks explore whether the political efficacy of individual citizens has been eroded as policy decisions are increasingly imposed by external actors. More specifically, using Ireland as case study, the analysis seeks to identify whether feelings of powerless over individuals’ ability to influence politics has become more pronounced in countries that have struggled to retain more sovereignty over their regulatory and policy responses to the crisis than others. Also, while the impact of economic recession has been well studied in the literature generally and in an Irish context (O’Sullivan et al. 2014; Dellephine and Hardiman, 2013), less attention has been devoted to how economic recovery affects these indictors.

The paper proceeds by outlining the relationship between political efficacy, participation and trust, the next section outlines the macro and micro economic impacts of the crisis in an Irish context, the following section presents the methodology, after which the results are presented. The paper concludes with some discussion and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Since on the onset of the 2008 financial crisis the political and economic context in many contemporary European democracies has been radically transformed generating much scholarly attention (see e.g. Fraser et al., 2013; Armingeon and Guthmann, 2013; De Sousa et al., 2014; Torcal, 2014). Much of the analysis has focused on the policy responses of nation states which can be broadly characterised as the rolling out of tough austerity measures underpinned by public spending cuts, rising taxes and the privatisation of state assets (see e.g. de Sousa et al., 2014; Torcal, 2014). Several scholars have argued that the widespread adoption of austerity measures essentially represents more neoliberalism to fix a neoliberal crisis (e.g. Fraser et. al., 2013). More importantly however, is the fact that such policy responses signify a shift towards ‘deepening neoliberalism’ as they have mainly been imposed by large scale institutional arrangements which are working to frame the activities of actors and institutions within specific neoliberalised politico-institutional parameters (e.g. IMF, EU, WTO etc.) (see e.g., Armingenon and Guthmann, 2013). While it has been well established in the literature that unfavourable economic conditions and performance result in lower support for incumbent governments (Almond and Verba, 1963) (and vice versa (Roth et al., 2011)), the loss of sovereignty witnessed in European democracies over the crisis period is a new departure. Easton (1975) distinguishes between ‘specific support’ for government parties and ‘diffuse support’ for political objectives such as democratic outcomes, with the former fluctuating with national economic performance, but the latter much less prone to influence form national economic crises.

In the current crisis, responsiveness to citizens demand has been replaced by responsiveness to the demands of the international lending bodies such as the IMF, EU and European Central Bank (Torcal, 2014). Armingenon and Baccaro (2012) argue that “‘democratic discourse’ was ineffective in countries which were subject to bailouts, i.e. countries were instructed to implement austerity programs regardless of citizens demands.” Furthermore, Armingenon and Guthmann (2013 p426) argue that there is a “direct link between EU/IMP conditionality ….. and support for national democracy”. As outlined by Kahne and Westheimer (2006: 289) there is a strong empirical connection “between an individual’s sense that they can make a difference —their sense of efficacy— and their level of civic participation”. Essentially, the logic underlying this model is that those with
higher levels of political efficacy are more likely to vote and engage in other forms of political activity than those with lower levels of efficacy. As put by Anderson (2010: 59) “individuals are empowered and motivated when they believe that their involvement in politics will be consequential and that they can have confidence that the behaviour of others will be honourable”.

Within the literature, political efficacy is generally broken down into two separate components (1) internal efficacy and (2) external efficacy. The former relates to perceptions about one’s own ability to understand and participate effectively in politics. The latter refers to perceptions about the beliefs about the responsiveness of political institutions to citizen demands (Converse, 1972; Balch, 1974). In essence, political efficacy focuses on what motivates to participate, and refers to the sense of self-confidence and the ability to influence the political process, but also the ability of the system to meet individuals’ demands (see e.g. Olsson, 2014). This leads to our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** In countries subject to bailout conditions where political power and decision making was temporarily transferred to supranational and external bodies, external efficacy will be negatively affected.

While this is the dominant theoretical framework underpinning the concept of political efficacy, various others exist. For instance, Anderson (2010:61) outlines a theoretical framework that “posits that sense of community influences efficacy and trust”. In doing so, she seeks to explore the social forces that influence people’s efficacy and levels of individual and political trust by drawing on collective efficacy theory. This frameworks posits that social networks, friendships and community organisations foster ‘collective efficacy’ amongst community residents and a shared desire for ‘social-control related action’ (Ibid: 60). Elsewhere, others have sought to reverse the causality from efficacy to participation by focusing on the consequences that political participation can have on political efficacy. In this regard, Ikeda et al. (2008:77) contend that “political participation brings about political efficacy by promoting a better understanding of the complexities of the political system”. In order words, political participation leads to greater levels of political efficacy, not the other way around.

The relationship between political efficacy and political participation has been well recognised in the social sciences, with higher political efficacy linked with support for the democratic system (Wright, 1981). Citizens give the institutions that represent them power through the ballot box, hence political participation and activism is an important party of democratic legitimacy (Beetham, 1991). Also, participation generates procedural utility, i.e. individuals gain satisfaction simply from participating, regardless of the outcome (Frey and Stutzer, 2000). It is also contended that the degree of choice an individual has in relation to political party alternatives will influence the level of participation, with two party systems where rivals are ideogically similar (as in the US and UK), leading to ambivalence among voters (Ikeda et al. 2008). This leads to our second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** In an electoral system which allows greater representation of minority views, e.g. proportional representation, more political alternatives are available and hence participation rates will be higher.

For political efficacy to exist, there must also be political trust. It has been documented that trust in political institutions had been declining in advanced democracies even prior to the crisis which was attributed to a lack of responsiveness of those institutions to the demands of the citizens who voted for them (e.g. Pharr and Putman, 2000). In the current crisis, further declining political trust has been seen particularly in the areas of Government, Parliament and political parties (Roth et al., 2011). Torcal (2014), in the context of Spain and Portugal, attributes declining trust in European democratic institutions to a negative perception of the political responsiveness of representative institutions i.e. the causality runs from a reduction in external efficacy to reductions in trust. This leads to our third hypothesis:
**Hypothesis 3:** Declining levels of trust in institutions due to the economic crisis will result in declining participation rates and lower internal efficacy.

3. **Context**

The global financial crisis of 2008 has resulted in drastically different economic outcomes in countries throughout Europe. For example, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Hungary, Latvia, Cyprus and Romania all entered austerity programmes which included *inter alia* structural adjustments regarding property, finance, and labour markets. Poland, Spain and Italy also suffered negative economic shocks but were not subject to official IMF / Troika conditionality, while Germany, the UK and Austria did not suffer similar negative economic consequences. As the causes and impacts of the economic crisis globally have been well documented, as have the specific exacerbating factors in an Irish context (banking crisis, construction industry downturn and associated fiscal issues, see e.g. Whelan, 2013; Allen, 2007; Kitchin, et al. 2012), here we will focus on the specific macro and micro-economic issues expected to have an influence on political participation and political efficacy in an Irish context and which assist in the development of hypotheses.

**Irish Context**

Ireland is an interesting case study with which to examine the effects of recession (and subsequent recovery) on political efficacy. Firstly, it is a small open economy with a relatively small population (4.5m as of the 2011 census (CSO 2012a)) and hence is particularly vulnerable to global economic shocks. Between 2008 and 2011, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Ireland declined by 11.1% and unemployment increased from 4.8% in early 2008 to circa 15% in 2010. As a reaction to these negative macroeconomic indicators, the Government introduced a range of austerity measures including spending cuts in healthcare, social welfare (cuts in child benefit, reductions in job seekers allowance etc), education, and capital investment. There has been a reduction in the governments public sector pay bill of €1.5 billion between 2010 and 2012 (Fraser et al., 2013), coupled with net emigration of 90,000 in the same period (CSO, 2012b). Government tax revenues fell from €47 billion in 2007 to €31.8 in 2010, a fall of over 32%, this from a situation of recording Budget surpluses in the early 2000s (Whelan, 2013). In late 2010, due to rising borrowing costs on international monetary markets and capital flight, Ireland entered into an €85bn bailout agreement with the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (‘troika’).

Public sector workers were subject to direct cuts to income of between 24.1% and 28.6% among other indirect cuts. In parallel, numbers employed in the public sector in Ireland fell by approximately 15,000 between 2008 and 2010 (Fraser et al. 2013). Additionally, at the end of 2012, almost 20% of residential mortgages were in arrears in Ireland (Central Bank of Ireland, 2013) and Waldron and Redmond (2015) outline the “extreme distress faced by suburban mortgagors”. Also, specific to the Irish case was the transformation of private bank debt into public debt with the main financial institutions in Ireland receiving €64 billion euros from the state by June 2012 (Fraser et al. 2013). Additionally, a number of new taxes and charges were also introduced including the Universal Social Charge, Water Charges, Property Tax, Second Home Tax, increased PRSI, Bin Charges, and increases in VAT etc.

**Influence on Democracy / political participation**

According to Fraser et al. (2013) “Ireland sticks out because its bailout and the associated austerity has not been met with significant sustained resistance from trade unions and civil society”. They outline how there have been protest marches, demonstrations, and campaigns against particular aspects of government policy e.g. closure of A&E hospital departments, but even in the context of
sustained austerity, cutbacks in state spending and increasing unemployment, only 3,695 days were lost to industrial disputes in 2011, the lowest number since records began in 1985. They attribute this industrial peace to the State’s ability to enter international bond markets in advance of exiting the bailout.

Voter turnout in Ireland increased as the economic crisis took hold, peaking in 2011 at the height of the recession and declining somewhat as an economic recovery has begun. Turnout in the 2011 general election in Ireland was 70.1%, almost a 10 percentage point increase since 2002, when Ireland was in the middle of an economic boom, and 3% points higher than in 2007. Hence, political participation was at its highest level since 1987, when interestingly, Ireland was also in the grip of a severe economic recession. Hence, it would appear that democratic principles are still alive and well in Ireland and Fraser et al. (2013) point out that in 2011, the “Irish electorate overwhelmingly voted for two parties”, these being Fine Gael and the Labour party, leading to a government with the largest majority in the history of the state.

Recovery

Ireland is interesting as it has also witnessed quite a dramatic turnaround in fortunes. It was the first country in the Eurozone to officially exit its bailout program (15th December 2013) with decision making on key areas of economic policy returned to the sovereign state for the first time in three years. Furthermore, positive economic indicators suggested that the worst of the economic recession was over and that growth was returning to the economy. For example, growth rates of 9% in GNP and 7.7% in the more important GDP figure were seen in 2014. Also, from a peak of over 15% between 2010 and 2012, unemployment rates have dropped to 7.8% at the time of writing (June 2016), while the government budget balance deficit was within stability and growth limits at less than 3% for the year 2015. In comparison, Greece is still in recession and suffering negative growth rates, Spain, while not officially entering a bailout, has persistently high unemployment rates over 20%, Portugal has returned to economic growth but this is not keeping pace with inflation and Italy is in a state of stagnant growth. What has been the impact of this tentative recovery in Ireland on the indicators described above, namely political participation, trust in institutions; democratic legitimacy and political efficacy?

The literature suggests that economic recovery will be associated with an increase in support for national democracy (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014) and the incumbent government. Furthermore, Armingeon and Guthmann (2014) opine that a loss in democratic support may be endogenously driven, i.e. caused by poor Government decision making in the run up to the financial crisis in the areas of fiscal, social and economic policy. However, they dismiss this argument for all crisis hit countries except Greece, stating for example that “Ireland experienced strong growth and had low deficits and debt levels before the crisis”. The viewpoint that there was prudence in any of these areas in Ireland pre-crash has been resoundly rejected in an Irish context by commentators in political science (e.g. O’Sullivan et al., 2014), economic geography (e.g. Fraser et al., 2013) and economists en masse (e.g. Whelan, 2013; Kelly, 2010) to name a few!

4. Methodological Approach

To test the hypotheses presented in this paper, we rely upon rounds 6 and 7 of the European Social Survey (ESS). The European Social Survey provides a rich comparative dataset with which to examine changing trends in a European context. Political efficacy is broken down into two separate components (i) internal efficacy and (ii) external efficacy, where the former relates to perceptions about one’s own ability to understand and participate effectively in politics. It is operationalised using new variables introduced in ESS R7 as follows:
Internal efficacy is operationalised using questions B1b, B1d and B1f:
- B1b: How able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?
- B1d: How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?
- B1f: How easy do you find it personally to take part in politics?

External efficacy is operationalised using questions B1a, B1c and B1e:
- B1a: How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?
- B1c: How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics?
- B1e: How much would you say that politicians care about what people like you think?

We also examine trust in political institutions that represent the citizens, satisfaction with the performance of these institutions, and support for democracy. Together, these provide a measure of political legitimacy. Political trust is operationalised as trust in Government, Parliament and political parties while political participation is measured as voting habits and party voted for. Satisfaction is measured using items related to satisfaction with economy, government and democracy. As these variables have been extensively analysed in both a European context (see e.g. Armingenon and Guthmann, 2013; de Sousa et al., 2014; Torcal, 2014) and in an Irish context up to Rounds 5 (see e.g. O’Sullivan et al., 2014; Dellepiane and Hardiman, 2013), this paper focuses on the changes specific to Rounds 6 and 7.

Ideally, comparative data analysis would in the first instance focus on i) countries that were subjected to formal EU/IMF conditionality i.e., Portugal, Ireland and Greece (PIG) as these countries have embarked on programmes of austerity including reduced public spending, increased taxes and privatisation of state assets i.e. neoliberal policies. Comparisons could then be made to ii) countries who have been impacted by the crisis but where formal EU/IMF conditionality did not take place (i.e. Italy and Spain) and iii) to countries which did not suffer austerity as a result of the financial crisis e.g. Germany and UK. However, comparative country analysis is currently restricted to some extent by data availability. For example, some of the countries that were subjected to formal EU/IMF conditionality i.e. Greece, Cyprus, Latvia and Romania, did not participate in the ESS rounds of interest in this paper - Greece did not partake in Rounds 6 or 7, Cyprus did not participate in Round 6, Romania last participated in Round 4, as did Latvia. Also, in a comparative context, countries such as Poland, Hungary, Latvia and Romania do not have the same democratic history or economic development as the PIIGS.

Hence for comparison i) above, we compare Ireland and Portugal. In a comparative sense, Portugal is a relevant country to assess Ireland’s political efficacy pre-and-post crisis as they are both small open economies, have small populations and both suffered IMF / Troika conditionality. Interestingly, there are also important differences between Portugal and Ireland. While the current crisis is the worst experienced by Portugal in its history as a democratic state (de Sousa et al., 2014), this is not the case in Ireland which suffered higher unemployment rates during the economic recession of the 1980s with rates above 17% and interest rates in double figures for much of that decade (Whelan, 2013). For comparison ii), we compare Ireland and Spain as Italy did not participate in Round 7, while for comparison iii), we compare Ireland to the UK and Germany. Analysis of the variables of interest is further restricted as the items measuring political efficacy were only introduced in R7, hence data exists for one round only and a comparison to previous rounds is not possible.
5. Analysis and Results

Political Efficacy

To examining political efficacy in Ireland, we firstly begin by looking at internal efficacy. The question asking “how able do you think you are to take an active role in a group involved with political issues?” averages 3.6 on an 11 point scale in Ireland. Similar results are found for “how confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?” at 3.9 and for “how easy do you find it personally to take part in politics?” at 3.3. In relation to external efficacy the question asking “how much would you say that the political system in Ireland allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?” averages 3.22 on an 11 point scale. This is the highest average of the external efficacy variables, with both “how much would you say that the political system in Ireland allows people like you to have an influence on politics?” and “how much would you say that politicians care about what people like you think?” averaging just over 3 on the same scale. Comparing external and internal efficacy, internal efficacy is higher in Ireland, albeit both are relatively low. This is important as low levels of efficacy discourage political engagement (no incentive to engage if you believe it won’t effect change).

As the items measuring political efficacy were introduced in R7, it is not possible to conduct temporal analysis on these variables. Hence a comparison of countries is carried out. Preliminary analysis shows that there are differences between Ireland and Germany in relation to the variables capturing internal efficacy, with German respondents recording higher levels of political efficacy on the three questions by one category on the 11 point scale in each case. Comparisons of levels of trust in politicians and parliament between ESS Rounds 3 and 7 to some extent substantiate these findings, Round 3 being when Ireland was at the peak of an economic boom. Levels of mistrust in parliament in Ireland increased significantly from 39% in the categories 0 to 4 on an 11 point scale (0 = ‘no trust at all’) in R3, to 54% in R7. On the contrary, Germany has witnessed growing levels of trust in parliament over this period, with mistrust decreasing from 52% in R3 to 39% in R7. Lower differences are observed between Ireland and Germany for external efficacy. In comparison to Ireland, Portugal, a country that also suffered negative economic consequences from the crisis, also shows low levels of efficacy. Internal efficacy averages 3 and under in each category (B1b – 2.8; B1d - 3 and B1f – 2.65) as does external efficacy at 3 and under in each category (B1a – 3.1; B1c – 2.6 and B1e – 2).

O’Sullivan et al. (2014) extend their analysis of political legitimacy in Ireland to examine if outcomes differed by political affiliation and find that it does with winners (those who voted for the incumbent) more displaying more political and social trust. We examine political efficacy by partisanship, focusing on those respondents who voted for the administration in place at the time of R7 i.e. Fine Gael and Labour. Interestingly, we find very little difference for internal efficacy for ‘winners’ compared to ‘losers’; (B1b: W 3.8 vs L 3.7; B1d: W 4.2 vs L 4; B1f: W 3.5 vs L 3.4 ).

Political Trust

Examining the measures of political trust, all have remained low in R7 from their low base in R5. Trust in parliament averages 3.8 on an 11 point scale, with trust in politicians at 3.4 and political parties at 3.3. That these variables have remained low is surprising given the overwhelming mandate given to the administration in Ireland at the time R7 data was collected, a historic majority. At the height of the crisis, political participation in Ireland increased which may be attributed to the range of political alternatives available (Ikeda et al., 2008). Voter turnout as measured in the ESS R7 records voter turnout in Ireland very accurately at 70.3% compared to official statistics of 70.1% which is surprising given the findings in the literature that surveys tend to over represent turnout. Also, while that economic crisis may have actually increased political activism and participation in Ireland, de Sousa et al. (2014) find that citizens’ engagement in political issues as a direct result of the economic crisis were only partially fulfilled in Portugal.
An initial analysis of the data reveals some interesting trends in relation to distrust in political institutions (as measured by those stating 0 – 3 on an 11 point scale following Torcal (2014)) between the fourth and seventh rounds of the ESS. For example, there was a significant increase in distrust in most of the countries subject to IMF conditionality. Between Rounds 4 and 6, Cyprus recorded an increase in distrust in the countries parliament from circa. 15% to 55%, distrust in political parties and politicians from circa. 30% to 70% and significant increases in those distrusting the police and legal system. Similar, but less dramatic trends were seen in Spain and Portugal between these rounds. However, the same trends were not recorded in Ireland, where figures in these categories remained at a stable, albeit relatively high, level of between 45 and 50% over this period. A similar trend is seen in relation to trust in political parties 55% to 60%, with distrust in politicians actually reducing to some degree in R7 to 53% (from 60%). Even more interesting is that Ireland witnessed stable levels of trust in the legal system and the police over this period which has continued into R7, at 5.3 and 6.3 on the 11 point scale respectively. Hence, it appears that while support for the incumbent has remained low, trust in the democratic structure in Ireland has remained high. de Sousa et al. (2014) examine the effect of the economic and financial crisis on political support and overall legitimacy of democracy in Portugal. Their analysis reveals that the decline in economic performance is reflected in citizens’ rising discontent with the performance of democracy and declining levels of participation in Portugal under austerity conditions, with particularly negative outcomes for the middle classes, described in the literature as the backbone of democracy (Lipset, 1959).

That the variables capturing political trust display comparable trends over rounds in an Irish context is not surprising given the high correlation between these variables found in previous literature (O’Sullivan et al. 2014). Hence, if these variables do begin to exhibit an upward trend as the economic recovery gathers pace in Ireland, they would be expected to do so together. Also, while these variables are very similar in magnitude to those for political efficacy, correlation coefficients reveal that they are not highly correlated with either internal efficacy or external efficacy.

Form the analysis above, in an Irish context, ‘political input’ appears to have increased with rising voter turnout at the national level at the height of the crisis and increases in demonstration and protest (Ahern 2015), but also increases at the ‘output level’ as measured by international commenters who herald Ireland as the ‘poster boy’ of successfully navigating a crisis period; and increases in the ‘throughput level’ with Ireland increasing its score on the Transparency International Corruption Index from 69 in 2012, to 72 in 2013 and 74 in 2014.

Satisfaction

As may be expected at a time of economic crisis, indicators measuring satisfaction with the government and economy show highly negative trends between Round 4 (2008) and 5 (2010) (O’Sullivan et al., 2014), failing from an average of almost 7 on the 11 point scale to less than 3. The level of satisfaction for the national government fell from an average of over 5 on the same scale to under 3, but surprisingly, given the level of cutbacks imposed on the health and education sectors over this period, satisfaction with these items did not show declining levels.

Unlike the variables measuring political trust, the variables measuring satisfaction do show some tentative signs of recovery in R7. Satisfaction with economy has risen from a low of less than 3 on the 11 point scale to over 4 in R7, while satisfaction with Government increased slightly to 3.8 from a low in R5 of under 3. Hence, while it appears that individual’s satisfaction with the work of Government is increasing, they are not quite ready to trust it. O’Sullivan et al. (2014) report that political trust shows a much smaller decline during the crisis than satisfaction with government. This may suggest that while what Easton (1975) refers to as ‘specific support’ has declined dramatically, ‘diffuse support’ has remained high in Ireland during the crisis. We find declining levels of trust in political parties, parliament and politicians at the height of the crisis (as in O’Sullivan et al., 2014), but not on a scale comparable to other countries subject to bailout conditions such as Portugal, Greece
or Cyprus and indeed, increases in these variables in the period after 2012 as Ireland’s economy began to recover. In fact, measures such as trust in the legal system and trust in the police did not witness any discernible reduction over the crisis period.

The variable measuring satisfaction with the way democracy works in Ireland has remained relatively stable in R7 at 4.8. de Sousa et al. (2014) state that low levels of satisfaction in democracy are not usually a sign of fundamental political changes are underway, rather a change of government is likely. However, issues with the item measuring support for democracy have been highlighted and it may be more likely to capture attitudes to the current administration rather than the workings of democracy (Linde and Ekman, 2003). Hence, it may be the case this variable reveals more about ‘specific support’ rather than ‘diffuse support’. Also, while the difficulty in separating the impact of 1) the interference from external actors on national democracy (loss of decision making power) from 2) the implications of this interference (tax increases, service cuts etc.) has been recognised (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014) the net effect of a decline in political efficacy and support for democracy is the likely result.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Political efficacy is influenced by political participation (Ikeda et al., 2008), the latter being affected by the economic performance of an economy. Deteriorations in economic conditions lead to a change in ‘specific support’ for incumbent government (Easton, 1975), hence in a time of economic downturn, a change of political incumbent is expected. Whether this leads to a change in ‘diffuse support’, and ultimately regime change, may depend on the severity of the economic crisis in question. Theoretically, the countries that have been adversely affected by the current economic crisis in Europe should be above the threshold, in GDP terms, that protects democracies from falling (Przeworski et al., 2000) but a deep, protracted and unprecedented crisis such as the current crisis in Europe may be the catalyst that puts advanced economics at risk (Armingeon and Baccaro, 2012). The current economic crisis ask the questions - what level of economic collapse can be tolerated before the very fabric of European democracies are tested (de Sousa et al., 2014; Armingeon and Guthmann, 2013)? This could be the case in countries hardest hit by the recession such as Portugal and Greece, which in addition to severe negative economic outcomes do not have same history of democracy as the other countries impacted by the recession. Armingeon and Guthmann (2013) state that the current crisis has “undermined democratic self-determination to a hitherto unknown extent in mature European democracies since the end of the Second World War.” They also show (p428) that this imposition from outside played “an additional, independent – and substantial – part in the process of eroding citizen support for their national democratic systems”. Also, lower levels of efficacy and lower levels of political engagement/participation lends support to lower political accountability of those in power i.e. less checks and balances and less scrutiny of those in power.

This paper has examined a number of inter-related constructs. It builds on previous work in an Irish context, extending the timeline examined by O’Sullivan et al. (2014) to include Rounds 6 and 7, includes the formal questions on political efficacy introduced in Round 7 and also examines the impact of (tentative) economic recovery on this issue. Comparisons were made between PIIGS countries that have been impacted by the crisis, and these countries were then compared to those negatively impacted by the crisis, but where formal EU/IMF conditionality did not take place. Finally, comparisons were made to countries which did not suffer austerity as a result of the financial crisis. However, further analysis by country and cohort is required to elaborate on these findings (i.e. younger, well educated, males etc.). For example, the middle classes have been described in the literature as the backbone of democracy (Lipset, 1959) and it would be interesting to examine the impact of the current recession on this cohort it is argued that they have been hardest hit by the current recession (de Sousa et al. 2014). Additionally, more elaborate statistical analysis is necessary to examine interrelationships between the variables of interest. Also, as Ireland has exited its bailout
program on the 15th December 2013, decision making on key areas of economic policy were returned to the sovereign state for the first time in three years and economic growth has also returned. Hence it will be interesting to follow the trend in these variables in R8 of the ESS. While Ireland has now emerged from the worst effects of the crisis with its democratic political structure intact, studies in contemporary European societies impacted by the current crisis reveal worrying trends in political (dis)trust across Europe and the final impact on the worst effected countries such as Greece, and to a lesser extent Cyprus and Portugal, still remains to be evaluated.

References


Table 1: Variable Names and Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Question Description</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Voted in last general election</td>
<td>B9</td>
<td>1 yes, 2 no</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>With Economy</td>
<td>B21</td>
<td>0 extremely dissatisfied to 10 extremely satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With Government</td>
<td>B22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With way democracy works</td>
<td>B23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>In Parliament</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>0 no trust to 10 complete trust</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Political Parties</td>
<td>B6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Politicians</td>
<td>B5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the Police</td>
<td>B4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legal system</td>
<td>B3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal Efficacy</td>
<td>Ability to have a say in what the government does</td>
<td>B1a</td>
<td>0 not at all able to 10 completely able</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>political system in allows people like you to have an influence on politics</td>
<td>B1c</td>
<td>0 not at all to 10 completely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>politicians care what people like you think</td>
<td>B1e</td>
<td>0 not at all to 10 completely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External efficacy</td>
<td>ability to take an active role in a group involved with political issues</td>
<td>B1b</td>
<td>0 not at all able to 10 completely able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics</td>
<td>B1d</td>
<td>0 not at all confident to 10 completely confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>how easy do you personally find it to take part in politics</td>
<td>B1f</td>
<td>0 not at all easy to 10 extremely easy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>