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The EU at Stake? Changes in European Identification in Southern Europe and in Germany Following the Great Recession

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Abstract: This article looks at the evolution of European identification during the Great Recession in four Southern European "debtor" countries and in Germany. Although the crisis initially had a negative effect on European identification in the five countries, its medium-term impact was more severe in the Southern European countries than in Germany. While we find that microeconomic variables shed little light to account for these changes, we combine multilevel institutional and identitarian approaches to explain changes in European Identification. Following the multilevel institutional argument, attitudes might depend not only on citizens perceptions of institutional performance at the European level, but also on their perceptions of institutional performance at the national level; and they can operate through two mechanisms: citizens might *transfer* their positive (or negative) evaluations from the national to the European level, or, alternatively, they may *substitute* or *compensate* their negative national evaluations with positive evaluations of the European level. Our results indicate that both mechanisms were at work: at the peak of the Eurozone crisis, *substitution* effects—especially in the countries of the South—helped sustain European identification when it was at its weakest. However, *transfer* effects were also relevant to explain the recovery of European identification in two of the three countries in which the latter was greatest: Germany and Portugal. Following the identitarian argument, we find that the positive effect that national identification had on European identification previous to the Great Recession, had disappeared or weakened in four of the five cases by 2014. Nonetheless, this positive relationship had been fully restored in Germany and Portugal after the Great Recession, in 2017, signalling that the fading link between the two identifications might have been only temporary, at least in these two countries.

Keywords: European identification; national identification; great recession; Eurozone crisis; national evaluations; European evaluations; party system change

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1. Introduction

The Great Recession, which began in 2008, had significant economic and political consequences. In economic terms, it was the worst crisis in Europe since the 1930s. Politically and institutionally, the European project suffered a dramatic loss of confidence, resulting in a striking increase in negative attitudes towards the EU (Paradés et al. 2013; Braun and Tausendpfund 2014), particularly in the Southern European member states (Verney 2017). In the first stage, the financial crisis led to a severe economic contraction in almost all European countries, but after 2010, it became a debt crisis characterised by the difficulties of some Eurozone countries to continue financing their deficits in the international financial markets. The debt crisis led to the implementation of austerity policies in public spending in Southern European countries and Ireland, with the consequent increase in unemployment, especially in Greece and Spain.