

What leads citizens to vote for 'anti-establishment' parties?

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Credit: UPF

The first national elections that were held in Europe after the economic crisis of 2008 revealed rather a clear political map. In almost all countries (especially in southern and eastern Europe), challenger parties obtained significant electoral results at the expense of the traditional parties.

In some cases, citizens expressed their vote in favour of new political parties that have emerged in the party system with the clear aim of opposing the political establishment and channel citizens' political discontent towards the political elite. Some of the most obvious examples of this can be seen in the unexpected and successful entry into the political arena by Podem and Ciutadans in Spain, the 5 Stars Movement in Italy, and Alternative for Germany.

What's the explanation for this phenomenon? Why has an increasingly broad sector of the public decided to withdraw its support for the traditional parties and support those whose *raison d'être* is to oppose the traditional political class?

In an article published recently in the journal *European Politics and Society*, Danilo Serani, a member of the Research and Expertise Centre for Survey Methodology (RECSM) at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at UPF, has tried to answer these questions. "The main goal of my work was to explain the electoral success of challenger parties and especially to analyse the impact of the [economic crisis](#) on the electoral preferences of European citizens," the researcher explains.

The research has used data from the European Social Survey (ESS), one of the most prestigious and methodologically rigorous international surveys. Through quantitative techniques (multilevel analysis in particular), the study analysed the factors with the greatest impact on the decision to a vote for a challenger party (whether right- or left-wing) versus the safe option of continuing giving support to one of the traditional parties.

Lack of trust and dissatisfaction regarding the negative economic situation

"The empirical analysis reveals that votes for challenger parties can mainly be explained by the lack of trust in the principal actors of political representation (political parties and the ruling class). Also, citizens' dissatisfaction with the domestic economic situation is another factor associated with the decision to vote for anti-establishment parties," Danilo Serani asserts.

Thus, according to the author, it can be said that challenger parties manage to catalyse citizens' discontent towards the traditional means of political representation. In particular, the anti-establishment discourse and anti-elitist rhetoric of challenger parties are a valid attraction for those citizens who are wary of the political classes.

The relationship between political distrust and the poor economic situation

The study also sheds light on the relationship between political distrust and a country's macroeconomic situation. "The mechanism of the protest vote prompted by the lack of trust is more intense in elections held in the context of a negative economic situation," Danilo Serani assures. And he adds: "The distrust in the traditional actors of political representation and the economic recession reinforce each other when determining the electoral success of anti-establishment parties."

These findings, the UPF researcher concludes, may explain why some of the most successful [challenger](#) parties have arisen in Spain and Italy, two of the countries most affected by the negative economic climate.

More information: Danilo Serani, A time-series cross-sectional analysis of the impact of political distrust and the economy in the aftermath of the Great Recession, *European Politics and Society* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/23745118.2019.1672918](https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1672918)

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