Economic crisis and attitudes towards the European Union:
are Italians and Greeks becoming Eurosceptic because of the crisis?

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Abstract

The economic crisis has emerged as a global phenomenon affecting several countries at the same time. This situation has had an impact on attitudes towards supranational institutions, among which the European Union has a prominent role. This is true also in countries that have traditionally been less critical towards the European integration process such as Italy and Greece, where the crisis not only heavily hit the economy, but also triggered serious political and institutional turmoil. In these countries, different national and international actors have been identified as potential culprits for the crisis. The main research question of the paper is whether the attribution of blame for the crisis to national or international actors had an impact on voters' attitudes towards the European Union. Analyses are carried out using fresh data from the national election studies (ELNES 2012 and ITANES 2013) of the two countries. To answer our questions we further control forpolitical sophistication and ideological positions of voters, as the political narrative that voters apply to understand the current crisis can affect their perceptions towards the European Union.

1. Introduction

After the onset of the economic crisis two of the countries of "Old Southern Europe", Italy and Greece started following similar political trajectories. The crisis not only heavily hit their economy, but also triggered serious political and institutional turmoil and created a unique political landscape. Italy and Greece are very interesting case studies since, contrary to Portugal and, to a lesser extent, Spain, they experienced "earthquake" elections (May and June 2012 for Greece and February 2013 for Italy) and a period of political instability and uncertainty. At the time of writing this paper, a new coalition government was put into place in Italy since February 2014, led by centre-left PD's leader Matteo Renzi, whereas centre-right ND's leader Samaras still leads the Greek coalition government after the withdraw from the majority of Democratic Left. The fact that both in Italy and Greece the crisis not only concern the economic dimension, but also the political one makes these two countries very interesting to compare.

In addition to this, another aspect of the "storm" is that there is evidence that the two traditionally pro-European countries are experiencing increasing signs of anti-European attitudes, and might have entered the Eurosceptical group. As one could expect, one of the most noteworthy issues that emerged in all EU countries during the sovereign debt crisis is related to the attribution of blame for the economic crisis and the impact of these attitudes towards national and supranational institutions. In this regard, blame towards the European Union has assumed a prominent role. Yet, for countries like Italy and Greece this question is particularly challenging, given the tradition of patronage in the two countries, the high levels of political corruption, and the profound discontent with national politicians but also the historical widespread consensus towards the EU. Whereas poor management of national governments and administrations has been at the focus of the media and beyond, negative attitudes towards the EU have increased and the unchallenged positive image of Europe of the past has started to change. Thus, the question of the attribution of blame for the crisis and attitudes towards the EU creates an interesting empirical puzzle.

Specifically, in this paper we aim at looking whether a linkage between perceptions of responsibility of European and/or national institutions and increased anti- European stances exists. The debt crisis in European periphery and especially in Southern Europe redefines the straightforward rationale of economic voting, the correlation between the economic situation and voting pro or against the incumbent (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). In other words, we cannot easily depict that voters in these countries use the elections to punish the incumbent given the fact that in the relationship between "poor economic conditions and attribution of blame to the government" other factors intervene, such us for instance the role of the European Union, the IMF,

and the banking sector. This is indeed a central assumption in our study. Our first and overarching goal is thus to explore to what extent the patterns of attribution of responsibility vary between Italian and Greek citizens by giving special attention to their possible impact on attitudes towards Europe. Central research questions are whether stances between blame attribution and "EU supporters" or "EU opponents" are in place and what can explain possible differences not only between the two groups, but also between the two countries. The second main objective of the paper is to further control for the party preferences of voters, as the political narrative that voters apply to understand the current crisis can affect their perceptions towards the European Union. In addition, we control for the level of political sophistication of voters. The empirical investigation utilizes fresh data from the national election studies (ELNES[1] 2012-June and ITANES 2013) of the two countries. The set of targets of blame are classified as either domestic causes of the crisis (e.g. the national government) or European/international causes (e.g. the EU), aiming at identifying similarities and dissimilarities between a national and supranational political arena of responsibilities.

Despite the similarities of the current economic political situations of the two countries, for our analysis we should also consider some main points of divergence. First of all, more severe austerity measures have been implemented in Greece than in Italy. Although a pension reform has been implemented in Italy in the first month of the Monti government (December 2011), Greece is experiencing the most severe cuts in wage reductions and pensions of the whole Europe[i]. The second point is related to the fact that while the Greek government has been forced to request the activation of emergency funds (bailout packages that rely on EU-IMF loans), Italy has been able to survive the economic and financial crisis on her own. Finally, as we show in the next sections of the paper, since 2010, when the crisis first became critical, trust in both EU and national political institutions and politicians assumed a downward trend in both countries. Yet, in Greece this trend translated into an unprecedented extreme and rapid delegitimization of political parties, as well as of the main executive and representative institutions.

The structure of our paper is as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the economic and political background in Italy and Greece up to the time of writing this paper. In the third section, we focus on the positions on Europe adopted by political elites, including the patterns of blame attribution for the crisis. In the fourth section, we introduce a conceptual framework for the possible determinants of Eurosceptic attitudes and for blaming the EU for the crisis. The fifth section is focused on the presentation of our data, variables and method, while in the sixth one we present our findings. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

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2. Background

Greece

A few days after the parliamentary elections held in Greece on 4 October 2009, the new Socialist PASOK's Prime Minister, George Papandreou expressed doubts about the accuracy of the previous government's estimation of the budget deficit. On 21 October 2009, Greek authorities provided Eurostat with new statistics about the deficit and debt of the Greek government for 2008 and an estimate for 2009. This was a second correction on the figures submitted in April 2009 after a first correction had been submitted by the previous government of New Democracy (ND)'s Costas Karamanlis just before the elections on the 2nd of October 2009 (see European Commission, 2010). The deficit for 2008 was revised from 5.0% of GDP to 7.7 % of GDP. The estimated deficit for 2009 was revised from 3.7 % to 12.5 % of GDP. These revisions of the estimated past government deficit ratios, indicating the lack of quality of the Greek fiscal statistics, naturally led to a crisis of confidence in the Greek state by the markets. This was expressed by a widening of bond yield spreads and the increased cost of risk insurance on credit default.

Given the extremely high offered interest rates, Greece was practically unable to get funds by the private capital markets and it was facing the possibility of defaulting on 19 May 2010, when it had to repay 9 billion euro to its creditors. On 23 April 2010 the Prime Minister George Papandreou was obliged to appeal to the European Union and the International Monetary Fund for loan assistance. On May 2 2010, an agreement was reached by the Eurogroup to provide Greece with 80 billion euros (in a joint package with the IMF of 110 billion euros) and a provision that Greece would receive the first disbursement before May 19 to avoid the danger of defaulting.

The Heads of State or Government of the euro area, in a meeting in Brussels on 7 May 2010, decided to approve the Eurogroup agreement and give the loan to Greece. But this was done only after the Greek Parliament, following intensive polarized debates between the parties, had already approved an austerity bill, a package of tough austerity measures including increases in taxes as well as salary and pension cuts aiming to reduce costs and the deficit by 5.5 % of GDP in 2010. The proposal passed with 172 members of parliament supporting it, and 121 opposing it. The socialist party of PASOK and the radical right wing populist party of LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally) supported the proposal. On the contrary, the main centre-right party of New Democracy (ND), the Communist party (KKE) and the radical left wing party of the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA) opposed it. Divergent views within parties have not been well accepted. Three PASOK MPs (Dimaras, Sakorafa and Oikonomou), who did not support the bill were expelled by the PASOK parliamentary group, whereas the ND's MP Bakoyannis was expelled by the ND parliamentary group for supporting the measure. Opposition parties railed against the harsh economic measures and their

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supporters participated in general strikes, mass demonstrations and protests. Some of these ended up with violence from both the protesters and the authorities, such as when a group of protesters threw a firebomb towards a bank that resulted in the killing of three people.

The initial adjustment program for Greece hoped to re-establish the access to private capital markets by 2012. Nevertheless, it was soon discovered that this process would take longer than planned with unexpected political and socio-economic consequences. Almost a year after the agreement, in June 2011, the Greek government proposed additional spending cuts and had to pass in parliament an austerity bill, the so-called "Mid-term Strategy Plan" (or *Memorandum*) as an exchange of the release of further vital aid to Greece by middle of July 2011. It was said that, without it, the country was once again facing the danger of default. The major Greek political parties failed to reach a consensus on the necessary measures to qualify for this package. The growing political unrest fed fears of a generalized social breakdown and forced George Papandreou to propose a re-shuffled cabinet, who asked for a vote of confidence in the Parliament. The new government won the confidence vote of the parliament on the 22nd of June 2011 and few days later the mid-term strategy plan was finally voted in parliament. For both cases, the government relied on the support of PASOK MPs only and the Eurozone bailout package was released when the proposal was passed. The leader of ND, Antonis Samaras was in favour of a renegotiation of the memorandum and a call for snap elections. The desired consensus was far away from ND's intentions, whose leader insisted on an alternative plan: a new government with the credibility to implement a new rescue plan. He only agreed to back the 50-billion-euro privatisation plan that was part of the bailout package. Inflexibility manners of Samaras became a point of concern for European leaders and representatives of the International Monetary Fund.

A second and even more prominent example of ND's inflexibility was documented in late November 2011. As it is known, on the 27th of October 2011, the Euro zone leaders and the IMF came to an agreement with banks to accept a 50% write-off of (some part of) Greek debt. The aim of the haircut was to reduce Greece's debt to 120% of GDP by 2020. One day after this agreement, George Papandreou announced his intention to hold a referendum (without clarifying the exact question, but vaguely suggesting that it would relate to the approval of the decisions taken at the Euro-Summit of the 27th of October). His intentions behind the announcement of the referendum have been a matter of intense speculation for the international press, pundits and social scientists around the world, highlighting the question whether the "fear" of a referendum was an instrument for seeking consensus or just a blunder. However, the ND's leader refused to negotiate unless his rival resigned first. Moreover, the widespread criticism of the referendum proposal, from within the parliamentary group of PASOK, the opposition and other EU governments, forced George

Papandreou to withdraw the referendum proposal and to announce his plans for resignation in favour of a "national unity" government. Immediately afterwards Papandreou asked for a vote of confidence in order to begin the negotiations with opposition parties to form a grand coalition "emergency" government. Protracted negotiations between PASOK, ND and LAOS - the only smaller party that agreed to be involved in these negotiations – followed, mainly on the issues of the choice of the new Prime Minister and the exact time of the snap election. After being stalled by the insistence of Antonis Samaras to avoid having members of his own party directly participating in the new government, the three parties finally agreed on the new coalition cabinet. Prime Minister Lucas Papademos and his cabinet were formally sworn in on November 11, 2011. Even after the formation of the coalition government, the leader of ND insisted that his party was not "co-governing" with PASOK. This statement created another round of conflict, with the EU and IMF demanding a written commitment of agreement from all leaders of the parties that had members in the new cabinet. The ND party strongly argued that the verbal commitments by Samaras were sufficient, but the EU-wanted to see a written agreement (Teperoglou & Andreadis 2012). The government of "national unity" led the country to the national elections of 6th of May 2012. It was a unique "earthquake election" for the Greek political and electoral history (Teperoglou & Tsatsanis 2014). The losses for the ruling socialist party of PASOK have been massive, while vote percentages of the small left party of the coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) exploded. Due to the lack of a clear winning majority, no government was formed, and the country went to the polls again on the 17th of June 2012. After this last election, the plurality winner, ND, formed a coalition government led by Samaras with PASOK and a small left party (Democratic Left/DIMAR) that withdrew its support almost one year after the formation of this ruling coalition (for more details see Teperoglou and Andreadis, 2012; Teperoglou, Freire and Andreadis 2013).

Italy

After having presented the political and economic background of Greece, we now move to a brief presentation of this background in the Italian case. On the 12th of November 2011, after being in power since the 2008 elections, Berlusconi cabinet came to an end. The decision of Silvio Berlusconi to resign as Prime Minister was made because of the increasingly difficult economic conditions of the country and the increasing pressures from international financial markets. Not only unemployment was constantly growing, but starting from July 2011 there had been a dramatic increase in the "spread", the differential between the Italian 10-years benchmark bonds (BTP) and the German Bund, considered a highly reliable state. Given that the increase of the "spread" could be read as the decreasing degree of confidence that the economic agents had in the capacity of the Italian state to

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pay back its debt, and that national and international media, as well as the international community were alarmingly looking at this financial distrust, Silvio Berlusconi decided to leave his role as Prime Minister.

A technocratic government led by former EU commissioner and economist Mario Monti was then formed without elections. Given the emergency situation, after a call for national responsibility, he and his ministers implemented harsh and unpopular austerity measures (most notably the pension reform), implementing policies prescribed to the Italian government in the summer of 2011 by a "policy guidelines" letter from the European Central Bank. Monti's government was not a political government and it was made of technocrats. However, it was supported in Parliament by all major parties, including the largest parties of the two traditionally opposite coalitions: the left-wing Democratic Party (PD), led by Bersani, and the right-wing People of Freedom (PdL), led by Berlusconi. The only exceptions to the cabinet support were the independence party Northern League (LN) and the small Italy of Values party (IdV) that firmly stayed at the opposition. The shared support of the Monti government by the two main parties of the left and right, after being arch-enemies for twenty years, has been a real novelty in Italian politics. Although this did not lead to a weakening of voters' ideologies related to the two main parties (i.e. PD and PDL), there are evidences that it led to increasing feeling of disengagement from all political parties. This was also due to a two faced-behaviour of MPs between policies support in Parliament and the open conflict and aversion to the government decision when given the chance to speak in the public arena (for more details see Vegetti, Poletti, Segatti, 2013; Vegetti, Poletti, Segatti, 2014).

In mid-September 2012, primary elections of centre-left attracted a few millions left sympathisers to vote for Pierluigi Bersani as leader of the PD, the favoured party in the following election. Yet, in November 2012, the regional elections in Sicily gave the first signs that something was changing in the mind of the voters. The Five Star Movement (M5s), a movement founded in 2009 led by the blogger and former comedian Beppe Grillo, had its first electoral success in an important Italian region, obtaining almost 15% of the votes. When in December 2012 Berlusconi's PdL revoked its support to the Monti government, Monti decided to leave his role as Prime Minister and to call for new elections (creating a new political party himself (Civic Choice - Sc) that aimed to position itself outside the left-right dimension and that raised many expectations abroad). After the financial disaster during the Berlusconi government, and the perceived "irresponsibility" of his party to withdraw support to the Monti government, the idea that the left-wing Democratic Party (PD) was going to have an easy victory was widely shared and as a result, their electoral campaign was virtually inexistent.

As in Greece 2012 elections, however, February 2013 Italian elections resulted in a political earthquake in terms of its outcomes. The greatest vote swing in the history of the Italian Republic took place, with an index of aggregate volatility of 39.1% (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2013). Both the PD and Berlusconi's PdL had heavy vote losses. The PD won the elections by a very small margin, obtaining 25.5% of the votes (in 2008 it had lost the elections with 33%) against 25.1% of the votes obtained by the Five Star Movement (M5s), that was running at national elections for the very first time. To the surprise of international observers, Monti's party obtained only 10.8% of the votes (Itanes, 2013; Vegetti, Poletti, Segatti, 2013).

The outcome of the elections did not allow an easy solution to form a government. Indeed, the electoral law, widely criticized by all parties for different reasons, allowed for a wide PD majority in the Chamber of Deputies, but not in the Senate. This meant that the PD needed to find somebody to govern with. The M5s, being the second largest party, was the natural candidate. However, a compromise with either left or right-wing parties was not in the political philosophy of the movement. Thus, after two months of negotiations, on the 29th of April a new left-right coalition cabinet was created: it was led by a left-wing PD Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, together with a right-wing PdL vice-Prime Minister, Angelino Alfano. After a series of political crisis within the left-right majority, less than a year after the elections, in February 2014 a crisis within the left-wing PD led to substitute the government with a new one led by Matteo Renzi as Prime Minister, the young former-mayor of Florence who had won the PD primary elections in early December 2013. Being explicitly against the government of large coalitions and critical of the stalemate in which the government was in, he could not wait too long for his turn to be in power.

3. Political Parties' Euroscepticism and Blame in the Era of Austerity

Previous studies suggests that the traditional pro-European stances of Italy and Greece should not be interpreted as evidence of widespread psychological attachments to the project of European integration, but rather as instrumental views (Vernardakis 2007) mixed with national pride and identity (e.g. Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014). However, regardless of motives, it is safe to claim that these two countries have historically been predominantly non-controversial in terms of EU evaluations, most of all if compared to more Eurosceptic Northern countries. We therefore now look at how political elites in the two countries have recently positioned themselves on this issue.

Along with predominantly non-conflictive publics on EU matters, Italian and Greek political parties have for long not been very keen to politicize the issue of European Union until the current crisis. Under this rather critical political landscape, and with the need for blaming somebody for negative

economic performance and implementation of harsh austerity measures, things started to change. European matters have now become relevant for party conflict at the domestic level in both countries. This, in turn, might have affected changes in public opinion attitudes towards Europe.

Just before the 2013 elections, the Italian political system was divided in domestic and international blaming. On the one hand, parties belonging to the Berlusconi cabinet of 2008, namely People of Freedom party (PdL) and Northern League have tried to indicate international financial markets, as well as the EU, as the main culprits for the crisis and of the resignation from office in 2011. On the other hand, former opposition parties have pointed the finger towards bad economic administration of Berlusconi government. The M5s has instead turned the blame not only on the EU, but also on the Berlusconi and Monti government and, more in general, on the old political establishment.

In Greece the political debate was focused mainly on the responsibilities of the domestic actors. In absence of studies of a direct exploration of blame attribution and parties' stances, it is instructive to mention that the main opposition party, New Democracy (ND), mainly accused all the previous socialist governments. The government party of PASOK and its leader and Prime Minister at the time when the crisis exploded George Papandreou blamed the ND governments of Costas Karamanlis (2004-2007 and 2007-2009), but also the previous governments of PASOK. The other opposition parties, mainly SYRIZA and LAOS also linked the crisis with the national political arena. Moreover, the party of SYRIZA clearly manifested a clear criticism on the neoliberal policies adopted at the European level. The EU membership *per se* was mainly highlighted and criticized by the Communist Party, although this party also blamed previous governments.

We argue that two kinds of anti-EU voters exist led by different kinds of anti-EU parties: a) *Old anti-EU voters*: In Greece, these are the voters of KKE (and other smaller parties like Antarsya), while in Italy they are voters of the Northern League and, to a lesser extent, to the Communist Re-foundation party[2]. They are explicitly against the EU. Getting out of the EU and going back to the old national currency (i.e. Drachma for Greece and Lira for Italy) is the most significant issue in their agenda. Thus, for these old anti-EU voters the direction of the mechanism is as follows: due to their anti-EU position, they blame EU and the Euro for the financial crisis. b) *New anti-EU voters* (after the Troika and implementation of austerity measures). For them, the mechanism works on the opposite direction: they suffer from austerity measures, therefore they look for someone to blame for their problems. They have decided, besides other national actors, to blame the EU and as a result, they develop anti-EU attitude. In Greece, these voters did not vote for KKE (KKE has not gained much by the *anti-Memorandum* wave); but they preferred other parties such as SYRIZA,

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[2] The Communist Refoundation party is not properly anti-EU. It is rather anti a neo-liberal idea of the EU.

Independent Greeks, etc. In Italy, these voters did not vote for the Northern League but for the Five Star Movement or for the People of Freedom party.

This recent politicization of EU issues is not too much of a surprise. We have already been warned in literature that pro-anti EU orientations were a "sleeping giant" and politicization of EU issues was only a matter of time. Ten years ago, Van der Eijk and Franklin (2004: 47) wrote that despite its apparent irrelevance for political participation, if the sleeping giant were awakened, it would have the potential to mobilize and polarize a higher number of people that the left-right dimension. This is so because the pro-anti EU orientations dimension has been thought as not overlapping with the left-right orientations dimension, but orthogonal to it. This means that orientations pro or against Europe could be adopted for different reasons by parties on the right and on the left, with different implications for who these parties are going to blame in difficult times, such as during the economic and financial crisis that is hitting the Eurozone.

In Italy and Greece, only few studies exist looking at vote choice as dependent variable and its association with Euroscepticism. In Italy, Bellucci (2014) shows for instance that, holding the last elected cabinet before the elections responsible made voters turn towards left-wing parties, while if they did not held it responsible they tended to vote PdL or Northern League. In similar ways, when Italian voters associated economic difficulties with blaming the European Union for the crisis, they were more likely to choose pro-EU parties, rather than openly Eurosceptic parties.

For the Greek case, we can refer to two studies that are mainly focused on economic voting. Kosmidis (2013) reveals that attribution of blame to the national government became prominent and increased only once the bailout package by international lenders was in place. He explains this rather counter-intuitive finding through reference to a 'room to maneuver' argument whereby Greek economic conditions deteriorated rapidly causing voters' to pay more attention to the issue and to who was responsible. As international institutions started to intervene, the government suffered constraints but maintained a limited room to manoeuvre, which voters were aware of. Later on, however, a larger proportion of the blame switched towards international lenders. A complementary interpretation of this relationship could be that the electorate started assigning blame to the national government for ceding sovereignty in key policy areas to international lenders. A study by Karyotis and Rüdig (2013), however, challenges these conclusions using individual-level data. The authors find that blame attribution exerted no significant impact on vote intention - at least during the early months after the voting of the first bailout deal - while egocentric and prospective socio-tropic economic perceptions had some impact. Crucial, however, has been the extent to which an individual accepted the government's line that the bailout deal was the least worst of available options.

4. Determinants of EU attitudes

Before moving ahead to the analysis of the relationship between blaming the EU and attitudes towards Europe at the individual level, we present some theoretical perspectives relevant for our study, which rely on the literature of economic voting and blame attribution, and on the relevance of political sophistication and political beliefs for investigating the relationship between blaming the EU and attitudes towards Europe. Even if it is beyond the aim of this study to provide a complete review of this literature, some relevant points are worthwhile mentioned in order to better frame our concepts.

Economic evaluations (Socio- and ego-tropic economic perceptions and government evaluation)

Two of the most important distinctions in the field of economic evaluations are a) the difference between retrospective and prospective perceptions of the economy and b) the difference between evaluation of the country's economy and the household finances. Based on this distinction, we can identify the socio-tropic and the ego-tropic economic voting. Previous studies suggest that socio-tropic perceptions usually play a more important role in the vote choice compared to ego-tropic attitudes (e.g. Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). Voters' assessment of the government performance on economy is closely connected to economic evaluations. Indeed, the main hypothesis of economic voting in its basic *reward-punishment* version is that voters cast their vote for the incumbent if the economy is doing right, while the reverse happens if the economy is doing badly (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). However, recent studies have shown that national economic vote diminishes to the extent that the EU is held responsible for the economy (Lobo & Schmitt Beck, 2012). Moreover, many studies have shown that voters in more closed economies tend to blame national leaders for the poor economic conditions, while the reverse happens for those voters in open economies who are less likely to reward or blame domestic politicians (e.g. Fernandez-Albertos 2006; Hellwig and Samuels 2007). In Italy and Greece and other EU countries following austerity policies, retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy as well as voters' assessment of the government performance on economy could have an impact on the attitudes towards Europe. Being optimist about the future of the economy or evaluating the incumbent government positively implies that voters recognize that the tools used (e.g. austerity measures, salary cut, increased taxes, reforms, etc.) were the right ones to deal with the crisis. As a result, we expect these voters to be more positive towards the EU.

Political Sophistication

The accountability relationship of democracies assumes that voters are able to attribute responsibility for important policy outcomes or for the state of the economy. Voters are influenced by different

factors in the way they construct their judgement on who to hold responsible. One is political sophistication, with the more sophisticated being more able to assess both the relative cost and the correct responsibility (Gomez and Wilson, 2003, 2006). This leads to the expectation that more educated citizens will be able to construct more complex narratives and avoid blaming easy targets. However, when international actors are called into question together with domestic actors, the task of citizens in constructing their judgment on who to hold responsible is complicated because in multi-level government systems, such as that in the European Union, it becomes more difficult to properly assess who is responsible. In this context, blame shifting activities by parties are an important determinant of responsibility attribution and they are even more likely to be so in a context of economic crisis. Blame shifting consists in minimizing the blame for any outcome that may jeopardize their chance of re-election (Weaver, 2003; Hood, 2002). In a context of crisis of the Eurozone, it is more likely for incumbent governments to engage in blame shifting not only towards opposition parties, but also and most of all towards the European Union. It is assumed, however, that more educated citizens will still be able to avoid blaming the EU, unless they really believe it is an appropriate actor to be blamed. We therefore expect voters with higher education levels to be able to understand that the austerity measures were necessary because of the financial situation of the country. As a result, we expect that they will be more positive towards EU.

Political beliefs

In this paper, we are interested in looking at whether blaming Europe leads to negative attitudes towards the EU. However, when investigating these types of relationships, an endogeneity issue might arise since the causal direction could actually be reversed, i.e. voters who did not like the European Union even before the economic crisis, have found a good opportunity to support their arguments on exiting the EU and to return to the old currency. These voters are expected to blame the EU and the Euro as a logical consequence of their initial attitude towards the EU. As we saw in previous sections, however, two types of euroscepticism seem to exist in the political offer of the two countries, made up of old anti-EU voters (and parties) and new anti-EU voters (and parties). Moreover, prior political beliefs have been shown to be important in conditioning blame attribution (Campbell et al. 1960; Abramowitz 1988; Lewis-Beck 1997; Sigelman and Knight 1985). It is therefore likely that partisanship plays a crucial role in guiding blame attribution towards the EU. By taking *vote choice* into account, this endogeneity can therefore be partially dealt with.

5. Data, Variables and Methods

The Greek National Election Study/ELNES (Andreadis et al 2012, Andreadis 2014) was conducted as a mixed-mode survey in the period between 19 October 2012 and 5 January 2013, asking questions referring to June 2012 elections[3]. The sample was selected randomly by area proportional to total phone population. Half of the sample was designed to be collected online (Andreadis 2010). The selected respondents were called on the phone and they were asked to provide their email address if they wanted to participate in a web survey conducted by the Laboratory of Applied Political Research, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. These email addresses have been used into the epolls.gr web survey system. The other half of the sample was designed to be collected by face-to-face interviews. For the face-to-face sample, additional weight was given to people from rural areas, aged >= 55 years and with lower educational levels (taking into consideration the limited access and use of the Internet of these groups). The final dataset consists of 531 respondents to the web survey and 500 respondents to the face-to-face interviews.

Italian data are taken from Itanes (Italian National Election Studies) post-electoral survey. A sample of 1508 Italians have been interviewed in March-April 2013 after the elections of February 2013. Interviews have been conducted face-to-face following the CAPI (computer assisted personal interview) method, and lasted a little more than an hour. The sample was constructed by randomly extract of people enrolled in electoral lists on the base of a three stage probabilistic sampling (municipalities, electoral sections, individuals). Data have been collected by Ipsos[ii]

The dependent variable: attitudes towards the EU

Our aim is to study if the economic crisis has affected attitudes of Greek and the Italian citizens towards the European Union and such variables should be used as dependent variable in our models.

The Greek questionnaire includes the following question:
"In general, would you say that the membership of Greece in the European Union is…" (a good thing, a bad thing, neither good nor bad).

The Italian questionnaire includes the following question:

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[3] One could object that June 2012 elections were more like a referendum pro vs. against Europe, while in May 2012 the same voters voted in very different ways. It is certainly true that during June 2012 elections there was a significant pattern of realignment towards "New Democracy" and "Syriza" compared to May 2012. However, as recent public opinion polls and the 2014 European Parliament election results show, the realignment has been more or less stable until today. Thus, we believe it is more appropriate to use the June 2012 dataset.

"In your opinion, the fact that Italy belongs to the European Union is...." (a good thing, a bad thing, neither good nor bad).

*The blaming dimension and its relation with attitudes toward Europe*

Our main hypothesis is that attitudes towards the EU depend on blame attribution for the crisis. To be more specific, we argue that if citizens blame the EU and the Euro for the financial crisis in their country, they will develop a negative attitude towards the EU. Thus, the main independent variable that characterizes the focus of our analysis is represented by the "blame" questions[iii]. In Greece, respondents have been asked about their opinion regarding the attribution of blame to nine institutions, using a 5-point Likert scale, while in Italy respondents had to evaluate blame to seven institutions on an-11 points scale (0 to 10). Harmonization between common items of the two datasets was carried out as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Homogenization of Blame variable

GREECE	ITALY
Greek government	Berlusconi government
Greek government	Monti government
The international economic situation	International finance
European Union	European Union
Integration of the country in the Euro zone	Euro
Bank system	Italian banks

The first exploration that we carry out concerns the relation that exists in the two countries between the attribution of blame to the EU and to the Euro and attitudes towards the EU in general. What we expect from this bivariate analysis is to detect a strong correlation between these dimensions. This is made clear by Figure 4, where it is possible to see how in both countries an increase in the perception of the EU/Euro as responsible for the crisis lead to a lower percentage of positive answers to the question about the general attitudes towards the EU.

Figure 4. Blaming the EU and the Euro for the crisis leads to less positive attitudes towards the EU both in Greece (A) and in Italy (B)
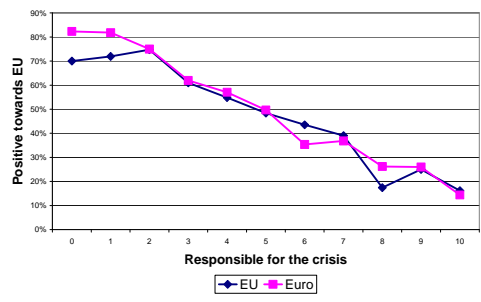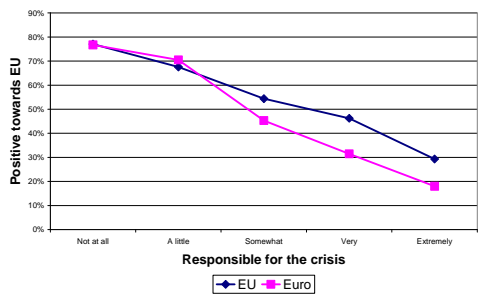
Source: A) ELNES 2012; B) ITANES 2013

In Greece, among the respondents who do not attribute any responsibilities to the European Union or to the Euro for the economic crisis, more than 70% believe that the EU membership is something positive. Very similar figures can be observed for Italy. In both countries the blame items on European Union and Euro seems to follow the same trend in the relation with attitudes toward Europe (i.e. blaming leads to less positive attitudes). Moreover, the two variables are strongly correlated (Greece: Pearson corr=0.51; Italy: Pearson corr=0.52). This evidence brings us to decide to create an index that summarizes the blame attribution towards Europe. The index is computed by averaging the two items. The distributions for Italy and Greece are presented in Figure 5A and B.

Figure 5. Distribution of the Blame Europe Index in Greece (A) and Italy (B)
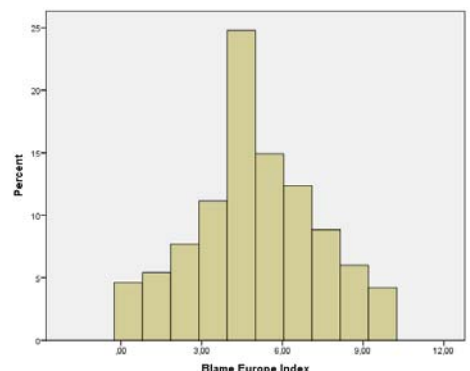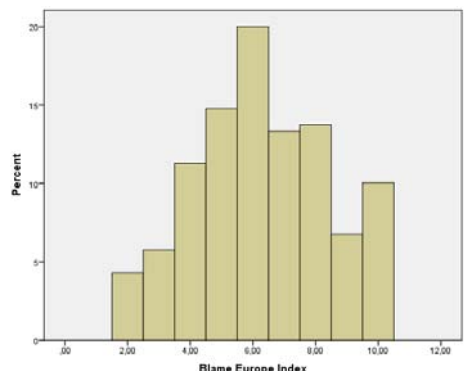
The correlation between the Blame Europe Index and attitudes towards the EU is strong. In Greece it is 0.45, while in Italy it reaches 0.47. This outcome naively confirms our expectation. Nonetheless, it is necessary to investigate this relation more closely, controlling for other intervening variables and checking whether this relation is stable or it depends on other respondents characteristics. In other

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words, to achieve our aim, we introduce a number of other variables in the analysis and we add interactions where necessary.

The Three Models

In order to investigate the relation between blaming the Euro and the EU and attitudes towards Europe more in depth, we use a linear regression approach with attitudes toward Europe as dependent variable. Despite the ordinal nature of this dependent variable, linear regression allows for a much more efficient presentation of the result and, in this specific case, the outcomes are not substantially differing following an approach that explicitly acknowledges the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. Thus, we decide to stick to the simplest model.

We first estimate a model where we simply introduce the blame items to explore the pattern of relation between the blame structure and attitudes toward Europe (*Model 1*). We then introduce the additional independent variables of retrospective and prospective economic evaluations[iv] together with government evaluation[v]. We also add vote choice at the national elections (i.e. vote recall) and we control for their direct effects. Finally, together with education, we add some standard socio-demographic variables (*Model 2*)[vi]. Finally, we introduce an interaction between blaming Europe for the crisis and a) voted party as well as b) education. This is to test whether respondents' political positions and education have an effect on the connection that exists between blaming and attitude towards Europe (*Model 3*).

6. Findings

Tables 3 and 4 show the outcomes of the three models estimated for Italy and Greece. From *Model 1* it clearly emerges what already expected, that is blaming Europe for the economic crisis brings a negative effect on attitudes towards Europe. From the Italian model analysis, it seems not to emerge a clear structure of blame based on national vs. international attribution of responsibility for the crisis, as the more respondents blame Berlusconi's government, Italian Banks (national) and the International financial system (international), the more positive their attitudes towards Europe. This might be partially due, however, to the fact that blaming Berlusconi's government is a rhetoric that has been enacted by the centre-left Pd, who traditionally also tend to be strongly pro-European. Blaming the Monti's government brings to the opposite result, that is more negative attitudes towards Europe. This is reasonable since Monti is a strongly pro-European technocrat, who has often been depicted in the public sphere as a "puppet" or a "servant" of the EU's diktat of austerity reforms. For Greece, Model 1 shows instead that only the index variable "blaming the EU" is significant for explaining attitudes towards the EU. The rest of the independent variables included (i.e. blaming the

Greek Government, blaming the international economic situation and blaming the bank system) do not seem to have an impact on attitudes towards the EU.

If we go beyond this first analysis, introducing other independent variables (*Model 2*), the most remarkable outcome in the Italian case is that blaming Europe for the crisis maintains a strong negative impact on attitudes toward Europe, while the impact of other sources of blame is reduced. Only blaming Berlusconi's government maintains a significant role in defining EU attitudes, in the same direction as seen before. Monti's government evaluation is otherwise taking away the negative effect of blaming his government. In general, respondents who positively evaluate the performance of his government have overall a more positive idea of Europe. Moreover, the evaluation of the economy has a stronger significant impact on attitudes towards Europe both in its *retrospective* (negative effect) and in its *prospective* version (positive effect). The direction of the relations are as expected: the more respondents have positive expectations about the future, the least they will have a negative opinion about Europe. Also, the more respondents evaluate positively their previous economic conditions, the least likely are to have a positive idea about Europe that imposed harsh austerity measures on the Italian government.

Among other variables, it is interesting to notice that, controlling for all other independent variables, supporting the Centre-left party of Pd (Democratic Party) or the Leftist party Communist Re-foundation (Rc) brings to more positive attitudes towards the EU. This is not surprising for the supporters of Pd that is traditionally a warm pro-European party. Less obvious the case of Rc that always maintained a critical edge towards Europe. Evaluating this result, however, we should not forget, that in our Italian sample we have only 19 respondents who indicated Rc in their vote recall. As far as the Pd is concerned, the respondents are 355, and this makes the estimate for the effect more robust.

Interestingly enough, there are no other vote declarations that seem to influence attitudes towards Europe, not even the North League that is a firmly and openly (old) Euro-sceptic party. Another element of interest is the negative sign attached to the M5s vote, although this coefficient turns out to be non-significant. This outcome, in its direction, is consistent with the rhetoric of the party that opposed the national government as well the supranational entities for failing to address the real problems of citizens. To close the comments concerning Model 2 for Italy, it is worth noticing that education has a positive and significant effect on EU attitudes, and that this is an expected outcome: more education makes overall Italian citizens more pro-European.

Model 2 in Greece gives findings that are very similar to the Italian data. Blaming Europe for the crisis maintains a strong negative impact on attitudes towards Europe. The *prospective* evaluation

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of the economy has a significant impact on attitudes toward Europe, e.g. citizens who are optimistic about the future of the economy are expected to have more positive opinion about Europe [7]. Education has a positive impact on EU attitudes, i.e. voters with higher education levels are more politically sophisticated and have more positive attitudes towards the EU than less educated voters. As far as the political parties are concerned, we observe that voting for the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) has a strong, significant negative impact on the attitudes towards EU. On the other hand voting for the Democratic Left (DIMAR) (sig 0.02) and for ND (sig 0.08) has a positive (although less strong) impact on the opinion about EU.

Finally, *Model 3* allows us to see whether the mechanisms depicted above are holding independently from other variables, or whether they depend on certain characteristics of the respondents. In particular, we are interested in evaluating whether the relation between blaming Europe and attitude towards Europe is crosscutting on all the electorate, or whether supporting a specific party or having more cognitive resources make a person able to detach the evaluation of the responsibility for the economic crisis from his attitudes towards Europe. For this reason, we add the interactions of Blame Europe index with vote declaration and with education to *Model 2*.

The outcome of the Italian model seems to confirm that the effect of the blame placed on Europe is crosscutting and constantly produces more negative attitudes towards Europe. Indeed, with the exception of one, all interaction coefficients turned out to be non-significant. However, the connection between blaming Europe and voting for M5s is stronger that in the general population. This means that being a 5SM voter and blaming the EU for the crisis can have strong negative impact on EU attitudes. Finally, being highly educated and blaming the EU for the crisis does not lead to having negative views of the EU.

Also in this case, *Model 3* coefficients for the Greek dataset are very similar to the Italian one. Almost all interaction coefficients are non-significant. The only exception is the party of Independent Greeks (ANEL): we can observe that ANEL voters who do not blame the EU tend to be positive towards the EU, but being an ANEL voter and blaming the EU for the crisis can have a very strong negative impact on EU attitudes. Others parties show instead non-significant interactions. This means that even the voters of the most pro-European parties can develop anti-EU attitudes when they blame the EU for the crisis. Also for Greece, being highly educated and blaming the EU for the crisis does not lead to having negative views of the EU.

In general, these results show how the strong rhetoric of parties against Europe can ignite a spiral of Euro-scepticism. This outcome is even more serious if we consider that in the general population the relation between blame attribution to Europe and support to Europe are strongly related and independent from other respondent characteristics.

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Table 3. Final model for Italy: linear regression (DV: Attitude toward Europe, N = 1252)

	Model 1. Blame			Model 2. Other			Model 3.		
	Coef.	s.e.	Sig	Coef.	s.e.	Sig	Coef.	s.e.	Sig
Blame									
Europe (EU/Euro)	-0.16	0.01	***	-0.15	0.01	***	-0.13	0.03	***
Government - Berlusconi	0.02	0.01	***	0.02	0.01	***	0.02	0.01	***
Government - Monti	-0.01	0.01	*	0.02	0.01	*	0.02	0.01	**
Internat financial system	0.02	0.01	**	0.01	0.01		0.01	0.01	
Italian banks	0.02	0.01	**	0.02	0.01	*	0.02	0.01	*
Gov. Evaluation in economy: Berlusconi				0.01	0.01		0.00	0.01	
Gov. Evaluation in economy: Monti				0.06	0.01	***	0.06	0.01	***
Economic evaluation: Retrospective				-0.07	0.03	**	-0.06	0.03	*
Economic evaluation: Prospective				0.09	0.02	***	0.09	0.02	***
Gender: male				-0.02	0.04		-0.03	0.04	
Age				0.00	0.00		0.00	0.00	
Education				0.12	0.02	***	0.14	0.05	***
Vote recall: (ref: refuse to answer)									
Rc (Communist Re-foundation)				0.36	0.16	**	0.55	0.38	
Sel (Left and Freedom)				0.01	0.11		0.09	0.25	
Pd (Democratic Party)				0.17	0.06	***	0.17	0.14	
M5s (Five Star Movement)				-0.10	0.06		0.16	0.15	
Sc (Civic Choice – Monti)				0.15	0.09		-0.03	0.21	
Pdl (People of Freedom)				0.09	0.07		0.12	0.19	
North League				0.10	0.16		0.49	0.48	
Others				0.05	0.19		-0.27	0.34	
Do not vote				0.05	0.07		0.25	0.17	
Invalid/spoilt ballot				0.19	0.14		0.10	0.34	
Interaction: Blame Europe * Vote									
*Rc (Communist Re-foundation)							-0.04	0.06	
*Sel (Left and Freedom)							-0.02	0.05	
*Pd (Democratic Party)							0.00	0.02	
*M5s (Five Star Movement)							-0.05	0.03	**
*Sc (Civic Choice – Monti)							0.04	0.04	
*Pdl (People of Freedom)							-0.01	0.03	
*North League							-0.07	0.08	
*Others							0.10	0.08	
*Do not vote							-0.04	0.03	
*Invalid/spoilt ballot							0.01	0.05	
Interaction: Blame Europe * Education							0.00	0.01	
Constant	0.75	0.08	***	-0.05	0.15		-0.19	0.21	
R-squared	0.25			0.33			0.34		

Source: ITANES 2013

Table 4. Final model for Greece: linear regression (DV: Attitude towards Europe, N = 827)

	Model 1. Blame			Model 2. Other			Model 3. Interactions		
	Coef.	s.e.	Sig	Coef.	s.e.	Sig	Coef.	s.e.	Sig
Blame									
Europe (EU/Euro)	-0.15	0.01	***	-0.11	0.01	***	-0.08	0.04	**
Greek Government	0.01	0.02		0.02	0.02		0.01	0.06	
Internat economic situation	0.02	0.02		0.03	0.02		0.03	0.02	
The bank system	-0.01	0.02		-0.01	0.02		-0.00	0.02	
Gov. Evaluation in economy: Papandreou				-0.03	0.03		-0.03	0.03	
Economic evaluation: Retrospective				-0.02	0.02		-0.01	0.03	
Economic evaluation: Prospective				-0.10	0.02	***	-0.10	0.02	***
Gender: male				0.03	0.04		0.02	0.04	
Age				-0.00	0.00		-0.00	0.00	
Education				0.07	0.01	***	0.10	0.03	***
Vote recall: (ref: refuse to answer)									
Nd (New Democracy)				0.13	0.07	*	0.10	0.21	
Syriza-Ekm (Radical Left-Unitary Social Front)				-0.04	0.07		0.22	0.24	
Pasok (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)				0.13	0.10		-0.04	0.30	
Anel (Independent Greeks)				-0.10	0.11		0.75	0.37	**
Ls-Xa (Popular Association -Golden Dawn)				0.13	0.13		0.40	0.38	
Dimar (Democratic Left)				0.21	0.09	**	0.23	0.28	
Kke (Communist Party of Greece)				-0.71	0.14	***	-1.15	0.69	
DX (Recreate Greece)				0.22	0.14		0.23	0.41	
Others				0.01	0.21		0.50	0.74	
Do not vote				0.01	0.08		-0.18	0.25	
Invalid/spoilt ballot				-0.15	0.18		0.00	0.55	
Interaction: Blame Europe * Vote									
*Nd (New Democracy)							0.01	0.03	
*Syriza-Ekm (Radical Left-Unitary Social Front)							-0.04	0.04	
*Pasok (Panhellenic Socialist Movement)							0.03	0.05	
*Anel (Independent Greeks)							-0.13	0.05	***
*Ls-Xa (Popular Association -Golden Dawn)							-0.04	0.05	
*Dimar (Democratic Left)							-0.00	0.05	
*Kke (Communist Party of Greece)							0.05	0.08	
*DX (Recreate Greece)							-0.00	0.07	
*Others							-0.12	0.16	
*Do not vote							0.03	0.04	
*Invalid/spoilt ballot							-0.03	0.08	
Interaction: Blame Europe * Education							-0.01	0.01	
Constant	1.26	0.13	***	1.08	.24	***	0.88	0.32	**
R-squared	0.21			0.34			0.35		

Source: ELNES 2012

7. Conclusions

The aim of our paper was to explore to what extent the patterns of attribution of responsibility vary between Italian and Greek citizens by giving special attention to the possible interdependence with attitudes towards Europe. Also, we wanted to see whether party preferences of voters and their political sophistication (i.e. educational levels) influenced this relationship, as the political narrative that voters apply to understand the current crisis can affect their perceptions towards the European Union and towards its future role.

After briefly presenting the theoretical framework and a background of recent political events in Greece and in Italy, we we saw how the political offer of the two countries is divided between old (i.e. traditionally against Europe and the Euro) and new Eurosceptic voters (looking for somebody to blame for the crisis). This latter category has arisen due to the politicization of the issues by national political parties.

Using public opinion surveys of ELNES and ITANES, collected in the occasion of the last national elections in these countries (June 2012 in Greece and February 2013 in Italy), we wanted to investigate the relationship between blaming the EU/Euro and having negative attitudes towards the EU at the individual level, controlling for several respondents' characteristics.

We found that, in both countries, attributing blame for the crisis to Europe is related to general attitudes towards the membership of one's country in the EU. In particular, the more the blame is put on Europe (seen both as an institution and as a common currency), the more negative perceptions of the advantages of being a member of the European Union are. In the Italian case, findings depict that there is not a clear distinction between the national and the supranational sphere of attribution of responsibility. In the Greek case, instead, only the index variable "blaming the EU" is significantly explaining attitudes towards the EU. A general conclusion is therefore that blaming Europe for the economic crisis brings a negative effect on attitudes towards Europe.

Moreover, in both countries *prospective* evaluations of the economy have a significant positive impact on attitudes towards Europe: the more positive the vision of economic conditions for the future, the more positive the attitudes towards Europe. Finally, the relationship between blaming Europe and having more negative attitudes towards Europe is crosscutting the electorate, with the partial exception of M5s voters in Italy and Independent Greeks party voters in Greece, who, if blaming the EU, tend to have stronger and association with having negative attitudes towards the EU. Also, it seems that higher educated voters tend to be more positive towards the EU, while having higher cognitive skills and blaming the EU does not affect attitudes towards Europe.

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These outcomes bring to a pretty obvious conclusion: in the measure in which national governments and national politics will use narratives that puts the blame for the poor national economic situation on Europe, it could be expected that citizens of their countries will translate that narratives in withdrawal of support of the European Union. If we assume that still most of the European governments see Europe as vital element of safety and stability for their national economic systems, our results suggests that those government should be cautious in concealing their responsibilities and charging Europe with all the blame. Awakening the "sleeping giant" (Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2004) could bring in a pretty short time to the vanishing of popular support for the European endeavour and a consequence lack of viability for such an historical project.

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[ii] Ipsos is a social research institute that collects citizens' public opinion.

[iii] The Greek questionnaire includes the following question: *"During the last few years the economy is in recession. To what extent do you think that the each one of the following could be held responsible for the appalling economic situation of the last couple of years?" Not at all responsible, A little responsible, Somewhat responsible, Very responsible, Extremely responsible*. Institutions: the Greek government, the **EU,** international economic situation, the bank system, integration of the country in the Euro zone, opposition's parties, the credit rating agencies, the German government, the

IMF). The Italian questionnaire includes the following question: "*The economic crisis in Italy is surely influenced by several factors. Can you please tell me how responsible are in your opinion the following institutions?*" Institutions: the Berlusconi government, international finance, the EU, the Euro, the Monti government, the Italian banks, the Italian entrepreneurs.

[iv] Greek questions: Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the economic situation of Greece now is.... and In the 12 months to come, how do you think that the economic condition of Greece will emerge? It will be… Italy questions: *In your opinion, the Italian economic situation in the last year is...* and *Looking at the future, in your opinion how the Italian economic situation will be in a year?* For Greece the answers are coded as follows: 1. Much better, 2. A little better, 3. Remain the same, 4. A little worse, 5. Much worse, thus we expect that the coefficients between negative attitudes and this variable to be positive. For Italy the answers are coded in the opposite way, thus we expect coefficients between negative attitudes and this variable to be negative.

[v] Greek question: *Would you say that during the governance of George Papandreou (2009-2011) the Hellenic economy got a lot better, got a little better, stayed the same, got a little worse, or got a lot worse?* Italian question: *Can you tell me how you evaluate the work of the Monti's government as far as the economic situation is concerned?* Answers expressed on an 11-point scale from 0 to 10. For Italy we take into account not only the incumbent government (i.e. Monti) but also the performance of the Berlusconi's government, as the political position of the pre-elecotral government in Italy was not very clear (being a technocratic government).

[vi] Education is a four categories variable in the Italian data and a nine categories variable in the Greek data. Age and gender are trivial variables and are introduced in the models as follows: male as a dummy variable, age as a continuous variable with a linear effect on attitudes toward EU.

[7] The codes of the Greek variable are 1: much better to 5: much worse. In Italy they are reversed. This is why the coefficients are of opposite signs in the two countries, but the substantive relationships are the same.