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What should governments do to deal with the economic crisis? Exploring Portuguese laypeople's support for government strategies

Gabrielle Poeschl^a, Kelly Nogueira-Rodrigues^a and Joaquim Pires Valentim^b

^aFaculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal; ^bFaculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação, University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The economic crisis that hit European countries has been the object of various studies, aiming to understand how laypeople construct their opinions and guide their actions to deal with the difficulties stemming from the implementation of austerity measures. The present study analyses the responses given to an online survey by 630 Portuguese adults. Focusing on their support for possible government strategies to manage the crisis, it examines the changes which have occurred over time in their opinions, and compares them with opinions expressed in other European countries hit by the crisis. The main results suggest that support for strategies differs according to the attribution of responsibility for the crisis either to the people or to supranational institutions. In line with the findings from other countries, conformity to European Union demands is supported by higher class right-wingers, rationalization of the public sector by somewhat insecure centrists, and exit from the European Union by more vulnerable left- and right-wingers. Results also show a global decrease in support for the European project, which questions the way the EU deals with the problems of its member states as well as the ideals it pursues.

KEYWORDS

Social representations;
economic crisis; Portugal;
European Union; government
strategies

Introduction

The fall of Lehman Brothers, in 2008, severely hit the world economies. Portuguese citizens became aware of the extent of the financial and economic crisis, when, in 2010, with the support of the opposition parties, the then socialist Portuguese government successively presented three programmes aiming at reducing the public deficit and controlling the increase of the public debt, the so-called 'PEC' (Programas de Estabilidade e Crescimento/Programs of Stability and Growth).

Among other things, the measures included in these programs aimed on one hand to increase public revenue, in particular by means of an increase of the direct and indirect taxes, privatizations, greater control of fraud and fiscal evasion. On the other hand, they aimed to reduce public spending through cuts in social benefits, public subsidies and

salaries of public servants, greater control of employment policies, suspension of public works projects (Ministério das Finanças e da Administração Pública, 2010).

The fourth programme presented in 2011 was rejected, leading to the fall of the government and the need for new elections. During the transition period, the European Commission was asked for help. An agreement was reached in May and, in exchange for a bailout loan of 78 billion euros, the crisis began to be handled by the Troika, an entity composed of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EU; cf. Sá & Cabral, 2011). This agreement did not include more dismissals, cuts in the salaries of public servants or in the lowest pensions, nor reduction of the national minimum salary, and this led the then finance minister to claim to have succeeded 'in turning austerity toward the State and not toward the people' (cf. *Visão online*, 2011).

The new government resulting from a right-wing coalition that won the elections in June 2011 initiated a programme which included measures that exceeded those planned in the Memorandum negotiated with the Troika and which had devastating effects on the Portuguese people and on the Portuguese economy (Romão, 2013): from 2011 to the end of the first trimester of 2013, the gross domestic product (GDP) was reduced by more than 6 per cent, investment fell of approximately 30 per cent, the rate of unemployment went from 12.9 per cent to 17.8 per cent, while the government deficit went from 4.4 per cent to 8.8 per cent and the public debt from 108.3 per cent of the GDP to 127.2 per cent.

The rise in the unemployment rate occurred in spite of the increase in emigration (Caritas Europa, 2015): there were about 54 000 permanent emigrants and 74 000 temporary emigrants in 2013, which represented about 1 per cent of the population of Portugal (INE, 2015a). The number of people living in households without any income from work since the onset of the crisis and the number of people at risk of poverty increased from 18.0 per cent in 2010 to 19.5 per cent in 2013, or, considering the 2009 poverty threshold, from 19.6 to 25.9 per cent (INE, 2015b). According to Caritas Europa (2015), between 2012 and 2013, Portugal recorded the highest rate of increase in the at-risk-of poverty rate, reflecting the reduction by 30 per cent of the spending on support for families with children, the restriction of access to social benefits, the reduction of unemployment protection, the normalization of low salaries and precariousness (amongst other things). Thus, the National Institute of Statistics concluded that, in 2013, Portugal had returned to the levels of poverty and social exclusion it had presented ten years previously (Crisóstomo, 2015), a situation which had significant negative consequences not only for individuals, but also for social cohesion and for the long-term sustainability of society (Frazier et al., 2014).

Laypeople's representations of the economic crisis

Research on public opinion has shown that when people are affected by an event as important as an economic crisis, they seek to understand it: they share their thoughts about the issue, reinterpret the information transmitted by the media, and discuss available expert information in the interactions that take place within social groups (Moscovici, 1976). Because they belong to different social groups, which occupy different positions in society and have different sources of information, people form theories presenting

similarities and differences which enable them to make sense of the social reality and guide their behaviour (Bourdieu, 1979; Moscovici, 1981, 1984). As social representation theory is specifically interested in these co-constructed theories, different authors working in this theoretical framework have analysed laypeople's representations of the economic crisis, and often compared the opinions of citizens from countries differently affected by the crisis (see, for example, Galli et al., 2010; Leiser et al., 2016; Papastamou et al., 2018a), producing rich material on the formation of public opinion.

A study in Portugal, using a free association task, undertaken in December 2011 with 453 Portuguese students showed that the word most frequently associated with the crisis was 'poverty', followed by 'unemployment', 'money' and 'difficulties' (Poeschl et al., 2015). This result confirmed the central status of unemployment, poverty and money in the representations of the economic crisis already highlighted in studies conducted in Greece, Italy, France and Romania (Galli et al., 2010) and in France (Lemoine et al., 2016). An analysis of the global discourses evoked by the students also revealed that the crisis was described in terms of misery, difficulties, or change, depending on their family income. On the other hand, the words that pointed to the factors responsible for the crisis, such as 'debts', 'mismanagement', 'Troika', or 'banks' were common to all groups.

Using some of the opinion scales already applied by Greek authors (Chrysoschoou et al., 2013), this study also revealed that students from lower-income families felt less positive emotions and more negative emotions toward the crisis than students with a higher family income, and experienced stronger feelings of vulnerability and relative deprivation that resulted from comparisons with others. However, in contrast to the results obtained in Greece by Chrysoschoou et al. (2013), there were no differences among Portuguese students regarding their declared unwillingness to participate in protest actions against the austerity measures implemented by the government.

It is likely that differences in the socioeconomic situations of the countries generated the differences observed between the Greek and Portuguese studies. But it is also likely, as suggested by the literature, that the way the media and the specialists talked about the phenomenon contributed to shape citizens' opinions and behaviours differently. For instance, a study carried out in Italy by Rizzoli et al. (2017) showed that the media discouraged Italian citizens from adopting proactive attitudes or behaviours to deal with the situation, by describing the crisis as a distant phenomenon that could be kept away, then as a contagious disease caught by the Italian economy for which Italian citizens were unprepared, and then as a natural catastrophe against which people were helpless. These descriptions possibly also explained the result of a study by Poeschl et al. (2017) which revealed that, unlike their Greek colleagues, Italian students viewed actions against austerity measures as scarcely effective.

Unsurprisingly, the way specialists talked about the crisis highlighted disagreements about the causes of the phenomenon in Portugal. Some economists pointed to internal factors, such as the fragility and stagnation of the economy, the low productivity and competitiveness of the country (Vasconcellos e Sá, 2011), or mistakes in political management (Cortez, 2011). Others held external factors to blame, such as greedy capitalism, triumphant neoliberalism, globalization or the 'euro' crisis (Louçã & Mortágua, 2012). Others blamed the mentality of the citizens and those who lived beyond their means (Murteira, 2011).

The discourse of specialists had a different influence on the various segments of the population. For example, the students who gave more credit to the discourses that blamed the powerful nations and globalization, the financial organizations and neoliberalism, or the Portuguese governments and corruption were more willing than the others to participate in civic actions or seek economic protection (Valentim et al., 2018). They also positioned themselves more to the left of the political spectrum, a position diverging from that of the then right-wing government. This result illustrated the importance of attributing responsibility in the process of sense making (Moscovici, 1984) and the effect of group-serving biases on choosing which actors were held responsible for the crisis (Cordero & Lago, 2016; Fernández-Albertos et al., 2013; Gangl et al., 2012; see also O'Connor, 2012 for an analysis of lay perceptions of the causes of the Irish recession).

Nevertheless, the low overall willingness to take action against the austerity measures highlighted by Valentim et al. (2018) suggested that, in 2011, many Portuguese citizens were not opposed to the application of these measures. They possibly believed that these measures would bring prosperity in the future or that the consequences of the crisis would be worse if they would not be applied (Moury & Freire, 2013). However, until May 2013, significant changes occurred in the Portuguese socioeconomic and political contexts: the austerity measures were reinforced, producing increasing difficulties in people's lives, members of Parliament resigned and the Portuguese Constitutional Court pronounced that it was against some of the measures included in the Programs of Stability and Growth. While the EU and the IMF were showing their satisfaction with the Portuguese government, considered the 'good pupil of the European Union' (Magone, 2016), a growing number of expert voices were heard speaking against the austerity measures (culminating in the Manifesto undersigned in 2014 by 70 personalities from all political orientations). It is thus likely that an alteration occurred in citizens' opinions and, indeed, even if the mobilization in Portugal did not have the magnitude and organizational development of those of Greece or Spain, new social movements were created, actively involved in changing the politics of austerity (Valentim et al., 2018) and defending alternative strategies to deal with the crisis.

Possible government strategies to deal with the crisis

The research conducted with Greek, French, Italian and Portuguese respondents on the socio-cognitive elaborations of the economic crisis (Papastamou et al., 2018b) has already looked at people's support for possible government strategies to deal with the crisis. An analysis of the responses given by 1806 citizens from France, Greece and Italy led to the identification of three types of strategies (Papastamou et al., 2018a): conforming to European Union demands, making cuts in the public sector budget (a strategy that was called rationalizing the public sector), and exiting the European Union. However, even though Portuguese respondents, a sample made up only of students, were not included in the analysis, there was no equivalence in the structure of the three dimensions across the samples of the countries. This result led the authors to consider that the agreement with strategies was dependent on the position of the countries and/or of the respondents.

Further analysis of the factors associated with the three types of government strategies was thus conducted. Prodromitis et al. (2017) highlighted the effect of the perceived relationship between Greece and the European Union on Greek respondents' acceptance

of the three types of government strategies. They showed that a positive image of this relationship, presenting the European Union as benevolent and dominant, led respondents to be favourable to conforming to EU demands and rationalizing the public sector. The acceptance of conformity to EU demands was partially due to respondents' perception of their own personal favourable situation, whereas the acceptance of the rationalization of the public sector was due to respondents' perception of their favourable situation in comparison with others. On the other hand, a negative image of this relationship, viewing Greece in a position of submission, led respondents to favour an exit from the EU. Acceptance of leaving the EU was also partially due to the perception of an unfavourable personal and relational situation, in line with relative deprivation theory (Runciman, 1966), suggesting that people challenge the status quo when they think they have less than they deserve.

In turn, Mari et al. (2017) examined the effect of vulnerability and political orientation on the acceptance of the three types of government strategies by Greek and Italian citizens. They found that a greater feeling of vulnerability, defined as the feeling arising from the perception of being in a precarious situation, was associated to stronger support for exiting the EU. A greater feeling of vulnerability was also moderately associated to stronger support for rationalizing the public sector and to weaker support for conforming to EU demands. To examine the effect of political orientation, the authors used the traditional single left-right scale, which they viewed as translating preferences for resisting vs. accepting inequality or, more specifically, for resisting vs. accepting capitalism. They found that left- and right-wingers were more likely than centrists to support an exit from the EU whereas respondents who positioned themselves at the centre of the political spectrum were more likely to agree to conform to EU demands and to agree with the rationalization of the public sector. Mari and colleagues attributed this result more to the conformism of the centrists than to a moderate political position.

Under the assumption that common trends may be found in the way of thinking of citizens from different countries hit by the crisis, this paper analyses the support for the strategies that could be adopted by the Portuguese government to deal with the crisis. First, we describe the support for some possible strategies and examine the evolution of this support using data gathered shortly after the implementation of the austerity measures by the Troika. Then, we analyse whether a set of variables contributed to explain the support for these strategies on the basis of the following hypotheses:

Attribution of responsibility: Attributing responsibility for the crisis to external factors, such as the European Union and globalization, to financial organizations and neoliberalism, or to the then right-wing government viewed as 'the good pupil of the EU', will lead to a greater acceptance of exiting the EU (Hypothesis 1a), whereas attributing the responsibility for the crisis to internal factors, such as the citizens and their mentality, will lead to a greater acceptance of conforming to EU demands and rationalizing the public sector (Hypothesis 1b).

Political orientation: Respondents at the centre of the political spectrum will be more likely to agree to conform to EU demands and to agree with the rationalization of the public sector than left- and right-wingers, whereas left- and right-wingers will be more likely to support an exit from the EU, in line with Mari et al. (2017) (Hypothesis 2).

Perceived socio-economic position: Because the crisis had a different impact on different social groups (Cavero & Poinasamy, 2013), respondents perceiving themselves in the worst

socioeconomic situations will be less favourable to conforming to EU demands (Hypothesis 3).

Perceived vulnerability: Respondents feeling more vulnerable will show greater acceptance of exiting the EU and rationalizing the public sector and less acceptance of conforming to EU demands, in conformity with Mari et al. (2017) (Hypothesis 4).

National identification: Because of the consensus that the extent to which people identify with their country has consequences on their political positions (Roccas et al., 2010) and in line with the common views on nationalism, we expect that stronger national identification will lead respondents to be more favourable to exiting the European Union (Hypothesis 5).

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 630 Portuguese adults, half of them men and half women aged between 17 and 77 years ($M = 33.35$). There were 355 unmarried, 229 married and 44 widowed or divorced (two missing values). Most ($n = 416$) did not have children and the others declared they had between one and four children. In terms of education, 15 had completed primary school, 176 high school and 434 university level education (five missing values). One hundred and eighty were students, 98 unemployed, 268 were employed, 57 self-employed and 26 retired (one missing value).

Note that for the analysis of the evolution of the support for the government strategies, we used data gathered in 2011 with a sample of 453 Portuguese students from social and human sciences. Most declared themselves to be politically centre-oriented and have a monthly family income situated between 485 Euros (minimum salary in January 2011) and 1000 Euros (for a more detailed description, see Poeschl et al., 2015).

Questionnaire and procedure

The study was conducted by means of an online survey, constructed with the software *Limesurvey* and diffused through the following devices: email, Facebook and LinkedIn. The questionnaire was available for eleven days in the month of May 2013. The respondents were informed that the objective of the study was to know the opinions of the Portuguese about the current Portuguese economic crisis, and were ensured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The questionnaire was composed of various parts concerning different aspects of the crisis (see Nogueira-Rodrigues, 2013). We analyse here the following subset of variables:

Strategies to be adopted by Portugal to deal with the crisis.- Respondents were asked to indicate (1 = *totally disagree*; 7 = *totally agree*) to what extent they believed that Portugal should adopt 11 measures to handle the crisis. The items had been elaborated in the context of the development of the international research presented by Papastamou et al. (2018b) and were selected among the solutions discussed in the media (see Table 1).

Attribution of responsibility for the crisis.- We asked respondents' opinions about the factors responsible for the economic crisis (1 = *not at all responsible*; 7 = *very much responsible*) using a set of 20 items extracted from the questionnaire by Chrysoschoou et al. (2013). These items had already been used, together with 'corruption', in the Portuguese

Table 1. Strategies to be adopted by Portugal to deal with the crisis. Factorial solution. Explained variance, Cronbach's alphas, saturations, means and standard deviations (1 = *totally disagree*; 7 = *totally agree*).

	F1 20.78% $\alpha = .63$	F2 18.21% $\alpha = .63$	F3 15.61% $\alpha = .65$	Mean	SD
<i>Rationalizing the public sector</i>					
To restrict public sector spending	0.66	0.07	-0.16	5.22	1.94
To reduce bureaucracy in order to attract private investment	0.64	-0.31	-0.20	5.98	1.47
To create an attractive environment for private investments through reduction of the costs of labour	0.61	0.22	-0.12	3.82	2.24
To agree to have a reduced management of their finances	0.59	0.17	0.07	3.85	1.96
To implement a technocratic government	0.59	0.33	0.16	3.37	1.94
			Mean	4.45	1.22
<i>Conforming to European Union demands</i>					
To increase direct and indirect taxation	-0.06	0.81	0.06	1.95	1.18
To implement rigorous austerity measures in relation to salaries and pensions	0.23	0.70	-0.21	2.47	1.72
To concede decision-making power to the EU, IMF and European Central Bank	0.29	0.62	-0.12	1.90	1.43
			Mean	2.11	1.10
<i>Exiting the European Union</i>					
To leave the Eurozone voluntarily	-0.01	-0.04	0.84	3.09	2.13
To refuse to pay the debt	-0.13	-0.12	0.83	3.14	2.13
			Mean	3.12	1.83

context (see the analysis of Valentim et al., 2018), and in the present study we included the item 'right-wing extremists' (Table 2).

Political orientation.- Respondents were asked to indicate their political orientation on a single scale going from 1 = *left* to 10 = *right*. In spite of the debate on the relevance of using a single dimension to capture the complexity of ideological and political orientations, the left-right dimension still appears to be a good indicator of political orientation (cf. Mari et al., 2017).

Perceived socio-economic position.- Respondents' perceived socio-economic situation was assessed by means of two items: (i) the variation in family income (1 = *decreased very much*; 5 = *increased very much*) during the last three years (cf. Ribeiro, 2011); (ii) the social class (1 = *lower*; 2 = *lower-middle*; 3 = *middle*; 4 = *upper-middle*; 5 = *upper*) in which they would include themselves.

Perceived vulnerability.- The nine items of the vulnerability scale proposed by Chrysoschoou et al. (2013), based on the work of Staerklé et al. (2007) and already used by Poeschl et al. (2015), were reformulated and adapted to the current situation of crisis (Table 3). Respondents were asked to indicate how likely (1 = *very unlikely*; 7 = *very likely*) they thought they might find themselves in each of the nine situations in two or three years.

National identification.- Respondents' national identification was assessed (1 = *not at all proud*; 5 = *very proud*) by their feeling of pride in being Portuguese (cf. Vala et al., 2003).

Results

In accordance with the above-mentioned objectives, we begin by describing respondents' support for the strategies that could be adopted by the Portuguese government to deal with the crisis in 2013, and analyse the evolution of this support using data gathered in

Table 2. Attribution of responsibility for the crisis. Factorial solution. Explained variance, Cronbach's alphas, saturations, means and standard deviations (1 = *not at all responsible*; 7 = *very much responsible*).

	F1 15.05% $\alpha = .80$	F2 14.38% $\alpha = .78$	F3 10.21 % $\alpha = .73$	F4 7.70% $\alpha = .73$	F5 7.48% $\alpha = .52$	F6 7.17% $\alpha = .49$	Mean	SD
<i>Portuguese population</i>								
Employees	0.81	−0.03	0.10	−0.06	−0.19	0.03	2.60	1.48
Citizens in general	0.79	0.04	0.05	−0.11	0.03	0.12	3.25	1.64
Portuguese mentality	0.67	0.10	0.05	−0.05	0.35	0.03	5.00	1.67
Public sector employees	0.65	−0.16	0.23	0.27	−0.01	−0.11	3.39	1.69
Trade Unions	0.64	0.04	0.33	0.00	0.18	−0.11	3.45	1.72
						Mean	3.54	1.22
<i>Powerful nations and globalization</i>								
European Union	−0.01	0.74	0.01	0.20	0.19	0.10	5.43	1.39
Powerful countries of the EU	−0.10	0.72	0.07	0.10	0.03	0.23	5.42	1.56
Globalization	0.17	0.71	−0.05	−0.15	−0.03	0.11	4.62	1.70
USA	−0.03	0.68	0.09	0.36	−0.08	−0.09	4.67	1.66
International factor	−0.05	0.67	−0.07	0.13	0.06	−0.00	5.65	1.26
						Mean	5.16	1.11
<i>Minority groups</i>								
Extreme left wing	0.28	−0.06	0.82	−0.08	0.16	−0.04	3.21	1.87
Extreme right wing	−0.01	0.10	0.81	−0.08	0.15	0.28	3.58	1.95
Immigrants	0.32	0.05	0.55	0.01	−0.22	−0.08	2.38	1.52
Beneficiaries of subsidies	0.49	−0.13	0.53	0.06	0.10	−0.15	3.81	1.95
						Mean	3.24	1.36
<i>Financial organizations</i>								
Banks	−0.03	0.19	−0.11	0.79	0.06	0.29	6.20	1.08
Financial credit organizations	−0.02	0.34	−0.05	0.71	0.10	0.11	6.25	1.05
						Mean	6.23	0.94
<i>Previous governments</i>								
Past governments	0.02	0.01	0.08	0.23	0.78	−0.12	6.41	0.93
Portuguese State	0.25	0.09	0.09	−0.10	0.74	0.22	5.69	1.33
						Mean	6.05	0.93
<i>Current government and economic interests</i>								
Employers	0.16	−0.02	0.06	0.30	−0.06	0.69	4.27	1.48
Current government	−0.21	0.26	−0.03	0.04	0.28	0.62	5.68	1.57
Capitalism	−0.03	0.48	0.03	0.08	−0.10	0.51	5.15	1.69
						Mean	5.03	1.11

Table 3. Perceived vulnerability. Factorial solution. Explained variance, Cronbach's alphas, saturations, means and standard deviations (1 = *very unlikely*; 7 = *very likely*).

	F1 44.63% $\alpha = .90$	F2 27.34% $\alpha = .78$	Mean	SD
<i>Insecurity about meeting basic needs</i>				
Needing economic support from friends and relatives	0.87	0.24	4.58	1.95
Not being able to pay your electricity and water bills	0.84	0.28	4.04	2.05
Not being able to find a job, or losing the job you already have	0.82	0.18	4.79	1.98
Not being able to buy a house, or losing the house you already have	0.79	0.23	4.67	2.13
Not being able to buy the medication you need	0.67	0.42	3.82	2.01
		Mean	4.38	1.71
<i>Insecurity about maintaining standard of living</i>				
Finding that the things you would like to have are too expensive for you	0.18	0.87	5.72	1.64
Having to reduce expenses with leisure activities	0.25	0.83	5.84	1.56
Finding that you are not able to attain the goals you had set up	0.52	0.58	5.34	1.74
		Mean	5.63	1.37

2011. Then, we describe the variables that might constitute explanations of the support for government strategies (attribution of responsibility, political orientation, perceived socio-economic position, perceived vulnerability and national identification), assess their contribution to this support and look for common trends in the way of thinking of the European citizens surveyed.

Strategies to be adopted by the Portuguese government to deal with the crisis

In the principal component factor analysis performed on the measures to be adopted by the Portuguese government, we excluded the item 'to implement measures that do not threaten social cohesion' because of its low loadings on the factors, even after recodification. Thus, after varimax rotation, the extracted solution presents three factors with eigenvalue greater than one, which together explain 54.59 per cent of the total variance. In line with Papastamou et al. (2018a), these factors refer, respectively, to: rationalizing the public sector through cuts in expenditure, conforming to European Union demands and increasing taxes, and exiting the European Union (Table 1).

We constructed three scales by aggregating the items gathered on the factors, and performed an analysis of variance with repeated measures on the means of the three dimensions. The analysis indicated significant differences between the three types of strategies that could be adopted in Portugal to minimize the effects of the crisis, $F(2, 1258) = 410.90$, $p < .001$. Overall, the respondents disagreed more with conforming to European Union demands ($M = 2.11$) than with exiting the European Union ($M = 3.12$), and they slightly agreed ($M = 4.45$) with rationalizing the public sector, all differences significant according to the *LSD* test for multiple comparisons, $p < .001$.

We may note that, although the composition of the factors does not entirely correspond to that of the factors extracted in studies using the same variables (Papastamou et al., 2018a), their order of agreement matches that of the Greek sample (Prodromitis et al., 2017). In addition, there is also a positive correlation between conforming to European Union demands and rationalizing the public sector, $r = .37$, $p < .001$, which, according to Prodromitis et al. (2017), suggests a similar ideological underpinning of the two strategies. Finally, the two strategies are also negatively correlated with the exit from the European Union (both $r = -.18$, $p < .001$).

Strategies to be adopted by the Portuguese government: evolution between 2011 e 2013

The items used in 2013 to identify the strategies to be adopted in Portugal to deal with the crisis were already included in the data collected in 2011. So, we also performed a principal component factor analysis on those previously gathered data and, given that the obtained solution was identical (percentage of explained variance: 55.04 per cent), we examined the evolution of the opinions on those strategies. This comparison revealed that there was a global decrease of support for conforming to EU demands (2011: $M = 3.08$; 2013: $M = 2.11$), $t(1081) = 14.19$, $p < .001$. There was also a global increase in support for the exit solution (2011: $M = 2.53$; 2013: $M = 3.12$), $t(1081) = 5.84$, $p < .001$, and for the rationalization measures (2011: $M = 4.30$; 2013: $M = 4.45$), $t(1081) = 2.14$, $p = .032$ (see Figure 1).

These tendencies were maintained when we took into consideration only the sub-sample of students from the present 2013 study. Indeed, a comparison of the responses showed that students' position in relation to the rationalization measures remained unchanged (2011: $M = 4.30$; 2013: $M = 4.45$), $t(631) = 1.53$, $p = .126$. However, students manifested less support for conforming to EU demands (2011: $M = 3.08$; 2013: $M = 2.31$), $t(631) = 7.58$, $p < .001$, and more support for the exit solution (2011: $M = 2.53$; 2013: $M = 2.84$), $t(631) = 2.46$, $p = .014$.

The change in the support for the government strategies is in line with the increase of distrust in the EU revealed by the analysis performed by Bărgăoanu et al. (2016) on the 2008–2013 data of the Eurobarometer.

Attribution of responsibility for the crisis

In the principal component factor analysis performed on the 22 elements possibly responsible for the economic crisis, we excluded the item 'corruption' because of its low loadings on the factors. So, after varimax rotation, the extracted solution presents six factors with eigenvalue greater than one, which together explain 61.99 per cent of the total variance. These factors point, respectively, to the Portuguese population, powerful nations and globalization, minority groups, financial organizations, previous governments, government of the time and economic interests (Table 2).

We performed an analysis of variance with repeated measures on the degree of responsibility attributed to the six entities, after having aggregated the items in accordance with the factorial solution. This analysis showed significant differences, $F(5, 3135) = 926.93$, $p < .001$. Thus, respondents attributed the main responsibility for the crisis to financial

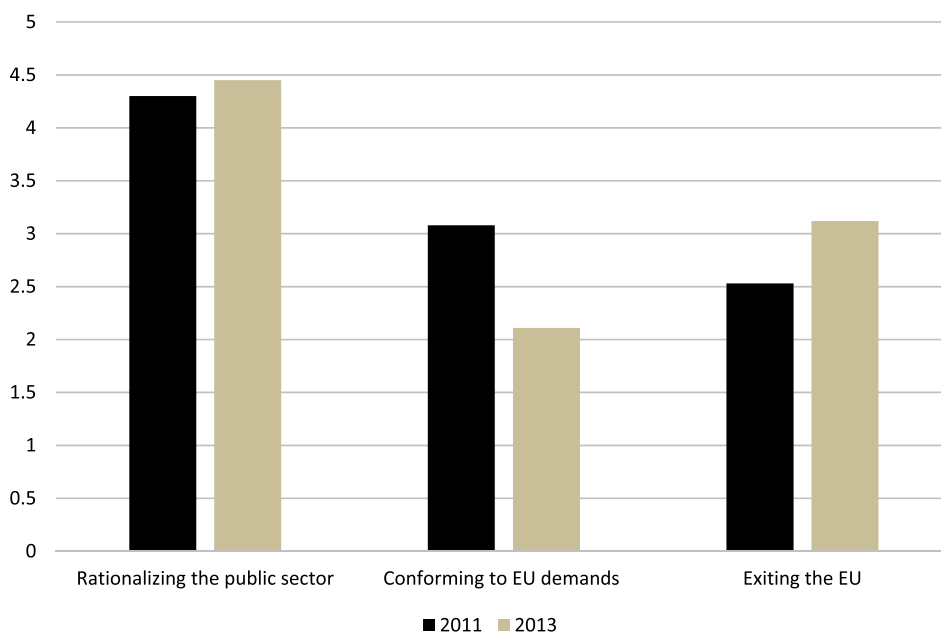


Figure 1. Support for strategies to be adopted by the Portuguese government to deal with the crisis. Comparison between 2011 and 2013.

organizations ($M = 6.23$), then to previous governments ($M = 6.05$), to powerful nations and globalization ($M = 5.16$), to the government of the time and economic interests ($M = 5.03$), and much less to the Portuguese population ($M = 3.54$) and minority groups ($M = 3.24$), all means significantly different according to the *LSD* test for multiple comparisons, all $p_s < .01$.

Political orientation

With regard to political orientation, 43.7 per cent of the respondents declared to be more on the left wing, 38.9 per cent at the centre, and 17.5 per cent more on the right wing of the political spectrum.

Perceived socio-economic position

With regard to *variations in family income*, 76.0 per cent of the respondents stated that their global family income had decreased during the last three years, whereas for 11.3 per cent it had remained unchanged and for 12.7 per cent it had increased. With regard to *subjective class belongingness*, respondents included themselves in the following classes: 12.4 per cent lower class, 45.4 per cent lower-middle class, 37.5 per cent middle class, 4.3 per cent upper-middle class, 0.5 per cent upper class.

Perceived vulnerability

After elimination of the item 'Finding that your education is no longer of value in the labour market', which loaded on more than one factor, the principal component factor analysis performed on the nine items measuring respondents' perceived vulnerability extracted two factors with eigenvalue greater than one. Together, these factors explain 71.97 per cent of the total variance, and point respectively to the feeling of insecurity about meeting basic needs and the feeling of insecurity about maintaining standard of living (Table 3). Interestingly, the extraction of two factors is not often reported in the literature, which most of the time considers vulnerability as a unidimensional concept.

After aggregation of the items gathered on the factors, a comparison of the two dimensions revealed that respondents believed that in two or three years it was more likely that they would be unable to maintain their standard of living ($M = 5.63$) than to meet their basic needs ($M = 4.38$), $t(629) = 23.38$, $p < .001$.

National identification

Respondents stated that they were moderately proud to be Portuguese ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.21$), with 11.6 per cent stating they were not at all proud and 15.9 per cent stating they were very proud to be Portuguese.

Explanatory variables of support for strategies likely to be adopted in Portugal

We performed three multiple regression analyses (method enter), one for each of the three possible strategies to be adopted by the Portuguese government (rationalizing the public

sector, conforming to European Union demands, and exiting the European Union), with the following independent variables (see Table 4): attribution of responsibility for the crisis (six variables), perceived socio-economic position (two variables), perceived vulnerability (two variables), and national identification (one variable). As suggested by the analysis of Mari et al. (2017) showing that the opinions of people at the poles of the political spectrum were sometimes closer to each other than to the opinions of people at the centre, we also looked for the quadratic effect of political orientation and, for this purpose, we mean-centred the variable and computed its quadratic values. So, to assess the effect of political ideology, we considered the linear effect and the quadratic effect of political orientation.

Table 4 indicates that the support for rationalizing the public sector was explained by a whole set of variables, namely putting the blame on the previous governments, the minority groups and the Portuguese population, but not on the right-wing government of the time and economic interests, having a feeling of insecurity about maintaining standards of living, but not about meeting basic needs, and having a more right-wing political orientation, $R = .59$, $R^2 = .35$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .33$, $F(13, 593) = 24.37$, $p < .001$. The quadratic effect of political orientation suggests, however, that the respondents who positioned themselves at the centre of the political spectrum were particularly likely to support the measure, which is in line with the result of Mari et al. (2017).

In turn, conforming to EU demands was explained by putting the blame on the Portuguese population and the minority groups, but not on the government of the time and economic interests, by the perception of belonging to a higher social class and having

Table 4. Explanatory variables of support for government strategies.

	Rationalizing public sector		Conforming EU demands			Exiting the EU			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
<i>Attribution of responsibility for the crisis^a</i>									
Financial organizations	-.02	.05	-.02	-.08	.05	-.07	-.01	.08	-.00
Previous governments	.25	.05	.19***	-.04	.05	-.04	-.16	.07	-.08*
Powerful nations and globalization	.01	.04	.01	-.05	.04	-.05	.24	.07	.14***
Current government and economic interests	-.23	.05	-.21***	-.10	.05	-.11*	.37	.08	.23***
Portuguese population	.14	.04	.14***	.22	.04	.24***	-.10	.06	-.07
Minority groups	.14	.04	.15***	.10	.04	.12**	-.10	.06	-.08
<i>Political orientation^b</i>									
Linear effect	.24	.04	.22***	.14	.04	.15***	-.20	.07	-.12**
Quadratic effect	-.10	.02	-.15***	-.00	.02	-.01	.12	.03	.12**
<i>Perceived socio-economic position</i>									
Variation in family income during the last three years ^c	-.00	.04	-.01	.03	.04	.03	-.06	.07	-.04
Subjective class belongingness ^d	.05	.06	.03	.13	.06	.09*	-.07	.10	-.03
<i>Perceived vulnerability^e</i>									
Insecurity about basic needs	-.08	.03	-.11*	.02	.03	.03	.15	.05	.15**
Insecurity about standard of living	.15	.04	.17***	.00	.04	.00	-.08	.06	-.06
<i>National identification^f</i>									
R^2	.35			.24			.30		
<i>F</i>	24.37***			14.25***			19.13***		

***, $p < .001$; **, $p < .01$; *, $p < .05$.

^a1 = not at all; 7 = very much; ^b1 = left; 10 = right; ^c1 = decrease very much; 5 = increase very much; ^d1 = lower; 5 = upper;

^e1 = very unlikely; 7 = very likely; ^f1 = not at all proud; 5 = very proud.

a more right-wing political orientation, $R = .49$, $R^2 = .24$, $R^2_{adj} = .22$, $F(13, 593) = 14.25$, $p < .001$. There was no quadratic effect of political orientation, suggesting that conformity to EU demands was especially supported by the right-wing respondents, who seemed more likely to accept the discourse of blaming those who 'live beyond their means' (Murteira, 2011). In this respect, our results differ from those of Mari et al. (2017), who found that centrists supported this strategy.

Finally, the support for exiting the European Union was explained by attributing the blame to powerful nations and globalization and to the government of the time and economic interests but not to the previous governments, by experiencing a feeling of insecurity with regard to meeting basic needs, having a weaker national identification, and a more left-wing political orientation, $R = .54$, $R^2 = .30$, $R^2_{adj} = .28$, $F(13, 593) = 19.13$, $p < .001$. The significant quadratic effect of the political orientation suggested, moreover, that this strategy was less likely to be supported by the respondents at the centre, in line with Mari et al. (2017).

In sum, to attribute greater responsibility for the economic crisis to external factors, such as powerful nations, the EU, globalization and a government which shared their economic priorities, triggered the desire to exit the EU, in line with our Hypothesis 1a, whereas denying the responsibility of the right-wing government and economic interests contributed to a better acceptance of conforming to EU demands and rationalizing the public sector. On the other hand, supporting our Hypothesis 1b, putting the blame on internal factors, such as the minority groups and the Portuguese population led respondents to favour the rationalization of the public sector and conforming to EU demands, in agreement with the strategy of the then right-wing government.

Right-wingers supported conforming to EU demands, a position consistent with the political orientation they shared with the government. Citizens who positioned themselves at the centre of the political spectrum were more likely to support the rationalization of the public sector and were less likely than right- and left-wingers to support an exit from the EU. These results partially contradict our Hypothesis 2 and Mari et al.'s (2017) findings, and they need to be related to respondents' perceived socio-economic position and feeling of vulnerability.

In fact, the perception of variation in income had no effect on the support for the government strategies, but respondents who saw themselves as belonging to higher classes were more likely to favour conforming to EU demands. This result is in line with our Hypothesis 3, and with the findings of Prodromitis et al. (2017), according to which acceptance of conformity to EU demands stemmed from respondents in a favourable personal situation.

Partially supporting our Hypothesis 4 and Mari et al. (2017), a greater feeling of insecurity about meeting basic needs predicted support for exiting the EU. However, the feeling of vulnerability was not associated with less acceptance of conforming to EU demands. Rationalization of the public service was supported by respondents experiencing a stronger feeling of insecurity about maintaining their standard of living but also a weaker feeling of insecurity about meeting basic needs. This result suggests that alternative strategies were viewed as constituting a greater threat for these respondents, and it may be approximated to the findings of Prodromitis et al. (2017), according to which respondents who viewed their personal situation as more favourable than that of others were more likely to accept the rationalization of the public sector.

Finally, stronger national identification did not lead respondents to be more favourable to exiting the European Union as stated by our Hypothesis 5, but, on the contrary, weaker identification with their country predicted support for the exiting the EU. This result suggests that in Portugal there is a positive relationship between national identity and European identity, as is the case in Spain, according to the findings of Medrano and Gutiérrez (2001) on nested identities (for a psychosocial discussion on multiple identity dynamics in the framework of the European Union, see Devos & Doise, 2013). As a result, losing faith in a country led by a government complying with the demands of the European Union would also mean losing faith in the European project viewed as serving to achieve economic goals at the expense of social progress.

Discussion and concluding observations

This paper analysed the support for the strategies that could be adopted by the Portuguese government to deal with the economic crisis. It examined the changes which occurred in citizens' perceptions between 2011 and 2013, a period of time in which the situation of Portuguese people deteriorated and experts criticized the measures implemented by the right-wing government and the Troika. It looked for common trends with the way of thinking of the citizens from Greece and Italy who took part in an earlier survey on the crisis (Mari et al., 2017; Papastamou et al., 2018a; Prodromitis et al., 2017), considering that similarities can be found in spite of the specificities of each country.

First, our data corroborated the results of Papastamou et al. (2018a), identifying three main strategies to deal with the crisis: to rationalize the public sector (i.e. to make cuts in the public sector budget), to conform to European Union demands, and to exit the European Union. Rationalization of the public sector was viewed as the best possible strategy, similar to the findings from Greece (Prodromitis et al., 2017) and Italy (Mari et al., 2017). Rationalizing the public sector and conforming to European demands also appeared as sharing a common ideological ground.

Looking at the change in support for government strategies which occurred in Portugal between 2011 and 2013, our results revealed a decrease over time in support for conforming to EU demands and an increase in support for exiting the EU. This change corroborated the data from the Eurobarometer showing that 81 per cent of Portuguese respondents in the 2013 survey thought that their voice did not count in the EU vs. 57 per cent in 2010 (Eurobarometer, 2010, 2013). It is also in line with the observation by Bărgăoanu et al. (2016) that the economic crisis greatly contributed to an increase of distrust in the EU and the spreading of Eurosceptic attitudes. Thus, results suggest that the European Union should pay greater attention to the way European citizens look at how it deals with the problems of its member states, even when their grievances are not expressed through big public demonstrations.

With regard to the explanations of the support for the government strategies, data showed that the attribution of responsibility and group-serving biases played a significant role in the preferences for the three strategies identified. To attribute responsibility to external factors, such as globalization, led to support an exit from the EU, whereas putting the blame on internal factors, namely 'other' people, led to agree with the austerity measures. Looking at Figure 2, which summarizes our findings, we may note, on the one

hand, an association between blaming the Portuguese population and blaming the minority groups (showing a correlation of $r = .52$, $p < .001$), and, on the other hand, an association between the then right-wing government and economic interests, and powerful nations and globalization (showing a correlation of $r = .45$, $p < .001$). The attribution of the causes of the crisis either to the system or to the people clearly divides acceptance of what seems to be the two facets of the actual response of the government as opposed to the alternative solution. It highlights that those who supported what Prodro-mitis and colleagues referred to as the harder (conformity to EU demands) or the softer (rationalization of the public sector) versions of the dominant strategies to manage the crisis shared a common understanding of its causes.

In Portugal, the effects produced by respondents' feelings of vulnerability and political orientation were quite similar to those described in the above-mentioned Greek and Italian studies. Right-wingers, centrists, often better-off respondents, accepted the strategies of the Troika and the right-wing government, whereas more vulnerable respondents, often not at the political centre, with a lower level of national identification, supported an exit from the EU.

A closer look at the combination of these explanatory variables (see Figure 2) leads us to note that right-wingers who were likely to support the conformity to EU demands also perceived themselves as belonging to a privileged class (left-right political orientation and subjective class belongingness are positively correlated, $r = .21$, $p < .001$).

With regard to centrists, it is not clear whether, as suggested by Mari et al. (2017), they merely expressed conformist opinions, or whether they supported strategies that they considered less damaging to their own future and to the future of the country. Centrists were indeed more likely to support the rationalization of the public sector, a strategy associated with a feeling of insecurity about maintaining standards of living, and also supported by those who were more likely to blame the previous governments for the crisis. It thus seems plausible that the rationalization of the public sector was viewed as a way to redress, both locally and temporarily, the bad choices of earlier governments, and centrists

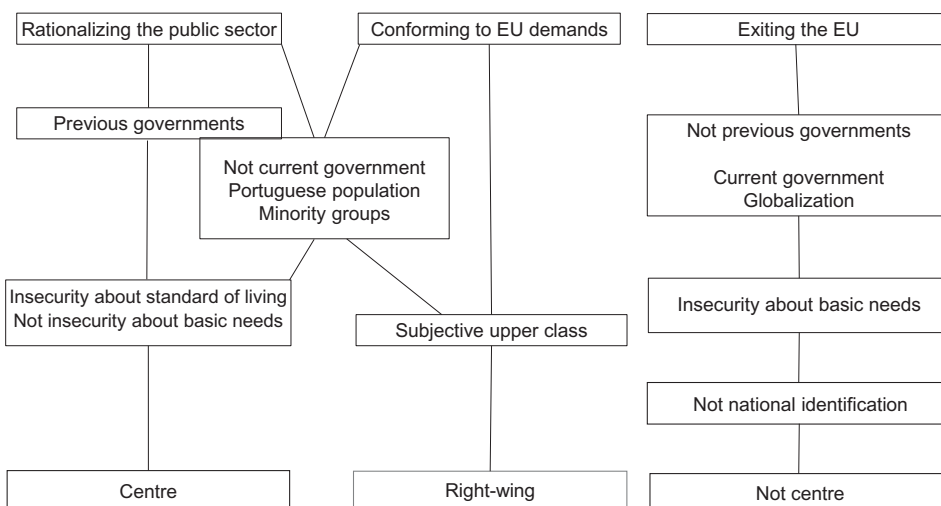


Figure 2. Portuguese laypeople's support for government strategies.

were not only those who supported this strategy more strongly, but also those who were less willing to exit the EU.

The difference between our results and those of Mari et al. (2017) may be due to the fact that we took into consideration two aspects of the feeling of vulnerability. Indeed, the respondents who supported the rationalization of the public sector were not feeling insecure about meeting basic needs, unlike those who supported an exit from the EU. The relation between the feeling of vulnerability about meeting basic needs and exiting the EU suggests that this strategy was viewed as a withdrawal from a damaging relationship. As noted by Prodromitis et al. (2017), such a strategy may be the last choice of those who feel unable to modify a situation or, in line with Tajfel's (1981) theory, a possible attempt to act for social change by those who viewed social inequalities as illegitimate. This interpretation is sustained by the finding that a lower support for the European project came from left-wingers as well as right-wingers.

The support for exiting the European Union was also explained by a weaker national identification, in line with the existence of nested identities reported by Medrano and Gutiérrez (2001). In this respect we may note that national identification was negatively correlated with the feeling of vulnerability about meeting basic needs, $r = -.16$, $p < .001$, showing that more vulnerable citizens were less identified with their country. This result is thus at odd with the finding of Hierro and Rico (2019), suggesting that nationalist attitudes are strengthened among lower class individuals in need of a positive identity.

On the other hand, national identification was also positively correlated with the perception of belonging to higher classes, $r = .20$, $p < .001$, a perception which supported the conformity to EU demands. This finding suggests that higher Portuguese classes identified with the values of the European Union and, possibly, showed a certain disregard for the consequences of the austerity measures on the lower classes. As a matter of fact, in 2013 Portugal was among the most unequal countries of the EU according to the Gini index, with a score of 34.2, whereas the average of the EU was 30.5 (Eurostat, 2018).

Overall, our conclusions are consistent and seem relevant in spite of the limitations of our study. Indeed, our sample is not a representative sample of the Portuguese population and the comparison between the results of 2011 and those of 2013 was made using independent samples. In 2013, we used an online survey, which has the advantage of being widely accessible, but has the disadvantage of often being answered by a specific public. For this reason, our questionnaire mostly reflects the opinions of educated people, university students and people in employment. It would undoubtedly have been desirable to gather more answers from unemployed people or from the many, mainly young people who found no alternative but to emigrate.

We think that further studies should be conducted to understand how laypeople presently make sense of the crisis and assess its consequences for the country and for its citizens. Indeed, it seems consensual that Portugal is recuperating with 'surprising results' (BIT, 2018) since the withdrawal of the Troika, in May 2014, and the formation of a left-wing government coalition in October 2015. However, Portuguese citizens still suffer from the measures introduced during the crisis, some of which are nowadays considered unnecessary by experts (BIT, 2018).

To give a few examples, the number of weekly working hours, which had increased by one hour between 2009 and 2016, is now setting Portugal among the ten EU countries with the highest number of working hours. The salaries, which had decreased abruptly

between 2010 and 2013, are still low and the real average wages were only 3 per cent higher in 2016 than they were in 2007 (BIT, 2018).

Unemployment is decreasing, but temporary contracts are frequent and are largely involuntary, in contrast to what is observed in other countries. They particularly affect young workers, even those with higher education, and the number of these temporary contracts has risen from less than 40 per cent in 2000 to more than 60 per cent in 2010, a number that has remained unchanged since (BIT, 2018). This partially explains the emigration of young people looking for a first job, and, although it is true that the rate of emigration has reduced (32 000 permanent and 49 000 temporary emigrants in 2017), Portugal remains the EU country with the highest rate of emigration in proportion to the resident population (Observatório da Emigração, 2019).

These data show that the European Union should not only pay attention to the way the citizens of its member-states make sense of its decisions, but should also consider the multiple long-term repercussions of its decisions on these citizens. The ideals of the founders of the EU were to form a peaceful, united and prosperous Europe (European Union, 2018). Those who believe in a social Europe may well ask whether a peaceful and united Europe only depends on the country members' economic output.

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