

Participation in hard times: how constrained government depresses turnout among the highly educated

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ABSTRACT

Existing studies on electoral turnout in times of economic crisis have predominantly focused on disadvantaged voters. However, during the recent economic crisis, turnout among highly educated citizens has strongly declined as well. Existing resource-based theories of political participation cannot account for this. This article suggests that the anticipation of government inefficacy is an important driver of abstention among highly educated. Where governments are severely constrained, these citizens anticipate that the hands of future governments will be tied. Hence they are more likely to abstain out of frustration or rational calculations. The study uses the recent economic crisis as test case, as it entails particularly acute constraints on several European governments. The cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence – based on ESS survey data and different measures of government constraint in 28 European countries – provides ample support for the argument.

KEYWORDS European politics; elections; turnout; participation; economic crisis; Eurocrisis

A growing literature studies the effects of the Great Recession on government reactions (Armingeon 2012; Pontusson and Raess 2012; Walter 2015) and on the impact of economic voting for election outcomes (Duch and Sagarzazu 2014; Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2014). However, less attention has been paid to the effect of the crisis on the structuration of political participation. Hardly any studies address *whether and which people participate* in the election of a new government in such hard times. Yet, given the important concerns that many scholars have raised about the impact of increasing inequality and austerity on democratic legitimacy and responsiveness (e.g. Anderson and Beramendi 2012; various contributions in Schäfer and Streeck 2013), this question seems of high political as well as scholarly importance and topicality.

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Existing research on the impact of economic hardship on political participation focuses on the effects that inequality and grievances have on the political behaviour of lower classes (e.g. Goodin and Dryzek 1980; Rosenstone 1982; Solt 2008; Verba *et al.* 1995). They expect – and most of them find – that turnout among the socioeconomically more privileged voters should remain stable or even increase in times of growing economic hardship (Solt 2008). However, as we will show, electoral turnout among the highly educated has dropped considerably in most countries that have been hit hard by the recent economic crisis. Existing resource-based theories cannot account for this development.

We argue that a specific context condition is key to account for the declining turnout among these voters: where governments are severely constrained in their room for manoeuvre, highly educated citizens anticipate the inefficacy of the future government and are more likely to abstain, either out of frustration or out of a rational calculation that election results will hardly matter for the policies that will eventually be implemented. We expect this mechanism to be particularly prevalent among more highly educated voters for two reasons: first, challenger and protest parties of the left and the right, which typically downplay such economic and political constraints on domestic policy-making, tend to mobilise votes predominantly among the lower social classes (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015), whereas more highly educated voters seem to be less likely to respond to this rhetoric. Second, highly educated voters are generally more likely to take the economic context into account when evaluating their choices in an election (Gomez and Wilson 2006). Understanding the repercussions of complex macroeconomic context conditions for the governments' capacity to enact policy decisions is a demanding task and requires considerable cognitive resources as well as substantive information on the economic and political environment. For these reasons, we expect international constraints on governments to have a stronger effect on turnout among the highly educated. As an observable implication, we expect that an increase in international and domestic constraints on government should correlate with a lower probability of turning out to vote among the highly educated. This is indeed what we find in this article: when economic constraints on governments are particularly strong, participation levels among the highly educated tend to drop.

The article is structured as follows. We start with a discussion of why existing individual-level theories of participation are unable to account for the drop in participation among the highly educated that we observe in crisis-ridden countries. We then develop our theoretical argument with reference to both macro-level theories of how characteristics of elections shape turnout and theories of economic voting, before testing it empirically by means of a hierarchical regression model and establishing the robustness of our findings with a series of additional tests.

Declining electoral participation among the highly educated

In lock-step with the economic turmoil of the last years, overall levels of turnout in hard-hit countries dropped sharply between the last pre-2008 election and the following elections. Spain's turnout fell from 76% to 69% and Italy's from 84% to 75%, while we saw a decrease from 74% to 63% (January 2015) and 56% (September 2015) in Greece, from 64% to 60% in Portugal and from 89% to 79% in Cyprus.¹ These are massive declines within only a few years, which require the theorisation of more short-term dynamics than the long-standing secular decline of turnout we have been observing in Western democracies over the past decades (Franklin 2004; Mair 2006). Given that the crisis has affected wages (OECD 2014) and jobs (OECD 2013, Arpaia and Curci 2010) of less well-educated citizens much more strongly than those of the highly educated, one might expect that growing abstention among the economically disadvantaged drove this decline. But this was not the case. In fact, according to European Social Survey (ESS) data, electoral turnout has declined equally strongly among well-educated voters in countries heavily affected by the crisis (Gubler 2013). As the trends in the average turnout level decomposed by educational level and crisis impact in Figure 1 show, the development is very similar for both the highly, as well as the less well-educated citizens. Turnout among the former decreases by 7 percentage points in countries strongly affected by the crisis,² while turnout among the latter decreased by 8.5 percentage points.

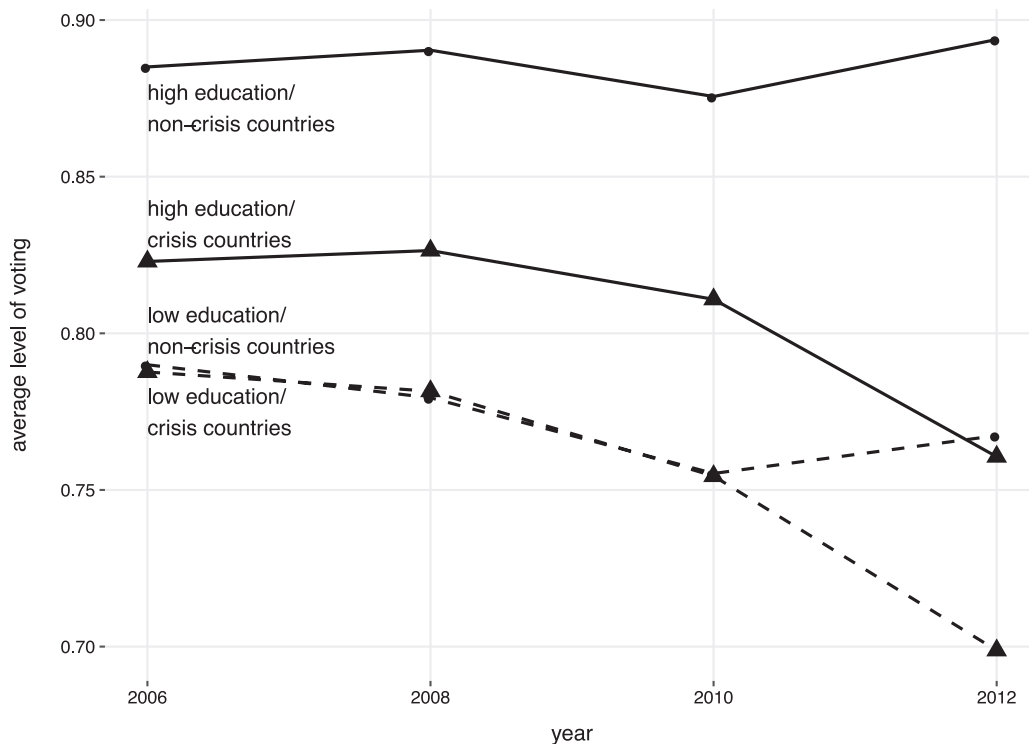


Figure 1. Turnout over time decomposed by education and crisis impact.

In Cyprus and Hungary, the two most extreme cases in our sample, participation among the well-educated dropped even by about 10 percentage points.

Declining participation among the less well-educated citizens does not seem surprising, because their resources to engage in politics (Verba *et al.* 1995) have come under considerable strain during the Great Recession (OECD 2013, 2014). By contrast, existing theories with an emphasis on individual resources are ill-suited to explain the drop in participation among highly educated citizens, since they would predict stable or even increasing levels of participation among highly educated citizens in hard times. Among these existing theoretical approaches theorising participation with reference to citizen's socio-demographic background, we can distinguish between incentive- and resource-based approaches. 'Resource-theory', which holds that political participation is stratified, because it requires time, money, social and cognitive skills (Gallego 2010; Verba *et al.* 1995), is one of the most prominent approaches to studying participation. In this view, citizens with higher levels of resources do have the necessary means, skills and psychological dispositions (interest and knowledge) to participate in politics. The positive link between social status and participation – theoretically and empirically mostly asserted on the basis of cognitive arguments (i.e. education) – is a highly robust and consistent finding in the literature on participation (Gallego 2007; Kam and Palmer 2008). Through processes of habit formation (Franklin 2004), turnout therefore tends to be comparatively strong and stable among the highly educated, even in times of growing inequality and hardship (e.g. Anderson and Beramendi 2011). But even if individuals reacted on a short-term basis to declining resources by 'withdrawing' from participation (as suggested by Rosenstone 1982), the resource model could not empirically account for the stark decline in turnout among the highly educated that we focus on, simply because they do not belong to the main victims of the Great Recession. Education has long been known as a powerful factor in reducing the risk of unemployment (e.g. Mincer 1991) and has again proved effective in the most recent economic crisis: non- and unemployment has affected mostly the less well-educated (OECD 2013) whereas among the highly educated, a *growth* in employment has been observed even during the peak of the crisis in 2009 (Arpaia and Curci 2010). Similarly, the impact on wages has been much greater among the lower-income earners than among the more privileged social classes in all countries affected by the crisis (OECD 2014). Given the modest impact of the crisis on the highly educated and their more widespread habit of voting, a pure resource argument cannot account for the decline we observe.

With regard to incentive-based individual-level arguments, existing theories would instead predict *mobilising*, rather than demobilising effects of economic hardship. Martin and Veiga (2012), for instance, argue that macroeconomic strain may create incentives for all people to be more active politically, because the distributional stakes increase and because citizens want to make their discontent heard. Similarly, 'conflict theory' of turnout (see Solt 2008) argues

that increasing inequality exacerbates the divergences in political preferences between the economically disadvantaged and the better-off classes in society. This polarisation is supposed to fuel political conflict about the right distribution of resources and might thereby stimulate participation in the political process (cf. Brady 2004). Goodin and Dryzek (1980), as well as Solt (2008), make a more differentiated argument: increasing inequality concentrates power among the rich, which is why they more consistently prevail in political conflict. This experience teaches the more privileged citizens that their goals can effectively be pursued through the political process, whereas it signals the opposite to citizens in lower social strata. The consequence would be growing social inequality in turnout. Hence, incentive-based individual-level theories would suggest that heightened macroeconomic strain should – if anything – increase participation among the highly educated, a prediction that is clearly not in line with the drop we observe during the recent crisis.

Hence, in order to explain turnout during the Great Recession, we need to go beyond the personal characteristics of voters and take into account the political context in which these elections take place. There seems to be a driver of declining turnout that has so far been neglected. Our argument builds on incentive-based explanations of participation and draws on the literature emphasising the importance of the ‘character of elections’ (Franklin 2004: 4), which crucially affects turnout rates.

The argument: disincentives for participation under conditions of constrained government

Two different strands of literature have theorised the role of macro-level incentives for citizens to take part in politics. First of all, Franklin (2004) prominently discussed the large variation in turnout over time and space, which is difficult to explain with reference to individual traits only. The socio-demographic composition of national electorates can hardly account for the remarkable fluctuations in turnout between countries or between different kinds of elections. Rather, turnout depends on the ‘character of elections’ (Franklin 2004: 4), which is a clear indication of voters responding to the expected benefits of electoral outcomes. Indeed, Franklin (2004: 27) demonstrates that turnout clearly varies with the competitiveness of an election (e.g. closeness of the race and how much is at stake), which decisively alters the ‘instrumental benefits of voting’. Our explanation for declining turnout among high-skilled voters in times of crisis builds on this reasoning but expands the scope of relevant context conditions. We argue that the character of an election is not only defined by features of the electoral system but also – and especially in times of crisis – by macroeconomic context. A weak economy greatly constrains government’s room for manoeuvre, as its policy decisions are increasingly dictated by austerity constraints and the budgetary rules and demands of supranational institutions. Governments in

countries hard hit by the recent financial economic crisis are heavily constrained in their economic policy-making capacity by the international financial markets, as well as European and international policy measures (Pontusson and Raess 2012). In extreme cases like Greece, policy-making in many domains has literally been taken over by actors outside government offices, primarily by the so-called Troika. Returning to Franklin's terminology, elections under such circumstances are elections of extraordinarily limited instrumental benefits of voting. No matter which party makes it into office, the policy agenda is largely set.

A second informative strand of literature for our argument is the theory of retrospective economic voting, which provides a related yet distinct incentive-based perspective on political behaviour. It holds that voters punish or reward the government in line with the course of the economy (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Fossati 2014; Key 1966).³ One of the most valuable contributions by this literature to our understanding of electoral choice is the finding that incentive-based electoral behaviour is highly conditional: it matters more in certain contexts and for certain individuals. The first point is related to Franklin's argument about the character of elections but has a more specific focus: research has shown consistently that economic voting is a forceful explanatory framework only in contexts of clearly attributable government responsibility (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Hobolt *et al.* 2013; Powell and Whitten 1993; van der Brug *et al.* 2007). Hence, if voters know and understand that the responsibility for the course of the economy cannot be attributed clearly to a government party ('low clarity of responsibility'), past economic performance turns out to be a weak predictor of vote choice (van der Brug *et al.* 2007: 107f.).

The contributions by Hellwig and Samuels (2007), as well as Hellwig (2008) are especially informative for our argument, as they explicitly assess the impact of specific macroeconomic context conditions on the clarity of responsibility. They show that economic voting is less prevalent in economically interdependent ('globalised') countries, because citizens realise that the globalisation-induced constraints prevent governments from responding as voters demand. This makes it less worthwhile for voters to try to hold governments accountable in elections, and, consequently, reduces turnout. We adopt from this literature the insight that citizens factor their knowledge on government constraints in when evaluating electoral choices. The economic voting literature, however, mainly focuses on vote choice, rather than participation. The question of incentive-based *turnout* has been addressed by Steiner (2010), as well as Marshall and Fisher (2015), who provide empirical evidence for lower overall turnout levels under conditions of high transnational economic interdependence. More precisely, it is 'the globalization of ownership (direct and portfolio investment) that reduces turnout by constraining domestic policy' (Marshall and Fisher 2015: 353).⁴ Again, economic circumstances constrain governments' leeway in domestic policy-making, which in turn clearly reduces the instrumental

benefits of voting and discourages citizens from carrying the cost of political participation.

The second important aspect highlighted by the economic voting literature is that incentives vary not only between different context conditions, but also between different groups of individuals. We follow this argumentation and suggest that the effect of constrained government will be unequal across social classes: understanding the mechanisms by which, and the extent to which policy-makers are constrained in their choices requires rather extensive cognitive sophistication and political information. Hence, government constraints should be particularly consequential for the willingness to engage in electoral participation of highly educated citizens. This theoretical claim is further bolstered by the fact that highly educated voters are particularly sensitive to incentive-based electoral behaviour in general: Gomez and Wilson (2006) show that education is positively related to the likelihood that citizens evaluate their governments on the basis of the economic situation.

Combining these insights, we contend that highly educated voters are particularly likely to include the government's political and economic constraints into their decision whether or not it is worth going to the polls, i.e. in the evaluation of their instrumental benefit of voting. Once a citizen reaches the conclusion that – due to external and internal constraints – the new government will only have an extremely limited room for manoeuvre, irrespective of its ideological and coalitional composition, participation is likely to decrease. Given that voters respond to the expected benefits of an electoral outcome, two mechanisms can account for such a declining willingness to engage in political participation: calculation and frustration. A citizen may conclude that bearing the costs of voting (i.e. the investment in time it takes to acquire enough information for a decision and carry out the actual voting procedure) is simply not worthwhile given the limited policy-making power the government will have. However, citizens who understand how strongly the hands of politicians will be tied after the elections may also abstain because they are frustrated with the 'hollowing of democracy' (Mair 2006) and with the ensuing non-responsiveness of governments. In such a reading, declining levels of participation among the more educated citizens reflect a more general political alienation, a detachment from national-level partisan politics. The consequence is the same and the two mechanisms are empirically undistinguishable in their observable implications:⁵ highly educated citizens find it not worthwhile to go to the polls, because they anticipate inefficacy of their partisan choice. Therefore, government constraints are expected to lower participation rates among the highly educated, thereby weakening the otherwise positive relationship between education and participation.

There is one potentially competing theoretical explanation for declining turnout among the highly educated that we want to discuss here. Indeed, one might think that the causal mechanism between the economic crisis and turnout

levels runs through partisan convergence, i.e. a lack of programmatic alternatives in times of crisis. In other words, political parties would propose highly similar policy programmes during the election campaign, thereby reducing the incentives for voters to actually participate. If programmatic convergence was indeed endogenous to the economic crisis, abstention might be the result not of *anticipated* government ineffectiveness (as we argue), but of *current* partisan convergence. Convergence of party positions is indeed related to lower levels of political participation (Wessels and Schmitt 2008; Brockington 2009). If party convergence drives declining turnout, then abstention is not the result of international economic and political constraints, but of domestic political dynamics. Hence, the two distinct mechanisms can co-exist in parallel, but are analytically distinct. Fortunately, they are also distinguishable empirically, because economic circumstances and partisan convergence are not systematically related. Difficult macroeconomic circumstances do not lead to programmatic convergence:⁶ quite the contrary, in the past crisis-ridden years, we have observed the emergence of various new political actors that increase polarisation on the electoral supply side (think of Podemos or Ciudadanos in Spain, or the Cinque Stelle movement in Italy). Accordingly, various country studies document increased diversity and polarisation rather than convergence of policy positions in times of crisis (see Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014 for Greece; Torcal 2014 for Spain; and Magalhães 2014, for Portugal). However, the vote for such new challenger parties could also be seen as the expression of frustration with programmatic convergence among the political mainstream. Hence, even if convergence increases among all parties, decreasing *mainstream party* convergence still might be lowering citizens' incentives to go to the polls, since only mainstream parties can credibly claim that their programme will be implemented after the election. Mainstream party convergence, however, is not substantially correlated with economic constraints either.⁷ Just like overall party convergence, it may be an alternative explanation for abstention, but it does not invalidate our argument. Hence, we include both overall party polarisation and mainstream party polarisation as controls in our analysis. As we will show below, neither of them alters our main finding on the decrease of turnout among highly educated individuals under government constraints (see Table A7 in the online appendix 1).

In sum, we expect that the politico-economic turmoil of recent years has altered the relationship between education and political participation. In times of severe constraints, the probability of participating should decline among the highly educated compared to times of more relaxed constraints, since these citizens are expected to include considerations about their government's room for manoeuvre in their evaluations.

Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we use data from four ESS rounds (2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012) as well as several country-level data sources (for an overview, see Table A1 in the appendix). The intersection of these data sources allows us to conduct the analyses for 120,513 respondents in the following 28 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovenia, Slovak Republic, United Kingdom.⁸

As an indicator of a high level of political knowledge and cognitive resources (our main independent variable), we choose education, as in the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). We recoded the more fine-grained classification provided from 2010 onwards so that it fits the five-point scale used in the ESS waves up to the year 2008. The resulting measure of the highest level of education ranges from ‘less than lower secondary school’ to ‘tertiary degree’. A possible alternative to education as indicator of political knowledge is political interest. We maintain that education is a more valid measure of the concept of cognitive skills, on which our theoretical argument builds. However, our findings are robust to using political interest instead of education, as Table A2 in the online appendix shows.

In order to better isolate the impact of our main independent variables, we control for additional factors at the individual level that are likely to affect participation. To account for incentive-based electoral behaviour in times of economic hardship, we include unemployment. Two demographic characteristics (age, gender) as well as interest in politics are included in the models (see Solt 2008). To control for a mere resource effect, we also include income as reported in the ESS (deciles).

At the country level, we consider three specific indicators of government constraint. First, we anticipate a soaring *public deficit* to be a major constraint on a government’s room for manoeuvre, since political and market pressures for austerity measures are likely to increase with the public deficit. We operationalise public deficit with the World Bank development indicator data, where it is defined as cash deficit in percentages of GDP.⁹ Second, *conditionality* as a result of bailouts by the (former) Troika (i.e. the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) can be perceived as an important confining factor for the governments of affected countries. Such conditionality is present for Bulgaria in the ESS round 2006, for Hungary and Latvia in 2008, Greece, Hungary and Ireland in 2010, as well as Spain, Ireland and Portugal in 2012.¹⁰ Third, we regard financial market pressures stemming from difficulties in issuing government bonds as a constraint for governments, not only because of the actual limitations on the possibility to finance public activities, but also because of the accompanying media attention

and public outcry. As an indicator, we rely on the *long-term interest rates for government bond yields* as reported by the OECD and Eurostat. Obviously, the three variables are substantially correlated,¹¹ which is why we decided to run separate models for the three indicators, as well as a factor aggregating the three indicators. The factor scores result from a maximum-likelihood factor analysis on the three single indicators (see Table A3 in the online appendix for details). Figure 2 illustrates the development of these government constraints during the time span under consideration. The outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 clearly reduced governmental leeway due to soaring levels of deficits, increasing bond yields and more widespread incidence of bailouts by the Troika. The constraints intensified in the aftermath of Lehman Brother's collapse and overall climaxed in 2010. While deficits have started to recover by 2012, conditionality has remained high throughout the entire period and bond yields even climaxed in 2012.

Finally, it is important to control for macro-level covariates. First, we include GDP growth in the calculations in order to control for general cross-sectional variance in terms of the severity of the economic crisis. Furthermore, we distinguish between more recently democratised countries in Eastern Europe and Western European countries, since the former show systematically lower turnout levels (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013). Lastly, we consider party system polarisation and mainstream party polarisation (as captured by Dalton's (2008) index of party system polarisation) as potentially important, alternative drivers of turnout (see the theoretical discussion above).

We rely on hierarchical logistic regression models with countries and years as higher levels¹² and substantiate our results by simulations of the predicted probabilities. In addition, we ran a multitude of robustness checks on the fully specified model, which are reported in Table A2 in the online appendix. The checks include an outlier analysis, the exclusion of survey and sample weights,

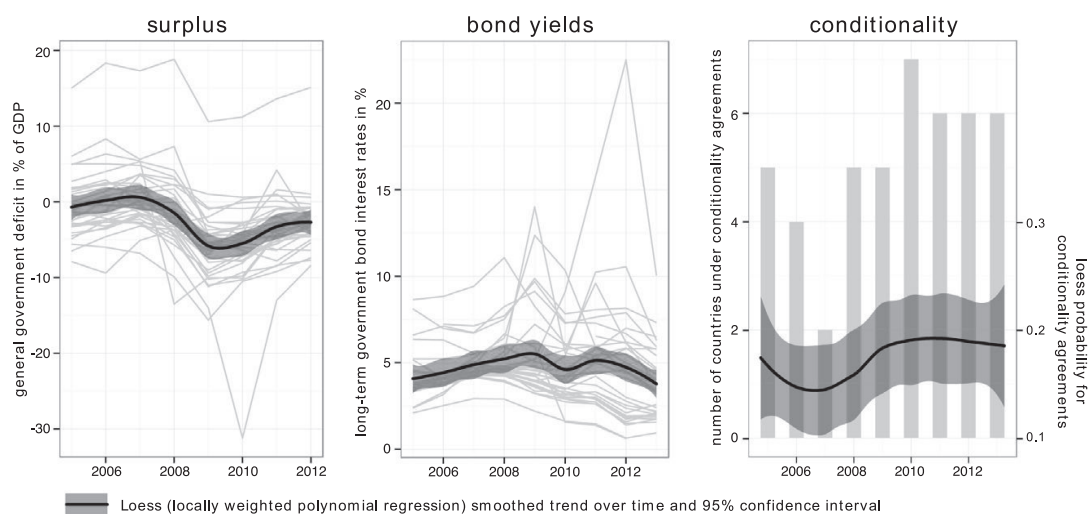


Figure 2. Time trend government constraints.

the replacement of party system polarisation with the effective number of parties and party system disproportionality, an alternative measurement of polarisation including only mainstream parties, the use of multiple imputation instead of listwise deletion of missing data, the exclusion of political interest and income, the inclusion of party identification and additional indicators for social risk (temporary and part-time employment), as well as the consideration of country and year fixed effects instead of the multilevel specification. None of these specifications has led to substantial changes in the results, as the education–constraint interaction remains significant in all specifications.

How constrained government affects the relationship between education and participation

Our empirical analysis is organised as follows. In a first step, we assess the general validity of our hypothesis regarding the political participation of highly educated individuals under constrained government by pooling individuals over time and space. In a second step, we more specifically investigate the effect of the crisis by calculating separate models for each year, which allow us to identify potential time-varying dynamics.

Model 1 shows a baseline specification in order to establish the validity of our micro-level operationalisation (see Table 1). It consists of all individual-level predictors, the multilevel specification and a random slope for education. Over all countries, education unsurprisingly picks up a large part of the variation in electoral participation in model 1. Furthermore, the control variables unemployment, age, interest in politics and income show highly significant effects and work in the direction expected by existing studies on participation (e.g. Gallego 2010; Solt 2008).

The contribution of the individual-level predictors in all following models is consistent with the ones in model 1, which points to the robustness of our individual-level specification. In model 2 we introduce our macro-level covariates. Our joint factor of government constraints is moderately related to lower turnout (odds ratio of 0.95). Besides this main explanatory variable, party system polarisation and the distinction between Eastern and Western European countries are substantially related to turnout. Eastern Europeans have a systematically lower propensity to go to the polls, which in the literature is mainly explained by frustration about corruption and the ramifications of communist legacies (see Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2013).

In models 3 to 6, we test the interaction effects of different operationalisations of government constraint and education in a stepwise fashion. To allow for a substantive interpretation of these hierarchical logit regressions, we plot the simulated predicted probabilities for different levels of education depending on the indicators of government constraint in Figure 3.¹³

Table 1. Hierarchical logit regression models predicting electoral participation.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	−2.660*** (0.179)	−2.774*** (0.212)	−2.774*** (0.214)	−2.927*** (0.228)	−2.847*** (0.210)	−3.075*** (0.247)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>						
Education	0.191*** (0.037)	0.151*** (0.009)	0.138*** (0.009)	0.247*** (0.014)	0.157*** (0.009)	0.242*** (0.025)
Unemployment	−0.440*** (0.038)	−0.452*** (0.038)	−0.452*** (0.038)	−0.456*** (0.038)	−0.444*** (0.038)	−0.451*** (0.038)
Age	0.629*** (0.034)	0.646*** (0.034)	0.641*** (0.034)	0.639*** (0.034)	0.652*** (0.034)	0.640*** (0.034)
Age sq.	−0.032*** (0.003)	−0.033*** (0.003)	−0.033*** (0.003)	−0.033*** (0.003)	−0.034*** (0.003)	−0.033*** (0.003)
Gender (female = 1)	0.157*** (0.020)	0.139*** (0.020)	0.141*** (0.020)	0.142*** (0.020)	0.140*** (0.020)	0.141*** (0.020)
Hardly interested in politics	0.686*** (0.027)	0.660*** (0.027)	0.661*** (0.027)	0.661*** (0.027)	0.663*** (0.027)	0.661*** (0.027)
Quite interested in politics	1.357*** (0.030)	1.351*** (0.030)	1.351*** (0.030)	1.350*** (0.030)	1.355*** (0.030)	1.351*** (0.030)
Very interested in politics	1.693*** (0.044)	1.691*** (0.044)	1.687*** (0.044)	1.690*** (0.044)	1.695*** (0.044)	1.686*** (0.044)
Income	0.077*** (0.004)	0.078*** (0.004)	0.079*** (0.004)	0.079*** (0.004)	0.077*** (0.004)	0.079*** (0.004)
<i>Country-level variables</i>						
Recent democratisation		−0.707*** (0.204)	−0.706*** (0.207)	−0.812*** (0.217)	−0.647** (0.213)	−0.712*** (0.206)
GDP growth		0.012 (0.012)	0.012 (0.012)	0.029* (0.014)	0.008 (0.012)	0.013 (0.012)
Party system polarisation		1.136** (0.366)	1.247*** (0.369)	0.685 (0.397)	1.303*** (0.346)	1.199** (0.368)
<i>Cross-level interactions</i>						
Govt constraint		0.011 (0.037)	0.170** (0.054)			
Education × Govt constraint			−0.055*** (0.014)			
Deficit				0.092*** (0.011)		
Education × Deficit				−0.021*** (0.003)		
Conditionality					−0.005 (0.108)	
Education × Conditionality					−0.106** (0.033)	
Bond yield						0.072** (0.023)
Education × Bond yield						−0.023*** (0.006)
Log likelihood	−31871.0	−32034.1	−32026.0	−31992.5	−32018.9	−32026.1
Num. obs.	103,285	103,285	103,285	103,285	103,285	103,285
Num. groups: cntry	28	28	28	28	28	28
Num. groups: year	4	4	4	4	4	4
Var: cntry (Intercept)	0.484	0.231	0.237	0.255	0.257	0.234
Var: year (Intercept)	0.013	0.002	0.003	0.010	0.002	0.003

Notes: Unstandardised logit coefficients. Standard error in brackets.

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

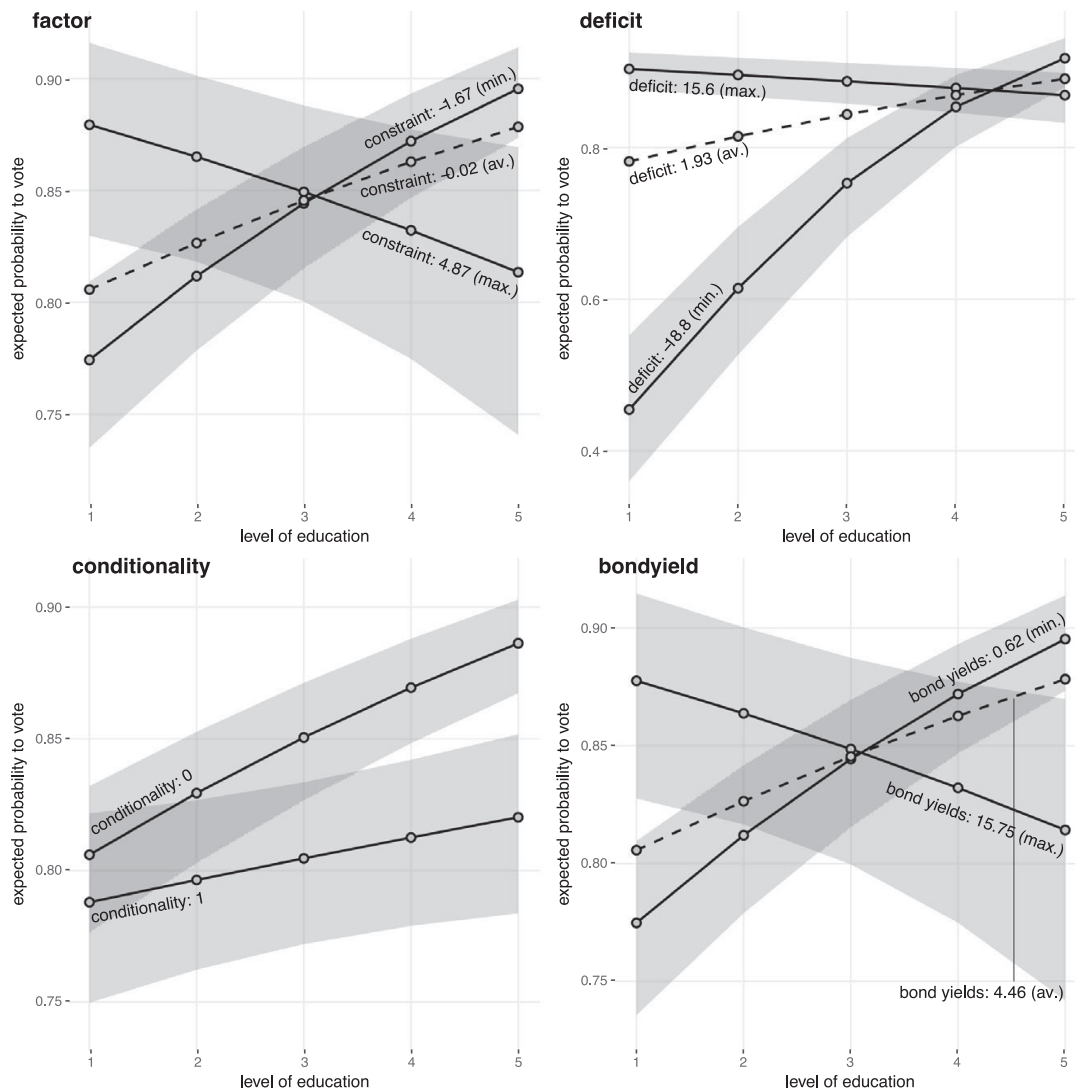


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities and 90% confidence intervals of electoral participation depending on education and government constraints.

In line with our theoretical expectation, *government constraint substantially moderates participation among the highly educated and – by implication – the link between education and participation.*¹⁴ The graphs in Figure 3 show that in countries where public deficit, government bond yields and conditionality work in favour of a government's room for manoeuvre, going from minimum to maximum education is related to an increase in the predicted probability of participating of around 10 percentage points (or even around 40 percentage points in the case of deficit). In countries with an average strength of government constraint, the positive effect of education is slightly moderated. The crucial difference occurs with regard to the countries with a strongly constrained government, namely Greece, Portugal, Hungary and Ireland in our sample. Here, education ceases to have any effect on participation. At a level of about 1.7 of our factor for constrained government, the positive relationship of education on participation becomes insignificant.¹⁵

Figure 3 shows that the moderating effect on the education–participation nexus is also apparent when looking at the different proposed indicators of

government constraint (deficit, conditionality and bond yields) separately. At severe levels of constraint, the highly educated cease to be more likely to go the polls. For example, at a public deficit of about 10% of GDP or above, education entirely loses the explanatory power it usually has. Likewise, conditionality in the context of international financial agreements substantially lowers the propensity to vote of individuals with upper secondary level education or higher. It has to be emphasised that, although we have only a few countries in the sample with severe levels of government constraint, the effects are not systematically driven by single cases. The exclusion of outliers – Ireland in the model estimating the effect of public deficit as well as Greece in the model including government bond yields – affects neither the significance nor the direction of the effect of government constraint on the relationship between education and participation (see Table A2 in the online appendix). These findings are in line with our argument that in strongly constrained contexts, the better educated hold a pessimistic outlook on the leverage their vote has with regard to government effectiveness and therefore they may tend to abstain.

This first step of the empirical analysis provides strong evidence of decreasing participation levels among the highly educated in certain countries. However, the variance of government constraints obviously differs considerably across time (see Figure 2), because we start our observation period before the beginning of the crisis. If the declining willingness to vote in elections is in fact based on the mechanism that we propose, then we should see shifting patterns of participation among the highly educated over time. We therefore computed hierarchical regression models for each year in our dataset separately. The time span from 2006 until 2012 allows us to re-examine the proposed interaction effects for years before as well as during the crisis. Table 2 displays year-specific coefficients, standard errors and significance levels of the model specified above.¹⁶ In line with our theoretical expectation, as well as with the development of government constraints over time, the interaction between education and constraints is significant in the years 2008 (*p*-value 0.08) and 2010; 2010 is the year when deficits peaked, bond yields were heavily volatile from 2008 through 2012 and the influence of the Troika remained strong from 2008 onwards. In contrast, we do not find significantly moderated participation levels for the well-educated in pre-crisis years.

Figure 4 lends confidence to these findings and allows for a more detailed evaluation of the underlying dynamic aspect of our argumentation. As expected, in the pre-crisis year the three slopes run almost parallel (i.e. no interaction effect) and reveal a generally increasing probability to vote with increasing levels of education – just as standard theory would predict. However, this positive slope vanishes as soon as governments face higher levels of constraints due to the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008. The effect builds up in 2008 and becomes most pronounced in 2010. Hence, the change in participation

Table 2. Hierarchical logit regression models predicting electoral participation by year.

	2006	2008	2010	2012
Intercept	-3.722*** (1.044)	-3.302*** (0.640)	-2.224*** (0.672)	-2.347*** (0.644)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>				
Education	0.123*** (0.024)	0.163*** (0.017)	0.103*** (0.019)	0.195*** (0.023)
Unemployment	-0.309*** (0.090)	-0.396*** (0.083)	-0.670*** (0.073)	-0.403*** (0.066)
Age	0.715*** (0.075)	0.778*** (0.066)	0.555*** (0.067)	0.516*** (0.068)
Age sq.	-0.039*** (0.008)	-0.047*** (0.007)	-0.025*** (0.007)	-0.020** (0.007)
Gender (female = 1)	0.186*** (0.043)	0.156*** (0.040)	0.139*** (0.039)	0.082* (0.040)
Hardly interested in politics	0.658*** (0.058)	0.654*** (0.056)	0.792*** (0.053)	0.541*** (0.054)
Quite interested in politics	1.412*** (0.064)	1.262*** (0.059)	1.514*** (0.058)	1.254*** (0.059)
Very interested in politics	1.753*** (0.096)	1.718*** (0.090)	1.785*** (0.084)	1.539*** (0.086)
Income	0.120*** (0.012)	0.059*** (0.008)	0.060*** (0.008)	0.084*** (0.008)
<i>Country-level variables</i>				
Recent democratisation	-0.752 (0.799)	-1.136** (0.423)	-0.641* (0.251)	-0.488 (0.263)
GDP growth	0.044 (0.152)	0.052 (0.051)	0.032 (0.072)	-0.071 (0.060)
Party system polarisation	2.778 (2.228)	2.124 (1.510)	0.394 (1.471)	0.246 (1.454)
<i>Cross-level interaction</i>				
Govt constraint	0.997 (0.803)	0.439 (0.235)	0.430** (0.152)	0.099 (0.119)
Education × Govt constraint	0.101 (0.090)	-0.064 (0.037)	-0.080** (0.026)	-0.032 (0.023)
Log likelihood	-7050.01	-8384.65	-8410.91	-8173.50
Num. obs.	20,498	26,619	28,823	27,345
Num. groups: cntry	18	22	24	24
Var: cntry (Intercept)	0.253	0.225	0.199	0.154

Notes: Unstandardised logit coefficients; standard errors in brackets.

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

among the highly educated clearly developed in tandem with the variance in constraints.

Observable implications of the mechanism

In the analysis above, we provide evidence for important empirical links between constrained government and turnout among highly educated voters. If the mechanism we propose to explain this link is correct, we should by implication not only observe vote abstention, but also a more general frustration with politics among the highly educated. In other words, if knowledgeable individuals indeed anticipate the inefficacy of governments in national elections,

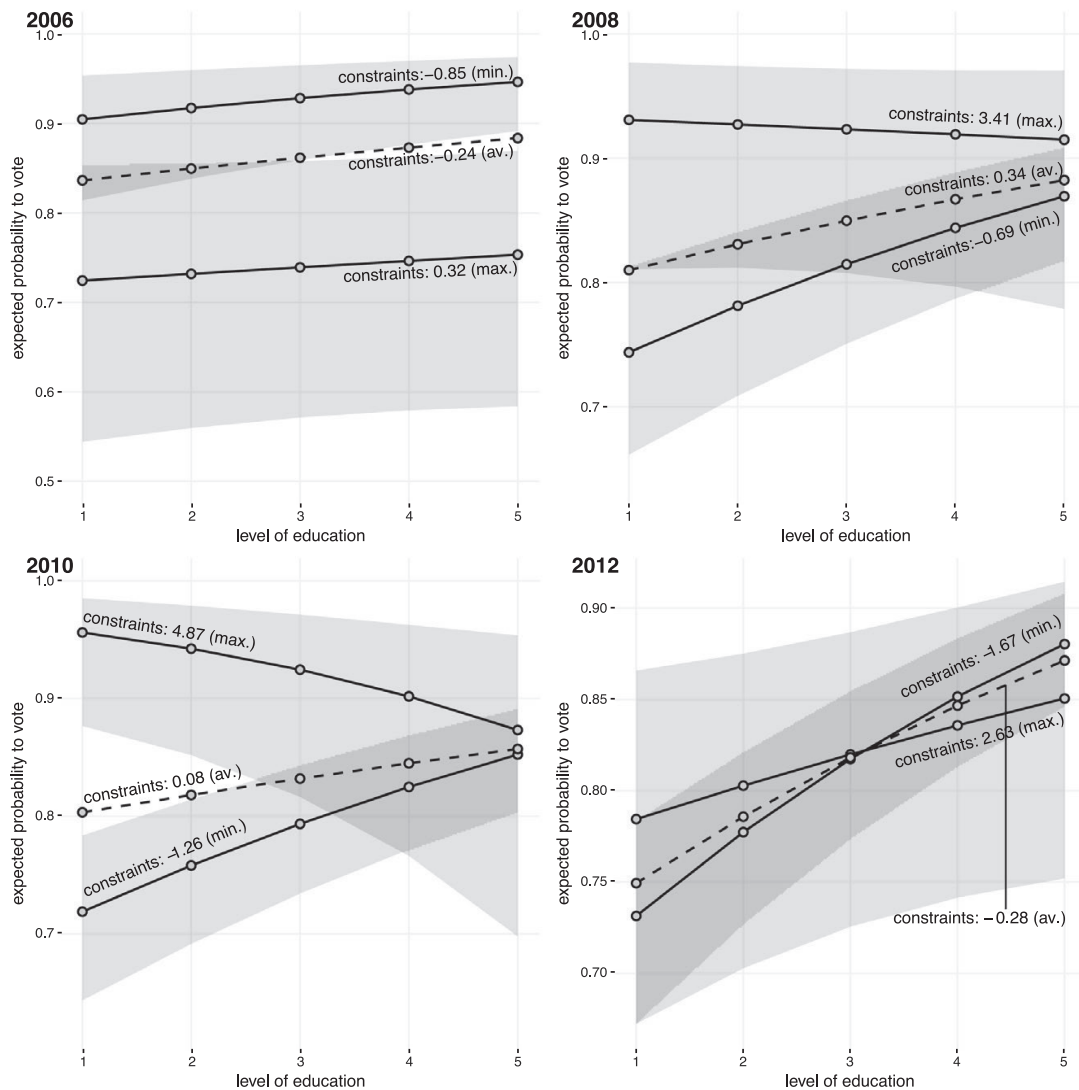


Figure 4. Predicted probabilities and 90% confidence intervals of electoral participation depending on education and government constraints, over time.

their absence from the ballot should go together with a loss of confidence in the political system more generally (Clarke and Acock 1989).

To further substantiate our findings, we therefore re-examine the proposed mechanism with two alternative but closely related dependent variables. First, we test whether the moderated (or even reversed) effect of higher education in severely constrained countries can also be observed with regard to *political efficacy*, i.e. trust in the responsiveness of governments.¹⁷ Voters who anticipate the potential inefficacy of their vote in circumstances of strong constraints should be sceptical about government's responsiveness to citizens' preferences. Furthermore, voters who realise that their vote might be redundant in times of austerity should also evaluate more negatively the performance of the entire political system. That is why we also examine the response patterns with regard to the broader question of *satisfaction with how democracy works* in the respondent's country.

Table 3. Average predicted values for alternative dependent variables at different levels of education and government constraints.

	Highest level of education			Difference
	Government constraint	Upper secondary or lower	Post-secondary or higher	
Satisfaction with democracy	minimum	5.58	6.18	0.60
	average	5.00	5.26	0.26
	maximum	3.29	2.52	-0.77
Political efficacy	minimum	4.57	4.98	0.41
	average	4.08	4.26	0.18
	maximum	3.06	2.75	-0.31

Both of these alternative operationalisations of political support range from 1 to 10, where higher values indicate higher levels of efficacy and satisfaction, respectively. Apart from changing the dependent variables, the model specifications remain identical to the ones presented in model 3 of Table 1. Hence, Table 3 displays the predicted values of satisfaction with the way democracy works and political efficacy, respectively, at different levels of education and government constraint (measured as a joint factor of deficit, conditionality and government bond yields).¹⁸

The overall picture strikingly resembles the results from our previous analysis: While highly educated citizens usually assess political circumstances more positively than less educated individuals, this pattern is exactly reversed in severely constrained countries. This is not only true for the evaluation of political efficacy, but also for satisfaction with the political system in general. Compared to less educated voters, highly sophisticated citizens indeed seem to place more weight on governmental constraints and factor this knowledge in when it comes to support for the political system. This additional evidence gives further credence to the proposed mechanism at work: highly educated individuals in heavily constrained countries anticipate the inefficacy of their vote and therefore withhold their votes and report lower satisfaction.

Conclusion

An increasing literature studies the policy reactions in the political aftermath of the Great Recession, but studies on the effect of the crisis on the political behaviour of individuals are still rare. In studying behaviour, it turns out to be crucial to distinguish between different social groups, which are affected very unequally, and through different mechanisms, by the crisis. This is why, in this article, we focus on highly educated individuals, whose level of turnout in national elections has dropped markedly in most crisis-affected countries, even though their socioeconomic resources were much less affected by the crisis than those of the less well-educated. None of the existing individual-level theories of political participation can account for this decline.

We offer an explanation for this ‘hidden’ shift in turnout across Europe, building on theories of ‘election characteristics’ as determinants of turnout. Where contextual factors such as public deficit, government bond yields and conditionality work against a government’s room for manoeuvre, people with higher levels of education increasingly abstain from the polls. The link between education and participation becomes even insignificant in extremely dire circumstances. In order to explain this finding, we argue that once a person reaches the conclusion that the new government has only small room for manoeuvre irrespective of its ideological and coalitional composition, willingness to make the effort of voting decreases, because the instrumental benefit from voting is so low. In other words, citizens no longer believe in the value and effectiveness of their vote, either because of a rational calculation or because of frustration and political alienation. However, this anticipation of political inefficacy of the government in the light of external constraints requires substantial political and economic knowledge, as the political repercussions caused by soaring public deficits or high government bond yield rates are complex. In addition, we know from previous studies that highly educated individuals are more sensitive to incentive-based voting behaviour. This is why we argue that the suggested mechanism is most prevalent among highly educated citizens. Testing our argument across countries and over time (before and during crisis) indeed shows that the effect of education on participation co-evolves with the development of constraints: the stronger economic constraints on governments, the weaker the effect of education on participation. Consistent with what we would expect, this effect is strongest among younger voters, who have not yet developed strong voting habits.

Our results are in line with a broader literature emphasising that turnout level shows things not only about voters but also about elections (Franklin 2004). In times of economic crisis, macroeconomic context conditions tie the hands of any future government, irrespective of its ideological leaning, and thereby sharply reduce what is at stake on election day. Context clearly matters as it fundamentally changes the instrumental benefits of voting. Expanding the temporal and spatial scope of our analysis by collecting more data on macroeconomic government constraints and turnout rates would be a fruitful avenue for further research. Drawing on a dataset that includes more time points would allow our analysis to be complemented by means of (multiple) time-series models.

Overall, our findings show that government constraints, besides other non-electoral consequences, lead to shifts in the composition of the electorate. This, of course, has important normative ramifications on the democratic quality of elections. On the one hand, a moderation of participatory inequalities caused by education could be welcomed, since this improves the representativeness of elections. On the other hand, if overall participation decreases because educated voters perceive that they have no say in the making of government

policy, these increasing constraints on government policy-making raise a challenge to the legitimacy of electoral contests.

Therefore, more equal participation at lower levels does not seem desirable from a theoretical-normative perspective.

Notes

1. Data relates to parliamentary elections, retrieved from the IDEA database: <http://www.idea.int>.
2. The following countries are defined as strongly affected by the crisis, because they showed bond yields of 6% or higher, deficits of 10% or higher, or the presence of conditionality agreements in one or more years from 2006 until 2012 (also see section on data and methods): The Southern European countries Cyprus, Spain, Greece and Portugal, the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Iceland, Ireland, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary. For Romania, Iceland and Latvia, however, only one ESS round is available so we could not calculate their participation rates over time.
3. The empirical evidence for the economic vote overall is somewhat inconclusive and effects are substantively small (Fraile and Lewis-Beck 2014; Kayser and Peress 2012; Kayser and Wlezién 2010).
4. International trade flows, in contrast, do not induce systematic constraints on governments, since they are less volatile and thus less consequential for the domestic economy.
5. Mair describes a long-term, structural process of political disaffection, not a cyclical, situational reaction that we study in this article. However, these two empirical views (long-term gradual vs. cyclical) are entirely compatible. Not by accident, the crisis has hit those countries hardest which have been affected by institutional, political and economic rigidities for a very long time. The political elites in these countries have been severely constrained in their actions by both institutional legacies and oftentimes economically dysfunctional power relations since the 1980s (Beramendi *et al.* 2015). Hence, in our attempt to understand electoral participation under constrained government, the crisis in itself is not a rival, alternative factor to such structural rigidities. Rather, the crisis works as a magnifying lens that brings existing constraints into the light, exacerbates them and adds even further (external) limitations to what governments can do.
6. In the section below on ‘Data and methods’, ‘How constrained government affects the relationship between education and participation’, we develop and discuss the respective indicators to control for programmatic convergence in our models. The correlation between our joint factor of economic constraints and Dalton’s (2008) polarisation index measuring party system convergence is -0.15 . The correlations between the separate constraint measures – deficit, conditionality and bond-yields – are -0.27 , -0.08 and -0.15 , respectively.
7. The correlation between our joint factor of economic constraints and the restricted polarisation index measuring mainstream party convergence is -0.29 . As for the separate constraint measures, the correlation is -0.35 for deficit, 0.10 for conditionality and -0.29 for bond yields.
8. Note that oftentimes not all ESS waves are available for a country.
9. More precisely, revenue (including grants) minus expense, minus net acquisition of nonfinancial assets.

10. Greece, of course, is subject to constant conditionality agreements from 2010 on. However, it is not included in our sample in 2012.
11. Pearson's R of -0.38 (deficit and bond yields), -0.27 (deficit and conditionality) and 0.66 (bond yields and conditionality).
12. In the following tables, the coefficients, standard errors and levels of significance of the following indicators are reported at the higher levels of countries and years: deficit, conditionality, government bond yields, the factor of the three just listed indicators, growth in GDP, party system or mainstream party polarisation, effective number of parties, party system disproportionality and recent democratisation.
13. We show the predicted probabilities with the control variables fixed at zero (dichotomous variables) or at their mean (continuous variables).
14. This moderation is quite linear over the different educational levels, as regression analyses with an ordinal specification of education indicate (see Table A4 in the online appendix).
15. The age cohort argument brought forward by Franklin (2004) and further specified by Franklin and Hobolt (2011) can be traced in our analysis (see Tables A8 and A9 in the online appendix). The impact of government constraints on the relationship between education and turnout is significant for both younger and older age cohorts. However, it is stronger negative among citizens 35 years and under (odds ratio of 0.85) than among citizens above 35 (odds ratio of 0.95). Hence, younger citizens who have not yet fully developed their habit of voting are more affected by the macroeconomic context of elections.
16. We only show results of one measure for government constraints, the factor resulting from the other three indicators, noting that the application of alternative indicators, yields very similar effects (see Table A5 in the online appendix). In addition, for the sake of interpretability, we abstain from presenting the dynamic analysis as a three-way interaction between education, government constraints and the four years. Such a specification, however, leads to robust findings regarding the continuous change in the moderation effect of government constraints (see Table A6 in the online appendix).
17. Here we rely on the variable *chpldmc* in the ESS 2012, which asks people to what extent (0–10) they think that: 'in [country] government changes policies in response to what most people think'.
18. Due to the different scale of the dependent variables, linear multilevel models instead of hierarchical ordered logit models have been estimated. See Table A10 in the online appendix for the full results. Table A10 also includes a linear probability model for our main dependent variable, participation, to set the effects into perspective and demonstrate that the magnitude is comparable.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Micro-level indicators used in the analysis.

Variable	Operationalisation	Mean	Standard deviation
Vote	Based on variable <i>vote</i> in ESS 'Did you vote in the last [country] election in [month/year]?' Recoded so that 0 = no and 1 = yes	0.80	0.40
Political efficacy	Based on variable <i>chpldmc</i> in ESS: 'In [country] government changes policies in response to what most people think?' Ten-point scale from 1 to 10	4.17	2.47
Satisfaction with democracy	Based on variable <i>stfdem</i> in ESS: 'And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?' Ten-point scale from 1 to 10	5.27	2.49
Education	First digit of variable <i>edulvlb</i> in ESS 'What is the highest level of education you have successfully completed?' Five-point scale from 1 to 5	3.28	1.32
Unemployment	Based on variable <i>mnactic</i> in ESS 'Main activity, last 7 days': Recoded so that 'unemployed, looking for job' and 'unemployed, not looking for a job' are counted as unemployed	0.06	0.23
Gender	Based on variable <i>gndr</i> in ESS: 'Sex of respondent' Recoded so that 0 = men and 1 = women	0.52	0.50
Age	Based on variable <i>agea</i> in ESS: 'Age of respondent, calculated', divided by 10	4.98	1.67
Interest	Based on variable <i>polintr</i> in ESS: 'How interested would you say you are in politics – are you...?' Recoded so that (1 = 'not at all interested in politics', 4 = 'very interested in politics')	2.48	0.88
Income	Based on variable <i>hinctnta</i> in ESS: 'Household's total net income, all sources (in deciles)'	5.68	2.75
Party identification	Based on variable <i>clsprty</i> in ESS: 'Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties?' Recoded so that 0 = no and 1 = yes	0.53	0.50
Part time work	Based on variable <i>wkhtct</i> in ESS: 'Total contracted hours per week in main job'. Recoded so that less than 35 hours are counted as part-time work	0.25	0.43
Temporary employment	Based on variable <i>wrkctra</i> (no work contract or limited or unlimited work contract) and <i>mnactic</i> (unemployment) in ESS. Recoded so that 'limited contract' in <i>wrkctra</i> and 'no contract' in <i>wrkctra</i> combined with 'paid work' in <i>mnactic</i> are counted as temporary employment	0.15	0.36