

How Did the 2008 Economic Crisis Affect Social and Political Solidarity in Europe?

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One possible outcome of the economic crash of 2008 was that the majority or mainstream members of a society would direct their anger and fear against the minority or marginal members of their society. Commentators on television or the radio would claim, “it’s all the fault of the immigrants!” or “if we didn’t hand over so much of our tax dollars to the poor, the economy would not have deteriorated so much,” or “social benefits to African Americans [or German Turks] have distorted the housing market.” Citizens would come to believe these assertions, politicians would echo them – and the upshot would be not only a deteriorating national and international economy but also increased hostility and fear among racial, ethnic, or nationality groups in a country. Social solidarity would decline, perhaps irrevocably.

Another possible outcome of the 2008 economic crash was that both mainstream and marginal members of society would lose faith in their governments, or even in democratic governance more generally. Commentators would claim, “we need a strong leader to get us out of this mess!” or “we need a new system of governance to control these powerful and destructive economic forces,” or “we need to suspend the usual processes of law-making to

deal with the crisis effectively.” In this scenario too, citizens would come to believe these assertions, politicians would echo them – and the upshot would be not only a deteriorating national and international economy but also increased hostility to and fear of the slow and messy processes of democratic decision-making. Political solidarity would decline, perhaps irrevocably.

A year later, we know that the deepest fears have not been realized -- social and political solidarity have not disintegrated irrevocably. But we do not yet have a clear picture of how and how much a sense of solidarity did in fact change after the economic crash. Providing that picture is the goal of this essay. I cannot make any claims about causation. That is, I can't show that changes in the public's views had any direct impact on levels of social or political solidarity, since solidarity involves a great many practices in addition to public opinion. Similarly, I can't show that governmental actions with regard to the economic crisis shaped public opinion, since opinions derive from a great many stimuli. Nevertheless, the public's views surely matter in how politicians and fellow countrymen act, even if we cannot trace precise causal chains. So understanding the trajectory of solidarity requires understanding the dynamics of public opinion.

The evidence for my analysis comes from the European Social Survey (ESS), “an academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations” (<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). It encompasses about 30 countries, and has been deployed four times. Most importantly for my purpose here, the third round occurred in 2006 and the fourth round in late 2008 or early 2009, that is, after the economic crash of September 2008 but before people knew what its political, social, or economic ramifications

would be. I focus on attitudes in thirteen western European countries whose populations were asked the same questions in both 2006 and 2008.

Political Solidarity

The first question is simply whether or how much the economic failures of 2008 registered in the public’s mind; did people notice them, and if so, what was their reaction? The ESS asked people about levels of satisfaction with the present state of their national economy, national government, and “the way democracy works” in their country. Table 1 shows the results for the thirteen western European countries included in both surveys. It is ordered in terms of the biggest decline in satisfaction with the national economy:

Table 1: Changes in Satisfaction with the Country’s Economy, Government, and Democracy, 2006-2008

	<i>National economy</i>	<i>National government</i>	<i>Democratic practice</i>
<i>UK</i>	-2.30	-0.66	-0.01
<i>Spain</i>	-1.91	-0.73	-0.07
<i>Belgium</i>	-1.42	-1.26	-0.37
<i>Denmark</i>	-1.30	-0.41	-0.06
<i>Sweden</i>	-1.27	-0.02	0.11
<i>France</i>	-0.85	0.01	-0.04
<i>Switzerland</i>	-0.79	0.15	0.03
<i>Netherlands</i>	-0.78	0.13	0.21
<i>Norway</i>	-0.61	0.42	0.05
<i>Finland</i>	-0.58	-0.29	-0.24
<i>Portugal</i>	-0.49	-0.49	-0.16

<i>Germany</i>	-0.33	0.77	0.26
<i>Poland</i>	0.39	0.85	0.37
<i>TOTAL</i>	-0.77	0.31	0.19

The first thing to note is that western Europeans as a whole, and residents of all countries except Poland, became more dissatisfied with their national economy between 2006 and 2008.¹ It would have been astonishing had it been otherwise. However, overall and in most countries, they did not lose faith in their national governments or in the practice of democracy. In a few cases, especially among Germans and Poles, they became notably more satisfied. If this survey genuinely represents public opinion, Europe is not facing a broad crisis of rejection of governance or democratic practice.

If we look more narrowly at particular features of democratic governance, we see the same pattern – a loss of trust in some aspects of government in some countries, but overall no loss of trust and in some cases even an increase. Table 2 shows the results, ordered in terms of the biggest loss of faith in the respondent’s parliament:

Table 2: Changes in Trust in the Country’s Parliament, Legal System, Politicians, and Political Parties, 2006-2008

	<i>Parliament</i>	<i>Legal system</i>	<i>Politicians</i>	<i>Political parties</i>
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¹ The possible responses ran on a scale from 1, “extremely dissatisfied” to 10, “extremely satisfied.” In 2008, the highest median levels of satisfaction with the economy were in Norway (6.85) and Denmark (6.69). Portugal (2.67) and France (2.94) had the lowest median levels of satisfaction with the economy.

<i>Portugal</i>	-0.59	-0.28	-0.31	-0.13
<i>Belgium</i>	-0.32	0.01	-0.41	-0.47
<i>Finland</i>	-0.10	0.02	-0.10	-0.02
<i>Spain</i>	0	-0.73	-0.38	-0.44
<i>Denmark</i>	0.05	-0.10	-0.04	-0.01
<i>Norway</i>	0.08	0.28	0.18	0.25
<i>UK</i>	0.10	0.14	0.21	0.13
<i>France</i>	0.14	0.18	0.29	0.14
<i>Switzerland</i>	0.19	0.07	0.04	-0.05
<i>Sweden</i>	0.25	0.01	0.10	0.08
<i>Netherlands</i>	0.30	0.27	0.22	0.16
<i>Poland</i>	0.40	0.18	0.26	0.24
<i>Germany</i>	0.42	0.23	0.33	0.29
<i>Total</i>	0.46	0.14	0.34	0.28

Note to editor: There is a parallel question in 2006 and 2008 about trust in “European Parliament” – do you want an additional column with those results for table 2???

In countries where respondents lost faith in their parliament, they also lost faith in other aspects of the political system; more generally, a loss of faith in one arena is usually associated with a loss of faith in the other three arenas.² But in seven of the thirteen countries,

² Here too, the possible responses ran on a scale from 1, “no trust at all” to 10, “complete trust.” In 2008, the highest median levels of trust in the national parliament were in Denmark

respondents trusted various aspects of their government *more* in 2008 than in 2006, and in two others their views were essentially unchanged. These results also provide no grounds for fearing a loss of political solidarity within a state.

An even more focused issue is whether one's state can protect its residents from a terrorist attack. Fear of what appears from the victim's perspective to be random political violence can destroy solidarity in a different way than distress over economic hardship or mistrust of feckless politicians. More generally, one's level of anxiety about a terrorist attack might be a sign of diffuse fear of outsiders or of the political future.

However, regardless of whether one interprets the responses broadly or narrowly, the issue of terrorism presents no grounds for concern about political solidarity in western Europe. Overall, fear of a terrorist attack in one's country did not change in the ESS between 2006 and 2008, and fear of a terrorist attack in Europe actually declined slightly in the same period.³ To the degree that these survey data reveal public sentiment in response to the 2008 economic crash, western European polities need not fear a loss of political solidarity within their country.

(6.83) and Finland (6.31). Poland (2.85) and Portugal (3.52) had the lowest median levels of trust in the national parliament.

³ In both 2006 and 2008, just over 13 percent of the respondents in these thirteen countries thought a terrorist attack in their country was "very likely" during the next twelve months. In 2006, 26 percent thought a terrorist attack in Europe was very likely; the proportion in 2008 was just over 21 percent. Across all European countries in both the 2006 and 2008 ESS, the correlation between the two fears was high -- .63 in 2006 and .66 in 2008. Thus this measure may be tapping a general fear more than a concrete prediction.

Social Solidarity

Perhaps even more surprisingly, the ESS does not provide evidence of a major decline in social solidarity after the 2008 crash. Overall, the proportion of people in our thirteen western European states who believe that they belong to a group discriminated against in their country stayed almost stable (moving from 7.3 percent in 2006 to 7.5 percent in 2008). The proportion rose slightly in most countries -- Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, Spain, Finland, the U.K., the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden -- but it declined or remained the same in the two largest, Germany and France, as well as declining slightly in Portugal. We cannot tell from the question whether any increase or decrease is due to changing perceptions of discrimination, changes in the composition of the population, changes in sampling for the survey, or changes in actual levels of discrimination. But in any case, the central point is that there was little movement in expressions of social (non)solidarity after the 2008 economic crash.

Attitudes toward immigrants and immigration diverged only slightly after the 2008 crash between those who do and do not feel discriminated against. The ESS asks three questions about support for increased or decreased immigration from different sources, and three questions about the impact of immigration on the respondent's country of residence. To understand the pattern of change in views about immigrants and immigration, I took the following steps: I separated respondents into those who did, and those who did not, see themselves as members of a group that is discriminated against. I then looked at the median response of each group to each of the six questions in each of the thirteen western European countries. I subtracted the median views in 2006 from the median views in 2008, to see which views had changed, in what direction, and how extensively. Table 3 presents the results on

preferences for increasing the number of immigrants. The table is arrayed in alphabetical order of the countries.⁴

Table 3: Changes from 2006 to 2008 in Views about Changing the Number of Immigrants

	<i>Allow many or few immigrants of same race or ethnicity as majority in country</i>		<i>Allow many or few immigrants of different race or ethnicity as majority in country</i>		<i>Allow many or few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe</i>	
	<i>1. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>2. R does not feel discriminated against</i>	<i>3. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>4. R does not feel discriminated against</i>	<i>5. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>6. R does not feel discriminated against</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	+	0	++	0	+	+
<i>Denmark</i>	+	0	0	+	+	0
<i>Finland</i>	0	+	0	+	-	+
<i>France</i>	0	0	0	+	0	+
<i>Germany</i>	++	++	++	++	+	++
<i>Netherlands</i>	+	+	+	++	0	+
<i>Norway</i>	-	+	0	+	0	0
<i>Poland</i>	0	0	-	0	-	0

⁴ The questions displayed in table 3 permitted four possible answers, ranging from “many” to “none.” In 2008, the median responses ranged between 1.7 (roughly speaking, “some”) to 2.8 (roughly, “a few”). The ESS website permits an on-line analysis that yields the median response for each set of respondents in each country on all three questions.

<i>Portugal</i>	++	0	++	+	++	0
<i>Spain</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Sweden</i>	+	0	+	0	0	0
<i>Switzerland</i>	++	0	+	+	-	0
<i>UK</i>	0	0	+	+	+	+

Notes: 0 means that the proportion who wanted more (or fewer) immigrants of a particular kind rose (or fell) only minimally, between -.05 and .05 of a point from 2006 to 2008.

+ or - means that the proportion who wanted more (or fewer) immigrants of a particular kind rose between .051 and .20 of a point.

++ or -- means that the proportion who wanted more (or fewer) immigrants of a particular kind rose between .201 and .40 of a point.

+++ or --- means that the proportion of respondents who wanted more (or fewer) immigrants of a particular kind rose by more than .40 of a point.

Note first the large number of 0's (29 of 78 cells), and the small number of double or triple marks (11 of 78 cells). In general, people's preferences about admitting many or few immigrants from various sources did not change much between 2006 and 2008. All of the double marks were ++; that is, all substantial changes in views were in the direction of wanting more immigrants. Germany is the limiting case here, but not the only one to show enthusiasm for newcomers. Conversely, apart from Spain, which is suffering from severe unemployment and other economic problems, only five cells reveal a stronger preference for fewer

immigrants in 2008 than in 2006.⁵ So we have no evidence that new immigrants or would-be immigrants were blamed for the 2008 economic crash, and considerable evidence that residents of some states (Germany and the Netherlands especially) would welcome more.

Second, looking down the columns rather than across the rows, we see that the views of people who feel discriminated against changed a little more than did the views of people who do not feel discriminated against – but in both directions. On the one hand, slightly more cells in columns 1, 3, and 5 show a negative sign (change toward a preference for fewer immigrants) than in columns 2, 4, and 6. On the other hand, slightly more cells in columns 1, 3, and 5 show a ++ sign (fairly strong change toward a preference for more immigrants) than in columns 2, 4, and 6. Overall, these data provide no grounds for believing that social solidarity with regard to immigration policy has splintered between people who do and do not see themselves to be on the losing side of social interactions. That is a powerful conclusion, given what might have happened when economies went into crisis in 2008 and given what has happened in earlier economic crises in Europe or the United States.⁶

⁵ Poland is the only country in which people who feel discriminated against were consistently less welcoming to immigrants in 2008 than in 2006, while people who do not feel discriminated against showed little change.

⁶ During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States deported several hundred thousand Mexican or Mexican American farm laborers and their families, some of whom were American citizens. During Germany's hyperinflation and economic instability of the 1920s, Jews, the Roma, and other outsiders were widely blamed for the country's hardships.

We do see more signs of fragmentation between people who do and do not see themselves as victims of discrimination when we look at ESS questions about the impact of immigration in their country. Table 4 shows the results of an analysis similar to that above, and it is set up in the same way as Table 3.⁷

Table 4: Changes from 2006 to 2008 in Views about the Impact of Immigration

	<i>Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live.</i>		<i>Immigration is bad or good for the country's economy.</i>		<i>The country's cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants.</i>	
	<i>1. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>2. R does not feel discriminated against</i>	<i>3. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>4. R does not feel discriminated against</i>	<i>5. R feels discriminated against</i>	<i>6. R does not feel discriminated against</i>
<i>Belgium</i>	+++	++	++	+	0	0
<i>Denmark</i>	+++	-	++	-	-	-
<i>Finland</i>	-	0	+	+	+	+
<i>France</i>	+	++	-	++	-	+++
<i>Germany</i>	++	+++	++	+++	++	+++
<i>Netherlands</i>	-	+	+	++	0	+

⁷ The questions displayed in table 4 permitted ten possible answers, ranging from a very negative to a very positive view of the effects of immigration. In 2008, the median responses ranged from a low of 4.3 to a high of 7.3. In this case also, the ESS website permits an on-line analysis that yields the median response for each set of respondents in each country on all three questions.

<i>Norway</i>	-	+	-	+	-	0
<i>Poland</i>	+	0	-	0	---	-
<i>Portugal</i>	+++	0	+++	+	++	++
<i>Spain</i>	-	0	---	---	-	-
<i>Sweden</i>	++	+	++	+	--	+
<i>Switzerland</i>	+++	++	++	++	-	+
<i>UK</i>	+	+	++	+	++	+

Notes: 0 means that the proportion who thought immigrants improved (or harmed) the country rose between -.05 and .05 of a point from 2006 to 2008.

+ or - means that the proportion who thought immigrants improved (or harmed) the country rose between .051 and .20 of a point.

++ or -- means that the proportion who thought immigrants improved (or harmed) the country rose between .201 and .40 of a point.

+++ or --- means that the proportion of respondents who thought immigrants improved (or harmed) the country rose by more than .40 of a point.

Views about the impact of immigration changed much more from 2006 to 2008 than did views about immigration policy. Table 4 has only nine 0's, meaning that median preferences on these three policies shifted broadly across countries, respondent groups, and survey questions. Thirty-one cells have double or triple marks, meaning that median preferences shifted not only broadly but substantially. Only four of those thirty cells have double or triple minus signs (-- or ---), meaning that median preferences usually shifted toward more positive views of the impact of immigrants. Germany is again the limiting positive case, and Spain the limiting negative case.

As with the results in table 3, we do not see strong differences between those who did and those who did not claim that they were members of groups that suffer from discrimination. Columns 1, 3, and 5 look fairly similar to columns 2, 4, and 6 – in both sets of columns, there are shifts toward more negative views of immigrants’ impact, shifts toward more positive views, and occasionally little shift in either direction. Strong shifts – in both directions – were more common among those who see themselves as victims of discrimination, perhaps because the whole issue of immigration and its impact is more salient to them than to others in their country. But if so, that salience did not produce a uniform response.

Thus once again we do not see grounds for deep fears about a loss of social solidarity after the 2008 economic crash. Overall, western Europeans seem to be moving in the direction of endorsing the effects of immigration on their countries, even though they do not much want more immigrants themselves.

Conclusion: The Dog that Didn’t Bark

Of course, no matter its quality, one public opinion survey cannot reveal all that we need to know about changes in social and political solidarity in response to an international crisis of the magnitude of the 2008 market failure. One needs to examine changes in interpersonal interactions in neighborhoods and workplaces, changes in public support for political parties that are hostile to one or another segment of the population, levels of social services and social welfare policies, changes in attitudes and behaviors that are more subtle or complex than a survey can capture, and so on. But even if surveys are a fairly blunt instrument, they can be very revealing. They are generalizable to a population in a way that almost no other type of evidence can be, and they permit tightly structured comparisons with earlier points in time in a way that almost no other type of evidence permits. They enable us to move outside our own sphere of knowledge, our personal connections, and our shared unquestioned assumptions.

In the case of these repeated questions on the ESS, we see a clear case of Sherlock Holmes' famous dog that didn't bark. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the perennially naive Dr. Watson asks, "Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?" Holmes answers, "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time." But, says Watson, "the dog did nothing in the night-time." Holmes responds, "That was the curious incident." Social scientists and public commentators seldom pay close attention to what does not happen, for obvious reasons. But when we expect something to happen and it does not, it may be worth our notice. Many people expected or at least feared that the 2008 market crash would lead Europeans (and Americans) to lose faith in their economy, polity, and each other. That mainly did not happen, at least insofar as an important public opinion survey can show. That is a curious incident worth noting, and celebrating.