# The Politics of Immigration During an Economic Crisis: Analysing political debate on immigration in Southern Europe

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**Abstract**

Since 2008, dramatic economic crises have brought falling GDP, rapidly rising unemployment and pressure on government to limit public spending to Spain and Italy. These are two countries with similar experiences of migration but quite different politics of immigration over the past two decades, with public order and security concerns coming to the fore in Italy during the 1990s and 2000s, whilst there was a general avoidance of the issue in Spain. Spain and Italy therefore provide a useful opportunity to examine the interaction between the economic crisis and political debates on immigration. Examining political debates on immigration in the parliaments of both countries from 2008 to 2011, this paper finds that during the crisis there was not a mainstream negative politicisation of immigration in these countries, despite high migration flows, rising high unemployment, aggressive austerity from government and uncertainty regarding the economy. This is explained by showing how the political debate in each country is mediated by different configurations of public opinion, institutions and discursive structures.

From 2008, dramatic economic crises brought falling GDP, rapidly rising unemployment and government cuts to welfare and public services to Spain and Italy, two countries of high immigration in Southern Europe. Where economic issues such as unemployment, welfare spending and the affordability of and access to services become highly salient, such as in crisis-stricken countries, measures against immigration and immigrants may be presented as potential resolutions by politicians aspiring to capitalise on popular angst (Betz 1994; Rydgren 2008; van Dijk 2006). In light of this, it is important to ask what impact the recent economic crisis had on the politics of immigration in these countries.

Various studies have acknowledged that the economic crisis has had an impact on international migration and the lives of migrants. As noted in the introduction to this special issue,

crises are a source of change (Finotelli and Ponzo, in this special issue). Studies have, for example, highlighted a slowed rate of increase of global migration flows, a worsening of the employment rate and living conditions of immigrants in host societies and a slight increase in those claiming welfare support (Koehler et al 2010; Koser 2009; Papademetriou and Terrazas 2009). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the representation of immigration in politics during the economic crisis. This is despite the fact that political conflicts on immigration have been of interest to much previous research (for example, Ford and Goodwin 2014, Rydgren 2008), and that a range of studies have highlighted the role that economic conditions can play in influencing the prevalence of anti-immigrant views in politics (Cea D'Ancona and Valles Martinez 2008, 2011; Dancygier 2010; Zamora-Kapoor et al 2013).

Economic conditions, particularly rising unemployment and cuts to public services, can be selectively associated with immigration by political actors for various reasons. They may seek to emphasise a sense of competition between host society and migrant groups in order to gain electoral support, particularly from the unemployed and those who feel that, in economic terms, they have been 'left behind' (Billiet et al 2014; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Zamora-Kapoor et al 2013). It has also been highlighted how the strategic association of immigration with a range of socio-economic problems has often benefited radical right-wing and populist political parties, especially during the years of the economic crisis (Ellinas 2013). Mayer found, for example, that in France the economic crisis amplified the move of the working classes to the far right, which had included anti-immigrant sentiment within a broader criticism of globalisation and a rising sense that people no longer felt 'at home' in the country (2014: 266-7). Kuisma has also argued that economic grievances of voters in Finland were associated with immigration by the populist party True Finns in order to justify and de-radicalise exclusionary policies which may otherwise have been rejected as racist or xenophobic (2013).

These studies offer, however, a limited view. By concentrating on radical right and populist parties which have gained support whilst voicing anti-immigrant views, they tell us little about the times and places in which such parties do not arise or where an anti-immigrant backlash does not become influential in the political mainstream. In contrast, although Spain and Italy were both

affected by significant economic crises from 2008, right-wing populist leaders did not significantly gain popularity or drive the agenda on the issue in either. The cases of Spain and Italy are therefore particularly interesting as examples highlighting how high levels of immigration and economic uncertainty do not necessarily result in anti-immigrant views gaining widespread consensus in mainstream political debate. The article will also show that although these are two countries with similar experiences of migration and economic crisis, the politics of immigration in each has been markedly different. Public order and security concerns had come to the fore in Italy during the 1990s and 2000s whereas there was a general depoliticisation of the issue in Spain. From 2008, when the crisis began, there was little change in political debates on immigration in Spain and the political system remained relatively stable, with elites sharing consensual views on the need to minimise any potential links with controversial nationalist overtones. In Italy, during the economic crisis the governing coalition collapsed and the journeys of migrants in unsafe boats across the Mediterranean Sea took a prominent place in media and politics, providing an opportunity for humanitarian arguments to come to the fore over the previously-prevalent association of immigration with crime and public order.

The paper is structured as follows over the next four sections. Firstly, it describes the way that political debates are mediated and shaped by social and political contexts. It then describes the contexts of immigration and economic crisis in Spain and Italy, highlighting in particular the institutional and discursive configuration in each before presenting the ways that immigration has been framed in the respective parliaments. The final section concludes.

**Shaping political debate**

Previous research on political debates on immigration has aspired to unveil xenophobic, racist and prejudiced ways of talking and thinking in politics and society (e.g. Edelman 1964, van Dijk 2006). They have a broadly shared focus on the symbolic dimension of political competition and in particular on the ability of political leaders to construct and manipulate the public's interpretation of issues and social groups (Edelman 1964). Political leaders have been seen to have considerable freedom to

determine how issues are presented in political debate because they see audiences as largely incapable of accessing and understanding sufficient information to develop accurate opinions (Ibid.: 27-8).

However, in practice the ways that political elites publicly discuss issues are constrained and mediated by social and political contexts. On one hand, politicians often need to present their arguments in ways that respond to and intersect with the public's opinions and concerns. Political leaders are elected to stand for their constituents (Pitkin 1967), taking their claims and ideas into the political arena (Urbinati 2000: 767). Audiences can actively interpret and contest their comments and if politicians wish to achieve particular responses, such as increased support from constituents or peers, then their arguments and the issues or events that they refer to must be understandable, relevant and recognisable (Manin 1997: 218-230). As a result, arguments often take symbolic cues from and look to align with existent discourses and dominant cleavages that are already accepted by the public as relatively coherent and legitimate (Tarrow 1998: 110; Snow et al 1986). By shaping and situating arguments in this way, political actors can seek to facilitate the comprehension and acceptance of their own view. These legitimate and accepted existent discourses have been defined in the literature as discursive or cultural opportunity structures (Cinalli and Giugni 2011; Magnani 2012). On the other hand, the content of political debate is also shaped by the contextual opportunities that political actors have to present their views. In order to have their view heard and influence others, political actors require opportunities to access the political system and build alliances with potential supporters (Diani 1996, Tarrow 1998). Where the political system restricts access and where alliances among dominant actors are strong, such as in popular catch-all political parties, then it will be difficult for new voices to gain a presence and influence the terms of the debate. These opportunities to access political debate and the stability of alliances among elites can be summarised as institutional opportunity structures.

There is a long-standing debate around the relative importance of two perspectives in the framing of immigration and similar contentious issues (e.g. Statham 2003; Statham and Gray 2005). While some have argued that public perceptions of difference inform political discourse (Thranhardt 1995), others have stated that political dynamics among elites have greater influence (Freeman 1995). This article finds, in line with the former, that in both Spain and Italy political debate on immigration during the economic crisis followed the general contours of public opinion. However, what is of

particular interest is also how and why this took place, which requires that the relationship between public opinion and political debate are examined in the light of the contextual dynamics of each time and place as the content of political debate is mediated by contingent configurations of public opinion, institutions and discursive structures (Scholten 2011, Wimmer 2012).

The analysis will examine the way that immigration is presented in the politics of both countries through a frame analysis of parliamentary debates over the period from May 2008 to April 2011. As will be shown in the next section, from May 2008 GDP fell and unemployment rose in both countries. By 2011, GDP had risen but was falling again (a so-called 'double-dip' recession) and unemployment had continued to rise. The severity of the crisis, in terms of falling wealth and extended hardship, could therefore be increasingly felt. At the same time, the size of the immigrant population in both countries continued to rise. As a result, these years provide an opportunity to examine the evolution of political debate in a context of rising immigration but declining GDP, increasing unemployment and economic uncertainty. The article also situates the parliamentary debates in their social and political context. 'Context' is characterised here with three dimensions; firstly, events beyond the control of politicians may push immigration onto the agenda, such as the widely reported arrival of large numbers of forced migrants fleeing popular unrest and violence in their countries of origin. Secondly, concerns of the public, expressed in public opinion surveys, may influence the issues that politicians seeking to represent the concerns of their constituents choose to address. Finally, institutional and discursive opportunity structures can have an impact on whose voice can be heard and which arguments are likely to get consensus and support.

Recently, analysis of political debate and issue frames in particular has enjoyed something of a renaissance in migration studies (e.g. Allen and Blinder 2013, Benson 2013, Bleich et al 2015, Lawlor 2015, Vicol and Allen 2014). Studies have uncovered a myriad of issue frames, such as on economic change and the threat of violence from immigration (Lawlor 2015: 3) as well as victim frames, a beneficial frame, and problem frames (Bleich et al 2015: 7). Benson also identified ten immigration frames, grouping them as victim frames (a global economy frame, a humanitarian frame and a racism/xenophobia frame), hero frames (a cultural diversity frame, an integration frame and a good worker frame), and finally threat frames (a jobs frame, a public order frame, a fiscal frame and a

national cohesion frame) (2013). The frames signalled in this previous literature provided a coding guide for the examination of Spanish and Italian parliamentary debates (the full list of frames found in the material is shown below, in Table 1).

Contributions to debates were gathered from searching online databases hosted by each country's parliament. An actor's whole intervention was taken as possible venue for one frame, meaning that multiple frames could not be coded from single interventions. In this article, citations are included where possible that are representative of the whole frame for that particular intervention. Each frame was composed of (a) a problem definition, (b) an assertion of the cause of that problem, (c) an assignment of the moral implications of the problem and (d) a proposed response to the problem (Entman 1993). A typical competition frame could state the problem to be that (a) there are scarce jobs and funds for native citizens, as a result of (b) competition from immigrants, which (c) increases poverty, unemployment and insecurity of native citizens and (d) should be addressed by restricting migration. A humanitarian frame, in contrast, may focus on the problem of (a) the suffering of migrants in boats crossing the Mediterranean Sea, caused by (b) their disadvantaged situation in countries of departure which is (c) the responsibility of international leaders to address by (d) increasing search and rescue or stopping boats from departing at all. One group of frames that did not fit into the extant categories was the 'unity' frame, which was particularly present in Spain and emphasised the need to depoliticise immigration to maintain unity among the political class and in society, as will be described later.

The subsequent section will summarise the dynamics of immigration and economic crisis in Spain and Italy, before examining the different contexts and framing patterns in each country.

[Table 1 near here]

**Immigration and crisis in Spain and Italy**

Spain and Italy represent two contexts of high immigration that were hit particularly hard by the economic crisis from 2008. It has often been suggested that these countries are broadly comparable in their experiences of immigration, in line with a 'Southern European' model of immigration characterised by rapidly growing migration flows, little legislation for integration and high levels of undocumented residence (see Finotelli and Ponzo, introduction to this special issue). Indeed, in both countries there had been a rapid increase in the immigrant population during the decade leading to the crisis: between 1998 and 2008 the population of registered immigrants in Italy rose from 991,678 to 3,432,651 (according to data from the Institute for Statistics, ISTAT) and in Spain from 719,647 to 4,473,499 (according to data from the National Statistics Institute, INE). This growth continued from 2008 until 2011, despite the arrival of the economic crisis in these countries (see Figure 1). After 2011 immigration stopped rising in both.


[Figure  1 near here]


Italy and Spain also saw significant economic crises from 2008. In Italy, annual GDP growth fell from 1.7% in 2007 to -1.2% in 2008 and -5.5% in 2009 (see Figure 2). Unemployment rose from 6.1% in 2007 to 8.4% in 2010 and again to 10.7% in 2012 (see Figure 3). Spain was also gripped by a financial and then economic crisis resulting in growth in GDP per year falling from 4.1% in 2006 to 0.9% in 2008 and -3.8% in 2009 (Figure 2), followed by a dramatic increase in the level of unemployment from 8.5% in 2006 to 20.1% in 2011 and 24.8% in 2012 (Figure 3). In both countries, GDP rates seemed to rise in 2010 but would fall again in 2011, signalling a return to recession. The employment situation hit young people, those on lower incomes and the unqualified particularly hard in both countries (Gutierrez 2014: 379). The crisis also put severe pressure on social expenditure as

the need for support to those at risk from poverty increased, whilst austerity budgets were proposed by various European Union partners to make savings (Gutierrez 2014). This, together with rising unemployment, meant a reduction in the capacity of the Spanish and Italian governments to reduce income inequality and protect against poverty.

The following sections will look at how debates on immigration developed against the backdrop of this context of crisis.

[Figure  2 near here]

[Figure  3 near here]

**A call for unity: the politics of immigration and crisis in Spain's** *Congreso de los Diputados*

*Context*

The Spanish politics of immigration have been generally characterised by stability following the consolidation of democracy after the end of the authoritarian regime of General Franco (Gunther and Montero 2009; Torcal and Chhibber 1995). Cross-party consensus during this time emphasised the importance of democracy and equal rights and an avoidance of the ideology, symbols and memories of Francoist nationalism (Núñez Seixas 2005: 122). This civic consensus was subsequently maintained between Spain's large, stable catch-all parties, the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) on the left and the *Partido Popular* (PP) on the right, which consistently held 80% of the available seats between them in general elections for three decades following the transition to democracy (Gunther and Montero 2009: 99).[1]

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[1] It is worth noting here that the Spanish general election of 2015 provided the first change in this pattern of stable alternation between the two dominant parties. Not only did neither of these parties gain sufficient support to form a government, but also new political actors on the left (*Podemos*) and the right (*Ciudadanos*) each made significant gains, receiving 21% and 14% of the vote, respectively.

Controversial debates on immigration have during this time been largely avoided due to their potentially divisive nature when tied to questions of nationhood and identity (Arango 2013; Morales et al 2015). Over most of the 1990s and the 2000s immigration was treated mostly as a technical political issue to be kept off the mainstream agenda (Zapata-Barrero 2003) and the main parties tended to refer to 'immigrants' as a general category, distinguishing only between legal and illegal migration rather than speaking of specific nationalities or ethnic groups (Morales et al 2015). This is despite claims that immigration was 'discovered' as a contentious issue in the early 2000s in response to anti-immigrant riots in the southern market town of El Ejido (Zapata-Barrero 2003). Public opinion also showed great concern about immigration during 2005 and 2006 (see Figure 4), as significant increases in irregular migration flows from West Africa to the Canary Islands put images of migrants heading across the sea in rickety fishing boats at the top of the news agenda. And yet, in politics the consensus between the principal parties had returned by 2008, as reflected in political manifestos for that year's election: in the PP's manifesto, the chapter on immigration emphasised the preference of legal over illegal immigration and pledged to establish 'an integration model' based on 'our principles and constitutional values' (PP 2008: 20); the PSOE manifesto of the same year stated almost the same, taking a stance against illegal immigration and calling for greater integration 'starting from the recognition of our constitutional values and our rights and obligations' (PSOE 2008: 13-4).

Over the period that is the focus of this study, from 2008, immigration declined in salience in public opinion (see Figure 4). Indeed, in Eurobarometer surveys in the first half of the 2000s immigration had been consistently ranked among the three greatest concerns for the Spanish population, but during the years of the economic crisis it became consistently less salient. Arrivals of migrants to the Canary Islands slowed and immigration occupied less of the headlines. Meanwhile, in politics the stable alternation of power between the PSOE and the PP continued: the governing Socialists gave way to the PP in the general election of 2011. However, this was a snap election called in order to give way to a new government able, in the words of the outgoing President Zapatero, to 'address the economy's uncertainties' (El Pais, 29th July 2011). The government had already been pushed to pass deep cuts to public budgets in May 2010 and Zapatero's popularity had sunk (Barreiro and Cuenca 2012). A year later, in May 2011, a series of mass protests by the Movimiento 15-M

struck Spain's cities as thousands of protesters known as the *indignados* took to the streets, but no major new parties had made an impact on the political system by 2011, when voters punished the incumbent PSOE in local elections across the country by casting blank votes or supporting the PP.

By the 2011 elections by far and away the most concerning issues to the Spanish public were unemployment and the economic situation. On this count, the *indignados* and similar movements such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform for those Affected by Mortgages) played an important part in increasing the saliency of economic concerns as part of a broad critique of the country's political institutions and economic model, demanding 'real democracy' rather than the existent party system dominated by socialists and conservatives (Barreiro and Cuenca 2012; Fominaya 2015). In this way, they could be seen as pushing for a 'second democratic transition', renewing the aspiration for a more democratic Spain from three decades earlier (Fominaya 2015: 467). Their impact has however been described as 'more substantial on the public agenda than on the electoral results' (Barreiro and Cuenca 2012: 289).

Thus, in summary, the crisis had a significant impact on public opinion over the period from 2008 to 2011, but immigration did not. The institutional and discursive context was characterised by stability of the two principal political parties, although expressions of popular unrest were directed at the country's political and economic elites. Demands for change concentrated on institutional renewal and greater democratic participation for all.


[Figure  4 near here]


*Framing immigration during the crisis*


In the Spanish parliament over the period from May 2008 to April 2011 a total of 72 speeches were made on immigration in which complete frames were constructed. Reflecting the dominance of the two main parties in the Spanish Congress, the greatest number of speeches was made by the PSOE (29 in total), in large part due to them being in the government and having to respond to interrogations, and the PP, which also made 21 speeches. The smaller parties made between only 5

and 7 each. A range of ways of presenting immigration were presented, with the most common being unity frames (32%) and control frames (31%). Humanitarian frames were also common (22%), but competition did not arise to any significant degree (7% of speeches) (see Figure 5).

[Figure 5 near here]

The economic crisis had a significant presence in parliamentary debates on immigration over the period studied. This took two principal forms; one was as a way for the PP to criticise the incumbent PSOE government and the other as a call for unity from other parties to prevent such a contentious topic damaging Spain's political balance.

Criticism of the government which explicitly linked immigration and the crisis was rare, but when it did arise it came in the form of competition and control frames voiced by the PP. The competition frame argued that persistently high levels of immigration combined with the effects of the economic crisis would create social tensions, marginalisation and crime:

> "the situation of unemployment that we are passing through … now affects thousands and thousands of families everyday who find no joy in the policies of the government and this only takes them closer to desperation and unemployment. Immigration is a positive phenomenon for a country with growth and opportunities for all, but can change to a serious problem when things are done badly … and the economic crisis that the government created is now making things worse"
>
> (Rafael Antonio Hernando Fraile, PP, 21/05/2008)

As seen in the quote, the PP clearly blamed the PSOE for the economic crisis whilst stating that immigration could make the situation even worse. At the same time, the PP also criticised the economic situation within a broader and much more common criticism of the PSOE as out of control and therefore unable to effectively govern the country. The use of these control frames saw the party

argue that under the PSOE migration rates were too high, that there was too much illegal immigration, too many mass regularisations and that deportations were ineffective:

> "[the Interior Minister] has converted his ministry into the Ministry of Propaganda and Secrets and when you don't like something you cover or hide it, whether deaths in *pateras*, foreigners who are not deported, the SIVE (radar system at sea) that does not work, illegal immigrants or the number of crimes committed in Spain"
> (Rafael Antonio Hernando Fraile, PP, 11/03/2009)

> "The situation of immigrants in our country is, unfortunately, much worse now than it was a few years ago … the government has been incapable of developing policies because even [they] do not believe in the reform that [they] have done; failure to link immigration to employment … failure to integrate, because integration policies cannot be based only on giving grants; failure to coordinate regional and local governments, which are loaded with tasks and obligations which they have no budget to carry out; and failure in combatting illegal immigration, shown by the falling number of deportations and returns and rising number of illegal immigrants in our country"
> (Rafael Antonio Hernando Fraile, PP, 23/03/2011)

The control frame thus served as a way of undermining the current government and criticising the level of immigration, but it only referred to immigration as a general process and never to specific groups of migrants. The cause was claimed to be the government's inadequacy and the solution proposed was a change of government.

The response from the government and other left wing parties was to refer to the crisis through a 'unity' frame. This was the most frequently used frame and was voiced by a range of different parties, predominantly from the left including the small network *Izquierda Unida* (IU) and the regional Basque Nationalists in the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), as well as the PSOE. The PP did not use the unity frame. When using the unity frame, the speaker could admit that there were

challenges related to immigration and a need for policy reform, but that this should not result in the issue becoming politicised or polemical. The unity frame instead claimed that immigration debates were often inflammatory and discriminatory and so had the potential to turn political parties, government ministries and social groups against each other. Reflecting the concerns of public opinion, the economic crisis was frequently mentioned, although it was so in hypothetical dystopian images of a divided, conflict-ridden Spain if consensus, unity and measures to protect immigrants were not found. The resolution was to establish and always maintain consensus in order to even discuss immigration in public:

> "on this type of issue, consensus is a paradigm. I cannot conceive an initiative that refers to the problems of immigration – multidisciplinary and complex – and that is not founded on wide consensus, on a definitive State-wide pact"
> (Emilio Olabarría Muñoz, *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), 09/12/2008)

> "it is the will of the government, and in a concrete manner of this ministry and minister, to work with the greatest possible consensus with all political actors to arrive at an agreement about immigration issues"
> (Celestino Corbacho Chaves, PSOE, 11/06/2008)

> "keep in mind that, despite the crisis, the amount of net migration to Spain continues to be positive, because there are immigrants who leave and others who arrive … we are not only talking, particularly in a context of economic crisis, about the importance of first reception policies but also about the integration policies for the second generation … [and] as there is less money, let's be more efficient and more collaborative through our institutions"
> (Joan Tardà i Coma, *Izquierda Unida* (IU), 20/04/2010)

The prevalence of the unity frame reflects the long-lasting consensus in Spain on the importance of maintaining unity in the state and in society by not politicising divisive issues. It also confirmed the

efforts of Spain's politicians on the left to emphasise principles of democracy and tolerance in a potentially conflictive public debate. This could also be seen as a tactic to delay any action on reforming immigration policies, as there was little demand from social movements and public opinion to concentrate on the issue (and little money in public purses to do so).

Finally, humanitarian frames were also common in Spanish debates, employed above all in reference to the situation of migrants who had gone to Spain by boat, arriving at the Canary Islands from the coasts of West Africa, particularly during 2008. In these references, the humanitarian frame was employed to signal that children were suffering as a result of international inequality and ineffective Spanish policies that were not protecting sufficiently at sea or on arrival:

"care for unaccompanied migrant children who arrive on the Canary Islands is a serious problem … in 15 days we will sign an agreement so that this very serious problem has a social and humanitarian response that is deserving of a country like Spain"
(Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, PSOE, 19/11/2008)

The humanitarian frame here was employed as a way of calling for action in order to save people who are suffering. In Spanish debate, the action required was claimed to be greater involvement of the EU in relocating people and preventing migration on dangerous routes.

In summary, the political debate on immigration in Spain during the economic crisis years of 2008 to 2011 was dominated principally by the division between the PSOE and the PP, reflecting their continued stability as the two key political parties at this time. The PP employed control and competition frames to criticise the incumbent PSOE government, but their response was to emphasise a need for unity. The unity frame was a consensual view held by all parties except for the PP, emphasising the need for a stable, inclusive society and avoiding nationalism, in alignment with the post-transition democratic consensus. This, in addition to the fact that the salience of immigration in public opinion surveys was low throughout the period studied, ensured that it was unlikely to be a fruitful topic to build political capital for the PP in opposition to the PSOE.

**A humanitarian lens: the politics of immigration in Italy's *Camera dei Deputati***

*Context*

The early politics of immigration in Italy developed during a time of political and social upheaval that would set the tone for the years to follow. During the 1980s and 1990s, social change and political corruption scandals heralded a shift in the balance of party competition, as traditional political formations of Christian Democrats and Communists crumbled (Diani 1996, Zincone 1998). Instability became the mainstay of Italian politics: between 1994 and 2011 there would be eleven different governments, nearly all of which collapsed due to intra-coalition and intra-partisan conflicts (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012: 1470). New political formations such as the populist *Lega Nord* (LN) and *Forza Italia!* (FI) came into power, vocally criticising immigrants and shifting the political response to immigration from under-evaluation to over-evaluation of its relevance (Zincone 1998: 44). On the right, coalitions led by Silvio Berlusoni and uniting LN, FI and the ex-fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) governed in 1994, from 2001 to 2006, and again from 2008 to 2011. On the left the main party, which went through various iterations, name changes and internal struggles before settling as the *Partito Democratico* (PD) in 2007, governed in coalitions from 1996 to 2001 and 2006 to 2008. Over this time only one government completed the full term of its mandate.

Political debates on immigration often emphasised a threat of insecurity and declining public order. These views acted as a glue among coalition partners on the right who held divergent views on other issues, with LN being an especially vocal critic of immigration as an invasion posing a threat to the economic, cultural and political unity of the North of Italy (Geddes 2008: 354). A generalised perception of *extracomunitari,* immigrants from beyond the European Community, was also associated with acts of criminality and threats to public order in the press (Sciortino and Colombo 2004). In 2007 concerns regarding Romanians and the Roma in particular reached feverish levels as two highly publicised murders by immigrants were followed by Italian gangs attacking informal 'nomad camps' on the outskirts of large cities (McMahon 2015). The concern about crime was clearly reflected in public opinion as it became the most salient issue recorded in Eurobarometer surveys at

the end of 2007 (see Figure 6). At the same time, factions on the left were divided, failing to form strong governments when in power and struggling to build a shared post-socialist platform in opposition (Picker 2011). The consequence was a lack of consensus on the left on how to address immigration and minority-related issues.

However, during the period examined here, three important changes took place which altered the context in which political debates on immigration were situated. First, as the economic crisis developed the parties on the right entered their own political crisis. Over the period studied, the governing coalition of the *Popolo della Libertá* (PdL, a conglomeration of FI and AN) and LN increasingly faced a decline in public support, fuelled in part by the economic difficulties and widely publicised scandals involving its leader Silvio Berlusconi. A general decline came in the LN vote share in national elections, from 8% in elections in 2008 to 4% in 2013. A further sign of decline was the disintegration of the right-wing coalition: in 2010 Gianfranco Fini, previously the leader of AN, coalition partner of Berlusconi and Speaker of the House of Deputies, left to form his own group, *Futuro e Libertá* (FLI). By May 2011, the centre-right had lost much of its support in local elections and its decline came to a head in November when the government lost a confidence vote and was replaced by a cabinet of technocrats, led by ex-EU Commissioner and academic Mario Monti. Finally, whereas the PdL agreed to support the technocrat government, LN did not, causing the coalition between these parties to split for the first time since the turn of the century. The period from 2008 to 2011 thus saw the collapse of the coalition of parties which had so effectively dominated the immigration debate since the 1990s.

Second, during this period immigration was not particularly high on the list of issues concerning Italian public opinion. From 2008 to 2011 the economic crisis had far greater salience, with the issues of greatest concern in Eurobarometer surveys recorded as inflation and, above all, the economic situation and unemployment (see Figure 6). Crime, which had previously been associated with immigration, also dropped in significance. Subsequent survey data prior to the 2013 elections found that only 0.1% of respondents considered immigration to be an important issue (Biorcio 2013: 40-1). It seemed that the previously fruitful association of immigration with crime would not give a great deal of political capital.

Third, during the period from 2008 to 2011 there was a significant increase in the arrival (and visibility in the media) of boats of migrants fleeing from North Africa to Italy, and in particular the small Italian island of Lampedusa. By 2006 nearly all of the arrivals to Italy's coastline were to Sicily and Lampedusa, but in 2010 the sea route was blocked by increased cooperation with North African governments, in particular that of Libya (Paoletti 2011). In 2008, the Italian government had signed a controversial Partnership Treaty which included shared border patrols and a readmission agreement in a five-billion-euro settlement of colonial memory to Libya. With the social and political unrest that came to North Africa during the Arab Spring, followed by violent conflict, these controls broke down (McMahon 2012). Between January and April 2011 there were 390 crossings bringing 25,867 migrants to Italy (Ministero dell'Interno 29th March 2011). These events were reflected in an increase in the public's concerns about immigration in 2011 (see Figure 6). And yet, as will be shown in the following section, a combination of decreasing influence of the parties on the right and increasing visibility of suffering in North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea meant that this immigration would be associated primarily with humanitarian concerns.

[Figure  6 near here]

*Framing immigration*

In the Italian parliament over the period from May 2008 to April 2011 a total of 96 speeches were made on immigration in which complete frames were constructed. Reflecting the collapse of the right wing parties outline above, the single party with most speeches was the PD, followed by the centrist *Unione Democratico del Centro* (UCD) and then the right wing PDL (in government at the time). The LN, which had dominated the tone of the immigration debate during the previous decade made only 7 speeches. In contrast to preceding years, over the period of the crisis the most common way of debating immigration was through a humanitarian frame (68% of speeches). The competition frame, in contrast, shaped only 8%

of the speeches and other frames viewing immigration as a threat (Burden and Control frames) were even less frequent (see Figure 7).

[Figure 7 near here]

In Italy the economic crisis was not explicitly mentioned in reference to immigration during the period studied, although a few cases of the competition frame arose in disparate speeches on employment and education. These claimed that in specific cases the treatment of immigrants was unequal to that of Italians, favouring the immigrants:

> "the large presence of foreign students in classes in compulsory schooling brings about objective difficulties in terms of teaching and students' learning … [but] the presence of foreign children as well as nomads and children of parents with refugee status implies additional economic and teaching resources"
> (Roberto Cota, LN, 16/09/2008)

The cases of the competition frame predominantly reflected on single, particular cases in local contexts rather than making a broader case linking immigration and the economic crisis across the country. As a result, they were not repeated nor shared across party lines.

In contrast, the most prominent issue in the debates was that of migration to Italy across the Mediterranean. In the parliament the burden placed on the island of Lampedusa and the presence of illegal trafficking were mentioned, but above all the emphasis lay on the plight of the migrants themselves and the harm caused by joint maritime patrols by Italian and Libyan forces. A humanitarian frame was employed by representatives from across the

party spectrum. For example, in 2009 a series of speeches concentrated on 'pushbacks' of migrant boats at sea, which contravened international law and the Italian constitution:

> "on 1st July 2009, 82 refugees and migrants, mostly of Eritrean nationality, have been consigned from the Italian military ship 'Orione' to Libyan military ships in high seas … according to the claims from these people, at least 8 suffered physical violence by the Italian military … [the government should think again about] the policy of pushbacks that has principally hit those in need of international protection"
> (Savino Pezzotta, UDC, 21/07/2009)

> "in all cases of pushbacks that have taken place since May 2009 to today, there has been no process of identification of the migrants nor a review of their health nor verification of the requirements for being granted international protection … every person under the control of the Italian authorities, including those intercepted in sea, should have guaranteed equal and complete asylum procedures"
> (Antonello Soro, PD, 27/10/2009)

Later, in 2010 and 2011, concern was also shown for the impact of the unrest in North Africa:

> "faced with a humanitarian tragedy of dimensions which have been called 'Biblical', many European partners, above all in the north of Europe, are holding back the opportunity to adopt united, strong and immediate European initiatives … the establishment of burden sharing among Member States in reference to both refugees and irregular migrants seems indispensable"
> (Marco Giovanni Reguzzoni, LN, 07/03/2011)

In this last quote, although the term 'burden' is mentioned the problem raised is the humanitarian tragedy facing migrants at sea. Burden-sharing is proposed as a solution to prevent that human suffering. The responsibility for the tragedy happening is placed firmly with Europe in general for lacking a strong migration policy at sea. The proposed response is a concerted effort to prevent migration, showing how a humanitarian need can be presented to justify restrictive and security-based measures. This mirrors Fassin's observation that the deployment of humanitarian language in public debates on migration has become the most likely to generate support among public audiences to justify practices aimed at the government of human beings (2012: 2-3). The quotes from representatives of parties on the right (*Lega Nord*), left (*Partito Democratico*) and centre (*Unione Democratico di Centro*) of Italy's political spectrum illustrate the prominence of this humanitarian reason across party lines, despite its association with varying political responses to migrant suffering.[2] Inter-party contention focused on the specifics of responses to the situation, but was broadly consensual on the frame employed. Consequently, although public salience of immigration did increase in response to the boat arrivals of 2011, the way that the topic was framed in politics was through this consensual humanitarian lens.

Similarly, the plight of unaccompanied and undocumented children migrating to Italy found consensus across the parties through a humanitarian frame. Concern was shown for children disappearing from care homes, due in particular to the dangers posed by organised criminals;

"the Interior Ministry has recently affirmed that there are many concrete cases showing a close link between the disappearance of immigrant children from reception

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[2] The comments from the LN representative are particularly surprising; in 2009 the party had put a simple videogame on its Facebook page which asked players to shoot immigrant boats out of the water (La Repubblica 21st August 2009).

centres and organ trafficking … [this is] one of the most inhumane and most unworthy forms of exploitation in Italian culture and tradition"

(Paola Binetti, PD, 04/02/2009)

"a large part of the children left in reception centres face an uncertain future, in many cases moving away without trace and exposing themselves to the dangers of exploitation by organised crime and/or of serious risks for their safety … the government should take control to ensure that right to asylum of unaccompanied foreign children is effective"

(Alessandra Mussolini, PDL, 06/05/2009)

Again, these references highlight how the humanitarian frame was employed in speeches from left and right wing parties (the PD and PDL, respectively), with the result of calling for greater support for migrant children who had rights to protection and needed care due to their vulnerability. Reflecting the low level of salience of the topic at the time, immigration was not employed as a dividing issue across party lines.

So in summary, the Italian parliamentary debate on immigration from 2008 to 2011 had little to do with the economic crisis. Migration and crime, which had previously been associated with each other in political debate, had low salience in public opinion as dramatic events in the Mediterranean, specifically the death and hardship of people at sea, came to dominate the agenda. Meanwhile, there was a shifting balance of political power with the PD becoming the most vocal on immigration and the coalition that governed up to 2011 having a declining presence. In particular, LN contributed very little in the parliament, although the analysis above suggests that they adopted more of a focus on local issues and controversial

online communication. Consequently, there was a considerable focus on humanitarian language to refer to migration flows across the Mediterranean by all political parties.

**Conclusions**

This paper has explored the impact of the economic crisis on the politics of immigration in Italy and Spain. These are two countries with similar experiences of migration but quite different politics of immigration over the past two decades, with public order and security concerns coming to the fore in Italy during the 1990s and 2000s and considerably less interest in the issue in Spain. Moreover, from 2008 onwards both of these countries have faced economic crises with negative effects on the growth of the economy, unemployment and pressure on government to limit public spending. They have therefore provided a useful opportunity to examine the interaction between the economic crisis and political debates on immigration.

The analysis has shown how there was not a predominance of anti-immigrant views in political debate in either country over the period studied. Whereas in Spain this represented a continuation of previous trends, in Italy it constituted quite a change. These findings should be viewed against the backdrop of broader dynamics. In Spain there was little change in the politics of immigration because the crisis took place in a context of low salience in public opinion and a relatively stable political system where elites shared enduring consensual views on immigration and its potentially negative connotations with controversial nationalist overtones. The stability of the main two parties also left little opportunity for new political actors to present alternative frames. Indeed, in the parliament efforts were made to maintain a consensual and unified approach to immigration. Outside of the parliament, popular frustration regarding the crisis and increasing protests about unemployment and the economy

were directed at the country's political institutions rather than at immigrants. In Italy, there was also a low level of salience of immigration in public opinion but at the same time there was a collapse of right wing political parties amidst scandals and increasing distrust from the public. This context heralded a significant change in the debate on immigration, from a predominant public order and security lens maintained by consensus by right-wing coalitions during the previous two decades, to a humanitarian focus. This mirrored, in particular, the prevalence of images of protest and then violence in North Africa as well as hardship on the journey across the Mediterranean in news stories and parliamentary debates. There was no mention of an economic crisis at all and even when the competition frame was employed it was unable to provide the basis for consensus with their previous coalition partners.

The findings suggest that even at a time of economic crisis, low public salience of migration may mean that there is little political capital to be gained from mobilising around anti-immigrant positions. However, this only tells part of the story; to see how and why certain arguments arise it is not only necessary to highlight whether either public opinion or political dynamics influence how immigration is represented, but also how the interaction between them is mediated and shaped by context. Whereas the stability of the closed institutional and discursive context in Spain maintained a strong, consensual counter-narrative to controversial debates on migration, in Italy it was political *in*stability and the decline of the actors who had previously maintained a negative anti-immigrant discourse which enabled a new consensus around humanitarian concerns to come to the fore. Thus, in order for an economic crisis to influence the politics of immigration it would also need to have an impact on the strength and stability of existing political systems.

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| Frame title | Description |
|---|---|
| **Humanitarian** | Immigrants are in disadvantaged situations, not caused by their own actions, and need help to improve their welfare and have their rights guaranteed |
| **Integration** | Immigration poses challenges but there should be changes in the host country to ensure immigrants can integrate |
| **Competition** | Immigrants compete for already scarce jobs and funds, increasing poverty, unemployment and insecurity |
| **Public order** | Immigrants have dangerous, violent cultures and pose a threat to public order and safety |
| **Burden** | Immigrants absorb public funds because they need support but this is a burden for states and local authorities so cannot go on indefinitely |
| **Control** | Immigration is out of control and policies are ineffective, requiring stronger borders and reduced migratory flows |
| **Unity** | Immigration is a positive phenomenon but also complex, contentious and potentially divisive, so should not be politicised but addressed with maximum consensus and unity from the political class |

Table 1. Frames found in parliamentary debates in Italy and Spain, 2008-2011

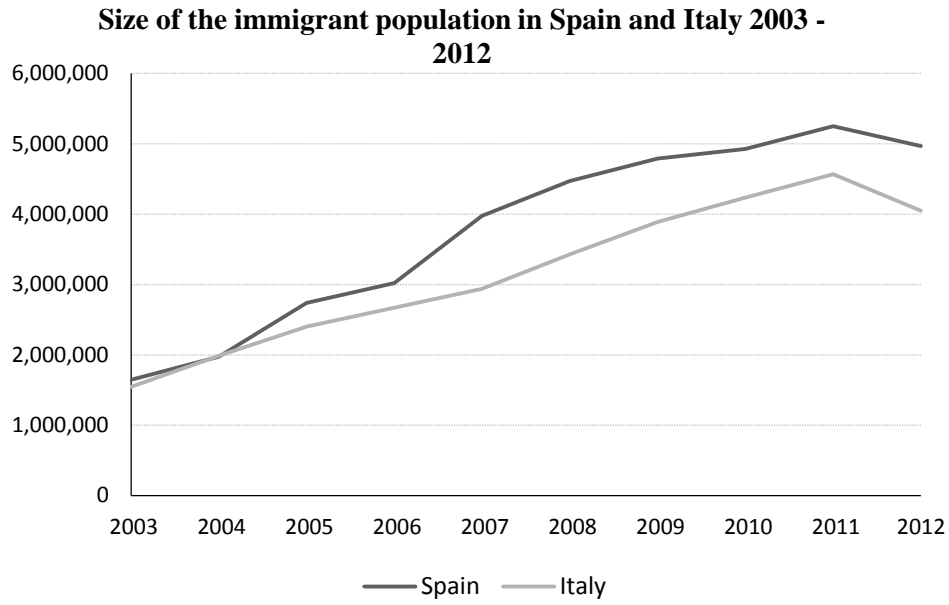**Size of the immigrant population in Spain and Italy 2003 - 2012**

Figure 1. Size of immigration population in Spain and Italy, 2003-2012 (data from Italy's Institute for Statistics ISTAT and Spain's National Statistics Institute, INE)

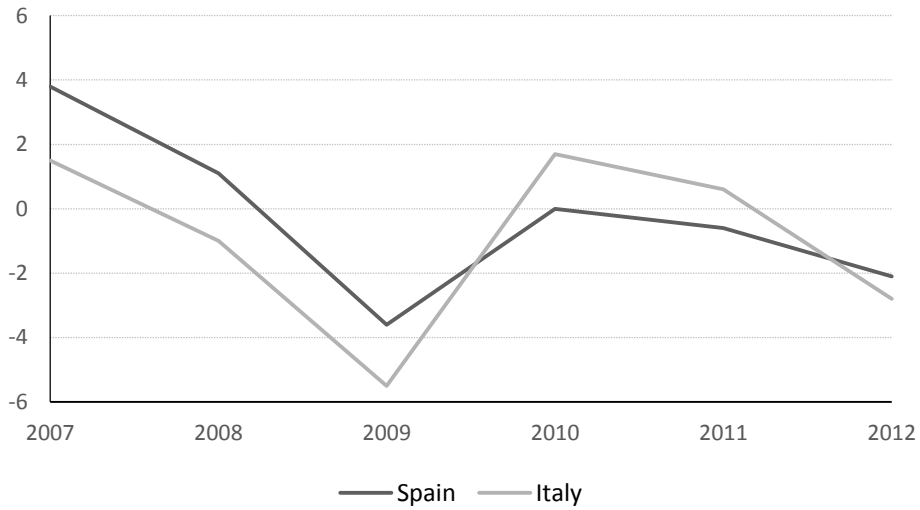**Change in Gross Domestic Product in Spain and Italy 2003 - 2012 (%)**



Figure 2. GDP in Spain and Italy 2003-2012 (data from ISTAT and INE)
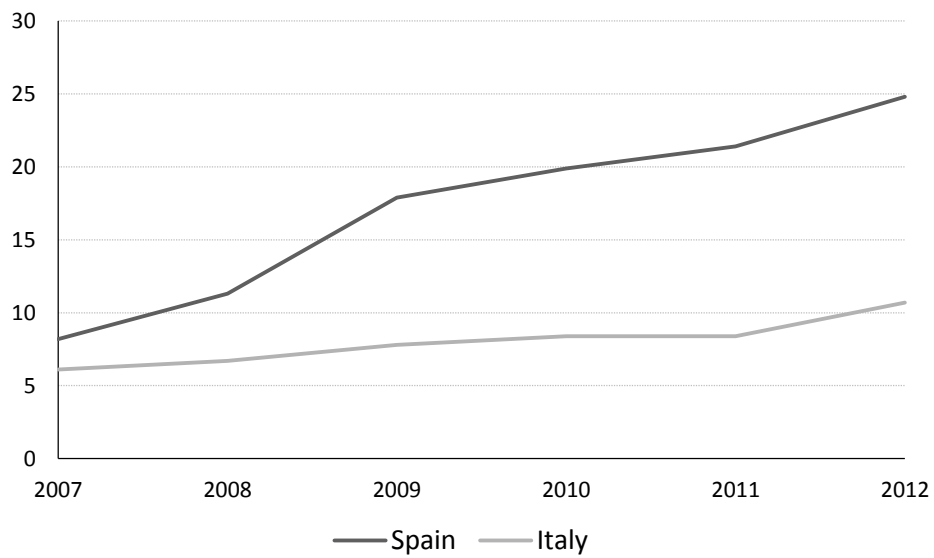
**Unemployment rate in Spain and Italy 2007 - 2012 (%)**



Figure 3. Unemployment in Spain and Italy 2007-2012 (data from ISTAT and INE)

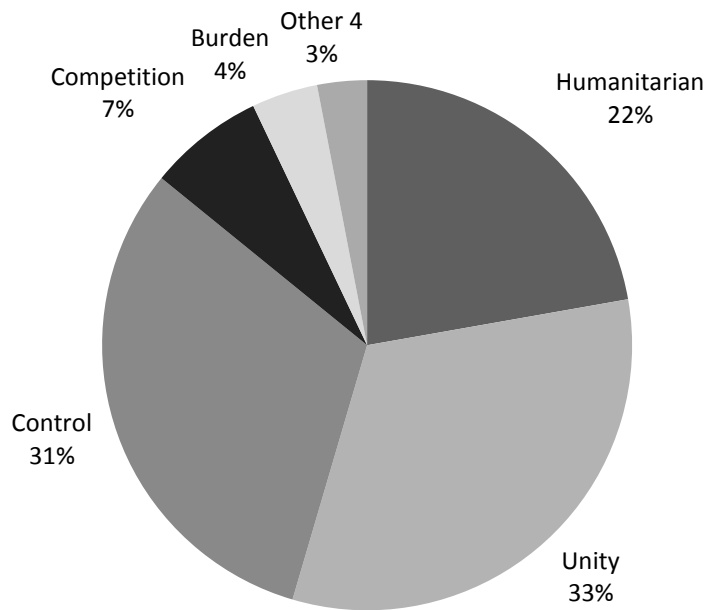**Frame occurrences (% of all speeches in Spanish parliament)**

Other 4
3%

Burden
4%

Competition
7%

Humanitarian
22%

Control
31%

Unity
33%

Figure 5. Immigration frames in Spanish parliamentary debate, 2008-2011

**Frame occurrences (% of all speeches in Italian parliament)**

Control Unity Other
3%   2%   2%

Burden
7%

Public Order
6%

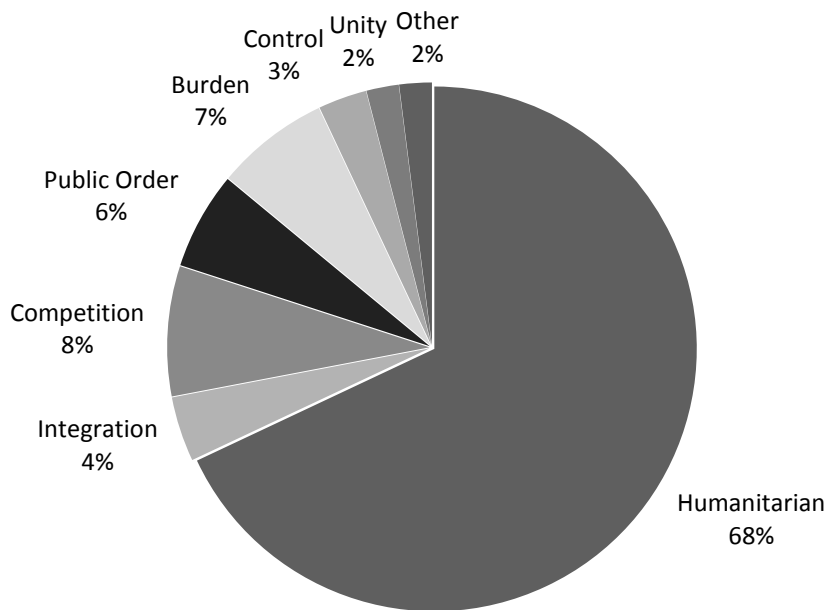Competition
8%

Integration
4%

Humanitarian
68%

Figure 7. Immigration frames in Italian parliament debates, 2008-2011