



Parties and Blame Avoidance Strategies in the Shadow of the Troika

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Dublin, 3.12.2013



Party Strategies in Good Times

Party goals (K. Strom)

- Office
- Votes
- Policy

Straightforward relationship between 3 objectives

- Parties want to have votes to be in office
- Parties are in office to make policies
- Anthony Downs: parties make policies to win votes

Assumptions

- Different policy options to choose from
- Governments enjoy autonomy in agenda-setting
- Voters vote for most popular option



Party strategies under adjustment

- **Range of policies to choose from severely limited**
 - only one policy option and it is dictated from outside: limited control over agenda-setting
 - Austerity as “only game in town”
- **Adjustment massively raises the electoral cost of governing**
 - Incumbents in power at beginning of crisis have lost: Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain, Ireland but also France, UK
 - Difficult to be in office and keep votes: whatever governments do is going to be unpopular (cuts, retrenchment, tax increases)
- **Adjustment changes payoffs of party goals**
 - Office becomes less attractive: you lose votes, you cannot have the policies you want
 - ...But somebody has to do the dirty work.



What can parties do?

- **Kent Weaver: Politics of Blame Avoidance**

- Voters more sensitive to potential losses than to potential gains
- Politicians more concerned with avoiding blame than with claiming credit

- **Incumbents**

- Find scapegoats (blame others)
- Pass the buck (force somebody else to take blame)
- Circle the wagons (co-opt opposition to form political cartel)
- If all else fails: Try to claim credit for only option available

- **Opposition:**

- Jump on the bandwagon (defect and blame)
- Pass the buck (cooperate: since somebody has to do the work, it better be not us (e.g minority government)

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Jumping on the Bandwagon





Avoiding Blame

- **Incumbent: Finding a scapegoat**
 - It's Brussels, it's the IMF, it's the ECB, it's financial markets
 - Greek PASOK 2009-2011
 - Problem: national governments are always those that take the hit

- **Opposition: Jump on the bandwagon**
 - Capitalise on popular opposition to austerity
 - Ex: New Democracy 2009-2011; Protest parties
 - Can win votes, but if party has aspiration to come to power, same policies have to be implemented (credibility)

- **Strategies determined by party-voter linkages**
 - Difficult to support austerity if party support relies heavily on public spending (jobs for the boys)

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Circling the Wagons





Avoiding Blame

Circle the wagons

- Co-opt opposition to contain blame, create a political cartel and suspend party competition.
- technocratic governments/grand coalitions in Italy and Greece, “Bloco central” in Portugal

Pass the buck

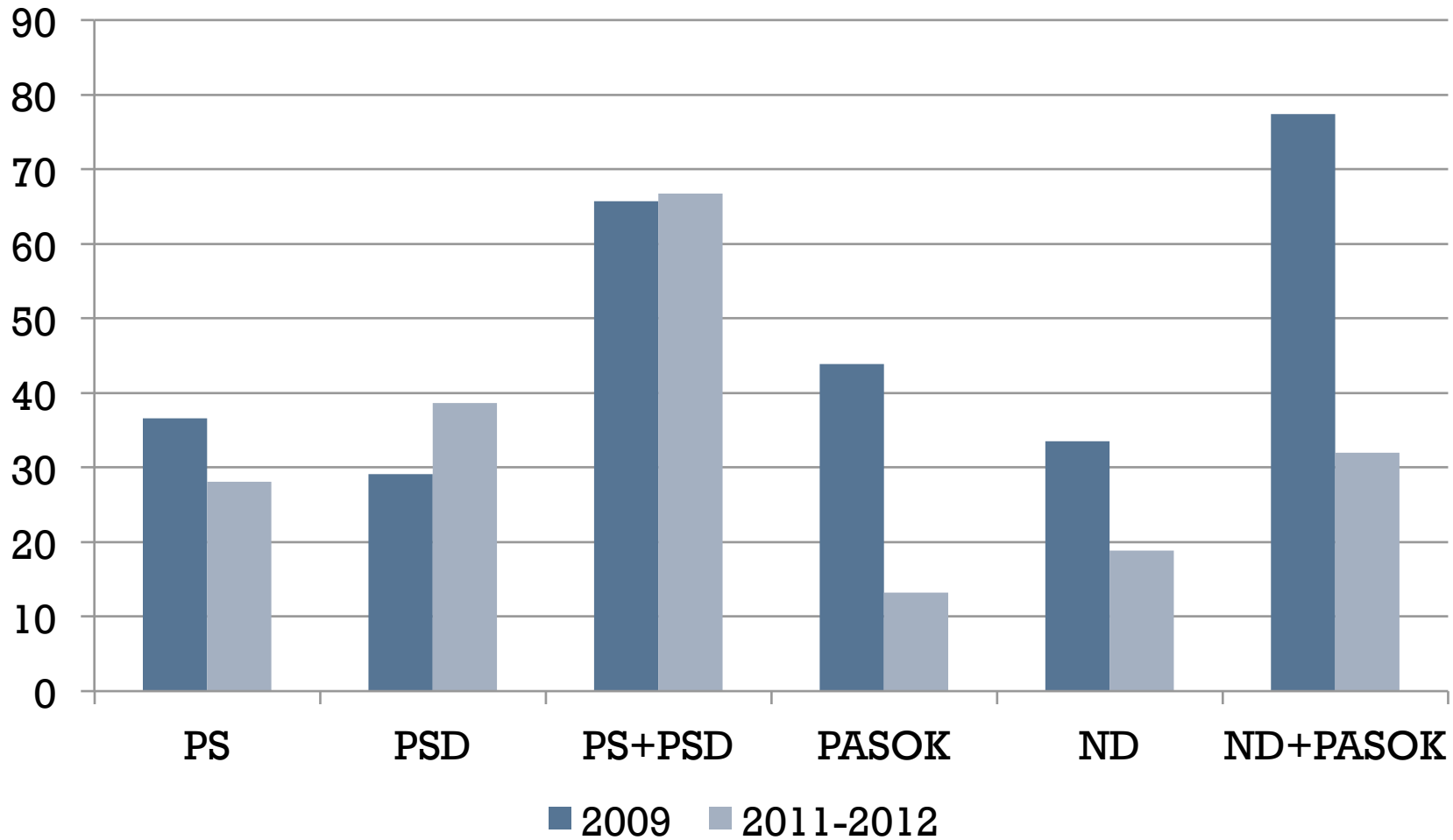
- Portugal 2009-2011: opposition supports socialist minority government (forgo office to enable change done by somebody else)

Risk:

- leave room for outside challenger who capitalises on popular discontent (Syriza, Golden Dawn, Beppe Grillo)
- Presence of challenger or of “exit” options for voters matters



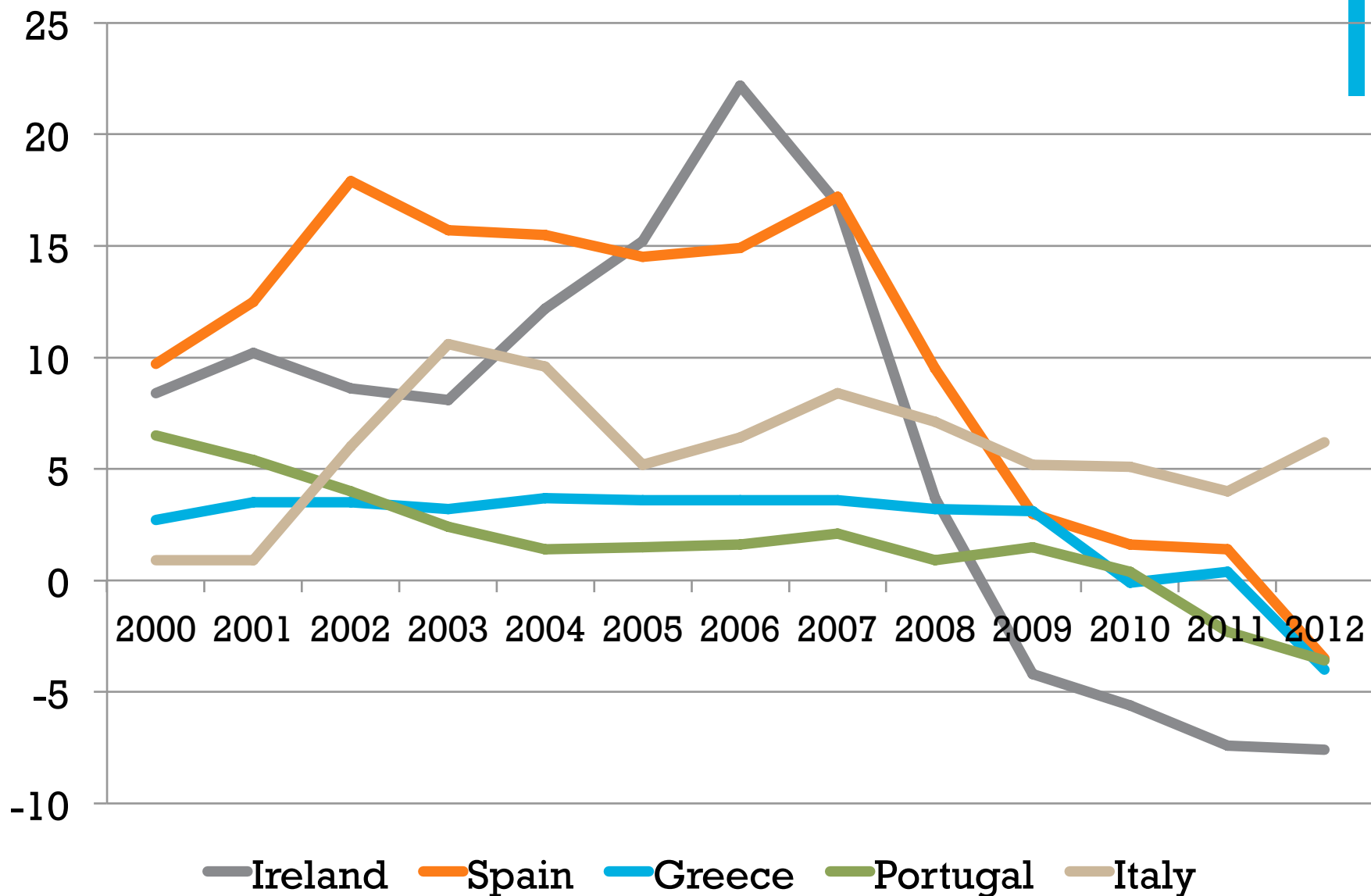
Electoral Change 2009-2012



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Net Migration Rates (1/1000)





When your back's against the wall

■ Try to claim credit

- Make the austerity agenda one's own
- Portuguese PSD government: adjustment sooner and “further” than Troika requirements; Spanish PP
- Emergence of new liberal elites without rooting in national tradition (Passos Coelho)

■ Strategy

- Voters are not always against retrenchment: some parties gain from it (Giger & Nelson)
- Liberalisation and austerity sold as way to solve corruption and clientelism (voters support that, as long as it doesn't hit them)



Conclusion

- Adjustment politics changes the way we think about democratic politics
 - “There is no alternative” as dominant frame.
- Peter Mair: Governments are “Ruling the Void”
 - No longer possible for governments to be “responsive” (to voters) and “responsible” (vis-à-vis creditors and financial markets) at the same time.
- Albert Hirschman: Exit, Voice, Loyalty
 - Troika assumes that citizens will comply (loyalty)
 - But if people do not have a voice, they’ll opt for exit (abstention, disaffection, emigration, capital flight).