



Political economics and citizens' engagement in Croatia: a differential analysis

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Article**

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Abstract

Based on the Euro Social Survey, we show that Croatians' values do not predict perfectly their political partisanship. This feature may be a consequence of the lack of interest of Croatian people on politics, which explains the significantly lower electoral turnout in Croatia. Besides, surprisingly, Croatians' judgment of government's performance is more unfavourable when their party holds power. Political polarization is increasing, which jeopardizes the median voter assumption. Besides, trust of Croatians in parliament and politicians is extremely low. Most probably, it is due to high corruption and to the post-communism effect (the belief that the state worked against the individual rather than for it). Croatia missed the opportunity to implement ambitious reforms when opting to join the EU and NATO. However, the Croatian budgetary process performs very well, which is a very positive feature that should increase the engagement of Croatians in their government, economy and political system.

Keywords: SDG16, Croatia, political economics, citizens' engagement, trust, partisanship

1 INTRODUCTION

After the fall of communism and state-planned economic systems, a new market system and democracy were introduced into Croatia, with controversial results. Some institutional issues emerged during the transition processes, as will be shown in this research paper. The Western Balkan states have been politically stabilized as a result of their efforts to access international organisations such as the EU and NATO. Croatia introduced several legal amendments during the process of joining the EU (July 1st, 2013). These amendments contributed to the harmonisation of the Croatian legal framework with European anti-corruption legislation (Budak, 2007). According to the Commission of the European Communities (2004), Croatian reforms aimed at enabling accession to the EU had to be in accord with the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law on which the Union is founded. Thus, the integration process speeded up reforms (Ateljevic and Budak, 2010), but Croatia still differs in some ways from other European countries. This empirical research will evaluate these unique features of Croatia.

Budak (2007) shows that in Croatia there exists civil and political awareness of the problem of corruption. However, it remains to be assessed to what extent perseverance in the implementation of and political will for combating corruption will yield results in the forthcoming period. The author also states that political corruption usually starts with non-transparent financing of political parties or their campaigns. Therefore, insights about corruption must consider its connection with the political arena.

Democracies assume accurate knowledge by citizens, but misinformation poses a serious problem for healthy democratic functioning. Identification with a political party – known as partisanship – can alter perceptual judgments and shapes

political judgments such as voting preferences or support for a specific politics (Van Bavel and Pereira, 2018). In the case of Croatia, political will is a prerequisite for building confidence in the ruling structures and public administration (Budak, 2007). We evaluate the extent to which Croatian governments arising from elections have succeeded in building citizens' trust in institutions. In other words, to what extent do Croats engage in politics and how much do they know about the national economy?

Research about Croats' engagement with politics is necessary because after the collapse of Yugoslavia, Croatia was able to establish its own currency and cut levels of inflation comparable to those in Western Europe. For some, this was a source of great national pride. For others, however, the new state meant unemployment and a fall in living standards. It meant that to survive they had to retain the habits learned during the communist period. Such habits, based on the belief that the state worked against the individual rather than for it, included trading on the black market and not declaring employment (Bellamy, 2003). Therefore, two research questions arise. On the one hand, does citizens' distrust of government stemming from communism still obtain 30 years after the disintegration of Yugoslavia? On the other hand, does the behavior described above, aimed at evading the restrictions of from the communist state, mean a higher level of corruption in Croatia?

Trust is considered a cornerstone for democracy, since it enhances the legitimacy, validity and sustainability of governments by connecting citizens with public institutions (Godefroidt, Langer and Meuleman, 2017). Although trust is considered a critical component of good governance (Wu, Ma and Yu, 2017), public trust in governments has decreased significantly in recent decades (Park et al., 2015). According to Bouckaert and van de Walle (2003), the most frequently expressed concern by politicians, journalists and the general public is the decrease in confidence in the government and the harmful effects that this generates. This paper will provide a thorough analysis of trust in Croatian political institutions.

We will evaluate empirically the features of Croatian civil society, how Croats participate in politics and how they engage in public economics: in sum, whether Croatian people are willing to hold their politicians accountable. Accordingly, we would like to answer three questions: is Croatia different from the rest of Europe in terms of political partisanship? How do Croats engage in politics and the national economy? Is Croatia, in terms of trust in institutions, budget transparency and corruption, comparable to other European countries?

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 discusses the literature on political economics (partisanship). Section 3 summarises literature on citizens' engagement in politics and economic affairs. Section 4 reviews the literature on trust, budget transparency and corruption. Section 5 addresses the empirical methodology. Section 6 comments on the results concerning political partisanship, citizens' engagement and trust/corruption. Finally, section 7 summarises the conclusions and proposes further research.

2 LITERATURE ON POLITICAL ECONOMICS: PARTISANSHIP

There is extensive literature on the alignment of citizens' values with political partisanship. It is broadly held that left-wing parties value equality and economic security, while right-wing counterparts place a premium on moral traditionalism and social order (Ciuk et al., 2017). These authors list core political values that influence political attitudes. For example, equality and economic security shape attitudes toward social welfare programs. Racial questions shape citizens' attitudes towards immigration. Conservative citizens in many countries complain that government policies have favoured immigrants while their own communities have been neglected (Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019).

Moral traditionalism shapes attitudes toward several cultural issues. Wealthier citizens are consistently and significantly more likely to oppose social welfare spending relative to other citizens, thus connecting higher income with conservative parties. Older respondents tend toward left-wing parties. Finally, more religious respondents are more ideologically conservative than the more secular (Ciuk, Lupton and Thornton, 2017).

Hemingway (2022) finds that legislators from business backgrounds are more likely to support income inequality and small government, as well as less likely to consult with labour groups, than those from working-class and other backgrounds. Similarly, core values concerning equality and government intervention versus individualism and free enterprise are fundamental orientations that can themselves shape partisanship (Evans and Neundorf, 2020).

One of conservative citizens' concerns is the size of the government, and particularly the amount of government spending. Nearly 90% of respondents of a sample of conservative US citizens rated "deficits and spending" a very important issue to address. Most of them thought economic should take precedence over social issues. Right wing partisanship considers that government spending is creating benefits for people who do not contribute, who take handouts at the expense of hard-working citizens. Moreover, there is criticism of unauthorised immigration, it being alleged that immigrants receive undue government support (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, 2011).

The literature shows that, generally speaking, leftist parties are in favour of a broader public sector, focused on the distribution of wealth, which increases public spending and debt levels, while rightist parties tend to emphasise budgetary discipline to reduce spending (García-Sánchez, Mordán and Cuadrado-Ballesteros, 2014). Additionally, leftist supporters tend to oppose restrictive fiscal policies, due to their negative impact on income and employment. On the opposite side, right-wing parties attempt to control inflation and promote price stability (Bojar, 2015). Jost, Christopher and Napier (2009) show that in an empirical research, both social and economic forms of conservatism were positively associated with right-wing orientation in 60 countries investigated. Therefore, some patterns hold across countries when it comes to determining political partisanship. The research question is, therefore, if Croatia follows the same partisanship pattern as other European countries.

A current topical issue has to do with environment and, specifically, with climate change. In this respect, Fielding et al. (2012) empirically show that politicians from more left-leaning groups have beliefs that more closely endorse scientists' beliefs about the causes and impacts of climate change and give greater priority to climate change in their political work. In contrast, conservative politicians are more uncertain and sceptical about climate change and prioritise climate change less. According to Switzer (2017), politics influence environmental policy implementation, since the local role in environmental policy is tied to political incentives. This author suggests that cities with more liberal constituents should be incentivized to comply with environmental regulation at higher rates than those serving more conservative citizens.

Based on this literature review, we would like to gauge whether Croatians place themselves in the left-right political scale following the same values and beliefs as other Europeans. Accordingly, we test the following hypothesis:

H₁: Political partisanship in Croatia is driven by the same values and principles as in the rest of Europe.

3 CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT: PERCEPTION ABOUT ECONOMY AND POLITICS

In a scenario of aging western countries, public pensions have become a sensitive issue. In this regard, the overall level of misinformation is huge, and it rejects the common assumption in political economics that voters are able rationally to compare alternative policies according to their economic self-interest. Thus, informing the public about the costs is an important aspect of any politically successful reform (Boeri, Börsch-Supan and Tabellini, 2001). Achieving better-informed citizens requires the provision of more information or the same information but provided in a different, more transparent way.

Thus, citizens need to be informed in an objective way, so that information is not biased by the media. In this respect, Dubois and Blank (2018) explain that in a high-choice media environment, there are fears that individuals will select media that reinforce their existing beliefs and lead to segregation based on interest and/or partisanship. This can lead to partisan *echo chambers*. Today, individuals may access news and political information from social media, Internet searches, online, and offline versions of newspapers, television broadcasts, radio, etc. These authors provide evidence of polarization in some media, such as partisan news websites, blogs, and some social media. In Croatia, this polarization would be mirroring the polarization already taking place in political parties' programs. Finally, these *echo chambers* will exacerbate the gap between those who are informed about politics and those who are not, will increase political polarization, which will reinforce political divides, and will threaten democracies by limiting political information and discussions.

According to Diercks and Landreville (2016), the knowledge gap predicts that individuals of higher socioeconomic status will be better informed on political issues. Bisgaard (2015) shows that citizens' identification with a political party directs their thinking about reality in striking ways. In perhaps one of the clearest

examples, studies find that party identifiers tend to perceive economic conditions as being markedly more favourable when their party holds office. Belonging to a political party leads to a partisanship bias to some extent. This bias affects how citizens perceive economic conditions. However, this bias decreases when real economic conditions are clear. Recent experimental work further indicates that when the evidence is unambiguous, partisans appear not to reject it. In the same vein, Citrin and Stoker (2018) posit that citizens' judgments of governments' performance are more favourable when their party holds power and more unfavourable when their party does not. According to Hetherington and Rudolph (2015), this bias in performance evaluation has become more pronounced in recent years.

According to Bullock et al. (2015) citizens know little about politics, and they often recognise their own lack of knowledge. Partisanship seems to affect factual beliefs about politics. For example, Croatian supporters of the HDZ party will play down the economic failures of the HDZ government. Thus, political partisanship shapes citizens' perception about economy and politics.

If we now shift our focus to the supply of information, the media play a custodian role of holding the three sides of modern states – government, judiciary and parliament – accountable. The media check the balance of power and keep the public informed, consequently enabling citizens to make informed decisions on social, economic and political matters. Because of their decentralized nature, social media and the internet are considered user-centric and therefore “democratic” platforms, enabling a better and unbiased information society (Chitanana and Mutsvairo, 2019). The Arab Spring in 2011 as well as the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns fuelled interest in how social media might affect the way in which citizens receive political information (Boulianne, 2015).

Some research shows that mass media have been giving increasing attention to polarization, with coverage that is overwhelmingly negative (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Citizens learn about elite partisan polarization, and politics more generally, through media reports. Yet, party divisions may be communicated to the public in varying ways with important consequences for opinion and behaviour (Robison and Mullinix, 2016). Therefore, citizens are informed by media and the way they report on polarization itself feeds back polarization.

Boeri, Börsch-Supan and Tabellini (2001) indicate through a survey that a retrenchment of the welfare state would not carry a majority among the voters in any of the countries in their panel. The electorate would oppose any shrinkage of the welfare state if asked to participate in governmental decision-making. Misinformation matters when it is used to engage citizens to participate in political decision-making. Better informed voters are more likely to favour reforms. Politicians, union leaders, or opinion makers who do not disclose full information are making reforms less likely. Moreover, an important ingredient of successful reforms is their simplicity and transparency (ibid., 2001).

Political parties have adapted to voters' preferences: electoral competition has forced them to offer the policies preferred by the majority (Boeri, Börsch-Supan and Tabellini, 2001). This political strategy is called the *median voter theorem*, and it shapes the way voters can participate in their governments' decision-making. In Croatia, though, as has happened worldwide in recent years, political polarization makes it more complicated for governments to implement the *median voter* strategy.

Ančić, Baketa and Kovačić (2019), on an empirical analysis of political behaviour in Croatia, show that interest in politics is the most robust predictor of voter turnout. Therefore, if the interest in politics of Croatians is similar to the remaining Europeans, we should expect a similar electoral turnout. Lalić (2011) analysed the February-April 2011 protests in Croatia, demanding the calling of early elections. These demonstrations, mostly led by radical right-wing and left-wing activists, showed that polarization started more than a decade ago in Croatia. The ruling politicians were faced with a strong combined pressure from the "street" and the opposition, which strengthened the public's awareness; accordingly, the referendum concerning EU accession held before the elections was able to express a prevailing anti-government sentiment. In spite of this, the government still agreed to hold the elections before the referendum. In conclusion, the 2011 protests certainly intervened in the political arena. Criticism of institutions was expressed at the protests, showing that the public had become more interested in political issues, increasing participation in politics. In addition, the protests had the effect of increasing the awareness of many citizens about the wear and tear of the old and the need for a new political paradigm. An assessment of the electoral turnout in Croatia will confirm whether Croatians' engagement on politics is currently as high as the 2011 unrest showed. As Lalić (2011) concludes, this topic deserves special attention.

Croatia has advanced both in the area of free elections and association, yet it still needs to develop incentive policies for elections and civic activism to keep the government accountable and transparent (Florentina and Dritero, 2020). In Croatia, the election turnout is low, and there is no trust in elected political representatives' ability or willingness to act in the public interest. Dissatisfaction with governance remains the most mentioned cause for this low electoral turnout (Florentina and Dritero, 2020).

In agreement with this literature review, and regarding citizens' engagement, we posit these hypotheses:

- H₂: Interest in politics/current affairs is similar in Croatia to that in the rest of Europe.
- H₃: The partisanship alignment bias predicted by the literature holds in Croatia.
- H₄: The trend of increasing political polarization observed across the world holds in Croatia.
- H₅: Political participation through electoral turnout in Croatia is similar to that in the rest of Europe.

4 TRUST, BUDGET TRANSPARENCY AND CORRUPTION

Political trust refers to citizens' feelings about their government. The absence of trust can take two forms, mistrust and distrust. Mistrust reflects doubt or scepticism about the trustworthiness of the other, while distrust reflects a settled belief that the other is untrustworthy. The literature gives examples of research into trust in different institutions such as the police, civil service, judiciary, and parliament (Citrin and Stoker, 2018).

The literature on the consequences of trust for participation has long recognised competing expectations. On the one hand, trust could be a sentiment of civil affirmation that inspires political engagement and participation in politics. On the other hand, the trusting may be satisfied with government and view it as needing little monitoring, so trust could weaken the impulse to participate in politics (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). In the case of Croatia, we will research the levels of trust and political participation.

Drawing on the Euro Social Survey (ESS), Torcal (2017) finds out that the 2008 crisis functioned as a "stress test" for representative democracies in western Europe in general, but much more so for countries suffering the most severe effects, resulting in a deterioration of political trust, particularly in southern Europe. The frustration of citizens with the perceived lack of responsiveness of the political system resulted in increasing levels of political distrust. Political parties and politicians, the two main actors of representation, are consistently distrusted the most in all the countries. Following these two institutions are parliaments, which are the institutions most essential to political representation. Finally, the most trusted are consistently the legal system and the police (Torcal, 2017). Abramowitz and McCoy (2019) points out that rising mistrust and, at times, hatred of the opposing party and its leaders, may be one of the most dangerous consequences of growing partisan polarization.

Civil society is still relatively weak in Croatia, while the parallel structures, networks of organised crime, corruption and para-state institutions are still relatively strong (Ateljevic and Budak, 2010). Lack of security and trust in their own state forced many individuals from the Western Balkans to find their own ways to move on by creating mechanisms detached from the formal state structure; some have had more opportunities than others. Success depends on a number of factors; individual background (e.g. belonging to a particular ethnic/religious group, political party, fake patriotism during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, etc.). It is also worth noting that democratization "hit" the Western Balkans too quickly, and for the first time in its history. Indeed, this kind of complex social environment in the region provides fertile ground for almost all the main types of corruption.

Croatia is a worrying phenomenon, but the logic of political survival of Croatian politicians is comparable to that of other countries. The difference is only in institutions that either prevent or encourage corrupt behaviour. Countries with clear and enforceable rules manage to prevent power-hungry individuals from usurping social and market outcomes, while countries that lack such rules or lack

enforceability of existing rules are condemned to increased corruption. A change of such a social order must come from an institutional push, encouraging both greater transparency and accountability to the voters, and credibly punishing politicians when they break the rules (Vuković, 2017).

In the last 25 years Croatia has set up a legal framework and other instruments that provided the citizens with the necessary rights for participation in governance, thus enabling their participation in the budgetary process as well. In addition, there were several projects financed by international donors, aimed at fostering fiscal transparency and enabling citizens to involve themselves in budgetary decision-making. Citizen participation in the budget process is crucial for ensuring democratic, transparent and politically accountable decision-making in public finance (Švaljek, Rašić Bakarić and Sumpor, 2019). These authors find that public policy needs to focus on raising awareness among citizens of the ways they could influence the budget process.

One of the most frequently used corruption perceptions indicator is the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International. Although corruption perceptions indicators are subjective measures based on surveyed survey of the prevalence of corruption as it is perceived, for the time being they are the only methodologically consistent databases for an analysis of corruption. For Croatia and other countries included in international integration processes, international ranking according to corruption perceptions indicators reflects an external image towards the international community (Budak, 2007).

H_6 : Croatia is similar to the rest of Europe in terms of corruption, budget transparency and trust in parliament and politicians.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 SAMPLE AND VARIABLES

The sample takes all the rounds of the ESS, from 2002 (ESS round 1) to 2020 (ESS round 9). There are limited data on Croatia, as this country appears only in the years 2008 (ESS round 4), 2010 (ESS round 5) and 2020 (ESS round 9). The universe of ESS is all persons aged over 14 resident within private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language or legal status, in the participating countries. Table 1 summarises the set of variables included in the main political partisanship regression described below. Table 2 reports correlations among these variables. For the sake of simplicity, tables 1 and 2 show only the variables included on the main regression on political economics (partisanship). We will use additional variables for the remaining sections of this article, which will be briefly described and referred to their corresponding public datasets.

TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics

	Variable	Description	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
<i>Dependent</i>	<i>lrscale</i>	Placement on left right scale. 0 Left – 10 Right	5.13	2.19	0	10
	<i>gincdif</i>	Government should reduce differences in income levels. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.17	1.02	1	5
<i>Income</i>	<i>hinctnta</i>	Household's total net income, all sources. 1 1 st decile – 10 10 th decile	5.52	2.73	1	10
	<i>lknemny</i>	How likely not enough money for household necessities next 12 months. 1 Not at all likely – 4 Very likely	2.00	0.89	1	4
	<i>imprich</i>	Important to be rich, have money and expensive things. 1 Very much like me – 6 Not like me at all	4.13	1.33	1	6
	<i>sbsstrec</i>	Social benefits/services place too great strain on economy. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	3.02	1.05	1	5
	<i>sbprvpv</i>	Social benefits/services prevent widespread poverty. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.55	0.98	1	5
<i>Redistribution</i>	<i>sbeqsoc</i>	Social benefits/services lead to a more equal society. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.70	0.99	1	5
	<i>sbsbstx</i>	Social benefits/services cost businesses too much in taxes/charges. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.97	1.05	1	5
	<i>sblazy</i>	Social benefits/services cost make people lazy. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.62	1.12	1	5
	<i>imsclbn</i>	When should immigrants obtain rights to social benefits/services? 1 Immediately on arrival – 5 They should never get the same rights	3.17	1.01	1	5
<i>Immigration</i>	<i>imbgeco</i>	Immigration bad or good for country's economy. 0 Bad for the economy – 10 Good for the economy	5.10	2.40	0	10

Variable	Description	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
<i>uentrjb</i>	Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	3.01	1.09	1	5
<i>lbenet</i>	Many with very low incomes get less benefit than legally entitled to. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.68	0.96	1	5
<i>benmet</i>	Many manage to obtain benefits/services not entitled to. 1 Agree strongly – 5 Disagree strongly	2.47	0.98	1	5
<i>impenv</i>	Important to care for nature and environment. 1 Very much like me – 6 Not like me at all	2.15	1.03	1	6
<i>r'lgblg_r</i>	Belonging to particular religion or denomination. 1 Yes – 0 No (recoded)	0.58	0.49	0	1
<i>gndr_r</i>	Gender 0 Female – 1 Male (recoded)	0.50	0.50	0	1
<i>agea</i>	Age of respondent, calculated. age in years	48.21	17.59	15	98
<i>blgetmg_r</i>	Belong to minority ethnic group in country 1 Yes – 0 No (recoded)	0.06	0.23	0	1

Note: All variables obtained from the ESS, rounds 1 (2002) to 9 (2020). Croatia is available in rounds 4 (2008), 5 (2010) and 9 (2020). Total observations: N= 50,718.

TABLE 2
Pearson correlation matrix

	<i>irscale</i>	<i>gincdif</i>	<i>hincntia</i>	<i>lknemmy</i>	<i>imprich</i>	<i>sbstrec</i>	<i>sbprpyv</i>	<i>sbegsoc</i>	<i>sbsbntx</i>	<i>sblazy</i>	<i>imscbln</i>	<i>imbgcco</i>	<i>uentribj</i>	<i>lbenent</i>	<i>benntent</i>	<i>impenv</i>	<i>rlgblg_r</i>	<i>gndr_r</i>	<i>ageu</i>
<i>gincdif</i>	0.17																		
<i>hincntia</i>	0.06	0.18																	
<i>lknemmy</i>	-0.04	-0.17	-0.31																
<i>imprich</i>	-0.09	-0.05	-0.09	-0.07															
<i>sbstrec</i>	-0.11	-0.08	-0.01	0.03	0.03														
<i>sbprpyv</i>	0.04	0.00	-0.03	0.12	-0.05	0.06													
<i>sbegsoc</i>	0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.12	-0.03	-0.01	0.54												
<i>sbsbntx</i>	-0.14	-0.07	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.46	0.05	0.02											
<i>sblazy</i>	-0.12	-0.09	0.01	0.06	0.00	0.38	0.01	-0.05	0.34										
<i>imscbln</i>	0.11	-0.01	-0.06	0.09	-0.08	-0.06	0.07	0.09	-0.08	-0.08									
<i>imbgcco</i>	-0.06	0.08	0.16	-0.17	0.05	0.07	-0.09	-0.11	0.11	0.09	-0.31								
<i>uentribj</i>	-0.11	-0.02	0.06	-0.02	0.05	0.23	-0.06	-0.07	0.22	0.42	-0.12	0.15							
<i>lbenent</i>	0.04	0.21	0.15	-0.19	0.03	-0.04	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	-0.03	-0.04	0.09	0.09						
<i>benntent</i>	-0.07	0.06	0.08	-0.06	0.04	0.17	-0.05	-0.07	0.19	0.28	-0.15	0.17	0.32	0.23					
<i>impenv</i>	0.05	0.09	0.01	0.03	-0.05	-0.02	0.04	0.05	-0.01	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	-0.02	0.06	0.05				
<i>rlgblg_r</i>	0.11	-0.07	-0.09	0.05	-0.01	-0.02	0.00	-0.03	-0.04	-0.02	0.00	-0.02	-0.04	-0.09	-0.07	-0.05			
<i>gndr_r</i>	0.03	0.07	0.10	-0.07	-0.11	-0.03	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.05	-0.09		
<i>ageu</i>	0.02	-0.08	-0.22	-0.04	0.25	-0.02	-0.02	0.00	-0.02	-0.02	0.05	-0.06	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.12	0.15	-0.04	
<i>blgetmg_r</i>	-0.06	-0.03	-0.07	0.08	-0.07	0.04	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.03	-0.04	0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.01	0.01	0.06	0.01	-0.06

5.2 EMPIRICAL MODEL

The main model to test the first hypothesis (partisanship determinants), is an ordinary least square regression (OLS) with standard error consistent with heteroscedasticity:

$$y_{it} = \gamma + \sum \beta_j x_{jit} + centry_XX_r_k + essround_t + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

Where y_{it} represents the indicators of our dependent variable *lrscale*: *where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?* γ is the intercept, x_{jit} is the vector of explanatory variables and β_j is a vector of parameters to be estimated. To control for fixed country effects, we introduce *centry_XX_r_k* (33-1 dummy variables accounting for the 33 European countries surveyed in the ESS). Table 3 provides the full list of the 33 countries covered by the ESS and the regressions results. To control for annual shocks that affect all surveyed countries simultaneously, all regressions include *essround_t* (9-1 dummy variables to control for the 9 ESS waves). The error term is ε_{it} . Subscripts i and t represent interviewee and ESS wave (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020), respectively. Panel data methodology is not suitable because interviewees are not repeated in each wave.

Table 3 also shows two robustness checks. On the one hand, there is an ordered probit model, considering that the dependent variable is ordinal 0 to 10. This specification works as a confirmation of the OLS coefficients. On the other hand, a multilevel analysis for Croatia. We did not run a multilevel regression on the European sample due to the large amount of regions (different per country), which would make the regression too complex. For this reason, on the European sample, the OLS and ordered probit regressions control the country effect through the variable *centry_XX_rk*.

Dept. variable: 0 Left – 10 Right	Definition	Expect. sign	European countries	Croatia
<i>uentrib</i>	Most unemployed people do not really try to find a job.	(-)	-0.089*** -8.6	-0.00 0.0
<i>lbenent</i>	Many with very low incomes get less benefit than their legal entitlement.	(+)	0.071*** 6.6	0.02 0.3
<i>benent</i>	Many manage to obtain benefits/services they are not entitled to.	(-)	-0.05*** -4.5	0.00 0.1
<i>impenv</i>	Important to care for nature and environment.	(+)	0.08*** 8.7	-0.01 -0.3
<i>r/igblg_r</i>	Belonging to particular religion or denomination.	(+)	0.50*** 25.2	0.50*** 4.4
<i>gndr_r</i>	Gender	?	0.10*** 5.6	0.05 0.6
<i>agea</i>	Age of respondent, calculated.	(-)	0.00*** 8.5	0.00 0.1
<i>bigetmg_r</i>	Belong to minority ethnic group in country	(-)	-0.75*** -17.0	-0.47* -1.8
	N		50,713	552
	R-squared		0.13	0.12
	Maximum VIF		1.55	
	Log pseudo likelihood			-1,228.72

OLS= Ordinary Least Squares (robust variance estimations).

Below each coefficient, t value is reported. Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%.

All models include these not reported variables:

- The intercept
- Variable *essround* (ESS round), to control for possible year-shocks.

32 (33-1) dummy variables entry *XX_r*, which account for each European country in the ESS dataset (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia, Turkey, Ukraine). These dummy variables do not enter in the Croatia regression.

6.1 POLITICAL ECONOMICS IN CROATIA: PARTISANSHIP

Table 3 shows the impact of citizens' values on their partisanship (hypothesis 1). We split the regression in two columns as a way to compare the Croatian sample with the remaining European countries. It is important to point out that the coefficients agree with the expected signs of all variables except for the social benefits variable in Croatia (*sbprvpv*), as will be explained below. Therefore, citizens align their values with the level of partisanship expected by the literature on political economics. There are two main features of the Croatian case. On the one hand, there is the low impact of Croatian values on partisanship. In other words, it seems that Croatian citizens' values do not predict perfectly their political alignment, which, as we will see later, may be a consequence of the lack of interest of Croatian people in politics. Secondly, the impact of social benefits/services to prevent widespread poverty (*sbprvpv*) has an opposite impact to literature predictions and other European experience, i.e., conservative Croatians are more in favour of this policy.

If we focus on the variables grouped under the "income" label (*gincdif*, *hinctnta*, *lknemny*, *imprich*), they show that respondents with higher income (*hinctnta*, *lknemny*, *imprich*) tend to vote more conservatively in the rest of Europe, but not in Croatia. Regarding the government role of helping lower income groups (*gincdif*), conservatives in both Croatia and elsewhere in Europe are less in favour than their leftist counterparts. This result was expected according to Abramowitz and McCoy (2019), Ciuk, Lupton and Thornton (2017), Hemingway (2022) and Evans and Neundorf (2020).

Regarding the redistributive government role and social welfare variables (*sbstrec*, *sbprvpv*, *sbeqsoc*, *sbbsntx*, *sblazy*, *uentrjb*, *lbenent*, *bennent*) they are connected with more left-wing respondents in the European sample. These regression coefficients agree with Abramowitz and McCoy (2019) and Ciuk, Lupton and Thornton (2017). However, the Croatian sample shows much less significance in all these variables, meaning that these issues do not have much on the political alignment of Croatians. Regarding the variable *sbprvpv* (Social benefits/services prevent widespread poverty), Croatians show a result opposite to that predicted by the literature, since leftist Croatians oppose this policy. Further research is needed to disentangle the determinants of this feature.

As far as immigration is concerned, conservatives in both Croatian and the rest of Europe think it is not good for the economy (*imbgeco*). The empirical literature reports the same relationship, for example Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin (2011) and Abramowitz and McCoy (2019).

Croatians' concern for environment issues (*impenv*) does not influence their partisanship preferences. However, as predicted by the literature, the rest of Europeans' values are in line with the literature, being leftist implies increased concern about environmental issues (Dubois and Blank, 2018).

Regarding personal features treated as control variables (*rlgblg_r*, *gndr_r*, *agea*, *blgetmg_r*), Croatians agree with their European counterparts and with the literature (Ciuk, Lupton and Thornton, 2017; Diercks and Landreville, 2016; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019). Belonging to a minority tends to meaning voting for the left. Religious people lean toward conservative parties.

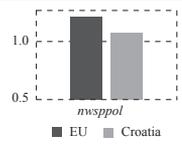
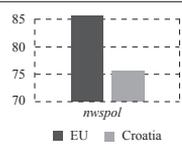
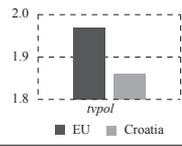
6.2 CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT: PERCEPTION ABOUT ECONOMY AND POLITICS

This section evaluates how Croatian citizens engage in governmental and economics issues. Figure 1 reports the different attitude of Croatians and remaining Europeans as far as getting informed about politics and economy (Hypothesis 2). Variables considered are *nwsppol* (Newspaper reading, politics/current affairs on average weekday), *nwspol* (News about politics and current affairs, watching, reading or listening, in minutes) and *typol* (TV watching, news/politics/current affairs on average weekday). As figure 1 shows, Croatians show a highly statistically significant lower interest in political or economic news. It is worth mentioning that considering different news media (TV, newspapers, radio) does not change the result. Croatians are quite a lot less interested in politics/economic than other Europeans. This feature is relevant, because voters cannot hold politicians accountable if they ignore what is going on in politics and economy (Dubois and Blank, 2018). As Bullock et al. (2015) points out, Americans know little about politics, and they often recognise their own lack of knowledge. However, Europeans want to be informed, but the same cannot be concluded about Croatians, which means that Hypothesis 2 must be rejected.

There is an interesting feature pointed out by the literature. Bisgaard (2015), Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) and Citrin and Stoker (2018) posit that citizens' judgments of governments' performance are more favourable when their party holds power and more unfavourable when their party does not. We tested this point in Croatia (Hypothesis 3), and figure 2 shows the results.

ESS has a variable (*uemplwk*) with this question: "Of every 100 people of working age in [country] how many would you say are unemployed and looking for work? Choose your answer from this card. If you are not sure please give your best guess". We subtracted this number provided by interviewees from the real unemployment of the interviewee's country, and we got a measurement of the favourable perception of citizens. The more negative, the more pessimistic are respondents compared to the real economic situation (unemployment). Surprisingly, citizens are less favourable in their perception of unemployment when their party holds power. We think this feature relates to the lack of trust of Croatians in their politicians and parliament, which as we will see later, is increasing. Therefore, we reject Hypothesis 3, as the political alignment bias does not apply to Croatia.

FIGURE 1
Searching for news about politics in Croatia

Variable	Groups				Student's t-test for the comparison of two means
	<i>cntry_HR_r=0</i> Remaining European countries		<i>cntry_HR_r=1</i> Croatia		
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
 <i>nwspol</i>					
<i>nwspol</i> Newspaper reading, politics/ current affairs on average weekday	1.21	166,912	1.07	2,097	7.07***
 <i>nwspol</i>					
<i>nwspol</i> On a typical day, about how much time (in minutes) do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs?	85.67	87,795	75.53	1,793	3.07***
 <i>tvpol</i>					
<i>tvpol</i> On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs?	1.97	315,072	1.86	2,976	4.36***

Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 318,048.

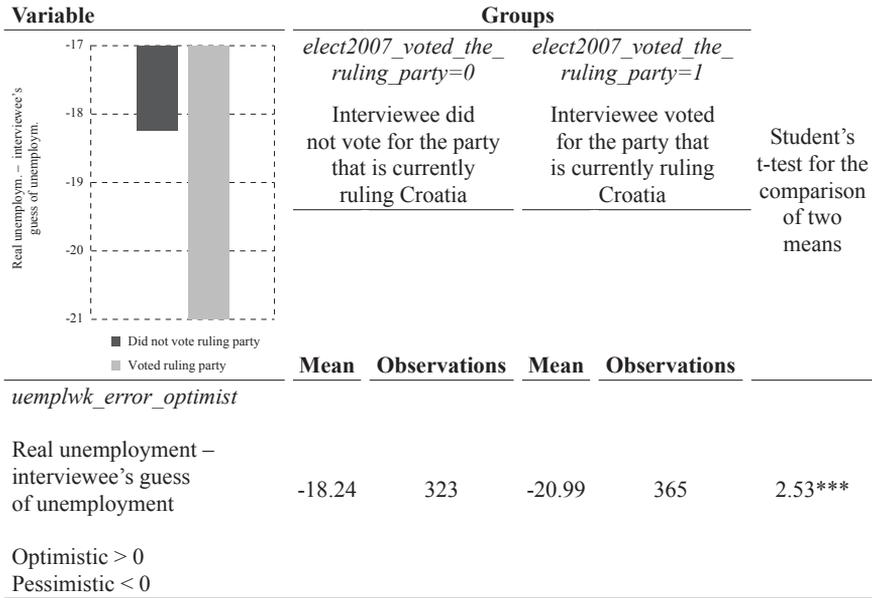
Sample is ESS round 4 (2008), 5 (2010) and 9 (2020). All countries vs. Croatia.

Variables description:

- *cntry_HR_r*: Country is Croatia 1, otherwise 0.
- *nwspol*: Newspaper reading, politics/current affairs on average weekday: (0) No time at all, (1) Less than 0,5 hour; (2) 0,5 hour to 1 hour; (3) More than 1 hour; up to 1,5 hours, (4) More than 1,5 hours, up to 2 hours, (5) More than 2 hours, up to 2,5 hours, (6) More than 2,5 hours, up to 3 hours, (7) More than 3 hours.
- *nwspol*: On a typical day, about how much time (in minutes) do you spend watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs?
- *tvpol*: On an average weekday, how much of your time watching television is spent watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs? (0) No time at all, (1) Less than 0,5 hour, (2) 0,5 hour to 1 hour, (3) More than 1 hour; up to 1,5 hours, (4) More than 1,5 hours, up to 2 hours, (5) More than 2 hours, up to 2,5 hours, (6) More than 2,5 hours, up to 3 hours, (7) More than 3 hours.

FIGURE 2

Optimism in citizens who voted for the ruling party in Croatia



Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 688.

Sample is ESS round 4 (2008), Croatia subsample.

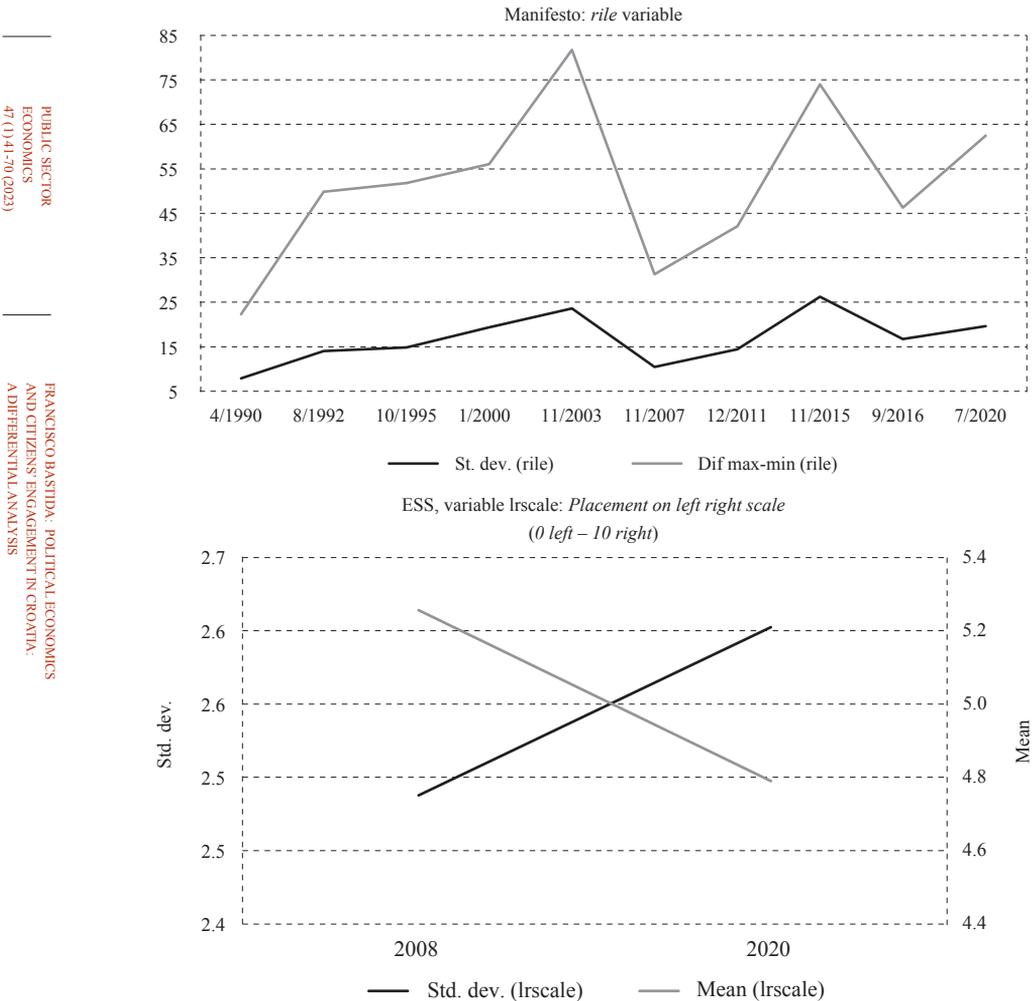
Variables description:

- *uemplwk_error_optimist*: Real unemployment of the country – interviewee's guess of their country's unemployment. This latter variable coded as *uemplwk* on ESS round 4 and ESS round 8: "Of every 100 people of working age in [country] how many would you say are unemployed and looking for work? If you are not sure please give your best guess."
- *elect2007_voted_the_ruling_party*: Interviewee voted for party currently ruling Croatia 1, otherwise 0.

Many scholars are claiming that polarization is increasing and they warn about the negative effects this trend may have for democracies around the globe (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Robison and Mullinix, 2016; Boeri, Börsch-Supan and Tabellini, 2001). Figure 3 shows the assessment of polarization in Croatia, as a way to check Hypothesis 4.

Party polarization is also a prime suspect for the overall downward trend in trust (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). As shown in figure 3, polarization has increased in Croatia over the last years. Figure 3 presents two indicators of this trend, which reinforces the robustness of the results. First, at the top of figure 3, the Manifesto project variable of partisanship is presented (variable *rile* – right-left). The difference between the most conservative (right wing) party's numerical indicator minus the most progressive (left-wing) indicator has increased from 22.328 in 1990 to 62.489 in 2020. Similarly, the standard deviation of the variable *rile* has increased from 7.903 in 1990 up to 19.609 in 2020. Second, the bottom part of figure 3 shows the variable *lrscale* from the ESS, with a standard deviation rising from 2.48 in 2008 to 2.60 in 2020. All these data confirm Hypothesis 4.

FIGURE 3
Political polarization trend in Croatia



Top figure reports variable *rile*: Volkens et al. (2021) publish the Manifesto dataset (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>), with a variable called *rile*, which measures the left (minimum value) vs. right (maximum value).

Bottom figure reports variable *lrscale*: European Social Survey.

This increasing polarization makes political consensus more difficult and, to some extent, biases citizens' judgment in the direction of a fixed rejection of political opponents' proposals. Polarization reinforces political divides, and will threaten democracies by limiting political information and discussions (Dubois and Blank, 2018). This high political polarization of Croatia makes it more complicated for the government to implement the *median voter* strategy.

How do all these features (low interest in politics, polarization) affect Croatians participation in political issues? Figure 4 seeks to answer this question (Hypothesis 5).

FIGURE 4

Voter turnout (%), average of previous parliamentary election (*voter_turnout_parliam*)



Variable	Groups				Student's t-test for the comparison of two means
	Remaining European countries		Croatia		
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
<i>voter_turnout_parliam</i>					
Voter turnout in last parliamentary election	0.7518	30	0.6412	1	5.89***

Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 31.

Variable *voter_turnout_parliam*: Voter turnout in last parliamentary election.

Source: Voter Turnout Database (<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>).

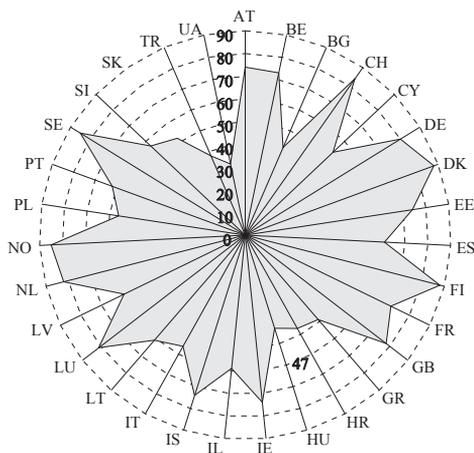
As figure 4 shows, voter turnout of Croatian citizens is significantly below the European context. The voter turnout of the last parliamentary elections was 64.12%, which is significantly lower than the benchmark sample composed of the remaining European countries. Therefore, Croatians vote less in the parliamentary elections, indicating low participation and engagement, which agrees with all the features pointed out in this section. Accordingly, our data reject Hypothesis 5.

6.3 TRUST, BUDGET TRANSPARENCY AND CORRUPTION

Figure 5 shows the corruption perception index of European countries (Transparency International). The index for Croatia is 47, which is significantly lower than the remaining European countries (average of these 30 European countries is 65.7). This finding shows that the high levels of corruption claimed by Ateljevic and Budak (2010) hold more than a decade later. Budak (2007) states that at the beginning of the twentieth century, in Croatia there existed a problem of corruption. Integration of Croatia in international institutions, such as EU (in 2013) and NATO (in 2009), seemed to speed up reforms towards lower corruption (Ateljevic and Budak, 2010). However, as data show, there is still room for improvement.

FIGURE 5

Corruption perception index 2021, Transparency International



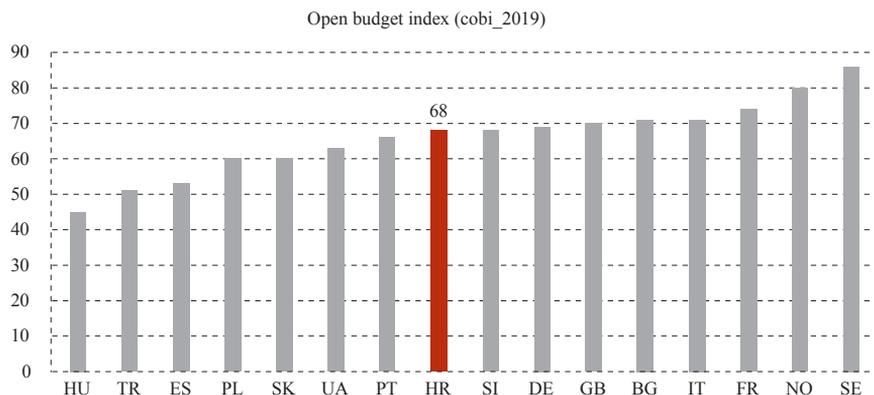
Variable	Groups				Student's t-test for the comparison of two means
	Remaining European countries		Croatia		
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
<i>cpi_2021</i>					
Corruption perception index (higher value means lower corruption).	65.7	30	47.0	1	6.45***

Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 31.

Variable *cpi_2021*: 2021 Corruption perception index, Transparency International. Higher values mean cleaner (less corrupt) countries. (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>).

Regarding budget transparency, figure 6 shows the open budget index (OBI), as computed by the Open Budget Partnership. The Open Budget Survey ranks countries according to their level of accountability in national budget processes. The last available index corresponds to 2019. Due to missing values of some European countries, we compared the Croatian budgetary transparency index with the rest of the world. In this case, Croatia clearly outperforms the international sample of countries. This means that the Croatian government is preparing and disclosing the budget in a correct way, according to international standards. Thus, we confirm that the budget is well implemented and disclosed, but it does not reach Croatian citizens, due to the lack of their interest in politics in general. Švaljek, Rašić Bakarić and Sumpor (2019) find that public policy needs to raise awareness among citizens of the ways they could influence the budget process, once the Croatian budget transparency is greater than the international average.

FIGURE 6

Budget transparency, Open Budget Partnership

Variable	Groups				Student's t-test for the comparison of two means
	Remaining European countries		Croatia		
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
<i>cobi_2019</i>					
Open budget index (higher value means timely and comprehensive budget)	44.4	116	68.0	1	-11.14***

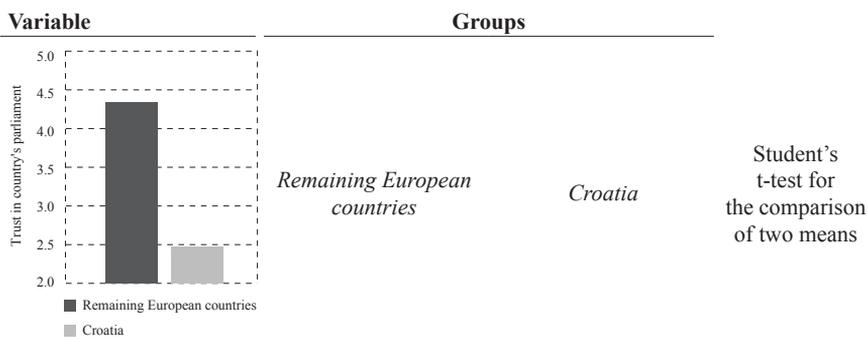
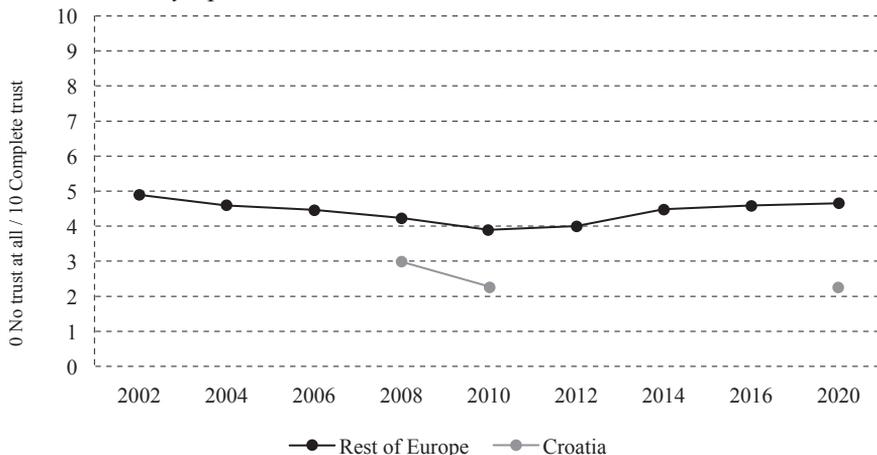
Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 117.

Variable *cobi_2019*: 2019 Open budget index, as computed by the Open Budget Partnership. Higher value means more budget transparency.

Note: t-test performed with the rest of the world, as EU had some missing values. Data available at: <https://internationalbudget.org/open-budget-survey/>.

To what extent do Croatians trust their political system? This is the question we aim to address now (see figures 7 and 8).

FIGURE 7
Trust in country's parliament

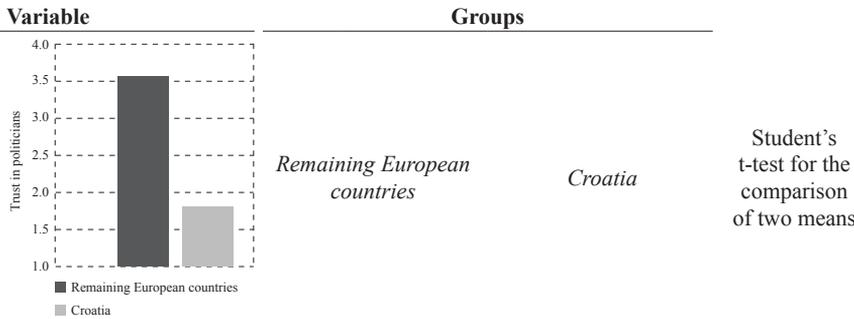
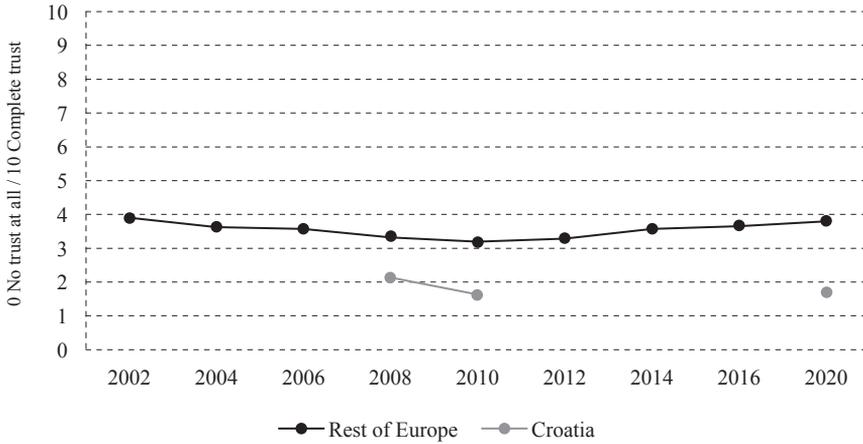


Variable	Remaining European countries		Croatia		Student's t-test for the comparison of two means
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
<i>trstprl</i>					
Trust in country's parliament (higher value means more trust)	4.40	406,259	2.48	4,852	51.12

Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 411,111.

ESS variable *trstprl*: Trust in country's parliament. "Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. [Country]'s parliament?"

FIGURE 8
Trust in politicians



Variable	Groups				
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations	
<i>trstplt</i>					
Trust in politicians (higher value means more trust)	3.53	409,088	1.80	4,851	49.82***

Sig.: *10%, **5%, ***1%. Total number of observations 413,939.

ESS variable *trstplt*: Trust in politicians. "Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Politicians?"

Both figures 7 and 8 show that Croatians trust their parliament and politicians to a significantly lower extent than other Europeans. The average level of trust in parliament for Croatians is 2.48 compared to 4.40 of Europeans. For politicians, the Croatian average is even lower, 1.80 vs. 3.53. Besides, both graphs show a declining trend, meaning that trust on parliament and politicians is decreasing over the years in Croatia. This reduced trust in government in Croatia was claimed by Ateljevic and Budak (2010) more than a decade ago. These two levels of Croatians' trust agree with Torcal (2017), who shows that politicians are consistently the most distrusted in all European countries, but parliaments are trusted a bit more.

Torcal (2017), when evaluating trust in a European context with the ESS dataset, concludes that there is a “Mediterranean” or “southern European” political culture, deeply rooted in particular and stable ways of life. This culture is characterised by traditionalism and fatalism, elitism and charismatic leadership, distance from politics and low participation. Although Croatia was not evaluated by this author, we wonder if some of these features may apply to Croatia, since Croatia shows significantly lower trust in parliament, politicians, etc., as compared to the remaining European countries surveyed in the ESS.

As an overall conclusion, with a significance of 1%, our data reject Hypothesis 6. Regarding corruption, trust in parliament and politicians, Croatia ranks worse than the remaining European countries. As far as budget transparency is concerned, Croatia performs well above the remaining countries (the rest of Europe and additional countries included in the OBI 2019 dataset).

7 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The two findings on Croatian partisanship are, on the one hand, a lower impact of Croatian values on partisanship. In other words, it seems that Croatian citizens' values do not perfectly predict their political alignment, which may be a consequence of the lack of interest of Croatian people in politics. The role of government in reducing income inequality (*gincdif*), the impact of social benefits in terms of taxes (*sbbsntx*), immigration (*imbgeco*) and religion (*rlgblg_r*) significantly impact political partisanship in the way predicted by the literature, and all these features mimic other European countries. On the other hand, the impact of social benefits/services on the prevention of widespread poverty (*sbprvpv*) works in the opposite way to that predicted by the literature and shown in other European countries, i.e., conservative Croatians are more in favour of this policy. Further research is needed to disentangle the determinants of this feature.

Furthermore, Croatian political parties will face problems to implement the *median voter* strategy, because polarization is an issue that is increasing over the years. This polarization clearly decreases the quality of Croatian democracy and jeopardizes the *median voter* assumption.

Trust of Croatians in their political system (parliament, politicians) is extremely low. Most probably, it is due to the high level of corruption and to the post-communism effect. The habits learned during the communist period, based on the belief that the state worked against the individual rather than for it, prevent Croatians from trusting their political system.

The country missed the opportunity to implement ambitious reforms in this regard when opting to join the EU and NATO. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the Croatian government effectively curbs corruption. We believe that the joint effect of corruption and distrust explains the low engagement in elections, which in turn means low electoral turnout. This low level of trust most probably explains

why Croatians do not keep up with political or economic news. We confirm that citizens' distrust of government stemming from communism still holds, 30 years after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. It seems that citizens' behavior aimed at evading the rules of the communist state means a higher corruption level in Croatia

It is worth mentioning the positive evaluation of the budgetary process in Croatia, since this country ranks well above the international standards in terms of quality of budget and scope of disclosure. This very positive feature should be reinforced in the future, as a way to increase the engagement of Croatians in their government, economy and political system.

As policy implications from this research, we can highlight the positive finding of the Croatian budgetary process, which outperforms the international standard, and that should be capitalized on by the Croatian government, and used as a landmark to campaign about increasing citizens' involvement in public affairs. Thus, we agree with Švaljek et al. (2019), in the claim that public policy needs to raise awareness among citizens of the ways they could influence the budget process. It is essential that the government achieves higher trust from citizens, so that the democracy that was prompted in post-communist Croatia matures and allows Croatia to implement the reforms requested by the European Union in terms of corruption and democratic quality. The target should be to achieve an electoral turnout similar to the remaining European countries, i.e., 75%. In a nutshell, our findings align with Vuković (2017), in a claim for an institutional push that encourages both greater transparency and accountability to voters, and that punishes corrupt politicians.

Further research should address the trend on the factors that are affecting the quality of Croatian democracy, i.e., corruption, low citizen engagement and declining trust. Furthermore, researching the determinants of the budgetary implementation success could shed light on the policies that are working well in Croatia. This philosophy could be extended to other fields of the political system, as a way to curb the main problems identified in this piece of research.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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