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Trento, Italy

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Marco Giugni • Maria T. Grasso  
Editors

# Citizens and the Crisis

Experiences, Perceptions, and Responses to the  
Great Recession in Europe

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editors*

Marco Giugni  
University of Geneva  
Geneva, Switzerland

Maria T. Grasso  
University of Sheffield  
Sheffield, UK

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Eva Anduiza** is Associate Professor of Political Science and ICREA (Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats) Academia Fellow at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her main research interests include political participation, voting behaviour and political attitudes.

**Lorenzo Bosi** is Assistant Professor at the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS) and Research Fellow within the Centre on Social Movement Studies (Cosmos). His main research interests are in political sociology and historical sociology where his studies primarily focus on qualitative research of social movements and political violence. He is mainly interested in how and when contentious political actors shift forms of action.

**Didier Chabanet** is Senior Researcher at IDRAC Lyon and Triangle (Ecole Normale Supérieure). He is also Associate Researcher at Sciences Po-CEVIPOF, France. His interest lies especially in the fields of social movements, social exclusion, social entrepreneurship, and European integration.

**Manlio Cinalli** is Research Professor at CEVIPOF (CNRS—UMR 7048) Sciences Po, in Paris. He previously delivered research and teaching in various leading universities and institutes across Europe and the USA, including Columbia University, the European University Institute (EUI) and the University of Oxford. He has published widely on citizenship and political integration.

**Marco Giugni** is Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Institute of Citizenship Studies (InCite) at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. His research interests include social movements and collective action, immigration and ethnic relations, unemployment and social exclusion.



**Maria T. Grasso** is Professor at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. She is the author of *Generations, Political Participation and Social Change in Western Europe* (2016) and co-editor of *Austerity and Protest: Popular Contention in Times of Economic Crisis* (2015). Her research focuses on political sociology and political engagement.

**Marc Guinjoan** is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Political Science and Public Law at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and visiting scholar at the Department of Political Science at University of Copenhagen. His research interests are focused on political behaviour, elections, parties, populism, electoral systems, identities and decentralisation.

**Stefania Kalogeraki** is Assistant Professor of Quantitative Methods in Sociology and Social Demography at the Department of Sociology, University of Crete, Greece. Her research interests include questionnaire design, quantitative comparative social research, social demographic analysis and mixed method designs.

**Johannes Kiess** is Researcher in Sociology at the University of Siegen. His research interests include political sociology, political attitudes and right-wing extremism, trade unions, European integration and the framing of politics and policies.

**Anna Kurowska** is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Social Policy, University of Warsaw. Her research focuses on family policy, employment and gender-related issues. She is an author of articles and co-author of books on mothers' employment, parental leave systems and capability approach in social policy.

**Christian Lahusen** is Professor of Sociology of Europe at the University of Siegen. His research is devoted to political sociology, social problems and the sociology of Europe and European integration. He is involved in international research consortia and is currently the coordinator of the TransSOL research project (Horizon 2020).

**Maria M. Mexi** is Scientific Collaborator at the Institute of Citizenship Studies (InCite) at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. Her research interests fall within the areas of migration, social dialogue and the future of work.

**Anne Muxel** is Research Professor at CEVIPOF (CNRS—UMR 7048) Sciences Po, in Paris. She studies political attitudes and behaviour in contemporary France and in European countries, focusing on youth and politics. She also works on voting, exploring electoral surveys regularly conducted at the CEVIPOF. She has written many articles on these topics.

**Guillem Rico** is Ramón y Cajal Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. His research interests include politi-

cal attitudes and behaviour, public opinion, political socialisation, political leadership and populism.

**Luke Temple** is Research Assistant in the Department of Politics and a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Geography at the University of Sheffield, UK. His research interests include the links between citizen understandings of democracy, digital engagement and political participation.

**Maria Theiss** is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Social Policy, Warsaw University. Her research focuses on the issues of social citizenship, social capital, civic society and the local level of social policy. She has written and co-edited books on poverty, social exclusion and governance processes at the local level in Poland.

**Katrin Uba** is Associate Professor at the Department of Government at the Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research focuses on social movements and trade union activism in Sweden and beyond. She is particularly interested in the role of different forms of protest activities in national and local welfare politics.

**Steven M. Van Hauwaert** is an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the University of Mainz and the principal investigator of the Global Public Opinions Project ([www.gpop.eu](http://www.gpop.eu)). His primary research interests are in the fields of comparative political behaviour and public opinion, as well as populism and political extremism.

**Thierry Vedel** is CNRS Senior Researcher at CEVIPOF (CNRS—UMR 7048) Sciences Po, in Paris. His research interests cover the impacts of the internet on political systems and democracy, politics and communication and the regulation of media in a globalised world. He has been involved in many international projects.

**Lorenzo Zamponi** is a research fellow in sociology and political science at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, where he is part of the COSMOS (Centre on Social Movement Studies) research team. His research interests include contentious politics, collective memory and media analysis.

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PART III

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The Social Bases of the Crisis



## Critical Men? Perceptions of Crisis Without Crisis in Sweden

*Katrin Uba*

### INTRODUCTION

It is well known that the Great Recession of 2008 did not hit all countries in Western Europe equally. In Sweden, the GDP per capita did not drop as much as in Greece and the unemployment rate did not increase as much as in Spain; in general, the economic situation looked quite similar to that of Germany or Switzerland (Livewhat D1.2 2014). Swedish economic growth did decline for a while and unemployment among young people—that is, people between 15 and 24 years old—increased from 20% in 2008 to 25% in 2009 (SCB 2016). Still, the economic situation had already improved by 2011, when the governor of the Swedish national bank officially stated that the financial crisis was over for Sweden (*Svenska Dagbladet* 04.03.2011). According to the media, the government had handled the crisis very well. *Financial Times* ranked the Swedish finance minister Anders Borg as the best finance minister in Europe—“the wizard behind one of Europe’s best-performing economies” (*Financial Times* 22.11.2011).

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K. Uba (✉)

Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

In the context of this “success story”, it is somewhat surprising that when a representative sample of the Swedish population was surveyed in June 2015, five years after the economic crisis peaked and just before the “refugee crisis” started in August of 2015, 16% of the respondents noted that Sweden was suffering *a very serious economic crisis*. With the addition of those who noted that *we are suffering a crisis but it is not a serious one*, the pessimists formed a clear majority (58%) of the respondents. These numbers are obviously low in comparison with the respective numbers in crisis-affected Greece, where 88% of respondents perceived the country to be suffering a very serious crisis, or those in Italy, where 90% of respondents perceived that the Italian economy was suffering some crisis. The perceptions of crisis in Sweden are more comparable to those in Germany, where 17% of respondents noted that there was a very serious crisis and a total of 49% of respondents perceived the presence of some economic crisis. Although the Swedish public appears to be somewhat more pessimistic than the German one, this picture resembles the situation even before the Great Recession of 2008, when northern European countries had a more positive economic mood than the countries in Southern Europe did (Anderson and Hecht 2014).

While some people always have pessimistic economic perceptions, the numbers in Sweden are still somewhat striking, especially considering that welfare states such as Sweden are expected to provide some cushioning effect in the context of an economic downturn. Thus, it would be interesting to know whether those who perceive Sweden to be suffering a very serious economic crisis are people who have suffered from the crisis, or if real economic experience plays little role here. In this chapter, I investigate which socioeconomic groups are more likely to express a negative economic mood in Sweden, by testing two general hypotheses. Some prior studies about public economic mood suggest that people react negatively to a macroeconomic downturn (Anderson and Hecht 2014) and that this reaction is relatively uniform across different income groups. Thus, personal exposure to economic crisis would not decrease their economic mood (Duch et al. 2014). Rich and poor have similar perceptions of macroeconomic circumstances since they are exposed to the same mediated representations of macroeconomic events (Duch et al. 2014: 252). In contrast, other studies argue that the effect of mac-

roeconomic changes on individual satisfaction with the state of the economy is conditioned by the objective personal economic situation. Citizens with higher income and higher socioeconomic status are more affected by economic crisis and therefore have different levels of satisfaction with the state of the economy than those with lower levels of income (Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2014). Although satisfaction with the state of the economy is somewhat different from the perception that the national economy is suffering a crisis, these perceptions are generally comparable. Hence, the analysis presented in this chapter tests which of these two approaches about the variation of economic mood is supported by the recent survey data for Sweden. In addition to the effects of personal experience and income, I focus on the specific roles of age and gender, for two reasons. First, the cushioning effect for youth has decreased in Sweden because the coverage of unemployment benefits for young unemployed persons has significantly decreased since 2006 (Lorentzen et al. 2014). Second, women report a lower health status more often than men in times of economic downturn (Hammarström et al. 2011), and women with low socioeconomic status were more affected than their male counterparts by the severe economic crisis that hit Sweden in the early 1990s (Burström et al. 2012). During the years of welfare retrenchment in Sweden (2006–2010), mental distress increased among women in the labour market as well as among unemployed women (Blomqvist et al. 2014). It is likely that these groups also had more negative perceptions of the Swedish state of economy after the Great Recession.

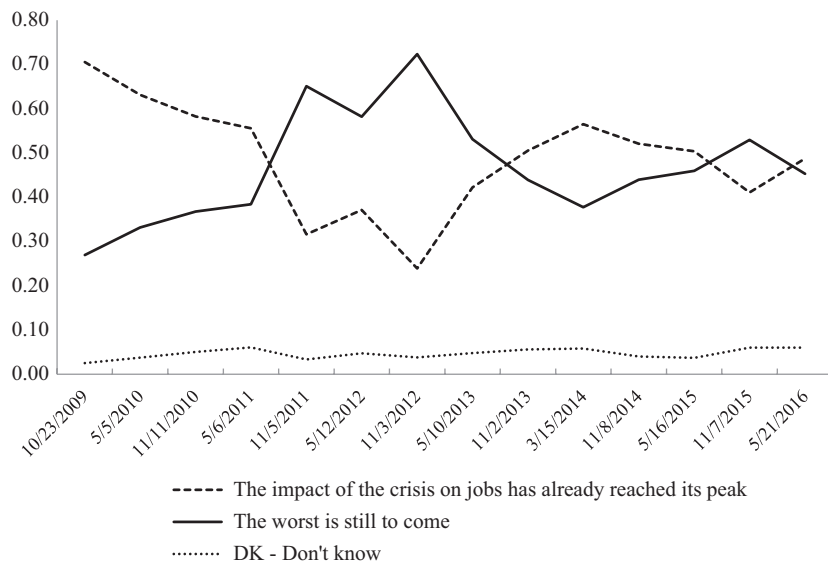
The following analysis does not aim to provide a causal explanation of which factors explain the development of individuals' economic perceptions. The cross-sectional character of the survey data only permits a finding regarding which socioeconomic groups are more likely to have a more negative economic mood. While prior studies usually make large cross-national comparisons of economies that suffered crises of various degrees, focusing on one country that is (almost) without a crisis allows us to take a closer look at specific individual factors. This study could also be helpful for future research on economic voting and political preferences, which are often related to public economic opinion (e.g., Niemi et al. 1999; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014).

## ECONOMIC MOOD AND THE (LACK OF) CRISIS IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In order to better understand the perceptions of crisis among Swedish respondents in 2015, it is useful to take a short look at the changes in the economic situation and examine how individuals' economic mood in Sweden has changed during recent years. In the autumn of 2007, 43% of respondents noted that the Swedish economy had improved during the last 12 months. However, a year later, that number was down to 11%; and in 2009, only 3% of survey respondents saw any improvements in the Swedish economy (Shehata and Falasca 2014). This decline seems to reflect the economic situation, as the Swedish real GDP fell drastically in 2009 (as it did in many other countries) and the unemployment rate peaked to 25% in 2009–2010 (SCB 2016).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, major political reforms, such as the restructuring of state subsidies for unemployment insurance, had already taken place before the Great Recession in 2007—just after the centre-right government came to power in 2006. Restrictions in sickness benefits were implemented in 2008 (Livewhat D2.4 2014). Despite these reforms, trust in the ruling centre-right coalition increased from 33% in 2007 to 52% in 2010 (Nord and Shehata 2013), and the coalition did not lose its power until the 2014 elections.

Data from the Eurobarometer's survey (Fig 10.1) demonstrates further fluctuations and shows how pessimism towards the economic situation in Sweden dominated perspectives from mid-2011 until mid-2013. This is not surprising, considering the intensive media coverage of the economic crisis that occurred during these years (Asp 2011; Färm et al. 2012). The media mainly focused on the consequences of the crisis in Southern Europe; however, local events such as the closure of the famous Swedish automobile producer SAAB were also widely covered. On the other hand, it has been noted that the media framing of the Swedish economy and unemployment trends became increasingly positive in the second half of 2010 (Asp 2011).

The presented numbers align with prior research about the changing public economic mood, in that economic mood is expected to reflect changes in the economic situation and media coverage; however, this is an aggregate picture. A more detailed picture is obtained by comparing the Swedish numbers with those of the other countries examined in the survey, and by taking a particular look at how the perceptions of crisis vary across gender (Table 10.1). Regardless of general differences in economic



**Fig. 10.1** Individuals' perceptions of economic crisis in Sweden from 2009 to 2016 (Source: Eurobarometer)

mood, the difference between male and female respondents is very similar across all examined countries except Sweden. While women are generally more critical towards the state of the economy in their country, Swedish male respondents have *significantly more negative perceptions* of their country's state of economy than female respondents.

Examining the reasons behind these very interesting differences across countries goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is likely that the effect of a crisis does not explain the difference as well as some other factors do (e.g., gender equality or the character of the welfare state). I focus only on the case of Sweden, and examine whether this gender difference disappears when I account for factors that explain the variance of citizens' economic mood according to prior studies.

### EXPLAINING THE VARYING PERCEPTIONS OF CRISIS

Individuals' assessments of their country's state of economy are much discussed by scholars of economic voting, who tend to treat assessment as an independent variable in their analyses (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Paldam

**Table 10.1** Perceptions of crisis by gender across nine countries

<i>Country</i>	% “a very serious crisis”		<i>t-test</i>	<i>N</i>
	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
France	57.0	43.0	0.520	2027
Germany	54.7	45.3	2.239*	2108
Greece	54.0	46.0	2.447**	2048
Italy	53.6	46.4	2.133*	2040
Poland	59.3	40.7	1.835	2024
Spain	51.6	48.7	2.280*	2035
<b>Sweden</b>	<b>42.8</b>	<b>57.2</b>	<b>4.723***</b>	<b>2018</b>
Switzerland	55.3	44.7	0.825	2046
UK	53.0	47.0	0.041	2022
Total	53.8	46.2		18,368

Note: The t-test is based on a comparisons of means, where answers of “very serious crisis” were coded as 1 and the rest of the answers were coded as 0

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

2000). More recent studies have shifted towards investigating factors that explain the varying economic moods, as well as the mechanism that might explain the effect of these various factors (Duch and Stevenson 2010; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2014; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014). Many of these studies note, for example, that varying economic assessment is closely related to context-specific factors, such as the media coverage of the issue or the real economic situation of the country, and to micro-level factors such as the individuals’ own experience of an economic downturn, income and individuals’ political attitudes, and self-interest (Duch et al. 2000; Duch and Sagarzazu 2014; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2014; Niemi et al. 1999; Pardos-Prado and Sagarzazu 2014).

The effects of macro-level factors are not much disputed, and it has been shown that economic decline has a generally negative impact on individuals’ economic mood (Duch and Sagarzazu 2014). Similarly, negative media coverage of economic news is shown to play an important role in individuals’ evaluation of government economic policies (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017).<sup>2</sup> These arguments also align with studies in psychology, which report how the anticipation and experience of economic hardship influence the development of poor mental and physical health (Sargent-Cox et al. 2011; Smith and Huo 2014). The major disagreements in prior research are rather about the group-level effects: whether all groups are

equally affected by a crisis and the negative media coverage or whether there are significant differences across socioeconomic groups.

The first approach argues that people react negatively to a macroeconomic downturn, and that this reaction is relatively uniform across different socioeconomic groups (Anderson and Hecht 2014). Due to their similar exposure to negative media coverage and economic crisis, perceptions regarding macroeconomic circumstances or the status of a crisis in the country should not differ between rich and poor (Duch and Sagarzazu 2014). Rather, economic perceptions and expectations are mainly related to the political position of the individual and to the party they support (Duch and Stevenson 2011). People tend to be more optimistic about the economy when they are partisans of the incumbent than when they are partisans of the opposition (Duch and Stevenson 2011:18). This approach might work well for economic expectations, but it is unreasonable to suggest that citizens' economic mood or evaluation of the state of the economy changes as soon as a new party or governing coalition comes into power. This approach leads to two hypotheses to be tested: first, that there will be no significant differences in perception of crisis between those who have experienced economic downturn and those who have not. Here, experience will be measured as restricted consumption. The second hypothesis focuses on the support for non-incumbent political parties. Considering that Sweden was ruled by the centre-right coalition during the crisis, and that during the survey there was already a left-wing government, the only party that has been in opposition throughout the entire period is the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats party. The party won 29 new seats in the 2014 elections and became the third largest party in parliament (Berg and Oscarsson 2015). Thus, following Duch and Stevenson (2011), I would expect the electorate of the Sweden Democrats to be more critical towards the economic situation in Sweden than voters for other parties.

The second approach for explaining the different economic moods among citizens claims that individuals are affected by the economic crisis by different degrees, and that they would therefore perceive the severity of a crisis in their country differently (Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2014). People with higher socioeconomic status have more to lose and would therefore be more vulnerable and disappointed. This perspective aligns with studies about relative deprivation, which find that a perceived reduction in the standard of living has a strong emotional effect by increasing individuals' anger and perceptions of subjective injustice (Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2013).

While Fraile and Pardos-Prado (2014) focused mainly on the difference between income groups, it is likely that in countries with relatively small income differences, such as Sweden, the effect of a crisis on the economic mood of people from different income groups is not as strong. Similar to several prior studies, I suggest that two other factors might play a more important role here—the status of being employed or unemployed (cf. Anderson 2007; Fraile and Pardos-Prado 2014), and the sector in which one has existing employment—that is, the public versus the private sector (cf. Singer 2011).

Employment status is particularly relevant in the context of an economic crisis, when many people might lose their jobs, particularly since the cushioning effect of the welfare state is limited due to retrenchments. For example, youth unemployment in Sweden increased directly in relation to the financial crisis (8.6% in 2009). Even though unemployment among women before the crisis in Sweden was higher than that of men, the situation has changed since 2008; the unemployment rate among men is now higher than that of women (SCB 2016). The unemployed are expected to be more likely than the employed to perceive that there is a severe economic crisis in Sweden.

The expected difference between public- and private-sector workers is also motivated by the character of the recent crisis because public-sector workers suffered the most from retrenchments in many countries (Livewhat D2.3 2014). This was not the case in Sweden, where the crisis affected several industries, including the automobile industry (SAAB). The share of employment in the public sector, out of total employment, did not change much in Sweden during the crisis, remaining at around 5% for the central government and 24% for the local government (Mailand and Hansen 2016). Thus, public-sector workers are expected to be less likely to perceive that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis.

Finally, as already suggested above, it is reasonable to expect that gender and age affect perceptions of the national state of the economy in Sweden. It is not just personal experience that might influence a negative mood; a certain group identity might play a role here. When the media reports on increasing unemployment among youth, it might have a spillover effect on the attitudes of employed young people as well. For example, a medical study found that, regardless of employment status, young people reported poorer health during a recession than during a boom; this effect was particularly significant for women (Novo et al. 2001). Hence, it



is likely that young people and women are more pessimistic in their evaluation of the economic situation, regardless of their employment status.

## DATA AND OPERATIONALIZATION

I used the same dataset described in the introduction of this book—the nine-country survey focusing on questions of economic crisis, political attitudes and behaviour. I analysed only the data about Sweden, which initially yielded about 2000 respondents with relatively representative social backgrounds. As all the respondents did not answer every question of interest in this chapter, the final analysis used only the responses from 1375 individuals (descriptive details about the data are in the [Appendix](#)).

The survey captures the economic mood of the respondents by the following statement: “Some say that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis, others that there is a crisis but not a serious one or that there is no economic crisis. What do you think?” The dependent variable for this analysis is the binary variable, which measures whether or not the respondent notes that “We are suffering a very serious economic crisis”. After omitting all those who did not answer the question at all or who stated *Do not know*, 19.7% of the respondents perceived the presence of a serious crisis (the rest stated that “We are suffering a crisis but it is not very serious” or “No economic crisis”). Figure 10.2 demonstrates the clear difference between the responses of male and female respondents across age: young men seem to be much more pessimistic than young women about the Swedish economic status. The analysis below will demonstrate whether this difference remains once personal experience of crisis, political party support, and employment status have been controlled for, along with several control variables.

Personal experience of crisis could be measured in various ways, but in this context, reported experience regarding reduced consumption over the past five years seems to be a more appropriate measure than that of relative deprivation, such as estimated household situation.<sup>3</sup> Reduced consumption measure is an index of reported reductions of consumption, composed of ten different variables referring to reducing consumption of staple foods, reducing IT services or entertainment, delaying payments for gas or water, reducing or postponing the buying of medicines, reducing car use, skipping holidays, and moving to live with parents. Descriptive information of all variables are presented in [Appendix](#); here, it suffices to

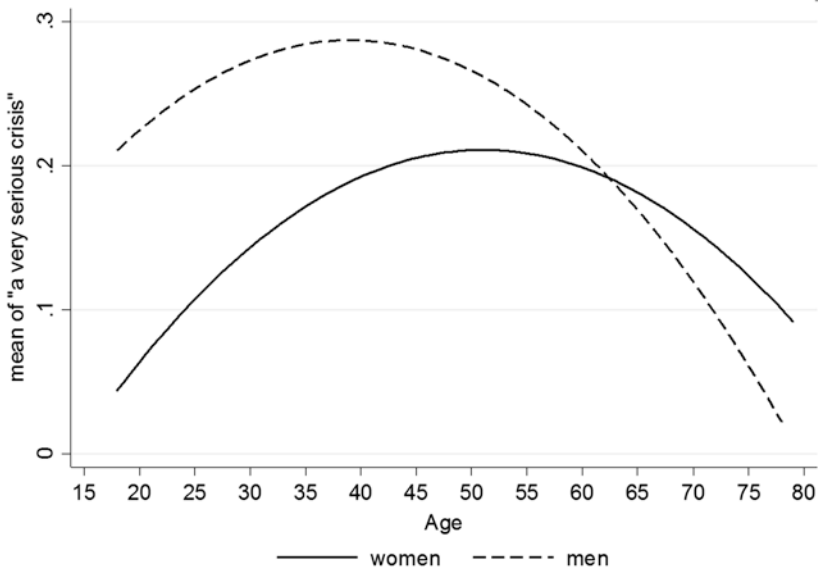


Fig. 10.2 Perceptions of crisis across age and gender in Sweden

note that more than half of the Swedish respondents did not reduce their consumption of any of the listed items.

The second independent variable of interest is the electoral support for the Sweden Democrats party in the last national election in 2014 (coded as 1 if the respondent voted for the Sweden Democrats party and zero if not). Of the respondents, 19.4% reported that they voted for this party; this is an overestimation, as the party actually won only 12.9% of the votes. It is likely that the sample includes slightly more supporters of the party than in reality, but it might also reflect the tendency of people to over-report their electoral participation.

Next, there are two employment-related variables—being unemployed at the time of the survey (5.4%) and working in the public sector (34%). The last variable refers only to those who are active in the labour market; therefore, the effect of this variable will be analysed separately from the effect of unemployment.

There are also several control variables that might be correlated to the perception of crisis in addition to the listed independent variables. Such controls are income on a ten-step scale from low (£760) to high (more

than £4200); level of education measured in three categories (upper, middle, lower); and an index of reported newspaper readership, which refers to the number of different newspapers the respondent reads. The last is an important variable because of the theoretical idea that the perception of a crisis, or individuals' economic mood, is strongly related to media presentation of the issue (Duch and Sagarzazu 2014).

### WHAT MATTERS: CRISIS EXPERIENCE, PARTY SUPPORT, OR GENDER?

To examine which factors correlate with the perceptions of serious economic crisis, I use a simple logistic analysis. The results are presented in Table 10.2. In addition to the variables discussed above, the analysis also includes the measure of squared age, in order to account for the curvilinear relationship between crisis perception and age (as shown in Fig. 10.2). Also relying on Fig. 10.2, the models include interaction variables for gender and age. Young male respondents seem to hold more pessimistic views than young female respondents, while at the age of 60, there was no clear gender difference in respondents' perception of crisis. Thus, it is reasonable to account for these interaction effects in the statistical analysis as well.

The results (Table 10.2) do not support the first hypothesis, which suggested that there would be no differences in economic mood between people who experienced a crisis to different degrees. Swedish data shows a slightly positive effect of reduced consumption on perceptions of a serious crisis. The effect of this variable is significant, even when other independent variables are included along with the control variables (Models 3 and 4). Based on the results in Model 3, the predicted probability of perceiving a very serious crisis can be calculated: of those who have not reduced their consumption at all (55% of respondents), the probability is 14%; and of those who reduced their consumption of almost all the items listed in the survey (3% of respondents), the probability is 38% (holding all other variables at their mean). These results provide more support for the so-called pocketbook perspective, which suggests that personal experiences play a role in economic predictions (Niemi et al. 1999), than for those who argue that a crisis affects all groups equally and that there should not be much difference between the crisis perceptions of different socioeconomic groups.

The importance of economic situation in the perception of a crisis is also visible when the effect of individuals' reported income is examined: those with higher income are significantly less likely to perceive

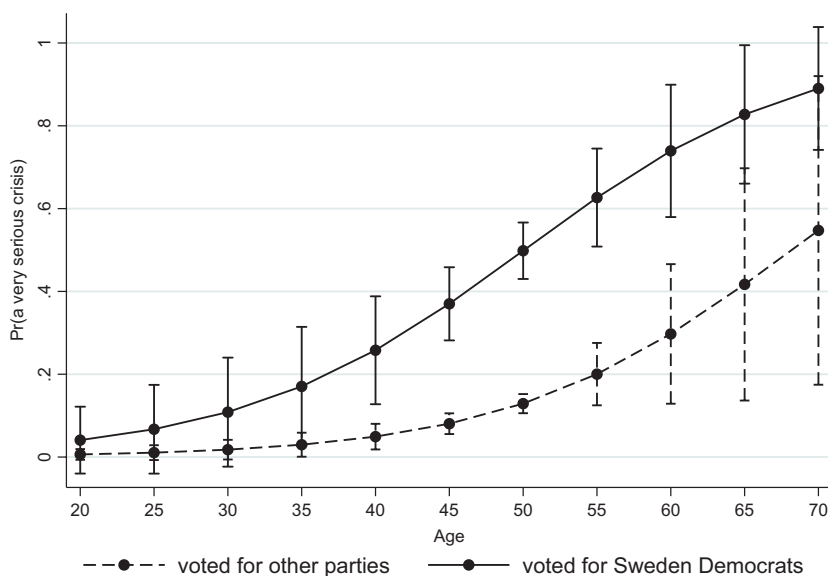
**Table 10.2** The probability of perceiving that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis (log coefficients)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Age	0.101*** (0.034)	0.093** (0.037)	0.093** (0.037)	0.089** (0.038)	0.090** (0.037)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.001*** (0.0003)	-0.001*** (0.0003)	-0.001*** (0.0003)	-0.001*** (0.0003)	-0.001*** (0.0003)
Female	-1.851*** (0.517)	-1.579*** (0.548)	-1.578*** (0.548)	-1.563*** (0.560)	-1.529** (0.554)
Age*Female	0.026** (0.010)	0.025** (0.011)	0.025** (0.011)	0.024** (0.011)	0.023** (0.011)
Reduced consumption	0.143*** (0.030)	0.149*** (0.033)	0.149*** (0.033)	0.148*** (0.034)	0.153*** (0.033)
Voted Sweden Democrats		1.903*** (0.163)	1.904*** (0.163)	1.857*** (0.168)	1.838*** (0.164)
Unemployed			-0.0575 (0.345)		-0.021 (0.345)
Public sector				-0.0520 (0.180)	
Trust in media					-1.054*** (0.277)
<i>Controls</i>					
University education (baseline)					
Completed secondary	0.280 (0.186)	0.146 (0.197)	0.145 (0.197)	0.147 (0.206)	0.113 (0.199)
Below secondary	0.582*** (0.190)	0.228 (0.207)	0.226 (0.207)	0.237 (0.217)	0.197 (0.208)
Income	-0.064** (0.028)	-0.061** (0.030)	-0.062** (0.031)	-0.059* (0.032)	-0.063** (0.0325)
News readership	1.144 (0.659)	0.913 (0.705)	0.909 (0.706)	0.896 (0.719)	0.912 (0.713)
Constant	-3.089*** (0.817)	-3.478*** (0.888)	-3.480*** (0.888)	-3.362*** (0.918)	-3.227*** (0.897)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.08	0.181	0.181	0.174	0.193
Observations	1357	1375	1375	1311	1375

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$

that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis, although this effect is actually very small. It is possible that the crisis in Sweden was too small to have any large effect on individuals' income and consumption; in that case, the correlations presented in this study might not actually reflect the effects of economic crisis, but might rather describe which socioeconomic groups tend to have a more pessimistic perception of the Swedish economic state, regardless of the objective situation.

The second hypothesis suggests that political party support will have an effect on individuals' perception of a crisis, and Model 2 in Table 10.2 demonstrates clear support of this. Those who reported voting for the Sweden Democrats party in 2014 are significantly more likely to perceive that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis. The probability of seeing a crisis is 45% among Sweden Democrats voters, while it is 11% among voters for other parties. This effect, however, is not consistent across all age groups. As Fig. 10.3 demonstrates, the difference in the per-



**Fig. 10.3** Marginal effect of voting for Sweden Democrats on perceptions of a very serious crisis over age (with 95% confidence interval)

ceptions of crisis between the voters of Sweden Democrats and voters for the different other political parties is largest at ages of 40–60. The result is not surprising, as this is the age group which is the most vulnerable to lay-offs as results of macroeconomic changes caused by the financial crisis.

One could suggest that the strong effect of supporting an anti-immigrant populist party might be related to the political situation of the summer of 2015, and refer to the emerging refugee crisis, even though the survey's fieldwork in Sweden only lasted until June 2015. The numbers of asylum seekers increased and media attention to the issue became more intense in September 2015, but there was already a slight increase of articles mentioning the "asylum crisis" in May 2015 (in comparison with January 2015) (Ringmar 2016). The effects of this emerging "refugee crisis" probably added to the effects of the argument presented above—that partisans of the opposition have more negative perceptions of economy (Duch and Stevenson 2011). The Sweden Democrats has never been included in a national-level coalition government. Moreover, its electoral success and political statements are often framed negatively by other political parties and in the mainstream media (Hellström et al. 2012). Thus, the electorate of this party probably have less reason to trust the mainstream media when it reports the "end of the crisis". In fact, when the analysis includes a variable measuring trust in the media, the effect of voting for the Sweden Democrats decreases and trust in the media appears to have a significant negative effect on perceptions of a very serious crisis (Table 10.2, Model 5). Respondents who trust media are significantly less likely to perceive that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis.

The argument about the negative attitudes of those who support oppositional parties is also reinforced by the fact that if the voters of another non-governing party—the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet)—are included in the analysis, then their electorate is also slightly more likely to perceive a serious crisis in Sweden. The Left Party has been accepted as an important actor in the Swedish political arena, but it has not been part of the so-called red-green governing coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party because the Left Party is sometimes seen as "too radical". This result clearly demonstrates that it is not the ideology of the party but rather its non-mainstream, or oppositional, character that explains why the supporters of the Sweden Democrats (and those of the Left Party) are more likely to perceive that Sweden is suffering a very serious crisis.<sup>4</sup>

The third hypothesis focused on employment status; the results in Model 3 show that unemployment has no significant effect on an

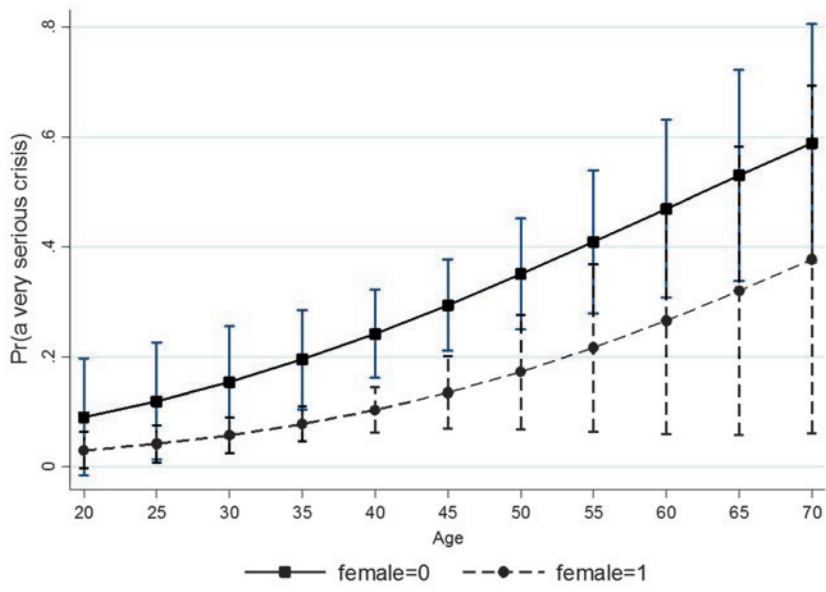
individual's economic mood. The effect is not present even if party support or reduced consumption is omitted from the analysis. There might be several reasons for such a result. First, there are relatively few unemployed people in this sample—only 5% are unemployed in the sample, versus the official 7% as recorded by the Swedish Statistics Bureau (SCB 2016). This makes it more difficult to find significant effects. On the other hand, the effect of unemployment on crisis perception might not be evident because the retrenchments in the unemployment policies in 2006 did not cancel out the “cushioning effect”. Hence, those who became unemployed during the crisis years, or those who have been unemployed for some time, have not experienced a radical worsening of their living conditions as a result of the crisis.

Similar to unemployment, a status of public-sector employee has no significant effect on individuals' economic mood. Again, the lack of a real crisis in Sweden (since the crisis did not lead to retrenchments in the public sector, as it did in Southern European countries) might be the reason for this null effect. Although some private-sector workers, mainly in the automobile industry, suffered directly from the consequences of the crisis, this is not reflected in the data.

Finally, gender and age were expected to play an important role in explaining the varying perceptions of crisis in Sweden. Young people and women were expected to be more pessimistic because of their probable vulnerability to economic downturn and to retrenchments in the welfare state (unemployment and health insurance policies). None of these expectations are supported by the results, which show the effects of gender and age to be exactly the opposite of what was expected, with the effect of age actually being very small.

While on basis of Model 1 we can say that male respondents of age 40–50 had more pessimistic views than female respondents, at the age of 20 or 60, there was no clear gender difference in respondents' perception of crisis. In Model 5, after including the variables which account for the voting for Sweden Democrats, unemployment, and trust in media, the effect of gender over age disappears.

Although the gender effect in average is strong and significant, it is opposite to expectations. Even though the effect decreases somewhat after party support is included in the analysis (compare Models 2 and 3), women are significantly less likely than men to say that the Swedish economy is suffering a very serious crisis. The predicted probability of perceiving a



**Fig. 10.4** Marginal effect of gender on perceptions of a very serious crisis over age gender (with a 95% confidence interval)

crisis is 13% for women and almost two times more (22%) for men, holding all other variables at their mean. This difference varies slightly across age (see Fig. 10.4), as there is little gender difference among young people and a significant difference for those between the ages of 40 and 60. These results are interesting because prior studies tend to show women as being more vulnerable to crisis and, as shown in Table 10.1, women in all other examined countries were more pessimistic than men. On the other hand, one recent study on risk perception and economic crisis in the US found no statistically significant gender differences in perceived risk during times of crisis (Burns et al. 2012). Considering that the difference between male and female respondents in my analysis appears mainly in the group of middle-aged people, it is likely that there are some specific characteristics of this age group that explain the difference. The analysis in this chapter controlled for the effects of education, income, news readership, and employment status. Further studies are needed to better understand this gender difference.



## CONCLUSION

This chapter examined individuals' perception of Sweden as suffering a very serious economic crisis in June 2015, at a time when many objective economic measures, as well as the mainstream media, appeared to argue the opposite. Although Sweden was hit by the Great Recession of 2008, it was much less affected than countries such as Greece or Spain, and it recovered quickly. Hence, it is particularly interesting to set the Swedish case into the context of studies that examine changes and variation in individuals' economic mood, especially as a result of economic crisis. This issue is often seen as important for literature about economic voting. However, instead of examining the government's crisis response or individuals' satisfaction with the government, the main interest in this analysis was to examine the variation in individuals' perceptions of the national economic situation. Two different approaches were tested: one that suggested that there is little difference between the crisis perceptions of different socioeconomic groups, but that party support has a strong effect on crisis perception; and another that predicted the importance of income and socioeconomic situation in explaining variations in people's economic moods. In addition to these hypotheses, I added a third that emphasized the role of age and gender, because retrenchments in unemployment policies were expected to make young people more vulnerable to crisis, and because prior studies reported negative experiences of women in previous economic crises.

None of the approaches found clear support in the analysis of Swedish data. Reduction of consumption and income had a small effect on crisis perception. People who had to reduce their consumption during the last five years were more likely to perceive the presence of a very serious economic crisis, and the same applied for people from lower-level income groups. The effects were small, and when these findings are combined with the finding that unemployment had no significant effect on individuals' economic mood, it is not fully clear whether different socioeconomic groups in Sweden perceive the presence of economic crisis differently or not.

This lack of clarity could be explained by the fact that the Swedish welfare state has balanced or "cushioned" some negative effects of the (eventually) small crisis. For example, Sweden's public expenditures increased by 22% during 2008–2013, while those of Germany increased by 13% and those of Greece decreased by 9% (Cylus and Pearson 2015). Hence, the

results of the Swedish case should not be seen as refuting the argument that different socioeconomic groups experience a crisis differently and therefore have diverse perceptions of crisis several years after the crisis.

On the other hand, similar to the results presented in the chapter about Germany, the lack of a real economic crisis brings other factors, which are important for explaining individuals' economic perceptions, into focus. Support of the populist anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats party had the strongest positive correlation with the perception of a very serious crisis. Considering the idea that the formation of individuals' perceptions of economic situation is based on media consumption, and the fact that the Swedish media mainly reported about the crisis elsewhere, I also tested the effect of trust in the media. The effect of support for the Sweden Democrats party remained strong and significant, but the results also showed that distrust of the media is strongly related to the perception of an economic crisis. The results of the analysis provide evidence for the argument that supporters of oppositional or less-mainstream parties are more likely to perceive the economic situation negatively. In fact, this appears to occur regardless of the ideological leaning of the supported parties.

Finally, the chapter demonstrated that, in Sweden, female respondents were clearly more optimistic about the status of the economy than male respondents; this division is unique in comparison with the other countries examined in this book. The high level of gender equality in Sweden and the relative strength of its welfare state might be the reasons behind this exceptional situation. Still, further comparative studies are needed to establish a better understanding of this phenomenon. The gender effect remained strong even when I examined the effects of other factors that are often related to gender: income, working in the public sector, and supporting the populist anti-immigration party. The predicted probability of saying that Sweden is suffering a very serious economic crisis was almost two times higher for men than for women. Further studies could examine whether this situation was specific to 2015, or if the pattern changes over time and was different the last time Sweden suffered a real economic crisis, in the early 1990s. This result also encourages a search for factors other than economic ones for explaining individuals' economic mood.

## NOTES

1. It should be recalled that the Swedish economy was restructured considerably during the 1990s, when the country experienced a truly serious economic crisis (Jensen and Davidsen 2016).

2. In the case of media coverage, there is some dispute, as Shehata and Falasca (2014) demonstrate that negative crisis-priming in the media had no effect on public approval of the government in Sweden.
3. One could also use a measure related to worsened job conditions, but issues like reduction of pay, unpaid overwork, increased workload, and so forth, apply only to employed respondents and thereby reduce the sample. The question wording used here was as follows: "In the past 5 years, have you or anyone else in your household had to take any of the following measures for financial/economic reasons?"
4. Prior studies also note that SD supporters have little political trust and tend to have a more authoritarian than libertarian value position and that the left-right ideology plays much less of a role in their identity than trust and authoritarian values do (Oskarson and Demker 2015).

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