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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Party–group interactions in Southern Europe: evidence from an expert survey

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Abstract

Despite the development of empirical research on the relations between parties and interest groups, the topic is still understudied and presents several shortcomings. On the one hand, this relationship has been studied mostly from the political parties' point of view. On the other, there is a lack of consensus regarding the determinants of party–group connection. This study aims to advance our knowledge on the topic by examining the relationship between interest groups and political parties in Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain). By relying on new data collected through an expert survey, we focus specifically on the strength of the linkage established between parties and interest groups, as well as their determinants. The results suggest that there is a great variation in party–group links, which is explained mostly by party characteristics, namely the type of parties, ideology, and their electoral strength.

Key words: expert survey; interest groups; party–group linkage; political parties; political representation; Southern Europe

Introduction

It is widely agreed that both political parties and interest groups matter for the quality of democratic regimes and that their collaboration is a cornerstone of democratic governance (Allern and Bale, 2012; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017).[1] Political parties and interest groups share representative functions for citizens' concerns about the political system. Although interest groups can provide political parties with useful resources to obtain votes and governing positions, political parties can help interest groups gain access to political decision-making in order to exert their influence. From this viewpoint, parties and interest groups are linked through a mutual relationship, based on the sharing of resources and the establishment of formal or informal channels of communication (e.g. Richardson, 1993; Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013: 264; Fraussen and Halpin, 2018). Political parties and interest groups may cooperate or, alternatively, find themselves in a situation where they pursue opposing goals (Heaney, 2010: 568). Be that as it may, the interaction between these two political organizations is crucial to the understanding of the policy-making process, democratic representation and the way they connect citizens to government (e.g. Beyers et al., 2015; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Fraussen and Halpin, 2018).

Yet, the kind of relationship between these two political actors, and its development over time, has remained an understudied topic in the literature. With a few exceptions (e.g. Thomas, 2001; Allern, 2010; Allern et al., 2020), the studies of political parties and interest groups have either

[1]The terms 'interest group', 'interest organizations', and 'organized interests' are used interchangeably in this text. The notion of civil society includes a wider universe of groups, which are not necessarily based on an organizational structure (e.g. social movements) and/or do not aim to influence public policies (e.g. civic associations).

been incorporated into larger studies on political representation, or conducted in the framework of separate (independent) academic strands, treating these political organizations not as complementary but as alternative intermediaries in a democratic system (Lisi and Oliveira, 2020).

Although studies of interest group politics were mostly concerned with the analysis of corporatism (for Europe, see especially Lehmbruch and Schmitter, 1982), the study of party–group relations has often been developed under the assumption that 'pressure groups thrive on the weakness of the parties' (Schattschneider, 1948: 19), which are seen as 'superior' forms of political organizations. Indeed, party scholars seemed to agree on a 'common wisdom' that the traditionally strong links between political parties and interest groups have been weakening or have faded away (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2018; van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014).

The increasing distance between political parties and interest organizations – together with declining levels of party membership and a more heterogeneous support base – has been interpreted as a symptom of the so-called 'party crisis', specifically with regards to the loss of their intermediation function (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; van Biezen *et al.*, 2012). However, this trend is also due to the emergence of interest groups linked to new issues or to broad constituencies, characterized by a more open and contingent relation with political parties. The transformation of state bureaucracies towards decentralization, state retrenchment, and Europeanization (and the related goal of increasing administrative efficiency) has also facilitated the delinking between parties and organized interests (e.g. Sotiropoulos, 2007). Interest group autonomy has also increased as the consequence of changes in the policy-making process, as group participation in formal institutional structures (government agency boards or social concertation frameworks) has decreased to a considerable degree and civil society organizations have been replaced by experts or specialists, mostly from the private sector (see Rhodes, 1997; Peters, 2018).

This paper aims to build upon this literature and advance our knowledge on the topic by addressing the following questions: how can be described party–group interaction in contemporary democracies? To what extent the intensity of this interaction varies across distinct parties and groups? What kind of party/group characteristics influences the closeness of this relationship? This study contributes to innovating extant research by adopting an alternative approach to this topic. In particular, we innovate research on party–group relations in three ways. Empirically, we focus on Southern European countries, a region for which the few comparative studies on the topic are completely outdated (Schmitter, 1995; Morlino, 1998). There is also an unbalance between the scholarship that focuses on Italy (e.g. Morlino, 1991; Lizzi, 2014; Pritoni, 2018) and Spain (Chaqués and Muñoz, 2016; Molins et al., 2016; Chaqués et al., 2020), and the two remaining countries (Greece and Portugal), which have not been the object of more comprehensive and systematic investigation. In addition, we employ a new methodological approach based on an expert survey, which allows us to systematically compare countries by collecting several indicators on party–group linkages. Finally, this research design allows us to consider party-related features (see Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017) as well as some unexplored characteristics of group organizations. Overall, this study advances our knowledge on neglected countries, innovates methodologically this object of study, and identifies the main factors that explain the strength of party–group connections.

The paper is structured as follows. We start with a literature review of party–group relations, discussing both its conceptualization and the empirical findings. The following section examines the main findings of party–group relations in Southern Europe, before presenting our data and methods in section four. Section five provides the empirical analysis. The conclusions summarize the findings and set out some avenues for future research.

Literature review

The literature commonly identifies political parties and interest groups as formally organized groups 'aggregate(ing) individual interests and preferences into collective demands and seek

(ing) to influence the form and content of public policy' (Allern and Bale, 2012; 9–10). They serve as distinct channels of representation but cooperate in the electoral, institutional, and societal arenas in an attempt to influence public policy. However, although parties compete in elections to gain formal political/governmental power and are usually oriented towards a broader range of policy fields, interest organizations do not contest elections and focus on a narrower range of causes/issues/policy fields (Thomas, 2001; Bolleyer, 2018).

As several studies have pointed out, there are many conceptualizations of party–group linkages (Römmele *et al.*, 2005; Mavrogordatos, 2009; Allern, 2010; Allern and Bale, 2012). Perhaps the most widely used definition of party–group relations comes from Allern (2010), who understands this notion in terms of personal/institutional contacts; it 'consists of links that connect interest organizations to the party's members, decision-makers and/or decision-making bodies, i.e. links that open up for contact and potentially provide communication about information, know-how, opinions and policy views between parties and interest organizations. Thus, links are those means by which a party and an interest group may communicate, such as, for example, corporate membership, joint committees, leadership overlaps or regular elite contact' (Allern, 2010: 57).

The empirical evidence on party–group linkages is mostly based on case studies and it is characterized by its fragmentation and disconnection (Eising and Cini, 1997; Beyers *et al.*, 2008). Generally speaking, there is broad consensus in the literature that the strong links established between parties and interest groups during the 'golden age' of mass parties – the most notable case being the formal affiliation of trade unions and social democratic parties (e.g. Moschonas, 2001; De Waele et al., 2013) – have gradually been replaced by looser forms of relations, with no organizational links (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2018; Allern, 2010). However, comparative studies have questioned the fact this is a general and linear trend. Thomas (2001: 271), for example, found no clear patterns in terms of party–group relations in advanced and newer democracies in different regions of the world. Although it is clear that party–group ties are loosening in countries that have had strong left-wing governing parties and historically strong party–group ties (as in Northern Europe, Britain, Spain, and Israel), other countries are characterized by different trends (e.g. Yishai, 2001; Allern, 2010; Mach, 2015). Although the most common pattern is indeed one of a fairly distant and fragmented relationship, there is substantial diversity, and some parties have quite strong links to interest groups.

In a more methodologically coherent and comprehensive study, Poguntke (2006) analyzed party statutes for 11 European countries between 1960 and 1989 to capture the substantive difference and strength of two forms of the organizational access to parties held by collateral organizations: representation in party bodies, and holding the right to send delegates (the latter being considered a stronger linkage). The results show different trends for linkages to external and internal organizations. Although external collateral organizations have become less relevant to political parties in Western Europe, internal organizations have increased at roughly the same rate. The overall picture, then, is one of the declining linkages to external interests offset by the increasing representation of internal interest organizations over the past few decades. Although the author claims that traditional political parties have managed to maintain relatively stable and close ties with their collateral organizations, 'their capacity to "deliver" votes and interest aggregation has suffered due to ongoing processes of social differentiation" (Poguntke, 2006: 403). New parties, on the other hand, are concentrated on the core political organization but pay less attention to creating or strengthening peripheral organizations or structures, which results in 'an increasingly pluralistic system of interaction between organized interests and party politics' (Poguntke, 2006: 403).

A recent study based on statutory connections confirms that party–group ties are relatively weak and that there is variation both at the country-level and the party-level (Allern and Verge, 2017). Based on the comparison between 19 countries (and more than 100 political parties), these authors found that very few parties have formal (statutory) linkages with interest groups (non-party organizations), and that trade unions tend to display a stronger representation – through representation rights in party decision-making bodies – than business

groups. On the other hand, parties are more likely to use party sub-organizations, especially women and youth structures, as a linkage mechanism to connect with social groups.

Fraussen and Halpin (2018) examine political parties and interests as two types of political organizations that share commonalities in terms of internal dynamics (e.g. increasing professionalization and centralization) and their development. Therefore, they argue that both face common challenges and that present a complex relationship because they are inextricably bound. This approach is also important for assessing configurations of party–group relations in a comparative fashion, and to assess the way external factors – for example, party system features and type of policy-making process – interact with organizational features of these political actors.

Extant research shows that no single factor or model is able to account for the variety of party–group links, either within or across countries (Thomas, 2001; Allern and Bale, 2012). Yet, a number of studies, mostly based on Western European countries, have tried to identify the main determinants of party–group connections. Firstly, we need to consider how institutional features can affect the ties between political parties and interest organizations. From this standpoint, the degree of pluralism of the system of interest intermediation may influence these ties. According to extant research, groups have fewer institutionalized contacts in pluralist systems and are therefore expected to establish stronger links to parties than in corporatist systems (Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013). Another important institutional variable is institutional strength. In particular, the higher the power of the parliament (*vis-à-vis* the executive), the higher the incentive for groups to establish contacts with political parties. The second group of variables that help explain the linkage between parties and organized interests is based on group or party characteristics. On the one hand, the way interest organizations were formed, the type of funding, their size and the degree of professionalization are all important variables to take into consideration (Rasmussen, 2012; Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017). On the other, the ideological position of parties (more or less moderate or extreme), their degree of institutionalization, and their participation in governmental offices may also affect party–group interaction.[2] There is also evidence that mainstream parties are the main target of groups in the attempt to influence the policy-making process (Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2020). Overall, material resources, organizational incentives (e.g. statutory linkages), and mobilization strategies (insider/outsider; issue salience, formal vs. informal contacts) seem to be important explanatory factors that account for party–group interactions (see Allern, 2010; Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.*, 2020).

This paper aims at identifying the conditions that are associated with interest group–party interactions. In particular, this study emphasizes the importance of the second bunch of factors, namely party and interest group characteristics, in shaping the strength of these relations. To do so, we focus on Southern European countries, which allow us to control for some key environmental features, as explained more in detail in the following section.

Party–group relations in Southern Europe

The empirical analysis of party–groups interactions focuses on the four main Southern European countries: Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. These cases have been selected not only because there are no recent comparative and empirical studies on this topic, but also because they present a number of similarities in terms of the political and institutional settings. First, these countries can be characterized as 'mixed-market economies' (Molina and Rhodes, 2007), marked by a wide state involvement in the economy and similar models of industrial relations ('middle' or 'soft pluralism'). Second, they share several institutional features, namely a relatively fragmented system of intermediation and social concertation mechanisms (Schmitter, 1995). Third, there has

[2]Unfortunately, due to the research design and data's limitations, it was not possible to include all the relevant variables included in similar studies. For example, finance data are not available neither for parties, nor for groups. The number of employees or staff working in interest organization is also missing. The most problematic case is certainly Greece, for which it is very difficult to gather empirical data on relevant actors of intermediation.

been a high level of politicization of party–group linkages (Morlino, 1998). Finally, they present a wide variety of party families that can be easily compared, ranging from (old and new) communists to extreme-right forces.

Van Biezen's pioneering study (2003) noted that political parties in Southern Europe have not emerged as strong movements of society, but rather as agents of the state. In this context, parties had an institutional, rather than societal, origin and had no real presence on the ground. The social basis of political parties was, therefore, created *a posteriori*, usually through expansive electoral mobilization (rather than partisan mobilization), leading to low levels of party affiliation and partisan linkages with society (Morlino, 1998; Gunther and Montero, 2001). As for the relationship between parties and interest groups, this tends to consist of a direct linkage with society and is of a pragmatic (vs. ideological) nature. From the organizational standpoint, most studies confirm the lack of a structured relationship (e.g. Schmitter, 1992; Puhle, 2001). In particular, the research conducted by Morlino (1998) emphasizes the weak links between business groups and parties, the politicization but growing autonomy of trade unions, and the lack of interactions between professional associations and political parties. But, in several cases – notably for left-wing parties – the ideological affinity has led to the establishment of a 'group dependence model' in which groups (mainly trade unions) are seen as 'transmission belts' (Mavrogordatos, 2009; Tsakatika and Lisi, 2013; Charalambous and Lamprianou, 2016).

To what extent have party–group linkages in Southern Europe followed the general trend observed in advanced democracies towards increasing distance between the two actors? Single case studies have contributed to further qualifying earlier findings. Scholarship tends to agree that links between parties and groups are nowadays driven by contingent and dynamic factors, rather than organizational or ideological ones. In Spain, for example, there has been an open and broad collaboration between parties and civil society organizations, while interest groups are prone to act strategically by targeting mainstream parties (Chaqués and Muñoz, 2016; Barberà *et al.*, 2019; Chaqués *et al.*, 2020). The pragmatic relation between parties and groups in Southern Europe is also confirmed when we consider patronage practices based on an exchange of material benefits (Lanza and Lavdas, 2000; Jalali *et al.*, 2012; Sotiropoulos, 2019).

Despite these common traits, recent developments during the crisis period show distinct trajectories. Although Greece and Spain have seen the emergence of new actors that have reshaped party system format and dynamics, Portugal has remained relatively stable (Barberà *et al.*, 2019; Razzuoli and Raimundo, 2019; Sotiropoulos, 2019). Italy has also displayed high levels of electoral fluidity and new patterns of government formation, leading to much uncertainty and an extremely open party system. From this point of view, the crisis did not lead to convergence in terms of evolution of the party system (e.g. Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; Lisi, 2019*a*). Indeed, we find as much continuity as change across our cases. A comparative assessment of the evolution of party–group linkages in newer Southern European countries found that in Greece there is an overall decline in the intensity of these links, while both Portugal and Spain show that party genetic models are important in shaping interaction between parties and groups, leading to a variety of interactions, especially between right- and left-wing parties (Lisi, 2019*b*). Yet, in Spain the degree of innovation is higher due not only to the emergence of new political actors (Barberà *et al.*, 2019), but also to the consolidation of stable policy communities that interact with parties more on the basis of information exchange than favouritism (Molins *et al.*, 2016; Aguilar, 2020). Finally, empirical evidence for the Italian case shows that interest groups have been able to adapt to an increasing fragmentation of the policy-making process, acting as a strategic actor in the policy cycle, thus establishing even more pragmatic and contingent relations with political parties (Lizzi and Pritoni, 2019). This process was reinforced by the huge changes experienced at the party system level after the onset of the Great Recession.

The general objective of this study is to unveil the diversity of party–group interactions and the main drivers that account for different types of linkages as well as to inspect whether or

not the Great Recession has had some homogenization effect. In light of the findings discussed above, we can formulate four broader hypotheses. The first is that new and old parties display different levels of proximity with regards to interest groups (H1). In particular, new parties are more likely to present a lower level of closeness compared to more traditional actors. On the group side, we expect to find closer ties for groups that rely more on formal contacts (at the institutional level), that privilege insider strategies and that have a longer experience (H2). In addition, we expect party–group proximity to be stronger for left-wing than for right-wing parties due to the ideological and historical legacy of the ties between communist and socialist parties on the one hand, and trade unions on the other (H3). Finally, we posit that there are still substantial differences in terms of party–group links across countries, and that the economic crisis has affected this variety given its differential impact on Southern European democracies (H4).

Data and methods

As mentioned in the previous sections, party–group linkages are operationalized differently depending on the approach and conceptualization. By far the most common way of studying this topic is through the analysis of party statutes (see Poguntke, 2002; Allern and Verge, 2017). Another approach seeks to examine party–group ties in the parliamentary arena, for example through MPs' profiles (Celis *et al.*, 2016; Celis and Mügge, 2018), or through appearances in parliamentary committees (Chaqués-Bonafont and Muñoz Márquez, 2016). While these studies have emphasized the party side, interest group research has relied on surveys of organized interests to analyze their interaction with party actors (e.g. Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017). Clearly, the main limitation of these approaches is the asymmetrical analysis of party–group ties. In order to consider both actors as a dyad, thus avoiding any bias, we innovate previous research by implementing an expert survey.

To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have employed expert surveys to examine the interaction between interest groups and political parties. The first analyzes Italian interest groups and their influence on policy-making (Pritoni, 2015). The second work relying on an expert survey is the study conducted by Charalambous and Lamprianou (2016), which examines the linkage between radical left parties and civil society in those European countries most affected by the 2008 economic crisis (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, and Portugal). Both studies contribute to qualifying conventional wisdom and to identify the conditions that might affect the relations between parties and groups.

In order to collect information on party–group ties, we conducted an expert survey in the main Southern European countries, namely Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The survey was implemented in four steps. The first was the identification of the most relevant political parties and interest groups. It was quite easy to identify the political parties as we decided to include the five most important (i.e. highest vote shares) parties with parliamentary representation. Therefore, we excluded minor parties as well as regional forces. The selection of interest groups was more problematic given the enormous variety of organized interests that can establish some kind of relation with political parties. For the sake of parsimony and in order to optimize the comparability across countries, we decided to include only the most important economic groups, distinguishing between trade unions and employer associations. Although we acknowledge that the variety of interest groups is much wider and that the number of groups that play a relevant role in the policy-making process is certainly higher, we decided to restrict the choice for two main reasons. First, economic interest groups are the type of organizations that dominate interest systems in these countries (see Molins *et al.*, 2016; Lizzi and Pritoni, 2017). Second, it would be impossible and too much demanding for experts to assess party–group relations for a wide variety of group types. From this viewpoint, we chose to survey up to six peak organizations that have

Table 1. Population (sample) vs. survey respondents – distribution by country

Country	Population (sample)	Valid responses	Return rate (%)
Greece	34	14	41
Italy	42	22	52
Portugal	40	20	50
Spain	39	14	36
Total	155	70	45

Source: Own elaboration.

traditionally played an important role in their respective political system.[3] Our choice was validated with the aid of secondary literature and advice from country experts.[4] Therefore, we compare groups that are comparable in terms of 'party-political relevance' and organizational resources, yet not in terms of type of membership (corporate vs. individual).

The second step consisted of assembling a list of specialists whom we considered sufficiently qualified to be an expert for our study. The most important requirement was that the expert had published an article or book on interest groups in the past 10 years. The publications did not have to be in English because the surveys were all translated into their original language. In order to assure us that experts had detailed knowledge of a given country, we circulated the master list among the members of the project 'From Representation to Legitimacy: Political Parties and Interest Groups in Southern Europe' and canvassed for recommendations. If these recommendations met the first requirement (which they nearly always did), we included them in our master list of experts. In total, we assembled a list of 155 names (see Table 1). For each country, we aimed to have 10 completed questionnaires. Although no fixed number is required for an expert survey, Huber and Inglehart (1995: 76) suggest that one should obtain a minimum of five experts per country; this strategy was empirically supported by Gabel and Huber (2000) who show that various expert surveys converge on their estimates for parties' overall ideological orientation. As clearly demonstrated in column 3 of Table 1, we have a sufficient number of experts for each country, with all countries meeting the goal of 10.

Given the complexity and multidimensionality of the topic, the final list of specialists with proven knowledge on the main objects of analysis – political parties, trade unions, and business associations –, included not only political scientists, but also scholars from different fields (e.g. sociology, history, and economics) and some journalists. It was necessary to extend the academic background given the fact that some Southern European countries have very few political scientists with expertise on interest groups and their relations with parties. We checked for the reliability of experts' responses by calculating the 'exact agreement index' (Charalambous and Lamprianou, 2016) and we found that no expert was completely out of tune with the rest of the selected specialists. Despite some experts failed to give score to all dyads, no one systematically avoid to answer to the 'closeness' question for all parties or groups included in the survey.

The third step involved drafting the questionnaire. Given that it was the first time an expert survey had been administered on such a topic, we could not rely on existing research. However, we were able to benefit from Allern and Bale's project on the links between trade unions and centre-left parties (Allern and Bale, 2017) for the measurement of 'party–group closeness', as well as the type of contacts established between these two actors. The survey provided a definition

[3]In Greece, we included two trade unions (GSEE and ADEDY) and two employer associations (SEV and GSEVEE); for the Italian case, we selected CGIL, CISL, and UIL (trade unions) and two business organizations (*Confindustria* and *Confcommercio*); for Portugal, we have two trade unions (CGTP and UGT) and three employer associations (CIP, CAP, and CCP); finally for Spain, we included CCOO and UGT (trade unions) and four business organizations (CEOE, CEPYME, ASAJA, and COAG). See the online Appendix for the full list of organizations and their abbreviations.

[4]These country experts were members of the research team within the project 'From Legitimacy to Representation: Political Parties and Interest Groups in Southern Europe' (PI: Marco Lisi).

of key concepts, such as 'closeness', 'influence', etc. to guarantee that all experts interpreted them in the same way. The final questionnaire included two parts. The first asked questions on the relationship between the main economic interest groups (national peak-level business and trade union confederations) and political parties, the interest groups' access to various actors and their capacity to mobilize and influence specific arenas and public decision-making processes. A second set of questions controlled for the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics and specific areas of expertise.

The final step was the survey administration. The surveys were fielded between September and December 2018. The questionnaires were sent out via e-mail to all experts included in the database. The platform used for the filling in of the questionnaires was the 1KA – OneClick Survey (https://www.1ka.si). Two e-mail reminders were sent out to all experts. If we take the number of experts we approached as a base and relate it to the number of completed questionnaires we actually obtained, the response rate ranged between 36% in Spain and 52% in Italy (Table 1).

The empirical analysis follows a two-step approach. First, we evaluate the relations between parties and groups by considering our key dependent variable, that is, the 'closeness' of party–group connections, based on the question 'what is the level of proximity that you believe to exist between the main interest groups and each political party?'. In particular, we examine the score each expert gave to the 'strength' of party–group interaction for every party–group dyad, on a 5-point scale (1: not close; 5: very close). Second, we perform a multivariate analysis testing the impact of key independent variables included in different models, regressing party-group closeness (dependent variable) on the main independent variables (see below). Our unit of analysis is each individual party–group dyad. We perform a linear regression analysis (ordinary least squares (OLS)) with country fixed effects, allowing us to control for unobserved country-level variation. The original data collected through the expert survey allow us to include unexplored independent variables related to the mobilization strategy of interest groups, in terms of access (i.e. the target of group activities) and type of contacts (both formal and informal). In the first case, we ask the following question: 'Please state how important are the following entities for each of the interest groups under analysis, when the latter aim to influence and participate in the processes of public and political decision-making'. We consider in the analysis only the response associated with political parties.[5] This variable (named 'mobilization parties') ranges from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important). As for party–group contact, we created a new variable ('type of contact') based on an index that measures formal (at the institutional level) vs. informal contacts (ad hoc meetings or exchanges).[6]

Findings

Descriptive analysis

We begin the analyses by presenting the aggregate scores for each party–group dyad. Starting with the direct measure of closeness between the two actors of intermediation, we see that there are interesting differences across countries. While Greece displays higher scores for party–group ties (2.57 on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 – not close to 5 – very close), Spain registers the lowest levels (2.21). This finding may be due to the presence of two recently created parties, *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* (C's), which have had insufficient time and resources to build solid bonds with the main interest groups. On the other hand, Italy and Portugal present roughly the same level of closeness (an average of approximately 2.4), indicating that these ties are rather weak, thus confirming the overall impression given by previous studies. Although these country

[5]We also asked the importance of the following actors: parliament, government, public administration, media, and professional consultancies.

[6]The question was: 'how important are the following types of contact for the interaction between these interest groups and the political parties?' The responses included six items (government, parliament, party, ad hoc meetings, informal exchanges, and other types of contacts) based on a 5-point scale (1: not important; 5: very important).

differences are not statistically significant, there are relevant disparities across distinct types of party and interest group. The general picture suggests that the economic crisis had not a homogenization effect, and this is in line with our fourth hypothesis. Moreover, as argued in more detail below, party system differences and distinct patterns of policy-making processes are important environmental factors that shape interactions between parties and interest organizations.

In order to shed more light on party–group relations, we examine the results country by country. Starting with the Greek case, we can make the overall observation that Pasok and ND have established more widespread links with the main interest groups, while KKE and in particular GD display distant relations with the selected organizations. It is also worth noting that, according to our experts, although Syriza has been able to build close linkages with GSEVEE, its relations with the main business association are very weak. Although this might be largely explained by the clientelistic politics pursued by both Pasok and ND (Afonso *et al.*, 2015; Sotiropoulos, 2019), the government experience under Syriza (2015–2019) has probably contributed to fostering similar ties even for this young political actor. In general, these findings resonate with Sotiropoulos' argument (2020: 41) that the recent crisis has contribute to diversifying the way interest groups connect to state institutions, going beyond the clientelistic/corporatist model. This was just one step further in the move towards an increasing disengagement of the main interest groups from the political parties. The radical forms of mobilization of civil society against the state that took place during the economic crisis not only enhanced this process, but it also led the main interest groups to legitimize the protest against governing parties.

In the case of Italy, the scores of party–group closeness are generally rather weak, especially for the recently created M5S. Usually considered a 'populist' party, the M5S was formed in 2007 and ran for the first time in national elections in 2013 (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Given its strong links with grassroots movements and online forms of mobilization (Mosca, 2014; Tronconi, 2015), it is not surprising to find very low levels of proximity between the M5S and traditional economic groups. The partial exception is its link with the *Confcommercio*, given that some of the policies advocated by the party are in line with the interests of autonomous workers. This is also the case of the *Lega*, which registers the highest level of closeness when we consider the same interest group. As expected, trade unions display distant ties with centre-right parties, but even in the case of the PD the figures always remain below 3, confirming the tension – if not conflicts – between the main centre-left party and labor organizations especially during Renzi's government (Mattina and Carrieri, 2017). However, it should be noted that the relationship between trade unions and the PD improved significantly after Renzi withdrew from party leadership and formed a new party. Regardless of the interpretation of our experts, under the new secretary Zingaretti (2019–2021) the leftist party has certainly become closer to CGIL than employer associations.

The results for Portugal provide sound confirmation of previous findings, namely the strong alignment between the radical left and trade unions, as well as the 'natural convergence' between right-wing parties and business organizations (Razzuoli and Raimundo, 2019). Indeed, the proximity between CGTP and PCP achieves the highest score (4.85), while the ties between the radical left (BE and PCP) and employer associations are the lowest (see Table 2). The PS displays stronger ties with the UGT, but it is also remarkable to find quite close links with business organizations, higher than the score for the main trade union (CGTP). Finally, according to the experts, the PSD is closest to the CIP, followed by the other two business organizations. This alignment has remained rather stable also during the economic crisis and reflects the higher mobilization potential of CIP compared to other employer associations (see Lisi and Loureiro, 2019). It is also worth noting that the fragmentation of the business sector has hindered a more robust right-wing party–group alignment as emerged in the Spanish case during the democratic regime. Overall, these findings seem to confirm the stability of system intermediation, which parallels the resilience of its party system during and after the Great Recession.

Table 2. Closeness between parties and interest groups in Southern Europe (averages)

Greece	*KKE*	*Syrizaa*	*Pasok*	*ND*	*GD*
GSEE	2.86	3.21	3.21	2.07	1.27
ADEDY	2.71	3.64	3.21	2.36	1.0
SEV	1.0	1.54	3.07	4.71	1.55
GSEVEE	2.15	3.15	3.15	3.38	1.7
Italy	*PD*	*M5S*	*FI*	*Lega*	
Confindustria	3.19	1.44	3.29	2.8	
Confcommercio	2.05	2.56	3.32	3.47	
CGIL	2.79	1.83	1.41	1.71	
CISL	2.74	1.72	2.33	1.84	
UIL	2.35	1.63	2.33	1.81	
Portugal	*BE*	*PCP*	*PS*	*PSD*	*CDS-PP*
CGTP	2.68	4.85	2.05	1.0	1.0
UGT	1.53	1.5	4.15	3.32	1.74
CCP	1.21	1.33	2.82	3.44	3.47
CAP	1.0	1.06	2.24	3.33	4.24
CIP	1.0	1.0	2.59	3.94	4.18
Spain	*IU*	*Podemos*	*PSOE*	*C's*	*PP*
ASAJA	2.5	2.0	2.63	1.25	3.0
CCOO	4.14	3.38	2.93	1.36	1.46
CEOE	1.46	1.31	2.36	3.86	4.14
CEPYME	1.77	1.54	2.57	3.54	3.79
COAG	2.2	2.5	2.63	1.0	2.29
UGT	2.93	3.0	3.86	1.43	1.46

Source: See Table 1.

Spain is a particularly interesting case because it includes two recently-formed parties of different ideological positions, namely *Podemos* and C's. As one might expect, the former displays close ties to trade unions, while C's seems to have more links with business organizations, especially CEOE and CEPYME. The same occurs with the right-wing PP, with the exception that this party displays higher scores with respect to ASAJA and COAG. On the other hand, PSOE displays rather weak ties with almost all interest groups, with the partial exception of UGT, with whom there is a stronger convergence. Finally, unsurprisingly IU has a great proximity with CCOO, but displays distant relations with business associations. This picture tells us two things: first, it is still visible the imprint of the cleavage structure in shaping party–group interactions. Indeed, the main political parties have sought to establish and condition social organizations during democratic consolidation (Verge, 2012). Second, mainstream parties seem less important in mediating the connection of interest groups to politics, and this can be interpreted as a result of the economic crisis that accelerated a longstanding process of the emergence of lobby-like interaction between economic interests and political power.

To what extent are parties the privileged targets of interest groups' strategies? We asked the respondents of the survey to evaluate the importance of different types of party contacts (government, parliament, central organization, or individual politicians) on a 5-point scale (1 – not important, 5 – very important). Also in this case, we can observe interesting differences both across countries and across organizations. In the Greek case, contacts with the government seem to be the most important type of interactions, followed by party leaders or organizations (Table 3). On the other hand, informal contacts are regarded as less important. The pattern is quite similar in Italy, although the distinctions across different forms of relations are less evident. Contacts with government are particularly important, but in this case other institutional actors seem to play a significant role, even more important than for political parties. As far as Portuguese groups are concerned, the most noteworthy finding is the different patterns displayed by trade unions and employer associations. Although all groups seem to privilege governmental

Table 3. Type of contacts between interest groups and parties

	Formal contact in parliament	Formal meeting with government	Formal meeting with parties	Meeting with other institutional actors	Informal contacts	External and ad hoc events
Greece						
GSEE	2.71	3.75	3.43	3.5	3.0	2.29
ADEDY	2.57	3.88	3.57	3.43	3.0	2.14
SEV	2.57	3.88	4.14	4.25	3.71	3.14
GSEVEE	2.75	3.78	3.63	3.89	3.0	2.75
Italy						
Confindustria	3.0	3.63	2.86	4.07	3.92	3.27
Confcommercio	3.0	3.5	2.83	3.92	3.67	3.07
CGIL	3.5	3.81	3.57	3.93	3.46	2.73
CISL	3.42	3.81	3.5	4.0	3.85	2.86
UIL	3.33	3.88	3.57	3.71	3.46	2.64
Portugal						
CGTP	4.1	4.5	4.11	4.0	2.86	2.89
UGT	4.0	4.7	4.11	4.0	3.71	3.11
CCP	3.8	4.9	3.56	4.11	4.0	3.44
CAP	3.78	4.89	3.63	4.0	4.0	3.25
CIP	3.7	4.9	3.44	4.11	4.29	3.33
Spain						
ASAJA	3.2	4.4	3.2	3.2	4.0	2.6
CCOO	3.44	4.56	3.89	3.56	4.29	3.11
CEOE	3.56	4.44	3.67	3.56	4.29	3.33
CEPYME	3.56	4.44	3.67	3.56	4.29	3.22
COAG	3.2	4.4	3.2	3.2	4.0	2.6
UGT	3.44	4.56	3.89	3.56	4.29	3.11

Source: See Table 1.

contacts, business organizations seem to rely more on informal contacts than on formal meetings with political parties. Finally, according to our experts informal contacts and government meetings are equally important in Spain, but there are no significant differences among the other categories.

Explanatory analysis

How can we explain the variation in the expert evaluation of the party–group relationship? We use the average score for each party–group dyad as the dependent variable and we regress it on several independent variables deemed relevant in the literature for understanding the closeness between parties and groups. The baseline model includes three variables. First, we distinguish between group types, using a dummy variable that differentiates trade unions (which take the value 0) from business organizations (1). Second, we consider the difference between old and new parties, measuring this item through a dummy variable that takes the value 0 for new parties, and 1 for old parties.[7] Third, we also control for government participation, a dummy variable with a value 1 if the party participated in government before 2018 (and 0 otherwise). Finally, we control for distinct countries and we weight the results according to ideological position of each expert on the left-right scale.[8]

[7]New parties are considered as those new forces that emerged after 2008, when the Great Recession began. This is considered an important benchmark in the reshaping of Southern European party systems. See the online Appendix for more details.

[8]We use the standard question that asks the respondents to place themselves on the 11-point scale (0: left; 10: right). It is worth noting that we did not include a measurement for the level of confidence experts had regarding their responses, both for technical reasons and for keeping the questionnaire shorter.

Table 4. Explaining party–group ties (OLS coefficients)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Variable	*B*	SE	*B*	SE	*B*	SE
(Constant)	1.22**	0.57	−1.08	3.02	1.025*	0.61
Group_type	0.591**	0.20	0.195	0.27	1.02***	0.22
Party_new	0.653***	0.23	0.653***	0.23	1.172***	0.33
Government_particip	0.065	0.22	0.065	0.22	0.214	0.18
Portugal	−0.25	0.30	0.036	0.39	−0.592**	0.26
Spain	−0.077	0.29	0.24	0.39	−0.478**	0.26
Italy	−0.312	0.31	−0.161	0.50	−0.608**	0.28
Age (groups)			0.443	0.38	–	–
Type of contact			−0.181	0.50	–	–
Mobilization parties			0.248	0.60	–	–
Age (parties)			–	–	−0.405**	0.18
Vote share			–	–	0.025***	0.01
Ideology			–	–	0.098**	0.04
Trade union × Left			–	–	1.874***	0.29
R^2	0.11		0.11		0.47	
(*N*)	(94)		(94)		(94)	

Notes: (1) Dependent variable: 'closeness'; (2) *$p < 0.10$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.001$; (3) Country: Greece as the reference category.
Source: See Table 1.

The regression analysis displayed in Table 4 reports the main results. The basic model (second column) shows that whether the party is a new or old one matters. In particular, older parties are associated with stronger links to group organizations, thus supporting hypothesis 1. One of our control variables, namely group type, also achieves statistical significance, suggesting that business groups tend to display (according to experts' eyes) higher level of closeness to party actors.

Moving to the analysis of group-related variables (see model 2), none of them achieves statistical significance. Neither the age of foundation (measured through its logarithm) nor the importance of parties for interest group strategy (gauged through a question included in the expert survey, see the variable 'mobilization parties' in the previous section) displays a statistically significant coefficient. Moreover, it is worth noting that our measure of party–group closeness is not associated with the type of contacts these actors establish, even when we include the linkages – established by the statutes – between the central party organization or the parliamentary group, on the one hand, and organized interests, on the other (as measured by Allern and Bale, 2017). This means that the statistical analysis does not support our second hypothesis.

The regression results show that the variance explained is relatively low in the first two models. Consequently, we add specifications by including party-related variables. On the one hand, as noted in the literature review, the age of party organizations seems particularly relevant for explaining the closeness of party–groups ties. We operationalize this variable by considering the foundation year of each party, including its logarithm in the statistical model. On the other, we enter in the equation the vote share for each party (operationalized as the percentage of votes obtained in the lower Chamber), as suggested by the rational approach. According to Allern and Bale (2017), this is an important dimension that is expected to favour party–group ties. In addition, we include a variable for party ideology, using as indicator the position of parties on the 11-point left-right scale based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES).[9] Finally, we add an interaction term between the type of group and the ideological position of the parties (distinguishing between left vs. other parties), with the idea that trade unions display historical linkages to left-wing parties. This variable aims to control for left wing-union dyads vs. not left-wing union dyads.

[9]As a robustness check, we also test an alternative measure of ideology, distinguishing between left, centre, and right parties. However, this operationalization does not substantially change the results.

The results indicate that, although still parsimonious, model 3 does a good job in explaining the variation in party–group linkages. Indeed, several factors account for party–group closeness. Contrary to what we expect from the literature, group type is strongly associated with the intensity of this relationship, suggesting that business groups generally display stronger ties with political parties. As mentioned in the previous section, this is due mainly to the relatively strong alignments between business organizations and right-wing parties. In addition, we also corroborate the closer association between old parties and interest groups, as new parties tend to be more distant from the main peak organizations.

The interaction term between trade unions and left-wing parties indicates that their connection is particularly strong. This seems to confirm a common wisdom in the literature, in particular the importance of the legacy – especially in Southern European countries – of the linkage between left-wing parties and the main trade unions. Our results suggest that this is indeed the case as indicated by the positive coefficient. Finally, the vote share shows a significant association with the degree of closeness between the two types of political actors. This means that the higher the electoral strength of the party, the greater the strength of party–group linkages. Although this runs against the findings of Allern *et al.* (2017: 323), the results are not directly comparable because their analysis is limited to the link between trade unions and left-of-centre parties and relies on a different set of countries. Considering the electoral basis of mainstream parties included in this study and the challenges that have emerged in the electoral arena after the economic crisis, we can speculate whether this finding reflects the broader process identified by Kirchheimer (1966) long time ago towards an increasing interaction between (non-partisan) interest groups and political parties. Indeed, the need to secure access to a variety of interest groups for financial and electoral reasons was one of the main transformations highlighted by this scholar in his seminal contribution. The trans-class appeal of catch-all parties and the longing of organized interests for increasing (or maintaining) their power can be interpreted as powerful incentives to establish connections.

One particular aspect deserves further exploration, namely country difference and, in particular, whether there are statistically significant differences in the way groups interact with political parties in distinct contexts. Our results suggest that the main difference is between Greece and the remaining countries. As mentioned in the descriptive analysis, Greek groups systematically display stronger ties than those shown in other Southern European countries. However, no statistically significant effects can be found when we add interaction terms between our main independent variables and the conditional effect of countries. This is the case, in particular, of the variable 'party size' and ideology. Contrary to what we found for the Dutch and the Danish cases (Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017), party system characteristics – namely the patterns of government and the degree of polarization (or extremism) – do not seem to be relevant intervenient variables that shape the collaboration between parties and groups in Southern European countries. One possible interpretation for these negative findings is the high level of instability and unpredictability of party systems in a region particularly affected by the Great Recession; this had a huge impact on the reshaping of patterns of competition and government through the rise of new parties and the formation of new government coalitions (Bosco and Verney, 2017; Casal Bertoa, 2019).

Conclusions

This paper has considered the types of relations between parties and interest groups in Southern Europe. It is widely held that these ties are relevant to various aspects in modern democracies. However, very few studies to date has tried to systematically and comparatively measure these ties avoiding subdiscipline bias. Although most studies recognize the contingent nature and ad hoc basis of party–group interactions, this research aims to identify more general patterns of this relationship and their main explanatory factors. We seek to do so by relying on original data collected through an expert survey.

The results stemming from the empirical analysis confirm previous findings and shed some new light on the linkage between parties and groups. Overall, as previous studies have emphasized (Allern, 2010; Allern and Bale, 2017), there is much variation in the ties between parties and organized interests both across countries and party–group dyads. A first important finding is that business groups are considered to have relatively strong ties with political parties, which seems to contradict conventional wisdom. Their links seem to be as strong as – or even stronger than – those between trade unions and left-wing parties.

In an attempt to explain the conditions that favour the establishment of party–group linkages, we tested several models. The results indicate that new parties tend to display weaker ties, whereas old parties still display the legacy of the links to the main interest groups established during democratic consolidation. It is true that these ties have generally evolved towards an increasing weakening, but these links are still visible, especially those corresponding to societal cleavages. Besides this, the type of interest groups is also important. Although economic associations are, in general, more likely (compared to trade unions) to strengthen their ties with political parties in Southern Europe, this is also true when we consider the dyad composed of trade unions and left-wing parties. Overall, these findings resonate with Allern and Bale's (2017) comparative analysis of party–union dyads in advanced Western democracies, which not only tells us that historical roots are germane for explaining why these parties are more or less distant from traditional union allies, but also that pragmatic factors (e.g. the electoral relevance of parties) are important. Although our study cannot make a more in-depth analysis of each party–group dyad and lacks a more qualitative assessment, we believe that the general pattern can be explained by the instrumental incentives of the two sides to establish more or less close ties. In other words, it is plausible that the resources each side can offer the other – in terms of votes, financial or material support, as well as policy influence – have a considerable influence in determining the proximity of ties between parties and the main organized interests. Indeed, the party's electoral strength is an important variable that accounts for party–group closeness. On the other hand, group-related characteristics are not associated with the relation between parties and organized interests. Finally, macro-level factors, which can be related to both institutional arrangements and/or economic characteristics, seem to be of less importance to the intensity of party–group collaboration in Southern Europe.

These considerations allow us to assess the role played by organizational links in fostering party–group linkages. Overall, it seems that the closeness between the two actors of intermediation does not depend on the existence of organizational bonds. Indeed, very few parties in Southern Europe present any type of permanent structure to maintain regular contacts with interest groups. On the one hand, informal relations seem as essential as formal ties. On the other, political parties seem to be important – in the eyes of interest groups – only insofar as they can be a vehicle to access government offices, thus allowing them to have some influence on the policy-making. One limitation of this study is that it considers only the main interest groups, while it would be interesting to include also professional associations and civic organizations (like NGOs).

We are aware that these are preliminary findings that must be validated, and expanded, in subsequent studies. In addressing the problem of measurement of party–group ties, we believe we recast traditional discussions about the important interactions between these two actors. However, the results suggest that further research is required on this topic to fully understand party–group ties in Southern Europe and beyond. More specifically, three distinct lines of research might be promising. The first line involves making comparisons with other countries in order to test our hypotheses more systematically and to achieve broader generalizations. The second line is the inclusion of other independent variables to explain party–group ties, especially related to group characteristics or the features of the economic setting. Finally, the third line of research should focus on the importance of policy positions. From this viewpoint, future research should strive to make a more systematic analysis of the extent to which the ties between

parties and groups reflect their ideological/political convergence and the prioritization of similar policies.

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