

A Return of Mainstream Politics?

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The Greek election results of Sunday 21 May 2023 had a seismic effect, with many commentators juxtaposing them to the elections of 2015, when Syriza's dramatic victory marked the overhaul of the pre-crisis political system. This time, the circle of crisis politics is said to be complete. Syriza's devastating defeat with a margin just above 20% supposedly marks the end of a polarized era and the desire to return to 'mainstream politics'. Syriza did not adapt its discourse for 'normality', commentators hastened to add, justifying those who persistently spoke of a 'left-wing parenthesis'. While concealing a dose of wishful thinking, these positions build on something real, which is the victory of New Democracy in almost all geographic and demographic categories. New Democracy [won](#) by a significant margin in the working-class districts of Athens and Piraeus, in traditionally center-left regions of Greece, such as Crete, it won among the young, 17-24 year old voters, and even among the unemployed – all examples where Syriza used to be particularly strong. Yet, as these elections were exceptionally conducted under a directly proportionate system, New Democracy came short of absolute majority in the parliament. Unwilling to engage in a coalition with the third party, the old social democratic Pasok, New Democracy pushed for a new round of elections in June, this time with an electoral law that guarantees a bonus of seats that will likely lock its absolute majority. In this article, I share some first thoughts on this electoral result that defied expectations, including on what is at stake in the foreseeable future.

With the benefit of hindsight: Deficient political strategy, wayward communication

In a recent [poll](#), 43% of respondents attributed the victory of New Democracy to weaknesses of the opposition. To some extent, Syriza pays the price for following its predecessors in imposing harsh austerity measures during its years in government in 2015-2019. Syriza's current narrative that these policies were forced from the outside appeared not to convince or exonerate. Yet, this does not fully explain how Syriza lost over 11% of support compared to 2019, while being in opposition.

Political strategy and communication provide some explanatory tools. Placed in a quandary between its left, movement-based past and its expressed desire to articulate a social-democratic, programmatic opposition to New Democracy, Syriza appeared to lack distinct orientation, conviction, and vision. In terms of political strategy, during its time in government and in opposition, Syriza did not manage to build broader political alliances that would ensure the rooting of its political message within various social spaces. It remained unable to successfully permeate trade unions, local and municipal governments, or the media, while even its influence within universities waned after the referendum of 2015. Desperately trying to emulate Pasok in its historical references and discursive style, Syriza appeared to forget that

Pasok forged its broad social alliances during the early 1980s, largely thanks to a program of fiscal expansion that was inconceivable during Syriza's tenure. Forming such alliances in times of fiscal contraction proved exceedingly difficult. Syriza's progressive transformation from a party that relied on and fueled social mobilization, to a hierarchical party structured around its leading team made this task dependent on the success of a central political message largely disconnected from grassroots social struggles.

Adding insult to injury, this political message proved largely unconvincing. Unwilling to articulate a radical agenda that would involve some restructuring of the economy, Syriza's political program differentiated itself from New Democracy primarily in the extent of certain social provisions. Its most ambitious suggestion was arguably the regaining of public control in what used to be the public electricity company, only reversing the course of the last two years. Syriza did not capture the opportunity presented by the overarching political landscape of the green transition, the European Green Deal, and the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan to set a more profound social-democratic agenda of [instrumentalizing markets for social objectives](#). Overall, Syriza's agenda did not present a more holistic vision that would counter or reform the already existing reality – and, among those aspiring to solely manage reality, voters chose the certainty of those already doing it and who appear dedicated in doing it.

In terms of communication and political campaigning, Syriza chose to focus on an emotive language reminiscent of the polarization of the years of the financial crisis, primarily criticizing the government as opposed to proposing a vision and an agenda. With the benefit of hindsight, it becomes clear that New Democracy's largely positive agenda of “steadily, boldly, forward” was much more successful among voters, who appeared eager to leave crisis politics behind. This miscalculated campaign was coupled with several inconsistencies and last-minute mistakes that further harmed Syriza's trustworthiness.

Of course, the electoral result cannot be explained only through the shortcomings of Syriza. New Democracy managed to move past major crises and mishandlings – including a major [wiretapping scandal](#), the recent tragedy of a [train crash](#) exposing the fragility of national infrastructure, repeated claims of [violent pushbacks](#) against refugees, or allegations of [corruption](#) and lack of transparency over public finances – to achieve a colossal victory, using the economy as its spearhead. Capitalizing on the lax economic monitoring and the temporary fiscal expansion that followed the pandemic, New Democracy adeptly crafted the long-craved impression of a return to pre-crisis normality, with economic growth and reduced unemployment counterbalancing inflation, high trade deficits, escalating living costs, and increasingly unaffordable accommodation. At the same time, New Democracy was responsible for real advances in the digitalization of public administration. It is, of course, also notable that New Democracy benefits from consistent and quasi-consensual support by major media, with Greece consistently appearing in the [lowest ranks of freedom of press](#) rankings.

What is at stake?

On the one hand, New Democracy appears to have realized the zeitgeist of 'post-neoliberalism' and increasingly relies on a discourse that places the state as a central actor in the economy – promising, for example, a stronger public healthcare system and a rise of the minimum wage. On the other hand, it persistently winks at projects of privatization, including in the heavily charged, for the left, fields of education or public utilities. The vice president of the party already expressed the intention to initiate the process of constitutional amendment, should New Democracy gain the necessary 180 (out of 300) seats in the upcoming elections – with the implication, among others, of amending the provision that ensures the public character of higher education. One can speculate that the forthcoming Mitsotakis government will attempt such a type of hegemonic politics, cementing its gains in the political centre, focusing on ensuring the stability and safety that voters have missed during more than a decade of crisis, while steadily advancing the interests of private capital. Within the context of the European Green Deal, national economies are bound to undergo transformations that will have power-conferring and distributive effects. A strong New Democracy government likely means that green transition projects will be shaped by market expansion and an ideology of trickle-down economics, even if coupled with partial measures of social protection.

At the same time, a central concern arising from the extent of New Democracy's victory is the prospective lack of strong opposition. New Democracy showed a disregard for institutions of opposition and safety valves of critique, culminating in the major scandal of wiretapping and the pressure exerted to autonomous regulatory agencies to contain it. An eclipse of substantive opposition could potentially pave the way for similarly strong-armed tactics that threaten democratic institutions and the rule of law. The question of the quality of opposition emerges even more forcefully in the resurgence of Pasok, which increased its percentage to 11,5%. Pasok has declared its ambition to regain its hegemonic role in the center-left, setting the stage for a challenge to Syriza in the upcoming elections of June. Besides the risk of a further fragmentation to the left of New Democracy, the agenda and structural dynamics of the old social democratic party points to the possibility of an opposition that is fundamentally complementary to New Democracy.

These elections made clear that there is currently no articulated, alternative vision of social ordering that could inspire and successfully challenge the current constellation of social forces. While many on the left lament the increasing conservatism and individualism of Greek society, it is worth remembering that electoral trends emerge in dialectical relationship to social movements and political agendas. Rather than products of unknown forces, such trends may be reversed through political action and vision that have recently been missing from the political landscape.

