

Elections 2012: the Greek Political System in Flux?

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The Greek political system has come under intense scrutiny in the past few years. The two successive electoral contests that took place on May 6 and June 17 opened a Pandora's box so to say of democratic ailments: extremism, populism, witch-hunting, and fear-mongering. Viewed from the perspective of five successive years of recession, unprecedented levels of austerity, and acute economic uncertainty, this should come as no surprise.

Both May 6 and June 17 elections cemented major partisan realignments in the Greek political system under the shadow of continued austerity and immense economic contraction. They came down to a heated fight between the unfazed defenders of the *status quo* and the ardent proponents of change. Rampant unemployment, rising taxation, and plummeting economic activity have over the past years altered the make-up of the Greek electorate giving rise to new or previously dormant political cleavages: between the young and the old, the urban and the rural areas, the tax payers and the tax evaders, the public and the private sector employees. Successive years of extraneous, sporadic, and poorly designed austerity measures have upended all notions of social justice. As a result of extensive popular disenchantment and heightened political stakes, both campaigns were characterized by high levels of polarization and populist rhetoric in lieu of substantive debate over policies and necessary reforms. The more pragmatic policy-savvy voices were muffled by the cacophony of self-serving scare tactics, vilifying rhetoric, and unbalanced press coverage both at home and abroad. The people were presented with stark, often bogus, dilemmas, compounded by a clutter of highly technical and misguided at times information over issues they never had to consider before.

Following the inconclusive outcome of the May 6 elections, parties had to modify their positions accordingly so as to accommodate growing popular discontent with austerity measures. As a result, there was a parallel shift in the agenda from arguments in favor or against the bailout agreement to promises over attainable levels of renegotiation and commitments to different bargaining postures in the upcoming European summit talks. However, there remained important differences in the narratives: centrist and liberal pro-bailout parties put more emphasis on the *endemic* causes of the crisis (corruption, market distortions, economic mismanagement), while the more extreme anti-bailout parties chose to focus their campaigns on the *systemic* factors, namely the flawed design of the European Monetary Union. Voters in response were cornered into voting with their minds rather than their hearts; the June 17 vote was a (prospective) pre-emptive vote against the other side, rather than a (retrospective) punitive vote of existing records of effectiveness and conduct. The vast amount of half-hearted strategic voting came at the expense of smaller parties that did not surpass the 3% parliamentary threshold in May despite tallying a record-high vote total of 20%. The remaining five parliamentary parties (including the far-right Golden Dawn party) managed in varying degrees to maintain their May 6 vote shares, with the notable exception of the anti-European Communist Party (KKE) that suffered heavy electoral losses.

Some have argued that this was just 'business as usual' with the survival of the two-party system under a different guise. Even though SYRIZA, a coalition of radical left-wing factions, has supplanted the socialists of PASOK as the government-in-waiting, having been able to take advantage of the deep fissures in the ranks of the formerly dominant socialist party, it is still too early to judge whether we have reached a stable constellation of powers. The spikes in the vote shares of the two leading parties (New Democracy and SYRIZA) came as a direct consequence of i) the electoral bonus for the first party, ii) the strategic pre-electoral consolidation of small parties around these two center-right and center-left poles, and iii) the engineered perceptions of highly disparate expected policy outcomes (i.e., in or out of the Eurozone). Yet, within the current context, it would appear disingenuous to suggest that the latest elections solidified the entrenchment of a new form of bipolarity in the system.

This is for a number of reasons : first, mirroring the strategic considerations that inhere in a sequential two-ballot system, the majority of people who voted for each of the two party did so for tactical reasons without any particular partisan affiliation as such; second, there remain a number of prominent political figures lingering within the moving cracks of the political system; third, there is no liquidity left to support the erection of clientelistic structures as buttresses for a new two-party system. For all practical purposes then, the current party system remains in a state of flux.

The increase in the number of effective parties and vote dispersion signaled the electorate's will for a more collaborative and synthetic approach to government and the introduction of more checks and balances into the system. It soon became evident that the range of politically feasible coalition outcomes expanded the second time round under the specter of continued ungovernability and disorderly default. Albeit politically unsustainable before, the coalition between New Democracy, PASOK, and the Democratic Left suddenly became the core outcome of post-electoral coalition talks. PASOK was naturally delegated to junior partner status, while the Democratic Left portrayed itself as the moderate representative of the anti-bailout forces. All three parties were fast in achieving a convergence of policies as part of an explicit coalition pact. SYRIZA arguably achieved its best possible outcome, namely an exponential rise in its support just short of winning the election. A party undergoing a rapid transformation from a small opposition party of protest to a credible party of government will be better served to first prove its metal as a shadow government with a distinct and credible policy agenda before taking on the reins of government.

That being said, key government offices are seen as ticking time bombs that threaten to destroy the long-term careers and reputations of their holders. In contrast to the senior partner in the new coalition government (New Democracy), the other two government participants (PASOK and Democratic Left) refrained from placing any of their elected parliamentarians under the precarious circumstances of ministerial tenure. On the face of it, this new government garners the support of a majority of voters, is compact in size, draws on technocratic expertise, and enjoys a strong and fresh pro-European mandate despite years of recession, foiled reforms, and weak administrations. Yet, the unrelenting market pressures, the dwindling room for political maneuvering, and the emergence of a militant, rabble-rousing main opposition party do not bode well for the medium-term prospects of this new government. The fluidity of the external environment and the smothering debt burden have ushered in a period of instability and increased volatility in the Greek political system.