

The Erosion of National Democratic Politics?

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The results of the May 6 parliamentary elections have heralded the end of an era in its post-dictatorial democratic politics (*metapolitefsi*) characterized by alternation in power by two catch-all parties, cartelization of government, and heavy statism. The people have expressed a strong aversion to established political elites of the center-left PASOK and the center-right New Democracy (whose vote shares added up to 32%, less than half of their sum total in the 2009 elections). The rise of SYRIZA, a pre-electoral coalition of left-wing movements, has been the major story so far. However, the existing electoral system – designed by New Democracy in 2006 as a buttress for an entrenched two-party system and stable single-party government – has led to a significant distortion of the democratic will in terms of the translation of vote shares into seats (New Democracy gained more than a third of the seats with only 19% of the vote).

Recent developments in Greek politics are giving us a glimpse into the future. The Greek political system has been strained beyond its breaking point by the exigencies of its international commitments. As a result of increasing fiscal and supply-side conditionality and complex policy interdependence, the dimensionality of electoral competition has dwindled. The scope for unilateral political action has shrunk to such an extent that political rhetoric has been greatly polarized around stark political dilemmas between pro- and anti- Europeanism, pro- and anti- austerity, populism and realism, democracy and technocracy. The electoral shift towards extremist and radical parties (e.g., the extreme right-wing Golden Dawn party witnessed a meteoric rise in its vote share from less than 1% to 7%) provides clear evidence of the radicalization of Greek politics, a natural consequence of the unprecedented economic recession (the country experiencing its fifth successive year of negative growth).

Some have been making the argument that the early elections were ill-timed and that Greece should have followed a purely technocratic approach in the form of a Monti-like government with a clear medium-term reformist agenda. In fact, the experiment of the Papademos government, bestowed with a very narrow mandate and a limited time horizon, proved relatively successful in the fulfilment of its mission, namely the completion of the debt restructuring and bailout negotiations in 2012. Yet, it remained shackled in its reform capacity by the existing political configuration of powers and the heavy politicization of the state apparatus. Simply put, the antecedent conditions for stable non-partisan technocratic rule were not there. The last parliamentary elections in 2009 took place at a time where the full extent of the crisis had not been widely publicized; the Papandreou government had not been voted into office with an explicit austerity mandate. As a result, it resorted to fickle policies and sporadic measures of fiscal adjustment, plagued by a distinct lack of democratic legitimacy and true political will for reform. The waning two-party system was not able to overcome the opposition of deep-rooted institutional actors, client groups, and favored constituencies eager to defend the status quo till its last throes. This paralyzing misalignment of the political system with popular will and the need for a renewed political agenda had to be brought to light and democratically expressed at the ballot.

However, the pro-European reflexes of the Greek electorate cannot be refuted by the latest electoral results. The overall commitment to the Union remains a mainstream political orientation in the country (the Greek Communist Party and the Golden Dawn party being the only ones openly calling for exit from Europe). The impending electoral reform towards higher proportionality and the democratic purge of entrenched political elites (around 180 out of 300 recently elected MPs are first-timers) seem to usher in a new era of ideologically compact parties, unstable post-electoral coalitions, and ill-defined coalition pacts. The specter of continued ungovernability will tend to force parties into uneasy coalitions with weak reformist mandates. The reform capacity of the country will thus remain subject to speculation.

The polarizing rhetoric of the latest electoral contest gave vent to much popular frustration over a range of issues,

such as debt restructuring, unemployment, and immigration policy, that fall beyond the nation-state's problem-solving capacity. All mainstream party platforms evoked the use of supranational policy instruments and rested on dubious assumptions about the outcomes of future intergovernmental negotiations. The people were thus made aware of the limits of their national democratic system in providing sound and credible answers to the hardships of their everyday life. Such deep frustration gave rise to social unrest, civil disobedience, and of late political anti-systemic radicalization.

It is thus that Greece may be viewed as a harbinger of the gradual erosion and de-legitimization of national-level democracy in the face of unfettered, crisis-ridden globalization. This vicious cycle of social unrest and political instability may only be broken by agreements and initiatives at the supranational level, which will essentially change the rules of the game and alter the contours of political debate. By further centralizing policy domains that currently reside within the purview of national governments (immigration, taxation, unemployment, welfare policy etc.), one may thus pull the carpet underneath populist and radical rhetoric and limit its appeal to small pockets of society. All the tools and answers at this time of crisis lie in Berlin, Paris, and Brussels.

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