

Greece implodes as protests drown out its European vocation

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Greece's elections, held on Sunday, saw both the previously most popular parties punished by voters weary of austerity measures. [Kevin Featherstone](#) reviews the results, finding that public anger has led to the rise of populist parties, some of which are on the extreme right, and that any government that is formed may well be weak and short-lived. But, despite the popular opposition to Greece's bailout conditions, most Greeks still back the Euro and EU membership.



On Sunday, Greece went on a binge-party, drinking to forget the nation's economic woes and indebtedness. Voters wanted to punish the two main parties that have governed the country for the last four decades, holding them responsible for the austerity measures they're suffering. So, the party that had won the previous elections – the centre-left PASOK – saw its vote fall by 31 percentage points to just 13%. The main opposition party – the centre-right New Democracy (ND) – scrambled into first place with just 18.8%, down by 15 percentage points. ND leader Antonis Samaras has the mandate to seek a coalition, but his options are limited: not even a combination of ND and PASOK – continuing the recent caretaker government format – can command a majority in Parliament and PASOK's leader, Evangelos Venizelos, has ruled this out.

The election produced shockwaves across the Greek political system, but if this was an electoral 'revolution', then it was desperately incomplete. Protest votes went to the far Left SYRIZA, with its populist attacks on Greece's bailout terms, making it the second largest party in Parliament with 17% of the vote. Its leader – the charismatic Alexis Tsipras – had identified himself with the widespread street protests of the last two years and will be given the mandate to form a government if Samaras fails. He has already made demagogic promises to not release it if the people on the streets wish him to soldier on.

Public anger also led to other populist successes. The Independent Greeks (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες), is a party led by Panos Kamenos, a former ND MP. He has suggested that the old guard politicians should be hung on street lamp-posts and has urged citizen arrests of them if they try to escape the country. The elections also saw the arrival into Parliament of the Golden Dawn party (Χρυσή Αυγή/Chrysi Avgi), a neo-Nazi party led by Nikolaos Michaloliakos. Its platform is anti-immigrant (Greece has become a 'jungle') and anti-austerity. At a post-election press conference, journalists that refused to stand for the entrance of 'the leader' were hustled out by a militant guard. The party's 21 MPs have vowed to wear their military berets as a bloc in Parliament.



The political sociology of the electoral upheaval carries warnings to Greece's leaders. Large proportions of younger voters – half of whom are unemployed – voted for the parties opposing austerity. Chrysi Avgi, for example, appeals to the ranks of the young, uneducated and excluded as the Front National has taken votes from the poor Paris suburbs.

The elections produced a majority vote for those parties opposing the bailout conditions. But, then, the campaign had placed the advocates of the plan on the back-foot: the public mood obliged all leaders – former Finance Minister Venizelos included – to promise to change the terms. To resist the tide against the continued austerity measures would have been political suicide.

Foreign critics will see the Greek election outcome as the height of irresponsibility by its leaders. Such a view is not without reason. The decision of Samaras to oppose the first bailout legitimised opposition to the austerity measures. It gave the signal that it was safe and sensible to think of another path for Greece. His later conversion to accept the second bailout seemed more tactical and opportunist than a retraction of his earlier principle. Likewise, Samaras' insistence on the recent caretaker government of Lucas Papademos being short-lived removed the opportunity to stabilise the economic situation and forced Greece into a crisis election. PASOK's former leader, George Papandreou, totally mishandled his initiative last December for Greece to hold a referendum on the second bailout. Yet, this could well have led to a public endorsement and a redrawing of political forces. Small centrist parties remained separate and proved unable to enter Parliament as potential coalition partners, even though in combination they could have done so.

Paradoxically, while Greece indulged itself in protest on Sunday, the electorate is still firmly behind membership of both the European Union and the Euro, according to the polls. Thus, what the elections expressed was a public anger against austerity and this had the unintended effect of drowning-out Greece's continued European vocation. This happened as mainstream, technocratic voices remained cowed and left the stage to the demagogues.

Populist appeals to 'the people' are so far failing to lead them to the answers. If Greece is not granted its next tranche of bailout loans, who will pay the salaries of state employees? After the elections, Greek banks are taking another big hit. There is no winning coalition in Parliament to exit the Euro; but then again it isn't clear that there is a government available to keep it there.

Even if a government can be formed after these election results, it is very likely to be weak and short-lived. The prospect is of further elections in June, hurried along by international worries. At that point, the election will not be so much about punishing past leaders as finding solutions to present problems. Last Sunday's indulgence cannot last.

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