

# Greece's elections have shown that the EU is actually a subversive force against the legitimacy of national democratic structures.

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**Nikitas Konstantinidis** examines Greece in the wake of the recent election, noting a deepening democratic deficit shown by a surprisingly low voter turnout. He argues that the root causes of the Greek predicament are deeply systemic and should be addressed as such.



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 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. The interested observer will of course also wonder about possible contagion effects, not only with respect to Greece's economic woes but also its political maladies. What are the root causes of the unfolding crisis and to what extent are they idiosyncratic, systemic, or a combination of both?

Both the 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: the young vs. the old, the urban vs. the rural areas, the tax payers vs. the tax evaders, the public vs. 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 at times misguided, information over issues they never had to consider before.

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:

1. the electoral bonus for the first party;
2. the strategic pre-election consolidation of small parties around these two center-right and center-left poles, and
3. 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 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.

One feature of the June 17 elections that *prima facie* appears the most surprising of all is the high rate of abstention of 37 per cent (up from 35 per cent in May). Notwithstanding instrumental cost-benefit explanations of the decision to vote, I regard this as a manifestation of a deepening democratic deficit. The gradual erosion of national sovereignty and the deep-rooted frustration with the state's inability to single-handedly tackle a range of festering problems (unemployment, fiscal imbalances, immigration, etc.) has left many people feeling effectively disenfranchised from the democratic process, without any real choice. The trite assertion that there are no dead-ends in democracy has started to ring hollow for Greeks suffocating under the straightjacket of Eurozone membership.

Greece is becoming a clear-cut example of [Rodrik's trilemma](#): financially integrated and economically interdependent polities will either have to relinquish their national sovereignty or their democratic institutions; something has to give! The effects of economic interdependence have long started to spill over to the political sphere rendering political integration and national democracy effectively incompatible. Ironically enough, we are witnessing the reversal of the EU's oft-touted democracy-enhancing role in its expanded periphery and its degeneration into a subversive force against the legitimacy of national democratic structures.

Greeks have been left wondering about their medium- and long- term existential prospects. Politicians and pundits alike are making the case that a long and painful process of fiscal consolidation and modernization of the Greek state is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the return to sustainable growth and prosperity. A new consensus is emerging across Europe that the only viable end-state of this process is that of full political and economic integration. Going back to the original question posed, if then most of the important answers lie abroad, this also implies that the root causes of the Greek predicament are deeply systemic and should be addressed as such. If the political forces of the center cannot show a way out of the Eurozone crisis, then its connecting ties with the periphery are bound to be cut loose.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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