

The recent election has left Greek politics deeply split

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[Spyros Economides](#) takes a look at Greek politics in the aftermath of the recent elections, finding that the middle ground is being increasingly eroded.

Greece's economic crisis and increasingly polarised public opinion fuelled much loose talk about the potential for civil war in the run-up to the repeat election of 17 June. This touched a raw nerve in Greece's public consciousness, invoking memories of the civil war which engulfed the country for three years in the late 1940s.



The question remains: is there a deep left-right split, or are current divisions in Greek politics of a different nature?

That civil war, from 1946 to 1949, pitted Greek communists against the monarchist "National" forces: a classic civil conflict between left and right which scarred the Greek political landscape. Defeated militarily in 1949, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) was banned from politics until 1974, when it was legalised as Greece entered its post-dictatorship democratisation.

By the late 1970s, the Greek left had found its voice through the increasingly popular socialist Pasok party led by Andreas Papandreou, which finally got into power in 1981. In the 31 years since then, the political scene has been dominated by Pasok – which has governed for 23 of those years – and the centre-right New Democracy party (ND). Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) has now supplanted Pasok as the dominant party of the left.

In a startling electoral leap, Syriza went from polling 4.6% in the October 2009 general election, to just under 27% this month, emerging as the main rival to the victorious ND party.

PASOK decline

This massive change in the political dynamics of the left is mainly a result of the blame attached to Pasok for the creation and dire handling of the economic crisis. Disaffected Pasok voters and the discontents farther to the left have abandoned their traditional party affiliations and shifted to Syriza.

Syriza has been cast as the successor to Pasok, as the "soft" or "centre" left party. Its leader is the telegenic Alexis Tsipras, prone to populist promises and rhetoric, and compared by many in style and tone to the young Andreas Papandreou. Syriza challenges the parties that are sticking with the EU/IMF austerity programmes – in particular New Democracy. Consequently, Syriza for many does not offer a "leftist" answer to Greece's economic problems, but a popular, nationalist one – an attempt to rescue Greece on Greek terms.

So the political debate in which Syriza has become a central player is not one of right and left. Rather, it is between those – like ND – seeking solutions to Greece's woes within the eurozone and through austerity and radical reform, and those – like Syriza – willing to risk Greek membership of the eurozone, and potentially the EU, by promoting unrealistic policies based on bravado and increased public spending.

Yet there is in effect a deep left-right cleavage in Greek

politics, enhanced by Syriza's rise. It may have embraced many centre-left, middle class professionals and public sector workers, but it remains at heart a party of the hard left. Syriza is a coalition of 12 groups, including the Communist Organisation of Greece (KOA), the Renewal Communist Ecological Left (AKOA) and the Movement for the United Action in Left (KEDA), which emerged from the KKE, as well as the more moderate Synaspismos. This core of the movement has aspirations which go beyond the current crisis and speaks a Marxist language from a different age. Many of them would be glad to return to the drachma and a big-spending state, with nationalised industry and banks.



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Search for solutions

ND by contrast offers European centre-right politics and economics, based on private enterprise and public sector reform, tempered by a history of clientelism and corporate statism. If you throw into this mix the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party, which has emerged from nowhere to claim 7% of the vote and 18 seats in parliament, what emerges is a picture of increasing division between left and right.

Greece is undergoing an extremely painful period of economic hardship, caused by a generation of economic mismanagement and exacerbated by debilitating austerity programmes. Now in its fifth year of recession, Greek society is desperately seeking a lifeline to cling to. Many believe that Europe holds answers to Greece's problems, and an amended austerity and reform package will lead Greece out of turmoil.

Significant numbers have sought solace in more nationally introspective parties, which portray Europe as part of the problem and are ideologically driven to consider market-based economics as a curse. Others have gone even further and embraced basic nationalism and even fascism in seeking solutions to their problems. In essence, the middle ground in Greek politics is being eroded.

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