

The radicalisation of lower middle class Greek families was the key to Syriza's victory

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A number of commentators have written on the extent to which Syriza managed to attract the backing of a wide section of Greek society in its election victory on 25 January. [Vasilis Leontitsis](#) writes that one of the key dynamics in the election was the support Syriza received from lower middle class families. He argues that while such families had tended to vote conservatively in previous elections, the net effect of the country's economic crisis was to radicalise this section of the electorate and push them toward parties with more radical platforms.



The recent national elections in Greece have brought about a major shift in the Greek and European political landscape. This is the first time that a radical left party has won national elections in Greece and, indeed, in Western Europe. This by itself is a major feat for [Syriza](#) and Alexis Tsipras, the party's charismatic populist leader.

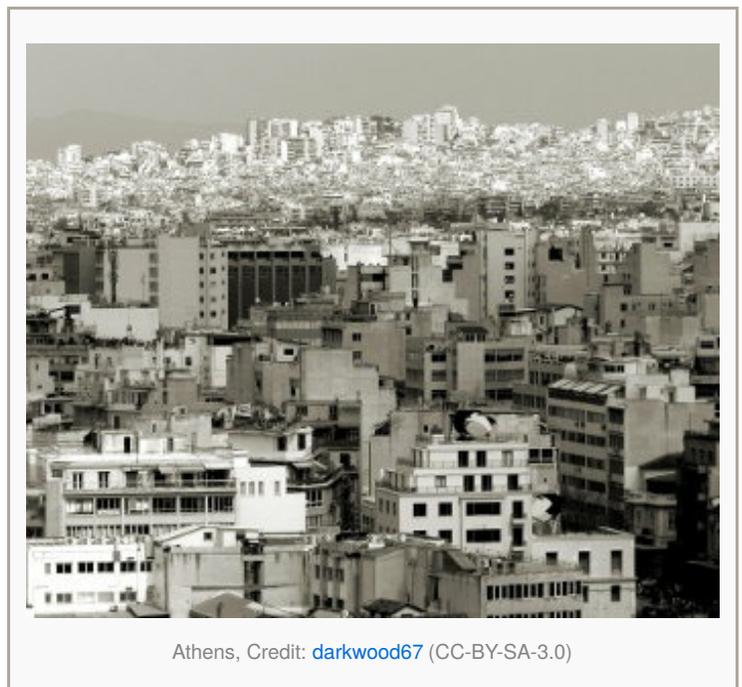
However, there is one aspect that the post-election political discussion has largely overlooked. This is that behind the radical shift experienced in Greece lies the fact that the average Greek family as a major institution of Greek society is not necessarily influenced by the ideological struggle between the left and the right. Naturally, there have been elements of ideational influence in recent elections. However, even more importantly, Greek families have shown practical concerns and have fought, in many respects, for their self-preservation.

The radicalisation of lower-middle class Greek families

The family was and still remains the cornerstone of Greek society. It is based on mutual help and symbiotic relations among its members. In a country where the state has never been able to provide a comprehensive social safety net, the family is perceived as an inviolable institution able to absorb external shocks when necessary. It has thus historically allowed its members to weather social and financial storms.

Nevertheless, after more than five years of increasing unemployment, household debts and a reduction in its disposable income, the Greek family is now struggling to perform this fundamental role. The number of jobless households has surged in the country: they now constitute almost 20 per cent of all households. Additionally, dissaving (i.e. spending existing savings to compensate for a lack of income) is now the norm. Hence, the ability to retain a healthy level of family income has been compromised.

Naturally, it is the lower-middle class families that have suffered the most. Such families constitute the backbone of Greek society. In the period after 1974, the so-called *Metapolitefsi* (post-dictatorship period), they managed to accumulate some modest assets. By the beginning of the financial crisis they were therefore relatively affluent by Greek historical standards. They enjoyed a decent standard of living



based on the solidarity ties of their members.

The relatively affluent lower-middle class families of the past have become the *nouveaux pauvres* of today – the new poor. They have lost heavily in terms of material wealth. Their financial assets have vanished, but they have retained a vivid memory of more financially secure times. To add to this, they also feel humiliated and betrayed by the traditional Greek political elites and their European partners. This has fuelled anger and has radicalised a segment of the population that has traditionally been socially conservative.

This part of Greek society tended, until recently, to avoid abrupt political change. Hence, the political discourse of the radical left used to drive such voters away. For years they voted either for [New Democracy](#), Greece's largest Conservative party, or for [Pasok](#), a centre-left party that has long lost its socialist roots. Both parties promoted similar policies, increasingly based on neo-liberalism or watered-down versions of it. As long as the financial foundations of Greek families were protected, through economic growth and clientelistic relationships, they were happy to retain the political status quo.

The acute financial crisis overturned this fine balance. The financial collapse of the average Greek household led to the collapse of old political appeals. The traditional political elites were de-legitimised and Greek citizens sought alternatives either in the far-right through [Golden Dawn](#), or in the radical left, namely Syriza. The latter, in particular, swiftly filled the political vacuum. It offered hope to a disillusioned electorate. It also offered the potential to reverse the measures that had crippled the financial basis of Greek households.

The average Greek family has nothing more to lose. It has nothing to be scared about. This is why New Democracy's attempt to generate anxiety over the economy in recent elections failed to work as a political strategy. With Greek families feeling lost, betrayed, and insecure, they were prepared to go to the extremes of the party system in order to express their resentment over years of hardship. They were therefore ready to embrace radical political alternatives, having dared to enter uncharted waters. Syriza's victory made this clear: that the electorate was ready to respond to the shaking of the most sacrosanct pillar of Greek society; the family.

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Note: This article is a reworked and extended version of a comment originally published in the [Greek Politics Specialist Group](#) (GPSG) pamphlet on the Greek elections. It 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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