

# Syriza's victory underlines the transformation of Greek political culture during the crisis

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*On 25 January, Syriza, led by Alexis Tsipras, won the 2015 Greek parliamentary elections and formed a new coalition government with another anti-austerity party, the Independent Greeks. **Gerasimos Karoulas** writes on the changes within Greek political culture which have occurred in Greece during the country's economic crisis and which were underlined by Syriza's victory. He argues that there has been a significant transformation in the nature of Greek political elites which will continue after the 2015 elections.*



In May 2010 the Pasok government in Greece signed the first [Memorandum of Understanding](#). The austerity policies that followed have fed into a deep crisis, not only on a socioeconomic level, but also at the level of politics. Greek political elites have undergone a significant transformation which has entailed, among other features, an emerging democratic deficit, the changing of recruitment networks of MPs, a high turnover rate of political figures, and a reduction in the kind of nepotism which had previously characterised some aspects of Greek politics. This evolution can to a large extent be evaluated and interpreted using academic approaches to the study of political elites.

Many of the concepts from this literature have been apparent in the Greek case. These include the notion of 'homogenisation', whereby once competing political elites negotiate a consensus in order to help retain their status. The insights of the German sociologist [Robert Michels](#) have also appeared relevant to Greece, which has witnessed the strengthening of elite level decision-making at the expense of other decision-making processes, such as those centred around party organisations, MPs in parliament, or the views of voters.

As Robert Putnam has [described](#), crises are also associated with the emergence of new recruitment channels for political elites, and the marginalisation of existing channels. This can be accompanied by the detachment of citizens from their traditional bonds with parties and the emergence of new political powers. As the 2015 Greek elections demonstrate, with the rise to power of [Syriza](#) and the collapse of previously dominant parties such as Pasok, the insights from this body of literature have in many respects held true for the Greek case.

## Greek political elites in transformation

The transformation of Greek political elites can be traced back to 2010, with the two parliamentary elections held in 2012 forming a crucial point in this process, which is still continuing through the 2015 elections. In the initial period of the crisis, [Pasok](#) and [New Democracy](#), then the two dominant political parties in the country, made a substantial effort to retain their power.

Although New Democracy, as the major opposition party to the Pasok government, originally took a negative stance toward the Memorandum, the party's position changed dramatically with the adoption of the [second Memorandum of Understanding](#) in October 2011. The political negotiations that followed led to the creation of a coalition government between Pasok, New Democracy and the far-right [Popular Orthodox Rally](#) (LAOS). This was a highly unusual situation for Greece in the post-junta period, which had maintained a strong tradition of one party governments. The coalition was necessary chiefly because both Pasok and New Democracy had lost a great number of their MPs as a result of the unpopularity of the requests now being made by the 'troika'.

Similarly, the political figures at the heart of the government managed to increase their power at the expense of other levels of decision-making, such as those built around party organisations, parliament and ordinary citizens.

The adoption of each Memorandum and the other agreements which followed were determined primarily by the party elites of Pasok and New Democracy, with inadequate participation from those in the party organisation or parliamentary members. As a consequence, a large number of members in the parliament, in addition to several figures who participated in party committees, resigned their positions. In a number of cases MPs and committee members were simply marginalised on the basis of the “urgent necessity” of the matters under discussion.

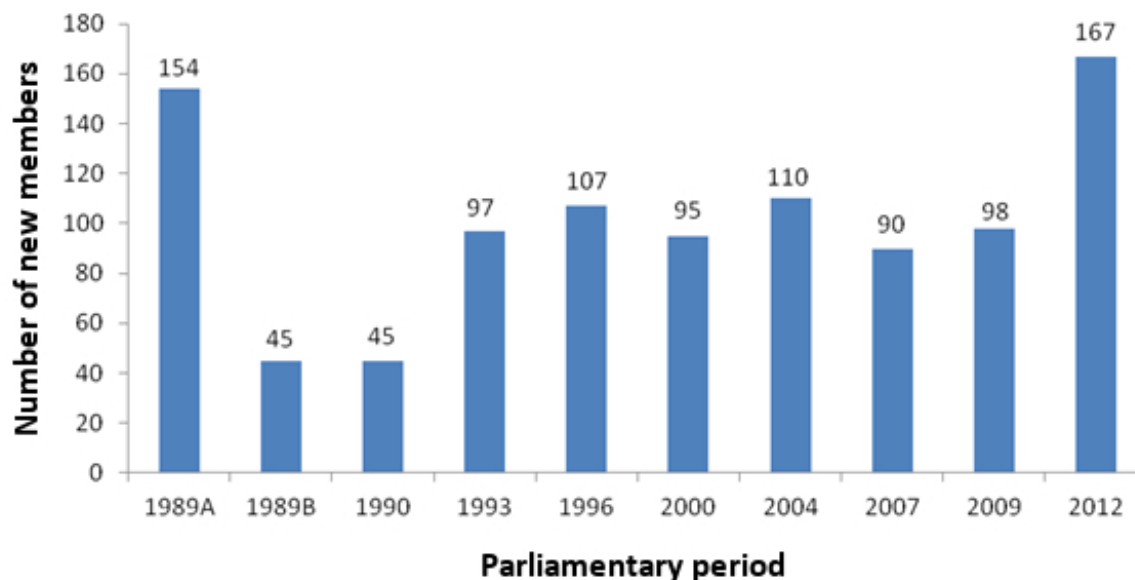
The limited role played by citizens is apparent in two respects in particular: first, in the fact that elections were only conducted in 2012, despite the substantial protests which had occurred since the beginning of the crisis; and second, in the cancelling of the referendum proposed by then Greek Prime Minister, George Papandreou, following pressure from both within Greece and abroad. These conditions created a heightened legitimacy crisis regarding the right of the government to make such important decisions without the approval of Greek citizens. The opposition was mobilised on both a political level, through parties such as Syriza and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), and on a societal level through the protests referred to above.

The transformations that took place during the first two years of the crisis were evident in the national elections in May and June 2012. The two party system was essentially replaced by a fragmented party system, with new political parties such as the [Democratic Left](#) (Dimar) and the [Independent Greeks](#) emerging, while existing parties such as Syriza considerably increased their power as a result of the detachment of citizens from Pasok and New Democracy, who lost almost half of their voters in comparison to the elections of 2009.

Although New Democracy won the elections, it was necessary to include Pasok and Dimar in a coalition to achieve a parliamentary majority. Syriza became the mainstream opposition party and the most powerful party to oppose the Memorandum agreements. Syriza’s empowerment, alongside other parties’ success, resulted in a huge turnover in the personnel of the Greek parliament, with almost half (48.6 per cent) of the new members being elected for the first time. An indication of how many new political representatives achieved their first electoral success is shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Number of newly elected members in Greek politics (1989 – 2012)**



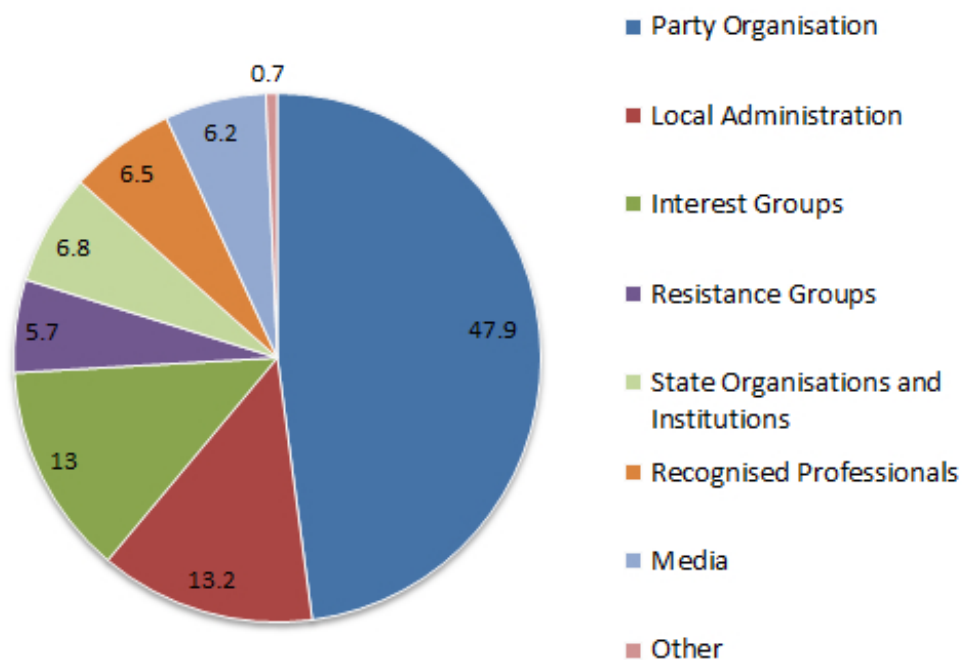
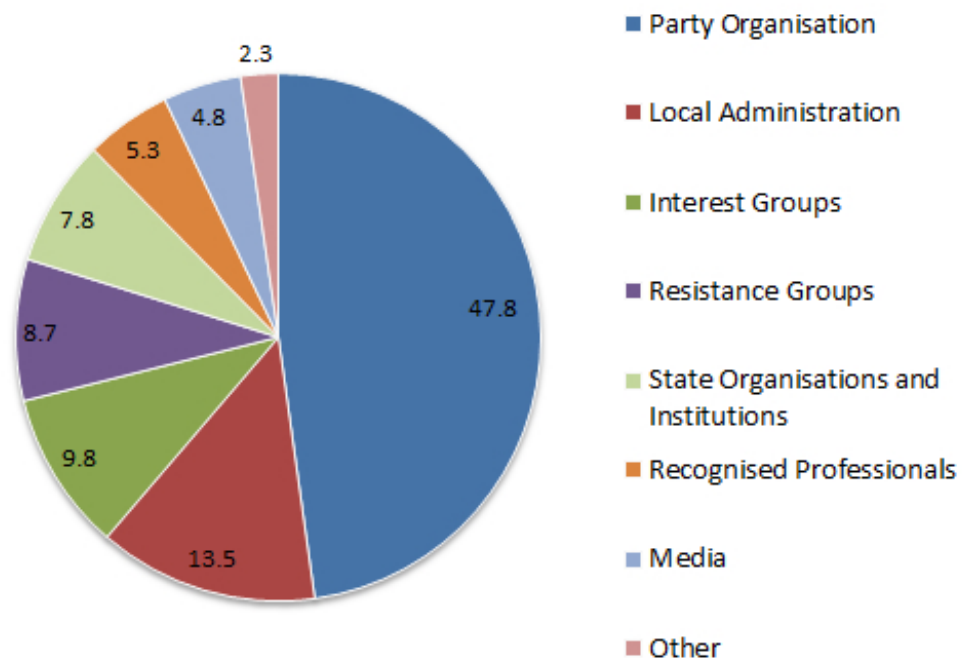


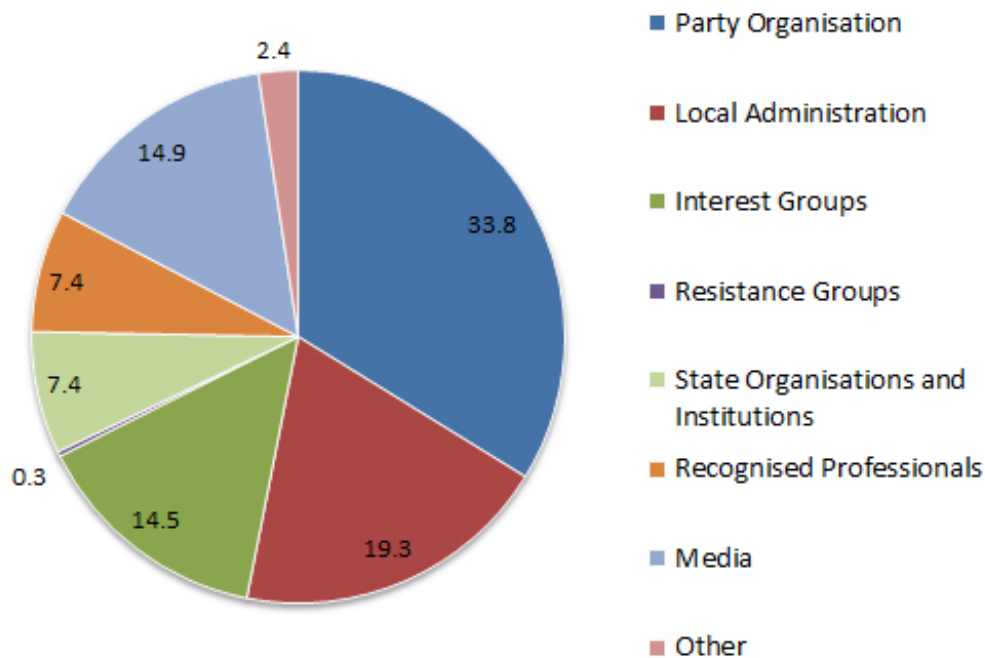
**Note:** The chart shows the number of individuals who were elected or appointed for the first time in each parliamentary period (i.e. the period between the previous Greek legislative election and the election shown in the horizontal axis). The figures show both representatives elected to the Greek parliament, non-parliamentarian members of the government, and new representatives elected by Greece to the European Parliament. Figures are from the author’s doctoral research.

In addition, the prevailing conditions had a significant impact on the profile of new political figures as social groups which had only marginal representation in the Greek parliament, such as women and younger citizens, now had a more powerful role. The political situation also altered the recruitment networks of MPs. Traditional recruitment channels became marginalised in favour of links to civil society organisations and social movements, which until the 2012 elections had only a limited presence. Figure 2 shows the change in recruitment channels over time for MPs in the Greek parliament.

**Figure 2: Change in recruitment channels for Greek MPs**

- Pre-1990
- 1991-2000
- 2001-2010





**Note:** Each chart shows the percentage of Greek MPs who had sat within the parliament in the indicated period who had been recruited from a given sector.

The crisis conditions also had two other serious consequences. First, the political system itself suffered rejection from a large part of Greek society, which is shown by the significant numbers of citizens who chose not to participate in elections during this period. Second, the crisis has also witnessed growing popularity for the far-right Golden Dawn, which has managed to gain support through an anti-system and populist discourse, particularly from those associated with the Greek military and those in lower socio-economic classes. Golden Dawn received 6.9 per cent in the 2015 elections, putting it in third place behind Syriza and New Democracy.

All of these effects were evident over the last two and a half years and the results of the 2015 elections have underlined their relevance. With Syriza winning power, the continuing transformation of political elites and the political culture in the country will undoubtedly have a considerable impact both on Greece and across Europe in the months and years to come.



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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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