

# This month's elections will underline the fundamental changes to the Greek party system that have occurred since the crisis

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*Greece will hold parliamentary elections on 25 January, which were called after the incumbent government, led by Antonis Samaras, failed to elect a new President in December. **Nikoleta Kiapidou** assesses the lead up to the vote, and the contest between Samaras' New Democracy and the radical-left Syriza to be the largest party in the Greek parliament. She writes that regardless of which party comes out on top, the elections will underline the fundamental changes to competition within the Greek party system which have occurred since the beginning of the country's debt crisis.*



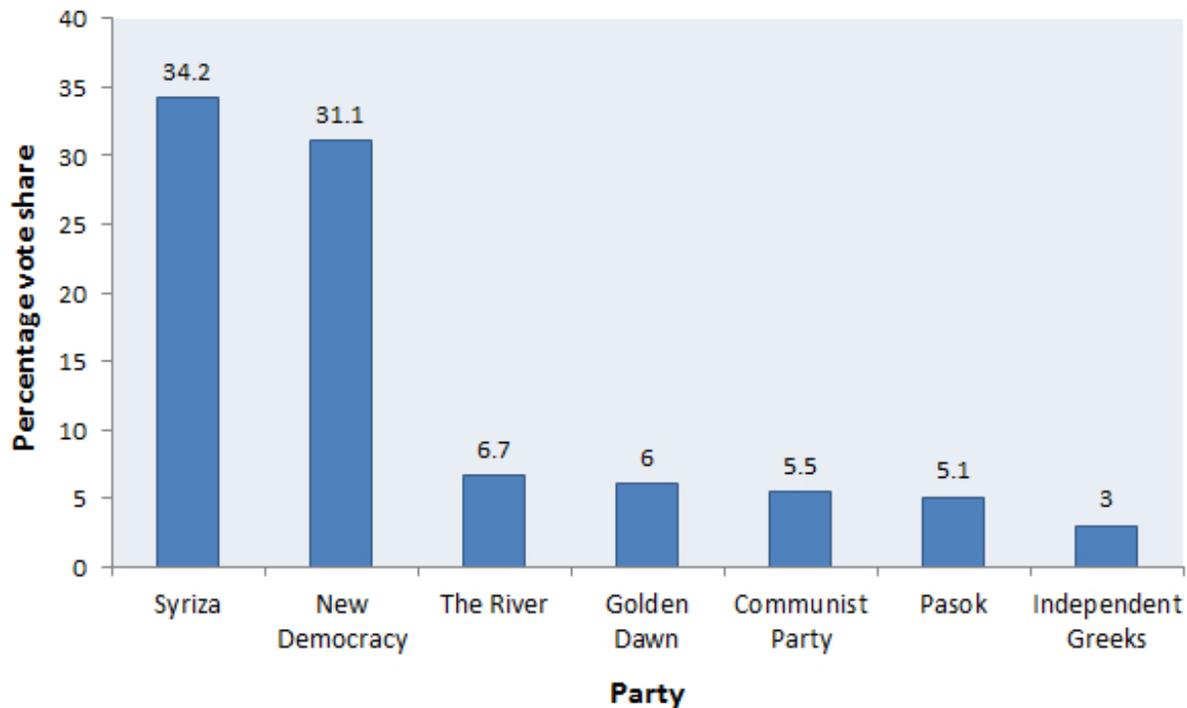
Two years after the crucial 2012 general elections in Greece, a snap election will be held again in the country. On 25 January Greek voters will have to make a decision between continuing with the conservative government led by **New Democracy** or giving the radical left **Syriza** party an opportunity to govern for the first time. The once stable Greek party system has gone through a significant transformation during the last five years and more changes are likely to be seen in the near future; the 2015 elections will bring about more innovative patterns in Greek politics to add to those we have seen thus far.

## Background to the election

Although only in office for two and a half years, the current Greek coalition government of New Democracy and the social democratic **Pasok** were forced to dissolve parliament after failing to gain the majority required for the selection of a new President. The government's candidate for President, Stavros Dimas, was supported by only 168 MPs out of 300, with 12 more being needed to avoid elections. According to the Greek constitution, the failure to elect a President leads automatically to general elections and opposition parties took advantage of this rule by voting against the government's candidate, despite the governing parties' pledges for agreement on the matter. After the result, Antonis Samaras, Greek Prime Minister and New Democracy leader, accused Syriza and the far-right **Golden Dawn** of leading the country into early elections which the Greek people had little appetite for.

The announcement of the snap election triggered an immediate chain reaction. Financial markets reacted negatively to the news, while discussions about a so called 'Grexit' began again in earnest, given the potential for Syriza to become the largest party in the Greek parliament. The opinion polls have consistently shown Syriza in the lead ahead of New Democracy, although the difference between the two is currently narrowing. Under these conditions, just as it was in the 2012 Greek elections, the upcoming vote will be highly important not just for Greece, but for the rest of Europe as well. The Chart below shows predicted vote shares for each party based on a 'poll of polls' conducted between 2 January and 10 January (compiled by **Metapolls**).

## Chart: Poll of polls for the Greek parliamentary elections (2 – 10 January)



**Note:** Only parties which had 3 per cent or higher are shown. Support for other parties stood at 8.4 per cent. For more information on the political parties see: [Coalition of the Radical Left – Unitary Social Front \(Syriza\)](#); [New Democracy](#); [The River \(To Potami\)](#); [Panhellenic Socialist Movement \(Pasok\)](#); [Communist Party of Greece \(KKE\)](#); [Golden Dawn](#); [Independent Greeks](#). Polls are compiled by [Metapolls](#) and were conducted by Alco, Pulse RC, Metron Analysis, Metrisi, Kapa Research, Interview, Rass, Public Issue, GPO, Marc, MRB between the dates of 2 January and 10 January.

European actors are now divided between two different responses. First, there are those who fear a far-left Greek government which will not be willing to negotiate the bailout under existing terms and which will put the whole of the Eurozone in danger. Immediately after the announcement of the election, a number of news reports focused on the ‘Grexit’ angle and the EU’s and Germany’s reaction to it.

On the other hand, there are those who actually hope for such a far-left government to gain power in Greece. A Syriza government may facilitate the kind of anti-austerity discourse backed by some left-wing leaders in Europe who have been disappointed by the experience of other politicians on the left, such as François Hollande. Left-wing parties have gained support in other countries, most notably Podemos in Spain, who now have a realistic prospect of winning the 2015 Spanish elections. According to these voices, a Syriza victory could herald a new era of fighting against austerity, privatisation and the bailout programmes overseen by the Troika.

Aside from its implications for the rest of Europe, the election will also be particularly important for Greece itself. The long-standing Greek two-party system was already shaken in the previous 2012 election. Back then, new patterns of fragmentation and polarisation, along with a coalition government that no one would have imagined just a few years before, were the outcomes. New parties, such as [Democratic Left](#) and the [Independent Greeks](#), were created and managed to gain seats in parliament. Extreme right-wing forces also appeared and, of course, Syriza gradually became a significant political power.

While the previous elections occurred in probably the most difficult time for Greece regarding its economic situation, the upcoming elections find the country in an advanced stage of the bailout agreement. In 2012 the country was still

trying to secure its position in the middle of the crisis and Greek voters were awkwardly swinging from one party to another. In 2015, voting behaviour will be a less hot-blooded process and the outcome will form a more complete picture of what transformations are really taking place in the Greek party system.

### **The European issue in domestic political narratives**

For now, the short pre-election period has introduced a highly polarised debate between New Democracy and Syriza. This debate has been initiated by, but not shaped around, the European issue. It could be anticipated that the impact of the Eurozone crisis on Greek politics would be apparent in any form of political discussion in the country. However it is not Europe per se, but rather the way in which the European issue and domestically salient issues interact, which is shaping the political narrative. The issues which emerged on the agenda as a result of the crisis are still present, but they are used by the main parties in different ways in order to attack the opposition and attract voters.

New Democracy uses the European issue in two ways in particular: to promote its own effective crisis management when in government and to create a feeling of insecurity in relation to the potential for Syriza to become the governing party after 25 January. The party's key argument rests on the competence of Antonis Samaras. Successful negotiations with the Troika and the EU, and even an improved financial situation, have, it is argued, been guaranteed by the coalition government. At the same time, this narrative has been used to attack Syriza. By citing the left-wing profile of its opponent, New Democracy has aimed to create an environment of insecurity and fear over the potential economic collapse and exit from the euro which could accompany a Syriza victory.

On the other hand, Syriza also uses the European issue for its own purposes. Alexis Tsipras rarely loses a chance to criticise the ineffectiveness of the austerity measures and bailout agreements imposed by the Troika and implemented by the Greek government. These arguments, however, are not used only against the EU's behaviour, but also against New Democracy's policy making during the economic crisis. For Tsipras, a Syriza victory will help bring economic growth and social equality to the country: elements that vanished during the crisis during fruitless negotiations between the various Greek governments and Europe.

However, the debate over the European issue itself still remains quite abstract. Despite the polarised debate surrounding austerity, no mainstream party, except for the Communists, has expressed an openly anti-European or even anti-euro stance. Syriza's anti-austerity arguments focus mainly on the incompetence of the Greek government, while New Democracy's pro-European discourse is largely about its own ability to deal with Europe efficiently. Not even the far-right Golden Dawn, which represents the most extreme views in the Greek parliament at present, is openly against European integration. The debate on Europe is not only vague and lacking in specifics, but is also curiously absent from political discourse unless it is linked to leading domestic policy concerns. Europe thus plays a role in Greek politics mostly when it is tied up with salient domestic issues.

### **New lines of competition**

While Europe watches developments in Greece, the increasingly polarised debate between New Democracy and Syriza has also introduced new lines of competition in the Greek party system. With Pasok, the former centre-left opponent of New Democracy, now relegated to the status of a minor party in the parliament, Syriza has emerged as a new political power in the country. The other new political parties that emerged during the crisis, however, will also now have to demonstrate whether they are capable of stabilising their position.

The latest polls indicate Democratic Left, which was a member of the joint coalition government in 2012, will likely fail to make it into the parliament, while the right-wing Independent Greeks also face significant challenges. Meanwhile the far-right Golden Dawn, despite a number of its MPs currently [being in prison](#) awaiting trial, is likely to remain a force in the parliament. The newly formed centrist [To Potami](#) party (translated as 'The River') is also likely to gain a significant number of seats and could become a member of a new coalition government.

Whatever happens on the day after the election one thing is certain: party competition in Greece will never be the same. The impact of the Eurozone crisis on Greek politics was such that it not only shook the traditional lines of competition, but also pushed the system toward a completely new situation. Pasok, one of the most well established centre-left parties of Europe, will now struggle to receive more than five per cent of the vote. A coalition government, while largely out of the picture before 2012, seems the most realistic option, with the exact combination of new parties joining the government remaining to be seen. Greece now has the appearances of a country entering a new political era, which the upcoming elections may well confirm.

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## About the author

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