

# The European Parliament elections in Greece will take place against a backdrop of increasing disillusionment with politics among Greek citizens

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23/04/2014

*The Greek party system experienced substantial change during the Eurozone crisis, with Pasok, the country's main centre-left party, suffering a particularly damaging loss of support. Ahead of the European elections in Greece, [Eri Bertsou](#) previews the vote and assesses what the elections might mean for the Greek political landscape. She writes that with a fragmented party system and increasing disillusionment with politics among Greek citizens, it is extremely difficult to predict what the final results might be.*



With only a month to go until local and European elections, Greek political parties are now in election campaigning mode, yet most citizens have remained unenthusiastic. This month has seen both encouraging and worrying news headlines coming out of the country. On the positive side, Greece has [returned](#) to the international financial markets after four years. However, earlier this month a Golden Dawn MP leaked a [secretly filmed conversation](#) between himself and the Prime Minister's chief of staff discussing possible political motivations behind the judicial inquiry into the Golden Dawn's criminal activities.

Despite such developments, surprisingly little has changed for Greek citizens, who are now living through the 6<sup>th</sup> year of an economic recession with heavy austerity measures and [unemployment](#) reaching 27.3 per cent.

## The fragmented political landscape

As a result of the economic crisis, the national elections of 2012 caused a major change in the political landscape. This brought about an increased [polarisation and fragmentation](#) of the Greek party system, a collapse in the support of the centre left Pasok party, the rise of Syriza as the main party of opposition to New Democracy, and the highly documented rise of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party. Since then, the coalition government led by New Democracy has held on to its thin majority and hopes to capitalise from the recent favourable economic headlines, but overall, the fragmentation of the political landscape persists.

Ahead of the European elections, polls suggest that the two 'big parties' will take away a very modest share of the vote, as they have failed to mobilise their core voters and do not appear to have mustered any campaign dynamic. Voting intention responses show New Democracy and Syriza are likely to go head to head with 1-2.5 percentage points difference, in either direction, depending on the polling date and on the main news headlines.

In fact, [a poll](#) conducted for Sunday newspaper To Vima, on the two days before and the day following the Golden Dawn tape scandal, showed a reversal of the previous 2.1 per cent lead for New Democracy, to a 0.7 per cent lead for Syriza. This further demonstrates the fluctuating mood of the electorate and the very low levels of core party mobilisation. Prediction figures from [PollWatch](#) presented in Table 1 below, should be treated with caution, as they are calculated based on valid votes only.

**Table 1: Polls for 2014 European Parliament Elections compared to 2009 results**

<i>Party</i>	<i>Parliamentary group</i>	<i>Predicted vote share (%)</i>	<i>Predicted seats</i>	<i>2009 vote share (seats)</i>
Syriza	GUE-NGL	27.4	6	4.7 (1)
New Democracy	EPP	25	5	32.3 (8)
To Potami	NI	10.7	3	N/A
Golden Dawn	NI	8.2	2	N/A
Communist Party of Greece (KKE)	GUE-NGL	7.4	2	8.4 (2)
Pasok	S&D	6.5	2	36.6 (8)
Independent Greeks	EFD	4.1	1	N/A
Democratic Left	S&D	2.6	0	N/A
Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	EFD	-	-	7.1 (2)
Greens	Greens/EFA	-	-	3.5 (1)

**Note: Predictions are from [Pollwatch](#) and are based on an average of polls conducted between 3 April and 9 April, calculated for valid votes only.**

One thing that has changed over the course of the past few months is the appearance of a new political party, [To Potami](#) (The River), led by St. Theodorakis, a leading journalist behind popular televised documentaries focusing on social issues across Greece. It is currently the third biggest party, capturing 8-10 per cent of voting intentions for the European elections. Undoubtedly, its biggest asset has been a clean ‘apolitical’ image, although the lack of a left-right position and a clear political programme generates scepticism among many citizens. In fact, the party will only present its candidates for the European Parliament elections, but not in the local elections which will be held at the same time.

The creation of a political party free from any political connections should not come as a surprise to anyone who has been following Greek politics and society. Citizen indignation with politicians and the party system in general has been rife among Greeks of all ages and political preferences. Although ‘To Potami’ is currently capitalising on this popular anti-establishment sentiment, it appears to do so in a more positive – and an outright pro-European – manner, than either the opposition Syriza or the extreme right have done so far.

To Potami’s political stance is interpreted to be closer to the political preferences of centre and centre-left voters. [Recent polls](#) show that 48.1 per cent of citizens consider the party to be a ‘positive or mostly positive’ development for the country’s political scene, with 42.4 per cent claiming they believed it was a ‘negative or mostly negative’ development. Even more tellingly, its leader St. Theodorakis enjoys the highest score in the current political leaders’ feeling ‘thermometer’, however, this can be mainly attributed to the fact that – until recently – he was a popular household name and not a politician. The argument remains that, in its current form, the party is unlikely to make any real political impact in the national scene.

### **What does this mean for Greece and Europe?**

European elections do matter for the people of Greece, the political parties and Europe itself. For the first time, the label of ‘second order’ elections might not be the most appropriate way to describe the EP elections in Greece. Ever since the first bailout package, the country’s relationship with and place within the European Union, as well as the Union’s shape and vision, have dominated national politics. Unfortunately, the fact that the issue of the European Union has preoccupied Greek citizens does not override their profound disappointment and anger towards their political system.

In reality, the main argument to be made on the back of polling data is the volatility and uncertainty of the Greek electorate. A recent European election [poll](#) registered almost 20 per cent of undecided voters and respondents who claim they will not vote in the upcoming election. If we add to this the number of polled citizens claiming they will cast an invalid or blank vote and those who intend to vote for another smaller party that will fail to pass the 3 per cent threshold (together 8-10.5 per cent of responses), the picture coming out from Greece ahead of the European elections is one of reluctance and unpredictability.

These responses could also be interpreted as citizens' unwillingness to engage with the campaign and electoral process. In popular interviews conducted last autumn for the purposes of my doctoral research, many Greeks expressed intense disillusionment and frustration with their politicians and the political parties. On the subject of elections, many appeared to dread the moment when they would have to make a voting choice, feeling invariably unrepresented by the political options available. Such feelings of aversion towards the political alternatives are more powerful for citizens who consider the vote as a fundamental civic right and obligation and create an overwhelming sense of exasperation, even guilt and resignation, which spills over to the electoral process itself.

### **Election and party campaigns**

In this backdrop of popular disappointment, political parties may attempt to mobilise voters by making emotional appeals. The opposition Syriza is expected to exploit sentiments of widespread anger and blame towards the former governing parties. The party's first televised [spot](#) captures such negative emotions and portrays Syriza as the most reliable political answer, although the party's attitude towards the EU has softened. An emphasis on anger and punishment, coupled with a dangerous dose of pseudo-nationalist pride, has been the main line of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn party, which is currently predicted to win 6-7 per cent of the vote and up to 2 seats in the European Parliament.

On the other hand, the governing coalition of New Democracy will have to place its emphasis on the progress of reforms and the benefits coming from the extensive sacrifices made by the Greek people, in order to voice more optimistic attitudes about the future. Although negative sentiments are widespread and fear often acts as a stronger mobilising factor than optimism, the rapid spread and relatively broad popularity of To Potami indicate that – apart from intense aversion towards the traditional political class – a large group of Greek citizens may prefer a more positive discourse on the changes the country needs.

For the first time, in this European Parliament election Greek citizens will be able to pick their representatives from open party lists, which will include many candidates outside the political sphere, such as athletes, artists, academics and other professionals. Yet the mood of the electorate is muted, a sign of disappointment and frustration toward the political class, weariness of austerity measures and economic insecurity, as well as severely destabilised political identities. This shouldn't be hastily interpreted as apathy towards Europe or toward the pressing issues of financial and political integration the Union needs to deal with in the coming years.

For Europe, the stakes are high in this European Parliament election. Current polls cannot give a clear indication of which political groups will dominate the 21 seats Greece will hold in the European Parliament, but they do depict a vivid image of uncertainty in the country. Regardless of the results, every political party is expected to declare themselves a winner, yet all evidence points to an ailing relationship between citizens and their representatives on all political levels that, by default, makes everyone a loser.

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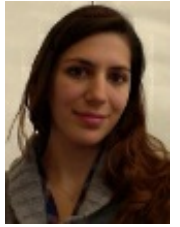
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