

The rise of the Golden Dawn in Greece

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A voluminous literature on radical right wing parties in Europe predicts that parties like the Golden Dawn are doomed to electoral failure.

Parties with a strong neo-Nazi or neo-fascist profile and violent activity are known to be penalized rather than rewarded by voters. Unlike radical right-wing parties, extremist right-wing parties tend to scare voters away with their authoritarian views and their association with violence. Extremist right-wing parties like the British National Party, the German National Democratic Party, the Spanish National Democracy and the Italian Forza Nuova have repeatedly failed to gain representation in national parliaments.



Defying scholarly expectations and the electoral experience of its European counterparts, the Golden Dawn achieved an electoral breakthrough in the May and June 2012 elections, attracting almost 7% of the vote, and global media attention. The imprisonment of GD's leader Nicos Michaloliakos and other top party members in October 2013 on charges of setting up a criminal organisation did not deter voters in the local, regional and European elections in May 2014, as the party managed to significantly increase its share of the vote. In the January and September 2015 elections, the party received 6.3% and 7% of the vote, respectively, solidifying its position as the third biggest Greek political party.

The protracted economic crisis in Greece can go some way in explaining the persistence of one of the most extreme European political parties. To better understand GD's success, though, it is important to also understand how economic crises change the way people associate and interact with their polities. In Greece, the economic crisis has helped exacerbate the chronic malfunctioning of Greek political institutions. The crisis severed the – perhaps instrumental – ties many Greeks have had with their democratic political system.

The Golden Dawn has managed to capitalize on the legitimacy crisis Greece faces by projecting a strong anti-system message. To do so, it has relied on a growing network of local organizations that remained relatively active even after the arrests and imprisonment of its leadership. Although the arrests took a toll on the party's organization, in the past two years, the Golden Dawn sustained a notable level of organizational activity. Its organizational network and activity might help explain why the party managed to sustain its electoral support in an adverse political environment.

The deep crisis of Greek political institutions and the organizational capacity the Golden Dawn has already built up to capitalize on this crisis, suggest that the challenges the party poses to Greek democracy are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Greece, then, faces the Herculean double-task of simultaneously rebuilding not only its economic but also its political institutions.

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Relevant publications:

Ellinas, Antonis A. "Neo-Nazism in an Established Democracy: The Persistence of Golden Dawn in Greece." *South European Society and Politics* 20.1 (2015): 1-20.

Ellinas, Antonis A. "The rise of Golden Dawn: the new face of the far right in Greece." *South European Society and Politics* 18.4 (2013): 543-565.

