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The end of an era? Not really. A Post-mortem of the Greek elections

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On 6th May 2012, the Greek nation punished its political establishment for the country's financial, economic and political meltdown. The election's result put an end to the dominance of the two major parties, New Democracy and PASOK, which had been taking turns at governing for the past three decades. Indeed, both parties together barely scraped in about 32 per cent of the vote, a catastrophic result when compared to their usual 80 per cent. Indicative of the fragmentation in political support, the elections on Sunday produced, for the first time in the country's recent political history, a Parliament comprising [seven different political parties](#) ranging from Marxist-Leninists to neo-Nazis. As a result, it appears almost impossible for a viable coalition to emerge from the elections with a clear majority and implement the necessary structural reforms to overcome the current crisis.



The end of the two party system

At a first glance, the elections can be interpreted positively, as a trigger for change. After 38 years, the two-party system appears to have come to an end. Prompted by painful austerity measures and intensifying recession, the two main political parties have lost their capacity to maintain the [votes-for-jobs system](#), and guided by fear, rage and disappointment, voters have decided to withdraw their support. Greeks have condemned both parties for having been unable [to pursue a coherent and prudent economic policy in accordance with the European norm](#).

This may well be a window of opportunity for political change, and perhaps sound alarming bells to Europe regarding the [futility of the strategy of recovery exclusively through austerity](#). However, the good news for Greece ends here. Even if Europe does decide to [change](#) its current obsession with austerity, it is certain that real change will demand long and arduous decisions, and not only a few cleverly drafted clauses added to a EU treaty. The history of European integration shows that the Union is not 'an ill disposed animal but certainly a slow-moving one', to quote former President of the European Commission Roy Jenkins.

Mixed Signals

In the meantime, Athens may miss the European bus, as the Greek political elite appears incapable of rising to the challenges the country faces. Even today, in the face of complete impasse and impending national disaster, Greek leaders are yet to hammer out a blueprint to reboot the country's economy. Instead, the election campaign was centered around the infamous Memorandum that divided the parties along the pro and anti-austerity camps, but it did not focus on the real question, i.e. whether the Greeks are determined to remain in the Eurozone or not. In particular, the two main parties fought to present themselves as who could deliver the 'softest' version of austerity; the rest fought over who can deliver a more credible and faster cancellation of the debt, without leaving the euro – [which is obviously an utopia](#).

To make matters worse, the big winner of the elections, the coalition of the radical left – SYRIZA – which won the unprecedented 16.78 per cent of the vote playing on young voters' frustration, introduced a populist rhetoric beset with ill-conceived, unrealistic slogans of the past. The head of SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, [claimed](#) that the "expression of the public's will has rendered the memorandum null and has chosen as its first alternative a left-wing government to cancel the loan agreements". Far from helping the country, [this rhetoric will threaten](#) Greece's latest bailout package from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, if it hasn't already done so.

The analysis of the electoral result would be incomplete if the [35 per cent of abstention](#) is not considered. It is questionable whether the majority of the Greeks were angry at the memorandum per se, or largely at its selective implementation and mismanagement followed by the former governments, mainly PASOK. In an attempt to condemn the current political handling, many Greeks underestimate the catastrophic consequences of the alternative route, namely declaring default and returning to the national currency, the drachma and are drawn to opportunistic papering-over of difficulties policy.

No wonder that the press – albeit falsely – [tends to portray Tsipras as the new Andreas Papandreou](#) of the early 1980s who initially did not formulate a clear policy on European integration, and hinted behind a rhetorically robust nationalistic thesis. Again, SYRIZA thinks that Greece's current situation is a foretaste of what will happen in the rest of Europe. There is a

widespread belief that the electoral turnout will scare the European Union into easing its fiscal demands on Greece and even sending some generous aid package. This argument is a form of diplomatic and economic brinkmanship: [it is feeble in its own right](#) and building a whole strategy around such hypothetical premises can only prove catastrophic for the country. Unfortunately, Tsipras (and others, like the leader of the populist right-wing party Independent Greeks, Panos Kammenos) are encouraged towards such illusionary attitudes based on a Greek paradox, i.e. that eight out of ten Greeks want to stay in the euro but are not willing to continue to support tough EU-IMF austerity measures. In some ways, Lord Mandelson is right to say that ['Greece is author of its own misfortune'](#).

Greece, 'author of its own misfortune'?

Since the restoration of democracy in 1974, the Greek political elite has encouraged a culture of easy money and prosperity for all with the state apparatus as its main provider. This policy was initially important to consolidate the newly emerged democracy and was partly justified by the ascendancy of a 'leftist' mentality that wanted to restore the rights of those who had been persecuted since the end of the civil war in 1949. The [1980s, 1990s and 2000s](#), however, saw the dominance of such policies solely for electoral gains rendering the Greek public 'un enfant gâté'. But, after Greece's admission to the EMU in 2001 and the successful organization of the Olympic Games in 2004, the country lost its sense of direction. The political system and large segments of the population took for granted the beneficial European economic climate that masked the damaging effects of long term loan-induced consumerism and political populism. It was only when the money went dry that the true magnitude of such practices hit home.

In 1979, when [Constantinos Karamanlis](#), former Prime Minister of Greece and main architect of Greece's entry into the EEC, was signing the Treaty of Accession to the European Community, he emphasised that "the adaptation of Greece to the European structures will need not only a radical restructuring of our economy but also a change in our mentality". How true this is today.

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