

# Greece: A story of government punishment and party-system stabilisation

EFTICHA TEPEROGLOU

In Greece the 2019 European Parliament elections took place on May 26<sup>th</sup>, together with municipal and regional elections. The governmental party of the radical left SYRIZA suffered severe losses, whilst the centre-right party of New Democracy (ND) increased its electoral strength and gained a plurality for the first time since the 2012-2015 period. The outcome of the election had immediate consequences for the national electoral arena. On the night of the election, the Greek PM Alexis Tsipras called for snap elections (four months ahead) to be held on 7 July 2019.

## THE CONTEXT

The 2019 European election in Greece was the first contest after the national elections in September 2015. It arrived after a very busy political timeline, as from 2012 to 2015 there were four consecutive national elections, the 2014 EP election and the referendum of 2015 on acceptance or rejection of an EU/IMF lending proposal (the third bailout agreement since 2010). The majority of citizens still share high levels of Eurosceptical attitudes towards the EU (e.g. only 25% have a positive image towards the EU according to the standard Eurobarometer 90 in autumn 2018, while the European average is 43%) – a reflection on the economic crisis.

From the 2014 to the 2019 European elections, the country experienced a tense period both in economic and socio-political terms. Under the first coalition government between SYRIZA and the nationalist right-wing party of Independent Greeks/ANEL (formed in the aftermath of the January 2015 national elections), the country entered a phase of sharp economic instability. SYRIZA won again the September 2015 snap election and formed another coalition government with ANEL. During this second term, the government had to implement a harsh economic programme which created disillusionment among its supporters. Moreover, the coalition government agreed with the creditors on the third and last bailout programme which expired on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2018. Overall, during the last year before the European elections one could say that the Greek economy had been stabilised. However, social and political dissatisfaction was very high. Unemployment rates went down, but these were still high (18.5% in February 2019), and more severe taxes have been imposed especially on the middle/upper class. Additionally, there was a sense of growing dissatisfaction of citizens with the perceived ineffective and sometimes dangerous

sly inept administration of SYRIZA (e.g. the fires in the summer of 2018 in the Attica region with more than one hundred deaths). The coalition government formally ended in February 2019 due to disagreement between the two parties over the Macedonia name dispute. On June 12th 2018, an agreement was reached between Greek PM Alexis Tsipras and his counterpart Zoran Zaev, whereby the name *Republic of North Macedonia* would be adopted. It was an international issue that had remained unsolved for more than twenty years, but according to the majority of Greeks (and especially those living in the Greek region of Macedonia) the agreement was a bad one for Greece and the PM himself was often labelled as a traitor by nationalist opposition groups. Therefore, part of the explanation for the losses by SYRIZA can be attributed to this issue, especially in Northern Greece.

#### THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN: EUROPEAN ELECTIONS WITHOUT EUROPE

The debate between the two main parties, SYRIZA and ND, overshadowed any other aspect of the campaign. National issues – especially the future of the Greek economy and the Macedonia dispute – were predominant. The election was a typical referendum contest with a very high level of polarisation. The socialist party of PASOK tried to mobilise part of its old electorate, and positioned itself as an alternative political solution. It was part of the centre-left coalition Movement for Change (KINAL), which was founded in March 2018. Some new parties participated in these elections. Among them the Course of Freedom by Zoe Kontantopoulou, a former SYRIZA MP, the new pan-European party European Realistic Disobedience Front (DiEM25) formed by Yanis Varoufakis, a former MP of SYRIZA and ex-minister of Economics, as well as Greek Solution by Kyriakos Velopoulos, an ex-parliamentary member of the nationalist Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) who had also been a member of ND from 2012 to 2015. Overall, forty parties participated, ranging from the communist left to the extreme right. A proportional electoral system with a 3% electoral threshold and open lists (since 2014) was adopted. The latter feature produced a personalised electoral campaign with EP candidates running individual campaigns throughout Greece. A major issue was the mobilisation of younger voters. A significant change compared to previous elections was the passage of a new electoral law by the SYRIZA government, in which the eligible age for voting was reduced from 18 to 17 years old.

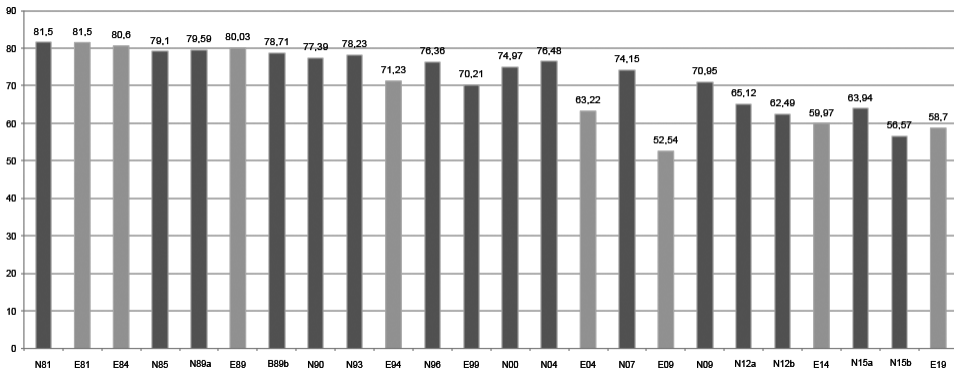
SYRIZA claimed that this election had to be seen as a vote of confidence on the government after the end of the bailout programmes. Its main slogans were “*We have the power, we do not go back*”, “*We join our forces. For the Greece of the many, for a Europe of the peoples*”, “*The time of the many has arrived!*”. The party blamed ND for supporting the candidacy of Manfred Weber, from the European People’s Party, as next President of the European Commission. Weber is widely perceived as a champion of austerity for the countries of Southern Europe. On the other hand, ND highlighted the necessity for change: “*On 26 May we vote for political change*”. Its leader, Kyriakos Mitsotakis promised an economic programme with a restructuring of the taxation system aiming to reduce taxes. SYRIZA pushed for welfare and pension benefits, as well as favourable payment plans for taxpayers with arrears, in the run-up

to the contest. Almost no political actor talked about European issues. This is particular striking given the fact that in both the economic and ongoing refugee-immigration crises, Greece is very much involved and affected.

TURNOUT

Greece is a country where, in principle, voting is compulsory. However, the relevant penalties for not voting are never imposed. Participation reached 58.7%, as shown in Figure 1 – a reduction of 1.27 percentage points compared to the 2014 European election – but an increase compared to the previous national elections of September 2015 (+2.13 percentage points, which translates into 352,507 more voters). Nevertheless, when observing this increase, it is important to take into account that, compared to 2015, 161,289 additional citizens were entitled to vote because of the lowering of the voting age (from 18 to 17).

Figure 1. Turnout % in National (N) and European (E) elections in Greece 1981-2019



RESULTS

The election stands as another example of a momentous contest in the history of European elections in Greece. Back in 2014, there was a historical shift with SYRIZA winning the elections (Teperoglou et al., 2015). This time there is again a shift, but towards a new equilibrium. SYRIZA was severely punished (23.8% of the vote) and the opposition party of ND obtained 33.1 %. The difference in the vote share between the two parties (9.3 percentage points) is the biggest one ever observed in a Greek European Parliament election. The party of ND managed to increase its vote share compared to the national election of September 2015 (+5.03 percentage points) while SYRIZA lost much ground (-11.7 percentage points). According to the exit poll data (by Metron Analysis, Alco, Marc and MRB opinion poll companies), SYRIZA managed to hold 58% of its 2015 electorate, while the figure for ND was 85%.

The smaller coalition partner, ANEL gained only 0.8% of the total vote (a decrease of 2.89 percentage points compared to 2015). Overall, the punishment of the coalition is a classic example of “voting with the boot” (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996)

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Greece

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
New Democracy (ND)	EPP	1,873,080	33.1	8	+10.4	+3
Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA)	GUE-NGL	1,343,788	23.8	6	-2.8	
Movement for Change (KINAL)	S&D	436,735	7.7	2	-0.3	
Communist Party of Greece (KKE)	NI	302,677	5.4	2	-0.8	
Popular Association-Golden Dawn (GD)	NI	275,822	4.9	2	-4.5	-1
Greek Solution-Kyriakos Velopoulos	others	236,361	4.1	1		
Mera25		169,286	3.0			
Course of Freedom		90,859	1.6			
The River	S&D	86,003	1.5		-5.1	-2
Centre Union		82,072	1.5		+0.8	
Greece-the other way Notis Marias		70,286	1.2			
Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)		69,524	1.2		-1.5	
Independent Greeks (ANEL)	ECR	45,149	0.8		-2.7	-1
Other parties		574,480	10.2			
Total		5,656,122	100	21		
Turnout (%)			58.7			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			3%			

against government policies, given also the fact that the European election took place late in the first-order national electoral cycle. The concentration of votes for SYRIZA and ND – a total of 56.9% – (compared to 49.3% in 2014) confirms a shift in the Greek party system towards a more modest form of two-partyism which has gradually been restored in the post-crisis period, with SYRIZA replacing PASOK as the major left-of-centre party.

A point worth mentioning is the decrease in vote share for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party (-2.1 percentage points compared to 2015, and -4.5 percentage points compared to the 2014 European election). This decline could be due to internal conflicts and ongoing legal troubles for the party's leadership, but also to vote-switching in favor of ND and "Greek Solution". The electoral performance of KINAL remained stable, but the coalition became the third largest political actor because of the decline of Golden Dawn. The performance of the communists remained stable too, while the party The River did not manage to repeat its electoral success of 2014. The breakthrough of the newly formed nationalist "Greek solution" party is perhaps a typical example of elections that function as a "midwife assisting in the birth of new parties" (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). The party of DiEM25 failed by only a few hundred votes to reach the 3% required to elect an MEP.

Because of the losses by incumbent parties and its referendum character, this election could be classified as a second-order national election (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), even though turnout was higher compared with the previous national election. The results were not favourable for smaller parties, with the exception of the newly formed nationalist party.

#### CONCLUSION

The 2019 European election - similar to the one of 2014 – could serve as a prelude of a shift in the balance of power in the forthcoming national elections. This time, presumably, the party of ND will win the national elections of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2019. The first major lesson of this election is that a second-order election prefigures changes in first-order electoral politics, rather than the other way around (Schmitt and Teperoglou, 2018). A second lesson is that the Greek party system has entered a new period of stabilisation.

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