

The parliamentary election in Greece, October 2009

Iosif Kovras*

School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast, 21 University Square, Belfast BT7 1PA, Northern Ireland

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1. Background

On 4 October 2009 the Greek public went to the polls, amidst the financial crisis and two years ahead of schedule, and delivered a landslide victory for the centre-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). The decision to call early elections was announced by the Prime Minister and leader of the conservative-liberal New Democracy (ND), Costas Karamanlis on 4 September, less than a hundred days after his party's poor showing in the elections for the European Parliament. This decision caused widespread surprise, not least among the members and supporters of the governing party among whom it triggered a fierce debate about the timing of the elections. However, ND's meagre parliamentary majority, coupled with public dissatisfaction with the government – for various reasons, notably a string of corruption scandals and its perceived inadequate response to the calamitous forest fires around Athens during the summer of 2009 – significantly decreased the “moral support” available to the administration in its push for economic reforms. The need for such reform, in particular to narrow the fiscal deficits which had caused an enormous increase in the level of public debt, was even more pressing given that the global financial crisis, and its knock-on impact on the real economy, had further worsened the country's public finances.

It was always likely that the elections would be called ahead of schedule, as a result of the lack of consensus among the major parties on the election of the next President of the Republic. The President is elected indirectly, by Parliament. A provision in Article 32 of the Constitution stipulates that, unless the 180-vote majority within parliament, the parliament is automatically dissolved. This provision paves the way for elections in case there is no necessary majority to elect the President. The leader of the major opposition party PASOK, Giórgos Papandreou, had declared that he would have exploited this provision in the forthcoming (February 2010) presidential election by refusing to support the re-election of Carolos Papoulias, incumbent President (and former PASOK minister of foreign affairs), in order to trigger elections. Karamanlis

concluded that a lingering pre-election period would have had a negative impact on the ailing Greek economy and opted for early elections.

2. Electoral rules

Amendment of electoral law to suit the governing party's interests has become so common in Greek politics that a contest like the 2009 election, in which the same rules were used for the second election in succession, is something of a rarity. In the twelve elections since *metapolitefsi*, the restoration of democracy in 1974, the electoral rules have been changed seven times, and the newly elected government has already announced its intention to make further amendments. The current rules, although passed by Parliament before the 2004 elections, were first applied in 2007. The 300 deputies of the unicameral parliament (*Vouli*) are elected for a four-year term via a system of ‘reinforced proportionality’. 260 deputies are elected via proportional representation on a nationwide list. The remaining forty seats are allocated to the leading party, this ‘reinforcement’ being designed to bolster the governing party. While overall seat shares – and also the application of the 3% threshold for parliamentary representation – are based on nationwide vote shares, the allocation of deputies to Greece's 56 constituencies (48 multi- and eight single-member seats) requires a further and complicated system, based largely on open list voting in constituencies, but with twelve seats elected from national closed lists in proportion to nationwide vote shares.

3. Campaigning and issues

As in previous elections, the main contenders in 2009 elections were once again ND and PASOK. The campaigns of both parties revolved primarily around the economy and institutional reforms. In line with the official justification of the early elections, ND's campaign focused on the critical decisions facing the country and on the painful measures that the new government should take over the next two years in order to revitalize the Greek economy. The phrase ‘responsible and painful decisions’ was repeated by Karamanlis, ND's leader, in every single campaign speech. ND maintained the strategy of centring its campaign on Karamanlis, winner of the previous two elections. Following PASOK's poor showing in the national elections of 2007,

* Tel.: +44 (0) 28 9097 5028; fax: +44 (0) 28 9097 5048.

E-mail address: ikovras01@qub.ac.uk

Papandreou was re-elected as the party's president and managed to bridge the gap between its two main factions, namely the traditional socialist base and the modernizers. PASOK's campaign also emphasised the need to push for economic reforms but framed the issue more optimistically, promising generous benefits to the 'disaffected'. Papandreou promised to revive the stricken economy with a €3bn stimulus, to raise education expenditure to 5% of GDP, and – in perhaps the most ambitious pledge – to hunt down the tax evaders that were claimed to be costing the Greek economy approximately €20bn (Stevis, 2009).

The other major point of contention was the need for extensive political reforms, a need inferred not only from the recent experience of scandals and corruption but also from wider problems as diverse as the wildfires that destroyed the area around Athens and the unprecedented youth riots in the capital and other major cities in December 2008. PASOK harshly criticized ND's failure to deliver the promised reforms in social security, education and economic policy, as well as its inefficiency in hunting down corruption.

Many of PASOK's criticisms were echoed – indeed amplified – by SYRIZA, the coalition of Synaspismos with other factions and social movements of the Left. The party complained about corruption and about the 'securitization' of the issue of immigrants, and adopted an unusually nuanced posture towards the riots, its stance leading other parties to accuse it of condoning violent protest. Just a year before the 2009 elections, SYRIZA reached an unprecedented opinion poll high of 18%, much of this momentum generated by its young, energetic and popular leader, 35-year-old Alexis Tsipras. However, intra-party divisions over leadership soon surfaced, and the coalition's anti-EU stance in the recent European elections took aback many within Synaspismos, a traditionally Europhile party. All of this sapped the public appeal of SYRIZA.

The other smaller parties campaigned on familiar territory. LAOS, an extreme-right party established in 2000, emphasised immigration and security issues as part of their appeal to disillusioned supporters of ND. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) persisted with its long-established anti-Western, anti-EU rhetoric, and stressed the urgent need for a fairer distribution of wealth. Finally, the Ecologist-Greens party, flushed with their success in electing an MEP in the European elections, focused almost exclusively on the need for a "green mode of economic development", putting issues of environmental degradation at the top of the political agenda.

Although PASOK and ND were mainly focused on their battle over the economy, both parties also made comprehensive and extensive efforts to prevent the loss of votes to smaller parties. Under the electoral rules, the chances of forming a single-party government are much improved if several of the minor parties fail to cross the threshold and enter Parliament (Delithanasi, 2009). Both major parties therefore needed a campaign flexible enough to attract the voters of the smaller parties. For example, PASOK, the most likely party to be able to form an autonomous government according to pre-election polls, adopted a clear 'green agenda' in a bid to deny votes – and hopefully parliamentary representation – to the Greens.

Remarkably, issues related to foreign affairs were barely mentioned by any of the parties. Whereas previous elections were dominated by foreign affairs issues such as Greco-Turkish relations, Cyprus and the "Macedonian question", it was domestic issues that ranked much higher in this election.

This election also had a noticeable Obama flavour, with the campaigns of both major parties – and even the dress codes of the candidates – heavily influenced by the style of the new US President. In particular, the slogans and catchphrase used by Giórgos Papandreou were designed to draw on the same 'politics of hope' message used by Obama. Equally, both party leaders used the Internet extensively as a means of communication and dedicated a specific day to replying to citizens' questions through their party web-pages. But the most evident influence from the US elections was the agreement of the two main party leaders to participate in Greece's first televised election debate. In addition to the head-to-head between Karamanlis and Papandreou, another debate was organized in which the leaders of all six parties participated. Finally, it should be mentioned that a law banning the publication of opinion polls over the last fifteen days of the elections stirred considerable controversy, with several unofficial results leaking from the headquarters of the two major parties.

4. Results

While the global economic crisis triggered electoral collapse for several European social democratic parties in the EU, PASOK bucked the trend with a landslide win. Although the outcome was not surprising, the margin of victory – more than ten percentage points between the two leading parties – exceeded most expectations. With 43.9% of the vote, PASOK took 160 seats and thus a fairly comfortable majority, while the ND's 33.5% meant a meagre harvest of just 91 seats – compared to 152 in the previous election – and hence defeat on an unprecedented scale. The party lost more than one third of its parliamentary representation and several former ministers and high-ranking officials failed to retain their seats in parliament. ND also lost traditional strongholds such as the first periphery of Athens, in which ND had been the majority party since 1981, as well as the second periphery of Thessaloniki.

In absolute terms, ND lost around 750,000 votes compared with the previous election (Table 1). However, PASOK gained only around 250,000 votes, raising the question of who else profited from ND's demise. One answer is that there was an increase in abstention, turnout in these elections falling three points to an unprecedented low of 71%. Although compulsory voting in Greece is not enforced, participation has long and widely been seen as a civic duty in the country's political culture, making these levels of abstention quite striking by Greek standards. LAOS looks to have won votes from ND, increasing its vote share from 3.8% in 2007 to 5.6% this time. The Greens also made gains, moving from 1% to 2.5%, but still fell short of the threshold for entering parliament.

The extent of direct transfers from ND to PASOK is difficult to discern. However, popular accounts suggest that a significant number of non-partisan, moderate and well-educated voters, frequently and clumsily subsumed under

Table 1
Results of the Greek parliamentary elections, 2009 and 2007.

	2009			2007		
	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes	Votes (%)	Seats
PASOK	3,012,373	43.9	160	2,727,853	38.1	102
New Democracy (ND)	2,259,967	33.5	91	2,995,979	41.8	152
KKE	517,154	7.5	21	583,750	8.2	22
LAOS	386,152	5.6	15	271,809	3.8	10
SYRIZA	315,627	4.6	13	361,101	5.0	14
Green Party	173,449	2.5	0	75,502	1.0	–
Other	193,620	2.3	–	173,981	2.1	–
Blank/spoilt ballots	186,137	2.6	–	166,319	2.7	–
Total votes	7,044,479			7,356,294		
Registered voters/turnout	9,933,385	29.1		9,918,917	25.9	

Source: Greek Ministry of Interior (<http://www.ypes.gr>).

the heading ‘middle ground’ (although ‘cognitively mobilized’ might be a better description), shifted allegiance from Karamanlis to Papandreou. In the run-up to the 2007 elections, the ND government experienced similar problems to those facing the party in 2009, namely forest fires and several incidents of political scandals and corruption. On that occasion, voters gave the administration a second chance to pursue the heralded reforms. However, the patience of the electorate eventually ran out, especially after Karamanlis’s speech at the International Exhibition of Thessaloniki in September 2008, in which he appeared to be covering up a case of corruption involving one of his closest cabinet colleagues. Meanwhile, the obvious side-effects of the global economic crisis constrained ND’s ability to deliver on their promises. This under-performance in office cost ND the support of a significant segment of the non-partisan electorate, who turned instead to PASOK. Many of these had previously switched in the other direction: in 2004, Karamanlis’s first election victory was owed in large part to winning over one in six of those who had previously supported PASOK (Mavris, 2009).

Another interesting feature of the election results is the persistence of the phenomenon of bipartisanship (*dikomatismos*), namely the domination of the total vote share by the two major parties. Between them, PASOK and ND took 77% of the votes, not far down from the 80% in the previous election. This is striking given the prevalent sense of anger at the political establishment – as illustrated by the rise of abstention – and the existence of conditions conducive to smaller parties, such as high unemployment. It seems that only LAOS and the Greens were able to reap the fruits of this discontent, and then only to a limited extent. The durability of bipartisanship is due partly to features of the Greek political system which enable the domination of the state by parties preserving their clientele. However, it should also be attributed to the inability of the other parties to put forward convincing solutions to existing problems.

5. Outcomes

The comfortable majority won by PASOK, in combination with the fact that its main opponent spent the election campaign pointing to the necessity of painful measures,

legitimizes the new government to push for much-needed economic and institutional reforms. Provided that PASOK can maintain its lead over ND, the new electoral rules will give it a significant benefit because the next election will see the first party receiving a larger premium of 50 seats. Moreover, since the governing party has control over the timing of the elections – and early calls for elections are a tradition in Greek political culture – PASOK seems highly likely to be able to realise this advantage.

The new cabinet featured many innovations, such as the establishment of a Ministry of Environment, the nomination of five women ministers, and the introduction of several members with no previous involvement in politics (increasingly considered to be a virtue in Greek politics). Although foreign affairs played a minor role in the election campaign, they look to be a priority for the new government, with a more proactive stance including further attempts at rapprochement with Turkey and at finding some sort of settlement of both the Cyprus conflict and the Macedonian issue. New Prime Minister Papandreou took charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he had a successful experience as the man behind the Greco-Turkish rapprochement (1999–2004), and his priorities were symbolically denoted by the destinations for his first two official visits as the new Prime Minister, namely Ankara and Nicosia.

Meanwhile, on the domestic front, PASOK has to govern the same distrustful and weathered society that punished Karamanlis’s inability to deliver. In essence, the new Prime Minister has to face the two major problems that beset his predecessor: a large and inefficient state, heavily penetrated by partisanship and clientelism, and a significant section of support that is highly resistant to reforms. The punishment of the ND administration should have become a lesson for the new government.

The other major side-effect of the elections was the resignation of ND’s leader, Costas Karamanlis, the same night that the results were announced. It has become a tradition for the losing leader to resign, as had happened with Constantinos Mitsotakis (1993) and Miltiades Evert (1997). Furthermore, some within the party held Karamanlis personally accountable for the scale of defeat, having taken the decision to call early elections when it was obvious that the party had little hope of winning. Elections

for Karamanlis's replacement took place on the 29 November. ND became one of the first major right-of-centre parties in Europe to open its leadership election to the party's mass membership (Tegopoulos, 2009), following the example set by PASOK two years earlier. The election generated great interest, with nearly 800,000 votes cast. Two broad strands within the party competed for the leadership: the popular right, represented by Antonis Samaras, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs who had briefly abandoned ND in the 1990s to form the right-wing splinter party Political Spring; and the more moderate wing represented by Dora Bakoyanni, daughter of former prime minister Constantinos Mitsotakis and Minister of Foreign Affairs in the recently ousted government. Samaras achieved a clear victory, defeating Bakoyanni by 50–40%, the latter's defeat a further manifestation of the anti-incumbent sentiment that produced the national election outcome.¹ ND discourse is now expected to take a conservative turn, especially in the field of foreign policy given Samaras's uncompromising approach during his term as Minister of Foreign Affairs

(Loizides, 2007). The fact that the heads of both main parties enjoy a broad popular basis for their election gives added legitimacy to their leadership, and more generally denotes a significant development in Greek political culture.

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¹ For the results of these elections see: http://www.nd.gr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57261&Itemid=482.