

PROFILE

The 2007 Parliamentary Election in Greece

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Background

After the defeat of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) in the 2004 election, the party of *Nea Dimokratia* (New Democracy, ND) began its first term in government since 1993 on a platform promising to fight rising prices and corruption and ‘reconstruct’ the state. ND’s term began with the realisation that public deficit and public debt figures have been underestimated by the previous PASOK government. This recognition brought sanctions from the European Union and criticism from the socialist opposition which cited the country’s ‘national interest’. More importantly, however, it enabled the government to abandon many of its popular but costly electoral promises. The increase of value added tax by 1 per cent the following year, which fuelled inflation, and the clash with university students in 2006 and 2007 over the proposed reforms in higher education, further weakened the positive image of the government. ND has nevertheless managed to maintain its primacy in the regularly conducted polls. The suggestion, however, in March 2007 that government officials might have been involved in the shady deal of over-priced structured bonds (worth €280 million) bought by four state pension funds, was a big blow for the government that led to much speculation about an early election. The prime minister repeatedly and for months entertained the scenarios about calling for an early election but finally did so on 16 August 2007. The reasons behind this decision were not made clear but suggestions are that the prime minister, who expected a landslide victory for his party, called for a snap election in order to avoid the looming scandal, especially in case the unpublished report of the head of the money laundering commission, George Zorbas, reached the Parliament.

The 2007 election was contested with a new electoral system, introduced to enhance proportional representation. Out of the 300 seats in the legislature (*Vouli ton Ellinon*), 260 are allocated by proportional representation in 51 multi-seat

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constituencies, five single-seat constituencies, and a single nationwide list. The new law ensures that the small constituencies have a strict proportional representation in the Parliament. The remaining 40 seats, distributed among the constituencies, are altogether given as a bonus to the party or coalition of parties that comes first countrywide. As under the previous electoral law, in order to win representation, parties must achieve at least 3 per cent of the vote nationally. The most important consequence of the new electoral law is that it makes it more difficult for the leading party to gain a ruling majority. Unlike the previous law, establishing winning a majority is not dependent on the advantage over the second party but on the strength of all parties represented in the Parliament.

The Election Campaign

The date for the election was set for 16 September 2007, and it was obvious from the beginning that the election campaign would be short time-wise. ND was the first party to begin campaign advertising by focusing on macro-economic indicators (unemployment, public deficit and growth rates) for which the government had a good record. It has been estimated that almost 90 per cent of ND's advertising was focused on the economy (*To Vima*, 17 September 2007). PASOK, in contrast, concentrated its criticism on corruption issues citing sources such as Transparency International and George Zorbas' report, which, meanwhile, was leaked to the press.

On the left wing of the political spectrum, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) emphasised its familiar strategy of attacking neo-liberalism and called all working people to vote for KKE and against the bipartism of ND and PASOK. Moreover, in the hope of winning a good share of the protest vote and thus expanding its electoral base, it tried to appeal to voters who may not necessarily be communists or agree with all its policies. The Coalition of Left, Ecology and Movements (known as *Synaspismos*) once more decided to run as SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), a wider electoral coalition that includes many other small leftist parties and independent activists. With a new outspoken president, the erstwhile MEP Alekos Alavanos and a youthful spokesperson, the Athens city council member Alexis Tsipras, SYRIZA came out with a student-friendly campaign expecting to win the vote of student protesters. Finally, the socialist splinter Democratic Social Movement (DIKKI), after two consecutive unsuccessful attempts to win representation in the Parliament, announced that it would contest the election as part of SYRIZA. This decision, however, was overturned by the Supreme Court (*Areios Pagos*) citing that DIKKI's decision to join SYRIZA was in conflict with DIKKI's party statutes.

On the right wing of the political spectrum, the radical right Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) appeared determined to pass the 3 per cent threshold and gain representation in the legislature. In this process, its leader George Karatzaferis attempted to get rid of the 'far right' label by removing some of the most radical cadres like Kostas Plevris and by recruiting new candidates such as the light-hearted pop singer Efi Sarri who sought to attract the homosexual vote. In general, LAOS followed a nationalist and anti-American rhetoric and criticised the government for accepting the neighbouring republic's EU candidacy under the name 'Macedonia'. Equally interesting was the

standing of Stelios Papatthemelis with *Dimokratiki Anagennisi* (Democratic Revival). Papatthemelis, known for his Christian fundamentalist ideas, was a PASOK MP from 1981 but fell out with the party's modernizers some time after Costas Simitis took over. He later founded his own party, Democratic Revival. For the 2004 election he nevertheless ran on a ND ticket. The renewal in 2007 of Democratic Revival, a party which covers much of the Christian, populist and nationalist ideological ground of LAOS, but without the far-right connotations, as Papatthemelis has centrist credentials, was construed as ND's plan to counterbalance LAOS' influence. This view was reinforced when a group of former LAOS cadres announced that they had joined Democratic Revival and especially when ND insisted that Papatthemelis should participate on equal terms with other party leaders in the televised debate, even though it was extremely unlikely that his party could win representation in the legislature.

The electoral campaign, however, was interrupted by the protracted forest fires that broke out in the week of 24 August 2007. The disaster, which led to over 65 confirmed casualties and nearly half-a-million acres of burned land, brought Greece into the international spotlight and forced political parties to postpone their electoral campaigning. Prime Minister Karamanlis declared a state of emergency and quickly installed a compensation scheme for those affected. Fearing that the 'condensed' campaign could work in favour of the government, PASOK was quick to resume its tried and tested strategy of confrontational tactics (Panagopoulos and Marantzidis, 2006: 407). Its president, George Papandreou, criticized the government for mismanaging the forest fires crisis, for fabricating evidence about arsonist terrorists and for the rather clumsy compensation scheme which was left open to massive abuse. ND responded by playing their strongest card: Karamanlis himself, whose popularity in the polls was still strong. As a consequence, ND's televised advertising became highly personalized, focusing on the 'humane' aspects of Karamanlis. This seemed to have worked in favour of the party as the polls later indicated.

However, it was clear that the forest fires disaster would work at the expense of both major parties. All the published polls indicated that a considerable portion of the electorate was swinging towards the minor opposition parties and that even though ND was still leading the fight, the 2007 election was far from becoming a landslide victory for the conservatives. The question then turned to whether ND could win the minimum governing majority of 151 seats in the Parliament. The options were clearly laid out in the televised debate: PASOK refused to form a coalition with ND. LAOS on the other hand was willing to enter the government but Karamanlis stated (by pointing to the ideology of LAOS) that he would not cooperate with 'extremists'. Since KKE had already dismissed the idea of a coalition with either of the major parties, PASOK turned to SYRIZA, which, though not against the idea in principle, asserted that such decisions should not be hurried but carefully planned on the basis of the parties' programmatic policies.

Election Results

Participation in the election was high, with a turnout typical for a parliamentary election in Greece. The official reported turnout figure was 74.1 per cent. Turnout figures in

Greece, however, tend to be underestimated due to poor record keeping in the electoral register which produces inflated figures for the registered voters. According to my estimates, the real turnout figure for Greece should be at least 10 per cent higher than the one officially reported

Geographically, ND suffered equal losses throughout the country but managed to dominate most constituencies and won 152 seats in the legislature, one more than the minimum governing majority (see Table 1). For PASOK, which managed to win a plurality in only 13 out of 56 constituencies, mostly in the traditionally 'socialist bulwarks' of Crete and south-western Greece, it was the worst result since the party gained power in 1981. Like ND, PASOK suffered losses in practically every constituency with the exception of Rhodopi and Xanthi in north-western Greece where it successfully attracted the minorities' vote by including two Muslim candidates in its tickets. As predicted by the polls, KKE, SYRIZA and LAOS increased their share of the vote and, helped by the new electoral law, radically increased their share of seats in the legislature. In contrast, despite extensive media exposure, Papatheamelis' Democratic Revival fared rather badly and ended up seventh, behind the newcomer Ecologist Greens. In general, the voter swings and change in the electoral law accounted for the shift of 28 seats (almost 10 per cent of the total 300) from the major to the minor parties.

Demographically, according to the exit poll conducted by Kapa Research (*To Vima*, 17 September 2007), ND performed best among pensioners and housewives and among the dynamic strata of free commercialists and enterprise owners. PASOK performed best only among public employees and fared relatively well among

Table 1. Results of the parliamentary elections in Greece, 2004 and 2007

	Election date					
	16 September 2007			7 March 2004		
	Vote %	Votes	Seats	Vote %	Votes	Seats
New Democracy (ND)	41.83	2,995,321	152	45.36	3,360,506	165
Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)	38.1	2,727,702	102	40.55	3,003,920	117
Communist Party of Greece (KKE)	8.15	583,768	22	5.89	436,711	12
Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA)	5.04	361,216	14	3.26	241,722	6
Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	3.8	271,761	10	2.19	162,494	
Democratic Social Movement (DIKKI)				1.79	132,750	
Ecologist Greens	1.05	75,477				
Democratic Revival	0.8	57,175				
Registered voters		9,921,343			9,897,626	
Votes cast		7,355,946			7,571,601	
Turnout (per cent)		74.14			76.49	

Source: Ministry of the Interior (2007, <http://www.ypes.gr>).

farmers. Finally, KKE appealed well to the unemployed, while SYRIZA was particularly supported by university students. Another important observation is that PASOK seems to have lost its previous appeal among young people and women. The typical gender gap in national elections, which favours the socialists (Panagopoulos and Marantzidis, 2006: 408) seems to have now turned in favour of ND.

Discussion

The result of the 2007 parliamentary election offers an interesting insight into how unexpected events can affect the outcome of an election. Both the forest fires disaster and the bonds scandal increased the scepticism among the electorate concerning the two major parties. This led to a considerable amount of protest voting and a swing towards small parties. In this battle for authority and effectiveness, PASOK desperately tried to change its stereotypical image of an old and tired party of clientelistic politics. Moreover, Papandreou could not exploit the achievements of his predecessor Costas Simitis and his increasingly confrontational rhetoric did not convince the electorate that he had an alternative vision for the future (Moschonas, 2007). On the other hand, ND, despite the failures, had an appealing leader who still carried the 'fresh and new' outlook from 2004 and managed to convince the electorate to give him a 'second chance' (Moschonas, 2007). It is no surprise therefore that, in a survey conducted by Kapa Research in June 2007 (*To Vima*, 17 September 2007), the majority of respondents recognized that the advantage of ND was its 'ability to express the novel' rather than its government record or quality of cadres.

The net outcome of the election, however, posed major challenges to all parties concerned. For PASOK, the outcome has already translated into a protracted leadership crisis. Having suffered continuous electoral defeats in first- and second-order elections, Papandreou admitted his personal responsibility and called for an open primary for the party leadership. Evangelos Venizelos, the erstwhile minister of culture in Costas Simitis' governments, who had been openly challenging Papandreou's leadership, immediately announced that he would stand as a candidate. The primary was set for 11 November 2007, and Costas Skandalidis, the former PASOK secretary, confirmed that he would run as the third candidate. During the aftermath of the parliamentary election, the polls showed that Venizelos was heading the primary with over 60 per cent. Nevertheless, according to the surveys conducted in September and October, although PASOK voters rated Venizelos as the 'most able' to defeat Karamanlis in the next parliamentary election, Papandreou elicited the electorate's sympathy as the 'most honest' of the candidates. In the long run, this worked in Papandreou's favour and he managed to reverse the trend among PASOK voters.

The procedures governing the election of PASOK's new president were novel for Greek politics inasmuch as eligibility to vote was not confined to party members, but also extended to citizens or immigrants aged 16 or over who could register as 'friends of PASOK'. In total 769,156 members and friends voted in 1,376 polling stations in Greece and abroad. Papandreou received 55.91, Venizelos 38.18 and

Skandalidis 5.74 per cent of the vote. Notwithstanding his success within the party organization, Papandreou still faces the challenge of restoring PASOK's electoral appeal. Although he already announced his intention to move forward with the party's ideological revival, it remains unclear whether the proclaimed 'leftist' turn will pay off.

Karamanlis' government, on the other hand, will have to work with one of the slimmest majorities in the Parliament. As observed by *The Economist* (17 September 2007), in the event of just two ministers being absent on EU business, ND will have to seek the support of the radical right LAOS, who pledged to prioritize foreign policy and other 'national' issues. The new minister of education's unexpected decision to withdraw a controversial school history textbook has thus been criticized as a concession to these nationalist pressures. This situation will become even more difficult should the government decide to move forward with other controversial reforms, such as the scheduled reform of the pension system, the privatization of Olympic Airlines, or the amendment of Article 16 in the Constitution, which stipulates that higher education should be provided by state institutions only, aimed at allowing privately-owned institutions to operate on equal terms. University students have been particularly vehement in their objection to the latter proposal, which would in any event require a two-thirds parliamentary majority. This majority, however, can only be attained with the support of PASOK, which has changed its earlier position and now refuses to support the amendment, thus aligning itself with the parties of the left. There are reasons to believe therefore that, in order to avoid an impasse, the government might plan another snap election, this time to coincide with the European Parliament election in 2009.

Turning to the smaller parties, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the challenges they face revolve around their ability to transform the protest vote into a solid electoral base. On the one hand, KKE assesses that the strategy of equating PASOK with ND and calling for people to vote for KKE and against bipartism has been successful. *Synaspismos*, on the other hand, seems to be less interested in the protest vote but more in expanding its appeal within the electorate by attracting disillusioned PASOK voters and in broadening its coalition structure by incorporating green and extra parliamentary left parties. The president of SYRIZA has also not completely ruled out cooperation with other parties on specific issues. As a result, the possibility of a PASOK–SYRIZA electoral coalition emerging from an electoral stalemate is becoming a particularly troublesome scenario for ND. To address this issue, the government has already begun working on a bill that will introduce amendments to the existing electoral law including an increase in the first party bonus to 50 seats.

Despite the catastrophic events which, without a doubt, have influenced the election result, 16 September was far from being a watershed in Greek politics. The future of the Greek party system is still largely dependent on the electoral strategies of the parties, the possibilities of electoral and government coalitions, the willingness and ability of the major parties to instrumentally manipulate the electoral system and not on attenuating events such as forest fires or economic

scandals. With these in mind, the extent to which the Greek two-party system will persist remains to be seen.

References

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