

Embattled Democracy: *Legitimation Crisis, Party System Change, and the Rise of Political Extremism in Greece*

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Democracy remains a work in progress, an evolving aspiration rather than a finished product
– Greenberg and Page, *The Struggle for Democracy*

1. Issues and questions

In the aftermath of the consecutive May and June 2012 national elections in Greece, and as politics became thick with non-democratic, or at least illiberal, ideologies, many drew parallels between contemporary Greek and Germany's Weimar Republic politics. Thus, in an article that appeared in the *Financial Times* under the telling title "Back to the 1930s: The hammer, sickle and swastika" it was noted that "it is difficult to find a notable dictator, even among the great butchers of the 20th century, without a steady following in the Greek parliament" (Hatzis 2012). Short thereafter, Greece's current Prime Minister Antonis Samaras told a German newspaper (*Handelsblatt* 2012) that "Greek democracy stands before what is perhaps its greatest challenge" as its social cohesion is "endangered by rising unemployment, just as it was toward the end of the Weimar Republic in Germany." Such assertions seemed hardly an exaggeration as at the time political extremism was everywhere to be seen: In far right gangs in paramilitary uniforms meting out violence on the streets against immigrants; in daily demonstrations typically ending with tear gas and clashes with the police; in the state's increasing inability to apply the rule of law. As a journalist of the *New York Times* reported from Athens in early 2012, "Something profound and distressing is happening: the rapid dissolution of a democracy in plain sight" (Donatio 2012).

Greece is an embattled democracy. Still more distressing, as will be shown below, is the fact that at present Greek democracy displays each and every significant factor that has been associated in relevant literature with democratic instability. Most

puzzlingly, all those factors became manifest almost simultaneously within a short time frame extending from late 2008 to the 2012 legislative elections. These developments present great interest for democratic theory and have far-reaching implications for the democratic world and the European project. This article raises the following questions: Why has democracy degenerated in Greece? How did that happen? And, what are the prospects for Greek democracy's future?

The easiest, and currently most popular, explanation attributes democratic decay to economic slump and, more specifically, the harsh austerity measures imposed upon the Greek society by Greece's foreign lenders. Such an explanation, however, faces at least two shortcomings: firstly, the events that were eventually to destabilize Greek democracy began *before* and not after the 2010 imposition of austerity on Greece; and, secondly, with the possible exception of Hungary, no other European country similarly stricken by economic crisis (such as Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Latvia, or Italy) experienced such a spectacular rise of political extremism and swift erosion of its democracy as has Greece. This article offers an alternative explanation. It argues that Greece became afflicted with what has been described as the "syndrom" of *extreme and polarized pluralism* (Sartori 1976: 131-44). This happened because, in the wake of an intense legitimation crisis, and within a dramatically short time period, Greece's post-authoritarian politics imploded; the general economic crisis only accelerated events – also making solutions harder to come by. Such an argument has important political and normative implications. Given that there exists among party system and democracy theorists a solid agreement that the rise of political extremism poses serious threats to democracy (Duverger 1954: 419-20; Huntington 1968: 412; Linz 1978; Linz and Stepan 1996; Powell 1981; Sartori 1976), a full understanding of the Greek case becomes imperative. The issue at hand, therefore, is no more theoretically important as it is practically urgent.

This article aims at offering a theoretically compelling and empirically rich explanation of how a modern democracy may wither and become faced with political extremism and a non-promising future. It consists of three parts, each tackling one of the questions already asked. Part I (*Why has Greek democracy decayed?*) presents Greece's post-authoritarian system as a specific subtype of pluralism herein termed "populist democracy" and then goes on to explain the legitimation crisis it suffered already by 2008. Part II (*How did democratic decay come about?*) begins by stating the puzzle of synchronous convergence of factors inimical to democratic stability. It then tries to solve it through the empirical analysis of the implosion of old politics, which occurred in a three-staged sequence: an insurrection against the state in late 2008; the prolonged mass unrest during 2009-2012; and, eventually, the fatal elections of 2012. Part III (*Now what?*) is about the present state of affairs and future prospects of Greece – a country that is currently bedeviled by anti-system oppositions of both neo-populist and anti-democratic varieties.

2. The old arrangement, its logic and workings: *Populist democracy*

Any explanation of political instability and the rise of political extremism in Greece would be either simplistic or incomplete without comprehending the grievances motivating Greek society during the years preceding the elections of 2012. This requires an understanding of the nature and mechanics of post-authoritarian Greece's dominant political and socio-economic arrangement that, by and large unexpectedly, came to a bitter end during the socialists' last administration (2009-2011). Here is a short account of it.

As has been explained in more detail elsewhere (Pappas 2013a; 2013b), beginning in the early 1980s, Greece developed as a *populist democracy*, that is, a pluralist system in which the government no less than the opposition parties became and behaved as populists. As the exact opposite of political liberalism, populism (herein simply defined and understood as *democratic illiberalism*) featured the idea of Greek society riven by a single cleavage ostensibly dividing “the people” from some entrenched elite; viewed politics as a zero-sum game, thus eschewing consensus-seeking; and stressing majoritarianism and a winner-takes-all logic. In such a system, however, both the country's political class and the vast majority in Greek society were able to achieve, and for a long time maintain, an admirably high coordination of aims thanks to two complementary mechanisms: a state bent on handing out political rents to practically every member of society; and a party system built to ensure the distribution of these rents in an orderly and democratic way.

State-related rents and other inducements, or entitlements, were both material and immaterial. Thus, besides typical patronage tangibles (such as state jobs and pensions),¹ a large number of closed-shop professions also enjoyed privileged protection against market risks while virtually everyone in society was in a position to act illegally against the state's interests with no punishment – through systematic tax evasion, unauthorized construction, pension fraud, or legislative immunity. The vast majority of Greeks, therefore, had been allowed to gain individually at the expense of the public good, while the rule of law degenerated and corruption flourished. Still, given the finite nature of state-related resources, there needed to be a way of distributing state-related benefits in a prudent and politically sustainable way. This was provided by the unusual system of *polarized twopartism* that developed in Greece after the 1981 elections.

¹ By 2008, public sector employment in Greece amounted to an impressive 21 percent of the entire active workforce and pension expenditures (which equaled 11.5 percent of GDP in 2005) were among the highest in the OECD, which averaged a mere 7.2 percent.

That system combined the format of two party politics (i.e., the existence of only two significant parties able to govern singlehandedly) with the mechanics of polarized pluralism, in particular polarization. Such a system could only work on three interrelated premises: each of the two major parties could win a parliamentary majority large enough to allow it to govern alone; the two parties regularly alternated in power; and each time there were sufficient state resources for the party in office to hand out to society. As long as the Greek state coffers had sufficient funds, the regular alternation of the two rival parties made possible the distribution of political rents in society in a truly democratic and economical way – that is, *by turns* rather than in one go.

Greece's system of populist democracy worked admirably well for nearly thirty years, during which the country's two major parties, center-left *Panhellenic Socialist Movement* (PASOK) and center-right *New Democracy* (ND), aided by an electoral law that was devised to each time reinforce the major party, had been able to hold office alternately, in most cases commanding ample parliamentary majorities: PASOK ruled during 1981-89, 1993-2004, and 2009-11; ND enjoyed office during 1990-93 and 2004-2009. A note is in order about the particular type of partisan polarization that developed in Greece's populist democracy. For, unlike it happens in liberal pluralist systems with multiple cleavages (such as deep rooted divisions of class, language, region, or religion, which often create deep social rifts) and a large spread of public opinion, polarization in Greece has not been primarily over ideologies. Greek polarization has instead been *strategic* polarization, pursued deliberately by pragmatic parties competing to grab the state singlehandedly and control its resources; Greek society was polarized over (scarce) state resources. As shown by Corrales (2011) and Corrales and Penfold (2007) in their analyses of polarization in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, polarization can be used strategically by parties firmly in office for winning ambivalent non-ideological voters in the middle (or preventing them from defection). To this end, state holding incumbents offer the undecided voters state-related inducements, tangible as well as intangible, while at the same time making certain that opponents will be punished through exclusion from state jobs and other patronage benefits. Such polarization may become electorally rewarding as it forges in-group solidarity by simply "crowding out" the opposition. However a winning strategy in the short term, deliberate polarization has at least three major drawbacks: the opportunism of electoral majorities; its contagious effects on opposition parties; and its dependence on state resources availability.

To the extent that incumbent parties succeed in winning the support of ambivalent voters chiefly through the selective bestowal upon them of state rents and other related benefits, electoral majorities are opportunistic and, therefore, highly tenuous: what keeps them together is the fear that the opposition may take away their gains. Such polarization becomes mutually reinforcing as the only option of the party in opposition is, indeed, to become irresponsible by trying to overpromise, thus outbidding, the incumbent party. Finally, strategic polarization is feasible only to the

extent that, and as long as, state funds and other resources are available for handing out to government supporters. What may happen when such resources become exhausted? The Greek case offers an answer.

3. Legitimation crisis and the rise of contemporary *political Luddism*

A political crisis ensued in Greece once it became evident that the state could no longer serve society. Already by 2008, as public funds got increasingly scarce, and systemic irrationality became more obvious, various social groups began one after another manifesting their opposition to government and withdrawing their loyalties to it. The first social categories to do so were those more vulnerable to market downturns and with little or no resource to political representation – the youth and the illegal immigrants. In subsequent months, as unemployment kept rising fast, the bankruptcy of the Greek state caused the deprivation of state-related benefits to even broader social categories. With the political and economic crises feeding on each other, gross irrationalities and social tensions that during previous decades had been kept latent, now became manifest and the Greek political system went into a fast developing legitimation crisis spiral. For, as Habermas (1988: 69) explains, in cases of state management failure, the government “lags behind programmatic demands *that it has placed on itself*. The penalty for this failure is withdrawal of legitimation.”

Greece’s crisis of legitimation began in earnest in early December 2008 and carried on until the 2012 legislative elections. It was marked by intense social unrest with three partial features: mass membership extending across the social board; the fact that it targeted specifically the state and the state infrastructure; and its violent nature. Along that process, society broke long-standing ties with old parties and fashioned new public realms (ranging from neighborhood initiatives to street demonstrations); became vocal and invented new forms of participation (as varied as including both the creation of direct democracy councils, social media, and street rioting); and, above all, it looked for new political agencies for conferring its loyalties on. During such processes, social boundaries between friend and foe became redrawn, new conflict areas emerged, old certainties were gone, and novel meanings won currency.

The question is raised: Why was Greece so different from other European countries also hit by similar crises? The answer, I submit, hinges on the particular nature of grievances voiced by the Greek society when the old “game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996) appeared as turning into a thing of the past. As it emerges from the foregoing analysis, under the old political arrangement the state had presented for the vast majority of Greek society a vital utility function – one, moreover, that was assumed to always get increased, however marginally. That was, to be sure, an unreasonable assumption; yet, it was widely accepted as true as long as the Greek state “worked” – that is to say, it was in a position to satisfy society’s increasing

demands, mostly thanks to borrowing. During the almost three decades of its existence, such a system became “deeply embedded in the norms and expectations of political and social life” (Diamond 2007: 119) in Greece and suited established economic practices. By 2008, however, the looming global economic crisis made it increasingly clear to Greek political elites that the old state-based system of opportunities, incentives, and rewards was about to be overturned. As both parties upon which Greece’s populist democracy had been erected found it increasingly difficult to sustain the time-honored political and socio-economic arrangement with common citizens, old linkages eroded and coordination between the two parts became rather rickety. Before long, as society sensed that the political class had begun cheating on its promises, the old consensus was breached. And the people took to the streets.

Interestingly enough, when the Greek society realized that the old elites could not sustain the hitherto arrangement, thereby preserving systemic equilibrium, and out of fear for reforms that now appeared as quite inevitable, it behaved very much like the machine-breakers in the early phase of the British Industrial Revolution. As Eric Hobsbawm (1952) and others have shown, Luddism was neither a “pointless and blind activity” nor an act of despair by people faced with harsh economic difficulties; it rather was a rational reaction of workers feeling threatened by the passage of their societies from a traditional into the industrial world. The Luddite movement was a backlash against modern technology by groups in society that had been endowed with assets specific to the old technology (e.g., ancient capital equipment, outmoded labor skills, social reputation pertinent to traditional social hierarchy) and who found it hard to shift to the opening of market economy. According to Joel Mokyr (1992), resistance to new technology went through two consecutive phases. In the first phase, the protesters attempted to influence political power through both ordinary protest activity (such as strikes or demonstrations) and lobbying in order to prevent the innovations, regulate their usage, or obstruct their diffusion. But once such innovations had become inevitable, and embraced by the state, as it happened in industrializing Britain, there followed a second phase of protest during which workers resorted to machine breaking and other violent activities with the aim to intimidate their potential users. In their actions, the machine wreckers enjoyed widespread support from other social groups that were similarly affected by the introduction of new technologies and the opening of markets. Hence the persistence and duration of machine breaking activities, as well as the difficulties of the authorities in repressing them.

In the manner of the machine breaking Luddites, state reformism and markets liberalization in contemporary Greece were resisted by a society that, for many years, had been lavishly endowed with state privileges and other favors at the expense of open and meritocratic competition. During the years of populist democracy that preceded the economic crisis (roughly extending from the early 1980s to 2008), the protesting society had successfully prevented governments, whether of the center-

left or the center-right, from rationalizing the state and introducing market reforms as were the reduction of state ownership through privatizations of public utilities and other state-provided services; market liberalization in state-monopolized sectors and the removal of entry barriers in other sectors of economic activity with oligopolistic structures; the restructuring of public administration in general and the tax system in particular (e.g., Christodoulakis 2012). Indeed, every single effort during that period to reform the state and restructure the economy had met in society with hostility and often became the cause of ferocious political squabbles. In point of fact, during 1980-2008, Greece exhibited by far the richest record of general strike activity in Europe (see *Table* below).²

Once it became clear, however, that the old political arrangement could be no more, especially after the bailout agreements had made radical state reforms inevitable, social protest began since 2009 resembling the Luddites' machine breaking. Since then, and until capped by the 2012 elections, there was to follow in Greece a much more intense, widespread, violent and destructive wave of social reaction to reforms. The crucial difference was that this new wave of protest was against the *state* in its totality, not just the government of the day as in the past. Andreas Kalyvas (2010: 354) puts it nicely: "With their direct actions and words, the demonstrators violated the law, turned against its guardians, attacked public goods, disrupted order, looted government property, resisted arrest, and, when arrested, charged under anti-terrorist law." For the modern-day Greek Luddites the state had simply outlived its utility.

Nowhere does both the carrying out of contemporary Luddism and the Greek case singularity appear more clearly than in comparing the patterns of *general strike* activity among European countries that were hit similarly by the recent economic crisis (*Table 1*). Unlike "economic" strikes, which aim at the satisfaction of sectional or occupational demands and are directed specifically against employers, general (or "political") strikes are typically organized at national level around broad issues that concern large parts of society and are intended against governments themselves and their (actual or, more often, proposed) policies.

Table 1 around here

Strikingly, in the height legitimization crisis, Greece's record of general strike activity becomes even more impressive, especially when compared to similarly conditioned countries, as it now accounts for 68.1 percent (15 observations) of the 22 general

² According to the dataset of general strikes in 16 European countries (EU15 plus Norway) over the 1980-2006 period provided by Kelly et al. (2011), Greece alone accounts for 45.8 percent (33 observations) of the 72 strikes in all countries for the entire period. To these authors' definition, a general strike is defined as "a temporary, national stoppage of work by workers from many industries, directed against the executive or legislative arms of government, to enforce a demand or give voice to a grievance."

strikes in our select group of nations for 2009-2011. Most of the remaining strikes (4) occurred in Italy, while 2 took place in Portugal and only one in Spain; Ireland experienced no general strike. Besides their large number, general strikes in Greece during recent years have often also been characterized by violent and illegal conduct, a topic to which I will return in the following section. For the time being, what should have been clear is that no other democratic system in crisis-ridden Europe has been faced with such a massive legitimation crisis as Greece. That political consequences were to be calamitous was only inevitable.

II

4. The puzzle of synchronous convergence of factors hostile to democracy

From surveying the literature on unstable democracies, there emerge no less than seven explanatory variables that stand out most prominently: economy; cleavage; polarization; historical legacy; fragmentation; cabinet stability; and foreign involvement (for a concise account, see Diskin, Diskin and Hazan 2005).³ Puzzlingly, all these variables are present and hard felt in post-2012 elections Greece, *while they were barely visible, if at all existent*, by 2008. More specifically:

As it has been shown by numerous studies, susceptibility to political extremism and democratic decay is more evident in countries with a weak and malfunctioning rather than a stable and robust economy (Przeworski et al. 2000); countries where social cleavages are deep or running parallel to each other rather than being low-intensity or crosscutting (Lipset 1959; 1960; 1994); countries with highly polarized party systems rather than ones enjoying low or no polarization (Sartori 1976); countries with undemocratic histories and adverse political cultures than those with solid democratic records and a liberal culture (Putnam 1993); countries which tend to be characterized by a high fragmentation of their political forces (Sani and Sartori 1983) and, consequently, are more likely to have unstable cabinets or governing coalitions rather than stable ones (Laver and Schofield 1991; Laver and Shepsle 1996); and, finally, susceptibility to political extremism increases in countries in which there is open involvement by third countries rather than in fully sovereign ones.

Here lies a riveting puzzle. By late 2008, when the global economic and financial crisis had already gripped most western nations, there seemed in Greece to be *none* of the foregoing factors that could have rendered it vulnerable to political extremism. And

³ Another three possible causes of democratic fragility as identified in the literature are federalism, presidentialism, and electoral proportionality. None of them, however, applies to Greece – a unitary state with a strong parliamentary system and an electoral law designed to yield ample majority governments.

yet, by the elections of 2012, *each and every* other variable that is commonly used to account for the rise of extremism was already on tap (*Table 2*). More specifically: even as late as the 2009 elections, Greece was considered as one of the world's thirty richest countries with small internal socioeconomic gaps; despite a large inflow of immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s, it was still thought of enjoying a high degree of social cohesion in terms of ethnic composition, language and religion; polarization may have been high during past decades but, as already pointed out, was of a strategic rather than ideological type; Greece, moreover, had by that time enjoyed an unprecedented record of uninterrupted democratic normalcy, which had led to the establishment of a seemingly solid two-party system resulting in stable majoritarian governments; and, finally, as a member of EU and since 2001 of the Eurozone, Greece had been, and acted as, a fully sovereign country.

Table 2 around here

And yet, within only a few years, everything had come upside down. In the economy, lest it default on its debt, Greece had to be temporarily rescued by successive bailout programs by the so-called *Troika* (consisting of the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) in exchange for painful austerity measures (as they have been stipulated in the *Memorandum of Understanding [MoU]* between the Greek government and the *Troika*). Thus forced to implement decisions taken by its foreign lenders, Greece for all practical purposes ceased to be a sovereign nation. With unemployment constantly on the rise,⁴ new cleavages emerged in society. Most salient have been the cleavages between young and aged Greeks; native Greeks and foreign immigrants; and, of course, pro-MoU and anti-MoU Greeks. In politics, too, changes have been wide-ranging and far-reaching. The old two-party system that in the past gave the country stable single-party governments is gone. New contestants emerging on both far right and far left have caused both the fragmentation of political forces and extreme ideological polarization. As will be shown shortly, Greece's political forces are grouped into three mutually antagonistic categories: liberals, populists, and non-democrats. No wonder, then, that all four governments Greece had since 2009 (including two interim coalition governments) have been wobbly and short-lived.

5. Political implosion amidst social unrest, December 2008-June 2012

Greece's legitimization crisis led the time-honored system of populist democracy to implosion. How did that happen? And which have been the characteristics of that implosion? For their obvious importance, this section examines these issues in some

⁴ In the time period examined in this section, unemployment rates for each February were: 2008, 7.9%; 2009, 8.9%; 2010, 11.1%; 2011, 15.2%, and 2012, 21.7%, which was twice as high as the Eurozone average. By the same year, unemployment for people 15-24 years old stood at 53.8%, more than double the figure of three years earlier. Source: Hellenic Statistical Authority (2012).

detail. It will be shown that the transformation in Greece from two-party politics to polarized pluralism was the end result of a thick sequence of events unfolding within a remarkably short period of time through three distinct phases including (a) an insurrection against the state in late 2008; (b) the prolonged period of civil disturbances lasting from May 2010 to February 2012; and (c) the elections of May/June 2012. I begin with the events in chronological order, account for common characteristics, point to specific actors and outcomes, and propose an overall explanation.

Insurrection against the state: December 2008-January 2009

When the global financial and economic downturn hit Europe in 2008, Greece still seemed to enjoy relative political stability and, at least in what would presently become known as “Greek statistics,” even some economic fitness. At that year’s end, however, an insurrection against the state occurred in Greece. It all began in early December 2008, right after the shooting in Athens of a teenager student by a trigger-happy police officer, and featured riots that soon spread throughout most Greek cities turning their streets into urban battlegrounds. It was a mass insurrection against the state akin to low intensity civil war: “There was civil disobedience and public unruliness, direct action outside institutional channels of expression, unmediated by parties and formal rules, at the edges of and beyond legality, directed against the state and the civic order it represents” (Kalyvas 2010: 353-4). The insurrection was characterized by long duration, high intensity, and unprecedented violence. Riotous action lasted several weeks before it subsided in mid-January 2009. Rather than remaining isolated in Athens, it swept across the country with almost every other urban center being caught in a conflict that featured daily marches, strikes, sit-ins, and civil disobedience. In terms of size, participants amounted to hundreds of thousands nationwide and, during the events, some 600 schools and 150 university faculties remained occupied. The most prominent features of the insurrection were violence and widespread destruction of both public and private properties. More than 800 stores, banks and other public buildings, including numerous police stations, were destroyed, mostly by arson, while hundreds of vehicles were torched. According to estimates of the Athens Traders Association, rioting caused €2 billion (\$ 2.8 billion) in private property damages.

Although the immediate causes of the youth uprising were the killing of the teenager boy and, at a broader level, the government’s erratic attempts to rationalize higher education and, by recognizing private universities, restructure it according to market rules (Bratsis 2010: 193), its root causes were even more complex. True enough, as the editors of a collection of essays on the December explosion note, “The main grievances of the demonstrators were directed at a political system and state behavior which Greek youths believed had let them down” (Economides and Monastiriotis 2009: vii). The insurgent youth (known at the time as the “700 euros generation”) reacted when they realized that the low-hanging fruits of the Greek

state had been depleted during a thirty-year old political compromise between the country's political class and previous generations. It was their challenge that, almost instantaneously, most than anything else revealed the deep legitimization crisis of the Greek state.

Besides the appearance in the public realm of the insurgent youth, the 2008 events also brought under light another new political subject, the *rebellious immigrant*, who rose against a legal regime that was reluctant to grant him citizenship and other rights under any conditions. To such immigrants, the insurrection "opened up new spaces of citizenship from below ... [and] staged their public appearance as active and engaged agents. ... They became informal citizens, citizens *de facto* but not *de jure*, that is, citizens against the law" (Kalyvas 2010: 358). Immigrant participation in the protests helped bring to light a deep social divide that had long existed almost unacknowledged in Greek society between native citizens and aliens without legal citizenship. As society became all of a sudden mindful of that divide, political entrepreneurs thriving on anti-immigration calls could simply not miss the opportunity.

Prolonged mass unrest: May 2009-February 2012

By mid-January 2009, the insurrection against the state had subsided but the conservative government stood completely delegitimized. In the June 2012 elections for the European Parliament, the government suffered heavy losses and, in addition to many scandals, its image was further tarnished by its incompetence to solve any of Greece's accumulated problems – ranging from corruption and urban violence to fighting the wildfires that, in previous summers, had destroyed large parts of the country leaving dozens of people dead and many more wounded. By autumn 2009, the Greek economy was in recession and the budget deficit was found to be worse than previously calculated, making it the largest in the Eurozone (European Commission 2010). At that point, then Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis called for snap elections pledging to reduce government expenditures and halt recruitment in the state. Opposition leader George Papandreou, on the other hand, put forward a quite different line of policy. He opposed the government's austerity plan, proposing instead to enhance market liquidity on the belief that "there is money, it is only that the government prefers to give it to the few and powerful." Papandreou's party was thus able to win the October 2009 elections by a landslide (*Table 3*, below) but, as it would soon turn out, that was PASOK's last hurrah as a major party.

Once in office, and when it became evident that the Greek debt was not sustainable, Papandreou's government had to strike painful deals with the *Troika* in May 2010, and again in October 2011, for bailout loans in exchange for austerity. While protests and general strikes in Greece had meantime become commonplace (refer to *Table 1 supra*), often turning violent, Papandreou was forced to resign in November 2011, thus allowing the formation of a caretaker coalition government headed by

economist Lucas Papademos. In the social unrest of that period there were three high points: May 2010; May 2011; and February 2012. During that period, there was also a resurgence of terrorist activity by far left and anarchist groups carrying a series of attacks, as well as of far right terrorism directed at immigrants and anarchists. Here is a brief account of events.

The first cycle of social unrest started on 5 May 2010 with a nationwide strike sparked by the government's decision to impose a harsh austerity program. However, in Athens, the strike turned into a tidal wave of fury as protestors tried to storm the parliament, inside which deputies were debating spending cuts, shouting "thieves, thieves" and "let the plutocracy pay" (Smith 2010). Pushed back by the riot police, the crowd retorted to vandalism and, using petrol bombs, set fire to dozens of buildings in the city center. A second cycle of social unrest began on 25 May 2011 with peaceful protests against new austerity measures organized in Athens and other major Greek cities. Modeled after the Spanish *indignados* movement, protesters in Athens once again gathered outside the Parliament and organized daily demonstrations disrupting the parliamentary process while they built "assemblies" mimicking direct democracy. On 28 June, as the government was trying to pass a new round of austerity measures in order to receive rescue loans to avoid bankruptcy, the labor unions called for a new 48-hour strike and a march through the center of Athens. That event soon turned violent as protestors clashed with the police amidst extensive use of tear gas and petrol bombs. Protests in Athens and other parts of the country continued well into the summer. The third cycle of social unrest opened on 12 February 2012 with an estimated half-a-million protesters outside of the parliament opposing a yet another package of austerity measures proposed by the caretaker cabinet of Papademos. As lawmakers were debating and protesters demonstrating, the city of Athens became again a battleground between the state police making heavy use of tear gas and dissenting citizens hurling stones and petrol bombs. Dozens of buildings in the center of Athens were set ablaze and even more dozens of protesters and police officers were reported injured.

Social unrest and strike action also sparked terrorist activity, which, besides arson and petrol bomb attacks by hooded youths against banks, police stations, political party offices, ministries, government officials, journalists, and political activists among its targets, also claimed several casualties. Meantime, far right hit squads riding motorbikes and armed with wooden poles also appeared and began to attack immigrants, chase them through the streets, beat and stab them – in at least one case, to death. Only in the period between January and September 2012, the UN High Commissioner of Refugees would report 87 racist attacks, also calling the situation "exceptionally alarming" (UNHCR 2012).

Legislative elections: May/June 2012

The legitimacy crisis that had begun in late 2008 culminated in the collapse of Greece's two-party system during the consecutive parliamentary elections of May and June 2012. Between 1981, when two-partism was introduced, and 2009, when it made its last show of strength, the combined share of the vote of ND and PASOK had averaged an impressive 83.8 percent of the national vote (and an average of 274 seats in the 300-seat parliament). By June 2012, ND scored below 30 percent while PASOK plummeted almost 32 percentage points since 2009, now standing at a paltry 12.3 percent, the lowest received by this party since its foundation in 1974. Meanwhile, new potent challengers had appeared on both left and right of the political spectrum (*Table 3*).

Table 3 around here

The real winner of the elections was the *Coalition of Radical Left* (SYRIZA), a merger of a dozen organizations ranging from the reformist to the radical left under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras (at that time aged 33).⁵ The support for this party, which had first appeared shortly before the national elections of 2004 garnering 3.3% of the vote, now jumped to almost 27 percent making it the major opposition force. No less impressive was the rise of the neo-Nazi *Golden Dawn* (GD), which, commanding almost 7 percent of the national vote and 18 seats in the Greek parliament became a potent political agent. Another two new parties appeared on the electoral spectrum. One of them, the *Independent Greeks* (ANEL), presents as a patriotic populist party aiming to “liberate” Greece from its creditors’ “foreign occupation.” The other new party to enter parliament in 2012 was the *Democratic Left* (DIMAR), a moderate social-democratic force uneasily squeezed between PASOK and SYRIZA. There was, finally, the *Communist Party of Greece* (KKE), the oldest of all Greek parties, which however saw its vote dropping to 4.5 percent. Quite remarkably, no self-professing liberal party (as were the *Democratic Alliance*; *Creation Again*; *Action*; and the *Green Ecologists*) succeeded to enter parliament, for those parties’ inability to cooperate among other reasons.⁶

The elections of 2012 also pointed to other consequential developments in Greek politics – an increasingly high abstention from voting; the crystallization in electoral results of an intergenerational divide in Greek society; and, perhaps most importantly, the emergence of a major cleavage effectively pitting these Greeks who

⁵ Among the organizations that consist SYRIZA are: reformist *Synaspismos* (Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology); *AKOA* (Renewing Communist Ecological Left); *KOE* (Communist Organization of Greece), a militant Maoist organization; *DEA* (Internationalist Workers' Left), associated with the US International Socialist Organization; *KEDA* (Movement for the Unity in Action of the Left), a KKE splinter group; *Energoi Polites* (Active Citizens); *Eco-socialists Greece*, *DIKKI* (Democratic Social Movement), a PASOK splinter group; *Xekinima*, the Greek section of the Committee for a Workers International; and several other tiny left groups with such as names as *Kokkino* (Red) or *Rosa* [Luxemburg].

⁶ Put together, in the elections of May 2012 those four parties won 9.5 percent of the national vote.

saw painful reforms as necessary for achieving future gains against those who opposed reforms for fear of losing past benefits. More specifically:

Declining turnout, as shown in *Table 3*, dipped from 70.9 percent in the 2009 elections to an unprecedentedly low 62.5 percent by June 2012. “In total,” notes Mavris (2012: 102), “in the two years since the Memoranda began to be implemented, the number of voters has dropped by 800,000” – a clear indication of low party system legitimation and voters’ disenchantment with democracy. The age polarization of the electorate was also “unprecedented and very deep (*ibid.*: 105) as the voter base for ND and PASOK was markedly aged in comparison to SYRIZA’s exceptionally high support among younger voters. By far the major development was, however, that the emerging party system was a “constellation” of the new major cleavage that had meantime been created.

The destruction of Greece’s populist democracy combined with the imposition of long-term austerity measures on Greek society led to the formation of a new structural conflict, which cut across the traditional left-right divide eventually setting supporters of Greece’s bailout program (pro-MoU) against its opponents (anti-MoU). The former group, albeit very reluctantly, favored market reforms, austerity measures, and further European integration; the latter stood firmly for a large, protective and over-spending state, as well as the distancing from the EU and growing nationalism, often mixed up with nativism. I am going to take up this issue again in the last section.

6. Sorting out the puzzle and accounting for the rise of polarized pluralism

Contemporary Greece is, perhaps, the closest we can get to a laboratory for examining liberal democracy’s defects. It has been shown how the events that took place in Greece between the social revolt at the end of 2008 and the duplex elections of 2012 caused the sequential emergence of virtually *all* factors commonly associated with regime instability, political extremism, and democratic decay. This happened in stages. As already explained, and graphically shown below (*Chart 1*), the 2008 insurrection against the state testified to the existence of a deep intergenerational divide in Greek society as younger generations now realized that older ones had for many decades plundered the state leaving it bare of any reserves. In addition, the rise of the rebellious immigrant brought illegal immigration to the public fore, as a both salient and polarizing issue. The destructive events during that first stage also served as a powerful sign that the Greek state was simply not capable for exercising its legitimate monopoly of power. This would serve as a background reminder for subsequent developments, thus facilitating social mobilization against the state and its institutions. For, however true that Greece is being distinguished by a culture of “rioting and anti-system politics,” the December 2008 events exhibited three new characteristics (cf., Andronikidou and Kovras 2012): riotous mobilization with

impunity (as made clear by the low number of arrests during the events); ample public sympathy towards protestors coupled with open hostility to the state apparatus; and, as already said, the low capacity of the state to confront rebellious society and apply the rule of law.

Chart 1 around here

There followed, in the aftermath of Greece's bailout programs, the stage of civic disturbances between 2009 and early 2012. During that stage, four more variables affecting democratic normalcy cropped up. First, as it soon became painfully evident to everybody in Greek society, the Greek economy, unable to sustain its spiraling debt, became faced with the specter of default. In order to prevent such a development, and also guarantee the euro's stability, international lenders and foreign governments had to intervene in Greek domestic affairs demanding, in exchange for financial aid, austerity measures and other reforms. That, in turn, led to increased *ideological* (rather than strategic) polarization in Greek society, which now appeared divided between pro-MoU and anti-MoU citizens. That eventually led to great political and governmental instability. The fall in November 2011 of Papandreu's single-party government was followed by a national unity technocratic government and then by an even shorter caretaker government for leading Greece to elections. As the May 2012 electoral results did not produce a coalition government, the country went to new elections in June, after which there was formed a three-party coalition government.

The combination of political *and* economic crises that afflicted Greece since 2008 caused the detachment of voters from the traditional parties, the emergence of new contentious challengers, the shattering of former party allegiances, the demolition of the old left-right cleavage bases, and, eventually, the complete destruction of two-party politics. The party system that came into existence in the aftermath of the 2012 elections consisted of both entirely new parties and old parties trying to reinvent themselves.⁷ It is built upon, and reflects, the cleavages produced by the current crisis and fits perfectly Giovanni Sartori's category of *extreme and polarized pluralism* – a party system that has historically been causally linked to democratic breakdowns.

III

7. Greek democracy in perspective: Is it a new Weimar Republic?

According to Sartori's (1976: 131-73) classical analysis, which was informed primarily by the experiences of the German Weimar Republic, the French Fourth Republic, and

⁷ Cf., in this respect, Lipset and Rokkan's (1967: 2) remark that, as long as party systems remain unchanged, parties "do not present themselves *de novo* to the citizen."

Italy's *Anni di Piombo* (Years of Lead) in the 1970s, polarized pluralism has three core features, which may sufficiently identify the category.⁸ The first feature is the presence of anti-system parties, which, asserting not to “share the values of the political order within which [they] operate,” actively seek to undermine its legitimacy; to this purpose, they use what Linz (1978: 29-32) has termed “disloyal opposition,” which involves “blanket attacks on the political system rather than on particular parties or actors” with “disruptive purposes.” Polarized pluralism, secondly, features the center placement of one party or a group of parties. Because it is already physically occupied, the central area of the political system remains out of competition. This, to be sure, tells us nothing about the size, coherence, and resilience of the center forces against attacks from both left and right. The third feature of polarized pluralism is the existence of bilateral and, therefore, mutually exclusive oppositions to the government. As parties cannot in this view leapfrog over each other, left and right oppositions remain incompatible and cannot join forces.

It bears stressing, extreme and polarized pluralism indicates “an unhealthy state of affairs for a body politic” that is “hardly in a position to cope with explosive or exogenous crises [and therefore] is conducive either to sheer paralysis or to a disorderly sequence of ill-calculated reforms that end in failure” (Sartori 1976: 140). As the system’s stability hinges above all upon the presence *and* strength of anti-system forces, we should begin by mapping them and trying to estimate their political muscle.

Initially, however, it is necessary that we assess what is considered as *system* in today’s crisis-ridden Greece. There are two distinct and yet intertwined perceptions of it: On the one hand, it refers to the old party system that is being kept alive and perpetuated by ND and PASOK, which, in tandem with more recently DIMAR, have fashioned in the aftermath of the 2012 elections a coalition government intent on promoting pro-*Mou* reforms. On the other hand, the “system” refers to the very idea and practice of democracy as it developed and became applied in post-authoritarian Greece (and is summarily known as *Metapolitefsi*). The distinction is important. For, if in the former case anti-system parties militate against the current government and its (mostly *Troika*-imposed) policies, in the latter case anti-system opponents direct their actions against political liberalism and, indeed, democracy itself. The manifold oppositions that have developed in contemporary Greece are depicted in *Chart 2*. Thus, besides the old left-right cleavage, which has now become rather obsolete, the main fault lines are, first, between pro-*Mou* and anti-*Mou* forces (i.e., cycles A vs. B+C) while, second, also dividing (reluctant) liberal forces from both neo-populist and non-democratic ones (i.e., A vs. B vs. C). Interestingly, in contrast to Sartori’s original

⁸ In addition to its core features, Sartori (1976) also identifies a few secondary ones, including strong polarization; the prevalence of centrifugal rather than centripetal drives in the polity; emotive involvement in politics; irresponsible oppositions; and the politics of outbidding. None of them is missing from today’s Greek politics.

assumption that polarized pluralism is characterized by mutually exclusive oppositions, the Greek case indicates that oppositions may be perfectly compatible and, in perilous fact, they can even join forces.

Chart 2 around here

With regard to their political and electoral dynamics, the first opposition pits anti-MoU parties located on both the left (KKE and SYRIZA) and the right (ANEL and GD) against the largely pro-MoU parties of the coalition government. This to a certain extent recalls the values-based cleavage outlined by Hans-Peter Kriesi and his collaborators (Kriesi et al. 2012; 2010; 2006) structurally dividing “winners” and “losers” during Europe’s contemporary process of globalization.⁹ Such winners and losers, to be sure, constitute “political potentials,” which, despite their heterogeneous social composition, may become articulated and politicized by creative political entrepreneurs and their party organizations.¹⁰ Similarly in Greece the cleavage between pro-MoU and anti-MoU forces is about the positions voters take on issues regarding the relationship between state and market, which further depend on whether they are inside or outside the labor markets; work in protected versus unprotected sectors of the economy; and take pro-EU versus anti-EU stances.

What, however, adds further complexity to the Greek case, and makes it fraught with danger, is the fact that the foregoing economic-cum-cultural cleavage not only intersects the old left-right divide; it also cuts across society’s three very different ideas about the role of the state and, consequently, the nature of political regime itself. Each idea is represented by opposing political groups; but each of these groups includes quite a few strange bedfellows. This requires a brief analysis of Greece’s political forces.

The center group of parties, first, consists of formerly powerful ND and PASOK, both with strong populist instincts but now forced to turn into liberal reformist, together smaller DIMAR. These parties, currently in coalition, are intent under pressure by the *Troika* on reforming and, indeed, rationalizing the Greek state. To this purpose, they have to uphold political liberalism, push for further European integration, and keep Greece into the Eurozone. Taken together, their current electoral strength is below the 50 percent threshold, and there are also serious frictions at both the interparty and the intraparty levels.

⁹ In another terminology (Bornschiefer 2010), this is a cleavage between “libertarian-universalistic” and “traditionalist-communitarian” values.

¹⁰ As Kriesi et al. (1996: 922) put it, “The likely winners include entrepreneurs and qualified employees in sectors open to international competition as well as all kinds of cosmopolitan citizens. The expected losers, by contrast, include entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, all unqualified employees and citizens who strongly identify themselves with their national community.”

Straddling the political and ideological center, there are two parties, leftist SYRIZA and rightist ANEL, which are categorized as radical populists. According to its own declaration (December 2012), SYRIZA seeks to “organize the democratic overthrow of the political system and its underpinnings, and open the way for a government of the Left” through the use of “strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, rallies, civil disobedience, and other forms of protest.” ANEL, on the other hand, presents as a “patriotic and democratic front” aiming at the “liberation” of Greece from foreign powers, especially Germany, and the unilateral erasure of the debt. Despite their other differences, both parties trumpet the return to the status quo ante, this meaning the restoration of a big and over-generous state.

At the far ends of the new party system, there are the communist KKE and the neo-Nazi GD. The former is a “revolutionary organization struggling to overthrow capitalism and build the socialist-communist society ... [through] the winning of political power by the working class [and] the socialization of the main means of production” (KKE 1996). GD, on the other hand, presents as a socialist-nationalist movement aiming at “forming a new society and a new type of man.” Claiming to speak “the secret voice of the [Greek] blood that survives unaltered through the thousands years of history until today,” it promises to overthrow the corrupt system of governance and establish a classless, “organic people’s state inspired by the nationalist ideology.” Their ideological differences notwithstanding, both extremist parties stand against capitalism, EU and the euro, but above all liberal representative democracy. They both pledge to supplant the state and, by extension, the pluralist polity with some other more appropriate to their ideological inclinations: a dictatorship of the proletariat with a state-controlled economy in the case of the KKE, an organic community of Hellenes under an economic policy of autarchy and self-sufficiency in the case of GD.

How strong are at present the anti-system and extremist forces in Greece? Giovanni Capoccia (2002) operationalizes the strength of the challenge to democratic politics as the percentage of seats held by extremist parties in parliament. After the June 2012 elections, the non-democratic challengers (i.e., KKE and Golden Dawn) held together 30 seats in parliament, while the liberalism challengers (i.e., SYRIZA and ANEL) held no less than 91 out of 300 parliamentary seats. This however is an insufficient criterion for at least two reasons. First, it dismisses all too easily the challenge posed by extra-parliamentary forces; and, second, it implicitly assumes Sartori’s foregoing postulate that anti-system parties cannot form alliances. This calls for empirical and theoretical amendments.

In what concerns the forces on the extra-parliamentary left, our knowledge is still incomplete and much more research is needed. We do however know that they consider violence against the regime as both “inevitable and justifiable” (Kassimeris 2005: 748; 2013) and have mushroomed in recent years (Xenakis 2012), growing particularly strong among the youth and the unemployed. Such forces moreover

benefit from increasing abstention, which, as we have seen, is by now a constant during elections.

The issue of anti-system parties joining forces is even more dangerous, but also theoretically intriguing. As depicted in *Chart 2*, Greece's anti-system parties are strong partly because they *do not always face bilateral oppositions*; only the pro-system center parties do. Anti-system oppositions are indeed compatible and they can join forces. This is particularly true for SYRIZA and ANEL bestriding in quasi-symmetric ways the dividing line between left and right. Irrespective of their opposing spatial locations, these two parties often reach out to each other seeking to set up a common social and political front in support of similar goals and against their common enemies. As of KKE and GD, they are, of course, uncompromised ideological enemies; they however share their hostility to representative democracy, parliamentary procedure, political moderation and the rule of law.

The question lingers. Is Greece's system of extreme and polarized party politics viable at all? Or is Greece at risk of becoming a new Weimar Republic? As Sartori once put it, the matter is whether the polity manages to "survive long enough to absorb anti-system parties into the existing political order." Maybe. Only that Greece is now faced with a much more pressing task, which is precisely the need to forge, almost from scratch, that liberal political order that will stand as a credible alternative to both populism and authoritarianism before being able to eventually absorb them.

Table 1
General strikes in selected countries, 1980-2011

	1980-2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
Greece	35	1	7	7	50
Italy	12	1	1	2	16
Spain	6	0	1	0	7
Portugal	3	0	1	1	5
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0

Sources: Kelly et al. (2011); Rudig and Karyotis (2013);
data for Ireland provided by Eoin O'Malley

Table 2
 Causes of political instability in Greece in December 2008 and June 2012

12/2008	Causes of political instability	06/2012
X	Malfunctioning economy	✓
X	Deep social cleavages	✓
X	Ideological polarization	✓
X	Adverse historical background	✓
X	Party fragmentation	✓
X	Government instability	✓
X	Foreign involvement	✓

Table 3
Greek election results, 2009 and 2012

	<u>7 October 2009</u>		<u>6 May 2012</u>		<u>17 June 2012</u>	
	% of votes	N of seats	% of votes	N of seats	% of votes	N of seats
ND	33.5	91	18.9	108	29.7	129
PASOK	43.9	160	13.2	41	12.3	33
SYRIZA	4.6	13	16.8	52	26.9	71
ANEL	--	--	10.6	33	7.5	20
GD	--	--	7.0	21	6.9	18
DIMAR	--	--	6.1	19	6.3	17
KKE	7.5	21	8.5	26	4.5	12
LAOS	5.6	15	2.9	--	1.6	--
Others	4.9	0	16.0	0	4.3	0
<i>Totals</i>	100	300	100	300	100	300
Turnout	70.9		65.1		62.5	

Chart 1

The development by stage of the causes of political extremism in Greece, 2008-2012

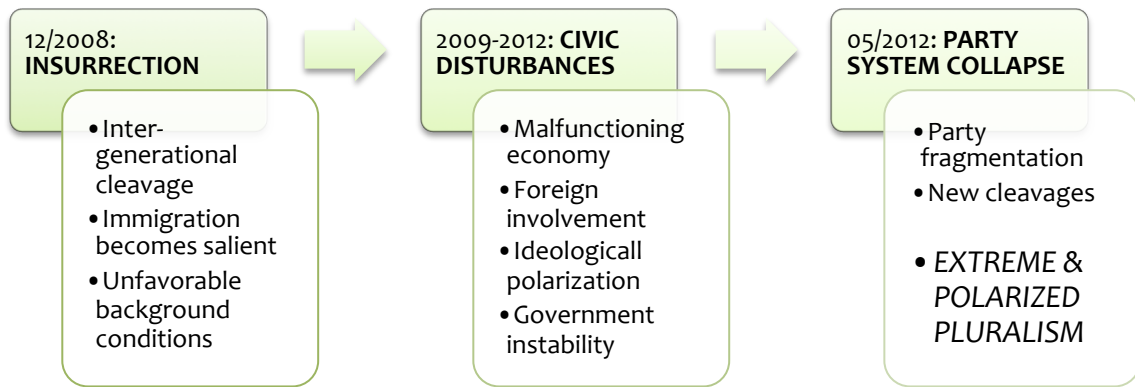
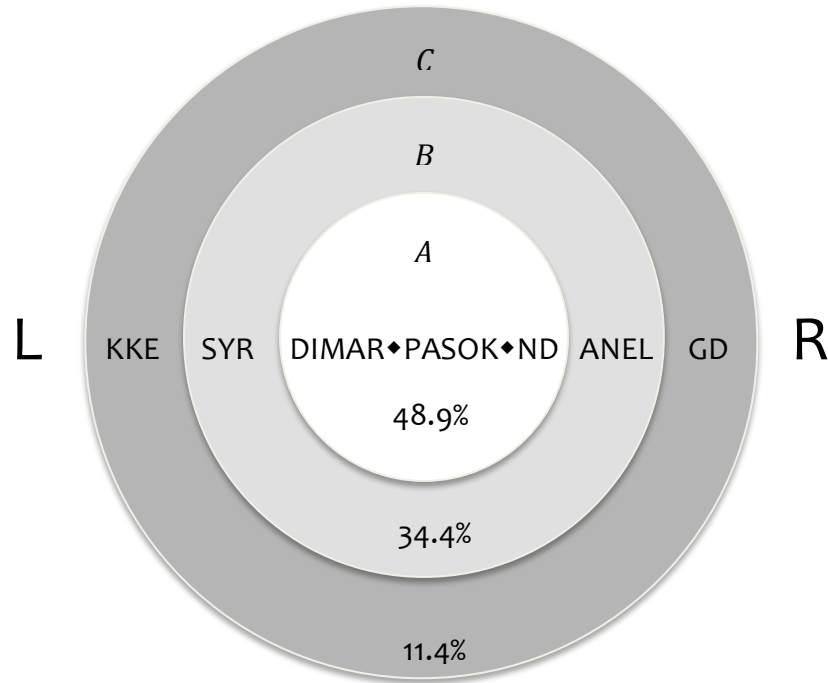


Chart 2
Greece's multiple oppositions and their combined electoral strength



Key:

- A** Old populists (plus DIMAR) turned into reluctant liberals
- B** Radical neo-populist parties
- C** Non-democratic parties

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