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Election note: The September 20, 2015 parliamentary election in Greece

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1. Background

The early parliamentary election of September 20, 2015 was called only eight months after the previous one was held (January 25, 2015) as the *SYRIZA-Independent Greeks* coalition government resigned in late August and the negotiations that followed among party leaders did not result in the formation of a new government. The resignation was triggered by the fact that the government lost its majority in the parliament, after the leftist faction of *SYRIZA* abandoned the party to form its own parliamentary group known as *Popular Unity*.

First, we briefly summarize the events that took place between the two parliamentary elections of 2015 (January 25 and September 20). In the January election, *SYRIZA*, a party of the radical left, won the election and elected 149 out of 300 parliament members. *SYRIZA* formed a post-electoral coalition with *Independent Greeks*, a right-wing populist party, on the basis of their anti-austerity platforms. Together they commanded more than the required absolute majority of seats in the parliament (see [Table 1](#)). *Independent Greeks* received a small number of ministerial portfolios (e.g. its leader became the Minister of Defence) and offered continuous support to the decisions of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras regarding the most important issue during this period: the negotiations between the Greek authorities and its institutional lenders (European Central Bank, European Commission, International Monetary Fund).

During the January campaign both *SYRIZA* and *Independent Greeks* promised that, if elected, they will annul the previous set of agreements with Greece's institutional lenders (known in Greek politics as “memorandum”). Instead, they will negotiate from scratch a new agreement with Greece's lenders. This new agreement will have very different characteristics compared to the previous agreements, including that a) international institutions' representatives will no longer be supervising the implementation of the agreement in Greece, and b) the largest part of the Greek debt will be forgiven. Yet, in the months that followed, Greece's institutional lenders were not willing to alter the main characteristics of the agreement, while the coalition government was not willing to step back from its pre-electoral promises. This led, in the beginning of the summer, to a deadlock between Greece and its institutional lenders which culminated in the end of June, when Greece missed its loan repayment to the IMF¹ and Greece's creditors refused to extend the second Greek bailout programme.² In response, the Prime Minister called a referendum on the topic of whether or not to accept the terms of agreement for a new bailout programme, which were presented to the Greek government by its institutional lenders during the *Eurogroup* meeting of June 25, 2015 –himself endorsing a “No” vote. The announcement of the referendum led to an immediate imposition of capital controls –some of them still apply (e.g. in January 2016 there was still a weekly 420 euros limit on all cash withdrawals). This, in turn, intensified the recession dynamics ([European Commission, 2015a, 2015b](#)) that followed Greece's half-a-year long denial to accept its lenders' terms.³ The

¹ Technically speaking, the IMF declared Greece to be in arrears in order to avoid using the term default.

² The programme was left to expire without the final evaluation being concluded successfully and, as a result, the final tranche was never disbursed. At the same time, a new round of negotiations between Greece and its institutional lenders concerning a third two-year bailout programme had started.

³ In its winter (February 5, 2015) economic forecast the European Commission projected that the Greek economy will grow by 2.5% in 2015, and by an additional 3.6% in 2016, compared to an anaemic growth rate of only 0.8% in 2014. By contrast, in its autumn forecast (November 5, 2015), following the imposition of capital controls in June, the Commission projected that the Greek economy will slide back to recession, shrinking by 1.4% and 1.3% in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and will only return to growth by mid-2017.

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Table 1
Results (allocation of votes and seats) of the September 20, 2015 general parliamentary election in Greece.

Party	September 2015			January 2015			Change (Sep–Jan) in	
	Percent	Votes	Seats	Percent	Votes	Seats	Percent	Seats
SYRIZA	35.46	1,925,904	145	36.34	2,245,978	149	–0.88	–4
New democracy	28.10	1,526,205	75	27.81	1,718,694	76	+0.29	–1
Golden dawn	6.99	379,581	18	6.28	388,387	17	+0.71	+1
PASOK – democratic coalition	6.28	341,390	17	5.16	319,289	13	+1.12	+4
Communist party	5.55	301,632	15	5.47	338,188	15	+0.08	0
Potami	4.09	222,166	11	6.05	373,924	17	–1.96	–6
Independent Greeks	3.69	200,423	10	4.75	293,683	13	–1.06	–3
Centrist union	3.43	186,475	9	1.79	110,923	0	+1.64	+9
Popular unity	2.86	155,242	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	+2.86	0
Other parties	3.55	192,831	0	6.35	392,485	0	–2.80	0
Voter turnout	56.57	5,566,295	–	63.62	6,330,356	–	–7.05	–
Valid votes (% of total)	97.58	5,431,850	–	97.64	6,180,872	–	–0.06	–
Blank/Null votes	2.42	134,445	–	2.36	149,484	–	+0.06	–

Note: PASOK – Democratic Coalition's vote shares are compared to the sum of the vote shares that its two constituent parties (PASOK and Democratic Left) received in the January 25, 2015 elections. Popular Unity did not contest the January 25, 2015 election as it was part of the SYRIZA party. In the percentage of other parties in January 2015 the vote share of former Prime Minister Papandreou's party is included. Parties' vote shares are computed on the basis of only the valid votes cast. The percentages of blank and null votes are computed on the basis of all votes cast.

outcome of the referendum was against Greece accepting the terms of its institutional lenders.⁴ A week later, at an EU Summit of Heads of States, where the future of Greece in the Eurozone was at stake, the Greek Prime Minister agreed to the terms, proposed by Greece's institutional lenders, for a third bailout programme.

In the weeks that followed the capitulation of the Greek Prime Minister, many SYRIZA MPs resigned from the party but kept their seats in parliament. This resulted in the SYRIZA led coalition government losing its parliamentary majority. Despite the coalition losing its majority, the agreement that was concluded between the Greek government and its institutional lenders was introduced by the government to the parliament for approval. The agreement was approved by a large majority since, on top of the non-defecting government MPs, all the MPs from the pro-EU parties (*New Democracy*, *Potami*, *PASOK*) also supported the deal. Nevertheless, the failure of the government to maintain majority support of 151 MPs led to the Prime Minister's resignation on August 20, 2015. During the talks that followed among party leaders, it was reaffirmed that the formation of a new government was not possible and thus an early election was called. The members and MPs of SYRIZA who opposed their party signing a new “memorandum” formed the new party of *Popular Unity*.

2. Electoral rule

In Greek parliamentary elections all citizens of age eighteen and above have the right to vote. The ballot is secret and, essentially, voluntary. Strictly speaking, the Constitution stated that voting is compulsory and that the exact penalty for someone abstaining will be specified by a common law. The latter provision was eliminated following the 2001 constitutional amendment. Ever since it has become *lex imperfecta* and, hence, potential laws that determine punishments have no constitutional grounds to be applied. On the ballot paper each party presented an ordered list of candidates. The election took place under a closed-list system. That is, voters could not express preferences over the ranking of candidates. This is a particular feature of the electoral rule –which otherwise specifies an open-list system: when an election takes place within a year of the previous one, party-lists have to be closed.

The current electoral law (3636/2008) is a modified PR-system with a *plurality premium* and, hence, it is rather disproportional

in favour of the plurality winner. A total of 300 seats are allocated to all parties that surpass the three percent electoral threshold; 250 seats are distributed among all parties in a proportional manner while the remaining 50 seats are awarded to the *plurality winner* party as a bonus. Most MPs are elected from electoral district lists (288) and the rest (12) from nation-wide party lists. A small number of electoral districts (7) elect a unique MP. In the remaining districts, seats are attributed to the competing parties as proportionally as possible with the following exception: the 50-seat *plurality bonus* is not allocated from a separate list, rather it is allocated by reserving some seats in multi-member districts for the winning party *irrespective* of its electoral performance in that particular district. This, obviously, creates sometimes strong distortions in representation.⁵

The law was introduced by the centre-left *PASOK* back in 2004 –when it was a dominant party– and was amended by *New Democracy* (it was made more disproportional) in 2008. The two parties agreed in such a distortion to the proportionality of the electoral rule as in the past it tended to favour them while SYRIZA had opposed that rule back in 2008 (Matakos and Xefteris, 2015a). In the aftermath of the 2012 elections and the increase in electoral fragmentation (Matakos and Xefteris, 2015b) *PASOK* started to campaign for an electoral rule reform and the abolition of the 50-seat bonus. This time, it was SYRIZA who opposed such a reform.

3. Main issues, contenders and campaigns

The early election of September 20, 2015 was triggered by the fact that the governing coalition lost its support in parliament –even falling below the necessary threshold (120 MPs) required for a minority government– as a result of its decision, in July, to agree to a third bailout programme –and further austerity– with Greece's institutional lenders. Naturally, therefore, the issue that almost exclusively dominated the electoral campaign was related to the third bailout programme and its implementation. An additional issue made its appearance during the campaign: the refugee crisis and the uncontrolled influx of refugees and migrants from the Turkish mainland to many Greek islands. The issue was highly controversial and was raised by the conservative opposition parties in order to score gains against the governing coalition.

⁵ For example, in the September election, SYRIZA got all four MPs in the electoral district of *Chania* despite having won only about 40% of the vote.

⁴ The “No” vote gained 61%.

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