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15. Greece. Populism Between Left and Right

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Introduction

By reviewing the existing literature on populism in Greece, this chapter, aims at providing a systematic framework to understand the role of populist rhetoric in the formation of the modern Greek state and in contemporary Greek political culture. Most of the literature on populism is based on theoretical work. The quantity of publications based on empirical work has, until recently, been limited. Currently, a growing number of studies are centered on populism. Surveys that include a battery of items to measure populist attitudes have just appeared within the last year. Most publications include single-case studies.

Research on Populism in Greece

There are various approaches to the meaning of populism in Greek politics. For some, populism is an ideology that is not linked to a program for political action but rather offers a spectrum for organizing the political space. For Mavrogordatos, "populism tends to deny the legitimacy of any entrenched elite, however recruited. In the populist view, the very existence of elites and hierarchies smacks of oligarchy and embodies an intolerable injustice against 'The People'" (1997, p. 19). According to Lyrintzis (1987), "populism is an ideology aimed at creating a hegemonic discourse through the exploitation of popular elements that appeal to individuals by stressing their participation and the fact that they belong to the 'people' or the 'non-privileged'" (p. 671). As a result, it creates a "confrontation between a majority (the masses, the people, the underprivileged, and the poor) and some minority (the elite, the establishment, the privileged, and the rich)" (Pappas, 2013, p. 41).

For others, populism includes some elements of nationalism. According to Pantazopoulos (2013, p. 70), nationalism becomes an indirect component through ideas that the evil, national elite co-operates with foreigners, and together, they are depriving the sovereign people from their prosperity. When the social populist discourse accuses the elite of failing to protect the interests of the people and of selling the nation to foreigners, the foreigner—the "other"— becomes part of the group of enemies. He concludes that pure social populism and pure national populism are never truly realized.

According to Pantazopoulos (2013, p. 100), all populist movements include both a social populist dimension and a national populist dimension. Some populist movements may be dominated by the former dimension, whereas others may be dominated by the latter dimension. National populism aims to morally and politically delegitimatize and demonize those who think and act differently by depicting them as enemies of the nation (Pantazopulos, 2013, p. 140).

Tsatsanis (2011, p. 15) argues that the perception of people as a homogenous body creates the ideal opportunity for the "deployment of nationalist ideas which equate 'the people' with 'the nation,'" leading to an articulation between populism and nationalism, which results in the formation of a "national populist idiom" that has become the most common variety within Europe. However, Tsatsanis notes that the high abstraction of the populist frame permits the articulation of populism with other ideological systems such as socialism or neoliberalism.

The question of Greek populism is often examined within the scope of the "cultural dualism" thesis. Populism has been linked to an account of Greek political culture that understands and defines political space as a distinction between the "reformist" and the "underdog" camps (Diamandouros, 1994). The modernizing strand favors change at the political, social, and economic levels, aiming at the integration of Greece into Europe. The "underdog culture," however, has strong ties with tradition and resists the reformist urge, being more influenced by the Ottoman and Byzantine past than by Western ideals. In this framework, nationalist populism would be associated with the underdog culture, which, in fact, stigmatized the political discourse in Greece throughout the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s (Kalpadakis & Sotiropoulos, 2007, p. 48). In populist discourses, "the people" are often described as "the underdogs," which are oppressed or exploited by the power block—that is, "the other" (Panizza, 2000, p. 179).

Surveys examining the populist character of political forces have set a minimum of criteria, resulting in the formation of an operational theory of populism. The alleged populist character of any discourse is judged upon (a) whether the discursive practice under examination is articulated around the *nodal point* of "the people" or other non-populist nodal points, and (b) to what extent its representation of society is antagonistic. In other words, does it predominantly divide society into two main blocks: the establishment (the power block) versus the people (the underdogs)? (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 123).

While a good number of researchers attribute an outright negative meaning to populism (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015), others identify some positive elements in it. Katsambekis (2014a) argues that "anti-populism" can be seen as a crucial aspect of post-democracy and a way to marginalize any disagreement. Stavrakakis (2014) notes that the axis between populism and anti-populism emerges as the dominant cleavage. The anti-populist camp dismisses popular demands by attaching a negative populist sign on them all. Along the same lines, Sevastakis (2012) notes that populism is often presented as the main source of all grim situations that threaten to destroy the country, the nation, and the society.

Various Greek political parties have been classified as populist—sometimes for limited periods of time—during the last four decades. Pappas and Aslanidis (2015, p. 5) note that the election of the populist Miltiades Evert (1993–1997) as the leader of the conservative party New Democracy (ND) marked the beginning of a new era during which populism contaminated Greece's two-party system. Along the same lines, Pappas (2013) argues that populism has penetrated the political system of Greece, and he characterizes the Greek political system as a "populist democracy." Political parties change over time, and they may cross from the populist to the non-populist camp, and vice versa. For instance, the PanHellenic Socialist Party (PASOK) has used populist discourse in the past, but PASOK's identity and discourse have been transformed so radically that today it can be classified in the anti-populist camp. According to Lyrintzis (2005), the "passage from populism to modernisation" occurred during the "modernising" period of the Greek political system from the mid-1990s onwards. Other parties, such as the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA),

used to have some populist characteristics in the past, and these populist characteristics have been intensified or transformed during the recent financial crisis. It should be noted, however, that not all Greek populist political parties share the same populist characteristics. For instance, even in its most populist period, New Democracy can be placed in the *empty populism* category (minimal anti-elitist or excluding discourse).

PASOK (1974–1996) may be classified with *anti-elitist populism*. Populism initially emerged in the Greek political spectrum after the country's 1974 transition to democracy (Pappas and Aslanidis, 2015). It was then that PASOK managed, under the charismatic leader Andreas Papandreou, to unite "the people," who found in PASOK a powerful political party that can express the people's common ideological beliefs (Pappas, 2013, p. 35). As Lyrintzis suggests, PASOK managed to establish itself by "exploiting the division of the political space between Left and Right, thus presenting itself as a 'New Left' [party]" and by developing a strategy that "presented Greek society as one split by the fundamental division between an all-embracing 'non-privileged' majority and a tiny 'privileged' oligarchy representing foreign interests and domestic monopolies" (1987, p. 668).

According to Pantazopoulos (2007, 2011), early PASOK has a nationalist ideology. One of Papandreou's favorite slogans was "Greece belongs to the Greeks." The party was against the United States, against NATO, and against Greece's entry into the European Economic Community, and it separated the political and intellectual elite into two groups—friends of Greece and enemies of Greece. The nationalization of key industries and sectors of the Greek economy, welfare policies, and national independence were some of the key traits of PASOK'S political discourse, at least until 1981, when it was struggling to forge its identity on the political spectrum (Spourdalakis & Tassis, 2006, p. 498). As Kalpadakis and Sotiropoulos suggest (2007, p. 50), PASOK's hegemony signifies the shift toward nationalist populism.

The 1981 elections revealed the triumph of Papandreou in promising a general change (*allage*) within Greek society, politics, and administration. Greek society was about to encounter the implications of populism turning into political action in the following years of Papandreou's premiership. PASOK had no concrete program to reform the country. Instead, it tried to reward its electoral constituency by offering benefits to "the people," or "the forces of light" (meaning PASOK voters), in order to satisfy the Greeks' high expectations, cultivated by the party's motto "PASOK in office—the people in power." In other words, PASOK's hegemony signified a transition from traditional clientelism to "machine politics" (Mavrogordatos, 1997).

Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) is better classified as *excluding populism*. In 2000, under the leadership of its "modernizer" leader Simitis, PASOK decided to delete the reference to religion from Greek identity cards, provoking the immediate response of the Church of Greece. Stavrakakis's analysis (2002) of Archbishop Christodoulos's discussions revealed that the Church's discourse clearly had a populist profile. Doxiadis and Matsaganis (2012) also stressed the role of the Greek Orthodox Church as a "guardian of the nation's purity" against the threat from the West. The Church's position brings the "cultural dualism thesis" to the surface again, since the controversy between the state and the Church is conceptualized as another indicator of Greek society's long-standing division between the modernizers and the traditionalists.

The above incident is considered to have triggered the emergence of LAOS. The party's acronym LAOS coincides with the Greek word for "the people" and has a clearly nationalistic connotation. In LAOS' discourse, "the people" are conceptualized as "the Greek people" since the party maintains a hostile attitude toward immigrants, demanding their repatriation. In its programmatic thesis, LAOS made reference to themes that are well established in radical right-wing parties (Tsiras, 2012). According to Ellinas (2012), "LAOS is directly comparable with West European extreme-right parties, sharing their nationalist ideology and populist rhetoric as well as their anti-immigrant, xenophobic and anti-Semitic appeals."

After the bailout, SYRIZA is an example of *anti-elitist populism*. In 2010, the global financial crisis hit Greece, and the Greek government was forced to implement austerity measures to avoid bankruptcy. Once again "the people" were suppressed by a "dominant elite." Only this time, "the enemy" was both domestic (PASOK and New Democracy had disappointed "the people") and foreign (the European Union, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund—the so-called "Troika"—had asked for the unpopular austerity packages). SYRIZA is one of the parties to have emerged, reclaiming the sovereignty of "the people." The electoral advance of SYRIZA is remarkable. It received an unprecedented 17% of the Greeks' vote in the May 2012 elections, almost 27% in the June 2012 elections, and more than 36% in the January 2015 elections, the last enabling it to form a coalition government with the right-wing populist party Independent Greeks (ANEL).

While in opposition, SYRIZA's main programmatic thesis was "21st century socialism"—the socialization of the means of production and the state operating in accordance with the rules of participatory democracy. SYRIZA used to hold a strong anti-German position. Prime Minister Tsipras maintained that George Papandreou, the socialist prime minister who had signed the first Memorandum (the First Economic Adjustment Program for Greece, signed on 3 May 2010) had agreed, before being elected, to surrender Greece to its lenders (Pantazopoulos, 2013, p. 44). Tsipras, in his main pre-electoral speech in Athens, made 40 references to the people, who have to fight their enemies: the establishment, local, and foreign interests; the Troika; the pro-Memorandum parties; the oligarchy; and the rich. As a result, SYRIZA, together with the Independent Greeks (ANEL), have formed a common national populist movement that accuses the political elites of working against the interests of Greece (Pantazopoulos, 2013, p. 150).

The first empirical analysis of the discourse of SYRIZA and its leader, Tsipras, before and after the 2012 elections, is provided by Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014). They analyzed the party's rhetoric according to the minimum criteria set by Laclau's discursive theory of populism. Their findings revealed that "the people" not only constitutes a common reference in SYRIZA's discourse but is actually the nodal point, penetrating the party's rhetoric from beginning to end. By making use of the popular feelings of resentment caused by the Memorandum and the austerity measures, Tsipras managed to unite heterogeneous identities and demands under the common enemy (the Troika, the external elites, the government coalition). In this sense, SYRIZA's populism is an *inclusionary populism* (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 132); for SYRIZA, "the 'we' is constructed in terms of the 'Greece of the many' or the 'determined people'" (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015, p. 13).

At the same time SYRIZA's narrative is built on an antagonistic schema that offers a portrait of society divided in two parts; us ("the people") against them ("the establishment") (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 130). SYRIZA has adopted the idea that there is a need for a national front to resist the foreign enemies of the nation. According to Pantazopoulos

(2013, p. 44), this stance becomes clear by the frequent references to the National Liberation Front—which was the main movement of the Greek Resistance during the Axis occupation of Greece during World War II—and by the adoption of a *left-wing national populism* (p. 154).

A Greek example of *complete populism* is ANEL. ANEL is another populist party from the right wing of the political spectrum that managed to establish its position in the Greek Parliament during the financial crisis. ANEL makes use of well-established themes of the conservative right by stressing the role of the family and the Greek Orthodox religion, while accepting a certain limited percentage of immigrants in Greece. In ANEL's discourse, "the people" are constructed mainly according to ethnic terms, since the party addresses voters who support the ideas of national and social conservatism. In analyzing the discourse of party leader Kammenos, Pappas and Aslanidis (2015) noted that his rhetoric rests on two main axes; anti-corruption and the conspiracy of the New World Order (pp. 11–12). The latter is presented as the main cause for all the difficulties that the Greek people are now facing. Kammenos's rhetoric is penetrated by an anti-German tone, making reference to "the Fourth Reich" when describing the current political situation in Greece, accusing the previous government (a coalition of conservatives and socialists) of being the trustees of German interests.

Finally, one could also argue that the party Golden Dawn represents complete populism. Golden Dawn is one of the most extremist political formations not only in Greece, but also in Europe. Golden Dawn managed to pave its way into the Greek parliament, raising concerns about the future of democracy in the country. This political formation claims to be a nationalistic party and is hostile toward immigrants, but its anti-immigrant rhetoric is different from that of other ethno-populist parties such as LAOS or, to a lesser extent, ANEL (Georgiadou, 2013, p. 88). Golden Dawn's vision is an ethno-homogenous state; nationality, defined in terms of "race, blood and ancestry," is endangered by immigrants, and thus immigrants should be forced to leave the country. It should be noted that Golden Dawn's members and leaders have been engaged in violent activities, usually against immigrants. Although Golden Dawn denies the "Nazi" label, official documents outlining Golden Dawn's structure and ideology have revealed its ideological lineage from Nazism. So the question is, what makes Golden Dawn a popular political force? The answer lies in the populist strategies that Golden Dawn put in action in order to gain citizens' sympathy. More precisely, Golden Dawn, by exploiting the fear of citizens— in particular, in specific central districts of Athens, where the concentration of immigrants is high-started to present itself as an "alternative police force" that would protect the people from immigrant attacks. Xenophobic nationalism has always been present in the political discourse of mainstream parties, but Golden Dawn managed to revitalize its social connotations in a remarkable way (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012). In reality, Golden Dawn's members and leaders tried to cultivate a correlation between immigrants and rising criminality during the crisis, which would legitimize their violent attacks against various ethno-social groups. In addition, Golden Dawn's members tried to "help" the economically vulnerable social classes by providing them with food—but only if they were able to prove that they were Greek.

For many years, the major political parties have been attempting to satisfy their "political clientele" by engaging in an endless policy of giving benefits to their electoral bases in exchange for their votes. In the long run, these policies have resulted in a dramatic increase of the public debt (Mylonas, 2011). In October 2009, George Papandreou, the son of PASOK's emblematic leader Andreas Papandreou, won the elections under his successful campaign slogan "The money is there," implying that the former New Democracy government preferred

to allocate economic resources to the few and powerful. But soon after his election, he had to sign a bailout agreement and to enforce austerity measures. As a result, the traditional populist constituency, "the people," turned their backs on their former "representatives," deciding to offer their support to the new populist actors. After all, all forms of populism are built on exactly this fundamental axiom: any problems with the social and political systems are caused by others, never by "the people." The enemy always comes from the outside and has to be demolished in order to safeguard the people's sovereignty (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, p. 12).

Populist Actors as Communicators

Although the literature on populism had grown in the last years, there is no systematic knowledge on the role of the media environment in the diffusion of populist discourse. Andreas Papandreou has been described as a storyteller par excellence, a virtuoso of simile and metaphor full of powerful emotional undertones, a great inventor of compelling slogans" (Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015, p. 2). It is worth noting that during his electoral campaign, Tsipras claimed to speak in the name of the "non-privileged"-a signifier highly associated with Andreas Papandreou's discourse (Pappas and Aslanidis, 2015, p. 12). A relevant analysis (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou, & Exadaktylos, 2014) that empirically tested the use of populist frames by the leaders of five parties (PASOK, New Democracy, the Communist Party of Greece, SYRIZA, and LAOS) during the period 2009–2011 showed that the Greek party leaders not only engaged in populist rhetoric but also, most significantly, in a populist blame-shifting game, which was dominant. The authors conclude that in the Greek political spectrum, we are able to identify a typology of populism. On the one hand, there is mainstream blame-shifting, where blame is orientated toward fewer actors, mainly toward the major rivals in the political system (i.e., PASOK and New Democracy, who blame each other for the malpractices that drove Greece into the recession) and to external blocks of power. On the other hand, fringe blame-shifting is expressed by the smaller parties, and it should be understood as a form of populism, where the blame is diffused over a wide range of actors (the party of government, the party of opposition, external elites, interest groups, and the collaborations among them) (Vasilopoulou et al., 2014, p. 400).

In the same vein, Katsikas (2012) notes that the Greek crisis is mainly a crisis of political leadership, since the political system has failed to offer a consistent vision and a concrete plan for the recovery of the economy. Instead, during the crisis, "public debate has been conducted in populist terms, which [has] polarized the political climate, at a time when consensus building should have been a political priority" (Katsikas, 2012, p. 54).

The Media and Populism

The media's role in conveying the populist discourse is under-studied in Greece. Populist leaders are media savvy, knowing exactly what to say and how to catch the media's attention. In fact, a recent study in five European countries has shown that populism has become the "mesmerizing message" transcending political discourse in public debates in the media (Rooduijn, 2013). This observation is also related to the Greek media's presentation of a closed relationship with the political world. The introduction of commercial media has not necessarily undercut clientelism nor eliminated the game of particularistic political pressures associated with clientelism; only its form has changed. The erosion of state monopoly on broadcasting, the expansion of privately owned media with wide reach, and the introduction of market-oriented, "tabloid" forms of reporting have given the media new means to put pressure on politicians and populism (Papathanassopoulos, 2004).

Doxiadis and Matsaganis (2012, pp. 11–12) suggest that since the emergence of the financial crisis, two poles in Greek society quickly crystallized in both the traditional media and the digital media; the Memorandum supporters and the anti-Memorandum front (*antimnimoniakoi*).

Evidence suggests that populist explanations of the Greek crisis based on conspiracy theories have been aided by social media (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, pp. 47–52). On YouTube, an abundance of videos claim to reveal the "real motives" behind the Greek bailout agreement. Kazakis, socialist economist and leader of the United Popular Front (EPAM), is perceived as "a prime example of this new breed of charlatan economists, who have become a 'fixture' of public debates on the economy ... [Kazakis was] virtually unknown until 2010" (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, pp. 48–49).

Golden Dawn's populist rhetoric has been under the mainstream media's attention. According to, Ellinas (2013, p. 560) the media seems to have helped the party to amplify its anti-system profile by covering its activities. The anti-system character of this political formation appealed to a wider audience in an era when the "establishment" has lost its legitimacy. SYRIZA and its leader, Tsipras, have been the focus of analysis by both international journalists and academics. Most journalists agree that SYRIZA constitutes a political movement and articulates a populist rhetoric. Tsipras is characterized as "an unabashed populist" and is given a prominent place among "Europe's Ten Most Dangerous Politicians" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, p. 120). In addition, SYRIZA has often been framed as a "populist danger" for the European Union (p. 120). In the domestic arena, the mainstream media have leveled various accusations against SYRIZA. It "is portrayed as a dangerously populist, a defender of the 'drachma lobby': anti-EU, anti NATO, as a party that 'flirts with violence' if not fomenting ultra-leftist terrorism" (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014, 134).

Citizens and Populism

Chadjipadelis and Andreadis (2004) analyzed the profile of LAOS voters using both exit poll data from the 2004 Greek parliamentary elections and ecological inference methods. They claim that the right-wing populist party LAOS appeals to men who are younger than 35 years of age and who reside in urban areas with more than 4,000 inhabitants (where there is usually a significant percentage of immigrants).

The demographics of the new populist actors' supporters are enlightening; Chadjipadelis and Andreadis confirm that the social strata most affected by the Memorandum and the austerity measures are indeed the newly formed constituencies of the new populist parties (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012, pp. 18–20; Ellinas, 2012, pp. 554–556; Georgiadou, 2013, pp. 90–95). According to the results of opinion surveys, voters with uncertain employment conditions are more likely to offer support to parties "that address their problems in a simplistic way and systematically exploit their fears" (Georgiadou, 2013, p. 95). As Demertzis (2006) puts it, "it seems that the feeling of resentment grows, withdraws and is replaced by other feelings (fear, vindictiveness, indignation, etc.), in an historical period of thirty years, contributing to the forming of collective identities and to the consolidation of political institutions and processes" (p. 27).

For several weeks in 2011, the central square of Athens and other central squares all over Greece were occupied by thousands of people protesting against the austerity measures. They described themselves as *aganaktismenoi*— that is, the Greek version of the Spanish

Indignados (indignants / the outraged). According to Katsambekis (2014b) the *aganaktismenoi* were an ideal type of populist, grassroots movement. He argues that the basic characteristics of *aganaktismenoi* (leader-less, self-organized mobilization, demanding direct democracy) could classify them as a "multitude." Or, since they claim that they represent the whole community, they could be characterized as "the people."

The heterogeneous group of protesters included people from all kinds of ideologies and social strata. These protesters believed that they were defending themselves, their rights, and the Greek nation against various opponents: the markets, the banks, foreigners (particularly Germans), and the corrupted Greek political elites who betrayed Greece by not protecting national and popular interests. According to Pantazopoulos (2013, p. 62), this point was exactly where social populism met national populism. The enemy was no longer only at the top. The enemy was also on the other side; and the political elite was co-operating with them against the people. The appearance of these *Indignados*, who perceived themselves as being the new National Liberation Front, initiated the transformation of social populism to national populism, breaking the boundaries between the left and the right (Pantazopoulos, 2013, p. 226).

Summary and Recent Developments

Populism is the bedrock ideology of the Greek political system, since it affects both the left and right wings of the political spectrum. As such, it is expressed through the narratives of political actors. The political "horse race" is broadly defined by an antagonistic dichotomy that separates "the people" (represented by the party that asks for the people's vote) and "the other" (e.g., "the enemy," "the establishment," or in the recent period of financial recession, "the Troika," "the Memorandum defenders" and "the global financial elites").

Another remarkable feature of Greek political populism is that left and right populist political parties present common characteristics; anti-globalization, anti-Western, and anti-imperialist rhetoric has had a long history in Greek political culture (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012). Among the most recent developments in research on populism in Greece is the co-operation between the Hellenic National Election Studies (ELNES) and the Populismus project. ELNES collects and provides data on both the demand side and the supply side of elections in Greece, which includes the Greek voting advice application, HelpMeVote (Andreadis, 2013, 2015). Populismus focuses on the way that media cover the issue of populism and on how populists communicate through media venues. This co-operation has provided evidence that we can use surveys to measure the populist attitudes of political elites and voters (Andreadis, Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2015).

Greece is not only one of the few countries with successful populist parties; it currently has a coalition government that is formed by a left-wing and a right-wing populist party. This setting allows for very interesting studies. Research on populism in Greece is expected to provide fascinating outputs in the following years. The current political situation in Greece creates the opportunity to gain deeper knowledge and understanding about populism and its impact not only on electoral outcomes but also on a country's future.

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