

# Abstention in Greek elections shows anger at PASOK austerity

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Sunday's regional elections in Greece revealed the hostility of millions of people to the austerity programme being imposed by the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) government of Prime Minister George Papandreou.

Almost 10 million people were eligible to vote in the regional elections for 13 governors and 325 mayors. With more than 95 percent of the votes counted, PASOK was ahead of the right-wing opposition New Democracy (ND) in 7 of the 13 regions. These included the important province of Attica, which includes Athens and 40 percent of the Greek population. But under Greek election law, if no one party achieves over 50 percent in a region being contested, the voting proceeds to a second round. In only one seat did a candidate achieve over 50 percent, so a second round of voting will take place next Sunday with PASOK predicted to win 8 of the 13 regions.

Despite leading in most of the regions, PASOK lost more than 1 million votes compared to the national elections in 2009. ND lost around 500,000 votes from its 2009 total. Just prior to the elections, Papandreou had threatened to call a snap general election if PASOK did badly. His government has only been in power for just over a year, since its routing of ND last October.

In a televised address Sunday, Papandreou said that he was satisfied with the result and claimed that the results coming in were a mandate for his government to continue pushing through the austerity programme. "We know that change is not easy," he said. "But it was for this change that the Greek people brought us to power a year ago. And today it again confirmed that it wants this change."

Every word is a lie. PASOK was elected in 2009 on the basis of hostility to the widely despised ND regime, led by Kostas Karamanlis. Over the previous five years ND implemented overtly pro-business and anti-welfare policies and had been enmeshed in a series of political scandals. ND had fought that election on a programme of

continuing such measures. PASOK promised it would reverse this and committed itself to a €3 billion stimulus package combined with above-inflation wage and pension increases and higher taxes for the wealthy.

Within weeks of coming to power, all of this was ditched as PASOK began the introduction of massive austerity at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank.

The most important statistic from Sunday's election was the protest represented in the abstention rate. With 40 percent of the vote in, 40.2 percent of the electorate did not vote. Blank or spoiled votes posted were also at a record 9 percent. In the municipal counts, the abstention rates were 40.5 percent, while blank and spoiled votes accounted for 5.37 percent.

In Greece the electorate is legally bound to vote, yet just 60 percent of the electorate turned out. This compares with the 70.9 percent who took part in the national elections that swept PASOK to power last October. In the last local elections in 2006, 72.4 percent of the electorate voted.

In some areas of the country, the abstention rate was even higher. In the northwestern town of Velvendo, in Kozani prefecture, which has an electorate of 4,821, virtually no one voted, with the abstention rate recorded at 95.77 percent. The Velvendo Citizens' Coordination Committee said that only 204 people voted Sunday and of these only 168 of the ballots were valid. The town's population is set to be severely affected by public sector cuts due to the government's proposal for its municipal unification with other towns. The "Kallikratis" administrative plan is being introduced in January and will see the ending of two-thirds of the more than 1,000 remaining municipalities and dozens of district governments.

The *Wall Street Journal* said last month, "The steps will come on top of the most stringent fiscal austerity plans in

Europe after Greece's near-insolvency last spring and risk rekindling popular resistance."

Drawing attention to the mass abstention rate, the headline of the ND-supporting daily *Adesmeftos Typos* read, "Abstention the winner". Speaking to the Alter television channel, Dimitris Rizos, the editor of *Adesmeftos Typos*, said, "There is a general disregard for the whole political system with the two main parties getting less than 40 percent of the vote altogether after abstentions."

Following the ousting of ND and the replacement of party leader Karamanlis with Antonis Samaras, the party has attempted to present a semblance of opposition to the "Memorandum" agreement with the IMF, European Union and European Central Bank (ECB) being implemented by PASOK. The May agreement gave Greece access to a loan package worth €110 billion, provided the government slashed its budget deficit by more than a third by the end of 2011.

The elections reflected the discontent of millions of people with PASOK and their understanding that ND does not represent an alternative. ND has voted against the most draconian measures, claiming it supports a strategy for economic growth. But had it been in government, it would have imposed the same level of austerity as PASOK.

The elections were held amid mounting concerns the Greek economy will still default, despite the austerity measures. The financial markets were also concerned that the regional elections could result in a new general election and political instability.

The cost of insuring Greek government debt increased dramatically in the run-up to the election. Mohamed El-Erian, the chief executive of global investment management firm Pimco, said in New York last month that he expects Greece to default on its debt within three years. Economist Nouriel Roubini told *Kathimerini* that it was now a matter of when, not if Greece would default. "If you don't want to call it default or bankruptcy, call it a restructuring under pressure, but it's going to happen," he said. Comparing Greece to the US investment bank whose collapse triggered the 2008 global financial meltdown, he said the country was now "the Lehman Brothers of Europe". The "best case scenario" was the "stabilization of Greece's public debt at 148 percent of GDP", he added, but concluded, "In my opinion this is just not viable. It is impossible for Greece to survive with a debt reaching 150 percent of output ... a controlled restructuring of the debt will be required. It has happened

so many times before. Nobody believes that it will not also happen in Greece's case."

Roubini pointed out that the austerity measures had succeeded in cutting back the budget deficit, but had also resulted in deepening the recession and caused a fall in GDP. "As was expected ... tax increases and reduced spending have curbed demand and caused gross domestic product to shrink," he said.

Recent figures cited in the Greek press have drawn attention to the deepening poverty affecting wide layers of the population. Sales tax increases have put many basic shopping items out of the reach of struggling working families. Many people can no longer afford utility bills. As many as one in four electricity bills now remain unpaid and Greece's largest telecom provider, OTE, has announced that 500,000 bills are overdue.

Papandreou pledged to continue with the austerity programme in his speech Sunday and sought to reassure the bond markets that Greece would meet its deficit reduction targets. A candid assessment of the further social assault on the working class to come was revealed in the recent comment of PASOK MP Costas Spiliopoulos. He stated, "On a scale of one to 100, I would say that we have covered about 5 percent of the ground we need to travel".

PASOK is well aware that even this may not be enough to stave off economic collapse and a debt default. It knows that the final decisions regarding the Greek economy are not made in Athens but by the IMF, the EU, the ECB and by the government debt bond markets. Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou said during the election campaign that a repayment extension "is not up to us ... What is up to us is to do the best that we can to reduce the deficit and do the structural reforms".

*AthensPlus*, published by *Kathimerini*, warned on November 5: "It is quite likely that when the EU and IMF see that the Greeks are not taking economic reform seriously, they may delay a tranche of the loan agreement. This would lead to immediate social crisis, as pensions, public sector salaries and fuel imports would be suspended. This might concentrate everyone's mind wonderfully, but the drawback is that we could see fighting in the streets."



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