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**Winning Votes and Weathering
Storms:
The 2009 European and Parliamentary
Elections in Greece**

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WINNING VOTES AND WEATHERING STORMS: THE 2009 EUROPEAN AND PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN GREECE

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BACKGROUND

In 2007, the New Democracy (ND) party led by Kostas Karamanlis renewed its term in office, albeit with a very slim parliamentary majority (see Gemenis 2008). For the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) the result marked the fourth consecutive defeat in first and second-order election and drove the party into a crisis. Although its president, George Papandreou, easily won the open primary with more than 55% of the vote, the party fell into a protracted intra-party fighting lasted several months. For the following nine months, the opinion polls indicated that disillusioned PASOK supporters were moving towards the Coalition of the Left, of Movements and Ecology, known as *Synaspismos* (SYN), which was experiencing a remarkable surge in its popularity (Figure 1). This popularity was also related to the election of the former party spokesman Alexis Tsipras as the new party president in the February 2008 party congress, which was devised as a strategy to make the party more appealing to young voters.

Meanwhile, the government found itself struggling with the global recession while it was extremely difficult to proceed with the proposed reforms in education, pensions and telecommunications. The attempts for reform found resistance in vested interests and the resulting social upheaval meant that the final reforms often consisted only of half-measures. This situation was topped by a series of scandals that led to the resignation of three ministers within less than a year. Marine and island policy minister Giorgos Voulgarakis and state minister and government spokesman Theodoros Roussopoulos resigned over the shady

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land-swap deals between the wealthy monastery of Vatopedi and the state. Minister of employment Vassilis Magginas resigned for personal reasons after the press revealed that he employed uninsured Indian workers at his home and that he constructed a villa by using a refreshment bar permit. Another minister was accused for a bribery scandal involving contracts in ferry routes, whereas an MP was forced to leave the ND parliamentary caucus while being investigated for his alleged involvement in a suspicious financial transaction. This meant that the government had to work under the absolute minimum parliamentary majority. Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis became extremely unwilling to expel any of his MPs (as he had done in the past) in order to restore the public's confidence in his government. This decision would eventually backfire. By the time he backed the actions of his ministers and MPs in the prime ministers annual public address at the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair in September 2008, the opinion polls recorded a major drop in the support for ND, from which the party would not recover.

By October 2008, it was clear that the swing of PASOK voters to SYN was only temporary. The analysis of opinion polls showed that their defection was conditional to the requirement of SYN being willing to form a government coalition with PASOK. When it became clear that Tsipras remained completely uninterested in this prospect, the support for his party quickly fell back to the pre-2007 estimates (Figure 1). This development along with the drop in the support of ND enabled PASOK to top the opinion polls for the first time since 2000, while the popularity of Papandreou as a potential prime minister increased sharply.

In December 2008, Greece experienced the worst violent riots of the post-authoritarian period (see Karamichas 2009). The riots were sparked by the wanton killing of a teenager by a policeman in Exarcheia, an area in central Athens that is frequented by anarchist groups. The reluctance of the government to challenge the rioters, most possibly due to fears of further weakening its public image, allowed the events to get out of proportion and spread outside Athens. For nearly two weeks, the motley crew of youthful protesters was left to destroy banks, cars, public buildings and private business. Even though most party leaders were quick to condemn the violence, the lukewarm response by SYN cost its party leader a thirteen-point drop in his popularity (*Kathimerini*, 21 December 2008).

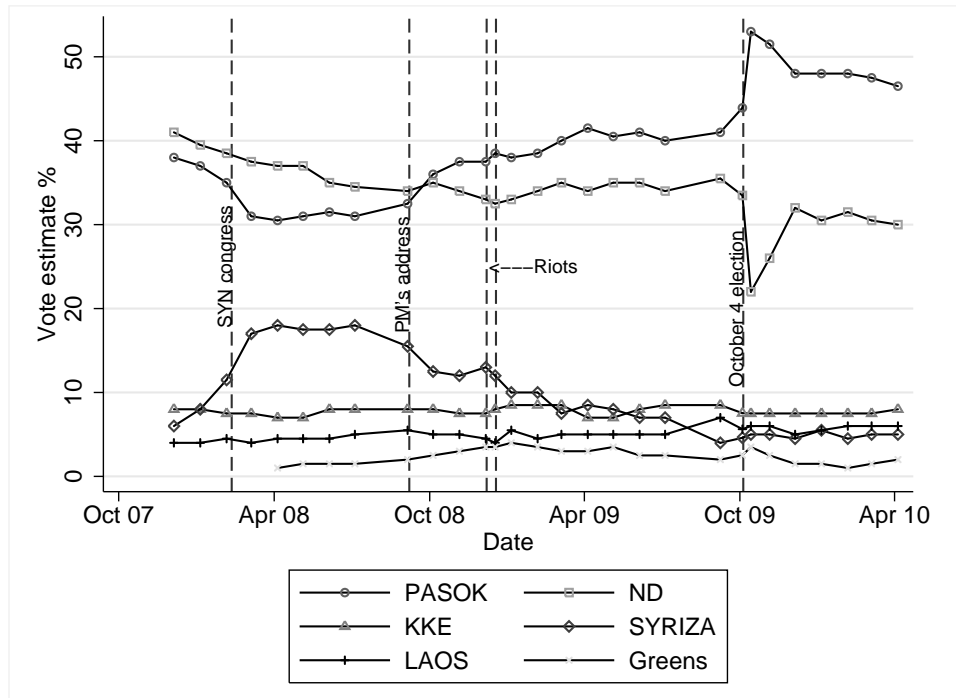


FIGURE 1. Opinion polls voting estimates, December 2007–April 2010. Public Issue Barometer data (various editions) available at <http://www.publicissue.gr>, except for the 4 October 2009 time-point which indicates the actual election result.

THE 2009 ELECTION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

As soon as the aftershock of the December events subsided, the country went into a lame duck period until the June 2009 election to the European Parliament. The election campaign formally began when the Parliament was closed, rather unexpectedly, in May. The opposition accused the government of effectively writing off all the financial scandals that were being investigated, the most important of which was a bribery scandal involving Siemens AG and the administrations of both ND and PASOK.

For PASOK, the election offered a testing ground for its policies and strategy in anticipation of a snap parliamentary election, whereas ND hoped to minimise the losses. PASOK began its campaign by launching its ‘Europeanisation’ manifesto: for each policy area, the impact of

European integration was explicitly acknowledged, emphasising therefore the importance of the election which was fought under the slogan ‘We vote for Europe—We decide about Greece’. ND on the other hand designed an electoral campaign based on the second-order national election model. For the first few weeks of the campaign, the disseminated literature and Karamanlis’ speeches focussed almost exclusively on national issues. It is most telling that the early television adverts of ND simply accused PASOK of overestimating the implications of the recession without making any reference whatsoever to Europe. This trend was to be reversed during the final weeks, however. As Karamanlis began acknowledging the fact that he was contesting a European election and referenced his party’s consistent pro-EU stance, PASOK turned to a confrontational tactic accusing Karamanlis of corruption

The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) followed its tried and tested strategy of unqualified opposition to the EU, hoping that it could increase its vote share by attracting the protest vote of those who were most affected by the recession. SYN decided to contest the election as the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA), a loose electoral coalition around SYN, headed by its former president Alekos Alavanos, which incorporates several fringe leftist groups and parties. This meant that the party had to sacrifice its left Europeanism (see Gemenis & Dinas 2010) in favour of a Eurosceptic position favoured by the extreme left parties in SYRIZA. As expected, this stance was resented by the reformist and traditionally pro-European faction of the party, known as *Ananeotiki Pteryga*. The rift became more pronounced when it was announced that the second prime slot in the coalition ticket would be allocated to a candidate of a Maoist party in SYRIZA and not to Dimitris Papadimoulis, an MEP who is associated with *Ananeotiki*.

Expecting the electoral collapse of the governing party, the radical right Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) focussed on attracting right-wing and Eurosceptic voters from ND. Its campaign focussed almost exclusively on foreign policy issues, attacking all the other parties claiming that their voting record in the European Parliament was against the national interest of the country. A similar ideological ground was covered by the Panhellenic Macedonian Front (PAMME), a Christian-nationalist coalition between Kostas Zouraris (a former KKE candidate) and Stelios Papatthemelis from the Democratic Revival party (see Gemenis 2008, 97). PAMME ran a single-issue campaign in an attempt

to mobilise the voters who oppose the neighbouring republics claim of the name ‘Macedonia’.

During the months before the election, much of the media attention was devoted to the Ecologist Greens. The Greens were founded in 2002 and made a remarkable appearance at the 2007 parliamentary election gaining 1.05% of the vote (see Gemenis 2009). From late 2008, the opinion polls indicated that the party could possibly pass the 3% threshold for parliamentary representation, something which sparked the journalists’ interest. Considering that the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 would reduce Greece’s MEPs from 24 to 22 for the sixth term, the smaller parties became particularly concerned that the rise of the Ecologist Greens could easily work at their expense. Fearing this prospect, each of the parties followed a different strategy. LAOS attacked the Greens on the basis of their controversial position regarding the name of the neighbouring republic (see Gemenis 2009, 133), while KKE’s secretary general Aleka Papariga accused them of preparing to coalesce with the mainstream parties. Conversely, SYRIZA’s president expressed his sympathy for the Greens and reminded the electorate of his coalition’s commitment to environmental issues.

As predicted by the numerous opinion polls, the election was won by PASOK (Table 1), which increased its vote share by roughly 2.6%. ND got a plurality in 22 out of 56 constituencies but lost more than 10% of its 2004 vote and three seats. From the small parties, KKE and SYRIZA were the losers, the former more so since it also lost a seat, whereas LAOS and the Ecologist Greens were the winners, since they both increased their vote share and gained one seat each. As expected, over the following weeks, each of the parties reflected on the outcome of the election. PASOK braced up and called for a parliamentary election arguing that the drop in support of ND effectively expressed the public dissatisfaction towards government policy. In SYRIZA, the disappointing result sent the coalition into a protracted infighting over four dimensions: SYN versus the parties in the wider coalition of SYRIZA; Tsipras versus Alavanos; *Ananeotiki* versus the rest of the factions within SYN; and moderates versus radicals within *Ananeotiki* and within the other SYN factions. Conversely, KKE remained unabated from the setback and continued in the ideological direction set by February’s 18th congress in which the party rehabilitated and praised Stalin.

TABLE 1. Results of the European Parliament elections in Greece, 2004 and 2009.

	Election date					
	7 June 2009			13 June 2004		
	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Votes	Vote %	Seats
Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)	1,878,982	36.64	8	2,083,327	34.03	8
New Democracy (ND)	1,655,722	32.29	8	2,633,574	43.01	11
Communist Party of Greece (KKE)	428,282	8.35	2	580,396	9.48	3
Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	366,637	7.15	2	252,429	4.12	1
Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) ^a	240,930	4.7	1	254,447	4.16	1
Ecologist Greens	178,987	3.49	1	40,873	0.67	
Panhellenic Macedonian Front (PAMME)	65,176	1.27				

Note: ^aThe 2004 results refer to *Synaspismos* alone. Source: <http://www.ypes.gr>

Aware that it got severely punished for its government record, ND found itself in the most difficult position. Karamanlis must have realised that it would be impossible to govern with the slimmest parliamentary majority and the Greek economy at its weakest. He therefore asked his closest advisers to investigate the feasibility of calling for an early election but his party proved to be divided over the idea. Seeing this difficult position, LAOS' president Georgios Karatzaferis openly offered to support the government in order to prevent PASOK from coming to power. In exchange, Karatzaferis envisaged an increased role for his party in shaping public policy, especially in the areas of immigration and foreign affairs. Karamanlis rebuffed Karatzaferis' proposal, but Papandreou warned that PASOK could trigger an early election in March 2010 by refusing to support the re-election of the President which requires a special parliamentary majority of 180 deputies. ND accused Papandreou of manipulating the institution for the benefit of his party, but the difficulties over drafting the state budget for 2010 forced Karamanlis to announce a snap election on September 2.

THE 2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Hoping to reverse the climate before the election which was scheduled for October 4, Karamanlis began his election campaign by apologising for the scandals in his annual public address at the Thessaloniki International Trade Fair. As ND could not advertise its economic record as it has done in the previous parliamentary election (Gemenis 2008, 96), the campaign was almost exclusively focussed on Karamanlis. Under the slogan 'the responsible choice', ND's political advertising presented Karamanlis as the responsible leader who would be willing to take the difficult decisions amidst the crisis. The 'difficult decisions' referred to ND's programme of freezing salaries, pensions and recruitment in the public sector in order to help the moribund economy. PASOK, on the other hand, presented a manifesto which promised green development, open and accountable politics and the injection of three billion Euros to jump start the economy.

Turning to the smaller parties, it was clear that their strategies for the upcoming election were pretty much dictated by June's results. On the one hand, the parties that experienced a decline in their support appeared extremely cautious. Pappariga once again resumed her traditional strategy and called all working people to vote for KKE and against the bipartyism of ND and PASOK (Gemenis 2008, 96), but was careful not to openly set a goal for the election as the party has done disastrously in the past. Some KKE cadres however revealed that the target was a better result than the 8.15% of the previous election (*Eleftherotypia*, 3 October 2009). Similarly, SYN avoided to set any electoral goals as it was still recovering from June's disappointing result. As the bitter infighting continued, Alavanos resigned as the president of SYRIZA and its constituent parties accepted SYN's conciliatory proposal to contest the election together and without a leader. On the other hand, both LAOS and the Ecologist Greens could set more ambitious goals as they experienced consistent increases in their electoral fortunes since 2004. The former set as a target the election of 15 MPs in order to be able to trigger roll-call votes in the Parliament, while the latter aimed to pass the 3% threshold and elect eight MPs.

Apart from the different communication strategies, all parties released manifestos or similar documents outlining their policies. Nevertheless, the televised debate conducted on September 21 offered the

best chance for the six parties to present their policies to a wide audience. As expected, much of the debate focussed on the economy. Karamanlis outlined some aspects of his government record that could be considered as successful and reminded the electorate that hard times require tough measures. He also attacked Papandreou by arguing that PASOK's programme was unrealistic and obscure. For ND and for most of the public, the three billion Euros pledged by PASOK, amidst a period of soaring public debt, looked like an impossible promise. To that, Papandreou responded that his plan was to engage in judicious public spending and accused ND of wasting state money in subsidised work experience acquisition programmes where young people were hired by clientelistic practices. Karamanlis claimed that the programmes were subsidised by the EU, only to be revealed later that the subsidies worth 150 million Euros came indeed directly from the state budget (*Kathimerini*, 25 September 2009).

The televised debate also offered smaller political parties the chance to come up with their own proposals for the economy. Tsipras castigated the government for its decision to award 28 billion Euros to banks while small businesses had troubles in securing loans, whereas Pappaliga proposed to heavily tax all big businesses. Nikos Chrysogelos representing the Ecologist Greens, proposed to raise money by legalising, and therefore getting into the social security system, 600,000 immigrants living in Greece. Finally, Karatzaferis suggested taxing the Orthodox Church of Greece and proposed to, more or less, launder the money of the underground economy and the funds of suspicious Swiss bank accounts.

Apart from the issues pertaining to the economy, the entrant presence of the Ecologist Greens in the debate ensured an adequate coverage of environmental policies. In this respect, both the government's environmental record and PASOK's proposal for 'green development' went under scrutiny, whereas KKE was forced to defend its controversial decision to oppose the recycling programmes of private companies. Conversely, Karatzaferis admitted that he is less interested in the 'verdure', as he prefers the issues relating to the economy, foreign policy and immigration. In any case, Karatzaferis appeared determined to continue his strategy of shedding the 'far right' label (see Gemenis 2008, 96) by arguing that his proposals for immigration were inspired by *Die Linke's* Oskar Lafontaine.

TABLE 2. Results of the parliamentary elections in Greece, 2007 and 2009.

	Election date					
	4 October 2009			16 September 2007		
	Votes	Vote %	Seats	Votes	Vote %	Seats
Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)	3,012,373	43.92	160	2,727,279	38.1	102
New Democracy (ND)	2,295,967	33.48	91	2,994,979	41.84	152
Communist Party of Greece (KKE)	517,154	7.54	21	583,750	8.15	22
Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS)	386,152	5.63	15	271,809	3.8	10
Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA)	315,627	4.6	13	361,101	5.04	14
Ecologist Greens	173,449	2.53		75,502	1.05	
Democratic Revival	30,856	0.45		57,167	0.8	

Source: <http://www.ypes.gr>

The remaining election campaign was uneventful, however. A second televised debate, conducted between Karamanlis and Papandreou, offered little in terms of new policy proposals. Karamanlis repeatedly apologised for past mistakes and once more presented himself as the most responsible leader who can lead the country out of the crisis. This did little, however, to change the political climate where ND consistently trailed the opinion polls behind PASOK. The decision of ND to present a highly unpopular economic plan as an alternative to the one presented by PASOK may have contributed to this trend as a cross-national analysis of economic voting and party strategy has recently concluded (see Hellwig 2007, 25).

The result of the parliamentary election was a moderate victory for PASOK which resembled a landslide due to the lower turnout and the crushing defeat of ND (Table 2). Geographically, PASOK earned a majority in 10 out of the 56 constituencies (mostly in the traditional socialist bulwarks like Crete) and a plurality in another 40. ND earned a slim majority in Kastoria in northern Greece and a plurality in another five, mostly in the south. Helped by the electoral system (see Gemenis 2008, 95–96), which awards a 40 seat bonus to the first party nationally, PASOK found itself with a comfortable majority of 160 (out of 300) seats.

Among the smaller parties, the pattern of winners and losers was similar to June's election to the European Parliament. LAOS was the most successful as it, once more, increased its electoral base and reached its electoral goal of 15 seats. It seems that, just like other parties in Europe LAOS' success can be attributed to its appeal to a particular electoral niche that is opposed to immigration and is disaffected by the mainstream parties. Also successful were the Ecologist Greens who more than doubled their votes but nonetheless, fell short of the 3% threshold. Conversely, KKE and SYRIZA lost both in terms of seats and votes, a development that posed more troubles to SYRIZA, which saw its high hopes of the first half of 2008 being crushed, than KKE which generally keeps its internal life away from public view.

THE LEADERSHIP ELECTION IN NEW DEMOCRACY

The 2009 parliamentary election marked a watershed for ND. Faced with the worst electoral result in the 35-year history of the party, Karamanlis, who had for months entertained the speculations, announced his resignation. He was quickly followed by the head of ND's nationwide list Georgios Souflias who was criticised for having advised Karamanlis to call the election. The ensuing leadership race was contested by four candidates of whom Dora Bakoyannis and Antonis Samaras were the most prominent. Bakoyannis, daughter of ND Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis, had served as a mayor for Athens and minister of foreign affairs in the Karamanlis government, while Antonis Samaras was minister of foreign affairs in the Mitsotakis government. Samaras became notorious in 1993 when he walked out of ND precipitating the governments collapse, after disagreeing with Mitsotakis over the Macedonian issue (see Featherstone 1994). Samaras then formed a short-lived splinter party, but when Karamanlis came to power in 2004, he was slowly reintegrated into ND first as an MEP and later as minister for culture. The contest between Bakoyannis and Samaras was more than a battle between names and political families, however. The two candidates represented distinct ideological traditions within ND with Bakoyannis being more liberal and pro-Western/American and Samaras being more conservative and nationalist. The leadership was also contested by Dimitris Avramopoulos, a former mayor of Athens and minister of health, who subsequently stepped aside in support of Samaras, and, perhaps less seriously, by Panagiotis Psomiadis the radical right and populist prefect of Thessaloniki.

Although the candidates disagreed as to how the party leader should be elected, with Bakoyannis favouring an election through the parliamentary caucus or party congress, they finally accepted Avramopoulos proposal for a two-round open primary. In total, 782,136 members voted in Greece and abroad and Samaras was elected in the first round held on November 29, with 50.06% of the vote, compared to 39.72% of Bakoyannis and 10.22% of Psomiadis. The result implied that ND's supporters were willing to forget past controversies and make a fresh start by electing a leader whose prime virtue was his limited association to the scandal-ridden outgoing government. The election of Samaras also signalled a new ideological direction for the party. Having the reputation of a hard-liner in foreign policy issues, Samaras is expected to abandon Karamanlis' centripetal strategy (see Gemenis & Dinas 2010, Pappas & Dinas 2006) and turn rightwards, in a motion to spearhead the foreign policy and immigration issues that have been exploited by LAOS. Nevertheless, this strategy is not uncontroversial as evident by the exit of Muslim cadres from the ranks of ND (*Eleftherotypia*, 6 December 2009). Moreover, Samaras cannot afford to ignore the influence of Bakoyannis in the party who, defiantly, refused to take up the shadow cabinet post that she was offered.

THE NEW PASOK GOVERNMENT

The new cabinet sworn in on October 7 came as no surprise for it contained a mix of familiar names who held posts in past PASOK governments along with newcomers who served as advisers for Papandreou. To reflect the priorities of the new government, three new ministries were created by transferring competencies from existing ministries. The creation of an independent ministry of finance in addition to the ministry of economy was largely precipitated by the fiscal priorities in a period of global recession. The creation of the ministry of citizen protection was a response to issues such as the deadly forest fires of August 2007 and the resurgence of violence after the December 2008 riots. The ministry reinstated the public order portfolio that had been downgraded in the last Karamanlis government and was given to Michalis Chrysochoidis, best known for his success in dismantling the November 17 terrorist group. The new ministry of the environment, energy and climate change was an anticipated outcome of the 'green development' theme that ran through PASOKs election manifesto. In addition, Papandreou restored the post of the deputy prime minister

and chose to be his own foreign minister. The merging of several of the remaining portfolios enabled Papandreou to honour his election pledge of creating a small cabinet. Another striking feature was the enhanced representation of women who now hold five portfolios (economy, environment, education, agriculture and health) compared to just two in the last Karamanlis cabinet.

The new government began its term by reviewing ND's controversial policy record. Over the first few weeks, the government repealed the law that criminalised the wearing of head gear by protesters and the university licenses given to private colleges; cancelled the subsidised work experience acquisition programmes in the public sector and part of the wasteful order of 16 million influenza shots for an eleven million population; while the environment minister Tina Birbili halted the Acheloos river diversion programme. Other initiatives proved more controversial, however. In a move to promote transparency, Papandreou introduced a new online advertisement process for hiring the 90 most senior civil servants. However, the government was unprepared for the influx of applications and the process led to long delays in filling the crucial administrative posts. Another example was the bill for granting legal immigrants the right to vote in local elections and offering citizenship rights to immigrant children born in Greece that was voted by PASOK and SYRIZA, but was heavily criticised by ND and LAOS that voted against. The latter even requested a referendum on the issue, disregarding the inherent danger of putting minority rights to majority vote. The new government also proposed to change the electoral system and adopt a variant of the mixed-member proportional system used in Germany, while retaining the 3% threshold and other Greek peculiarities such as the 40-seat bonus given to the first party.

THE FINANCIAL CRISIS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A couple of months after the election, however, it became apparent that the government would have to take unpopular decisions in order to cut the soaring public deficit. The austerity measures began with a reduction in public sector recruitment, a pay freeze for civil servants as well as a hike in vehicle road taxes. The government soon realised that it would be impossible to sustain the economy with such short-term revenue-raising tricks. Seeing the country's cost of borrowing skyrocketing, Papandreou embarked in a diplomatic tour-de-force in order to

muster political support and curtail financial speculation. With a joint statement on February 11, the EU heads of states or governments expressed their support for Greece but also called for tougher measures to be implemented. Papandreou then moved to a broader austerity programme with further cuts in public sector salaries through reductions in wage supplements; a near-complete freeze in the public sector recruitment; plans for privatisations; an increase in VAT and fuel taxes; a new method for fighting tax evasion which demanded from taxpayers to calculate their minimum income based on the value of their property; and various other cuts in the public expenditure. With further joint statements of March 25 and April 11, the EU heads of states or governments decided on the details of a rescue package that could be used as a last resort to guarantee the financial stability of the Euro area. In particular, EU member states announced that they were ready to provide bilateral loans in conjunction with funding from the International Monetary Fund.

One of the most interesting consequences of this unparalleled financial crisis regards the effect on the popularity of the parties. At the aftermath of the October election, the polls indicated that 83% of the electorate viewed the new government in positive light (*Kathimerini*, 11 October 2009). Moreover, PASOK's vote estimate reached a record high of 53% (see Figure 1). Conversely, ND found itself at a historic low after the election and the resignation of its leader. As the party tried to cope with the intra-party fighting brought by the leadership contest, it projected its inability to propose a viable alternative and establish itself as credible opposition. In addition, LAOS offered a tacit, if critical, support to the government's economic policies. The parties on the left were the only ones that defiantly opposed the measures by staging and supporting strikes but, despite the widespread discontent, this strategy did not pay off in terms of electoral popularity. Undoubtedly, the government's austerity measures came as a shock to those who believed Papandreou's pledge of real wage rises. It seems, however, that the austerity measures did little to hurt PASOK's popularity. By turning a crisis which involved the country's fiscal imbalances into an issue with a strong foreign policy dimension, Papandreou managed to garner public support for his leadership in a situation which resembles the 'rally round the flag' phenomenon (see Mueller 1970, 21). Nevertheless, given that leadership effects have usually a limited duration while they can produce unexpected results in the long run (see Dinas 2008), we can only speculate about the government's staying power. On April

23, Papandreou asked for the activation of the bilateral EU-IMF aid package which means that the government will have to implement more budget cuts. As the electorate is expecting the government to lead the country out of the crisis with minimal cost, it remains to be seen how the latter will balance its popularity with the economic imperatives without backsliding to populist practices.

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