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Extremely complex yet surprisingly simple

Between feuds and different electoral systems — why the complicated elections in Greece could actually end up being very simple this year

Greece has had several crucial elections over the past 10-15 years during which the country's fate hung in the balance. The parliamentary vote on 21 May is unlikely to be as momentous as recent electoral battles, but it may be the most complex.

The ruling centre-right party New Democracy (ND) is currently ahead in the opinion polls. The party's main line is that its market-friendly reforms and tax cuts have helped the Greek economy grow, as the country emerges from its long financial crisis. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis also believes that greater use of digital services in public administration, defence alliances with the US and France and a tougher stance on migration have helped Greece to be better placed to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Serious opponents

Yet, the left-wing party SYRIZA, which currently comes in second place, maintains that the benefits of Greece's newfound economic stability are not being shared fairly; wages are still low, inflation is high and many of the jobs being created – particularly for younger Greeks – are precarious or seasonal. Opposition leader Alexis Tsipras also accuses Mitsotakis of abusing his power to serve narrow political and business interests and of overriding checks and balances, such as a free media and independent authorities.

The centre-left party PASOK, which trails in third by some distance, is involved in a difficult balancing act. The social democrats had mostly dominated the Greek political scene for four decades since the 1980s but were nearly obliterated when the 'fiscal timebomb' exploded on their watch in 2009. PASOK elected a new leader in December 2021. The 44-year-old MEP (Member of the European Parliament) from Crete, Nikos

Androulakis, initially saw his party's support rise, perhaps reflecting the fact that many centrist or centre-left voters, who previously backed Mitsotakis out of frustration with SYRIZA's time in power between 2015-19, had started to feel let down.

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The conditions for a further increase in support for PASOK were good: a series of issues contributed to the Mitsotakis administration losing some of its appeal over the last four years. Greece's high Covid-19 mortality rate after the first wave, the poor state of the public health system, questionable grants for certain media outlets, heavy-handed policing, repeated reports of migrant pushbacks, massive wildfires and allegations of extensive spying on a range of targets – including the government's opponents – all took its toll on New Democracy.

However, Androulakis was not able to capitalise on this discontent or his honeymoon period as PASOK leader. Inexperienced in Greek politics and perhaps lacking personal charisma to help a smaller party stand out in a political battle centred a lot on political and personal antipathy between New Democracy and SYRIZA, he has not been able to carve out a distinct space for PASOK. Instead, Androulakis has tried to play the role of the adult in the room, aiming to display responsibility whenever the two leading parties were busy 'screaming' at each other. This strategy may still put the centre-left party in the position of kingmaker this summer, but the road ahead is not clear.

Three potential outcomes

After reforms under the SYRIZA government, the 21 May elections will take place under a proportional representation system. This means that around 45 per cent of the vote will be needed for a government to be formed. No single party can get anywhere near this figure. New Democracy is currently polling at around 35 per cent, while SYRIZA is expected to reach around 29 per cent and PASOK is at approximately 11 per cent. They are followed by three smaller parties that are expected to pass the 3 per cent threshold needed to elect MPs.

If the opinion polls are accurate, there are three potential outcomes of the election.

Firstly, Prime Minister Mitsotakis could seek to form a governing coalition with PASOK. However, there are several obstacles to this; The

relationship between Mitsotakis and Androulakis is strained since the latter discovered that he had been under surveillance by Greece's National Intelligence Service (EYP). There was also an attempt to target Androulakis with the Predator spyware that was reportedly used to eavesdrop on dozens of Greek politicians, journalists, businessmen and known personalities. Mitsotakis acknowledged that EYP had overstepped the mark by bugging Androulakis but insisted his government had nothing to do with the use of the spyware. This response, in connection with unsatisfying judicial and parliamentary inquiries into the scandal, has enraged the PASOK leader and made further collaboration very unlikely.

PASOK leader Androulakis has said that he would not be willing to work with Varoufakis.

The second option is for SYRIZA to lead a coalition that would incorporate PASOK and possibly also other parties. This would be an extremely difficult exercise for Tsipras to undertake if the party came in second place. In fact, he has already suggested that it would only be possible if SYRIZA upset the forecasts and came in first. Even then, however, the support of a third party would probably be needed — either through active participation in the coalition or by providing tacit consent so the new administration could win a vote of confidence.

What makes this second possible outcome very complicated is that there would only be one likely candidate for a third party in the coalition: the radical left MeRA25, led by former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis with whom Tsipras clashed in 2015. The two broke with each other when Tsipras turned the 'No' for a third bailout in the July 2015 referendum into a 'Yes'.

There is another barrier to such a progressive alliance. PASOK leader Androulakis has said that he would not be willing to work with Varoufakis, accusing him of putting Greece's place in the eurozone at risk in 2015.

A second round of elections

Taking this into account, the third, most likely scenario is that Greece will need a second round of elections to form a government. Mitsotakis has made no secret of the fact that this would be his preferred outcome.

The second round, which has been pencilled in for 2 July, would take

place under the old electoral system, rewarding the winning party with a bonus of up to 50 seats. Based on a scenario of six parties gaining seats, the winning party would likely need around 37-38 per cent to elect at least 151 of the 300 MPs in the Greek Parliament. New Democracy officials believe that they are on track to meet this target.

If the conservatives fall short of this goal, there will – once again – be three options; If Mitsotakis is missing just a few seats, he might try to convince some MPs from PASOK and possibly from the ultra-nationalist Greek Solution party to cross the aisle. If, however, New Democracy came out well below its target, PASOK would be the only realistic coalition partner.

The uncertainties concerning the election outcomes and a possible subsequent vote have worked in New Democracy's favour.

Androulakis and his party seem conflicted about what to do in such a scenario. Some social democrats see a coalition with Mitsotakis as the only viable way for their party to return to power. Others feel that PASOK should only ally with parties of a similar progressive ideology and that a coalition with New Democracy could result in their party being politically compromised and completely overshadowed. There are also PASOK officials who feel the party is best served if it remains in opposition for the time being.

If this view prevails, it could lead to Androulakis rejecting an invitation to govern with Mitsotakis, and third elections would be needed to achieve a workable result. This option, however, would probably carry a very high cost for PASOK and its leader, who would be blamed for the impasse.

The uncertainties concerning the election outcomes and a possible subsequent vote have worked in New Democracy's favour. Most of the focus during this election campaign has been on the election arithmetic and little attention has been paid to actual policies.

Whichever way one looks at the numbers – and to the misfortune of the opposition parties – the estimates always seem to spell out a second term for Mitsotakis. If this is how events play out, the upcoming elections could go from being a very complex process to being a surprisingly simple one.



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