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The technopopulist trap

Today's fragmentation in Greece and beyond allows politicians to build their electoral strategies by claiming expertise and appealing to 'the people'

Greece's main opposition party Syriza elected former Goldman Sachs trader Stefanos Kasselakis as its new leader on 24 September. Representing himself as the 'voice of the society', an ex-banker with no background in politics, no party membership and without a concrete ideology, Kasselakis relied heavily on social media to win the elections. During his campaign, he made promises to 'all people' to 'change it all' and to recapture the 'Greek dream'.

But leftist Syriza's newly elected leader is 'not a new phenomenon'. Rather, he is just another example of a technopopulist leader relying on a combination of technocratic appeals to expertise and populist invocations of 'the people, as we have seen come and go over the past decades, especially after the EU financial crisis of 2008. And underlying this surge of technopopulism, as coined by Chris Bickerton and Carlo Accetti, lies a much deeper and longer crisis of party politics, as well as a lack of institutionalised collective interest to challenge the status quo.

The technopopulist way of doing politics

In 2011, after Greece's then Prime Minister George Papandreou tried, but failed, to hold a referendum on the bailout terms, he was replaced by Lucas Papademos, an American-trained technocrat and economist, and a former Vice President of the European Central Bank (ECB). Papademos, a non-party member without official affiliation, pursued the austerity measurements demanded by the creditors in exchange for a rescue package deal worth €130 bn, approved by the Eurozone finance ministers.

But the Greek citizens' anger regarding the conditionalities that were demanded in return for the credits had been intensifying since the first bailout in 2010, leading to large-scale protests and riots in Athens. And it in this context that Syriza saw an opportunity to build an electoral

campaign with the promise to end the austerity programs. Alexis Tsipras, then leader of Syriza, used the crisis to mobilise voters against the interim government and the rescue package. In his speeches he criticised the signed deal for not being passed by a 'popular mandate' and for being forced on 'the people'. Tsipras succeeded in his strategy and came to power in January 2015 by forming a coalition with the Independent Greeks party.

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The use of the logic technopopulism as a way of doing politics is neither new nor limited to Greece. It became an emerging reality in several European countries where the failings of the traditional party democracy have eroded its legitimacy. In France, President Emmanuel Macron, also an ex-banker, has used external expertise from global management consulting firm McKinsey in his electoral campaigns in order to solve the 'people's problems'. In Italy, starting from the Berlusconi days marked by hispersonal 'business' competences in the 1990s, technopopulism has also gained strength. The Five Star Movement (M5S) emerged initially as an anti-establishment movement founded not by a politician but a comedian, Beppe Grillo, with the promise to fight the corruption of the mainstream Italian political parties. In doing so, Grillo, representing neither the left nor the right, was appealing directly to 'the people' to solve their problems. While the former Prime-Minister Mario Draghi acted in a technocratic manneras as well, uniting all of the Italian political parties, from the left to the far right, during the EU financial crisis, with the aim to pursue austerity measurements. The technopopulist logic also came in handy for current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni during her election campaign, covering the entire ideological spectrum, when necessary.

In the case of the UK, populists have also regularly been embracing the language of science and expertise. Such a *non-ideological* approach was also used in the Netherlands, leading to a 'normalisation' of neither left nor right-wing policies and a disengement in political contests. In the Czech case, a former businessman with no background in politics, using the same logic as in Greece, won the elections in 2019.

A crisis of traditional party politics

All of these varieties of technopopulism are results of much longer societal, political and economic transformations where social classes and collectively organised interest have been dismantled in favour of a neoliberal doctrine. The ruptures that were thus created in the political systems of the EU Member States, in absence of collective solutions to societal problems and amidst the rapid transformations of the welfare systems, further gained strength once the the democratic character and functions of traditional political parties had been transformed. These conditions created a 'hollowed' framework for doing 'politics without policy' in the absence of regulated intermediating bodies. This fragmentation in contemporary societies makes it very convenient for party leaders to build electoral strategies by staking a claim to expertise and/or by appealing to 'the people'.

Technopopulist leaders, which present themselves as neither left nor right, are suggesting new solutions to the 'people's problems', which, due to their underlying economic and problem-solving logic, are offered as the only *logical* alternative. That said, technopopulism suggests that turning governance over to independent experts, who have remained 'pure' and uncorrupted from doing politics in the past and have no personal or ideological commitments to old-style political parties, is the best option for solving the 'people's problems'. And yet, this very unstable but persistent form of technopopulism reflects a crisis of democratic representation and an absence of social solutions for challenging the resulting 'void'.

Technopopulism exposes all the many shortcomings of state transformations, societal defragmentation, as well as the fictional economisation of commodities, where state's intervention is marginalised at the expense of the market demands.

This crisis of representation, exposed during and after the 2008 financial crisis, is thus a reflection of the ongoing challenges of party democracy and the absence of institutionalisation of politics via active social actors. As a result, the technopopulist logic is locked in a perpetuate loop of doing politics 'for the people' rather than 'by the people' and continues to feed the weak legitimation of the populist leaders and non-elected officials to run state affairs. And hence newcomers or party leaders run electoral strategies without the need to reflect on any structural problems, improve inner party democracy or challenge the status quo of the neoliberal doctrine.

Following the same logic, the electoral strategies taken during the

financial crisis in Greece were responses to an already fragmented party politics, as well as party leaders that were unable to resist the actions of 'emergency politics'. Years later, this status quo has still not been challenged. The newcomers in Greek party politics are justifying their choices to run electoral campaigns and solving the 'people's problems' with a managerial expertise, borrowed from the business logic, as a necessary skill to solve emergencies when the globalised market economy might be threatened. From this aspect, technopopulism exposes all the many shortcomings of state transformations, societal defragmentation, as well as the fictional economisation of commodities, where state intervention is marginalised at the expense of market demands.

Between 2004 and 2019 the number of voters in Greece who went to the polls fell by 1.8 million, and in the last three elections, the average turnout at the polls has been below 60 per cent.

Feeding this logic of doing politics, however, has its consequences. One is a further alienation of citizens from politics, reflected in the abstention from voting and indicators of gradual erosion of political trust. Between 2004 and 2019 the number of voters in Greece who went to the polls fell by 1.8 million, and in the last three elections, the average turnout at the polls has been below 60 per cent.

While self-empowerment is evident in the form of social movements and protests, amongst others, the *collective* empowerment in which political parties should have the central role is simplified to electoral cycles and strategies in which citizens remain disengaged. Rather than articulating their collective choices, they are stuck with the choices the political leaders have already made for them. This risk to contemporary democracies requires reinventing the role of party organisations and a new impetus for collective actions, which would reflect the needs of societies and their citizens. Such party democracy would assume that political leaders are recruited from within and are held to account by the party itself, including by its base — its members.



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