

Vivian Phillips

Dr. Carl Caldwell

November 6th 2023

Authoritarian Constitutionalism

The Rise and Rhetoric of Populism in Greece

In the wake of rising levels of debt in the 2010s, populist parties in Greece took advantage of civil unrest in order to further their political platforms through various tactics of crisis populism. SYRIZA, a socialist political organization led by Alexis Tsipras, restructured their party in response to the crisis in order to unify their otherwise fragmented supporter base. The Greek financial crisis became SYRIZA's primary concern, with the Troika (a group of European international organizations) being their primary enemy. The Troika – consisting of the International Monetary Fund, European Union, and European Central Bank – negotiated the terms of Greece's debt relief and repayment. SYRIZA began a pointed attack campaign to dismantle public trust in international organizations and Greek political incumbents. After winning Greece's parliamentary election in 2015, SYRIZA then combined forces with ANEL – its far-right counterpart – to form a populist coalition that stretched across the political spectrum. Though opposite in many ways, these two parties shared one key similarity – an “anti-establishment” disdain for political and corporate elites.¹ In this paper, I will analyze the rhetoric used by populist leaders that captivated their audiences and catapulted SYRIZA-ANEL

¹Halikiopoulou, Daphne. “Economic Crisis, Poor Governance and the Rise of Populism: The Case of Greece.” *Intereconomics*.

into political prominence. I will investigate how SYRIZA-ANEL used this rhetoric to craft an overall narrative about the nature of the financial crisis facing Greece in the 2010s. Finally, I will conclude that SYRIZA's rapid increase in success can be attributed to its use of crisis populism tactics aimed at dismantling public trust in the media, and political elites.

Alexis Tsipras swore that if elected, he would reject any bailout deal offered to Greece by members of the Eurozone, in the interest of preserving Greek autonomy – and preventing Greece's further descent into irrevocable debt. In a speech at the nationwide SYRIZA conference in 2014, Tsipras captivated his audience by harnessing public discontent, shifting blame, and appealing to a sense of relatability. Tsipras began by addressing his listeners as “comrades,” before praising them for the work achieved by the party in the year prior.² Beginning nearly every sentence with the word “we,” Tsipras focused on binding his audience together through language, emphasizing the community that could be found in SYRIZA's socialist movement. This sense of communitas was represented by Tsipras in direct contrast to the Troika, which he identified as an establishment aimed at dismantling the livelihood and stability of Greece. Tsipras described collaborating with “conservative powers in Europe,” as “national suicide,” that would lead the people of Greece “who keep their life savings in the Greek banks” to devastation.³ This contrast between SYRIZA's strong sense of community with “the other” (that being European powers and international organizations) worked by immediately priming Tsipras' audience to be unsympathetic to any argument in opposition to the populist coalition's impact on Greece's economy. Primed to see “the other” as the sole force responsible for the weakening of Greece's

² Alexis Tsipras, Speech At Nationwide Syriza Conference, 2014

³ Alexis Tsipras, Speech At Nationwide Syriza Conference, 2014

economy, Tsipras guided his audience to the conclusion that SYRIZA's platform was the only trustworthy solution to fix Greece's economy.

Tsipras strongly emphasized the culpability of European countries, while praising SYRIZA for all of the "battles" that had been "ceaselessly fought" by its members with "persistence and resolve ... to assert the rights of the Greek people."⁴ By employing language that represented the campaign efforts of SYRIZA as "battles," Tsipras pinned the people of Greece in direct conflict with the greater powers of Europe. Claiming that his opponents possessed "means of economic pressure, intimidation, propaganda, bribery, and corruption," Tsipras went as far as to describe SYRIZA's campaign as a "ruthless war," against their political oppressors. Oftentimes, Tsipras began his sentences by describing what "they" were planning to do to squander SYRIZA's political efforts and further oppress the people of Greece. By representing European powers as an elusive boogeyman seeking to wreak havoc in Greece, Tsipras sufficiently garnered enough European distrust among his audience to reach his final call to action: "Our opponent remains the corrupt political establishment, and the old system of power is now being galvanized. Now is the time to take the streets, go to the public squares, coffee shops, in towns and villages to convey one and only message – we shall win."⁵

The careful language used by Tsipras in the speech above is just one example of SYRIZA's narrative-based campaign strategy. More important still was SYRIZA's focus on attacking the Greek media, and crafting an even larger overarching conspiracy about the political elites leading Greece and international organizations. SYRIZA "took on the role of representing sharp 'us

⁴ Alexis Tsipras, Speech At Nationwide Syriza Conference, 2014

⁵ Alexis Tsipras, Speech At Nationwide Syriza Conference, 2014

versus them’ polarities” in an attempt to further alienate the Greek government from its people.⁶ The ‘us’ had been “marginalized by the process of neoliberal globalization and deregulation,” while the ‘them’ consisted of “powerholders” such as the media, the elites, the banks, etc.⁷ By vilifying even the media by which Greek citizens were receiving information about the political world, SYRIZA destabilized the foundation of public trust in the government. This destabilization functioned as a “disruptive force” within Greece’s political system, causing the public to deeply doubt and distrust any information that they received about the status of Greece’s financial crisis.⁸ Greek Citizens’ “us vs them” mentality could not be shaken, given that the very media feeding them information about current events were grouped together with political elites as corrupt.

Hailed as the opposite of these corrupt elites in SYRIZA’s rhetorical campaign were “the youth” and “the movements.” These groups functioned as “empty signifiers,” oftentimes representing Greece’s general public as a whole within SYRIZA’s narrative. Ultimately, SYRIZA claimed to want a “unified” party consisting of various marginalized groups interested in the same issues (such as the labor movement, the environment, LGBT rights, gender equality, etc.)⁹ Before the debt crisis of the 2010s, this platform was not strong enough to achieve more than 5% of the public’s vote. SYRIZA’s political platform was consistent but far too “fragmented” to amass

⁶ Katsambekis, Giorgos “Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza’s Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power” John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 3

⁷ Katsambekis, Giorgos “Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza’s Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power” John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 4

⁸ Katsambekis, Giorgos “Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza’s Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power” John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 4

⁹ Katsambekis, Giorgos “Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza’s Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power” John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 4

wide-scale support.¹⁰ The middle class in Greece was comfortable enough and consequently did not relate to SYRIZA's radical wishes for systemic change and reform. After Greece's debt deepened and "austerity measures hit the majority of the population," however, SYRIZA's once obscure and radical platform became relevant to the majority of Greece's middle and lower classes.¹¹ SYRIZA seized this moment to center its campaign strategy around the universal issue of Greece's financial crisis, thereby uniting their party with one common cause, rather than a laundry list of minoritarian issues only pertinent to a small proportion of the population.

In order to further their reach even more, SYRIZA coalesced with ANEL - a similarly outspoken party – to reach an even wider proportion of the Greek population with their rhetoric. This move – a clear attempt to gain more public support above all else – went against the very policies that were once the foundation of SYRIZA's political platform. Seeing as ANEL was known for its far-right agenda, which functioned in direct contrast to SYRIZA's progressive platform of inclusivity, it is clear that at this point in their campaign platform, SYRIZA had abandoned much of their integrity as a party. Tsipras' abhorrence for bailouts was one of the sole factors binding SYRIZA together with ANEL, seeing as these two parties existed on opposite ends of the political spectrum and consequently "lacked a detailed common policy platform."¹² Despite this seemingly unstable coalition, SYZIRA-ANEL "proved (to be) unexpectedly durable" because of the parties' shared emphasis on critiquing the incumbent political elites in Greece and in international organizations, without providing much of a focus on the tangible ways they would

¹⁰ Katsambekis, Giorgos "Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power" John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 5

¹¹ Katsambekis, Giorgos "Radical Left Populism in Contemporary Greece: Syriza's Trajectory from Minoritarian Opposition to Power" John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2017, 6

¹² Palaiologos, Yannis, and Theodore Pelagidis. "How to Damage an Already Fragile Economy: The Rise of Populism in Greece." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 53

enact change upon achieving political power.¹³ Taking “advantage of growing social discontent,” SYRIZA-ANEL represented themselves as “exponent(s) of ordinary people and of their concerns,” garnering from the Greek public “feeling(s) of aversion towards political elites, the EU, the German government.”¹⁴ In other words, SYRIZA-ANEL harnessed the inertia of growing public discontent and rode the wave of an already prevalent political movement to election victory. It is not as though the campaign points of this coalition were disingenuous, per se. However, key speakers for SYRIZA-ANEL, such as Alexis Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis, consciously appealed to the growing frustrations that were festering amongst the general public – perhaps over-emphasizing the talking points in their campaigns that were relevant to these frustrations.

SYRIZA’s rapid increase in popularity can partially be attributed to civic rage. Unhappy with the feeble state of Greece’s economy in 2009, Greek citizens were desperate to elect a politician into office that would rescue Greece from its “ever-deepening recession” and “the humiliation of externally imposed austerity.”¹⁵ Rather than accrediting the state of Greece’s economy to the general “fiscal derailment of the years before 2010,” Greek citizens were looking for a scapegoat to blame for their financial problems – in the hopes of finding an easy solution to an otherwise complicated and systemic issue.¹⁶ The political platform of SYRIZA-ANEL echoed public concerns, claiming to be a party that was “representative of the Greek people against ...

¹³ Palaiologos, Yannis, and Theodore Pelagidis. “How to Damage an Already Fragile Economy: The Rise of Populism in Greece.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 53

¹⁴ Mavrozacharakis, Emmanouil and Tzagkarakis, Stylianos, The Impact of 'Anti-Political' Parties after the Restoration of Democracy in Greece and the Challenge of Confronting the Crisis

¹⁵ Palaiologos, Yannis, and Theodore Pelagidis. “How to Damage an Already Fragile Economy: The Rise of Populism in Greece.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 52

¹⁶ Palaiologos, Yannis, and Theodore Pelagidis. “How to Damage an Already Fragile Economy: The Rise of Populism in Greece.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 52

institutions of domestic and foreign elites.”¹⁷ In a form of crisis populism, SYRIZA-ANEL used heightened political tensions to their benefit by seizing public attention at the right time, with the right story. Feeding off of a “set of myths,” SYRIZA-ANEL heightened public concerns about international organizations such as the EU and IMF from general disdain into near paranoia.

In conclusion, SYRIZA transformed its political platform by taking advantage of the financial crisis facing Greece and using the crisis as a unifying issue to strengthen the party. SYRIZA employed crisis populism tactics to blame political elites for these failings by establishing an “us vs. them” mentality in the Greek public. SYRIZA used its status as a political outsider to relentlessly criticize Greece’s political incumbents, and garner public distrust of the powers in command of Greece’s economic state. While campaigning, SYRIZA made wild promises to relieve Greece’s debt that were not feasible in reality. The lack of follow-through on these unrealistic promises, coupled with SYRIZA’s decision to coalesce with ANEL, revealed SYRIZA’s true intentions of amassing political power without much concern for maintaining their integrity as a political party. Ultimately, SYRIZA’s involvement in the Greek financial crisis proved to solely be an instigator of further civil unrest. Rather than unifying a nation, SYRIZA created deeper divisions within Greece’s government and public. SYRIZA dismantled public trust not only in political incumbents but also in their own party itself upon taking office. Thus, the Greek people were left with an economy still plagued by the same issues, only without the relative governmental stability in place before SYRIZA’s election.

¹⁷Palaiologos, Yannis, and Theodore Pelagidis. “How to Damage an Already Fragile Economy: The Rise of Populism in Greece.” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2017): 52