

1. WHY VOTERS ABSTAINED IN THE EUROPEAN ELECTION

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Why voters abstained in the **European** election

COMMENTARY | BY DIMITRI A. SOTIROPOULOS *

The majority of Greek citizens spoke through silence and abstained from the recent European election. Voter turnout was just 41%, much lower than that in the June 2023 national election (54%). To interpret this record high abstention rate, one common and one more dramatic explanation have been suggested. The first tells us that the European Parliament elections are not of interest to citizens. Based on this good scenario, the European elections are considered politically inferior ("second-class elections") to national elections, because no government is elected from them. The second explanation tells us that politics is no longer of any interest to citizens. This is the bad scenario. But none of this is new.

With the exception of the European elections of 2014 (voter turnout was 59% and 2019 (also 59%) – that is, European elections that coincided with the municipal elections and also preceded the national elections by only a few months – the voter abstention rate was usually high (in 2009 it was 52%). More generally, abstaining from elections, and specifically from the less crucial ones, is also a familiar phenomenon. In Greece, for example, as early as the late 1980s, surveys by Greece's National Center for Social Research (EKKE) had recorded trends of political alienation, from democratic processes and outlets for political expression. Later on, interest in politics recovered.

That is, the comparatively high abstention rate in June 2024, although very worrying, is not a harbinger of more permanent trends in the future. Furthermore, there is no single cause of a low turnout. A common, and reasonable, mistake of many analysts is to look for a one-size-fits-all interpretation of political phenomena. This habit is also expressed in slogans. The day after the electoral failure of a party or a government, people say and media write that "the citizens turned their backs" on that party or government.

Indeed, there are times when the worse turnout can be interpreted unambiguously. These are moments in which a social current of disapproval over the functioning of democracy crystallizes politically. We also observe this specific disapproval



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A common, and reasonable, mistake of many analysts is to look for a one-size-fits-all interpretation of political phenomena, says Professor Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos.

in periodic, tested, sample surveys of pan-European scope, such as the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, in which the degree of satisfaction of the interviewed citizens with democracy is measured. Even when this satisfaction is limited, there is no permanent detachment from democracy as a system of government. Then why are democratic citizens occasionally indifferent to democracy?

Unequivocal interpretations of the increase in voter abstention are not convincing. As is well known, citizens differ widely in terms of their socioeconomic status, the way they have been politically socialized, their political values, attitudes and perceptions and their multiple social identities. They also differ in terms of their interest in politics and their expectations from politicians. It is strange that many are still looking for a certain – if not unique – explanation for the behavior of those who abstained from the elections.

For example, the reasons for the low voter turnout on June 9 were many and varied. Some abstained because, while they had voted for the ruling party in 2023, they were not satisfied with its performance so far in different policy areas. Based on pre-election polls, for many voters, the fight against inflation, especially in food, was one such area. For some, it was the problems in the protection of life and property. For other, centrist, voters of New Democracy, the

slowness in investigating incidents relating to the rule of law that have injured Greece's international image weighed, while the more conservative voters were alienated by the establishment of marriage equality. In short, the abstention pool included those who, for different reasons, withdrew from their support for the ruling party, which, compared to the national elections of June 2023, now lost almost 1 million voters, according to data of the Interior Ministry on the elections of 2023 and 2024.

The same pool also contained voters who, in June 2023, had voted for SYRIZA, the largest opposition party. Since then, SYRIZA has also lost nearly 337,000 voters. Also, between June 2023 and June 2024 other opposition parties lost tens of thousands of votes each: PASOK lost 109,000, the Communist Party (KKE) 33,000 and Niki 20,000. In the same period, Greek Solution (Elliniki Lysi) won 138,000 voters and smaller parties secured smaller numbers of voters, but the number of the disappointed voters of the first, second and third parties (ND, SYRIZA, PASOK) was too large to go unnoticed. They made up the large part of those who did not vote at all. Disillusioned voters turned away from their parties. But political parties failed to attract them. For there to be such low voter turnout as the one recorded this June, it is obvious that both had to happen: Voters were strongly repulsed by the party they had previously supported and the other parties could not attract them – all of which happened in a "second-class election."

In the end, observations such as that the citizens are generally disillusioned with politics, or that the specific parties in Greece today have priorities that do not concern citizens at all, or that the citizens are convinced that their problems cannot be solved by the current parties, are mostly fascinating generalizations, rather than solid analyses.

* Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos is professor of political science at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the University of Athens, and senior research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).