



Liberal Democracy in a Less-than-Liberal Context? The Case of Contemporary Greece

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Abstract

The persistence of democracy in today's Greece may be surprising for two reasons. First, liberal democracy survived an economic crisis in the 2010s that was more severe than the Great Depression of the 1930s. Second, liberal democracy has remained stable despite the fact that the period since the 1974 transition from the Colonels' Regime has witnessed the diffusion of illiberal ideas and an emergence of relatively small yet very active antiliberal parties. Liberal democracy has been resilient in the face of nationalism and populism, even though accountable liberal institutions enjoy limited political trust. The resilience of contemporary Greek democracy can be explained through two sets of factors: a political set and a social set. Political factors include a long history of political liberalism and the robustness of contemporary political-party competition. Social factors include Greece's relatively large middle class and the absence of overlapping social cleavages that could otherwise have led to destructive socio-political polarization and then a slide toward illiberalism. The Greek case shows under what conditions a liberal democracy can flourish in a less-than-liberal context.

Keywords: Greece, liberalism, illiberalism, middle classes, party competition, polarization

The frequency of military interventions in Greek politics in the twentieth century (even if these were relatively short-lived), the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), and the Greek economic crisis of the 2010s may lead to misperceptions about contemporary Greece. Observers unfamiliar with contemporary Greek democracy may regard it as an unfinished project or a frail political regime. They may find it something of a surprise that democracy has survived in the southernmost area of the conflict-ridden Balkan peninsula and may believe that contemporary Greece is just waiting for its democracy to fail again.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Greece went through several acute political and economic crises, from which it nevertheless recuperated.¹ In the early 2010s, at the beginning of the Greek economic crisis, there were plausible arguments that Greece had failed.²

In 2009, the failure of the Greek economy became obvious. The budget deficit was -15.4% of GDP and public debt stood at 127% of GDP, while the country's current account deficit had been 14.4% of GDP in 2008. This left the country, as of 2010, on the brink of sovereign default.³ The European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) put together a rescue mechanism. For the vast majority of the decade that followed (2011-2020), the Greek economy was under foreign-monitored Economic Adjustment Programs.

There were also signs of political failure.⁴ In the decades prior to the onset of the economic crisis, there were grave problems with fiscal management and macroeconomic policy, the responsiveness of public administration, and the representativeness of mainstream parties.

In the early 2010s, it came as something of a shock that an advanced European economy could reach the point of sovereign default. While economies in the developing world (e.g., in Latin America or South Asia) had experienced economic failure in the last decade of the twentieth century, such a fate would have been unprecedented for a developed economy.

Another shock—one closer to the topic of this article—was the spectacle of a consolidated democracy facing the challenge of fascism, as reflected in the spectacular rise of the Golden Dawn (GD). For a while, in 2015-2019, this neo-Nazi party was the third-largest party in the Greek Parliament, having obtained seven percent of the total vote and 18 out of 300 parliamentary seats. While there had been fascist parties in other post-war European democracies (including post-war Italy), it was surprising in the 2010s to see a party that believed in Nazi ideology and organized

1 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Modern Greece: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 Kevin Featherstone, "The Greek Sovereign Debt Crisis and the EMU: A Failing State in a Skewed Regime," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no.2, (2011): 193-2017, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02139.x>; Takis S. Pappas, "Why Greece Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 31-45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0035>.

3 Data for the budget deficit and public debt is drawn from OECD, "Country Notes: Greece," 2011, last accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/47840787.pdf>. Data on the current account deficit is drawn from World Bank, "Current Account Balance - %GDP - Greece," 2022, last accessed August 9, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.CAB.XOKA.GD.ZS?locations=GR>.

4 Haris Mylonas, "Is Greece a Failing Developed State? Causes and Socio-Economic Consequences of the Financial Crisis" in *The Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy Yearbook 2011: The Global Economic Crisis and the Case of Greece*, ed. Konstantina E. Botsiou and Antonis Klapsis (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2011), 77-88.

itself along paramilitary lines win parliamentary representation in one of the EU's national parliaments.⁵

Today, however, one may argue that the greater surprise has been the resilience of Greek democracy.⁶ In 2010-2018, Greece experienced an economic recession on the scale of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which preceded the breakdown of several European democracies in the inter-war period. Although the Greek party system imploded and the legitimacy of major liberal institutions—including the parliament and political parties—eroded, liberal democracy survived.

This democratic resilience in the face of an acute economic crisis was accompanied by the comparatively wide diffusion of illiberal ideas—including populist and nationalist ones. Even before the economic crisis, liberalism in Greece had been challenged by competing ideologies. There were nationalist-chauvinist fringe political parties and newspapers, as well as intellectuals distrustful of liberal democracy. There was also populist political discourse in the electoral campaigns of mainstream parties in 1974-2009. The personality cult of some leaders, such as Andreas Papandreu, the founder and leader of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) in 1974-1996, went hand in hand with stressing the historical virtues of the Greek people, a theme also popular with other parties.⁷ Yet it would be far-fetched to argue that populism has ever taken center stage in Greek post-authoritarian politics.⁸ Liberal democracy may have been challenged by nationalist and populist ideas, but it has neither broken down nor backslid to the extent observable today in other South East and East European democracies. Despite everything, democracy in post-1974 Greece has remained resilient.⁹

How did Greek democracy manage to weather the economic crisis and function in an illiberal context? And what lessons can be learned from the Greek case? To answer these two questions, the article proceeds as follows.

First, it provides a brief theoretical framework for the linkages between liberal values, the middle class, and liberal democracy. Then it presents a short but critical introduction to liberal political institutions in Greece, followed by a discussion of illiberal values in Greece based on national and comparative attitudinal surveys. The next section contrasts illiberal values with liberal institutions and suggests explanations for this apparent contradiction. The article concludes by identifying the lessons that a resilient liberal democracy like Greece can teach us about illiberalism.

Liberal Values, the Middle Class, and Liberal Democracy

There is abundant research linking liberal values, the middle class, and modern liberal democracy. To start with, the relationship between liberal democratic values and liberal democracy, despite conceptual tensions, is taken here to be straightforward.

5 Antonis Ellinas, "The Rise of Golden Dawn: The New Face of the Far Right in Greece," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 4 (2013): 543-565, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2013.782838>.

6 Pappas, "Why Greece Failed"; Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, "Political Culture", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 337, 347.

7 Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, *Populism and Bureaucracy: Greece under Pasok Rule, 1981-1989* (South Bend, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

8 Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

9 Emmanouil Tsatsanis, Enrico Borghetto, André Freire, and José-Ramon Montero, "Generational and Ideological Gaps in Democratic Support: Seeds of Deconsolidation in Post-Crisis Southern Europe?" *South European Society and Politics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 209-237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2021.2016245>.

According to one opinion, one cannot exist without the other.¹⁰ According to another opinion, liberalism and democracy are not identical because in the past, before the rise of the welfare state, liberalism was associated with a particular kind of state, one marked by limited powers and functions. By contrast, democracy denoted a specific type of political regime that was counterposed to oligarchy and monarchy.¹¹ As democracy developed, the powers and functions of the once liberal state were extended, corresponding to additional rights for which citizens had fought. Today, there is a sound and strong basis on which to argue that political liberalism is closely linked to liberal democracy.¹² To put it otherwise, the former is a most suitable armor for the latter.

A specific type of democratic political culture is a precondition for stable liberal democracy.¹³ Liberal democratic values include rationality, accountability, tolerance, and participation in the pursuit of the general interest, as well as support for human rights—including the individual freedoms of expression and religious beliefs, as well as the right to own private property.¹⁴

Self-expression values have also been associated with effective democracy. Such values include liberty, public self-expression, tolerance of diversity, interpersonal trust, and life satisfaction.¹⁵ Liberal values could, however, be different things to different people. As Marlene Laruelle suggests, it is useful to think of liberalism as “multiple liberalisms” that exist simultaneously and to distinguish among “five major liberal scripts”: political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical liberalism and liberal colonialism.¹⁶

Geopolitical liberalism, related to U.S. hegemony in the post-1945 period, and liberal colonialism, pertaining to relations between “the West and the rest,” are less relevant to an analysis of the affinity between liberalism and democracy in domestic politics, which is the focus of this article. The same is true of economic liberalism, or neo-liberalism. The latter, despite provoking fierce debates, has nevertheless been practiced by conservative, social-democratic, and even populist governments in democracies as well as by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments in autocracies and hybrid political regimes.

For their part, the remaining two liberalisms—political and cultural—are more salient to the analysis of a European liberal democracy that is pursued below. Political liberalism includes the aforementioned democratic values, which are related to diffuse support of liberal democracy. As is well known, diffuse support may coexist with weak specific support of particular institutions and policies in a democratic regime.¹⁷

10 Marc Plattner, “Liberalism and Democracy: Can’t Have One Without the Other,” *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 2 (1998): 171–180, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048858>.

11 Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990), 1–2.

12 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

13 Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 69–105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes in Five Western Democracies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

14 Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, “Political Culture and Democracy: Analyzing Cross-Level Linkages,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 1 (2003): 62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150160>; Michael Freeden, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

15 Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

16 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

17 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

Cultural liberalism is also crucial for liberal democracy. Today, the concept of human rights has been enlarged to include not only civil, political, and social rights, as was the case in twentieth-century Western European democracies, but also several types of identity rights. These may include ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual orientation, and gender rights. In contemporary democracies, all these types of rights are much more contested than are civil, political, and social rights. This opens up the possibility of a liberal democracy functioning in a less-than-liberal value setting. In such a context, some of the values of political and cultural liberalism would not be adhered to consistently, yet liberal institutions would still be operational—as is arguably true in the case under study.

A liberal democratic regime in a less-than-liberal democratic value setting is not the same as either an illiberal democracy or a hybrid regime. In an illiberal regime, there is only a democratic façade: elections take place, but “checks and balances” and the other pluralist characteristics of liberal democracies are absent.¹⁸ In hybrid regimes, at least one of the following four aspects of minimal democracy is absent, be it universal suffrage; free, fair, recurrent, and competitive elections; the existence of more than one political party; or alternative media sources from which for citizens to choose.¹⁹

In a liberal regime embedded in a less-than-liberal democratic setting, elections are not the only one of the democratic institutions remaining, nor are any of the four aspects of minimal democracy mentioned above missing. In such a liberal regime, all four aspects of minimal democracy are present, as well as other liberal institutions like a functioning parliament and justice system, and constitutionally guaranteed human rights. What is missing, however, is at least a slice of the liberal values system that theoretically accompanies liberal democracy.

It has been argued by other authors that there exists in the many cases of modern authoritarian or hybrid political regimes a paradox whereby democracy itself is absent, but citizens support democratic values and desire to live in a democracy.²⁰ Here, what is analyzed is the reverse, namely, the case of a democracy in which liberal democratic institutions are more or less alive and well, but citizens are periodically tempted by illiberal political and cultural values.

Liberal Institutions in Greece

While after the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire (1821-1827) and the establishment of the modern Greek state (1830) liberal values did not become diffused in Greek society, liberal institutions were quickly introduced and consolidated. It is important for the argument of this article to acknowledge that in Greece there is a historical tradition of political liberalism that dates back to previous centuries. For instance, mayors were first elected in the country in 1835.²¹ A national parliament was elected in 1843, while universal suffrage was introduced in 1844 and

18 Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

19 Leonardo Morlino, “Are There Hybrid Regimes? Or Are They Just an Optical Illusion?” *European Political Science Review* 1, no. 2 (2009): 277, 281, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773909000198>.

20 Chrisitan Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 307-331.

21 Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, “Local Government and Regional Administration,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 190.

implemented in 1864. In other words, the right to vote was an early feature of Greece, at a time when it was absent from many other European countries.

Despite short intervals of military rule (1925-1926, 1936-1940, and 1967-1974), Greece has enjoyed very long periods of parliamentary democracy.²² Since 1843 (the year of the first parliamentary elections), there have been 68 parliamentary elections. Of these, only five have been boycotted by major political parties due to the onset or peak of national political crises (in 1910, 1915, 1923, 1935 and 1946), while the vast majority of elections have been considered free and fair by the parties.²³ This is supported by the fact that voters have turned out to vote in vast numbers: in 1974-2009, turnout ranged from 74 to 85 percent. Turnout subsequently declined due to the destabilizing impact of the recent economic crisis, ranging between 56 and 71 percent in 2009-2019.²⁴ In other words, turnout reflected Greeks' support for free, fair, recurrent, and competitive elections, i.e., the minimum requirement for liberal democracy.

Electoral systems in Greece have frequently been manipulated by governing parties prior to elections so as to favor the incumbent. The overall tendency has been for electoral systems to favor the emergence of a two-party system and to produce relatively strong governments that enjoy single-party parliamentary majorities. For almost three decades after the 1974 transition to democracy, a two-party system prevailed, while there was little change in the total number of parties in parliament.²⁵ The party system changed in content, but not in form, after the eruption of the economic crisis in the early 2010, when the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) replaced the center-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) as the competitor to the center-right New Democracy (ND) party. In view of the above, relatively few parties gained parliamentary seats (in the parliament of 1981-1985, there were only three parties: Pasok, ND, and KKE). The range of political representation may thus have suffered, as small and very small political parties normally did not survive parliamentary elections. On the other hand, the above tendencies of the electoral and party systems eventually contributed to the stability of elected governments and parliaments, two major liberal political institutions.

Moreover, as noted above, political liberalism is not a novelty in Greek politics. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with few exceptions, the country's constitutional monarchs respected the results of elections and appointed the leader of the political party that had won the elections to be Prime Minister. In 1974 constitutional monarchy was abolished. With the adoption of the post-authoritarian constitution in 1975, Greece became a parliamentary democracy in which the head of state, the President of the Republic, is not elected through direct suffrage, but by enhanced majority in the parliament.

Admittedly, constructive dialogue with and tolerance toward political opponents were established as norms in Greek politics—to an extent—only after the fall of the Colonels' regime (1974). Before this, various measures of political discrimination and political exclusion applied. For instance, after the end of the Greek civil war

22 Nicos C. Alivizatos, "Greek Constitutionalism and Patterns of Government," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 104-5.

23 *Ibid.*, 105, 107.

24 Yannis Tsirbas, "The Party System," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 224, 229.

25 Elias Dinas, "The Electoral System," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 216.

(1946-1949) and the defeat of the communist guerrilla army, voters of the left were either rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps or subjected to heavy surveillance by security forces. Even though elections took place in the post-civil war period, political parties of the left and the center as well as labor unions and student activists were constrained in their exercise of collective rights. The judiciary and the public administration served the ruling elites, consisting of the conservative political class, the monarchy, and the military. There were weak, if any, checks and balances to constrain the central government. Greece's post-war democracy was a crippled democratic regime.²⁶ This arrangement reflected domestic and international historical legacies, particularly the impact of the Civil War and the Cold War (Greece was a member of the NATO alliance and heavily dependent on U.S. military, economic, and technical assistance).

The non-democratic deviations of Greece's post-war democracy reflected the strength of illiberal values, which—from the birth of the modern Greek state—developed in parallel with liberal ones. This pattern may recall the phenomenon of “cultural dualism,” a term that refers to a complex social and political reality beyond conflicting sets of values. Although it has been contested, this concept aims to capture the tension between a modernizing culture and an “underdog” one and between the different collective actors associated with these two cultures.²⁷ A similar, though not identical, concern about the tense coexistence of liberal and illiberal values informs the analysis that follows.

Illiberal Values in Greece

Greeks prefer democracy over other types of political regime, but they have also long supported political ideologies, such as nationalism and populism, that are not always compatible with liberal democratic values. As a result, some civic values, usually linked with efficient liberal democracy, have remained underdeveloped, as documented below.²⁸

In detail, it has been argued that populism, which believes in the prevalence of the people over institutions (e.g., the parliament, the judiciary) and the alleged moral superiority of the masses over elites, may be a permanent and defining characteristic of post-1974 Greek politics.²⁹ Populism certainly overran the Greek political system during the economic crisis of 2009-2018. The populist vision of democracy became hegemonic.³⁰ Particularly in 2015-2016, the ruling coalition of two populist parties—Syriza and the right-wing nationalist party “Independent Greeks” (Anel)—put liberal institutions, such as the media and the judiciary, to demanding stress tests. The radical left/nationalist right-wing coalition tried to bend democratic processes to its short-term political interests—including by launching a national referendum in 2015—and to compromise institutions, such as state and private electronic media. In 2016 the populist coalition passed legislation to restrict the number of private nationwide channels to just four, but the relevant law was struck down by Greek

26 Nicos P. Mouzelis, *Greece: Facets of Underdevelopment* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

27 P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, *Cultural Dualism and Political Change in Post-Authoritarian Greece* (Madrid: Instituto Juan March de Estudios e Investigaciones, 1994).

28 Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, “Political Culture,” 347.

29 Pappas, *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece*.

30 Sofia Vasilopoulou, Daphne Halikiopoulou, and Theofanis Exacadyctylos, “Greece in Crisis: Austerity, Populism, and the Politics of Blame,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 2 (2014): 388-402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12093>.

courts. The coalition eventually succumbed to the pressure of international creditors and the domestic opposition.³¹

Compared to populism, nationalism may have been a longer-term feature of Greek democracy. In Greek popular culture and the discourse of Greek political parties, one used to find recurrent nationalist themes, such as ethnocentrism, defiance, and resistance against foreigners. Particularly on the far right of the political spectrum, there was an emphasis on national bonds defined by race, blood, and the creed of Orthodox Christianity.³²

Nationalism and populism have had an impact on political values in Greece for a time period exceeding the lifetime of their most ardent supporter, the GD party (the party was essentially eclipsed in 2019 after its leadership was found guilty of the politically motivated assassination of a left-wing rap singer). Indeed, political analysts and recent opinion surveys attest to the co-existence of illiberal and liberal values.

Foreign and Greek analysts alike have observed the tense co-existence of liberal principles and statist beliefs and a tendency to tolerate political extremism instead of trying hard to work in the context of consensual politics. Personal responsibility as a social value coexists with a belief in the omnipotent state to which—with a few exceptions—citizens resort.³³ Volunteerism is anemic, while local social solidarity among neighbors emerges only in instances of grave crisis (earthquakes, wildfires, floods, major economic crises).³⁴ The ease with which Greek politics slipped into anti-democratic extremism during the economic crisis was alarming.³⁵

However, leaving aside periods of crisis, liberal democratic values are generally upheld by the population. A 2020 opinion poll conducted by the Athens Office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) in cooperation with the Greek polling company Kappa Research focused on the liberal values of a random sample of Greeks.³⁶ More than 9 out of 10 respondents declared that democracy is the best system of governance. Asked to choose between two sets of values—namely “individual freedoms-justice-democracy” and “security-strong leadership-stability”—68 percent chose the former and only 31 percent the latter. Moreover, Greeks appreciate liberal values as vehicles to achieve desired societal goals, such as economic growth: 68 percent of respondents valued meritocracy and justice.

However, in a national sample survey conducted in Greece in March 2022, only 19 percent of respondents identified with the political ideology of liberalism. While 17 percent chose no political ideology at all, others subscribed to social democracy (14 percent), socialism (12 percent), environmentalism (8 percent), neoliberalism (7

31 Paris Aslanidis and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Dealing with Populists in Government: The Syriza/ANEL Coalition in Greece,” *Democratization* 23, no. 6 (2016): 1077-1091, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1154842>.

32 Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, “Political Culture,” 343-346.

33 Ronald Meinardus, “The Malaise of Greek Liberalism,” *The Globalist*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.theglobalist.com/greece-liberalism-politics-syriza/>.

34 Asteris Huliaras, “The Party System,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 351-365.

35 Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, “Greek Politics: Economic Crisis or Crisis of Democracy?” *World Affairs* 178, no. 3 (2015): 13-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24888110>.

36 Friedrich Naumann Foundation, “Survey: Liberalism in Greece, Today,” 2020, <https://kaparesearch.com/en/liberalism-in-greece-2020/> (in Greek).

percent), and conservatism (6 percent).³⁷ In other words, only a minority of Greeks openly subscribe to liberalism.

This is not to suggest that most Greeks are anti-liberal. It may mean that there is space in the Greek value system for illiberal values to intrude. For instance, racism in Greece is expressed through hostile attitudes toward and discriminatory actions against minorities residing in the country (e.g., the Roma) and immigrants passing through Greek territory on their way from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to the countries of Northwestern Europe. For example, in a national sample survey on attitudes toward religious and ethnic groups conducted in March 2022, 64 percent of respondents favored the Greek authorities taking a stricter stance on immigrants.³⁸

Xenophobia is also diffused in Greece and takes the form of extreme dislike of the religion and customs of Muslims. For instance, in the same national sample survey mentioned just above, authoritarianism is shown in attitudes and actions against political opponents during electoral campaigns. At times of acute political polarization (for example, during the recent economic crisis), voters of opposing parties are treated not as rivals but—at least to a certain extent—as enemies.

However, a distinction should be drawn between state-driven authoritarianism and authoritarianism exhibited in political-party competition. The former is evident in how the state treats groups of protesters and incoming migrants. At political protests in Greece, the police often treat protesters with brutality, particularly when provoked by the latter. When it comes to checking identity papers of migrants and refugees, government employees are dismissive, while security forces behave in an oppressive, if not violent, manner toward them.

Authoritarianism in the context of political-party competition is exhibited in outbursts of political violence by members of one party against those of another. This second kind of authoritarianism is also problematic. It is an indication that in the eyes of certain groups of voters or party activists, the liberal democratic outlets for non-violent political engagement are non-existent or closed off. The public sphere in Greece does not provide adequate channels of public consultation and deliberation, as civil society itself remains relatively weak.³⁹

Authoritarian attitudes and actions appear in all political camps in Greece, on the right and on the left. For example, political parties of the far right, of which the neo-Nazi GD party is the foremost example, treat not only socialists or communists, but also political liberals, with hostility. The GD has inflicted physical wounds on opponents and even (as noted above) killed a left-wing singer. Other far-right organizations have not collapsed with the fall of GD, but remain active.⁴⁰

Yet without equating the GD's paramilitary organization to social protest by collective movements, nor should one be blind to the use of violence by other political

³⁷ Dianeosis, "What Greeks Believe in," March 2022, full report-Part A, p. 178, Table A38, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/tpe_2022_part-A.pdf (in Greek).

³⁸ Dianeosis, "What Greeks Believe In," March 2022, summary of the report, Part 2, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/tpe_2022_part-a_brochure.pdf (in Greek).

³⁹ Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, "Civil Society in Greece in the Wake of the Economic Crisis," Athens Office of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and ELIAMEP Foundation, May 2014, <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/kas.pdf> (in Greek).

⁴⁰ Nicholas Alex Isychos, "Mapping the Greek Far Right One Year After Golden Dawn's Conviction," *IERES Occasional Papers* 12 (January 2022), <https://www.illiberalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/IERES-occasional-papers-12-Isychos-Mapping-the-Greek-Far-Right.pdf>.

forces. In settings in which radical left-wing party-controlled associations (student factions, labor unions) have a longstanding presence, such as university campuses or labor union mobilizations, radical left-wing activists have been known to suppress dissenting opinions using force. For instance, on Greek university campuses, academics who have resisted the activities or rejected the opinions of radical or anarchic student factions have been physically attacked, held hostage for hours, or blocked from their offices for days.⁴¹ During the economic crisis, some labor unions physically attacked Greek and foreign government officials.⁴² Nor is it uncommon for labor factions opposing the government of the day to attempt to violently storm and occupy government buildings.⁴³

Naturally, the national General Confederation of Greek Workers of Greece (GSEE) and the corresponding national confederation of civil servants (ADEDY), who officially represent the interests of salaried workers and employees, do not endorse such practices. There have also been outbreaks of violence in other contemporary Western democracies (including the US, France, and Italy). However, liberal democracy in Greece seems to have periodically encountered collective behavior that surpasses the usual limits of conflict in the political, labor, and university arenas. This may be a symptom of the failure of traditional liberal democratic means to manage conflict.

After all, Greeks do not trust major liberal political institutions. Based on Eurobarometer surveys, only 5 percent of Greeks trusted political parties in 2010, at the start of the economic crisis (down from 28 percent in 2003). Trust in parties has not improved over time.

Such distrust is a permanent trend of Greek politics and is not necessarily related to the economic crisis. In 2018-2019, the World Values Survey showed that Greeks had very little trust in the following political institutions (starting with the highest level of distrust): political parties, the press, television channels, the government, and the parliament.⁴⁴

In addition, a 2019 Eurobarometer survey showed that the Greek national government, public administration, and regional and local authorities enjoyed the trust of a minority of respondents (between 23 and 27 percent).⁴⁵ As of January 2022, only 11 percent of Greeks trusted political parties, far below the EU-27 average of 21 percent.⁴⁶

41 Ellie Bothwell, "Greek Scholars Hope New Law Ends Student Anarchy on Campuses," *Times Higher Education*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/greek-scholars-hope-new-law-ends-student-anarchy-campuses>; Apostolos Lakasas, "Time to End Uni Violence, Says Rector," *He Kathimerini*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/258925/time-for-uni-violence-to-end-says-rector/>.

42 Helena Smith, "Greek Protesters Storm Conference Hurling Coffee, Water, Eggs and Abuse," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/15/greek-protesters-storm-conference-german?CMP=twi_gu.

43 See photos published in *USA Today*, "Labor Protest in Greece Turns Violent," <https://eu.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/news/2017/12/05/labor-protest-in-greece-turns-violent/108334652/>.

44 Anastasia Charalambi, Aggeliki Yfanti, Joanna Tsinganou, and Catherine Michalopoulou, "Investigating Political Trust in Institutions and Organizations: Evidence from the World Values Survey 2017-2018 in Greece" in *Values, Cultural Models and Social Orientations in Contemporary Greece* (in Greek), ed. Sokratis Koniorodos (Athens: Papazisis, 2020), 284-285.

45 Nikolaos Zahariades, Evangelia Petridou, Theofanis Exadactylos, and Jorgen Sparf, "Policy Styles and Political Trust in Europe's National Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis," *Policy Studies* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.2019211>.

46 Standard Eurobarometer no. 96, Winter 2021-2022, fieldwork conducted in January-February 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553>.

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In 2020 the aforementioned FNF survey of liberal values in Greece showed that only 19 percent of Greeks trusted political parties, 14 percent trade unions, 13 percent the mass media, and 12 percent non-governmental organizations. Notably, middle-income groups tend to trust these institutions more than low-income groups (such as workers and farmers) do.

And yet, despite the inhospitable values context sketched above, liberal democracy in contemporary Greece remains relatively predictable and stable. Below, I briefly elaborate on two explanations for this phenomenon.

Reasons for the Resilience of Greek Democracy

There is academic literature claiming that liberal values were never really embedded in Greece: neither during Ottoman rule (1453-1830) over the southern part of the Balkan peninsula nor after the birth of the Modern Greek state (1830). The shallowness of liberal values was attributed to the dominant cultural patterns.⁴⁷ But it is difficult to argue that the incompatibility between liberal institutions and cultural values registered in the nineteenth century has explanatory value today.

Instead, the presence of resilient liberal democratic institutions in a less-than-liberal setting may be explained through an analysis of the contemporary Greek political party system and the social structure of contemporary Greece.

Parties and the Party System

In Greece's two-party system, the center-right New Democracy (ND) party and the center-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) have alternated in government, relying on single-party parliamentary majorities, since the 1974 transition to democracy.⁴⁸ Since 1974, coalition governments have been formed only for relatively brief time periods in which there was either governmental instability (1989-1990) or economic crisis (2011-2018). Both of the aforementioned parties adopted a toolkit approach to liberal democratic institutions. From 1974 to 2014, once in power, the party that had won the elections used the public administration, state-owned enterprises, the state-managed television and radio organizations, and—to the extent possible—the courts as tools to improve its chances of re-election.

The government coalition of the radical left party “Coalition of the Radical Left” (Syriza) with the nationalist right-wing nationalist “Independent Greeks” (Anel) party in 2015-2018 did not alter this utilitarian approach to institutions. Instead, as explained above, that coalition simply put a populist spin on the utilitarian approach.

In 2019-2022, under the single-party majority government of ND, the familiar pattern of executive interference with (if not control over) the legislature continued. As in previous decades, one witnessed the full control of parliamentary processes by the governing majority. It is telling that in Greece, the law-making initiative rests squarely in the hands of the government. The parliament exercises parliamentary scrutiny, for instance, through questions put to ministers. However, parliamentarians almost never succeed in drafting, let alone passing, legislation on their own initiative.

47 Constantine Tsoucalas, “Enlightened Concepts in the Dark: Power and Freedom, Politics and Society,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 91, no. 1 (1991): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2010.0117>; Adamantia Pollis, “The Impact of Traditional Cultural Patterns on Greek Politics,” *The Greek Review of Social Research* 29 (1977): 2-14, <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.330>.

48 Yannis Tsirbas, “The Party System,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 219-238.

Under the ND government, as under previous ones, no bills of law submitted by opposition parties were ever adopted as law. This follows the tendency to render the parliament subservient to the government that was common under Pasok, ND, and Syriza/Anel governments of the past. The inability of the parliament to check the ND government in the early fall of 2022 following allegations that the government-supervised secret services wiretapped in 2021 the cell phones of a prominent opposition politician and an investigative journalist is a case in point. Yet while in Greece today the executive towers over the other institutions, it does not do so in the intense, asphyxiating manner one would witness in an illiberal regime.

To explain in more detail, Greece's liberal democratic institutions have provided a stable context that all players of the democratic game have accepted—without, however, squandering any opportunities to trim these institutions around their edges, as the following examples indicate. Throughout the post-authoritarian period (1974 onward), governments used to hand-pick and appoint higher judges to the posts of presidents and vice-presidents of high-level courts. Thus, the appointment of higher judges was made by the Cabinet on political criteria. This practice continues today, but with an additional filter that partly curbs government bias. The president and vice-presidents of the parliament meet and vote on a short-list of candidates for the presidents and vice-presidents of high-level courts. The short-list is then passed on to the Cabinet to decide.

Recruitment of civil servants to tenured posts was made through entrance examinations or on the basis of measurable educational credentials. Still, promotions to the posts of Director and Director General were orchestrated by government-dominated civil service councils in ministries and public bodies, while recruitment to entry-level, temporary public-sector jobs was organized by governing parties. State television and radio channels granted disproportionate airtime to governing-party candidates, while their news coverage was biased toward government activities. All of the above were common practices under ND, Pasok, and Syriza/Anel governments. In other words, while political parties accepted liberal democratic institutions, they did so in a lukewarm rather than wholehearted fashion. To the extent they could, parties bent such institutions to their own ends.

Meanwhile, within the parties, dissent—let alone organized opposition to the party leader—was rarely tolerated. The management of party finances was often not at all transparent. Party youths became involved in violent incidents, particularly in universities, where opposing student factions made shows of force. In short, parties were only reluctant agents of the political socialization of their card-carrying members and voters into the values of liberal democracy.

That being said, political parties have played a positive role in contemporary Greek democracy. First of all, they helped consolidate democracy after the 1974 transition from authoritarian rule. Many social groups and individuals identified with political parties and mobilized behind the single goal of winning parliamentary elections. Whereas in other European democracies, social movements—such as labor and agrarian movements—have given birth to political parties defending corresponding social interests, in Greece the linkages between parties and movements have been complex, with parties penetrating movements as well as interest groups.⁴⁹ For

49 George Th. Mavrogordatos, "Models of Party-Interest Group Relations and the Uniqueness of the Greek Case" (paper presented to the Workshop "Political Parties and Civil Society," ECPR Joint Sessions, Lisbon, April 14-19, 2009); Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, "Political Party-Interest Group Linkages in Greece Before and After the Onset of the Economic Crisis," *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 5 (2018): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1428149>.

instance, after the 1974 transition to democracy, parties of the left dominated labor, student, youth, and feminist movements. Each of the parties created its own front organization within these movements. Party control of social movements had the effect of limiting movements' autonomy. However, it also meant that parties contributed to centripetal tendencies in the post-1974 democratic regime and eventually to the wide political legitimization of liberal democracy, as explained in the previous sections of this article.

The party system contributed to the same positive result in an intriguing manner. Alternating governments meticulously and frequently amended the electoral legislation to boost the electoral chances of the party in power. The electoral playing field was often tilted in favor of the incumbent. However, successive governments' toying with the electoral system never reached the point after which democracy would start backsliding. Multiple government turnovers—in 1981, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2019—attest to the fact that the rules of political competition were never so biased as to prevent the overthrow of an unpopular government, which is the sign of a functioning, if not necessarily robust, liberal democracy.

The Middle Class and Non-Overlapping Social Cleavages

The link, in economically developed societies, between the existence of a strong middle class and democratization is well-known in the mainstream sociology and political science literature.⁵⁰ The middle class considers liberal democracy to be the appropriate institutional setting to seek political representation, promote its business interests, and benefit from political stability. For these reasons, the entrepreneurial segment of the middle class bears democratic credentials. Intellectuals influenced by the democratic ideas of Enlightenment and political liberalism also belong to the middle class. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the democratic credentials of the state-dependent segment of the middle class (namely public employees) in post-communist autocracies, but not in other regimes.⁵¹ The middle class continues to offer its diffuse support to liberal democracy, a pattern that holds for contemporary Greek democracy, which is embedded in a basically middle-class society.

Greece's social structure is characterized by the presence of a large and fragmented middle class. This consists of public-sector employees (22 percent of total employment in 2020),⁵² professionals (20 percent of total employment), shopkeepers, and small and very small entrepreneurs. It is telling of middle-class fragmentation that 85 percent of Greek businesses employ 5 people or less.⁵³

Since the 1974 transition to democracy, these middle strata have consistently voted for mainstream parties, namely parties of the center-right and center-left. Explicitly

50 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, (New York: Beacon Press, 1966); Ronald M. Glassman, *The New Middle Class and Democracy in Global Perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

51 Bryn Rosenfeld, "State Dependency and the Limits of Middle-Class Support for Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 3-4 (2021): 411-444, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020938085>.

52 For the figure of public employees, including civil servants and employees of state-owned enterprises, see the official website of the Ministry of Interior: <http://interops.ydmed.gov.gr/month/monthlyen.php>. See also Stavros Mavroudeas and Costas Passas, "The Level and Evolution of Greek Public Sector Salaries from the Crisis of 2009-2010 until Today" (Athens: ADEDY Koinoniko Polykentro, 2022) (in Greek), p.20, https://kpolykentro.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/exelixa-misthon-it_mavroudeas.pdf.

53 For information on employment, see European Commission, "Labor Market Information: Greece," 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eures/public/living-and-working/labour-market-information/labour-market-information-greece_en.

anti-liberal parties, such as the neo-Nazi GD and the pro-Soviet KKE, have attracted voters from various electoral pools.

GD was an explicitly anti-liberal party. Its leadership wanted to abolish the democratic political regime and replace it with a totalitarian state, while in 2015 76 percent of its supporters agreed with the statement “Parliamentary democracy is a camouflaged authoritarian regime” (compared to 45 percent of all voters).⁵⁴ The party was strong in all social strata other than the middle-class ones. During the economic crisis of the previous decade, the following categories were over-represented among the voters of the GD: farmers, the unemployed, private-sector employees, and pensioners. Its supporters also included artisans and craftsmen with very low educational credentials.⁵⁵

The KKE explicitly stands against liberal democracy and for state socialism.⁵⁶ The party’s voters include people from all socio-professional groups⁵⁷ and particularly wage workers,⁵⁸ although the latter—as well as the unemployed—have tended to vote more for Syriza than for the KKE.

For their part, typical middle-class strata have remained in favor of liberal democracy. They voted for the two main protagonists of party competition, which did not challenge liberal democracy, namely ND and Pasok, until 2010 and have voted for ND and Syriza since 2010. Regardless of its radical-left platform, which at the start of the economic crisis was strongly anti-austerity, Syriza eventually took over the center-left spot once occupied by Pasok in the Greek party system.

As the largest parties in a two-party system, the center-right and center-left political parties poll strongly across all social strata and particularly among the middle class. The pattern of middle-class support for the two parties is borne out by exit poll results in the three most recent national parliamentary elections (January 2015, September 2015, and July 2019).

The elections of January 2015 signaled the rise of Syriza to government, replacing the ND-Pasok coalition (2011-2014). The largest share of autonomous employees, including those in the liberal professions and business, voted for either ND or Syriza (29 percent for Syriza vs. 34 percent for ND). Public-sector employees also voted disproportionately for these two parties (38 percent for Syriza vs. 24 percent for ND).⁵⁹

In the snap elections of September 2015, which Syriza called after reversing its anti-austerity policy, the largest share of autonomous employees voted for either ND or Syriza (29 percent apiece). Public-sector employees voted disproportionately in

54 Vasiliki Georgiadou, “The Far Right,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 249, 251.

55 “The Profile of Voters of the Golden Dawn Party,” *He Kathimerini*, October 13, 2013 (in Greek), <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/56337/poio-einai-to-profil-ton-psifoforon-tis-chrysis-aygis/>; Myrto Laliouti, “Golden Dawn: Voters’ Profile,” *To Vima*, October 18, 2020 (in Greek), <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/10/18/society/xyysi-aygi-to-profil-ton-psifoforon/>.

56 Giorgos Charalambous, “The Communists,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 322.

57 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of July 7, 2019. See also “The Ballot Box under the Microscope: What Exit Polls Reveal,” *To Vima*, July 8, 2019 (in Greek), <https://www.tovima.gr/2019/07/08/politics/i-kalpi-sto-mikroskopio-ti-apokalyptoun-ta-exit-poll/>.

58 Charalambous, “The Communists,” 328.

59 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of January 25, 2015.

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favor of Syriza (37 percent vs. 28 percent for ND). The same held for private-sector employees, including workers (37 percent for Syriza vs. 22 percent for ND).⁶⁰

In the most recent parliamentary elections (in 2019), ND performed far better among autonomous employees than it did nationally (44 percent among professionals vs. 40 percent of the total vote). It competed with Syriza for the vote of public-sector employees (37 percent voted for Syriza vs. 32 percent for ND).⁶¹

In sum, it is possible to argue that in contemporary Greece the middle class is far more supportive of liberal parties than anti-liberal ones.

Conclusion

In Greece, diffuse support for liberal democracy as a political regime has long coexisted with persistent racism, xenophobia, and intolerance toward political opponents and social minorities, coupled with very low trust in accountable political institutions such as the parliament and political parties. The steadfast diffuse support of liberal democracy as a political regime has not prevented the emergence and survival of distinct anti-liberal political parties, including the communist KKE and the neo-Nazi GD.

On the basis of the above (unavoidably brief) analysis of the Greek case, general lessons could be drawn about the performance of liberal democracy. These lessons pertain to the conditions required for liberal democracy to survive in what may seem—at first glance—like inhospitable circumstances. The lessons summarized below may provide research hypotheses to be tested in other cases.

Based on the case of Greece, it can be argued that for liberal democracy to be resilient, it is necessary for the electorally strongest parties to support that type of regime in at least a tool-kit, utilitarian manner—that is, to use liberal democratic institutions to ascend to and remain in power, even if they do not fully subscribe to the institutions in an ideological sense. Moreover, it is necessary for the middle classes to support liberal democracy as a political regime, even if they may be dissatisfied with the way in which democracy functions.

To conclude, the main argument of the article is that despite the diffusion of illiberal ideas in a given society (here, contemporary Greece), liberal democracy is sustainable if there are conducive conditions in two fields: first, the party system; and, second, the social class structure in which liberal democracy is embedded.

60 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of September 20, 2015.

61 *To Vima*, “The Ballot Box under the Microscope.”