



Contemporary Southeastern Europe

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

A Critical Analysis of the Greek Referendum of July 2015

Event Analysis

Yannis Sygkelos

Lecturer, DEI College, University of London

yannissygkelos@hotmail.com

www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/cse/en/sygkelos

Contemporary Southeastern Europe 2015, 2(2), 1-6

Contemporary Southeastern Europe is an online, peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-oriented research on issues relevant to societies in Southeastern Europe. For more information, please contact us at info@contemporarysee.org or visit our website at www.contemporarysee.org

A Critical Analysis of the Greek Referendum of July 2015

Yannis Sygkelos*

Keywords: Greece, Referendum, Syriza

Introduction

On 27 June 2015, after five months of politics of brinkmanship in negotiations with the European Union / European Central Bank / International Monetary Fund (EU/ECB/IMF) troika, Alexis Tsipras, the Prime Minister of the unusual coalition government of the left-wing Coalition of the Radical Left (*Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras*, SYRIZA) and the far-right Independent Greeks (*Aneksartitoi Ellines*, ANEL), all of a sudden, proclaimed a referendum, to be held on 5 July 2015. Referendums first ushered in under the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte; in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, they were, at its best, a highly controversial form of direct democracy. Referendums were being advocated by so uncommon political forces as British Conservatives, German Social Democrats and Nazis, but were also being disapproved by severely opposing political ideologues such as liberals and communists.¹ By the end of the 20th century, though, they have proliferated in many European countries, inasmuch as issue politics have been outweighing representative democracy along with social, economic, ethnic and/or religious cleavages.² Hence, citizens are now getting more and more eager to influence key decision-making concerning single issues and this is feasible through referendums or citizens' initiatives. Nonetheless, Greece has got an extremely poor political experience in types of direct democracy. Apart from the post-junta referendum of 1974 on Republic, all other six referendums held during the 20th century were conducted in conditions of political turmoil, chaos and, in most of the cases, extensive electoral fraud.

Referendums have assorted shapes and dilemmas, such as constitutional issues, strategic options for a state (e.g. accession to the EU, adoption of the euro), devolution or secession, and local mundane issues. In constitutional

* Yannis Sygkelos is a Lecturer at DEI College [Thessaloniki, Greece], a registered teaching institution of the University of London (International Programmes). His research interests involve nationalism, human rights, political ideologies, and discourse theory and analysis, while his main field is the Balkans. He is the author of the manuscript "Nationalism from the Left" and several academic articles.

¹ Qvortrup, Matt. 2014. *Referendums around the World: The Continued Growth of Direct Democracy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 4-10.

² Inglehart, Ronald. 1990. *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. 2010. Changing Mass Priorities: The Link between Modernization and Democracy. *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2), 551-67; and Tierney, Stephen. 2012. *Constitutional Referendums: The Theory and Practice of Republican Deliberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

theory, referendums are classified into binding and advisory or into constitutional and facultative.³ In practice, however, one could distinguish referendums between those that governments use to consult the electorate or are constitutionally required to approve constitutional amendments, and those that governments abuse as a façade of legitimacy and popular mobilization. This classification does not intend to imply that the latter are always rigged and satisfactory for the leaders who devise them, the Chilean plebiscite of 1988, which removed Pinochet from power, being the most compulsive.

Constitutional oddities in respect of the Greek referendum of July 2015

The legality of the recent Greek referendum is wholly indubitable. Greek Constitution art.44 stipulates that

a referendum over pivotal national questions is proclaimed by a Presidential decree, after the approval of Cabinet's request by the absolute majority of the total number of MPs.

Art.44 is supplemented by the implementing law 4023/2011 “on enhancing direct and participatory democracy through referendums.” Fiscal questions are excluded, albeit upon already passed bills. In his address to the Greek people, Alexis Tsipras announced that the Cabinet decided to put the ultimatum (sic) of the EU/ECB/IMF institutions, that is, their proposal on Greece’s bailout programme, at referendum. Articulating a discourse fraught with national instances, he invoked national sovereignty, national unity, the dignity of the Greek people, national history, and the metaphor of Greece as the birthplace of democracy and the foundation of the European civilisation.⁴ As a consequence, the national question art.44 refers to was translated into a national cause: the resistance of the Greek people to EU/ECB/IMF proposals and plans of people’s humiliation and subversion of government’s democratic mandate. Playing the patriotic card and setting the goal of popular mobilization, Tsipras and his close associates resorted to a facultative referendum in order that the incumbent coalition government retain office.

Within this framework, a wide range of constitutional oddities took place. To begin with, the one-week-time frame between the call and the date of the referendum was too pressing. A week time, as the General Secretary of the Council of Europe, Thorbjorn Jagland, mentioned, is not sufficient for the voters to make their minds up.⁵ 4023/2011 art.12 provides that the referendum should be held within 30 days “*after the publication of the Presidential decree on its proclamation.*” Evidently, this is not to be interpreted that a referendum ought to be called and conducted within 30 days. Such a very brief period is rather unprecedented: we could only compare it with referendums held by

³ A constitutional referendum is stipulated in the Constitution, e.g. Irish referendums over any constitutional amendment; a facultative referendum operates as a mediating device to cope with an exigency, e.g. the UK referendum over the EEC membership (1975).

⁴ N.N. *Dimopsifisma stis 5 Iouliou yper i kata tis Protasis ton Thesmon* (Referendum on the 5 July for or against the Proposal of the Institutions). *To Vima*. 26 June 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).

⁵ Council of Europe. *Greek Referendum Falls Short of Standards*. *Reuters*. 1 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).

authoritarian or illegitimate regimes, such as the one concerned the status of Crimea (2014), which was proclaimed by pro-Russian secessionists to be held within ten days. On the contrary, referendums held in established European democracies allow a long period for public deliberation. For instance, the recent referendum on Scottish independence was settled on under the Edinburgh Agreement (15 October 2012), proclaimed under the Scotland Act 1998 Order 2013 (issued on 12 February 2013), and held on 18 September 2014. Also, the Danish euro referendum (2000) allowed over six months of campaigning despite that two referendums on the Maastricht Treaty on European Union (1992 and 1993) had already been held and the recent, more trivial, Irish referendum over same-sex marriage allowed four months of public debate.

Within the very limited time of one week, no essential campaigning was unfolded. Instead of distinct YES and NO camps being deployed and public debate being held, YES and NO proponents orchestrated rallies and argue their cases mainly through broadcasting and the social media. As political science comparative studies have shown, however, campaigning might prove to be decisive in determining the outcome of a referendum.⁶ Eventually, the referendum ended up to a proxy-election aiming to determine the popularity of the incumbent government. And the shorter a government has been in office, the more likely it is to convince the electorate to take its side: in our case, the NO side. Apparently, there was not enough time for the voters to make informed decisions, campaigning was at its best truncated, and the voters cast their ballot expressing, in general terms, their preference to the government of the day or the opposition.

Another important constitutional oddity concerns the clarity of the question. According to 4023/2011 art.3, “*the question is phrased in a comprehensible and succinct manner.*” On the contrary, the question was puzzling and vaguely framed. The ballot read:

should the plan agreement submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in the Euro-group of 25.06.2015, be approved? It consists of two parts, which constitute an aggregate proposal: the first document is entitled “Reforms for the Completion of the Current Program and beyond” and the second “Preliminary Debt Sustainability Analysis”

(both document titles appeared in English with a translation in Greek placed in brackets). It offered two options: Not approved/NO and approved/YES. Apart from being too lengthy to be placed on a referendum ballot, the question cited two documents of a very recent non-paper amounted to 34 pages that the voters themselves had to find out and read carefully. Besides, the Greek translation of the above documents contained abbreviations in English as well as economic and legal jargon non-comprehensible to most of the voters. Citation of documents is not unusual in referendum ballots: most of the referendums on the EU required prior reading of Treaties; yet, the texts were not that sophisticated and the time allowed the voters to be informed was substantially

⁶ LeDuc, Lawrence. 2002. *Referendums and Elections: How do Campaigns differ?*, in *Do Political Campaigns Matter? Campaign Effects in Elections and Referendums*, edited by Farrell, David and Rüdiger, Schmitt-Back. London: Routledge, 145-62.

longer. Nevertheless, the questions were rather comprehensible and succinct, e.g. "are you in favour of or against approval by the Netherlands of the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe?" (Dutch referendum on the Constitutional Treaty held in 2005). That is to say, that even if a voter had not read the document of the Treaty could very well reply to the question of whether s/he is in favour of a European Constitution or, by implication, of ceding part of sovereignty to a supranational authority. On the contrary, the Greek referendum ballot did not address the issue at stake outright, that is, the bailout program, but a peripheral agreement emanating from it.

As regards to the consequences, they were wholly unforeseen and ambiguous. Even the seemingly clear-cut YES option would have had ambiguous ramifications. The draft agreement that the Greek electorate would have potentially approved concerned a bailout program due to expire on the 30 June, that is, before the referendum having been held. The NO option was completely ambiguous: had the electorate disapproved the draft agreement put in referendum, would the government have proceeded with another bailout agreement? To what extent, a new bailout agreement would have been different from the disapproved one? Would there have been no bailout programme at all? Would this have meant default and Grexit? A request for an extension of the bailout program with amendments on the proposal that the coalition government called the voters to disapprove, was submitted by Tsipras on 30 June and caused further confusion as regards the expediency and the necessity of the referendum. Such ambivalence as of the impact of the result of the referendum is rather unprecedented in established democracies. From a constitutional point of view, referendums should not allow any interpretation of the popular vote and the impact of YES and NO should be absolutely clear either.

The last but not least oddity concerned the architecture of the ballot. Paradoxically, the NO option, backed by the government, was above the YES one: a manoeuvre rather reminiscent of referendums called by authoritarian regimes. For example, the format of the 1978 Chilean referendum ballot on the approval of Pinochet's regime was biased in favour of YES, which was represented by the national flag, whereas the NO block was a black rectangle.⁷

Conclusions

Too a pressing time frame, absence of an essential campaigning, puzzling wording, unforeseen implications, and a bizarre format, all made the Greek referendum of July 2015 problematic. Regardless of whether aiming to forestall the split of SYRIZA and government's downfall, or being a step towards a decisive split with the euro-zone facilitating a drachma plot,⁸ or intending to

⁷ N.N. [The Greek referendum question makes \(almost\) no sense](#). *BBC*. 29 June 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).

⁸ Many reports published in the press describe this scenario: Hope, Kerin and Tony Barber. 2015. [Syriza's Covert plot during Crisis Talks to Return to Drachma](#). *Financial Times*. 24 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015); Evans-Pritchard, Ambrose. 2015. [Syriza Left Demands 'Icelandic' Default as Greek Defiance Stiffens](#). *Telegraph*. 14 June 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015); Kounalaki, Ksenia. 2015. [Plan B me Ypoklopes kai Hacking \(Plan B with Interception and Hacking\)](#). *Kathimerini*. 26 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015); Kanellis, Vasilis. 2015. [To](#)

increase the popularity and legitimacy of Tsipras, because of all the aforementioned oddities, this referendum should have never been made. It rather constituted an abuse of direct democracy, an unexpected political manoeuvre made by a political leader to circumvent a hard political exigency. Despite the so many appeals of the coalition government to European values and standards during the tiny period of campaigning, such a referendum falls short of European standards and is unfamiliar with European democratic norms.

The financial repercussions of the proclamation of this referendum were harsh for the Greek society, as it immediately led to a bank run and the inevitable imposition of capital controls. What is more, the compromise reached in the EU Summit of 12 July 2015 made it absolutely meaningless in political terms. Most interestingly, nonetheless, the referendum of July 2015 highlighted the oxymoron of what might be called a “leftist democratic myth”, systematically articulated by SYRIZA, that is that globalised neo-liberal institutions, namely the EU/IMF/ECB troika, and hegemonic figures at a global level, i.e. Schaeuble foremost, Merkel, Lagarde, Dragi, and Juncker, all allegedly aborted the democratic mandate of the coalition government and defied the vote and will of the Greek electorate. On the contrary, the conduct of a referendum manipulative of the popular vote and serving certain partisan considerations and ends is apparently at odds with the democratic discourse of SYRIZA’s leadership.

Bibliography

- Council of Europe. Greek Referendum Falls Short of Standards. *Reuters*. 1 July 2015 (accessed: 13 October 2015).
- Evans-Pritchard, Ambrose. 2015. Syriza Left Demands 'Icelandic' Default as Greek Defiance Stiffens. *Telegraph*. 14 June 2015 (accessed: 13 October 2015).
- Hope, Kerin and Tony Barber. 2015. Syriza’s Covert plot during Crisis Talks to Return to Drachma. *Financial Times*. 24 July 2015. (accessed: 13 September 2015).
- Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. 2010. Changing Mass Priorities: The Link between Modernization and Democracy. *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2), 551-67.
- Inglehart, Ronald. 1990. *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kanellis, Vasilis. 2015. To Mystiko Sxedio gia ti Drachmi (The Secret Drachma Plan). *Imerisia*. 19 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).
- Kounalaki, Ksenia. 2015. Plan B me Ypoklopes kai Hacking (Plan B with Interception and Hacking). *Kathimerini*. 26 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October, 2015).
- LeDuc, Lawrence. 2002. *Referendums and Elections: How do Campaigns differ?*, in *Do Political Campaigns Matter? Campaign Effects in Elections and Referendums*, edited by Farrell, David and Rüdiger, Schmitt-Back. London: Routledge, 145-62.

Mystiko Sxedio gia ti Drachmi (The Secret Drachma Plan). *Imerisia*. 19 July 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).

- N.N. Dimopsifisma stis 5 Iouliou yper i kata tis Protasis ton Thesmon (Referendum on the 5 July for or against the Proposal of the Institutions). *To Vima*. 26 June 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).
- N.N. The Greek referendum question makes (almost) no sense. *BBC*. 29 June 2015. (accessed: 13 October 2015).
- Qvortrup, Matt. 2014. *Referendums around the World: The Continued Growth of Direct Democracy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Tierney, Stephen. 2012. *Constitutional Referendums: The Theory and Practice of Republican Deliberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.