



The parliamentary voting behaviour of populist parties in Greece



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Key findings

- Timbro Institute's methodological distinction in the *Authoritarian Populism Index* between extreme and authoritarian populist parties is highly relevant in the Greek political environment, as shown by the parliamentary voting patterns in the period 2012-2018.
- The parliamentary voting patterns of the Greek populist parties are significantly different from that of non-populist parties. Populists when in the opposition tend to oppose the majority bills much more often and consistently than non-populists.
- The extreme parties (KKE and Golden Dawn) when in opposition follow a confrontational and rigid parliamentary voting behaviour. They remain strongly opposed to both populist (2015-2018) and non-populist (2012-2015) majorities. Despite the deep ideological differences among them, when it comes to their respective voting patterns their differences are small and insignificant.
- The authoritarian parties (SYRIZA and ANEL) when in opposition exhibit a different voting behaviour. They vote against most of the bills, but less consistently than the extreme parties. SYRIZA's voting behaviour is more confrontational and rigid than ANEL's.

Introduction

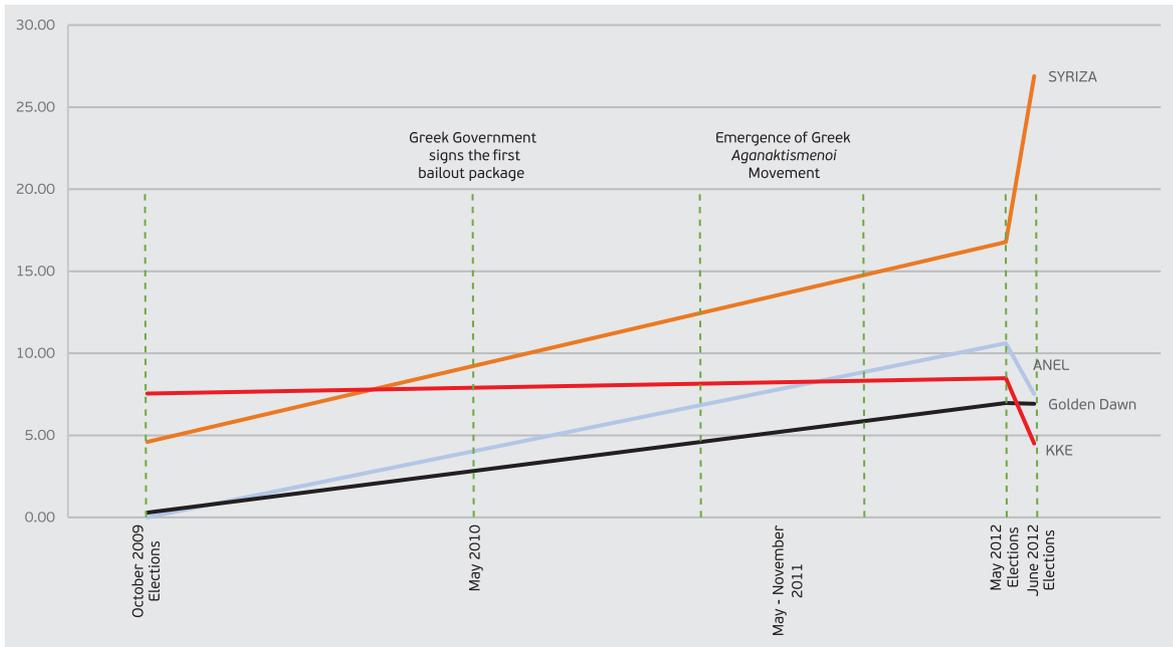
The 2012 general elections marked the radical transformation of the Greek political arena, which saw the collapse of the traditional *Metapolitefsi*¹ system in which majority had been switching between the center-right Νέα Δημοκρατία (ND) and the center-left ΠΑΣΟΚ (PASOK). Since 2009, all four parliamentary populist parties examined in this study (SYRIZA, ANEL, Golden Dawn-XA, KKE) made gains,² mainly because they successfully expressed the frustration of the Greek *Aganaktismenoi*³ (May-November 2011) against the austerity measures of the PASOK government (*Figure 1*).

Even more troubling was the advance of the neonazi Golden Dawn which entered the Greek parliament for the first time in 2012. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Greek Communist Party (KKE), the oldest in Greek political history, still adheres to communism with a large part of its members self-identifying as Stalinists.

The high point of this transformation was the election of the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government in January 2015. The radical left SYRIZA and the populist right ANEL agreed to form a coalition government which would lead Greece out of the “memoranda-caused austerity” and restore power to the people. However, the SYRIZA-ANEL government signed a new bailout program in July 2015. Despite their ideological differences, the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition ruled Greece for four years, winning in the process a referendum in July 2015 and another parliamentary election in September 2015.

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- 1 The political period that began with the fall of the Colonels' Junta and the restoration of democracy in July 1975.
 - 2 Until May 2012 SYRIZA's biggest electoral result was 5.12% on 1996. In May 2012, its electoral power skyrocketed to 16.8%, and on the next elections, held one month later, to 26.9%.
 - 3 *Aganaktismenoi* was a social movement similar to the Spanish Indignados. See also Aslanidis & Marantzidis, 2016 and Georgiadou, Kafe, Nezi, & Pieridis, 2019.

Figure 1: Electoral support for SYRIZA, ANEL, Golden Dawn and KKE before and after the Aganaktismenoi movement⁴



Conceptual framework

Although populism is a notoriously difficult to define, context-dependent category, its main characteristic can be identified as the notion that “the conflict between elite and people supercedes all other conflicts” (Timbro, 2019, p. 9).

This study follows the distinction used in Timbro’s *Authoritarian Populism Index* between anti-liberal but democratic (“authoritarian”) parties and both anti-liberal and antidemocratic (“extreme”) parties⁵.

Consequently, in Greece Timbro’s study categorises SYRIZA and ANEL as “authoritarian populist” (ie. anti-liberal but democratic) and Golden Dawn and KKE as “extreme” (ie. both anti-democratic and anti-liberal) parties.

4 ANEL was founded after 2009 elections.

5 “The division between ‘authoritarian’ or ‘extreme’ depends on the concept of democracy. Only explicitly anti-democratic parties have been categorised as anti-democratic. Parties embracing nazism, fascism, communism, trotskyism and maoism have been regarded extreme. Parties classified as authoritarian are anti-liberal, but still democratic” (Timbro, 2019, p. 14).

Table 1: The Greek populist political parties according to Authoritarian Populism Index by Timbro

	<i>Democratic</i>	<i>Anti-democratic</i>
<i>Liberal</i>	EK ¹	n/a
<i>Anti-Liberal</i>	SYRIZA, ANEL	Golden Dawn, KKE

[1] The Index excludes parties “which are adamantly anti-establishment, use unforgiving rhetoric, but still do not in essence depart from liberal principles” (Timbro, 2019, p. 21). In Greece, such a party arguably is Ένωσιν Κεντρώων (EK, Union of Centrists) as it appeals to voters tired from the status quo, but do not support extreme ideas.

Populist political discourse in Greece

The Greek crisis offered a unique opportunity to the populist parties. Each populist party presents itself as representative of the people (the popular sovereignty, the poor, the working class, the weak, the nation, the blood, the Greek culture, the underprivileged) who fight against the elites (the capital, the privileged, the establishment, the rich, the foreign creditors, the “troika”).

SYRIZA refers to “the people” in socio-economic terms, setting “the society” against “the neoliberal agenda”. According to Stavrakakis *et al.* “this narrative has been successful in articulating a variety of heterogeneous reactions and emotions against austerity into a new – retroactively and radically constructed – political subject (‘the people in the leading role’), thus ascribing to SYRIZA’s confrontational populism a hegemonic appeal”⁶.

ANEL defines “the people” on a more cultural and nativist boundary; they present themselves as “anti-establishment” against those who want to harm the Greek people and the nation⁷.

Golden Dawn builds its political identity and agenda on an ultra-nationalist, xenophobic discourse, defending “the idea of an organic interclassist state, which is a ‘People’s state’ that protects the ‘biological’ and ‘cultural unity’ of the Greek nation”⁸. The party is against “both communist internationalism and universalism-liberalism” and holds that “democracy means rule of the people, and therefore the society that is comprised of people of common origin (definition of Citizen in Classical Athens). The social state of nationalism is the only direct democracy. The state were the people are the only reality and do not need authority but leadership. The People are the real sovereign and rule themselves through their leader [sic]”⁹.

KKE defends workers against the privilege of “the capital” represented by “the elites”. The party “is guided by the revolutionary worldview of Marxism-Leninism... against the reactionary theories, such as Greece being a “poor relation”, the “inferiority of women”, the racist theories,

6 Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, Nikisianis, & Siomos, 2017, p. 24.

7 For a more in-depth analysis of the key characteristics of populist radical right parties, see Georgiadou, Rori, & Roumanias, 2018.

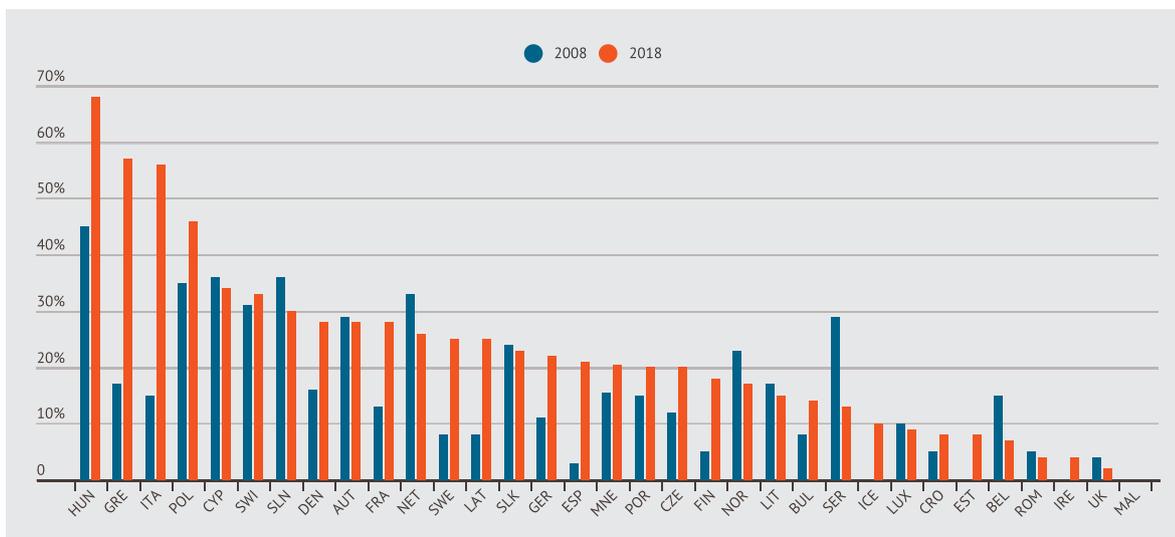
8 Dinas, Georgiadou, Konstantinidis, & Rori, 2016, p. 81.

9 <http://www.xryshaygh.com/en/information>

nationalism and cosmopolitanism of capital, obscurantism and intolerance ... faithful to the principle of proletarian internationalism [sic]"¹⁰.

The appeal of the populist discourse in Greece has been impressive. According to Timbro's *Authoritarian Populism Index 2018*, Greece is the second most supportive to populist parties European country, behind Hungary, one of the four EU member states where the government comprises solely of populist parties, and one of the three European countries where the populist parties amass more than half of the popular vote.

Figure 2 : Electoral support for populist parties across Europe (2008, 2018)



Source: Timbro, 2019, p. 17, <https://populismindex.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/TAP2019C.pdf>

Today, the authoritarian parties are much more popular than the extreme parties, while before 2009 their electoral results were relatively similar (Figure 3).

While the populist left had had historically only a minor parliamentary representation, since 2009 it emerged as an alternative solution to the country's problems. The populist right has also gained, managing to double its electoral support within 2009-2015 (Figure 4).

10 <https://inter.kke.gr/en/aboutKKE/history/>

Figure 3: Electoral support, authoritarian populist parties and extreme populist parties in Greece, 1981-2015.

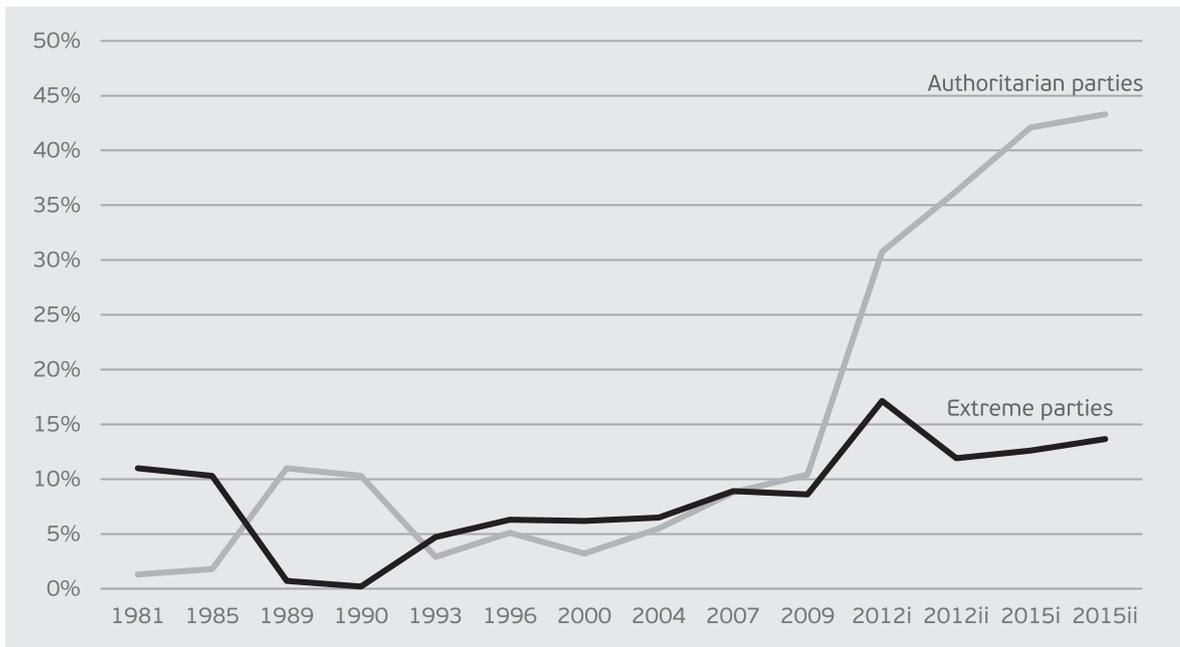
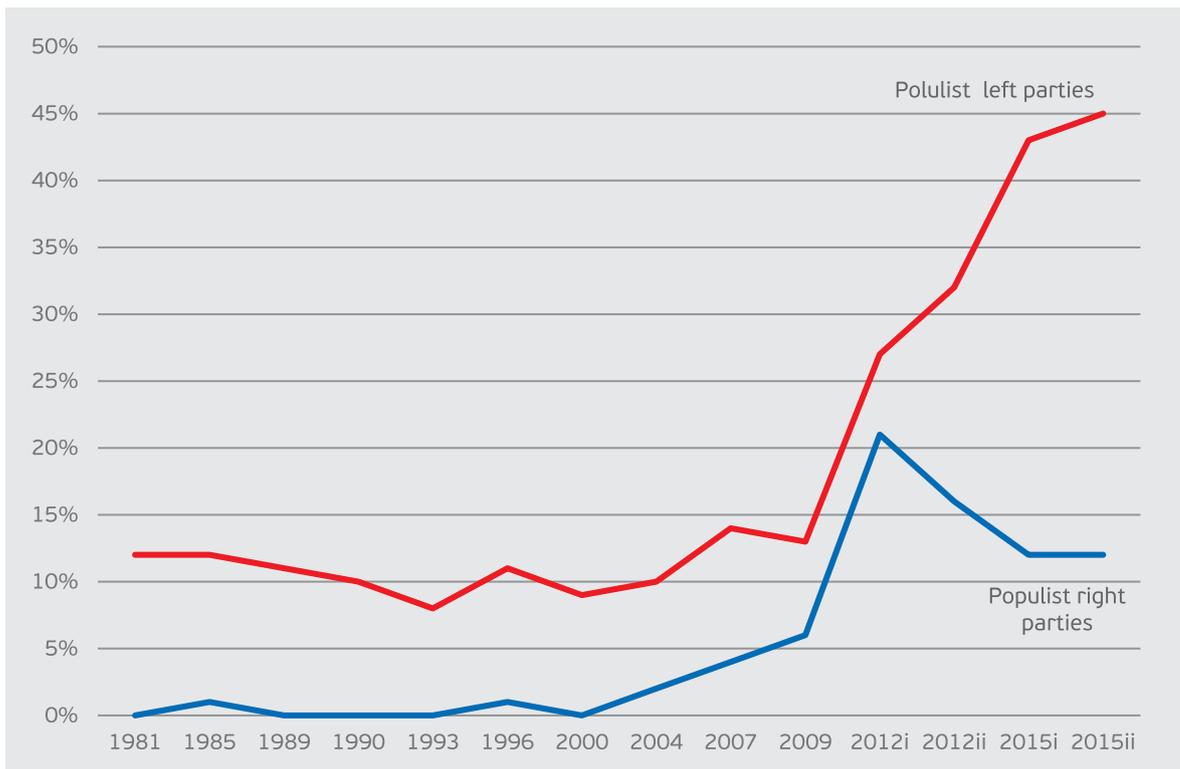


Figure 4: Electoral support, left populist and right populist parties in Greece, 1981-2015.



Methodology

To test the relevance of the Timbro distinction between authoritarian and extreme populist parties in Greece, we analyzed and compared the opposition parliamentary vote of SYRIZA, ANEL, Golden Dawn, and KKE relative to 432 bills during the period June 2012 to December 2018. Given that during the first two and half years there was a center right/center left coalition government¹¹ and during the rest of the period a radical populist left/radical populist right coalition government,¹² this analysis offers a comprehensive insight on how the populist parties vote under both populist and non-populist governments¹³.

More specifically, we calculate the *voting-against percentage*¹⁴ both on the total number of bills, and for each function of government, according to the relevant European Commission classification.

Thus, the parliamentary voting behaviour of each party is conceived into two dimensions:

- *Voting Stance (Consensual-Confrontational)*: It expresses the *voting-against percentage* on the total number of 432 bills. If a party's *voting-against percentage* is below 50%, we characterize its stance as "consensual"; otherwise, we characterize it as "confrontational".
- *Voting Strategy: (Rigid – Flexible)*: It expresses the consistency of voting behaviour across the different functions of government. If the standard deviation of a party's *voting-against percentages* is below 10 percentage points (pp), we characterize its strategy as "rigid"; otherwise, we characterize it as "flexible".

11 After June 2012, centre-right ND formed a government coalition with the centre-left PASOK. From June 2012 to July 2013 DIMAR (Democratic Left) participated in the government coalition as well.

12 On January 25, 2015, SYRIZA and ANEL formed a government coalition. Eight months later the government called for a new election that ended up pretty much with the same result. SYRIZA and ANEL formed another government coalition. Given the brief time the two parties formed the first government and the small legislative production, this period (January-September 2015) is not examined.

13 Since SYRIZA and ANEL formed a government coalition on 2015, their voting behaviour can only be studied under the ND-PASOK (+DIMAR) government coalition.

14 NO votes + PRESENT/ABSENT (neutral position).

Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the voting behaviour for each populist party under the two government coalitions.

In 2012-2015, under the ND-PASOK (+DIMAR) coalition government, Golden Dawn exhibited the most confrontational voting behaviour (93%). KKE follows with a comparable rate (92%). SYRIZA (79%) and ANEL (64%) follow. The same pattern is shown regarding the voting strategy: Golden Dawn had the most rigid voting strategy (4 pp) followed by KKE (5 pp), SYRIZA (11 pp) and ANEL (19 pp).

The authoritarian parties (SYRIZA, ANEL) as a group were therefore less confrontational (72%) and more flexible (16 pp) to the government than the extreme parties (93% and 4 pp respectively (Table 3).

In 2015-2018, under the populist SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government, Golden Dawn and KKE remained almost equally strongly confrontational to the populist government coalition of SYRIZA-ANEL (95% and 94% respectively), albeit with a slightly less rigid voting strategy (6pp and 7pp respectively). This shows that the extreme populist parties' voting behaviour remains pretty much unchanged, regardless of whether the government is formed by a populist or a non-populist coalition (Table 3).

Table 2: Voting behaviour, populist parties

Parties	Voting Behaviour	ND- PASOK (+DIMAR)	SYRIZA – ANEL
		2012-2015 (N=238)	2015-2018 (N=194)
ANEL	Voting Stance: Confrontational	64%	-
	Voting Strategy: Flexible	19pp	-
SYRIZA	Voting Stance: Confrontational	79%	-
	Voting Strategy: Flexible	11pp	-
Golden Dawn	Voting Stance: Confrontational	93%	95%
	Voting Strategy: Rigid	4pp	6%
KKE	Voting Stance: Confrontational	92%	94%
	Voting Strategy: Rigid	5pp	7%

Table 3: Voting behaviour, authoritarian populist and extreme populist parties

Group	Voting Behaviour	ND- PASOK (+DIMAR) 2012-2015 (N=238)	SYRIZA – ANEL 2015-2018 (N=194)
Authoritarian parties	Voting Stance: Confrontational	72%	-
	Voting Strategy: Flexible	16pp	-
Extreme parties	Voting Stance: Confrontational	93%	94%
	Voting Strategy: Rigid	4pp	6pp

Figure 5 indicates the voting behaviour of all Greek parties when in opposition during the whole period under study (2012-2018). Voting patterns corroborate Timbro's distinction:

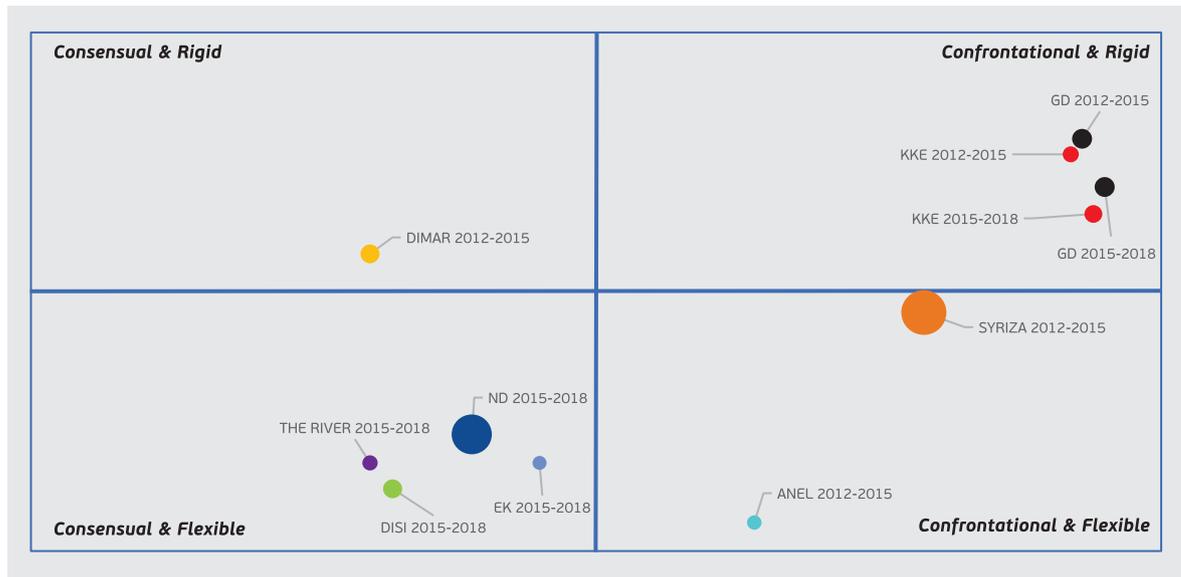
The bottom left corner includes the non-populist parties under the populist coalition government of SYRIZA-ANEL (ND, DISI, To Potami, EK). All parties score close to each other in terms of consistency and opposition rates, as expected for parties that cover a political spectrum from the center-left to the center-right.

The top left corner contains only one party, DIMAR. This is not surprising given the fact that DIMAR was a non-populist party that supported the coalition government of 2012-2015, for its first year. Thus, its low opposition and relative high consistency rate (for a non-populist party) is explained by this factor.

The top right corner includes the extreme populist parties (Golden Dawn, KKE), which exhibit the same strong opposition and consistency scores under both populist and non-populist coalition governments.

The bottom right corner includes the authoritarian populist parties (SYRIZA, ANEL). There is a large divergence between SYRIZA and ANEL in both metrics and the voting pattern is more varied. The authoritarian populist group does not have a solid voting behaviour and one should seek other factors that shape the voting behaviour of SYRIZA and ANEL.

Figure 5: Voting behaviour of Greek parties when in opposition, 2012-2018 (bubble size represents election results)



A strong factor that differentiates the voting behaviour of the two parties could be that SYRIZA became the main opposition party after the 2012 elections, which restricted its behaviour.

Concluding remarks

The Greek populist parties vary in the way they transform their political discourse to an anti-systemic (confrontational) and coherent (rigid) legislative voting behaviour. This observed variation corresponds to Timbro's *Authoritarian Populism Index* categories quite well.

The extreme populist parties rejected the vast majority of the proposed legislative bills and kept the same voting behaviour whether there was a populist government in power or not. This voting pattern underscores an anti-systemic, radicalized political discourse, and correlates with their political discourse and agenda.

Contrary to the extreme parties, the authoritarian populist parties tended to be more flexible when a bill was closer to their agenda. Thus, right and left authoritarian populist parties seem to follow a separate voting strategy. Though we can identify some similarities, there is no coherent and compact voting pattern among the authoritarian populist parties in the Greek Parliament. Thus, the voting behaviour of SYRIZA and ANEL seems to be the product of interaction of other important factors rather than solely their authoritarian populism, such as their ideological orientation (left-right) and/or their role in the political antagonism. As the *Authoritarian Populism Index* highlights, in practical politics the populist parties tend to overlap with the established parties (2019, p.7); the right-wing populist parties have a realistic perspective on issues related to the economy, whilst the left-wing populist parties seem to respect minority rights. These views are usually a result of different ideological and/or policy approaches.

It is unclear if the above voting patterns for SYRIZA and ANEL will reappear after the next general elections, in the event that they will be part of the opposition. This further examination will likely lead to new interesting conclusions.

As the example of SYRIZA and ANEL indicates, there are many factors that affect the voting behaviour of a party: ideological perspectives, socio-economic circumstances, political antagonism, electoral basis, influence of interest groups etc. However, a line can be drawn in the voting behaviour of each group. Non-populist parties are more flexible and they tend to base their vote on a policy ground; authoritarian populist parties are more restricted, since they are anti-liberal but they embrace the democratic values; and extreme populist parties most often exhibit no legislative consensus, enabling more radicalization and polarization in the political arena.

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Acknowledgements

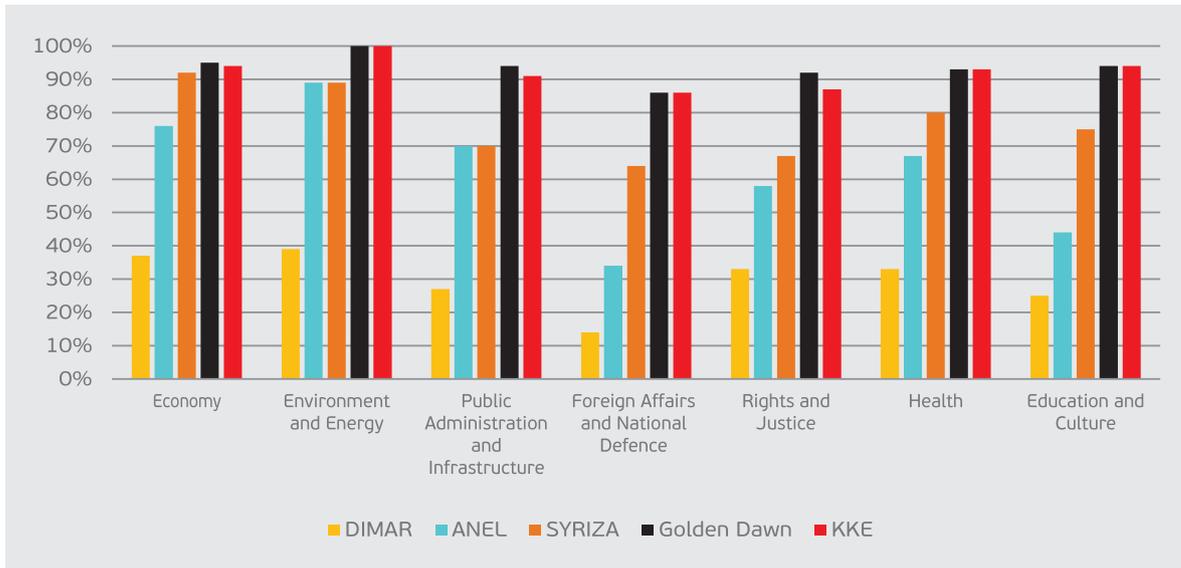
The collection of the legislative voting data could not have been completed without the help and cooperation of Mrs Argiro Kartsoni, who is a scientific associate in the Parliamentary Group of Δημοκρατική Συμπαράταξη (Democratic Alignment) and of Mr. Konstantinos Mentzelos, content manager of vouliwatch.gr.

Appendix

Table 1: Table of functions of government

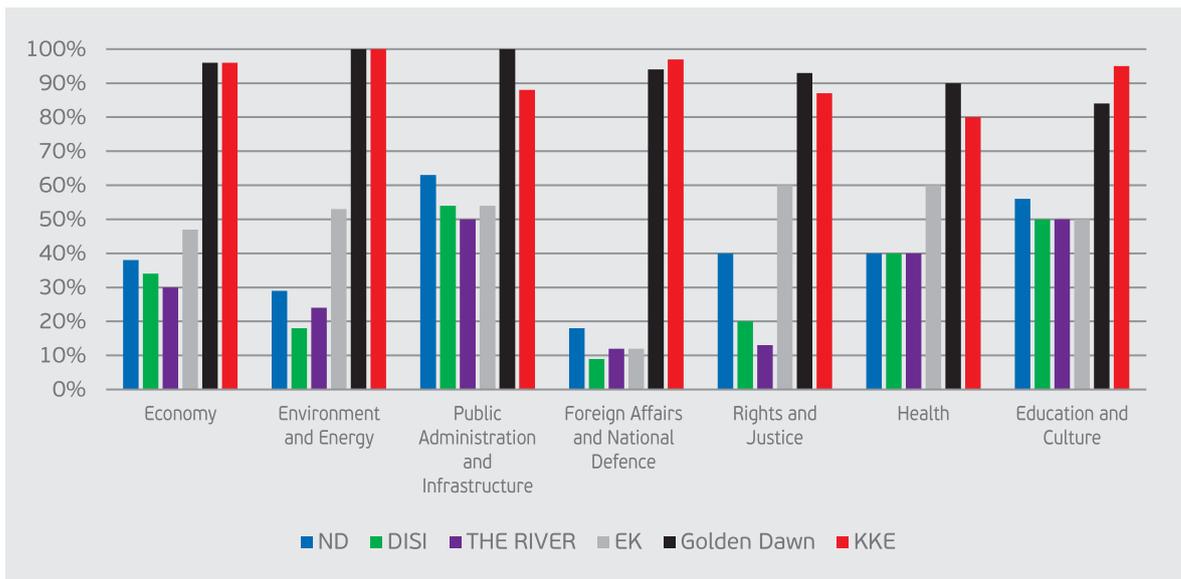
Economy	Economic affairs, social policy, pro-growth measures, investments, fiscal regulations, social policy, maritime regulations, tourism, banking system, insurance system, unemployment measures etc.
Environment/ Energy	Forests, sustainability, recycling, environmental protection, climate change, urban planning, renewable energy and resources etc.
Public Administration/ Infrastructure	Open government, public services, open data, political and electoral system, institutional issues, public constructions, infrastructure etc.
Foreign Affairs/ National Defense	International relationships, civil security, national security, European integration, security forces, bilateral agreements, military equipment etc.
Rights/Justice	Public order, safety, individual rights, human rights, legal rights, equality, civil and criminal regulations, courts, protection of minorities, discrimination etc.
Health	Hospital regulations, pharmaceutical products and operation, upgrade of health services etc.
Education/Culture	Research, schools, universities, sports, recreation, religion etc.

Figure 2: Non-populist parties vs populist parties voting-against percentages by Function of Government when in opposition, 2012-2015¹⁵



N=238

Figure 3: Non-populist parties vs populist parties voting-against percentages by Function of Government when in opposition, 2015-2018¹⁶



N=194

15 Besides the populist parties, the center-left party Democratic Left (DIMAR) participates also in the opposition group.

16 Besides the extreme populist parties, the opposition group comprises also New Democracy (ND), the Democratic Alignment (DISI), To Potami, and the Union of Centrists (EK).



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