

10 Electoral Systems in Greece

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1926, when the paper ballot finally replaced the lead ballot throughout the country, Greece has seen 22 parliamentary elections and 17 electoral systems, which fall into three categories: plurality systems, 'simple' proportional representation, and 'reinforced' proportional representation. In this chapter we will explain the characteristics of the three categories, detail the similarities and differences among the various versions of each category, and evaluate the electoral systems' effects on seat distribution as well as on the evolution of political forces and on government formation. We will also argue that the frequent changes of the electoral laws were mostly due to three reasons: the search for government stability (53 cabinets in 50 'democratic' years), the marginalization of 'undesirable' political forces, and minimization of the outgoing governments' potential seat losses.

A TRADITION OF REAL OR SIMULATED PLURALITY SYSTEMS

Should we want to introduce a new electoral law, I cannot really see why we would announce it early on. The best tradition of democratic and parliamentary governments consists of keeping the opposition in doubt and choosing oneself the moment, the circumstances and the methods with which to confront her in the electoral ground (*Le Monde*, 12 June 1991).

The French daily, *Le Monde*, reminded its readers of this 1 June 1966 statement by the then prime minister, George Pompidou, in an article on the current debate on electoral reform in France, in which it lamented that, contrary to the long-term stability of the electoral laws

of Western democracies, France has seen 11 electoral laws in 35 parliamentary elections since 1871. However Pompidou's statement applies even more to the case of Greece, which has seen 20 electoral laws and 44 elections since 1871 (21 laws and 55 elections since 1844). Moreover, since the 1920s, when changes in them became a regular feature of Greek electoral politics, electoral laws were legislated shortly before election time, with two exceptions that may well confirm the rule: one has never been used and one has yet to be used. The unused law was introduced in 1954, with elections not expected before 1956, and was completely changed in 1955; the latter was introduced in November 1990 by the conservative New Democracy (ND) government, which took office in April 1990, with the next elections not expected before 1994.

In fact the one-and-a-half centuries of Greek elections (with near-universal manhood suffrage and with a duration of many days from 1844 through 1875, universal manhood suffrage and with a one-day duration from 1877 through 1952, and universal suffrage ever since) can be divided in two almost equal periods: one characterized by near-stability in the electoral laws (1844–1920) and another by great instability (1920–91). In the first period 32 elections were held with four electoral laws (Table 10.1); in the second there 22 elections with 15 electoral systems, plus the two that were legislated but never/not yet used and three elections for the European Parliament, using a different electoral system again (Table 10.2).

In the first period the four electoral laws were variations of the plurality or majority systems, always applied in multiple-seat districts (at the beginning in the countries – 'narrow' districts – then [twice in the late nineteenth century and in six elections between 1910–20] in the prefectures – 'wide' districts). Between 1844 and 1862 a two-ballot majority system was used, with the voters having one choice from the list of candidates: a run-off election was organized in the districts where not enough candidates received the absolute majority of votes in the first ballot. In 1864 the 'lead ballot' was introduced. For each candidate there was a ballot box divided into two sections: a 'Yes' white one and a 'No' black one. Each voter had to throw a lead ballot in one or other section of *all* ballot boxes, thus voting for or against each candidate. The candidates with the most 'Yes' votes were gained the seats. In 1877 a new law extended suffrage to all male adults and introduced rules to limit the, until then, widespread fraud: the electoral system was otherwise not altered. Since then the only alteration has been the introduction of larger districts (prefectures in-