

Election in Greece

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Fourth Election in Three Years Reflects Ongoing Political Instability

Greece will hold a snap legislative election on September 20, only eight months after the country's last election. The new election comes as Greece continues to struggle with the negative repercussions of a sovereign debt and financial crisis that began in 2009. Over the past six years, Greece's economy has contracted by 25% and unemployment has tripled to above 25%. Economic challenges have in turn shaken the political system. This will be Greece's fourth parliamentary election since May 2012. Since 2009, the country has had six different governments (including two caretaker governments). Each has struggled—and three have collapsed—in the face of growing public and political pressure to halt the spending cuts, tax increases, and economic reforms that have been implemented in exchange for financial assistance from other European governments and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

For more information on the Greek debt crisis and the European response, see CRS Report R41167, [Greece's Debt Crisis: Overview, Policy Responses, and Implications](#); and CRS Insight IN10303, [Crisis in Greece: Political Implications](#).

Why the Snap Election?

Incumbent Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras took office in January 2015 following a campaign in which his far-left Syriza party pledged to reverse austerity measures and secure debt relief from creditors, but remain in the European Union's (EU) common currency, the Eurozone. This position ultimately proved untenable—Greece's creditors insisted that the government continue fiscal and structural reforms in exchange for the financial assistance Greece needed to stay in the Eurozone. In mid-July, after Athens failed to make scheduled payments to the IMF and was forced to enact capital controls on Greek banks, Tsipras reversed course and accepted creditors' terms in exchange for a [new assistance package](#) that he believed would ensure continued Eurozone membership. Many Syriza members opposed the decision and withdrew their support for Tsipras. Faced with this loss of confidence, but buoyed by his [apparent continued popularity](#) with Greek voters, Tsipras chose to resign on August 20 and seek a new popular mandate.

Key Policy Issues, Main Political Parties, and Poll Numbers

The short election campaign has centered almost exclusively on the economy and candidates' positions on the fiscal and structural reforms outlined in the financial assistance package agreed in July. Four of the six or seven parties expected to meet the 3% voter threshold required to be elected to the 300-member parliament say they are committed to the reform program, which they deem necessary for Greece to remain a member of the Eurozone. All acknowledge to varying degrees, however, that the measures could continue to exacerbate negative economic conditions in the short term.

Greece's economic struggles are affecting the government's ability to address other policy challenges, including a [cash-strapped healthcare system](#) and an [unprecedented influx of migrants](#) and refugees. Over the past year, Greece has become the primary entry point to Europe for individuals from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq; [an estimated 310,000 of](#)

[the 430,000 migrants](#) who have entered Europe this year reportedly have come through Greece, almost triple the number last year (for more information, see CRS In Focus IF10259, [Europe's Migration and Refugee Crisis](#)).

The main political parties competing in the election include the following:

- **Syriza** ([public support at about 28.5%](#); *won 36.3% of the vote in January*): Far-left party swept to power for the first time in its 10-year history in January, winning 36% of the vote. Tsipras's policy reversal on the austerity measures appears to have damaged his credibility and caused a major rift within his party, including defections to form a new party, Popular Unity, opposed to the July agreement. Tsipras contends that by implementing additional reforms, Greece can secure much-needed debt relief.
- **New Democracy** ([public support at about 27.5%](#); *won 27.8% in January*): Greece's main center-right party appears to have more public support than expected. Many voters have embraced the calls of ND's leader and candidate for prime minister, Vangelis Meimarakis, for a unity government unequivocally committed to economic reform and Greece's Eurozone membership. Meimarakis says he is open to governing together with Syriza in pursuit of this goal, despite strong ideological differences between the parties. ND led the Greek government from 2012-2015, but was unseated by Syriza in January due largely to public opposition to austerity measures deemed too harsh and a series of corruption scandals.
- **Golden Dawn** ([public support at about 7%](#); *won 6.3% in January*): Far-right, anti-immigrant party whose leaders currently face criminal charges for violent attacks on foreigners and political opponents. The party, which is staunchly opposed to the EU, may be benefiting from anti-immigrant sentiment in light of the growing number of migrants and refugees entering Greece.
- **Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK)** ([public support at about 5.5%](#); *won 4.7% in January*): Greece's main center-left party was last in office from 2009-2011, but has weathered a sharp drop in popularity since then. PASOK has joined forces with another center-left party, Democratic Left (DIMAR), in the hopes of improving its chances in the election. Some analysts see PASOK, which voted in favor of the latest financial assistance package, as a potential coalition partner for Syriza.

Possible Outcomes

Unlike in January, polls indicate that this election could have no clear victor, with Syriza and New Democracy in a close race for first place. Although Greek electoral law grants 50 additional seats to the first place finisher, analysts expect that the winner will need to rely on the support of at least one or two additional political parties to form a [coalition government](#).

A major factor in determining the make-up of the next government could be Tsipras's willingness to join a coalition with establishment parties like ND and PASOK. He has thus far ruled this out, but many analysts believe he [would reconsider](#) if left with no other feasible options to lead a government. The top parties have all ruled out forming a coalition with Golden Dawn.

In the event that either of the top two finishers is unable to form a government, Greece's president could seek to install a caretaker government of technocrats with cross-party support and/or call another election.

Implications for the United States

Since the onset of the Greek debt crisis, the Obama Administration and many Members of Congress have stressed the economic and strategic importance to the United States of a Greece that remains in the Eurozone. Although some U.S. policymakers have at times been critical of a European crisis response that some believe [relies too heavily on austerity policies and provides insufficient debt relief](#), they have also urged their Greek counterparts to adopt reforms and maintain a pro-European perspective.

In addition to concerns about economic stability in Europe, a struggling Greece may present significant security challenges for both Europe and the United States. As a member of NATO, Greece is an important U.S. ally and source of stability in a broader Balkan region that has been beset by conflict over the past 20 years. The security implications for the United States could be compounded by Greece's geostrategic position near the Middle East and North Africa, as well as its long-standing tension with Turkey. From this perspective, an election outcome that ensures political stability

and Greece's continued commitment to the Eurozone, the EU, and trans-Atlantic security is likely to be viewed as serving U.S. interests.