The ecological movement in Greece: organizational and electoral expression in Greece 1974-2009

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Abstract

In the European elections of June 2009 and for the first time in the electoral history of Greece the Ecologist Greens managed to elect one of their candidates as a representative in the European Parliament. In the early national elections of October that followed, the party gathered 2.53% of the votes cast in the territory, their largest share in their short history. The Party failed naturally to participate in the distribution of seats of the Greek Parliament; however this percentage of valid votes is for many an indication of the rise of a new eco-movement to the Greek political space. In Western Europe, and especially in developed industrialised countries such as Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain etc., 'green' parties acquired stable electoral stream and managed in several cases to gain “access to power” and be able to shape policies regarding the environment and other wider social and economic problems of their country. However, this was not the case of Greece where the ecological movement did not manage to develop to the point to become an equal “player” to the political deliberation but was always present in the background. More specific, my research question is why was not the greek ecological movement able to establish a mass party like the Socialists and therefore “build” a steady electoral power and influence in the political life of Greece. I aspire to answer to that question based on theories of voting behaviour of the electorate, focusing on “issue voting” theory. In this announcement I will present you some of the historical information regarding the ecological movement in Greece that I have gathered in my first year of research, and how I am planning to continue.

Keywords: political ecology, green party, voting behaviour, ecological movement
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Introduction

First of all I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to present part of the work I have done so far with my doctoral research and also my thoughts on how I am planning to continue with it since I am only in the first year of my research. The subject of my doctoral thesis is the ecological movement in Greece, how it started and developed from 1974 to the establishment of the party of the Greek Greens. The title, specifically, is “The forces of ecology: organizational and electoral expression in Greece 1974-2009”. The results of the European Elections in 2009 was my motive to work on this subject, where the Greek Green Party elected for the first time in its short history a representative in the European Parliament gathering a percentage of 3.49% of the valid votes in the whole country. Later, in the early national elections in October 2009 it received 2.53% of the valid votes, a percentage not enough to overcome the threshold of 3% of the valid votes that the greek electoral law sets and, therefore, take part in the procedure of the allocation of the parliamentary seats, but the highest so far. This percentage was for many a sign that the ecological movement was, finally, rising as an important player in the greek political scene. In countries of Western Europe like Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain etc., many “green” parties have managed to attract a solid electorate and in many cases gain access to power by winning seats in the national parliaments and being able to form policies regarding the environment and other social and economical issues. A recent example is the last elections in the land of Baden Wuerttemberg in Germany where the green party has gathered 24.2% of the valid votes and won 36 out of the 138 parliamentary seats, being at this point the main opposition to the government. However, the greek ecological movement did not follow the same route. So, my original thought was to answer to that question: why was not the greek ecological movement able to establish a mass party like the Socialists and therefore “build” a steady electoral power and influence in the political life of Greece?

Theoretical background

Someone could study a variety of factors in order to find an answer to this question like the greek political culture which is formed by complex processes or the historical circumstances, both in the country and in the wider European area, that affected the form of the political agenda of the last thirty years in which environmental issues were always left last to deal with, are a few of them. I chose to examine the factor “voter” meaning I am planning to form an answer to my research question based on the models of interpretation of the voting behavior of the electorate and more specifically in models that focus to the “issue voting”. The voting behavior of the electorate is studied scientifically by many research schools such as the Columbia which formed the sociological model of voting behavior which suggests that social factors influence the vote and the school of Michigan which assumes that party identification is the main factor behind the behaviour of the voters (this is the psychosocial model). Another model of voting behaviour is the one that the rational choice theory suggests which assumes that voters shape their opinion and choice by
objective criteria such as information. There are also ecological models of voting behaviour that are based on the study of the space in which the voters live and act and the relation they build with it like the theory of electoral geography, quantitative ecology and condition analysis. Further more, there are models that are based on the divisions in the society such as caste or religion. However, many researchers assume that the traditional criteria are no longer so important in the formation of their preference, so the voters choose parties and candidates according to their aspects in several issues and how much they (the voters) agree with them. It seems that the vote of the electorate has disengaged from party identification and people are voting in accordance to the challenges of each election. So, my assumption is that, since in Greece the ecological movement was unable to build a clear identity and its political agenda was restricted, it was not able to attract an important part of the electorate and, therefore play an important role in the political life of the country. The rise of its percentages of valid votes in the last elections shows that the movement has found its legitimate representative in the Green party and that there is a part of the greek electorate which has changed its voting behaviour and is attracted and convinced by the words and actions of the party members.

Historical background

The first step to my research was to gather the bibliography on the greek ecological groups, non-governmental organizations, volunteer groups with environmental concerns, citizen initiatives, any information about groups official or non-official that were dealing with the environmental issues, whether these were local, regional or regarding the urban centers. The sources of information were references from books and theses, mostly regarding environmental studies, but also interviews, opinions, articles or essays that the leading characters of the ecological movement have given or written. I would like to present you here the first results of my research.

Ecological groups made their appearance in the political life of Greece long before 1974, the year that democracy was reestablished in the country after 7 years of dictatorship of Ioannis Metaksas. However, the historical circumstances and the political and social conditions that existed after the Second World War and the Civil War of 1946-1949, there was no space left for the ecological movement to manifest and develop. That is why I decided to set as starting point for my research the decade of 1970. I concluded to the following indicative period division:

- from 1974 to the early ‘80s,
- from 1982 to 2002 and
- from 2002 to 2009.

In the first few years after 1974 many small and local groupings of activists or individuals who have fought for the liberation of the country from the dictatorship, continued their action informally and disorganized. However, the appearance of the Socialists Party (Pasok) and its rapid rise to power, cases it has prevented the further organization of the ecological movement and its activation in the politics of Greece. The Socialists have absorbed a great number of the activists and this way clarified the difference that existed inside the groups of activists between the, so called, “professionals” of ecology and the “true” ecologists. The first were fighting for a democratic governance of the country by the Rights and believing in the protection of the environment by the government’s policies. Ecology is not an ideology for them, but part of their total conception of how the world should work. Therefore, these people were attracted by the Socialists (Pasok) and became part of the state machinery
for the years that the Socialists were in power. They were the main shaper of the policies of the government regarding the environment and the reason why “environmentalism”, instead of ecology, prevailed in the political field. After 1982, when the Socialists (Pasok) became government and even the few hopes of change became ashes, many groups of activists started meeting and trying to collaborate on basic issues that concerned them. There were four main groups of activists. The people that formed these groups had influenced significantly the course of the movement until the establishment of the Green Party in 2002. These four groups were the following:

a) Ecological Initiative (Oikologiki Protovoulia), a number of leftists which participated in the student protests of 1979 and created this group that lasted 4 years. This group published the Ecological Newspaper and evolved into the Alternative Action of Ecologists (Enallaktiki Kinisi Oikologon) which lasted until 1993.

b) This group originates from Ananeotiki Aristera- KKE esoterikou and published the magazine Ecology and Environment and later the magazine New Ecology.

c) The third group of activists created the Consumers' Association-Quality of Life (E.K.POI.ZO) and transformed into the Ecological Movement of Thessaloniki (Oikologiki Kinisi Thessalonikis) and the Greek Naturalistic against Hunting Initiative.

d) Last is the group RIXIS which was formed by leftists and at some point had relations, also, with the anarchists. This group later on approached the alternative ecologists.

All of these groups were more or less gatherings of people with similar way of thinking regarding the social, political and economical situation of the country and major concerns about the environmental problems. They had very pure structure and organization. Only RIXIS and the Consumers’ Association had strict hierarchy and clear identity. Furthermore, these groups had an unclear relation with the left parties and ideology. Although they originated from the progressive left, they did not adopt the same political agenda nor shared the same conception of the world. They, also, separated themselves from the traditional left. Ecology was for them a whole different ideology than the socialistic. Their radical conception of politics was based on a new form of relation between people and environment. They were, also, considered alternative as they suggested an immediate change which would occur through the gradual change of the personal habits and actions of the people and not through a revolution or a rearrangement in the political arena. Not all of them can be characterized as alternative or radical though, since for some of them the ecological issues were not their only concern but part of a wider range of interests and concerns. Another characteristic of these groups is that they were formed and developed in the urban centers. Smaller groups existed in the periphery and were working in the basis of consensus decisions without any clear and specific program or identity. These informal groups of activists were focusing mostly on matters of local interest. A few of them

However, as said before, despite their differences there were thoughts to establish some kind of official collaboration. Some of the activists wanted to create a loose network of exchanging information without a central body of representation. There were, also, few who wanted the establishment of a minor party that would participate in the forthcoming European Elections. Until the late 1980s when the ecologists
participated for the first time in elections with the Federation of Ecologists Alternatives (FEA), there were meetings, debates and efforts made to that direction. Fair enough, they managed to elect a single MP gathering a percentage of 0.8 of the valid votes. This success did not last for long, although for many might have been the beginning of a new era for political ecology. In 1992 the FEA collapsed and it was “replaced”, first, by the “New Ecological Initiative” and, later, by “Political Ecology”. The first one supported SYN (an alliance of minor progressive left parties) on the national elections of 1993 and the other participated in the European Elections of 1994. The next effort to establish some form of representation of the ecologists was Prassini Politiki (Green Politics) in 1999 but did not have a better luck. Although it managed to become a member of the European Greens, its strategy to keep a low profile by abstaining from the elections of the next year and competing in the political arena as a social movement and not a minor party, downgrade any accomplishment in the “eyes” of the media and the public and pointed out the need for something different. So in 2002 the Ecological Forum for debating over political issues was formed and, later on, a meeting was held in order to create a new party. This party was Oikologi Prasini (Ecologists Greens).

This was a very short history of the greek ecological movement until the establishment of the Ecologists Greens. In the next stages of my research I am proceeding to a content analysis of the manifests, declarations, speeches and interviews of the leading cadres of the green movement in order to define the issues that concerned them and how these were communicated to the electorate. The same procedure will be followed for the statute, the declarations of intent and the beliefs of the party members of the Ecologists Greens. My ambition is to compare and define the differences of the pre-election periods and the electoral attempts and create an interpretation of why the movement did not “gain access” to the electoral body. For that reason I will also study the profile of the ecologist candidate and voter based on the exit polls of the national elections of 2007 and 2009, and of the European Elections of 2009.

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