Populist(s) in Government? The Case of SYRIZA

Maurits Meijers

Abstract

This article discusses the uneasy relationship between Syriza’s role as the main coalition party and its populist character. While many newly governing populist parties shed their populist strategy once they assume office, the case of Syriza is less straightforward. In office, Syriza has retained many of its populist traits. With populism defined as the juxtaposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites, the paper examines Syriza’s anti-establishment politics while in government. In the light of the distinction between populism as a core ideological feature and populism as a political strategy, this paper analyses the character of Syriza’s populism in their first months in office.

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Introduction

This article discusses the uneasy relationship between Syriza’s role as the main coalition party and its populist character. While many newly governing populist parties shed their populist strategy once they assume office, the case of Syriza is less straightforward. In the past six months, we have witnessed Syriza struggling to strike the right chords – both with their electorate and with their international negotiation partners.

Naturally, a populist (or anti-establishment) government is paradoxical. Once a party assumes power in the national executive, it arguably becomes the national establishment. Therefore, in coalition governments where a populist party is the minor coalition partner, the populist party cannot credibly maintain their outspoken anti-establishment attitude. In the case of Syriza, however, the party at times was able to uphold its outsider status despite being governing party. It did so by attacking, first, the international or European establishment constituted by the Troika (IMF, ECB and the European Commission), other European member-states as well as private creditors. Second, Syriza attacked the former governing parties, PASOK and New Democracy. Given its swift emergence from the Greek political margins and its refusal to cooperate with either party in a coalition, Syriza could credibly claim to be a clean break with Greece’s former political establishment. The paper argues that the combination of Syriza’s fundamental populist ideology, ingrained in their rejection of market-liberalism, and their populist strategy, in attempts to gain leverage in their negotiations with Greece’s creditors, explain Syriza’s populist character while in government.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the concept of populism will be discussed and the merits of differentiating between populist ideology and populist strategy will be highlighted. Secondly, this paper will review the literature on populist parties in government and will highlight the gap in the literature concerning the question of how populist parties can retain their populist character once in office. After briefly discussing the ideological attributes of Syriza, the populist character of Syriza’s ideology will be examined. Subsequently, two instances of strategic use of populism will be highlighted. The paper will end with a brief discussion on the implications of agreement to the third bail-out of July 8, 2015.

Defining Populism: Between Ideology and Strategy

The concept of populism has been the object of much terminological warfare. Indeed, many contributions on the subject of populism have alluded to its elusive and disputed nature. Some have characterized populism as a political style and a form of political organization (Canovan, 1999, p. 6; Rensmann, 2006), a political strategy (Mair, 2002) or a political ideology (Mudde, 2004). In recent years, a broader base of scholars have come to agree on a working definition of
Populism (Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, de Lange, & Van Der Brug, 2012). Populism is thought of as a set of ideas that underline a fundamental opposition between the ‘people’ and ‘the establishment’ or the elites (Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). Importantly, such a definition is not value-laden (Stavrakakis, 2014, 2015) nor employed in an accusatory fashion (Rensmann, 2006, p. 59). Rather, it enables to empirically identify political parties that highlight such a distinction between the people and the elites. While it is true that all political parties claim to govern for ‘the people’ (i.e. Volkspartei), the distinctiveness of populists is that they claim to be part of the people and, hence, enable government by the people.

Importantly, while some scholars have regarded exclusionism as a central component of populist parties (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007), this is a limitation that unnecessarily inhibits a broader application of the concept (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Rooduijn et al., 2012). Arguably, exclusivist tendencies are a prerogative for radical right populist parties but not a necessary component of populism itself (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, p. 5; Mudde, 2007). Indeed, who ‘the people’ are can differ for different populist parties (cf. Meny & Surel, 2002). Populists that see ‘the people’ as a nation are likely to be found on the radical right spectrum holding exclusivist views. Populists that regard the people as a ‘sovereign’ subscribe to radical democratic views favouring direct forms of democracy over representative ones. Lastly, populists that regard ‘the people’ as a class tend to stress distributional inequalities and can be found at the radical left spectrum. Indeed, as the extant literature has pointed out populism is an attribute for many radical left parties (March & Mudde, 2005; March, 2011). Moreover, Rooduijn and Akkerman (2015) in a recent paper have demonstrated empirically that radical left parties are fervent users of the ‘populist message’. Indeed, the authors found that all radical left parties express a high degree of populism in their election manifestos.

Yet, even within this consensus on the concept of populism the attentive reader will find subtle differences. In the words of Mudde for instance, populism is a thin-centred ideology that refers to an essential juxtaposition between the ‘virtuous people’ and the ‘bad’ elites (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). According to Mudde, this populism is a thin ideology as it is in most cases accompanied by a thick ideology, usually related to the placement of a party on the left-right spectrum. Hawkins, on the other hand, has refers to populism as a discourse (Hawkins, 2009, 2010). Whereas both Mudde and Hawkins see populism as a ‘set of ideas’ (Hawkins et al., 2012), ideology refers to a set of held beliefs, while discourse refers to the verbal expression of such beliefs. Of course, oftentimes a populist discourse is an expression of deep felt beliefs. As Hawkins puts it “[t]he discourse of populist movements is indeed more than rhetorical window dressing; it reflects an underlying worldview that shapes the choices of leaders and followers as they organize themselves and implement policies.” (Hawkins, 2010, p. 7) While the difference between
ideology and discourse is not paramount, the distinction between the two is nonetheless relevant as the former denotes an ideational phenomenon and the latter a communicative phenomenon.

Moreover, although Mudde defines populism as a ‘thin-centred ideology’ in his influential 2004 article, he acknowledges in the conclusion that “most mainstream parties mainly use populist rhetoric” (Mudde, 2004, p. 562, emphasis in the original). Thus, he makes the albeit more or less implicit distinction between parties, whose populism is part of its ideological core, and parties – often belonging to the political mainstream – whose populism is a rhetorical device, indeed a strategy. In this light the claim by Tony Blair that “the old order, those forces of conservativism” have “held the people back” (quoted from Mair, 2002, p. 92) is an example of strategic use of populism. Indeed, as Mair also argues, Blair’s use of populist language was part of a distinctive strategy (Mair, 2002, p. 95).

This tension between populism as an idea or belief of a political actor or party, on the one hand, and populism as a (communicative) action of a political actor or party, on the other hand also comes to the fore in recent applications of the concept of populism in empirical research. For instance, in order to measure ‘populism’ Rooduijn has operationalized the concept the extent to which ‘populist messages’ are voiced, i.e. the extent to which anti-elitism and people-centrism are expressed (Rooduijn et al., 2012; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn, 2013). Indeed, according to Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug populism is an attribute of a particular message rather than an attribute of a political actor (Rooduijn et al., 2012, p. 3). Rather than a dichotomous definition of being either populist or not populist, populism is defined as a matter of degree. Indeed, while populism is mainly a prerogative for parties on the radical right and radical left of the political spectrum (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015), mainstream parties also express make populist statements – albeit to a much more limited degree (Rooduijn et al., 2012).

Thus, the tension between a definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology and the operationalization of quantitatively measuring populism by counting the extent of populist messages as Rooduijn does. Surely, parties that score high on the populism indicator are likely to hold populist worldviews that juxtapose the people with the establishment (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015). Based on the low number of populist messages they disseminated, mainstream parties (i.e parties that belong to the establishment), however, are not considered populist (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015; Rooduijn et al., 2012). Hence, despite giving rise to some degree of populism, such mainstream parties are not defined as populist. Moreover, while mainstream parties might rely on populist discourse during campaign times to differentiate
themselves from their competitors, it is unlikely for many mainstream parties that have been part of the political establishment, to ideologically subscribe to populist views. This suggests that populism can be something else than a thin-centred ideology as well. Naturally, ideological and strategic expressions of populism are linked to one another and, in some cases, might be hard to differentiate between empirically. Arguably, parties that subscribe to Manichean, populist world views are more likely to voice populist messages and enact populist policies and vice versa. The two aspects of populism are not mutually exclusive definitions as some have suggested but can rather be mutually reinforcing attributes.

Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug (2012, p. 4) also distinguish between programmatic and rhetoric applications of populism. The former signifies how parties think in terms of the opposition between the people and the elites, while the latter merely denotes how parties speak about these issues. This, again, suggests that populism can be both a true ideological aspect of a political parties and a political rhetoric part of a political strategy that political parties employ. Importantly, these two conceptions of populism as an ideology and as a strategy are not contradictory. On the contrary, populist rhetoric, similar to stylistic and organizational attributes, can arguably facilitate and reinforce the populist character of a party.

What is more, populist strategy is not limited to a certain rhetoric delineating 'the people' from 'the establishment', it can also be traced in particular (policy) decisions and actions. As we will see, the choice of coalition partner by Syriza is a clear indication of a populist strategy. Counterfactual logic may help us out of the puzzle. Would Syriza's ideology or world view be any different if it would have chosen a party more acceptable to Greece's international creditors? Most likely not. The effect of their coalition choice is that by choosing a fringe party with which they only shared their opposition to austerity, they were able to signal that they desired a clear break with the establishment's treatment of the crisis in Greece. Thus, in effect of their coalition choice was predominantly of strategic and representational nature, although it clearly reflected the centrality of their anti-establishment stance as part of their ideology.

**Populist(s) in Government?**

In recent years, populist parties in European democracies have become relevant parties in the securing of a parliamentary majority. Either in the role of a full-fledged coalition partner or as supporter of a minority government, populist parties from across the political spectrum have discarded their image as mere protest parties and have been implicated in decision-making processes. The government participation of populist parties has been widely discussed in recent years (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; de Lange, 2008; Heinisch, 2003, 2008; Luther, 2003, 2011). Markedly, most populist parties that have participated in
governing coalitions in the European context belonged to the radical right (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). Radical left populists have participated in governing coalitions to a much lesser extent. Besides the case of SYRIZA under discussion in this paper, the case of the French PCF in the Jospin government from 1997 to 2002 is the only known case of radical left populists in the European context.¹

Some scholars have argued that it is in the nature of populist parties to fail in government (Heinisch, 2003). In his discussion of right-populist parties in office, Heinisch (2003, p. 91) argues that while the populist character helps the parties in question to win elections, it leads to failure once in government since it is not compatible with constraints of public office. Kitschelt has argued that populist parties thrive on negative campaigns in which they voice their discontent with the current decision-makers (Kitschelt, 1995, p. 201). In most cases, however, once a populist party assumes office, it has to transform its negative message into a positive programme – i.e. a coalition agreement stipulating the policies that will be enacted.

Others, on the other hand, have argued that populists are not intrinsically destined to fail in office (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Luther, 2011). Akkerman en de Lange show for the case of radical right parties that some are able to enact policy change while in government and secure elections wins after their incumbency (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). Similarly, Albertazzi and McDonnell show for the cases of the Italian Lega Nord and the Swiss SVP that populist parties too can achieve policy efficacy (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015, p. 169). Moreover, the authors show that the Lega Nord and the SVP were able to secure electoral success after their incumbency debunking the myth that radical and populist parties face electoral punishment after government participation. Moreover, Bolleyer et al. have shown that new parties do not necessarily experience severe problems with regard to party organisation when they enter government for the first time (Bolleyer, Van Spanje, & Wilson, 2012).

Yet, while these contributions show how parties of populist nature can – perhaps after a certain learning curve (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015) – be effective policymakers and be electorally rewarded for it, it is less clear to which extent these parties are still populist. In other words, to what extent can populist parties hold on to their anti-establishment character once they have become part of the political establishment? While a sizeable literature has focused on the efficacy and durability of populists in power, the literature has not really examined the extent to which populist parties in office remain populist (for an exception see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 of Hawkins, 2010). In other words, it is not clear whether parties that espouse an outspoken anti-

¹ On the basis of an analysis of their manifesto, the PCF should be classified as populist as well (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2015).
establishment rhetoric are able to credibly uphold such a rhetoric, indeed, uphold such an ideology once they themselves have become the prime locus of power in a national context.

Extant literature on West European cases has suggested that a populist ideology and/or rhetoric is infeasible once in office. Heinisch, for instance, noted that, when in a coalition with a centrist mainstream party, populist parties are persuaded to moderate their proposals and their communication strategy (Heinisch, 2003, p. 101). Such an adaptation strategy is risky for populist parties, since they can no longer be plausibly regarded as an anti-establishment party and risk losing their electorate in subsequent elections (Heinisch, 2003, p. 102). In his discussion of Tony Blair’s populist rhetoric, Mair argued that Labour’s populism is unlikely to be sustained as “the notion of maintaining an anti-establishment rhetoric whilst dominating the key positions within the governing elite will eventually seem implausible.” (Mair, 2002, p. 93)

With the exception of the Forza Italia – Lega Nord coalitions (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015), the populist parties that became governing parties did so in a coalition with mainstream party, often as junior coalition partners (de Lange, 2008, p. 130). A minor position in a government cabinet arguably makes it harder for the populist party to retain its populist message and to enact policies in line the populist juxtaposition between the people and the establishment. The case of Syriza is unique in this respect. While the coalitions between Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the Lega Nord were also purely composed of populists according to some (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015), others have argued that after governing a few years Berlusconi’s party has “become enmeshed in conventional political structures” to become an albeit flamboyant mainstream party (Taggart, 2004, p. 284).

If we look beyond the European context to Latin America, however, we find other instances of populist parties (or leaders) solely at the head of the executive. While in the Latin-American context, populism is closely associated with statist and leftist modes of governance, it has been argued that these are not necessarily defining elements of Latin American populism (Hawns, 2010; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Rather, like their European counterparts, populists in Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela espouse a worldviews that pit the essential virtuous people against the corrupted elites (Hawksins, 2010; Levitsky & Loxtan, 2012; Roberts, 2012). Importantly, populist leaders such as Fujimori in Peru and Chavez in Venezuela have been able to retain their populism once in office. By attacking besides older, economic elites, Chavez was able to uphold his anti-establishment discourse as president by attacking international, external elites. In their challenge to market-liberalism, populists such as Morales and Chavez have challenged international institutions such as the IMF (Hawksins, Rosas, & Johnson, 2010, p. 197) as well as the alleged American hegemony in the region. In Venezuela, the market reforms and austerity measures implemented during the second presidency of President Pérez from the centre-left AD
in 1989 were done so in collaboration with the IMF (Roberts, 2012, p. 140). These measures were met with fierce public disapproval and are said to have motivated Chávez coup d’état attempt in February 1992 (ibid.).

What is more, Hugo Chavez not continued espousing populist rhetoric he also embarked on enacting populist policy. The Bolivarian Circles enabled grassroots participation in the decision-making process "in part to help carry out social and economic reforms, and in part to provide a counterweight to the de facto power of elite groups in the business community and mass media" (Roberts, 2012, p. 151; see also Hawkins, 2010, Chapter 6). Like the Bolivarian Circles, the Missiones initiated by the Chávez government "[reveal] the distinct imprint of populist ideas on the actual conduct of politics", as Hawkins and Rosas and Johnson argue (2010, p. 195).

In the next sections, I will make the argument that Syriza has been able to retain its character while in office. Syriza's populism is both the outcome of their fundamental ideologies and their political strategy that stress and reinforce their ideologically populist dispositions.

**Syriza: A Radical Left Populist Party**

As Mudde (2004) argued a thin-centred ideology, populism usually appears in conjunction with 'thick ideologies'. In the case of Syriza, its anti-establishment character and people-centrism is accompanied by a radical left ideology (March, 2011). Radical left parties are characterized by their "rejection of 'neo-liberal', 'consumerist' and 'globalised' capitalism and support for state action to achieve full employment, protect working people's rights, redistribute wealth and provide welfare through non-market mechanisms" (Bale & Dunphy, 2011, p. 273; see also Olsen, Hough, et al., 2010, pp. 6–7; March, 2011). The radical left accepts the system of democratic representation (March, 2011, p. 16), but earns the prefix 'radical' because of their rejection of the basic structures of the capitalist system. Indeed, in this sense radical left parties are 'transformative parties' (Dunphy, 2004, p. 2).

Syriza, an acronym for *Synaspismós Rizospastikís Aristerás* (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς), which means 'Coalition of the Radical Left', was formed as an alliance of twelve radical left-wing parties in 2004, with Synaspismós (Coalition of Left, of Movements and Ecology) being the largest party in the coalition. Syriza, which as a Greek adverb (σύρριζα) means 'from the roots', established as an official party in May 2012 after the first of two 2012 elections. The ascendance of Syriza as an electoral force to count with is remarkable. In the 2007 and 2009 Greek legislative elections, Syriza secured meagre vote shares of 5 and 4.6 per cent respectively. In the May 2012, it won 16.8 per cent of the vote and in June 2012 it won 26.9.
In the 2014 EP elections, Syriza came first with 26.6 per cent of the vote, a rise of 21.9 per cent compared to their 2009 result. In June 2015 it topped the bill with 36.3 per cent of the national vote. Being the largest party, the reinforced proportionality electoral system gave the party a near parliamentary majority. Only a day after their victory, party leader Alexis Tsipras agreed with Panos Kammenos, leader of the right-wing populist Independent Greeks (or Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες, Anexartitoi Ellines, ANEL), to form a coalition government.

**Syriza’s Populist Ideology**

Like in the case of Chávez in Venezuela, Syriza has been able to retain its populist character while being in office by attacking external elites, an establishment higher than the highest Greek national office. Indeed, while Chávez rallied against US domination and the influence of ‘neoliberal’ institutions such as the IMF, Syriza lamented the crisis politics of the EU institutions and the IMF, the insistence on austerity measures from other EU member-states as well as the market-liberal paradigm that allegedly underpins European integration. Indeed, since its inception, Syriza has espoused the ‘neoliberal paradigm’ as well as the inherent market-liberal logic of European integration (Spourdalakis, 2014). Such a radical rejection of the basic underlying economic and political structures is inherently associated with anti-system and anti-establishment politics that underpins populism.

Importantly, however, as Rooduijn, de Lange and van der Brug (2012) argue, populism is constituted not only of an anti-establishment attitude, it also harbours a people-centric attitude. In this respect, Tsipras and his party repeatedly emphasized, they were mere vehicles for a message from the people. Indeed, Syriza was voted into office on a campaign that called both for the end of further austerity measures as well as thorough debt relief and debt restructuring. In this sense, the interests of the Greek people were diametrically opposed to those of the IMF, the EU institutions and, perhaps most importantly, other European electorates. In an interview with the Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, President of the Eurogroup and Dutch Minister of Finance, argued that “Syriza fundamentally rejects the mainstream economic thinking in Europe”, which he noted is inherently problematic for the common currency.2

Hence, this points to a deeper ideological problem Syriza has with the economic and financial governance of the Eurozone and, as a corollary, the proposed solutions for the enduring Greek crisis. Thus, despite the fact that one could argue that Syriza’s election promises were unfeasible and unrealistic, the Greek people have given their mandate for a clear political programme that inherently goes against the grain of what ‘the establishment’, or the Troika and most European

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leaders, advocate. In other words, the anti-establishment politics advocated by the Syriza-led Greek government is a function of the great divergence between Syriza’s position and the position of the creditor countries and institutions.

Moreover, the fact that the position of the Tsipras government goes hand in hand with an anti-system and anti-establishment attitude signals that there is no room in the Eurozone for ideological deviation. Indeed, EU governance has and will thrive on consensus. Dijselbloem in this regard remarked that the reason that the ‘Institutions’ (EC, ECB, IMF) were involved was to “reduce the political nature” of the negotiations. This includes cross-partisan and, indeed, cross-national consensus on economic and fiscal matters. As Arend Lijphart famously argued, consensus democracy is the only plausible system of government in pluralistic societies. The Eurozone is such a pluralistic ‘society’. And yet, as Thomassen also argued for the case of the Netherlands, a (formerly) pluralistic and segmented society, consensus democracies invite ‘depoliticization’ (Thomassen, 2000). Equally, the EU has become ‘depoliticized’ as political contentiousness of ideological nature has no place in the current system of multi-level governance (Mair, 2007; Schmidt, 2006). Indeed, as White has argued the discretionary form of governance as they unfolded during the Euro crisis lead to “sharp asymmetries between decision-makers on the one hand and those who would scrutinise them on the other” (White, 2014, p. 7).

**Syriza’s Populist Strategy**

Having noted the central ideological expression of Syriza’s populism in government, we now turn to two examples of strategic instances of populism. Importantly, as noted before, a populist worldview or ideology informs populist strategies (in which the establishment is directly contested) and populist strategies, in turn, enhance the overall populist character of a party. Two examples of strategic populism will be explored here. First, Syriza’s choice of their right-wing populist coalition partner and thereby effectively forming a single-issue government will be examined. Second, Tsipras’ decision to call a referendum on the latest version of the creditor’s proposal will be examined.

**The Single-Issue Government**

One day after the Greek parliamentary elections on January 25, 2015, Alexis Tsipras announced the formation of a governing cabinet with the Independent Greeks. The Independent Greeks (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες, Anexartitiol Ellines, AE) were formed as spin-off party from New Democracy in February 2012 and have right-wing populist agenda (Vasilopoulou &

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Three months later the party secured an impressive electoral result in the May 2012 election with 10.6 per cent share of the vote and in the June 2012 elections a month later it won 7.5 per cent. Their initial success waned after these relative successes, though as they received a mere 3.5 per cent of the vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections. Similarly, in the parliamentary elections in January 2015, the AE’s vote share dropped to 4.8 per cent. This was enough, however, for Syriza and AE to form a majority coalition. AE received one minister post with party leader Panos Kammenos becoming Minister of Defence and received 4 additional deputy minister posts of lesser importance.

The choice of AE as coalition partner is of an important symbolic significance as it signalled Syriza would not give up on its uncompromising, anti-establishment strategy to end austerity and negotiate debt relief and debt restructuring. Importantly, however, the choice of its coalition partner was not determined by ideological congruence. Figure 1 shows a scatter plot of the positions of Greek political parties on the economic (i.e. left-right) and cultural (or cosmopolitan-authoritarian) dimension (cf. Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson, 2004; Kitschelt, 1995; Kriesi et al., 2008) using data from 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015). The figure shows that apart from the Communist KKE, Syriza is the most leftist on economic issues. In contrast to the KKE, however, Syriza is much more liberal on cultural issues. In stark contrast to Syriza’s positioning, is the position of AE. AE is ideologically very close to the radical right

**Figure 1** Party positions in Greece. Data: Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2015 (http://chesdata.eu/).
populist party LAOS. Being even closer to the authoritarian pole of the cultural axis, the ideological difference with Syriza is striking. Moreover, while Syriza has an outspoken radical left economic programme, AE professes a rather centrist position on economic issues. Also, if we take a look at the party programmes we see that the two coalition partners diverge extremely with regards to issues on the liberal-authoritarian axis. Concerning immigration politics, SYRIZA advocates the abolishing of the Dublin II accords, while AE advocate a law and order approach to tackling illegal immigration. Also with respect to the role of religion in society the two parties diverge extremely. Today, Alexis Tsipras became the first Greek prime-minister to take the vow in a secular inauguration ceremony braking with Greek-orthodox tradition. At the same time, AE advocates an education system strongly shaped by Greek-orthodox teachings. However, also with regards to economic issues, SYRIZA and ANEL differ substantially. Being a split of the centre-right New Democracy, ANEL has a traditional centre-right economic platform rejecting strong state involvement in economic affairs and refusing to "criminalise entrepreneurship". This cannot be to the liking of the SYRIZA, which, as a union of radical left parties, regards centralized redistribution as its natural habitat.

Despite these ideological hurdles, however, Syriza has decided to join hands with AE. While in most cases a single common denominator is not sufficient for coalition building, it has proved to be the case in the Syriza-AE case. The two parties share their aversion for the austerity policies that the former Greek governments have put in place following pressures from the Troika consisting of advisors of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF. Syriza demands a debt relief and insists that Greek sovereignty should be restored. Similarly, and even more radically, the Independent Greeks reject any sort of repayment of Greece’s debts.

Indeed, austerity politics has become the most salient issue in Greek politics. Figure 2 which shows a graph Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou (2013) generated on the basis of data from Gemenis & Triga (2013). As Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou argue, the conflict over the bail-out regime and the austerity measures created a new line of competition in the Greek party system (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013, p. 528). The party positions on the Second Memorandum show a clear division between “the establishment versus anti-establishment division and is closely associated with governmental experience.” (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013, p. 528; see also Spourdalakis, 2014, p. 357). The converging of the Greek party system around the single issue of austerity and debt relief, thus, led the two parties to form a single-issue government.

With Syriza’s choice of AE as coalition partner, it gave its commitment to counter the ‘tide’ and the established politics of consensus extra weight. Yet, the choice does not reflect their ideological inclination of populism as this primarily relies on their fundamental rejection of the market-liberal foundations of the European Union as these positions are not shared by AE. It does, on the other hand, reflect their national anti-establishment attitude and their strategy of fundamentally breaking with the formerly established political culture. Indeed, an important element in Syriza’s political drive and, indeed, their attraction to voters is that advocated and represented a clean break with the former Greek political establishment. The sovereign debt crisis in Greece caused the relatively stable Greek party system to crumble (Spourdalakis, 2014). Indeed, since the end of the Colonels’ regime in 1974, there were two relevant parties with governing potential (cf. Sartori, 1976, pp. 123–4), the leftist PASOK and the right-wing New Democracy. Aided by the reinforced proportionality electoral system, in which the party securing a plurality is awarded extra seats, these two parties secured sufficient vote shares to alternate in office as single-party governments. The Greek political system dominated by PASOK and New Democracy has been described as having systemic weaknesses in part due to clientelistic practices (Featherstone, 2005; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013, p. 525).

**Figure 2** Greek Party divisions according to their positions on the left-right axis and their support or opposition for the Second Memorandum (Gemenis & Triga, 2013; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013, p. 529)
And, precisely, the Greek establishment and the structural problems in the Greek political system has been the focal point of Syriza's criticism (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013). Once in office, Syriza kept its harsh tone on the former Greek establishment. In April 2015, Tsipras announced the formation of a parliamentary committee to investigate who is responsible for signing the two Memoranda, which led to the adoption of stringent austerity measures, since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2009. While Syriza Parliamentary Secretary Christos Mantas noted that Syriza is “fulfilling our commitment and the social demand, with no intention of revanchism nor criminalization of the political life in order to explore the causes and responsibilities of an unprecedented crisis that devastated the vast majority of society”\(^5\), the initiative clearly indicates Syriza's wish to set itself apart from the political establishment previously in office.

Besides marking its distinctiveness with the previous political elite, there is a second strategic reason for Syriza's cooperation with AE. The fact that it chose AE as a coalition partner within a day's time, can be interpreted as a clear message of Syriza to their international creditors. As Mudde (2004, p. 544) notes, “[e]ssential to the discourse of the populist is the normative distinction between 'the elite' and 'the people', not the empirical difference in behaviour or attitudes”. Indeed, in defence of the virtuous people a compromise with the invirtuous 'Other' is rendered impossible. In Syriza's case, the coalition partner choice was an indication to Greece's European partners that it was Syriza's intent to be uncompromising in its attempt to attain its goals and that it was unwilling the play 'the European game of compromises'.

**Referendum**

The second instance of Syriza's strategic emanations of populism to be elucidated here is the Tsipras choice to call a referendum on the creditors' proposal on June 25, 2015. With a rejection of the creditors' proposal by popular referendum, Tsipras argued (and hoped) the Eurozone countries and the institutions would give him additional leverage. Indeed, Tsipras believed that such populist emancipation, where 'the people' would reject the 'unfair' proposals from 'the establishment', could motivate a change of heart among the creditors. Such a recourse to plebiscitary forms of democracy has also been distinctive for populists in power in Latin America. Indeed, as noted above the Bolvarian Circles initiated by Hugo Chávez show a similar tendencies of endowing 'the people' with power over distinct policy issues (Hawkins, 2010; Roberts, 2012).

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In his intervention during the Eurogroup meeting on June 27, Varoufakis notes that the prime reason for rejecting the Troika’s proposal and calling the election, is, besides the reinforced austerity measures, is that the proposal will neither “give us a period of tranquility during which to carry out the agreed reforms and measures” nor offers the prospect of ending the recession of the Greek economy. Since Syriza was voted into office precisely for these reasons, Varoufakis argued that his government did not have the mandate to sign the agreement. In the words of Varoufakis:

“We gave the people who live under the worst depression a chance to consider their options. We tried democracy as a means of breaking a deadlock. And we did what it took to give them a few days to do so.”

To be sure, there was a lot of confusion concerning the referendum of July 5, 2015. First, it is unclear what the Greek people can vote on, since the question was phrased vaguely and referred to the ‘final’ proposal by the Commission, ECB and IMF without stipulating its content. Indeed, the Venice Commission, an advisory committee of the Council of Europe composed of legal experts, stated that the referendum didn’t meet ‘European standards’ on the grounds that the questions are highly complex and that it was called on such a short notice. Second, it is unclear what the consequences would be of either outcome. The Tsipras government made clear it was not a referendum on whether Greece should stay in the Eurozone. Varoufakis noted that he believes that a ‘no’-vote gives the Tsipras new leverage to negotiate a deal that is different from the proposal by the Commission, ECB and IMF from June 25, 2015. Dijsselbloem noted that the referendum is a plebiscite on documents that are no longer of value, since there was no agreement on the European proposals Tspiras has called the referendum on. In fact, Dijsselbloem has called the documents meaningless. Yet, Dijsselbloem acknowledged that referendum does have symbolic value and signifies whether the Greek people “are willing to make commitments on further aid programmes”.

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8 The question was: “Should the plan of agreement be accepted, which was submitted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in the Eurogroup of 25.06.2015 and comprises of two parts, which constitute their unified proposal? The first document is entitled ‘Reforms for the completion of the current program and beyond’ and the second ‘Preliminary debt sustainability analysis’”. http://www.bbc.com/news/world/europe-33311422
Conclusion
This paper has shown how Syriza’s populist and anti-establishment attitude continued to be a central component once in office. In the first section, the argument was made that while the literature emphasizes that populism is a thin-centred ideology or discourse, it simultaneously leaves room for the possibility of strategic populism. While strategic populism can come in the form of rhetoric, this paper has argued and shown that strategic emanations of populism can be found in particular actions of the political party. In this regard, the paper discussed Syriza’s choice to cooperate with the Independent Greeks (AE), a radical right populist party, as well as their decision to call the referendum. The paper argued while both instances of populism have been informed by their populist worldview, they are primarily motivated by a strategic anti-establishment position.

The paper also addressed the question to what extent it is possible to be a populist government in a European democracy. The case of Syriza has shown that it indeed is possible to enact populist policies/decisions as governmental party. At the same time, recent events have shown the limits of a populist strategy in office. The July 5 referendum did not give the negotiations the impetus Syriza has hoped. Indeed, the populist would say the establishment has stifled ‘the revolt of the people’. Although Syriza secured the ‘no’-vote they campaigned for, this did not enhance their mandate on the European level. On the contrary, after the resignation of the controversial Minister of Finance, Yannis Varoufakis, Tsipras steered his government to accept a third bail-out and the ensuing austerity measures that come with the conditionality of the package. This 180-degrees turn by Tsipras has led to much internal within Syriza, with many party members including Varoufakis voting against the package on July 10.

Whether this drastic turn of events has fashioned Syriza a mainstream party remains to be seen. It is fact that with the July Agreement to a third bail-out package with austerity measures and no debt relief, Syriza has reneged on their election promises. While debt restructuring is in sight, Syriza failed to end the austerity politics on their countries and, instead, will be the party responsible for implementing further budget cuts. It is to be recalled here that PASOK, too, was once a populist party with Manichean, black-and-white worldviews (Pappas, 2013). Time will tell if Syriza will be the new PASOK in this regard.
Bibliography


