

Greece's 2015 Eurozone Bailout “Renegotiation”: Beware of Greeks Bearing “Unpolitics”?

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Abstract

In January 2015, Greece witnessed a political earthquake with the election of the populist anti-austerity/EU bailout coalition of the left-wing party SYRIZA and the far-right party ANEL. It is argued that during January–July 2015, the SYRIZA–ANEL coalition engaged in a protracted process of renegotiation of Greece’s bailout terms that were agreed between previous Greek governments and the so-called Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) adopting a behaviour ruled by “unpolitics.” First, the SYRIZA–ANEL government immediately rejected formal and informal rules of EU decision-making. Second, the SYRIZA–ANEL government rejected traditional means of compromise, such as package deals and side payments. Third, when Greece’s creditors presented their last-minute bailout offer in June 2015 to avoid Greece leaving the eurozone (Grexit), the SYRIZA–ANEL government rejected the suggested solution and tried to exploit the ensuing deadlock by calling a rashly organised referendum asking Greeks to vote against the suggested deal. This period of “unpolitics” ended almost immediately after the referendum when, in a sudden and unexpected volte-face, Tsipras interpreted the referendum result as a call for compromise with the Troika and accepted the previously intolerable bailout deal.

Keywords

bailout; eurozone; Greece; populism, SYRIZA–ANEL; Troika; unpolitics

1. Introduction

There has been plenty of academic literature on populist parties (cf. Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Taggart, 2004; Zulianello, 2020) and populist governments (cf. Csehi, 2023). More recently, the concept of “unpolitics” (cf. Taggart, 2018) was put forward to understand the disruptive behaviour of some populist governments at the EU level (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). In January 2015, Greece witnessed

a seismic political event with the election of an “anti-bailout” coalition government comprised of the far-left Coalition of the Radical Left (Greek acronym: SYRIZA) and the far-right Independent Greeks (Greek acronym: ANEL). Although SYRIZA and ANEL had little in common in terms of their core ideology, both parties and their leaders, Alexis Tsipras and Panos Kammenos respectively, had adopted a populist anti-austerity discourse blaming the EU, the so-called Troika (European Commission [EC], European Central Bank [ECB], and International Monetary Fund [IMF]), and Germany for Greece’s financial woes. This populist anti-austerity/bailout/EU/Troika/Germany agenda catapulted SYRIZA from a marginal political actor struggling to meet the parliamentary threshold of 3% to Greece’s most popular party and its leader Tsipras to become the prime minister.

SYRIZA’s rise to power was facilitated by the unprecedented economic crisis Greece had been dealing with for almost six years. To begin with, during 2008–2014 Greece had a cumulative recession of more than 29% (IMF, 2024) and several rounds of austerity packages (cf. Maris et al., 2022; Zartaloudis, 2014), which resulted in a staggering loss of disposable income of around 40% (Andriopoulou et al., 2017, p. 6). Furthermore, Greece stood out from other crisis-stricken eurozone members as it suffered from a decline in its GDP per capita of 25.8% during 2008–2014, while Italy had less than half of that with 10.3%, followed by Spain with a loss of 9.6%, then Portugal (7.8%) and Ireland with a decrease of 6.1% (Gourinchas et al., 2017, p. 17). Unemployment, furthermore, skyrocketed from 7.8% in 2008 to a historic 26% in 2014 (Gourinchas et al., 2017, p. 1), and could only be compared to Spain’s 25.1% while Cyprus, Portugal, and Ireland reached 15.7%, 15.4%, and 15.2% respectively (Maris et al., 2022, p. 454). Greece’s public debt to GDP exhibited similarly sharp deteriorating patterns as it increased from 103.1% in 2007 and 126.8% in 2009 to 177.1% in 2014 (Gourinchas et al., 2017, p. 17). Greece also witnessed an unprecedented wave of emigration from 2008 to 2014 as almost 600,000 Greek citizens emigrated (Eurostat, 2024). Overall, Greece witnessed a considerably more acute and sustained crisis episode than ever recorded, an extraordinarily large drop in output which was combined with a rarely acute drop in investment and entered the crisis in 2007–2008 with a much higher level of debt (Gourinchas et al., 2017, p. 65).

To examine whether “unpolitics” can explain the behaviour of populist governments in EU policymaking, this article will employ the case of the SYRIZA–ANEL government’s attempt to renegotiate Greece’s bailout agreements. Greece is selected as an explorative case study (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) given that the SYRIZA–ANEL government rose to power with a populist anti-austerity/bailout/EU/Troika/Germany agenda and vowed to reverse austerity upon its election (Klapsis, 2015; Zartaloudis, 2013, 2015). Moreover, PopuList, which is arguably one of the most comprehensive databases on populist, far-left, and far-right parties in Europe from 1989 until 2022, classifies SYRIZA as a populist, Eurosceptic, far-left party (until the end of 2015) and ANEL as a far-right populist anti-bailout party (Rooduijn et al., 2023). As noted above, Greece faced one of the most acute economic crises in Europe, which frequently put it at odds with Brussels (Afonso et al., 2015; Papadimitriou et al., 2019; Papadimitriou & Zartaloudis, 2020; Zartaloudis, 2014). Hence, the adoption of “unpolitics” that went against the standard practice of consensus in EU policymaking (cf. Heisenberg, 2005; Tsebelis, 2013) is plausible. Data collection relied on primary and secondary data available in English and Greek including primary and secondary accounts of the SYRIZA–ANEL behaviour in its efforts to renegotiate Greece’s bailout programme, as well as statements of government officials and policymakers made in national and international press outlets during this period. The research aimed to triangulate these data with secondary evidence from the academic and policy literature. One limitation of this study is that it did not conduct interviews with policymakers involved in the negotiations between

Greece and the Troika, but this was compensated by focusing on key events that took place in tandem with the public statements of key figures of the Greek government which are understood as their efforts to shape public discourse and agenda (cf. Papadimitriou et al., 2019).

It will be argued that in the period of January–July 2015, Greece’s attempt to “renegotiate” with the EU was ruled by “unpolitics.” First, the SYRIZA–ANEL government immediately rejected formal and informal rules of EU decision-making such as reaching unanimity in the Council and/or the Eurogroup and vis-à-vis the Troika. Second, the SYRIZA–ANEL government rejected traditional means of compromise, such as package deals and side payments with key Greek government figures threatening other European countries with an unprecedented wave of migration during the Syrian refugee crisis along with allowing the mass movement of third nationals via Greek territory towards northern Europe. Third, when Greece’s creditors presented their last-minute bailout offer in June 2015 to avoid Greece leaving the eurozone (Grexit), the SYRIZA–ANEL government rejected the suggested solution and tried to exploit the ensuing deadlock by calling a rashly organised referendum asking Greeks to vote against the suggested deal. This period of “unpolitics” ended almost immediately after the referendum when, in a sudden and unexpected volte-face, Tsipras interpreted the referendum result as a call for compromise with Greece’s creditors. It should be noted that this article does not evaluate the specific demands or requests of Greece vis-à-vis the creditors, nor does it absolve other EU members of their role in the eurozone crisis. Rather, it focuses on the public discourse and key decisions taken by the SYRIZA–ANEL government and examines whether “unpolitics” can explain its behaviour while in office.

2. Theory

There has been plenty of academic literature on populist parties (cf. Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Taggart, 2018; Zulianello, 2020) and populist governments (cf. Csehi, 2023). More recently, the concept of “unpolitics” was put forward and understood as an implicit element of populism (Taggart, 2018). In this line of reasoning, “unpolitics” is not apolitical or anti-politics but rather rejects politics as the process for resolving conflict and tends to resort to other forms of action while staying within the democratic context of reference. One such form of action is for “unpolitics” to perceive politics as war by other means, especially in tone, tools, and metaphors which can be used for mobilisation of their supporters in situations or periods of chaos and confusion (Taggart, 2018). Hence, “unpolitics” is linked to instances of polarisation whereby populists identify friends and foes, with foes being identified as the enemy of the people that need to be obliterated. Populists tend to focus on the (constant/never-ending) war instead of battles—hence, if they lose any battle, they are supposed to continue their war against the elites and utilise any lost battles or quagmires as a source of mobilisation. “Unpolitics” also sees politics as religion, particularly in the way it praises charismatic leadership. Parties or movements are often identified with their popular or charismatic leaders, emphasising the inherent virtue of the people. This virtue is seen as self-evident and does not stem from their actions or accomplishments, or the tendency to evangelise (Taggart, 2018). Lastly, “unpolitics” can be the tendency to use conspiracy theories in which the elite are unitary, corrupt and do not represent the people.

More recently, Zaun and Ripoll Servent (2023) examined whether “unpolitics” was present in EU policymaking since several EU member states have populist parties in government. By examining the case of intra-EU refugee redistribution negotiations, they found that populist governments, especially Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Italy had tried to undermine EU decision-making in the Council by

employing “unpolitics.” In doing so, they seemed to be rejecting (a) shared formal and informal norms of EU policymaking, (b) traditional means of compromise (such as side payments) and going for their maximum positions to serve their image or identity as the true/only representatives of the “pure people” against corrupt elites, and (c) using gridlock/stalemate to portray the EU as weak and dysfunctional (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). Moreover, two main conditions facilitating “unpolitics” have been suggested: the degree of “politicisability” of the issues at stake (the higher it is, the easier it is for populist governments to mobilise voters) and the nature of policy issues with “high gain” and “low risk” issues being more enticing to populist governments to politicise and engage in “unpolitics” (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024, pp. 5–6). Hungary and Poland tend to lead the emergence/use of “unpolitics” in EU policymaking as they, inter alia: (a) tend to blame “Brussels” in an anti-imperialist concoction of Euroscepticism and populism (cf. Csehi & Zgut, 2021); (b) obstructed the introduction of the rule-of-law conditionality (Csehi, 2024); (c) contested established norms of EU policymaking through “discursive and behavioural non-compliance” (Juncos & Pomorska, 2024); and (d) threatened to link development policy by linking it to migration and gender (Bergmann et al., 2024). Nevertheless, “unpolitics” is not restricted to Hungary and Poland, as other cases include Austria’s obstructive behaviour regarding the EU’s joint procurement of Covid-19 vaccines (Deters, 2024), Brexit, Trump, and Bolsonaro (Taggart, 2024).

There has been considerable debate in the literature over Greece’s negotiations with the EU over its bailouts and the events that unfolded during January–July 2015 with explanations ranging from dismissing Greece’s behaviour as “irrational” (“The way ahead,” 2015) or based on “a combination of ignorance, misconceptions, and wishful thinking” (Klapisis, 2015) to a perfectly rational and strategic one based on game theory (Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017). Alternatively, some more nuanced explanations refer to the economic interdependence between Greece and other EU member states (especially Germany) and their unequal power in intergovernmental bargaining (Schimmelfennig, 2015), the unequal bargaining strength between creditor (strong) and debtor (weak) countries which in the case of Greece was slightly diluted by Greece’s dire economic situation (Lim et al., 2018), SYRIZA–ANEL’s ideology and emphasis on distributive or value-claiming bargaining (Zahariadis, 2016), or the inability of Greek Premier Tsipras and Minister of Finance/Economy Yanis Varoufakis to act as policy entrepreneurs and form alliances or agreements with their counterparts to succeed in their demands (Dikaios & Tsagkroni, 2021).

3. “Unpolitics” I: Rejection of Formal and Informal Rules of EU Decision-Making

The first “unpolitics” hypothesis posits that populist governments tend to break formal and informal rules of EU policymaking and do so explicitly (reject norms). It will be argued that the case of the SYRIZA–ANEL government seems to support this in several ways. To begin with, as soon as the SYRIZA–ANEL government was formed, Tsipras declared that Greece’s bailout programme was “dead,” dismissed any suggestions about an extension to the current austerity programme as a waste of time and that Greece would stay in the eurozone with new terms (Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017, p. 42). Moreover, Tsipras, Varoufakis, and almost all members of the then cabinet were declaring that the new government would “renegotiate” with the EU partners (mainly Germany) and the Troika to end or reverse the so-far implemented austerity, which was in line with both parties’ anti-austerity/bailout electoral campaign (Klapisis, 2015). Additionally, the government, unilaterally and without any prior consultation with the country’s creditors, announced several measures aiming to reverse previous waves of implemented austerity, such as stopping any further pension cuts, an increase to the national minimum wage, and a reversal of cost-cutting measures for the public sector

(Klapisis, 2015, p. 31). All of these announcements, however, were openly against Greece's formal commitments previously agreed with its creditors and subsequently approved by the Greek parliament. Moreover, the SYRIZA-ANEL government was rejecting the EU formal and informal rules of EU decision-making such as reaching unanimity in the Council and/or the Eurogroup and vis-à-vis the Troika, which Greece was adhering to up until then.

Additionally, in early April 2015, the SYRIZA-ANEL majority in the Greek Parliament established an extraordinary Greek Debt Truth Committee (GDTC) to examine how much of Greece's public debt could be considered as "odious" and/or "illegitimate" (GDTC, 2015). This was in line with both parties' populist agenda of representing the people against both the domestic elites, who were accused of mismanaging Greece's economy, and the external ones, who were accused of using Greece's debt to impose austerity on Greeks (Klapisis, 2015; Zartaloudis, 2013, 2015). Notably, two leading cabinet ministers of the SYRIZA-ANEL government, Varoufakis and Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias, had been claiming before and after the January 2015 elections that Europe turned Greece into a "debt colony" (Zartaloudis, 2015). Tsipras applauded the beginnings of the GDTC by claiming that "after five years of parliamentary silence on the major issues that caused the bailout catastrophe, today we commence a procedure that will give answers to the questions concerning the Greek people" (Tagaris, 2015). In June 2015, the GDTC concluded that Greece's debt was "illegal, illegitimate, and odious" and that Greece could unilaterally suspend any debt payments and repudiate its debt (GDTC, 2015).

Concertedly, both Tsipras and Varoufakis were publicly asking the Troika/Eurogroup for debt relief with Varoufakis openly alluding to Greece defaulting on its debt (Klapisis, 2015), a request in clear breach of formal and informal eurozone rules and norms. Furthermore, Varoufakis admitted having personally broken formal and informal rules as he admitted that he had clandestinely recorded all Eurogroup meetings he participated in as the Greek representative without the knowledge and consent of the other participants. Recording the meetings of the Eurogroup, which is a confidential and private forum for ministers to talk openly about the eurozone, was a rejection of formal and informal rules of EU policymaking and Varoufakis did so explicitly (rejected norms) as he was the one who revealed this information to the press—albeit his justification for this was that it was for his own note taking and presentation of his work to Tsipras ("Varoufakis admits recording," 2015).

4. "Unpolitics" II: Rejection of Traditional Means of Compromise

Furthermore, it is argued that the SYRIZA-ANEL government engaged in a second form of "unpolitics" as it rejected traditional means of compromise, such as side-payments or package deals at least in two instances, namely, (a) approaching non-EU governments as an alternative to the Troika bailouts, and (b) the attempt to link the bailout negotiations with the Syrian refugee crisis. It is argued that both strategies went beyond what one could classify as traditional/consensual negotiations between EU members as, in the former, Greece would align with non-EU powers as an alternative or even against the EU, whereas in the latter, Greece actively endangered the stability of the EU and millions of refugees who were used as pawns in its bailout negotiations. Moreover, it is argued that the SYRIZA-ANEL government pursued its maximalist pre-electoral agenda of ending or even reversing the previous agreements and commitments between Greece and the Troika to validate its portrayal as the true/only representatives of the Greek people against corrupt elites.

To begin with, in April 2015, amidst intense negotiations with its creditors, Tsipras met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to examine whether Russia could provide financial assistance to Greece as an alternative to the one offered by the Troika (Klapisis, 2015; Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017). French President François Hollande revealed later that Putin had informed him that Tsipras inquired whether Russia could support Greece in printing its former national currency (drachma) as part of a clandestine Grexit plan (“Putin to Hollande,” 2016). A similar attempt to replace the Troika’s financial support with another one was supposedly attempted with China as the SYRIZA–ANEL government allegedly requested additional financial involvement of the Chinese state as an alternative to the Troika (Stroikos, 2023, p. 606). According to Varoufakis’s memoirs, the SYRIZA–ANEL government—and Varoufakis, personally—had offered favourable terms to China for Greece’s largest port of Piraeus, the Greek railways, and other sought-after privatisation projects; in return, China would be purchasing more Greek debt and bonds—something that Beijing never did (Toussaint, 2019). Allegedly, Greece’s threat to its creditors was that if the EU would not satisfy the demands of the SYRIZA–ANEL government, then Greece would be realigning its geostrategic and diplomatic orientation away from Europe and towards Russia or China (cf. Klapisis, 2015; Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017). Thus, by trying to replace the Troika with Russia and China, Greece arguably rejected traditional means of compromise with its EU partners.

The second example of the SYRIZA–ANEL government rejecting traditional means of compromise was arguably irregular migration, as the SYRIZA–ANEL government attempted to link the skyrocketing migration flows and the role of Greece in dealing with the migration crisis with its ongoing negotiations to gain concessions for less EU-imposed austerity on Greece (Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2022). Key members of the SYRIZA–ANEL government made direct links between the migration/refugee and eurozone crises, with some of them making direct threats to the EU that unless the latter agreed to satisfy Greece’s request for better bailout terms, the migration/refugee crisis would escalate even further. The first such statement was made by Foreign Minister Kotzias in March 2015, before an EU meeting in Riga, who said to journalists that if Greece collapsed because of lack of support over its bailout terms, then there would “be tens of millions of immigrants and thousands of jihadists” in the rest of the EU (Waterfield, 2015). This statement was further repeated and supported by other key members of the SYRIZA–ANEL government such as Kammenos, who added that Berlin had to be careful with Greece by stating that “if they [EU creditors] strike us, we will strike them. We will give migrants from everywhere the documents they need to travel in the Schengen area so that the human wave could go straight to Berlin” (Meehall Wood, 2015). He concluded by reiterating that this was not simply his own opinion, but the central policy of the SYRIZA–ANEL government (“Kammenos: Our struggle,” 2015). Kammenos repeated this threat in April 2015 to foreign media such as *The Times*, stating that “we cannot keep ISIS out, if the EU keeps bullying us” (Carassava & Aldrick, 2015). A similar statement was made by the Deputy Interior Minister, Yiannis Panousis, the minister directly responsible for dealing with irregular migration, who raised the prospect of sending 300,000 to 500,000 migrants to the rest of Europe if Greece would not get more EU help to cope with arrivals (Meehall Wood, 2015). Crucially, the SYRIZA–ANEL government’s discourse corresponded to a new policy of dealing with irregular migration, which amounted to a policy of waving through as many irregular migrants as possible from Greece towards northern Europe and attempting to use irregular migration as a weapon against the EU (cf. Tsourapas & Zartaloudis, 2022).

Furthermore, the SYRIZA–ANEL government pursued its maximalist pre-electoral agenda of ending or even reversing the previous agreements and commitments between Greece and the Troika to validate their portrayal

as the true/only representatives of the Greek people against corrupt elites. One of the first decisions the SYRIZA–ANEL government took was to refuse to extend the previously agreed bailout agreement and to request a renegotiation of a new deal that would not include austerity. In the words of PM Tsipras: “The bailout failed. The new government is not justified in asking for an extension...an extension would be a mistake and a catastrophe” (Smith, 2015a). Additionally, Varoufakis claimed that “the time has come to say what officials admit when the microphones are turned off and say out in the open....At some point, someone has to say ‘No’ and that role has fallen to us, little Greece” (Wearden, 2015), adding that “there is no economist I know in the world who thinks this programme has worked or will work...it couldn’t work” (Wearden, 2015). Moreover, he accused the ECB of “asphyxiating” Greece several times during March 2015 (Klapsis, 2015, pp. 32–33).

Moreover, both parties in opposition, and later in government, had adopted a Manichean discourse whereby any supporter of the previously agreed bailout agreements was not to be trusted, while those opposing these deals were the true representatives and/or custodians of the interests of the Greek people (cf. Zartaloudis, 2013, 2015). The accusations towards the so-called “pro-Memoranda elites” ranged from being labelled as puppets of the debtors to “Quislings” enforcing orders by Greece’s “occupiers” (Klapsis, 2015, p. 30; Papadimitriou & Zartaloudis, 2020). As the negotiations between Greece’s creditors and the much vilified Troika were at a standstill, the SYRIZA–ANEL government created a neologism claiming that they were fighting against two Troikas: the “Troika of the exterior,” that is, the EC, ECB, and the IMF, and the “Troika of the interior,” namely, all the critics or opponents of the government such as the opposition, hostile media, or even independent experts (Klapsis, 2015, pp. 34–35).

Several examples of statements whereby Greece was the victim of external and internal elites can be found. To begin with, in February 2015, amid pro-government demonstrations in Athens asking SYRIZA–ANEL to remain true to their electoral promises and resist the EU’s “blackmail” (“End ‘gross indignity,’” 2015), Varoufakis rejected the previously agreed measures between the Troika and previous Greek governments by accusing the bailouts of “begetting indignity in my nation for too long” (“End ‘gross indignity,’” 2015). Moreover, he accused both internal and external elites of accepting a programme designed not to work and aiming to humiliate Greece: “If you humiliate a proud nation for too long and subject it to the worry of a debt deflation crisis, without light at the end of a tunnel then things come to the boil” (“End ‘gross indignity,’” 2015). Additionally, he insinuated that the creditors were not respecting EU values by stating that he was sure that French Finance Minister Sapin and “every decent European will agree it’s not right that...hundreds of thousands of Greeks aren’t sleeping properly and are going to bed hungry due to mistakes made by Europe and the Greek government in dealing with the deflation crisis” (“Greek finance minister stakes claim,” 2015). In March 2015, Varoufakis reiterated this sentiment by claiming that “people understand” that the government is fighting the “establishment that said it was saving Greece while it put everything on the backs of the poor” (Scherer, 2015).

Similarly, in May 2015, Tsipras blamed both domestic and foreign elites for Greece’s troubles, elites that chose to hurt the Greek people (pensioners, self-employed, and small businesses) on purpose as:

The recession was, to a great extent, desirable by its masterminds. We are trying to overturn this to enter a period of growth...that will serve the interests of the social majority and will not undermine them to benefit the interests of an economic and political elite. (“Greek PM says on final stretch,” 2015)

Moreover, he accused some creditors of supposedly making impossible demands of Greece and vowed that his government “will not yield to irrational demands on VAT, pension and labour market issues when the architects of the most unsuccessful programme in the IMF’s history of rescue programmes insist on extreme [measures] to not admit their failure” (“Greek PM says on final stretch,” 2015). He also presented his government as defenders of the Greek people by claiming that “we have limits that the people’s mandate, common sense and the country’s need for growth oblige us to not violate” (“Greek PM says on final stretch,” 2015). In other words, in line with the concept of “unpolitics,” it was only the SYRIZA–ANEL government that were supposedly the true/only representatives of the Greek people against corrupt external and internal elites who chose austerity to punish Greeks.

5. “Unpolitics” III: Use of Non-Decisions to Mobilise Against the EU

As discussed above, almost immediately after its formation, the SYRIZA–ANEL government embarked on a policy of confrontation with Greece’s creditors, which resulted in an extended period of stalemate and a continuous but unsuccessful round of negotiations (Klapsis, 2015). In January–July 2015, the SYRIZA–ANEL government blamed every setback or non-decision entirely on the intransigence of Greece’s creditors. The only agreement that was reached between the SYRIZA–ANEL government and the creditors was the extension of the much-vilified previous bailout on the 20th of February 2015 for four more months, until the 30th of June 2015. In line with his anti-EU/elite discourse, Tsipras later denounced the agreement as unfair to Greece and accused the country’s creditors of deceiving the government as to what this extension entailed (Klapsis, 2015, p. 34). After the agreed extension, despite frequent optimistic predictions for an imminent successful resolution from the Greek government, both Greece and its creditors were unable to reach any decision as they were constantly rejecting each other’s proposals (Klapsis, 2015; Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017). On the 25th of June 2015, Greece’s creditors proposed another five-month extension coupled with some financial support linked to specific measures that the Greek government had to implement in return (Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017). The SYRIZA–ANEL government, however, immediately rejected this proposal and in the early hours of the 26th of June 2015, Tsipras surprised everyone by announcing a referendum to be held on the 5th of July 2015 on whether Greece should accept the terms of the previously rejected offer.

The referendum was mired in controversy for several reasons. First, since 1974, when Greece restored its democracy, the main body responsible for all law-making, including EU/euro membership and all EU Treaty ratifications, was the parliament, with no recourse to plebiscites taken. Second, the referendum would take place after a mere 10-day period of debate and public information campaigns. Third, the referendum question was long and complicated as it referred to accepting or rejecting a 38-page deal that the Greek government had negotiated but rejected. Fourth, the creditors had declared the question void as their previously suggested deal was withdrawn. Fifth, the “No” option was put first on the ballot, but without any specification of what the repercussions or next steps would be (Triga & Manavopoulos, 2017, pp. 124–126). With no ongoing/further negotiations, Greece was without any financial support, which meant that the ECB could not increase its emergency funding of the Greek banking system at a time when an ever-increasing number of Greeks were withdrawing their savings from Greek banks. Consequently, Greece had to shut its banks and the Athens Stock Market and impose capital controls. Moreover, Greece became the first advanced economy to default on the IMF (Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017, p. 42).

It is argued that the SYRIZA–ANEL government used the referendum to mobilise the SYRIZA–ANEL voters against the EU in line with the concept of “unpolitics” whereby politics is seen as a form of war, the opponent becomes an enemy that must be defeated, and it is the charismatic leader who can save the people from the elite conspiracy against them. For instance, when announcing the referendum, Tsipras rejected the Troika’s proposal as a “humiliation of the Greek people” (Karnitschnig & Eder, 2015), claiming that the Troika-proposed reforms were “blackmail for the acceptance on our part of severe and humiliating austerity without end and without the prospect of ever prospering socially and economically” (Smith, 2015b). He hinted that the “No” result was linked to his position as Premier declaring that “if the Greek people want to have a humiliated prime minister, there are a lot of them out there. It won’t be me” (Gearin, 2015). Furthermore, Tsipras blamed the creditors for trying to subjugate Greece by arguing that “if Europe desires the split and the continuation of subjugation, we will make the big decision to say ‘no’ and fight the battle for the dignity of the people and our national sovereignty” (“Tsipras seeks debt relief,” 2015). He also tried to portray his government and himself as heroes fighting in the name of the European people as he claimed that “future historians will recognise that little Greece, with its little power, is today fighting a battle beyond its capacity not just on its behalf but on behalf of the people of Europe” (“EU readies for Grexit,” 2015). On the night before the referendum vote, in front of 50,000 supporters, Tsipras asked Greeks to “turn your backs on those who terrorise you daily” vowing that “on Sunday, we are not just deciding that we are staying in Europe, but that we are deciding to live with dignity in Europe” (“Greece: Tens of thousands protest,” 2015).

Moreover, the SYRIZA–ANEL government blamed the EU and Greece’s creditors for the protracted stalemate. For example, Varoufakis wrote in an article in the Irish Times in June 2015 that:

An impartial spectator of our Eurogroup deliberations would come to the safe conclusion that it is a strange forum, one ill-equipped to forge good, hard decisions when Europe truly needs them. Greece and Ireland took a major hit early on in the crisis because the Eurogroup was not designed to handle crises efficiently. It is still unable to do so. (Varoufakis, 2015)

Varoufakis went further and accused other crisis-stricken countries, namely Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland as Greece’s “most energetic enemies” claiming that their “greatest nightmare” was for the Syriza government to succeed in easing Greece’s debts, as, according to him, “Were we to succeed in negotiating a better deal, that would obliterate them politically: They would have to answer to their people why they didn’t negotiate like we were doing” (“Yanis Varoufakis implies,” 2015). Moreover, Greece’s creditors were presented as intending to harm Greece and/or being ideologically biased against the SYRIZA–ANEL government and thus Greek voters who chose an anti-austerity coalition as their government. For example, Minister Nikos Voutsis claimed that creditors are trying to blackmail Greece because “they want the Syriza government to become a footnote after it is defeated; after it bows its head. The mandate we have is to not do them this favour” (Papadimas, 2015a).

Despite the short campaign period, Greek society was acutely polarised with Tsipras and his government leading the “No” vote campaign and most of the opposition asking Greeks to vote “Yes” to remain in the eurozone (cf. Triga & Manavopoulos, 2017). Greek voters supported the SYRIZA–ANEL government and voted with a clear majority (61.3%) against the proposed deal, reflecting accumulated domestic resentment against the EU (Papadimitriou & Zartaloudis, 2020, p. 132) but also Tsipras’s own popularity. In a surprising volte-face, however, after thanking the Greeks for their support, Tsipras interpreted the result as a call for compromise with Greece’s creditors and ended up agreeing to a new bailout deal on the 12th–13th of

July 2015. Subsequently, Greece agreed to implement another austerity programme which was concluded in August 2018, making it the worst performer in the entire eurozone in terms of the severity and duration of its economic crisis (cf. Maris et al., 2022). Astonishingly, after his U-turn, Tsipras became quite close to his arch-enemy Angela Merkel praising a “relationship of trust” and crediting her for helping Greece “to recover and of course remain in the central core of the European Union” (Smith, 2019). Moreover, the SYRIZA–ANEL government completely changed its tune towards the EU by ditching its Eurosceptic and anti-austerity agenda. Additionally, Greece stopped being a disruptive force in EU policymaking as Tsipras returned his government to the mainstream and made Greece a reliable European ally once again—something that inter alia was cemented with the Prespa Agreements on the North Macedonia name issue (cf. Smith, 2019).

Attempting to delve into Tsipras’s inner thoughts and calculations is treacherous, but one could plausibly argue that the referendum provided SYRIZA–ANEL the opportunity to try to gain some concessions from Greece’s creditors (cf. Pitsoulis & Schwuchow, 2017), and if that failed, they would have mobilised their base against the EU-induced pain that would follow. Regarding the latter, Tsipras was reassuringly claiming that voting “No” would not lead to a Grexit as “our aim is for the referendum to be followed by negotiations for which we will be better armed” (Gearin, 2015), using again the war metaphor in line with the conceptualisation of “unpolitics.” Tsipras referenced the referendum as proof that he tried everything against internal and external elites and gave the Greek people the opportunity to rally against the Troika and as a justification for the subsequent compromise. In defence of the newly agreed bailout deal he stated in the Greek parliament in August 2015 that he did not regret his decision to compromise as his government “undertook the responsibility to stay alive over choosing suicide” (Papadimas & Babington, 2015). Moreover, he was unapologetic about his U-turn and blamed creditors for Greece’s predicament by stating that “my conscience is clear....It is the best we could achieve under the current balance of power in Europe, under conditions of economic and financial asphyxiation imposed upon us” (Papadimas, 2015b).

Tsipras was seemingly vindicated when, despite agreeing to another bailout agreement with the Troika, he was easily re-elected as Premier in the snap September 2015 elections which were called to legitimise the implementation of the new bailout deal (Papadimitriou & Zartaloudis, 2020). Political analysts of the time claimed that SYRIZA voters believed that Tsipras tried everything and got the best possible outcome, and blamed the EU and the Troika for the new austerity package instead of Tsipras (Papadimas, 2015b). In line with the concept of “unpolitics” seeing politics as another form of war where lost battles provide an opportunity for further struggle, Tsipras promised in September 2015 that “the battle to improve it [the bailout] is far from over” (Koutantou & Maltezou, 2015). He declared that Greece inflicted a “moral defeat” on Germany and fundamentally challenged the “dogma of austerity.” He also gloated that “Europe is not the same after the 7-month negotiation with our country, Europe was shocked by the tough battle of a determined nation” (Koutantou & Maltezou, 2015).

6. Conclusion

To examine whether “unpolitics” can be observed or even explain the behaviour of populist governments in EU policymaking, this article employed the explorative case of the SYRIZA–ANEL government’s attempt to renegotiate Greece’s bailout agreements. It argued that this period can be understood as a period whereby the SYRIZA–ANEL government was engaged in “unpolitics” as it immediately rejected formal and informal rules of decision-making, traditional means of compromise, and tried to use non-decisions to mobilise

against the EU. This period of “unpolitics” ended almost immediately after the referendum when, in a sudden and unexpected volte-face, Tsipras interpreted the referendum result as a call for compromise with Greece’s creditors. Hence, the SYRIZA–ANEL case shows a mixed record vis-à-vis the hypothesised conditions facilitating “unpolitics.” On the one hand, the bailouts and the related austerity were highly politicised issues and allowed both SYRIZA and ANEL to mobilise their voters easily. On the other hand, the issue of austerity-led eurozone membership vs. Grexit was a policy with high gains and high risks in case of failure. The Syrian refugee crisis and its linkage to the bailout negotiations support initial expectations of an issue of high gain (getting better bailout terms to stop the linkage) and low risk (almost all irregular migrants used Greece as a transit state and thus Greece did not have any long-term concerns about them). Moreover, in line with “unpolitics,” the SYRIZA–ANEL government used the July 2015 referendum as a mobilisation tool against external and internal elites and a further opportunity to polarise between “friends” and “foes.” “Unpolitics” seems also useful in explaining why Tsipras was able to turn a victory of the “No” campaign into a new bailout deal with crushing austerity terms and then manage to get re-elected as Premier, which would then make him able to implement new terms as this was just a battle that was lost in the wider war against elites in the name of the Greek people.

“Unpolitics,” however, is unable to explain the transformation of the SYRIZA–ANEL government from a Eurosceptic and disruptive force during January–July 2015 to a compliant bailout student after the referendum and Tsipras’s U-turn. This suggests that populist governments are not always going to engage in “unpolitics” and that this is not the core of a populist government’s identity and/or strategy. Moreover, the SYRIZA–ANEL government did not follow Hungary’s and Poland’s approach in trying to blame “Brussels” as a permanent strategy. Thus, “unpolitics” may be understood as an extreme and unconventional negotiation tactic that aims to mobilise the voters of the coalition government. Moreover, if the negotiations resulted in some concessions from the EU, then the SYRIZA–ANEL government could claim success, whereas if no concessions were made then it would provide justification and legitimacy to another round of austerity/bailout deal. This raises the question of whether “unpolitics” can be an extreme version of hard bargaining which is not that uncommon in EU policymaking.

As mentioned in the Introduction, this article did not evaluate the specific demands or requests of Greece vis-à-vis the creditors, nor did it absolve other EU members of their role in the eurozone crisis. Rather, it focused on the public discourse and key decisions taken by the SYRIZA–ANEL government and examined whether “unpolitics” can explain its behaviour while in office. Furthermore, one could be somewhat understanding or even sympathetic to the behaviour of the SYRIZA–ANEL government if the claim is true that the German government exploited the eurozone crisis to further advance its “ordoliberal” agenda in the eurozone by using Greece as a convenient scapegoat (cf. Art, 2015). This raises the question of whether “unpolitics” is inherently a part of populist governments within the EU, or whether, in some cases, “unpolitics” is triggered or even caused by external forces, such as unpopular terms agreed by previous domestic governments or conditions imposed by other external member states, which voters struggle to accept. As a result, there is willingness among voters for anti-systemic parties or leaders to represent them. Hence, further research is needed to examine the behaviour of creditor nations during the eurozone crisis and whether they either engaged in “unpolitics” or facilitated the emergence of “unpolitics” in debtor nations.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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