

THE AMERICANIZATION OF GREEK POLITICS

The Case of the 2004 General Election

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Abstract

Over the last few years political communication has followed the trend toward globalization following the American model in many democratic countries, including Greece. Common electoral practices, the majority of which were initiated and developed in the USA, have spread to other countries as well. These practices are concerned with the employment communication consultants, the adoption of the principles of political marketing, the efforts to control the agenda setting, the adaptation of communication to 'media logic', the frequent opinion polls, the extensive use of new technologies, the increasing cost of the electoral campaigns, the vagueness in political speech, the emphasis on the candidates' image and many more.

The americanization of political communication has brought new standards and values in every country's "political civilization", values which were unknown a few years ago. This issue has become the subject of intense, ongoing, academic debates, especially in respect to the way it influences the conduct of politics in every country.

This paper deals with the americanization of the 2004 Greek General Election. After enumerating the reasons for this situation, it extensively focuses on the similarities and the differences between the electoral practices in the two countries. The question which arises in this paper is whether it could be said that American practices are being adopted by other countries or if these countries just adapt to the new conditions, while there is particular concern regarding the consequences of this situation on the domestic political system.

Keywords: Americanization, 2004 General Greek Election, political marketing

Nowadays, parties and candidates in many democratic countries have adopted common campaigning practices, originated primarily in the USA. Practices so similar, in fact that the phenomenon has been described as the 'globalization', or rather the 'americanization' of elections (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Negrine, 1996:146-166; Scammell, 1999; Ingram and Lees-Marshment, 2002; Kotzaivazoglou, 2004).

Greece is one of these countries, and, especially since the 1990s, the phenomenon is becoming more and more marked. This is due to a series of significant social, political and cultural changes connected primarily with the modernization of Greek society, the introduction of private commercial television and the ideological crisis of political parties (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Papathanassopoulos, 2000, 2001; Yannas, 2002; Samaras, 2003; Doukeri, 2003; Chondroleou, 2004; Doukeri and Kotzaivazoglou, 2004; Ikonou, Kotzaivazoglou and Papageorgiou, 2005).

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Greek elections have come to resemble American elections in a great many ways. There are, of course, significant differences between the two countries, relating chiefly to legal restrictions, socio-cultural mentality, politico-cultural traditions and degree of modernization. Some of the most important of these are that in Greece:

- The electoral system is a multiparty one.
- The voting system uses a plurality formula.
- Voters give great weight to party allegiance.
- In general elections, MPs are also elected.
- Voting is compulsory.
- The media system is dual: public and private.
- There is extensive media coverage of both main parties contesting the election.
- Key party figures conduct exhaustive televised debates.
- All parties are allowed proportional free air time to present their views.
- The press and, to a lesser degree, the broadcast media, especially local, are party-politicized.
- No polls are published in the final week before election day.

The 2004 election campaign in Greece displayed certain additional differences, largely concerning party and candidate campaign financing. Specifically, electoral law 3023/2002 provided for:

- Budgetary restrictions on campaign spending.
- Public and private campaign financing, although with restrictions on private contributions.
- Free broadcasting time, proportional to the electoral strength of the parties.
- A single broadcast debate, with an open agenda, among the leaders of the five parties represented in Parliament or in the European Parliament.

These differences notwithstanding, however, it can fairly be argued that Greece's 2004 general election was in many respects significantly 'Americanized'. This view is based on a number of elements, including:

1. Poll-based campaigning.

Both major parties, New Democracy and PASOK, shaped their communication policies to reflect what public opinion polls identified as the priorities of the electorate: increased cost of living, unemployment, and corruption. There was also widespread demand for political change after eight years of government under Premier Costantinos Simitis.

The two parties listened to the demands of the electorate, and adopted a largely market-oriented strategy (Lees-Marshment 2001a, 2001b, 2003). They tailored their behavior and their communication strategy to meet the requests of the voters, and they overhauled their party lists, putting up younger candidates from a variety of social backgrounds, and for the first time including a fair number of women. The governing party, PASOK, even went so far as to select a new leader, turn its back on much of its past, contemplate changing the party emblems and adopt positions that were exceptionally progressive for Greek society. It also chose to focus its campaign not on the successes of its period of governance, such as foreign and European Union policy, but on the specific issues identified as of particular concern to the public, even when past party policy in those areas had not been popular.

2. Weakening of parties as institutions; increasing numbers of volatile voters.

Although still powerful institutions, Greece's two main political parties have lost their former vigor and ideological independence; in these elections, moreover, there were no longer any clear distinctions separating them, as there had been in the past. The ideological differences between them were minimal and concerned only secondary issues. At the same time, there was a marked increase in the number of what Mazzoleni and Schultz (1999) have labeled 'volatile voters', that is, the mass of those who have no party allegiance but in each election vote for the party that they feel best represents them at the time.

In order to attract as many votes as possible, both parties implemented a 'catch-all' strategy (Kirchheimer, cited in Scammell 1999, 726 and Mancini 1999): that is, they adopted general, middle-of-the-road, 'feel-good' positions (term used by Scammell, 1999, and Holz Bacha, 2003), designed to attract the maximum number of voters. They even attempted to broaden their voter base by including on their party lists cross-over candidates from other parties, whom they had hardly criticized in the past.

Thus, the dilemma confronting the electorate was not which party expressed it better ideologically, but which party better expressed the social demand for political change and which party was better suited to govern. The distinction between 'Right' and 'Left' had evolved into a distinction between 'progressive' and 'conservative' or between 'able' and 'unable' to govern.

3. Personalization of campaigning.

The focus of the 2004 electoral campaign was primarily on persons, not on issues. The voters were not asked to choose on the basis of political positions, but on the basis of which party leader they thought most capable of governing the country and which party they thought had fielded the most able candidates.

Nowadays, voters generally have little grasp of the details of party and candidate positions. And indeed, as we noted earlier, the differences between them are insignificant. As a rule, therefore, people vote according to their general perception of the personality and image of the candidates (Plasser, Scheucher, Senft, 1999).

The importance of image also increases with the growing mass of what Mazzoleni and Schultz (1999) call 'chronic know-nothing' voters; that is, those who for whatever reason disregard politics and vote on the basis of irrational criteria such as candidates' external appearance, hobbies, personal acquaintance, etc. Most of these voters, who account for 10-15% of the Greek electorate, fall into one of three categories: young people, housewives, and the illiterate (To Vima, 2004, 18 January: A4). Given that voting is compulsory, they constitute a category of voters that the parties cannot afford to ignore.

The above reasons explain why both the party leaders and the candidates laid such emphasis on image in these elections. They sought, through appearance, statements and actions, to create an image of a capable, and at the same time human, leader. In order to reach specific target groups they attempted to make themselves more appealing to those groups, for example by shedding suits and ties for a more casual style of dress, appearing at sports events or on youth radio programs, participating in social or youth-oriented events, 'sharing' selected moments in their personal lives, getting their wives involved in their campaigns, etc. For the same reasons the candidate lists of both parties also featured actors, athletes, socialites and other celebrities, many of whom were in fact elected.

One final point worth making is that the personalization of Greek politics was hastened by the revolutionary (for Greece) way in which George Papandreou was elected as the new leader of the PASOK party. The openness of the procedure was very reminiscent of the way in which American presidential candidates are elected. This represents a change in the country's fundamental political structure and in the long term will, if it continues, further weaken the parties and enhance the importance of the leader.

4. Mediatization of the election.

The media play a crucial role in elections today, as intermediaries between politicians and voters. Television, and particularly the private channels, is the pre-eminent medium here.

This was obvious in Greece's 2004 general election. Television presenters treated the campaign like a race, with dramatic commentary, news flashes, live coverage, continuous polling and intense vying for position. Aware of the importance of publicity, each party's staff drew up detailed communication strategy plans to gain maximum positive media exposure. Their objective was to ensure that the main news programs focused on the positions and activities of the parties and their leaders. Their whole program was designed accordingly, with enthusiastic rallies, clever sound bites, staged events, cheering crowds, celebrity endorsements, attention to image and many other 'pseudo-events' (term initiated by Boorstin, 1964); that is, events insignificant in themselves, that generate maximum favorable publicity because they are in tune with what Altheide and Snow (1991) call 'media logic'.

Party communication strategies also relied heavily on American-style advertising spots: short, non-specific, appealing to the emotions, setting out dilemmas, many of them negative.

The Internet, finally, provided an additional means of communication. Informative, frequently updated sites allowed the parties to establish a two-way interpersonal dialogue with the citizens and thus in these elections make the first significant steps towards 'electronic democracy'.

5. Intensive use of consultants.

They may have remained behind the scenes, but communications consultants nonetheless played a leading role in the 2004 elections. Image-makers, spin doctors, advertisers, campaign directors, pollsters and other specialists formed what Scammell described as the 'war room' that plotted out the party's communication policy, advised candidates continuously on how to present themselves and what to say, and set up events for maximum media impact and exposure. These professionals essentially replaced the party officials that used to perform these duties. The outcome for Greece is that gradually the power to make decisions and trace policy appears to be shifting from party officials to professional marketers and public relations specialists.

In conclusion, it could fairly be argued that, in spite of the socio-political and legal differences, Greece's 2004 general election were strongly Americanized, at least with regard to the two main parties. This is evident particularly on the strategic planning and campaign levels. However, practices simply adopted wholesale from American experience are very likely to fail, because they are alien to the tradition and the customs of the country. Furthermore they are perceived by the electorate as an attempt to deceive. This happened to some extent in the 2004 elections. Parties and

politicians ought to express the needs and wants of the citizens of a specific society at a specific time. This means that their actions, even if inspired by the experience of another country, should be fully adapted to the socio-political identity of their own.

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