



## CHAPTER 2

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# Media Coverage of Greece's September 2015 Election Campaign: Framing and Interpreting the Issues at Stake

*Stylianos Papathanassopoulos and Iliana Giannouli*

### INTRODUCTION

The financial crisis has put Greece on the international map of the news industry. It has also provoked fundamental changes in the economic as well as rhetoric/symbolic space, resulting in an unprecedented readjustment of the established party system in the country (Zartaloudis 2013). The major parties of the Greek political system lost a significant portion of their electoral base when forced to implement austerity measures and break faith with their clientelist past. At the same time, new political actors from the left and the right wings of the political spectrum, by employing a populist strategy, aligned with what people wanted to hear and managed to establish themselves as a “new alternative” to the old political system. The decision of George Papandreou, then President of the Panhellenic Socialist Party (PASOK), to ask for a bailout back in 2010 signified the era of austerity for the Greek people and the triumph of populism in Greek politics. As Aslanidis and Kaltwasser (2016: 1078) put it,

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S. Papathanassopoulos (✉) • I. Giannouli  
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

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S. Salgado (ed.), *Mediated Campaigns and Populism in Europe*,  
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When left-of-centre parties undertake substantial economic reforms negatively affecting their core constituencies, they foster a process of political dealignment and potentially pave the way for populist entrepreneurs who succeed by castigating the establishment and mobilizing “betrayed” voters who feel abandoned or deceived.

Indeed, SYRIZA’s triumph in the elections of January 2015 established the re-emergence of nationalist populism in Greek politics (Exadaktylos 2015). SYRIZA’s victory was based on a political narrative that united the “people” suffering from austerity policies against a common enemy: “the establishment” and the Troika (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 130–131). According to Moschonas (2015), SYRIZA’s rise to power was paved long ago, since the “critical elections” of May and June 2012. Pappas also suggests that the elections of 2012 signified a landmark for the Greek political scene, “revealing new trends that will eventually shape the country’s newly emerging party system” (2014: 99). The 2012 election outcome must be seen as a result of the delegitimation of the old political system (Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou 2016: 4), which under the burden of the bailout agreements could not anymore satisfy the fallacies of its populist constituency (Pappas 2015), or as Sotiropoulos puts it “couldn’t anymore perform their traditional patronage functions” (Sotiropoulos 2012: 44). However, when in office SYRIZA made a U-turn and was forced to implement a new Memorandum under the same pressures of the preceding governments. The new election of September 2015 was a milestone for Greek political history. It was the fifth ballot over a period of six years and the only one in which all the contenders for the premiership were bound by a prearranged Memorandum’s obligations. Although in this campaign there was not much space for promising privileges to their political clientele, the political parties still opted for a populist discourse, incorporating a blame-shifting strategy.

The unique context of the September 2015 election provided an opportunity to examine how the domestic media covered the campaign, using analytical tools from agenda-setting and media-framing theory. During election campaigns, citizens do not get first-hand political information through their participation in political rallies but rather rely on news media, mostly on television in order to shape their opinions on issues at stake (Papathanassopoulos 2000). Therefore, news media provide the “informational environment” in which citizens shape their opinions on politics and politicians. Framing is the most overt manifestation of media’s power to influence politics and it is well documented to have consequences on electoral behaviour (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Trimble and Sampert 2004;

Hopmann et al. 2010). We investigated nine media outlets' coverage of the September 2015 election campaign in Greece. Our sample included three newspapers (two politically affiliated and one tabloid), three TV stations (two privately owned and the public broadcaster Elliniki Radiofonia Tileorasi [ERT]), as well as three online newspapers. Through content analysis of 1668 election news stories, we looked into news frame use among different types of media and within them. The results showed that strategic framing often still prevails in the press, but not in television and online newspapers. This strategy was also correlated with the interpretative function of journalism in the press (for further information on the links between strategic news framing and interpretive journalism see Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). Populism and “attack politics” also emerged as dominant rhetoric of this election campaign, captivating the media's attention.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE 2015 ELECTIONS

### *Continuity and Stability in the Greek Two-Party Political System*

The Greek political system has remained relatively stable after the country's transition to parliamentarism in 1974 (known as *metapolitefse*). For four decades, two parties, the PanHellenic Socialist Party (PASOK) on the centre-left, and New Democracy (ND) on the centre-right, had dominated the Greek political scene, cultivating a “deep-rooted” polarization firmly along the left–right axis (Featherstone 1990; Hamann and Sgouraki-Kinsey 1999; Karyotis and Rudig 2015a). Apart from this stable two-party system, another well-documented characteristic of the Greek political status quo is populism, described as the “bedrock ideology” which penetrates the rhetoric of politicians from both the left and the right wings of the political spectrum (Pappas 2013; Pappas and Aslanidis 2015).

Populism was initially presented to the Greek political system by PASOK, which managed through its indisputably charismatic leader, Andreas Papandreou, to forge “the people” as a distinct political entity sharing the same ideological beliefs and turned that entity into a powerful constituency (Pappas 2013: 35). The major implication of PASOK's populism was the creation in large parts of the electoral constituency of fallacious beliefs about politics and economics that no ambitious politician could afford to neglect (Pappas and Aslanidis 2015: 185). ND learnt this lesson the hard way, when after gaining power in 1990 they attempted to implement structural reforms of the Greek economy and faced strong resistance, which resulted in the collapse of the ND government in 1993.

After this defeat, ND decided to “rebrand” itself, succumbing to the same populist strategy as PASOK; instead of promoting the general welfare, it tried to satisfy popular demand. Pappas (2013: 36) notes that this is the beginning of a new era when populism contaminated Greece’s two-party system. In the following two decades PASOK and ND alternated in power, aggregating over 80 per cent of the total vote, while the political “horse race” had been broadly characterized by an antagonistic dichotomy that separates “the people” and the “other”, both defined in terms that reflect the traditional cleavage between the left and the right (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2016; Boukala 2014).

During the *metapolitefse*, Greek society experienced a generalized climate of prosperity, characterized by the reinforcement of civil liberties and the welfare state, where a consumerist culture prevailed, supported by high levels of economic growth (Gerodimos 2013: 16). The major political parties in Greece have been attempting to satisfy their “political clientele” by engaging in an endless policy of giving benefits to their electoral bases in exchange for their votes. In the long run, these policies resulted in a dramatic increase of the public debt (Mylonas 2011).

In October 2009, George Papandreou, PASOK’s leader, won the election under his successful campaign slogan “the money is there”, implying that the former ND government preferred to allocate economic resources to the few and powerful. But soon after his election, in May 2010, the socialist government introduced a bailout agreement (known as Memorandum) and was forced to take austerity measures, causing great frustration among its electoral base. However, the first bailout was not enough and led to a new agreement (a second, more painful Memorandum), which triggered the replacement of the PASOK government by a coalition of “national unity” (PASOK, ND, LAOS) under the technocrat Lucas Papademos.

New elections were held in May 2012, when all the parties supporting the national unity coalition saw the collapse of their electoral support. PASOK especially was severely punished by the electorate, paying the price for the implementation of the austerity measures, and most importantly because the voters felt that these measures affected social groups in an unequal and unfair way (Karyotis and Rudig 2015b: 138). While ND had experienced some significant vote loss, it managed to maintain its parliamentary representation better than PASOK. In the meantime, government formation talks were unsuccessful, resulting in a new electoral round in June 2012. The election’s outcome was the formation of an ND government, supported by PASOK and Dimokratiki Aristera (DIMAR).

Against this background, SYRIZA—a radical leftist party—continued its upward dynamic, receiving an unprecedented 26.89 per cent of the vote. During these electoral contests, Golden Dawn, an extremist right-wing party, managed to pave its way to the Greek parliament for the first time, by receiving about 7.0 per cent of the people's vote.

The financial crisis not only has challenged voters' confidence in the major parties to handle the crucial issues of economy (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014; Salgado and Stavrakakis 2018), but has also put under question the well-established “clientelist social contract”, which had reproduced and preserved for decades the two-party system in the modern Greek state, signifying the “beginning of the end for the post-1974 political system” (Gerodimos 2013).

### *SYRIZA in Power: The Rise of a Leftist Populism*

The 2009–2012 period was stigmatized by the weakening of the traditional left–right cleavage and the emergence of a new division around the bailout agreement. This nodal point also mobilized extremist and populist parties that had been for decades on the margins of the Greek political system. On the one hand, the pro-Europe camp supported the economic reforms necessary for securing the European future of Greece and, on the other, the anti-Memorandum camp opposed austerity measures proposed by the European Union (EU) (Katsanidou and Otjes 2016: 270). The pro-Europe camp attracted the two poles of the old two-party system (ND and PASOK) as well as the populist party (LAOS) and the new left-wing party (DIMAR). Opposition to the bailout agreement came both from radical leftist parties (SYRIZA and the Communist Party—KKE) and nationalist and xenophobic parties from the right (Independent Greeks—ANEL) and the *infamous* Xrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn). As Gerodimos argues, the “division regarding the bailout negotiations was an expression of a much more established social cleavage between modernizers (who favour extensive public secure reforms and an extrovert foreign policy, including deep engagement with the EU) and populists (who favour a return to an imagined past of prosperity and/or national purity)” (Gerodimos 2013: 16–17).

During the election campaign of January 2015, the main rivals for the premiership (SYRIZA and ND) structured their rhetoric on the basis of a politics of fear and a politics of hope (Rori 2016: 6). As Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou (2016: 13) suggest, “three social actors dominate the rhetoric of the two political leaders, the Greeks, Europe and the political

‘Other’”. For ND, SYRIZA’s potential rise to power would entail dangers for the stability and the European future of the country. According to ND’s communication strategy, the proven track record of responsibility of the ND government was the only solution to secure the country’s prosperity. On the other hand, Tsipras emphasized his party’s fights against European and domestic elites, while suggesting that SYRIZA’s electoral win would signify the end of the austerity era. Tsipras also tried to downgrade fears about “his secret plans of a Grexit” by stressing his goal to restructure the EU on the basis of democratic values and solidarity (Boukala and Dimitrakopoulou 2016: 13–14).

The elections of January 2015 expressed emphatically the decline of the two traditionally dominant parties; ND lost the election to SYRIZA, while PASOK imploded electorally. SYRIZA constituted more than 36 per cent of Greek votes and formed a coalition government with the right-wing, populist party, Independent Greeks (ANEL). Here, Gerodimos and Karyotis make a noteworthy observation: The reason for the electoral collapse of the pro-Memorandum parties could be traced to the failure of There Is No Alternative (to austerity) (TINA) logic, which was the salient frame at the beginning of the crisis. More precisely, the TINA “dogma” was effectively accepted during the first years of the crisis by a relative majority who were convinced of the necessity of fiscal austerity, especially since there was no counterargument from the opposition parties (2015: 265–266). However, as the recession deepened and the voters began to realize that there was no tangible end to their sacrifices, the anti-austerity camp found the ideal opportunity to capitalize on popular fatigue and anger, even though it lacked a clear plan for economic regrowth. SYRIZA’s leader, with his populist rhetoric, united heterogeneous identities and demands under the common “enemy” (the Troika, the external and domestic elites) and managed to establish SYRIZA as a new major political force in the Greek political system. SYRIZA’s narrative offered a new portrait of society divided in two parts; us (“the people”) versus them (“the establishment”) (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 130).

SYRIZA’s leader promised to put an end to austerity policies, “tear up the Memorandum”, and secure the restructure of Greece’s debt and all without having to leave the EU. However, once in office SYRIZA, after months of failed negotiations with the lenders, and a controversial referendum taking place on 5 July 2015, finally signed the third bailout package. Still, the difference from the previous ND and PASOK governments was that SYRIZA “didn’t fall without fighting” (Kiapidou 2015). SYRIZA

framed the negotiations as the “ultimate national fight” against the European elites who blackmailed the country and with this strategic move managed to maintain its popular appeal, since the Greek people liked to hear that this new political force “did not surrender without a fight”. As Kiapidou (2015) notes, SYRIZA survived its U-turn politically by combining the following three components: “distancing itself from the old political system, presenting itself as a fighter against Europe, and yet remaining pro-European”.

On the other hand, SYRIZA’s dramatic U-turn provoked a seismic shift in the intra-party balances, with the radical fraction of the party starting to rebel against the bailout agreement, resulting in the exit from SYRIZA of a core group of prominent MPs, who then formed a distinct party named Laiki Enotita (Demotic Unity). Given this situation, SYRIZA, after securing the opposition’s support for the third bailout package, led the country to elections on 20 September 2015.

The electoral campaign that followed was a distinguished case, since it was the first time in this five-year period of subsequent elections that Greek people went to the polls knowing that whatever the outcome, the new government had to comply with the obligations arising from the Third Memorandum. In addition, according to pollsters, due to the controversial referendum of July, which resulted in a very unstable political climate, the voters decided what to vote at the very last minute, which means that the electoral campaign period determined the outcome of the September 2015 elections (Mavris and Symeonidis 2016: 434). Both contenders for the premiership, SYRIZA’s leader, Alexis Tsipras, and ND’s leader, Vangelis Meimarakis, did not deny that the implementation of the new Memorandum was a prerequisite for Greece’s participation in the European Monetary Union (EMU). However, Tsipras utilized his “moral advantage” since he was a new, young, promising leader and tried to highlight that during his incumbency he had attempted to secure a better deal with the creditors (Rori 2016: 15). The party’s main rhetoric emphasized that although the stability pact is a one-way ticket, once in power SYRIZA would try to alleviate the burden on the shoulders of the less well-off (Chatzistavrou and Michalaki 2015: 3). In this context, one might argue that once again politics triumphed over economics, since major economic issues were approached through a populist rhetoric, while “the political debate retained populist elements, was based on vague terminology and focused on quasi-moral arguments on the past” (Triantopoulos 2015). Independent Greeks (ANEL), SYRIZA’s coalition partner, invested in the

same strategy by avoiding talk of the new austerity measures and the economic future of the country in the political dialogue, raising the dichotomy between the “new” and the “fair” political system versus the “old, corrupted one”, at the heart of this election campaign.

SYRIZA’s main opponent, ND, also chose to run a personalized campaign after its leadership change (Rori 2016: 16). With the urge of its new leader, an experienced and quite popular politician, ND invested its electoral campaign with an effort to portray SYRIZA as a “neo-Memorandum” party and its leader as an irresponsible, amateur politician who, with his “proud negotiations”, aggravated the fragile economic climate of the country, leading to capital controls. In the meantime, ND’s leader promoted his image as a conciliatory leader who was willing to cooperate with SYRIZA, so that the country would finally return to stability. As the election outcome proved, this “double rhetoric” cost him electorally.

Laiki Enotita (Demotic Unity), SYRIZA’s splinter faction, making its “political debut” during this election campaign, maintained an “anti-Memorandum” frame, without rejecting the idea of a “Grexit” and a return to the drachma, in case the lenders continued with their “black-mail”. In the anti-Memorandum camp remained the neo-Nazi Xrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), which during this campaign had been broadly marginalized by the media for a number of reasons, mainly because various Golden Dawn members were in prison for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. The admission of Nikolaos Michaloliakos, Golden Dawn’s leader, that Golden Dawn had taken “political responsibility” for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, seems to be the only moment throughout this election campaign that triggered the media’s attention. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) also maintained its anti-austerity stance, while rejecting the idea of cooperation with the other parties of the anti-Memorandum camp.

Regarding the centre parties, Potami (River), as well as PASOK, kept an old-fashioned modernization rhetoric, while stressing the need for stability in the country that would secure its European future. Finally, the Enosi Kentroon (Centrist Union), under the leadership of Vasilis Leventis, kept its highly populist rhetoric, hoping to find its way into the Greek parliament after 25 years of constant effort.

## POLITICAL AND MEDIA SYSTEMS IN GREECE

As mentioned above, the Greek political system after the fall of the junta remained quite stable with the two major parties, PASOK and ND, governing the country for 38 years and enjoying an overwhelming majority of

almost 80 per cent of the Greek peoples' vote. As Pangratis suggests (2008: 14), "Greece since 1980 has moved to a de facto party-system", while the small parties from the left and right wings of the political spectrum did not constitute a threat to two-party rule. However, Siaroff (2003) identifies Greece as a "two-and a half-party system", implying that the "half" party can play a potentially deciding role in the formation of government. Siaroff suggests that in the Greek case, the Greek Communist Party plays the role of the "half party", although he concludes that KKE's potential to act as a regulatory factor in Greek politics was hampered, since "most elections have yielded a majority of seats for either socialist PASOK or the conservative New Democracy" (2003: 276) and due to the fact that the party has been "hesitantly coalitional", more "interested in ideology than in office-seeking" (2003: 285).

According to Lyrintzis, patronage and clientelism have been the operative tools of the reproduction of two-party rule in the Greek political scene (2011: 4). Statism and clientelism, combined with the role of the public sector as employer, had been the mechanism through which the political elites had managed to satisfy their political clientele by securing a seat in the public sector (Zartaloudis 2013). However, the "democratic malaise" of the Greek political system seems to be populism, a phenomenon highly correlated with every aspect of the political life of the modern Greek state (Pappas 2013). As we mentioned earlier, the appearance of populism—largely attributed to PASOK—has penetrated the entire political spectrum with different political actors claiming to be the carriers of "the people's voice". The financial crisis has triggered a new wave of populism, which has resulted in two big "winners", namely SYRIZA and Golden Dawn, who managed to capitalize on popular resentment by campaigning on a populist anti-austerity anti bailout strategy. Although some analysts argue that the crisis signifies the "end of *metapolitefsē*" and the rise of a new era in the political life of Greece, others claim that we are rather witnessing continuity instead of change in Greek politics; SYRIZA's discourse maintains the same populist traits of PASOK's slogans in 1981 (Zartaloudis 2013). By promising to increase salaries and pensions to pre-crisis levels and abolish harsh taxation, SYRIZA secured its victory, but once in office had to face the consequences of its own populist strategy.

Between the state and the media in Greece, there has been an interplay which has largely arisen from the tensions within Greek society in contemporary history. Direct authoritarian control of the years of dictatorship is presumably a thing of the past, but some remnants have carried over into the democratic period. Second, the state has also played an important role

as an owner of media enterprises. The electronic media have traditionally been under the total and tight control of the state. Third, in a more indirect but nonetheless effective way, the state has enforced its policies on ownership as well as the unwritten rules of power politics by using a wide range of means of intervention. These means include sizeable financial aid to the press, on which individual enterprises have become dependent. Finally, the central role of the state in the Greek media system has no doubt limited the tendency of the media to play the “watchdog” role so widely valued in prevailing liberal media theory. The financial dependence of media on the state has combined with the intertwining of media and political elites within a highly centralized state polity. This has led to a journalistic culture which has historically been cautious about reporting news which would be embarrassing to state officials.

Indeed, the interlinkage between the state and the media affects the development of the news media in many ways (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002). First, it encourages the use of news media for other purposes than the balanced provision of news stories. The politicization of business is a result not only of the important role the state plays in the economy but of the nature of the political process. Second, this *modus vivendi* has made the media systems less self-regulatory and the regulatory bodies less independent compared to their counterparts in liberal countries. Third, politics has also affected the content of the media, especially newspapers, making it a means of negotiation among conflicting elites rather than a means for the information of the public and, therefore, mass circulation. It forces the logic of journalism to merge with other social logics—of party politics, for instance. And it breaks down the horizontal solidarity of journalists as it does of other social groups.

As far as the Greek media system is concerned, one could say it is primarily characterized by excess of supply over demand. This oversupply appears to be logical, since a plethora of newspapers, TV channels, magazines, and radio stations have to compete for a small-country audience and advertising market share (Papathanassopoulos 1999). Although developments in the Greek media sector may not entirely respond to the needs of its advertising industry, it has been surprisingly adaptable to swings in the economic business cycle (Papathanassopoulos 2014). The fiscal crisis, however, coupled with the crisis of the economy, brought major losses of advertising revenues for the media industry (Korderas 2012). Today, all media outlets are facing their most difficult period ever, but it is the print media (newspapers and magazines) which are suffering the most (Papathanassopoulos 2014).

## NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGN: DATA ANALYSIS

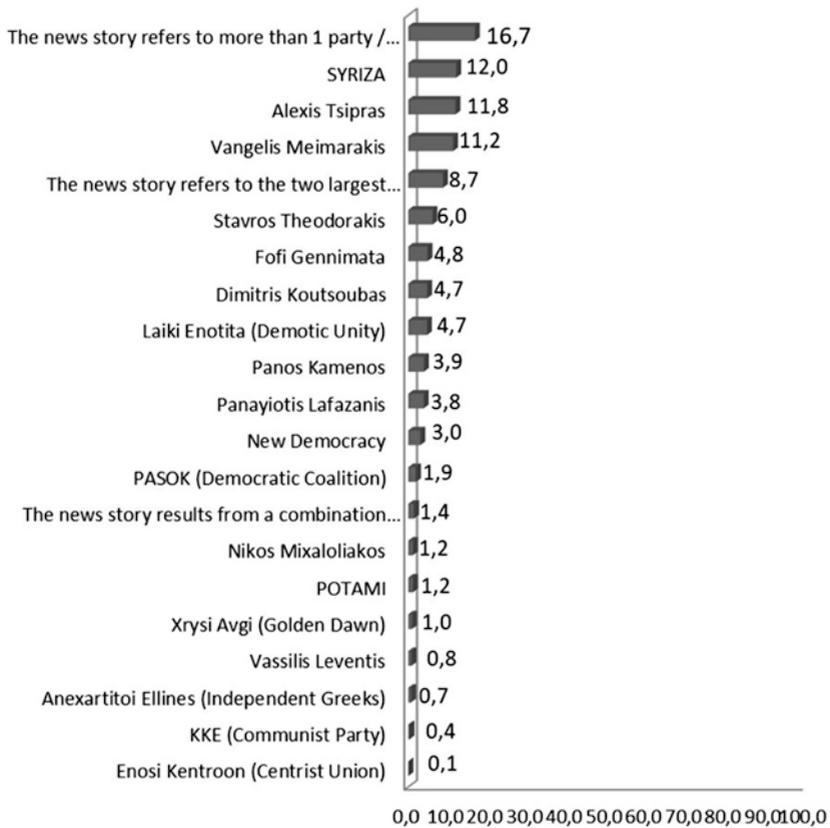
This study examines the election news coverage during the official campaign period of September 2015 through Salgado et al. (2015) framework. Our sample includes news stories and items from 6 to 18 September 2015, covering two weeks prior to election day. The research is based on the election coverage in the print editions of three daily papers: *Kathimerini* (centre-right), *Avgi* (left), and *Espresso* (tabloid paper). In addition, the main newscasts of three television stations (MEGA, ANT1, and the public broadcaster, ERT) were also analysed for the scope of this research, as well as the election news found in three online newspapers with high popularity, namely [www.in.gr](http://www.in.gr), [www.newsit.gr](http://www.newsit.gr), and [www.protothema.gr](http://www.protothema.gr). The unit of analysis was the news story. Every story, which referred to the election, the campaign, and/or parties and party leaders running for this election, was included in this study, resulting in a sample of 1668 articles.

### *The Media Focus during the Election: Personalization*

Personalization refers to “the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen 2010: 4). In media coverage, this trend is manifested in the form of increased visibility of candidates and more precisely of party leaders compared to their parties. In fact, many surveys have pointed out that the political power the candidates hold affects the amount of coverage they receive, with party leaders and the candidates of the party in office becoming more prominent during the election campaign (Tresch 2009; Schönbach et al. 2001; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006; Hopmann et al. 2011).

According to our results, party leaders dominated in the news stories at a rate of 57.3 per cent, compared to the focus on the party as a whole (25.2 per cent). More specifically, the media coverage of the election campaign of September 2015 focused on the two main “gladiators” for the premiership of the country, Alexis Tsipras (11.8 per cent) and Vangelis Meimarakis (11.2 per cent) (see Fig. 2.1). The heightened visibility of party leaders echoes the findings of a previous study regarding the media coverage of the election campaign of January 2015 (Giannouli and Karadimitriou 2015).

Regarding the party leaders of smaller parties, Stavros Theodorakis (River) seems to have attracted media interest to a significant extent (6 per cent). Remarkable is the strong presence of Panagiotis Lafazanis (3.8 per



**Fig. 2.1** Political leaders and parties in the media (percentages) during the September 2015 election campaign

cent) and his newly formed party, Demotic Unity (4.7 per cent), who won a significant share of media coverage compared with the leaders of the other smaller parties. Interestingly, Vasilis Leventis, leader of the Centrist Union, seems to be marginalized by media, receiving a media coverage share of 0.8 per cent, which is far smaller even than that of the leader of Golden Dawn, Nikos Michaloliakos, who received 1.2 per cent and experienced media marginalization due to the extremist nature of his political speech.

However, personalization does not only refer to the visibility of individuals. It goes beyond than that, referring to an increasing focus on

their “character” or “personality traits” (Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014: 156). Studies have also shown that the personal traits of candidates have become more salient than their policy plans (Aalberg et al. 2012: 172; Benoit et al. 2005).

As most pundits suggested, the election campaign was a contest between the two main contenders. More precisely, 16.2 per cent of the stories referring to SYRIZA's leader nominally commented on his political competence, while 12.1 per cent raised the issue of his trustworthiness. As far as concerns his major opponent, Vangelis Meimarakis (ND leader), 19.1 per cent of the stories referring to him nominally highlight his political competence and 11.2 per cent made references to his credibility.

### *Issues*

Debates and party politics emerged as the most prominent issue of this campaign (72.7 per cent). In the public discourse, emphasis was given to macroeconomics and taxes (8.9 per cent). Issues relating to the governance of the country and in particular the multi-alleged need for a coalition of national unity, which would secure the future of Greece in the European Union, were also salient in the media (3.2 per cent). Finally, news stories on polls and the standing of political parties and party leaders in these were also dominant in the coverage of this campaign (5 per cent) (see Fig. 2.2).

The economy has always been high in the pre-election agenda (Denemark 2005; Brandenburg 2006: 170). During the financial crisis, the economy seems to have become a nodal point, setting the voter's behaviour and provoking turbulences in the current political regime of Greece (Dinas and Rori 2013). The new bailout agreement emerged as a highly controversial issue among political leaders, captivating media attention, and all debates on economic policy were structured around a crucial question: whether Greece would respect its agreement and remain in the Eurozone or whether it would opt for setting its own financial policies and leave the European currency (16.8 per cent). The budgetary discipline and compliance to the obligations arising from the structure of the Euro system were seen as prerequisites for Greece's permanence in the Eurozone and comprised the main argument of the parties supporting the new bailout, receiving 22.6 per cent of media coverage.

The new antagonistic dichotomy of anti-Memorandum/pro-Memorandum penetrating the entire Greek society had not reflected the

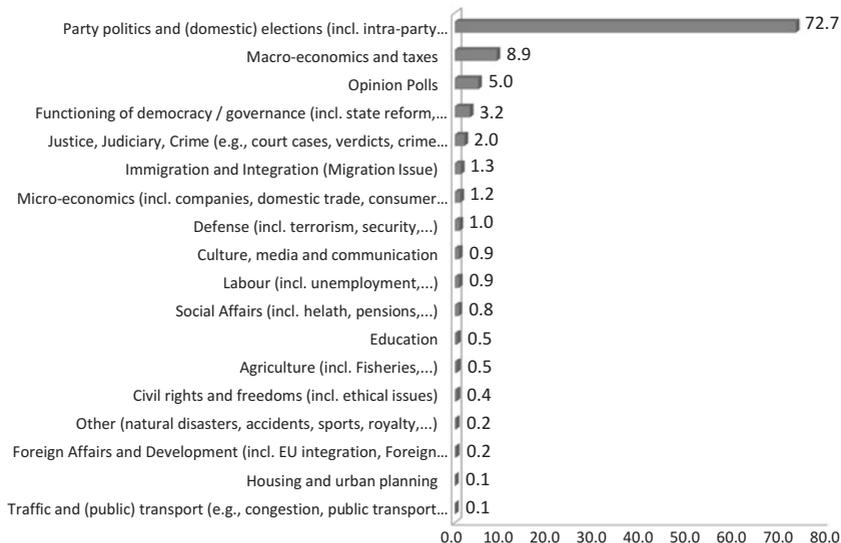


Fig. 2.2 Issues of the election campaign

traditional cleavage between left and right anymore, and most importantly had broadened its scope beyond economic policies, including a pro-/anti-European dimension (Katsanidou and Otjes 2016).

The negative consequences of the austerity measures and bailout agreement became salient in 36.6 per cent of the news stories in our sample. The political leaders from the so-called anti-Memorandum camp tried to deconstruct the pro-Memorandum parties' narrative regarding the benefits of the new agreement with the creditors by highlighting the rates of poverty and unemployment in the country. It is worth noting that the majority of news stories concerning the negative effects of the austerity measures are highly correlated (21.4 per cent) with the General Secretary of KKE, Dimitris Koutsoumpas. The side effects of austerity policy were also highlighted by the leader of Golden Dawn, Nikos Michaloliakos (4 per cent)—a percentage not at all negligible, given the very low volume of news stories about Golden Dawn's political rallies. As expected, Panagiotis Lafazanis, the leader of Demotic Unity, also pointed out this issue (14.4 per cent), proclaiming the country's right to decide about its economic policies, and favouring the option of leaving the European currency (13 per cent).

The shift in SYRIZA's political agenda, which won the election of January 2015 based on an anti-austerity campaign, and then transformed to a pro-bailout party, is reflected in the amount of stories where Alexis Tsipras is portrayed as holding a pro-Memorandum position, emphasizing the positive effects of the bailout agreement for the country (53.8 per cent). News stories referring to the bailout agreement with an emphasis on the positive aspects of the new bailout package are also correlated with the presence of River's leader, Stavros Theodorakis (23.1 per cent). Theodorakis during this campaign adopted an old-fashioned modernization discourse, proclaiming the need for radical reforms that would safeguard the European course of the country. ND's leader, Vangelis Meimarakis, as one of the two main contenders for the premiership, keeping in mind that if elected, he would be bound by the bailout agreement, highlighted the issue of budgetary discipline. As a result, more stories on this issue are highly correlated with Meimarakis's visibility (13.1 per cent). Also stories referring to the possibility of a Grexit are highly correlated with the ND leader, since his narrative was built on the need to keep Greece in the European family (16.3 per cent).

### *Populism*

It seems that the financial crisis provided the ideal field for populism to flourish in Greece, as more and more politicians try to attract voters by promoting the nodal point of "the people", whose meaning may vary, according to the political leader. SYRIZA's leader, Alexis Tsipras is by far the party leader who uses the term "the people" to the greatest extent when he addresses his voters (66 times) (see Fig. 2.3). SYRIZA and its leader were the focus of analysis for both international and domestic journalists and academics. The view held by the majority of them is "that SYRIZA constitutes a *populist* movement, articulating a *populist* rhetoric" (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 120). In our sample, the General Secretary of KKE, Koutsoumpas, was also depicted often as making references to "the people" (38 times). On the contrary, the leader of the main opposition party, Meimarakis, does not often address his voters using the word "the people" (15 times).

The results are significantly different as far as it concerns the use of the division "us" and "them", which seems to be frequently used by the majority of political leaders. Alexis Tsipras used this dual scheme quite often (85 times), adjusting his discourse in the main slogan of his campaign, "Let's

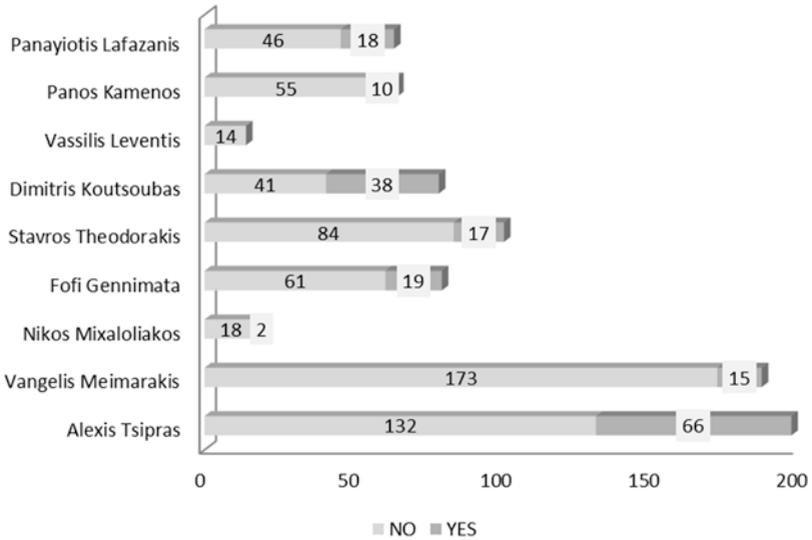


Fig. 2.3 Use of the term “the people” by political leaders

get over the past”. In SYRIZA’s rhetoric, the term “they” is used to describe the old and corrupt political system, as represented, according to SYRIZA’s discourse, by ND and PASOK.

Stavros Theodorakis (River) is the party leader with the second most frequent use of this dual scheme (54 times). Theodorakis used the term “they” to refer to the “new old” (SYRIZA) and the “old old” (ND and PASOK). Theodorakis during this election campaign implemented a severe strategy of personal attacks on SYRIZA’s leader, regarding his populist rhetoric. To a considerable extent the leaders of the smaller parties also made use of this rhetorical scheme (see Fig. 2.4). ND’s party leader also used this division in his rhetoric (48 times) and in most cases he refers to SYRIZA by name, in an attempt to highlight the difference between the realistic and responsible politics of ND and the “irresponsible promises” provided by SYRIZA.

Regarding criticisms of “the establishment” by political leaders, these are more common by the SYRIZA’s leader (56 times), followed by the General Secretary of KKE (36 times) and the leader of Demotic Unity (30 times).

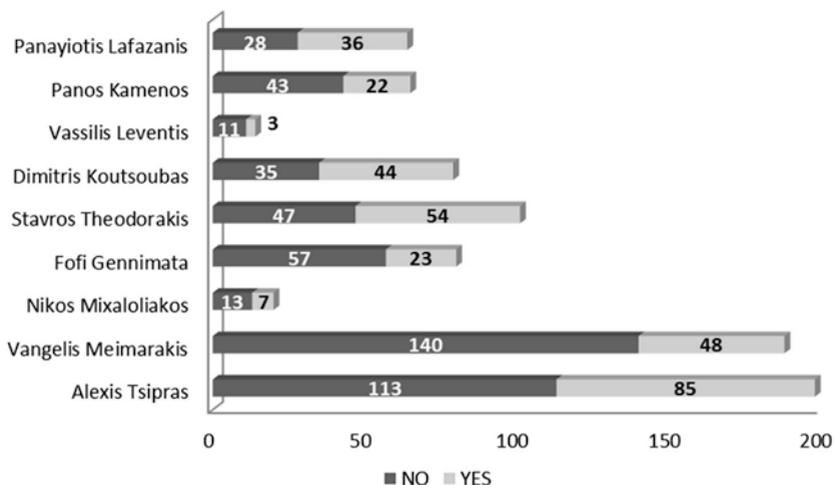


Fig. 2.4 Use of “us” and “them” by political leaders

Analysing the use of the term “elite”, it became apparent that most references concern the political elite (48.4 per cent), while the EU elite also emerged as a common source of criticism among political leaders (17.2 per cent). Besides, the attribution of responsibility for economic conditions to exogenous factors (blame-shifting), in order for governments to minimize political costs, is also manifested in the international literature (Vis and van Kersbergen 2007: 167).

SYRIZA’s leader refers to himself as a “system outsider” more times (39) than his political opponents, often stressing that SYRIZA is a party that differs from the existing party apparatus, aiming at eliminating interweaving in politics. Stavros Theodorakis also identifies himself as an “outsider to the system” (27 times), often emphasizing that his party members are not “children of the partisan political tube”, but capable and hard-working people, promising to struggle to safeguard the “people’s interests”. Similarly, Lafazanis and Koutsoumpas ranked third in terms of frequency of self-perception as “system outsiders” (18 times), separating themselves from the “pro-Memorandum parties”.

Analysing other specific characteristics of populism in the Greek political leaders’ discourse, one observes that a higher proportion of the blame-shifting strategy prevailed in their rhetoric. This trait is mainly apparent in the ND leader’s discourse (77 times), as well as in smaller parties’ discourse

(see also Vasilopoulou et al. 2014). Regarding Tsipras's discourse a quite prominent characteristic is the simplification of issues (24 times), as SYRIZA's leader often adopts the dualistic division of "us" and "them", where SYRIZA represents by default the "new", the "meritorious", and the "fair", and his political opponents (mainly ND) the "vicious", the "old", and the "corrupt". SYRIZA's leader claimed that he knows better the "needs" and "rights" of the people (16 times) and battles more for them when compared to his opponents, particularly compared to ND. As far as smaller parties' leaders are concerned, the Secretary of the Communist Party stressed that he belongs to "the people" (11 times), Theodorakis (River) seems to have a better understanding of "people's needs" (11 times) and Panagiotis Lafazanis presented simplified interpretations (13 times) of complex political issues, particularly that of the return to the national currency.

### *News Framing*

A noteworthy amount of political communication research is concerned with the notion that the media, rather than simply covering "just the facts" of elections and the candidates running in them, often carry their own personal biases, political affiliations, and opinions into their coverage through the way they choose to report on these facts. In other words, the media influence the public opinion by "framing" the news. As Entman noted the media "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (1993: 52). According to Norris (1995: 357), the idea of "news frames" refers to interpretive structures, which set particular events within their broader context; interpretation and evaluation of new information is thus achieved by slotting the new into familiar categories. One of the most often-cited criticisms of media's coverage of political campaigns is that the media rather than providing coverage with a main focus on the candidates' political platform and policy issues, prefer to present stories that focus on candidates' performance and image during the campaigns (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). The framing of election news stories can be broadly classified into two main categories: the "issue frame" and the "strategic game frame". The issue frame applies to new stories that focus on the substance of political issues, descriptions of parties' policies as well as on their ideological differences. On the other hand, the "strategic game frame" is defined as focusing on

politics as a game and personality contest, by placing emphasis on who is winning or losing in elections, candidates' standing in the polls as well as on candidates' strategies and tactics for winning the elections (Aalberg et al. 2012).

In the Greek sample, newspapers hold the lion's share in framing the election campaign as a strategic game (71.1 per cent), followed by TV (33.6 per cent) and online newspapers (32.4 per cent) (see Fig. 2.5). Online newspapers adopted the issue frame to a high extent (67.6 per cent), since in most cases online media presented the programmatic positions of parties on different issues, yet without any attempt to put them in a critical context.

Discussions of candidates' poll standing, outcome predictions, and commentary on tactics that each campaign team was currently using to win over new voters were common themes for the two politically affiliated newspapers (*Avgi* and *Kathimerini*). Regarding the television stations analysed in this study, MEGA takes the lead in framing politics as a strategic game (43.3 per cent), since political pundits and pollsters were quite often invited in the studio to discuss the candidates' standing in the polls and interpret the parties' strategies and tactics for attracting votes. ANTI used the strategy news frame at a rate of 36.5 per cent, while ERT made use of this frame at a rate of 23.1 per cent, proclaiming the issue frame (76.9 per cent).

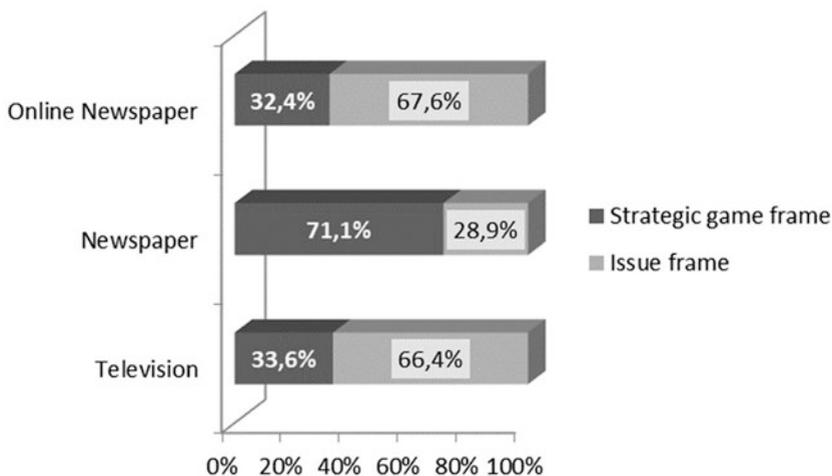


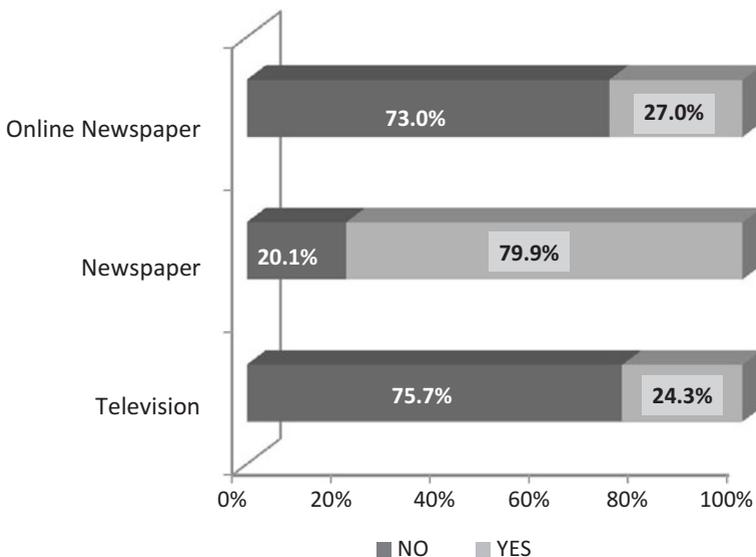
Fig. 2.5 Dominant framing of politics per type of media

These findings echo the market-driven orientation of privately owned media that invest in “horse race” coverage, since strategy reports proved far more popular than reports about the issues (Hahn et al. 2002). On the other hand, the state broadcaster ERT provided more thorough coverage on the issues at stake, defending its public service mission.

When polls dominated news stories, they were presented with a strategy frame at a rate of 85.9 per cent, followed by stories on the functioning of governance (68.5 per cent) and party politics, with a total amount of strategy frame coverage of 46.7 per cent.

### *Interpretive Journalism*

“Horse race” campaign coverage is correlated with interpretative journalism in our sample, and newspapers once again seem to have presented more opinionated stories compared to the other type of media. Overall, newspaper stories included journalistic interpretations (explanations, comments, speculations; for additional information on this operationalization of interpretive journalism, see Salgado and Strömbäck 2012) about politics at a rate of 79.9 per cent, followed by online newspapers (27 per cent) and television (24.3 per cent) (see Fig. 2.6).



**Fig. 2.6** Journalistic interpretation (explanations, speculations, commentaries) per type of media (percentages)

Newscasts and online newspapers focused mostly on the juxtaposition of events and even when some sort of explanation or interpretation accompanied the news stories, this was primarily in the form of a comment (19.5 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively). Among television stations MEGA provided the most explanatory news stories, presenting interpretation on politics and tactics at a rate of 18.6 per cent, while the other two television stations had significantly lower results (ERT 8.5 per cent and ANT1 7.4 per cent). Newspapers provided election news stories with a high rate of overt commentary (77.4 per cent) and a high percentage of analysis of political tactics and interpretations of the reasons behind events (44.4 per cent).

As expected the tabloid newspaper (*Espresso*) presented far fewer news stories with an interpretative angle (34.6 per cent) than the other two daily newspapers (*Kathimerini*, 50.6 per cent and *Avgi*, 40.4 per cent).

### *Conflict and Negativity*

Another finding in our analysis that is in line with previous studies is the increase in attacks in election campaigns. Geer (2010) provides a thorough examination of the media's role in the rise of "attack politics". The coverage of the September 2015 election campaign was marked by the "clash" between the two main contenders Alexis Tsipras and Vangelis Meimarakis, as well as by the intense conflict among the political leaders competing for third place. This was reflected in the confrontational impression of politics that prevailed in 42.7 per cent of the analysed news stories. This finding is quite surprising, given that ND's leader was trying to portray himself as a conciliatory leader, referring to the need of consensus among politicians for the sake of the country.

Television took the lead in conveying a primarily conflictual impression of the political campaign (45 per cent), since most news stories were framed in a way that presented the race for the premiership as a "fight" between the two main "gladiators". More precisely, key points from the two main candidate's speeches were aired in a way that put the two political leaders in constant debate, where chosen quotes from Tsipras seemed to provide an answer to Meimarakis's allegations and vice versa.

This trend is also reflected in the overwhelming percentage of television news stories which gave opportunity to all the relevant parties involved in a conflict to present their arguments (67.6 per cent), compared to the newspapers, which due to their clear political affiliation in most cases, presented a biased, one-sided view of politics (18.9 per cent).

In studies that examine the overall tone of political and election news stories, a tendency for negative media coverage is often reported (O'gara 2009: 2; Hopmann et al. 2012: 246; Lengauer et al. 2012), especially on the way that politicians choose to run on the campaign trail (Lichter 2001: 17). Bias and negativity of political news stories are often examined in the light of political affiliations between certain media and political candidates or parties (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Niven 2001, 2003; Gunther et al. 1999). In the 2015 Greek election campaign, the media seems to have covered election news stories in a neutral tone in the majority of cases (68.2 per cent), while stories with a negative tonality hold 27.8 per cent.

Of particular interest is the tonality that each type of medium adopted, with newspapers holding the lion's share of negative reports (51.1 per cent), which is partly due to more opinionated articles that allow frequent evaluations of political actors and tactics by journalists. In addition, the newspapers included in the study maintain a distinct political affiliation, resulting in the harsh criticism of the views and the actions of politicians from the other side of the political spectrum.

*Avgi*, the daily newspaper of the left, presented stories about SYRIZA with a negative tone at a rate of 16.9 per cent, balanced stories at a rate of 62.3 per cent, and positive tonality prevailed in 20.8 per cent of news stories. Stories on ND were significantly of negative tonality (90.9 per cent), while neutral coverage prevailed in 9.1 per cent of the coverage. The same picture is depicted in the results regarding the leaders of the corresponding parties; Alexis Tsipras (SYRIZA) dominated in stories with a negative tone at a rate of 39.4 per cent, while his opponent Vangelis Meimarakis was portrayed negatively in 85.7 per cent of the news stories.

In *Kathimerini*, SYRIZA was reported with an overall negative tone at a rate of 64.9 per cent, while a more neutral coverage was adopted in 35.1 per cent of the news stories. In effect, SYRIZA had zero positive coverage in this newspaper. On the other hand, ND was reported with a neutral tone in the majority of the news (75 per cent), while negative and positive tonality prevailed in the same amount of stories, that is, 12.5 per cent. Tsipras received negative coverage at a rate of 61.5 per cent and was portrayed in a neutral tone in 38.5 per cent of news stories. Meimarakis received 75 per cent neutral coverage, while negative and positive coverage prevailed in 16.7 per cent and in 8.3 per cent of the news items, respectively. These findings, despite echoing the obtrusively partisan character of the Greek press (Zaharopoulos and Paraschos 1993: 96), reflect Brandenburg's findings (2006) that the media's affiliation with parties and party leaders is not expressed in the form of blatant positive comments for

their “affiliates”, but rather takes the form of severe criticism of the tactics of political opponents.

On the contrary, newscasts adopted a primarily neutral tonality (79.5 per cent), with ANT1 showing the highest rate of “balanced” news (85.1 per cent), followed by state television (80.2 per cent). “Neutral” news stories also prevailed in online newspapers (81.3 per cent), which often published excerpts of political leaders’ speeches, without presenting an analysis of the political leaders’ strategy and performance. The online newspaper *in.gr* presented most election news in a neutral style (82.3 per cent), followed by *prothothema.gr* (80.9 per cent) and *newsit.gr* (78.3 per cent).

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study provide evidence that the news framing of the candidates in the September 2015 election campaign was largely consistent with previous research focusing on the national elections of January 2015 (Giannouli and Karadimitriou 2015). Personalization of politics prevailed once more, with the leaders of the two main parties fighting for the premiership of the country receiving far more coverage than their counterparts.

The populist discourse of some party leaders seems to have captivated the media attention. Populist leaders are media-savvy. They know exactly what to say and how to attract the media’s attention. Since the emergence of the financial crisis, two poles in Greek society quickly crystallized in the media and politicians’ discourse; the Memorandum supporters and the anti-Memorandum front (*antimnemoneake*). However, during the September 2015 election campaign, party leaders’ narratives have shown that this dichotomy could not reflect any longer the traditional cleavage between left and right. As Verney suggested the “sleeping giant” of Euroscepticism was awoken in Greece (2015: 292). The importance of the strategic frame in Greek newspapers proves that the “horse race still sells”. However, this has side effects for political life (see Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Valentino et al. 2001). The emphasis on strategy framing, supplemented by the focus on the personalization of politics, not only increases voters’ apathy, but also leads to a lack of knowledge about the issues at stake and the candidates’ stands.

Negativity and conflictual portrayals of politics emerged as a common theme in the media’s coverage of the September 2015 election campaign. Previous studies have also shown that the establishment of “telepolitics” with increased focus on contradictions and drama, since

both elements seem to appeal to the public, have changed politics, deteriorating people's chances for participation in the democratic process (Papathanassopoulos 2000).

Our study shows a notable correlation of the increased use of strategy frame with the rise of interpretative journalism. The “hot” question for the media today is not merely “who’s winning” but “why”. In order to address this question, election campaign news has shifted away from their traditional descriptive mode towards a more interpretive and analytic style (Zaller 1999: 24–26). Nevertheless, this may not be the case for the Greek media system. The Greek media, the press in particular, continues to be an instrument of negotiation among political, cultural, and economic elites, but, in the age of the social media, this negotiation is in danger of having no audience, especially among the younger generation. It is not a coincidence that populist leaders heavily use social media to communicate with their voters and at the same time dispute “traditional” media.

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