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DOI:

[10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Matakos, K., & Xefteris, D. (2016). Election Note: The September 20, 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Greece. *ELECTORAL STUDIES*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004>

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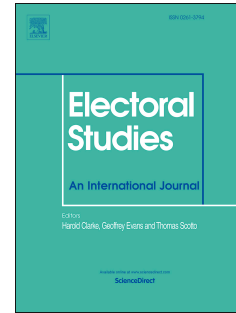
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Accepted Manuscript

Election Note: The September 20, 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Greece

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PII: S0261-3794(15)30070-6

DOI: [10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004)

Reference: JELS 1708

To appear in: *Electoral Studies*

Received Date: 5 October 2015

Revised Date: 10 January 2016

Accepted Date: 8 April 2016

Please cite this article as: Matakos, K., Xeferis, D., Election Note: The September 20, 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Greece, *Electoral Studies* (2016), doi: 10.1016/j.electstud.2016.04.004.

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The September 20, 2015 Parliamentary Election in Greece

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This version: January 10, 2015

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Election Note: The September 20, 2015 Parliamentary Elections in Greece

1. Background

The early parliamentary election of September 20, 2015 was called only eight months after the previous one was held (January 25, 2015) as the *SYRIZA-Independent Greeks* coalition government resigned in late August and the negotiations that followed among party leaders did not result in the formation of a new government. The resignation was triggered by the fact that the government lost its majority in the parliament, after the leftist faction of *SYRIZA* abandoned the party to form its own parliamentary group known as *Popular Unity*.

First, we briefly summarize the events that took place between the two parliamentary elections of 2015 (January 25 and September 20). In the January election, *SYRIZA*, a party of the radical left, won the election and elected 149 out of 300 parliament members. *SYRIZA* formed a post-electoral coalition with *Independent Greeks*, a right-wing populist party, on the basis of their anti-austerity platforms. Together they commanded more than the required absolute majority of seats in the parliament (see Table 1). *Independent Greeks* received a small number of ministerial portfolios (e.g. its leader became the Minister of Defence) and offered continuous support to the decisions of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras regarding the most important issue during this period: the negotiations between the Greek authorities and its institutional lenders (European Central Bank, European Commission, International Monetary Fund).

During the January campaign both *SYRIZA* and *Independent Greeks* promised that, if elected, they will annul the previous set of agreements with Greece's institutional lenders (known in Greek politics as “memorandum”). Instead, they will negotiate from scratch a new agreement with Greece's lenders. This new agreement will have very different characteristics compared to the previous agreements, including that a) international institutions' representatives will no longer be supervising the implementation of the agreement in Greece, and b) the largest part of the Greek debt will be forgiven. Yet, in the months that followed, Greece's institutional lenders were not willing to alter the main characteristics of the agreement, while the coalition government was not willing to step back from its pre-electoral promises. This led, in the beginning of the summer, to a deadlock between Greece and its institutional lenders which culminated in the end of June, when Greece missed its loan repayment to the IMF¹ and Greece's creditors refused to extend the second Greek bailout programme.² In response,

1 Technically speaking, the IMF declared Greece to be in arrears in order to avoid using the term default.

2 The programme was left to expire without the final evaluation being concluded successfully and, as a result, the final tranche was never disbursed. At the same time, a new round of negotiations between Greece and its institutional lenders concerning a third two-year bailout programme had started.

the Prime Minister called a referendum on the topic of whether or not to accept the terms of agreement for a new bailout programme, which were presented to the Greek government by its institutional lenders during the *Eurogroup* meeting of June 25, 2015 –himself endorsing a “No” vote. The announcement of the referendum led to an immediate imposition of capital controls –some of them still apply (e.g. in January 2016 there was still a weekly 420 euros limit on all cash withdrawals). This, in turn, intensified the recession dynamics (European Commission 2015a, 2015b) that followed Greece's half-a-year long denial to accept its lenders' terms.³ The outcome of the referendum was against Greece accepting the terms of its institutional lenders.⁴ A week later, at an EU Summit of Heads of States, where the future of Greece in the Eurozone was at stake, the Greek Prime Minister agreed to the terms, proposed by Greece's institutional lenders, for a third bailout programme.

In the weeks that followed the capitulation of the Greek Prime Minister, many *SYRIZA* MPs resigned from the party but kept their seats in parliament. This resulted in the *SYRIZA* led coalition government losing its parliamentary majority. Despite the coalition losing its majority, the agreement that was concluded between the Greek government and its institutional lenders was introduced by the government to the parliament for approval. The agreement was approved by a large majority since, on top of the non-defecting government MPs, all the MPs from the pro-EU parties (*New Democracy*, *Potami*, *PASOK*) also supported the deal. Nevertheless, the failure of the government to maintain majority support of 151 MPs led to the Prime Minister's resignation on August 20, 2015. During the talks that followed among party leaders, it was reaffirmed that the formation of a new government was not possible and thus an early election was called. The members and MPs of *SYRIZA* who opposed their party signing a new “memorandum” formed the new party of *Popular Unity*.

2. Electoral rule

In Greek parliamentary elections all citizens of age eighteen and above have the right to vote. The ballot is secret and, essentially, voluntary. Strictly speaking, the Constitution stated that voting is compulsory and that the exact penalty for someone abstaining will be specified by a common law. The latter provision was eliminated following the 2001 constitutional amendment. Ever since it has become *lex imperfecta* and, hence, potential laws that determine punishments have no constitutional

3 In its winter (February 5, 2015) economic forecast the European Commission projected that the Greek economy will grow by 2.5% in 2015, and by an additional 3.6% in 2016, compared to an anaemic growth rate of only 0.8% in 2014. By contrast, in its autumn forecast (November 5, 2015), following the imposition of capital controls in June, the Commission projected that the Greek economy will slide back to recession, shrinking by 1.4% and 1.3% in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and will only return to growth by mid-2017.

4 The “No” vote gained 61%.

grounds to be applied. On the ballot paper each party presented an ordered list of candidates. The election took place under a closed-list system. That is, voters could not express preferences over the ranking of candidates. This is a particular feature of the electoral rule –which otherwise specifies an open-list system– that was applied for the first time: when an election takes place within a year of the previous one, party-lists have to be closed.

The current electoral law (3636/2008) is a modified PR-system with a *plurality premium* and, hence, it is rather disproportional in favour of the plurality winner. A total of 300 seats are allocated to all parties that surpass the three percent electoral threshold; 250 seats are distributed among all parties in a proportional manner while the remaining 50 seats are awarded to the *plurality winner* party as a bonus. Most MPs are elected from electoral district lists (288) and the rest (12) from nation-wide party lists. A small number of electoral districts (7) elect a unique MP. In the remaining districts, seats are attributed to the competing parties as proportionally as possible with the following exception: the 50-seat *plurality bonus* is not allocated from a separate list, rather it is allocated by reserving some seats in multi-member districts for the winning party *irrespective* of its electoral performance in that particular district. This, obviously, creates sometimes strong distortions in representation.⁵

The law was introduced by the centre-left *PASOK* back in 2004 –when it was a dominant party– and was amended by *New Democracy* (it was made more disproportional) in 2008. The two parties agreed in such a distortion to the proportionality of the electoral rule as in the past it tended to favour them while *SYRIZA* had opposed that rule back in 2008 (Matakos and Xefteris 2015a). In the aftermath of the 2012 elections and the increase in electoral fragmentation (Matakos and Xefteris 2015b) *PASOK* started to campaign for an electoral rule reform and the abolition of the 50-seat bonus. This time, it was *SYRIZA* who opposed such a reform.

3. Main Issues, Contenders and Campaigns

The early election of September 20, 2015 was triggered by the fact that the governing coalition lost its support in parliament –even falling below the necessary threshold (120 MPs) required for a minority government– as a result of its decision, in July, to agree to a third bailout programme –and further austerity– with Greece’s institutional lenders. Naturally, therefore, the issue that almost exclusively dominated the electoral campaign was related to the third bailout programme and its implementation. An additional issue made its appearance during the campaign: the refugee crisis and the uncontrolled influx of refugees and migrants from the Turkish mainland to many Greek islands. The issue was

5 ¹ For example, in the September election, *SYRIZA* got all four MPs in the electoral district of *Chania* despite having won only about 40% of the vote.

highly controversial and was raised by the conservative opposition parties in order to score gains against the governing coalition.

The main contenders for first place (and the 50-seat bonus that the electoral rule provides) were the left-wing party of *SYRIZA* –which moved towards the centre of the political spectrum after the withdrawal of the more extreme *Leftist Platform* in August– and the main opposition party of *New Democracy* –a conservative centre-right party. Other contenders included parties that have also contested the January 2015 election such as the far-right party of *Golden Dawn*, the once-dominant centre-left party of *PASOK* (which joined forces, this time, with other social-democratic parties forming the *Democratic Coalition*), the centrist liberal party *Potami*, the *Communist Party of Greece*, *SYRIZA*'s coalition partner *Independent Greeks* (a populist right-wing party) and the *Centrist Union* – a party that failed to clear the 3% threshold in January. Most notably, the only new player in this election was *Popular Unity* –a splinter party that was formed by *SYRIZA*'s left-wing dissidents who opposed the third bailout. The *Movement of Democrats and Socialists*, led by ex-Prime Minister George Papandreou, did not contest this election. Most parties contested the election under the same leadership with the exception of the main opposition party of *New Democracy* and *PASOK* which elected new leaders in July and June respectively.

Concerning parties' positions on the main issues during the campaign, with the exception of the *Communist Party of Greece*, *Popular Unity* and *Golden Dawn*, which adapted a clear anti-EU and anti-austerity platform, all other parties (the governing coalition and the pro-EU opposition) pledged to abide by the conditions of the third bailout and implement the stabilization programme if elected. As a result, competition during the campaign was centred on valence issues and the question of which party was more capable of implementing those agreed policies: the old elites (implying the parties that governed Greece since 1974) or the new governing coalition of *SYRIZA* and *Independent Greeks* – which came in power in January 2015. Consequently, in comparison with the January 2015 election, the main cleavage of political competition shifted from the anti/pro-bailout one (only three small parties adopted an anti-bailout platform) to the one of who can better implement and renegotiate parts of the agreement with the EU institutions. This shift was the most prominent element of this electoral campaign.

An additional notable feature of the election campaign was the explicit pledge by the ruling *SYRIZA* party to enter in a coalition only with its preferred partner the *Independent Greeks* despite all polls suggesting that this was not a likely outcome –in all polls, the party of *Independent Greeks* was consistently failing to clear the 3% entry barrier. On the other hand, the main opposition party of *New Democracy* pledged to seek the support of *SYRIZA* in forming a grand-coalition even in the event that it won the election. The centrist parties of *PASOK* and *Potami* signalled their desire to coalesce with the winner –be it *SYRIZA* or *New Democracy*– on the basis of a programmatic agreement that did not risk Greece's place into the Eurozone.

4. Results

The election, which was held with closed-lists for the first time, produced a result very similar to that of January 2015: the incumbent coalition secured again a majority in the parliament (155 seats) and was able to hold on to power. The election result (Table 1) was marked by five main elements: the clear victory of *SYRIZA* despite all polls predicting a very tight race, the failure of *Popular Unity – SYRIZA’s* splinter party– to enter parliament, the success of the *Independent Greeks* in securing their representation in the new parliament, the record-high level of abstention, and finally, the remarkable resilience of the far-right party of *Golden Dawn* which scored moderate gains across the country –and considerable ones in the islands (e.g. Kos, Lesvos, Leros and Samos) affected by the refugee crisis (Fig. 1). Remarkably, the vote shares that the two main contenders (*SYRIZA* and *New Democracy*) received were not very different from those received in January (Table 1). The same is also true for almost all other parties with two notable exceptions: the centrist party *Potami* saw its support decrease by two percentage points while the centre-left *PASOK* saw its support going up by the same amount. Yet, in terms of absolute votes cast, all parties –but for *PASOK* and *Centrist Union*– saw a decrease in their support (Table 1). This was due to the record-high levels of voter abstention. As a result, the decline in turnout offset the decline in the absolute amount of votes that each party received and, hence, it did not result in a dramatic change in the distribution of seats in the new parliament (Table 1).

Moreover, turnout and abstention followed specific regional patterns in this election. As we show in Table 2, urban and metropolitan regions (e.g. Athens, Thessaloniki, Piraeus, Achaia and Heraklion) recorded the sharpest decline in voter turnout compared to the January 2015 elections. Moreover, the regions with the sharpest *differential decrease* in turnout tend to be *SYRIZA* strongholds (Fig. 2). There are many potential explanations for this pattern: electoral fatigue due to the high frequency with which people were called to the polls, or decreased pivotality in electorally safe districts (see Tukiainen and Lyytikäinen 2013). Yet, a crucial element behind this pattern seems to be the fact that some of *SYRIZA’s* January 2015 voters chose to abstain either due to *disappointment* by the party's capitulation to the creditor's terms or because they were *indifferent* between the two main contenders that converged and adopted very similar political platforms (see Matakos et al. 2015).

5. Effects

The outcome of the election was a clear reaffirmation of Prime Minister Tsipras' mandate to continue to govern in collaboration with his coalition partner *Independent Greeks*. In fact, this was the first election in the years following the break-out of the economic crisis –and the imposition of austerity programmes– that an incumbent government was not defeated in the polls after signing a bailout agreement with the EU institutions (the fate of the Papandreou and Samaras cabinets who agreed to the first and second bailouts was sealed by such agreements). In a clear sign of continuity, the Prime Minister appointed to almost all key cabinet positions (i.e. Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Finance, Minister of Economy, Minister of Defence, Minister for Foreign Affairs, etc.) the same

individuals that occupied them before the resignation of the previous *SYRIZA-Independent Greeks* coalition government. As a result, negotiations for the formation of a coalition between *SYRIZA* and *Independent Greeks* were concluded within a day. The new coalition government now commands a majority of 155 MPs, down from a majority of 162 in the previous parliament. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that in this election, and despite previous experience, *retrospective* voting did not seem to be in operation (see also Dinas et al. 2015). In spite of the imposition of *capital controls* – which resulted in a significant decrease in economic activity (European Commission 2015b)– voters decided not to punish the two coalition partners: they jointly lost only about two percentage points and seven seats. This pattern is strengthened further by the fact that *Popular Unity*, consisting of ex-*SYRIZA* MPs and cabinet ministers who resigned in disagreement to the third bailout, failed to clear the 3% barrier and enter parliament.

Moreover, the election result was also a clear reaffirmation of the pro-EU orientation of Greece: the combined vote share of all pro-EU parties which supported the third bailout programme in August 2015 exceeded 80 percent. As a result, the mandate of the government to swiftly implement the agreement with the EU institutions was reinforced further. Therefore, it came as no surprise that the Prime Minister has set the implementation of the agreement as the top priority of his government during the first cabinet meeting. On the negative side, the remarkable resilience of the far-right, xenophobic, and anti-EU party of *Golden Dawn* –which secured its parliamentary representation for a fourth time in a row, finishing third as it did in January 2015- casts a shadow on the, otherwise, strong support that all pro-EU parties received in this election.

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Table 1: Results (allocation of votes and seats) of the September 20, 2015 General Parliamentary Election in Greece

Party	September 2015			January 2015			Change (Sep – Jan) in	
	Percent	Votes	Seats	Percent	Votes	Seats	Percent	Seats
<i>SYRIZA</i>	35.46	1,925,904	145	36.34	2,245,978	149	-0.88	-4
<i>New Democracy</i>	28.10	1,526,205	75	27.81	1,718,694	76	+0.29	-1
<i>Golden Dawn</i>	6.99	379,581	18	6.28	388,387	17	+0.71	+1
<i>PASOK – Democratic Coalition</i>	6.28	341,390	17	5.16	319,289	13	+1.12	+4
<i>Communist Party</i>	5.55	301,632	15	5.47	338,188	15	+0.08	0
<i>Potami</i>	4.09	222,166	11	6.05	373,924	17	-1.96	-6
<i>Independent Greeks</i>	3.69	200,423	10	4.75	293,683	13	-1.06	-3
<i>Centrist Union</i>	3.43	186,475	9	1.79	110,923	0	+1.64	+9
<i>Popular Unity</i>	2.86	155,242	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	+2.86	0
<i>Other parties</i>	3.55	192,831	0	6.35	392,485	0	-2.80	0
<i>Voter turnout</i>	56.57	5,566,295	--	63.62	6,330,356	--	-7.05	--
<i>Valid votes (% of total)</i>	97.58	5,431,850	--	97.64	6,180,872	--	-0.06	--
<i>Blank / Null votes</i>	2.42	134,445	--	2.36	149,484	--	+0.06	--

Note: PASOK – Democratic Coalition’s vote shares are compared to the sum of the vote shares that its two constituent parties (PASOK and Democratic Left) received in the January 25, 2015 elections. Popular Unity did not contest the January 25, 2015 election as it was part of the SYRIZA party. In the percentage of other parties in January 2015 the vote share of former Prime Minister Papandreou’s party is included. Parties’ vote shares are computed on the basis of only the valid votes cast. The percentages of blank and null votes are computed on the basis of all votes cast.

Table 2: Districts with the largest drop in voter turnout from January to September 2015

District name	Sep. 2015	Jan. 2015	Difference	Winner in September 2015	SYRIZA margin (in Jan. 2015)
<i>Attica</i>	63.86	74.6	-10.74	SYRIZA	11.18
<i>Piraeus B</i>	56.57	67.23	-10.66	SYRIZA	23.09
<i>Athens B</i>	63.30	72.82	-9.52	SYRIZA	11.42
<i>Argolida</i>	56.98	66.48	-9.50	ND	-1.47
<i>Thessaloniki A</i>	59.90	69.25	-9.35	SYRIZA	9.28
<i>Achaia</i>	59.25	68.54	-9.29	SYRIZA	22.47
<i>Thessaloniki B</i>	64.91	74.04	-9.13	SYRIZA	2.41
<i>Heraklio</i>	63.11	72.23	-9.12	SYRIZA	29.31
<i>Imathia</i>	59.92	68.94	-9.02	SYRIZA	5.07
<i>Korinthos</i>	57.64	66.65	-9.01	SYRIZA	6.94
<i>Voiotia</i>	60.31	69.17	-8.86	SYRIZA	18.86
<i>Chalkidiki</i>	60.47	69.17	-8.70	ND	0.52
<i>Magnisia</i>	58.90	67.3	-8.40	SYRIZA	15.31
<i>Evoia</i>	58.73	67.1	-8.37	SYRIZA	16.81
<i>Pella</i>	57.48	65.74	-8.26	SYRIZA	-1.89
<i>Larissa</i>	61.15	69.34	-8.19	SYRIZA	8.99
<i>Piraeus A</i>	52.41	60.54	-8.13	SYRIZA	4.80
<i>Pieria</i>	56.67	64.53	-7.86	ND	-4.06
<i>Zakynthos</i>	49.59	56.98	-7.39	SYRIZA	18.98
<i>Kerkyra</i>	49.67	56.99	-7.32	SYRIZA	23.02
<i>Chania</i>	57.35	64.63	-7.28	SYRIZA	23.25
<i>Ileia</i>	50.90	58.05	-7.15	SYRIZA	10.99
<i>Lasithi</i>	58.74	65.86	-7.12	SYRIZA	18.65
National Average	56.57	63.62	-7.05		

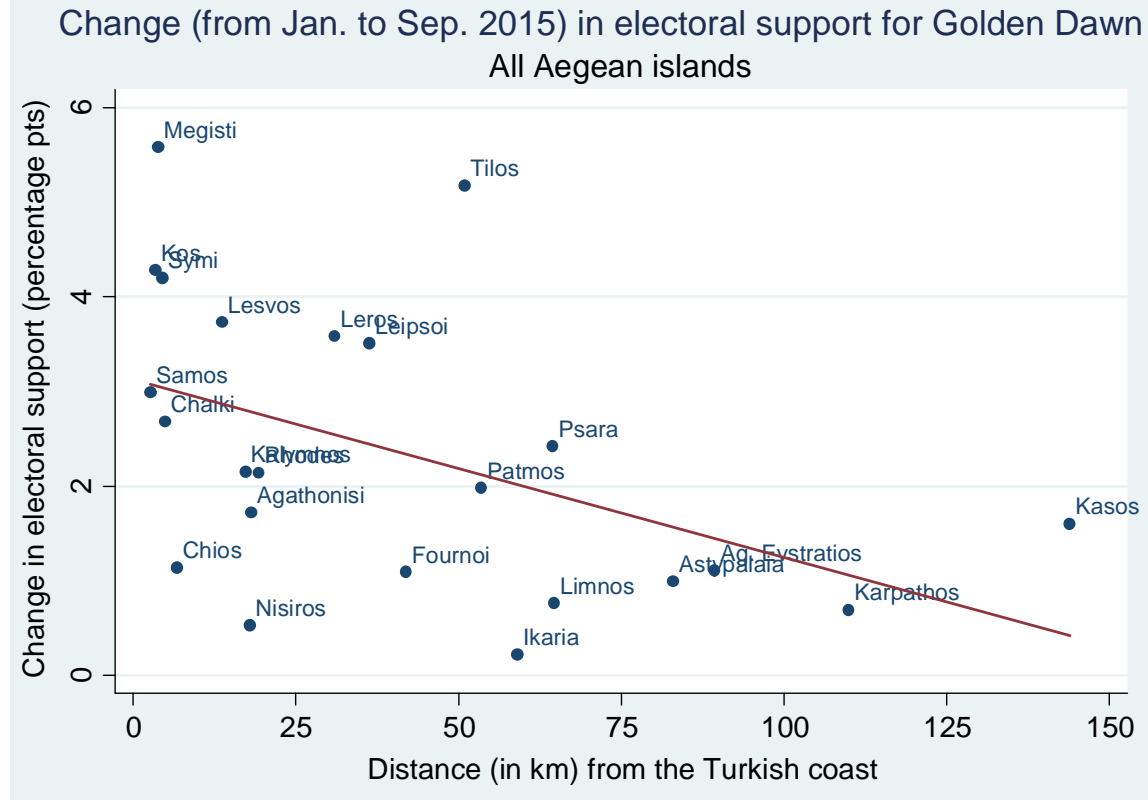


Figure 1. The correlation between the change in electoral support for *Golden Dawn* (from January to September 2015) in all Aegean islands (belonging to the prefectures of Lesvos, Chios, Samos and Dodecanese) and their proximity to the Turkish coast.

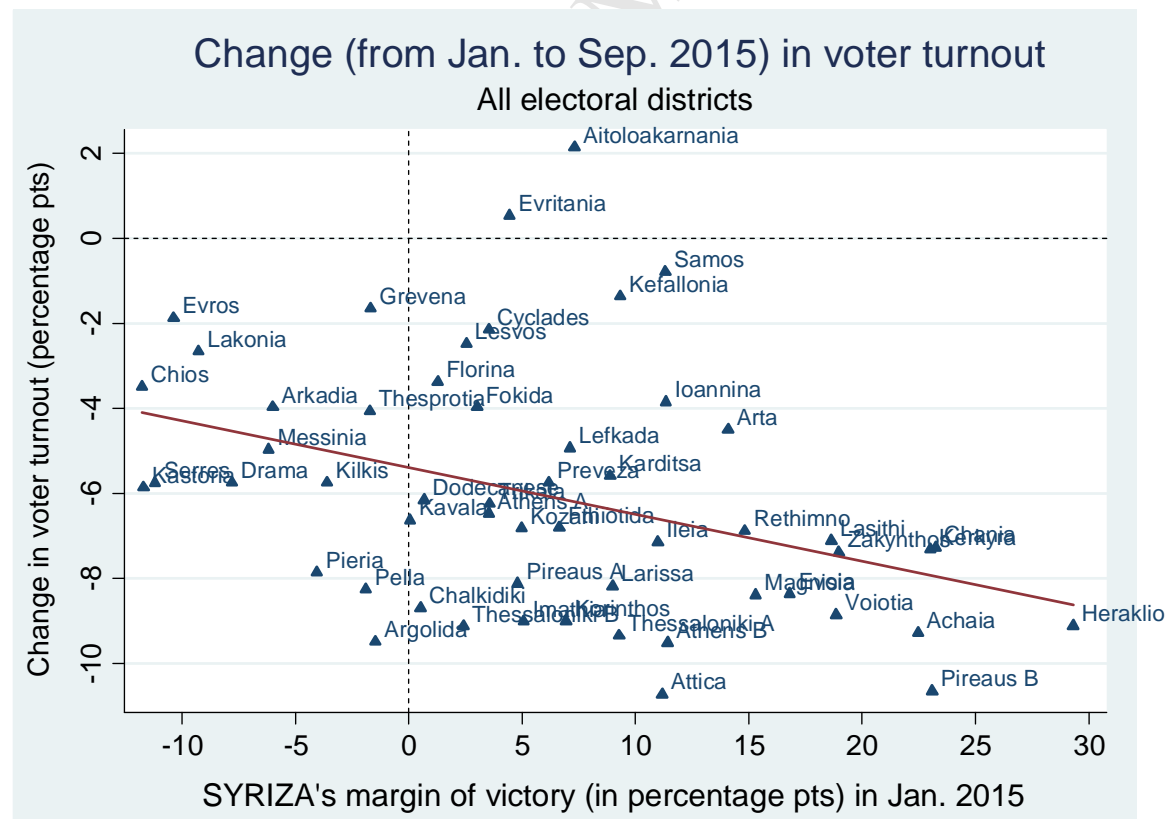


Figure 2. The correlation between the change in voter turnout (from January to September 2015) and *SYRIZA's* margin of victory in January 2015 election.