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The Politics of Greece

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Introduction

The modern Greek state, officially known as the Hellenic Republic, stands at a crossroads of history and geography, shaping and being shaped by a distinctive political tradition. Its politics are entwined with a legacy stretching from classical antiquity to the turbulent twentieth century and into the contemporary era of European integration. For anyone seeking to understand Greece today, it is vital to unravel the layers of its political system, the roles and powers of its institutions, and the societal forces that drive change and continuity alike.

At the heart of Greece's political system lies a parliamentary representative democracy governed by a constitution first adopted in 1975, shortly after the country's return to democratic rule. This foundational document, amended several times since, lays the groundwork for the division of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. These branches form the core of Greek governance and provide a framework intended to protect civil liberties while ensuring effective administration and political accountability.

Yet, to view Greece's politics only through the prism of institutions would be to miss the crucial influence of history, culture, and national experience. Political culture in Greece is deeply marked by ancient democratic ideals, centuries of Ottoman and foreign rule, wars, civil conflict, and decades of political turmoil. These experiences have forged a society where political engagement runs deep, where allegiances are often fiercely held, and where the tension between modernization and tradition—the so-called “cultural dualism”—manifests at every level, from village politics to decisions taken in Parliament.

The transformation of Greece since the 1970s, particularly its evolution as a stable parliamentary democracy and member of both the European Union and NATO, has been nothing short of remarkable. However, this transformation has not been without challenges. The aftermath of the military junta, the legacy of civil war, recurring economic crises, pressures from migration, and the ongoing demand for institutional reform all continue to shape the country's political landscape. High-profile events, such as the debt crisis that began in 2009, have caused seismic shifts within the party system, redefined political alliances, and tested the resilience of Greek democracy.

This book, “The Politics of Greece: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Greece,” provides a comprehensive exploration of these themes. It aims to guide readers through the architecture of the Greek state, the nature and transformation of its political parties, the texture of its civic and political culture, and the fundamental challenges it faces in the twenty-first century. Each chapter combines historical

context, institutional analysis, and a focus on ongoing developments to build a nuanced understanding of how Greece is governed and why its politics matter—both for its citizens and for the broader European and international community.

Through this guide, readers will gain insight into both the enduring foundations and evolving dynamics of Greek politics. The story of Greece is ultimately one of resilience and reinvention: a society navigating between legacy and change, where the pursuit of democratic principles and good governance remains a central—if perpetually challenging—endeavor.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Greek Politics

The political landscape of modern Greece is not a recent construction; it is a tapestry woven from threads of history stretching back millennia. To understand the intricacies of Greek politics today, one must delve into the deep currents of its past, from the birthplace of democracy in ancient Athens to the seismic shifts of the 20th century. These historical layers have shaped institutions, influenced political culture, and continue to resonate in contemporary political discourse.

The legacy of ancient Greece, particularly the Athenian model of democracy, provides a foundational layer, albeit one distinctly different from modern representative systems. In Athens, 'demokratia' meant the power of the *demos*, the people, who directly participated in decision-making through assemblies. While limited to free adult males, this system introduced revolutionary concepts like citizen participation, equality before the law (*isonomia*), public debate, and accountability of leaders through mechanisms like ostracism. These ideals, though not continuously practiced, left an indelible mark on political thought and continue to be referenced in discussions about civic engagement and the role of the citizen.

Following the classical period, Greece experienced various forms of rule, including the Hellenistic kingdoms and, significantly, becoming part of the Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, preserved Greek language and culture for over a thousand years. The Byzantine political system was characterized by a centralized autocracy under the emperor, who held immense power, often viewed as divinely ordained. While not democratic, the Byzantines developed a sophisticated bureaucracy and administrative system, elements of which, perhaps indirectly, influenced later state-building efforts in the region.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 marked the beginning of nearly four centuries of Ottoman rule over much of the Greek-speaking world. This period, known as the *Tourkokratia*, had a profound impact on Greek society and its political evolution. The Ottoman system, while granting some political rights to Orthodox Christians under the millet system, considered them inferior subjects. The Greek Orthodox Church, under the Ecumenical Patriarch, gained significant influence and played a crucial role in preserving Greek identity, language, and culture. Local Greek notables, known as *prokritoi* or *kocabaşis*, also emerged as a new elite class, often acting as intermediaries between the Greek population and the Ottoman authorities, though their role was sometimes viewed negatively due to corruption and nepotism. This era instilled a deep-seated desire for independence and self-determination among the Greek people.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw a rise in Greek nationalism, fueled by the ideals of the Enlightenment and a growing sense of shared identity and history. Secret organizations, such as the Filiki Eteria (Society of Friends), were formed with the aim of liberating Greece from Ottoman rule. This fervent desire for independence culminated in the Greek War of Independence, which began in 1821. This was a brutal and protracted struggle, marked by significant violence on both sides.

The war attracted the attention and support of European powers, influenced by Philhellenism and strategic interests in the collapsing Ottoman Empire. Britain, France, and Russia played crucial roles, their naval forces notably contributing to the decisive Battle of Navarino in 1827. After years of fighting and diplomatic maneuvering, Greece was finally recognized as an independent state in 1830 through the London Protocol, with its full independence secured by the Treaty of Constantinople in 1832.

The newly independent Greek state was initially a kingdom, with Prince Otto of Bavaria chosen as its first monarch in 1832. His autocratic rule, however, quickly led to discontent, culminating in the September 3rd Revolution of 1843, which forced King Otto to grant a constitution and establish a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament. This marked a significant step towards establishing modern political institutions, although the power of the monarch remained considerable. The 19th century also saw the emergence of the "Megali Idea" (Great Idea), a nationalist aspiration to unite all Greek-speaking territories under one state, which profoundly influenced Greek foreign policy and domestic politics for decades.

Political life in the 19th century was often characterized by instability, with frequent changes in government and a political system dominated by powerful families and clientelist networks. Despite these challenges, Greece gradually developed its parliamentary institutions. The Constitution of 1864, adopted after King Otto's deposition and the enthronement of King George I from the Glücksburg dynasty, further reduced the monarch's powers and established a more democratic constitutional monarchy with a unicameral parliament and universal male suffrage. This period saw territorial expansion following the Balkan Wars in the early 20th century, significantly increasing the size and population of the Greek state.

The early 20th century was a period of significant upheaval for Greece, marked by the National Schism, a deep political rift between those supporting King Constantine I and those backing the liberal statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, particularly over foreign policy during World War I. This division had lasting consequences for Greek politics. Following the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922 and the Asia Minor Catastrophe, a period of political instability ensued, including the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Second Hellenic Republic in 1924. However, the Republic proved short-lived, and the monarchy was restored in 1935.

The interwar period also saw the rise of authoritarianism in Greece, culminating in the establishment of the Metaxas dictatorship in 1936. This regime, though short-lived, further interrupted the development of democratic institutions. Greece's involvement in World War II, including resisting the Italian invasion and subsequent German occupation, was followed by a devastating civil war from 1946 to 1949. This conflict, largely fought between government forces supported by the Western Allies and the Communist-led Democratic Army of Greece, left deep ideological divisions within Greek society that would shape politics for decades.

The post-civil war era saw Greece align firmly with the West and join NATO in 1952. The political landscape was dominated by conservative governments, and the legacy of the civil war contributed to a climate of political tension and, at times, repression of the left. This period of fragile parliamentary democracy was abruptly ended by a military coup in April 1967, which established a repressive dictatorship known as the Regime of the Colonels. The junta suspended civil liberties, imposed censorship, and suppressed dissent. Their rule, characterized by human rights abuses, lasted until 1974.

The collapse of the junta in July 1974, triggered by the crisis in Cyprus, marked a pivotal moment in modern Greek history - the *Metapolitefsi*, the transition to democracy. Constantine Karamanlis, a former prime minister, returned from exile to lead a government of national unity. This period saw the legalization of the Communist Party, a referendum that decisively abolished the monarchy, and the adoption of a new constitution in 1975, establishing the Third Hellenic Republic and laying the foundation for the parliamentary democracy that exists today. This return to democracy, after decades of instability, war, and dictatorship, was a crucial turning point, setting Greece on a path towards European integration and solidifying its democratic institutions.

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