

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2011

A NEW ERA OF CITIZEN PARTY DISENGAGEMENT

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The high rate of abstention is the most notable result of the May 2011 elections to the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus. Its weight and real value cannot be contested as might be the case for the vote share of the political parties. The extreme increase of abstentions along with vote share calculated on the basis of valid ballots concealed the real influence of parties in society; thus, DISY, AKEL and the Ecologists appeared to have increased their influence, EDEK equalled its 2006 share, while DIKO and EVROKO lost votes. How true are these results in the light of high abstention or the new morals, where failure or success is based on opinion polls predictions instead of performance in the last elections? We could better assess the outcome of the election if we study the meaning and the impact of abstention.

The most prominent and widespread explanation, attributed the increase of abstention rate from 11% in 2006 to 21.3% in 2011 to the loss of credibility of both politics and politicians in the Republic. They are simply "disgraced". However, this possible cause cannot explain the size and timing of the increase; no extraordinary event occurred after 2006 leading to such a change of behaviour. In addition, disdain and low esteem for politics and parties have been long standing phenomena without affecting participation in polls.

Changes in political attitudes and behaviour can be attributed to factors of structural or conjectural character. For decades, attachment to parties has been connected to ideology and their influence, - broadened in the 1980s and 1990s, their potential to offer services to citizens, their clients. People invested also in politics, in the hope to see come true expectations related to various events; European Union membership, the relaxation of free movement bans in 2003, changes in power (2003 and 2008), the outcome of the 2004 referendum and a vision of a possible / better solution, all these factors entertained in people's hearts a picture of a better future. Large parts of Greek Cypriots today feel grossly deceived, as, years after all these events, no prospect is visible. Moreover, 'realities' consolidate their effects and many feel that things cannot or 'need' not change.

The economic crisis affected the overall picture; for some the grey colours of deception are turning into dark, to despair. No matter whether EU membership might have an attenuating effect on the impact of the crisis, the reality is that the present situation falls far behind expectations.

What is the role of politics and politicians? They hold central stage, almost exclusively and interminably, politicians fight each other without grace or they say nice things, sweet words that spin doctors taught them to use. Few of them may be serious and discuss in a constructive and creative way, but their voices are lost and no serious proposal for the future, no prospect is offered.

The lack of a vision alienates citizens from politics, turns many voters away from polls, in larger numbers than before; citizens today are more educated, more demanding, they have rich or very specific agendas and they are more critical towards parties and politicians. The spread of new media offers them more, varied information and before parties decide their line, many are already forming their opinion through online horizontal communication with other citizens.

The conjecture has not been helpful either. Parliamentary elections mean no change in power, no new prospect, while the authorities 'discovered' that penalising abstention is practically impossible. Appeals for larger participation fell in deaf ears; large numbers of future absentees were already too far away from politics to hear.

High abstention means that the overall influence of parties, with no exception, has declined. With 30000 more voters than in 2006 and stable abstention rate, in order to equal its 2006 share, DISY should have got 10000 more votes. The party got only 7,600 only and share ...increase of 3.8%.

The outcome of the 2011 elections means that new citizen values and attitudes are developing: As a result parties are losing ground in terms of authority and mobilisation capacity. They have more difficulties to approach voters, while the polarising discourses of the two big are becoming less efficient than before. More citizens are disengaging from politics and party life, and their selection of candidates is done more and more in terms of media visibility – media personas and celebrities. A new era of vote uncertainty lies ahead in politics.