

## Democratic Resilience and Institutional Reform in Post-Crisis Greece: A Political Analysis

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### Abstract

This study examines democratic resilience and institutional reform in post-crisis Greece, addressing the limited integration of institutional performance, political legitimacy, and citizen trust within a unified analytical framework, focusing on the political transformations following the sovereign debt crisis. It analyzes how austerity measures, external pressures from European institutions, and domestic political dynamics have shaped democratic governance. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research employs document analysis and process tracing, drawing on policy documents, electoral data, and secondary literature to systematically assess changes in political legitimacy, citizen trust, and institutional performance. The findings indicate that despite significant socio-economic disruptions, Greece has maintained democratic continuity, evidenced by sustained electoral processes and gradual institutional adaptation through sustained electoral participation and gradual institutional adaptation. However, these developments are constrained by persistent political polarization, fragile public trust, and limited administrative capacity, which undermine the depth and quality of democratic governance. The study also highlights the role of reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability, and governance effectiveness. It argues that while formal democratic structures remain intact, the quality of democracy is constrained by tensions between externally driven reforms and domestic political legitimacy from both internal and external factors. The article contributes to debates on democratic resilience by proposing a multidimensional framework that integrates institutional reform, political legitimacy, and citizen engagement in crisis-affected democracies in crisis-affected states and offers insights for strengthening institutional frameworks in similar contexts.

**Keyword:** democratic resilience; institutional reform; political legitimacy; governance; post-crisis politics

### I. INTRODUCTION

The sovereign debt crisis that struck Greece between 2009 and 2018 not only reshaped its economic landscape but also constituted a critical test of democratic resilience under conditions of external intervention, not only because of its economic consequences but also due to its profound implications for democratic stability.

The crisis triggered a series of austerity policies imposed through external oversight mechanisms by institutions such as the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, collectively known as the “Troika” (Featherstone., 2015; Matsaganis., 2018). This intervention raised fundamental questions regarding national sovereignty and, more specifically, how externally imposed

institutional reforms affected the resilience and legitimacy of Greek democracy (Papadimitriou, Pegasiou, & Zartaloudis., 2019).

Although existing studies link economic crises to declining political legitimacy (Xiaolong et al., 2025) they often fail to explain how institutional reform processes mediate this relationship, particularly in the Greek case and the rise of public distrust in democratic institutions (Armingeon & Guthmann., 2014; Bosco & Verney., 2016). In the Greek context, this phenomenon is reflected in increasing voter abstention, electoral volatility, and the emergence of populist parties across both the left and right political spectrum (Dinas et al., 2015). Nevertheless, despite these pressures, the Greek democratic system did not collapse. Elections continued to be held regularly, power transitions occurred peacefully, and the constitutional framework remained intact. This condition raises an important question regarding the extent to which Greek democracy can be considered resilient.

In this study, democratic resilience is understood not only as the capacity to endure shocks but also as the ability to adapt through institutional reform while maintaining political legitimacy.both external and internal shocks (Boese et al., 2021). Within the literature, there is an ongoing debate as to whether democratic resilience is primarily determined by the strength of formal institutions or by broader socio-political dynamics (Merkel., 2014; Levitsky & Ziblatt., 2018). In the case of Greece, some scholars argue that democratic resilience has been largely

supported by European Union integration, which functions as an institutional anchor (Featherstone., 2015), while others emphasize the role of civil society mobilization and domestic political culture (Sotiropoulos., 2018).

Furthermore, the crisis triggered a wave of institutional reforms aimed at improving public administration efficiency, transparency, and accountability (Spanou., 2020). These reforms included the digitalization of public services, bureaucratic restructuring, and anti-corruption initiatives. However, the effectiveness of these reforms remains contested. Some studies suggest that progress has been limited due to bureaucratic resistance and weak implementation capacity (Kickert., 2019), while others argue that these reforms constitute important steps toward stronger democratic consolidation (Zartaloudis., 2021).

Despite extensive scholarship on the Greek crisis, existing research rarely integrates institutional reform, political legitimacy, and democratic resilience within a unified analytical framework, leaving a critical gap in understanding their interaction. First, much of the existing research focuses predominantly on economic impacts and austerity policies, with relatively limited attention given to the interaction between institutional reform and democratic resilience in a comprehensive manner (Matsaganis., 2018; Papadimitriou et al., 2019). Second, studies on democratic resilience often employ macro-comparative approaches, thereby overlooking the specific dynamics within the Greek national context (Boese et al., 2021). Third, there is still a lack of research that integrates political

legitimacy, public trust, and institutional performance within a unified analytical framework.

Moreover, the literature tends to conceptualize democratic resilience in a dichotomous manner either as “surviving” or “failing” without adequately considering variations in the quality of democracy (Merkel, 2014). In the Greek context, such an approach risks overlooking the fact that, although democratic institutions have remained functional, the quality of political representation, public participation, and trust in government has experienced significant fluctuations (Bosco & Verney., 2016; Petrov et al., 2025). Therefore, a more critical and multidimensional approach is needed to better understand how Greek democracy has adapted under crisis conditions.

This study aims to address these gaps by systematically analyzing how institutional reforms implemented during and after the crisis have influenced political legitimacy and, in turn, shaped democratic resilience in Greece. Specifically, it explores how reforms implemented during and after the crisis have contributed to the recovery of political legitimacy and the improvement of institutional performance. In addition, this research examines the extent to which factors such as citizen participation, party system dynamics, and external influences have shaped this process.

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing policy analysis, electoral data, and a review of secondary literature. By integrating multiple sources of data, this research seeks to

provide a more comprehensive understanding of the condition of Greek democracy. This approach also enables a deeper analysis of the causal relationships between crisis, reform, and democratic resilience.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of the concept of democratic resilience by emphasizing the simultaneous importance of institutional dimensions and political legitimacy. Empirically, it offers new insights into the Greek experience as a country that has managed to sustain democracy amid a multidimensional crisis. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for other countries facing similar challenges in maintaining democratic stability under economic and political pressures.

Thus, this research is relevant not only within the context of Greek studies but also in the broader discourse on the future of democracy in an era of global crises. In an increasingly uncertain world marked by economic shocks, pandemics, and geopolitical instability, understanding the factors that support democratic resilience has become ever more crucial (Levitsky & Ziblatt., 2018; Boese et al., 2021). Therefore, the analysis of the Greek case provides a significant contribution to both the theory and practice of contemporary democracy.

## II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to critically examine the relationship between democratic resilience and institutional reform in post-crisis Greece. A A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate as this study

seeks to uncover causal mechanisms and contextual interactions between institutional reform and democratic resilience, which cannot be adequately captured through aggregate quantitative indicators, which cannot be fully captured through purely quantitative indicators (Creswell & Poth., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln., 2017). By emphasizing interpretive depth, this method enables a nuanced understanding of how political actors, institutions, and citizens interact within a post-crisis democratic framework.

The research employs a case study strategy focusing on Greece as a critical case of democratic endurance under conditions of severe economic and political stress. Case study methodology allows for in-depth exploration of causal mechanisms and institutional dynamics within real-life contexts (Yin., 2018). Greece is selected as a critical case, as it combines extreme economic crisis conditions with sustained democratic continuity, allowing for the examination of how institutional reform operates under high systemic stress despite external intervention and internal instability. This makes it a valuable case for examining the limits and possibilities of democratic resilience.

Data are analyzed through a structured document analysis framework, involving coding of policy documents and secondary sources to identify recurring themes related to institutional reform, political legitimacy, and democratic resilience. Policy documents include reform legislation, government reports, and European Union policy frameworks that outline institutional changes during and after the crisis. Electoral data

are used to assess patterns of voter participation, party system volatility, and shifts in political alignment. Secondary literature provides theoretical grounding and contextual interpretation, ensuring that the analysis is situated within broader scholarly debates.

To strengthen analytical rigor, this study utilizes document analysis as a central technique. Document analysis enables systematic evaluation of written materials to identify patterns, themes, and discourses related to democratic governance and institutional reform. In this research, documents are critically examined to uncover how reforms are framed, implemented, and contested within the Greek political system. This approach also facilitates triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of findings by cross-verifying data from multiple sources (Patton., 2015).

In addition, the study employs process tracing to systematically examine sequences linking crisis conditions, reform implementation, and changes in political legitimacy, focusing on key reforms such as administrative restructuring and anti-corruption measures as observable causal mechanisms initiatives, and democratic outcomes. Process tracing is particularly useful in qualitative political analysis as it allows researchers to examine sequences of events and infer causal mechanisms. Through this method, the research traces how specific reforms such as administrative restructuring and anti-corruption measures have influenced political legitimacy and institutional performance over time.

The analytical framework of this study is

structured around three core dimensions: institutional reform, political legitimacy, and democratic resilience. These dimensions are operationalized through specific indicators, as summarized in the Table 2.1 below

No	Dimension	Indicators	Data Sources
1.	Institutional Reform	Administrative efficiency, transparency, anti-corruption measures	Policy documents, EU reports
2.	Political Legitimacy	Public trust, voter turnout, political stability	Electoral data, survey reports
3.	Democratic Resilience	Continuity of elections, institutional adaptation, governance performance	Secondary literature, policy analysis

This framework enables a systematic and integrated analysis of how different variables interact within the Greek democratic system. Importantly, it moves beyond a narrow institutional focus by incorporating legitimacy and citizen engagement as key components of democratic resilience (Gerring., 2017; Azan., 2024).

However, this methodological approach is not without limitations. First, reliance on secondary data may introduce biases related to data availability and interpretation. While efforts

are made to use credible and peer-reviewed sources, the study remains dependent on existing scholarship, which may reflect particular theoretical or ideological perspectives (Silverman., 2016). Second, the case study design limits the generalizability of findings. Although Greece provides a rich empirical context, its unique historical and institutional characteristics may not be fully applicable to other countries.

Despite these limitations, the chosen methodology offers significant strengths. Its qualitative and integrative nature allows for a comprehensive understanding of democratic resilience that accounts for both structural and agency-based factors. Moreover, the combination of document analysis and process tracing provides a robust basis for identifying causal relationships and generating theoretically informed insights (Yin., 2018).

In sum, this methodological design is well-suited to addressing the research objectives by providing a critical and in-depth analysis of the interplay between institutional reform and democratic resilience in post-crisis Greece. It not only facilitates empirical investigation but also contributes to broader methodological discussions in political science regarding the study of democracy under conditions of crisis.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study and critically discusses the relationship between institutional reform and democratic resilience in post-crisis Greece. The analysis is structured around three core dimensions: (1)

institutional reform, (2) political legitimacy, and (3) democratic resilience. By integrating these dimensions, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how Greece has navigated the challenges posed by the sovereign debt crisis and its aftermath.

### **1. Institutional Reform: Progress and Structural Constraints**

The findings indicate that Greece implemented a series of institutional reforms aimed at improving administrative efficiency, transparency, and accountability; however, their effectiveness has been uneven due to structural bureaucratic resistance and limited enforcement capacity. Key reforms include the digitalization of public administration, fiscal restructuring, and anti-corruption initiatives. These reforms were largely driven by external conditionalities imposed by European institutions, which functioned as coercive policy constraints that reshaped domestic reform priorities through financial dependency mechanisms, which required Greece to modernize its governance structures (Spanou., 2020; Featherstone., 2015).

One notable achievement is the expansion of e-government services, which has reduced bureaucratic inefficiencies and increased accessibility to public services. According to OECD reports, digital governance reforms appear to have contributed to improved service delivery and partially reduced opportunities for rent-seeking behavior, although the magnitude of this effect varies across administrative sectors and remains unevenly documented (OECD., 2021). However, the implementation of these reforms

has been uneven. Bureaucratic inertia, limited administrative capacity, and resistance from entrenched interests have constrained their effectiveness (Kickert., 2019; Sotiropoulos., 2018).

Moreover, while anti-corruption frameworks have been strengthened, their enforcement remains inconsistent. Studies show that although hile formal institutional frameworks have improved, informal governance practices particularly clientelistic networks continue to mediate political decision-making, thereby limiting the transformative impact of institutional reform (Mungiu-Pippidi., 2015; Pappas., 2019). This suggests that institutional reform in Greece has been more successful at the formal level than at the level of political culture and practice.

### **2. Political Legitimacy: Recovery Amid Persistent Distrust**

The second key finding concerns the evolution of political legitimacy in post-crisis Greece. The data reveal a gradual recovery of public trust in democratic institutions, particularly after the stabilization of macroeconomic indicators in the late 2010s, suggesting a partial linkage between economic recovery and institutional legitimacy. Voter turnout, which had declined significantly during the peak of the crisis, has shown signs of stabilization in recent elections (Hernández & Kriesi., 2016; Arafat et al., 2025).

However, this recovery remains fragile. Public trust in political parties and government institutions continues to be relatively low compared to pre-crisis levels (Algan et al., 2017).

This reflects a broader pattern observed in crisis-affected democracies, where economic hardship undermines citizens' confidence in political elites (Armington & Guthmann., 2014; Saito et al., 2025). In Greece, austerity measures exacerbated social inequality and fueled perceptions of injustice, further eroding legitimacy (Matsaganis., 2018).

The rise of populist parties reflects not only contested political legitimacy but also a reconfiguration of political representation, wherein traditional party structures were challenged by anti-austerity mobilization and identity-based political narratives. Parties such as Syriza capitalized on public dissatisfaction with austerity policies, challenging traditional party systems and reshaping political competition (Dinas et al., 2015; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis., 2019). While this increased political participation and representation, it also contributed to polarization and instability.

The following table summarizes key indicators of political legitimacy in post-crisis Greece:

No	Indicator	Pre-Crisis Period	Crisis Period	Post-Crisis Trend
1.	Voter Turnout	High	Declining	Stabilizing
2.	Trust in Government	Moderate	Low	Gradual recovery
3.	Party	Stable	Fragment	Reconf

	System Stability		ed	iguring
4	Political Polarization	Low Moderate	High	Persistent

These findings indicate a dual-track democratic condition in which institutional continuity coexists with declining qualitative legitimacy, particularly in terms of trust, representation, and perceived fairness.

### 3. Democratic Resilience: Between Continuity and Adaptation

Despite the severity of the crisis, Greece has demonstrated a conditional form of democratic resilience characterized by institutional continuity under significant socio-economic stress, rather than robust democratic consolidation. The continuity of elections, peaceful transfers of power, and adherence to constitutional norms indicate that the core structures of democracy have been preserved (Boese et al., 2021; Botha et al., 2025). This supports the argument that democratic systems can endure significant shocks without collapsing, provided that key institutional safeguards remain in place (Merkel., 2014).

However, resilience should not be interpreted as mere survival. The findings show that Greek democracy has undergone significant adaptation, particularly through party system restructuring, shifts in electoral behavior, and incremental institutional reforms responding to crisis conditions (Kumar., 2024). Institutional reforms, changes in party systems, and shifts in

citizen engagement all reflect a dynamic process of transformation. This aligns with the view that democratic resilience involves both stability and change (Levitsky & Ziblatt., 2018).

At the same time, the study identifies several vulnerabilities that may undermine long-term resilience. These include persistent economic inequality, weak state capacity, and ongoing external dependencies. The role of the European Union, while providing stability, also raises concerns about democratic accountability and national sovereignty (Schmidt, 2020; Papadimitriou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the reliance on external actors for reform implementation may limit the development of domestic ownership and institutional learning. This creates a paradox in which reforms designed to strengthen democracy may simultaneously weaken its legitimacy if perceived as externally imposed (Blyth., 2013; Çelik et al., 2025).

#### **4. Interactions Between Reform and Resilience**

A key contribution of this study is its analysis of the interaction between institutional reform and democratic resilience. The findings suggest that this relationship is neither linear nor uniform. While some reforms have enhanced resilience by improving governance capacity, others have generated unintended consequences that undermine legitimacy.

For example, fiscal consolidation measures have stabilized the economy but at the cost of social welfare and public trust (Streeck, 2014). Similarly, administrative reforms have increased

efficiency but have not fully addressed issues of accountability and transparency. This highlights the importance of considering both the outcomes and processes of reform in assessing their impact on democracy.

The study also finds that citizen engagement plays a crucial mediating role in this relationship. Increased political participation, particularly through protests and social movements, has influenced policy outcomes and reinforced democratic norms (Kriesi, 2014). However, when participation is driven by dissatisfaction rather than trust, it may contribute to instability rather than resilience.

#### **5. Comparative and Theoretical Implications**

From a comparative perspective, the Greek case provides valuable insights into the broader dynamics of democracy under crisis conditions. It demonstrates that democratic resilience is contingent on a combination of institutional strength, political legitimacy, and societal engagement. This challenges deterministic views that economic crises inevitably lead to democratic breakdown (Przeworski, 2019; Abayomi & Shahriar., 2024).

Theoretically, the findings support a multidimensional understanding of democratic resilience that integrates institutional, political, and social factors. This approach moves beyond binary classifications of democratic success or failure and emphasizes the importance of quality and adaptability (Gerring., 2017; Amin et al., 2025).

#### **6. Synthesis of Findings**

To synthesize the results, the following

table presents the overall assessment of democratic resilience in post-crisis Greece:

No	Dimension	Key Findings	Implications
1.	Institutional Reform	Significant but uneven progress	Needs deeper implementation and cultural change
2.	Political Legitimacy	Partial recovery with persistent distrust	Requires rebuilding trust and inclusiveness
3.	Democratic Resilience	Strong continuity with adaptive transformation	Vulnerable to long-term structural challenges

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex relationship between democratic resilience and institutional reform in post-crisis Greece, highlighting how a democratic system can persist through profound economic and political shocks, albeit with significant strains in legitimacy, trust, and governance quality. The findings demonstrate that Greece's democracy has shown notable resilience, evidenced by the continuity of electoral processes, peaceful transfers of power, and the preservation of constitutional order, even during periods of intense socio-economic disruption. However, this resilience should not be interpreted as an indication of democratic robustness in all

dimensions, but rather as a conditional and evolving process shaped by both internal and external factors.

One of the central conclusions of this study is that institutional reform has played a significant yet ambivalent role in sustaining democracy in Greece. On the one hand, reforms aimed at enhancing administrative efficiency, transparency, and fiscal governance have contributed to stabilizing state institutions and restoring a degree of functional capacity. On the other hand, the externally driven nature of many of these reforms has generated tensions related to democratic legitimacy and national sovereignty. This duality underscores the importance of considering not only the technical effectiveness of reforms but also their political and social acceptability.

Furthermore, the study finds that political legitimacy remains a critical and unresolved challenge. Although there has been some recovery in public trust and electoral participation, these improvements are fragile and uneven. The legacy of austerity policies, combined with persistent socio-economic inequalities, continues to shape public perceptions of governance and democratic representation. The rise of populist movements further illustrates the extent to which legitimacy remains contested, reflecting both the strengths and vulnerabilities of democratic systems under stress.

Importantly, this research emphasizes that democratic resilience is not merely about institutional survival but also about the capacity for adaptation and transformation. In the Greek case, resilience has involved significant

reconfiguration of the party system, evolving forms of citizen engagement, and gradual institutional adjustments. These changes suggest that democracy in Greece has not remained static but has actively responded to crisis conditions, albeit with varying degrees of success.

The study also contributes to broader theoretical debates by demonstrating that democratic resilience is inherently multidimensional. It cannot be adequately understood through a single lens whether institutional, economic, or cultural but must instead be analyzed as an interaction between governance structures, political legitimacy, and societal dynamics. This integrative perspective challenges simplistic narratives of democratic decline or stability and calls for more nuanced approaches in the study of crisis-affected democracies.

Nevertheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on qualitative data and secondary sources may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on a single case study, while allowing for in-depth analysis, limits the ability to draw broader comparative conclusions. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating cross-national comparisons or mixed-method approaches to further validate and expand upon the findings presented here.

In terms of practical implications, the Greek experience highlights the necessity of aligning institutional reform with domestic political contexts and citizen expectations. Reforms that are perceived as externally imposed

or socially unjust risk undermining public trust and weakening democratic legitimacy. Therefore, policymakers should prioritize reforms that strengthen institutional accountability mechanisms, enhance participatory decision-making at local and national levels, and ensure transparency through enforceable oversight frameworks, so that reform processes are both operationally effective and democratically legitimate.

In conclusion, Greece provides a compelling example of how democracy can persist under extreme pressure while undergoing significant transformation. Its experience illustrates that democratic resilience is neither automatic nor guaranteed; it must be continuously negotiated, supported, and renewed through both institutional innovation and societal engagement. As global challenges such as economic instability, political polarization, and external intervention continue to shape democratic trajectories worldwide, the lessons drawn from Greece remain highly relevant for understanding and strengthening democracy in the contemporary era.

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