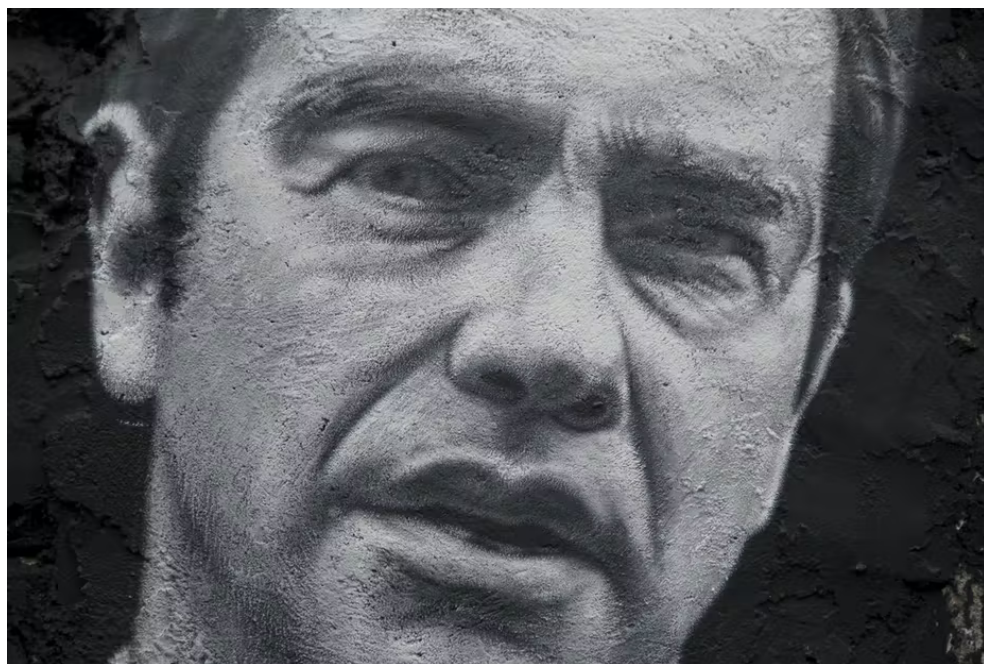


## Why are European leaders so afraid of Greece's Syriza party?

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Alexis Tsipras is on track to win the Greek election. *thierry ehrmann*

The calling of a snap election in Greece for January 25 has been met with great concern in political circles, prompted direct interventions by top European officials and alarmed markets and credit rating agencies.

This is all because Syriza, the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left, is being tipped to win the election. It is currently the largest opposition party in the Greek parliament and consistently leads the polls as the vote approaches.

According to the latest polls Syriza's vote share could stretch anywhere between 36% to 40%, with the centre-right New Democracy trailing by at least three percentage points. Anything above 36% gives Syriza not only an electoral victory but an outright governing majority in the Greek parliament because the winning party is automatically handed a 50-seat bonus in the 300-seat parliament.

Opponents claim that Syriza would renege on Greece's international obligations if it came to power and that efforts to reform the country would be halted. Political instability would ensue and the eurozone would again be plunged into crisis. Talk of Greece leaving the euro has been particularly prominent of late.

## **Syriza's roots**

Syriza emerged as a unified party just before the elections of June 2012 but it brings together political groups with long histories. It can be seen as the accomplished product of an effort to unite the Greek left that spans nearly 50 years.

Syriza's political strategy draws heavily on the principles of the Euro-communist "democratic road to socialism". Its values, organisation and mobilisation are influenced by the global justice movement.

The party advocates an eclectic egalitarian economic programme that draws on Marxism, Keynesianism and more recent Latin American economic experiments. It goes hand-in-hand with claims for the expansion of social and political rights, pacifism and environmentalism, as articulated by European and global social movements since the 1960s. This also ties in with a staunch, albeit critical, Europeanism that aims to build alliances with other progressive political and social forces in Europe in order to achieve radical root-and-branch reform of European integration.

## **The manifesto**

According to the Thessaloniki programme that lies at the heart of Syriza's election pledges, the party is committed to renegotiating Greece's colossal debt. Despite five years of extreme austerity, this still exceeds 170% of GDP. Syriza wants a 50% debt write-off as part of a wider European Debt Conference along the lines of the German debt write-off of 1953.

The programme also includes a promise to replace the 2010 bail-out agreement signed with the Europe with a long-term national plan aimed at the reconstruction of the Greek economy.

Syriza will also put in place a set of emergency measures meant to alleviate what it calls the "humanitarian crisis" caused by austerity. Minimum wages and public investments will be increased to trigger consumer demand, create jobs and kickstart growth. Only then, Syriza argues, will the country be able to repay its debt. Exhaustive negotiations will be conducted with creditors and European partners but Greece will remain in the eurozone.

The reforms envisaged involve the democratic refoundation of the Greek state. This means unsettling decades of collusion between big business, media groups and political parties. Syriza may indeed be well placed to make such a radical change work since it has not been a party of government and has not been involved in such practices.

Syriza also believes that Europe as a whole must be reformed. German-inspired austerity politics, the party argues, are leading the whole enterprise to ruin. The party wants a new deal for the EU involving public investment, financed by the European Investment Bank. It supports a shift towards quantitative easing by the European Central Bank that involves direct purchases of sovereign bonds. This is, in many ways, Syriza's most ambitious goal and probably the hardest to achieve.

How far Syriza gets will depend on the magnitude of political support it can muster at home but also on the alliances it builds beyond the limited forces of Europe's radical left, even counting an emergent Podemos in Spain and the German Die Linke.

The party's success in the forthcoming election may mark a turning point in Europe. It would be a step away from austerity and towards a resurgence of the left. But this is not the social democratic left. It is a radical new experiment. It is perhaps this, and not the potential for economic turmoil under a Syriza government that scares European leaders the most.