

Is Civic Consciousness Strengthening in Greece? Evidence in the Historical and Western European Contexts

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Introduction

A sense of civic consciousness, or civic community, may be defined as a compound of the following attitudes: a general respect for the law, based on confidence that it represents the public interest; sympathetic support for government, combined with readiness to criticise it in a constructive way; respect for the interests of all fellow-citizens; and readiness to cooperate with them – beyond the circle of family, friends, and interest group – in promoting objectives of public benefit. Both a prerequisite and a consequence of civic consciousness is a government capable of providing the varied services necessary to enable society to function smoothly, including physical infrastructure and social services. Possibly no country approaches these ideals, but it is notorious that Greece falls far short of them. There is in consequence a glaring lack of civic consciousness, leading to major public problems that are constantly in the news.

In this paper, evidence will be presented that this deficiency is more serious than in any other of the other fourteen countries of the European Union (EU). Historical reasons will be suggested for believing that civic consciousness is displaced, among most of the population, by loyalty to family, local community or interest group. It will then be argued that the main reason for lack of civic consciousness in Greece is the traditional inefficiency of the state. Finally, reasons will be given for believing that important prerequisites and components of civic consciousness have been strengthening in recent years.

The seriousness of the lack of civic consciousness

A few well-known examples should suffice to demonstrate the seriousness of the lack of civic consciousness. On trust among citizens, Greeks rate rather poorly, despite a comparatively high degree of ethnic cohesion until the recent flood of illegal immigrants. A Eurobarometer survey of 1996 asking respondents whether they felt “not very much trust or none” towards fellow citizens found 14 per cent of Greeks giving this reply, the fourth highest figure in the EU (*Eurobarometer*, 46, 1997:41–42). On respect for the law, Greeks give informed observers the impression of ranking very poorly, although comparative figures do not seem to be available. An academic specialist in communication studies, Roe Panagiotopoulou, expressed the view – conventional among Greek social commentators – that “anarchic individualism” prevailed in Greek society with the crumbling of authoritarian institutions from 1974 onwards (Panagiotopoulou, 1996:156–57). As we shall see, however, the origins of this phenomenon lay much earlier.

One example is the rate of traffic accidents in relation to population. This is almost the highest in the EU, despite the fact that the rate of car ownership is much the lowest. What is more, the number of traffic accidents increased greatly in Greece in the years 1975–2000, while in the rest of the EU it declined greatly (*Vima*, 7 May 2000:A44–45; *Kathimerini*, 15–16 December 2001, English Internet edition). The reason for Greece’s dismal showing becomes obvious if one glances at the behaviour of drivers in any city street or motorway, especially at peak periods. Also noteworthy is the apparent incapacity and unwillingness of the police to check anti-social behaviour on the roads. The belief is widespread, and plausible, that many driving licences are obtained by bribery (Karaïskaki, 2002). Little seems to have changed since 1935, when the Australian journalist, Bert Birtles, quoted a Greek friend as saying, regarding the noisy and disorderly streets of Athens, that “there were as many laws as there were individuals” (Birtles, 1938:23).

Another example of anarchic behaviour is the ubiquity of unlicensed or unplanned building activity, which accounts in fact for the overwhelming majority of buildings in the metropolitan conurbation. When building licences

are obtained, it is often by bribery of some kind. Outside the metropolitan conurbation, the landscape of Attica, much of which is legally public open space, is being consumed piecemeal by building development, much of it of dubious legality, with little or no regard for communal requirements. The consequences for public welfare are of course serious. The amount of green open space per head of population within the conurbation is exceptionally small by European standards; and the pollution of the air (mainly by traffic) is exceptionally bad. Winter downpours quite frequently cause floods which result in immense damage to property and occasional loss of human lives; and the flooding occurs because natural watercourses have been built over, and too much of the sloping land around the Attica basin has been sealed (*Vima*, 15 March 1998:A51; *Vima*, 18 February 2001:A8–9; *Vima*, 30 September 2001:A40–41; *Kathimerini*, 28 March 2001, English Internet edition).

Another example is the ubiquity of litter on open land near human settlements. Much of it constitutes a hazard to health or a potential cause of fires. There exist thousands of unauthorised and unregulated rubbish dumps. One of them – a dump for hazardous waste in a stream bed in western Crete – caused the Greek government in 2000 to be the first to be fined by the European Court of Justice, after failing for many years to comply with the instructions of the European Commission (*Vima*, 9 July 2000:A44).

A fourth example is the frequency of scrub fires. In most summers, large areas of woodland are devastated by fires, many of which – as is agreed – are lit deliberately by people wanting to use the scorched earth for unlicensed building or grazing sheep and goats. The scorched land is vulnerable to erosion by downpours during the following winter's rainy season. In the whole country, immense quantities of soil – estimated by a Professor of Forestry to be enough to cover 25 square kilometres to a depth of 2.5 metres – are consequently lost to the sea each year (*Kathimerini*, 28 March 2001, English Internet edition).

Respect for public open space is impossible without efficient town-planning departments and a national land register. The former have a low status, while the latter does not yet exist, making Greece unique in the EU. Since

1994, governments have been assisted in compiling a land register by vast sums of EU money. The failure of this project to progress beyond its early stages – despite a bad cost overrun – is currently (late in 2001) a scandal, which has provoked a decision by the European Commission that Greece must hand back 20 billion drachmaes. Perhaps the basic reason for this failure is general lack of sufficient motivation to succeed. Those with vested interests in continuance of the current anarchy are too strong. Among them are politicians and public officials who can reward supporters by allowing unlicensed building; private citizens who value the freedom to build or run their flocks where they like; and lawyers, who profit from the litigation resulting from constant disputes over land claims.

A different example of general disrespect for the law – which is too frequently in the news to require examples – is conflict among municipalities, or between municipalities and the government, over natural resources such as land or water. Road construction, the establishment of garbage dumps, and the appropriation of natural water sources by cities, are commonly delayed by the opposition of municipalities or communes which exercise jurisdiction over the affected land. The opposition is commonly conducted by appeals to law courts, and not infrequently by physical obstruction. What are significantly absent from such episodes are – on the government side – technical expertise, and an ability to negotiate with the public, and – on the protestors' side – a consciousness that they are subject to the same law as everyone else.

On the subject of bribery, a recent survey by the Greek branch of the international non-government organisation (NGO), Transparency International, showed that much of the public is still ambivalent. Whereas 85 per cent subscribe to the belief that society can progress only through transparency and meritocracy, 40 per cent see nothing wrong with some unofficial payment to expedite business. The sections of government which, according to surveys, citizens rate as especially corrupt are town-planning departments, the tax department, and public hospitals. Police corruption, too, is frequently in the news (*Kathimerini*, 7 February 2001, Internet edition; *Athens News*, 25 February 2001, Internet edition).

The historic weakness of the state

It could be argued that the weakness of civic consciousness is due to the failure of the state since its origins either to earn the respect of citizens, or to permit autonomous or local organisation amongst them. The Ottoman empire left no legacy of law or administration; but left instead a people fragmented into myriad families and communities, who were accustomed to promoting their interests by influencing authorities that were inefficient and corrupt. The first rulers who tried to build a modern state, from John Capodistria onwards, were brought up and educated outside the Greek world, and guided mainly by autocratic and foreign models. Thus the state – like that of the other new Balkan nations – was in its origins largely an exotic institution, imposed on the population from above. In Greece, its development was distorted, more than in other Balkan countries, by vigorous competition between parliamentary politicians in using the state machine as a source of favours with which to bribe their clientele, a practice consequently known as clientelism. The serious lack of economic development – from which Greece like other Balkan countries suffered until the second half of the twentieth century – led much of the population to seek state employment as a means of livelihood, while keeping it fragmented in backward villages which could not exert effective pressure on governments for reform of the state. Those public officials who aspired to make the state more efficient were thwarted by the clientelistic practices of politicians in rewarding supporters and penalising opponents. This perversion of the state was worsened in the twentieth century by the national schism of 1915–36, because warring parties purged all its branches of their opponents and stacked them with supporters. From 1935 onwards, a further motive for perversion of the state was ideological: the attempt by governments to exclude the left from influence. With the collapse from 1974 onwards of the post-civil war regime, and the accession to power in 1981 of an avowedly left-wing government, that of PASOK, those who felt that they had been excluded from office during previous decades sought their share of public spoils (Mavrogordatos, 1997:1–26). When a right-wing party returned to government in 1989, it

compensated itself in the same spirit by appropriating the spoils of office. Thus clientelistic practices reached a level that was possibly unprecedented, at a time when the need of an increasingly urbanised and educated population for efficient services of all kinds was growing steadily. It is only since 1994 that governments have tried in a determined way to make *axiokratia* (appointment by merit) the normal basis of recruitment to public office. It is going to take a long time to disseminate the view that public office is a skilled profession, in place of the traditional view that it is a secure berth in an economically insecure world.

The effects of clientelist practices on the efficiency of government, and on public esteem for government, have of course been disastrous. Professor Andreas Psomas conducted a survey of popular attitudes to public officials in 1972, and found that they were normally characterised by words such as “slow-moving”, “authoritarian”, “corrupt”, “ill-mannered”, “inefficient” (Psomas, 1978:204). In 1991 the prime minister, Constantine Mitsotakis, declared that “there are many government departments which merely harass citizens without doing anything for them”, words which earned much favourable publicity, even though they would probably have been just as true at any other time in the twentieth century (*Vima*, 1 September 1991:D2). A survey of 1996 found a majority of public servants admitting that they lacked relevant qualifications and were drawn to their occupation by its security of income (Nikolakopoulou, 1997:A49). That these problems are not peculiar to Greece is illustrated by Charles Dickens’ chapter on the Circumlocution Office in his novel *Little Dorrit* of 1857, in which he satirised the traditional faults of the British civil service, which had until that time been prevented by clientelistic practices from developing a sense of professional mission.

Of special relevance is the traditional inefficiency of the police and law courts. Until the 1990s, the police forces were instruments of party politicians, a status which prevented *axiokratia* or professional cohesion. But for nearly 50 years before 1974, the police were also inspired by the aim of destroying communist organisations, in which they achieved impressive success, at the cost however of alienating most of the population by oppressive

practices. This anti-communist mission ended with the legalisation of the Communist Party in 1974, leaving the police seriously discredited. The sad results were shown thereafter in the rising incidence of most of the commonest crimes, and the declining success of the police in tracking down those responsible for them. This incompetence has recently attained international notoriety because of the failure of the police to identify any member of the terrorist group “17 November”, which has assassinated 23 people – several of them prominent – since 1975. A national survey by the government in 2001 found that only one-fifth of thefts or burglaries were reported to the police (Lambropoulou, 2001:A37).

The judges too were until 1974 the servants of ideologically-motivated governments, with low status and little independence. Since then their independence of government has grown, and their level of training has risen. But they have been hampered by the limited resources and low pay characteristic of public services in Greece. Senior judges, addressing the annual meeting of the Union of Judges and Prosecutors on 2 December 2001, asserted that delays of five to eight years were now normal for serious crimes, and that pressure by the government on the judiciary was still strong (*Kathimerini*, 3 December 2001, English Internet edition).

Loyalty to the family and the local community have been shown by various recent surveys to be still stronger in Greece than in other countries of southern Europe, in all of which these loyalties are much stronger than in northern European countries, which are more secularised and economically developed. Compared with the rest of Europe – even with southern Europe – Greeks attach more importance for example to stable marriage as an essential prerequisite to having children; are more inclined to see children as their highest priority in life; and are more averse to leaving elderly parents in an old people’s home (*Kathimerini*, 25 January 1998:26; *Kathimerini*, 8 October, 2000:35; *Vima*, 13 June 1993:A46; *Vima*, 12 December 1999:A52–53). One could say without much exaggeration that Greek society consists of myriad cohesive families, which see themselves as competing to some extent with each other, each with the help of a network of personal friends (Campbell and Sherard, 1968:366–67). Family ties

have obviously weakened, and patriarchal authority has declined, in recent decades, but to a lesser degree than in the rest of western Europe.

Loyalty to local communities has remained remarkably strong, despite the country's transition, since the 1940s, from a rural to an urban society. According to the census figures, in 1940, 18 per cent of the population lived in the main conurbations of Athens and Salonika, and 52 per cent in villages of 2,000 inhabitants or fewer. By 1991, the corresponding figures were 39 per cent and 28 per cent. The change was in fact greater, because the figures for the conurbations do not include their growing satellite villages and distant suburbs; while those for villages are swollen by many people who usually lived in towns, but preferred for reasons of local patriotism to be censused in their ancestral villages. The urban population is admittedly smaller than in the rest of the EU, and consists largely of people whose families came in recent decades from villages or small towns. The latter fact may explain why in reply to a recent survey question asking "How attached do you feel to your town or village?" 81 per cent of Greeks replied "very", while the average in the other fourteen EU countries was only 55 per cent (*Eurobarometer*, 51, Spring 1999:B9). What is more, various studies have shown that in Greece some of the sociability of village life is retained in cities (McNeill, 1978:231–32). One indication of the extent to which village habits survive is that 95 per cent of Greeks said in 2000 that they spoke to neighbours at least once a week, compared with 80 per cent in other countries of the EU, none of which approached the Greek figure. On the other hand, participation in social, cultural, or political organisations is the lowest at 24 per cent, compared with 54 per cent in the other countries of the EU, although the Spanish and Portuguese figures are little higher than the Greek (European Commission, 2000:114–15).

Anthropological studies have shown that traditional village communities – as distinct from the families of which they consisted – varied in the extent to which they commanded a sense of loyalty and obligation from their members. In some villages this sense of community obligation was quite strong, and in others very weak (Sutton, 1988:207; Boeschoten, 2000:125). The latter were presumably rendered viable, as communities, by a network

of mutual favours between extended families. But most or all village communities have traditionally seen the state as an alien force, especially from the 1930s onwards, because of the way in which the Metaxas dictatorship, and then the right-wing regime from 1946 onwards, overcame vigorous attempts at spontaneous local organisation in many areas (Avdelidis, 1981:42–48; Collard, 1993:371–72). It is obvious that such a pattern of loyalties is inconsistent with an effective sense of national citizenship, or, therefore, of civic consciousness.

The increasing efficiency of government

The goal of modernisation – which can be broadly defined as conformity with the norms and practices of the developed countries of the west – was traditional among Greek elites from the 1820s, but became noticeably more urgent in 1989, when heads of government of the European Economic Community (EEC, or EU from 1992) decided to accelerate progress towards economic integration. One immediate incentive for successive governments was pressure by the European Commission, during most of the 1990s, to reform public finances and promote economic development. Another was pressure from the electorate, which was less and less interested in ideological conflict between left and right, while increasingly exasperated with the inefficiency of nearly all state services. Before the parliamentary election of April 2000, the public preoccupation with what were called “everyday” problems – those affecting people’s material wellbeing, for which governments could be held responsible – was shown by opinion surveys to be overwhelming (*Vima*, 3 October 1999:A1–2). Kostas Simitis, after becoming prime minister in succession to Andreas Papandreou in January 1996, was driven by electoral pressure as well as his own convictions in making modernisation of the state his central goal.

One landmark in government policy was the establishment in 1994 of the Supreme Council for the Selection of Personnel to supervise competitive examinations for appointments to public employment. Its scope was extended thereafter; and now the principle is established that merit must be the normal basis for permanent public appointments. Recently, the government has

extended the principle by publishing the specialised qualifications needed for every branch of public employment. The government also applied the principle of appointment-by-merit to the managers of public utilities and state enterprises, while leaving them increasingly free to operate on commercial principles.

During the 1990s, preoccupation by politicians with government corruption was intense, with special attention to so-called “interwoven interests” of tycoons with a stake both in public contracts and the mass media. It was often remarked that the extent of corruption was unprecedented; but there is good reason to believe that what was actually unprecedented was publicity about it, caused by the fact that the public was better informed and more critical than ever before. Governments have taken increasingly stern measures against corruption and are driven by a public which is made resentful of corruption by the increasing burden of taxation. The research organisation Transparency International, using diverse survey evidence from many countries, indicated that Greece in the late 1990s was not particularly corrupt for a country at its level of economic development, and was actually less corrupt than Italy or the rest of the Balkans (Koutsoukis, 1998:150–54; *Economist*, 16 September 2000:124).

At Simitis’ insistence, and against opposition within the government, the institution of Citizens’ Advocate (or ombudsman) was established in 1998, and given the resources and authority to investigate, and try to remedy, complaints by citizens. In its first two years of operation (1999–2000) it heard 21,000 complaints, finding the majority to be justified. Recently the government has increased police numbers, and diverted their attention increasingly to crime prevention and traffic control; so that thefts, and lethal driving over holiday periods, have declined in the latest year for which figures are available (2000–1).

Another way of making government more responsive to the citizens was to devolve power from the centre to the localities. The prefects (or nomarchs) were made elective in 1994, and received diverse additional responsibilities, while losing their supervisory powers over municipalities and communes. Extensive resources and powers were devolved to municipalities from the

late 1970s onwards. The new importance of elected local government was shown by politicians' unprecedented interest in the local elections of October 1998. The new independence of prefects and mayors was shown by the readiness of many of them to defy the leaders of the parties to which they nominally belonged (Lyrintzis, 2000:12–20).

This devolution of power is in fact part of a broad trend, which originated with the general reaction against authoritarianism in 1974. Thus the Church was guaranteed independence of government interference in 1977. Non-government broadcasting was legalised from 1987 onwards. Trade unions became progressively more independent from the early 1980s. Independent administrative authorities, such as the Supreme Council for the Selection of Personnel (ASEP), appeared from 1989 onwards, and acquired increasing importance. Influential think-tanks began to appear at this time, such as the Hellenic Foundation of Defence and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), the Foundation for Economic and Industrial Research (IOVE), and the Institute of Labour of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE). Particularly important is the proliferation of non-government organisations (NGOs) from the 1980s, and the growth of their influence. For example, a government survey of environmental NGOs in 1996 received answers from 194. They were dispersed throughout the country; four-fifths had been established since 1985; and a sizeable minority of them employed paid staff who worked from their organisations' offices. In 1999 the government estimated the total number of NGOs at 3,500; and by now ministers were warmly acknowledging their value in publicising problems, providing information, and meeting vital needs (Close, 1999:325–52; *Kathimerini*, 6 December 2000, Internet edition). In planning reforms, governments have recently shown more willingness to consult and cooperate with institutions that are affected, such as secondary schools and trade unions. In recent amendments to the constitution, the government has taken steps to increase its accountability to parliament (Venizelos, 2001:71–72).

Another power-centre that was growing in independence and authority was the judiciary, which periodically investigated abuses in which government officials were implicated, and frequently heard suits against the

government by private citizens, or by NGOs. By the latter half of the 1990s, the great majority of judges and prosecutors had been appointed in the liberal conditions since 1974, and administered a legal system influenced increasingly by the European Union and the Council of Europe. An important step, taken by the PASOK government in 1985, was to allow appeals by citizens against the government to the European Court of Human Rights established by the Council of Europe (Alivizatos, 2001:72, 219–22; Stavros, 1999:3–15).

The results of these trends are that governments have become increasingly accountable to the public; while citizens have acquired more diverse means of influencing them. The law and judiciary have acquired an increasing role in regulating relations between government and citizens, and between diverse centres of power. In some respects, citizens' respect for the political system seems to have increased. It is difficult to be sure, for lack of surveys at earlier dates for comparative purposes. But recent surveys by Eurobarometer of citizens' attitudes to various aspects of government have shown that, in general, Greek citizens are not much more disillusioned, or more dissatisfied, than those of other southern EU countries. For example, a Eurobarometer poll in 2000 found that Greek citizens were much more satisfied than those of the other EU countries with their public transport, water, postal, and fixed-telephone services – all of which were state-owned. It must be admitted that Greeks' expectations of anything run by the government were low; but it really seems as if several years of reforms had produced results. On the other hand, the level of satisfaction with the educational and health services offered by the government was much lower than in the rest of the EU (*Kathimerini*, 26 October 2000, Internet edition; *Vima*, 9 January 2000:A26–7; *Eurobarometer*, 51, Spring 1999:B5). In response to the question late in 2000 whether they felt “very or fairly satisfied” with “national democracy”, 47% of Greeks gave affirmative answers – which was more than in Italy or Portugal, but much less than the average of 67% in the other 12 EU countries. Other surveys, in 1999–2000, showed citizens' attitude to different sectors of government (*Eurobarometer*, 51, Spring 1999:B4–5; 54, Autumn 2000:14).

Table 1. *Percentage of EU citizens expressing trust in key institutions in 1999*

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Rest of EU</i>
Government in general	38	43
Civil service	43	46
Police	55	65
Judiciary and legal system	55	49
NGOs	48	41

The poor rating of the police can be explained by comments above. The comparatively high scores of the judiciary and NGOs are what one would expect in view of the fact that they have taken a prominent part in challenging national governments and exposing their defects.

Conclusion

Improvement in the efficiency of government is bound to be a slow process. A large proportion of public officials and employees were appointed under the old, clientelist criteria and have life-long tenure. Politicians have proved reluctant to abandon the old free-spending ways and clientelistic practices. The abolition of political criteria for appointment to public positions is only one stage. The next stages are the creation of professional criteria, and the construction of professional expertise and a professional ethos; and these are bound to take a long time. The traditional ethos of the public service – to obey rules and avoid responsibility – is painfully apparent, for example, in the current preparations for the 2004 Olympic Games to be held in Greece. Devolution of power to municipalities seems actually to have delayed reform of government services, because most municipalities still seem unequal to their new responsibilities. It will also take a long time for citizens to acquire more trust in government and respect for the law. But irresistible pressure is being exerted on governments by economic competition within a

more closely integrated EU, and by the desperate need of increasingly assertive citizens for improved services. The major political parties, and those who observe their conduct – parliament, think-tanks, and media commentators – have shown their determination to continue steadily the process of modernisation. In some respects, as we have seen, remarkable changes have already occurred. Civic consciousness is likely to strengthen in consequence.

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