A Tale of Two Referenda: The Greek Plebiscite of 1946 and the Referendum of July 2015

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Abstract:

In September 1946, after years of Civil War, Greeks were heading to the polls in order to decide the future of their country. The subject upon which they would be voting on however was not for the parliament and Prime Minister. Rather, the question upon which they were voting was intended to link the continuation of democracy in Greece with the monarchy in place. The question was not phrased this way. The question was if the Greeks wanted a monarchy or not; far too simple a question for its answer to be able to settle the deeply felt long-standing divisions in Greek society. In fact, the way this question was being asked at that time, was in violation of an earlier agreement, meant to end hostilities and provide a framework through which the warring parties could find a way to peace. Not surprisingly, the violation of the earlier agreement enflamed the divisions and hostilities flared again, driving Greece deeper into crisis and further delaying its recovery from occupation and Civil War. Seventy years later, a similar event played itself out in Greece. A vote took place on a question whose wording was far too complicated for the result to provide a meaningful answer to either the people of Greece or to the international community watching events unfold. In both cases, the crises highlighted the relative weakness of the state, and reduced the sense of legitimacy it held with the Greek people.

This paper compares these two periods of crisis in Greece separated by 70 years; the crisis surrounding the national elections and the plebiscite on the return of the Greek monarchy in 1946, the referendum on the terms contained in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of July 2015, and the international involvement in and reaction to these referenda. The inspirations for the paper were the ways in which external forces attempted to direct the outcome of the referenda, and the similarities in the ways in which in both periods, external forces attempted to frame their definition in favor of their wider strategic objectives.