Square Politics

Key characteristics of the indignant mobilizations in Greece[1]

Paper prepared for presentation at the 62nd PSA Annual International Conference, 3-5 April 2012 Belfast

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings from an online survey completed by 453 persons claiming participation in the indignant (Aganaktismenoi) mobilizations of Syntagma square in Athens during May/June 2011. The demographics of the respondents could have been highly affected by the research medium that was used. However, this paper argues that since the indignant mobilizations were called across different nations by using online social networks, like facebook, the characteristics identified in the Greek case perfectly fit within the general pattern that characterised the participants in these mobilizations. As such, this paper puts the mobilizations at Syntagma square in a good footing for comparative cross-national examination. Furthermore, this paper confirms the increasingly important role played by cyber activism over socio-political contestation in the Greek context. In addition, it discusses the impact that this cyber activism has on the gender composition of political activism and the role of mainstream political participation.

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Introduction

In May 2010 Greece became the first Eurozone member to be bailed out with an EU/IMF bailout package. A year later, Greece had reduced its public deficit by 5% of GDP, the largest such reduction by any OECD member in the past 25 years. The weight of this was carried mainly by the Greek taxpayer. Characteristically, 'one-third of the savings in the public sector in 2010 were mainly achieved by reducing wages, pensions and social transfers. Roughly three-quarters of the increases in revenues [...] came as a result of rises in indirect taxes and social security contributions' (Malkoutzis 2011: 1). These unprecedented cuts were bound to have an immense impact on existing patterns of social contestation. To be more precise, even without these severe austerity cuts, protest and public contestation would have taken place on a daily basis as before the onset of the crisis. That could have been stimulated by existing issues of intense protest politics in Greece, such as university reforms, farming policies, privatization of public services etc. but also the modernization policies that were to be brought in by the new Papandreou administration, which came to power in October 2009, such as the programmatic endorsement of the green growth agenda 'aimed at enhancing green growth and employment' (Pagoulatos 2011: 6). Characteristically, the ambitious programme of the new YPEKA ministry, under Tania Birbili, was facing increased attacks by various sectors that ranged from trade union organizations of the coal dependent energy corporation and politicians of different party affiliations who disagreed with the her plans to reduce the construction allowance in Natura areas. As more and more Greeks started to feel immense strain caused by harsh austerity, speculative attacks in the bond market, the possibility of a new wave of austerity measures was opened. In this direction, the Troika of EC, IMF and ECB produced a new interim programme that supported this new wave of measures. The interim programme was to be submitted for ratification by the Greek parliament in June 2011. In this context, a call for protest outside the Greek parliament at Syntagma square was made in a dedicated facebook page on 24 May 2011.

This paper presents the findings of an online questionnaire that was completed by 453 members of the Greek Indignants facebook page, the Aganaktismenoi of Syntagma Square. Although, the participants are not representative of the thousands of people that gathered for successive nights at Syntagma, we can still draw some useful conclusions about the characteristics of the new style of online activism in the Greek context.

Square Politics precedents

The origins of the square politics of the Indignants have to be traced back to the act of self-immolation by a 26-year old street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia in protest to a constant tirade of abuse that he was subjected for years by police. That was the defining act that set in motion what is now known as the Arab spring that show thousands of Tunisians, Egyptians and Syrians occupy streets and squares demanding regime change. This spread was facilitated by the use of new technology with the demonstration that erupted in Tunisia after the incident having been videoed and posted to Al-Jazeera and subsequently becoming popular through the internet sharing – 'a third of all Tunisian use the Internet, and three quarters of those have Facebook accounts' (Andersen 2011: 54).

The Tunisian case was not only inspirational but also offered a practical manual on how to topple an oppressive regime by using non violent direct action. Through online interaction, Tunisian activists exchanged information with Egyptian activists that led to unique, for Arab standards, protest event at Tahrir Square for its perseverance in light of severe repression, the

variety of participants of different faiths as well as the participation of women (some of them without wearing hijabs). All in all, the events of that period in the Arab World heralded the Arab Spring or the 'awakening'. Electronic communication couldn't have kept that development confined to a particular part of the world. Indeed, the events of Tahrir square crossed the Mediterranean sores to inspire people to act the same way in raising up their grievances against the existing system in their countries.

> ... America's great 21st century contribution to fomenting freedom abroad was not imposing it militarily but enabling it technologically, as an epiphenomenon of globalization. And for a second act, globalization returned the favour, turning democratic uprising in developing countries into inspirational exports for the rich world (Andersen 2011: 81)

On 15 May 2011, thousands of Spaniards gathered in the central square of Madrid, Puerta Del Sol, demanding "Real Democracy Now" (Democracia Real Ya). Spain is of course a liberal democratic country and an EU member state. However, still the country has suffered for years with rising youth unemployment and constantly increased prices in essentials. These combined with the housing bubble has resulted in the disillusionment with the system by many young Spaniards. That coupled with the perennial problems of the Mediterranean Syndrome/southern problem (see La Spina & Sciortino 1993; Pridham & Cini 1994), such as nepotism, clientelism and immense corruption and the impact of the global economic crisis of 2008 has led to an impromptu alliance of many disaffected, the unemployed, students and civil servants with declining incomes. The mobilization was organized with the use of Facebook and Twitter and after Puerta Del Sol spread to dozens of other cities across Spain attracting hundreds and thousands of people. By 24 May, a call for participation in protest against the new austerity measures that the interim programme was bringing started was placed in a dedicated page in facebook and Twitter in Greece.

Cyber-protest precedents in Greece

Protest movements had always made good use of whatever opportunities were afforded for disseminating their messages and mobilizing people and the available media had played a paramount role in this direction. Nevertheless, online media are offering new avenues for message dissemination and mobilizing opportunities in a much more autonomous horizontal fashion (see Hands 2011, Lievrouw 2011). The power of this new medium was demonstrated when a call that was placed online during the summer of 2007 for a public gathering outside the Greek parliament to express their discomfort for the devastating forest fires attracted in two occasions thousands of participants (see Karamichas 2007). There has been a range of other protest campaigns that have made use of the online medium ranging from the Greek chapter of the IMC networks, Athens.indymedia.org, to a variety citizen initiatives campaigning for improvements in a variety of issues by employing really innovative means (snickering, slow riding etc).

The Indignants (Aganaktismenoi): NSM or Revolution?

Although the protests do have a populist element to them, such as people chanting against the EU-IMF loan memorandum, they have been impressively peaceful and non-partisan.

This is a significant departure for Greece, which is a country familiar with public protests instigated by political parties or labour union. In the case of the "Indignants", however, there has been no such involvement and those taking part have strongly resisted attempts by both left-wing and right-wing elements to capitalise on the protests and use them as a recruiting tool. This non-partisan aspect means that these protests, which have attracted more than 100,000 people on some days, have a wide appeal and support (3-4).

Upper and Down Square

The use of the generic Indignants/aganaktismenoi should not disguise the fact that those participating in the protest action at Syntagma Square were composed by a wide range of individuals from various social sectors. However, a division between two clusters of demonstrators has been identified. The upper square cluster attracted a mosaic of individuals that can broadly be seen as easily susceptible to populist/ "patriotic" themes. That was attested by their adopted slogans, such as that from a bygone era, 'Greece belongs to the Greeks', the rhythmic repetition of 'Hellas, Hellas', singing popular extracts from songs by composer Mikes Theodorakis. All these were garnished with loads of coordinated 'moutzas' (moutzas is a traditional gesture of insult) and synchronised yelling of 'thieves, thieves' towards the parliament. There were also numerous Greek flags and a few individuals with shaved heads saluting in the Nazi way and wearing tattoos depicting the Greek flag and apolitical youngsters from the football terraces. Among this mosaic, there were also families with children in prams, something that was something completely alien to Greek protest politics.

The composition of the down square couldn't be more different. Those active in that part of the square were highly politicized and committed activists, some from left wing parties, such as SYRIZA and ANTARSYA (but not KKE) and anarchists from AK and others without declared identification. Taken together, they approximated the Spanish Real Democracy Now of the indignados of Puerta del Sol and the demonstrators of Tahrir Square with their pitched tents that have become one of the trademark signs of the Indignants/occupy movement across the world. For them, it was an opportunity action the autonomous organizational principles based on direct democratic procedures of the future society that they aspire to. That way, they organized different task groups, ranging from group responsible for food supplies, cleaning of the surrounding space, legal assistance, first-aid, translation services and an events committee that put theatre plays for children and other artistic events. As expected, the online survey of the Syntagma Square Indignants has only captured a fraction from the sheer diversity of participants in that protest event.

Researching the Indignants (Aganaktismenoi)

As expected there was widespread speculation with the usual conspiracy theories that mark any discussions about the unusual in Greece, be it extremely devastating forest fires or widespread riots, about the origins of the Aganaktismenoi. Who were these people? What kind of people participated for three consecutive weeks in an unusual movement that shook

Greek society? What is the political identification of the participants? What is their social status, age and educational background? Social scientists could not have stayed out from the debate. By employing their tools, they conducted a number of surveys during the first two weeks of June 2011.

The Barometer of Public Issue was conducted between 7 to 10 June 2011 and used telephone interviews to a sample of 819 participants form the general population (18 +). Most respondents (60%) in that survey declared that they first heard about these mobilizations on TV and only 16% were informed about them online. Those informed by internet sources about the mobilizations belonged to the 25-34 age groups and only 26% of who had higher education experience were informed by that medium. The vast majority of respondents, 95% expressed a positive impression and 76% a positive opinion about the mobilizations but only 35% had actively participated in any protest events that have taken place in squares across the country. Of those active in the square mobilizations, there was an equal representation of men and women, 35% and 35% respectively,

Research was also conducted by the Department of Statistics of the Economic University of Athens between 10 to 17 June 2011 and the participation 2131 adults from Attica and Central Macedonia. The findings demonstrated that 67.9% were declaring their support to the Aganaktismenoi movement whilst 8 out of 10 believed that it commanded the support by many of their fellow citizens. Moreover, 69.8% sees them as a positive step forward and 71.8% believed that the Aganaktismenoi can possibly influence the government or some politicians towards revising their position.

The third survey on the square mobilizations was conducted by Καπα research for the Greek Sunday newspaper, To Vima. The research was conducted on 14 and 15 June 2011 with the participation of 643 adults in Syntagma square and 1208 across Greece with proportional distribution on the 13 peripheries of the country. The sampling method was in many phases with a quota on the geographic distribution of the population, gender and age composition. The results were levelled with the 2009 vote. Data were collected through the use of personal interviews and on the basis of an electronic questionnaire.

The two groups of participants in this survey produced quite different results with their responses. For instance, whether the movement is a 'subversive' or 'a peaceful citizen's protest movement', the former was chosen by 45.7% of the Syntagma protesters and 28,1% of the protesters in other squares across the country. The latter was chosen by 49.3% from Syntagma and by a substantial 63.7% of the others. A total of 74.8% from Syntagma thought that protest gatherings by European citizens at public squares were fairly close to immediate democracy whilst a lower 60.7% though the same from the rest of the country. In both cases, the overwhelming majority – 88.7% and 82.3% respectively – thought that the Aganaktismenoi 'express the public sense of justice'.
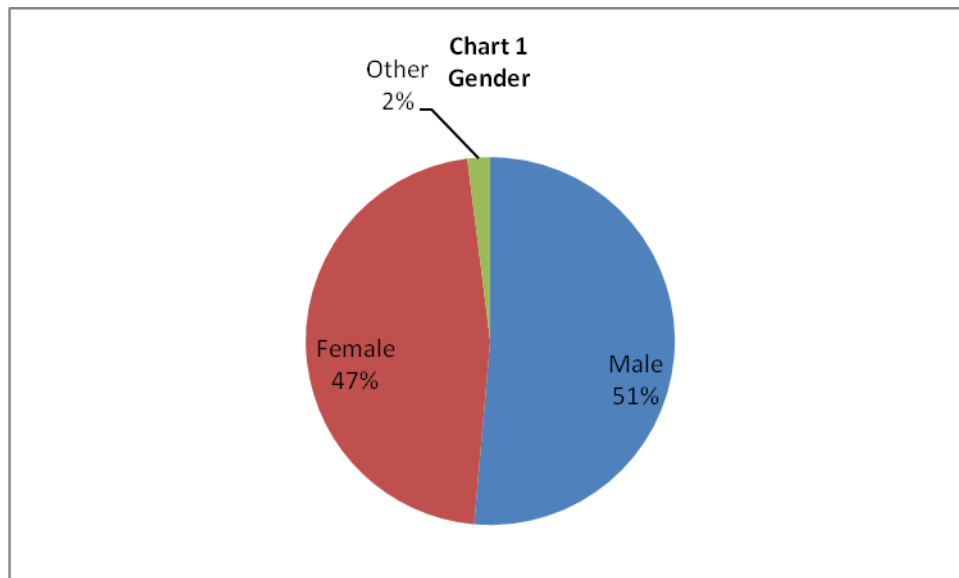
Online Research Aganaktismenoi

Since the call for the mobilization was published online, it was only fair to make use of the internet as a research medium. I was well placed in this direction with readymade survey at my disposal. That

questionnaire is a partially revised version of the questionnaire used by Stefaan Walgrave and his team in their investigating the February 15, 2003, international anti-war mobilizations. *Key issues*
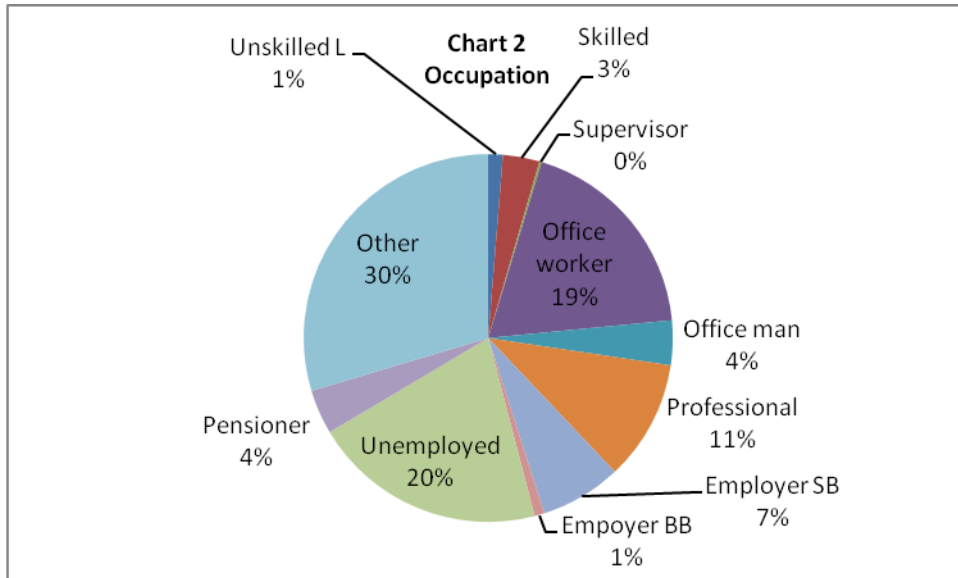
Discussing the Findings

Gender
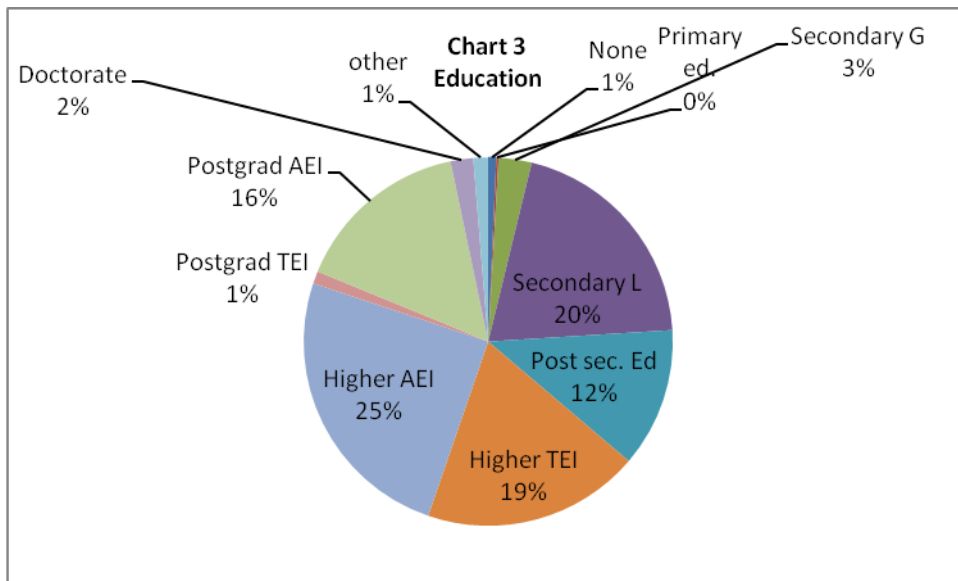

Walgrave and collegues (2010: 82) found in their comprative study on the February 15 demonstration against the iminent invasion of Iraq 'that men and women were present almost equally. In Belgium, however, there was a striking overrepresentation of men. On the other side of the spectrum, in the United States, two-thirds of the protesters were female'. In the aganaktismenoi online survey, male and female proclaimed participation is almost equal with 51% male and 47% female (Chart 1).
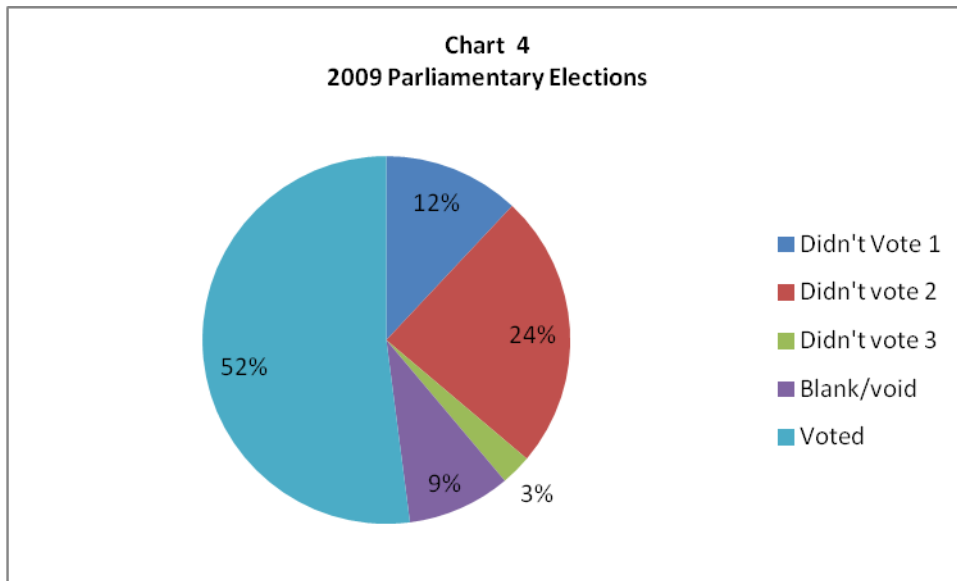
Occupation
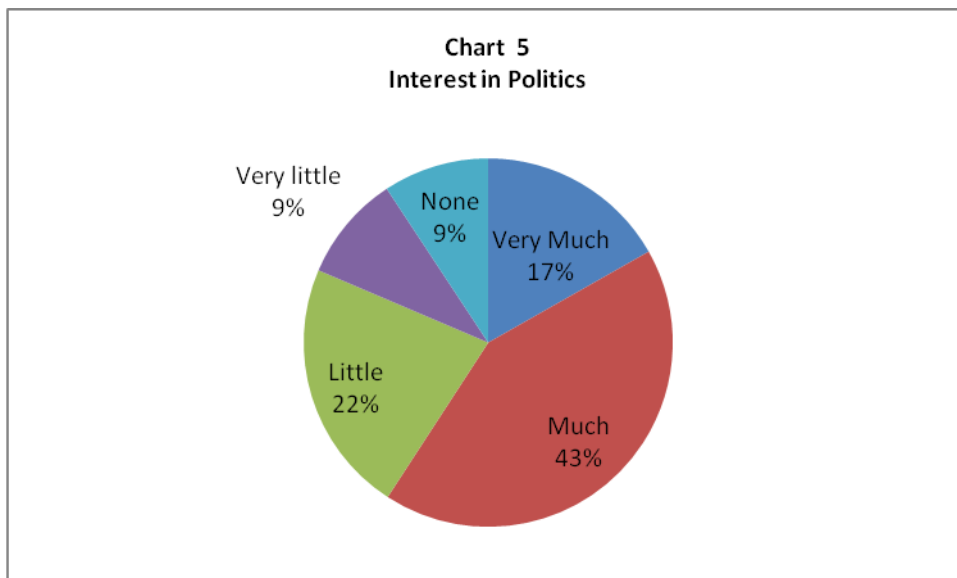
Age

Educational attainment

Respondents were asked about their educational qualifications. Their selection was made on the basis of either qualifications they already had or they were working towards. So, an individual choosing the secondary school option could have been either somebody with a high school certificate or a secondary school pupil. The same logic applied to the other educational qualifications. For instance, the Doctorate choice could have comfortably apply to both the individual who had submitted her thesis and passed her viva voce and the individual who just started her doctorate adventure. As we can see in chart 3, 63% of respondents had a higher education experience, followed by 35% with secondary and post-secondary school qualifications.
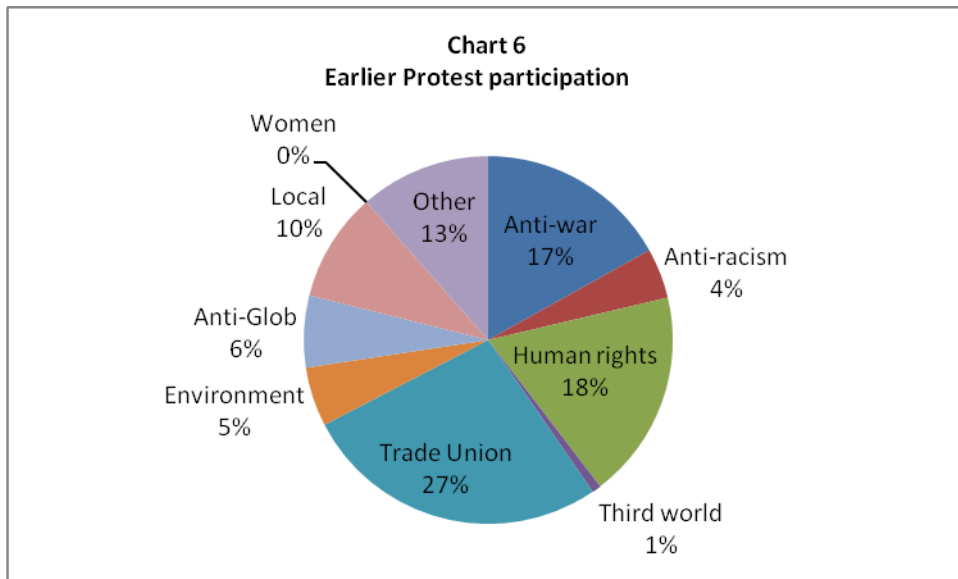
Electoral Participation

Chart 4
2009 Parliamentary Elections

- Didn't vote 1: Under 18 or out of the country
- Didn't vote 2: No party representing my views
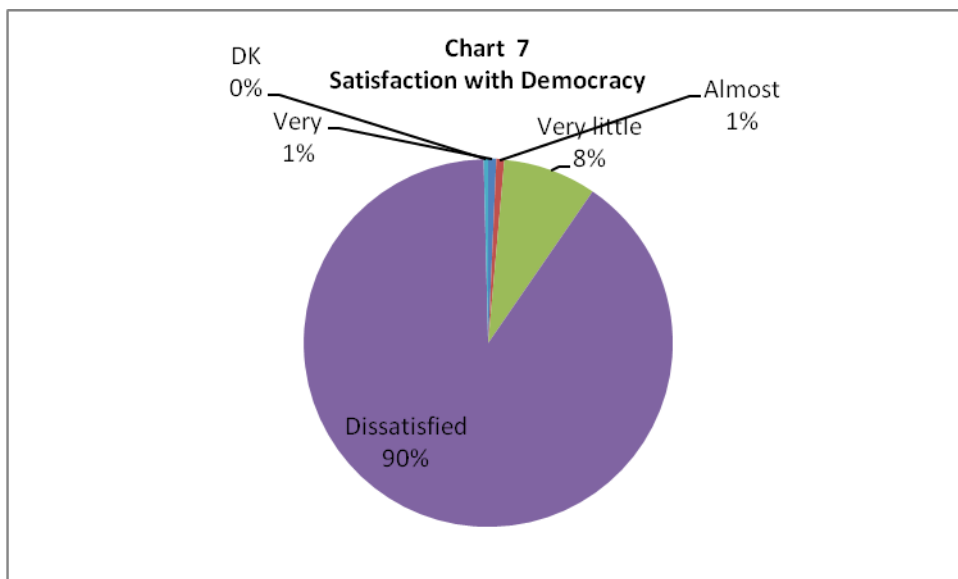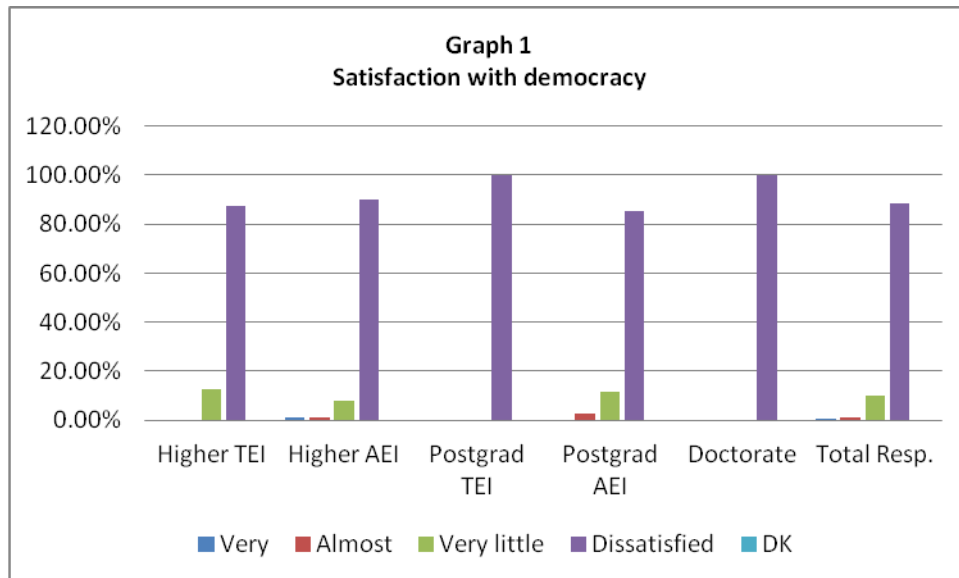- Didn't vote 3: Don't believe in parliamentary democracy

Interest in Politics

Chart 5
Interest in Politics

Protest participation

Chart 6
Earlier Protest participation

Satisfaction with the Functioning of Democracy in the Country

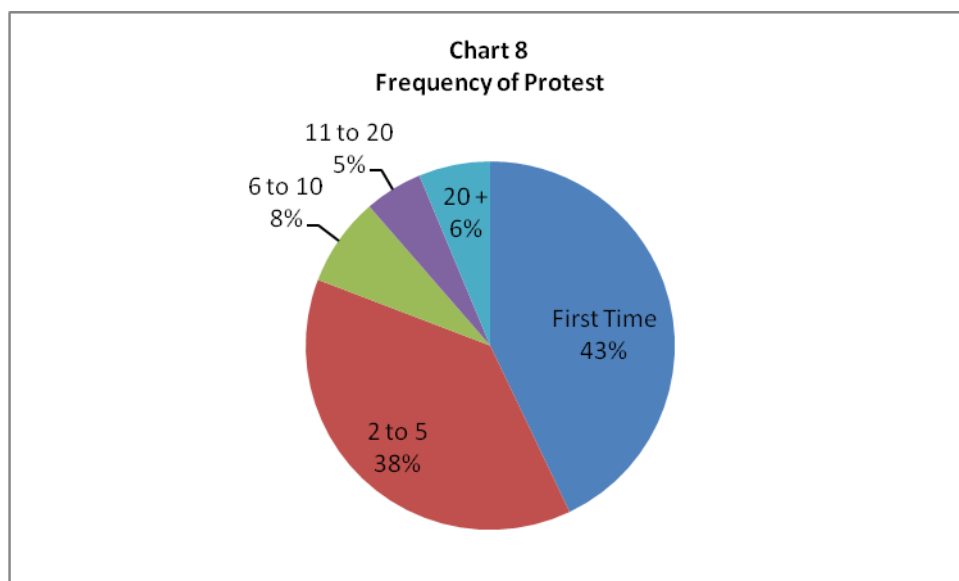**Chart 7**
Satisfaction with Democracy

As we can see in chart 7, the overwhelming majority, 90%, expressed dissatisfaction with functioning of democracy. As graph 1 demonstrates, the expressed satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Greece by different educational categories is too small to suggest anything of substance. After all,
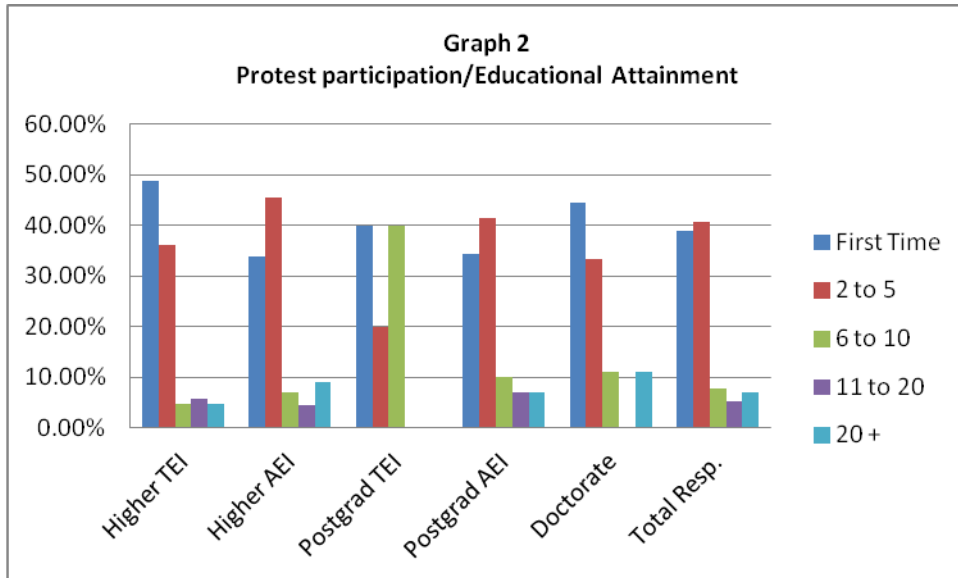
Graph 1
Satisfaction with democracy

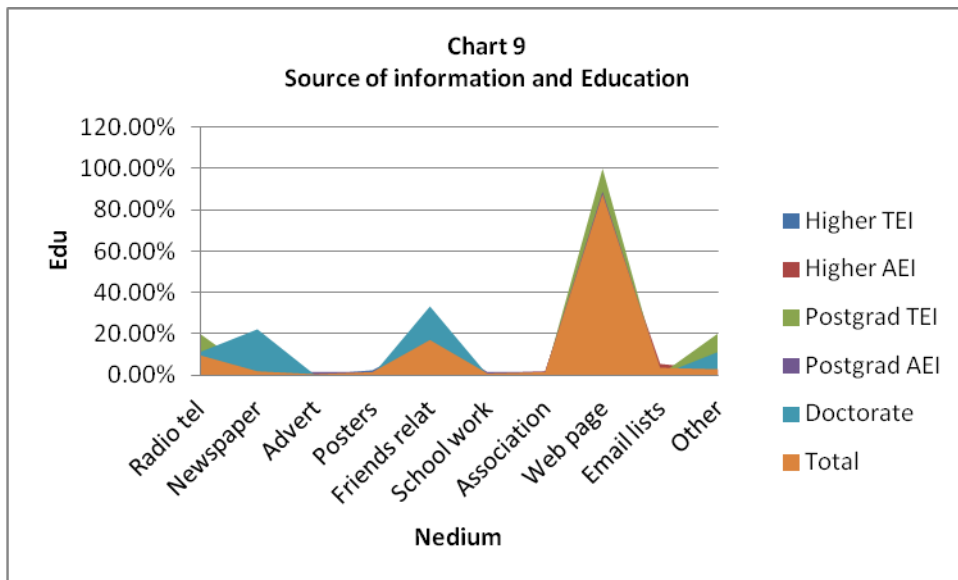*Frequency of Participation in Protest (5 years)*

As we can see in Chart 8, the majority of respondents, 81%, had participated in protest activities no more than 5 times over the past five years. For 43%, the Aganaktismenoi mobilizations at Syntagma Square were the first time that they have taken part in protest action. A total of 19% took part in protest action in at least 6 occasions and from that group of respondents, 6% protested in more than 20 different occasions.

Chart 8
Frequency of Protest

Graph 2 demonstrates that respondents with or working toward obtaining a postgraduate TEI qualification exhibited the highest participation rate in the '6 to 10' category whilst they didn't score at all in the '11 to 20' and '20+' categories. The highest score in the '11 to 20' category was achieved by the postgraduate AEI cluster which together with the higher AEI cluster also scored the highest in the '2 to 5' category. The highest score in the '20+' category was achieved by the doctorates. In total the highest scores were achieved by all educational clusters in the '2 to 5' and 'first time' categories.

Source of Information about Protest

Concluding remarks

The internet has now been established as an effective resource for street politics. Data collected through the survey that was conducted online reveal the samelevels of disatisfaction with the existing political system that was demonstrated by other surveys. However, most of the oartipants in the online survey had a higher education experince and that way they are not representative of the crouds that gathered in both sides of Syntagma Square.

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