

New Greek parties thrive online

DEREK GATOPOULOS, Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) -- From his tiny, windowless office, George Palamarizis tirelessly chips away at Greece's political establishment.

The web designer creates content for the Democratic Left - one of a crop of new parties that have rapidly built an online following that is translating into real electoral clout. As the economic crisis rages, they are harnessing the power of the Internet to get out their message as the biggest parties find they have little money in their coffers for traditional campaigning.

Ahead of Sunday's general elections, Palamarizis works on a shoestring. He has a staff of two, no additional funds for campaigning, and is promoting a political party that until recently most Greeks had never heard of.

They have now.

Democratic Left peaked at second place in opinion polls several weeks ago, an achievement party officials say would have been unthinkable without the Internet.

"It was obvious from the beginning that without money and access to the traditional media, we could only make our opinions and proposals known with new media, the Internet and social media," the 44-year-old Palamarizis said, his desk covered in cables, screens gadgets and not a single piece of paper.

Political newcomers are aggressively mobilizing to attract voters as they desert the major parties that left the country with massive debts and punishing austerity measures.

The two main parties in Greece - the Socialist Pasok and conservative New Democracy - have swapped places in and out of government for four decades, averaging more than 80 percent of the vote between them in the past 13 general elections.

Polls suggest half of that support could be wiped out on Sunday, while the number of parties elected to parliament is set to rise from five to as many as 10 - with everyone from pro-Soviet Communists to free-market evangelists to Neo-Nazis grabbing seats from the main parties, helped by vigorous Internet campaigns.

Palamarizis keeps his formula simple: Constantly upload new material and update your database of party members and "friends."

And never use spam.

"People have understood that we won't bomb them with info they don't need ... We

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only target friends and members of the party. They can pass our message on if they want."

Democratic Left, a moderate offshoot party that backs Greek membership of the euro, is headquartered in a run-down area in central Athens, located between two vacant stores and across the street from a row of brothels. Its no-frills online campaign is suited to the country's harsh economic conditions.

The financial crisis has seen Greeks lose jobs at a rate of 1,000 per day on average in the past year. As the country slides into poverty, long-standing campaign rules are being rewritten.

Major parties, unable to borrow money, no longer have the funds to stage mass public rallies or blitz the airwaves with election ads. Fearing physical attacks by protest mobs, politicians have also limited campaign appearances to small gatherings and speeches at well-policed indoor sports venues.

TV and radio stations are bound by rigid airtime quotas for each party during election campaigns, roughly based on their support at the last election in 2009 - making TV almost irrelevant for new parties.

But look online, and political debate is raging: Rival candidates slug it out on recorded video-calls, 30-second campaign ads for television are expanded to 5 minutes, and voters get to ask the questions themselves.

"We've seen these elections being dominated by the Internet," said Stefanos Loukakos, country manager in Greece for the Internet giant Google, citing a major shift in online habits since the 2009 election.

"People spend less time reading newspapers and watching TV. In the past couple of years, Greece has been bombarded with news blogs and news sites. The crisis and the elections in particular have a very high interest among users."

Google's Greek operation, Google.gr, set up an election platform with local news site protagon.gr, featuring interviews, debates and party-produced material.

"We've had a very high interest, with more than a million visitors in the first couple of days and more than 300,000 video views, without even advertising," Loukakos said.

"The crisis has actually increased usage of the Internet, and the reason is very simple: People are going out less, staying home more, and are using the Internet to search for deals and get their news."

The spread of Internet usage to older Greeks and swift growth of smartphones - now making up 20 percent of cell phones used in Greece, according to Loukakos - have also helped. It all makes the traditionally dominant parties also keen to exploit the cheap new campaigning methods.

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Above his espresso coffee import business, 36-year-old Panagiotis Haskos is launching his political career as a candidate for the conservatives.

Using new technology, he argues, saves money but also sends the right message to voters.

"Even if you have money, it's not good to spend it on campaigning. People don't like it," he said, speaking at his cramped office, which employs one I.T. worker.

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