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## **Greek university student's participation in national elections: Voting behavior and signs of political apathy and decreasing civic consciousness in the context of economic crisis in Greece**

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### **Abstract**

*During the first years of the establishment of the third Greek Republic (1974) Greek voters participated almost en masse in electoral processes. Over the years, the turnout was steadily decreasing, especially from 1990 onwards, culminating in the participation of the national elections of 2009 and the regional elections of 2010. Traditionally, Greek university students used to be a much politicized social group which was characterized by progressive ideology and revolutionary protest practices. In recent years, some research findings concerning depreciation of politics and politicians, a low voting turn out in national, local and European elections both with a tremendous abstention in students' unions elections show off that the aforesaid revolutionary political dynamics of the Greek university students were substituted by a political apathy and a low degree of civic consciousness.*

*In our research we analyze the participation and turnout of Greek university students in all four kinds of elections taking place in Greece (national elections, elections, regional elections, elections for the E.U. Parliament and student elections). Our analysis showed that from 1990 onwards there is a significant reduction in electoral participation and a subsequent increase in absenteeism. We believe that this phenomenon can not be regarded as the result of indifference or apathy of the electorate, but as an expression of political protest against the pathologies of the Greek political system.*

**Keywords:** voting behavior, political apathy, civic education, abstention

### **Introduction**

Traditionally, Greek university students used to be a much politicized social group which was characterized by progressive ideology and revolutionary protest practices. In recent years, some research findings concerning depreciation of politics and politicians, a low voting turn out in national, local and European elections both with a tremendous abstention in students' unions elections show off that the aforesaid revolutionary political dynamics of the Greek university students were substituted by a political apathy and a low degree of civic consciousness.

We present students' turnout in the main elections taking part in Greek political system in a historical and time series prospect. In specific we analyse the students' attitudes towards national elections and their voting behavior in the context of the economic crisis

in Greece. We used a questionnaire composed by three parts: the first part is aiming to collect demographic data, the second part is collecting data about students' and their parents' political identity and their political habits and the third part is an attitude Likert scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0,79) which is constituted in order to itemize students' political voting behavior. The statistical analysis showed that university students do not interesting in politics, they do not vote frequently in elections and they express a depreciation about politics and politicians.

### **Exploring the field**

In modern states there is no phenomenon as widespread as the elections. In all democratic societies, elections are the basic principle of legitimization of power (Meny, 1995). Some thinkers even reached the point to characterize the elections as the heart of democracy, equating the meaning of elections with the concept of democracy (Schumpeter, 2006). Lupia and M. McCubbins (1998) tried to classify the factors that influence voters in their electoral behavior, as follows:

- (a) the ideological identity of the political party (Downs, 1957)
- (b) matters of bias (Calvert, 1985)
- (c) goodwill towards a party or a candidate, (Brady and Sniderman, 1985)
- (d) specific behaviors of parties or candidates (Sobel, 1985),
- (e) an intensely competitive situation in the economy which can create common interests, according to the applicable policies in several groups of the population (Krehbiel, 1991)
- (f) the embedded status of specific elites (Zaller, 1992)
- (g) the collective actions of specific social groups (Downs, 1957)
- (h) the polls (McKelvey, and Ordeshook, 1986)
- (i) the media (Lyengar and Kinder, 1987)
- (k) the cost of election campaigns (Lupia, 1992)
- (l) the size of rallies or demonstrations (Lohmann, 1993)
- (m) specific events during the election campaign (Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau, 1995)
- and (n) the feelings of the public (Rahn, Kroeger and Kite, 1996).

Participation is not a static concept but has been recurring and changing with developments in social theory and research. The varying practices of civic engagement have also affected the ways in which participation has been understood and conceptualised. The disassociation of young people from democratic and political participation is a topic of much recent research by political sociologists. The observation that people in established democracies are appearing to shun traditional methods of political participation, such as voting and party membership has attracted a great deal of recent scholarly attention (Putnam 1993, 2000, Norris 2002, Mair and Van Biezen 2001, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 2005, Stoker 2006). This perceived shift away from these formal types of political involvement is deemed to be particularly acute in the case of young people who are often seen to be apathetic about or alienated from formal political processes (Putnam 2000, Norris 2002, 2003, Henn et al. 2002, 2005, Marsh et al. 2007, Sloam 2007, Robertson, 2009). Indeed this has led some observers to identify

the political disengagement of young people as a key element in the so-called ‘crisis’ of modern day liberal democracy (Russell 2005).

Political, democratic and civic participation are usually described as separate but inter-linked. The starting point for measuring youth disassociation with democratic life usually begins with a measurement of the number who fail to register to vote or turn out at the polling booth (Edwards, 2005).

There are numerous studies reporting declining levels of political engagement and participation among young people worldwide (Norris, 2003).

Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) tried to answer two basic questions: why people vote and why abstinenace rates begin to rise?

They believe that participation in an electoral process depends on factors such as *income, education, age, institutional field, the procedures required for participation and the level of an individual's mobility (eg participation in social networks, contacts with political parties, the type of work, etc.)*.

Carlson (1999) might well wonder: the people who not participate to the electoral processes are finally happy or alienated from the political system?

According to the terms of Verba and Nie (1972) there are many ways to affect political system's functions and that abstention from the elections is a mere expression of political behavior, which in relation to activities of other political attitudes of the same individuals can be considered negligible.

For example, participation in demonstrations and marches, writing and publishing texts are kinds of political participation, possibly much more dynamic than the participation in electoral processes. R. Dahl (1954) and B. Berelson (1954) consider abstinenace as a healthy political behavior. They find that high abstention rates show that the people have confidence in the political system. Edelman (1964) believes that the institution of voting is a myth that distracts the masses from the true power base. For J. Walker (1966) on the other part abstinenace is a threat to democracy.

We know that at the individual level the propensity to vote is associated with a number of sociodemographic characteristics (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980, Blais 2000). Studies of political participation in established democracies have long found that age acts as an important factor in explaining the likelihood of an individual being politically involved. Thus, being young or very old is most associated with a lower likelihood of turning out to vote or joining a political party (Verba and Nie 1972, Dalton 1996, Franklin 2004, Henn et al. 2002, 2005, Sloam 2007, Fieldhouse et al. 2007, Russell 2005, Cross and Young 2008). In recent decades the gap between young voters and older has apparently widened in many established democracies (Wattenberg 2002, Franklin 2004, Fieldhouse et al. 2007).

Furthermore, Matsusaka and Palda (1999), Milligan et al. (2004), Blais (2006) and Brady et al. (1995) point out that socioeconomic variables (including education) are

correlated with the skills and resources a voter develops over time. Disassociation from political life more generally has been measured most notably in declining youth membership of political parties (Henn et al. 2002). Attention has also been paid to young people 'self-reporting' of lack of interest in politics (Kyridis et.al 2011). Declining membership of civic and community groups has been regarded as evidence of disassociation in this context, and all of the above have been linked with a decline of social capital amongst young people (Putnam 2000, Edwards 2005).

### **Greek youngsters and politics- historic context**

Young people are probably the most demanding and rigid judges of politics, as they unpretentiously express their own views, rejecting politicians who they instinctively perceive as misleading people, as people who do not inspire hope. They criticize the "status quo", are skeptical about standard values and they mostly discard the old generation's lifestyles, wishing to improve what their forefathers have created and bequeathed (Asimomitis, 1998).

During the 60s, youth movements in Greece and throughout Europe contradicted institutions, attitudes and policies adopted by the recent capitalist system and contravened lifestyles that had been confined to the "paradise" of consumerism. In particular, the political culture of the 60s, which was characterized as "meta-materialistic", was very significant for the generations who came of political age in the 60s and 70s (Ball & Perers, 2001).

In the 70s and early 80s, youth and student movements had probably declined, but they were soon resuscitated by younger generations, who joined in alternative social movements with the conviction that they could create new sources of power and institutional networks to enable them to build up a more virtuous society.

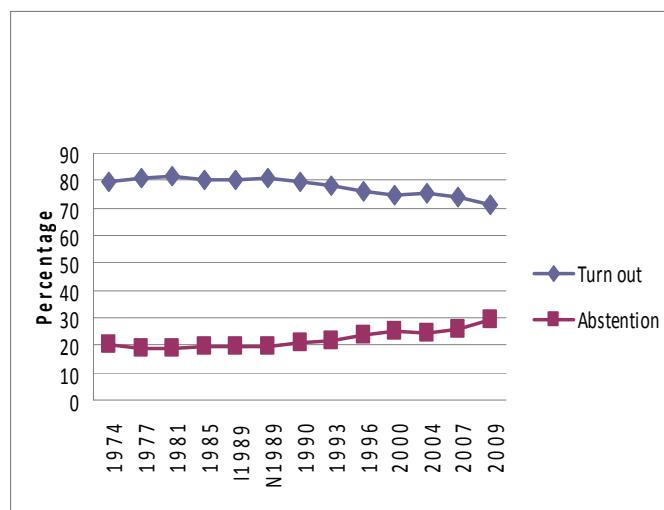
Since the late 80s there has been plenty of fatigue, frustration, despair and confusion, in tandem with a tendency for accommodating oneself in the current system to pursue careerism and personal happiness. Young people have been detached from the notion of a universal socioeconomic change and vindication, as they are integrated in the overall "state of decadence and iniquity" (Nikolopoulos, 1995; Pye, 1978; Filias, 1974).

As it was mentioned, an important part of Greek and international literature has focused on the analysis of electoral behavior and investigate the reasons that lead the citizens in specific electoral choices. However less attention has been paid to the theme of participation or non participation of the citizens in the electoral process and the reasons that lead many of them in total abstinence. This point requires special attention and for Greece where is observed a constant, except in rare cases, increasing abstinence from both national and European elections, since 1974 when the democracy war restored in the country.

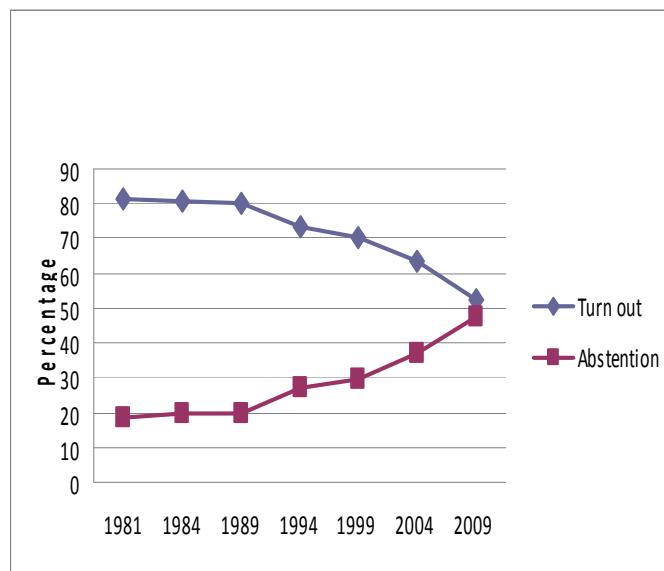
Still, the once vibrant and lively student movement, the intensely politicized and assertive, seems to have fallen into lethargy and political apathy, since turnout in student elections is really low. The expanding political apathy, or better the increased level of

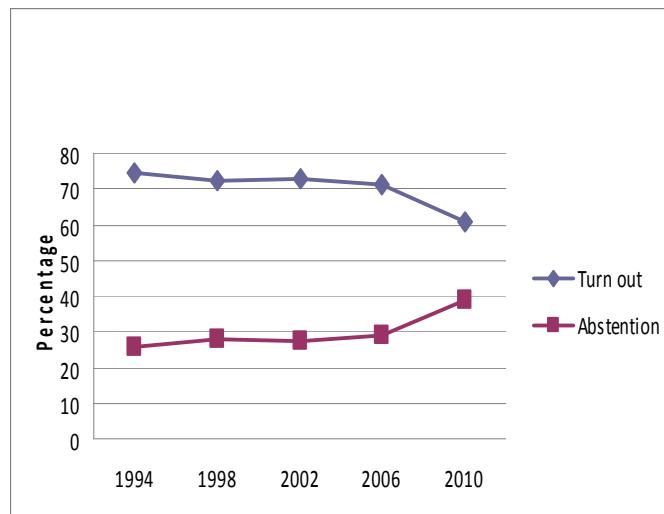
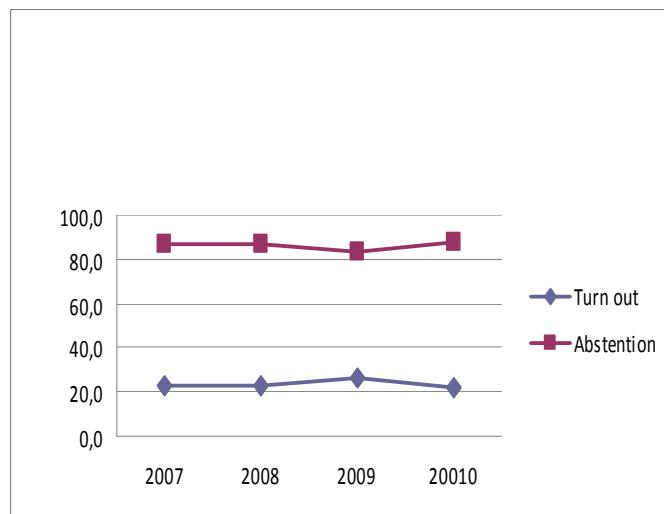
the non-participation of Greek University students is clearly reflected to the diagrams bellow.

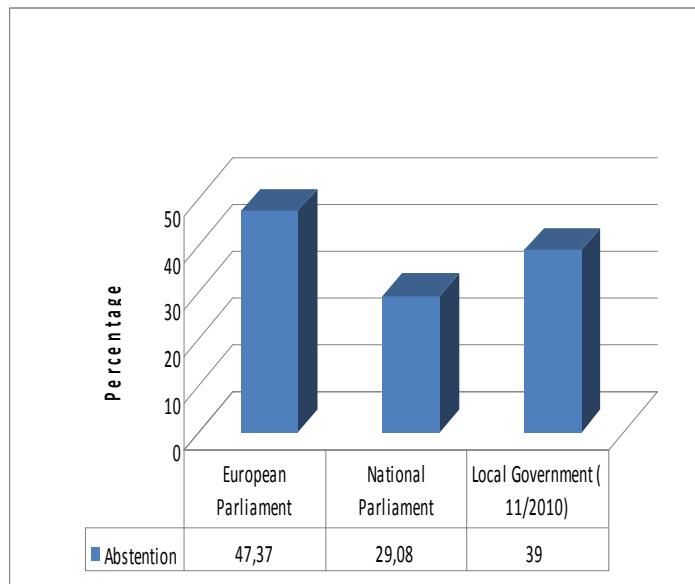
**Diagram 1. Voting turnout in Greece since the restoration of democracy (1974)**



**Diagram 2. Voting turnout and abstention in European elections in Greece**



**Diagram 3. Voting turnout and abstention in Local Government elections****Diagram 4. Voting turnout and abstention in University Student Unions Elections**

**Diagram 5. Abstention in recent elections in Greece****Table 1. Variation of abstention per kind of election**

Elections	First election	Penultimate election	Last election	Distance between first and last election	Distance between the last two elections
<b>National Parliament</b>	1974: 20,47%	2007: 25,86%	2009: 29,08%	8,61	3,22
<b>European Parliament</b>	1981: 18,52%	2004: 36,88%	2009: 47,37%	28,85	10,49
<b>Local Government</b>	1994: 25,5%	2006: 28,84%	2010: 39,01%	13,51	13,51
<b>University Students Union</b>	2007: 87,2%	2009: 83,7%	2010: 87,7%	0,5	4

### Methodology and sample of the research

The Research took place on the Greek student population in order to record its political culture through its participation to politics and its views towards politicians, political system and democracy e.t.c.

The sample of the research was 747 undergraduate and postgraduate students. It has to be mentioned that in this paper is presented a piece of work that is a part of a major project where in aspects of methodology we used a scale divided into 8 subscales (5

graded Likert scale), a questionnaire of 10 questions for recording and measuring the political knowledge of the sample and a questionnaire of demographic characteristics of the population of the research.

The research took place from March of 2010 to September 2010 and the estimated total reliability of the scale we used was: Cronbach's alpha = 0,919.

### Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

**Table 2. Distribution of the sample by gender**

Gender	%
Male	17,3
Female	82,7

**Table 3. Distribution of the sample by educational level**

Educational level	%
Undergraduates	79,2
Postgraduates	20,8

**Table 4. Distribution of the sample by place of residence**

Residence	%
Great urban area (Athens/Thessaloniki)	37,6
Urban area	34,2
Town	15,9
Rural area	12,3

**Table 5. Distribution of the sample by parents' profession**

Profession	Parents	
	Father	Mother
Free lancer/Scientist	14,0	4,7
Civil servant	37,9	25,2
Private sector servant	21,9	19,9
Free lancer/Technician	11,7	3,0
Trader	4,7	5,1
Workman	3,6	2,3
Farmer	6,2	3,6

Domestic duties		36,4
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**Table 6. Distribution of the sample by educational level of the parents**

Educational level	Parents	
	Father	Mother
Illiterate	0,6	1,2
Elementary school graduate	21,9	17,5
Secondary school graduate	30,4	40,0
Technological institution graduate	22,5	17,3
University graduate	21,7	21,6
Post graduate degree	3,0	2,4

**Table 7. Distribution of the sample by political ideology**

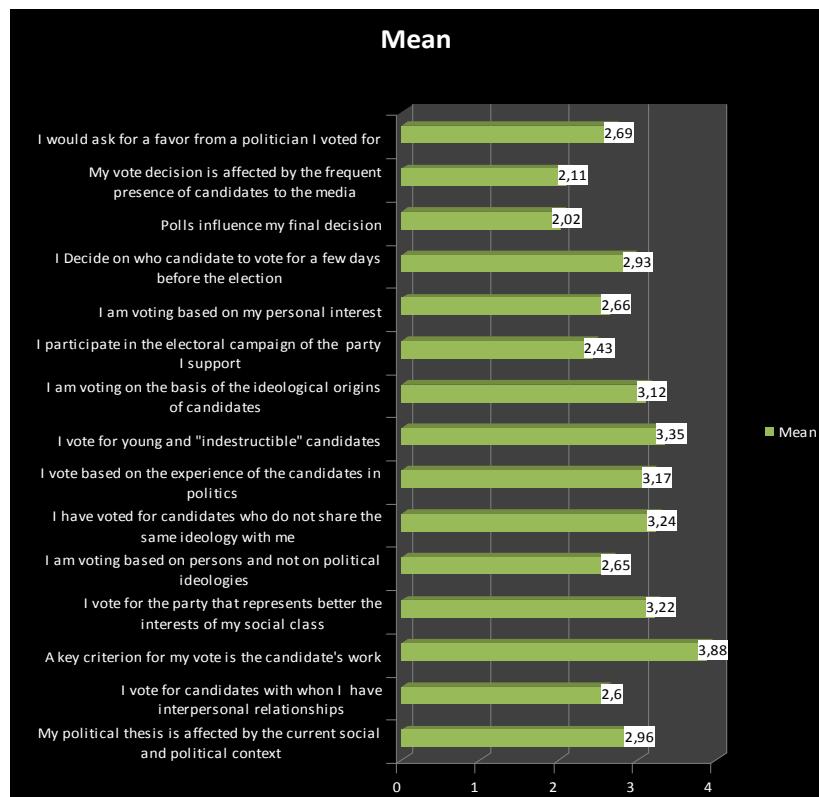
Political ideology	%
Extreme Right	2,2
Right	21,4
Centre	33,1
Left	30,6
Extreme Left	2,2
Anarchists	10,4

**Table 8. Distribution of the sample by degree of politicization**

Degree of Politicization	%
None	22,4
A little	38,0
Average	8,6
Enough	25,4
Very much	5,6

**Table 9. Frequency of participation in elections**

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Frequency of participation</b>		
	<b>Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Always</b>
National Parliament	22,8	19,1	58,1
European Parliament	31,0	26,1	42,9
Local Government	39,6	23,1	37,3
University Students Unions	32,0	40,3	27,7
Elections in groups	46,2	33,7	20,1

**Diagram 6. Results of the 5 graded scale about the electoral culture of the sample**

### **Research findings**

Regarding to the politicization degree of the sample the results of the research showed that:

*(a) men show higher degree of politicization than women, (b) there is higher degree of politicization of students with illiterate mothers and mothers with a postgraduate degree, (c) the degree of politicization increases with age, (d) there is a higher degree of politicization from science students than from students from other scientific fields and (e) there is a higher degree of politicization from those who belong ideologically to the left wing and especially to the extreme left.*

The full scale correlations (anova test) regarding the views of the sample towards Politics, Politicians, Greek political system, Greek democracy and electoral behaviour showed that:

*(a) women have more positive attitudes towards politics, politicians e.t.c., (b) the older people have more positive attitude than the younger ones, (c) the most positive attitude was recorded by those studying social sciences and the less positive by those studying science, (d) the less positive attitude was recorded by those that ideologically belong to the Centre and the more positive attitude by those who belong to the right wing.*

Finally regarding to what social characteristics affect the political participation of Greek students, the research showed that:

*(a) graduate students are seem to have less political participation than the postgraduates, (b) as age increases the political participation diminishes, (c) In the extreme Right and in the extreme Left the political participation seems to be lower and (d) the political participation increases analogically to the degree of politicization.*

### **Historical and political analysis**

Greece is one of the countries in the European south that had its democracy restored relatively recently, in 1974.

In the period (1967-74), the country was governed by a right leaning military dictatorship. In the period before that, most often the country was governed by rightist governments which often acted in an authoritarian way, usually harassing, arresting and imprisoning their leftist political opponents. With the restoration and full establishment of a democracy in 1974, the forces of the left (represented by the Socialists, Communists and the Democratic Left) started to gain the upper hand in politics.

After the junta and the beginning of the third Greek democracy (1981), Greece seemed to be conducted by a kind of socialistic, political plan. The social life in the country was highly politicized society and the people hurried by any chance to implement its democratic duty which for seven years was deprived by the junta of colonels. From 1974 to 1989 the abstention in national elections never exceeded a percentage of 20.5%. As in the rest of Europe, the left started to dominate the universities, the media and other cultural institutions in the period (1981-1991). However after the decline of Soviet Union and the war in Yugoslavia, it seems that they can't persuade the majority of young people for the socialization of the community: the liberalization of the community and the model of the citizen as a consumer have been established in the country as well in the Balkans.

An empirical analysis of the postwar Greek economy from a Marxist perspective shows *the rate of surplus value, the value and materialized composition of the general Marxian rate of profit, and the net rate profit for the 1958-1994 periods, as well as the long-run behavior of those variables in a capitalist economy.* The results provide empirical support for Marx's theory, which appears to be a useful tool for the analysis postwar history and the prospects of the Greek economy (Maniatis, 2005: 494-516).

Reading comparatively the research of A. Ross & Mel. Dooly (2010:43-59) "Young people's intentions about their political activity", which based on a survey of a 2.400 students (aged between 11-17 years, in 2008-2009) in four countries we can remark that: *there is considerable political interest amongst students (aged 11-17) in these four countries (Poland, Spain, Turkey and England) though not necessarily political interest in the conventional sense of traditional party political activity.*

*The majority of students say that they will participate in electoral activity, but party membership and standing for office will be activities for small minorities. Taking actions through campaigns will be important for about a third of these students and a possible activity for a further third half of them 44% will probably be involved in political discussions with their peers.*

Nevertheless our findings in Greece don't support those of Al. Ross and others about "the optimistic voices", because the results show that *most of young students in Greek Universities don't read about political history and philosophy. They don't even know about the recently political changes in Greek history, as which parties are represented in the national parliament or when the restoration of democracy in Greece took place. They don't want to vote and they don't participate in volunteering groups.*

This attitude can be explained because of the particular historical and political development and configuration of the Greek state, since citizenship and national identity is still confused in primary school curriculum: in elementary school, history lessons promote basically national and less politic education as a civic, international education, because a) on the one hand they contribute to the formation of national identity, by deleting the content and limits of "national" memory and b) on the other hand participate in the shaping and engraving of national.

As Hobsbawm (1987) analyses, *the problems of Europe were caused not by imperialism per se, but by the structure and development of the bourgeois classes, not by the agrarian revolution.* Hobsbawm's thesis is intimately connected to the failure of this class to deliver social justice, to dampen nationalism and recidivism, and to avoid war.

We can remark that according to the Kennedy's (in Ross, 2008: 47-49) two form of passive citizenship, Greek students' behavior refers more to the kind of passive citizenship. This form of passive citizenship is described by Kennedy as patriotism, which stress the value of social stability.

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