

THE DISCOURSE OF POLITICAL MESSAGES IN THE BULGARIAN DEBATE ON THE INTRODUCTION OF MAJORITY/PLURALITY ELECTORAL SYSTEM AFTER 1989

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The electoral system affects various aspects of the social, political and economic areas. Since 1989, the topic for the introduction of majority/plurality electoral system have been discussed frequently. Thus, the aim of the current study is to identify the main messages in the Bulgarian debate on the introduction of this electoral system. The results show that the leading arguments in favor of the majority/plurality system are that it will make possible voting for individuals, the parliament will be of higher quality and the overall functioning of the political system will enhance.

Keywords: *electoral system, Bulgaria, majority/plurality system, voting for individuals*

A country's electoral system can be defined as a set of rules and formulas that transform the votes into seats in the legislature. Those rules may be result of different approaches to the formation of a legislature, and in this sense the calculation can be done in several ways that produce different results [4]. The electoral system directly or indirectly affects various aspects of the social, political and economic areas. That's why the debate on the introduction of a given electoral system is rather significant for the function of a country.

In Bulgaria, the debate on the type of electoral system to be used dates from the late 19th century [10]. Since 1989, the topic for the introduction of majority/plurality electoral system have been discussed frequently. However, the discussion these days has its specifics and priorities, and therefore the *aim* of the current study is to identify the main messages in the Bulgarian debate on the introduction of majority/plurality electoral system. *Object* of the study is various information channels, mostly articles in print media after 1989. *Focus* of the research are the arguments, provided in articles, dedicated to the implementation of majority/plurality system in Bulgaria. Over 30 sources are examined and analyzed, some of which are referred to in the current study.

The work presents the conceptual framework of the electoral systems and their effects. The conceptual framework is followed by analysis of the results after the examination of the reviewed articles on the Bulgarian debate. The study closes with discussion of the results.

Electoral systems

Electoral system is mostly relevant for the level of fragmentation of *party system*. According to Duverger's law, plurality electoral systems favor the formation of a two-party system. Multiparty systems, in turn, are result of proportional and majority systems having a second round [7]. Mixed systems can have different effects on the party system, depending on how the proportional and majority systems are combined [3]. As a general principle, the introduction of mixed systems is an attempt to combine the best of the two main varieties [24].

The current electoral system in Bulgaria is proportional, which implies a pluralistic party system. Moreover, the introduction of preferential voting makes it focused on the candidates, because the open list allows voters to cast their vote not only for the party but also for a specific candidate on the party's list. [11]. It should be noted here that the method of calculating the electoral result currently applied (Hare-Niemeyer) favors smaller parties, which in turn has the potential to lead to a more fragmented parliament.

The effect that the electoral system has on the party system is also connected to the *political stability*. Usually, majority/plurality systems create stable one-party governments, which should facilitate the decision-making process. The main debate is whether states should adopt majority/plurality systems that prioritize government efficiency and accountability, or proportional systems that are fairer to smaller parties and provide more representation [18]. When we discuss the question of stability or representativeness it is essential to keep in mind that the very often majority/plurality systems create the so called "manufactured" majorities because it gives an over-exposed advantage to the party with the most votes [19]. On the other hand, proportional representation, depending on the allocation formula, often leads to coalition governments that have more difficulty in making decisions. [18].

The type of electoral system also affects the *representation of different social groups*. In recent years, a very popular topic for research has been the representation of women in the legislature by type of electoral system. There is a special report of the Venice Commission [8] on the impact of electoral systems on women's representation in politics. According to the latter, there is a higher proportion of women in the legislatures of countries with proportional electoral systems compared to those with majority/plurality. The result for countries implementing mixed systems seems to be somewhere between the last two.

Along with the representation of women, in recent years, there has been a growing focus on ensuring that young people are sufficiently represented in the legislature. The Interparliamentary Union (IPU) presents empirical data on the latter topic, which enables them to identify in practice where representation is more significant. According to IPU in 2018 the proportion of young representatives in the legislature is significantly higher in countries that implement proportional or mixed systems than those that use majority/plurality [13]. A study by Stockemer and Sundström [25] confirms this dependence.

As concerns ethnic minority groups proportional systems, on the one hand, make it possible to draw up a balanced list and, on the other, to form coalition governments with parties representing the minorities [14]. It is believed that majority/plurality systems may have incentives for politicians to polarize the electorate based on ethnic cleavages, thereby motivating voters to support ethnic parties [12]. According to Lublin and Bowler [14], majority voting systems such as Alternative Vote offer some incentives to include candidates from different ethnic minorities who, even if not placed in the first place, will at least be included in the lists. However, as this system is still majority, there is little chance of minority representation at national level.

To some extent the electoral system is also relevant to some aspects of the *economic development*. In their study of the economic origins of dictatorship and democracy, Acemoglu and Robinson [1] mention that there is empirical evidence that proportional representation systems provide more even redistribution of income than majority/plurality ones. Electoral systems are important for economic development and because voters indirectly choose the economic policy that is part of the party's platform. [8] As Przeworski [22] points out, every party has to promise and do as good things as possible, because otherwise there will be no votes for them.

The Bulgarian debate

During the last 30 years the debate in Bulgaria on the introduction of majority/plurality electoral systems has been almost permanent. There have been various arguments in support of this system and a lot of journalists, politicians and social scientists declared support for it. Results of the examination of articles, dedicated to the implementation of majority/plurality system in Bulgaria show that there are three main arguments in support of the introduction of the latter.

Voting for individuals and more accountability. Supporters of the majority/plurality systems point out that indeed the proportional system provides a higher degree of representation, but this is its only advantage. Moreover, its weaknesses cast doubt on its fairness, because the voter is deprived of the right to directly elect a MP or a municipal councilor because the parties arrange the lists. Thus this makes the MPs representatives of the parties and not of the people [9]. In addition, under this system, the personal connection with the voter is lost and in this sense the political responsibility of the elected ones to voters is impossible. Under majority/plurality systems the citizens can vote for specific individuals and not party lists. Thus, there is a connection between the candidate and his constituents and there is a possibility of seeking political responsibility. [17]

The lack of responsibility under proportional representation have been demonstrated in the frequent absence of MPs from the Parliament during its sessions. According to Markov they behave so irresponsibly because people do not know them personally as they are part of party list [16]. Furthermore, according to Obretenov the Bulgarians have long wanted to vote for individuals [20]. Although such arguments may sound motivating, it should be noted that in Bulgaria people vote predominantly for political parties and there is a little chance for an independent candidate to be elected. [6]

Improved quality of the legislature. The desire to introduce a majoritarian vote is largely generated by dissatisfaction with the quality of the current MPs [2]. According to Milanov members of the Parliament aren't real representatives and legislators, but rather are people, who seek expression primarily in political games dictated by narrow-minded and group goals and interests [17]. The supporters of majority/plurality systems believe that it can ensure the participation in parliament of more worthy people, with high moral, responsible, competent, individuals with high public recognition and high professional attainment [5] [16] [23] [27].

Overall positive development of the country. The people, who promote the majority/plurality electoral system are convinced that it will cause an overall positive

development for the country [15] and the proportional system have undermined such development [23]. Furthermore, the weakness of Bulgarian democracy [16] and its poor economic development [21] are due to the proportional representation. According to them only the majority vote can lead to the establishment of competent, capable state bodies that can solve the country's problems [17]. They give as positive examples the UK and the USA. [9]

Conclusion

The proper selection of country's electoral system can enhance the functioning of various social systems and promote democratic values. On the contrary, an electoral system, which is not suitable for the social environment in a given state can undermine its development and even lead to instability and conflicts. The democratic institutions in Bulgaria were established in the early 1990s. The electoral system have been predominantly proportional and it looks like that there is some level of agreement between political parties on this type of system.

However, the public debate on the type of electoral system occasionally draws the attention of the society. There are groups of people in the Bulgarian society, which are convinced that the majority/plurality system should be introduced in Bulgaria. The examination of their messages since 1989 shows that there are three main arguments in favor of the majority/plurality system. According to them it will make possible voting for individuals, the parliament will be of higher quality and the overall functioning of the political system will enhance. The only consistent argument is the first one. Indeed, the majority voting in single member constituencies forces political parties to present all of their candidates before the society. In the proportional systems usually the first one in the list is mostly presented. The last argument doesn't correspond at all to the empirical results in the literature on the topic [26]. As concerns the statement that it will lead to better quality of the legislature, it is something that cannot be empirically tested. It sounds much more like an optimistic desire rather than rational prognosis. Thus, the discourse of political messages in the Bulgarian debate on the introduction of majority/plurality electoral system after 1989 have been marked by the attempts to find a universal solution, which can lead to overall positive development of the country. It requires more scientific arguments and rationality in order to produce a relevant debate for the future development of Bulgaria.

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