

# *Exploring the factors that hinder the penetration of new political alternatives in the party system in Albania*

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*Dr. Anjeza XHAFERAJ<sup>1</sup>*

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*MSc. Kleda FISHTA<sup>2</sup>*

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## **Abstract**

*This study explores the entry of new and small parties into the party system in Albania, focusing on the period from 1990 to 2017. It is a comprehensive exploration of the Albanian political landscape from 1991 to 2017, focusing on the role of electoral systems and how they influence party politics. The study underscores the necessity for strong, stable political parties in a thriving democracy and investigates how the electoral system either facilitates or hinders the representation of small and new parties. It investigates the influence of institutional factors, as well as the challenges and strategies related to political survival that these parties face. The analysis reveals how the two-round majority system typically fosters a two-party system, whereas a proportional system can lead to a more fragmented party landscape, often necessitating coalitions for effective governance. The impact of these dynamics was observed during several key periods in Albanian political history, noting the consequences of changes in the electoral system on the party system. The paper also highlights how major parties often manipulate the electoral system, through practices such as gerrymandering, to their own advantage, leading to potential distortions in representation. Furthermore,*

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Anjeza Xhaferaj is Advisor at Prime Minister's Office in the framework of LEAD Albania Fellowship Programme.

<sup>2</sup> Msc. Kleda Fishta is graduated in 2017 in MSc. "Political Sciences" at the European University of Tirana.

*it presents the challenges for new and small parties, emphasizing the importance of financial support and media coverage for their survival and competitive performance.*

**Key words:** *political party, electoral system, new alternatives, gerrymandering, effective number of parties*

## **Introduction**

Between 1991 and 2017, electoral processes in Albania have not merely been periodic exercises to facilitate governance, but have instead taken on the guise of do-or-die battles between the two largest political factions. These confrontations are characterized by the use of all available resources, tactics, and maneuvers. After these combative episodes, the chasm between victors and vanquished remains considerable. In this period, elections were often viewed as opportunities to grasp or maintain power at any cost, rather than as tools to address societal issues. On the contrary, they often exacerbated problems, increasing the political and economic burden on the nation.

A deeper examination of Albanian electoral processes reveals that the fundamental democratic principle - the free judgment of citizens - has been supplanted by the ability of ambitious politicians to craft tactical electoral strategies. These politicians can secure electoral advantages and parliamentary mandates even before the ballots are cast. The continued polarization between the same factions makes the entry of new alternatives increasingly challenging.

Albania is one of the few countries where representative parties that capture parliamentary mandates seldom change. The Albanian Parliament remains predominantly occupied by two historical parties - the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, which are also the largest parties in the country. This dominance and the ensuing struggle to introduce new alternatives constitute the core issue we seek to explore in this paper.

This study aims to investigate the factors obstructing the emergence of new political alternatives in the Albanian political system. The premise is that from 1991 to 2013, the Albanian party system has demonstrated stability, being primarily dominated by the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. These parties have managed to attract a significant portion of the electorate. Smaller parties have had occasional representation, yet they have lacked the ability to maintain a consistent presence from one term to another, nor have they been successful in articulating ideas distinct from those of the two major parties.

The third significant entity in the Albanian political system is the Socialist Movement for Integration. While it has maintained a steady presence, its

positioning as a center-left party makes its discourse indistinguishable from that of other left-wing entities in the Albanian political spectrum, thereby, not qualifying it as a new political alternative.

In post-communist countries, including Albania, the first decade of transitioning to a new political regime did not prioritize the creation of new alternatives. The focus was primarily on establishing a multi-party political system with strong political parties geared towards creating and controlling governance, with robust popular support and clear political profiles (Bútora, 2013). However, unlike Albania, other post-communist countries managed to create new political alternatives that restructured the party system after the initial phase.

The question is, why didn't Albania manage to foster new political alternatives? What are the factors that obstructed this development? This study hypothesizes that institutional factors, such as the electoral system, as well as structural factors that blur ideological clarity amongst the Albanian electorate and hinder political parties from developing a clear political identity, are responsible.

Lami and Kocani (2015), in their study on the identity of Albanian political parties, postulated that due to factors like communist heritage, lack of social group structure in urban and rural areas, political culture and elites, international structures imposing a political agenda, and media, both left and right-wing political parties in Albania exhibit elements of the other's ideological stance in their programs and political behavior.

Other scholars argue that Albanian political parties operate on a clientelistic basis, using their power to fill public administration with their supporters and activists (Barbullshi, 2014; Elbasani, 2008; Xhaferaj, 2016; Xhaferaj, 2018). This strategy of capturing the electorate effectively prevents new political parties from making headway, as their lack of power does not enable them to offer incentives to potential voters.

To validate this hypothesis, this paper will analyze the relationship between the electoral system and party system, the fragmentation index, and Albanian legislation, assessing their impacts on the party system. The study will also scrutinize the discourse of the political parties.

## **Theoretical Framework and Analytical Model**

To answer the research question, it's necessary to clarify what the new political alternatives are, how the electoral and party system affects them, and what factors hinder their penetration in Albania. Literature on new alternatives identifies factors such as the electoral system (Duverger, 1954; Lijphart, 1996, Norris 2004) and others like the ideological absence of political parties in our country (Lami

and Kocani, 2013). However, before analyzing the role of the electoral system in the party system, let's understand what political parties are and what functions they serve.

### *Literature review on the role and function of political parties*

Democratic theorists have long debated the role and function of political parties. Most liberal theorists view political parties positively, considering them essential for the functioning of representative democracy. Societies are dysfunctional without parties. These organizations can fulfill a wide variety of functions: representing interests, formulating policies, providing platforms, organizing legislatures, coordinating government activities, developing election campaigns, mobilizing and channeling supporters, structuring electoral choices, linking leaders with activists, and selecting candidates for elected positions. Bartolini and Mair suggest that this long list of functions can be reduced to five main categories: integrating and mobilizing citizens; articulating and aggregating interests; formulating public order; recruiting political leaders; and organizing parliament and government (in Norris, 2004, p.3). However, there are also other approaches that view party organizations as 'greedy interests' capable of distorting or usurping the popular will of the majority. Anti-party sentiment continues to be reflected in public opinion, and confidence in parties remains very low in many countries (Norris, 2004, p.3).

Parties are not the only mechanism through which citizens can mobilize. In states where parties are banned, dissident groups, social movements, and protests provide alternative channels for organizing opposition movements. An independent media can also act as a watchdog and critique government decisions. Referendums are another type of initiative that allows people to express their direct preferences on specific policy issues.

The distinction between interest groups, new social movements, and political parties remains unclear, as many functions are shared. The main difference, however, is that only political parties have the ability to negotiate and reach a compromise among different groups, offer the electorate a program with alternative proposals for fulfilling their demands, recruit candidates for elected positions, and, if elected, pass legislation and oversee the implementation of public policies.

### *Features of the party system in post-communist countries*

The transition from a communist to a democratic system is closely linked to the transformation from a one-party system to a multi-party one, and with this transformation comes the birth of many political parties. To understand the party system in Albania, it's important to look at the features of the party system in post-communist countries. When voters choose new parties, they consider one of



three factors: a) sympathy for the party candidates' personalities; b) expectation of personal and selective advantages that come as a result of the party's victory; or c) production of indirect advantages that come in the form of collective goods and are realized as a result of the party's victory. These considerations give life to three types of parties: a) charismatic; b) clientelistic; and c) programmatic, although in reality these factors can interplay with each other and yield a party typology that displays features of all three types. Given that the competition of programmatic parties is costly and hard to achieve, Kitschelt (1995) concludes that:

- in post-communist countries, political parties will not rely on programs but will be clientelistic and/or charismatic;
- and consequently, democracy in these countries will remain unconsolidated for a long time (p.450-1).

Beyond the broader analyses of partisan systems, specific studies have focused on the heritage parties stemming from communist regimes. Scholars have scrutinized the elements that contributed to the survival and subsequent success of these successor communist parties. According to Grzymala-Busse (2002), the triumph of these parties can be attributed to their ability to reinvent themselves. Intriguingly, the key to their successful metamorphosis lies in their previously tarnished reputations: practices that were once deemed inappropriate during their communist reign paradoxically served as their lifelines during and after the democratic transition.

These parties capitalized on their past in two significant ways: firstly, by rectifying the most disgraceful aspects of their history and secondly, by empowering their elites with resources that transformed them into competitive players in democratic governance. The political resources they wielded were directly connected to their communist past; these assets shaped their responses to the challenges and intricacies of democracy and political transition. Moreover, these resources helped the political elites to comprehend the need for party transformation, aiding in policy implementation and negotiation with the opposition. This ultimately resulted in the creation of responsive programs, opening new competitive dimensions, and facilitating effective election campaigns.

The skills learned from their past experiences determined the capacity of these parties to strategize their organizational transformations. These skills were paramount in facilitating the public resurgence of the discredited parties forced to retreat from power. Centralization and a definitive break from the past enabled such parties to publicly manifest their evolution, strategically enhance their flexibility, and progressively adapt their electoral appeals and behavior.

Even though communist successor parties have exerted influence on party competition, other political actors gained experience and honed their skills in parliamentary and electoral maneuvering and influenced the formation of the party system in Albania. Nevertheless, being the most prominent actors during the authoritarian era and continuing to engage in democratic politics, these parties were well-positioned to considerably shape the early phases of party competition, both through formal institutions and informal practices (Grzymala-Busse, 2002).

Within this context, Albania, akin to other post-communist nations, has grappled with similar challenges and the absence of programmatic parties. Notably, its Socialist Party has not only managed to survive but also emerged as a key actor in structuring the party system.

### *Perspectives on New Political Alternatives*

‘Research on ‘political alternatives’ posits their purpose is to perform better than traditional actors, transform the unsatisfying status quo, and occasionally replace a stagnant political system with a fresh one (Butora, 2013, p.12). The sociological dimensions of emergent parties, their performance, and the demographic of their followers are explored. It scrutinizes their ideological identities, actions, strategies, candidate selection, campaign dynamics, outcomes, and political messaging. Such parties concentrate on engaging the youth, leveraging their political influence, and urging the public to reflect on their distinctive and shared characteristics, assessing their capacity to offer a genuine alternative to the established party system (Butora, 2013, p.12).

Populism, largely employed by “challenger parties,” is also utilized by key politicians across both government and opposition to counter populist adversaries, leading to its prevalence in many national policies and party structures (Butora, 2013, p.13). The surge of populism is indirectly attributed to a deficit of informed public discourse on key social, political, and economic issues. This is exemplified in Greece and Italy’s economic crises, where parties like SYRIZA and the “Five Star Movement” emerged as new alternatives, winning elections and leading their countries. Similarly, Austria witnessed the emergence of Frank Stronach, promising a transformative “revolution” (Butora, 2013, p.31-34). Positive facets include a genuine aspiration for functional, direct democracy, and the application of deliberative democratic procedures. This encourages the electorate to acknowledge the necessity for political change, often driven by the pressure from new parties stemming from civil society initiatives (Butora, 2013, p.42).

The term “new political alternative” refers to parties interested in novel political issues such as personal freedom, social equality, and life quality. These parties, though narrowly oriented, strive to infiltrate the party system dominated by traditional parties (Spoon, 2011, p. 2). Typically, such alternatives are represented



by small parties catering to a specific populace segment, differing from catch-all parties striving for mass appeal (Kirscheimer, 1966). To be considered a small party, it must focus on limited issues or hold few parliamentary seats (Spoon, 2011, p. 5).

The success of small parties in Western Europe varies. Various factors contribute to this, including systemic factors like electoral rules and institutions, partisan factors such as the interaction between large and small parties, and individual factors, namely voter decisions (Spoon, 2011, p. 7). This study primarily focuses on systemic and partisan factors.

### *Institutional Factors Hindering the Entry of New Parties into the System*

Referring to the literature, there are three main factors in the process of gaining parliamentary seats:

- a) The Nomination Phase: Nomination involves legal rules determining party registration and the process through which parties nominate candidates on the ballot.
- b) The Election Campaign Phase: This phase involves electoral regulations that determine how much access a party has to electoral resources, including distribution of time for free advertisements in the media, as well as the distribution of public funds or state subsidies for parties.
- c) The Election Phase: This phase revolves around the minimum required votes for a party to secure a seat in parliament (Norris, 2004).

Researchers agree that electoral systems have a significant impact on the party system, and the penetration of new alternatives into politics. Referring to Duverger's analysis of the relationship between the electoral system and the party system. Duverger's first law is: (1) "The majority system with one round produces a two-party system." The second law is: (2) "The two-round system and proportional representation produce multi-partyism".

Harmel and Robertson conclude that proportional electoral systems offer more opportunities for the entry of new parties than other systems. Similarly, Harmel (1985: 405) emphasizes that, for some authors, new parties are formed "to wage war on what is perceived to be 'new issues'". While Harmel and Robertson (2001) suggest that rules that facilitate or restrict participation may have an impact on the entry of parties into the "electoral clash". It is shown that new parties are more frequent when institutional structures are soft.

However, even within these systems, there are ways to prevent the penetration of new parties. These obstacles have to do with: a) geographic distribution; b) specific aspects of electoral systems beyond the basic formula, especially the use of voting thresholds, the size of the district in proportional systems, and also; c)

major social divides within a nation (Norris, 2004, p.12). For example, according to (Cox, 1997), the structure of electoral systems plays a significant role in the number of seats produced in an electoral district in the regional proportional system: the higher the level of voter support, the greater the chance of securing a seat. As a result, the smaller the size of the electoral zone (the fewer candidates to come from this area), the higher the formal threshold to be crossed and therefore the fewer parties manage to get a deputy in that area. Social divides are also important because, the greater the number of different ethnic, religious, or language groups in a neighborhood, the greater the chances of increasing party dis-coordination.

In addition to the specifics mentioned above, the frequent and rapid change of the electoral system plays a decisive role in the number of effective parties in a party system (Lago and Martinez, 2009, p.4).

Third parties within a predominantly two-party system, or minor parties in systems with multiple parties, can gain traction from the widespread sentiment against mainstream political parties. Particularly, when such parties employ anti-establishment rhetoric, they can mobilize those who are disillusioned with conventional politics and propose a novel approach to governance. They essentially function as conduits, redirecting political discontent among potential voters towards an alternative form of representation within the prevailing party structure (Lago, Martinez, 2009, p.7).

Legislation has a profound impact on a nation's political landscape. Scholars, however, often question the effectiveness of using legislation to shape party politics, particularly in developing nations with fluctuating political traditions. Although such laws can aid in organizing parties in well-established democracies, they can unintentionally hinder party competition in new democracies where authorities can easily access opposition lists. Even in mature democracies, party legislation can be contentious and yield unintended consequences. To encourage the development and competitiveness of political parties, countries implement policies that may prohibit, permit, promote, protect, or prescribe parties and party activities. These policies, used as ideal models, shape the drafting of party legislation. Generally, countries either eliminate party operations, allow them to function freely, actively support them, favor certain ones, or try to mold them to an ideal model (Janda, 2005, p.7-8).

Access to media is vital and significantly influences the ability of new parties to penetrate a given party system. Media involvement pertains to the opportunities for parties and individual candidates to disseminate their campaign messages. Costs can be offset by public funds, soliciting, or promoting the provision of complimentary time and space from media organizations. Policies offering free media are closely tied to the portrayal of various candidates' campaigns and their engagement in programs accessible to a broad audience, which is a crucial factor in persuading the electorate about the best alternative to choose (Johnston, 2005, p.17).



The establishment of enduring new parties demands a significant number of voters to modify their behavior in a unified manner. This process is expensive due to the need to negotiate and publicize a minimum threshold. After a party system is established in the founding elections, new political entities and previous non-viable parties will decide on re-entry into competition based on their chances of winning a seat. This decision is largely influenced by the intensity of the ideological contest between political parties in their propositions to the electorate.

### *Methodology and Theoretical Framework*

This paper focuses on analyzing the factors that have hindered the penetration of new alternatives in the Albanian party system. The work begins with the premise that, even after 25 years of political pluralism, the same parties continue to dominate the Albanian political scene. Despite the occasional emergence of political movements seeking change, these have not been sustainable.

*The central question this work aims to answer is: What factors hinder the penetration of new political alternatives in Albania?*

The work employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Primary sources include leaders' speeches, election results, and legislation. Secondary sources revolve around the literature written about political parties. Through this work, we aim to identify the factors that have prevented the penetration of new alternatives, focusing on two perspectives:

- ***The institutional approach*** within the ***structural – functionalist approach***. The structural-functionalist perspective posits that the ambiguity in political ideology and an insufficient articulation of post-materialist issues contribute to the challenges in presenting new alternatives within the Albanian political system. The crisis in ideology has indeed impacted Albanian political parties. In fact, the issue of representation in Albania can be traced back to the inability of the two primary parties to establish a solid ideological identity for themselves and the voters they aim to represent. Within this framework, we will explore the role of the institutions in the party system in Albania. Institutions like electoral systems could block the entry of new alternatives. The level of institutionalization of the party system (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006): the higher the institutionalization level, the lower the probability of a change in the number of stable parties. As a result, in a well-defined party system, we have fewer chances to observe stable new parties. In other words, once parties have developed strong loyalties with politicians or their ideological labels, changing voting habits becomes challenging, and the chances for new parties to be votable are reduced.

Political parties, in their inability to construct distinct social and political identities such as urban or rural, liberal or conservative, cosmopolitan or nationalist, etc., primarily stimulate voter engagement by aligning with needs for reform and Euro-Atlantic integration processes, irrespective of their ideological implications. Interestingly, these concepts, which fall under the ideology umbrella, remain unstable among Albanian political parties. The underlying causes of this scenario are linked to the constantly shifting socio-economic circumstances within Albanian society (Lami, 2013). As per Lami and Kocani (2013), the ideological uncertainty of Albanian political parties can be attributed to five primary factors: 1) The legacy of Communism; 2) The lack of structured social groups in rural and urban areas; 3) The political culture and political elite; 4) International structures dictating the agenda; and finally 5) The influence of the media.

According to Kitschelt (1995), in nations like Albania, where the former elites led the transition and secured key roles across all sectors, primary concerns revolved around law and order, and de-communization. Both successor communist parties and anti-communist factions advocate varying facets of an authoritarian agenda. Post-communist elites present themselves as agents of stability who can combat crime and uphold security, casting their rivals as instigators of chaos. Anti-communists, on the other hand, push for rigorous de-communization, advocating for the exclusion of a large group from equal participation in political and economic spheres. As a result, party system divisions are not on ideological lines and programmatic differences. Political competition remained personalized due to the lack of programmatic political structuring, hindering the emergence and positioning of new alternatives within the system. In this context, to answer the question, the paper follows these lines:

- Analysis of the party system to see what the main political parties of this system are. To analyze the party system, the Laakso and Taagepera (1979) formula is used.
- Analysis of the electoral system from 1991-2017 to see the influence of the electoral system (if this is the case) of the electoral system on political parties.

## **The Evolution of Albania's Party System**

### *Tracing the Origins of Post-Communist Political Parties in Albania*

Pluralism in Albania took root in 1991, following the collapse of communism. Since then, Albania has held parliamentary elections in 1991, 1992, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013 and 2017. In the 1991 elections, the Socialist Party won the



majority with 175 seats, followed by the newly - formed Democratic Party with 75 seats. The following table shows the elections' results from 1991 till 2017:

**TABELA 1:** Partitë parlamentare dhe shpërndarja e vendeve në parlament në periudhën 1991-2017.<sup>3</sup>

Political Party	1991	1992	1996	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2017
Socialist Party (former Communist Party)	169	38	10	101	73	42	65	66	74
Democratic Party	75	92	122	24	32	56	68	49	43
Republican Party		1	3	1	5	11	1	3	
Legality Party				2	4				
National Front			2	3	3				
Liberal Unity				1	2	1			
Social Democratic Party		7		9	4	7			1
Unity for Human Rights	5	2	3	4	3	2	1	1	
Demo Christian Party				1		2			
Democratic Party				2					
Agrarian Environmentalist Party				1	3	4			
Party of National Unity				1					
Democratic Unity				1					
The United Right of Albania				1					
Committee of Veterans	1								
New Democratic Party					6	4			
Democratic Alliance					3	3			
Socialist Movement for Integration						5	4	16	19
Party for Justice, Integration and Unity									3
Christian Democratic Party								1	
Social Democracy						2			

### *Party System Fragmentation Index*

Albania's party system exhibits a long-standing political stability. This stability is primarily manifested through the ongoing political contest between two key political parties in the country's political sphere. The first entity draws upon historical ties, such as the Socialist Party, which evolved from the country's communist past. The second entity, the Democratic Party, emerged in 1991 as a powerful and near-hegemonic force, arising from the ranks of opposition, primarily due to its anti-communist stance (Këlliçi, 2011, p.11).

<sup>3</sup> The table is based on the Reports of the Central Election Commission for 2001-2017, OSCE reports for 1997, Afrim Krasniqi book "History of Albanian Political Parties" for 1991, 1992, 1996.

Following Sartori's categorization, Albania's party system takes the form of moderate multipartism, characterized by two coalitions, each dominated by a major party (Këlliçi, 2011, pp 9-10). Up until 2001, however, the party system in Albania displayed more characteristics of a bipartite rather than a moderate multipartite structure. The electoral systems implemented since 1991 (Leëis 2001, Biberaj, 2011) have seen the establishment of a de facto two-party system. This system is shaped not just by the electoral formula allowing for a second round to achieve an absolute majority, but also by the inherent conflict that arose during the transition from one political regime to another. Interestingly, a similar two-party configuration was observed in the initial elections of many Eastern countries that shared political circumstances akin to those of Albania (Këlliçi, 2011, p.10).

The era from 1992 to 1997 marked a transition towards stabilization for Albania's party system. Several factors were considered in this assessment, including the duration of the party system. Between 1992 and 2009, the country was governed by two coalitions, with minimal essential shifts in the influence of different political actors. The stability of transitions between governing coalitions is another crucial factor to consider (Këlliçi, 2011, p.13).

According to the fragmentation index or the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) by Laakso and Taagepera, the ENPP is calculated using the formula:  $N = 1 / \sum Si^2$ , where 's' signifies the proportion of parliamentary seats held by party 'i'. For Albania, this translates into:

**TABLE 2:** Party System Fragmentation Index for Albania (1991-2017)

Viti	NEPP	Electoral System	Party System
1991	1.82	Majoritarian System	Two party system
1992	1.96	Mix electoral system	Two party system
1996	1.31	Mix electoral system	Two party system
1997	2.12	Mix Electoral System - Paralel	Two party system
2001	2.65	Mix Electoral System	Two party and a half
2005	3.64	Mix Electoral System	Multi- party system with a dominant party
2009	2.21	Closed Regional Proportional	Two party system
2013	2.78	Closed Regional Proportional	Two party and a half
2017	2.55	Closed Regional proportional	Two party and a half

This index primarily provides a quantitative measure and does not necessarily indicate the actual influence of these parties. It doesn't tell us how significantly the larger parties can dictate the formation of coalition governments or vice versa. Dualism in the party system features three distinct characteristics: (1) over time, major parties develop such a significant gap with other parties that (2) they



attain an absolute majority, and (3) they are capable of forming a government independently, without needing coalitions (Sartori, 2003, p.57).

Considering this, we can deduce that Albania experienced party dualism between 1991 and 2001, during which major parties could form governments without coalition support. This trend is also mirrored in the fragmentation index. To glean more qualitative information about the party system's dynamics and to determine if the electoral system has an impact on it, we have constructed a table that combines the ENPP, the applied system type, and the electoral system type as classified by Blondel.

This table clearly shows that the electoral system is closely linked to the party system, influencing it. The mathematical formulas of electoral systems greatly affect the increase or decrease in the fragmentation of the party system. We distinguish that in the years when we have a change in the electoral system, we also have the greatest changes in the fragmentation of the party system, while during the years when we have not had a change in the electoral system, we do not have major changes in the party system. However, it is difficult to draw a final conclusion about this because it can be seen that in Albania, the electoral system has changed many times, to the point that it is difficult to distinguish a clear pattern. Precisely for this reason, we will consider the approach of the major parties towards the smaller parties: how they have used electoral thresholds, media, state funding, and other strategies to prevent the penetration of small parties into parliament.

## **Party Approach - Legislation and Manipulation of the Electoral System**

### *Legislation on the financing of political parties in Albania and Access to Media*

The term "legislation for parties" refers to the entirety of the state legislation regarding what parties are allowed or not allowed to do - what is legal and illegal in party politics: this generally includes legislation that defines what constitutes a political party, the form of activities that parties can develop, and what forms of party organization and party behavior are regular (Janda, 2005, p. 3).

In 1992, there was a change in the electoral law. The new electoral law stated that the People's Assembly would consist of no less than 140 deputies, of which 100 were directly elected based on a single list for each party and 40 from proportional representation. In each area, the candidate who received an absolute majority of votes in the first round was declared the winner. If no candidate received more than 50% of the votes, a second round of voting would be held between the two candidates who received the most votes in the first round.

From these elections, we also have the formation of new parties such as the Republican Party and the Social Democratic Party, parties which are still present in our country's political life. In the years 1996, 1997 and 2005, it is noted that during 1997 there was a significant increase in small parties achieving representation in parliament, which many researchers attribute to the unrest that our country was going through at that time.

For the 2005 parliamentary elections, the Electoral Code would change again. Proposals made by a parliamentary commission for amending the Code consisted of voting being conducted in one round, counting votes in a centralized manner, a new division of electoral zones, and changes to the procedures for drawing up electoral lists.

This electoral year was accompanied by a "trick" from the parties called the Dushku phenomenon, where in majoritarian part of the electoral system, the vote was cast for the deputies of DP or SP, while in the proportional part the vote was cast for the candidates of the smaller parties. In this year, the small parties had their best representation in the parliament.

Under the pretext of eliminating the Dushku phenomenon, the Democratic and Socialist Party, took the initiative to change the electoral code in 2008. The Albanian electoral system changed from a mixed system to a regional proportional system (140 seats for proportional representation chosen from party lists in the regions corresponding to the existing administrative divisions). Smaller parties opposed this change, arguing that it could effectively exclude them from Parliament.

And with this change in the electoral code, we have the 2009, 2013 and 2017 elections, where in 2009 we see that there is a significant increase in the number of small parties participating in elections. Looking at changes in Albanian legislation for political parties during the years 1991-2016, which are presented in the table below, we notice that the changes made are not always conducive to easing the inclusion of new alternatives.

Apart from changes in the electoral code regarding electoral systems, there are other changes related to the difficulties of penetration such as: in 2011 the legislation makes it difficult to create a new party because it requires at least 3,000 citizen signatures to register a political party (article 10) versus 300 signatures required in 1991 (article 10).

According to the OSCE's 2013 report: "Political parties registered according to the Law on Political Parties, as well as independent candidates, could register as electoral subjects. Lists of candidates from non-parliamentary political parties competing individually (outside of coalitions), or in coalitions that have fewer seats in the outgoing parliament than the number of parties in the coalition, had to be supported by the signatures of respectively 5,000 or 7,000 registered voters, collected nationwide. Independent candidates needed the signatures of at least

one percent of voters (but no more than 3,000 voters) registered in the respective area. After being given the opportunity to make corrections, the CEC approved all candidate lists, which included a total of 7,149 candidates, including 2,753 women.” From this paragraph, we clearly understand the difficulties that new alternatives face from Albanian legislation from the first step of collecting signatures for registration.

**TABLE 3:** Summary of Albanian legislation for political parties

Year	Articles
1991	<p>Article 10: The request for the formation of a political party must be signed by at least 300 people.</p> <p>Article 17: Political parties are legal entities. They have assets to carry out their activities. Political parties have press, their propaganda tools, and the relevant implementing institutions.</p> <p>Article 18: The financial and material sources of political parties consist of: 1. membership fees; 2. any property gained in a legal way; 3. income from economic and socio-cultural activity; 4. financial aid in the amount determined in the state budget, approved by law by the People’s Assembly.</p> <p>Article 20: For newly formed political parties, the measure of initial state financial and material assistance is determined by the Council of Ministers based on the number of members and territorial expansion of the parties. Financial aids are no more than 2 percent of the annual budget allocated for financing parties</p> <p>Article 22: For each national or local electoral campaign, special financial aid is provided from the state budget, according to the criteria set out in electoral laws.</p>
1992	<p>Article 6: The People’s Assembly consists of no less than 140 deputies, of which 100 are directly elected in single-member zones, while additional compensatory mandates are given to candidates who are on the lists of subjects at the national level, according to the proportion of votes won in the first round.</p>
1997	<p>Article 3: Article 6 is amended as follows: “The People’s Assembly consists of 155 deputies, of which 115 are directly elected in single-member zones, while the other 40 additional mandates are given to candidates who are on the lists of subjects at the national level, based on the votes won during the voting in the first round, according to the rule set in Article 11.”</p>
2011	<p>Article 2: In Article 10, the second paragraph is changed as follows: “The political party is registered upon a request signed by no less than 3,000 founding members. The request for the registration of a political party is deposited at the Secretariat of the Court of First Instance of the Judicial District, Tirana and must contain, for each founding member: a) name and surname; b) personal number; c) residence. In the decision on the registration of the political party, the court also indicates the number of founding members.”</p> <p>“Article 17: The financial and material resources of political parties consist of membership fees, public funds, including financial assistance in the amount specified in the State Budget approved by law by the Assembly, non-public funds, which are financial donations, donations in kind, services, sponsorships, loans or various guarantees, as well as any other financial transaction.”</p> <p>“Article 19 1.: Every year in the State Budget a fund is set which serves as public financial assistance for the annual activities of political parties. The financial aid provided in the State Budget in non-election years, as a rule, cannot be less than the aid provided in the previous year. 2. This fund is divided according to the following rules: a) 70 percent, according to the number of deputies won in the last parliamentary elections. Each parliamentary party receives financial assistance in accordance with the number of deputies it has won based on the electoral system provided in the Electoral Code; b) 20 percent, equally, between parliamentary parties; c) 10 percent, according to the percentage won among political parties that participated in the last parliamentary elections and won over 1 percent of the votes nationwide. The part that remains undistributed from the 10 percent is added to the 70 percent fund and distributed to parliamentary parties.</p>

## *Media's Role*

The political process has undergone a transformation due to the interplay between the media and political codes. Politicians address television audiences, who in turn are the electorate. This dynamic reveals the trend of politics exploiting television for its agenda, while also being influenced by it (Lami, 2011, p.71).

Starting from the interrelationship between politics and media, the electoral code is observed to encompass detailed rules about portraying the electoral campaign in news broadcasts and informational programs of both public and private channels. Albanian legislation mandates the public broadcaster (TVSH) to offer free airtime to all political parties, proportionate to their representation in parliament. Accordingly, the Central Election Commission (KQZ) prescribes that parties with more than 20 percent of parliamentary seats are allotted 60 minutes, other parliamentary parties receive 30 minutes, non-parliamentary parties are given 10 minutes, and independent candidates have 5 minutes.

However, the OSCE reports in 2009 and 2013 indicated that the media outlets under scrutiny did not meet their obligations to allocate half of the designated time to parliamentary parties with less than 20 percent of the seats. Smaller parties were not given the media coverage they were entitled to as per the Electoral Code. The two most significant political parties notably exceeded the 90-minute limit for paid advertisements, but the relevant authorities either overlooked this or failed to take action. As a result, other parties resort to conducting meetings on a smaller scale and distributing leaflets only in areas where they predict support. Social media is extensively used by most parties throughout the campaign. Direct debates between candidates or political party leaders are rare, and key personalities were notably absent (OSCE, 2013, p.16). The time granted by legislation to parties without parliamentary representation (i.e., emerging alternatives) is minimal. Further compounding the issue is that media outlets often don't honor this allocated time, making it difficult for these parties to gain traction within the political system. Without the means to convey their message and programs to a wider audience, there's a shortage of information about their existence and the solutions they propose to the electorate.

## *Electoral System Manipulations*

This section draws on several years of OSCE reports to investigate and decipher the various manipulations enacted by the two dominant political parties. These actions serve to impede the progress and potential influence of newer political entities. The primary considerations in this context are the size of the electorate and the electoral threshold.



The 2001 electoral code established a distinct “mixed” electoral system characterized by interdependent majority and proportional components. The system mandated the election of 100 deputies from single-member zones and an additional 40 deputies from a national electoral zone based on party lists or coalitions. If no candidate secures an absolute majority in a single-member zone, a second round of voting is required. To be considered for the allocation of the additional 40 seats, parties must secure at least 2.5% of the valid national votes, while coalitions need to secure 4%. One critique from the OSCE regarding this year’s elections highlighted the protracted procedure and the frequent need for repeated rounds of voting in certain electoral areas. This situation provides opportunities for the potential manipulation of the system, disadvantaging new and smaller parties which must meet high electoral thresholds to be included among the 40 proportional mandates. Their challenge is further amplified when they fail to meet these thresholds or choose to compete outside of the coalitions created by the two major parties. In such instances, the electoral threshold becomes a barrier to the successful entry of new alternatives.

The 2005 elections, held under the same mixed system, exhibited signs of manipulative practices within the legal structure that governs the system. Practices, termed as “Mega-Dushk”, can lead to disparities between the votes accrued by parties and the ultimate distribution of mandates. These discrepancies may significantly amplify the inequalities inherent in the electoral system, potentially contravening the constitutional principle of proportionality. Typically, in proportional distribution systems with an electoral threshold, votes cast for pre-election parties and coalitions that fail to meet the legal threshold are not considered in the mandate distribution process for the Assembly. Such issues are typically mitigated more by including less influential parties in pre-election coalitions than through tactical voting, as was observed in the 2001 Assembly elections. Pre-election coalitions usually fortify the constitutional objective of proportionality, contrasting with party strategies that are reliant on de facto pre-election coalitions that are only officially recognized post-elections.

**TABELA 4:** The size of the electoral zone during 2009-2017

Electoral Zone	Size of the Electoral Zone 2009	Size of the Electoral Zone 2013	Size of the Electoral Zone 2017
Berat	8	8	7
Dibra	6	6	5
Durrës	13	13	14
Elbasan	14	14	14
Fier	16	16	16

Gjirokastrër	5	5	4
Korca	12	12	11
Kukës	4	4	3
Lezha	7	7	7
Shkodra	11	11	11
Tiranë	32	32	36
Vlore	12	12	12

One of the most notable alterations to the electoral system lies in the territorial demarcation of electoral zones. The party in power invariably attempts to delineate a geographic layout that is beneficial to itself while simultaneously proving disadvantageous to both the main opposition party and emerging or smaller parties. The concept of gerrymandering embodies this principle, entailing a strategic division of a state into electoral districts to favor a certain political party. This is achieved by increasing the number of supporters in stronghold electoral districts while constraining the voting power of other parties into minimal districts. This scenario was recurrently observed in Albania during various governmental periods from 1991 to 2017.

Starting with the 1991 elections, the Labour Party, or the Socialist Party, was responsible for administering the elections, crafting the electoral map, and setting the electoral rules. Accusations arose that the government intentionally developed an electoral map that disproportionately favored rural areas—where the government secured an overwhelming majority of its deputies—over urban areas that traditionally supported the opposition. However, an electoral map that varies in voter count from one zone to another does not precisely constitute gerrymandering. Instead, gerrymandering pertains specifically to manipulation of the map, irrespective of the number of voters.

The 1996 government under President Sali Berisha, borne from the 1992 elections, held an absolute majority in parliament. With two-thirds of parliament, the government had the authority to alter the electoral code and the electoral map, thereby reshaping local power dynamics. This government exercised this authority, introducing an electoral law that compromised the principle of proportionality between votes won and deputies elected. Albania was segmented into 115 electoral districts based on government-dictated criteria. This led to a decline in the weight of proportionality in the allocation of parliamentary mandates, from 40 to 25. Regrettably, the principle of proportionality, enshrined in the Albanian constitution, appears to have been faithfully implemented only in 1992.

By 2001, the struggle for a favorable electoral map extended beyond socialists versus democrats; it also encompassed intra-socialist disputes. Influential deputies

within the socialist camp exerted their influence on the map creation process to maximize their electoral advantages.

In the 2005 elections, the votes were evenly split, giving rise to the “last box” problem. The newly redrawn electoral map favored the Democratic Party, representing a form of reverse gerrymandering. Around 2007, when the Socialist Party attempted to thrust the nation into political and constitutional crises by refusing to participate in local power elections, the issue was that in the event of early elections, the Democratic Party’s chances of victory were virtually indisputable with the 2005 map. This situation led to the conclusion that the victor in Albanian elections is determined more by the map than by the voters.

A subsequent electoral reform in Albania was implemented in 2008, following an agreement between the two major parties. On this occasion, there was no manipulation of the electoral map, as the parties relied on an existing map, that of the country’s division into counties. Despite this, discrepancies between the number of votes won and the deputies elected persisted.

Regrettably, the common pattern of electoral map changes preceding governmental changes in Albania has fostered the impression that electoral “reforms,” often disguised as redistricting, play a decisive role in determining election winners. Furthermore, achieving a level playing field between the parties has typically required a crisis, necessitating an assertive opposition that relentlessly works to destabilize the country as a prerequisite for reaching an agreement on electoral “reform.”

The OSCE concluded in 2013 that “The CEC was politically divided and could not approve the distribution of mandates. In the absence of a proposal from the CEC, parliament made the decision and distributed the mandates based on the 2009 population statistics (instead of those of 2013), undermining the principles of the regular legal process and equality of vote.”

To uphold the principle of vote equality, the allocation of mandates for electoral districts should be based on the most recent population distribution statistics, as stipulated by law. Reference to existing literature also identifies electoral size as a significant factor that influences the integration of new alternatives. Analysis of election results in larger counties reveals a higher incidence of small or new parties nearing the electoral threshold.

OSCE reports highlight that manipulations in the electoral system occur when smaller or emerging parties form coalitions with the two dominant parties. This tactic often results in many small party candidates appearing on the major party lists, particularly those of the Democratic and Socialist Parties. Although this strategy may enable these parties to reach the electoral threshold, it also risks their being overshadowed by the two dominant parties.

## Conclusions

Democracy needs strong and stable political parties, with the ability to represent citizens and to offer political alternatives that demonstrate their ability to govern for the public good. The weakening of the ties between citizens and their elected leaders, the decrease in political activism, and the increase in the skill of anti-democratic forces have constantly challenged political parties. Strong political parties are decisive in open, competitive democratic politics, especially in emerging democracies.

The central idea of this work revolves around the fact that the law often imposes restrictions on party competition, even in liberal democracies. Electoral systems, for example, use a legal minimum threshold to exclude small parties from official positions. Rules for election campaigns determine television advertising time depending on specific criteria such as the minimum vote or parliamentary seats a party has. Legislation may prohibit extremist parties that advocate violent overthrow of the state or act in a way that endangers internal security. Political parties can be registered as charitable or non-profit organizations, but they are not excluded from the general body of civil code laws, like other NGOs, e.g., from rules that prohibit Hate Speech, unfair dismissal of employees, financial irregularities, or the requirement for equal promotion opportunities for employees. The most important question that arises is whether some parties are unfairly penalized or unfairly advantaged by legal rules, e.g., if small and peripheral parties are systematically disadvantaged by rules for access to voting, public fund distribution, and/or the electoral formula for translating votes into parliamentary seats.

Based on what we have stated above, the electoral system greatly influences the party system, making it possible to facilitate or hinder small and new parties from achieving representation. It is the mathematical formula of these systems that make this possible. Upon analyzing electoral systems, we found that the two-round majority system tends to foster a two-party system. However, the proportional system leads to a more fragmented party system, as forming a government without a coalition isn't particularly challenging. To put it differently, while the majority system tends to be restrictive, the proportional system creates more opportunities for new alternatives to emerge.

We observed this dynamic when examining the impact of the electoral system on the party system from 1991 to 2017, a period spanning the post-communist elections. It's clear that during the years when the majority system was in place – essentially the first pluralist elections – we predominantly saw a two-party system. When legislative changes led to the adoption of a mixed system between



2001 and 2005 – where 100 mandates were determined by the majority and 40 by proportionality – there was an increase in the representation of small and new parties. This period witnessed the highest level of representation for such parties.

In 2008, changes were implemented once again, motivated by an agreement between the two major parties to marginalize smaller parties, leading to the adoption of a proportional system. Paradoxically, while proportionality theoretically increases the fragmentation index of the party system, the threshold requirements and complex mathematical formulas make it extremely difficult for small and new parties. On the flip side, this proportional system also hinders major parties from forming robust governments, necessitating coalitions with smaller parties. A case in point is the governing coalition formed between the Democratic Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration, marking the first time in Albanian history that a left and right party cooperated in this manner. This led to the establishment of broad-based alliances, which facilitated small parties in reaching the electoral threshold, while simultaneously overshadowing the major parties.

The meteoric rise of a small party like the Socialist Movement for Integration exemplifies this. In 2009, the party managed to secure four mandates, but by 2013, their previous coalition with the Socialist Party resulted in a significant increase to 16 mandates. This, in essence, represents a distortion of the vote. However, this leads us to the relationship between these parties and their ideological standpoints. Alliances formed in such a way often demonstrate ideological overlaps, sometimes to the point of erasing any distinct ideological differences. This phenomenon discourages small parties from challenging the hegemony of the major parties, while the major parties continue to associate with these smaller entities due to pragmatic considerations. The absence of a clear political distinction among parties, regardless of their size or novelty, is noteworthy. These parties often resort to utilizing similar theses to garner as much of the electorate as possible. This trajectory steers us towards the creation of pragmatic, clientelist parties, rather than ones driven by distinct and coherent political programs.

We must not overlook the fact that major parties, who hold decision-making power, can manipulate the electoral system to serve their own interests. Throughout the years, Albania has experienced the phenomenon of gerrymandering, where the governing party can alter the electoral map to its advantage. This is often done under the guise of “territorial reform”, strategically designed to maximize votes.

Reports from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have highlighted further manipulations related to the size of electoral districts and electoral thresholds. These manipulations distort the principle of proportionality, which is a constitutional right. The manipulation of the electoral system, exemplified by the ‘dove scheme’ implemented in 2001 and 2005, demonstrated how the Democratic Party skillfully exploited this mechanism to its benefit.

Electoral systems can pose significant challenges for political parties, particularly for those that are newly established. The challenges are compounded when there's interference in favor of the two primary parties. To survive, compete, and fulfill their democratic duties during and between election cycles, parties require financing. This research underscores the critical role of financial support for new parties, which is necessary for their successful integration into the country's political sphere.

Access to funds and television coverage are two key factors that enable parties to disseminate their message and mobilize their supporters. As a result, parties are increasingly reliant on financial resources to cover the cost of routine activities between elections and during election campaigns. This reliance extends particularly to the direct public income allocated to parliament members, parliamentary party groups, and national and regional organizations.

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Parties also benefit from indirect subsidies from the state, such as tax exemptions and service payments. Data from the Central Election Commission, which includes a declaration of party funds and expenditures during the 2009 and 2013 elections, clearly indicate that public funds for new alternatives are virtually nonexistent, rendering their campaigns almost negligible.

From this analysis, we reiterate that even in the written press, the percentage of publication and display of news during the campaign is in favor of large parties and the new or small parties that are cited have managed to become parliamentary parties, regardless of the number of mandates achieved. The exception is the New Democratic Spirit party, which was formed before the 2013 elections, but piques readers' curiosity because of the dynamics it brings. It is very clear from the extracted fragments that the differences are very small. What is important for parties is to capture as much of the grey electorate as possible, but to achieve this you need to differentiate yourself positively in the mind of this electorate. This is



achieved by serious and programmatic parties, which not only declare that they are different from others but also show it with deeds in front of the electorate, being different.

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