

Electioneering in Lithuania

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Abstract:

This article serves as an introductory note to the “Lithuanian chapter” of the journal. A brief description of the electoral history after the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990 is provided, the most important political parties are introduced and their interactions shortly explained. The article also describes basic research on electoral topics in Lithuania.

Key words:

Elections, campaigning, Lithuania

The year 2016 could be labeled as a period of great electoral victories and defeats. The final description of the outcomes should correspond to the system of particular political attitudes: it is possible to portray the Brexit vote as a free choice of free people, as a reckless decision of an uninformed public, or as a crucial political mistake, encouraged by irresponsible activities of selfish politicians. Similar or even stronger words could be found to characterize the electoral outcome of the American presidential elections and their winner Donald J. Trump, who, with equal success, is self-described as “the very definition of the American success story, continually setting the standards of excellence” (*Donald J. Trump - Biography*), or “little more than narcissistic motivations and a complementary personal narrative about winning at any cost” (McAdams 2016). The problem is, that it is hard to imagine, that only half of the electorate share the particular opinion, and another half strongly disagrees with it.

The electoral season of 2016 exposed not only the highest levels of polarization among the voters, but also revealed another important shift in modern political life: crisis of electoral research in general and forecasting in particular. For decades, electoral races in most Western democracies were highly predictable; experienced pollsters were able to proclaim the winners in

advance, the forecasts became a sort of self-fulfilling statements or important arguments in the hands of election campaigners. However, the final results of the most important elections of 2016 came to a great surprise for the mainstream media and for a significant part of the political establishment.

In this context, the Lithuanian parliamentary elections of 2016 and their outcomes look rather ordinary and perhaps even a bit boring. The fact that the results of the Lithuanian elections mirror, to some extent, the outcomes of the most important elections worldwide do not help to recognize its importance. However, it is hard to expect that regularly scheduled elections which are swiftly organized without any major complications in a small country, could attract at least moderate attention from the international media or political analysts. In the world, which is obsessed with the cult of celebrity, life in the periphery of great politics could look like a punishment, which, paradoxically, provides the comfort of stability. Nevertheless, understanding of democracy as a permanent and regime change-free state of society would be short-sighted. The experience of Central European countries during the 20th century reaffirm the fragility of the democratic order, which could be jeopardized by outside as well as by inside forces. Democratic order is not irreversible, the rank and file as well as political elites are equally responsible for the health of political system. From this point of view, there cannot be any “unimportant” elections for young democracies, and the success of every “ordinary” vote shows at least the vitality of the democratic system.

Elections in Lithuania

Lithuanian independence was restored in the middle of the election campaign which lasted for more than two years and was never finished. The Act on the Re-establishment of the State of Lithuania was passed on March 11th, 1990 by the Supreme Council, which was later renamed into Reconstituent Seimas. The elections to this body were held under Soviet law on February 24, 1990, when 98 of 141 members of the parliament were elected. In 43 constituencies, the second poll was held on March 4th, 7th, 8th or 10th. On the day of the declaration of the independence, powers of 133 members of the parliament were confirmed (*Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo posėdžių stenogramos 1990*). This was more than enough for the quorum and all the historical decisions were safely passed. The rest of the members of the Reconstituent Seimas were elected in by-elections later on. Nevertheless, one place in

the parliament remained vacant till the first Seimas elections under new laws were held on October 25, 1992. Despite all the attempts at the time, by-elections in Naujoji Vilnia electoral district never brought any results, as the Soviet era law required a minimum participation of 50 percent in the second poll, which was never achieved in this constituency, dominated by national minorities.

Since the restoration of the independence of Lithuania in 1990, there were only three years (2001, 2006, and 2010), when the citizens were not asked to participate in parliamentary, presidential, local, European elections or referendums. Some years (1998, 1999, 2005, and 2013) were not so busy for the Central Electoral Commission, as only by-elections in some electoral districts were held.

Such nearly permanent election campaigning inevitably had an impact on participation rates. In 1990, the Supreme Council (Reconstituent Seimas) was elected with a 71.72 percent participation rate in the first poll, and 66.4 percent in the second. However, the highest participation rate in the polls was registered on February 9, 1991, when so called “National survey on the independency of the Republic of Lithuania” was held. Then, 84.74 percent of the registered voters casted their votes and 90.24 of the participants were for the independence. The high rates of participation (more than 75 percent) were preserved only until 1993, when the first presidential elections were held. From this time on, the participation rate in Lithuanian elections remains relatively stable and fluctuates at about 50 percent. The most popular elections (presidential) attract a few percent more voters, the participation rate in the most unpopular (European parliament elections in 2009) elections goes down to the low 20s and is among the lowest rates throughout the European Union. The record of lowest participation rate among Lithuanian voters was achieved in a referendum on June 29, 2014, when only 14.98 percent of the registered voters bothered to vote. The poll was organized one month after presidential and European elections, at the very beginning of the vacation season. The so called referendum on land ownership was held on the demand of civic groups against the will of the political establishment. On the whole, referendums organized outside the regular elections days have a poor record in Lithuania. As the law requires a minimum participation of 50 percent in order to pass the law in referendum, the success of such decision making in Lithuania looks highly improbable.

The basis of the Lithuanian electoral system was created in 1992, and with minor changes survived until nowadays. It was a result of a compromise between Sajūdis movement, the principal force, which led Lithuania to independence, and the reformed Communist party, who slowly gained some strength after independence was restored.

The summer of 1992 became a scene of hot parliamentary discussions, and the principal question was, which electoral system to choose for Lithuania: single-member plurality or proportional representation. The supporters of both systems had their own arguments and political calculations. The center-right wing Sajūdis movement had a longer list of well-known personalities and expected it to become an asset in the new election campaign, while the center-left wing ex-communists were more eager to support proportional representation, as they had a feeling that public opinion is shifting to their side, but ex-members of soviet nomenclature were not very popular as personalities.

After long and heated discussions, a compromise was achieved and “for the time being” a mixed electoral system was established, with the same number of the members of the parliament (141 places) as before. It was agreed to create 71 constituencies: and in each one of them, one member of the parliament should be elected. If none of the candidates were able to gain more than a half of the votes, then the second poll was to be held between the two winners. The other 70 members of the parliament were elected according to the party list (proportional system). It was widely expected that such a mixed system would be temporary. As Liudvikas Narcizas Rasimas remembers: “We understood that such a system is neither equal, nor popular or direct, therefore, we agreed that a new elected Seimas will improve this system till October 25, 1993” (Rasimas 2016).

Despite all attempts to reform, the current electoral system survived without major changes. However, on the eve of the nearly each parliamentary election in Lithuania, we see a political party or movement that addresses the public with suggestions to cut the number of members of the parliament and argues for the switch to classical single-member plurality vote. As political parties are not trusted in Lithuania, there is a good basis for popular belief, that party lists only create some sort of nomenclature politicians, who feel the greater need to please the party leaders and receive a high place on the party list than to represent the needs of their voters.

In 1992, in order to encourage party building and to stop fragmentation of the political scene, a threshold of 4 percent for the party lists to get into the parliament was established. Only

national minorities were exempted from this rule, as it was believed that Polish and Russian political parties would be unable to draw such level of support. At the moment, diversity of the parliament was considered to be more important than proportionality. But this 4 percent rule and its exemption proved to be short lived. In the 1996 parliamentary elections, all political parties had to cross a new 5 percent barrier, a minimal 7 percent threshold was set for coalitions with no exemption for national minorities. Mainstream politicians tried to frame these changes not as an obstacle for national minorities to enter national politics, but as a way to encourage mainly Poles and Russians to join mainstream political parties. Until the 2012 elections, representatives of national minorities were elected to the parliament only in single member constituencies and lacked enough members to form parliamentary groups of their own.

The design of the electoral system was taken seriously by politicians from the very beginning of the restoration of Lithuanian independence. At the end of every parliamentary term, parties in power usually make some attempts to reform the electoral system in order to fit better their interests. Usually these changes are presented as a way to save state funds and make democracy “cheaper”. A good example of this sort could be short lived reforms of 2000. The Electoral law was changed in such a manner, that the winners in the single member constituencies were declared after the first poll, and no second poll was held. This first-past-the-post voting method in Lithuania showed itself unpopular, and was used only once. In some constituencies there was enough for the candidate to get support of some 20 percent of the registered voters to be elected. With the participation rate of about 50 percent this looked not very democratic.

For more than a decade, some wasteful political battles were fought in order to change the electoral calendar. With high expectations that the electoral pendulum will bring the change of power, parties in the opposition usually had suggestions to hold Seimas elections earlier in spring in order to allow a new government to draw a new budget plan, and not be obliged to live according to the plan passed by the previous Seimas, as parliamentary elections in Lithuania are traditionally held in autumn. These discussions lasted until 2004, when the amendment to the Constitution was passed and Seimas election date was fixed on the second Sunday of October.

As Lithuania is a parliamentary republic with some elements of a presidential republic (Jankauskas 2010: 21), Seimas elections are the most important date on the electoral calendar and have a crucial impact on national politics. But presidential elections are the most popular

among the voters. The creation of the institution of the president in Lithuania was a bit complicated and contradictory. On May 23rd, 1992, a Referendum on the restoration of the presidential authority of the Republic of Lithuania was held, but the proposition failed to get support and presidency was established during the process of creation of the new constitution. This left the highest political authority in Lithuania with limited powers.

The Lithuanian president is elected by popular vote, if no candidate receives more than half of the votes, the second round is held between the two leading candidates. From 1993, six presidential elections were held in Lithuania, and in two cases the head of the state was elected in the first round: in 1993 there were only two nominees (Algirdas Brazauskas and Stasys Lozoraitis), and in 2009 Dalia Grybauskaitė managed to win in the first round.

Local (municipal) elections were pushed into periphery of political life from the very beginning of the Lithuanian independence. The first free local elections were held just a few weeks after the declaration of the independence (March 24th, 1990), and “were left on their own” (Krupavičius 2004: 269). After long political debates, since 2015 the direct mayoral elections are held in Lithuania. Therefore, to some extent, this “personification” galvanized local politics, but created some serious contradictions in administration of municipalities, as in some cases ruling majorities of the local councils are in the hands of one party or coalition, while the popular elected mayor represents different political forces.

To no surprise, the new sort of elections, i.e. vote for European parliament, are the least popular in Lithuania. Despite the fact that Lithuanians are relatively pro-European, the turnout in European parliament elections is among the lowest in the EU: in the 2009 elections, 21 percent of Lithuanians casted their votes; five years later, the turnout was artificially boosted, as the European elections coincided with the second poll of presidential elections.

Political players

In 2017, there were 23 political parties in Lithuania. According to the law, political parties should have no less than two thousand active members (*Lietuvos Respublikos politinių partijų sąrašas 2017*). The Ministry of Justice, which oversees all political parties in Lithuania, has initiated re organization or abolition of at least fifteen political parties which do not match the new strict rules of member registration.

Despite the fact that, the principal aim of any political party is to win support of the citizens and influence the governance of the state, not all Lithuanian political parties participate in the parliamentary elections. Usually between 14 and 24 political parties have lists in a so called multi-mandate constituency, where 70 members of the parliament are elected according to the party list. At least four party lists receive support of more than 5 percent of the voters and receive places in the parliament. The electoral scene was most crowded in 1996 with 24 party lists, and the last elections in 2016 saw the smallest amount of competitors (14).

The roots of the contemporary Lithuanian party system could be traced back to the last days of the Soviet occupation, when most of the political parties, which existed between the two World Wars and, to some extent, were preserved in exile, were recreated. This was the fate of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, National Union, and Lithuanian Peasants Party. But the most important forces on the right and on the left were formed from the remnants of the Communist party and pro-independence Sąjūdis movement. Ex-communists created Democratic Labour party (*Lietuvos Demokratinė darbo partija*, LDDP), which later merged with social democrats; center right party Homeland Union (*Tėvynės Sąjunga*, TS) was formed on the basis of Sąjūdis. The creation of Liberal (and Central) parties took a bit longer.

Ideological differences, which usually form the backbone of political parties, are of less importance in Lithuania. According to Ainė Ramonaitė, “the Left-Right axis in Lithuania reflects the dominant Communist-Anti-Communist cleavage despite of purposive attempts of some political actors to change its content and to transform it into “Western” Left-Right dimension with dominant socio-economic-content” (Ramonaitė 2007: 177). In its negligence of “Western style” ideological divide, Lithuanian political scene is not unique in the region, similar trends could be traced in the neighboring countries as well. Such a situation highly complicates the consolidation of political forces and creates a fertile ground for the creation of new political parties, whose popularity and (usually) one-time electoral success lies in the strategy of populism. The political elite made some attempts to solve these structural problems: the laws increasing the obligatory membership of a political party to two thousand members were passed in 2013, and some restrictions on party finances were designed. This makes creation of new political parties in Lithuania highly complicated, and to some extent preserves current political landscape which is far from democratic perfection.

Since 2000, during every parliamentary elections every four years, a new political party emerged in Lithuania. In 2000: New Union–Social Liberals (*Naujoji Sąjunga-socialliberai*, NS) was created as a part of so called “New politics” movement. Lead by Artūras Paulauskas this party formed a coalition with Social Democrats for the elections of 2004, but four years later was already unable to cross the 5 percent threshold independently, stayed outside the parliament and later merged with the Labour Party (*Darbo partija*, DP), a newcomer from 2004, which had its representatives in the Parliament until the most recent elections (2016). These two parties comfortably fit into a so-called business-firm parties model, which could be “characterised by the absence of any unifying official ideology; instead, they manifest a related policy making flexibility that allows for the changing of political positions based on the current public mood. Party policies are not preset but determined by the results of “electoral market” surveys. The party is, thus, conceived as an organization with only one basic function – to mobilize immediate and superficial broad public support during elections” (Just, Charvat 2016: 87).

The 2008 Seimas elections brought a completely new National Revival Party (*Tautos prisikėlimo partija*, TPP), created by professional entertainers, which could be understood as a joke. The Kaunas pedophilia story was a source of the political party “The Way of Courage” (*Drąsos kelias*, DK) in 2012. These two parties were in the parliament only for one term.

It is highly questionable if the 2016 parliamentary elections in Lithuania make an exception from the rule, which predicts a creation of a new electorally successful party for every electoral cycle. We can argue, that Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union (*Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga*, LVŽS) is not a newcomer to Lithuanian politics. The roots of this party could be traced back to the resurrection of Lithuanian nation at the end of the 19th century, it was successful in 1920s, members of party were active in exile during Soviet occupation. For the last two decades LVŽS was associated with the names of two politicians: Kazimiera Prunskienė and Ramūnas Karbauskis, and had a few members in Seimas, the European Parliament and a broader representation on local level. LVŽS had changed the name more than once, in search of the popularity and votes, entered different unions. During the last few years, the leader of the party, R. Karbauskis, managed to attract some popular political and civic personalities and change the party. The question of how real the change of LVŽS is, or whether it is only a “rebrand” of the old party, remains open. As already mentioned, new restrictions of the laws complicate the creation of a new business-firm parties in Lithuania. In such situation,

political parties without deeper ideological roots can become an economically rational and cheaper substitute for creation of new political entities.

Election Research in Lithuania

Analysis of electoral campaigns and systems is a peculiar activity, as in the public it is usually overshadowed by the results of public opinion surveys. Foretelling of the future is a very promising business, predictions of election results often serves as a self-fulfilling prognosis and is used as an important tool of propaganda.

A skeptical attitude towards public opinion research in Lithuania dates its roots back to 1992, when the first Seimas elections were held. On the evening of elections day, when the polls were already closed, Lithuanian National broadcaster announced the exit polls results, which from the one hand were a great surprise as predicted the victory of ex-communist party. On the other hand, the reality occurred to be even more unpredictable: Lithuanian Democratic Labour party gained an even more convincing victory than predicted. This highly publicized story helped to create a long lasting suspicion towards sociological research, although the reality was much more nuanced, but remained unknown for broader public. As the famous public opinion researcher Vladas Gaidys remembers: “The winner of the 1992 election was known already in spring. Why did nobody speak about it? Such a prognosis looked not true. Media tried to avoid publication of such data, which was at the disposition of politicians who contravened the data and behaved in an opposing manner” (Gaidys 1998: 155).

The recovery from the 1992 political forecasting disaster was relatively quick. The 1996 parliamentary elections in Lithuania brought a decisive victory of the right wing forces, which was easily explained and predicted as a typical result of so called electoral pendulum, when electoral support quickly switches from the governing party to the opposition. Unavoidable, but painful economic reforms, which accompanied the collapse of Soviet rule in Central Europe, created a fertile ground for such electoral pendulums all over the region. The political outcomes of the 1996 elections received a comprehensive analysis in a serious volume edited by Algis Krupavičius “Seimo rinkimai '96: trečiasis atmetimas” (Krupavičius 1998). The next three consecutive parliament elections (2000, 2004 and 2008) were analyzed in a series of books named “Lithuania after Seimas Elections” (“Lietuva po Seimo rinkimų”), compiled by Algimantas Jankauskas (Jankauskas 2001; 2005; 2009). Electoral research, published in different

scientific journals by M. Degutis, D. Žeruolis, M. Jurkynas, R. Mačiūnas, G. Šumskas, M. Jastramskis, I. Petronytė, R. Žiliukaitė, J. Kavaliauskaitė, A. Šuminas, L. Bielinis, V. Savukynas and others should be mentioned as well.

The last decade of electoral research in Lithuania and the most important achievements in the field could be associated with the name of Professor Ainė Ramonaitė, who managed to assemble a group of young scholars and, employing the best practice of contemporary election analysis, began a consistent research of Lithuanian voters. Her ambition to have a Lithuanian equivalent of the famous book “The American Voter” became a reality in 2014, with the publishing of a volume “How do Lithuanian Voter choose?: Ideas, Interests and Images in Politics” (“Kaip renkasi Lietuvos rinkėjai?: idėjos, interesai ir įvaizdžiai politikoje” (Ramonaitė 2014)). The book became a “must read” source for every researcher of electoral processes in Lithuania.

This section of “Political Preferences”

This section of the journal “Political Preferences” is devoted to the initial analysis of the 2016 Lithuanian Seimas elections and is a result of joint efforts of researchers from two institutions: Vilnius University and Mykolas Romeris University. A fresh look into recent political developments has always its appeals as well as disadvantages. The presented collection of articles only confirms this rule.

This “Lithuanian chapter” opens with the article of Dr. Virgis Valentinavičius. The dean of the faculty of Politics and Management at Mykolas Romeris University concentrates on the roots of the victory of Lithuanian Peasants and Greens Union (*Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga*, LVŽS). According to the author, LVŽS success lied in its ability to create an image of an anti-establishment movement, it attracted voters using its candidates’ list with a “wide amalgam of contrasting personalities”, and did not seem to care about the contradictions between the electoral messages. However, the largest burden of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the established political parties and their leaders, who were unable to understand the changes of the mood of the electorate. It looks like that mainstream politicians are eager to forget lessons from the past, which show that a significant part of the Lithuanian electorate is always ready to support a newcomer. Such a situation allows us to look for parallels between Lithuanian politics and the global surge of anti-establishment forces. Nevertheless, “it is too early to declare the end

of party politics and democracy as we know it”, thinks dr. V. Valentinavičius. He points the most important problems of contemporary Lithuanian political system out, which uncomfortably functions in the shadow of big businesses. However, nearly permanent leadership problems, arrogance towards the man in the street quickly translates into low trust of political parties and fragmentation of the whole political system. These long living hardships could be solved only by the established politicians themselves, waiting for the help from some miraculous outside forces only deepens the feeling of the crisis.

Dr. Renata Matkevičienė, vice-dean of the Faculty of Communication at Vilnius University, raises one of the most mysterious questions of the 2016 parliamentary election campaign. Half a year before the elections, Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Respublikos liberalų sąjūdis*, LRLS) was broadly expected to be one of the winners of the upcoming elections, when in May 2016, the leader of the party Eligijus Masiulis was involved in one of the largest political bribery scandals in the history of Lithuania. Large sums of money were discovered in the politician's home, E. Masiulis resigned from his position of the leader of the party and left Seimas and politics as well. The electoral strategy of LRLS was partly based on the image of E. Masiulis, a young promising politician of a new generation. The bribery scandal evolved during the electoral campaign, but had a moderately reverse impact on the voting results: Liberal movement even increased its share of votes from 8.57 percent in 2012 to 9.06 percent in 2016, and gained four extra seats in the parliament (14 instead of 10). However, we should notice, that a party, involved in the bribery scandal, achieved better results in 2016, but its absolute amount of received votes (115,361 votes) was a bit smaller than in 2012 (117,476 votes). This situation allows dr. R. Matkevičienė to formulate an important question: how does media construct popular understanding of political corruption. Employing qualitative and quantitative media content analytics, the researcher formulates an alarming conclusion, that the media support, or media bias can even help a political party and its leaders to remain popular, even during political corruption scandals.

A group of researchers (associate professor Dr. Arūnas Gudiničius and PhD student Arnas Aleksandravičius) from Media Research Lab at the Faculty of Communication in Vilnius University lead by Dr. Andrius Šuminas, concentrates on one peculiar question of the 2016 Lithuanian Seimas electoral campaign – the use of negative political online video advertisements. The principal goal of their research is to identify the forms and means of

negative communication used in political video advertisements. Employing concepts of forms of negativity and targets of negativity the researchers suggest that negative communication is being used by Lithuanian political organizations, but positivity is still dominant in political video advertisements. The authors conclude, that “most widely used forms of negativity in Lithuanian political video advertisements are policy attacks and fear exploitation. The most popular targets of negativity are political opponents and national government. The forms and means of negativity vary greatly between the parties – while the more traditional parties use moderate means of negativity, questioning their opponents’ policy decisions, the radical populists use different methods, exploiting fear and organizing personal attacks on their opponents”.

Dr. Jolanta Mažylė, associated professor from Institute of Journalism at Vilnius University, employed literature and source analysis to examine the process of public information and its particularities during election campaign, while concentrating her attention on the regional press. The principal question of this article is how the regional press follows the main principles of journalism – accuracy, objectivity and impartiality – during the 2016 election campaign. To some extent, this research corresponds with the questions raised by Dr. R. Matkevičienė in her article about the impact of political scandals in election campaigns. Investigation of opinion survey of regional media editors and journalists reveal that attempts of the owners of the media could cause a serious threat to the independence of the content providers.

The article by Dr. Gediminas Kazėnas, director of the Institute of Political Sciences at Mykolas Romeris University, deals with the problems the Lithuanian Polish national minority and its participation in the electoral campaign. His research singles out three factors, which had a significant impact on the performance of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania (*Lietuvos Lenkų rinkimų akcija*, LLRA), which in 2016 parliamentary elections had a joint list with the Union of Christian Families (*Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga*, KŠS). According to Dr. G. Kazėnas, changes of constituency boundaries allowed Polish politicians to concentrate its supporters, while worsening the security situation after Russian aggression against Ukraine and the complicated socio-economic situation in Lithuania had a contradictory impact. However, LLRA gained the same number of seats in the Parliament. The more detailed analysis of Medininkai constituency suggests, that the loyalty of the voters to LLRA could be seriously questioned in the future. For now, the majority of Polish voters are faithful to the principle “vote for your own”

(“za swoich”). But rural communities begin to value the impact on local life more and more, so loyalty to the national party could be questioned in the future.

The article by Dr. Andrius Navickas from the Faculty of Philosophy at Vilnius University and editor in chief of the journal “Kelionė”, concludes this initial analysis of recent Seimas elections in Lithuania. The story of political turbulences in Lithuania serves as a background for the principal question raised by A. Navickas, on which direction Lithuania is moving. As the author says, he would like “to foster the discussion about the future of liberal democracy in Lithuania, about the prospects of political parties and the threat of the final victory of “consumer” against “citizen”, also about the lessons of political life in Lithuania for other post-communist states”.

We are thankful to the Editors of “Political Preferences” for this opportunity to present our research results to the broader international public and hope that parallels between the Lithuanian elections and votes held in other parts of the world could lead to important findings. However, the most interesting observations could come from comparisons with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have the similar experiences of the past.

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