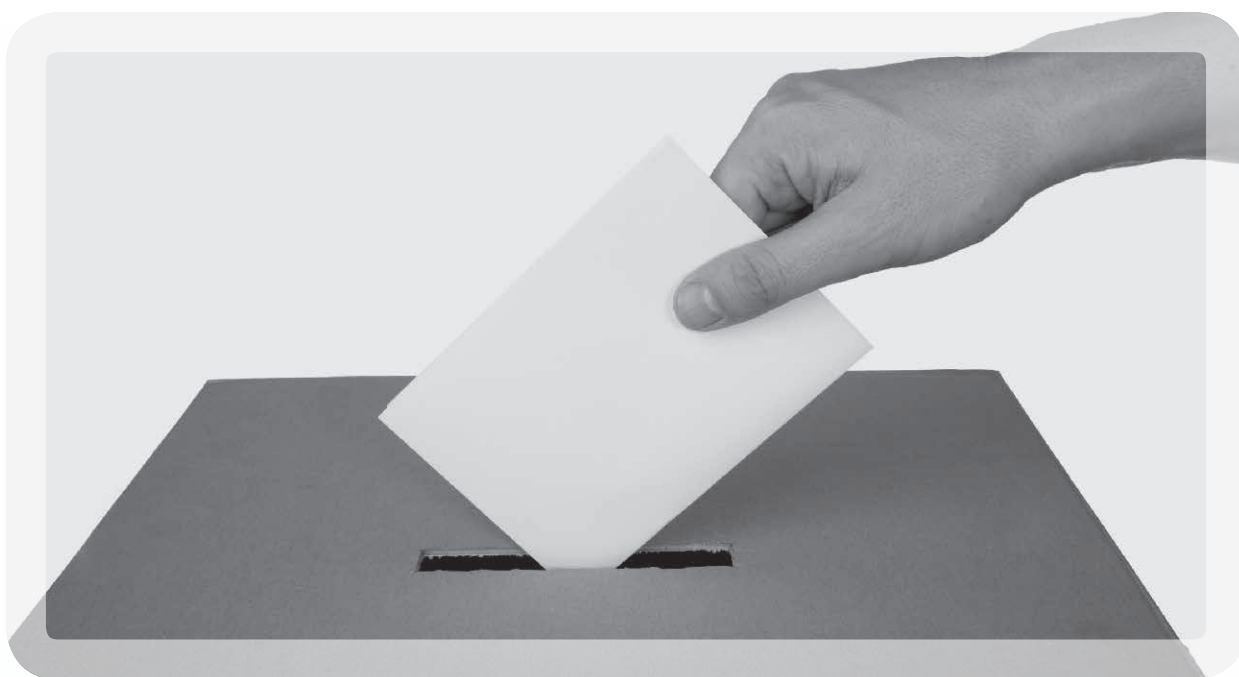


ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE AND THE CASE OF ALBANIA (with focus on the current electoral code and general elections held in 2009)

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Abstract

Elections are the basis of democratic governance. If they are held in a free and fair manner then the population has greater chances to be heard and feel part of the exercise of power. In addition, free and fair elections are grounds of good leadership. With this regard the choice of an electoral system becomes a key issue in every state. Electoral systems play a significant role in the political process in a state because they determine how votes cast for political parties or coalitions are translated into parliamentary mandates. The “translation” rules depend on the electoral system chosen. Thus, the total number of votes gained by a political party can result in the victory of the said party under an electoral system, or defeat under another electoral system.

This paper does not aim to be an exhaustive one with regard to the wide topic of electoral systems. Instead, it aims at presenting an overview of electoral systems in place in Europe, focusing on the presentation of the features of the main electoral systems from which originate a variety of others. A considerable part of this paper pays attention to the electoral systems used in Albania since 1991 until the present by pointing out positive and negative aspects of the electoral system currently in force, keeping in mind the last general elections of June 2009.

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ISSN1857-8993 © 2013 SEE Law Journal, UDC: 32(4-12)
UDC: 342.8(4); 342.843(496.5),, 2009

PART I

1. Electoral systems

An election is a process by which a decision is made in a formal manner in order to choose an individual (or several of them) to hold a public position and serve citizens of a certain state. Elections are the common instrument by which states have functioned since the 17th century in North America and Europe.¹ The use of elections as an instrument to select people's representatives in modern states is not similar to the practice followed in ancient Athens of the 6th century BC. There, elections were considered as an instrument not widely used (few persons who had a privileged status based on economic conditions could express their preferences), and the election process was equal to a lottery procedure for gaining an official position.

Nowadays, in many countries the principle applied for casting a vote is "one person, one vote", which means that each person's vote has equal weight to the other's. The electoral systems are detailed terms and voting systems that 'translate' (convert) preferences expressed by votes into political decisions. The main elements of an electoral system are the total number of mandates in an assembly, constituency's size, or number of mandates pertaining to each constituency, rules to translate votes into mandates, and the ballot permitting the voter different choices.² Different rules and procedures have combined the above-mentioned elements in several manners to result in a variety of electoral systems. This variety of electoral systems in the world has been operating along with the spread of democracy and creation of political parties.

Two poles exist with regard to electoral systems; those of proportional and majority. A third type is considered the mixed electoral systems using and combining elements from both main electoral systems.

1.1. Majoritarian electoral systems

The majority principle was first introduced in medieval Germanic law and the Christian Church's canon law as a result of failures in making unanimous decisions.³ In many political elections, less demanding procedures are more widely used. With a simple plurality rule, the winner is the candidate who gains a "relative majority". This means that he receives a higher number of votes than any other candidate, without requiring any particular number or threshold of votes. In practice, this makes it possible for decisions presumably decided by the "majority" to actually be won by only a minority of voters. In fact, in mass parliamentary elections by plurality rule, a single party has received a majority of seats on the basis of a minority of votes. This type of majoritarian system has been implemented in the United Kingdom and former British colonies.

In addition, there exists a majority-runoff which requires an absolute majority of votes (at least 50% + 1) during the first round, while in a second round of voting the choice can be reduced to the two most voted for candidates in order to secure majority support for the winner. Such a majority-runoff system has traditionally been used in France.

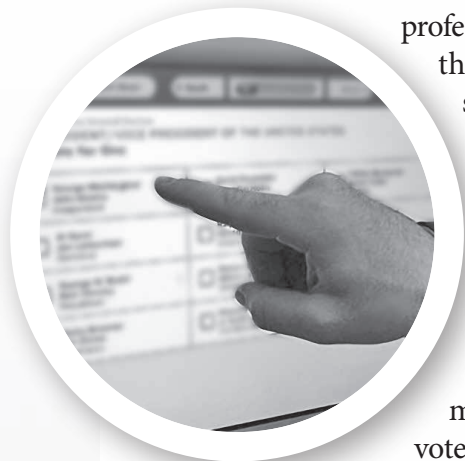
1 Definition of "election political science" – Encyclopaedia Britannica Online (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/182308/election>) Accessed on January 12, 2012.

2 Colomer, Josep M. "Electoral systems, majority rule, multiparty systems", International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, Volume 9, USA, 2008.

3 Colomer, Josep M. http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=josep_colomer&sei-redir=1#search=Electoral+rules+are+criteria+to+transform+votes+on+collective+decisions.+They+are+generally+inspired+by+one+of+three+main+principles, p. 13.

Another variant of the majority system requires in a single round all voters to rank all candidates and continues with several counts of votes until a candidate obtains the most preferences. This system is known as the majority-preferential electoral system, but it is also called alternative vote or instant runoff and applies in Australia.

The majority system can be preferred more than the proportional one because potential voters become aware of the candidacies. A national assembly composed by members elected in single candidate constituencies is more stable, because it is less fragmented than an assembly composed based on a proportional system.⁴ As a result, a major advantage of the majoritarian model is government effectiveness.⁵ So, voters can express their preference based on the individual and professional qualities of a certain candidate. Another reason in support of using the majority electoral system is its simplicity in turning votes into representative mandates. On the other hand, if a candidate is ranked second despite gaining many votes he can not win due to the absolute majority rule. Thus, the votes of his supporters “get lost”, even if this candidate has one vote less than the candidate who ranked first.



1.2. Proportional electoral systems

Proportional representation rules make possible the allocation of mandates to numerous parties participating in an election based on the votes received. They were invented with the aim of reducing single-party control, giving smaller parties the chance to be represented in national assemblies. As mentioned, majority systems have been widely used in contexts of simplicity, but the spread of suffrage rights, new political demands deriving from the creation of new parties trying to influence the political life in their state, made the traditional majority system increasingly non preferential for both political parties and voters. The “winner gets all” feature of majority rule is no longer applied in many states. Several countries introduced the proportional representation rules in the early twentieth century, which ran parallel to the introduction of other regulations favouring citizens’ participation and fair competition, such as more reliable electoral censuses, written ballot, secret vote, and an independent electoral authority validating the results.⁶ In small countries the size of the national assembly logically is small and as a consequence the development of multiple parties favours the adoption of large multimember constituencies with proportional rules. Proportional representation was first adopted for parliamentary elections in countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland in the early twentieth century.

The principle of proportional representation is that mandates in a constituency are divided according to the number of votes cast for party lists, but there are variations in how this is implemented in different systems. Party lists may be open, which means that voters can express preferences for certain candidates on the list, or may be closed, which means that voters can only express preference for a party, while the ranking of candidates on the list has been decided upon before election date by the political party structures. Party lists may be national where all the country is one constituency or regional where the country is divided into several constituencies.⁷

4 Omari, Luan. *Parime dhe institucione të së drejtës publike*, Shtëpia botuese “Elena Gjika”, Tiranë: 2007, pp. 138-139.

5 Ruel, Teresa. “Electoral systems in Southern European Countries – Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece – an introductory approach to the quality of democracy.” Lisbon, 2010, p. 4.

6 Colomer, Josep M. http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=josep_colomer&sei-redir=1#search=Electoral+rules+are+criteria+to+transform+votes+on+collective+decisions.+They+are+generally+inspired+by+one+of+three+main+principles, p. 16.

7 Ruel, Teresa. *op.cited*, p. 4.

Different forms of ballots may either permit some choice or restrict the voter to choose only one option. Categorical ballots are used in single-member constituencies (majority system) where voters can cast their vote for only one candidate, as well as in multimember constituencies (proportional system) where voters can vote for only a closed list of candidates (*en bloc*). By contrast, open lists give voters the possibility to select one or several candidates from a party list. In countries where the legislation permits one voter to cast more than one vote several variants apply:

- **Double vote** – where voters choose both a closed party list and one individual candidate
- **Open ballot** – where voters can vote for individuals from different parties
- **Majority-preferential vote** and **single-transferable vote** – where voters can rank individual candidates.⁸

There is a general trend toward proportional representation over time.⁹ Nowadays, most democratic countries in the world use electoral systems with proportional representative rules for parliamentary elections.

The main advantage of the proportional system is the ability to minimize the distortion between the number of votes cast and the number of seats in the parliament. Countries that use this system justify its choice with the equal weight given to every voter's preference. However, we should keep in mind that there is no absolute equality between preferences and distribution of seats, since threshold criteria apply.

2. Electoral systems in Europe at the present time

Countries vary from each other taking into account different criteria; geographical position, climate, economic standards, population composition, religion, etc. A certain electoral system does not work in the same manner in different countries due to differences between them, because it depends on the social and political atmosphere of the state where it is implemented. Under this section are briefly presented the electoral systems in use at present in several European countries.

Greece's electoral system is considered as complicated. Its parliament consists of one chamber of 300 members. Under the current Greek electoral law of 2004, 260 seats are allocated using proportional representation, while the remaining 40 automatically go to the party ranked first in the proportional allocation.

In Italy the electoral system differs for the two chambers of the Parliament: the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. For the election of the Chamber of Deputies are used both the majority and party lists (not in equal divisions). For the election of Senate members is used the proportional regional system, in which constituencies are different from those used for the election of members of the Chamber of Deputies.

In Portugal the electoral rules have remained more or less the same from the election of 1975, the electoral law of 1979 and amendments made to the Constitution of 1976 over the years. It has a single chamber assembly and uses the proportional system with closed party lists.

8 Colomer, Josep M. "On the origins of electoral systems and political parties: the role of elections in multi-member districts." *Electoral Studies*, 2006, 1-12

http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6V9P-4JVTC22-1&_user=10&_coverDate=06%2F30%2F2007&_alid=1700814920&_rdoc=3&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_zone=rslt_list_item&_cdi=5904&_sort=r&_st=13&_docanchor=&view=c&_ct=8&_acct=C000050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=a48ab55e665b3fe20de85eda0f49b4f0&searchtype=, p. 10.

9 Colomer, Josep M. http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=josep_colomer , p. 5 and <http://www.econ.upf.edu/docs/papers/downloads/812.pdf>
In addition, see also European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), *Electoral Systems in Europe: An Overview*, Belgium, 2000 <https://ecprd.secure.europarl.europa.eu/ecprd/getfile.do;jsessionid.>

In Spain the current constitutional provisions date from 1977-1978. This country has a bicameral parliament and uses different electoral systems to allocate the respective seats. For the elections of deputies in the lower chamber is used the proportional system with closed party lists. Meanwhile, for the Senate is applied the limited vote (a method according to which voters have fewer votes to cast than the number of seat for each constituency - province in this case).

Many other European states use proportional representation, mostly with closed lists: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Island, Netherlands, etc.¹⁰ There are few states that use the majoritarian system such as France and the United Kingdom, while a mixed electoral system is observed for example in Hungary.¹¹ The following table¹² illustrates the general trend toward a proportional system (though applied in different versions within this 'umbrella' system):

Proportional System	Majoritarian System	Mixed System
Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, FYROM, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine	Andorra, Belarus, France (National Assembly), Germany, Georgia, Lithuania, Poland, United Kingdom	Armenia ¹³ , Bulgaria ¹⁴ , Czech Republic, Hungary

PART II

3. Electoral systems in Albania over the last two decades

3.1. History of elections in Albania during pluralism (from 1991 onward)

The beginning of 1990 corresponds with political pluralism in Albania after almost half a century under a political regime based on a single party system. Since then, Albania has applied various types of electoral systems. Under the constitutional provisions of 1976 voters were not offered alternatives during elections. Each voter should cast his vote either in favour or against a single candidate (member of the Communist Party), while the mandate could be revoked.¹⁵ This meant that no other alternatives were on hand, since only one party existed legally in the country and the foundation of other political parties was forbidden by law.

10 International IDEA, Table of Electoral Systems Worldwide, <http://www.idea.int>

11 See supra footnote no. 9.

12 Election Guide – Government Structure: Assemblies
Accessible at <http://www.electionguide.org>.

13 Several European countries have a bicameral structure of the respective assembly and the listing in the table reflects the electoral systems applied for both chambers. Web site of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia <http://www.parliament.am/parliament.php?id=parliament&lang=eng>.

14 Bulgaria has a mono cameral parliament, while it applies a mixed electoral system <http://www.parliament.bg/en/election-assembly>.

15 Constitution of Albania of 1976, article 8.

Upon introduction of a new political system at the beginning of 1990, the Constitution of 1976 could not fit in the new Albanian reality. Thus, new constitutional provisions were approved in 1991.¹⁶ During the years 1991 – 1998 Albania did not have a codified constitution, meaning a single document in which all the principal constitutional rules are written down named as 'Constitution'.

During pluralism, elections in Albania have been held seven times in 1991, 1992, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009. The first pluralist elections of 31 March 1991 received a positive assessment from the international community, being considered as free and fair ones. The Labour Party was ranked first winning 67.6 percent of the votes, while the newly created Democratic Party came second with 28.7 percent of the votes. This election process was based on the pure majority system. However, just one year later early elections took place and the previous result was overturned. In the elections of 22 March 1992 the Democratic Party received 62.09 percent of the votes, while the Socialist Party (successor of Labour Party) gained 25.73 percent of votes. The electoral system was changed to a mixed one by law.¹⁷ This system represents a correction system, since one hundred seats were distributed based on the majority system while the remaining forty seats were distributed by proportional representation, and the latter was used to correct distortion created by the majoritarian system.¹⁸



At the beginning of 1996 the electoral legislation of 1992 underwent some amendments.¹⁹ The electoral system remained a mixed one and the total number of seats remained 140, but seats distributed based on the majority system increased from 100 to 115, with the rest to be distributed based on the proportional system. The elections of 26 May 1996 resulted in favour of the Democratic Party, which received 55.53 percent of the votes, while the SP only received 20.37 percent. However, these elections were disputable due to several irregularities in voting and counting procedures, and the opposition did not recognize the results that the Central Election Commission approved. So, the country went to early elections on 29 June 1997. Again, the electoral legislation was changed.

The electoral system remained a mixed one while the total number of seats increased from 140 to 155, of which 115 were to be filled with the majority system and the rest with the proportional one.²⁰ In these elections, the Socialist Party was ranked first by winning 65 percent of the votes, while the Democratic Party won 20.37 percent.

Under the socialist government regular elections were held after four years, in 2001. The new Albanian Constitution approved by the Parliament and by referendum in 1998 stipulated in Article 64 a mixed electoral system. The Parliament consists of one chamber of 140 members, where 100 members would be directly elected in 100 electoral constituencies (majority systems of two rounds), while the remaining 40 seats would be distributed based on the proportional system. Based on the constitutional provision a new electoral code was adopted and replaced all the previously implemented electoral legislation.²¹

16 Law no. 7491, dated 29 April 1991, On Main Constitutional Provisions.

17 Law no. 7556, dated 4 February 1992, On Elections to Popular Assembly of the Republic of Albania, articles 6 – 12 [The Popular Assembly consists of no less than 140 members, of whom 100 are directly elected in single-constituencies and the remaining mandates are distributed among candidates registered on parties' lists. A member of Assembly is elected if he wins more than half of valid votes cast in the respective constituency...]

18 Golder, Matt. "Democratic electoral systems around the world." *Electoral Studies*, Volume 24, 2005, 1946-2000, p. 113.

19 Law no. 8055, dated 1 February 1996, "On some amendments to the Law no. 7556, dated 4 February 1992, "On Elections to Popular Assembly of the Republic of Albania", article 3.

20 Law no. 8218, dated 16 May 1997, "On some amendments to the Law no. 7556, dated 4 February 1992, "On Elections to Popular Assembly of the Republic of Albania, amended", articles 3 and 4.

21 Law no. 8609, dated 8 May 2000, "Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania", article 62.

According to the new constitutional and electoral legal framework, the Assembly of the Republic of Albania was composed of 140 members, of whom 100 were directly elected by voters in single-member constituencies and 40 elected by a proportional percentage of votes won in the first round of elections from multi-name lists of the electoral subjects. On 24 June 2001 the Socialist Party won a second consecutive term with 41.43 percent of votes, while the Democratic Party received 36.88 percent. In the elections of July 2005 the same electoral system applied, but the majority system was simplified to the one round system²². The final result was in favour of the Democratic Party, which came into power after eight years of opposition. The overall process was positively evaluated by the international observers as "a step closer to democracy".

Though we present only the results pertaining to two parties, this does not mean that a two party system exists in Albania. There are many political parties registered at Tirana District Court. The figure of the registered parties is higher than 100 political parties, the majority of which during electoral processes have not ever managed to pass the threshold. Thus, they have not been able to have a voice in any political forum so far.

3.2. Current electoral system and novelties it introduced

Albania is a parliamentary republic²³ with legislative power vested in the Assembly, while the executive power is exercised by the Council of Ministers, under the leadership of the Prime Minister. Until the last general elections of 2009 Albania had been using mixed or majority electoral systems.

The 2009 general elections took place under a **regional proportional electoral system that replaced the previous mixed one**. The previous election system provided for 100 members of the parliament to be elected in single member constituencies and 40 supplementary seats to be allocated from nationwide multi-name lists, with a view to approximate proportionality.

The constitutional amendments of 21 April 2008 and the new Electoral Code²⁴ are the result of the latest electoral reform initiated after the 2007 local elections, and consensus between the two largest parties in the country: the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party. The legislation in force is considered as meeting the requirements for the conduct of democratic elections.²⁵

The Albanian Assembly is a unicameral body comprised of 140 members. The above-mentioned constitutional amendment introduced a regional proportional election system with closed candidate lists in 12 constituencies, which correspond to the division of Albania into 12 administrative regions. In addition, it provides that these zones correspond to the administrative divisions "of one of the levels of the administrative territorial organisation".²⁶ The rules for implementation of the electoral system, including the level of administrative-territorial organisation that is to be used for electoral zones and number of mandates to be elected in each electoral zone, are to be determined by the Electoral Code. The constituencies are of different size, with the number of mandates varying from four in the Region of Kukës to 32 in Tirana, based on the total number of citizens registered in each constituency.

The current Electoral Code provides for a threshold of 3% of the votes cast for political parties and 5% for coalitions²⁷, which must be met within a constituency, respectively by a party or coalition,

22 Anastasi, Aurela and Omari, Luan. *E drejta kushtetuese, Shtëpia botuese "ABC"*, Tiranë 2010, page 281 and Law no. 9087, dated 19 June 2003, "Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania", article 66.

23 Article 1 of the Albanian Constitution of 1998.

24 Adopted in December 2008.

25 International Election Observation Mission – Parliamentary Elections of 28 June 2009 "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions", p. 3.

26 Article 64 of the Albanian Constitution.

27 Articles 162 and 163 of the Electoral Code, 2008.

in order to be eligible for gaining mandates. A political party or coalition whose percentage of valid votes in the region is less than the legal threshold does not participate in mandate allocation in the region. The threshold applies in each constituency (region). Mandates are allocated in a regional constituency to political parties using *D'Hondt* divisors (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, *et seq.*) for the initial allocation and *Sainte-Laguë* divisors (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, *et seq.*) for allocating mandates to political parties within a coalition.²⁸

Many smaller parties expressed dissatisfaction with the new electoral system, which they felt favoured the two largest political parties.²⁹ In particular, they objected that, under the new system, the two largest parties dominated election administration. They also objected that under the regional proportional system, with some electoral constituencies returning a small number of seats, the threshold would be high for smaller parties to have their representatives elected.

The new electoral provisions introduced a gender quota. Women are generally underrepresented in Albanian politics, but the issue of gender balance gained momentum in the run-up to these elections. The Law on Gender Equality in Society (2008) stipulates for the achievement of a minimum 30% standard for representation of women in all public-sector institutions at national and local levels. Consistent with these provisions, the Electoral Code established gender quotas for candidate lists and membership in electoral commissions for the first time.

The current Electoral Code requires that each candidate list includes at least 30% of candidates from each gender, or one of the top three candidates must be from each gender. This legal requirement was generally met by the political parties registered to run in the 2009 general elections.³⁰

4. Conclusions

While accountability and openness are considered as essential characteristics of a democratic state, the voting process and its content are not included in this model. Instead, the casting of votes is considered as an individual right which should be respected and no one can be forced or obliged to reveal his preference, unless a person freely chooses to do so. The secrecy of vote is related to the free and fair process of elections in several countries.

The electoral system is an element that should be taken into account while evaluating the level of democracy in a state, because it is connected to the opinion of citizens and the compositions of political institutions. A “good choice” of the electoral system could improve the quality of a political system and democracy.³¹ Nevertheless, the choice of an electoral system by one country does not mean that this country is more democratic than another which uses another electoral system.

Since 1991 Albania has undergone many electoral processes, but the electoral culture and experience remain immature. From one election to the next political parties, especially those considered as dominant ones, have tried to introduce new electoral systems any time a general election approaches, as though the electoral system should be blamed for the loss of one party or another. Thus, the electoral system in Albania in the last 18 years is characterised by instability.

28 Joint Opinion on the Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania – adopted by the Venice Commission at its 78th plenary session 13-14 March 2009 - The total of votes of electoral subjects is divided by the divisors to arrive at a series of quotients for each political subject. Mandates are allocated to the highest quotients in sequential order.

29 OSCE/ODIHR Final Report Parliamentary Elections of 28 June 2009, p. 5.

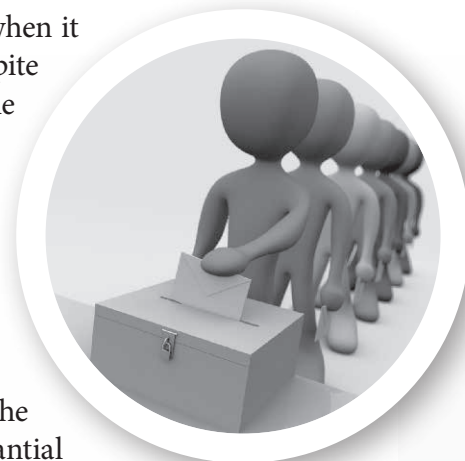
30 For 2009 elections only three candidate lists were registered without meeting either criterion, namely the lists of the Social Democracy Party and of the New European Democracy Party in Lezhë, and the list of the Democratic National Front Party in Berat.

31 Ruel, Teresa. “Electoral systems in Southern European Countries – Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece – an introductory approach to the quality of democracy.” Lisbon, Portugal, August 2010, p. 13.

For many people (meaning potential voters) the rules of each new electoral system introduced often are not easy to understand. Moreover, voters want to understand why the previous electoral system should be replaced by a new one. Of course, it is up to the political parties that enter a political race to determine the rules of the race, but such move should maintain the capability of voters to easily absorb and respect the new rules, which will have direct impact in indisputable electoral results.

The political climate in Albania during the 2009 general elections reflected the need for another electoral reform. Many political parties, despite being large or small parties or their real impact in the political life of the country, have the same stand when it comes to the necessity for reviewing the existing Electoral Code. Despite its positive aspects, the Electoral Code of Albania appeared to have some vague provisions as the electoral process of 2009 demonstrated. To bring this Code fully in line with international standards and commitments, following also the findings and suggestions of the Final Elections Report prepared by the ODIHR, a number of provisions have been reconsidered, such as the composition of the Central Electoral Commission, its competences and timelines to announce the official final results of elections.

In fact, the political parties in Albania introduced some changes to the existing legislation on elections in July 2012, without making any substantial amendments to the electoral system and distribution of seats at the closure of the voting process. These changes related mainly to some flaws observed during 2009 elections, without changing the regional proportional electoral system in force. For example, more strict provisions accompanied by administrative sanctions were introduced in case of non-observance of gender quotas. Furthermore, administrative and criminal sanctions were introduced for members to electoral commissions who fail to fulfill their tasks during the electoral process. For the time being, from the legal point of view, the electoral legislation appears to be acceptable to political parties in Albania and no further concerns have been raised in relation to its provisions.



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