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Some General Considerations Regarding the Implications of the Changing of Electoral System upon the Structure of Political Élites in Romania

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Abstract: This paper is inovating the theory of élites in the way it was configured by the Central and Eastern European thinking (researches and studies) because it is focused on the way the changing of the electoral system influences the structure of political parliamentary élites. This study aims at revealing the connection between the electoral system and the structure of political élites, and it is based on two sociological researches that took place in the Romanian Parliament (Chamber of Deputies) in two different chronological and political moments. The first chronological moment was in October 2008 and the second was in November 2009. The political moments are given by the presence of two different types of electoral systems. In the first research, the political élites analyzed belonged to a parliament elected by a proportional representation system (PR) on closed lists, and in the second, the elections took place by „uninominal” system. It is shown that the change of electoral system from a period to another does determines the strategy of behavior of the political parliamentary élites and, implicitly, the functioning of parliamentary democracy through the political decisions that shape a certain behavior of élites.

Keywords: democratic values; parliamentary elections; beliefs and attitudes

1 Introduction

After the falling of communism, in Romania began the transition to democracy. Transition and consolidation of democracy are viewed as distinct processes driven by different actors and facilitated by different conditions. However, the transition to a basic democratic framework is ultimately contingent on the decision of élites. The values perceived by the elites contribute to democracy in a variety of ways. This process of interaction between élites, in turn, determines the institutions and structures in a society and thus the prospects for a well-functioning democracy. A basic condition in setting the foundations in a democratic state are the free elections and, also, are crucial to élites accepting the rules of democracy. Citizens must trust that their elected leaders will generally represent their interests so the type of the electoral system could produce a certain type of leaders. For a better understanding, a necessary specification regards the reason for changing the electoral system in Romania: the institutional changing of the electoral system was necessary in order to change the structure of the parliamentary élites. The reasoning was obvious:

- the parliamentary élites perform under-optimally/ does not perform optimal;
- the increasing of the level of performance is achieved by changing the structure of the political parliamentary élites;
- the changing of the structure of the political parliamentary élites is accomplished by changing the electoral system;

- in order to increase the level of performance a modified electoral system is needed.

So, starting from the belief that the low performance of the political parliamentary élites is caused by the type of the electoral system, the political decision makers promoted a new electoral system hoping that will produce a strong reform of the political parliamentary class. The main question of this research is quite simple: How does the electoral system with „uninominal” vote influence the structure of parliamentary élites? In other words, the subject of research is represented by the way in which the political élites are structured after the change of electoral system in Romania.

2 The Theoretic Model

In order to have a comparative study of parliamentary élites, in the present work we used the theoretic model of Donald L. Horowitz (2003) which claims that an electoral system does not change the parliamentary configurations of a country but only fulfills a range of political purposes aimed at facilitating the functioning of an electoral system. In this model, Horowitz identifies also the political conditions that have to exist in order to exist a proper functioning of the system: the changing of configuration of the parliamentary élites is possible, only if the purposes of electoral system and the political conditions are simultaneously fulfilled to the real functioning of it and it has to pass, at least, three ballots of parliamentary elections organized through the same system (12 years from the first ballot) (Horowitz, 2006, p. 41).

This sociological research on the Romanian parliamentary élites confirms the theoretical model of Horowitz. The assumption of Horowitz's model is that the voting system, *per se*, does not generate changes at structural level of the parliamentary élites only is simply passing from a vote system to another. The design of the research methodology was projected in order to allow the empiric testing of the theoretical model of Horowitz on the concrete situation of Romania. We try to generate empirical data in order make the factual control of the theoretical model: the change of the electoral system does not bring significant alterations at the level of parliamentary élites. The operationalization has been produced the following way: the independent variable acquired two „values” during the research: the proportional representation electoral system with closed lists (in Romania, till 2008) and the uninominal majority electoral system (in Romania, after 2008).

The dependent variable whose variations have been measured was the structure of political parliamentary élites. In this frame, we defined at the level of the general category of political élites, the political parliamentary élites as a specific element, to be integrated in this category. In other words, we tried to investigate whether the change of electoral system in Romania triggered significant consequences in the structure of the political parliamentary élites in the Chamber of Deputies. In order to collect data, we used the sociological investigation based on directly applying a face to face questionnaire. During our two moments of investigations we measured the perceptions of political parliamentary élites generated by the two different electoral systems. The comparative analysis must answer to one question: are the two political parliamentary élites different or similar? Or, another question, did the change of electoral system produce, as a consequence, the significant alteration of the structure of parliamentary élites?

3 The Dimensions of Measuring the Structure of the Political Parliamentary Élites

In order to verify if the new electoral system generated significant changes in the structure of political parliamentary élites we proposed two fundamental dimensions:

- on one hand, we tried to investigate whether the socio-demographic profile of the new élites is significantly different from the old one (the one before 2008);
- on the other hand, we tried to investigate whether the perceptions of the new élites (investigated in 2009) on specific issues – social, economic and politic - are significantly different from the perception of old élites. We used this dimension, taking into account the assumption that a possible and probable alteration of the socio-demographic profile is not enough to admit that a significant change is caused by using a new electoral system.

Therefore, we approach the structure of political parliamentary élites both from socio-demographic angle and from the type of perception by the élites upon some issues, starting from the idea that the alteration of the structure of élites has to be analyzed not only at the level of objective features but also at the level of subjective features. This is why in our questionnaires we projected the design of questions able to produce information about how élites are and what they believe, what are their perceptions. The two questionnaires were applied for the population in the respect of deputies, between the 2004 and 2008 legislation and 2008 and 2012, and two types of groupings were built. The first grouping included 57 deputies and the second one 62. For the two groupings we used a simple, ransom and crossed procedure on layers.

4 The perceptions of the political parliamentary élites on the electoral system

In this part of the paper we present the results of our research and a short analysis regarding the self perceptions of the political parliamentary élites on the uninominal system.

Q1. After the election from 2008, what do you think the direction of the country is going to?

	Good	Wrong	I do not know	I do not answer
2004-2008	60%	25%	12%	3%
2008-2012	52%	45%	2%	1%

Q2. Do you think the uninominal system will have a decisive influence on the direction the country is going to?

	Yes	No	I do not know	I do not answer
2004-2008	49%	48%	2%	1%
2008-2012	48%	52%	0%	0%

From these results, we notice that both the new and old élites have almost no trust at any of the uninominal system, in spite of fact that the new élites were elected in this system.

Q3. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	The Romanian voters elect their representatives being well informed	The Romanian voters do not know whom they vote
2004-2008	48%	52%
2008-2012	39%	61%

As we could see, 61% from the present deputies agree the idea that the Romanian voters do not know whom they elected. So, taking into account that these deputies were elected by uninominal system which implies a closer relation between candidates and voters, we can come to the conclusion that the electoral system did not influence the way the citizens voted.

Q4. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	The Romanian voters elect their representatives taking into account the electoral program	The Romanian voters elect their representatives being manipulated in different ways (electoral bribe, partisan campaign, etc.)
2004-2008	44%	56%
2008-2012	23%	77%

These results sustain the previous question and identify the way the politicians built their electoral campaign: using manipulative techniques and electoral bribe. The present deputies, in a large proportion - 77% in comparison to 56% - agree with this affirmation. Again, the way the citizens elected their representatives disregarding the success of a campaign.

Q5. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	The uninominal system promotes better deputies	The uninominal system promotes worse deputies
2004-2008	63%	37%
2008-2012	54%	46%

The answers are logic because every governance considers itself to be better than the previous one.

Q6. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	The uninominal system promoted only candidates with a lot of money	The uninominal system promoted only candidates of high visibility
2004-2008	34%	66%
2008-2012	44%	56%

The success formula to be reached by the Legislative is not the electoral system but a combination between financial resources (intensively used during campaign) and high public visibility.

Q7. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	The uninominal system brings advantages for the candidates of the political parties	The uninominal system offers equal opportunities for all
2004-2008	79%	21%
2008-2012	93%	7%

Belonging to a political party is the best way to have access to Parliament, so the idea that the uninominal system promotes independent candidates is infirmed. It could be remarked that the figures are semnificative.

Q8. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

Period	In the uninominal system the citizens interests are better represented	In the uninominal system the citizens interests are represented in the same way like in PR system
2004-2008	63%	37%
2008-2012	60%	40%

The members of both the legislatures consider that citizens' interests do not depend on the electoral system.

Q9. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	In an uninominal system the electors vote rather a personality than a party	In an uninominal system the electors vote rather the political party to whom the candidate belongs
2004-2008	42%	58%
2008-2012	40%	60%

The major importance of a political party is re-asserted.

Q10. Which of the following assertions do you agree with?

	In an uninominal system the electors know better the electoral programs of the candidates	In an uninominal system the electors have less information on the electoral programs of the candidates
2004-2008	58%	42%
2008-2012	40%	60%

The news of the electoral system makes the member of the political parliamentary élites believe that voters will not have enough information about the electoral programs proposed by candidates. These results confirm the previous ones that the citizens will not vote being well informed about candidates programs. Citizens vote unaware of the candidate's electoral program, disregarding the voting system.

5 Conclusions

The theoretical model used in this research is confirmed by the answers given by the political parliamentary élites. The Romanian electors are not mature enough for electing their representatives in a uninominal system. This is also, as we showed, the idea supported by Horowitz, that only after three consecutive elections using the uninominal system one can notice significant alterations in the electoral behavior of the citizens. Only after 12 years it could be understood the functioning of the system, its advantages and disadvantages. So, the electoral system *per se*, does not produce changes at the level of parliamentary élites. Both the old élites (elected by PR) and the new elites (elected by uninominal system) share the same common corpus of values, have the same attitudes in respect of the voters and in the way they perceive the responsibilities of the institution they belong. Horowitz sustains that the first changes produced by an electoral system are visible only after three election terms using the same method of selection. Only future, and new and continuous researches, can tell us whether this is valid for Romania and for its parliamentary élites.

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