



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR  
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

# PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM: THE ONLY OPTIMAL WAY FOR GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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78

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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**2017**



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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ISSN 1512-4835  
ISBN 978-9941-0-9884-0

The existence of an optimal electoral system is of utmost importance in any democratic country. The fact that different democracies use different electoral systems indicates that there is no consensus on the superiority of one specific electoral model. The reasons for these differences are, for the most part, historical; however, in certain cases they are also caused by the constant attempts of liberal states to improve and perfect their electoral systems in order to achieve higher levels of democracy.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that this issue has been at the forefront of Georgian politics for almost two decades. Georgia has utilized the so-called parallel or mixed electoral system since 1995 which means that about a half of the MPs are elected using the proportional system while the other half is elected through the majoritarian system. During this time, opposition parties have been demanding the establishment of the full proportional system while those in power have consistently resisted the change. The 2012 Parliamentary elections is a case in point where the former opposition party drastically changed its position on this issue after coming to power, “rediscovering” the positive qualities of the majoritarian system. The fact that the majoritarian system in Georgia is more favorable to the parties in government is beyond doubt. We shall attempt to prove that such an arrangement is not incidental and that such a bias in favor of the incumbent is to be expected in every polity that is on a similar stage of political, economic and social development as Georgia. Hence, we can argue that the majoritarian system facilitates the maintenance of the hold on power for those who currently govern. In addition, the majoritarian system also tends to reduce the number of parties, creating a trend towards the establishment of a two-party system in the best of circumstances.

Proportional and majoritarian electoral systems bring two different results as the former ensures the precise representation of the population’s preferences while the latter tends to aggregate electoral views. All of this comes from the inherent characteristic of these two electoral systems. In the majoritarian system, one candidate wins while the votes cast for the other candidates are simply wasted. Hence, theoretically it is possible for a party to receive a rather large number of votes and get much fewer seats in the legislative body. For example, if 100 MPs in a country are elected from 100 majoritarian constituencies using the First Past the Post (FPTP) procedure, a situation may arise when a single party wins in about 90 constituencies with

just a thin margin and loses completely in the remaining ten. As a result, this party receives 90% of the seats in the legislative structure even though it has received less than 47% of the overall votes cast.

Majoritarian System	Percentage of Received Votes		Overall Vote Percentage	Percentage of Mandates
	90 Constituencies	10 Constituencies		
<b>Name</b>	<b>90 Constituencies</b>	<b>10 Constituencies</b>	<b>100 Constituencies</b>	<b>100 Mandates</b>
I Party	51%	10%	46.9%	90%
II Party	49%	90%	53.1%	10%

In the case of a proportional electoral system, on the other hand, the mandates are distributed in accordance with the number of received votes. Hence, if we take the same example, the second contesting party would be the winner with 53 mandates while the first one would get only 47 mandates. It is clear that the majoritarian system distorts the will of the population. Of course, the example discussed above is purely theoretical; however, factual analysis also shows that people’s preferences are more accurately reflected in the legislative structure in the case of a proportional system as compared to the majoritarian one. For example, according to the research of Professors of Political Sciences, John Huber and Bingham Powell, which analyze the results of the elections held from the years 1968 to 1985 in 12 democratic countries, people’s preferences in the legislative structure are represented with a 12% higher accuracy in a proportional electoral system than in the case of a majoritarian electoral system. Later, in his book, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy*, Powell analyzed 153 elections held in 20 democratic countries and concluded that the results of the elections in proportional systems are five times more accurate than in majoritarian systems. Despite the fact that less than half of Georgian MPs are elected through the majoritarian system, the Gallagher Disproportionality Index in Georgia is very high as is evident in the chart below, reaching 20.82 according to the results of the 2016 Parliamentary elections.

**Gallagher Disproportionality Index in the 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia**

Party	Number of Votes in %	Number of Mandates in %	Difference	Difference Squared
Georgian Dream	48.68	76.67	27.99	783.25
United National Movement	27.11	18	-9.11	82.99
Patriotic Alliance	5.01	4	-1.01	1.02
Industrial Party	0.78	0.67	-0.11	0.01
<b>Gallagher Index (Square Root from Half of the Sum of the Squared Differences)</b>				<b>20.82</b>

It should be noted that these results are 30% higher than the average index observed in Powell’s research on majoritarian elections. In other words, the 2016 Parliamentary elections results in Georgia showed an especially high disproportionality between the expressed will of the people and representation in the legislative structure.

All of this is directly linked to the level of political, economic and social development of our country. And indeed, political scientists are always suspicious of the establishment of majoritarian electoral systems in countries undergoing the process of democratization. One of the most prominent political scientists of our time, Arend Lijphart, recommends that such countries use the proportional electoral system. This issue became especially important after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and academic debates around it have become quite fierce. This was due to the turbulence caused by the collapse of the USSR and the resulting democratization in about 20 countries of Eastern Europe. Elections are among the key criteria for democracies and the issue of an optimal version for electoral systems has turned into one of the most important discussion topics for both practitioners as well as theoreticians.

Before we go into the details of these discussions, it is important to make a short overview of the positive and negative sides of both proportional as well as majoritarian electoral systems.

The positive side of the majoritarian electoral system is the direct accountability principle between the electorate and their representative.

Voters of specific constituencies have the opportunity to assess the work of their representative and vote for someone else in the next elections in the case of dissatisfaction. The majoritarian system facilitates the growth of parties and a possible creation of a two-party system in the country. Hence, in such a system, it is often possible for one party to get a majority and form a single-party government. Single-party governments are more stable as compared to coalition governments and, consequently, the political vector of the country is characterized with a much higher level of stability between the elections. Also, since the single-party government does not have to share its power with anyone else, its level of responsibility and accountability is much higher – such a government will not be able to blame a coalition partner for failing to deliver on pre-election promises. Consequently, it becomes much easier for the voter to decide whether or not the party has managed to deliver on its promises. On the other hand, a single-party government has a much better opportunity to fulfill its promises as it does not have to compromise to coalition partners. In this sense, it is much more logical to expect that a single-party government will better be able to deliver on promises than a coalition government.

We have already partly discussed the negative sides of the majoritarian system; however, it is worth elaborating further on this issue. The first and most important negative trait is that the majoritarian system is less representative and the elected legislative structure mirrors the political, social and economic diversities in the country on a much lower level as compared to the proportional electoral system. The discussion above clearly outlined that the disproportionality between voter preferences and the mandate allocation is much higher in the majoritarian system than in the proportional one. We have also seen that in the case of Georgia specifically, where the majoritarian system is just one component of the general electoral system, disproportionality still reached rather high levels. As for the negative sides of the proportional system, it must be pointed out that in such an electoral system there is a high probability that none of the parties will be able to obtain over 50% of the mandates and, hence, a coalition government would be the most probable outcome of the elections. Such governments may be less stable from one election to another, mainly because in the case of one of the members leaving the coalition, it would mean losing the majority in the legislative structure and the necessary formation of a new coalition government. In some cases, it even becomes impossible to form a new government and new elections need to be held ahead of time. On the other hand, however, studies show that the policies of coalition governments are much more coherent in the long-term perspective. Any new

coalition government ensures a higher level of longevity and continuation of the previous government's policies as it is highly probable that at least a small part of the members of the previous coalition are also present in the new coalition government. In the majoritarian system, on the other hand, where one party is usually replaced by another, dramatic changes to the main policies are more common which negatively influences the long-term sustainable development of the country. Coalition governments also facilitate the necessity of compromise and dialogue between various interest groups and, hence, contribute to the establishment of a diverse, multi-party and pluralistic democracy. In other words, the main disadvantage of the proportional electoral system is the short-term instabilities in the coalition government, which could lead to the inaction of the state institutions, while there are many positive sides of this system as it is much better for ensuring more precise representation as well as conducting long-term and coherent policies.

The debates in academia about the relative superiority of the majoritarian and proportional systems are still ongoing. **One thing can be said for certain: the absolute majority of scholars agree that for countries that are engaged in state building and democratization, the proportional electoral system has no real alternative.**

This conclusion is based upon the following additional factors. First, the formation of statehood in the modern world is very closely linked to the full integration of religious and ethno-linguistic minorities residing within the borders of the new state. The proportional system enables these groups to obtain mandates in the legislative structure while this is much less likely in the majoritarian system. It is less likely because following the growth in the size of the parties and the growing trend towards establishing a two-party system, voters tend to support the parties more likely to get the majority and the parties supported by minority groups have much smaller chances of obtaining a substantial number of mandates. Such developments during the formation of statehood contribute to a certain alienation of minority groups from the state, less participation on their part in political processes and result in apathy. Over time, this could grow into separatist movements if it becomes evident that minority groups are inadequately represented in the newly formed state institutions. This problem is especially relevant to newly formed states as they have no historically proven democratic traditions which would assure the minorities that their interests will be adequately taken into account. The second problem is the lack of a democratic and pluralistic political culture. In the process of transforming a former dictatorship into



a democracy, it is likely for the victorious party to try concentrating power under the banner of unity, forming a one-party authoritarian regime using the lack of pluralism in society. By its character, which is reducing the number of political parties, the majoritarian electoral system facilitates the creation of such opportunities.

In the specific case of Georgia, all of these reasons together with some additional factors create a serious danger for the creation of a one-party and a much less accountable government system. These factors include: first, historical experience. Practically all of the governments since 1995 have relied on one-party principles and needed no opposition support after assuming office. In this case, the Georgian Dream coalition, which won the 2012 Parliamentary elections in Georgia, can be considered as a one-party government since it participated in the elections as a single block and formed the government independent of any other parties in the Parliament. The coalition government means the force which forms as a result of negotiations with other parties entering the legislative structure after the elections. The result from all of this in Georgia was that the democratic processes eroded, leading to unconstitutional changes of government. Second is that the majoritarian electoral system clearly benefited the governing political party and created a significant dissonance between the will of the people and the distribution of political mandates. This is of major importance and requires a detailed explanation. In countries where the income inequality indicator is high (and Georgia is among such countries), clientelistic proposals to specific voters become more important in the majoritarian elections than the pre-election programs of the parties. Social inequality and a high level of unemployment enables the government candidate to offer the electorate more specific profit such as employment in government structures, government contracts and so on instead of just offering general welfare benefits. Proposing such profits is actually counter-productive when the financial resources of the electorate and the candidate do not differ dramatically and when the majority of voters are employed. In Georgia's case, the role of the state as the main employer is enormous. According to the information provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, about a half of those hired in Georgia are employed by the state. This is significantly different from the situation in democratic countries in Eastern Europe. Hence, the importance of the administrative resources at the disposal of the government is very high for winning in majoritarian elections. Third, balancing the administrative resources of the government is only possible if other political parties have solid financial bases. If we look at Georgian politics, however, it becomes evident that the funding of the

opposition parties is ten or more times less than that of the governing party. The reason for this is probably direct and indirect political pressure which limits the private sector from showing initiative. Applying such political pressure is especially easy in a country with an economic structure such as Georgia. The issue is that large businesses dominate the Georgian private sector. For example, about 50% of those employed by the private sector are employed by large businesses and the share of these businesses in the overall turnover is 80%. Hence, the sources for funding for political parties are few in number and easily monitored by the governing party. All of this creates a situation where the existence of the majoritarian system further strengthens one-party rule tendencies.

**Taking all of the aforementioned factors into account, the proportional electoral system has no real alternative for Georgia at this stage of development if our goal is to build a stable liberal-democratic state.**

Today, we have a principled consensus about this issue as the members of the Constitutional Commission from the governing party have confirmed on numerous occasions. It should be noted, however, that the proposed model where the winning party gets 100% of the unallocated mandates fundamentally disregards the expected results and content because of which the proportional electoral system is considered superior. The proportional electoral system, if it ensures a one-party government and maintains the disproportionality between the will of the people and the actual representation in the legislative structure, is the same old majoritarian system judging by its ultimate results. Citing the examples of Italy and Greece having these kind of systems is not a sufficient excuse to balance the existence of significantly different systems in about 20 other member states of the European Union. It should also be noted that the establishment of such electoral practices in Italy and Greece was due to the historical fragmentation of the political and social specter of these countries. **In Georgia's case, however, we have faced a cardinaly different challenge for the past two decades – this is a predominant party political system where the governing political party does not have to compromise with any political opponents.** As a result, we get the unravelling of accountability between the electorate and their representatives, authoritarian tendencies and the danger that the political process will move beyond the constitutional constraints. Overcoming the endemic weakness of the opposition political parties in our country will only be possible through the implementation of a genuine proportional electoral system. This is one of the most important guarantees of establishing a pluralistic and stable democratic governing system.