



UKRAINE: The Perils of Majoritarianism in a New Democracy

Sarah Birch

Ukraine's first elections as an independent state were held under a majoritarian Two-Round System (TRS). The collapse of the Soviet system in the early 1990s had precipitated the creation of numerous new parties seeking to establish their democratic credentials and lead Ukraine through economic and political reform. But geographical variations in Ukraine's economic and ethnic structure, coupled with a history of territorial division, led to the formation of different parties in different parts of the country. The result was a situation in which there were many small parties with support bases defined either along regional and ethnic lines, or along those of economic wealth. When Ukraine held parliamentary elections in 1994, most of the parties were ill-organized and had only a vague idea of how many supporters they had. One reason for this is that, although Ukrainians on the whole valued democratic politics, there was also a strong popular aversion to organized political activism, given the country's experience of one-party rule under communism.

The weakness of the parties at the outset of multi-party competition meant that electoral institutions were especially important in shaping the young party system. According to the electoral law that governed the 1994 contest, one deputy was elected from each constituency, and a run-off was held between the two candidates who received the highest number of votes if no candidate gained an absolute majority in the first round. Many commentators at the time saw the Two-Round System as an ideal means of limiting the number of parties in parliament while at the same time giving small parties a greater chance of being elected than they would have under a First Past the Post system (FPTP). Another perceived advantage of the system was that it would encourage the formation of tactical agreements between like-minded parties in the second round, to maximize the overall representation of their combined interests.

But the results of the elections demonstrated a number of flaws in this reasoning. Firstly, the geographical heterogeneity of partisan support led to the election of many deputies with narrow regional concerns, often associated with the interests of a specific ethnic group or economic sector. When the parliament assembled, it contained deputies from no fewer than 14 parties, a far larger number than that envisaged by the proponents of the majoritarian electoral law. Moreover, the tendency of majoritarian systems to exaggerate the seat share of large parties meant that although the revamped Communists gained only 13% of the vote, they won 23% of the seats and were thus considerably over-represented relative to their true electoral support. This

“seat bonus” effect did not operate for the smaller newly-formed parties, who mostly received fewer seats than their popular vote may have indicated. Secondly, the elections did little to consolidate the party system; most parties were reluctant to strike second-round deals amongst themselves, because they over-estimated their electoral strength and believed that they would perform best on their own. And thirdly, the preservation of single-member districts allowed many local officials and well-known local figures to win seats without having to associate themselves with an organized party. As a consequence, half of the deputies elected were independents. The large number of parties in parliament and the relatively small proportion of party-affiliated deputies generated a considerable amount of fluidity in the structure of parliamentary factions. This has led to unpredictable outcomes. It has weakened democratic accountability, and it has lowered the parliament’s esteem in the eyes of many voters.

A further problem with the Ukrainian electoral law is that it included two stipulations not found in most laws of this type: electoral participation had to exceed 50% for the election in a given constituency to be declared valid, and the winning candidate had to receive an absolute majority of the vote. These requirements meant that deputies were not elected at all in about a quarter of the constituencies; low turnout caused many elections to be declared invalid, and in many more cases neither of the candidates in the run-off election won over 50% of the vote, since many people voted against both candidates as a form of protest. The process of filling the empty seats carried on for over two years, generating considerable popular disaffection. Moreover, fluctuating numbers in the legislature added to the unpredictability of results, and several regions of the country were left severely under-represented for much of this period.

Following the 1994 elections, there was a general consensus that it would be desirable to move toward a more proportional electoral system so as to reduce the number of independent deputies, stabilise the party system, and promote more predictable legislative behaviour. The new electoral law which will govern the elections of 1998 is a semi-proportional parallel system, by which half the deputies will be elected by FPTP in single-member districts, and half from national party lists, with a 3% threshold for representation. These changes are likely to increase the efficacy of the electoral process, generate a more structured parliament, and help consolidate the party system.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the Ukrainian case is that, although proportional systems can often cause a proliferation of parliamentary parties in developed democracies, majoritarian laws also allow a large number of parties to enter parliament when parties are weakly entrenched and geographically distinct, which is the case in many new democracies. Furthermore, majoritarian systems do

little to help consolidate new party systems, because lack of widespread party identification encourages the election of independent candidates who can blur the balance of party strength in parliament and destabilize the legislative process. Finally, majoritarian systems give a distinct advantage to those parties that do have established organizational and support bases, and these are in many cases the heirs of authoritarian rulers.

