

Drawbacks And Advantages: The Romanian Two-Party System And The Electoral System (1866-1914)

Dogaru Cosmin-Stefan, Assistant Prof., PhD

Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania

Abstract:

My article, concentrating on a topic that is still viable nowadays, belongs to the field of political history and presents an important feature of the Romanian political life. The process of modernisation of the Romanian state and society was strengthened in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. There were major changes at the political, social, economic and cultural level. The present article proposes to analyse the relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system while investigating historical facts through the support of political science tools.

Keywords: Census suffrage, Romania, liberals, conservatives, two-party system

Introduction

In 1866, the census suffrage seems to have been preferred by the political elite and this census suffrage was also supporting the operation of the two-party system. However, in the second half of the 19th century, the European model had gradually become a milestone that could be adjusted by the political elite to all the levels of the political regime. Most of the liberal and conservative politicians preferred the Belgian model concerning the constitutional system and the British model of government regarding the government alternation.

I believe that the relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system during the period I am analysing (1866-1914) lead to positive aspects, but also to limitations regarding the operation of the political regime. It is possible that, in 1866, the Romanian society was not ready for the universal suffrage of male citizens, which would have lead to a real progress in the modernisation process of the country at all levels: political, economic, social and cultural.

The establishment of the Romanian two-party system – a long process

The political scientist Maurice Duverger analysed the construction of the political parties and of the party system starting from the idea that: « les partis <<bourgeois>> du XIXe siècle qui survivent toujours sous la forme des partis conservateurs et libéraux /.../ ne cherchent pas à multiplier leur adhérents ni à encadrer de grandes masses populaires, mais /.../ à grouper des personnalités » (Duverger, 1976, p. 43).

In the Romanian case, the local political elite, especially the liberal one, required a fast rhythm of reform in comparison with the conservative elite, more traditional, which preferred a moderate rhythm of action in adopting various laws and measures. But, despite of the different rhythms they preferred for the modernisation of the country, both the liberals and the conservatives had a strong partnership with Charles I (1866-1914) regarding the development of the country at all levels: political, social, economic and cultural. And that partnership had been established from the very beginning of Charles I's reign.

The conservative C. I. Istrati was convinced that: “*the liberal party was called to continually transform the nation in accordance to the general evolution of ideas and the mission of the humanity. On the other hand, the conservative party, this oak of the Romanian nation that has always been awake, was called to the helm of the nation – to surely and capably lead the boat of the nation and not to let the sails flutter too strongly in order not to allow the storms to destroy them and the entire ship*” (Istrati, 1904, p. 101).

In the Romanian realm, the government alternation mechanism of the conservatives and the liberals “developed in time, depending on the coagulation of the participating political forces”. “From the beginning of the reign of Charles I until 1895 /.../ this functioned in incipient, experimental variants, with unequal periods of government and with different alliances between political groups (1866-1871) or between parties and political groups (conservatives and the “Junimea” group members, 1888-1895)” (Dogaru, 2008, p. 5); between 1895 and 1914, there was a different type of government alternation - an organised one with periods that were approximatively equal for the liberal and conservatives governments, which could not be longer than four years (the specific legislative period), called in the Romanian specialised political history literature “the government alternation” (Dogaru, 2008, p. 5). In the years 1895 and 1914, the alternation became organised and efficient (lasting for one legislature – for an average of four years).

The political scientist Mattei Dogan was the first who analysed this type of alternation and asserted, in 1946, that the *government rotation* was a regular alternation between the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party: “this government majority in the Parliament was formed by each of

the two government parties, which ruled the country and organised the parliamentary elections alternatively” (Dogan, 1946, p. 108). Likewise, Dogan clearly admitted that: “we can say that we are facing a political system that can be characterised as government rotation in a parliamentary form” (Dogan, 1946, p. 110).

Moreover, the conservative leader Titu Maiorescu reflected that the liberal government formed in 1895, lead by D. A. Sturdza, could not be considered a *personal government* but, “*on the contrary, it is my duty to admit that it was a government that was correct from the constitutional point of view*” (Maiorescu, 2003, p. 65); little by little, the phrase *personal government* became a useless instrument in the political strife – especially after the introduction of the organised alternation of the two parties, the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party.

Along time, the stabilization of the two-party system became a visible certitude of the age. The conservative newspaper *Timpul (The Time)* highlighted this aspect in 1899: “*we, the conservatives, inaugurated the beneficial system of the natural alternation of the parties in assuming state leadership without violent movements, through the intervention of the Crown*” (“*Pretențiune absurdă*” (“*Absurd Demand*”), 1899).

The relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system

A clearly positive result was the gradual education of the political body within the political regime - the voters started having a certain experience after these elections that allowed them to consciously provide their vote to one of the two parties especially after the consolidation of the government alternation between the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. Most of the citizens were participating only indirectly in the Romanian political life - across demonstrations and public meetings.

In the 1866 Constitution - a liberal one according both to Charles I and the political elite of the time - a series of citizen liberties and rights were stipulated - among them, the freedom of speech, of press etc. (Damean, Oncescu, pp. 172-173). The existence of these citizen rights and liberties lead to the framing of a liberal regime in full swing of democratisation.

The conservative political leader Titu Maiorescu considered that: “*the voters did not understand the utility they could obtain from the formation of personal convictions and from the experience of the suffrage because the governments did not have enough wisdom to reduce the pressure and start educating the electoral body from above*” (Maiorescu, 2003, p. 11). The same leader admitted nevertheless that, after 1903, “*in the third Sturdza cabinet, when Vasile Lascarescu held the office of the minister of domestic affairs, the vote of the electors started being independent from the administration*” (Maiorescu, 2003, p. 12).

Concerning the electoral system, Eugeniu Stătescu highlighted the importance of the political education of the citizens: *“it was only through political education and the gradual improvement of the cultural level and of the public morality of the nation that they could bring about a significant improvement in this respect”* (Stătescu, 1886, p. 11); this outcome was attained little by little.

The suffrage, although restricted during that age, “contributed, from prince Cuza onwards, to the political education of the nation and created a progressive maturity of the voters and a better knowledge of the people and of the rules of the modern politics. It also stimulated a better organisation of the political parties and an improvement of their inner structure” (Scurtu, Bulei, 1990, p. 96). The relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system favoured the construction process of the two government parties, the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party.

In order to accomplish its government programme and to achieve the necessary reforms, the government party needed a clear electoral victory; thus, *“as long as the majorities were not impressive, the government could not work and the voters could see the consequences”* (*“Perdere de timp”* (*“Waste of Time”*), 1899).

The need of change regarding the electoral system in that period

The two-party system, although accepted and supported by the majority of the politicians of the time, was nevertheless contested in some points by some of these politicians, who were wondering whether it truly corresponded to the country’s necessities and whether a major change was not needed; such questions were particularly visible after the end of the 19th century.

In this sense, the liberal Vintilă Brătianu considered that a change of the party system was necessary and that it could be done through the introduction of the universal suffrage. He was firmly convinced that *“it was only through an electoral reform, that could bring together all the citizens of the country, without electoral census or professional colleges, that the state could find the support it needed and a strong shield against the damaging action of any political party that was not conscious of its duty”* (Brătianu, 1913, pp. 51-52). But the wish of such politicians was accomplished only after the First World War (WWI) when the census suffrage was changed with the universal male suffrage (the electoral law of 1918 was the one that stipulated this type of suffrage).

Some liberals reflected that it was necessary to impose an extension of the electoral body, given the domestic situation of the country (see the tensions generated in the political life by the electoral problem) and the events in other countries (which, in 1914, already had the universal male

suffrage). *“There are many people in the liberal party who did not cease denouncing the injustice and the lack of sincerity that underlie our electoral regime. It is an unjust regime because a census minority decides for the entire people; it is a regime that lacks political sincerity because, in the restricted colleges, both governmental pressure and corruption can operate; and no matter how much we would guarantee the secret vote, it is a fact /.../ that in the numerically restricted colleges /.../ the coalition interests of a privileged minority can get before the general interests of the state”*; from this motive, *“it is us, the liberal party, that should achieve a wide and democratic reform of the electoral law as soon as possible”* (Speech of the deputy Dr. I. G. Radovici, 1904, p. 173) (which was nevertheless achieved only after the First World War - WWI; the first elections after the introduction of the universal suffrage were those in 1919).

The dissatisfactions regarding the electoral system were quite many, but they did not create an important current of mobilization or change because most of the politicians considered it useful to maintain the census vote since it favoured the two-party system. The electoral *modus operandi* was preserved throughout that age even if some changes regarding the electoral law did exist (in 1903, 1906, 1907) - they were nevertheless related more to the electoral procedure than to the law itself (Radu, 2005, p. 29).

Direct criticism came from Nicolae Iorga, who asserted that the Romanian state was *“the most backward regarding the participation of the citizens in the political life. Beyond our border, people participate to the general life of their countries to a larger extent. Thus, Austria introduced the universal suffrage, Hungary is just preparing it /.../ Beyond the Prut river, the peasants participate in the political life of the country to a greater extent”* (Iorga, 1939, pp. 63-64).

The electoral *modus operandi* (the majority vote in only one voting term) did not support the minor parties, but invariably lead to the formation and maintaining of a two-party system, which permitted the maintaining and the consolidation of the government alternation of the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party.

An analysis concerning the number of inhabitants in relation to literacy

A contemporary of Charles I, the sociologist Leonida Colescu, made a generous analysis of the number of inhabitants as related to the degree of literacy in the Romanian society. Furthermore, in Romania, in 1899, we can remark that the population was of approximately 6 million inhabitants, out of which only 22% could read, while in comparison, in 1912, there were around 7,2 million inhabitants, out of which 39% could read (Colescu, 1947, p. X). In contrast, we observe that in other European countries concerning the illiterate, the percentages in 1910-1911 were considerable different: in

Portugal 69,7%, in Italy, 37,6%, in Hungary 33,3%, in Austria 16,5% (Colescu, 1915, pp. 33-34).

According to the comprehensive study of L. Colescu, we can perceive nevertheless that “the increase in the number of voters from one period to another was inferior to the increase in the population” (Colescu, 1915, p. 36).

The ending of the mechanism of the government alternation

The death of king Charles I and the break of the First World War hurried the dissolution of the system created by the monarch. After the introduction of the universal male suffrage, the party system itself changed. Out of the two government parties, the only one which adapted to the new political life was the National Liberal Party. Its political adversary, the Conservative Party, slowly disappeared from the political platform, having weaker and weaker electoral results and being in the end dissolved.

The electoral system ensured the power alternation of the liberals and the conservatives and the stabilization of the two-party system during the last stage of the reign of Charles I (1895-1914) brought political stability.

Conclusion:

Throughout that period, the political life of the country, with both its drawbacks and its positive aspects, permitted the delineation of a liberal political regime, on its way to democratisation, thus a major preoccupation of the political elite and of the prince (later the king) Charles I to initiate a process of reform in the Romanian state being observed.

References:

Brătianu, V. I. Crize de stat, 1901-1907-1913 (State Crises, 1901-1907-1913). Bucharest: Institutul de Editură și Arte Grafice „Flacăra” (“Flacăra” Institute for Publishing and Graphic Arts), 1913.

Colescu, Leonida. Statistica știutorilor de carte din România întocmită pe baza rezultatelor Recensământului general al populației din 19 decembrie 1912 (The Statistics of the Learned Persons in Romania Created on the Basis of the Results of the General Population Census on Dec. 19, 1912). Bucharest: Stabilimentul de Arte Grafice Albert Baer (Albert Baer Graphic House Press), 1915.

Colescu, Leonida. Știutorii de carte din România în 1912 (Learned Persons in Romania in 1912). Bucharest: Institutul Central de Statistică (Central Institute of Statistics), 1947.

Damean, Sorin Liviu, Oncescu, Iulian. O istorie a românilor. De la Tudor Vladimirescu la Marea Unire (1821-1918) (A History of the Romanians from

Tudor Vladimirescu to the Great Union: 1821-1918). Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun (Throne City) Press, 2015.

Discursul deputatului Dr. I. G. Radovici in *Discursurile rostite de membrii Partidului Național-Liberal în discuțiunea răspunsului la mesagiul tronului, sesiunea parlamentară 1903-1904* (Speech of the deputy Dr. I. G. Radovici in *Discourses Delivered by the Members of the National Liberal Party during the Discussion on the Response to the Message of the King, Parliamentary Session 1903-1904*). Bucharest: Tipografia „Voința Națională” (“The National Will” Press), 1904.

Dogan, Mattei. Analiza statistică a „democrației parlamentare” din România (Statistic Analysis of the “Parliamentary Democracy” in Romania). Bucharest: Editura Partidului Social-Democrat (Social-Democratic Party Press), 1946.

Dogaru, Cosmin Stefan. “Bipartidismul românesc. Implicarea lui Carol I și a liderilor politici în funcționarea alternanței la guvernare (1895-1914)” (“The Romanian Two-Party System: The Involvement of Charles I and of the Political Leaders in the Operation of the Government Alternation - 1895-1914”). *Analele Universității București, Științe Politice (Bucharest University Yearbook, Political Science Series)*, 2008.

Duverger, Maurice. *Les partis politiques*. Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1976.

Iorga, Nicolae. *Discursuri parlamentare (Parliamentary Discourses)*. (Vol. I, Part I, << Bucovina >>). Bucharest: I. E. TOROUȚIU, 1939.

Istrati, C. I. *De ce suntem conservatori? (Why Are We Conservatives?)* Bucharest: Editura Institutului de Arte Grafice „Carol Göbl” (“Carol Göbl” Institute of Graphic Arts Press), 1904.

Maiorescu, T. *Discursuri parlamentare (Parliamentary Discourses)*. [Vol. V (1895-1899)]. Bucharest: Albatros, 2003.

Perdere de timp (Waste of Time). (1899, 30 April [12 May]). *Constituționalul (The Constitutional)*.

Pretențiune absurdă (Absurd Demand). (1899, 25 February [9 March]) *Timpul (The Time)*.

Radu, Sorin. *Modernizarea sistemului electoral din România (1866-1937)* (The Modernisation of the Electoral System in Romania. 1866-1937). Iași: Editura Institutul European (European Institute Press), 2005.

Scurtu, Ioan, Bulei, Ion. *Democrația la români. 1866-1938* (Democracy with the Romanians. 1866-1938). Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990.

Stătescu, Eugeniu. *Partidul Național-Liberal față cu grupurile politice de astăzi* (The National Liberal Party Facing the Contemporary Political Groups). Bucharest: Tipografia Curtei Regale F. Göbl & Fii (F. Göbl & Sons Royal Court Press), 1886.