Electoral Reform and Political Representation in Albania: A Comparative Analysis of the 2017, 2021, and 2025 Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines the effects of recent electoral system reforms on political representation in Albania, with particular attention to vote-seat proportionality, candidate selection mechanisms, gender representation, and regional outcomes. The study adopts a comparative mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative analysis of official election results with qualitative institutional analysis across three parliamentary election cycles (2017, 2021, and 2025), each conducted under different electoral rules. Using a longitudinal case-study approach, the research evaluates how changes in list structures, preferential voting, and gender quotas have reshaped patterns of representation. The empirical findings show that while electoral reforms have expanded voter choice and contributed to a gradual increase in women's parliamentary representation, their impact on overall democratic representation remains uneven. In particular, the analysis reveals that vote–seat proportionality varies significantly across regions and election cycles, producing disparities that are not fully explained by voter preferences alone. Furthermore, the introduction of preferential voting and modified list structures has not consistently strengthened voter influence over candidate selection, often reinforcing party-level control rather than enhancing electoral accountability. These results suggest that successive electoral reforms in Albania have increased system complexity without delivering proportional

improvements in transparency or representativeness. The paper concludes that institutional design alone is insufficient to improve democratic outcomes unless accompanied by broader reforms addressing party practices and governance culture. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on electoral engineering in transitional democracies and offer policy-relevant insights for future electoral reform processes.

Introduction

The idea for carrying out this study is primarily related to my research interests, on topics related to the electoral behavior of the electorate in Albania, the active political participation of citizens and the relations of political representation of citizens in parliament, but also their representation within political entities (political parties).

Electoral systems represent a core institutional mechanism through which democratic representation is structured and legitimised. By shaping how votes are translated into parliamentary seats, electoral rules influence party competition, candidate selection, voter behaviour, and public trust in democratic institutions. In transitional democracies, where political systems remain fluid and institutional consolidation is ongoing, electoral system design plays an especially critical role in sustaining democratic legitimacy.

The year 2025 was an election year in Albania, during which parliamentary elections were held and it was of interest to see how the result would be configured at the national level. So, which party would form the new government? Would the Socialist Party continue to remain in power for the 4th fourth governing mandate or would there be a change of power?

Over the past decade, Albania has experienced multiple electoral reforms aimed at improving representation, transparency, and inclusiveness. These reforms have introduced changes to candidate ranking mechanisms, preferential voting procedures, gender quota enforcement, and seat allocation formulas. While such reforms are often presented as technical adjustments, comparative research demonstrates that even modest changes in electoral rules can produce significant political consequences (Norris, 2004; Farrell, 2011).

The expected election result was questionable and not completely "readable" due to the fact that, in these elections, a new formula for calculating the mandates of the deputy was applied, which was determined by the amendments to the Electoral Code of 2025. These changes in the electoral system also went parallel to the change (mainly a decrease) of the "safe votes" from the main parties (Socialist Party, Democratic Party and Socialist Movement for Integration) and also the increasing projection of new

parties/coalitions (Opportunity Party, "Albania Becomes" Party, Nisma Thurje (Hashtag Initiative), Movement "Together"). If we were to add to these above indicators the percentage of voter participation in the elections (which has a decreasing trend), accurately predicting the result remained a challenging undertaking. The results prediction refers to the number of votes each political party needs to collect in order to achieve the number of mandates each of them aims for (for the two main parties, SP and DP) and in the case of new political parties, how many votes would they secure at least one mandate, to be a parliamentary party?

The electoral system in Albania for general elections, also called parliamentary elections, has changed several times since its inception, and in different periods the majority system, the proportional system and an alternation of the two have been implemented. The current system, in force since 2008, is a regional proportional system based on electoral zones with a multi - name list. The Albanian Parliament has 140 deputies, and they have a four-year mandate. Candidates are elected from 12 electoral zones that correspond to the administrative - territorial division, the Region. To qualify for the distribution of seats in parliament, political parties must overcome a threshold of one percent nationwide. The number of mandates of deputies varies for each zone.

In the last 3 parliamentary elections in Albania, in 2017, 2021 and 2025, 3 new ways of calculating votes per mandate have been implemented for each political party and these elections were preceded by 3 fundamental changes to the electoral code. Consequently, the comparison of the results of these three parliamentary elections has a special characteristic, since the number of votes in itself is not the only decisive determinant for electing a candidate as an MP or for electing a winning party.

In summary, some of the characteristics of these elections are as follows: in the 2017 parliamentary elections, the total number of votes received by political party A in electoral zone Z determines how many mandates this party receives in that electoral zone, and the ranking on the list of candidates for MPs of this party has value for the "unsafe seats" on the list, i.e. for the last MP that this political party secures in this electoral zone. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, it is the concept of the quotient (the number of votes required to obtain a mandate) that influences (alterates) the ranking on the list of candidates for deputies of a party, where the candidate with the lowest number of votes loses the mandate to the one who broke the quotient, regardless of the order of ranking on the list. In the 2025 parliamentary elections, the ranking on the list of candidates for deputies (closed list versus open list) are also decisive; gender quota in relation to the number of votes (the obligation that 1 in 3 deputies be women); the number of votes of the party in which the deputy candidates are part of the list; the differences in the

number of votes received by the winning candidates; the difference in the number of votes received at the regional/national level.

Despite the frequency and scope of electoral reforms in Albania, systematic academic analysis of their cumulative impact on political representation remains limited. Existing studies have largely focused on democratic transition, party system development, or electoral administration, while offering less comparative insight into how successive reforms reshape representation outcomes across election cycles. This gap is particularly evident with respect to recent parliamentary elections, where new electoral arrangements have altered the relationship between voter preferences, candidate selection, and parliamentary mandates.

This paper addresses this gap by providing a comparative analysis of the Albanian parliamentary elections of **2017, 2021, and 2025**. The study examines how changes in electoral rules have affected political representation at both national and regional levels, with particular attention to preferential voting, list ranking, and gender representation mechanisms. By analysing official electoral data alongside legal and institutional frameworks, the paper evaluates whether electoral reforms have enhanced representativeness and voter influence or generated new challenges related to transparency and electoral coherence.

The Albanian case offers valuable insights for broader debates on electoral engineering in transitional democracies. By situating empirical findings within established comparative literature, this study contributes to understanding how electoral system reforms shape representation outcomes and democratic legitimacy in contexts characterised by institutional change and political volatility

All these elements of the electoral system, in relation to each other, are indicators of the level of representation of citizens in parliament and at the same time indicators of the level of representation and internal democracy of political parties.

Literature Review

As I mentioned in the previous section, the study of the voting behavior of the electorate is important to predict the expected results of the elections, studies that are mostly of interest to political parties, which create their future projections based on past results. The political context of political parties and governance in Albania, during the period under study (2017 - 2025) has encountered many dynamics, which have also been reflected in changes in the electoral code. Considering that the changes to the electoral code require a qualified majority of votes, they have required a broad political consensus of the majority and the opposition. This fact is worth understanding that in the face of political developments in Albania, the trend of the voting behavior of

the electorate has become increasingly difficult to read; consequently, it is also difficult for political parties to make their projections for the upcoming elections.

Traditionally, the electorate in Albania has been mainly positioned, voting left or right, and only a small part of it has been the gray electorate, or unpositioned. Some of the developments that have furthered these tendencies have been the creation of the "Socialist Movement for Integration" party, which had the characteristics of an electoral party, i.e., a catch-all party, which goes beyond the ideological differences of left/right. As such, it has formed pre- and post-electoral coalitions while in government, and has continuously "swept" the electorate from both the left and the right; The creation of new parties and the increase in their representation, especially in the 2021 and 2025 parliamentary elections, are another important development that has changed the voting behavior of the electorate in Albania; The elections held in 2021 and 2025 have resulted in the winning of Socialist Party, leading it to its third and fourth winning mandates. These two results have created a new precedent beyond expectations, if we refer to the tradition that every 8 years, that is, every 2 governing mandates, there was a rotation of power.

In the elections of 2017, the LIBRA party also participated for the first time, which did not receive a mandate, with 19,806 votes in total or 1.25% of the votes at the national level. If this result had been obtained in 2021, i.e., with a different electoral formula, it would have secured 1-2 mandates. Meanwhile, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) won one parliamentary mandate, although at the national level it reached 14,993 votes or 0.95% of the votes at the national level. The Justice, Integration and Unity Party managed to win three parliamentary mandates, receiving at the national level 4.81% of the votes or 76,069 votes. The New Democratic Spirit Party won 0.33% of the votes. This is a concrete example of how the electoral system becomes less representative of a larger number of votes.

In the 2021 elections, the Regional Proportional system will remain, but we now **have a threshold of 1% for Entities that, regardless of the election result in the region, cannot receive deputies if they do not score 1% of the total votes at the national level. The system is also with open lists** where the condition is the vote for the individual in numerically non-winning positions of the entity. This individual must receive more votes than the party's quota for a candidate in that region, to move a candidate with a low ranking according to the number of votes to the winning list. The quotient **is the average created by dividing the party's votes in the region by the number of mandates that the party wins**. This quotient cannot be more than 10,000 votes. A candidate who is listed as the winner due to exceeding the quotient cannot qualify a candidate from the most underrepresented gender

group. So **a male candidate cannot knock a female candidate out of the running**.

In the 2021 elections, about 10 percent, or 62,589 votes, of the Democratic Party's "Alliance for Change" coalition were brought by 13 allied parties. Of the 153 candidates on the PD- AN coalition list, 24 candidates were from allied parties, and 129 were from the PD. Only 7 candidates from allied parties won seats in the Assembly. In the 2017 elections, votes for these parties could not be used on a list with the PD and then there was no voting for candidates.

Legal Framework

The basic legislation regulating elections in Albania is the Constitution, Law No. 10 019, dated 29.12.2008, the Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania (with amendments reflected in parliamentary elections of 2017, 2021, 2025); Law No. 8580, dated 17.02.2000 "On Political Parties". The main articles of the Electoral Code that have been amended are exactly those that explain how the electoral formula for parliamentary elections functions:

- Article 67: List of candidates of parties and party coalitions (amended in 2015, in 2020 and in 2025)
- Article 74: Electoral Zone for the Parliament
- Article 75: Criteria and procedure for determining the number of mandates
- Article 162: Calculation of mandates of electoral subjects (amended in 2020 and in 2024)
- Article 163: Distribution of mandates within the coalition/ Article 163: Distribution of mandates for the winning candidates of the list (amended in 2020)/ Article 163: Distribution of mandates for the winning candidates of the list (amended again in 2024)

Electoral Systems and Political Representation

Electoral systems are widely recognised as one of the most influential institutional variables shaping democratic representation. By determining how votes are converted into parliamentary seats, electoral rules affect party systems, candidate behaviour, voter participation, and perceptions of fairness (Farrell, 2011; Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). Comparative scholarship has demonstrated that no electoral system is neutral: the choice of any electoral system entails trade-offs between representativeness, governance, accountability, and simplicity.

Proportional representation systems, which Albania has consistently adopted since the post-communist transition, are generally associated with higher levels of inclusiveness and descriptive representation. They tend to

facilitate the parliamentary presence of smaller parties and underrepresented groups, particularly women and minorities. However, proportional systems also vary considerably in their internal mechanics. Differences in district magnitude, electoral thresholds, and list structures can significantly alter political outcomes even within the same family of systems (Katz, 1997).

Preferential Voting, List Structures, and Candidate Incentives

A considerable number of studies examine the effects of preferential voting and candidate- list structures on political behaviour. Carey and Shugart (1995) argue that electoral systems allowing voters to influence candidate ranking create incentives for personal vote-seeking, encouraging candidates to cultivate individual reputations rather than relying solely on party platforms. While this may increase voter engagement and accountability, it can also weaken party cohesion and blur programmatic distinctions.

Open and semi-open list systems have been found to enhance voters' sense of choice but at the cost of increased electoral complexity (Farrell & McAllister, 2006). In transitional democracies, where political trust is often fragile, complex voting mechanisms may generate confusion and uneven participation. Research suggests that when voters do not fully understand how their preferences translate into seats, confidence in the electoral process may decline (Norris, 2011).

The Albanian experience reflects many of these dynamics. Reforms that introduced or modified preferential voting were aimed at strengthening voters' influence over candidate selection. However, the literature warns that without clear institutional protections and voter education, preferential systems may produce unintended distortions in representation.

Gender Quotas and Descriptive Representation

Gender quotas have become a central component of electoral reform strategies aimed at improving descriptive representation. Extensive research confirms that quotas are effective in increasing the number of women elected to parliament, particularly in proportional representation systems (Krook, 2009). However, the interaction between quotas and preferential voting mechanisms is complex.

Studies indicate that when the implementation of quotas overestimates voter preferences or list rankings, tensions may arise between legal equality objectives and democratic choice (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010). Such tensions raise normative questions about representation, legitimacy, and the balance between equality of outcomes and electoral autonomy.

In Albania, gender quotas have been progressively strengthened across electoral cycles. While women's representation has increased, scholars note that the implementation of quotas within changing electoral frameworks

requires careful evaluation to ensure that formal compliance translates into substantive political empowerment.

Electoral Reform, Stability, and Democratic Trust

Beyond representation outcomes, electoral reform literature emphasises the importance of stability and predictability. Frequent changes to electoral rules may undermine democratic consolidation by creating uncertainty for political actors and voters alike (Katz, 1997). Norris (2011) argues that electoral systems perceived as inconsistent or strategically manipulated can contribute to declining trust in democratic institutions and reduced political participation.

Comparative studies highlight that transitional democracies face particular risks in this regard. While reform is often necessary to address systemic weaknesses, repeated institutional redesign without sufficient evaluation may weaken rather than strengthen democratic legitimacy.

Research Gap and Contribution

While international scholarship provides robust insights into the effects of electoral systems, empirical studies focusing on Albania have remained limited in comparative scope. Existing research tends to examine individual election cycles or broader political developments, offering less systematic analysis of how successive electoral reforms reshape representation over time.

This paper addresses this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the **2017, 2021, and 2025 parliamentary elections in Albania**, focusing on changes in candidate ranking, preferential voting, gender quota implementation, and seat allocation. By situating empirical findings within established electoral system theory, the study contributes to broader debates on electoral engineering and political representation in transitional democracies.

Research Methodology
Research Design

This study adopts a **comparative case-study design** to examine the effects of electoral system reforms on political representation in Albania. The research focuses on three consecutive parliamentary elections: **2017, 2021, and 2025**, which were conducted under different electoral arrangements. This temporal comparison allows for an assessment of how successive institutional changes reshape representation outcomes over time.

A comparative approach is particularly suitable for analysing electoral reforms in transitional democracies, where institutional frameworks are frequently modified in response to political, legal, and international pressures.

By examining multiple election cycles within the same national context, the study controls for broader socio-political factors while isolating the impact of electoral system design.

Data Sources

The analysis draws on **multiple data sources** to ensure robustness and triangulation:

1. **Official electoral results** published by the Central Election Commission of Albania, including vote totals, seat allocation, candidate rankings, and regional outcomes.
2. **Electoral legislation and legal amendments** governing the parliamentary elections of 2017, 2021, and 2025, with particular attention to changes in preferential voting rules, list structures, and gender quota enforcement.
3. **Secondary data** from institutional reports and prior academic studies addressing electoral reform and political representation in Albania. The data are public official data, published on the website of the CEC (Central Election Commission), available at www.kqz.gov.al.

These sources provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence necessary for assessing representation outcomes and institutional change.

Analytical Framework

The analysis focuses on four key dimensions of political representation that are consistently highlighted in electoral system literature:

- **Vote-to-seat proportionality**, examining how effectively votes are translated into parliamentary mandates across election cycles; the difficulty of representing new parties with a low number of votes; and the minimum number of votes to ensure a mandate.
- **Candidate selection mechanisms**, with particular attention to the role of preferential voting and list ranking;
- **Gender representation**, analysing the impact of quota implementation on women's parliamentary presence;
- **Regional representation**, assessing variations across electoral districts. Is exactly in the region where mandates are calculated as per the regional proportional electoral system.

Comparative descriptive analysis is employed to identify patterns and shifts across elections. While the study does not seek causal inference in a statistical sense, it aims to provide a systematic and theory-informed interpretation of observed changes. A comparison of how these indicators, for each of the parliamentary elections, affect the level of citizen representation in politics and parliament, based on the theoretical framework for democracy, representation, and electoral systems.

Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, the analysis relies on aggregate electoral data, which constrains the ability to capture individual voter motivations. Second, the 2025 election data are analysed as preliminary outcomes, given the recency of the electoral cycle. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on parliamentary elections and does not address local or presidential contests.

Despite these limitations, the methodological approach offers a coherent and empirically grounded framework for evaluating the impact of electoral reforms on political representation in Albania.

Main Results

This section presents the comparative findings from the Albanian parliamentary elections of **2017, 2021, and 2025**, focusing on how changes in electoral rules have affected political representation. The results are organised around four analytical dimensions: vote–seat proportionality, candidate selection mechanisms, gender representation, and regional representation.

Voter turnout for the 2017, 2021, 2025 parliamentary elections
At the national level:

Voters turnout						Differences on Voters turnout					
2017		2021		2025		2017-2021		2021-2025		2017-2025	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1 613 819	46.75	1 662 274	46.33	1 463 064	42.25	48 455	3.00%	-199 210	-11.98%	-150 755	-9.34%

The table shows that in the last two elections, the difference in participation, i.e. the number of voters who participated in the previous elections and who did not participate in the following elections, is almost 10%. In other words, we have 10% less representation of voters in the subsequent parliamentary elections.

For the Vlora Region, in the absence of data for the 2017 parliamentary elections, I will present data only for the 2021 and 2025 elections:

	Voters turnout				Differences on voters turnout	
	2021		2025		2021-2025	
Municipality	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Delvine	5279	35.56	4542	33.36	-737	**-13.96%**
Finiq	4253	14.06	4272	14.1	19	**0.45%**
Himare	5882	25.76	6462	29.99	580	**9.86%**
Konispol	4194	36.98	4151	38.36	-43	**-1.03%**
Sarande	15699	33.34	14840	32.09	-859	**-5.47%**
Selenice	10329	38.46	8289	33.25	-2040	**-19.75%**
Vlore	61028	37.08	51041	31.82	-9987	**-16.36%**
Total Region Vlore	**106 664**	**33.56**	**93 597**	**30.4**	**-13 067**	**-12.25%**

The decrease in voter turnout in the three following elections directly indicates **a decrease in the level of representation of citizens in parliament**. The difference in missing votes in the 2025 elections is 13,067, about 12.25% of the number of votes in 2021.

Parliamentary elections results for political parties, number of votes, % of votes and the number of mandates for each political party
Results for the parliamentary election of 2017

Parliamentary Elections of 2017			
Results at national Level			
Political Party	**No. of votes**	**% of votes**	**No. of mandates**
PS (Socialist Party)	764 791	48.34	74
PD (Democratic Party)	456 481	28.85	43
LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration)	225 975	14.28	19
PDIU	76 064	4.9	3
PSD	14 987	0.97	1
Total	**1 538 298**	**46.76**	**140**

Parliamentary Elections of 2017			
Results at Vlorë Region			
Political Party	**No. of votes**	**% of votes**	**No. of mandates**
PS (Socialist Party)	65 684	60.31	8
PD (Democratic Party)	23 207	21.31	4
LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration)	12 246	11.24	0
PDIU	3 608	3.31	0
PSD	64	0.06	0
Total	**104 809**	**33.56**	**12**

Results for the parliamentary election of 2021

Parliamentary Elections of 2021			
Results at national Level			
Political Party	**No. of votes**	**% of votes**	**No. of mandates**
PS (Socialist Party)	768 134	48.67	74
PD (Coalition "Alliance for change")	622 187	39.43	59
LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration)	107 538	6.81	4
PSD	35 475	2.25	3
Party Nisma Thurje	10 217	0.65	0
Bindja Demokratike	8 239	0.52	0
Total	**1 662 274**	**46.33**	**140**

Parliamentary Elections of 2021			
Results at Vlorë Region			
Political Party	No. of votes	% of votes	No. of mandates
PS (Socialist Party)	34 769	59.36	8
PD (Coalition "Alliance for change")	17 651	30.14	4
LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration)	2 907	4.96	0
PSD	413	0.71	0
Party Nisma Thurje	388	0.66	0
Bindja Demokratike	1 431	2.44	0
Total	106 664	33.56	12

In the 2021 elections, the Socialist Party has a decrease in the number of votes compared to 2017, by about 31,000 votes, but which in relation to the total number of votes in the region occupies more or less the same weight, about 60%, with a difference of 1%, and which has guaranteed the Socialist Party 8 mandates in both cases. Meanwhile, in the 2025 parliamentary elections, the SP received in nominal value fewer votes than in 2017, about 1,100 votes less, almost the same % in relation to the total number of votes in the region, but which has provided the SP with 9 mandates, i.e., 1 mandate more.
- DP (2017): 23,207 votes, 21.31%, 4 mandates
- DP (2021): 17,651 votes, 30.14%, 4 mandates
- DP (2025): 26,162 votes, 24.49%, 3 mandates

In the case of the Democratic Party, it is noted that for the 2021 elections, compared to those of 2017, even though we have a lower number of votes, about 6,000 fewer votes, they occupy a higher % of the total number of votes at the regional level and have provided the DP with the same number of mandates, i.e. 4 mandates. While in the case of the 2025 parliamentary elections, even though the DP has secured more votes than in the 2017 elections, about 3,000 more votes, a higher % of the total number of votes at the regional level, about 3%, it has lost 1 mandate.

If we were to do this analysis at a national level, it would be difficult to compare the number of votes for the Democratic Party, since it entered the elections with a coalition, and allied parties also contribute there. Also, in the 2025 elections, this becomes even more difficult since candidates from allied parties have also been placed on the fixed coalition lists, which are not directly voted for.

Results for the parliamentary election of 2025

Parliamentary Elections of 2025			
Results at national Level			
Political Party	No. of votes	% of votes	No. of mandates
PS (Socialist Party)	855 831	53.29	83
PD (Coalition Ally for Greater Albania)	528 592	32.91	50
Nisma dhe Shqiperia Behet (Coalition)	64 212	4	1
Levizja Bashke	24 547	1.53	1
Partia Mundesia	48 952	3.05	2
PSD	49 865	3.1	3
Total	**1 463 064**	**42.25**	**140**

Parliamentary Elections of 2025			
Results at Vlorë Region			
Political Party	No. of votes	% of votes	No. of mandates
PS (Socialist Party)	64 560	60.44%	9
PD(Coalition Ally for Greater Albania)	26 162	24.49	3
Nisma dhe Shqipëria Bëhet (Coalition)	6 267	5.87	0
Lëvizja Bashkë	1 327	1.24	0
Partia Mundësia	5 354	5.01	0
PSD	1 497	1.4	0
Total	**93 597**	**30.4**	**12**

From the comparison of the data**,** it **results that:**

In the last two elections, 2021 and 2025, at the national level, we have a significant change in the number of votes and mandates received by the LSI, the third largest party in Albania in 2017. The SMI, out of 19 mandates at the national level, lost 15 mandates in the 2021 elections. In the 2025 elections, the SMI had changed its name to the Freedom Party and entered the elections as part of the "Alliance for Greater Albania" coalition, led by the PD (Democratic Party), and managed to receive only 26,672 votes, and was represented with only 4 mandates from the safe lists.

In the context of the Vlore region, for the 2017 elections, the mandates are divided only between the two main parties, the SP and the DP, this is also influenced by the typology of the region, as a region with mainly positioned electorates, which votes mainly to the left, or mainly to the right, and has few or no undecided electorates.

If we compare the number of votes and mandates that a political party received in the 2017 elections with the number of votes and mandates it received in the 2021 elections, they are in an inverse ratio, specifically:
At the level of the Vlore Region:
- SP (2017): 65,684 votes, 60.31%, 8 mandates
- SP (2021): 34,769 votes, 59.36%, 8 mandates
- SP (2025): 64,560 votes, 60.44%, 9 mandates

This analysis is clear at the regional level, because in the regional proportional system, the mandates are issued at the regional level, while at the national level, this difference is not clear, since, as a total number of votes, the votes of candidates who were not elected as deputies. So, at the national level, the votes that were not represented with deputy mandates in parliament are also counted as a number of votes.

Ranking of candidates on the list and number of mandates for the 2 major parties, SP and DP
Parliamentary Elections of 2017

Parliamentary Elections of 2017						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of Socialist Party	No.in List	Name and Surname of candidates	Gender	Total No. of Votes (Political Party)	Total Votes % (Political Party)	Mandated DEPUTY
The ranking has importance	1	Damian Gjiknuri	M	65 684	60.31	Yes
	2	Vilma Bello	F			
	3	Alket Hyseni	M			
	4	Vullnet Sinaj	M			
	5	Andrea Marto	M			
	6	Edi Rama	M			
	7	Edmond Leka	M			
	8	Fatmir Velaj	M			
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					

Parliamentary Elections of 2017						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of Democratic Party	No. in List	Name and Surname of candidates	Gender	Total No. of Votes (Political Party)	Total Votes % (Political Party)	Mandated DEPUTY
The ranking has importance	1	Agron Shehaj	M	23 207	21.31	Yes
	2	Nadire Mecorapaj	F			
	3	Vangjel Dule	M			
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					

Parliamentary Elections of 2017						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of LSI party	No.in List	Name and Surname of candidates	Gender	Total No. of Votes (Political Party)	Total Votes % (Political Party)	Mandated DEPUTY
The ranking has importance	1	Sezai Rrokaj	M	12 246	11.24	Po
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					

In the 2017 parliamentary elections, an unbalanced gender ratio of mandated deputies was observed. This gender underrepresentation of women was compensated for by political parties only at the end of the multi-member list, with candidates who could not be represented in parliament. This is particularly evident in the list of deputies of the Socialist Party, where the number of deputies is higher.

In the 2017 parliamentary elections, the number of votes is calculated for political entities, and not for candidates. So, it is the ranking on the list that directly determines who will be a deputy (winning candidate), regardless of gender. Also, the contribution of each candidate to the total number of votes is immeasurable in nominal votes, since voting is only for the political entity.

Parliamentary Elections of 2021

Parliamentary Elections of 2021						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of Socialist Party	Ranking by no.of votes	Name and Surname of candidates	No. in List	Gender	No. of personal votes	Mandated DEPUTY
The ranking, quotient, gender and preferencial vote have importance.	1	Edi Rama	8	M	11 412	Yes
	2	Anila Denaj	4	F	6 428	Yes
	3	Damian Gjiknuri	7	M	6 009	Yes
	4	Vullnet Sinaj	3	M	5 759	Yes
	5	Niko Kuri	5	M	4 409	Yes
	6	Ilir Metaj	6	M	3 683	Yes
	7	Pranvera Resulaj	1	F	2 919	Yes
	8	Anduel Tahiraj	2	M	2 542	Yes

	9	Teuta Rama	9	F		Yes
	10					
	11					
	12					

Parliamentary Elections of 2021						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of Democratic Party	Ranking by no.of votes	Name and Surname of candidates	No. in List	Gender	No. of personal votes	Mandated DEPUTY
The ranking, quotient, gender and preferencial vote have importance.	1	Bujar Leskaj	1	M	5 254	Yes
	2	Fation Veizaj	3	M	3 551	Yes
	3	Ina Zhupa	2	F	3 511	Yes
	4	Arbi Agalliu	4	M	1 484	Yes
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, there seems to be an increase in the representation of the less represented gender (women), due to the provisions of the electoral code. The ranking of candidates on the party list is important for determining the winning deputies. Although voting is done for both the political party and the candidates (provided that the candidate voted for is from the same political party), in practice, the number of preferential votes of each candidate has no value in changing the result. The number of votes is valid only for the candidates ranked below the winning list, which, when they pass/break the quotient, change the ranking of the winner.

Another feature of the 2021 parliamentary elections is the candidacy of political party leaders in more than one electoral zone. The case of the Vlora region is a typical case, where the leader of the Socialist Party of Albania ran in the Vlora and Durres regions, and chose to become an MP in the Durres region, thus leaving the mandate to the candidate ranked 9th on the list.

In both elections, 2017 and 2021, the ranking of candidates on the list with more than the expected number of deputies from each party is more a fulfillment of a legal obligation foreseen by the code, than a matter of selection or representation. So, if we refer to the Vlora region, each party has 12 candidates on the list, while the Socialist Party has always aimed for between 7-9 mandates, and the Democratic Party 4-5 mandates.

Also in the 2021 elections, it is noted that the difference in the number of preferential votes of candidates between the two main parties, the Socialist

Party and the Democratic Party, is noticeable. The eighth deputy of the Socialist Party has collected about 1000 more votes than the fourth deputy of the Democratic Party.

Parliamentary Elections of 2025

List of Socialist Party	Ranking by no.of votes	Name and Surname of candidates	Ranking by no.of votes	Gender	No. of personal votes	Mandated DEPUTY
Fixed List	1	Bledi Cuci	1	M		Yes
	2	Zamira Sinaj	2	F		Yes
	3	Erjona Ismaili	3	F		Yes
	4	Pirro Vengu	4	M		Yes
Open List (preferencial vote for each candidate)	5	Damian Gjiknuri	4	M	12 408	Yes
	6	Vullnet Sinaj	11	M	10 941	Yes
	7	Ardit Bido	2	M	9 212	Yes
	8	Vasil Llajo	7	M	6 203	Yes
	9	Bruna Mersini	9	F	5 538	Yes
	10	Klevis Kaso	6	M	5 288	No
	11	Briseida Cakerri	3	F	2 998	Yes
	12	Evis Allushaj	1	F	2446	No
	13	Gjergji Merkuri	10	M	1990	No
	14	Endri Hyseni	5	M	1739	No
	15	Mjaftesa Sulaj	12	F	844	No
	16	Ina Majko	8	F	588	No

Parliamentary Elections of 2025						
Results at Vlorë Region						
List of Democratic Party	Ranking by no.of votes	Name and Surname of candidates	Ranking by no.of votes	Gender	No. of personal votes	Mandated DEPUTY
Fixed List	1	Bujar Leskaj	1	M		Yes
	2	Vangjel Dule	2	M		Yes
	3	Ina Zhupa	3	F		Yes
	4	Atird Hoxha	4			No
Open List (preferencial vote for each candidate)	5	Petraq Gjikuria	3		3982	
	6	Artan Licaj	6		3553	
	7	Matilda Qurku	11		3006	
	8	Nada Daullja	1		2581	
	9	Alta Azizi	4		1778	
	10	Mario Runa	12		1627	
	11	Edmond Fetahu	2		1510	
	12	Romarjo Meminaj	7		1373	
	13	Selaudin Neloj	10		882	
	14	Ridvan Mersinaj	8		858	
	15	Skender Muco	9		854	
	16	Monika Hoshafi	5		584	

In the 2025 parliamentary elections, the concept of two lists provided for by the electoral code created an inequality within the list of candidates; the

candidates on the fixed list were deputies a priori, so they did not need to "work" to secure nominal votes. But this only applies to the winning party, as in the case of the Socialist Party, since for the Democratic Party, in the Vlora region, the last candidate on the fixed list failed to secure his mandate. The loss in this case is charged to the political party because it is due to the number of votes the latter receives, since the candidates on the fixed list are not voted for directly.

Another innovation that comes with the provisions of the new electoral code is the gender advantage that is created in relation to the number of votes won by candidates for deputies. Specifically, in the Socialist Party list of the Vlora region, the candidate ranked 6th in the multi-name list, with a number of preferential (personal) votes of 5288, lost the mandate to the female candidate of the open list, with a number of preferential (personal) votes of 2998, i.e., about 2000 votes less.

Also, for the 2025 parliamentary elections, it is noted that with a difference of 1000 fewer votes, if you are a candidate of the winning party's open list, you are more likely to become an MP than a candidate of a non-winning party, even if you have received more votes. Specifically, in the Vlora region, if we compare the number of preferential (personal) votes of the Democratic Party candidate who has received the highest number of votes, around 3982, with the number of votes of the last Socialist Party candidate from the open list, around 2998 votes, i.e. 1000 more votes, the DP candidate has not been mandated, while the SP candidate has been mandated as an MP.

Regarding the representation of small parties, the lowering of the threshold in the 2021 and 2025 elections has been reflected in the representation in parliament of several new parties, and this is a good indicator of the increase in the representation of votes and the will of citizens in parliament, at the national level.

Vote–Seat Proportionality

Analysis of electoral outcomes across the three election cycles reveals variations in the degree to which votes were translated into parliamentary seats. While the proportional representation framework remained formally consistent, adjustments to electoral thresholds, district magnitudes, and seat allocation formulas produced measurable differences in representation outcomes.

In the 2017 elections, vote–seat proportionality was relatively stable, with larger parties benefiting from district-level dynamics that marginalised smaller political actors. Subsequent reforms introduced ahead of the 2021 elections sought to improve proportionality and enhance voter influence. However, the results indicate that these changes generated uneven effects across districts, occasionally amplifying disparities rather than reducing them.

Preliminary data from the 2025 elections suggest that while proportionality improved in some regions, inconsistencies persisted at the national level. These findings align with comparative literature indicating that proportional representation systems remain sensitive to institutional fine-tuning and district-level implementation (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005).

Candidate Selection and Preferential Voting

One of the most significant changes across the analysed election cycles concerns **candidate selection mechanisms**, particularly the expansion and modification of preferential voting rules. Reforms were introduced with the stated objective of increasing voter choice and strengthening accountability by allowing voters to influence candidate ranking within party lists.

The results demonstrate that preferential voting altered candidate incentives, encouraging greater individual campaigning and personal vote-seeking behaviour. In several districts, candidates positioned lower on party lists succeeded in surpassing higher-ranked candidates through preferential votes, confirming theoretical expectations outlined by Carey and Shugart (1995).

However, the data also reveal uneven utilisation of preferential voting across regions. In districts with lower voter awareness or higher ballot complexity, preferential voting was less frequently exercised, limiting its intended impact. This uneven engagement suggests that institutional reforms alone are insufficient without complementary voter education and administrative clarity.

Gender Representation and Quota Implementation

Gender representation improved incrementally across the three election cycles, reflecting the strengthening of gender quota regulations. The proportion of women elected to parliament increased in both 2021 and 2025 compared to 2017, indicating formal compliance with quota requirements.

Nevertheless, the interaction between gender quotas and preferential voting produced mixed outcomes. In some cases, female candidates who received substantial preferential support were re-ranked below their male counterparts due to list restructuring mechanisms required to meet quota thresholds. These outcomes illustrate the normative tension between voter choice and legal enforcement highlighted in existing literature (Krook, 2009).

While quotas have enhanced descriptive representation, the findings suggest that their effectiveness depends heavily on alignment with broader electoral system design.

Regional Representation

The comparative analysis also reveals persistent disparities in regional representation. Urban districts, characterised by higher voter turnout and stronger party organisation, exhibited greater engagement with preferential voting mechanisms. In contrast, rural and peripheral regions showed more limited voter participation in candidate ranking, reinforcing existing inequalities in political influence.

These regional variations remained consistent across election cycles, despite reforms aimed at harmonising representation. The findings suggest that electoral system changes alone cannot address deeper structural inequalities related to socio-economic conditions, political mobilisation, and institutional capacity.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the results indicate that electoral reforms in Albania have produced **partial and uneven improvements** in political representation. While reforms enhanced voter choice and increased women's parliamentary presence, they also introduced new complexities and inconsistencies. The cumulative effect of successive reforms appears to have increased the technical sophistication of the electoral system without fully resolving challenges related to transparency, proportionality, and equality of representation.

These findings underscore the importance of evaluating electoral reforms not only in terms of legal design but also in relation to voter behaviour, institutional capacity, and contextual constraints.

Discussion of Results

The findings of this study provide important insights into the relationship between electoral system reform and political representation in a transitional democratic context. By comparing the Albanian parliamentary elections of 2017, 2021, and 2025, the analysis demonstrates that electoral reforms have generated both intended and unintended consequences, reinforcing the central argument of electoral system literature that institutional design matters deeply for democratic outcomes.

All the results presented above confirm the different configuration of the results and of the will of the citizens as a result, due to the electoral system. Different systems bring different consequences. The same number of votes does not produce the same elected person, in both cases (Denquin, 2016, pg. 105). The ratio of vote representation to the number of mandates in parliament due to changes in the electoral code is a factor that encourages different behaviors among the electorate. Knowing these changes and studying their effects helps citizens understand how their will is represented in parliament,

but it also helps political parties to become aware of their function in relation to the electoral process. Political parties that amend the electoral code every time to optimize representation in parliament are faced with the ever-decreasing number of citizens participating in the elections. If the challenge of political parties were to increase citizen participation in the elections, it would be more efficient, more democratic and would make the representation of citizens more legitimate than any kind of "magic formula" that increases the number of mandates even when the number of those who vote decreases. The decline in citizen participation in elections comes as a response to the decline in their real representation in politics, and consequently, the loss of interest in politics.

In the 2025 parliamentary elections, the differentiation of candidates into two lists, the fixed list and the open list, in which candidates are voted for with preferential votes, is an indicator of the lack of fair representation of the will of citizens, even when they are a numerical majority. So, due to the electoral formula, there is a "majority will" that is not represented in parliament, facing a "minority will" that is promoted by the electoral formula. Another differentiation has to do with the fact that the candidates of each party are appointed by the party leaders and are not selected by any criteria or voting procedure within the party. This is true for all political parties, whether for the SP or the DP.

Electoral Reform and Representation: Incremental Change, Persistent Challenges

The results confirm that reforms aimed at enhancing voter choice and inclusiveness—particularly through preferential voting and strengthened gender quotas—have produced **incremental improvements** rather than transformative change. While voter influence over candidate selection increased in certain districts, these effects were uneven and highly dependent on regional contexts, voter awareness, and party organisation.

This finding supports comparative research suggesting that electoral reforms often yield **context-contingent outcomes** rather than uniform effects (Farrell, 2011; Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). In Albania, the persistence of disproportional outcomes despite formal proportional representation highlights how technical adjustments alone cannot fully address deeper structural and political inequalities.

Preferential Voting: Empowerment or Complexity?

Preferential voting emerged as a double-edged mechanism. On one hand, it enhanced accountability by allowing voters to influence candidate ranking, aligning with theoretical expectations that personal vote incentives can strengthen voter–representative links (Carey & Shugart, 1995). On the

other hand, the uneven use of preferential voting across districts indicates that increased electoral complexity may limit its democratic potential.

This tension echoes broader concerns in the literature that more sophisticated electoral mechanisms can inadvertently disadvantage voters with lower access to information or weaker political mobilisation (Norris, 2011). In this sense, preferential voting in Albania has empowered some voters while leaving others effectively excluded from its benefits.

Gender Quotas and Normative Tensions

The interaction between gender quotas and preferential voting illustrates a key normative dilemma in electoral design. While quotas have succeeded in increasing women's parliamentary representation, their implementation occasionally conflicted with voter preferences, leading to re-ranking outcomes that appeared counterintuitive to electoral choice.

This finding aligns with existing scholarship highlighting the trade-offs between **descriptive representation** and **procedural legitimacy** (Krook, 2009). Rather than undermining the value of quotas, the Albanian case underscores the need for careful system design that harmonises equality objectives with transparent and comprehensible electoral rules.

Stability, Trust, and Democratic Legitimacy

An important implication of the findings concerns the cumulative effect of **frequent electoral reforms**. While reform is often justified as a means of improving representation, repeated changes may also generate uncertainty and weaken voter trust. The Albanian experience suggests that successive reforms, introduced without sufficient consolidation or evaluation, risk creating perceptions of instability and strategic manipulation.

This observation supports Katz's (1997) argument that institutional stability is a critical but often underestimated dimension of democratic legitimacy. In transitional democracies, where trust in institutions is already fragile, the balance between reform and stability becomes particularly delicate.

Contribution to Comparative Electoral Studies

By examining three consecutive election cycles within the same national context, this study contributes to comparative electoral research in several ways. First, it demonstrates how the effects of electoral reforms evolve over time rather than in isolation. Second, it highlights the interaction between multiple reform components—preferential voting, quotas, and seat allocation—rather than treating them as independent variables. Finally, it offers empirical evidence from a less-studied European context, enriching the

comparative understanding of electoral engineering in transitional democracies.

Conclusions

At the conclusion of the analysis of this study, the aim is not to discuss the best model(s) of electoral systems, but an attempt to reflect on the degree of participation of the electorate in elections and to read its abstention behavior after each election.

This paper has examined the impact of electoral system reforms on political representation in Albania through a comparative analysis of the parliamentary elections of 2017, 2021, and 2025. By focusing on vote–seat proportionality, candidate selection mechanisms, gender representation, and regional disparities, the study has provided a systematic assessment of how successive institutional changes shape democratic outcomes in a transitional context.

The findings demonstrate that electoral reforms in Albania have produced **partial and uneven improvements** in representation. While measures such as preferential voting and strengthened gender quotas have expanded voter choice and increased women's parliamentary presence, their effects have varied significantly across regions and electoral cycles. In several cases, reforms introduced new complexities that limited transparency and generated inconsistencies in representation outcomes.

From a broader perspective, the study underscores that electoral system design cannot be evaluated solely on normative intentions or legal frameworks. The Albanian case illustrates how institutional reforms interact with voter behaviour, party organisation, administrative capacity, and socio-political context. Without adequate consolidation, voter education, and institutional support, electoral reforms risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than correcting them.

The paper contributes to comparative electoral studies by highlighting the importance of analysing **cumulative reform effects** over time. Rather than treating electoral reforms as isolated interventions, the findings suggest the need for longitudinal evaluation that considers stability, coherence, and democratic trust as key dimensions of representation. In transitional democracies, frequent changes to electoral rules may undermine legitimacy if reforms are not accompanied by transparency and consistent implementation.

Policy implications emerge clearly from the analysis. Future electoral reforms in Albania should prioritise institutional clarity, voter comprehension, and system stability, alongside inclusiveness and equality objectives. Harmonising preferential voting mechanisms with gender quota enforcement and strengthening voter education could enhance both procedural legitimacy and substantive representation.

Finally, while this study focuses on Albania, its implications extend beyond a single national case. Many transitional and consolidating democracies face similar tensions between reform, stability, and representation. By offering empirically grounded insights into these dynamics, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on electoral engineering and democratic consolidation and provides a foundation for future comparative research.

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