



## ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EU MEMBER STATES: AN EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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### ABSTRACT

The electoral system plays a significant role in various areas of the functioning of the states. Alongside this, there are areas, which can't be affected by the change in the electoral system or of the electoral system type. However, in Bulgaria, there is a debate on the introduction of the majority/plurality electoral system and one of the arguments is related to the possible overall positive effect on the functioning of the country.

Thus, the purpose of the current study is to identify if the electoral system is relevant for the development of the EU member states. The object of the study is the countries, members of the European Union, studied in 2018. Focus of the research is their electoral system and their development, measured on a number of indicators.

For the purposes of the analysis statistical methods (frequencies and cross tables) and comparative approach are used. The results show that the type of electoral system is not relevant for the development of EU member states, measured on the selected indicators.

**Key words:** elections, electoral systems, democracy, development

### INTRODUCTION

The electoral system plays a significant role in various areas of the functioning of the states. Among them is the party system, which is directly affected. There are also areas, which are influenced indirectly, namely political stability, the representation of various social groups (women, minority groups, etc.), economic development, etc. Alongside there are areas, which can't be affected by the change in the electoral system or of the electoral system type. However, in Bulgaria, there is a debate on the introduction of majority/plurality electoral system and one of the arguments is related to the possible overall positive effect on the functioning of the country.

Thus, the *purpose* of the current study is to identify if the electoral system is relevant for

the development of the EU member states. The *object* of the study are the countries, members of the European Union. The *focus* of the research is their electoral system and their development, measured on number of indicators in 2018.

For the purposes of the analysis data from the EIU Democracy Index, Human Development Index, Corruption Perceptions Index, The Worldwide Governance Indicators (Government Effectiveness and Political Stability and Absence of Violence) was used. The data was processed with statistical software SPSS, using the *methods* of frequencies and cross tables. Furthermore, the comparative *approach* was used.

### WHY DO COUNTRIES CHANGE THEIR ELECTORAL SYSTEMS?

The electoral system is related to various aspects of the functioning of the countries. The system for the election of members of the parliament directly influences the party system (1). Indirectly it affects political stability (2-4),

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representation of various social groups (5), economic growth and policies (6), etc.

However, it is significant to identify why the countries make transformations in their electoral rules or change their electoral system as a whole. The electoral engineering can be defined as the implementation of a small or significant change in the electoral rules to achieve certain goals by those making the changes.

As regards the circle of persons who benefit from electoral change, the goal of the electoral engineering can be of public interest, but also it can be an expression of private interests (personal, party, corporate, etc.). When implemented in the public interest the electoral engineering can be used to stabilize and optimize the socio-political environment. It can be applied to ensure political stability (7,8,9), to reduce ethnic tensions (10-12), and normalize the postwar environment (13, 14). There are also examples of electoral engineering, which aim to achieve a more balance between national and regional interests in bicameral parliaments (15), and even to optimize the electoral behavior of the youth (16).

In addition, there are studies that focus on electoral engineering as a negative phenomenon through which parties manipulate election results. Ahmed (17) calls this approach “party electoral engineering”. Very often political parties attempt to manipulate the electoral system to their own advantage and this is how the term electoral engineering is explained (18). Sometimes the electoral engineering provides authoritarian elites with a mechanism to control the results of the vote without having to commit frauds, which are hidden institutional arrangements. (19)

In the above examples, the changes are made on the basis of the expectation that when certain election rules are applied, they will lead to predictable desired results. However, the practice shows that not in all cases things go according to the plan and the desired effect is not achieved. Some authors present empirical evidence that the standard electoral engineering procedures do not always yield the expected result. This is valid both for the attempts of the political parties to win the elections (20) and for the attempts to optimize the functioning of a country (21, 22). Such results indicate that in addition to the set goal, the context also plays a significant role in the

results of the transformations realized through electoral engineering.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purposes of the study, a data file is created in IBM SPSS Statistics 23. It consists of the following variables:

- 1) Country – there are 28 countries included in the study (EU member states in 2018);
- 2) Type of electoral system – majority/plurality, proportional representation and mixed systems. For the type of electoral system of each country are used various sources – official institutional websites, ACE The Electoral Knowledge Network (23), Inter- Parliamentary Union (24), Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (25) and The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (26);
- 3) Overall score for democratic performance according to EIU Democracy Index 2018 (27);
- 4) Overall score for Human development index 2018 (28);
- 5) The result for the Corruption Perceptions Index for 2018 (29);
- 6) Assessment of government effectiveness for 2018, made by the World Bank (30);
- 7) Assessment of political stability and absence of violence for 2018, made by the World Bank (30);

In accordance with the number of cases only frequencies and cross tables were made, using the statistical software SPSS. Furthermore, comparative analysis was performed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the studied countries, there are 22, which implement proportional electoral systems. Four of the EU member states use mixed systems and these are Germany, Hungary, Italy and Lithuania. In 2018 there are only two countries in the EU, which use majority/plurality electoral systems, namely France and the United Kingdom. (**Figure 1**)

The results, presented on Figure 2 show that as concerns the assessment of the democracy in the countries no association with the type of electoral system can be identified. Both the most democratic country (Sweden) and the least democratic country (Romania) of the EU implement a proportional electoral system. Furthermore, both among the best performing and the worst performing countries, there are states with mixed electoral systems and these are Germany (8.68) and Hungary (6.63). Furthermore, the United Kingdom, which implements a plurality electoral system, has a result very close to the one of Germany. In addition, France has a result, which is close to the average. (**Figure 2**)

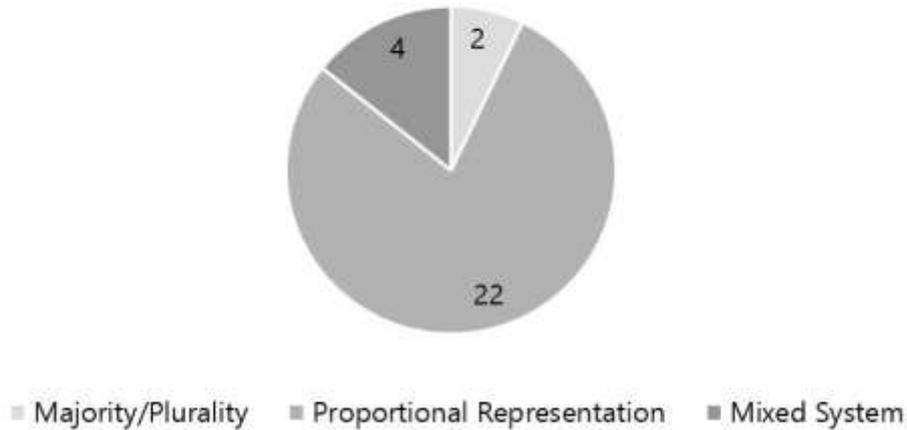


Figure 1. Share of electoral system types across EU member states, 2018

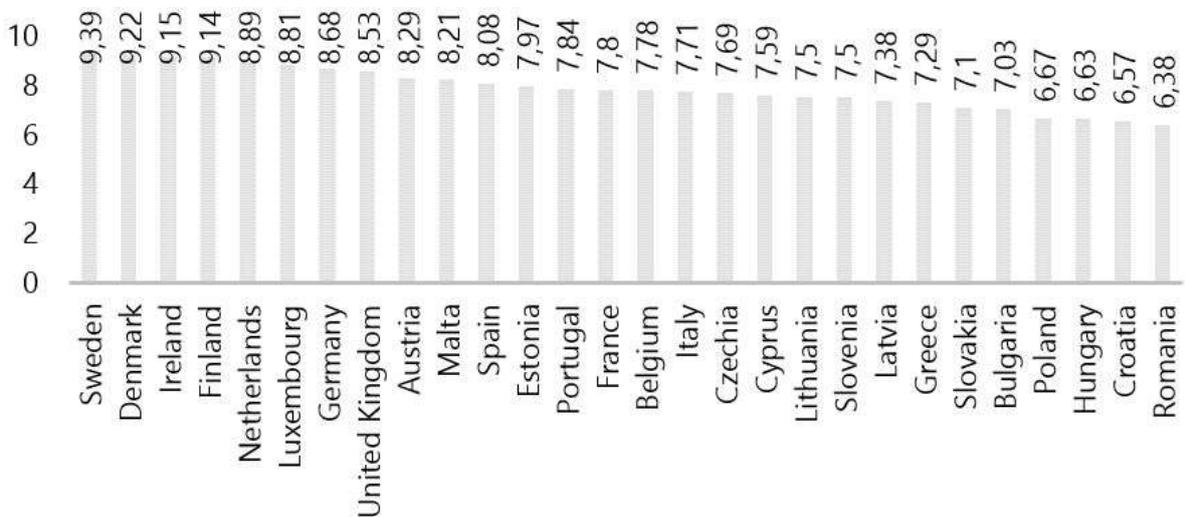


Figure 2. The overall score of EIU Democracy Index across EU member states, 2018

As concerns, the results for the Human Development Index, the countries with the highest score have a mixed electoral system (Germany) and a proportional electoral system (Ireland). The countries with the lowest score (Bulgaria and Romania), namely 0.81, use

proportional representation. Nevertheless, Hungary, which use a mixed system, has a result, close to their (0.84). France and the United Kingdom, which use majority/plurality systems, have results a little higher than the average. (Figure 3)

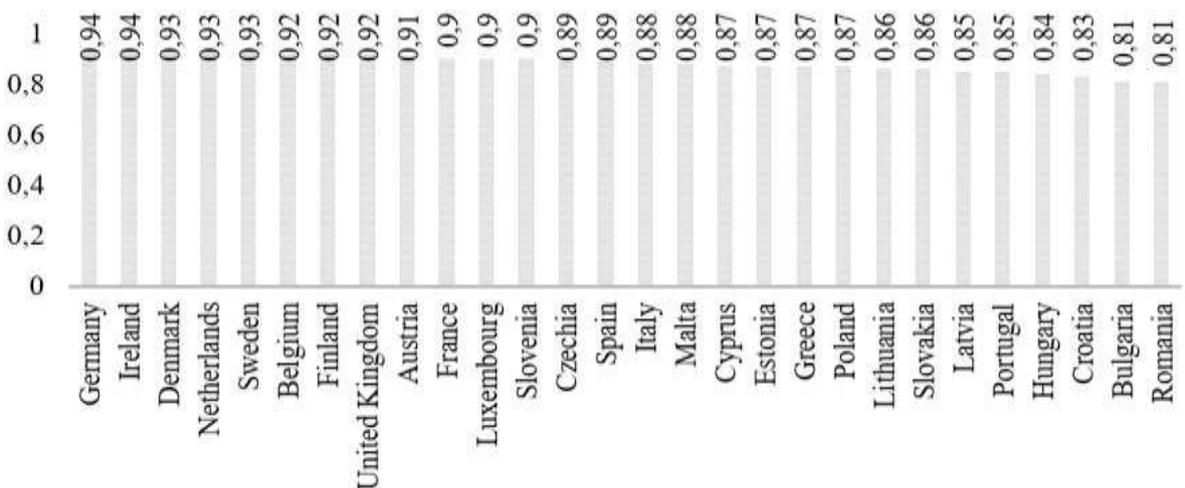


Figure 3. The overall score of Human Development Index across EU member states, 2018

The data on the perception of corruption, position Bulgaria (value 42) as the country with the highest level of corruption, and Denmark (value 88) as the country with the lowest level of corruption. Both countries have proportional electoral systems. It is interesting

that Luxembourg, Germany and the United Kingdom have almost the same result (around 80) and they have different electoral systems, respectively proportional, mixed and plurality. (Figure 4)

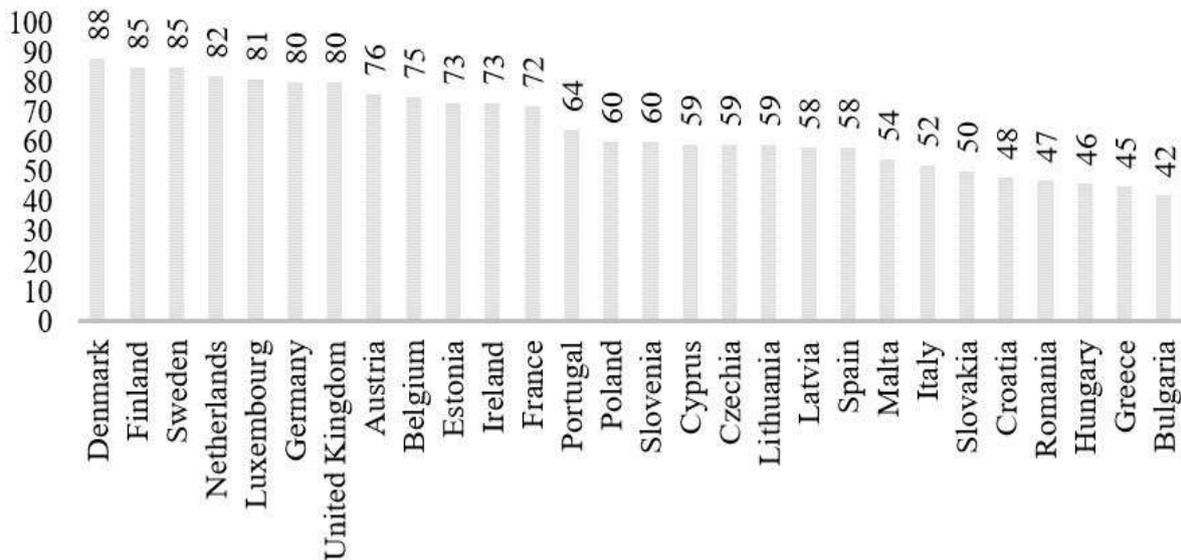


Figure 4. Corruption perception index across EU member states, 2018

The country with the most effective government (Finland; 1.98) and the one with the least effective (Romania; -0.25) both use proportional representation. Among the least performing countries are also Hungary (0.49) and Italy (0.41), which have mixed electoral

systems. Furthermore, Germany (1.62), France (1.48) and Austria (1.45) on one hand have close results, but on the other they have different electoral systems, respectively mixed, majority and proportional. (Figure 5)

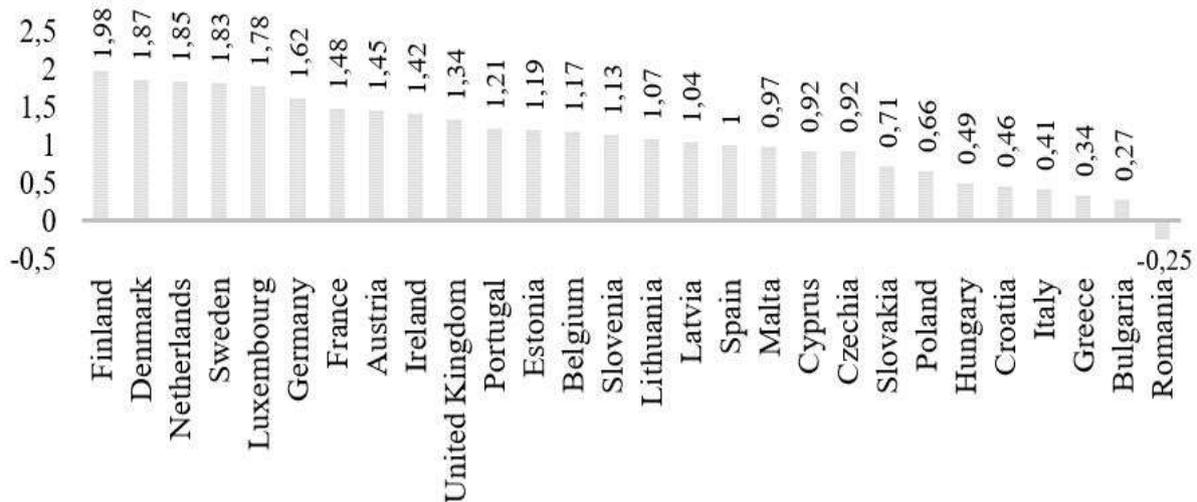
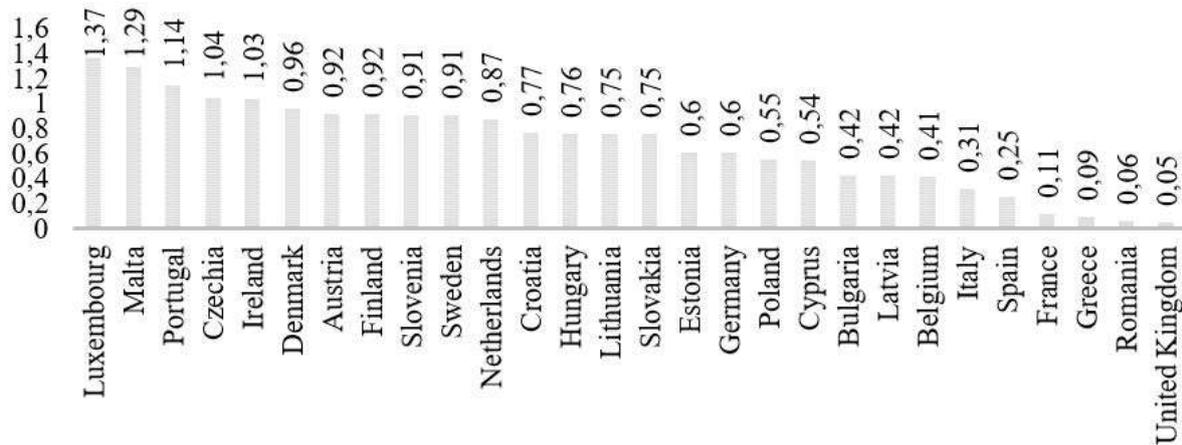


Figure 5. Government effectiveness across EU member states, 2018

The results on the political stability and absence of violence of the countries provide an interesting perspective on the stability. Traditionally it is believed that the countries with majority/plurality systems are the more stable ones. The empirical results for the EU

member states show that United Kingdom (plurality system) is the least stable country (0.05) and France (majority system) has a similar result (0.11). The first twelve most stable EU member states have proportional electoral systems. (Figure 6)



**Figure 6.** Political stability and absence of violence across EU member states, 2018

## CONCLUSION

In general, the electoral system is relevant for some basic elements of the political system. However, it can't affect various aspects of the socio-political development of the countries. The case of the EU member states very clearly demonstrates it. No clear association between the electoral system and the development of the countries on the studied indicators was identified. However, the results on the political stability show that in EU the least stable countries are the ones with majority/plurality systems. This interesting result needs a further investigation with more countries and in dynamics.

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