



**SOFIA UNIVERSITY 'ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI'**

**FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY**

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

**'THE DEMOCRATIC MASK OF POLITICAL  
ENGINEERING: AMENDMENTS IN ELECTORAL  
RULES IN BULGARIA (2009-2021)'**

**ABSTRACT**

of a doctoral dissertation in scientific field 3.3. Political Science  
- Bulgarian Political Process

**PhD Candidate**

Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva

**Academic Supervisor**

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Stoycho Stoychev

**Sofia,**

**2023**

**PhD Candidate:** Dimitra Dimitrova Voeva

**Dissertation title:** The Democratic Mask of Political Engineering: Amendments in Electoral Rules In Bulgaria (2009-2021)

The dissertation consists of 196 pages of the main text (introduction, three chapters, and conclusion) and 146 pages of appendices. A total of 211 sources have been used in both Bulgarian and English languages.

The dissertation was discussed and recommended for public defence at a meeting of the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski,' held on June 15, 2023.

The defence of the dissertation will take place on ... at ... at .... The materials are available in office № 324, Block 4, Tsarigradsko Shose Boulevard, № 125.

Committee Members:

Committee Chair:

Reviewers:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Opinions:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Contents

General characteristics of the dissertation.....	3
Relevance .....	3
Aims and Subject .....	4
Tasks.....	5
Study Limitations .....	6
Brief Overview of the dissertation .....	6
Preferential voting .....	8
Electoral Reforms.....	9
Bulgarian Electoral System.....	10
Chapter 2. Substantive Aspects of Proposals for Electoral Reforms in Bulgaria .....	10
Summary and Analysis of Preferential Voting in Parliamentary Elections .....	17
Factors Affecting the Dynamics of Preferential Voting.....	24
Analysis of the Effect of Machine Voting .....	28
Conclusion.....	30
Contributions .....	33
Publications Related to the Dissertation Topic .....	34

## **General characteristics of the dissertation**

### **Relevance**

Elections form the bedrock of modern democracy. While the roles of parties and candidates, encompassing their policies, vision, and image, undeniably play a pivotal role in determining electoral outcomes, the electoral systems and technologies that establish the "rules of the game" are of equal significance. The same participants may present themselves differently based on these rules. Consequently, political actors, aiming to enhance their representation, often seek to amend these rules with the expectation of improving their prospects.

During the research period, Bulgarian electoral legislation underwent frequent changes. A significant electoral reform was enacted in 2009. In 2011, the electoral process was codified. The initial electoral code was applied in local and presidential elections in October 2011, as well as early parliamentary elections in 2013, with the code being amended once before each of these elections. In March 2014, a new Electoral Code replaced the previous one, only to undergo further revisions a month later. From 2014 to 2021, the existing Electoral Code witnessed a total of 23 amendments and additions. A particularly notable instance occurred in 2016 when changes were made just 10 days before the presidential elections. Changes were also implemented approximately two months before the European elections in 2019, as well as around three months before the local elections in October. Such changes preceded the parliamentary elections on April 4, as well as the elections held in July 2021. It would not be an exaggeration to state that pre-election changes have become an established practice, while the absence of such changes is more of an exception.

The topic of electoral reforms holds relevance and significance within society, likely intensified by low levels of trust in public institutions and political parties. The aspiration for improved governance transforms electoral rules into a symbol of change. According to the French sociologist Gustave Le Bon, nothing is more detrimental to society than an obsession with grand reforms. He perceives institutions and laws as external manifestations of our character and, therefore, believes that they, by themselves, cannot change this character (2021:8). Electoral reform in Bulgaria bears the weight of high expectations in addressing existing democratic deficits. The fact that solving these issues may require a profound change in societal character often goes underestimated.

This trend aligns with the spirit of the times—a quest for simple solutions to complex problems, with an emphasis on changing form rather than content. The popularity of the topic, in turn, creates conditions for its "political use." During the examined period, various proposals were frequently discussed and suggested, including the introduction of electronic remote voting, machine voting, compulsory voting, voter's residence for local elections, rules for voting abroad, mechanisms for determining electoral results, video surveillance, and more. One of the most popular topics that carries significant expectations is undoubtedly "voting for individual candidates", This topic loosely encompasses the possibility of introducing the so-called "majoritarian element" through preferential voting, a majoritarian election for some parliamentary representatives (a mixed electoral system), or a transition to an entirely majoritarian system. It should be clarified that preferential voting within party lists is not fundamentally a majoritarian element but rather an opportunity to reorder the party ranking within a proportional outcome. This concept is often misunderstood in the public sphere, and its adoption is a consequence of the popularity of the majoritarian system in society.

### **Aims and Subject**

In 'The Theme of Our Time', Ortega y Gasset writes that initially, laws emerge from a certain necessity but eventually transform into an expression of hope and desire. This study will seek to address the question he raises: 'Have the forms of law ever delivered the happiness expected of them?' (Ortega y Gasset 2016:156). The increased interest in reform does not always align with an assessment of the application of specific rules. It would be logical for each reform to be followed by an analysis of the achieved results. The fact that reforms are often proposed more as a desired image effect does not facilitate the process. Consequently, this dissertation focuses on the introduction of preferential voting, one of the most significant changes during the period under examination. The study will track the dynamics of preferential voting in each parliamentary election within the period. To shed light on how electoral reforms are employed as a means to gain a political advantage, the dissertation not only relies on data but also places emphasis on the parliamentary debate regarding majoritarian voting and preferential voting. In this way, both subjects of the research can be summarized: the debate on changes in electoral rules and the effects of the adopted rules.

## **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis of this study posits that the political elite instrumentalizes electoral reforms, aiming to secure advantages shortly before elections. Parties and individual political actors alter the "rules of the game" in line with their interest in gaining an edge over their opponents or proposing reforms to achieve a desired image effect. This inter-party competition is essentially concealed under the guise of a desire for greater democracy, fairer electoral rules, and improved outcomes. Electoral reform is presented as an opportunity to legitimize the electoral process and, consequently, boost voter turnout. Although this motive is frequently mentioned by political factions, the examination of preferential voting reveals that it primarily impacts the personalization of mandates and their allocation among parties, rather than influencing voters' motivation to exercise their right to vote.

## **Tasks**

To validate the hypothesis, the following tasks have been accomplished:

- Tracing the parliamentary debate during discussions on the majoritarian electoral system, the mixed electoral system, and preferential voting.
- Identifying the primary motives articulated by parliamentary parties in favour of or in opposition to the implementation of a majoritarian electoral system and preferential voting.
- Analysing the broader political context in which these changes are adopted, examining public sentiments regarding the topic, and their impact on voting for the reforms.
- Monitoring the extent of preferential voting usage and its dynamics in the five parliamentary elections held between 2014 and 2021.
- Conducting a comparative analysis of preferential voting by political parties, as well as the number of deputies elected through preferential voting.
- Identifying the factors that contribute to an increase or decrease in preferential voting.
- Tracing the scale and trends in preferential voting usage from 2007 to 2019 in European Parliament elections.

## **Study Limitations**

The proposed study is characterized by a significant limitation. During the period under consideration, there have been numerous changes in electoral rules, with some of them undergoing multiple revisions. This necessitates narrowing down the scope of the research. One possible option was to limit the time frame. The other possibility was to focus on specific key changes. This led to placing emphasis on majoritarian voting and the "majoritarian element" - a topic that has been repeatedly used for political purposes. Consequently, the study does not provide a complete picture of the changes. However, it offers a more comprehensive view of the approach taken by political parties when implementing reforms in electoral rules.

## **Brief Overview of the dissertation**

### **Chapter 1. Electoral Systems and Electoral Reforms: Theory and Practice**

In the first chapter, an extensive review of both Bulgarian and international literature on the subject was conducted. This process helped to delineate the scope and content of the fundamental concepts. The discussion encompassed electoral systems, their types, and distinctive features, as well as their correlation with party systems. In order to comprehend why there is such a heightened interest in electoral regulations and their alteration by the political elite, it was imperative to initially clarify the essence of the electoral process, its fundamental elements, and its overall significance.

Numerous authors describe elections as a "game" (Laponce 1969, Massicotte, Blais, Yoshinaka 2004, Boix 1999). Similar to any game, elections have winners and losers, with electoral rules playing a pivotal role in shaping the performance of individual players. Tsebelis defines electoral systems as "redistributive institutions" because they either give or take power from one entity in favour of another. Consequently, there is always a winning and a losing side (Tsebelis 1990). Electoral rules establish the boundaries that participants should not transgress. While it is not uncommon for these rules to be more favourable to certain participants than others, they are invariably taken into consideration, influencing campaign strategies and the behaviour of individual candidates.

Elections are carried out through an electoral system, which consists of a set of rules. In a broad sense, these rules govern how voting takes place and how the cast votes are translated into seats (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005:3). The significance of the electoral system is of such magnitude that

a political party, enjoying a certain level of popular support, can attain substantially different levels of representation in the government depending on the specific set of electoral rules in place (Taagepera 2009:678). Electoral systems assume a pivotal role as a 'mediating function between citizens' preferences and government policies' (Stoychev 2018:57). Furthermore, they can exert influence over the legitimacy of institutions and serve as a mechanism for resolving societal conflicts (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis: 2005).

The voting rules can exert influence on the behaviour of voters, as well as on other participants in the electoral process, including candidates, political parties, and factions (Duverger 1964; Cox 2003; Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). In addition to electoral rules, Taagepera (2009:678) includes citizens' ability to use the rules as an integral part of the electoral system. Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005:10) argue that the accessibility of voting depends on the type of electoral system - if electoral regulations are intricate or structured in a way that minimizes the impact of voters on the country's governance, this would diminish the significance of the electoral process. Furthermore, we should also consider the broader context of a country's electoral legislation and how the rules are governed, as these factors can be of substantial importance for their effective implementation.

### **Types of Electoral Systems and Trends**

To gain a deeper understanding of the motives behind the initiators of changes in electoral legislation, we have explored the primary types of electoral systems, their advantages and disadvantages, and the outcomes they lead to. This overview provides a basis for a critical examination of proposals to introduce a majoritarian electoral system and preferential voting. We have also conducted an analysis of electoral reform trends, drawing on publications by Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005), Josep Colomer (2004), and Alen Renwick (2010). The conclusion drawn is that guided by the genesis of electoral systems, there is reason to believe that reforms will increasingly gravitate towards proportional representation. The cited studies confirm that proportional representation is associated with enhancing the representation of various social groups and interests.

It should be emphasized that the electoral system is not directly correlated with the quality of democracy. Some of the longest-standing democracies employ majoritarian systems. Conversely,



there are nations that utilize proportional systems yet cannot be characterized as democratic. Lastly, the electoral system should align with the unique characteristics of a particular society. What functions effectively in one social and political context may be entirely impractical in another.

### **Preferential voting**

One of the main focuses of the current work is preferential voting. The text examines the various ways in which it is used in different countries. Two typologies for classifying preferential voting are mentioned – one by Shugart (2005) and another by Passareli (2020). Attention is drawn to the effects of preferential voting on intra-party competition. This aspect closely aligns with Cox's definition of an electoral system, which encompasses a set of laws and party regulations governing party competition, both between different parties and within individual parties (Cox 1997: 38). In electoral systems where preferential voting is employed, candidates can't rely solely on their party's support for election. Instead, they must compete against fellow party members (Katz 1985: 230). This allows individual candidates to campaign for themselves, which doesn't always align with the party's policies. Candidates may take positions differing from their party's stance or emphasize issues of particular local interest, with which they have some connection. In some electoral systems, candidates have an incentive to differentiate themselves from their fellow party members and strive to win personal votes (Marsh 2007: 501).

The emphasis is placed on the possibility of voting for individual candidates and voting turnout. The cited publications do not provide a clear-cut conclusion regarding the relationship between the two. Some studies suggest that preferential voting serves as an additional incentive for voter turnout (Anduiza 2002; Sanz 2015). However, others, like Marsh (1985), point out that there is no clear correlation, or that the relationship is actually inverse. According to Soderlund (2016), voter turnout tends to be lowest in electoral systems that prioritize individual candidates and highest in systems that emphasize political parties, such as closed-list systems. It's important to consider that the specific context in which elections are held, the educational level of the voters, the presence/absence of experience and traditions in using such electoral rules, and other factors play a crucial role in this relationship.

Studies have been presented that find a relationship between open-list electoral systems and corruption. Open-lists place greater emphasis on the personal reputation of candidates compared

to closed-list systems (Carey and Shugart 1995; Sartori 1976; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). Reed (1994) notes that in a competition among candidates from the same party, they cannot gain an advantage through ideological positions or emphasis on different issues, as these are already defined by the party. This can lead to the search for other means of gaining an advantage over opponents, including personal charisma and qualities, as well as unregulated practices to secure an advantage.

### **The Relationship Between Electoral System and Party Systems**

In the literature, two main approaches are generally recognized when studying the relationship between the electoral and party systems. The first approach regards the party system as an outcome of the electoral system, while the second approach sees the electoral system as a product of the party system. In the context of the first approach, the French political scientist Maurice Duverger has made a significant contribution. According to the well-known "Duverger's Law," plurality rule leads to the formation of two-party systems (Duverger 1964:217). Additionally, there is a connection between two-round majoritarian systems and proportional representation systems, which tend to favour the development of multi-party systems (Duverger 1964:239). Scholars who follow this approach include Duverger (2003), Riker (1982), Douglas Rae (1967), Lijphart (2012), Pipa Norris (2004), Richard Katz (1980). As for the second approach, which views the electoral system as a product of the party system, it has been explored by various authors including Grumm (1958), Lipson (1959), Rokkan (1970), Boix (1999), Benoit (2007), Colomer (2005; 2018), and Taagepera (2009). Both approaches have their merits. However, this dissertation primarily aligns with the approach of authors who consider the electoral system as a product of the party system.

### **Electoral Reforms**

Two leading concepts have been considered regarding the foundation of electoral reforms. The first emphasizes that the interests of political parties are the primary driving force behind the change (Lipson 1959; Rokkan 1970; Boix 1999; Norris 2004; Colomer 2004, 2005; Brady and Mo 1992; Stein, Owens, Leighley 2004; Birch 2003). The second concept acknowledges that in addition to interests, there may be other factors that can drive changes in the electoral system. Such factors could include external imposition of reforms (in cases of bicameral parliaments, judicial decisions, referendums) (Katz 2005), conflicts between party interests and ideology (Taagepera 1999),

pressure from citizens, activists, experts on the political elite, compelling them to accept reforms to avoid appearing obstructive (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001), among others.

The question of the frequency with which electoral reforms are implemented is also relevant. It should be noted that most authors focus on major electoral reforms and, as a result, regard them as relatively infrequent events (Donovan 2006; Dunleavy and Margetts 1995; Lijphart 1992; Cox 1997; Katz 2005; Renwick 2010; Sakamoto 1999; Fishburn 2003). Benoit, on the other hand, argues that instability in electoral systems is inherent to their nature - they redistribute power from one player to another. Therefore, collaboration among parties is not to be expected, but rather a struggle for advantage, which defines the unstable nature of electoral systems (Benoit 2004).

To demonstrate that electoral reforms are used as a "panacea" for existing problems, the text examines the Italian reform of 1993, the Japanese reform of 1994, and New Zealand's reform in 1993. It is concluded that while in Italy, Japan, and New Zealand, suspicions of manipulation and corruption are more broadly directed at the political elite, in the Bulgarian case, distrust is specifically focused on the electoral process. It is noteworthy that even in these broader cases of dissatisfaction the focus shifts towards electoral systems. In his study of electoral reforms, Alan Renwick notes that attempts to direct citizens' interest toward the necessity of electoral reform are unsuccessful. This changes when citizens' discontent is directed toward the political elite, and the elite, in turn, presents electoral reform as a solution to the problems (Renwick 2010:21).

### **Bulgarian Electoral System**

At the end of the chapter, a concise overview of the electoral system in Bulgaria prior to 2009 is presented, outlining its most fundamental characteristics. The citations include studies by Zhivkov (2022) on early proportional representation legislation in Bulgaria before the First World War, as well as Stoychev (1992) and Ganev (2018) on the electoral system during the early stages of democratic reforms.

## **Chapter 2. Substantive Aspects of Proposals for Electoral Reforms in Bulgaria**

Chapter 2 examines the parliamentary debate in the period from 2009 to 2021. All transcripts from the specified period were reviewed, with a focus on key terms such as 'preference,' 'preferential voting,' 'majority vote,' 'majoritarian electoral system,' and their derivatives. The analysis of

parliamentary debate is based on the idea that linguistic actions, such as speeches, are essentially political actions (Wiesner, Haapala, and Palonen 2017). Our understanding is that to fully comprehend why a statement is made and why a particular position is taken, we must examine what is said within the broader political context. The research aims to identify the main arguments in favour of or against the majority vote and preference. A qualitative analysis method has been chosen. The parliamentary debate is examined against the backdrop of the political context in the country, which includes the events leading up to the changes in 2009, the adoption of the first and second electoral codes, the two referendums related to aspects of the electoral process, the debate on the mixed electoral system in 2020, and the developments during the dynamic year of 2021.

The summary of the motives regarding the acceptance or rejection of the majority vote and preference is presented in two separate tables. While there is significant overlap between them, this approach is favoured because during the debate, the two options are often contrasted with a focus on their respective advantages and disadvantages.

*Table 1 "For" and "Against" the Majority Vote during the discussions in the National Assembly in the period 2009-2021.*

<b>Majoritarian Electoral System</b>	
<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to public expectations, citizens' desires; in response to the referendum conducted on the matter;</li> <li>• Increasing voter participation;</li> <li>• Parties will nominate more competitive candidates;</li> <li>• Recognizable candidates;</li> <li>• Candidate accountability; candidates run under their own names;</li> <li>• Equality between party and independent candidates;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefiting the major parties;</li> <li>• "Excessive expectations towards the majority system"; mythologizing; turning it into a "panacea";</li> <li>• Unequal passive voting rights (reform from 2009);</li> <li>• Unequal distribution of mandates;</li> <li>• Party engineering;</li> <li>• Increased vote buying;</li> <li>• Oligarchic dependence of candidates;</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced interest in politics, reducing the influence of vote buying;</li> <li>• Greater freedom for citizens to decide whom to send to parliament;</li> <li>• Winning a seat depends on the personal qualities of the candidates;</li> <li>• Strengthening the voter-representative relationship; bridging the "gap between politicians and the people"</li> <li>• Larger and stronger parliamentary majorities;</li> <li>• Voting for individuals rather than parties;</li> <li>• Candidates with high professional and moral qualities;</li> <li>• Greater effort by deputies to retain the trust of their constituents;</li> <li>• Increased trust in the National Assembly;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The poor example of the 2009 reform; an "unsuccessful experiment";</li> <li>• Weak representation of the population;</li> <li>• Single-party rule without a majority of votes behind it;</li> <li>• Demagoguery;</li> <li>• Encapsulation of single-member electoral districts;</li> <li>• Administrative burden and the need for additional personnel in administration.</li> <li>• Unpredictability of the political ideas of elected MPs;</li> <li>• Problems with the district magnitudes;</li> <li>• Lack of pluralism;</li> <li>• Fragmentation of the political system - encouraging local and regional parties;</li> <li>• Wasting votes;</li> <li>• Decreasing competition;</li> <li>• Unsuitable for Bulgaria.</li> </ul>
--	--

*Table 2 "For" and "Against" Preferential Voting during its discussion in the National Assembly in the period 2009-2021.*

<b>Preferential Voting</b>	
<b>For</b>	<b>Against</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Majoritarian element' in proportional representation;</li> <li>• Recognizable candidates;</li> <li>• Response to public expectations/desires;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tension among candidates from the same list (especially in local elections);</li> <li>• Preconditions for vote buying/ voting control through marking a specific</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing voter participation;</li> <li>• Party ideology remains prominent, unlike pure majoritarian voting;</li> <li>• Greater representation compared to pure majoritarian voting;</li> <li>• Voting for individuals, not parties;</li> <li>• Enhanced representation;</li> <li>• Correction of party hegemony in candidate selection;</li> <li>• Alignment of voting systems for Bulgarian and European Parliament elections;</li> <li>• Real competition between candidates, not party headquarters.</li> </ul>	<p>preference or combination of preferences as a code;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inequality between Bulgarians in the country and abroad (due to the inability to mark preferences outside the country);</li> <li>• Intraparty issues/conflicts;</li> <li>• Complicated vote counting/election result reporting;</li> <li>• Confusion/difficulty for voters;</li> <li>• A large number of invalid ballots;</li> <li>• Demagoguery;</li> </ul>
---	--

## Summary

For the first time, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) gained representation in the national parliament in the 2009 elections. This party won the majority of seats in the 31 single-member electoral districts where candidates are elected through a majoritarian system with relative majority. During the period in question, the party proposed the introduction of a majoritarian system multiple times. In 2014, during the discussion of the new Electoral Code, GERB proposed that 32 mandates be elected through a majoritarian system. At that time, GERB was the leading political force, but the insufficient number of mandates to form a government led to its remaining in opposition. Later, in 2016, after a referendum on the topic failed to reach the required threshold, GERB again proposed the introduction of a majoritarian system. In this way, they did not allow dissatisfaction to rise against them and advocated for a reform that had garnered significant support. The third proposal for a majoritarian vote came in 2020 amid massive protests primarily against the government of Borisov and the Chief Prosecutor. At that time, GERB proposed the introduction of a mixed electoral system for the Grand National Assembly. The last

initiative within the period in question came in 2021 when GERB won the April elections but the results could not lead to the formation of a regular government. GERB's position aligns directly with its self-interest, as practice shows that major parties and those with strong regional representation benefit the most from majoritarian systems. On the other hand, advocating for a reform that is popular in society has an image effect. Therefore, the proposals discussed above often come at a time when the party needs legitimization, and it remains debatable whether the goal is the actual implementation of the system or an attempt to position the party as reform-minded.

With regard to preferential voting, GERB's position is not consistently aligned. In the drafting of the Electoral Code in 2010, they proposed preferential voting for parliamentary elections with a threshold of 20%, while such an option was not provided for local elections. After criticism regarding the high threshold, which would have made it very difficult to rearrange the lists, the threshold was lowered to 9%. Later, even before elections were held under the new rules, they abolished preferential voting. During the debate on the second election code ("Manolova"), GERB insisted that the threshold should not be 7% but 5% of the votes cast for a party list. In 2019, the party supported the proposal of the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) that preferential votes for individual candidates should be considered valid if the candidate received valid votes not less than the district electoral quota. This change would have made it much more difficult to rearrange the lists. Following numerous criticisms and a veto imposed by President Radev, GERB changed their position. Despite these divergent actions, GERB has never officially opposed the so-called "majoritarian element." Even in cases where their actions have resulted in the abolition of preferential voting or an increase in the threshold for its validity, they have not declared themselves against it.

BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) is the party that initiated the reform introducing 31 single-member electoral districts in 2009. The party proposed this change at a time when it had lost the trust of the voters and the newly established GERB was gaining an advantage. After failing to win any of the majoritarian mandates, BSP reconsidered its position. Their opposition to the majoritarian vote remained in effect until the end of the period under review. The actual introduction of preferential voting for parliamentary and local elections again came at the proposal of BSP in the "Manolova Code." Despite the unexpected result in the European elections when the party's leader was displaced from the top position by a candidate selected by chance, BSP did not dare to officially

propose the abolition of preferential voting due to its popularity among the voters. Contrary to its official position, during the 2014 elections, the party's executive bureau prohibited left-wing candidates from campaigning for preferential voting.

The party of Slavi Trifonov Ima Takav Narod (There Is Such a People) is the biggest proponent and initiator of the majority voting system. This is one of the main political messages of ITN. The organized referendum with a question about the introduction of the majority vote gives a strong boost to the political project. A clear indicator that this issue is being leveraged for gaining popularity is the fact that, after ITN entered parliament, the majority vote was not even included in their initial project to amend and supplement the Electoral Code. After facing criticism between the first and second debate on the Code, a new paragraph was added, which envisions the application of a proportional electoral system until the first regular elections for members of parliament are held. The proposed text does not specify what system will replace the proportional one. It is also problematic to introduce substantial changes to the Transition and Final Provisions without following the logic of the overall legislation. Thus, the realization of the party's main declared goal – the introduction of a majority electoral system – is postponed indefinitely.

In terms of preferential voting, ITN does not express opposition, but they oppose the proposal to lower the validity threshold, arguing that this would lead to an increase in bought and controlled votes.

The position of DPS remains unchanged throughout the entire period – firmly against the majority vote and preferential voting. The only exception is their support for the reform in 2009. Even at that time, they presented reasons against the proposal but supported their coalition partner, BSP. It could be assumed that their support for the reform was also based on the expectation of winning mandates in the regions where they traditionally hold a strong political presence. Their stance against preferential voting is understandable due to the fact that they have the least educated electorate, which is less likely to utilize this tool and prefers support for the party list.

One of the main effects of the majority vote is the reduction in the number of parties entering parliament. Naturally, most of the smaller parties (that enter parliament but their support does not exceed 10%) oppose the majority vote. This includes patriotic formations and urban right-wing parties. Only Volya party takes a stance in favour of the majority vote, aligning with several of its



populist promises. What proves more decisive for both the urban right-wing and nationalists is their coalition format. It forms the basis of support for preferential voting from Reformist Bloc and DB (Democratic Bulgaria), ISMV (Stand Up. Mafia Out!), PF (Patriotic Front), and "United Patriots". For them, intra-coalition competition is not destructive but rather serves as a mobilizing factor for their electorate. An exception to this is the position of the Attack party, which consistently opposes the majority vote and preferential voting.

The parties that will gain representation for the first time by the end of the period under review – Prodalzhavame promyanata ("We Continue the Change") and Vazrazhdane ("Revival") - do not have statements that clarify their positions on the topic.

The summary on the topic indicates that the positions adopted by the parties align with their direct political interests. This is achieved through two primary methods: directly, when the initiator of the change anticipates a mechanical advantage from its implementation (electoral engineering), and indirectly, when an image effect is sought through the proposed reform.

### **Chapter 3. Practical Implementation of Electoral Changes**

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of data from the five parliamentary elections that implemented preferential voting during the examined period: 2014, 2017, April 4, 2021, July 11, 2021, and November 14, 2021. The chapter includes the total number and percentage of voters who cast preferential votes, both overall and by political party. Preferential voting percentages are calculated based on the votes received by political parties within the country, as voters abroad do not have the option to indicate preferences. The calculations utilize actual votes cast for political parties and coalitions, excluding votes from abroad, votes for initiative committees, and **votes for the option** "I do not support anyone". The analysis encompasses instances where candidates succeeded in surpassing the 7% preferential quota, details the number of list changes, and provides information about the number and names of preferentially elected representatives. Additionally, a comparative analysis of preferential voting dynamics across political parties during the period is presented. The appendices contain comprehensive data for each election, including the number of ballots with and without preferences categorized by political party and electoral districts, preferential quotas per political party and electoral districts, ballots with and without preferences per political party and

electoral districts, candidates who exceeded the preferential quota, and the number of votes received. The appendices also feature the percentage of voters who cast preferential votes for a political party in a given electoral district, the number of candidates surpassing the preferential quota for a political party in an electoral district, and the count of effective preferences for a political party in an electoral district.

To enhance comprehensiveness, data from European elections in the country for the years 2007, 2009, 2014, and 2019 are included at the beginning of the section. However, it is important to note that unlike the data for parliamentary elections, the dissertation does not contribute to the collection and processing of European election data, as these figures are publicly available on the website of the Central Electoral Commission.

## **Summary and Analysis of Preferential Voting in Parliamentary Elections**

### **Share of Preferential Voting**

The review of data on preferential voting in Bulgaria reveals that from its introduction in 2014 until the first elections in 2021, there was a trend of increasing usage. The share of voters who took advantage of the opportunity to indicate their preference increased from 36% in October 2014 to 44% in April 2021. These elections recorded the highest number of voters marking preferences, totalling 1,317,422. However, this trend was interrupted in the three elections held within 2021, where the opposite trend of decline was observed. The share of preferential voters dropped from 44% in April to 26% in November. The November election saw the lowest share of preferential voting in parliamentary elections in the country. When measuring this decline in absolute numbers, it is essential to consider the overall decrease in voter turnout, which makes it difficult to make a straightforward comparison. Still, the number of preferential voters decreased by more than half, from 1,317,000 in April to 624,000 in November. This indicates that while preferential voting initially gained popularity and was widely used by voters, its usage declined significantly in subsequent elections in 2021.

Table 3: Summary Data for the Number and Share of Preferential Votes from 2014 to 2021

	Number of valid votes cast for parties and coalitions in the country	Number of preferences	Share of preferential voting
5 Octobre 2014	3 143 854	1 121 624	35.7
26 March 2017	3 310 608	1 238 407	37.4
4 April 2021	3 029 178	1 317 422	43.5
11 July 2021	2 562 168	971 284	37.9
14 Novembre 2021	2 669 260	624 504	26.0

### Share of preferential voting by party

Preferential voting among GERB voters can be divided into two periods. The first period, spanning from 2014 to the first elections in 2021, is characterized by an increase, while the second period, from April 4 to November 14, 2021, sees a decrease. Interestingly, these two periods are nearly symmetrical: during the first two elections, preferential voting increased at a similar rate to the decline observed in the last two. Thus, at the beginning of the period, preferential voting starts at 36%, and by the end of the period, it returns to approximately the same level of about 33%.

Among BSP electorate, preferential voting is high at the beginning of the research period. More specifically, BSP and Bulgaria Uncensored voters are second only to Reformist bloc voters in terms of marked preferences (at 44%) at the 2014 elections. Until the July 2021 elections, this share varies between 40% and 46%. The last elections of the research period are an exception, with the share sharply dropping to 28%. An interesting fact is that in July 2021, the share decreased by 5%, which is likely due to the introduction of entirely machine voting. One possible reason for the significant drop in November could be attributed to the initial screen of the machines, which turned out to be confusing for voters.

Throughout the entire study period, DPS remains the party whose voters have made the least use of the opportunity to mark a preference. It should be noted that in 2017, when the share was slightly higher, DPS was listed as number 9 on the ballot, which increased the occurrence of unintentional preferences<sup>1</sup>. It is evident that the transition to entirely machine voting results in a significant

---

<sup>1</sup> When the candidate's preference number matches the party number on the ballot and this leads to voters confusion.

decrease in preferential voting. For DPS, the preferential voting threshold is rarely exceeded in the party's strongholds. This occurs more frequently in weaker areas where the quota is very low, and practically any candidate, relying on a higher number of personal acquaintances in the area, could surpass it.

The party led by Slavi Trifonov, which emerged with the slogan "voting for personalities," maintains relatively low levels of preference usage. In the three elections in which it participates, ITN remains below the average level for this indicator. The most significant decline here is observed in November, which we attribute to difficulties with the initial screen of the voting machines.

The voters who use preferential voting to the greatest extent are those of the so-called "urban right-wing" parties. Their share varies, reaching nearly half of those who voted for the respective party in the election. It is highest for the Reformist bloc at 52%, slightly decreases for Democratic Bulgaria in the first two elections of 2021, and reaches its lowest level at 44% in November when an overall decline in preferential voting is observed.<sup>2</sup>

Another group of voters, which we will conditionally consider collectively, are those of nationalist formations. Their share remains lower than the average for the respective elections. However, when in 2017, Patriotic front (VMRO and NFSB) and ATAKA appeared together, they received a slightly higher share of preferences compared to 2014 when they appeared separately. The share of preferences for the party Vazrazhdane in November 2021 was also lower than the average.

ISMV (Stand Up. Mafia Out!) enters the parliament twice, and the share of preference use remains consistent - four out of ten voters.

The rest of the parties have only gained representation in one of the five parliaments, making it impossible to compare across years. BBTZ (Bulgaria Uncensored), led by Nikolay Barekov, had a relatively high share of preferential voting in 2014, reaching around one-third of the voters. For ABV (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival), it was about one-third, and for Volya, it was slightly less than one-third. The share of preferential voting is low among the parties that entered parliament

---

<sup>2</sup> We allow ourselves to make a conditional comparison between the Reformist Bloc and Democratic Bulgaria. Still, it should be noted that the parties within their composition differ, even though there is a significant overlap in their electorate. It should also be taken into account that after the dissolution of the Reformist Bloc, SDS (Union of Democratic Forces) formed a coalition with GERB.

for the first time in November 2021 – Prodalzhavame Promyanata (We Continue the Change) (20%) and "Revival" (25%). This result comes against the backdrop of a decline in the use of preferences among voters of all parties, except for DPS, where the share remains the same as in the previous elections.

*Table 4 Share of preferential voting by parties in the period 2014-2021.*

Elections	GE RB	BS P	D PS	R B	PF	BB TZ	ATA KA	AB V	P F	VOL YA	IT N	D B	IS MV	P P	Revi val
5.10. 2014	36.2	43 .5	22	5 2	27 .7	43.8	26.5	34. 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
26.03. 2017	43.1	39 .5	26. 6	-	-	-	-	-	3 0	28.1	-	-	-	-	-
4.04 2021	53.7	45 .8	23. 2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	33 .9	48 .8	39. 5	-	-
11.07. 2021	43.9	40 .9	15. 3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31 .6	48 .3	41. 8	-	-
14.11.2 021	32.6	28 .1	15. 2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	23 .1	44 .2	-	2 0	24.5

### **Number of candidates surpassing the quota**

The candidates who received 7% of the votes cast for the candidate list in the respective electoral district were only studied for the parties represented in parliament. This limitation in the study results from narrowing the scope for feasibility purposes. Therefore, besides the share of preferential voting, the number of candidates is also influenced by the number of parties that pass the 4% threshold for entering the parliament. For instance, in 2014, when 8 parties entered the National Assembly, the number of candidates with valid preferences was significantly higher than in other years, even though the share of preferential voting was close to the average.

*Table 5 Number of Candidates Passing the 7 Percent Preferential Quota in the Period 2014-2021*

Elections	Number of candidates passing the 7 percent quota	Number of Parliamentarily Represented Parties and Coalitions
5 Octobre 2014	377	8
26 March 2017	238	5
4 April 2021	303	6
11 July 2021 г.	277	6
14 November 2021 г.	231	7

### **Effective Preferences**

This indicator provides us with an opportunity to delve more deeply into the actual use of preferences. It neutralizes preferences for party leaders, revealing where votes have genuinely resulted in changes within the lists. This allows us to see which parties primarily rely on preferential voting for their leaders of party lists, essentially indicating support for the proposed list. Unlike the indicator of the number of preferentially elected deputies, it enables us to track preferential voting within parties with lower parliament representation. In such parties, candidates each secure only one mandate within an electoral district, consistently benefiting the list leader and offering no insight into any reordering. This indicator does not account for cases in which some candidates relinquish their deputy position even before the decision of the Central Election Commission, and these cases are not reflected in the "number of preferentially elected deputies" metric.

While the share of preferential voting is split into two periods – a period of growth between 2014 and April 4, 2021, followed by a period of decline – the count of effective preferences was at its peak in 2014 and has been gradually decreasing since. Several factors contribute to this trend. It's important to consider that the number of parties entering parliament has a significant impact. In the 2014 elections, there were eight parliamentary forces, while in the 2017 elections, the count decreased to five. Naturally, the count of effective preferences diminishes even though the share of preferential voting is on the rise. In the most recent April 2021 elections, due to changes in the ballot design, the possibility of "unintentional preferences," which previously had a significant influence on effective preferences, was eliminated. In the last two elections, the decrease in effective preferences corresponds with the decline in preferential voting. Additionally, in both

winning parties – ITN in July and PP in November 2021 – candidates who surpass the 7 percent quota are predominantly list leaders, which doesn't lead to any reordering.

As previously mentioned, the number of effective preferences in the first two elections is influenced by unintentional preferences. Their accumulation is, in turn, related to the party's position on the ballot. Therefore, no comparison will be made between individual parties for these two elections.

The remaining three elections are more interesting since they occur within a very short timeframe without significant changes in the candidate lists. In this context, during the first elections on April 4, GERB, BSP, and DPS received the most effective preferences. In the subsequent elections, the count decreases, with a more substantial decline for GERB and BSP, and a milder one for DPS, where it is traditionally lower. This corresponds to the share of the used preferential vote, which was discussed earlier.

Effective preferences increase for DB and ISMV, which does not correspond to the use of preferential voting. The explanation may be found in the increased internal party competition, resulting in fewer preferences for the party leaders at the expense of other candidates.

*Table 6: Number of Effective Preferences by Parties for the Period 2014-2021*

Electi ons	GE RB	B SP	D PS	R B	P F	BB TZ	ATA KA	A B V	P F	VOL YA	IT N	D B	IS M V	P P	Revi val	To tal
5.10. 2014	18	15	13	2 3	0	22	10	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10 7
26.03. 2017	27	17	1	-	0	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	10 2
4.04 2021	26	20	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1 3	5	-	-	75
11.07. 2021	14	15	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	1 4	10	-	-	61
14.11. 2021	10	9	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1 8	-	0	0	47

### **Number of Preferentially Elected MP's**

The most crucial component, in terms of the results, is the number of deputies who are elected through preferential voting. However, this number doesn't fully capture the dynamics of

preferential voting. It shows an almost twofold increase between 2014 and 2017. After the elimination of the option for unintentional preferences, the count returned to levels close to the initial figures and has been consistently decreasing, reflecting the decline in the use of this option.

Table 7: Number of Preferentially Elected Candidates by Party for the Period 2014-2021.

Electi ons	GE RB	B SP	D PS	R B	P F	BB TZ	ATA KA	A B V	P F	VOL YA	IT N	D B	IS M V	P P	Revi val	To tal
5.10. 2014	10	5	2	2	0	1	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20
26.03. 2017	20	17	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	39
4.04 2021	14	5	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	4	0	-	-	23
11.07. 2021	8	4	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	5	0	-	-	17
14.11. 2021	6	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	3	-	0	0	10

As the party that secured the most members of parliament in three of the elections and ranked second in the other two, it's unsurprising that GERB also boasts the highest number of preferentially elected representatives. The proportion varies from 10% in the 47th National Assembly to 21% in the 44th National Assembly.

Table 8: Preferentially Elected MPs from the GERB Party for the Period 2014-2021

Electi ons	Number of MPs	Number of Preferentially Elected MPs	Share of preferentially elected MPs out of the total share
5.10. 2014	84	10	11.9
26.03. 2017	95	20	21.1
4.04 2021	75	14	18.7
11.07. 2021	63	8	12.7
14.11.2021	59	6	10.2

The 44th National Assembly is the most powerful in terms of preferentially elected representatives, and for BSP, their share equals that of GERB, at 21% of the left-wing deputies. However, there is more significant dynamics within BSP. After the latest elections in the study period, their share has dwindled to a mere 4%.



Table 9: Preferentially Elected Representatives from the BSP Party for the Period 2014-2021

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Number of MPs</b>	<b>Number of Preferentially Elected MPs</b>	<b>Share of preferentially elected MPs out of the total share</b>
5.10. 2014	39	5	12.8
26.03. 2017	80	17	21.3
4.04 2021	43	5	11.6
11.07. 2021	36	4	11.1
14.11.2021	26	1	3.9

Given the low share of preferential voting, the regional nature of the vote, and the party's position against preferential voting, DPS has preferentially elected deputies only in the first two elections during the study period. In 2014, they had two (5.2% of a total of 38 MPs), and in 2017, they had one (3.9% of a total of 26).

For the parties of the so called ‘urban right’, whose supporters make the most use of preferential voting, there is an increase in the proportion of deputies elected by preference – from 9% for the Reformist Bloc to 19% for Democratic Bulgaria in the elections on November 14, 2021.

Table 10: Preferentially Elected Representatives from the ‘Urban Right’ (Reformist Bloc and Democratic Bulgaria) for the Period 2014-2021

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Number of MPs</b>	<b>Number of Preferentially Elected MPs</b>	<b>Share of preferentially elected MPs out of the total share</b>
5.10. 2014 RB	<b>23</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8.7</b>
26.03. 2017	-	-	-
4.04 2021 DB	<b>27</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14.8</b>
11.07. 2021 DB	<b>34</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14.7</b>
14.11.2021 DB	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>18.8</b>

The remaining parties that had preferentially elected representatives during the study period are BBTZ and VOLYA. BBTZ had one preferentially elected representative in 2014, which equates to 6.7% of a total of 15. VOLYA also had only one preferentially elected representative in 2017, which accounts for 8.3% of its 12 representatives.

### **Factors Affecting the Dynamics of Preferential Voting**

At the end of the chapter, the main factors leading to an increase or decrease in the use of preferences are summarized as follows:

- **Informed choice**

This can result from the fact that voters take an interest in the candidates put forward by the respective party and make an effort to inform themselves about their personalities and their positions on the party's list. It is also a consequence of parties taking into account and nominating candidates who are known at a national or regional level. As a result, they can attract both the portion of voters supporting the party and those who do not vote or vote for other parties. The candidates themselves also run successful personal campaigns to attract votes.

- **Unintentional preferences** - the accumulation of preferences for candidates whose number on the party's list matches the number of the party on the ballot

This explanation is valid from the introduction of preferential voting until the change in the ballot in 2019 when the party numbers started from 1, and candidate numbers started from 101. The first elections conducted with the new ballot were the European Parliament elections in 2019. The new ballot was used for the first time in parliamentary elections on April 4, 2021. The accumulation of candidate numbers matching the party numbers is observed for all parties and in all electoral districts. While this phenomenon is common, it's not possible to determine its dynamics over the years and make a fair comparison between parties. Even if we were to compute the percentage of voters choosing the candidate whose number corresponds to the party's number, it would still be an unfair comparison. Even if we were to compute the percentage of voters choosing the candidate whose number corresponds to the party's number, it would still be an unfair comparison. Parties cannot be placed on an equal footing - their ballot number is a determining factor. According to Article 253, Paragraph 3 of the Electoral Code, the number of candidates on the party list cannot surpass twice the number of mandates in an electoral district. Nevertheless, districts throughout the country differ in size - some allow for a maximum of 8 candidates on the list, while the largest district, Sofia, accommodated 32 candidates during the study period. This means that a party with a ballot number between 1 and 8 can have a candidate in every electoral district whose number matches the party's number, thereby receiving significantly larger unintentional accumulations of preferences. Conversely, a party listed as, for instance, number 21 on the ballot, as was the case with the "Reformist Bloc - Voice of the People" coalition in the parliamentary elections of 2017, has the opportunity for similar accumulations in only 9 districts.

Measuring the weight of unintentional preference is further hindered by the fact that not all parties register complete lists. A notable example is the VOLYA party in 2017. Although it is listed as number 6 on the ballot, it doesn't have a candidate listed as number 6 on every list.

Comparing the total share of unintentional preferences across different elections is also inaccurate. This is primarily due to the significant impact of where the major parties are positioned on the lists. For instance, whether the BSP party was situated as number 4 or number 22 on the ballot has a substantial influence.

Additionally, it is not feasible to compare the number of candidates randomly elected with a preference. This is because smaller parties often have a maximum of one representative in an electoral district, taken by the first candidate in the list, and any rearrangements further down the list remain 'hidden'. On the other hand, larger parties have a greater likelihood of their unintentionally chosen candidates entering parliament.

- **The Use of Preference Votes for Vote Buying Control**

Preferential voting can serve as a control mechanism. This assurance that voters have cast their ballots 'correctly' is achieved by marking a specific preference for a particular candidate. In some instances, this could be the last candidate on the list, in others, a specific number or a code/combination of numbers. Separately, preferential voting provides candidates with more opportunities to 'play for themselves' within the campaign. This includes both honest methods such as being active, media appearances, meetings with potential voters, and others, as well as unethical practices like buying votes and using influence to control the vote. The dissertation highlights two indicators that could suggest such practices, with specific cases referenced. The first indicator is related to cases where a candidate receives a significant number of votes in one election but fails to meet the quota or experiences a substantial drop in votes in subsequent elections. Another indicator for suspicion in the use of preferences is when unknown individuals surpass well-known party members in terms of preferences.

- **Introduction of Machine Voting**

Analysis of preferential voting results reveals a significant decrease in its use in July and November 2021 when a transition to fully machine-based voting occurred. A comparison was made between

the votes for parties that crossed the threshold in all three 2021 elections and the share of preferential votes. It's worth noting again that the comparison of candidate lists, with a few exceptions, doesn't show substantial changes in candidates and their order. This indicates that the decline isn't due to a change in the composition of the lists. The results in the table below represent the preferential vote for parties that were present in at least two National Assemblies. It is evident that, apart from ISMV, all other parties experienced a decline in the use of preferences. In the case of Democratic Bulgaria, whose voters are highly active in preferential voting, this decline is the least pronounced.

*Table 11: Preferential Voting as a Share of Party Votes in 2021 for Parties Represented in at Least Two Parliaments*

<b>Elections</b>	<b>Political Party</b>					
	<b>GERB</b>	<b>BSP</b>	<b>DPS</b>	<b>ITN</b>	<b>DB</b>	<b>ISMV</b>
4.04 2021	53.7	45.8	23.2	33.9	48.8	39.5
11.07. 2021	43.9	40.9	15.3	31.6	48.3	41.8
14.11.2021	32.6	28.1	15.2	23.1	44.2	-
<b>Total decline for the period</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>10.8</b>	<b>4.6</b>	+ 2.3

- **The Emergence of New Parties**

In 2021, during all three elections, new parties that had not previously obtained parliamentary representation entered the political scene. These parties include "There Is Such a People," "Revival," "We Continue the Change," "Stand Up. Mafia Out!" and "Democratic Bulgaria." ISMV and DB are coalitions comprising different political entities. Despite not participating in parliamentary elections in this composition, DB is not a new party but includes what is known as "urban right-wing" parties, which traditionally receive a high number of preferential votes. ISMV consists of several old and new formations and received a preferential vote close to the average. The various formations within both coalitions lead to internal coalition battles in which preferential voting is used as a weapon.

However, this is not the case for the other three parties. While DB and ISMV have recognizable political figures, "There Is Such a People" is strongly associated with its party leader, Slavi Trifonov, and the only other recognizable figures are the scriptwriters from his TV show. "We Continue the Change" was formed by former caretaker ministers Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev shortly before the elections and lacks well-known party figures. "There Is Such a People" won the

elections in July, and the rate of preferential voting was below average. In the November elections, the winning party was “We continue the change” which had the lowest rate of preferential voting after "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" throughout the entire research period. The low rate of preferential voting for these parties is at the core of the overall decline in the use of this tool.

### **Decreased Vote Buying and Controlled Voting**

Vote buying and controlled voting was already discussed as factors contributing to the increase in preferential voting. On the other hand, the decline in such practices may have an impact on the use of preferential voting. It is worth exploring further and might be suitable for further investigation in other studies. The dynamics of preferential voting in 2021 need attention, especially as three consecutive elections were held within a year with nearly identical party lists. One possible hypothesis explaining this phenomenon is the reduction in purchased vote activities. Given the conditions of three consecutive parliamentary elections in 2021, it is reasonable to assume that the incentives and financial means for controlled voting may have decreased. In the context of three successive elections, there's a heightened risk for vote-buyers that their investments might not yield expected results due to the short life span of the National Assemblies. Additionally, factors contributing to the decline in purchased votes include government measures taken under prime minister Stefan Yanev's administration, particularly by the Minister of the Interior, Rashkov, focusing on preventing such practices. Nearly all regional governors (24 out of 28) were replaced, along with key personnel within the Ministry of the Interior (MVR). Various actions were carried out throughout the country, with a particular emphasis on Roma communities, which are susceptible to vote-buying and selling. Further evidence of the decrease in purchased votes is found in the analysis conducted by the Anti-Corruption Fund, which focused on activity in certain sections deemed at risk (Karayotova and Rusinov, 2021). Their data indicated that voter activity in these high-risk sections experienced a decline in July and November compared to April. It is possible that the decrease in preferential voting can be partially attributed to the overall reduction in purchased votes, further supporting the negative scenario for the use of this tool.

### **Analysis of the Effect of Machine Voting**

At the end of this chapter, a chronology of the introduction and use of machine voting in Bulgaria, from its experimental use in 2014 to its use in all sections with over 300 voters in 2021, is presented.

While the other explanations for the decline in preferential voting are more apparent, we believe that more evidence is needed to support the hypothesis about the effect of machine voting on voter turnout and the use of preferences. Furthermore, machine voting is one of the most frequently discussed changes in the study period, which is also a common subject of legislative changes and its examination will enrich the overall research. In this section, the main advantages and disadvantages of machine voting are presented, along with studies on the influence of machine voting on voter turnout in other countries (Roseman and Stephenson 2005; Fujiwara 2015; Schneider and Senters 2018; Card and Moretti 2007; Allers and Kooreman 2009; Desai and Lee 2021).

A chronology of the introduction and use of machine voting in Bulgaria, from its experimental use in 2014 to its use in all sections with over 300 voters in 2021, is presented. Data on the interest in machine voting are provided, showing that throughout the period in which there was a choice between paper ballot voting and machine voting (until the elections in July 2021), below one-third of voters preferred to cast their votes using the machines. Sociological surveys on the attitudes toward machine voting are referenced, based on which the profile of voters who potentially abstained from voting in July and November 2021 due to concerns about handling the technology is identified. This includes individuals over the age of 70, those with poor education, residents of small towns and rural areas, as well as voters of the BSP and DPS

A comparative analysis of the data between polling stations with machine voting and polling stations where paper ballots were used in 2021 has been conducted. The data indicates that traditionally there is different behaviour among voters in smaller and larger population areas. However, the comparison shows that when paper ballots were used (on March 26, 2017, and April 4, 2021), the difference in voter turnout between the two types of voting locations was around 13-14%, while on July 11 and November 14, when only machine voting was used, it increased to 18-19%.

It should be emphasized that while in sections where paper ballots were used, voter turnout decreased by 6% between April 4 and November 14, 2021, in sections with machine voting, the decline reached 12%. Although it is not possible to pinpoint the exact extent of its influence, machine voting can be identified as one of the factors contributing to the reduced voter participation in the elections.

It should be noted that the introduction of any new technology or change in the electoral process requires a period for voters to adapt to it. Concerns about voting with machines may prove to be temporary and can be overcome over several consecutive elections. As highlighted by Kashukeeva-Nusheva, more frequent use of a particular technology in the electoral process instils confidence both in voters and the electoral administration when using it (2019: 67-82). We believe that this analysis of the impact of machine voting on voter turnout explains the negative influence on the use of preferences in the short term. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that machine voting provides the opportunity for a more accurate recording of preferential votes by the electoral commissions, as manual counting of preferences often leads to errors.

## **Conclusion**

Electoral reforms are often presented by parties, disguised with idealism. Behind this, there are usually direct party interests or a desire for indirect benefits and the cleansing of their political image. The Bulgarian example is no exception to this rule. Traditionally low levels of trust in the parliamentary institution and doubts about the fairness of the electoral process lead to additional expectations for reforms.

During the period under consideration, "voting for individuals" is often portrayed as a "panacea" that will restore trust in the electoral process. According to Le Bon (2021: 103), the power of words lies in the images they create, regardless of their actual content. He argues that it's the words with the vaguest meanings that exert the strongest influence. This is likely the reason for society's fixation on this topic. The debate in the National Assembly shows that the both majoritarian and preferential voting are proposed as instruments that will increase voter turnout, lead to the elevation of more qualified candidates, and enhance representativeness. However, in the period from 2014 to 2021, when the option for preferential voting was made available to citizens, this was not confirmed. The first parliamentary elections with preferential voting in 2014 saw a voter turnout of 47.8%, a slight decrease compared to the previous parliamentary elections held a year earlier in 2013 when turnout reached 51.3%. In the second parliamentary elections with preferential voting in 2017, there was indeed an increase in voter turnout to 54.1%, which was 5.4% higher than the previous elections. This was the only increase in voter turnout during the entire research period. However, the three consecutive elections in 2021 showed a declining trend in participation,

dropping from 50.6% in April to 40.2% in November. Consequently, the primary argument presented by the political elite, which posited that the reform was undertaken in response to citizens' demands to engage them in election participation, remains unsupported. This outcome demonstrates that electoral technology cannot compensate for the lack of political ideas, vision, and strong political leadership, and it cannot be decisive in mobilizing voters. High public expectations for the majoritarian system and preferential voting, known by the public as "majoritarian element," have forced parties to adopt positions that present them as reformers. Positive attitudes towards "voting for individuals" have led to moderation in criticism, especially regarding preferential voting. Some have also tried to find alternatives by imposing stringent validity thresholds instead of eliminating it altogether.

Apart from highlighting the populist nature of the proposals for the majoritarian vote and the "majoritarian element," this study conducts an analysis of one of the most significant reforms in the electoral process. The project is led by the principle that law amendments should be prefaced and followed by in-depth analyses of their pros and cons. Mere popularity of a proposal in society doesn't suffice to justify its implementation. There's a lack of data confirming that the introduction of preferential voting has resulted in increased voter turnout. It's worth considering the hypothesis that permitting voters to select a specific candidate on a party list might have appealed to those who traditionally vote for another party. This could impact electoral volatility and mandate personalization but not necessarily electoral mobilization.

Without aiming to investigate vote buying and controlled voting, the project provides examples where there are reasonable suspicions that preferential voting is used in this manner. This field has been examined by leading researchers, whose data delves more deeply into this phenomenon. Currently, there isn't enough information to conclude that preferential voting has increased vote buying and controlled voting. Therefore, we are inclined to argue that preferential voting might serve as an instrument for control, which, by itself, doesn't increase their share but replaces other practices like photographing the ballot with a mobile phone or using various deceptive methods. Additionally, it enhances the possibility of buying votes from individual candidates who are "playing for themselves." This doesn't prove that the market for purchased votes is expanding, but rather, it provides an opportunity for a redistribution toward individual candidates.



In conclusion, we can summarize that the emphasis on the format of the electoral process and electoral procedures sometimes shifts the focus away from what's more important – its content. Excessive expectations regarding reforms can lead to further disappointment. The quality of the political elite primarily depends on the parties, which bear the main responsibility for selecting and preparing their candidates. Preferential voting is another means for voters to indicate their representatives, but it is the responsibility of political parties to offer them the chance to make a quality selection.

## Contributions

- The dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of one of the most significant amendments in electoral legislation during the study period – the introduction of preferential voting. For the first time in academic literature, it compiles and analyzes aggregated data on the number and percentages of votes cast with preferences, both in total and by party, the number of candidates who manage to surpass the 7% preferential quota, and the number of list position changes. It also includes a comparative analysis of the dynamics of preferential voting by parties over the period. The appendices contain the complete data for the respective elections, including the number of ballots with and without preferential vote by party and electoral districts, preferential quotas by party and electoral districts, ballots with and without preferential vote by party and electoral districts, candidates who exceeded the preferential quota and the number of votes received by them, the share of voters who expressed a preference for a party in an electoral district, the number of candidates who exceeded the preferential quota for a party in an electoral district, and the number of effective preferences (rearrangements) for a party in an electoral district.
- The study provides a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates from 2009 to 2021 on the topics of the majoritarian vote, mixed electoral system, and preferential voting. Based on this analysis, it demonstrates that parties' positions are influenced by their direct political interests, achieved through two primary methods: directly, when the reform's initiator expects a mechanical advantage from its implementation (electoral engineering), and indirectly, when an image-related effect is aimed for with the proposed reform.

## **Publications Related to the Dissertation Topic**

- Publication in the "Annual of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," Faculty of Philosophy, Postgraduates Students' Book, Volume 5, 2020 on the topic: "Amendments in electoral rules as a panacea for the defects of Bulgarian democracy: evidence from parliamentary debates during the discussion of the 'Manolova' Electoral Code (2013-2014)"
- Publication in „*Doctoral readings 2021*“, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the topic: "The Effect of Machine Voting on Participation in the Elections on July 11, 2021."
- Publication in „*Doctoral readings 2022*“ Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" on the topic: „The decline in preferential voting in 2021”