

Does a Multi-party System Lead to “More” Democracy?

Written by Anastasija Malachova

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The question whether the multi-party system leads to “more” democracy is obviously not unequivocal. Before answering this question, I believe, the concepts of “democracy”, “multi-party system” and the notion of “more” should be defined and discussed in order to pave the way for the further analysis.

First of all, I would like to discuss “democracy” which “is an example of “essentially contested” concept “in a sense that the word means different thing to different people”. [1] Political scientists, as well as politicians, have not reached the consensus on what democracy exactly is. There are many different types of democracy being discussed and observed. However, “the modern understanding of the democracy is dominated by the form of electoral democracy that has developed in the industrialized West, often called liberal democracy”. [2] In order to make my analysis more specific and clear, I would like to focus on the concept of liberal democracy which “is a system of government that includes broad rights of political participation, liberal rights, as well as social and economic rights”. [3]

Secondly, the notion of “multi-party system” also has to be defined. According to Hague and Harrop, “in multiparty systems, the legislature comprises several minority parties, resulting in coalitions or, less often, minority government by the leading party”. [4] Simply stating, multipartism implies a party system that has more than two parties. However, according to Ware, multipartism has several different types such as polarized, moderate, segmented or atomized. [5] Obviously, a democratic regime in multi-party is “shaped” by the type of multipartism. This is because different multi-party systems have different levels of fragmentation as well as different competition/cooperation patterns, which have to be taken into account while observing and analyzing the “level” of democracy in the country.

Finally, I am inclined to think that the notion of “more democracy” should be also specified. What does it mean to ‘lead to “more” democracy’? As I am observing the concept of liberal democracy then, in this context, leading to “more” democracy should lead to an extension or improvement of the citizens’ rights. In my opinion, it does not necessarily have to be an extension or improvement of all rights; I believe that if, due to multipartism, there is an improvement in at least one of the rights (economic, liberal, etc.), then this could be regarded as “leading to “more” democracy”.

After having defined the main constituent parts of the question, now let me turn to the analysis itself.

To begin with, let me observe the representation of constituencies’ interests in multi-party system. According to Zagorski, “liberal democracy is the modern system of representative government that embodies the principle of popular rule while protecting individual rights”. [6] I would like to point out the notion of “representative government” mentioned by Zagorski. This means that the political parties which are in the government should represent the diversified interests of the constituency. In other words, “political parties and the systems they form constitute the major channels of interest aggregation and citizen input in contemporary democracies”. [7] Thus, the broader the representation or the interest aggregation, the greater is the citizen input and, hence, the more democratic the government should be. Taking the multi-party system into consideration and comparing it to two-party or dominant party (one-party) systems, it could be argued that in the multi-party system, constituencies have a greater probability that their interests will be represented than in any other party system. In my opinion, this is because multipartism implies having at least three parties which may represent completely different political ideologies and may be broadly scattered along the political spectrum; whereas, in the two-party system, there is usually a maximum of two political

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ideologies being represented that may have a rather big ideological distance, which implies quite a big gap between the two parties, and, consequently, voters do not have their interests fully represented.

Of course, the case when parties in one country have totally different ideological principles is rather extreme and unusual. However, intuitively, the greater the party fragmentation and the bigger the ideological distance between those parties, the more the constituency will benefit in terms of interest representation, which means that, in theory, the “rights of political participation”[8] should be enhanced, thus, leading to “more” democracy. Nevertheless, theory does not always correspond with the reality and practice. Furthermore, the intuition that a greater level of party fragmentation, as well as greater ideological distance, between parties should enhance democracy is a sense that this leads to better representation of constituency interests, but is not an incontestable fact. This is because there are many factors beyond multipartism which may have a considerable effect on the “level” of democracy in the country.

The Case of Russia

Let me observe the peculiar case of Russia during the transition period from communism to democracy. In general, I absolutely agree with Riggs’ and Schraeder’s argument that “Russia’s transition to democracy actually has been inhibited by the development of dysfunctional and extremely unstable multi-party system”.[9]

On the whole, the multipartism has obviously existed, but has it facilitated the transition to democracy or has it brought “more” democracy to Russia’s political system? In my opinion, there were some other factors beyond multipartism, which had complicated the development of democracy in Russia. First of all, I believe that one of the obstacles for Russia’s successful transition to democracy was the weak political culture. Throughout its history, Russia has almost always been under “one person” rule: before the formation of Soviet Union this person was tsar; after the formation of Soviet Union the dictatorship of the party leader was established. So, in general, even if political parties existed, they were usually suppressed, i.e. had no real power (except from CPSU which was subordinate to the party leader/dictator). Moreover, there was no experience of democratic elections as well as party competition, nor has the Russian political system inherited strong party-voter relationships – “the very concept of ‘party’ was strongly, negatively, associated with...CPSU”. [10] All in all, the political culture had to be built from scratch which, for sure, has influenced the democratization process in the country. To be more precise, the formation of political culture in Russia is an on-going process which, in my opinion, has a strong correlation with the level of democracy: I believe that weak political culture negatively contributes to the democratization process. Undeveloped political culture, even under multipartism, is an obstacle for democracy. To support my views, I would like to quote the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy 2008, according to which Russia has the 107th position out of 167.[11] It was classified as hybrid regime (which implies a rather low level of democracy) with the political culture score equal to only 3.75 out of 10.[12]

Another factor that lies beyond multipartism is coalition formation. According to Hague and Harrop, “to judge multi-party systems, a view is therefore needed on the character and functioning of coalitions”. [13] In my opinion, during the transition period, parties in Russia were highly broken up: there were very few common interests and principles they shared as parties were formed mainly under self-interests, which, in fact, is quite usual for the “political system without democratic heritage”. [14] As parties were driven mainly by “self-centred motives” [15] of political elites or party leaders, there were usually very few or even no common grounds for coalition formation, which, obviously, had complicated the democratization process in the country.

Corruption, in my opinion, is also one of the problems which has brought down the incipient Russian democracy. The greater the party fragmentation, and the more “self-centred motives” [16] parties have, the higher the probability of corruption would be. One reason is that parties seek “private gain through corrupt practices”. [17] Another reason is weak and poorly developed political culture, which, in fact, was the case in Russia.

Taking everything into consideration, I think that the case of Russia during the period of transition to democracy is the perfect example illustrating that the multi-party system on its own (solely) does not ensure “more” democracy. The example clearly illustrates that there are other factors behind multipartism which influence the process of democratization. Moreover, I absolutely agree with Riggs and Schraeder on the fact that “until the party system re-

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establishes its links with society and the incentives of party elite behavior are shaped by the need to promote societal interests rather than their own, Russia's party system will continue to be dysfunctional in the ongoing process of democratization”.[18]

Accountability

Another factor which is worth considering while analyzing the effect of multipartism on democracy is the notion of accountability. Accountability is one of the important “components” of democracy which implies that “in a democracy, citizens must have ability to reward and punish office holders for good or bad conduct and successful or unsuccessful policies”.[19] I am inclined to think that multipartism may lead to a decrease in accountability. This is because in a multi-party system, the government is usually formed by coalitions, which consist of several parties, and the decision-making process in this case is not straightforward, i.e. parties propose different initiatives and then come up with a policy or other decision as a result of negotiation and bargaining. Thus, it is difficult for the constituency to blame any particular party if the policy or the decision is undesirable or they believe it is unsuccessful.

Let me consider the example of the Netherlands, where multipartism has led to “the unaccountability of party strategy phenomenon”.[20] To be more precise, Gladdish argues that in the Netherlands, “the voter...has no certain knowledge where his party will end up in the bargaining process which surrounds the compilation of a governing coalition. Nor does he know how much of his party's programme will be preserved or implemented if the party enters a multi-party government”.[21] Obviously, due to the presence of coalition and collective bargaining, voters cannot be certain about the direction of the future policies, nor can they be sure which party to blame for the unfavourable policy; this has a negative impact on accountability. The situation is different in the two-party system where the accountability for the unpopular decision or policy is usually clearly attributed to either one party or another; the case of the dominant party system is even more clear- all the unpopular decisions are the burden of one party. All in all, the highly fragmented party system may cause the accountability to decrease and thus lead to “less” democracy in the country.

Party Competition

Up to now, there was little evidence of multipartism leading to “more” democracy. However, it should be argued that the multi-party system has a positive impact on the level of democracy in terms of party competition for gaining the support of voters. To be more precise, “the political parties in the multi-party context are not contending for exclusive power, because none can achieve it”.[22] Political parties instead are trying to get the maximum support from the voters to ensure their domination over the other parties. The tough competition makes parties adopt their programme and objectives to serve the interests of the constituency. Thus, it “tends to be more stress upon the need for views to be heard than upon the question of who actually takes the decisions”.[23] The voters, by no doubt, benefit from such competition as their “rights of political participation”[24] are enhanced and, hence, this leads to “more” democracy.

Electoral System

Finally, I would like to observe the concept of electoral competition in the context of multipartism. I believe that the type of the electoral system within the particular party system may have an influence on democracy. Karvonen and Ankar, in their comparative study of the Third World,[25] argue that “in countries with majoritarian electoral systems...a high degree of party system fragmentation *is* detrimental to the development of democracy”.[26] In my opinion, this is because the majoritarian electoral system implies one governing party. To be more precise, the party that gets the majority of votes executes the greatest power and, thus, in general, only people who have voted for that party get their interests fully represented; other constituencies lack the representation of their interests which, obviously, has a negative impact on the democracy.

Another effect is reached by the proportional representation electoral system. The PR, in my opinion, ensures the greater probability for the voters to get their interests represented in the parliament. This is because the PR system gives the parties which have not got the majority vote the opportunity to be elected in the parliament as well. Let me support my evidence with the example of France, where “the introduction of PR for the 1986 elections provided an

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incentive for those who might have earlier voted for the far right – which had almost always got the minority in the elections held before 1986 and had not got to the parliament – to do so now, knowing that their candidates might well get elected”.[27] Hence, it could be argued that multipartism with the proportional representation electoral system contributes to the development of democracy.

Taking everything into consideration, it could be argued that the existence of a multi-party system alone does not necessarily lead to “more” democracy. Many factors along with multipartism shape the level of democracy in a country. Based on my analysis, in order for the multi-party system to lead for “more” democracy, there should be a strong political culture in the country, good coalition potential, i.e. parties may be scattered along the political spectrum (represent quite big ideological difference), but they should have common interests and goals. Moreover, parties should not act solely on the basis of self-interest but should reflect the demands of constituency. In addition to this, the type of the electoral system, accountability, and party competition within the multi-party system affects the “level” of democracy as well. Thus, only the successful combination of all these factors within the multipartism may lead to the enhancement of democracy.

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