

The Strong Connection between the Romanian Two-Party System and the Electoral System (1866-1914)

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Abstract

In the year 1866, Romania moved to a new stage of its modernisation process and both the electoral system and the party system supported this process, which had been initiated by the political and cultural elite, formerly educated in various European universities.

In this article, I intend to show the relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system while studying historical facts by the aid of political science instruments. In my research, I am using a methodological approach based on critical text analysis and comparison of both primary sources (discourses, memories etc.) and specialized literature in history and in political science.

However, the evolution of the two-party system permitted the appearance of a few specific features starting from not only the resemblances, but also the differences between the British and the Romanian political systems.

Key words: Romanian two-party system, electoral system, Charles I, National-Liberal Party (1875), Conservative Party (1880).

The Constitution of 1866 and the foreign prince: Charles of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen

The political leaders, both liberals and conservatives, fulfilled their political desideratum by bringing a foreign prince on the throne of the country. This prince belonged to an important reigning house of Europe.

Opting for Charles of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen in 1866 signified an important step towards the consolidation of the young Romanian state and gradually permitted the accomplishment of other national objectives: gaining the independence and having it recognised (1877, 1878) and Romania becoming a kingdom (1881). But the new institutional and constitutional system of the newly created regime of 1866 was achieved due to the drafting and the promulgation of the 1866 Constitution (following the model of the Belgian constitution of 1831). The liberal and conservative political elite found a common denominator in adopting the 1866 Constitution. Thus, *“one could consider the 1866 Constitution as a compromise between the parties”* (Măiorescu, 2003: 72).

Under these circumstances, the fundamental law represented the juridical basis of the new regime and was preceded by an electoral law that stipulated the existence of the census suffrage, based on the wealth levels of the citizens. Furthermore, the vote was secret. This way, according to the census, for the election of the members of the Deputy Assembly, the electorate was divided in four colleges while for the election of the members of the Senate there were only two colleges (Radu, 2005: 20). An important electoral reform was applied in 1884, when the electorate was divided into three colleges for the election of the deputies and into two for the senators (*Constitution and Electoral Law*, 1884: 13-24).

The 1866 electoral law was revised in 1884 as a part of the necessary modernisation process of the state. In 1884, the National Liberal Party being the one that was ruling, it adopted the project for the adjustment of the electoral law. On the 8th of April 1884, Charles I promulgated the revised Constitution: *“the Decree no. 1788 of 8 June, of*

the same year, also promulgated a new electoral law (140 articles)" (*The Official Observer*, no. 51, 8 (20) June 1884).

The government formation mechanism

The configuration process of the new government was clearly established by the constitutional and institutional system of the newly created regime of 1866. The first stage was the stepping down of the ruling government, the second stage was the arrangement of consultations between Charles I and the political leaders of the future government and, finally, the last stage was the endorsement of one of these leaders as the prime minister (Hitchins, 2004: 104). The appointed prime minister was supposed to select his collaborators in order to form the new government and the sovereign, according to the 1866 Constitution, was then dissolving the legislative bodies (*Speeches of King Charles I*, Vol. II (1887-1914), 1939: 166).

Rendering to this process, as the liberal Vintilă Brătianu was observing, the new government was expected to "*belong to a political group, representing the aspirations of the majority of the public opinion at that moment as they were manifested through the elections*" (Brătianu, 1937: 361). If during the first stage of the reign of Charles I (1866-1871) no political group obtained the majority of the seats in the Parliament, this situation changed after 1871, when those who organised the elections invariably accomplished to also win them.

The electoral *modus operandi* of the electoral system and the shaping of the two-party system

In the operation of the political regime, the local elite preferred the electoral *modus operandi* of the *majority system with only one term of voting*, in which: "those elected were proclaimed as such on the basis of the absolute majority of the number of electors" (Colescu, 1913: 54). In case there was only one eligible place, the one who achieved the greatest number of votes was the one who won. When there were at least two eligible places, in case the number of votes for the two places was slightly similar, then it was the ballotage that represented the only solution etc. This type of scrutiny favored the two-party

system and, in this respect, Romania was not an exception in that period.

Likewise, article 109 of the 1884 electoral law stipulated undoubtedly that: *“the election of the deputies and of the senators should be done with the absolute majority of the expressed votes”* (Constitution and Electoral Law, 1884: 84). For the ballotage, a relative majority was sufficient.

Throughout that period, Charles I was the adept of the British model of government because it ensured the political stability and invariably lead to the modernisation of the country, a major objective he and the political elite had. Under these conditions, we can share the idea that: *“Britain has traditionally enjoyed the benefits of a stable, consistent, two-part system”* (Ingle, 1987: 17).

The development of the Romanian two-party system in 1866-1914 in relation to the electoral system

As the political scientist Maurice Duverger was noting plainly, *« le suffrage censitaire a d’abord engendre un bipartisme <<bourgeois>>»* (Duverger, 1976: 300), a phenomenon that was noticeable during the reign of Charles I (1866-1914). Under these conditions, one can agree with the idea that the electoral system favoured the two-party system in Romania.

The construction process of the political regime during that age was based on the two-party system. In 1866, after the creation of the new political regime, both the liberals and the conservatives were successively ruling. The formation process of the Romanian two-party system invariably intersected the first stage of Charles I’s reign (1866-1871), when numerous cabinets formed either by liberal groups or by conservative ones alternated in ruling the country (Dogaru, 2015: 126).

After having become prince of Romania on 10/22 May 1866 (Damean, 2000: 58), Charles I formed governments that could not ensure a stable political climate (there were ten governments and the legislative bodies were dissolved six times) (Damean, 2000: 100). Subsequently a highly tensioned period, culminating with prince

Charles I's threat to step down, in 1871, the conservative leaders found the solution of forming a strong conservative government under the leadership of Lascăr Catargiu and comprising of all the conservative groups (1871-1876).

The conservative newspaper *Timpul* (*The Time*) was offering a general evaluation of this five-year period: "*after five years of wise, energetic and patriotic administration, he managed to impose the principles of order and stability to this society and the country regained its self-esteem /.../ there was a strong impetus of the political and economic development. Nowadays, even the enemies of the old government [in 1877] admit the truth of this with late regret and bitter remorse*" ("Bucharest 31 December", 1877).

After this stage, the government alternation imposed the coming to power of the liberals, from 1876 to 1888. The liberals, united around the National Liberal Party, resisted in power for 12 years, under the leadership of the prime minister I. C. Brătianu. The fall of the liberals, in 1888, happened after much political strife and after a very tensioned period in the political life of the country.

Following this phase, the Junimea-conservative government ensured the government alternation and the modernisation process in tune with the conditions of the age. From this perspective, during the reign of Charles I, there were two long-term governments that succeeded each other: "the long liberal government" (1876-1888) and the Junimea-conservative government (1888-1895).

Seeing both the positive aspects and also the limitations of these two governments, the monarch understood that long governments can be dangerous because the two parties tended towards *personal governments*, which could make the government alternation difficult. In fact, the king's desideratum was to ensure political stability and this could be achieved on the basis of a partnership between liberals and conservatives according to which the ones could leave the governmental office and the others could accede to governmental office through a peaceful transfer of power. Obviously, this partnership could not be sanctioned in writing, but the alternation of the two political forces did become a customary political practice,

both political forces being conscious of the necessity that such a political mechanism operated well.

Gradually, the two-party system became more stable during the period 1895-1914 and invariably sustained the electoral system.

The conservative newspaper *Epoca* (*The Epoch*) mentioned that: *“while it was absolutely normal that a twelve-year liberal government should step down, it was equally normal that the conservative party should take the lead in the state affairs”* (“Guvern de coaliție” (“Coalition Government”), 1889).

Also in *Epoca* (*The Epoch*), the danger of the existence of a coalition government was announced: *“a coalition government would signify the disappearance of all party programs – all coalition parties would renounce their own principles. A coalition government would be the most discouraging example for the electors. They would see all those who had fought against each other on the pretext of high principles now united altogether according to personal desires and ambitions”* (“Guvern de coaliție” (“Coalition Government”), 1889).

Prince Charles I, in accordance with his prerogative of appointing the prime minister, helped the liberals to accede to power. The constitutional system was well-established – Art. 93 was stipulating that the prince *“appointed and revoked his ministers. He sanctioned and promulgated the laws. He could also refuse to sanction them. He could exercise his right of political amnesty /... / He appointed or confirmed all the public functions”* (*Constitution and Electoral Law*, 1884: 31).

The establishment of the “government alternation” was done almost automatically, becoming a political mechanism accepted and supported both by the political elite and by Charles I in order to ensure political stability.

Continuing this well defined politics of the political game between the king and the two political forces – the liberals and the conservatives – the liberal newspaper *Viitorul* (*The Future*) explained, in 1907, that: *“the governmental change took place in specific conditions because it was the first time that the coming government indicated to the leaving government which was its entire political program and, moreover, asked for its support in accomplishing it”* (“O înțelegere patriotică” (“A Patriotic Agreement”), 1907); the stabilization of the two-party

system was more and more obvious and it was supported by a political class that was not yet prepared for the universal suffrage. All this political class supported the census suffrage, which was creating a two-party system.

On the domestic political platform, the government alternation between the liberals and the conservatives was consolidated during the last period of Charles I's reign (1895-1914), when a new type of alternation could be observed – a more organised and efficient one.

With all the boundaries of the Romanian state, the majority of the politicians respected the two-party system and consolidated it – in that being supported by king Charles I. The application of the British model referring to the government alternation represented a constructive aspect of the Romanian political regime. The politicians got used to the two-party system and, in this respect, one could agree with the fact that: “although government can govern, it can never relax or become complacent because it is constantly confronted by an opposition that acts as a government in waiting” (Heywood, 2007: 285). This phenomenon was observed also within the Romanian political regime especially during the last period of Charles I's reign (1895-1914).

The liberal leader Vasile Lascăr, during a meeting of the Chamber, on 25 March 1901, mentioned the importance of the existence of only two strong modern parties on which the entire political platform could be based. He referred to an episode in which the Conservative Party was supposed to step down due to inner strife generated by political ego conflicts, which were specific to the parties during that age: “*we strongly wish for it to become complete again and become a strong government party, which could deal with the state affairs when we would not be able to go ahead anymore and which could continue the work done by the liberals*” (Lascăr, 1912: 401).

On the other side of the political spectrum, the conservative Take Ionescu reminded of the need to have a natural succession in government, in which each party was supposed to continue what the other had started – at least out of rational motives: “*there is no true constitutional and parliamentary government of political parties but when*

the difference between the parties is such that one can continue the work of the other" (Ionescu, 1903: 107).

A positive aspect of this relationship consists of the fact that using the government alternation between the liberals and the conservatives favoured the collaboration between the two government parties for the benefit of the country: *"the collaboration of the two parties would have been a good means of political education for the future and a proof both for the Romanian citizens and for the foreigners that we are a people that is full of life, who manage to unite in cases of danger"* ("Partidele politice" ("Political Parties"), 1907).

While analysing another important advantage, we can assert that the relationship between the electoral system and the party system ensured the modernisation process of the young Romanian state - the citizens still indirectly participating in the political life of their country. With years, due to the electoral competition, there were conferences and debates organised, thus the incipient political participation of the time being much encouraged.

The close relationship between the electoral system and the two-party system had advantages and drawbacks, but it also generated intense and sometimes tensioned debates regarding the extension of the suffrage. The electoral body was indeed reduced and the direct participation was indeed restricted due to the census system, but the citizens could still participate in diverse public manifestations (street demonstrations, public meetings etc.).

The progress of the country could exist only if the two political parties were working together. Although at the beginning of Charles I's reign there existed some tensions between the liberal and conservative groups of the time, with time, after the consolidation of the government alternation between the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, things started going their natural way from a political point of view and not only.

Nevertheless, in the year 1914, one could remark in Romania the fact that, in total, "only 1,46% of the population of the country were voting while in other countries the percentages were again different: in Hungary 6,2%, in Italy 8,3%, in Portugal 12%, in France 29%, in

Norway 33%, in Finland 45%" (Bulei, 2006, p. 11). Nevertheless, we can admit that the census suffrage during that time could be seen as a limit to the development of the Romanian state because the number of citizen who could vote was quite reduced. Regarding this limit, one can admit that there still could be indirect participation ensured for the citizens who could not vote (due to restrictions of census/wealth); such indirect participation in the political life could be noticed across different public manifestations such as public demonstrations, street manifestations, public meetings etc.

Nicolae Iorga criticised maybe a bit too harshly the existing electoral system because it did not propose a just representation of the people in the Parliament, a fact that was accurate. However, it was also true that Nicolae Iorga himself was not involved in the political game since it was only the liberals and the conservatives who participated in that and Iorga was thus excluded. In his analysis, the solution was the following: *"we are expecting at least an essential change of the present regime if not the universal suffrage itself. We cannot go on like this, with the present system, with people who are registered with one of the two political parties and vote without any sense of independence or of the value of citizenship and who largely brought us to this situation"* (Iorga, 1939: 64).

A drawback was also the *majority system with only one term of voting* (the candidate had to attain the absolute majority of the votes). For instance, this type of scrutiny helped in the creation process of the National Liberal Party and the Conservative Party, but, in contrast, generated some boundaries concerning the elections in general, because it was not easy to obtain the majority of the votes; for example, during that period, one can remark candidates who obtained a large number of votes, but they could not acquire the mandate in the legislative body, a fact that created a real issue within the political regime.

During that period, nevertheless, the essential advantage could be the long process of development of the Romanian two-party system, in which the electoral system had an important contribution and which eventually lead to the consolidation of the country and its

evolution towards modernisation. In contrast, among the drawbacks could be counted the reduced number of citizens who could vote and the visible obstacles for other political forces to intervene in the political life. That happened due to the fact that the census suffrage ensured a two-party system, making it almost impossible for other political parties to attain the political power.

Conclusion

During the period we are analysing (1866-1914), Romania had a two-party system and applied the British model of government, but all that had its own specific features. For instance, the census vote of the time favoured the government alternation of the conservatives and the liberals during the reign of Charles I, which led to the strengthening of the political regime and to the modernisation of Romania.

Despite all the limits and due to the positive aspects resulted from this relationship, the political regime was consolidated and one could observe, on the one hand, an intensified political education of both the citizens and the political elite and, on the other hand, specific features of the Romanian electoral system that were determined by the evolution of the Romanian society and had a major influence in the Romanian political life.

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