

Regional aspects of electoral transformations in Bulgaria (2021-2026)

Pavlinka Vladimirova, Marin Roussev,

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” Sofia, Bulgaria

Electoral transformations in Bulgaria in recent decades have been determined by a complex interaction between demographic, economic, ethno-confessional, socio-political and party factors, which in their aggregate change both the structure of the electorate and the logic of political representation. These processes lead to tangible changes in voter turnout, the territorial distribution of the vote and the degree of institutionalization and sustainability of the party system.

Bulgaria is among the countries in the European Union with the highest mortality rate and the fastest declining population. Aging, negative natural growth and continued external migration reduce the absolute number of voters, while simultaneously increasing the relative share of elderly voters. This has a direct impact on electoral behavior - the importance of socially conservative attitudes, policies aimed at social security and income, as well as stability as a value in political choice is increasing. In addition, internal migration and the depopulation of peripheral and rural areas lead to an uneven electoral weight between large urban centers and small settlements.

A specific factor for the Bulgarian political dynamics is the traditional social divisions (cleavages) - center-periphery, city-village, ethnic and religious differences, as well as socio-economic inequalities. After 2022, these divisions were further strengthened by external military-political events, which polarized public attitudes along lines such as Euro-Atlantic orientation versus Euroscepticism and geopolitical loyalty. Thus, a new dimension of value and foreign policy opposition was added to the traditional internal cleavages, which affected party competition and coalition formats.

After the democratic changes after 1989, relatively stable macro-electoral regions were formed, characterized by predictable party support, regardless of the personal and organizational transformations of the parties. For years, certain regions have identified themselves as “left”, “right” or dominated by ethno-confessional votes, which has created stable geographical voting patterns. However, these patterns have been called into question in the period of increased political fragmentation and institutional instability.

Regional aspects of electoral stereotypes in Bulgaria after 1989

Under the influence of specific socio-economic and cultural-political factors in the country, geographically distinct regions with stable electoral attitudes are formed.

Electoral districts with predominant left-wing political preferences.

The most characteristic of this type are 6 administrative districts, which are distinguished by an average of about 39% support for the BSP and its coalition partners in parliamentary elections during the period 1991-2005: Vidin (43%), Vratsa (42%), Montana (40%), Yambol (38%), Pleven

(36%) and Kyustendil (35%). Their total relative share in the country, in terms of territory, population and GDP indicators, is 19.2%, 14.4% and 11.4%, respectively, which is a sign of low values of demographic density, economic density and income of the population. They give 15% of the total parliamentary votes but provide 20% of the parliamentary seats in NA for the BSP in the country. They are distinguished by a relative wealth of land resources. Their characteristic features are the rapid depopulation, the high relative share of the rural and Christian population, the low level of economic activity and investment attractiveness, high rate of unemployment, the clearly expressed agricultural specialization of the economy. The average parliamentary voter turnout in them is higher than the average for the country – 68%. The relative share of votes for BSP candidates in the first round of presidential elections in them is 43%. Over 54% of the mandates for municipal mayors in the indicated administrative districts are cast or are clearly supported by the BSP.

Electoral districts distinguished by a clearly expressed ethno-social vote.

The most characteristic of this electoral type are 4 administrative districts, which are distinguished by an average of 39.4% support for the MRF in parliamentary elections: Kardzhali (60%), Razgrad (39%), Targovishte (27%) and Silistra (27%). Their total relative share, in terms of territory, population and GDP indicators, is 10.1%, 7.4% and 5.2% of the national potential, respectively, which is a sign of even lower values of the indicators of demographic density, economic density and income of the population. They give 8% of the total parliamentary votes, but provide 41% of the parliamentary votes for the MRF in the country, during the period 1991-2005.

They are distinguished by relatively favorable characteristics, in terms of land resources and the ecological state of the natural environment. Their characteristic features are the high relative share of Turkish and Muslim population, the widespread rural lifestyle, low investment attractiveness, high unemployment, a relatively favorable crime environment and high economic activity in the primary sector. The average parliamentary voter turnout in them, for the period 1991-2005, is 71%, which is significantly above the national average.

Electoral districts with predominant right-wing and center-right political preferences.

Unlike the already mentioned administrative districts, this electoral type is represented by administrative districts that are distant from each other with a clearly expressed center-periphery spatial structure. The most typical in this respect are Sofia-city, Plovdiv-city, the districts of Varna (excluding the municipality of Dalgopol) and Gabrovo. At the same time, significant for the final election results in the country are a number of right-wing electoral nuclei, whose center plays a major regional administrative role - Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Dobrich, Pernik, Pazardzhik, Blagoevgrad, Veliko Tarnovo. The total territory of the mentioned administrative districts and municipalities represents nearly 11% of the national territory, about 41% of the country's population lives in them and about 48% of its GDP is produced. The population is distinguished by a relatively preserved age structure. The share of the Turkish and Muslim population is small. The contingent of the Roma population is significant, which usually occupies compact territories

in separate residential neighborhoods with unfavorable infrastructure characteristics. The relatively high values of the indicators for economic density and living standards are the result of their greater investment attractiveness, the predominant economic specialization in the industries of the secondary and tertiary sectors and lower unemployment. The prevailing urban lifestyle is associated with a less unfavorable criminogenic situation. The high degree of anthropogenic pressure gives rise to problems of a social and environmental nature. The prevailing electoral preferences of the population are directed towards political platforms of parties and/or coalitions, presenting themselves in a diverse and dynamically changing format over time - UDF, DSB, NMSII, Atack, CEDB, etc. In parliamentary elections, during the period 1991-2005, a total of 39.4% of all valid votes in the country were cast in them, but only 27.9% of the votes cast for the BSP and the MRF, taken together, were received (26.7% and 1.2%, respectively).

Electoral districts in areas of divided electoral-political gravity.

The remaining administrative units cover about 60% of the country's territory, where 37% of its population live and 35% of its GDP is produced. The majority of them are sparsely populated, mainly mountainous and semi-mountainous, regions. They are characterized by an imperfect biparty or pure multiparty model and dynamic changes in electoral sentiment, especially with the emergence of new populist formations. Depending on the specific political configuration, two subtypes of administrative districts and municipalities are distinguished. The first includes those in which there is relative parity between left-wing and right-wing political parties and coalitions. Typical in this respect are the districts of Veliko Tarnovo, Sofia and Blagoevgrad, and among the municipalities – Belene, Levski, Tsarevo, Svilengrad, Simeonovgrad, Nedelino, Bratsigovo, Parvomay, Sadovo, Septemvri, Panagyurishte.

A second subtype is formed by regions with relative parity between several parties and coalitions. These are mostly administrative units in which the MRF plays an equal or balancing role between left and right formations. At the level of administrative districts, such as Haskovo, Shumen, the predominant part of Ruse can be mentioned. Among the municipalities, typical examples are Gotse Delchev, Hadzhidimovo, Aytos, as well as the pre-Balkan Lovech municipalities.

During the first half of the transition (1991-2005), several macro-electoral regions emerged with a traditional political orientation towards a certain spectrum of the political space – Northwestern, Western Sofia-Pernik periphery, Southeastern, Northeastern, Eastern Rhodope, Western Rhodope-Mesta.

In the 2009 parliamentary elections, the CEDB political party managed to win the elections by uniting the traditional right-wing and center-right voters behind it, with the greatest influence in large cities and regional centers.

At the same time, the BSP electorate began to decline sharply even in its traditionally strong electoral districts. A factor in the latter is the relatively higher average age of BSP voters, due to which they are declining for natural reasons.

Traditionally, the MRF retained its electoral influence in the districts of Kardzhali, Razgrad, Shumen, Targovishte and Silistra. This electoral model was maintained in the next ten years without significant changes, while CEDB became the longest-ruling political party in Bulgaria since 1989.

Significant changes in territorial terms are noted by the MRF. In regions such as Lovech, Sliven, Sofia – 2, the electoral votes are halved. At the same time, in a total of 12 other regions, the votes are increasing, such as in Pernik by 60%, and Sofia – 1 by 38%. These regions are not traditionally supporting the MRF.

The holding of eight parliamentary elections in the period 2021–2026 has accelerated the processes of electoral mobility and shaken traditional regional identifications. Some electoral regions have changed their political orientation, with a shift in support between ideologically and value-diverse parties being observed. Traditionally right-wing regions have registered stronger support for liberal and anti-system formations, while traditionally left-wing regions have provided higher results for ethno-confessional parties. This indicates a weakening of classic ideological divisions and a growing importance of pragmatic motives in voting.