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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Architecture of Power: The Systemic Impact of Electoral Models on the Structure and Dynamics of Political Parties. A Look into the Future

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Abstract
This article explores the causal relationship between voting rules and the configuration of party systems. The analysis starts from the classical premises of political science analyses concerning electoral engineering and integrates recent developments from the European political landscape of 2026, such as the digitalization of the electoral process and the adaptation of parties to increasingly restrictive representation thresholds. The analytical framework is expanded by including recent data on democratic resilience and losers' consent, highlighting how the perception of legitimacy is mediated by negative partisanship in contexts of extreme polarization. The central conclusion is that the electoral system functions as an institutional filter that determines not only the number of political actors, but also their degree of internal cohesion and their capacity to adapt to emerging digital infrastructures, such as the "Democracy Stack".

Keywords: *electoral system, political party, voting, majoritarianism, proportionality, artificial intelligence, Democracy Stack, digital integrity.*

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Introduction

In contemporary political science, electoral systems are considered the most concrete alterable variable of a democratic political regime. They are not simple tools for counting citizens' options, but represent the set of rules that define the political market. Beyond their accounting function, electoral systems directly influence the quality of participation. In the year 2025, strategies to support democracy at the European level underwent a structural recalibration, prioritizing the protection of internal democratic norms against the rise of far-right parties and governance crises that fueled public disillusionment.

Recent research demonstrates that the simple personalization of the vote through open-list systems does not automatically generate an increase in voter turnout; paradoxically, it can decrease voting efficacy by increasing the rate of electoral errors and voided ballots due to heightened cognitive complexity for voters. Empirical evidence collected from the Spanish electoral system confirms that open lists do not produce incentive effects on turnout compared to closed lists, but instead introduce a critical trade-off between freedom of choice and procedural complexity that can undermine the initial intention of democratic inclusion.

In a context marked by electoral volatility and the emergence of populist movements in the first half of the 2020–2030 decade, analyzing the impact of these systems on political parties becomes crucial for understanding democratic stability in 2026.

This article analyzes how electoral design influences party system fragmentation, elite selection, and campaign strategies, while also integrating the perspective of disinformation mechanisms and hybrid aggression that threaten the stability of European states, particularly in eastern regions.

Theoretical Framework: From "Duverger's Laws" to Game Theory

Starting from the techniques specific to different categories of electoral systems, the starting point for any academic analysis of the topic remains the contribution of Maurice Duverger. In 2026, although societies are much more complex than in 1951, his postulates remain valid under certain conditions.

The first postulate, the **Mechanical Effect**, suggests that majoritarian "single-member district" (SMD) systems tend to under-represent small parties whose votes are geographically dispersed, favoring the concentration of seats among large parties.

The second postulate, the **Psychological Effect**, describes the behavior of voters who avoid wasting votes on candidates with no real chances, while political elites tend to merge to achieve the critical mass necessary to win a seat.

Continuing the classical perspective offered by Duverger, subsequent literature refined and, in certain respects, nuanced both effects. Gary W. Cox (1997), in his work *Making Votes Count*, formalizes these mechanisms through the concept of "strategic coordination" at the voter and elite levels (Cox, 1997). Cox demonstrates that the effective number of competitive candidates in a district tends to be limited by the M+1 rule, where M represents district magnitude. Thus, in SMD systems (M=1), competition converges toward two relevant candidates, providing a formal foundation for the two-party law (Cox, 1997).

This perspective is complemented by the contributions of Rein Taagepera and Matthew Shugart (1989), who introduced the concept of "effective number of parties" (ENP) as an empirical tool to measure party system fragmentation (Taagepera & Shugart,

1989). Their studies show that not only the electoral formula, but also the broader institutional structure (including federalism, presidentialism, or electoral thresholds) influences the degree of fragmentation. In particular, Taagepera (2007) proposes predictive models that directly link district magnitude to ENP, suggesting that increasing M leads almost mechanically to an increase in political pluralism (Taagepera, 2007).

From a game theory perspective, elections can be modeled as coordination games with imperfect information. Voters face a strategic dilemma: vote sincerely (for their true preference) or strategically (for a viable candidate). Myerson and Weber (1993) developed the concept of "coordination equilibrium" in electoral contexts, showing that outcomes critically depend on voters' common expectations regarding candidate viability (Myerson & Weber, 1993). In this sense, opinion polls and media signals become central tools in stabilizing these equilibria.

More recently, Blais and Nadeau (1996), as well as Gschwend (2004), empirically analyzed strategic voting, demonstrating that it is more frequent in majoritarian systems than in proportional ones, though it does not completely disappear in proportional representation (Blais & Nadeau, 1996) (Gschwend, 2004). This suggests that Duverger's psychological effect is conditioned by voter information levels and the clarity of competition.

Regarding voter turnout, the literature is more divided. Franklin (2004) suggests that proportional systems tend to increase turnout by reducing wasted votes, whereas other authors, such as Jackman (1987), indicate that the effects are mediated by contextual factors like party mobilization and perceived competitiveness. Thus, the aforementioned contraction effect is not universal, but depends on how competition is reconfigured at the national versus local level (Jackman, 1987).

Integrating game theory with institutional analysis leads to an important conclusion: electoral systems do not mechanically determine outcomes, but rather structure a strategy space within which actors (voters, parties, candidates) interact. In this sense, Aleman and Tsebelis (2011) show that electoral rules can be understood as "equilibrium institutions" that stabilize certain patterns of political competition (Aleman & Tsebelis, 2011).

Contemporary analyses indicate that the transition from majoritarian systems to proportional representation (PR) generates a contraction effect in the distribution of mobilization effort. Long-term studies show that introducing proportional representation can reduce voter turnout in districts that were previously highly competitive under a majoritarian system, because the stake of a direct local victory is diluted in favor of a national party logic.

On the other hand, regarding how electoral engineering influences party dynamics, perhaps the most important technical variable of an electoral system is not necessarily the seat allocation formula (D'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë), but the district/constituency magnitude (M — the number of seats allocated in a constituency). According to Arend Lijphart (2012), there is an inverse correlation between district magnitude and the degree of disproportionality. In small districts (M=1), the entry barrier is immense, forcing parties to merge to survive. Conversely, in proportional systems with national lists (e.g., the Netherlands, where Magnitude = 150), fragmentation is at its maximum.

Another important aspect is the role of explicit and implicit electoral thresholds. Lijphart (1994) emphasizes that legal thresholds (e.g., 5%) function similarly to district magnitude in limiting access for small parties (Lijphart, 1994). At the same time, Carey and Hix (2011) introduce the concept of the PR "sweet spot," arguing that medium-

magnitude systems offer an optimal balance between representativeness and governability, avoiding both hyper-fragmentation and major distortions (Carey & Hix, 2011).

Therefore, in addition to the variables mentioned above, the role of electoral thresholds requires closer analysis when attempting to explain how party dynamics are influenced by various forms of electoral engineering.

Party Dynamics and Electoral Thresholds

Legal electoral thresholds act as mechanisms of political engineering, limiting fragmentation even within proportional systems. They force small parties to form pre-electoral alliances, thereby altering the configuration of the party system before voting takes place. This trend is visible across the European Union, where the 2018 Electoral Law reform and subsequent 2022 proposals aim to introduce mandatory thresholds between 2% and 5% for member states with large constituencies, intending to prevent excessive fragmentation within the European Parliament.

Gary Cox (1997) extends Duverger's analysis through the theory of strategic coordination. He argues that the electoral system operates like a set of market rules limiting the number of viable "products" (parties). In plurality systems, coordination occurs at the district level, whereas in proportional systems, coordination occurs nationally. If a party consistently fails to cross the threshold or win seats, political elites and financial backers will abandon that entity in favor of one with viable chances.

Electoral thresholds do not merely act as technical barriers, but as institutional tools with anticipatory effects on actor behavior. Literature shows that they generate a process of "anticipatory coordination," in which elites and voters alike adjust strategies prior to balloting (Cox, 1997). Thus, the electoral threshold not only filters results, but restructures the political supply *ex ante*. Small parties are forced to decide between merging, forming alliances, or making a strategic withdrawal—a choice influenced by organizational resources, access to funding, and ideological positioning (Golder, 2006).

At the same time, threshold effects are conditioned by district magnitude and the electoral formula. According to Taagepera and Shugart (1989), a mathematical relationship exists between constituency magnitude and the effective number of parties, meaning a formal threshold of 3% can yield vastly different effects in a nationwide list system compared to regional constituencies. In the European Parliament, where some states use single nationwide constituencies, implementing uniform thresholds between 2% and 5% can significantly reduce the number of represented parties without entirely eliminating fragmentation, instead reconfiguring it around broader political blocs.

Cox's theory of strategic coordination becomes even more relevant in today's context of polarization. Voters are no longer merely rational consumers choosing the ideologically closest party, but actors calculating electoral success probability and strategic vote consequences. This behavior is also conceptualized in literature on tactical voting, which appears more frequently in threshold systems or tight competitions (Tyszler & Schram, 2016).

By 2026, however, this mechanism is amplified by negative partisanship. Recent studies indicate that political identification is increasingly defined by opposition to a "political enemy" rather than attachment to one's own party (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). This dynamic profoundly alters strategic coordination logic: voters not only avoid wasted votes, but are willing to support larger parties or broad alliances to prevent the victory of a rival perceived as unacceptable.

This transformation directly affects the concept of *losers' consent*. In classical theory (Anderson et al., 2005), democratic legitimacy stems from losers accepting the rules of the game. Under negative partisanship, this acceptance becomes emotionally and instrumentally conditional: voters are more inclined to accept outcomes when the "greater evil" is defeated, even if their preferred party loses. Conversely, when an ideological rival wins, perceived legitimacy drops sharply, increasing the likelihood of contested results, protests, or radicalized political rhetoric.

Furthermore, research on affective polarization suggests that this form of partisanship reduces readiness for post-electoral compromise and cooperation (Iyengar et al., 2019). Combined with electoral thresholds, the outcome can be paradoxical: while the system appears less fragmented at an institutional level, it becomes more rigid and contentious politically. Pre-electoral alliances formed strategically to clear thresholds may be ideologically fragile, complicating subsequent governance (as illustrated in Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Electoral Systems and Fragmentation (2025–2026 Data)

Country	**Electoral System**	**District Magnitude (M)**	**Electoral Threshold**	**Effect on Party System**
Netherlands	Pure Proportional	150 (Single district)	0.67%	Extreme multi-party system; governmental fragility
Germany (2025)	Reformed Mixed	630 (Fixed seats)	5%	Forced concentration; elimination of overhang seats
Spain	Proportional (D'Hondt)	Small-medium average (52 districts)	3% (local)	Rigid ideological blocs; favors large parties
France	Majoritarian (Two-round)	1	—	Forced bipolarization; pre-electoral alliances required
Romania (2024)	Proportional	Variable	5%	Rise of anti-system parties; dependence on state subsidies

In the context of heightened polarization in recent years, negative partisanship has become a central element of electoral behavior, redefining how citizens relate to politics and democratic legitimacy. Unlike the classical model where voters were motivated primarily by allegiance to their own party, recent research shows that individuals increasingly act out of a desire to block power access for a rival deemed undesirable. Literature highlights that negative partisanship is not merely a temporary reaction, but can solidify into a stable social identity comparable in intensity and durability to positive identification, generating hostility toward rival party supporters and eroding social cohesion. In this sense, voters no longer define themselves solely by what they support, but by what they reject—a phenomenon conceptualized as political "disidentification".

This shift carries direct consequences for voting behavior and perceptions of political competition. Comparative studies indicate that negative assessments of parties and leaders significantly drive vote choice, and in some Western democracies, negative partisanship levels exceed positive affiliations. At the same time, affective polarization causes voters to view politics as an existential conflict where a rival's victory threatens core values. This perception boosts voter mobilization while diminishing readiness for compromise and dialogue.

Normatively, the implications for democratic legitimacy are profound. The traditional concept of *losers' consent*, rooted in accepting democratic rules regardless of outcome, is eroded by this dynamic. Accepting electoral results becomes emotionally and partisan-conditioned: voters accept defeat more readily if the opponent is weakened or delegitimized, but contest outcomes when the hated side prevails. Consequently, legitimacy no longer derives purely from process, but from partisan satisfaction or frustration. Democracy risks being viewed not as a neutral framework for competition, but as an instrument of conflict between antagonistic identities, where rules are respected only when producing desired outcomes.

In conclusion, electoral thresholds should not be analyzed in isolation as mere tools for reducing fragmentation, but as elements interacting with broader dynamics—strategic coordination, polarization, and negative partisanship. In today's European landscape, these interactions can produce party systems that appear more consolidated on the surface, yet are simultaneously more tense and vulnerable to political challenge.

Conversely, this perspective brings forward another essential dimension: if electoral system design affects party counts, and if thresholds, magnitude, and voter behavior exert similar influences, it is necessary to examine the internal organization of parties as they adapt to different formulas of electoral engineering.

Impact on Internal Party Organization

The electoral system dictates how a party exercises authority over its members. Closed-List Proportional Representation systems solidify central party power. Because candidate ranking on the list is set by leadership, parliamentary discipline remains high. Party members tend to remain loyal to the leader to secure an eligible spot in the next election. In contrast, Preferential Voting or Open-List systems shift competition from external (between parties) to internal (among candidates of the same party). This leads to the personalization of politics and frequently weakens ideological cohesion, as candidates are forced to build personal financial and electoral support bases independent of the central apparatus.

The evolution toward the digital party or platform-party in 2026 has redefined these dynamics. The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) enables direct interaction between leaders and supporters, bypassing traditional media. However, research shows digitalization is not a neutral process: left-wing parties tend to use digital tools to boost internal democracy and deliberation, whereas new parties lacking organizational legacy deploy digital innovations as functional substitutes for missing infrastructure. This model of distributed centralism allows grassroots supporters to participate actively in specific decisions, while consolidating strategic control within a small elite managing the platform.

Another major trend in 2026 is party adaptation to new party financing regulations. In proportional systems with high thresholds, mid-sized parties are forced into cartelization strategies, working closely with the state to secure subsidies essential for surviving against anti-system parties.

Romania's 2025 case study illustrates the risks of this model. The political system became almost entirely dependent on state subsidies, which in 2025 were capped at approximately 290 million RON (a 25% reduction compared to 2024, yet still considered excessive by independent observers). This massive funding facilitated opaque investments in friendly media outlets, distorting public messaging and allowing anti-system actors to gain ground through non-conventional campaigns on platforms like TikTok, outside the strict regulations imposed on television networks.

Party system fragmentation is not purely a result of electoral engineering, but a reflection of how parties exploit identity configurations. Recent studies indicate that particularism and expansivism are minority stances, with pluralist identity serving as the norm. Research by Martin Lukk demonstrates a causal link between income inequality and radical-right party success through "boundary consolidation" (Lukk, 2024).

Economic inequality creates social status threats, prompting exclusionist shifts in defining national belonging. This reactive ethnonationalism becomes the primary mobilization lever for the radical right, which leverages cultural protectionism to attract voters feeling abandoned by traditional elites.

This dynamic is exacerbated by affective polarization. Voters no longer judge government performance through economic indicators, but through the satisfaction of seeing ideological opponents defeated. Data from 2026 show that accepting election results relies critically on negative partisanship: citizens accept unfavorable results more easily if their most disliked party failed to secure a decisive victory.

Additionally, in the present context, digitalization and artificial intelligence are once again reshaping and re-particularizing the framework of this analysis.

Technological Transformation: Digitalization and Electoral Integrity

In the political landscape of 2026, Artificial Intelligence has transitioned from an experimental tool to a systemic variable. AI's capacity to generate "persuasion at an industrial scale" using logical arguments and plausible evidence (even if not always factual) has redefined political campaigns. Experiments from 2024–2025 show that interactive AI dialogues can shift political preferences more effectively than traditional media, with information density accounting for 44% of persuasive impact (Olejnik, 2026).

The European Union responded via the AI Act, establishing clear technical criteria in February 2025 to determine systemic risk (models exceeding 10^{23} FLOPS). Regulations strictly prohibit AI usage for psychological manipulation while allowing permissible influence based on logical reasoning. Nevertheless, vulnerabilities persist;

July 2025 experiments revealed that responses from models like ChatGPT could be manipulated through strategic content placement on low-authority domains, suggesting AI systems remain susceptible to hybrid influence operations.

Blockchain-based voting systems have emerged as a major technical solution to combat fraud and enhance transparency. Research from 2025 and 2026 proposes multi-level models (Booth, District, State, Country) using asymmetric cryptography (ECDSA) and hash functions (SHA3_256) to secure data. These systems enable full auditability and remove reliance on a central authority, lowering the risk of internal tampering (Yao et al., 2020).

In January 2026, International IDEA launched the concept of the **Democracy Stack** in response to the rise of digital authoritarianism. This framework proposes that Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) be designed with democratic values at its core, rather than as an afterthought. The Democracy Stack integrates digital identity systems that safeguard individual rights, inclusive payment mechanisms, and information flows designed to counter disinformation (Marskell et al., 2023).

The Democracy Stack thus introduces a paradigm shift: democratic values—such as rights protection, transparency, accountability, and inclusion—must be embedded from the initial design phase of digital infrastructure, not added later as corrective measures. The conceptual framework emphasizes reconfiguring all DPI layers, from digital identity and payment systems to information flows and data governance, to uphold citizen agency and political participation (Marskell et al., 2023). In this regard, the concept aligns with literature framing the "stack" as a multi-layered architecture of digital power, where every level—infrastructural, algorithmic, and interface—helps shape relations of sovereignty and control (Rodriguez, 2026).

Analytically, the Democracy Stack can be interpreted as a response to three major trends identified in academic literature:

1. **The rise of "digital authoritarianism,"** characterized by using digital infrastructure for surveillance, control, and information manipulation. Recent studies indicate that profit-driven digital platforms tend to amplify disinformation and polarization, undermining democratic deliberation and public trust (Mueller-Bloch & Ciriello, 2026). In this context, embedding democratic mechanisms of information governance—such as algorithmic transparency or responsible moderation—becomes essential.
2. **The legitimacy crisis in digital democracies,** where technological infrastructure is frequently controlled by private actors or configured without public participation. E-democracy literature notes that while technology can expand participation, it introduces risks related to algorithmic bias, power concentration, and digital exclusion (Rodriguez, 2026). The Democracy Stack addresses this tension by promoting public-interest infrastructure where citizens are not merely users, but co-beneficiaries and ideally co-governors of the system.
3. **The imperative of "digital sovereignty,"** meaning the capacity of states and societies to control the critical infrastructures shaping their political and economic lives. DPI is already regarded as critical infrastructure for democratic resilience, and examples like the "India Stack" demonstrate both scaling potential and risks associated with surveillance and exclusion (Shackelford, 2025, p. 240). Here, the Democracy Stack offers a normative alternative: digital infrastructure that is not only efficient, but fundamentally democratic. A central element of this framework is the functional integration of three components: digital identity, payment systems, and the information ecosystem. Digital

identity must guarantee universal access without compromising privacy rights; payment systems must be inclusive and reduce inequality; and information flows must be designed to limit disinformation and foster pluralism. This integration reflects a systemic view of digital democracy where civic participation is not separate from technological infrastructure, but mediated and shaped by it.

In conclusion, the Democracy Stack represents an effort to reconcile technological shifts with democratic norms, moving from profit- and efficiency-driven digital infrastructure toward one centered on rights and participation. By "future-proofing" democracy, the concept suggests that the survival and adaptation of democratic regimes in the digital age depend not only on political institutions, but also on the technological architecture supporting them. Without such reconceptualization, digital infrastructure risks becoming a vector of democratic erosion rather than a catalyst for its renewal, even beyond the casting of votes or the application of electoral mechanisms established by various systems.

Conclusions and Future Trends

The impact of an electoral system on political parties is structural and multidimensional. In 2026, it is evident that no ideal system exists, only trade-offs between accurate representation and executive efficiency. Political parties are not autonomous entities, but organisms that adapt biologically to the environment created by electoral laws.

The analysis demonstrates that democratic stability in the second half of the decade depends on the ability to manage two divergent forces: the demand for institutional simplification and efficiency versus the push for personalization and digital inclusion (promoted by platform-parties).

Any future voting reform will need to incorporate digital integrity clauses to prevent AI manipulation while maintaining losers' consent within a landscape marked by deep affective polarization.

In essence, the future of political parties will be defined by how successfully they navigate between the traditional logic of electoral engineering and the new realities of the Democracy Stack. Success will belong to those organizations capable of demonstrating campaign algorithm transparency and mobilizing the electorate without exacerbating the social fractures that threaten the very foundation of democratic consensus.

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