

PARTY POLITICS IN THE BALKANS: ANALYSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTY SYSTEMS FRAGMENTATION AND VOTER TURNOUT

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Introduction

Political parties serve as fundamental institutions in democracies today. Their role often is as intermediaries between citizens and the state. Parties mobilise voters, aggregate interests and advocate for civic involvement. Party systems in the Balkans are the backbone and the drivers of political representation. However, the relationship between party systems and civic engagement is not uniform across regions, particularly in countries undergoing profound transformation. As countries are still on the journey of democratic consolidation amidst post-conflict realities, the role of political parties is even more fundamental in this region. Parties' effectiveness, however, is shaped by a wide range of factors including institutions, socio-political conditions, historical legacies.

The Balkan countries stand at the crossroads of historical complexity and political transformation, offering a distinctive context for exploring their party systems dynamics and influence on the democratic processes in the countries.



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The Balkan region is a historically complex and volatile area, having undergone major transformations in the post-conflict realities. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the wars faced in the region, Balkan countries have experienced challenges in rebuilding societies and establishing functioning democratic systems. These transitions have been shaped by the interplay of historical legacies, ethnic and socio-economic challenges. Despite European integration, the region remains marked by uneven democratic development with variations in the levels of government trust and fluctuating turnout levels.

Importance of Party Systems in Shaping Political Dynamics

The Balkans is home to a diverse array of political parties, many of which are small and often fail to secure significant electoral support. This proliferation of parties, while seemingly indicative of a vibrant democratic process, complicates the political landscape. In the Balkans, party systems have played a pivotal role in shaping politics dynamics, reflecting and reinforcing societal cleavages. The party systems in the Balkans were formed under the influence of various historical events and external factors. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent national liberation movements, many of the Balkan states began to build their own political structures. In the 20th century, especially after World War II, communist parties dominated the region, but after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, democratic parties began to take leading positions.

The evolution of party systems in the Balkans has raised further concerns that citizens involvement in democracy might be at risk, characterised by mix of old ideologies and new political movements. In time of crisis, we might not only witness that a fragmented party system in a country has a significant impact on the electoral outcomes, but does it also influence electoral participation and (de) motivation in citizens to be active agents in the democratic life of their country? Does the fragmentation of party systems influence electoral participation?

What is the relationship between party systems and voter turnout in the context of post-conflict Balkan democracies? Is party system fragmentation constant for specific countries or does it change over time? We are urgently in need of empirical evidence to be able to answer these questions.

Political participation rates reflect the degree to which citizens feel empowered to influence the decision-making process. Talking about Balkan countries, trends in political engagement show valuable insight into the health and inclusiveness of emerging democracies. When we have high levels of political participation,

we could say that there is a functioning democracy where the citizens feel represented and capable to influence change. On the other hand, low rates of political participation suggest dissatisfaction with political structure, institutions, leaders and parties. By analysing political participation in the Balkans in this chapter, we can illuminate how party systems fragmentation fosters or hinders democratic engagement. This chapter analyses parliamentary elections only as presidential elections occur not that often in countries. After in-depth research, it was evident that in presidential elections, candidates are not always associated with a certain political party. In some countries, the president is elected by the parliament, not directly by the people e.g., Albania.

This chapter aims to explore the relationship between party systems and electoral participation. It will shed more light on this relationship by discussing empirical findings from an analysis of voter turnout and a measure of party fragmentation across Balkan countries. In order to present evidence reflecting on the influence of the high/low fragmented party systems on the propensity of individuals to cast a ballot, I explore levels of voter turnout among Balkan countries¹ and analyse these findings in relation to the fragmentation of party systems in each country. The analyses use effective number of parties (ENP) as an accurate measure of fragmentation in a party system as it takes into account the relative vote share or seats that are being held by each political party (Sartori, 1976). Hence, in this chapter, I do not simply classify by multiparty vs two-party systems but analyse the effective number of parties to account for fragmentation in the party system. Consequently, I highlight trends, challenges and expose what are the implications for democracy in the Balkans.

Conceptualising the Relationship Between Party Systems and Political Participation

Party systems are one of the central phenomena studied across social sciences. For decades, scholars have analysed the influence of party configurations on the democratic life. A party system is the structure and dynamics between political parties, it is not simply a collection of parties within a country, including number of parties, ideology and competition (Sartori, 1976). The Balkans are home to a diverse range of political parties, where many are small and often cannot secure significant voter support. This proliferation of parties, while it seems indicative of a vibrant democratic process, has an effect on the political landscape.

1 The term by most definitions fully encompasses Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Romania and Turkey.

Electoral systems and party systems are one of the most studied institutional determinants of voter turnout. Numerous studies reinforce that Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems boost political participation as they make voters feel they are creating a meaningful and direct impact by voting. Existing research highlights the clearer relationship between turnout and PR electoral systems as PR systems enhance voter motivation to cast a ballot (Jackman and Miller, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Ladner and Milner, 1999; Bowler et al., 2003; Fornos et al., 2004; Milner and Ladner, 2006; Selb, 2009; St-Vincent, 2013). The unconventional wisdom that Proportional Representation systems, reduce the risk of “wasted votes” and create a direct link between individuals’ preferences and electoral results, hence creating higher engagement. As per Duverger’s law (1954), PR systems create multipartyism, and it is expected that more political parties will participate in the electoral race, and small political parties are not likely to be excluded from that race. This would encourage people to vote as they could have greater choice.

Balkan countries utilise Proportional Representation², which tends to foster multiparty systems. However, this model can also lead to political fragmentation, making it challenging to form stable governments. While other factors influencing turnout are explored in this chapter, the consistent use of PR across the Balkan region ensures that analysing electoral systems will not introduce significant variance in electoral participation.

The interplay between party systems and political participation is both direct and mediated by various factors. Fragmentation within party systems, for instance, can result in increased voter choice, potentially leading to higher participation by offering citizens more diverse political options (Powell, 1986). However, excessive fragmentation may also lead to political instability and voter disillusionment, especially in post-conflict societies where citizens may struggle to see tangible benefits from their involvement (Lijphart, 1999). The relationship between the number of political parties and turnout has been debated largely in the political science field. Key influential studies suggest that a higher number of political parties increases turnout as it increases the number of choices available to the voters, making it more likely citizens to feel they can easily find a party that aligns with their ideologies and needs (Blais and Carty, 1990). Citizens

2 The parliamentary election in May 2023 in Greece was the first one under the simple PR system, which was introduced by SYRIZA in 2016 abolishing the 50 seat bonus. As parties were unable to form a government after the election, a second election took place in June 2023 where it was reverted to a modified version of the reinforced PR system, introduced by the New Democracy government in 2020 (Difford, 2023).

are more likely to find a party or a candidate that represents their interests as there are more options to choose from. In addition, a higher number of political parties creates a higher level of partisanship across individuals. However, it is important to note that even if there is a multi-party system within a country, this does not automatically mean that all political parties represent divergent ideas. Franklin (2004) argued that higher numbers of political parties mobilise the disengaged voters as the likelihood of parties focusing on underrepresented groups is greater in multiparty systems. The predominant argument in the literature is that a higher number of parties increases voter turnout as there are more alternatives to choose from and there are more parties that take part in the process of voter mobilisation (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995; Koopmans and Kriesi, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais and Massicotte, 2002).

On the other hand, research indicates that too many parties can lead to voter confusion or apathy, resulting in decreased turnout or no significant change. For instance, Stockemer (2017) analysed the effect of the number of parties on electoral turnout and reported that 22 studies showed a positive relationship, 13 showed a negative one, and 59 models revealed that the number of parties is unrelated to electoral turnout. The influential study of Powell (2000) discussed that coalition politics, which are very common in PR highly fragmented party systems, might result in voters feeling disconnected from the decision-making process, contributing to low turnout. Schneider and Schmitter (2004) suggested that coalition governments in fragmented party systems potentially lower the perceived efficiency of votes, leading to voter apathy and low engagement (Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004). Another influential study of Jackman (1987) concluded that a highly fragmented party system could lead to lower turnout as when we have smaller parties competing for government, and higher likelihood of a coalition government making it harder for parties to truly represent voters' interests. This would make voters uncertain about their ability to affect the outcome leading to doom abysmal parties actually reducing turnout rates (Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008). Jackman and Miller (1995) suggest that party fragmentation in combination with low electoral competitiveness could reduce voter turnout as the electorate feel their vote would not matter. In addition, the authors' empirical analyses reported that as ENP increases, turnout rates increase as well, however beyond a certain level of fragmentation, the effect of the votes is diluted, which leads to voter apathy.

In the Balkan region, several types of party systems are identified based on Blondel's classification (1968) of party systems, which distinguishes between two-party systems, two-and-a-half-party systems, multiparty systems with a

dominant party and multiparty systems without a dominant party. Countries with multiparty systems tend to form coalition governments, presenting both opportunities for inclusive governance and challenges related to stability and accountability. Bulgaria is an example where there are multiple parties with a diverse ideological orientation, presented with a great challenge to form a stable coalition.

The conventional wisdom suggests that in systems with a higher number of parties, the electorate might be more likely to vote as they see more choices available to them and a greater possibility of their vote impacting the outcomes. This is the case for advanced democracies that have been widely analysed in the literature. However, there is little research on party systems in the Balkans, as mainly the western Balkans have been studied (Stojarova, 2013; Lastro and Bieber, 2013; Arpalier, 2020). Especially, this chapter contributes to the field of political research by analysing how party system fragmentation influences voter turnout in Balkan countries. Hence, this chapter aims to shed light on this debate by empirically analysing data over a period of 10 years in 12 Balkan countries.

Merely counting the number of political parties participating in elections does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics at play within each country. Hence, this chapter uses the effective number of parties (ENP) index as a critical tool for analysing party strength and diversity, setting the stage for deeper exploration. The party systems in this chapter is analysed by the effective number of parties as it presents a comprehensive tool for accommodating party system fragmentation in an accurate way the influential study of Sartori (1976) presented a nuanced approach in exploring and analysing party systems, focusing on the number and size of the political parties within a country. The author emphasised that the effective number of parties is an accurate measure of fragmentation in a party system as it takes into account the relative vote share or seats that are being held by each political party. Hence, in this chapter, I do not simply classify by multiparty vs two-party systems but analyse the effective number of parties to account for fragmentation in the party system. The ENP is a measure (direct and indirect) of how fragmented a party system is in a particular country. The higher the ENP, the more fragmented the party system becomes.

In addition, socio-economic variables have been shown to have an influence on political engagement (Norris, 2002) as the higher the wealth, the higher the turnout, in such wealthier societies are analysed to have more resources to mobilise participation and stable institutions (Teorell et al, 2007). As the relationship between the number of political parties and electoral turnout could depend on the contextual factors within each country, a country-level variable is included

in this chapter's analyses. GDP per capita features in the analysis as an indicator of economic development across countries.

Developing partisanship is more important for new democracies. If a country is a new democracy, it has a younger party system age. A study by LeDuc, Niemmi and Norris (2010) found out that there is a positive relationship between the age of the party system and the number of partisans in a country. At the same time, their study reported that feeling closer to a party is less likely to occur in a post-communist country. The situation differs in new democracies where people learn how to participate in politics. In post-communist countries, the democratic experience is new. Therefore, parents may have difficulties and challenges to adapt to the new democratic system. This makes parties, partisanship, and electoral behaviour not necessary based on family and social groups or even social traditions which actually reinforce participation behaviour in advanced democracies (Dalton, 2016). In addition to that, the parties running for elections are newly formed and partisanship is less likely to occur in new democracies. All of these make it difficult for citizens to identify with a particular party, and at the same time to participate in politics in the context of Balkan countries. In addition, the extent of policy differences among parties is a critical consideration. In Eastern Europe, the frequent emergence of new parties, nevertheless, how much are actually their policies different? What is the ideological spectrum of these parties – whether they represent extreme-left or extreme-right or centrist positions? As a result, even though voters are presented with a vast option to choose from, there are not substantive differences among these choices.

Party Systems in the Balkans: Historical Context

The transition from communism to democracy with a multi-party system is a complex process that Balkan countries have undergone not long ago. This transition has shaped the region's contemporary political systems. Before the fall of communism, the majority of Balkan countries have been governed by single-party systems, characterised by strong central authority, suppression of political pluralism, and limited civil liberties. With the collapse of the communist regimes in the late 1980s and 1990s, most of the Balkan countries embarked on a transition towards democratic governance, however a lot of challenges for the process of democratisation existed (Diamond, 1996). On one hand, there was a desire to have more pluralistic political system that offers great representation and inclusiveness. And on the other hand, the democratic transition was hindered by deeply rooted legacies of autocratic governance, weak civil societies and a complete lack of experience with a competitive political process.

The transformation in the Balkans from communism to democracy needed the construction of new political institutions, being able to manage a multiparty system. In many Balkan countries, the lack of prior experience with democratic governance left institutions underdeveloped (Blais and Plach, 1997). Communist rule in the Balkan countries had suppressed the development of a vibrant civil society. Lust-Okar (2005) highlighted that the underdevelopment of a civil society in a post-communist country could lead to a weak and fragmented political landscape where citizens feel disconnected from the democratic processes. Civil society organisations, independent media, and grassroots political participation were all relatively undeveloped, making the institutionalisation of democratic practices more difficult. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Banac (1992) noted that the legacy of authoritarian rule fostered a climate of mistrust, preventing the formation of stable democratic institutions.

While some countries like Slovenia and Croatia made a smoother transition to democracy, other countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, experienced violent conflicts during the process. This was driven by a combination of nationalist aspirations, ethnic tensions, and the collapse of a centralised control (Steinbruner; 1998). In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, ongoing wars hindered significant party competition until the late 1990s. Although Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro did not experience wars, their democratisation processes were severely impacted by challenging circumstances, including the collapse of the Albanian state in 1997, tensions with name dispute with North Macedonia, a low-intensity conflict in 2001 between Macedonians and Albanians (Boduszynski 2010).

Fragmentation of the Political Landscape

When it comes to post-communist countries, a defining feature is the fragmented party systems in the region, which have been analysed in the existing literature and can be contributed to the following several factors. First, some of the Balkan countries are characterised by a large number of small political parties that do not last long and lead to a more fragmented party system (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Serbia). Second, contrasting to the established democracies where the political formations have deep roots in the society, in the Balkans, parties lack deeper organisation and structure (Lewis, 2007). In addition, most parties in the Balkans are unable or not keen to form coalitions, which leads to political instability and frequent election cycles e.g. Bulgaria. Third, research has shown that in post-communist countries with ethnic divisions, parties are often categorised into ethnic lines, contributing to party fragmentation

and affect the political landscapes in Balkan countries (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008). This is the case, especially for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic parties dominate the political scene (Party of Democratic Action, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats). Kovacevic (2012) stated that as parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina are divided into ethnic groups, this prevents the establishment of ideologically-different parties. Fourth, the influence of the EU, Russia or the US also play a role in reinforcing fragmentation. These external actors create division, which makes it even harder to form inclusive and cross-ethnic coalitions.

Although the majority of the existing literature highlights that a higher number of parties leads to higher turnout in elections, there are also studies suggesting a negative relationship between the two. In a highly fragmented party system, the excessive party competition might provoke voter disillusionment, dissatisfaction with coalition formation and lower turnout (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003). The review of the literature demonstrating both positive and negative relationship between party fragmentation and voter turnout, highlights the complexity of that relationship. Acknowledging and contextualising the unique political dynamics in the Balkan region as countries experienced regime changes and the transition from communist rule to liberal democracy will have potential influences on their political behaviour. This stabilisation process in newly democratised countries takes time and it has effects on citizens' behaviour. Hence, the relationship between party fragmentation and voter turnout in the Balkan region needs to be understood within the context of their transitional political landscapes.

Based on these insights, this chapter analyses further the relationship between party systems fragmentation and voter turnout in the Balkans. I propose to test a number of hypotheses that derive from the previously presented research features. I hypothesise that as the effective number of parties increases, voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries (H1). As the existing literature has reported that economic development is positively related to political participation and the higher the economic development, the higher the turnout is (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Siaroff and Merer, 2002), I hypothesise that higher GDP per capita increases voter turnout (H2).

Data and Methods

This chapter analyses the influence of the effective number of parties (ENP) on voter turnout in Balkan countries. The dependent variable, turnout, is operationalised as a continuous variable of percentage of turnout in parliamentary elections over the last decade (2014-2024). The turnout data for each parliamentary election for the respective country is derived from several sources e.g. IPU, International IDEA, National election commissions, Election Guide³.

The independent variable, effective number of parties (ENP), measures party fragmentation, as ENP is the most common operationalisation for party fragmentation. The higher the ENP, the more fragmented the party system is, and the lower the ENP, the less fragmented the party system is in a particular country. This chapter uses the Gallagher's dataset on Election Indices (Gallagher, 2024), which features the Effective Number of Parties index at the parliamentary or legislative level, providing systematic data to depict and analyse party system fragmentation⁴. The data was crosschecked with the Comparative Political Data Set, which provides the same information on the ENP (CPDS, 2024)⁵, and if there was any difference in the numbers, it was marginal. The indices that Gallagher uses are originally outlined in the influential, most authoritative Laakso and Taagepera's (1969) measures of the effective number of parties. Therefore, ENP is computed based on the Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula:

$$N=1/(\sum pi^2)$$

where N is the number of parties and pi is the fractional share of the i th component. This measure is also an indicator of the strength of parties.

The second independent variable used in this chapter is GDP per capita in order to account for economic development in each country. The chosen indicator of GDP for this chapter is GDP, current prices (Purchasing power parity; billions of international dollars) (International Monetary Fund, 2021). The Balkan region has diverse economies and a continuous variable for GDP shows more detailed

3 Data for turnout percentage per country: Albania (Komisioni Qendror I Zgjedhjeve, 2024); North Macedonia (State Election Commission of North Macedonia, 2024); Bulgaria (Central Election Commission, 2024); Kosovo (Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, 2024); Montenegro (ElectionGuide, 2024); Romania (International IDEA, 2024); Serbia (ElectionGuide, 2024); Croatia (ElectionGuide 2024); Greece (Election Guide, 2024); Slovenia (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024); Bosnia and Herzegovina (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024); Turkey (Inter-parliamentary Union, 2024).

4 The exact index used in this analysis is "(ii) the effective number of parties at the electoral level (Eff Nv, also termed ENEP)" (Gallagher, 2024).

5 In addition, the CPDS dataset does not feature some of the countries used in this chapter.

state of the economy across countries. The chosen indicator accounts for cost-of-living differences across countries.

Statistical Analyses

This chapter employs multilevel linear regression analyses. Using multilevel modelling ensures that an in-depth analysis is performed and how turnout it affected by the hierarchical nature of the data and context. The random effects account for unobserved heterogeneity which improves the model robustness and reliability.

Table 1. presents a general descriptive analysis of the dependent and independent variables used in the analyses including the minimum and maximum number, mean, and standard deviation.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables*

Variable	Min	Mean	Max	SD
Turnout	33.3	55.5	87.1	13.75
ENP	2.4	4.84	10.68	1.987
GDP	11.49	357.55	3277.51	681.148

Party systems: empirical evidence from Balkan countries⁶

How does the effective number of parties influence voter turnout in the Balkans?

Party Systems in The Balkans: Descriptive Account

The conceptual discussion of previous research emphasised the need for empirical evidence on what influence does a higher number of effective parties have on voter turnout in the Balkan region. On one hand, studies supported a positive relationship between ENP and turnout, mainly in developed democracies; on the other hand, studies have reported an alternative perspective that excessive fragmentation can lead to lower voter turnout due to disillusionment, complexity and coalition instability. Hence, I first present descriptive analysis of the variations of ENP across time and countries, differences in terms of the levels of turnout in Balkan countries, followed by statistical analyses to test out the hypotheses posed in this chapter.

6 The 2024 Romanian parliamentary election, the 2024 October Bulgarian parliamentary election and the 2014 Serbian parliamentary elections are omitted from the statistical analyses as data is not available on ENP as per Gallagher indexes used in the analysis (Gallagher, 2024).

Table 2 shows Balkan countries’ classifications of party systems based on the influential Blondel’s categorisation (Blondel, 1968). Out of the 12 Balkan countries analysed, 25% of the countries are classified as multiparty systems without a dominant party, 33% are countries with multiparty systems with a dominant party, 42% are countries with two-and-a-half- party systems.

Table 2. *Party system classification (Blondel’s 1968)*

Party system classification ⁷ (Blondel’s 1968)	Countries
Two-and-a-half- party systems	Albania, Romania, Croatia
Multiparty systems with a dominant party	Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey
Multiparty systems without a dominant party	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Greece

Albania, Romania and Croatia are characterised by two main political parties that are dominating the political processes, where a smaller third party also plays a significant role, however it is a secondary role. This suggests a certain degree of political consolidation. As for Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, even though the political system features multiple parties, one party dominates the electorate. This suggest that the dominant party leverages institutional advantages e.g. media control, resources control. In terms of Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Greece and Slovenia, there are multiple parties that are competing for power and no party preserves power. In multiparty systems without a dominant party, we observe instability due to the fragmented parliaments and frequent coalition’s inability to form a stable government e.g. Bulgaria.

Figure 1. shows graphically the change in the effective number of parties for each Balkan country across the years (2014-2024; Gallagher, 2024). A high ENP indicates a fragmented party system, where a low ENP reflects on a concentrated party system dominated by few main political parties. When it comes to analysing the Balkan region, its countries usually report high ENP scores reflecting the fragmented political system they belong to (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008).

Historical legacies, social cleavages and the process of transition to democracy foster the development of multiple political parties that represent different

7 Two-party-systems is not included in the table as not a single country has a two-party-system.

social groups as ethnic-based electoral choices guarantee sustained fragmentation with small shifts over time. This reinforces the argument made by scholars (Mueller, 1992; Lust-Okar, 2005).

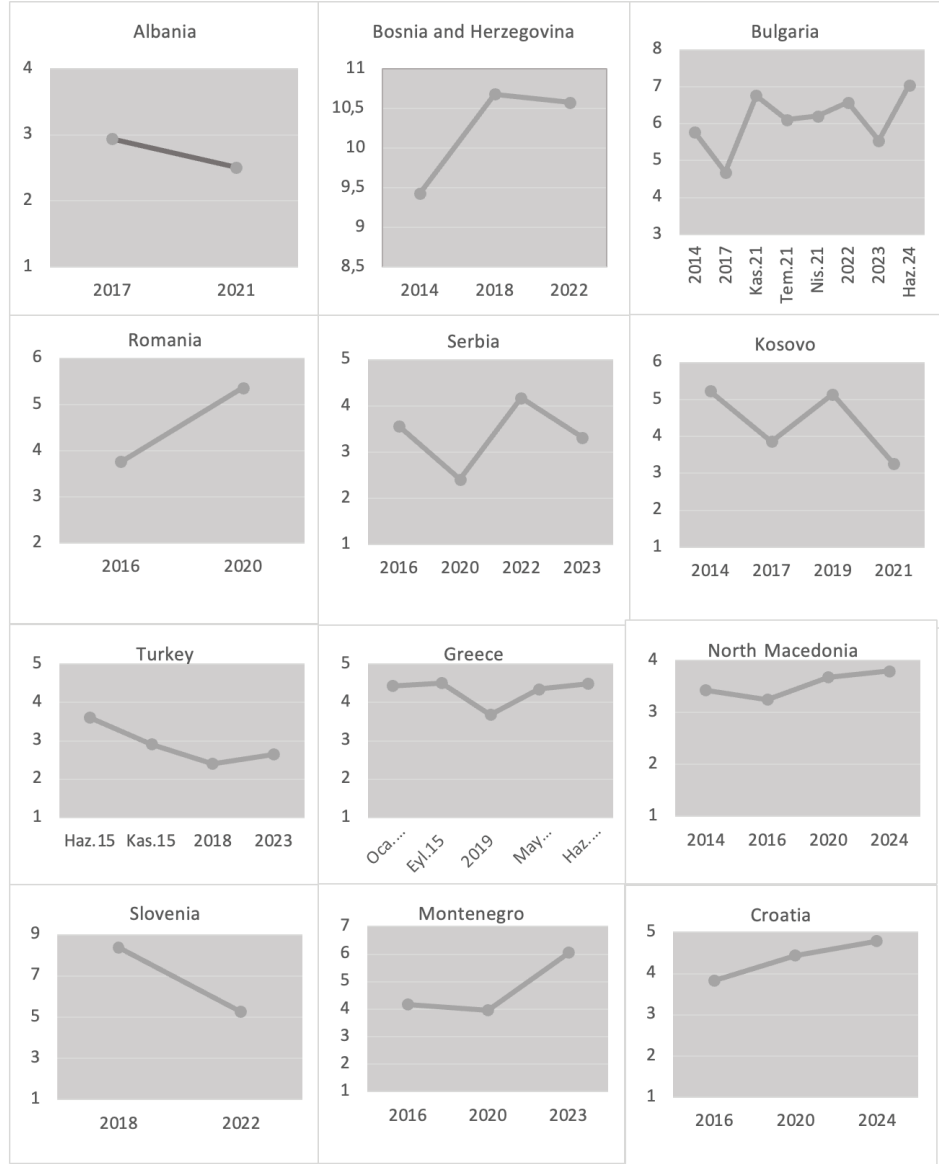
As shown in Figure 1, Albania has a two-party system, which is clear from its relatively low ENP score, indicating a concentrated party system dominated by the two main political parties (the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party). Bosnia and Herzegovina's ENP is the highest in the Balkans showing its complex ethnically divided political system. The fragmentation of parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects deep societal divisions, especially ethnic, cultural, and economic cleavages. Bosnia and Herzegovina's ENP score is expected and aligns with the arguments reviewed in the literature (Banac, 1992).

The findings demonstrate that Bulgaria shows a steady increase in fragmentation, reflecting the growing number of reformist parties challenging the political elite in the country e.g. the emergence of We Continue the Change, There is such a People, Revival, Velichie etc. Kosovo's ENP peaked during the political shift with strong reformist movements and is declined when the dominant political parties consolidated power again. Serbia and North Macedonia display a lower ENP than most countries, which in Serbia could be explained by the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party, where opposition fragmentation further depresses ENP score. The political polarisation is repressing the emergence of viable players to the party in power. As per North Macedonia, the ENP scores reflect a moderately concentrated party system with few dominant political parties.

Montenegro's increase in ENP scores in recent years reflects on the weakening of the dominance of the Democratic Party of Socialists and the rise of the new opposition coalitions. Romania's score of ENP reflects on the rise of new political parties challenging the traditional dominant ones. Croatia's ENP shows competition between the two main parties and the emergence of new reformist movements. Greece's ENP scores are related to its economic situation as the economic crisis and austerity measures influenced fragmentation, rising new parties and weakening the influence of traditional parties. As of Greece's 2023 ENP score, the Greece parliamentary election in 2023 was held under a new PR system which encouraged more parties to participate, hence the high ENP score again.

Slovenia shows a vast difference in the ENP score across the parliamentary elections in 2018 and 2022, echoing the consolidation of political movements and removal of smaller parties. Turkey's relatively low ENP score shows the dominance of the Justice and Development Party.

Figure 1. *Effective number of parties for each country (2014-2024)*

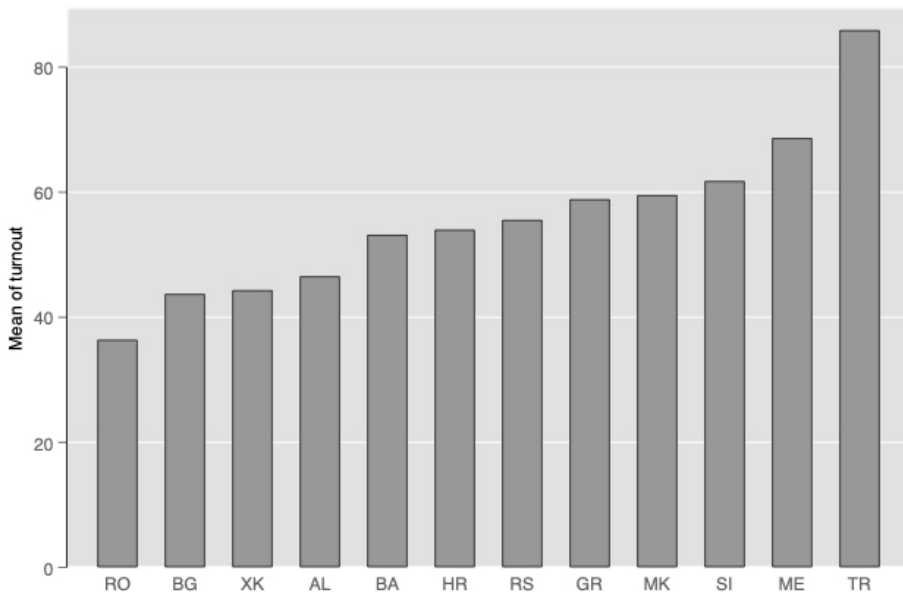


This data reveals that the highest political fragmentation is observed in countries characterised by strong ethnic, regional or inter-government divisions. Social cleavages lead to the emerging multi-party systems, where the proportional representation electoral system provides smaller parties with parliamentary representation. This results in a large number of parties competing for influence, complicating the creation of stable coalitions.

Political Participation in The Balkans: Descriptive Account

Figure 2 graphically present the mean of percentage of voting per country and compares the average levels of turnout across the Balkan countries analysed. It is evident from Figure 2 that turnout varies considerably across different Balkan countries. Turkey has the highest turnout which is not surprising as voting is compulsory in Turkey plus the political culture strongly emphasises on the duty of civic participation. Romania, Bulgaria and Kosovo are among the countries with lowest levels of turnout. The three countries have different historical trajectories and conflict pasts.

Figure 2. *Mean of percentage of voting per country*⁸



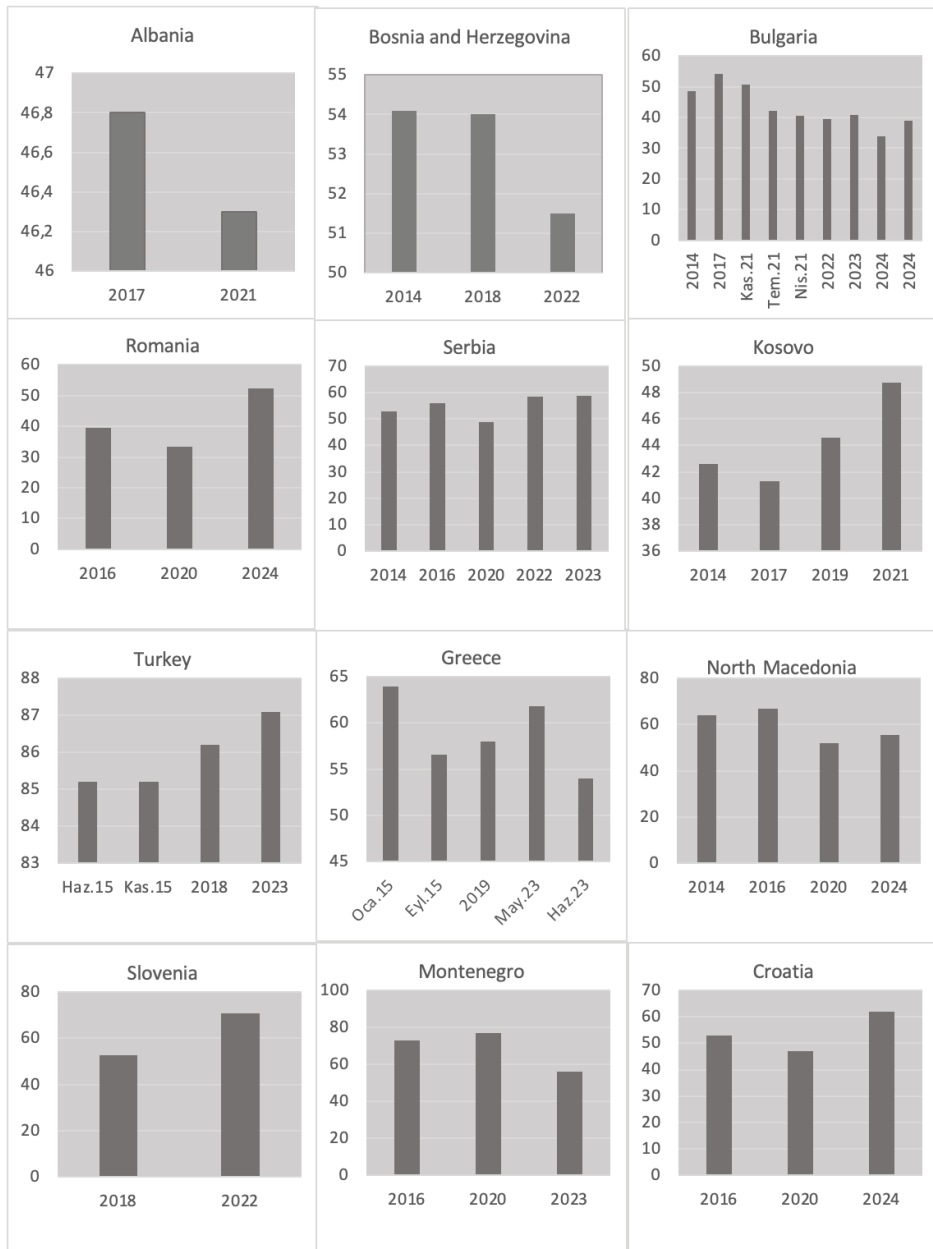
Next, trends in electoral participation across time and countries are shown in Figure 3: voter turnout in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries over the last decade. The turnout in Albania is relatively stable, same as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In terms of Bulgaria, voter turnout peaked at 50% in 2014 and has since then showed a declining trend that could be due to a fragmented political landscape or increased voter apathy due to the frequency

⁸ The official country codes are used in the graphs (RO: Romania; BG: Bulgaria; XK: Kosovo; AL: Albania; BA: Bosnia and Herzegovina; RS: Serbia; GR: Greece; MK: North Macedonia; SI: Slovenia; ME: Montenegro; TR: Turkey).

of elections. Among the Balkan countries, Bulgaria is the only country with such a high number of parliamentary elections over the period of 10 years (9 parliamentary elections). The results for Bulgaria reflect the political instability the country has. Especially, in the period of 3 years, the country had 7 parliamentary elections due to the failure of political parties to form a stable coalition. This persistent political instability has led to voter apathy and fatigue, leading to low voter turnout. The voter turnout in the June 2024 parliamentary election was 34.4%, the lowest voter turnout since Bulgaria has become a democratic country, underpinning the voter apathy and disillusionment among citizens. For the case of Bulgaria, corruption in the election process could have a vast role as reported electoral violations in terms of vote-buying exist (Euroactiv, 2024) which further undermines the democratic process.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Romania and Serbia indicate noticeable consistency across elections in the levels of turnout with data showing stable electoral engagement with minor variations across the years. The results for Kosovo indicate growing political mobilisation as turnout rises from 38% in 2014 to 50% in 2021. The formation of new political movements and the appearance of reformist parties have motivated the voters, especially among younger electorate seeking change and anti-corruption measures. Turkey is the Balkan country with the highest voter turnout, reflecting strong electoral engagement, political interest, and strong sense of civic duty among citizens. The fluctuating turnout in Greece varies between elections reflecting the economic crisis in Greece. After a decade of austerity, Greek voters feel like there is no political party that can actually bring change. Montenegro displays strong electoral participation, representing a highly engaged citizens. Future analysis is needed to explore how the structures and functioning of party systems impact voter turnout in the region.

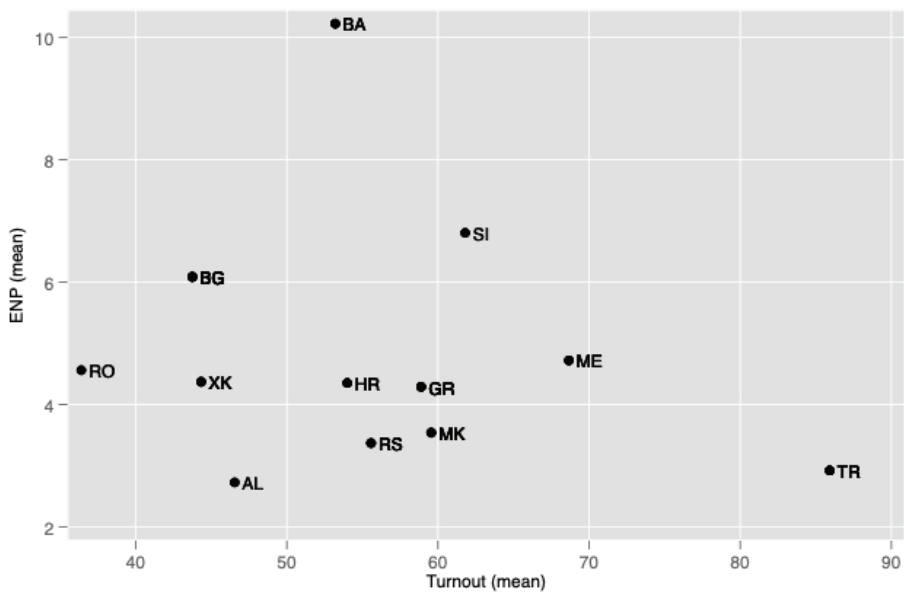
Figure 3. *Voter turnout in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries for the last decade*



Relationship Between Party Fragmentation and Political Participation in The Balkans: An Explanatory Account

The previous findings showed that there is a huge variation among ENP scores across countries, but also across same countries in different elections. This could be due to the role of ethnic parties, varying levels of political stability over time, and the lack of structure in political parties (Mueller, 1992; Lewis, 2007).

Figure 4. *The relationship between turnout and ENP across the period 2014-2014*



First, Figure 4 presents a descriptively analysis of the relationship between turnout and ENP between the period 2014-2014 in 12 Balkan countries. The x-axis of the graph shows the mean of turnout for each country, and the y-axis shows the mean of ENP for each country. As seen below, the lowest mean of turnout is in Romania where the ENP is also relatively low. This shows a potential positive relationship between ENP and turnout in Romania suggesting that a consolidated party system not necessary motivates the electorate to vote. This result could be a reflection of the limited choices of political alternatives and the dominants parties have failed to gather the interests of the voters, leading to higher apathy and disengagement. This descriptive single-cased result is tested further in this chapter for significance. The country with the highest ENP score has a relatively moderate turnout. The graph shows big variations in the average levels of

turnout and ENP scores across countries. The graph's results indicate a further need for statistical analysis in order to explore the relationship between ENP and turnout in the Balkan countries.

Of particular interest are Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia as ethnic parties are present in those countries, playing significant roles in their political landscapes: Bosnia and Herzegovina with the main political parties representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs; North Macedonia with influential parties among the Albanian minority (Democratic Union for Integration; Alliance for Albanians); Kosovo with ethnic politics dominated between Albanians and Serbs (Vetevendosje and Serb List); Montenegro with parties representing Albanians (Albanian Alternative), Bosniak minority (Bosniak Party); Serbia with ethnic minority parties that are influential in specific regions e.g. Albanian parties in the Prasevo Valley. The presence of ethnic parties across countries might ensure representation, however, it can also lead to stagnation, disillusionment, and lower turnout due to the inefficiency of fragmented governance. On one hand, such parties mobilise voters effectively by appealing to ethnic solidarity; on another hand, these parties create societal divisions leading to apathy. The presence of ethnic cleavages in many Balkan countries advances the emergence of parties tailored to specific groups. Such dynamics can vary across parliamentary elections depending on shifts in political alliances and the salience of ethnic/nationalist issues during the given period. These findings are echo the observations made in the literature on the influence of ethnic parties on party fragmentation in the Balkans (Mueller, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Kostovicova, 2005; Prorokovic, 2008).

The descriptive analysis showed differences in ENP scores and levels of electoral engagement across countries and within countries over time. These observations lead to follow-up questions: How does a fragmented party system in a country influences variation in its levels of turnout? Does a higher number of political parties in a country increase or decrease voter turnout? For this purpose, I employ a multilevel linear regression analysis that takes a closer look at the data and explores the hypotheses introduced in this chapter.

Second, Table 3 shows the results of the multilevel linear regression analysis examining the relationship between the effective number of parties and voter turnout across Balkan countries over time.

Table 3. *Results from the multilevel analyses (2014-2025)*

	Model 1	Model 2
ENP	-3.181*** (0.992)	-2.865*** (0.988)
GDP		0.004 (0.004)
Log Likelihood	-153.497	-152.980
ICC	0.852	0.814
Number of elections	44	44
Number of countries	12	12

Note: Multilevel model: coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and P value showed with stars: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

The results from Model 1 show a negative relationship between ENP and voter turnout. The ENP coefficient of -3.18 indicates that an increase in the ENP is associated with a decrease in voter turnout. To be more specific, for each one-unit increase in the number of effective parties in a Balkan country, voter turnout decreases by 3.18 percentage points. This result confirms H1 that as the effective number of parties increases, voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries. This result is statistically significant ($p=0.001$) indicating a robust inverse association between party system fragmentation and participation in parliamentary elections across Balkan countries over a period of 10 years. This result corroborates the work of Jackman (1987) who suggested that a highly fragmented system can lead to lower turnout. The statistically significant result reinforces the argument made by Lijphart (1999) that very high fragmentation might lead to political instability and voter disillusionment.

Another interpretation of the multilevel model is that voter turnout decreases in Balkan countries as the ENP scores increase due to the fact that high ENP leads to frequent, unstable coalitions, which demotivates citizens to vote as suggested in the literature (Jackman, 1987; Lijphart, 1999). As outlined in the literature, these patterns suggest the inability to perceive the efficiency of votes in coalition governments leading to low turnout (Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004; Schneider and Schmitter (2004).

This finding emphasises that the Balkan context has a unique political dynamic which challenges the prevailing assumptions by scholars on the dominant

positive relationship between effective number of parties and voter turnout, as reported by numerous studies (Powell, 1986; Blais and Carty, 1990; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Koopmans and Kriesi, 1995; Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998; Blais and Massicotte, 2002).

The Interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.852 in Model 1 suggests that 85% of the total variance in turnout is explained by country-level differences. The high ICC value justifies the use of a multilevel analysis indicating large between-countries variations that need to be accounted for by random effects. Model 2 in Table 3 reveals that once adding GDP per capita (PPP) in the analysis, the significance of ENP remain the same. For every one-unit increase in the GDP per capita, turnout increases by 0.004 percentage points. This result is not statistically significant ($p=0.251$). This result shed light on the discussion that once including ENP in the model, GDP in a non-significant predictor of voter turnout, suggesting that ENP is much stronger predictor. For robustness check, I run additional multilevel analysis including only GDP per capita as an independent variable. The results are presented in Model 3, Table 4 and indicate that once excluding ENP from the analysis, GDP becomes a significant predictor of voter turnout. This result is consistent with the existing literature that the wealthier the country, the higher the voter turnout it (Norris, 2002; Teorell et al, 2007).

Table 4. *Robustness check, multilevel linear regression including GDP per capita only*

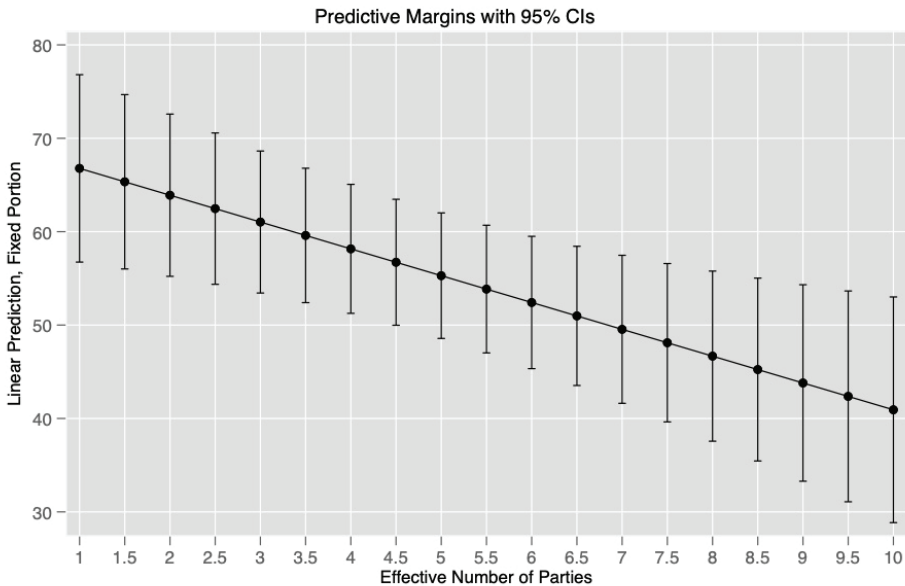
	Model 3
GDP	0.007** (0.003)
Log Likelihood	-156.248
ICC	0.693
Number of elections	44
Number of countries	12

Note: Multilevel model: coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and P value showed with stars: * $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$

Finally, in Figure 5, I plot the marginal effect of ENP based on Model 1, Table 3, on voter turnout. Figure 5 graphically presents the results and findings discussed and shows that as ENP decreases, the likelihood of electoral participation among Balkan countries increases. In other words, the more fragmented a party system is, the less likely are its citizens to vote. This finding supports the argument that excessive party fragmentation can dilute the perceived effectiveness

of voting and people fail to see the clear pattern to influencing policy outcomes (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003; Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008). When there are numerous parties competing for power, this can lead to a feeling of instability as no single party can have a dominant position. This is specifically the case among the Balkan region as many parties complicate the coalition-formation process, which results in unstable government and inability to create policy. Citizens experiencing this, might feel disappointed, resulting in abstaining from voting.

Figure 5. *Marginal effect of ENP on turnout*



The analyses raise crucial questions about the role of contextual factors in influencing participation and shaping the relationship between party systems and voter turnout. In the Balkans, historical legacies of ethnic conflicts, economic challenges, external influence could play an important role in affecting voter turnout. Fragmentation in the case of the Balkan countries is driven not so much by ideological differences across parties. Party system as a determinant of voter turnout, is related to the political framework that shapes electoral behaviour. Understanding its relationship is essential for developing strategies to strengthen the democratic presentations in Balkan countries.

Conclusion

Historically, the party systems in the Balkan region have been shaped by different historical, ethnic and political factors. The aim of this chapter was to provide an empirical analysis employing quantitative research to investigate how the structure and functioning of party systems influence voter turnout, providing new insights into the complex relationship between political institutions and participation in this politically diverse and historically rich region, the Balkans.

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter shows strong negative relationship between the effective number of parties and voter turnout across Balkan countries. The results imply that as the party system in a country becomes more fragmented, the electoral participation declines. These findings generally confirm what the existing literature has argued that high fragmentation in a country leads to voters feeling disconnected from the decision-making process, leading to voter apathy and low engagement (Powell, 2000; Tsebelis, 2002; Van der Eijk and Van der Burg, 2004). It was expected from the literature review that in a highly fragmented party system, the extreme party competition could result in voter disillusionment, frustration with coalition formation, hence resulting in lower turnout (Radcliff and Davis, 2000; Kostadinova, 2003; Geys, 2006; Hicken and Stoll, 2008).

The findings of this chapter, demonstrating that high fragmentation can demobilise voters, contribute to the understanding of how party systems influence the democratic process in the Balkan region showing vast differences between the Balkans and the rest of the democratic societies across the globe.

Policy Implications and Future Research

The continued fragmentation of party systems in the Balkans echoes not only historical and social divisions but also the difficulties inherent in transforming authoritarian regimes into functioning democracies. To move forward, the Balkans will need to strengthen democratic institutions, reduce ethnic divisions in political competition, and encourage cross-party cooperation, a process that will likely require both internal reform and external support.

The result from the empirical analysis, reporting the clear negative relationship between party fragmentation and electoral participation, emphasises the potential challenges of fragmented political systems in engaging the electorate, highlighting the importance for discussion on electoral reforms or political stability strategies across Balkan governments. Political institutions should promote

mechanisms that reward stable coalitions among parties e.g. the funding towards party in parliaments could be allocated in proportion to the ability of parties to work collaboratively to deliver results.

As populist movements rise in the Balkan region, future research could investigate the long-term effects on voter turnout, voter trust and party systems, by identifying patterns leading potentially to destabilising trends.

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