Slovenian Parliament

Andreja Pegan & Alenka Krašovec

Slovenians' experiences with elections and parliaments go back to the Habsburg Monarchy in the nineteenth century and the parliamentary assemblies in Yugoslavia. As an independent state, Slovenia's first experience with a democratic parliament goes back to 1990 when a democratically chosen representative body, a tricameral assembly (an inherited socialist institutional arrangement), was elected. This body adopted the Slovenian Constitution establishing a parliamentary system with a weak directly elected president.

Since then, the Slovenian parliament has had two chambers. The lower directly elected chamber - the National Assembly (*Državni zbor*) – is a 90 seat chamber representing citizens. The indirectly elected upper chamber – National Council (*Državni svet*) – is a 40 seat chamber representing local interests and socio-economic interest groups. Elected through universal suffrage, the Assembly occupies a major role in the Slovenian political system. On the other hand, the National Council takes up a relatively weak role with the possibility to issue a suspensive veto, which the Assembly can override with the majority of all MPs.

In the early years, Slovenia established a reputation of being a stable post-communist democracy. Increasing electoral volatility and party fragmentation has meant that Slovenia is starting to resemble more newly democratic states in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, unlike in some other Central and Eastern European countries, none of Slovenia's parties has ever won a constitutional majority, and party fragmentation has made changes to the constitution difficult.

Coalition formation and executive-legislative relations

In its 30 years of democratic government, Slovenia held eight parliamentary elections to the National Assembly. Given a high number of political parties elected into parliament, forming a government coalition and maintaining a parliamentary majority has been difficult for all winning parties. Over eight parliamentary terms, Slovenia changed nineteen governments with an average duration of less than two years.

While the constitution favours the stability of the executive, for instance through the vote of no-confidence, the National Assembly exercises considerable power over government formation. Unusually for a parliamentary system, the Slovenian lower chamber elects *both* the prime minister (PM; head of government) and the government's ministers. The Assembly can remove the PM and individual minister. On average, there have been six interpellations per parliamentary term between 1992 and 2020. Most of these questioned the work of individual ministers and rarely resulted in dismissals. On the legislative side, individual MPs, the National Council, 5 000 voters (via the citizen initiative) and the government can propose draft legislation. Despite a dispersed right of legislative initiative, the government dominates the agenda proposing the vast majority of laws, most of which are also adopted by the Assembly.

For the larger part of its democratic history, new governments were formed following regular elections. However, since 2011, Slovenia has organised three early elections to resolve the political deadlock. In the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis, PM Borut Pahor (Social Democrats) lost a vote of confidence in 2011. In 2014, PM Alenka Bratusek (the first and so far only female PM) resigned following in-party fighting. In 2018, the PM Miro Cerar resigned just before the end of the legislative term. The eighth parliamentary term has so far seen two different government coalitions, the first one headed by the newcomer Marjan Sarec (*Lista Marjana Sarca*) and the second by the seasoned Janez Jansa (Slovene Democratic Party; *Slovenska demokratska stranka or SDS*).

Party system

Electoral volatility and party fragmentation are the two main characteristics of the Slovenian party system. They are particularly strong on the left political spectrum, while the right-wing political space is more consolidated. The People's Party (*Slovenska ljudska stranka or SLS*), the party with the longest political tradition, has been an important player in the early years of independence, forming coalitions with centre-left and centre-right parties. While the party has continued local success, support at the national level has faded, and the party has not been represented in parliament since 2014. The Slovenian Democratic Party has been the most prominent and stable centre-right party also due to the strong leadership of Janez Jansa who has been at the party's helm since 1993 or for most of the party's existence. The Slovenian Democrats received most of the popular vote on two elections (2004 and 2018) and headed three of the five centre-right governments since 1990.

The centre-left, on the other hand, has seen much more fragmentation and party splintering. Fragmentation became visible especially after 2004 with the demise of the social-liberal party Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (*Liberalna demokracija Slovenije, LDS),* which, until then, dominated the Slovenian political space heading [five government coalitions.](#) In 2011, the Liberal Democrats failed to pass the parliamentary threshold. Several splinter parties and newly formed parties with a social-liberal tradition (*Zares, Pozitivna Slovenija, Zaveznistvo/Stranka Alenke Bratusek)* entered parliament. Following the fragmentation of the social-liberal parties, the Social Democrats (*Socialni demokrati*, formerly *Zdruzena lista*) became the leading centre-left party in the 2008 election, but never repeated the success.

At the centre, there are several parties, which have either cooperated or shown willingness to form a coalition with mostly centre-left parties. The Pensioner's Party (*Demokraticna stranka upokojencev* or DeSUS) has a big coalition potential on both parts of the ideological spectrum. The party has taken part in all but one coalition government since it first passed the parliamentary threshold in 1996. A similar role to the Pensioners' Party, has been played by the Modern Centre Party (*Stranka Modernega Centra* or SMC, formerly the *Party of Miro Cerar*) in the eighth parliamentary term.

At the poles, the parliamentary political space is occupied by the Slovenian National Party (*Slovenska nacionalna stranka or SNS*) and the Left (also United Left; *Levica/Zdruzena levica*). Among other political stances, both parties adopt an anti-EU and euro rhetoric. The Slovenian National Party has recently re-entered parliament after two consecutive non-elections. The party's platform mostly promotes nationalism and Slovenian identity. The Left, first elected in parliament in 2014 (as the Coalition of the United Left, *Koalicija zdruzena levica*), won nine per cent of all votes in 2018 and has been crucial in providing support as an external partner party to Marjan Sarec's minority government. The Left and the Slovenian National Party's election in 2018 brought the Slovenian party system closer to the one in several Western European countries, where *both* radical left and radical right dominate parliamentary poles.

As with some other Central Eastern European countries, Slovenia has witnessed the phenomena of newly established parties. Some of these parties have attained considerable power but failed in the subsequent election. For instance, in 2014, the Modern Centre Party (as the *List of Miro Cerar*) obtained 34 per cent of the votes and led a government coalition. However, its electoral share was reduced to ten per cent in the following election. In 2018, the newcomer List of Marjan Sarec successfully led the formation of a coalition. While starting as a government party holding the premiership, it is now in opposition, making it interesting to see how it will perform in the next election. Newcomer parties have already lost to even newer parties, making it likely that Slovenia will observe a new 'hurricane season'.

Electoral system
The National Assembly is elected with a proportional electoral system. The current electoral law divides the country into eight electoral units (constituencies) further divided into 11 districts (sub-constituencies) for the election of 88 members. The Italian and Hungarian minorities elect the remaining two members in specially designated districts. Parliamentary seats are divided between the list of candidates that obtained at least four per cent of the votes, first, at the electoral unit level using the Droop quota and, second, at the country level using the D'Hondt rule.

The electoral system has been criticised for years now, with only small changes being implemented. In 2018, the Constitutional Court ruled that electoral districts' designation is unconstitutional as it does not confer voters sufficient equal influence over the allocation of seats to candidates. Several electoral reform ideas have circulated, such as the abolishment and the resizing of the 88 electoral districts, the introduction of the preferential vote in the 11 electoral units, the introduction of a mixed electoral system or a two-round majoritarian system. However, none of these ideas have so far come to fruition.

Bicameralism

The upper chamber, the National Council, is a relatively weak institution. As in other parliamentary systems, the upper house can delay legislation via a suspensive veto, which has been used 73 instances with five successes between 2007 and 2019. The Council also has the right of legislative initiative insofar as it can submit to the National Assembly a proposal to pass or amend laws.

Between 2007 and 2019, the Council made 35 legislative initiatives, but only seven were adopted in the Assembly.

In the last decade, the asymmetry between the two chambers has deepened. Since 2013, the Council can no longer require a popular referendum (which had previously occurred in two instances in 1997 and 2007). Throughout the years, expressing concerns over the representative nature and the role of the Council and as a cost-saving measure, several political parties have suggested to either reform or abolish it. Since a little over half of all the seats in the Council represent territorial interests through local authorities, any reform of the Council would need to consider the representation of local interests at the national level. So far no serious debate has been held in the National Assembly indicating little political willingness and priority to reform the National Council.

Going ahead

One of the main challenges facing the National Assembly is declining electoral turnout, which from an all-time high in 1992 (85.6 per cent) fell to barely 50 per cent of the electorate in 2014 and 2018. In the absence of electoral reforms, it remains unclear how

parliamentarians and established parties intend to motivate citizens to participate in elections. Gender representation is another element worth monitoring in the future. After the introduction of the gender quota, the number of females in parliament increased. In the eighth term, 26 per cent of seats are occupied by female politicians, with the [sixth and seventh term](#) recording female representation closer to forty per cent. Finally, an important challenge is to strengthen parliament's democratic roles in substantive matters. For instance, increasing resources could help parliament reinforce its roles of representation, law-making and scrutiny in the (post) Covid-19 era. These are necessary if parliament is to pass legislation to increase citizens' trust in government, which has further eroded with the pandemic.

Andreja Pegan is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Science of the University of Ljubljana working on issues of democracy and the European Union. [@andrejapegan](#), [www.pegan.org](#)

Alenka Krašovec is professor of political science at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. Her main research interests are focused on studying political institutions and processes.

Further reading:
Bibič, A. (1993). The emergence of pluralism in Slovenia. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *26*(4), 367-386.

Fink-Hafner, D., & Krašovec, A. (2010). Factors influencing changes in parliamentary statutory rules in Slovenia. *Politologicki časopis*, *17*(1), 3-23.

Fink-Hafner and Robbins, J.R. (1997). Making a New Nation: The Formation of Slovenia. Aldershot and Brookfield: Dartmouth

Lange S.K. (2015) Slovenian Parliament and EU Affairs: Strong Formal Powers Awaiting Interest and Capacity to Be Used. In: Hefftler C., Neuhold C., Rozenberg O., Smith J. (eds) The Palgrave Handbook of National Parliaments and the European Union. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Nikić Čakar, D., & Krašovec, A. (2021). Coping with the new party challenge: patterns of prime ministerial survival in Croatia and Slovenia. *East European Politics*, 1-15.

Zajc, D. (2007). Slovenia's National Assembly, 1990–2004. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *13*(1), 83-98.

In Slovene:

Drago, Z. (1993) Slovenski parlament v procesu politične modernizacije. Ljubljana: Državni zbor Republike Slovenije.

Grad, F. (2013) Parlamentarno pravo. GV Zalozba.