



# Election forecasting in Lithuania: The case of municipal elections

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the possibilities for election forecasting in Lithuania, a post-communist country that has a party system which is characterized by high levels of electoral volatility and fragmentation. The main argument of the article is that despite these unfavorable conditions, election forecasting in Lithuania has potential. Since the sample of national parliamentary elections is too limited for statistical modeling, the possibility of forecasting at the level of municipalities in the municipal council elections is discussed. Four factors (local unemployment change, party's belonging to the national government, population size and lagged vote share) are integrated into a model that strives to predict the vote share of the party that holds the mayor's post (the dominant political power in the municipal council). The model presented explains more than 70% of the variance in the dependent variable. The case diagnostics reveal that the model predicts municipal election outcomes very accurately.

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## 1. Introduction

Forecasting election results in a recently democratized, post-communist country such as Lithuania may seem a complicated task. A researcher has to face a range of obstacles: a very small sample (the number of available democratic elections for analysis), high electoral volatility, and fragmented party systems (where party labels often change, mergers and splits are quite common, and new parties constantly achieve success in elections). These factors may explain why no one has previously attempted to forecast elections (based on statistical modeling) in Lithuania. However, the distinction between “complicated” and “impossible” should be emphasized: this article argues that election forecasting is still possible, even under such unfavorable conditions, and could be considered as a meaningful and even necessary practice.

Though the possibility of forecasting at the national level (for example, forecasting parliamentary election results) should not be ruled out completely,<sup>1</sup> this article

aims to present a model that forecasts the results of elections for municipal councils at the local level (municipalities). The selection of such a research design effectively solves the “small  $N$ ” problem,<sup>2</sup> though this is not the only merit of this solution. It could also be regarded as quite an innovative approach, taking into account the fact that the majority of forecasting studies to date have been carried out at the national level only (parliamentary or presidential). The analysis presented in this article (the Lithuanian case) shows that credible election forecasts at the local level are also possible, if an alternative to surveys

on 11 March, 1990. This leaves a sample of only 4 cases for the analysis, because the 1992 elections should be excluded for a number of reasons, the two most important being, first, that it would not be possible to measure changes in the economy (since these were the first democratic elections) and second, that the variable of lagged votes or any other reliable popularity indicators of the government parties would not be available.

<sup>2</sup> Forecasting the results of parliamentary elections at the level of constituencies is another option. However, data on potential independent variables (for example, unemployment) at the constituency level are not available consistently: the administrative division of Lithuania does not exactly reflect the geographical division according to the constituencies. For example, major cities have several constituencies and unemployment data are not available for the different districts of those cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Five free and democratic parliamentary elections have been held in Lithuania since the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union

(which are quite scarce at the local level in Lithuania) and observer opinions (unscientific) is desired.

To better understand the logic behind the forecasting model for a particular country, a short overview of the political context is required. Therefore, important aspects of the Lithuanian party system and relevant electoral (democratic) experience are discussed in the next section. The tradition of election forecasting in Lithuania is also presented, along with examples from recent municipal elections; following which, theoretical possibilities for forecasting local election results in general, and those in Lithuania in particular, are discussed. Relevant findings from existing studies on voting in Lithuania are also presented; they provide a framework for the model (a method of OLS regression) that is introduced in the final section. There, the in-sample predictions are evaluated and the prospects of electoral forecasting in Lithuania are discussed.

## 2. Elections and parties in Lithuania

The party system (and especially its format) shapes the possibilities of election forecasting. It is not surprising that the vast majority of such work (based on statistical modeling)<sup>3</sup> has been carried out in countries that have either a two-party format (USA, United Kingdom) or a multi-party format with a relatively low fragmentation and essentially the same mechanics as two-partyism (for a comprehensive discussion of the mechanics and format of party systems, see Sartori, 2005). In any case, in the past, research on multi-party systems has formed the minority of research in the field of electoral forecasting (Arzheimer & Evans, 2010, p. 19).

A fragmented party system is certainly not a favorable context for election forecasting. This scientific tradition usually relies on the assumption that economics influences voting (Lewis-Beck, 2005, p. 150), and at the heart of economic voting theory is the responsibility hypothesis, which presupposes that voters hold the government responsible for the economy (Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). Fragmented party systems are usually characterized by unstable coalitions and larger numbers of parties in them. Particularly in this type of political context, it seems reasonable to expect that weaker economic voting will be observed, because the responsibility becomes more blurred (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000, p. 209) and (Powell & Whitten, 1993, p. 410). In other words, a higher number of parties has a negative influence on the relationship between the economy and voting at elections. This could lead to complications when trying to construct a forecasting equation.

The Lithuanian party system has undergone two main phases since the transition to democracy. The first phase was associated with trends of stabilization and relatively low fragmentation (for a multiparty system). Two parties (the Lithuanian Democratic Labor Party (LDLP),

the reformed communist party; and the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Conservatives (HU-LC), a party formed from the independence movement), dominated the political system, with one of them controlling half of the seats in parliament;<sup>4</sup> three other relevant but significantly smaller parties also existed (Krupavičius, 1998, p. 192). However, fragmentation has increased significantly since the 2000 elections: in the period 2004–2011, the number of relevant parties fluctuated between 7 and 9, and the number of parties forming the government never dropped below four (Jastramskis, 2010, p. 162). It must be noted that two relatively stable opposite poles in coalition-making can be distinguished: the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HU-LCD, the descendant of HU-LC) and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP, the descendant of LDLP, formed after a merger with a smaller social-democratic party) usually lead coalitions of the right and left respectively.

The tendency towards increasing fragmentation since 2000 has also been observed in local elections (Lukošaitis, 2003). It is not uncommon for the governing majority in the municipal council to be formed of five or even more parties. For example, in the municipalities of the three largest Lithuanian cities, the governing coalitions that were formed after the 2011 elections had four (Vilnius), five (Klaipėda) and six (Kaunas) political powers.<sup>5</sup> The average number of parties that have at least one seat in the municipal council in Lithuania is 6.7.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account the fact that a considerable threshold (4% of votes for a party/candidate, 6% for a coalition) is applied in local elections and all parties usually have the potential to participate in a governing municipal coalition, it can be stated that the standard format of municipal party systems resembles the situation at the national level.

Another characteristic of party systems that is important for election forecasting is electoral volatility. A tendency towards a high level of electoral volatility usually indicates highly unpredictable and chaotic elections: the higher the volatility, the more complicated it becomes to provide credible forecasts. For example, it would be almost impossible to forecast election results in a situation when the volatility reaches its maximum (100), as that would mean that all relevant parties had lost and been replaced by new parties (Mair, 1997, p. 79) and (Pedersen, 1979). Furthermore, volatility is usually related to a range of other instability traits: mergers and splits of parties, the success of new political powers, etc. It is quite complicated to forecast the vote share of opposition parties when a forecaster is not sure about the structure of the party system in the near future: maybe a new party with a fresh-made politician

<sup>3</sup> When the terms “election forecasting”, “forecasts of elections”, and similar are used without specification later in this article, they refer to forecasting based on statistical modeling. In cases where survey forecasts (polls) are mentioned, it is noted specifically.

<sup>4</sup> LDLP had 71 (out of 141) seats in 1992–1996, and HU-LC had 70 seats in 1996–2000.

<sup>5</sup> Independent candidates and coalitions were allowed to participate in the 2011 elections for Lithuania’s municipal councils, and therefore the term “parties” would not be precisely correct in this case.

<sup>6</sup> Calculations based on data provided by the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, <http://www.vrkt.lt/> (accessed on 15 September 2011).

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