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0261-3794/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2004.02.001

The parliamentary election in Latvia, October 2002

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1. Background

The fourth general election since the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991 took place on 5 October 2002. Parliamentary general elections are now scheduled to take place at four-year intervals.

The Latvian parliament, or *Saeima*, is made up of 100 elected seats. These are apportioned between five constituencies according to population size. Some shifts of population had resulted in a reapportionment of representation since the previous election in 1998. Riga, the district that includes the capital, gained four seats to become the largest multi-seat constituency, with 28 representatives in the *Saeima*. Vidzeme, previously with the largest population, lost two seats to have 26 in the 2002 election. This meant that the two largest constituencies held over half of the total number of seats. Among the smaller constituencies, Latgale lost three seats, falling to 17; Zemgale lost one, for a revised total of 15; and Kurzeme, the smallest constituency, remained at 14 seats.

In 1995, a new party, the People's Movement for Latvia, led by Joachim Siegerists, emerged from nowhere to gain 16 seats in the election. Although Latvian by

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parentage, Siegerists was German-born, and had a weak command of the Latvian language. Relying on a chaotic agenda of demagogic issues, Siegerists had proved a liability to his short-lived party, and many considered him an embarrassment to the Latvian polity. A law was later introduced to ensure that candidates who could not prove they had their high school education in Latvian would have to take a Latvian language test to high school equivalence. Russia complained that this was a human rights issue, affecting the rights of Latvia's large Russian-heritage population by discriminating against weak Latvian speakers. Under this pressure, the language condition was removed, and an oath of allegiance to Latvia was introduced.

At the time of the 2002 election, approximately 22% of the 2.4 million Latvian population did not have citizenship rights to vote or stand in elections. A very high proportion of these is from the Russian-speaking communities settled in Latvia during the half-century that Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union. Ethnic Latvians make up 54.8% of the country's population, while Russians (30%) form the largest minority. Naturalisation is proceeding for those eligible at a rate up to 1000 persons a month. None the less, the Council of Europe observers at the 2002 election were minded to comment in their report on the 'serious and long-term democratic deficit' that this represented, and recommended that ways be worked on urgently to take tangible steps towards expanding the electorate.

2. Electoral system

The electoral system has not changed since the 1998 election. A modified 'closed' party list system is used. Voters receive the ballots of all the parties standing for election in their constituency. The ballot papers also list all the candidates nominated by each party in their constituency, and voters, having chosen a particular party, can modify the candidate list by indicating support (with a '+') or by striking out the name of any candidates they dislike.

Parties need 5% of the national vote to win a seat in the *Saeima*. The Sainte Laguë electoral formula is applied in the constituencies, and seats are allocated to the candidates of the victorious parties according to the preference vote. Candidates can be placed on lists in more than one constituency, so the distribution of seats between the parties is likely to emerge more quickly than the complete list of the names of the deputies holding those seats.

3. Political parties

Altogether, 20 party lists were submitted in 2002, which included 1024 candidates. Two hopeful candidates were rejected under the Latvian law barring from office those who had previously been salaried staff of the USSR security services, or who continued to work in support of the Communist Party after 31 January 1991. One of these candidates, Tatiana Zdanoka, formerly of the Harmony Party,

had been elected to the *Saeima* in 1995 and 1998, but was deemed ineligible in 2002. The Constitutional Court has indicated that it envisages an end to such restrictions, once it is felt that the integrity of the new state does not need such protection.

Since gaining independence, many groups have attempted to establish political parties in Latvia. There have been some 20 lists in each of Latvia's four elections during this period, but many have existed for only a very brief period. The New Party, for example, emerged at the 1998 election to take eight seats, but by 2002 was no longer a player. Some parties have failed to gain any serious public support for their policies, ideology, or leader. Other parties have imploded even after quite significant electoral success: in some cases, leadership charisma has not proved long-lasting; in others, vague policy coalitions have found it problematic to sharpen up their platforms; in yet others, pragmatic co-ordination to achieve the minimum 5% threshold has not led to successful co-operation in the long run.

The most remarkable new party to emerge in 2002 was New Era (*Jaunais Laik*). It was founded in 2001, led by the former director of the central bank, Einars Repse, and jumped to the lead in opinion polls despite having no representation in the previous *Saeima*. Repse made clear his wish to lead a party based on a broad foundation of small individual donations, which may have increased the party's appeal among the electorates increasingly concerned about corruption in post-independence politics. Whereas previous 'new' parties have regularly been founded by incumbent *Saeima* members defecting from other groups in the fluid party structure of the past decade, New Era was established from outside the sitting parliament. Although some of the party's candidates had previous political experience, the party had no base of defectors from other elected parties. This separation from incumbent politicians may have been part of the appeal of the party, especially in view of increasing public suspicion about corruption in some parts of the business and political establishment.

Another new group among the 2002 party lists was the Latvia First Party (*Latvijas Pirma Partija*), associated with a broad base of Christian organisations. This party, however, did include a core of some *Saeima* members who defected from other existing parties, and was led by Eriks Jakobsons, a religious minister.

4. Election campaign

The issues facing Latvia early in the new millennium were, for the most part, not hugely divisive. Economic development remained a major concern, and a wide spectrum of post-Soviet economic difficulties remains. Nevertheless the economy was recovering since a dip in the late 1990s, when much export trade to Russia was lost as a result of that country's economic crisis. Gross domestic product grew by 7.6% in 2001, and was predicted to continue growing, although at a slower rate. Inflation was fairly steady, in a range between 2% and 3.5%, and unemployment remained stable in the 7–8% range.

Social issues—how to ensure the fair provision, and financial viability, of public goods such as education, health care, and pensions—exercised all the political leaders. There was also concern about growing public fear of corruption and organised crime in a polity where the culture and experience of democratic politics is still relatively weak and brief. Playing to this unease, New Era adopted a commitment to 'honesty, openness, professionalism', and promised a more open form of government. New Era also benefited from a very positive response to Einars Repse, who was perceived as having been a successful chief executive of the Bank of Latvia.

Impending invitations to join NATO, and the European Union (EU), also formed a backdrop to the election. There was a unity about the benefits of EU membership, but the party for Human Rights in Latvia, especially popular among Latvia's large ethnic minority populations, stood out for its opinion that NATO membership was not necessary for Latvia. Some observers felt that the Russian government signalled its preference in this argument when President Putin welcomed Janis Jurkans, leader of Human Rights in Latvia, on an official visit to Moscow. If the election was in any way a referendum on NATO membership, the vast majority of voters chose parties that wanted to take Latvia into NATO.

Given the lack of fundamentally divisive issues, and the shifting sands of party politics, it is not surprising that personality and image featured quite significantly in the campaign. For example, Juris Bojars was blamed for causing the split of the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance into the Social Democratic Workers Party and the Social Democratic Union, both of which failed to gain seats. On the other hand, the former Prime Minister Andris Skele attracted such negative opinions that his People's Party tried to avoid too close a link with his personal image or record. Indeed, at one point in the campaign, the People's Party found its public opinion poll rating was close to the 5% threshold for *Saeima* seats. The party thus concentrated its advertising on the message that the People's Party was the 'Team' with experience.

The People's Party was also notable for investing heavily in campaigning, declaring campaign expenditure of almost 1.4 million lats (1 lat is approximately £ 1.09 or $ 1.75). This was more than 2.5 times as much as the next highest spending party, the Green and Farmers Union. Four of the parties that won seats spent roughly 460,000–540,000 lats each, while the Human Rights Party declared a total campaign expenditure of less than 300,000 lats. The aggregate declared that the money spent on advertising for all parties in the campaign was over 5.2 million lats—a substantial amount in a country of only 2.4 million people.

5. Election results

The two new parties won 36 seats between them: New Era with 26 seats, the largest party in the new *Saeima*; Latvia First with 10 seats (see Table 1). Although this shows the continuing flux in Latvian party politics, other parts of the 2002 vote suggest continuity and development. For example, Human Rights in Latvia,

Table 1
Legislative election results, 2002 and 1998

	2002		1998	
	Votes (%)	Seats (100)	Votes (%)	Seats (100)
New Era	23.9	26	–	–
Human Rights in Latvia	18.9	25	14.1	16[a]
People's Party	16.7	20	21.2	24
Latvia's First Party	9.6	10	–	–
Green and Farmers Union	9.5	12	2.5	0[b]
Fatherland and Freedom	5.4	7	14.7	17
Latvia's Way	4.9	0	18.1	21
Latvian Social Democratic Party	4.0	0	12.8	14[c]
New Party	–		7.3	8
Other lists [d]	8.1	0	9.3	0

Electorate: 1.4 m (1998, 1.4 m). Turnout: 71.4% (1998, 71.9%). Spoiled ballots: 0.76%.
Local party names: New Era, *Jaunais laiks*; Human Rights in Latvia, *Par clivcka tiesibam vienota Latvija*; People's Party, *Tautas partija*; Latvia's First Party, *Latvijas Pirma Partija*; Green and Farmers Union, *Zalo un Zemnieku savieniba*; Fatherland and Freedom, TB/LNNK; Latvia's Way, *Latvijas cels*; Latvian Social Democratic Party, *Latvijas Socialdemokratu Stradnieku Partija*.
[a] 1998 figures are for the Harmony Party, on which the Human Rights in Latvia party is founded.
[b] 1998 figures are for the Latvian Farmers Union; the Greens were part of a different coalition in 1998.
[c] 1998 figures are for the Social Democratic Alliance, a broader based political group.
[d] 12 other lists in 2002; 14 in 1998.

with 25 seats, suggests the steady coalescence of some groups of the left under one banner. Its foundation was the Harmony Party (16 seats in 1998), which was based on the earlier Concord Party (six seats in 1995). Its vote may have been helped by the breakup of the Latvian Social Democratic Alliance (14 seats in 1998) into two party lists, neither of which passed the electoral threshold.

The People's Party, which first won seats in 1998, remained well represented, with 20 seats. The Fatherland and Freedom Party, which has been successful in every Latvian election, fell to seven seats, just one more than in the first election in 1993, and well down on its results in the intervening elections. The Green and Farmer's Union was a recombination of groups that had fought previous elections under a variety of banners. Their success especially shows the pragmatic compromises that can be made to maximise electoral viability in the Latvian system. Although it can be surmised that some previous supporters of the Social Democrats shifted their allegiance to the People's Party, the two social democrat groups—even with their reduced following—combined received an aggregate 5.5% of the vote, which would have resulted in about seven seats in the *Saeima* for a united party list.

These changing combinations contribute to the sense of the Latvian party system as fluid, but this has to be counterbalanced by recognising that, for example, both the interests of the Green and the Farmer parties were represented in the *Saeima* from the very first elections of 1993. Then, however, they were part of different

party list coalitions. This careful, if changing, positioning to maintain a political voice for their interests can be seen as evidence of the continuity of representation for these minority political interests. On the other hand, one symbol of party continuity, Latvia's Way (*Latvijas cels*), failed, for the first time in this period of Latvia's history, to win any seats at all. The leader of the party, Andris Berzins, had been the Prime Minister in Latvia's longest-serving government, hence it may have fallen victim to its close links with the former administrations at a time when a goodly proportion of the electorate seemed to be voting for change.

Of the 100 members of the new *Saeima*, 18 were women (an increase of one), and the age of the deputies ranged from 23 years (New Era) to 84 years (Latvia's First). On the whole, the deputies tended to be middle-aged: 31 were younger than 40, 59 were aged 41–60 years, and only 10 were over 61 years. Fewer than half (41) were re-elected from the previous *Saeima*; the largest proportion of these being in the People's Party. Some of these were re-elected, but had previously sat for different parties. For example, while the New Party shattered after the 1998 election, six of its eight members were re-elected variously as representatives of the People's Party, Latvia's First, and the Green and Farmer's Union.

6. Outcomes

Although the election took place on 5 October, the previous *Saeima* remained in office until 5 November 2002, giving time for alliances to be worked out among the six parties elected. Repse's New Era had only one more seat than Human Rights, but all the other groups have political positions generally in the centre-right, and closer to New Era than to Human Rights. Avoiding the People's Party, which clearly had leadership problems, Repse formed a government in alliance with three smaller parties: Latvia's First, Green and Farmers Union, and For Fatherland and Freedom.

This alliance controlled 55 of the 100 seats in the *Saeima*. Negotiations over the allocation of portfolios were difficult, but cabinet positions were eventually distributed with four offices for Latvia's First, two to Green and Farmers Union, and two to For Fatherland and Freedom. New Era retained seven offices for itself. Sandra Kalniete, a former diplomat and not a member of the *Saeima*, was drafted in to lead the Foreign Ministry. This administration, with an average age of 39, was the youngest ever in modern Latvia, with relatively little experience of government office. This outcome seems to be a very direct response to public demand that Latvia tries to develop a new era in its politics.

The country's president is selected by the *Saeima*, and in June 2003 Vaira Vike-Freiberga was overwhelmingly re-elected as President. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, a multi-lingual and intellectual leader, has become a symbol of Latvian stability and steady development; and she is widely recognised as a valuable figure for the new democracies that have emerged from the former Soviet Union.

Not all political decisions since the election of 2002 have been so clear-cut. Latvian administrations since 1991 have generally not been very long-lasting, as party

coalitions shift, party lists disintegrate and reform, and individual politicians change allegiances. These kinds of challenges have not disappeared; for example, in opposition, Human Rights splintered, and the new administration had to weather crises, including one that forced the resignation of the Health Minister. But the recent crises have been modest; and when there was a threat that the ruling coalition might be about to break down, a surge in public support for the government prompted potential defectors to reconsider their position. By late 2003 the administration formed after the 2002 elections, and which had drawn on few experienced politicians, was still managing to maintain its authority and to provide a stable government in Latvia.

0261-3794/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2004.02.004

The presidential election in South Korea, December 2002

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The presidential election in South Korea, held on 19 December 2002, was the fourth time the electorate was able freely to choose its political leader in the aftermath of the 1987 Democratic Movement. Roh Moo-Hyun of the ruling Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) was elected president, narrowly defeating Lee Hoi-Chang from the conservative Grand National Party (GNP). Contrary to expectations, the campaign was not dominated by personalities, but by a number of political issues, domestic and international. This pre-eminence of politics over personality suggests a maturing of South Korean democracy. Nonetheless regionalism also decided the election, leaving chronic issues unresolved.

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