

Briefing on

Parliamentary Elections in Lithuania

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47.81%

voter turnout in 2020

15

running political parties

141

seats in the Seimas

About the elections

2024 is a big election year in Lithuania, as the country has already seen presidential elections, elections to the European Parliament and a referendum on dual citizenship, and now faces the upcoming parliamentary elections. Usually, such intensity of campaigning activities translates into political excitement in the country, but not in the case of Lithuania. If we had to describe the pre-election atmosphere in this Baltic state in one word, it would probably be "boredom". The word is by no means pejorative in this case but rather means "democratic stability": a state of affairs of which many democratic countries – particularly in Central and Eastern Europe – could only dream.

The Lithuanian parliamentary elections will take place on 13 October 2024 (and, if necessary, a second round on 27 October), as ordinary elections to the Seimas (the unicameral Lithuanian parliament) are always held on the second Sunday of October in the year in which the mandate of the members of the Seimas ends. Despite several crises and perturbations, elections to the Seimas have been held regularly every four years since 1992 in the manner envisaged following a full term. In comparison to other countries in the region, Lithuania can therefore be regarded as having a stable parliamentarism.

Indeed, the Lithuanian party system, to some extent shaped by the electoral system, gives citizens a certain political predictability. However, at the same time, it forces the formation of government coalitions, which in Lithuania does not so much increase the risk of government crises, but rather enforces the 'consensual' nature of the political culture. This results in the fact that, despite the significant Russian threat and the high dependence of this small country's economy on external factors, Lithuanians know what to expect from the parties that are fielding candidates in the upcoming elections.

Background

The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania states that the Seimas consists of 141 representatives, elected for a term of four years through universal, equal, direct suffrage by secret ballot. The rules for electing members of the Seimas are outlined in the Law on Elections to the Seimas. Members are elected through a mixed electoral system, with 71 members elected in single-member constituencies and 70 members elected from a multi-member constituency.

In single-member constituencies, elections follow a two-round system, while in multi-member constituencies, a proportional system is used (and the seats are allocated to the participating political parties using the largest remainder method).

Only parties receiving more than 5% of the total votes cast in the election may participate in the seat allocation, while coalitions must meet a 7% electoral threshold. The mixed electoral system and the existence of thresholds, on the one hand, has prevented too much party fragmentation, but on the other hand has allowed strong regional leaders to enter the parliament, giving the representatives of regions densely populated by national minorities the chance to enter the Seimas.

Possible changes in the organisation of parliamentary elections have been the subject of much heated political discussion in Lithuania for the last half a decade. In 2019, on the initiative of the ruling party, a referendum was held in conjunction with the presidential election to reduce the number of members of the Seimas from 141 to 121. Due to low turnout, the referendum was invalid. A few months later, representatives of the governing party registered a draft law on lowering the electoral threshold for parties from 5% to 3%, and for coalitions from 7% to 5%. The Seimas passed it, but the President vetoed the law and it did not enter into force.

However, a few other improvements for more responsive and fairer elections were made, such as changing the size of several constituencies. These changes seemed to respond to the real needs of demographic change rather than being a political manipulation (although representatives of the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania accused the authors of the reform of artificial dilution of the minority electorate). In addition, some amendments to Article 56 of the Constitution were introduced in 2022, extending the passive right to vote to all citizens from the age of 21, and creating a special constituency for Lithuanian citizens voting abroad.

Some amendments were also related to the problem of disinformation and troll farms. With the amendments formalising the prohibition of such activities, Lithuania, as a small state significantly vulnerable to disinformation – albeit only from Russia – underlined its determination to combat such practices during the election period.

For the Seimas elections in 2024, 15 different electoral lists were registered. 1742 candidates will participate in the elections: 1091 men and 651 women.

Distribution of seats and current political landscape

The conditions for organising elections in Lithuania are undoubtedly one of the factors of the stability of democracy in the country. Another such factor is the not-so-subtle difference between the programmes of the political parties most likely to reach the thresholds and the social consensus on important issues such as the country's membership of the European Union, anti-Russianism and the necessity to support Ukraine, democratic values, and the pursuit of a welfare state according to the model of the European Union. All this means that – despite only a dozen days until the general elections – there is no certainty as to which parties will win the elections and form a coalition; however, there is a certainty that they will continue on the country's current political course, even if some of the finer details change.

The winner of the general elections in Lithuania in 2020 was *Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats* (TS–LKD; at the election: 50 seats), the largest conservative and Christian democratic party in Lithuania. It has been governing together with two liberal groups, namely *Liberal Movement* (LS; 13 seats) and the *Freedom Party* (LP; 11 seats). The president, Gitanas Nausėda, nominated Ingrida Šimonytė as prime minister, and the Seimas approved the appointment in December 2020, even though she was not a TS–LKD party leader.

The opposition's parliamentary benches after the elections of 2020 included representatives of such groups as the green-conservative *Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union* (LVŽS; 32 seats), the *Social Democratic Party of Lithuania* (LSDP; 13 seats), the populist *Labour Party* (DP; 10 seats), the *Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania* (LLRA–KŠS; 3 seats), the *Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania* (LSSDP; 3 seats), *Freedom and Justice* (PLT; 1 seat), the *Lithuanian Green Party* (LŽP; 1 seat), and four independent MPs.

Volatile party system

Every now and then in the Lithuanian party system, there are situations when a new party (often with a leader from the business or show-business world) forms and enters parliament. It is also not uncommon that new groupings are created from parties that already exist. This is how LVŽS disintegrated, even though it had governed from 2016 until 2020 and was the largest opposition party before it split. The party's chairman, Ramūnas Karbauskis, will struggle to pass the electoral threshold after a group of his MPs split off to form a new party – the *Union of Democrats 'For Lithuania'* (DSVL) – with the former prime minister Saulius Skvernelis, who has taken the radical and populist former presidential candidate Ignas Vegele under his wing. Skvernelis, on the other hand, could have the opportunity to enter a governing coalition with LSDP if his new party wins the election, or even with TS–LKD if any of the liberal groupings fall below the 5% threshold.

In further changes to the political landscape in Lithuania, another new party recently appeared – *Dawn of Nemunas* (NA) – established by Remigijus Žemaitaitis after his expulsion from PLT due to his antisemitic statements, having relinquished his seat to the Seimas before he would be deprived of it. LSDDP has been replaced by the *Lithuanian Party of Regions*, which has also taken in several MPs who have left other groups. The hitherto extra-parliamentary party, the *Lithuanian Christian Democracy Party*, came to the Seimas in 2024 through the MP Mindaugas Puidokas, who transferred his allegiance from LVŽS.

Main parties running for election

Party	Leader	Political Orientation	European affiliation	Current seats (changed since 2020)
Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	<u>Gabrielius Landsbergis</u>	Conservative	EPP	49
Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS)	<u>Ramūnas Karbauskis</u>	Green-conservative, agrarian	ECR	17
Union of Democrats “For Lithuania” (DSVL)	<u>Saulius Skvernelis</u>	Centre-left, green	EGP	16
Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP)	<u>Vilija Blinkevičiūtė</u>	Centre-left	ESP	14
Liberals' Movement (LS)	<u>Viktorija Cmilytė-Nielsen</u>	Conservative liberal	ALDE	12
Freedom Party (LP)	<u>Aušrinė Armonaitė</u>	Social liberal	ALDE	10
Lithuanian Regions Party (LRP)	<u>Jonas Pinskus</u>	Social conservative, regionalist	-	9
Dawn of Nemunas (NA)	<u>Remigijus Žemaitaitis</u>	National conservative	-	3
Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA–KSS)	<u>Valdemar Tomaševski</u>	Polish minority, conservative	ECR	2
Lithuanian Christian Democracy Party (LKDP)	<u>Mindaugas Puidokas</u>	Conservative	-	1
Labour Party (DP)	<u>Viktor Uspaskich</u>	Populist, pro-Russian	-	1

Opinion polls

As already mentioned, it is not easy to forecast who will win the Lithuanian parliamentary elections. Nor do past elections give a clear picture of any particular trends: LSDP won the 2023 local elections; TS–LKD, represented by the current prime minister, lost in the second round of the presidential elections to the current president Nausėda, an independent candidate; while in the European Parliament elections TS–LKD won.

However, it appears that the following three political forces are likely to get the most votes in the multi-member constituency:

LSDP is leading the opinion polls, albeit with slightly declining support (stabilising at around 16–20%); NA is growing in strength (reaching 10–11%); while support for TS–LKD has decreased from 21.33% in the European elections to about 10–12%. According to polls, DSVL and LVŽS, led by the former allies Skvernelis and Karbauskis respectively, will go head-to-head (9–10%), although commentators favour Skvernelis as the one who has “civilised” and become more “radicalised” as a politician over Karbauskis, who shows a rather radical face, having lost in the presidential elections together with the advocate-populist Ignas Vegėlė.

Coalition scenarios

The results of the opinion polls, if translated into election results (bearing in mind that this is not necessarily the case in Lithuania's mixed electoral system), offer a chance for several possible coalition government configurations in Lithuania. Firstly, if the parties currently forming the governing coalition cross the electoral thresholds and gain a majority again, they are likely to continue to govern together; alternatively, if one of those parties fails to cross the threshold, it could still be replaced by DSVL; or if the three parties still have too few seats for a majority, they could invite DSVL. Another option is a government consisting of LSDP (who are likely to win the election), DSVL and NA. It is unlikely that the liberal parties will form a coalition with social democratic parties or that Skvernelis' DSVL will enter a coalition with his now-rival Karbauskis' LVŽS.

The Lithuanian president is not a big fan of TS-LKD and would prefer the country to be governed by a coalition co-created by LSDP. The open conflict between President Nausėda and the leader of TS-LKD, Gabrielius Landsbergis, prevented the latter from running for the position of EU commissioner, which will probably be filled by the former leader of TS-LKD, Andrius Kubilius. At the same time, public opinion polls show that around 15% of respondents would like to see the current head of government (from TS-LKD) as prime minister, while less than 10% can imagine the leader coming from NA, and just over 7% favour LSDP.

Electoral agenda

The key electorate for TS-LKD is made up of voters in larger cities and of higher education, while LSDP is supported by employees and voters from smaller towns and villages. Voters' main accusations against the current government are arrogance, a certain detachment from the voters, deterioration of the situation in health care and education, and attempts to increase taxes. Meanwhile, the leader of LSDP, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė – very popular among pensioners – is identified with the vision of a caring and protective welfare state version.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned divisions become somewhat blurred when it comes to discussions about the topics significant for the political agenda in Lithuania. On key issues related to security, foreign policy, protection against disinformation, and Lithuania's future in the EU, there are virtually no differences between the parties, and in several pre-election debates that have already taken place, these issues were surprisingly similarly framed by party leaders. Some significant differences, although widely echoed in the media, concern the less harsh course towards Russia or China presented by LSDP, DSVL, or LVŽS, as well as the approach to taxes and the welfare role of the state. Smaller parties and individual, expressive candidates who may not have a chance of passing the electoral threshold or entering from single-member constituencies, such as LLRA or the independent candidate Eduardas Vaitkus, but also LVŽS, show more radical views: far more pro-Russian, anti-vaccination, and anti-European.

While the ideals of mainstream parties do not differ significantly, TS-LKD is internally divided on its ideology, which is why in recent years it has not been possible to pass more progressive solutions, for example on the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, despite the presence of liberal and progressive parties in the coalition. However, the issues of the rights of sexual minorities or the legalization of soft drugs are present in the public debate.

Lithuanian pre-election debates are substantive discussions (if a little boring), not squabbles or bouts of throwing insults at each other. The levels of both societal as well as partisan polarisation – which undoubtedly distinguishes Lithuania from its neighbours Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, or even stable democracies like the USA – are relatively low. Regardless of which parties win the parliamentary elections in Lithuania, it is highly likely that the next government will continue to implement the most important strategic goals set up for this country so far.

In the framework of a panel discussion series, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is jointly organised with the Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Karl-Renner-Institut.