

Boycott strategy of opposition parties in authoritarian regimes: Case of Azerbaijan

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Author's declaration

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Abstract

Although elections are the core elements of democratic systems, authoritarian regimes also organise elections. Opposition parties in authoritarian regimes, therefore, face a dilemma: participation or boycott? As previous studies demonstrate, the latter is a popular strategy among political parties in authoritarian regimes, from Venezuela to Jordan and Bangladesh to Belarus. Through boycotting, political parties aim to change public opinion against incumbent parties or leaders, damage the reputations of their contenders, preserve their resources, and protect their reputations.

This thesis investigates the boycott strategy as practised by opposition parties in Azerbaijan, a typical case of an authoritarian regime. Opposition parties in the country have boycotted nearly half of the elections (presidential and parliamentary) in 33 years of independence. Taking presidential elections into consideration, which are more consequential than parliamentary elections in the Azerbaijan political system, classical opposition forces or parties have participated in only three presidential elections, while four presidential elections have been boycotted. This uneven strategy is evidenced by the multiple cases of opposition parties choosing to participate in some elections, yet boycotting others.

To investigate the case of Azerbaijan, this thesis uses a within-case comparison method, through which the context of the different elections is analysed qualitatively. The research demonstrates that opposition parties in Azerbaijan boycott elections when they consider themselves weaker than the incumbent.

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Introduction

Electoral competition, where multiple political parties contest free and fair elections with the intention of winning power, is core to the healthy functioning of democracy. Political power creates opportunities for parties or leaders to control the bureaucratic system, implement their policies, and enhance their popularity. In states with anti-democratic political actors, however, authoritarian leaders often manipulate elections, use fraud, and apply pressure to opposition parties – thus undermining the validity of the democratic process. Where it is expected that elections will not be held without interference, parties can choose to reject participation in the elections, in a tactic referred to as “electoral boycott”.

According to Beaulieu, from 1990 to 2002, boycotted elections comprised thirteen per cent of all elections around the world (Beaulieu, 2006, 1). While electoral boycotts can be observed across various types of regimes, they are predominantly prevalent in authoritarian regimes. About 89 per cent of electoral boycotts across the world occur in “partly free” or “not free” countries (Buttorff, 2011, 78). Electoral strategies used by opposition parties in authoritarian regimes draw specific attention because, in these regimes, the results of the elections are often certain in advance. Nonetheless, despite these electoral irregularities, opposition parties also sometimes choose to participate in elections while, at other times, declining to participate and launching boycotts.

Why, then, do opposition parties boycott elections? Four leading explanations have been put forward in literature to explain the motivation behind the boycotting decisions. The first is that opposition political parties choose to boycott the elections when they consider the electoral process flawed. Lindberg has examined elections in various African countries, and his investigation demonstrated that opposition parties boycotted 55-60 per cent of all flawed elections (Lindberg, 2004, 10). The second explanation holds that opposition political parties refuse to participate in the elections once they have concluded that they are stronger than their adversaries, and that a

boycott may force them to make reforms, as in the case of Jordan (Buttorff and Dion, 2016). The third explanation suggests that opposition parties boycott elections when they are much weaker than their contenders and thus believe that participating in the election might cause devastating electoral loss. (Pastor, 1999) The final explanation holds that there is a positive correlation between electoral boycotts and observation of the election by international organisations. (Hyde and Beaulieu, 2009).

The electoral boycott strategies of opposition parties invite many questions. Firstly, opposition political parties do not boycott all elections, often boycotting one election and then choosing to participate in another. Secondly, opposition parties often insist on boycotting elections for several consecutive elections, even when the strategy has so far proved unsuccessful. Lastly, within a single country, only some political parties choose to boycott the elections, while others decide to participate.

Azerbaijan organizes elections periodically: parliamentary elections are held once in five years, while presidential elections (since 2016) are held once every seven years. According to international and independent local observation groups, however, the elections held in Azerbaijan do not meet the requirements of international standards. They are rigged and flawed, the candidates of opposition parties are disadvantaged, and electoral law is manipulated. (See the OSCE reports cite). Since 1993, the ruling New Azerbaijan Party has won all presidential and parliamentary elections. Despite election results being certain before voting has begun (with the incumbent already declared victor), opposition parties still choose to participate in some elections and boycott others.

The main reasons given for the electoral boycott strategy by opposition parties have been irregularities in elections and pressure against the opposition political parties, such as arrest or violence. Although governments have not met the demands of opposition parties, many have still chosen to participate in elections. Moreover, over the last ten years (2013-2024), these main political parties have insisted that the boycott strategy in presidential elections, with the aim of

forcing the government into making reforms, is ineffective. The strategies of different political parties also differ between elections. Although classical opposition parties have boycotted presidential elections, for example, others have decided to participate.

Bearing these competing explanations in mind, this thesis will ask: “Why do opposition political parties boycott elections in Azerbaijan, and why do some parties choose to boycott some elections, but not others?”

Considering the Azerbaijani case of electoral boycott by political actors, I will attempt to explain that electoral irregularity is *not* the main reason behind the boycott strategy of opposition parties in authoritarian regimes. In Chapter I, I will focus on the literature on electoral authoritarianism and electoral boycotts. In Chapter II, I will explain the methodological approach used in the thesis. In Chapter III, I will delve into the boycott practice of opposition parties in Azerbaijan. Considering four main theoretical explanations, I will explain that the main reason for an electoral boycott of opposition parties in Azerbaijan is the threat of electoral loss. After assessing the current political debate between classical and new opposition parties, I will lastly explain the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the boycott strategy.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

Concept of Electoral Authoritarianism

Since the Portuguese Revolution in 1974, widely viewed as the outset of the third wave of democratisation, the number of democratic regimes increased by almost two, over thirty years. According to data provided by Freedom House, if 26.97% of all countries worldwide were classified as ‘free’ in 1975, this indicator stood at 46.35% by 2005. This escalation in the number of democratic countries persuaded authors like Fukuyama to claim that this wave of democratisation signalled “the end of history” and an absolute victory of liberalism. However, the following years demonstrated that liberal democracy has not absolutely won the fight against authoritarianism. As demonstrated by Lührmann and Lindberg (*Figure 1* on page 4), a third wave of ‘autocratization’ began in 1993 before, and in the 2010s, authoritarian states surpassed democratic ones worldwide (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019).

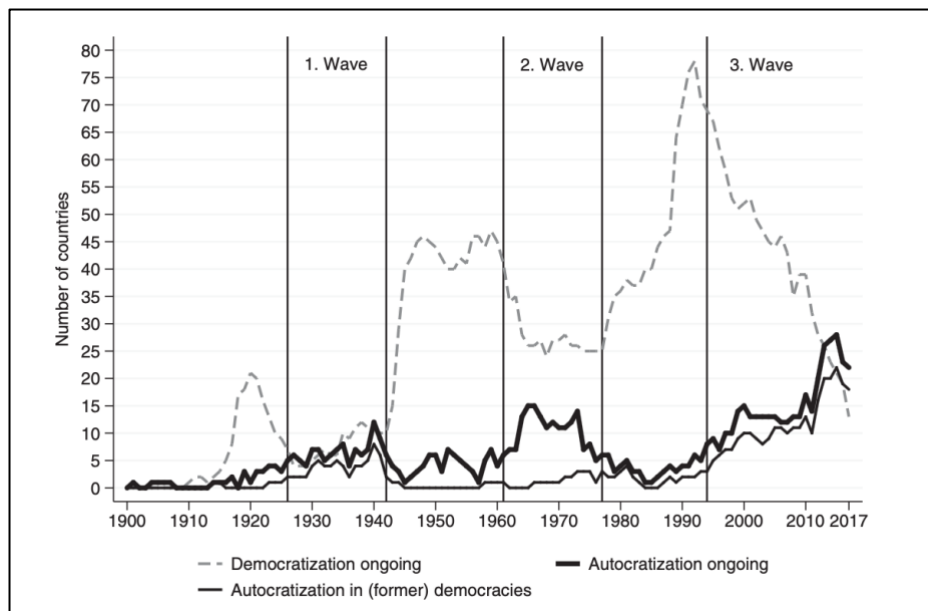


Figure 1: Three waves of autocratization.

Source: Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2019). A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113. P.1103

However, this anti-democratic wave did not contain the features typically employed by classical authoritarian actors, instead moving regimes towards a position located somewhere between democratic and classical authoritarian regimes. The transition from authoritarian regimes to democracy thus caused a new type of authoritarianism behind the electoral façade: electoral authoritarianism. Under this system, regimes tend to organise regular elections for the legislative assembly and chief executive, while still violating liberal-democratic principles such as freedom and fairness. The elections are organised under universal suffrage, and opposition parties are permitted to participate in elections, but opposition parties are not “permitted” to win the elections and face varying levels of repression (Schedler, 2006, 3). Electoral authoritarian regimes, therefore, seek to benefit from the façade of democracy and the presentation of legitimate government obtained through popular election. However, behind this façade, there remain significant differences between liberal and electoral democracies, *as well as* “closed” authoritarian regimes. As the ‘spectrum of political regimes’ proffered by Schedler suggests, electoral authoritarianism borders both electoral democracies in the democratic camp and closed authoritarian regimes in the non-democratic camp. The difference between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism lies in the nature of their approach to elections. The former organises free and fair elections, while the latter violates electoral rights and manipulates the electoral process. The similar element employed by both regime types is a violation of constitutional rights (Schedler, 2013) (*Figure 2* on page 5).

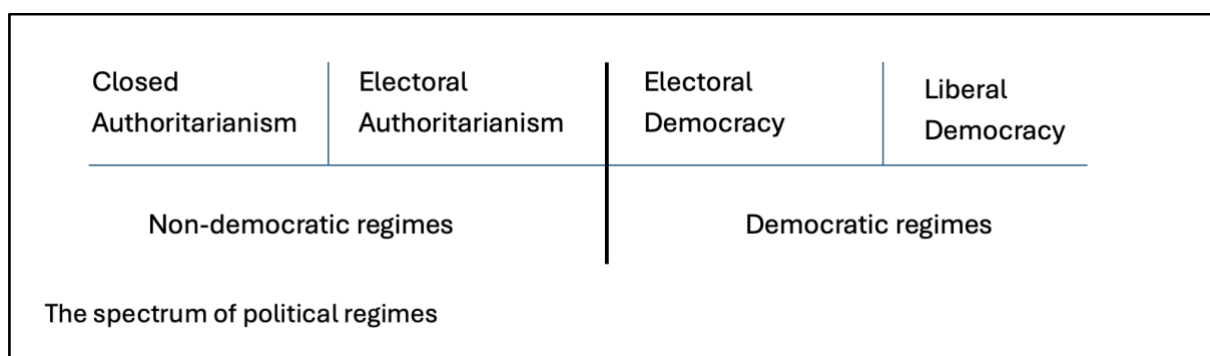


Figure 2: Spectrum of political regimes.

Source: Schedler, A. (2013). Shaping Electoral Arena. The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism, Oxford Studies in Democratization, P.78

Miller also similarly defines electoral authoritarian regimes as authoritarian regimes where legal multiparty elections are held for the legislature. The difference, however, between electoral authoritarian regimes and democracies is that elections in the former are understood to be unfair and unfree. (Miller, 2017, 19). Miller's research focuses on regime transitions from closed authoritarianism to both electoral authoritarianism and democracy, demonstrating that from 1946 to 2010, the majority of transitions observed moved from closed authoritarian regimes towards electoral authoritarian regimes (*Table 1* on page 6).

Previous year	Current year		
	Closed Autocracy	Electoral Autocracy	Democracy
Closed Autocracy	2514	139	145
Electoral Autocracy	115	2015	57
Democracy	46	20	3226

Table 1: Transition among regime types

Source: Miller, M. K. (2020). *The Strategic Origins of Electoral Authoritarianism*. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(1), 17–44. P.22

The author explains the transition from closed authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism through three factors: international pressure, regional contagion and socio-economic structure. According to the empirical results of the research, the author concludes that the transition to an electoral authoritarian regime occurs when the authoritarian regime is dependent on external support (aid, membership in international organisations or military alliances); when average income is low in the country; or when the country borders an electoral authoritarian regime (39).

Author	Article	Year	Topic of the article
Andreas Schedler	Shaping the Electoral Arena	2013	Borders between electoral authoritarian regimes, closed authoritarian, and electoral democratic regimes

Michael K. Miller	The Strategic Origins of Electoral Authoritarianism	2017	Factors needed for transition from closed autocracy to electoral autocracy
Larry Diamond	Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes	2002	Regime classification and borders of authoritarian regime subtypes.

Table 2: Selected literature on electoral authoritarianism

In his seminal work, Diamond focuses on “hybrid regimes” located within the “grey zone” between democracy and dictatorship. According to his classification, countries which are not democratic fall into 3 different categories: competitive authoritarian, hegemonic electoral authoritarian and closed authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2002, 25). Ambiguous regimes are difficult to determine as they sit between electoral democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes. Diamond defines hegemonic authoritarian regimes as ones which permit independent media and political opposition on the condition that they do not challenge the incumbent regime (26). Diamond also pays significant attention to the border between competitive autocracies and hegemonic electoral autocracies, distinguishing between these regime types in agreement with the definition offered by Levitsky and Way, also noting that in competitive regimes, the opposition has the capacity to genuinely challenge the incumbent and even win the election (29).

To conclude, electoral authoritarian regimes are a subtype of authoritarian regimes. The difference between electoral authoritarian regimes and democracies (liberal or electoral) is that in electoral authoritarian regimes, regular elections are held, but they are not free and fair. The incumbent parties or leaders pressure opposition parties, as well as the media and civil society, while constitutional norms are violated. However, these regimes remain different from closed authoritarian regimes, in which opposition parties are not allowed either legally or practically, and the political system is fully “closed”.

Theories on the reasons of electoral boycotts

As we have seen, electoral boycotts are a common strategy employed by opposition parties to exert pressure on incumbents through refusing to participate in elections, across various types of regimes. For example, elections in Venezuela in 2020 were boycotted by the opposition, and a

boycott campaign was carried out to encourage people to abstain from voting in France in 2017. Despite the fact that electoral boycotts are pervasive worldwide, scholars have paid little attention to the topic, especially in the context of authoritarian regimes. However, some seminal works can be considered milestones on the topic.

One key study regarding the electoral boycott strategy of opposition parties was authored by Staffan Lindberg, who attempted to explain why opposition parties boycotted elections by focusing on the period between 1989 and 2003. Analysing a comprehensive dataset of 53 African countries, Lindberg concluded that there was a correlation between electoral boycotts and rigged elections, whereby opposition political parties were more likely to boycott elections if they were rigged (Lindberg, 2004, 9). The dataset also reveals that about 74 per cent of losing parties in presidential elections and 55 per cent of losing parties in parliamentary elections refused to accept election results in the event of the election being flawed (Lindberg, 2004, 10). Lindberg then evaluates the participation rate of opposition parties using three categories: a 'total boycott', whereby the 'real opposition' parties all choose to boycott the elections; a 'partial boycott', in which some but not all opposition parties boycott; and 'total consent', where all major parties participate in the elections (Lindberg, 2004, 9).

Another key work published by Buttorff and Dion merits attention due to the author's contrasting approach. The two authors take as a case study the tactical considerations of Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) and argue that electoral factors, such as voting, are insufficient to explain the boycott strategy in a single country. Therefore, more than electoral considerations (such as the absence of the possibility of real competition) is needed to explain the different strategies of opposition parties in a single authoritarian country across several elections.

In autocratic regimes, opposition parties complain about irregularities yet still participate in some (but not all) elections (Buttorff and Dion, 2017, 98). The authors suggest that non-electoral factors should be considered to explain the different strategies (participation or boycott) of opposition

political parties. Using an incomplete information model, authors argue that, in the case of Jordan, when opposition forces consider the regime weak and mobilisation costs low, they prefer to boycott the elections, presuming that the weakness of the regime will cause a pullback from the government and encourage electoral reform, through the force of the boycott (Buttorff and Dion, 2017, 103-106).

A doctoral thesis by Beaulieu, focusing on electoral boycotts in developing countries, uses a two-dimensional approach, classifying boycotts as ‘major/minor’ and ‘Gandhian/Fearonian’ (Beaulieu, 2006). “Major” boycotts occur when mass opposition parties criticise electoral irregularities and flaws, while minor boycotts are launched to pressure governments for their particular interests. Gandhian boycotts are a form of boycott in which peaceful methods are observed, while Fearonian boycotts occur when the boycott is accompanied by violence. Beaulieu also considers how international factors impact the type of boycott employed, indicating that Gandhian (non-violent) boycotts aim to draw the attention of the international democratic community to the illegitimacy of the elections (Beaulieu, 2006).

Bratton, analysing 54 elections held in 40 African countries between 1989 and 1997, also claims that opposition parties prefer to boycott the elections when they disagree on the “rules of the democratic game” (Bratton, 1998, 52). Bratton demonstrates the correlation between boycotts of opposition parties and perception of poor quality elections, whereby boycotts by opposition parties occur more often, where elections have been assessed as unfree and unfair by observers (56). An additional crucial point made by the author is that boycotts can also signal that the opposition party has concluded that it has no chance of winning the election (52).

Robert A. Pastor similarly understands electoral boycotts primarily as a sign of opposition party weakness. According to his approach, boycotts happen when opposition parties are sure that they are weaker than the incumbent party and believe that they do not have any chance of winning (Pastor, 1999, 1).

Hatungimana and Wuthrich come to the same conclusion as Buttorff and Dion via a comparison between African/Middle Eastern countries and the rest of the world. Using samples from these two groups, they demonstrate that electoral boycotts occur when the opposition believes that the public support for them is greater than that of the incumbent. In this case, there are two reasons for a boycott: Firstly, the decision to boycott by the opposition can cast a shadow on the legitimacy of elections. Secondly, because the support for the opposition is greater, the level of electoral manipulation by the government increases (repression against opposition elites, manipulation of electoral procedures), which may, in turn, lead to electoral boycotts by opposition parties in the future, thus threatening the legitimacy of the incumbent (Hatungimana and Wuthrich, 2024).

Lastly, according to Beaulieu and Hyde, there is a positive correlation between the boycott of opposition parties and the presence of international observation groups. International observation of elections is assumed to increase the quality of elections in which unincumbered opposition parties participate in free and fair elections (Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009, 393). Using 453 elections from 107 countries, the authors demonstrate that 63 % of elections were boycotted when the elections were observed by international organisations (398). The primary reason for electoral boycott by opposition parties in this case was the desire to draw the attention of international observation groups to the strategic manipulation of the incumbent (402).

The literature on electoral boycotts suggests four main explanations for the motivation behind the boycotts of opposition parties (*Table 3* on pages 11). The first strand holds that opposition boycotts occur when elections are flawed; the second claims that opposition parties boycott when they see no chance of winning; the third considers that boycotts happens when opposition parties consider the ruling regime weak; and the last argues that boycotts by opposition parties are more likely when international observation groups observe the elections.

Author	Result	Data	Source
Lindberg Staffan	The parties boycott the elections when elections are flawed	Dataset of 53 African countries regarding election participation	Lindberg, S.I, (2004), When Do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections?
Buttorff and Dion	The parties boycott the election when they consider ruling regime weaker	Participation of the IAF in elections in Jordan	Buttorff, G., & Dion, D. (2016). Participation and boycott in authoritarian elections.
Emily Ann Beaulieu	Major boycotts occur when mass opposition parties criticise electoral irregularities and flaws	Dataset of 44 countries	Beaulieu, Emily Ann. (2006). Protesting the Contest: Election Boycotts around the World, 1990-2002
Michael Bratton	Boycotts occur when elections are flawed	Dataset of 54 elections in 40 African countries	Bratton, M. (1998). Second Elections in Africa
Robert A. Pastor	Boycotts occur when opposition parties consider themselves weaker	Dataset of 387 countries	Pastor, R. (1999). The role of electoral administration in democratic transitions: Implications for policy and research
Beaulieu and Hyde	Presence of international observation groups in elections increases probability of the boycott	Dataset of 453 elections from 107 countries	Beaulieu and Hyde. (2009). In the Shadow of Democracy Promotion: Strategic Manipulation, International Observers, and Election Boycotts
Hatungimana and Wuthrich	Opposition boycott elections when they believe that they have more public support than the incumbent.	Dataset of 124 countries	Hatungimana, W., & Wuthrich, F. M. (2024). Incumbent and opposition popular support and boycotts in authoritarian and hybrid regimes in Africa, the Middle East and beyond.

Table 3: *Selected literature on the electoral boycott*

Chapter 2. Methodological framework

Single case study

This thesis will explore boycott strategies as practised by Azerbaijan's opposition parties. A case study is research that studies the elements of a single case or phenomenon, fulfilling descriptive, explanatory and exploratory functions, as necessary (Gerring, 2004, 342). The value of this isolated approach is that it permits a detailed examination of why decisions were taken, how they were carried out, and what the results were (Schramm 1971, as cited in Yin, 2003, 13).

A descriptive study aims to present a comprehensive description of a phenomenon. An explanatory case study attempts to find causal factors. It seeks to find the answers to the questions “why” and “how”, as well as whether the phenomenon occurred or did not occur. In the exploratory case study, the researcher intends to explore research questions which can then be investigated in later studies. (Yin, 2003, as cited in Priya, 2021, 96). In this thesis, I will investigate Azerbaijani elections since 1991, and describe why opposition parties decided to boycott different elections at different times. Due to the in-depth nature of case studies, the researcher is able to use a broad range of data collection methods, such as surveys, in-depth interviews, and study of documents (Priya, 2021, 95). I will therefore leverage documents, reports of international organisations, statements of opposition party leaders, and relevant news stories to explore the phenomenon.

The research will compare all presidential elections in Azerbaijan using the within-case comparison method, creating an opportunity to compare different properties (elections in this thesis) of a case. Comparing the electoral boycott strategies of opposition parties during elections, I will attempt to isolate and reveal the key motivation behind the decision to refuse to participate.

Case selection

Azerbaijan is a typical case of electoral authoritarianism. A typical case is one in which the population is represented descriptively (Gerring and Cojocaru, 2016, 415). The researcher strives to discover a typical case of a population to find a causal relationship: if the presented theory offers a causal relationship, the researcher investigates whether the case validates the suggested theory. (Seawright and Gerring, 2008, 299) Since its independence in 1991, parliamentary, presidential, and municipal elections have been organised regularly in Azerbaijan, with nine presidential and seven parliamentary elections held at the time of writing. Parliamentary and presidential elections are typically held every five and seven years, respectively. Political activists, politicians, journalists, and civil society members face harsh repression by the government, although, until the COVID-19 pandemic, opposition parties were allowed to organise occasional demonstrations. The quality of elections has long been considered unfair and unfree by OSCE, which has observed elections in Azerbaijan since 1995. Since its independence, Freedom House's score for political rights and civil liberties has been between 5-7. Its status was labelled 'partly free', until 2003, and 'non-free' since 2003. The Azerbaijani government is understood to be a violator of human rights by the international community¹ – all factors contributing to Azerbaijan's accepted status as a typical electoral authoritarian regime. In his work regarding dissenting voting in Azerbaijan, Erik S. Herron assesses Azerbaijan as an example of an electoral authoritarian regime (Herron, 2011. 1558-1559). Despite the regime shifting to a more authoritarian position from 2011 onwards, it still maintained regular elections for parliament and the presidency. Azerbaijan has consequently been included in the category of hegemonic authoritarian regime, according to the classification system suggested by Diamond (Diamond, 2002, 30-31).

The Azerbaijani case is significant because it has not been investigated before, while scholars such as Lindberg (2004) and Buttorff (2011 and 2016) have primarily focused on African and Middle

¹ See the reports published by Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International

Eastern countries. The case of Azerbaijan in an electoral boycott of the position is essential, not least because of how regularly the strategy is employed within the country. Since 1998, opposition political parties have made use of electoral boycotts, most commonly the two traditional opposition parties: the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party. The two parties have led boycotts in presidential elections in 1998, 2008, 2018, and 2024. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party also boycotted parliamentary elections in 2015, 2020 and 2024.

Scope of the thesis

As this research aims to determine the causes of the decision to boycott elections made by opposition parties in Azerbaijan, the focus will be on 1991, the date of Azerbaijan's independence and supposed democratic birth, until the present day. Recent years have seen a significant decline in the number of opposition political parties in Azerbaijan. According to the Central Election Committee, in 2022, there were 59 officially registered political parties operating within Azerbaijan, however, in 2023, this number dropped by more than a half, to 26, primarily due to a new decree on political parties (*Figure 3* on page 14).

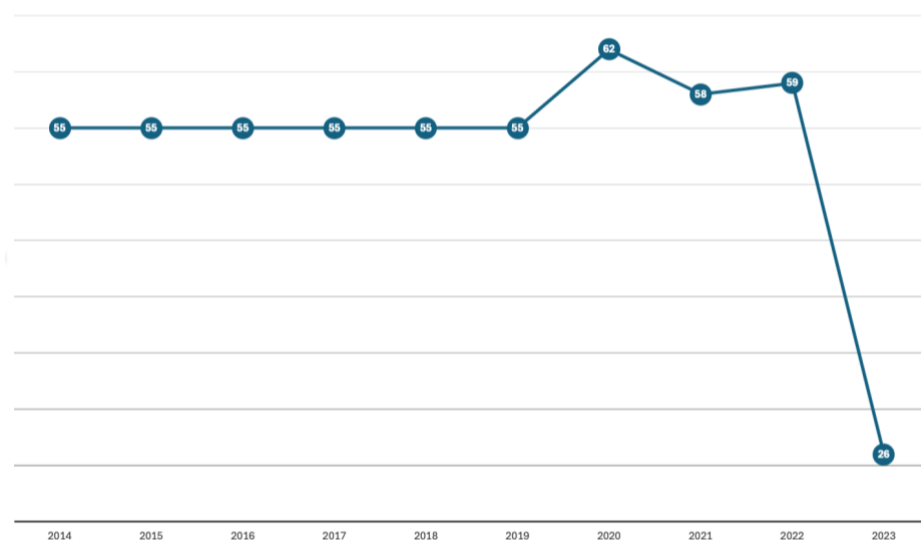


Figure 3: *The number of political parties in Azerbaijan.*

Source: Msk.gov.az

Moreover, many of these registered 26 political parties are considered unfunctional and cannot, therefore, be considered as *legitimate parties*. It is difficult differentiate the legitimate and illegitimate parties in the political system of Azerbaijan. However, According to Sartori, for a party to be considered relevant, two criteria must be met: firstly, a party can be counted as a relevant party if included in a coalition, and, secondly, party competition is affected by the party's existence (Sartori, 2005, 108).

Since the independence of Azerbaijan, a coalition has never been successfully formed to govern. In 1991, Ayaz Mutallibov, the sole candidate, was elected as the first president of independent Azerbaijan. The following year, Abulfaz Elchibey was elected in the early presidential elections with 60 per cent of the total votes and, since the 1993 elections, the New Azerbaijan Party has won every election – thus failing Sartori's first rule. As the second rule is more abstract and intangible, more analysis is needed into the role of various parties in the political competition of Azerbaijan.

I argue that the Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party can be considered relevant parties for the following reasons:

- 1) Both are historically essential parties. The Musavat Party was the leading party in the independence of Azerbaijan in 1918. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Movement was the leading political entity in the independence movement in the 1990s (The party was formed officially in 1995; until that time, it was a movement). ***Across the thesis, when I use "classical" opposition parties, I mean the Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party.***
- 2) The two parties were in the coalition of opposition parties in 2005 (Freedom Bloc), 2010, and 2013 (National Council of Democratic Forces). Moreover, these two parties boycotted presidential elections in 1998, 2008, 2018 and 2024.

- 3) The two parties have organised the most prominent opposition demonstrations in Azerbaijan's recent history.

Another indicator is the government-led smear campaigns directed against the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, whereby the state has used the media and visible public figures to discredit the two parties and their members. The opposing parties have been accused of being a tool of the Western countries, acting against the state interests of Azerbaijan, and seeking to overthrow the government using unconstitutional methods.

Lastly, the parties under the control of the government are not involved in public life. Indeed, since the outbreak of the pandemic, none of the political parties have been permitted to organise rallies or demonstrations according to government regulations. However, until this point, most parties were not involved in this type of public action anyway. In one of the biggest demonstrations in recent history, organised on 19 January 2019, only the Musavat, the Azerbaijan Popular Front, and the Republican Alternative parties participated.

Additionally, while these “under-control” parties participate in some elections, they do not criticise the policies of the governments or the evidence of electoral irregularities. Party leaders run for office, yet do not express any negative views against the incumbent party or the president: a phenomenon detailed in the reports of the OSCE during observation of Azerbaijan elections.

As such, for the reasons outlined above, I will take the two “classical” opposition parties, the Musavat and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, into account in the thesis. Another party that can also be included is the Republican Alternative Party. Although this party cannot meet Sartori's requirements, it has played an undeniably important role in recent political discourse. While the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party consider electoral boycott a strategy against the government, the Republican Alternative Party supports participation in the elections. This contradiction is the main element shaping the contemporary discourse between opposition parties.

Across the thesis, when I use “new opposition”, I will mean the Republican Alternative

Party. Considering these factors, this thesis will focus on these three parties, while excluding other – irrelevant – parties (*Table 4* on page 17).

Political parties	Date of establishment	Boycott of presidential elections	Boycott of Parliamentary elections
Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan	01.09.1995	1998, 2008, 2018, 2024	2015, 2020, 2024
Musavat Party	08.12.1992	1998, 2008, 2018, 2024	
Republican Alternative Party	31.08.2020	None	None

Table 4: *Selected opposition parties to be included in the scope of this thesis.*

This thesis will focus primarily on presidential elections due to the critical importance of these elections for opposition parties (Azerbaijan is a presidential republic, and the president wields more power than the parliament). Opposition parties and the government also have not had a stubborn position regarding the parliamentary elections. Due to 2015, neither the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party nor the Musavat Party boycotted the parliamentary elections.

Regarding electoral boycotts by opposition parties, I will also exclude the presidential elections of 1991 and 1992, for the following reasons: In 1991, a few weeks after the independence, the first presidential elections were held with no registered parties able to compete. In 1992, the following year, the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Movement, Abulfaz Elchibey, the foremost figure of the independence movement and opposition forces, chose to participate in the presidential election.

Limitations

One limitation to this research is the lack of previous research into electoral boycotts by opposition parties in Azerbaijan. Although boycott practice is very common in the country's political environment, scholars have paid minimal attention to it, resulting in a lack of theoretical approaches which are specific to Azerbaijan regarding boycott practice.

The second difficulty is the lack of data in relation to the elections held at the beginning of the 1990s. The Central Election Committee, for example, began publishing data about election results only after 2008. The Central Library of Azerbaijan does not publish entire newspaper archives either, making media monitoring more difficult. The OSCE did, however, begin to observe elections in 1995, making access to relevant data somewhat easier.

An additional challenge has been finding credible data regarding the actual preferences of the voters. According to local (SMDT) and international (OSCE ODIHR) observation groups, elections in Azerbaijan are often accompanied by fraud – meaning the nominal results cannot be accepted as credible reflections of vote preferences. Nor can government-controlled organisations conducting public polls be accepted as reliable, either.

Chapter 3. Boycott strategy of opposition parties in Azerbaijan

Political System in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The first years of independence were turbulent, with wars, coups, and regime changes. In 1992, a presidential election was held, and the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Movement, Abulfaz Elchibey, was elected president of the Azerbaijan Republic. After a military coup, however, Elchibey left his position, and a new presidential election was held, with former First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, Heydar Aliyev, being elected president. Heydar governed the country until 2003, before being succeeded by his son, Ilham Aliyev.

According to the 1995 Constitution, Azerbaijan is a presidential republic, with power ostensibly divided between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. Following a referendum in 2016, the Azerbaijani President – the head of the executive branch – is now elected, even for seven years, through a popular vote. The President is responsible for forming the government (Article 99-124) and is also the official head of state, tasked with ensuring the country's territorial integrity and independence (Article 8). There is no limit to how many times the same person can be elected to the presidency.

Azerbaijan's legislative branch, the National Assembly (Milli Majlis), is a unicameral parliament with 125 deputies elected from single-member districts through a majoritarian electoral system (Article 81-98) and is elected to sit for five-year terms. The judicial branch, as described in the Constitution, comprises the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Court, appeal courts, and other specialised and local courts (Article 125-132).

There are numerous political parties in Azerbaijan. However, the New Azerbaijan Party, the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, and the Musavat Party can be considered the main actors. The New Azerbaijan Party is the incumbent party, having won all presidential and parliamentary

elections since 1993. The Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party are classical opposition parties that have been operating since the early 1990s.

Following independence, three referendums have had a major impact on the consolidation of authoritarian-style government in Azerbaijan. As a consequence of a 2002 referendum, power is now passed to the Prime Minister, instead of the parliament speaker, in the event of the president's inability to work. In 2009, the limitation on the number of terms served by one President was removed, meaning the same individual was now permitted to run for officer numerous times. As of 2016, the current seven-year term for the Presidency was approved.

Although the Constitution and legislation enshrine human rights, freedoms, the division of power, and other liberal ideas, the country is ruled by an authoritarian regime. Elections are not free and fair, human rights and freedoms are abused, and civil society organisations and journalists operate under pressure.

Boycott Strategy of Opposition Parties in Azerbaijan

Opposition political parties in authoritarian regimes face a constant dilemma: whether or not to participate in elections. The nature of the regime is a crucial factor in this regard, determining to what extent opposition parties believe to be worthwhile to field candidates at all. In authoritarian regimes where the chance of opposition parties winning the elections is very low, for example, participation or boycotting the elections in authoritarian regimes will not change the result for the opposition parties.

Additionally, boycotting the elections may prove to be a misguided strategy, according to Gordji, Askari and Abdi, as demonstrated in the case of Iraq, Jordan and Turkey, in which boycotting elections (or Referendum in the case of Turkey) did not benefit the opposition; contrary, it served the ruling regime (Gordji, Askari and Abdi, 2018). So, what is the motivation of opposition political parties when boycotting elections in Azerbaijan?

In the case of Azerbaijan, it is crucial that these opposition parties *did* choose to participate in two presidential elections in 2003 and 2013 – while preferring to boycott the 1998, 2008, 2018 and 2024 elections. This means that opposition parties have boycotted, in total, over 70 per cent of the presidential elections after 1992. As such, we can understand electoral boycotts as regular tactic employed by opposition parties in Azerbaijan.

Overview of the history of presidential elections in Azerbaijan:

The first post-independence presidential election in Azerbaijan was held in September 1991. Only one candidate was fielded in the election, the former first secretary of the Azerbaijan Communist Party, Ayaz Mutallibov, securing 98.50% of the final vote share. Taking into consideration that the election was conducted immediately after the announcement of independence from the Soviet Union, it was understandable that opposition forces (I use here “forces” instead of “parties” because there was not any officially registered opposition party at that time) could not participate in the elections.

In 1992, after President Ayaz Mutallibov was forced to leave his position, new presidential elections were held, and the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Movement, Abulfaz Elchibey, was elected President. The subsequent year, 1993, Elchibey was forcibly removed via a military coup. New presidential elections were announced – with none of the classical opposition forces and parties participating – and Heydar Aliyev was announced as the new head of state. In 1998, opposition parties to the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party chose to boycott the elections, claiming that contemporary electoral laws were undemocratic. However, a separate opposition party, the Azerbaijan Independence Party, participated in the elections. Incumbent Heydar Aliyev was again victorious.

During the 2003 presidential elections, opposition parties decided to participate in the elections, and the elections ended with the victory of Ilham Aliyev, candidate of the New Azerbaijan Party (and son of previous president Heydar Aliyev). In 2008, the opposition parties established the

“Azadliq” Bloc and chose to boycott the election once more, leading to Aliyev retaining the Presidency.

In 2013, the opposition parties, the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party, decided to stand candidates in the election, constituting the first time the two parties joined together to move forward with a unified candidate, Professor Jamil Hasanli. Nonetheless, Aliyev won the election again. In the next two elections, in 2018 and 2024, both opposition parties decided to boycott the elections (*Table 5* on page 22).

Party	1991	1992	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018	2024
Azerbaijan Popular Front Movement (Party)	N/A	P	A	B	X	B	X	B	B
Musavat	N/A	N/A	A	B	P	B	X	B	B
ReAl	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	A

Table 5: Electoral strategy of the opposition parties in Azerbaijan.

Note: A – Abstention, B – Boycott, P – Participation, X – party supported another candidate, N/A – the party has not been established yet.

As discussed in the literature on the electoral boycott (Section 1.2), there are four main approaches to the strategy of electoral boycott by opposition parties:

1. Boycotts occur when elections are flawed.
2. Boycotts occur when opposition parties see no chance of winning
3. Boycotts occur when opposition parties consider the ruling regime weaker.
4. Boycotts occur when international groups observe the elections

In light of the four possible explanations, I will analyse the presidential elections in Azerbaijan.

Opposition parties boycott the elections because of electoral irregularities

Electoral irregularities have been suggested by Lindberg as the main motivation for the electoral boycotts (Lindberg, 2004). However, according to his research, opposition parties have also, seemingly paradoxically, participated in flawed elections.

Opposition Behavior Variables and Distribution										
		Opposition Participation				Losers' Acceptance				
			Total Boycott	Partial Boycott	All Contest	Total	Not at All	Later/ Some	All At Once	Total
Presidential Elections	Flawed	%	11	45	45	101	74	26	0	100
		N	5	21	21	47	34	12	-	46
	Free & Fair	%	0	12	88	100	17	44	40	101
		N	-	6	42	48	8	21	19	48
	All	%	5	28	66	100	45	35	20	100
		N	5	27	63	95	42	33	19	94
Parliamentary Elections	Flawed	%	4	55	41	100	55	44	2	101
		N	2	31	23	56	30	24	1	55
	Free & Fair	%	1	4	94	99	9	26	65	100
		N	1	3	65	69	6	18	45	69
	All	%	2	27	70	99	29	34	37	100
		N	3	34	88	125	36	42	46	124

NOTE: Presidential Elections: Free & Fair – Opposition Participation .462 $p=.000$, Free&Fair – Losers' Acceptance .631 $p=.000$;
Parliamentary Elections: Free & Fair – Opposition Participation .569 $p=.000$, Free&Fair – Losers' Acceptance .675 $p=.000$.

Table 6: *Opposition behaviour in elections in Africa from 1989 to 2003.*

Source: Staffan I. Lindberg. (2004). When Do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections? P.10

The dataset provided by Lindberg demonstrates that opposition parties in Africa boycotted 26 (total and partial) out of 47 flawed elections. However, according to this same data, a significant proportion (21 flawed elections) have not been boycotted. Additionally, 6 elections were boycotted partially by opposition parties even though the elections had, in fact, been assessed as free and fair (Table 6 on page 23).

The Azerbaijan example is similarly paradoxical. Since independence, every presidential election that has been held has been assessed as flawed. If the main motivation behind the boycott of opposition parties was disagreement on *the rule of the game*, then the same parties should have boycotted *all* presidential elections in Azerbaijan. However, as Table 7 on page 24 demonstrates, in 2003 and 2013, the opposition parties did not boycott the elections, and therefore this has not been the case.

Election year	Flawed	Decision of the opposition	Vote share of the winning party	Vote share of the main opposition
1993	Yes ²	Absentation	98,8	
1998	Yes	Boycott	77,7	
2003	Yes	Participation	76,84	13,97
2008	Yes	Boycott	88,73	
2013	Yes	Participation	84,54	5,53
2018	Yes	Boycott	86,02	
2024	Yes	Boycott	92,12	

Table 7: *The strategic decision of the opposition in presidential elections.*

Note: The information about the quality of the election has been taken from the reports prepared by the OSCE.

Comparing four consecutive elections, between 1998 and 2013, is instructive. The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat party boycotted the 1998 elections, participated in the 2003 elections, boycotted the 2008 elections again and participated once more in the 2013 elections. In these elections, the main demands of the opposition parties have been consistently based around strengthening the legitimacy of elections, such as ensuring the fair composition of the Central Election Committee, the prevention of government interference in elections, providing appropriate amounts of time for the pre-election campaign. However, these demands have been routinely rejected by the government. If we consider the demands of the opposition and the response of the government as an independent variable, with the decision of the opposition as the dependent variable, then the opposition should have boycotted all elections in the case of a positive correlation between electoral irregularities and the boycott of the opposition (*Table 8* on page 25).

² There was no international observation in the 1993 Presidential Elections, however, taking into consideration that Heydar Aliyev won the elections with 98,8 percent of votes, I assume that this election was flawed.

Election year	Main demand of the opposition	Response of the government	Boycott
1998	Implementation fair electoral rules	Rejected	Yes
2003	Implementation fair electoral rules	Rejected	No
2008	Implementation fair electoral rules	Rejected	Yes
2013	Implementation fair electoral rules	Rejected	No

Table 8: Decision of the opposition about participation in the presidential elections in four consecutive elections

Additionally, Freedom House's ranking regarding political rights in Azerbaijan did not change from 1993 until 2014. Therefore, electoral irregularities or abuse of political rights cannot explain the decision to boycott one election and participate in another. This would suggest an alternative explanation for the decision of opposition parties to pursue an electoral boycott strategy (*Figure 4* on page 25).

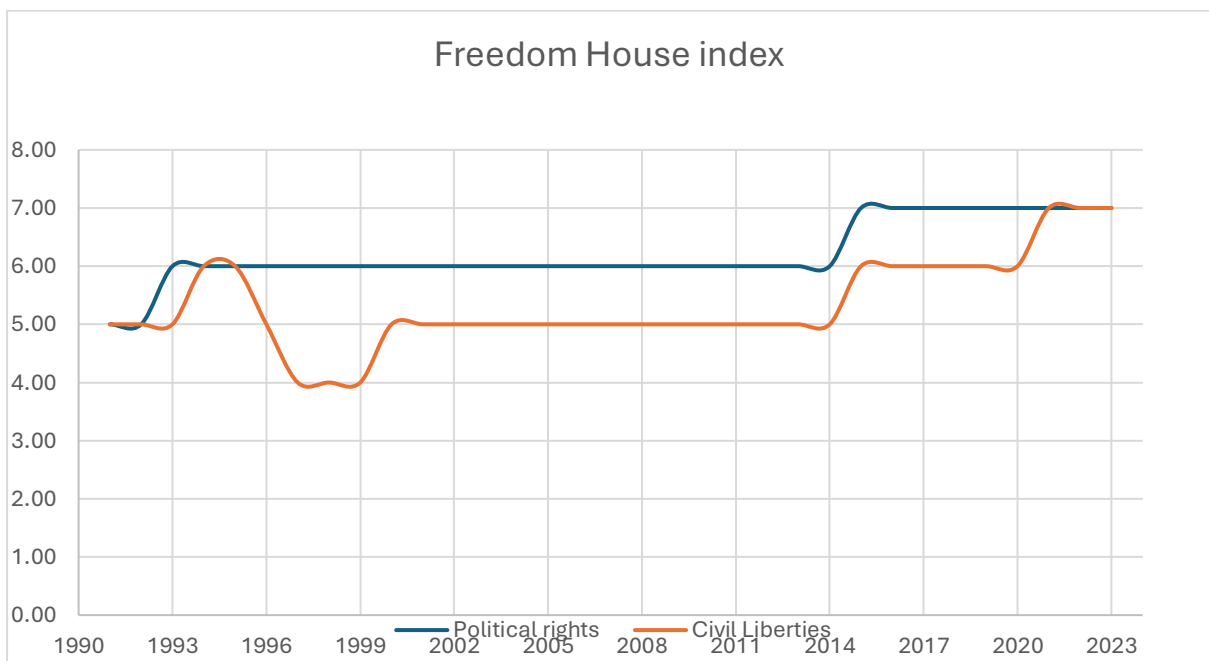


Figure 4: Freedom House Index of Azerbaijan since independence

The opposition considers the ruling regime weaker, or the opposition sees no chance to win.

These two hypotheses contradict each other. Buttorff and Dion, in their research, inquire about the boycott strategy of the opposition in Jordan. According to their approach, electoral irregularities are not enough to explain the boycott strategy of the opposition in one country across different elections (Buttorff and Dion, 2017, 98). They explain that a boycott occurs in Jordan when the regime's probability of failure increases and mobilisation cost decreases (108). Conversely, Pastor holds that opposition parties boycott the election in order not to face devastating electoral losses (Pastor, 1999, 1).

It is challenging to quantitatively assess the “weaknesses” of a given regime or its opposition. One potentially effective method would be to conduct regular opinion polls regarding the citizens' support for the ruling regime or the opposition parties – however, opinion polls have rarely been carried out by independent organisations. Considering this lack of quantitative analysis, I will attempt to analyse the political context in Azerbaijan qualitatively to understand the motivation behind opposition parties' boycott decisions.

After the military coup of 1993, ousted President Abulfaz Elchibey returned to the village where he had previously resided. Before leaving office, Elchibey invited Heydar Aliyev, the former First Secretary of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, to Baku. Aliyev was later elected president in October 1993. Considering Elchibey's forcible removal from the presidency, in addition to Aliyev's cultivation of close relations with the commander of the military coup³, it was perhaps understandable that the opposition did not participate in the elections.

In late 1997, former president and leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, Abulfaz Elchibey, returned to Baku and re-joined the political process (Qayıdış, 1997). During this period, however,

³ The commander of the military coup, Surat Huseynov was appointed Prime Minister. See the decree of the President: <https://e-qanun.az/framework/8483>

President Heydar Aliyev consolidated, at least partly, his executive power. In 1994, an oil agreement was signed between Azerbaijan and Western countries, known as the “contract of the century” in Azerbaijan (Efron, 1994). A ceasefire was also signed with Armenia the same year (Resolution 1047, 1994). Meanwhile, Aliyev successfully removed any significant political challenger, such as Surat Huseynov, Rovshan Javadov, and Alikram Humbatov.⁴ While opposition figures protested the formation of the Central Election Committee, they were unable to force the government to step back (OSCE, 1998, 5).

The 2003 presidential election was one of the most critical events in Azerbaijan's post-independence political history. For the opposition, the election offered an opportunity for the first time in a decade to win power due, in part, to the incumbent, Heydar Aliyev, being unable to participate in the election while hospitalised in Turkey (Azerbaijan: Opposition Rallies, 2003). Moreover, there was confusion within the government regarding which candidate it would field to replace Aliyev. A group within the government supported Ilham Aliyev's candidacy. (Azerbaijan Report, 2003) As a result, a group of voters suggested Ilham Aliyev as a candidate in advance. (Azerbaijan: Election Body Authorizes, 2003) The ruling New Azerbaijan Party decided only two weeks before the election to put forward Ilham Aliyev as its candidate, who was widely regarded as inexperienced figure (Azerbaijan: Incumbent Aliyev Withdraws, 2003). The opposition saw this confusion within the government as a sign of its weakness, and an opportunity to win power.

During Ilham Aliyev's first term as president, however, between 2003 and 2008, the country's economic condition improved remarkably. Azerbaijan went through an economic boom spurred by the sale of oil resources, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from 7 billion USD to 48 billion USD.⁵ The opposition was also considerably weakened following the disintegration within the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party. In 2005, the Great Order Party and the Whole

⁴ Surat Huseynov and Alikram Humbatov were arrested, Rovshan Javadov was killed in a coup against the government.

⁵ See data from Macrotrends: <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/AZE/azerbaijan/gdp-gross-domestic-product>

Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, and in 2007, the Classical Popular Front Party were established. The leaders of all these three parties had previously been high-ranking members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party.⁶

In 2013, the opposition parties, the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party, joined the elections with the unified candidate, Jamil Hasanli. The year also saw a marked increase in levels of political activity, with memories of the 2011 Arab Spring bolstering the belief of the opposition parties, and the NIDA citizen movement organising a major demonstration in the city centre in January in Baku (BBC.com, 2013). Russia-Azerbaijan relations were also worsening during this period, with the Russian government believed to be supportive of a change in government (Balci, 2013). Despite these developments, the opposition was not successful, and Ilham Aliyev secured electoral victory with a reported 4.54% of the vote share.

Following the election, Aliyev consolidated power in his hands completely. Independent media organisations, journalists, NGOs, and political activists were immediately arrested. The political and civil environment was restricted, and the opposition weakened to the point it had no credible chance of winning subsequent elections in 2018 and 2024 (See reports of the Human Rights Watch, Freedom House).

Observation of the elections by international organisations triggered the boycott decision of the opposition.

The leading international observation group which focuses on elections in Azerbaijan is the OSCE, observing all presidential and parliamentary elections in the country since 1995 (excluding the 2015 parliamentary elections).

Election year	Elections	Presence of the OSCE	Boycott of election by opposition
1995	Parliamentary	Yes	No

⁶ See the data regarding the establishment of parties on the official page of the Central Election Committee of Azerbaijan: <https://msk.gov.az/az/parties/generalinformation/2023>

1998	Presidential	Yes	Yes
2000	Parliamentary	Yes	No
2003	Presidential	Yes	No
2005	Parliamentary	Yes	No
2008	Presidential	Yes	Yes
2010	Parliamentary	Yes	No
2013	Presidential	Yes	No
2015	Parliamentary	No	Yes
2018	Presidential	Yes	Yes
2020	Parliamentary	Yes	Yes
2024	Parliamentary	Yes	Yes
2024	Presidential	Yes	Yes

Table 9: Strategic decisions of opposition parties in elections from 1995 to 2024

As such, the OSCE has observed 12 elections in total, only 6 of which have been boycotted by opposition parties. In the 2000, 2003, and 2005 elections, the organisation observed the elections, but opposition parties did not launch a boycott. In 2015, the organisation did not observe elections, yet opposition parties still chose to boycott. It is clear then that, in the case of Azerbaijan, there is no correlation between the observation of elections by international organisations and the boycott of the elections by opposition parties (*Table 9* on page 29).

In short, the classical opposition parties – the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party – prefer different strategies at different times. The main stated argument of opposition parties has tended to be related to electoral irregularities, violence against political rights, and pressure against opposition parties. However, although the government has not met the demands of opposition parties, they have still regularly altered their strategies, participating in some elections while boycotting others. The boycott strategy of opposition parties cannot, therefore, be explained through electoral factors, as electoral factors have mostly stayed the same since 1993, something that has been well-documented by local media, experts, and international observation groups.

Opposition parties did decide to participate in the presidential elections of 2003 and 2013, which can be explained by non-electoral factors, such as domestic politics and the international situation. In Azerbaijan, the decision to boycott depends on how the opposition parties understand their

likelihood of winning. Participation is more likely when parties consider themselves stronger than the incumbent party or leader, such as in the 2003 and 2013 presidential elections.

Parliamentary elections

Opposition parties have been relatively uncritical of parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. Both major opposition parties, the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, have participated in all parliamentary elections from 1995 until 2015. In my argument, this decision originates from the constitutional organisation of the political system, whereby the presidency is the most crucial position for securing meaningful regime change – as opposed to winning a few extra seats in parliament. Indeed, the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party were *permitted* by the government to win seats in the 1995, 2000 and 2005 parliamentary elections, demonstrating government indifference to the issue.

Importance of satellite parties and independent candidates

Although classical opposition parties prefer to boycott the presidential elections, several opposition parties have chosen to participate in presidential elections. To understand why some parties participate in the elections, while others boycott, we need to understand the party system in the country.

According to the Central Election Committee, currently, there are 26 political parties officially registered in Azerbaijan. Before the new law on political parties was approved (Law on Political Parties, 2022), the number of political parties was even greater. For example, in 2022, there were 59 political parties in Azerbaijan. As is clear from the number of parties, the party system remains atomised, while the substantive ideologically differences between parties remains minimal. This is made clear by the observation that leaders of the Azerbaijan People's Party, the Great Order Party,

the Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, the Classical Popular Front Party, the National Revival Movement Party, and the National Front Party have all, previously, been high-ranking members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party.

The majority of these parties do not have political influence on the political system and remain under government control. For example, according to one OSCE report, during the election campaign for the 2024 Presidential elections: “None of the candidates challenged the incumbent directly, though some presented platforms which called for parliamentary reforms, a strengthening of the rule of law, an end to corruption and greater social welfare measures. However, overall, the contenders did not present themselves as alternatives to the president, and in several respects, their platforms often echoed the YAP campaign” (OSCE, 2024, 9). The same tendency has been observed in the 2018 presidential elections, in which genuine opposition parties did not participate (OSCE, 2018, 14).

As we have seen, within electoral authoritarian regimes, parties such as these are used to create a *façade of democracy*. The leaders of these parties participate in the elections primarily to give a democratic *appearance* to the elections. In the 2024 presidential elections, for example, three candidates received less than 40000 votes, despite initially collecting more than 40000 signatures to be candidates in the elections in the first place.⁷

Members of some of these parties are also occasionally permitted to “win” seats in the parliament. Since the 2010 Parliamentary elections, however, none of the genuine opposition parties have won a seat, with current representation of these parties in the legislature remaining low. Calculating the effective number of parliamentary parties through Tagaopera’s equation, we can see instead that most of the seats are “won” by the incumbent party (*Figure 5* on page 32) (See Appendix 2).

⁷ For more information about the results of the 2024 presidential election, see the official website: <https://www.infocenter.gov.az/e-services/prezident2024.aspx?m=&egov=>

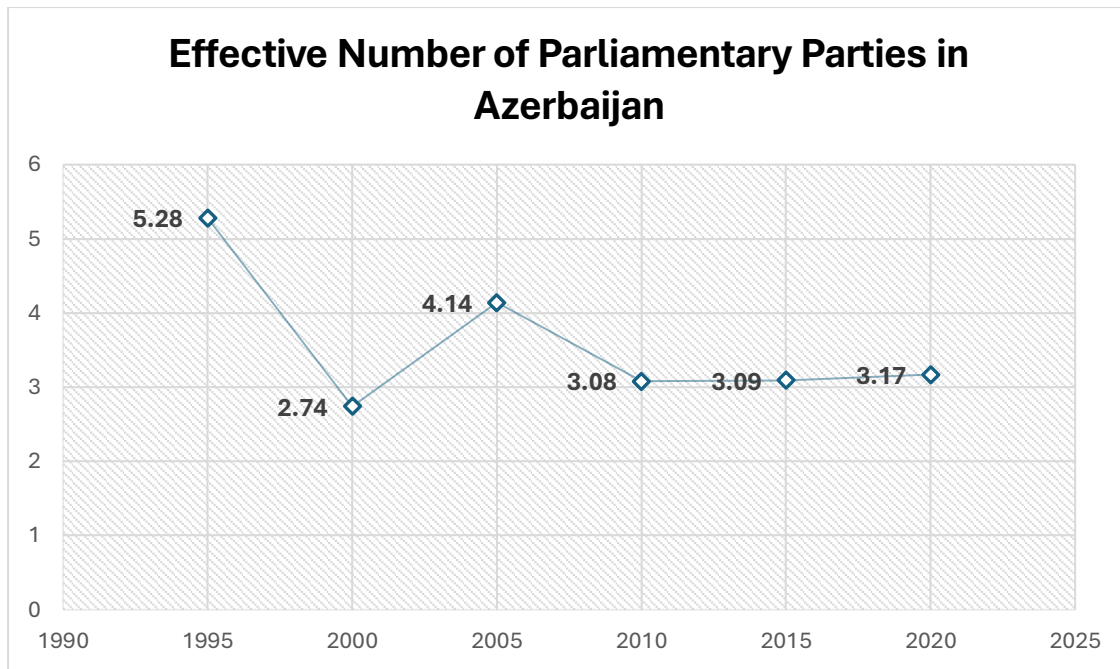


Figure 5: The effective number of parliamentary parties

To calculate the effective number of parliamentary parties, I took only the official candidates of the parties. However, the candidates noted as “independents” are pro-governmental candidates, who are supportive of government policies. If we take these “independent” candidates as candidates of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party, the effective number will be lower.

As we have seen, these parties do not criticise the government’s policies, and leaders of these parties do not see themselves as an alternative to the president; they are therefore not subject to government pressure and intimidation, instead acting as a tool in government attempts to imitate democracy.

Another essential point is that the government uses independent candidates to manipulate the elections. According to local law, individuals who do not have any party affiliation can stand as candidates for both the parliamentary and presidential elections. For presidential elections, these candidates play the imitation role of the multi-candidate elections. For parliamentary elections, these candidates serve to show a low number of the MPs of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (If these “independent” candidates join the elections as the member of the ruling New Azerbaijan

Party, then nearly all seats are won by the ruling party which would demonstrate authoritarian nature of the regime).

Current debate: boycott or participate?

The opposition camp in the Azerbaijani political system consists of two classical political parties: the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and the Musavat Party. The Republican Alternative party is considered the “new opposition”. What makes the difference between classical and new opposition?

The main difference is their approach to regime change. The classical opposition, who can be considered the “hard-liners,” employ non-electoral methods to instigate regime change. In their view, the elections in Azerbaijan are beset by irregularities, manipulation and fraud; the results of any election are certain in advance, and there is no chance for the opposition to win elections and come to power. Therefore, revolution and mass demonstrations are the only way to change the regime. On the other hand, the Republican Alternative party, which can be considered “soft-liners” or “moderates”, believes that revolution is not possible in Azerbaijan and is an ineffective method for permanent democratisation. Therefore, constitutional methods, such as elections, must be used.

This difference in approach to regime change dictates the position of the two opposition groups, with regards to electoral participation. The classical opposition has preferred to boycott the elections as its primary strategy, especially since the 2013 presidential elections. Conversely, the Republican Alternative Party normally advocates participation.

The REAL Party, a newly established entity formed out of a movement begun in 2009, also advocates for voter participation in elections. The chairman of the REAL Party, Ilgar Mammadli,

was arrested for “allegedly” inciting riots in an Azerbaijani city in 2013. (Azadliq.org, 2017). During his time in prison, in 2018, party members announced the establishment of the Republican Alternative Party, though it was only officially registered in 2020.

The Republican Alternative, both as a movement and party, has always advocated for electoral participation. Indeed, Ilgar Mammadov, the chairman of the Republican Alternative party, has stated explicitly that the boycott strategy of the classical opposition parties (The Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and Musavat Party) was unsuccessful because this strategy did not harm the government.

The REAL Party’s view is drawn from multiple explanations. Firstly, the party has been critical of the view that boycotts weaken the government's domestic and international legitimacy. They claim that boycott of the elections does not negatively affect the ruling regime domestically and internally. Citizens in the country live under the rules implemented by the government, while the international community has accepted President Ilham Aliyev as the legitimate head of state. Moreover, the chairman of the REAL party has made the point that those who chose to boycott elections (such as the 2020 parliamentary elections) were still obliged to pay taxes determined by the parliament (Mammadov, 2020).

The same individual has also argued that boycotts actually serve to weaken competition during elections, as well as the contestant losing the opportunity to hold the government to account. Taking the last boycotts as indicative, President Ilham Aliyev did not lose power and, despite the classical opposition parties claims that the boycott would worsen the regime's isolation in the international community, this did not materialize in reality. Immediately after the 2018 presidential elections, Aliyev made official visits to the UK and Belgium, where he was accepted as the legitimate president of Azerbaijan” (Açıq Azərbaycan, 2019).

Deputy Chairman of the REAL party, Natig Jafarli, has also argued that boycotts become effective only when opposition parties can prove that voters did not participate in the election, and when

opposition parties are able to organise protests against the election, helping to throw the international legitimacy of the election into question. Again, this did not materialize in Azerbaijan, and as such the opposition boycott strategy only served the interests of the government (Jafarli, 2023). Electoral boycotts have therefore been strongly criticised for their effectiveness, especially in the context of Azerbaijan, in which the strength of the government means that even classical opposition parties cannot organise demonstrations without the permission of the government.

Conversely, classical opposition camps, especially the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, still prefer to pursue electoral boycotts, indicating that the minimum requirements for competition are not met during national elections. The party has argued that the polls have been and always will be rigged, while the government will not allow a candidate to win in the elections using electoral irregularities, for which there is considerable evidence. The only way to change the regime, therefore, is through mass demonstrations, forcing the government to make compromises to lift restrictions. This is the view taken by the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and, partly, the Musavat Party (who did partake in the 2020 and 2024 parliamentary elections).

Interestingly, APFP officials claim that the aim of a boycott is *not* to delegitimize the president (as it is understood that the president will be accepted as legitimate internally and internationally). This is something that has been stated explicitly by Ali Karimli, chairman of the party, who has stated that the government is unconcerned about whether it is perceived as legitimate (Karimli, 2024). Moreover, a member of the Musavat Party and the National Council of Democratic Forces, Tofiq Yagublu, has also written that elections will not lead to a refusal to accept Ilham Aliyev as the legitimate president of Azerbaijan, either internally or internationally. Nonetheless, these opposition parties have still decided to not add any further legitimacy to the presidential elections by choosing not to participate (Yagublu, 2019).

There is also a moral dimension to the classical opposition parties, who have stated several times that they will not participate in rigged elections. While they accept that they are in a weak position

because of the pressure tactics used by the government, and the fact that they are unable to organise mass demonstrations in protest, the state can still use their participation as a means through which to legitimize the election.

The classical opposition parties also explain their electoral boycotts by pointing to the influence this action has on other voters, encouraging others to also partake in the boycott. Voter turnout has historically been low in Azerbaijan, to the extent that the government has used administrative resources to force citizens to participate. Local media outlets have documented how citizens working in state bodies are forced to participate in the elections. Even though the government uses administrative resources and votes are not counted accurately, according to the Central Election Committee, in the 2024 presidential elections, voter turnout was declared as 76.43%. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, in which many real independent candidates joined the elections, the turnout was 47.81%.⁸ Boycott strategies must also be differentiated from abstention, whereby a party prefers to refrain from participating (Buttorff, 2011, 69). Opposition political parties who advocate for a boycott of the election do not carry out an active campaign in the pre-election period, instead announcing that they will not participate in the elections. Therefore, it is impossible to conclude whether individuals have chosen to boycott the election or abstain from it.

In democratic regimes, the opposition and the incumbent parties compete in elections. If the *rules of the game* are fair, both sides attempt to win the elections, without contesting the procedures of the validity of the vote. However, in authoritarian regimes, the opposition and incumbent parties are involved in the “two nested games.” On the one hand, they compete in the elections against each other to win. On the other hand, they are involved in the bigger game in which they compete over the game's rules (Schedler, 2002). In the case of Azerbaijan, the classical opposition parties focus on the rules of the game, as well as the elections. They claim that the results cannot not be

⁸ See the results of parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan on this website:
<https://www.infocenter.gov.az/default.aspx>

valid, due to the unfair conditions. Therefore, they call for fair rules as a prerequisite for participation. However, according to the approach of the REAL party, opposition parties should participate in the elections regardless, because even though they will be unable to win, participation also has its advantages, such as the opportunity to communicate with voters, reveal electoral fraud, and thus improve the possibility of free and fair elections in the future.

In short, both opposition parties condemn the other for their chosen strategy. The classical opposition parties condemn the REAL Party for their involvement in rigged elections, while the REAL Party condemn the classical opposition for their electoral boycotts, which have been ineffective for decades in changing the regime.

Despite the differences between these leading views, they also have a common approach to regime change. Both reject regime change via unconstitutional methods, such as coups, subscribing to the view that the only legitimate method of regime change is elections, through which a new government and parliament will be elected. Both also approve of non-electoral direct democracy methods, such as demonstrations. The key difference between these two approaches is what they prefer as the first step of the process. The classical opposition has considered demonstrations the first step, followed by a new electoral system to establish a new government. The Republican Alternative party considers the victory in the elections the first step and, if the government then refuses to surrender power, non-electoral methods to achieve regime change.

Why is the boycott strategy ineffective?

Despite the ongoing debate between the classical and new opposition about whether to participate in or boycott elections in Azerbaijan, it is clear that opposition strategies have so far been unsuccessful in securing any significant democratisation measures. With the consolidation of power by the president in 2013, the index for political and civil rights reached its negative peak.

Since 2020, civil liberties have been at their most restricted since the country achieved independence.

But why is the boycott strategy ineffective? First of all, one reason is that opposition parties do not launch active boycott campaigns. With “active campaign”, I mean using all possible communication channels (social media, placards, booklets, face-to-face meetings with voters) actively to convince the voters not to go to polls. This can be explained by the absence of financial resources and the extremely restrictive political environment within which opposition parties operate.⁹ Opposition members are arrested, exposed to surveillance, and blackmailed, as well as their relatives also being put under pressure. Additionally, demonstrations in Baku and citizens meetings organised by opposition parties have also been restricted. For these reasons, the opposition could not and cannot implement an active and effective boycott campaign during the pre-election period.

The second reason is absence of minimum turnout limit in the elections. In cases of countries where there is a minimum turnout limit for validation of the elections, low turnout in elections can therefore cause the cancellation of elections. According to Azerbaijani electoral laws, there was a minimum turnout threshold which must be reached to validate elections. For Milli Majlis, this was 50% of all voters, while for presidential elections, it was 2/3.¹⁰ However, this threshold was removed with the Election Code passed in 2003. Indeed, since the 2000 elections, the government has not cared about the lower turnout. For example, in 2020, voter turnout was 47.81 per cent; in 2015, it was 55%, according to the Central Election Committee, even though this committee increases the turnout level intentionally.

⁹ Parties must present information about the people that donates party. See the law: <https://e-qanun.az/framework/53163>

¹⁰ See the laws on elections to Parliament and the law on presidential elections: <https://e-qanun.az/framework/9441> and <https://e-qanun.az/framework/3591>

Thirdly, divisions between opposing parties on the subject of electoral boycotts can be used by the government to weaken the opposition and emphasize the legitimacy of contested elections. Especially in the 1998 presidential elections, the participation of the opposition was an important aspect of President Heydar Aliyev's ability to present the elections as a step toward democratisation internationally. Although the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, the Musavat Party and the Azerbaijan National Independent Party decided to boycott the elections, the Azerbaijan National Independent Party left the bloc close to the elections and instead chose to participate. This division, in turn, helped the government to validate the elections as being contested by multiple parties.

Some politicians who left the established opposition camp created their own parties, which are under the control of the government. In the 2024 presidential elections, three out of six opposition candidates were former members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party. In the 2018 elections, three out of seven candidates were former members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, while one was a former member of the Musavat Party.¹¹ The members of classical opposition parties, such as the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and Musavat Party, who left their parties in the late

¹¹ According to the reports of the OSCE, in both elections, the candidates did not explicitly criticise the president. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/3/562473.pdf> and https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/388580_1.pdf

1990s and early 2000s, created their own parties and began operating as satellite parties. Some of them were “elected” to the parliament later. For example, Gudrat Hasanguliyev, Fazil Mustafa, Asim Mollazadeh, and Razi Nurullayev were high-rank members of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, all of whom later created their own parties.

Fourthly, the government has administrative and financial resources, which it weaponizes for its own interests. Azerbaijanis are routinely forced to attend poll stations on election days, while international and local observation groups, as well as independent media, have established that citizens, especially those who get a salary from the government, are forced to participate in the elections. Because the government uses administrative resources to force people to go to polling stations and the opposition does not have enough resources to convince voters to abstain, the government is advantaged in this competition.

Conclusion

This thesis has used the case of Azerbaijan to investigate the electoral boycott strategies of opposition parties in electoral authoritarian regimes. In these systems, parties face a constant dilemma as to whether participate in flawed elections or boycott them. Opposition parties are almost certain to lose, and elections are regularly understood to possess many irregularities. However, according to Lindberg (2004), opposition parties do not always choose to boycott elections that are flawed. Within-case comparisons of elections in a single country (for example, Jordan or Azerbaijan) demonstrate that the same parties under the same electoral conditions often change their strategies with regards to the decision to participate or boycott elections. Therefore, electoral irregularity cannot be accepted as the main explanation for electoral boycott.

My argument, therefore, is in line with Buttorff & Dion or Pastor's arguments, which take non-electoral factors into consideration (unlike Lindberg or Bratton). In the case of Azerbaijan, the quality of elections did not improve over time, and the opposition changed their strategy regularly (especially between 1998-2013). Therefore, electoral irregularities cannot explain the boycott decision of the opposition. This thesis has instead argued that the main motivation for opposition parties deciding to boycott elections is judgements made about the relative strength of the regime.

Since 1993, opposition parties have participated in only two presidential elections, in 2003 and 2013, while all other presidential elections were boycotted. According to my analysis, in these two elections (both of which were flawed, as with every post-1993 election), the opposition parties considered themselves stronger than the incumbent. In 2003, ex-president Heydar Aliyev was hospitalised, there was confusion regarding the candidate of the ruling party and the probable candidate, Ilham Aliyev, was chosen despite his inexperience. In 2013, the main opposition parties joined the elections with a unified candidate, Jamil Hasanli (the very first time in the history of Azerbaijan). Additionally, the wider international situation (such as the Arab Spring and Azerbaijan-Russia relations) helped to trigger the decision of the opposition.

As we have seen, other opposition parties that participate in elections tend to be “under control” parties. They do not have any popular support, nor they do aim to actually win elections, refusing even to criticise the current president in their election campaign. Their presence in the elections, however, is essential for the government to give elections the appearance of “competition”.

The contribution of this thesis to the literature is that it brings non-electoral factors to the forefront. In every election, political parties assess the current condition, their weak and strong points, electoral regularities, their popular support in society and even the international situation, and then decide to participate or boycott, according to this assessment. Whether to boycott or participate depends on a broad category of factors, including electoral irregularities. While electoral irregularities can be essential in this assessment, they are not the only factor in explaining the boycott strategy. The case of Azerbaijan demonstrates that opposition parties participate in flawed elections if non-electoral factors surpass the electoral factors, and the probability of winning is high. It also explains why boycotts occur in authoritarian regimes more, in which opposition parties operate under pressure, with generally negative financial conditions, and a climate of fear preventing citizens from joining opposition parties. Under these conditions, the likelihood of opposition parties winning elections is very low, and so the decision to boycott is made. In authoritarian regimes, boycotts help opposition parties avoid devastating losses and maintain the image of a strong party.

For further investigation

Although I attempted to show that the main reason behind the boycott of elections in Azerbaijan, taking the country as a typical example of an authoritarian regime, is the relative weakness of the opposition, this also raises a new question, which might be answered in further investigations. The question is *why* opposition parties tend to be weak in authoritarian regimes. Is it the consequence of the wrong policies of the parties, or is it the result of the pressure of the incumbent?

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Appendix 1

Election year Party	1991	1992	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018	2024
Azerbaijan Communist Party	98,53 %	X	X	0,89 %	X	X	X	X	X
Azerbaijan Popular Front Party	X	60,86 %	B	B	X	B	X	B	B
Musavat Party	X	X	B	B	13,97 %	B	X	B	B
National Council of Democratic Forces	X	X	X	X	X	X	5,53 %	B	B
Independent Azerbaijan Party	X	33,84 %	X	8,22 %	X	X	1,99 %	X	X
Social Movement for Democratic Reform in Azerbaijan	X	0,67 %	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
People's Republic Party	X	0,52	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
New Azerbaijan Party	X	X	98,83 %	77,61 %	76,84 %	88,73 %	84,54 %	86,02 %	92,12 %
United Azerbaijan Party	X	X	1,01 %	X	X	X	X	X	X
Azerbaijan National Independence Party	X	X	X	11,83 %	2,92 %	X	X	X	X
Azerbaijan Social Prosperity Party	X	X	X	0,25 %	X	X	X	X	X

Justice Party	X	X	X	X	1%	X	X	X	X
Civic Solidarity Party	X	X	X	X	0,82 %	X	X	X	X
Azerbaijani Unified Popular Front Party	X	X	X	X	X	2,28 %	X	3,02 %	1,72 %
Modern Musavat Party	X	X	X	X	0,34 %	0,65 %	0,66 %	1,52 %	X
Party of Hope	X	X	X	X	X	2,86 %	2,40 %	X	X
Great Order Party	X	X	X	X	X	2,47 %	X	X	1,99 %
Azerbaijan Liberal Party	X	X	X	B	X	0,78 %	X	X	X
Azerbaijani Social Democratic Party	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,87 %	1,38 %	X
National Revival Movement Party	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,86 %	1,17 %	X
Azerbaijan Democratic Party	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,62 %	3,03 %	X
Great Azerbaijan Party	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,66 %
National Front Party	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,80 %
Independent candidates									
Yagub Mammadov	X	1,70 %	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Zakir Taghiyev	X	X	0,16 %	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ashraf Mehdiyev	X	X	X	0,87 %	X	X	X	X	X

Lala Shovket	X	X	X	X	3,62 %	X	X	X	X
Gudrat Hasangulyev	X	X	X	X	0,50 %	X	X	X	X
Gulamhus eyin Alibayli	X	X	X	X	X	2,23 %	X	X	X
Zahid Oruj	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	3,12 %	2,17 %
Razi Nurullayev	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,74 %	X
Fuad Aliyev	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	0,54 %

B – Boycott

X – Not participation or support for another candidate

% - Share of votes

Appendix 2

2020 Parliamentary Elections	Political parties	Number of seats	Share of seats	Effective number of parliamentary parties
	New Azerbaijan Party	70	56	3.17
	Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party	1	0.8	
	Civil Solidarity Party	3	2.4	
	Ana Veten (Motherland) Party	1	0.8	
	Party for Democratic Reforms	1	0.8	
	Great Creation Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Democratic Education Party	1	0.8	
	Vahdat (Unity) Party	1	0.8	
2015 Parliamentary Elections				
	New Azerbaijan Party	71	56.8	3.09
	Civil Solidarity Party	2	1.6	
	Ana Veten (Motherland) Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Democratic Enlightenment Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Social Democratic Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Social Wellbeing Party	1	0.8	
	Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party	1	0.8	
	Great Creation Party	1	0.8	
	National Revival Movement Party	1	0.8	
	Vahdat (Unity) Party	1	0.8	
	Civil Union Party	1	0.8	
2010 Parliamentary Elections				

	New Azerbaijan Party	71	56.8	3.08
	Civil Solidarity Party	3	2.4	
	Ana Veten (Motherland) Party	2	1.6	
	Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Social Wellbeing Party	1	0.8	
	Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front Party	1	0.8	
	Great Creation Party	1	0.8	
	Civil Union Party	1	0.8	
	Party of Hope	1	0.8	
	Party of Justice	1	0.8	
2005 Parliamentary Elections				
	YAP	61	48.8	4.14
	Musavat	5	4	
	Ana Vatan	2	1.6	
	Civil Solidarity Party	3	2.4	
	Ümid Party	1	0.8	
	Social Prosperity Party	1	0.8	
	Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFPA)	1	0.8	
	Civic Unit Party	1	0.8	
	Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party	1	0.8	
	Whole Azerbaijan Popular Front	1	0.8	
	Great Creation Party	1	0.8	
	Justice Party	1	0.8	
2000 Parliamentary Elections				
	New Azerbaijan Party	75	60	2.74
	Civic Solidarity	3	2.4	
	ANIP	2	1.6	
	Popular Front	6	4.8	
	Yurddash Party	1	0.8	
	Alliance for the Sake of Azerbaijan	1	0.8	
	Communist Party	2	1.6	

	Musavat	2	1.6	
	Social Prosperity	1	0.8	
	Motherland	1	0.8	
	AnaVatan	1	0.8	
1995 Parliamentary Elections				
	New Azerbaijan Party	54	43.2	5.28
	Popular Front Party	4	3.2	
	National Independence Party	4	3.2	
	Democratic Independence Party	2	1.6	
	Democratic Entrepreneurs Party	1	0.8	
	Citizens' Solidarity Party	1	0.8	
	"Musavat" Party	1	0.8	
	Social Justice Party	1	0.8	
	"Motherland" Party	1	0.8	