

Latvia

Contents

Introduction	1
Elections	1
7-8 October 1922	2
3-4 October 1925	2
6-7 October 1928	3
3-4 October 1931	3
Parties	5
Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party	5
Latvian Farmers' Union	5
Ethnic Minority Parties	6
Latgalian Parties	6

Introduction

On 18 November 1918, Latvia proclaimed its independence from the Russian Empire and created a provisional government led by Karlis Ulmanis. Shortly after Latvia became independent, Latvian independence was challenged by Soviet Russia. In December, the Red Army entered numerous cities, proclaiming the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic. The remaining Baltic German nobility attempted to recover their privileged status in the country and captured Riga, the capital of Latvia, from the Red Army. In 1919, Latvian and Estonian forces defeated German troops and ousted Bolsheviks from the country. Following the signature of a peace treaty with Russia and international recognition, Latvia began its brief yet vibrant democratic political life (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010: 1104) until a military coup d'état in 1934 and annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940.

The population of Latvia was represented by a variety of ethnic groups, mainly Latvians (73,4%), Russians (10,5%), Jews (7,4%), Germans (6,2%), Belarusians (4,1%), Poles (3,4%), according to the 1925 census (Skujenieks, 1925). The country's religious background included significant confessional groups, such as Most of the inhabitants were Lutherans (55.1%), Roman Catholics (22,6%), Orthodox (9,1%), Judaism (5,2%), and Old Believers (4,8%). Unlike Lutherans, citizens belonging to the Roman Catholic faith mainly resided in eastern Latvia, specifically in Latgale, a region that was once part of Polish Livonia. One-third of the population lived in cities, while the remainder of the country resided in rural areas and primarily worked in agriculture.

Elections

The linguistic, religious, class, and geographical diversity of the country has led to a relatively large number of political parties compared to other European democracies. First, most ethnic and labor groups have political parties that represent their interests. Second, many existing parties have their Catholic counterparts in Latgale.

In 1920, 84.9% of eligible voters elected the Constitutional Assembly of Latvia, which functioned until 1922 and was succeeded by the country's first parliament, Saeima. From

1922 until 1931, Latvia held four cycles of parliamentary elections. The parliament consisted of 100 members of parliament from five constituencies elected using proportional representation.

7-8 October 1922

In total, 31 parties participated in the first Latvian parliamentary elections in October 1922, with voter turnout reaching 83.1%. The **Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party** achieved the highest result, garnering 30.56% and securing 30 parliamentary seats. The **Latvian Farmers' Union** followed with a second-place result of 16.77%, earning 17 seats. **The Union of Social Democrats – Mensheviks and Rural Workers** received 7 seats, while parties such as **the Democratic Centre, Latgalian Christian Peasant and Catholic Party, and Committee of the German Peasant and Catholic Party** each obtained around 5-6%, resulting in 6 seats for each. The government was formed by the two leading parties along with several parties from Latgale. The first head of government was Jānis Pauļuks, who was not an MP and soon had to resign due to pressure from **the Latvian Farmers' Union**. His position was taken over by Zigfrīds Anna Meirovics until, in January 1924, left-wing parties called for a new government. This led to Voldemārs Zāmuels, a nonpartisan figure supported by social democrats, assuming leadership. Nearly a year later, in December 1924, **the Latvian Farmers' Union** requested a new government led by their candidate, Hugo Celmiņš. In the meantime, the Speaker of the Parliament, Frīdrihs Vesmanis, a member of **the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party**, was appointed and remained in that role until 1925.

3-4 October 1925

The second election, held on October 3 and 4, 1925, yielded similar results. **The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party** and **the Latvian Farmers Union** secured 31.37% (32 seats) and 15.03% (16 seats), respectively, while voter turnout decreased to 74.8%. The remaining seats were allocated among smaller parties, including **the Latgalian Christian Peasant and Catholic Party** (5 seats), **Democratic Center** (5

seats), **Committee of the German Baltic Parties** (4 seats), and nearly 20 others. The role of Speaker of the Parliament was again held by a member of the **Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party**, this time Pauls Kalniņš. Kārlis Ulmanis, the head of the **Latvian Farmers Union**, presented his established government and won by a narrow majority over the other candidate, Voldemārs Zāmuels. In May 1926, Ulmanis' cabinet was soon challenged by his own party and replaced by Arturs Albergins, but only for a brief period until his resignation in December 1926, when a new government was formed by a coalition of leftist parties, led by Mārgers Skujenieks, which included the Democratic Center. The left-wing coalition lost the support of the Democratic Center and was forced to resign in January 1928, yielding the government to the right-of-center coalition under the leadership of Pēteris Juraševskis until the next election in November 1928.

6-7 October 1928

The third cycle of parliamentary elections in Latvia took place on October 6 and 7, 1928. Compared to 1925, voter turnout increased, reaching 79.26%. **The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party** claimed victory once again, although it lost 7 seats, garnering support from 24.34% of voters. The Latvian Farmers' Union received 14.97%, maintaining 16 seats in parliament. The usual parties, such as **the Latgalian Christian Peasant and Catholic Party** or **the Committees of the German Baltic Parties**, holding 5 to 6 seats, performed comparably to the first-time contender, **the Communist Party of Latvia**. The government of Hugo Celmiņš, backed by **the Latvian Farmers' Union**, was in office from December 1928 until March 1931, the longest period during Latvia's first period of independence. He was then succeeded by Kārlis Ulmanis, who served from March 1931 until October 1931.

3-4 October 1931

The fourth and final democratic parliamentary election in interwar Latvia was held on October 3 and 4, 1931. Both major parties, **the Latvian Social Democratic Workers'**

Party and the **Latvian Farmers' Union**, lost vote share, receiving 19.23% (21 seats) and 12.25% (14 seats), respectively. **The Latgalian Christian Peasant and Catholic Party** secured 8 seats, **the New Farmers-Small Landowners Party** gained 7 seats, and **the Communist Party of Latvia** obtained 6 seats. After two ministerial cabinets were formed by Mārgers Skujenieks (former member of the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party, joined the Progressive Association, December 1931–March 1933) and Ādolfs Bļodnieks (**New Farmers–Small Landowners Party**, March 1933–March 1934), Kārlis Ulmanis planned a coup d'état. With the support of military volunteers and his closest allies, he dissolved the existing government, effectively ending the Latvian democratic system, banning all political parties, and enforcing censorship (Zake, 2007: 294). He remained in power until the Soviet Union annexed Latvia in 1940.

Parties

The Latvian party system during this period was defined by five main cleavages: left-right, urban-rural, religious-secular, center-periphery, and nationalist-separatist. Party politics revolved around issues related to nation building, agricultural reforms, increased industrial production, rights of ethnic minority, and relations with neighboring countries. Each election featured more than 20 participating parties, with some being small, issue-oriented groups, resulting in a total of over 100 parties in the country during the studied period. A party needed only 100 signatures to register, which contributed to the rising number of parties. Another notable aspect was that many national parties were mirrored by their counterparts in Latgale, aiming to attract local voters.

Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party

The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party was the most popular party according to the election results in the studied period. However, it was often not represented in the government, remaining in opposition to Latvia's Farmers Union and other right-wing parties. The party focused on promoting workers' rights and social welfare, and it opposed right-wing nationalism. In certain years, it participated in the Labour and Socialist International (LSI).

Original Name	Lietuvos krikščionių demokratų partija
Other Names	
Abbreviation	LKDP
Factions	Lithuanian Farmer's Union, Lithuanian Federation of Labour

Latvian Farmers' Union

Despite finishing second in every election during that period, **the Latvian Farmer's Union** was the most influential conservative party at the time. It represented the interests of landowners, promoting agrarian reforms and increasing funding for agriculture. The party's leader, Kārlis Ulmanis, successfully executed a coup d'état, banning all other competing parties.

Original Name	Latvijas Zemnieku Savienība
Other Names	
Abbreviation	ZS
Factions	Latvia's Farmers Union

Ethnic Minority Parties

Latgalian Parties

References

Nohlen, Dieter and Philip Stöver. 2010. *Elections in Europe*. Nomos.

Skujenieks, Margers. 1925. *1925 census in Latvia*. Valtera un Rapas akc. sab. spiestuve.

Zake, Ieva. 2007. “Authoritarianism And Political Ideas Of Latvian Nationalist Intellectuals.” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38(3):291–315.