

## **OPINION**

by Associate Professor PhD Simeon Asenov, UNSS, Department of Political Science,  
professional direction 3.3. "Political Sciences",  
member of a scientific jury formed by order of  
the Rector of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski",

for Alexander Draganov's dissertation

on the subject:

**“U.S. and Canadian Political Parties in the Context of  
the confrontation between liberals and conservatives” (2016-2019)”**

for awarding the educational and scientific degree  
"PhD of Political Science",  
professional direction: 3.3 "Political Sciences" (Comparative Political Science).

### **1. Actuality and general characteristics of the dissertation work**

The presented dissertation is a timely and successful attempt to fill a poorly studied and little-known research niche for Bulgarian political science, related to the specificity of relations between parties in the party systems of the USA and Canada. North American politics has always had certain differences with European politics. In this case, this circumstance is strengthened even more, because the research presented is based on the comparison between the parties in the two countries, which experience the influence of several new factors and processes. As a result, the nature and dimensions of political opposition between liberals and conservatives in the two-party systems are changing differently. This undoubtedly determines the relevance of the dissertation and makes it the first comparative study in our country of the parties in the two North American democracies for the period 2016-2019.

The dissertation has a total volume of 212 pages (of which 173 pages are the author's text) and represents a complete text that meets the accepted standards for this type of scientific work. It is structured in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography that logically link its content. It is worth noting the rich bibliography, which includes numerous scientific and other information sources and resources of different natures, empirical studies, etc., used to achieve the goals and objectives of the study (pp.174-212).

In the introduction, the research elements of the work are formulated - object, subject, main goal, hypothesis, tasks, the limitations of the analysis, and the choice of the researched period, the adopted structure, and methodology are presented and justified (pp. 4-9). The main objective is "...to compare the party systems of the USA and Canada", to achieve which four research objectives are set. The thesis is that "Canadian voters reject fringes in contemporary politics, while Americans, heavily influenced by the country's media climate, are more likely to vote for fringe candidates, particularly on the right." It is assumed that this is due to changes in inter-party competition and relationships, which are expressed in public polarization and sharp opposition in the US and specific maintenance of consensus between parties in Canada.

The first chapter sets the theoretical basis of the study. A synthesized overview of basic concepts and theories from a number of contemporary researchers related to the party systems in the USA and Canada is made. Emphasis is placed on elucidating the growing confrontation and polarization in the US, which translates into electoral attitudes, competition, and relations between the two leading parties. The concept of "polarization" is very well explained in its various forms of manifestation - ideological, affective, etc. false polarization deployed through social media. By contrast, this process in Canada has been in a much milder and more restrained form, as a result of a number of country-specific reasons and factors supporting cross-party agreement on key social and political divides and topics of contemporary politics.

The second chapter analyzes the two leading parties in the US party system - Democrats and Republicans. The author's analysis of the two parties in the course of their historical development reveals their weak ideology, political flexibility, and situational problem orientation, which are specific features of the established two-party model. This makes it possible for their beliefs, political actions, and the profile of their voters to change over time. In recent years, there are a number of prerequisites and factors that lead to strong opposition and polarization along the liberal-conservative lines between the two parties. Such are the themes and dividing lines regarding the disputes about women's rights, the fight against racial inequality, the attitude towards sexual minorities, the attitude towards migration, climate change, the "swapping" of white and black voters in the southern parts of the country, etc. Attention is also paid to the so-called "third parties" (small parties). It has been argued that they do not have enough public support to effectively influence political life and electoral outcomes, which are dominated and determined by the two leading parties in the US.

A third chapter is devoted to the study of parties in Canada. A majoritarian electoral system is also applied here and there are two leading parties - Liberal and Conservative - which form the governments of the country. The author's analysis here aims to bring out and highlight

the specifics of Canadian parties. First, here the two parties often have to form a majority with smaller parties. Second, the strong traditions, role, and importance of the Liberal Party, which has a dominant role and is at the center of Canadian politics. Although there are symptoms of growing tension, this party has incorporated itself and managed to form a specific and acceptable consensus with the other parties on the new divisive topics and lines that polarize the parties and society in the USA. Third, the Conservative Party in its current form was established in 2003 and has less public influence in the period under study. Finally, small parties have, in some cases, a crucial coalitional role in shared governance, which reduces party opposition. It is concluded that a sharp clash of values and political division does not determine the weaker expression of the liberal-conservative cleavage in the Canadian party system.

In the fourth chapter of the dissertation, the prerequisites and reasons for the differences established in the previous two chapters in the political and party systems of the two neighboring countries concerning the opposition between liberals and conservatives are investigated. In this regard, the historical predetermination, political culture, institutional, demographic, social factors and media coverage of the essential differences between the USA and Canada are thoroughly highlighted and analyzed. It is argued that among them the most essential role and immediate cause of opposition and polarization is the type and character of the media. In the US, the media is commercial rather than public, while in Canada it is different. The author concludes that there is a strong polarization in the USA, and a weaker one in Canada, because in one country the media completely follows its commercial interest, while in the other there is a combination of public and private media with a high degree of public responsibility.

## **2. Evaluation of scientific results and scientific contributions**

The dissertation submitted for public defense presents an in-depth analysis of a current and unexplored problem in Bulgarian political science. The exposition is built on a rich theoretical basis and empirical data, which gives depth and completeness to the studied subject. The developed work presents its author with dignity and a number of positive aspects and achievements can be pointed out in it. In summary, I would point to the following scientific results achieved.

- An analytical overview of leading theories of party systems in the US and Canada is presented, which provides a basis for their comparison regarding the phenomenon of "polarization" and the opposition between liberals and conservatives.

- An in-depth comparative analysis of the party cleavages, mechanisms, and tools through which the parties influence the electorate in both countries has been carried out.

- A comparison was made between the political parties along the lines of "liberal-conservative" for the studied period.

- The leading role of the media and social networks is revealed as the immediate cause of the different dimensions and degree of political opposition and polarization between the parties and citizens in the two countries.

Based on the content of the dissertation text, I accept the author's self-assessment of the contributions made in the abstract. They correspond with the obtained results of the study.

### **3. Evaluation of the abstract and scientific publications**

The presented abstract was developed according to the requirements. It consistently and faithfully reflects the content of the dissertation. Three publications have been made on the subject of the dissertation, which covers the necessary requirements for the defense of a dissertation work. The publications are published in editions that have the necessary accessibility and publicity for a wide range of readers.

### **4. Notes, recommendations and questions**

The dissertation work is very well developed considering the research parameters set in the introduction and the final scientific result. In a constructive spirit, I would like to make some comments and recommendations. They do not question its scientific merits and the convincing results achieved.

First of all, in the introduction, the methods used are not well highlighted and directed to the individual structural parts of the dissertation. Along with the leading method of comparative analysis, the paper also uses other methods, such as secondary analysis of empirical studies and others, content analysis of websites and other information sources, etc. Next, I would recommend organizing the thematically rich bibliography of the work, according to the type and character of the sources used.

I recommend that the dissertation work takes into account the constructive comments, then it is prepared and published in order to find a wider readership on this little-known topic in Bulgaria.

My question to the PhD student is: how sustainable is and by what measures and tools can the media's role in the rise of populism and polarization in the US be limited?

### **5. Conclusion**

On the grounds stated so far in the opinion and considering the implementation of the legal provisions of Art. 6 of ZRASRB, art. 27, para. 1 of the Regulations for its implementation, I express my firm conviction and support "for" awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor of Political Science" to Alexander Draganov, for his dissertation work on the topic: "The political parties of the USA and Canada in the context of the confrontation between liberals and conservatives" (2016-2019)".

Assoc. Professor PhD Simeon Asenov

Sofia, May 9, 2024.