

THE IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT CROSS-PARTY COALITIONS ON THE OUTCOME OF LOCAL ELECTIONS IN ROMANIA. CASE-STUDY: THE 2024 ELECTIONS IN CONSTANTA COUNTY

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Abstract: Local elections constitute an opportunity for voters to express their political choices in a more authentic way, closer to their party preferences and ideological convictions, as opposed to other types of elections where they have to act strategically and make compromises to maximize the utility of their choices relative to the available electoral options. What happens when due to political developments at the governmental level, voters find themselves in a position to sanction the ruling parties for mismanaging their trust and express this dissatisfaction in second order local contests that carry less significance compared to parliamentary or presidential elections? In the Romanian case, the 2024 electoral cycle included all types of electoral contests (local, European, parliamentary, and presidential) providing multiple opportunities for voters to exhibit a wide range of electoral behaviors – support, rejection, protest. However, what stood out and eventually culminated with a political crisis of ample dimensions was that voters did not exhibit electoral behaviors outside the mainstream expectations until the first round of the presidential elections, when a majority of them supported a fringe independent candidate in the first round, leading to the annulment of the elections altogether and a rescheduled contest in the Spring of 2025. This article analyzes how the local elections were impacted by the bipartisan decisions of the governmental coalition PSD-PNL in the period leading up to the beginning of the electoral cycle and in its aftermath. Were voters inclined to opt for alternatives outside the two main political options, given the ideological differences that could not be sanded off by the coalition format? Or did they retain traditional voting patterns established in previous electoral cycles, favoring party loyalty, instead of untested electoral alternatives? To address these questions, we analyze the results of the 2024 local elections organized in the county and municipality of Constanta, using a mixed methodological approach that focuses on the mayors' elections across all the 70 municipalities, towns and communes of Constanta County.

Keywords: local elections, political parties, electoral behavior, 2024 Romanian elections, PSD-PNL coalition

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Rezumat: Alegerile locale constituie o oportunitate pentru alegători de a-și exprima opțiunile politice într-un mod mai autentic, mai apropiat de preferințele lor de partid și de convingerile ideologice, spre deosebire de alte tipuri de alegeri, unde aceștia trebuie să acționeze strategic și să facă compromisuri pentru a maximiza utilitatea voturilor lor în raport cu opțiunile electorale existente. Ce se întâmplă atunci când, ca urmare a evoluțiilor politice la nivel guvernamental, alegătorii se află în poziția de a sancționa partidele de guvernământ pentru gestionarea defectuoasă a încrederii lor prin exprimarea acestei nemulțumiri în cadrul alegerilor locale, de ordin secundar, care au o semnificație mai mică în comparație cu alegerile parlamentare sau prezidențiale? În cazul românesc, ciclul electoral din 2024 a inclus toate tipurile de competiții electorale (locale, europene, parlamentare și prezidențiale), oferind multiple oportunități pentru alegători de a manifesta o gamă largă de comportamente electorale – susținere, respingere, protest. Totuși, ceea ce s-a evidențiat și a culminat în cele din urmă cu o criză politică de ample dimensiuni a fost faptul că alegătorii nu au manifestat comportamente electorale în afara așteptărilor până la primul tur al alegerilor prezidențiale, unde o majoritate a acestora a susținut în primul tur un candidat independent marginal, ceea ce a dus la anularea alegerilor și la o reprogramare a procesului electoral în primăvara anului 2025. Acest articol analizează modul în care alegerile locale au fost influențate de deciziile bipartizane ale coaliției guvernamentale PSD-PNL în perioada premergătoare începerii ciclului electoral și în perioada ulterioară acestuia. Au fost alegătorii înclinați să opteze pentru alternative în afara celor două opțiuni politice principale, având în vedere persistența diferențelor ideologice care nu au putut fi eliminate de structura coaliției? Sau au fost menținute modelele de vot stabilite în ciclurile electorale anterioare, bazate pe loialitatea de partid, în dauna alternativelor electorale netestate? Pentru a răspunde la aceste întrebări, analizăm rezultatele alegerilor locale organizate în județul și municipiul Constanța în 2024, utilizând o abordare metodologică mixtă axată pe alegerile primarilor din toate cele 70 de municipii, orașe și comune ale județului Constanța.

Cuvinte cheie: alegeri locale, partide politice, comportament electoral, alegeri în România în 2024, coaliția PSD-PNL

I. Introduction

Local elections constitute a fundamental dimension of democratic governance, shaping political accountability, service delivery, and the allocation of public resources at the level closest to citizens' everyday concerns. Despite their often-limited visibility, local elections are highly consequential for local communities, shaping how public policies are designed and implemented. This, in turn, has a significant impact on the quality of democratic processes.

Local political contests can be a barometer of the political environment, measuring voters' attitudes while reflecting on party performances. Are national parties driving local dynamics or are there regional particularities shaping the electoral behaviors of voters? Are electoral outcomes at the local level, in a county, or even further down the line, in a municipality, city, or commune, relevant when assessing the degree of support for a party at the national level? The results of local elections might not be indicative of national trends since factors specific to local public administration – quality of public services and infrastructure, taxation and budget management, availability of funding for public schools and hospitals, public safety, or economic development opportunities – as opposed to party preference or ideology, shape electoral behavior

In Romania, citizens' interest in local elections has been relatively high, at least for the first two decades after the fall of the communist regime, but started to fade in the last decade. From a comparative perspective, Romania's higher turnout in local elections is an outlier relative to other countries where turnout is significantly lower¹. After 2008, the interest in local electoral contests has been higher than even the one in parliamentary elections. This has been attributed to the fact that the latter were not held at the same time as the presidential elections anymore (after the constitutional reform from 2003, this can only happen once in every 20 years), but also to the multiple electoral reforms that were adopted in a relatively short period of time (reforms concerning not only general and local elections, but also referendums), that generated confusion and distrust in political institutions, especially political parties².

One reason that led to a drop in participation was the reform that changed the procedure for electing the mayors. After 2011, the change of the legal provisions regarding the election of mayors, from a two-round majority electoral system to a single round vote, using the first-past-the-post rule, had a paradoxical consequence: the reform did not lead to a more competitive race for the mayoral office or a higher turnout, instead it further contributed to electoral absenteeism as a decline in turnout could be observed³. Since the fall of the

¹ Lysek, "Local passion and national apathy: investigating the phenomenon of selective voting behaviour", *Local Government Studies* 51, no. 2 (2025): 203-204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2024.2341234>.

² For more details, see Mihaela Ivănescu, "Romanian Electoral Laws between 1990 and 2012: Reforms and Evolutions, or Absenteeism Generating Instability?", *Annals of the Ovidius University of Constanta – Political Science Series*, no. 2 (2013): 159-173; Mihaela Ivănescu, "Insurmountable Rules, Absenteeism and Political Strife: A Comparative Analysis of the Romanian National Referendums (1990-2018)", *Annals of the Ovidius University of Constanta – Political Science Series*, no. 7 (2018): 133-154.

³ Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Istoric electoral – secțiune cuprinzând date privind toate alegerile desfășurate în România după 1990”, 2025, https://www.roaep.ro/prezentare/istoric_electoral/.

communist regime, turnout in these elections has generally remained high and until 2016, it rarely fell below 50%. Moreover, for the last four electoral cycles, participation in local elections has consistently exceeded turnout in national legislative elections, with the gap ranging from 8.68 to 14.68 percentage points – the largest difference occurring in 2020⁴.

While nearly two-thirds of eligible voters participated in the 1992 local elections (65%), subsequent elections recorded declining yet relatively stable turnout levels: 56.47% in 1996, 50.85% in 2000, and 54.23% in 2004⁵. In 2008, turnout dropped below 50% for the first time, reaching 48.81%, but rose again in 2012 to 56.26%, the highest level recorded since 1990⁶. Over the last decade, however, a downward trend has re-emerged, culminating in the two lowest turnout rates in Romania’s post-communist history: 48.17% in 2016 and 46.62% in 2020. These figures suggest that the Romanian political parties have become increasingly unable to mobilize voters for local elections, despite the heightened importance ascribed to these contests by the media and political elites, who often treat them as performance predictors for general elections.

The 2024 Romanian local elections took place under a distinctive institutional arrangement. On the one hand, decisions involving the organization of the electoral process were taken by a coalition government comprised of the two main parties in Romania: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and National Liberal Party (PNL); on the other, because the local elections were held simultaneously with the European elections. This merging of electoral contests altered the usual second-order dynamics of local elections by increasing overall mobilization and bringing national and European issues more strongly into the local campaign arena. This opened the door for strategic advantages for governing and well-resourced parties, which could coordinate their messaging and voter mobilization across both contests. As we have noted in another article, to the extent that “the merger was intended to help increase the turnout in the European elections” since voters are more drawn to local elections, “the measure warped the participation and, in a reversal of expectations, turnout for European elections was higher than for the local ones”⁷.

This article examines the local electoral contest from June 2020 in Constanta County, a socio-economically diverse region combining major urban centers, a port economy, tourism-dependent localities, and extensive rural areas. This region features substantial municipal-level variation in turnout, party competition, and incumbency strength. The main research questions concern whether the decision to merge local and European elections generated an

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mihaela Ivănescu and Luiza-Maria Filimon, “Local Elections: Still Second-Order? An Analysis of the 2024 Local Elections in Romania”, *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 87 (2025): 141.

increase in voter turnout and whether this favored government parties' candidates for mayoral offices.

To analyze these aspects, we examined, from a quantitative perspective, the results of the competition for the mayors' election and the turnout rates from all the 70 municipalities, towns and communes of Constanta County. Additionally, to add a qualitative dimension to the analysis, we reviewed the recent literature on models of electoral behavior in Romania. The electoral data used was retrieved from the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority and the official documents of the Central Electoral Bureau. By linking municipal turnout data to political outcomes, the article contributes to research on the general issue of local elections and voting in Europe, while from a national perspective, it expands the area of research on democratic engagement and territorial political dynamics in Romania.

II. Literature Review

Research on electoral participation has traditionally pointed to the interaction between individual resources, mobilization, and political motivation⁸. However, local electoral contests are usually defined as lower-tier or less salient, therefore less consequential, and analyzed mostly in relation to declining voter turnout or directly as second-order national elections⁹. Cross-national evidence supports this pattern. Kouba, Novák, and Strnad find that turnout in local elections is shaped by institutional factors, such as electoral timing and the degree of local autonomy, as well as community-level variables, including

⁸ Aengus Bridgman and Dietlind Stolle, "Mobilization and Political Participation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Participation*, ed. Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 703-724; Gary W. Cox, "Electoral Rules, Mobilization, and Turnout", *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 49-68, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-060414-035915>; Peter Söderlund, Hanna Wass, and André Blais, "The impact of motivational and contextual factors on turnout in first- and second-order elections", *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (2011): 689-699, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2011.06.013>.

⁹ Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results", *European Journal of Political Research* 8, no. 1 (1980): 3-44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1980.tb00737.x>; Anthony Heath et al., "Between First and Second Order: A Comparison of Voting Behaviour in European and Local Elections in Britain", *European Journal of Political Research* 35 no. 3 (1999): 389-414, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006924510899>; Alistair Clark and Timothy B. Krebs, "Elections and Policy Responsiveness", in *The Oxford Handbook of Urban Politics*, ed. Peter John, Karen Mossberger, and Susan E. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87-113; Ulrik Kjaer and Kristof Steyvers, "Second Thoughts on Second-Order? Towards a Second-Tier Model of Local Government Elections and Voting", in *The Routledge Handbook of International Local Government Research*, ed. Richard Kerley, Joyce Liddle, and Pamela T. Dunning (London: Routledge, 2019), 405-417.

population size and urbanization¹⁰. Kouba, Novák, and Strnad's study confirms that local turnout is significantly influenced by whether local elections coincide with higher salience electoral events¹¹.

Discussions about participation in local elections and potential solutions to mitigate electoral absenteeism and revitalize citizens engagement have focused on both single-case studies and comparative analyses¹². Research in comparative politics highlights that, although often overshadowed by national contests, local elections offer valuable insight into subnational political dynamics and provide an arena in which political parties test their organizational strength, local leaders cultivate networks, and voters evaluate performance in ways that may diverge from national level political behavior¹³. Post-communist democracies offer particularly fertile ground for examining these dynamics. Studies show that legacies of political distrust, uneven institutional consolidation, and persistent socio-economic inequalities contribute to lower levels of political participation, especially in local elections¹⁴. Romania fits this broader regional pattern: participation has declined over time, and substantial territorial variation shapes local political competition. Scholars highlight the role of clientelist structures, incumbents' organizational advantages, and the socio-economic heterogeneity of municipalities in shaping electoral outcomes¹⁵.

On the relationship between central and local authorities, this issue has been analyzed in terms of vertical and horizontal power relations¹⁶. Stănuș and

¹⁰ Karel Kouba, Jakub Novák, and Matyáš Strnad, "Explaining Voter Turnout in Local Elections: A Global Comparative Perspective", *Contemporary Politics* 27, no. 1 (2021): 58-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1831764>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Heath et al., "Between First and Second Order", 1999; Tatiana Kostadinova, "Voter Turnout Dynamics in Post-Communist Europe", *European Journal of Political Research* 42, no. 6 (2003): 741-759, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00102>; André Blais and Daniel Rubenson, "The Source of Turnout Decline: New Values or New Contexts?", *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 95-117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414012453032>; John Fenwick and Howard Elcock, "Elected Mayors: Leading Locally?", *Local Government Studies* 40, no. 4 (2014): 581-599, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2013.836492>; Kouba, Novák, and Strnad, "Explaining Voter Turnout", (2021).

¹³ Daniele Caramani, *The Nationalization of Politics. The Formation of National Electorates and Party Systems in Western Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Régis Dandoy and Arjan H. Schakel, eds., *Regional and National Elections in Western Europe. Territoriality of the Vote in Thirteen Countries* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁴ Kostadinova, "Voter Turnout Dynamics", 2003.

¹⁵ Clara Volintiru, "Clientelism: Electoral Forms and Functions in the Romanian Case Study", *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 35-66; Sergiu Gherghina and Clara Volintiru, "A New Model of Clientelism: Political Parties, Public Resources, and Private Contributors", *European Political Science Review* 9, no. 1 (2017): 115-137, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773915000326>.

¹⁶ Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers, "Local elections and voting: grasping vertical integration and horizontal variation", in *Handbook on Local and Regional Governance*, ed. Filipe Teles (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 145-161; Arjan H.

Gheorghiță consider that vertical power relations are linked to decentralization efforts, noting that, in Romania, the reform of local administrations was not supported “by full fiscal decentralization” – in other words, the government retained control on administering local finances¹⁷. Meanwhile, horizontal power relations are influenced by electoral rules, with local power split in a “dualist system” comprised of mayors and local councils (the former have executive attributions, while latter exercise legislative functions)¹⁸.

Concerning the relation between the mayor and the local council, Stănuș and Gheorghiță underline a critical aspect regarding the nature of the dualist system, namely how unbalanced it is compared to the central administration: the mayors are full-time officials who “control the bureaucratic apparatus of the local government”, while the councilors, who are also elected, are part-time officials and majorities in the council tend to be controlled by the mayor¹⁹. This leads Stănuș and Gheorghiță to observe that, when examining the role of mayor, the Romanian case functions under a “strong mayor model”²⁰.

On the importance of the mayor in the political landscape, Richard Stren and Abigail Friendly remark that “local politics in many large cities is no longer purely local. Influences from the outside [...] are enlarging the political perspectives of elected officials, and particularly, elected mayors”²¹. The Romanian case is notable because there is a self-reinforcing relationship between the center and local branches of public administration, reflected in the vertical mobility of political representatives from county and local levels to executive and legislative positions in government and parliament. Not coincidentally, three of the five democratically elected presidents were former mayors (Traian Băsescu, Klaus Iohannis, Nicușor Dan) while some of the most consequential prime ministers in terms of their reform agenda have also been mayors (Emil Boc, Ilie Bolojan).

Schakel and Valentyna Romanova, “Horizontal and Vertical Spill-over in Multilevel Electoral Systems”, *Regional & Federal Studies* 31, no. 3 (2021): 299–311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2021.1934455>; Tomáš Došek and Kent Eaton, “Mayors Unchecked: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Local Autonomy in Latin American Municipalities”, *Urban Affairs Review* 61, no. 2 (2024): 556-590, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874241266222>.

¹⁷ Cristina Stănuș and Andrei Gheorghiță, “Romania: A Case of National Parties Ruling Local Politics”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, ed. Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 453-454.

¹⁸ Ibid, 454.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. See also: Alessandro Sancino, Giacomo Carli, and Davide Giacomini, “Relational Leadership in Local Governance: The Engagement of Mayors with Citizens, Public Managers and Politicians”, *Public Management Review* 25, no. 9 (2023): 1730-1754, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2039274>; Richard C. Schragger, “Can Strong Mayors Empower Weak Cities? On the Power of Local Executives in a Federal System”, *The Yale Law Journal* 115 (2006): 2542-2578.

²¹ Richard Stren and Abigail Friendly, “Big city mayors: Still avatars of local politics?”, *Cities* 84 (2019): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.08.005>.

From the voters' perspective, we consider two aspects: participation and behavior. In terms of participation, Lysek divides voters between three categories: core voters (participate regularly in all types of elections); core abstainers (do not participate in elections); and selective voters (participate occasionally)²². In the selective voters category, Lysek notes that there is a type of voters who only participates in local elections on account of “intrinsic and specific place-bound reasons for voting, (...) trust, and support of continuity”²³.

Regarding electoral behavior, there are multiple models that can explain the process involved in selecting a candidate that can find an application at the local level as well. These include the sociological model, the social cleavage model, the party identification model, the rational choice model, the economic voting model, retrospective and prospective voting model, the second order model, the valence model, the spatial voting model, the issue voting model, or the protest voting model, etc.²⁴.

For the present analysis, we will briefly refer to two dimensions of electoral behavior: voting patterns in former communist countries and voting patterns in local elections. Gherghina observes that voters' behavior in Central and Eastern Europe is characterized by electoral volatility, which makes it hard for parties to enjoy “stable support among citizens”²⁵. In the post-transition barrenness, Gherghina argues, voters were characterized by political (in)experience, negative attitudes towards the post-communist successor parties, as well as a sense of persistent ideological confusion, undoubtedly fueled by the parties' weak programmatic identities²⁶. Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker add “disenchantment” to the profile of the Central and Eastern voter, noting that political dissatisfaction is a chronic issue in the region, related more to the

²² Lysek, “Local passion and national apathy”, 2025, 206. See also: Benny Geys, “Explaining voter turnout: A review of aggregate-level research”, *Electoral Studies* 25, no. 4, (2006): 637-663, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2005.09.002>. See also; Silvia Bolgherini, Selena Grimaldi, and Aldo Paparo, *Local Electoral Participation in Europe: The Roots of Municipal Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024); Zoltan L. Hajnal and Paul G. Lewis, P. G., “Municipal Institutions and Voter Turnout in Local Elections”, *Urban Affairs Review* 38, no. 5 (2003): 645-668, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087403038005002>.

²³ Ibid., 205.

²⁴ Kai Arzheimer, Jocelyn Evans and Michael S. Lewis-Beck, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour (Volume 1 and Volume 2)* (London: SAGE Publishing, 2017); section on “Theoretical approaches to the study of voter behavior” (chapter 1 - 4) in Justin Fisher et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018). For details regarding the main economic, psychological and sociological models of electoral behaviors, see also: Mihaela Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România. De la local la național* (București: Editura Universitară, 2015), 35-92.

²⁵ Sergiu Gherghina, *Party Organization and Electoral Volatility in Central and Eastern Europe: Enhancing Voter Loyalty* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

²⁶ Ibid.

perceived quality of the democratic state, as opposed to the economic developments usually associated with negative attitudes²⁷.

Local trends in electoral behavior in Central and Eastern Europe reflect a complex albeit understudied dynamic²⁸. In Hungary, Dobos finds that voters display a limited interest in local elections, reflected in the rates of turnout compared to parliamentary elections, though the author notes that voters in larger cities are more politically engaged than those in smaller communities²⁹. This electoral behavior could be explained by the particularity of the local electoral system, which is divided into two subsystems on the basis that “local politics in smaller communities should be about local issues, while in larger cities it should mirror the divisions of national politics”³⁰.

In Poland, Gendźwill characterizes the outcomes of local elections in terms of “splendid isolation” from national politics, with electoral behavior being shaped by “strongly personalized” local politics attributed to “long-lasting dominance of local independent lists (usually organized around local leaders) and the weakness (underinstitutionalization) of nationwide political parties”³¹. Meanwhile, in Bulgaria, Kalcheva and Ushatova point out that citizens regard local elections as important, with surveys indicating that Bulgarian voters participate in local elections on the assumption that “municipal officials are sufficiently responsible and [...] can significantly influence the development of the locality”³². Moreover, factors shaping electoral behavior are not limited to party affiliation, voters being more drawn to a candidate’s personal qualities that must show a connection to the constituents and be knowledgeable of the issues impacting the local community³³.

²⁷ Alexander C. Pacek, Grigore Pop-Eleches, and Joshua A. Tucker, “Disenchanted or Discerning: Voter Turnout in Post-Communist Countries”, *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 2 (2009): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609090409>.

²⁸ Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers, “From perennial bridesmaids to fully fledged spouses: Advancing the comparative study of local elections and voting”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, ed. Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 3-18.

²⁹ Gábor Dobos, “Hungary The expansion and the limits of national politics at the local”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, ed. Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 296-297.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 295

³¹ Adam Gendźwill, “Poland: A hyperlocalized system?”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, ed. Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 335

³² Desislava Kalcheva and Daniela Ushatova, “Bulgaria More open local electoral rules”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*, ed. Adam Gendźwill, Ulrik Kjaer, and Kristof Steyvers (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2022), 388.

³³ *Ibid.*, 390.

In Romania, mayors are elected using a single-round plurality system in accordance with the provisions of Law no. 115/2015³⁴. Under this rule, the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether they secure an absolute majority. The first past the post system structurally benefits candidates supported by larger, well-organized parties, whose mobilization of resources nation-wide exceeds those of newer or smaller parties³⁵. Comparative literature provides a theoretical basis for these outcomes: plurality systems tend to penalize fragmentation, benefit large parties, and create barriers for challengers lacking organizational networks³⁶. In Romania, this effect is amplified by incumbents' access to administrative resources and by the prevalence of local clientelist structures³⁷.

Experts and civil society organizations have argued that the one-round rule reduces representativeness and strategically favors incumbents and major parties³⁸. Empirically, the system can produce mayors elected with relatively small pluralities in competitive municipalities, while incumbents in less competitive rural areas benefit from concentrated local loyalties and organizational capacity³⁹. For the 2024 elections in Constanta County, this institutional framework is essential for understanding patterns of partisan control and turnout variations.

³⁴ Law no. 115 of 19 May 2015 for the election of local public administration authorities, amending the Law of local public administration no. 215/2001, as well as amending and supplementing Law no. 393/2004 on the Statute of local electees, published in the *Official Gazette of Romania*, part I, no. 349 of 20 May 2015, <https://www.roaep.ro/legislative/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Law-115-2015.pdf>.

³⁵ On the systemic advantage of large parties in plurality systems, see: Shaun Bowler, André Blais, and Bernard Grofman, eds., *Duverger's Law of Plurality Voting The Logic of Party Competition in Canada, India, the United Kingdom and the United States* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2009); Massimo Bordignon, Tommaso Nannicini, and Guido Tabellini, "Single round vs. runoff elections under plurality rule: A theoretical analysis", *European Journal of Political Economy* 49 (2017): 123-133, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpeleco.2017.02.001>.

³⁶ Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count. Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Matthew Soberg Shugart, "Comparative Electoral Systems Research: The Maturation of a Field and New Challenges Ahead", in *The Politics of Electoral Systems*, ed. Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell, 25-56 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Volintiru, "Clientelism: Electoral Forms and Functions", 2012.

³⁸ Expert Forum, „Vrem primari aleși în două tururi!”, 28.04.2015, <https://expertforum.ro/vrem-primari-alesi-in-doua-tururi/>; George Jigău and Gabriel Bădescu, „De ce ar trebui să alegem primarii în două tururi de scrutin”, *Centrul pentru Studiul Democrației*, n.d., <https://democracycenter.ro/publicatii/reprezentare-politica-publicatie1/>; Elena Crângașu, „De ce încă alegem primarii dintr-un singur tur. Pe cine avantajează”, *Cotidianul*, 20.11.2025, <https://www.cotidianul.ro/de-ce-inca-alegem-primarii-dintr-un-singur-tur-pe-cine-avantajeaza/>.

³⁹ On the issue of incumbent reelection, see: Corneliu Iașu, Andreea-Daniela Fedor, and Silviu-Petru Grecu, "Predictors of mayoral reelection in Romanian local elections. Long-term analysis 1996–2016", *Heliyon* 10, no. 21 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e39812>.

As concerns the electoral behavior, in the Romanian case voters show a constant interest in local elections, as observed earlier. However, their options are significantly influenced by two factors: the specifics of the electoral system, developed to give an advantage to larger national parties; and the timing of the elections, which generally precedes the parliamentary elections by several months. According to Stănuș and Gheorghiiță, voters' participation reflects the dominance of national parties, acting as a “litmus test” on the outcome of parliamentary elections⁴⁰ and, as a result, we would posit that the electoral behavior is symbolically vitiated by these particularities.

III. Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional research design at the level of the administrative territorial units in Constanta County. To eliminate the risk of sampling bias, we develop a systematic comparison across different types of localities. The dataset includes all 70 communes, towns, and municipalities in Constanta County, enabling us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of local variations, since territorial heterogeneity is known to influence political participation, especially at the local level⁴¹. A total of 4,949 candidacies were submitted for the 2024 local elections: 302 candidacies for the position of mayor, 4,351 candidacies for local councilor positions, 288 candidacies for the positions of county councilors, and 8 candidacies for the position of president of the county council. In the majority of the administrative units in Constanta County, voters had multiple options for mayor: in 49 of the administrative units, there were a maximum of 4 candidates, while in another 21, there were at least 5 candidates registered on the voting lists.

The research approach follows established methodologies in electoral studies that treat localities as meaningful units for assessing the particularities of electoral competitions, voter mobilization, and territorial political behavior. For example, using the “friends and neighbors voting” model, Górecki, Bartnicki, and Alimowski analyzed the election results in over 700 rural municipalities from Poland and found that local candidates influence voter's options and participation, noting that “voters tend to prefer candidates living close to them and candidates enjoy an additional surplus of votes in their home localities”⁴². Another approach focuses on elite mobilization. Fiva and Smith explain that

⁴⁰ Stănuș and Gheorghiiță, “Romania: A Case of National Parties”, 2022, 462.

⁴¹ See: Jonathan Rodden, “The Geographic Distribution of Political Preferences”, *Annual Review Political Science* 13 (2010): 321-340, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.031607.092945>.

⁴² Maciej A. Górecki, Sławomir Bartnicki, and Maciej Alimowski, “Local voting at local elections revisited: ‘Friends and neighbors voting’ at mayoral elections in rural Poland”, *Political Geography* 94 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102559>.

“candidates or parties will target their mobilization efforts at individuals or groups who would most likely support them but might not otherwise turn out if not contacted”⁴³. Fiva and Smith applied their analysis to Norway’s two-round election system and found that there is a “friends and neighbors” effect on voter participation while parties “gain votes through the mobilizational effort of individual candidates, and that this effect is strongest in those candidates’ hometowns”⁴⁴.

In our research framework, localities represent environments where political competition follows uniform electoral rules, but under heterogeneous social, demographic, and political conditions. In theory, this makes them suitable for assessing how local, decentralized political dynamics interact with institutional arrangements driven from the center. In this sense, the analysis seeks to identify patterns in mayoral electoral competition associated with turnout differences and other legislative particularities, such as merging two types of elections, as was the case in Romania in 2024.

The systematic comparative approach across locality types allows us to identify whether electoral volatility and observed turnout differences are context-dependent and whether the typological differentiation of the localities influences political competition, mobilization capacity, and turnout rates. The empirical analysis uses three primary sources: electoral turnout rates for each municipality of Constanta County in the 2024 local elections; mayoral election results, including candidate identity and party affiliation; and locality type (urban / rural, respectively, for urban areas, municipality / town). The datasets, sourced from the Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority and the Central Electoral Bureau provide reliable and comparable indicators across the administrative units.

The empirical focus on mayoral electoral competition is operationalized through the following indicators: number of candidates; party affiliation; vote concentration or fragmentation. We consider mayoral elections to be suitable for local-level analysis because they combine personalized competition with party structures, and we can assess whether they amplify or depress local effects. Regarding the turnout, it is treated as both an outcome and an indicator of mobilization capacity, reflecting the interaction between institutional context, political competition, and voter engagement⁴⁵.

From the dataset, the municipality of Constanta was selected as a case-study because it is the county capital and an important economic node as a city-port and touristic destination in the region. In addition to the quantitative

⁴³ Jon H. Fiva and Daniel M. Smith, “Local candidates and voter mobilization: Evidence from historical two-round elections in Norway”, *Electoral Studies* 45 (2017): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.11.021>.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁴⁵ See: André Blais, “What Affects Voter Turnout?”, *Annual Review Political Science* 9 (2006): 111-125, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.070204.105121>.

analysis of the electoral data, we include a breakdown of the campaign themes of the main candidates running for mayor and try to outline the profile of the average voter in the municipality. After all, when considering place-based dynamics, Schulte-Cloos and Bauer find that “territorial identities and sentiments of local belonging can be powerful in shaping political behavior”⁴⁶. In our analysis, the municipality of Constanta stands out because it registered the lowest turnout rate (42.97%) from the dataset and, therefore, represents a good example of the limitations associated with the single-round plurality system given that the electoral developments in the municipality epitomize the opposite of local politics.

IV. Discussion

IV.1. Electoral Overview

At the county level, nine political formations (eight political parties and one alliance) participated in the local elections and all contented in at least one electoral contest: 1) *Partidul Social Democrat* (Eng. trans.: Social Democratic Party – PSD); 2) *Partidul Național Liberal* (Eng. trans.: National Liberal Party – PNL); 3) *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor* (Eng. trans.: Alliance for the Union of Romanians – AUR); 4) *Partidul România Mare* (Eng. trans.: Greater Romania Party – PRM); 5) *Partidul Ecologist Român Mare* (Eng. trans.: Romanian Ecologist Party – PER); 6) *Partidul Umanist Social Liberal* (Eng. trans.: Social Liberal Humanist Party – PUSL); 7) *S.O.S. România* (Eng. trans.: S.O.S. Romania Party – SOS); 8) *Partidul Dreapta Alternativă* (Eng. trans.: Alternative Right Party – AD); and 9) *Alianța Dreapta Unită (Uniunea Salvați România – USR, Partidul Mișcarea Populară – PMP, Forța Dreptei – FD)* (Eng. trans.: United Right Alliance – comprised of Save Romania Union, the People’s Movement Party, and Force of the Right – known as ADU). At the locality level, other 7 smaller parties and electoral alliances had only one candidate for the mayor position in the entire county: REPER (in Mangalia municipality); *Partidul Neamul Românesc* (Eng. trans.: Romanian People’s Party) (in Năvodari city); *Comunitatea Rușilor Lipoveni din România* (Eng. trans.: Lipoveni Russian Community in Romania (in Ghindărești commune); *Partidul Adevăr, Democrație, Educație, Reconstrucție* (Eng. trans.: Truth, Democracy, Education, Reconstruction Party (in Pecineaga commune); Alliance for Medgidia (in Medgidia municipality – candidate proposed by the Tatar Democratic Union); Alliance for Mangalia (in Mangalia municipality – candidate proposed by the Right Alternative Party); and Alliance for Agigea (in Agigea commune – candidate proposed by USR). Several

⁴⁶ Julia Schulte-Cloos and Paul C. Bauer, “Local Candidates, Place-Based Identities, and Electoral Success”, *Political Behavior* 45 (2023): 680, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09712-y>.

independent candidates were also registered on the voting lists. At the county level, 16 independent candidates were registered in the mayoral race. Five of them ran for office in the municipality of Constanta.

At the party level, there was a high discrepancy in the number of candidates proposed by the parties for the position of mayor. In this regard, PSD was the only political party that ran candidates in all 70 administrative units in the county; PNL had candidates in 66 administrative units; and AUR had candidates in 58. In the case of ADU, the alliance supported the same candidate in 19 administrative units, but the parties composing it also ran candidates independent of the alliance, as follows: USR had separate candidates in other 14 administrative units, PMP in 9, and FD in 5.

From this outline, we can draw several conclusions: large, traditional center-left and center-right parties are well-represented in the territory; small parties are present, but in a limited capacity; new and small center-right parties reproduce locally the same patterns of fragmentation as observed at the national level (see the case of ADU), while minority groups are represented in electoral contests reflecting the ethnic makeup of the localities. Another significant aspect to consider is the growing presence of the radical right represented by AUR, which was third in terms of territorial representation, behind PSD and PNL. AUR was only able to win in one of the 58 mayoral races and, while these results could indicate a rejection of radical ideologies, given the nature of local politics it is more likely that the voters supported representatives from the PSD-PNL continuum based on political identification or incumbency. Moreover, in the case of AUR, we have to consider the party's long-term ambitions and electoral perspectives at the end of the 2024-2028 electoral cycle, in view of the fact that all the other important parties formed a coalition government after the December 2024 parliamentary elections, that left AUR as the main opposition party. Their participation in local elections in a majority of localities – from large municipalities to the smallest communes, could allow AUR to become an electoral alternative, given how fragile the majorities in the 2024 parliamentary elections were and how unpopular the coalition government became after the adoption of austerity measures in the succeeding period.

IV.2. The County of Constanta: The Domination of Large Parties

At the county level, there were 561 voting sections. The number of total registered voters was 618,238 of which 304,126 presented to the polls. The overall turnout registered was 49.19%, with the county ranking 31st out of 41 Romania counties⁴⁷. In 62 of the 70 localities, turnout was higher than 50% (see Annex no. 1). In terms of electoral outcomes, of the political formations

⁴⁷ Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Alegeri locale – Detalii generale (Filtru: Județul Constanța)”, 2024, <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale09062024v2/romania/pv-final>.

identified, we will mention only those that obtained at least one mayoral mandate. In this sense, the results were as follows: PNL received 114.459 votes or 38.22% of the cast votes and won 34 mayorships; PSD received 85,019 votes or 28,89% of the cast votes and won 31 mayorships; AUR received 26.389 votes or 8.96% of the cast votes and won 1 mayorship (Negru Vodă); ADU received 25.195 votes or 8.56% of the cast votes and won 1 mayorship (Fântânele); USR received 4.557 votes or 1.54% of the cast votes and won 1 mayorship (Ghindărești); FD received 2.704 votes or 0.91% of the cast votes and won 1 mayorship (Ion Corvin)⁴⁸. From the independent candidates, only one was able to win a mandate in Săcele, placing fifth at the county level in terms of turnout, above established parties, after receiving 11.464 votes or 3.89% of the cast votes⁴⁹ (see Annex no. 1).

For the local councils, the results were more diversified, with 13 political formations and two independent candidates gaining seats, however over 80% of votes were obtained by just 4 political formations: PNL (32.83% – 378 mandates), PSD (29.22% – 358 mandates), AUR (13.02% – 101 mandates), and ADU (8.57% – 27 mandates). For the county council, only four political formations obtained seats: PNL (15 seats), PSD (10 seats), AUR (6 seats), and ADU (5 seats). Meanwhile, the election for the president of the county council was won by the PNL representative, Florin Mitroi, who obtained 110.863 votes and 38.10% of the votes cast⁵⁰.

The analysis of the results shows that the two largest parties – PNL and PSD – dominate the electoral scene, just as they did in the 2020 elections, when PNL received 37.36% of the votes and obtained 31 mayorships, while PSD received 25.78% of the votes and 33 mayorships respectively. In the beginning of the article, we posited that results might be affected by the fact that since 2021, the two parties were part of a governmental coalition and that local elections were organized at the same time as the ones for the European Parliament. However, the results do not indicate that the parties' performance suffered on account of these dynamics in the local elections. As with previous electoral cycles, the large parties benefited from the single-round plurality system established by Law no. 115 of 19 May 2015, which, as we have analyzed, is prone to maximize the electoral advantage of these parties. Small parties and independent candidates can win mayoral elections, but only in context-dependent outliers (six instances in 2020 and five in 2024 respectively).

⁴⁸ Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă, (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Alegeri locale – Prezență la vot (Filtru Județul Constanța, Primar)”, 2024, <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale09062024v2/romania/pv-final>.

⁴⁹ The turnout at the level of Săcele commune was the highest in the county: 94,12 %.

⁵⁰ Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Alegeri locale – Prezență la vot (Filtru Județul Constanța, Consiliu Local)”, 2024, <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale09062024v2/romania/pv-final>.

In terms of trends, we would note the issues associated with political fragmentation that accompany small center-right wing parties, regardless of whether they are part of coalitions (see the case of PMP, which wins three mayor elections in 2020, while as part of the ADU, the coalition wins two mayorships, but none of the candidates are from PMP). Coupled with the absence of territorial networks of representation and limited organizational power, small parties cannot be electorally competitive in the county of Constanta. For example, nation-wide, USR was able to win 28 elections for mayor, but only three of these were in municipal urban centers: Dominic Friz in Timișoara, Elena Lasconi⁵¹ in Câmpulung, and Lucian-Daniel Stanciu-Viziteu in Bacău⁵². Another notable trend would be the continued electoral decline of PSD over the last two electoral cycles, both at local and national levels. In the case of Constanta, the decline is more preeminent since, between 2004-2016, PSD used to dominate the elections at the municipality and county level in all the four types of elections (mayor, local council, county council, president of the county council)⁵³. The local downswing can be a sign of voter's fatigue with the party (former mayor of Constanta was embroiled in various corruption scandals that tarnished the image of the party) but coupled with the middling performance in the parliamentary elections, the results point to a party in systemic crisis. This situation might have wide-ranging ramifications in future elections, especially when considering the rise of AUR, as a radical alternative, even if AUR is not presently regarded as an alternative by the general electorate and by the PSD electorate, in particular.

IV.3. The Municipality of Constanta: The Nationalization of Politics

The municipality of Constanta recorded the highest number of candidates for mayor compared to the other administrative units: 9 representatives from the political formations identified and 5 independent candidates. For the present analysis, we will analyze the first four candidates who obtained the highest scores. The turnout in the municipality of Constanta was the lowest compared to the other administrative units but, relative to the 2020 elections, it was higher by four percentage points (42.97%). Obtaining 29.44%, the candidate who won the elections for mayor was Vergil Chițac, the PNL representative and incumbent mayor. The runner-up was the ADU candidate, followed by the PSD candidate, while the fourth place was occupied by the representative from AUR (see Table no. 1).

⁵¹ It should be noted that in the first round of the presidential elections that were annulled at the end of 2024, Elena Lasconi, who was the president of USR at the time, was the runner-up candidate, ahead of the PSD and PNL candidates.

⁵² USR, „Primari”, <https://usr.ro/organizatie/primari?page=1>.

⁵³ For a timeline of results for local election beginning with 1996, see Commit Global, „Rezultate vot (județul Constanța)”, <https://istoric.rezultatevot.ro/elections/114/results?division=county&countyId=6793>.

2020 Mayor Election			2024 Mayor Election		
Candidate	No. of votes	% votes	Candidate	No. of votes	% votes
Vergil Chițac PNL	27,569	28.48	Vergil Chițac, PNL	31,042	29.44
Stelian Ion USR	23,523	24.30	Stelian Ion, ADU	21,889	20.76
Decebal Făgădău PSD	23,414	24.19	Horia Constantinescu PSD	21,840	20.71
Horia Constantinescu PPU-SL	4876	5.03	Ovidiu Cupșa, AUR	11,752	11.14
Total registered voters: 262,237 Total voters present at the polls: 100,256 Turnout: 38.23% Total valid votes cast: 96,781 Total invalid votes: 2,611			Total registered voters: 252,662 Total voters present at the polls: 108,571 Turnout: 42.97% Total valid votes cast: 105,416 Total invalid votes: 3,004		

Table no. 1: Results of the mayor election in the Constanta Municipality in comparative perspective (2020 – 2024). Source: Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Alegeri locale – Prezență la vot”, 2020, 2024, <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale27092020/romania-pv-final>, <https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale09062024v2/romania/pv-final>

In terms of the electoral programs, Vergil Chițac, the PNL candidate, who was the incumbent mayor of Constanta, campaigned on the idea of continuity. Chițac’s focus was on the development of the municipality, pledging that he would continue the rehabilitation of the major boulevards; would build five large multistorey car parks and road crossings that will contribute to traffic decongestion; would prioritize the construction of the coastal road, essential for the development of the seaside; and that he would encourage investments in the Mamaia resort, which he envisioned as an all-season resort⁵⁴.

Horia Constantinescu, the candidate supported by the PSD, was the former head of the National Authority for Consumer Protection. One of the main campaign themes focused on issue of parking and infrastructure, proposing the construction of new parking lots and lower parking fees in the

⁵⁴ Vergil Chițac, „Ordine și seriozitate. Constanța puternică. Program electoral”, 2024, https://www.vergilchitac.ro/wp-content/themes/avc/Program_Electoral.pdf; see also: Vergil Chițac, „Progam de guvernare locală (2024-2028)”, 2024, <https://vergilchitac.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Program-electoral-Vergil-Chit%CC%A6ac.pdf>.

city; the creation of new sidewalks or pedestrian paths; the development of green spaces around residential parking areas⁵⁵. Regarding social policies, Constantinescu promised the establishment of a call center for vulnerable categories, as well as the reduction of prices for certain categories of food products and medicines for seniors⁵⁶. Other measures included the construction of neighborhood multifunctional centers and a logistic hub for young people⁵⁷.

Stelian Ion, the candidate supported by ADU, was the former USR Minister of Justice. Of all the candidates, Stelian Ion's electoral program had the least mentions of social policies, focusing more on issues regarding the sustainable development of the city through initiatives aimed at reducing pollution, recycling, or using environmentally friendly transport alternatives⁵⁸. Like the other candidates, he also addressed the issue of parking, with promises to build new multistorey car parks. Among other topics included in the electoral program were the development of an educational center for children with special needs, the rehabilitation of pedestrian sidewalks, or the construction of a new theater⁵⁹.

Ovidiu Cupșa, the AUR candidate, is a former member of PNL, who had previously been the manager of the Romanian Center for the Training and Improvement of Naval Transport Personnel (CERONAV) until 2023. His electoral program was one that abounded in populist promises and social measures, such as subsidizing the down payment that young people needed to buy a home through the “New House” program; building homes that could be purchased at prices below 40,000 euros; creating 20,000 jobs in the next 12 years; and increasing the average salary, GDP per capita and the local budget of Constanta by 100%. Other initiatives included: building social canteens for the elderly or offering vouchers to support pregnant women⁶⁰.

⁵⁵ Tomis TV Constanta, „Soluțiile lui Horia Constantinescu pentru parcuri și trafic”, 22.05.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vth9eXKIMG4>.

⁵⁶ HotNews, „Magazinele RESPECT, un proiect marca Horia Constantinescu. „Oamenii au nevoie de protecție, le-o voi oferi din prima zi a mandatului meu!”, 26.05.2024, <https://hotnews.ro/p-magazinele-respect-un-proiect-marca-horia-constantinescu-oamenii-au-nevoie-de-protectie-le-o-voi-oferi-din-prima-zi-a-mandatului-meu-909023>.

⁵⁷ Călin Gavrilăș, „Profil de Candidat. Horia Constantinescu (PSD)”, *Dobrogea Live*, 25.04.2024, <https://dobrogealive.ro/profil-de-candidat-horia-constantinescu-psd-as-fi-un-primar-si-jumatate-nu-stiu-sa-lucrez-doar-8-ore-pe-zi-eunudorm/>.

⁵⁸ USR, „Stelian Ion și-a depus candidatura pentru funcția de primar al municipiului Constanța”, 30.04.2024, <https://usr.ro/stiri/stelian-ion-si-a-depus-candidatura-pentru-functia-de-primar-al-municipiului-constanta>. See also: Replica de Constanța, „Stelian Ion, despre programul electoral „Constanța contează!”, 17.05.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEq3Hf4sjs8>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gabriela Gevelegean, Nicoleta Baci, and Nicușor Bușurică, „Ovidiu Cupșa își depune candidatura la Primăria Constanța din partea AUR”, *Ziua de Constanța*, 29.04.2024, <https://www.ziuaconstanta.ro/informatii/alegeri-electorale-romania/live-text-video-ovidiu-cupsa-isi-depune-candidatura-la-primaria-constanta-din-partea-aur-854997.html>; see also: Ovidiu Cupșa, „Program”, 2024, <https://www.oviduicupsa.ro/program>; Redacția Dezvăluiri.ro, „Cine e

In the sample analyzed, aside from the PNL candidate, two others had also participated in the elections from 2020: Stelian Ion, the ADU candidate and Horia Constantinescu, the PSD candidate. Stelian Ion previously ran on the part of USR, though he retained the support of party in the ADU coalition, while Horia Constantinescu had been the candidate of the *Partidul Umanist Social Liberal* (Eng. trans.: Social Liberal Humanist Party – PPU-SL) in the 2020 elections. Notably, while Constantinescu improved his score – arguably aided by the PSD electoral apparatus – the 2024 scores of ADU and PSD were worse compared to 2020 (minus four percentage points), when USR had not been part of a coalition, while the PSD candidate had been the incumbent mayor at that time, Decebal Făgădău.

The 2024 results reflect the consolidation of the National Liberal Party's position at the municipal levels, reconfirming the electorate's decoupling from the Social Democrat Party, first observed in the 2020 elections. When considering the percentage of votes and the rate of turnout, we can assess how PNL benefited from electoral system to further entrench its institutional presence in the municipality of Constanta. As for the impact of the electoral programs, we would posit that their influence on voters' options was limited, given that, on the one hand, there was an overlap between certain topics adopted by the candidates, while, on the other, certain proposals were too technical or abstract (see the case of the multifunctional centers) as to garner the interest of the general electorate.

V. Conclusion

In Constanta County and the Municipality of Constanta, the 2024 local elections reflected broader national patterns of political consolidation, supported by legal frameworks that favor established parties. The local context analyzed also showcased the challenges that new or small parties face in gaining meaningful electoral support. The elections, held on 9 June 2024, coincided with the European elections, following a government decision to merge the two contests. This decision, which the coalition government believed would be efficient in administrative terms and help mobilize a higher turnout in European elections, was criticized for compressing the campaign period and creating difficulties for electoral engagement for smaller political formations.

In the municipality of Constanta, incumbent Vergil Chițac won the mayoral contest with about 30% of the votes cast against a crowded field of 14 candidates, demonstrating again how plurality systems can reward candidates even without absolute majority. PNL also led in the county council election,

în spatele candidatului AUR la Primăria Constanța. Interviu cu omul Ovidiu Cupșa”, 24.02.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC2cWr8wnO8>.

followed by PSD and AUR, while smaller parties and independent candidates accounted for a modest share of votes, often failing to surpass thresholds for proportional representation for local and county councils.

This dominance of the large parties, PNL and PSD, is consistent with national results, where the parties captured the highest share of mayoralties and council seats. National data show that the two parties together garnered over 60% of the vote share and a disproportionately high share of seats due to vote redistribution from parties that failed to cross the electoral thresholds. This structural advantage stems from both electoral law and political practice: larger parties have deeper organizational networks, broader name recognition, and greater access to resources. These factors represent an additional advantage in the case analyzed, when local elections were merged with European contests that tend to emphasize national party identities.

For smaller and new parties, the electoral environment proved inhospitable. Parties like USR (which struggled even under the ADU banner to convert candidacies into institutional representation in Constanta) and others mirrored nationwide patterns, where they placed near or below the electoral thresholds and won few mandates. Moreover, the need to compete simultaneously in local and European elections diluted the visibility of niche platforms, as voter attention centered on major party coalitions and the broader implications of European representation.

The degree to which PSD and PNL were penalized by the electorate for being in a coalition government – antithetical to traditional partisan positions – was not evident at the local level, which, as noted elsewhere⁶¹, may very well have created a false sense of security and undue electoral confidence for which both parties would be sanctioned by swathes of the electorate in the national elections from November-December 2024.

In conclusion, the 2024 elections in Constanta highlighted how electoral law, timing, and entrenched party dominance shape local political outcomes. The single-round plurality system tended to consolidate power among established parties, particularly in a crowded field, while the merging of local with European elections may have exacerbated the challenges for smaller parties to campaign in local elections. As a result, in the 2024-2028 electoral cycle, local governance in Constanta continues to be monopolized by the larger national political parties, with limited breakthroughs for emerging political actors. However, where breakthroughs were registered, as in the case of AUR, however small (winning one mayorship out of 70), these should be analyzed more in-

⁶¹ Ivănescu and Filimon, “Local Elections: Still Second-Order?”, 2025; see also: Luiza-Maria Filimon and Mihaela Ivănescu, “The SOE Redux: The 2024 European Parliament Elections in the Romanian Context”, *L’Europe Unie* 23 (2025): 132-150, https://leuropeunie.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/art-9-132_150.pdf.

depth to determine whether they are context-dependent outliers or whether they might signal that radical politics are electorally viable under the right conditions.

Finally, we would argue that a focused study of the 2024 local elections in Constanta County and the Municipality of Constanta advances the literature on local elections by providing a detailed, sub-national perspective on how electoral laws and institutional design shape political competition. While existing literature often emphasizes national-level outcomes, the analysis of the Constanta case-study allows for an examination of how plurality systems, the nationalization of politics by large parties, and the organization of simultaneous local and European elections impact electoral results at the local level. In this sense, the present research also contributes to comparative studies on local elections, party dynamics, and voter behavior in multi-level elections, providing empirical insights relevant beyond the Romanian context.

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Annex no. 1

Election Results and Turnout at the Level of the Administrative Units of Constanta County (Municipalities, Cities, Communes)

Territorial Administrative Units					
Municipalities					
No.	Municipality	Turnout (%)	Elected Mayor	% of votes	Party affiliation
1.	Constanta	42.97%	Chițac Vergil	29.44%	PNL
2.	Mangalia	51.02%	Radu Cristian	48.85%	PNL
3.	Medgidia	41.92%	Vrabie Valentin	63.49%	PNL
Cities					
No.	City	Turnout (%)	Elected Mayor	% of votes	Party affiliation
4.	Cernavodă	48.92%	Negoită Liviu-Cristian	34.20%	PNL
5.	Eforie	50.28%	Șerban Robert-Nicolae	64.24%	PNL
6.	Hârșova	54.13%	Ionescu Viorel	37.95%	PNL
7.	Murfatlar	54.34%	Cojocaru Gheorghe	77.33%	PNL
8.	Năvodari	43.94%	Chelaru Florin	32.25%	PSD
9.	Negru Vodă	54.23%	Argintaru Mihai-Adrian	41.28%	AUR
10.	Ovidiu	52.06%	Scupra George	65.25%	PNL
11.	Techirghiol	57.02%	Soceanu Iulian-Constantin	64.36%	PNL
Communes					
No.	Commune	Turnout (%)	Elected Mayor	% of votes	Party affiliation
12.	23 August	51.66%	Mitrana Mugur-Viorel	85.56 %	PNL
13.	Adamclisi	71.44 %	Floca Ionuț	36%	PSD
14.	Agigea	61.80 %	Cîrjaliu Cristian-Maricel	54.75%	PSD
15.	Albești	60.84 %	Moldovan Paul-Mihăiță	62.01%	PNL
16.	Aliman	62.88 %	Nicola George	68.59%	PNL
17.	Amzacea	56.44 %	Gobeajă Laurențiu-Adrian	68.81%	PNL
18.	Băneasa	61.43 %	Blagan Eleonor	60.97%	PNL
19.	Bărăganu	57.52 %	Neague Magdalena	41.21%	PSD

20.	Castelu	61.07 %	Anghel Nicolae	55.54%	PSD
21.	Cerchezu	65.45 %	Chelaru Dumitru	47.95%	PSD
22.	Chirnogeni	44.04 %	Manta Gheorghe	60.16%	PSD
23.	Ciobanu	61.09 %	Gurgu Tudorel	55.87%	PSD
24.	Ciocîrlia	68.02 %	Șerbu Ionuț	51.14%	PNL
25.	Cobadin	47.53 %	Telehoi Cristian	50.93%	PSD
26.	Cogealac	72.01 %	Cati Hristu	68.53%	PSD
27.	Comana	58.33 %	Osman Erdal	60.06%	PNL
28.	Corbu	58.33 %	Lumînare Vasile	64.95%	PSD
29.	Costinești*	72.53 %	Jeanu Dumitru	48.24%	PSD
30.	Crucea	58.64 %	Tudorache Iulian	80.34%	PNL
31.	Cumpăna	50.21 %	Gâju Mariana	68%	PSD
32.	Cuza Vodă	55.40 %	Dulgheru Viorel	74.54%	PNL
33.	Deleni	72.39 %	Dan Marian	66.23%	PSD
34.	Dobromir	71.02 %	Iliescu Eugen	55.58%	PNL
35.	Dumbrăveni	80.76 %	Șandru Luminița	62.99%	PNL
36.	Fântânele	71.45 %	Ciobanu Niculina	55.15%	ADU (USR)
37.	Gârliciu	66.90 %	Tufă Anica	65.57%	PNL
38.	Ghindărești	49.42 %	Vîlcu Mihai	40.66%	USR
39.	Grădina	61.49 %	Iacobici Gabriela	100%	PSD
40.	Horia	58.53 %	Ioniță Nicolae	75.34%	PNL
41.	Independența	62.96 %	Ștefan Marius	42.82%	PNL
42.	Ion Corvin	69.93 %	Cazacu George	47.17%	ADU (FD)
43.	Istria	61.72 %	Ionescu Mihai	75.77%	PSD
44.	Limanu	54.76 %	Georgescu Gheorghe-Daniel	68.14%	PSD
45.	Lipnița	61.39 %	Dinu Nicolae-Florin	47.20%	PNL
46.	Lumina	50.99 %	Chiru Dumitru	33.78%	PSD
47.	Mereni	63.82 %	Guriță Dumitru	33.83%	PNL
48.	Mihai Viteazu	56.73 %	Costache Adrian	40.53%	PNL
49.	Mihail Kogălniceanu	53.86 %	Belu Ancuța-Daniela	77.67%	PNL
50.	Mircea Vodă	56.53 %	Ionașcu George	62.11%	PSD
51.	Nicolae Bălcescu	62.71 %	Bălan Viorel	53.71%	PNL
52.	Oltina	69.24 %	Cealera Ștefania	61.64%	PSD
53.	Ostrov	56.13 %	Dragomir Niculae	42.95%	PSD
54.	Pantelimon	68.02 %	Armășescu Costel	68.78%	PNL
55.	Pecineaga	56.02 %	Makkai Marian	75.17%	PSD
56.	Peștera	50.85 %	Demirel Bobe Paraschiva	55.79%	PSD
57.	Poarta Albă	58.49 %	Delicoti Vasile	70.17%	PNL
58.	Rasova	60.68 %	Neamțu Mihalache	57.27%	PSD
59.	Saligny	47.21 %	Beiu Ion	83.19%	PSD

60.	Saraiu	67.07 %	Irimia Dorinela	75.36%	PSD
61.	Săcele	94.12 %	Tucă Ștefan	37.39%	Independent
62.	Seimeni	59.18 %	Șerban Mitică	61.22%	PSD
63.	Siliștea	68.07 %	Soare Mihai	53.85%	PSD
64.	Tîrgușor	71.20 %	Negru Mădălina	63.30%	PSD
65.	Topalu	67.90 %	Stanciu Valentin	60.98%	PNL
66.	Topraisar	53.89 %	Gheorghe Stelian	44.55%	PSD
67.	Tortoman	63.02 %	Grosu Gheorghe	34.67%	PNL
68.	Tuzla	56.52 %	Reșit Tânăr	27.77%	PSD
69.	Valu lui Traian	53.05 %	Iurea Iulia-Claudia	77.31%	PNL
70.	Vulturu	59.29 %	Berbec Eugen-Marius	100%	PSD

Source for aggregated data: Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă (Eng. trans.: Permanent Electoral Authority), „Alegeri locale – Date finale”, 2024,

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