Eroding democratic representation? The electoral scores of the winning candidates in the 2020 local elections in Romania

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1. Low turnout: a threat to democracy? Low turnout, democratic representation and the majority run-off voting system

This article describes and attempts to explain the loss of formal democratic representation in the 2020 local elections, the third electoral test using a single-round voting system. It shows the decrease in turnout in the local elections and the subsequent erosion of the popular support for the winning candidates in the mayoral elections in the capital-cities of the 41 Romanian counties, in Bucharest and its six sectors. It also discusses the perceived impact of the introduction of the plurality voting system in 2011 on the electoral turnout and formal democratic representation (and the legitimacy of the elected mayors). In this respect, it draws comparisons based on the turnout in the previous electoral tests (2016, 2012, 2008), to evaluate the extent of progressive erosion of popular support of the elected mayor. In order to explain low turnout and low electoral representation of the winning candidate, the paper links the electoral score of the winning candidate (i.e., the winning percentage relative to the total number of possible votes) to population size, unemployment rate and the proportion of senior voters within the municipality, the incumbency of the winning candidate, the electoral margin, the number of candidates, and the existence of "safe constituencies".

Is the low turnout in local elections a real threat to democracy? As early as the 60s, a range of scientific endeavors have argued in favor of this perceived danger. In their studies, Alford and Lee (1968), Morlan (1984), and Bridges (1997) held that low turnout in local elections is a genuine menace to both legitimacy of directly elected officials (members of Municipal Councils and mayors) and to democracy overall. Baybeck (2014) concludes that "turnout in local elections occupies last place in an already low division". Discriminating between types of elections according to their perceived importance, Lefevere and Van Aelst (2014) conclude that the "less at stake" argument of the second-order theory for local elections tends to decrease voter turnout at the local level. Generally, researchers have contended that low turnout in local elections is primarily linked to "a lack of understanding of the functions of local elected officials and their impacts on daily life"[1]. In Romania, for the local elections of 2020 (including ballots of October 11th, 2020, and January 24th, 2021), for the mayor's office, the average voter turnout was 45.64%.[2] For the previous electoral tests, the voter turnout was: 37.35% in 2016; 48.09% in 2012; 48.81% in 2008 (for the first round)[3], and 37.26% in 2008 (for the second round). With the exception of 2012, the first year using a plurality, single-round voting system, when a super-coalition between the right and the left formed to counter a strong populist party, the voter turnout in local elections have revolved around one third of the electorate, with a rather mild erosion in 2020. With a decrease in turnout also comes a decrease in the number of votes needed to gain a mayoral seat. In what follows the paper explores this aspect of Romanian local elections.

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[1] Jan Brennan, "Increasing Voter Turnout in Local Elections", *National Civic Review*, https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/ncr-article/increasing-voter-turnout-in-local-elections/, last accessed: 28.11.2020.

[2] https://locale2020.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PV_3840.pdf, last accessed: 06.02.2021.

[3] http://beclocale2008.roaep.ro/documm/finale17_IUNIE.pdf, last accessed: 06.02.2021.

The concern of this text refers to the actual proportion from the turnout which decided the winning candidate and, as a result, to the actual electoral representativeness of the elected mayor. This proportion (for the mayor's office) was, in 2020, at 16.32% of the total number of voters in a constituency, and evolved as follows: 16.66% in 2016; 26.38% in 2012; and 23.19% in 2008 (last year using the majority run-off voting system for the election of mayors)[4]. This index of electoral representation is indeed worrisome and it has constantly decreased in the last electoral tests (with the exception of 2012, an outlier in the analysis, given the motives explained above).

1.1. Low electoral representation and the voting system

For the two opposition parties of 2012 (joined in the "socialist-liberal" super-coalition, USL), the formal democratic representation and the legitimacy of winners in local elections has allegedly suffered a serious blow with the single-round elections introduced in 2011, when the majority run-off system was eliminated from the election of mayors. While passing the amendments to the electoral law, the Romanian MPs stressed that the majority run-off system is more expansive, particularly in the context of the consequences of the 2008-2009 economic crisis. Moreover, they assumed that the voting intention is reflected in the first round, so that a second round would be redundant, for it would replicate the same tendencies from the first round[5]. The contenders (the opposition composed of liberals and the social-democrats) warned about the dangers on democracy of the single-round local elections, especially in the context of a decreasing turnout in the last local electoral tests; they highlighted the lack of legitimacy of mayors resulting from one-round voting, but the opposition's initial prognosis of mayors elected in single-round elections with only ¼ of the voters is well surpassed by the crude reality. But the logic of the majority run-off system is that the winning candidate should enjoy the support of an absolute majority of voters, as opposed to the first-past-the-post system, one of the less representative electoral *formulae*. Majority run-off systems come with pros and cons, but they can ensure a higher degree of electoral legitimacy of mayors.

In addition, majority run-off systems are prone to promote compromise and negotiation, because, in the second round of elections, eliminated candidates tend to polarize around one of the two remaining candidates, and a game of replacing the votes from one candidate to another unfolds (Birch 2003; Norris 1997; Bullock & Johnson 1992; Fisichella 1984). But this contention is only true if parties, candidates and voters are ideologically flexible (Birch 2003) enough to allow such a dynamic. This observation is quite telling for the case of the Romanian local elections. First, it has been observed, during the last electoral test employing the majority run-off voting system (2008), that voter turnout decreased by 2.30%[6] on average; this means that 2.3% of the electorate was uncompromising (or for whom the result was so predictable that there was no incentive to go to vote again). The highest differences in turnout between the first and the second rounds were recorded in Alexandria (8.17%) and Călărași (8.75%). Moreover, in 2008, out of the twenty cases (at the level of the capital-cities of the 41 counties) in which a second electoral round was held, there were only eight instances (Bucharest and four of its sectors – 1, 4, 5, and 6 –, Satu Mare, Ilfov, and Iași) in which a second round generated a higher turnout than the first round of

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[4] Author's computations based on electoral data available at: http://alegeri.roaep.ro/, last accessed: 12.01.2021. The way of computing the electoral score of the winning candidate (expressed as %) was:
$electoral\ score\ of\ the\ winning\ candidate = \frac{no.of\ votes\ gathered\ by\ the\ winner \times 100}{total\ no.of\ possible\ votes}$ (the percentage is calculated from the total number of possible votes, rather than the turnout).

[5] Stenograph of the debate in the Lower Chamber: http://www.cdep.ro/pls/steno/steno2015.stenograma?ids=7006&idm=10, last accessed: 10.11.2020.

[6] Author's computations based on electoral data available at: http://alegeri.roaep.ro/, last accessed: 12.01.2021.

elections; in all of these eight cases, the second round only reconfirmed the winner in the first round. As a matter of fact, out of the total number of cases, only in Bistrița, a second round of elections made the difference, the winner of the first round was the second runner-up in the second round. This is illustrative for what Sarah Birch (2003) considered the "effect of the diminution of uncertainty" of the two-round voting systems. While discussing parliamentary elections, Sarah Birch convincingly argues that such a two-round system would be "a destabilizing factor that inhibits democratic development and encourages the use of nonelectoral means of exercising power" (Birch 2003: 320).

Although described as leading to an "artificial representation", the majority run-off voting system (or the majority runoff system) is credited to be "more conducive to preference and information revelation than plurality, and to ensure a large mandate to the winner, thereby providing him/ her with more democratic legitimacy" (Bouton & Gratton 2015: 284). On the other hand, single-round voting tends to excessively break the electorate among candidates, an electorate which is no longer polarized, during a second round, between two final candidates. Plurality voting is prone to generate lower percentages for the winning candidate. With respect to competitiveness, surely electoral systems based on a plurality formula are prone to generate more competition; the majority run-off voting system presupposes a second chance for the second runner-up, who (if able to devise convenient strategies resulting in the relocation of the votes of those candidates who did not enter the second round towards the second place) might be able to change the ranking of the first round of elections. This, however, happened rather rarely, as the last electoral test employing a second-round system (2008) has showed (one in 48 instances).

2. Factors affecting turnout in local elections and the score of the winning candidate. Methodology

In an attempt to describe the manner in which the electoral score of the winning candidate (expressed as percentage of votes gathered by the winning candidate in the competition for the mayor's office out of the total of number of eligible voters) varies, this paper puts forward a series of questions to be answered below:

1. In which way does the population size of the county capital influence the electoral score of the winning candidate?

2. Is a higher proportion of seniors in the population prone to increase the electoral score of the winning candidate?

3. How does the unemployment level affect the electoral score of the winning candidate in a county capital?

4. Does incumbency increase the electoral score of the winning candidate for the mayoral office?

5. Is a "safe constituency" susceptible to increase the electoral score of the winning candidate at the level of the county capital?

In answering the abovementioned questions, the paper employs a series of variables referring to both the specificities of the community/ municipality in which elections take place (e.g., population size, proportion of seniors, official unemployment rate) and to the electoral context (e.g., incumbency of the winner, the duration of this incumbency, the dominance of a certain party in the last three electoral tests in a given constituency, the number of candidates running for the mayor's office, the electoral margin between the winner and the second runner-up).

| Variable | Mean | Standard | Minimum | Maximum | Nr. of |

		deviation			observations
Turnout (%)	35.0877	5.20097	15.42	50.31	48
Incumbency	0.67	0.781	0	2	48
No. of candidates	10.79	3.326	4	20	48
Population size	187,628.60	269,793.437	22,178	1,883,425	48
	3.15	1.010	1	6	48
Electoral margin (%)	22.7075	20.77578	0.05	70.69	48
Unemployment rate (%)	0.7850	0.29784	0.00	1.35	48
Age (% of seniors)	12.2479	2.58438	6.67	18.97	48
The same party winning the last 3 electoral tests	0.54	0.771	0	2	48
Winning percentage from the turnout (%)	47.8790	14.07815	26.26	78.06	48
Electoral score of the winning candidate out of the total possible votes (%)	**16.3192**	**5.21554**	**8.10**	**31.35**	**48**

For the sample of forty-eight constituencies, this paper addresses a series of hypotheses: (1) Incumbency increases the electoral score of the winning candidate. (2) In constituencies with a higher proportion of senior voters (voters aged 65+), the electoral score of the winning candidate is higher. (3) A higher number of candidates in the mayoral race decrease the electoral score of the winning candidate. (4) A higher unemployment rate is prone to decrease the electoral score of the winning candidate. (5) The three-term dominance of a certain party in a constituency, coupled with a two-term incumbency of the candidate, are prone to slightly decrease the electoral score of the winning candidate. The paper employs "the electoral score of the winning candidate", computing the number of votes gathered out of the total number of available votes, interchangeably with "formal democratic representation" and it is seen as an indicator of legitimacy at the local level.

There is also a classical, though still inciting, discussion on the relationship between population magnitude of one municipality and different forms of participation, including voting (a discussion famously inaugurated by Verba and Nie (1972), but continued by some significant contributions, such as Preuss 1981, Morlan 1984, Rallings 1994, Rallings, Temple, and Thrasher 1996, Oliver 2000, Geys 2006, Neal 2007, Swianiewicz 2013, etc.): smaller municipalities tend to generate higher turnout. For the Romanian case, the conjecture of smaller communities determining higher participation in the elections should be counterbalanced by the demographic characteristics of the municipalities (especially, age and educational level, but also income). For the purpose of this paper, I have set a series of thresholds regarding the population size, and discussed the turnout and the electoral score of the winning candidate (democratic representation) in the 2020 local elections for each of the resulting categories. These thresholds are based on the classifications developed by ESPON's Final Scientific Report (2014) on small- and medium-sized towns (SMST) and on the classification of cities developed by Dijkstra and Poelman (2012) for the European Commission.

Romania is different in the sense that very few municipalities can be defined as big cities (primarily in terms of demographics, but also with respect to existing urban-specific infrastructure)[7]. From the total of the capital-cities of the 41 counties, only Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Iași can be categorized as "big cities" relative to the demographic distribution of the country and to the general urban landscape in the countries of East-Central Europe. As a result, Bucharest belongs to the category of "XXL cities" (with

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[7] For instance, Dijkstra and Poelman (2012) could not identify a single "XL" type of city in Romania, but 7 "L" cities and one "XXL" city, i.e. Bucharest. An "XL" type of city is one with a population between 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants. This sort of gap is also characteristic for Bulgaria, Sweden, Hungary, Austria, and Denmark.

a population ranging between 1,000,000 and 5,000,000 inhabitants), while the other three cities were included in the category of "L cities" (with a population ranging from 250,000 to 500,000 inhabitants), alongside Contanța, Craiova, Galați and Brașov, cities within the population size range of an "L city" (Dijkstra and Poelman 2012). In this category, one can also include the six sectors of Bucharest. A third category was composed of "M cities" (with a population ranging from 100,000 and 250,000 inhabitants), seventeen cases among the capital-cities of the 41 Romanian counties: Arad, Pitești, Bacău, Oradea, Botoșani, Brăila, Buzău, Baia Mare, Drobeta-Turnu Severin, Târgu Mureș, Piatra Neamț, Ploiești, Satu Mare, Sibiu, Suceava, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Vaslui. The fourth category belongs to those cities with a population ranging from 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, the so-called "S cities"; for the Romanian case of county capitals, the "S cities" are: Alba Iulia, Bistrița, Reșița, Sfântu Gheorghe, Târgoviște, Târgu Jiu, Deva, Călărași, Slobozia, Giurgiu, Slatina, Zalău, Tulcea, and Focșani. There is an apparent consensus concerning those municipalities comprising over 5,000 inhabitants, but below 50,000 inhabitants as being small-to-medium sized towns (Russo, Serrano, Pérez, and Brandajs 2014), rather than cities[8]. This paper distinguishes between two such categories of "SMSTs": A fifth category in this study is that of towns of populations ranging between 25,000 and 50,000 inhabitants (2 such cases: Miercurea Ciuc and Alexandria), generally called "medium-sized towns", while a sixth category is that composed of towns with a population ranging from 5,000 to 25,000 inhabitants (one case among the Romanian county capitals: Buftea), labeled "small-sized towns".

With these six categories in mind, the paper proceeded to operationalize another socio-demographical variable deemed as important in explaining the variations in turnout in local elections (see, for instance Schlozman and Verba 1979): the unemployment rate, which might shed additional light on the discrepancies between municipalities of similar importance at regional and county level, but so different in terms of demographics, opportunities and development of urban-specific infrastructure. The link between the economic outlook of a municipality and turnout in the local elections has been previously inquired either in the "mobilization effect" paradigm (harsh economic situation triggers active participation) or in the "negative voting" one (Lau 1982, Martins and Veiga 2013) (the participation drive to punish is greater than to reward) or the "withdrawal from politics" hypothesis (Wolnger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone 1982; Cladeira et al. 1985) or, simply, the "no effect" theory (actually, the dominant one: Florina 1978; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Blais 2000; Kostadinova 2003; Fornos et al. 2004).

The paper also employs as a variable the age of the population in the municipalities selected here. There is a widespread contention that two segments in the population are prone to significantly improve the turnout: the young (the 18 to 34 years old) and the elders (over 65 years old). There are different approaches in this respect. While studying turnout in the U.S., Jan E Leighley and Jonathan Nagler (2014: 46) show that there is a surprising increase in participation at the ballot box for the age category over 60 years old. In a similar note, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) conclude that age is "the only demographic characteristic estimated to have a greater (conditional) effect on voter turnout than education and income". Due to a sort of "electoral discipline" inherited from the communist past (when elections were rather a mockery of a genuine electoral process), voters aged over 65 tend to be that segment which is present at the ballots very early in the morning of the elections day, hence increasing the overall turnout percentage. This is to some extent consistent with Beck and Jennings's (1979) observations on the importance of age

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[8] Although, in Romania, the generic term "oraș" applies to a diversity of municipalities, different in terms of demographic magnitude. The term "municipiu" might approximate the concept of "city", but here one encounters the same diversity in terms of population size (e.g., București is a "municipiu", while "Tecuci", a town of 35,000 inhabitants is also a "municipiu"). "Municipiu" designates a certain importance at the regional or country level of the municipalities bearing the title, although, at the level of urban-specific infrastructure, cities and towns called "municipii" are immensely different.

in voting leading to the conclusion that citizens politically socialized in a certain politically charged climate tend to continue to vote for the rest of their lives. Moreover, older age is associated with lower information costs of voting (Strate et al. 1989, Harder and Krosnick 2008). However, Turner, Shields, and Sharp (2001) argue that older age is by no means a standalone factor for higher turnout, but it should be coupled with marital status, church attendance and contact by political operatives. On the other hand, studies such as those of Rubenson, Blais, Fournier, Gidengil and Nevitte (2004) concluded that "there is no statistically significant difference in turnout between young and old citizens".

In measuring the degree of political competition, this paper utilizes two indicators: (1) the electoral margin (i.e. the difference between the winner and the second runner-up), and (2) the number of candidates running for the position of mayor in each selected municipality. Instrumental in assessing competitiveness, the number of candidates has been connected in the literature to either the population size of the municipality in which the elections are held (Franklin 2004: 87), to the degree of ethno-cultural diversity of the community (Akdağ 2014: 96; e.g., Constanța is a telling example in this respect, with 14 candidates in the race for the mayor's office, candidates proposed by different local ethnic political groups), or, most importantly, to the budget of the municipality (Sutaryo, Rossa, Aryani, Rahmawati, and Muhtar 2018); although the discussion about the relationship between the number of candidates for the mayor's office and the budget of the municipality is beyond the scope of this paper, it is indeed a research path worth expanding.

This study explored, as well, those situations (for the selected cases) in which the same party had won the previous three consecutive elections (2016,2012, and 2008); in these situations, two scenarios were possible: (a) the party dominating the mayoral elections in the last three electoral test has marked a fourth victory, or (b) there was a "power change" (i.e., after three successive electoral tests of dominance of a certain party, the candidate of another party wins the mayoral elections). This condition is at the basis of what is customarily coined as the existence of "safe constituencies" and of "successor candidates", but it might also be linked to a certain type of patron-client relations within the municipality, especially in the case of East-Central European municipalities (Volintiru 2012; Schuster 2020). However, due to frequent party migration, to the perceived lack of importance of party politics at the local level (Bäck 2000; Erlingsson 2008; Copus, Sweeting and Oliver 2016), due to party mergers and splinters and to rather informal coalitions at the local level (facilitating party migration), there are only a few cases of clear party dominance among the cases selected. For the first scenario, the cases of municipalities of Oradea (PNL dominating since 2008), Piteşti, Brăila, Buzău, Alexandria, Vaslui, Focşani (PSD dominating the mayoral elections for the last four electoral tests), Sfântu Gheorghe and Miercurea Ciuc (municipalities in which UDMR has traditionally won the elections), and Sibiu (a stronghold of FDGR for the last four local elections) are illustrative examples. The second scenario, the "power change" scenario is applicable in the cases of: Călăraşi (where the three-term dominance of PNL was interrupted by the 2020's win of the PSD candidate), Constanța, Târgu Jiu, Slobozia and Iaşi[9] (where the PSD's dominance of at least three consecutive mandates was successfully challenged by the PNL's candidate), Timișoara, București (where USR has broken a three-term "tradition" of PNL's, and PSD's, respectively, electoral victories), and the 5th district of Bucharest (where the PSD dominance was stopped by the victory in the local election of a former, highly controversial, PSD member). However, again, due especially to widespread phenomenon of party migration at the local level, the application of these two scenarios is rather limited and fails to illustrate the subtleties of power relations and power dynamics at the local level.

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[9] Iaşi is rather an "artificial change of power", because the PSD's successful mayoral candidate in 2016 switched parties prior to the 2020 local elections. This sort of dynamic is precisely the reason why the two scenarios proposed here are heavily skewed by party migration (a widespread phenomenon of switching sides).

Finally, also a variable affecting competitiveness in the local elections, the situation in which one of the candidates previously held at least two consecutive mandates as mayor in the municipality under scrutiny is taken into consideration as a dummy variable. There is an important literature devoted to the relation between incumbency and higher turnout and higher scores for the winning candidate (Núñez 2018; De Benedetto & De Paolo 2016). The fact that the Romanian electoral system provides no limitations on the number of mayoral mandates has effects on both the electoral competition at the local level and the manner in which the incumbent interacts with the voters. The lack of limitations on the number of mandates for the mayor's office leads to an amble discussion on the development of patron-client relations at the local level, particularly in small-to-medium-sized communities. If this relationship between the absence of term limits and the emergence and evolution of clientelistic relations is still to be investigated, the relationship between the former and the voter turnout seems to be negative (Veiga and Veiga 2018). Consequently, this paper expects that, in those situations in which the mayor has won a third consecutive mandate, the turnout would be lower, but the winning percentage might be expectedly high. Given a low turnout, the incumbents (especially those candidates who have already completed a two consecutive terms) are likely to win a third or even a fourth mandate irrespective of the existence of a majority run-off voting system or a plurality system.

The number of observations drawn is limited to the capitals of the forty-one Romanian counties, Bucharest, and its six sectors, for the local elections of 2020[10]. The data concerning socio-demographical characteristics of the selected municipalities are collected from official sources, available online (National Institute of Statistics and the 2020, for the population size and for percentages of the population aged 65+; the National Agency for Employment, for unemployment rates; Romania's Central Electoral Bureau and the Permanent Electoral Authority, for the final results of the local elections in 2020, 2016, 2012, 2008). The other observations (electoral margin, incumbency, "safe constituencies", number of candidates, electoral score out of the total number of votes) are this author's computations, based on PEA data available online. The richness of research on the causes of and the factors affecting turnout in municipal settings is extremely valuable for adjacent and less explored terrains, such as the influence of these factors on the electoral score of the winning candidate. Based on the theoretical assumptions regarding the influence of socio-demographic and electoral factors on voter turnout, this paper ventures on these terrains and attempts a series of correlations between the winning percentage of the elected mayor and the socio-economic and electoral indicators discussed above.

3. Results and observations

3.1. Incumbency and "safe constituencies"

Incumbency and voting for the incumbent mayor might generate higher turnout and higher scores for the winning candidates. On the other hand, what is perceived to be "a safe vote", an unsurprising win from a powerful incumbent might generate low turnout. This may be valid for the case of Vaslui, for instance, where the incumbent won the elections in one of the "safest" constituencies for the Social-Democrat Party, which resulted in one of the lowest turnouts in the sample discussed here (The incumbent mayor was elected with only 9.38% of the total eligible votes). There is a tendency towards higher percentages for reelecting incumbent mayors (*e.g.* the first three highest electoral scores belong to incumbent mayors:

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[10] The results of the local elections are centralized on: https://prezenta.roaep.ro/locale27092020/romania-pv-final, last accessed: 02.01.2021.

the mayors of Buftea (31.35%), Buzău (27.72%) and Cluj-Napoca, where the incumbent mayor managed to gather 26.28% of the entire voting citizenry). However, based on the electoral results of the few cases of the capital-cities of the Romanian counties, one cannot identify a strong statistical difference in the electoral scores of the winning candidates between the group of incumbents, the group of incumbents with at least two previous terms, and the group of nonincumbents (Sig. = 0.086). On average, nonetheless, the electoral score of the incumbent mayors is 17.97%, only 1.66% higher than the average electoral score for the constituencies observed in 2020. For those mayors with an incumbency of at least two terms, winning a third or a fourth mandate in 2020, the electoral score is 19.21%, almost 3% higher than the average score, with sharp discrepancies between cases (e.g. one of the highest, Buftea – 31.35%, and one of the lowest scores, Vaslui – 9.38%, among the 48 cases are to be found among those incumbents with at least two previous terms in mayoral office).

Descriptives

Actual score of the winning candidate (%)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
NO	25	14,8000	4,46745	,89349	12,9559	16,6441	8,10	25,89
YES	14	18,5407	3,93967	1,05292	16,2660	20,8154	11,23	27,72
YES, at least 2 terms	9	17,0833	7,62952	2,54317	11,2188	22,9479	9,36	31,35
Total	48	16,3192	5,21554	,75280	14,8047	17,8336	8,10	31,35

ANOVA

Actual score of the winning candidate (%)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	132,046	2	66,023	2,592	,086
Within Groups	1146,443	45	25,477		
Total	1278,489	47			

There is also a slight tendency for higher percentages for new candidates proposed by incumbent parties: The cases of the mayors of Oradea and Miercurea Ciuc (and, to some extent, Tulcea), where the candidates of the respective parties governing the towns for several electoral circles – a sort of "successor candidates" – have won the respective constituencies with a seemingly high score, are illustrative examples.

Finally, this paper also looked at the main parties' electoral score at the level of the 48 constituencies observed here. From the data available following the 2020 local elections and the computations (i.e. the sum of electoral scores of the winning candidates of one party divided by the number of constituencies in which that party won the mayoral elections), the USR candidates were elected, on average, with 14.45% of the total number of voters; the PSD candidates were elected with 17.13%, while PNL candidates were elected with an average of 16.07%. Surprisingly, the USR, a fresh presence in the local elections (the attempts in 2016 were not materialized), with its message of change, did not enjoy higher percentages for their elected mayors. On the other hand, the social-democrats register the highest winning percentage,

because the PSD mayors were elected in those "safe" constituencies, fully secure towns, where PSD traditionally wins (Pitești, Brăila, Buzău, Alexandria, Vaslui, Focșani are cases in which the same party won the elections in 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020). This paper considers a "safe constituency" that city or town in which a party has won the mayoral elections in four consecutive electoral tests (2020, 2016, 2012, 2008). Subsequently, the PSD's "safe constituencies" were identified as being the following: Pitești, Brăila, Buzău, Alexandria, Vaslui, Focșani; the PNL's safe constituency is Oradea; the UDMR's safe constituencies are Miercurea Ciuc and Sfântu Gheorghe, while FDGR's safe constituency remains Sibiu. The average electoral score of the winning candidates in such "safe constituencies" is 18.835%, 2.52% higher than the average electoral score for the constituencies observed in 2020. The difference in the electoral scores of the winning candidates between the group of "safe constituencies", that of no "safe constituencies", and that of the "change of power" (i.e., the situation in which, after three-term domination of one party in a certain constituency, the 2020 marked the victory of a candidate from another party), for the 48 observations, is not statistically significant (Sig. = 0.107).

Descriptives

Actual score of the winning candidate (%)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
NO	30	16,1937	5,18384	,94644	14,2580	18,1293	8,10	31,35
YES	10	18,8350	5,88376	1,86061	14,6260	23,0440	9,38	27,72
POWER CHANGE	8	13,6450	3,08570	1,09096	11,0653	16,2247	10,40	17,98
Total	48	16,3192	5,21554	,75280	14,8047	17,8336	8,10	31,35

ANOVA

Actual score of the winning candidate (%)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	120,976	2	60,488	2,352	,107
Within Groups	1157,513	45	25,723		
Total	1278,489	47			

Verifying the fifth assumption advanced above, this paper established the number of observations as being insufficient ($N_{H5} = 3$: Sfântu Gheorghe, Alexandria, Vaslui). However, the dominance of a party in elections for three consecutive electoral tests has a positive relation to the electoral score of the winning candidate, although not a statistically relevant one.

3.2. Electoral margin and number of candidates

It is telling to observe the difference in electoral scores between the first two candidates in the mayoral elections, the "electoral margin". The discrepancies between the 48 observations are significant: the smallest difference between the first two candidates was 0.05% (in the case of Botoșani), while the biggest

difference between the winner and the second runner-up was 70.69% (in the case of Buzău). The average electoral margin for the 2020 mayoral elections for the sample analyzed here is 22.7%, which indicates quite a difference between the first two contenders in the race for the mayor's office, and, as a result, a weak competition for the position in the analyzed sample. The correlation between the electoral score of the winning candidate and the electoral margin is expectedly one of the most statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.755$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000).

For the second indicator for competitiveness, the number of candidates in the mayoral electoral race, it has been observed that it may vary relative to the population size of the municipality (in this respect, for the sample of 48 units of analysis, the correlation is remarkably strong: $r = 0.532$; $p < 0.01$). The correlation between the number of candidates and the score of the winning candidate is expectedly negative, but it is only moderately significant for the 48 observations analyzed here ($r = -0.325$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.024): A large number of candidates would decrease the score of the winning candidate, hence increasing the elections' competitiveness. For the 2020 local elections, the average number of candidates for the mayor's office was 10,79, with a peak of 20 candidates in the Sector 1 of Bucharest (one of the municipalities enjoying a rather generous budget) and a maximum low in the case of Focșani, where only four persons entered the local competition). Based on the statistics resulting from the relation of the number of candidates with the electoral score of the winning candidate, for the 48 observations, the data are indicative for a validation of the third assumption of this study (H3).

3.3. Socio-demographical factors (population size, unemployment rate, seniors' proportion in the population

This paper explored three socio-demographical indicators and their relation to the electoral score of the winning candidate. The correlation coefficient between the population size and the score of the winning candidate is negative and not statistically relevant ($r = -0.058$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.695). It is nonetheless a negative relation, for the sample selected here, between the population magnitude of a municipality and the score indicating the formal representativeness of an elected mayor: The bigger the municipality, the less representative the mayor (consistent with Neal's observations in 2007). This observation might appear rather as a proxy for the relation between population size of a municipality and its voter turnout, but, for the latest local elections and for the 48 cases observed, the correlation between two variables is extremely weak ($r = 0.044$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.765).

For the relation between the unemployment rate of a municipality and the electoral score of the winning candidate, the correlation is rather weak, as well ($r = -0.224$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.125), but it expresses a negative relationship: the higher the unemployment rate, the less representative the elected mayor. It has also been observed that unemployment rate tends to increase in smaller municipalities (there is a rather strong negative correlation $r = -0.487$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000) and to generate lower turnout (although the negative correlation for the selected sample is not statistically significant: $r = -0.272$; Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.061, which might be in line to the "withdrawal from politics" hypothesis). However, the data concerning unemployment rate employed in this paper, although officially endorsed, should be taken with a grain of salt: this indicator fails to account for the inactive proportion in the population, which may add up to the socio-economically challenged segments within a municipality.

The link between the proportion of seniors in the municipality's demographic outlook and the electoral score of the winning candidate, for the 48 cases discussed here, is statistically nonexistent; there is no relation between the two variables, a result which clearly invalidates the second assumption of this paper (H2).

3.4. Turnout and winning score from the turnout

This paper chose to discuss the electoral score of the winning candidate, that is the winning percentage relative not to turnout, but to the total number of possible votes, as it sees representation in a wider perspective: the Mayor is the representative of the entire *populus* of the municipality and administrates the territorial unit in the benefit of the entire population. As a result, the main dependent variable, the electoral score of the winning candidate, is an indicator-percentage lower than the score the mayor obtained in the official statistics, which is calculated out of the votes registered in an election, out of the turnout… The correlation between the turnout and the score of the winning candidate, for the sample analyzed, was $\rho = 0.287$, Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.048 ($p < 0.05$). Higher turnout might increase the score of the winning candidate, might improve the formal democratic representation and the perceived legitimacy of the elected mayor's leadership. For the selected sample, the difference between the electoral score of the winner relative to the turnout and the his/ her electoral score relative to the entire number of citizens with the right to vote in a constituency is, on average, 31,55%, which is relatively high and primarily caused to a seemingly declining turnout in local election.

3.5. Other observations

Having discussed and being secondarily concerned with the impact of single-round voting system on the erosion of turnout in the local elections, this paper discusses also those cases in which the winning candidates won an absolute majority in 2020 and, consequently, would have won the local elections in a majority run-off voting scenario: Florin-Alin Birta (70.13% of the votes) in Oradea; Viorel-Marian Dragomir (63.19%) in Brăila; Constantin Toma (78.06%) in Buzău; Ioan Popa (74.41%) in Reșița; Emil Boc (74.76%) in Cluj-Napoca; Árpád-András Antal (76.49%) in Sfântu Gheorghe; Daniel-Cristian Stan (65.61%) in Târgoviște; Ionuț-Florin Pucheanu (59.18%) in Galați; Attila Korodi (73.78%) in Miercurea Ciuc; Gheorghe Pistol (64.59%) in Buftea; Zoltán Soós (50.53%) in Târgu Mureș; Andrei-Liviu Volosevici (57.52%) in Ploiești; Ionel Ciunt (50.94%) in Zalău; Gábor Kereskényi (51.94%) in Satu Mare; Victor Drăgușin (50.56%) in Alexandria; Dominic Samuel Fritz (53.24%) in Timișoara; Vasile Pavăl (62.01%) in Vaslui; Daniel Băluță (57.03%) in Sector 4 (Bucharest). This means that only 37.5% of the selected sample would have won the elections from the first round in a majority run-off voting scenario, a consistent decline compared to the 2008 and 2012 local elections, when, in 58.33% of the cases in the same sample, the mayors won the mandate from the first round, but a slight increase in comparison with the 2016 local elections, when only 29.16% of the mayors would have won from the first round.

One seemingly important exogenous, contextual variable should be taken into consideration, *i.e.* the global sanitary situation caused by the spread of Covid-19 virus. One should consider the fact that a certain part of the voters preferred not to vote in the 2020 local elections due to fear of getting the virus from the voting booth. However, the percentage of this category from the total number of potential voters was not clearly established and it does not constitute the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, this factor is worth mentioning and taken into account, as a potential (though probably weak) and partial explanation for the low turnout in the 2020 local elections. I assess this factor as being rather weak, for the simple reason the trend in the turnout for local elections in Romania has – even in the absence of a peculiar medical crisis, as is the current pandemic situation – steadily and progressively decreased over the years.

4. Conclusion and Limitations

When looking at the local elections and the formal democratic representation they should generate, one might observe the strikingly low popular support the winning candidate actually enjoys. What type of representation is to result from a situation in which the mayor is elected with 14% or even 8% of the total number of voters? What are the outcomes on policy making of this increasingly worrying phenomenon? These are questions to be further addressed when studying the electoral score, the popular support of a mayor.

What this paper proposes are a series of assumptions connected to the electoral score of the winning candidate resulting from the 2020 local elections in Romania, elections that employed, for the third consecutive time, a plurality voting system. It enquires into the population size, unemployment rate and the proportion of seniors in the population of a municipality, voter turnout, incumbency and the dominance of a party in a constituency (the municipality as a "safe constituency"), number of candidates in the mayoral race, the electoral margin, and the electoral score from the turnout, in order to establish factors influencing the electoral score of the winning candidate.

Due to a small number of observations, the relations described by the first, the second, and the fifth assumptions of this paper proved to be not statistically significant. The third assumption, trying to establish a relation between a higher number of candidates in the mayoral race and a low electoral margin, on the one hand, and a declining electoral score of the winning candidate, was partially validated. A fourth assumption, concerning a higher unemployment rate, in those municipalities other than "L" and "XXL" cities, being prone to decrease the electoral score of the winning candidate, generated statistically insignificant correlations, but confirmed a negative relation between the two variables.

This paper is an attempt to account for decreasing turnout in local elections and for the score of the winning candidates, with an application on the capital-cities of the 41 Romanian counties, Bucharest and its six sectors. One of the most important limitations of this study is the small number of observations, which may lead to statistically irrelevant results. However, this is a piloting attempt to be further extended to the entirety of the Romanian municipalities. A second limitation concerns the available official data used in this paper; the paper employs socio-demographical statistical data derived from the 2011 Population Census or provided by state institutions. These data are either perishable (nine years old for the population size indicators) or incomplete (the unemployment rates do not consider the inactive population, which is, *de facto*, similar to the unemployed).

Another significant limitation of the paper refers to the observations concerning the effects of replacing a majority run-off voting system for the elections of mayors of the actual electoral scores of the winners out of the total number of voters. The number of electoral tests using a plurality mechanism (2012, 2016, 2020) is too small to indicate trends, taking also into consideration the 2012 electoral test which might appear as an outlier (a super-coalition confronting a populist party (Dragoman 2019), confronted, in its turn, with the electoral results of its highly unpopular management of the economic crisis). Therefore, the number of electoral tests is insufficient to provide coherent and pertinent observations.

The data should be contextualized for the situation of the Romanian big cities and the most important towns. A clearer view on the electoral scores of the winning candidates (relative to the entire voting population, not to the turnout) may be drawn from an analysis of the entire population of municipalities and territorial-administrative units in both urban and rural area. A relationship between the magnitude of the local budget and the electoral competition for the mayor's office might be worth observing on a wider scale, as well.

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Annexes

1. Correlation coefficients between variables

Variable	Turnout (%)	Incumbency	No. of candidates	Population size	Electoral margin (%)	Unemployment rate (%)	Age (% of seniors)	The same party winning the last 3 electoral tests	Winning percentage from the turnout (%)	**Electoral score of the winning candidate out of the total possible votes (%)**
Turnout (%)	1			$r = 0.044$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.765		$r = -0.272$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.061				
Incumbency		1								
No. of candidates			1	$r = 0.532$** Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000						
Population size				1						
Electoral margin (%)					1					
Unemployment rate (%)				$r = -0.487$** Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000)		1				
Age (% of seniors)							1			
The same party winning the last 3 electoral tests								1		
Winning percentage from the turnout (%)									1	
Electoral score of the winning candidate out of the total possible votes (%)	$r = 0.430$** Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.002	$r = 0.234$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.109	$r = -0.325$* Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.024	$r = -0.058$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.695	$r = 0.755$** Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000	$r = -0.224$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.125	$r = 0.000$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.999	$r = -0.093$ Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.528	$r = 0.834$** Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000	1

(** Pearson Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Spearman correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).)

2. Types of municipalities, according to population size (county capitals)

Type of municipality, according to the population size	No. of cases	Cases
5,000 – 25,000 (small-sized towns)	1	Buftea – 22,718
25,000 – 50,000 (medium-sized towns)	2	Miercurea Ciuc – 41,460 Alexandria – 49,519
50,000 – 100,000 (S cities)	14	Alba Iulia – 74,885 Bistrița – 94,574

		Reșița – 84,435 Sfântu Gheorghe – 63,659 Târgoviște – 91,655 Târgu Jiu – 94,734 Deva – 68,643 Călărași – 75,058 Slobozia – 51,391 Giurgiu – 66,303 Slatina – 82,466 Zalău – 69,087 Tulcea – 85,562 Vaslui – 130,622 Focșani – 91,481
100,000 – 250,000 (M cities)	17	Arad – 176,064 Pitești – 172,982 Bacău – 197,222 Oradea – 221,413 Botoșani – 119,521 Brăila – 200,159 Buzău – 131,100 Baia Mare – 144,925 Drobeta-Turnu Severin – 105,651 Târgu Mureș – 146,918 Piatra Neamț – 112,186 Ploiești – 225,049 Satu Mare – 118,819 Sibiu – 168,273 Suceava – 125,191 Râmnicu Vâlcea – 117,480
250,000 – 500,000 (L cities)	7	Brașov – 289,502 Cluj-Napoca – 327,272 Constanța – 311,374 Craiova – 299,743 Galați – 306,424 Iași – 387,103 Timișoara – 325,363
500,000 – 1,000,000 (XL cities)	0	
1,000,000 – 5,000,000 (XXL cities)	Bucharest	2,151,665

(Data from 2020: http://www.dpfbl.mdrap.ro/documents/Populatia_romaniei_la_1_ianuarie_2021.xls)

(Sources: https://www.anofm.ro/upload/14091/someri_localitati_august_2020.pdf, one mouth prior to the elections; socio-demographical indicators: http://www.dpfbl.mdrap.ro/documents/Populatia_romaniei_la_1_ianuarie_2021.xls (2020); electoral results: http://alegeri.roaep.ro/. The rest of the data resulted from the author's own computations.)