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ELECTIONS AND VOTER BEHAVIOUR IN ROMANIA



CAMPAIGN PERSONALIZATION,
MEDIA INFLUENCE, AND THE RISE OF
THE DIGITAL VOTER

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ

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Media Influence, and the Rise
of the Digital Voter**

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Contents

General introduction	1
Chapter 1. It Takes One to Tango! The Effect of Individualized Campaigning and Electoral Constraints on Legislators' Behaviour	14
1.1. Introduction	15
1.2. Theoretical framework.....	18
1.2.1. Individualized campaigns	18
1.2.2. Voting dissent	22
1.3. Data and empirical strategy	25
1.3.1. Data	25
1.3.2. The dependent variable.....	26
1.3.3. The covariates.....	27
1.3.4. Empirical strategy	30
1.4. Empirical analysis and results.....	32
1.4.1. MPs' perceptions towards representation.....	32
1.4.2. Determinants of voting dissent	35
1.5. Conclusions.....	44
Chapter 2. Where did it all start? Does media exposure influence vote change types? Evidence from Romanian presidential election	48
2.1. Introduction	49
2.2. Theoretical insights on media and voting changes	53

2.3. Data and empirical strategy	62
2.3.1. The curious case of the Romanian electorate	62
2.3.2. Data	63
2.3.3. Empirical strategy.....	66
2.4. Results.....	68
2.5. Discussion	73
2.6. Conclusions.....	80
Chapter 3. The connection between party positions and media influence: A Romanian paradox	83
3.1. Introduction	84
3.2. Data and empirical strategy	87
3.3. Results and discussions.....	90
3.4. Conclusions.....	100
Chapter 4. Where did we end up? Digital (traditional) Voter in the Super Electoral Year	103
4.1. Introduction	104
4.2. The curious case of the Romanian super electoral year...107	
4.3. From traditional clientelism to digital clientelism	116
4.4. Data and empirical strategy	135
4.5. From Poll-Based Voting Behaviour to the Digital Voter: Why Online Data Became Essential in Romania's 2024–2025 Super Electoral Cycle	137
4.6. Digital Participation, Estrangement from Institutions, and the Appeal of Anti-System Politics	153
4.7. Conclusions.....	165

General conclusions.....	170
References.....	176
Appendix A.....	207
Appendix B.....	212
Appendix C.....	216

List of figures

Figure 1. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the self-declared political orientation	91
Figure 2. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the self-declared political orientation	91
Figure 3. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the position of individuals towards PSD ..	94
Figure 4. Cross – correlation between the access of left mass media channels and the position of individuals towards PSD ..	96
Figure 5. Evolution of online searches for C. Georgescu over time.....	114
Figure 6. Evolution of polls results for second round (May 2025)	139
Figure 7. The results of presidential elections as indicated by the pollsters in comparison with the actual results (last poll of each institute compared to the actual results)	143
Figure 8. Heatmap of pollsters' marginal error.....	145

List of Tables

Table 1. Multinomial logit model explaining legislators' attitudes towards representation	34
Table 2. Linear regression model explaining dissent at roll-call	37
Table 3. Extended regression model explaining dissent at roll-call	41
Table 4. Extended regression model explaining dissent at roll-call	43
Table 5. Multinomial logistic regression assessing the effects of media exposure on voting change types	69
Table 6. Estimates of logistic regression on factors affecting the access of right – wing mass media channels	97
Table 7. Aggregated data of the pollsters results in Romania ..	141
Table 8. Descriptive statistics of pollsters' results	144
Table 9. Ranking of pollsters	147
Table A 1. Description of variables.....	207
Table A 2. Summary description of dependent and independent variables	210
Table B 1. Index construction : main questions	212
Table B 2. Additional multinomial logistics regression.	215

General introduction

Elections are moments of truth for any democracy. They represent the recurring ritual through which citizens evaluate those who govern them, reaffirm or withdraw their trust, and decide the direction of political communities (Besley, 2007). In Romania, as in many other post-communist countries, elections have carried a special symbolic weight since 1989. They have not only been about choosing leaders but also about validating the democratic order, testing the resilience of institutions, and confirming the country's Euro-Atlantic path. The study of voters and elections in Romania is, therefore, more than a narrow national preoccupation: it is a window into the challenges of democracy in a world shaken by populism, digital disruption, and geopolitical pressures.

For social scientists, Romania is a case study that allows the investigation of classic questions of electoral behaviour under conditions of volatility. Since Lipset (1967) formulated his social cleavages' theory, scholars have been debating whether elections are determined primarily by long-term social structures such as class, religion, ethnicity, or region, or by short-term factors such as candidate charisma, campaign effects, and media coverage. In Western Europe, cleavage-based voting has weakened over time, giving rise to the age of dealignment: partisan attachments eroded, ideological orientation faded, electoral volatility increased, and voters became more susceptible to persuasion during campaigns (Bornschieer et al., 2024). Romania, as a post-communist democracy, has experienced these processes in an accelerated form. Here, the

erosion of party loyalty and the rise of short-term influences occurred almost simultaneously with the very consolidation of the party system (Gherghina, 2014; Iftimoaei, 2013).

At the same time, Romania illustrates a more recent transformation that scholars are only beginning to fully grasp: the emergence of the digital voter. Social media platforms, from Facebook in the 2014 diaspora mobilization, to TikTok in the annulled 2024 presidential first round, have reshaped not only how campaigns are conducted, but also how citizens form opinions, express emotions, and act politically. In this digital ecosystem, information spreads faster than ever, often stripped of nuance, privileging emotional resonance over programmatic detail, and often lacking substance. Research on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) and algorithmic politics (Tufekci, 2015) shows that digital spaces reward outrage, humour, and spectacle, precisely the registers that populist leaders deploy most effectively.

Against this background, Romania's recent elections demonstrate how the rise of populism is inseparable from the rise of digital campaigning. Populist actors such as George Simion or Călin Georgescu have leveraged the logics of social media to bypass traditional party structures, reach younger voters, and frame politics as a moral battle between "the people" and "the corrupt elite." Their capacity to generate viral content speaks to a shift from the rational, socio-demographic voter of the mid-20th century to the emotional, digitally embedded voter of the 21st century. This does not mean that traditional determinants (e.g., class, education, region) have disappeared; rather, they now interact with contingent, media-driven, and emotionally amplified dynamics.

Thus, studying Romanian elections helps us understand not only the persistence of structural determinants of voting, but also the increasing weight of contingent factors, intensified by digital technologies. In Romania, volatility is not just a reflection of weak partisanship, it is also the outcome of a media and digital environment that rewards populist performance and exposes voters to a contradictory mix of information and disinformation. The Romanian case therefore offers a unique opportunity for examining how social media and populism converge to reshape the very nature of electoral democracy.

This book brings together a set of studies, each of them offering a different perspective, but all of them converging upon a single concern: how do Romanians make electoral choices, and what does that reveal about democracy today? The decision to gather these perspectives under one cover is motivated by the conviction that the Romanian case, with all its peculiarities, speaks to broader themes in electoral studies and communication studies. Personalization of campaigns, media influence on vote change, paradoxes of media consumption, the relationship between governance quality and electoral outcomes, and the rise of digital platforms such as TikTok (which, as of end of 2025 had 200 million active users in Europe and 9.1 million active users in Romania) (TikTok, 2025), all these are not only Romanian phenomena. They are part of a wider transformation in how citizens interact with politics. Romania simply makes these dynamics visible in sharper contours, because its democracy is still young, its party system volatile, and its electorate unusually exposed to shocks.

The idea of a book composed of multiple studies implies variety of conjectures and inferences. Each chapter can stand alone, advancing its own research questions, data, and conclusions. However, the introduction outlines the common threads that tie the pieces together. At the heart of this collection is the tension between continuity and change in Romanian electoral politics. Continuity is reflected in the persistence of certain party families, the structural dominance of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and, to a lesser extent, of the National Liberal Party (PNL), as well as in the enduring East–West and urban–rural cleavages that shape vote distributions (Gherghina, 2014). Change, however, is equally present: rising electoral volatility, growing distrust of parties, changes in electoral rules, the personalization of campaigns, the multiplication of media channels, and the surge of populist and anti-establishment actors (Bârgăoanu et al., 2023; Soare, 2019). This connection between continuity and change provides the red thread that links all studies.

However, to appreciate the significance of these themes, we must briefly revisit Romania’s electoral history. The first free elections in 1990 and 1992 were dominated by the National Salvation Front (FSN) and its successor factions, reflecting both the institutional legacy of communism and the polarized debates over the country’s direction. The emerging political party system included mass parties, but also umbrella organizations, ideological, catch-all, territorial and cadre parties. The first three democratic elections witnessed changes in the party systems and electoral rules (L. Popescu, 1997; Roper, 1994) and delivered in 1996 the first democratic alternance to government in the last sixty years. Voter

loyalty was relatively high but often grounded in clientelism and identity politics rather than programmatic preferences. As the transition unfolded, the political system consolidated into a multiparty structure, but one still characterized by high fluidity and recurrent party splits.

The 2000s brought partial stabilization. Alternations between PSD and centre-right coalitions (PNL, PD/PDL, UDMR) indicated some degree of democratic consolidation. However, the fragility of party organizations and their weak institutionalization, was visible: electoral demise, party mergers, rebrandings, and leadership crises were recurrent. Romanian politics remained highly personalized, dependent on charismatic figures such as Ion Iliescu, Traian Băsescu, and later Klaus Iohannis. Since Romania's EU accession in 2007, the country has been firmly embedded in European structures, but domestic politics have remained turbulent, with repeated government crises, impeachment referenda, and contested presidential races (Muntean et al., 2010).

In 2008 the electoral rules were changed, both for the national and the local elections. The most radical change was implemented for the election of the members of parliament. The PR system with 5% threshold was replaced by a mixed-member proportional electoral system that compensated for the disproportionate effects produced by the nominal tier. In accordance with the mixed-member systems typology of Shugart and Wattenberg (2001), the linkage between the seats allocated on the nominal tier and those allocated on the list tier secured a proportionate distribution of parliamentary seats, closer to the simple PR system. The composition of proportional party lists was

established by pooling best loser candidates from the single seat districts.

Electoral turnout has followed a declining trend. It had notable spikes during high-stakes presidential contests, but consistently lower levels in the European Parliament and local elections. This mirrored the wider “participation gap” documented in new democracies (Norris, 2001; Stancea & Muntean, 2024). However, in Romania the abstention has also been explained as being a form of protest against political elites (Margarit, 2016). Meanwhile, volatility has grown. According to Eurobarometer and national surveys, partisan attachments are weak, and a significant share of voters shift preferences between elections (Chiru & Gherghina, 2012). This makes Romania a “laboratory case” for studying intra- and inter-electoral volatility (Dassonneville, 2012).

Shaped by this historical background, the conditions under which voters decide can be better framed and explained. The studies in this book start from the assumption that Romanian elections are shaped by both structural determinants (socio-demographic cleavages, institutional rules, economic conditions) and contingent factors, such as campaign strategies, media coverage, and digital mobilization. To understand Romanian voters, we must consider both the long-term anchors of political behaviour and the short-term shocks that campaigns generate. The connection between these levels is particularly pronounced in contexts of high volatility, where a significant share of the electorate switches preferences from one election to the next or even during the campaign itself.

Classic works in voting behaviour (Campbell et al., 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 2019) emphasized the power of long-term factors such as class, religion, and partisanship. Later scholarship pointed to the growing relevance of candidate evaluations, media exposure, and issue salience (Dalton et al., 2000). Romania illustrates the coexistence of both dynamics. Regional and urban vs. rural cleavages still matter, but campaigns and media shocks often tip the balance. The 2004 and 2014 presidential elections, for instance, hinged on last-minute mobilizations amplified by television and, later, social media.

It is important to clarify the scope of this book. Why does Romania matter for comparative politics? Firstly, because it exemplifies the challenges of young democracies where institutions are still consolidating and where voters are simultaneously enthusiastic and skeptical about politics. Secondly, it illustrates the intersection of national and supranational dynamics: domestic elections are influenced by EU issues and governance, global populist trends, and transnational digital platforms. Thirdly, because it shows that the transformations seen elsewhere, personalization, media effects, and emotional digital politics are not limited to established democracies. On the contrary, they may be even more visible in countries where volatility and distrust are higher.

This book does not claim to offer a unified theory of Romanian voting behaviour. Rather, it presents a series of empirical windows, each shedding light on a particular dimension. Readers are invited to see the connections between them, to appreciate the diversity of methods, from survey analysis to natural language

processing and to reflect on the broader implications. The essays complement each other: one highlights the agency of candidates, another the role of media, another the paradoxes of citizen behaviour, and another the new frontier of digital emotions. Together, they portray Romanian elections as a dynamic field where old and new forces collide.

The roadmap of the book follows a simple logic. We start with the micro-level of campaigns and candidate behaviour, then move to the meso-level of media effects on voters, then to the paradoxes of media consumption, followed by the macro-level of governance and European democracy, and conclude with the digital frontier and emotional engagement. The reader thus travels through different analytical layers of Romanian electoral politics, guided by the unifying theme of how citizens make choices in a fragile democracy.

The first chapter explores the effect of campaign personalization on legislators' behaviour. Personalization has become a defining trend of contemporary politics: candidates seek to brand themselves individually, highlight their personal qualities, and cultivate a direct relationship with voters (Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). In Romania, this phenomenon was exacerbated by the mixed member electoral system employed between 2008 and 2016, by increased segmentation within parties but also by a party system that has historically been centralized and disciplined. The chapter investigates whether running a personalized campaign makes elected Members of Parliament more prone to dissent from party lines and more likely to adopt a delegate style of representation. The findings suggest that

personalization shapes perceptions of representation before elections, but once in parliament, party discipline tends to remain strong. This illustrates a paradox of Romanian politics: voters may be attracted by individualistic campaign styles, but institutional structures and intra-party leadership dynamics still bind legislators to collective party strategies.

The second chapter shifts the focus from candidates to voters, examining how media exposure influences different types of vote change during the presidential campaign of 2009, one of the first moments when social media began to significantly affect voting behaviour. Drawing on multi-wave panel data, the study distinguishes between reinforcement (strengthening of prior preferences), conversion (switching to another candidate), and crystallization (moving from indecision to a clear choice). The results show that media exposure significantly affects all three processes.

Voters who consume more media are more likely to crystallize their preferences, to reinforce their initial choices, but also, in some cases, to convert. The study demonstrates that media act both as information providers and as reinforcers of identity. This resonates with broader debates about the dual role of media in campaigns: they can both mobilize and polarize (Strömbäck, 2008; Zaller, 1992). In the Romanian context, with low trust in parties and high reliance on television, media play a disproportionate role in shaping electoral dynamics.

The third chapter addresses a puzzling phenomenon: the misalignment between individuals' political orientation and their media consumption habits. Drawing on a 2023 survey, it shows that

many self-declared left-wing Romanians consume right-wing media and vice versa. This contradicts the classical assumption of selective exposure theory (Stroud, 2011), which posits that people prefer information aligned with their beliefs. How can we explain this paradox? One interpretation is that many citizens lack clear political knowledge about media leaning and thus choose outlets based on other criteria such as entertainment value, trust in personalities, or habit. Another is that some deliberately seek dissonant views, either to reinforce their own convictions or to remain informed about the “other side.”

Last, but not least, one explanation might reside in the relatively frequent changes in the political orientation of media outlets, which might be caused by changes in ownership or media ideological adjustments as a result of party funds flow towards media. Increased state subsidies for political parties transformed them into some of the most generous clients in the advertising market, thus, acting as a distorting factor in this market. With over 20 million euro in 2022, over 40 million euro in 2024, and over 46 million euro in 2025, parties used more than half of state subsidies for political advertising contracts with mass-media (Andrei, 2024; Expert Forum, 2023, 2024, 2025; Recorder, 2022).

These funds created a strong dependence linkage between traditional media outlets and political parties, and severely reduced the independence of media and its role in effectively monitoring performances of the elected officials, by influencing the content of media reports and the transparency and fairness of public funds' allocation (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2025). Therefore, comparative analysis of Romanian mass-media

identified problematic issues in the last eight years, related to the opaque and unequal relationship between politicians and traditional mass-media (Reporters without Borders, 2025). Whatever the explanation, the finding complicates the common narrative of echo chambers and suggests that in Romania, media pluralism coexists with and fuels political confusion.

Finally, the fourth chapter brings us to the most recent and perhaps most impactful development: the role of social platforms and voters' engagement in elections. For the first time, a platform primarily associated with youth culture became a central battleground for political communication. Independent candidate Călin Georgescu and far-right leader George Simion harnessed TikTok's algorithms to reach disillusioned voters, while mainstream candidates struggled to adapt.

The study of comments reveals that voters increasingly express themselves not through rational debate but through emotions such as anger, fear, enthusiasm, and hope channelled by digital affordances. This signals a shift in electoral politics: from socio-demographic determinants to digital emotional dynamics (Papacharissi, 2015; Wodak, 2015).

Public opinion polls encountered methodological problems in measuring voting intentions and explaining discrepancies between their measurements and final voting results (Comşa, 2025). The annulment of the first round of the 2024 presidential election, amid investigation results of external interference via social media, further illustrates the fragility of democratic processes in the digital age.

Furthermore, this chapter examines how Romania's 2024–2025 super-electoral cycle revealed a deeper transformation in political campaigning: voter mobilisation is increasingly produced through platform-based digital diffusion, rather than only through partisan, ideological, programmatic, or personalised appeals. As documented by previous studies on Romanian elections, electoral mobilisation has also relied on illegal mechanisms such as electoral clientelism, which operate through networks of brokers and selective incentives.

In this chapter we discuss how online platform infrastructures expand observable behavioural signals, introduce new forms of non-material inducements, and enable new intermediary roles, thus, developing a new type of electoral brokers: online brokers. We argue that these developments allow digital and algorithmic variants of brokerage and discipline, which reshape electoral mobilisation and contestation.

Taken together, these chapters map a complex landscape of Romanian electoral politics. Several cross-cutting themes emerge. One is volatility: Romanian voters are less anchored by traditional cleavages and more open to persuasion and mobilization during campaigns. Another is personalization: candidates increasingly build their campaigns around individual branding, yet once elected, they remain constrained by party discipline.

A third theme is media's centrality: from television to social media, media exposure shapes not only what voters know but also how they feel and how they decide. Finally, a fourth theme is paradox: whether in the misalignment between political orientation

and media consumption, or in the coexistence of personalization and party discipline, Romanian politics is full of contradictions that defy simplistic theories.

Chapter 1. It Takes One to Tango! The Effect of Individualized Campaigning and Electoral Constraints on Legislators' Behaviour

Abstract

This chapter investigates the relationship between campaign personalization and legislators' behaviour. The main objectives of this chapter are (1) to analyse the effects of campaign personalization on candidates' perceptions of representation before being elected, and (2) to examine the effects of campaign on MPs' intentions to defect from their parties' voting discipline after being elected. To do so, it combines two datasets: the Romanian comparative candidate survey study (CCS) from 2012, with legislative data from 2013. Multinomial logistic regression and multivariate ordinary least squares models test for the effect of campaign personalization on legislators' behaviour, while also controlling for individual factors and district characteristics. Results indicate a positive effect of the level of campaign personalization on candidates' attitudes towards representation, but, contrary to current literature, no effect of campaign personalization on the voting dissent of MPs. However, when testing models predicting the MPs perception towards styles of representation, we found significant

results. We conclude by emphasizing a stronger impact of individual factors and district characteristics on the legislators' behaviour than campaign indicators.

Keywords: campaign personalization; legislator behaviour; voting dissent; representation.

1.1. Introduction

The individualization of electoral campaigns increasingly gains importance in explaining the attitudes and behaviours of candidates in electoral competitions and during legislatures (Karvonen, 2014; McAllister, 2007). Campaigns, particularly those with a high level of personalization, are frequently perceived as a necessary instrument for gaining additional votes. The question that arises is whether personalized campaigns are favouring the defection of elected candidates from their parties' line and focusing more on localized activities like district services. Normally, Members of the Parliament (MPs) are expected to cultivate voting behaviour following their party strategies and agendas. However, the behaviour of legislators may depend on the level of campaign personalization. Legislators who promoted a personalized campaign are expected to be more individualistic and less attached to their parties. Consequently, campaign personalization and legislator behaviour are likely to be correlated in some way.

The literature on legislative voting and campaign personalization emphasizes strong connections between

politicians' careers, political parties, and leadership choices. It reveals a mixture of campaign personalization and political behaviour' determinants such as campaign norms, campaign agenda, individual factors, and district characteristics (Gheorghiu, 2010; Gherghina & Chiru, 2014; Stefan et al., 2025; Zittel & Gschwend, 2008). However, the literature has sparked little interest in explaining the effect of campaign personalization from a comparative perspective: the effect before and after elections. This chapter adds empirical evidence on this issue and contributes to the debate by hypothesizing a stronger impact of campaign personalization during electoral campaigns, when candidates have some perceptions of their attitudes towards representation, than during the legislative period, when elected MPs vote on legislative bills.

Therefore, to test our assumption, the main research objective of this chapter is to unfold to what extent there is a relationship between campaign personalization and legislators' behaviour, under a mixed member electoral system. We structure this empirical analysis in two parts. The first part assesses the relationship between campaign personalization and the candidates' perceptions towards representation. The research question we intend to answer in this part is to what extent the level of campaign personalization affects the candidates' perceptions towards representation before being elected. The second part of this chapter assesses the relationship between campaign personalization and the MPs' actual behaviour in the legislature.

The research question we intend to answer in this part is what determines MPs to defect from their parties' voting discipline.

We will, therefore, analyse the effects of individualized campaign strategies on the attitudes of candidates towards representation and on the legislative voting dissent. Furthermore, we will expand our initial explanatory model by testing and controlling for other determinants of voting dissent, like individual factors (e.g., electoral security, party affiliation, legislative experience, etc.) and district characteristics (e.g., welfare, magnitude, employment, etc.). We combine the data collected in one study on candidate survey from 2012 with legislative data from the 2012 – 2016 legislature (Chiru & Popescu, 2017) elected under a mixed-member proportional electoral system, to assess whether more individualized campaigns result in a higher propensity to vote against the party line and a higher likelihood of reflecting constituency interests in parliament.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. In the chapter 1.2 we briefly review the literature on campaign personalization and legislator behaviour, which is followed in chapter 1.3 by the introduction of the dependent and independent variables of the analysis. In chapter 1.3 we also present the empirical strategy employed for answering our research questions. Chapter 1.4 presents the results of multivariate models and discusses the findings of empirical analysis aimed at explaining the relationship between campaign personalization and voting dissent. Finally, we present the conclusions of this chapter and suggest further research directions.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This chapter brings a contribution to several streams of literature. The first part of our theoretical framework presents some of the main lines of the individualized campaign using different European case studies. Secondly, we will briefly introduce the concept of voting dissent using a larger framework linked to party cohesion studies.

1.2.1. Individualized campaigns

Recent literature contributed to a better understanding of the concept of individualized campaigning and analysed which electoral system is more suitable for promoting individualizing factors in campaigning for national elections. These studies addressing the individualization of electoral campaigning in Germany, Norway, Austria, Belgium, Hungary, and Romania, assess different aspects of campaign individualization. In this chapter we intend to bring a contribution to their theoretical framework by offering new theoretical and empirical insights.

Running an individualized campaign means that the candidate aims to receive a personal vote from electors based on their characteristics. To pursue an individualized campaign both the candidates and their party supporters favour a candidate-centred campaign organization, electoral agenda, and campaign tools (Zittel & Gschwend, 2008). The framework of Zittel and Gschwend (2008) defines three main indicators of campaign personalization (campaign norms; agenda; means and funds) that became the starting point for studies focusing on campaign

personalization. From this perspective, Zittel and Gschwend (2008) uncovered statistically significant relationships between incentives for focus on local campaigns and individualization of campaigns in Germany. Candidates seem to favour campaigns that focus on personal agendas and local district issues rather than party interests. Furthermore, Zittel and Gschwend's data (2008) supports the following argument: when candidates have strong electoral incentives, like the chances to directly win the mandate, they favour individualized campaigning. Based on their framework, we test in our first empirical model the effect of three campaign indicators (norms, means, and agenda) on legislators' behaviour before and after being elected.

A different perspective on the relationship between *localization* and *individualization* is presented in studies focused on the Norwegian parliamentary elections campaigning (Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015) and the campaigns in Austrian general elections (Eder et al., 2015). Using a mixed methodology (Norway Candidate Survey and 29 in-depth interviews) Karlsen and Skogerbø collected data from the 2009 parliamentary election and concluded that the Norway parliamentary system is based on strong parties and a solid party discipline. They also assess that in a parliamentary system with PR, such as the case of Norway, the top-down electoral campaign tends to be dominant. Although the data are congruent, there are significant differences between candidates depending on their position on the list, the first candidates being more inclined to promote a candidate based-campaigning, rather than endorsing a party-focused agenda (Karlsen & Skogerbo, 2015).

At the same time, another important factor for determining variance in individualization is party affiliation. It is not the party organization itself that influences individualization, but rather the political culture and the internal or candidate interpretation of the party organization and tradition. In cases where the parties have traditionally strong organizations, like in Austria, studies (Eder et al., 2015) found that personalized means of campaigning are more important for candidates with strong political support and experience, as well as for candidates that are better in securing high/safe seats on the electoral list. Moreover, the personalization is higher for the candidates aiming their campaign on self-promotion and for the candidates basing their campaign on rural areas (Eder et al., 2015).

We will expand our first model by adding several new covariates such as candidate political experience (party record and party switcher). In another paper De Winter and Baudewyns (2015) explore a different perspective on campaign individualization in a political framework that raises many electoral obstacles against candidates who prefer self-promotion rather than the party-centred campaign. One of these obstacles was introduced by the 2002 electoral reform when the average size of constituencies was tripled. By making use of data from the first genuine parliamentary candidate survey conducted in Belgium (2007), within the framework of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS), they show strong effects of electoral safety and district magnitude on the campaign personalization. Adding to these empirical results, we will also test in our empirical models' determinants such as

electoral security of the candidate (the position on the list is directly related with the electoral security) and the party affiliation.

Under a mixed-member majoritarian formula, other covariates account for campaign individualization (Chiru, 2018), while recent studies unfold the effects of electoral formula on the personalization of campaigns (M. Popescu & Chiru, 2020). Making use of empirical data from the Hungarian Candidate Study conducted in 2010 within the framework of CCS, Chiru (2018) showed compelling evidence that individualized campaigning is positively and highly dependent on decentralization and the level of experience in local politics. Furthermore, this experience is also important in explaining the legislative behaviour of elected candidates, candidates with higher experience being more prone to voice inside the party and even defect in parliament when it comes to voting (Chiru 2015). From this point of view, the Hungarian case study is important for our analysis because it emphasizes the relationship between the individualized campaign style and the rebel behaviour during the legislature, an important predictor in our explanatory model.

In another important case study on the mixed-member electoral system individualized campaign, Papp (2018) assessed the effect of campaign personalization on two levels of behaviour: before being elected and after being elected. The study shows no direct effect of campaign personalization on legislator behaviour in Hungary (Papp, 2018). Following the steps of Papp (2018), we designed our chapter's objective: investigating the relationship between campaign personalization and legislators' behaviour before and after being elected. We expand our model with several

covariates to test other potential determinants in influencing legislator behaviour in the parliament.

1.2.2. Voting dissent

The literature defines the concept of voting dissent as the legislators' ability to withstand the disciplining pressure of the party exerting on MPs to maintain party unity and their capacity to show disagreement with party decisions concerning legislative behaviour (Cowley & Stuart, 2004; C. J. Kam, 2009). Hence, voting against the party line on (at least some) legislative bills indicates MP's willingness to put their re-election at risk for representing either voters' views or her interest (Papp, 2018). Scholars concerned with legislative votes approached the topic of dissent from different perspectives including party cohesion and ideological preferences (C. Kam, 2001), party culture and party discipline (Kistner, 2006), and attitudes toward party discipline (Stefan et al., 2025), and voting loyalty (Gherghina & Chiru, 2014).

To understand voting dissent in a larger context one needs to better understand the concept of *party unity*. Andeweg and Thomassen (2010) found evidence that homogeneity of political preferences, party loyalty, and division of labour within a parliamentary group are the main pathways for assuring party unity. At the same time, they noted that "sanctions are more an *ultimo remedium*" in case the MPs adopt continuous dissenting strategies, although the effectiveness is very limited, especially for opposition parties (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2010).

Therefore, the literature on voting dissent does not manifest a consensus regarding legislators' behaviour toward defecting from

the party line. On one side, the literature emphasizes the importance of party affiliation, party unity, and party control over the MPs' preferences (C. Kam, 2001; Kistner, 2006; Sieberer & Norton, 2020; Traber et al., 2014). Using data from surveys conducted on Polish MPs from two different legislatures in Sejm, elected on a PR system, Kistner (2006, p. 32) pointed out that there were differences between opinions about voting 'to the opinion of the party' or 'according to one's own opinion'.

Firstly, there are high levels of acceptance to vote on the party line when the vote is related to budget issues and the government's program. Secondly, there is more room for dissent when the vote is for appointments to important positions or related to issues of ideology. To differentiate between dissent measured at the level of the party and the one at the level of the individual, Kam (2001, p. 95) made use of proxies like speaking publicly against the party, not participating in voting inside Parliament, without party consent, voting against the party, or exiting the party. According to Traber et al. (2014), party unity is stronger during election years, especially in votes on issues that are essential to the party program and are more visible to voters.

On the other side, the literature promotes a different perspective on voting dissent: the frequency with which legislators deviate varies considerably. Leston-Bandeira (2009), argues that even in party-centred parliaments, such as Portugal's, voting dissent manifest (Leston-Bandeira, 2009). Furthermore, electoral incentives (particularly intra-party competition) to personal vote-seeking induce legislators to dissent at roll-call, according to (Depauw & Martin, 2008) and (Carey, 2007). Hix (2004) finds out

that MEPs elected under candidate-centred electoral rules are more likely to break party unity than those elected under party-centred systems.

In mixed-member contexts, such as in Russia (Kunicova & Remington, 2008), Germany (Sieberer, 2010), and Hungary (Olivella & Tavits, 2014), studies have discovered considerable differences between SMD and list MPs. Poiré (2002), on the other hand, claims that when candidate selection is centralized, the effect of electoral procedures disappears. The importance of nomination procedures in voting dissent is further supported by Hix (2004), Sieberer (2010), and Depauw and Martin (2008). In addition, according to Tavits (2009, 2010), parliamentarians with local links are more prone to break party unity.

Within this framework, we assess two forms of legislator behaviour: MPs' views about representation and actual legislative behaviour. Firstly, we assess how candidates perceive their roles in terms of representation. Following Wahlke et al. (1962) it is critical to understand how representatives view their responsibilities because their self-perceptions might affect their future actions and behaviour. The literature investigating the attitudes towards representation distinguishes between two approaches: the focus, and the style of representation (Weßels, 2007). In this chapter, we look at the latter which refers to the manner in which legislators represent constituencies. We excluded from our analysis the focus of representation because it does not create a direct linkage between voting perceptions and actual votes during the legislative term. In accordance with Converse and Pierce (1986), we differentiate between trustees, party delegates, and voter delegates.

Secondly, while legislators' attitudes are crucial and are expected to translate into behaviour, constituency service must be watched as well (Wahlke et al., 1962). The literature offers several possibilities to assess the legislators' behaviour by investigating factors such as local bill initiation, membership in key communities, or speeches. In this chapter we examine voting dissent at roll-call votes on legislative bills. We expect a stronger impact of campaign personalization on attitudes towards representation and a weaker impact on the actual behaviour of legislators in the parliamentary activity. In short, we investigate the impact of campaign individualization before and after elections by looking at the style of representation and voting dissent.

1.3. Data and empirical strategy

1.3.1. Data

We test our research objective on an aggregated dataset encompassing the Romanian Comparative Candidate Survey study (CCS) (Chiru & Popescu, 2016) and the dataset of voting behaviour collected in the project Rethinking Individual Representation (Chiru and Popescu 2016).

The Comparative Candidate Survey data contains 407 responses, out of which 173 candidates got elected in the 2012-2016 legislature. They were matched with the MPs database on parliamentary activity (votes, questions, and interpellations) for the activity year of 2013. The original MPs dataset contains 256,062 observations, each observation representing an MP vote for each proposed bill. Out of the total sample, 97.6% did not dissent from

the party group decisions. In the rest of the cases, the MPs have dissented either by abstaining while the party group decided to take a stance, or by voting yes or no, contrary to the party group's decision. There is a statistically significant relationship between the MPs' vote and party group vote (chi-square of 350000, 4df, at $p < 0.001$). These would suggest a low prevalence of voting dissent, MPs and their parties having rather congruent voting decisions than disagreement. In chapter 1.4 we will further explore the determinants of MPs' voting dissent on the 2013 merged dataset.

1.3.2. The dependent variable

We select two main dependent variables from our dataset. Firstly, we utilize as dependent variable the style of representation in answering the first question of this chapter. Empirically, the style of representation describes how citizens' interests are represented.¹ In hypothetical situations, MPs have to choose sides in which the opinions of the party, the MP herself, and the voters, are in conflict. We follow in the footsteps of Converse and Pierce (1986) and Papp (2018) and differentiate between trustees, party delegates, and voters delegates. For operational standardization, we keep the same meaning for the three categories as described in other studies (Converse and Pierce 1986; Papp 2018). In this chapter, MPs who vote accordingly to their opinions, even if it contradicts voters'

¹ The question that was asked from the respondents is formulated as follows: 'How should a Member of Parliament vote if (1) the voters in their constituency have one opinion and his/her party takes different position, (2) his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of the voters in his/her constituency and (3) his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of the voters in their party's position?'

opinion or party position, are in the trustee's category. Similarly, MPs who always vote in line with the party position are in the party delegate's category, while MPs who vote accordingly with the voters' opinion are in the voter delegate's category.

Secondly, we use as dependent variable the frequency of voting dissent computed as a natural logarithm. To measure dissent at roll – call, all bills' votes were taken into account for the year 2013 of the 2012 – 2016 legislative term. In this analysis, voting dissent is computed as a percentage based on the total number of votes when the MP voted differently from his or her parliamentary group. Thus, the dissent measure takes values between 0 and 100. If the individualization is a mixed measure which contains opinions (the goal of the campaign) and behaviours (including constituency issues into the electoral agenda), the variable used for voting dissent is based only on MP's behaviours during legislatures.

However, since the dependent variable does not meet the assumption of normal distribution (Shapiro Wilk measures 0.54 at $p < 0.001$), nor the one of Poisson distribution (the variance is three times higher than the mean), we transformed it using the natural logarithm (Shapiro Wilk measures 0.985 at $p < 0.07$, thus rejecting the null hypothesis of normal distribution of the outcome). A quantile normal plot as illustrated in Figure A1 (see Appendix A) of the correlation between observed and expected quantiles of the outcome variable supports the decision of using the log transform.

1.3.3. The covariates

In this chapter, the individualization of the electoral campaign is measured based on the candidates' responses to a survey

conducted in the CCS framework (self-evaluation regarding the campaign goal – promoting individual vs. the party; declared using of party independent funds as well as the importance of constituency issues for the MP's electoral agenda). In defining the forms of campaign personalization, we follow Zittel and Gschwend's approach (2008).

In this chapter, the first indicator, campaign norms, is measured based on a single question asking candidates to place the main goal of their campaign on a one-dimensional scale of attracting as much attention to their candidacy as possible versus furthering their party's reputation.² The second indicator, campaign means, is measured based on 5 questions related to the personalized instruments candidates used in their campaigns such as personalized TV spots and radio, personalized webpage, personalized political ads, personalized posters, and personalized flyers. The third indicator, campaign agenda, is measured based on one question and it shows if the MP has brought up locally relevant issues which were not present in her party's campaign.³

Additionally, we also test for factors at the individual level – electoral security, party record, party affiliation, and party switching, as well as at the district level – district characteristics. The electoral security of the MP could influence her voting behaviour. To secure her re-election, the MP who did not win the

² The respondents were asked: What was the primary aim of your campaign? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10', where 0 = the aim was to attract attention on the party; 10 = to attract attention on the candidate not the party'.

³ The respondents were asked: 'Did you raise any issues during your campaign that were specific to your constituency and that were not raised by the national or regional party?'

plurality of votes in the constituency has to prove her commitment to the party and vote more often along the party line.

Furthermore, MPs who changed their political affiliation during the time are more open to voting differently than their party. If they already changed a party, then their roots in the actual party are more fragile and at the same time, they can be more open to discussing voting support with other parties. When a party or a coalition forms the cabinet, it is more likely to have and use mechanisms for better control for its MPs. The cabinet needs the parliament's support and it is expected that during this period the percentage of voting dissenters to be lower mainly because the party pressure is higher and dissenting is too costly (Giannetti & Benoit, 2008). Additionally, we expect MPs who hold or held an executive office to vote more often with the party line (in some cases they are the most influential representatives of the party, and they decide the party line).

In addition, Thames (2007, p. 474) pointed out that in the Russian and Ukrainian parliaments “differences in levels of institutionalization among political parties produced important differences in levels of party discipline in the legislature.” In the Romanian case, the MPs belonging to USL represented two of the most institutionalized parties in Romania (PSD and PNL) and this is another argument for expecting lower levels of voting dissent.

At the same time, with the indicators related to the campaign style and to the individual features, our analyses take into consideration district characteristics in influencing candidates to defect from their party line. De Winter and Baudewyns (2015) pointed out that the district magnitude is an important factor for an

individualized campaign style. Our analyses also pay attention to the average employment rate (2009-2012), average unemployment (2009-2012), and the average number of doctors (2009-2012). The last three indicators are used as proxies for the development level of the district. A summary description of dependent and independent variables can be found in Appendix A in Table A1.

1.3.4. Empirical strategy

We are interested in assessing the existence of a relationship between campaign personalization and legislator behaviour, in particular voting dissent. In testing this objective, first, we intend to analyse the perception of candidates before being elected. In other words, in the first part of the empirical analysis, we assess if the style of representation (trustee, voter delegate, and party delegates) is influenced by the type of campaign promoted by the candidates. We group the candidates in three main categories underlined by the literature (Papp 2018; Zittel and Gschwend 2008) and employ a multinomial logistic regression to test the effect of the main indicators of campaign personalization (campaign norms, campaign means, and campaign agenda) on the style of representation. We assume that the style of representation is positively affected by the level of campaign personalization promoted by the candidates. Because we have multiple independent observations with h-explanatory variables and because our qualitative response variable has more than two categories, we apply for the first part of the analysis a multinomial logistic regression model with a base level category – party

delegates. To compute the model, we estimate the following equation:

$$\log \left[\frac{\pi_j(x_i)}{\pi_k(x_i)} \right] = \alpha_i + \beta_{1j} * \text{campaign norms} + \beta_{2j} * \text{campaign means} + \beta_{3j} * \text{campaign agenda} + \beta_{4j} * \text{ideological distance} + \beta_{5j} * \text{selected by party leadership} + \beta_{6j} * \text{number of doctors in the district} + \beta_{7j} * \text{district magnitude} + \beta_{8j} * \text{affiliation period} \quad (1)$$

where j denotes the type of candidate (trustee and voter delegate), π denotes the multinomial probability of an observation falling in the j th category, and i denotes the observations relative to which the type of candidate is tested (campaign norms, campaign agenda, campaign means, etc.) and k represents the base category chosen for our model. A base category means that the probability of membership in other categories is compared to the probability of membership in the base category. Furthermore, in our model $\alpha_i = 0$.

Second, we intend to assess to what extent the MPs' behaviour, in particular the chance of defecting from their parties' voting line, is influenced by the level of campaign personalization. In our extended OLS models we also introduce determinants such as individual factors and district characteristics. In assessing this relationship, we apply several explanatory models based on OLS with log outcomes. To improve our model, we transformed the outcome variables by taking the natural logarithm. Our model estimates could be specified as follows:

$$\ln(y) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 \dots + \beta_k x_k + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where $\ln(y)$ is the normally distributed outcome variable, and $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_k$ are the covariates, measured following the description

included in Appendix A. We will, thus, explain the model outcomes by making use of the exponential regression coefficients.

When considering the best model fit, we have made use of the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) measures (Burnham and Anderson 2004). To recommend the best model, the AIC statistics consider the goodness of fitness and the model complexity. Since the OLS and Tobit models are based on the normality distribution assumption, we can compare the AIC and BIC statistics between these models. Considering that the outcome variable is constrained (Shapiro Wilk measures 0.54 at $p < 0.001$) we tested the models with log outcome variable. The AIC statistics reported for all the six tested models consistently produced better statistics for OLS compared to Tobit regression models. Thus, we decided to run OLS models with log dependent variables. We add new explanatory variables for our dependent variable in each new OLS model, following the equation:

$$\text{Voting dissent}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{explanatory variable} + \dots + \beta_8 * \text{explanatory variable} + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

1.4. Empirical analysis and results

1.4.1. MPs' perceptions towards representation

In the first part of our empirical analysis, we focus on the effects of campaign personalization on MPs' perceptions towards their style of representation. In testing the effects of campaign personalization on attitudes we follow the step of Papp (2018) and control for several additional individual factors such as distance from the party

(Hix, 2004), candidate selection (Hix, 2004; Sieberer, 2010), and affiliation period as well as for district characteristics such as district magnitude. We test for multicollinearity, showing that the interconnectedness of the three campaign indicators does not cause statistical issues in our models.⁴

The findings of multinomial logit models explaining MPs' views about representation are presented in Table 1. In particular, Model 1 explains the various aspects of the style of representation. We present the coefficients' results as relative risk ratio: if values are more than 1, the effect is positive and if values are less than 1, the relationship between the dependent and independent variables is negative. For Model 1 our control group is 'party delegate'.

⁴ The respective values of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) are 1.032 for campaign norms, 1.067 for campaign means and 1.024 for campaign agenda.

Table 1. Multinomial logit model explaining legislators' attitudes towards representation

Variables	Model 1	
	Trustee	Voter delegate
Campaign personalization		
Campaign norms	2.373 (0.193)***	0.767 (0.195)
Campaign means	0.941 (0.141)	0.625 (0.186)**
Campaign agenda	0.648 (0.111)***	1.051 (0.103)
Control variables		
Ideological distance	1.163 (0.183)	1.084 (0.157)
Selected by party leadership	1.152 (0.152)	0.987 (0.222)
Number of doctors in the district	1.000 (0.0002)*	1.000 (0.0002)
District magnitude	0.917 (0.068)	0.983 (0.059)
Affiliation period	0.965 (0.026)	0.941 (0.022)***
Constant	1.554 (0.069)***	5.351 (0.062)***
Log Lik	-165.6898	
Pseudo R2	0.134	
AIC	367.234	

Entries are relative risk ratios (RRR) with standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05; * p<0.1.

The results of Model 1 show that campaign personalization variables affect the style of representation positively. For the trustee category, a more personalized campaign, in terms of campaign norms and campaign agenda, correlates with a higher probability of a candidate voting more according to his/her views than with the party position. One unit increase in the log odds of the campaign norms (how much attention the candidate declared to attracted towards him or the party), increases the probability of voting according to his/her views by 2.37. Similarly, one unit increase in

the log odds of the campaign agenda (how much the candidate raised local issues during the election), increases the probability of not voting in accordance with the party position by 0.64.

The results of Model 1 also show that one unit increases in the log odds of the campaign means (the frequency of individual promotional material used during elections), increases the probability of being a voter delegate by 0.62. Overall, the results of Model 1 show that candidates have a more candidate-centred attitude regarding their style of representation if they promote a personalized campaign during the elections.

1.4.2. Determinants of voting dissent

In the second part of this empirical analysis, we focus on the actual behaviour of legislators and assess which factors result in being more important: campaign indicators, individual factors, or district characteristics. In testing the second question of this chapter we have produced multiple explanatory models based on OLS with log outcomes. Holding all the explanatory variables used in Table 1, we replaced the dependent variable with voting dissent to see the effect of the campaign personalization on the legislator's behaviour after being put in office. As we could see from Table 2, contrary to predictions from the current literature, there is no significant effect of campaign personalization on the voting dissent of MPs in the basic Model 2 which includes the three main predictors of campaign personalization.

An interesting finding in Model 2 is that an increase in the affiliation period and district magnitude decreases the probability of dissent. One possible explanation might be that long-term party

membership increases ideological and partisan identification. It can also increase the investments individual MPs make in their party and, thus, increase the personal losses in case of factionalisation. In addition, it might increase the political capital by intra-party networking that an MP can develop during long-term stable party affiliation. All these factors can reduce the propensity to defect.

As regards the district magnitude effects, one possible explanation might reside in the higher pool of elected positions to be distributed within a political party if the district has more seats allocated. In such districts individual party members can compete for more resources, increasing their chances of obtaining personal benefits and, thus, decreasing their propensity to defect with the aim of finding or setting up alternative and competitive party organizations. Simply put: the larger the pool of political resources the smaller the intra-party competition for these resources and, therefore, the smaller the probability for defection.

These results from Model 2 suggest that individual factors and district characteristics are more important than campaign indicators in increasing the probability of voting against the party line. To test for these results, we extend our model by applying other individual factors and district characteristics.

Table 2. Linear regression model explaining dissent at roll-call

Variables	Model 2
	Dissent ratio (logged)
Campaign personalization	
Campaign norms	0.159 (0.268)
Campaign means	0.334 (0.231)
Campaign agenda	-0.0003 (0.011)
Control variables	
Ideological distance	-1.002(0.096)
Selected by party leadership	0.221 (0.235)
Number of doctors in the district	0.0003036 (0.00009066)**
District magnitude	-0.143 (0.040)***
Affiliation period	-0.059 (0.015)***
Constant	0.757 (0.333)**
Observations	173
R2	0.143
F Statistic	4.608*** (df = 8; 164)

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01; ** p<0.05; * p<0.1.

In Table 3 we expand the basic model by including individual covariates such as the previous political experience of the MPs in a different party. As we could see from Table 3, there is no significant effect of campaign personalization on the voting dissent of MPs, in the basic model (3) that includes two main predictors tested here (campaign personalization and constituency agenda). A possible explanation might be that the sample size is too small.

The new model (Model 4) explains 11.4% of the outcome variance and exposes a strong direct link between party switching and voting dissent, all the other variables held constant. The estimated coefficient for party switching experience of MPs is 1.480 which represents an average effect on the change in log outcome.

This effect is statistically significant across all the models that include this independent variable, except for the aggregate model that includes all the covariates. A possible explanation could be that the party switching MPs, which (often) change sides and parties, develop less partisan and ideological connections with the political party they represent in the parliament. Party switching top politicians tend to invest fewer resources in their new political party and maximize their benefits. In addition, their integration within the new host party could be altered by difficulties in adjustment to new organizational features, such as discipline, leadership, rules for career prospect. To sum up: electorally supporting “political migrant” MPs in order to develop their candidacy and obtain access to party resources (for example seats on party lists) has good chances to translate into a future undisciplined MP and defector.

The results hold robust when controlling for MPs’ socio-demographic characteristics, as well. Another interesting finding in Model 4 is that making use of party-independent campaign means in the electoral campaign increases the probability of dissent. When a candidate employs her own personal resources and makes less usage of party resources (e.g., funds, support staff, donor lists, media contacts), she develops weaker connections and dependencies with the political party. Developing and accessing such personal resources increases chances to get re-elected

irrespective of the resources she can access from the party organization. Therefore, cultivating party candidates that are resource-independent, reduces the effectiveness of political party disciplining mechanisms. A one unit increase of the index of independent campaign means used by the candidates increases the voting dissent by 12.8%, all the other variables held constant, since:

$$\% \Delta_y = 100 \times (e^\beta - 1) \quad (4)$$

Model 5 as illustrated in Table 3 presents some evidence that electoral security influences the MPs' dissent. An MP winning the place by at least a plurality of votes (FPTP) has an average effect of -1.632 on the log outcome. Henceforth, an MP winning a plurality of votes would be less inclined to defect when it comes to voting accordingly with the party stance. Winning at least a plurality of votes in a mixed-member system could translate in more power inside the party. This might be explained by stronger and more important leadership positions such a successful candidate can obtain in her party, but also in higher position inside the parliamentary groups and committees. Therefore, such candidates could identify themselves with the party, in a greater degree, diminishing the propensity to defect.

We analysed whether there are effects of the parliamentary activity of MPs on their propensity to dissent. Model 6 explains 38.7% of the total variance of the outcome variable. A one unit increase in the number of questions the MP raises as part of its legislative activity increases the voting dissent by 16.1%, all the other variables held constant. One possible explanation for this effect is that more active MPs, tend to have increased chances and

opportunities to express positions that are in dissonance with the official stances of the party leadership. In addition, such active MPs tend to be more informed and more active as well as more involved in governmental control in the parliament. Active MPs could also have a greater knowledge of specific fields and issues, which could increase their level of involvement in parliamentary issues, a stronger positioning concerning those issues, and create greater pressure and costs for conformation, which, in turn, could increase the chances for dissent. Last, but not least, such active MPs could use their parliamentary activities in order to create a personal image to increase reputation, visibility and leadership potential, which could enter in conflict with the official party line.

As well, an increase with one unit in the number of parliamentary questions on local issues decreases the voting dissent by 1.2%, with all the other variables held constant. Though being more active in the parliament and raising more questions increases the dissent, focusing on local issues does not create a constituency pressure towards diverging from the party line. This can be explained by the signal that putting forward questions on local issues can in fact limit the necessity to claim credits for political activity without involving party dissent and, thus, costs for the MP. Furthermore, raising local issue questions in the parliament can, in fact, increase the propensity to bargain inside the political party and seek building support for constituency issues, rather than creating political conflict and defection. This can create exchange mechanisms in which party loyalty is more effective than dissent. In addition, it could also increase the credibility inside constituency and create more capacity for local representation which is more

important for local-focused MPs compared to a strategy focused on adversarial relations with the party. Another explanation might be related to the potential low conflict local issues which are less ideological and more technical, with an administrative focus. Last, but not least, MPs that prefer local issues questions as parliamentary activity, could manifest fewer dissent attitudes because the local issues (e.g., local infrastructure and services) are often dependent on funds transferred from the central government. Therefore, these MPs are the ones that are more inclined to stay within the party line. This explanation is substantiated by empirical observation of party orientation from Model 6.

This other interesting result in this model is that being a member of the parliamentary majority (USL) in 2013 has an average effect of -1.723 on the log outcome. Henceforth, a USL MP would be less inclined to defect when it comes to voting accordingly to the party's stance. This probably has to do with the high utility of being a member of the governing coalition and the possible rewards that MPs could receive if supporting the government. A party leader holding the prime minister job has more clientelist strings attached to his/her party members, more benefits that he/she could distribute, and even more favours that he/she can return in exchange for voting support in the legislature.

Table 3. Extended regression model explaining dissent at roll-call

Variables	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
	Dissent ratio (logged)				
Campaign personalization					

Campaign norms	-0.010 (0.04)	-0.025 (0.04)	0.001 (0.04)	-0.016 (0.04)	-0.030 (0.04)
Campaign means		0.121 (0.05)**			
Campaign agenda	0.203 (0.25)	0.061 (0.27)	0.211 (0.25)		
Control variables					
Party switching		1.480 (0.27)***	1.477 (0.29)***		
FPTP			-1.632 (0.21)***		
District Welfare				0.125 (0.11)	
Total questions				0.015 (0.00)**	
Local questions				-0.012 (0.00)***	
Years MP				0.004 (0.02)	
USL				-1.723 (0.19)***	
Constant	0.498 (0.30)*	-0.094 (0.35)	0.384 (0.30)	1.857 (0.26)***	1.567 (0.31)***
Observations	161	157	161	161	150
R2	0.003	0.114	0.095	0.266	0.387
Prob > F	0.7	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
AIC	593.1	560.2	579.70	543.9	480.2
BIC	602.4	575.5	592.00	553.1	501.3

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01. Unstandardized b coefficients. Robust standard errors in parentheses. OLS MODELS: Model 3: campaign personalization; Model 4: campaign personalization; Model 5: party switcher; Model 6: electoral security; Model 7: parliamentary activity.

The district magnitude has proved an important predictor for voting dissent, as shown in the statistics from Model 8 in Table 4. The unstandardized coefficient tells us that for a unit increase in the district magnitude we expect to see a 12.7% decrease in voting dissent, all the other variables held constant. This holds also in aggregated Model 10. Apart from the explanations offered above when discussing Model 2, the district magnitude could reduce the voting dissent by other means as well. In larger districts the party

lists could increase the ideological and party-related vote and decrease the personal vote, thus reducing the dissent. Higher district magnitude means larger party lists, which can translate into more mechanisms (e.g., more eligible position on the list) the parties could employ in reducing the voting dissent. Last, but not least, larger districts tend to be more important for winning strategies of parties. Political organizations could invest more in such districts and, therefore, could prefer trustworthy candidates to be supported in these districts, such as more loyal party activists and leadership-dependent candidates, which are less inclined towards voting dissent.

Another interesting result in the model is that MPs residing in smaller localities have more propensity on dissenting when voting. The coefficient tells us that for a unit increase in the size of residence locality we expect to see a 52.2% decrease in voting dissent. These findings could be explained by MPs developing a closer relationship with their constituency in smaller localities. In addition, in small communities, the MPs can employ stronger and more diverse networks of supporters and electoral brokers. Local mayors are key agents and can mobilize such networks, thus reducing MPs dependency upon central party organization, therefore increasing the dependency of MPs on the local political networks.

Table 4. Extended regression model explaining dissent at roll-call

Variables	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
	Dissent ratio (logged)		

Campaign personalization			
Campaign norms	0.014 (0.04)	-0.032 (0.05)	-0.016 (0.04)
Campaign means			0.023 (0.04)
Campaign agenda			0.08 (0.103)
Control variables			
Number of doctors	0.000 (0.00)**		0.000 (0.00)***
District magnitude	-0.136 (0.04)***		-0.184 (0.03)***
Party switching		0.926 (0.37)*	0.136 (0.39)
Party record		-0.030 (0.02)	-0.022 (0.02)
Residence		-0.740 (0.44)*	-0.493 (0.36)
Gender		0.833 (0.39)	0.217 (0.32)
Age		0.008 (0.01)	-0.003 (0.01)
Education		-0.532 (0.68)	-0.139 (0.59)
Church attendance		-0.000 (0.10)	-0.040 (0.08)
FPTP			0.395 (0.37)
District welfare			0.261 (0.13) *
Total questions			0.007 (0.00)*
Local questions			-0.004 (0.00)
Years MP			0.014 (0.03)
USL			-1.866 (0.33)***
Constant	1.254 (0.28)***	1.439 (1.07)	2.489 (0.95) **
Observations	159	136	128
R2	0.083	0.117	0.52
AIC	576.5	498.6	411.90
BIC	588.8	524.9	466.10

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01. Unstandardized b coefficients. Robust standard errors in parentheses. OLS MODELS: Model 8: district characteristics; Model 9: individual characteristics; Model 10: all variables.

1.5. Conclusions

The main objective of this chapter was to unfold to what extent there is a relationship between campaign personalization and legislators' behaviour before and after electoral campaigns. The

starting point was to assess to what extent the level of campaign personalization affects the candidates' perceptions towards representation before being elected. The results of our first model (Model 1) indicate a positive effect of the level of campaign personalization on candidates' attitudes towards representation. Testing the effect of campaign personalization, we argue that the more personalized campaign is in terms of norms and agenda, the higher the probability of a candidate to vote more according to his/her views than with the party position (being in the trustees' category). In terms of campaign means, our results indicate a higher probability of a candidate, if elected, to vote according to voters' views (being in the voter delegates' category). Overall, the first part of our empirical analysis strengthens our assumption that candidates have a more candidate-centred attitude regarding their style of representation if they promoted a personalized campaign during the elections. Their self-perceptions are more focused on their views and their voters' views than on party positions.

Following the analysis of candidates' perceptions towards representation, we assessed the effects of the campaign personalization on the legislators' behaviour after being put in office. We test campaign indicators, individual factors, and district characteristics. Our basic exploration model suggests no effect of campaign personalization on the voting dissent of MPs. However, when testing models predicting the effects of party switching, use of party independent campaign tools, increased electoral security, and increased parliamentary experience, we found significant results. Our explanatory models based on OLS with log outcome indicate a strong direct link between party switching and voting

dissent. Another interesting finding indicated by our models (4 and 5) is that making use of party independent campaign means in the electoral campaign increases the probability for dissent, while electoral security influences the MPs' dissent.

Before concluding, we highlight two apparent shortcomings of the analysis. Firstly, the causal relationship between campaign personalization and legislators' behaviour, might be better unfolded by a panel study that offers explanations on whether the changes in campaign personalization between different points in time change how representatives behave in the legislature. However, using data collected just before elections suppresses these shortcomings. This allows us to know which campaign strategies were successful in influencing legislator behaviour without confronting respondent biases. Although reduced in size, the sample employed in the analysis is powerful enough to account for changes in legislative behaviour, since the sampling framework of MPs and candidates is rather small. Our analysis could serve as a sample frame for cross-sectional studies employing more countries and legislative periods. The results of this analysis can be used as first-stage research that allows for further investigation of the effects of campaign personalization on legislators voting behaviour.

Against its shortcomings, the empirical evidence on the relationship between campaign personalization and legislator behaviour emphasized by this chapter is powerful. One question might remain as to why campaign personalization does not affect legislator' behaviour during legislative terms, in the same manner as it affects the candidates' perceptions of their future representation style? An explanation for this puzzle could be that

during election times candidates try to convince voters to vote for them by assuring them that they will stand for voters' interests and strengthen the ties with her constituency, while going against the party line if necessary. However, when elected, the focus of the candidates changes towards their parties' principles because parties have a major say in the next step in the legislator's political careers (Strøm, 1997).

Contrary to previous studies, this chapter revealed that there is little effect of campaign personalization on legislator behaviour in the parliament. In addition, it emphasized several individual factors and district characteristics contributing to MPs' decision to defect from the party line. We conclude by highlighting the stronger impact of individual factors and district characteristics on the legislators' behaviour than campaign indicators.

Chapter 2. Where did it all start? Does media exposure influence vote change types? Evidence from Romanian presidential election

Abstract

The voting decision process and the factors that shape voters' choices during electoral campaigns is central to the study of voting behaviour. This chapter analyses the most common vote change types and assesses the effects of media exposure on three different types of vote change: reinforcement, conversion, and crystallization. We use multi-wave panel data collected during the electoral campaign for the 2009 Romanian presidential election to assess our hypotheses on campaign effects on vote change. Findings reveal that exposure to media increases the chances of crystallization and conversion. For the reinforcement category, the results show a significant effect of exposure to media on vote intention. Exposure to media increases the chance of voters changing, reinforcing, or crystallizing their vote option. Media contributes to the voting process by having an informational and reinforcement role.

Keywords: voting decision process; media exposure; campaign effects; multi-wave survey; electoral volatility

2.1. Introduction

In the last decades, the voting decision process became even more dynamic and complex than before due to the increased scores of electoral volatilities across European countries (Kostelka, 2017; Kostelka et al., 2023; Mainwaring & Su, 2021; Moraes & Béjar, 2023; Rekker, 2022). If the period between the 1950s and 1960s is characterized by electoral stability and frozen party systems, the last decades were characterized by increased electoral volatility (Drummond, 2006; Mair, 2008; Remmer, 2021; Willocq, 2016, 2019). Nowadays, vote changes occur both in the periods between elections (known as inter-electoral volatility) and during elections (known as intra-electoral volatility), influencing election outcomes and party system stability (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007; Dassonneville, 2012, 2018).

Various explanations, ranging from the role of long-term factors (e.g., age, gender, or economic status) to short-term factors (e.g., candidate evaluation or exposure to media), have been offered to explain voting behaviour. The early studies supported the idea that electors acquire a vote option before campaigns due to their loyalty towards a party or candidate. Classical empirical models highlighted that voting behaviour is primarily affected by “long-term” factors such as education, age, residence, religion, etc. (Lazarsfeld et al., 1919) or partisan allegiances (Campbell et al., 1960) concluding that most voters’ party preferences were rather inflexible and often transferred between generations. However, a

minority of voters were observed to frequently switch their preferences (Lazarsfeld et al., 2019).

This apparent unpredictability of such behaviour raised interest in what causes these vote changes. Studies brought attention to a larger spectrum of factors that determine voters to change their vote option during the election campaigns, labelled as “short-term” factors (Dalton, 2015; Schmitt & Wüst, 2006; Walczak et al., 2012). Walczak, van der Brug, and de Vries (2012) assessed that short-term factors affect the vote much closer to Election Day because these factors focus on issues attitudes, performance assessments, and candidate evaluations, which are abundantly presented during campaigns, with more relevant and fresh information, with voters paying more attention to such issues during campaigns compared to inter-electoral periods. Furthermore, electoral nudges are used more frequently during campaigns, especially in the last days before voting day, by candidates and their supporters, with particularly strong effects upon undecided electors. Exploring the short-term factors’ impact on voters’ choices is essential in the context of increased levels of volatility. This exploration allows us to understand which voters are more likely to change their votes.

Previous studies emphasized the role of media, as a short-term influencing factor, creating a linkage between voter instability and widespread influence of television (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1982; Bybee et al., 1981; Lang & Lang, 2018; Rohrschneider et al., 2012). It was assessed that people that are most exposed to television are also the most likely to exhibit volatility (Lang & Lang, 2018). In relation with this assumption, other studies (Baum & Groeling, 2008) have

documented the advent of new types of media such as media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.) and their influence upon the voting decision process.

Recent studies (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gallo & Langtry, 2020) started to focus on the effects of new media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) on voters. Drawing the arguments from psychology and communication, some studies assessed a crucial role of confirmation bias and fake news on voting behaviour. Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) assessed that people are exposed to at least 3 to 5 fake news articles during an electoral campaign. According to Allcott & Gentzkow (2017), exposure to fake news is extremely effective in changing the way people vote. Furthermore, media offer opportunities to study how voting decisions are affected by the social interactions of individuals over internet platforms.

In view of this, we focus on two research objectives. First, we analyse the most common vote changes manifesting during electoral campaigns. We find that the most common vote change types are crystallization, conversion, and reinforcement. Wavering and party alienation are also present within the electorate, but the percentage is much smaller. Second, we measure if the exposure to media influences, in the same manner, all the vote change categories selected from the literature (reinforcement, conversion, and crystallization).

This chapter has several scopes. Firstly, to measure the association between media exposure and voters' behaviour by commonly treating three types of vote change: reinforcement, conversion, and crystallization. Considering the complexity of

voters' behaviour, the factors that influence their voting decisions have different effects, depending on the voting categories within which they are included. Studies differentiate between types of volatility in electors' behaviour. As such, the literature has identified various categories of vote changes that media may affect (Dassonneville, 2012; Lazarsfeld et al., 2019). Conversion, crystallization, and reinforcement are the most common categories, while wavering and party alienation characterize a smaller share of voters. Previous research focused more on measuring the impact of media in general (TV, internet, radio) and offline social networks (friends, relatives), or on the new media such as media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit) in developed democracies, and less on third wave democracies, such as Romania. This analysis tries to fill this gap.

Secondly, this chapter aims to unfold media exposure on vote changes from an individual perspective. Previous research focused more on aggregate volatility (the overall shift in party support in society) because the possibility to collect individual predictors such as media usage is in general limited. Overall, this study attempts to bring a granular contribution to recent research linking media exposure to voting changes, contributing to the findings of research investigating the impact of online and offline social platforms on voting behaviour.

Thirdly, the chapter focuses on the first three categories and examine how exposure to mainstream media affects these types of vote change. Recent research highlighted the need to study these types of vote changes from a common perspective. Until recently, scholars either focused solely on conversion (Dassonneville &

Stiers, 2018; van der Meer et al., 2015) or studied conversion and crystallization separately from reinforcement (Geers et al., 2017; Geers & Strömbäck, 2019). Most studies excluded reinforcement arguing that it does not reflect an actual change in vote. We contend that exposure to media channels can affect vote options by reinforcing people's beliefs due to the instruments that media platforms use to activate the confirmation bias of users or their ideological identity. Reinforcement is thus seen as a representation of citizens' ideological identity that can influence their evaluation of the candidate, such as the president and other political actors, by determining them to look out for information in accordance with their beliefs (Lebo & Cassino, 2007).

This section proceeds as follows. Chapter 2.2 presents state-of-the-art literature while chapter 2.3 describes the empirical strategy, case selection, and data. Chapter 2.4 emphasizes voting changes patterns observed during the electoral campaign, as well as the impact of media exposure to the identified patterns. Chapter 2.5 presents the discussions of the results and the main conclusions.

2.2. Theoretical insights on media and voting changes

The impact of short-term factors on voting changes evolved over the years along with the development of modern electoral campaign instruments and widespread usage of digital communication and networking. Focusing on the impact of media channels on the voting decision process, this chapter is one of the

first to assess these issues in the Romanian electoral campaign period from 2009, and it also extends several streams of the literature.

Firstly, this chapter connects our analysis to both early and recent research investigating different types of vote change and their effects on the voting decision process, such as studies of Berelson et al. (1986), Lazarsfeld et al. (1968), Wattenberg (2002); Taber and Lodge, (2006); Mair (2008); Strömbäck (2008); van der Meer et al. (2015); Geers et al. (2017), and Geers et al. (2019). In some of the earliest studies of electoral behaviour, Berelson et al. (1986) and Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) identified various vote change categories focusing more on long-term predictors that define voters (age, gender, religion etc.) and assessed that they can either reinforce, convert, or activate/crystallize their vote option.

The definitions and characteristics of the vote types identified by Berelson et al. (1986) and Lazarsfeld et al. (1968) have been maintained over the years. This classical perspective was reinforced in more recent study, which emphasized that crystallization encompasses those voters whose hypothetical support for a candidate/party transforms into an actual vote (Geers et al., 2017). However, this process requires pre-existent positive or at least neutral attitudes towards candidates and political parties, but also resources for understanding differences between candidates and parties. Such attitudes and understanding can help transform support into actual vote. Regarding conversion category, defined as having a vote option at the beginning of the campaign and ending up voting for another candidate/party than initially

preferred, it was treated by early studies (Berelson et al., 1986; Lazarsfeld et al., 1968) as a situation that rarely occurs.

In contrast, recent studies show that voters are more inclined to change their options for parties and candidates during the electoral campaign or between campaigns (Dassonneville & Stiers, 2018; Mair, 2008; Wattenberg, 2002). In Western Europe, on average, 7–8% of voters shifted between parties from one election to the next in the period between 1950 and 2000 (Mair, 2008). Van der Meer et al. (2015) explained that more than half of the respondents in a longitudinal study covering two rounds of Dutch parliamentary elections (N=29,955) changed their party preferences at least once between September 2006 and June 2010. Such studies shed new light on only on the voting changes but also on the methodological issues that might be encountered when studying stability of voting behaviour. The longer the time between elections, the longer the time for recalling the vote, thus, the less consistent is the measurement of voting behaviour.

Reinforcement, the third vote change type, refers to the consolidation of the initial vote option as an effect of campaign exposure. Studies emphasized that voters within the reinforcement category, who identify with a party/candidate, unconsciously expose themselves or pay attention to political information that supports their preference (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Strömbäck (2008), and later Geers et al. (2017) broadened vote change types, describing them as more diverse, since there are voters who never acquire a vote option, also called voters with party alienation, or have multiple vote options, thus being wavering voters (Strömbäck, 2008; Geers, 2017). The main common

view attributes a positive effect to short-term factors (news content, political knowledge) in influencing the political attitudes and preferences of the voters.

In the Romanian context, the literature on electoral volatility with a focus on vote types is restrained, scholars focusing more on voters' loyalty (Chiru & Gherghina, 2012; Gherghina, 2014; Gherghina & Tap, 2024; Giugal et al., 2011). Thus, this chapter aims at extending the literature, by aligning Romanian context with the international findings on electoral volatility.

Secondly, this chapter connects with the literature assessing the role of the campaign instruments in affecting vote options. Studies assessed that campaigns have a potential role in changing voters' options, as well as an activating and information role in helping voters without a vote option to acquire one (Bond et al., 2012; Peterson, 2009). According to findings of the study conducted by Bond et al. (2012) on more than 61 million Facebook users, the turnout in the 2010 US congressional election increased due to the online campaign messages or related messages shared on Facebook. Bond et al. (2012) estimated 340,000 more votes in the 2010 elections, from which 280,000 were obtained through social contagion. Similarly, Peterson (2009) assessed that electoral campaigns alter the perception of uncertain voters about some candidates. The psychological mechanism he took into account for evaluating the voting choices include personality traits of the candidates, partisanship of the electors, policy disagreements between elector and candidates, and retrospective economic evaluations of the candidates.

According to the longitudinal study of 1984 US presidential campaign by Peterson (2009), the interaction between voters and the campaign changes the criteria used by voters in their decision-making process. In either case, the campaign effects surface only when the electorate is exposed to political advertising, political messages, and media exposure. However, restrained literature focused on the effects of campaign exposure through media, most of the studies focusing on first time voters and campaign effects (Gherghina & Marian, 2024; Gherghina & Mitru, 2023; Gherghina & Rusu, 2021; Tóka & Popescu, 2007). Thus, this chapter provides empirical evidence to the theory by emphasizing the increasing electoral role of the media platforms in the new wave democracies.

Thirdly, this chapter connects with a complex, but restrained stream of literature, the one focusing on the individual effects of media exposure on voters. Most studies discuss how media content influences voters rather than if media content determines voters to cast a vote for a specific candidate/party (Dassonneville & Stiers, 2018; Dilliplane, 2014; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020; van der Meer et al., 2015). Dilliplane (2014) assessed that exposure to information shared in the media has a positive impact on vote changes, to an enhanced degree when this information is proliferated by partisan news platforms. Dassonneville and Stiers (2018) and van der Meer et al. (2015) concluded that media exposure, without necessarily changing the vote options, has a reinforcement effect on people's vote options, especially for the voters that decided to offer their support for a particular party or candidate, before the electoral campaign started.

In contrast, for the voters without a vote option before the electoral campaign, the exposure to media can have an informational effect by activating their political attention and interest through the information they receive about parties and candidates (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) or through the social pressure they are exposed to (Sinclair, 2012). The different effects that media exposure has on voters help them to reach a vote choice or reinforce their options.

However, restrained research discusses about the factors that might determine Romanian voters to switch from one candidate/party or another either between or during elections. Thus, our study brings a new country into the discussion on the factors that influence voting decision process, arguing that media exposure contributes to vote changes. Based on new data from a third wave democracy, this chapter brings forward new insights to support this strand of literature. We show a significant impact of media exposure on three vote change categories, assessing that media platforms play a crucial role in voting decision process.

As previously mentioned, the research on the effects of media exposure on different vote types in the context of increasing intra-electoral volatility is vast. In a panel study comprising 55,847 voters from Dutch national elections, studied between 2006 and 2010, Van der Meer et al. (2015) concluded that there is an effect for voters who read news. Namely, more educated voters, who tend to be better informed tend to be more volatile compared with less informed voters. Thus, volatility is a deliberate choice. Being more informed might offer voters more complex mechanisms for processing voting related decisions and produce more changes in

preferences. Such voters could be more sensitive towards governmental performance, electoral debates, policy outcomes. They could also evaluate to a finer degree the differences between candidates, and be more inclined to accept voting changes, even if they could lead to ideological changes. Last, but not least, such educated voters could be more sensitive towards campaign issues saliency compared to less educated voters, thus, manifesting more volatility during campaigns.

Other studies, such as the one conducted by Ruth Dassonneville (2012) on Belgian voters in 2009, found no effect of exposure to media on vote changes of educated/sophisticated voters. They are more inclined to make decisive voting choices before electoral campaigns. Less educated individuals are less interested in politics and tend to switch sides during electoral campaigns. Researchers further developed the assumption that campaign exposure in the media can change one's choices. It means that voters who are more informed about political information and campaigns will tend to change their choices (Geers et al., 2019). Zaller's (1992) hypothesis sustains this assumption by arguing that voters with stable political choices often have better political knowledge and information within a campaign than uninformed ones (Zaller, 1992).

Anticipating Zaller's (1992) study findings, Converse (1980) assumes that those who are most influenced by the media are either extremely stable voters or volatile voters. According to Converse's findings (1980), the stable voters reach a vote option weeks before the end of the election campaign and they manifest high attention to campaign news due to their interest in politics. On the other

spectrum, the volatile voters use the media as a source of finding information that helps them to reach a vote option (Converse, 1980).

As intra-electoral volatility increases (Dassonneville, 2012; van der Meer et al., 2015), as documented by previous studies, this study contributes to the research gap concerning media exposure and its impacts on different vote types. We aim at unfolding the voting behaviour and explaining the differences in behaviour and the exposure to media channels by employing a three-wave panel study administered in Romania for the 2009 presidential election. This enables us to reveal different vote change behaviours during the election campaign. We intend to assess if the voting decision process is affected by the exposure to media channels during the electoral campaign.

In short, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of media exposure's effects by distinguishing between conversion, crystallization, and reinforcement and by testing if the voting decision process through the lens of electoral volatility is affected by the exposure of the electorate to media platforms. Firstly, we expect media exposure to have a positive effect on crystallization. Our reasoning is that undecided voters that are exposed to media search for supplementary information that help them to crystallize a vote option at the last moment, in congruence with findings from other recent studies (Bond et al., 2012):

H1: Exposure to media increases the likelihood of crystallization. Voters tend to crystallize a vote option during the campaign due to information they access online.

Secondly, we expect that voters who are exposed to media are also prone to change their vote options and convert their vote from one candidate to another. Based on this reasoning, we expect that conversion and media exposure are positively related. We conjecture that media exposure is positively affecting voters within the conversion category. The assumption is that exposed voters who have a candidate preference when the campaign starts, might change their voting choice based on the new information they receive about other candidates:

H2: Exposure to media has a positive effect on conversion. Voters exposed to media channels are prone to cast a vote for another candidate than the one preferred when the campaign started.

Our third conjecture builds on cognitive psychology theories. In line with Bakshy et al.'s (2009) findings, we expect that voters who are exposed to media are more prone to confirmation biases. This develops in the sense that they tend to predominantly share the news with friends and read the news that is in line with their ideology (Bakshy et al., 2009; Gallo & Langtry, 2020). Voters are prone to choose sources of information that are in line with their existing political predispositions and often resist media information if it contradicts their established beliefs (Mutz, 2001; Taber & Lodge, 2006):

H3: Exposure to media has a positive effect on reinforcement. Voters exposed to media channels are likely to keep their choices and reinforce their decisions due to confirmation biases.

2.3. Data and empirical strategy

2.3.1. The curious case of the Romanian electorate

We focus on Romania, a third-wave democracy country, treating it as a critical case study that may be representative of many of the Eastern European Union member states. The Romanian electorate is a curious case to study in the area of voting decision process and media exposure, for several reasons. Firstly, like other European countries, the Romanian electorate is characterized by a large share of voters who tend to switch between candidates/parties. In addition, fewer and fewer voters remain loyal to their political preferences, no matter the performance of the preferred party or candidate (Chiru & Gherghina, 2012; Gherghina & Tap, 2024).

Secondly, through this case study and based on the findings of other studies applied to European countries, we can test whether the patterns of vote change applicable in a first and second wave of democracies (Western countries) are also applicable in newer waves of democracy (Eastern European countries), particularly in a post-communist country. The findings of our study can help us better understand the role of media channels in recently democratized countries. The results could help us better assess the role of new media, such as social media channels, in offering candidates effective campaign channels, in increasing the digital participation and information of voters and, last, but not least, in determining who wins undecided and unsatisfied voters.

2.3.2. Data

Empirically, we select our variables from a three-wave panel study conducted in 2009 (Comşa et al., 2023). We select the year 2009 as our timeframe for the analysis, for two main reasons. Firstly, it was starting with the US presidential election in 2008 that the usage of social media during electoral campaign began to be successful. Therefore, we use the Romanian presidential election from 2009 to assess a similar impact of new media in another region, but in roughly the same period. Secondly, being one of the first studies looking at the impact of media channels on voting decision-making in Eastern Europe, we believe it is critical to first measure the level of media impact at its inception and then reassess after new advancements in media platform usage.

The sample consists of 1,505 respondents and is representative for the Romanian adult population for the main socio-demographic factors. The data was collected through Romanian Electoral Studies (RES) in the year 2009. The waves were applied as follows: one wave was applied before the start of the election campaign (10-20, November 2009), the second wave after the first round of the election (2-6, December 2009), and the third wave after the end of the election period (7-15, December 2009).

However, to avoid the potential of having *thwarted* voters in the sample – voters whose candidate option in the first round did not make it to the second round – we exclude from the analysis the third wave in order to avoid introducing *thwarted* voters. The rationale for this is that the respondents whose preferred candidate in the first round did not qualify for the second round would distort

our measurement of intra-electoral volatility because their vote change between rounds does not reflect genuine attitudinal or preference shifts, but rather a forced choice created by the electoral structure. In addition, since the candidate of their prime electoral choice did not qualify in the second round, the voter's behaviour does not represent, in our understanding, a change in vote preference, nor is a measurement of electoral volatility.

As the literature on electoral volatility shows, the meaningful vote changes are those driven by short-term factors, such as candidate evaluation, information exposure, or media effects, and not by institutional constraints that eliminate a voter's original option (Dassonneville, 2012, 2018; Lazarsfeld et al., 2019; Walczak et al., 2012). In two-round systems, the second round artificially restricts choice, which means that voters whose preferred candidate is eliminated must choose among remaining options regardless of their true preferences. Their behaviour, therefore, reflects a structural constraint rather than the individual-level mechanisms of reinforcement, conversion, or crystallization we aim to study.

Furthermore, from the main database, we extract variables emphasizing the focus of our study. For our dependent variable, we first select from the dataset a variable measured within the waves used in the survey. In the first wave, the respondents had a question that asked which candidate they would vote for if an election was held today, while in the second wave the respondents were asked which candidate they voted for in the first term of the presidential election.

Second, we recode our dependent variable by placing the respondents in one vote type category based on their answers. Thus, the recoded dependent variable has five possible outcomes. We structure the outcomes as follows: (1) *reinforcement* – it is the category of respondents that did not change their vote option during the electoral campaign, (2) *conversion* – represents the category of respondents that when the campaign started, they preferred one candidate and when the campaign ended, they voted for another candidate, (3) *crystallization* – it is the category of respondents that changed from a do not know position into acquiring a candidate option during the campaign. The fourth outcome, (4) *wavering*, is the group within voters changing their preferences several times or from having to not having a vote option. Our last category is (5) *party alienation*, which denotes the respondents that never indicate a vote option.

We exclude from the exploratory analysis alienation and wavering. The main reasoning is that alienation and wavering do not show explicitly if exposure to media had an impact on the voting decision process. These categories of voters did not express a vote option/cast a vote, or they had multiple vote options during the campaign. Based on this, we examine if the exposure to media during the electoral campaign affects differently the first three types of vote change: reinforcement, conversion, and crystallization.

For our independent variables, the most important one is the exposure of voters to media. This variable is measured with a battery of four questions, resulting in an index of media exposure ranging from 1 to 7. Another independent variable is the attention to the electoral campaign. This variable is also measured with a

battery of four questions, resulting in an index of campaign importance ranging from 1 to 5. The reason to construct the indices for media exposure and attention to the campaign comes from the difficulty to measure exposure or attention with simply one question or questions treated separately. Instead, we select several questions from the main dataset that deal with attention to campaign and exposure to media and construct two indices of the included variables. The exact questions selected to construct the indices are included in Table B1 in the Appendix B.

We include in our analysis several control variables from conventional socio-demographic variables such as age and gender to individual political predispositions such as political interest and strong preference towards a candidate or another.

2.3.3. Empirical strategy

We start by presenting a short descriptive analysis of vote changes observed during the electoral campaign. Following, we apply and present the findings of our association model that measures the potential relationship between media exposure and vote change. Because we have multiple independent observations with h-explanatory variables and because our response variable has more than two categories, we apply a multinomial logistic regression model with a base level category – party alienation. To compute the model, we estimate the following equation:

$$\log \left[\frac{\pi_j(x_i)}{\pi_k(x_i)} \right] = \alpha_i + \beta_{1j} * \text{political interest} + \beta_{2j} * \text{strong preference} + \beta_{3j} * \text{index 1 (attention to campaign)} + \beta_{4j} * \text{index 2 (media exposure)} + \beta_{5j} * \text{age} + \beta_{6j} * \text{gender} \quad (5)$$

where j denotes the vote change type (reinforcement, conversion, crystallization), π denotes the multinomial probability of an observation falling in the j th category, i denotes the observations relative to which the vote change types are tested (political interest, strong preference, index 1, index 2, age and gender) and k represent the base category chosen for our model. A base category means that the probability of membership in other categories is compared to the probability of membership in the base category. Furthermore, in our model $\alpha_i = 0$. To strengthen the results of our multinomial logistic regression, we also estimate the predicted probabilities of our independent variables. To obtain the predicted probabilities we compute the following equation:

$$\pi_{ij} = \frac{\exp\{\pi_{ij}\}}{\sum_{k=1}^J \exp\{\pi_{ik}\}} \quad (6)$$

where j denotes the vote change type (reinforcement, conversion, crystallization), i denotes the observations relative to which the vote change types are tested (political interest, strong preference, index 1, index 2, age and gender) and k represent the base category selected for our model. Note that equation 2 automatically yields probabilities that add up to one for each i . We also computed several robustness checks that were included in Table B2, from the Appendix B.

2.4. Results

In the first part of our empirical strategy, we identify the vote changes during the electoral campaign. To do so, we separate the voters into five different voting change categories, according to the literature: reinforcement, conversion, crystallization, wavering, and party alienation. Figure B1 in the Appendix B describes the frequencies of these voting changes' patterns of the electorate during the 2009 presidential election campaign.

The descriptive results show that the largest share of respondents (30%) crystallize their decision during the election campaign, while a similar share of respondents (29.5%) never changed their vote option throughout the election campaign. If anything, the exposure to media had a reinforcement role or a crystallizer role for vote intentions. Furthermore, the results emphasize that 25% of the respondents converted and changed their vote options. Additional analysis indicates that a reason for their conversion is associated with the information they read and share on media platforms during the electoral campaign.

The latest two groups of vote change do not appear to be highly common in our sample. Only 5% represents wavering, those voters that changed their options for several times. Furthermore, our last category – party alienation – is represented in the sample only by 10%. These voters did not have a vote option when the campaign started and ended up not having one when the campaign ended. For these reasons, we did not include the last two categories in our explanatory model.

In general, the results presented above sustain key findings of previous research. Firstly, electoral campaigns are characterized by some degree of volatility. Secondly, many voters decide which party or candidate to vote for in the last weeks or days of the electoral campaigns. Because crystallization, conversion and reinforcement occur most when the campaign ends, we assume that voters' changes in their candidate options are influenced by the instruments used in campaigns (e.g., advertising messages, electoral debates, unexpected events related to candidates and supporting parties etc.). However, the question that remains is to what extent these changes are explained by the exposure of the respondents to media.

To answer this question, in the second part of our analytical strategy, we apply our multinomial model to measure this relationship. Tables 5 and 6 reveal the results of the multinomial logistic regression model and our predicted probability.

Table 5. Multinomial logistic regression assessing the effects of media exposure on voting change types

	Conversion (1)	Crystallization (2)	Reinforcement (3)
Age	0.997 (0.006)	1.000 (0.005)	1.001 (0.006)
Gender	0.991 (0.202)	1.023 (0.198)	0.948 (0.199)
Political interest	1.125 (0.131)	1.059 (0.128)	1.152 (0.129)
Strong preference	1.046 (0.136)	0.922 (0.133)	0.997 (0.134)

Index 1 (attention to campaign)	0.791 (0.210)	0.725 (0.205)	0.613** (0.209)
Index 2 (exposure to media)	0.813* (0.111)	0.795** (0.109)	0.749*** (0.111)
Constant	4.894** (0.725)	8.326*** (0.709)	8.973*** (0.714)
Log Likelihood		-1765.039	
Nagelkerke R squared		0.016	

Note: N = 1,351. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Party alienation is the base category.

Based on the results in Table 5, we test our alternative hypotheses. H1 assumed that exposure to media positively affects the crystallization category. The regression results show a positive effect of media exposure on crystallization, at a significance level of $p<0.05$. This means that exposure to media during the electoral campaign increases the chances to crystallize a vote option. A one-unit increase in exposure to media increases the log odds of crystallization by 0.795. Hence, hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

Applying the same reasoning for H2 and H3, we arrive at similar conclusions. H2 assumed that exposure to media has a positive effect on conversion. However, even if the results of our multinomial logistic regression for this category are positive, they are significant only at a level of $p<0.1$. The exposure to media affects voters with an opinion formed before the electoral campaign but does not necessarily persuade them to change their vote choice. Thus, H2 is valid at a lower significance level.

Turning to our third hypothesis, we measure if the exposure to media has a positive effect on reinforcement, since people tend to be in general highly influenced by confirmation biases or by their

ideological identity. In line with our expectations and with the findings observed in Table 5, the results of our multinomial regression show a highly significant relationship between exposure to media and reinforcement, confirming our conjecture. A one-unit increase in exposure to media increases the log odds of reinforcement by 0.749, at a level of significance of $p < 0.01$. Voters who kept their primary choice during the entire campaign are unconsciously following and searching information on media that confirms their primary choice. Usually, these voters confer high importance to the electoral campaign and follow the electoral debates and other events organized for the campaign to reinforce their choices. This assumption is sustained by the results of our regression. Contrary to the other vote change types, the attention to the campaign affects the most the reinforcement category. A one-unit increase in the attention paid to the electoral campaign increases the log odds of reinforcement by 0.613 at a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

Because the coefficients of multinomial logistic regression are relative, we also estimate the effects of our independent variables in terms of predicted probabilities. The results of predicted probabilities are presented in Table 6. It can be distinguished that higher levels of media exposure and campaign attention are associated with an increased likelihood of vote reinforcement and crystallization, rather than conversion. In particular, among voters with high media exposure, reinforcement emerges as the most probable outcome (0.39), followed by crystallization (0.36), while conversion remains comparatively less likely (0.30). A similar pattern is observed for attention to the

electoral campaign: at high levels of attention, the predicted probability of reinforcement (0.35) slightly exceeds that of crystallization (0.34), with conversion again remaining lower (0.28).

The analysis presented above emphasizes some general, but important insights into the effect of media exposure on the voting decision process. The results indicate positive effects of exposure to media on conversion and crystallization and highly positive effects for reinforcement. We observe small differences between the categories of vote change. Voters within the reinforcement category are the most influenced by confirmation bias or ideological identity, determining them to look out for information that reinforces their beliefs. The exposure to media, but also the attention to the electoral campaign, are highly significant for reinforcement, while conversion and crystallization are affected only by the exposure to media.

Table 6. Predicted probabilities of each type of vote change

	Low level	Moderate level	High level
<i>Political interest</i>	<i>(score = 1)</i>	<i>(score = 3)</i>	<i>(score = 5)</i>
Conversion	0.22	0.25	0.28
Crystallization	0.30	0.33	0.36
Reinforcement	0.26	0.30	0.33
<i>Strong preference</i>	<i>(score = 1)</i>	<i>(score = 3)</i>	<i>(score = 5)</i>
Conversion	0.22	0.25	0.28
Crystallization	0.30	0.33	0.36
Reinforcement	0.26	0.30	0.33
<i>Index 1 (attention to campaign)</i>	<i>(score = 1)</i>	<i>(score = 3)</i>	<i>(score = 5)</i>
Conversion	0.23	0.26	0.28
Crystallization	0.28	0.32	0.34

Reinforcement	0.29	0.32	0.35
<i>Index 2 (media exposure)</i>	<i>(score = 1)</i>	<i>(score = 3)</i>	<i>(score = 5)</i>
Conversion	0.22	0.26	0.30
Crystallization	0.27	0.31	0.36
Reinforcement	0.29	0.34	0.39

Note: N = 1,351. The table shows the predicted probability of each type of vote change at low, moderate, and high values of the independent variables.

2.5. Discussion

Limited, but novel, research has focused on short-term factors affecting electoral volatility, especially on the effects of media exposure on vote changes and the voting decision process in the Romanian context. Thus, the aim of this chapter was to uncover whether vote changes can be associated with media exposure and how this exposure affects different categories of vote change at an individual level. To achieve this, the chapter used the original data collected through the Romanian Electoral Studies (RES). The research was conducted in three waves as part of the 2009 Romanian presidential elections. Additionally, we elaborated an index of media exposure and an index of attention to the electoral campaign. The findings of this chapter reinforce those from previous studies (Dassonneville, 2012; Dassonneville & Stiers, 2018; Stiers & Dassonneville, 2020; van der Meer et al., 2015; Walczak et al., 2012) in identifying the determinants contributing to the vote changes.

The chapter distinguished between five types of vote changes during the electoral campaign, but it only focused on three of them. The results of the descriptive analysis showed that the first largest share of voters' category (30%) was crystallization, the one

that acquire a vote option during the electoral campaign. Additional analysis showed strong positive effects of media exposure. The group of crystallizers changes their position from not having a vote option at the beginning of the campaign to having one until the end of the campaign. Several factors contribute to the vote's crystallization, including exposure to media or the belief in civic duty.

In addition to media exposure and civic duty, voting crystallization could be explained by several campaign mechanisms that might reduce uncertainty and raise the voters' incentives to decide on a specific candidate. As the electoral campaign advances, voters can clarify their understanding of candidates and the consequences of elections. They could learn more about candidates and parties through debates and interviews which could help them update their political attitudes and choose a candidate. These factors could be enhanced and mediated by political crystallization of candidates and parties. Some parties form alliances, some candidates withdraw from the electoral competition, while other competitors could alter or even polarize their electoral offerings as a result of such political crystallization, thus, making it easier for the electors to crystallize their electoral option.

Furthermore, campaign communication increases the salience of particular issues, candidates increasing the visibility and usage of issues and emotions that they can control, therefore priming the voters on these campaign issues. This makes it easier for initially undecided voters to crystallize and anchor their choice to issues that become most important to them once the campaign unfolds and reaches the last stages. The priming could be effective

for voting crystallization because it can provide undecided voters low-cost informational shortcuts, such as coalition signals, candidate endorsements. Thus, priming could reduce the costs for electoral cognitive processes and increase the probability for crystallizing a decision. Last, but not least, a similar crystallization engagement can be obtained through factors that tend to be activated in the last part of the electoral campaign: surveys, door-to-door and last-minute mobilization via personal connections. Thus, undecided voters could crystallize their vote strategically.

The second-largest share of voters (29.5%) reinforce their vote option during the election period. As an outcome of media exposure, voters with a strong preference before the campaign maintained their vote option until the end of the campaign. We assume electoral campaigns and exposure to media reinforce voting options for voters with a strong preference acquired before the campaign. The reinforcement role is caused by the tendency of decided voters to look after and share information on media that only confirms their vote option due to their confirmation bias or ideological identity.

In addition, the reinforcement may also reflect mechanisms that include evaluation and social context. Firstly, media can provide inputs that support decision and confirm and stabilize a previous electoral choice. This can be done through mechanisms such as bandwagon effect induced by the political parties in order to reassure their supporters that their vote is the right one and, thus, strengthening / reinforcing their electoral commitment. In a similar manner, the candidates and their parties favour salient issues through electoral agenda-setting and better anchor the voters'

preference. Last, but not least, media exposure can provide additional information and reduce the political ambivalence of voters, increase the approval of a candidate and, therefore, reinforcing their choices during the electoral campaign.

Secondly, reinforcement can be produced by campaign communication and socially mediated interaction with peers. These mechanisms can increase supporters' mobilization and voter's self-confidence in their turnout intention and vote decision, without changing the preference. Media can also have negative partisan effects. When media presents narratives that intensify aversion towards specific candidates or parties, supporters of these parties could reinforce their option even if their voting support for that party is only mild. Their voting reinforcement is in line with the voting behaviour known as underdog effect.

The third significant share of voters is represented by conversion (25%), the category that changed their vote option from the beginning of the campaign to another vote option until the end of the campaign. Beyond the effect of media exposure on the conversion category, some voters within this category may also apply strategic voting to support their preferred candidate to run in the second term (Dassonneville and Stiers, 2018). Other possible explanations reside in the unexpected events that happen in electoral campaigns. Candidates' poor performances in debates, electoral scandals, media investigations can change electors' perceptions about candidates' competence, integrity or leadership capacity. For example, in the 2009 Romanian Presidential elections, media outlets presented evidences that Mircea Geoană, the opposition candidate, visited the residence of Ovidiu Vântu, a rich

and controversial businessman accused of corruption. This information was also used by the incumbent candidate, Traian Băsescu, in the last presidential debate, to frame the debate and diminish the integrity of his challenger (Revista 22, 2009). Following such campaign events, voters could sanction or reward candidates by vote switch.

In addition, the vote change can be explained by, sometimes unexpected, changes in issue salience during campaign. Charges of corruption, electoral process mismanagement, economic crises, security issues, can change voters' choices and become the dominant voting criterion. For example, prior to the second round in the 2014 Romanian Presidential elections, electoral agenda previously dominated by integrity and economic and social issue, was replaced by a new issue: fairness of electoral process in diaspora. A decision to limit the number of polling stations in diaspora translated into a massive mobilization favourable to the opposition candidate. Another example is offered by the terrorist attacks in Madrid in March 2004, days before the general elections. This event suddenly changed the electoral issues from economics to security, leading to vote switch of dissatisfied electors, and loss of the elections by the Popular Party in favour of the Socialist Party (Bali, 2007).

Overall, the first part emphasizes patterns of the vote changes, as well as an increasing level of volatility among voters. Considering that nowadays the campaign strategies are designed mostly to be applied to online environments, it is also important to observe how voters might change their voting decision process due to the type of information they read and share on online platforms.

Turning to the second part of the study and in line with the research objective, the chapter aims at finding out whether these changes can be explained by voters' exposure to media. Based on the findings of previous research, we expect that exposure to media has a significant positive effect on conversion, reinforcement, and crystallization. In line previous studies, the results show a positive effect of media exposure for all of these three vote changes. More specifically, for crystallization, we observe that exposure to media raises the chance of acquiring a vote option. In that sense, we attribute an informational role to media exposure. Testing media exposure through other methodologies (e.g., sentiment analysis) also offers insights about the types of media content that determine voters to acquire a vote option.

Previous research on specific countries found that exposure to issue news raises the chance of crystallization, while exposure to poll news decreases the chance of crystallization (Geers et al., 2019). Studies on how the content of the posts shared on media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) affect voters' decision process are limited, especially for new wave democracy countries. The result of our hypothesis sustains the findings from previous research in the sense that voters who are exposed to media content are more likely to crystallize their vote choice (Blumenstiel & Plischke, 2015; Geers et al., 2019).

For reinforcement, we observe that exposure to media increases the chance of reinforcing the vote option until the end of the campaign. We assume that exposure to media does not affect only undecided voters, but also voters using media platforms to reinforce their options. We attribute a reinforcing role of media

exposure. Previous research has shown that voters may be exposed unconsciously to confirmation bias while navigating the internet (Gallo & Langtry, 2020). Specific research on the reinforcement category is necessary to observe if media exposure is one of the main factors for voters' reinforcement behaviour.

Other studies emphasized that voters' evaluation of the president or political actors is also influenced by voters' ideological identity that determines them to look out for information in accordance with their beliefs (Lebo and Cassino, 2007). In line with these voters' predispositions, our multinomial analysis supports the conjecture that the attention to the campaign affects the reinforcement category, while for the other categories it does not seem to have an impact on their final choice. These results strengthen our assumption that individuals seek out information to reinforce their own beliefs, media platforms being one of the most powerful channels.

Regarding our third category, conversion, the findings suggest that exposure to media affects the final vote choice of the voters. However, the results are not highly significant. In line with our preposition for the crystallization category, to understand how the exposure to media is contributing to the formation of a vote choice during the campaign a sentiment analysis methodology is required. Previous research focused more on political knowledge as a factor affecting the conversion category. Those studies show that the level of political knowledge is not that significant for the conversion category (Geers & Strömbäck, 2019).

Overall, the findings suggest that media exposure has, to some extent, an effect on the voting decision process. Our results

emphasize that media exposure affects differently the vote change categories during the election campaign. The mechanisms used by media platforms to affect voters' preference towards a candidate/party, or another, remain untested.

2.6. Conclusions

In the conclusions for this chapter we have to highlight some shortcomings of our study. Firstly, we only focus on the potential effects of media exposure to different types of vote changes, without considering a sentiment analysis of the content shared on media platforms. Including an analysis of the content shared on media offers an in-depth view of how different content affects differently the vote types. Secondly, we are restricted to the self-perceptions of respondents towards media exposure that can raise the issue of respondents' biases. Thirdly, the absence of updated data makes it difficult to assess our assumptions on more recent presidential elections, characterized by an increase in new media usage

A caution should be put forward concerning the interpretation of the relationship between exposure to media and voting. Firstly, the crystallizers, or at least some of them, could change their initial "no option" as a result of a perceived normative pressure to identify a candidate with the election day approaching. This could lead to the possibility that measuring crystallization may also include situations in which media could rather increase the incentive to vote, leading to vote activation, than the change in preference through persuasion. Secondly, the strong effect of media

exposure may also reflect a selection mechanism: voters who begin to make up their minds, or who are more interested in politics, tend to consume more information during the campaign. These factors could increase the probability to decide but also to consume more media, therefore influencing the direction of the causal relationship.

Further research is necessary to observe the mechanisms used by electoral campaigns to attract voters towards a candidate or another. Employing a media content analysis of the information shared during the campaigns could help in revealing some of these strategies. This type of analysis also allows for observing what media content affects which type of vote change behaviour and what content is not effective for the process of vote decision. From a general perspective, our findings are optimistic. In line with Stromback (2005), we sustain the argument of an informed electorate on political issues and of an electorate participating in the electoral process as representing the cornerstone of democracy. Moreover, we assess a significant impact of media exposure in helping voters to acquire the necessary political information to crystallize a vote option or to help them to strengthen their confidence in their vote choice. In general terms, we assume that media contributes among other factors to the formation of a voting decision.

It remains an open question if media objectively contributes to informed voting decisions or if it is used as a tool for political confirmation bias to produce shock election results. This study only shows the effects of media exposure on the voting decision process, assuming that voters are oriented towards a candidate or another depending on the information shared on media platforms.

Despite these limitations, this chapter presents some additional strengths of our study. Firstly, it is one of the few studies that analyse the effects of media exposure on voters in new wave democracies, and secondly, it can be used as first-stage research that allows for further investigation on the effects of media as campaign instruments in new wave democracies elections. These findings demonstrate that voters are susceptible to change, reinforcing, or crystallizing their vote option due to the exposure to media. Exposure to media contributes to the process of voting decisions by having an informational and reinforcement role. Voters use the information (also the information shared on media) as input for substantial deliberation to come to an informed vote choice.

Chapter 3. The connection between party positions and media influence: A Romanian paradox

Abstract

Media leaning has become a significant concern for media scholars and practitioners in recent years. The increasing polarization of political discourse and the rise of partisan media outlets have exacerbated this issue. This chapter aims to examine the relationship between party positions and media, and to understand how this relationship varies across different individuals. Employing an original dataset collected in 2023 in Romania, this chapter investigates to what extent the media consumption behaviour of individuals is reflected in their self-declared political orientation. The chapter is expected to yield several potential findings and it will contribute to our understanding of the complex relationship between political parties and the media, shedding light on the potential role of party positions in shaping media coverage.

Keywords: media leaning; self-declared political orientation; media consumption; individuals' political behaviour

3.1. Introduction

The news media plays a crucial role in contemporary societies, providing citizens with essential information on various issues, particularly politics. However, it is evident that each media outlet constructs its own version of reality. Despite the widely recognized political bias in the media (Barberá et al., 2015; Hassell et al., 2020; Schiffer, 2006; van der Linden et al., 2020), individuals often have a limited understanding of the proximity between media channels and political parties (Hochwarter et al., 2020).

This recurrent issue of political bias of media, has been extensively explored in electoral studies and communication studies, focusing on the alignment of media channels' reality construction with political ideologies and party agendas. Previous research has proposed several methods for measuring media outlets' political leaning and ideology, such as content analysis (Meyer & Wagner, 2021), surveys (Mitchell et al., 2014), and machine-learning sentiment analysis (Falck et al., 2020), among others. Based on their findings, previous studies share a common belief that media outlets, categorized as left-wing or right-wing, tend to cater to specific ideological preferences, with individuals presumed to align themselves with media that matches their political orientations. However, this chapter challenges this conventional assumption by investigating the paradox of misalignment between individuals' political orientation and their media consumption behaviour. In this chapter, we test whether left-wing individuals from Romania are favouring right-wing media channels and vice-versa.

Romania's fledgling democracy is still undergoing its developmental phase. Within the realm of political analysis, the arguments presented often carry a sense of ambiguity, and the quality of political discourse in the media displays a level of uncertainty. A foundational premise we began with is that proprietors of media outlets aimed to exert influence on the political sphere. Consequently, their perspectives were adopted by a majority of talk show participants, irrespective of the ideological leaning of the media platform. As a result of this dynamic, the audience (comprising Romanian citizens) sought to achieve two primary objectives: (1) they endeavoured to pinpoint alternative political viewpoints presented on different media platforms in order to fortify their own political convictions and (2) they aspired to comprehend the divergent approaches of opposing political factions toward the same subject matter.

In Romania, as in many other countries, media plays a crucial role in shaping political opinions and influencing public discourse. Media outlets are often perceived as having distinct ideological leanings, catering to left-wing and right-wing audiences. However, this study explores the intriguing paradox of Romanian individuals' media behaviour, where individuals with left-wing political orientations exhibit a preference for consuming right-wing media channels and vice versa.

This chapter contributes to the ongoing research efforts uncovering media channels' reality construction with political ideologies and party agendas. We focus on two main questions: (1) To what extent do individuals' self-declared political orientation align with their media consumption behaviour? and (2) Does the

level of sympathy or antipathy towards a specific party influences the media consumption behaviour? To address these questions, this chapter employs an empirical analysis based on survey data analysis. Firstly, we conducted a pilot survey to assess the political orientations of participants and their media consumption habits. The survey includes questions related to their preferred media channels, the frequency of consumption, the level of trust in different channels of information, as well as questions assessing individuals' political engagement. Secondly, we employ correlation and regression models on selected media outlets to identify their ideological leanings and assess the extent of their reach across the political spectrum.

Preliminary findings reveal a paradoxical relationship between political orientations and media behaviour among Romanian individuals. Surprisingly, left-wing participants display a higher propensity to consume right-wing media channels. However, ring-wing individuals tend to have a more balanced media consumption behaviour. These results challenge the conventional assumptions about the role of media in reinforcing existing beliefs. Existing research on political orientations and media behaviour has primarily supported the idea that individuals tend to consume media that aligns with their political beliefs. This alignment is often attributed to selective exposure theory, which suggests that people prefer information that reinforces their existing beliefs. However, recent studies have highlighted the presence of selective avoidance, wherein individuals deliberately seek out contrasting viewpoints to reinforce their own convictions or maintain a balanced perspective.

The remaining part of this chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly present the dependent and independent variables of the analysis, as well as the empirical model employed to test our hypotheses, while Chapter 3.3 discusses the findings of empirical analysis and presents the results of the logistic regression models. Chapter 3.4 presents the conclusions and further research directions.

3.2. Data and empirical strategy

We rely on original individual data collected in 2023. The survey collected information from individuals in Romania. Our pilot dataset includes a sample of approximately 200 individuals, aged 18 and over.⁵ There are two reasons to employ this dataset. Firstly, the dataset contains the necessary sample size which allows us to conduct a pilot study in order to test not only our main assumption, but also to test the applicability of the survey's questions for our research objectives. Secondly, the dataset offers the necessary information needed to apply our empirical model and to test both the self-declared political orientation of individuals, as well as the distance between the declared political orientation and actual media political behaviour.

As an empirical strategy, we estimate a logistic regression. We control for several other factors, and we estimate several checks to emphasize the robustness of our results. To capture media exposure and its ideological orientation, we construct three binary

⁵ Detailed information about the dataset and variables used in our analysis are presented in Table A1.

variables based on respondents' self-reported use of specific news outlets during the electoral campaign. Firstly, we create a dummy variable for left-oriented media exposure, coded 1 if the respondent reported accessing at least one outlet classified as left-leaning (such as Antena 3, Gândul, Observator, Realitatea TV), and 0 otherwise. Secondly, we construct a corresponding dummy variable for right-oriented media exposure, coded 1 if the respondent accessed at least one outlet classified as right-leaning, (such as Adevărul, B1 TV, Digi24, G4Media, HotNew), and 0 otherwise. Thirdly, for robustness purposes, we define a simplified media exposure indicator, coded 1 if the respondent was exposed to any right-oriented media outlet and 0 otherwise. This parsimonious coding allows us to test whether the substantive results hold when media exposure is captured through a single binary indicator rather than differentiated by ideological orientation. Thus, logistic regression specification has the following form:

$$\log(p(x)) = \log\left(\frac{p(x)}{1-p(x)}\right) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i \quad (9)$$

where α_0 is the constant of the equation, and $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \dots, \alpha_i$ are the coefficients for the independent variables. The parameters of the logistic regression are estimated by using maximum likelihood. Specifically, p can be computed having in view the following specification:

$$p = \frac{e^{\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i}}{1 + e^{\alpha_0 + \alpha_1 x_1 + \alpha_2 x_2 + \dots + \alpha_i x_i}} \quad (10)$$

The pilot survey included items capturing (1) respondents' self-declared political orientation, (2) their attitudes toward PSD (pro/neutral/anti), (3) trust in different information sources, and (4) socio-demographic characteristics. Media behaviour was measured through self-reported access to a set of prominent news outlets. For the empirical analysis, we operationalize media access using binary indicators that capture whether a respondent accesses (at least occasionally) outlets categorized as right-leaning or left-leaning, based on their dominant editorial framing and widely recognized positioning in the Romanian media market.

We choose to rely on logistic regression models because they are used for categorical and binary dependent variables. Furthermore, these kinds of models are attractive since they do not assume linearity, normality, or homoscedasticity.

In the regression models, the dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator of access to right-leaning news outlets, while key independent variables include self-declared ideology and party affect (anti-PSD), alongside trust in TV, trust in social media, and trust in information from friends and family. We also include standard socio-demographic controls to account for compositional differences in media consumption. Coefficients are analysed in relation with the changes in the log-odds of accessing right-leaning outlets. Given the pilot nature of the dataset and the modest sample size, the methodological goal is primarily exploratory, that is to evaluate the feasibility of the instrument and to identify systematic correlates of cross-ideological media exposure that can be tested more rigorously in future research.

Considering political behaviour as a gathering instrument of available information, we anticipate that individual's political orientation is not reflected in media behaviour. The expectation of this study is that those who self-identify as being left-wing oriented access more media channels that are oriented towards ring-wing issues than channels oriented to left-wing issues. Additionally, we expect that individuals who declared themselves as being more ring-wing oriented have a more balanced behaviour when accessing mass media channels.

3.3. Results and discussions

This section presents the results of our pilot study. Firstly, we tested the correlation between individuals' self-declared political orientation and their behaviour in terms of mass media access. The results presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 indicate that individuals' political orientation is not always reflected in their media consumption behaviour. In addition, this paradox can be attributed to individuals' lack of political knowledge, which leads to challenges in accurately assessing the political orientation of various media channels.

The figures below describe the correlation between the self-declared political orientation of individuals (left, centre, or right) and their preference for specific mass media channels. As can be observed, there are variations in media consumption preferences among individuals with different political orientations. Some media channels are more popular among left-wing individuals, while others are favoured by right-wing individuals. These figures

suggest that political orientation plays a role in shaping media behaviour, but it also reveals instances where individuals from one political orientation consume media that aligns with the opposite ideological spectrum. This indicates a level of media pluralism and diversity in information sources within the Romanian context.

Figure 1. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the self-declared political orientation

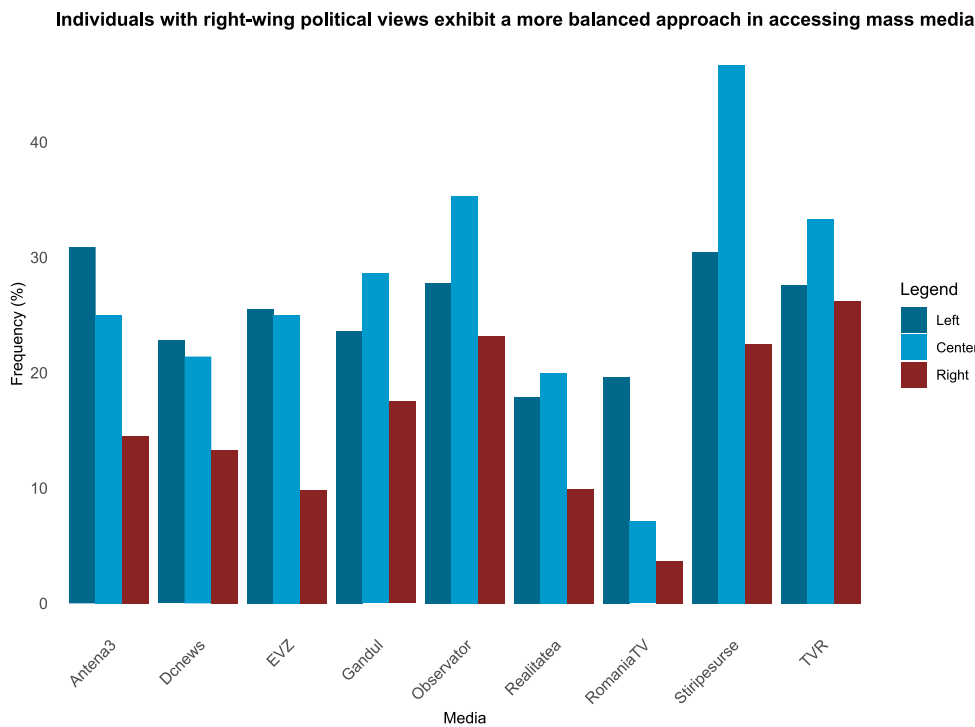
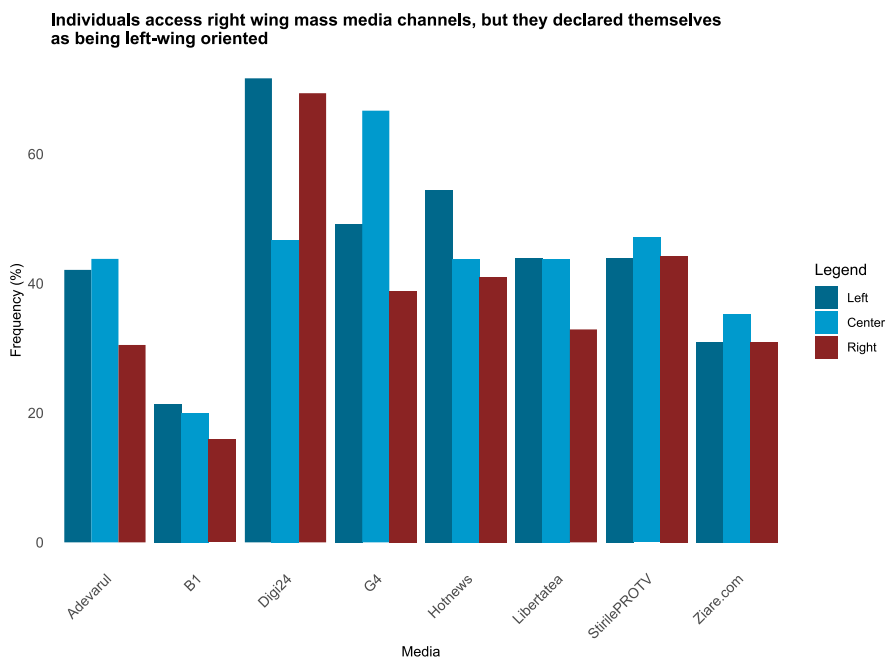


Figure 2. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the self-declared political orientation

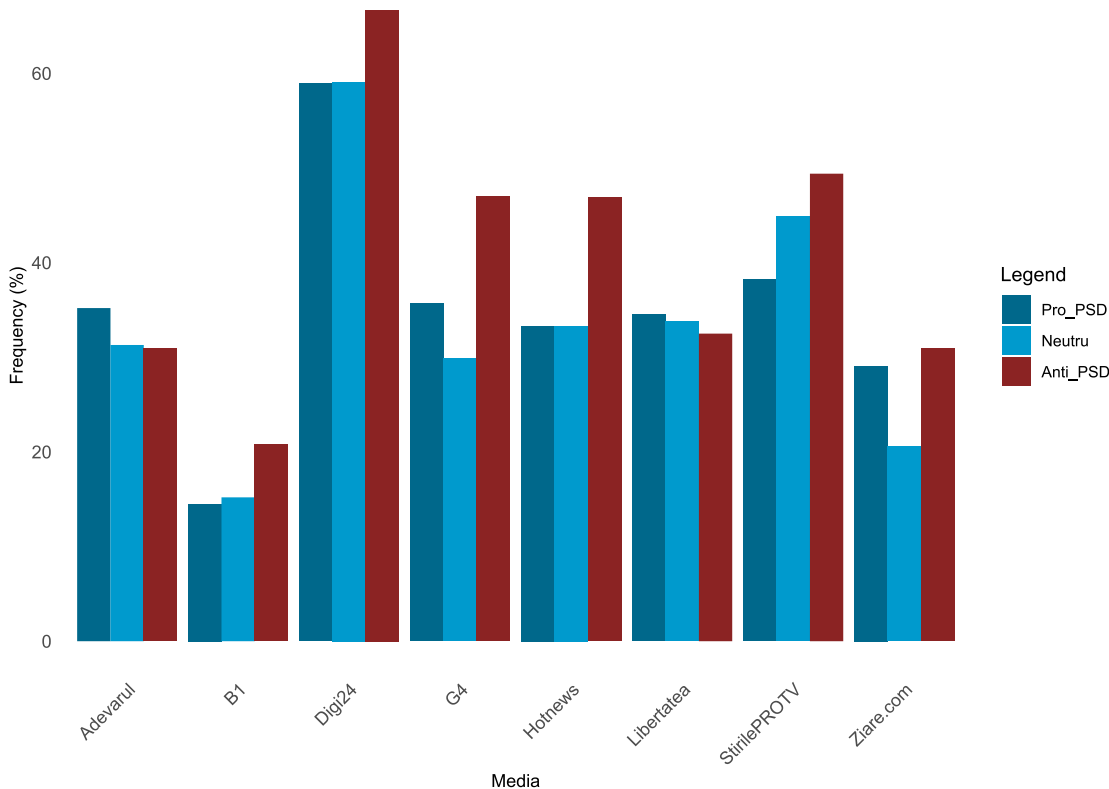


Additionally, we also tested the position of individuals towards a left-wing Romanian party and their mass media behaviour. In Figures 3 and 4 we show the distribution of respondents across three categories: "Pro-PSD" (supporters of PSD - Social Democratic Party), Neutral (neither supporter, neither opposed to PSD), and "Anti-PSD" (opponents of PSD) with respect to their media preferences for specific news outlets. These results can be indicative of media polarization and the influence of political affiliations on media preferences. The differences in media consumption patterns among different political groups might be attributed to several factors. For instance, some media outlets may be perceived as having political bias favouring a particular party, leading supporters of that party to prefer and trust those outlets more. Moreover, individuals often seek information that reinforces

their existing beliefs and opinions. Pro-PSD respondents may gravitate towards media outlets perceived to support their views, while Anti-PSD respondents might do the same with outlets critical of PSD. It is important to note that these results are contradictory to the previous results presented above.

The results reveal an intriguing discrepancy between self-declared political orientations and media consumption patterns. Contrary to conventional expectations, individuals who identified as left-wing oriented demonstrated a preference for accessing right-wing media channels, while those who declared themselves as right- oriented showed a more balanced propensity for accessing right-wing media channels.

Figure 3. Cross – correlation between the access of right mass media channels and the position of individuals towards PSD



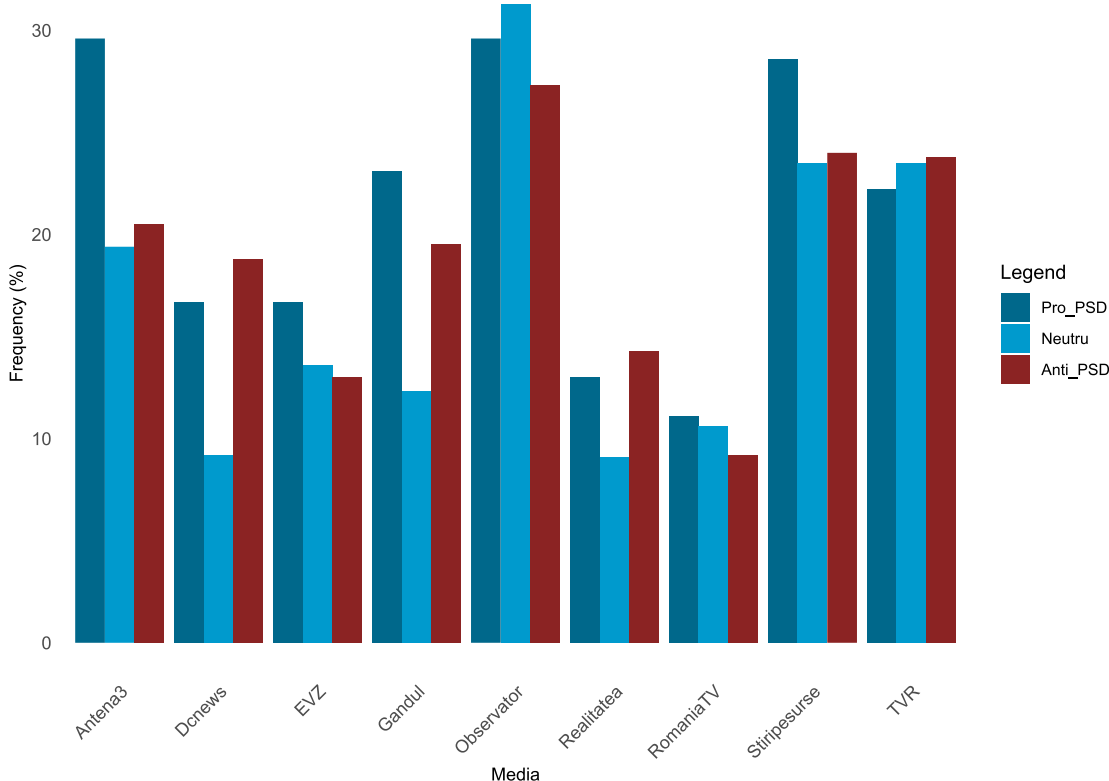
Conversely, respondents who identified as pro-PSD (a left-wing party) displayed a greater inclination towards accessing left-wing media channels. These findings underscore the complexity of media consumption behaviour, indicating that political affiliations alone do not strictly dictate media preferences. The observed patterns suggest that individuals seek diverse sources of information, engage critically with media, and might prioritize

factors beyond ideological alignment when accessing news outlets. These results prompt further exploration into the intricate dynamics of media consumption and political affiliations in the Romanian context, shedding light on the nuanced interplay between media behaviour and political ideologies.

These patterns may also suggest the lack of political understanding and knowledge of individuals. Some respondents might not have a deep understanding of the specific ideologies or policy positions associated with the political parties they align with or oppose. Often the way in which public and social policies are promoted by representatives of power confuse citizens who do not understand why some right-wing policies are made by left-wing representatives and left-wing policies are made by right-wing representatives. As a result, they might access media outlets that do not necessarily align with their declared political orientation due to a lack of awareness about the ideological stances of those outlets. Last, but not least, it might be difficult for respondents to identify one single and clear ideological orientation of media outlets, therefore, they might not feel any cognitive and ideological dissonance in consuming media that has adverse ideological orientation.

The discrepancy between self-declared political orientations and media consumption patterns in Romania calls for a comprehensive exploration of the factors driving individuals' media behaviour. Further research can delve into the impact of media literacy, media trust, and the role of media outlets in shaping public opinions across political spectrums.

Figure 4. Cross – correlation between the access of left mass media channels and the position of individuals towards PSD



Second, we employed a logistic regression model to test the impact of several factors on media access behaviour. We aimed at exploring which factors contribute to individuals' decision to access either a right – wing or left – wing mass media channel. The results emphasized in Table 6 offer valuable insights into the factors influencing mass media access to right-wing channels. Table 6 presents the results of the regression analysis examining the

relationship between mass media access (right-wing media channels), self-declared political orientation, trust in different information sources (TV, social media, information from friends and family), as well as other demographic variables (gender, and age).

Table 6. Estimates of logistic regression on factors affecting the access of right – wing mass media channels

	Mass media access (right)
Self-declared political orientation	0.14* (0.08)
Trust in TV	0.21* (0.12)
Trust in social media	0.06 (0.11)
Trust in information provided by friends and family	-0.23** (0.12)
Anti-PSD	0.15 (0.19)
Gender	0.41 (0.46)
Age	0.05*** (0.02)
Observations	197
Log Likelihood	-80.82
AIC	177.64

Note: Standard errors are presented in parentheses; *, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% confidence.

The positive association with self-declared political orientation highlights the role of ideological alignment in shaping media preferences. Trust in TV and social media as positive predictors indicates that individuals who have confidence in these information sources are more likely to access right-wing media outlets, potentially indicating media echo chambers or bubble democracy where individuals reinforce their existing beliefs. The negative association between trust in information from friends and family and mass media access to right-wing channels suggests that interpersonal networks might not be strong sources of right-wing media exposure. This could indicate the presence of homophily within social circles, where people tend to interact with others who share similar political views. The weak positive association between anti-PSD affiliation and mass media access to right-wing channels may indicate that political opposition to a specific party might play a minor role in media choices compared to broader ideological orientation. Finally, the demographic variables (gender and age) as significant predictors of mass media access to right-wing channels suggest that these media preferences might vary based on socio-demographic factors.

Beyond statistical significance, the results in Table 6 are important to illustrate how citizens reach ideologically labelled outlets. The positive coefficients for self-declared ideology and trust in TV indicate that orientation and perceived credibility of traditional broadcast sources are associated with a higher likelihood of accessing right-leaning channels, while reliance on friends and family is negatively related to such access. Age also emerges as a statistically significant predictor, suggesting that

media access patterns are structured not only by political dispositions but also by generational habits and information routines. Predicted probabilities further clarify the analysis showing differences in likelihood across respondents.

Another important finding based on the descriptive figures and the regression results is that political behaviour in Romania may be better captured by two related but distinct dimensions: (1) the left-right self-placement and (2) the party affect (pro-PSD or anti-PSD). The descriptive patterns show that self-declared ideology does not fit neatly onto media behaviour, while the PSD-based categorization produces a different and, in some respects, opposite distribution of media access. These findings can be interpreted as evidence that ideology is not always the primary organizing principle for media choice. Party-related evaluations and perceived outlet credibility may intervene between abstract ideological labels and concrete media behaviour.

These results are compatible with several political behaviour mechanisms beyond standard selective exposure. Cross-ideological media access may a context where citizens perceive politics as ambiguous, where outlet positions are not easily identifiable, or where audiences deliberately compare competing narratives to validate their own views. At the same time, the trust-related findings suggest interpersonal networks may channel information in ways that could reduce reliance on ideologically branded outlets. Framing the Romanian case in terms of both selective exposure and selective avoidance would better reflect the patterns observed in this pilot study.

Taking into account the limits of the pilot design of this study, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than causal. The survey relies on self-reported media access and trust, which can be affected by recall error and social desirability, and the regression models are estimated on a limited sample. In addition, the classification of outlets as “right-leaning” or “left-leaning” is inherently imperfect in the Romanian context. Firstly, because media ownership and editorial policies often change the ideological orientation of the outlets. Secondly, because respondents may have limited political knowledge and may struggle to accurately identify the ideological orientation of media outlets. Finally, because media exposure and trust are likely endogenous to political attitudes, so the observed associations can be interpreted as correlates of media access patterns, which can further motivate stronger tests with larger samples and more refined measurements.

3.4. Conclusions

The chapter sheds light on the paradoxical relationship between political orientations and media behaviour in Romania. The unexpected media preferences of left-wing and right-wing individuals challenge traditional assumptions about the role of media in reinforcing ideological beliefs.

The history of post-communist Romania shows that the media has the claim to be the “fourth power in the state” but uses ambivalent stereotypes. The way right or left-wing politics are understood combined with the methods certain media outlets use to promote them, can generate confusion among the audience, who

seek to complete their information and understand correctly what is being conveyed to them by accessing multiple media channels, whether right or left. By investigating the unique dynamics of media consumption in the Romanian political context, we aim to contribute to the broader understanding of political communication in diverse societies. Further research and analysis are warranted to comprehensively explore the factors driving this phenomenon and its impact on the country's political landscape.

The logistic regression results suggest that the relationship between ideology and media behaviour in Romania is shaped by more than simple selective exposure. The paradoxical finding that self-declared left-wing respondents report higher access to right-leaning outlets, while right-wing respondents display a more balanced pattern, indicates that media consumption may function as a tool for sense-making but also confirmation, in a context where ideological labels, party strategies, and media cues are often blurred. At the same time, the contrast between self-declared ideology and attitudes toward PSD points to the importance of party affect, whether sympathy or antipathy, as a separate axis of political behaviour, which can produce different media choices than those predicted by left-right self-placement alone.

These results also raise important questions about the role of trust and information environments. The positive association of trust in TV (and, to a lesser extent, social media) with access to right-leaning channels, alongside the negative association of relying on friends and family, suggests that media behaviour may be driven by perceived credibility and habitual information pathways rather than ideological comfort. In this sense, cross-ideological

consumption can be interpreted in two competing ways. On one hand it may reflect a form of pluralism and critical engagement, such as seeking alternative frames of political information. On the other hand, it may also signal low media literacy and limited ability to identify outlets' ideological positions, which can make audiences vulnerable to persuasive framing and agenda manipulation.

Finally, as a pilot study based on a relatively small sample, this chapter should be read as an exploratory step that maps a phenomenon and motivates stronger tests. Acknowledging the limits of our pilot study, we can conclude by highlighting that future research on political behaviour could expand the understanding of the influence of new media, by employing research designs that can better separate between competing mechanisms such as selective avoidance versus confusion, or instrumental monitoring versus entertainment-driven exposure. Extending the measurement of media ideology through systematic content analysis and machine-learning approaches, and comparing TV versus online outlets, could help clarify whether the observed paradox is outlet-specific, platform-specific, or driven by other features of Romania's post-communist media market. Such empirical data could help us shape media literacy initiatives and policies that aim to strengthen the quality of democratic deliberation.

Chapter 4. Where did we end up? Digital (traditional) Voter in the Super Electoral Year

Abstract

The first round of Romania's 2024 presidential elections revealed profound shifts in voter behaviour, most visibly through the unexpected rise of independent candidate Călin Georgescu. His surprising electoral performance, which exceeded all pre-election polls, emphasized a broader transformation in how political preferences are formed and mobilized in contemporary Romania. This chapter argues that the Romanian electorate can no longer be understood solely through traditional sociological cleavages or partisan attachments. Instead, it increasingly reflects the dynamics of a *digital (traditional) voter*: individuals who inhabit highly networked online environments while simultaneously expressing long-standing cultural, nationalist, and anti-elite orientations. To explore this phenomenon, we combine an analysis of polling discrepancies with an examination of online behaviours and digital conversations during the 2024 super electoral year. We contextualize the shift from media-driven political communication to platform-driven visibility, assess why traditional opinion polls failed to anticipate key outcomes, and trace how

Georgescu's anti-establishment message spread rapidly across digital spaces. We also discuss how online platforms used in electoral campaign support the development of digital clientelism, understood as a form of brokered exchange, developed in online environments, in which electoral inducements and monitoring are mediated through digital infrastructure.

Keywords: electoral volatility; anti-establishment mobilization; hybrid media system; digital (voter) behaviour; digital clientelism; online brokers

4.1. Introduction

The first round of the 2024 Romanian presidential elections came with a series of surprises that left many citizens, journalists, political analysts, and even political figures in a state of bewilderment. Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate outside the traditional party system, garnered an unexpected wave of support, surpassing pre-election poll predictions (Comşa, 2025) and outpacing candidates from major parties. His meteoric rise was widely interpreted as the outcome of an atypical campaign built on anti-establishment discourse, direct appeals to citizens' unmet needs, and an intense online presence that allowed him to connect with a heterogeneous electorate disillusioned with conventional political offerings. However, the exact causes of this electoral outcome are difficult to

measure with precision.

The first round of the 2024 Romania presidential elections emphasizes a shift in voter behaviour that is not exceptional to this country. Worldwide, we can observe a transition from electorates whose choices could be largely explained by socio-demographic cleavages and partisan loyalties to electorates whose decisions are increasingly shaped by anti-elite and anti-establishment narratives circulating in digital spaces and public discourse (Bach et al., 2021). In Romania, the hybrid media system combined with the low trust in parties and low electoral turnout create a fertile ground for anti-establishment candidates who master the logics of digital platforms. Thus, the profile of the digital (traditional) voter becomes analytically useful.

In this chapter, we define “digital (traditional) voter” as being the voter focused on media sources dominated by platforms (short-form video, algorithmic recommendation, dual-screening, and comment-driven interpretation), and having durable attitudinal anchors (national conservatism, anti-elite distrust, and a preference for outsiders). Empirically, we observe this configuration indirectly through polling misalignments, platform-driven surges in visibility, and the emotional-intensity patterns that structure online engagement.

On the one hand, many voters are deeply embedded in digital networks: news outlets gave up printed editions and switched exclusively to online editions who are able to catch users attention, voters follow politics through social media feeds, engage in real-time commentary during debates, and share partisan or conspiratorial content within online communities. On the other

hand, these same voters often hold “traditional” attitudes from cultural conservatism, distrust of elites to belief in national exceptionalism, which are now expressed and reinforced in digital spaces rather than through classic party organizations.

Therefore, this chapter asks: What can online behaviour and digital conversations tell us about the emergence of this digital (traditional) voter in Romania’s 2024-2025 extended electoral year? We address this question in three steps. First, we outline the broader electoral campaign context of the 2024 super electoral cycle, emphasizing how Romania’s political communication environment shifted from one dominated by traditional media logics to one shaped almost exclusively by increasingly algorithmic visibility and user-generated content. This contextualization allows us to trace the gradual transition from the traditional voter, whose preferences were largely measured and shaped through opinion polls, television debates, and agenda-setting media, to the digital voter, whose political cues, emotions, and mobilization patterns emerge within online ecosystems.

Second, we evaluate the performance and limitations of traditional opinion polling in this new environment. We aim at understanding the fluctuations in voter intention measurements by different pollsters, as well as the volatility that characterized the months preceding the presidential elections, as documented by other recent studies (Comşa 2025) We highlight why polls alone were insufficient to capture the complexity of voter behaviour in 2024.

Third, analytically, we turn our attention to online environments to ask: what actually happened in the digital sphere?

We situate the case of Călin Georgescu within broader debates on hybrid media systems and present secondary evidence that documents how Georgescu moved from unknown to phenomenon in a matter of days. Together, these analyses offer an in-depth perspective of how anti-establishment mobilization is co-produced by digital infrastructures and emotionally charged online publics.

This chapter introduces a framework for analysing digital and algorithmic clientelism as an adaptation of brokered electoral influence to platform environments. In Romania, classic clientelism has been built around contingent exchange and delegated brokerage, under secret-ballot conditions that make compliance difficult to observe and enforce. In digital settings, the logic of brokerage persists, but the relevant resources and signals change. TikTok, Facebook groups, Telegram, and WhatsApp generate non-material benefits and make behavioural traces more effective. The chapter uses these features to decompose digital clientelism into inducements, platform brokers, monitoring proxies, and sanctions, and analyses algorithmic clientelism as a subset where recommendation and ranking systems magnify brokered mobilisation.

4.2. The curious case of the Romanian super electoral year

The term “super electoral year” refers to a compressed sequence of local, regional, national and supra-national electoral contests spanning 2024 and extending into 2025, during which campaign

dynamics and voter attention were continuously reactivated. It started with the local, regional and EU Parliamentary elections held on 9 June 2024, followed by the first round of the Presidential elections on 24 November 2024, and the national Parliamentary elections on 1 December 2024. The second round of the Presidential elections, scheduled to be held on 8 December 2024, was cancelled by the Romanian Constitutional Court on 6 December 2024, following reports of the intelligence and defence authorities which indicated electoral irregularities such as foreign interference in the electoral process. The recalled Presidential elections took place on 4 May 2025, while the second round was organised on 18 May 2025. In this chapter, we, therefore, treat 2024 and 2025 as a single interconnected cycle in which narratives, mobilization networks, and trust in institutions evolved across successive elections.

Therefore, we separate between two analytical layers. The first one, the 2024 presidential shock, is used to illustrate how an outsider can gain sudden visibility through platform-driven diffusion. The second, the 2025 polling series and runoff dynamics, is used to demonstrate how conventional measurement struggles under fragmented digital climates of opinion. The purpose is to show that both events reflect the same underlying transformation in political communication.

The electoral systems used in this super electoral year were diverse. The local elections used a plurality system for electing the mayors and the presidents of the county councils. The city councillors and the members of the county councils were elected based on a PR system with a 5% threshold at the district level. The EU Parliament elections were organized based on PR system with

5% threshold and a single, national, tier. The parliamentary elections used the PR system with 5% threshold at the national level, with two tiers: one at the district level, and the other one at the national level. The presidential elections used a majority two-round system, with 50% majority in the first round computed out of the total registered electors, while in the second round the 50% majority was computed out of the total number of electors casting votes.

Romania's super electoral year of 2024–2025 marked one of the most turbulent and transformative periods of the post-1989 democratic experience. Never in the country's modern history had Romanians been called to vote in four major national elections within just twelve months: European, local, parliamentary, and presidential elections, followed by a prolonged period of coalition negotiations, political recalibration, and institutional repositioning in 2025. This condensed sequence did not only test the administrative capacity of the electoral system and the organizational strength of political parties, but it also exposed long-standing structural vulnerabilities within Romanian democracy.

Furthermore, these rounds of elections were also emphasizing profound shifts in how Romanians engage with politics, how they interpret political messages, and where they place, or withdraw, their trust.

The year 2024 began against the backdrop of fragmentation, governance fatigue, and structural mistrust. The governing coalition of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL), formed in 2021 under the banner of stability, had been characterized less by ideological negotiations and more

by strategic competition. As several authors have noted (Anghel, 2018; Stănuș et al., 2024; C. Volintiru, 2016), Romanian coalition governments are rarely grounded in durable programmatic compatibility; instead, they often represent short-term bargains designed to maintain power within a volatile electoral environment.

By 2024, the PSD–PNL coalition was held together more by institutional inertia than political vision. Public confidence in government and parliament was low, mirroring the chronic institutional skepticism (Ioniță et al., 2010; Tufiș, 2014). In this context, the super electoral year did not emerge into a neutral political field but into an environment saturated with disillusionment and a latent appetite for anti-system alternatives.

The first critical moment of the electoral marathon took place in June 2024, when Romania held elections for the European Parliament and local administrations simultaneously. This strategic decision, engineered by the PSD–PNL coalition, was widely understood as an attempt to maximize turnout and consolidate the position of established parties whose extensive territorial networks gave them advantages in mobilization. The most unusual element was the joint PSD–PNL list for the European elections, a highly atypical arrangement in Romania's competitive political landscape. Analysts saw it as a strategic move to blunt the rise of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), whose online-driven popularity had grown steadily (Beșliu, 2024; Tufiș, 2024). Although criticized by political commentators and scholars alike as undemocratic or confusing, the joint list proved electorally effective. It secured a commanding victory and allowed the

governing coalition to claim continuity and stability during a time of economic pressure and public dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, the local elections reinforced well-known territorial patterns deeply rooted in Romania's socio-demographic structure. PSD maintained its dominance across the rural South and East, where historical loyalties and clientelistic ties have historically shaped voting behaviour (Sandu, 2024). PNL remained strong in much of Transylvania, consistent with long-standing patterns of liberal-conservative attachment among urban centres and historically prosperous regions. AUR, despite its strong online presence and disruptive rhetoric, underperformed at the local level, revealing the discrepancy between digital mobilization and formal organizational capacity.

However, the local elections also contained a symbolic moment: the re-election of Nicușor Dan as mayor of Bucharest. His victory, achieved despite a fragmented opposition, confirmed a widening divide between major urban centres and the rest of the country. Dan's victory reflected the classical urban tendencies in Romania: in urban areas voters are more individualistic, more protest-oriented, and more distrustful of traditional parties.

The parliamentary elections of autumn 2024 constituted the next important moment. PSD and PNL, unwilling to repeat their joint European strategy, re-entered competition. PSD under the leadership of Marcel Ciolacu emphasized social protection and national stability, while PNL attempted to regain its middle-class electoral base. Meanwhile, AUR emerged as a strong competitor, capitalizing on anti-establishment sentiment, distrust in elites, and diaspora frustration. Romanian literature on protest voting (Tufiş,

2024), highlights that when institutional trust is low and party identities are weak, voters often gravitate toward anti-system actors, especially in times of perceived institutional stagnation.

Another major player emerged: Elena Lasconi, whose unexpected popularity reshaped the reformist space. Her refusal to run under USR's leadership deepened fractures within the opposition and illustrated a broader phenomenon: the rise of personalized, charisma-based political entrepreneurship beyond formal party structures.

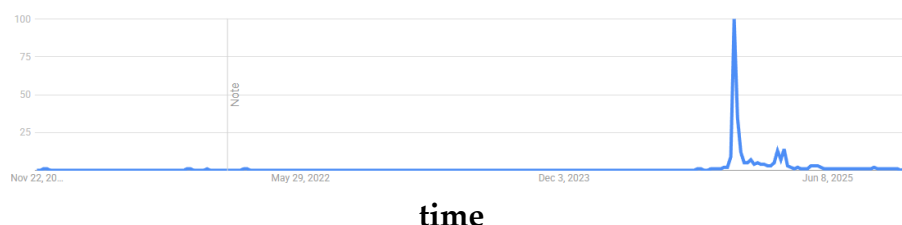
The parliamentary results confirmed PSD as the largest party (22.30%), followed by AUR (18.30%) and PNL (14.28%). However, no formation could govern alone. Coalition-building extended into late 2024 and early 2025, revealing the extent of fragmentation. Romania has long relied on multi-party coalitions, which many citizens perceive as unstable and opportunistic. Thus, the 2024 results, and the subsequent negotiations, amplified political alienation and reinforce cognitive distances between citizens and elites.

However, nothing defined the super electoral year as the presidential race of November 2024. All polls indicated a predictable contest among familiar actors: Mircea Geoană, Marcel Ciolacu, Nicolae Ciucă, and Elena Lasconi. Analysts expected a conventional second-round match-up anchored in established party lines. The shock arrived on election night, when a previously unknown independent candidate, Călin Georgescu, emerged as the winner of the first round. His sudden ascent constituted the most dramatic electoral surprise since the early 1990s.

To Romanian scholars, this was not a complete anomaly. The literature on the protest dimension of voting has repeatedly shown that segments of the Romanian electorate vote not for policy proposals but as expressions of frustration, symbolic rejection, or desire for rupture. Georgescu's performance, however, far exceeded traditional protest voting patterns. What made his rise extraordinary was the profound disjunction between traditional institutional visibility and digital mobilization. Polls failed to detect him not because he lacked support, but because his support circulated in online ecosystems largely invisible to mainstream political communication. After the first-round results, millions of Romanians turned to online searches to learn who he was. The Google Trends spike (Figure 5) revealed a deep informational asymmetry that caught journalists and analysts off guard.

Our discussion of digital diffusion relies on secondary indicators: documented spikes in search interest, publicly visible cross-platform circulation of short-form clips, and prior analyses produced by researchers and journalists. These indicators cannot fully identify individual-level persuasion, but they are useful for capturing sudden visibility shifts and the timing of attention cascades, which are phenomena that conventional polling often misses.

Figure 5. Evolution of online searches for C. Georgescu over



Source: Google Trends ([Călin Georgescu - Explore - Google Trends](#))

In the days that followed, confusion and emotional polarization dominated public discourse. Supporters interpreted the result as a defeat of the political class. Critics described it as a symptom of democratic fragility or misinformation. The second round unfolded under this tension: Georgescu's anti-system narrative versus a mainstream candidate representing continuity. The latter prevailed, but the implications were profound: Romania had witnessed the ability of online publics to generate political outcomes capable of reshaping national expectations overnight.

At the beginning of a new year (2025) the Romanians were still digesting the implications of the super electoral year. Coalition negotiations revealed strategic distrust not only between parties but also between institutional actors and the broader public. PSD and PNL found themselves forced into collaboration despite months of mutual attacks. AUR consolidated its role as the major opposition force but struggled to transition from protest-based politics to coherent parliamentary strategy.

What emerged from 2024–2025 was more than a new political configuration, it was a revelation of structural transformation in how political meaning is produced in Romania.

Over the years, Romanian electorate was described as being composed of “developmental regions” with distinct cultural, cognitive, and communicative patterns. (Sandu, 2018). The super electoral year demonstrated that these differences now operate within digital structures that amplify them and create new political subcultures. Tufiş (2024) has shown that political distrust is not merely attitudinal but behavioural, affecting participation, preferences, and media consumption. All of these tendencies were visible in 2024–2025, magnified by an information ecosystem where algorithmic visibility and fragmented publics undermine the capacity of institutional actors to shape political narratives.

Romania’s super electoral year thus represented more than an intense succession of elections. It marked a profound shift in the relationship between political institutions and citizens. Furthermore, it exposed a democracy struggling with legitimacy and cohesion. And last, but not least, it demonstrated the limits of polling and traditional media in detecting emerging political forces. Above all, it signalled that Romanian democracy has entered a new era: one defined not by structured party competition or ideological clarity, but by fragmented publics and (digital) volatile identities.

Thus, to understand the outcome of the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, we must examine two complementary dimensions: first, how the polls performed and what their shortcomings reveal, and second, how political dynamics unfolded within online environments, where much of the unexpected mobilization actually took shape.

4.3. From traditional clientelism to digital clientelism

Romania's 2024–2025 super-electoral cycle uncovered a deeper transformation in political campaigning: voters' mobilization is increasingly produced through platform-based, digital, diffusion. This is new for Romanian politics. At times, in Romanian elections, mobilization of voters has been accomplished not only by partisan, ideological, programmatic, and personalized messages, but also through novel mechanisms that allowed shaping, monitoring and disciplining elector's behaviour.

The events of 2024–2025 brought digital tendencies to the forefront in ways that surprised political elites and underscored the growing autonomy and power of digital publics. Besides ideological mobilization, previous research has revealed frequent usage of electoral irregularities such as electoral clientelism. Studies have long described the Romanian electorate as characterized by relatively high electoral clientelism, weak partisan attachments, and chronic distrust in institutions (Chiru & Gherghina, 2012; Gherghina, 2014; Taranu & Taranu, 2013; C. A. Volintiru, 2012)

Electoral clientelism is based on complex interpersonal relations and delegated forms of electoral mobilization. In clientelistic relationships politicians act as principals vis-à-vis brokers, who serve as intermediaries in distributing selective benefits and mobilizing voters. Brokers, in turn, attempt to secure voters' compliance. However, compliance is not easy to be enforced upon voters, by candidates or their brokers. Furthermore, voter's

choices remain difficult to monitor under secret-ballot conditions. For this reason, the compliance mechanisms underlying clientelism are difficult to observe empirically.

The overwhelming literature on clientelism has been limited to the documentation of extent and types of clientelistic strategies. In addition, the measurement of clientelism has produced mixed findings, and some scholars argue that there is limited direct evidence that clientelistic strategies work through effective monitoring of individual voting behaviour (Hicken & Nathan, 2020).

Explaining electoral clientelism focused on mechanisms that include psychological and mechanical tools which are employed by candidates and their agents. These mechanisms are used to identify the needs of voters, involve them in clientelistic exchanges and monitor their electoral compliance. Traditional electoral clientelism has been documented in various comparative empirical studies which focused exclusively on differentiating between analogue (material and traditional) type of incentives: vote-buying, favours (framed under various processes such as receiving bureaucratic procedures or social rights), violence (threats of), economic intimidation, jobs, social exclusion.

In addition, studies have also differentiated between positive and negative incentives, based on the expectations and beliefs of voters vis-à-vis the incentive at stake in the clientelistic exchange: losing something that one has (e.g., a right) is a negative incentive, while receiving something that one did not have before (money from vote buying) is a positive incentive. Winning or losing, as a result of electoral choices, is related to the way that voters evaluate

the utility (degree of benefits or losses) and risks (impact of a specific decision) associated with the incentives.

Therefore, traditional electoral clientelism is based on complex networks of electoral intermediaries (brokers). They act as agents that have a deep knowledge of voters' needs and are capable of delivering them the benefits they expect to receive in exchange of adjusting their electoral behaviour in accordance with candidate's expectations (e.g., voting or not voting for a specific candidate).

The clientelistic strategies is unfolded by candidates and their parties based on their capacity to mobilize networks of electoral brokers (Hicken & Nathan, 2020; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Oliveros, 2013; Stokes et al., 2013; Szwarcberg, 2015; Zarazaga, 2014). There are multiple broker types, that can vary from the most radical supporters and partisan brokers, such as party agents, to the criminal gangs-related brokers, such as money lenders, human trafficking agents and mafia, or the more moderate supporters such as public employees, firms (employers), or religious and ethnic leaders. These brokers contribute to a very diverse mix of clientelistic strategies employing traditional incentives. These incentives are rather analogue, since they are more prone to be transformed into material identification (benefits).

Various empirical studies (Auerbach & Thachil, 2020; Dawson et al., 2023; Gherghina et al., 2022; Mares et al., 2017; Stroud, 2011; Zarazaga, 2014) have proved that traditional clientelistic strategies are more prone to be used in local and regional elections because, firstly, they are of outmost importance for the central nodes in the clientelistic networks: the incumbent

mayors. Incumbent mayors have access to public resources in order to deploy them in organizing such clientelistic networks.

Secondly, local elections provide the best environment for enforcing connections between local elites and brokers. Mayors can potentially use such networks in regional and national elections. Therefore, mobilizing networks and voters in local elections is very important for later support for parties' electoral campaigns in national elections.

Winning local elections creates stronger party organizations to be used in national elections for mobilizing voters. In addition, local elected officials, especially the mayors, play an important role in public policies, as they are responsible for providing the majority of the public services and goods (local infrastructure, urban planning, education facilities, primary healthcare, social assistance, administrative permits, licences and certificates). Therefore, their performance can fuel success in national elections.

Last, but not least, local elections are a specific type of electoral competition: a rather small number of voters (except for large cities and capitals) which might reduce the resources needed for mobilizing electors; smaller margin of votes (in absolute numbers) which can be easier secured by clientelistic incentives; a stronger social connection and knowledge between locals (especially in rural and very small urban areas where kinship between local families is rather common) which is important in reducing the uncertainties of compliance mechanisms and the risks of being turned down to public prosecutors for breaking the electoral law.

A central issue in electoral clientelism is how an illegal transaction that, formally, cannot be fully controlled, can be turned into one that is credible enough to work for all the parties involved? This dilemma can be unfolded as a two-stage relationship. Firstly, there is the relationship between the politician and the broker. The politician wants votes, but cannot reach all voters directly, does not necessarily know them personally, does not want to directly expose itself, and cannot easily identify who is persuadable, who is vulnerable, or who can mobilize relatives, neighbours, or local networks. For this reason, the politician delegates the distribution of money, goods, services, or favours to brokers. They are useful because they possess local information, relational capital, and the capacity to identify those voters who are more receptive to clientelistic exchanges, thus, reducing the politician's costs for information and implementation of clientelistic strategies.

However, the politician cannot be sure that the broker distributes resources exactly as instructed and expected. The broker may divert part of the resources, falsely report a higher number of "convinced" voters, favour their own personal network, or use the resources to strengthen their own local position rather than to maximize votes for the candidate. That is why politicians try to control brokers through several mechanisms. One is the selection of brokers from trusted networks: relatives, party members, local leaders, or people with a reputation and a degree of dependence on the candidate. Another is indirect monitoring through electoral results at the level of polling stations, neighbourhoods, or villages. If a broker promises to deliver a certain number of votes in an area and the result is weak, the politician may conclude that the broker

either failed or cheated. And a third is making brokers offers they cannot refuse: rewards such as administrative jobs, preferential public housing, or support for political positions. However, this control is imperfect because aggregate electoral results do not reveal exactly who voted and who did not. This is why the politician-broker relationship often relies on repeated interactions, reputation, future sanctions, and conditional access to resources. This relationship is not necessarily asymmetrical and unilateral. As we are going to show below, it is not uncommon for electoral brokers to gain so much power in order to exert effective influence upon the politicians.

The second relationship in the complex clientelistic framework is that between the brokers and the voters. The brokers offer money, food, firewood, jobs, promises of administrative help, preferential access to services, social assistance, but can also use threats, physical violence, or social exclusion, as incentives. In return, the voters are expected to provide their vote in support for a certain party list or person, or do not turnout to vote. However, the problem is that the vote is secret, so the voters may accept the benefit and then refuse to vote according to the agreement. In this relationship the voter might defect after receiving the reward, or before receiving it (due to vote secrecy).

For this reason, clientelism does not function well as a simple instantaneous "purchase" of votes in the strict contractual sense. It works rather through mechanisms that reduce uncertainty. Brokers look for voters they know personally, often in small communities where political behaviour can be approximated through social observation and personal communication. They prefer people who

are economically, socially, or administratively dependent, because such individuals have less autonomy and more reasons to enter and respect such exchanges.

In addition, brokers rely on informal monitoring: who actually turned out to vote, who was seen near the polling station, what political reputation a family has, who has previously benefited from social assistance. Even if they cannot directly observe the vote, they can observe enough peripheral indicators to make defection riskier. In a fieldwork study from 2015, aimed at documenting electoral clientelism, one of the brokers revealed the mechanism he used in relation with the brokered voters: they are his clients for money they need to borrow and electronic products and construction materials they buy from the broker's stores. Thus, he obtains fine and advances insight into the economic and social status of many of local voters, as well as knowledge of their particular "weak spots" during difficult times. Rarely using threats, this broker preferred to induce social pressure (via possible exclusion or public knowledge of individual's particular issues) and constructs psychological mechanisms through which he can control what buttons he can push in order to determine a particular response (e.g., submission) from the voter. The psychological tools employed by the broker in this relationship targeted the religious beliefs of voters: he asked one voter (old, religiously active person) to swear that she will vote with a specific candidate while putting her hand on a Bible and keeping a coin between her teeth (Personal interview of Aurelian Muntean with electoral broker in Teleorman County on 15 September 2015).

The same broker revealed another characteristic of traditional electoral clientelism: electoral intermediaries can be mercenaries for hire. This does not necessarily mean that they do not have a prior political preference, but just that they make a rational economic usage of the network and mechanisms they develop and administer in small local communities. As such, the interviewed broker which used psychological tools upon controlling local voters' behaviour, had also provided his electoral intermediation services to candidates for elected office at local, regional or even national (MPs) level. In exchange, it received political protection in dealing with regional and national authorities, and political influence at local level. This transformed him from an electoral broker to a political kingmaker. For example, although not directly involved through membership in political parties, he had extensive control of local politics. His services were decisive in a specific candidate winning the local mayor office. Failing to provide personal benefits to the broker, the mayor was pressed by the broker to resign, because, as the broker acknowledged "he was too stupid to steal and to share with us. And although I thought it was a medical/psychiatrically problem, for which reason I appealed to a doctor to cure him, he [the mayor] still refused to share and steal the resources. That is why I changed him with the deputy-mayor." (Personal interview of Aurelian Muntean with electoral broker in Teleorman County on 15 September 2015).

Therefore, brokers play a crucial role of translating resources into social control. They do not distribute only goods, but also relational pressure. In a small community, the voter is confronted not only with a material offer, but also with the personal

relationship with the broker, the fear of exclusion from social community, and the possibility of losing future benefits. Thus, the clientelistic exchange is usually not a one-shot and fully anonymous transaction, but one embedded in repeated, asymmetrical, and personal relations. Control comes not from a formal contract, but from contingency, reputation, monitoring, and sanctioning.

More broadly, the clientelistic strategies are built on informational asymmetries. The brokers know better than the politician who is worth the "investment" and who can be mobilized. The voters know better than the brokers what they will actually do inside the voting booth. Each part conceals something, and each tries to extract as much as possible from the relationship. The politicians want votes at minimum cost. The brokers want resources, influence, and the preservation of their local position. The voters want immediate benefits, possibly without fully honouring the implicit voting obligation. Clientelism is therefore a game of incomplete control, not a transparent social transaction.

However, several factors can raise the costs (in terms of risks and effectiveness) of implementing clientelistic strategies, irrespective of the mix of strategies used. Among them, several are difficult to overcome by the candidates, such as: building a reliable local network of brokers, facing narrow margin of votes and strong electoral competition, or election monitoring deployed by independent organizations or by competitors. The factors are important in reducing clientelism. Reports on recent elections in Romania documented very few instances of electoral irregularities (Krause & Pârvu, 2024; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024; VotCorect.ro, 2024a, 2024b). These reports have, however, documented increased usage

of non-transparent online political activity, astroturfing, webpage online coordinated behaviour, fake accounts and coordinated comments (for example on TikTok), and unassumed online mobilization of voters (VotCorect.ro, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b).

The literature on online campaigning shows that platforms do more than host political talk or fundraising: they shape what people see, determine whose voices are amplified, and what seems socially expected, while algorithmic feed ranking influences users' experiences, increases the time individuals spend on platforms, and multiplies the number of their platform interactions under a strong homophilic effect of exposure to same-partisan news (Guess et al., 2023). Social media cues influence offline political mobilization of individuals, and, more importantly, the spread of social media messages between friends and other connections increases the political behaviour, as previous research documented (Bond et al., 2012).

Such effects of platforms have also been identified by other studies which showed that exposure to cross-cutting political information is constrained by networks and ranking systems not only by individual preferences (Bakshy et al., 2015). In addition, there is a continuously growing and large-scale spread of misinformation during election times, while an increasing amount of fake news and disinformation is produced and disseminated by algorithms (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2021). Yet, with limited exceptions, these studies tend to treat platforms as channels of persuasion and exposure, rather than as sites of conditional exchange that can distort democratic competition, similar to traditional electoral clientelism.

Romania's 2024-2025 super-electoral year provides a timely motivation for rethinking clientelism under platform conditions. The Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the 2024 presidential election amid allegations of foreign interference and digitally mediated manipulation, including concerns related to TikTok campaign dynamics and algorithmic amplification. The subsequent re-run in May 2025 intensified debates about information integrity, platform governance, electoral legitimacy, and democratic backsliding. Given Romania's long history of brokered mobilization in local networks, we can use this valuable context in order to theorize how traditional electoral clientelism and brokerage can migrate into platform infrastructures.

The literature on clientelism focused exclusively on the traditional types of incentives, on brokers capability for delivering such incentives, and on the dual-stage clientelistic relationships between candidates, brokers and voters. However, in recent years, especially after the unfolding of electoral campaigns during 2020-2021 locked down and pandemic events, candidates and brokers employed new strategies focused on using the widespread appeal of online interaction, social networks and digital algorithms, live streaming, while voters moved their electoral interest in the digital space. Electoral campaigns made extensive usage of tools such as TikTok, Facebook groups, Twitter/X, YouTube, Telegram and WhatsApp (Costiță, 2024). These digital tools are used to develop new types of strategies and incentives, network brokers, voter decisions, and mechanisms, that take place exclusively online, part of a new strategy: digital clientelism.

Contemporary campaigns increasingly rely on inducements that are non-material yet electorally valuable, especially within platform environments. These include sponsored amplification, algorithmically mediated visibility, access to semi-private networks, curated interpretive narratives, reputation protection, status and recognition, group inclusion, and a sense of belonging. Because these benefits are scarce and unevenly distributed across online users (voters), they can be allocated selectively and conditionally by a new type of brokers: platform intermediaries such as group admins, local page operators, micro-influencers, and other network gatekeepers. Digital environments expand the domain of observable signals that are exchanged in clientelistic relationships, and they also change the nature of resources and intermediaries.

Therefore, digital clientelism can be defined as a contingent, brokered exchange in which electoral inducements and monitoring are mediated through digital infrastructure (not necessarily involving AI). Within this broader category, we define algorithmic clientelism as a subtype in which the allocation and effectiveness of inducements are amplified by platform governance tools and recommendation or ranking systems, and increasingly by AI-enabled content production and automation. This new type of clientelism operates as exchange and control between candidates, parties, intermediaries and voters, but its underlying mechanisms are adapted to the digital infrastructure and online behaviour. These specific mechanisms are used to enable platform behaviour of individual voters based on conditional exchange, behavioural monitoring, and coordinated algorithmic amplification.

Algorithmic clientelism operates through selective, broker-controlled, and often semi-private channels that reduce public contestation. In these partially insulated environments, recipients are active participants, while brokers can enforce loyalty through platform-specific sanctions, such as exclusion, moderation, or reputational attacks. It can, thus, function as a non-democratic electoral mechanism within formally democratic elections by undermining equality of access to voice, information, and accountability, and by inserting platform brokers between candidates and voters.

Online mobilization is increasingly dependent upon algorithmic tools that offer a wide range of cost-effective mechanisms to use digital traces in order to observe and monitor individuals' behaviour (Bach et al., 2021; Kristensen et al., 2017), map their preferences (Jaidka et al., 2019; Kitchener et al., 2022) and identify their non-material needs, which are cheaper to be rewarded compared to the material ones in traditional, analogue clientelistic incentives. Online tools enable targeted outreach, rapid response to criticism, online viralization (e.g., via live video streaming, memes, reels). Furthermore, the digital environments based on platforms and online tools offer access to contingent mechanisms such as reciprocity, conditional cooperation, reputation-for-behaviour, sanctions and exclusions.

Online activity, especially on social platforms leave digital traces that can provide valuable information about an individual's political preferences and voting behaviour (Bach et al. 2021). These traces are embedded in the platforms and, in a way, they are administered by platform managers. During elections, digital

platforms can, in their sense, act as mediators enhancing the role of classic electoral intermediaries (brokers). Voters' behaviour can be analysed as effects mediated by digital platforms. Consequently, while traditional clientelistic relations were defined by voters, candidates/parties, and brokers, in the algorithmic clientelistic exchanges, mediated by brokers, a new, fourth, actor gains structural power: algorithms and digital platforms. In future, as studies revealed (Chu et al., 2026; Kusche, 2020) this outcome produces a shift in the weight that candidates and brokers have in online mediated exchanges. These systems do not fully replace political actors, but they increasingly monopolize access to voter information, behavioural knowledge (that was previously produced in a relations manner), and campaign experience, thus, expropriating the candidates and their brokers from their control over political knowledge.

Consequently, online intermediaries have more tools they can employ to incentivize and monitor voters. Brokers are no longer limited to face-to-face social connections, or kinship trust in small social communities, that would allow them to better identify the issues, needs and expectations of voters. Instead, the digital platforms give online brokers access to algorithmic tools that provide a finer screening of individuals, access to large communities, widespread coverage in terms of number of targeted voters, and less costly rewards. The online brokers are less dependent upon candidates and parties, but can effectively influence many more voters, compared to traditional clientelistic brokers. This is extremely valuable in large scale, national, elections, in which coordination of local party networks is limited, and

traditional clientelism can be more costly, more risky and less effective.

These platforms and the algorithmic tools they offer, decrease the complex costs implied for candidates in order to set up and feed networks of brokers and supporters. Online brokers primarily require financial resources. They do not require political positions, jobs, preferential access to public housing. They are rather intermediaries for short-term hire. This could increase the financial costs for candidates, which can be effectively administered via public funds that parties generously receive in political systems such as the Romanian one. Political parties from Romania received public funds of over 20 million euros in 2022, over 40 million euro in 2024, and over 46 million euro in 2025, from which they used more than half for political advertising contracts with mass-media (Andrei, 2024; Expert Forum, 2023, 2024, 2025; OSCE/ODIHR, 2024; Recorder, 2022). Apart from these funds, parties and candidates also received private donations that were partly unaccounted by some candidates which were later placed under investigation from public prosecutors for electoral irregularities and improper usage of campaign funds and usage of millions of euros for coordinating irregular campaign on social platforms (Context, 2025; Funky Citizens, 2025; Mocanu, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Ross & Popoviciu, 2024). These events have led to demand improve the legislative framework for transparency of private media financing, and for the financial accountability of public funds received by political parties during electoral years (Toth, 2026).

Social media create behavioural effects such as addictions (Cataldo et al., 2022; Mieczkowski et al., 2020). They also favour the

development of local ecosystems in which individuals' behaviour is contingent upon cooperative exchange and reciprocity. These effects are administered via digital platforms that are infrastructures upon which social media thrives, on which individuals can interact. Studies have empirically proved that cooperation and compliance can be supported by scarce and directly beneficial reputation (Samu et al., 2020).

Experimental evidence have shown that expected future non-material benefits (such as ratings, continued access, or future transactions, likes, or comments) depend on observable behaviour and on expectations of reciprocity (Surma, 2016; Teubner & Camacho, 2023). Mixed findings have been documented by other experimental designs (Garnefeld et al., 2020) analysing the material benefits of reciprocal online interaction: material incentives increase likelihood for reciprocation, but psychological costs and dissatisfaction can affect review.

However, online behaviour is not always fully observed or accounted for, such as in the case of alias-based or anonymous comments; yet, such behaviour can lead to changes in future outcomes. Diekmann et al. (2014) have showed that in anonymous online markets, reputational feedback can stabilise cooperation even when interactions are nominally one-shot, because future opportunities become conditional on past behaviour. Therefore, digital platforms, being designed as interaction tools between individuals, can support conditional compliance via proxies (such as signals, reputational standing, access) even when specific behaviour is not fully observable. Yet, these digital platforms used in social media were not, theoretically, designed specifically for

reciprocity and reputation, or, in particular, political reciprocity. However, the interactions are recorded by design on these platforms, voters leave digital traces such as posts, reactions, comments, which makes online platforms ideal tools for monitoring and unfolding individual behaviour, as recent studies have documented (Bach et al., 2021; Barclay et al., 2015; Jaidka et al., 2019; Kirkizh et al., 2024).

Online platforms expand the mechanisms used in traditional clientelistic strategies. The systems developed on online platforms for social interaction can create traceable records of participation, endorsement, and loyalty that brokers can observe and reward selectively. Voters who consistently share campaign content, attack opponents in comment threads, and mobilise their own network become easier to be identified, assessed and monitored by online brokers, compared to the social mechanisms that traditional brokers could use for such observations (for example, community gossip and direct social observation). This online visibility of voters can be combined with digital governance tools that online platforms provide, in order to develop contingent relationships between brokers and voters, and to create effective incentives.

In addition, online platforms create non-material benefits, such as recognition, elevated standing, privileged access, which can be powerful when they are scarce, visible, and controlled by intermediaries who allocate them conditionally. In platform environments, especially in campaigns that rely on TikTok, Facebook groups, Telegram, and WhatsApp, the relevant benefits are often not material goods distributed on the platform. They are benefits produced within the infrastructure itself, such as inclusion

in semi-private networks, preferential visibility within a community, status and recognition, reputational protection, or avoidance of organised harassment. In Facebook groups, administrators can approve membership, restrict posting rights, pin or feature content, remove comments, provide recognition through public endorsement, or expel members. Telegram allows even stricter control in channels and gated groups, including broadcast-style dissemination. On WhatsApp the control is even more granular, as inclusion in groups or broadcast lists defines who receives cues first and who is treated as an insider. These benefits matter because they are embedded in a relevant social space and exit from that space can carry social and informational costs. On online platforms inclusion and standing of users can be tied to repeated compliance signals such as reposting content, amplifying messages, policing dissent, attending offline events, or following community lines. These online networks make sanctions very feasible and ubiquitous, ranging from moderation, to exclusion, loss of status, reputational attacks, or even removal from coordination channels. These technical features exist in online networks and can support repeated conditionality inside bounded communities. In digital clientelism similar mechanisms could be employed by brokers that govern digital spaces used for political purposes.

In digital clientelism broker intermediation includes group administrators, moderators, operators of local pages, micro-influencers, or diaspora coordinators. They act as gatekeepers with governance power within bounded spaces, in which they select and

control the information flows (Gorwa, 2019; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

What is repeated, who is included, and which interpretations are treated as legitimate can be shaped by a small number of gatekeepers. Thus, opinion leaders filter and translate messages for others, such as online users and candidates, as argued by (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955)

Algorithmic amplification can help us understand mechanisms that brokers can use to enhance the online tools they use but also to increase visibility and mobilisation. Such amplification is not entirely algorithmic but incorporates coordinated human input that exploits platform dynamics. Research on coordinated link sharing demonstrates how networks of pages and accounts can intentionally manufacture visibility during election periods by synchronising shares and repeatedly injecting content into platform circulation (Giglietto et al., 2020; Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021).

Romanian 2024-2025 super electoral year was not the first electoral cycle in Romanian politics in which platform-mediated mobilization was documented (Oprea, 2023). However, the extent of algorithmic amplification was unprecedented in the last presidential elections of 2024 and 2025. This included coordinated posting and engagement bursts on TikTok, viral page networks and group circulation on Facebook, and Telegram/WhatsApp's rapid redistribution into closed spaces followed by re-entry into public feeds through screenshots, clips, and cross-platform reposts.

Online brokers do not simply wait for algorithms to favour their content, instead, they actively learn platform dynamics,

synchronise behaviour across accounts and groups, trigger ranking systems to amplify their messages, and use political astroturfing (Keller et al., 2017; Pacheco et al., 2021). This online amplification is inflated by platform tendencies to reward certain content types, that increase disagreement and reward intense online activity. Such emotional interaction and the false news can spread faster and travel farther in social networks than neutral information (Brady et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Digital brokers understand these patterns and can craft content that both fits algorithmic preferences and mobilises their online communities. The result is not technological determinism in electoral times, since algorithms do not decide political outcomes independent from human input, they do not negotiate support for specific candidates, but coordination can generate the signals that algorithms multiply and online brokers can strategically exploit platforms by combining technical knowledge with political objectives.

4.4. Data and empirical strategy

Polls data

This empirical study employs a comparative quantitative methodology combining longitudinal polling data with election results to assess the performance of opinion polls during Romania's 2024–2025 super electoral cycle and to identify systematic patterns of misalignment associated with fragmented digital publics. The dataset consists of all publicly available national opinion polls conducted for the 2025 Romanian presidential elections (first and

second rounds), compiled from media releases, polling institute reports, and archived sources.

Exit polls and surveys conducted on election day were excluded from most comparative analyses in order to preserve methodological comparability with pre-election polling.

For each polling institute, we retained the final published estimate prior to Election Day (or the closest available poll when multiple releases existed) and compared reported vote shares with official electoral results published by the Permanent Electoral Authority. Poll accuracy was evaluated using two complementary metrics.

Firstly, the Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) was calculated to measure the average magnitude of percentage estimation errors across candidates, with larger deviations weighted more heavily. Secondly, the Mean Rank Error (MRE) was employed to assess whether polls correctly predicted the relative ordering of candidates, a particularly relevant criterion in multi-candidate and runoff elections. Together, these indicators allow for distinguishing between errors of magnitude and errors of electoral ranking. Beyond static accuracy, the analysis also examines internal volatility by computing descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for institutes that conducted repeated measurements over time.

4.5. From Poll-Based Voting Behaviour to the Digital Voter: Why Online Data Became Essential in Romania's 2024–2025 Super Electoral Cycle

To answer the first question, the Romanian super electoral year has made visible a structural mismatch between the way political scientists and journalists traditionally measure public opinion and the way political preferences are now formed. Throughout the 2025 presidential race, opinion polls continued to occupy a central symbolic position: they set the rhythm of the news cycle, framed expectations about who was *in front*, and guided campaign strategies. However, when we look closely at the aggregated data that come from different pollsters, the surface appearance of control transforms into volatility: (1) different institutes describe different realities, (2) perceived frontrunners change from week to week and (3) the distance between measured preference and actual vote reveals something more than technical error. It signals a transformation in how citizens relate to politics and how the *digital voter* has begun to escape the measurement tools designed for a pre-platform era.

Therefore, the aggregate data of different polling institutes analysed in this chapter shows a dense sequence of misalignments. A first layer of misalignment emerges clearly when contrasting the first-round poll estimates with the official results: George Simion (40.96%), Nicușor Dan (20.99%), Crin Antonescu (20.07%), Victor Ponta (13.04%), and Elena Lasconi (2.68%). Many pollsters

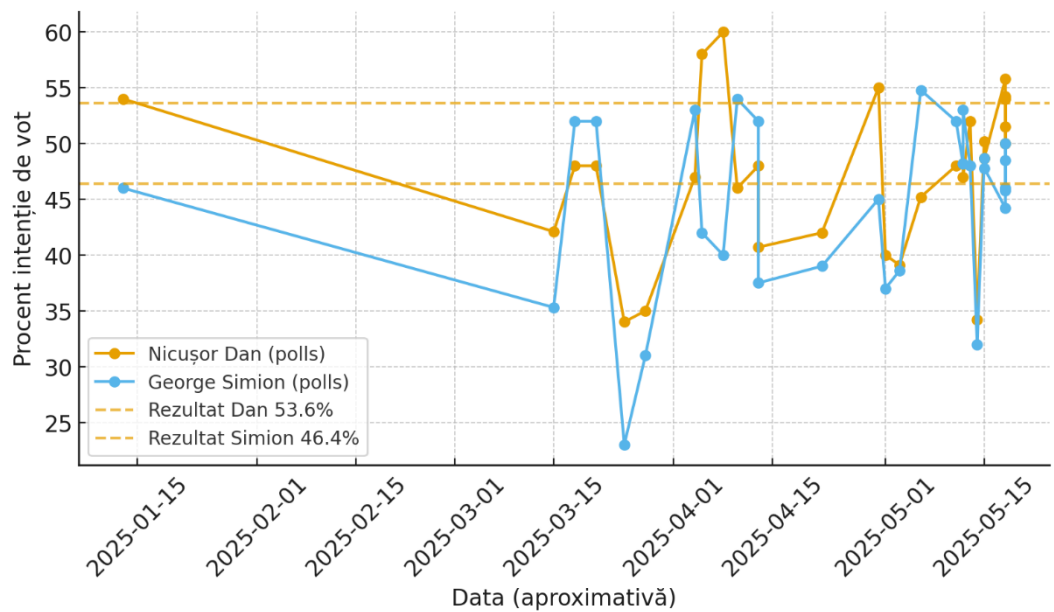
underestimated Simion by ten to fifteen points in late April. DataEcho measured him at 26.7%, ARA placed him at 26.5% while FlashData at 29%. These represent some of the largest systematic underestimations of a frontrunner in recent Romanian electoral history. Simion's vote was anchored in online-mobilized, nationalist, anti-establishment, and diaspora communities that are chronically underrepresented in conventional sampling frames. This bias reflects a long-standing challenge in Romanian polling: identifying and correctly weighting electorates that are simultaneously politically active and sociologically invisible to traditional survey methods.

Nicușor Dan's support, in contrast, was more consistently captured but slightly overestimated. Polls often placed him between 22% and 26%. This stems from a well-documented structural bias: urban, educated, politically engaged voters, Dan's core constituency, are more likely to respond to surveys. Crin Antonescu displayed high volatility across institutes, with estimates ranging from 17% to 26%. His electorate partially overlapped with that of Dan and Lasconi, meaning that small fluctuations in strategic sentiment produced large movements in polling. Victor Ponta, meanwhile, was underestimated as well, signalling that older, television-centred voters remain difficult to reach through online methodologies.

Furthermore, when we plot all these polls over time and compare them with the final official result for the second round (53.6% for Nicușor Dan and 46.4% for George Simion) a second misalignment emerges. Figure 6 shows a noisy fluctuation of percentages from February to mid-May 2025. Simion is sometimes

ahead, sometimes behind, sometimes tied. In early April, FlashData measures 58% for Dan and 42% for Simion, suggesting a comfortable mainstream victory. Only days later, an ARA poll reverses the story and places Simion ahead. AtlasIntel repeatedly finds a much tighter race, while Sociopol for a time even measures Simion above Dan. Rather than converging as election day approaches, the lines move erratically around the eventual outcome.

Figure 6. Evolution of polls results for second round (May 2025)



Polling data were compiled from publicly available releases by major Romanian institutes and media partners, restricting the dataset to polls reporting comparable vote-intention estimates and fieldwork dates. For each institute, we retained the final poll before

election day, or the exit poll where available, in order to compare the last measurement with the official result.

We evaluate accuracy using RMSE and MRE, two complementary metrics. RMSE captures the average magnitude of error across candidates in a given contest, while MRE captures whether the poll correctly predicted the ranking/order of candidates, which is a stricter criterion in multi-candidate races. Because polling methodologies differ, in terms of data collection mode (PAPI – paper assisted personal interviewing, CAPI – computer assisted personal interviewing, CATI – computer assisted telephone interviewing, online internet interviewing etc.), sampling frame, weighting, or operationalization of variables, our goal is not to identify a single “best” institute universally, but to diagnose systematic patterns of misalignment that are consistent with segmented publics and differential reach.

The comparison of each company’s final poll with the official result makes this even clearer. Table 7 ranks institutes by the root mean square error (RMSE) of their last poll. Some exit-poll consortia performed remarkably well. The final CURS exit poll, fielded on election day, shows 54% for Dan and 46% for Simion, barely 0.4 percentage points away from the official result. The Avangarde exit poll is similarly close, with 54.2% to 45.8%. IRSOP’s last pre-election poll, conducted a few days earlier, underestimates Dan slightly and overestimates Simion slightly, but still remains within a narrow band of error. INSCOP also predicts Dan’s victory with only moderate deviation. At the other end of the spectrum, Verifield’s final poll projects Simion as clear frontrunner, with 54.8% against 45.2%. The April ARA poll also gives Simion a comfortable lead.

MKOR’s last measurement is a true outlier, with very low scores for both candidates, suggesting methodological and sampling problems that make it incomparable to other surveys.

Table 7. Aggregated data of the pollsters results in Romania

Pollster	Date	Dan (%)	Simon (%)	Err_ Dan	Err_ Simio	RMSE	Pred_ Winner	Correct_ Winner
n								
Exit-Poll								
CURS	18 May	54%	46%	0.4	-0.4	0.4	Dan	TRUE
Exit-Poll								
Avangarde	18 May	54,2%	45,8%	0.6	-0.6	0.6	Dan	TRUE
IRSOP	10–13 May	52%	48%	-1.6	1.6	1.6	Dan	TRUE
Exit-Poll								
ARA	18 May	51,5%	48,5%	-2.1	2.1	2.1	Dan	TRUE
INSCOP	18 May	55,8%	44,2%	2.2	-2.2	2.2	Dan	TRUE
Noi,								
Cetățenii	11-15 May	50,2%	48,7%	-3.4	2.3	2.9	Dan	TRUE
Sociopol	18 May	50%	50%	-3.6	3.6	3.6	Tie	FALSE
AtlasIntel	13–15 May	48,7%	47,8%	-4.9	1.4	3.6	Dan	TRUE
FlashData	3–5 April	58%	42%	4.4	-4.4	4.4	Dan	TRUE
ARA	9–13 April	48%	52%	-5.6	5.6	5.6	Simion	FALSE
CURS	8–11 May	48%	52%	-5.6	5.6	5.6	Simion	FALSE
Verifield	6 May	45,2%	54,8%	-8.4	8.4	8.4	Simion	FALSE
MKOR	8–14 May	34,2%	32%	-19.4	-14.4	17.0	Dan	TRUE

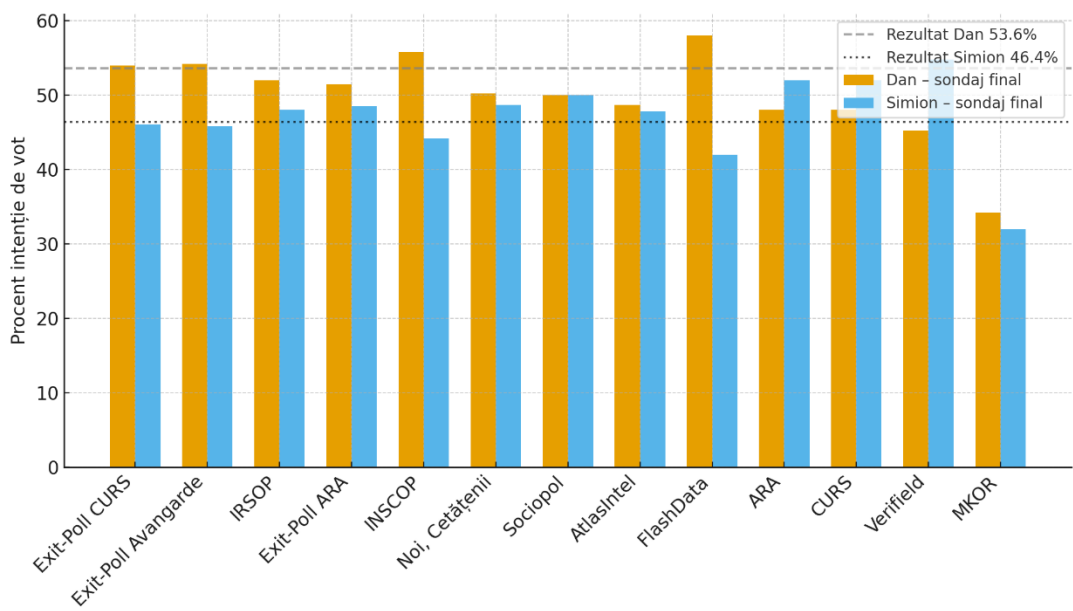
The bar chart in Figure 7 summarizes this divergence visually. For each institute, the bar representing Dan’s final share sometimes rises above the dashed line of the official result, sometimes stays below it, while the bar for Simion oscillates around the dotted line

indicating his real performance. The direction of the error is not random. Some institutes systematically under-estimate Dan and over-estimate Simion, effectively amplifying the perceived strength of the anti-system candidate. Others systematically do the opposite, reinforcing the impression that mainstream forces are safer than they actually are. The accuracy table shows that several institutes correctly predicted the winner but differed considerably in the projected margin, while a smaller group both misread the winner and produced substantial quantitative error.

Because the majority runoff electoral system is a two-candidate contest in the second round, these deviations should be read as mirror errors: whenever an institute places Dan too high, it almost mechanically places Simion too low, and vice versa. In that sense, Figure 7 is not just about who was closer, but about which electorate each polling institute effectively reached and how it modelled turnout. Institutes that systematically under-estimate Dan and over-estimate Simion likely capture more strongly the segments where anti-system narratives were salient. These segments are formed by younger, highly networked publics, diaspora-adjacent communities, or voters embedded in Simion-friendly digital climates. Similarly, polling institutes that move in the opposite direction are more aligned with television-centric or moderate publics where Dan's victory felt socially safer and more expected. In a hybrid environment marked by social desirability and fragmented opinions, the same operationalization of voting intention can yield different answers depending on data collection mode, sampling frame, and the perceived majority implied by recent media narratives. Therefore, the bars in Figure 7 can be

interpreted as traces of a fractured measurement ecosystem rather than random noise.

Figure 7. The results of presidential elections as indicated by the pollsters in comparison with the actual results (last poll of each institute compared to the actual results)



Polls do not differ only in accuracy, they also differ in internal volatility. Pollsters who measured the race repeatedly over time show different levels of internal consistency (see Table 8). AtlasIntel, which has seven measurements in the runoff, reports a mean of around 43% for Dan and 40.5% for Simion, with a standard deviation of roughly 3.9 and 5.3 percentage points respectively. Sociopol’s five polls cluster around 48% for Dan and 52% for

Simion, indicating a clear pro-Simion pattern. Noi, Cetățenii oscillates more strongly between different waves. MKOR has almost no variation internally, but its levels are so low that its polls cannot be treated as comparable to the rest. This internal volatility suggests that polls do not simply mirror a stable underlying preference with some noise; they are themselves sampling from dynamically evolving digital climates of opinion.

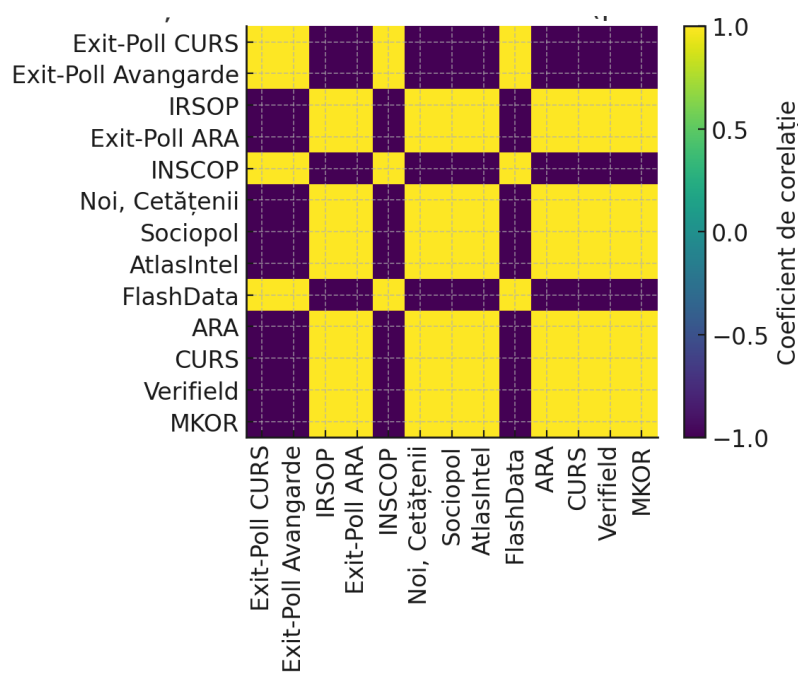
Table 8. Descriptive statistics of pollsters' results

Pollster	Dan (mean)	Simion (mean)	Dan (std)	Simion (std)	Count
ARA	41.00	37.50	9.90	20.51	2
AtlasIntel	42.97	40.49	3.89	5.27	7
CURS	47.00	53.00	1.41	1.41	2
Exit-Poll ARA	51.50	48.50			1
Exit-Poll					
Avangarde	54.20	45.80			1
Exit-Poll CURS	54.00	46.00			1
FlashData	58.00	42.00			1
INSCOP	55.80	44.20			1
IRSOP	52.00	48.00			1
MKOR	34.60	31.50	0.57	0.71	2
Noi, Cetățenii	54.80	44.93	4.04	3.64	4
Sociopol	48.00	52.00	1.22	1.22	5
Verifield	45.20	54.80			1

If we compute a simple correlation matrix of pollster error profiles and display it as a heatmap (see Figure 8), what appears is less a sign of strong alignment and more a weak, noisy pattern with pockets of similarity: some institutes tend to err in the same

direction, others diverge. Because we only have one final poll per institute for the accuracy calculation, this correlation is mathematically fragile, but its very fragility speaks to the underlying problem. The ecosystem of measurement is fractured. Different institutes reach different segments of the electorate, and those segments do not share a unified understanding of the race.

Figure 8. Heatmap of pollsters’ marginal error



However, a more systematic evaluation requires moving beyond these descriptive observations (see Table 9). To ensure comparability across institutes, the evaluation is based on each

institute's final published estimate prior to Election Day, or the closest available poll when multiple releases exist, and the error is computed by comparing reported vote shares to the official result for the same contest.

The accuracy analysis derived from the aggregate data assigns each institute to an accuracy class ranging from A to F, using two complementary criteria. The first is RMSE, the average squared percentage error across candidates; the second is MRE (mean rank error), which measures how accurately the poll predicted the relative ranking of candidates. RMSE is calculated as the square root of the mean of squared candidate-level errors, which penalizes large deviations more heavily and therefore captures not only directional bias but also the magnitude of misestimation. By contrast, MRE records the average distance between the poll's predicted ordering and the official ordering (with 0 indicating a perfect ranking). The A–F accuracy classes combine these two dimensions to distinguish institutes that are consistently close in levels from those that may get the ordering right but miss the margin (or vice versa), while acknowledging that differences in fieldwork timing and data collection mode can still shape apparent performance.

Table 9. Ranking of pollsters

	Rank accuracy	Percentage accuracy	Average errors across the four elections – Rank error MRE	Average errors – Percentage error RMSE	2025 Presidential Elections, Round 2 – Rank error		2025 Presidential Elections, Round 1 – Rank error		2024 Parliamentary Elections – Rank error	2024 Parliamentary Elections – Percentage error	2024 Bucharest Mayor Elections – Rank error	Bucharest City Council Elections – Rank error
Eni	A	3	0	4,22%	0	2,9%	0	5,53%	–	–	–	–
Prophetia	B	4	1	4,67%	0	6,47%	–	–	–	–	–	–
Realitatea	B	2	0,13	3,20%	3,1	0,4%	4,9	3,28%	0	1,52%	–	–
Realitatea	B	2	0,2	2,94%	0	1,9%	0,4	3,97%	–	–	–	–
Realitatea	B	2	0,13	4,31%	0	4,4%	0	4,3%	–	–	–	–
Realitatea	B	4	0,6	6,63%	0	5,4%	0	4,18%	0	8,08%	–	–
Prophetia	C	3	0,13	4,43%	0	1,6%	0,4	5,54%	0,5	5,36%	–	–
Prophetia	C	3	0,5	4,79%	0	3,1%	0,4	5,15%	0,4	6,59%	–	–
Prophetia	D	4	0,6	6,52%	1	5,6%	0,7	7,34%	0	6,62%	–	–

Model	Performance Metrics										
	Rank accuracy	Percentage accuracy	Average errors across the four elections – Rank error MRE	Average errors – Percentage error RMSE	2025 Presidential Elections, Round 2 – Rank error	Round 2 – Percentage error	2025 Presidential Elections, Round 1 – Rank error	Round 1 – Percentage error	2024 Parliamentary Elections – Rank error	2024 Parliamentary Elections – Percentage error	2024 Bucharest Mayor Elections – Rank error
Model A	E	4	0,6	6,28%	0	4,6%	0	4,84%	0,33	7,41%	0
Model B	E	4	0,7	6,23%	1	6,6%	0,4	7,15%	0,39	8,93%	1
Model C	F	4	0,9	6,34%	1	4,8%	0,4	4,41%	0	6,20%	0

The highest accuracy category, Class A, includes Noi, Cetățenii, with an average RMSE of roughly 4.22%, and DataEcho, with a slightly higher value of around 6.47%. Class B includes strong performers such as AtlasIntel and MKOR, with RMSE values around 3.20%, and 2.94% respectively, as well as FlashData and Avangarde. Class C comprises IRSOP and INSCOP, while the lower tiers, Classes D, E, and F, include ARA, Sociopol, CURS, and Verifield. These firms show RMSE averages between 6.2 and 6.5 percent.

This stratification illustrates that modern online probability-based sampling methods, used by firms such as AtlasIntel, MKOR, and some civic initiatives like Noi, Cetățenii or DataEcho, can match or outperform more traditional CATI-based surveys or politically aligned pollsters. Nevertheless, the RMSE values across all classes indicate that even the higher-performing institutes retain considerable margins of error, especially in multi-candidate contexts. An RMSE of 3 to 4 percent remains substantial when candidates are separated by similarly narrow margins, and therefore it can easily lead to incorrect assumptions about which candidate will reach the second round.

Accuracy, however, is not only a technical concern but also a political one. When an institute persistently misreads a particular electorate, overestimating it or diminishing it, its results shape public narratives in ways that affect voter expectations and strategic behaviour. Repeated projections by Sociopol or ARA suggesting a Simion advantage may strengthen perceptions within his digital communities that victory is imminent, while polls showing Dan

comfortably ahead can encourage undecided mainstream voters to consolidate behind him.

The key question then becomes: why is this happening, and what does it have to do with the digital voter? The answer lies in the mismatch between the assumptions of polling and the reality of hybrid public opinion. Polls assume that preferences are relatively stable and can be verbally expressed when asked. In the digital environment of 2024–2025, preferences are often contingent on the latest viral content. An undecided voter might see a TikTok montage attacking Simion and leaning temporarily toward Dan when answering a survey; a week later, after a scandal about Dan circulates through Telegram groups, the same voter might gravitate to Simion. Classical polling sees this as “instability” or “measurement error”; in fact, it is a direct expression of digital volatility.

Social desirability and the spiral of silence also interact with digital structures in ways that undermine the transparency of polls. In Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) original formulation, individuals fall silent when they perceive that their view is in the minority, to avoid isolation or sanctions. In Romania’s super electoral year, many media outlets constructed a narrative in which Simion’s potential victory was framed as dangerous or extremist. In telephone interviews, some of his supporters may therefore have concealed their real preference or declared themselves undecided. At the same time, inside Simion-friendly digital echo chambers, TikTok streams, Telegram groups, Facebook pages, the climate of opinion was exactly the opposite: users were repeatedly told that “everyone” was with Simion, that he was the authentic voice of the people, and

that polls under-reported his support because of manipulation by the “system.” In such spaces, the spiral of silence turned around: mainstream voters became the ones unlikely to comment, while anti-system supporters expressed themselves loudly and aggressively. The public climate measured by polls, which approximate a national conversation, diverged from the lived climate experienced inside specific online communities.

This duality helps explain the conflicting patterns in the accuracy table. Institutes whose sampling frames, modes of contact, and media alignment connected them primarily with television-centric or moderate digital publics tended to predict a Dan victory with moderate error. Institutes that had stronger access to younger, anti-system, or digitally radicalised users measured higher levels of support for Simion and sometimes projected him as the probable winner. When these poll results entered the media ecosystem, they did not just describe public opinion; they fed into it. A poll that showed Simion leading reinforced the sense of majority within his digital communities and deepened the spiral of silence among his opponents there. A poll that showed Dan clearly in front reassured mainstream voters and tempted undecided citizens who feared instability to “vote with the winner.” In this way, surveys and digital environments co-produced expectations, but in a fragmented and often contradictory manner.

The concept of the digital voter captures this new configuration. The digital voter does not have a fixed ideological position that can be neatly placed on the left–right axis and read off in a questionnaire. Instead, their political identity is fluid, mediated by platforms, and strongly affective (Falck et al., 2014). They

interact with politics through memes, short clips, emotional narratives, and personal testimonies rather than through party programmes or formal debates. Their sense of who is “one of us” and who is “against us” is shaped by influencers and micro-celebrities, by anonymous admins of Facebook pages, and by algorithmic suggestions that reinforce what they engage with. When they answer a poll, they provide a snapshot of their current orientation; but the forces that brought them to that orientation (the viral video they watched the night before, the outrage on their Telegram channel, the fear circulating in their Facebook feed) remain invisible in the survey instrument.

This is why the super electoral year makes the use of online data indispensable for serious analysis. Time series of polling numbers, like the ones we derived from the runoff, are insufficient on their own. To understand why Simion surged in one week and lost ground in another, why some institutes systematically underestimated Dan while others overestimated him, we need to look at the digital environment in which these shifts took place. We need to know which hashtags were trending, how narratives about corruption, betrayal or national sovereignty circulated, which emotional tones dominated comment sections, and how quickly these emotions spread.

Therefore, the polling data from 2025 show that the Romanian electorate cannot be understood anymore as a homogeneous public whose preferences are reliably captured by periodic surveys. Instead, it appears as a constellation of partially insulated digital publics, each with its own climate of opinion and narrative universe. The spiral of silence now unfolds not at the level

of the entire nation, but within each of these spheres. The silent majority that appears in the final vote is the aggregate of citizens whose voices were unevenly represented both in polls and in online debate. To make sense of this, electoral research must move from a model centred on polling the electorate to a model that maps the relationship between polls and digital traces, between declared preferences and the online communicative processes that generate them. Only by bringing these two dimensions together can we fully grasp the behaviour of the digital voter who defined Romania's 2024–2025 super electoral year.

Having established why polls struggle under fragmented digital climates, we now turn to the mechanisms that generate those climates: hybrid media circulation, dual-screening, and the affective dynamics of digital participation.

4.6. Digital Participation, Estrangement from Institutions, and the Appeal of Anti-System Politics

In this endeavour for understanding the new digital voter, the starting point for analysing contemporary electoral communication is Andrew Chadwick's (2017) conceptualization of the hybrid media system, a model that captures the interconnectedness between traditional broadcast media and digital platforms. Rather than functioning as separate spheres with distinct logics, television, social media platforms, print journalism, influencer ecosystems, and private messaging channels constitute an integrated and interdependent information environment. Political messages

circulate across these domains in fluid, nonlinear ways; they are reframed, contextualized, contested, and emotionally amplified as they move. The hybrid media model emphasizes this circulation of messages as a dynamic process shaped by multiple actors such as journalists, politicians, influencers, content creators, activists, and ordinary citizens, each operating with different resources, incentives, and communicative styles.

In the Romanian 2024 presidential elections, the hybrid media dynamics were visible with particular intensity. Television debates, once the central ritual of electoral communication, still played a significant agenda-setting role, but their impact was conditioned by immediate digital reactions (Beratis & Wright, 2022; Langer & Gruber, 2021; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). As soon as a candidate paused, stumbled, smiled awkwardly, or raised their voice, TikTok clips, YouTube shorts, and Facebook reels proliferated (Ventura et al., 2021). These clips often stripped moments of their original context, highlighting emotional cues or transforming statements into ironic soundbites. As a result, the meaning of a debate performance was no longer determined within the closed frame of the broadcast but was collectively co-produced by thousands of digital participants, many of whom did not even watch the original debate in full (Sudhahar et al., 2015; Tremayne & Minooie, 2015). An illustrative case is the Euronews presidential debate. In the middle of an exchange on administrative competence, George Simion attempted to deflect a criticism from Nicușor Dan but delivered a muddled and awkwardly phrased line. In the live broadcast, the moment passed almost unnoticed. Online, however, it took on a completely different life. Within minutes, users clipped

and circulated a short reel on TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook featuring Simion saying, *"I am better than Nicușor Dan at throwing words around"*⁶. Stripped from its wider context and compressed into a seven-second meme, the clip was reframed as an ironic confession and circulated far more widely than the substantive discussion from which it originated, shaping public perception not through policy arguments but through a viral soundbite.

This dynamic illustrates what Chadwick (2017) identifies as the power exercised through managing information flows. Political actors no longer gain visibility solely by securing a prime-time TV slot, instead, they must navigate a landscape in which visibility depends on how effectively their messages can be recirculated, re-edited, and repurposed by networks of users who enjoy substantial agency in shaping the narrative. Viral TikTok commentary, influencer reactions, or ironic memes can exert pressure on traditional newsrooms, forcing journalists to respond, reinterpret, or justify their framing. In this sense, the informational agenda does not flow top-down from mainstream media to citizens. Instead, citizens and semi-professional digital actors such as vloggers, meme-producers, micro-influencers, actively participate in creating and amplifying political messages in real time.

Within this hybrid information ecosystem, dual-screening has become one of the most consequential modes of political engagement. Rossini et al. (2021) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2017) demonstrate that dual-screening: consuming political events on one

⁶ Simion: „Sunt mai bun ca dumneavoastră la aruncat cu vorbe.” Dan: „Bravo! Exact!” - YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/MIAqKFIPQJs>

screen and reacting to them on another, transforms political communication from a unidirectional, broadcaster-driven process into a socially embedded, participatory, emotionally charged one. During dual-screening, citizens experience political events collectively rather than individually. Their interpretations are shaped by the flow of comments, jokes, emojis, and evaluative cues coming from their networks. A candidate's performance is therefore mediated not only by media professionals but by peers, influencers, and algorithmic recommendations that foreground certain reactions over others.

Romania represents an especially salient case for studying these processes. During the major presidential debates of 2024, digital backchannels became the decisive arena of political meaning-making (Dogaru, 2025; European Digital Media Observatory, 2024). Thousands of comments appeared within seconds of candidates' statements. These comment streams, often chaotic, highly emotional, and saturated with memes, did not merely reflect debate content but reshaped perceptions of performance and credibility. In many cases, the perceived "winner" of a debate was determined online before television analysts offered their assessments. Romanians watching the debate were not simply interpreting candidates' messages; they were performing and enacting those interpretations publicly, in ways that influenced the perceptions of millions of others who interacted with the content afterwards.

This phenomenon underscores the broader transformation of citizens from audiences into co-producers of political communication (Tuurnas, 2020). Digital publics act as immediate

interpreters of political events, elevating certain moments, decontextualizing others, and reframing narratives in ways that reflect their own emotional and ideological predispositions. Salient issues emerge not because parties strategically foreground them but because digital publics *amplify* or *mock* certain messages, often turning minor gaffes into defining campaign moments (Perloff, 2021; Stromer-Galley, 2019).

In the context of the 2024 elections, this dynamic proved crucial for candidates like Călin Georgescu. His messages circulated rapidly in online networks even when television offered him limited attention (Gross & Schultz, 2025). Users extracted and disseminated clips that fit their own affective framing, whether conspiratorial, nationalist, anti-elite, or anti-system. In a hybrid ecosystem, therefore, the visibility afforded by traditional media becomes only one factor among many. For a platform mechanism to work it matters that it aims for the *circulation* of messages: their memetic qualities, their emotional resonance, their capacity to trigger engagement and produce participatory reinterpretations across platforms. The logic of dual-screening thus reveals not simply a technological change but a fundamental transformation in how political meaning is constructed. Politics is increasingly experienced as a social, interactive, and emotionally mediated phenomenon, shaped as much by the digital spectators surrounding an event as by the event itself.

Understanding why digital publics have become so central to contemporary Romanian politics requires situating digital participation within the broader socio-historical landscape of Central and Eastern Europe. Political engagement in this region has

long been shaped by structural legacies that continue to influence citizens' perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and collective agency. The collapse of communist regimes in the late 1980s brought about democratization, but it also introduced patterns of institutional fragility, weak civic trust, and volatile party competition that remain deeply ingrained. Surowiec and Štětka (2020) note that these conditions have transformed social media into a parallel arena where political grievances, identity claims, and counter-narratives are articulated with intensity.

Romania embodies these patterns vividly. Throughout the post-1989 period, public trust in political institutions has been consistently low, undermined by repeated corruption scandals, unstable governments, and party realignments that obscure ideological distinctions. The ideological convergence of mainstream parties around pro-European, technocratic, and centrist economic positions, highlighted by Bakker, Jolly, and Polk (2020), has produced a long-term crisis of representation. Large segments of the electorate feel that established parties no longer articulate alternative visions for society, nor do they respond to the socioeconomic anxieties of ordinary citizens. As a result, voters increasingly interpret politics through a lens of betrayal, inefficiency, and elite detachment.

This chronic dissatisfaction is the primary cause for the rise of anti-system and outsider figures. Moreover, the rise of movements and candidates positioning themselves as alternatives to the "political class" is not merely a reaction to specific scandals or unpopular reforms. It reflects deeper structural disaffection with the functioning of democratic institutions. Foa and Mounk (2017)

describe this phenomenon as “democratic deconsolidation,” where citizens maintain democratic preferences but lose faith in the elites, parties, and procedures responsible for upholding them.

Within this environment, digital platforms serve as mechanisms of empowerment, especially for citizens who feel marginalized or unheard. Social media offers spaces where individuals can articulate discontent without the mediation of elites, express political identities, and connect with others who share similar frustrations. Unlike traditional media, whose gatekeeping practices often exclude outsider voices, digital platforms are perceived as more open, horizontal, and democratic (Wallace, 2018). On Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram, users can bypass editorial filters and engage in direct, unrestrained communication. For many Romanians, digital participation becomes synonymous with reclaiming agency in a system perceived as rigged or unresponsive.

These dynamics are particularly potent for anti-system political entrepreneurs. Figures like Călin Georgescu can position themselves as unmediated truth-tellers who speak “from outside the system,” directly addressing citizens’ grievances. Their communication strategies often rely on narratives of national renewal, societal decline, elite corruption, and moral awakening, narratives that resonate deeply in contexts marked by disillusionment. The affordances of digital platforms amplify these messages (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Moreover, digital platforms reward particular communication styles, those that are affective, confrontational, and authenticity driven. Populist communication thrives in this

environment because it relies on powerful symbolic binaries (“the people” vs. “the elite”), emotional appeals, and personal storytelling. Unlike traditional political communication, which often requires programmatic detail or policy articulation, digital populism is built around affective resonance and identity confirmation. Georgescu’s online supporters did not gravitate toward him because of detailed policy proposals; they responded to the affective signals he transmitted, his framing of elites as corrupt, his invocation of national dignity, and his posture as a persecuted outsider (Homolar & Löfflmann, 2021; Illouz, 2024; Trifan, 2025).

Outsider candidates also enjoy structural advantages in the digital sphere. They do not need to convince television producers or editors to grant them airtime; they can build their own audiences from scratch. They do not need to navigate party hierarchies or secure endorsements from established institutions; instead, their legitimacy comes from digital visibility and audience engagement. They can represent themselves as “authentic” precisely because they appear detached from professionalized politics. Criticism from mainstream news outlets can then be reframed as evidence of elite fear or conspiracy, reinforcing the boundary between “the people” and “the corrupt system.”, especially in countries with low trust in media and political institutions such as the case of Romania.

Finally, digital participation interacts with estrangement from institutions in a cyclical manner. The more citizens distrust parties and mainstream media, the more they rely on digital sources for political information. The more they rely on digital sources, the more they are exposed to anti-system messaging, emotional

content, and conspiratorial framing. These dynamics contribute to a feedback loop in which digital disaffection becomes both a symptom and a driver of anti-establishment sentiment. The 2024 presidential election made this cycle visible: Georgescu's digital momentum emerged not despite Romania's institutional malaise but *because of it*, reflecting a political environment where alienation, digital mobilization, and anti-elite narratives reinforce each other.

The growing centrality of digital platforms in electoral communication requires a better understanding of how algorithmic environments structure political exposure and engagement. Unlike earlier models of mass communication, based on relatively fixed channels and gatekeeping hierarchies, contemporary digital platforms rely on algorithms designed to optimize engagement, personalization, and user retention (Crain, 2016; Schmøkel, 2025; Wallace, 2018). These algorithmic logics fundamentally reshape the circulation of political information, amplifying some messages while obscuring others, and playing a significant role in the emotional and ideological contours of public debate.

The literature on echo chambers and selective exposure provides an important entry point for understanding these dynamics, but it also requires careful interpretation. Early concerns suggested that social media would trap individuals in isolated informational silos, shielding them from opposing viewpoints. However, empirical research, from Dubois and Blank (2018) to Bakshy et al. (2015), has shown that complete isolation is rare. What emerges instead are semi-permeable ideological clusters, in which individuals frequently encounter cross-cutting content but interpret it through the lens of their own predispositions, often reinforcing

rather than challenging prior beliefs. These clusters are especially salient during high-intensity political moments when emotional arousal is high, content production intensifies, and algorithmic amplification becomes more reactive to user behaviour.

The 2024 Romanian presidential race demonstrates these processes vividly. Long before mainstream media acknowledged Călin Georgescu as a significant candidate, pro-Georgescu communities, particularly on Facebook groups, TikTok micro-communities, YouTube comment sections, Telegram channels, and informal WhatsApp networks, were already circulating videos, ideological framings, and personal testimonials describing him as a moral, anti-corruption, or “patriotic” outsider. These digital environments did not merely mirror pre-existing attitudes; they produced and reinforced them through constant mutual validation, symbolic boundary-making, and algorithmically encouraged repetition.

When televised debates and exit polls propelled Georgescu into broader public consciousness, these online communities responded with what digital sociologists describe as affective intensification (Samoilă, 2025). Within sympathetic clusters, Georgescu’s unexpected success was interpreted as a vindication of their long-standing grievances against political elites, media institutions, and mainstream parties. Messages within these clusters quickly took on celebratory, defiant, or triumphant tones, framing his rise as evidence of a popular awakening. This collective emotional amplification is characteristic of digital populism, where feelings of recognition, empowerment, and moral righteousness play a central role in fostering political cohesion.

Simultaneously, trending hashtags, viral short-form videos, and cross-platform shares introduced Georgescu to audiences outside these supportive clusters. For many citizens, particularly those who had not encountered him prior to the election, the sudden visibility of an unfamiliar candidate produced cognitive dissonance and information-seeking behaviour, evidenced by the dramatic spikes in Google searches (Expert Forum, 2024). These reactions ranged from mild confusion to intense skepticism, reflecting the broader dynamics of cross-cluster exposure: when content originating in one ideological cluster becomes algorithmically ubiquitous, it is often experienced as disruptive or alarming by those in other clusters.

At the core of these processes lies the emotional structure of online political debate, which has become a defining feature of digital communication. Hasell and Weeks (2016) show that anger spreads more rapidly and broadly on social media than neutral or reasoned content, creating cascades of emotional contagion. This logic helps explain the speed with which Georgescu-related content propagated online. His supporters felt anger toward mainstream elites and enthusiasm about the symbolic success of an outsider; his critics felt anxiety about democratic backsliding or suspicion about foreign influence, ideological extremism, or media manipulation. In both cases, emotional reactions, not ideological or policy-based reasoning, structured engagement.

Anxiety plays a particularly fascinating role in these dynamics. According to Marcus et al. (2000), anxiety triggers information-seeking behaviours, prompting individuals to search for explanations when confronted with unexpected or threatening

stimuli. This theoretical insight aligns precisely with the surge of Google searches for “Călin Georgescu” after the first-round results. Citizens who encountered his name for the first time during election night were driven by an affective sense of uncertainty to seek clarification. Search patterns thereby reveal not only informational gaps but also the emotional turbulence generated by political surprise.

The intensity of these emotional exchanges creates a feedback loop. Supportive clusters interpret Georgescu’s rise as proof that the system is vulnerable to disruption, which heightens their online activism, increases their production of content, and strengthens their group identity. Oppositional clusters, perceiving his rise as a threat, amplify critical or alarmist narratives, which fuels their engagement and reinforces their own boundaries. Meanwhile, the platform algorithms reward this affective escalation by further amplifying high-engagement content, ensuring that emotional extremes dominate the online political landscape.

What ultimately matters for an effective influence of electoral behaviour is not whether users encountered pro-Georgescu or anti-Georgescu content but how they experienced it emotionally, how they interpreted it through the lens of group identity, and how algorithmic systems amplified these affective responses. In this sense, Georgescu’s digital trajectory exemplifies a larger structural transformation in democratic politics: the shift from deliberative, issue-based engagement to emotion-driven, algorithmically mediated political behaviour.

4.7. Conclusions

The 2024 (to 2025) Romanian super electoral year highlights a structural transformation in the production of political meaning: electoral preferences are increasingly formed and mobilized inside fragmented digital publics rather than through the institutional and media channels that previously structured campaigns. The chapter's evidence suggests that the digital (traditional) voter is not a fully new actor, but a hybrid one. These voters are citizens who remain anchored in familiar cultural and anti-elite (anti-establishment) orientations, while navigating politics through platform logics, short-form content, and networked commentary. In this platform-focused environment, political salience tends to be generated through circulation, affect, and peer interpretation, rather than through programmatic competition or party gatekeeping. Therefore, it can provide new opportunities for underdog candidates that are perceived as outsiders and anti-establishment.

A second key implication of this chapter concerns measurement. The polling gaps documented in this chapter are not "bad polls" in a technical sense. Instead, they reflect a harder problem: many voters do not hold a stable, clearly articulated choice throughout the campaign, and they may answer differently depending on what they have seen most recently online. In a fragmented media environment, different groups live in different information streams, which reinforce themselves in a closed environment, thus generating a confirm bias electoral behaviour. Therefore, when surveying the same population, different polling

institutes can field similar questions, employ sound methods, yet effectively reach different publics, and not simply as a result of sampling. In the end, they produce different (by a large margin) estimates of who is ahead and by how much. These polling discrepancies can also feed back into the campaign itself by shaping expectations, turnout, and strategic voting. For this reason, modern electoral polling could have an increased reliability by being complemented with systematic indicators of online attention and diffusion (such as platform engagement patterns, search interest, and the spread of short-form content). These are not indicators that could replace traditional measurements, but a way to understand when and why preferences become volatile. This chapter, therefore, suggests that electoral analysis could benefit from developing a framework that systematically connects polling time series to digital traces, platform dynamics, and the structure of online engagement.

Furthermore, this chapter unfolded a theoretical debate on electoral irregularities. The 2024-2025 electoral cycle illustrates how platforms reshape mobilisation by producing new inducements and new forms of monitoring, different from the traditional electoral clientelism documented in previous literature and empirical studies. Digital environments generate non-material benefits, such as visibility, inclusion, status, reputational protection, access to semi-private networks, that can be selectively allocated by platform intermediaries such as group admins, page operators, and micro-influencers. Algorithmic amplification further multiplies these dynamics through coordinated activity, engagement bursts, and cross-platform circulation, reducing public contestation in

semi-private spaces and shifting power toward those who control platform governance levers. Such digital tools are deployed by a different type of electoral intermediaries: the online brokers. They are a key element of campaign strategies that use inducements to determine a specific electoral behaviour of voters. These online brokers, such as group admins, moderators, local page operators, micro-influencers, and diaspora organisers, can allocate non-material benefits selectively and can discipline participation through moderation and exclusion. In digital clientelism monitoring shifts from ballot compliance to proxy compliance, as visible traces (likes, shares, comments, participation) allow inference about loyalty and mobilisation. Algorithmic clientelism adds a further layer: coordinated human action can trigger ranking and recommendation multipliers, accelerating diffusion and reducing contestation within semi-private spaces. Together, these mechanisms show how clientelistic exchange and voting discipline can be partially reconfigured under platform governance.

Last, but not least, the Romanian case illustrates how anti-system mobilization can be fuelled by institutional distrust and platform-driven visibility. Outsider messages can scale rapidly when amplified by algorithmic recommendation and participatory reinterpretation such as memes, reels, comments, while countermobilization can spread through the same affective mechanisms. Therefore, digital participation is not only a contextual variable, but an important arena where legitimacy, credibility, and perceived majorities are developed in real time. Methodologically, this chapter advocates for mixed designs that integrate polling diagnostics with systematic digital data collection (search trends,

cross-platform content diffusion, and structured comment analysis) to better capture how electoral volatility is generated.

This chapter points to gaps in electoral governance. During times in which electoral mobilisation shifts toward platform brokers and digitally controlled infrastructures, electoral integrity is no longer a matter of classic clientelism or clearly labelled campaign spots. The focus should concern paid or quasi-paid amplification, opaque targeting, and the gatekeeping tools that shape access and visibility inside Facebook groups, Telegram channels, and WhatsApp networks.

The readers of this book might expect that we provide policy recommendations for fighting disinformation and electoral irregularities, and propose measures for improving democracy from an electoral and behaviour perspective. However, this would fall beyond the scope we assumed for this book. In addition, such recommendations would require a more extensive and different, policy-oriented, analysis. Furthermore, such policy advice is already in place for civil institutions, temporary electoral bodies, and other intelligence institutions whose mandates are to produce integrated responses during electoral times. The mechanisms and tools that these institutions could follow are, for example the regulations produced at EU level, such as the Regulation (EU) 2024/900 (European Parliament 2024) on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, or the Digital Services Act, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 (European Parliament 2022), which sets ongoing obligations for very large online platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including risks affecting electoral processes. Election monitoring organizations and coalitions, such as *Coaliția*

Vot Corect, provide clear and effective recommendations that elections-related institutions could adopt (Pârvu and Voinea 2025).

Measures such as transparent disclosure of information through repositories, administering political communication registries of online intermediaries and their clients, creating enforceable rules for political microtargeting, and continuous and real-time auditing of platform algorithms during electoral campaigns, could create more effective election-specific risk mitigation. The goal is not to simply regulate elections and political speech, but to secure clear and transparent mechanisms for contestation. Transparency can serve as a democratic requirement in fragmented information environments, and citizens should know who pays, who coordinates, and through which channels political visibility is manufactured.

General conclusions

The main conclusion we can draw from the studies collected in this book is that elections represent a contradictory moment in the democratic life. They are routine and exceptional at the same time: routine because they are regularly scheduled events in which citizens cast ballots, exceptional because they crystallize the legitimacy of political order in one decisive act, and because they can produce unexpected and disruptive results. Since the work of Dahl (2008) and Przeworski et al. (1999), political scientists have emphasized that elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy. They are the minimum institutional requirement that allows citizens to replace leaders without violence.

After 1989, elections in Romania were not only procedures of representation but also symbolic acts of rupture with authoritarianism. Every electoral cycle reaffirmed that Romania remained on a democratic trajectory, even when institutions faltered or scandals undermined trust. From Iliescu's overwhelming victory in 1990 to the annulment of the 2024 presidential first round, elections have carried existential weight.

The studies collected in this volume explored Romanian elections from multiple angles: personalization of campaigns, media effects on vote choice, paradoxical consumption of news, and the transition from a voting behaviour measured in polls to a voter that is highly influenced by online ecosystems. Each chapter addressed a particular research question, but together they paint a portrait of a democracy in motion.

The first chapter analysed whether individualized campaigns shape legislative behaviour. Globally, scholars have observed a trend toward personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2014; McAllister, 2007; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Personalization denotes a growing emphasis on individual politicians, especially party leaders, instead of parties or collective ideologies. It can be centralized (the dominance of leaders like Berlusconi, Orbán, or Băsescu) or decentralized (local candidates branding themselves separately from parties as was the case of Ciprian Ciucu, the PNL candidate in 2025 for the Bucharest general mayor position).

Romania exemplifies both dynamics. Campaigns are increasingly centred on personalities. Mayors, presidents, and MPs highlight their biographies, authenticity, or charisma, rather than party manifestos. But once in office, party discipline remains unusually strong, with voting cohesion among the highest in Europe (Gherghina, 2014).

This creates what Rahat and Kenig (2018) call a “paradox of personalization”: campaigns appear individualized, but institutional outcomes remain party driven. For voters, this generates tension. They may believe they are electing independent-minded representatives, only to find that parliamentary behaviour is tightly controlled. In comparative literature, this speaks to a broader dilemma of representation in newer democracies: personalization mobilizes electorates but also risks increasing cynicism if personalized promises cannot be delivered in office (Cross et al., 2018).

The second chapter investigated how media exposure shaped voting dynamics in the 2009 presidential election. The

findings resonate strongly with classic theories of media effects. Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) “Columbia model” emphasized reinforcement over persuasion: media primarily strengthen pre-existing loyalties. Zaller’s (1992) model complicated this by showing that persuasion depends on political awareness: moderately informed citizens are most open to influence.

Romania confirms both models, but with an added twist. Media reinforce choices, but they also contribute to crystallization among undecided voters. In highly volatile electorates, crystallization may be more consequential than conversion. Moreover, the fact that media sometimes induce late conversion, as in the 2009 Geoană–Băsescu debate, shows the enduring relevance of campaign events in contexts where partisan attachments are weak. The Romanian case highlights the ongoing importance of television in newer democracies (Veltmer, 2008). Whereas in the U.S. or Northern Europe, digital media dominate analyses, in Romania, legacy TV channels remain agenda-setters. However, as we see in chapter 4, voters are now also co-producers of news in online environments.

The third chapter addressed the paradox of media consumption: Romanians often watch outlets that contradict their declared ideology. In the U.S. literature, selective exposure is well-documented (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011). Conservatives watch Fox News, liberals watch MSNBC. Echo chambers and filter bubbles are thought to reinforce polarization (Sunstein, 2011). Romania disrupts this model.

Here, many citizens consume cross-ideological media, either inadvertently (uncertainty about outlets’ leanings) or deliberately

(curiosity about the “other side”). This suggests that the echo chamber thesis may be less applicable in weakly institutionalized democracies. Instead of hermetically sealed information silos, Romanian media consumption is plural but incoherent. This aligns with recent critiques of the filter bubble narrative (Dubois & Blank, 2018), which show that even in polarized societies, people often encounter diverse information. But in Romania, the problem is not excessive polarization through isolation, but informational disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017): exposure to contradictory, sometimes unreliable narratives without clear ideological anchors.

The final chapter examined the 2024 presidential elections and the role of online platforms. It showed that Georgescu’s unexpected rise was not an isolated anomaly but the expression of a deeper shift in how political visibility and credibility are produced in Romania. Digital platforms no longer complement traditional campaigning; they shape it. They enable rapid diffusion of anti-establishment messages, accelerate emotional mobilisation, and allow outsider candidates to become competitive without party structures or media alliances. This chapter offers a theoretical framework for understanding changes in electoral irregularities and the development of digital clientelism.

The 2024 and 2025 presidential elections revealed that contemporary electoral behaviour cannot be explained only through preferences and messages in a unified public sphere. Platform infrastructures are used to increase mobilisation by expanding behavioural traces, creating new non-material inducements, and empowering new electoral intermediaries who gatekeep access, visibility, and participation of individual voters.

Digital clientelism operates through platform brokers who control access and standing in bounded communities, rely on behavioural traces as monitoring proxies, and use platform sanctions to discipline participation. Algorithmic amplification can magnify these dynamics by scaling brokered signals through ranking and recommendation. In this sense, digital and algorithmic clientelism provide mechanisms through which electoral competition and democratic accountability are reshaped. Clientelistic mobilisation has not disappeared but has partially migrated into platform infrastructures.

Ultimately, the 2024 elections revealed the limits of traditional measurement tools and the growing importance of online ecosystems in shaping electoral volatility. Understanding Romanian politics now requires integrating polls with digital trace data and recognizing that political legitimacy is increasingly constructed through visibility, virality, and online affect rather than institutional cues.

Concluding, this book is about more than Romania. It is about the dilemmas of democracy in the twenty-first century. The story of Romanian voters is a story of contradictions: volatile yet committed, rational yet emotional, skeptical yet mobilized. It is a story of democracy adapting, sometimes stumbling, sometimes innovating, in a turbulent world.

This book, therefore, demonstrates that peripheral democracies, like Romania, are not marginal cases. On the contrary, the Romanian case emphasizes several current questions about democracy everywhere: How do voters decide when parties are weak? How do media shape choices in fragile information

environments? How do emotions and algorithms transform the very meaning of elections? Romania is democracy in motion. Its elections mirror the dilemmas of our century.

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Table A 1. Description of variables

Variable	Definition
Dependent variables	
Style of representation	Indicates the manner in which interests are represented. The question that was asked from the respondents is formulated as follows: ‘How should a Member of Parliament vote if (1) the voters in their constituency have one opinion and their party takes different position, (2) his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of the voters in his/her constituency and (3) his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with the opinion of the voters in their party’s position? Depending on respondent’s answers we coded the candidates as ‘trustees’, ‘party delegates’ and ‘voter delegates’.
Voting dissent (logged dissent)	Measured as the percentage of times the MP voted differently than the party (measured from 0 to 100) to which we apply natural logarithm
Independent & control variables	
Campaign personalization	
Campaign norm	The main scope of the campaign. The question is formulated as follows: ‘What was the primary aim of your campaign? Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10’, where 0 = the aim was to

Variable	Definition
Campaign means	attract attention on the party; 10 = to attract attention on the candidate not the party). Index of campaign means used independently from the party (personalized TV spots and radio, personalized webpage, personalized political ads, personalized posters, and personalized flyers). Measured as dummy variables taking the value of 1 if the candidate used campaigns means independently, and 0 otherwise.
Campaign agenda	Dummy variable taking the value of 0 if the candidate raised no issues related to the electoral district and 1 if the candidate promoted in the campaign local issues from his/her district).
Electoral security FPTP	The candidate has won at least the plurality of votes. Dummy variable equals 0 if the candidate did not won at least plurality of votes, and 1 otherwise.
Parliamentary activity Total PQ	Total number of parliamentary questions asked in 2013
Local PQ	Total number of parliamentary questions asked in 2013 on local issues.
District welfare	How much did the MP emphasize local welfare issues in your electoral campaign (1 = not at all; 5 = very much)
Parliamentary experience Years MP	The number of years the politician served as MP before the election under investigation
Party record	Current party membership duration in years
USL	Parliamentary majority status. Dummy variable taking the value of 0 if other, opposition and of 1 if USL.

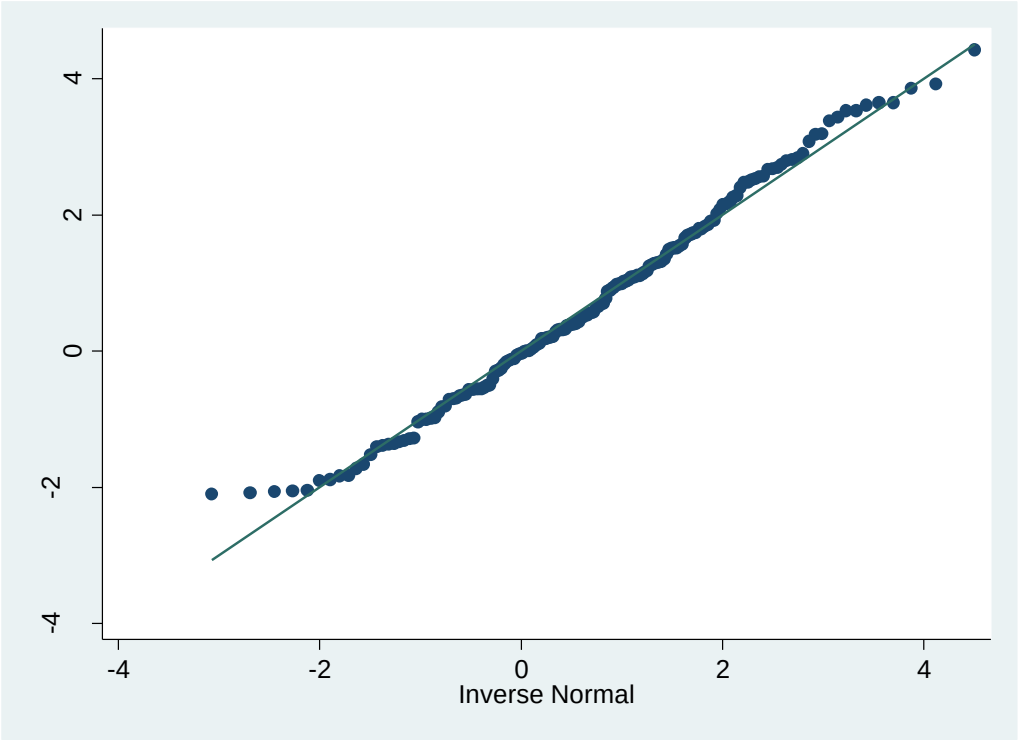
Variable	Definition
Party switcher	If the candidate was previously member of a different party. Dummy variable taking the value of 1 if yes, and 0 otherwise.
District characteristics	
Number of doctors	Average no of doctors 2009-2012
District magnitude	District magnitude
Socio-demographics	
Gender	Gender of the respondent. Dummy variable taking the value of 0 if male and 1 if female.
Age	Age of the respondent in years.
Residence	Type of residence (0 = rural area, .33 = small or medium town, .67 = suburb of big city, 1 = big city).
Education	University educated. Dummy variable taking the value of 0 if high school and 1 if university degree.
Church attendance	Church attendance (0 = never; 5 = at least once a week)

Data source: Rethinking Individual Representation (Chiru and Popescu 2016); The measurements for variable such as voting dissent are the authors' computations.

Table A 2. Summary description of dependent and independent variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Dependent variables					
Voting dissent	168	.7157766	1.505569	-2.101692	4.422849
Style of representation	173				
Independent variables					
Campaign norm	166	4.650602	2.50301	0	10
Campaign means	163	3.98773	2.393375	0	7
Campaign agenda	166	.7771084	.4174454	0	1
FPTP	173	.6589595	.475435	0	1
Total PQ	173	15.81503	29.20637	0	173
Local PQ	173	13.11561	29.69748	0	299
District welfare	155	1.683871	.8198419	1	5
Years MP	173	2.725434	4.539288	0	22
Party record	173	10.13295	7.493386	0	22
USL	173	.6069364	.4898486	0	1
Party switcher	173	.1040462	.3062068	0	1
Number of doctors	171	1735.064	2336.749	231.5	9151.5
District magnitude	173	8.16185	5.96378	2	28
Gender	173	0.132948	.340504	0	1
Age	173	46.76879	8.751994	27	65
Residence	173	.7996146	.3209721	0	1
Education	172	.9593023	.1981658	0	1
Church attendance	141	2.957447	1.235616	0	5

Figure A1. qnorm plot of outcome



Appendix B

Table B 1. Index construction: main questions

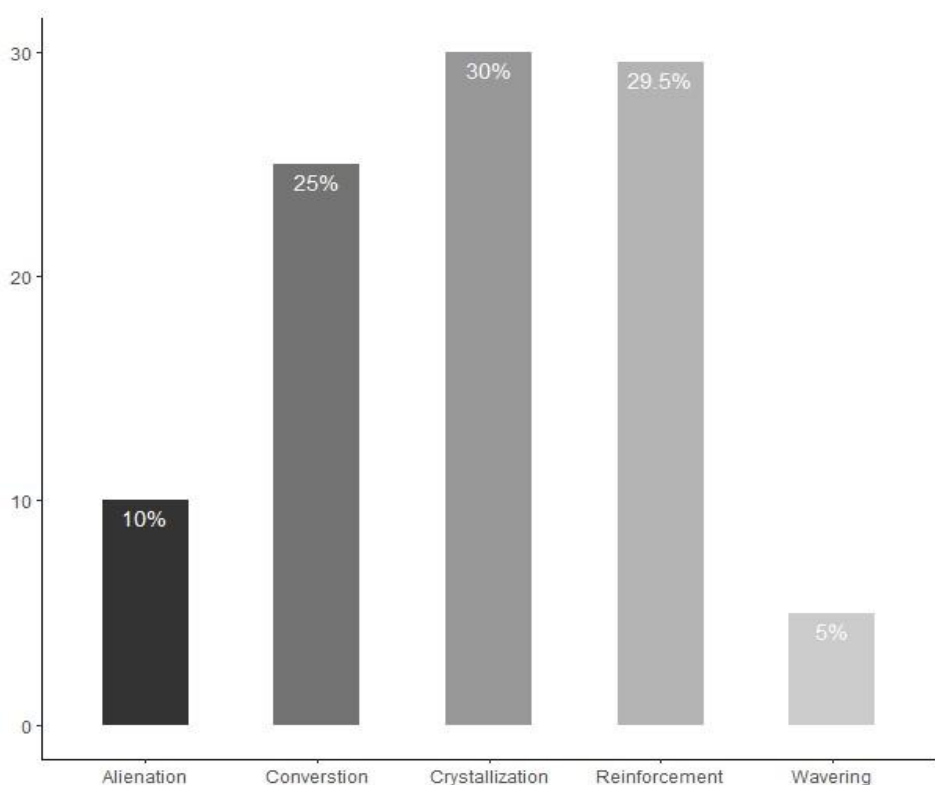
Index 1: Media Channels Exposure

1. How many days out of the seven usual days do you watch the news on TV?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
2. How many days out of the seven usual days do you follow the news on the radio	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
3. How many days out of the seven usual days you read the newspaper?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
4. How many days out of the seven usual days do you follow the news on internet?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer

Index 2: Attention to Electoral Campaign

1. During the electoral campaign how often did you follow political news on TV?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
2. During the electoral campaign how often did you follow political news on the radio?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
3. During the electoral campaign how often did you read political newspapers?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer
4. During the electoral campaign how often did you follow political news on the internet?	0. Never	1	2	3	4	5	8. Do not know	9. No answer

Figure B 1. Patterns of vote change throughout the election campaign (% of Respondents)



Note: N = 1,423. We include only the respondents who answered to all three-panel waves and excluded the respondents whose options in the first round did not make it to the second round to avoid thwarted voters.

Table B 2. Additional multinomial logistic regression

	Conversion (1)	Crystallization (2)	Reinforcement (3)
Political interest	-0.037 (-0.123)	0.041 (-0.115)	0.046 (-0.115)
Strong preference	0.218* (0.116)	0.143 (-0.116)	0.240** (-0.113)
Time of decision	-0.054 (-0.046)	-0.007 (-0.044)	-0.046 (-0.045)
Attention to electoral campaign	-0.054 (-0.11)	-0.007 (-0.102)	-0.046 (-0.1)
Vote preference before the campaign	-0.054 (-0.069)	-0.007 (-0.069)	-0.046 (-0.067)
Media consumption	0.057 (-0.051)	0.037 (-0.05)	0.041 (-0.05)
Accessing internet	0.025 (-0.109)	-0.009 (-0.106)	-0.05 (-0.106)
Vote persuasion	0.102 (-0.133)	0.082 (-0.131)	0.042 (-0.134)
Discussion about campaign	0.102 (-0.088)	0.082 (-0.085)	0.042 (-0.088)
Positive media awareness	0.006 (-0.005)	0.006 (-0.005)	0.008* (-0.005)
Negative media awareness	0.005 (-0.003)	0.006* (-0.003)	0.004 (-0.003)
Media trust	-0.009* (-0.005)	-0.008* (-0.005)	-0.005 (-0.004)
Log Likelihood		-2024.246	
Nagelkerke R squared		0.407	

Notes: Estimates of the multinomial logistic regression showing the effect of media exposure on voting change types (base category = party alienation) applied for variables included in the indexes.
 * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Appendix C

Table C 1. Description of the variables

Variable	Measurement
Mass media access	Dummy variable taking the value of 1 if respondents access right-wing mass media channels, and 0 otherwise.
Self-declared political orientation	The respondents were asked ‘In politics, we sometimes talk about left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?’ It is measured on an eleven-item scale, where 0 means <i>left</i> , and 11 means <i>right</i> . There are also labels for <i>I never heard of left and right</i> , <i>Do not know</i> and <i>No answer</i> .
Trust in TV	The respondents were asked ‘How much trust do you have in the following sources of information’, where 1 means <i>total trust</i> , and 5 means <i>no trust at all</i> .
Trust in social media	The respondents were asked ‘How much trust do you have in the following sources of information’, where 1 means <i>total trust</i> , and 5 means <i>no trust at all</i> .
Trust in information provided by friends and family	The respondents were asked ‘How much trust do you have in the following sources of information’, where 1 means <i>total trust</i> , and 5 means <i>no trust at all</i> .
Anti-PSD	The respondents were asked ‘To what extent do you agree or disagree with

Variable	Measurement
	the following statement: PSD party is the main actor accountable for the problems that Romania is currently facing', where 1 means <i>Totally agree</i> , and 5 means <i>Totally disagree</i> . The variable was coded as follows: respondents answering with 1 and 2 were considered as <i>anti-PSD</i> , the respondents selected the third option were considered to have a <i>neutral</i> position, and the respondents answering with 4 and 5 were considered to be supporters of the PSD.
Gender	Dummy variable indicating the respondents' gender, where 1 means <i>male</i> , and 0 means <i>female</i> .
Age	The respondents were asked to tell the year in which they were born. To compute the exact age of the respondents we extracted the current year (2023) from the year of birth.



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