

ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CONSTANȚA, ROMANIA (2008–2012)

ЕЛЕКТОРАЛНО ПОВЕДЕНИЕ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКА АКТИВНОСТ В КОНСТАНЦА, РУМЪНИЯ (2008–2012 г.)

Constanța is one of the largest cities in Romania and the most influential in the South-East region of the country. Its political particularities make it an interesting case-study for someone who wants to understand better the mechanisms that function at a regional and local level and to analyze the political behaviours.

Our paper aims to analyze the electoral behaviour in Constanța from the local, general and presidential elections that were held in Romania between 2008 and 2012, based on the main thesis that the voters in Constanța use different criteria for evaluating the candidates within the different types of elections, so that the party identification, even though it plays a major role in the voting decision, especially in the presidential elections, does not represent the main defining element for voting options.

Keywords: national elections, local elections, Constanța, voter turnout, electoral behaviour.

The 2008 Local and Parliamentary Elections

The political Right has known a percentage increase in the Romanian voters options between 2000 and 2008, due to the decreased inflation in this period compared to 1996–2000¹. Nevertheless, in 2008, although they had a better result than the left-winged parties, the right wing did not manage to form a government by itself, the result being a large coalition, where the main parties of each group had very similar shares.

When we intend to analyze election results for the 2008 election year it is very important to note from the outset the fact that ever since 1990 and up to present days, Romania has had a continuous decrease in the rate of voter participation. Although between 1996 and 2004 the vote participation rate decreased relatively constantly, with 10,7% between 1996 and 2000, and with 6,8% between 2000 and 2004; in 2008 the percentage of voter participation was 19,31% lower than the previous ballot, difference which was twice, three times respectively larger than in previous cases. Moreover, an extremely important element to be considered is the fact that the 2008 election year was the first year in Romania's post-communist history when the electoral participation dropped below 50%. In our opinion, this is an alarm signal referring, on the one hand, to the decreased degree of Parliament legitimacy, whose members were practically only voted by roughly a third of the population, and on the other hand, to the increasingly lower interest the population has in Romania's political life.

Constanța is a county where the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has won the local elections, as well as the parliamentary ones in 2008. However, we can notice in this situation – when we discuss voting options, not voter turnout – that there are significant differences between the results obtained by SDP candidates, but also candidates of other parties, depending on the type of elections. If in local elections, SDP candidates were the clear winners in Con-

stanta municipality in both the race for Mayor's Offices and the race for Local and County Council, in parliamentary elections, the differences were not that significant.

In the race for Constanța Mayor's Office, the SDP candidate, Radu Ștefan Mazăre, with the help of various material incentives, attracted, on the one hand, the elderly voters (which are known to always have a large voting turnout, and the monthly aids offered by the acting mayor represented a big incentive for the retired people to offer him their vote), and on the other hand, the young voters (his program „Cheap homes for young people”, started at the beginning of the year, being the reason for which many young people opted to offer Mazăre yet another mayor's mandate and the chance to continue this program). Thus, Radu Mazăre won the election for mayor of Constanța in the first round of voting, the difference of over 50 percents between him and the runner-up being a new and unique situation for Constanța local elections. With 68,65% of the votes (a total number of 86 357 votes), he was the clear winner against his main counter-candidate, Victor Gheorghe Manea – NLP – National Liberal party (who obtained 11,22% of the votes) and Dorel Constantin Onaca – DLP – Democratic Liberal Party (who obtained 10,46% of the votes)².

At the elections for Local Council of Constanța, the SDP did not score such a clear win as the one registered by its candidate for mayor's office, but the difference from the runner-up, the DLP, was also a considerable one: 59,02% of the votes for SDP and only 17,03% of the votes for DLP, 10,73% for NLP³ respectively. An element we find extremely important is that, unlike the elections for Constanța mayor's office, where the DLP candidate obtained only 10,46% of the votes, placing third, at the elections for Local and County Council, DLP placed second, with 17,03%, 17,95% of the votes respectively. This allows us to state that Constanța voters chose according to different criteria for the different types of elections, a part of this SDP electorate for the mayor's office migrating towards DLP in the case of Local and County Council elections.

The difference between the two main parties wasn't that significant for the parliamentary elections in November 2008, indicating, upon a first analysis, the fact that the result of the local elections was not a valid predictor for the parliamentary elections.

The elections held on November 30th, were the first parliamentary elections to be held based on the new electoral law, and also, the first ones not to take place at the same time as the presidential elections. In Constanța County, permanent electoral lists registered 633 059 people, the total number of voter turnout being 277 690, meaning a vote participation of 43,86%, inferior to the rates registered in previous elections at county level, but above the national average⁴.

In the elections for the Chamber of Deputies, the SDP+CP Alliance (electoral alliance between the Social Democratic Party and the Conservative Party) obtained 47,80% of the votes (and 5 deputy mandates), DLP – 27,14% of the votes (3 deputy mandates), and NLP – 14,86% of the votes (2 deputy mandates)⁵. In the elections for Senate, we can notice sensibly larger differences between the main parties, compared to the elections pot for the Chamber of Deputies. Thus, the SDP+CP alliance obtained 51,37% of the votes (and 2 senator mandates), DLP obtained 28,52% of the votes (and one senator mandate), and NLP obtained 14,88% of the votes (and also one senator mandate)⁶.

As in 2004 parliamentary elections, in 2008, voter turnout in Constanța municipality was lower than the county average. Thus, if in Constanța municipality the permanent electoral lists registered 279 732 persons, the voter turnout was 120 616, resulting in a 43,12% turnout, slightly lower than the county average⁷.

By comparing the results at national level with the results obtained in Constanța county, and municipality, we will first notice the fact that DLP, the winning party at national level, placed second in Constanța (both in the county and in the city), the differences from SDP+CP being much larger (between 20 and 23 percents in favor of SDP+CP), when the difference between the two at national level is extremely low in favor of DLP, being only surpassed in the case of Senate elections with one percent.

NLP placed third, both at national level, and in Constanța, the only mention, as stated above, being the one referring to the great difference between the score obtained by this party at national level and the one obtained in Constanța county and municipality; the percentage differences are of 5,70% and 12,31% for the Chamber of Deputies, and of 5,55% and 12,12% for the Senate.

If in the case of NLP the major difference was registered between the results obtained in the county and the ones obtained in the city, the one between the national average and the county average being a foreseeable one, as Constanța county has never been a county where liberals were better represented than in other counties, the results presented above indicate us, as expected, that the larger differences between the national average and the county average appear in the case of SDP+CP. This political formation obtained a much better electoral score in Constanța county than at national level, the differences being of 10,73%, and 13,47% for the Chamber of Deputies and 15,61%, and 17,36% for Senate.

After the local and the parliamentary elections in 2008, Constanța county appeared to be a major “red” one, with an electorate devoted to SDP, a county where the success of this party seemed to be guaranteed in case of any elections. In this regard, some were quick to provide a resounding success of the SDP candidate in the presidential elections, which were to take place the following year. However, we cannot forget the fact that in the 2004 elections, SDP registered a clear success in the local and parliamentary elections, but in the presidential elections (which were, at that time, concomitant with the parliamentary elections), the situation was reversed, as the NLP-DP Alliance candidate, Traian Băsescu, obtained in Constanța a much higher score than in other counties.

Therefore, before rushing to advance a definite verdict in favour of the county opting for SDP on all levels, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of the 2009 presidential elections, which will confirm, as we shall see below, that Constanța voters are, from certain points of view, an atypical electorate, well informed and involved, which clearly differentiates between the different types of elections.

The 2009 Presidential Elections

In the first round of the presidential elections of 2009, held on 22nd of November, the total number of electors of the permanent voters’ lists was of 18 293 277, of which 9 946 748 turned out at the polls, namely 54.37% of Romania’s voting population⁸. According to

the documents published by the Central Electoral Bureau, at national level there were 9 718 840 ballots validly cast and 227 446 spoiled ballots. The results obtained by the first three candidates participating in the presidential race after the first round of the elections were the following: Traian Băsescu (Democratic Liberal Party) – 3153640 votes (32.44%); Mircea Dan Geoană (Political alliance (Social Democratic Party + Conservative Party)) – 3027838 votes (31.15%); George Crin Antonescu (National Liberal Party) – 1945831 votes (20.02%)⁹.

The second round of the presidential elections was held on 6th of December 2009 and it roused, as one would have expected, a higher interest among citizens, given the little difference between the first two ranked candidates in the first round. The percentage of the voters who turned out was, at national level, of 58.02%, almost 4-points higher than in the first round. From the 18 303 224 electors registered on the permanent voters' lists, 10 620 116 turned out to the polls; among these, 10 481 568 voters' ballots were considered to be validly expressed, whereas 138 476 were spoiled¹⁰.

The final results of the voting process showed the lowest gap between two candidates in the second round of double-ballot voting system in Romania's democratic history, of only 0.67%, namely a number of 70 048 ballots in favour of Traian Băsescu, the one who was re-elected as President of Romania, for another five-year term: Traian Băsescu – 5 275 808 votes (50.33%); Mircea Dan Geoană – 5 205 760 votes (49.66%).

The 2012 Local and Parliamentary Elections

In 2012, local elections were held in Romania on June 10th, and parliamentary elections on December 9th. Initially, the government led by Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu tried merging the two types of elections and holding both polls in the fall, one of the main possible reasons being the drastic decrease, during the pre-election period, in the popularity of the Liberal Democratic Party and of the government where this party had the majority, and of the president of the country. The Constitutional Court of Romania, however, opposed to the merging of elections and they were held following the original program, but in a relatively unstable political context, where the Ungureanu Government had been replaced in late spring with a government of a new parliamentary majority, led by the Social-Liberal Union (SLU), composed of three political parties: the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the National Liberal Party (NLP) and the Conservative Party (CP).

With a continuous ascent ever since its formation, SLU has managed, in a rather short period of time before the local elections, to gain not only popularity, but also the trust of a rising percentage of the population. The leaders of the union sought immediately after assuming parliamentary majority and after the formation of a new government to show that they wish to rapidly implement some of the most "populist" measures of public policy, in an attempt to attract political support before the local elections. The most popular of these measures has been the reinstatement of the public sector wages and of the pensions the former government had decided to reduce by 25%, combined in the public speeches of SLU representatives with promises to reduce VAT from 24% to 19% (and an even greater reduction of this tax for basic products), to increase foreign investments, and, as a result, to create new jobs, and, generally, of medium and long term economic growth.

With a growing popularity, both at the time of the elections, and at the end of 2012, SLU has been the indisputable winner of local and parliamentary elections. In the local elections, the SLU has won the mayor mandates of the largest cities in the country (obtaining, at the same time, the highest percentage of votes at national level), and in the parliamentary elections, the largest number of deputies and senators mandates have been also won by candidates of the same political union.

At national level, in the local elections on June 10th, SLU obtained 1324 mayor mandates, 41,55% of the total number of mayor mandates allocated nationally¹¹. The Liberal Democratic Party (DLP), which had been the main governing party, holding the parliamentary majority in 2008–2012, only managed to obtain 498 mayor mandates (15,63% of the national total), followed by the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), with 203 mayors (6,37% of the national total)¹². If we talk about the Presidents of County Councils, we can also see the major difference between SLU and the main political party they confronted in the elections – DLP. Thus, at national level, of the 41 mandates for County Council Presidents, 36 went to SLU, 2 to UDMR, and only one to DLP (the other two mandates being obtained by the Liberal Christian Movement and the European People’s Progressive Liberal Electoral Alliance)¹³.

In Constanța County, as in all elections held after 1990, the participation rate for the citizens in local elections has been superior to the national rate of participation. Out of the total of 638 446 registered voters on the electoral roll, on June 10th, 374 512 actually voted, registering a turnout of 58,65%, with over 2 percents higher than the national average (56,26%)¹⁴.

However, in the city of Constanța, for the first time in the last 22 years, the participation rate has been inferior to the national rate with almost four percents, registering about 52,42%. Of a total number of 274 645 registered voters on the electoral roll, only 143 969 actually voted¹⁵. At a first glance, this might seem to indicate – compared with previous elections – a decrease in the interest the residents of Constanța have in politics in general, and in the local authorities in particular. Parliamentary elections that took place just six months following the local elections have shown, however, that the residents of Constanța are again superior to the national average in terms of turnout.

Consequently, one might argue that the decreased interest to participate in local elections has been only registered because of the fact that the victory of the main candidate – Radu Ștefan Mazăre, SLU candidate and acting mayor of Constanța for the past 3 mandates – had been predictable, leading to a decrease of the residents’ interest for these elections. Our explanation is supported by the final result of these elections: Radu Mazăre obtained on June 10th 2012, the fourth mandate of mayor of Constanța, in the first round at a very great distance from its main counter-candidates. This, with 87 495 votes obtained (62,76% of the total votes validly expressed), he obtained almost 50 percents more than the runner-up, the candidate of the Right Romania Alliance (RRA), Christian Gigi Chiru, who, with 18 903 votes, only managed to obtain 13,49% of the total¹⁶. Moreover, the attitude of Constanța residents toward these local elections might also have another explanation. Despite the growing popularity of SLU candidates, in local elections the turnout has also been lower because, in case of these

elections, party identification is not such an important factor in voting behaviour as in parliamentary or presidential elections. In this case, the more important factors are the candidate's personal qualities, his popularity and – in the case of Constanța – his previous activity on the job, despite party identification and ideological affinities. It is important to mention, in this regard, that Radu Mazăre had obtained his first mayor mandate as an independent candidate, becoming a member of the Social Democratic Party before running for mayor the second time. This might be, in the current context, the best argument in favour of the fact that the voters use different criteria for different types of elections, and in case of local elections, they favour personal, emotional criteria, replacing ideological and party identification criteria.

This argument can be supported by the voting behaviour of the citizens of Constanța in the elections held before 2012 (as shown above), but also by the voting behaviour at the parliamentary elections in December 2012. Although close, as mathematical value, to the results registered by Radu Mazăre in the local elections, the percentages obtained by SLU candidates in the county and in the city of Constanța at the parliamentary elections were more likely obtained as a result of voters' identification between the candidates of this political union and the parties they came from. This is supported by numerous studies performed at national level, which have shown that, despite the use of a majority electoral system, according to which in each electoral college there was just one deputy or senator mandate available, in their electoral process, the people were more guided by their ideological preferences, the personal qualities of the candidates having a secondary role¹⁷.

As with all ballots conducted in Constanța after 1990, at the parliamentary elections held in December 2012, voter turnout was higher than the national average. Compared to a 41,76% national turnout, Constanța County has registered a 43,72% turnout, and in Constanța municipality, it has been even higher, registering 44,92%¹⁸. As in the local elections, the largest number of deputy and senator mandates have been obtained by SLU (10 deputy mandates, of a total of 14 and 4 senator mandates, of a total of 6), followed by PP-DD (2 deputy mandates, and one senator mandate) and RRA (2 deputy mandates, and one senator mandate)¹⁹.

The interesting thing is the fact that in Constanța County, RRA (alliance where the main component party was DLP) was outranked by PP-DD, political formation, which, in spite of the fact that it was formed with just a few months before the elections, with 16,34% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 17,57% of the votes for Senate, managed to place second in the voting preferences of the residents of Constanța, after the SDP, which was a clear winner, with 60,25% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 63,84% of the votes for Senate²⁰. Therefore, RRA placed third in Constanța County in the parliamentary elections, with 15,45% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 15,97% of the votes for Senate²¹.

Conclusions

Voters in Constanța municipality remained, in 2012, in a higher proportion consistent with prior ideological and party preferences, which made RRA (more exactly DLP) obtain electoral scores higher than in the rest of the county. Therefore, in Constanța municipality,

RRA placed second in the voters preferences, after SLU (which, as at county level, had electoral scores higher than those of its counter-candidates: 60,17% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 63% of the votes for Senate). The Alliance obtained 19,70% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 20,57% of the votes for Senate, as opposed to PP-DD, which obtained, in the city, only 12,22% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies and 13,56% of the votes for Senate²².

All these elements lead us to conclude that the results of the 2012 elections and the voting behaviours of Constanța residents have once again shown a dynamic electorate, interested in politics and involved in the local and national political life. We are observing an electorate, which, even though it follows general trends of party identification also noticeable at national level, distinguishes itself through an increased capacity to differentiate between the stakes of different types of elections and, as a result, are capable of using different criteria to form its voting preferences, depending on the ballot. Therefore, in our opinion, Constanța has an electorate, which, despite certain shortfalls or instabilities, is above the national average in terms of seriousness of reporting to political issues, element of utmost importance for the development and consolidation of democratic life, both locally and nationally.

NOTES

¹ According to polls, the right-wing voting pool increased from 6% in 2000 to 13,6% in 2008. More details in http://www.gallup.ro/romana/poll_ro/releases_ro/pr040604_ro/pr040604_ro.htm (official website of The Gallup Organization, accessed on August 19th 2010), as well as in http://www.insomar.ro/documente/barometre/2008_09_barometru_insomar.pdf (official website of Insomar Research Institute, accessed on August 19th 2010).

² Source: http://www.beclocale2008.ro/documm/locale_2008/Pales_moc1.pdf, p. 211. (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on August 21st 2009).

³ Source: http://www.beclocale2008.ro/documm/locale_2008/CLvm_judcircpart.pdf, pp. 271-271(official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on August 21st 2009).

⁴ Nevertheless, Constanța was, at national level, one of the counties with the highest rates of voter participation, placing 8th, after Buzău, Ilfov, Mehedinți, Olt, Sălaj, Teleorman and Vrancea.

⁵ Data obtained from <http://www.becparlamentare2008.ro/statis/Voturi%20valabil%20exprimate%20si%20mandate%20pe%20circumscriptii%20si%20competitori.pdf>, p. 21 (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on August 22nd 2009), and from Constanta County Statistics Office.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Calculation done based on data provided by Constanța County Statistics Office.

⁸ Data from the official documents of the Central Electoral Bureau, which can be referred to at <http://www.bec2009p.ro> (a section of the official site of the Central Electoral Bureau, that deals exclusively with the 2009 presidential elections, accessed March 14, 2012).

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ According to the official data of the Central Electoral Bureau, which can be referred to at <http://www.bec2009p.ro/Documente%20PDF/Rezultate/Rezultate%20finale%20turul%20II/PV%20BEC%20Turul%20II.pdf>, 1 (a section of the official site of the Central Electoral Bureau, that deals exclusively with the 2009 Presidential Elections, accessed March 14, 2012).

¹¹ Source: <http://www.beclocale2012.ro/Primari.html> (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on June 23rd 2013).

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Source: <http://www.beclocale2012.ro/Presedinti%20CJ.html> (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on June 23rd 2013).

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.beclocale2012.ro/DOCUMENTE%20BEC/REZULTATE%20FINALE/PV%20SCANATE/Primari%20anexa%206b.pdf>, p. 2 (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on June 23rd 2013).

¹⁵ According to official data obtained from Constanța County Statistics Office.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*. The following runners up in the race for mayoral candidate in the municipality of Constanța were the candidate of the National Union for Romania's Progress (NURP), Claudiu Iorga Palaz (who obtained 12 360 votes, 8,82% of the total) and the candidate of the People's Party Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD), Dinu Gheorghe (who obtained 11 894 votes, 8,48% of the total). It is quite interesting that the fourth place was held by the PP-DD candidate, a political party formed less than a year before, led by a television host, but who managed, in a rather short period, to concentrate a large percentage of the voters' options, especially of the right-wing voters, which, until recently, had been loyal to the Liberal Democratic Party.

¹⁷ Generally, in the case of majority voting systems, the candidate's personality and his qualities represent much more important elements in configuring voting options than voters' partisan identification and ideological preferences, who take a backseat.

¹⁸ According to official data obtained from Constanta County Statistics Office. Therefore, at county level, of a total number of 634 512 voters on permanent electoral lists, 277 458 actually voted, and in Constanta municipality, of the 273 894 voters on permanent electoral lists, 123 059 actually voted.

¹⁹ Source: <http://www.becparlamentare2012.ro/rezultate%20la%20nivel%20de%20circumscriptii%20electorale.html> (official website of the Central Electoral Bureau, accessed on June 23rd 2013).

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.