

BOOK REVIEW

Mihaela Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România. De la local la național*, București: Editura Universitară, 2015, 383 pp., ISBN: 978-606-28-0377-3

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On the eve of a new electoral cycle, Mihaela Ivănescu's book, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România. De la local la național* (Eng. trans.: *Elections and Electoral Behaviors in Romania. From the Local to the National Level*) provides a much needed overview of how and why citizens vote a certain way. Understanding the complexities of the electoral behavior is one of those issues that falls not only under the purview of academic research avenues, but also of an entire cottage industry of (political) actors and party operatives whose success is dependent more or less on figuring exactly how to persuade potential voters to their side. If we go by Anthony Downs' observation – father of the rational choice theory – “political parties propose policies in the hope of winning elections”, they do not seek “to win elections in order to propose certain policies”¹. Yet the very essence of the electoral process hinges on the candidates' ability to (re)ingratiate themselves with their constituents from one electoral cycle to another. After all, even though each party has its own partisans, the history of elections

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¹ See: Anthony Downs, *O teorie economică a democrației*, trad. Șerban Cerkez, Iași: Editura Institutului European, 2009, p. 65 quoted in Mihaela Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România. De la local la național*, București: Editura Universitară, 2015, pp. 58-59. For the original English version, see: Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York: Harper, 1957.

shows us that they rarely are enough to win elections. *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România* is not a book about the parties' role in shaping electoral behaviors, about political ideologies or campaigns, not even about political leaders – though the role played by these figures is not entirely omitted either. Instead, it is a book that draws upon the patterns of exception and irregularities in the voters' decision-making process in order to highlight the fact that electoral behavior cannot be reduced to a handful of variables or theoretical prescriptions. In light of this, the author makes apparent that the most accessible entry point into the chosen subject of study is to examine the mechanics behind the split vote.

Based on the author's doctoral research, the book tries to identify the discrepancies that appear in an individual's electoral behavior from one type of election to another, seeking to understand what might be the reasons that motivate them to split their votes. This is even more intriguing given that the split vote implies jumping not only across partisan lines², but also across ideologies. In the case-study analyzed by the author, voters alter their political choice both on a vertical axis – from the local to the national level – but also within horizontal coordinates – a voter might select the mayoral candidate of a certain party, but vote with a different party where other local branches of government are concerned. Similarly, in terms of first order elections, they might vote for a certain party during parliamentary elections and with the candidate of a different party in the case of presidential elections. While at the individual level, we might be tempted to downplay the idea that the results of an election depend on one single vote, it is an entire different story when we look at the aggregate level where the patterns or outliers of incongruence become more obvious. After all, in recent years, we have seen how the advance of social media technologies has opened new avenues not only of identifying electoral behaviors, but more importantly, of predicting and therefore influencing these behaviors by micro-targeting the voters. These practices came under review in 2016 during the British referendum on whether Great Britain should remain or leave the European Union as well as during Donald

² In Romania, this behavior might be more easily understandable given that while the left pole of the spectrum has gravitated around one socially-democratic inclined party, the right side, on the other hand, has constantly reconfigured itself and split in multiple political combinations that generally vie for the same segments of the electorate.

Trump's presidential campaign. Arguably, they were used even earlier, at the dawn of the social media revolution, during Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns³.

In countries like Romania that suffer from an electoral culture lag and where the process of democratization remains in a constant flux, the electoral behavior can emulate the dysfunctions of the political system. The reasons behind these splintered choices can be attributed to a vast array of causal relationships stemming from a post-communist immature political class, a dysfunctional electoral system, poor understanding, but also poor representation of the parties' ideology, practices of bad governance, so on and so forth. It is not a coincidence that one might find similar reasons when talking about electoral absenteeism⁴ – a phenomenon that during the transition period has alarmingly continued to grow especially for the time-span analyzed in the book (from 1990 an up to the 2009 presidential election). In order to get a better grasp of the mechanisms involved in shaping certain electoral behaviors, Mihaela Ivănescu focuses on the voting practices exhibited in Romania, and more specifically, in the county and city of Constanta. A former communist country, Romania's transition process from a single-party regime towards a multi-party system has been chaotic, anomalous, and precarious.

Of course, none of these characteristics are outliers in and of themselves when we take into account the forty decades long hegemony of the single party, but one would think that nearly thirty years after the fall of Communism, the electoral system might have started to stabilize over time. Ironically and paradoxically, as the book shows, the budding

³ On the topic of micro-targeting, see for example: Sasha Issenberg, "How Obama's Team Used Big Data to Rally Voters", MIT Technology Review, 19 December 2012 [<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/509026/how-obamas-team-used-big-data-to-rally-voters/>]; Andrew Mullen, "Leave versus Remain: the digital battle", EU Referendum Analysis 2016, [<https://www.referendumanalysis.eu/eu-referendum-analysis-2016/section-7-social-media/leave-versus-remain-the-digital-battle/>]; Tom Dobber et al., "Two crates of beer and 40 pizzas: the adoption of innovative political behavioural targeting techniques", Internet Policy Review, vol. 6, no. 4, 2017 [<https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/two-crates-beer-and-40-pizzas-adoption-innovative-political-behavioural-targeting>]; Paul-Olivier Dehaye, "Microtargeting of low-information voters", Medium, 30 December 2016 [<https://medium.com/personaldata-io/microtargeting-of-low-information-voters-6eb2520cd473>].

⁴ See the section on Electoral absenteeism in Romania, pp. 207-215.

democracy quickly arrives at a modicum of stability for the first decade of transition where even the test of democratic alternance is successfully passed, only to enter a period of retrograde instability. After a cycle of almost 15 years in which the political power switched hands from one ideological party or political coalition to another (1992-1996-2000-2004), came a period characterized by three main aspects: the waning dominance and popularity of the center left-wing party; the traction gained by center right-wing parties which enabled them win both the parliamentary and presidential elections; and a rise of internecine conflicts: the coalition partners of yesterday became the opponents of tomorrow while the opposition was incessantly proactive in its efforts to regain power. Moreover, though for the most part of this period, the president and government tended to be in lockstep – the party or coalition would win both the presidential and parliamentary elections – in recent years, we have witnessed that a split executive power can also engender the stability of the political system. Specifically, when one party wins the presidency – generally a candidate from the center-right – and another party is in charge of the government either as a result of elections or of a motion of no confidence, cohabitation proves difficult, to say the least.

Outside these political aspects, changes in the constitution and a complete overhaul of the electoral system – that switched from a majoritarian framework to a proportional one – brought plenty of unintended electoral dysfunctions. For example, as Mihaela Ivănescu remarks, while turnout has continued drop, presidential elections continue to register higher turnouts compared to other elections. What is notable is that as long as parliamentary elections were organized at the same time with the first round of presidential elections, turnout for both was high, but after the constitution was amended in 2003 and the presidential mandate was extended from four to five years, the turnout for the parliamentary elections began to drop significantly⁵.

⁵ Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale...*, p. 107. Prior to 2008, the turnout for parliamentary elections which were held at the same time with presidential elections registered the following scores: 76.28% in 1992, 76.01% in 1996, 65.31% in 2000, and 58.51% in 2004 respectively. Since 2008, the following turnout rates were registered: 39.20% in 2008, 41.76% in 2012, and 39.49% in 2016. By comparison, turnout for presidential elections during the same time period reached: 54.37% and 58.02% during the first and second round of the 2009 presidential elections, and 53.17% and 64.10% respectively during the first and second round of the 2014 presidential elections.

At this point, an overview of the book structure is order. First and foremost, it is important to stress out the pedagogical merits of this research beginning with the introduction – that addresses the preliminary setup, the research hypotheses, the methodological apparatus as well as the overall structure of the analysis – and all the way up to the section of conclusions which assesses whether the proposed hypotheses were confirmed or infirmed, reviews the evolution of the electoral system in the years after the completion of the research, and also proposes other potential avenues of research. The referenced literature also points to the pedagogical character of this book, citing groundbreaking studies authored both by foreign politologists and electoral behavior specialists – predominantly from the Anglo-American space, but also from France, for example – as well as by Romanian ones. Among these works, we can mention: Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963), Samuel H. Barnes and Max Kaase (ed.), *Political Action. Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (1979), Bernard R. Berelson et al., *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (1954), David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice* (1969), Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (1960), Paul L. Lazarsfeld et al., *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (1968), Nonna Mayer and Pascal Perrineau, *Les comportements politiques* (1992), or Samuel Merrill III and Bernard Grofman, *A Unified Theory of Voting: Directional and Proximity Spatial Models* (1999). Of the Romanian works, notable mentions are: Daniel Barbu, *Republica absentă. Politică și societate în România postcomunistă* (1999); Daniel Barbu, *Indistinția: o cronică a sfârșitului politicii românești* (2010); Alfred Bulai, *Mecanismele electorale ale societății românești* (1999); Georgeta Ghebre, *Metamorfoze sociale ale puterii* (2007), Cristian Pîrvulescu, „România între democrația de opinie și absenteismul de masă” (2009); Cristian Preda, *Partide și alegeri în România postcomunistă: 1989-2004* (2005), Cristian Preda and Sorina Soare, *Regimul, partidele și sistemul politic din România* (2008), etc.

Of the six chapters that comprise this book, the five chapters that lead up to the case-study meticulously investigate aspects pertaining to: 1) the theoretical positions on electoral behavior (chapter one); 2) the brief history of the electoral system in Romania from the XIXth century and up to

the present moment (chapter two); 3) the comparative statistical analysis of the electoral cycles in the post-communist period at the national and local levels between 1990 and 2009 (chapters three and four); and finally, 4) the voter participation dynamic in Romania (chapter five). While in the third and fourth chapters, we can find a comparative application of the statistical method, the sixth chapter details a particularized theoretical model of electoral behavior that resulted from conducting a qualitative inquiry at the local level. Between October 2009 and March 2010, three opinion polls were administered to a panel of 30 members. Each of the polls was conducted during a pre-defined period: prior to the start of the presidential electoral campaign; during the campaign, but prior to the first round of the presidential election; and, finally, three months after the election. According to the author, the research sought “to analyze the manner in which the electorate develops various political options for different types of election, as well as the effects that local elections have on the way voters come to relate to parliamentary and presidential elections”⁶.

The central thesis of the analysis is rooted in the idea that the voters of a particular city like Constanta use different criteria when evaluating the candidates participating in different types of election. This observation has a direct effect on those variables concerning partisan identification. In other words, Mihaela Ivănescu asserts that while partisan identification “plays a major role in forming one’s voting decision especially in the case of presidential elections, it does not represent the main defining element in the [observed] voting behavior”⁷.

In *Voters and Voting. An Introduction*, Jocelyn A. Evans remarks that while voting is regarded “as a unique activity which forms the bedrock of political equality and civic rights in our society”, the literature on electoral behavior highlights the fact that this process – seen to be of paramount importance for the democratic state – is not usually treated with the apparent “hallowed responsibility” one might be tempted to ascribed it with⁸. As such, Evans points out that many theories on this subject “present voting as an activity much like any other”: “the way individuals make up

⁶ Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale...*, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

⁸ Jocelyn A. Evans, *Voters and Voting. An Introduction*, London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2004, p. 1.

their minds [on] how to vote is linked to how individuals make up their minds and take decisions in many other spheres"⁹. Yet while this observation might remind us of the consumer voter pertaining though not limited to the Himmelweit model, Mihaela Ivănescu does not limit herself to a single school of thought, focusing, instead, on several competing explanatory frameworks starting with the ecological one, continuing with the economic¹⁰, psychological, and sociological ones and, finally, ending, with the combined model proposed by Merrill and Grofman. The economic, psychological, and sociological models are also split in several subcategories: 1) in the first instance, the author introduces the Downs model – theorizing the spatial proximity vote; the directional model of voting; the retrospective vote model; and the Himmelweit model concerning the consumer voter; 2) in the second case, three voting frameworks are addressed – the Michigan model (on partisan identification); the cognitive theory of voting; and the psycho-dynamic model; 3) lastly, where the sociological models are concerned, the author examines the Columbia model and the radical model of voting. About the Merrill and Grofman combined model, the author explains how it “utilizes as explicative variables [factors such as] the intensity of preferences and the directional aspects, but it also accounts for other variables as well”¹¹. The voting experience cannot therefore be reduced only to the right-left axis, individual preferences, moral psychologies or group experiences – it is a sum of all of these aspects (and more) where each and every one of them can dominate the decision-making process of a voter at a given time.

Merrill and Grofman consider that “a combined model that explains electoral behavior must establish a connection between the voters’ access to information on the candidates’ agenda, voting behavior and the candidates’ strategies” – such a model has “to incorporate all the influences identified by the pure models”¹². In accordance with this assessment, Mihaela Ivănescu also argues that in order to understand why electoral behaviors

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive Romanian contribution on the economic models, see: Mihai Ungureanu, Alexandru Volacu, Andra Roescu, *Alegere rațională și comportament electoral*, București: Tritonic, 2015.

¹¹ Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale...*, pp. 91-92.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 92.

function as they do, a singular explicative model does not suffice. Or it can also be the case that the models that might apply in one case (see the research conducted on electoral behavior in the US), do not apply in others. In Romania's case, for example, it is rather difficult to talk about strong partisan affiliations. While it is true that segments of the electorate can be found on what one might come to expect as the right – left axis, the ideology, overall, plays what we might refer as a necessary, but insufficient condition in deciding the outcome of an election. For example, when the reform of the electoral system happened in 2008, Florin N. Feșnic and Oana I. Armeanu point out that the change “from a closed party list proportional representation to a single-ballot mixed electoral system” was designed “to give voters the possibility to choose candidates, rather than party lists”¹³. According to the two authors, the operating principle “was that, for many voters, their preferred candidate may not represent their preferred party”¹⁴. Furthermore, in such a case – where “personal qualities [...] trump ideology”, we are talking about “a shift from ideological voting to ‘personalized’ voting”¹⁵. While this hypothesis was not confirmed by the results registered during the parliamentary elections that fell under the incidence of this reform (specifically those from 2008 and 2012), there are other types of election – such as presidential or mayoral elections – where this prescription is more likely to come into play.

Mihaela Ivănescu highlights this aspect in the chapters reviewing the results of the local, parliamentary, and presidential elections that occurred in Romania between 1990 and 2009. Where Constanta is concerned, two instances stand out: the election of the independent candidate Radu Mazăre as mayor of Constanta in 2000 and the election of Traian Băsescu as president of Romania by a majority of Constanta residents during both of his presidential runs. In the first case, Radu Mazăre had obtained a considerable number of votes from the first round of the mayoral election, surpassing the socialist candidate Tudor Baltă by more than ten percentage points while in the second round, the difference between the two had been even more pronounced (a difference of almost thirty percentage points).

¹³ Florin N. Feșnic, Oana I. Armeanu, “Strategic Effects of Electoral Rules. Testing the Impact of the 2008 Electoral Reform in Romania”, *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2014, p. 15, p. 199.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 199.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

It is also notable that in the local elections from 2000, not only the mayor, but also the president of the county council (Nicușor Constantinescu) had also been an independent candidate. This prompted the author to note that “partisan identification plays a smaller role during local elections than during [other types of election] and it is even less important during the mayoral elections compared to those for the county or municipal councils”¹⁶.

In the case of Traian Băsescu, the fact that he was elected by a majority of the city residents came more or less as a surprise when considering that in the local elections from 2004, the center-left party (the Social Democratic Party) had swept all of the four available contests (mayor, local council, county council, president of the county council¹⁷). Moreover, the results were particularly interesting because, overall, both the city and the county have tended to vote for the Social Democratic Party during all the local electoral cycles, leading one to believe that the region was as partisan as it got. Yet, the parliamentary and presidential elections tell another story altogether. For example, in 2004, the center-right coalition¹⁸ won the same number of Deputy mandates as the center-left coalition (four) and one more Senate mandate compared to the latter.

Additionally, as it has been mentioned earlier, the presidential candidate of the center-right coalition also won the presidency, outpacing the center-left candidate by 21,84% of the votes at the county level and by an even more impressive score at the city level, where the difference between the candidates was of 37,64%¹⁹. Notably, the difference was higher at the local level than at the national level²⁰. Mihaela Ivănescu argues that one factor that might have contributed to this strong support could have been the fact that the President had strong ties with the region (born in what is today known as the town of Murfatlar, he would later graduate

¹⁶ Ivănescu, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale...*, p. 160.

¹⁷ Notably, in the period between the two electoral cycles, the two independent candidates that the local electorate had voted for – Radu Mazăre and Nicușor Constantinescu – had switched to the Social Democratic Party.

¹⁸ The Alliance D.A. – Dreptate și Adevăr (Eng. trans.: Justice and Truth) comprised of the National Liberal Party and of the Democratic Party.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 168-174.

²⁰ At the national level, in second round of the presidentials elections, 51.23% of the eligible persons voted for Traian Băsescu, while at the city and county level, the registered scores were significantly higher: 68.82% and 60.92% respectively. *Ibidem*, p. 168, p. 174.

from the Naval Academy of Constanta, and eventually, assume command of various Romanian commercial vessels).

In the 2008-2009 electoral cycle, the Social Democratic Party similarly won all four of the local contests, but unlike previously, it also won the parliamentary election. While usually, there would be certain differences between the county and city levels, with the county voters favoring the Social Democratic Party more than the city voters, in 2008, the city was more supportive of the party than the county (a difference of +1.74% for the Deputy Chamber and of +1.75% for the Senate). By comparison, at the national level, the Social Democratic Party registered, on average, a drop of more than ten percentage points for the Deputy Chamber and of almost twenty percentage points for the Senate when compared to the results registered in the city and county of Constanta²¹. In 2009, when it came the time for the presidential elections, President Băsescu won the re-election but this time, the differences between the two candidates were significantly smaller all across the board, though the city and county level remained marginally higher when compared to the national scores²²: +0.67% at the national level versus +7.27% at the county level and +6.75% at the city level.

While the case-study does not set out to make quantitative observations, in the analysis of the individual electoral behavior, we can see that the voters exhibit a complex “cross-pollinated” voting pattern that goes beyond partisan or identitarian variables. During the 1996 presidential elections, Paul E. Sum and Gabriel Bădescu identified five major factors that determined people to vote and while partisan identification was one of them, age, education, union membership or the frequency of political discussion with family members and acquaintances also contributed to the decision-making process²³. For the time period analyzed, the book provides an accessible review of the stages involved in the formation of the democratic political system and of the electoral behaviors themselves. Almost thirty years have passed since Romania has entered in the democratic family of states and

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 185-187.

²² Traian Băsescu was voted by 50.33% at the national level, 53.63% at the county level, and 53.52% at the city level. By comparison, the social-democrat candidate was voted by 49.66% at the national level, 46.36% at the county level, and 46.57% at the city level. *Ibidem*, p. 193.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 282. See also: Paul E. Sum, Gabriel Bădescu, “An Evaluation of Six Forms of Political Participation”, in Henry F. Carey (ed.), *Romania since 1989: Politics, Economics, and Society*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004, p. 181.

yet the ideal of a consolidated democracy remains out of reach. The political class remains for all intents and purposes divorced from the needs and ailments of the electorate which, in turn, only serves to further antagonize the latter. As a result of this disconnect, the voters see themselves faced with two options: to disengage completely from the political system through abstention or to vote against one particular party or candidate and not because of some deep-seeded ideological convictions. Where Constanta is concerned, Mihaela Ivănescu has showed that, time and time again, both the city and the county register higher than average rates of participation and that the results vary depending on “the type of election, the perceived economic situation, and the different stakes associated with each type of electoral contest”²⁴. When you add to this mix, an electoral reform with such confusing effects as that from 2008²⁵, public disengagement is further enabled.

During a period as conflicted as that of the last few years, *Alegeri și comportamente electorale în România* provides a thorough analysis of the Romanian contemporary political and electoral system rooted equal parts in theory, history, and actuality. The case-study shows that while there is a tendency to disparage the electorate of Constanta and most specifically, the electorate of the Social Democratic Party – regarded in general as a “captive” electorate due to the preeminence of the party in local affairs – the electoral behavior displayed by the voters of Constanta, is one rather complex and multifaceted, in equal parts, rational and strategic, but also emotional to a certain degree. As the author remarks, while the ideological issue is not what ultimately shapes the electoral behavior, voters will try to maximize their utility²⁶ and if they do not resonate with the available political alternatives, they will sit out the elections. As the abstention rates soar, it remains to be seen where these significant segments of the electorate that shun political participation will go next. That the political class ignores them in favor of petty squabbles and hollow tit-for-tats, speaks to how “anti-social” the political system they created actually is. In this case, it should not come as a surprise that reactionaries might take advantage of this vulnerability like they did in neighboring post-communist countries like Hungary or Poland. Voter beware!

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

²⁵ See the switch to an alleged uninominal system.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

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