The 2024-2025 elections in Romania: From local elections to the international impact of political choices

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This special issue on the 2024 and 2025 (unexpected) elections in Romania aims to help in understanding better the impact of these elections, from the local level to international political implications. The special issue is published in two parts as issues 1 and 2 of volume 25 of the *Romanian Journal of Political Science*. For this first part we have selected six articles we believe will be useful in understanding not only how electoral choices are constructed, but also their stagnations, developments, and positive or negative implications in a turbulent, to say the least, geopolitical context.

The first article (Ștefanachi and Grecu, 2025) analyzes how political science researchers have developed the economic model of voting as an important predictor of both political participation and the aggregation of collective preferences. In the political science literature, the economic dimension is considered significant enough to offer empirical support both to the theory of rational choice and to behavioral models that include objective socio-economic factors, such as those represented by macroeconomic indicators. In this context, economic voting is analyzed from the perspective of political accountability. Thus, the electorate can reward or sanction political actors based on economic performance. Regardless of their sociotropic (with positive externalities at the level of the entire social structure) or egotropic (with direct implications for personal well-being and finances) dimensions, macroeconomic variables are positively correlated with electoral results, having a major impact on the dynamics of voting and the aggregation of political values and preferences.

Based on these theoretical premises and against the backdrop of systemic imbalances generated by the post-pandemic situation and the effects of the war in Ukraine, the 2024 Romanian parliamentary elections are of relevance not only to citizens but also to researchers of the electoral process. Persistent inflation, the national economic and financial situation, and geopolitical tensions

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on Romania's eastern border have created an economic and social context characterized by instability and political divisions. This context has favored the performance of "anti-system" political actors, as a reaction to the public perception of poor management of the national economic situation.

The analysis presented by Ștefanachi and Grecu illustrates the impact of macroeconomic variables on the aggregation of electoral preferences, emphasizing the role played by labor market dynamics and wage levels in political choices. The results of their study are consistent with previous studies, revealing a moderate and statistically significant correlation between economic variables and the electoral preferences of Romanians in the 2024 legislative elections.

We can also highlight the relevance of the results for individual or collective political actors, who can shape their political projects or strategies according to the impact that economic conditions have on electoral results. Comparing these results with an expanded analysis of Central and Eastern European countries would facilitate understanding the role that economic variables play in shaping political behavior at the regional level, contributing to the consolidation of the participatory dimension of democracy.

The second article in this issue (Angi, Bădescu, and Radu, 2025) analyzes the determinants of electoral behavior in the 2025 presidential elections in Romania, with a particular focus on the second round, contested between a centrist, pro-European candidate and a nationalist-conservative candidate with a populist profile. The study is part of the theoretical debate on economic versus cultural explanations for electoral support for populism and seeks to assess the relative relevance of the two perspectives in an Eastern European context marked by accelerated economic convergence and, at the same time, by persistent cultural and religious polarization.

The central contribution of the article is the use of Covid-19 vaccination rates as a contextual indicator of deeper cultural and epistemic orientations related to trust in expertise, state authority, religiosity, and moral traditionalism. The authors draw on recent literature on "medical populism" and the politicization of the pandemic, which shows that public health behaviors can serve as observable proxies for cultural attitudes that are otherwise difficult to measure directly.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on county-level aggregate data (N = 42, including the municipality of Bucharest). The dependent variable is the share of votes obtained by the populist candidate in the second round of the presidential elections on May 18, 2025. The main explanatory variable is the Covid-19 vaccination rate as reported in the Fall of 2021, a moment that represented the peak for both the vaccination campaign and the public controversies associated with it.

This is analyzed in relation to three sets of contextual variables relevant in the Romanian case: (1) a pre-pandemic (2017) socio-economic development index; (2) participation in the 2018 constitutional referendum on the definition of family, used as an indicator of traditionalist and conservative mobilization; and (3) the share of the ethnic Hungarian population at the county level, included as a control variable for structural differences in electoral behavior associated with ethnic composition.

To capture both the direct and indirect effects between these variables, the authors use structural equation models (SEM), which allow testing the mediating relationships between socio-economic development, cultural indicators, and populist voting. The results show that the vaccination rate is the strongest predictor of territorial variation in voting for the populist candidate. Counties with lower vaccination levels in 2021 tend to give significantly more electoral support to the populist candidate, even when the level of economic development is controlled for. In contrast, socio-economic development does not have a significant direct effect on voting, its influence being mainly indirect, through vaccination rates and the traditionalist mobilization captured by the 2018 referendum. The

proportion of the ethnic Hungarian population has a distinct and consistent effect, confirming the existence of differentiated electoral patterns associated with ethnic composition.

The analysis is supplemented by additional institutional-level data regarding vaccination rates of teaching staff in the municipality of Cluj-Napoca. Significant differences between confessional and non-confessional schools, under comparable socio-economic conditions, support the interpretation of vaccination rates as an indicator of the influence of religious networks and their associated cultural norms.

The study has twofold relevance. Theoretically, it reinforces the argument that cultural and religious factors play a central role in sustaining populism in Central and Eastern Europe, even in conditions of economic growth and reduced inequalities. Methodologically, the article demonstrates the usefulness of contextual behavioral indicators for analyzing political preferences when individual data are limited. From a normative and public policy perspective, the results suggest that strategies to reduce the appeal of populism cannot rely exclusively on economic performance, but require interventions that target institutional trust, public communication, and the relationship between the state, expertise, and religious actors.

The third article (Bucur, 2025) makes an innovative methodological contribution to the study of political extremism by applying a semi-quantitative approach to the history and sociology of European fascism. The approach goes beyond normative or exclusively qualitative assessments and proposes a comparative measurement of the systemic criminality of fascist regimes, based on transparent and replicable analytical tools. Its central originality lies in the controlled mathematization of political history through the operationalization of five structural dimensions of fascism: political authoritarianism, racial ideology, repression of opposition, systemic crimes, and military expansionism. Applying this grid to European fascisms (1922-1975) shows that the Legionary regime in Romania (7.6/10) and the Antonescu regime (8.0/10) rank immediately below German Nazism (10/10) in terms of the intensity of political violence and the criminal nature of repression.

Bucur makes the first systematic attempt to measure contemporary fascist discourse in Romania, analyzing the doctrinal convergence between classical European fascism and the public discourse promoted by Călin Georgescu. The analysis indicates a medium-high convergence (5.8/10) between the defining features of historical fascism and current political rhetoric, without supporting the existence of institutionalized fascism, but signaling a significant ideological risk.

The main conclusion of the study is that contemporary radical discourses can and should be analyzed using standardized measurement tools that are historically comparable and legally relevant. The proposed methodology opens a line of research with European relevance, situated at the intersection of sociology, history, law, and political science, providing a solid framework for analyzing historical responsibility and current democratic vulnerabilities. Through its methodological rigor and conceptual courage, the study stands out as a benchmark for future research on neo-fascism, political memory, and historical responsibility in contemporary democracies.

The fourth study (Copilaş, 2025) shows from the outset that the cultural and political influence of Eurasianist ideology is usually understood in the Russian context. Eurasianism, both in its classical form, which emerged after the First World War, and in its newer versions, which consolidated after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, insists on Russia's uniqueness as an eclectic civilizational pole with its own identity, superior to both European and Asian civilizations.

While the old Eurasianism was more of a conservative movement, quite divided and reacting from European exile to what it perceived as the dissolution of the Russian cultural space under the influence of European ideologies, the new Eurasianism has gone beyond the defensive-reactive

attitude of the movement's founders and can be understood as an assertive ideological current with global geopolitical aspirations.

The new Eurasianism has inspired derivative ideologies in Central Asia, Turkey, Mongolia, Japan, and Central and Eastern Europe. Copilaș argues that its newest branch has developed in Romania, as exemplified by the writings and public statements of Călin Georgescu, the presidential candidate whose exponential political rise in the December 2024 presidential election ended, following the discovery of irregularities and alleged electoral fraud, with the annulment of those elections and the transformation of Georgescu into a quasi-political martyr. Due to this radical and unprecedented decision, the image of the mainstream Romanian parties and of the political system deteriorated significantly, both internally and externally.

By analyzing and interpreting Georgescu's political ideology as a subspecies of Eurasianism, this contribution offers new hermeneutic possibilities for understanding the political events that took place in Romania at the end of 2024 in a regional and local context. It is important to note that Romanian Eurasianism developed and consolidated in a society where the perception of Russia is extremely low. Starting from here, further research could investigate how this branch of Eurasianism will develop, what political weight will it have, especially domestically, and how it could be framed within the broader landscape of European radical right-wing populism. Furthermore, based on the historical observation of the existence of anti-Semitism without Jews in Romania, as documented by Michael Shafir, one could also hypothesize the existence of Eurasianism without pro-Russian sentiment, which would be worth pursuing further.

The next study (Tavalla and Matiuța, 2025) investigates the role of the TikTok platform in shaping nationalist populism and affective polarization among young Romanians during the 2024-2025 Romanian presidential elections. Based on theories of digital nationalism, populist communication, youth political engagement, and affective polarization, the study develops an integrative theoretical framework for analyzing how TikTok's algorithmic logic promotes emotionally charged political content. It argues that TikTok functions as an incubator for affective nationalism by amplifying far-right narratives and mobilizing young people through emotional media content. The authors use a mixed methodology that combines social media data analysis, public opinion data, and content analysis of TikTok posts to assess the circulation and the influence of these narratives on young voters.

The article belongs to research examining the changing structure of political mobilization. Whereas in the past electoral campaigns depended on parties, television, and charismatic leaders, we are now seeing the emergence of distributed networks of content creators and influencers who play central roles in this process. TikTok does not function as a classic channel of political communication, but as an emotion machine, where politics becomes an emotional spectacle and success depends on the emotional intensity of the messages. At the same time, TikTok not only mobilizes but also reinforces political polarization. Its algorithms favor content that arouses strong emotions, leading to the emergence of "algorithmic antagonism".

The research has broader implications beyond the Romanian context, attempting to answer essential questions about the functioning of democracy in the age of algorithms. The 2024–2025 presidential elections in Romania represented a turning point in this regard and a global warning. As elections around the world increasingly move online, understanding and managing the role of algorithms becomes a democratic necessity. Without this awareness, there is a risk that political decisions will be less the result of collective deliberation and more the product of invisible calculations by digital platforms. Discussions about the future of democracy must also include how these platforms work.

The special issue is closed by an article (Petrila and Turcescu, 2025) that analyzes the mechanisms that shape the electoral participation of first-time voters through a comparative analysis between Romania and Austria. The authors argue that youth turnout is not just an individual choice, but also the result of a broader civic ecosystem that includes family socialization, civic education, institutional support, and the digital environment. While Austria represents a model of coherent democratic socialization, Romania illustrates a fragmented and informal approach that contributes to the persistent disengagement of young people.

The study integrates four major theoretical perspectives: the influence of primary groups, digital socialization, voting habit formation, and the civic voluntarism model. Together, these perspectives show that electoral behavior is the result of social context, not just individual preference. In Romania, civic education is described as formalistic, theoretical, and disconnected from practice, i.e., fragmented. Young people often face elections without significant institutional guidance.

As a result, the family environment becomes the main influencing factor. Young people from politically involved families are more likely to vote, while others remain disengaged. Digital platforms are important sources of political information. However, online engagement is more expressive and symbolic than oriented toward concrete electoral participation. Social media amplifies existing attitudes but does not compensate for the lack of structured civic education. Socio-economic factors also matter. Low income, unstable employment, and low levels of education are strongly correlated with voting abstention. Many young Romanians feel unrepresented and question the impact of voting, thus reinforcing a pattern of long-term disengagement.

On the other hand, Austria offers a contrasting model based on institutional coherence. Civic education is applied, compulsory, and interactive, including debates, simulations, and community projects. Schools, families, NGOs, and public institutions work together to normalize participation from an early age. Social media is not isolated from civic education but integrated into public campaigns. Platforms are used to communicate accessible political content, helping to transform symbolic engagement into real participation. Voting at 16, combined with this supportive environment, reinforces political knowledge and long-term voting habits. As a result, young Austrians show higher levels of institutional trust, political efficacy, and consistent electoral participation.

Youth participation reflects the democratic maturity of a society. Where civic education is practical, inclusive, and institutionalized, young people develop lasting political engagement. Where it is fragmented, participation remains selective and socially unequal. There is a need to reform civic education towards practical democratic experiences, to support first-time voters through national information campaigns, to use digital platforms as deliberative tools, not just informative ones, and to strengthen non-formal civic networks, such as youth organizations. Without these reforms, youth disengagement risks becoming a permanent feature of Romanian democracy.

Overall, this special issue presents multiple directions of research on the 2024-2025 elections, with different social, societal, and political perspectives and angles. The articles selected for this issue dealt with the elections from the national perspective. The next issue of the *Romanian Journal of Political Science* includes the second part of the special issue, the articles published there addressing the 2024-2025 elections from the perspective of the Romanian diaspora, of international relations, as well as from regional perspectives. We hope that the two issues devoted to the 2024-2025 elections will provide important insights into understanding better the Romanian elections, and that will be a starting point for solid debates in both academic communities and the society at large.

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