

Strategic effects of electoral rules: Testing the impact of the 2008 electoral reform in Romania

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Abstract

In 2008, Romania changed its electoral system from party list PR to single ballot mixed. A major reason behind this reform was to strengthen the ties between the candidates and their constituents, and our goal is to test whether this has happened. More specifically, we want to see whether the ideological vote inherent in a party list PR system has been replaced by a “personal” vote, i.e. by a vote based on the personal qualities of candidates, rather than their ideological affiliation. To this end, we analyze aggregate electoral returns from Romania’s 3,000 localities, and rely on the notion of ‘uniform partisan swing,’ which states that the level of regional support for a given party in an election is an excellent predictor of its level of support in the same locality or region in the next election. Our expectation was that the new electoral system will lead to a decrease in ideological voting and a larger impact of the qualities of individual candidates. We found a lower correlation between regional support for parties in the 2004 and 2008 elections, compared to the correlation between the 2000 and 2004 elections. This appears to indicate a substantial impact of the electoral reform. However, another test, the correlation between the party votes for the two chambers of parliament in 2008, compared to the correlation in 2004, did not confirm it. Instead, it appears that the changes in the patterns of regional and local support for various parties, quite noticeable in the last parliamentary election, are caused by dealignment, rather than electoral reform.

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Political institutions matter. Not only that they affect political outcomes (e.g., Duverger's 'mechanical effect'), they also structure political behavior (Duverger's 'psychological effect'). When we have a change in the rules governing a political institution, most often we have a change in the incentives governing the behavior of political actors. Changes of the electoral systems are no exception to this rule; they are arguably the most prominent exemplification of it.

In 2008, Romania changed the rules governing the election of the two chambers of its parliament (the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies), from closed party list proportional representation to a single-ballot mixed electoral system. One of the justifications offered for this change (in fact, the reason that was the most widely discussed), was to offer Romanian voters the chance to vote for a specific candidate. One of the implications is, then, that some voters may choose based on the qualities of candidates, rather than their ideological affiliation, and may prefer to vote for a candidate who does not represent their preferred party. If that happens, then the reform has 'personalized' the vote and, by doing so, it achieved its purpose. If that does not happen, and voters continue to choose solely based on ideological preferences and party labels, then we can say that the electoral reform has failed.

The purpose of this paper is precisely to test whether the reform did, in fact, have an effect. One way of testing this, with the benefit of hindsight, is to use aggregate returns from Romania's most recent parliamentary elections (November 2008), held under the new electoral rules, and compare those with the results of previous elections, held under the old rules, and see whether the patterns of regional support for various political parties do change as a result of the aforementioned institutional reform. We

develop a model of electoral behavior at the individual level which has observable implications at the aggregate level. We formalized these implications into hypotheses which, if confirmed by empirical data, will indicate that the electoral reform was successful.

Past research

There have been a number of studies of the effects of electoral systems on personalizing the vote. The study of Carey and Shugart (1995) develops a ranking of electoral systems according to the degree to which they increase incentives to cultivate a personal vote. According to the authors, the likelihood of personal vote increases with the increase in the freedom of choice by voters and with a decrease in party leaders' control over candidate nominations. For instance, they rank the single non transferable vote (SNTV) without party leadership control over nomination as the "zenith in the value of personal reputation relative to party reputation" (Carey and Shugart 1995: 429). Other systems that rank high are plurality systems that use primaries, because they create intraparty competition and party leaders cannot decide who will use the party label. The new Romanian electoral system used for the 2008 parliamentary elections falls, according to this ranking, somewhere in the middle. While it is more encouraging of a personal vote than the previous party list PR, the party still controls the nomination and the party reputation still matters because the votes of a party's candidates are pooled, determining the party's share of the seats in the legislature. It is interesting to note what Carey and Shugart discuss as the downside of the personal vote, although it is not the subject of our study: "more attention by legislators to personal reputation would generally lead to more

'pork' in a country's budgets [...]. Where, on the other hand, party reputation matters more, policymaking should be more 'efficient'" (Carey and Shugart 1995: 433-34).

Other authors using alternative classifications of electoral systems arrive at similar results. Grofman, for instance, divide the Carey and Shugart index of 'incentives to cultivate a personal vote' into two components: degree of party-centeredness of the electoral system and the size of a legislators' electoral constituency, i.e. the number of voters who voted for a candidate (Grofman 2005). While their classification of electoral systems using their own criteria provides different results than those of Carey and Shugart for a number of electoral systems, such as single transferable vote (STV) and SNTV, it gives similar results for the mixed electoral systems located in an intermediate position. Comparable results but more difficult to interpret are those of Pereira and e Silva, because they do not consider the specific variant of electoral system used in Romanian 2008 elections. The authors develop an index of citizens' freedom to choose members of the parliament as a function of ballot structure, district magnitude, and electoral formulas (Pereira and e Silva 2009). They find maximum freedom associated with STV, open ballot and open party list, and rank mixed systems at an intermediate level of freedom.

Other works focused on different aspects of mixed electoral systems. In a study of New Zealand elections, Karp is concerned with a possible contamination effect from candidates to parties in mixed systems (Karp 2009). In those systems where voters have the option of choosing the candidates, their strong preference for a candidate may influence their vote for the party, which will ultimately determine the partisan composition of the legislature. This applies mainly to two-ballot mixed systems, but it

could also be extrapolated to the concomitant election of the two chambers of the Romanian parliament in 2008, when a voters' support for a candidate for one of the chambers could have driven his/her party vote for the other chamber. The findings suggest a limited 'coat-tail' effect.

An important question for the new democracies, with weak and poorly institutionalized party systems, is to what extent voters react to the incentives present in the electoral rules. Moser and Scheiner address this question, looking specifically at ticket-splitting in mixed electoral systems in post communist countries (Moser and Scheiner 2009). Their results show a much higher prevalence of ticket-splitting and strategic voting in established democracies, where sophisticated voters make strategic calculations in order to improve the outcome. In contrast, in new democracies ticket-splitting and strategic voting occur to a lesser extent, due to the difficulty for the voters to gain sufficient information in order to differentiate the strengths of the candidates.

The literature discussed above leaves us with unclear expectations about the potential effects of the Romanian electoral reform. First, mixed electoral systems tend to fall into a grey middle area where any outcome does not appear as a surprise. Second, institutions in new democracies are not expected to generate similar effects as in established democracies, at least not on the short run. The expectation that emerges, however, based on the existing literature is that the impact of the recent electoral reform is likely to be limited by two factors: the maintenance of party control over the nomination process and the difficulty of voters to make informed decisions.

The politics of electoral reform in Romania

Discussions about reforming the Romanian electoral law go back as early as 1995, but electoral reform has never been able to achieve strong support among the main political parties. This has remained largely true even when reform was eventually adopted in 2008, which explains the long delays during the adoption process and, most of all, the minimalist character of reform. The outcome seems more an effort in damage control of the part of the parliamentary parties as opposed to a well-designed plan expected to benefit at least some of the parties involved in the negotiations. The idea originated with a civil society organization, Asociația Pro Democrația (APD), which in 1995 initiated a bill aimed at reforming the existing proportional representation electoral system with a mixed system for the election of the lower house and a single-member district system for the election of the senate (Bretea 2008). The aim of this reform was to increase the responsibility of the MPs and their ties with the constituency (http://www.apd.ro/votul uninominal/intrebari_frecvente.php).

In between 1998 and 2008 APD organized four campaigns aimed at making its initiative known to the general public and attempted to gather the 250,000 required signatures to introduce the bill as a citizens' initiative (www.apd.ro). Failing to collect the necessary number of signatures, APD attempted to rally the support of one of the major political parties. Even in 2003, after several APD campaigns and the collection of over 161,000 signatures on its legislative proposal, many MPs were unaware of the differences between various electoral systems and their consequences, while the parliamentary parties lacked a clear position regarding electoral reform (http://www.apd.ro/stiri_editie.php?id=19). APD campaigns, however, succeeded in

attracting public support for the bill. Their catchphrase was '*uninominal* vote,' reflecting the proposal to elect representatives in SMDs. Opinion polls conducted after 2000 showed that over 60% of Romanians favored electoral reform (Gallup 2002), despite the fact that a majority of them (76%) knew little or nothing at all about the new proposal for electoral reform, and only 17% were well informed, according to the same polls.

Over the next years, APD exercised systematic pressure over the parliamentary parties through a variety of campaigns, workshops, and street events about electoral reforms. Three of these parties who declared their support for reform (National Liberal Party-PNL, Democratic-Liberal Party-PD-L, and Party of Social Democracy PSD) began working together in a parliamentary commission established in 2006 to amend the APD bill, but the progress was almost inexistent. PRM (Great Romania Party) rejected reform, while the ethnic UDMR (Democratic Union of Hungarians) demanded guarantees that the Hungarian minority will maintain the same representation under the new system (Jurnalul National 2008). In November 2007 Romanian President Traian Basescu called a referendum on electoral reform, but the reform was not the one debated in the parliamentary commission, but an old proposal by PSD, a majoritarian system with two rounds similar to the French system. The referendum failed due to the low turnout.

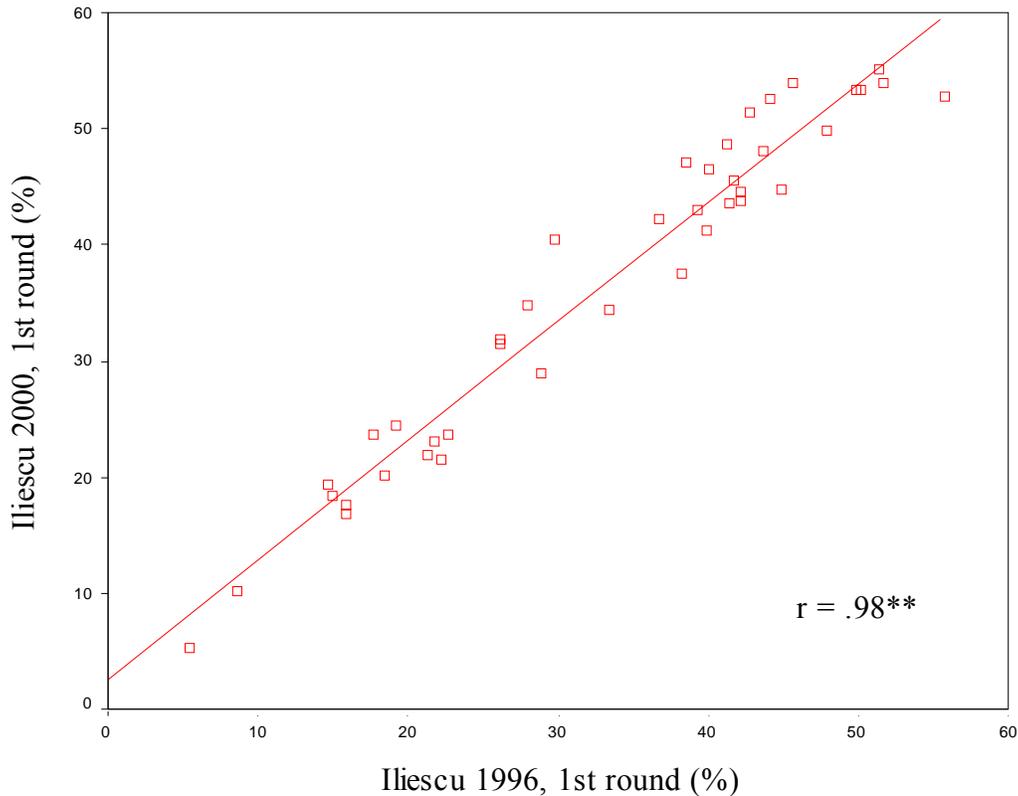
The parliament eventually concluded negotiations and adopted the bill in March 2008. The new electoral law reflects the compromises among the major parties: it includes the '*uninominal*' concept, with voters casting a single ballot in SMDs, but due to a corrective mechanism the final outcome is very proportional. The seats are initially filled by majority in SMDs. The remaining seats are then redistributed at the district level to the parties passing the threshold in proportion to the overall number of votes obtained

nationally. A second redistribution takes then place at the national level. According to the classification of mixed electoral systems by Massicotte and Blais, this system falls in the category of *correction* systems (Massicotte and Blais 1999). This particular variant, in which the proportion of PR seats that provide the correction is left unspecified is extremely rare and, to our knowledge, is not currently used for general elections anywhere in the world. The existence of three main parties competing (PSD, PD-L, and PNL), in addition to the ethnic UDMR, makes very difficult to fill in the seat through majority. The allocation of seats through redistribution takes place through a complicated and difficult to predict process for the voter. It was expected and, indeed, election results confirmed it that candidates placed third or fourth on the list won the seat. The question therefore is whether the voters react to the incentives of the new system by voting more for candidates than for parties or do they continue to cast an ideological vote?

Ideological vs. personal voting in 2008 Romanian general elections

According to the theory of "uniform partisan swing" (King et al. 2004), the regional support for a party or candidate in an election is typically an excellent predictor of its level of support in the following election. For example, let us assume that, in election t , lesser developed regions will support a left-wing party more than more developed regions do; in the absence of a major change, be that institutional, political, or otherwise, we will see the same pattern of support in the subsequent election, $t+1$.

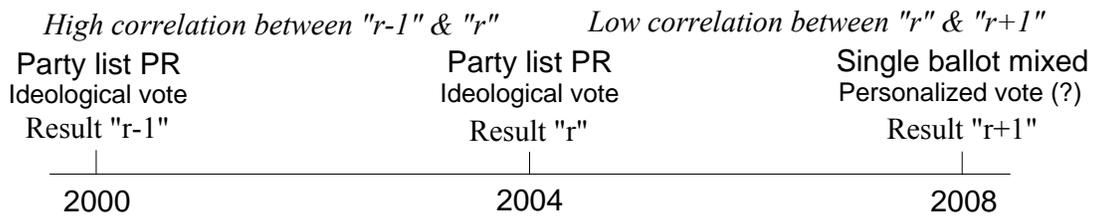
Figure 1. Uniform partisan swing in Romanian presidential elections: County-level vote for Ion Iliescu, first round of the 1996 & 2000 elections



In Figure 1 we see an illustration of this concept. The figure shows the percentage of the vote cast for the candidate of the left, Ion Iliescu, in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, in the 41 Romanian counties. The correlation is very high, $r = .98$, so Iliescu's 1996 share of the vote was indeed a very good predictor of his 2000 vote. The question is, then, if a Romanian party's results at the regional or local level in consecutive parliamentary elections prior to the electoral reform are highly correlated, will they continue to be so after the enactment of the reform? Romania's last three parliamentary elections were held in 2000, 2004 and 2008. The first two were conducted under party list PR; the last one, under the new, single ballot mixed system. Thus, in this last election, unlike in previous elections, voters chose candidates rather than parties. Let us assume

that, in 2008, the electoral reform *did* achieve one of its stated objectives, 'personalizing' the vote, and so a substantial number of voters chose the candidate that they considered the best, irrespective of partisan affiliation. If that were the case, then the 2000 vote at the locality level for a given party will be a very good predictor of the 2004 vote for the same party, since we had ideological voting in both instances. At the same time, the 2004 will be a poorer predictor of the 2008 vote, since in the latter case, the qualities of each individual candidate will play an important role, driving up or down the vote for the party they represent (Figure 2):

**Figure 2. Electoral reform and its expected effect:
A shift from ideological voting to personalized voting?**



Along with this longitudinal analysis, comparing the correlations between the locality-level results in consecutive elections, there is another test that we can perform. In every election, Romanian voters chose both chambers of parliament, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. In 2000 and 2004, both chambers were elected using party list PR; in 2008, both chambers were elected using a single ballot mixed system, with the Senate SMDs about twice the size of Chamber SMDs. In 2000 and 2004, the ideological vote would lead us to expect a high correlation between the locality-level Senate and Chamber vote for a given party. In 2008, a non-ideological vote should result in a lower correlation, since it is highly unlikely that different candidates of the same party for the

Senate and the Chamber will lessen or improve that party's vote at the locality level by *exactly* the same amount. If this condition is not fulfilled, even an unequal increase or decrease in the locality-level vote will result in a lower correlation. Summing up, if the electoral reform brought with it a shift from ideological voting to 'personalized' voting, the following two hypotheses must be confirmed:

H1: We have ideological voting in 2000 and 2004, and less ideological voting in 2008, so we should see a high correlation between the 2000 and 2004 locality level vote for a given party, but a lower correlation between the 2004 and 2008 locality level vote for the same party.

H2: We have ideological voting in 2000 and 2004, and less ideological voting in 2008, so we should see a high correlation between the locality level Senate and Chamber votes for a given party, in both 2000 and 2004, but a lower correlation between the locality level Senate and Chamber votes for the same party in 2008.

We test these hypotheses using locality-level data from the 2000, 2004, and 2008 parliamentary elections, for both Senate and Chamber. The electoral data are from *Biroul Electoral Central* (Central Electoral Commission) and *Asociația Pro Democrația* (For Democracy Association), a non-governmental group involved in monitoring elections. The data are at the locality level, following the administrative divisions of Romania employed by the National Institute for Statistics, which are also used to draw the electoral colleges. This system is known as SIRUTA, *Sistemul Informatic al Registrului Unităților Teritorial – Administrative* (The Informatic System of Territorial Administrative Units), which at the most disaggregate level includes rural districts, towns, cities, and the six administrative divisions (*sectoare*) of Bucharest. SIRUTA gives us about 3,000 cases, and we begin with an analysis of the vote for the leftist Social Democratic Party (PSD), the only large party which was continuously present as such on Romania's political scene during the last decade.

Figure 3. Locality-level PSD vote in 2004 against locality-level PSD vote in 2000 (Senate)

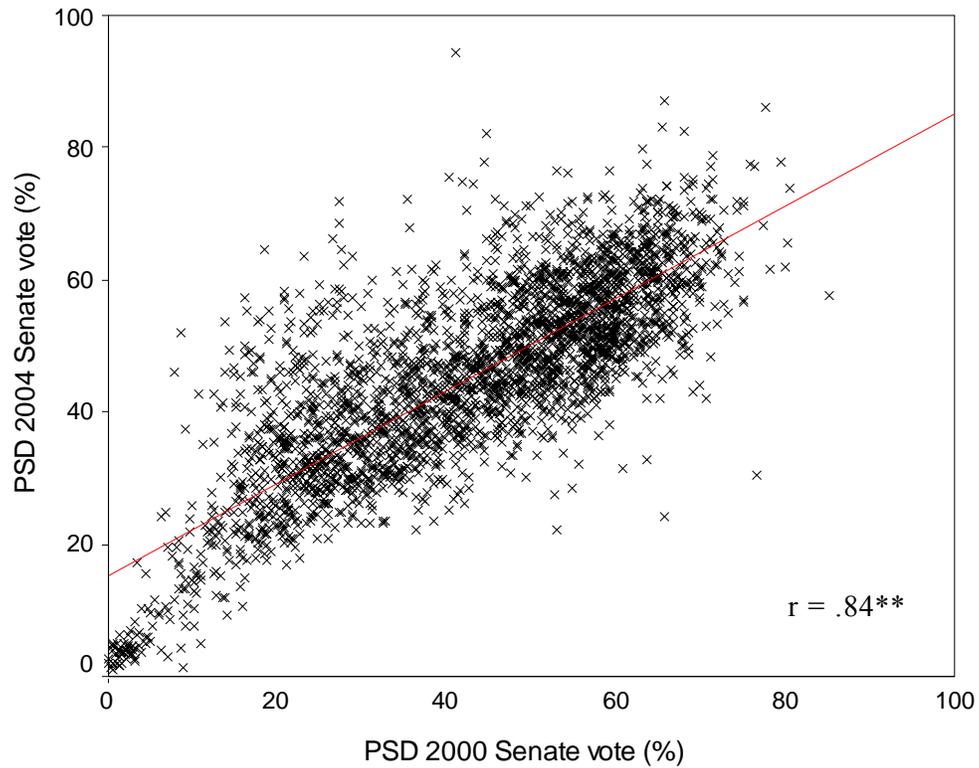
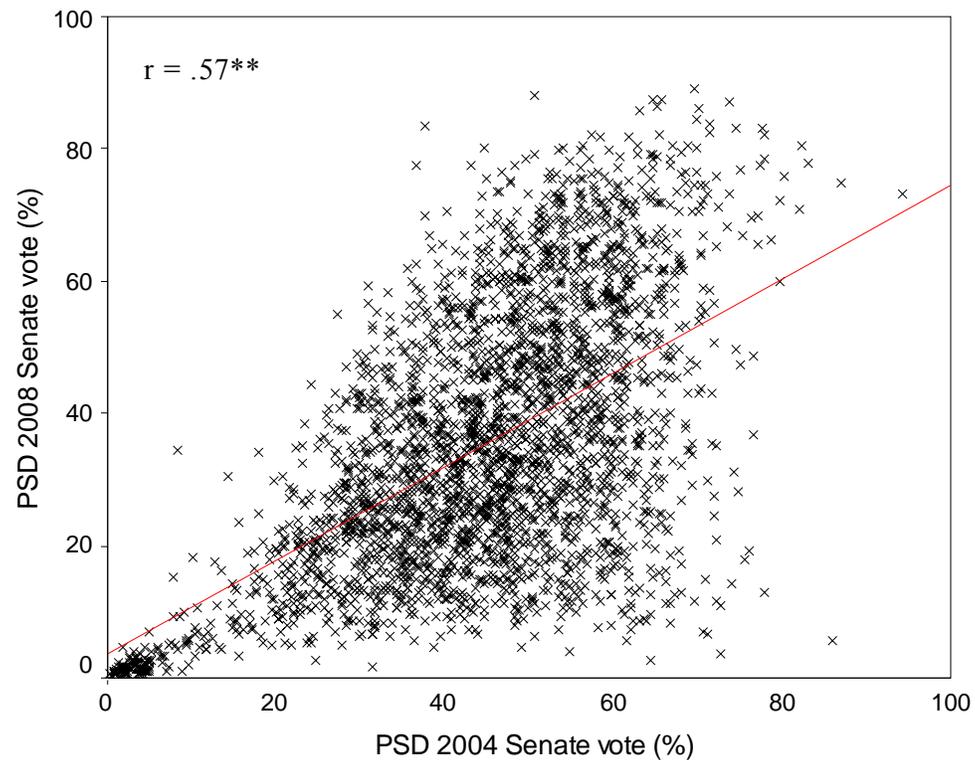


Figure 4. Locality-level PSD vote in 2008 against locality-level PSD vote in 2004 (Senate)



If we compare Figures 3 and 4, the first hypothesis is confirmed. The 2000 Senate vote for the PSD is a very good predictor for PSD's Senate vote in 2004 (.84 correlation), a result that is consistent with an ideological base of the vote. The 2004 Senate vote is a much poorer predictor of the 2008 Senate vote (.57 correlation), which is consistent with a shift from ideological voting to a 'personalized' voting – when voting becomes largely a function of the personal qualities of the candidates, it becomes less predictable.

Figure 5. Locality-level PSD Senate vote against locality-level PSD Chamber vote (2004)

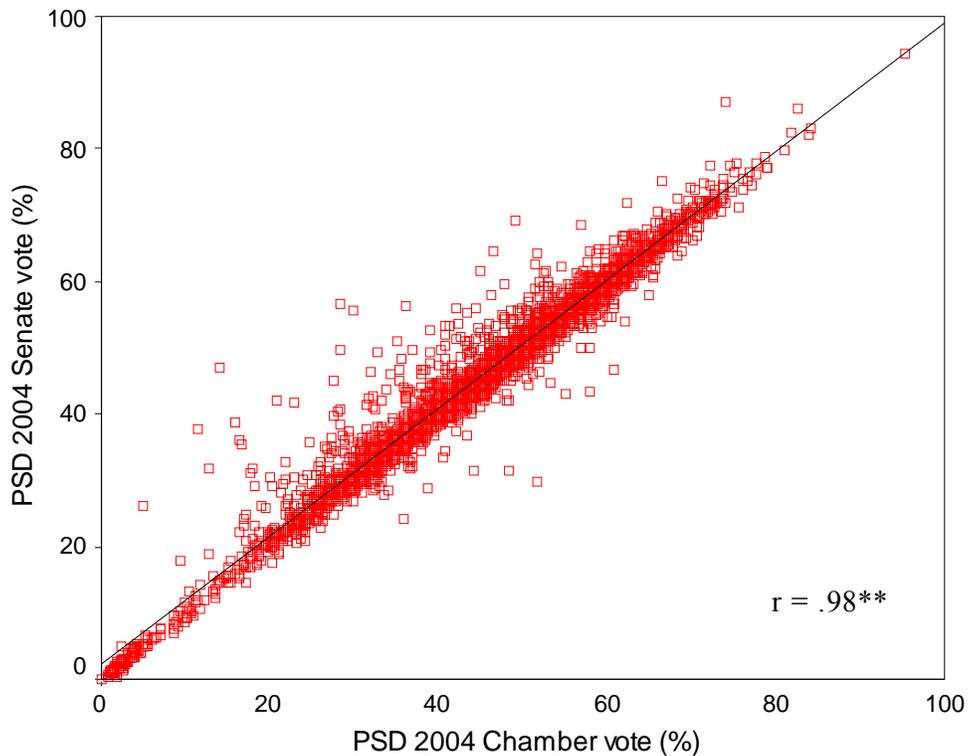
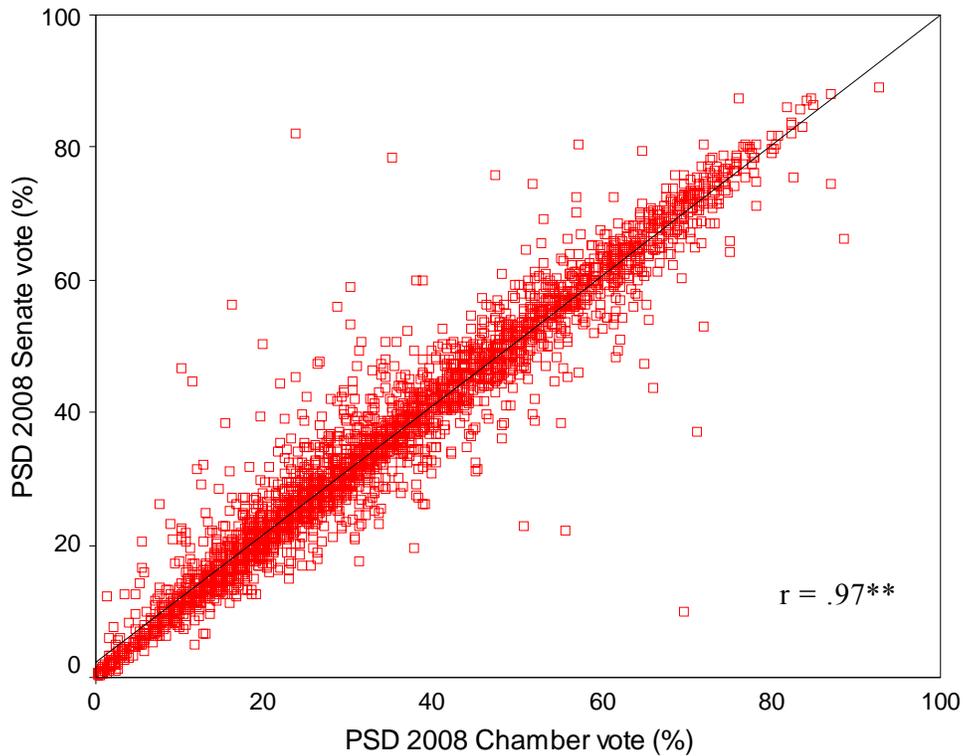


Figure 6. Locality-level PSD Senate vote against locality-level PSD Chamber vote (2008)



However, if we compare Figures 5 and 6, the second hypothesis is not confirmed. In Figure 5, we do observe a high correlation between Senate and Chamber vote in the 2004 elections, a result which is consistent with an ideological explanation of the vote (voting for the same party in both Senate and Chamber election). However, we see an equally high correlation in Figure 6, and such a result does not indicate a vote that is less ideological in 2008 than it was in 2004. If the 2008 vote were less ideological, the personal qualities of candidates would increase or decrease the Senate and Chamber vote for the candidates of the same party, and the result will be a lower correlation than in 2004.

Thus, we have one result that is consistent with the notion that the electoral reform did have an impact, namely, the lower correlation between the 2004 and 2008

vote, compared to the correlation between the 2000 and 2004 vote. But we have another result which we see as inconsistent with such an impact – the fact that the correlation between the Chamber and the Senate vote is, in 2008, as high as it was four years before, and this latter result is more consistent with an ideological rather than ‘personalized’ vote. It is theoretically possible to have a contagion effect, so that the vast majority of PSD’s ‘natural’ electorate who deserted it in 2008, as well as the vast majority of PSD’s ‘unnatural’ electorate who voted for the PSD in 2008, voted for the same party for both chambers because they liked or disliked very much a certain candidate, and their vote for the other chamber was merely a reflection of their first choice. However, we see this scenario as highly implausible.

We think that a more plausible explanation, one that is consistent with all the results presented so far, is that the Romanian party system is in a process of dealignment. If that is the case, then we continue to have ideological voting to the same extent as before, as indicated by the comparison of the correlations between the Senate and the Chamber votes in 2004 and 2008. Voting continues to be partisan, so how a certain locality voted for the Chamber in a given election is still an almost perfect predictor of how it voted for the Senate in the same election (Figures 5 and 6). On the other hand, the process of dealignment means that the differences between more developed localities, which traditionally vote for rightist parties rather than PSD (bottom left in Figure 3), and lesser developed localities, which traditionally vote with the PSD (upper right in Figure 3), starts to blur (Figure 4). Therefore, a locality’s vote in the previous election is not such a good predictor of its vote in the subsequent election than it used to be (Figures 3 and 4).

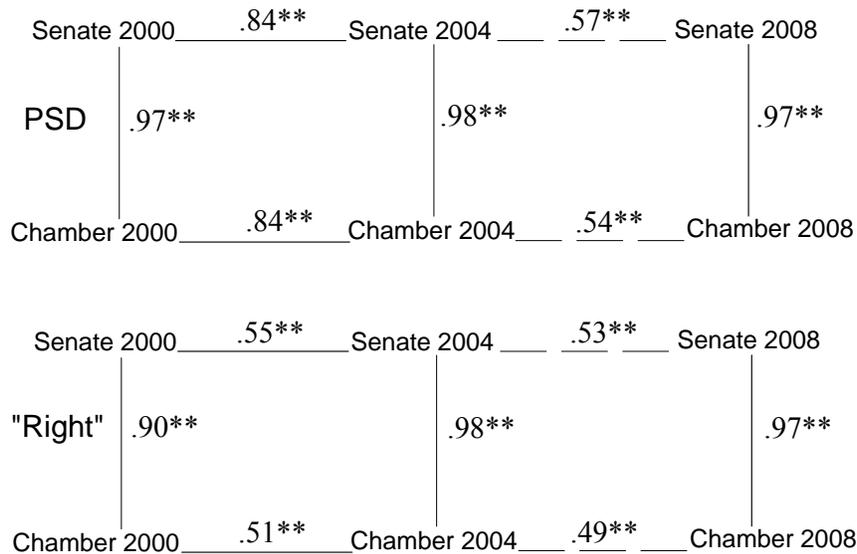
Even though the scenario of realignment is more plausible and more consistent with the analysis above than an institutional explanation, the realignment argument would benefit from and become more persuasive if additional data would back it. Our analysis here is only the first step in that direction, and we are confident that survey data will back it. When such data become available, we expect that a longitudinal comparison of the profile of Romania's main parties' core constituencies will reveal that these constituencies are far less distinctive from one another than they were in the past. More specifically, if the data indicates that, throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Social Democrats were clearly a party of the have-nots, this may still be the case, but to lesser extent than in the past, and variables such as education or income have become poorer predictors of the choice between the left and right than they were in the past.

**Other parties, additional tests:
Locality-level results in parliamentary elections, 2000-2008**

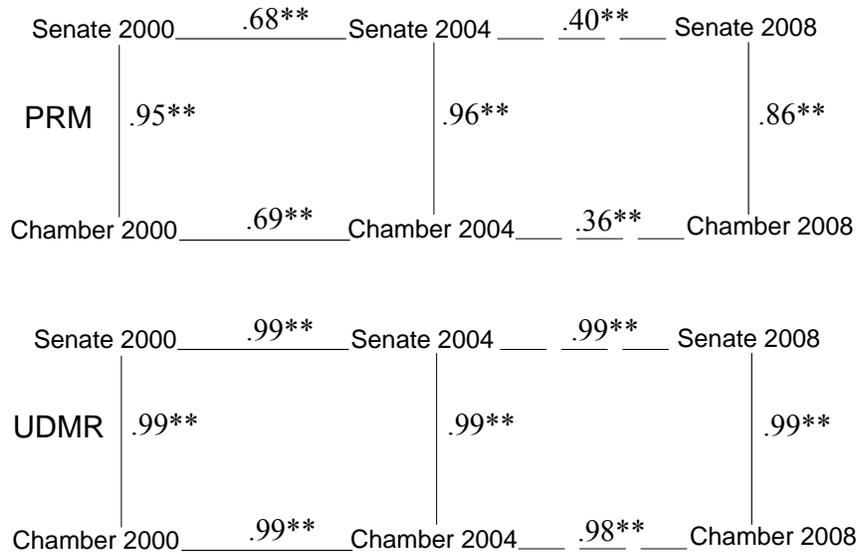
For the last ten years, Romanian political life was dominated by five parties. On the left we have the Social Democrats (PSD) and, on the right, we have the liberals, PNL (National Liberal Party), and the conservative PDL (Democratic-Liberal Party, previously known as the PD, or Democratic Party). We have the extreme left PRM (Greater Romania Party), which promotes a mix of xenophobia, authoritarianism and nostalgia for Communism, and the UDMR, an ethnic party representing the Hungarian minority. The PRM failed to clear the five percent threshold in the last election, thus reducing the number of parties represented in the current parliament to just four (the handful of Conservatives elected under the joint PSD-PC label represent an insignificant number).

To show that the results presented above are not an accident, we perform a more systematic test for all these parties, using the locality-level results for both the Senate and the Chamber from the last three parliamentary elections. In 2004, the PNL and the PD (PDL) run as an Alliance (the "DA", or "Truth and Justice" Alliance). Therefore, the only possibility to replicate the analysis for the moderate right vote was to analyze the total vote for these two parties, not just in 2004, but in 2000¹ and 2008 as well. Even though the PSD offers the clearest illustration, the results in Figure 7 indicate that, with some caveats, the results for the other parties are consistent with our analysis and the dealignment hypothesis:

Figure 7. Bivariate correlations, major parties' vote in Romanian parliamentary elections, 2000-2008 (Senate and Chamber votes)



¹ For 2000, when the Democratic Convention 2008 (CDR 2008) and the Alliance for Romania (ApR) received rather significant shares of the total vote (in the case of the Senate, 5.3 and 4.3 percent, respectively), we included the vote for these two parties in the total. Subsequently, the Democratic Convention disintegrated, and the ApR merged with the liberals (PNL). In 2004 and 2008, only the PD/PDL and the PNL received a substantial share of the total vote.



In the case of the moderate right parties, the correlation between the Chamber and the Senate vote in 2008 is as high as it was in previous election (it is, in fact, higher than it was in 2000). This result is consistent with the dealignment scenario, but the decrease from the correlations between the 2000 and 2004 locality-level votes, for both the Senate and the Chamber, to the correlations between the 2004 and 2008 votes is negligible, unlike the sharp decline that we saw for the PSD. However, we should keep in mind the fact that, in 2000, we have four moderate parties on the right, each gaining a respectable share of the total vote. In 2004, we have only two parties on the right (PNL and PD), but they formed an alliance and presented a joint list. Finally, in 2008, the PNL and the PLD (PD) presented separate lists of candidates. Overall, is it reasonable to expect that this instability of the offer on the right has affected the demand side (i.e., the voters), thus making the patterns of regional support for the right less predictable (and consequently lowering the correlations between the vote for right in consecutive elections before the dealignment).

Then we have the two smaller parties, the PRM and the UDMR. For the PRM, the results are also consistent with the dealignment hypothesis (although they can be consistent with an institutional effect as well, considering the lower correlation between the Chamber and the Senate vote in 2008). Nonetheless, taking into account the dramatic decrease of PRM's share of the vote in 2008, this lower correlation can be attributed to these low percentages across the localities and the very narrow range associated with them. Finally, the UDMR has an ethnic base, which is not affected by either the process of institutional reform, or by the dealignment process, which is restricted to "Romanian" parties, leaving the UDMR untouched.

Conclusion

The change of Romania's electoral system for parliamentary elections was promoted in order to give voters the possibility to choose candidates, rather than party lists. The underlying assumption was that, for many voters, their preferred candidate may not represent their preferred party. When that happens, personal qualities may trump ideology, and we see a shift from ideological voting to 'personalized' voting. In this paper we used aggregate (locality-level) data from the last three parliamentary elections to see whether this shift did in fact occur.

A first test appeared to support this hypothesis. The 2000 vote for the leftist PSD was a very good predictor of its 2004 vote. However, its 2004 vote was a much poorer predictor of its 2008 vote. If we had ideological voting in 2000 and 2004, but a mix of ideological and 'personalized' voting in 2008, this could have resulted in a less predictable vote in the last parliamentary election, and thus a lower correlation between

the 2004 and 2008 votes. Nonetheless, a further test appears to reject the hypothesis of 'personalized' voting. In 2008, the correlation between the PSD's votes in the Senate and the Chamber elections was as high as it was in previous elections, an indication of ideological consistency (and an ideologically-driven vote for both chambers). We argue that the most plausible explanation for these results is a process of dealignment, one which started after the 2004 elections.

Our analysis of the results of the PSD offer the most clear illustration of an apparent effect of the electoral reform, an interpretation refuted by a further test. While these results are the clearest suggestion of a dealignment, we argue that the analysis of the results of the vote for the other major parties is also consistent with the dealignment hypothesis. What makes these latter results less clear-cut are the idiosyncrasies of the Romania party system, with a fragmented, unstable and conflict-prone right, and an 'extreme left' (PRM) that is becoming increasingly insignificant. It is possible to further test this hypothesis by using survey data. When more recent data becomes available, we will see whether background factors such as education, income, age, and urban or rural residence, which up until recently used to be very good predictors of the vote, have now become much poorer predictors – a clear indication that the Romanian party system is indeed in a process of dealignment.

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