



Electoral Behaviour in Rural Areas. Case Study: Last Elections in Romania

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Introduction

One of the explanations of the voting behaviour in Romania refers to the differentiations between rural and urban electorate as part (or not) of the territorial and functional cleavages induced by processes taking place before or after the changing of the political and economic regime. No particular functional cleavage or interests between urban and rural population can be noticed in the post-communist period, but only a spatial differentiation of electoral behaviour in Western Romania and in the Old Kingdom as concerns the attitude and the availability for reform of the rural electorate. The party system in Romania, as in most countries, came as a result of political development in Europe, an evolution influenced by three fundamental processes, namely the national, industrial and international revolutions, each of them leading to two main social, cultural, economic or political cleavages on two main conflict axes, one territorial and the other functional (Rokkan & Lipset 1967, Johnston, Shelley & Taylor 1979, Seiler 1999). These cleavages have determined a voting stability in specific geographical regions in Romania characterized by an electoral behaviour dominated by ethnic and socio-economic issues.

The ethnic dimension has represented a reflection of the functional and territorial cleavages between minority and majority, Church and State, between the national churches and the minority churches. This particularity of the electoral behaviour has imposed individualization among Romanian provinces as a result of all democratic elections that took place. From this perspective, the voting stability that occurred after December '89 in all Western parts of the country is far less obvious in comparison to the other extra-Carpathian regions.

The socio-economic dimension was determined by the conflicts on a functional axis, between the partisans of political reforms and economic liberalization and the ones that supported the maintenance of the state as main actor. Again, Transylvania and the rest of the provinces Westside the Carpathians, reveal a totally different electoral map in comparison to other “single party” Romanian territories, with a clear-cut discrepancy between urban and rural areas. The existence of a single cleavage, the social-economic one, in the counties of Moldavia, Muntenia or Oltenia determined the exaggerated dominion of a single party and the electoral map remains unchanged during all the elections after 1989 (Bodocan, 2001).

Apart from these differentiations and cleavages at regional scale, the Romanian electorate encountered also differences as concerns *electorate behaviour in rural and urban areas*. Taking this last aspect into consideration, we have tried to answer the question if there is any social or territorial cleavage opposing urban and rural electorate or there is only a differentiation in electoral behaviour according to socio-economic characteristics. Thus, we have proceeded to a voting explanation and interpretation of electoral behaviour in rural areas of Romania using three different approaches: functional, territorial and cultural ones.

Functional approach

The explanation and the interpretation of the rural votes in post-communist Romania can be partially done by *Rokkan and Lipset's "four cleavage paradigm"* but also on the cleavage induced by the international revolution (Seiler, 1999).

This has started at the beginning of the last century and ended with the anticommunist revolution and it had influenced decisively the Eastern part of the continent and it produced conflicts between the communists and the legitimate parties, between the state and the civil society and between conservatives and reformers (Bodocan, 2003). In Romania, this opposition between the conservatives and the reformists was better expressed on a territorial axis, namely in the difference in behaviour between rural electors (from villages and small towns) and urban electors (from the big cities).

During the last 16 years, there was no particular functional cleavage between urban and rural population or between their interests, but only a spatial differentiation as it concerns electoral behaviour. As a contrast to the fact that 45% of Romanian population lives in the countryside and over one third of the active population works in the primary sector, there was no specific party for the rural people, peasants or small landowners. But such parties could be found in the inter-war democracy: Agrarian Party, Agrarian League and different Peasants' Parties from the 20's and 30's, representing the interests of big landowners or peasants opposing the industrial bourgeoisie. In the early 90's, the Agrarian Democrat Party was the only rural political organization represented in the Romanian Parliament (1990-1996) but its electoral support was rather ambiguous. After 1990, we cannot speak about an association of farmers or peasants in a political organization to support and defend their common interests. Those which existed were a copy of similar parties from the neighbouring countries and this characterizes merely the Hungarian community (Small Landowners Party of the Hungarians).

The difference in behaviour between *rural* and urban electorate can be explained on the reformers-conservatives cleavage: as a rule, when there are no agrarian/peasants parties (including all activities related to agriculture and farming products), this role is played by conservatives (like in England or France) or by Christian-democrats (in catholic countries). In the rural Romania, with all its problems (overwhelming primary activities, subsistence agriculture, aged population and retired workers from collective associations), this role (conservative) was played by the left Social-Democrats (National Salvation Front, National Democratic Salvation Front, Social Democracy Party from Romania and the present Social-Democrat Party).

Territorial approach - persistent regional discrepancies

Western vs. Eastern and Southern Rural Romania – a historical cleavage/context. Regional discrepancies characterize all post-communist elections, the opposition between "Transylvania" and the rest of the country remains definitely obvious and these territorial cleavages are accentuated in *rural areas*. The most constant electorate can be found in Moldova and Walachia, with a reduced rate of urbanization, but also in mining and isolated rural areas of Transylvania (Hunedoara, Sălaj, Bihor), all these regions being characterized by a strong left party support in all the elections held after 1989. Alternation of the majority and opposition and of the right wing and nationalist parties are specific for historical regions of Transylvania, Banat, Crişana, Maramureş and Bukovina, but also for parts of Dobrogea and industrialised and urbanized Central Walachia.

Urban area vs. rural area – a territorial cleavage. A constant urban support can be found in the big cities and especially in administrative capitals, thus almost all county capitals belonged to alternative electorate. In contrast, the electorate living in most of the small towns is similar in behaviour with the one from the surrounding rural settlements. The case is accentuated in those settlements which were declared urban centres without any socio-economical or "cultural" support, often for electoral purposes. Electoral behaviour is similar in the cities and villages dominated by Hungarian population. No difference is found between urban vote and surrounding rural areas even in the case of important administrative centres as Miercurea Ciuc, Sfântu Gheorghe, Târgu Mureş and Satu Mare. In Southern and Eastern Romania, the dichotomy between urban and rural areas is to be found only in the case of big cities and of medium and small towns located on major roads (national or European). The stability of the vote increases with the distance: the farthest the settlement is (from towns and major ways of communication), the most increase in electoral support for the left parties or its presidential candidates.

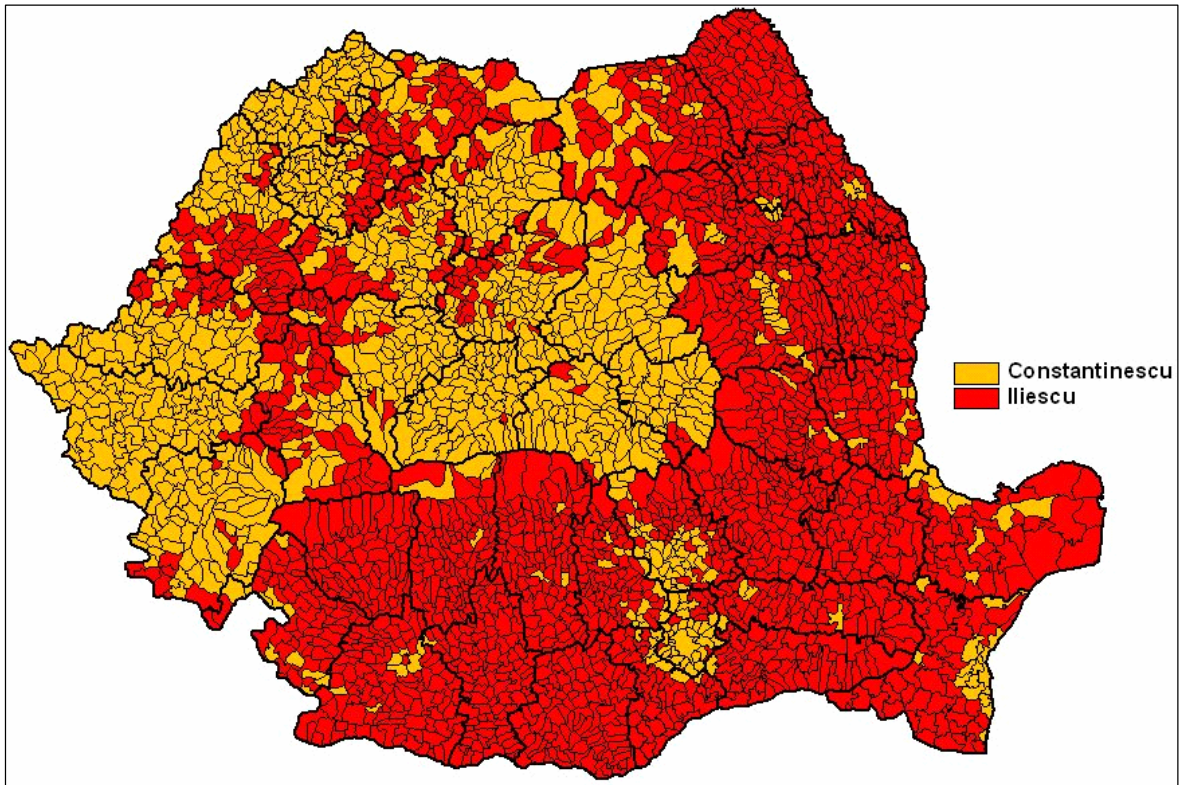


Figure 1. Regional discrepancies in electoral behaviour for 1996 presidential elections, 2nd round.

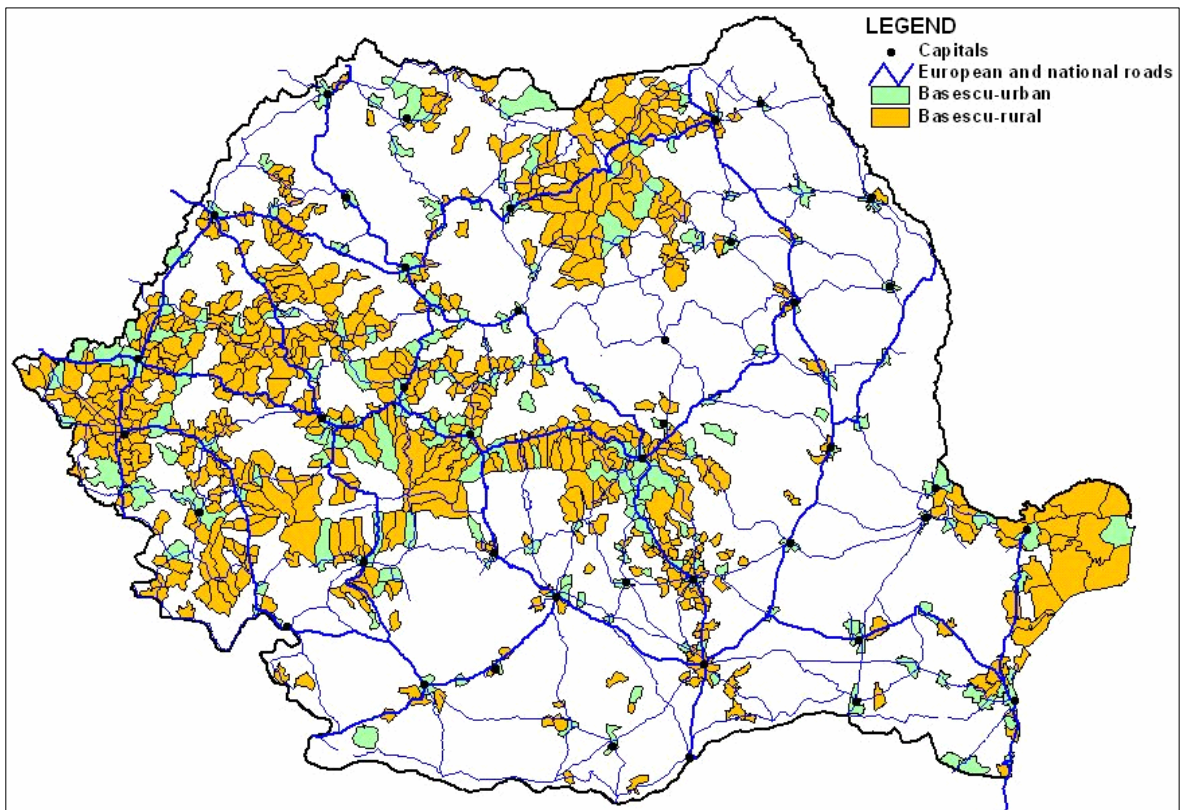


Figure 2. Axes of communication and electoral support for the opposition, 2004 presidential elections, 2nd round.

Neighbouring rural areas with similar electoral behaviour as urban centres are very small in these regions and expand in Western Romania or around urban centres with national or regional importance (Craiova, Ploiești, Bucharest, Galați). In the 2004 elections, the former governmental party won only in a single county capital (Botoșani) and only in Miercurea Ciuc the President in charge did not win the majority of the votes.

Ethnic approach – a cultural-territorial cleavage

A well-defined territorial differentiation is produced by cultural regionalism. The changing relations between central culture and peripheral one and especially that which refers to the political status of the Hungarians and Romanians from the last 150 years influenced decisively their electoral behaviour, national ideology prevailing over social economic aspirations. Thus, territorial and behavioural differences may be noticed between ethnic and majority areas and between mixed and homogenous areas.

The most constant electorate, both urban and rural, is that of Hungarians and of small other minorities in some isolated communes, although ethnic political activism is an urban phenomenon in Romania. Communes and towns dominated demographically or politically by Hungarians are recording in the same political “colour” on the electoral map due to the constant and stable support for their ethnic party.

The ethnic dimension of electoral behaviour has dominated the political pattern in Transylvania in the 90's, but it is of a decreasing importance in this century. Due to the flexible electoral legislation, the number of ethnic parties increased until the elections of 2000, when the seats reserved for minorities were restricted to 18 in the parliament.

Table 1. The evolution of the election structures.

Year	Political parties	Ethnic parties	Seats
1992	85	21	13
1996	95	33	15
2000	91	39	18
2004	65	28	18

The number of ethnic votes decreased with 20% in 2004 as compared with the 2000 elections, the same process being registered as concerns the nationalistic vote. In the same manner the number of electoral Hungarian majority decreased from 268 to 228 administrative units, 4 of these lost majorities being urban centres (Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Pecica and Bălan). The number of ethnic majority (besides Hungarian) has also decreased from 13 registered in 2000 to 9 in 2004.

As conclusion, there is no functional urban-rural cleavage but a territorial and historical differentiation among Transylvania and the Old Kingdom as it concerns the attitude and availability for reform. This clear-cut territorial difference between these historical regions of Romania is given especially by the electoral behaviour in rural areas.

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