

## Ethnicity, Strategic Mobilization and Voting in the Romanian Parliamentary Elections of 2008

Marius I. TĂȚAR

**Abstract.** Social scientists have made contradictory claims about the impact of ethnicity on social cohesion, the levels of social trust, civic and political engagement. This paper conceptualizes ethnic diversity as a contextual variable and evaluates its effect on the electoral participation of the Hungarian minority from Romania, using a case study of the Romanian Parliamentary Elections of 2008. The article examines the differences in turnout between Hungarian electors living in different counties of Romania, and how this varies by the ethnic composition of the counties. We discern two patterns of electoral participation of the Hungarian minority: lower turnout in ethnically non-competitive counties (i.e. low ethnical diversity, with the size of Hungarian minority below 8% or above 50% of the county's total population); higher turnout in ethnically competitive counties (i.e. higher ethnical diversity, with the size of the Hungarian minority between 8% and 50% of the county's population). The findings support the "strategic mobilization hypothesis" according to which electoral mobilization was unevenly distributed due to various stakes attributed to voting in different electoral districts, followed by a pragmatic cost/benefit logic adopted by the leaders and partisans of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR).

**Keywords:** *ethnic voting, electoral mobilization, Hungarian minority, Romania*

### Introduction

Ethnic voting is one of the persistent features of electoral behavior in post-communist Romania, especially in the areas inhabited by the Hungarian minority. Since 1990, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania's (DAHR from now on) electoral performance always reliably reflected the ethnic share of the Hungarian minority and assured it political representation in the Romanian Parliament. Both the Romanian public opinion and academia attributed DAHR's electoral success to the high solidarity and unity of a much disciplined Hungarian electorate. On the other hand, the leaders and partisans of the Romanian political

parties perceived that the above average electoral turnout of Hungarians was not only a consequence of a higher sense of voting as a civic duty among Hungarians, but also a result of the enviable electoral mobilization capacity of DAHR and its local branches.

However, the 2008 Romanian parliamentary elections seem to misfit Hungarian minority's behavioral pattern outlined above. The counties where the Hungarians represent the majority of the population (namely Harghita and Covasna) had among the lowest electoral turnouts. Overall, Hungarians had a lower propensity to vote in these elections, compared to the rest of the population of Romania. What is even more puzzling is that DAHR's partisans had a lower probability to vote than their counterparts from the main Romanian political parties. This paper explores the reasons behind the electoral patterns' dynamics of the Hungarian minority from Romania. More specifically, the paper aims to answer the following research question: *Why did Hungarians have a lower propensity to vote in the Romanian parliamentary elections of 2008, compared to non-Hungarians?*

I will assess two alternative hypothetical answers to this question, using both county aggregated data and individual-level survey data:

H1: *Non-vote as political disaffection*: Hungarians had a lower propensity to vote because they were less satisfied with government performance and political leaders, than non-Hungarians;

H2: *Non-vote as strategic de(mobilization)*: Hungarians' probability to vote is contingent upon a contextual variable, namely the ethnic diversity of the county of residence. Therefore, Hungarians had a higher propensity to vote in ethnically competitive counties (i.e. with high ethnic diversity) and a lower propensity to vote in ethnically non-competitive counties (i.e. with low ethnic diversity).

The paper is structured in 6 parts. In the first section of the article, I review two strands of academic literature in which this research is theoretically embedded, namely ethno-politics and mobilization theory. Then, I outline the ethnic dimension of electoral behavior in post-communist Romania with a special emphasis on the electoral turnout of the Hungarian minority. In section three, I focus on the electoral participation of the Hungarian voters and as well as DAHR's partisans, in the 2008 parliamentary elections. Section four presents the institutional context, namely the electoral reform of 2008, which changed the party-list proportional-representation system with a new electoral design, based on

single-member electoral districts. In section 5, I assess the impact of the institutional and ethnic contexts on the patterns of electoral behavior of the Hungarian minority's members, in different counties of Romania. In section 6, I draw the conclusions of the paper.

### **Ethno-politics and Electoral Mobilization: An Outline of the Theoretical Framework**

The first strand of academic literature which theoretically frames this research examines the relationship between ethnicity and politics. Ethno-politics derived its popularity in many parts of the world from the enduring character of ethnicity as a political resource. Ethnicity is one of the factors though to influence the likelihood a person will be politically engaged. The impact of ethnicity on political engagement is very complex, however, and can only be suggested here. More specifically, as Woshinsky (2008) has pointed out, the influence of ethnicity on political behavior can be mediated or even obscured by other factors among which the most prominent is social status. In many cases, individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups, especially those despised by the majority, will be less politically active than average because usually minority groups are poorer and lower on social status than average, and groups toward the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum are usually less politically active (Woshinsky, 2008, p. 90).

However, if such socioeconomic differences between minority groups and the majority are insignificant, or if in our analyses we control for the effect of social status variables, it might turn out that in fact ethnic minority groups are more active than majority ones. The question then is why, *ceteris paribus*, the political involvement is usually higher in ethnic minority groups than average? According to Woshinsky (2008) the main reason has to do with social identification. Minority groups' members in all cultures tend to be more conscious of their group identity. In turn this group identification makes them more attuned on how society, through its political mechanisms, can affect their daily life (Woshinsky, 2008). Social consciousness derived from strong social identity is producing political participation of ethnic minority members especially when it is backed by an organization that can provide the mobilization framework necessary for political activism.

Ethnic parties represent the most evident organizational aspect of ethno-

politics (Salat, 2009). They have been successful in fostering ethnic identities, mobilizing voters and voter loyalty in elections in many democracies. Some authors even claim that in terms of electoral performance, ethno-nationalist parties have done better than class-based parties, especially in the Western democracies where class-based cleavages seem to fade away (Alonso, 2008). Despite a widespread decline of political parties' membership accompanied by a decline of turnout in elections, ethnic parties seem to have better preserved their electoral constituencies and most of the time display a remarkable stability in terms of electoral performance.

What are the potential explanations for the relative electoral advantage of ethno-nationalist parties compared to class-based parties? The answer to this question can be framed by the academic debate on the meanings of ethnicity underpinned from two different perspectives supported by primordialists, on the one hand, and constructivists, on the other hand (Hasmath, 2011). According to Alonso (2008, p. 82) primordialists (see Geertz, 1973; Gellner, 1983; Horowitz, 1985) would say that people think of ethnicity in primordial terms and therefore once created ethnic identities tend to be stable, and ethnic voters tend to be more rigid in their loyalties. Ethnic parties transform this rigidity into an electoral advantage. When voting is mainly based on ethnic membership electoral performance is expected to be stable as a straightforward reflection of ethnic demography (Horowitz, 1985, apud. Alonso, 2008, pp. 82-83).

In contrast, constructivists (Brubaker, 2004; Chandra, 2004, apud. Alonso, 2008, p. 83) would say that individual ethnic identities are easily changeable and highly malleable. Therefore one should not expect a priori more stable support for ethno-nationalist parties than for any other type of party. Ethnic parties are not mere reflections of ethnic demography, a constructionist would say (Alonso, 2008, p. 83). Yet, why then ethno-nationalist parties seem to be more stable in terms of electoral performance than class-based parties? Alonso (2008) believes that one possible answer could be that they are judged by voters using different criteria. Class-based parties are judged sensitively by voters on economic matters and they are highly vulnerable to electoral punishment on these grounds. On the contrary, ethnic parties are judged not so much on government performance but mainly in terms of the government's success "to represent the group that considers itself to have a national identity different from the rest of the population" (Aguilar & Sanchez-Cuenca, 2008, p. 127). For these reasons, Sonia

Alonso argues that the main political consequences of ethnic allegiances can be summarized as follows:

“... if it is true that ethnic allegiances provide nationalist parties with a competitive electoral advantage over class-based parties, *ceteris paribus* (i.e. under similar institutional settings), ethnic parties should show lower fluctuation of votes, less electoral punishment, lengthier durations in office, and less political erosion with the passage of time than class-based parties” (Alonso, 2008, p. 89).

The second strand of literature outlined here is mobilization theory, which emphasizes the role of mobilizing agents as a source of political participation of the citizens. The main argument of the mobilization theory is that people need a catalyst in order to participate. This could be a candidate, political party or other type of organizations or social networks that could drive people to politics. Even among individuals with similar socio-economic and attitudinal characteristics, there may be varying degrees of political participation due to the influences exerted by different mobilizing agents (Norris, 2002). These actors are well informed, know what are the ways and means of action which can bring benefits and therefore have every incentive to mobilize citizens to achieve certain political goals (Comșa, 2006).

Thus, the theories of *mobilization* highlight the importance of agents either taken individually (as the political leaders) or collectively as social organizations and networks generated by parties, unions, voluntary organizations and community associations which act as mobilizers of participation (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). According to Rosenstone and Hansen’s comprehensive study of political mobilization, this concept is defined as “the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate” (1993, p. 25). Moreover, mobilization theorists highlight the link between the patterns of participation and the choices and incentives for participation structured by politically mobilizing agents. Furthermore, people will be mobilized through affiliation to political organizations, where they might be asked by others to take part and there is an increasing number of evidence that shows that links to parties and different social groups are important predictors of turnout (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007; Tătar, 2011). In brief, according to mobilization theory, people do participate primarily not because they can and want to participate, but because they were asked for by mobilizing agents.

## **The electoral relevance of ethnicity in post-communist Romania**

Electoral behavior in Romania has a significant, and historically and geographically well documented, ethnic dimension<sup>1</sup>, especially in Transylvania, including also the North-Western parts of the country (Bodocan, 2001; Ilieș, 1998; Șișeștean, 2002). But even within these regions, ethnic voting has an important territorial distribution, being more salient in some electoral districts than in others. After 1989, most of the ethnic minority groups from Romania have organized themselves in cultural associations aiming to preserve their identity and to represent them politically. Consequently, there is a plethora of organizations which participate in the Romanian parliamentary elections in different electoral districts that correspond more or less with the territorial distribution of specific ethnic minority groups (Bodocan, 2001).

However, in this paper I will focus on the political representation of the Hungarian minority from Romania and more specifically on the electoral performance of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR). DAHR has certain peculiarities when compared with other ethnic minority organizations from Romania. For instance, it is the only ethnic-based organization that has always passed the electoral threshold<sup>2</sup> in the Romanian parliamentary elections after 1989, and obtained proportional political representation for the Hungarian minority more or less in accordance with its share in the total population of Romania (Bodocan, 2001). DAHR is also different from the Romanian majority's political parties, being the political organization with the most stable electoral performance in the volatile post-communist political landscape of Romania: it has constantly gained seats in the Romanian Parliament under the same label and the same organizational structure (Salat, 2009).

---

<sup>1</sup> Ethnic voting is also relatively frequent in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Some authors argue that the map of ethnic voting in this region is simply mirroring the legacies of ethnic minority issues which appeared with the late formation of national states in this part of Europe (Vandermotten, Lockhart, & Freyer-Macola, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The actual electoral threshold is of 5% of the total votes, or alternatively, a party would need to win the elections in 6 deputy districts and 3 senatorial districts. Some authors call this alternative threshold "lex DAHR" as they argue it was mainly conceived "as a safety belt" in case the DAHR would not pass the 5% threshold (Székely, 2009). Except the DAHR, none of the ethnic minorities' organizations has passed the 5% threshold in the last parliamentary elections. However, even if their representative organizations do not pass the electoral, each officially recognized national minority is granted a seat in the lower chamber of the Romanian Parliament (Chamber of Deputies). The representatives of national minorities in the Romanian Parliament constitute a distinct parliamentary group which regularly consists of 18 deputies. DAHR has its own, separate parliamentary groups, both in the Romanian Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

**Table 1: The electoral performance of DAHR in parliamentary elections, 1990-2008**

Year	General Turnout Romania (%)	DAHR's electoral performance					
		Chamber of Deputies			Senate		
		Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats
1990	86.19	991601	7.23	29	1004353	7.20	12
1992	76.29	822290	7.46	27	831469	7.58	12
1996	76.01	812628	6.64	25	837760	6.82	11
2000	65.31	736863	6.80	27	751310	6.90	12
2004	58.51	628125	6.17	22	637109	6.23	10
2008	39.20	425008	6.17	22	440449	6.39	9

Data source: Salat (2009, p. 121)

In spite of its enduring electoral performance (see Table 1), DAHR is legally and formally not a political party (with a certain political ideology), but an umbrella organization which aims to promote and represent the interests of the Hungarian minority from Romania. However the political recast of the DAHR in the last 20 years is similar to the one of an ethnic party: “from an organization primarily concerned with the identity problems of the Hungarian minority in Romania to an organization interested mainly in increasing its electoral/political performance and coalition building potential” (Salat, 2009, p. 115). The lack of a strong and clear ideological position and its relative size (about 6-9 % of the seats in Parliament) are two important factors that make DAHR the ideal partner in coalition governments<sup>3</sup> led by Romanian political parties that ideologically place themselves either at the left or right wings of the political spectrum. As Salat (2009, p. 118) points out, after 1996 the behavior of DAHR's leaders has been increasingly dominated by what can be labeled as “political rationality” accomplished by a pragmatic shift from a politics centered on the identity issues to a politics focusing mainly on granting access to resources through electoral success and the subsequent conversion of this success into political influence and governmental positions. The access to resources was then used as a mechanism to marginalize more radical leaders<sup>4</sup>, and the

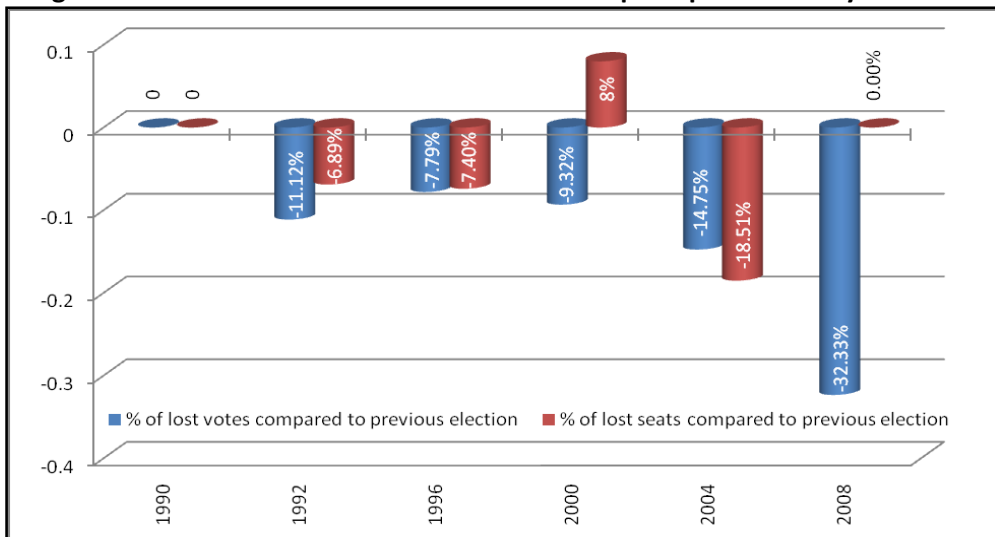
<sup>3</sup> From 1996, DAHR has almost continuously participated in government coalitions in a form or another: from 1996 until 2000 it was a member of the governing coalition led by the Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR); from 2000 to 2004 it had a cooperation agreement with the governing Social Democratic Party (PSD); from 2004 until the end of 2008 it was again part of the governing coalition; since 2010 is participating in the governing coalition led by the Democrat Liberal Party (PDL).

<sup>4</sup> In 2002, Gheorghe Șîșeștean assessed the role of the DAHR's participation in coalition governments in Romania as having ambivalent consequences: on the one hand, is a test of the Hungarian political elite's willingness to participate in the decision making process in the

development of strong local clientele and a well organized network of political caucuses able to electorally mobilize the constituencies (Salat, 2009).

However, we cannot fully assess the electoral performance of the DAHR if we do not take into consideration the general patterns of electoral participation in Romania, after 1990. Data in table 1 point out that turnout in the Romanian parliamentary elections has dramatically declined in the last 20 years (Alexandru, Moraru, & Ercuş, 2009) by over 50%: from 86.19 % in 1990 to only 39.20 % in 2008. In a similar vein, DAHR lost more than half of the votes (numbers in absolute terms) in the last 20 years: from 991601 votes for the DAHR’s candidates for the Chamber of Deputies in 1990 to 425008 votes in 2008. On the other hand, this dramatic decline is obscured if we only look at the DAHR’s share of total votes casted in each election which seems remarkably stable (around 6-7%) both for the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. But this stability might prove to be only illusory if we take into account the general decline of electoral participation in Romanian parliamentary elections, regardless of ethnicity (Hungarians and non-Hungarians) or political and ideological affiliation.

**Figure 1: DAHR’s lost votes vs. lost seats in subsequent parliamentary elections**



Source: author’s own elaboration based on data presented in Table 1.

Note: data represent % of DAHR’s lost votes/seats compared to previous election for the lower chamber of the Romanian Parliament (i.e. Chamber of Deputies).

Romanian state, and at the same time, it helped to mitigate the segregationist fears existing in some segments of the Romanian population (Şişeştean, 2002, p. 152).



Figure 1 further explores the patterns of DAHR's electoral performance by comparing the percentage of lost votes with that of lost seats in two subsequent elections. In general, as one should expect there is a correlation between the shares of lost votes with the share of lost seats. However there are two notable exceptions from this rule. The first one, in 2000, when although DAHR lost more than 9% of votes compared with 1996, it gained around 8% more seats than in 1996. The second exception, and the one more relevant for the scope of this paper, is revealed by the parliamentary elections of 2008. Compared with 2004, although DAHR lost almost one third of the votes it did not lose any seat in the Chamber of Deputies. This is again in line with the fact there has been a general decline of turnout (both of Hungarians and Romanians) in the Romanian parliamentary elections of 2008 compared with previous elections: turnout has dropped from 58.51% in 2004 to only 39.20% in 2008. Consequently, in 2008 DAHR preserved its relative share of seats in the lower chamber of the Parliament mainly because the Romanian political parties have also lost significant amounts of votes, compared with the previous election of 2004.

### **Hungarian voters and partisans in the 2008 parliamentary elections in Romania**

Despite declining turnout, Hungarians from Romania remain largely DAHR's "captive" electorate. All the data we have point out the electoral prevalence of the ethnic cleavage for the Hungarian minority's voters and DAHR partisans. For instance, over 70% of the Hungarian voters in the 2008 parliamentary elections in Romania actually voted for DAHR. On the other hand, over 90% of the DAHR's voters and over 92% of the DAHR's partisans (those who feel closer to DAHR than to any other political party) declared themselves as Hungarians<sup>5</sup>. They also have a generally low electoral fluctuation, that is Hungarian voters generally do not migrate from one party to another. Although some dissatisfied parts of the Hungarian minority also voted in the local elections of 2008 for another Hungarian party from Romania, namely the Hungarian Civic Party (HCP), the electoral performance of this party was rather modest<sup>6</sup> (Salat, 2009; Székely, 2009). However, the relative immobility of Hungarian voters does not necessarily translate

---

<sup>5</sup> Estimations based on the European Social Survey 4 applied in Romania in December 2008-January 2009, right after the parliamentary elections held on 30 November 2008)

<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian Civic party did not participate in the electoral contest of 2008 as a party, but supported several independent candidates competing against the candidates of DAHR.

into a steady adherence of Hungarians to DAHR. Some authors even believe that while in opposition (during 2009), DAHR could try to reinforce the weakened ties with its electorate (Salat, 2009, p. 127). Moreover, Vladimir Pasti argues that the dynamics of the electoral behavior of the Hungarians from Romania is illustrating, in quasi-experimental conditions, the loss of trust of previously loyal voters in the political elites that represent them (Pasti, 2009, pp. 341-342).

**Table 2: The propensity of the Hungarian minority’s members to vote in the parliamentary elections of 2008 (Logistic regression analysis)**

Dependent variable: 1=voter, 0=non-voter								
Predictors	B	SE	Wald	df	P	Exp (B)	95% CI for Exp. (B)	
							Inf.	Sup.
Constant	-3.945	.372	112.57	1	.000	.019		
Age (years)	.020	.004	32.321	1	.000	1.020	1.013	1.027
Male(1)	.282	.101	7.773	1	.005	1.326	1.087	1.617
Hungarian(1)	-.455	.197	5.368	1	.021	.634	.431	.932
Residence in rural area (1)	.718	.107	44.702	1	.000	2.050	1.661	2.531
Married (1)	.353	.109	10.438	1	.001	1.423	1.149	1.763
Children in household (1)	.269	.116	5.408	1	.020	1.309	1.043	1.643
Education (years of schooling)	.024	.016	2.306	1	.129	1.025	.993	1.058
Happiness scale (0-10)	.013	.025	.257	1	.612	1.013	.964	1.064
Media consumption index	.025	.011	5.283	1	.022	1.026	1.004	1.048
Subjective general health (1)	.272	.110	6.064	1	.014	1.312	1.057	1.629
Working abroad experience (1)	-.963	.269	12.775	1	.000	.382	.225	.647
Income	.064	.036	3.176	1	.075	1.066	.994	1.143
State owned company employee (1)	.298	.129	5.291	1	.021	1.347	1.045	1.736
Active in NGO (1)	.542	.327	2.759	1	.097	1.720	.907	3.263
Voluntary work (1)	.512	.205	6.271	1	.012	1.669	1.118	2.492
Trade unionist (1)	.075	.121	.387	1	.534	1.078	.851	1.366
Generalized trust scale (0-10)	.060	.019	10.096	1	.001	1.062	1.023	1.102
Church attendance frequency	.193	.036	28.154	1	.000	1.212	1.129	1.302
Model Omnibus Test $\chi^2(18) = 243.30$ , $p < 0.001$ , $N = 2053$ $R^2$ (Cox & Snell) = 0.112, $R^2$ (Nagelkerke) = 0.151 Hosmer & Lemeshow Test $\chi^2(8) = 4.784$ , $p = 0.780$ Overall correct classification rate = 66.7%								

Source: own elaboration based on ESS4 post-electoral survey.

For the 2008 Romanian parliamentary elections, Hungarians not only voted in lower proportions compared with 2004, but also they had a lower propensity to vote than non-Hungarians from Romania (i.e. Romanians and also the other ethnic minority groups). Table 2 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis of the

predictors of voting in the 2008 parliamentary elections using post-electoral survey data. As highlighted in Table 2, Hungarians had a significantly lower propensity to vote (over 1.5 times lower probability) than non-Hungarians, even when we control for the effect of some basic socio-demographic variables as well as for the influence of different social capital indicators. Estimations from ESS 4 (2008) data, point out that around 34% of the Hungarians and 40% of the non-Hungarians voted in the 2008 Romanian parliamentary elections.

**Table 3: Partisans’ mobilization to vote in the 2008 parliamentary elections<sup>7</sup>**

		Non-voters	Voters	Total
Partisans of...	National Liberal party (PNL)	37%	63%	100%
	Democrat-Liberal Party (PD-L)	35%	65%	100%
	Social Democrat Party (PSD)	25%	75%	100%
	Democratic Alliance of Hungarians from Romania (DAHR)	39%	61%	100%
<b>Total (Partisans in Romania)</b>		<b>34%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: own elaboration based on ESS4 post-electoral survey.

Note: data represent the % of voters and non-voters among the respondents who fell closer to a specific party than to other parties (i.e. are the partisans of a specific party).

What is even more puzzling is that not only Hungarian electors had a lower probability to vote, but also DAHR’s partisans<sup>8</sup> (which represent around 35% of the voting age Hungarians from Romania) had a lower propensity to vote than their counterparts from other Romanian political parties<sup>9</sup> (see Table 3). For instance, around 39% of DAHR’s partisans did not vote compared to an average of 34% of the total number of partisans in Romania which did not cast a ballot in the 2008 elections. How can one explain that although some people feel close to a specific party, a significant part of them tend not to vote (they are "partisan non-voters")?

<sup>7</sup> For the sake of simplicity and clarity I present here only the results for the partisans of main political parties from Romania, although in some of the statistical analysis carried out for this research I included all the parties which were present in the ESS4 survey dataset.

<sup>8</sup> Here, I use the term partisan to mean a person who declares that s/he feels closer to a specific political party than to all the other political parties.

<sup>9</sup> Comparing the rates of absenteeism among partisans, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) seems to have mobilized the best its supporters in the parliamentary elections of 2008, only about 25% of those who declared themselves closer to this political party did not cast a ballot.

We believe that “partisan non-vote” can be interpreted both as a way to express political discontent and as a non-voting strategy based on rational calculation. Thus, on the one hand, partisan non-voters could be included in the category of those who were somewhat disappointed with the performance or decisions taken by certain politicians of the party they feel closer. On the other hand, partisan non-voters could also fall in the category of those who believe that the electoral stake is very low and therefore it does not deserve to take the effort to go voting, or alternatively, the elections are not competitive enough and their party will win or lose the election anyway, with or without their vote (i.e. their vote will not bring an additional number of parliamentary seats to the party or conversely will not reduce the number of seats won anyhow).

In the case of the political parties that have obtained parliamentary seats in the 2008 elections, the two situations (non-voting as dissatisfaction and strategic non-voting as a rational calculus) are best illustrated, on the one hand, by the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians from Romania (DAHR), on the other. The two political parties are best suited for a comparison in this respect due to several reasons. First, PNL fits to a certain degree the pattern of what has been labeled in the theoretical framework of this paper as a class-based party with a strong commitment to the liberal ideology. On the other hand, as showed above, the DAHR politically behaves as an ethnic party. Second, in late 2008, PNL together with DAHR were both in power, forming the governing coalition<sup>10</sup>, so that they were both in an incumbent position in the 2008 parliamentary election. Third, the ESS4 post-electoral survey showed that in the winter of 2008/2009 both political parties had the highest shares of partisans (people close to the party) which did not vote in the parliamentary elections of 2008 (see Table 3: 39% of those close to DAHR and 37% of those close to PNL approach did not vote).

The reasons for which the supporters of the two parties did not vote seem to be different, however. If among PNL partisans occurs the lowest degree of trust in politicians (an average of 3.53 on a scale from 0="no trust at all" to 10="total confidence") of all parliamentary parties' supporters, sympathizers of UDMR show the highest degree of confidence (an average of 3.72 on the same scale from 0 to 10). However, Liberal supporters were most disgruntled with the government (an

---

<sup>10</sup> Although in parliament the two parties did not have a majority, they have negotiated the support of PSD for certain legislative projects and initiatives.

average of 3.86 on a scale of 0 - "completely dissatisfied" to 10 - "completely satisfied") compared with the supporters of PD-L (average 3.99) and especially those of DAHR, which were the most satisfied with the work of the Executive<sup>11</sup> (an average of 4.56).

The comparative data presented above (PNL-DAHR) seem to support the hypothesis that ethnic allegiances provide ethnic-parties with and competitive electoral advantage over class-based parties, all other things being equal, ethnic parties suffered less electoral punishment and less electoral erosion than class based parties. In the case of PNL the high rate of absenteeism from voting of those who feel closer to this party could be explained, among other factors, by the low level of trust in politicians and the relatively high rate of dissatisfaction with the liberal governance. However, in the case of DAHR's supporters non-voting as an "electoral punishment" is a less plausible hypothesis for at least two reasons: a. Hungarians were relatively more satisfied with government performance than non-Hungarians in 2008 (although DAHR was part of the governmental coalition in 2008 as mentioned above); b. In 2008, Hungarians tended to be more trustful in political leaders and in political institutions than non-Hungarians. Yet why, then, Hungarians had a lower propensity to vote than non-Hungarians and, moreover, why DAHR's supporters tended to vote less in the 2008 elections than supporters of other political parties? The explanation of the increased absenteeism of DAHR's supporters seems to be connected with to the mobilization (or rather demobilization) strategies as a rational decision of both DAHR's leaders and the Hungarian electorate.

### **Institutional context: The Electoral Reform of 2008**

To provide a potential explanation for this strategic mobilization (which actually meant in some areas lack of mobilization) of DAHR's voters, we need to make some clarifications about the institutional context in which parliamentary elections were held in 2008. For the first time since 1989, MPs were elected in single-member districts. In 2008, in each county were drawn a specific number of

---

<sup>11</sup> To test whether the differences between party supporters in terms of satisfaction with the work of the Government are statistically significant I used the analysis of variance (one way ANOVA). Satisfaction with Government's activity differ significantly between supporters of the 9 political parties (8 nominally mentioned political parties plus an "other party" choice) included in the questionnaire of ESS4 in 2008/2009:  $F(8, 608) = 3.452$   $p = 0.001$ .

electoral districts depending on the size of the population of that county. The drawing of these districts was done in an Electoral Code Commission based on proposals from political parties and negotiations between them. In each district was disputed only one parliamentary seat and each party could propose a single candidate. Each elector could vote for only one candidate in the electoral district of residence. How could a candidate win a parliamentary seat? In the first stage, a candidate would need to win the majority of the votes in the single-member electoral districts (i.e. 50% of votes + 1). In the second stage, if none of the candidates won a majority of votes in the single-member electoral district, there was a proportional redistribution of seats, at county level, among the parties which passed the electoral threshold.

I believe that, in terms of the competitiveness of the 2008 elections, there were two types of single-member electoral districts. Non-competitive electoral districts are overlapping more or less faithfully the electoral fief<sup>12</sup> of a political party and the winning of the parliamentary seat by the dominant political party's candidate in that college is almost certain. Competitive electoral districts are those that do not overlap any electoral fief and in which parliamentary seats are really disputed, none of the parties is dominant and therefore none of the candidates has the certainty that s/he will win the elections in the respective district. Taking into consideration the prevalence of ethnic cleavage for the electoral behavior in multiethnic areas in Romania, we can distinguish, in a similar vein, between ethnically competitive districts (the ones with ethnic diversity) and ethnically non-competitive districts (with low or inexistent ethnic diversity). Moreover, taking into consideration the fact that if no candidate has won a majority in the electoral district, there was a proportional redistribution of seats among parties at county level, we can also extend our classification to counties. Consequently, we distinguish between ethnically competitive counties (with high ethnic diversity) and ethnically non-competitive counties (low ethnic diversity).

Certainly in the Electoral Code Commission negotiations each party tried to maximize its chances of winning more parliamentary seats, by "drawing" the single-member electoral districts so that they overlap as closely as possible to the territorial distribution of its electorate. Therefore, each party sought to increase

---

<sup>12</sup> The party's electoral fiefdom is understood here as a place, area or region where a party/candidate regularly wins elections.

the number of 'safe' electoral districts (non-competitive) in which it will easily get a majority of votes and win the parliamentary seat. This risk-minimizing strategy has also implications for the resources allocated by political parties for electoral mobilization reasons. Thus, it is expected that political parties would focus their campaign resources in electoral districts that are really disputed and in which the mobilization of their own supporters, and also the undecided electors, can make a difference for one or the other of the parties/candidates. By contrast, in non-competitive electoral districts it is expected that neither the dominant party, nor the other competing parties should consume too many resources to mobilize voters. On the one hand, eventually, dominant parties have and almost insurmountable electoral advantage and they are very sure of winning the election in that district. On the other hand, any other competing parties are not so much interested to invest/waste resources in mobilizing voters in an electoral district where the chances of winning are extremely small. Following this logic, the strategic mobilization of voters will be differentiated according to the type of electoral district: greater mobilization (and consequently higher electoral turnout) in competitive electoral districts: smaller mobilization (and hence a lower participation rates) in non-competitive districts.

### **Patterns of electoral turnout in ethnically competitive vs. non-competitive counties**

In order to test the statistical significance of turnout variation between ethnically competitive and non-competitive counties, I have selected 16 counties from Transylvania that concentrate almost 99% of the Hungarians living in Romania (Kiss, Barna, & Sólyom, 2008). These counties are (abbreviations in parentheses): Alba (AB), Arad (AR), Bihor (BH), Bistrita-Nasaud (BN), Brasov (BV), Caras-Severin (CS), Cluj (CJ), Covasna (CV), Harghita (HR), Hunedoara (HD), Maramures (MM), Mures (MR), Satu Mare (SM), Salaj (SJ), Sibiu (SB) and Timis (TM). In Table 2, I divided these counties into ethnically competitive (8 counties) and ethnically non-competitive (8 counties) based on the share of the Hungarians in the total population of the county. An ethnically competitive county is one in which the Hungarians' share is large enough to win at least one parliamentary seat (i.e. above 8% of the county's population in the case of our data), but not so large that they would win almost all the seats in that county (i.e. below 50% of the total population of the county). Conversely, ethnically non-competitive

counties are the ones in which the Hungarian minority is too small (i.e. has no realistic chance to win even a single seat in the parliament) or too large (above 50% and has all the chances to win almost all the seats in that county). In the absence of more valid data aggregated at county level, in Table 4, I use the share of Hungarians who voted for DAHR in each country as a proxy for the Hungarians' turnout in that county. I base this assumption on two facts, already mentioned in the previous sections of this paper: a. the Hungarians who voted in the 2008 parliamentary elections, actually voted in an overwhelming proportion for the DAHR's candidates; b. the number of non-Hungarians who voted for DAHR is insignificant.

**Table 4: DAHR's electoral performance in 2008: county aggregated data**

N o.	County Abbreviation	Hungarians who voted DAHR (%) (= turnout of Hungarians)	Hungarian population in the county (%)	Share of DAHR votes in the county (%)	No. of parliamentary seats won	Ethnically competitive county
1	BN	38.5	5.9	5.4	0	No
2	HR	37.6	84.6	74.3	4	No
3	AB	31.6	5.4	4.1	0	No
4	HD	31.2	5.2	3.5	0	No
5	CV	27.5	73.8	61.5	3	No
6	TM	24.9	7.5	5.3	0	No
7	SB	23.5	3.6	2.1	0	No
8	CS	22.8	1.7	1	0	No
9	SJ	54.7	23	27	1	Yes
10	MS	44.1	39.3	39.5	3	Yes
11	BH	43.6	26	25.1	3	Yes
12	SM	41.1	35.2	36.1	2	Yes
13	CJ	36.6	17.4	16.4	2	Yes
14	BV	34.1	8.7	7.6	1	Yes
15	MM	31.4	9.1	7.8	1	Yes
16	AR	30.6	10.7	8.3	1	Yes

Source: own elaboration based on data published by Salat (2009, p. 123) and the Central Electoral Office ([www.becparlamentare2008.ro](http://www.becparlamentare2008.ro)). Note: An ethnically competitive county is one in which the Hungarian minority is large enough to win at least one parliamentary seat and the Hungarians represent less than 50% of the county's population.

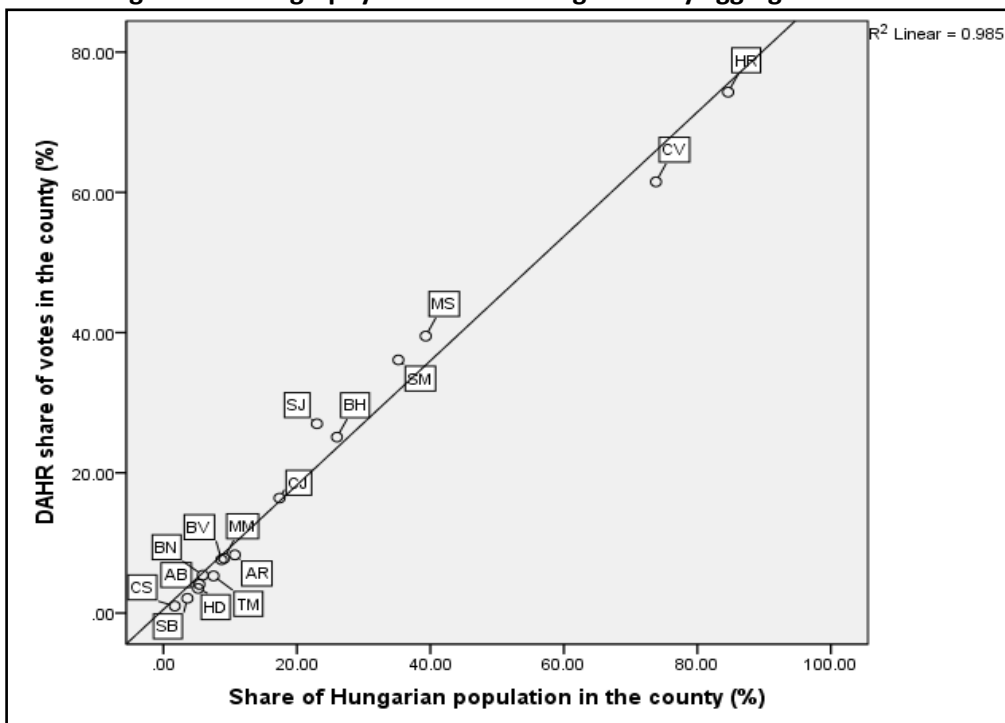
Table 4 points out that in ethnically non-competitive counties the “under-representation” of the Hungarian minority by DAHR tends to be higher than in ethnically competitive counties. That is the share of DAHR's votes in



noncompetitive counties tends to be lower than the proportion of Hungarian population in those counties, compared with ethnically competitive counties. Moreover, in three ethnically competitive counties (SJ, MS, SM) actually DAHR managed to slightly “over-represent” the Hungarian minority by having a greater share of votes, than the actual proportion of Hungarians in the total population of those counties. This might suggest that, in these counties, DAHR succeeded to mobilize Hungarians better to turn out and vote, than did the other competing parties with their supporters.

Besides the differences between ethnically competitive and non-competitive counties, in general, there is a very high association between the proportion of Hungarian population and the share of votes DAHR obtained in each country (see Figure 2). These findings confirm the fact that demography (or head-counting) is of special interest for ethnic parties (Salat, 2009) since their electoral success is a straightforward reflection of ethnic demography (Horowitz, 1985, apud. Alonso, 2008, p. 83).

**Figure 2: Demography and ethnic voting – county aggregated data**



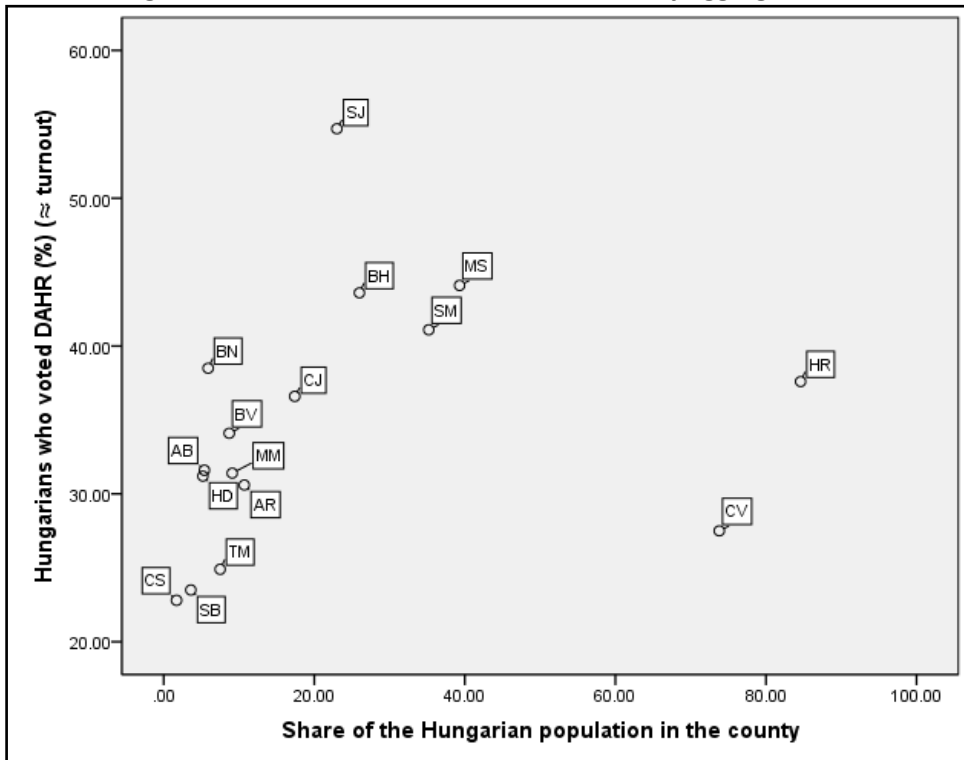
Source: own elaboration based on data presented in Table 4

While the DAHR share of votes in a specific country almost linearly increases with the proportion of Hungarians living in that county, the relationship between the share of Hungarians in a county and the turnout of Hungarians in that county reveals a more complex pattern (see Figure 3). The relationship depicted in Figure 3 resembles more to a curvilinear pattern (reversed “U”) in which the turnout of Hungarians increases to a certain point after which decreases. More specifically, turnout tends to be lower in ethnically non-competitive counties, namely those with a low proportion of Hungarians and those in which Hungarians represent the majority of population (i.e. Harghita and Covasna).

On the other hand, turnout tends to be higher in ethnically competitive counties where Hungarians’ proportion ranges somewhere between 8% and 40% of the total population of the county. There is almost a 10-percentage points difference between the turnout of Hungarians residing in ethnically competitive and ethnically non-competitive counties. As such, the median turnout of Hungarians in ethnically competitive counties is 38.85% while the median turnout of Hungarians in ethnically non-competitive counties is of only 29.35%. Hence, turnout of Hungarians is significantly higher in ethnically competitive counties, compared to ethnically non-competitive counties (Mann-Whitney  $U = 11$ ,  $z = -2,205$ ,  $p=0.028$ ,  $N=16$ ).

Moreover, residence in one type of county or another (i.e. ethnically competitive vs. non-competitive) had a strong effect on Hungarians’ turnout in the 2008 parliamentary elections ( $r = 0.55$ ). These findings support the strategic mobilization of Hungarians according to different stakes assigned to the electoral process both by DAHR leaders and the Hungarian electorate. Thus we can notice a higher mobilization of voters by DAHR’s local branches and leaders in counties where political competition with the other parties was fierce and “every vote counted” for winning (more) seats to the Parliament. On the other hand, in counties where DAHR had no chance to win votes or in those where it had no strong challengers (i.e. Covasna and Harghita) the mobilization of voters was lower. The institutional context (i.e. the new electoral setup) and the territorial distribution of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania contributed to this electoral outcome.

**Figure 3: Patterns of electoral turnout – county aggregated data**



Source: own elaboration based on data presented in Table 4

In the parliamentary elections of 2008, DAHR took the strategic advantage of a relatively high geographic concentration of its electorate in non-competitive electoral districts (i.e. located in areas inhabited dominantly by Hungarians). It is not by chance that, for example, in Covasna County has been recorded one of the lowest turnout rate in the parliamentary elections of 2008, only 33.1%. Thus, the county ranked 40 out of 42 counties in Romania, in terms of turnout (a lower electoral participation rate was recorded only in Bucharest and Timis county). However, with about 35 000 votes in Covasna county (representing approximately 61% of the total votes casted by the residents of this county), DAHR won 3 parliamentary seats for the Chamber of Deputies (the fourth being assigned to PSD) and 2 seats of senators. Ironically, with a double number of votes (over 71 000, representing nearly 70% of the valid votes casted in the county constituency), DAHR obtained, in the previous elections of November 2004, the same number of deputies and senators in Covasna county. In other words, the DAHR achieved in 2008 the same electoral outcomes in terms of number of MPs, "paying" only half

the cost of mobilizing their voters, compared to 2004. Or, put differently, the efficiency of resources used for electoral mobilization by the DAHR simply has doubled itself from 2004 to 2008. Not surprisingly, therefore the counties dominated numerically by Hungarians, namely Harghita and Covasna, are leading in a ranking of the counties with the strongest decrease in turnout rates from 1992 to 2008 (Alexandru, et al., 2009): in Covasna electoral participation decreased with over 52 percentage points, and in Harghita turnout was lower with 48 percentage points in 2008, compared to 1992. On average, turnout in Romania declined by 37 percentage points, over the same period.

The significant differences between counties in terms of electoral turnout of DAHR's partisans, suggests that the most plausible explanation for the higher rate of absenteeism of Hungarians from voting is the strategic (de)mobilization thesis. According to this thesis, there was a higher electoral mobilization of Hungarians in areas where the elections were ethnically competitive and where more votes really mattered for increasing the number of seats won by DAHR. On the other hand, in ethnically non-competitive districts DAHR's leaders knew that they have no real chance to win even a single parliamentary seat, or on the contrary, in the areas where Hungarians represent the absolute majority DAHR leaders knew that they can easily win most (if not all) the parliamentary seats.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of the 2008 parliamentary elections in Romania revealed not only a lower propensity of Hungarians to vote in general, but also, a lower turnout of DAHR's partisans compared with the supporters of other major political parties in Romania. However, DAHR supporters' absenteeism in the 2008 elections, higher than the national average, should not be interpreted primarily as a decrease in DAHR's electoral adherence in areas inhabited mostly by Hungarians, but rather as a rational decision for a more efficient distribution of resources used for the strategic mobilization of the Hungarian electorate in uninominal districts where DAHR knew it will win the election anyway, even in the context of a modest electoral participation of its supporters.

Although, in Romania, Hungarians as well as Romanians are increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of political elites, in general the lower turnout of the Hungarians in the 2008 parliamentary elections is not primarily due to the

dissatisfaction of voters with DAHR and its leaders. The paper showed that the relatively high abstention from vote of Hungarians is mainly a consequence of strategic de(mobilization) as a rational cost/benefit strategy adopted both by DAHR's leaders and partisans. In this paper I discerned different mobilization strategies in various countries depending on the perceived stakes of the electoral process. On the one hand, one can notice high electoral mobilization in ethnically competitive counties where 'every vote counts' for winning more seats. In these counties there was an important stake for DAHR's leaders and partisans in 'getting out the vote'. On the other hand, there was a low electoral mobilization in ethnically non-competitive counties, where DAHR's candidates had no realistic chance of winning even a single parliamentary seat or, on the contrary, had all the chances to win most of the seats. In these counties, there was no pragmatic reason to pay the cost of electoral mobilization.

## References

- Aguilar, Paloma, & Sanchez-Cuenca, Ignacio. (2008). Performance or Representation? The Determinants of Voting in Complex Political Contexts. In Jose Maria Maravall & Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca (Eds.), *Controlling Governments: Voters, Institutions, and Accountability* (pp. 105-130). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexandru, Violeta, Moraru, Adrian, & Ercuș, Loredana. (2009). Declinul participării la vot în România. București: Institutul pentru Politici Publice (IPP).
- Alonso, Sonia. (2008). Enduring Ethnicity: The Political Survival of Incumbent Ethnic Parties in Western Democracies. In Jose Maria Maravall & Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca (Eds.), *Controlling Governments: Voters, Institutions, and Accountability* (pp. 82-104). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernhagen, Patrick, & Marsh, Michael. (2007). Voting and Protesting: Explaining Citizen Participation in Old and New European Democracies. *Democratization*, 14(1), 44-72.
- Bodocan, Voicu. (2001). *Etnie, confesiune și comportament electoral în Transilvania*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană.
- Brubaker, Rogers. (2004). *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chandra, Kanchan. (2004). *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comșa, Mircea. (2006). Cultură, participare și opțiuni politice. In Dumitru Sandu (coord), Mircea Comșa, Cosmina Rughiniș, Alexandru Toth, Mălina Voicu & Bogdan Voicu (Eds.), *Viața Socială în România Urbană* (pp. 137-199). Iași: Polirom.
- ESS (2008). European Social Survey Round 4 Data ([www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)): Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data, accessed on 15.02.2011.
- Geertz, Clifford. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gellner, Ernst. (1983). *Nations and nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.



- Hasmath, Reza. (2011). The Complexities of Ethnic Diversity. In Reza Hasmath (Ed.), *Managing Ethnic Diversity: Meanings and Practices from an International Perspective* (pp. 1-10). Surrey: Ashgate.
- Horowitz, Donald L. (1985). *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ilieș, Alexandru. (1998). *Etnie, confesiune și comportament electoral în Crișana și Maramureș*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia.
- Kiss, Tamás, Barna, Gergő, & Sólyom, Zsuzsa. (2008). Tinerii maghiari din Transilvania 2008. Anchetă sociologică despre starea socială și așteptările tinerilor maghiari din Transilvania. Dimensiuni comparative. In Zsuzsa Bokor & István Horváth (Eds.), *Working Papers in Romanian Minority Studies* (Vol. 12). Cluj-Napoca: Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale.
- Norris, Pippa. (2002). *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pasti, Vladimir. (2009). Criza politicii după alegerile din 2008. In Gheorghe Teodorescu (Ed.), *Alegeri 2008: campanii, lideri și sondaje* (Vol. 1, pp. 335-356). Iași: Polirom.
- Rosenstone, S. J., & Hansen, J. M. (1993). *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan.
- Salat, Levente. (2009). Perspective ale UDMR după alegerile parlamentare din 2008. In Gheorghe Teodorescu (Ed.), *Alegeri 2008: Continuitate și schimbare* (Vol. 2, pp. 109-130). Iași: Polirom.
- Șișeștean, Gheorghe. (2002). *Etnie, confesiune și căsătorie în nord-vestul Transilvaniei*. Zalău: Caiete Silvane.
- Székely, István Gergő. (2009). The political representation of national minorities in Romania. In Zsuzsa Bokor & István Horváth (Eds.), *Working Papers in Romanian Minority Studies* (Vol. 20). Cluj-Napoca: Institutul pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minoritatilor Naționale.
- Tătar, Marius I. (2011). *Participare politică și democrație în România după 1989*. PhD Thesis, Oradea: Universitatea din Oradea.
- Vandermotten, Christian, Lockhart, Pablo Medina, & Freyer-Macola, Danuta. (2003). Geografia electorală a Europei centrale și de est. In Jean-Michel De Waele (Ed.), *Partide politice și democrație în Europa centrală și de est* (pp. 16-35). București: Humanitas.
- Woshinsky, Oliver H. (2008). *Explaining Politics: Culture, Institutions and Political Behavior*. New York: Routledge.