



ORIGINAL PAPER

Local Elections: Still Second-Order or in the Service of National Aspirations? An Analysis of the 2024 Local Elections in Romania

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Abstract:

Local elections are considered second-order elections (SOE), being often regarded as less relevant than national elections. According to the SOE model, local elections garner less attention from the public and register lower turnout rates than parliamentary elections. Most of the literature on second-order elections focuses on European elections, with the main characteristics emerging from the analysis of this type of electoral contest: low turnout, anti-government votes, better electoral performance for smaller, newer or radical political parties, and more invalidated ballots than in first-order elections. Where local elections are concerned, are all these particularities observable as well? Or can we discern rather significant differences between various electoral contests that are seen as second order? When analyzing the 2024 elections in Romania, we argue that local elections can become first-order national elections, depending on whether certain variables are present, such as the period when they are organized in relation to other electoral contests or the overall popularity and support for the national government parties. As the Romanian case reveals, by using legislative interventions and exploiting a particular political context, local elections can serve as an important tool for the government parties which seek to further secure their positions and use these elections as an electoral vehicle for their national aspirations. This leads us to conclude that the SOE model cannot be considered the default approach to local elections, neither when it comes to electoral turnout, nor when trying to analyze political parties' performance compared to other types of elections. This is due to the fact that local elections hold immediate relevance to the voters, as opposed to the European ones, where voters are more politically disconnected and, as such, more disinclined to participate.

Keywords: *local elections, second-order elections, European elections, Romania, turnout, merged election.*

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Introduction

Local elections represent a fundamental component of democratic governance, offering citizens a direct opportunity to influence decisions that affect their daily lives. While often overshadowed by national contests, local elections have received increasing scholarly attention for their distinct political dynamics, their role in promoting accountability, and their contribution to democratic consolidation, participation and responsiveness (Dahl, 1998; Hajnal and Lewis, 2003; Denters and Rose, 2005). Depending on the period in which local elections are organized in an electoral cycle, relative to national elections, the former can act as a barometer for political attitudes that political parties can use to determine if the electoral behavior of the voters has remained constant or whether there are nascent trends indicative of a break between the electorate and the political establishment. In this article, we apply a second order election (SOE) framework to argue that even though local elections have an apparent minimal relevance – limited to localities or regions – and lower stakes, they hold an important position in the electoral experience of the voters that is more authentic than national elections (where voters often vote strategically, out of a sense of preservation) and more engaged than European elections (where neither the parties nor the majority of the citizens are driven by an European agenda).

This article examines the results from the local elections held in Romania in 2024 in order to discern if the electoral trends emerging on the local scene could carry over to the national stage in the context of a complex domestic and international environment. That the local, national, and international levels are profoundly interconnected is clearly reflected in the Romanian case since the aftermath of the pandemic and the outbreak of the war in Ukraine enabled certain political developments that would otherwise not have happened in the first place or would have been unlikely to last in an electoral setting. These developments refer to the fact that the traditional political parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) that would normally occupy adversarial positions – formed a coalition government midpoint in the 2020-2024 cycle, that would oversee the organization of the four sets of elections held in 2024 – local, European, parliamentary, and presidential.

Our analysis shows that local elections acted as a conduit for the government parties' ill-fated attempt to secure their positions at the national level by making use of legislative interventions in a critical political context represented by the elections. In other words, local elections were transformed into an electoral vehicle for the government parties' national ambitions that hijacked their traditional second-order nature. While the cohabitation brought stability in the short term, it also carried the seeds of turmoil that would be reaped throughout the various electoral outcomes of 2024, ultimately culminating with the annulment of the first round of the presidential elections by the Constitutional Court in December 2024. The annulment arguably represents the biggest political crisis impacting the Romanian contemporary democratic system since it became a member of the European Union. Against this backdrop, we can assess if the trends from the local elections had first order implications, and if they confirm the established second order hypotheses: low turnout, protest votes, loss in support for government parties.

Literature Review

Understanding Local Elections in Comparative Perspective

One of the key challenges in the study of local elections lies in explaining patterns of voter turnout and voting behavior, which invariably differ from national elections. The main findings across democratic contexts are that turnout is significantly lower in local elections, seemingly confirming the perception that these elections are less engaging and, therefore, less consequential (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003). This electoral dynamic can be explained by the second-order election model developed by Reif and Schmitt (1980), which posits that voters treat non-national elections as opportunities for protest or abstention. In other words, voters display strategic voting behaviors while, at the same time, being less electorally engaged, and consequently, less vested in the outcomes of second order elections.

Empirical research challenges the universality of this model. For instance, in countries with strong local governments, visible local candidates, and policy-relevant elections, voters may engage more directly with local contests. Marien, Dassonneville, and Hooghe (2015) find that in Belgium, while national party identification plays a role, many voters cite candidate familiarity and local issues as decisive factors in their local electoral choices. Local political culture and institutional design also shape participation. For example, electoral systems based on proportional representation tend to lead to higher turnout and more diverse council representation than majoritarian systems, which often discourage minority and independent candidates (Norris, 2004). In post-communist democracies and developing countries, local elections provide insights into state-building, party system institutionalization, and clientelism. Studies in Central and Eastern Europe suggest that local elections can both reinforce and challenge national political trends. For instance, Kopecký (2006) finds that in some post-communist countries, local elections are highly nationalized, while in others, they exhibit strong localism with weak party links.

Another line of inquiry concerns territorial variation in electoral behavior. Regional cleavages, driven by economic inequality, identity politics, or decentralization, can also shape local political landscapes. Schakel and Jeffery (2013) caution that not all subnational elections follow the second-order model, but regional authority and identity can transform local contests into high-stakes arenas. At the same time, scholars emphasize the potential for local elections to revitalize participatory democracy, especially through mechanisms like participatory budgeting and deliberative assemblies, which link elections to sustained civic engagement (Sintomer, Herzberg, and Röcke, 2008). These innovations suggest that local elections, while sometimes dismissed as low-salience events, may in fact be sites of democratic renewal and experimentation.

Local Elections as Second-Order Elections

All elections other than national elections are generally considered second-order elections (SOE), being regarded as less relevant and, as such, garnering less attention from voters. Regional or local electoral contests that usually register lower turnout rates than national (parliamentary) elections, are also characterized by the fact that voting decisions are directly influenced by political issues from the national arena (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schakel and Jeffery, 2013). Notably, in the case of regional elections, since the composition of regional political institutions is determined by national politics, regional government came to be considered as “second-order government” (Verdoes, 2025). However, on this topic, other scholars argue that the second-order nature of regional

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elections tends to decrease when the stakes of those elections are higher (Dandoy and Schakel, 2013; Schakel and Jeffery, 2013). This tendency also applies in the case of local elections, and it is what differentiates them from other similar contests, as is the case of European elections which are vested by European policymakers with first order supranational prerogatives.

Additionally, it is not only voters that are influenced by national issues in local elections, but political parties also use the electoral campaigns for local elections to emphasize national political themes (Norris, 1997; Gross et al., 2023) or to take advantage of the opposition against parties in national government (Cabeza et al., 2017). By supporting opposition or newly formed parties, voters try to obtain the implementation of their desired policies, and this strategy has more chances of success when local institutions have the necessary leverage to influence national political decisions (Golder et al., 2017: 95; Schakel and Verdoes, 2024).

Most of the literature on second-order elections is centered on European elections, from which emerged the analytical reference system for this type of electoral contest, with its main traits being low turnout, anti-government votes, better electoral performance for smaller, newer or radical political parties, and more invalidated ballots than in first-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Hix and Marsh, 2011). These effects tend to be different depending on the timing of local elections in relation to national ones and, although it was argued that the most significant influence can be observed midpoint in the electoral cycle, it is not always the case (Jeffery and Hough, 2003; Schakel and Romanova, 2023). The Romanian case further corroborates this observation.

The SOE model was designed by Reif and Schmitt (1980) after the first direct election for the European Parliament (EP), from 1979, which allowed the authors to draw a set of preliminary conclusions based on the electoral sample constituted from the nine states that were members of the European Communities at that time. Reif (1997) would further refine the SOE model with the subsequent electoral cycles and future enlargements waves of the European Union. The initial study found that European elections had lower turnout rates compared with national elections and attributed significant gains in the distribution of votes to opposition or to small and new political parties, while the parties in national government obtained lower vote shares. The underlying hypothesis behind these patterns states that because voters perceive that there is less at stake in second-order contests (as they do not influence the structure of the national government), they will feel more open to express dissatisfaction, vote more ideologically or “vote with the heart” in a SOE context (Heath et al., 1999).

Reif and Schmitt argued that the SOE model can be applied to other types of elections, like municipal elections, by-elections, and “various sorts of regional elections” (Reif and Schmitt 1980, 8). Based on their initial findings and proposals, more recent literature on SOE has focused on aspects like the impact of economic factors or the perceptions regarding the performance of the national government on voter behavior at regional levels (Schakel, 2015; Toubeau and Wagner, 2018; Cabeza 2018). In particular, research from countries with decentralized political systems or strong traditions of local governance suggests that local considerations play a more substantial role than the original SOE model would predict. In their work on regional elections in Europe, Schakel and Jeffery (2013) note that the extent to which elections are “second-order” depends in part on the institutional strength of subnational governments. In regions with significant policy autonomy or identity politics, such as Catalonia, Flanders, or Scotland, the typical SOE dynamics may not apply. Here, voters may treat regional or local elections as first-order

contests, particularly when issues of autonomy or local governance are salient. This suggests that local elections often involve a dual logic, in which national and local concerns coexist, interact, and influence one another. Supporting this more complex view, Dodeigne et al. (2022) argue that the relevance of local factors is particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities, where voters are more likely to know the candidates personally or to be directly affected by municipal policies. Their study revealed that the so-called “friends-and-neighbors” effect – voting for a candidate due to personal familiarity – remains a powerful force at the local level, thereby tempering the explanatory power of the SOE model.

While originally developed in the context of the EP elections, the SOE model has since been applied to local and regional elections, prompting a growing scholarly discussion about the degree to which local electoral behavior follows the same logic, which is why we opted to analyze the Romanian local elections from this perspective. The application of the SOE framework to local elections has produced a rich body of literature, albeit one marked by debates over the relative weight of national vs. local factors in shaping voter behavior.

Early comparative studies, such as those by Heath et al. (1999), found that local elections in Britain exhibited some of the classic SOE characteristics: voter turnout was significantly lower than in general elections, and government parties tended to underperform. These findings supported the idea that voters use local elections to send signals about their satisfaction with national politics, treating them in effect as a referendum on the central government rather than as contests over local governance. Subsequent empirical studies have introduced important clarifications and nuances to the SOE framework when applied to local elections.

The timing of local elections relative to the national electoral calendar has also been shown to affect their second-order nature. If held close to national elections, local contests may become more politicized, encouraging voters to use their outcomes as indicators of national party strength. Conversely, in mid-term or “off-cycle” elections, voters may be more inclined to focus on local matters (Hajnal and Lewis, 2003). This “electoral cycle” effect is frequently observed in U.S. local elections but also applies more broadly in comparative contexts.

Taken together, these studies suggest that while the SOE model offers a valuable starting point for analyzing local elections, it must be adapted to account for contextual variables such as political decentralization, municipal size, party system maturity, and candidate familiarity. The distinction between first- and second-order elections is thus best understood not as a binary, but as a spectrum influenced by institutional and political conditions. As Denters and Rose (2005) argue, local elections are not necessarily subordinate to national politics but may instead reflect distinct democratic logics shaped by the immediacy of local governance and citizen proximity to elected officials.

In sum, although many local elections exhibit characteristics consistent with the SOE framework – especially lower turnout and a tendency for government parties to lose support – these tendencies are neither uniform nor inevitable. National partisanship remains influential, but it is often mediated by local context, candidate effects, and institutional design.

Methodological Approach

This article analyzes the local elections organized in Romania in 2024, using a SOE framework of reference to assess whether they were purely second order contests or

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they crossed over into national significance, in pursuit of first order aspirations. In other words, based on the data from the electoral contests, we intend to determine if local elections remain in second-order logic or if there are indications that they can be considered, in fact, another type of first-order electoral competition. The variables considered when trying to see if a certain electoral contest falls into the first or second-order category are: the turnout rate; the perceived stakes of the election; the performance of the government parties vs. the newer, small or radical political parties; voting motives (punishing the government parties vs. casting a strategic vote); and the number of invalidated ballots.

Most research confirms that turnout in local elections is lower compared to first-order national elections and, in turn, that low turnout is considered an indicator of SOE which is directly linked to the perceived stakes of an electoral contest: the less important the election is perceived by voters, the lower the turnout. Additionally, parties in national government perform less well than opposition, small and new parties, even though due to their share of the votes, they are not necessarily surpassed by the latter. In this sense, another indicator of SOE is tied to the performance of these marginal political parties, based on differences in voting choices between different elections (even more so when different elections are held at the same time or in close proximity of each other). Finally, it is important to note that these effects tend to vary depending on the timing of the local elections in the national election cycle (although the strongest impact is not always observed during the mid-term, as Reif and Schmitt initially argued).

The 2024 elections were held in an electoral super-year for Romania, where all four types of elections were supposed to take place, allowing us to identify different electoral patterns and tendencies and contrast them against the SOE typology. An aspect that drew us to this methodological approach was that local elections were organized at the same time with the European ones, enabling us to clearly distinguish the differences between the two second order contests due to the way that political actors and citizens alike perceived the elections (Filimon and Ivănescu, 2025, Ivănescu and Filimon, 2024).

For the purpose of this analysis, we used official electoral data and results, retrieved and compiled from the Romanian Central Electoral Bureau (BEC). We argue that the SOE model cannot be considered the default approach to local elections, irrespective of whether we are focusing on the political parties' performance, voters' attitudes, or turnout. This is because local elections hold immediate relevance to the voters, as opposed to the European ones, where they are more politically disconnected, and where the SOE hypotheses can be tested and confirmed. In a previous study focusing on the 2024 European elections, we noted that: "During the 2024 electoral cycle, the chronic lack of themes about the EU was not an accident. In the case of the major parties, this was reflected in their eschewing of electoral debates and confrontations as well as in the absence of related projects highlighting the importance of European elections. Regarding this display of disinterest for European affairs, we can surmise that the responsibility is split between the politicians and the voters themselves" (Filimon and Ivănescu, 2025: 16). Furthermore, by merging the European with the local elections, the government parties further ensured that the former would retain their second order electoral shortfalls.

The Romanian Case: The Mainstream Holds, the Radical Right Emerges *Electoral Context*

In Romania, empirical studies show that while local elections do echo certain SOE patterns, there is also a distinct blend of local agency and systemic dynamics rooted in the country's post-communist transition and political culture. For Romanian cities, local election turnout was historically higher than for parliamentary elections until the mid-2000s. Since then, turnout has remained higher at the local level, but political reforms, specifically the shift from a two-round process to a single-round mayoral election, appear to have depressed voter engagement over time. This underscores a nuanced interpretation: while local elections retain relative importance, institutional design matters significantly for participation (Ivănescu, 2022a; Ivănescu, 2013). In addition to that, research has highlighted that Romanian voters often separate local and national preferences. Local elections reveal that voters may support a municipal candidate for personal, clientelist, or client-mediating reasons, even when their national vote favors a different party. This reflects a feature of Romanian politics, where local party networks and personality-based voting may predominate at the municipal level, while national elections rely on an ideological or identity-based logic (Ivănescu, 2015).

Concerning turnout trends, aggregate data suggest that participation in Romanian local elections has fluctuated. Turnout varied around 46-56% between 2012 and 2024, with local elections consistently outperforming parliamentary ones (e.g. 47% local vs. 32% national in 2020) (for an in-depth breakdown of the electoral data across the various types of elections held between 1990 and 2020, see Ivănescu, 2022b: 135). These differences reject the SOE expectation of comparative drop-off, suggesting that democratic disengagement is more acute in national contests, due to “the excessive fragmentation of the main ideological poles in a great number of small parties that [occupy] similar ideological spots on the Romanian political scene” (Ivănescu, 2018: 149), and most likely reflecting disillusionment with centralized political institutions.

Romanian local elections thus exemplify a contextualized SOE model: while voters do treat local polling as less salient than national ones, the salience gap is narrower when local institutions are strong or personal connections to candidates are high. As observed in a previous study, “it can be argued that it is not necessarily the SOE model which shows its limits in the Romanian case, but it is rather the loss of the Romanian electorate's trust in the political class that becomes the main limitation and prevents us from drawing more generalizing conclusions about the validity of the SOE framework of analysis” (Ivănescu, 2021: 164). It is precisely because of this very loss of trust that in 2024, the political upheaval manifested in an abrupt way ushering a wave of radical and extremist parties in the parliament and even priming a fringe candidate to win the presidential elections. While the radical right trend has entrenched itself in Western European politics to the point that in certain member states it has become mainstream (Ivănescu and Filimon, 2022; Filimon, 2025), in Romania, the extremist / radical right laid dormant for the better part of a decade.

Discussion

When considering the SOE variables, the results of the 2024 super-electoral year paint a hybrid picture, interspersing second order false-positives with first order aspirations (see Table 1 and Table 2). On February 21, 2024, following several months of negotiations, Romania's ruling coalition parties, PSD and PNL, reached an agreement to merge the local and European elections. Both elections were scheduled to take place on

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June 9. The coalition decided to field separate candidates for the local elections, but to submit a joint list for the EP elections. This decision appears to have been influenced by the results of an opinion poll conducted a week earlier, which showed that 53% of respondents supported the merger of the elections, while only 35% opposed it. Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu, who also served as the leader of PSD at that time, stated that the move aimed to boost voter turnout in the European elections by holding them alongside local elections, which traditionally generate higher public engagement from Romanian voters (Filimon and Ivănescu, 2025).

In terms of turnout, local elections (49.62%) scored lower than the EU (52.40%), parliamentary (52.50%) and the first round of the presidential elections (52.55%) by almost three percentage points. In our view, the drop is not significant enough in order to meet the SOE criteria for turnout. Even in aggregate, as reflected in the results recorded between 1990 and 2020, local elections do not fit in the SOE framework, as reflected in the higher turnout compared to national parliamentary elections (see: Ivănescu, 2022b: 135). While just below the 50% threshold, turnout was higher than in the previous two cycles of local elections. However, we can attribute the lower turnout to the national context, reflected in the decision to merge local and European elections. The merger was intended to help increase the turnout in the European elections since local elections usually arouse the most interest for the Romanian voters. In reality, the measure warped the participation and, in a reversal of expectations, turnout for European elections was higher than for the local ones to the degree that local elections were hindered by this decision.

We can posit that two reasons contributed to this outcome. First of all, there was the issue of access: according to Romanian electoral legislation, Romanian citizens can vote for the EP elections in any polling station, throughout the country or abroad (Romanian citizens living in the diaspora; those living in Romania, but somewhere else than their legal residence), but not for local elections, where they can only vote in Romania, in the locality where they reside, based on the information from their national identity card. We can also remark that another important category of voters who were unable to cast their votes for local elections (but could vote for the EP elections) were the thousands of students who were attending their summer university exam session and were away from their places of residence (Tufiş, 2024: 218). These aspects can explain the difference of about three percentage points in the turnout rate between the two elections.

Second of all, as we have argued in another analysis examining the 2024 European elections, another possible motivation for the decision to merge the elections could be strategic, with the government coalition seeking to limit the electoral gains of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a radical-right party trending up with the voters in recent years (Ivănescu and Filimon, 2025). AUR's unexpected rise in Romanian politics began with the 2020 parliamentary elections, when it secured nearly 10% of the vote – surpassing established parties such as PMP, ALDE, and even the long-standing UDMR – despite earning less than 1% in the local elections held just months earlier. Approximately 30% of AUR's support came from the diaspora, where its nationalist and populist rhetoric resonated strongly. If the results from the 2020 parliamentary elections could be attributed to low turnout and discounted on account of party mobilization issues related to the pandemic, the results from the 2024 cycle demonstrated AUR's electoral bona fides and confirmed the party's staying power on the national political scene.

SOE Framework				
Elections	Low turnout	Anti-government votes		More invalidated ballots than in first-order elections
Local elections	49.62%	PSD PNL USR + PMP + FD AUR PSD + PNL* UDMR SOS Romania	34.74% 29.07% 6.28% 6.27% 5.83% 4.32% 0.97%	276.153 (3.05%)
European elections	52.40%	PSD + PNL AUR USR + PMP + FD UDMR SOS Romania POT	48.55% 14.92% 8.70% 6.47% 5.03% did not participate	488.551 (5.17%)
Parliamentary elections	52.50%	PSD AUR PNL USR SOS Romania POT UDMR	21.96% 18.01% 13.20% 12.40% 7.36% 6.46% 6.33%	172.178 (1.82%)
Presidential elections (first round)	52.55%	-	-	223.132 (2.35%)

*Marks results from localities where PSD and PNL supported the same candidate for mayor

Table 1 SOE framework in comparative perspective

(Source: BEC 2024: https://locale2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PV_P.pdf; https://europarlamentare2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PVCVAM_1.pdf; https://parlamentare2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/RFCD_1.pdf; https://prezidentiale2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PV_RFT1.pdf)

The next set of variables focuses on anti-government votes and support for minor, new, or radical parties. In the local and European elections, the government parties registered comfortable majorities compared to their competitors, both independently as was the case in the local elections, and in the joint post-political venture pursued in the European elections. As Table 2 shows, in the local elections, PSD placed first, obtaining 34.74% of the votes, while PNL came second with 29.07% of the votes. When adding the percentages from the localities where PSD and PNL supported the same candidate for mayor (5.83%), the total amounts to 69.6% of the votes cast for candidates of the

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government parties. Once more, another SOE hypothesis is unconfirmed since minor parties, regardless of their political orientation, whether they campaigned alone or as part of coalitions, or despite their novelty on the political scene, scored below 10%, at best. The percentage breakdown speaks for itself: the coalition USR+PMP+FD registered 6.28%, the radical parties AUR and SOS Romania scored 6.27% and 0.97%, respectively. We exclude from the analysis UDMR, the party representing the Hungarian minority which obtained 4.32% of the votes, since turnout for this party is politically constant and regionally delimited.

Political parties	Local elections (June 9)	European elections (June 9)	Parliamentary elections (December 1)
Government parties	PSD = 34.74% PNL = 29.07% UDMR = 4.32%	PSD + PNL = 48.55% UDMR = 6.47%	PSD = 21.96% PNL = 13.20% UDMR = 6.33%
Opposition parties	USR + PMP + FD = 6.28% AUR = 6.27%	AUR = 14.92% USR + PMP + FD = 8.70%	AUR = 18.01% USR = 12.40%
New, small, radical parties	SOS Romania = 0.97% POT = 0.08%	SOS Romania = 5.03% POT – did not participate	SOS Romania = 7.36% POT = 6.46%

Table 2 Results recorded by marginal parties across three local, European, and parliamentary elections (Source: BEC 2024: https://locale2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PV_P.pdf; https://europarlamentare2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PV_CVAM_1.pdf; https://parlamentare2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/RFC_D_1.pdf; https://prezidentiale2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PV_RFT1.pdf)

A similar scenario was replayed in the European elections, where the government parties running in the coalition formula won first place with 48.55%. Due to the coalition effect and the different format of the election, the runner-up, albeit a distant second, was AUR, obtaining 14.92% of the votes. The element of novelty was that a second fringe party – SOS Romania – also entered the EP, crossing the electoral threshold with 5.03%. Combined, the results amounted to nearly 20% of the votes cast in support of radical parties, arguably validating the SOE hypothesis in the case of European elections. Meanwhile, other minor parties – even those whose members had once been in government, such as USR or the new party REPER, underperformed or failed to enter the EP: USR as part of the USR+PMP+FD coalition scored 8.70%, while REPER, boasting the candidature of Dacian Cioloș, former prime-minister and leader of the RENEW group in the ninth European legislative, received only 3.74% of the votes.

Returning to the discussion about local elections, we argue that the SOE model does not apply in the Romanian case where anti-government votes are concerned. However, we can discern emerging electoral trends that would prove to have a destabilizing effect in both first order elections held in November 2024. While the ruling

parties maintained their electoral preeminence, despite local elections being organized at the tail end of a governmental cycle, the overall results were mixed: PSD seemingly swept the electoral contests, winning additional seats across all four types of local elections (mayors +315; local council councilors +2689; county council presidents +5; and county council councilors +188); meanwhile, PNL lost seats (mayors –100; local council councilors –2601; county council presidents –5; and county council councilors –53); lastly, AUR won seats in three out of the four elections (mayors +27; local council councilors +3430; and county council councilors +158). In comparison, in the 2020 local elections, AUR won only three mayorships and 79 seats for councilors in the local councils.

Unlike European elections, the results in the local contests represented an early warning that the mainstream parties should have been apprehensive of and not be dismissed on account of their limited impact or because of local or regional particularities. This aspect has to be correlated with the fact that the ruling coalition brought together electorates that would otherwise be in an adversarial dynamic and who were likely to be dissatisfied by the willingness of either party to work together, even going against their ideological particularities. Additionally, another first order implication of the local elections was that PSD and PNL sought to manage the outcomes locally, so that they would maximize their gains nationally, in an overestimation of their political prowess.

By acting in an un-electoral way and turning the elections into a simulacrum, the parties were severely sanctioned by voters during the parliamentary elections, when the anti-government votes were clearly discernable, and where along with AUR, two more radical / sovereignist parties (SOS-Romania and POT – Party of Young People) entered the parliament for the first time, passing the electoral threshold on their first attempt. In the case of SOS-Romania, the party improved its performance compared to the local and European elections (7.46% in the parliamentary elections vs. 5.03% in the EP elections and 0.97% in the local elections). As for POT, which did not participate in neither the local, nor the European elections, the parliamentary elections provided an ample setting for the party to announce its presence on the political scene. Arguably, the outcome of the first round of the presidential election and the fact that the parliamentary elections were held a week after this first round led to massive electoral mobilization for these radical, sovereignist parties.

Finally, in the case of the SOE hypothesis positing that there are more invalidated ballots in second order contests than in first-order elections (Table 1), the data shows that in the 2024 Romanian local elections, there were more spoiled votes (276.153) than in the parliamentary elections (172.178) and the presidential elections (223.132 in the first round), respectively. In analyzing the data, due to the particularities of the first round of the presidential election, in order to test the hypothesis, we look at the results from the local and the parliamentary elections, where we find a difference of over 100.000 invalidated ballots between the two (3.05% in local elections vs. 1.82% in the parliamentary elections). Compared to the presidential elections, the difference in this category of votes is further reduced, coming at under one per cent (53.021 votes – 0.7%). In terms of electoral behavior, these votes can be attributed to voters' dissatisfaction with local governance, specific leadership figures in the municipalities, or party performance in the respective regions. In light of this, we argue that the 1.23% difference in invalidated ballots between the two elections is too small and does not clearly place the local elections in a SOE context. Coupled with the high turnout, the invalidated ballots hypothesis cancels itself out.

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Another aspect that better highlights why the local elections do not meet the SOE condition results from the comparison with the European elections. In this sense, we observe that the invalidated votes in the European elections not only surpass all the other three elections, in line with the standard SOE pattern, but they total nearly half a million votes (488.551). In contrast to the local elections, the European elections are second order despite the high turnout, because, as we mentioned before, neither the political parties, nor the voters are vested in the outcome of these elections. The parties use them as an opportunity to campaign on themes of national interest which, in turn, limits the voters' electoral options with regard to the European Union, paving the way for chronic disengagement. It is because of these systemic issues, that even in a context supposed to foster participation in European election, where turnout was high, there were so many invalidated ballots recorded. The variation of two percentage points in spoiled votes between the local and European elections might not seem much at first glance, but when examined along with the other issues identified, makes the difference between a first order and a second order election.

Conclusions

Given how significant local elections are in the perception of the voters, our analysis of the results confirms that the local elections do not always function according to second order principles. In the case of the 2024 Romanian elections, none of the party gains and losses across the political and governmental spectrum can be dismissed under the SOE preconditions, since an electoral continuity was maintained from local to national contests. Furthermore, we would argue that voters acted in an authentic first order logic, sanctioning the government parties for a haphazard leadership that flew against typical electoral behaviors. In other words, the voters did not use the local election to diffuse their dissatisfaction, as tends to happen in a SOE framework.

The causes of the political crisis marking the end of 2024 are not entirely found in the local elections. There were signs: the attitude of the government parties towards the voters and the growth of AUR at the local level signaled that turbulences were ahead, though they did not indicate that something as severe as the annulment of the first round of the presidential elections would take place. Between June and November 2024, various subsequent actions, such as the inadequate electoral campaigns conducted by the parties or the uninspired candidate selection, coupled with a rising wave of political discontent, led to the coalescence of a sanction vote on which the radical right capitalized.

In the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, three radical parties entered the parliament, their combined scores amounting to 31.83% of the votes, in the context of a solid turnout (52.50%). The ruling parties retained modest majorities and, while they did not outright lose the election, from a political standpoint their electoral performance was underwhelming, signaling that they are vulnerable and liable to be sanctioned by the voters, not in SOE contests where the outcome carries little significance, but where it matters the most electorally: in parties' quest for political power.

Returning to the discussion about local elections, we can conclude that for the Romanian political parties, local elections are strategically important, especially since even in non-super-electoral conditions, they are held in the same year as parliamentary elections. Organized a couple of months before the latter, they offer significant insights into the parties' chances of gaining more votes at the national level. As the analysis of the Romanian case has showed, the SOE model cannot be considered the default approach to local elections, neither when it comes to electoral turnout, nor when trying to analyze the

parties' performance compared to other types of elections, because of particular conditions existing at the local level that enable the formation of strong attachments between voters and political parties.

Our analysis has shown why the 2024 local elections do not meet the criteria to be considered second order elections. While in isolation, the results tell a tale of local experiences in political representation, they need to be considered in the aggregate and looked at like pieces of a multilevel puzzle, where party actions, political decisions, and voter's attitudes are intertwined and interconnected. That local elections have less important stakes compared to national elections does not mean that they are *lesser* democratic instruments. On the contrary, in a complex political setting like the Romanian one, they highlighted the hubris of the government parties acting as if the electoral outcome was already predetermined. Afflicted by complacency and in the apparent absence of other viable political competitors, the ruling coalition was blindsighted in November 2024, when neither of the two parties' leaders were able to enter the second round of the presidential election, and when a third of the seats in the parliament were occupied by radical and fringe actors. This is why research of local elections is of critical importance for early diagnosing changes in electoral behavior, because, as the Romanian case so amply demonstrated, such changes could later trigger political upheavals on the national stage, plunging the country into a prolonged state of crisis.

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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