

# Mediatization of political life in conditions of electoral campaign – a retrospection of the elections in Romania



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**ABSTRACT:** In the circumstances of the last decade, when the real unchaining of mass media took place as well as its intense invasion in politics, the whole activity of mass media, actually subordinated to politics, is considered precisely from the point of view of the political circumstances, therefore of the electoral campaigns, in the first place. The rhythm and the trajectory of Romanian political life result from the electoral cycles. Electoral years have influenced Romanian politics, giving it sense and consistency in the medium term. The paper presents the main characteristics of electoral campaigns in Romania.

**KEYWORDS:** electoral campaign, Romanian election, local election 2008, electoral evolution



## **INTRODUCTION**

The decisional scheme in elections is very complex, being conditioned not only by the rational/affective element, but also by various factors that characterize this process – researchers mention the attitudinal-value components, the perception, the objective expectations determined at the level of common knowledge, but also the subjective ones that are conditioned according to value and affection, the conceptions regarding the vote and the rules that regulate the electoral system.

If we are to take into consideration that the elector “is not a passive subject that consumes whatever is being proposed, but a processor of information that rebuilds the received messages,” (Ricolfi, 1994) it is obvious how hard it becomes to exhaustively appreciate the role of mass media in electoral campaigns and the inadvertence of a univocal answer to the questions related to the media mechanisms of electoral influence.

In the circumstances of the last decade, when the real unchaining of mass media took place, but also its intense invasion in politics, the whole activity of mass media, actually subordinated to politics, is considered precisely from the point of

view of the political circumstances, therefore of the electoral campaigns, in the first place.

Mass media has become an essential instrument in the forming of public opinion; more than 80% of the Romanian people use at least one source (TV, radio and newspapers) for their own information (Fig. 1).

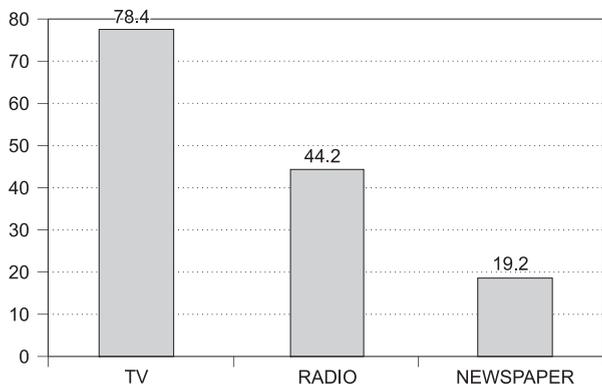


Fig. 1. Population's use of the mass media sources – 2007

Source: Research Report of National Survey, April 2007, made by Survey and Socio-Human Investigation Center – Constanta for INSO-MAR, in: (Seceleanu, 2008).

The Internet has been rarely used in electoral campaigns and we note the timid start in 2004 when Traian Băsescu (in 2004 the candidate for presidency; now he is the President of Romania) used it successfully. Even though the Internet can offer many advantages, at least for the urban area, being addressed to a more participative public and the possibilities of the anonymity for the virtual space may be easily used for a negative campaign or for a communicational war, it has not been totally explored by politicians. In 2008 some politicians' blogs have appeared and it is obvious that they have understood that it is an easy and efficient way of keeping in touch with a certain part of the electorate.

**ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS AND MEDIA PRACTICE**

Electoral campaigns demonstrate that the media-politics sphere begins more and more to feel the influence of *political marketing*, being understood as a set of actions directed towards promotion through mass media, in the given case, of the political “product”: the object of the political marketing consists in the obtaining of an “agreement” between “the producers” of political images and their “consumers” for the optimization of the relation between supply and demand, and it does not have, according to Phillipe Maarek, “nothing in common with the increase of political participation or the civic attitude of the electorate,” being more pragmatic and more precise, oriented towards the providing of influence on electoral options of the au-

ditory. In accordance with the laws of marketing, as Vance Packard shows in his reference work *I persuasori oculi*, “the elector, entering the voting booth, hesitates just as she/he would if she/he found herself/himself in a drugstore having to choose between two toothpastes. In the end, she/he will choose the one she/he heard most of.” The quoted observation reflects a common truth: the opinion of electors on electoral candidates depends a lot on the information offered by mass means of communication. Inevitably, we arrive to the idea of agreement of promotional electoral action with media practice, and the communicational flows – including current information, relating to events happening in the society, analytical programs, seconded by special shows like round tables, political teleshows, electoral communications – are marked by signs of political marketing.

Media practice proves the importance of at least two elements that condition the success of a political message transmitted through mass media channels, able to produce the wanted electoral effect: its concordance with the expectations of the electorate, in the first place, and its adjustment to the media demands. Precisely, the observance of these conditions determines the candidates’ eligibility (Constantin, Cherci, 2002).

Lately, the adjustment of media practices within electoral campaigns involves more and more the so-called *dirty technologies* (or *grey, black*) of manipulation of public opinion, quite efficient, as the results of elections show.

Manipulation must be related to communicator’s intentions, but also to the methods of communication. Verbal and non-verbal means of manipulation are numerous. Because of the complexity of the processes of communication and the subjective nature of the relationships between those that communicate, it is very hard to distinguish between persuasion and manipulation. It cannot be clearly stated that persuasion can be addressed only to reason, while manipulation only to the sensitiveness of the manipulated one, who would be subjugated to the purposes of the manipulator (Seceleanu, Rus, 2005).

Manipulation produces effects, at different levels, on an individual or on groups, because people have the capacity to verify, appreciate, interpret and evaluate what is transmitted to them, passing the information through their own critical filter. It is this filter that makes the manipulation successful. Given the facts, the action against manipulation must be addressed, on the one hand, to the manipulators, discouraging them through sanctions and limiting their maneuver space through adequate rules of social conduit, and on the other, to the potential victims of manipulation, strengthening their critical spirit, through information and education.

Manipulation and its techniques are mostly noticed during electoral campaigns. Due to the manipulation, the decision is transferred from the zone of rationality of comparative type to that of the emotionality and absolute subjectivity. The relatively short period of electoral campaign determines politicians to launch in complex interdependent strategies, having as a final purpose receiving, at any costs, as

many votes as possible, giving the impression to the elector that he/she makes a decision without being influenced.

Political manipulation has many chances of succeeding in electoral campaign because the electorate is more attentive to political information and manifests bigger interest towards political actors. Also, during electoral campaigns, contradictory messages issued by politicians easily create confusion because of a large amount of political information that is projected into communicational space and a short period of time for its verification.

The expansion of media logic within political process has determined in the contemporary society the proliferation of the phenomenon of political publicity, another essential element of media cover within electoral campaigns. In a traditional way, the denomination of *political publicity* is attributed to a certain type of electoral propaganda, based on the use of methods and of publicity techniques during the period before the elections. The propagandistic electoral message of the political subject carries the formal signs of the proper publicity, including the broadcasting by means of mass communication, orientation of the content towards the favorable attitudes of a political doctrine, of a party or candidate, of an electoral program, the clear and explicit identification of the message as a publicity action, etc. (Seceleanu, Rus, 2005).

In the last years, mass media theoreticians have reevaluated the role of press in an electoral campaign, especially when electoral practice has become inconceivable in the absence of television device. In the 2004 elections, an increase of the importance of written press was felt and because of legislative modifications that limited the antenna times and moreover, interdicted the purchase of electoral space: according to art. 60 paragraph 5 "It is forbidden to purchase broadcasting spaces for the purpose of broadcasting video clips or electoral shows."

Still, one may say that the outcome of an electoral campaign can be decided on TV and not in the press. Press cannot control the discursive exchange between the candidate and the public, whereas television offers, to the candidate, but also to the public – the potential electorate – more opportunities for the fulfillment of its own role in the electoral campaign.

Candidates "learn" to use strategically the entire television device, and the public, in turn, must distinguish between different offers on TV. Unlike press, television situates the candidate into very elaborate media situations, but which, once strategically used, may be transformed into electoral capital. In these conditions, what kind of resource could be the written press for the candidate, what kind of evaluation criteria could it offer to the public?

In the first place, we must take into consideration the fact that the press challenges less the candidates' competences, diminishing public's participation in the electoral competition.

Press, more than television, has its own "public", relatively stable, a fact that has consequences for the electoral campaign.



Also, new fears were stressed and different categories of electorate were intimidated. Characterized as chaotic, the first political campaign after 1989 coincided also with the stimulation of the most ill-fated public manifestations: coal miners' strikes. They were the elections that brought the change requested during the revolution: FSN (see Abbreviations) won the elections, the party that had taken power after 1989.

The other electoral campaigns may be shortly characterized as follows (Seceleanu, 2008):

1992 – anti-communist ideology. The anti-communist discourse becomes stronger around the first structure of organized opposition. It is the electoral campaign in which the ex- FSN does not participate, being divided into two parties. The heir of FSN, Ion Iliescu's FDSN (see Abbreviations), wins the elections basing on a message of change (of the mistakes made by the government of Petre Roman). On that date, a choice has to be made between a moderate change (that of Ion Iliescu's) and a radical change (that of the new right opposition). It is the first campaign where foreign counselors made their appearance.

1996 – the first professional campaign. The professionalizing of communication makes progress, and the main forces confront each other in a different league than the rest of the parties. The campaign is better organized; the three blocks (PDSR, CDR, and USD) (see Abbreviations) make use of the majority of modern instruments of communication (including the foreign counselors). The difference between big and small campaigns becomes obvious, especially at the outcome of the elections. 1996 is the year in which it becomes clear that an interesting discourse is not successful unless it is supported by a professional campaign. Again, the winning message is one of a change, derived from the exhaustion of PDSR government. The change of power is made with enthusiasm, a fact that foretokens the orange revolutions in 2004.

2000 – de-ideologization and personalization. The process of professionalizing continues and includes the small parties that have very good campaigns. After a government of right, the discourse of left begins to gain power, also in the idea of change. The option is being made between two directions of change: the moderated one of PSD (see Abbreviations) and the radical-extremist one of PRM (see Abbreviations). The discourse of pro-occidental right-wing parties is canceled. The campaign is no longer based on communism versus anti-communism. More and more people begin to capture the public's attention with their discourse. The image of some personalities becomes essential for the success of a campaign.

2004 – tactics elaboration and the involvement of the biggest structures of communication. The electoral campaign requires a lot of resources, with the most important structures of communication in Romania being involved, altogether with a major contingent of foreign counselors. The dispute is carried out at a high level, the details making the differences, not only in what concerns the organization, but also in what concerns the communication. The scores are balanced, the votes being given, as it was predicted, for the change. On the one hand, the change refers to the

internal change, promised by PSD (see Abbreviations); on the other, it is about the revolutionary change, promised by the PNL-PD (see Abbreviations) Alliance. The latter wins the elections, as a result of the personal victory of Traian Băsescu (Rotariu, Comsa, 2005).

The local elections in June 2004 have determined the configuration of pre- or post-electoral alliances and have foreshadowed the tendencies of the electorate. The coupling of the two election systems: uninominal majority system in two ballots, for the election of the mayor, with proportional system with a threshold of 5% for the election of local or county counselors led to the personalization of electoral confrontation, balancing the influence of the parties.

The hierarchies resulting from local elections contributed to the revitalization of the negotiations of pre-electoral alliances and of the possible directions of the government.

The electoral year 2004 meant, besides the control of the mass media, of the migration of local winners, of the artificial political imbalance, for the first time in the post-Decembrist history, the redefinition of the role of the electorate.

2007 – the first Europarlimentary elections gave rise to certain problems that the parties did not have to deal with in the previous elections: how to manipulate the electorate using European themes, or, more exactly, with what to buy it off? The second problem was related to the necessity of redefining the position of every party on the political scene, under the conditions of a turmoil year, with many changes of situation.

Although the stake of these elections was high, considering that the score of these elections could signal the trend for the 2008 elections, *the themes of the campaign were vague* and there were not any themes of public debate to draw attention and increase the interest. The *informational element of the campaign* was insufficient, people stating that they did not know what they had to vote for and that happened because there was not a pre-campaign that could prepare the public from an informational point of view.

Mass media made efforts, but it alone could not animate an informational campaign, the direct interest being that of the institutions of the state, of the politicians and of the parties. *It counted on leaders and not on the message.* From the drawing up of the lists and continuation with the schedule at the debates on TV, an excessive personalization of the campaign was tried, although the long lists of the political parties were contradicting this tactic and were destroying it. Monopolization of attention by leaders is an impediment in the receiving of the messages.

Moreover, the leaders' ego and an unfortunate theory of the electoral motives render to our campaigns an unnatural observance of the hierarchy in the scheme of the programming of public appearances. *It was a non-combat campaign. We did not have a dialogical campaign; there was hardly any political dialogue.* Every party was satisfied with only expressing their own themes, little political dispute was generated only by the conflicts of the daily agenda.

Europarlimentary elections on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November generated big surprises on the Romanian political scene. Besides a very poor attendance (about 27%), a series of political parties came off the scene, missing the access in the European Parliament. Thus, the winner of elections was PD (see Fig. 2), with 28.81% of votes, followed by PSD (23.11%), PNL (13.44%), PLD (7.78%) and UDMR (5.52%). The ones who lost were PRM, with little above 3%, and the conservatives, with 2.9%. Another surprise was caused by PNG which came close to the electoral threshold, with a score of 4.85%. The attendance was very poor, a decisive factor being – as the political analysts estimated it – the fact that for the electorate the stake was not the same as in the local or general elections. Another reason was the confusion created by organizing the national referendum for the uninominal system vote on the same day as the Europarlimentary elections.

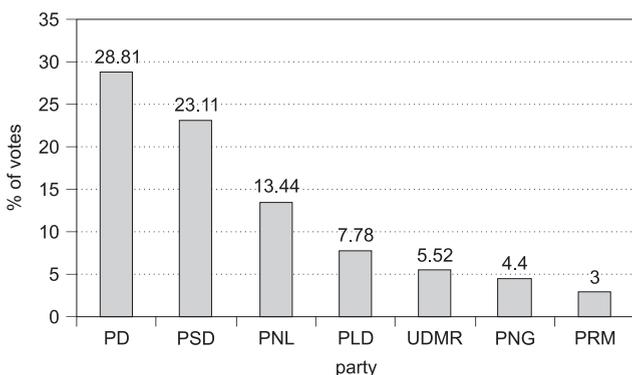


Fig. 2. Europarlimentary election score

Source: Central Electoral Bureau – published in [www.ziua.ro/news.php?id=1832&data=2007-11-28](http://www.ziua.ro/news.php?id=1832&data=2007-11-28).

2008 – local elections and the law of the uninominal vote system. The law regulating voting system was adopted and for the first time presidents of the county councils were elected by uninominal vote.

Traditionally, the local elections have poorer attendance. If during the first local elections in 1992, the parties managed to mobilize almost 65% of the citizens registered in the electoral charts, in the following elections the rate of participation was constantly maintained around 50%. Practically, half of the electoral body was present to vote for the election of local public authorities: 56.47% (1996), 50.85% (2000), 54.23% (2004), and 49.38% (2008) (<http://www.beclocale2008.org>).

In the local elections in 2008 we notice the presence of an electoral offer, in general, unsatisfactory, and in its content we find multiple promises, but a small amount of real solutions to the problems that citizens have to deal with at the administrative and public service levels. Such a situation has been for several years now, and if we believed that in 2008 it would change, we can clearly see now that we were wrong. If in the 2004 elections two powerful structures were confronting each other on the

political scene, in 2008 there were three structures that fought for power: PD-L, PSD, and PNL.

The stake in these elections was high: the winning of the mayor function because the key-agent of the future campaign becomes the local political leader. The autumn 2008 campaign for the election of the future Parliament stayed, for the first time, on the shoulders and, in a certain way, in the hands of some people that have not got anything to do with national politics. These are, according to their importance, the mayors, the presidents of the county councils, newly elected in direct voting and, somewhere in the background, the local and county counselors.

A study made by the Institute for Public Policies (IPP) shows the dramatic increase of the costs in comparison with the previous local elections. The increase of the costs only in the domain of the publicity in the press was of 250%: 8.686.950 euro (in 2008) compared with 3.460.936 euro (in 2004).

The fact that the political parties spent large amounts of money in the electoral campaign shows the lack of communication/interaction between candidates and citizens. The candidates and the parties they represent were perfectly aware of this fact, therefore they understood that they had to minimize this shortage by assuring an expensive electoral publicity.

The candidates for the position of local or county counselor had suffered from an insufficient campaign (compared to the candidates for mayor) with a reduced or inexistent publicity. Although the decision of initiative on the projects that affect the local community must belong to the members of the Local Council and not to the mayor, the first ones remained practically unknown for the public during the electoral campaign.

A very important actor in the electoral process is the citizen. If at the 2004 elections most of the Romanians chose between the “useful” vote and the “sanction” vote, at the local elections in 2008 the citizens proved to be uninterested in the electoral offer, practicing the emotional vote. Moreover, the citizens who practice their right to vote, for one reason or another, do it in a formal and not informed kind of way, and their choice is made according to the subjective, emotional or financial factor.

Besides this, the “retrospective” voting (in which the electorate makes its choice according to the evaluation of the situation before the electoral period) or the “thematic” one (that implies to process and simplify the information according to the sources and the resources of the elector) has revealed a complex typology of the political and electoral behaviors. More and more voters have accumulated information, more or less structured, which they interpreted according to their own experiences; the vote becoming a form of public investment, economically oriented towards the future (in the sense of investment in the confidence in the candidate).

## **POSSIBLE ELECTORAL EVOLUTION**

In the old voting system, the major actor of the campaign was the party, and what made the difference between local and parliament elections was the so-called po-

litical vote. But what counted the most were the general image and the national message that the parties succeeded to transmit to the electorate.

Given the overlapping of parliamentary elections with the presidential ones, the role of the center was once again accentuated; the candidate to the presidency being in some cases the only promoter of the entire campaign.

Although the legend of the uninominal vote says that we choose our candidates for the future Parliament especially because of what these tell us, in fact, the decision of vote is strongly influenced by other factors. Generally, statistically speaking, the votes for the two kinds of positions are related. Greater differences were seen in the urban environment, especially in big cities, which is very important when we think about what is going to happen in the autumn 2008 elections. Since the urban environment is generally more sophisticated, more informed, more demanding and more attentive to details, the correlation between the two kinds of votes is a little bit weaker.

Why is this difference important? Because between those two environments we also have to deal with significant differences from the point of view of the distribution of the votes among the parties.

Although they have gained a lot in the past few years, PD-L and PNL continue to remain under the general average in the rural environment, while PSD remains underrepresented in the urban environment. At the elections in autumn 2008, this fracture made a difference in a sense that we will discuss next. During the electoral campaign in autumn 2008, this tandem (mayor-president of a county council) becomes a warranty of success or a discouraging factor, according to the political color, for any uninominal candidate from the electoral area that he/she represents. The candidate may promise whatever the others can. If those three, the candidates for the Parliament, for the mayor and for the president of a county council, have the same political color, they form the "golden triangle" of the autumn elections. The party that owns the greater number of such "triangles" has greater chances of winning the elections. PD-L rightfully brags about the fact that at the local elections it obtained the biggest number of votes, irrespective of the mandate at stake, be it mayoralty, presidency of Local or County Council. Actually, PD-L is ahead of PSD, the second classified, with 2.45% of votes for the candidates to mayoralty, by 1.3% of votes for local counselors, by 0.6% of votes for the county councils and by 0.11% of votes given to the candidates for the presidency of county councils. As it can be observed, the surpluses of votes, although clear, are actually tiny. In political terms, PD-L and PSD are equal (<http://www.mma.ro>).

The differences that count are seen in another part and they are clearly, from the point of view of the autumn 2008 elections, in favor of PSD. There are three such essential differences: the number of mayors, the mandates for the presidents of the county councils and the percentage of mayors that won their position in the first ballot. In percentage we have the following situation: PSD has by 7.23% more mayors than PD-L, 7.32% more mandates of chiefs of county councils and 11% more

mayors that won in the first ballot. The importance of the latter is greater because it makes a difference between them and the candidates that won the elections in the second ballot. What do these results hide? Speaking in terms of the theory above, they can be translated as follows: PSD owns 25% more pairs of mayor-president of the county council than PD-L will ever have, 548 compared to 445, from which 508 compared to 381 in the rural environment, where, we know, the electoral promises are better received.

As a demographic covering, the PSD triangles cover 45.8% of the population of Romania, besides Bucharest, while those of PD-L – only above 32, and 8%. Moreover, the presidents of the county councils of PSD have a background of 46% from the total of the votes granted to those who obtained this position, while the chiefs of the counties of PD-L have only 32%.

The mayors, but also the presidents of the county councils benefit, as winners, from the so-called popularity bonus that can support them for at least half a year after they have taken over the mandate.

According to all public opinion polls, the newly elected enjoy a high level of trust. On the contrary, the defeated suffer a significant undervaluation, and the important consequence is that, compared to the results obtained in the local elections, on a short term, until a year, the percentages that the elected ones already have gained are far too big and the percentages that the defeated have gained are far too small.

This makes it possible for the presidents of the county councils to remain, until the autumn 2008 elections, a lot more popular and, therefore, more influential in electoral terms than they appear, strictly in terms of the votes they received in the local elections. PSD has more popular presidents of county councils than PD-L and, therefore, it may receive a lot more votes in autumn 2008 for the members of the party which they represent in the parliamentary elections.

## ABBREVIATIONS

CPUN – Temporary Council for National Union  
 FSN – National Salvation Front  
 FDSN – National Democratic Salvation Front  
 PSD – Democratic Socialist Party  
 PD-L – Democrat-Liberal Party  
 PNL – National Liberal Party

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