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No Space for Female Mayors in Romania: Incumbents' Degree of Re-Election and the Impact on Future Candidates

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Abstract: It is expected that the number of elected female mayors in local government will increase globally, yet no major progress has been registered lately despite the increased focus on the topic. At the European level, no country exceeds 40% female mayors or other leaders of the municipal council (or equivalent), with the highest descriptive representation of 39.1% in Iceland. Following the 2020 elections in Romania, only around 5% of mayors were female with a strong over-representation of male mayors. The current study aims to analyze the male–female distribution of mayors, the degree of re-election, the relationship between the number of candidates and re-election of incumbents, and how these factors impact female political representation at the local level in Romania. Thus, we argue that a high degree of re-election of incumbents may be a barrier to women's access to the position of mayor. In addition, it is important to determine whether female incumbents are as successful as their male counterparts in being re-elected. While there is an extensive body of literature on incumbency that covers a range of topics, there is a gap in the literature regarding the proposed subject. The present research aims to fill the gap and contribute to a better understanding of the political representation of women in Eastern Europe. We utilized a dataset of Romanian elections from 2008 to 2020 to test our hypotheses. Our findings indicate that during the studied period, more than 95% of mayors were male, the re-election was a frequent occurrence in Romania with a percentage ranging from 70.82% (2008–2012) to 72% (2012–2016 and 2016–2020), and female incumbents were just as likely to be re-elected as their male counterparts.

Keywords: female mayors; incumbent mayors; re-election; local elections; incumbency advantage

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1. Introduction

In 2023, at the European level, there were only four countries that exceeded the 35% critical mass (Childs and Krook 2008) of female mayors or other leaders of the municipal council (or equivalent): Iceland, Finland, Sweden, and Norway, revealing Nordic dominance (EIGE 2024). The EU-27 average is 18.2% and the most under-represented countries from the group, with less than 10% female mayors (or equivalent), are Romania at 5.3%, Lithuania and Greece at 6.7%, and Cyprus at 7.6%. This may be linked to the fact that, except for Lithuania, the other countries are dominantly orthodox, a denomination that perpetuates the subordination of women (Kizenko 2013), and studies show that in Romania, in the high-standard socio-professional areas—academia and politics—the positions are occupied predominantly by males (Cordoneanu 2012). Even though Romania is politically and socially classified as a democratic society, the dominance of the Orthodox Church, which is, more than other Christian denominations, the least flexible to democratic social changes (Cordoneanu 2012), may influence women's intention to become involved in politics. At the European level, a lower representation than in Romania is seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. In Romania, women's descriptive representation in politics is low at all levels (Matei et al. 2010; Gârboni 2014), including national and European, and it is decreasing rather than increasing. In parliament, females

represent only 18.5% compared to 19.1% in 2016; at the European level, 21.2% are female (Băluță and Tufiș 2021). However, the highest presence of women is observed in the European parliament, while the lowest presence is at the local level. Therefore, parties show a greater interest in promoting women on the external level rather than at the local or national levels (Fedor et al. 2019).

The total of 5.3% female mayors following the 2020 elections translates to 169 seats out of 3186, with 160 of these in the rural area (comune). However, in counties in which the numerical majority is constituted by a minority, there is an absence of female mayors. Thus, this represents a case of intersectional exclusion, particularly in Harghita and Covasna, where the gender discrimination overlaps with minority status. In Romania, the Hungarian minority is geographically concentrated, and after the fall of the communist dictatorship, they founded a party, UDMR, which is governed by the ethnic minority. Ilieș (1998) highlights the fact that after 1990 the idea of ethnic minorities providing the vote to the ethnic parties representing them was revived, but this aspect is not translated into an advantage for females' representation in politics. Studies suggest that the impact of ethnic parties on the election of women is contingent upon both institutional and cultural factors (Holmsten et al. 2009), which, in turn, restrict women's access to the position of mayor.

At the international level, the causes of female under-representation in local politics as mayors (or equivalent) have been widely studied, but little attention has been given to the role of incumbency as an additional impediment to female political representation (Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa 2014). This is because incumbents are predominantly male (De Paola et al. 2010) and women have to challenge and defeat male incumbents to win office (Schwindt-Bayer 2005). In Romania, the presence of females in politics has been the subject of debate for researchers from diverse fields such as political science (Băluță (2010, 2012, 2013, 2015), O. Băluță (2015, 2017), Iancu (2021), Neaga (2012, 2014), Hurubean (2015), Ghebrea (2015), Ghebrea and Tătărâm (2005); geography (Matei et al. 2010; Fedor et al. 2021); and history (Cosma 2002; Jinga 2015), yet the accent was more on the national level than the local (except from Ghebrea and (Fedor and Iațu 2022)) and none of them focused on how the incumbency may influence females' access to the position of mayor.

Therefore, the present research seeks to address the following questions: (1) What is the re-election rate of incumbent mayors in Romania in local elections in 2012, 2016, and 2020, and how does it impact women's access to the mayoral position? (2) Are female incumbent mayors as likely to be re-elected as their male counterparts? (3) Is there a correlation between the number of candidates and the incumbent's chances of being re-elected?

The article covers in following section the incumbency advantage and potential causes, as well as the limited number of studies that examine the degree of re-election of mayors and the female incumbency advantage, which will emphasize the gap and place the study in the European and global context. Following this, the data and the methodology, based on a quantitative approach, will be presented. The results section will analyze the outcomes obtained within the context of Romania and compare them, where applicable, with developments at the European/global level.

2. Literature Review

Despite the fast-growing literature on the incumbency advantage in mayoral elections (Karnig and Walter 1981; Titiunik 2009; Kukovič and Haček 2013; Marschall 2014; De Magalhaes 2015; Freier 2015; Holman 2017) and the considerable number of studies that analyze women's descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) at the local level of mayors (Saltzstein 1986; Smith et al. 2012; Carroll and Sanbonmatsu 2013; Ferreira and Gyourko 2014; Maskarinec et al. 2018; Kjaer et al. 2018; Cardenas Acosta 2019; Alberti et al. 2021; Lukáčová and Maličká 2023), there are only a few studies that bridge these two topics. The present research aims to contribute to the existing literature on the topic by examining the degree of re-election of incumbent mayors in Romania and its impact on female mayors. In other words, can the incumbency advantage of male legislators become a disadvantage for their female counterparts in local elections?

Incumbency has been widely studied, and there is evidence that incumbents are strong and advantaged, (Erikson 1971; Garand and Gross 1984; Alford and Brady 1988; Gelman and King 1990; Katz and King 1999; Lee 2008; Butler 2009; Kendall and Rekkas 2012) with a high likelihood of being re-elected. However, most of these studies focused on national elections and were gender-blind. Although mayors play a crucial role within communities, enjoying considerable powers and responsibilities, this type of election has been overlooked. At the mayoral level, incumbent mayors who choose to run for re-elections win in high percentages: 70% USA (Karnig and Walter 1981), 58% in 2005 and 69% in 2009 in Brazil (Moreira 2012), 82.4% in 2010 in Slovenia (Kukovič and Haček 2013), and 72% in 2010 in Slovakia (Sloboda 2014) and in 2011 in Lithuania (Kukovič and Lazauskienė 2018), and in Portugal before the term limit was introduced, on average, 83% of the incumbents ran for re-election and 86% of them were re-elected (Veiga and Veiga 2018). Through the present research, Romania's case will also be analyzed and placed in an international context. Several studies have analyzed women's participation in local government as mayors and the female incumbency advantage in Chile, Slovakia, and California such as Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa (2014), Sloboda (2014), and Martin and Conroy (2024). The mentioned studies concluded that incumbents are very strong, but this is a disadvantage for women, as they are rarely incumbents. However, according to studies conducted in Chile and Slovakia when female incumbents are re-nominated, they are as likely as male incumbents to be re-elected, confirming Fox and Oxley's (2003) findings that women are just as likely to be successful as their similarly situated male counterparts. On the other hand, in California, the incumbency advantage does not apply equally to male and female incumbents, as the latter has a lower vote share.

It is important to note that the research conducted thus far has been in countries with different forms of organization, types of elections, and length of the terms (Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2019), which makes it even more difficult to observe similarities and patterns. Freier's analysis (Freier 2015) identified three main dimensions as causal for the incumbency effect: the first one is the characteristics of the town, the second is the mayor's past performance in terms of local economic indicators, and the third is the constitutional setting under which the mayor works.

For the purpose of this research, certain factors were considered relevant in contributing to the re-election of mayors, including the type of election of the mayor, whether the number of terms is limited, and the voting system (one-round/two-round system).

For instance, in Europe, the methods of electing mayors and their responsibilities and powers can vary significantly depending on the country. In the European Union-27, seven countries hold direct elections (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), two hold elections directly or indirectly, depending on the state (Germany and Austria), and the rest are indirect, either elected by the council (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden) or the mayor is the head of the party list council election (Spain, Portugal, Greece, Croatia, France), or they are appointed by the central government on the recommendation of the municipality (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands) (Czyż 2009; Várnagy and Ilonszki 2012; Hambleton 2013; Podolnjak and Gardašević 2013; Hambleton and Sweeting 2014; Tybuchowska-Hartlińska 2019; Górecki and Gendźwiłł 2020; Rajca 2021).

The role of the directly elected mayors has been the subject of much debate. On one hand, they are considered to be more powerful than other types of city leaders (Gash and Sims 2012; Hambleton et al. 2022) and the concentration of power in the hands of one individual can have drawbacks (Hambleton et al. 2022). For example, there is evidence from Lithuania that directly elected mayors lead to a shorter mayoral incumbency, whereas in Slovenia the share of re-elected mayors grew (Kukovič and Lazauskienė 2018). In addition, the one-round system can contribute to a high degree of re-election as the new candidates have little chance of being elected and, with no limitations of the terms, mayors can remain in office for decades. For instance, in France, there are mayors who stayed in office for more than 30 years such as Jacques Mahéas in Neuilly-sur-Marne-DVG and Laurent Cathala in

Créteil-PS who were mayors for 37 years. To avoid long tenures in office, some countries have implemented limits on the number of terms that a mayor can serve. For instance, in Brazil, the number of terms has been limited and, at the European level, Portugal and Italy have limited the number of consecutive terms, the latter to one to two terms for municipalities with more than 3000 inhabitants and three terms for the municipalities under 3000 (Veiga and Veiga 2018; Dalle Nogare and Kauder 2017; De Benedetto and De Paola 2019).

There is evidence that long-serving mayors de-mobilize voters, as elections may be seen as a formality to perpetuate the incumbent mayor (Veiga and Veiga 2018); for example, in Portugal, the turnout increased after the implementation of a limited number of terms. In addition, there is a concern that politicians who have been in power for too long might be more likely to develop a set of corrupt relations (Coviello and Gagliarducci 2017). Studies have also found that Romanian mayors, on average, become more corrupt the longer they stay in office (Klašnja 2015).

Certainly, in addition to the local laws that somehow may advantage the re-election of incumbents, there are numerous other (subjective) factors that can contribute to their successful re-election: Leoni et al. (2004) identified some key elements that can influence the re-election of a candidate including their success in the past, personal characteristics, and electoral vulnerability. Moreover, as Mondak (1995) noted they are often competent, and also succeed in attracting funding and contributing to the development of the commune, city, and municipality.

Among the advantages of re-electing incumbents is the argument that they are familiar with the way in which the political function is performed and eliminate the need for an introductory period at the beginning of the term (Kukovič and Haček 2013).

3. Materials and Methods

We evaluate our hypotheses using an original dataset of all candidates for election in Romania during 2012, 2016, and 2020, as well as the elected mayors from 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020. It must be noted that between 2008 and 2012, there were some administrative re-organizations after which three new administrative units were founded that were excluded from the 2008–2012 calculations as there were no data available for comparison. Additionally, the mayoral elections in 2008 and 2012 used a two-round system (or two-ballot), while the 2016 and 2020 elections used the one-round system, also known as first-past-the-post (FPTP). Under the FPTP system, the candidate receiving the largest share of valid votes is elected, even if s/he receives less than 50% of the total votes.

All the data were collected from the Central Electoral Commission, Romanian Permanent Electoral Authority, and the data from 2020 were collected from Vote Results, a platform developed with the aim of supporting participatory democracy and providing electoral information accompanied by analyses. It is developed by Code for Romania in the Civic Lab, an independent non-governmental organization that is not politically affiliated.

The dataset is of elections for mayors and includes not only candidate names but also their gender, administrative unit, and party. The dataset includes 14,138 candidates for the position of mayor in 2012, 14,041 in 2016, and 13,872 in 2020. Additionally, there were 3183 elected mayors in 2008, and 3186 in 2012, 2016, and 2020.

As for administrative units in Romania, there are 102 (103 if we include the capital) municipalities (municipii), 217 cities (orașe), 2861 communes (comune) that comprise 12.957 villages (sate). In total, there are 42 counties (including the capital) organized in eight regions of development (Table 1). The county represents the traditional administrative-territorial unit in Romania, comprising municipalities, cities, and communes, depending on the geographical, economic, and social–political conditions and the cultural and traditional ties of the population (INS).

The municipality is a city with an important economic, social, political, and cultural role, and it usually has an administrative function. Municipalities and cities present a lifestyle and a professional structure of the population specific to urban areas, while

the communes include the rural population. According to the 2021 Census, 52.16% of the population reside in urban areas, while 47.83% live in a rural area (Recensământul populației din 2021).

Table 1. Development regions in Romania. Quantitative characteristics.

The Name of the Region	Counties	No. of Administrative Units	Urban/Rural
South	Dâmbovița, Călărași, Argeș Ialomița, Prahova Teleorman, Giurgiu	567	48/519 (8.47%/91.53%)
North-East	Botoșani, Suceava, Iași, Neamț, Vaslui, Bacău	552	46/506 (8.33%/91.67%)
South-West	Mehedinți, Dolj, Gorj, Vâlcea, Olt	448	0/408 (8.92%/91.08%)
North-West	Sălaj, Satu Mare, Bihor. Cluj, Maramureș, Bistrița-Năsăud	446	43/403 (9.64%/90.36%)
Center	Alba, Covasna, Harghita, Brașov, Sibiu, Mureș	414	57/357 (13.76%/86.24%)
South-East	Tulcea, Brăila, Galați, Constanța, Buzău, Vrancea	390	35/355 (8.97%/91.03%)
West	Caraș-Severin, Timiș, Hunedoara, Arad	323	42/281 (13%/87%)
Bucharest-Ilfov	București, Ilfov	46	14/32 (30.43%/69.57%)

Source: Rectification regarding Law No. 315/2004 of 7 July 2004, (Institutul National de Statistica n.d.).

The data were processed manually in *Microsoft Office Excel* as the variation in name spelling, the use of the father's initial surname in some cases and not in others, and accent use did not allow accurate results in other programs.

By analyzing the data, we observed the percentage of female mayors, the re-nomination of incumbents, the degree of re-election, and the success rate of male and female incumbents who chose to run for another term.

First, we calculated the female representation in each election as follows:

$$Female\ representation = (F * 100)/T\ ,$$

where

F—female candidates;
T—total candidates.

Second, we analyzed and compared the mayors and candidates from two successive terms: 2008 with 2012, 2012 with 2016, and 2016 with 2020. This analysis resulted in two categories of classes and two subcategories: (R) re-elected incumbents; (N) not re-elected incumbents, including (Na) incumbents who ran for re-election but were not successful and (Nb) incumbents did not run for another term. To determine the proportion of incumbents who chose to run for re-election, we used the following formula:

$$Proportion\ of\ incumbents\ who\ chose\ to\ run\ for\ re-election = (R + Na)/T,$$

where

R—re-elected incumbents;
Na—incumbents who ran for re-election but were not re-elected;
T—total number administrative units (3186).

We also calculated two key metrics to assess the electoral performance of incumbents: the success rate and the degree of re-election. The success rate of incumbents was calculated by dividing the number of re-elected incumbents by the total number of incumbents who ran for re-election, which is the sum of re-elected incumbents and incumbents who ran but were not re-elected:

$$The\ success\ rate\ of\ incumbents = (R * 100)/\ (R + Na),$$

where

R—re-elected incumbents;
Na—incumbents who ran for re-election but were not re-elected.

$$The\ degree\ of\ re-election = (R * 100)/T$$

where

R—re-elected incumbents;
Na—incumbents who ran for re-election but were not re-elected;
T—total number administrative units (3186).

Third, we calculated the success rates of male and female incumbents separately. The success rate of female incumbents was calculated as follows:

$$The\ success\ rate\ of\ female\ incumbents = (RF * 100)/TFI,$$

where

RF—re-elected female mayors;
TFI—total number of incumbent female mayors.

Similarly, the success rate of male incumbents (SRMI) was calculated as follows:

$$The\ success\ rate\ of\ male\ incumbents = (RM * 100)/TMI,$$

where

RM—re-elected male mayors;
TMI—total number of incumbent male mayors.

We utilized the data from the studied period for the two categories, (1) re-elected mayors and (2) not re-elected mayors, to generate a cartogram using the open-source Philcarto software V.2020.f (Montpellier, France). This cartogram represented the typologies of re-election for the 2008–2012, 2012–2016, and 2016–2020 elections. The Hierarchical Ascendant Classification highlights the unique features of each class resulted from the representation of the two variables for the studied period.

4. Results

4.1. How Big Is the Incumbent's Advantage? The Re-Election of Mayors in Romania

Every four years in Romania, incumbent mayors have the opportunity to run for re-election and be re-elected by citizens through a free, equal, secret, and direct voting in a one-round system without any term limitation. Once elected, the mayor is employed full-time; there is evidence from Germany that the incumbency advantage is greater for towns with full-time mayor positions, as they spend more time on the job and have more interactions with constituents (Freier 2015).

In the 2012 local elections, 92% of the incumbent mayors ran for another term, while in 2016 and 2020, 86.12 and 86.94% of incumbents ran for re-election (Table 2). Most of the incumbents who ran for re-election were successful as follows: 76.92% in 2012, 83.60% in 2016, and 82.81% in 2020. This translates to a re-election rate of 70.84 in 2012, 72.00% in 2016, and 72% 2020 for the 3186 administrative units in which the incumbent mayor retained their position. These re-election rates place Romania in close proximity to Slovakia (72% in 2010) and Slovenia (82.4% in 2010), where the mayors are also directly elected. Therefore, the incumbent advantage is confirmed in the Romanian local elections.

Table 2. The incumbent candidates and their re-election as mayor in Romania in 2012, 2016, and 2020.

Year	No. of Administrative Units	No. of Candidates	Incumbents That Ran for Another Term	Incumbents That Did Not Run For Another Term	Re-Elected Incumbents	Not Re-Elected
2012	3186	14,138	2934	248	2257	677
2016	3186	14,041	2744	442	2294	450
2020	3186	13,872	2744	416	2294	476

Source: Data processed by the authors using (BEC n.d.; ROAEP n.d.), Rezultate Vot data accessed on January 2024.

A possible explanation for the lower rate of success of the incumbent mayors from 2012 (76.92%), despite the high number of them running for another term, might be the fact that in these elections, the mayor was elected in two rounds, while the following elections used the first-past-the-post election system where a winning candidate might become mayor without majority support (Van der Kolk et al. 2004). Romania adopted the first-past-the-post electoral system for a local election in 2011 (Law No. 129/2011) under the pretext of the economic crisis. Prior to this, the election of mayors was conducted in a two-round system, which was considered too costly by the ruling party PDL (Democrat Liberal Party). There was great debate around the adopted law. On one hand, there were different perspectives of the representants of the parties; some of the PDL (Democrat Liberal Party)[1] representants considered the measure as a means to support the economy and argued that voting intent is accurately reflected in the first round, while PNL (National Liberal Party) contended that the law would represent a step away from democracy and democratic values. Meanwhile, PSD (Social Democrat Party) asserted that the election of the mayor in a single round would be conducted with a fourth or maybe even less of the citizens with the right to vote (Chamber of Deputies, 30 May 2011). On the other hand, experts in the field and civil society underlined the effects of this law, and there were unsuccessful initiatives regarding the return to the election of mayors in a two-round system. Consequently, the new system enables voters to express their support for one of the candidates and although s/he does not have the majority of votes cast, s/he can win the position. As a result, the number of candidates for both genders decreased (Fedor et al. 2021), as did the number of parties in the elections, leading to an increase in electoral alliances. The existing literature shows that the first-past-the-post electoral system is very costly for female candidates and fails to elect more women (Shrestha and Mishra 2024), as it favors incumbents. Research from South Africa—for the national elections—suggests that when the first-past-the-post system was used, there was a vivid underrepresentation of small political parties, women, and minorities (Britton 2008; Johnson-Myers 2016).

Furthermore, there is evidence that the more times the incumbent is re-elected, the stronger the incumbency advantage becomes (Sloboda 2014). In Romania, incumbents frequently run for re-election and, as the data show, in 1075 out of 3186 administrative units, the mayor was re-elected in all of the studied elections. Consequently, 32.71% of the Romanian localities continued to have the same administrative leader for (at least) 16 years[2]. Additionally, within the 1075 administrative units, the electoral data show that the rate of re-election is higher in rural areas with 34.95% of communes that continued with the incumbents in comparison with 25.8% re-elected mayors in cities and 17.64% in municipalities.

Overall, for the studied period of 16 years, covering four local elections, eight distinct classes were identified in relation to the two categories of (1) re-elected mayors and (2) not re-elected mayors. These classes are as follows: (1) administrative units where the mayor served for four consecutive terms, represented with red on the map—1075 units; (2) administrative units where the mayor served for three consecutive terms, represented in navy blue—506 units; (3) administrative units where the incumbent mayor was re-elected in 2008–2012, not re-elected and changed in 2012–2016, and re-elected in 2016–2020 represented with lime on the map; (4) administrative units where the incumbent mayor was

re-elected in 2008–2012, but not re-elected in 2012–2016 and 2016–2020, represented with yellow on the map—149 units; (5) administrative units where the incumbent mayor was not re-elected in 2008–2012, but the new mayor was re-elected in 2012–2016 and 2016–2020, faded pink on the map—533; (6) administrative units where the mayor was not re-elected in 2008–2012, but the changed mayor was re-elected in 2012–2016 and not re-elected in 2016–2020, represented with blue sky; (7) administrative units where the incumbent mayor was not re-elected in 2008–2012 and 2012–2016, but the changed mayor was re-elected in 2016–2020, represented in spring green on the map—155 administrative units and, (8) administrative units where there were no consecutive terms of the same mayor represented in light cyan (Figure 1).

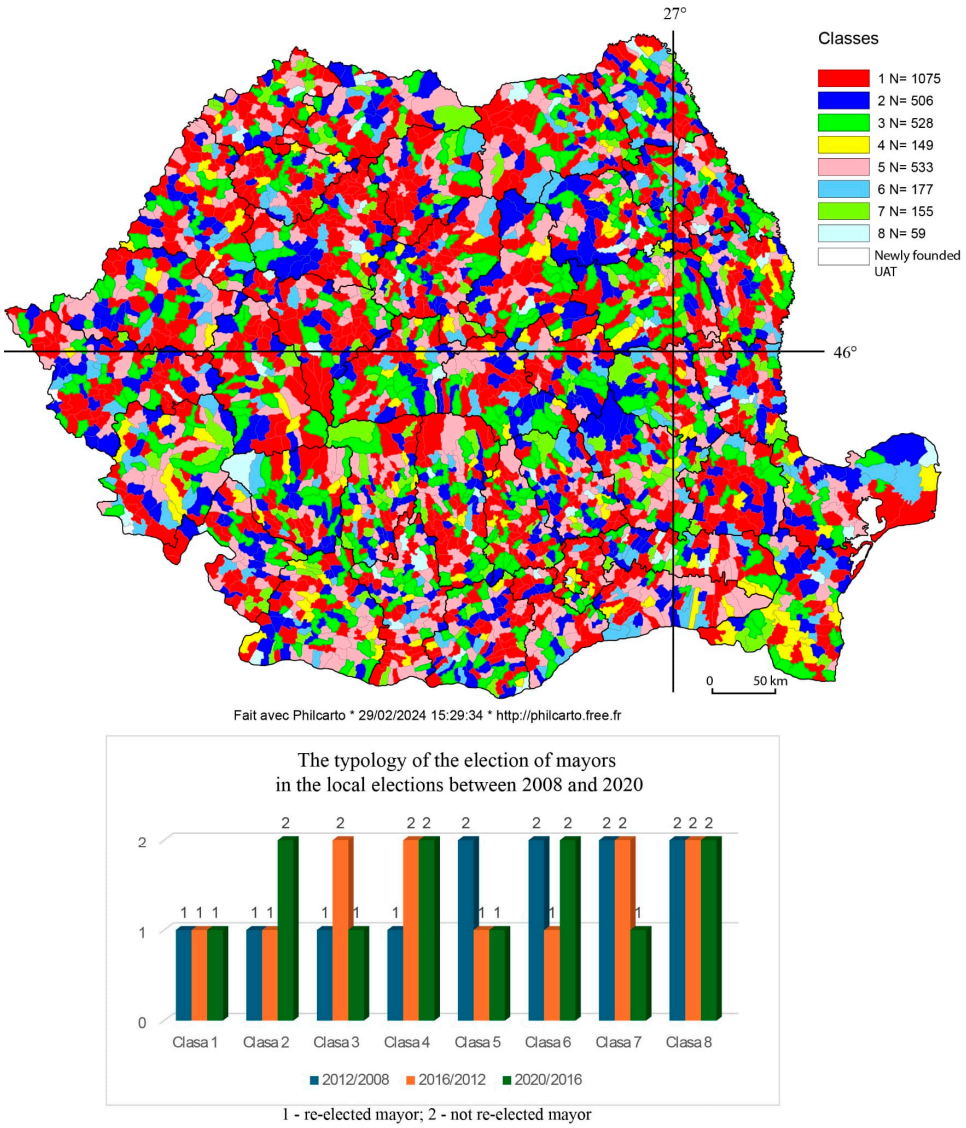


Figure 1. The typology of the election of mayors in Romania between 2008 and 2020: the eight classes. Source: (BEC n.d.; ROAEP n.d.), Rezultate Vot, processed data by the authors accessed on 10 January 2024 (made with Philcarto, http://philcarto.free.fr). * authomatically inserted by the Philcarto.

At the NUT2 level, it could be observed that the region with the highest success rate of incumbents was the center region which is characterized by the significant Hungarian minority presence. In two counties within the region, the minority constitutes the majority and is represented by the UDMR, a party which proves to be conservative. In the mentioned region, 90% of the incumbents chose to run for another term and 84,45% of them were successful. In 2016, even if the north-west region had the highest percentage of incumbents

who chose to re-run (87.67%), the center region occupied again the first place regarding the success rate of incumbents: out of 83.09% incumbents that ran for re-election, 87.5% were re-elected. In 2020, two regions had the highest rates of incumbent re-election: the north-west region with 84.89% and the center region with 84.55%. At the county level, in 2012, the lowest percentage of incumbents that re-ran for election was 84.62%—Botoșani—and there was one county—Brăila—with 100%. In 2016, it decreased, registering a minimum of 75.32% in Caraș-Severin and a maximum of 94.55% in Călărași; while in 2020, Tulcea was the county with the lowest percentage of incumbents that chose to enter the electoral race again of 72.55%; while the highest was Maramureș—96.05%.

4.2. Can the Number of Candidates Influence Re-Elections?

Counting the number of 'real' candidates in elections is complicated, as there are many candidates, but they only win a small share of votes and have no realistic chance of winning the election (Niemi and Hsieh 2002). However, if it is to present the numerical data in Romania at the national level, the average number of candidates is around four in the rural areas and six in the urban areas (Table 3).

Table 3. Candidates in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 local election in rural and urban areas.

Year	No. of Administrative Units	Rural/Urban Classification	No. of Administrative Units	No. of Candidates	Avg. Number of Candidates at National Level
2012	3186	Urban	325	2032	6.25
		Rural	2861	12,106	4.23
2016	3186	Urban	325	1984	6.1
		Rural	2861	12,057	4.21
2020	3186	Urban	325	2123	6.53
		Rural	2861	11,659	4.07

Source: Processed by the authors using (BEC n.d.; ROAEP n.d.), Rezultate Vot data accessed on January 2024.

Yet, in the counties in which the Hungarian minority is the majority, the average number of candidates, comprising both rural and urban areas, is less than three, with many rural administrative units having only one candidate running for office. For instance, in 2012, there were 46 administrative units which had only 1 candidate; in 2016, 82 administrative units had 1 candidate, of which 54 were candidates from the Hungarian minority party; while in 2020, 75 administrative units had only 1 candidate. This high number of candidates does not prevent the re-election of incumbents as their positions are very strong, and once mayors manage to establish themselves in town halls, it is quite difficult for challengers to dislodge them (Morales and Belmar 2022). For instance, apart from the capital, Gorj County has the highest average of candidates: 6,04 in 2012, and 6,99 in 2016 and 2020, yet the percentage of incumbents that ran for re-election was 91.43% in 2012, 85.71% in 2016, and 92.86% in 2020, and their success rate was higher than 70%, which shows again that a high number of candidates does not necessarily contribute to the replacement of the incumbent mayor.

In addition, particular attention was paid to the administrative units where the incumbent mayor did not run for another term to observe if the number of candidates increased. However, after analyzing the data a strong link could not be identified, and even if the number increased, their realistic chances of winning the elections are also low because there are cases in which the previous mayor proposes a specific candidate to the party, sometimes even a relative. The mayors of communes/small cities lead the party's local branches and control the membership. They do not necessarily encourage internal competition, and they may take actions to ensure their control. When comparing the 2008–2012 election cycle to observe the new winners (of the seats for which the incumbents did not run), it could

be observed that there are cases in which the newly elected mayor has the same surname as the previous one. In some cases, there was clear evidence in the media that they were relatives: father–son, husband–wife. The titles are suggestive: "following father's footsteps" or "dynasty at the town hall in a commune" (Adevărul 2011; Tomita 2012; Departamentul Social Mediafax 2013; Boța 2013; 7 Est 2015; Felseghi 2016; Adevărul 2016; Ionescu 2017; Marian 2020; Jurnalul De Arges 2021). One of the female mayors declared in an article, "To some extent, it is a family heirloom. My father-in-law was mayor for almost 18 years, during Ceaușescu's time, then my mother-in-law from 2004 to 2012, then, until last year, it was my husband, who was dismissed by order of the prefect, because he had hired my mother-in-law as a councilor to the mayor. While this was allowed at the time, it was later deemed a conflict of interest. Then, in order not to give in, more to the insistence of the residents. . ." (Felseghi 2016).

4.3. To What Extent Are Incumbent Female Mayors Re-Elected in Compared to Their Male Counterparts?

Can a high rate of re-election of incumbents affect female access to the local government? There is a link, as highly advantaged incumbents are more likely to win the election, allowing fewer seats for newcomers/non-incumbents. Incumbency effects are usually seen as an additional impediment to female political representation (Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa 2014; Luhiste 2015), as incumbents are mainly males and are more likely to be re-elected (De Paola et al. 2010). Before analyzing the degree of re-election, it is essential to observe the number of candidacies and the male–female distribution of mayoral seats. In the studied elections, female candidates represented 6.9% in 2012, 8.41% in 2016, and 9.73% in 2020 of the totals of candidacies, placing the country below the "critical mass" threshold even at the candidacy level. During the study period, none of the counties exceeded 20% and there were numerous administrative units that did not have any female candidate: 2350 in 2012, 2230 in 2016, and 2124 in 2020.

In 2012, 705 administrative units had one female candidate, 121 had two female candidates, 9 had three female candidates, and 1 had four. In 2016, 763 had one female candidate, 158 had two female candidates, 28 had three female candidates, and 3 administrative units had four female candidates. In 2020, the number of administrative units with one female candidate increased to 820, 192 had two female candidates, 44 had three female candidates, 5 administrative units had four candidates, and 1 sector of the capital had ten female candidates out of a total of twenty. Additionally, out of the 75 administrative units that had only one candidate, only two were female. Although most political parties do not have a set of formal requirements that a candidate needs to meet (Luhiste 2015), they will seek to select a candidate that will maximize the chance of success (Gallagher and Marsh 1988), thereby preferring the political seniority of the incumbent mayors over a new candidate. As a result, the biggest problem is that women do not have the opportunity to be nominated, as seats are already occupied. The national legislation does not regulate this, and parties, in the absence of quota regulations, fail to propose female candidates. In addition, the predominant male presence within the parties' gatekeepers at the national or local level can both discourage women's participation (Sundström and Wängnerud 2016) and lead to the selection of fewer women as viable candidates, as they undermine women (Sanbonmatsu 2002). Consequently, the lack of quotas together with a one-round system and no limitation of terms make it impossible for women to be nominated. Of course, the socio-cultural background also plays a decisive role: after 1989, Romanian citizens proved to be in a continuous transition, with little preoccupation for civil and political life, and women are no exception. Their lack of involvement in local politics, even as active and vocal citizens, doubled by the mentality (theirs and that of voters) that it is a male job, the division of housework, religion, and even the sometimes-violent electoral campaigns make it even more difficult for females to access political positions.

Under these circumstances, the percentage of female mayors slowly increased from 3.7% in 2012 to 5.3% in 2020, showing an over-representation of male mayors. In the 2012

local elections at the national level, 118 women (3.70%) and 3068 men (96.29%) won the mayor's office from a total of 3186 territorial administrative units. The lowest representation was recorded in the center region with 11 female mayors from a total of 414 administrative units (representing 2.66% at the regional level), while the south-east region registered the highest representation with 18 female mayors elected from a total of 390 administrative units (representing 4.62% at the regional level). Several counties had a 100% male representation (Bucharest, Bistrița-Năsăud, Covasna, Olt, Brașov, Mehedinți, Harghita), namely a total of 416 administrative units (representing 13.06% nationally).

In the 2016 local elections at the national level, 144 women (4.51%) and 3042 men (95.48%) won the mayor's office from a total of 3186 territorial administrative units. The lowest representation was recorded in the center region, with 13 female mayors from a total of 414 administrative units (representing 3.14% at the regional level), while the north-east region recorded the percentage with the highest representation—36 women mayors were elected from a total of 552 administrative units (representing 6.52% at the regional level). Several counties had a 100% male representation (Bucharest, Bistrita-Năsăud, Brasov, Harghita, Buzău, Timiș), totaling 379 administrative units (representing 11.9% nationally).

In 2020, 169 women (5.3%) and 3017 men (94.69%) won the mayor's office from a total of 3186 territorial administrative units. The lowest representation was recorded in the south-west development region with 17 female mayors from a total of 448 administrative units (representing 3.79% at the regional level), while the north-east development region recorded the percentage with the highest representation, with 36 women mayors elected from a total of 552 administrative units (representing 6.52% at the regional level). This was closely followed by the western development region with a percentage of 6.5% at the regional level with a number of 21 female mayors elected from a total of 323 administrative units. The only county that had a 100% male representation was Bistrița-Năsăud County (62 administrative units).

Although only 169 women won the mayoral position following the 2020 elections, 104 of them were incumbents. Out of a total of 145 female mayors in 2016, 21 did not run for another term, while 124 ran but 20 were not re-elected. In the latter case, in 12 administrative units out of 20 that changed the mayor, the number of candidates was higher than the county average while in eight lower than the county average. Regarding the 104 administrative units that re-elected the female incumbent mayor must be mentioned that in 63 of them the average number of candidates was lower than the county average and in 41 higher than the county average. Thus, in 61% of the cases the female incumbent mayors were seen as strong and there were few challengers.

When it comes to re-election, one can observe that the success rates of incumbents both male and female are over 70%, with a notable difference in 2012 in female disadvantage, but very similar in 2016 and with a slight advantage in 2020 (Table 4). Thus, just as in Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa's findings (2014), it is demonstrated that female incumbents are just as likely to be renominated as their male counterparts. Moreover, it is proved that once female mayors are proposed and elected, their re-election is as probable as that of their male counterparts. Black and Erickson (2003) find that women might even have a slight advantage over their male colleagues at renomination that was somewhat confirmed in the 2020 elections.

Given the data, in Romania, the incumbent advantage is confirmed by the female incumbents as well (Figure 2). Moreover, some of them succeeded, as did their male counterparts, in spending a long time in office, as out of the 1075 administrative units that had re-elected the same mayor for four consecutive terms, 1037 were males and 38 females.

Table 4. Male and female incumbents and their success rate in being re-elected.

Year	Incumbents That Ran for Another Term	Gender	Number	Re-Elected Incumbents	Gender	Number	Success Rate %
2012	2934	male	2831	2257	male	2183	77.11%
		female	103		female	74	71.84%
2016	2744	male	2637	2294	male	2206	83.66%
		female	107		female	88	82.26%
2020	2770	male	2647	2294	male	2191	82.77%
		female	123		female	103	83.73%

Source: Processed by the authors using (BEC n.d.; ROAEP n.d.), Rezultate Vot data.

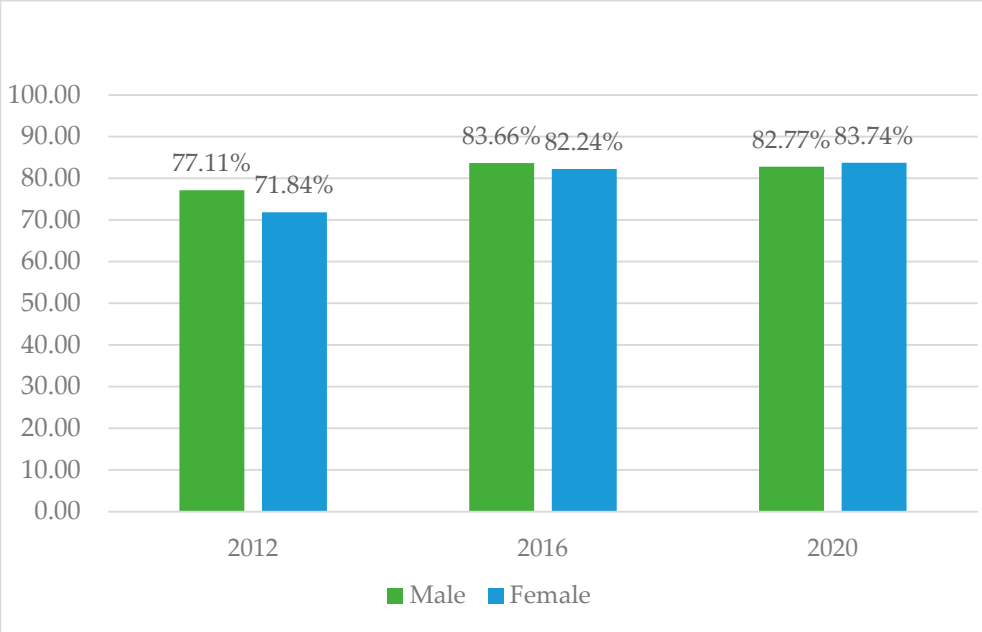


Figure 2. The success rate (%) of male and female incumbents for 2012, 2016, and 2020 elections. Source: Processed by the authors using (BEC n.d.; ROAEP n.d.), Rezultate Vot data.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

The present research makes an in-depth analysis of the re-election of mayors in Romania, given that this topic is not covered in the specialized literature. Romania can be considered a special case with a history of about 50 years of communism (1947–1989), a period leaving traces still visible at the level of society even today.

After analyzing the electoral data for three elections in 3186 administrative units in Romania, an overwhelming domination of male candidates and mayors over their female counterparts was observed. For all the studied elections (2012, 2016, and 2020), the percentage of male candidates exceeded 90% as follows: 93.1% in 2012, 91.59% in 2016, and 90.27% in 2020. As mayors, only 1 out of 20 is a woman, which is very few in comparison to the European level. For instance, in Slovakia, 1 out of 10 mayors was a woman (Sloboda 2014).

The nomination of female candidates by a party does not necessarily ensure the election of that candidate, so the phenomenon of the election of women to the position of mayor is difficult to control. Only an increase in the number of female candidates could ultimately lead to their election. The problem remains the will of the parties to nominate as many female candidates as possible. Obviously, female candidates must also be more visible in terms of imposing themselves as candidates. Women's organizations should be

more vocal and constitute credible alternatives to male candidates. It depends not only on the availability of the parties but also on the availability of women to represent themselves as candidates. Although it seems a bit forced, the political strategy of imposing a minimum threshold of women's presence might have effects in the first phase in the context of a situation in which women seem to more and more frequently assume a different role in society than the traditional one. These mutations at the socio-economic level for women can lead to their greater political involvement and a rebalancing of the political scene, currently dominated categorically by men.

However, the success of these efforts also depends significantly on the behavior of the electorate, which still maintains certain patriarchal mentalities regarding female politicians. In other words, it is not enough for the parties to have the will to impose as many women as possible on the political chessboard, but the electorate must also transform and perceive the woman politician through a modern point of view in which she assumes responsibilities at the political level as well as at the economic level, overcoming the conservative framework specific to the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century.

Moreover, this under-representation of female mayors leaves little room for improvement, as the degree of re-election of (predominantly male) incumbents is higher than 70% for all the studied elections and with no limitation of terms mayors can stay in office until retirement. In a system in which incumbency is so powerful, it is difficult to increase minority representation (McGregor et al. 2017). The incumbency effect in the Romanian administrative units reaches the level Sloboda and Kukovic and Lazauskienė described in Slovakia and Lithuania. Also, an important role within the high success rate of incumbents may be the first-past-the-post system, which encourages re-election. Hence, further research on the topic of the previous elections (1996, 2000, 2004, 2008), when a two-round system was used, is required in order to understand the extent to which first-past-the-post changed or did not change the patterns.

Thus, the present study succeeded in bringing arguments for an affirmative answer to the question: *Can the incumbency advantage for the male legislators become a disadvantage for their female counterparts*, while also strengthening previous findings that proved that high incumbency affects women's inclusion in politics (De Paola et al. 2010; Shair-Rosenfield and Hinojosa 2014; Luhiste 2015).

These findings succeeded in providing an overview of the Romanian situation regarding a subject that has not been studied previously in this country. It will fill the gap and contribute, together with studies from Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Portugal, to a better understanding of the European context.

Important events such as Romania's accession to the EU (2007) have had a significant impact on the phenomenon of local elections. In particular, the infusion of EU-financed projects was an important boost in this regard for those who knew how to attract European projects. Although it was not the subject of our analysis in this article, the political affiliation of the mayors played an important role as well. The phenomenon of political migration towards the ruling party (or parties) is so prevalent in Romania that it requires a separate approach.

Even if there are major differences regarding the descriptive representation between the two genders numerically, in what concerns the degree of re-election of mayors, there were not observed significant differences. This allows us to draw the conclusion that gender is not the decisive factor in the re-election of mayors. Instead, other factors play an important role such as the advantage of being in office, making decisions as mayor to appeal to the electorate for re-election, ensuring appropriate visibility compared to other potential candidates, and forming profitable alliances.

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Notes

[1] In 2014, the Democrat Liberal Party merged with the National Liberal Party to form the entity known as the National Liberal Party.

[2] There is a limitation, as the research is conducted only for the 2008–2020 elections and there is the possibility that the incumbents spent other years in office before 2008.

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