

RADU CINPOEȘ

## The Dilemmas of Political (Mis-)Representation: Political “Cruising” in Romania

**Abstract.** This article analyses the widespread phenomenon of party switching, labelled “political cruising” in Romania, that characterises that state’s electoral politics. First, it considers party switching to be a dimension of fragmentation (alongside fusions and divisions within the parties themselves), which helps more accurately gauge the level of party system institutionalisation in a given case. Second, it looks at why individuals change parties and why parties accommodate and embrace such switching to explain why the phenomenon has reached endemic levels in Romania. Finally, the author suggests that the pervasive political “cruising” driven by clientelism in Romania has resulted in a lack of public trust in political institutions and a decrease in electoral turnout.

**Radu Cinpoeș** is Senior Lecturer in Politics, Human Rights and International Relations at Kingston University, London.

### Introduction

Representative democracies aggregate diverse public interests and preferences and cater to them. Stable democratic systems facilitate effective political choice by providing viable, coherent programmes and a range of policy alternatives and by ensuring unimpeded links between voters and their political representatives. These achievements, in turn, enhance public political engagement and electoral participation.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that the conditions of post-communism in Central and Eastern Europe have affected the emergence and consolidation of institutional frameworks that could effectively organise what Peter Mair calls the political marketplace. These countries’ fragmented party systems and

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. DAHL, *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*. New Haven/CT 1971; Russell J. DALTON, *Political Parties and Political Representation. Party Supporters and Party Elites in Nine Nations*, *Comparative Political Studies* 18 (1985), no. 3, 267-299; IDEM / Martin WATTENBERG, *Parties without Partisans*. Oxford 2000; Arend LIJPHART, *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven/CT 1999.

weak links between parties and their potential constituencies have generated an unstable “supply” for such a marketplace.<sup>2</sup>

Joining the growing research on party system institutionalisation in Central and Eastern Europe and its effects on representation and electoral participation, this article focuses on party switching, viewing it as a practice that hampers the development of competitive political parties that would offer the electorate clear choices in the service of the public interest. It takes a staggered process-tracing approach to contribute to a better understanding of Romanian party politics. The case study allows for an intensive examination of party switching, based largely on analysis of official documents and data, secondary data from existing research, and media reports. Its longitudinal data analysis identifies specific trends in patterns of switching and electoral participation. Romania’s case offers an interesting picture: widespread party switching both within and outside parliamentary politics has important consequences on central aspects of the democratic process, especially the links between voters and parties. The main focus here is on floor-crossing in the Parliament, because this practice points to the instability and fragmentation of the party system and directly influences electoral competition and voter participation.

Thus the article aims, first, to make an analytical contribution by showing that party switching reflects the deeper nature of Romanian politics today. Although some degree of stability has been achieved, Romania’s party system is still highly unpredictable and prone to fragmentation. This article argues that party switching is an important dimension of the broader instability affecting political parties (which routinely splinter and merge), a sign of the fragmentation and lack of institutionalisation among individual parties and throughout the party system in Romania.

Second, it discusses the frequency of the practice in relation to clientelism and the distribution of public resources. The aim here is to explain why Romanian parties accommodate defectors and thus perpetuate a vicious circle of inter-party movement. Politicians and political parties not only tolerate but actively encourage party switching, and thus it has become regrettably pervasive.

Finally, the consequences of party switching are discussed in relation to representation and participation, showing that this characteristic of non-institutionalisation results in voter alienation (rather than volatility),<sup>3</sup> manifested

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<sup>2</sup> Peter MAIR, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*. Oxford 1997; Geoffrey EVANS / Stephen WHITEFIELD, *Identifying the Bases of Party Competition in Eastern Europe*, *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (1993), no. 4, 521-548; Jack BIELASIAK, *Substance and Process in the Development of Party Systems in East Central Europe*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30 (1991), no. 1, 23-44.

<sup>3</sup> As Gherghina and Chiru argue, the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, PSD), for example, has achieved a reasonably low level of electoral volatility, at least from 2000 onwards, and it can consistently count on around 35 percent of the votes. See Sergiu

through decreased participation in electoral politics. While the effects of party switching on accountability are common areas of investigation in the literature, the link to electoral participation has not been explored in the case of Romania, where the phenomenon is rampant.

### Conceptual Clarifications

Research on democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe has focused on electoral politics and, within this field, on party system dynamics in the cases investigated; the level of democratisation has been assessed according to patterns evident in the institutionalisation of party systems, the level of stability and regularity of party competition and the electoral process, the level of voter volatility, and the links between parties and voters.<sup>4</sup> Based on such analyses, scholars have claimed that Central and Eastern European countries have evolved – especially in the last fifteen years – towards greater stability and a higher degree of institutionalisation of party systems, with Hungary and the Czech Republic appearing to be among the least volatile of those nations.<sup>5</sup> Romania occupies a middle rank for democratisation and institutionalisation: after a shaky start, it recently developed a relatively stable party system.<sup>6</sup> To some extent, this assessment appears to be borne out when looking at its party system and state of electoral competition.

Democratisation, however, is not a linear process that enables a country to move gradually from being less democratic to more democratic, and it is not unidirectional. In fact, to make a distinction between “stable” and “unstable” countries is to oversimplify the picture. When it comes to stability and institutionalisation, as noted by Grotz and Weber, states often follow “idiosyncratic paths”: some countries held up as exemplars for democratisation because of

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GHERGHINA / Mihail CHIRU, Taking the Short Route. Political Parties, Funding Regulations, and State Resources in Romania, *East European Politics and Societies* 27 (2013), no. 1, 108-128, 110. However, as will be shown, the decrease in electoral participation also means a net decrease in PSD voters.

<sup>4</sup> See MAIR, Party System Change; Scott P. MAINWARING, Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave of Democratization. The Case of Brazil. Stanford/CA 1999; Sarah BIRCH, Electoral Systems and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe. One Europe or Several? Basingstoke 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Margit TAVITS, On the Linkage between Electoral Volatility and Party System Instability in Central and Eastern Europe, *European Journal of Political Science* 47 (2008), no. 5, 537-555; Florian GROTZ / Till WEBER, Party Systems and Government Stability in Central and Eastern Europe, *World Politics* 64 (2012), no. 4, 699-740.

<sup>6</sup> See George JIGLĂU / Sergiu GHERGHINA, The Ideological Institutionalization of the Romanian Party System, *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 11 (2011), no. 1, 71-90, which counts among the features of this stabilisation the establishment of clearer ideological cleavages in Romanian politics.

relatively speedy movement towards stable and institutionalised party systems have then regressed in those areas. Telling examples include Latvia – considered to be stable, though in the 2006-2010 term it went through four different cabinets – and Poland – considered to be less stable, though there were no changes in its cabinet between 2006 and 2011.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Romania seems partly institutionalised at best, as it shows fluctuation in voter volatility and in the ideological coherence of both its parties and its voters.<sup>8</sup> The identification of progress in party institutionalisation, therefore, tells only part of the story: contingent factors and dynamics that can influence (positively or negatively) such developments must also be explored.

Investigating party switching can be revealing when evaluating the stability of political systems of any country. In addition, what happens below the level of party system and electoral competition is (at the very least) equally relevant, inasmuch as it can bring to light other factors that shape the political process. Party switching, therefore, is considered here as an important (micro-level) phenomenon that accounts for the instability and fragmentation of Romania's party system, complementing macro-level phenomena such as splits and mergers among parties, as well as the emergence of new parties and the extinction of others.<sup>9</sup>

The relatively limited but growing literature on party switching suggests increasing research interest in this phenomenon. The concept itself is straightforward, with little disagreement in the existing research about what it entails: broadly speaking, it refers to "any recorded change in party affiliation on the part of a politician holding or competing for elective office".<sup>10</sup> Analyses of party switching generally look at MPs who change party allegiance, likely because these shifts on the level of parliamentary politics are more visible and exert a more direct impact on elections. However, party switching by those other than MPs or would-be MPs is also relevant, and this study considers it as part of the broader phenomenon, including in its discussion group movements from one party to another that may affect the number of parties competing in elections. Processes of fusion – where the number of parties decreases because two or more groups consolidate into a single organisation – and of fission – where splits into factions increase the number of parties – influence the level of insti-

<sup>7</sup> GROTZ / WEBER, *Party Systems and Government Stability*, 699.

<sup>8</sup> Clara VOLINTIRU, *The Institutionalisation of the Romanian Party System*, *Sfera Politicii* 172 (2012), no. 6, 134-143, available at <<http://www.sferapoliticii.ro/sfera/172/cuprins.php>>. All internet sources were accessed on 4 March 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus KREUZER / Vello PETTAL, *Party Switching, Party Systems, and Political Representation*, in: William B. HELLER / Carol MERSHON (eds.), *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. Basingstoke 2009, 265-286.

<sup>10</sup> Carol MERSHON / Olga SHVETSOVA, *Parliamentary Cycles and Party Switching in Legislatures*, *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (2008), no. 1, 99-127, 104.

tutionalisation in a political system.<sup>11</sup> They exercise a similar effect to that of party switching because they weaken the link between voters and parties, and lower trust in the political process.

“Party switching” is sufficiently self-explanatory and conceptually straightforward so as not to require amendment. But it is important to point out that the widespread phenomenon of party switching has been dubbed *traseism politic* (political cruising) in colloquial Romanian<sup>12</sup> – a coinage with negative sexual connotations, emphasizing the immorality of the practice.<sup>13</sup>

Looking beyond the concept, several trends can be observed in the literature. First, party switching is a phenomenon with rather limited relevance for European politics. It is broadly associated with politics in relatively young democracies, and research shows it to be more prevalent in places such as Brazil, India, and parts of Africa. Not that it does not occur in Europe: the research has highlighted it happening in Italy and, more recently, Poland.<sup>14</sup>

A second trend relates to explanations of the movement of individuals from one party to another. McMenamin and Gwiazda accurately observe that reasons for switching can be circumscribed within Strøm’s three avenues to institutionalisation, a model that distinguishes vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking parties.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the first category, defectors act on electoral incentives, either those that enhance their re-election prospects or allow them to avoid accountability. The office-seeking category covers switching by politicians who eye a favourable distribution of office positions or – as Desposato notes,

<sup>11</sup> Diana Z. O’BRIEN / Yael SHOMER, A Cross-National Analysis of Party Switching, *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 38 (2013), no. 1, 111-141, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Radu CINPOEȘ, Extremism in Disguise. Casual Intolerance and Political Cruising in Romania, *Holocaust. Study and Research / Studii și Cercetări* 6 (2013), 228-251.

<sup>13</sup> In Romanian, the term *traseistă* refers to prostitutes soliciting sex by the side of the road. It is common for lorry drivers to pick them up and drive on, to the nearest service station or lay-by. Although not having precisely the same connotations, the English slang word *cruising* nevertheless captures something similar: travelling for the purpose of engaging in sexual activities that suggest, at least for those who disapprove of them, loose morals. Both terms describe temporary encounters made out of convenience and for personal gain – though only the Romanian term makes it explicit that money changes hands. Romania is not unique in developing a local phrase for party switching: in New Zealand, the term *waka-jumping* is used colloquially to refer to politicians “jumping ship”.

<sup>14</sup> William B. HELLER / Carol MERSHON, Dealing in Discipline. Party Switching and Legislative Voting in the Italian Chamber of Deputies: 1988-2000, *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008), no. 4, 910-925; EADEM, Introduction, in: EADEM (eds.), *Political Parties and Legislative Party Switching*. Basingstoke 2009, 3-28, 4; Iain McMENAMIN / Anna GWIAZDA, Three Roads to Institutionalisation. Vote-, Office- and Policy-seeking Explanations of Party Switching in Poland, *European Journal of Political Research* 50 (2011), 838-866; Daniel J. YOUNG, An Initial Look into Party Switching in Africa. Evidence from Malawi, *Party Politics* 20 (2014), no. 1, 105-115.

<sup>15</sup> Kaare STRØM, A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties, *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (1990), no. 2, 565-598; McMENAMIN / GWIAZDA, Three Roads to Institutionalisation, 841.

writing of Brazil – the means to allocate “pork”. Finally, those politicians whose defections are motivated by policy aim either to obtain greater control in policy making, which may otherwise be hindered by fuzzy party labels, or to minimise ideological heterogeneity.<sup>16</sup> These categories have the virtue of being analytically distinct, but the actual motivations for switching are more ambiguous and do not always fit neatly into one of these rationales. In Romania’s case, however, research shows that party switching has largely been a means to secure access to the distribution of public funds.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, switching to avoid being held accountable by the electorate does not seem to be a significant motivation for Romanian politicians, especially since floor-crossing in Parliament happens throughout each term (rather than right before the end), and often occurs very soon after elections (as opposition party members switch to the ruling party), as will be shown.

Finally, the literature discusses political parties’ relation to party switching largely as a way to identify the interplay between a party and its potential defectors; that is, it looks at the conditions that would put a party at a higher or lower risk of defections, that would allow it to command greater or lesser loyalty from its members. In the last few years, there has emerged particularly relevant research on party switching concentrating on Romania. Work by Ștefan et al., for example, focuses on party discipline and points out that floor-crossing is facilitated by underlying issues with political parties and a lack of programmatic enforcement of discipline.<sup>18</sup> Complementary research by Gherghina looks at the mutual benefits (for defectors and the parliamentary party groups that receive them) of party switching, exploring the conditions in which parties are willing to accept defections.<sup>19</sup> The present study adds to the debate about why political parties benefit from and encourage defections by looking at clientelistic

<sup>16</sup> McMENAMIN / GWIAZDA, Three Roads to Institutionalisation, 841f.; Scott W. DESPOSATO, Parties for Rent? Ambition, Ideology and Party Switching in Brazil’s Chamber of Deputies, *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006), no. 1, 62-80, 70f.; Carol MERSON, Legislative Party Switching and Executive Coalitions, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 9 (2009), no. 3, 391-414, 394.

<sup>17</sup> Alina MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, Romania. Outsmarting the EU’s Smart Power, in: Michael EMERSON / Richard YOUNGS (eds.) *Democracy’s Plight in the European Neighbourhood. Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties*. Brussels 2009, 41-48, 43f. See also information on corruption and party switching offered by the civil society-based project “Alianța pentru o Românie curată”, available at <<http://romaniacurata.ro/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Laurențiu ȘTEFAN / Sergiu GHERGHINA / Mihail CHIRU, We All Agree that We Disagree Too Much. Attitudes of Romanian MPs towards Party Discipline, *East European Politics* 28 (2012), no. 2, 180-192.

<sup>19</sup> Sergiu GHERGHINA, Rewarding the ‘Traitors’? Legislative Defection and Re-Election in Romania, *Party Politics*, published online before print (2014), available at <<http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/09/17/1354068814550434.abstract>>, 1-11. See also Michael LAVER / Kenneth BENOIT, The Evolution of Party Systems between Elections, *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (2003), no. 2, 215-233, for a broader discussion of some of these issues.

practices embedded in Romanian politics. Political clientelism is understood here primarily in relation to structurally embedded networks indicative of long-term interaction based on the preferential distribution of public employment and public funds. Electoral gains are often the goal of these transactions (examples of the short-term iterative and non-iterative exchanges distinguished by Volintiru, which are made with varying degrees of success).<sup>20</sup> In addition, the article looks at the effects of these interactions on voter confidence in the political process and consequently on participation.

## The Case of Romania

### *Assessing the Level of Party Fragmentation*

Because its party system dynamics are unpredictable, Romania is an interesting case in terms of its level of institutionalisation. It reinforces emphatically Grotz and Weber's claim mentioned earlier about the non-linear paths that states can take to democratisation and stability. Until recently, Romania followed a slow but steady route to a party system where the number of parliamentary parties that competed consistently and repeatedly in elections had gradually decreased.<sup>21</sup> At first glance, the outcome of the 2012 parliamentary elections seems aligned with this trend: only four political groups won seats in both the upper and lower chambers of Parliament. However, only two were discrete parties: the People's Party Dan Diaconescu (*Partidul Poporului – Dan Diaconescu*, PP-DD) and the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*, UDMR). The other two were large blocs comprising several parties. The Social Liberal Union (*Uniunea Social Liberală*, USL) bloc was formed of two alliances: the Centre Left Alliance (*Alianța de Centru Stânga*, ACS) and the Centre Right Alliance (*Alianța de Centru Dreapta*, ACD). On the other side, the Right Romania Alliance (*Alianța România Dreaptă*, ARD) brought together

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<sup>20</sup> Clara VOLINTIRU, Clientelism: Electoral Forms and Functions in the Romanian Case Study, *Romanian Journal of Political Sciences* 12 (2012), no. 1, 35-66. For a broader discussion of forms of clientelism in Romania, see also Alina MUNGIU-PIPPIDI, A Case Study in Political Clientelism. Romania's Policy-Making Mayhem, working paper, 3 October 2010, available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1686617>>; Clara VOLINTIRU, How Public Spending is Fuelling Electoral Strategies in Romania, *Südosteuropa* 61 (2013) no. 2, 268-289; Sergiu GHERGHINA, Going for a Safe Vote. Electoral Bribes in Post-Communist Romania, *Debatte. Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 21 (2013), no. 2-3, 143-164.

<sup>21</sup> As Jiglău and Gherghina argue, Romania moved from having sixteen parliamentary parties in 1990 to seven in 1992, six in 1996, five in 2004, and four in 2004 and 2008. JIGLĂU / GHERGHINA, The Ideological Institutionalization, 72. The authors consider the results for the second chamber, but even then it can be argued that technically the number of parliamentary parties in 2008 was five, given that the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*, PSD) and the Conservative Party (*Partidul Conservator*, PC) entered the elections in an alliance.

several parties. Combined, the two blocs encompassed seven parties, so that the total of parliamentary parties was nine.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, as of summer 2014 (in the same 2012-2016 term), due to various splits and realignments, the situation has become even more complicated and volatile. Now ten parties are represented in both houses.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly in this context, the electoral system change of 2008, which eliminated the party-list proportional representation system and adopted a mixed-member proportional system, has not produced significant changes in stability for the party system. In fact, in this regard Romania regressed in the elections of 2008 and fell back even further in 2012. At the moment the political arena is very much in flux, with attempts at realignments on the right side of the political spectrum.

The (in)stability of the political parties due to repeated splits and mergers needs to be considered, – though we can do so only in a perfunctory manner, due to the complexity of the party permutations since 1990. Many of the main parliamentary parties at the moment (setting aside their various alliances and coalitions) have undergone significant changes.

The current Social Democratic Party (PSD) is one of the two heirs of the National Salvation Front (FSN), the group that emerged in the aftermath of the 1989 events in Romania and was supposed to ensure the transition to free elections.<sup>24</sup> In 1992 the FSN split. The faction led by former president Ion Iliescu formed the Democratic National Salvation Front (FDSN), which became the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) in 1993, having absorbed the Romanian Socialist Democratic Party (PSDR), the Social Solidarity Party (PSS), and the Republican Party (PR). In 2001 the PSD was created out of the merger of the PDSR with the PSDR; it absorbed the Labour Socialist Party (PSM) and the Socialist Party of National Rebirth (PSRN), a splinter group that had left the Greater Romania Party (PRM) in 2003, and the National Initiative Party (PIN), formed by a splinter group from the Democratic Party (PD), in 2011. As for breakaway factions, a group led by Teodor Meleșcanu left the (then) PDSR to form the Alliance for Romania (APR) in 1997, and the current UNPR was formed in 2010 by MPs who left either the PSD or the National Liberal Party (PNL).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ACS included the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Union for the Progress of Romania (*Uniunea Națională pentru Progresul României*, UNPR), while the ACD included the National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*, PNL) and the Conservative Party (PC). The ARD comprised the Democratic Liberal Party (*Partidul Democrat-Liberal*, PDL), the Civic Force (*Forța Civică*, FC), and the Christian Democrat National Peasants' Party (*Partidul Național Țărănesc Creștin Democrat*, PNȚCD).

<sup>23</sup> These parties are: the PSD, the PNL, the PDL, the PP-DD, the UDMR, the PC, the UNPR, the FC, the PNȚCD, and the Green Party (*Partidul Verde*, PV).

<sup>24</sup> Despite huge criticism, the group subsequently organised itself as a political party and won in the 1990 elections.

<sup>25</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the UNPR, having partially emerged out of a split from the PSD, competed in the 2012 elections together with the PSD, as part of the Centre

The other faction of the FSN in the 1992 split carried on under the leadership of Petre Roman and changed the party's name to the Democratic Party the following year. It merged with the Liberal Democratic Party (PLD) – itself a breakaway PNL faction – and formed the PDL. In 2014, the PDL merged with the Civic Force (*Forța Civică*, FC), and in July 2014, the two parties announced a merger between the PDL and the PNL, which is still being finalized. The group will retain the name PNL.

Finally, the PNL has undergone many transformations over the years. Having been reconstituted after the collapse of communism, the party endured repeated splits and mergers in the early 1990s. In July 1990, a group broke away from the PNL to form the National Liberal Party-Youth Wing (*Partidul Național Liberal – Aripa Tânără*, PNL-AT). There followed in 1992 another splinter group, the National Liberal Party-Democratic Convention (PNL-CD), which itself broke apart after the 1992 election when a faction within it founded the National Liberal Party-Câmpeanu (PNL-C). In 1993, PNL-AT became the Liberal Party '93 (PL '93) and later formed – with the Civic Alliance Party (PAC) – the Liberal Party (PL). In 1998, the PNL absorbed the PL and the PNL-CD and merged with the PAC; it merged with the APR in 2002, and the following year it absorbed the Union of Right-Wing Forces (UFD). In 2014, the PNL approved the merger with the PDL (which included within its ranks the former breakaway faction from the PNL, which had formed the PLD). Also in 2014, Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu and around thirty MPs left the PNL to found the Liberal Reformist Party (*Partidul Liberal Reformator*, PLR).<sup>26</sup>

Such varied permutations (with numerous and ongoing splits, mergers, and absorptions) among the political parties reflects a very fluid and fragmented party system. In the following section, an examination of the micro-level dynamics in party switching will reinforce this view. In turn, as will be suggested, a party system in constant flux and widespread political cruising result in voters' disenchantment with the political process and induce low participation in electoral politics.

### *Assessing Party Switching in Romania*

The often quasi-incestuous transformations of the main political parties are part of the broader fragmentation that mars Romanian political life. Consider-

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Left Alliance. Furthermore, discussions took place in 2012 about a possible merger between the PSD and the UNPR (which has not materialised). See Florin NECULA, Fuziune între PSD și UNPR? Ce zic liderii progresiști, *Ziare.com*, 18 September 2012, available at <<http://www.ziare.com/unpr/victor-ponta/fuziune-intre-psd-si-unpr-ce-zic-liderii-progresisti-1190626>>.

<sup>26</sup> For details about party transformations, see JIGLĂU / GHERGHINA, *The Ideological Institutionalization*; and CÎNPOEȘ, *Extremism in Disguise*.

ing individual party switching makes the situation appear even more alarming. These factors have profound implications on political representation in several ways.

First, rampant party switching has contributed to notable realignments in the Romanian party system since 1990. The phenomenon has been responsible for the consolidation of some parties' positions and the outright extinction of other parties. It has also caused the party system to evolve unpredictably, with periods of apparent stabilisation and institutionalisation followed by turmoil. Second, and consequently, this fluidity has exerted a negative impact on voters' trust in their representatives and on participation in elections.

As suggested earlier, party switching in Romania can be better understood if observed both as a parliamentary phenomenon and as something that affects inter-party relations. A look at party switching across several legislative sessions reveals a steady trend of increases during periods marked by important shifts in the organisation of the party systems. Data concerning the full structure of the Chamber of Deputies in each legislative term in Figure 1 and Table 1 detail the number of MPs in the lower house of the Romanian Parliament who served in one term as members of a different party than in the previous legislative session (including those with no party affiliation) (see Fig. 1, Table 1).<sup>27</sup>

Several aspects require further qualification and discussion, especially regarding the limitations of the data presented above. First, the figures do not account for changes across chambers, which would likely show additional migration. Second, the figures up to the current 2012-2016 term represent only the switches that have taken place between parliamentary sessions. The count is based on the composition of the Chamber of Deputies at the end of each term (from data provided by the website of the Romanian Parliament). Thus the figures do not account for migration *during* a term, and so the number of switchers from one term to the next will be significantly smaller than if these politicians had also been counted. Hypothetically, if an MP moves from the PDL to the PSD during the 2008-2012 term, and is counted in the 2008-2012 Parliamentary data as a PSD representative, then he or she will not appear as a switcher in the 2012-2016 term.

Looking at floor-crossing within each parliamentary term shows an even higher level of defection than indicated in the tables below. Research by Ștefan et al., for example, shows that during each parliamentary term from 1992 until 2011 the proportion of floor-crossers ranged from 10 to nearly 25 percent of

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<sup>27</sup> Compiled from data available on the website of the Romanian Parliament, Camera Deputaților, available at <<http://www.cdep.ro/>>. Figure 1 and Table 1 account only for the MPs that served in one term as part of a different party than in the previous term (including independent MPs), using the end-of-term lists of MPs. Thus, the figures exclude those who did not complete their term (or were not re-elected), as well as floor-crossing taking place within terms.

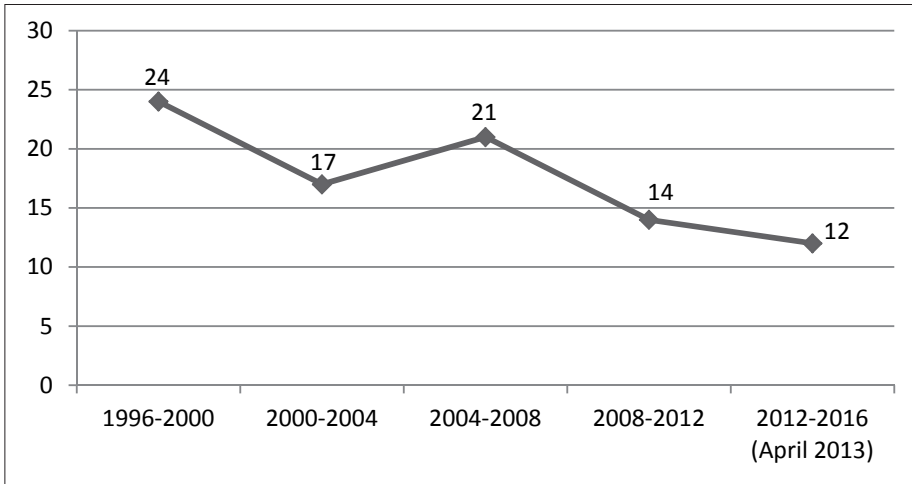


Figure 1. MPs in the lower house who are members of a different party than they had been in the previous legislative session.

Table 1. MPs in the lower house who were members of a different party than they had been in the previous legislative session presented as net numbers and as a percentage of the number of all MPs in each legislature.

Legislature	1996-2000	2000-2004	2004-2008	2008-2012	2012-2016 (April 2013)
Net total of MPs in the lower house who switched compared to the previous legislative session	24	17	21	14	12
Percentage of the total number of MPs in each legislative session	7	5	6.5	4.6	3

the total MPs in the lower house.<sup>28</sup> In addition, halfway through the current 2012-2016 parliamentary term, 66 MPs (16.5 percent) have switched parties, if we compare the April 2013 and August 2014 lists of deputies. With the next parliamentary elections still more than two years away, more are likely to do so, especially given the splits and mergers currently in process, which have not yet been fully accounted for in the structure of the Parliament. The current situation tallies with the pattern of frequent floor-crossing in previous terms (Figure 2).

Furthermore, data from the Alliance for a Clean Romania (*Alianța pentru o Românie Curată*, ARC) show that during periods in the 2008-2012 parliamentary

<sup>28</sup> ȘTEFAN / GHERGHINA / CHIRU, *We All Agree that We Disagree*, 185f.

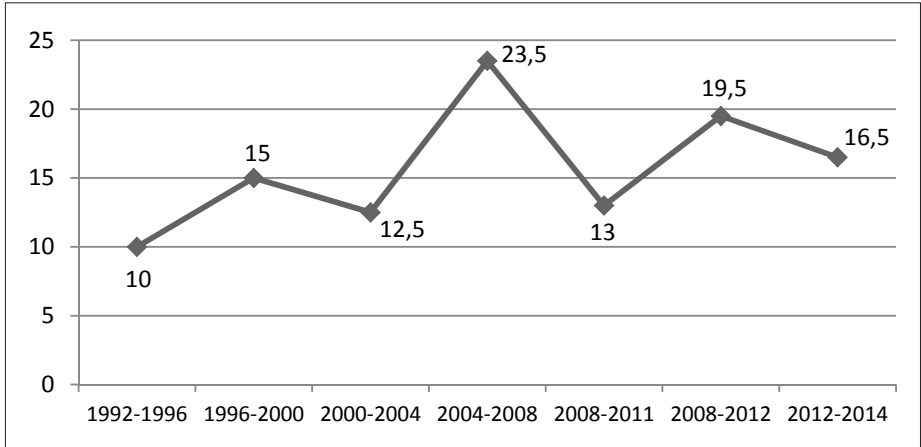


Figure 2. Party switching during each term in the lower house of the Romanian Parliament since 1992 (as a percentage of total MPs). Source: Data compiled using ȘTEFAN / GHERGHINA / CHIRU, *We All Agree that We Disagree*, 186, for the period 1992-2011; Violeta ALEXANDRU / Adrian MORARU / Raluca MIHAI, *Sinteza activității parlamentarilor în mandatul 2008-2012*, *Institutul pentru Politici Publice*, September 2012, available at <[www.ipp.ro/profiles.php?IDfile=162](http://www.ipp.ro/profiles.php?IDfile=162)>, for the term 2008-2012; and the author's findings using data available on the website of the Romanian Parliament for the period 2012-2014. The 2008-2011 and the 2012-2014 figures show only partial results (as in the former case, data was collected before the term had finished, while in the latter case, the parliamentary term was ongoing when the research was carried out). See also GHERGHINA, *Rewarding the 'Traitors'?*, 5f., for additional figures of floor-crossing within parliamentary terms.

term alone, 80 MPs (52 in the Chamber of Deputies and 28 in the Senate) switched parties.<sup>29</sup> Looking at data for the entire 2008-2012 term, the Institute for Public Policies in Romania (IPP) found that 94 MPs (59 deputies and 35 senators) did so, totalling 120 switches (some switched more than once). Similar incidences of switching have occurred in other legislative terms as well, showing a much higher overall level of switching in Romania than elsewhere. Thus, the IPP shows that during the 2000-2004 term, the party most affected by defections was the PD, who lost 20 percent of their MPs; the PRM shed 18 MPs over the same period. During the 2004-2008 legislature, party switching increased and exerted the most pronounced effect on the PSD, who lost 18 MPs.<sup>30</sup>

Floor-crossing in Parliament is complemented by broader, widespread inter-party switching. Taking place away from the very public scene of parliamen-

<sup>29</sup> Adrian POPESCU, *Traseism parlamentar: 20% din aleșii poporului și-au trădat partidul în actuala legislatură*. ARC vă prezintă lista completă a celor 80 de senatori și deputați migratori, *Alianța pentru o Românie Curată*, 24 April 2012, available at <<http://romaniacurata.ro/traseism-parlamentar-20-din-alesii-poporului-si-au-tradat-partidul-in-actuala-legislatura-arc-va-prezinta-lista-completa-a-celor-80-de-senatori-si-deputati-migratori/>>.

<sup>30</sup> ALEXANDRU / MORARU / MIHAI, *Sinteza activității parlamentarilor*.

tary politics, it has received less attention from organisations that monitor the phenomenon. It is also much more difficult to account for. Nonetheless, there is some data about inter-party switching that shows the impact it has had on Romanian politics.

For instance, the rise of the extreme right in post-communist Romania and its eventual collapse were shaped – at least to some extent – by party migration. In the early 1990s, the battle between the Party for Romanian National Unity (*Partidul Unității Națiunii Române*, PUNR) and the PRM for supremacy on the extreme right was settled by significant migration from the former to the latter. In 1997, following a leadership squabble in the PUNR, Gheorghe Funar, one of its prominent members and the former mayor of Cluj Napoca, was expelled from the party. His ouster led to a splinter group exiting the party. He and some of his followers joined the PRM in 1998, with Funar serving as its General Secretary. Arguably, this led to a shift in voter support away from the PUNR and towards the PRM, as voting patterns in the former Transylvanian strongholds of the PUNR show.<sup>31</sup>

After the 2000 elections (and more visibly from 2004 onwards), the PRM's decreasing popularity triggered another major wave of defections, with many of its members seeking refuge within the mainstream parties.<sup>32</sup> At the broad level of inter-party dynamics, instances of collective party switching have become common in Romania. In several cases not only groups of individuals but entire local organisations have shifted party allegiance, either in protest against unpopular decisions from the party centre or simply because their party's popularity is waning.<sup>33</sup>

Considered together, the high level of floor-crossing in the Parliament and the switching taking place in local party organisations paint a bleak picture of the level of stability of the Romanian political system. Because these migrations occur without relevant constituencies being consulted, they are likely to have consequences on voter satisfaction, which in turn exerts an impact – as will be discussed – on electoral participation.

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<sup>31</sup> Radu CÎNPOEȘ, *Nationalism and Identity in Romania. A History of Extreme Politics from the Birth of the State to EU Accession*. London, New York 2010, 93f.

<sup>32</sup> For a more detailed examination of the incorporation of extreme right-wing politicians into the mainstream in Romania, see CÎNPOEȘ, *Extremism in Disguise*.

<sup>33</sup> For example, news agencies reported that several hundred local PDL and PC members in Petrla and Lupeni migrated to the PNL in 2008: Alexandra ȘANDRU, *Sute de membri PDL și PC din Valea Jiului au migrat în PNL*, *Ziare.com*, 5 February 2008, available at <<http://www.ziare.com/pnl/stiri-pnl/sute-de-membri-pd-l-si-pc-din-valea-jiului-au-migrat-in-pnl-232714>>. See also CÎNPOEȘ, *Extremism in Disguise*, 243 and note 14.

*Party Switching in Romania: Features and Effects*

Party switching in Romania thus pervades all levels of the political process and influences party system dynamics. What follows in this section outlines some of its visible characteristics and evaluates its more prominent effects on electoral participation.

Observing the level of party switching since 1996 across different legislative terms, there appears to be no significant change after 2008, unlike in the previous period. The year 2008 is relevant because it marks the date of Romania's electoral system change. The move from a closed-list proportional representation (PR) system to a single-member constituency system should have produced – in theory – some changes in MP behaviour concerning party switching. In a closed-list PR system, elected MPs have weaker links with their constituents than in single-member constituencies. That switching has *not* decreased since the mixed-member proportional (MMP) system was introduced suggests that politicians are not especially concerned with how their constituents regard their performance as MPs (and do not fear potential punishment at the polls); electoral incentives – at least those involving accountability – are not chiefly why they switch. Their indifference to voter scrutiny suggests that the electoral system change has not strengthened links between MPs and their constituents. In fact, evidence shows that voters continue to manifest an utter lack of information and awareness about their representatives. In a 2012 survey by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES), 62 percent of the respondents did not know the name of the deputy who had been their representative for the past four years; 68 percent did not know the name of the senator during the same period. Surveys of voter knowledge about the activities of their representatives in Parliament yielded even worse results: 73 percent knew nothing about what their deputy had done, and 80 percent were completely ignorant of their senator's activities.<sup>34</sup>

Electoral incentives do seem to play a role, however, at least for politicians aiming to enhance their chances of getting elected. As was shown in the cases of the PUNR and, later, the PRM, when a party's popularity decreases, in concert with other contextual aspects that reduce an MP's re-election chances, politicians will often defect to another party (unsurprisingly, usually one trending upwards in popularity) to maximise their chances of retaining a parliamentary seat.

Politicians' willingness to sacrifice party loyalty to keep their seats does not, in itself, explain why they act this way. Data on party switching reveal that a great deal of the movement happens during rather than across legislative

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<sup>34</sup> De ce și cu ce schimbăm sistemul electoral, *Societatea Academică din România Policy Brief* 64, June 2013, 8, available at <<http://www.romaniacurata.ro/spaw2/uploads/files/Policy%20brief%20iunie%202013-1.pdf>>.

terms, and quite often very early on, as the details of the 2012-2016 term show. This may appear curious, as far as the pressure of securing a seat goes; after all, these individuals have mounted successful electoral campaigns. The direction of migration is relevant in this respect. During the 2000-2004 term, the main beneficiary of the PD and PRM defections was the PDSR, the party in government. Similarly, in the 2004-2008 term, switching affected the PSD, which lost the elections, and benefitted mainly the PD but also the PNL, which were part of the coalition government. After 2007, disagreements emerged between the PNL and the PD, and the PNL split. The PD (in its new, PDL incarnation) acquired – via their newly constituted party – the defectors from the PNL. In the current term, it is – unsurprisingly – the PSD, the main governing party (after the PNL pulled out of the coalition), that has attracted most of the switchers (mainly from the PP-DD), whereas other cross-party movement is attributable to fluidity along the centre-right spectrum.<sup>35</sup> Considering the timing and the direction of migration, party switches can patently be explained as efforts by politicians to be part of the governing structure, whereby they gain preferential access to the distribution of public funds. As Mungiu-Pippidi notes, “Romanian politics continues to be dominated by nepotism and clientelism, with public resources being the main source of spoils and fuel of politics, recycled through private businesses to political parties”.<sup>36</sup> In short, there is a direct link between switching and the amount of governmental funds that can be allocated to the constituency of an MP who is in the governing party. This clientelistic relationship is further evinced by the many amendments put forth by MPs concerning state budget projects.<sup>37</sup> Volintiru’s detailed research on political clientelism in Romania highlights the different avenues suited to such activity. For instance, she points to the potential for preferential distribution of public investment funds through direct transfers to local public administrations, and offers a thorough analysis of the use of discretionary government funds to bankroll clientelistic exchanges.<sup>38</sup>

These power dynamics, revolving around the allocation of public funds, help explain another puzzling aspect of the phenomenon: the attitude of the political

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<sup>35</sup> ALEXANDRU / MORARU / MIHAI, *Sinteza activității parlamentarilor*, 29-30; Institutul pentru Politici Publice, *Review of the First Parliament Session for the Current Term of Office* (February – June 2013), Bucharest, 15 July 2013, 6, available at <[http://ipp.ro/library/bilant%20de%20sesiune\\_OSJ\\_ENG.pdf](http://ipp.ro/library/bilant%20de%20sesiune_OSJ_ENG.pdf)>.

<sup>36</sup> Alina MUNGIU-PIPPIDI (ed.), *Landslide Victory for Left-Right Coalition in Romanian Elections*, *Societatea Academică din România. Policy Brief* 63, December 2012, updated, available at <<http://sar.org.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Policy-Brief-SAR-63-3.pdf>>.

<sup>37</sup> De ce și cu ce schimbăm sistemul electoral, 8.

<sup>38</sup> VOLINTIRU, *How Public Spending is Fuelling Electoral Strategies*; see also IDEM, *Clientelism. Electoral Forms and Functions*; and IDEM, *The Institutionalisation of the Romanian Party System*.

parties themselves towards party switching. At first sight, it may appear counterintuitive that political parties tolerate party migration. Politicians who have been disloyal towards their own parties might well be regarded suspiciously by other political parties – which, presuming defectors to be politically fickle, would be reluctant to accept such people into their ranks. And if floor-crossing reached a certain threshold then the scale of the phenomenon would risk jeopardising the parliamentary positions of certain political parties; thus we would expect parties to establish (formally or informally) some self-regulating framework to limit switching. But this has not happened in Romania, where, in fact, parties seem to regard the risks of haemorrhaging MPs after losing an election an acceptable price to pay for the benefits of attracting members from opposing parties. When on an ascending trajectory, a party that accepts defectors can ensure that it will acquire more comprehensive control over state funds. While the law prohibits elected local officials from switching parties, there is no such ban for members of the legislature, where parties encourage such practices in their efforts to secure large governing majorities that would reduce the legislature's power to scrutinise them.<sup>39</sup> A vicious circle is created: local party organisations contribute to the election of their candidates with the clear expectation that rewards will be directed to their constituencies from the public purse, thus perpetuating preferential networks and exchanges.<sup>40</sup>

Overall, party switching facilitates clientelistic practices and prolongs party system instability; it leads to voter alienation and a lack of trust in politicians and political institutions. In the Romanian public's perception, political parties and the Parliament are the institutions most affected by corruption.<sup>41</sup> This view, in turn, can be linked to a decrease in electoral turnout.

The weak link of candidates and/or elected representatives with voters despite the personalisation of the elections (via the electoral systems) suggests that switching parties has little bearing on whether individuals get elected. This is because voters make their choices largely on the basis of party names, which they are more familiar with.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, however, popular figures win based purely on personality rather than on party support: George Becali, a controversial football club owner, secured his seat with ease in 2012 after making a last minute pre-election switch from his own party, the New Generation Party-Christian Democratic (PNG-CD), to the PNL. Voter choice based on party name recognition increases the importance of the local party organisation, and

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<sup>39</sup> MUNGIU-PIPPIDI (ed.), *Landslide Victory*, 10; ALEXANDRU / MORARU / MIHAI, *Sinteza activității parlamentarelor*, 30f.; Institutul pentru Politici Publice, *Review of the First Parliament Session*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> De ce și cu ce schimbăm sistemul electoral, 8f.

<sup>41</sup> VOLINTIRU, *Clientelism: Electoral Forms and Functions*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> De ce și cu ce schimbăm sistemul electoral, 8.

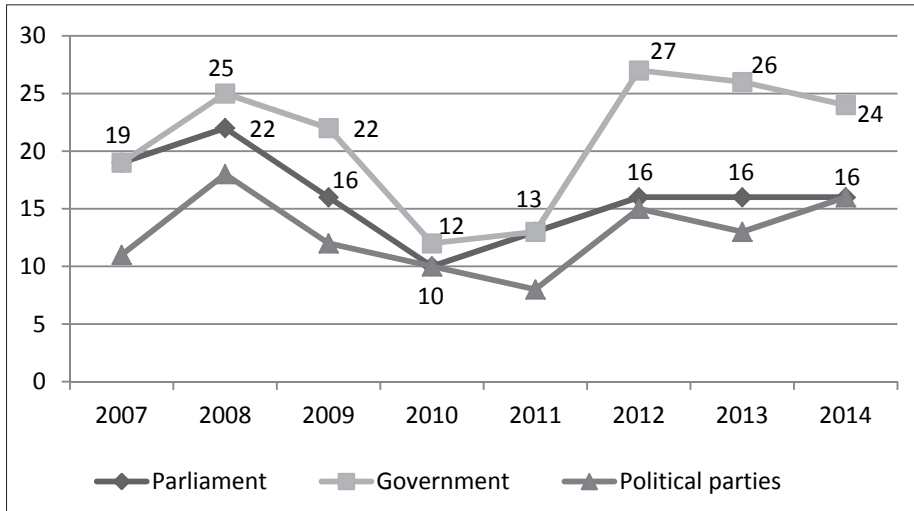


Figure 3. Level of trust in political parties, legislative and executive bodies.

despite legislation limiting large electoral gifts, these laws are frequently not enforced. Allegations of electoral bribery and vote buying persist in Romania.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, trust in politicians and in the main political institutions – the legislative and the executive – is very low. According to data from the Eurobarometer, it falls short of the EU average by a significant margin, although it is to some extent comparable with trends in other Central and Eastern European countries (see Fig. 3).<sup>44</sup>

A decline in voter turnout underscores the lack of trust in political institutions and the general disconnect between the electorate and its elected officials (see Fig. 4). Turnout for parliamentary elections since 1992 has shown a continuous downwards trend. In this respect, Romania is one of the worst cases in the EU (only Lithuania fares worse). The only exception is the 2012 elections, although the 2.56 percent difference compared to 2008 is marginal (39.20 in 2008, compared to 41.76 in 2012). The slight improvement could be explained by President Traian Băsescu, the polarising figure who was the main driver of

<sup>43</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe / The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Romania. Parliamentary Elections 9 December 2012, Warsaw, 16 January 2013, 12, available at <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/96479?download=true>>; VOLINTIRU, Clientelism. Electoral Forms and Functions.

<sup>44</sup> European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, available at <[http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb\\_arch\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm)>. Since for 2014 only the spring wave is currently available, data for the spring wave were used for the other years, starting with 2007, the year Romania joined the EU. For trust in political parties, only autumn-wave data were available and were used for 2007 and 2011.

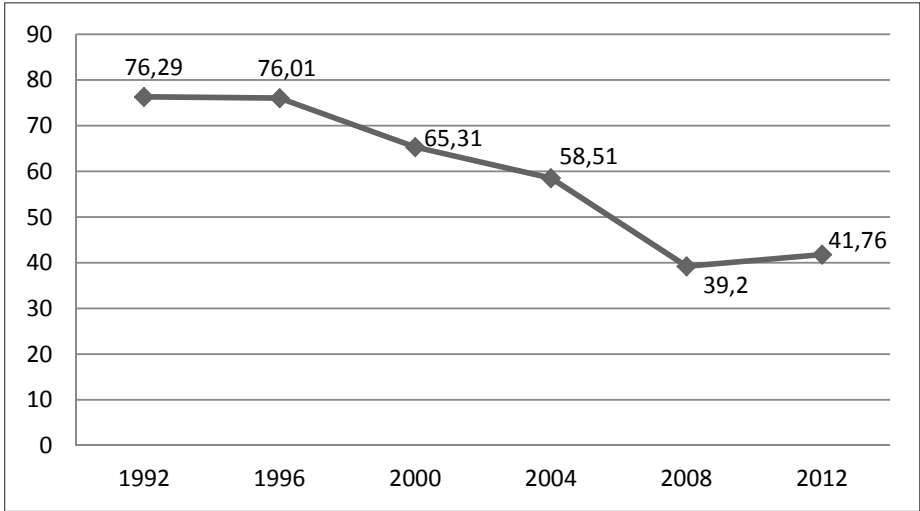


Figure 4. Voter turnout in Romanian parliamentary elections. Data compiled from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Voter Turnout Data for Romania, available at <<http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=189>>.

the electoral competition, pitching the anti-Băscescu left-right coalition the Social Liberal Union (USL) against what was perceived to be the pro-Băscescu camp – the Right Romania Alliance (ARD), a makeshift attempt to unify centre-right groups including the PDL, the PNTCD, and the newly formed Civic Force (FC). The steady drop in turnout is also dramatic in net terms: the difference between the highest and the lowest points of the interval is 37.09% per cent, a drop of nearly half the 1992 figures.

### Concluding Remarks

Party switching poses important analytical and normative questions concerning party system institutionalisation, political representation, and voter participation. A party system's stability is directly related to the stability of political parties themselves, that is, to their ability to secure internal cohesion and retain member loyalty. Without these features, political parties may fragment, break apart into factions, and be vulnerable to party switching. As a phenomenon to be studied, party switching has received relatively little attention, which can perhaps be justified by its relatively low frequency (rare enough so that it does not affect the political process) within older, more established democracies. Scholarly attention has focused on newer democracies. This study contributes

to this growing literature by focusing on the case of Romania, where this type of movement between parties is endemic.

The case study reveals that party switching is an important cause of instability and fragmentation and shows that the Romanian party system still suffers from limited institutionalisation. Its pervasiveness shows that party switching is not a result of fuzzy party labels, nor is it primarily motivated by political ambition or even by an attempt to avoid being accountable to the voters. Instead, the clientelism embedded in Romanian politics and society incentivises politicians to seek to become part of the governing party or parties so as to gain access to the distribution of public funds. Rather than being frowned upon by political parties, the practice is actually encouraged as a way to maximise control of the public purse when in power. Most importantly, this vicious circle – where individual interests drive party switching and party interests encourage it – alienates the electorate from the political process, causing an erosion of trust in political institutions and decreased levels of electoral turnout.

The analysis opens up an important normative question as well. If the profit motive acts as a powerful incentive for political institutions to perpetuate this vicious circle, how can the situation be changed? Ultimately, voters can hold politicians accountable. At the moment, apathy and a lack both of specific information and more general political education are strong hindrances. The dissemination of information and more robust political education can provide a way out of this catch-22 situation. In the last few years there have been some encouraging initiatives. The Romanian Academic Society and the Alliance for a Clean Romania have been scrutinising candidates using varied criteria (including party migration, nepotism, business relationship with the state, etc.), and have made data on candidates' integrity publicly accessible. It is hoped that such initiatives can lead voters to more closely scrutinise candidates as well as put pressure on political parties to reform themselves – particularly with regard to their embrace of party switching.