

## The electoral returns of party-sponsored citizen legislative initiatives

Short title: *Electoral returns of citizen initiatives*

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### Abstract

Increasingly, parties sponsor citizen legislative initiatives to raise the salience of issues they own, mobilize supporters, or attract new voters. While the literature focusing on this phenomenon frequently cites electoral motivations, evidence that such strategies result in electoral gains is lacking. Our case study explores this gap by focusing on a citizen legislative initiative sponsored by the Save Romania Union (USR), as part of their anti-establishment appeal. We leverage the assignment of signature collection points across the country to causally identify the electoral impact of this citizen initiative. Our matched difference-in-differences (DiD) design corroborates the positive impact of the initiative on the party's results at the 2019 European Parliament elections and the 2020 parliamentary elections and illustrates how this is likely driven by a mobilization effect. Additional analyses show that the share of citizens signing the initiative in each locality is a strong predictor of the USR vote.

**Keywords:** citizen initiatives, political parties, voting behaviour, anti-establishment appeals

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## **Introduction**

More and more often, political parties sponsor citizen legislative initiatives to promote their own ideological priorities, increase the salience of issues they own, mobilize supporters or attract new voters. The phenomenon is present not only in countries with strong direct democratic traditions such as Switzerland or the USA (Leeman 2015; Smith and Tolbert 2001), but also in parliamentary democracies, young and consolidated alike (Auers 2012; Budge 2001; Meyer and Müller, 2013; Müller 1999; Schiller and Setälä 2012a). From a normative perspective this might be perceived as a “perversion of plebiscitary instruments” (Müller 1998, 41), or an example of an “intrusion of politics” that limits the deliberative potential of direct democracy (LeDuc 2015), but it is nonetheless a rational strategy employed by parties in their pursuit of votes and office. This growing literature discusses cases of citizen legislative initiatives introduced by new parties, small and marginalized parties, as well as mainstream parties in opposition, all acting with the hope of bolstering their electoral support or causing electoral damage to the competitors. Nevertheless, we know virtually nothing with respect to whether such strategies result in electoral gains or not, due to the absence of appropriate individual-level data and the difficulty of implementing research designs that would allow such gains to be causally identified, even at an aggregate level.

This article addresses this gap in the literature, drawing on two unique sources of data. The central research question of the study is: “Do party-sponsored citizen legislative initiatives pay off electorally?” We answer this question with a case study that focuses on a citizen legislative initiative sponsored by a new political party, the Save Romania Union (USR), as part of their anti-establishment appeal, built around anti-corruption messages. The initiative, called “No Convicts in Public Office!”, aimed to revise Romania’s Constitution so as to prevent citizens

who had received sentences which entailed deprivation of liberty for intentional offenses from holding public office at local or national level.

We analyze the impact of the initiative on the success of the party at the 2019 European Parliament elections, and at the 2020 parliamentary elections, leveraging the assignment of signature collection points across the country to causally identify the electoral impact of the citizen initiative. This causal identification strategy is complemented by analyses which estimate the effect of the share of citizen signatures in support of the initiative from all localities, irrespective of whether they are treated or not (i.e., having signature collection points). The cumulative evidence indicates a substantive positive effect, which is robust to the matching of localities on a range of empirical observables, including local party organizational strength, as well as to a doubly robust difference-in-differences approach. We explore the mechanisms behind the effect and show that an increase in electoral presence took place in localities where signature collection points were assigned and present individual-level data suggesting that the initiative likely contributed to a mobilization of core voters.

The case study suggests that party-sponsored citizen initiatives are more likely to have positive electoral spillovers when the subsequent electoral campaign clearly reuses messages and slogans from the citizen initiative campaign, and when the main issue promoted by the citizen initiative remains salient on the public agenda at the time of elections.

This study has both theoretical and practical relevance. It contributes to a body of literature exploring political processes at the intersection of direct democracy, party politics and voting behavior, which have been observed in a wide variety of political settings but are notoriously difficult to study. We propose an innovative research design that can be easily replicated to study other party-sponsored citizen initiatives. The findings are also relevant for the literature on

genuinely new, anti-establishment or centrist populist parties which have emerged in almost all CEE countries (Hanley and Sikk 2016). Many of these parties have failed to capitalize on their initial popularity, have maintained only light organizations and have ended up being replaced by even newer political forces (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018). This article suggests that a viable path for these parties is to sponsor citizen initiatives or engage in contentious politics actions that can result in a stronger claim of ownership of the anti-corruption issue and in reinforced organizational structures.

The following section introduces the theoretical framework of the study and our hypotheses. We then briefly discuss the legal framework for citizen legislative initiatives in Romania, the USR's "No convicts..." campaign and how it related to the ideological and organizational profile of the party. The third section includes the details of the research design: data, operationalization of variables, and methods. Next, we present the main findings of our analyses and then we discuss a series of robustness checks. The conclusions discuss the implications of our results and point to areas of further research.

### **Theoretical framework**

The benefits and costs of citizen legislative initiatives for a variety of political outcomes have attracted a considerable amount of academic interest (Bowler and Donovan 2004; Christensen 2019; Matsusaka and McCarty 2001). A subset of this research focuses on the gains that political parties can derive from the usage of this direct democratic tool.

Smith and Tolbert (2001) showed that the mainstream American political parties used citizen initiatives in California to promote their own ideology, divide the opposition vote or bolster turnout for their own candidates. Müller notes that in Austria "most party-sponsored initiatives

have addressed issues that had electoral potential. Most of them indeed cut through the voter alliances behind other parties and had a unifying effect on the sponsoring party's electorate” (Müller 1999, 313). Similarly, Leeman (2015, 596) argued that Swiss parties introduce citizen initiatives “to change the relative saliency of issues in pursuit of their electoral goals”. Thus, the main goal of party-sponsored initiatives is to increase the salience of issues the respective party owns in order to attract voters from other parties and campaign for the next elections (Leeman 2015).

Parties also use citizen initiatives to pass legislation that would otherwise be blocked in parliament. This was the case with the Italian abrogative referendums in the 1970s, sponsored mainly by the parties which were excluded from government: Communists and Radicals (Budge 2001). Similarly, in Switzerland the radical right populist SVP has hijacked citizen initiatives to influence agenda setting in law-and-order policy making (Biard 2019).

Schiller and Setälä (2012a, 10) note that “new and marginalized political parties have used [citizen] initiatives to gain publicity for their policy goals' and that 'opposition parties in particular may use initiatives to mobilize voters”. The involvement of smaller and new parties in citizen initiatives with an electoral mobilization goal in Eastern European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Hungary is one of the comparative findings of Schiller and Setälä’s edited volume (2012b, 252-253). The hijacking of citizen initiatives by opposition parties is also a recurrent story in Western European countries such as Switzerland, Italy and Austria as well in several German states (Schiller and Setälä 2012b, 252). Nevertheless, no research to date has shown convincingly that such strategies do succeed in mobilizing supporters or gaining new voters. A partial exception is Müller (1998), who found, in his descriptive analysis of Austrian plebiscitary politics between 1969 and 1995, that in 8 out of 10 cases

analyzed, launching a citizen initiative was followed by improved performance of the sponsoring party at the next elections. Our paper is the first to estimate the electoral benefits of party-sponsored citizen initiatives by drawing on a causal identification strategy.

We argue that there are three main channels through which sponsoring a citizen initiative can matter electorally for a party, compared to simply spending more on political advertising or canvassing more during the electoral campaign. The causal mechanisms behind them imply not only a mobilization of the party's own voters but also a potential learning and switching effect for alienated citizens and other parties' voters.

First, through the symbolic act of co-creating legislation with citizens on a salient issue ostensibly ignored by all other parties and regular parliamentary politics, a party can boost its democratic responsiveness credentials. The visibility of its presence on the streets in the service of direct democracy can help promote a contentious message that binds together and challenges the legitimacy of all the other political opponents and the old ways of doing politics, potentially capturing the attention of protest voters.

Second, by taking such action a party can claim ownership of the underlying issue behind the initiative (anti-corruption in the case analyzed here) and attract undecided or disaffected voters who assign high salience to that issue. What is essential is that this happens outside the campaigning period, when such citizens would also be exposed to the counter-messaging of other parties which have a stake in the issue.

Third, on the voter side, signing a petition in the recent past has been shown to increase the probability of voting in elections (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004). Parties sponsoring a citizen initiative would hope that by witnessing the process and signing in support of the initiative, their core voters would be mobilized for the next elections.

The USR case reflects all three mechanisms. First, the launch of the initiative was supposed to reiterate the party's commitment to collaboration with civil society while at the same time being consistent with the party's constant criticism of Parliament and parliamentary elites, and their advocacy of direct democracy (Dragoman 2020). The party was born out of an initiative of civil society activists in Bucharest and aimed at least initially to maintain a strong connection with citizen action groups and NGOs. The "No convicts..." initiative had an obvious contentious message, as the USR campaigners implied that many of their political adversaries were against the initiative because they feared they would potentially be banned from politics. This contributed to further polarization of Romanian society (Ciobanu and Sandu 2023) and tensions were amplified by USR leaders' accusation that established parties were trying to hinder the collection of signatures. According to the USR, these strategies included delays in the validation of signatures by mayors, who are obliged by law to certify the eligibility of signatures<sup>2</sup>, and intimidation by local authorities and politicians with the help of police, which consisted of destroying campaign tents, harassment, and even physical assault of those in charge of collecting signatures.

In line with the second mechanism discussed above, the introduction of the initiative was also a way for the USR to claim leadership on the topic of anti-corruption, a common goal when political parties sponsor citizen initiatives (Leeman 2015). Unlike the main competitors for the hegemony of the anti-corruption discourse – the National Liberal Party (PNL) and the Popular Movement Party (PMP) – the USR could claim purity: they had not been in government and had not been involved in corruption scandals. Making anti-corruption their main issue is usually a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20191102164159/https://farapenaliinfunctiipublice.ro/comunicate-de-presa/primarii-intimideaza-cetatenii>

winning strategy for new parties, as illustrated by previous comparative research. Drawing on a sample of Western and Eastern European countries, Bågenholm and Charron (2014) have shown that new political parties that politicize corruption are more successful than new parties that do not, and that the effect is stronger in countries with higher levels of corruption.

The tents at the signature collection point were branded with the logo and official colors of the party to ensure that uninformed citizens would learn that the citizen legislative initiative was sponsored by the USR. Previous research has shown that visual campaigning helps small parties expand their electoral base through an information effect that targets mainly new voters (Dumitrescu 2012). The visibility of the signature collection campaign was further enhanced by the regular presence at the collection points of USR MPs and their most prominent national leaders.

It is reasonable to expect that in localities where signature collection points were set up, more citizens would engage in political discussions with family and friends about the topic, which would lead in turn to increased visibility for the USR and their anti-corruption platform. The mobilization effort also had the potential to illustrate the viability of the USR as an option for electorates outside the major cities, given that the party did not have branches in seventy-one of the localities where they were gathering signatures. The volunteers and party activists present at the campaign initiative tents gave the citizens they interacted with additional information about the party's stances, the professional credentials of its politicians and their commitment to integrity in public office. Moreover, they tried to dispel negative stereotypes about the party propagated by opponents or partisan media.

Reaching and convincing a large share of citizens in a locality to sign the initiative implies that a substantial number of potential voters have been made aware of the party's role in sponsoring

this popular initiative. In turn, this would contribute to increasing the USR's ownership of the issue of anti-corruption. This had been extremely salient for several years but was particularly relevant in the period prior to the initiative, as the ruling party, the PSD, and its leader<sup>3</sup> were perceived to be actively pushing a legislative agenda attempting to hinder the prosecution of acts of corruption. Indeed, feeling targeted by the anti-corruption fight carried out by the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA), the PSD spent much of the first two and a half years after their landslide victory in the parliamentary elections in late 2016 trying to decriminalize certain acts of corruption (Tara 2017). This generated a long series of anti-corruption street protests, the largest since the fall of Communism (Adi and Lilleker 2017; Crețan and O'Brien 2020). The citizen initiative sponsored by the USR had an anti-corruption message that was easy to grasp. Through it, the party could hope to mobilize its core voters and gain new supporters from the large pool of citizens dissatisfied with the mainstream parties.

The European election campaign of the USR-PLUS coalition made sure to capitalize on the success of the citizen initiative not only by re-using the initiative's slogan "No Convicts in Public Office" and other similar messages (e.g. "Without theft we will go far"; "A Romania without corruption"), but also by emphasizing in their manifesto that they would favor European anti-corruption regulations with common standards of integrity and monitoring of the rule of law for all Member States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Under investigation in a corruption trial, the PSD's president, Liviu Dragnea, was sentenced the day after the European Parliament elections.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the two largest parties adopted campaign strategies that had explicit nationalist messages. The main slogan of the PSD was 'Patriots in Europe: Romania deserves more' ('Patrioți în Europa: România merită mai mult'), which included a hint of the soft Euroskepticism

Hypothesis 1a: *Localities where signature collection points were set up will have higher USR vote shares in subsequent elections.*

Hypothesis 1b: *The larger the share of inhabitants signing the initiative, the higher the USR vote share in subsequent elections.*

In addition to the two hypotheses, we consider several additional factors as covariates used in the matching of treatment and control cases for the difference-in-differences design and as control variables in the secondary analyses. First, organizational strength, which we proxy with the presence of a party branch in the locality, founded before the start of signature collection.<sup>5</sup> This is relevant because organizational strength could turn into plebiscitary mobilization for collecting signatures at one point in time and into electoral campaign efforts at a later point in time.

Another covariate/control we take into account is the human development level of the communities. The expectation is that the share of votes for the USR will be lower in poorer, less developed localities because the mainstream parties have built well-functioning clientelistic networks there (Giugal and Costinescu 2020; Mares and Young 2019). On the contrary, the USR

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the party had recently experimented with. The PNL campaigned on a grassroots nationalism slogan, “Romania first” ('România, în primul rând'), an obvious imitation of Trump’s “America first”.

<sup>5</sup> The proxy’s validity is enhanced by the fact that the establishment of a new party branch is a highly demanding process in the USR compared to most other new parties, given the emphasis put by the party on a thorough screening of new members, to avoid admitting party switchers or being infiltrated by members of other parties’ informal networks.

is more likely to mobilize support in developed communities, given the appeal of its discourse to the urban middle classes. Following the same rationale, we include as covariates/controls a dummy for urban as opposed to rural locality, the population of the locality (logged) and the distance to a major city (logged).

### **Citizen legislative initiatives in Romania and the “No convicts in public office!” campaign**

Citizen initiatives are usually divided into full-scale initiatives and agenda initiatives. Full-scale initiatives introduce a political proposal which is then decided upon in a referendum, whereas in agenda initiatives, the decision on the proposal is made by the legislature (Schiller and Setälä 2012a, 7). The Romanian Constitution of 1991 allows for both procedures depending on the type of bill that is introduced: agenda initiatives are reserved for ordinary bills, while a full-scale initiative is required for constitutional bills. Since 1999, when a law establishing the steps that need to be followed for a citizen legislative initiative to be considered by the Parliament was adopted (Law 189/1999), only three citizen legislative initiatives aiming to amend the Constitution, apart from 'No Convicts...', have gathered the required number of signatures.<sup>6</sup> The USR launched the “No Convicts in Public Office!” (“Fără penali în funcții publice!”) citizen initiative to amend the Constitution in March 2018. The collection of signatures proceeded in two ways. Collection points were set up in 120 localities and advertised on the party’s website and social media platforms. Alternatively, regular citizens or NGO activists could independently gather signatures and submit them through the post or via a free courier service.

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<sup>6</sup> For laws that aim to revise the Constitution the threshold is 500,000 signatures from at least half of the country’s counties, with at least 20,000 signatures per county (Romanian Constitution, art. 150).

The campaign was planned to last six months and was an unqualified success, as over one million signatures were collected – more than double the required amount. The ultimate aim of the initiative was to add a new paragraph to Article 37 regarding the constitutional right to be elected: “Citizens who are subject to a final sentence establishing punishments that involve deprivation of liberty for intentional offenses cannot be elected in the local public administration bodies, the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and as the Romanian President, until a situation that removes the consequences of the conviction occurs” (Nine O’Clock 2019). The initiative was also supported and promoted by many public intellectuals, NGOs and volunteers. The harsh stance of the policy and lack of discrimination regarding the gravity of the crimes committed (Dragoman 2020), adopted primarily because of their anticipated popularity, makes the initiative a textbook example of penal populism (Boda et al. 2015; Roberts et al. 2003).

In April 2019 the Constitutional Court declared the initiative constitutional, certifying that it fulfilled all the requirements for a citizen legislative initiative aiming to modify the Constitution.

In July 2020 the bill was adopted by the Chamber of Deputies, the lower House of the Parliament, but as of April 2024 a vote in the Senate has still not taken place.

The initiative is representative of the strong anti-corruption profile of the USR, which together with their alliance partner, PLUS<sup>7</sup>, skillfully combines technocratic and populist appeals (Chiru and Enyedi 2022; Dragoman 2020; Kiss and Székely 2022), an increasingly widespread strategy for new parties (Bickerton and Invernizzi-Acetti 2021). Despite the salience of corruption for party competition and voting behavior (Borbath 2019; Chiru and Gherghina 2012), Romania was one of the last countries in Central and Eastern Europe to witness the emergence of a genuinely new anti-corruption party. The breakthrough happened at the 2016 parliamentary elections when

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<sup>7</sup> In August 2020, the two parties merged under the name USR PLUS.

the USR managed to enter Parliament, but they achieved their best performance ever at the 2019 European Parliament elections.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the anti-corruption content, the USR's decision to sponsor the citizen initiative indicated at the same time a level of rhetorical continuity and a novel organizational strategy. As mentioned earlier, the party was born out of an initiative of civil society activists. Moreover, the party relies to a certain extent on plebiscitary intra-party democracy mechanisms to reach internal decisions on political strategies or even adopt ideological positions, via electronic voting open to all party members. However, sponsoring the citizen initiative also represented a break with the previous organizational model, which was marked mostly by online political activism and a rather thin offline presence.

The domestic context in which the 2019 European Parliament elections took place favored a positive electoral spillover from the USR's mobilization around the “No convicts...” citizen initiative. Beyond the controversial judiciary measures of the governing party and the wave of protests they generated, a referendum initiated by President Iohannis was organized at the same time as the European Parliament elections and contributed to keeping the anti-corruption fight very high on the public agenda. The first referendum item asked Romanians to give their assent to the idea of banning governmental emergency decrees from changing criminal penalties. The

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<sup>8</sup> At the 2019 European Parliament elections, the USR-PLUS alliance received 22.4% of the votes: a much higher score than the 8.9% achieved by the USR at the 2016 national legislative election.

second item asked citizens whether they approved of a ban on any amnesty or pardon for corruption-related offences (*EURACTIV* 2019).<sup>9</sup>

## **Research design**

### *Case selection*

The case analyzed here is a typical one, being representative of the many theoretical arguments related to issue ownership, issue saliency and party organizational building in the literature on why parties sponsor citizen legislative initiatives and why such actions might benefit them electorally. Typical cases are well-suited to explore causal mechanisms (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 297-299). The initiative sponsored by the USR is also typical regarding the party's status in the political system: an opposition party, relatively small and newly founded. Thus, of the 70 cases of referendums held in Europe since 1990 on citizen initiatives launched by political parties (Centre for Research on Direct Democracy 2023; Nohlen and Stöver 2010), 61% were sponsored by opposition parties and the average share of votes in the last parliamentary election for the party or parties launching the initiative was 13.8%. Moreover, almost a third of these initiatives (28.6%) were launched by new parties.<sup>10</sup> Table A1.1 in the Appendix presents the full

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<sup>9</sup> The referendum might have contributed, on top of the unpopularity of the PSD government, to the record turnout at these elections, 51.2%, the highest ever turnout registered at European elections in Romania, and higher than the participation rate at the previous three national parliamentary elections (Gherghina and Chiru 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The share of citizen legislative initiatives sponsored by new parties as opposed to established increases to 57.1% if we only consider cases outside Switzerland, which has a different tradition of plebiscitary politics.

list of referendums on party-sponsored citizen initiatives and the main characteristics of these parties.

### *Data*

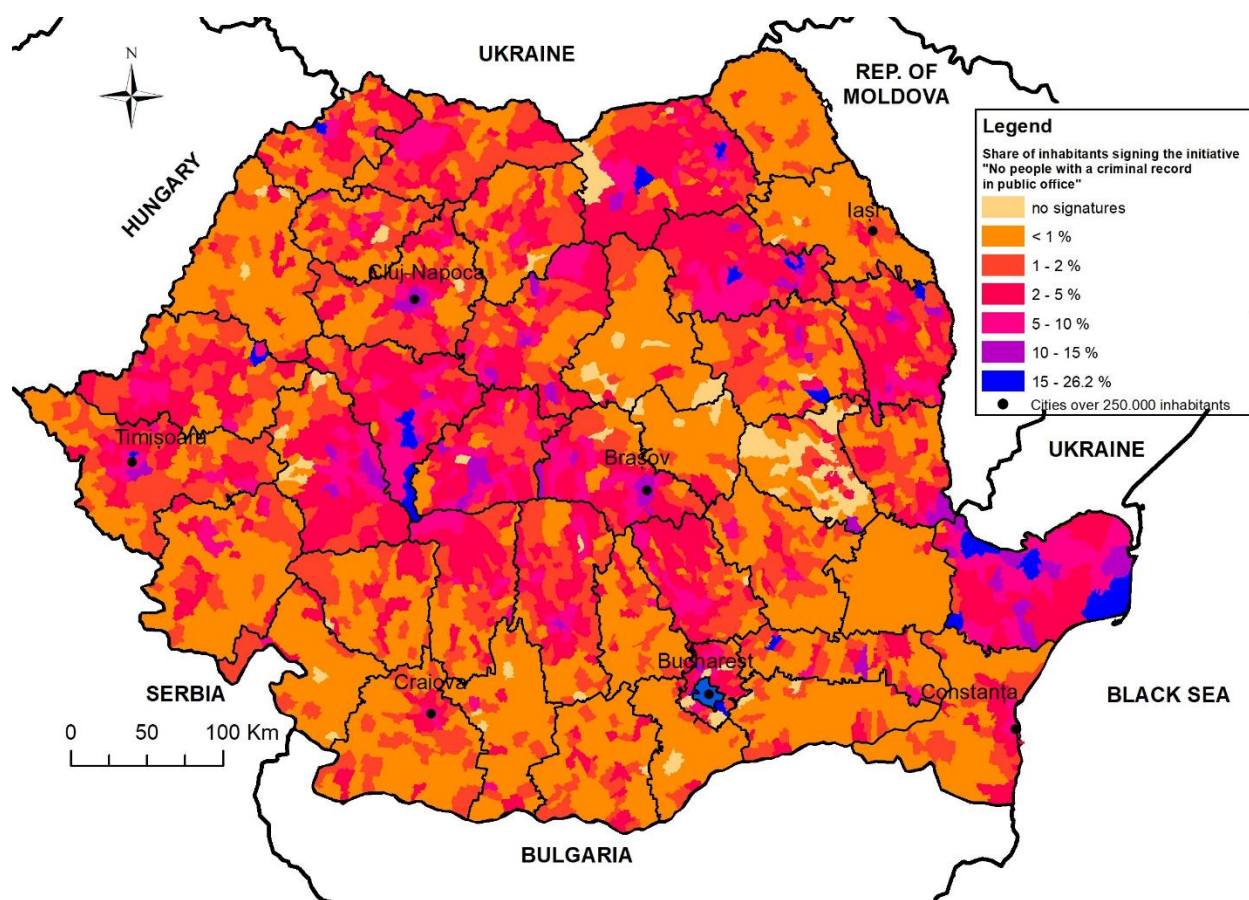
Using Internet archive tools, we were able to retrieve from the party's website the localities where signatures were collected for the initiative. These included 69 municipalities, 22 small towns and 29 rural localities. The 120 localities in which collection tents were set up can be considered treated while the rest can be considered the control group. Although citizens living in 'control' localities could to some extent self-select into treatment – i.e., sign the petition and convince others to do the same – we consider that the highly visible mobilization effort and the capacity to reach a larger number of citizens associated with the collection points still warrants the decision to use a difference-in-differences research design to compare these two sets of localities.

The data for the second set of analyses, i.e., on the share of signatures collected for the initiative from citizens officially residing in each locality, was obtained from the USR officials who coordinated the campaign. Figure 1 below displays the share of signatures at locality level. One can observe that higher shares of signatures were gathered in larger towns, which were more likely to have collection points. On average, 1.9% (std. dev.: 2.6) of citizens signed the initiative in each locality.

The average share of signatures from citizens officially residing in localities where a collection point had been set up was 6.56%, whereas it was 1.80% elsewhere. With our data it is impossible to know how many of the latter were in fact collected in localities which had signature collection points. However, this is probably non-trivial given the fact that internal migration has been

constantly above 15% since 2006, most of it towards urban centers (Horváth 2016), and a substantial share of internal migrants do not change their identification documents. This should not represent a violation of the Stable Unit Treatment Value Assumption (SUTVA) for the difference-in-differences estimations (Gerber and Green 2012) given that these informal internal migrants who signed the initiative in a treated locality could and likely did vote in European Parliament elections in the same locality, where they de facto reside, as Romania uses a single national electoral district for those elections.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1: Distribution of signatures at locality level**



<sup>11</sup> For the national parliament elections that use the counties as multi-member districts for a closed list PR system, these citizens would still be able to vote in localities where they de facto reside if their locality of origin is part of the same county as their locality of actual residence.

Thus, the effect (i.e., vote) of their realized treatment would be registered in the assigned treated locality, not in a control locality. If anything, this phenomenon would decrease the magnitude of the effect we are able to observe in the secondary analyses, based on the overall levels of signature collection in each locality, discussed below.

We obtained from the USR a complete dataset of all their 553 local branches as of April 2020, which includes the date of establishment of each branch (see Figure A1.1 in the Appendix). This enabled us to measure local party organizational strength and to account for a potential confounder, i.e., the possibility that this strength could turn into plebiscitary mobilization for collecting signatures at one point in time and into campaign efforts at a later point in time. We use the information regarding the presence of a local branch in the locality before the start of the signature collection for our matched difference-in-differences design. We also included a similar variable – branch established prior to the respective elections – as a control in the secondary analyses regressing the share of residents signing the initiative on the party's vote in the locality. The localities' development levels are measured using the local human development index (Sandu et al. 2020). This was developed via cluster analysis taking into account the education stock, life expectancy at birth, material capital and mean age of the adult population in each locality. Figure A1.2 in the Appendix illustrates the development level of each locality.

### *Methods*

In the present analyses we rely on ecological inference, as our variables are descriptive properties of areas, not individuals. Frequently, aggregate or ecological data are used not because of the advantages they possess but because individual-level data are not available (Johnston 1988). When aggregate, spatially defined data are used in inferential analyses, there is

a risk of committing the ecological fallacy, as Robinson (1950) stated in his classic paper. But individual-level data also have limitations (Kramer 1983). For example, there are some inherent limitations to the individual-level approach which will not allow for the investigation of the long-term dynamics of elections (Achen and Shively 1995). By contrast, ecological data are useful because they offer an opportunity to study electoral dynamics. In short, aggregate data have some advantages because of their “availability, reliability, and ability to deal with electoral dynamics” (Park 2008, 5) and have been commonly used in electoral studies, particularly in electoral geography (Johnston, Pattie, and Johnston 1988; Johnston, Jones, and Manley 2019). We assess the electoral consequences of the citizen legislative initiative in two ways. First, we leverage the assignment of signature collection points as a causal identification strategy and draw on a matched difference-in differences design. Second, we assess how the overall levels of signature collection in each locality influenced the vote share of the USR.

A salient assumption for the difference-in-differences estimation is the parallel trends assumption, which requires that, in the absence of the treatment, the initial differences between both groups would have been maintained. Unfortunately, this assumption cannot be directly tested, as there is only one data point prior to the signature collection (the treatment), i.e., the 2016 elections were the first in which USR ran. Similar to other studies that face this constraint (Malik 2020) we consider difference-in-mean tests for covariates and then match the treatment and control groups on those dimensions on which they differ substantively. Since the data comprises of repeated observations for each locality, standard errors are clustered at the locality level (Abadie et al. 2023).

### **The difference-in-differences analyses**

The 120 treated localities are more likely to have had a USR local branch founded before the start of the signature collection, are on average more urban and wealthier, i.e., have higher human development scores, a larger population, are less likely to be villages and are closer to major cities. All these features should lead to a higher vote share for the USR.

Indeed, the pre-treatment average vote share for the USR was three times higher in treated localities than in control ones. This indicates that the margin for vote share increase was considerably higher in the control group localities and therefore the risk of subsequent campaign mobilization efforts confounding the treatment effect is arguably lower. Moreover, this also seems to suggest that the assignment of the treatment, i.e., signature collection points, was done mainly to maximize signature collection, not with a view towards expanding the vote at the next elections. This contributes evidence towards the important assumption that treatment assignment is independent to potential outcomes.

Nevertheless, reducing the pre-treatment differences between groups could enhance the precision of the causal estimation. Therefore, we present difference-in-differences regression run on both the raw sample and on a matched sample that uses weights produced by entropy balancing (Yeandle 2021) accounting for differences in local organizational strength, local human development, population and urbanity. Table A1.2 shows that after the entropy balancing the matched cases fall within the conservative recommended standardized mean difference of 0.1 for all five covariates (Austin 2009; Stuart 2010).

The difference-in-differences regressions on the raw sample in Table 1 show that the effect of the treatment amounts to more than 4 percentage points at the 2019 European Parliament elections and 3.5 percentage points when also including the 2020 parliamentary election results.

**Table 1: The evolution of the USR vote in treated localities vs. elsewhere**

	M1 (raw)	M2 (raw)	M3 (balanced)	M4 (balanced)
Treated locality post 2018	4.212*** (0.469)	3.475*** (0.409)	1.569** (0.790)	1.695*** (0.649)
2019 EP election	7.981*** (0.086)	8.009*** (0.085)	10.689*** (0.642)	10.626*** (0.576)
2020 parliamentary election		4.410*** (0.082)		5.457*** (0.476)
Constant	2.748*** (0.042)	2.748*** (0.049)	6.910*** (0.198)	6.910*** (0.216)
R <sup>2</sup> within	.748	.627	.863	.805
N	6362	9542	6158	9236
Elections	2	3	2	3
Clusters	3181	3181	3079	3079

Notes: Significance at \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; robust standard errors clustered by locality in parentheses.

The difference-in-differences models run on the balanced sample show that, all other things being equal, the assignment of collection points led to a 1.6 percentage point increase in the vote share of the USR at the 2019 elections and a 1.7 percentage point increase if the 2020 parliamentary elections are also included. These results corroborate Hypothesis 1a.

### Secondary analyses

In the second set of regressions, we use the variation in the number of signatures of citizens officially residing in each locality to test H1b. Overall, only 85 localities appear with no signatures. The models in Table 2 report the results of the OLS regressions assessing how the variation in the percentage of residents signing the initiative influenced the share of votes of the USR at the 2019 European Parliament elections and the 2020 parliamentary elections. We ran two alternative OLS regression models. The first is run on a dataset that includes all the localities in Romania. The second draws only on the sample of localities for which we have data for development levels. The regressions include controls for previous vote share at national

elections, for the presence of a party branch, and for various indicators of wealth and urbanism (i.e., population, human development levels, distance to a major city and an urban dummy).

The models explain between 67% and 69% of the variation in the USR vote. The results corroborate our second hypothesis: a 1 percentage point increase in the number of residents who signed the initiative brought a 0.32% higher vote share for the USR in that locality at the 2019 EP elections and approximately half of that at the 2020 parliamentary elections.

**Table 2: The share of signatures for the initiative and the USR vote (OLS regressions)**

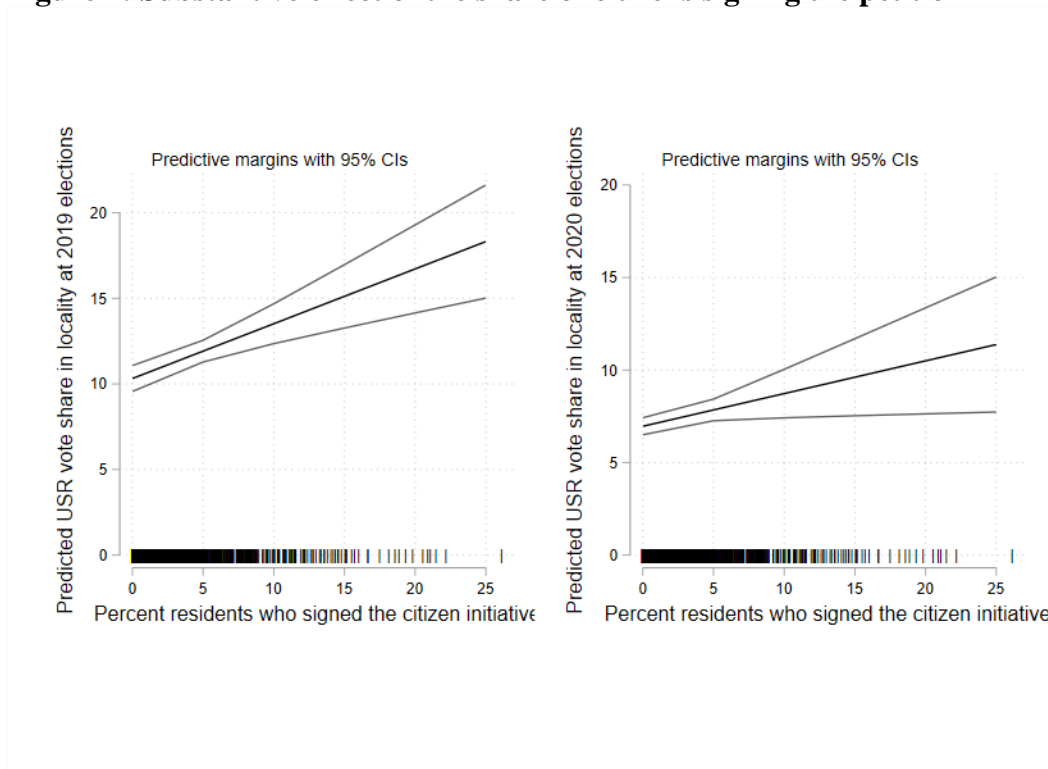
	M1 (2019)	M2 (2019)	M3 (2020)	M4 (2020)
% residents signed citizen initiative	0.399*** (0.067)	0.320*** (0.074)	0.176** (0.083)	0.177** (0.078)
USR vote % 2016 elections	1.351*** (0.107)	1.229*** (0.131)	0.589*** (0.101)	0.548*** (0.091)
USR vote % 2019 elections			0.517*** (0.048)	0.507*** (0.047)
Local party branch	2.554*** (0.693)	2.425*** (0.668)	0.316 (0.230)	0.366 (0.232)
Population (log.)	0.746*** (0.247)	0.731** (0.281)	-0.181 (0.149)	-0.151 (0.172)
Urban	-1.091** (0.493)	-1.356** (0.527)	-0.844** (0.402)	-1.025** (0.430)
Distance to major city (log.)	-1.691*** (0.420)	-1.576*** (0.399)	-0.182 (0.273)	-0.153 (0.269)
Local human development		7.464*** (2.033)		2.324** (1.103)
Constant	7.126** (2.760)	3.757 (2.915)	1.917 (1.375)	0.678 (1.400)
R <sup>2</sup>	.673	.693	.685	.693
N	3181	3079	3180	3078

Notes: Significance at \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01; robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.

Figure 2 displays predicted probabilities based on models 2 and 4 showing that a switch from the minimum to the maximum percentage of residents signing the legislative initiative in the sample

is associated with an increase in the USR vote share of 8 percentage points at the 2019 EP elections and 4.4 percentage points at the 2020 parliamentary elections.

**Figure 2: Substantive effect of the share of citizens signing the petition**



To understand whether the electoral returns of the citizen initiative resulted from a mobilization effect, we re-ran our differences in differences analyses, having turnout as the outcome variable.

Table A1.3 presents the findings. The difference-in-differences models run on the balanced sample show that, all other things being equal, the assignment of signature collection points is associated with a 2.5 percentage point increase in turnout at the 2019 elections and a 2 percentage point increase if the 2020 parliamentary elections are also included.

Last but not least, we analyzed individual-level data from the 9<sup>th</sup> round of the European Social Survey to further probe our argument regarding core voter mobilization via the sponsoring of the citizen initiative. The survey was fielded in Romania in 2019, thus the question regarding whether the respondent had signed a petition in the last 12 months overlaps with the ‘No

convicts' signature collection period. As can be seen from Table A1.4, the share of respondents who signed a petition in 2018 and have voted for the USR in 2016 is several times higher than that of any other party.

### **Robustness checks**

A first robustness check was to implement a series of difference-in-differences analyses using a doubly robust regression approach (Sant'Anna and Zhao 2020) instead of the standard two-way fixed effects model. The former uses inverse probability tilting matching and a two-step modelling strategy that includes a logit regression to account for the probability of an observation to be treated and an outcome regression. The doubly robust difference-in-differences is seen as a solution for concerns regarding the challenges posed to causal inference by potentially heterogeneous treatment effects. We implement it using the `drdid` module in STATA (Rios-Avila, Sant'Anna, and Naqvi 2021).

The regressions shown in Table A2.1 are run both with controls (party branch in locality, local human development score, urban status, population and distance to major city) and without. The positive and substantial effect we revealed in the above analyses is corroborated for treated localities for both the 2019 and the 2020 elections. The magnitude of the effect is similar in both cases to those presented in Table 1 above.

Second, we ran the difference-in-differences regressions again on a matched sample that uses entropy balancing weights which also account for differences in anti-corruption action and mean electoral volatility in the locality apart from the other covariate matching. Anti-corruption action can be considered a proxy for the increased saliency of corruption for local voters. Similar to previous studies (Klašnja and Pop-Elecheș 2022), we measure anti-corruption action with a

binary variable indicating whether any politician holding office in the locality was indicted by the DNA in the three years before the election.<sup>12</sup> In the context of a stable menu of parties and given the irrelevance of regional parties, greater electoral volatility in past elections in the locality might indicate a larger pool of voters who are willing to switch their vote choice and might also be more likely to experiment with a new political party, such as the USR. Mean electoral volatility is computed using the Pedersen Index formula for the 2000-2012 parliamentary elections. The results presented in Table A2.2 show that the main findings of the difference-in-differences analyses are robust to matching on these additional covariates. The same is true if the two variables are included as controls for the regressions on the number of signatures, as shown by Table A2.3.

## **Conclusions**

This article is the first to bring evidence that party-sponsored citizen legislative initiatives can have positive electoral spillovers, and it does so based on a causal identification strategy. Previous studies have assumed that parties engage in sponsoring citizen legislative initiatives not only to increase their visibility, signal issue ownership or increase the salience of issues that matter to them, but also because they are motivated by potential electoral gains. Our case study shows that a party can indeed benefit electorally from sponsoring a citizen initiative and

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<sup>12</sup> We collected data on corruption cases at locality level from the DNA's press releases issued between 2015 and 2018. We aggregated the number of cases of politicians indicted at locality level and then created a dichotomous variable. In total, 147 localities out of 3,181, or 4.6% of the cases, experienced some form of recent anti-corruption action prior to the 2019 elections.

illustrates how this effect is realized through a mobilization of core supporters and an increased turnout. The positive outcome appears to be favored by an electoral campaign which clearly reused messages and slogans from the citizen initiative campaign and a situation in which the main issue promoted by the citizen initiative remains salient on the public agenda at the time of elections.

From a normative perspective, such actions might be perceived as problematic: a hijacking of a citizen direct democratic tool for partisan gains, even less justified when a party is represented in Parliament and has direct ways to initiate legislation. On the positive side, a citizen initiative could enable the passage of legislation for which there is substantial popular support, but which would otherwise be blocked in parliament.

This case study also contributes to the research on the success of genuinely new parties in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly those embracing an anti-establishment reform profile (Hanley and Sikk 2016). These parties campaign on anti-corruption platforms, adopting vague or centrist positions on all policy dimensions (Enyedi and Deegan-Krause 2018), and emphasizing their competence and moral probity as opposed to the incompetence and corruption of the old party elites, a mixture sometimes labelled “centrist populism” (Stanley 2017) or “valence populism” (Zulianello 2020). Usually, the breakthrough of these parties is followed by a failure to develop strong organizations on the ground, and they end up being replaced by even newer political parties (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). The USR's decision to sponsor the citizen initiative helped them not only to strengthen their claim of ownership over the anti-corruption issue, but also in building their party organization outside the main urban areas. Their strategy can thus provide a blueprint for similar, young party

organizations in party systems where the mainstream parties are seen as highly corrupt and partisanship is relatively weak (Engler 2016; Ibenskas and Sikk 2017).

Future studies could adopt a comparative research design to collect cross-national data on various types of party-led citizen initiatives and test their relationship with the electoral performance of the sponsoring parties under different institutional configurations and political opportunity structures. This would allow for better understanding of whether the timing of the initiatives, their ideological content or the profile of the parties sponsoring them influence electoral outcomes, as well as to uncover any mediating contextual factors, such as the frequency of parties' usage of direct democratic tools.

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Figure 1

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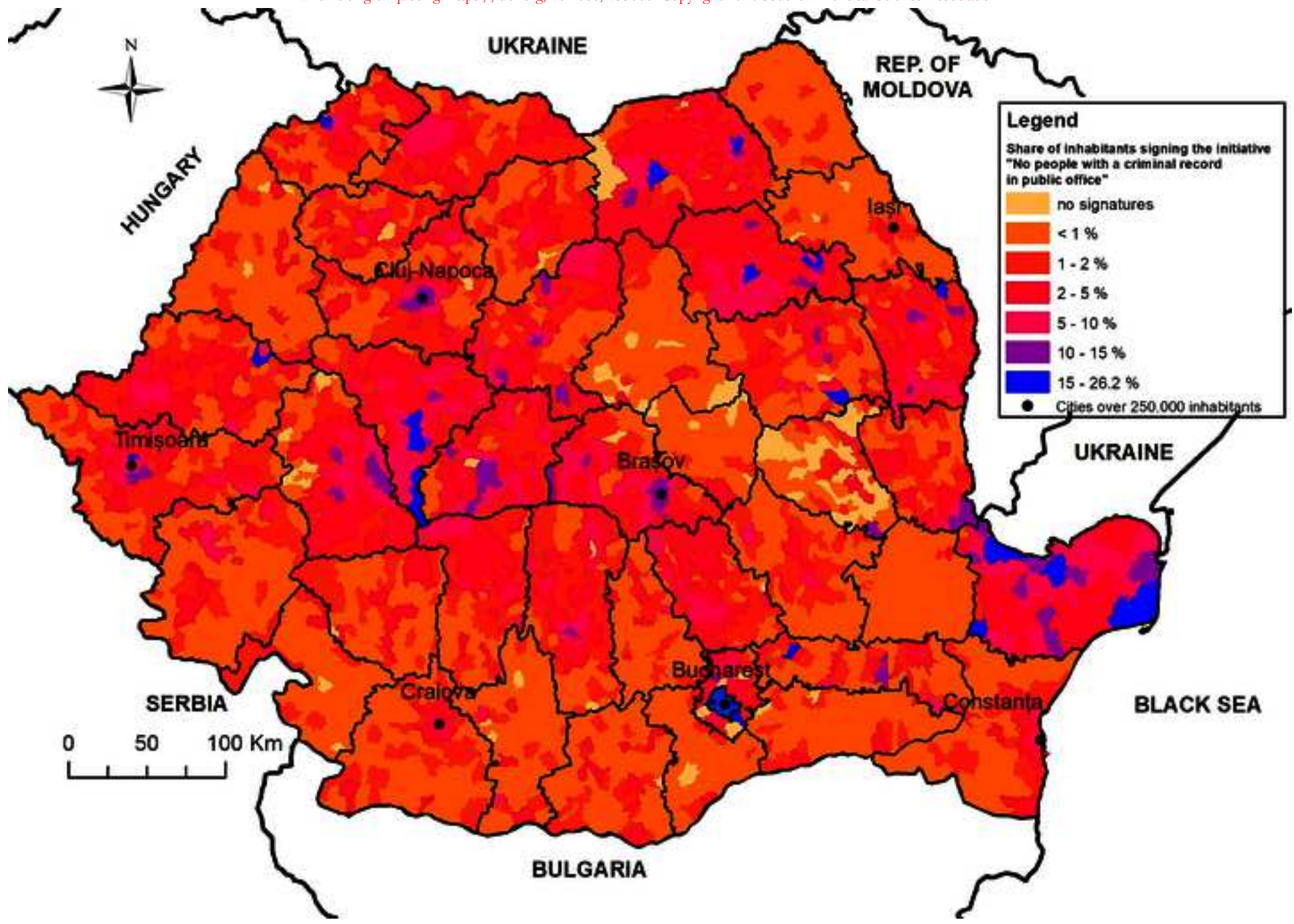
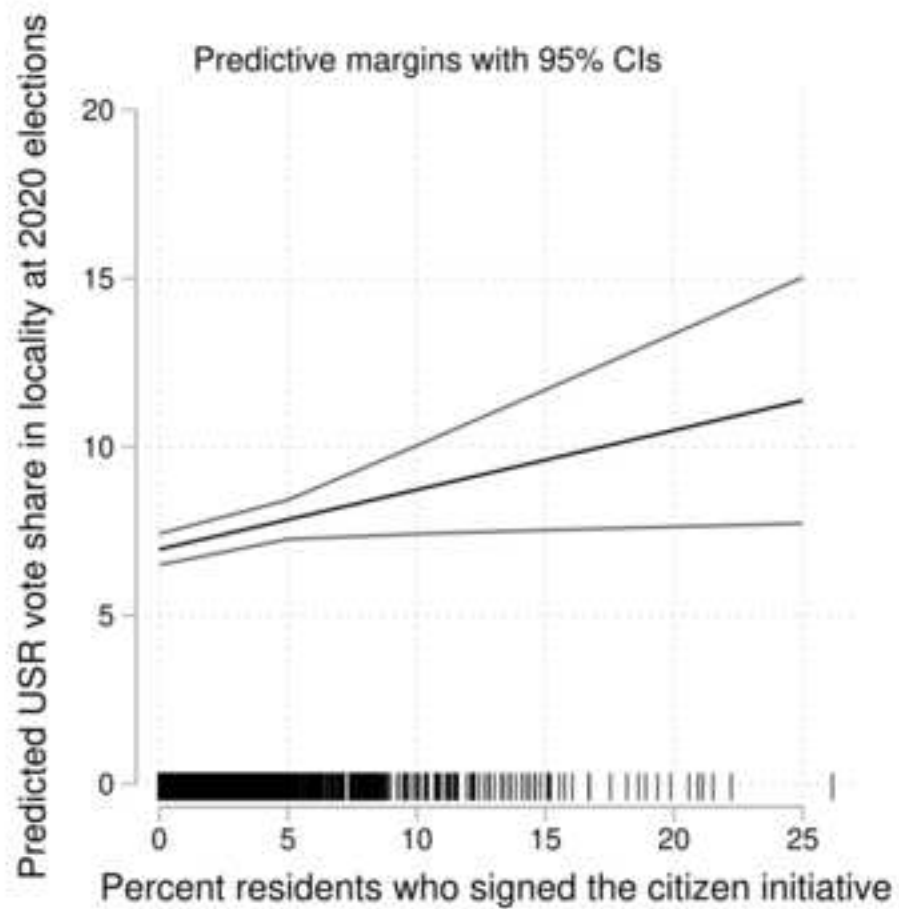
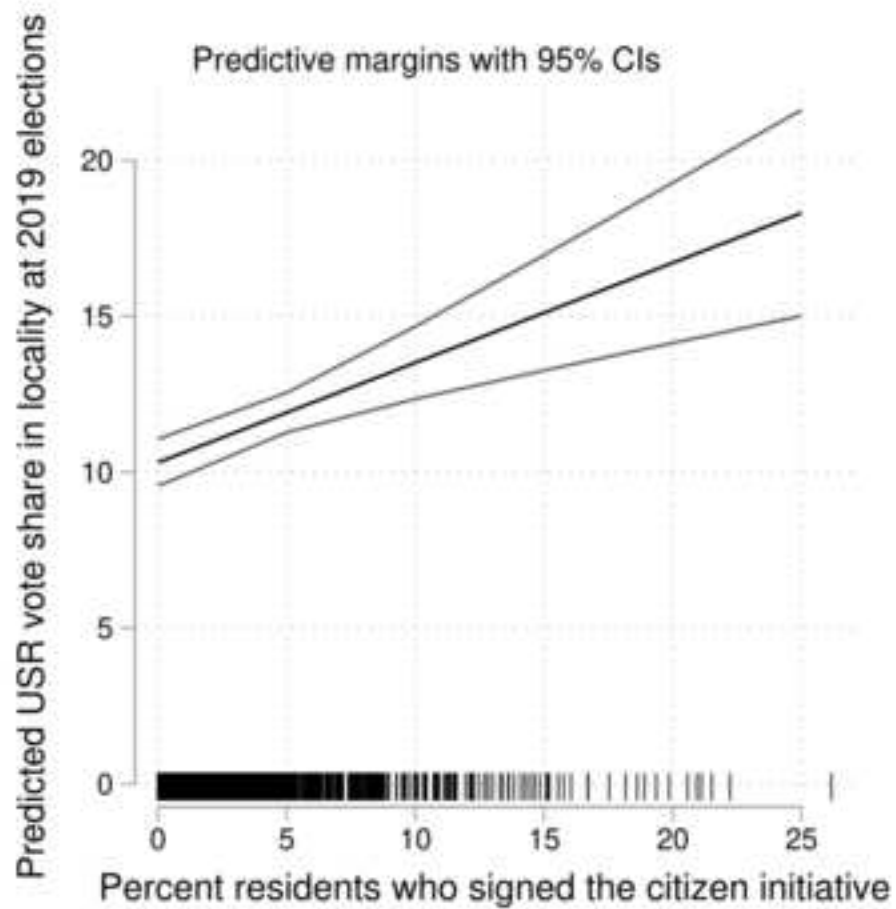


Figure 2

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## Online Appendix

### The electoral returns of party-sponsored citizen legislative initiatives

#### Appendix 1: Supporting data and analyses

##### Party-sponsored citizen initiatives in Europe (1990-2022)

Out of the 196 referendums held on citizen initiatives in Europe since 1990 (Centre for Research on Direct Democracy 2023), 70 were sponsored by political parties. We identified these cases by relying on information from the yearly reports published by the European Journal of Political Research under the Political Data Yearbook project and from the volume edited by Nohlen and Stöver (2010). The data on government vs opposition status comes from Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2022), the information on new parties was retrieved from Chiru et al (2021), while the vote share data relies on the ParlGov data base (Döring et al 2023). Of the citizen initiatives not sponsored by political parties three were launched by youth party organizations and a fourth one by a media personality that would later launch a new party (Slavi Trifonov's ITN in Bulgaria).

**Table A1.1: Referendums on party-sponsored citizen initiatives in Europe (1990-2022)**

Country	Date	Title	Party name	Opposition	New party	Vote Share
Bulgaria	1/27/2013	Nuclear Power Referendum (construction of a new nuclear power plant)	The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)	1	0	17.7
Hungary	7/29/1990	Direct election of the President	The Social Democratic Party of Hungary (MSZP)	1	0	10.9
Hungary	12/05/2004	Referendum on privatisations within the health care system	Workers Party	1	0	3.2
Hungary	03/09/2008	Abolition of fees for convalescent treatments	Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ)	1	0	42
Hungary	03/09/2008	Abolition of tuition fees for higher public education	Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ)	1	0	42
Latvia	2/18/2012	Russian as second official language	The National Alliance (NA)	0	0	7.84
Liechtenstein	11/08/1992	Abolition of the 8% threshold for parliamentary elections	A newly formed minor party with no seats in parliament	0	1	0

Liechtenstein	11/08/1992	Codification of discrimination ban in the Constitution	A newly formed minor party with no seats in parliament	0	1	0
Liechtenstein	8/30/2020	Balanced representation of the sexes in political bodies (HalbeHalbe)	Free List	1	0	12.62
Liechtenstein	6/26/2022	Exemption of pensioners from the franchise (cost contribution)	Democrats for Liechtenstein (DpL)	1	1	11.14
Lithuania	5/23/1992	Presidential System	Sąjūdis (the Reform Movement of Lithuania)	1	1	21.17
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission VIII: Implementing the law on illegal privatisations, accounts, shares and the failure to respect protective legislation	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission II: Law on illegal privatisations	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission I: Law on illegal privatisations, devalued accounts, shares and the failure to respect protective legislation	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission III: Abolition of the consequences of illegal privatisations and future privatisations of State property	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission IV: Re-establishment and reimbursement of devalued private bank accounts	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission V: Recording the value of long-term capital investments	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission VI: Restoring the value of devalued assets belonging to the State	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	8/27/1994	Initiative Submission VII: Unification and transparency in protective legislation	The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	1	0
Lithuania	10/20/1996	Compensation for lost assets prior to 1990	Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS–LKD)	1	0	31.34
Lithuania	6/29/2014	Constitutional reform	LVŽP	1	0	3.88
Malta	04/11/2015	Spring hunting of birds	The Democratic Alternative (DA)	1	0	1.8
Slovakia	10/22/1994	Retrospective disclosure of financial transactions regarding privatisations	ZRS (Union of the Workers of Slovakia)	1	1	7.35
Slovakia	5/24/1997	Direct presidential elections	KDH, Hungarian Coalition Party, Democratic Union, Common Choice	1	0	9.81

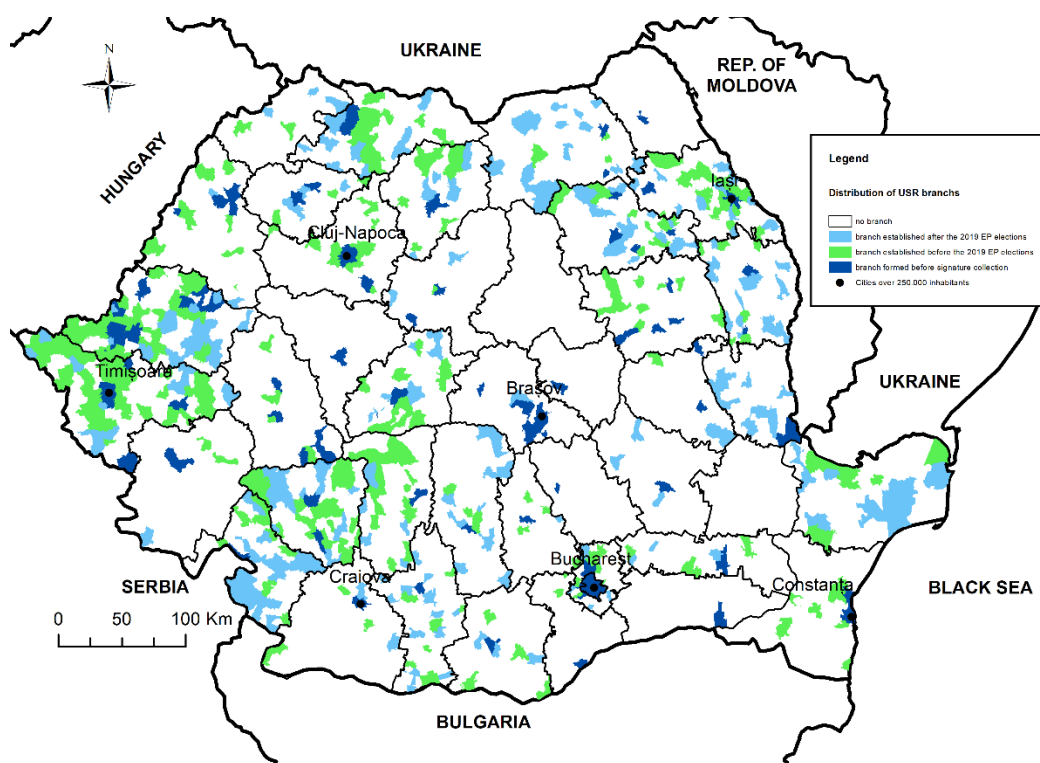
Slovakia	9/26/1998	No privatisations of strategically important enterprises	Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	0	0	34.97
Slovakia	11/11/2000	Amendments to the Electoral Law in order to hold early elections of the National Council	HZDS and SNS	1	0	18.04
Slovakia	9/18/2010	Abolition of concession fees for broadcasting and television	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	9/18/2010	Limitation of parliamentary immunity	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	9/18/2010	Reduction of the number of parliamentary seats	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	9/18/2010	Ceiling price for official vehicles	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	9/18/2010	Elections via internet	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	9/18/2010	No right of reply for office holders	Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	1	1	12.14
Slovakia	1/21/2023	Procedure for dissolving parliament (citizens' initiative)	Direction – Slovak Social Democracy - SMER–SSD, Voice – Social Democracy - HLAS–SD, Socialisti.sk	1	1	7.33
Slovenia	12/08/1996	Electoral system for the National Assembly: Initiative B (launched by the SDS)	The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)	1	0	3.34
Slovenia	11/27/2022	Care Act	The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) Independents' Party (Landesring der Unabhungigen - LdU)	1	0	23.48
Switzerland	03/03/1991	Citizen's initiative on promotion of public transport	Greens	1	0	4.2
Switzerland	2/20/1994	Citizen's initiative to protect the alpine regions from transit traffic	Greens	1	0	6.1
Switzerland	12/04/1994	Citizen's initiative "For sound health insurance"	Social Democrats (SPS)	0	0	18.5
Switzerland	6/25/1995	Citizen's initiative "To expand the state old age-, widows-, orphans- and disability insurance"	Social Democrats (SPS)	0	0	18.5
Switzerland	12/01/1996	Citizen's initiative "Against illegal immigration"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	14.9
Switzerland	06/08/1997	Citizen's initiative "Negotiations on joining the EU: let the people decide!"	Swiss Democrats	1	0	3.1
Switzerland	06/08/1997	Citizen's initiative "For a prohibition on the export of materials of war"	Social Democrats (SPS)	0	0	21.8
Switzerland	9/24/2000	Citizen's initiative "Increased citizens rights through referendums with counter-proposals (constructive referendum)"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	22.5
Switzerland	11/26/2000	Citizen's initiative "For a more flexible old age-, widows- and orphans insurance - against raising the retirement age for women"	Greens	1	0	5
Switzerland	11/26/2000	Citizen's initiative "For a flexible retirement age for men and women from 62 upwards"	Greens	1	0	5
Switzerland	11/26/2000	Citizen's initiative "Saving on army and defence spending - for more peace and forward-looking jobs (redistribution initiative)"	Social Democrats (SPS)	0	0	22.5
Switzerland	12/02/2001	Citizen's initiative "For a capital gains tax"	Greens	1	0	5
Switzerland	11/24/2002	Citizen's initiative "Against the abuse of asylum law"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	22.5

Switzerland	5/18/2003	Citizen's initiative "Yes to fair rents for tenants"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	22.5
Switzerland	06/01/2008	Citizen's initiative "For democratic naturalisations"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	28.9
Switzerland	06/01/2008	Citizen's initiative "Popular sovereignty instead of government propaganda"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	28.9
Switzerland	11/28/2010	Citizen's initiative "for the expulsion of criminal foreigners" (expulsion initiative)	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	28.9
Switzerland	11/28/2010	Citizen's initiative "for equitable taxes"	Social Democrats (SPS)	0	0	19.5
Switzerland	06/09/2013	Citizen's Initiative «Popular election of the federal government»	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	26.56
Switzerland	11/24/2013	Citizen's initiative «Family initiative: tax deductions for parents who raise their children by themselves too»	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	26.56
Switzerland	02/09/2014	Citizen's initiative «The abortion financing is a private matter - discharge of the health insurance by cancellation of the costs of termination of pregnancy from the compulsory basic health insurance»	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	26.56
Switzerland	02/09/2014	Citizen's initiative «Against mass immigration»	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	26.56
Switzerland	11/30/2014	Citizen's initiative of 19.10.2012 «to end tax breaks for wealthy foreigners» (Abolition of lump sum taxation)	Alternative List	1	0	0
Switzerland	11/30/2014	Citizen's initiative of 30.03.2013 «Save our Swiss Gold» (Restrictions for central bank gold reserves)	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	26.56
Switzerland	03/08/2015	Citizen's initiative of 5 November 2012 «Strength families! For tax free children and education supplements»	Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland (CVP)	0	0	12.3
Switzerland	03/08/2015	Citizen's initiative of 17 December 2012 «To replace of value added taxes by taxes on energy»	Green Liberal Party (GLP)	1	0	5.38
Switzerland	6/14/2015	Citizen's initiative of 15 February 2013 «to impose inheritance of millions for our Old-Age and survivors' insurance AHV (Reform of inheritance tax)»	Social Democratic Party (SVP) and the Greens	0	0	13.58
Switzerland	2/28/2016	Citizen's initiative of 05 November 2012 "For marriage and family - against the marriage penalty"	Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland (CVP)	0	0	11.65
Switzerland	2/28/2016	Citizen's initiative of 29 December 2012 "For the enforcement of the deportation of criminal foreigners"	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	29.39
Switzerland	9/25/2016	Citizen's initiative of 06 September 2012 "For a sustainable and resource efficient economy (green economy)"	Greens	1	0	7.06
Switzerland	11/27/2016	Citizen's initiative of 16 November 2012 "For an orderly nuclear phase-out"	Greens	1	0	7.06
Switzerland	9/23/2018	Citizen's initiative "For healthy, environmentally friendly and fair food products (Fair Food Initiative)".	Greens	1	0	7.06
Switzerland	9/23/2018	Citizen's initiative "For Food Sovereignty"	Greens	1	0	7.06
Switzerland	11/25/2018	Citizen's initiative "Swiss law instead of foreign judges (initiative for self-determination)".	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	29.39
Switzerland	9/27/2020	Citizen's initiative «For moderate immigration (limitation initiative)»	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	0	0	25.59

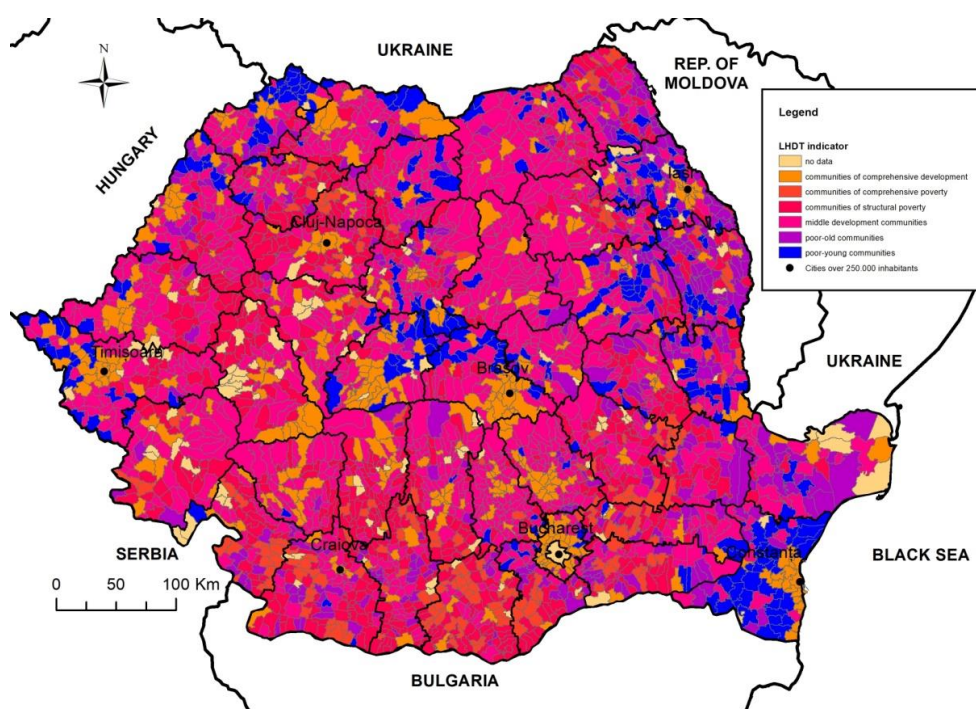
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**Figure A1.1: USR local branches as of April 2020**



**Figure A1.2: Local Human Development Typology Index**



**Table A1.2 Results of the entropy balancing matching**

		Treat			Control		
		mean	variance	skewness	mean	variance	skewness
Raw	Local Human Development	0.63	0.01	-0.06	0.47	0.02	0.23
Balanced	Local Human Development	0.63	0.01	-0.06	0.63	0.01	0.78
Raw	Party branch	0.41	0.24	0.36	0.01	0.01	9.95
Balanced	Party branch	0.41	0.24	0.36	0.40	0.24	0.40
Raw	Urban	0.66	0.23	-0.65	0.04	0.04	4.62
Balanced	Urban	0.66	0.23	-0.65	0.64	0.23	-0.60
Raw	Population (log.)	10.25	2.21	0.01	8.10	0.40	0.77
Balanced	Population (log.)	10.25	2.21	0.01	10.21	0.34	-1.05
Raw	Distance to major city (log.)	4.27	0.36	-1.52	4.14	0.34	-1.08
Balanced	Distance to major city (log.)	4.27	0.36	-1.52	4.27	0.39	-1.37

**Table A1.3: The evolution of turnout in treated localities vs. elsewhere**

	M1 (raw)	M2 (raw)	M3 (balanced)	M4 (balanced)
Treated locality post 2018	1.026*	-0.825*	2.549**	1.997**
	-0.603	-0.434	-1.289	-0.864
2019 EP election	7.243***	7.313***	5.622***	5.898***
	-0.154	-0.152	-1.151	-0.975
2020 parliamentary election		-4.821***		-9.267***
		-0.139		-0.623
Constant	41.196***	41.197***	38.095***	38.095***
	-0.075	-0.08	-0.322	-0.288
R <sup>2</sup> within	.427	.523	.531	.776
N	6362	9542	6158	9236
Elections	2	3	2	3
Clusters	3181	3181	3079	3079

Notes: Significance at \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; robust standard errors clustered by locality in parentheses.

**Table A1.4: Party identifiers who signed a petition in 2018**

Party	Share yes	Share no
PNL	22.76	77.24
PSD	12.12	87.88
PMP	34.4	65.6
UDMR	10.56	89.44
ALDE	16.77	83.23
USR	54.29	45.71
other	0	100

Source: European Social Survey, round 9; observations weighed with analysis weight.

Note: party identifiers were coded based on the respondents' declared vote at the 2016 elections, supplemented for missing cases by responses to the question regarding closeness to a political party.

## **Appendix 2: Robustness checks**

**Table A2.1: The evolution of the USR vote (doubly-robust linear regressions)**

	M1 (2019)	M2 (2019)	M3 (2020)	M 4 (2020)
Treated locality	4.212*** (0.469)	1.615** (0.806)	2.738*** (0.426)	1.860*** (0.654)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	6362	6158	6360	6156

Notes: Significance at \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; the treatment model uses inverse probability tilting while the outcome model uses weighted least squares.

**Table A2.2: The evolution of the USR vote in treated localities vs. elsewhere, with additional covariate matching (anti-corruption action and mean electoral volatility)**

	M3 (balanced)	M4 (balanced)
Treated locality post 2018	1.237* (0.730)	1.392** (0.623)
2019 EP election	11.022*** (0.566)	10.944*** (0.519)
2020 parliamentary election		5.744*** (0.470)
Constant	7.073*** (0.182)	7.073*** (0.208)
R <sup>2</sup> within	.870	.811
N	6158	9236
Elections	2	3
Clusters	3079	3079

Notes: Significance at \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; robust standard errors clustered by locality in parentheses.

**Table A2.3: The share of signatures for the initiative and the USR vote, controlling for anti-corruption action and mean electoral volatility (OLS regressions)**

	M1 (2019)	M2 (2019)	M3 (2020)	M4 (2020)
% residents signed citizen initiative	0.389*** (0.067)	0.309*** (0.074)	0.177** (0.083)	0.177** (0.078)
USR vote % 2016 elections	1.342*** (0.108)	1.214*** (0.126)	0.594*** (0.101)	0.553*** (0.091)
USR vote % 2019 elections			0.514*** (0.049)	0.502*** (0.048)
Local party branch	2.485*** (0.690)	2.345*** (0.660)	0.310 (0.231)	0.358 (0.233)
Population (log.)	0.854*** (0.224)	0.820*** (0.257)	-0.151 (0.149)	-0.118 (0.173)
Urban	-0.920* (0.493)	-1.156** (0.513)	-0.779* (0.397)	-0.960** (0.424)
Distance to major city (log.)	-1.634*** (0.408)	-1.510*** (0.384)	-0.177 (0.272)	-0.147 (0.268)
Anti-corruption action	-0.768 (0.568)	-0.733 (0.542)	-0.407 (0.249)	-0.409 (0.263)
Mean electoral volatility	6.395** (2.579)	7.238** (2.891)	0.862 (1.271)	1.113 (1.284)
Local human development		7.741*** (1.880)		2.397** (1.130)
Constant	4.183 (2.636)	0.569 (2.622)	1.422 (1.348)	0.063 (1.472)
R <sup>2</sup>	.679	.700	.685	.693
N	3180	3079	3179	3078

Notes: Significance at \* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\*p < 0.01; robust standard errors clustered by county in parentheses.