ORIGINAL PAPER

Millennials, a Swing Vote in the Romanian Presidential Elections

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Abstract:
The Millennial Generation in Romania was born in the last years of the Communist regime but first cast their ballot under democratic rule. In 1990, after the fall of the totalitarian regime, Millennials were aged 6 to 9. They first went to the polls in the 2000 general and presidential elections.
In the 2014 presidential elections, as the entire generation had reached the voting age, Millennials played a significant role. The second most numerous generation in Romania, they have since had a greater influence on the outcome of elections. Regarding birth years, my study refers to the Pew Research Center classification (Pew Research Center, 2018), which places them between 1981 and 1996. As a result, Millennials were aged 18 to 33 in 2014, and 23 to 38 in 2019. The results of the first round of the 2019 presidential elections point to vote splitting within the Millennial Generation: 39% voted for incumbent Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and 31% for Dan Barna, the leader of the Save Romania Union (USR). Other Millennials voted for former leader of the Social Democratic Party Viorica Dăncilă (10%), Theodor Paleologu (7%) and Mircea Diaconu (5%). In the second round, Klaus Iohannis defeated Dăncilă. Millennials voted massively for Klaus Iohannis: 84,16%.

Keywords: *political participation; generation; Millennials; vote; elections.*

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Political participation

The subject of political participation has long been studied along with its sociological and psychological determinants: socio-demographic factors (Verba and Nie, 1972; Lazarsfeld et al., 2004; Berelson et al., 1986; Blondel, 1963; Mayer and Schweisguth, 1989) or attitudes and partisanship (Campbell et al., 1980;). Income, education (Gallego, 2010; Schlozman, Brady and Verba, 2018), occupation, race, gender (Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001), age (Franklin, 2004), emotions, political interest, and social capital (Putman, 2000; Norris, 2002) are only some of the variables taken into consideration by leading theories on political participation.

Approaches to political behaviour are heterogeneous because social realities are far more complex than we tend to believe. In order to understand political participation in Romania, it is essential to understand the way social institutions encourage a broad range of activities such as voting, volunteering, contacting public officials, protesting or running for office. Almond and Verba ([1963] 1996: 158) assert the value of political participation of citizens in a democratic system. In their view a democratic political culture resides in a *"set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, perceptions"* (Almond and Verba, ([1963] 1996: 158) which encourage participation.

The new pattern of social engagement in Romania is apparent in an extensive analysis of protests held over the past years. Never before in recent political history have so many citizens gotten involved in civic activities as they have recently. Two important parties emerged during the 4-year interval between legislative elections: The Save Romania Union (USR), The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) and The Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity (PLUS), under the leadership of former technocrat Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș. Not only does a new party such as USR govern the country as part of a coalition with The National Liberal Party (PNL), but an allegedly far-right party such as AUR managed to enter Parliament in the December 2020 elections.

Campbell et al. underline that voting is a part of one's habitual behaviour in terms of voting or non-voting ([1960] 1980: 93). My study focuses on voting as a dimension of Millennials' political participation. As a young generation, the pattern of their voting or non-voting can influence election results. The findings of the Michigan School show that greater attachment to a party determines higher psychological commitment (Campbell et. all, ([1960] 1980: 143). With respect to political generations Berelson et al. consider that voting options are determined by the political context of voters' reaching the voting age: *"The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and vote is partly a function of the political conditions under which each generation comes of ages"* ([1954] 1986: 59).

Assmann (2006:211) considers that the individual and collective memory are interconnected and puts forward four types of memory: individual memory, social memory, political memory, and cultural memory. She underlines that social memory develops due to lifetime family interactions and by peer interaction. From her perspective *"generational memory"* is one type of social memory, which refers to the fact that people from the same age-cohort share a common way of life. *"The members of a generation tend to see themselves as different from preceding and succeeding generations. Within a generation, there is much tacit knowledge that can never be made fully explicit to members of another generation." (*Assmann, 2006: 214).

Millennials, a Swing Vote in the Romanian Presidential Elections

Regarding the collective impact on the individual, French sociologist Le Bon underscores the importance of common characteristics on defining a group or a *"crowd"*: *"Under certain given circumstances, and only under those circumstances, an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it."* (Le Bon, [1896] 1996:43).

Civic engagement in Romania has increased during the past decade simultaneously with social and political protests taking place across the country during the past five years. Dogaru-Tulică (2019) affirms that in Romania the social media had its role in the political participation increase, such as protesting, because Facebook acted as *"a catalyst for the mobilisation of former silent groups to emerge from the online environment and to argue their beliefs in the offline environment"*.

From Putman (2000:17) perspective the concept of social capital refers to the importance of social network and of the norms of reciprocity in the society. In the same time, Putman (2000:32-33) explain the social change in terms of intracohort and intercohort interactions, while the first is observable and unstable, the second is it is less obvious and harder to change. From this point of view, understanding this process allows us to explain the trend of turnout

Regarding the evolution of the turnout, amid the factors that may affect it, Putman (2000: 33) identifies the *"generation gap in civic engagement"*. He underlines as a possible explanation that disengagement is due to the lack of time and money. Furthermore, the anxiety caused by the economic pressure related to the work market may decrease the social bond and civic engagement (Putman, 2000: 204). In Romania, during the last decade, civic engagement increased, but the turnout in presidential elections reached the lowest rate in the post-communist period.

Millennials at the turning point of Romanian politics

Political behaviour in Romania is a process of political and social reconfiguration following a long transition towards democratisation. At the end of 1947, after the abdication of King Michael I, Romania officially became a Communist state under the name The Socialist Republic of Romania (The Chamber of Deputies, n.d.). The 1989 Revolution ended a totalitarian regime that shaped the life of the Romanian people for over 40 years.

Sociologist Karl Mannheim ([1927] 1952), who wrote the essay "The Problem of Generations", postulated the idea that the concept of generation differs from actual social groups. *"Generation location is based on the existence of biological rhythm in human existence – the factors of life and death, a limited span of life, and ageing."* (Mannheim, 1952: 290). In this regard, a generation shares „a common location in the historical dimension of the social process" (Mannheim, 1952: 290).

The Millennial Generation or Generation Y, also called Millennials or GenMe (Twenge, J., 2014), is a cohort following Generation X and preceding Generation Z. Upon exploring how the generation has voted and gotten involved in issues such as the reform of justice laws, political renewal and protests against mainstream parties, it becomes clear that Romanian Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, largely resemble Millennials worldwide. The entire generation had the right to vote in 2014. Throughout the past decade, political behaviour has gained consistency. The first registered protests after the collapse of Communism occurred during the Millennials' formative years. Most Millennials were in their twenties, the youngest were 16, while the oldest citizens were 31 years old. In 2021, they are aged 25 to 40.

Never before has a particular generation been objectified as have the Millennials. The object of debate has ranged from the way of life, to preferred habits, and educational background, working and living style. Millennials get married later in life and are more likely to live in their parents' home than previous generations. In Romania, the median marriage age has increased. In 2014, when Millennials were between 18 and 33 years old, the median age at first marriage was 27,3 in the case of women, and 30,4 in that of men (Agerpres, 2016).

Scott (2018, 17) asserted that the Millennials *"were born alongside a particular era of American capitalism, and that the popular culture of this era serves to legitimate this social order"*. In contrast to the American Millennialls, Romania does not have the same ethnic and religious diversity.

Stein (Time Magazine, 2013) underlines the conditions that made possible the similarities between the Millennials worldwide: *"globalization, social media, the exporting of Western culture and the speed of change"*. About the characteristics of the generation, also Stein states that self-esteem is an important part of their evolution due to the way they were raised to belive they are importants and that gave them an entitlement atitude. Also he underlines that Millennials tend to extend the life stages by placeing themselves *"between teenager and adult"* (Time Magazine, 2013). Withal, the social media use and the develpoment of tehnology increase the way the generation interacts through screens and texting. This type of communication has led to an increase in peer pressure.

2019 was a crucial year for the political arena in Romania. There were two types of elections – European Parliament elections held in May and Presidential elections held in November. Looking back at local electoral history, presidential elections are the most relevant in terms of interest and turnout. In the last 30 years turnout in presidential elections has been significantly higher than in any other type of elections. A high turnout was registered in European elections, with over 49% of voters casting their ballot (Central Election Bureau of Romania, 2019). It was the highest turnout in the history of European elections in Romania.

With regard to the 2019 presidential elections, the turnout of the first round was the lowest after the fall of the Communist regime: 47,66% turned out (Central Election Bureau of Romania, 2019), while the second round saw a minor increase: 49,87 % (Central Election Bureau of Romania, 2019), that is just a little over 9 million Romanians that went to the polls.

The low turnout was the result of all opinion polls and the general public strongly expecting the rise to pole position of then-President Klaus Iohannis. Dwindling enthusiasm of left-leaning and PSD voters equally accounted for the turnout.

Figure 1: The results of the European Parliament elections versus Presidential elections
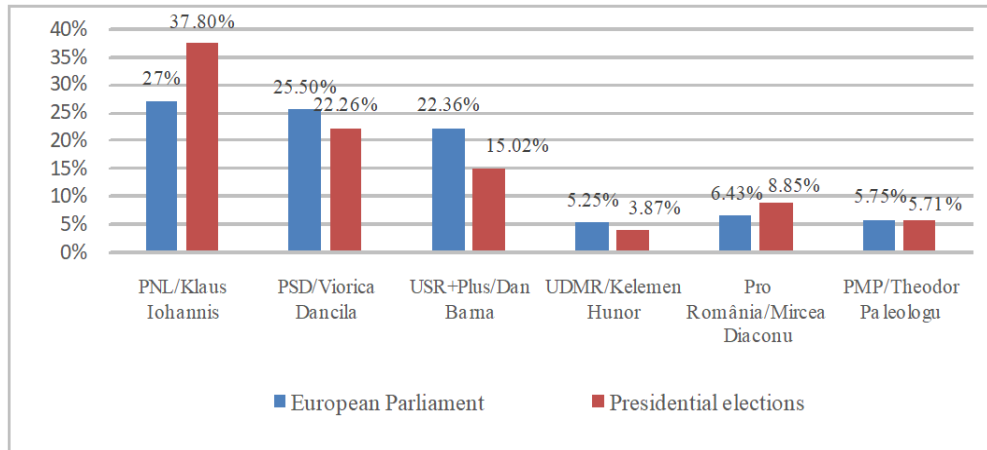
Source: Self-made from Central Election Bureau of Romania data (2019)

Given that in the European Parliament elections and the first round of presidential elections similar turnouts were registered, my study focuses on analyzing how the electorate voted, including by generation factor. A comparison between results of parties contending in the European election and the presidential candidate's results, backed by the same parties, was most needed in order to identify potential similarities between each nominee electorate and the party that endorses it.

A resemblance is visible in the way that the electorate of the Social Democratic Party voted in the two types of elections. PSD reaped 25.50% of votes and Viorica Dăncilă won a 22.26 percent. This phenomenon is also apparent with regard to the PMP electorate. The party itself won 5.75%, and its presidential candidate, Theodor Paleologu, got 5.71% of the votes.

With respect to the UDMR - Kelemen Hunor case, differences are in line with expectations regarding a niche party that exclusively represents the local Hungarian minority. Parliamentary and European Parliamentary elections mobilize poll-goers to a significantly larger extent than Presidential elections which its candidate has a nil chance of winning.

The most important percentage changes can be identified in the PNL - Klaus Iohannis and USR+PLUS - Dan Barna competition. USR+PLUS is an alliance between two new political parties, generally drawing on an anti-corruption and anti-mainstream party message. The new parties claim right-wing values. PNL, the oldest party in Romania, is a right-wing, liberal party.

Both parties vie for the same electorate, the major difference being determined by the PNL's having secured an invincible electoral core, due to its seniority and tradition. USR+PLUS currently has a volatile electorate, generally composed of young people with huge expectations from its leaders.

While in the case of European elections the division of right-wing voters between the PNL and USR+PLUS is quite clear, Presidential elections saw significant awareness of the role of the useful vote. This accounted for Klaus Iohannis's securing the vote of a large segment of the USR+PLUS electorate.

My study focuses on the analysis of exit poll datasets provided by the Center for Urban and Regional Sociology (CURS) and the Avangarde Socio-Behavioral Studies

Group at the 2019 presidential elections, as well as partially at the 2019 European elections. At the 2019 presidential election 22.994 voters were polled. Over 22.500 people were polled at the European elections. The official results indicated that estimates were accurate both in predicting the winner and the candidates' hierarchy.

The first round of the 2019 Presidential elections

According to the Exit Poll run by the CURS-Avangarde institutes at the 2019 presidential elections, 24% of voters were Millennials. The Baby Boomers Generation accounts for the highest share with 33%, while 31% of Generation X members cast their vote. 39% of Millennials who went to the polls voted for then-President, Klaus Iohannis, while 31% preferred Dan Barna, of the USR+Plus Alliance. Only 14% voted for PSD candidate, Viorica Dăncilă. Independent candidate Mircea Diaconu secured a slim 5%.

Figure 2: How generations voted in the presidential elections held in Romania in 2019
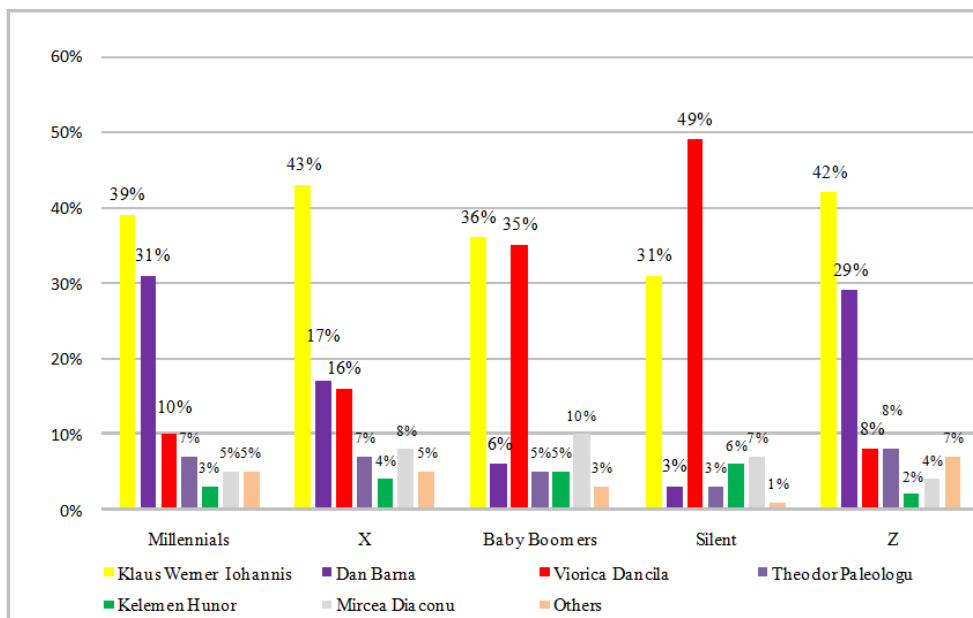
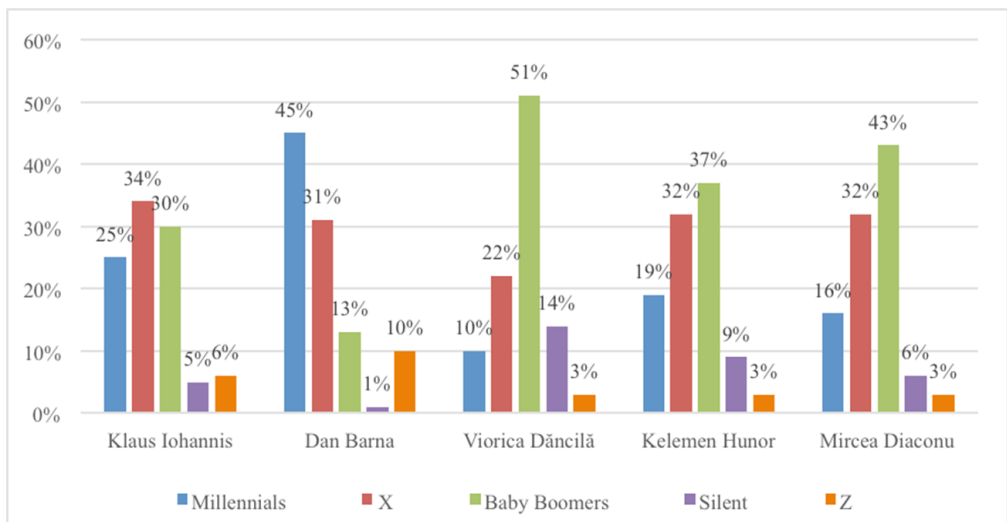Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

A similarity between the Millennial Generation and Generation Z regarding the vote is apparent – both generations primarily supported Klaus Iohannis and Dan Barna. 42% of Generation Z voted for then-president Klaus Iohannis, and 29% opted for Dan Barna (2% less than Millennials). Just 8% of new generation voted for the Social Democratic Party candidate. Upon comparing the political options of these generations with other generations it is apparent that 43% of Generation X voted for Klaus Iohannis, while only a mere 17% cast their vote for Dan Barna and 16% for Viorica Dăncilă. Baby Boomers and the Silent generation displayed similar electoral options. Almost half of the Silent generation (49%) voted for Viorica Dăncilă (the highest percent from a generation), 31% for Klaus Iohannis and only 3% for Dan Barna. Baby Boomers were

divided between Klaus Iohannis (36%) and Viorica Dăncilă (35%). Only 6% of them backed Dan Barna.

The vote for Klaus Iohannis is high across all generations, while the lowest score is registered with older voters. 31% of the Silent Generation endorsed him. Support for Dan Barna decreased inversely proportional to the older generations opposed to Viorica Dăncilă from whom the support increased directly propotional to the age of generations.

Figure 3: The vote by generation for each candidate in the first round of the presidential elections held in Romania in 2019

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

The data show that the majority of Millennials voted for Klaus Iohannis, but Dan Barna also managed to win an important slice of this electorate: 31%. From the generation perspective, when it comes to the profile of Dan Barna voters, 45% were Millennials, 31% belonged to the X Generation, 13% were part of the Baby Boomer Generation and 10% were members of the Z Generation. Barna voters were young people, with 55% being Millennials or members of the Z Generation. However, the impact of the Generation Z on the outcome of presidential elections was low mainly because just a minor share had the voting age. As Figure 2 and Figure 3 show Generation X and the Boomers preferred Klaus Iohannis and Viorica Dăncilă, while the lowest procent obtained by Dan Barna from a generation was from the Boomers (6%). 17% of Generation X members voted for Dan Barna, whereas 43% voted for Klaus Iohannis. The Millennial Generation is the second largest in Romania, after X, while the Boomers come in third, and are still close to the Millennials. To win the elections, Dan Barna would have had to get to the second round. As the data show, if he had managed to steer the Millennials votes away from Klaus Iohannis, his chances of getting there would have been higher.

From the gender perspective, more Millennials men voted (53%) than women (47%). An important factor is the level of education. 49% of voting Millennials have

higher education. 60% of voters live in urban areas, and 40% live in rural areas. 36% of them are employees with higher education, 14% of them are employees with average education, while 22% are uneducated workers and 14% are unemployed.

In order to be able to identify any differences, including within a generation, I divided the population belonging to the Millennials - Y Generation into two – younger Millennials and older Millennials, in the exit poll dataset.

Figure 4: Younger Millennials versus Older Millennials votes in the first round of the presidential elections held in Romania in 2019
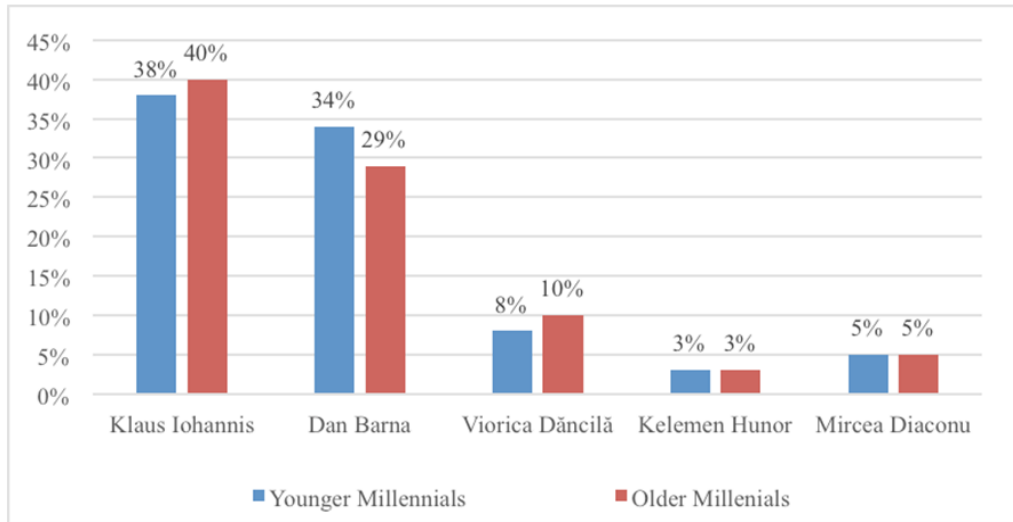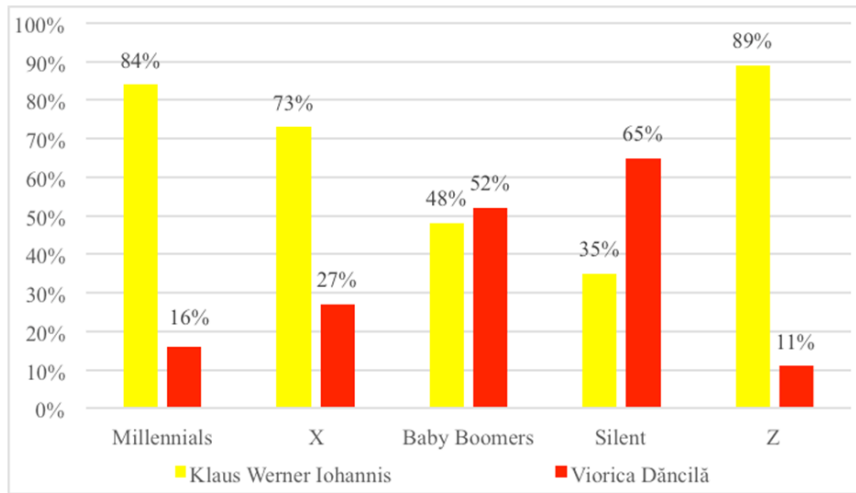

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde
The data indicate small differences between these two categories.

The secound round of the 2019 Presidential elections
According to the Exit Poll conducted by CURS and GSSC Avangarde at the second round of the 2019 presidential elections, 23% of poll-goers represent Generation Y (Millennials). That is 1% lower than the first round. As had also been the case in the first round, Baby Boomers accounted for the highest turnout (34%), while Generation X had a 30% share. The way generations voted in the second round of presidential elections is extremely relevant. Millennials voted *en masse* for Klaus Iohannis. 84% of them voted for him and only 16% for left-wing candidate Viorica Dancila.

Figure 5: The vote by generation for each candidate in the second round of the presidential elections held in Romania in 2019
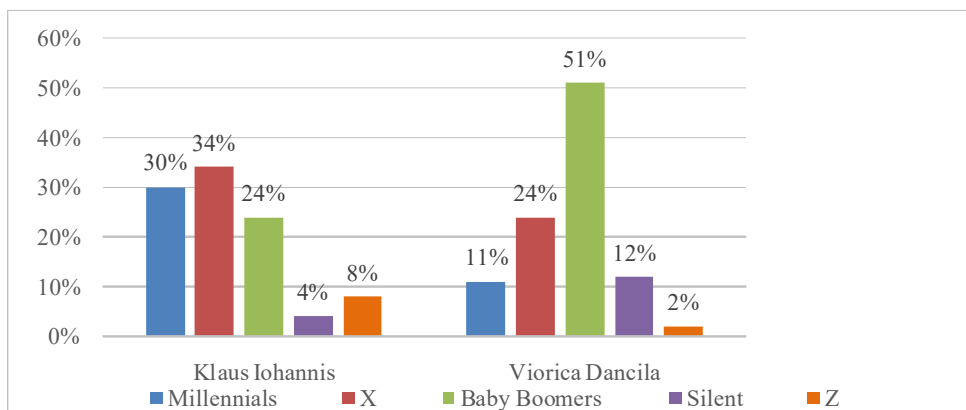

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

In the 2019 presidential elections, the gap between Millennials (and the Z Generation) and Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation is apparent in *Figure 3* and in *Figure 5*.

Millennials hold the most important share among Klaus Iohannis voters, 30%, while Viorica Dăncilă only 11%. Generation X, which is the largest in Romania, voted for Klaus Iohannis, but the difference between the voters of the two opponents is smaller than within the Millennial Generation: 34% versus 24%.

Figure 6: The voters profile for each candidate depending on generation

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

From the gender perspective, Millennials men accounted for 53% while women for 47%. 48% of them have higher education, 39% hold a high school diploma, and 13% have secondary school education. 60% of them hail from urban areas and 40% from rural areas. 37% are employees with high education, 15% are employees with average education, 21% are uneducated workers and 14% are unemployed.

Figure 7: Younger Millennials versus Older Millennials votes in the first round of the presidential elections held in Romania in 2019
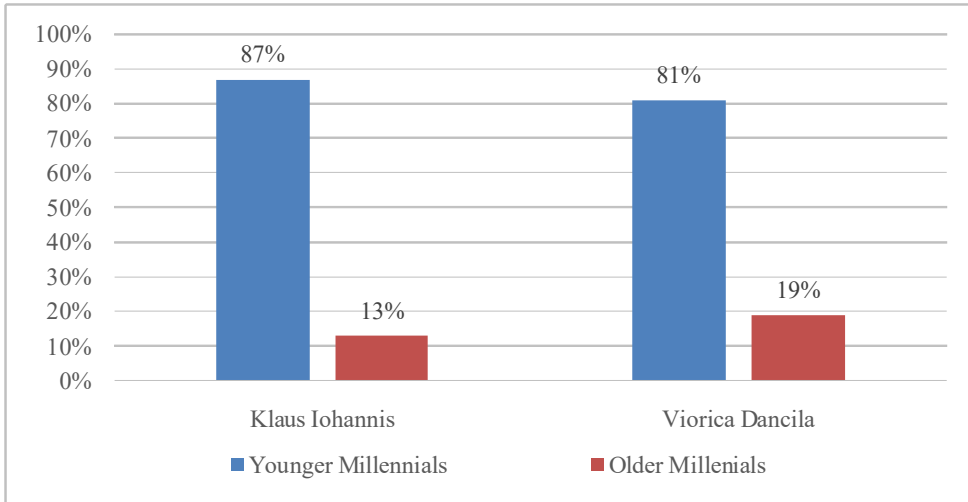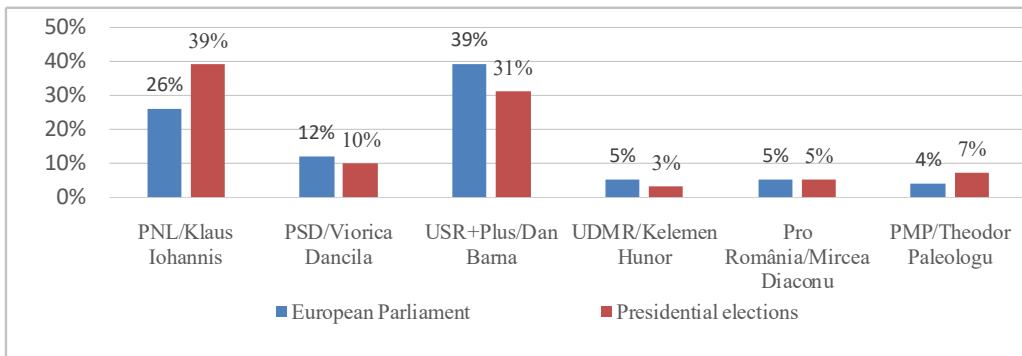

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

Was the Millennial Generation vote a swing vote in the 2019 presidential elections?

The two graphs *(Figure 8 and Figure 9)* on voting patterns reveal that in most cases differences between votes obtained by parties in the European elections and candidates backed by these parties are slim, with two exceptions – the two most important right-wing parties in Romania and their candidates failed to overlap their votes. Thus, while in the case of Millennials, USR+PLUS managed to obtain the majority of their votes in the European elections, in the Presidential elections the candidate backed by the party, Dan Barna, lost 8% of these votes to Klaus Iohannis.

Figure 8 Comparing voters options of the Millennials at the 2019 European elections and the first round of the 2019 presidential elections
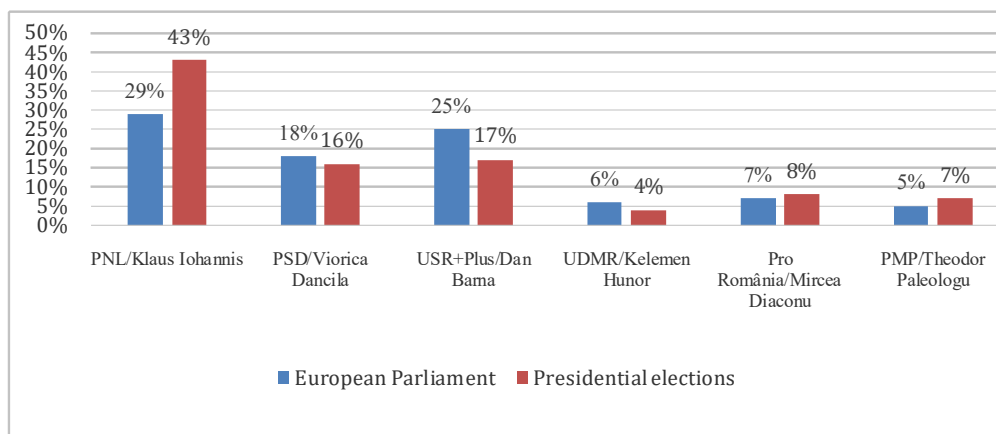

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

The same situation emerges in the case of Generation X. In the presidential elections Barna secured 8% less than the USR+PLUS score in the European elections, while Klaus Iohannis won14% more than PNL in the European elections.

Figure 9: Voters options of the X Generation at the 2019 European elections and the first round of the 2019 presidential elections

Source: Self-made from the databases of exit poll drawn up by the CURS-Avangarde

In the presiential elections, Klaus Iohannis managed to secure the vote of the largest generation (Generation X). He obtained 43%, more than the other two opponents together, Dăncilă won 16% of their votes and Barna 17%. It was a major winning for the then-President of Romania. Six months earlier, PNL won only 29% of the Generation X voters.

Given the similarities between the two rounds of elections, the European elections and Presidential elections, it is highly relevant to analyse distribution from the perspective of the generation turning out to vote, in order to identify possible reasons for voters switching support for party candidates.

The data from the two exit polls show that there are no differences between the turnout of both rounds in terms of voters' distribution by generation.

	European Parliament elections turnout	*Presidential elections Round 1 turnout*
Millennials	25%	24%
X	30%	31%
Baby Boomers	33%	33%
Silent	6%	6%
Z	6%	6%

Comparing the results of the European elections and presidential ones in terms of generation, PNL secured only 26% of the Millennials's vote, while USR earnt 39% of them. Dan Barna did not manage to preserve this part of the electorate during the following few months. From this point of view, based on corroborated information on the two types of elections, two scenarios were possible: (1) changing the campaign

rhetoric of the PNL regarding vote usefulness and preserving Millennials' vote by adapting the public messages to the needs of the Millennial Generation or (2) changing the candidate. Pre-electoral polls showed that most PSD voters would elect Dan Barna in the second round rather than Klaus Iohannis. Generation X could have been convinced to vote for Dan Barna, considering that in the 2019 European Parliament Elections 25% of X Generation voters cast their ballot for USR. Dan Barna lost 8% of these voters. When comparing the two sets of elections, it becomes apparent that Dan Barna lacked support of the X Generation, as he failed to secure votes of his party's hardcore electorate. His electoral decisions, as well as tensions amid USR members throughout 2019 – the election year – took a heavy toll on him at the presidential elections.

When assessing the profile of voters by education attainment in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the Millennials generation displays a significantly higher level of education. Higher education was a key characteristic with Millennials (49%), Generation X (32%), Baby Boomers (19%), the Silent Generation (16%) and Generation Z (12%).

The Millennial Generation is mostly employed in the private sector. 76% of Millennials stated that they worked in this sector, while only 19% were employed in the public sector. 67% of Generation X members worked in the private sector, while 39% of Baby Boomers, 4% of the Silent Generation, and 3% of Generation Z, respectively were also employed in this sector.

56% of college graduate Millennials voted for USR+PLUS in the European elections, while 20% of them cast their ballot for PNL and a mere 6% preferred the PSD. High school graduates voted for PNL (34%), for PSD (33%) and for USR+PLUS (13%).

Accordind to exit polling in the first round of the 2019 presidential election, the share of votes by education resembled the 2019 European elections, with a significant increase in the turnout of Generation Z voters with higher education (25%). Thus, 49% of Millennials who voted reported higher education. While 31% of Generation X had higher education, only 19% of Baby Boomers and 18% of Silent Generation had a college degree.

In the first round of the presidential election, 42% of Millennials with higher education voted for Dan Barna, 32% for Klaus Iohannis and only 6% for Viroica Dăncilă. In the case of those with high school education, 51% voted for Klaus Iohannis, 21% for Viorica Dăncilă and only 11% for Dan Barna.

Conclusions

Millennials are today's young adults. Their generation will have an impact on electoral results for decade to come. Understanding their political participation will allow researchers, politicians and political experts to comprehend electoral behaviour of a relevant category. Generation Z has started to vote, but most of them have not reached the voting age so their influence will be noted in the 2028 elections.

The data show a sustantial split between old and younger generations. Whether this trend will remain constant remains to be seen. This study aims at stating that the generation replacement has made possible a political change in legislative elections over such a short period of time. The party led by former president Traian Basescu (The People's Movement Party), that headed by former Prime Minister Victor Ponta (PRO Romania), as well as the party led by former prime minister Călin Popescu Tăriceanu (The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats) failed to obtain the 5% electoral threshold. USR became the third most important Romanian party and the new party AUR secured a

major win in the elections. It is worth noting that AUR is a party that was widely unknown to many citizens. It won 10% of votes in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Comparing the first round of the Presidential elections and the European elections, Dan Barna managed to get only 42% of the votes of Millennials with higher education, while USR +PLUS got the vote of 56% of them. Things were the other way around in the case of Klaus Iohannis and PNL. The president-elect obtained the votes of 32% of Millennials with higher education, while PNL received merely 20%.

Millennials changed their political options in the short span between two types of elections. They voted mostly for USR at the European elections, but secured Klaus Iohannis' election as president. The same pattern applied to the X Generation. As for Barna voters, the percentage of Millenials was similar to that of citizens who voted for Klaus Iohannis. Nevertheless, Dăncilă and Barna secured roughly the same percentage – 17% and 16%, respectively, 27% of Generation X voted went for the PSD candidate in the second round. Only 16% of Millennials cast their ballot for Viorica Dăncilă in both voting rounds.

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