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UNDERSTANDING VOTER BEHAVIOR AND ELECTION DYNAMICS: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS IN KOSOVO

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze whether the 2021 local elections in Kosovo can be classified as first-order elections based on sufficient evidence. Employing a quantitative approach and utilizing surveys among eligible voters, the methodology allowed for observing indicators supporting the local elections' classification as first-order. An empirical study was conducted using Google Forms, encompassing the entire region of Kosovo and involving a representative sample of respondents (n=596). The study also relies on data from the Central Electoral Commission (CEC). The research design employed a comparison approach and a deductive method. The study's key findings reveal that despite the diverse practices and ideologies of developed countries, the most recent local elections in Kosovo should be recognized as first-order elections.*

Keywords: *Local Elections; First Order Elections; Municipalities; Kosovo*

INTRODUCTION

A fundamental aspect of "democratic governance is holding free and fair elections" (Felsenthal and Nurmi 2018, 5). Elections without these characteristics may or may not have occurred. However, their relationship to the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people", as Abraham Lincoln phrased, is questionable (Mieder 2005, 15).

Studies indicate that national elections are considered first-order elections, while local institutions are equally crucial for improving a nation's quality of life and overall state. This is due to the greater attention given to national elections, which often determine the parliamentary composition and the country's leadership. Despite their significance, elections at lower geographical levels are considered second-order elections and have received comparatively less scholarly attention than higher-level elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). More specifically, elections that result in the formation of national governments are the most significant for the vast majority of voters and political parties (Schakel and Jeffery 2013); in contrast, local elections are regarded as second-order because voter preferences are more strongly influenced by the outcomes of national elections than by local election-related factors. In other words, the assertion is made that voter behavior in local elections, akin to that observed in other second-order domains, is influenced by factors stemming from first-order domains. Conversely, under other circumstances, voters will be more likely to cast a different vote, as they

do in European elections, and vote expressively, for instance, for small political parties and new parties, to condemn or support the parties in power at the national level (Gendzwill et al. 2022).

Furthermore, while determining whether an election is first- or second-order, Lijphart (1997), Nachmias et al. (2012), Freire (2004), and Reif et al. (1997) distinguish between two groups of possibilities in a significant way. Voters can make the crucial decision of who should lead the country in "first-order" elections. These include presidential elections in nations like the United States, Costa Rica, and the Philippines and general elections in nations with parliamentary governments like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany. In contrast, "second-order" elections, which determine the outcome for smaller positions like those held by regional, municipal, and local politicians, are less significant because they are still susceptible to the impact of a national party's policies. Furthermore, second-order elections often exhibit certain characteristics, such as lower voter participation, as fewer individuals feel compelled to vote due to the perceived lower stakes involved. The outcome is then closely related to how well-liked national parties are in a particular country as opposed to "second-order election campaigns" focusing on particular subjects, particular candidates, or local occurrences (Karp et al. 2002).

Otherwise, Marien et al. (2015) emphasize that voters are influenced by local preferences rather than national and ideological ones when they define local elections as first-order and that some characteristics, such as personality, experience, network, or personal connection - the voter's closeness to the candidate's family - strongly influence the choice of vote.

In this study, we examine whether the latest local elections in Kosovo present sufficient evidence to classify them as first-order elections. Through the analysis and comparison of the recent local and national elections, we observe a noteworthy shift in voter behavior that was previously absent. In essence, these elections have demonstrated two significant developments.

First, there is a significant difference in voter behavior, or even the opposite, with fewer votes in the central elections and more in the local ones. While one party wins convincingly in the central elections with more than 50% of the vote, it only manages to win a very small number of municipalities in the local elections, held only six months later.

Second, because the number of votes a party received at the local and national levels was roughly identical, this significant difference did not occur in the most recent and previous elections. As a result, the argument that there was a significant and roughly comparable proportion of voter participation in both the parliamentary and municipal elections within six months also supports the claim that there was a change in voter behavior in Kosovo's most recent local elections.

This study is grounded on the premise that local considerations are prioritized by voters, leading to a higher likelihood of divergence from their party preferences in parliamentary elections. Furthermore, examining gender differences in the perception of voting divergence in national elections, along with variations in age, education, region, and location regarding voting divergence in parliamentary elections, constitutes our objective.

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VOTER MOTIVES AND PREFERENCES

According to certain studies, it has been found that voters' choices of candidates are influenced by multiple factors rather than a single one. It has been asserted by Miller and Wattenberg (1985) that by applying a two-dimensional retrospective/prospective politics/performance coding method to the verbal evaluations of candidates, voters can be categorized. Moreover, these two distinct methodologies have demonstrated that concerns regarding his past performance primarily influenced Carter's ratings. In contrast, evaluations of Reagan encompassed both the candidate's anticipated performance and future policy measures. In other words, according to the researchers in question, people cannot only judge candidates' past performance. However, they are often concerned with candidates' future policy implementation, although historically, neither retrospective nor prospective considerations have been the dominant focus of political thinking. Nevertheless, the public may consider candidates' explicit policy opinions when deciding during elections.

On the other hand, the Downsian model appears to be most suitable for challengers, as they are frequently evaluated based on their proposed future policies. Referring to the case of Kosovo, data from an exit poll with a sample of 2400 respondents, including 9 municipalities of the Republic of Kosovo in the study, indicates that regarding the decision to vote for mayor, the majority of respondents, or 74.5%, indicating that they made their voting decision before the election campaign. This suggests that voters in Kosovo place greater reliance on the retrospective voting preferences of candidates rather than prospective preferences (RTV Dukagjini 2021).

Regarding the motivations and preferences of candidates among American voters, Miller et al. (1986) point out three key criteria throughout history, such as competence first, followed by integrity and credibility. Competence, a criterion tied to performance, was the main dimension utilized by citizens from 1952 to 1984. Since 1964, however, the importance of integrity and dependability in candidate evaluations has increased. The general expectations that the public has of a president's performance seem to be influenced by both prior presidents' policies and present contenders' agendas.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, voters conclude from their observations of previous presidents regarding the qualities and behaviors they associate with political success. Consequently, they evaluate other candidates based on similar characteristics. As individuals consider these traits essential for effective governance, candidates strategically emphasize certain attributes during the campaign to convey their competence, integrity, and trustworthiness. Voters may also take into account a variety of other models that outline the evaluation procedure. Voters may evaluate candidates, for instance, by contrasting them with an ideal president or abstract ideal. According to this concept, regardless of their perception of Mondale, Reagan voters would favor Reagan due to his perceived high level of competence, making him their ideal choice for the presidency. An alternative model would allow voters to directly compare the two candidates across various typical characteristics (e.g., is Reagan more competent than Mondale?). Differentiating between different theories of individual-level cognitive processing becomes crucial in understanding the overall preferences of the candidates.

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For years, there has been a belief that assessing candidates based on their traits is emotionally driven, irrational, and unsuitable for politics. However, candidate evaluations emphasize practical matters of how a candidate would govern rather than concerns about performance. In general, these evaluations present an idealized image of the president as someone who can be trusted to effectively address the country's challenges honestly and unbiasedly (Miller et al. 1986).

VOTE DEVIATION

Since 1952, partisan voting patterns in congressional elections have diverged from presidential election results in two ways. First, there are often smaller variations between the party affiliations of strong and weak partisans (not shown due to data limitations in 2006 and 2010). Second, unlike in presidential elections, the exit rate does not change much from year to year. Both differences are attributed to the lower visibility of congressional races.

In presidential elections, the flood of information means that a particularly attractive candidate or compelling topic might touch the conscience of weak partisans, leading them to deviate from their conventional party affiliations; strong, tightly-knit partisans are more likely to resist. Information that might persuade weak partisans to defect is less likely to reach them in less well-publicized congressional contests. Weak partisans vote for their party affiliation when unaware of the candidates and issues. Particularly in the last two midterm elections, partisan turnout on both sides of the aisle was historically low (Elizabeth et al. 2018).

Karp et al. (2002) note that voters were influenced by the prospects for their party's candidate and their preferences for specific candidates when discussing vote divergence. As informed voters became aware that the electorate's vote would defeat their initial preference for a candidate from a particular party, a phenomenon known as "party voting desertions" emerged. Voters who stayed home because their party's nominee was unstable were more inclined to support more competitive and ideologically similar candidates. Those with a wide range of preferences and poor partisanship were likelier to switch parties. However, they were just as likely to vote strategically as voters with a strong sense of devotion to one party and a narrow range of preferences.

Marien et al. (2015) note, however, that in smaller municipalities, local candidates and their proximity to voters might override the preferences of national parties. Most respondents then discussed local factors concerning their voting motivations, citing everything from the candidates' stances on political matters to an evaluation of the current municipal authorities. It may be said that politics is quite local regarding municipal elections. Because voters directly know the individuals on the list, the election relies less on external factors. The idea that personality, experience, and personal networks matter more than ideology in municipal politics is strengthened (Marien et al. 2015).

THE KOSOVO 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS: A CASE STUDY

Kosovo has succeeded in building a strong legislative framework for local elections since the end of the war. Local elections in Kosovo follow democratic ideals, including fair competition and open voting. In formal terms, the mayor's role is highly powerful. Following Kosovo's Law on Local Self-Government, the municipality's mayor has extensive executive authority (Law on Local Self-Government 2008). On the other hand, the municipality, as a constitutional category in Kosovo, has its powers delegated by the central government, and a special case is local self-government in Kosovo, including the extended powers of the municipality for the non-majority communities living in the respective municipalities.

The municipality's powers include a wide range of local government issues it regulates (Law on Local Self-Government 2008). The municipality's revenues are numerous and come from many different sources (Law on Government Local Finance 2008), as are the responsibilities of local self-government arising from these powers, where the mayor has the right to issue ordinances and decisions within the scope of his competences (Law on Local Self-Government 2008). In this way, the municipality and the mayor greatly affect the standard of living of the people of Kosovo. As a result, this empirical study aims to investigate the most influential factors on the electorate that directly votes for the mayor of the municipality, with the hope of identifying the most determining factors for citizens to vote for their preferred candidate for mayor of the municipality.

The significant participation at the municipality's public meetings with the citizens, which it is obliged to organize twice a year, is the best indicator of the recent political emancipation of the electorate at the local level. Every municipality "frequently hosts, at least twice a year, public meetings in which any person or group with interest in the municipality may participate", as stated in Article 68, point 1, of the Law on Local Self-Government. At least two weeks before the meeting, the time and location are announced. One of the meetings is held during the first half of the year; this is one of the instruments for direct local public participation in democracy. The recent political emancipation of the electorate can also be argued for by the fact that in the last early national elections on 14 February 2021, the number of participants in these elections was considerably high; there were 903,379 voters, or 48.78% of participation (Central Election Commission 2021).

Kosovo uses a two-round majority system for local elections. According to well-known Albanian authors Omari and Anastasia (2010), this system allows voters to express their preference for a candidate in the first round even though their vote might not be "useful" because this candidate would not have a chance to win.

The different parties are not grouped until the second round. Once a voter's choice withdraws, they may choose another candidate they believe to be superior to the others still running. The majority system is considered more effective because it produces a more dependable political majority, a local government majority (Omari and Anastasia 2010, 274).

We aim to contribute to this literature by studying the case of the recent local elections in Kosovo. So, what explains the big change in voter behavior in Kosovo between the last parliamentary and local elections?

Studies that have attempted to address this issue have concluded that various sociological, psychological, and economic factors influence voter behavior in Kosovo. If our analysis is based on a study conducted in Kosovo about voter behavior from the post-war era until now (Sejdiu and Haliti 2017), three factors - or, more precisely, three changes - are highlighted as the most significant in Kosovar voters' behavior. First, the psychological component was important for an ideology party because it influenced how voters for an independent Kosovo acted immediately after the Kosovo War. As a result of the lack of a political culture, the voter's behavior has made it possible for political parties not to offer something concrete for the economy, security, education, infrastructure, energy, and other important areas. Then, in addition to this, there was the economic factor in voter behavior, where, as a result of poverty, clientelism, a system of patronage, corruption, lawlessness, etc., Kosovars voted for political parties that had fought for the country and were working for the declaration of independence.

Voting was perceived as an expression of loyalty for those who had participated in the war. The second type of voting behavior was rational, in which voters supported themselves or a particular party through lobbying to receive material or intangible rewards, such as employment or access to government contracts. Members of the family or party would then be proposed to various state-owned corporations and public institutions by the ruling party. Many organizations in Kosovo, particularly state firms that already had monopolies, were characterized by a sizable, ineffective, and clientelistic bureaucracy due to this patronage system (Sejdiu and Haliti 2017).

According to Qorri (2018), in a study conducted in Kosovo on the psychological aspects of voter behavior, the results are consistent with the idea that rational and irrational variables fight with one another when people make their voting decisions. In general, irrational factors will gain precedence, with logic playing a supporting role. The results of this study indicate that family, ideology, social identity, gender bias, and emotions significantly impact voting behavior.

Another study on "Albanian Political Culture in Transition: Does it Help or Hinder the Consolidation of Democracy?" was carried out in Albania. According to Bedini (2010, 7), political culture will not aid in consolidating democracy if people feel alienated by politics and let down by the political process and governance in general. The democratization process will have challenges once more if society and politics do not have a relationship built on mutual trust.

Peshkopia and Mustafa (2022) conclude that this significant shift in voter behavior or the significant decline in votes for the party that won the most votes in the central elections - in this case, the *Vetëvendosje* Movement - came as a result of many factors, including the total lack of qualified candidates for mayor, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lack of good or limited success in local governance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For this study, the quantitative method was used. The core value of this methodology is that it incorporates quantitative techniques for data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing up study findings (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 33). The quantitative method has made it

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easier to gather information to determine if Kosovo's most recent local elections may be deemed first-order elections. The questionnaire, a self-reporting tool, serves as the measurement instrument. The requests are formed of statements, and the answers are often provided on a Likert scale. The requests are divided into demographic questions and related categories to assess each variable. The research's selection design is cross-sectional, meaning that data is only gathered once throughout a given period. Secondary quantitative data from the Central Electoral Commission was also used in addition to the primary data to determine if the local elections provided evidence to be considered a first-order election.

Sample

Non-probability random sampling was used for this study. The intended audience was citizens over 18 years old in the Republic of Kosovo. The main condition for being part of the sample was that they had the right to vote. The total number of participants was (N=596), with N=(266) belonging to the female gender and N=(328) belonging to the male gender.

Measuring Instruments

In order to identify whether the last local elections in Kosovo indicate that they should be considered the first-order election, a structured questionnaire was used based on a review of the literature and data from the Central Electoral Commission. This questionnaire has answers divided on a Likert scale, which are presented in the form of statements from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree).

The Cronbach's Alpha value was examined to evaluate the questionnaire's internal consistency in measuring voting decisions. According to Table 1, Cronbach's Alpha value for the questionnaire statements measuring the factors influencing a voter's vote choice is mean and acceptable (α=.620).

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient Reliability of the Individual Questionnaire for Assessing the Choice to Vote in the Most Recent Local Elections (Source: Authors' research)

Variable	N	Statements	Cronbach's Alpha
Decision to vote	596	8	.620

Procedure

This research has continued its application in practice following a literature review, the emergence of hypotheses, and the formulation of research questions. Various citizen forums were employed through social networks to distribute the questionnaires online using Google Forms. This technique made it possible to include people of all ages and most of Kosovo's towns, including urban and rural ones. Since the research was conducted this way, no official approval was required; only the study's purpose was made clear on the first page of the questionnaire, after which the citizens were given detailed instructions on how to complete the

forms, and their successful completion was tracked. The respondent's involvement in this study was entirely voluntary. It took several days to distribute the questionnaire. The research's ethical norms, such as ethical communication, complete anonymity, transparent explanations, etc., were always upheld when collecting data. For the analysis of quantitative data, SPSS was employed.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, it was arranged and analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Initially, the data from the CEC and descriptive data such as minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation were analyzed. Then, a variable was created for the perception of citizens with the right to vote concerning their decision to vote in the most recent local elections, as well as a variable for the citizens' perception of the deviation of voting from the parliamentary elections. Comparative and descriptive analysis were used based on the main purpose and nature of the study, which is comparative, to understand if the last local elections in Kosovo indicate being considered a first-order election. Furthermore, based on the other goal that has to do with finding gender differences in the perception of vote deviation from national elections, the t-test was used; meanwhile, to find the differences regarding age, education, region, and location with vote deviation from parliamentary elections, the ANOVA test was used.

RESULTS

Participation and Election Results According to the CEC

First, voting patterns and election outcomes from 2000 to 2021 are examined to determine whether Kosovo's most recent municipal elections should be considered first-order. Election participation rates are seen as a crucial measure of the high level of political commitment among voters and, consequently, of the character of second-order elections. Despite the laws granting people the ability to exercise their right to vote, some voters choose not to vote. The "order" of the various elections can therefore be determined by comparing the participation rates in elections at the various levels of government.

The decision of those with voting rights to participate in the most recent local elections is then evaluated by descriptive analysis of each statement from the questionnaire. Finally, we investigate the factors that influence voting divergence in parliamentary elections, including the influence of socio-demographic control variables such as gender, age, education, region, and location (rural vs. urban). The analysis of the percentage of participation and election results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of the Percentage of Participation and Election Results 2000-2021 (Source: Peshkopia and Mustafa 2022)

Year	Type of Election	Participation	LDK	PDK	AAK	LVV
2000	Municipal Assembly	79.09%	58.0%	27.3%	7.7%	-
2001	Parliament	64.3%	45.6%	25.7%	7.8%	-
2002	Municipal Assembly	53.8%	45.8%	29.5%	8.8%	-
2004	Parliament	53.5%	45.4%	28.8%	8.3%	-

2007	Municipal Assembly	39.4%	22.2%	39.3%	12.1%	-
2007	Mayors	39.1%	7	18	3	-
2007	Parliament	40.1%	22.6%	34.3%	9.6%	-
2009	Municipal Assembly	44.7%	24.5%	31.7%	15.9%	-
2009	Mayors	44.6%	7	15	7	-
2010	Parliament	45.3%	24.7%	32.1%	11.0%	12.7%
2013	Municipal Assembly	46.3%	25.6%	27.1%	14.0%	8.2%
2013	Mayors	46.3%	9	10	3	1
2014	Parliament	42.6%	25.2%	30.3%	9.5%	13.6%
2017	Parliament	41.3%	25.5%	33.7%		27.5%
2017	Municipal Assembly	44.1%	24.0%	22.1%	13.3%	15.7%
2017	Mayors	44.1%	8	5	7	3
2019	Parliament	44.5%	24.5%	21.2%	11.5%	26.3%
2021	Parliament	48.8%	12.7%	17.0%	7.1%	50.2%
2021	Municipal Assembly	41.6%	22.9%	21.8%	12.2%	22.7%
2021	Mayors	41.6%	8	8	5	4

Table 2 shows the evolution of the percentages of participation in local and parliamentary elections in Kosovo from 2000 to 2021. From what can be seen, the percentages of participation at the local level are almost the same as in the parliamentary elections. After the election results, the percentages of results between the parliamentary and local elections of the political parties do not differ much, except that big differences are observed between the last local and parliamentary elections, even after only 6 months.

In summary, regarding participation in local elections in Kosovo, they do not align with the concept of second-order elections. In contrast to previous research conducted in other countries, where local elections are classified as second-order, Kosovo does not indicate that the local level holds such a position. Therefore, the question arises as to whether the same conclusion can be reached when another defining characteristic of second-order elections, namely vote choice and motives, is investigated - first, the extent to which voters considered local-specific factors is analyzed.

Voting Motives as Perceived by Citizens with the Right to Vote

The questionnaire for evaluating the perception of voting motives perceived by citizens with the right to vote consists of seven statements. In this section of the questionnaire, a specific question has been created about the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections.

Table 3 in this paper provides a descriptive analysis of the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation associated with the questionnaire's statements on the reasons for voting as perceived by citizens entitled to vote.

Also, this table provides a descriptive analysis of each statement of the questionnaire used to assess citizens with the right to vote's decision to vote in the most recent local elections. There are seven statements in total. The minimum of all responses to the statements is 1, and the maximum of all statements is 5.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of the Statements in the Citizens' Questionnaire (Source: Authors' research)

Statements	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his governing program.	596	1	5	3.86	1.331
In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his political party.	596	1	5	2.80	1.603
In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his personality (an outstanding, charismatic personality).	596	1	5	3.64	1.425
I voted for the mayor candidate in the last local elections because of my close family ties with him.	596	1	5	1.57	1.101
In the last local elections, I decided to vote to punish the ruling party.	596	1	5	2.62	1.669
In the last local election, I decided to vote purely out of preference for the political party.	596	1	5	2.89	1.641
In the last local elections, I voted to support the best candidate.	596	1	5	4.20	1.262
In a recent local election, did you vote for the same party as in the last national election?	596	1	2	1.69	.464

For the statement, "In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his governing program", the mean is M=3.86, and the standard deviation is DS=1.331. For the statement, "In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his political party", the mean is M=2.80, and the standard deviation is DS=1.603. The mean and standard deviation of "In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of his personality (an outstanding, charismatic personality)" are M=3.05 and DS=.777, respectively.

For the statement, "In the last local elections, I decided to vote to punish the ruling party", the mean is M=2.62, and the standard deviation is DS=1.669. For the statement, "In the last local election, I decided to vote purely out of preference for the political party", the mean is M=2.89, and the standard deviation is DS=1.641. The mean is M=1.69, and the standard deviation is DS=.464 for the statement, "Did you vote for the same party as in the last national election?".

The statement with the highest average is "In the last local elections, I decided to vote, simply to support the best candidate", with the value M=4.20 and standard deviation DS=1.262. Whereas the statement with the lowest mean, "In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor because of the close family ties I have with him", with the value M=1.57 and standard deviation DS=1.101.

Table 2 shows the frequency with which various vote-choice categories were stated. The local environment undoubtedly influenced the decisions made by voters in October 2021. The three most often cited considerations for casting a vote were "the political party", "the identification of a candidate on a certain list", and "the personality and program of the government". When asked explicitly about the motives of voting, voters clearly emphasize the motives of local voting. Preferences for the party, to punish the ruling party, or for family,

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reasons are less common. This pattern of responses shows that voters take the local level seriously and claim that local considerations determine their voting behavior.

Analysis of Deviant Voting Behavior

Data was analyzed through the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A t-test analysis was used to analyze the gender differences regarding the vote deviation from the parliamentary elections' preferences.

Table 4: Group Statistics Regarding the Deviation of the Vote from the Preferences of the Parliamentary Elections (Source: Authors' research)

	Please select your gender	N	Mean	SD	SD with mean error
Vote Deviation	Male	328	1.69	.465	.026
	Female	266	1.69	.463	.028

Table 5: T-Test Analysis for Gender Differences Regarding the Deviation from the Preferences of the Parliamentary Elections (Source: Authors' research)

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-Test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Vote Deviation	Equal variances assumed	.091	.763	-.150	592	.881	-.006	.09378	-.038	.069
	Equal variances not assumed			-.150	567.996	.880	-.006	.09212	-.038	.069

The t-test study of the gender differences related to the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections is shown in the table above. According to the results, the group of men (N=328) had a mean of M=1.69 (DS=.465) in the answers to questions about the deviation of the vote, as opposed to the group of women, who had a smaller number of responses to questions about the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections, M=1.69 (DS=.463). According to the findings, t=-.150 and p.880 values indicate that the differences are invalid (Table 5).

Table 6: ANOVA Analysis for the Differences of Age, Region, Location, and Education Regarding the Deviation of the Vote from the Preferences of the Parliamentary Elections (Source: Authors' research)

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	Between Groups	.183	1	.183	.150	.698
	Within Groups	721.742	594	1.215		
	Total	721.924	595			
Region	Between Groups	6.188	1	6.188	1.288	.257
	Within Groups	2724.132	567	4.804		
	Total	2730.320	568			
Location	Between Groups	1.061	1	1.061	4.313	.038
	Within Groups	145.100	590	.246		
	Total	146.160	591			
Education	Between Groups	3.165	1	3.165	1.951	.163
	Within Groups	963.578	594	1.622		
	Total	966.743	595			

In Table 6, the significance analysis for age yields a value of .698; for the region, it yields a value of .257, and for education, it yields a value of .163. These values indicate no significant difference in terms of deviation from the preferences of the parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, if we examine the significance of the location (urban or rural) where the value .038 is found, we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections.

DISCUSSION

The objective was to determine whether Kosovo's most recent local elections yielded evidence to support their classification as first-order elections. As a result, an investigation was conducted into the voter turnout rates and election results from 2000 to 2021 (Table 2). A descriptive analysis was employed to evaluate the perception of eligible voters regarding their decision to participate in the most recent local elections and the variations in their voting choices compared to the preferences observed in the parliamentary elections.

These variables were considered to assess whether Kosovo's most recent municipal elections present evidence supporting their classification as first-order elections. Initially, an analysis was conducted on the voter turnout rates from 2000 to 2021, encompassing local and parliamentary elections (Table 2). This is because when discussing whether to view elections as first- or second-order, Lijphart (1997), Nachmias et al. (2012), and Freire (2004) relate it to the proportion of voters who participate in the elections. If we look at Table 1, we cannot see any big difference between the local and parliamentary elections in terms of the percentage of participation in the last local elections, even among the earlier ones, which suggests that they are not seen as second-order elections.

These findings conflicted with Reif et al. (1997), who believed that "first-order" elections allowed voters to decide who should lead the country. General elections in parliamentary systems, such as that of the UK, fall within this category. Second-order elections commonly exhibit various characteristics, including lower voter turnout, as fewer individuals are motivated to vote due to the perception of lower stakes involved. Immediate attention is anticipated toward elections that ascertain the composition of parliaments and the selection of the country's leader. Consequently, it can be inferred that national elections hold a position of utmost significance as first-order elections, relegating all choices at lower geographic levels to the status of second-order elections. As a result, these lower-level choices have garnered considerably less scholarly attention (Reif and Schmitt 1980).

The influence of national and party policies on voter behavior was analyzed. Scholars such as Lijphart (1997), Nachmias et al. (2012), and Freire (2004), when discussing second-order elections, associate them with reduced importance due to the ongoing impact of national party policies. These elections determine the outcome for smaller offices, such as regional, municipal, and local officials. Consequently, the outcome of second-order elections is strongly connected to the popularity of national parties within a given country rather than being influenced by specific issues, individual candidates, or particular events in second-order election campaigns.

For most voters and political parties, the most significant are elections that result in national governments (Schakel and Jeffery 2013). In contrast, local elections are second-order because their participation more strongly influences voters' preferences in national elections than local-level motivations. In other words, it is posited that voter behavior in local elections, similar to other second-order domains, is influenced by factors originating from first-order domains. Peshkopia and Mustafa (2022) conclude that this significant shift in voter behavior or the significant decline in votes for the party that won the most votes in the central elections - in this case, the *Vetëvendosje* Movement - came as a result of many factors, including the total lack of qualified candidates for mayor, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the lack of good or limited success in local governance.

Contrary to expectations, the findings of this study indicate that the observed deviation of voters in local elections (as shown in Table 3) was not attributable to the influence of national and party policies. Instead, it can be attributed to the citizens' capacity to adopt a new voting approach, where candidate selection is based on platforms and personalities rather than being influenced by central policies or party influence. Regarding the reasons given by the 596 survey participants for voting for their preferred mayor, the response "In the last local elections, I chose to vote merely to support the best candidate" received a value of M=4.20 and a standard deviation of DS=1.262. In contrast, the claim with the lowest mean, "In the last local elections, I voted for the candidate for mayor due to the close relationship I had with him", had a value of M=1.57 and a standard deviation of DS=1.101. This implies increased voter awareness and a shift from most researchers' second-order views of local elections to a first-order view. These findings align with research conducted by Gendwi et al. (2022), which suggests that voters are more inclined to alter their vote choices, as seen in European elections, and engage in expressive voting, such as supporting minor or new parties. This behavior is often driven by the intention to penalize or commend national government officials.

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There is also a difference from the time after the war in Kosovo, where, according to Sejdiu and Hamiti, the voter's behavior has been irrational, influenced by psychological, economic, and social factors, and Kosovars voted for the political parties that had fought for the country and were working for the declaration of independence; in other words, the vote was translated into a sign of loyalty for those who fought in the war. Our findings align with the research conducted by Marien et al. (2015), who classify local elections as first-order elections. Their study emphasizes that voters are primarily driven by local preferences rather than national and ideological considerations. Various factors, including personality, experience, network, and personal connections, such as familial closeness to a candidate, strongly influence the voter's voting choice.

According to various studies, voters' choices of candidates are influenced by many factors rather than just one. Miller and Wattenberg (1985) assert that voters can be categorized by applying a two-dimensional retrospective/prospective politics/performance coding method to their verbal evaluations of candidates. Additionally, these two methodologies demonstrate that Carter's ratings mostly reflected concern about his past performance, whereas Reagan's evaluations concentrated on predicted candidate performance and future policy measures.

According to an exit poll conducted by RTV Dukagjini in 2021, 74.5% of respondents indicated that they decided to vote before the election campaign. This suggests that voters' decisions are more influenced by their past voting preferences for candidates than by their future preferences. However, our data support a plausible perspective that individuals increasingly rely on government initiatives. This observation is connected to Reagan's assessments, which emphasized the anticipated performance of candidates and future policy measures (Miller and Wattenberg 1985).

Regarding the gender differences in the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections, it can be seen that the group of men (N=328) had a mean of M=1.69 (DS=.465) in the answers to the deviation of the vote, as opposed to the group of women, who have a lower number in the answers to the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections, M=1.69 (DS=.463). According to the findings, t=-.150 and p.880 values indicate that the differences are invalid (Table 5). In conclusion, we can state that there are no statistically significant variations in the vote's divergence from preferences in the parliamentary elections between men and women.

Then the significance (Table 6) of age shows a value of .698, the region shows a value of .257, and education shows a value of .163, which does not show any significant difference regarding the deviation from the preferences of the parliamentary elections. These results corroborate the findings of Marien et al. (2015) on the effect of socio-demographic control variables, gender, age, and region of residence, where the results have not shown significant effects of gender, age, or region on deviant voting behavior.

In the meantime, drawing from the analysis of the significance of the location factor (urban or rural) with a value of .038, we can deduce that a noteworthy disparity exists in the vote deviation from the preferences observed in parliamentary elections. This suggests that individuals residing in urban areas distinctly cast their votes compared to those in rural areas.

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CONCLUSION

Numerous studies on first- and second-order elections have been conducted in many other countries, but we have been unable to find any such study in our country. This study assists in determining whether there are any indications that the most recent local elections in Kosovo should be regarded as the first-order election.

The statistical analysis enables us to conclude that there are indications that the local elections in Kosovo are first-order elections. The first indication that municipal elections are regarded as first-order elections is the lack of notable differences in voter turnout between the national and local levels. The fact that the winning party only managed to win 22.7% of the vote, or 4 municipalities, in the local elections despite receiving more than 50.2% of the vote in the parliamentary elections is the second indication that the results of the central elections have no bearing on the results of the local ones.

According to the findings of the t-test analysis, no significant gender differences were found among the study participants $p<.880$ regarding the gender differences in the deviation of the vote from the preferences of the parliamentary elections. Consequently, only the location with a value of.038 has a significant statistical difference when it comes to age, region, education, and location concerning the deviation of the vote, suggesting that there are differences between villages and cities in terms of the deviation of the vote from parliamentary election preferences.

The findings presented provide indications that the recent local elections in Kosovo can be regarded as first-order elections. Furthermore, these findings substantiate the earlier hypothesis, suggesting that voters considering local voting motives are more inclined to diverge from their preferences in parliamentary elections. As a result of this study, several practical and scientific recommendations for future research have been addressed, which are elaborated upon below.

Recommendations

Researchers should look into whether voters of a specific political party are more likely to deviate from their national party in the future than voters who have never voted for a political party. Additionally, it is recommended to determine whether there is a notable difference between voters whose party participated in the municipal elections as a political party and voters whose party participated in the elections independently about their likelihood of departing from the national party.

It is urged that future researchers look into whether voters who stick to their preferences in a national election can increase the likelihood that a local pre-election coalition will impact their divergence from their core vote.

Limitations

Like many other studies, this study also has certain limitations. One of the limitations pertains to the participation rate, which could have been higher. With increased number of

participants, the sample size would have been larger, resulting in a more representative sample. Another limitation is the approach employed. While the self-report method has its advantages, it is not without drawbacks, such as the potential for participants to not answer honestly or misinterpret the questions, among others. Additionally, the statistical methodology employed to assess hypotheses has its limitation. The t-test and ANOVA techniques only reveal statistical differences and do not establish connections or cause-and-effect relationships.

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Statement of Human Rights:
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Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
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