

## **Partial Local Elections in Albania: Continued Socialist Party Dominance and an Unconventional Opposition Strategy**

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### **Abstract**

The partial local elections held on 9 November 2025, constituted a significant political moment despite their limited scope and the contentious context in which they were conducted. The elections took place in five municipalities amid a confrontational political climate. Initially, the Municipality of Tirana was also slated for an election, but its removal by a Constitutional Court decision on 3 November altered the dynamics of the electoral contest and its campaign. The Socialist Party won in all five municipalities, reaffirming its electoral advantage and longstanding political dominance. The Democratic Party, the largest opposition party, chose to support independent candidates. This unconventional strategy sparked considerable debate among political analysts and scholars. It remains unclear whether this move was a deliberate political manoeuvre or a de facto boycott, especially given the challenges the party faced following its resounding defeat in the May 2025 parliamentary elections. Voter turnout was low for multiple reasons, marking the lowest level since the beginning of Albania's democratic transition. In this context, these partial elections serve as a barometer for the dynamics of the balance of power, highlighting the need for new opposition political strategies, stronger institutional trust, and increased citizen participation as prerequisites for sustainable democratization.

**Key words:** local elections, parties, non-partisan candidates, Albania, low voter turnout

### **Introduction**

On 9 November 2025, Albania held partial local elections in the municipalities of Vlorë, Tepelenë, Berat, Mat, and Cërrik. These elections filled only the mayoral posts; municipal councils were not on the ballot. In three municipalities –Berat, Tepelenë, and Mat the by-elections were triggered by the resignation of incumbent mayors who had stood for the May 2025 parliamentary elections and subsequently assumed seats in the National Assembly. In Cërrik, the vacancy arose when the mayor was appointed Minister of Environment in the new Rama government, whereas in Vlorë it followed the mayor's resignation. The mandate of the newly elected mayors will run for approximately one and a half years, until the 2027 general local elections. Under Albania's electoral legislation, mayors are

elected in a single-round, plurality (majoritarian/first-past-the-post) contest. Across the five municipalities, 334,559 citizens were eligible to vote, an electorally meaningful universe in the Albanian context for observing trends in vote choice and political dynamics.<sup>1</sup> The Socialist Party (*Partia Socialiste*, SP) dominated the executive office, leading 53 of the country's 61 municipalities following the 2023 local elections; accordingly, these partial elections provided a useful probe of local pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

The partial elections occurred amid renewed calls for comprehensive reform of local government. The 2015 reform, adopted with the votes of the governing majority, has increasingly been judged as dated and, above all, as falling short of its central aims: substantive decentralisation and the provision of effective, democratic local governance.<sup>3</sup> Recent assessments also note signs of re-centralisation in policy domains such as territorial/spatial planning and selected service delivery, prompting concerns about the balance of authority between the centre and municipalities. In response, Parliament constituted a Special Commission on territorial/local government reform during the autumn of 2025. Given that Albania is in the accession-negotiation phase with the European Union, the performance and autonomy of local government remain consequential in meeting EU benchmarks.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding their importance on several dimensions, turnout in these by-elections was exceptionally low, the lowest recorded in the history of elections during Albania's democratic transition. Although only five of the country's 61 municipalities voted, the contests remained analytically significant for assessing the state of local democracy, the organisational capacity of major parties, and citizens' confidence in institutions. By analysing the political context of the contests, party strategies, participation levels, and outcomes, this article seeks to illuminate what these elections reveal about the condition of local governance and the consolidation of democracy in Albania, as well as the implications for the trajectory of national politics.<sup>5</sup>

The article devotes special attention to the Municipality of Tirana, the country's capital. The Constitutional Court's decision of 3 November 2025 to remove Tirana from the list of jurisdictions holding by-elections not only established a precedent concerning the tenure of locally elected officials, but also reshaped the main parties' approaches to the partial contests, their campaign strategies, and the continuity of local administration in Tirana, whose mayor remains in pre-trial detention.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. 2025. Zgjedhje të pjesshme për kryetar Bashkie [Partial Election for the mayor of municipalities]. *Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve*, 9 November 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. 2025. Zgjedhjet e pjesshme të datës 9 nëntor 2025 – KSHZ miraton sasinë e fletëve të votimit që do të prodhohen [Partial Elections of 9 November 2025- Central Election Commission approves the quantity of ballots to be produced]. *Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve*, 17 October 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Radio Televizioni Shqiptar [Albanian Radio Television]. 2025. Special Committee for Administrative-Territorial Reform Starts Work, Mazniku: Goal, More Efficient and Democratic Institutions. *Radio Televizioni Shqiptar*, 11 November 2025.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission. 2023. Commission Staff Working Document Albania 2023 Report. *European Commission*, 8 November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve. 2025. Patial elections of 9 November – the voting process is over [Zgjedhjet e pjesshme të datës 9 Nëntor - Përfundon procesi i votimit]. *Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve*, 11 September 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Balkan Web. 2025. Veliaj returns to office/ Tirana not part of the local by-elections, here's when the race for the new mayor of Tirana could be held. *Balkan Web*, 3 November 2025.

## The Democratic Party's Support for Independent Candidates: Electoral Strategy or De Facto Boycott?

For many years, Albania's Democratic Party (*Partia Demokratike*, DP), the country's largest opposition force, has accused the SP and its leader, Edi Rama, of vote manipulation and theft. It has elevated the fight for "free and fair elections" to its primary cause, with DP leader Sali Berisha repeatedly asserting in public statements that Albania does not hold free and fair elections. The party has typically explained its electoral defeats through this narrative. For the local elections of 2023, it even compiled "The Black Book of Elections. The Electoral Farce of May 14, 2023 in Albania".<sup>7</sup> Following the May 2025 parliamentary elections, one of the weakest results in the DP's transition-era history, the party again maintained, officially and publicly, that the elections had been *manipulated*.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, international observers assessed the 2025 polls as competitive and professionally administered, while highlighting widespread misuse of public resources and reports of pressure on public employees and other voters, a combination consistent with a lack of a fully level playing field.<sup>9</sup> Against this backdrop, the DP has not undertaken a systematic post-electoral review or intraparty reform to address strategic shortcomings; instead, its public explanation has continued to emphasize the impossibility of winning 'under Rama.' The November partials were therefore approached within this same narrative frame, amid ongoing accusations about electoral manipulation following the May contest. Notwithstanding its allegations, the DP took up its parliamentary seats and, at least formally, participated in the creation of special parliamentary commissions on territorial and electoral reform in late October to early November 2025.<sup>10</sup>

The 9 November partial local elections thus became a test of the DP's credibility toward the electoral process and a political test of its capacity to restate an opposition mission after the heavy parliamentary loss. Yet the party chose an unconventional strategy. In all five municipalities, the DP did not field party-labelled nominees; instead, it supported independent, non-party candidates drawn from civil society. After a meeting of the leadership, Sali Berisha publicly invited *any* civil-society figure willing to run to declare their candidacy, promising DP support.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the DP's logo did not appear on the ballot, though the party organized endorsements and campaign support for

<sup>7</sup> According to DP, the book is a "detailed report of vote manipulation and plunder, the involvement of organized crime, the use of the state as a tool of the electoral machine of the party in power, and efforts to eradicate the opposition. Partia Demokratike [Democratic Party]. *The black book of elections: The electoral farce of May 14, 2023* (accessed: 19 January 2026).

<sup>8</sup> Partia Demokratike [Democratic Party]. 2025. [Berisha: Zgjedhjet në Shqipëri, si ato të Zimbabve nën diktatorin Mugabe. E drejta e shqiptarëve për të votuar si qytetar të lirë, është qëllimi më madh i yni. Ata që nuk e mbështesin, janë lakej të Ramës \[Berisha: Elections in Albania, like those in Zimbabwe under dictator Mugabe. The right of Albanians to vote as free citizens is our greatest goal. Those who do not support him are Rama's lackeys\]. Partia Demokratike, 15 May 2025; Partia Demokratike \[Democratic Party\]. 2025. Berisha: \[Zgjedhjet në Shqipëri kishin rezonimin më të keq tek anëtarët e IDU, si zgjedhjet më të dhunuara, si një farsë elektorale e plotë. Edi Ramën e garantoj se, këtë mandat nuk do e gëzojë \\[The elections in Albania had the worst resonance among the members of the IDU, as the most violated elections, as a full electoral farce. I guarantee Edi Rama that this mandate will not be enjoyed\\]. Democratic Party, 16 May 2025.\]\(#\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> OSCE. [Republic of Albania. Parliamentary Elections 11 May 2025. ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report](#) (accessed: 10 November 2025).

<sup>10</sup> OSCE, *Republic of Albania. Parliamentary elections 11 May 2025*; Kuvendi i Shqipërisë [Albanian Parliament]. [U konstituua Komisioni i Posaçëm Parlamentar për Realizimin e Reformës Zgjedhore \[Establishment of the Special Commission on the Electoral Reform\]](#) (accessed: 11 November 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Partia Demokratike [Democratic Party]. 2025. [Berisha: Do të konsiderojmë kandidatët të pavarur që duan mbështetjen e PD për të fituar. Ftoj personalitete të këtij vendi, e këtij qyteti, të guxojnë, ne i mirëpresim me shumë sinqeritet \[Berisha: We will consider independent candidates who want the support of the DP to win. I invite the personalities of this country, of this city, to dare, we welcome them with great sincerity\]. Partia Demokratike, 4 October 2025; Euronews Albania. 2025. \[Kryesia e PD vendim për zgjedhjet. Berisha: Do të mbështesim kandidatët e pavarur \\[DP Leadership take a decision on elections. Berisha: We will support independent candidates\\]. Euronews Albania, 4 October 2025.; BalkanWeb. 2025. \\[November 9th Elections/ DP does not announce names. Berisha: We support independent candidates in Tirana and the other 5 municipalities. Not political figures!. BalkanWeb, 4 October 2025.\\]\\(#\\)\]\(#\)](#)

independents in each municipality. This approach was justified, in part, by reference to the requests of smaller opposition actors for a single, jointly backed candidate emerging from civil society rather than from the DP. While elements of this formula were designed with Tirana in mind, the Constitutional Court's decision of 3 November 2025 removed Tirana from the by-election schedule; the blueprint was then applied to Berat, Mat, Tepelenë, and Vlorë, while in Cërrik the DP-backed an independent competitor alongside a nominee from the Albania Can party (*Shqipëria Bëhet*).<sup>12</sup>

Whether this amounts to a strategy or a de facto boycott of the local by-elections is contested among analysts. Some commentators endorsed the independent-candidate approach as a way to aggregate opposition support behind a single non-polarizing figure and to overcome brand fragmentation. Others argued the move functionally withdrew the DP brand from the race, demobilized co-partisans, and resembled a boycott by other means, particularly given the party's post-May defeat, the absence of internal reform, and its persistent fraud-centric narrative. Post-election statements by DP figures and media debates captured this divide: some insisted the tactic was *not a mistake*, while others called for a deep internal analysis and criticized the leadership for effectively ceding the field.<sup>13</sup>

In institutional terms, Albania's single-round FPTP mayoral rule magnifies the stakes of pre-electoral coordination. Comparative theory predicts that opposition parties maximize their chances by converging on a single, clearly branded challenger who can serve as a focal point for anti-incumbent voters.<sup>14</sup> Substituting that focal point with unaffiliated independents may signal openness, but it also weakens partisan brand cues that aid voter decision-making and mobilization.<sup>15</sup> Under conditions of dominant-party advantage, long incumbency, territorial organization, and access to state resources, such cue-weakening typically reinforces the incumbent's edge.<sup>16</sup>

At the narrative level, repeated claims that 'elections are a farce' can depress opposition participation, even when observers document real integrity problems but still deem the process competitive overall.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, supporting independents while withholding the party label looks less like a novel mobilization tactic and more like a low-cost exit, a way to avoid another branded defeat while preserving the overarching claim that victory is impossible 'under the current rules.' Viewed through this lens, the November 2025 approach more closely resembles a de facto boycott than a high-risk, high-reward coordination gambit.

<sup>12</sup> MAPO. 2025. EKSKLUZIVE/ Gjykata Kushtetuese rrëzon DEKRETIN e Presidentit Begaj, pezullohen zgjedhjet e 9 nëntorit [Exclusive/ Constitutional Court overturns the request of the President, elections of 9 november in Tirana are cancelled]. *Mapo*, 31 October 2025.

<sup>13</sup> BalkanWeb. 2025. Local by-elections, Berisha: Supporting independent candidates was not a mistake! Rama was abandoned by the citizens. *BalkanWeb*, 15 November 2025; ABC News Albania. 2025. By-elections in 5 municipalities/ Minxhozi: DP stayed out on purpose from the campaign, because it is difficult for itself. *ABC News Albania*, 9 November 2025; Shqiptarja.com. 2025. Zgjedhjet/ Kikia: Berisha u fsheh pas kandidatëve të pavarur, pjesëmarrja s'pritej kaq e ulët, në Vlorë u bojkotuan [Elections/Kikia: Berisha hid behind independent candidates, turnout was not expected to be that low, elections were boycotted in Vlorë]. *Shqiptarja.com*, 9 November 2025.;

<sup>14</sup> Cox, Gary W. 1997. *making votes count: Strategic coordination in the world's electoral systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Golder, Soana N. 2006. Pre-electoral coalition formation in parliamentary democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* 36(2), 193–212; Taagepera, Rein, and Matthew S. Shugart. 2017. *Votes from seats: Logical models of electoral systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>15</sup> Lupu, Noam. 2016. *party brands in crisis: Partisanship, brand dilution, and the breakdown of political parties in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Greene, Kenneth F. 2007. *Why dominant parties lose: Mexico's democratization in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Norris, Pippa. 2014. *Why electoral integrity matters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### The Tirana Case and its Impact on an Apathetic Electoral Campaign

On 10 February 2025, pursuant to an arrest order issued by the Special Prosecution Against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), the Mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj, was detained in his office, an unprecedented episode in Albania's post-1990 transition that provoked intense public debate on both political and legal grounds. He was charged with nine counts of "passive corruption by high-level public officials or locally elected officials,"<sup>18</sup> as well as with money laundering. Beyond his role as mayor of the capital, Veliaj had, in recent years, been regarded as one of the most prominent figures of the Socialist Party; many analysts considered him a potential successor to Edi Rama at the helm of the party. The arrest substantially shaped political rhetoric and altered the course of the partial local elections scheduled for 9 November 2025.

On 23 September, the Tirana Municipal Council, invoking Article 62(c) of the 2015 Law on Local Self-Government, which allows the council to propose the dismissal of a mayor who has been absent from work for three consecutive months, voted to remove Veliaj amid a highly polarized atmosphere.<sup>19</sup> Two days later, on 25 September, the Council of Ministers approved the dismissal decision.<sup>20</sup> In response to the vacancy thus created, the President of the Republic issued a decree setting the date for partial local elections,<sup>21</sup> which, besides Vlorë, Tepelenë, Berat, Mat, and Cërrik, would also have included Tirana. Veliaj appealed both the government decision and the presidential decree, arguing that they contravened Article 115 of the Constitution and violated the principle of local autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Following the appeal, the Constitutional Court suspended the capital's by-election and, on 3 November, struck down the Council of Ministers' decision as unconstitutional, reasoning that removal of a directly elected local official is permissible only for serious violations of the Constitution or the law, not on the basis of absence *per se*. In effect, the Court left Veliaj in office as Mayor of Tirana; however, he continues to govern under abnormal conditions given his ongoing pre-trial detention and the fact that no final judgment has yet been rendered in his case.

This ruling set a legal and constitutional precedent and has continued to generate debate among experts and jurists. On one hand, Tirana now has a mayor in pre-trial detention, an arrangement with practical implications for day-to-day city governance. On the other hand, the constitutional rights of locally elected officials and their political freedoms, including the presumption of innocence, must be upheld to protect local self-government. In clarifying that removal may occur only for serious legal or constitutional violations (Constitution, Art. 115), the Court implicitly raised questions about the compatibility of Article 62(c) with the Constitution when applied to an *involuntary* absence. Several legal commentators argue that, after this decision, Article 62(c) may be largely inoperative in cases akin to Veliaj's.

The 3 November decision affected not only the status of locally elected officials; it also reshaped the political race and the campaign for the 9 November partial elections. Tirana, home to nearly one-third of Albania's population and traditionally a launching pad for national political careers, was removed

<sup>18</sup> Ermira Isufaj. 2025. [SPAK, arrest me burg për krvebashkiakun e Tiranës Erion Veliaj \[SPAK, the Mayor of Tirana is arrested and put in prison\]](#). *Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare*, 10 February 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Blerina Gjoka. 23 September 2025. [The Municipal Council of Tirana unanimously dismisses Erion Veliaj \(Këshilli Bashkiak i Tiranës shkarkon unanimisht Erion Veliajn\)](#). *Reporter.al*, 23 September 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Euronews Albania. 2025. [Këshilli i Ministrave shkarkon Erion Veliajn \[Council of Minister dismisses Erion Veliajn\]](#). *Euronews Albania*, 25 September 2025.

<sup>21</sup> President i Republikës së Shqipërisë [President of the Republic of Albania]. 2025. [Presidenti Begaj dekreton caktimin e datës së zgjedhjeve të pjeshme vendore për Kryetar Bashkie, për disa njësi të qeverisjes vendore \[Decree for the establishment of the partial local elections for Head of Municipality, for some local municipalities\]](#). (accessed: 01 October 2025).

<sup>22</sup> BIRN. 2025. [BIRN: Veliaj apelon shkarkimin, pezullon zgjedhjet në Tiranë \[BIRN: Veliaj appeal the dismissal, cancellation of elections in Tirana\]](#). *BIRN*, 29 September 2025.

from the by-election list because Veliaj remains mayor. This decision markedly reduced parties' political investment in the remaining contests. Prior to the annulment of the presidential decree and the Council of Ministers' dismissal, the election in Tirana had absorbed most political energy. The DP had backed Florian Binaj,<sup>23</sup> a popular comedian, as an independent candidate; indeed, the DP's broader strategy of supporting independents rather than fielding party-labelled nominees for the 9 November partials originated in Tirana. Binaj consolidated support from the right-of-centre opposition, and was viewed by some analysts as a potentially competitive challenger to the Socialist candidate, Ogerta Manastirliu, a former health and education minister and a prominent Socialist figure. A News24 poll reported Binaj at 42% and Manastirliu at 44%<sup>24</sup>, figures that, even with the usual caveats about polling, suggested a politically interesting race in the capital. With Tirana's removal, the campaign became apathetic and low-salience, consistent with the well-documented dynamics of 'second-order' contests in which perceived stakes and media attention are reduced.<sup>25</sup>

Historically, Vlorë, Tepelenë, Berat, and Cërrik have tended to favour the Socialist Party, whereas Mat is less reliably aligned. In this cycle, however, the DP opted for indirect participation by backing independents rather than entering with its own party label, again, a choice that contributed to a subdued contest. Even if these were only partial elections, and even if overall political interest was diminished for the reasons noted above, the results remain meaningful for assessing the state of local democracy, broader political dynamics, and citizens' confidence in the vote as an instrument of accountability and in public institutions more generally.

### **Confirmation of the Socialist Party's Electoral Superiority**

Since 2013, electoral contests in Albania, parliamentary and local, whether partial or general, have consistently produced victories for the PS. The SP has thus remained in power for twelve years, across central and local levels. This pattern has animated debate over the increasing concentration of power, and over the consequences for democratic competition and institutional accountability. After the 2023 local elections, the SP controlled the vast majority of municipalities – 53 of 61, with the opposition winning seven, and one municipality led by the Greek minority party MEGA – a balance widely interpreted as evidence of an entrenched dominant-party landscape.<sup>26</sup>

The 9 November 2025 partial local elections confirmed this. In Vlorë, Tepelenë, Berat, Cërrik, and Mat, the SP won all five mayoralties, reiterating its organizational superiority and electoral reach.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the partials operated as a barometer of the balance of power: with the opposition fragmented and turnout depressed, the governing party's mobilization capacity and territorial networks remained decisive.

<sup>23</sup> Partia Demokratike [Democratic Party]. 2025. Bershia: Full support for Florian Binaj (Berisha: Mbështetje e plotë për Florian Binaj). *Democratic Party*, 9 October 2025.

<sup>24</sup> BalkanWeb. 2025. Binaj and Manastirliu "head to head"/ "Noto" poll: Strong race between the two main candidates. How the capital's residents tend to vote?. *BalkanWeb*, 28 October 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Reif, Karlheinz, and Hermann Schmitt. 1980. Nine second-order national elections. A conceptual framework for the analysis of european election results. *European Journal of Political Research* 8, 3–44.

<sup>26</sup> OSCE. 2023. Republic of albania. Local elections 14 May 2023. ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (accessed: 10 November 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. 2025. Zgjedhje të pjesshme për krvetar Bashkie [Partial Election for the mayor of municipalities]. *Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve*, 9 November 2025.

Table 1: Percentage of people who voted in the Partial Local Elections 2025

municipality	Have voted		
	VC reported	No	%
Vlorë	171895	21093	12.27%
Berat	82161	16285	19.82%
Cërrik	38724	9528	24.60%
Mat	29092	11431	39.29%
Tepelenë	12667	4286	33.84%
<b>Municipality All</b>	<b>334539</b>	<b>62623</b>	<b>18.72%</b>

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. 2025. *Zgjedhje të pjesshme për kryetar Bashkie [Partial Election for the mayor of municipalities]*. Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, 9 November 2025.

The deepest victory was recorded in Berat, whereas margins were narrower in Mat and Cërrik. Mat is not considered a traditional Socialist stronghold, which helps explain a closer race there. In Cërrik, the presence of an additional challenger from ‘Albania Becomes’ (*Shqipëria Bëhet*) alongside the independent backed by the Democratic Party contributed to a three-way configuration and a tighter margin than elsewhere. In contrast, Vlorë, Berat, Tepelenë, and even Cërrik are generally viewed as SP bastions, and commentators broadly expected a Socialist sweep—expectations that likely further suppressed media salience and citizen engagement in the partials.

Table 2: Percentage of SP winning

Municipality	SP (%)	Independent Candidates (%)
vlorë	78.44	21.56
Berat	83.35	16.65
Cërrik	66.22	33.78
Mat	66.54	33.46
Tepelenë	77.85	22.15

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. 2025. *Zgjedhje të pjesshme për kryetar Bashkie [Partial Election for the mayor of municipalities]*. Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve, 9 November 2025.

Multiple factors underpinned the SP outcome. First, even in a low-intensity cycle, the SP field operation and campaign routines were visible and coordinated; second, incumbency advantages and long-standing territorial organization matter more in single-round, first-past-the-post mayoral races, where opposition coordination failures can be especially costly.<sup>28</sup> Third, the principal opposition party’s passive stance, notably its support for independents rather than party-labelled nominees, limited brand-based mobilization and reduced voters’ informational shortcuts, effects often observed in dominant-party environments.<sup>29</sup> In Albania’s current setting, these structural and strategic asymmetries favoured the PS.

### Elections with the Lowest Turnout on Record

According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), turnout in the five municipalities was exceptionally low, 18.72% overall, the lowest recorded in Albania’s post-1990 electoral history. Substantial inter-municipal variation was evident: Mat and Tepelenë registered relatively higher participation within this low-salience context, while Vlorë recorded the lowest turnout, at roughly 12.27%. These differences are consistent with the role of local factors – candidate recognition,

<sup>28</sup> Cox, *Making votes count*.

<sup>29</sup> Greene, *Why dominant parties lose*.

organizational mobilization, and prior partisan alignment – in shaping participation even when the overall stakes are perceived as limited.

Relative to the 2023 local elections, the drop was dramatic. In May 2023, nationwide turnout reached 38.23%. By comparison, the 9 November 2025 partials cut that figure by roughly half. Municipality-level comparisons suggest especially pronounced declines in Vlorë and Berat relative to their 2023 baselines.<sup>30</sup> While partials are, by definition, lower-salience contests, the magnitude of the decline is nonetheless analytically significant.

Table 3: Local Elections 2023

Municipality	Voters registered in total	Voted	
		N°	%
Vlorë	167688	41427	24.70
Berat	81078	28273	34.87
Cërrik	37710	12231	32.43
Mat	29292	13593	46.41
Tepelenë	12729	5131	40.31
<b>Total</b>	<b>328497</b>	<b>100655</b>	<b>30.64</b>

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. *Zgjedhjet vendore 14 Maj 2023 [Local Elections 14 May 2023]* (accessed: 10 November 2025).

In addition to aggregate levels, the age profile of participants points to a positive correlation between age and turnout. The CEC published real-time participation by age group for the first time in these 2025 partials; the most active cohort was 65+, while 18–24 registered the lowest participation. The age gradient underscores the particular disengagement of younger citizens, whose low propensity to vote in local races – especially when perceived as low-stakes or foregone – aligns with broader European evidence linking turnout to perceived efficacy and trust.

Table 4: Percentage of voters according to age

Age Group	Total Number	Voted	%
18-24	36133	4432	12.3
25-34	62998	7833	12.4
35-44	64536	9347	14.5
45-54	55847	9768	17.5
55-64	53387	14000	26.2
65+	61638	17243	28.0

Source: Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve [Central Election Commission]. *Zgjedhjet vendore 14 Maj 2023 [Local Elections 14 May 2023]* (accessed: 10 November 2025).

More broadly, low local-election turnout is a well-documented phenomenon across consolidated democracies and is often interpreted through the lens of ‘second-order’ elections, races where voters and parties perceive fewer immediate stakes, leading to lower participation and attenuated campaign intensity<sup>31</sup>. Yet the Albanian case is distinctive: when considering only residents inside the territory (excluding emigrants on the rolls), participation in national contests remains comparatively robust; the record-low partial-election turnout therefore points to fragile confidence in local institutions and

<sup>30</sup> OSCE, *Republic of Albania. Local elections 14 May 2023*.

<sup>31</sup> Reif and Schmitt, *Nine second-order national elections*.

limited perceived responsiveness of local governance, both of which matter for accountability and democratic consolidation.

These elections, therefore, reveal low citizen confidence that their vote can alter conditions in their municipalities or improve community outcomes in the near term. While a limited mandate and a predictable outcome structure diminished incentives to participate, the scale of abstention is nonetheless concerning. The stark youth disengagement signals a deeper attitudinal problem. Politics are viewed as ineffective or costly which, if unaddressed, could impair local accountability and the quality of representation in subsequent cycles.

### **Conclusions and Political Implications**

The partial local elections of 9 November revealed low political engagement on both sides of the aisle, opposition and governing majority alike. This was visible in an apathetic campaign and depressed turnout. To be sure, these were partial elections, and the parties' limited investment was often justified on that basis; moreover, the removal of Tirana from the contest further lowered interest and visibility. Yet the elections still yield salient conclusions with short-term implications for Albanian politics. Comparative research on 'second-order' contests indicates that when the marquee race is withdrawn and media attention fragments, mobilization falls disproportionately among peripheral voters, compounding baseline abstention in low-salience environments.

First, very low participation signals electoral fatigue and weak confidence in the vote as an instrument of influence. This has consequences for democracy and local governance, since the legitimacy of locally elected officials is easier to contest when only a small share of registered voters participate. A turnout of this magnitude inevitably raises questions about political representation and whether local elections, as conducted, meet citizens' expectations of meaningful choice, especially in second-order contexts, where voters perceive low stakes and parties scale down mobilization. Evidence from cross-national turnout studies suggests that perceptions of efficacy, trust, and party-provided information cues are central drivers of participation, especially among younger cohorts—implying that organizational investments and clearer programmatic appeals are necessary to reverse the decline.

Second, the Socialist Party continues to dominate at both the central and local levels. Even in low salience conditions and in municipalities widely regarded as its bastions, the party again demonstrated organizational capacity and mobilizational reach. Analysts did not doubt the SP's victory; indeed, the contests were broadly viewed as lacking a genuine partisan competition. This does not render the outcome inconsequential; rather, it underscores a structural reality: under dominant party conditions, organizational advantages, resource control, and territorial networks interact with low opposition coordination to reinforce incumbency over time. Dominant-party literatures similarly emphasize that career incentives of local elites, command over discretionary resources, and reputational advantages accumulate across cycles, making opposition entry and coordination progressively costlier in the absence of credible alternative brands.

Third, the Democratic Party missed an opportunity to relaunch after its heavy defeat in the May 2025 parliamentary elections. These partials could have been used to signal credibility and governing readiness. Instead, by not fielding party-labelled, programmatic candidates and by supporting independents, the party projected political apathy and limited confidence in victory. The result is a persistent asymmetry: against a long-tenured SP with stronger structures, the DP's current approach falls short of the strategic ambition needed to regain competitiveness. The municipalities at stake—however few—mattered not only as territorial gains but as political signals capable of rebuilding public trust. In single-round FPTP settings, recognizable partisan brands and pre-electoral coordination are

crucial focal points for anti-incumbent voters; withdrawing the label weakens the heuristics that facilitate choice and turnout, especially when incumbent advantage is steep.

Fourth, the PS's sweep in low competition settings reduces pluralism in local governance, with predictable effects: weaker accountability, potential efficiency losses, and a public perception that local government is not meaningfully responsive to electoral sanction. The absence of candidate debates, governing platforms, and issue-focused exchanges in these races further impoverished the democratic process. Over time, these dynamics risk blurring local priorities, both in day-to-day service delivery and in shaping national agendas ahead of future parliamentary cycles. Research on decentralization and local accountability warns that where competition is muted, programmatic responsiveness and performance monitoring deteriorate, underscoring the need for stronger institutionalized channels of scrutiny.

Finally, the elections reinforced a widespread perception that the opposition has further weakened. Without organizational and programmatic renewal capable of mobilizing citizens, these partials may foreshadow larger defeats to come. The apathy displayed here risks diffusing into general political apathy, consolidating single-party control across decision-making levels. If unaddressed, this trajectory would place democratic competition, political balances, and accountability under strain—an unwelcome prospect for a polity that has invested three and a half decades in democratic consolidation since the regime change of 1990. The comparative experience of hybrid and uneven playing field regimes suggests that reversing such trajectories requires simultaneous action on voter engagement, opposition coordination, and procedural guarantees—none of which alone is sufficient.

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