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*The disorientation of Albanian citizens against the voting  
process*

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this abstract is to examine the reasons for Albanians' lack of engagement in the electoral process in Albania, as well as the variables that influence this phenomenon. We employed a variety of available sources to achieve this goal, including data from the Central Election Commission, reports from international organizations such as ODIHR, population displacement statistics from INSTAT, and data published in the media and through public opinion polls.

In this study, we uncovered several key explanations for Albanians' low participation in elections. A significant component is the public's distrust of governmental institutions. Albanians' trust in politicians and the electoral system has been eroded as a result of numerous corruption scandals and abuses of power during the transition years. This lack of trust is reflected in their voting habits as well as their vote boycott.

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Another factor is that the majority of the Albanian population lives overseas. The tremendous migration of Albanians over the years, for both economic and political reasons, has resulted in a sizable number of them remaining absent in their nation of birth during the election season. The inability to vote in their own nation is a substantial barrier to their involvement in the democratic process.

Also, the influence factor of the politics of the big parties and political polarization is another reason that affects the lack of participation of Albanians in voting. Many Albanians feel that political parties do not adequately represent their interests and prefer to abstain from voting as a form of protest or indifference regarding current politics.

To increase Albanian participation in the electoral process, a number of significant measures must be taken, such as changing the electoral code, administrative division, internal democracy of political parties, and the main element of including the vote of the diaspora, all of which will be addressed in this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Electoralcode; immigrant vote; Local autonomy; Referendum right

**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. - 2. Local autonomy and the referendum right. - 3. Immigrant voting and the voter apathy. – References.

## 1. Introduction

Albania's political climate is a complex one, with a lengthy history and countless events that have influenced its development over time. To properly comprehend this environment, it is necessary to examine the country's historical background and political backdrop.

With the fall of the communist regime in 1991, Albania opened up to democracy with the establishment of a multi-party system. The political shift, however, was tough and fraught with serious political and social tensions. Political parties appeared and disappeared quickly, while new political individuals emerged on the scene. All of these challenges and political shifts have resulted in a volatile political environment in Albania, with considerable ramifications for various political, economic, and social interests. However, there have been advancements, such as increased freedom of expression, the right to dispute within political groupings, the diversification of political groups, or the rise of civil society on different Albanian society-related issues.

Corruption, nepotism, and deficiencies in state institutions have all become significant challenges for Albania's political system. In recent years, the political landscape in Albania has been affected by major debates and allegations over corruption, the justice system, and election integrity. These issues have sparked political tensions and widespread demonstrations around the country, resulting in a tense political climate. Albania has attempted to reform its institutions and combat corruption in

order to meet the criteria for membership in the European Union, but this goal remains elusive. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), out of 3,588,869 voters, 1,662,274 voted in the parliamentary elections held in 2021<sup>1</sup>, representing 44.99% of Albania's population. According to the CEC, a total of 1,395,627 voters voted in the local government elections of 2023<sup>2</sup>, out of 3,650,202 voters, for a total of 38.23% of the population, or about 1/3 of the Albanian population. Considering that the trend of elections in numerical terms has begun to decline, the question arises: Why do Albanians not vote, and numerous explanations are given for this, which are of a political, legal, economic, and social nature.

## **2. Local autonomy and the referendum right**

Local autonomy, also known as regional autonomy, is a political-administrative concept that grants administrative units at the local level the right and competence to make decisions by managing various issues within their jurisdiction without the interference of the central government. Local autonomy is provided for and guaranteed in Albania under the country's Constitution and laws. According to these regulations, the local government has distinctive authority over the administration and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://kqz.gov.al/results/results2021/results2021.htm> (accessed on 27.05.2023)

<sup>2</sup> 1. <https://kqz.gov.al/results/results2021/results2021.htm> (accessed on 27.05.2023)

development of its territory's concerns, such as local revenue, urban planning, local health, education, regional public transportation infrastructure, culture, and so on.

To ensure local autonomy, Albania has divided the territory into different administrative units, such as municipalities, which have a democratically elected mayor and elected local bodies. These units are given certain authorities and prerogatives to make decisions and carry out policies in conformity with the law. The central government has responsibility for helping to foster the development of local autonomy by providing financial support, training employees locally, defining competencies and tasks, and monitoring and assessing the performance of local entities. Albania established a new administrative division in 2015<sup>3</sup>, dividing the country into 12 large districts and 61 municipalities, replacing the previous division, which was partitioned into 65 municipalities and 308 municipalities. The new administrative division abolished municipalities, which were administratively responsible for the city's surrounding areas and, above all, were based on elections. Their transformation into administrative units meant that the "chairman" of the unit was no longer elected by the electorate but was appointed directly by the mayor.

So, this panorama brings a direct intervention of the center towards the periphery where the periphery no longer decides its fate but is de facto ruled by the city. This division presents two main problems. First and foremost is the right to vote and compete within these micro-

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<sup>3</sup> [https://aam.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ligj\\_115-2014\\_31.07.2014.pdf](https://aam.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ligj_115-2014_31.07.2014.pdf)

communities. Article 107 of the Albanian Constitution states: The executive body of the municipality or commune is the mayor, who is chosen directly by the people in the manner specified in paragraph 1 of this clause<sup>4</sup>. As a result of being selected by the municipality, the citizens of these communities have lost the ability to make decisions for their communities and have become reliant on the larger municipality.

Secondly, the competence of the city municipality has increased by taking accountability and the form of development of the former municipalities where it should be noted that the needs of the city as an industrial and financial center differ from the needs of the suburbs which are primarily for agricultural and forestry purposes and hydric. Local government administrative-territorial divisions are set by legislation based on needs, mutual economic interests, and historical tradition. Their borders cannot be altered without first receiving the consent of the people who reside within them<sup>5</sup>. The decision to dissolve the municipalities was made not by the resident people, but by the Council of Ministers, which was accepted by the Parliament of the Republic of Albania.

Local autonomy, in general, attempts to guarantee that local people have an active involvement in decision-making on matters that directly impact them, as well as to foster local development in conformity with local requirements and culture. This is in accordance with the fifth clause of the European Charter of Local Autonomy and the right to a referendum<sup>6</sup>. As

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<sup>4</sup> <https://klp.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Kushtetuta-2017.pdf> (page 29)

<sup>5</sup> <https://klp.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Kushtetuta-2017.pdf> (page 28-29)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.shav.al/pdf/Karta-Evropiane-e-Autonomise-Lokale.pdf> (page 4)

previously stated, the term referendum appears in both the Constitution and the European Charter of Autonomy.

The Electoral Code of 2003 addressed issues with the initiative for a municipal referendum. According to this Code (Article 132), the initiative for a local referendum on a local government issue can be exercised by: 10% of registered voters or a number of municipal councils representing no less than one-third of a district's population.

With the agreement of then-Prime Minister Sali Berisha and the opposition leader Edi Rama in 2008, the Parliament ratified the revised Electoral Code with broad consensus. Part IX, Referendums, was not included in this Code, but it was emphasized in its article 185 that: "Referendums of Law No. 9087, dated 19.06.2003" of the Code of the Republic of Albania as amended, as well as every part of that is related to it, remain in force, until the approval of the law "On general and local referendums"<sup>7</sup>.

In accordance with the tenets stated above, the Albanian citizen has only had two important elements violated from 2008 to today, namely the freedom of selection in the case of municipalities and the right to call for a referendum initiative. These are crucial details that have substantially strengthened the Prime Minister's and Parliament's positions. From this perspective, citizens vote to elect the parliament, and once elected, it is extremely difficult to control by the citizens during its operation. Under the current circumstances, citizens may only hold themselves accountable

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<sup>7</sup> <https://qbz.gov.al/preview/75122d2e-9ebc-45de-b0ea-b5efde2f6836>

once every four years, when the next election is held. Local autonomy, sometimes known as local self-government, is a fundamental element of the European Union (EU). The EU values local governments and their ability to make decisions and manage local matters within the framework of national laws. Protecting and boosting local autonomy in Europe through a indenture containing the values embraced by all democratic European governments is an old ambition of local government circles.

In the EU, the notion of local autonomy is based on the principle of subsidiarity, which retains those decisions should be taken at the most appropriate level, closest to citizens. The EU recognizes and promotes the idea of subsidiarity, which recognizes the importance of local governments in formulating and executing policies that directly affect their communities. The EU has well-defined ties between its institutions. Albania's setting is not the same. Albania, as a country, is now in negotiations with the Union to begin membership negotiations. If the referendum right continues at this rate, one of the key elements of the EU that can penalize, and slow down Albania's integration process is called into doubt.

### **3. Immigrant voting and the voter apathy**

Before delving into the particulars, it is crucial to note that voting is an indispensable right for a democracy to function effectively. Citizens in a



democratic system have the freedom to freely express their thoughts and preferences through free voting.

Diaspora voting is a process through which citizens of a country who live and vote outside its borders have the right to vote in their country of origin's elections. The diaspora vote is a vital component of democracy because it ensures the involvement and voices of citizens who reside distant from their home country but have an interest in and influence over its political processes. Another major reason why immigrants should be allowed to vote is that they provide a unique viewpoint to local politics. Their experience outside their country of birth has presented them with new challenges, cultural diversity, and the recognition of different experiences in countries where Albania seeks to gain experiences, such as the EU countries; thus, their integration will positively influence the undertaking of concrete steps not only towards integration, but also towards the process of democratization of the country of origin.

The vote of immigrants is essential since depopulation remains the major challenge, not only a political one, for Albanian society as a whole. According to Instat<sup>8</sup> data for the year 2021, the number of immigrants was 9195 individuals, while the number of emigrants was 42.048 individuals. The difference between immigrants and emigrants, often known as net migration, increased in absolute value over the previous year.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/treguesit-demografik%C3%AB-dhe-social%C3%AB/popullsia/>

From -16,684 to -32,853 inhabitants in 2021. According to World Bank<sup>9</sup> data, Albania has a population of 2,811,666 people as of the last population census in 2021. If we generate an approximate estimate from the World Bank data and the previously provided by CEC, the population gap appears to be 838,536 fewer individuals. This number, however, is not an accurate depiction of immigrants because it includes those who profess political apathy toward the Albanian political system. The Freedom House report for Albania provides no new information regarding the democratization process. In terms of the democracy of Albania, the report classifies it as a hybrid democracy<sup>10</sup>.

According to the compte rendu (French: report), there is data on contested elections, despite the fact that "political parties are highly polarized and frequently organized around key personalities." Despite recent government efforts to address them, corruption and organized crime remain important issues, and the intertwining of powerful corporate, governmental, and media interests impedes the formation of truly independent news organizations.

All of the components listed above, starting with the constitutional amendments in 2009 and ending with the alterations in the electoral law, strengthen the apathetic citizen, since Albanian voters know that their vote does not have much value in terms of bringing concrete change to society.

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<sup>9</sup>[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=AL&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=AL&most_recent_year_desc=false)

<sup>10</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania>

It should be noted that Albania lacks a separate statute defining what constitutes a sufficient percentage of the voting population for elections. The same can be said for the 2019 elections, which have a unique flavor. The Opposition opted not to participate in the elections, or to boycott them, in 2019. According to the CEC, 3,536,016 citizens with voting rights voted, with 811,727 voting, or 22.96%. Power was determined by the minority. In these conditions of citizen mistrust and disrespect, it is envisaged that Albanian citizens will shun the ballot box, i.e., become apathetic, or choose the path of emigration in the absence of hope and the ability to make a life in their home country. As a result, under these circumstances, it is vital to incorporate the vote of immigrants into the political electoral paradigm. The Albanian government took the initiative to address the issue of immigrants by creating the office of Minister of State for Diaspora inside the government cabinet.

The following are some components of the diaspora vote that can be included:

1. Registration: In order to vote, diaspora citizens must often be enrolled in a special diaspora electoral register. This includes supplying the requisite papers and information to confirm the voter's identity and eligibility.
2. Voter identification: Accurate voter identification is a crucial part of the voting process to ensure that only real citizens of the country of origin are able to vote. This includes the use of identity documents and other forms of verification.

3. Voting methods: Diaspora voting can take place in a variety of ways, including voting in diplomatic and consular centers in the country of origin, voting in mobile diplomatic missions, and voting by mail. Electronic voting may be made available to diaspora citizens in some instances.

4. Results and counting of votes: Following the conclusion of the voting procedure, diaspora ballots are counted within consulates or embassies by volunteers.

The Albanian state took some concrete steps addressing the issue of immigrants by establishing the position of Minister of State for the Diaspora. The Albanian government took real efforts toward addressing the issue of immigrants by establishing the position of Minister of State for the Diaspora. Despite the uproar, little did change towards the integration of immigrants into the Albanian political process. This is due to a variety of factors. First, it was a “Minister without a portfolio”, and second, no effort was taken to establish a proper ministry with a structured organization that could handle the issue of immigrants. All these details contributed to the assignment being amalgamated and competences being transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Europe.

It must be acknowledged that the immigrants’ vote is an essential process in terms of the democratization and development of Albanian society. The phenomenon of immigration has become a tradition as far as Albania is concerned. As mentioned above, the main problem lies in the depopulation of the country and distrust of the political elite, so we are

not only dealing with economic but also political criteria. One of the main steps that can invigorate the confidence of all citizens is the vote of immigrants as long as they still possess Albanian citizenship.

The vote of immigrants serves as a political promise that the Albanian political caste<sup>11</sup> has yet to fulfill. The promises made are numerous, but they are never materialized in an adequate draft law. The most recent policymakers' meeting did not provide a precise picture, instead passing in the form of excuses between them and the CEC. It is worth noting that according to Law No. 9668 of December 18, 2006, ON THE EMIGRATION OF ALBANIAN CITIZENS FOR EMPLOYMENT (Amended by Law No. 10 389 of March 3, 2011)<sup>12</sup> According to Article 6 on political rights, immigrants have the right to vote and participate in public life in their country of origin. Point 2 of this article requires the competent State Authorities, including the Parliament and the CEC, to create the necessary facilities for Albanian immigrants to exercise their right to vote while adhering to the legal provisions of the Electoral Code and the host state's legislation.

Taking this into account, the issue of immigrants is completely a matter of politics that is dragged on purpose for as long as the legal basis exists and openly displays political indifference to present it further, in a supplementary legislative form. Returning to the issue of democratization of society, in a context of continual population reduction, the vote of

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<sup>11</sup> <https://abcnews.al/vota-e-emigranteve-premtohet-per-zgjedhjet-e-2025-es/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.infocip.org/al/?p=6724>

immigrants can shift the balance of the Albanian political elite's status quo. The fact that this problem has been deliberately kept unresolved reflects the lack of (party) democracy and how the 32-year-old establishment that controls the political scene opposes social will and attempts to perpetuate the hermitization of the Albanian political system.

Analyzing the figures mentioned above, the vote of immigrants brings about a revolution and may very well create the appropriate conditions for the Albanian political system to transform, giving space to new political actors who do not carry on their shoulders the mistakes made by the previous elite but who appear as a new, modern leading elite ready to undertake concrete steps that would simplify and accelerate not only the democratization of Albanian institutions, political parties but above all would accelerate the integration of Albania within the European family.

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