

County Elections in Croatia: On the Path to Genuine Regional Politics

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Croatian counties were tailored with little consideration for historical, natural, economic, social, and professional criteria. They are rather small in size and population and there are considerable differences between them. Subnational electoral system with proportional representation, blocked lists and five per cent threshold causes deperso-

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nalisation of local politics. In addition, only few political parties and their political agendas could be identified as regional. Political arena in the counties is still dominated by national parties and their organizational branches while county elections are highly “nationalized” and subordinated to national elections. The analysis of congruence between county and national governments, turnout rates and electoral supply shows “second-orderness” of county elections resulting in voters’ orientation towards national elections and statewide parties. Counties are politically autonomous, but fiscally depend on the central state, which in turn has a decisive influence on county voters’ political behaviour at the county level – they turn to statewide parties just as counties turn to the state. The abolishment of counties and introduction of true regions with broader autonomous scope of affairs in the Croatian territorial organization could contribute to a positive feedback of regional electorate towards genuine regional politics.

Key words: counties, Croatia, electoral system, national elections, county elections, county assembly, regional political parties, regional politics

1. Introduction

The territorial self-government in the Republic of Croatia is two-tiered, with municipalities (*općina*) and towns (*grad*) at the municipal level and counties (*županija*) at the second level.¹ Between 1992 and 2001, counties were supposed to serve as the middle tier of government and were

¹ The first draft of this paper was presented at XXII IPSA World Congress of Political Science *Reshaping Power, Shifting Boundaries* in Madrid, July 8–12, 2012, within panel *Regionalization of Regional Elections: Beyond Mid-Term and Second-Order Elections*. The second draft of the paper was presented at Council for European Studies, Columbia University’s 20th International Conference of Europeanists *Crisis and Contingency: States of Instability*, University of Amsterdam 2013, 25–27 June within Panel 087. *Territoriality in the National and Regional Vote in Central and Eastern Europe*. Both panels were chaired and discussed by Arjan H. Schakel, Assistant Professor in Research Methods at Maastricht University and Régis Dandoy, Research Associate at the University of Brussels and the University of Louvain, who conceptualized and coordinated a research project on regional elections in Central and Eastern European countries. This paper is only partially following the research framework proposed by Schakel.

intended to have a limited autonomous scope, but their first and more important role was to be the units of deconcentrated state administration. In 2001, counties became solely units of regional self-government: they lost all the competences with regard to deconcentrated state administration and obtained a wider autonomous scope. However, a rather weak self-government capacity of the counties limits the possibility for strengthening the genuine regional political processes. Subnational politics still lacks the influence of regional parties that would have regional problem-oriented approach and political programs for economic and social development of the region. Therefore, county elections are identified as second-order in comparison to national elections.

The paper's theoretical framework is second-order election effects theory in the Croatian county elections, which assumes that county elections are subordinate to national elections. In its first chapter, the paper gives an overview of the territorial self-government in Croatia, i.e. developments and current trends in the territorial structure, the scope of local affairs, and the political system. In subsequent chapter factors of regional distinctiveness – institutional (electoral system and electoral calendar), ideological, geographical, economic and political – are analysed. The third chapter analyses second-order election effects and thus the status of county elections in respect to national elections by measuring the congruence between national and county government, analysing turnout rates and electoral supply (political parties' participation at the county level, electoral coalitions and party volatility).

2. Constitutional and Legal Settings of the Croatian Territorial Self-Government System

2.1. Territorial Structure and Scope of Local Affairs

Before gaining independence at the beginning of 1991, Croatia was one of six republics in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). During that period, the official ideology was very much inclined to Marxist form of strong local communes, so that self-management in municipalities became a widespread practice – the whole system was strongly local-oriented.² Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, Croatia had a very

² More on the history of the Croatian local self-government in Koprić, 2003: 183–187.

strong municipal level of government consisting of 101 large communes and a relatively weak state level,³ in terms of competences, finances, civil servants, etc. The first multiparty elections were held in May 1990, at both local (municipalities) and central levels within the frame of old, socialist institutions (three-chamber representative bodies). The new Constitution adopted at the end of 1990 granted the right to local self-government. The Homeland War, which lasted between 1991 and 1995, slowed down the process of transition to market economy and full multi-party system, financially exhausting the country and detrimentally affecting new democracy.

At the very end of 1992, after a two-year delay, Croatia started to develop a new local governance system. The first local elections under new circumstances were held on 7th February 1993. The radical territorial reform of 1992/93 introduced the so-called *system of local self-government and administration*, with two tiers of self-government units, municipalities (*općina*) and towns (*grad*) at the local level,⁴ and counties (*županija*) at the regional level. The City of Zagreb as the capital and the largest unit enjoyed a special legal position having competences of both a city and a county.⁵ In comparison to the socialist period, municipalities lost many of their competences, revenues, and a significant part of local governments' property. Strict central control over local self-government units was implemented. Besides strong centralization, the system was highly politicized. The counties played a particularly important role in strong central supervision and had a rather narrow autonomy. They were centralization instruments in the hands of central government and president of the Republic. The institution of county governor was especially criticized in that regard. He/she was elected by the county assembly, but had to be confirmed by the President, on the Government's proposal. While being highly influenced by the ministries in performing a broad range of state administrative affairs, counties' self-government scope of affairs was limited to co-ordination and supervision over the activities of municipalities and towns (more in: Koprić, 2003: 187–200).

³ There was no mid-tier level in Croatia at that time. Previous form of intermunicipal arrangement named communities of municipalities (*zajednice općina*) was dissolved by the Amendments to the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Croatia of 25th July 1990 (Art. 3).

⁴ A new category of large towns was introduced in 2005. They have somewhat broader scope of affairs than towns and may perform the county affairs on their territory.

⁵ It also performs numerous state administration tasks on its territory and is the largest and the most prosperous city.

It was only after the 2000 parliamentary and presidential election and subsequent formation of a left-wing coalition government that the process of decentralization began in 2001. A major change in the local self-government scope of competences was a result of decentralisation process that started with the Amendments to the Constitution at the end of 2000. The number of counties and their territorial organization remained mostly the same since their establishment in 1993, but the very concept and role of counties was redefined in the 2001 reforms. The concept of local self-government, together with the principle of subsidiarity and solidarity, was accepted in that reform (Koprić, 2003: 200–204; Koprić, 2009; Koprić, 2010: 111–112). The new Law on Local and Regional Self-Government, adopted in 2001, introduced the general clause according to which the self-government scope of affairs of municipalities, towns, and counties includes all public affairs that are not explicitly excluded by law.⁶ Until 2001, counties were intended to be both units of state administration and autonomous units, but in reality, they merely served as units of deconcentrated state administration. The status of the counties was changed in 2001 when they became units of ‘territorial (regional) self-government’ and, at the same time, lost almost all their competences with regard to deconcentrated state administration. According to the 2001 Law, counties perform affairs of regional significance, in particular related to education, health services, spatial and urban planning, economic development, traffic and traffic infrastructure, planning and development of networks of educational, social, cultural and health institutions, issuing location and construction licenses and other urban planning documents outside large towns, and maintenance of public roads outside large towns.

When looking at the data on unemployment rates and income, some counties are quite homogenous; others face substantial internal disparities. There are significant differences among the counties and although county revenues⁷ play a role in reducing regional income inequalities in Croatia, they are unable to prevent inequalities despite various meas-

⁶ In contrast, the previous Law of 1992 had prescribed enumeration for municipalities and counties, in which case only those public affairs that were allocated specifically to local self-government units were considered as local affairs. However, the method of general clause was applied to towns even at that time.

⁷ The Law on Financing Local and Regional Self-Government Units stipulates four county taxes: inheritance and gifts tax, motor vehicles tax, boats tax and slot machines tax. However, counties may decide to transfer the income from these taxes to towns and municipalities within their boundaries. Other sources of county income come from its assets, central state grants, misdemeanour fines, etc. but they are rather insignificant.

ures for disadvantaged units. The City of Zagreb and three counties (Istarska, Primorsko-Goranska, Zagrebačka) have above-average income and low unemployment rates, whereas the majority of underdeveloped counties are situated mostly in Eastern Croatia (Brodsko-Posavska, Vukovarsko-Srijemska, Virovitičko-Podravska, Sisačko-Moslavačka, Osječko- -Baranjska) (Puljiz, Maleković, 2007: 10, 17). In those counties, as well as in Ličko-Senjska County, depopulation processes are also noticeable.

In 2005, Croatia registered four statistical units – Central Croatia (comprising five counties), Zagreb Region (City of Zagreb and Zagrebačka County), Adriatic Croatia (seven counties) and Eastern Croatia (seven counties) (Koprić, 2010: 674–675). Later, in 2007, three NUTS II units or statistical regions (North-West Croatia, Central and Eastern Croatia, and Adriatic Croatia) were introduced, according to the NUTS classification.⁸ This was a result of political processes at the time and it was neither responsive to the development needs nor to the optimal utilisation of EU funds (Đulabić, 2013: 189). For that reason, in 2012 Croatia introduced two NUTS II regions: Adriatic Croatia that comprises seven coastal counties and Continental Croatia that comprises thirteen counties and the City of Zagreb. According to Đulabić (2013: 192), new statistical classification enables utilization of EU funds under the most favourable conditions, with the highest rate of project co-financing from the EU. Counties are classified as NUTS III units and represent a basis for the formation of broader statistical regions. This fact hinders the functioning of counties as proper regional development actors with sufficient financial, professional, and other capacities. It can be concluded that the Croatian counties are not large enough to be considered as real regions in European context (Blažević, 2010: 189). Moreover, a historically and geographically rooted sense of regional identities exists, but counties are much smaller than such entities.

Croatian counties had quite a vivid history of serving daily political needs and interests of the central government rather than interest of their citizens. Aggregation and articulation of regional specific interests was one

⁸ NUTS refers to the classification of the territorial units for statistical purposes introduced by EUROSTAT. NUTS classification consists of three categories of regional units differing in terms of number of inhabitants. NUTS I units represent areas that encompass between min. 3 and max. 7 million inhabitants, NUTS II between min. 800 thousand and max. 3 million inhabitants and NUTS III between min. 150 thousand and max. 800 thousand inhabitants.

of the proclaimed reasons for establishing a bicameral parliamentary system that existed in Croatia in the period 1990–2001. At the time, the Croatian Parliament consisted of the House of Representatives and the House of Counties. The latter served as a deliberative and consultative chamber. Members of the House of Counties were elected in special elections held in 1993 and 1997, in 21 three-mandate electoral districts by the principle of proportional representation.⁹ The very nature and role of the second chamber were contested (see *infra* 3.4.). Only a smaller number of counties coincided with the areas of specific historical and cultural identity (Istarska, Međimurska, Zadarska, Krapinsko-zagorska). Historical regions (Dalmatia, Slavonia, north-western Croatia) are divided into several counties. Considering the nature of such a representative base, second chamber was not a representative body of regional, but of “administrative-bureaucratic interests articulating in particular territorial units” and “colonisation of political parties” (Kasapović, 1997: 97).¹⁰

The role of the counties has shifted from executing state administrative tasks towards the autonomous, enabling, and supportive tasks, i.e. coordination and support of weak municipalities, administration of “decentralized” social services (education, health, social care), and a slight push towards economic development. Considerable regional differences still to a large extent affect the limited economic and fiscal capacities of the majority of counties, making them incapable of initiating and supporting regional development (Koprić, 2013: 12). The counties were tailored with little consideration for historical, natural, economic, social and professional criteria for establishment of natural self-governing entities (Ivanišević 2003: 28; Koprić, 2010: 115–116). Furthermore, frequent change of sub-national electoral system has caused a dynamic history of local and regional political processes in Croatia.

2.2. Local and County Political System

Local and regional units have the same governance structure based on the principle of separation of powers. Representative bodies are the municipi-

⁹ Both times the HDZ won the majority of seats (58.7 per cent in 1993; 65.1 per cent in 1997) whereas the strongest regionalist party, IDS in Istarska County won only 4.8 per cent resp. 3.2 per cent of the seat share (Kasapović, 1997: 102).

¹⁰ Candidates could be residents of a county different from the county in which they were competing.

pal or town council (*vijeće*) and county assembly (*županijska skupština*). Since the 2009 subnational elections, executive bodies are the municipal or town mayor (*općinski načelnik, gradonačelnik*) and the county governor (*župan*). The number of seats in the local and regional representative bodies depends on the number of inhabitants in the local unit.¹¹ The size of the local council ranges from 7 to 15 members in municipalities and from 13 to 35 members in towns, while county assemblies have 31 to 51 members.¹² Among other things, these ranges have shown that citizen's vote is worth less in urban than in rural communities (Koprić, 2009: 9). Local and county councillors have four-year non-imperative mandates. After the 1990 elections, general local elections were held six times (in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2013). The electoral system was changed four times. Only last four general local elections were held according to the same rules – full application of the proportional representation principle.

The system of absolute majority was used only in the 1990 elections. Local elections of 1993 were held with the usage of fragmented or mixed proportional and majority electoral system.¹³ One half of the councillors was elected by proportional representation from either political parties or independent lists,¹⁴ while the other half was elected in election districts by one-round relative majority system.¹⁵ They were held simultaneously with the elections for the House of Counties. Fragmented system was applied in the 1992 and 1995 national elections. Fragmented system was applied also in the 1997 general local elections (3/4 share of pro-

¹¹ In the elections for county assembly, members of national minorities that participate with more than 5% in total county population have the right to proportional representation in the county assembly. If the proportion is not accomplished in regular local elections, additional elections will be held and under certain conditions, the number of county assembly representatives may be even.

¹² Since 2001, the City of Zagreb Assembly has had 51 members.

¹³ The fragmented electoral system is widely used in the East European post-communist states as a result of political compromise between the ruling party and opposition. Kasapović uses the term segmented or 'entrenched' electoral systems (*die Grabensysteme*) because of the differences between the proportional and majority systems (Kasapović, 1995: 173).

¹⁴ The threshold was 5 per cent of votes. More about independents in: Koprić, 2007; Koprić, 2011.

¹⁵ In the majority system, the local unit is divided into as many electoral districts as there are members to be elected – one member is elected in each electoral district. In the proportional system, the entire territory of the county or the municipality becomes an electoral unit.

portional representation). The use of this rather hybrid system assumes that no “interdependence between the proportional and the majority part” exists, because members of representative bodies are elected through two separate electoral systems (Kasapović, 1995: 173–175; Omejec, 2003: 270).

The full implementation of proportional representation with blocked lists was introduced in the 2001 general local elections; the following elections of 2005, 2009, and 2013 were held applying the same electoral procedure. This system provides for competition of party and independent lists, without competition of individual candidates. Only the lists that gain more than 5 per cent of votes can divide the seats in representative bodies (5 per cent threshold). The number of seats for each list is calculated by using D’Hondt’s method. Although the proportional system is theoretically in favour of small parties and independents, the relatively high threshold and small number of voters in the majority of Croatian municipalities has produced somewhat different results.¹⁶ However, proportionality system allows certain number of small actors into local representative bodies, which can cause frequent political conflicts and inefficiency of local decision-making. Moreover, blocked lists cause depersonalisation of local politics – this is inadequate for local communities in which voters may identify themselves with certain candidates and their political programmes. In addition, local elections often serve as a ‘laboratory’ to experiment with new institutional and political solutions before they are applied in national elections (Kasapović, 2004: 65). However, the situation in Croatia is quite the opposite – proportional electoral system was first applied in the 2000 national elections and only after that in the 2001 local elections. Due to fact that voters usually express their attitude toward political parties at the national level when voting in their municipalities and counties, local politics is under strong influence of political parties and their national political programmes.

Interrelations between local bodies have fairly changed after the introduction of the direct election of mayors and county governors in 2009.¹⁷

¹⁶ Independents won more than 20 per cent of votes and got about 10 per cent of seats in the 2009 local elections (more in: Koprić, 2011: 92).

¹⁷ Prior to introduction of directly elected mayors and county governors, each local self-government unit had two executive bodies: an individual executive functionary and a collegial executive body. From 1993 to 2005, mayors and county governors were appointed by the local representative bodies. The same procedure was applied regarding members of the executive body but they were proposed by the previously appointed executive function-

Previous parliamentary-like relationship between representative and executive bodies is now more presidential-like, although representative bodies are entitled to some control mechanisms over executive functionaries. Strong position and political influence of the local executive functionary has been extended further. The mayor has taken over all the competences previously belonging to the collective executive bodies. The mayor can exert significantly influence the council's decisions. Initial expectations from the introduction of directly elected of mayors, such as “higher rate of voters’ turnout” and “decrease of party politicisation, reinforcement of ethical standards, and more managerial-like behaviour of mayors” have not been realized (Koprić, Vukojičić Tomić, 2013: 164-183). Since 1st January 2013, local executives’ power has been somewhat weakened by a new institute of simultaneous dissolution of the council and dismissal of the mayor by the Government in cases of delay in budget voting, since this crises have often occurred in local units where executive functionaries come from different political party than the majority of the councillors.¹⁸

3. Contextual Factors of Regional Distinctiveness

In order to explore second-order election effects in county elections in the fourth chapter, a selected set of factors that might contribute to understanding the distinctiveness across counties ought to be analysed first. The difference in voters’ behaviour and strategies of the political parties participating in county elections over time may be understood by institutional, ideological, geographical, economic, and political factors.

ary. Beside authority to assemble and govern the executive body, the executive functionary also had other competences with regard to local representative bodies and in relations between municipalities and central state bodies, which confirmed their power even when they were elected in such an indirect way. It is therefore possible to say that such a system had strong elements of monocacy and (quasi) hierarchy (more on the characteristics of different types of local executive bodies see in Ivanišević, 2008).

¹⁸ The main arguments for the introduction of the new institute of simultaneous dissolution of the local representative and executive bodies are slow and ineffective decision-making processes, mutual obstructions and blockades, and dissolution of local representative bodies.

3.1. Institutional Framework

3.1.1. Electoral System

County elections are elections for the county assembly and, since 2009, for the county governor (county executive body) and his two deputies. The elections are direct, free and candidates are elected by secret ballot. The most important aspects of the overall Croatian electoral system can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1: Important features of the national, county and local electoral systems over time

Year	National elections	County elections	Local elections
1990	Absolute majority in the 1 st round; relative majority in the 2 nd round.	—	—
1992	Fragmented system with 50:50 % ratio of the majority* and proportional systems; 64 uninominal electoral districts applying the principle of one-round relative majority ¹ and 60 proportional lists for the national level (3% electoral threshold for the list mandates).	—	—
1993	—	Fragmented system with 50:50% ratio of (one-round) relative majority and proportional system (5% threshold for the lists).	Fragmented system with 50:50% ratio of (one-round) relative majority and proportional system (5% threshold for the lists).

* Four uninominal electoral districts were only for representatives of ethnic and national communities or minorities whose share in population was lower than 8 per cent, i.e. for representatives of the Hungarian, Italian, Czech, Slovakian, Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Austrian national minorities. In the Parliament, 14 MPs were elected subsequently, 13 thereof as representatives of national and/or ethnic minorities whose share in population is larger than 8 per cent (Serbian national minority) and one MP as the representative of those minorities whose share is lower than 8 per cent (State Electoral Commission, www.izbori.hr).

1995	Fragmented system with 25:75 % ratio of the majority and proportional systems; 32 uninominal electoral districts applying principle of one-round relative majority** and 80 proportional lists for national level (5% threshold for one party or independent list, 8% threshold for two-party list, 11% threshold for electoral alliance of three or more parties).	—	—
1997	—	Fragmented system with 25:75% ratio of (one-round) relative majority and proportional system (5% threshold for the lists).	Fragmented system with 25:75% ratio of (one-round) relative majority and proportional system (5% threshold for the lists).
2000	Proportional system; 10 plurinominal electoral units + 1 special electoral unit for non-resident Croatian citizens (<i>diaspora</i>) + 1 special electoral unit for national minorities; single vote, closed blocked lists, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	—	—
2001	—	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt method of mandate calculation.

** Four uninominal electoral districts were created for voters of the Hungarian, Italian, Czech, Slovakian, Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Austrian national minorities. Majority segment included one special three-mandate electoral district for the representatives of Serbian national minority, while proportional segment included one special twelve-mandate electoral district for voters who are non-resident Croatian citizens (State Electoral Commission, www.izbori.hr).

2003	Proportional system; 10 plurinominal electoral units + 1 special electoral unit for non-resident Croatian citizens (diaspora) + 1 special electoral unit for national minorities; single vote, closed blocked lists, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	—	—
2005	—	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.
2007	Proportional system; 10 plurinominal electoral units + 1 special electoral unit for non-resident Croatian citizens (diaspora) + 1 special electoral unit for national minorities; single vote, closed blocked lists, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	—	—
2009	—	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation. County governor elections: county governor is elected in two rounds.	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation. Town mayor/ municipality mayor is elected in two rounds.
2011	Proportional system; 10 plurinominal electoral units + 1 special electoral unit for non-resident Croatian citizens (diaspora) + 1 special electoral unit for national minorities; single vote, closed blocked lists, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation.	—	—

2013	—	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation. County governor elections: county governor is elected in two rounds.	Proportional system; closed blocked lists, single vote, size of constituency determined by the counties' statutes, 5% threshold, D'Hondt's method of mandate calculation. Town mayor/municipality mayor is elected in two rounds.
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Source: Kasapović, 2004: 84, adapted by the authors

Subnational (local and regional) electoral model is fully harmonized with national one, with only difference regarding the size of the constituency. At the national level, the model is determined by the Law on Electoral Units for Elections of Representatives in the Croatian Parliament, while at both local and county levels it is determined by the statutes of local units.

Regarding the size of the constituencies, until 2000 and introduction of the exclusively proportional system, each electoral cycle had a different number of electoral units for both national and local elections. The changing boundaries of the electoral units caused constant volatility of voters' number therein. This type of *gerrymandering* strategy was used by the leading party (HDZ) and operationalized by two main steps: the first one was decreasing the size of "electoral strongholds" (see below) and shifting the redundant votes (those exceeding 50 per cent+1 of total votes) for HDZ to electoral units in those areas where votes were needed more; the second one was creating several large electoral units in the areas where HDZ had less chance for success and where voters and votes cast for rival parties would have been as clustered as possible (Kasapović, 1995a: 20).

3.1.2. Electoral Calendar

Electoral calendar is determined by the Law on Local Elections. Elections for the county assemblies and the City of Zagreb Assembly (since 2009, also for the county governors and the mayor of the City of Zagreb) are called by the Government every four years and held at the same time in each county (horizontal simultaneity). County elections are held simulta-

neously with elections for the mayors and municipal and town councils, and take place in the middle of the national election cycle.

Table 2: County elections as mid-term elections

County elections	Days after previous national elections
February 7 th 1993	189
April 13 th 1997	532
May 20 th 2001	503
May 15 th 2005	539
May 17 th 2009	539
May 19 th 2013	532

Source: Authors

Since 2001, elections for the municipal and town councils, county assemblies and the City of Zagreb Assembly have been held on the third Sunday in May. Both county councillors and county governors have four-year mandates. A member of the local representative body may not perform the same function in another local unit, civil service in his local unit, or a state function. If a member of the local representative body accepts a duty considered incompatible with his/her mandate, the latter will stand still during the performance of incompatible duty, with a deputy substituting him/her in the local representative body. Furthermore, an MP may not perform the function of the county governor or mayor of the City of Zagreb. However, the two laws say nothing about the possibility of cumulating the functions of the MP and local councillor or about those of the MP and town/municipal mayor. Hence, the two possibilities for *cumul des mandats* are open and in many cases practiced, as approximately 16 per cent of the national parliament representatives simultaneously perform the function of the town or municipal mayor.¹⁹

¹⁹ MPs from the governing coalition have better chance to lobby for local projects in those local units where they perform the function of the town or municipal mayor. There are several initiatives of civil society organizations proposing to ban the accumulation of MP and mayoral functions by the law.

3.2. Ideological Cleavages

After the fall of self-management socialism in SFR Yugoslavia in 1991, Croatian society has been influenced by ideological conflicts more than any other CEE country in transition. The polarisation of the electorate in those countries may be better explained by socioeconomic conflicts. Empirical researches on voters' political attitudes and behaviour have shown that Croatian political arena can be divided into left wing, right wing, and centre, with regionalist parties mostly floating between left wing and centre. Furthermore, Croatian electorate may be divided into modernistic-liberal pole (voters of the SDP, IDS, HNS, and HSLs) and conservative-catholic-nationalistic pole (voters of the HDZ and HSP). HSS voters are somewhere in the middle of this continuum, representing traditional values, although with moderate nationalistic sentiments. Regionalist parties are not deeply rooted in the ideological basis as their political platform concerns representation of regional interests.²⁰

The configuration of political parties and the political polarization of voters in Croatia can be further explained by certain structural cleavages.²¹ The oldest and most important one is the territorial-cultural cleavage, which is a difference between the centre and the periphery. This one is partly overlapping with ideological-cultural cleavage, which comprises various elements of the "religiousness-secularization" conflict (Zakošek, 1998: 47–48). In conjunction with segmented electoral system, these cleavages shaped the Croatian partisan and political system during the 1990s.²² The territorial-cultural cleavage (centre-periphery) comprises voters' attitudes towards Croatian sovereignty and joining EU integrations, national and ethnic minorities in Croatia, and the relationships between central state and local autonomy. After gaining independence in 1991, territori-

²⁰ Since the 1990s, ethnicity, religion and to some extent urban/rural provenance as well as the level of education have been the most important factors influencing party polarization (Zakošek, 1998: 32; differently on the effect of religiousness on party polarization see in Kasapović, 1994: 178–179).

²¹ In the 1960s, Lipset and Rokkan identified cleavage structures arising from three historical processes: formation of the national state (centre-periphery), secularization, and development of industry and market economy, which is a suitable framework for the research of post-socialist systems (Zakošek, 1998: 16–19).

²² Regional distinct voting patterns could be explained using territorial cleavage approach that "starts from a sociological standpoint and predicts that areas with distinct territorial identities – history, ethnicity, religion, language, economy will display dissimilar election results" (Caramani, 2004 & Rokkan, Urwin, 1983, in Schakel, 2011: 5).

al oppositions are found in the peripheral, ethnic, regional, and cultural communities (Kasapović, 1994: 177). The centre-periphery cleavages are found not only among the Serbian ethnic communities aggregated in the SDSS but also in regionalist parties who advocate decentralization of the country (IDS, PGS, ARS, HDSSB, ZDS). The most expressive territorial opposition to the centre has been established in the multicultural Istarska County, but the processes of regional identification are also noticeable in other parts of the country as a result of centralized governance system and of cultural and social discrepancies (*ibid.*). Furthermore, territorial-cultural cleavage is observable in the attitude of voters of statewide parties regarding territorial organization and level of centralization of the country. The results of a survey conducted by Zakošek before subnational elections in 1997 showed that more than one third of right-wing parties' voters (HDZ and HSP) were in favour of a strong centre, whereas voters of the left-wing SDP and centre-oriented HSLs were predominantly in favour of a balanced relationship between the centre and the regions (above 80 per cent), and below average for centralism (5.2 per cent resp. 7.6 per cent). Closer to the latter attitude were the voters of the HSS and other smaller centre and left-wing parties (Zakošek, 1998: 40).

The Croatian political system has been bipolarized since 1990 and the formation of the first nationalist-unionist polarization axis. After the first elections in 1990, the dissolution of the left-wing bloc with the SDP²³ as its main exponent occurred. Serbian political movement was the first to abandon the left bloc (either establishing ethnic parties or falling into oblivion), followed by the dissidence of "periphery" opposition movements that formed new regional parties. Meanwhile, a massive Croatian national, anti-communist movement amalgamated in a single, right-wing conservative party, the HDZ that profiled itself as ideologically and politically the strongest, hegemonic political party with a wide membership. Still, the HDZ had not managed to absorb liberal, demochristian, and popular political parties. It had not succeeded in swallowing the newly re-established peasant party and some of the right-wing movements (Kasapović, 1994: 179–180). On the one hand, there are supporters of the Croatian national "centre" with conservative political and social attitudes (voters of the HDZ and HSP) and, on the other, supporters of the Croatian "periphery", advocating decentralization and/or cosmopolitan social attitudes (SDP, HNS, HSLs, small centre, left-wing, and regionalist par-

²³ In 1990, the SDP still had the extension SKH – Croatian Communist Alliance.

ties).²⁴ It is obvious that the territorial-cultural and ideological-cultural cleavages coincide (Zakošek, 1998: 47–48). Classical western-types of structural conflict: church vs. state and/or urban vs. rural areas have not significantly shaped the Croatian partisan system. The Catholic Church in Croatia, which is considered as a traditional bastion of Christianity, has mostly had a good relationship with the state, considering it as a “political framework of spiritual emancipation” (Kasapović, 1994: 179). Urban-rural polarization has a strong conflict potential, although is still rather silent and in the shade of the political left-right polarization. This type of polarization is to be found more on the regional level, namely peasant political parties have mostly regional character as they are competing in (mostly rural) North-Western and North-Eastern parts of Croatia (counties in Zagorje, Međimurje, Podravina and Slavonia).²⁵ Regional parties in coastal parts of Croatia are competing in mostly urban or more developed areas (IDS in Istarska County, PGS in Primorsko-Goranska County, DA in Splitsko-Dalmatinska County). Furthermore, this cleavage has further implications on higher vote and seat shares for independent lists in the counties along the Adriatic coast, especially in local units in Istarska, Splitsko-Dalmatinska, Šibensko-Kninska, Primorsko-Goranska and Dubrovačko-Neretvanska counties, but also in the City of Zagreb and Osječko-Baranjska County (Koprić, 2011: 96–97).

It seems that the majority of political parties in Croatia still reproduce historical territorial and ideological cleavages, which in turn affects political behaviour of the new generation of voters (similar: Zakošek, 1998: 48). However, around 30 new political parties were established after the the 2009 elections and many of them competed in the 2011 elections for the Croatian parliament reflecting in their political platform socioeconomic conflicts that are on the rise throughout Croatia.²⁶ Nevertheless, these conflicts, which especially concern the redistribution of resources in the conditions of privatization and market liberalization, in the environment of the global economic crisis, did not have a decisive effect on reshaping

²⁴ The HDSSB as a regionalist party advocates decentralization, but its right-wing orientation attracts mainly conservative electorate. The case is similar with the ZDS and other regionalist parties in northern Croatia.

²⁵ This includes the HSS as the largest peasant party, but partly also regionalist parties HDSSB (Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja), PSS (Posavsko-Slavonska Party), Zagorje Democratic Party (ZDS), Party of Međimurje (MS), Slavonsko-Baranjska Croatian Party (SBHS), etc.

²⁶ Names of these new parties are indicative: Croatian Labourists – Labour Party; Action for Better Croatia; Voice of Reason; Alliance for Change, etc.

the existing partisan system and did not lead to higher mobilization of the electorate in the Croatian subnational elections in May 2013.

3.3. Geographic and Economic Factors

Croatia has five geographic and historical regions: Istria with Primorje (including Gorski kotar), Dalmatia, Slavonia, Zagreb, and Central (Northwest) Croatia. Instead of taking into account the regions' geographic and historical boundaries in designing administrative-territorial division of Croatia in 1992/1993, emphasis had been put on the political criteria instead of introducing a more functional and development-oriented regionalization. Thus, counties were established as niches for bureaucratization and accumulation of politicized administrative personnel (Koprić, 2010: 115; Blažević, 2010: 187). As a direct consequence of this process, counties vary in terms of their size, number of inhabitants and settlements, number of towns and municipalities within their territory and the level of economic development. Although the average county size is 2.798 km² and 174.887 inhabitants,²⁷ the numbers hide some important disparities. Ličko-Senjska is territorially the largest county (5,353 km²) whereas Međimurska is the smallest, 729 km² (1:7.3 ratio). The county with the smallest population is Ličko-Senjska with 51.022 inhabitants, whereas Splitsko-Dalmatinska is the most populated with 455.242 inhabitants (1:8.9 ratio).²⁸ The highest average GDP per capita in 2008 was recorded in the City of Zagreb (€18,554) and Istarska County, and the lowest (€6.183) in Brodsko-Posavska County (Koprić, 2013: 12). Differences in development rate between counties are obvious and growing, which has resulted in migration from underdeveloped to more developed ones, followed by decrease in the number of professional staff and economic resources, population aging, depopulation, etc. (cf. Šimunović, 2007: 172). Furthermore, in comparison to towns and municipalities, counties are collecting smallest revenues (only 19.76 per cent of all local revenues,

²⁷ The National Census of 2011 (State Statistics Office) showed a decrease in the average number of county inhabitants in all counties compared to the 2001 National Census.

²⁸ Territory of Splitsko-Dalmatinska County comprises 55 local units (16 municipalities and 39 towns) whereas Ličko-Senjska County comprises 12 local units (4 towns and 8 municipalities). Zagrebačka County has 697 settlements whereas Vukovarsko-Srijemska County only 84 (more in: Šimovć et al., 2010: 231, Koprić, 2013: 11).

Šimović et al., 2010: 245); which is in sharp contrast with their legally defined competences (see *supra*).

3.4. “Regionalization” of County Elections

Regionalization of Croatia was a delicate political and social issue during the 1990s as it was considered, in official public discourse, as a separatist tendency, if not a subversive threat to national integrity (Blažević, 2010: 176). Only after 2000 did this topic obtain political attention free of ideological fallacies. Croatia ratified the European Charter on Local Self-Government in 1997, and the remaining Charter’s principles were ratified in 2008. The European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Cooperation between Territorial Communities or Authorities was ratified in 2003. In that way, the country has committed itself to further implementation of the subsidiarity principle. All those legal changes intend to strengthen local and regional autonomy *vis-a-vis* central state. Furthermore, Croatia has been strongly influenced by Europeanization since the mid-2000s, first as an EU candidate country and since 1st July 2013 as a new Member State. Adoption and design of legal and institutional framework for regional development policy in Croatia is a result of strong EU regional policy. This can lead to functional regionalization which conceptualizes the regional level of government as an important policy actor in the field of general social and economic development. However, the role of counties in that regard is only minor, and the new regionalisation is under examination and design.

The HDZ as the largest national right-wing party traditionally wins the majority of vote and seat shares in underdeveloped and rural areas (this includes Ličko-Senjska, Sisačko-Moslavačka, and Krapinsko-Zagorska counties), as well as in the areas adversely affected and impoverished by war (including Vukovarsko-Srijemska, Osječko-Baranjska, Brodsko-Posavska, Šibensko-Kninska and parts of Zadarska and Dubrovačko-Neretvanska counties). The SDP as the largest national left-wing party wins majority of seats in the Zagreb area, Primorsko-Goranska County, and Medimurska County, whose economy is the most developed (Kasapović, 1995a: 20). However, certain regional right-wing parties, like the HDSSB in Slavonia, have begun to take over voters in their respective areas.

The widespread viewpoint on political behaviour of the county electorate is that it is mostly determined by “partisan identification, as a long-term stabilized coherence of an individual towards political parties, rather in-

dependent of concrete political events and, what is the most important, of concrete social context in which this coherence is expressed" (Omejec, 2002: 150). The results of subnational elections, as a political test of voters' support to national government, are thus proving second-order election effects.

As seen from above, counties were designed to fulfil volatile political interests rather than to reflect geographic, social, cultural, and other specifics and distinct identities within regional boundaries. Current organisation of small counties with weak self-government capacities also limits the possibility for strengthening the genuine regional political processes and overall democratic potential in counties and in wider regions. By furthering the decentralization process, Croatia needs to consider the (re)-establishment of regions, which would have not only a broader policy scope and wider financial autonomy, but would also be established according to the NUTS II criteria in order to become leading actors in genuine regional policy that initiate and support regional development processes (Koprić, 2012: 10). Since 2001 and the abolishment of bicameralism (see *supra* 2.1.), there is no institutionalised political representation of the regions or different parts of Croatia in the national Parliament, which, consequently, strengthens further centralization of the country. By organizing the national elections in five regions, the Parliament could obtain (clear) regional representativeness. Regions could then obtain a role in the national political system, simultaneously figuring as electoral units for national elections, instead of the existing ten electoral units.²⁹ By performing this additional role, regions would become effective political channels for conveying regionally specific interests into the national political arena (Kasapović, 2011: 28; Koprić, 2013: 45–46).

²⁹ Ten electoral units for general (national) elections were established in the period of bicameral Croatian Parliament, consisting of the House of Representatives and the House of Counties, with the latter having the task of representing political interests of different parts of the country. The Constitutional amendments of 2001 abolished the House of Counties, which was hugely overrepresented by party members of the then dominant right-wing national political party – HDZ. Nevertheless, the ten electoral units still exist, although gerrymandered, and dividing the country's territory into illogical parts. The constituency of each electoral unit elects 14 MPs, and the number of voters in each unit must not exceed the difference of +/-5 per cent. If the regions were to become electoral units, the number of MPs elected from each region could be twice as high, the same or lower. Nevertheless, it should be related to the size of the region's constituency and thereby differ not more than +/-5 per cent (see also: Koprić, 2013: 46).

4. County Elections – Framework of Analysis

The dominant theoretical framework used for studying regional elections is the second-order election model. It claims that national elections are first-order elections, while other elections, such as European and subnational have “less at stake” and are thus subordinate, i.e. of second-order nature to national elections (Omejec, 2002: 117 calls them *low-stimulus* elections). According to Reif and Schmitt (1980), in second-order elections voters’ turnout is lower, and those who do participate cast their vote to punish government parties (in: Schakel, 2011: 5). This leads to three predictions with regard to regional election results:

1. Government parties lose votes.
2. Turnout in regional elections is lower than in national elections.
3. Small, new and opposition parties gain votes.

Voters are inclined to behave in these ways following a cyclical logic; they are most likely to do so at the mid-point between national elections and less likely to do so soon after, or in the run-up to national elections (Reif and Schmitt, in: Schakel, Jeffery, 2013: 326).

In order to examine whether second-order election theory can be confirmed in county elections in Croatia, Prediction 1 and 2 are examined in subchapters Government Congruence Pattern and Turnout Rates, while Prediction 3 is examined in subchapter Electoral Supply.

4.1. Government Congruence Pattern

Studies on regional elections in Western European countries show that regional elections differ from national elections according to their structural, procedural, and substantial features, as well as their political and social importance and effects. Hierarchical subordination of regional elections to national elections is usually confirmed by their general status, and by data on electoral participation and electoral competition in regional elections. Voters pay less attention to subnational elections and local political institutions because they consider them as irrelevant for the national decision-making processes (Kasapović, 2004: 61–62; Schakel, 2011: 2).

County elections in Croatia are highly nationalized, i.e. they reflect national political institutions, processes and patterns of political behaviour. Furthermore, on the hierarchy scale, they might even be considered as third-order elections, standing behind national and local elections. The

almost absolute domination of one party (HDZ) in both national and county elections throughout the 1990s³⁰ and partly in the 2000s can be explained by the fact the role of the “constructor of the national state” was ascribed to the HDZ, presided by the first Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman (Kasapović, 1994: 176–177; Zakošek, 1998: 47). His authoritarian leadership in conjunction with successes in liberation of the occupied territory led to a strong mobilization of the electorate. In the 1993 county elections, the HDZ won absolute or relative majority of the vote share in all counties except in Istarska County, where the IDS won almost 90 per cent of votes, and in Varaždinska County, where the majority was won by the coalition of left-wing parties. In 1997, the HDZ won the national elections, and formed regional government in as many as 19 counties.³¹

Majoritarian effects of the segmented election system can be observed in high overrepresentation of HDZ in national and subnational governments after two general and two subnational elections in the 1990s. HDZ “remained, figuratively speaking, isolated on the political stage” (Kasapović, 1995: 185).³²

Another characteristic of county elections showing “nationalizing” effect on the local political system is that, especially since 2000 and the introduction of the proportional system, national political parties (sometimes together with regional parties) often form different pre-electoral coalitions and in that formation usually win the county elections. In 2000, centre and left-wing coalition (SDP, HSLs, HSS, HNS, IDS, and LS) won national elections, which initiated an avalanche of party coalitions in subsequent subnational elections. Most coalitions at the county level are formed by left wing (SDP, HNS) or centrist (HSS) parties, with somewhat smaller parties (HSU), whereas the HDZ usually forms coalitions with right or far-right (HSP, HKDU, HČSP) or centrist (DC) parties, but to a lesser extent. The 2001 local elections were a clear example of “barometer” elections – the HDZ as an opposition party in the Croatian

³⁰ With a steady exception in Istarska and Primorsko-Goranska counties, higher average dissimilarity scores are also shown in Ličko-Senjska and Međimurska counties as opposition parties received many votes at the county level.

³¹ The HDZ formed a coalition with right wing parties the HKDU, HSP and KDM (later merged with HKDU) in Međimurska County, and with HKDS and HSP in Varaždinska County.

³² In 1992 national elections, the HDZ obtained +16.9 per cent and in 1995 +13.9 per cent seats. The second strongest party, the HSLs, was underrepresented with -8.3 per cent of seats (Kasapović, 1995: 180).

Parliament managed to win the majority of votes in 14 counties and form county governments (alone or in a coalition) in 12 counties. In the 2003 parliamentary elections, the HDZ won a relative majority and formed a smaller coalition with the HSS, HSLs, DC, and SDSS, so the 2005 local elections were again a “coalition parade” – only Ličko-Senjska County had no coalition government (HDZ obtained 57.77 per cent seat share). The HDZ formed government in 10 counties (sometimes again in unusual coalitions, such as with the HNS and HSS in Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska County and with the HNS in Međimurska County). In eight counties, the SDP formed government with the HNS, HSS and smaller parties (with SDA in Sisačko-Moslavačka County), while Istra remained electoral stronghold of the IDS. The HNS, HSLs and SHUS (the Croatian Alliance of Retired and Senior Citizens) formed government in Varaždinska County. In Osječko-Baranjska County, independent list of Branimir Glavaš formed a post-electoral coalition with the HSP. In the 2007 national elections, the HDZ again formed a smaller coalition with the HSS, HSLs, SDSS and SDA. The 2009 local elections and electoral results were marked by pre- and post-electoral coalitions. The IDS formed a coalition with the HNS in Istarska County; the HDZ formed coalitions in 12 counties, usually with the HSS, HSLs, HSU, and/or HSP, and with independent lists in Splitsko-Dalmatinska and Šibensko-Kninska counties. The SDP formed government mostly with the HNS, HSU, and regional parties (PGS in Primorsko-Goranska County and ZDS in Krapinsko-Zagorska County) in eight counties. Finally, the 2013 local elections again show characteristics of barometer elections, quite similar to the 2001 elections, as the HDZ won the majority of votes in most counties. A further problem is that many parties that receive a relative majority of votes form *ad hoc* and volatile post-electoral coalitions, sometimes even with parties on the opposite side of the ideological pole (e.g. HDZ and HNS in Međimurska County in 2005). There are numerous cases of pre- and post-electoral coalitions falling apart after the election, taking-up seats in county assemblies, and resulting in new party negotiations and coalitions or even in new elections.³³

³³ For example, after the 1997 county elections, the share of two party coalitions in the County Assembly in Primorsko-Goranska County was equal (HDZ/HSLs/HSS – 20; SDP/PGS/HNS – 20). The Assembly was dissolved because it did not manage to elect the county governor and the executive body. The early elections were held on 30 November 1997 (Ivanišević et al., 2001: 195).

The government congruence pattern explains to which extent a regional (county) voter responds to national or regional (county) government, i.e. the national government is compared to the regional (county) government. Government congruence is measured by using the dissimilarity index,³⁴ comparing the county political party (or coalition of parties) that has won the majority of county assembly seats to the national (or statewide) political party (or coalition of parties) that has won the majority of seats in the national parliament in the previous national elections. This means taking the absolute difference per party, dividing it by two, and summing up the absolute differences. Scores obtained can range from complete congruence or similarity (0%) to complete incongruence or dissimilarity (100%) (Schakel, 2011: 3). Government congruence is calculated depending on the following possibilities:

- a) If one party alone obtained the absolute majority (50 per cent +1) of seat share in the county assembly and also the absolute majority (50 per cent +1) of seat share in the national parliament in preceding national elections, absolute value of that party's seat share (in per cent) obtained in county elections is subtracted by absolute value of the party's seat share (in per cent) obtained by that party in the national parliament. The difference per party is then divided by two. In case that in the time of county elections the party is in opposition in the national parliament, the absolute value subtracted from the party's county assembly seat share is 0 (in %) and divided by two.
- b) If a pre-electoral party coalition obtained absolute majority (50 per cent +1) of seats in the county assembly, first the share of each party to the coalition is calculated. For example, in the 2001 county elections in the City of Zagreb county coalition of the SDP and HNS won the majority of seats in the county assembly (32 out of 51), with SDP bringing in 20 seats (62.5 per cent of 32) and HNS bringing in 12 seats (37.5 per cent of 32). Then the seat share of each of that party in the national parliament is looked at. In the above example, at the time of county elections in 2001, the SDP and HNS (together with four other parties) were

³⁴ The dissimilarity index, which compares vote shares of the same party participating in different elections, was developed by Jefferey and Hough, 2009; Johnston, 1980; Pal-lares and Keating, 2003, in: Schakel, 2011: 3–4. The authors have applied the dissimilarity index to calculate the government congruence between elections for the county assembly and preceding elections for the national parliament, as suggested by Schakel and Dandoy.

also forming a governing coalition in the national parliament, winning 46 out of total 151 seats. The SDP brought in 44 seats (47.31 per cent of the share in coalition) and the HNS brought in 2 seats (2.15 per cent of the share in coalition) taking the absolute difference per party, dividing by two and summing the absolute differences. Now, the share of SDP in the county assembly governing coalition (62.5 per cent) is subtracted from its share in the governing coalition in the national parliament (47.31 per cent) and divided by two (equalling 7.60 per cent). HNS's share of 37.15 per cent in the county assembly governing coalition is subtracted by its 2.15 per cent share in the governing coalition in the national parliament and divided by two (equalling 17.68 per cent). The absolute differences are then added up for both parties (7.60 + 17.68) and hence the government congruence between county and national government is 25.26 per cent. In case one or both parties were in opposition in the national parliament, the absolute value subtracted from the party's county assembly seat share is zero (0) (in per cent), divided by two, and added up.

In Table 3, county elections held in 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, and 2013 are compared to the preceding national elections both per county election and per county over time. Bolded figures represent the highest government congruence score (in Virovitičko-Podravska County in the 1997 county elections (0.26 per cent), the lowest government congruence score (in Varaždinska County in the 1993 county elections 79.62 per cent), the highest to the lowest average government congruence score per county election (11.15 per cent in the 1997 county elections to 49.89 per cent in the 2013 county elections) as well as the highest and the lowest average government congruence score per county over time (17.61 per cent in Požeško-Slavonska County and 44.17 per cent in Medimurska County). However, none of the Croatian counties has ever reached the maximum value of dissimilarity or incongruence between county and national governments, while in very rare cases the dissimilarity index exceeds 50 per cent. In addition, as observed in Table 3, the variance in government congruence between counties over time shows a rather low dissimilarity index, which indicates a constant trend of nationalization of county elections, i.e. voters' orientation towards statewide parties.

Table 3: Congruence between county and national governments over time (in %)

Name of the county	1993	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	Average per county over time
Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska (BJB)	50.00	20.48	32.70	45.84	45.16	41.01	39.20
Brodsko-Posavska (BRP)	3.73	5.48	37.10	20.38	50.00	49.99	27.78
City of Zagreb (GZ)	4.13	5.53	25.26	42.36	48.24	45.55	28.51
Dubrovačko-Neretvanska (DUN)	2.05	4.60	40.86	49.99	26.59	47.74	28.64
Istarska (IST)	43.75	32.50	31.99	50.00	50.00	52.96	43.53
Karlovačka (KAR)	4.21	0.96	40.86	13.30	11.21	54.53	20.85
Koprivničko-Križevačka (KOK)	36.35	3.28	40.86	44.12	46.00	49.98	36.77
Krapinsko-Zagorska (KRZ)	9.21	20.47	28.37	49.49	49.35	57.07	35.66
Ličko-Senjska (LIS)	12.96	8.25	40.87	9.93	15.30	50.00	22.89
Međimurska (MEĐ)	25.00	49.99	26.88	57.00	46.00	60.16	44.17
Osječko-Baranjska (OSB)	1.71	1.75	40.98	47.60	50.00	50.00	32.01
Požeško-Slavonska (POS)	2.13	2.18	31.81	14.65	9.87	45.00	17.61
Primorsko-Goranska (PRG)	27.50	52.17	34.66	45.16	49.50	23.14	38.69
Šibensko-Kninska (ŠIK)	5.22	1.73	26.82	11.17	13.10	50.00	18.01
Sisačko-Moslavačka (SIM)	5.91	0.26	49.99	40.60	48.00	75.22	36.66
Splitsko-Dalmatinska (SPD)	3.30	0.78	28.43	19.13	46.50	51.84	25.00
Varaždinska (VAR)	79.62	0.78	29.64	26.82	28.04	46.20	35.18
Virovitičko- Podravska (VIP)	4.92	0.26	40.78	39.47	40.50	50.03	29.33
Vukovarsko-Srijemska (VUS)	13.41	0.48	46.99	26.18	42.34	50.00	29.90
Zadarska (ZAD)	0.46	1.73	46.23	20.40	21.82	47.40	23.01
Zagrebačka (ZAG)	5.80	20.48	30.60	42.34	43.16	49.99	32.06
Average per county election	16.26	11.15	35.85	34.09	37.18	49.90	30.74

Source: Authors' calculation

4.2. Turnout Rates

High average turnout rates may be observed in the 1990 national elections (84.5 per cent), in 1992 (75.60 per cent), in 1995 (68.80 per cent) and in the “critical” 2000 national elections (76.44 per cent). Average turnout rates for county elections were also rather high: 66 per cent in 1993 and 71 per cent in the 1997 elections; but in the following elections, a steady decline in turnout is perceived (average 48 per cent turnout in 2001; 42 per cent in 2005; 47 per cent in 2009 and 48 per cent in 2013). In the 2009 and 2013 elections for county governors (now the sole county executive body), turnout in the first round was in most cases identical to turnout for county assemblies. In the counties where two electoral rounds for the county governor had to take place, turnout in the second round was 5–20 per cent lower than in the first round in 2009, while in the 2013 county elections turnout in the second round was 1–10 per cent lower than in the first round.

Table 4a: Highest and lowest turnout rates for county elections over time (in %)

	1993		1997		2001		2005		2009		2013	
	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	Highest/ Lowest	
County	VIP 80.30	ZAD 30.87	VUS 83.59	SIM 62.92	POS 55.47	CoZ 39.79	DUN and VAR 51.78	CoZ 35.94	VAR 57.69	CoZ 41.69	DUN 56.73	PRG 41.33

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 4b: Highest and lowest turnout rates for national elections (in counties) over time (in %)

Elections	1992	1995	2000		2003		2007		2011	
			Highest/Lowest	Highest/Lowest	Highest/Lowest	Highest/Lowest	Highest/Lowest			
County	-	-	VAR 81.44	VUS 66.25	VAR 70.19	VUS 55.90	VAR 70.54	VUS 56.40	VAR 65.88	ZAD 55.23

Source: Authors' calculation

For comparison, turnout in elections for the Croatian President has also been in systematic decline, with an exception of the 2000 presidential election, when the turnout rate was 67.5 per cent in the first round and 63 per cent in the second round (Kasapović, 2011: 10).

Table 4c: Turnout rates in presidential elections over time (in %)

Election	1992		1997		2000		2005		2009/2010	
	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round (2009)	2nd round (2010)
Turnout	74.90	/	54.62	/	62.98	60.88	50.57	51.04	44	50.13

Source: Authors' calculation

Electoral participation in Croatia has been in steady decline since 1990, with the exception of the 2000 national elections, which were marked by strong psychological and political mobilization of the Croatian voters resulting in termination of the right-wing HDZ domination on the Croatian national and subnational political scene and victory of the left-wing coalition (SDP, HSLs, HSS, HNS, IDS, and LS). The decline in participation in that period can be explained by structural factors, such as frequency of the elections, strong incumbent party and candidate, limited resources for electoral campaign, as well as by the empirically proven attitude of the vast majority of Croatian voters that their participation makes no difference as they have no influence on the national and local governments (Grdešić, 1998: 18).³⁵ More recently, institutional arrangements in which elections are conducted serve as an explanatory variable (Kasapović, 2011: 8). Political participation and transparency of the electoral procedure continued to decline in the 2000s due to the extended practice of forming pre-electoral coalitions in the framework of the proportional electoral system. Voters abstain because of their dissatisfaction with the composition of the coalition, since pre- and post-electoral coalitions are formed following the “everybody-with-everybody” principle, which means that even large and ideologically opposite national parties sometimes make an alliance to win both national and subnational elections. An additional problem may arise in post-electoral government formation when weaker political par-

³⁵ A survey conducted before the 1997 local elections on a random sample of 1,000 voters in seven Croatian cities showed that only 55 per cent of them knew who the county governor was (Grdešić, 1998: 13).

ties abandon their stronger coalition partners if they fail to occupy certain political positions in the county or to “push through” certain policy issues on the county assembly’s political agenda.

4.3. Electoral Supply

From 1990 to 2013, approximately 150 political parties, associations, and movements were founded in Croatia. Majority of them have participated in national and subnational elections for over two decades now. Approximately a quarter never manage to reach the electoral threshold. There are fifty three parties competing in one county only. Thirty nine parties compete in several (two to five) counties, ten parties (DC; HDZ; HNS; HSL; HSP; HSS; HKDU; HSU; SDP; LS) or compete or have competed in all counties. One party was competing at the national level only,³⁶ 87 parties compete at the county and local levels, and 26 parties compete at all government levels.

Eighteen political parties in Croatia can be considered as parties with at least partially regional political agenda and thus conditionally referred to as regional parties. They are believed to represent specific interests of one or more neighbouring counties situated within the boundaries of the Croatian geographic and historic regions (Istria with Primorje, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Northwest Croatia, and Zagreb). However, they are not rooted in a particular ideological basis, as their political platform concerns representing “interests of a certain region reflecting all the heterogeneity of its population which means that they ... have features of populist parties”. (Šiber, 1993: 126). Some of them are more or less successful in county elections (IDS, HDSSB, PGS, ZDS), while others have a marginal influence on voters’ preferences (AM, ARS, DA, IDF, MS, PS, SBHS, etc.). Seven regional parties participate in county and local elections in one county;³⁷ five of them have participated in county and local elections in

³⁶ LIBRA, Party of Liberal Democrats, participated in the 2003 national elections and obtained three seats, but it merged with the HNS in 2005.

³⁷ AM – Youth Action; ARS – Autonomous Regional Party of Croatian Primorje, Gorski kotar, Rijeka and the Islands, LRI – List for Rijeka participated in the Primorje-Goranska County elections; MDS – Democratic Alliance of Međimurje and MS – Party of Međimurje competed in Međimurska County; PS – Party of Podravina competed in Koprivničko-Križevačka County; PSS – Posavsko-Slavonska Party competed in Vukovarsko-Srijemska County.

several (2-5) counties;³⁸ and six of them have competed in both county and national elections.³⁹

When looking at the political parties' participation in the county executive body in a single county, in several counties, and in both the county executive body and the national government, the Primorsko-Goranska Alliance (PGS), Zagorje Democratic Party (ZDS), Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP), Croatian Dalmatian Home (HDD), Posavsko-Slavonska Party (PSS), and the Autonomous Regional Party (ARS) were the parties that participated in a single county's executive body. Five of them can be referred to as regional parties: the PGS and ARS in Primorsko-Goranska County, the HDD in Splitsko-Dalmatinska County, the PSS in Vukovarsko-Srijemska County, and the ZDS in Krapinsko-Zagorska County. The HČSP as a statewide party participated only in the executive body of Šibensko-Kninska County. Parties participating in several (two to five) county executive bodies were the IDS (Istarska and Primorsko-Goranska counties), HDSSB (Osječko-Baranjska and Požeško-Slavonska counties), SDSS (Sisačko-Moslavačka and Vukovarsko-Srijemska counties), and HKDU (Varaždinska, Sisačko-Moslavačka and Splitsko-Dalmatinska counties). Two of them are regional parties, the IDS and HDSSB, while one is an ethnic party (SDSS). The HKDU is a statewide party, although during 2000 it lost all of its influence. Finally, there are eleven political parties participating in both national governments and county executive bodies: HDZ, SDP, HSLs, HSS, HNS, LS,⁴⁰ IDS, DC, SDSS, HSU, and SDA Croatia.⁴¹

³⁸ DPZS, Democratic Party of Prigorje and Zagreb competed in the City of Zagreb, Zagrebačka, and Karlovačka counties; DSSR, Democratic Party of Slavonian Plain competed in Osječko-Baranjska, Požeško-Slavonska, and Brodsko-Posavska counties; HDD, Croatian Dalmatian Home, IDF, Istrian Democratic Forum competed in Primorsko-Goranska and Istarska counties; ZS, Party of Zagorje, competed in the City of Zagreb, Zagrebačka, and Krapinsko-Zagorska counties).

³⁹ DA, Dalmatian Action competed in several counties of Dalmatia; HDSSB, Croatian Democratic Party of Slavonia and Baranja competed in five counties of Slavonia; IDS, Istrian Democratic Assembly competed in Istarska and Primorsko-Goranska counties; PGS (ex RDS, Rijeka Democratic Alliance) competed in Primorsko-Goranska County, SBHS, Croatian Party of Slavonia and Baranja competed in three counties of Slavonia; and ZDS, Zagorje Democratic Party competed in the City of Zagreb and Krapinsko-Zagorska County.

⁴⁰ It joined the HSLs in 2006.

⁴¹ SDA was founded in 1990 as a Bosniac party whose basic goal is to protect the national identity and political representation of the Bosniac community in all former Yugoslav countries. It has a Croatian branch called SDA Croatia.

The Serbian minority is the largest national minority in Croatia with interests politically aggregated in parties competing in elections. The share of Serbian minority in the population is the highest in Vukovarsko-Srijemska County (15.5 per cent). Its presence in other counties is as follows: 11.7 per cent in Sisačko-Moslavačka County, 11.5 per cent in Ličko-Senjska County, 11 per cent in Karlovačka County, 9.1 per cent in Šibensko-Kninska County, 8.7 per cent in Osječko-Baranjska County, 7.1 per cent in Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska and in Virovitičko-Podravski Counties, and 6.5 per cent in Požeško-Slavonska County (Koprić, 2007: 343). There are four ethnic parties representing Serbian national minority (SDSS, SNS, NSS, DPS). The SDSS as the strongest Serbian party competes at the national level and in ten counties where Serbian minority has a share in total population (those counties mostly overlap with counties affected by the war).⁴² Bosnian ethnic community is represented by the SDA, which competes at the local and county levels in Primorsko-Goranska, Šibensko-Kninska, Vukovarsko-Srijemska and Zadarska counties, as well as at the national level.⁴³

The most powerful statewide political parties are the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the Social-Democratic Party (SDP), the Croatian Popular Party (HNS), the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS), the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs), and the Retired Citizens' Party (HSU). Some of those parties have a large and dense hierarchical organizational system of their county and local branches. The HDZ has 21 county branches, as well as the HNS. Moreover, the HNS has five regional alliances (Northwest Croatia, Slavonia and Baranja, Central Croatia, Dalmatia, and one for Istra, Primorje, Gorski kotar, Lika, and Senj).⁴⁴ The SDP has 16, HSS 20, and HSP 7 county branches.

⁴² These are the following: Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska, Karlovačka, Ličko-Senjska Osječko-Baranjska, Primorsko-Goranska, Sisačko-Moslavačka, Šibensko-Kninska, Virovitičko-Podravski, Vukovarsko-Srijemska, and Zadarska counties.

⁴³ The political interests of the Roma ethnic community have been aggregated in two extremely marginal political parties, the SRH and HRDS. The SRH competed in Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska and Međimurska counties in the 1993 and 2005 elections. The HRDS was founded in 2007.

⁴⁴ The statute of the HNS does not recognize the interconnection between regional identities and present administrative-territorial division (20 counties + the City of Zagreb). Rather, it envisages the tasks of the party's regional alliances: "... acknowledging geographic, historical, cultural, and other particularities of the Croatian regions as units existing and recognized regardless of the present territorial-administrative organization of the Republic of Croatia, resp. administrative division into 20 counties and the City of Zagreb and taking into account the achieved level of institutionalization of its organization in Croatian regions, the

The branches usually have a rather differentiated internal structure usually consisting of the assembly, the executive body, the presidency, the secretary, the treasurer, and the court of honour. They also have coordination units and certain types of interest branches (e.g. youth club, women's club, etc.). The tasks of county branches do not differ from party tasks at the state level, such as implementation of the partisan politics at the county level, information collection and reporting to the headquarters, information sharing, supervision of local (town and municipal) branches on the county territory, recruitment of new party members, mobilization of voters, etc. These tasks have a "nationalizing" effect on the local political system. Due to the similarity of local and national political systems, there is little chance for local policy, local parties, and local problems to influence voters' preferences at the subnational level (cf. Kasapović, 2004: 91). The IDS as the most important regional party has a large organizational network consisting of nine branch associations of all over Istria and in part of Primorsko-Goranska County, with each community consisting of several town and municipal branches. The HDSSB has spread its parliamentary influence and has its branches in a large part of Slavonia and Baranja. In the 2013 county elections, party coalitions won the majority of vote share in all counties. Two new regional parties participated in Dubrovačko-Neretvanska County (MOST and DDS), each obtaining four seats in the county assembly.⁴⁵ Two regionalist parties, the IDS (alone) and the HDSSB (in coalition with the Green Party) won the majority of votes in the assemblies of Istarska and Osječko-Baranjska County respectively. Nine regional parties obtained vote share in county elections in 11 counties, out of which six regional parties in electoral alliance with statewide

HNS establishes its regional organization so that it connects partisan county organizations in a particular region, i.e. that it allies close regions or subregions into one regional alliance of HNS ... specific function of a regional alliance is harmonization of county organizations' viewpoints in a particular region on the issues interfering specific economic, social, cultural and other interests of regions, as well as representation of regional viewpoints in the central bodies of HNS ..."

⁴⁵ Although the statute of MOST mentions decentralisation of state functions to the units of local and regional self-government, neither of those two parties have promotion of specific regional interests as a separate goal in their statutes. The statute of MOST: <http://most-nl.com/o-mostu/nas-statut/>; the statute of DDS: http://dubrovaackidemokratskisabor.hr/images/Statut_stranke.pdf. DDS mentions in its general provisions "... safeguarding and promoting particularities and values of political, economic, and cultural heritage and tradition of the Republic of Croatia and broader Dubrovnik region ..." but later states that "... the broader Dubrovnik region ... in the time of enacting this Statute 'covers' the area of Dubrovačko-Neretvanska County".

parties (in nine thereof one regional party was in coalition, in two counties more than one regional party was in coalition). The majority of county assembly seats in eight counties were obtained by regional parties. No regional party out of electoral alliance obtained the absolute majority of votes, except the IDS in Istarska County. Statewide government parties won a relative majority of vote share in electoral alliance in five counties, and absolute majority of vote share in a coalition in one county. Statewide opposition parties won a relative majority of votes in coalition in ten counties, and absolute majority of votes in three counties, which proves the second-order election effects in county elections as a trend.

5. Conclusion

Hesitating attempts of political regionalization in conjunction with weak fiscal capacities provoke counties' political and economic dependence on the central state, which in turn has a decisive influence on voters' political behaviour at the county level – they might turn to statewide parties just as counties depend on and turn to the state. Where this is not the case, namely where historic, social, economic, and cultural environment allows for the development of distinctive regional identities and interests, powerful regional political sentiments arise. Istarska County and the IDS are the best example. However, the majority of county political scene is still strongly dominated by national actors, political parties, and processes.⁴⁶ When talking about county and local political parties, this mostly refers to county and local organizational branches of the most powerful national parties that are considered as “regional” because they have an “electoral stronghold” in the counties where they were founded (Kasapović, 2004: 85). Ličko-Senjska, Vukovarsko-Srijemska, Splitsko-Dalmatinska, Brodsko-Posavska, Zadarska, Karlovačka, and to some extent Šibensko-Kninska, Osječko-Baranjska, Požeško-Slavonska Virovitičko-Podravska and Karlovačka counties are electoral strongholds of the HDZ. Regarding the SDP, this is mostly the case in Primorsko-Goranska County and in the City of Zagreb while the HNS is strong in Međimurska County. “True” regional parties, the IDS and HDSSB, continuously obtain seats in

⁴⁶ This can also be concluded by looking at the names of the political parties that form both national and subnational government, as they have the adjective ‘Croatian’ in their name, with the exception of the SDP and IDS, both of which are currently in the governing parliament coalition of left-wing parties (SDP, HNS, IDS, and HSU).

their respective counties. The IDS formed the majority in Istarska County Assembly in 1993, 1997, 2001 and 2013 alone, in 2005 in coalition with the left-wing SDP, and in 2009 in coalition with the left-wing HNS. The IDS (also in coalition with the SDP and some regional parties) won county elections in Primorsko-Goranska County. Since 2009, the HDSSB has obtained assembly seats in five Slavonian counties (Brodsko-Posavska, Osječko-Baranjska, Požeško-Slavonska; Virovitičko-Podravska, and Vukovarsko-Srijemska) and it had the majority in Osječko-Baranjska County Assembly in 2009 and 2013, both times in coalition with the Green Party. In 2009, the HDSSB's candidate won the county governor election.

Since 2001, an ongoing but hesitant process of decentralization and proliferation of new, small parties can be noticed. However, they achieve rather poor, almost insignificant results in regional elections. On the other hand, independent lists are progressively on the rise regarding their number and success since the 2001 subnational elections. They gain about 20 per cent of votes, but only 10 per cent of seats. The same figure is true for independent candidates for executive functions in the 2009 subnational elections. In the 2013 county elections, 20 independent lists competed for the county assembly, 8 of them obtained above 5 per cent of votes (11.24 per cent of vote share on average). Nine independent candidates competed for the position of county governor, one of them won (City of Zagreb) and one of them entered the second election round, but lost them (Splitsko-Dalmatinska County).

Second-order election (or rather, third-order election) effects are rather strong in Croatian counties. National political parties dominate the regional political scene, depriving regional politics from independent development adjusted to the specific regional context and resulting in voters' orientation towards statewide parties and formation of electoral coalitions modelled after national patterns. Nevertheless, there are arguments that the Croatian subnational electoral system has some elements that may be pointing at a certain regional logic. Turnout is lower than in national elections (which is a standard element of second-order election effects) but electoral results show rise of votes cast for independent lists and decline of votes cast for national parties (both government and opposition). What could change the nature of regional elections is the transformation of subnational electoral system towards more local problem-oriented approach and preferential voting for the candidates. Institutional mechanisms should enable more personalized elections: majority system, preferential lists, and/or better promotion of independent candidates (Omejec, 2002: 150–151; Kasapović, 2004: 92).

In addition, the processes of territorial reorganization and further decentralization could contribute to representativeness and legitimacy of the regional electoral system. Current electoral units in Croatia should follow natural and historical regional framework. This could be possible if the current illogical structure of 21 counties (more in: Koprić, 2001) were transformed into five regions that could also serve as electoral units for national elections.⁴⁷ In this way, regional dimension in electoral competition and political representation could be strengthened (Kasapović, 2011: 28). Although society is politically, economically, culturally, regionally, religiously, and ethnically heterogeneous, the Croatian governance system is still highly centralized (Koprić, 2010: 137; Kasapović, 2011: 26). It is obvious that the more regionalized and decentralized the state, the more importance and independence will be gained by regional communities, regional political actors, and elections. This will probably have a positive feedback on political culture of the regional electorate. However, the desired changes are still under consideration as the political and social consent for transformation of the current stabilized, but dysfunctional electoral and territorial system has still not been given.

At the moment, a new regional concept with five historical regions is undergoing a serious professional and political debate. If Croatia had five regions with significant financial capacity and autonomy for performing a wide scope of public affairs, including regional economic and social development, the importance of regional elections would certainly be increased, maybe even to the level of national elections.

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⁴⁷ In the same vein, Albania reformed its national electoral system by turning regions into electoral units in 2008, which enabled rationalization of the territorial-administrative structure and is a form of “recognizing the regions as an integrative part of the politico-administrative system” (Škarica, 2012: 383).

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COUNTY ELECTIONS IN CROATIA: ON THE PATH TO GENUINE REGIONAL POLITICS

Summary

Current second-tier organization in Croatia is based on twenty counties and the City of Zagreb with the county status. The counties are relatively small and have a rather low financial capacity and developmental role. In the period 1993–2001, counties were predominantly units responsible for deconcentrated state administration, with rather narrow autonomy. That is why county elections were of third order, after national and local elections. After 2001, counties were rearranged as autonomous units without any state administrative tasks and with a widened self-government scope. County elections became second-order, subordinated to national elections, which is demonstrated in this analysis. Relatively low government congruence score between county and national governments over time confirms that government parties lose votes in county elections and opposition parties gain votes. The turnout rate shows that voters cast ballots in county elections more rarely than in national elections. The counties political arena is still dominated by national parties and their organizational branches. County elections are highly 'nationalized' since they reflect national political institutions, processes, and patterns of political behaviour. At the moment, a new regional concept with only five historical regions is under serious professional and political debate. In the near future, the introduction of new, genuine regional organization instead of present counties is likely. If those five new regions with broad autonomous scope of affairs are established, including regional development and strong regional policy, regional elections may become less subordinated to national elections and more oriented to specific interest of particular regions. The importance of regional elections depends mainly on the significance of the regional scope of public affairs and the financial capacity of regional units.

Key words: counties, Croatia, electoral system, national elections, county elections, county assembly, regional political parties, regional politics

ŽUPANIJSKI IZBORI U HRVATSKOJ: NA PUTU PREMA STVARNOJ REGIONALNOJ POLITICI

Sažetak

Sadašnja organizacija druge razine lokalne samouprave u Hrvatskoj temelji se na dvadeset županija i Gradu Zagrebu, koji ima ovlasti grada i županije. Županije se relativno male i imaju slabe financijske kapacitete i nedovoljnu razvojnu ulogu. U razdoblju 1993.–2001. županije su prije svega bile odgovorne za obavljanje poslova dekoncentrirane državne uprave s vrlo uskom autonomijom. Zato su županijski izbori bili po važnosti izbori trećega reda, iza parlamentarnih i lokalnih izbora. Nakon 2001. županije su reorganizirane kao autonomne jedinice koje više ne obavljaju poslove državne uprave, a samoupravni djelokrug im je proširen. Županijski izbori postali su izbori drugog reda, kako se vidi iz analize. Relativno niski indeks podudaranja županijskih i nacionalne vlasti u vremenskoj perspektivi potvrđuje da vladine stranke gube glasove u županijskim izborima, dok oporbene stranke glasove dobivaju. Stopa izlaznosti pokazuje da glasači rjeđe izlaze na županijske nego na nacionalne izbore. Županijska politička arena je još uvijek u rukama nacionalnih političkih stranaka i njihovih županijskih ogranaka. Županijski su izbori visoko nacionalizirani jer odražavaju nacionalne političke institucije, procese i načine političkog ponašanja. Trenutno se vode ozbiljne stručne i političke rasprave o novom regionalnom konceptu s pet povijesnih regija. Postoji vjerojatnost uvođenja istinske regionalne organizacije u budućnosti, umjesto postojeće županijske organizacije. Ako bi se uspostavilo pet regija sa širokim samoupravnim djelokrugom, uključujući regionalni razvoj i snažne regionalne politike, regionalni bi izbori mogli postati manje podređeni nacionalnima i više orijentirani na posebne interese pojedinih regija. Značenje regionalnih izbora uglavnom ovisi o važnosti kruga regionalnih poslova i financijskom kapacitetu regionalnih jedinica.

Ključne riječi: županije, Hrvatska, izborni sustav, nacionalni izbori, županijski izbori, županijska skupština, regionalne političke stranke, regionalna politika