



Affective Clientelism and Resident Turnout in Albania: Moral Reciprocity, Leader Attachment, and Cynical Adaptation under Hybrid Rule

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Abstract

Electoral participation among resident citizens in Albania remains unusually high despite pervasive perceptions of corruption and low institutional trust. Existing accounts of clientelism often model turnout as a contingent material exchange, leaving under-specified the moral and affective mechanisms that sustain loyalty under chronic dissatisfaction. This article develops the concept of affective clientelism: a mode of political linkage in which distributive dependence is stabilized by (i) normatively sanctioned reciprocity, (ii) leader-centered attachment and out-group threat, and (iii) cynical adaptation that attenuates the behavioral consequences of scandal. Empirically, the article employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design that triangulates (a) turnout recalculation using the resident voting-age population from the 2023 census as the denominator (to address register inflation driven by emigration), (b) a nationally representative survey (September 2024, N=1,000), and (c) six focus groups conducted in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, and Kamëz (November 2024). Corrected calculations indicate that resident participation exceeds 85% in multiple districts and surpasses 90% in several cases. Survey evidence using projective items shows that employment-based expectations are widely perceived to influence vote choice (67.0%), that the party leader is reported as a dominant influence (82.6%), and that a substantial share of respondents report limited vote change in response to scandals (48.5%). Focus-group narratives contextualize these patterns within a moral economy of “help” and obligation, leader-centered protection, and a defensive cynicism that normalizes corruption as a condition of political life. The findings suggest that high resident turnout in Albania should not be read straightforwardly as democratic accountability, but as evidence of dense party-centered dependency networks operating under low-trust conditions.

Keywords: Affective Clientelism; Voter Turnout; Moral Economy; Political Trust; Albania

1. Introduction

Albania offers an analytically instructive case for research on political participation under hybrid and post-communist conditions. Electoral competition is regular and adversarial, and partisan mobilisation is pronounced, yet the political system operates in an environment widely perceived as affected by corruption, politicised allocation of opportunities, and unequal access to public resources. Under such conditions, elections may operate not only as mechanisms of democratic accountability but also as recurring episodes of partisan reproduction, through which rival political communities reaffirm boundaries, sustain organisational discipline, and reactivate local mobilisation infrastructures. The empirical tension is therefore clear: while institutional trust is persistently low and extra-electoral civic engagement comparatively weak, resident electoral participation appears unusually resilient. This raises a basic theoretical question: what sustains political loyalty and continued participation in a system that many citizens simultaneously evaluate as unfair or untrustworthy?

Prevailing accounts of hybrid-regime durability emphasise macro-structural determinants, including elite entrenchment, constraints on oversight institutions, asymmetric access to administrative capacity, and informational environments characterised by uneven media pluralism. While these approaches illuminate the institutional conditions of dominance, they often operationalise the electorate as either (i) passive recipients of coercion and inducement or (ii) rational utility maximisers responding to selective incentives. In doing so, they may under-specify the micro-foundations of participation—specifically, the moral and affective processes through which sustained engagement becomes subjectively reasonable and socially intelligible even under chronic dissatisfaction. This article addresses this gap by developing the concept of affective clientelism, defined as a mode of political linkage in which loyalty is (i) personalised and leader-centred, (ii) normatively justified through a moral economy of reciprocity and protection, and (iii) stabilised through pragmatic cynicism that normalises corruption and reduces the moral and emotional costs of continued support.

A significant obstacle to explain the Albanian puzzle concerns participation. Standard interpretations of Central Election Commission (CEC) turnout figures often suggest only moderate participation. However, this inference is highly sensitive to denominator specification. Albania’s electoral registers include a sizeable non-resident population, which mechanically reduces conventional turnout rates and can produce an artificial appearance of disengagement. When turnout is recalculated using the resident voting-age population as the denominator, a markedly different baseline emerges¹.

This correction is not merely technical. Albania’s regional proportional system allocates mandates across twelve districts, creating incentives for parties to maximise mobilisation in territorially concentrated strongholds rather than optimise only a national aggregate. Table 1 reports adjusted resident participation by district, computed as total votes cast in the 2021 parliamentary election divided by the resident voting-age population recorded in the 2023 census. Once turnout is computed against the resident population, the notion of an “apathetic electorate” becomes difficult to sustain. In multiple districts—including Lezhë, Gjirokastër, Fier, Korçë, and Shkodër—resident participation exceeds 90 per cent, consistent with dense and routinised mobilisation environments rather than intermittent civic engagement.

Table 1. Adjusted resident voter turnout by electoral district (CEC 2021 votes cast / INSTAT 2023 resident voting-age population 18+)

Electoral District (Qark)	Resident Participation Rate (%)
Lezhë	97%
Gjirokastër	93%
Fier	92%
Korçë	91%
Shkodër	91%
Kukës	89%
Durrës	89%
Elbasan	88%
Vlorë	86%
Dibër	82%
Tiranë	80%
Berat	68%

Source: Author’s calculations based on CEC 2021 Election Data and INSTAT 2023 Census Data. Percentages represent total votes cast divided by the resident voting-age population (18+). Because ballots cast can include some non-resident voters who return to vote, these figures should be interpreted as approximations of resident mobilization intensity rather than precise behavioral measures of residency.

¹ Adjusted resident turnout is calculated as total votes cast by district in the 2021 parliamentary election (CEC) divided by the resident voting-age population (18+) by district reported in the 2023 Population and Housing Census (INSTAT). This adjustment addresses inflation in civil-registry voter lists associated with long-term non-residency. The measure should be interpreted as an approximation of resident participation because census and election dates differ and because district-level internal mobility may introduce minor denominator error.

Taken together, these patterns imply that—among large segments of the resident electorate—voting is plausibly embedded in party-centred social worlds and dependency networks, rather than driven primarily by episodic programmatic evaluation. The central analytic problem is therefore not simply the weakness of democratic accountability, but the capacity of a hybrid political order to generate and sustain high levels of resident participation under conditions of pervasive distrust and recurrent elite scandal.

To explain this configuration, the study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design triangulating: (i) turnout recalculation using census-based denominators (CEC 2021 votes cast; denominator = resident voting-age population from the 2023 census), (ii) a nationally representative survey of voting motivations and partisan attitudes (September 2024, $N = 1,000$), and (iii) six focus groups conducted in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, and Kamëz (November 2024). The analysis identifies three mutually reinforcing mechanisms of mobilisation: moral reciprocity, whereby voting is construed as repayment within a reciprocal economy of favours and protection; affective attachment, whereby loyalty is anchored in leader-centred identification and partisan social identity; and cynical adaptation, whereby corruption is treated as a durable feature of political life, weakening behavioural responsiveness to scandal and lowering the moral costs of continued support. Together, these mechanisms specify how a citizenry may remain highly mobilised electorally while expressing sustained cynicism toward institutions and political elites.

2. Literature Review

This section locates the article at the intersection of three complementary strands of scholarship that speak to participation under hybrid and post-communist conditions: (i) structural accounts of hybrid-regime durability and electoral mobilisation, (ii) clientelism as distributive linkage and contingent exchange, and (iii) affective and identity-based approaches to partisan attachment under low trust. Across these literatures, a shared limitation is that high participation under low legitimacy is typically treated either as an instrumental response to selective incentives or as an artefact of structural constraint. Less attention is devoted to the moral and affective micro-foundations that can render durable loyalty socially intelligible and psychologically sustainable in contexts where citizens simultaneously recognise systemic dysfunction.

2.1 *Hybrid regimes, state capture, and participation*

Hybrid-regime research highlights the institutional conditions under which electoral competition persists without producing effective accountability—especially through uneven access to state resources, constrained oversight, and selective enforcement (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In the Western Balkans, these dynamics are frequently analysed through the lenses of competitive authoritarianism, managed pluralism, and “stabilitocratic” governance, where elections perform both legitimating and organisational functions (Bieber, 2018). This scholarship clarifies the macro-architecture of dominance, but it tends to explain participation mainly in terms of resource asymmetries, administrative leverage, and informational control, rather than the micro-level mechanisms through which voters interpret participation as reasonable—even when they express distrust toward parties and institutions.

2.2 *Clientelism as contingent exchange and distributive linkage*

The clientelism literature typically conceptualises political linkage as a discretionary and selective exchange in which political support is traded for targeted benefits delivered through brokers and monitored through patronage networks (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes, 2005). This approach yields clear expectations about incentives, monitoring, and compliance. However, its market-like behavioural assumptions—particularly the expectation that voters will readily defect when benefits are unavailable—are often strained in settings where partisan attachment is durable and where defection carries relational, reputational, and identity costs (Piattoni, 2001). These considerations point toward the need to treat clientelist exchange not only as material transfer, but also as socially embedded linkage shaped by normative expectations of reciprocity and protection.

2.3 *Affective attachment, distrust, and identity conflict*

A third perspective of literature emphasises the affective and identity-based foundations of political competition. Research on affective polarisation distinguishes ideological disagreement from emotional hostility and social distance toward

partisan out-groups, showing how “lock-in” dynamics can stabilise electoral loyalty even under poor performance or scandal exposure (Iyengar et al., 2012). This perspective is directly relevant to contexts where distrust coexists with high turnout, because it theorises how perceived threat and group identity can constrain defection. Yet it is rarely integrated with clientelism’s focus on distributive linkage, leaving under-developed accounts of how material dependency and affective conflict interact to sustain participation.

2.4 *Literature gap and contribution*

Taken together, these complementary strands of scholarship account for the institutional and distributive conditions of dominance, but they under-specify how loyalty remains durable under low trust when participation is experienced as both necessary and morally intelligible. The next section develops affective clientelism as an integrated framework linking: (i) distributive dependence (clientelism), (ii) normatively grounded reciprocity (moral economy), and (iii) identity-based lock-in and cynicism (political psychology), to explain why high participation can coexist with pervasive scepticism toward institutions.

3. Theoretical Framework: From Transaction to Affective Engagement

To account for Albania’s participation paradox, the article develops affective clientelism as a hybrid mode of political linkage sustained by three mutually reinforcing mechanisms: (i) moral reciprocity, (ii) affective attachment, and (iii) cynical adaptation. The framework draws on moral economy scholarship, political psychology on affective polarisation, and theories of cynicism, while retaining the distributive insight of contingent-exchange models.

3.1 *Beyond the transactional model: The limits of rational choice*

In seminal accounts, clientelism is conceptualised as a discretionary exchange in which political support is reciprocated with targeted material benefits (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes, 2005). The implied behavioural model treats voters as utility maximisers and politicians (or brokers) as strategic agents who purchase compliance through credible delivery and monitoring. On this view, the relationship is primarily instrumental and episodic: it persists insofar as benefits continue to flow and enforcement remains credible.

However, a strictly transactional account is insufficient for explaining the persistence of partisan loyalty in settings where citizens evaluate governance as corrupt and distributively biased yet remain electorally mobilised across repeated cycles. If the vote were treated purely as a commodity, one would expect comparatively high volatility: voters should defect when benefits are not delivered, when rival patrons offer superior packages, or when incumbents lose control of distributive resources. Yet the Albanian case appears to exhibit a more rigid structure of political attachment than a purely market-based model would predict.

One reason is that transactional accounts tend to reduce political exchange to material transfer, under-theorising the relational and identity dimensions of brokerage. In high-uncertainty environments, clientelist networks often operate as problem-solving infrastructures that mediate access to the state and provide predictability under administrative discretion and vulnerability (Auyero, 2000). In this sense, exchange is not only about discrete goods (employment, permits, assistance), but also about belonging to a protective community and maintaining access to a trusted medium of state capacity. The analytic implication is that clientelism should be conceptualised not only as market exchange but as socially embedded linkage, where loyalty is stabilised by relational obligations and the multidimensional costs of defection.

3.2 *The post-socialist moral economy: Reciprocity as justice*

To explain why citizens may remain loyal to patrons widely perceived as corrupt, the concept of moral economy is instructive. Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) argue that economic relations are embedded in shared normative expectations about reciprocity, obligation, and justice; exchanges are evaluated not only through legal or procedural standards, but also through locally legitimate norms of fairness and protection. In moral-economy settings, practices that appear as corruption from an external legalistic perspective may be interpreted internally as rightful reciprocity—particularly where impersonal institutions do not provide reliable protection and where access to state resources is experienced as discretionary (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971; Hann, 2018).

In post-socialist contexts, moral-economy logics may be reinforced by legacies of institutional disruption and prolonged uncertainty. Where citizens experience the state as unpredictable, weakly protective, or selectively responsive, they may retreat—both rationally and normatively—into personal trust networks that substitute for impersonal guarantees. Under such conditions, the exchange of political support for employment or administrative facilitation can be re-coded as an obligation of care and repayment rather than as an illicit bribe: support is framed as the settlement of moral debt, and failure to reciprocate is evaluated as ingratitude rather than integrity (Scott, 1976; Hann, 2018). The implication for participation is that voting and loyalty may be sustained not only by prospective material benefits, but also by normatively sanctioned expectations of reciprocity that structure how citizens interpret “favour,” “protection,” and “deservingness” within partisan networks (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976). Empirically, this mechanism implies that citizens will describe employment, permits, and administrative access as legitimate forms of “help” tied to reciprocal obligation—proxied in this study via projective survey items about perceived voting motivations and elaborated through focus-group narratives.

3.3 *Affective polarisation: Identity-based conflict and political lock-in*

While moral economy helps account for the stability and legitimacy of reciprocal exchange, affective polarisation helps explain its intensity. Political-psychological research distinguishes ideological polarisation (policy disagreement) from affective polarisation, defined as emotional hostility and social distance toward partisan out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2012). Where affective polarisation is high, politics is experienced less as programmatic contestation and more as identity conflict; electoral choice becomes anchored in social identity and perceived group threat.

In such contexts, affective polarisation can generate a lock-in mechanism that reinforces clientelist dependency. Even when voters are dissatisfied with incumbent performance, defection may be constrained by fear of alternation: the opposing camp is perceived not merely as a competitor but as a threat to in-group access, security, and status. Leader-centred attachment can then operate as an affective anchor, providing a focal point for group identification and protection. Empirically, this mechanism implies asymmetric leader evaluations—highly favourable assessments of the in-group leader alongside strongly negative assessments of the opposing leader—and a muted behavioural response to scandal exposure, patterns that can be assessed using survey evidence on leader evaluations, leader influence, and reported scandal effects (Iyengar et al., 2012).

3.4 *Systemic cynicism and the adaptive citizen*

A further mechanism concerns the coexistence of pervasive corruption awareness with continued participation. Sloterdijk’s notion of “enlightened false consciousness” captures a form of cynicism in which individuals recognise systemic dysfunction yet continue to comply because exit is costly, perceived as futile, or associated with risk (Sloterdijk, 1988). In electoral settings, cynicism can lower the moral and emotional costs of participation by reframing corruption as a durable feature of political life rather than a correctable deviation. Under such conditions, scandals may lose their capacity to trigger withdrawal; participation becomes a pragmatic accommodation rather than a normative endorsement.

Cynicism also reshapes the meaning of participation. Instead of mobilising to enforce abstract standards of accountability, citizens may mobilise defensively to secure access, maintain protection, or minimise losses under alternation. Civic engagement becomes oriented toward risk management within constrained opportunity structures rather than proactive claims-making. This logic is consistent with empirical patterns in which trust in parties and institutions is low while turnout remains high—an apparent contradiction that the present framework treats as theoretically predictable rather than anomalous.

3.5 *Distinguishing affective clientelism from populism*

Affective clientelism shares external features with populism—personalisation, moralised conflict, and heightened in-group/out-group dynamics—but it remains analytically distinct. Standard definitions of populism emphasise a vertical antagonism between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” articulated through anti-establishment rhetoric and claims to exclusive moral representation (Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005). In affective clientelism, by contrast, the “elite” is not primarily an external enemy to be displaced; it is an internal patronage structure that citizens seek to access and navigate. The motivational core is therefore less rupture than risk management and group security within a known distributive order.

Moreover, whereas populist mobilisation may be episodic and contingent on a leader’s performative capacity,

affective clientelism is structurally anchored in dependency networks, reciprocal obligations, and identity-based lock-in. Loyalty can therefore persist even in periods of poor performance because defection is costly not only materially but also socially and affectively. In this sense, affective clientelism can be conceptualised as a high-density clientelist order in which the costs of exit are multidimensional, combining material dependency with moral obligation and affective threat perceptions (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Iyengar et al., 2012; Scott, 1976).

3.6 *Conceptual synthesis*

Integrating these streams, affective clientelism is conceptualised here as a hybrid mode of political linkage sustained by three mutually reinforcing drivers: (i) moral reciprocity; (ii) affective attachment; and (iii) cynical adaptation, in which corruption is normalised as an enduring condition, lowering the moral costs of participation and attenuating the behavioural consequences of scandal (Hann, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2012; Sloterdijk, 1988; Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1971). This framework is designed to explain the Albanian participation paradox: a citizenry that expresses sustained cynicism toward institutions while remaining highly mobilised through party-centred dependency networks.

4. **Contextual background: From party-state legacies to a “state of parties”**

To understand why affective clientelism has become a dominant mode of political linkage in Albania, contemporary participation must be situated within the country’s historical and institutional trajectory. Compared to negotiated transitions in parts of Central Europe—where dissident networks and autonomous civic organisations developed more robustly—Albania entered the post-1991 period with comparatively weak associational infrastructure and limited experience of liberal pluralism. The late communist system constrained autonomous organisations and undermined horizontal trust, leaving political parties to expand into a relatively thin civic space and to assume functions that, in more institutionalised settings, are partly carried by civic intermediaries and labour organisations (Vickers, 2019). In this context, parties did not only compete for votes; they also became key brokers of access to resources, protection, and administrative mediation—conditions conducive to vertical, personalised linkage.

4.1 *The 1997 crisis and the credibility problem of the state*

The fragility of the early post-communist order was revealed sharply during the 1997 crisis following the collapse of pyramid schemes and the breakdown of public order. The episode involved a severe erosion of state authority and public security, including looting of military depots and the temporary loss of effective governmental control in parts of the country (Vickers, 2019). The political implication is not simply “trauma” but a durable re-weighting of perceived risk: where the state is experienced as intermittently incapable of providing predictable security, citizens may shift toward personal and partisan networks as functional substitutes for impersonal guarantees. This pattern is consistent with moral-economy approaches in which protection and reciprocity become salient evaluative standards under conditions of institutional fragility (Scott, 1976; Hann, 2018).

4.2 *Rotation, public employment, and perceived distributive risk*

A second contextual factor concerns perceptions of distributive vulnerability across cycles of alternation. In patronage-prone systems, public employment and administrative access can be experienced as politically contingent, raising the perceived costs of political defection and reinforcing incentives for continued participation even when institutional evaluations are negative (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes, 2005). In Albania, public debate has repeatedly focused on the political salience of public administration employment and the incentives created by political nomination control. (Erebara, 2025). In parallel, election observation reporting continues to document allegations and indicators consistent with the perceived conditionality of state access—particularly pressure on voters, including public employees, and blurred boundaries between state and party—reinforcing the plausibility of distributive-risk perceptions among citizens (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025, pp. 2–3).

4.3 *Leadership centralisation, electoral reform, and the personalisation of authority*

Over the post-communist period, Albania's party competition has become increasingly leader-centred, with organisational authority and electoral brand identity strongly aligned with long-standing leadership figures. This personalisation is not merely cultural; it is reinforced by institutional incentives that centralise control over nominations and career advancement within party hierarchies. A key step in this direction was the 2008 constitutional–electoral redesign, which consolidated regional proportional representation and strengthened party-centre influence over candidate selection and list ordering (Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Art. 64, as amended; Electoral Code of Albania, as amended; Erebara, 2020; Pejo & Rusi, 2022; Krasniqi, 2009).

Under list-based systems where nomination and ranking are controlled centrally, MPs' re-selection prospects hinge heavily on party leadership decisions rather than on constituency-based responsiveness. This institutional structure tilts accountability inward (toward the party centre), weakening incentives for local autonomy and consolidating vertical dependence inside parties. For voters, this can rationally re-map perceived authority upward: if local intermediaries are understood to have limited discretionary power without central endorsement, the party leader becomes the most salient focal point for both expectations of access and affective attachment. This logic is consistent with identity-based "lock-in" dynamics documented in the affective polarisation literature (Iyengar et al., 2012).

These incentives operate within an electoral environment in which state–party boundaries remain contested. In its final report on the 11 May 2025 parliamentary elections, ODIHR concluded that the ruling party benefited from the "widespread use of administrative resources" and noted numerous allegations of pressure on voters, especially public employees, contributing to an uneven playing field (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025, pp. 2–3). In combination, centralised nomination control and incumbency advantages can intensify vertical dependence and reinforce leader-centred brokerage, strengthening the plausibility of leader-focused voting heuristics in survey responses.

4.4 *Weak horizontal trust and the substitution of partisan networks*

Finally, Albania displays persistently low levels of generalized political and social trust in comparative perspective, as documented in cross-national survey infrastructures such as the European Values Study (European Values Study, 2022). Low horizontal trust increases the relative importance of vertical, particularistic relationships: citizens become less likely to expect fair outcomes through impersonal institutions and more likely to rely on bounded networks for problem-solving and protection (Scott, 1976; Hann, 2018). Under such conditions, political competition can be experienced as high-stakes conflict over access and security rather than policy disagreement, reinforcing affective polarisation and sustaining participation even when institutional trust is low (Iyengar et al., 2012). This configuration complements the article's core claim: high resident turnout is not necessarily evidence of robust democratic accountability but may reflect dense party-centred dependency networks operating in a low-trust environment.

5. Research Design and Methodology

To examine how high resident electoral mobilisation is reproduced under conditions of pervasive distrust, the study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The design proceeds in two linked phases. First, quantitative analysis establishes the prevalence and distribution of key behavioural and attitudinal patterns (turnout recalculation, perceived motivations, leader influence, scandal tolerance, and political trust). Second, qualitative evidence is used to interpret those patterns by eliciting the justificatory narratives and normative assumptions through which citizens render participation intelligible. The design is explicitly problem-driven: it seeks to explain the empirical puzzle documented in Section 1—namely, why a polity characterised by low institutional trust and widespread corruption awareness nonetheless yields resident participation often exceeding 85%.

5.1 *Quantitative component: survey data and measurement strategy*

The main quantitative dataset is the Euronews Albania Barometer (September 2024; N = 1,000), a nationally representative survey fielded using multistage stratified probability sampling across Albania's twelve regions and the urban–rural divide. Post-stratification weighting (demographic & political) was applied to align the sample with population marginals (Euronews Albania Barometer, 2024). The survey instrument includes batteries designed to capture (i) perceived determinants of vote choice, including employment-related inducements, (ii) the salience of party leadership

and (iii) attitudinal responses to political scandal.

Because clientelism and administrative pressure are socially sensitive topics, selected items use a third person/indirect format: respondents assess what influences “Albanian citizens” in general rather than reporting exclusively on their own behaviour. This approach helps reduce social desirability bias and item non-response for normatively disapproved behaviours. Substantively, these measures are interpreted as perceived norms and perceived prevalence (beliefs about others), not as direct behavioural incidence.

5.2 *Qualitative component: focus groups and interpretive leverage*

To interpret the meaning structures underpinning the quantitative patterns, six focus group discussions were conducted in November 2024 in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodër, and Kamëz. All focus groups were conducted by the author, and participants were recruited using a predetermined profile matrix to ensure variation in party identification, age, gender, and socio-economic position (including public/private employment status and educational attainment). Discussions followed a semi-structured protocol oriented toward (i) perceptions of obligation and reciprocity, (ii) meanings attached to “help,” “protection,” and “deservingness,” (iii) perceptions of leader authority and threat from alternation, and (iv) narrative rationalisations for continued participation under corruption awareness.

5.3 *Turnout recalculation: correcting the denominator with the 2023 Census*

A core empirical contribution is the recalculation of turnout using a resident voting-age population denominator derived from the 2023 Population and Housing Census (INSTAT, 2024). Standard turnout rates in Albania are computed against civil registry electoral lists that include a substantial non-resident population, mechanically depressing conventional turnout and distorting resident participation. To correct this “diaspora-denominator” distortion, district-level participation rates are recalculated as:

Resident turnout (district/region) = Votes cast (district/region, CEC 2021) / Resident voting-age population 18+ (district/region, Census 2023)

where votes cast are taken from the Central Election Commission’s 2021 parliamentary results and resident voting-age population is taken from census counts. The purpose is not to reconstruct a “true” legal turnout rate, but to establish the appropriate empirical baseline for explaining mobilisation among residents: the phenomenon to be explained is not disengagement, but high-intensity resident turnout concentrated in specific districts.

5.4 *Integration and inference*

The inferential strategy is triangulation across sources: (i) corrected turnout provides the macro-level mobilisation baseline, (ii) survey evidence estimates the prevalence of leader-centred influence, employment-related motivations, scandal tolerance, and (iii) focus group narratives specify the interpretive mechanisms—moral reciprocity, affective lock-in, and cynical adaptation—through which participation is sustained. Integration occurs at the interpretation stage by mapping qualitative mechanisms to quantitative regularities and specifying the conditions under which each mechanism is most salient.

6. Empirical Analysis: The Anatomy of Affective Loyalty

This section unpacks the micro-foundations of unusually high resident participation by distinguishing three analytically separable—yet empirically interlocking—drivers: (i) distributive expectations, (ii) leader-centred influence and social embedding, and (iii) scandal normalization (cynical accommodation). Quantitative evidence is drawn from the Euronews Albania Barometer (September 2024; N = 1,000). Because clientelist inducements and administrative pressure are socially sensitive topics, several indicators are measured using a third person/indirect format (i.e., what influences “Albanian citizens” in general). These items are interpreted as perceived prevalence and perceived norms—not as direct admissions of respondents’ own behaviour.

6.1 *Distributive expectations: Employment and rewards as a structuring incentive*

A core empirical result is the prominence of perceived employment- and reward-related expectations in voting decisions. When respondents assess the influence of “rewards/jobs” on how citizens decide to vote, a clear majority place this factor in the high-influence range. Substantively, this points to an electoral environment in which political competition is widely interpreted through the lens of access (employment, administrative facilitation, material advantage) rather than programmatic evaluation.

Table 2. Perceived influence of “rewards/jobs” on voting decisions

Indicator (third-person item)	Share reporting high influence (%)
Expectation of rewards/jobs	67.0

Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (Sept 2024), N = 1,000; Top 2 influence categories.

Analytically, the key implication is not simply that material expectations exist, but that they are described as socially common and electorally relevant. This is consistent with distributive linkage arguments in the clientelism literature (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Stokes, 2005) and with the moral-economy expectation that “help” and “protection” can be interpreted as legitimate currencies of exchange under institutional fragility (Scott, 1976; Hann, 2018). The qualitative evidence below, focus-group analysis is used to specify the justificatory frames through which these expectations are narrated and normalised.

6.2 *Leader-centred influence and family cues: Affective and social embedding*

The most pronounced result in the influence battery is the dominance of the party leader. Respondents overwhelmingly report that leader influence is high, exceeding the weight attributed to family cues (although family remains substantial). This pattern is consistent with a political field in which authority is cognitively organised around national leadership, and where political choice is shaped not only by expected benefits but also by attachment, identification, and perceived group security.

Table 3. Perceived influence of leader and family on voting decisions

Indicator (third-person item)	Share reporting high influence (%)
The party leader	82.6
How the family votes	63.0

Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (Sept 2024), N = 1,000; Top 2 influence categories.

Two implications follow. First, the leader result supports the claim that personalisation is not only a cultural pattern but is compatible with institutional conditions that centralise political careers and access pathways (see Section 4.3 on nomination gatekeeping and the upward “remapping” of authority). Second, the continuing salience of family cues suggests that voting is socially embedded: choice is often organised within relational environments where conformity, reputation, and intra-family alignment can shape political practice and perceived risk.

6.3 *Scandal normalization: Why scandal exposure does not necessarily translate into exit*

A third empirical pillar concerns the normalization of scandal. If participation functioned primarily as an accountability mechanism, one would expect corruption revelations and scandal exposure to generate a stronger propensity to withdraw support or punish incumbents. Instead, the survey indicates that a large share of respondents endorses the proposition that scandals/problems do not alter voting behaviour.

Table 4. Agreement that scandals/problems do not change vote choice

Statement	Share agreeing (Top 2) (%)
"Whatever problem/scandal the government has, citizens vote the same."	48.5

Source: Euronews Albania Barometer (Sept 2024), N = 1,000; Top 2 agreement categories.

Interpreted within the affective-clientelism framework, this pattern is consistent with cynical accommodation: corruption awareness coexists with continued participation when the perceived costs of defection (material, social, affective) are high, while the perceived efficacy of moral protest is low (Sloterdijk, 1988). In such environments, scandal can be reframed as "normal politics," attenuating behavioural responsiveness and lowering the psychological costs of continued engagement.

6.4 Integrating mechanisms: from incentives to durable loyalty

Taken together, Tables 2–4 specify the empirical "anatomy" of affective clientelism proposed in Section 3. Distributive expectations provide an instrumental foundation (jobs/rewards), leader-centred influence supplies an affective focal point (personalised authority), and scandal tolerance signals a mode of adaptive compliance (cynical normalisation). The configuration supports the article's central claim: high resident turnout under low trust is not paradoxical once participation is conceptualised as risk management and network reproduction within dense party-centred environments rather than as a straightforward indicator of democratic accountability.

7. Discussion: The mechanics of regime resilience

The findings revise a common inference of electoral disengagement in post-communist Albania. Once turnout is recalculated against the resident voting-age population (rather than civil-registry denominators inflated by non-resident citizens), the empirical object is not withdrawal but high-intensity resident mobilisation in several districts. This pattern is not straightforwardly interpretable as democratic "health." It is more consistent with a political order in which participation is embedded in (i) distributive and administrative vulnerability, (ii) leader-centred and socially embedded political identification, and (iii) a routinised, adaptive cynicism that insulates behaviour from scandal shocks. In this configuration, voting functions less as retrospective accountability and more as recurrent risk management within party-centred networks.

7.1 Hyper-mobilisation as risk management under distributive uncertainty

Standard participation models expect that low institutional trust and corruption perceptions should depress turnout or redirect participation into protest. Albania approximates a different equilibrium: residents continue to vote at very high rates, even when evaluative orientations toward institutions remain sceptical. This becomes theoretically plausible once participation is treated as a strategy for managing exposure to distributive and administrative contingency.

Survey evidence supports this interpretation: respondents widely recognise employment/reward expectations as a strong influence on how citizens decide to vote (Table 2). Where access to jobs, permits, or administrative facilitation is experienced as discretionary and mediated through partisan hierarchies, abstention can be interpreted not as neutral "non-participation," but as a voluntary increase in vulnerability. The relevant behavioural contrast becomes networked compliance versus exposure to loss, not civic engagement versus apathy.

This interpretation also aligns with external observation evidence. ODIHR's 2025 final report explicitly notes an uneven playing field and that the ruling party benefited from widespread use of administrative resources, alongside numerous allegations of pressure on voters, especially public employees.

7.2 Affective dependency and the consolidation of leader-centred linkage

High participation becomes more durable when material contingency is coupled with identity-based conflict and leader-centred authority. According to Euronews Albania Barometer data, the party leader is perceived as an exceptionally powerful influence on citizen vote choice, while family voting cues remain substantial (Table 3). These patterns are

consistent with an affective lock-in mechanism: even when governance performance is evaluated negatively, defection can be constrained by perceived out-group threat, reputational costs, and intra-family/intra-network expectations.

The institutional logic developed earlier makes this mechanism more credible: under closed-list regional PR, career advancement and candidate selection are centrally gatekept, encouraging an “upward remapping” of authority. Citizens do not need to know electoral rules in detail; they only need to experience where problem-solving capacity sits. In such settings, leader-centred attachment operates less as vague “charisma” and more as a cognitively economical map of who controls access, protection, and sanction.

7.3 *Cynicism as adaptive compliance, not disengagement*

The third stabilising mechanism is scandal normalisation and the routinisation of low expectations. The survey evidence indicates that a sizeable segment of respondents accept the proposition that scandals do not change how citizens vote (Table 4). In the framework developed earlier, this is behavioural insulation—consistent with cynicism as adaptive compliance.

Cynicism reduces the moral and psychological costs of continued participation by reframing corruption as a durable condition rather than a correctable deviation. Where voters believe that viable governing alternatives are similarly compromised—or that exit is costly—scandal information does not supply a credible basis for defection. Instead, it can deepen the very cynicism that stabilises continued participation inside familiar protection networks.

7.4 *The external dimension: stabilitocracy and a constrained repertoire of alternatives*

Domestic resilience mechanisms are often reinforced by an external environment in which “stability” is prioritised. The stabilitocracy frame is analytically useful here because it highlights how international engagement can mistakeably increase the perceived inevitability of incumbents and narrow the imagined alternative set. For citizens who already interpret politics as a closed distributional order, external signals that privilege short-term predictability can be read as confirmation that meaningful change is unlikely—thereby strengthening leader-centred inevitability narratives and deepening adaptive cynicism.

The key point is not that external actors “cause” affective clientelism. Rather, stabilitocracy dynamics can reduce the credibility of exit options and thus increase the relative rationality of remaining embedded in party-centred networks of access, protection, and risk management.

8. Conclusion: Affective clientelism and the political economy of participation

This article addressed an empirical and theoretical paradox: why does electoral participation among resident Albanian citizens remain exceptionally high despite pervasive distrust in parties and institutions, and recurrent corruption scandals? Conventional interpretations—grounded in official turnout rates calculated from civil-registry denominators—have often obscured the phenomenon by presenting participation as moderate and, by implication, the electorate as partially apathetic. By recalculating turnout using the resident voting-age population from the 2023 census and triangulating these corrected rates with nationally representative survey evidence (September 2024, N = 1,000) and focus-group narratives (November 2024), the study re-specifies the empirical baseline: the core feature to be explained is not disengagement but dense resident mobilisation (see Table 1), exceeding 85 per cent in multiple districts and surpassing 90 per cent in several.

To account for this configuration, the article developed the concept of affective clientelism: a hybrid mode of political linkage in which distributive dependence is stabilised by (i) leader-centred attachment, (ii) normatively structured reciprocity, and (iii) cynical adaptation. The evidence is consistent with a tripartite mechanism. First, citizens perceive electoral choice as strongly shaped by leader influence, implying that political loyalty is frequently personalised and mediated through perceived access to central authority rather than anchored in programmatic evaluation alone. Second, employment and material facilitation are widely recognised—captured in part through projective items about “citizens in general,” and therefore interpretable as perceived norms rather than direct admissions—as consequential drivers of vote choice, indicating that participation is embedded in a moral economy where “help,” “protection,” and “deservingness” are interpreted through reciprocal obligation rather than impersonal meritocratic standards. Third, a substantial share of respondents endorse the proposition that scandals/problems do not change vote choice, suggesting that corruption awareness does not necessarily translate into demobilisation; instead, it can be accommodated through a pragmatic

interpretive frame in which politics is treated as a structurally compromised arena with limited credible exit options.

These findings carry implications for democratisation strategies in Albania and comparable Western Balkan contexts. Reform agendas that concentrate narrowly on institutional engineering—electoral-code revision, compliance benchmarks, or post hoc criminalisation of electoral malpractices—risk mis-specifying the operative mechanism of regime resilience. Where political parties function (or are perceived to function) as gatekeepers to employment, administrative access, and everyday security, anti-corruption interventions may be experienced not as emancipation but as an increase in uncertainty. Under affective clientelism, the relevant constraint is not merely the illegality of exchange; it is the socially embedded cost of exit, combining material vulnerability, moralised reciprocity, and identity-based lock-in. Effective accountability, therefore, is unlikely to emerge from legal deterrence alone unless accompanied by credible reductions in dependency—most plausibly through labour-market diversification, merit-protecting public employment safeguards, and enforceable constraints on the political use of administrative resources.

This article also clarifies why high turnout is normatively ambiguous. In settings characterised by affective clientelism, participation may signal not robust democratic accountability but the capacity of parties to mobilise under low trust—a form of compliance that coexists with scepticism. In the focus groups, this logic was frequently expressed in deliberately blunt terms: voting was described less as expressive endorsement than as a practical necessity tied to livelihood, risk, and security.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Two limits should be noted. First, the analysis relies on projective survey techniques; while these are appropriate for reducing social desirability pressures, they cannot fully resolve measurement error in sensitive domains. Second, the turnout correction improves descriptive validity for resident participation, but it does not on its own distinguish mobilisation arising from social obligation, coercive pressures, or distributive inducement—although external observation evidence helps triangulate administrative-pressure dynamics. Future work should therefore: (i) model district-level variation using administrative and labour-market indicators; (ii) extend qualitative designs to systematically compare public- versus private-sector households; and (iii) test whether perceived reciprocity and leader attachment mediate the relationship between distrust and turnout in a formal causal framework (e.g., mediation models or conjoint designs on distributive expectations).

In sum, the article shifts the explanation of Albania's participation paradox from a narrow transactional reading of clientelism toward an integrated account of moral economy, affective attachment, and adaptive cynicism. Resident mobilisation persists not because institutions are trusted, but because participation is embedded in a political economy of dependence and an affective structure of threat and protection. Under those conditions, turnout can remain high—even when institutional legitimacy remains contested.

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