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Explaining electoral volatility in Central and Eastern Europe : a party organizational approach

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Chapter 6 | A Multivariate Analysis of the Electoral Volatility at Party Level in CEE

Introduction

How can electoral volatility in the new European democracies be explained? This general question drives the comparative analysis of this book. The key explanatory variable is the party organization. Each of the previous three chapters analyzed on a bivariate basis the empirical relationships between the components of party organization (i.e. candidate selection, membership rates, and MPs' renomination rates) and electoral volatility at party level in CEE. This chapter complements the bivariate correlations with a multivariate statistical analysis. The components of party organization are introduced into the same model (OLS with robust standard errors) to observe their impact on volatility while other variables are held constant.

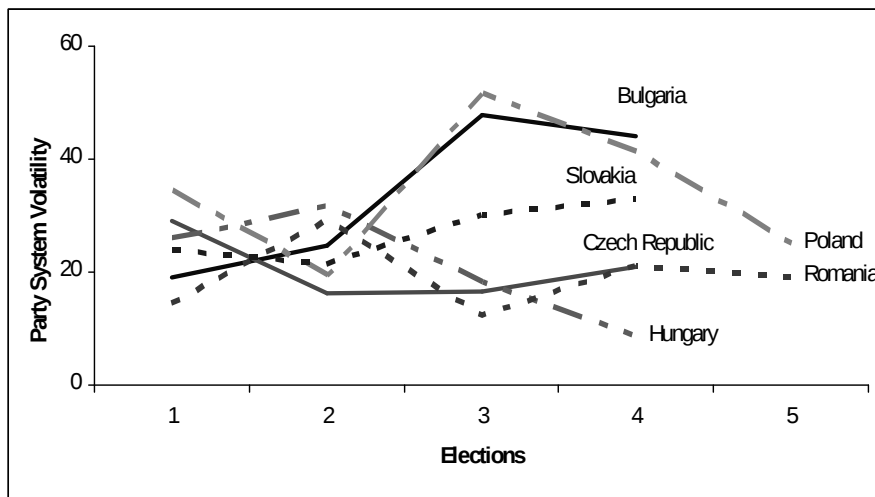
The multivariate analysis adds relevant methodological and empirical value to this study. First, it tests for causal relationships. The theoretical expectations, formulated hypotheses, and qualitative assessments pointed in the direction of causality. Second, next to the main hypothesized effects, there are theoretical reasons to control for three additional variables: party system volatility, electoral turnout, and government incumbency of the party (Figure 1.4). Political parties evolve and develop within an environment where similar actors perform comparable actions. Despite the focus of this analysis on individual parties, the possible systemic influences (i.e. party system volatility and turnout) have to be controlled for. Government incumbency, discussed also in Chapter 2, can influence the electoral volatility: elections often serve as visible milestones that reflect voters' tendencies to hold incumbents responsible for the domestic situation. The survival in office often depends on parties' performance (Przeworski et al. 1999; Gherghina 2011).

The first section includes a discussion of the systemic control variables. It includes the evolution of the party system institutionalization and electoral turnout across time and countries. The following section conducts bivariate correlations between all independent and control variables to show the existing relationships. The third section includes the results of the multivariate analysis. The findings strengthen the conclusions reached in the previous chapters: the candidate selection for the legislative elections and the renomination rates are important determinants of the electoral volatility. The evidence shows little impact of the control variables on the party level volatility.

The Evolution of the Systemic Components

The two systemic control variables – party system volatility and electoral turnout – display oscillations over time; they depict a rich picture with relevant cross-country variations. Figure 6.1 reflects the evolution of party system volatility and electoral turnout in CEE. The horizontal axis represents the elections for which the volatility can be calculated (e.g. the first number corresponds to the second election as this is the first moment in time when vote shifts can be measured). The party system volatility ranges between minimum values around 10% for the Hungarian elections in 2006 and Romania in 2000 to a maximum around 50% in the 2001 Bulgarian elections.

Figure 6.1: The Evolution of Party System Volatility in CEE

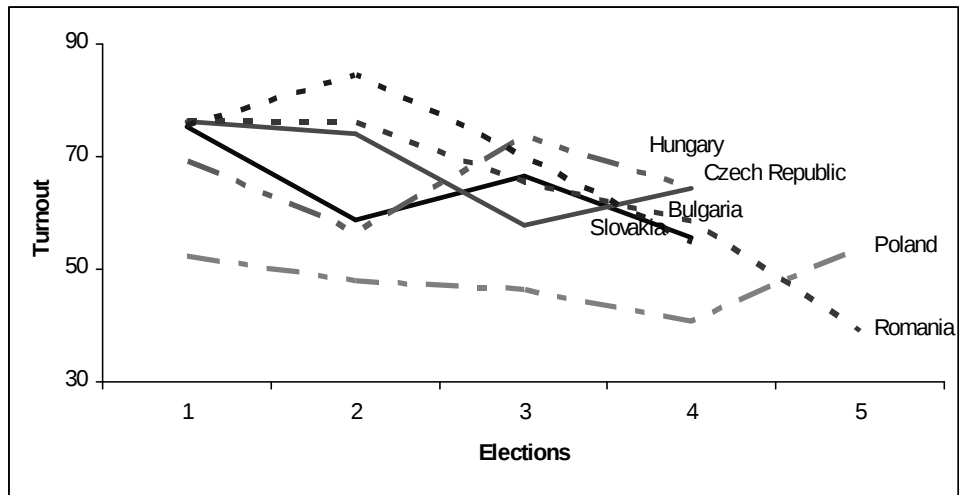


In general, this figure indicates oscillatory trends with similar levels in the first and most recent elections. Hungary displays a continuous decrease of volatility starting 1998 that coincides with the orientation of voter preferences towards two very large political parties (FIDESZ and MSZP). Slovakia registers a slow increase of the party system volatility starting with the same year, 1998 when the domination of the HZDS ended and new parties mobilizing relevant portions of the electorate emerged on the political scene (e.g. SDK in 1998, SMER in 2002). Bulgaria is the country where the level of volatility in the most recent election of 2005 is considerably higher than that of 1994 although the over-time trend is characterized by ups and downs. As a final remark, the six countries can be clustered in two groups according to the values of their volatility: Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania have visible lower levels than the rest of the countries.

Figure 6.2 depicts the longitudinal evolution of turnout levels in CEE. The electoral turnout is generally characterized by descending slopes. The

enthusiasm of voters in the aftermath of the communist breakdown was gradually reduced and most of the countries witnessed increased absenteeism. This is clearly visible in the Romanian case where the percentage of over 75% turnout in 1992 dropped to less than 40% in 2008. In a similar situation, Czech Republic and Slovakia had turnout losses of 15 to 20 percentage points between the first and the last elections in the graph. Until recently, Poland registered a similar decrease, but the electoral stake of the 2007 elections brought citizens to the polls; the turnout exceeds the previous peak – the 1993 elections. Hungary and Bulgaria are characterized by oscillatory trends in which the latter ended up with a much smaller level of turnout than in the 90s.

Figure 6.2: The Evolution of Electoral Turnout in CEE



The longitudinal development of these two systemic control variables may influence the variations of electoral volatility at party level in CEE. However, before taking a close look at their actual explanatory potential, I investigate the statistical relationships between all variables included in the multivariate analysis – the independent and control variables.

Correlations between Variables

This section explores all correlations between the independent and control variables. The correlation coefficients from Table 6.1 show the existence of generally weak linear relationships between these variables (and thus no concerns for multicollinearity). The only moderate correlation is observed between the size of membership and the variations in the size of membership. The positive coefficient (0.55), statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicate that large member organizations have wider oscillations in terms of membership. For them it is difficult to maintain a stable organization: they

either lose or gain a lot of members. At the same time, political parties with a low number of members rarely alter dramatically the dimension of their organizations. They remain small. This observation strengthens the conclusions from Chapter 4 about the low variation in the size of most membership organizations across time.

Table 6.1: Correlations between the Variables of the Multivariate Model

	Candidate Selection	Membership Size	Variations in Membership Size	Renomination	Party System Volatility	Turnout	Incumbency
Candidate Selection	-	-0.08	-0.02	-0.14	0.22*	-0.08	-0.08
Membership Size		-	0.55**	-0.05	-0.04	0.22*	0.02
Variations in Membership Size			-	-0.08	-0.17	0.25*	0.02
Renomination				-	-	-0.10	0.05
Party System Volatility					0.22*		
Turnout						-	0.08
Incumbency							-

Notes: Reported coefficients are *Pearson's r*. N = 112.

** statistical significance at 0.01 level.

* statistical significance at 0.05 level.

The coefficients in Table 6.1 allow a few general observations. First, there is a weak negative linear correlation (without statistical significance) between the candidate selection for legislative elections and the renomination rates of the MPs. It indicates that political parties with more decentralized mechanisms of candidate selection renominate more MPs. There are three interconnected explanations for this process: the limited recruitment pool, the prominence of local leaders, and the focus of parliamentary activity. The recruitment pool of the local and territorial organizations is limited. If the local branches can renominate a person with experience, proven loyalty towards the party, or positive image acquired during the term in office, they are likely to do so. Moreover, for most CEE political parties, the leaders of the local organizations are in place for a long time. When the local organizations have a word to say in the candidate selection for the legislative elections, they are the usual suspects for nomination. If such leaders served a term in office, the likelihood of their renomination is large. Furthermore, the intensity and focus of parliamentary activity can represent another relevant explanation. The MPs belonging to

parties in which the selection process takes place mainly at regional or local level have higher incentives to allocate resources and concentrate on their constituency in the attempt to convince the local organizations to support them with future nominations.

Second, there is no relationship between the MP renomination rates and government incumbency of the party. There are theoretical reasons to expect incumbent parties to rely more on their previously successful candidates; these candidates benefit of the advantages of the term in government of their party (e.g. higher access to financial resources). Moreover, candidates of the incumbent parties can be more visible than those of the opposition and people can recognize them better. The empirical evidence from CEE suggests that no such logic is employed by the examined parties: those in government renominate their MPs on lists of candidates to a similar extent with the parties from opposition.⁶¹ This result complements the qualitative description from Chapter 5. The analysis of renomination oscillations at party level revealed isolated cases in which government parties relied on more MPs in the subsequent elections compared to the opposition parties.

Third, there is a statistically significant relationship between the decentralization of candidate selection and party system volatility. The positive correlation indicates that the countries in which political parties have more decentralized selection of candidates are less volatile than the rest. Corroborating this result with the findings from Chapter 3, the decentralization of candidate selection for the legislative elections is related to the electoral volatility both for individual parties and party systems. As the measurement is done at different levels (i.e. the party system volatility is constant across parties in the same country at a given moment in time), the substantial conclusions to be derived from such a relationship are limited.

Fourth, there is a negative correlation between the renomination rates and party system volatility. This shows that the electorate is more stable in those systems where parties are characterized by high renomination rates. Similarly to the previous observation, this is also in line with the findings of the hypothesis testing in chapter 5. it is worth noting that the correlations between each component of party organization – candidate selection and MP renomination rates – and electoral volatility are much higher at party (Chapter 3 and Chapter 5) than at party system level.

Fifth, there is a weak positive correlation, statistically not significant, between the candidate selection and the size of membership. This indicates

⁶¹ There is a direct link between this observation and the previous correlation. MPs do not have higher chances of renomination if their party is in government. Instead, in the context of more autonomy enjoyed by the local organizations in selecting candidates for the legislative office, the constituency service and the position within the local organization (e.g. being part of the local elite) can ensure the renomination.

that parties with more decentralized selection mechanisms have slightly larger membership organizations compared to the rest. This result is mainly driven by the successor parties that benefit of communist organizational legacies and often maintained the large membership without keeping the highly centralized decision making that characterized the communist parties. This organizational reform took place in the aftermath of regime change when most successor parties tried to persuade voters about their discontinuity with the past. The credibility of their message relied also on the intra-party formal arrangements. That is why, with the exception of the SDL in Slovakia, the successor parties decided to allow at least partial autonomy to the local branches in selecting candidates for the legislative elections.

Finally, the moderate correlation between the two control variables examined in the previous section provides useful information for the general picture of electoral volatility in CEE. The negative value of the correlation coefficient (-0.35), statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicates that lower turnout favors increased volatility. In theoretical terms, the low turnout is an indicator of voters' protest against the representation provided by political parties. Discontent often leads to absenteeism. Under these conditions, vote shifts between the components of the system are more likely to occur when less people are present at the voting booth.

This happens for two concurrent reasons. On the one hand, those who decide to vote are willing to express their discontent on the ballot. In doing so, they do not vote with the same party as they did in the previous elections. On the other hand, if all those who vote maintain their preferences, the party and party system volatility can still change. As explained in Chapter 1, if a political party has the same voters in election t_0 and t_1 , the percentage of people who vote changes the share of votes that this particular party receives. Empirically, large parties in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and more recently Romania usually mobilize large numbers of voters. Thus, small variations in turnout do not alter their support. However, small parties are the main beneficiaries or victims: when the electoral support is close to the electoral threshold, the entries and exits from the party system are partially due to the oscillations in turnout.

The statistical analysis of the relationships between the independent and control variables provided a few insights in the characteristics of the parties and their environment. The following section moves to the multivariate analysis used to explain the variation of the electoral volatility at party level in CEE.

The Multivariate Analysis

Chapter 1 and the introductory section of this chapter mention two multivariate models: one with the main effects for which I formulated hypotheses (model 1)

and one including also the control variables (model 2). A few brief methodological clarifications are necessary before conducting the analysis. The use of OLS requires the satisfaction of four model assumptions: independence, normality, homoskedasticity, and linearity. To correct for the violation of the third and third assumption, I use OLS with robust standard errors.

Table 6.2 includes the regression coefficients of the two OLS models. Model 1, including only the main effects, explains 21% of the variation in electoral volatility at party level. This percentage is not high, but it should taken into account that it is the statistical result of only two variables: the decentralization of candidate selection and the renomination rates. The other two variables – both related to the size of membership organizations – have little if any explanatory power.

Table 6.2: The Multivariate Models Explaining Electoral Volatility at Party Level in CEE

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	25.74** (7.74)	27.48 (14.09)
Candidate Selection	38.84** (12.52)	33.76* (13.91)
Membership Size	-2.16 (2.29)	-1.14 (2.06)
Variations in Membership Size	-1.66 (4.30)	-0.59 (4.40)
Renomination	-43.17** (14.11)	-38.66** (13.53)
Party System Volatility		0.24 (0.23)
Turnout		-0.07 (0.17)
Government Incumbency		-9.47* (3.77)
R ²	0.21	0.28
N	101	

Note: Reported coefficients are not standardized (robust standard errors in brackets)

* statistical significance at 0.05 level.

** statistical significance at 0.01 level.

All hypothesized relationships are supported by empirical evidence. According to the regression coefficients⁶², if we compare the political parties using the most decentralized with those parties using the most centralized candidate selection process, there is a 39 percentage points decrease of volatility. This result is generalizable with a confidence interval of 99%.

Regarding the membership organizations, the effect on electoral volatility is almost non-existent. A comparison between the political parties with the highest membership organizations and the political parties with the smallest percentage of members in the electorate, there is slightly more than 2 percentage points increase of electoral volatility. Similarly, if we compare the parties with less fluctuation in the size of membership organization with those

⁶² For an easier interpretation of the regression coefficients, I standardized their values on a 0-1 scale.

parties with large variations in the percentages of members, there is almost 2 percentage points increase of volatility. The lack of statistical significance points in the same direction: the membership organizations and their fluctuations have no explanatory power for the variation of electoral volatility at party level. As illustrated in Chapter 4 the absence of an effect may be due to the low variation in terms of membership organizations across time and parties.

The MP renomination rates is next to candidate selection for the national elections the variable that influences the electoral volatility at party level to a considerable extent. The comparison between the political parties that renominate more MPs and those parties that renominate few MPs reveal a difference of 43% between the two; high renomination rates lead to less volatility (Figure 6.6). This indicates that MP renomination has a similar effect to the decentralization of candidate selection.

These results confirm the findings from the bivariate analyses regarding the strength and direction of the relationships. The effect of membership organizations (both size and variations in size) on electoral volatility is the smallest among the ones hypothesized. They are sample specific and cannot be generalized to a broader population. The effects of candidate selection and MP renomination rates have comparable effects, both being generalizable to a broader population.

The inclusion in Model 2 of the control variables does not increase its explanatory power. The model explains 28% of the variation in electoral volatility at party level in CEE. Such an increase is minimal given the fact that three new variables were introduced. At the same time, the control variables do not diminish to a relevant extent the predictive potential of candidate selection and renomination rates. With the exception of the variation in size of the membership organizations the impact of the main variables is stronger than that of the controls. The candidate selection and the renomination rates continue to explain best the variation in electoral volatility at party level. Turnout is the weakest predictor among the controls.

These findings have two implications. First, the results of the bivariate relationships are robust; they do not change when we have all variables together or when we control for the environment factors. Second, at the core of this endeavor, the party system volatility is a separate process from that of the party volatility. Although the party system represents the sum of the party level volatilities – calculated differently than the measurement employed in this book – the variation of party volatility is explained to a small extent by what happens at systemic level. Among the control variables government incumbency has the highest impact on party volatility. From a methodological perspective, this outcome is not surprising as it is the only control variable measured at party and not systemic level. From an empirical perspective, the

descriptive statistics in Chapter 2 have already pointed to a different distribution of volatility between incumbent and opposition parties. Results indicate that incumbents are more volatile than the rest of parties.

Conclusions

The evidence provided by the multivariate statistical analysis of this chapter strengthens the conclusions reached in the previous chapters. The components of party organization have a relevant effect on electoral volatility at party level. At the same time, there is a hierarchy of these effects. The most important predictors of electoral volatility are the candidate selection process and the MP renomination rates. The membership organization (both the size and the variation in size) is the variable with no effect.

Overall, the control variables have little effect on the volatility. The model that includes them does not add much explanatory power to the variation of volatility. The government incumbency is the only control variable that predicts the values of volatility. This means that there is no evidence to illustrate that any systemic factor – party system volatility or turnout – has an influence on the electoral volatility measured at party level. These empirical results strengthen the theoretical approach from Chapter 1 that clearly differentiated between factors determining volatility at multiple layers (Figure 1.1). The quantitative multivariate analysis represented the final step of this study. The concluding chapter wraps up the analysis and emphasizes the most relevant findings. It also discusses the implications of the results and indicates directions for further research.

