



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Gherghina, S.M.

Citation

Gherghina, S. M. (2012, March 8). *Explaining electoral volatility in Central and Eastern Europe : a party organizational approach*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/18567>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/18567>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/18567> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Gherghina, Sergiu

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

Issue Date: 2012-03-08

Conclusions

The political change in post-communist Europe involved a multi-faceted transformation of the polity, society, and of the political actors engaged in the competition for representation. The re-emergence of multiparty competition generated high electoral volatility, a situation which contrasted starkly with that of Western Europe. The large number of vote shifts was not only observable at the party system level, but also amongst political parties from the same country. The main goal of this study was to explain the variations in electoral volatility at party level across Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia between 1990 and 2008. The analysis included political parties with a relatively continuous presence in the legislature. The main contention of my analysis has been that the organizational features of political parties can influence the extent to which parties achieve stability within the electorate. More specifically, it was argued that a decentralized process of candidate selection for national elections, the size and stability of membership organizations, and the extent to which political parties re-nominate their MPs on candidate lists have an effect on electoral volatility. These features have the capacity to ensure good communication between parties and voters, create a broader social network in support of the party, provide continuity of representation, and have a socializing effect on citizens.

Consistent with previous research focusing on the role of external factors in shaping long-term electoral preferences (e.g. the electoral system, the degree of democratization etc.), this study indicates the existence of a response from the voters to the way in which parties organize. The importance of internal settings to diminishing electoral volatility appears to hold under various circumstances. The explanations provided are not country or time specific, they do not refer to specific types of parties, nor are they limited to particular events in the political evolution of CEE. Instead, the mechanisms identified here appear to explain the broad range of electoral volatility observable for all selected parties across various elections.

The Complex Picture of Electoral Volatility

This book introduced a systematic approach to electoral volatility at the party level across several new European democracies. Volatility was measured by calculating vote gains and losses relative to the electoral support of the political parties; any bias related to the party size was thereby diminished. The empirical findings presented here add nuance to and complement the picture drawn by previous research on electoral volatility at the party system level

(Lewis 1996; 2001a; Agh 1998; Toka 1998; Krupavicius 1999; Moser 2001; van Biezen 2003; Millard 2004; Sikk 2005; Tavits 2005; Casal Bertoa and Enyedi 2011). The nuances were found when comparing the countries based on the volatility of their most relevant political parties.

The dynamic of electoral support for these political actors reveals two country-specific features: the volatility range, and the homogeneity of party distribution on this range. In four out of six countries studied, there are political parties with almost no volatility at specific moments in time. This indicates the potential of some political parties to maintain a stable core of voters in consecutive elections. Out of these four countries, Hungary and Slovakia have the broadest dispersion. They are the only countries in which political parties register values of electoral volatility above 80%. This empirical observation reveals similarities between two party systems that were often considered to fall under different categories of electoral volatility – Hungary being one of the most stable party systems in CEE, and Slovakia being one of the systems with relatively large volatility.

In Bulgaria and Poland, there are no parties close to the minimum extreme value. Moreover, these are the countries with the fewest political parties with low volatility in CEE. Conversely, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania are the countries in which most political parties have low volatility in various elections. These conclusions are in line with earlier research that placed Bulgaria and Poland in the same category of volatile party systems (Szczerbiak 2001; Spirova 2007), whereas the Czech, Hungarian, and Romanian party systems are among the least volatile in CEE. The distribution of political parties across the volatility continuum allows for a deeper exploration of the cross-country similarities and differences. For example, Bulgarian and Polish parties display a similar pattern of clustering around certain values of volatility. However, there is a difference between the two countries in terms of the number of parties, the concentration, and their respective volatility values. Bulgarian political parties cluster in three groups: a small group situated around 3%, a larger group around 20%, and the largest group around 40%. Polish political parties have are clustered in reverse: most parties are positioned around the 15% value, slightly fewer around the 50% value, and the smallest cluster resides close to 65%. Furthermore, Polish parties approach the uppermost extreme of electoral volatility compared to the parties in Bulgaria.

Apart from these country-level differences, the general observation is that the vast majority of CEE political parties are dispersed across a broad range of electoral volatility. This dispersion exists irrespective of the timing and party system in which the parties compete. Although there is some concentration in the 0-20% range of volatility, the variation in electoral volatility is high. The range is broad with a minimum value of 0.11% and a maximum of 89.21%. The analysis found no effect of time on electoral volatility. A comparison of the

1990 and 2000 decades revealed no relevant differences between the volatility values and distribution of parties. The empirical evidence contradicts existing research underlining the consolidation and stabilization tendencies of the CEE party systems (Olson 1993; Agh 1998; Chan 2001). Instead of a uniform decline of electoral volatility in CEE, these results indicate that voters continue to change their electoral preferences to a similar extent across time. This is consistent with the oscillatory pattern identified by Sikk (2005) for the electoral volatility at party system level. In the context of the party level analysis conducted in this book, a specific conclusion can be drawn on the basis of these empirical observations. Even after several elections, volatility remains a salient issue for most CEE political parties.

If the time does not reduce electoral volatility, the presence in government appears to play a role. CEE incumbent parties are, on average, less volatile than opposition parties. Such findings complement the existing research from Western Europe (Muller and Strom 2000; Strom et al. 2003) pointing that incumbents are likely to display higher levels of electoral change compared to the opposition parties. Moving beyond the electoral loss or gain, this book illustrates that in CEE incumbent parties have a more stable core of voters compared to the opposition parties. This happens in the context of continuous alternations in government. However, the advantage of the term in government is not very high and is nuanced by a supplementary empirical observation. Incumbent parties do not display moderate volatility; they have either low or high levels of electoral volatility.

In addition to these general differences, there is significant variation in electoral volatility within the same party system. The variation is visible both across parties and across time for the same political party. The average volatility indicates large discrepancies between the least and the most volatile parties within a political system. Moreover, there are isolated examples of political parties that maintain a stable core of voters across several elections. Most parties do not even display a linear trend (decreasing or increasing) over the years; periods of low volatility rates are followed periods of high volatility and vice versa. In light of these empirical observations, CEE continues to represent fertile soil in which to investigate electoral volatility. In many respects, this complex picture was generally left unexplained by variables included in previous analyses. There are isolated instances in which the ethnic cleavage or the networks established by political parties with non-political organizations can explain the variation in electoral volatility at party level. However, general explanations are missing. To fill this gap, the central argument of this book was that the organizational features of political parties were likely to explain the variation in electoral volatility.

The Relevance of Candidate Selection

The way in which political parties select their candidates is relevant not only to those directly involved in the internal decision-making. So far, an extensive body of literature has focused on the implications of this process for members, leaders of local or territorial organizations, as well as the central elite of the party. There are a number of reasons for which candidate selection can influence electoral support and its long-term stability. The underlying mechanism at work here relates to the establishment of a better connection to the voter. Most political parties in CEE are hierarchical institutions with three decision-making layers: central, territorial (e.g. regional, county, or municipal), and local. Decisions made at the central office that are simply imposed on all local organizations run the risk of reflecting only the one-sided perspective of the central elite on the issue at hand. Decisions made at the highest level of interaction between most voters and the party – the local organization – are more likely to be based on citizens' priorities and needs. Local organizations can mirror citizens' day-to-day issues into policy issues, thereby demonstrating the potential for adaptation. In this way, the autonomy of local organizations in reaching relevant decisions within the party can provide the basis for a strong connection to the voters.

This general argument gets stronger when the decision making refers to candidates. Voters are more familiar with those candidates nominated at the constituency level. By providing the local organizations a voice in the process of candidate selection, political parties send a clear message: they care about voters' opinions. Moreover, a candidate selected at the local level contributes to a psychological effect within the electorate: people believe that candidate represents them. From a candidate's perspective, earlier studies have shown that politicians exhibit the greatest loyalty to the locus that influences their re-election. The selection of candidates in a decentralized manner (in territorial organizations) is therefore likely to enhance deeper connections between elected candidates and citizens.

The empirical relationship between the centralization of candidate selection and electoral volatility confirms these theoretical expectations. The statistical analysis revealed that political parties that allow the local organizations more room for maneuver in selecting candidates are less volatile than the rest. The centralization of candidate selection for national elections, measured using an index adapted to the CEE realities, reveals a diverse approach on the part of political parties towards the selection of their candidates. Most CEE political parties prefer the involvement of the central office in reaching decisions. However, this involvement takes various shapes. For more than one third of the parties, control of the central office is reactive and involves the use of the right to oppose or veto initial proposals. Selection takes place at the local or regional level and the list of candidates (as most

countries use list PR) is subject to the approval of the central organization. One fifth of the parties opt for mixed selection of candidates in which both the local and central level make proposals until a final decision is reached. A similar share of parties opts for a totally centralized decision making process in which local organizations have practically no say in the selection of candidates.

One implication of this categorization of parties according to their candidate selection procedures is empirical. It adds nuance to the conclusions drawn on the basis of previous research that dealt with the centralized character of political parties in CEE (Szczerbiak 2001a; Deegan-Krause 2006). The general tendency of centralization is visible. However, the degree to which the centre is involved in decision-making differs considerably. In many cases, the control of the centre does not limit the opportunities for involvement of the local level. In addition, centralization does not characterize the entire universe of cases. One fifth of the parties examined have decentralized selection: the local organizations have autonomy in choosing the candidates.

The fact that parties connect with their electorates through the decentralization of candidate selection for national elections has an impact on theories about voting behavior and intra-party decision making. The existence of such a relationship adds one more analytical dimension: voting can be the response to internal decisions of the political actors. So far, a large number of studies considered voting to be mostly the result of parties' activity on the political arena (see Chapter 1). However, the linkage identified in this book indicates that voters can react positively when local organizations – the primary unit of interaction between voters and parties – have a greater word to say in the selection of candidates for national elections. The recognition of candidates, the willingness to adapt to specific features of local politics, and the responsiveness to voters' priorities are among the most important messages sent by parties. Furthermore, with such effects in place, the locus of selection may influence the behavior of candidates once they reach office. Thus, this may constitute an incentive for successful candidates to push towards further decentralization of the decision making within their party.

The Limited Role of Membership

The theoretical arguments from Chapter 1 explained how membership can create social networks in society; at their turn, these networks can ensure a certain degree of voter encapsulation and allow the formation of party identity among members and their acquaintances. Moreover, communication with voters between elections gives citizens signals that their opinions are important and are being addressed as such. Members can make the process of representation more palpable. In this way, party members are able to close the gap between parties and voters that originates in the tenuous relationship between parties and society in CEE. On these grounds, the size of membership

organizations and its stability over time were expected to diminish electoral volatility.

The results indicate that the political parties with numerous members have slightly lower levels of electoral volatility than the parties with small number of members. The strength of this relationship varies across countries. Extreme values appear to be related to the share of party membership in the population. In this sense, the size of membership has the strongest influence on electoral volatility in the country with most party members (Romania) and the weakest in the country in which only very few people are registered party members (Poland). At the same time, the variations in size are not related to electoral volatility. Overall, membership appears to have a limited role in explaining electoral volatility at party level in CEE. Consequently, the enlargement of party membership can hardly represent a mechanism through which parties can stabilize their voters in CEE.

Two general observations can explain the weak relationships and can serve as bases for further research. First, the longitudinal analysis presented in this book reveals that only a small percentage of parties (14%) consistently increase their membership organizations over time. A similar percentage of parties registered a consistent loss of members. In more than two thirds of the cases, political party membership does not display a linear progression in one direction or the other; its evolution is marked by oscillations. Second, on average, the membership organizations continue to be small or extremely small both in absolute and relative terms (compared to Western European countries). Only eight parties have more than 1% members (calculated as percentage of the electorate). Of these, only two parties have more than 2%, both of which rely heavily on the organizational legacy of their communist predecessors. These low levels of membership diminish the influence that party members could have exercised on electoral volatility. Furthermore, given the oscillatory trends of most membership organizations in the region, the stability of membership rates does not influence volatility.

The Advantages of MP Renominations

MPs' activities and performance in the legislature shape the image of political parties in the eyes of the electorate. Due to their position, MPs have access to resources that can bring benefits to those who voted for their party. The period spent in office is often considered to be an indicator of professionalization and expertise. These attributes enhance the credibility of MPs when they run for re-election. MPs also have the resources (i.e. public allowances, free access to media) to interact extensively with groups or individual citizens within their constituencies. These features suggest that continuity in office may have a positive effect on electoral volatility. Political parties using the same MPs in consecutive elections are better able to establish a strong connection with the

electorate and are thus more able to influence its voting loyalty. This nexus functions on the basis of three complementary mechanisms. First, incumbent MPs play an instrumental role using their high visibility, publicity, and name recognition to their advantage. Incumbents act as recognizable elements of the party that add a personal dimension to the organizational attachment of the voters. Second, MPs are the guarantors of long-term communication between candidates and voters to their mutual benefits. Third, there is a process of voter socialization. Through their constituency service, MPs accustom voters to issue of representation and responsiveness to their needs.

Given this, it is not surprising that the average estimation of re-nomination indicates that CEE political parties use approximately one third of their MPs to fill in the candidate lists for the upcoming elections. Due to a variety of reasons ranging from floor-crossing to unwillingness of MPs to run for re-election, there is a substantial discrepancy in MP re-nomination rates across political parties. Consequently, the average re-nomination rates vary between less than a quarter of MPs (as is the case with the KDNP in Hungary) to more than two thirds (KDU-CSL in the Czech Republic). The statistical analysis shows the effect of re-nomination rates for electoral volatility. The political parties that re-nominate more MPs ensure continuity of representation. This process is reflected in the stability of electoral support: the parties with higher re-nomination rates exhibit lower electoral volatility.

These findings have an empirical implication. In the new European democracies in CEE, the nexus between parties and voters involves the legislators. They are the most visible representatives of the parties and their continuity in office can encourage the stabilization of electoral preferences. Continuity is relevant to electoral volatility without accounting for the MPs' performance. The simple fact of being present in the legislature appears to trigger more loyal voter behavior at polls.

Implications

This study revealed the importance of organizational components in shaping electoral volatility at the party level. The centralization of candidate selection and the MP re-nomination rate have a relevant effect on the stability of electoral performance. The size of membership has little impact on volatility. The multivariate statistical analysis controlled both for variables in the political environment such as party system volatility and electoral turnout as well as for government incumbency. Its results revealed that the effects of the organizational components are the strongest; their impact is not weakened by the presence of other variables.

The empirical evidence presented in this book has four major implications. First, the effect of organizational structures and procedures on the societal acceptance of parties (i.e. the stability of electoral support) has

implications for the theory of institutionalization. Previous studies (Mainwaring and Scully 1995) have considered these two components as indicators of institutionalization. The analyses from this book, however, indicate that this conclusion may be problematic. If there is a cause-effect relationship between these two variables, they are no longer components of the same concept (institutionalization). Instead, as one partially explains the other, there is conceptual tautology. Consequently, a new conceptualization of institutionalization is required.

Second, these empirical results indicate the necessity to rethink the linkage between parties and their electorates. So far, existing research illustrates how parties react to existing constraints in society, to the electoral market, or to a large number of external factors (Kircheimer 1966; Rae 1971; Sartori 1997; Harmel and Janda 1982; Bartolini and Mair 1990; Mair et al. 2004; Millard 2004). Some results of the analysis conducted throughout this book indicated that political parties can be in the position to influence the institutional settings in which they operate. Thus, political parties can also be seen as agents that can structure people's choices and model, to some extent, their own electoral stability over time. The degrees of success in reaching this outcome can set the theoretical premises for new typologies of political parties in CEE.

Third, at the methodological level, this book provides a few indicators to allow the comparability of party organization and further investigation. Earlier studies provided several conceptualizations of party organization (Harmel and Janda 1982; Panebianco 1988; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Randall and Svasand 2002; van Biezen 2003) that allow little or no replicability as they are based more on in-depth or contextual knowledge of the cases. This study provided an analytical alternative to qualitative assessment of organization components. The quantitative operationalization and the data provided may represent useful tools for further comparative research.

The major empirical implication of these results is that electoral volatility can have endogenous sources. This observation adds nuance to the conclusions drawn in two different streams of literature. First, many studies have focused on external determinants of volatility. The role played by the internal selection of candidates, membership rates, and MP re-nomination illustrates that this is not the case at the party level. Moreover, the prominence of endogenous explanations – when included in the same model as some exogenous explanations – strengthens these claims. Voters appear to react to the behavior of political party. For example, if the party shows willingness to respond to their demands or ensures continuity of representation, citizens do not alter their electoral preferences. Second, earlier research has discussed the adaptation of party organization to inputs received from the electorate. This book has demonstrated that this process can be reversed and the internal

organization can shape the electoral stability of the party. The process is complex and is based upon three interconnected mechanisms by which a stronger nexus with the voters is created. Further research can elaborate on the propensity of parties to choose to either adopt one of the two stances (adaptation or influence) or to combine them for political and electoral success.

Directions for Further Research

This analysis opens the floor to three main avenues for further research. First, the broad longitudinal and cross-party variation in electoral volatility may inspire the quest to find further determinants. The multivariate statistical analysis accounted for 20 to 30% of this variation. This leaves plenty of room for future research to employ new variables that may explain volatility. Among other organizational features to be considered, future studies may include leadership changes or division of funding within the party as potential explanatory variables for electoral volatility. As splits and mergers often appeared to be useful variables in explaining some organizational processes, a systematic investigation of such processes may prove valuable also, in direct relationship with electoral volatility.

Second, the candidate selection process and MP re-nomination are significant – both from a statistical and substantive perspective – determinants of electoral volatility. Further research may contribute to these findings by taking a closer look at the quality of selected candidates and the performance of representatives. The effect of these two variables may become stronger when the selected candidates are quality MPs who successfully fulfill their representation function (i.e. they perform well as MPs). With such nuanced information, government incumbency that appears to play a role in decreasing volatility may become less relevant. In that case, the emphasis of future research should be on the politics of representation and the qualities necessary to perform it in a manner that may influence volatility.

Finally, departing from these results, further research may distinguish between political parties that show general similarities in terms of organization and volatility. Differences may be assessed through process tracing at the level of each party. Organizational changes, modifications of membership rates, leadership style, or loyalty of the elite may point to differences overlooked by this study. Thus, future research may focus on further distinguishing the causal mechanisms driving the effect of organization on electoral volatility at the party level in the new European democracies observed here.

