



Social structure, social coalitions and party choice in Hungary



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between social structure and party choice in Hungary on the basis of a survey from 2009 ($N = 2980$). The following structural variables are examined: ascriptive variables (age and gender), territorial variables (region and urban-rural residence), social class variables (education, social class and household income), sector employment and religious variables (religious denomination, church attendance and self-declared religiosity).

The analysis shows that age and territorial variables are the most important socio-structural variables for explaining party support in Hungary. The role of religious and class variables is considerably smaller in this respect.

The two largest parties, Fidesz and the Socialist Party, are first and foremost anchored in different generations and in territorial variables although different degrees of religiosity also has significant effect on support for these parties. The impact of the religious variables is, however, low. The class variables have the opposite impact on the two largest parties from what we should expect according to traditional class voting. Fidesz gets strongest support from the working class and the lower educated strata while the Socialist Party gets strongest support from the service class. The two largest parties are foremost social coalitions of very different social groups. The explanatory power of social structure on party choice is low in Hungary. This is also confirmed from comparative studies.

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Introduction

One important issue in the debate on the democratisation and transformation in Central and Eastern Europe (hereafter CEE) has been whether a stable and fairly strong relationships would develop between social structure, interests and the party system. Given the weakness of the civil societies after the communist period, there was doubt whether such relationship would occur and develop into stronger relationships (Evans, 2006: 247–250; Whitefield, 2002: 184). Such developments of persistent alliances between social groups and political parties are – according to some authors – central to the legitimacy and stability of political processes. For these authors crystallisation and politicisation of the social structure are important processes in this respect. Crystallization includes a constrained relationship between social structure and interests; politicization includes a constrained relationship between the interaction of the social structure, social interests, and political parties (Wessels and Klingemann, 2006: 23–24).

Based on a longitudinal comparative study of 11 CEE countries, Wessels and Klingemann (2006: 25–31) conclude their analysis that there has been a strengthening of the relationship between the social structure and political social interests, and between political social interests and parties, but these relationships are still weak and the relationship between the social structure and parties is also weak. This relationship has not increased over time. Some of the same empirical findings were reported by Gijbels and Nieuwbeerta (2000: 417–422) regarding the relationship between social class, economic left–right values and party choice in most CEE countries.

Other researchers have, however, come to different conclusions. Evans (2006: 262–264) concludes in a review article of the social bases of political divisions in post-communist Eastern Europe that: a) there is a similarity in the pattern of relationships between social structure and political preferences with those observed in established democracies; b) social divisions have emerged to some degree in each state according to its specific social composition, historical inheritance, and post-communist economic and political performance. He rejects the *tabula rasa* position with no residue of a pre-communist inheritance regarding social divisions; c) the social structural characteristics that influence party cleavages can be interpreted as doing so via their consequences for values, interests, and identities. This position implies that both crystallisation and politicisation are fairly well developed in the CEE countries.

The study of the relationship between social structure and party choice is a classic topic within political science and political sociology. Since the seminal essay of Lipset et al. (1967) on societal cleavage structures and party alignments was first published, it is a common place among political scientists that the West European party systems reflect social structure, particularly where societal cleavages have emerged in the process of the modernization of European societies and persisted up to recent times. As the scholarly discussion outlined above shows, there has been an important debate whether social structural variables will be politicised and have a considerable impact of party choice in the CEE countries.

In their analysis of the development of the conflict structure in Western democracies, Lipset et al., (1967: 15–23) focused on the historical origins and the major conflicts between the political parties. They identified four central cleavages which had their basis in the social structure:

- 1) The centre–periphery cleavage was anchored in territorial regions and related to different ethnic and linguistic groups as well as religious minorities.
- 2) The conflict between the church and the state pitted the secular state against the historical privileges of the churches and over control of the important educational institutions. This cleavage has more specifically polarised the religious section against the secular section of the population.
- 3) The conflict in the commodity market was between buyers and sellers of agricultural products, or more generally, between the urban and the rural population.
- 4) Finally, the conflict in the labour market involved owners and employers versus tenants, labourers and workers. This conflict is more generally referred to as the class cleavage.

In this article I examine the impact of all these conflicts on party choice in Hungary.

The traditional measure for tapping the centre–periphery cleavage is to examine whether voters in different regions are inclined to support different parties. The conflict in the commodity market is tapped by urban–rural residence which also is a traditional measure.

Three variables tap aspects of the religious cleavage, namely religious denomination, church attendance, and a direct measure of religiosity. I consider these variables tap various facets of the religious cleavage. This is explained below.

The conflict in the labour market is traditionally associated with class cleavage, and in a broad sense, social class, education and income can be considered as class variables or variables that tap the class cleavage. However, it is important to emphasise that such variables can also tap other aspects of societal conflict. This is explained in details in the section on the relevance of the ideological space.

In addition age, gender and sector employment are included. Age has proved to be an important predictor of party choice in the CEE countries. Gender differences in voting behaviour has become significant in many West European countries and is also included in most studies of the impact of socio-demographic variables on party choice. Sector employment has become a significant predictor of party choice in West European countries and there are important reasons why this could also be the case in the CEE countries.

I group the various variables in some parts of the analysis below into three or four groups. The first group is the ascriptive variables ‘age’ and ‘gender’. The second group comprises region and urban–rural residence. These are called territorial variables, but they can also be considered as quasi-ascriptive variables since many people live their whole life in the same territorial unit. The explanatory power of the ascriptive and territorial variables is occasionally grouped together in the analyses below. The other two group of variables are more homogeneous, namely the three religious and the three class variables. I also discuss sector employment in connection with these latter variables.

In this article I examine the relationship between socio-structural variables and party choice in Hungary based on a survey from 2009.¹ The article is organised as follows: I first review previous findings regarding the impact of social structure on party choice and the structuring of the ideological space in Hungary. In the subsequent empirical analyses the focus is initially

¹ The survey ($N = 2980$) was part of the Hungarian Election Study and was one of several Hungarian political surveys that were financed by Norway through the European Economic Agreement (EEA).

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