



What's past is prologue, or is it? Generational effects on voter turnout in post-communist countries, 1990–2013



Lukáš Linek*, Ivan Petrušek

Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Jiřská 1, Prague 1, 110 00, Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

A common theme in studies of voter turnout in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is that the legacy of communism attenuates electoral participation. It is argued that socialization and the political habits that emerged under communism impeded democratic development by not motivating citizen activism. This paper examines this claim for voter turnout in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland for all general elections since 1990 using cohort analysis on pooled cross-sectional post-election surveys from given countries. This paper shows that socialization and political habit formation under communism have had no discernible effect on voter turnout in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary between 1990 and 2013. Generational effects are evident in Poland suggesting that this country's political history is qualitatively different from that of its neighbours. This research is important in highlighting that citizens' political development within non-liberal democratic regimes does not always lead to lower levels of voter turnout. Consequently, the decline in turnout in CEE is likely to have attitudinal rather than generational origins where contemporary rather than historical political developments are most important.

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There is a consensus within the academic literature that electoral behaviour in post-communist countries is influenced by their communist past. This perspective adopts the “what's past is prologue” perspective (elegantly expressed in Act 2, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) that the communist experience has had, and continues to have, a strong and measurable impact on post-communist citizens' electoral behaviour. Some authors emphasise the weak social roots of political parties (van Biezen, 2003; Kostelecký, 2002), low relevance of cleavages in structuring political competition (Gijsberts and Nieuwbeerta, 2000; see literature reviews by Evans, 2006 and Whitefield, 2002) and high levels of electoral volatility (Epperly, 2011; Powell and Tucker, 2014; Tavits, 2008). Other studies show that post-communist countries have lower levels of party membership (van Biezen et al., 2012) and lower proportions of individuals with party identification than Western European countries (Dalton and Weldon, 2007; White et al., 1997). However, we still do not know if the communist experience influences voter turnout as well. Studies of the relationship between communist experience and civic participation in

general suggest that such an experience makes post-communist citizens less willing to participate (Bernhard and Karakoc, 2007; Howard, 2003; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013). This raises the question of whether the experience of communism also influences voter turnout in newly democratized countries.

In this paper we focus on how generational effects change voter turnout in post-communist countries. These generational effects are examined in terms of three sets of theories. First of all, political socialization in different political regimes and periods is expected to lead to generational differences in the level of pro-democratic values, trust in political institutions, belief in the function of political parties, and adequacy of elections as a means of choosing political representatives (Lyons, 2013; Mishler and Rose, 2007). These differences may translate into a differential willingness to vote. Secondly, voter turnout is influenced by specific experiences linked to the organization of elections in communist regimes. These elections were not competitive and participation was effectively mandatory. Such a combination allows us to analyse if participation in communist elections helped form a “habit of voting” that is observable in later competitive democratic elections (Czesnik et al., 2013). Thirdly, our study also allows us to check the generalizability of findings from advanced democracies concerning strong generational effects on turnout and younger generations having a much

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lukas.linek@soc.cas.cz (L. Linek).

lower propensity to vote than older generations (Bhatti and Hansen, 2012a; Blais et al., 2004; Blais and Rubenson, 2013; Franklin, 2004; Wass, 2007). These generational effects seem to be driven mainly by changing levels of belief that voting is a civic duty. Thus, besides the hypotheses that are specific to post-communist countries, we also present a hypothesis which stresses the similarity of post-communist countries with advanced democracies. The findings of this study are important because general theories of electoral participation have been tested on new data.

Our study focuses on voter turnout in parliamentary elections in four post-communist countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. An important consideration in every research is selection bias (King et al., 1994: 115–149). In the subset of post-communist states examined in this paper there is variation on the dependent variable because turnout ranges from 98% for Czechs and Slovaks in June 1990 to 40% in Poland in 2005. With this variation in turnout problems associated with selection bias, such as underestimating the causal effect of our key independent variables, i.e. age, period, and cohort effects, are attenuated. Moreover, the trends in turnout in the four post-communist countries studied are divergent where electoral participation has declined for Czechs and Slovaks and remained reasonably constant for Hungary and Poland. For these reasons, modelling the generational effects on turnout in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary provides considerable variation on the dependent variable and change over time. Case selection was also influenced by practical concerns, i.e. data. Study of generational effects on turnout requires having post-election surveys for as many elections as possible over a prolonged period. Thus, it was important to have survey data (i.e. ideally post-election surveys or academic surveys fielded close after an election) for each country for all democratic elections since 1989/1990.

While the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary share a communist past, they differ in the ways their communist regimes functioned after the end of Stalinism, especially in terms of liberalization and tolerance of alternative political organizations (e.g. Linz and Stepan, 1996). Their political regimes before WWII also differed. Czechoslovakia had a democratic regime with regular elections and mandatory electoral participation, while Poland and Hungary had, for most of the interwar period, authoritarian regimes with limited levels of political competition. This variability allows us to enquire whether there is some kind of general communist experience that influences voter turnout or whether differences in the nature of communist regimes translate into contrasting effects of the past on contemporary voter turnout.¹

We begin this study with a presentation of theoretical assumptions about generational effects on turnout which are based on theories of political socialization, habitual voting and value change. Then we outline the analytical strategy we have employed to investigate generational effects on turnout. We briefly explain the fundamentals of cohort analysis, outline the analytical approach taken, and proceed to present the data used in our analyses.² In the

analytical section, we first describe the evolution of turnout in four post-communist countries over time. Then we use a hierarchical logistic regression model to analyse generational effects on turnout. Our study demonstrates clear generational effects on voter turnout in Poland, and weak effects in the other three countries. Furthermore, our modelling results do not show higher turnout among generations socialized in democratic regimes, compared to those socialized under communism. In the conclusion, methodological and theoretical questions and the implications of these results are discussed.

1. Why should electoral participation in post-communist countries be dependent on generations?

Our theoretical framework for studying generational effects on turnout integrates two approaches to explain voter turnout in post-communist countries. The first suggests that political regime change is not that important for the electoral participation in newly democratized countries. This explanation stresses the importance of general value change. Similar to the advanced democracies, younger generations should have a lower propensity to participate in elections since they do not care as much about partisan politics and traditional political institutions (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Dalton, 2008).

The other two explanations highlight the role of political regimes for “learning” to vote. One of them focuses on the role of primary political socialization during impressionable years (Alwin, 1993; Sears, 1975). To simplify this argument, individuals socialized in times when a positive emphasis was placed on democracy, pro-democratic, and pro-participative values should be more likely to vote than those socialized in periods with a less positive emphasis on democracy and participation. The other stream of literature focuses on the fact that electoral participation is at least partially learned or even habitual (Aldrich et al., 2011; Franklin, 2004; Plutzer, 2002). It argues that individuals learn to vote during their first three or four elections and thereafter they reproduce learned voting behaviour. The applicability of both arguments to the post-communist context strongly depends on two factors: (1) the meaning of the electoral experience under the communist regime; and (2) the meaning of socialization in democratic versus communist regimes.

1.1. The socialization hypothesis

The socialization argument is based on the persistence model. According to this model, values learned when young persist for the rest of one’s life. Most of the literature suggests that this process is the strongest during the impressionable-years of adolescence and early adulthood when political values are the least stable and the most susceptible to change (Alwin, 1993; Sears, 1975). In subsequent stages of life, these values may become more stable, but the relationship to politics established during the impressionable years remains more or less stable for the rest of one’s life (Krosnick and Alwin, 1989; Sears and Levy, 2003: 83–87).

Under the impressionable-years model, a political generation cannot be formed in the absence of shared historic experience (Mannheim, 1952). Thus, the term generation refers to a group of people who were born around the same point in time and, as a result, share the same socio-historically specific experience which may shape their attitudes, values and actions (Mannheim, 1952; Inglehart, 1989). What kind of events and socialization experiences should, then, be relevant to the formation of political generations in post-communist countries, and more specifically, of political generations with different levels of voter turnout? The basic line can be drawn between political regimes, delineating

¹ Existing studies tend to emphasize the uniform effects of communist heritage (typically Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013), while one of the main objectives of our study is to find any differences between the effects of communist socialization between the countries, depending on the different trajectories of their communist regimes.

² The terms cohort and generation are used interchangeably throughout the present text. Strictly speaking, cohort refers merely to a group of individuals born in the same year or in the same interval (of three, five, or ten years). Generation is a cohort or a group of cohorts with *shared and distinct* experiences of a given time period. Thus, every generation is a cohort defined by year of birth, while every cohort is not necessarily a generation (Alwin and McCammon, 2006).

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