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Institutions and the stabilization of party systems in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Most explanations of party system stability focus on the strength of mass-elite linkages. We highlight the role of institutions, focusing on how electoral rules and elected institutions, especially the presidency, impact elites' incentives to coordinate on a stable set of parties or to form new parties, thus affecting electoral volatility. Using Central and Eastern European elections data, we find that directly elected presidents increase volatility and that presidential power magnifies this effect. Absent a directly elected president, high district magnitude is associated with increased volatility, but district magnitude dampens the impact of an elected president on volatility; hence, our findings underscore the interactive impact of institutions on party systems. We also find evidence that bicameralism and concurrence of presidential and parliamentary elections decrease electoral volatility. Our model not only explains persistently high electoral volatility in Eastern Europe, but the extreme stability of Western European party systems.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have long argued that successful democratization demands development of a stable party system (Sartori, 1976; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Mainwaring, 1999; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tavits, 2005; Mozaffar and Scarritt, 2005). However, lack of party system stabilization has not impeded successful democratization in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe.[1] Since democratization began in this region, measures such as Polity have risen steadily, yet voters have continued to change party allegiance and the composition of parties competing has been in constant flux (Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Colton, 2000; Rose and Munro, 2003).

Scholars use an index of electoral volatility (Pedersen, 1983), a measure that captures change in vote share from one election to the next, to operationalize stability of party systems. High volatility is associated with weak or unstable party systems (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Mainwaring, 1999). Despite the overall success of democratic transition, levels of volatility across the post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe have been consistently higher than those observed in other transitions (Toka, 1995; Mair, 1997; Lewis, 2007; Powell and Tucker, 2009; see especially Bielasiak, 2002, Table 2). Further, levels of volatility remain higher than in Western Europe, despite the fact that many Central and Eastern European democracies are now economically and politically integrated with their Western neighbors.

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[1] As of the most recent competitive election in each country, the Polity score was 7 or above for all but Russia. Further, eleven Central and East European countries have joined the EU, implying that they have met EU criteria for successful democratization. Croatia is set to join in 2013, and Albania is an official candidate country. Only Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova have no official relationship with the EU.

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Since Lipset and Rokkan wrote on the origins and stability of West European party systems (1967), lack of party system stabilization is best explained as the result of inconsequential party organizations with weak ties to the electorate (Mainwaring, 1999; Roberts and Wibbels, 1999; Kitschelt et al., 1999). Recent work has shown that exogenous factors such as economic performance and time since democracy's founding also impact electoral volatility, but the focus on the quality and characteristics of mass-elite linkages remains (Mainwaring, 1998; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Reich, 2004; Tavits, 2005).

Our approach differs. Our institutions-based theory of party system stabilization explains high volatility in post-communist democracies primarily as the result of institutions chosen at the time of transition. Characteristics of these countries' initial choice environments—in particular the extremely condensed time-frame in which new institutions were chosen, the high degree of instability in number and strength of parties, and "politicians' miscalculations of costs and benefits of alternative institutions"—yielded institutional outcomes "not predicted by legacies of communist rule" or by pre-communist political history (Kitschelt and Smyth, 2002, 1231). In several countries, including former Soviet republics and former satellite states, elites adopted the West European model of parliamentarism with proportional electoral rules; however, in other cases, elites added popularly elected presidents with varying levels of executive power, single-member district electoral tiers, and upper legislative chambers.

As we demonstrate, such institutional additions, especially the addition of a directly elected president with more than ceremonial power, help explain both variation in electoral volatility within Central and Eastern Europe and the decidedly higher levels versus Western Europe. We argue that the most important factors explaining party system stabilization are the institutional prizes that political elites compete for and the rules governing that competition. Institutions that provide incentives to coordinate on a stable set of parties—low district magnitudes and upper chambers—reduce electoral volatility; institutions that provide incentives to forge new parties in order to compete more successfully for national office—high district magnitudes and directly elected presidents with more than ceremonial power—increase volatility. Furthermore, the combined effect of any or all of these institutional features is not additive: we find that district magnitude impacts volatility differently in a system with a directly elected president than in a system without, and the impact of directly elected presidents varies depending on the strength of that institution.

Although studies of volatility often include institutional controls, such as district magnitude (Tavits, 2005; Birch, 2001) or elected president (Birch, 2001), none offers theoretical reasons for doing so, and none considers potential ways in which combinations of institutions may impact volatility. Hence, results are inconsistent (Tavits finds that DM decreases volatility, Birch that it increases it) and explanations are ad hoc. We provide a consistent theoretical framework to explain how institutions comprising the competitive electoral environment impact elite coordination incentives and thus party system stabilization.

Using original data on electoral volatility, we test our hypotheses on 16 post-communist Central and Eastern European countries from first competitive, free and fair elections through 2011.[2] We find that volatility is higher in countries with directly elected presidents, and that presidential strength amplifies this effect. Electoral rules impact volatility as expected, with higher district magnitudes promoting higher volatility; however, this effect depends on other institutions. Absent a directly elected president, high district magnitude is associated with increased volatility but in systems with a directly elected president it has little independent effect. Bicameralism and concurrent election of president and legislature are associated with decreased volatility. Thus, we find that complex institutional choices affect volatility interactively. According to our theoretical framework, volatility is, on average, high in the new Central and Eastern European democracies because directly elected presidents are common, upper chambers rare, and district magnitudes high.

We begin by developing theory on how elected institutions affect incentives for elites to coordinate on a stable set of political parties, underscoring unique features of the initial choice environment that allow us to isolate the impact of institutions on volatility. From this theory, we develop a series of hypotheses that we test using original data on electoral volatility from 70 democratic lower-house elections in 16 post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the study of comparative institutions.

2. Theory

Typically, scholars operationalize electoral volatility using the Pedersen Index (Pedersen, 1983); however, this standard measure does not differentiate volatility due to shifts in voter allegiance versus volatility due to disappearance of old and appearance of new parties (Sikk, 2005; Tavits, 2008; Powell and Tucker, 2009). A voter who switches support to another party is making a different kind of choice than a voter who must switch because the party voted for in the last election no longer exists. Most studies of volatility, motivated

[2] We include all free and fair elections, as assessed by international monitoring organizations, starting with each country's first election after attaining independence. This criteria corresponds well with a Polity score of 6, insuring that we include only cases in which the Polity score is 6 or better. We exclude elections to constituent assemblies, elections held during periods of civil collapse (e.g. 1996 Albania), the Czechoslovakian election, and all Russian elections after 2003. For the case of Russia, we make an exception to strict adherence to Polity because there is stark disparity between Polity coding scores and first-hand accounts of competitiveness and quality of elections as well as overall freedom of the press during the 1990s. According to Fish (2005), Shevtsova (2003), and many others, it is clear that Russia was more democratic in the 1990s than in the 2000s. Freedom House coding for Russia reflects these first-hand accounts, worsening considerably during the 2000s. Therefore, we include all elections in the 1990s, but include only the 2003 election from the 2000s, after which Russia's Polity score dropped from 6 to 4.

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