

The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article explains the puzzling finding that postcommunist citizens living in countries with higher quality institutions have lower levels of political trust and participation. Why do political trust and participation not follow the quality of democratic institutions? I argue that in postcommunist Europe vibrant and robust political competition has stifled trust and, in turn, participation. Using multilevel data, I show that the polities that experienced vibrant political competition in their electoral arenas also witnessed the highest levels of disillusionment with political parties and, consequently, with the political system. Decades of monopolization of the electoral arena by communist parties left Eastern Europeans ill prepared to appreciate vigorous political competition, which, depending on its intensity, tended to depress trust in political parties as an institution and, consequently, stifled political participation.

Keywords

political competition, voting, distrust, postcommunist Europe

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The democratization process in Central and Eastern Europe has been one of the greatest success stories of the Third Wave of democratization. Many post-communist countries, especially those that have already joined the European Union (EU), have established stable and durable democratic institutions and well-functioning market-based economies, which have significantly improved the living standards of their citizens. At the same time, recent research has shown that Eastern Europeans are dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their countries and exhibit alarming levels of distrust of the major political institutions (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, in press; Rose, 2009). Even more intriguing are findings that show that the most highly rated postcommunist democracies have the most distrustful citizens (Klingemann, Fuchs, & Zielonka, 2006; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, in press).

What explains these findings? And what are the consequences of such high levels of distrust in political institutions for the democratic process and for political participation? The existing research identifies these puzzles but does not provide satisfactory answers. The goal of this article is to introduce a theoretical framework that explains the high levels of distrust in one key democratic institution, political parties, and to explore its effects.

I demonstrate that in postcommunist Europe vibrant political competition has come with a high price tag: it has led to disillusionment with the political system and has stifled direct political participation by citizens. I take a bottom-up approach and analyze survey data to identify the individual- and country-level factors that determine trust in political parties and the likelihood of political participation at the individual level. The results point in one direction: The postcommunist polities that experienced vibrant political competition in their electoral arenas also witnessed the highest levels of disillusionment with political parties and, consequently, with the political system. This, I argue, is mainly the result of the communist legacy of the one-party system and the opportunities for rent seeking unleashed by the closing down of centrally planned economies. Decades of monopolization of the electoral arena by communist parties have left Eastern Europeans ill prepared to appreciate vigorous political competition—especially as it exposed a parade of economic and other scandals. Depending on its intensity and the vigor with which parties exposed corrupt dealings, competition tended to depress trust in political parties as an institution and, consequently, stifled direct political participation.

The causal story I tell involves several steps. The basic argument runs as follows: Intense political competition and, in particular, vocal and critical opposition parties that criticize and expose government scandals do much to convince the average Eastern European that political parties are deeply corrupt institutions run by self-interested and power-hungry politicians. Mishandlings

of the privatization process provide much of the ammunition for the opposition, which, when coupled with a political culture of distrust and apathy, tends to further erode trust in political parties. This distrust, I argue, has had the overall effect of depressing direct political participation as disillusioned citizens have tended to withdraw from public life. However, some of the disillusioned have been an electoral boon for some new and unorthodox parties that have been able to mobilize them (Pop-Eleches, 2010).

I also demonstrate that there is an interaction effect between partisanship and competition in explaining trust in parties. More specifically, competition has the effect of reducing trust in parties only for those individuals who have weak or no party identification. For intense partisans, vigorous political competition has no effect on their trust of political parties as an institution.

Although the main empirical section of this article primarily uses cross-sectional data from a particular wave of surveys conducted in Eastern Europe between 1997 and 2001, my theoretical framework has dynamic implications as well. My theory suggests that as time passes and as individuals are able to form party attachments, the effect of competition on trust in parties should fade away. Furthermore, as the economic transition draws to a close and as new generations of Eastern Europeans are socialized into democratic norms and rules, the communist legacies should matter less. Thus, the relationship between competition and trust should be further weakened. Therefore, in the final section of this article, I investigate trends over time and offer some preliminary evidence in support of the dynamic predictions of my theory.

The article is organized into five sections. First, I discuss the relevant strands of literature that deal with political competition, participation, and trust. Second, I discuss the measures I use for the main variables of interest. Third, I describe the methods used and discuss the findings. Fourth, I trace trends in political trust and party identification over time. The final section concludes with the implications of my findings.

Political Competition, Trust, and Participation

The quality of political competition assumes a central position in our understanding of democracy. The competitiveness of the electoral arena has become the predominant yardstick against which scholars of transitology have classified and evaluated the democratic progress of regimes in transition (Diamond, 2002). This section discusses the literature that has grappled with different conceptions and measures of political competition and why it is important.

First, many scholars have examined the role of political competition in deepening democracy in fledgling democracies by focusing on alternation of

power and the strength of the opposition (Vachudova, 2005; Wright, 2008). For these scholars, the alternation of power between ruling parties and the opposition is a strong indicator of a competitive electoral arena. Others have used the ideological distance (i.e., ideological polarization) between the major ruling and opposition parties to measure competition (Frye, 2002). The logic for using this measure is that ideologically distant parties are more likely to serve as greater checks on their opponents than are parties with closer ideological orientations. Thus, polarization provides the checks and balances that produce political accountability. Some scholars have criticized this and other measures as static (Grzymala-Busse, 2006). For example, Grzymala-Busse (2006) argues that our measures need to capture the robustness of political competition by focusing on the dynamic interaction between parties.

My conceptualization of political competition is in line with that of Grzymala-Busse (2006). Given that one of the main roles of opposition parties is to act as “watchdogs” and hold the opposition accountable, measures of competition need to reflect the activity and behavior of parties. I am primarily interested in analyzing the effect of vocal and critical political competition on trust and participation. As such, my operationalization of competition, which I discuss later, taps into the robustness of political competition.

Why do we care about political competition? What evidence do we have that more competition does in fact lead to better democratic outcomes? Some of the early work on this topic suggests that there is a strong link between political competition and public policy (Key, 1949; Schattschneider, 1942). Specifically, this literature argues that higher political competition leads politicians and parties to distribute public goods more. More recent work has established that the sooner a country establishes a competitive political arena, the quicker it sheds its authoritarian past (Grzymala-Busse, 2006; O’Dwyer, 2004; Vachudova, 2005; Wright, 2008). Vachudova (2005) argues that political competition is crucial in explaining the different trajectories that countries followed after the fall of communism. The countries that had strong opposition movements prior to 1989 had better chances of electing liberal leaders during the first democratic elections and of institutionalizing a competitive political system. For Vachudova (2005), the main virtue of political competition is that it limits rent seeking by exposing politicians to greater scrutiny. Others, most notably Wright (2008), have looked into the effect of political competition on regime stability. Using pooled data for more than 90 countries, Wright shows that democracies with low levels of initial competition tend to fail because they face antisystem forces, which seek to ascend to power through extrajudicial means.

This may all be true, but scholars have neglected to investigate the impact that competition has on citizens’ trust and political participation. Below I show

that it depresses both. Many authors have explored the importance of trust in democratic institutions for democratic consolidation (e.g., Schmitter, 1994). One observation that has been validated by comparative research is that trust in political institutions, especially trust in political parties, is significantly lower in Eastern Europe compared with both Western Europe and other new democracies of the Third Wave (Catterberg & Moreno, 2005; Rose, 2009).

What does the literature have to say about the determinants of support for democracy and its institutions? Herbert Kitschelt (1992), for example, makes a forceful case for the connection between market success and mass support for democracy in Eastern and Central Europe. However, the prediction that economic performance will largely determine support for democracy and its institutions has been only partially validated. For example, Evans and Whitefield (1995) find that political factors are more important in explaining commitment to democracy than is economic performance. In fact, when they look at the link between GDP per capita levels and support for democracy, they find that the poorest three countries exhibit the most support for democracy, the opposite of what Kitschelt predicted. This is consistent with my theoretical model. Generally speaking, poorer countries in postcommunist Europe lacked vibrant party competition and the citizens of these countries were less likely to become disillusioned with political institutions as a result of competition.

Political participation has likewise been extensively studied. Although there is much dispute about global trends in participation, there is one striking regularity that emerges in virtually every study that compares postcommunist Europe to the rest of the world: Eastern Europeans are less likely to participate in the public sphere, however participation is operationalized (Howard, 2003; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Rose, 2007, 2009). Furthermore, there is rich variation in the levels of participation across the postcommunist world. Why are the Poles, the Estonians, and the Slovenians some of the most skeptical and disengaged democrats in Europe while their countries are considered to be the region's democratic and economic frontrunners? This article is about answering this puzzle, and in the following section I sketch my theoretical framework and offer a causal story that links political competition to direct political participation.

Theories and Hypotheses

The main theoretical argument of this article is that vibrant political competition has had the effect of eroding public trust in postcommunist democratic institutions, particularly in political parties—and this has negatively affected political participation. This, I argue, is caused primarily by two factors that

are unique to postcommunism: the communist legacy of distrust and the economic transition. Decades of communist party hegemony have left Eastern Europeans deeply distrustful of political parties and ill prepared to appreciate vigorous political competition. Depending on its intensity, competition has tended to depress trust in political parties as an institution and, consequently, stifle political participation.

There are three causal stories in this argument. First, I argue that competition tends to depress trust in parties. Second, I argue that this is the case only for those individuals who have weak or no party identification. Competition does not affect the level of trust that strong partisans have in political parties. In other words, political competition interacts with partisanship. Third, lack of trust in political parties stifles direct political participation as disillusioned citizens tend to withdraw from public life. I now turn to each building block of this theoretical model and give a more detailed account of the causal mechanisms at play.

The Effect of Competition on Trust

First, how does competition depress trust in political parties as an institution? The mechanism that causally links these two variables is a psychological one. Fierce electoral competition and, in particular, vocal and critical opposition parties that expose government misdoings do much to convince the average Eastern European that political parties are fundamentally corrupt institutions. As Levi and Stoker (2000) have pointed out, one trusts politicians and political institutions to the extent that there is no evidence to the contrary. Consequently, the more vigilant and scrutinizing the political parties are of one another, the more one hears about corruption, incompetence, and failure. In short, the logic of political survival and competition leads political parties and individual politicians to exaggerate the failures of their opponents, and this creates an impression of severe social, economic, and political disorder for the average citizen.

The economic transformation that occurred in postcommunist Europe played a crucial role in galvanizing preexisting cynicism toward the political. The transition from command economies to market-based ones that started right after the fall of communism created spectacular opportunities for rent-seeking behavior and state capture (Ganev, 2007; Hellman, 1998). During this rent-seeking bonanza, politicians could divvy up public property among friends and cronies, dole out construction contracts to companies they partly owned, and engage in myriad other forms of corruption. This, in many cases, led to sensational and widely publicized corruption scandals.

Before we discuss specific cases of corruption and show how they lowered trust in political institutions, it is important to note that, at least theoretically, the extent to which ruling elites were involved in corrupt practices is not necessarily reflected in the number of scandals that were exposed and publicized. In fact, in countries such as Poland, Estonia, and Slovenia ruling elites were far less abusive of state resources precisely because of the fierce political opposition they faced (Grzymala-Busse, 2007). This has been indicated consistently by third-party corruption measures, such as the Transparency International Corruption index. However, survey data from the 1990s and 2000s show that the citizens of these three countries have been consistently the most distrustful of political parties, with more than 90% of the respondents indicating that they have very little or no trust in them (Rose, 2009).

There is little doubt that the extent to which elites have engaged in corrupt practices has varied. What matters, and this is the crux of my argument, is that the scandalization of corruption cases was most pronounced in those countries where vigilant and critical opposition parties were able to expose government abuse. As Grzymala-Busse (2006) suggests, “A critical opposition constantly monitors and publicizes the misdeeds of the government, criticizing its actions in parliament, questioning its motivations, and turning also to media channels to voice criticism” (p. 283).

The paradoxical case of Slovenia is particularly instructive: It is widely considered one of the least corrupt in the region, yet it is home to some of its most distrustful citizens. The authors of a report on corruption and anticorruption policy in Slovenia by the Open Society Institute (2002) conclude that despite “statistics on criminal proceedings and the opinions of analysts and international organisations including the European Union [indicating] that corruption is not a serious problem in Slovenia . . . citizens’ perceptions are that corruption is both widespread and increasing.” When asked in 1997, only 1.2% of the Slovenian respondents reported that they had personally been victims of corruption.¹ Yet in a survey conducted in 1999 by the Slovenian Institute of Social Sciences, more than 62% of the respondents believed that corruption in Slovenia is on the rise and 38% believed that “almost all or the majority of public officials” were involved in some form of corruption (p. 578). This clearly suggests that the alarmingly high levels of perceived corruption, and the consequent low levels of trust in political institutions, are not borne out of personal experience with corruption or based on objective third-party measures of corruption.

Why do Slovenian citizens have so little trust in public officials? Slovenian political expert Drago Zajic explains that Slovenians had unrealistically high hopes for democracy after the fall of communism. What they

got from pluralistic politics was interparty quarrelling and criticism, and a constant questioning of the intentions, legitimacy, and truthfulness of politicians.² Slovenian civil society activist Dejan Savic concurred, adding that average citizens have come to distrust the government and the political parties that run it because the heavy criticism levied against them has convinced many “that it must be true that politicians and their parties are either incompetent or corrupt.”³

To be fair, Slovenia and its political establishment have been rocked by a number of corruption scandals over the years.⁴ However, corruption and state capture were, by all accounts, far more endemic in Bulgaria, for example; yet Bulgarians exhibit the highest levels of trust in parties in the survey data analyzed here. My theory explains these puzzling findings in terms of substantial information failures on the part of the citizens and their inability to compare the relative democratic and economic progress of their countries. Despite more widespread corruption in Bulgaria, the lack of powerful opposition forces with resources and political skill to expose and scandalize corruption cases has resulted in Bulgarians being more trusting of political parties than Slovenes!

In fact, if one considers the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International to be a reasonable measure of the actual levels of corruption in a country, bivariate correlation analysis shows that there is no relationship between trust in parties and actual levels of corruption (Pearson’s correlation coefficient is $-.08$).⁵ However, the correlation coefficients between trust in parties and the two measures of political competition I use below are relatively high. Specifically, the effective number of parties and trust in parties are highly correlated at $.61$. Similarly, closeness of elections is correlated to trust in parties with a coefficient of $.46$ (higher values of closeness indicate less competitive elections).

But why would citizens be disappointed with political parties rather than with the individual actors involved in corruption, ranging from party officials to would-be oligarchs to well-connected *nomenklatura* beneficiaries? The answer is that political parties are the institutions through which politicians run for office and implement policies once in office, and in many cases individual politicians see parties as vehicles for their self-enrichment. Furthermore, voters vote for parties during elections and not for individual politicians. Thus, politicians do not operate independently of their parties; their actions, including corruption, reflect on the parties that allow them to exercise power. As Enyedi and Tóka (2007) have argued, “The initial reservation against parties can be explained in terms of the communist legacy, but the various scandals surrounding party politics have certainly strengthened

negative stereotypes concerning the actual motives of party politicians” (p. 152) Numerous privatization-related scandals “generated much cynicism about the moral integrity of . . . political parties in general” (p. 153).

Why does the communist legacy of one-party rule play such an important role in determining how postcommunist citizens regard parties? My main claim here is that nowhere else were political parties as hated and political involvement as tainted. Unlike parties in other authoritarian regimes, the communist parties of Eastern Europe managed to transform the institution of the political party into an anathema for millions of Eastern Europeans. For decades, many saw the communist parties as incompetent and corrupt institutions that served the interests of the nomenklatura. Political persecutions, dismal living standards, and empty propaganda left many questioning the moral integrity of the communist parties in the region.

The communist party-states gave rise to what Vaclav Havel has called the “politics of anti-politics” (Rose, 2009) and led György Konrád (1984/1996), the famous Hungarian novelist and dissident, to claim,

We ought to depoliticize our lives, free them from politics as from some contagious infection. We ought to free our simple everyday affairs from considerations of politics. . . . So I describe the democratic opposition as not a political but antipolitical opposition, since its essential activity is to work for destatification. (p. 180)⁶

Thus, given these deep-seated antiparty sentiments, some parties that ran in the first few elections avoided calling themselves parties. As the Czech Civic Forum famously put it during the 1990 elections, “Parties are for party members, Civic Forum is for everybody” (Kopecky, 2001, p. 178).

Party Identification as a Conditioning Factor

However, not all Eastern Europeans hate or distrust political parties as an institution. In fact, I argue that the effect of competition on trust in parties depends on how closely an individual identifies with a party, and this is the second causal claim of my theoretical framework. How does partisanship mitigate the link between competition and trust? The key here is that the partisan brain is a biased brain. Whenever an individual with strong emotional attachments to a party is confronted with contradictory evidence suggesting that, say, his or her party is involved in corrupt dealings, he or she is unlikely to be impartial in evaluating such claims. Thus, the individual will be less likely to lose trust in his or her own party and consequently in political parties

as an institution. The effect of such allegations is different for someone who has no emotional stake in any of the parties involved in the supposed corrupt dealings. Such an individual is more likely to be objective about the facts presented and thus more likely to reinforce his or her negative prejudices against parties (Westen, 2007).

The Consequences of Political Trust for Participation

Third, I argue that distrust in political parties is directly linked to lower political participation. If one is convinced that parties are corrupt institutions that serve the interests of party leaders at the expense of the public, one will be less likely to turn out and vote or work for a party. In other words, if political parties are not seen as aggregators of societal interests, as our theories usually assume, and are instead considered to be in the business of rent seeking and state capture, political participation will be lower.

Distrust, however, can also spur people to mobilize for other parties.⁷ The extent to which disillusioned voters can be mobilized to vote instead of withdrawing completely from the political process is an empirical question. Theoretically, some disillusioned voters will shop around instead of simply resigning from politics. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that disillusioned voters in Eastern Europe switch from one party to another and, when they run out of mainstream parties, vote for unorthodox parties (Pop-Eleches, 2010). The regression results presented later in this article are in line with this finding. On average, distrustful voters are less likely to vote than those who trust parties, but some of them present an electoral opportunity for different parties. Controlling for relevant factors, however, these distrustful voters are very unlikely to go to work for a party.

Having laid out my theoretical framework, I now proceed to discuss the measures I use for my key dependent and independent variables.⁸

Measuring Political Competition, Participation, and Partisanship

As discussed above, we find many different operationalizations of political competition in the literature. For the regression analyses here, I use two measures of political competition: the effective number of parties (ENP) and the closeness of elections. The ENP (parties that manage to win seats in parliament) serves as a proxy for party behavior (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979).⁹ Laakso and Taagepera (1979) introduced this measure to count parties that win seats in elections and to weigh them by their relative legislative strength. The mathematical formula used to calculate ENP is,

$$N = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2}$$

where n is number of all parties competing in the electoral contest and p_i^2 is the square of each party's proportion of all the seats in the parliament. This measure systematically distinguishes important parties from smaller and less significant ones. Given that the proportion of the seats that each party wins is squared in the measure, bigger parties count more than smaller parties. This measure of political competition is particularly suitable because it directly taps into the intensity of competition and the activity of parties by measuring both the number and strength of parties in parliament. So higher ENP scores would indicate that the electoral system is more competitive and that several significant opposition parties have won seats in the parliament, thus increasing the heat and scrutiny that the ruling party or parties receive from the opposition.¹⁰ In using this measure, I implicitly assume that the presence of a larger number of strong parties in parliament gives greater opportunities to opposition parties to be vocal and critical of the government by asking questions in parliament and bringing media attention to corruption scandals and economic failures. Based on this measure, Bulgaria is the least competitive country in the sample, with a score of 2.52, whereas Slovenia is the most competitive one with an ENP score of 5.53.

However, the ENP measure has its limitations. It cannot capture intense competition in systems that, because of the electoral rules, are dominated by two parties (e.g., the Westminster system). Here two powerful parties can be very effective critics of one another. Fortunately, none of the cases included in the regression analyses has a purely majoritarian electoral system, limiting the bias that the ENP measure introduces in my analysis.

Nonetheless, as a robustness check, I constructed an additional measure of political competition, the *closeness of elections*, to test my main hypotheses. I use the *Comparative Data Set for 28 Post-Communist Countries, 1989–2004*, by Armigeon and Careja (2007), to calculate the difference in the share of votes received by the two largest parties in an election. The logic is that closer elections should be more contentious and harder fought than elections won in a landslide. The regressions using *closeness* as the main independent variable yield similar results and provide support for my main hypotheses that competition decreases political trust. Because of space limitations, the results using this additional measure are available on request.

Scholars have used numerous indicators of political participation ranging from the most conventional, such as voting, to more unconventional ones such as signing petitions, protesting, and boycotting (Rose, 2007). In this article, I

use survey questions that ask people (a) whether they have voted in the last parliamentary elections and (b) how frequently they work for political parties.¹¹ These two measures are appropriate because they measure both the most frequent form of participation (voting) and a more sustained and long-term form of participation that taps into the grassroots support of parties (working for a party). Although participating in the latter activity probably increases in the run up to elections, the time that people spend working for parties is an indicator of more sustained political activism that goes beyond voting on Election Day. Finally, for party identification I use a measure that taps into the intensity of party ID with the options being *no party ID*, *not very close*, *fairly close*, and *very close to a party*.

Controls for Trust in Parties

In the next two subsections, I discuss some alternative explanations that scholars have found to determine trust and participation. The relevant hypotheses are included as controls in the regression analyses.

Many have argued that interpersonal trust is an indicator of human capital that is positively related to trust in political institutions. As Catterberg and Moreno (2005) have found, “Individuals who generally trust in other people express higher confidence in political institutions” (p. 44). Some individuals might be more or less skeptical by nature, and their trust of other people (e.g., neighbors and coworkers) should predict trust in political institutions as well. Thus, I include two controls for interpersonal trust: *trust in neighbors* and *trust in coworkers*. Furthermore, if one believes that parties serve only the interests of their leaders, one is less likely to trust in parties. I control for this by including a variable that asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that “parties only serve their leaders’ interests.”

As I discussed earlier, some have argued that support for democratic institutions in Eastern Europe will depend on economic experience during the transition period (Kitschelt, 1992; Przeworski, 1991). To control for this, I include a variable that measures how well-off individual respondents are. Furthermore, satisfaction with democracy as a system should be related to trust in its institutions as well as political participation. I therefore include a variable that measures the extent to which the respondent is happy with the way democracy works in the country on a scale from 1 (*totally dissatisfied*) to 10 (*totally satisfied*). Trust in parties might also depend on how exposed one is to media. Given that corruption allegations and other negative information that tends to erode trust in parties come from the media, people who spend more time reading newspapers should be more distrustful of parties than

people who do not read as much. I also control for a set of socioeconomic and demographic variables such as income, gender, sex, and size of community.

As far as country-level variables are concerned, I include Freedom House (Nations in Transit) democracy scores to control for democratic consolidation and internalization of democratic values. I also include freedom of press scores and independence of media ratings to control for the role that professional and independent media play in uncovering and exposing corruption cases. Again, a freer and more independent media should be associated with lower levels of trust in parties. Furthermore, I include a measure of income inequality, the Gini coefficient, from Solt's (2008–2009) data set. The expectation here is that citizens living in societies with greater inequality should have lower levels of trust in political institutions (Anderson & Singer, 2008). To control for political culture (i.e., religious traditions), I include a dummy variable (*Catholic*) that takes the value of 1 if 50% or more of the population identify themselves as Catholic. To code this variable, I used data from the CIA's World Factbook. Finally, the existing literature has found that highly proportional electoral systems are characterized with higher levels of political trust than systems that are mixed (Marien, in press). Thus, I include a dummy variable for electoral rules based on Armingeon and Careja's (2007) data set on political institutions. This variable takes a value of 1 if a country has a pure or modified proportional representation (PR) system and a value of 0 if parliamentary seats are allocated using a mix of PR and majoritarian rules. Only Hungary and Lithuania fall in the latter category.

Controls for Political Participation

Almost two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/1945) claimed that civic engagement in voluntary organizations leads to direct political participation. Tocqueville's theory postulates that as members of civic organizations have face-to-face contact with other members, they learn to care more about the wider world and develop certain civic skills, which induce political efficacy. Putnam (1993, 2000) and others have espoused this view of civic associations as "schools of democracy" and have found Tocqueville's theory to be supported by evidence. I operationalize social capital as the total number of organizational memberships per person. Furthermore, interest in politics should be positively associated with participation. I control for this factor by including a variable that asks respondents about how often they discuss politics with others.

Furthermore, Inglehart (1997) has found that individuals who hold post-materialist values such as self-expression and gender equality as opposed to

materialist values of economic and physical security are more likely to be civic minded and politically active. I run confirmatory factor analysis on several questions that tap into postmaterialist values and use the predicted scores to construct a Post-Materialist Index.¹² Many previous studies have shown that more educated individuals who have higher incomes and live in smaller territorial units are more likely to participate. I include control variables for all these factors. In addition, age is found to be positively related to participation as older people have more time on their hands to participate. Others have found gender to be important in predicting both political and nonpolitical participation, with men being more likely to participate than women (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Having introduced the theoretical argument and empirical expectations, along with several alternative hypotheses identified by the existing literature, I now turn to statistical analysis to better demonstrate the link between political competition and political participation in Eastern Europe.

Before I discuss the results, I need to say a few words about the statistical methods I employ in my analysis. I use hierarchical logistic models with random effects that utilize both individual-level data (e.g., sex or age) and aggregate data (e.g., country measures for political competition).¹³ Single-level models such as multivariate linear and logistic regression are valuable for establishing causal relationships and are widely used in our field. However, many populations of interest in political science have a multilevel structure. For example, when analyzing survey data such as ours, we might be interested in both individual factors and country-level factors that explain a certain outcome (Gelman & Hill, 2007). If we choose a single-level analysis, we are not utilizing all the information we have in estimating our models. It is important to note that my data set has a total of 10 groups, in our case countries, for which I estimate second-level effects. Although this might seem like a low number of groups, Gelman and Hill (2007), for instance, have argued that “even with only one or two groups in the data . . . multilevel models can be useful for making predictions” (p. 276).

I use survey data for my regression analysis. *Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe 1990–2001* comprises an excellent set of surveys that provides a wealth of information about Eastern European attitudes toward democracy and participation. Because of better data availability, I use surveys from the second wave (1997–2001) of this study.¹⁴ These surveys are suitable for conducting comparative analyses because the questions asked are theoretically motivated and nuanced enough to allow for more sophisticated tests.

How Does Political Competition Affect Trust in Parties?

The main theoretical claim of this article is that competition depresses trust in parties. But this effect is conditional on the intensity of party identification. Therefore, I now turn to regression analysis and test whether there is an interaction effect between competition and party identification in determining trust in political parties.¹⁵ To test for this interaction effect, I construct four dummy variables using information from the *party ID* variable. Each variable corresponds to the intensity of partisanship that ranges from no party identification to very close identification, with the base being no party identification. I then interact each of these dummy variables with the measure for competition. Table 1 presents the regression results.

The results strongly support the hypothesis that the effect of competition on trust in political parties depends on the intensity of party identification. As hypothesized, this effect is observed only for those who identify very closely with a political party. As we can see from the coefficients of *comp* × *not very close* and *comp* × *fairly close*, the effect that competition has on trust for parties for people with weak or fairly weak party identification is statistically indistinguishable from the same effect for those in the base category with no party identification. In other words, given the highly significant coefficient of the *competition* variable, political competition tends to depress trust in parties equally for all individuals who either identify weakly with parties or do not identify with them at all.

However, competition does not affect the extent to which those who identify very closely with a party trust parties. The slope representing the effect of competition on trust for strong partisans is statistically indistinguishable from zero. This interaction effect becomes even clearer if one looks at the graphs in Figure 1.

These graphs plot the predicted marginal probabilities of trust in parties for the whole range of the ENP index for people with different levels of party identification. Figure 1 is striking in that, in the lowest right graph, the solid line that corresponds to those who identify very closely to parties is flat, suggesting that political competition has no effect on the probability of trust in political parties for intense partisans. As predicted, logistic curves for all other categories are downward sloping, indicating that as competition increases, the probability of trusting parties goes down. In substantive terms, controlling for the effect of all other variables in the regression, a one-unit increase in the ENP index is associated with an approximately 10.5% decrease in the probability of trusting parties for all but the very intense partisans. In sum, there is

Table 1. Estimation Results: Trust in Parties.

Variable	Coeff.	SE
Competition	-0.420***	(0.1)
Comp × not very close	-0.100	(0.2)
Comp × fairly close	0.098	(0.1)
Comp × very close	0.400**	(0.2)
Electoral system	-0.030	(0.2)
Gini coefficient	0.063**	(0.03)
Catholic	-0.260	(0.4)
Independence of media	0.250	(0.4)
Freedom of press	-0.076**	(0.04)
NIT democracy	0.420	(0.4)
Self-interested	-0.740***	(0.09)
Not very close	0.460	(0.8)
Fairly close	0.220	(0.4)
Very close	-0.380	(0.7)
Newspaper	0.099**	(0.04)
Dem. satisfaction	0.210***	(0.02)
Size of community	-0.042	(0.03)
Trust in neighbors	0.480***	(0.06)
Trust in coworkers	0.590***	(0.07)
Income	0.074***	(0.03)
Age	0.008***	(0.003)
Sex	-0.150*	(0.08)
Constant	-0.900	(1.6)
Observations	6,128	

NIT = Nations in Transit. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

strong evidence suggesting that intense partisans are immune to the negative effects of competition on trust in parties. For those who do not identify very closely with a party, however, competition tends to depress trust in this political institution. In all four graphs, the dotted flat line represents the average percentage of people who claim to trust parties, and the dashed lines around the curves represent 95% confidence intervals.

It is important to note that the weak partisans are by far the biggest group. In fact, more than 60% of the respondents in the second wave of surveys suggested that they had no party affiliation. Strong partisans, for whom intense competition does not depress trust in parties, make up only 5.65% of

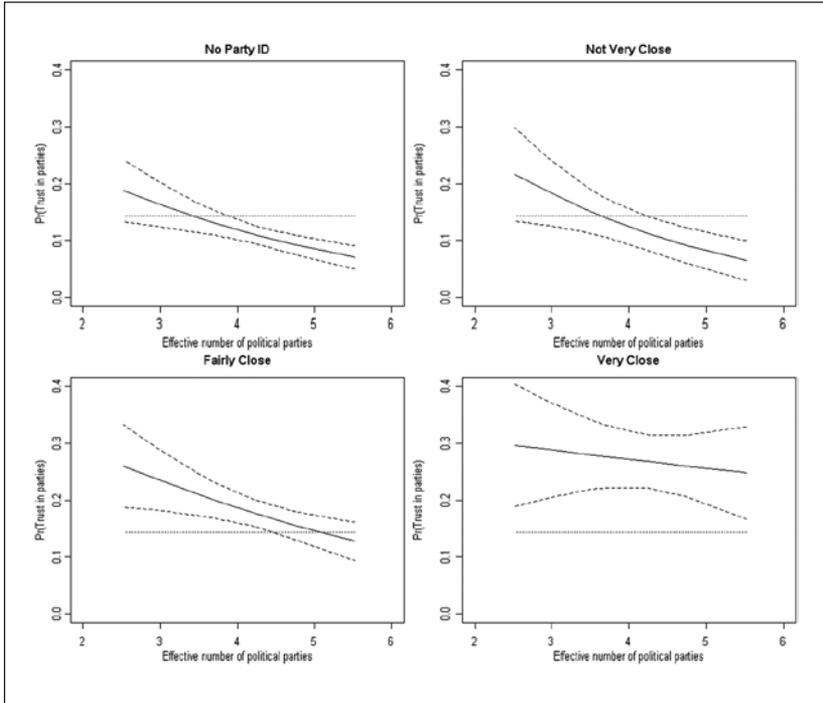


Figure 1. Marginal effects of competition on trust by party ID.

the respondents. Furthermore, around 25% indicated that they are not very close to any party, and 9% said that they were fairly close to a party.

The regression output suggests some other interesting findings. Contrary to what I hypothesized, more exposure to media, measured by how often one reads about politics in newspapers (*newspaper*), is associated with more trust in political parties. There might be some selection bias in this variable as disillusioned citizens might be less likely to read about politics than, say, political partisans. However, the *freedom of press* variable is negatively related to trust, confirming that more independent media with greater capacity to expose scandals do depress political trust. As hypothesized, higher satisfaction with democracy is positively related with higher trust in parties, as indicated by the coefficient of *dem. satisfaction*. This result suggests that the more one is satisfied with the general functioning of democracy, the more likely one is to trust its core institutions.

Furthermore, the highly significant coefficients on the two variables measuring interpersonal trust suggest that people who are more trusting of coworkers and neighbors are also more trusting of parties. Therefore, the evidence indicates that there might be some individual characteristics that make some people generally less trusting than others. As far as demographic variables are concerned, I am surprised to find that age is positively and statistically significantly related to trust in parties: One might have assumed that the more time an individual spent living during communism, the less he or she would trust parties. One creative interpretation of this result might be that, given that older voters are more likely to show up and vote on Election Day, they are also more likely to form attachments to parties, which tends to increase trust in parties. It is not surprising that the belief that parties serve only the interests of their leaders, measured by the *self-interested* variable, lowers the probability of trust in parties, and this variable is highly significant and has the largest substantive effect on the dependent variable.

Regarding country-level variables, besides *competition* and *freedom of press*, income inequality is also related to trust in parties, but contrary to what one would expect, countries with more unequal distribution of income have higher levels of trust in parties. However, this result becomes less puzzling if one considers Hellman's (1998) finding that "post-communist systems with a higher level of political participation and competition have been able to adopt and maintain more comprehensive economic reforms" (p. 234) and have experienced the slowest growth in income inequality. In contrast, in partial and slow-reforming countries, a small number of people—unhampered by strong political competition—have amassed fabulous fortunes at the expense of the society; these countries have also experienced the highest increase in inequality. These are the same countries whose citizens, as my analysis has shown, have exhibited greater levels of political trust than the citizens of countries with more competition. Thus, the positive relationship between income inequality and trust is consistent with the existing literature that emphasizes the exceptional nature of postcommunist transition and politics.

How Does Trust in Parties Affect Direct Political Participation?

So far, my empirical analysis has shown that increased competition tends to depress trust in parties only for those who are not intense partisans. I now proceed to show the final causal relationship between trust in parties and direct political participation to complete the testing of the entire theoretical framework. Table 2 reveals some interesting results.

Table 2. Estimation Results: Voting and Working for Party.

Variable	Voted in last parliamentary elections		Work for party	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Trust parties	0.110**	(0.050)	0.523***	(0.058)
Membership	0.010	(0.039)	0.324***	(0.041)
Postmaterialism	0.123***	(0.045)	-0.178***	(0.060)
Party ID	0.534***	(0.039)	0.384***	(0.042)
Discuss	0.347***	(0.038)	0.748***	(0.055)
Dem. satisfaction	0.076***	(0.018)	-0.015	(0.021)
Size of community	-0.188***	(0.022)	-0.082***	(0.028)
Education	0.379***	(0.058)	0.195***	(0.074)
Income	0.070***	(0.022)	0.070**	(0.028)
Age	0.029***	(0.002)	-0.001	(0.003)
Sex	-0.030	(0.066)	0.133	(0.085)
Constant	0.352	(0.398)	0.332	(0.381)
Observations	6,814		6,941	

Standard errors in parentheses.

** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

The most significant pattern that can be inferred from this table is that trust in parties is positively related to both forms of direct political participation. Although the effect that trust in parties has on voting is substantially lower than the effect it has on working for a party, both coefficients are significant at the .05 level. We are pretty confident that the more a person trusts parties, the more likely he or she is to vote or work for parties. For example, trusting parties somewhat as opposed to a little corresponds to a 13% increase in the probability of working for a party and to an approximately 3% increase in the probability of voting. The fact that lower levels of trust in parties have a substantially smaller effect on voting is most likely a result of the fact that some disillusioned voters can still be persuaded to vote. Further research is needed to establish this link more convincingly.

It is not surprising that interest in politics is positively related to participation. People who talk more about politics are more likely both to vote and to work for a party. Membership in civil society organizations is positively related to both voting and working for parties, but its coefficient is significant only for *work for parties*. Putnam's claim that civil society organizations act as "schools of democracy" is at least partially supported by the regression results. Of interest, postmaterialists are more likely to vote but less likely to

work for parties. The coefficient of the *postmaterialism* variable is significant in both regressions. One interpretation of this contradictory finding is that, given that postmaterialism is associated with challenging authority, people who hold postmaterialist values are less likely to work for parties because they tend to be hierarchically structured.

As we expected, party identification is positively related to voting and working for a party. *Democratic satisfaction* is positively related to voting only. From the socioeconomic variables only income is consistently and positively related to participation. Wealthier people are both more likely to show up at voting booths and get involved in more sustained political activity by working for parties. Older people are more likely to vote, but age does not seem to affect one's likelihood of working for parties. Also, people living in smaller communities are more likely to vote and work for parties than those living in bigger communities. One interpretation of this finding is that trust networks and civil society organization are denser and more personalized in smaller communities, leading to higher rates of participation (Putnam, 1993).

Trends Over Time

The surveys I have analyzed so far were conducted a decade ago. What has happened in Eastern Europe since then? I do not have space to marshal definitive evidence, but important indicators point to an increase in trust in political parties. For example, evidence from the European Social Surveys (ESS) suggests that, by 2008, levels of trust in countries such as Slovenia, Slovakia, and Estonia had become as high as or higher than levels in Western Europe. Hungary is the exception to this trend (see Figure 2).

Of interest, survey data (Norwegian Social Science Data Services, 2004, 2008) on party identification from a select number of Eastern European countries also seems to suggest that Hungary is the only country where there was a drop between 2000 and 2008 in the percentage of respondents who claim to feel very close or fairly close to a political party.¹⁶ There is little doubt that these trends can be explained by a 2006 political scandal that rocked Hungary: Prime Minister Gyurcsány had admitted in a speech that he and his party had been lying to the public for years to remain in power.

To return to the broader picture, it seems that, as my theory would predict, an increase in party identification has been accompanied by an increase in trust in parties in Eastern Europe. Among the EU's postcommunist members included in my analysis, political competition has certainly not gone down either. This preliminary evidence suggests that the negative effect of competition on trust in parties may be fading away. There are several possible

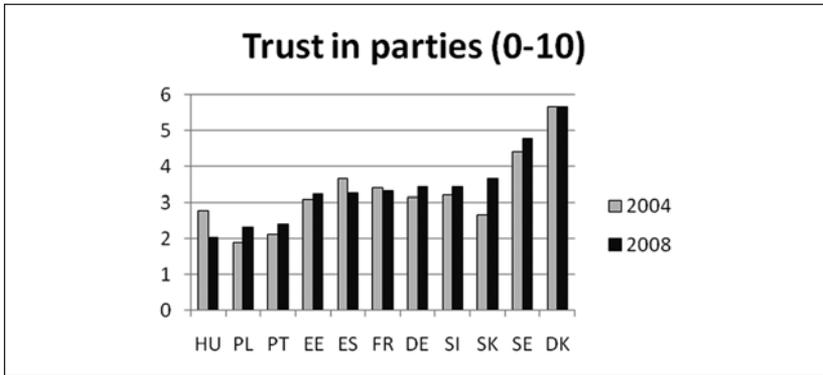


Figure 2. Trust in parties over time.

Source: European Social Surveys, Round 2 and Round 4.

explanations. First, 20 years have passed, and as new generations of Eastern Europeans are socialized into democratic norms and rules, the communist legacy of distrust in parties might be losing its salience. Second, the economic transition has worked itself out and the privatization process is drawing to a close, providing fewer opportunities for spectacular self-enrichment on the part of party leaders and limiting the number of scandals. More research is needed to explore the link between political competition and democratic support in a more dynamic fashion.

Concluding Remarks

In this article I have shown that in postcommunist Europe, at least for the first 10 years, the effects of political competition have been to depress direct political participation by the citizens. What are the implications of this argument? First and foremost, it offers a more complete understanding of the factors driving disillusionment with political life in postcommunist Europe. It also offers a systematic way of thinking through puzzling findings that show low levels of support for democracy and its institutions in the very countries that have been the democratic and institutional front-runners of the transition. Where does this leave us? Do we need to rethink our theories of political competition? I would say not. There is little doubt that competition has been tremendously beneficial for postcommunist societies: It has constrained rent-seeking by government officials, it has prompted better governance, and it has improved economic performance. My hope is that this article helps explain the political apathy of

certain Eastern European citizens that so many comparative politics scholars and other informed observers have noted and found puzzling. Finally, and the evidence for this is inconclusive, it may well be that Eastern Europeans are becoming more accustomed to the adversarial nature of democratic politics and more comfortable with political parties as an institution.

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Notes

1. These data are reported in the Open Society Institute (OSI, 2002) report and are taken from the International Crime Victim Survey, which is an international comparative crime survey dealing with 11 types of crimes.
2. Personal communication, Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 8, 2011.
3. Personal communication, Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 7, 2011.
4. See the OSI (2002) report for a discussion of a number of corruption scandals.
5. Higher Corruption Perception Index scores indicate less corruption.
6. This is an excerpt from Konrád's (1984/1996) essay titled "Antipolitics" that he wrote in and that has been reprinted in Stokes, *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe Since 1945*.
7. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
8. A detailed description of all variables used in this article is available on request.
9. The actual calculations were done by Michael Gallagher (n.d.) and are available on his website at http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/Staff/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf.
10. Since turnout in the last parliamentary elections is one of the main variables I am trying to explain, I used the effective number of parties (ENP) measure for

- the elections that the respondents were asked about. The countries and election years for which the ENP measure was constructed included Bulgaria 1997, Czech Republic 1998, Estonia 1999, Hungary 1995, Latvia 1995, Lithuania 2000, Poland 1997, Romania 1996, Slovakia 1998, Slovenia 1996.
11. The questions are from *Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe 1990–2001*, cumulative data from a 15-country study from 1997 to 2001 and the 1990–1992 Post-Communist Publics Study in 11 countries coordinated by Edeltraud Roller, Dieter Fuchs, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, and Bernhard Wessels (2002; Social Science Research Center Berlin) and János Simon (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest).
 12. Only one factor emerges with an eigenvalue greater than 1 (1.03647 in our case), indicating that the predicted factor taps into one dimension only—postmaterialism.
 13. Here I follow Gelman and Hill's (2007) recommendation to use random effects for multilevel modeling.
 14. Here are the countries and the dates of the surveys: Bulgaria, 1999; Czech Republic, February 2001; Estonia, November to December 2001; Hungary, May 1999; Latvia, September 1998; Lithuania, September 2001; Poland, March 2000; Romania, March to May 1998; Slovakia, February 2001; Slovenia, May to September 1999. With the exception of the ENP measure, each of the country-level indicators corresponds to the year in which the survey was conducted in a particular country. The countries and election years for which the ENP measure was constructed included Bulgaria 1997, Czech Republic 1998, Estonia 1999, Hungary 1995, Latvia 1995, Lithuania 2000, Poland 1997, Romania 1996, Slovakia 1998, and Slovenia 1996.
 15. The dependent variable in this regression is a dichotomous measure of trust in parties, which was coded as 1 if people indicated that they trust parties either totally or to a certain point and 0 if people said that they had little or no trust at all in parties.
 16. More specifically, there was a 10% drop in the number of respondents who indicated that they feel very close or fairly close to a party.

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