

Regional Disparities in Romania:
Political Participation in a Transitional Society

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Abstract

We attempt to explain variation at the regional and individual level in patterns of political participation with modernization theory and the standard socioeconomic model of participation. We use for our analysis survey data collected in Romania almost one decade after its transition from a totalitarian communist regime to a more democratic government. Education played the role predicted by modernization theory (and by the congruent standard socioeconomic model of political participation) in its independent association with the likelihood of participating in the institutionalized forms of political activity. Its inverse association with protest activity suggests that the more educated segments of the population had begun to identify with the new democratic regime. Regional differences in participation were not explained by controlling for the socioeconomic indicators or attitudes toward privatization or political changes. Overall, the patterns of regional difference partially support the predictions of modernization theory: the most westernized area, Bucharest, had low levels of political participation, although the rest of the most westernized regions were relatively high in participation. Ethnic mobilization may have explained the high levels of participation in regular political activities and political protest in Mier Ciuc, while the high levels of discontent and low levels of participation in Iasi suggest that the more traditional, rural segments of the population are being left behind in the economic and political development of a modern Romania.

Regional disparities in both circumstances and orientations lie at the heart of many conflicts associated with economic development and political transition. Where variation in such factors as economic resources, political ties, ethnic heritage and religious preference follows regional geographic divisions, the potential for political discord and even separatist movements is heightened. Investigation of the consequences of cross-sectional regional disparities can improve understanding of the processes of economic development and political transition and help to identify the sources of political conflict.

We focus on political attitudes and behavior in Romania, one of the East European countries that experienced a transition from a totalitarian communist regime to a representative democratic government within the past decade. Our analysis seeks to explain individual- and regional-level variation in different types of political participation. Specifically, we seek to explain participation in voting, in other forms of political participation, and in protest activity. We draw on modernization theory to guide our analysis.

Modernization and Political Participation

Modernization theory rests on the expectation that economic development has systematic and predictable consequences. In the transition from preindustrial to industrial societies, these consequences are expected to include increasing occupational specialization, higher levels of education and income, and, as a consequence of these changes, a shift from traditional to more secular-rational values (Crenshaw, Christenson, & Oakey, 2000; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). For example, Inglehart and Baker's (2000)

analysis of the World Values Survey identified an empirical clustering of attitudes about authority, national pride, abortion, and religion that distinguished those holding traditional and secular-rational values. These attitudes varied between nations in the predicted direction with modernization indicators.

In spite of the influence of modernization, attitudinal differences rooted in different national cultures persist (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The same phenomenon of “path dependence” can be observed between regions (Putnam, 1993), although intra-national regional attitudinal differences identified in the World Values Survey were much smaller than the corresponding international differences (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Totalitarian governments can also suppress the open political expression of regional differences in orientations, but sharp discord along regional lines emerged rapidly in several eastern European countries after the breakdown of their Communist governments.

The influence of modernization also appears to be reflected in attitudinal differences between birth cohorts. Age is associated with secular-rational values in both developed and ex-Communist countries. Comparisons between regions and nations must therefore take into account the age distributions of their populations, and analyses at the individual level must seek to distinguish the effect of age from the correlated effect of education.

Predicting Political Participation

The predictions of modernization theory are consistent with the findings of research on political participation at the individual level. The correlation of education and income with political participation is one of the most consistent findings in research on politics in the United States (Verba and Nie, 1972). Whether within an organization

or across a community, individuals of higher social status have more time for involvement in political affairs, more useful skills for political participation, and are more schooled in the value of civic participation (Verba et al., 1978).

The effect of social status can be modified by both individual and institutional factors. Ideologies can increase rates of participation among even low status groups. Thus, African-Americans with a high level of group consciousness participate more in politics than would be expected on the basis of their social status alone (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978). In addition, small and relatively self-contained communities tend to have higher rates of participation than expected on the basis of social status (Verba and Nie, 1972), as do societies in which group-based mobilization is based on well-structured political cleavages (Verba et al., 1978).

All forms of political participation are not necessarily products of the same influences. In particular, voting may not be as influenced by individual level factors as other forms of participation because it occurs only rarely, has relatively little cost to the participant, and is stimulated and facilitated by an extensive institutional apparatus (Kluegel and Mason, 1999). Non-institutionalized protest actions may have different predictors than more traditional forms of political participation. Signing petitions, participating in political rallies, and attending meetings are aspects of both institutionalized politics and protest movements, while such protest activities as demonstrating and marching are more distinct. Understandably, then, there are some similarities between theories of political participation and of involvement in protest activities. For example, Klandermans (1984) uses value expectancy theory to derive the

expectation that individual activism will increase with expectations about the likelihood of success.

More generally, participation in protest activities can be explained as a product of grievances that motivate it, resources that facilitate it, and constraints that inhibit it (Schutt, 1986). Since protest activity is not institutionalized, some level of grievances must exist for action to occur. The resources may be both socioeconomic and social psychological factors like those that motivate other forms of political participation. Constraints can include the strength of government social control efforts, community sentiment, and such social psychological orientations as feelings of powerlessness or anomie.

Kluegel and Mason (1999) found that predictors of political protest and voting differed markedly during the early transition period in Eastern Europe. Younger age, political anger, and a pro-market ideology were primary determinants of protest support but were not related to voting. Since in this period protest was directed in most cases against the communist regimes at the beginning of transition, the protestors seemed to be those who stood to benefit the most from regime change. Education was positively associated with both forms of participation.

Democratic transition in Romania

Nicolai Ceaucescu governed Romania using a totalitarian “sultanistic” style-- family members were installed in leadership positions and policies were personalized and erratic (Linz and Stepan, 1996:344-365). Although party-controlled forms of participation were common, independent trade unions were banned and their leaders arrested or killed; even typewriters had to be registered and conversations with foreigners

reported. A survey in Eastern Europe in June 1989 found only two independent political movements in Romania (just several months before Ceaucescu's overthrow), compared to 21 in Hungary and 60 in Poland. Without organizations to nourish political skills among potential rivals or formal opportunities for the expression of popular opinion, there was no organized national opposition until almost the moment of the regime's demise.

The Romanian population could not be entirely sheltered from news of the demise of other totalitarian governments in Eastern Europe. News of these changes filtered through the populace, in spite of a press blackout, particularly in areas like Timisoara that were in range of radio broadcasts from other countries (Hall, 1999). Outrage grew when a popular priest in Timisoara was to be arrested. Demonstrations in Timisoara were followed by factory-based protests and unexpected public demonstrations. These popular protests finally resulted in to the collapse of Ceaucescu's government in December 1989, although it was individuals in the government itself who quickly tried and executed Ceaucescu and his wife. (Linz and Stepan, 1996:344-365). By that time, the population had had some direct or indirect experience with street protests, but they lacked experience with more regularized forms of political participation.

Initial enthusiasm for Ceaucescu's overthrow was followed by a much slower process of political change (Vulliamy, 1998). Former members of Ceaucescu's government were reelected in 1990 and 1992, with only weak opposition. It was not until 1996 that democratic, contested elections became a reality and a president was elected without ties to the former communist regime.

Economic transition was only a partial success. Inflation has exceeded 100 percent, the economy is shrinking, and the infant-mortality rate remains one of the highest in Europe. Miners and industrial workers whose employment was formerly maintained by the government--in spite of low productivity--now find themselves without alternative sources of income. Large-scale unemployment and migration in search of jobs have become common. Although new social policies have improved conditions in squalid orphanages, thousands now live as street children. Privatization has improved conditions for peasant farmers, but rural poverty remains common. Romania had the third lowest industrial output of all 26 East European nations in 1993 and output had declined rapidly from 1989-1992 (although it stabilized in 1993-1995). Two-thirds of Romanian respondents to an international survey in 1993 said that their overall household economic situation was worse than 5 years ago—the second highest percentage among East European nations.

In spite of the mixed results of political and economic transition, Romania has thus far avoided the violent intergroup hostility and strident nationalism that have captured ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia. Demographics are partly responsible. Only the Hungarian minority, largely concentrated in the Transylvania region, represents a major fraction of the population. Although prejudice against Hungarians is not uncommon, intergroup conflict has been subdued. Gypsies are a common target of popular derision, but are too small a fraction of the population to provide an important source of domestic opposition.

Low levels of both urbanization and college education in Romania compared to other East European countries suggest that support for democratic political change is

likely to be low. In fact, in the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 1998), Romanians scored lowest among East European populations on belief in secular-rational authority while, like other East Europeans, they scored high on survival concerns (Albania was not included in the research). Romania is one of the most rural East European nations, with about half of the population in 1992 living in communities of less than 5,000, and rural or urban residence can also influence political attitudes and forms of participation. Although Sum (1999) found no association of rural or urban residence with support for governing institutions in Romania, rural residents were less likely to have engaged in forms of political participation that depended on a mobilizing agent (such as contacting media sources, signing petitions, and joining legal protests); instead, they were more likely to have contacted public officials and worked in campaigns.

Predictions from these theories and prior research must take into account several unique characteristics of Romania. Romania is a relatively homogeneous society that has not to date experienced open regional conflict, but it does have a large predominantly Hungarian region with close ties to Hungary. There are marked differences in orientations between more western regions and the more rural eastern regions that are closer to Russia. At the time of the survey, Romania's economy was doing poorly and many citizens seemed disenchanted with the political process. In a period when political roles are poorly defined and norms and values are in flux, the value of political involvement is likely to be unclear to many and rates of participation may vary markedly. Concomitant rapid economic changes (Centeno, 1994) alter the distribution of many of the factors that influence political participation and thus call into the question the applicability of standard models.

Summary

We will examine regional differences in forms of participation and in other characteristics and we will then attempt to explain these differences at the individual level with the socioeconomic variables suggested by modernization theory. We hypothesize that across regions and among individuals, political participation will vary directly with social status. We hypothesize that support for non-institutionalized forms of protest will decrease with age, increase with education, and vary inversely with evaluation of the transition, irrespective of social status. We also hypothesize that political participation will be higher in the one minority ethnic (Hungarian) region.

Methodology

We surveyed in the summer, 1999, a representative sample of Romanians in cities throughout the western regions as well as in two comparison cities in other regions. Our survey questions draw on earlier studies of the transition in Romania and other countries, but also include measures from research on political participation.

Sampling

We designed a multi-stage disproportionate stratified random sampling strategy. We selected 566 residents from voter lists in all cities with at least 100,000 residents in the four western regions in Romania, with a special allocation from the capital city of Bucharest (population of about 2 million). We also drew a large random sample (N=100) from the largest city in the predominantly Hungarian region of Transylvania, Mier Ciuc, and another (N=100) from the more traditional agricultural eastern region of Iasi. Staff affiliated with the Center for Social Science Research in Timisoara, Romania conducted

in-person interviews over the summer, 1999. Multiple call-backs were made as needed to reach the selected household member.

Measurement

We selected our measures from five conceptual clusters: social background, current social status, sociopolitical beliefs, sociopolitical involvement, and health and well-being. In each cluster, some of our measures replicate those used in previous surveys in Eastern Europe: Inglehart et al.'s (1998) World Values Survey and Firebaugh and Sandu's (1998) Romanian survey of support for marketization and democratization. Other measures have been used in earlier studies of political participation and sociopolitical beliefs, including the General Social Survey (Davis, 1996), surveys by Verba and Nie (1972; 1978), and others.

Our measure of voting identifies individuals who reported voting in either the most recent Presidential or Parliamentary elections. Other forms of political participation included in a separate index are writing or phoning a media outlet, signing a petition, distributing materials in an election, and contacting a public official. Protest involvement is distinguished by response to the one question, "Have you ever participated, after 1989, in a legal protest, march, or demonstration?"

Table 1 identifies each of the variables measured in each of the concept clusters, as well as its source. Reliability coefficients or other indicators of measurement quality are presented for these measures.

Data Analysis

We identify regional variation with crosstabulation analysis and comparisons of means. We then use multi-stage regression analysis to test our primary hypotheses and to

evaluate our model of influences on political participation. Region is coded as a set of dummy variables for this analysis.

Findings

Each form of political participation varied by region (Table 1). Voting was least common in Bucharest, where only half the population had voted, and most common in other Western towns and in the predominantly Hungarian city of Mier Ciuc, where more than 90% of the sample reported voting. Informal forms of participation were least common in Bucharest, but did not vary across the other regions. Just over half the sample reported having participated in protest activity in Mier Ciuc, compared to just over one-third in the other regions.

Numerous social features distinguished the four regions (Table 3). Bucharest respondents were the least likely to be married and had the fewest children; residents of Mier Ciuc were most fecund, with an average of 2.5 children. Attendance at religious services was also most common in Mier Ciuc. Income levels were highest in Bucharest and the other areas in the west, while residents of Iasi reported much less satisfaction with their family incomes relative to other families.

Residents of Iasi reported the lowest level of support for privatization and were least likely to agree that economic competition is good or that democracy was developing in a satisfactory way in Romania. In general, then, residents of Iasi had the highest level of grievances and the lowest levels of political participation.

Bucharest was identified in the regression analysis as the “region” with the lowest levels of voting and informal types of political involvement, although it did not differ from the other regions in the likelihood of having been involved in protests. The

likelihood of voting and participating in other routine forms of political activity increased with education, but likelihood of participating in protest activity declined with education. Women were also less likely to report having participated in protest activity. Neither support for privatization nor level of satisfaction with the way democracy was developing were associated with political participation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Regions in Romania differed in patterns of political participation and in a variety of social and economic indicators. In many respects, the town of Iasi, which was in a rural region close to the former Soviet border was most distinctive. Iasi residents were the less likely to have voted or participated in protest activity than those in other regions, although they used informal means of political participation as regularly as those in any other region. The largely Hungarian city of Mier Ciuc, by contrast, had the highest overall levels of political participation. Almost all residents had voted, their participation in informal political activity was relatively high, and they were much more likely to have participated in protest activity than those in the other regions. Bucharest residents, in what was by far the largest, most cosmopolitan city, were less likely to have voted than residents of the other regions and were relatively in terms of the other forms of participation.

Differences in other characteristics between regions support the distinctions made between them in terms of westernization and involvement in the transitional processes. Bucharest residents were less likely to be married or to have children, and both western regions had relatively low levels of church attendance. Incomes were higher in the western regions and ideological support for privatization, competition and democracy

were relatively high. Iasi was distinctive in its lower incomes, particularly in the perception of less adequate incomes, and in disagreement with privatization, competition, and the progress of democracy in Romania.

Education played the role predicted by modernization theory (and by the congruent standard socioeconomic model of political participation) in its independent association with the likelihood of participating in the institutionalized forms of political activity. Its inverse association with protest activity suggests that the more educated segments of the population had begun to identify with the new democratic regime. Neither objective nor subjective income measures had an independent association with political participation.

The regional differences in participation were not explained by controlling for the socioeconomic indicators or attitudes toward privatization or political changes. Overall, the patterns of regional difference partially support the predictions of modernization theory: the most westernized area, Bucharest, had low levels of political participation, although the rest of the most westernized regions were relatively high in participation. Ethnic mobilization may have explained the high levels of participation in regular political activities and political protest in Mier Ciuc, while the high levels of discontent and low levels of participation in Iasi suggest that the more traditional, rural segments of the population are being left behind in the economic and political development of a modern Romania.

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Table 1

Table of Measures

Concept/Variable	Source	Statistics
Social Background		
Age	categorical	45% < 40 yrs. old
Ethnicity		15% Hungarian
Gender		52% female
Education		44% college grads
Marital status	World Values	62% married
Religion	World Values	79% Orthodox
Social Status		
Income		43% < 101,000 lei/mo
Compare other families		59% below average
Sociopolitical beliefs		
Support for marketization	World Values	$\alpha=.58$
Satisfaction with democratization	1 question	14% fairly or very satisfied
Authoritarianism	Adorno (select)	$\alpha=.63$
Confidence in institutions	GSS	$\alpha=.58$
Perceived political problems		$\alpha=.75$
Powerlessness	2 items	$r=.56$
Locus of Control		$\alpha=.62$

Sociopolitical involvement		
Political participation	World Values	$\alpha=.52$
Organizational involvement	World Values	$\alpha=.74$

Table 2

Political Participation by Region

	Region					
	Bucharest	Other West	Iasi	Mier Ciuc	Total	p
Voting	52%	92%	74%	91%	76%	<.001
Informal	.70	1.13	1.19	1.19	1.01	<.001
Protest	38%	38%	35%	55%	40%	<.01
N	246	320	100	100	766	

Table 3

Regional Characteristics

	Region				Total	p
	Bucharest	Other West	Iasi	Mier Ciuc		
% Female	46%	55%	56%	48%	52%	NS
Age	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.7	3.6	NS
% Married	48%	68%	59%	66%	62%	<.001
% College	41%	50%	35%	39%	44%	NS
N Children	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.5	2.1	<.001
Religious Services	3.8	3.9	3.7	3.4	3.8	<.001
% Higher Income	59%	62%	40%	48%	57%	<.001
Fmly Income Better Others	43%	44%	19%	44%	41%	<.001
Support Privatization	5.6	6.2	5.3	6.1	5.9	<.01
Political Problems	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	<.05
Social Problems	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.6	NS
Disagree with Competition	1.7	1.6	2.0	1.7	1.7	<.001
Dissat with Democracy	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.1	3.2	<.001

Table 4

Regression Analysis of Political Participation
(Beta Coefficients)

	Voting	Informal	Protest
Region			
Iasi	-.08*	.06	-.02
Mier Ciuc	-.01	.01	-.13**
Bucharest	-.44***	-.17***	-.00
Female	-.02	.07	-.12**
Age	.03	-.02	-.06
Education	.10**	.18***	-.25***
Income	-.01	-.02	.06
Family Income v.	.01	.04	.04
Support Privatization	.01	.02	-.07
Dissat Democracy	-.06	.02	.05
R2	.19	.23	.18
Adj. R2	.20	.30	.31
N	663	663	575

*p<.05

**p<.01

***p<.001