The Development of Stable Party Support: Electoral Dynamics in Post-Communist Europe

Margit Tavits  University of Oxford

What conditions help stable patterns of party support to emerge? Using pooled time-series cross-section data on election results from 15 East European democracies, the empirical analysis finds that (1) right after a regime change electoral volatility increases while the trend is reversed after democracy has endured for about a decade; (2) ethnic cleavages have no effect on stability while social cleavages affect electoral stability only during economic downturns; (3) both institutions and economic performance influence the stability of party support; however, the effect of the latter diminishes over time when democracies mature.

Few institutional developments are more critical to democratic stabilization than the development of stable party systems. In a democracy, political parties are prime mechanisms for integrating diverse interests and social forces in the governing institutions, regulating social conflict, formulating policy alternatives, and holding officials accountable to the public. The functions that parties provide are crucial for legitimizing the regime (Diamond and Linz 1989; Elster, Ofte, and Preuss 1998; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Prüdhim 1990; Toka 1996). Where representative parties fail to provide a stable linkage between state and society, democracies will be vulnerable to instability and takeover regardless of how well other institutions of the state are functioning (Innes 2002). Even if unstable electorates do not threaten the survival of the regime, they may affect the quality of democracy (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Mainwaring 1998), because when the existing party system is not strong and stable, the potential for voters to be attracted to populist parties and demagogic leaders is considerably higher. Further, as electoral volatility is a strong predictor of cabinet instability (Powell 1982), it affects not only the quality of representation but also the quality, stability, and predictability of policies. Constant fluctuations in party support do not allow parties to make long-term policy commitments, which are necessary for the stable development of a polity. Indeed, Haggard and Kaufman (1995) argue that strong party systems are crucial for the success of economic reforms in new democracies.

The evolution of party systems in young democracies of Eastern Europe has been one of the most important political questions of the transition after 1989. Although these democracies have endured for a decade, the instability of party systems has remained a source of puzzlement and concern. A number of scholars have noted the high levels of electoral volatility in this region in comparison to the average rates in Western Europe (Birch 2001, 2003; Lewis 2000; Olson 1998). Will the East European electorates remain unpredictable and party systems "open" (Mair 1997), or are there certain conditions that work toward stabilizing the new democracies?

We know from the literature on advanced democracies that electoral institutions, economic performance, and cleavage structures all help to explain why some countries have more stable party support than others. However, we do not know how each of these factors contributes to the process of stabilization across time. There is much talk about democratic development and maturation, but what is the independent effect of democratic maturation on stabilizing party support? Can we draw a timeline for democratic transition? Looking at these puzzles in new democracies provides an unparalleled opportunity to uncover how electoral democracy develops in a real-world laboratory setting. It shows us the origins of elite-mass political participation.
linkages in ways that we could never uncover in long-standing democracies, and it lets us do so with real data, with observable cases, instead of just trying to make inferences from what we see now in older democracies.

The current study addresses the puzzle of electoral volatility using a pooled time-series cross-section dataset of all national legislative elections in 15 East European countries. I find that, first, right after the regime change electoral volatility increases while the trend is reversed after democracy has endured for about a decade; second, ethnic cleavages have no effect on stability while social cleavages affect electoral stability only during economic downturns; third, both institutions and economic performance influence the stability of party support; however, the effect of the latter diminishes over time when democracies mature. In sum, the analysis uncovers the relevance of the existing explanations of electoral volatility in the context of democracies in transition and provides a clear timeframe for stabilization. As such, it provides a better understanding of the evolution of party systems in general and in emerging democracies in particular.

Explaining Electoral Volatility: Previous Studies, Theories, and Hypotheses

Electoral volatility is understood as the change in vote shares for individual parties across consecutive elections. Despite the centrality of this phenomenon to the democratic development, little attention has been focused on the causes of electoral instability in Eastern Europe. Previous studies have used electoral volatility mostly as an indicator of party system fluidity supporting the tabula rasa theory of transition to democracy, characterized by overall chaos and uncertainty in this region (Bielasiak 2002). The indicator has also been used as an explanatory variable for public satisfaction with party performance (Anderson 1998). As for the explanations, the overall continued instability (beyond just electoral volatility) in the region is often tied to the theory about state-society relations under communism (Kitschelt 1992; Innes 2002). Some authors complement this argument with the cleavage theory (Tworzecki 2003) and with the effect of electoral systems (Kostelecky 2002). These studies, however, have remained either descriptive or restricted to a few cases. Based on the literature developed for Western Europe, Birch (2001, 2003) tests an institutional model of electoral volatility. Her basic finding is that the electoral system, the threshold of representation, and the number of parties determine the extent of vote shifting. Such a model, however, neglects the competing explanations of voting. Previous research in Western Europe and Latin America has argued that both the strength of social cleavages and short-term economic fluctuations serve as viable alternative explanations for the variance in volatility (Roberts and Wibbels 1999). Furthermore, there is some evidence of economic voting (Duch 2002; Packe 1994) as well as social-cleavage-based voting (Tworzecki 2003) also in Eastern Europe and, thus, these alternatives should be taken seriously. Yet the relative importance of these different explanations cannot be assumed or inferred from studies conducted in other regions as the context of post-communist transition itself conditions the relevance of these explanations. Last, but not least, a study of party system stability and change has to account for the dynamics of these processes. We have too many speculations and too little hard evidence on the timeframe of stabilization. Pinpointing how electoral volatility changes over time and determining whether and when it declines by giving way to stable patterns of electoral representation would make a much needed addition to our understanding of this timeframe.

Electoral volatility in contemporary Eastern Europe stands out because in comparison to Western Europe and even Latin America it is exceptionally high. The following figures illustrate this problem: In a study of party system development in Western Europe 1885–1985, Bartolini and Mair (1990) find that the average volatility1 for this period was 9.1. Roberts and Wibbels (1999) report that the mean volatility in congressional elections in 16 Latin American nations during the 1980s and 1990s was 21.4. In 15 Eastern European countries included in this study, the average electoral volatility since the first democratic elections is 25.6.2 Furthermore, there is a substantial cross-national variance in electoral volatility among East European countries as seen from Figure 1. For each country, the figure reports the mean volatility since the first democratic election.

The representative patterns in Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania seem more fragile and fluid than in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and even Ukraine. There is also considerable across-time variance in the volatility levels. Most

---

1Electoral volatility is measured by the formula provided by Pedersen (1983): \( V = \Sigma (c_{i,t} - c_{i,t-1}) / 2 \), where \( V \) is volatility, \( c_{i,t} \) is the vote share for a party \( i \) at a given election \( t \) and \( c_{i,t-1} \) is the vote share of the same party \( i \) at the previous election \( (t - 1) \).

2The volatility scores for Eastern Europe are calculated using the Pedersen index. Most of the data come from Birch (2003). For the elections not included in her study, I have calculated the volatility scores using the electoral results available at the database on Central and Eastern Europe Elections, www.essex.ac.uk/elections. Information about party splits and mergers was obtained from Bugajski (2002) and various other sources. The complete list of sources and the data are available from the author.
Central and Eastern European countries and the Baltic States experienced an increase in volatility from the second to the third election and then subsequent decline the extent of which varied by country. Poland and Romania, however, experienced first a decrease in electoral volatility and then a considerable increase from the third to the forth election. The countries of the former Soviet Union have only had two or three democratic elections, thus, it is difficult to describe a trend there, but all countries have experienced a decrease in volatility from mid-1990s. It is not clear, however, what accounts for these differences across time and space. Are the patterns of stability and volatility tied to institutional factors that determine the supply side of electoral politics? Or perhaps the answer lies in some deeply rooted structural features? Or maybe the fluctuations occur simply as a result of anti-incumbent vote that one expects in a context of economic hardships? I will consider the competing arguments in more detail and combine them into a unified explanatory model that can be tested with the help of pooled statistical techniques.

**Institutional Explanations**

Extant literature on comparative politics has demonstrated the political consequences of alternative institutional designs. Institutional choices may also have effects on electoral instability. The main argument here centers around the permissiveness of the institutional arrangements toward new competitors on the electoral arena. That is, changes in electoral volatility are brought about by changes in the range of electoral contenders. Such an institutional explanation treats electoral volatility as an endogenous effect of party systems. Several properties of party systems may influence the level of volatility. One of these is the number of parties. Studies on both Western Europe (Sartori 1976) and Latin America (Mainwaring and Scully 1995) have argued that party system fragmentation has a destabilizing effect on democratic regimes and hinders the construction of coherent legislative majorities. According to Pedersen (1983), volatility increases in multiparty systems because the greater the number of parties, the smaller the ideological differences between them and the more easily can a voter transfer his or her vote from one party to another. Bartolini and Mair (1990) and Crewe (1985) confirm this positive relationship between volatility and the number of parties in Western Europe. Also, Remmer (1991) has shown that fragmentation contributes to electoral volatility in Latin America, and Birch (2001) has done the same for Eastern Europe.\(^3\)

\(^3\)Previous research has also found that change in institutional rules has been associated with change in electoral volatility (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Roberts and Wibbels 1999). The East European countries during the time period included in this analysis, however, have not adopted a new constitution or experienced large increases in electoral turnout engendered by the enfranchisement of certain groups in society, as was the case in Western Europe, or presidential "coup" as in Latin America. Some East European countries have only introduced changes to their electoral systems after the first election but very little beyond that. Still, these cases of institutional change were captured by a dummy variable (using data reported by Bielasiak 2002). When the variable was entered into the regression equation presented below, its coefficient was insignificant, and its presence had no effect on the significance level of other variables in the model, which is why it was excluded from the final analysis.
Furthermore, Roberts and Wibbels (1999) argue that the level of party institutionalization is a significant predictor of volatility in Latin America. Pedersen (1983) makes the same argument about the West European countries. That is, systems that have more established parties with stronger historical roots discourage electoral volatility by “closing off the electoral marketplace, narrowing the range of viable alternatives, and socializing voters to embrace established partisan identities” (Roberts and Wibbels 1999, 578). While most parties in Eastern Europe lack the kind of historical roots that characterize parties in Latin America and Western Europe, the fact that a party survives multiple elections and attracts popular support is a good indicator of being accepted as a representational tool. The greater the number of such surviving parties in a system, the higher the probability that the electorate forms stable partisan identities and preferences. At the same time, systems with many new and young parties make it difficult for the voters to identify which of them best represents their interests or values, thus causing more inconsistent behavior by the electorate.

Another characteristic of a party system that may influence volatility is the ideological polarization. Bartolini and Mair (1990) have argued in the context of the West European countries that the greater the distance between parties, the less likely will voters transfer their vote from one party to another. Similar logic is supported by the spatial voting theory (Downs 1957). Polarization reflects higher levels of social and political conflict as well as pronounced programmatic differences between parties. Both parties and voters are located in highly differentiated ideological positions and switching one’s vote would mean trading one’s ideology. Thus, polarization should reduce vote shifts between elections as all parties have their differentiated and antagonistic support base. The presence of these strong antagonistic feelings toward certain political parties is supported by the empirical finding that an overwhelming majority of the electorate in the Eastern European democracies tends to have a negative party identification (Rose and Mishler 1998). That is, most voters find certain specific parties strongly objectionable. The more widespread this antagonism, the less likely will voters shift from one party to an opposing party and the aggregate volatility decreases. Some of the polarization effect may, of course, be offset by the multiplicity of parties. However, the direct effect of polarization on volatility is still expected to be significant. In sum, it is possible to formulate three hypotheses about the institutional effects on electoral volatility:

**H1:** Electoral volatility will increase with the increase in the number of parties in the political system.

**H2:** Electoral volatility will decrease with the increase in the average age of parties.

**H3:** Electoral volatility will decrease with the increase of ideological polarization.

### Economic Voting

The perspective of economic voting assumes that voters punish or reward incumbent parties for their success in managing the economy (Kramer 1971; Lewis-Beck 1988; Tuft 1978). Electoral volatility is the result of these individual level vote shifts as a response to retrospective evaluations of economic performance. The proposition that economic conditions shape election outcomes in the world’s democracies is robust (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Previous studies have found substantial evidence of economic voting in the United States (Feldman 1982; Fiorina 1981; Kiewet 1983; Tuft 1978), Western Europe (Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993), and Latin America (Remmer 1991; Roberts and Wibbels 1999).

Economic voting is also an important and growing subfield of the general voting literature on post-communist Europe. The primary motivating question has been whether and how economy affects electoral results and voting behavior. The general conclusion of various studies, both at micro as well as macro level, has been that economy does matter (Tucker 2002). Pacek (1994) provides the first look at macroeconomic conditions and electoral outcomes in Eastern Europe. Using data from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Bulgaria, he found that rising unemployment lowered the vote for the incumbent. Fidrmuc (2000) uses a longer time-period and data from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to confirm that there is a strong relationship between economic development and voting behavior in these post-communist societies. Powers and Cox (1997) have shown, using individual-level data, that the probability of individuals supporting different parties is a function of shifts in economic evaluation. Tucker (2002) argues that not only incumbents feel the consequences of economic voting but the vote share for each party changes as a result of economic shocks. Overall, previous studies on elections in Eastern Europe have confirmed the presence of economic voting and its effect on the shifts of voter support for specific contenders.

The relationship between economic voting and electoral volatility follows the general reasoning of economic voting. Economic hardship can be expected to increase volatility by increasing anti-incumbent votes, undermining existing party loyalties, or, more relevant in the case of young democracies, preventing these loyalties from
emerging and encouraging voters to support not only opposition parties, but entirely new political alternatives. In a positive economic climate, one would expect the punishing effect to decrease as more people support the status quo. As a result, volatility would decrease. In both cases, electoral volatility would be a linear function of the economic performance allowing me to formulate the following hypothesis:

\[ H4: \text{The better the national economic performance the less volatile is the electorate.} \]

The latest studies on voting behavior in Eastern Europe also speculate that the instances of economic voting increase, and consequently the effects will be more pronounced, with the increase in voters’ familiarity with the functioning of the democratic institutions (Duch 2002). Using individual-level data, the argument is plausible, although the dynamics have not empirically been proven as Duch (2002) uses data from one election in one post-communist country only. He finds that more educated and more informed people are more likely to make their vote choice according to economic performance. However, it does not mean that over time such behavior will increase on the aggregate level. Across-time dynamics certainly can be expected, but the argument here is that rather than increasing, the effect of economic conditions on electoral behavior will decrease over time. This proposition is based on the following logic: in the beginning of the transition, the post-communist societies experienced a large-scale economic shock as a result of switching from planned economy to free market. The overall economic situation in all countries deteriorated as a result of that switch. It is reasonable to assume that in such a situation personal well-being and basic needs of economic security take precedence over ideology or identity in determining one’s vote choice. Once the initial shock, however, has passed, the economy does not experience large-scale fluctuations any more, and people have adjusted to the functioning of market economy, the effect of economic performance on people’s vote choice is expected to be less significant. In short, the proposition is that the effect of short-term economic performance on electoral volatility is conditional upon democratic maturation.

**Cleavage Structures**

The third major theoretical approach links party systems to cleavage structures. Political cleavages are structured and persistent lines of salient social divisions within a society. They have attracted a great deal of attention from political scientists because of their role in providing bases of support for parties (Dalton 1988) and structuring the party system and political conflict in general. The presence of cleavages can solidify the ties between parties and the public, increase predictability of political outcomes, and, hence, contribute to democratic stability (Lijphart, Rogowski, and Weaver 1993). This line of argument follows the seminal study by Lipset and Rollkan (1967) about the basis for the stability of West European party system. They argue that this stability is caused by the fact that parties are deeply rooted in class, religion, and other types of generative cleavages. These cleavages have become institutionalized through party competition and the construction of mass parties. The existence of social cleavages leads to strong electoral alignments. Voting, thus, becomes primarily an expression of social positions and the well-established values and interests associated with them. In sum, party systems are more stable and electorate is more loyal to a specific political group in societies with well-defined and well-organized societal cleavages. Without the stabilizing effects of social cleavages, party systems are susceptible to the swings and volatility associated with personality politics and authoritarian populism (Evans and Whitfield 1993). Bartolini and Mair (1990) demonstrate that social cleavages close off the electoral market place and constrain the electoral mobility of voters. Furthermore, these cleavages need not only represent socioeconomic differences within the electorate (i.e., the most common division in West European societies). For example, in societies with ethnically based competition, the refusal of the dominant ethnic group to compromise on its positions makes cross-ethnic alliances less likely. Ethnic minorities will be unlikely to switch their allegiances in a situation where there is no middle ground for parties to compete for votes (Evans and Whitfield 1993).

Arguments and evidence of the importance of social cleavages in structuring the East European party systems are mixed. Some authors claim that the East European countries lack a social base of collective identity, which, in turn, results in failure to produce cleavages necessary to form stable party systems (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Lawson 1999; White, Rose, and McAllister 1997). Most empirical studies, however, do not confirm this argument. Tucker (2002) states in his review of studies on post-communist elections and voting that most of the literature agrees that social cleavages exist. Furthermore, authors have found a growing correspondence between social structures and political attitudes, voting patterns, and election results (Kostelecky 2002; Tucker 2002). The nature and location of these cleavages, however, is different from the types of cleavages most prominent in
the advanced democracies. One cannot deny that class and other socioeconomic cleavages matter less today in Eastern Europe than they do in Western Europe, and this discrepancy has to do with the communist past: the operation of egalitarian economic policies and the disaggregation of social resources such as property, education, status, occupation, and wealth inhibited the formation of social classes (von Beyme 1996; Elster, Ofte, and Preuss 1998; Evans and Whitefield 1993; Remington 1990; Whitefield 1993). But other types of cleavages—such as religion, ethnicity, and urban vs. rural—will undoubtedly persist and continue to have an impact on post-communist electoral behavior (Tworzecki 2003; Whitefield 2002). While the prediction about the relevance of ethnic and also religious cleavages is rather straightforward, the urban-rural cleavage needs further discussion. It is generally agreed that in former centrally planned economies rural households appeared to have suffered more in relative terms during the transition (Titma, Tuma, and Silver 1998; World Bank 1995). The dissolution of collective farms created large-scale unemployment in countryside. Also the decreased demand for agricultural products under the free market and the discontinuation of policies of agricultural protection did not leave the rural population with many options to earn living. The different experiences as a result of transition to democracy and free market economy have, thus, created two very distinct social groups and it is fair to assume that these experiences influence one’s vote choice to a large degree.

Furthermore, the studies of post-communist societies present a picture of considerable diversity in the structure of social divisions across the region rather than evidence that communist power had leveled these divisions. Some politically relevant social cleavages, reflecting the historical as well as post-communist social and economic inheritances, have emerged in every country of that region (Innes 2002; Kitschelt 1992; Whitefield 2002). The cleavages in different countries vary in nature and strength with some countries being more homogeneous than others (Evans and Whitefield 1993; Kitschelt et al. 1999). In Poland, for example, the role of the Catholic Church is more pronounced than in the Czech Republic or the Baltic countries that are mostly secular. The latter, with the exception of Lithuania, have clear ethnic divisions lacking in more ethnically homogeneous countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Whitefield (2002) has compiled a list of social cleavages in 12 East European democracies. According to this list, ethnicity, region (i.e., urban-rural division), and also religion are the major components of the social basis of the cleavage structure in the region. Several country-studies have also found that urban-rural divide and regionalism are the most important cleavages determining electoral behavior (Clark 1995; Kubiček 2000; Zarycki 2000). Furthermore, the direct link between social cleavages and electoral volatility among East European countries has continuously been stressed (Evans and Whitefield 1993; Whitefield 2002). Thus, the substantive relevance of the relationship in Eastern Europe as well as the presence of a cross-sectional variance in cleavage structures gives credence to using this variable for explaining the levels of electoral volatility in this region. The relationship is hypothesized to be as follows:

H5: Electoral volatility will be lower in societies with well-structured and salient social cleavages.

The discussion about the effect of economic voting on electoral volatility also suggests that as the sort-term fluctuation in economic performance decrease in magnitude, other factors influencing vote choice may become more prominent in determining electoral stability. More specifically, as previous research has shown that social cleavages are important basis for electoral behavior, the suggestion here is that the effect of these cleavages becomes more pronounced as the economic performance stabilizes. That is, it may also be that cleavages will become more significant predictors of electoral stability once the economies of Eastern Europe stabilize and cleavages develop stronger and more visible basis for political competition (Agh 1994). This suggests again an interaction term between economic performance and cleavage structures in their relation with electoral volatility. In other words, the effect of social cleavages on electoral volatility is conditional upon the short-term economic performance.

**Measurement and Data**

The hypotheses listed above are examined with the help of a regression analysis of electoral volatility in 45 parliamentary elections in 15 East European countries. The dataset includes countries that score at least “partly free” on the Freedom House scales in order to minimize variation in the level of democratic development between countries. The countries used in the analyses have either

---

4 In fact, the level of democracy, even within the group of free and partly free countries, could influence volatility. There were altogether 10 partly free and 35 free elections in the sample. All relationships reported below hold when only free elections are included. The number of partly free elections is too small to run a separate regression with all variables. However, I ran regressions with both Freedom House score for political rights as well as the one for civil liberties as separate explanatory variables included in two different

Following previous studies on electoral volatility, the concept is measured by the Pedersen index (Birch 2001, 2003; Roberts and Wibbels 1999; see fn 1 for the formula).\footnote{Birch provides a correction of Pedersen index, stating, "to obtain the 'true' volatility score, it is necessary to divide not by 2 . . . but by the sum of the fractional shares of the total vote at each election of the parties which are included in the calculus" (2001, 4). The correlation between the two indices is very high ($r = .819$), and the basic relationships hold with different measurement of the dependent variable. I have reported the results using the more conventional Pedersen index as the measure of electoral volatility. As stated above, most of the data for this variable come from Birch (2001), the rest are based on my own calculations. The range of the measure is from 0 to 100.} The first set of hypotheses states that the fragmentation of the party system, their average age, and ideological polarization are significant predictors of electoral volatility. The first of these concepts can be measured in different ways. First, District magnitude captures the disproportionality of the system and the cross-national variance in the level of institutional permissiveness toward new contestants in the electoral arena (Coppedge 1997; Taagepera and Shugart 1989). The magnitude of an electoral district denotes the number of candidates to be elected in the district. In the current analysis I will use the mean district magnitude for each country coded from Beck et al. (2001).

Another measure of fractionalization, one that would capture also within-country dynamics, is the number of parties per se. Although the concept of the number of parties is straightforward, its measurement is not. It is tempting to use the raw number of parties competing in a given election, as this measure would account for all those parties that contribute to volatility. At the same time, counting a host of minor parties creates a figure that bears little resemblance to the political reality and may remain a poor predictor of electoral instability. Thus, a more widespread measure of party system fragmentation in comparative politics—the index of Effective number of parties (ENP) (Laakso and Taagepera 1979)—may be a more useful measure in the current context as it accounts for the differences in vote shares.\footnote{Previous studies have shown that district magnitude has a strong effect on the degree of proportionality and the number of parties both in the context of advanced democracies (Taagepera and Shugart 1989) as well as Latin America (Coppedge 1997). This effect is definitely more pronounced in countries with longer democratic experience and is expected to determine the number of parties in Eastern Europe when these democracies mature. During the first four to five elections, however, the number of parties is perhaps more a function of time and experience with the democratic system than of district magnitude. That is, in young democracies where the patterns of competition have not been well developed and parties do not have stable support bases, new parties are encouraged to crowd the electoral marketplace as they may succeed in beating some of the continuous contenders despite the restrictive effect of the district magnitude.} The correlation between the measure of disproportionality and the effective number of parties is very low ($r = .105$) and not statistically significant indicating that they capture separate institutional effects and can simultaneously be used in the same statistical model.\footnote{The measure of the effective number of parties in a given election is calculated using the formula provided by Laakso and Taagepera (1979): $N = 1/Ev^2$, where $N$ is the effective number of parties, and $v_i$ is the proportion of votes of the $i$th party. The information about the vote share for each party on a given election was obtained from the Database on Central and Eastern European Elections, http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections; Electoral Commission of Republic of Slovenia, http://www.gov.si/elections/rvk.html; Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Armenia, http://www.elections.am/; IFES Georgia, http://www.ifes.ge; IFES Election Guide, http://www.ifes.org/eguide/elecguide.htm, and various issues of Electoral Studies. It is also clear that any change in the number of parties will be associated with certain change in volatility. Yet the disappearance or appearance of contestants (or party replacement) is almost certainly associated with an extent of electoral interchange and predicting volatility with the help of replacement offers little insight into the explanation of the former.}

Party age is measured by the average age of parties in parliament, while Polarization captures the maximum distance between the ideological positioning, coded left, center, or right of the chief executive's party or parties and that of the up-to-four principle opposition parties in the legislature. The data for these two variables are obtained from Beck et al. (2001) and Keefer and Stasavage (2003).

In order to assess the effect of economic voting on electoral volatility, I use two economic indicators: the GDP growth rate and Inflation. Both constitute yearly averages and are measured 12 months before the election. These measures are expected to test the short-term economic fluctuations on electoral volatility. Again, multicollinearity may be a potential problem when including both of these measures in the same equation. However, the correlation between these variables is only $- .152$, very
much below the level at which multicollinearity becomes a problem.9

The third set of variables is expected to capture the extent and strength of social cleavages. Whitefield (2002) reports in his extensive survey of the studies of social cleavages in Eastern Europe that the most salient and most common types of cleavages existing in the countries of the region are ethnic cleavages and the urban-rural division. The latter is also an expression of the only type of class cleavage salient in the East European societies (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998). Ethnic heterogeneity is measured by a Herfindahl-Hirschmann index of concentration for ethnicity: \( \Sigma p_i^2 \), where \( p_i \) is the share of \( i^{th} \) ethnic group in the total population. This measurement is commonly used in studies of ethnic fractionalization (Alesina et al. 2002; Easterly and Levine 1997). The relevant ethnic groups were identified from the Central Intelligence Agency (2003).

The Urban-rural division is more difficult to capture, as it is not immediately clear whether a large urban population and a small rural population means a stronger or weaker division along urban-rural lines. In terms of differences between groups, however, one might think that if the difference is small, i.e., the groups are of equal size, then the divisions along urban-rural or center-periphery lines are less pronounced and other factors influence voting behavior. However, if the difference is large, i.e., one of the groups is dominant and the other one becomes a minority, the cleavage may become more salient because the smaller group may feel threatened by the power of the majority. For example, when the share of the rural population is small, defending their interests of rural and agricultural development becomes more difficult against the dominant group of urban population. This, in turn, may rally farmers more intensely around rural identity and trigger antagonism against “them” in the urban centers. Again, the more equal the groups, the less they feel threatened by each other, and the less salient will be the potential cleavage. Following this logic, I have included in the analysis a variable capturing the absolute difference between the share of urban and rural population.10

Finally, the model includes a trend variable (Time) for the number of years since the first democratic election. As common in time-series analyses, the trend variable helps to avoid the problem of spurious correlation arising when the values of the dependent variable and those of one or more independent variables vary independently but in a consistent direction over time. Furthermore, the time variable is expected to capture the dynamics of the democratic development and maturation that has a separate effect on the extent of volatility and system stabilization in general (Tvorzecki 2003). The relationship, however, rather than being linear, is expected to be positive during the first few years of democratic experience and only then turn negative. That is, it is fair to assume that the stabilization of both electoral as well as party behavior takes time. Following the initial shock of regime change, party system instability, and electoral volatility is higher and increasing. During the first few elections the electoral arena is crowded as the odds of winning are still rather equal to any entrant (Cox 1997). Similarly, with so many power claimants it is not easy for voters to differentiate between parties and assess whether they are able to deliver their promises. After the initial shock of a few elections, however, the electoral market-place is expected to become tamer: the initial elections have selected out the most viable parties, the electorates have learned not to waste their votes on nonviable alternatives, parties holding office have had time to formulate and implement their policies and grow their support bases. At this stage, thus, democratic maturation is expected to have a negative relationship with electoral volatility. This effect will be estimated with the help of a second-order polynomial model. The descriptive statistics for all the variables included in the analysis are presented in Table 1.

The analysis of pooled time-series cross-sectional data entails threats both to heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation (Stimson 1985). There is no reason to expect a temporal dependence between the observations because the number of panels is greater than the time periods (Beck and Katz 1995). As the concern with the heteroskedasticity remains, I estimated the models using OLS with Huber/White/sandwich robust standard errors within the country clusters (Greene 2002).11

9Studies of economic voting have also used unemployment as one of the economic indicators. However, official unemployment rates in most East European countries do not capture the high levels of actual and structural unemployment and may not be reliable indicators of the short-term fluctuations in economic performance. Indeed, if the unemployment data provided by International Labor Organization (www.ilo.org) were used, then this variable was positively and significantly related to volatility. However, when data from the International Monetary Fund were used for the same variable, with or without other economic variables in the model, then the coefficient for unemployment was insignificant. It is difficult to say which of these results captures reality. Due to this unreliability, I decided to resort to using only GDP growth and inflation as the economic indicators. The data for the other two indicators are coded from International Monetary Fund (2001).

10This variable is coded form Easterly and Sewadeh (2002).

11The “cluster” command in Stata7. Similar results were also obtained when using the command “xtpcse” that provides panel corrected standard errors.
Analysis and Results

Before proceeding with multivariate analysis, let me discuss the issue of potential multicollinearity as several of the independent variables included in the analysis have been shown not to be independent of each other. I briefly already discussed the relationship between the number of parties and district magnitude. In the current data set these two indicators do not correlate. However, previous research has also shown that the number of parties is the function of not only district magnitude but also the number of social cleavages or even the interaction between the two. Here, however, the Pearson correlation coefficients between the ENP and the ethnic heterogeneity and urban-rural cleavage are only -.186 and .055, respectively, neither of which reaches the level of statistical significance. Thus, there is no empirical relationship between ENP, mean district magnitude, and cleavages in this data set.

Furthermore, one might also envision a relationship between the salience of cleavages and economic performance. There are several examples of divided societies that suffer from low levels of economic development presumably because of the difficulty in achieving compromise and cooperation in governing. In none of the societies included in the analysis, however, have the ethnic or other types of divisions lead to violence that could more directly be linked to low economic performance. Also, I have measured the short-term fluctuations in economic performance and not the general level of economic development, yet if cleavages influence economic performance, they should have a more long-term effect rather than accounting for short-term turbulence that may occur in advanced as well as less advanced economies. Further, the Pearson correlation coefficients between the measures of social cleavages and the measures of short-term economic performance used in this study do not show a significant relationship between these two factors, the coefficients ranging from -.149 to .141 for different indicators.

Also, one may think that the measure of the average age of parties is correlated with time, i.e., the average party age increases with time. In the context of Eastern Europe during its immediate post-transition years, this may not be the case due to high level of party replacement. The correlation coefficient between these two measures is only .08. Overall, none of the potential dependencies between different predictors are large enough to cause concerns. On the one hand, this is good news for the current analysis. On the other hand, the lack of some correlations introduces interesting puzzles for further analysis and may lead to recasting some of the well-known regularities in comparative politics to accommodate the realities of new democracies.

I have first estimated a model without the hypothesized interaction terms. The first column in Table 2 presents the results for the following model:

\[ \text{Volatility} = \alpha + \beta (\text{ENP}) + \beta (\text{party age}) + \beta (\text{district magnitude}) + \beta (\text{polarization}) + \beta (\text{GDP}) + \beta (\text{inflation}) + \beta (\text{ethnic heterogeneity}) + \beta (\text{urban-rural}) + \beta (\text{time}) + \beta (\text{time})^2 + \epsilon. \]

Diagnostics performed on the analysis did not detect any outliers to the model and found no significant multicollinearity or autocorrelation.

The model provides some support for all three theoretical approaches. First, three of the four institutional variables entered in the additive model are significantly related to electoral volatility. The increase in the effective number of parties is indeed associated with more
Table 2: OLS Regression of Electoral Volatility and Institutional, Economic and Structural Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Main Effects Model</th>
<th>Interaction Effects Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \beta ) (SE)</td>
<td>( \beta ) (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENP</td>
<td>1.149* (.644)</td>
<td>.941 (.671)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party age</td>
<td>-.102 (.109)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District magnitude</td>
<td>-.060*** (.020)</td>
<td>-.053** (.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
<td>-2.661** (1.198)</td>
<td>-2.496* (1.349)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>-.975*** (.314)</td>
<td>-1.099*** (.319)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflation</td>
<td>.070*** (.013)</td>
<td>.448*** (.146)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic heterogeneity</td>
<td>-1.438 (5.111)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban-rural</td>
<td>-.137*** (.044)</td>
<td>-.062 (.069)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>4.955** (1.911)</td>
<td>7.280*** (1.872)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Time)²</td>
<td>-.218* (.125)</td>
<td>-.359*** (.116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time * Inflation</td>
<td>-.017* (.009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban-rural * Inflation</td>
<td>-.004** (.001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.660 (8.261)</td>
<td>-7.693 (7.666)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table presents unstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. *p \leq .1, **p \leq .5, ***p \leq .01.

electoral instability. Increasing the effective number of electoral contestants by one increases volatility by more than 1%. The mean district magnitude also reaches the level of statistical significance, although it performs in an unexpected manner. That is, following previous studies, one would expect there to be a positive relationship between district magnitude and electoral volatility, because of the effect that the former has on the number of parties (Täagepera and Shugart 1989). However, here the results show that the higher the district magnitude, the lower the electoral volatility. This negative relationship is robust against several different specifications of the model: although the significance level varies the relationship holds up when the variable district magnitude is logged, when the effective number of parties is excluded from the analysis, and when an interaction term between the district magnitude and the effective number of parties is included in the model. As for the latter, the conditional marginal effects show that the coefficient for district magnitude stays negative at all values of the effective number of parties.

An explanation to this finding may have to do with the survival of political parties. In young democracies with low levels of party identification and little ideological difference between parties, voters may be more willing to shop around for their best alternative and not stay loyal to one party. In countries that have higher district magnitudes and are more permissive toward multiple parties, the parties that emerge after the first election are more likely to survive than parties that win the first elections in systems with more restrictive institutional rules. This may be because the electoral market in systems with high district magnitudes becomes saturated already after the first few elections. If voters are not satisfied with the performance of the party they voted for, they have many existing alternatives to choose from, i.e., they do not necessarily have to opt for an entirely new party if the one they voted for last time proves unsatisfactory. Consequently, in such systems the aggregate volatility may not be so high as individual vote shifts cancel each other out. That is, if 10% of party A supporters switch their vote to party B, 10% of party B supporters switch their vote to party C, and 10% of party C supporters switch their vote to party A, then there has been quite a bit of vote switching, but the percentage of votes won by each party has stayed the same and the aggregate volatility would, thus, be zero. Systems with low district magnitudes, on the other hand, restrict the pool of existing parties. Here, when voters are not satisfied with their current vote choice, they will have fewer existing alternatives to choose from, and they may opt for a new party more frequently. Again, if there only were a party A and a party B, and 10% of party B supporters were not satisfied with their vote choice but did not like party A either, then the only option for them would be to support someone entirely new. In this case, this 10% would not cancel out but would show up in aggregate volatility levels. Thus, low district magnitude may cause a lot of party replacement in young democracies. This interpretation fits the current results very well, but at the same time it also serves as an interesting hypothesis that further studies might investigate more closely.

As for the other institutional variables, the coefficient for ideological polarization barely reaches the level of statistical significance indicating that the higher the level of polarization the less volatile the electorate, thus confirming the theoretical prediction. The average party age does not have a significant effect on electoral volatility, and
Although the sign of the coefficient is in predicted direction, it is impossible to infer with any certainty the nature of this effect.

Both economic variables are also consistent predictors of the dynamics in electoral volatility. GDP growth is associated with decrease in aggregate vote shifts. Even a small 1% increase in GDP is associated with slightly more than 1% decrease in volatility. The relationship between inflation and volatility is also significant: 10% decrease in inflation rate is associated with .7% decrease in volatility. Given the high inflation rates in the East European countries in the beginning of the transition, this effect is considerable. In the current context the effect becomes substantively less significant as a majority of East European democracies have been able to tame inflation rates and keep them below 10%. However, in a time-series cross-sectional perspective the fluctuation in inflation corresponds well to the initial turbulence and subsequent stabilization of the electoral arena.

In terms of the economic explanation, one may also be concerned by the direction of causality, as there is no agreement in literature whether economic stability produces political stability or vice versa. To a certain extent this potential concern is accounted for by the measurement of the economic variables: both are measured 12 months prior to the election, so that in terms of temporal sequence the observation of economic performance precedes the observation about electoral behavior. Further, the existing literature on economic voting—a theory on which the current analysis is based—is very consistent about the claim that short-term economic performance determines electoral behavior both on the individual as well as aggregate level. Also, the debate about whether economic stability causes political stability or vice versa usually is concerned with the level of general economic development and not so much with short-term fluctuations that may occur both in highly developed as well as less-developed countries and cause the anti-incumbent vote in both contexts. Overall, thus, while this cannot be claimed with certainty, I believe that the causal arrow in the current case runs from the economic performance to electoral volatility and not vice versa.

Interestingly, the ethnic cleavage hypothesis does not find support. Although the coefficient is negative as expected, it is difficult to infer from this result whether ethnic cleavages have the predicted effect on electoral volatility. The effect of the urban-rural division is significant and also in the predicted direction: the larger the difference in the size of urban and rural population the lower the aggregate volatility. That is, if one of these groups becomes too dominant, the other one may mobilize in a more unified manner. Given that most East European societies are industrialized, it is more plausible to think of the urban population as the dominant group. Thus, if the rural population is considerably smaller than the urban population, the threat of exclusion from national politics becomes more acute for farmers and people living in periphery triggering their mobilization behind an agrarian or rural party and unwillingness to switch away from this identity-based political support.

Importantly, the analysis also supports the curvilinear relationship between democratic maturation and electoral volatility. The coefficient of the time variable is positive while the second derivative is negative indicating that in the beginning of transition the volatility increases over time, but starts to decrease once democracies have had time to mature. The curve expressing the relationship between time and volatility has zero slope at $-\beta_1 / 2 \beta_2 = 11$ years. Thus, on an average, it takes about 11 years of democratic experience before the electoral arena starts to move toward stabilization. Considering this result, it is not surprising that several earlier studies were rather pessimistic about the prospects of democracy in the region.

Overall, the full model explains 61% of the variance in electoral volatility in Eastern Europe. The results are also robust in the face of fixed country effects. Because the number of countries in the dataset relative to the number of total observations is rather large, it is not possible to include dummies for each cross-section in a single equation. Rather, I ran a series of separate equations with a dummy for each country. The substantive results of the model presented in Table 2 were not altered in those estimations.

The second column of Table 2 presents the model with interaction effects. Due to the concern with the small number of cases and many variables, this model excludes two of the variables that did not contribute to the explanation of electoral volatility: party age and ethnic heterogeneity. In order to investigate the interaction effects between economic conditions, time and urban-rural divide, I have selected the economic indicator of inflation rate to be included in the interaction terms. Both interaction terms yield statistically significant coefficients suggesting the presence of interaction effects (see Jaccard and Turrisi 2003). The strength of the effects is indexed by the difference in $R^2$ for the main effects model ($R^2 = .61$) and that of the interactive model ($R^2 = .68$). This yields .07, i.e., the interaction effects account for about 7% of the variance in total government revenue, a reasonable effect size.

I will first evaluate the nature of the interaction between time and inflation on electoral volatility. As was hypothesized that the effect of short-term economic performance on volatility is conditional upon the level of democratic maturity, I will use time as the moderator
variable. The value of the coefficient for the product term indicates how the relationship between electoral volatility and inflation rates varies across time. Table 3 presents the coefficients of this relationship for the beginning of the transition (minimum), as well as 6 (mean) and 13 years (maximum) since the first democratic election.12

In the beginning of transition to democracy the relationship between inflation and electoral volatility is highly significant: 1% increase in inflation is associated with .4% increase in volatility. About six years after the transition the effect is still statistically significant, but substantively lower: 1% increase in inflation is associated with .3% increase in volatility. About 13 years after the transition, the effect of inflation on volatility is no longer statistically significant. Over time, thus, the effect of short-term economic fluctuations becomes less significant predictors of electoral stability leaving more room for other factors to account for the dynamics in the electoral arena. As said earlier, this finding most probably results from a dramatic drop in inflation rates in the region after the early 1990s, making it less of a political issue. Indeed, compared to the inflation rates that reached hundreds in the beginning of 1990s, by the end of the decade all countries with the exception of Moldova had managed to keep the inflation level well under 10%.

The second interaction effect tests the proposition that the urban-rural divide becomes a more significant predictor of electoral volatility at times when the economy is more stable. The effect of the urban-rural divide on volatility is conditioned by economic performance; thus, the nature of the second interaction effect is investigated using inflation as the moderator variable. Table 4 presents the conditional coefficients of the urban-rural divide on volatility on various levels of inflation. Contrary to what was hypothesized, the effect of the urban-rural divide on volatility increases with the increase in inflation. Indeed, as the coefficient of urban-rural in the interaction model reported in Table 2 shows, if inflation rate is zero, the effect of the urban rural division on electoral volatility is not significant. Table 4 reports a series of conditional coefficients of the urban-rural division at various levels of inflation rate. The pattern is rather clear: when inflation is low or negative, the relative size of the urban vs. rural population has no effect on volatility. However, when the inflation rate reaches about 10%, the effect of the urban-rural divide becomes significant, and the conditional coefficient increases with the increase in inflation.

There are three ways to explain this seemingly counterintuitive result. First, as only in two cases was the rural population marginally larger than the urban population, the measure of the urban-rural divide effectively captures the size of the urban population. Thus, it may be that the rural population in general is more stable in its vote choice and less influenced by short-term economic fluctuations in their electoral behavior. The aggregate volatility is, thus, mostly due to unstable urban voters, who are also very sensitive to economic performance. Second, and in addition, the urban-rural divide may not be the best measure for capturing a definitive social cleavage. While the rural population may form a more homogeneous group of electors and develop allegiance with one or a few rural parties, the urban population is not a homogeneous group developing identities only based on the fact that they live

---

12The conditional coefficients are calculated using the “lincom” command in Stata 7.

### Table 3 Conditional Coefficients of Inflation at Various Levels of Democratic Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Conditional Coefficient of Inflation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>.431*** (.139)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>.342*** (.111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>.195 (.116)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses, *p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01.

### Table 4 Conditional Coefficients of Urban-Rural at Various Levels of Inflation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inflation</th>
<th>Conditional Coefficient of Urban-Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>−.49</td>
<td>−.060 (.070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(minimum)</td>
<td>(.070)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>−.087 (.064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>−.112* (.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>−.209*** (.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>−.307*** (.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>−.552*** (.153)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>−2.06*** (.731)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(maximum)</td>
<td>(max)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses, *p < .1, **p < .05, ***p < .01.
in an urbanized area. Thus, this divide does not become a defining factor of electoral volatility when economy has stabilized. The originally hypothesized relationship may still hold if we had better understanding of the other types of salient cleavages in the East European societies and were able to measure them more precisely. Third, it may be that the East European electorate have entirely skipped the social cleavage oriented politics of identity that used to define the party systems in Western Europe and jumped right to the issue-based politics with weak partisan loyalties and temporary coalitions of voters that political parties must put together for every election—a phenomenon that the West European party system is experiencing now (Tworzecki 2003). Thus, the specific issues rather than identities determine the electoral behavior in times of economic stability. All of these explanations, in turn, point to new research questions that remain yet to be answered.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results presented in the previous section have several important implications. The analysis illustrates the relative importance of different theoretical arguments concerning electoral volatility. First, the empirical data confirm the theory of economic voting. The deterioration of economic conditions and the loss of security in Eastern Europe as a result of the transition to market economy brought people’s survival needs to the forefront of political rhetoric. Indeed, the analysis showed that the effects of economic shocks on electoral stability were most pronounced in the beginning of transition diminishing over time as the economy stabilized. However, the fact that the indicators of short-term economic performance remained significant even after controlling for the time trend indicates that economic situation has an effect on volatility separate from the liner trend of overall stabilization, both political and economic, in the region.

The effect of cleavages on electoral volatility is less straightforward. I have found that the more equal in size both groups in society are the more volatile will be the electorate as urban-rural divide does not really take on cleavage characteristics and both groups remain heterogeneous in their vote choice. However, if one of the groups (generally the urban population) is considerably larger than the other one, the minority group may feel threatened by majority interests and mobilize more effectively behind certain political groups. This situation creates more stability, as the minority group is less reluctant to trade its political support. Interestingly, the effect of this urban-rural divide is significant only during the times of economic downturn.

The two significant and novel findings concern the effect (or the lack thereof) of ethnic cleavages on electoral volatility and the timeframe of stabilization. The weak effect of ethnic cleavages remains rather puzzling given that many societies in Eastern Europe have clear divisions along ethnic lines. These ethnic divisions may simply not have manifested themselves in the party-political arena and people turn to cues other than their ethnic origin when making political decisions. In some cases restrictive citizenship laws can explain the insignificant role of ethnic cleavages in politics. For example, although one-third of Estonian population is Russian (or Russian speakers), there is no viable Russian political party. This effect may occur in part because many Russian speakers lack citizenship and cannot vote on national elections; it may also be because some Estonian parties have effectively taken over some of Russians’ issues and offered them representation without the need to create a separate ethnic-based party. The latter suggests that the political conflict has not developed simply along ethnic lines but along issues that crosscut these lines.

Overall, if the weak effect of ethnic cleavages remains robust against the subsequent developments in nascent democracies, it has important positive implications on the stabilization and structuring of the party system. That is, several authors have argued that socioeconomic cleavages are more compatible with and more easily processed through the institutions of liberal democracy than more divisive ethnic cleavages (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Whitefield 2002). Thus, the type of societal conflict that prevails has been argued to determine the potential for democratic consolidation. Societies with class cleavages (as reflected most prominently in urban-rural division) are more likely to develop into a Western style mutually supporting social cleavages and party systems (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998; Evans and Whitefield 1993). A highly salient ethnicity-based competition, however, impinges class-structured distributional cleavages by defining the axis of political contestation (Evans and Whitefield 1993). The fact that ethnic cleavages, on an average, have not been salient in the countries of the region through the past decade increases the probability that more socioeconomically based cleavages become prominent and structure the party system according to a Western style competition characterized by considerable stability in the future.

Furthermore, the fact that the general effect of social cleavages on voting behavior is not very strong indicates that the communist past in itself may have an influence on the voting behavior in new democracies. That is, the
fact that the communist system effectively worked to erase social cleavages may account for the high level of electoral volatility in the region today. This, in turn, suggests that economic voting might be more frequent in the post-communist region than in other regions—a proposition that definitely warrants careful analysis in future studies.

Another finding that has important implications on the stabilization of the East European democracies is the curvilinear relationship between the maturation of democracies and electoral stability. The finding explains the pessimistic prospects of stabilization in the region or some countries of the region painted by several earlier studies (Cirtautas 1994; Comisso 1997; Elster, Offer, and Preuss 1998; Whitefield 2002). The initial developments in these countries were indeed toward more instability, yet this trend has reversed by now. More specifically, the analysis shows that electoral volatility started to decline after eleven years of democratic transition on an average. Pinpointing such a timeframe is an important addition to the transition literature that is constantly seeking to explain when stabilization and consolidation begin, but has remained obscure and vague in its speculations. In addition to that, the method of explicitly modeling democratic maturation outlined here can also be applied to studying other dependent variables of interest to the transition literature and, thus, it paves the way for mapping an even broader timeline for transition.

In sum, I have argued that the immediate years after transition to democracy see increasing volatility, but more stable patterns of party support start to emerge when democracies have endured more than a decade. This stabilization is enhanced by supportive institutional structures and good economic performance, while the positive effect of cleavages cannot be fully corroborated. These findings contribute directly to our understanding of the process of democratic consolidation suggesting that increasing instability after the regime change does not necessarily lead to the failure of the regime. In fact the increasing instability is simply a prologue for the process of stabilization indicating that regime endurance itself may be a major factor in democratic consolidation. Whether the positive trend toward stabilization that follows will continue depends on the ability of parties to deliver their economic promises and to relate themselves to the social experiences that may begin to divide the electorate.

References


