



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Czech Republic and Slovakia

Political Attitude Formation in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Topic of Research:

I seek to propose a model of political attitude formation in new democracies, where the partisanship cue, typically the primary predictor of vote choice in advanced industrial democracies, is largely absent. In this research, I intend to uncover the structure of political attitudes and their origins in newer democracies, and how citizens' predispositions (economic self-interest, symbolic values, group attachments and antipathy) may make them more or less susceptible to persuasion.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

I hope to add to the extant literature in comparative political science by adding a new layer of analysis, as well as shed light on the conditions under which citizens are persuaded by opportunistic politicians to change their initial opinions.

Using concepts and methodology developed in social and political psychology, I attempt to examine whether extant theories about attitude formation apply to the political realm more generally, and more specifically, to see whether and how these concepts illuminate political decision-making in the lives of ordinary citizens in new democracies. I seek to uncover the precise causal mechanism underlying political attitudes, looking

beyond standard sociological predictors of vote choice to the psychological processes that produce political attitudes. In doing so, I hope to uncover whether the way *individuals* think politically corresponds to existing theories about how *groups* of people (for example, political cleavages) tend to behave politically, and whether this corresponds to existing sociological accounts of political behavior in Central and Eastern Europe. With this knowledge, we can better predict the circumstances under which authoritarian leaders can gain power legitimately by appealing to the most salient political predispositions present in the population. Conversely, we also can use this information to guard against opportunistic politicians who would seek to erode democratic structures, particularly in less-established newer democracies.

Approach and Methodology:

I conducted in-depth cognitive questionnaires in Prague, Czech Republic and Bratislava, Slovakia. With the help of colleagues at the Institutes of Sociology at both the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Slovak Academy of Sciences, I surveyed Czech and Slovak citizens about their political predispositions, attitudes toward specific parties, politicians, and parties. I used a semi-representative sample that was stratified by age group, age, and gender. In my questionnaire, which took approximately 45 minutes for each respondent to complete, I specifically instructed respondents to describe their thought processes as they answered closed-ended questions about their predispositions, attitudes toward parties, policies, and the like. This method, using cognitive interviewing techniques, is useful for two reasons: first, it helps me determine whether my questions actually ask what I want them to ask, but more importantly, it provides an opportunity for respondents to describe the predispositions, impressions, and/or received political messages that help them to make political judgments. The questions that I have found to measure the target concepts will be included in an omnibus survey conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Polls at the Institute of Sociology at the Czech and Slovak Academies of Sciences this fall.

I asked standard demographic questions, as well as questions about political interest and political knowledge, understanding of democratic concepts such as “liberal-conservative” and their relationship to the respondent’s understanding of political parties, as well as attitudes toward governmental institutions, specific parties, specific policies, other ethnic groups. I also asked respondents to rank different competing social and political values according to their preferences, in addition to the personal importance of religion in their ordinary decision-making processes. These questionnaires employed some of the same questions used on a similar questionnaire I conducted in 2000 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which allows me to examine continuity in political predispositions and attitude formation across time.

I collected the survey data myself and supervised the translation of the responses by Czech and Slovak colleagues at the respective Institutes of Sociology. I also monitored specific persuasive messages that were present in media reports and in specific parties’ and politicians’ campaigns and speeches, collecting relevant newspaper articles and radio television news reports. I often held informal discussions with ordinary Czechs about their political decision-making processes throughout the region. I also discussed

at length my theoretical framework and hypotheses with my Czech and Slovak colleagues at the Institutes, gaining access to previously unreleased data on political attitudes as measured in a survey conducted in 1968 prior to the infamous “Prague Spring.”

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions:

I would be wrong to say that I have reached any conclusions at this early stage of analysis, but I can assess the role that existing citizen predispositions play in political decision-making at least at a superficial level, and determine whether any of these predispositions play a similar role today as they did in 2000.

My findings appear to confirm my hypotheses that citizens do possess a set of political predispositions and value hierarchies that inform their support for various parties, politicians, and policies *in predictable ways across time*. Interestingly, I have also continued to find that different predispositions and values inform political attitudes between Czechs and Slovaks, and that these relationships appear to exist across time as well. I expect further confirmation to be found with a comparison of these data to data from 1968, a time when Czechoslovakia’s communist regime began to democratize for a brief period. Different considerations matter to Slovaks than Czechs when it comes to specific targets, such as attitudes toward EU membership, attitudes toward minorities, and attitudes toward parties that fall at specific spots on the left-right ideological continuum. I also found that Czechs’ and Slovaks’ understanding of concepts that are standard in the political science literature, such as “left-right/liberal-conservative,” do not correspond to which political parties they support. In this sense, I found that developing partisanship in these countries does not correspond to existing political values, economic self-interest, and more generally, ideology in the ways that political scientists take for granted.

Suggested Future Research Agendas:

- *Examination of the relationship of existing political predispositions to resistance to or acceptance of elite messages, as measured with survey experiments;
- *Comparative analyses of political predispositions across other newer democracies and their role in political decision-making;
- *Analysis of the role of political socialization in the transmission of political culture; and
- *Confirmation of the micro-level psychological processes underlying political attitude formation found in new democracies with data from advanced industrial democracies.

US Policy Recommendations:

- *Use what we know about citizen predispositions to predict which kinds of campaigns and initiatives are likely to be supported by the population, and which are likely to be rejected.
- *Determine how to present information to citizens in such a way that they are likely to respond favorably to US policies.
- *Develop education and media policies that correspond to the native decision-making processes of citizens of target countries.

