

# Democratic Scepticism and Political Participation in Europe

JEFFREY A. KARP\* & CAITLIN MILAZZO\*\*

\*University of Exeter; \*\*University of Nottingham

**ABSTRACT** *The former Communist countries of Eastern Europe have markedly lower levels of voter turnout than Western European countries, which could be a cause for concern if it represents a rejection of democratic values. In this article, we examine what people think about democracy and how these attitudes affect their likelihood of participating in the democratic process. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems drawn from national election surveys in 22 countries in Eastern and Western Europe, we find that citizens in Eastern Europe are more likely to express doubts about democracy and be dissatisfied with how it works in practice. More importantly, while we demonstrate that attitudes about democracy do affect political participation, they cannot fully account for the low levels of turnout observed in post-communist countries. This has implications for our interpretation of the significance of low turnout in national elections.*

## Introduction

Although large proportions of the electorate once embraced early elections in many post-communist countries, enthusiasm for engaging in the democratic process appears to have faded. In the first wave of open and competitive elections average turnout rates were around 80%. Since then, there has been a dramatic decline in turnout observed in a number of studies (Kostadinova 2003; Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker 2009). Turnout in recent elections appears lower than the rates observed in Western Europe, where concerns have also been raised about low turnout.<sup>1</sup>

Some have suggested that the low turnout in post-communist countries represents a transitional process (Kostadinova 2003). A more sobering view is that declining turnout may represent a rejection of democratic values. Disillusionment with the political process – stemming from social and economic hardship and perceptions of electoral malpractice and widespread corruption – is frequently cited as a potential cause of declining political engagement (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Birch 2010).

In existing literature, reliance on aggregate data makes it difficult to ascertain what has led individuals in post-communist countries to abstain from the political process.<sup>2</sup>

---

*Correspondence Address:* Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, Devon EX4 4RJ, UK. Email: [j.karp@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:j.karp@exeter.ac.uk), [www.jkarp.com](http://www.jkarp.com)

In this article, we examine how attitudes about democracy affect political behaviour. We argue that citizens in the newer democracies of post-communist Europe are more likely to be sceptical of democratic institutions, reducing their willingness to participate in elections. We refer to these citizens as “demo-sceptics”. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) drawn from national election surveys in 22 countries in Eastern and Western Europe, we find about three times as many demo-sceptics in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. However, while scepticism about democracy does appear to influence why citizens choose not to vote, it only goes a small way toward explaining the differences in turnout between East and Western Europe.

### **Attitudes about Democracy in Eastern Europe**

Individuals socialized in communist societies were indoctrinated not to challenge the actions of government. The question of how deeply ingrained these attitudes are in society and how quickly citizens acquire democratic attitudes when institutions change is a matter of some debate. On the one hand, cultural theories assume that attitudes acquired early in life persist over time. Such a view would predict that post-communist culture would be incompatible with democratic institutions and attitudes. This assumption has been challenged by several studies. Hahn (1991) found strong support for democratic institutions just before the collapse of the Soviet Union particularly among the young and the better educated. Gibson et al. (1992) found evidence of a similar shift in Moscow prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a later study, Mishler and Rose (2007) found evidence for life cycle effects, suggesting that Russians would quickly acquire democratic attitudes. While Neundorf (2010) finds that older generations are less positive about democracy than younger generations, she argues that economic development can lead to changes in democratic values. Norris (2011) argues that citizens in young liberal democracies, which include the post-communist countries in Europe, are now strongly committed to democratic values. Other scholars are not so optimistic. Recent European Values Study surveys suggest that the levels of authoritarianism in most Eastern European countries have actually increased in the 2000s (de Regt, Smits, and Mortelmans 2011).

Citizens in post-communist societies are also likely to distrust democratic institutions, an attitude that is endemic in authoritarian political cultures (Mishler and Rose 2001). Such scepticism may be reinforced by perceptions of corrupt practices. In Russia, post-communist rule is most closely associated with criminality and corruption. Kostadinova (2009) suggests that many East Europeans are frustrated with politicians who come to power just to plunder the state. Of course distrust of politicians, political parties, and political institutions is not unique to post-communist Europe. Dalton (2004) has traced an erosion in political support in virtually all advanced industrial democracies. Nevertheless, the levels of distrust that have been observed in Russia and other post-communist countries appear to be far greater (White and McAllister 2004). Studies examining the consequences of scandal and

corruption suggest that it does not only affect what people think of specific politicians but it can also affect attitudes about government (Bowler and Karp 2004) and erode confidence in national institutions (Anderson and Tverdova 2003).

These attitudes may be moderated by the degree to which citizens feel they are better off in a democracy. It is widely assumed that strong economic performance can help to promote democratization and democratic values. Likewise, economic adversity is assumed to reduce the capacity of citizens to bear the costs of political participation if those who lack resources do not have the means to engage meaningfully in elections. Hopelessness and despair may also discourage the poorest from participating, which lowers overall turnout (Solt 2008). Dissatisfaction with economic conditions is often cited as an explanation for low turnout in post-communist societies. For example, Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier (2008) find that unemployment explains low turnout in post-communist elections for the European Parliament. Similarly, in their analysis of 137 elections in 19 post-communist national elections, Pacek et al. (2009) find that high unemployment and high inflation were associated with lower turnout.

Political competition is widely assumed to be an essential element of democracy. It is linked to the nature and dynamics of campaigns, media coverage, party systems, and strategies. Competitive elections are likely to attract quality candidates and translate into greater party mobilization efforts and more media attention (Goidel and Shields 1994). As a result, competition should stimulate voter interest, enhance political efficacy (Karp and Banducci 2008), and increase voter turnout (Franklin 2004). Competitive elections are also believed to make representatives more responsive to popular demands (Powell 2000). Competition therefore has the potential to enhance satisfaction with democracy and strengthen democratic values (Pietsch, Miller, and Karp, 2015). These expectations would predict that citizens are more likely to be disengaged and more dissatisfied when elections are not competitive, a common feature in authoritarian regimes.

This brief review of the literature leads to several expectations. Theories of political socialization predict that generational differences, education, and political orientations may lead people to accept democratic values and be more supportive of democratic institutions. By contrast, disillusionment with the economy may lead people to reject democracy. Finally, we might also expect political context to matter. When elections are un-competitive, citizens may be more dissatisfied with democracy and less supportive of democratic institutions.

### **Explaining Variation in Democratic Attitudes**

To examine these questions, we rely on data from the CSES. The CSES provides a common module of questions across a range of established and new democracies. It differs from other cross-national datasets such as the World Values Surveys because all surveys are administered as part of a post-election wave in a national election study. Thus, measures such as reported turnout should be more accurate than in other surveys that rely on recall from a previous election or intended vote in a future

election. Citizens may also be primed to think more about the democratic process during an election than at other times when politics is less salient.

The CSES began in 1996 and now provides data from four modules that have been administered in a number of countries often more than once. While we would like to examine differences over time within countries, we are limited to Module 2, fielded between 2001 and 2006, the only module to have included a question that allows us to measure fundamental orientations to democracy. Based on Winston Churchill's famous line, this question asks respondents to consider the statement, "Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government". Possible responses include "agree strongly", "agree", "disagree", or "disagree strongly".

Concerns have been raised about the validity of questions that measure abstract concepts without specifying any of their concrete attributes. Respondents may understand that democracy is a good thing without being able to specify what it is supposed to represent. This may lead more people to support democracy as an abstract concept (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007). Also, the question does not pose an alternative to democracy so we can only assume that responses reflect scepticism about democracy. Nevertheless it is reasonable to assume that East Europeans, who have experienced authoritarian rule, may use that as a benchmark when answering the question.

The CSES also includes an item meant to capture attitudes about *democratic performance*, which is theoretically distinct from attitudes about democracy. Many studies have shown that citizens express strong support for the principles of democracy while at the same time expressing discontent with the way democracy works in practice (Klingemann 1999; Lagos 2003). The CSES question reads, "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country X]?" This question is frequently asked in cross-national studies and assumed to be an indicator of the diffuse support necessary for building legitimacy (Klingemann 1999). Although concerns have been raised about its validity, it nevertheless is assumed to capture attitudes towards democratic practices and performance distinct from democratic aspirations.

Table 1 shows how the responses to both of these items are distributed across a sample of 22 countries in Europe.<sup>3</sup> The figures represent the percentage of all respondents who "disagree" or "strongly disagree" and the percentage of respondents who were "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied". Of the respondents surveyed in the Western European countries, only 6% expressed doubt as to whether democracy is the best form of government, compared with 18% in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. Italy is the only Western European country where the percentage of demo-sceptics exceeds 11% while Albania is the only country in Eastern Europe below 11%. The responses suggest that a considerable proportion of citizens in the post-communist countries remain sceptical about democracy. Far more people express dissatisfaction with the way democracy works. Across both regions, 42% of respondents indicate that they are dissatisfied with this aspect of democracy. However, as in the case with scepticism about democracy, the level of dissatisfaction in the post-communist countries is far greater, with nearly two-thirds expressing dissatisfaction, compared to 33% in the established democracies of Western Europe. The

**Table 1.** Attitudes about democracy in Eastern and Western Europe (%)

Country	Sceptical about democracy	Dissatisfaction with democratic performance	Sceptical and dissatisfied
<i>All</i>	10	42	7
<i>Eastern Europe</i>			
All	18	62	15
Bulgaria	32	79	31
Russia	28	67	24
Hungary	18	53	14
Czech Republic	16	54	10
Poland	15	60	14
Slovenia	15	61	13
Romania	13	56	10
Albania	3	64	3
<i>Western Europe</i>			
All	6	33	4
Italy	18	61	15
Germany	11	49	9
France	10	44	8
Finland	9	30	6
Britain	9	28	6
Portugal	6	51	4
Ireland	5	18	3
Spain	4	22	1
Norway	4	22	2
Switzerland	3	23	3
Sweden	3	23	2
Denmark	3	7	1
Iceland	2	30	2
The Netherlands	1	34	1

percentage of respondents who indicate that they are dissatisfied with the way democracy works ranges from 7% in Denmark to 79% in Bulgaria, and once again, Italy is the only Western European country amongst those countries with the highest percentages.

We test several hypotheses in order to examine why citizens in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe are more likely to be sceptical about democracy and dissatisfied with democratic performance. As discussed above, various studies have found that older citizens socialized under communism are likely to hold quite different views about democracy than younger citizens. However, these studies often reach different conclusions about the nature of these generational differences, with some suggesting that younger citizens are more likely to embrace democratic attitudes while others suggest that younger citizens are more sceptical about democracy. We examine these generational differences by relying on the age of the respondent.<sup>4</sup> In addition, we include measures of ideological orientation measured by dichotomous

variables that capture whether citizens place themselves on the right or the left of the ideological spectrum.<sup>5</sup> We also capture a respondent's ideological extremism by including a variable that measures the respondent's distance from the median voter in her country to test whether ideology is the source of dissatisfaction. Attitudes about democracy are also likely to be affected by economic conditions. Those with the lowest levels of income are assumed to be the most vulnerable to economic forces. We include two dichotomous variables that capture whether the respondent fell into the highest or lowest income quintile in their country.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to individual-level characteristics, we examine whether electoral context affects attitudes about the democratic process. We hypothesize that citizens are more supportive of democracy and more engaged when elections are competitive, relying on a measure of competitiveness that measures the overall margin of victory for the largest party over the second largest. Higher values are associated with less competition. To take into account differences in the saliency of elections, we also control for whether the contest was only a presidential election. Finally, we control for whether a respondent is from Eastern Europe to capture any remaining differences that can be attributed to the legacy of communism.<sup>7</sup>

Given that (a) our dependent variables comprise multiple ordered categories and (b) that our data are hierarchical in nature (i.e. citizens nested within countries), we estimate two multilevel ordered logit models. These allow us to correct for dependence of observations within countries (i.e. intra-class correlation) by estimating random intercepts for each country.

## *Results*

Table 2 presents the results of the ordered logit multilevel models, where the dependent variables are the extent to which a citizen holds authoritarian attitudes and the extent to which a citizen expresses dissatisfaction with democracy. The results confirm that there are substantial attitudinal differences between citizens in Eastern and Western Europe; the average level of scepticism with democracy and overall dissatisfaction in Eastern Europe are nearly 1 point higher on a 4-point scale.

The results also provide mixed evidence regarding other determinants of democratic attitudes.<sup>8</sup> We find that younger citizens are more sceptical about democracy than older citizens who were socialized under different norms, similar to Denemark, Donovan, and Niemi (2012) who examined generational differences in Europe and Anglo-America and found that the youngest cohorts were inclined not to value democratic principles and practices as much as older cohorts. However, younger citizens are less likely to be dissatisfied with democratic processes than older citizens.

Those who place themselves on the right side of the ideological spectrum are less likely to be sceptical about democratic structures and are more satisfied with the democratic process than those who place themselves in the centre. In contrast, those on the left are more dissatisfied with the democratic process than those in the

**Table 2.** Multilevel ordered logit models of attitudes towards democracy

	Scepticism with democracy		Dissatisfaction with democratic performance	
	Coef	Std. Error	Coef	Std. Error
Eastern Europe	0.93**	(0.05)	0.86**	(0.03)
Age (in 10s)	-0.04**	(0.01)	0.02**	(0.01)
Left	0.04	(0.05)	0.12**	(0.05)
Right	-0.28**	(0.05)	-0.26**	(0.04)
Distance from median voter	0.00	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Low income	0.22**	(0.04)	0.11**	(0.03)
High income	-0.37**	(0.04)	-0.29**	(0.03)
University degree	-0.65**	(0.04)	-0.17**	(0.04)
Female	0.18**	(0.03)	0.05*	(0.03)
Margin of victory (largest party)	0.02**	(0.00)	-0.01**	(0.00)
Presidential	0.52**	(0.05)	0.80**	(0.04)
Intercept 1	0.02**	(0.05)	-2.06**	(0.05)
Intercept 2	2.84**	(0.05)	1.08**	(0.05)
Intercept 3	4.34**	(0.07)	3.13**	(0.05)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Variance component		0.05		1.02
Log-likelihood		-21,288		-25,029
N(Respondents)		23,673		23,991
N(Countries)		22		22

*Notes:* The dependent variables comprise four, ordered categories, where higher numbers indicate that a respondent expressed less support for democracy and greater dissatisfaction with democracy. Standard errors are given in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

centre. Ideological extremism does not appear to have an influence on authoritarian values or dissatisfaction with democracy.

We find results that are more consistent with expectations with respect to education and economic dislocation. Those with a high level of education and high-income earners are more likely to express strong support for democracy while those who have lower levels of education and low incomes are more sceptical. Finally, a lack of electoral competitiveness (i.e. when the largest party secures a larger margin of victory) is associated with greater scepticism about democracy but is nonetheless associated with greater satisfaction with process. Presidential elections are also associated with greater scepticism about democracy and greater dissatisfaction with democratic performance.

### Attitudes about Democracy and Turning out to Vote

As the results in Table 2 show, citizens in the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe are more sceptical about democracy and more dissatisfied with democratic

performance. While we assume that scepticism about democracy will make citizens less likely to vote, we do not have any clear expectations about the effects of dissatisfaction with democratic performance. On the one hand, citizens who are dissatisfied may withdraw from the political process. On the other hand, discontented citizens may be more motivated to participate. Norris (1999) has argued that citizens who are critical of democratic performance are more engaged in the political process. It is unclear, however, whether these attitudes affect the decision to vote or whether attitudes about democracy have a different impact in different contexts.

To examine these questions, we rely on a measure of reported turnout in the national election. A common problem with measuring voter participation is that non-voters may be motivated to give a socially desirable response and report voting when they have not (Karp and Brockington 2005). While the CSES advised collaborators to ask questions that minimized over-reporting, there is no way to ascertain whether such efforts were successful. To deal with this issue, we estimate the models with data that are weighted to reflect estimates of actual voter turnout. If attitudes about democracy alter the incentives for voter participation, then we should see a negative coefficient associated with these variables (i.e. citizens with unfavourable attitudes towards democracy should be less likely to vote). To examine whether these effects are stronger in Eastern Europe, we estimate a second model with interaction terms.

Beyond these key variables, we also control for several alternative individual-level explanations for voter turnout. Past research has shown that voters with strong party attachments are generally more involved in the political process, more interested, and more likely to vote (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978). Partisanship can also engender greater support for the political system which may be particularly helpful to the process of democratization (Vidal et al. 2010). Some early studies suggest that citizens in emerging democracies are likely to have weak party preferences, largely because citizens have had less opportunity to accumulate electoral learning –both from their parents and from their own repeated experience in elections (Dalton and Weldon 2007). The legacy of communism may also have contributed to a greater sense of scepticism about politicians and political parties, leading many citizens to develop strong negative feelings about political parties (Rose and Mishler 1998). Early empirical studies in Russia and Eastern Europe supported this view, finding few party identifiers and more people with multiple attachments (White, Rose, and McAllister 1997; Chiru and Gherghina 2011). In contrast, other studies of post-Soviet citizens indicate that citizens are rapidly developing a sense of party attachment at the same time that they express negative judgements about how the political parties are operating more generally (Miller and Klobucar 2000). To measure party attachment, we rely on a series of questions where respondents are asked to evaluate up to six political parties on a 10-point scale ranging from “strongly dislike” to “strongly like”. Our measure is the maximum value that the respondent ascribed to one or more parties.

Beyond party attachment, we control for several other factors that might explain a respondent’s decision to turn out to vote. First, it is well known that respondents are



more likely to vote when they are contacted by a political party (Karp and Banducci 2007). Second, as already mentioned, political and economic disenchantment may explain lower levels of turnout. We measure economic disenchantment using two variables. *Perceptions of Corruption* captures the extent to which the respondent believes that corruption is widespread in his or her country. This variable ranges from 0 (the respondent believes that it hardly happens at all) to 3 (the respondent believes that corruption is “very widespread”). We also rely on a measure asking respondents whether they approve or disapprove of government performance.<sup>9</sup> *Government Job Approval* ranges from 0 (the respondent believes the government has done “a very bad job”) to 3 (the respondent believes it has done “a very good job”). Third, we also control for a variety of individual-level characteristics that may affect voter turnout, including citizens’ distance from the median voter in their country, income, education, age, gender, and whether they are married. Finally, we control for the competitiveness of elections measured by the percentage of votes that differentiated the largest party from its nearest rival along with whether the election was only presidential.

### *Results*

The results are presented in [Table 3](#). Attitudes about democracy emerge as one of the primary explanatory factors. In comparison, concerns about corruption exert less influence. However, even after controlling for these various factors, citizens in Eastern Europe are less likely to vote than those in Western Europe. While attitudes towards democracy are significant predictors of voting across Europe, they cannot explain the differences in voter turnout between the two regions. This means that there is something else that is either not taken into account in the model or not properly measured that is depressing turnout in the post-communist countries. Moreover, as the results in model 2 show, none of the interaction terms are statistically significant, indicating that the effects of democratic scepticism are not any stronger in the post-communist countries.

To ease the interpretation of the coefficients, [Table 4](#) reports the estimated probabilities of voting for an Eastern European for each of the independent variables at their minimum and maximum values, holding all other variables constant at their means and modes. As [Table 4](#) indicates, all other things being equal, the average citizen in Eastern Europe has a probability of voting that is 0.14 lower than an average citizen in Western Europe. The average Eastern European citizen who is the most sceptical about democracy has a probability of voting of just 0.40. The likelihood of voting increases to 0.57 for the same citizen who is the most supportive of democracy. Dissatisfaction with democratic performance can also reduce the likelihood of voting. These effects are stronger than the effects of a university education or party mobilization, which increase an average citizen’s probability of voting by 0.11 and 0.10, respectively.

We can use these estimates to simulate the effects on overall turnout by taking into account the overall proportions in democratic attitudes (see [Table 2](#)). Assuming

**Table 3.** Multilevel logit models of voter participation

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef	Std. Error	Coef	Std. Error
Eastern Europe	-0.60*	(0.30)	-0.79*	(0.32)
Demo-scepticism	-0.23**	(0.03)	-0.24**	(0.04)
Democratic performance	-0.12**	(0.03)	-0.15**	(0.03)
Government job approval	0.06	(0.03)	0.06	(0.03)
Perceptions of corruption	-0.11**	(0.03)	-0.10**	(0.03)
Party contact	0.40**	(0.05)	0.40**	(0.05)
Party preference	0.21**	(0.01)	0.21**	(0.01)
Age (in 10s)	0.22**	(0.01)	0.22**	(0.01)
Distance from median voter	0.04**	(0.01)	0.04**	(0.01)
Low Income	-0.41**	(0.05)	-0.41**	(0.05)
High income	0.07	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)
University degree	0.47**	(0.06)	0.47**	(0.06)
Female	-0.01	(0.04)	-0.01	(0.04)
Married	0.27**	(0.04)	0.27**	(0.04)
Margin of victory (largest party)	-0.00	(0.01)	-0.00	(0.01)
Presidential	0.50	(0.42)	0.48	(0.42)
Demo-scepticism*Eastern Europe			0.03	(0.06)
Democratic performance*Eastern Europe			0.10	(0.05)
Intercept	-1.11**	(0.22)	-1.05**	(0.22)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Variance component		0.42		0.43
Log-likelihood		-9549		-9546
N(Respondents)		19,797		19,797
N(Countries)		22		22

*Notes:* The dependent variable is dichotomous and captures whether the respondent reported that they voted in the election (or not). Reported turnout and abstention are weighted by the actual rates of turnout and abstention in each country. Standard errors are given in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

everyone had the same characteristics, the model predicts that democratic scepticism across Eastern Europe contributes to a maximum loss of turnout of about 3%.<sup>10</sup> In Bulgaria where 32% of the electorate is sceptical about democracy, the loss is nearly 6%. If one takes into account the joint effects of scepticism and dissatisfaction with democracy, then the overall effect on turnout is more substantial but still does not approach the gap in turnout between West and Eastern Europe of 15%.

Beyond these attitudes, we find that party attachment and age are strong predictors of voting behaviour; respondents with strong party attachments, and those who were contacted by a party or a candidate, are more likely to turn out to vote. Older citizens, those who hold a university degree, and citizens who are further from the median voter in their country are all more likely to report that they voted. While there are no meaningful differences between affluent citizens and those who fall in the

**Table 4.** Predicted probability of voting

	Minimum	Maximum	Change
Eastern Europe	0.68	0.54	-0.14
Demo-scepticism	0.57	0.40	-0.17
Democratic performance	0.69	0.49	-0.20
Government job approval	0.51	0.56	0.04
Perceptions of corruption	0.59	0.50	-0.08
Party contact	0.52	0.61	0.10
Party preference	0.18	0.65	0.46
Age (in 10s)	0.38	0.79	0.42
Distance from median voter	0.52	0.58	0.06
Income (low)	0.63	0.54	-0.10
Income (high)	0.54	0.55	0.02
University degree	0.54	0.65	0.11
Female	0.54	0.52	-0.02
Married	0.54	0.60	0.07
Margin of victory (largest party)	0.56	0.49	-0.06
Presidential	0.54	0.66	0.12

*Note:* Probabilities derived from Table 3 (Model 1) holding all other variables constant at their means and modes.

middle income quintiles, citizens with the lowest incomes are more likely to abstain. Interestingly, government job approval, which is known to vary with economic conditions and which is frequently used in aggregate level analyses, appears to have no effect on the likelihood of turning out to vote.

## Discussion

The findings presented above suggest that many citizens in Eastern Europe remain sceptical about democracy. However, perceptions of corruption and economic performance do not appear to explain why citizens in post-communist countries abstain from the political process. Instead, the lack of participation is linked to scepticism about democracy. This is a particular problem in post-communist societies where more citizens are sceptical and democracy is fragile. While they are in a minority, the fact that scepticism is more prevalent in Eastern Europe raises concerns about the long-term consequences for democratic consolidation. Shin and Wells (2005) argue that transitions to democracy may be threatened when authoritarian orientations coexist with democratic ones (see also Pietsch, 2015). However, as Dalton (1994) notes, citizens in post-communist Europe were socialized under systems that mixed democratic and authoritarian attitudes. One of the problems with measuring democracy as a concept is that it may contain conflicting values (see Gibson 1996) and its core meaning may vary across countries. This should make us somewhat cautious about what kinds of inferences we can draw from these data.

Our results also have implications for larger debates about the consequences of democratic performance. Clearly, many people remain dissatisfied with the way democracy works even where support for democracy remains strong. We have also seen that economic considerations can have an effect on these attitudes, which suggests that the path to democracy may depend in part on how governments respond to economic challenges. Ideological differences also appear to be a factor with those on the left in post-communist countries being more sceptical of democracy and more likely to be dissatisfied with democratic performance.

The consequences of this dissatisfaction remain subject to debate. On the one hand, Norris acknowledges that “critical citizens” may support democracy yet at the same time remain deeply sceptical about performance (Norris 2011, 4–5). She argues that critical citizens are a positive force for democracy because they are actively involved in the political process. But the evidence presented here suggests that citizens who remain dissatisfied are more likely to abstain from the political process at least in terms of conventional participation, even if the negative effects of dissatisfaction for the average citizen are not as strong as those of democratic scepticism.

Many scholars have expressed concerns about the low rates of voter turnout that have been observed in Eastern Europe. While we have demonstrated that a link exists between these attitudes and political behaviour, this cannot explain why overall turnout is substantially lower in the post-communist countries. While there are segments in the society who are sceptical about democracy, the majority of citizens in post-communist countries fully support democracy and yet are still less likely to vote than citizens in Western Europe. Even if we were to find that one out of every two demo-sceptic citizens would abstain from voting we could still not fully explain the gap in turnout of nearly 15% between East and West Europe. This suggests that concerns that low turnout may represent a rejection of democratic values is unwarranted. We have also ruled out other popular explanations, such as perceptions of corruption and economic malaise as well as contextual factors such as electoral competition. Our findings suggest that low turnout in post-communist countries is due to factors as yet unmeasured. Solving this puzzle will require further investigation.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Mark Franklin, Pippa Norris, Arthur Spirling and members of the Electoral Integrity Project at the University of Sydney for helpful comments.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number RES-239-25-0032].

### **Notes**

1. For comparisons of turnout in national elections across European countries see [www.jkarp.com/jepop](http://www.jkarp.com/jepop).
2. Notable exceptions include Kostadinova (2009).

3. See [www.jkarp.com/jepop](http://www.jkarp.com/jepop) for a list of the election studies included in the sample along with an illustration of how these attitudes vary by country.
4. Unfortunately with cross-sectional data, it is not possible to disentangle the generational differences hypothesized above from simple life cycle effects.
5. The reference category includes respondents who self-place in the middle of the ideological spectrum.
6. The reference category includes respondents who fall into the middle three income quintiles.
7. Mean values of all of our variables for each region, as well as the average across regions are available at [www.jkarp.com/jepop/](http://www.jkarp.com/jepop/).
8. Note here that positive coefficients indicate that a characteristic is associated with more scepticism about democracy or greater dissatisfaction with democratic performance, while negative coefficients indicate that the characteristic is associated with more democratic attitudes and greater satisfaction with democracy.
9. Direct measures of economic performance are not available in Module 2 of the CSES.
10. The estimate is obtained by multiplying the change in probability by the overall distribution. Of course, not everyone is identical. Comparable census data across countries are needed to provide more precise estimates.

## References

- Anderson, Christopher J., and Yuliya V. Tverdova. 2003. "Corruption, Political Allegiances, and Attitudes toward Government in Contemporary Democracies." *American Journal of Political Science* 47(1): 91–109.
- Birch, Sarah. 2010. "Perceptions of Electoral Fairness and Voter Turnout." *Comparative Political Studies* 43 (12): 1601–1622.
- Bowler, Shaun, and Jeffrey A. Karp. 2004. "Politicians, Scandals, and Trust in Government." *Political Behavior* 26 (3): 271–287.
- Chiru, Mihail, and Sergiu Gherghina. 2011. "When Voter Loyalty Fails: Party Performance and Corruption in Bulgaria and Romania." *European Political Science Review* First View: 1–21.
- Dalton, Russell J. 1994. "Communists and Democrats: Democratic Attitudes in the two Germanies." *British Journal of Political Science* 24 (4): 469–493.
- Dalton, Russell J. 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J., and Steven Weldon. 2007. "Partisanship and Party System Institutionalization." *Party Politics* 13 (2): 179–196.
- Denemark, David, Todd Donovan, and Richard G. Niemi. 2012. "Generations and Democratic Attitudes in Advanced Democracies." Paper presented at the New Zealand Political Studies Association Annual Meetings, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, November 26–28.
- Fauvelle-Aymar, Christine, and Mary Stegmaier. 2008. "Economic and Political Effects on European Parliamentary Electoral Turnout in Post-Communist Europe." *Electoral Studies* 27 (4): 661–672.
- Franklin, Mark N. 2004. *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gibson, James L. 1996. "A Mile Wide But an Inch Deep?: The Structure of Democratic Commitments in the Former USSR." *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (2): 396–420.
- Gibson, James L., Raymond M. Duch, and Kent L. Tedin. 1992. "Democratic Values and the Transformation of the Soviet Union." *Journal of Politics* 54 (2): 329–371.
- Goidel, Robert K., and Todd G. Shields. 1994. "The Vanishing Marginals, the Bandwagon, and the Mass Media." *The Journal of Politics* 56 (3): 802–810.
- Hahn, Jeffrey W. 1991. "Continuity and Change in Russian Political Culture." *British Journal of Political Science* 21 (4): 393–421.
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2007. "Party Mobilization and Political Participation in New and Old Democracies." *Party Politics* 13 (2): 217–234.

- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2008. "Political Efficacy and Participation in Twenty-Seven Democracies: How Electoral Systems Shape Political Behaviour." *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (2): 311–334.
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and David Brockington. 2005. "Social Desirability and Response Validity: A Comparative Analysis of Overreporting Voter Turnout in Five Countries." *Journal of Politics* 67 (3): 825–840.
- Klingemann, Hans-Dieter. 1999. "Mapping Political Support in the 1990s: A Global Analysis." In *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, edited by Pippa Norris, 31–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kostadinova, Tatiana. 2003. "Voter Turnout Dynamics in Post-Communist Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 42 (6): 741–759.
- Kostadinova, Tatiana. 2009. "Abstain or Rebel: Corruption Perceptions and Voting in East European Elections." *Politics & Policy* 37 (4): 691–714.
- Lagos, Marta. 2003. "Support for and Satisfaction with Democracy." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 15 (4): 471–487.
- Miller, Arthur H., and Thomas F. Klofucar. 2000. "The Development of Party Identification in Post-Soviet Societies." *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (4): 667–686.
- Mishler, William, and Richard Rose. 2001. "What are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-communist Societies." *Comparative Political Studies* 34 (1): 30–62.
- Mishler, William, and Richard Rose. 2007. "Generation, Age, and Time: The Dynamics of Political Learning During Russia's Transformation." *American Journal of Political Science* 51 (4): 822–834.
- Neundorf, Anja. 2010. "Democracy in Transition: A Micro Perspective on System Change in Post-Soviet Societies." *Journal of Politics* 72 (4): 1096–1108.
- Norris, Pippa. 1999. "The Growth of Critical Citizens and its Consequences." In *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, edited by Pippa Norris, 257–272. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic Deficit Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pacek, Alexander C., Grigore Pop-Eleches, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2009. "Disenchanted or Discerning: Voter Turnout in Post-Communist Countries." *The Journal of Politics* 71 (2): 473–491.
- Pietsch, Juliet. 2015. "Authoritarian Durability: Public Opinion towards Democracy in Southeast Asia." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 25 (1): 31–46.
- Pietsch, Juliet, Michael Miller, and Jeffrey A. Karp. 2015. "Public Opinion Support for Democracy in Transitional Regimes." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 25 (1): 1–9.
- Powell, G. Bingham. 2000. *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Visions*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- de Regt, Sabrina, Tim Smits, and Dimitri Mortelmans. 2011. "Trends in Authoritarianism: Evidence from 31 European Countries." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies* 3 (1): 395–404.
- Rose, Richard, and William Mishler. 1998. "Negative and Positive Party Identification in Post-Communist Countries." *Electoral Studies* 17 (2): 217–234.
- Schedler, Andreas, and Rodolfo Sarsfield. 2007. "Democrats with Adjectives: Linking Direct and Indirect Measures of Democratic Support." *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (5): 637–659.
- Shin, Doh Chull, and Jason Wells. 2005. "Is Democracy the Only Game in Town?" *Journal of Democracy* 16 (2): 88–101.
- Solt, Frederick. 2008. "Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement." *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (1) (January 1): 48–60.
- Verba, S., Nie, N., and Kim, J. 1978. *Participation and Political Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vidal, D. Xavier Medina, Antonio Ugues Jr., Shaun Bowler, and Jonathan Hiskey. 2010. "Partisan Attachment and Democracy in Mexico: Some Cautionary Observations." *Latin American Politics and Society* 52 (1): 63–87.
- White, Stephen, and Ian McAllister. 2004. "Dimensions of Disengagement in Post-Communist Russia." *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 20 (1): 81–97.
- White, Stephen, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister. 1997. *How Russia Votes*. Chatham House Publishers.