Electoral Behaviour: Voter Turnout and Vote Choice

Filip Kostelka* & Eva Krejcova†

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the extensive literature on voter turnout and vote choice in Eastern Europe. More than three decades after democratisation, electoral behaviour in the region remains shaped by low turnout, weak partisan loyalty, and high electoral volatility. Contrary to widespread belief, low voting rates do not appear to be primarily driven by democratic disillusionment, but rather seem linked to factors such as communist-era legacies, emigration, and automatic voter registration. Despite high electoral volatility, vote choice is ideologically structured and only loosely tied to government performance. The ideological landscape differs from that observed in Western Europe: economically left-leaning voters often hold culturally conservative views, while those on the economic right tend to be culturally liberal. Similarly, support for the far right does not carry the same meaning across the continent, but in both Eastern Europe and Western Europe, it is positively associated with tolerance of democratic transgressions. The chapter concludes by highlighting how the reviewed findings expand our understanding of electoral behaviour and by outlining promising directions for future inquiry.

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*European University Institute, Florence, Italy & University of Essex, Colchester, UK. Email: filip.kostelka@eui.eu

†University of Lausanne, Switzerland & European University Institute, Florence, Italy. Email: eva.krejcova@unil.ch

Introduction

Electoral behaviour is fundamental to contemporary democracy. Without voting, democratic systems cannot function as citizens would be unable to express their preferences by electing representatives in elections or choosing policies in referendums. The degree of citizen participation in public votes matters *inter alia* for substantive representation, government responsiveness, and the nature of party competition (Blais, Dassonneville, and Kostelka 2020). Electoral behaviour consists of two main components: voter turnout and vote choice. These components correspond to two key sequential decisions democratic citizens make: whether to participate and, if so, whom (or which policy) to support.

Early scholarship on the post-1989 electoral behaviour in Eastern Europe investigated how citizens who spent decades under communism were adjusting to the emerging democratic institutions. Researchers wanted to know if and how fast the East would emulate the programmatic linkages between voters and parties observed in the West. While the patterns of participation and vote choice in the region quickly resembled politics in established democracies in many ways, they also exhibited significant differences, such as low voter turnout, high electoral volatility, regular electoral setbacks for incumbents, and unusual ideological configurations. These features have proved more durable than many had expected.

Contemporary studies are still interested in the inter-regional differences, but they no longer view them as symptoms of the East's early-stage democratic development. On the contrary, many now recognize that, if any convergence exists, it is largely because Western electoral politics is shifting toward patterns observed in the East. Studying the East thus can offer insights into the current and perhaps future developments in the West. For instance, understanding voters' support for populist and authoritarian leaders, who have made significant electoral breakthroughs in the East, is increasingly relevant for politics in Western democracies.

Since electoral behaviour in non-democracies and hybrid regimes often reflects distinct logics (Solt 2008, 50; Schmitter 2010, 18), this chapter primarily focuses on research conducted on those countries in the region that have met, during most of the post-communist period, the highest democratic standards. This includes especially those ten countries that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 and 2007 (EE-10),[1] even though some of them experienced significant democratic erosion in the last decade. Due to space constraints, the emphasis lies on the research adopting the perspective of citizens (for party-centered research, see Chapter 6) and published in the last fifteen years.[2] The vote choice section reviews the literature on programmatic voter-party linkages, which have predominated in the region since the early 1990s (Kitschelt et al. 1999), with studies on clientelism covered in Chapter 8.

The following sections highlight several key findings. The literature suggests that to

understand why voter turnout declined so sharply in the East, we must first consider why it was so high in the early 1990s. Empirical evidence contradicts the popular misconception that today's low levels mainly result from citizen disenchantment. Instead, the most plausible explanations lie in communist attitudinal legacies, emigration flows, and automatic voter registration. Both macro-level and micro-level drivers of citizen electoral participation mirror those observed in established democracies. However, it seems that Eastern Europeans, perhaps due to their lower baseline level of participation, tend to turn out more in response to the emergence of populist parties and parties they view with hostility.

Regarding vote choice, Eastern Europeans remain significantly more fickle than their Western counterparts. They nearly always punish incumbents, whose performance on economic and corruption indicators is only loosely related to election results. Despite the high levels of electoral volatility, electoral decisions are significantly shaped by ideology. Yet, the association between the economic and cultural ideological dimensions is, in most countries of the region, reversed when compared to the West: economic left-wingers tend to be culturally conservative, and economic right-wingers are usually culturally liberal. On the cultural dimension, the region has experienced mounting polarisation since the second half of the 2000s. The growing strength of the far right correlates with Euroscepticism, religiosity, and support for redistribution. As in Western Europe, culturally conservative voters and disengaged citizens appear to constitute the two main reservoirs of support for authoritarian leaders who undermine liberal democracy.

Voter Turnout

Declining and Low Participation in Legislative Elections

The most striking development in Eastern Europe with regard to voter turnout has been a steep decline that characterized the first two democratic decades, reaching about twenty-five percentage points on average in the EE-10 (Kostelka 2014).[3] The pioneering explanations emphasized explanatory factors that intervened after democratisation, such as citizen disenchantment with democratic institutions (Kostadinova 2003; Kostadinova and Power 2007) or reduction in electoral stakes as a result of democratic consolidation (Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker 2009).

Building on these early works, Kostelka (2015, 2017b) shows that the post-communist voter decline was in large part due to an early exceptional mobilisation, reflecting factors that, counter-intuitively, occurred before or during democratisation. He finds that voter turnout in new democracies tends to be exceptionally high when democratisation is preceded by authoritarian electoral mobilisation and when the democratisation path is opposition-driven. In Eastern Europe, both factors were largely present. The communist

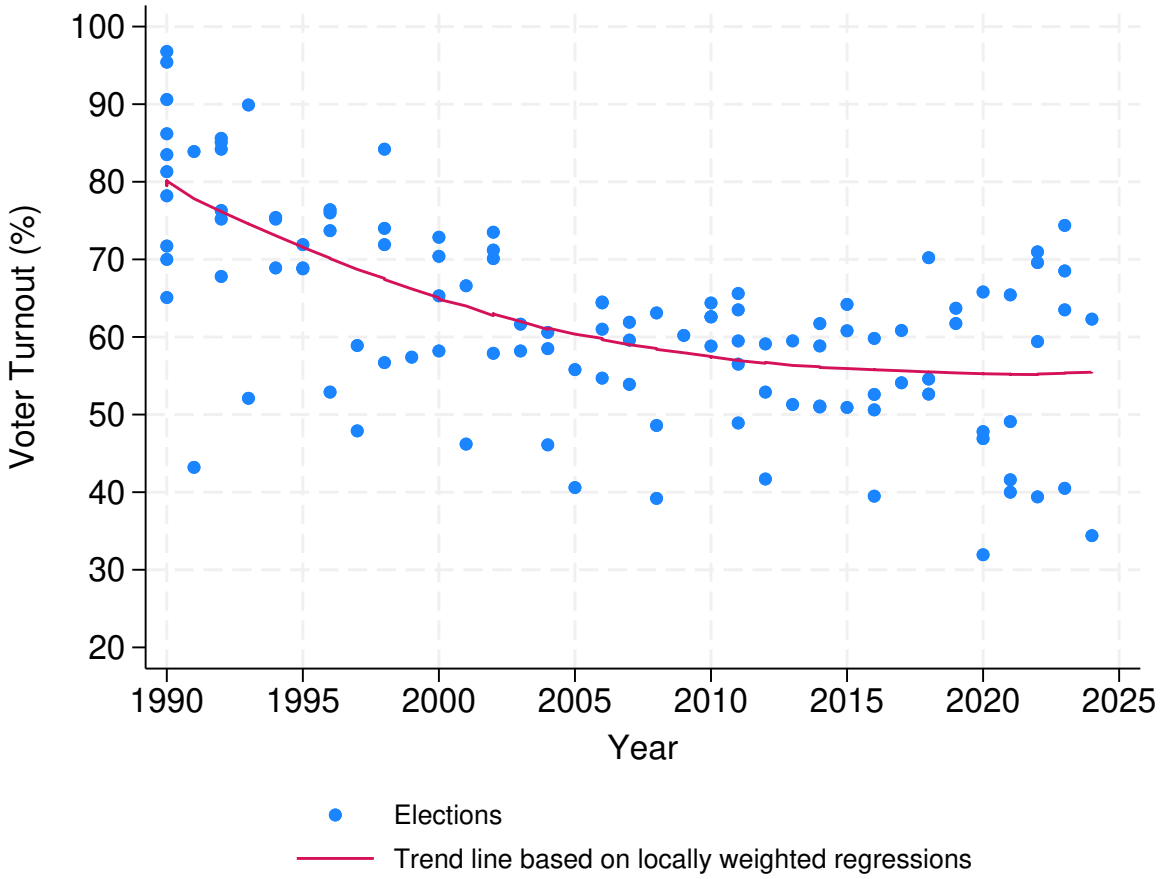
regimes invested significant efforts in facilitating voting and made electoral participation *de facto* compulsory due to informal pressure and harassment (Furtak 1990). Voter turnout in pre-1989 authoritarian elections thus usually exceeded ninety percent. Furthermore, the subsequent fall of communism was often accompanied by significant public protests, which accelerated or even drove the regime change (Dahrendorf 1990). In the early 1990s, Eastern Europeans were thus socialised into voting from authoritarian times and had good reasons to vote as elections became finally meaningful and the stakes seemed high. These factors increased voter turnout above the "normal" level that would be expected outside the peculiar democratisation context, i.e. in an election held in an established democracy with the same socio-economic, political and institutional characteristics as the Eastern European countries at hand. Thanks to this "democratisation bonus", the average turnout rate exceeded eighty-one percent. However, as time passed and citizens re-socialised into democratic politics, the democratisation context gradually lost salience and participation expectedly plummeted.

From the mid-2000s onwards, the region's average turnout stabilised at approximately fifty-five percent (see Figure 1). This is not only nearly twenty points lower than the average in West European democracies without compulsory voting (Kostelka 2014, 950), but also below the level that, based on a global analysis, would be expected in democracies with the same socio-economic, political and institutional characteristics as the EE-10 (Kostelka 2017b, 665). Eastern Europe stands out for the weakness of its electoral participation.

Researchers offer several explanations for the low voter turnout in the region. The most intuitive one, embraced by the media, has to do with citizen disenchantment with post-communist democratic politics. Factors such as corruption, bad governance, or rising economic inequality would lead to citizen dissatisfaction and withdrawal from the public sphere (Kostadinova 2003; Kostadinova and Power 2007; Quintelier, Hooghe, and Marien 2011; Karp and Milazzo 2015). While it is true that Eastern Europeans are less supportive of democracy in general (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), and more dissatisfied with the workings of their democracy than Western Europeans (Karp and Milazzo 2015, 100), this explanation may be more problematic than meets the eye. Theoretically, it is not clear why democratic dissatisfaction should be more demobilising than mobilising (Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker 2009, 474). Indeed, research from Western Europe finds that dissatisfaction is, if anything, rather mobilising than demobilising at the macro level (Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016) and that, in panel surveys, pre-election satisfaction is unrelated to voter turnout (Kostelka and Blais 2018).

Empirical evidence from Eastern Europe remains similarly inconclusive. Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker (2009) use macro-level indicators related to citizen disenchantment and find inconsistent associations with aggregated voter turnout. Kostadinova (2009) shows that corruption perceptions exert both positive and negative effects on electoral

Figure 1: Voter Turnout in the EE-10 Between 1990 and 2024



Note: The figure includes all first rounds of legislative elections held between January 1990 and June 2024. The data come from national election bodies and other official sources (see Kostelka and Krejcova 2024 for more details).

participation, which offset one another. A more recent analysis, focusing on Hungary, finds that perceptions of an increase in corruption are positively (and not negatively) associated with voter turnout (Kostadinova and Kmetty 2019). While Karp and Milazzo (2015) demonstrate that democratic dissatisfaction is negatively related to voter turnout in survey data, their evidence is based on post-election surveys (and thus could reflect reverse causality) and, as they conclude, the magnitude of the detected relationship is not sufficient to explain the whole East-West gap in turnout (p. 108). A recent study of panel surveys, which are rare in Eastern Europe, does find that pre-election democratic satisfaction is positively associated with electoral abstention unlike in Western countries (Kostelka et al. 2025). However, it also finds that within-individual change in satisfaction does not relate to turnout. Moreover, at the aggregated level, democratic satisfaction has increased in the region since the 1990s (Vlachová 2019; Foa et al. 2020), which runs counter to the decline and subsequent stagnation of voter turnout. While refined conceptualizations and measurements (e.g., distinction between dissatisfaction

and apathy), or focus on some particular cases where turnout continued to decline, such as Romania or Bulgaria, could reveal a stronger relationship between citizens' assessment of their political regimes and their willingness to turn out in elections, the disenchantment thesis clearly provides much less explanatory leverage than media pundits and laymen assume.

One source of the low turnout in Eastern Europe are the voter registration systems and significant migration outflows, which accelerated after the EU's enlargement in the mid-2000s (Goździak 2014; Kostelka 2017a; Szulecki, Erdal, and Stanley 2023a). By contrast to Western countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or France, post-communist democracies keep voter registration automatic and based on population registers. When Eastern Europeans emigrate, their voting rights thus usually remain unaltered,[4] but their voting costs significantly increase. This dramatically depresses emigrants' participation rates, often below ten percent (Kostelka 2017a). Since emigrants remain registered in their home countries' electorates, emigration mechanically reduces voter turnout in Eastern Europe and, unsurprisingly, is negatively associated with aggregate voter turnout rates (Kostelka 2015, 2017a; Comşa 2017). According to one estimate, emigration depressed voter turnout by more than two points in the EE-10 during the first six democratic elections (Kostelka 2017a, 1076). More generally, whereas geographically mobile and electorally inactive citizens are often dropped from the voter registry in the aforementioned Western countries, their Eastern European counterparts remain registered for life. A share of the East-West gap in electoral participation is thus an artefact of an "inaccurate" denominator in the West.

Another source of the low turnout presumably lies in communist attitudinal legacies (Mishler and Rose 1997; Bernhagen and Marsh 2007; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011, 2017; Kostelka 2014, 959–961; Simpser, Slater, and Wittenberg 2018). This account is supported by the fact that, since the early 1990s, Eastern Europeans have lagged behind Westerns also in other forms of political and civic participation (Howard 2003; Letki 2004; Barnes 2006; Bernhard and Karakoç 2007; Bernhagen and Marsh 2007; Kostelka 2014; Hooghe and Quintelier 2014; Vráblíková 2014; Kostelka and Rovny 2019), although some observers suggest that protest participation has been expanding in Eastern Europe in recent years (Bernhard 2020; Gherghina, Ekman, and Podolian 2023). Several studies identify traces of even older legacies in Poland, demonstrating that citizens in the former Austrian partition—characterized by cultural autonomy and political rights before 1918—vote at higher rates than those in other regions of the country, which experienced more oppressive Prussian or Russian rule (Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya 2015; Bukowski 2019; Zagórski and Markowski 2021).

The most relevant communist legacies for voter turnout pertain to partisanship and civic norms. From the pre-1989 one-party rule, Eastern Europeans inherited distrust of political parties (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011), whom they are less likely to join,

trust, and identify with than Western Europeans (Rose and Mishler 1998; Howard 2003; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). Their anti-party attitudes—perhaps reinforced by the post-communist transformation, during which political parties were considered the most corrupt institutions (Kopecký 2006, 267)—contribute to parties' institutional and mobilisation weaknesses (Gherghina 2014). Using survey data, Cutts and Haughton (2021) show that Eastern Europeans are half as likely to be contacted by political parties as other Europeans, and confirm that party contact is a strong correlate of self-declared turnout. Jung (2017) finds that, unlike in Western democracies, partisans (i.e., those close to a political party) are as affected in their decision to vote by attributes such as political information and political efficacy as non-partisans, which the author interprets as a deficiency of post-communist partisanship.[5] Regarding civic norms, Hur (2017, 58) reports a durable twenty-point gap between former Eastern Germany, which shares the communist past, and former Western Germany in the belief that citizens have a duty to vote—a factor that is globally one of the strongest predictors of electoral participation (Blais 2000; Blais and Daoust 2020).

Although communist legacies contribute to the East-West gap in turnout, they do not seem to translate into significant differences within Eastern European electorates. Linek and Petrúšek (2016) and Zagórski (2021) find that cohorts socialised under communism do not vote at different rates than those socialised after democratisation. That said, Zagórski (2021) shows that, among the former cohorts, those socialised under the totalitarian phase of communism vote at higher rates than those socialised under the authoritarian phase. Linek and Petrúšek (2016) report a similar finding for Poland, but not for Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. In a non-democratic setting, Northmore-Ball and Tertytchnaya (2023) find that Russians socialised in the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1966, which corresponds to an electorally mobilised totalitarian and early post-totalitarian era, participate at higher rates in Russia's post-1990 authoritarian elections than the older or younger cohorts of Russian citizens.

The overall relative weakness of generational differences in voting rates in Eastern Europe is puzzling since generational effects and replacement have been identified as a major source of the global decline in voter turnout that started in the 1960s (Kostelka and Blais 2021). One possibility is that, in Eastern Europe, the need for political and electoral re-socialisation after democratisation equalized the propensities to vote between the re-socialising pre-1989 cohorts and the socialising post-1989 cohorts. Alternatively, as the detection of generation effects is demanding in terms of both methods and data (Bell and Jones 2018), future research might significantly update our knowledge on the topic when longer time-series of high-quality survey data become available.

Voter Turnout Drivers and Different Election Types

The existing research suggests that most institutional predictors affect aggregate voter turnout in Eastern Europe in similar ways to those in established democracies. Voter turnout tends to be larger in presidential elections in presidential systems, and parliamentary elections in parliamentary and semi-presidential systems (Pacek, Pop-Eleches, and Tucker 2009). Holding presidential and legislative elections simultaneously also leads to higher participation (Kostadinova and Power 2007). Conversely, high election frequency depresses voter turnout (Kostelka et al. 2023), making electoral abstention more acceptable to citizens (Kostelka 2025).

Several studies explore the role of party competition. Ceka (2013) argues that robust party competition (operationalised as weak party system fragmentation and close elections) counter-intuitively depressed voter turnout in Eastern Europe. Strong and contentious opposition that held governments accountable would reduce trust in political parties, which would, in turn, reduce turnout. However, the argument relies only on indirect empirical support, as the article analyses party competition and turnout only separately. Conversely, Zagórski (2022) claims that party system fragmentation reduces participation in general and in Eastern Europe in particular through indirect, socialising effects on young cohorts. Whether and which of these contrasting findings withstand the test of time remains an open question as the current scientific consensus holds that election closeness increases voter turnout, while party system fragmentation exerts little to no effect (Blais 2006; Cancela and Geys 2016; Stockemer 2017). Focusing on the type of parties rather than their number, Leininger and Meijers (2021) find that the presence of populist parties in parliament increases voter turnout in Eastern Europe, whereas it exerts no effect in Western Europe. It remains to be seen if the increases come from previously abstaining voters, whose pool is larger in the East than in the West, counter-mobilisation, or both.[6]

The individual-level correlates of electoral participation in Eastern Europe generally mirror those observed in established democracies, similarly to the macro level. Those who are older, interested in politics, and endowed with resources (education, income, experience) tend to vote at higher rates in Eastern European elections (Tworzecki 2003; Bernhagen and Marsh 2007; Kostelka 2014; Tambe 2021). The post-1990 voter decline resulted in an increase in educational inequalities in electoral participation (Northmore-Ball 2016), but the participation bias did not appear significantly larger in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe despite the considerably lower turnout levels (Kostelka 2014; Pospieszna and Vráblíková 2022). Like in the West, those who participate in other forms of political participation tend also to vote, and thus non-electoral participation does not constitute a substitute, but a complement to voting (Nový 2014; but see Tatar 2022). Mayer (2017) finds that negative party identification (i.e., hostility towards a party) is

more strongly associated with turnout in the East.

A considerable East-West gap in voting rates can also be observed in European Parliament (EP) elections, where the successive waves of EU Eastern enlargements in 2004, 2007, and 2013 significantly depressed the EU-wide turnout level (Kostelka and Krejcova 2024). In Eastern Europe, the average EP turnout falls short of thirty percent and the difference in turnout between national and EP elections is larger than in Western Europe (Kostelka and Blais, Forthcoming). Drawing on survey data, Petričević and Stockemer (2020) ascribe the low participation in EP elections to weak media coverage, reflected in Eastern Europe's lower EU election-specific knowledge. Gyárfášová and Henderson (2018) qualitatively analyse EP turnout in Slovakia, which recorded the lowest voting rate in the history of EP elections (thirteen percent) in 2014. They explain the infamous record by factors that are common to other post-communist and small countries (low mobilisation on EU issues by political parties; low party loyalty; small country size and thus weak influence in the EP parliament) and also factors more specific to Slovakia (high election frequency, satisfaction with EU membership). Fauvelle-Aymar and Stegmaier (2008) analyzed within-country variation in EP turnout, showing that, participation is lower in regions with *inter alia* higher unemployment rates.

Other studies focus on participation in local elections. Analysing survey data from fourteen Central and Eastern European countries, Górecki and Gendźwiłł (2021) show that it is negatively associated with municipality size, a relationship which does not hold for national legislative elections. Locally residing candidates and the local embeddedness of citizens foster participation in Polish local elections (Górecki, Bartnicki, and Alimowski 2022; Markowski, Balas, and Stanley 2024). In Czech local elections, the presence of independent candidate lists is associated with higher voting rates, especially when they compete with party lists (Bernard et al. 2024). In local referendums, turnout tends to be higher on not-in-my-backyard questions, in small municipalities, and when local referendums are held concurrently with other elections (Nový 2016).

Researchers devoted limited attention to public authorities' attempts to increase turnout. Polish voters reported that they would vote in considerably higher numbers if voting were made compulsory (Czesnik 2013). However, in Bulgaria, a lottery for voters during the 2005 legislative election[7] and unsanctioned compulsory voting, introduced in 2016, failed to dramatically increase participation (Balinov 2006; Kostelka, Singh, and Blais 2024, 84). Gulczyński and Cześnik (2024) used a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to demonstrate that a government-sponsored turnout competition for fire trucks among municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants neither increased voter turnout nor boosted support for the incumbent in the 2023 Polish presidential election.[8]

Some citizens do not abstain from voting but instead cast invalid ballots. In Eastern Europe, the prevalence of invalid voting has declined over time, and this practice is consistently less common than in the new democracies of Latin America. The comparatively

low levels of invalid voting are hardly surprising given the infrequent use of compulsory voting (only in Bulgaria) and high literacy rates (Kouba and Lysek 2016). The occurrence of invalid voting in the region seems to reflect the logics of public protest, voter errors, and, perhaps, choice fatigue since it is more common in low quality democracies, concurrent elections, mixed electoral systems, and fragmented party systems (Lysek, Lebeda, and Kouba 2020). However, most Eastern Europeans who turn out cast valid ballots, and the next section explores the logic behind their choices.

Vote Choice

Fluidity of Voter Support and Performance Voting

Voter support for political parties and candidates remains highly volatile. In the early 1990s, Eastern European parties lost about thirty percentage points of their support from one election to the next, and this figure was still above twenty-five points in the 2010s (Emanuele, Chiaramonte, and Soare 2020; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020, 96). While the East-West gap in electoral volatility dropped from twenty to ten points, this is mostly due to an increase in volatility in Western Europe (Emanuele, Chiaramonte, and Soare 2020). The literature has yet to identify factors that explain within-region and over-time variation in vote switching, notably finding no linear relationship with major economic indicators (Epperly 2011; Powell and Tucker 2014; Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Crabtree and Golder 2017; Powell and Tucker 2017; but see Sikk and Köker 2023, Chapter 6). Scholars also debate whether most of the electoral volatility comes from the entrance and exit of political parties, or shifts among established parties (Powell and Tucker 2014; Emanuele, Chiaramonte, and Soare 2020). This distinction largely depends on how "new" and "established" parties are operationalised (see also Bértoa, Deegan-Krause, and Haughton 2017).

Overall, however, it is clear that a significant number of Eastern Europeans are available on the electoral market and tend to opt for recently formed parties. In a typical election, new parties secure around twenty percent of the vote, while the overall vote share of established parties steadily declines with each successive election cycle (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020, Chapter 3). Although some parties managed to build a core of loyal voters, their strength tends to weaken over time. Sikk (2012) argues that "newness" itself constitutes an attractive feature to Eastern European electorates, demonstrating that new parties typically do not significantly differ from established ones in either ideology or the concerns of their voters. Indeed, voters who have chosen a new party in one election are more likely to choose a newer party in the subsequent election rather than return to an established party (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020, Chapter 8). More comparative research is needed on the individual determinants of vote switching and individual-level

voting trajectories.

The low levels of party loyalty could signify that voting behaviour in Eastern Europe may be strongly influenced by government performance. Researchers have particularly studied how a country's economy and corruption levels shape the prospects of incumbents and their challengers.

During the first twenty post-communist years, voting patterns in the region appeared to be evolving toward classic retrospective economic voting, as some had expected (Duch 2001). In the decade immediately following communism, voters' responses to the economy were initially shaped by their attitudes toward the post-communist economic transformation. Several studies found that old (communist or ex-communist) parties benefited from bad economic times, especially high unemployment, regardless of whether they were in power or not to the detriment of new (pro-reform) parties (Fidrmuc 2000; Tucker 2006; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2009). This "stickiness of transitional identities" (Tucker 2006, 288) faded in the 2000s when researchers increasingly found support for the standard economic model whereby voters punish the incumbents for unsatisfactory economic performance (Roberts 2008; Roberts 2009, 65; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2009; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2011; Shabad and Slomczynski 2011; Helgason and Mérola 2017; Jastramskis, Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius 2021; see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008 for an overview). For example, Lippényi, Maas, and Jansen (2013) analyse forty-one surveys from Hungary conducted between 1998 and 2008 and find a growing relationship between egotropic (household's economic situation) and sociotropic (the country's economy) considerations and party preference, especially among educated voters. Tertytchnaya et al.'s (2018) findings suggest that, in less developed post-communist countries, the perception of the economy and blame attribution can be moderated by the reception of financial remittances from abroad. Citizens who receive them are more satisfied with the household and national economic conditions and trust more the incumbent.

However, recent scholarship reports that economic voting declined again in the 2010s, suggesting a curvilinear relationship over time between the 1990s and 2010s (Bochsler and Hänni 2019; Jastramskis, Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius 2021). Bochsler and Hänni (2019) conduct a global study and argue that this U-shape relationship corresponds to different stages of democratic regimes' consolidation. They do not find that, at the aggregate level, economic voting in Eastern Europe would stand out compared to the general patterns observed in other regions. By contrast, Hernández and Kriesi (2016) show that in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, economic voting was stronger in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe, which they attribute to alleged greater tolerance towards economic hardship that Eastern Europeans would have acquired during the post-communist transformation. Coffey (2013) makes a similar claim about post-communist "pain tolerance". Using survey data, she finds that economic indicators hurt incumbents in the Czech Republic only when they deteriorate from their long-term averages. Jastramskis,

Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius (2021) detailed aggregate analyses reveal a statistically and substantively significant association between unemployment and the incumbent's vote share in the 2000s, but a *de facto* null relationship in the 2010s.

The findings regarding corruption are similarly mixed. The corruption issue, for which the postcommunist transformation created a favourable environment (see Chapter XXX), has been increasingly politicised by political actors (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; Polk et al. 2017; Engler 2020). Party-level analyses suggest that politicisation of corruption does benefit opposition and new parties in highly corrupt countries (Bågenholm and Charron 2014) and that rising corruption is linked to breakthroughs by anti-establishment parties (Hanley and Sikk 2016). However, Engler (2016) finds that it is not absolute levels of corruption, but deviations from those levels that matter for new parties' vote shares in the region. Studying incumbents' vote shares, Hernández and Kriesi (2016) identify a negative association with corruption based on thirty-six elections, while Jastramskis, Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius (2021) analyse fifty-five elections and do not find a substantively consistent or statistically significant relationship. Drawing on a survey experiment, Klašnja and Tucker (2013) show that, unlike in Sweden, corruption in Moldova hurts candidates political candidates solely when it is combined with poor economic performance. Observational analyses of survey data further reveal that although voters' personal experience with corruption, such as being asked for a bribe by a public official, is consistently detrimental to incumbent support, socio-tropic perceptions only matter when an anti-corruption party emerges (Klašnja, Tucker, and Deegan-Krause 2016).

On the whole, the countries' economic performance and levels of corruption appear to variably influence election results in the region. This aligns with findings from other contexts and presumably reflects broader limitations of the retrospective voting model (Anderson 2007; De Vries and Solaz 2017). The patchy support for the model in volatile electoral arenas—where incumbents are significantly less shielded by long-term partisan loyalties from electoral sanction than in long-established democracies—suggests that raw performance indicators alone may rarely suffice to satisfactorily explain electoral outcomes.[9]

At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that Eastern European incumbents can easily get away with poor economic performance and rampant corruption. Since the early 1990s, most cabinets have lost elections, a phenomenon some authors refer to as "hyperaccountability" (Roberts 2008) or "anti-incumbency bias" (Pop-Eleches 2010). Statistical analyses estimate the average cost of governing (measured as the loss in incumbent vote share) to range between 14.8 percent (Roberts 2008) and 12.6 percent (Jastramskis, Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius 2021), which is up to seven times higher than in Western Europe. Eastern European voters systematically punish incumbents and likely factor their perception of incumbents' performance into their voting decisions. However, these perceptions may be coloured by the aforementioned legacies of distrust towards par-

ties and politics in general (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011), leading voters to assume their government is corrupt and the economy underperforms. Rather than tolerating pain, voters might anticipate suboptimal outcomes and disregard minor variations in objective performance. In line with some of the reviewed findings, government performance would need to significantly deviate from the country's long-term equilibrium to meaningfully influence voter preferences. This could explain why several studies observe an interaction between the effects of corruption and unemployment (Klašnja and Tucker 2013; Jastramskis, Kuokštis, and Baltrukevičius 2021). Supporting this hypothesis, Jastramskis (2023) highlights that in Lithuania—the leader in hyperaccountability in the region—there exists a notably large gap between citizens' evaluations of the economy and the objective economic situation.

Pop-Eleches (2010) offers another perspective on the anti-incumbency bias in Eastern European politics. He contends that hyperaccountability stems from citizen dissatisfaction and protest voting, whose outlet has been changing over time. Distinguishing three generations of elections, he argues that Eastern Europeans first voted against communists, then against mainstream incumbents, and, finally, against mainstream elites. The third generation thus resulted in the emergence of "unorthodox" political parties, which are populist, radical, or both. The success of such political forces could result from protest voting, but also from genuine contestation over radical policies. The next section thus turns to the role of policy preferences, ideology, and social structure in vote choice.

Role of Social Structure, Ideology, and Policy Preferences

Despite the high levels of electoral volatility, hyperaccountability, and dislike of political parties, voting behaviour in Eastern Europe exhibits clear ideological structuring. Like in established democracies, it reflects attitudes organised along at least two dimensions: economic and cultural. However, as Kitschelt (1992) predicted, researchers find that the association of the two dimensions is reversed. The economically liberal pole tends to be culturally liberal (and not conservative as in the West) and the economically statist pole tends to be culturally conservative (and not liberal). These patterns, which originate in the conflict over the communist regime—which was economically left-wing and authoritarian—can be observed both in party ideology (Marks et al. 2006; Vachudova and Hooghe 2009; Rovny and Edwards 2012) and citizen attitudes (Kostelka and Rovny 2019; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2020). Furthermore, they tend to be stable over time (Rovny and Polk 2017).

When we zoom in beyond the simple East-West comparison, the region's aggregated ideological patterns conceal significant cross-country diversity (Rovny and Edwards 2012; Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2012). In some Eastern European countries, economic left-wingers are culturally liberal, similar to their Western counterparts. Rovny (2014; 2015;

2024, Chapter 5) attributes this divergence from the general Eastern European ideological pattern to post-communist state-building and ethnic politics. He observes that it occurs in former federal peripheries that harbour significant ethnic minorities originating from the former federal center (e.g., Estonia, Latvia, Croatia, and Slovenia) and, to a lesser degree, in those countries hosting any significant ethnic minority (e.g., Lithuania, Slovakia).[10] In the former countries, the left aligns with the ethnic minorities, who espouse culturally liberal ideology to protect their rights, whereas the right adopts anti-communist and nationalist rhetoric to construct the new state. Beyond party-level evidence, this theory receives support from individual-level analyses of voting behaviour drawn from various comparative and country-specific surveys (Rovny 2015; 2024, Chapter 5; see also Kostelka and Rovny 2019). They demonstrate contrasting associations between citizen cultural attitudes, minority status, and support for economically left-wing parties. Moreover, because of their tendency to support the liberal and constitutional camp, ethnic minorities play a crucial role in defending democratic institutions. Rovny (2023; 2024, Chapter 7) argues that they serve as a vital antidote to democratic backsliding in the region.

As in the West, it is primarily through ideology that socio-demographic characteristics impact vote choice. Already in the mid-1990s, education, non-manual occupation and urban residence were positively correlated with support for economic liberalism and left-right self-placement, which were, in turn, strongly indicative of voting for market-liberal parties (Kitschelt et al. 1999, Chapter 8). Most empirical studies from the region emphasise the role of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, and place of residence (Evans 2006). In a broad comparative study, Knutsen (2013) shows that religion and urban/rural residence are strongly associated with vote choice in Eastern Europe, similarly to the West. By contrast, social class and gender are practically unrelated, which could reflect the initially flat structure of post-communist societies (Rose 2009). Rovny's (2024) work highlights the importance of ethnicity, which is likely the only socio-demographic characteristic whose degree of relative social closure and group identity provides a basis for a proper Rokkanian cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990).

Researchers have explored a variety of ways in which ideology shapes Eastern European voting behaviour. Tavits (2008) finds that, when new parties emerge, they tend to have a stronger negative impact on the vote shares of their established ideological neighbours within the party system rather than on those of non-neighbours. De Vries and Tilman's (2011) analysis of survey data reveals that respondent-party proximity on the left-right scale exerts only a slightly weaker effect on voting propensity in the East than in the West and that proximity on European Integration plays a stronger role in the East. That said, perhaps due to their party systems' instability, Eastern Europeans seem less able to correctly identify the ideological positions of political parties than Western Europeans (Kritzinger, Sylvia and McElroy, Gail 2012). Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits (2014) argue that this voter uncertainty about party positions benefits radical parties whose

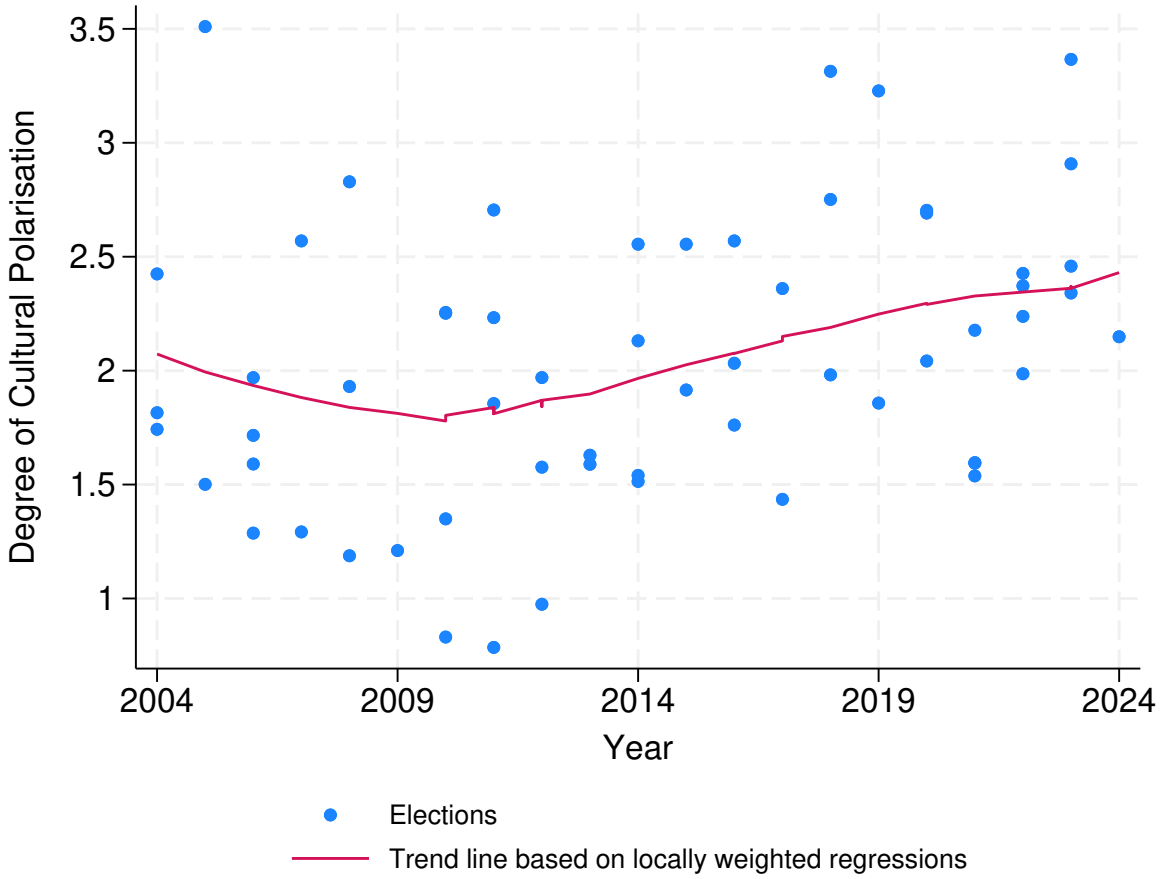
positions appear clearer and who, unlike in Western Europe, tend to receive more votes than mainstream parties. Dinas and Northmore-Ball (2020) demonstrate an ideological anti-left bias in the self-identification of those Eastern Europeans who were born after 1950 and whose negative experience with communism was not mitigated by the Stalinist indoctrination from the 1940s and early 1950s. However, in the aggregate, this bias does not seem to translate into an electoral penalty for left-wing parties, which may have to do with Eastern Europeans' strong support for welfare and redistribution (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017).

Since the second post-communist decade, researchers have observed a rise in the importance of the second, cultural dimension. Drawing on insights from an expert survey, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009; 2012, Chapter 3) find that, in the 2000s, the economic conflict over welfare was important in all Eastern European countries, but in some, it was trumped by issues such as ethnicity (e.g., Latvia), nationalism (Hungary), or religion (Poland). Tavits and Letki (2014) argue that as economic inequality in the region increased, right-wing parties began emphasising cultural issues to divert voters' attention from problems that were disadvantaging them. Using survey data, Lancaster (2022) shows that the outbreak of the 2015 refugee crisis strongly increased the salience of the immigration question to Eastern European voters. These and other developments contributed to polarisation on the cultural dimension, as illustrated in Figure 2, and a rise of far-right parties,[11] which attracted significant scholarly attention.[12]

Several socio-demographic characteristics set Eastern European far-right voters apart from their Western counterparts. Economic vulnerability, frequently emphasised in studies of Western Europe, appears less significant for far-right support in the East. While some studies link economic hardships to far-right voting in specific contexts (Stefanovic 2008; Rydgren 2011), more recent comparative analyses generally find no significant relationship between economic deprivation or unemployment and far-right support (Santana, Zagórski, and Rama 2020; Brils, Muis, and Gaidytė 2022). Religiosity plays a similarly contrasting role across the two regions. While in Western Europe, far-right supporters tend to be less religious, in Eastern Europe, religious voters of Christian denomination are more likely to support far-right parties (Allen 2017; Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022; Jackson and Doerschler 2024). This reflects the integration of religion with ultra-nationalist platforms in Eastern Europe, exemplified by Poland's far-right espousing ultra-Catholic and anti-liberal ideologies (Minkenberg 2018, 536). As in Western Europe, women are less likely than men to support the far-right, but socio-structural factors play a more significant role in explaining the gender gap in Eastern Europe (Harteveld et al. 2015).

Further East-West differences in far-right support lie in attitudinal factors. Far-right voters in Eastern Europe are economic leftists. This position contrasts with the mixed right-wing economic stances of far-right voters in Western Europe (Allen 2017) and re-

Figure 2: Cultural Polarisation in the EE-10 Between 2004 and 2024



Note: The figure draws on election results from the Parlgov Dataset (Döring and Manow 2024), complemented from official sources for the most recent elections, and party positions data from Chapel Hill Expert surveys (Jolly et al. 2022; Hooghe et al. 2024). It comprises all legislative elections held between January 2004 and June 2024. Cultural polarisation corresponds to the standard deviation in party positions (weighted by party vote share) on the GAL-TAN axis (1-7).

flects the post-communist far rights' economically left-leaning ideology (Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009; Buštíková 2018). Intriguingly, anti-immigrant sentiment–a strong predictor of far-right voting in Western Europe–plays a less prominent role in Eastern Europe (Santana, Zagórski, and Rama 2020; Brils, Muis, and Gaidytė 2022; Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022). Given the relatively higher levels of xenophobia in the region compared to Western Europe (Minkenberg 2013), it may indicate that anti-immigrant sentiment also manifests in support for other political parties. Furthermore, it highlights the historical salience of minority-related issues. Notably, Bustikova (2014) has shown that the success of politically mobilised minorities can significantly enhance far-right support. Another peculiarity is that far-right voters, notably in Hungary and Poland (where far-right parties assumed governmental responsibilities), exhibit higher trust in national institutions and satisfaction with democracy than non-supporters of these parties (Zagórski and Santana 2021; Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022). This pattern is the opposite of trends in

Western Europe and suggests that far-right support in these countries is far from merely protest-driven. Finally, Euroscepticism represents a key factor behind far-right support in Eastern Europe (Santana, Zagórski, and Rama 2020; Zagórski and Santana 2021). Voters respond to criticism of EU accession terms (Pirro 2014) and integration (Stanley 2017), and are drawn to portrayals of these parties as defenders of Christian Europe and traditional values (Enyedi 2020; Vachudova 2020).

Voters' support for far-right parties in the region is often interpreted through the lens of strategic party behaviour. Rydgren (2011) argues that neither mass society theory nor social capital theory accounts for the far-right rise. Instead, as traditional left-wing parties reformed (Berman 2019; Snegovaya 2022), their economically left-leaning supporters increasingly gravitated toward far-right parties capitalising on issues such as corruption (Vachudova 2009; Bustikova 2009), ethnic minorities (Bustikova 2014; Pirro 2015), and Euroscepticism (Santana, Zagórski, and Rama 2020). Moreover, populist parties in government frequently draw on authoritarian-era strategies to exploit the new system's weaknesses and erode their countries' democracy (Buštíková and Guasti 2019). They progressively shifted to more extreme positions (Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022) and used conspiracy theories to divide the opposition (Marinov and Popova 2022), compounded by information warfare led by foreign actors such as Russia seeking to manipulate public opinion in the region (Wenzel et al. 2024).

The experimental literature investigates citizens' tolerance of democratic erosion. Svolik et al. (2023) find that, in Western and Eastern Europe alike, leaders committing democratic violations have two main reservoirs of support: culturally conservative voters and disengaged citizens. Their support appears to stem from a greater openness to authoritarianism and only partially reflects policy preferences. In Hungary, aspiring authoritarians receive stronger support among survey respondents with less education and lower economic status (Wunsch and Gessler 2023). In Poland, citizens disapprove of electoral violations, but this disapproval does not translate into a change in their vote during presidential elections (Jacob, 2024).

Some studies attempt to trace historical legacies in contemporary voting behaviour. Typically aiming at causal identification, these works have yielded a number of interesting findings. In Ukraine, support for pro-Russian parties appears to be weaker in communities that the Soviet government repressed more heavily in the 1940s (Rozenas, Schutte, and Zhukov 2017). In the 2001 Polish legislative election, the anti-Semite League of Polish Families received stronger support in the vicinity of the Treblinka death camp, which materially benefited from the Holocaust (Charnysh and Finkel 2017). In Czechia, the communist party's support in post-1989 elections was stronger in those areas of Sudetenland that had been liberated by the U.S. army at the end of the Second World War, which paradoxically protected German communists from being expelled (Grossmann, Jurajda, and Roesel 2024).

Scholars have also increasingly examined the electoral consequences of the region's significant emigration, noting its implications for political dynamics in the region (Kureková 2013; Kyriazi et al. 2023; Kelemen 2021). Migrants from the region are generally younger, more educated, and hold more liberal political views than their non-migrant counterparts (Auer and Schaub 2024). This emigration of liberal voters and the low external voting rates (see above) weaken support for liberal democratic values, leaving behind a more conservative electorate (Lim 2023). At the same time, diaspora voting can have a decisive impact on the election result, as shown in Traian Băsescu's narrow victory in the 2009 Romanian presidential election (Borz 2020). Voters from abroad are generally more likely to back right-wing economic policies (Szulecki, Erdal, and Stanley 2023b), less likely to vote for populist parties (Turcu and Urbatsch 2023), and more supportive of culturally liberal platforms (Szulecki, Erdal, and Stanley 2023b) compared to their counterparts in the countries of origins.[13]

Conclusion

This review of the extensive literature reveals that electoral behaviour in Eastern Europe remains distinct, in several respects, from that of Western Europe. The limited convergence is driven primarily by changes in the West rather than in the East. Western observers of Eastern voting patterns may, therefore, be catching a glimpse of their own region's future. This future could include reduced voter turnout, weaker voter loyalty, and heightened electoral volatility.[14] Whether such attributes can be conducive to accountable, high-quality, and resilient democratic regimes or, instead, expand opportunities for aspiring populists and authoritarians remains an open question.

The reviewed studies indicate that despite the volatility of party preferences, vote choice in Eastern Europe is ideologically constrained and only loosely tied to governments' performance. While in some Eastern European countries, the main ideological patterns closely resemble those in the West, in most others, they appear mirror-reversed. Similarly, support for the far right does not carry the same meaning across the continent. Yet, in both Eastern Europe and Western Europe, it is positively associated with tolerance of democratic transgressions.

Eastern Europe's unique historical context has offered social scientists an unparalleled opportunity to test and challenge major theories and long-standing assumptions about electoral behaviour originating in Western democracies. Studies on Eastern Europe have demonstrated that the association between the economic left and cultural liberalism is not natural and inevitable in developed democracies, and that non-electoral political participation is not favoured by economic left-wing ideology, but cultural liberalism. They have shown that the relationship between participation and inequality is moderated by contextual factors and that, in some contexts, even very low levels of participation

may not always lead to economically regressive policies. In the same vein, the poor performance of the economic voting model in an *a priori* extremely favourable context—with weak partisan loyalties and volatile party support—demonstrates that economic factors alone cannot satisfactorily explain electoral outcomes.

Future research should aim to provide deeper insights into several key areas of inquiry. It remains unclear how much the different factors discussed above contribute to Eastern Europeans' strained relationship with political parties and their low levels of political participation. There is ample room for ambitious theories and empirical analyses mapping the political conflicts in the region and their variation over time. More can be learned about the effects of foreign meddling, disinformation, and conspiracy theories on election outcomes. Researchers should investigate the mechanisms driving the electoral success of rhetorically pro-Kremlin politicians in countries that historically suffered from Soviet domination and oppression. Electoral support for politicians with a questionable commitment to democracy is likely to remain a pressing topic in the coming years. Geographically, greater attention could be devoted to the comparative study of electoral politics in Western Balkans and the Baltic States.

The quantitative stream of the existing literature also faces several data-related and methodological limitations. Firstly, panel surveys with suitable political questions remain rare and, in terms of length, scope, and sample size, they do not compare to the tools available in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or Switzerland.[15] Researchers studying Eastern Europe are thus severely constrained in their capacity to follow citizens' voting trajectories and properly distinguish within-individual and between-individual variances. Secondly, although the methodological standards in the field have clearly improved, there is still room for advancement when benchmarked to the state-of-the-art in the general literature on political behaviour. Time-series cross-sectional analyses, which are frequently used by the above-reviewed works, should, as a matter of course, address issues such as unit heterogeneity, serial correlation, and non-stationarity. At the very least, cross-national studies should present models with country-fixed effects, clustered standard errors by country, and some controls for time trends as the default specification. Future quantitative research on the region could also more readily embrace the causal revolution. Naturally, causally-identified research designs cannot answer all types of research questions and replace traditional observational studies, but they can complement them by providing greater confidence in causal inferences.

Notes

1. Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

2. For surveys of earlier research, see Jasiewicz 1998; Evans 2006; Barnes 2006; Birch 2013,

2017; Kostelka 2014; Bustikova and Zechmeister 2017; Enyedi and Deegan-Krause 2017.

3. In this chapter, voter turnout refers to the percentage of registered voters who cast a ballot.

4. A significant exception is Hungary, where citizens who declare a permanent address abroad have to re-register to keep the right to vote. See https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/voters-registration, visited on 05/01/2025.

5. An alternative interpretation is possible. The baseline turnout in the West being significantly higher than in the East, the moderation effect of partisanship in the West may be due to ceiling effects.

6. Furthermore, some of the observed effects could stem from reverse causality. If populists' success coincides with low turnout, the positive correlation between the populist presence and turnout could result from turnout returning to its long-term equilibrium.

7. Those who participated in the Bulgarian 2005 legislative election could win prizes including a car worth 15,000 euros. See https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/HTML/2045_05.htm, visited on 08/07/2025).

8. That said, the RDD that leverages the threshold of 20,000 inhabitants cannot tell whether the treatment exerted *any* effect on turnout. The municipalities that had a realistic chance to win (and where a mobilisation effort could be expected) are the smallest ones (where turnout tends to be the highest, as reviewed above), which are far below the threshold. This is confirmed by the low population of most winning municipalities (see https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/wyniki-i-tury, visited on 05/01/2025).

9. In defense of the performance model, it is worth noting that, in most studies, the measurement of economic welfare remains fairly restrictive (e.g., excluding economic inequality), and corruption is assessed using general and somewhat coarse indicators. The employed performance indicators usually do not incorporate numerous government scandals and blunders observed in Eastern European democracies, which may matter to voters. Improved measures could yield stronger results.

10. In the latter countries, the ethnic minority is not historically associated with the communist regime and the economic left, resulting in mixed patterns in the association between the two dimensions.

11. Given the dimensionality of the political space in Eastern Europe, it would be more accurate to refer to TAN parties (Hooghe and Marks 2018) or culturally conservative parties as some of these political forces—such as the social-democratic SMER in Slovakia—openly claim to be left-wing. However, to avoid confusion, this chapter adopts the terminology most commonly used in the reviewed literature.

12. Similar trends have been described in Western Europe (Kriesi et al. 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2018), but the identified causes for the West—globalisation, European integration, and especially immigration—may be at least partly different in the East (e.g., low relevance of immigration until 2015).

13. However, diaspora voting patterns also show considerable variation. In the 2024 Romanian presidential election, forty-three percent of the diaspora vote went to the populist far-

right candidate Călin Georgescu, contributing to approximately fifteen percent of his total vote share. See https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-romanian-citizens-propel-far-right-power-calin-georgescu-romania-presidential-election/, visited on 05/01/2025

14. That said, high participation rates in the most recent legislative and presidential elections in East-Central Europe (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) suggest that the threat (or experience) of democratic erosion might mobilise otherwise disengaged citizens.

15. The only exception is former East Germany, which is covered by long-term German panels. A formidable project is also the Polish Panel Survey (https://polpan.org/en/), which started already in 1988, but which is conducted in five-year intervals and contains only a limited number of political questions.

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