CHAPTER SEVEN

EXPLAINING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN
EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

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The democratic form of government critically implies the participation of the demos in decision-making processes at different levels and in various degrees. Therefore, it is widely recognized that democracies depend on their citizenry’s participation in the political sphere for their normal functioning. Although there are few cases of extensive direct democracy, even representative democracy requires a fair amount of participation. When one applies this participation criterion of democratic rule to new democracies, one sees comparatively lower levels of participation in new democracies in comparison with those in established Western political systems. This finding could be worrisome, since positive attitudes towards the system are indeed critical in unconsolidated democracies (Mishler & Rose, 1997). The first and most important question is then how can this gap in participation be explained? Is it even necessary to expect convergence?

Political participation is traditionally split into a two-category taxonomy, namely conventional and unconventional participation. The acts forming the sphere of conventional participation include voting, campaign activity and party volunteer work, while unconventional participation usually encompasses petition signing, protesting and boycotting. It is the latter that we aim to explore in this chapter. The main reason for our choice resides in the problematic situation of unconventional participation in East Central Europe, due to the ‘special’ status of protest during repressive communist regimes. In fact, under communism protesting was either a state mechanism for creating the facade of a workers’ regime, or forbidden and severely punished (Szabo, 1996). Alternatively, protest in the region is also associated with opposition to communism and with dissidence. Hence, unconventional participation in post-communist societies can have both positive and negative connotations, and here we explore this duality. On the one hand, lower involvement in politics in the East in comparison to the West could
be due to the unconsolidated status of democracy and the long-term process of internalizing democratic practices. Moreover, freedom after 1989 may also mean freedom from forced mobilization—freedom not to participate (Howard, 2003). On the other hand, differences in levels of participation between the countries of East Central Europe could be indicative of the ways in which regime change is embedded in the local context. If in Western democracies low turnouts have been interpreted by some as satisfaction with the way things are going, then, by the same token, low participation in East Central Europe does not necessarily signal a problem. Nevertheless, because of forced participation during communism, in East Central European countries, participation needs to be understood within a special context that we attempt to account for in this chapter.

Citizen’s political activism is crucial for the development of a strong and stable democracy. While turnout is not comparatively lower in the new democracies, levels of unconventional political participation in post-communist countries after 1989 were generally found to be below those in the older democracies (Letki, 2004; Bernhagen & Marsh, 2006). Does the newer data from the WVS support this difference? If so, what are the main factors explaining the difference? How do these differences change as a country consolidates its democracy? Furthermore, what are the differences within the former Eastern bloc, and how can they be explained? In the Western world, many categories of political activity are the preserve of an educated elite, primed by post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1990). But what happens in societies that do not have a large highly educated elite, and where ordinary people are not sufficiently well-off to be post-materialist (Uslaner, 2004)? What motivates the relatively few East Central European citizens who take an active role in political life? Are there similar or different motivations for each type of political participation?

We argue that political participation is influenced by factors at two different levels. First, there are the individual factors. Hence, political participation is largely driven by (1) demographics, (2) resources, (3) efficacy and interest, and (4) social connections (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003; Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Second, there are country-level indicators that may have an impact on just how much unconventional participation there is in each country. Therefore, we employ country-level indicators that contextualize the analysis and allow us to distinguish between East Central European countries.