THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN POLAND, HUNGARY, AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Introduction

Nearly a decade has passed since the fall of communist regimes in East Central Europe. During this time Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have each held several multi-party elections, including ones that resulted in peaceful transfers of power from the government to the opposition. However, there remains a widespread concern — evident in many press accounts of this year’s elections in Hungary and the Czech Republic — that most voters in these new democracies have few if any real partisan attachments, that they tend to be uninterested in politics, and that they generally perceive the political scene as something quite remote and disconnected from the realm of their everyday experience. Part of the blame is said to lie with the political parties, many of which appear preoccupied with internal squabbles, divisions, and leadership disputes, rather than the building of coherent programmatic proposals and effective organizational structures. With such supposedly unpredictable voters and ineffectual parties, elections in East Central Europe are often described as highly volatile contests of personalities and single, emotionally-charged issues.

This gloomy picture may well contain an important element of truth, and if it is indeed accurate, then the situation it describes would have profound implications for the chances of “democratic consolidation” in the region. Unlike the concept of “democratic transition,” which refers to the relatively brief period of time in which the institutions of an authoritarian regime are dismantled and replaced by institutions of democratic government, “consolidation” refers to the longer-term processes necessary for that democracy to take root. These are quite diverse, and include the establishment of the rule of law, the development of a (productive) market-based economy, the emergence of an autonomous civil society, and the disappearance from the political scene of significant forces con-
mitted to the destruction of the democratic order. In the electoral sphere, which is the focus of this study, consolidation of democracy requires that the party system represent and accommodate all major interests in society. In other words, the party system must correspond to the structure of society in significant and predictable ways, and not—to use a colorful expression favored by some East European analysts—“free float” above people’s heads.

But if structured and predictable multi-party politics were to emerge in East Central Europe, what factors could be expected to play a role in this process? The theoretical literature suggests that we look at the interplay of social cleavages, institutional arrangements, and autonomous choices made by political elites. Let us begin with social cleavages. Perhaps the best-known approach to investigating the origins of party systems is associated with the work of Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, whose landmark 1967 article “Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments,” outlined what has become the standard theory of the development of West European party systems. Briefly, Lipset and Rokkan argued that in Western Europe party systems were the product of a centuries-long historical process that resulted in the segmentation of societies into multiple groups with distinct interests. With the advent of mass suffrage in the 1920s, these historically-shaped social divisions served as a natural—and highly durable—foundation for the new party systems.

The Lipset-Rokkan theory has been criticized by some for its inability to predict which of the many social cleavages found in any given country might turn out to be politically significant. Others have questioned its claim (made in 1967) that West European party systems had remained basically unchanged since the 1920s. Indeed, the large literature on partisan re-alignment makes the