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978-0-521-11033-4 - The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe: Public Preferences and Policy Reforms

Andrew Roberts

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I

Introduction

On 9 December 1997, Václav Havel, then president of the Czech Republic, addressed his country's Parliament, Constitutional Court, and diplomats. His purpose was to deliver an assessment of the state of the country at the end of its fifth year as an independent democracy. His conclusions were disturbing.

He saw a society with two faces. The first face was everyday life – work, family, and leisure. This face he called incomparably better and more varied than that under communism.¹ But there was another face: “the relation of citizens to their own government, to politics and public life” – what might be called the state of democracy. In his words,

This side of life indeed shows a rather gloomy face at the moment. Many people – the opinion polls corroborate this – are disturbed, disappointed or even disgusted by the general condition of society in our country. Many believe that – democracy or no democracy – power is again in the hands of untrustworthy figures whose primary concern is their personal advancement instead of the interests of the people. . . . The prevalent opinion is that it pays off in this country to lie and to steal; that many politicians and civil servants are corruptible; that political parties – though they all declare honest intentions in lofty words – are covertly manipulated by suspicious financial groupings. An increasing number of people are disgusted by politics, which they hold responsible – and rightly so – for all these adverse developments. As a consequence, they have begun to feel suspicious of us all, or even take an aversion to us – notwithstanding the fact that they freely elected us for our offices (Havel 1999).²

Havel's evaluation of citizens' attitudes toward politics hit a public nerve. His pithy phrase describing this face of society soon entered into everyday conversation. He said that the country was suffering from a *blbá nálada*, or bad mood.

¹ I use the term communism rather than socialism or state socialism for reasons of conceptual clarity laid out in Roberts (2005).

² English translation from http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html.

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Havel was not alone in his gloomy assessment. Many scholars have expressed similar doubts about the functioning of the public sphere in the post-communist democracies. In a book-length assessment of the nature of post-communism, Richard Sakwa (1999: 116–7) wrote that “[t]he gulf between formal and substantive democracy is in most places the defining feature of postcommunist democratization.” Jane Curry (1995: 55) found that “in these new democracies, there is an increasing absence of the demos, the population, in the political process . . . even when individuals do participate their desires are all too often not reflected in political debates and policy decisions, or their votes reflect little real understanding of the positions of parties and candidates.”

It is easy to find anecdotal support for these judgments even today, more than fifteen years after the fall of communism. Consider the most recent elections in the three states that are considered the great successes of the transition. Poland’s elections of September 2005 produced a coalition of the Christian nationalist Law and Justice party with parties of the extreme left and extreme right that proceeded to collapse amid allegations of both corruption and persecution of political opponents. In Hungary, the Socialists won elections in May 2006 only to be exposed as having lied about the state of public finances and their future plans during the campaign. The release of a tape of the prime minister confessing these lies precipitated the largest street demonstrations since the fall of communism. Czech elections two months later ended with an exact tie between the parties of the right and left (the latter including an unreconstructed communist party), which after seven months of deadlock was only resolved by the mysterious defection of two Social Democratic MPs to their archrivals.

Other scholars, however, deliver a more positive assessment of the post-communist era. In surveying these same three countries, Hubert Tworzecki (2003: 3) writes that “[a]n optimistic observer witnessing Czech, Hungarian, and Polish elections of the late 1990s might have easily concluded that democracy in East-Central Europe had been practiced for a long time and had become quite routine.”³

Turning away from scholarship – where talk is sometimes cheap – ten countries in Eastern Europe did meet some of the toughest real-world challenges head on.⁴ All managed to survive recessions as large as the Great Depression along with the reconstruction of their entire economies and polities, and yet they rarely came close to suspending free and fair elections. Even where less-than-democratic rulers took power, they were almost invariably thrown out of office at the next election. These countries also managed to fulfill the rigorous accession requirements of the European Union (EU), which were often created *de novo* precisely to make things difficult for them. A mere decade and a half

³ Tworzecki follows this with a skeptical perspective, but he inclines to optimism.

⁴ The designation Eastern Europe is not a perfect one and I do not use it as a term of disrespect. Nevertheless, it is more specific than Central Europe – which usually includes Germany and Austria – and less of a mouthful than East Central Europe or Central and Eastern Europe. I use it here as a shorthand for the ten countries from the region who entered the EU.

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after exiting some of the most repressive regimes that the world has seen, these countries had entered the most prestigious and exclusive club of democracies in the world and done so while navigating economic and social problems that might have crippled even an established democracy.

These observations illustrate the two puzzles that motivate this book. The first is how to reconcile the diverse assessments of democratic quality in Eastern Europe. Are these democracies working poorly or well? Are they disconnected from their citizens and prone to corruption and repression as the pessimists argue? Or have they coped well with the transition and become functioning democracies, more or less indistinguishable – at least politically – from their Western neighbors? Are they truly full-fledged members of the club of democracies or do they reside in a halfway house between democracy and dictatorship that Richard Rose and his colleagues (Rose et al. 1998: 218) label “broke-backed democracy”? The first puzzle addressed in this book is which of the divergent assessments of democracy in Eastern Europe better fits the facts.

The second puzzle is how these countries managed to do what they did. Even the pessimists admit that these countries have managed to meet most of the minimal requirements of democracy: maintaining free elections and civil rights. But how have they managed to overcome enormous hurdles to reach as far as they did? Forty years without any genuine political competition or public participation meant that the entire political life of these countries had to be created from scratch with few memories of anything other than dictatorship. Moreover, the legacies of communism created a suspicion and apathy toward politics and a preference for technocratic rather than democratic solutions. And this does not include the rigors of the transition and economic reform mentioned earlier.

Even if one sides with the democratic pessimists, it is a puzzle that these countries could maintain the level of democracy that they did. What accounts for the fact that these ten countries survived as competitive democracies even as their governments had to deal with problems that would test even established democracies?

1.1. THREE ISSUES

The resolution of these puzzles requires that we address three issues. The first is the meaning of democratic quality. What does it mean to say that democracy is working well or badly? What differentiates a high-quality from a low-quality democracy? What sort of politics characterizes a high-quality democracy? As Chapter 2 makes clear, one of the causes of disagreement over the quality of democracy in Eastern Europe is the lack of a common conception of democratic quality. Different studies use different standards and some leave their standards implicit.

An important part of this book is an attempt to produce a set of criteria for assessing the quality of democracy and ways for operationalizing these criteria to conduct empirical research. This book puts forth an explicit definition of

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democratic quality and uses the definition consistently to assess the nature of democratic processes in Eastern Europe.

The second issue is the nature and level of democratic quality in Eastern Europe. Having established a set of standards, the main portion of the manuscript uses these standards to evaluate the new democracies in Eastern Europe. Another reason for disagreement over democratic quality in the region is the fact that many evaluations have proceeded either piecemeal – looking at isolated incidents – or at too high a level of abstraction – cumulating failures in different aspects of politics across multiple countries.

This study instead aims for a semblance of comprehensiveness and concreteness. In the first place, it considers a fairly wide portion of Eastern Europe: the ten countries that have joined the EU. Thus, conclusions can be made about general trends and outliers can be identified. Temporally, the study considers these countries over the entire period of their democratic existence, insofar as data permit. Thus, it can ask whether democratic quality has improved or declined over the first decade and a half of transition. With this set of standards and assessments, it is hopefully possible to determine if Havel's diagnosis is accurate.

The third issue is what stands behind these levels of quality. Given a set of standards and an assessment, what are the causes of the particular levels of quality in Eastern Europe? Are they to be found in the legacies of communism – its treatment of civil society, political parties, and economic life? Did it matter that citizens were well educated and mostly middle class? Or should attention be focused on the transition and particularly the economic challenges it presented? Did international pressure affect the development of democracy? Or were domestic political institutions at work with different constitutional structures producing different sorts of democracies? In short, what factors explain the sorts of quality that emerged in these countries and what do they imply for the quality of new democracies elsewhere in the world?

1.2. WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC QUALITY?

I begin by considering the first of these issues. The study of democratic quality has exploded in recent years. As Figure 1.1 shows, the phrases “quality of democracy” and “democratic quality” are much in vogue in political science.⁵ Relatively uncommon just a decade ago, their use in scholarly articles has ballooned in the early years of the new millennium. Yet, as I show in Chapter 2, most works have left the meaning of the concept vague or have stretched it to cover too many disparate phenomena. This book provides a clear definition of the concept of democratic quality. Although this definitional exercise is the subject of the next chapter, it may be helpful to briefly outline the argument of that chapter here so that readers know where the book is headed.

⁵ I use these terms interchangeably throughout.

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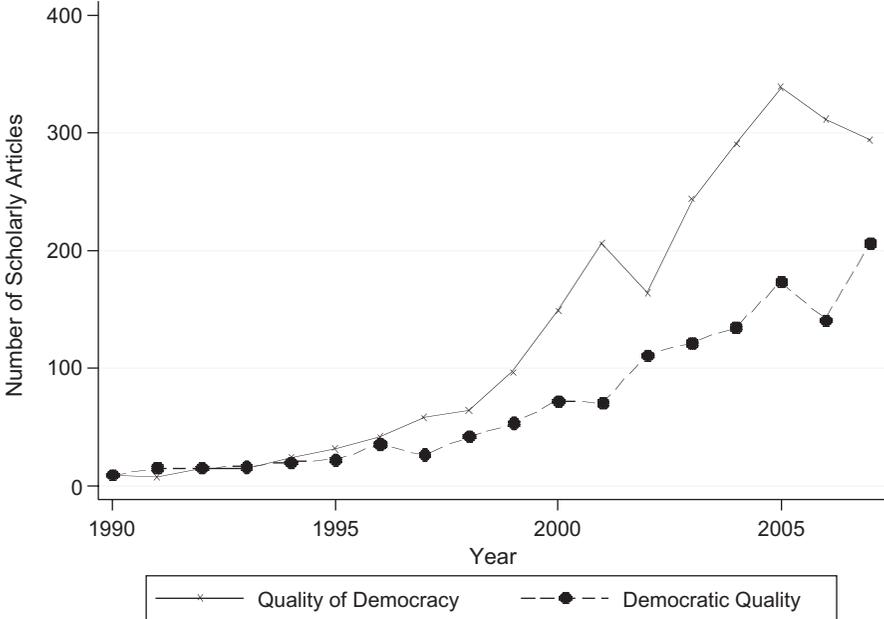


FIGURE 1.1. Scholarly articles mentioning “quality of democracy” or “democratic quality.” *Note:* Numbers of scholarly articles using the given phrase in each year. *Source:* Google scholar, <http://scholar.google.com>, searched on 3 January 2009.

Democracy is unique as a system of governance in requiring formal institutions that permit citizens to influence their government. In the modern world, these institutions are free, fair, and regular elections and the civil rights that allow citizens to express their opinions to and about their government. Although citizens can influence the behavior of their government in other regime types, this influence does not come through formal institutions. Authoritarian rulers may deal with citizens as they see fit – revoking and granting rights, and ignoring and heeding petitions according to their whim. Only democracy formalizes and institutionalizes public influence over rulers. Indeed, this potential for influence epitomizes the commonsense view of democracy as citizen rule.

I would emphasize the word *potential* in the previous sentence. Democratic institutions give citizens opportunities to control their government, but they do not guarantee that citizens exercise such control. The institutions of democracy are in fact complex tools for citizen rule. Citizens may use them to punish incumbents, to select policy directions, and to petition rulers to address their needs. Such actions tend to give them the sort of government they want. But there is no guarantee that citizens take advantage of these opportunities or that politicians respond to the incentives they create. It is possible to have democratic institutions without citizens controlling their government. It is this observation that leads to the current concept of democratic quality.

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I refer to the opportunities for citizen rule as linkages and define democratic quality as the strength of linkages or alternatively the strength of popular control. Strong linkages mean that citizens govern, as the commonsense understanding of democracy suggests; weak linkages mean that politicians escape popular control and rule as they themselves choose. Although strong linkages do not necessarily produce better government in the sense of better policy outcomes – a topic I explore later – they do produce more democratic government.

Three linkages are particularly important in allowing citizens to control and influence public policy, and they are the focus of the empirical analyses. Following Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999), I call these links electoral accountability, mandate responsiveness, and policy responsiveness. Electoral accountability means that voters sanction politicians for producing outcomes that they do not approve of. These punishments should induce politicians to produce the outcomes that citizens want, lest they lose office. Mandate-responsive politicians present clear and distinctive programs in their campaigns, which they enact when elected. This gives citizens a means of *ex ante* rather than *ex post* control over policy. A policy-responsive government is one whose policy choices continually follow public preferences. The correspondence between public opinion and policy is perhaps the strongest sign of popular control.

By providing voters with the means to gain information about politics and express their opinions – whether at the polls or in other fora – democratic institutions should promote all three of these links. Voters have every incentive to punish or reward politicians according to their performance and to select and advocate their preferred policy directions, because then they can achieve the kind of government they desire. As long as voters are doing these things, politicians who wish to attain or retain office have every incentive to respond to voters' demands and to follow through on their programs. One would thus expect all of these links to be strong in a democracy.

Yet this outcome does not always happen, as Havel's diagnosis attests. Voters may be too ignorant of politics or incapable of acquiring enough information to adequately sanction and select their rulers. Politics may be in such flux that accountability targets are hard to find, public preferences nonexistent or unknowable, and campaign promises impossible to fulfill. Politicians for their part may choose to ignore the public, even if it costs them at the polls, or build support through alternative means like charisma. Trade-offs may also exist between these linkages: responding to current preferences may mean ignoring some election promises, and using the vote as a sanctioning mechanism may be at odds with using it as a selection mechanism. Democracy in the sense of democratic institutions does not always lead to popular rule.

1.3. WHY CARE ABOUT DEMOCRATIC QUALITY?

Does it matter whether the people rule? Recently critics have begun to express worries about the global expansion of democracy. Fareed Zakaria (2003: 248) writes, "What we need in politics today is not more democracy, but less."

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Such critics doubt the ability of popular control to produce beneficial policies. High-quality democracy may not be a cure for the real problems that citizens face – whether poverty, disease, or physical safety – and may even make these problems worse. Is a focus on linkages then a diversion from the real issues and real problems of the current world?

Let me first lay out the critique. Even a high-quality democracy as defined here can produce disastrous policies. The reason is not the fecklessness of politicians – after all, in a high-quality democracy they are responsive to voters – but the incompetence of citizens. Many policies that promote human welfare are unpopular, hard to understand, or have short-run costs. As a result, citizens tend to oppose them and embrace populist fixes (Blinder 1997, Caplan 2006, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Przeworski 1991). Indeed, a society might benefit from weakening linkages so that politicians are free to pursue “better” policies. The claim is that the ultimate test of a political system is whether it provides substantive representation – policies that serve the best interests of citizens – rather than popular control *per se*.

Several responses can be made to this critique. The simplest is that the study of democratic quality is a positive, not a normative, endeavor. Quality refers to the nature of democratic governance, not its worth.⁶ Whatever the advisability of democratic quality, scholars wish to know what effect democratic institutions have. Despite the fears of critics, democracy is not only spreading to new countries but deepening in established democracies. As a result, understanding how democracy works is essential for making sense of politics in the world today. It may turn out that high quality is tantamount to poor policies, but it is important to know where and when high-quality democracy emerges to make this inference.

It is possible, however, to mount a stronger defense of popular control. Although this book remains agnostic on this defense until more evidence comes in, it does take seriously the possibility that high quality may be a good in itself. In the first place, evidence exists that citizens, especially in the aggregate, possess considerable wisdom about policy. If uninformed citizens choose among issue positions at random, their opinions should cancel each other and allow a small group of well-informed citizens to carry the day (Page and Shapiro 1992, Surowiecki 2004, but see Althaus 2003). Other studies show that citizens use heuristics and shortcuts to make good choices even when information is limited (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Some evidence suggests that, even in complicated policy domains like foreign policy, citizens’ opinions may be as reasonable as those of experts (Page and Bouton 2006).

Naturally, worries about the public are greater in new democracies, where citizens have less experience with politics and less access to unbiased information. Yet, even in these countries, there is cause for hope. In the first place, the excitement of the transition along with the high stakes of decisions may lead

⁶ Although the phrases “high quality” and “low quality” have the appearance of value judgments, they are in fact empirical ones that rest on objective assessments of the strength of linkages.

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citizens to become more informed about relevant policy choices. Moreover, the experience of dictatorship teaches citizens to be skeptical of the overblown claims and government propaganda through which they suffered for so many years.

This is not to say that the public is always “rational”; citizens are surely prone to hold false beliefs. But, even if these biases do exist, it is an open question of whether they are larger than the biases of rulers, particularly those unhinged from democratic control. A lack of popular control could certainly free expert politicians to pursue policies in the public interest, but it would also allow them to produce policies in their own personal interests. The course of mostly nondemocratic human history suggests that the latter path is more likely. Recent studies have in fact debunked the view that citizens are prone to manias and instead found that extremism is typically ignited by elites looking to improve their own fortunes (Bermeo 2003, Snyder and Ballentine 1996). The dangers of nonresponsiveness appear at least as large as the dangers of responsiveness.

Even if one grants that autonomous politicians could produce better policies, popular control may still provide a net benefit by increasing the legitimacy of rulers. Insofar as politicians ignore the preferences of the public, citizens lose confidence in the political system. Although this might lead citizens to simply tune out, it may also encourage antisystemic political activities like violence or riots or avoidance of beneficial actions like community service or paying taxes. Even if popular control produces some poor outcomes, it may help to avoid even worse outcomes by increasing the perceived legitimacy of collective decisions.

A final line of defense emphasizes one linkage in particular: electoral accountability. At the least, democratic quality implies that citizens remove leaders who perform particularly poorly and abuse the public trust. Indeed, fewer doubts exist about the ability of the public to throw the bums out than about the other linkages. Though detestable leaders have sometimes been able to win democratic elections, they have rarely, if ever, been able to win reelection in competitive contests. Although accountability has its downsides, little doubt exists that it limits the scope of true disasters.

Again, this is not to say that democratic quality is the be all and end all of political life in a democracy. Citizens of countries with low democratic quality may lead satisfying lives, and high quality is no guarantee against poor policy choices, sometimes with major consequences. Nevertheless, an important case can be made for popular control and, even absent that case, the empirical study of quality is necessary to provide a better understanding of the political system that for all its warts holds pride of place in today's world.

1.4. METHODOLOGY

This book uses a diverse set of tools to evaluate the quality of democracy. Three aspects of its methodology are worth comments: the use of mixed methods, the selection of cases, and the choice of policy domains. Although details

about specific techniques and data sources are reserved for the empirical chapters where they can be described in context, this section describes the general methodology at work here.

1.4.1. Mixed Methods

This book follows the recent trend in political science of mixed methods research (Brady and Collier 2004, Lin and Loftis 2005). It uses both statistical methods to assess trends across a larger group of countries and structured, focused comparisons of a smaller number of cases. The justification for this approach is that it leads to better and richer causal inferences. The inferences are better because, if different techniques using different data produce the same conclusion, one can be more certain that the conclusion is valid. The inferences are richer because each method provides inferences about different aspects of democratic linkages.

Gerring (2004) has been the most eloquent writer on the relative benefits of the two methods. Large-N statistical analyses have the virtues of generalizability and identification of genuine causal effects. By looking at the full range of variation across a given dependent variable, these analyses can best identify the direction and magnitude of causal effects. Insofar as the goal is to assess the quality of democracy in Eastern Europe as a whole, a natural way to do this is to look at the full range of cases.

Eastern Europe is a particularly appropriate region for this sort of analysis. All of the countries transitioned to democracy at about the same time and faced a common set of external constraints. Without ignoring the diversity of communist and precommunist regimes in the region, very large internal similarities existed between these countries before 1989. In fact, due to the forced imposition of the Soviet model, they were probably more alike than any other group of countries in the world. As such, they present a particularly striking natural experiment that makes region-wide comparisons rewarding, as many others have found (Fish 1998, Frye 2002).

The statistical analyses, however, are incomplete in a number of ways. The necessity of dealing with a larger number of cases means that less attention can be paid to the development of valid concepts. Instead, the researcher has to rely on off-the-shelf indicators rather than ones that better fit the concept at hand with the attendant danger of conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970). The larger number of cases also risks the problem of comparing apples and oranges – or unit homogeneity, in technical terms. Perhaps most seriously, these analyses leave one without a good sense of what is actually happening within the countries at hand.

Case studies remedy many of these problems. In the first place, they provide “detail, richness, completeness, wholeness,” without which a researcher has little sense of what is actually happening (Gerring 2004: 348). Indeed, it is hard to imagine that one could be persuaded that citizens control their rulers without considering the way politicians and citizens perceive and resolve particular controversies. This point is particularly important for democratic

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quality, where intentionality is central to the concept: are citizens trying to control politicians and are politicians listening to them?

In the same way, the case studies help to elucidate mechanisms connecting cause and effect (George and Bennett 2005: 21, Gerring 2004: 348). Although the statistical analyses may have uncovered genuine causal effects, scholars are interested not just in the direction and magnitude of effects but also in how they function. What, for example, are the mechanisms through which politicians respond to public opinion? Is it fear of electoral retribution or corporatist structures of interest intermediation or transmission belts within political parties? Detailed studies of individual cases also provide more guarantees that the indicators actually represent the concept at hand and indeed help researchers create both better indicators and better concepts (Goertz 2006).

One should not forget that case studies suffer from their own problems. It is difficult to choose cases that represent the full range of outcomes; therefore, inferences may be biased. It is also difficult to weigh the influence of a multiplicity of causes with this restricted variance. Combining case studies with statistical analyses, however, allows each method to correct the flaws of the other. The statistical analyses identify the average causal effects that apply across the region, whereas the case studies show how these effects work in practice and guard against spurious inferences.

1.4.2. Case Selection

The mixed method approach requires case selection at two levels – the larger set of cases for statistical analysis and the smaller set for the case study approach. The countries chosen for the statistical analysis are the ten Eastern European countries that had joined the EU by 2007: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

The reason for focusing on these countries is that they are the only ones in the region that have remained consistently democratic during the transition. A study of democratic quality only makes sense in countries that are procedurally democratic. In Eastern Europe, it was these states that quickly overthrew the communist regime and instituted elections widely regarded as democratic by organizations like Freedom House and Polity.⁷ The two minor exceptions to this rule were Romania at the start of the transition and Slovakia in the mid-1990s, when allegations of authoritarian practices had some traction, but these interludes passed fairly quickly. More telling is that all of these countries had democratized enough to enter the EU, albeit Bulgaria and Romania were part of a second wave of expansion two years after the first. This sample of ten countries represents nearly the universe of democratic experience in Eastern Europe and certainly the universe of consistent democratic experience.

The case studies focus on three countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. It would be difficult to call these countries representative of the region

⁷ Freedom House (2005) rated nine of the ten as “fully free” as early as 1991.