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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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The Quality of Democracy in Eastern Europe

Public Preferences and Policy Reforms

How does democracy work in the new democracies of Eastern Europe? Do the people actually rule as one would expect in a democracy or do the legacies of communism and the constraints of the transition weaken popular control? This book presents a new framework for conceptualizing and measuring democratic quality and applies this framework to multiple countries and policy areas in the region. It defines democratic quality as the degree to which citizens are able to hold leaders accountable for their performance and to keep policy close to their preferences. Its surprising conclusion, drawn from large-N statistical analyses and small-N case studies, is that citizens exercise considerable control over their rulers in Eastern European democracies. Despite facing difficult economic circumstances and an unfavorable inheritance from communism, these countries rapidly constructed relatively high-quality democracies.

Andrew Roberts is currently Assistant Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University and a Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research. He is the author of *From Good King Wenceslas to the Good Soldier Švejk: A Dictionary of Czech Popular Culture* (2005) and has published articles in numerous journals, including *Comparative Politics*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *Electoral Studies*, *Party Politics*, *Slavic Review*, the *Journal of Public Policy*, and *East European Politics and Societies*.

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ANDREW ROBERTS

Northwestern University



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Preface and Acknowledgments

Like many of my peers, I went to Eastern Europe in the early 1990s to work as an English teacher. I spent the next three years giving lessons in conversation and learning about the people and culture in my new home. Although I was not in a position to follow politics very closely – I only started learning the language after I arrived – in many ways those years shaped my view of Eastern European politics.

My dominant impression from that time was of living in a normal democratic country. If there were worries about civil liberties and political rights, they were mostly on the margins. Citizens and the press – not to mention my students – were not afraid to criticize the government. Elections were usually closely fought affairs that featured real differences of opinion about policy. Parties appeared to take the views of the public seriously, though mainly because they knew that getting votes depended on it. And a rough sort of accountability prevailed, where incumbents perceived as corrupt or incompetent typically lost their hold on power.

These impressions were partially a result of living in Brno rather than, say, Bucharest, but frequent visits to Hungary, Poland, and even Slovakia – then something of a pariah – did not overturn this impression. Of course, citizens complained to me constantly about their corrupt and self-serving leaders – and scandals were not in short supply – but then again Eastern Europeans are consistently among the least happy people in the world.

It was these simple observations that shaped the research questions at the heart of this book. The political science literature I read in graduate school took a fairly dim view of the new postcommunist democracies. The overthrow of communism elicited nothing but admiration. But scholars had doubts about whether democracy was working in these countries. They worried about whether politicians were accountable to citizens and even whether citizens were competent to rule. The standard picture was of corrupt and self-serving politicians manipulating hot-button issues and their old connections from communism to stay in power and enrich themselves and their friends.

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It was the dissonance between these evaluations and my own observations that stand at the root of this book.¹

The book itself was composed in two separate parts, which I hope is less evident to readers than it is to me. My doctoral dissertation asked about the causes of social policy reforms in three countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. The remainder of this project can now be found in Chapters 6 and 7. The answers that I found were what inspired the rest of the book. It seemed to me that, at least in these countries and policy areas, politicians were making policy with an eye toward what the public wanted – that democratic responsiveness prevailed. This conclusion was not one of my original hypotheses – hopefully a sign of unbiasedness – which is what made my discovery of it even more surprising. I had initially thought that it would be economic pressures or ideological conviction or even political institutions that shaped reforms of the welfare state. My graduate training was strong.

When I returned to the dissertation with an eye toward publication, I worried that the conclusion might be confined only to these countries and policy areas. I also began to think more broadly about the functioning of democracy in the region and the ways that public opinion, elections, and policy interact.

This thinking led to two major additions to the manuscript. One was conceptual. What did it mean for democracy to be functioning or malfunctioning – for a country to be a high- or low-quality democracy? Was it just responsiveness to the public or were there other pathways? These thoughts produced Chapter 2, which outlines my preferred way of conceiving of democratic quality as the degree of popular control of government. The other was to expand the number of cases and the range of policies. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 now analyze three modes of citizen control in the ten Eastern European countries that have entered the European Union across a range of economic policies. Even under these tougher tests, my initial conclusions mostly survived as I found good evidence that citizens could control their governments.

Despite its relatively positive conclusions, I hope that the book is not seen as Pollyannaish. I do not wish to turn a blind eye to the many problems these countries face – from corruption to populism – though my focus on a particular aspect of governance has removed some of these problems from my purview. Furthermore, if a bias exists in comparative politics, it may be to judge countries too harshly (Americanists have sometimes had the opposite bias). It is more serious to find flaws and to criticize. I hope this study is seen in that context.

I have a number of people and institutions to thank for this book. My dissertation research was generously supported by an SSRC dissertation fellowship and an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunity fellowship. The Searle Foundation for Policy Research helped me to pursue the additions to the manuscript that I described earlier and Northwestern University

¹ I should add that post-2000 politics in the United States further shaped my opinions. Corruption, abuse of power, and nonresponsiveness in the United States actually made Eastern European democracy look good by comparison.

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supplemented their grant to allow me a full year of leave. At Cambridge, I would like to thank Eric Crahan for his support and encouragement.

I have many scholarly debts and wish that I had accumulated more. Nancy Bermeo generously agreed to take me under her wing when it seemed like every other comparativist at Princeton was relying on her advice. Despite working in a different field, Doug Arnold never failed to point me in the right direction and showed more faith in me than I did in myself. Josh Tucker came in at a late stage to offer devastating critiques and still serves that function. Kathryn Stoner-Weiss did the same in addition to training me in comparative politics. Finally, Anna Seleny was there at the start of the dissertation and always had an open door for my ideas.

At Northwestern, Kathy Thelen has been as kind a mentor as I could ask for and colleagues like Dennis Chong, Jamie Druckman, Sean Gailmard, Ed Gibson, Ken Janda, Jeff Jenkins, Jim Mahoney, Ben Page, Will Reno, Jason Seawright, Hendrik Spruyt, and the sorely missed Mike Wallerstein provided both encouragement and much needed advice.

The entire project started with an email to Mitch Orenstein, and he has been a careful critic and faithful supporter since then. Among the many others whose advice and encouragement helped to make this a better work are Michelle Dion, Benjamin Frommer, Tim Frye, Sona and Matt Golder, Anna Grzymala-Busse, Marc Morjé Howard, Tomasz Inglot, Byung-Yeon Kim, Ron Linden, Petr Matějů, Eric McGlinchey, Monika Nalepa, Grigore Pop-Eleches, Richard Rose, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Gabor Toka, Hubert Tworzecki, Milada Vachudova, and Jiří Večerník. I wish I could also thank the many anonymous reviewers who read both the entire manuscript and some of the individual chapters that were submitted to journals. Although I still cannot open envelopes or emails with those reviews without steeling my nerves, they inevitably provide some of the most needed advice.

I also wish to thank Elsevier Limited for allowing me to reproduce analyses from the article “Hyperaccountability: Economic Voting in Central and Eastern Europe,” which appeared in the journal *Electoral Studies* (2008).

On a more personal note, I thank my parents for not asking too many times when the book would appear. My wife, Lenka, was extremely patient with the progress of a manuscript whose content is not her cup of tea. And for my son Matthew, who prefers books with animals in them, I add this sentence: The crocodile ate the book I was writing, so I am going to have to start writing another one.