

TRUST, ASSOCIATIONS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

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Summary

Many of the comparative studies conducted since the beginning of 1990s indicate not only significant difference but the lack of convergence between East and West with regard to the political culture and civic engagement of citizens. Romania makes no exception in these studies. On the contrary, it has one of the lowest levels of social trust, civic and political participation in the EU and it is also the country with one of the highest scores on most measures of corruption.

In this thesis, I focus on social trust, volunteering, and political participation, three key constitutive elements of a well-functioning democracy. The main assertion is that the democratic culture deficit, corruption, mitigated education payoffs, and migrant patterns in Romania result from a series of mutually reinforcing causal linkages.

This study provides an integrated overview of the research on trust, civic and political participation that I have published in more than 20 papers and books over the last ten years. They are based on a large variety of cross-national survey data, as well as surveys that are representative for the Romanian adult population, for high school students and for Romanian migrants in Italy and Spain. The statistical models in these studies include multilevel analyses and structural equations with latent variables.

This thesis shows that civic engagement continues to be low in the former communist countries, and particularly in Romania, and that lack of money, time and skills offer a partial explanation for the difference between East and West. At least as important, the process of learning the personal and social value of volunteering has been slow due to the high importance of socialization through family, coupled to the fact that very few of the Romanian adolescents grow up in families where at least one parent is active in associations. Finally, but at least as important, civic involvement depends on development of the nonprofit sector, which in turn, is strongly affected by the level of state support, which is extremely feeble in the case of Romania.

This study shows that political participation presents a similar divide between East and West, and lack of convergence over time. Part of the reason is that unconventional participation depends on the long-standing practice of democratic political culture, which ex-communist countries do not have. Another finding is that the more consolidated a democracy is, the more popular some participatory acts become – namely those acts that are essentially democratic in nature and manifestation, such as petition signing.

This thesis asks also whether the development of civic engagement and social capital can be explained by historical factors, such as ethnicity, dominant religion, former imperial influences, past levels of socio-economic development and historical vibrancy of associations. The results support the assertion that pre-communist legacies matter, yet the persistence of differences that conform to the historical legacy argument does not apply uniformly across all measures of democratic values and norms. Some democratic attitudes, including those associated with social capital, have been more resilient to the impact of communism than others, but even in their case, the evidence indicates significant change over time.

Another finding of this study is that the connections between corruption and democracy have a remarkable level of complexity. First, corruption is multifaceted, ranging from political and administrative malfeasance to bribery and cronyism in public institutions. Second, corruption weakens the links between collective decision-making and people's power to influence political decisions through participation. Third, who is exposed to corruption and in what ways matter, especially with regard to socializing effects. In particular, I show that, in addition to corrupt or unfair behavior by the courts, police, public officials, and medical system, unfair and corrupt practices in the schools have long term and profound effects on the quality of citizenship.

Temporary migration is another context that plays an important role on political culture. When former migrants are compared to the rest of the population by using quantitative data, they are largely similar with respect of many measures of political culture, including political trust and support for democratic values. However, optimism and social trust, as well as tolerance and political participation, are significantly higher for migrants who spent longer time abroad. At the same time, the effects of working abroad on the family members of the migrants are significant even in the case of fundamental values and norms: having a parent who worked abroad increases civic involvement, social trust and tolerance towards minority groups.

Finally, the study supports the fact that ethnic diversity in school has a negative effect on social trust of the students who are members of ethnic majority, a fact that rejects contact theory, and support conflict or constrict theory.

This thesis is relevant for at least **four distinct debates** on what shapes civic culture. It is highly significant for (1) the current theories about the impact of diversity on social cohesion and the wider consequences this may have for society, for (2) the current debates on how interaction between institutional performance and social trust determines civic morality and thus leads citizens to maximize public rather than private gains, deterring them from engaging in corruption and free-riding, for (3) investigating the reasons for which school education in the ex-communist countries have much lower positive effects on the formation of pro-democratic formation of norms and attitudes than education in the West, and for (4) the debate on the social and economic impact of income inequality.