

RELIGIOUS DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN POLAND AND ROMANIA¹⁰⁴: A research note

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the effect of religious determinants on political participation in Romania and Poland. In both countries there is a dominant church and very high levels of religiosity and church attendance, in comparison to other countries from East Central or Western Europe. Therefore, we aim to find out whether such levels of religious identification are in any way related to political participation, namely intention to vote and petition signing. Results indicate that church attendance, inner religiosity and religious traditionalism are important predictors of political participation, even when controlling for socio-economic indicators and political interest.

Key words: religion, democracy, political participation, political culture,

Introduction

In this paper, we examine the ways in which variables measuring religious identity influence political participation in Romania and Poland. As two of the most religious countries in the EU, we aim to find out whether religious values and activities influence people's political participation, both conventional and unconventional.

The relevance of this research is twofold. First, both countries display significant levels of religiosity and church attendance, at more or less constant levels since 1989 (Radu 2016). Moreover, confidence in most political system institutions is low, while confidence in church is high (Mishler and Rose 1997, Radu 2016). Second, the literature on

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determinants of political participation in democratic systems considers the church as an arena that can contribute to the learning of civic skills and, consequently, lead to increased participation. As such, this research contributes to this literature, by discussing two examples from East Central Europe - Poland and Romania - and tests the applicability of the civic skills thesis.

Positive attitudes towards the political system are critical in recent democracies (Mishler & Rose 1997). In consolidated democracies, the response of the population reflects aspects of democratic political culture. Successful transitions need political participation, and political participation in transitional countries requires mobilization and recruitment, due to the lack of democratic political culture hindered by an authoritarian regime. Among mobilizing factors, religion and churches - understood as institutionalization of religious practices - can be significant factors in influencing the decision to get involved. It is precisely this mobilizing potential that we explore.

The structure of the paper is tri-partite. First, we review several models explaining political participation in democracies. Second, we focus on the mobilizing role of churches in the context of political participation. Third, we analyze quantitative data.

Determinants of political participation

In this paper, the emphasis is on voting and petition signing, as two of the most popular participatory acts. The logic behind including two measure of political participation resides in the fact that the determinants are different for the two. While voting as the most common participatory act a citizen performs, is highly visible, and subject to intensive mobilization and recruitment, petition signing implies a certain unconventional, conflictual character, and explaining it has to delve into the social movements theories.

Pippa Norris (2002) asserts that there are (at least) 4 mechanisms that explain variations of both the repertoire and the intensity of political participatory actions. First, modernization, understood as structural change, diversifies political participation repertoire. The applicability of this model in the case of post-communist countries is limited, due

to the fact that transition to democracy was a fast-paced process, that does not overlap with broader phases of social and political development (like in Western democracies) (McIntosh et al. 1994). Second, institutional approaches assess the diversity of institutional arrangements (party systems and party politics, the electoral system) in enhancing or inhibiting political participation. In the context of this research, the effect of political institutions on political participation falls outside the topic under analysis. Third, agency theories emphasize the role played by mobilizing agents and in this respect, churches can function as mobilizing agents. The fourth approach, usually associated with the Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM) developed by Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995), explains political participation as a function of resources, motivation and integration. Simply put, people participate because they can, they want to, or because they are asked to (p.269).

Within the category of resources, age and gender are usually considered important predictors of voting. There are several findings showing that younger and older people tend to be less involved in participatory acts. On the one hand, this is attributed to the physical hindrances of older people and the high 'mobility' of the young that causes them to be less engaged (Curtis et al., 1992; Verba & Nie, 1972). On the other hand, older people have more time to participate, more resources and a higher level of social integration; young people, are also more interested in participating in unconventional and protest activities, especially during these times of intensive social networking. In Central and Eastern Europe, age may not have the same effects as in Western democracies, precisely because of the dramatic change brought about by the collapse of communism (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007). Gender has to be taken into account because women are disadvantaged by traditional role patterns. They are often excluded from professional careers, made responsible for the 'home' and less integrated in social and professional contexts (see e.g. Van Deth & Kreuter, 1998). Nevertheless, in Central and Eastern Europe, the impact of communist regimes may have moderated, to some extent, traditionalist understandings gender roles.

Status and material resources are also important predictors of political involvement. The literature shows that people with higher

status participate more. Status usually includes resources (time, money, contacts) and verbal and cognitive skills (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Furthermore, inequalities in levels of education and income can be magnified by political and organizational participation. This relation between status and participation can be found, with small variations, in most of the Western societies (Schlozman et al., 1999).

According to Schlozman et al. (1999), one way of bypassing the inherent inequality of status in participation is through empowering lower status citizens and their learning of civic skills through participation in non-political organizations. Social networks provide the possibility to communicate with other people having similar interests, while, at the same time, representing a training grounds for learning social skills. The most important networks tend to be those provided by family, workplace, associations and church (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). In the next section, we turn to the role played by churches in mobilizing people to participate.

Post-materialist value orientations are closely connected to values of political and social involvement and self-realization. These variables can be attributed to both a direct influence on political participation and an indirect one, mediated by involvement in associations in general (Van Deth, 1996). Once material concerns take a secondary role, people's need for expressing themselves and partaking in the decision-making process becomes more acute.

Religion and church as determinant of political participation

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) discuss the importance of church and church-related contexts in the formation of civic skills. While being an active member of a religious community can make one more participatory politically, not all religious groups have the same political empowerment effect. Indeed, Putnam (1993) considers the Catholic Church as an inefficient civic skills learning arena because of its hierarchical structure.

We chose to analyze the role of religion and church in affecting political participation because it is the one of the few institutions that is trusted in Central and Eastern Europe. People actually participate in religious activities more than in any political event (Mishler and Rose, 1997). There are differences within Central and Eastern Europe, but overall the rate of church attendance is higher than in Western Europe (Pollack and Pickel 2000).

Furthermore, the role of the church as a segment of civil society that can lead to the creation of civic skills is significant from an ethical point of view. Barnes (2001) mentions that churches are less compromised in East Central Europe than political institutions or some forms of social organizations, such as trade unions.

The Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM), developed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) takes into account the mobilizing role of civil society. Political engagement and civic skills, in addition to tangible resources, increase political participation. Civic skills are practices and experiences that familiarize individuals with the political game, and its rules of play. Writing a petition, organizing a campaign, even voting makes more sense if it is practiced. The authors show that participation in non-political organizations, such as unions, voluntary organizations and churches, creates a familiarity with the ways organizations function and give the individual a feeling of efficacy.

However, not all churches function similarly, and research shows that there are significant structural constraints that churches face in socializing parishioners (Wood, 1999). If some congregations in the United States emphasize individual freedom and protection of the disadvantaged (Smidt 2003), more mainstream dominant churches, organized around hierarchical principles are less conducive to civic skills formation (REF). Lasinska (2013) shows that the Polish Catholic Church was a fairly active mobilizing agent in the process of contesting the communist regime, only to become a conservative actor in postcommunist Poland.

Data analysis

In this paper, we investigate the effects of religious determinants on political participation. The focus is not on political preference and party choice, but rather on the decision to get involved. First, we review previous research, based on the Central and Eastern European Barometer conducted in 1991, so at the very beginning of the transition period, in order to have a point of reference. Then, we look in more details at the case of Romania and Poland, by analyzing the last wave of World Values Surveys (2012), and assess how religious variables influence participation. Romania and Poland were chosen as the two countries in Central and Eastern Europe that are both almost religiously homogenous, and that display the highest rates of religiosity and church attendance.

From a religious point of view, Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s paints a very diverse picture. Although religious revival was an important feature, numbers of atheists and differences in church attendance patterns are obvious. Political discussion is almost always negatively associated with church going, and in some more secular countries, religious identity and political participation are not at all correlated (Radu 2016).

Using World Values Survey from 2012, we constructed two parallel models, for each country, Romania and Poland respectively. We had the choice of operationalizing religious determinants – our independent variables – along three lines: church attendance, religiosity, and religious conservatism. We consider that the effect of each on political participation should be explored.

We opted for this tripartite categorization of religious variables because each of them measures different aspects of the religious phenomenon. Church attendance reflects the degree of involvement in church activities, thus measuring the effect of the church as a mobilizer and recruiter. Nevertheless, by analyzing survey data we cannot properly assess mobilization, but rather assume that correlations between church attendance and political participation are indicative of such efforts. Conversely, it is also possible that there is a self selection mechanism, meaning that certain categories of people are participatory in both religious and political contexts. The

level of prayer reflects people's religiosity. There are situations in which prayer and church attendance go against each other, and we consider those cases to either reflect ritualism (people go to church but are not necessarily religious) or inner religiosity (people feel disconnected from the church, along Grace Davie's (1994) distinction between believing but not belonging). Finally, religious conservatism is used to identify those people that perceive religion as a measure of traditionalism, of value stability, a category that is most likely to not be satisfied with a democratic system, and also less prone to participate.

For dependent variables, we used intention to vote as a proxy for voting behavior, and also included petition signing as a form of unconventional participation. As recent events show (for example the Romanian change of government in November 2015 under the pressure of demonstration), unconventional acts of political participation have become rather popular everywhere in East Central Europe (Ekman et al. 2016).

Finally, the control variables that we used include not only socio-economic indicators and demographics (resources), but also post-materialist values and political engagement, as justified in the literature we have discussed above.

In 2012, a vast majority of people say that they pray every day (almost 80% in Romania, and almost 70% in Poland), while they also frequent church (less in Romania than in Poland, but still, almost 70% say that they go to church at least weekly in Poland, compared to almost 45% in Romania). They are also fairly conservative from a religious point of view. Respondents in both countries have comparable rates of interest in politics and postmaterialist values (very low, with an average around 2, from an index with values up to 12). In both countries about 90% of respondent intend to vote, while only about 60% say that they would sign a petition in Poland compared to about 40% in Romania.

The models we ran are summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Logistic regression output for the effects of religious determinants on intention to vote and petition signing in Romania and Poland (WVS 2012)

	Romania intention to vote	Romania intention to vote	Romania petition signing	Romania petition signing	Poland intention to vote	Poland intention to vote	Poland petition signing	Polan d petiti on signi ng
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Church attendance	,332	1,394	-,039	,962	,587	1,799	-,249	,780
Prayer	,305	1,357	,345	1,412	,058	1,060	,030	1,030
Religious conservatism ¹⁰⁶	-,073	,930	,115	1,122	,208	1,231	,047	1,048
Postmaterialism index ¹⁰⁷	,388	1,475	,254	1,290	,206	1,229	,223	1,249
Political interest	-,197	,821	-,605	,546	-,693	,500	-,563	,570
Gender	-,502	,605	-,323	,724	,274	1,315	,219	1,244
Age	,033	1,034	-,013	,987	,012	1,013	-,027	,973
Education	,253	1,288	,225	1,252	,098	1,103	,159	1,172
Place of residence	-,188	,829	,048	1,049	-,029	,971	,013	1,013
Constant	,903	2,468	-1,105	,331	-,016	,984	1,779	5,924

Numbers in bold indicate statistical significance at .05

Our results indicate religious determinants influence political participation – either voting intention or petition signing, but they are

¹⁰⁶ The religious conservative index was constructed by adding-up the 3 variables below (each measured on a 4 points scale, with 1=strongly agree, and 4=strongly disagree).

1. Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right
2. The only acceptable religion is my religion
3. All religions should be taught in public schools

¹⁰⁷ The postmaterialism index is taken from the World Values Survey data set (details on its construction at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>)

not uniform across the two countries, or the two types of participatory acts. First of all, church attendance is only positively and significantly associated with increased voting participation in Poland, where, indeed, it seems that the church is an influential mobilizer for voting. Moreover, the correlation is identified in Romania, although at a lower level of statistical significance. Interestingly, the effect of church attendance is negatively associated with petition signing, albeit statistically insignificant, which suggests that religious participation may be discouraging unconventional forms of participation, while potentially mobilizing confidants for exercising more conventional acts. It is also possible that church goers are more conservative and less politically engaged, and so the negative correlation with petition signing may not be a function of church participation, but rather an effect of initial conservativeness.

Only in Romania is the effect of praying significant, and it functions similarly in both cases of vote intention and petition signing: people that pray more are also more predisposed to participate politically, irrespective of their religious participation patterns (this finding is confirmed on an older World Values Survey data set, by Radu (2016)). This result may suggest a potential effect of spirituality, with people disconnecting from the church while also continuing to be individually and privately religious, and those people may be more politically conscious people. This finding may represent confirmation of Grace Davie's (1994) "believing but not belonging" thesis as well. As it turns out, inner religiosity is widespread in Romania, much more so than regular church attendance. It is possible that more religious people are also more politically engaged, however the effect of political participation is not in any way influenced by religious participation.

Religious conservatism is a variable that influences petition signing in Romania and intention to vote in Poland. In other words, people that are less conservative religiously, tend to be more involved politically in both countries, but the effect is significant only on petition signing in Romania and only on voting in Poland. The index measuring religious conservativeness may also tap into religious traditionalism. As such, it is intuitive to argue that less traditionalist people in Romania are more prone to express themselves politically.

One important finding of this analysis is the strong effect of postmaterialism on both voting intention and petition signing. Except for its influence on intention to vote in Poland, which is statistically insignificant, postmaterialism is one of the strongest predictors of political participation, with individuals holding more postmaterialistic values being more inclined to participate, especially in unconventional ways. This finding is in line with previous research (Inglehart, 1990) which documents that civic skills and values are more developed in consolidated postmaterialistic societies. Indeed, postmaterialism is a sign of consolidated democracies. In this context, it is even more interesting to note the effects of religious determinants on political participation, given that postmaterialism itself taps into issues of religious identity.

Political interest, employed here as a proxy for political engagement is correlated positively and significantly with political participation, almost in all cases (except the effect on voting in Romania), which is in line with long lasting arguments according to which more politically interested citizens are also more participatory.

Finally, the effects of demographic and socio-economic indicators are also consistent with expectations derived from the literature. Gender is a significant predictor of both measures of participation only in Romania, with women engaging in politics less than men. In both Romania and Poland, younger people are more involved in petition signing, while in Romania, older people tend to vote more. Place of residence is not a significant independent variable, but education is almost universally significant, with more educated people choosing to participate more in politics, through both conventional and unconventional acts.

Conclusion

In this paper we explored the effects of religious variables on political participation in Poland and Romania – two of the most religious countries in the EU, according to levels of religious identification, religiosity and church attendance. Our analysis indicates that, even when controlling for demographics, socio-economic status, political interest or postmaterial values – all important predictors of

participation – the effect of religious values is significant. Some commonalities exist between the two countries, with church attendance being positively correlated with intention to vote, but negatively associated with petition signing. This results suggests that the theory of churches becoming arenas for gathering civic skills, or places where inefficacious citizens become empowered, is only partially right; one speculation, is that churches are more like recruiting agents, rather than mobilizers. Religious conservatism is negatively associated with unconventional participation, and, in Poland, even with voting. Interestingly, in Romania, people that pray more often are more inclined to participate, both conventionally and unconventionally, which may suggest a direction for further research into the political values and motivations of religious people which do not feel represented any more by their churches. Postmaterialist values are a key predictor of participation, and so is education.

This research suggests that religion and church may affect patterns of political participation in recent democracies, and that these relationships should be explored further in different contexts and with a mixed methods approach. One very important research direction that this paper points to, is to analyze in more depth the internal culture of churches, which, in the two countries analyzed here, at least, is a potential explanation for the results we got; both Catholic and Orthodox churches are hierarchical institutions, not particularly conducive to the learning of civic skills. The research would benefit from being replicated in religiously pluralistic contexts.

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