

Notes and Comments

Little is Known about Party System Volatility in Post-Communist Europe, but We Have Interesting New Methods and Data for Studying It

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We wish to begin by thanking Crabtree and Golder¹ for the time and effort they have spent replicating the results in Powell and Tucker² and providing further evidence in support of the primary substantive conclusion of that article. We also want to thank the *British Journal of Political Science* for offering us the opportunity to revisit the topic of electoral volatility in post-communist countries.

The primary goal of P&T (2014) was to rigorously conceptualize a new approach to thinking about electoral volatility – by disaggregating electoral volatility into volatility between parties that were present across both elections in a pair of consecutive elections ('Type B' volatility) and volatility due to new party entry and party exit ('Type A' volatility), an approach that is especially important in the context of post-communist countries – and to provide a comprehensive dataset for two decades of post-communist elections that incorporates these new measures. To be clear, P&T (2014) was not the only piece arguing for the importance of disaggregating measures of electoral volatility,³ but the article makes a contribution by systematically laying out a set of rules for exactly how to code these two different types of volatility (itself a complex task), making a case for why volatility should be coded in this particular manner and providing a substantially expanded set of measures relative to previous work.

Concurrently, in the course of introducing these new measures and data, P&T (2014) replicates and extends the existing literature on volatility in post-communist countries by adding additional countries and years of data beyond what had been included in previous analyses. To do so, P&T (2014) relies on a very specific algorithm to determine *a priori* which elections to include in the analysis.⁴

These analyses produced an interesting empirical finding: once these additional countries and years were added to the analysis, almost all of the previous results disappeared,⁵ leaving practically no

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¹ Crabtree and Golder 2016 (hereafter C&G (2016)).

² Powell and Tucker 2014 (hereafter P&T (2014)).

³ See, for example, Birch 2001, 2003; Sikk 2005; Tavits 2008. Moreover, our inspiration to pursue this line of research came as the direct result of a comment made by Michael Laver in a political parties reading group at New York University.

⁴ This rule was 'To meet the inclusion criteria, a country must have been a part of either the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, the former Czechoslovakia or a member of the Warsaw Pact. From each of these countries, we then include all pairs of consecutive parliamentary elections that were held when the country was deemed at least Partly Free according to Freedom House at the time of both elections. Non-consecutive free elections were not eligible. Similarly, elections that were invalidated due to fraud were also excluded.' This explains why P&T (2014) does not simply drop Bosnia-Herzegovina from the analysis as other studies have done, a point that G&C (2016) note in footnote 13.

⁵ 'Previous results' refers to results obtained using the same data and variables, but run only on limited subsets of the cases representing elections included in previous studies of post-communist countries (see Tables 3–5) or a commensurate set of cases from West European elections (see Table 6) (P&T 2014).

variables that were correlated with either Type A or Type B volatility. Moreover, the data clearly demonstrated that most volatility in post-communist countries was due to Type A volatility. These were the two most important substantive contributions of P&T (2014), and are listed as such in the conclusion of the article on pp. 142–3.

P&T (2014) did, however, note one exception to this general conclusion that there were no variables correlated with either Type A or Type B volatility, which was that GDP change since 1989 (hereafter GDP-89) was negatively correlated with Type A volatility (see Table 4, p. 139 of P&T 2014). C&G (2016), while replicating every other finding reported in P&T (2014), present two new findings that cast some doubt on whether GDP change since 1989 is indeed negatively correlated with Type A volatility. First, by adding data on GDP in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1989–93 to the analysis that was unavailable at the time P&T (2014) was submitted to the *British Journal of Political Science* for review, C&G (2016) find that the coefficient for GDP-89 *increased* in magnitude (from –4.6 to –6.0), but so too did the standard error of this estimate (from 1.3 to 6.6), thus decreasing our statistical confidence in this relationship below conventional levels (see C&G 2016, Table 1).⁶ Secondly, deleting Bosnia-Herzegovina from the analysis altogether also results in a similar *increase* in the size of the coefficient to –6.1, with the standard error also increasing by a roughly similar amount to 7.2 (see C&G 2016, Table 1).

While these new results clearly strengthen the primary substantive conclusion of P&T (2014) – that little is known about the correlates of either Type A or Type B volatility in the first two decades of post-communist elections – caution is still in order in claiming that the book is definitely closed on the possible link between growth since the start of the post-communist period and Type A electoral volatility. First, it remains the case that both using the new Bosnia-Herzegovina data and list-wise deleting the Bosnia-Herzegovina cases from the analysis *increases* the size of the coefficient on GDP-89. Many methodologists more sophisticated than we have long argued that too much attention is paid to standard significance levels at the expense of substantive effects, and this may serve as an example. Certainly, our confidence that there is no relationship between GDP growth since 1989 and electoral volatility would have been enhanced had the coefficient in the GDP-89 variable moved closer to 0 in the new analyses as opposed to heading in the opposite direction. Secondly, using the original data from P&T (2014), the GDP-89 results are robust to dropping every other country (in sequence) from the analysis besides Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Table 1).⁷

Of course, this does nothing to change the finding that dropping Bosnia – or using the new version of the Bosnia-Herzegovina data – increases the size of the standard error on the coefficient for GDP-89, but it does suggest that the relationship between GDP-89 and Type A electoral volatility was not so weak that dropping countries at random could produce similar effects. Furthermore, dropping each country in turn – including Bosnia-Herzegovina – results in a fairly consistent set of coefficients for GDP-89, ranging from –4.1 (dropping Hungary) to –6.1 (dropping Bosnia-Herzegovina).⁸ Taken together, it appears that there is even more evidence in support of P&T (2014)'s primary conclusion that little is known about the correlates

⁶ P&T (2014) coded the change in Bosnia-Herzegovina's volatility from the first year GDP data were available at the time of the submission of the article to the *BJPS*, which was 1994; this fact undoubtedly should have been noted in a footnote in P&T (2014) or in the codebook, and we have added an addendum on both of our websites doing so. (See C&G (2016) for details on the availability of new data in a 2012 *European Bank for Recovery and Development* report; P&T (2014) was submitted to the *BJPS* for review in April 2011.)

⁷ This point is also pointed out by C&G (2016).

⁸ Furthermore, the fact that the Bosnia-Herzegovina data is so sensitive to whether the time series starts in 1989 as opposed to 1994 (or 1993 or 1995, for that matter; see C&G 2016, Figure 2) raises an even bigger theoretical question about what *should have been* the appropriate year to start the 'Change in GDP since 1989' time series. The point of this variable is to capture the effect of change in the economy since the start of the transition away from communism, or what Owen and Tucker (2010) have labeled 'long-term retrospective evaluations'. The question then remains whether one ought to think of Bosnia-Herzegovina's transition as starting in 1989 with the general collapse of communism in East-Central Europe, or in 1995 with the conclusion of the Dayton Agreement. Moreover, a quick glance at Figure 2 in C&G (2016) suggests that any Bosnia-Herzegovina 'Change in GDP since 1995' data would look very similar to the 'Change in Bosnia-Herzegovina GDP since 1994' data used in P&T (2014) and would likely produce a similar finding as was reported in P&T (2014).

TABLE 1 *Country Dropping Robustness: Type A Volatility*

| Variables | Not Albania | Not Armenia | Not Bosnia | Not Bulgaria | Not Croatia | Not Czech Republic | Not Estonia |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| GDP Change from 1989 | -5.078*** (1.252) | -4.157*** (1.447) | -6.066 (7.178) | -4.593*** (1.308) | -4.830*** (1.374) | -4.483*** (1.363) | -4.684*** (1.387) |
| | Not Georgia | Not Hungary | Not Latvia | Not Lithuania | Not Macedonia | Not Moldova | Not Montenegro |
| GDP Change from 1989 | -5.153*** (1.324) | -4.144*** (1.177) | -4.523*** (1.576) | -4.175*** (1.346) | -4.410*** (1.382) | -4.529** (1.742) | -4.908*** (1.448) |
| | Not Poland | Not Romania | Not Russia | Not Serbia | Not Slovakia | Not Slovenia | Not Ukraine |
| GDP Change from 1989 | -4.370*** (1.431) | -4.422*** (1.414) | -4.530*** (1.390) | -4.515*** (1.355) | -4.597*** (1.450) | -4.885*** (1.495) | -5.474*** (1.105) |
| | All countries | | | | | | |
| GDP Change from 1989 | -4.623*** (1.326) | | | | | | |

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses. The full regression model is from the original Powell and Tucker (2014) article. For space reasons, other coefficients are omitted from the table. Full results are available on authors' webpages. Standard errors clustered by country. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

of electoral volatility in post-communist countries through the end of 2009, but that change in GDP since the start of the transition is probably worth continuing to analyze as a potential correlate of Type A volatility as new data become available.

Before closing, we wish to offer a dissenting view of the characterization in C&G (2016) of the primary contribution of P&T (2014). As noted previously, the primary contributions of P&T (2014) were to introduce a new framework for analyzing electoral volatility, to provide a detailed set of coding rules to operationalize this framework and to provide data for these new measures of volatility over two decades of post-communist election results. Substantively, the primary finding of P&T (2014) is that there are almost no correlates of electoral volatility in post-communist countries in the years 1989–2009 among a standard set of explanatory variables – in contrast to limited sub-sections of the post-communist cases included in previous studies (see Tables 3–5) or Western European countries (see Table 6) – and that most of the volatility in post-communist countries is of the Type A, as opposed to Type B, variety. Nevertheless, C&G (2016) present their contribution as a ‘challenge [to P&T 2014’s] *central claim* that replacement volatility in post-communist Europe is driven by long-term economic performance’ (emphasis added).

As further justification of the importance of making this challenge, C&G (2016) note that P&T (2014) has been ‘widely cited’ with ninety-five Google Scholar citations as of April 2015.⁹ To better understand how readers saw the central contribution of P&T, we tracked down as many of these citations as we could find and identified the reason why they cited P&T.¹⁰ Of these ninety-five citations, twelve were essentially different versions of other articles already in the collection (which is an interesting finding in itself concerning the use of Google Scholar as a metric for academic influence, but beyond the scope of our discussion here), leaving eighty-three unique papers/articles/books that had cited P&T (2014) as of April 2015. We were able to locate seventy-seven of the eighty-three. Of these, only six (8 per cent) referenced the finding that economic conditions impacted electoral volatility. In contrast, forty-six (60 per cent) cited the use of Type A and Type B volatility, while twenty-eight (36 per cent) referenced the data regarding overall levels of volatility in post-communist countries.

In net, an exhaustive re-examination of the data in P&T (2014) by C&G (2016) upholds the major substantive findings of the former – that we know little about the determinant of electoral volatility in post-communist countries – which should add to the authority of these findings moving forward. We continue to believe, though, that the major contribution of P&T (2014) going forward will be the framework presented for thinking about electoral volatility – especially in new democracies – in terms of Type A and Type B volatility, as well as the finding that so much of the first two decades of post-communist electoral volatility was of the Type A variety. Nevertheless, we are hopeful that the findings from P&T (2014) and C&G (2016) will both spur further work on the important topic of the determinants of electoral volatility, especially in new democracies and transitional societies.

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⁹ Some of these citations were of the published version of the article in the *BJPS*, and some to earlier conference papers, so we refer here simply to ‘P&T’.

¹⁰ We are very grateful to Megan Metzger for her assistance with this task.

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