

Modernization, Cleavages and Voting Behavior in East Europe

An analysis of Romanian voting behavior in comparative perspective.

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Since 1989 many Eastern European transformation states have shown a tendency towards frequent changes of government and witnessed the defeat of ruling parties in elections. Such voting behavior may be traced back to various deficits in the interrelation between parties and voters. One of those deficits will be analyzed in this paper:

The respective parties lack a strong link with the population; continuous (structural and functional) relations between parties and voters apparently do not exist.

The study of interrelations between political representatives and those represented and the subsequent idea of cleavages have been introduced into the electoral and party studies by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset (1967): Cleavages are societal conflicts that are transferred into political divisions and represented by particular parties (Eith 2001; Schmitt 2001). Rokkan and Lipset describe parties as the main "transmission belt" from group interests to political positions. Parties act on cleavages that stabilize the party system. They structure electoral preferences and develop long-term relationships with their voters, therefore allowing for stable majorities. If such ties are really missing in Eastern Europe or if they are not stable enough to produce reliable long-term voting behavior, the stability of newly established democratic systems may be at risk in the near future. Therefore, it is desirable and useful to (once again) systematically investigate the existence or non-existence of cleavages in Eastern Europe.

Theoretical Concept

According to democratic theory the participation of citizens combined with the rule of law and the guarantee of freedom constitute the crucial criteria of democracy (Dahl 1989, Vanhanen 1990). There is no democracy without participation. In representative democracies elections are the most important form of participation.

The transfer of power from the people to the representatives establishes a power structure (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*) which draws legitimation from the principle of the freedom of choice between candidates from different political groups. This leads to a limited rule that will be either suspended or reinstated periodically. *Thus, each representative democracy, which is the most common type of modern liberal democracies, depends on the voting behavior of its electorate.*

The principle of electoral choice offers genuine alternatives between several candidates and/or parties and ties the sphere of civil society to the political system – elections therefore serve as an expression of preferences of particular interests and in turn produce particular party constellations (party systems). Political and social groups and parties as intermediary institutions assume the role of the "transmission belt" as described by Rokkan and Lipset – they structure the interests of the people, thus integrating them into the decision making process, they recruit political personnel and mandate office seekers to take part in the political engineering.

This role is based upon a symbiosis within representative democracy: On the one hand, the ruled try to assert their interest vis-à-vis the rulers, on the other hand parties must rely on popular support. Parties and voters mutually benefit from this interrelation: Social groups facilitate their interests through representation and in return the parties gain support from the respective groups at the election polls.