

PUBLIC OPINION AND PARTY CHOICE IN SLOVAKIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

How do voters' political opinions shape the way they think about political parties? In the left-right socio-economic competition of advanced democracies the answer to this question is often taken for granted. For this reason many approaches to the study of parties are not easily applicable to countries where different issues dominate political debate. This paper offers an alternative. It provides a method for identifying differences in the weight that voters place on particular issues when they evaluate political parties, using the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic to show how these differences shape both electoral outcomes and the overall stability of democracy. The weight that Slovakia's voters place on national and democracy issues when evaluating parties contrasts sharply with the more familiar left-right socio-economic judgements made by Czech voters. This difference helps to explain the weakness of democratic institutions in Slovakia in comparison to those of the Czech Republic.

KEY WORDS ■ ideological dimensions ■ left-right ideology ■ nationalism ■ party preference ■ spatial competition

The very different paths taken by the governments of Slovakia and the Czech Republic after the two countries separated in 1993 might lead an observer to expect that Slovaks and Czechs held radically different sets of political opinions. This is not the case. Indeed, the political opinions of the average Slovak differed little from those of the average Czech. But political opinions cannot be written off altogether as formative influences on the politics of these two countries. A closer look at the Slovak and Czech voters shows that the similarity of their opinions actually conceals meaningful and significant differences in the weight that they gave to particular issues when making political decisions. These differences helped to cause different political outcomes.

The Slovak and Czech cases demonstrate that aggregate measurements of opinion on political issues are not always effective predictors of political outcomes. Just as important – in some cases more important – is the emphasis that voters place on particular issues when they evaluate political parties and choose a favorite. This paper shows that Czech voters tend to evaluate parties on the familiar basis of socio-economic questions while Slovak voters evaluate parties on the basis of questions about the nation and democracy.

In its final section, the paper goes further to argue that a difference in the weight given to particular issues can shape political development. The Slovak and Czech cases show that not all criteria for choice of party are equally conducive to the development of democracy. Democracy is safer when questions about democracy itself are not the main criteria for political choice and when the votes of those who hold authoritarian views are dispersed broadly across the party spectrum. When questions about democracy play a role in the preference for particular parties, those with more authoritarian opinions gather at one end of the political spectrum and can work to undermine democracy with little fear of a backlash from their electorate. As a result, the system becomes unbalanced, lurching toward and away from democracy with each change of government and facing the constant danger that the next lurch away from democracy may topple the entire system.

Different Outcomes, Similar Opinions

The political outcomes of Slovakia and the Czech Republic after the end of Czecho-Slovakia are very different. Although it is becoming increasingly popular to express skepticism about the Czech ‘miracle’, the Czech political institutions did at least operate according to basic democratic principles. Slovakia’s political institutions, by contrast, did not play by democratic rules (Leff, 1996; Krause, 1998a). Whereas the Czech Republic’s governing coalition made only rare and indirect use of its power for political advantage, Slovakia’s governing coalition intervened in the political contest at a more fundamental level, undercutting accountability mechanisms and making direct assaults on rival political institutions. Although Czech problems cannot be dismissed, Slovakia’s problems represented a far more severe threat to the entire democratic system.

Conventional wisdom regarding Slovaks and Czechs offers a relatively simple explanation for this difference: the outcomes differ because Slovaks and Czechs differ. Kusý (1995: 140) cites a long list of traits commonly attributed to Slovaks. In comparison to Czechs, he notes, Slovaks are thought to be orientated ‘nationalistically’, ‘Christian’, ‘left-wing’ and ‘eastwardly’. Others suggest that Slovaks are also more likely to be more orientated toward authority and against democracy (Ulč, 1996; Carpenter, 1997).

The results of political opinion surveys show these conclusions to be significantly overstated. Regular surveys sponsored by the Central European

University (CEU) show an unexpectedly narrow range of differences between Slovaks and Czechs. The mean difference for a series of questions on economic, social and political questions averaged just over 8 percentage points. Furthermore, mean differences between Slovaks and Czechs on these 12 questions actually declined over time, from 10 percentage points in 1992 to 8 percentage points in 1996. Only 2 of the 12 questions show a consistent increase, while 7 show a consistent decrease.

The two populations differed most significantly on questions related to economics and religion, but even here the mean difference remained below 12 percentage points. Differences on social and national questions were smaller, and in some cases they reversed common expectations. In 1996, according to a CEU survey, Slovaks were more likely than Czechs to oppose nationalism, patriotic politicians, the split of Czechoslovakia, the reduction of income differentials, and the concern for crime and morals over freedom and human rights.

Of course these reversals reflect different starting points. Slovaks may have been more likely to reject patriotism and nationalism because of more immediate negative experience with them. The CEU surveys, however, are not the only evidence of smaller-than-expected differences between Slovaks and Czechs. Other surveys with more concrete questions regarding nationality and patriotism reveal similarly small differences (AISA, 1991; CSA, 1992; ISSP, 1995).

On political questions the record is mixed. Czech experts commenting on the results of a 1995 joint survey conducted by the academies of science of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (SAV/AVCR) express 'surprise' at the finding that Czechs are more likely than Slovaks to prefer a leader with a 'firm hand' (Tuček, 1995). Nor is the SAV/AVCR study alone in finding results that contradict conventional wisdom. A wide range of studies show negligible differences between Slovaks and Czechs on questions of participation and political efficacy and only moderate differences on questions regarding democracy. Differences between the two populations on these questions proved to be small, usually below 10 percentage points and often below 5 (AISA, 1991; Institute of Sociology, 1991-3, 1995; Central European University, 1992-6; CSA, 1992; Wyman et al., 1995; Plasser and Ulram, 1996). This is true not only on the 'firm-hand' type of question that can take on different meanings in different political surroundings, but also on more concrete questions that refer to specific steps, such as the suspension of parliament and the abolition of political parties (Rose and Haerper, 1993).

The Basis of Evaluation

Although opinions in the two countries are by no means identical, the small differences cannot alone explain the sharp divergence of Slovak and Czech

political outcomes. Further exploration of the connection between opinions and outcomes requires attention to political parties. It is parties that form the primary connection between the electorate and the formal political institutions in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Outcomes in those two countries depend heavily on the mechanisms by which voters translate their political opinions into preferences for particular parties. Because each voter must filter many issues into a single choice, the process is complicated and difficult to discern. No single explanation can capture the decision-making processes of all voters, but three prominent approaches can help to identify the primary basis on which electorates evaluate political parties. One of these methods uses the political shorthand of 'left' and 'right', a second method looks at particular characteristics of voter opinions and a third method looks first at the underlying sympathies and antipathies for political parties and then matches these to particular opinions.

The Left-Right Approach

The most commonly discussed basis of evaluation is a single dimension defined by extremes of left and right. The tendency of political leaders throughout the world to use these terms provides researchers with a ready-made tool for comparison. Sani and Sartori (1983: 337) argue that 'the polarization that matters generally is of the left-right variety' and that 'this is generally the case because the spatial imagery subsumes under its ordering, regardless of domain of origin, the issues that acquire political salience'. Huber and Inglehart (1995: 73) likewise approach the left-right continuum as a generic 'tool generally used to describe this central dimension of political conflict'. More than Sani and Sartori, Huber and Inglehart acknowledge that the meanings applied to left and right may differ significantly from country to country. At the same time they hold that 'among expert observers on all six continents there is a widespread tendency to see political conflict as structured along only one dominant dimension, and to label this dimension as having left and right poles' (1995: 90).

Although Huber and Inglehart's approach greatly improves on methods that apply the same meaning of left and right to all cases, their approach nevertheless faces certain limitations. These limitations appear in sharp relief in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In their study Huber and Inglehart asked experts to locate political parties on a ten-point left-right scale. Czech parties on this scale range from 1.33 to 9.80, or 94 percent of the possible spread. Slovakia's parties, by contrast, range from 4.67 to 7.00, or 26 percent of the possible spread. The explanation for this sharp difference is not a greater degree of consensus among Slovak parties but a lower degree of consensus among expert judgements on the Slovak case. The standard deviations for the rankings of parties in Slovakia far exceed those of their Czech counterparts, indicating that the expert respondents in Slovakia disagreed substantially about where particular parties belonged on the

left–right continuum. For one major party in Slovakia, expert placements differed by as much as seven points on the ten-point scale. The difference between Slovakia and the Czech Republic within the framework of Inglehart and Huber therefore has less to do with the actual differences between parties than with the amount of meaningful information that ‘left’ and ‘right’ provide about the relationships between political parties. As subsequent sections show, these results actually conform extremely well to much earlier predictions by Inglehart and Klingemann (1976: 247) that left and right would perform poorly in certain countries, particularly those with open ‘questions of national identity’.

The CEU surveys reveal an identical pattern at the mass level. Table 1 shows an almost identical dispersion of the Slovak and Czech populations on left–right self-placement. However, a look at the supporters of individual parties reveals significant differences. As with the evaluations of Huber and Inglehart’s experts, the responses of voters indicate that Slovakia’s parties inhabit a much narrower range on the left–right continuum than Czech parties, whether measured by the standard deviation of party positions or by the range between extreme left and extreme right parties. At the same time, the spread of voter positions within individual parties is considerably greater among Slovak than among Czech parties. In fact coherence on the left–right scale is higher in all but one of the Czech parties than in *any* of Slovakia’s parties. In the Czech Republic the left–right continuum exists primarily at the level of the party system; while in Slovakia the continuum exists to a much greater degree within individual parties. It is therefore necessary to look more directly at the actual issues that influence voter choice and not simply at the shorthand labels.

The Factor Approach

A second major approach looks directly at the characteristics of the opinions themselves to determine the role they play in political choice. Works by Markowski (1997) and Kitschelt et al. (1997) examine the positions of party supporters on particular issues and use these characteristics to assess the importance of those issues in explaining choice of political party.

Identifying the Factors. Rather than explore every possible question individually, it is helpful to identify broader themes in the politics of the countries under investigation. The technique of factor analysis offers a powerful tool for grouping questions according to similar patterns of response, allowing a large number of issues to be aggregated into a smaller number of items without sacrificing precision. Using data from the CEU survey, Markowski (1997) identifies four factors in both countries, labeling them ‘economic populism versus market liberalism’, ‘participation’, ‘libertarian–cosmopolitan’, and ‘religious.’ In Slovakia he finds a fifth, ‘idiosyncratic’ factor related to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1997: 228). Factor analysis of

Table 1. Mean characteristics of left–right self-placement among party supporters in Slovakia and the Czech Republic from annual CEU surveys, 1992–6

<i>Country</i>	<i>Dispersion of population^a</i>	<i>Dispersion of party supporters^b</i>		<i>Dispersion of parties</i>	
		<i>Raw dispersion^c</i>	<i>Relative dispersion^d</i>	<i>Spread of parties^e</i>	<i>Range between extremes^f</i>
Slovakia	1.51	1.30	0.86	0.95	2.68
Czech Republic	1.58	1.16	0.73	1.30	3.57

Source: Central European University 1992–96

^a Defined as standard deviation of all respondents on a question asking for left–right self-placement on a seven-point scale.

^b Low dispersion indicates high coherence.

^c Defined as the mean of standard deviations among supporters of each major political party.

^d Defined as the raw dispersion divided by population dispersion.

^e Defined as the standard deviation of all major parties' left–right scores (mean value of left–right responses among party supporters) for each survey, averaged over all four surveys.

^f Defined as the distance between the left–right scores (mean value of left–right responses among party supporters) of the leftmost and rightmost party for each survey, averaged over all four surveys.

Czech respondents by Kitschelt et al. (1997: Table 8-2) finds an almost identical set of factors: 'socio-economic protectionism', 'religious values', 'cosmopolitans and civil liberties' and 'nationalism'.

Although the analyses made by these authors are extremely useful, it is possible to use newly available CEU data to derive factors for both countries over a full 5-year period. In the process it is useful to limit the set of questions by excluding those that ask respondents to make judgements of fact rather than judgements of opinion. This means that specific results differ somewhat from those of the above-mentioned authors, but the same general patterns emerge.¹ In fact the application of factor analysis to all four datasets for both countries produces strikingly consistent patterns. Slovakia exhibits four relatively strong factors for each of the four samples. These factors change little over time, and the main elements of all four factors are identical from 1993 through 1996. These four dimensions are relatively coherent in their subject matter and it is possible to give them shorthand labels with relatively little risk of the overstatement that is common to factor analysis. In order of clarity and consistency over time, the factors are:

- a *Religion* factor involving church influence, abortion, and atheists in politics;
- a *Nation* factor involving nationalism, the split of Czechoslovakia and patriotism;
- an *Economy* factor involving privatization, factory closure and income differentials;
- a *Transformation* factor involving the willingness of respondents to accept major changes in the immediate conditions of daily life involved in the transition away from communism, such as crime, unemployment and private ownership.

Results for the Czech Republic show similar but less consistent patterns.² The major difference in the factoring of Slovak and Czech opinions involves the questions of patriotism, nationalism and the split of Czechoslovakia. In Slovakia these three questions consistently factor closely together whereas in the Czech Republic the patriotism and national questions factor together only weakly, and neither of them factors together with the split of Czechoslovakia. This difference supports Markowski's notion that national questions mean something different for Slovaks than for Czechs. Slovakia's strong and consistent national factor links together all questions with perceptibly national content. In the Czech Republic, by contrast, the national factor is weaker in the public mind, its components are less coherent, and an issue that Slovaks consistently identify as national is completely absent. Unlike Slovaks, Czechs tend to interpret the split of Czechoslovakia as part of the broader postcommunist transformation.

Although the standard questions of the CEU survey provide an invaluable source for time-series data, they are quite limited in their number and scope. Other one-time surveys with broader sets of questions indicate that the set

Table 2. Questions comprising simplified factors for Slovakia and the Czech Republic

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Slovakia only</i>	<i>Czech Republic only</i>	<i>Question</i>
Economy	• • •			It is harmful for the economy if the government tries to reduce income differences between rich and poor. Putting the former state-owned companies into private hands is going to help very much in solving the economic problems of our country. Unprofitable factories and mines should be closed down immediately even if this leads to unemployment.
Nation	• •		•	Nationalism is harmful for the development of our country. In the case of a politician I [do not] prefer a strong patriot to an expert. It would be better if the Czech and Slovak republics were not separated.
Religion	• • •			Politicians who do not believe in God should not perform public functions. A woman should [not] be allowed to have an abortion in the early weeks of pregnancy if she decides so. The church [does not have] too much influence in our country.
Transition	• • •		•	It should be the government's responsibility to provide jobs for everyone who wants one. Politicians should care more about rising crime and deteriorating morality than about individual freedom and human rights. It would be better if former owners do not receive compensation. It would be better if the Czech and Slovak republics were not separated.
Democracy I		• • •		Unity and togetherness of people are more important than plurality of opinion and democracy. Decisiveness and the firm hand of a strong personality are more important than patience at negotiation. In the interests of the people a politician can act against the law.
Democracy II	• • •			An important part of democracy is protection of rights and freedoms of those political minorities who were not successful in elections. Democratically elected state bodies should [not] use their power more firmly. Our country [does not need] a strong personality who will direct it out of the current situation.

Source: Central European University (1992–6); FOCUS (1994); Institute of Sociology (1995).

of four factors listed above omits at least one other important set of issues. Factor analysis of more detailed surveys conducted in Slovakia in 1994, by CEU and the survey firm FOCUS, reveal a fifth factor that groups together questions on pluralism and democracy, firm leadership and obedience to law by political leaders. These findings concur with other works that call attention to strong disagreements within the Slovak electorate about the appropriate behavior of elected institutions (Krause, 1996a; Leff, 1996; Mesežnikov, 1997).

Since neither the extended CEU survey nor the FOCUS survey involved a counterpart in the Czech Republic, it is necessary to turn to other surveys for the purpose of comparing the characteristics of this factor in both countries. A survey conducted jointly in 1995 by the Slovak and Czech academies of science (SAV/AVCR) offers a means of resolving the problem, since it includes similar questions. Although the very different scope of the SAV/AVCR survey does not allow for comparable factor analysis, it is nevertheless possible to create a synthetic democracy factor consisting of those questions that most resemble their counterparts on the extended CEU and FOCUS surveys.

Table 2 presents a list of questions that comprise each of the factors used here. They are all synthetic to a certain degree because they reflect the overall pattern of the factor analyses conducted over a 4-year period and not the pattern of any single year. Furthermore, these synthetic factors eliminate specific factor weights, giving equal weight to each question within a factor.³ It is important to note that while the economy and religion factors for the two countries are identical, the nation and transformation factors differ slightly to reflect the above-mentioned differences in the assessment of Czechoslovakia's split. The grouping of democracy-related questions that emerged from the extended CEU and FOCUS surveys receive the label *Democracy I* and have no equivalent in the Czech Republic. The synthetic grouping of democracy-related questions from the SAV/AVCR survey receives the label *Democracy II*.

Evaluating the Factors. The identification of coherent sets of questions allows for further exploration of the relationship between opinion and party choice. Like Lijphart (1984: 128), Kitschelt et al. (1997: 222) recognize that some issues that divide the electorate may not spill over into party competition. Having identified the 'political divides', they therefore go on to identify which divides can be considered as 'competitive dimensions'. On the basis of data from political elites, they argue that a political divide is likely to constitute a competitive dimension if it 'makes parties express coherent positions', 'yields a high dispersion of party appeals', 'bundles many salient issues' and 'serves as a strong predictor of parties' left-right placements' (1997: 224). These indicators of competitive dimensions at the party level can be adapted to help measure whether a particular factor shapes voter choice.⁴ The indicators of competitive dimensions introduced

by Kitschelt et al. translate to the electoral level as the following four questions:

- Do supporters of the same party tend to hold similar opinions?
- Do supporters of different parties tend to hold different opinions?
- Does a factor include multiple questions?
- Do opinions of party supporters on a factor correlate closely with their positions on a left–right scale?

Not all of the four indicators can claim equal utility, however. The third indicator – the number of salient issues that are bundled together in a factor – raises difficulties because both the number of issues in a factor and the salience of those issues are difficult to measure in any reliable fashion. The number of issues in a factor depends heavily on the number and type of questions that are included in the original survey. A survey that omits certain questions might thereby artificially de-emphasize the competitiveness of a factor. On the other hand, factor analysis of a survey with numerous questions may skew the results in the opposite direction unless there is some way of excluding those questions that repeat others or are not particularly important. The salience of questions is a better indicator than the number of questions, but salience is one of the most difficult pieces of information to obtain since it requires lengthy interviews and respondents who are capable of making relatively sophisticated political judgements. Kitschelt et al. (1997: 137) note that even political leaders vary in their capacity ‘to distinguish between more important and less important political issues’.⁵

Even more problematic is the fourth indicator, which relies on the left–right scale as a sign of a competitive dimension. In countries where ‘left’ and ‘right’ actually provide significant information about the competition of political parties, this measurement may prove useful, but the case of Slovakia shows that ‘left’ and ‘right’ do not prove meaningful in all circumstances. Although the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ are extremely flexible, they are not free enough from residual meaning to accommodate all possible political meanings or to ‘[echo] much of the voters’ feelings towards significant political objects’ (Sani and Sartori, 1983: 314) in every circumstance. In Slovakia the left–right scale fails two of Kitschelt’s own tests: cohesiveness of party positions and wide dispersal of party appeals. It would not seem advisable, therefore, to set left–right alignment as a universal standard for the competitiveness of factors.

With these limitations in mind, it is possible to turn to Table 3, which averages the scores of major Slovak and Czech parties on measures for each of the four indicators between 1992 to 1996. In the Czech Republic the economy and transition factors closely fit the criteria suggested by Kitschelt et al. for a competitive dimension. These factors exhibit both a high coherence of opinion within individual parties relative to the population as a whole⁶ and a strong dispersion of party positions. The dispersion characteristics of the religion factor follow these patterns, though to a lesser degree.

The nation factor and the democracy II factor perform even worse, with low coherence of opinion within parties and a narrow spread of overall party positions.⁷ Since left and right yield meaningful information in the Czech Republic, it is not surprising to find that the left–right indicator produces a similar set of results. The economy and transition factors correlate very closely with left and right, religion correlates to a moderate degree, and the nation and democracy II factors correlate extremely poorly. To a certain extent the issue bundling indicator also follows this pattern. The transformation factor bundles more issues than others while the nation factor bundles fewer.

When applied to Slovakia the same indicators produce considerably different and far less consistent results. The indicators of coherence and dispersion favor the nation and democracy II factors since these exhibit both relatively coherent party positions and an even spread along a wide range. The religion and democracy I factors share a wide range but lack the internal coherence of party supporters,⁸ while the economy and transformation factors exhibit neither of these attributes. The left–right indicator yields nearly opposite results. As in the Czech Republic, it is the economy and transition factors that correlate well with left and right. Religion correlates less well and the nation and both democracy factors correlate extremely poorly. The issue-bundling indicator fails to resolve this inconsistency, since all four of the factors derived from the CEU surveys bundle an equal number of questions.

Although the factor approach of Kitschelt et al. works well in the Czech Republic, it works poorly in Slovakia. One option for resolving the internal conflicts is to leave aside the methodologically questionable ‘left–right’ and ‘bundled issues’ indicators. This, however, leaves only the measures of party coherence and party spread. Although these are important signals of how strongly a factor influences political choice, Kitschelt et al. (1997: 246) acknowledge that they are not ‘sufficient’ conditions. Other methods are needed for determining which opinions correspond most closely to voters’ preferences for particular political parties.

The Spatial Approach

Instead of beginning with the factors and trying to identify which of them shape preference for parties, it is possible instead to begin with preference for parties. Voters’ preferences can be summarized using a spatial model on which distance between two parties corresponds roughly to the degree of antipathy between them. By comparing the positions of parties in a space defined by voters’ preferences against the positions of the same parties in a space defined by voters’ positions on particular issues, it is possible to discern the relationship between the issues and the preferences. Although the roots of this method can be traced back 4 decades to the work of Downs (1957), and the method gained prominence nearly 2 decades ago with the

Table 3. Mean characteristics of response on factors among party supporters in Slovakia and the Czech Republic from annual CEU surveys, 1992–6

Country	Survey	Factor	Dispersion of population ^a	Dispersion of party supporters ^b		Dispersion of parties		Issues bundled ^g	Predictor of party left–right placement ^h
				Raw dispersion ^c	Relative dispersion ^d	Party spread ^e	Party range ^f		
Slovakia	CEU	Economy	0.97	0.92	0.95	0.20	0.52	3	0.83
		Nation	0.98	0.90	0.92	0.40	1.07	3	0.16
		Religion	0.99	0.94	0.95	0.43	1.17	3	0.79
		Transition	0.88	0.84	0.95	0.22	0.55	3	0.83
	CEU/FOCUS SAV/AVCR	Democracy I	1.14	1.11	0.97	0.33	0.93	–	0.25
		Democracy II	1.20	1.12	0.93	0.43	1.24	–	0.18
Czech Republic	CEU	Economy	0.91	0.87	0.96	0.36	0.99	3	0.91
		Nation	0.86	0.84	0.98	0.22	0.59	2	0.23
		Religion	0.84	0.82	0.98	0.41	1.08	3	0.45
		Transition	0.99	0.91	0.92	0.39	1.03	4	0.89
	SAV/AVCR	Democracy II	1.11	1.10	0.99	0.18	0.49	–	0.10

Source: Central European University (1992–6); FOCUS (1994); Institute of Sociology (1995).

^a Defined as the mean of standard deviation of all respondents for all questions comprising a factor. Questions in CEU and Democracy I factors use four-point scales. Questions in the Democracy II factor use a five-point scale.

^b Low dispersion indicates high coherence.

^c Defined as the mean of standard deviations among supporters of each major political party for all questions comprising a factor.

^d Defined as the raw dispersion divided by population dispersion.

^e Defined as the mean standard deviation of all major parties' factor scores (mean value of responses among party supporters for all questions comprising a factor) for each survey, averaged over all four surveys.

^f Defined as the distance between the factors scores (mean value of responses among party supporters for all questions comprising a factor) of the parties with highest and lowest factor scores for each survey, averaged over all four surveys.

^g Defined as the number of questions comprising a factor. Because of differences in their derivation the Democracy I and II factors receive no score on this indicator.

^h Defined as the correlation between major parties' factor scores and their left–right scores.

work of Enelow and Hinich (1984), it is only in recent years that scholars have applied similar techniques to countries outside the limited realm of advanced industrial democracies (Lin et al., 1996; Dow, 1998; Hinich et al., 1998).

Finding the Preference Dimension. A basic raw material of the spatial method is a battery of ‘thermometer-score’ questions that ask respondents about their general level of sympathy toward political parties without reference to any particular political issue. From these data it is possible to use a number of different statistical techniques to locate parties within a space defined by these preferences.⁹ Contrary to earlier predictions (Krause, 1996a), statistical techniques suggest that both the Slovak and Czech political party systems lend themselves equally to representation in a one-dimensional space without undue oversimplification, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 on the basis of factor analysis of data from CEU surveys.¹⁰

The locations of parties are internally consistent and remain so over time. In Slovakia, a group of three parties – the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), the parties of the Hungarian Coalition (MK) and the Democratic Union (DU) – stand together consistently near one pole of the preference dimension. Three others – the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Association of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS) – stand together near the opposite pole. In between these two poles moves the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL). In a pattern that closely corresponds with SDL’s political alliances in Slovakia’s parliament, the party shifts its position on the preference dimension from its proximity to HZDS and SNS in 1992 to proximity to DU, KDH and MK in 1994, and back again toward a more centrist position by 1996.

In the Czech Republic, the pattern is likewise clear and consistent. The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA) stand near one pole in close proximity to one another. The Christian Democratic Union–Czech People’s Party (KDU–ČSL) stands on the same side as ODS and ODA but closer to the center. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) stands near the opposite pole and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) stands on the same side but somewhat closer to the center. The Republican Party (SPR–RSČ) also stands on this side of the center line but fluctuates between the center and the extreme.

Determining the Meaning of the Preference Dimension. Having identified how voters tend to rank parties along the preference dimension, it is possible to go further and assess the similarity between party positions on this dimension and their positions on particular factors. Figures 3 and 4 depict the results of such correlations. The results are striking. In the Czech Republic, party positions on the economy and transition factors correlate closely with party positions on the preference dimension. This evidence strongly confirms the conclusions of both Kitschelt et al. (1997) and Markowski (1997) that

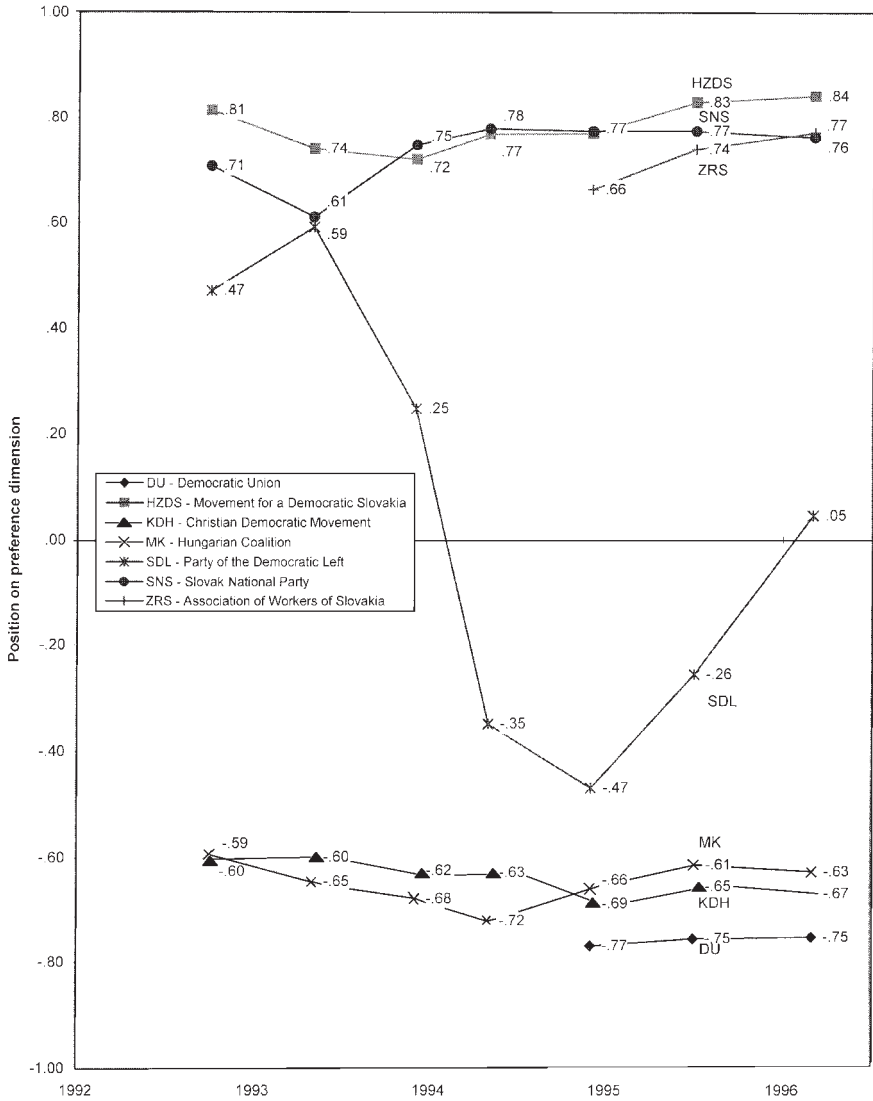


Figure 1. Positions of major political parties on the preference dimension in Slovakia, 1992–6

Source: Central European University (1992–6).

party choice in the Czech Republic involves primarily economic and socio-economic questions. The correlation of the preference dimension with the religion dimension begins at a low level and actually declines during this period, while the correlation with the nation factor rebounds after an extremely low ebb in 1993. The one-time measurement of the democracy II factor produces the lowest correlation for any factor over the whole 4-year period.

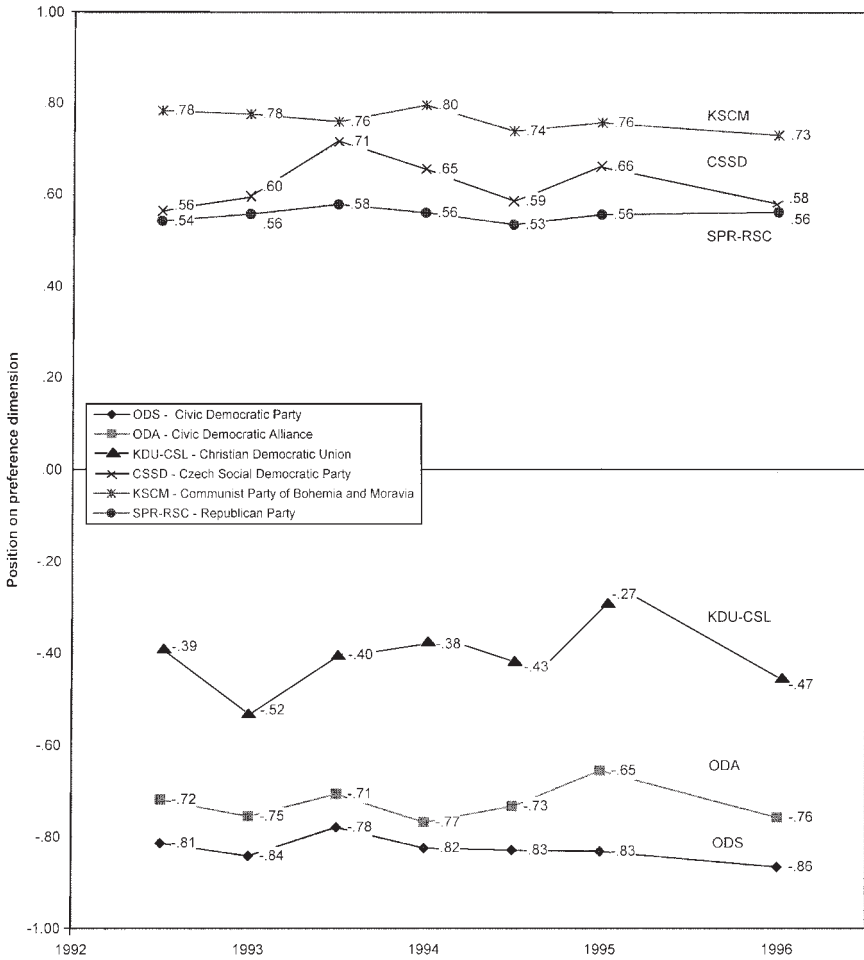


Figure 2. Positions of major political parties on the preference dimension in the Czech Republic, 1992–6
 Source: Central European University (1992–6).

The results for Slovakia differ significantly. The figures for 1992 show three factors that correlate well with the preference dimension: religion, economy and nation. In 1993, however, the correlations with religion and economy decline significantly and the correlation with the nation factor increases markedly. The nation factor continues to produce very strong correlations in 1994 and 1996, rivaled only by the extremely high correlations of the democracy I and II factors. After 1992 the nation and democracy factors remain considerably higher than those of any other factor, even after a sharp rebound of other factor correlations by 1996.¹¹

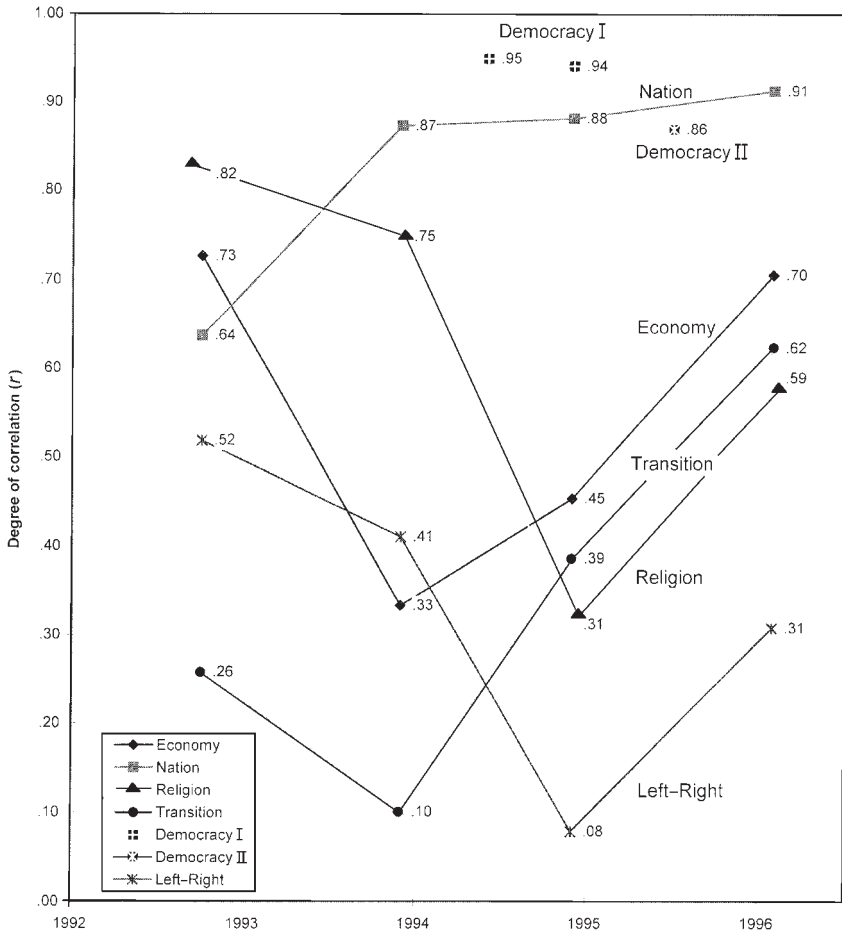


Figure 3. The degree to which party placement on key factors correlates with party position on the abstract preference dimension in Slovakia over time
 Source: Central European University (1992–6); FOCUS (1994); Institute of Sociology (1995).

These results offer clear replicable evidence that party choice in Slovakia after 1992 involved national and democratic questions more than economic, social or religious ones. The results mesh nicely with other sources of evidence and correspond extremely closely to the results obtained using the measurements of coherence and spread on particular factors as introduced by Kitschelt et al. (1997). Parties in the Czech Republic showed the widest spread and most coherence on precisely those factors – economy and transition – that correlate most strongly with the main dimension of competition. Slovakia’s national and democracy dimensions fit this same pattern, suggesting that party spread and coherence serve as strong indicators of the issues on which voters depend when making their party choice.

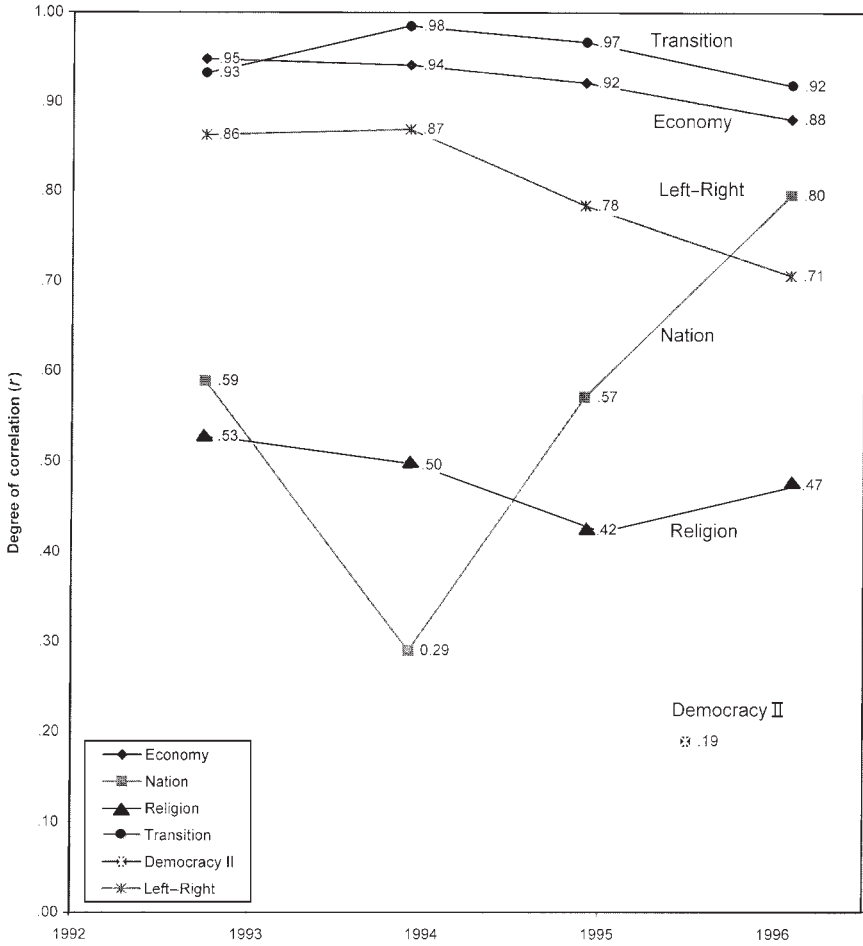


Figure 4. The degree to which party placement on key factors correlates with party position on the abstract preference dimension in the Czech Republic over time
 Source: Central European University (1992–6); Institute of Sociology (1995).

The overall results also conform closely to descriptive accounts of the Slovak and Czech party systems, particularly those that characterize the 1992 elections in Slovakia as an election about both economic policy and national sovereignty with overtones of the anti-communist struggle of 1990 (Innes 1997; Szomolányi, 1995). To the extent that the question of religion correlated strongly in 1992 with the question of anti-communism, there is evidence that all three of these shaped party choice in Slovakia in 1992.¹² By 1993 and especially by 1994, these other issues had largely fallen aside and questions about the nation and democracy emerged as dominant, a development that is echoed in the rise in references to these issues in the

programs of most of Slovakia's political parties between 1992 and 1994 (Carpenter, 1997; Krause, 1996a, 1998b; Leff, 1996; Mesežnikov, 1997).

How the Weight of Issues Shapes Democracy

The different weights that Slovaks and Czechs place on particular issues offer important insights into the dynamics of their respective party systems, but they also help to explain why Slovakia's democratic institutions proved to be more vulnerable than those of the Czech Republic. One of these explanations reflects unique and largely accidental differences in the array of opposition forces in the Slovak and Czech cases. The other two explanations suggest a causal connection between the basis on which voters evaluate political parties and the ability of party leaders to undermine democracy.

The Limits of Cross-cutting Divides

Differences in how voters evaluate parties in Slovakia and the Czech Republic yield important differences in the amount of common ground that parties can use for forming and maintaining coalitions. Coalitions in Slovakia and the Czech Republic show a high degree of coherence on those factors that lie at the heart of voter choice: the nation and democracy in Slovakia, the economy and the transition in the Czech Republic. On other factors the range of opinions varied. In the Czech Republic, the governing coalitions show greater coherence than the opposition on the nation factor, but they show less coherence on the religion factor. In Slovakia, by contrast, the coalition formed after 1994 shows greater coherence than the opposition on all factors. The difference is particularly sharp on the religion factor, where the difference within Slovakia's governing coalition stood just above zero, while the parties of the opposition differed more widely than any other set of parties on any factor in either of the two countries. This broad divide on the religion factor (along with the closely related question of decommunization) impeded effective cooperation within the opposition. A brief coalition of opposition parties that included both the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the former-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) produced a significant voter backlash, particularly within SDL, and led that party to seek 'its own seat within the opposition' (Mesežnikov, 1996: 21). Because of such conflicts, opposition parties missed key opportunities to cooperate and check the power of the coalition.

Slovakia's religion factor possessed some of the characteristics of a cross-cutting divide, a characteristic ordinarily thought to moderate political conflict. But Slovakia's religion factor cut only half way across the political spectrum, dividing the opposition against itself while leaving the coalition intact. Certain specific questions related to Slovakia's Hungarian minority yielded similar divisions within the opposition without disturbing the near

unanimity of the coalition (Krause, 1998b). The Czech opposition, while not particularly effective in its own attempts at cooperation, at least did not suffer from this additional handicap.

Nation-building Dimensions as a Source of Institutional Instability

Offe (1991) suggests that particular types of competition pose more dangers than others. Without explicit reference to political parties, he argues that the political change in Central and Eastern Europe occurs simultaneously on three levels: 'the territorial issue', 'the issue of democracy' and 'the issue of economic and prosperity order'. These levels correspond to questions concerning 'who "we" are', what the 'rules, procedures and rights' are, and 'who gets what, when, and how' (Offe, 1991: 869). Offe defines these levels of decision-making in hierarchical terms and places the territorial and citizenship questions at the 'fundamental' level, followed by the constitutional and institutional framework and finally the distribution of economic resources.

In Offe's analysis, the type of issue that shapes voters' preferences is very important. The focus of the Czech voters on economic issues, along with certain limited questions of rights and government activity, suggests an acceptance of the country's more fundamental institutional and national arrangements. In Slovakia, by contrast, voters' feelings about parties revert to the more fundamental questions of nation-building. It is much easier for enterprising political leaders to alter institutional relationships in settings where basic questions about citizenship and institutions are still in play than in settings where the matter is considered resolved. Unlike their Czech counterparts, Slovak political elites who wished to change institutional relationships did not first have to overcome presumptions against raising such issues in the first place.

Polarization on Democracy Questions and Democratic Oscillation

Voters' emphasis on democracy issues also reshapes the political landscape in ways that damage democracy. When voters base their political choices on a particular set of issues, they shape the internal composition of parties by forcing them to clarify their position on the issues in question. Leaders and supporters who do not agree with a party's position may feel compelled to move elsewhere on the political spectrum. As a result, the position of a party on the main dimension becomes more defined, even as the opinions on other questions may remain quite diverse. Parties may even avoid strong stances on other issues so as not to alienate potential supporters.

In most western democracies, the basis for party evaluation has involved socio-economic questions, and parties have developed strong profiles on the

left-right dimension. Differences between parties on socio-economic conflicts may become marked, even extreme, while questions about nationhood and democracy remain in the background. A change of government may usher in a significant change in socio-economic policy, but it will not, in most cases, produce a fundamental change in political organization of the state. The Czech Republic followed this pattern in the first years of its independent existence. Its parties developed clear socio-economic profiles at both the mass and elite levels and did not develop clear profiles on national or democracy questions.

Slovakia reversed this pattern. The socio-economic positions of Slovakia's parties differed little from one another, but dramatic differences emerged on democracy issues. The competition of Slovakia's parties around questions of democracy between 1992 and 1998 resulted in a self-sorting of party elites, party activists and party voters along those same lines. The shifts increased the possibility for sharp swings in political behavior analogous to the sharp swings in economic policy found elsewhere. Instead of general agreement among all parties about the importance and nature of democracy, Slovakia's system split into two halves, one that expressed preference for strong use of authority and another that expressed strong support for accommodation, negotiation and observance of law. This pattern of polarization on political questions quickly demonstrated its dangerous potential. The less authoritarian parties took power in a parliamentary vote of no confidence in 1994 but could not win the election that followed. The newly elected coalition, shaped by a self-sorting process along political rather than economic lines, contained few internal counterbalances against national and institutional extremes. The result was a dramatic erosion of democratic institutions.

The defeat of this same coalition in late 1998 appears to have signaled a halt to this process for the short term, but the underlying patterns do not appear to have changed. The winners of Slovakia's 1998 election demonstrated a willingness to follow democratic norms and act with more conciliation on national issues, but this new government must invest its political capital in a deeper resolution of these questions rather than spending it only on the imposition of its own goals. Otherwise, its victory may represent merely the final positive swing in Slovakia's dangerous political oscillation.

Notes

Research for this article was supported by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the United States Information Agency, and the US Department of State, which administers the Russia, Eurasian, and East European Research Program (Title VIII), a grant from the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, and grants from the Kellogg Institute for International Studies.

- 1 The fact that inclusion or omission of just two questions can substantially change the array of factors calls attention to the limits of factor analysis. The groupings that such analysis yields may be used for convenience but must not become reified.
- 2 The data for 1992 and 1994 yield three relatively strong factors for the Czech Republic. The data for 1993 and 1996 yield four factors, but in each case two of these four factors register weakly.
- 3 The questions comprising factors tended to bear similarly high weight. Calculations based on the synthetic factors do not differ markedly from calculations based on the actual factor scores.
- 4 The concept of the competitive dimension is complex and resolving disputes about its definition remains outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, there exists a close relationship between the issues on which voters evaluate parties and dimensions of competition at the political party level. Two surveys of Czech party elites show correlations between party leaders and party supporters at levels of $r = 0.99$ and $r = 1.00$ on virtually every measurement used in this paper (Kitschelt et al., 1994; Krause, 1996b). Attempts to replicate these surveys in Slovakia proved impossible because certain parties refused to participate, but similarities between party statements and party supporters' opinions suggest an equally high degree of correlation (Krause, 1998b).
- 5 Several of the CEU surveys include questions that ask respondents to identify the most important problem in their respective countries and to identify the parties that are most capable of resolving those problems, but these do not ask respondents to weigh issues against one another. It is also notable that there is only a moderate correlation (between $r = 0.55$ and $r = 0.65$ in both countries) between the party that respondents believe to be most effective in solving what they state to be the most important problem and the party to which they would give their vote.
- 6 As Table 3 shows, calculations of raw dispersion for particular factors yield no clear pattern, but this reflects wide differences in the dispersion of the population as a whole on those factors. The category of relative dispersion, which factors out differences in the population dispersion, produces considerably stronger patterns.
- 7 A closer look at individual party scores on the religion and nation factors shows a narrow range of opinion for all parties except one outlier. In the case of religion this outlier party is the Christian Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL). In the case of the nation factor the outlier is the Republican Party (SPR-RSČ). These results closely correspond to what Kitschelt et al. (1997: 207) find in their study of Czech elites and refer to as 'market niches'.
- 8 Although the outlying placement of Slovakia's Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) resembles the 'market niche' position of its counterpart in the Czech Republic, party positions on Slovakia's religion factor are broader and more evenly distributed.
- 9 Thermometer scores can be translated into spatial arrangements using numerous variants of factor analysis and multi-dimensional scaling. For the sake of consistency with previous sections of this paper, the results used here are the products of factor analysis with varimax rotation and the number of factors held constant at 1.0. These results correlate extremely closely with the result of multi-dimensional scaling for the same datasets.

- 10 Thermometer scores from surveys by SAV/AVCR and FOCUS overwhelmingly confirm the CEU studies' placement of parties on the main competitive dimension, correlating with the CEU results at levels between $r = 0.98$ and $r = 1.00$.
- 11 Both Slovakia and the Czech Republic show evidence of a rebound effect among secondary factors. A close look at the individual party scores indicates that this rebound effect is caused not so much by the re-emergence of these other factors as by the realignment of party supporters' positions on these other factors. In the Czech Republic, the movement of parties relative to one another on the nation factor is greater than their movement on the economy and transition factors, bringing the nation factor into a closer approximation with the economy and transition factors. The rebound of the economy and transition factors in Slovakia largely reflects the appearance of two new parties at opposite ends of the main competitive dimension that also held sharply opposing views not only on nation and democracy questions but also on economy and transition questions.
- 12 Correlation between party supporters' positions on the religion factor and their support for 'Removing former communist party members from positions of influence' averages $r = 0.78$ in Slovakia but only $r = 0.54$ in the Czech Republic, suggesting a weaker tie between religious issues and anti-communism among Czechs.

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Paper submitted 3 November 1998; accepted for publication 13 June 1999.