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Abstract
Why do party systems stabilise quickly in some new democracies while others remain in extended flux? As a core variable of comparative politics, party system stability has led scholars to generate various theoretical explanations, but consensus is still lacking. Given its widely divergent party systems, postcommunist Europe presents an important opportunity to revisit stability’s determinants. Applying hypotheses derived from theories about competition in multidimensional policy spaces, I find that they better explain variation in a 14-case sample than contending hypotheses about the electoral system, economic performance, constitutional design, political culture, or previous democratic experience.

The stability of political parties, and the party systems they comprise, is a core variable of comparative politics. How volatile is the vote for parties over time? How easy is it for new parties to enter politics? How common is party death? Scholars have invoked such attributes of party system stability to explain outcomes as various as democratic breakdown, political corruption, and the treatment of minorities. With Weimar Germany as the cautionary exemplar, unstable multipartism has been blamed for democratic collapse (Linz 1978; Sartori 1976). In the realm of state-building, recent scholarship has linked the stability of party systems and robustness of competition to variation in patronage in postcommunist states (Grzymala-Busse 2007; O’Dwyer 2006). Unstable party systems may also impact minority rights, as low barriers to party entry magnify the influence of illiberal outsider parties with radical views. Broadening this point, scholars have argued that large flows of new parties into parliament, and even government, may undermine new democracies’...
capacity to support programmatic competition, an ideal in which public policies reflect voters’ choices through the agency of programmatically defined parties (Mainwaring & Zoco 2007; Kitschelt 1995). Even in the best of circumstances, programmatic party competition is ‘costly and difficult to achieve’ because it requires that voters recognise the policy choices represented by party labels—which is complicated if the cast of parties changes rapidly over time. Underscoring the importance of party system stability to such theorising, new scholarship is focusing on methodological refinements disaggregating its components into more fine-grained measures (Powell & Tucker 2013).

Strikingly, however, while party system stability is often used to explain political outcomes, scholars are far from consensus when stability itself is taken as the object of explanation—this despite a vigorous debate that has produced robust theoretical perspectives on the determinants of stability. Thus, opportunities to explore these determinants empirically and comparatively are particularly valuable. With their highly divergent outcomes and similar starting points, postcommunist Europe’s party systems provide an almost unmatched opportunity in this regard. To consider the extremes: in Poland, elections typically bring recently established party organisations and electoral blocs into the party system, and even the government. By contrast, until the shock of the ongoing financial crisis, the Czech and Hungarian party systems had settled into stable patterns of electoral competition among parties established soon after democratisation and with predictable coalitional preferences. In Hungary, the same parties from the early 1990s won 96.7% of the vote in the 2006 elections—and, in the Czech Republic, 88%. Over a comparable span in Poland, the figure was 9.1%!

Using a sample of postcommunist countries, this paper asks: why do party systems in some new democracies stabilise quickly while others remain in an extended period of flux? Building on extant literature about party competition in multidimensional policy spaces and utilising comparative data on party positioning, I test the hypothesis that the structure and character of issue dimensions influences party system stability. Dimensions of competition are defined as underlying axes which link (or divide) parties along some larger number of discrete policy issue dimensions; e.g. the various policy issues of privatisation, taxation, and

Footnote 1 continued

dramatically and merged with the Latvia’s Way (Latvijas Cels) party. See also Vachudova and Hooghe (2009) and Millard (2009).

2 If elections are not decided by programmatic competition, factors like party leaders’ charisma or clientelism may fill the void (Kitschelt 1995, p. 451).

3 It is not my contention that stability is always seen as a positive influence. Scholars may disagree, for example, on whether political patronage is more pervasive in systems with high party turnover or in those with a stable cast of parties. The important point is rather that both perspectives centre on the character of party competition.

4 This paper covers the period from the early 1990s through early 2009—that is, until the financial crisis. Unsurprisingly, the sudden implosion of national economic fortunes in some countries has destabilised their party systems. In Hungary, the crisis has been particularly devastating, and it has remade the party system, as evidenced by the collapse of the socialists, the hegemony of Fidesz, and the success of radical-right newcomers like Jobbik. More than just a shock to the party system, these developments have raised questions about the quality of Hungary’s democracy itself. In Latvia—which saw its unemployment rate jump from 7 to 23% and its GDP decline by some 20% between December 2008 and December 2009—the crisis resulted in two pre-term elections over the space of a year. Shocks such as these have a logic of their own and are beyond the purview of my analysis. Further complicating the picture, the effect of the crisis has differed across countries: Poland’s economy has continued to grow. Lastly, not all of the countries covered in this paper (see Table 2) have held elections since the onset of the crisis. To eliminate these potentially complicating factors, I restrict my focus to the pre-crisis period.
social insurance may all be said to comprise an underlying dimension of market outcomes versus state redistribution. My empirical analysis uses Benoit and Laver’s 2002–2003 expert survey mapping party placement along a variety of issue dimensions (Benoit & Laver 2006).

My hypothesis makes explicit a common, if often implicit, argument about turbulent party systems in new democracies, especially in postcommunist Europe—namely, that instability reflects the failure of parties to structure voters’ electoral choices consistently, coherently, and pragmatically. More specifically, party elites are faulted for embracing populist issues like nationalism or social conservatism rather than organising interests pragmatically, which is to say, around economic issues. Ost’s account of the decline of Poland’s Solidarity (Solidarność) movement is a good example (Ost 2005). Asking why the once-powerful Solidarity provided so few resources on which to build political parties in the 1990s, he argues that Solidarity’s successor organisations failed to organise around economic issues. As their supporters became increasingly angry with the costs of economic reform, post-Solidarity parties channelled this discontent into cultural and identity issues. They blamed economic problems on former Communist elites. They answered voters’ economic fears with nationalism and social conservatism, periodically splitting to form new parties on these issues or recombining into blocs like Electoral Action Solidarity (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność—AWS). These tactics left voters disengaged from politics, and the post-Solidarity elites’ embrace of nationalism and social conservatism served to fragment what were, at base, economic grievances along these other dimensions.

The dimensions of party competition: their structure and character

Scholars of party system development tend to fall into two schools. The first explains stabilisation and consolidation in terms of the rules structuring interaction between self-interested, competing parties. Cox, for example, shows how parties’ behaviour between elections shapes the choices available to voters, augmenting the advantages of stronger parties and undercutting those of weaker ones (Cox 1997; Smyth 2006). Such ‘coordination strategies’ include restricting the entry of new parties into the system, changing the rules translating vote-share into seat-share, and forming inter-party coalitions. A second school looks at party system formation through the lens of ‘cleavage’ politics (Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Kitschelt 1992; Benoit & Laver 2006; Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2009). This paper situates itself in the second body of scholarship, not because the first has not generated many valuable insights for the study of party systems (it has), but because the two starting points are so different. The two approaches are, in fact, not competing but complementary, and though a full theory of party system development would incorporate both of them, that is too ambitious a goal for here.

To be clear, I conceptualise cleavages—or ‘axes of competition’—in an explicitly political sense. Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who defined the terms for thinking comparatively about party cleavages, conceptualised them in terms of relatively ascriptive traits: voters’ urban versus rural identity, religious denomination, etc. Subsequent research, however, argued that ascriptive and attitudinal cleavages do not translate directly into political ones (Powell 1970, p. 56). Instead, scholars emphasised how political elites, organised as parties,
influenced political affiliations and partisan behaviour through their selective mobilisation of latent ascriptive and attitudinal cleavages. Following scholarship by Benoit and Laver, Kitschelt, and Rohrschneider and Whitefield, I employ the latter approach, viewing axes of competition as defined by how parties position themselves on a multiplicity of issue spaces.

Scholars have written at length on the dimensionality of party competition and on party system stability in new democracies (Mainwaring & Zoco 2007), especially those in Eastern Europe, but rarely on the relationship between the two. If they have, they have conceptualised dimensionality in sociological rather than political terms. Tavits, for instance, hypothesises that ‘well-ordered’ social cleavages will promote party system stability but uses demographic indicators of cleavage structure such as ethnic heterogeneity and the size of the rural population (Tavits 2005). Regarding dimensionality, Kitschelt’s seminal application of the axes-of-competition framework to Eastern Europe’s new democracies has more recently sparked sophisticated refinements by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2009) and Marks et al. (2006). As here, the latter two studies move beyond ecological data to analyse dimensions of party competition, using surveys of experts’ opinions to characterise party positions. Yet this latter scholarship is primarily concerned with characterising and comparing competition, both within Eastern Europe and with Western Europe; it does not attempt to link axes of competition with party system stability.

My central purpose is to explore the hypothesis that the structure and character of the dimensions of party competition affect party system stability. I hypothesise that the more coherently parties ‘bundle’ policy positions into underlying dimensions of competition, the more stable the system will be. The tightest such bundling occurs when party positions can be reduced to one, or almost one, dimension. Further, if party systems contain multiple dimensions of competition, I expect greater stability where a market–redistributive, i.e. ‘economic’, dimension predominates.

These hypotheses, which are laid out more precisely below, are based on the starting assumption that parties structure (or fail to structure) choices that voters make in elections through their positioning on individual policy issues. These party positions may cohere, or crystallise, as broader axes of competition if there is a consistency in how, collectively, parties locate themselves on related policy issues. The extent to which such bundling occurs I will call ‘crystallisation’. It is possible (even likely) to have more than one axis of competition, and these may reinforce or cross-cut each other (Rae & Taylor 1970). If axes are reinforcing, then a party’s position on, say, issues pertaining to nationalism will correspond systematically to its position on economic issues; if cross-cutting, no such correspondence is implied.

I now develop three hypotheses about the structure and character of competitive dimensions and party system stability to guide the analysis in the sections devoted to comparing party system stability and the dimensions of party competition.

Hypothesis 1: stability will be highest in party systems in which there is a single underlying dimension of competition, or in those which closely approximate this model

Programmatic competition imposes sharp ‘cognitive processing demands’ on the electorate, an argument that derives ultimately from Downs (1957, pp. 96–103; see also Rohrschneider & Whitefield 2009, p. 283). As Kitschelt writes, ‘Programme-based parties incur the highest coordination costs among party supporters and leaders and require the greatest amount of information among voters to arrive at an intelligent choice among competing alternatives’
(Kitschelt 1995, p. 449). Not only must voters inform themselves about the issues and party programmes: depending on whether parties bundle certain issues, voters may also have to decide how to balance, say, economic policy concerns against identity concerns. Where parties collectively bundle policy issues into one, or nearly one, dimension,6 there are still multiple issues along which parties stake out different positions, but there is a direct correspondence between their positions on any policy dimension and all other policy dimensions. The less bundling parties provide, the greater the cognitive demands on voters, the greater the scope for contingency in voting, and the less reliable the ties between parties and voters.

The absence of bundling may reflect the newness of the party system, as parties sort out their own and voters’ preferences. It may also, however, represent parties’ strategic calculations. Riker (1986) has argued that, when faced with persistent losses along extant axes of competition, parties introduce new axes to craft new majorities. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century the Republican Party used the issue of slavery to divide the once powerful Democratic Party. Analogously, Ost’s account of the Solidarity successor organisation AWS’s electoral rhetoric may be framed in these terms. AWS was at a disadvantage relative to the postcommunist Democratic Left Alliance (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej—SLD) on the issue of economic reform, which AWS supported but which eroded its support among union members. Rather than lose the battle on economic grounds, AWS turned increasingly to nationalism and social conservatism to frame its message, but this strategy created fissions within AWS itself and the Polish ‘right’ more generally, fuelling party churn.7

Hypothesis 2: among party systems with multiple dimensions of competition, we expect greater stability where those dimensions conform to market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, or citizenship ‘logics’8

In real life, party systems, particularly those with more than two parties, generally contain more than one underlying dimension, sometimes many more. While multiple dimensions increase complexity, parties may still simplify choices to the extent that they collectively take consistent stances on similar issues. A ‘right’ party worthy of the name would oppose, say, both extensive social redistribution and regulatory burdens on private business. The same party might support gay rights, but a ‘right’ party that opposed social redistribution and yet supported heavy regulation would indicate an incoherent, or even nonexistent, ‘economics’ axis of competition.

To build my hypothesis about the types of bundling that I expect to observe, I am guided by Kitschelt’s theorising about the kinds of underlying dimensions relevant in

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6See later in this article for more on ‘nearly one-dimensional’ systems.

7How much freedom do parties have in choosing positions? To what degree are their choices constrained by structure, e.g. the historical processes of social cleavage formation? Even for two electorates with similar traits or preferences, it is possible to imagine that parties in each may structure the choices presented to voters differently. The classic texts on party systems all run up against this problem of separating agency from structural constraints. Typically, they acknowledge that either alternative is untenable on its own: social structure does not fully determine politicians’ choices, but neither are those choices made in a structural vacuum (e.g. Powell 1970, pp. 31, 48–49, 138–39; Downs 1957, p. 140; Lijphart 1977, pp. 114–16). For my analysis, finding the precise admixture between structure and agency is less important than recognising that the ‘bundling’ of policy issues presented to voters depends to a significant degree on the choices that parties make. How these choices are made is a prior step beyond my scope.
postcommunist politics (1992, pp. 12–14; 1995, p. 458). He suggests that three dimensions are most likely. The argument is not that all of these dimensions will be present in a given party system, only that these are the most likely to appear. Further, certain of these dimensions may reinforce each other, but whether they do so is an empirical question. The first axis concerns whether to define membership in the political community inclusively or exclusively; this is the national, or ‘citizenship’, dimension. Second, Kitschelt suggests that a libertarian–hierarchical (or social values) dimension may be visible. On one end of this dimension one finds parties ‘calling for participatory decentralized decision making respecting the autonomy of individuals in collective choice processes’ and, on the other end, a preference for an ‘authoritarian’ decision-making style with ‘various hierarchical authorities as the final arbiter of social organization’ (1992, p. 13). The third major dimension is market–redistributive, dividing ‘political actors between advocates of a political redistribution of resources and proponents of a purely “spontaneous” market allocation of resources’ (1992, p. 13). In the empirical section, I operationalise these dimensions using Benoit and Laver’s survey, classifying its questions along these theoretically derived axes of competition.

Parties are not meaningfully simplifying voters’ choices if their positions cannot be reduced to consistent underlying dimensions. One can imagine reasons why they may not: voting may not be decided by policy issues at all, but by the personal qualities of candidates or the distribution of patronage (Kitschelt 1995, pp. 450–51).

Hypothesis 3: among party systems with multiple axes of party competition, those where a clear market–redistributive axis predominates will be more stable than those where it does not

Since Lipset and Rokkan, the argument has often been made that economic issues make for different politics than identity- or values-based issues. Economic issues tend to be less polarising, more conducive to coalition-building, and more supportive of democratisation (Lipset & Rokkan 1967, pp. 17–20; see also Lijphart 1977, pp. 81–88). Almond and Verba (1965, p. 109) note the paradox that voters whose religious views shape their partisanship are, paradoxically, both more sharply partisan and less engaged with politics. Applying this logic to party systems, Kitschelt argues that the axes of market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, and citizenship ‘give rise to progressively sharper conflict potentials’ (1992, p. 14). If predominant, the latter two axes are more likely to yield party conflict and fragmentation, undermining party system stability. In contrast, party competition on the market–redistributive axis is likely to be less polarising and more open to compromise because ‘it involves tangible, incrementally divisible resources’ (1992, p. 14; see also Powell 1970, pp. 44–47).

Salience

Having described a set of hypotheses about how the axes of competition affect party system stability, I wish now to complicate the picture by introducing the concept of salience. As Rohrschneider and Whitefield argue, salience matters as a potentially simplifying factor in party competition. If parties’ positions fail to bundle certain issues but these issues are non-salient, then those issues should affect neither the voting calculus nor, by extension, party system stability. In such a case, the dimensional structure of party competition may be complex or dominated by values issues, but it does not matter for stability. Thus, to the
extent that salience patterns differ cross-nationally, they may explain variation in party system stability.

In their survey, Benoit and Laver polled both party position and salience, allowing me to empirically test whether certain issues lacked salience in some countries. Space constraints preclude a full presentation of this analysis, but, to summarise, the data showed very few, if any, substantive differences in issue salience, even when setting very low thresholds for non-salience. Only two issues—economic growth versus environment and socially conservative values—ever appear to be of somewhat lower salience, and these only in five of 14 countries. With the exception of Romania, all of these are countries with less stable party systems; therefore, if salience is mitigating the effects of unfavourable dimensional structure, the effect is rather small and has little observable impact on stability.

Alternative explanations

Before analysing the axes of competition, let us briefly consider what other factors might affect party system stability. First, we would expect majoritarian electoral rules to increase stability: by increasing the number of parties, proportional representation (PR) rules would, presumably, decrease stability (Bernhard & Karakoc 2011). Relatedly, high minimum threshold levels and disproportionality—as captured by mean district magnitude—would make the system more majoritarian, increasing stability. One might also link stability to parliamentarism (Fish 2006), previous democratic experience (Mainwaring & Zoco 2007), or macroeconomic performance (Tavits 2005). Last, one might expect geographic patterns reflecting neighbours’ influence or political culture (Kopstein & Reilly 2000).

Because I use factor analysis to assess my hypotheses regarding the axes of competition (see the section entitled ‘Comparing the dimensions of party competition’), I cannot control for these alternative explanations with the usual regression techniques. However, as a baseline for assessing my hypotheses, Table 1 compares the general fit between the party system stability and these other causal factors. The table divides the country sample into two groups based on party system stability (both the sample and the stability measures are detailed in the penultimate section and Table 2).

While the small number of cases constrains the capacity for systematic controls, Table 1 suggests that the alternative explanations offer little traction here: the differences between the groups are generally substantively small and in all cases statistically insignificant. We find an equivalent number of cases of party system instability among countries with and without previous democratic experience, across geographic sub-regions and—to use the predominant religion as a rough indicator—political cultures. Using Fish and Kroenig’s cross-national parliamentary power index, there is essentially no difference between the groups. In terms of macroeconomic performance, the results are also inconclusive. Stable party systems have somewhat lower rates of inflation, but the difference is only a percentage point; contrary to expectations, the same systems have lower growth rates.

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8 Using Polity IV data, I coded countries as having previous democratic experience if they ever achieved a polity score of six or higher before 1989 (Marshall & Jaggers 2009).

9 I use Fish’s (1998, p. 40) coding of this variable.

10 PPI scores are from Fish (2006, p. 11), with 2007 data from Fish and Kroenig (2009).

11 GDP growth and inflation data are from the year before the second of the two elections in the point-volatility calculation (International Monetary Fund 2009).
Concerning electoral rules, the evidence is mixed at best: there is little difference between the stable/unstable categories for either PR or mixed systems. Likewise, the comparison reveals little impact regarding the minimum threshold for representation. As expected, party system stability is associated with lower mean district magnitude, but this result is largely driven by two extreme outliers, Slovakia and Moldova, whose scores on this variable are five to seven times higher than the next country in the ranking.

Again, the small number of cases precludes definitive judgements. My point is not to definitively rule out rival hypotheses but to establish a basis to compare the ‘goodness of fit’ of the dimensional framework offered here. As the section entitled ‘Comparing the dimensions of party competition’ shows, this framework offers a better fit than the alternatives.

12Lithuania, Slovenia, Albania, and Hungary combined Proportional Representation (PR) and Single Member District (SMD) rules for the majority of the period under consideration.
14Slovakia and Moldova’s mean district magnitudes were 150 and 101, compared to around 11 for the other cases. Data (Beck et al. 2001) are for the second of the two elections in the point-volatility calculation.
### TABLE 2

**Party System Stability Compared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Second election (year)</th>
<th>Last election (year)</th>
<th>Number of elections in this period</th>
<th>Average volatility in this period</th>
<th>Volatility in 2002–2003</th>
<th>Continuity (in % vote-share)</th>
<th>Original parties still extant in most recent elections</th>
<th>Overall stability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>ODS, CSSD, KDU–CSL, KSCM</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>HDZ, SDP, IDS, HSP, HSL, HSS, HNS</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>MSzP, SzDSz, KDNP, FIDESz, MDF</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>93.5</td>
<td>PSD, PNL, PD, PRM, UDMR</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>SDS, LDS, SD, SLS, SN</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>K, IL, RE, SDE</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>SDS, BSP, DPS</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>HZDS, MKP, KDH, KSS, SNS</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>1998&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>PCRM, PDM</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>SRS</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>PSL, MN, SLD</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>86.8</td>
<td>PS, PD, PR, BLD, PSD, PBDNJ, PAA, AD, PDK</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>LZS, LSVP</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>LSDP, TS, LKD, AWPL</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: <sup>a</sup> From 1996 to 2008, Moldova had a Freedom House Score of three or better. After the second election in 2009, Moldova’s Freedom House score worsened to four.

Political parties by country:
- **Czech Republic**: ODS—Občanská Demokratická Strana; CSSD—Česká Strana Socio民主ickej Demokracie; KDU–CSL—Kresťanská a Demokratická Unie; KSCM—Komunistická Strana Čech a Moravy.
- **Croatia**: HDZ—Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica; SDP—Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske; IDS—Istarski Demokratski Sabor; HSP—Hrvatska Stranka Prava; HSL—Hrvatska Socijalno-Liberalna Stranka; HSS—Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka; HNS—Hrvatska Narodna Stranka–Liberalni Demokrati.
- **Hungary**: MSzP—Magyar Socialista Párt; SzDSz—Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége—a Magyar Liberális Párt; KDNP—Kereszténysorosdemokrata Néppárt; FIDESz—Magyar Polgári Szövetség; MDF—Magyar Demokrata Fórum.
- **Romania**: PSD—Partidul Social-Democrat; PNL—Partidul Național Liberal; PD—Partidul Democrat; PRM—Partidul România Mare; UDMR—Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România.
- **Romania**: SD—Slovenská Demokratická Stranka; LDS—Liberalna Demokracia Slovencija; SD—Socialni Demokrati; SLS—Slovenska Ljudska Stranka; SNS—Slovenska Načelnica Stranka.
- **Estonia**: K—Eesti Keskerakond; IL—Isamaaliit; RE—Eesti Reformierakond; SDE—Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond.
- **Bulgaria**: SDS—Sŭjud na Demokratichni Sili; BSP—Bŭlgarska Socio-Demokratska Partija; DPS—Dvizenie za Prava i Svobodi.
Slovakia: HZDS—Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko; MKP—Magyar Koalíció Pártja; KDH—Kresťanskodemokratické Hnutie; KSS—Komunistická strana Slovenska; SNS—Slovenská Národná Strana.
Moldova: PCRM—Partidul Comunisților din Republica Moldova; PDM—Partidul Democrat din Moldova.
Serbia: SRS—Srpska Radikalna Stranka.
Poland: PSL—Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe; MN—Mniejszość Niemiecka; SLD—Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej.
Albania: PS—Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë; PD—Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë; PR—Partia Republike Shqiptare; BLD—Bashkimi Liberal Demokrat; PSD—Partia Socialdemokrate e Shqipërisë; PBDNJ—Partia Bashkimi për t'ë Drejtat e Njeriut; PAA—Partia Agrare Ambientaliste; AD—Partia Aleanca Demokratike; PDK—Partia Demokristiane e Shqipërësë.
Latvia: LZS—Centriska Partija—Latvijas Zemnieku Savieniba; LSDP—Latvijas Socīaldemokrātiskā Partija.
Lithuania: LSDP—Lietuvos Socialdemokratų Partija; TS—Tėvynės Sąjunga; LKD—Lietuvos Krikščionių Demokratai; AWPL—Akcja Wyborcza Polaków na Litwie.
Comparing party system stability

I propose a two-part conceptualisation of party system stability, in terms of continuity and volatility. Party system continuity is designed to capture how different a new democracy’s party system appears after several election cycles. I measure it by aggregating the vote share of parties established at the beginning of democratisation in the most recent elections (extending up to 2009). Because the first, ‘founding’ elections were more referendums on the former regime than programmatic contests, I calculate party system stability (and later average volatility) beginning from the second elections after communism’s fall. In unstable systems, parties lack stable constituencies; therefore, the aggregate vote share of the original parties decreases over time. In more stable systems, the original parties are better able to preserve their vote share over time. By nature of its construction, this measure cannot capture all variation in the organisational continuity of parties over time. Consider a party whose fortunes decline and then recover between the second and most recent elections. Electoral volatility, the second component of party system stability, provides a measurement safeguard against this possibility. A commonly used metric for comparing party systems, volatility is the sum net change in each party’s vote share from one election to the next (then divided by two). In unstable party systems, parties’ vote shares fluctuate sharply across elections.

Why use two indicators? I hope to at least partially correct for a drawback of the party positioning data, namely, its lack of an overtime component. Benoit and Laver’s data capture a single snapshot from 2002–2003. Party system continuity is chosen as a cumulative aggregation of party system change over time. Volatility, which one would expect to co-vary with party system continuity, helps correct for the possibility of greatly varying party electoral strength over time even if the cast of parties remains constant. Moreover, volatility allows for both more and less ambitious comparisons. Less ambitiously, one can compare party systems by volatility around the pair of elections closest to Benoit and Laver’s observation point, which I term ‘point volatility’. More ambitiously, one may compare the average electoral volatility over the whole period. If the correlation between all three measures is high—especially, if the correlation between point volatility and average volatility is high—then we can with greater confidence assume that the snapshot offered by Benoit and Laver’s data represents relatively time-stable features of the system. Put differently, party systems that appear unstable in the early 2000s are, in general, unstable during the whole period. As a more sensitive and flexible measure, volatility is the more important criterion for judging stability, but continuity is an intuitive ‘before-and-after’ snapshot of party system development.

Given the propensity for name changes and party mergers, coding party continuity to create comparative statistics is an ongoing challenge of comparative parties research, especially in postcommunist countries. The issue is thorny because some changes are superficial, perhaps a slight change in name, leaving intact both the party organisation and voters’ ability to recognise it. Other changes, also involving modification of the name, may however signify parties with different organisations, leaderships, and messages. Likewise, some mergers are better considered as instances of larger parties swallowing smaller ones whole, whereas others create parties significantly different than either predecessor. On a single- or several-country basis, these cases are tractable, but for the number considered...
here, it is difficult to make these judgement calls reaching back to the early 1990s. To remove the possibility of introducing my own bias into the coding, I use a comprehensive database *Parties and Elections in Europe*, which uses contextual knowledge and national electoral commissions’ data to compile comparable party system data for this region.\(^6\)

The universe of cases comprises postcommunist democracies. Without discounting differences in economic development, culture, and histories under communism, I focus on this group because, relative to any other region of comparable size, its members’ starting points and political and economic conditions since communism’s fall are remarkably similar. Without being a perfect set of comparisons, the postcommunist region is nonetheless the best set of comparisons available. I am limited, first, by Benoit and Laver’s data, which do not include much of the former Soviet Union. Second, to exclude countries with questionable democratic credentials, I include only those which received a score of three or better on the Freedom House’s political rights index in 2002 and which maintained this score unbroken through the set of elections considered here.\(^7\) Following Schedler, I use this cut-off point to exclude regimes identified as ‘electoral authoritarianism’ or worse (Schedler 2006, pp. 10–11).

Within the frame of postcommunism, the countries under study divide into ‘early’ and ‘late’ democratisers, those which democratised in the 1990s and those like Serbia, Croatia, Moldova, and Albania, which first sustained political rights scores of three or better on the Freedom House index beginning in 2000–2001.\(^8\) Given the second group’s later starting point, the shorter span of free-and-fair elections they offer, and the fact that parties in these countries could establish themselves in the period of semi-pluralism between the fall of communism and the attainment of open politics, I began with the expectation that they would look different in terms of party system stabilisation. Therefore, I take the first free-and-fair elections as the beginning point for comparing party system stabilisation in these cases.

Table 2 summarises party system stability across my sample. It reports the years of the second\(^9\) and most recent elections (up to 2009), the number of elections in that span, the

\(^6\) *Parties and Elections in Europe*, available at: [http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/](http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/), accessed 24 January 2014. Even using third-party data, calculating the comparative stability statistics required some coding rules regarding party continuity. When parties formed electoral alliances but retained their separate identities, as reflected in the post-election allocation of parliamentary seats among them, I did not count the alliances as new parties. Likewise, if such alliances then split back up into their constituent parties in later elections, these parties were not counted as new. When electoral alliances pooled parliamentary seats to the merged entity, I did count this as a new party. If a party changed names but the ‘Party and Elections’ database did not count the renamed party as new, then neither did I. (Such was the case of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat—PSD) in Romania.)

\(^7\) I use the political rights index given my focus on parties and voting, available at: [http://www.freedomhouse.org/](http://www.freedomhouse.org/), accessed 10 May 2012.

\(^8\) Moldova is a borderline case, having sustained Freedom House political rights scores of three between 1996 and 2009.

\(^9\) A few cases present idiosyncrasies that might suggest using a later date for the second postcommunist elections. In Poland’s 1989 elections, not all seats were freely contested. For the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the 1990 ‘founding elections’ had occurred in a different country, Czechoslovakia. Thus, in Table 2, rather than take 1991 as the starting point for characterising the Polish party system’s stability, why not take 1993? Likewise for the Czech Republic and Slovakia, why not use 1996 and 1994, respectively—instead of 1992? I decided not to, first, because the extant scholarship designates 1989 in Poland and 1990 in Czechoslovakia as the decisive political junctures for democratisation (e.g. Fish 1998, pp. 47, 51). Moreover, for the Czech Republic and Slovakia, my analysis uses electoral figures for the republic-level National Councils throughout, as these remained intact after the federation’s break-up. Second, using the later date
acronyms of the parties who survived over that period, their collective vote-share in recent elections (continuity), average volatility across the period, point volatility around 2002–2003, and my assessment of overall stability. For the latter, primary weight is given to the volatility scores. A case like Albania, which saw high continuity, receives a low stability rating because it ranks at the bottom in terms of volatility. In most cases, though, the various measures of stability cluster together. The correlations between point volatility, average volatility, and continuity are strong and statistically significant. For the early democratisers alone, the most comparable set of cases, the correlations are even stronger. For these cases, point volatility and average volatility are almost perfectly correlated, and both indicators of volatility are almost as highly correlated with party continuity. This is an important point: although the party positioning data provide only one snapshot of the party system, empirically, that snapshot differs hardly at all from the longer-term picture of party system stability since democratisation began. Therefore, one can with confidence generalise from these data—limited temporally though the data are—about the developmental dynamics of the party systems.

The party systems in Table 2 fall roughly into two groups, six cases that can be classified as ‘more stable’ and eight as ‘less stable’. Given the small number of cases, it is wiser not to draw distinctions among them too finely. In the more stable group are party systems ranking highly on all three indicators. Average volatility in this group tops out at 29.1% in Estonia and falls in the low 20s for the group as a whole. Point volatility here averages at 19%, with Hungary’s reaching as low as 9.7%. Continuity levels are high, trending in the 80–90% range. Among the less stable systems, volatility trends over 30%, and continuity in vote share is generally under 50%. In the least stable members of this group—Serbia, Poland, Albania, Latvia, and Lithuania—frequent mergers, splits, and organisational changes have completely remade the electoral environment since the early 1990s. Here, the political parties of the early transition collectively polled at most a third of the electorate in later elections, on average 50 points less than in the more stable party systems. In Poland, these parties polled only 9.1%. For these counties, both indicators of volatility also averaged markedly higher, in the neighbourhood of 50%. Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Moldova occupy the upper end of this category, with volatility levels averaging about 15 percentage points higher than more stable party systems. There is a dramatic break between these and the more stable party systems, however, in party system continuity, where they lag by roughly 30-plus percentage points.

Comparing the dimensions of party competition

To probe my hypotheses, I use Benoit and Laver’s expert survey mapping parties’ positions across 12 policy issues, using a 20-point spectrum. These data lend themselves to statistical

Footnote 19 continued
does not affect the party system stability scores in ways that undermine the argument. In fact, using the alternate dates sharpens the contrasts among the party systems, increasing the stability scores for the Czech Republic and decreasing them for both Poland and Slovakia.

Pairwise correlations are $-0.66$ between continuity and point volatility, $-0.65$ for continuity and average volatility, and 0.68 for point volatility and average volatility, which are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (two-tailed test). For ‘early’ democratisers only, the relationships are $-0.74$, $-0.83$, and 0.88, respectively (also significant at the same level).

Albania is an exception, yet its high continuity score should be qualified. As a ‘late democratizer’ its continuity is computed only from 2001. Moreover, in its mixed electoral system, majoritarian elements were emphasised.
techniques for describing the structure and character of underlying dimensions, and the
analysis below replicates Benoit and Laver’s principle component analysis to do this. In this
section, I first describe the survey, discussing how its questions tap into the axes of
competition theorised by Kitschelt. Second, I describe principle component analysis as a
technique, how I apply it to the survey data, and how to interpret those results in their raw
form. Third, I present a coding schema to interpret these raw results in a form that enables
categorical comparisons between high- and low-stability party systems. Building on the
hypotheses introduced in the paper’s theoretical discussion, this coding allows me to
categorise each party system in terms of firstly whether it approximates one-dimensional
competition (Hypothesis 1); secondly, if not, whether it shows at least moderate
crystallisation of the expected market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, and
citizenship dimensions (Hypothesis 2); and thirdly, if so, which of these dimensions
predominates, determining the character of competition (Hypothesis 3).

Of the policy issues comprising the survey, all display some level of theoretical
connection with the citizenship, libertarian–hierarchical, and market–redistributive axes
described by Kitschelt (1992). (For the wording of Benoit and Laver’s questions, see Benoit
and Laver (2006 pp. 229–31).) Clearly, my classification of these policy issues within the
theorised axes of competition is a matter of interpretation; however, any attempt to apply
survey research to a theoretical construct like axes of competition will require interpretation.
Some of the survey questions tap more directly into Kitschelt’s conceptual definitions than
others. Therefore, when it comes to using factor analysis to code each party system in terms
of the crystallisation of the hypothesised dimensions, I divide the policy issues into core and
ancillary issues. Core issues are those which must go together if a hypothesised dimension
can be said to be crystallised. For example, there are three policy issues in the survey that tap
into the market–redistributive axis: public spending versus taxes, privatisation, and
economic growth versus environmental regulation. I posit that ‘spending versus taxes’ and
‘privatisation’ are core elements of the market–redistributive dimension: we would not
expect an ‘economically right’ party to be, say, in favour of tax cutting yet philosophically
against privatisation. Environmental regulation, however, is less fundamentally a part of the
conceptual definition of the market–redistributive dimension, though as Benoit and Laver
(2006, p. 115) emphasise, the question’s wording emphasises a trade-off between economic
growth and regulation. Therefore, I treat cases where party positions on environmental
regulation align with the straightforwardly economic issues of taxation and privatisation as
exhibiting a strongly crystallised market–redistributive dimension, but the absence of such
alignment is not taken as evidence against crystallisation.

Turning to the libertarian–hierarchical dimension, five of the survey questions tap into
the conceptual definition. Clearly, the core issues here are social conservatism and religion
in politics. I treat media freedom, urban versus rural, and decentralisation as ancillary; their
alignment with social conservatism and religion in politics is taken as evidence of greater
crystallisation but is not necessary. Media freedom concerns the individual’s right to make
independent moral choices. Because much of modernisation theory emphasises the
difference between urban and rural society in terms of the relationship between the
individual and the community, the question on urban versus rural interests would seem to fit
this category a priori. I also include decentralisation here because Kitschelt (1992, p. 13)
explicitly identifies a preference for decentralised decision making. That said, in countries
with significant ethnic minority populations, it probably makes more sense to group
decentralisation in the citizenship dimension: ethnic majorities, fearing separatism, would oppose decentralisation while minorities would embrace it. The interpretation of the factor analysis below is sensitive to this distinction.

Four questions map theoretically onto the citizenship dimension: on nationalism, whether foreigners can own land, joining the EU, and whether ex-Communists should have the same rights as ordinary citizens.\(^{22}\) The first two of these I take as core elements of the citizenship dimension. I treat EU membership as ancillary because almost all parties tend to officially declare themselves pro-EU, even when they are nationalist in other respects. The ex-Communists question I treat as ancillary because, arguably, it taps into citizen rights in a somewhat different way than the core questions do.

The question now is whether party positions across issues can be simplified and summarised along a smaller set of underlying dimensions that resemble these \textit{a priori} expectations. We are also interested in the possibility that issue stances could be reduced to one, or nearly one, dimension. The natural way to find such dimensions, if they exist, is through factor analysis, a statistical technique for reducing a set of variables to a smaller set of underlying dimensions. This section presents a full factor analysis of 14 postcommunist countries across 12 policy issues. The ‘input’ data are the position assessments of individual country experts for each party on each policy issue, for 2,611 observations overall.\(^{23}\) I avoid the problem of smaller parties disproportionately influencing the results by weighting each party’s contribution to the factor analysis by its electoral size, as measured by its vote share in the closest election to the survey.

The raw results of the factor analysis are listed in Appendix 1. The columns are divided into three groups, classifying the survey questions into the three hypothesised underlying dimensions. Again, the observed party positions on these 12 issues may or may not crystallise into the expected dimensions. Each country-row corresponds to a separate underlying dimension (factor) uncovered by the factor analysis. The eigen-value is a measure of the strength of that factor in summarising the policy positions contained in the full set of input variables (survey questions). An eigen-value greater than one indicates that that factor comprises more information than a single one of the input variables; therefore, the convention is to report only latent factors greater than one. The next column reports the amount of variation in party positions explained by each factor. The rest of the columns report the factor loading of each input variable. By considering which input variables load strongly (the convention is coefficients in the intervals \(-1\) to \(-0.5\) and \(0.5\) to \(1\)) on a particular factor, one can characterise the underlying dimension. For example, in Croatia four of the five libertarian–hierarchical input variables and three of the four citizenship input variables load on the first factor. Thus, this factor describes an underlying dimension on one end of which are religious social conservatives with a nationalist bent. On its other end are secular liberals with a cosmopolitan outlook. Here, then, two well-crystallised dimensions, libertarian–hierarchical and citizenship, are reinforcing.

To adapt the factor analysis to my hypotheses, I developed three coding rules classifying party systems according to firstly which, if any, of the expected dimensions crystallise, and

\(^{22}\)In Lithuania, the survey differed slightly, lacking a question on the political rights of ex-Communists. Therefore, following Benoit and Laver (2006, p. 174), I use the closest alternative question on political rights.

\(^{23}\)To be clear, the input variables are not the average of the experts’ scores on each issue by party; since in the typical country case there are about as many parties as issues in the survey, using mean scores would provide too few observations for factor analysis.
secondly the extent to which those party systems with evident crystallisation approximate one-dimensional competition. Inescapably, given the nature of factor analysis, there is an element of arbitrariness to where the dividing lines are set, but I deliberately set low hurdles for demonstrating crystallisation so that slight variations in the threshold criteria will not affect the classifications.

To operationalise Hypothesis 1, I categorise a party system as **dominant single-dimension** if the first factor to emerge in the factor analysis explains more than three times the variance in party positions as the second factor. This term (and associated coding rule) is Benoit and Laver’s (2006, pp. 116–17); it describes policy spaces that ‘appear to be “nearly” one-dimensional’. Outside of a two-party system, purely one-dimensional competition is almost never found in practice. Western Europe’s more stable party systems are generally ‘dominant single-dimension’ (Benoit & Laver 2006, pp. 116–17).

The second coding criterion, **crystallisation**, operationalises Hypotheses 2 and 3 and has two parts: crystallisation on a given dimension and overall crystallisation. Beginning with the former, each of the hypothesised underlying dimensions (market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, and citizenship) receives a crystallisation score of high, medium, or low. It is ‘high’ if that dimension shows strong factor loadings on the two core policy issues for that dimension and on one or more of the ancillary policy issues. It is ‘medium’ if that dimension shows strong factor loadings on the two core policy issues but not on any of the ancillary policy issues. It is ‘weak’ if only one of the core policy issues loads strongly on that dimension. The **overall crystallisation** coding then divides the party systems into two groups depending on the previous measure. Systems meeting or surpassing the criterion of medium crystallisation on at least two dimensions are said to show ‘evident overall crystallization’. Systems failing to meet this threshold are classified as lacking overall crystallisation.

Table 3 summarises the evidence provided for the hypotheses based on this coding of the factor analysis. Because Hypotheses 2 and 3 apply to subsets of cases (only those with multiple dimensions of competition), I apply the hypotheses in stepwise fashion. Part I of the table classifies all 14 cases into ‘nearly’ one-dimensional and multidimensional types. Part II concerns only the 11 party systems which cannot be classified as ‘nearly one-dimensional’. Part III concerns a six-case subset of Part II, those where the factor analysis showed evidence of issue crystallisation along the hypothesised dimensions. Space limitations prevent a discussion of all the cases; however, for each of the hypotheses I focus on illustrative examples to demonstrate the logic of the argument.

Part I of the table indicates strong support for Hypothesis 1, which predicts stability the more closely party systems approximate competition along a single dimension. While in none of the party systems can the full range of policy issues be completely reduced to a single dimension, three—Hungary, Croatia, and Romania—qualify as ‘dominant single-dimension’, and all of them fall in the most stable category. In Romania, the market–redistributive and citizenship dimensions are reinforcing. Interestingly, in Hungary and Croatia, the issues of nationalism, social conservatism, and religion load very strongly on the first dimension, yet it seems not to adversely affect party system stability. To illustrate the point, consider the Hungarian party system by the end of the 1990s, in which, to quote Gábor Tőka’s description, ‘something very close to a two-party system emerged, and the multiple cleavages were absorbed into the opposition between two poles symbolized by the two major parties, with the more centrist or otherwise idiosyncratic parties apparently
approaching extinction’ (2004, p. 289). Confirming the analysis here, Tóka finds the major axis of competition anchored by a liberal-socialist pole of the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt—MSZP) and the Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége—SZDSZ) on the one side and a national-Christian-pro-market pole of the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz—Magyar Polgári Szövetség) on the other (2004, p. 313). As here, Tóka finds that economic issues, though less defined, became part of an ‘all-embracing ideological super-dimension pitting two comprehensive camps against each other across all controversial issue domains’ (2004, p. 295). While Tóka also acknowledges the role of electoral rules, he explicitly links the relative stability of Hungary’s party system to the fact that issue positions are organised in essentially unidimensional terms (2004, pp. 289–90).

Among countries where factor analysis uncovers multiple dimensions of competition, most (eight) fall into the ‘less stable’ category. In order to gain analytical leverage on these multidimensional systems—especially the relatively stable Czech, Estonian, and Slovenian ones—we need to consider firstly the degree of overall crystallisation around the hypothesised market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, and citizenship dimensions and secondly, to the extent that crystallisation is evident, which of these dimensions predominates, determining the character of competition (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Part II of the table compares the multidimensional systems by overall crystallisation. According to

### Table 3

**The Structure of Underlying Dimensions Compared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party system stability</th>
<th>Higher</th>
<th>Lower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Number of dimensions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Nearly’ single-dimensional</td>
<td>3 (HU, RO)</td>
<td>0 (HR, HU, RO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidimensional</td>
<td>3 (CR, SL, ES)</td>
<td>8 (BU, SR, MD, SB, PL, AL, LV, LT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Overall crystallisation of hypothesised dimensions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evident</td>
<td>2 (CR, ES)</td>
<td>4 (SR, LV, LT, PL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not evident</td>
<td>1 (SL)</td>
<td>4 (BU, MD, SB, AL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. In those systems with evident overall crystallisation, which dimension(s) most variation in party positions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market–redistributive</td>
<td>2 (CR, ES)</td>
<td>0 (HR, HU, RO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship &amp; market–redistributive</td>
<td>0 (LV)</td>
<td>1 (SL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship &amp; libertarian–hierarchical</td>
<td>0 (PL)</td>
<td>1 (CR, ES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libertarian–hierarchical</td>
<td>0 (SR, LT)</td>
<td>2 (CR, ES)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes: Bolded font indicates an anomalous case. Country abbreviations: HR—Croatia; HU—Hungary; RO—Romania; CR—Czech Republic; SL—Slovenia; ES—Estonia; BU—Bulgaria; SR—Slovak Republic; MD—Moldova; SB—Serbia; PL—Poland; AL—Albania; LV—Latvia; LT—Lithuania.*
Hypothesis 2, we expect that party systems will be less stable where the factor analysis fails to uncover at least moderate loadings of the core policy issues on two or more of the posited dimensions.

As the table shows, there is good evidence for this hypothesis as well. The more stable Czech and Estonian systems show high levels of overall crystallisation. Though each has multiple dimensions, the market–redistributive axis clearly predominates—which also fits with Hypothesis 3. By contrast, Moldova, Serbia, Albania, and Bulgaria—all in the less-stable category—show little to no conformity to the expected axes of competition. Indeed, for these countries the factor analysis uncovers four underlying dimensions. Such incoherent axes of competition recall Kitschelt’s argument that, in the absence of programmatic competition, personalism or patronage (or both) will decide elections (1995, pp. 450–51).

The central role played by larger-than-life party leaders such as Albania’s Sali Berisha and Bulgaria’s Csar Simeon II—or the legacy of Slobodan Milošević’s personalisation of power in Serbia—suggest a strong role for personality politics in these party systems. In his analysis of Moldova’s ‘extraordinarily weak’ parties, Way offers a vivid description of personalist, and also patronage-tinged, politics in that system (2003, p. 461). Moldova’s ‘numerous parties (be they left-wing, right-wing, or “centrist”) … have virtually identical ideologies but highly incompatible personalities … [and are] loosely institutionalized negative coalitions (first anti-Soviet and then antinationalist) that quickly fell apart after the election that brought them to power’ (2003, pp. 461–62). Way terms the dynamic of Moldova’s party competition ‘rapacious individualism’, in which ‘politics is dominated by a nonideological, unstructured, and highly individuated competition for power and rents’ (2003, p. 471).

Moving now to the other cells in Part II of the table, what distinguishes the less stable Slovak, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish party systems from the Czech and Estonian ones? Hypothesis 3 offers traction for this subset of multidimensional party systems exhibiting at least moderate overall crystallisation of the expected dimensions. Hypothesis 3 examines the character of competition: which dimension predominates in a party system—i.e. which dimension explains a substantially larger proportion of the variation in party positions than the others? Again, we expect that countries in which the market–redistributive dimension predominates will be more stable. As Part III of Table 3 shows, there is evidence for Hypothesis 3, though given the small number of cases, it is more mixed than for the previous hypotheses.

Countries with a predominant market–redistributive dimension also had more stable party systems. Estonia and the Czech Republic, in which all three of the ‘economic’ policies loaded on the expected market–redistributive dimension, are cases in point. The Czech case provides a nice illustration of the kind of party stability that such market–redistributive competition provides. Competition among the economic programmes of the market–liberal Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana—ODS) and Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická—CSSD) has defined Czech politics since the early 1990s (Deegan-Krause 2006; Hanley 2008). Together with two smaller parties also active since the early 1990s—the right-leaning Christian Democratic Union (Křesťanská a demokratická unie–Československá strana lidová—KDU–ČSL) and Communist Party

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24In these two cases, as in all of the others in Part III, the predominant dimension explained roughly two times the variation of the next significant dimension.
(Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy—KSČM)—ODS and ČSSD have accounted ‘for 82% of seats held in parliament between the 1990 and 2010 elections, 88% in the period from 1992 and 92% from 1996’ (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2010, p. 229). ODS was the champion of rapid privatisation and economic reform, while ČSSD defined itself as the alternative to ODS’s neoliberal programme. Even issues such as the break-up of Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s were framed in the Czech Republic as a debate over the speed of economic reform, with the market reformers favouring a hard line against Slovak demands for autonomy and Social Democrats and other economically-left parties for preserving the state. The peaceful break-up of the state in 1993, which has not been matched elsewhere in the region, is a powerful illustration of Hypothesis 3’s premise that partisan divides framed in economic terms are less polarising and less destabilising than those framed around identity or values divides.

Also in line with Hypothesis 3, party systems with a predominant libertarian–hierarchical dimension all fell into the less-stable category. In Lithuania and Slovakia, the predominant dimension is clearly libertarian–hierarchical, while in Poland libertarian–hierarchical and citizenship issues overlap. In none of the three do market–redistributive issues load strongly on the predominant dimension. To illustrate with the case of Poland, the factor analysis, showing a fusion of religiosity and nationalism, confirms much of the secondary literature (Ost 2005). Poland’s well-defined market–redistributive dimension is decidedly separate, so parties with similar positions on national–religious issues typically find themselves quite opposed on economic ones. The Peasant Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe) and, say, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) take a similar position on ‘social values’ but differ widely on economic issues. As Ost has described at length, the nationalist-values debates dominating Polish politics have amplified conflict (especially about economic reform) and confounded attempts to build unified parties, especially among the descendants of Solidarity. These Ost describes, tellingly, as ‘movements of rage’ (Ost 2005, p. 6).

Of the admittedly small number of cases in Part III, only the highly unstable Latvian party system constitutes a partial exception to Hypothesis 3—inasmuch as the core market–redistributive issues load strongly on the predominant dimension. Unlike the Czech and Estonian cases, however, the predominant dimension in Latvia is actually dominated primarily by citizenship issues. Given Latvian society’s deep segmentation between ethnic Latvians and Russians, the issue of decentralisation is probably better considered as part of the citizenship dimension. Thus, four out of five citizenship issues load strongly on the predominant dimension. To the extent that other issues bisect the highly charged topic of membership in the nation, party differences are less amenable to compromise and more prone to spur fractionalisation. Given the absence of more cases in this category, this analysis of seemingly anomalous Latvia is not conclusive, but it fits with the theoretical framework.

Of the 14 cases here, only Slovenia constitutes a true anomaly. By all the hypotheses, it should rank at the bottom in terms of stability, yet it ranks at the top. It has a crystallised libertarian–hierarchical dimension, though the other dimensions fail to cross the threshold for crystallisation imposed in this analysis. Even if these thresholds were relaxed, Slovenia would remain anomalous since the predominant dimension is libertarian–hierarchical, not market–redistributive. The market–redistributive dimension in Slovenia is one of the least

\[Q3\] See the discussion earlier in this article.
defined in the entire sample. Let us, therefore, examine the Slovenian party system more closely.

A quick survey of the major parties and their development confirms the characterisation of the terrain of party competition revealed in the factor analysis. The chief parties—Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (Liberalna demokracija Slovenije—LDS), the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka—SDS), and the Social Democrats (Socialni demokrati—SD)—all went from left origins to espousing a moderately liberal economic programme (Krašovec & Haughton 2011). Attesting to more than just party system stability, LDS was the senior government party from 1992 to 2004. Nowhere else in the postcommunist region was politics less polarised between neoliberal economic reformers and gradualists than in Slovenia. In the absence of Vaclav Klaus- or Mart Laar-like advocates of shock therapy, Slovenia’s economic transition was marked by consensualism, pragmatism, and gradualism (Lindstrom & Piroska 2007). All the while, it enjoyed the highest per capita GDP in the postcommunist bloc. Against this backdrop, market–redistributive policy differences have not been the primary markers in the field of party competition. Instead, the counter-balance to the ‘liberal-left’ LDS, SDS, and SD have been parties espousing traditional and Catholic-based values, such as the rural-based Slovenian People’s Party (Slovenska ljudska stranka—SLS) and Slovenian Christian Democrats (Slovenski krščanski demokrati—SKD) (Krašovec & Haughton 2011).

If the Slovene anomaly may be explained in part by the country’s unusual economic transition, another possible explanation is suggested by Krašovec and Haughton (2011), who argue that Slovenia’s party system demonstrates many of the features of what party scholars have labelled ‘cartelized politics’ (Katz & Mair 1994). In cartelised systems, central party elites cooperate to control key determinants of party success (and survival) as state financing and candidate selection, which may increase stability by freezing out new entrants to the party system. In Krašovec and Haughton’s analysis, Slovene parties have been able to exercise greater leverage over such state resources, particularly with regard to public funds for party financing, than is the case elsewhere in the region (2011, p. 208). Explaining the Slovenian anomaly in this way takes us back to the distinction made earlier between the ‘coordination strategies’ school of party system development (e.g. Cox 1997; Smyth 2006) and the axes of competition school employed here. As this analysis suggests, ‘coordination strategies’ can complement a focus on the dimensions of competition for a fuller explanation of the range of party system variation.

Conclusion

This analysis has used a comprehensive cross-national dataset on party positioning to probe the widely divergent party systems of postcommunist Europe. This region’s disparities offer a compelling opportunity to reassess extant theoretical perspectives on party system stability, a core variable in comparative politics. In postcommunist Europe one finds both low-volatility party systems whose composition today closely resembles that of the early 1990s and, at the other extreme, volatile systems with vanishingly small continuity over time. The first part of the analysis presented three straightforward indicators of party system stability. It then drew on one school of party system analysis to build hypotheses to explain the variation in stability. Rather than seeing parties as the product of institutional
constraints, this school conceives of them as means for simplifying and structuring issue choices for voters.

The empirical analysis found strong support for these hypotheses. Where party positioning data showed that parties simplified or coherently structured issues choices, there was more stability. Additionally, where economic issues constituted the predominant ordering element in party competition, party systems tended to be more stable. With these hypotheses, I could account for 13 of the 14 party systems under consideration.

In assessing these findings, I close with two caveats and one broader conclusion. Caveat one: since they are based on data from a snapshot in time, these results are not definitive. While the high correlation between the three stability indicators suggests that the rankings of party systems display considerable inertia over time, having time-series data on party positioning would provide more leverage on the question of party system change. As a second caveat, because my analysis employs independently collected data, it is constrained by Benoit and Laver’s design decisions in constructing their survey. Some may find fault with the choice or wording of the survey questions. One might also quibble with my classification of those survey questions within the market–redistributive, libertarian–hierarchical, and citizenship categories. As valid as such criticisms may be, the implementation of factor analysis will always depend on questions of interpretation and, thus, will depend on the state of the party system theory, such as that from which my hypotheses are drawn.

Caveats aside, the finding that the structure and character of dimensions of competition offer a better fit for variation in party system stability than contending hypotheses about the electoral system, economic performance, constitutional design, political culture, or previous democratic experience is important and provocative. This analysis shows that further research into the still evolving party systems of postcommunist Europe is needed, as they can provide new empirical material for ongoing debates about party system development. Further, as the analysis of the Slovenian outlier suggests, there is room for further research to bring the ‘coordinating strategies’ school of party system development (Cox 1997; Smyth 2006) into the analysis of the region’s party politics.

The research design here does not provide sufficient empirical leverage to probe systematically how the coordinating strategies and dimensionality approaches may complement each other, but their clear theoretical links outline an avenue for further research. The ‘coordinating strategies’ perspective yields the important concept of how ‘permissive’ electoral rules are. These rules determine how constraining an electoral system is, i.e. what the upper bound is for the number of parties in the system (Cox 1997, p. 8). More parties, of course, allow the possibility for more dimensions of competition and, by the analysis here, greater potential for party system instability. A less permissive electoral system will, by constraining the number of parties, necessarily constrain the number of dimensions. Yet, given a minimum threshold of electoral system permissiveness, the character of the predominant dimensions (e.g. market–redistributive versus citizenship) will remain independent of the electoral rules. Moreover, the constraints imposed by electoral rules on the number of dimensions, as with the number of parties, will only be an upper bound. Ascertaining the extent to which dimensions overlap and which predominate will

26 As the discussion surrounding Table 1 describes, the cases here do not differ systematically in terms of, say, mean district magnitude or PR threshold.
require the kind of dimensional perspective employed here. Bringing the two perspectives together, further research into the dynamics of party system development can begin with the question: which dimensions does the electoral system permit to be shown, and how are they structured?

References


WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR PARTY SYSTEM STABILITY?

Appendix 1. Dimensional analysis of policy spaces using principle components analysis, with varimax-rotated loadings

### TABLE A1

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<th>Variable loadings higher than 0.5 are highlighted in bold, except when the variable had a higher loading on another dimension</th>
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Notes: * See footnote 22.
Source: Author’s calculations based on Benoit and Laver (2006).