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Hyperaccountability: Economic voting in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Are citizens in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe able to hold politicians accountable at elections? The inheritance of communism—disengaged citizens, economic flux, and inchoate party systems—might be expected to weaken accountability. Looking at the results of 34 elections in 10 Central and Eastern European countries, this paper finds instead a phenomenon that it calls hyperaccountability. Incumbents are held accountable for economic performance—particularly for unemployment—but this accountability distinguishes not between vote losses and gains, but between large and small losses. This result is significant in several respects. The evidence for economic voting restores some faith in the ability of voters to control their representatives in new democracies. The consistency of punishment in the region, however, may mitigate some of the benefits of economic voting. If incumbents know they will lose, then they may decide to enrich themselves when in power rather than produce good policies.
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Electoral accountability—the degree to which voters sanction politicians for poor performance—has been one of the most studied questions in political science. However most of this work has focused on the established democracies. The consequence is that we know little about the conditions under which it occurs. Are democratic elections sufficient to produce accountability? Or does accountability require certain background conditions on the part of voters or politicians?

This paper considers this question by looking at electoral results in ten new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe. At the start of the transition one might have expected accountability to be weak in these countries. Inchoate party systems meant that citizens would have difficulty finding targets for accountability (Rose and Munro, 2003). Citizens for their part were inexperienced with democracy and did not tend to participate in politics (Howard, 2002). The dramatic changes taking place in the political economy might also make it difficult to connect politicians' actions with societal outcomes.

Looking at national election results in the region, this paper finds a phenomenon that it refers to as hyperaccountability. This consists in the first place of a high degree of electoral accountability. Contrary to expectations, the vote shares of governments are strongly affected by economic performance—particularly by

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unemployment rates—even at the very start of the transition. In the second place, virtually all governments are punished in the region regardless of how well they performed economically. Economic performance determines the difference not between vote gains and vote losses, but only between large and small vote losses.

These results are significant in several ways. They suggest that citizens in new democracies can quickly learn to hold governments accountable. The domain of electoral accountability may be fairly wide, though there are reasons why post-communist countries might be particularly fertile ground for economic voting. This result counters some of the pessimism about the quality of new democracies. If politicians are being held accountable for economy, they have strong incentives to deliver good economic policies.

On the other hand, the ubiquity of punishment in the region may have the opposite effect. If politicians know they will lose, then they have incentives to shirk while in office. As a result, economic voting in the region may not produce entirely beneficial incentives for policy makers.

1. Literature review

Electoral accountability is typically equated with retrospective economic voting. Voters punish incumbents when the economy is doing poorly and reward them when the economy is doing well. While the economy is not the only measure of a government's performance in office, it is both highly salient to most voters and, as important for political scientists, easily measurable.

Much ink has been spilled in the search for evidence of retrospective economic voting (for a review see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). The vast majority of this research has focused on individual level survey data. Are citizen's vote intentions or reported vote choices affected by their perceptions of the economy? The major finding of this research is that to a large extent they are (for the most extensive evidence in favor of this proposition, see Duch and Stevenson, 2005). When citizens perceive the macroeconomy as performing poorly, they vote against the government.

However findings from survey research may not completely capture accountability. Citizens may misperceive the actual state of the economy, misreport their vote decisions, or not be sampled in the correct proportions. For elections to give politicians an incentive to produce the best policies, what really matters is that at the aggregate level these individual decisions hold governments accountable for real performance. Do governments or governing parties lose votes when the economy performs poorly and gain votes when it performs well? Only if these aggregate associations pertain does accountability provide incentives for good economic policy.

Surprisingly, when scholars have translated survey research to the aggregate level of governments, economic voting generally disappears. Vote shares for governments do not respond in the expected ways to standard economic indicators. A number of studies have shown that poor economic performance does not hurt the fortunes of incumbent governments (Lewis-Beck, 1988; Paldam, 1991; Przeworski and Cheibub, 1999; but also Wilkin et al., 1997).

In a landmark study Powell and Whitten (1993) (also Whitten and Palmer, 1999) did manage to find evidence of economic voting, but only in very specific cases. To isolate cross-national economic voting, they measured economic conditions relative to an international baseline, focused on countries where responsibility could be clearly assigned to a government, and considered only certain combinations of ideologies and performance indicators (specifically, right-wing parties and inflation and left-wing parties and unemployment). Under these conditions economic voting did occur.

While Powell and Whitten's results are persuasive, they do not provide the sort of strong confirmation of economic voting found in individual level studies. Indeed, Powell and Whitten look at the cases best suited to electoral accountability: 19 stable, industrialized democracies. It is thus not clear to what extent economic voting will occur in new democracies without traditions of holding governments accountable.

2. Hypotheses

Does retrospective economic voting occur in Central and Eastern Europe? This hypothesis is worth testing because there are good reasons to expect economic voting to be weaker in these countries than elsewhere. As Howard (2002) shows, citizens in post-communist Europe are far less likely to participate in politics than their counterparts in Western Europe and other new democracies. As a result, they may not possess the information necessary to practice economic voting or the motivation to act on it.

The uncertainty of the transition may also limit accountability (Bunce and Csanadi, 1993). Citizens first face uncertainty in choosing whom to vote for due to the large number, brief histories, and short half-lives of parties (Rose and Munro, 2003; Birch, 2003). Because of party splits, mergers, and name changes it may even be difficult to identify incumbents. Voters also face uncertainty in assessing economic performance because of the large number of major economic reforms and their unpredictable consequences. It is further unclear whether economic performance is a result of policies under the control of incumbents or circumstances outside their control like communist legacies or international factors. In short, the environment is not auspicious for economic voting.

Actual studies of voting in Central and Eastern Europe have painted a mixed picture. Several studies using public opinion data found that economic performance affected evaluations of incumbents. Thus, Przeworski (1996) showed that government popularity varied with the unemployment rate in Poland; Duch (1995) found that economic difficulties reduced support for governments in four countries; and Anderson et al. (2003) and Duch (2001) found evidence of economic voting in Hungary in 1994 and 1998, respectively. Using subnational data from early in the transition, Pacek (1994) found that regions with poor economic performance voted against the incumbent.

However, an equally large number of studies—often using subnational data—have found that the relation between economic conditions and voting is mediated by perceptions of party type more than the performance of incumbents. In a result most convincingly argued by Tucker (2006) and discussed in more detail below (also see Fidrmuc, 2000; Bell, 1997; Jackson et al., 2005), voters look mainly at whether a party is connected with the new or old regime rather than its responsibility for current economic performance. Powers and Cox (1997), using survey data from a Polish election, similarly find that assessments of party type are more important than those of economic performance. In an unrelated study, Harper (2000) found only weak effects of economic evaluations on vote choices in three countries. Given the variety of results, it is not certain whether economic voting will obtain at a cross-national level. This leads to the standard economic voting hypothesis.

H1: Incumbent vote shares will be positively correlated with economic performance.

As noted above, this result may be mediated in several ways. Considerable recent research (see Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999; Nadeau et al., 2002) has shown that economic voting depends on clarity of responsibility. Where voters can easily pinpoint responsibility for policy—for example, in the case of a single-party majority government—retrospective economic voting should be stronger. Where responsibility is blurred—because multiple actors are responsible for policy—economic voting will be weaker. While such results should transfer to Eastern Europe, there is not wide variation in institutional design across the region (Roberts, 2006). Most countries have multiparty, parliamentary systems with little separation of powers. Nevertheless, differences in clarity of responsibility can still be identified in different types of governments, leading to a second hypothesis.

H2: Incumbents will be punished more severely for poor economic performance when they govern as a majority or single-party government.

In addition to these theories drawn from the established democracies, I also test two hypotheses specific to new democracies. The context of voting and governance in these countries might substantially change the standard logic of economic voting. Though some studies of developing countries have shown evidence of economic voting (Wilkin et al., 1997; Hellwig and Samuels, 2007), others have cast doubt on it.

Stokes (1999) contends that the specific context of the transition may produce the reverse of economic voting. She hypothesizes that during transitions to democracy, voters may blame the outgoing authoritarian regime, not the current incumbent, for the economic mess the country is in or may sympathize with the reformer's axiom of "no pain, no gain". Both of these postures (see calls them exonerating and intertemporal respectively) should produce the opposite of economic voting: economic decline increasing support for the incumbent. Survey evidence from a sample of transiting countries confirms the existence of both postures, though to a lesser degree than retrospective economic voting (Stokes, 2001). Of course, such voting should mainly be in evidence at the start of the transition when the old regime can be most plausibly blamed for any difficulties.

Duch (2001) likewise expects economic voting to emerge only gradually. At the start of the transition citizens will have difficulty connecting economic outcomes with the policy actions of ruling parties. Only where citizens have built up enough information about politics and faith that policies are responsive to voters will they punish incumbents for economic performance. While Duch tests this hypothesis at the microlevel, one can hypothesize at the aggregate level that economic voting will become stronger over time as citizens become more accustomed to democracy. This leads to a third hypothesis.

H3: Economic voting will be weaker earlier in the transition and stronger later.

As noted earlier, Tucker (2006) makes a number of more subtle arguments about economic voting in the transitional setting. He argues that economic voting is conditional on the type of party. Some types of parties should do better and others worse when the economy is growing. These effects will differ across parties and circumstances in a phenomenon he refers to as conditional economic voting. One type of conditional economic voting is Powell and Whitten's (1993) finding that left parties are held accountable for unemployment and right parties for inflation.

Tucker argues that in post-communist countries, the main conditional economic voting effects will distinguish between old and new regime parties; that is, parties connected with the former communist rulers versus those associated with the opposition to communism. New regime parties should do better when circumstances are good and less well when they are bad. This is because these parties are associated with and held responsible for the changes involved in the transition. If these changes are successful, the parties are rewarded; if not, they are punished. Standard retrospective voting thus applies to these parties, though unusually without regard to incumbency. Old regime parties should be treated in the reverse way. They should be rewarded when conditions are bad and punished where they are good because bad conditions vindicate the relatively stable years of communist rule while good ones repudiate them.

Using regional data, Tucker finds evidence for just such effects. In fact, he finds that the new regime/old regime distinction explains regional variations to a greater extent than economic voting on incumbents. While his conclusion applies only to differences between regions, it might apply at the national level as well.

H4: Vote shares for new regime parties will be positively correlated with economic conditions and for old regime parties negatively correlated with economic conditions.

3. Data

Until recently the problem with testing these hypotheses was lack of data. The limited number of democratic countries in the region and the small number of elections has meant that cross-national studies have been difficult to perform. In their place, several scholars have disaggregated the vote by region (Pacek, 1994; Fidrmuc, 1999; Bell, 1997; Tucker, 2006; Jackson et al., 2005) as a way of increasing the number of cases. While these studies do show some evidence of economic voting, it is still important to know whether accountability works at the national level as well as across a broader set of countries than these studies have investigated.

Fortunately, 15 years of transition has provided nearly enough free elections to test this proposition. This study is based on a dataset of 34 elections in the ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe listed in Table 1. The countries are chosen because each has had several accountability elections conducted while rated "free" by Freedom House (2006). The freedom criterion is important because where elections are not free, incumbents will almost certainly perform better than actual conditions warrant. Incumbents restrict political freedoms precisely in order to hinder competition from challengers.

Only countries that have held multiple free elections were included in order to assess changes in accountability over time. Further, the first free elections in each country were not included in the dataset. The reason is that the incumbents—the communist parties—received nearly 100% of the vote in previous (fraudulent) elections; their drop off to becoming normal competitors is so great that it would unduly influence the results below.[1] The years of the accountability elections in each country are listed in Table 1.

The dataset consists of vote shares at each pair of elections for all of the parties represented in parliament in these countries.[2] The analysis is restricted to parliaments because all of these countries are parliamentary democracies. While direct presidential elections are held in some countries, presidents are not at the center

[1] Other potential accountability elections not included were: Czechoslovakia 1992 because of the breakup of the country and the leading parties; Bulgaria 1994 because a government of experts governed for two years prior to elections; and Romania 1992 because elections in 1990 did not meet democratic standards.

[2] Data on vote shares is taken from the Project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe at the University of Essex (http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections) and Rose and Munro (2003). There are a number of difficulties with calculating pairs of vote shares across elections in post-communist countries. First, many parties changed their names between elections. In these cases, I used the literature to best identify lines of continuity. More serious was the large number of party mergers and splits. In the case of mergers between two parties represented in the parliament, I reconstructed their vote share at the previous election by adding their totals together. If non-represented parties merged with a represented party, their total was not added since they were not the object of an accountability vote. If a party split in two between two elections, I identified the main successor and only counted the vote share of this successor which presumably carried the burden of accountability. Fortunately, almost all mergers and splits occurred in opposition parties and thus do not affect the main results below. A list of all coding decisions is available from the author.

Table 1
Electoral change in Eastern Europe

Country	Year	Incumbent government	Change in incumbent vote	Old/new regime
Bulgaria	1994	None, government of experts		
	1997	**BSP**	−21.5	Old
	2001	**ODS**	−33.8	New
	2005	**NDS** + DPS	−15.5	–
Czech	1992	None, breakup of country		
	1996	**ODS** + KDU-CSL + ODA	+2.1	New
	1998	**ODS** + KDU-CSL + ODA	−7.3	New
	2002	**CSSD**	−2.1	–
	2006	**CSSD** + KDU-CSL + US	−4.6	–
Estonia	1995	**I** + M + ERSP	−26.7	New
	1999	**KMU**	−24.6	New
	2003	K + **RE**	+3.8	New
Hungary	1994	**MDF** + FKGP + KDNP	−15.3	New
	1998	**MSZP** + SZDSZ	−12.2	Old
	2002	**FIDESZ** + FKGP + MDF	−3.6	New
	2006	**MSZP** + SZDSZ	+2.1	Old
Latvia	1995	**LC** + TPA	−17.7	New
	1998	**TB/LNNK** + LC + LZS/LKDS/LLDP	−1.8	New
	2002	TP + **LC** + TB/LNNK + JP	−34.6	New
Lithuania	1996	**LDDP**	−34.0	Old
	2000	**TS/LK** + LKDP + LCS	−35.9	New
	2004	**ABSK** + NS	−30.0	Old
Poland	1993	**UD** + WAK + KLD + PPG	−7.6	New
	1997	**SLD** + PSL	−1.4	Old
	2001	**AWS**	−28.2	New
	2005	**SLD**	−29.7	Old
Romania	1992	None, prior elections not free		
	1996	**FSN/PDSR**	−6.4	Old
	2000	**CDR** + USD + UDMR	−30.9	New
	2004	**PDSR**	+0.2	Old
Slovakia	1992	None, breakup of country		
	1994	**SDL** + KDH + ADSR + DUS + NDS	−3.1	–
	1998	**HZDS** + ZRS + SNS	−10.4	–
	2002	**SDK** + SDL + SMK + SOP	−30.5	New
	2006	**SKDU** + SMK + ANO	−2.8	New
Slovenia	1996	**LDS** + SKD	−1.4	Old
	2000	**SLS** + SDSS + SKD	−19.7	New
	2004	**LDS** + ZLSD + SLS + DESUS	−19.3	Old

Prime Minister's or largest party indicated in bold type. Abbreviations are the party's initials in its native language.

of policy making, and particularly not economic policy making, in any of them. The justification for the parliamentary representation criterion is that voters can only hold accountable parties who participate in parliamentary activity. I included even parties who did not participate in government as a comparator for assessing the costs of incumbency. Parties with a vote share below 2% were excluded.

The dataset also includes the governing status of each party. For a party to be characterized as a governing party, it had to be part of the government at the time of elections (or if there was a caretaker government at the time of elections, part of the nearest partisan government).[3] If it participated in a government but left before elections, then it is coded as a government leaver. Parties that sat in no governments between two elections are coded as opposition parties. These variables are calculated with data from Müller-Rommel et al. (2004).

[3] One exception to this rule was the government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) from 1994 to 1997. The party was replaced by a caretaker government including opposition politicians in February 1997, just before elections in April 1997. Given that the BSP had led the economy to a near meltdown, it is likely that voters were holding the BSP, not the opposition party, accountable in that election.

4. The costs of governing

Before turning to the economic voting hypotheses I look at the difference between government and opposition parties. For traditional economic voting to work, voters should distinguish between the government and opposition and make decisions based only on the performance of incumbents. Moreover, numerous studies of established democracies have found that there are costs to governing. Incumbents on average lose around 2–3 percentage points from their prior vote share (Paldam, 1991).[4]

The costs of governing might be particularly high in post-communist countries. Virtually all governments in the region have been called upon to undertake comprehensive economic reforms which typically have large distributional effects. Privatizing major industries, liberalizing prices, and opening borders to foreign competition are some of the policies that cause pain for a large proportion of the population. As many have noted in discussions of the J-curve, most of these policies provide benefits only in the medium to long run and have high costs in the short run (Przeworski, 1991). Not reforming, however, also carries costs, not only economic ones, but also in international integration, a goal of all governments in the sample.

In addition, these policies were introduced by politicians with little governing experience or practical knowledge of reform. There was thus a high likelihood that governments would make unintentional mistakes. And finally, citizens in these countries were used to economic guarantees—full employment, regulated prices—which were some of the few genuinely popular achievements of the communist regime. Since economic reforms meant that many of these guarantees would be dismantled, economic pain should be felt particularly strongly.

Have the costs of governing been high in Central and Eastern Europe? The final column in Table 1 presents the vote losses or gains—the vote differences—for all of the governments in the sample where the vote total for a government is the sum of the vote shares for all of the parties composing it.

For all governments, the average vote loss is 14.8 percentage points (SE 2.2, $n = 34$). Governments in the region tend to lose five to seven times more votes than in established democracies. Of the 34 governments in the sample, only four of them gained votes: the 2003 Estonian government gained 3.8%, the 1996 Czech and 2006 Hungarian coalitions 2.1% and the 2004 Romanian coalition only 0.2%. By contrast, seven governments lost more than 30% of their previous vote. Looking individually at parties, the average vote loss was 6.9% ($n = 73$, SE 1.2). Only 21 (29%) parties gained vote share and 12 of these gained less than 2%. Costs of government indeed.

Are there any time trends in these costs? The costs of governing might be expected to decline over time as governments become more capable. In fact there are no obvious trends. While Hungary and Estonia show downward trends, Poland and Slovenia have seen vote losses by governments go up over time. Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia have witnessed wide swings without a trend. Bulgarian and Lithuanian governments meanwhile have seen high losses in all elections, while all Czech governments have done relatively well. More generally, vote losses across the ten countries averaged 13% in the first accountability elections, 18% in the second, and 16% in the third.[5]

A better sense of the costs of governing can be gleaned by comparing these losses with the vote differences for opposition parties and parties who left government in the middle of the term. It is possible that all parties are being penalized and their votes picked up by brand new parties. Indeed, Rose and Munro (2003) and Birch (2003) have pointed to the continual emergence of new parties as one of the distinctive phenomena of party politics in the post-communist region.

In fact, the average opposition party actually gained 2.3% of the vote (SE 0.8, $n = 102$). While this effect is not large—it would require approximately six opposition parties to make up for the vote loss of governments—it is encouraging that the flux of parties is not complete. Parties who leave government, by contrast, are partially penalized for their participation; they lost on average 2.2% of the vote (SE 1.6, $n = 22$), though this loss is not significantly different from zero.[6]

In short, there are very heavy costs to governing. It bears noting that it is not only vote share which governing parties are losing. In the large majority of cases, parties who sat in government at the time of elections did not sit in the government formed immediately after the elections. Of the 73 parties who sat in governments at election time, only 22, approximately 30%, participated in the first government formed after elections. And in all but two cases—the Czech elections of

[4] For reasons why this happens see Nannestad and Paldam (2002).

[5] While this number is lower for the fourth election (9%) there are currently only four observations for this election.

[6] I further test these differences with regressions that control for prior vote shares. The results are substantively similar.

1996 and the Hungarian elections of 2006—parties who managed to stay in government became members of a different coalition. Elections did lead to important changes in the composition of political forces.

5. Economic voting

The previous section showed that voters tend to punish governments. But what are they punishing them for? It would be a poor sort of accountability if governments were punished merely for governing rather than for specific actions or results. This section tests the standard economic voting hypothesis, H1.

To test this hypothesis, I add to the dataset measures of economic outcomes for each government coalition. The three main economic variables used in the literature are growth, inflation, and unemployment. Unfortunately, there is not comparable quarterly data for all of the countries which would allow us to look at the months immediately preceding each election.[7] Instead, only annual data is available. For each country I use values from the year of the election if the election was held in the second half of the year and values from the previous year if the election was held in the first half of the year. All of the data on economic variables is taken from the EBRD's (1995) Transition Reports.

It is worth noting that economic outcomes were highly variable in the region. During the election years considered here, unemployment ranged from a low of 4% to a high of 19%, growth from −9% to +8%, and inflation from 1% to 123%. While there have been economic disasters (Bulgaria in 1997 posted a −9.4% growth rate, 123% inflation, and 13% unemployment) there have also been success stories (the Czechs in 1996 had 5.9% growth, 9.6% inflation, and 4% unemployment).

The variability of economic outcomes in itself presents a dilemma. As noted above, virtually all governments lost votes. The economic variables traditionally used to explain these differences, however, varied widely. While these variables purportedly explain whether governments are punished or rewarded, they can at best explain the difference between harsh and weak punishments. Even governments that achieved solid economic performance could only hope not to be punished. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

I also include in these analyses one additional control variable. Party systems in the post-communist region have been in great flux with parties exiting and entering the scene with great frequency (Birch, 2003; Rose and Munro, 2003). As a result, the number of parties competing in elections is quite variable. This may have effects on the vote share of governments. If the number of parties is increasing, governments should lose vote share and vice versa. To capture this effect, I add to the regressions a control variable for the change in the effective number of parties (ENP) between each pair of elections (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

I begin my analysis with simple correlations between vote differences and the main economic variables. Of the three variables, only unemployment rates are strongly and significantly correlated with vote losses ($r = -0.46$, $p < 0.01$). High unemployment is associated with greater vote losses. Growth ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.19$) and inflation ($r = -0.13$, $p = 0.46$) have the correct directional associations—higher growth leads to better performance and higher inflation to worse performance—but both correlations are smaller and insignificant.

Do these associations hold up after adding control variables? Table 2 presents the results of a series of OLS regressions of vote shares on these economic variables, controlling for previous vote share and change in ENP.[8] Model 1 indicates that unemployment is the only significant economic variable and it points in the correct direction: higher unemployment leads to greater vote losses. This confirms Przeworski's (1996) survey results from Poland which indicate that unemployment is the most deadly sin for governments. The growth and inflation variables also point in the correct direction though neither reaches conventional levels of significance. As expected an increase in the number of parties hurts incumbents though not significantly.[9]

Model 2 controls for time trends by including dummy variables for the first, second, and third accountability elections (leaving out the fourth). Unemployment maintains its significance and substantive

[7] Lags are rarely longer than one year in existing work.

[8] Whitten and Palmer (1999) recommend using absolute vote shares rather than differences and including the lagged dependent variable to control for auto-correlation. I follow their advice here. They also use a more complicated statistical technique to correct for the fact that this is panel data albeit a very unbalanced panel. I do not employ these techniques because the time series is very short—only three to four elections per country—and because their technically sophisticated results mirror the OLS results.

[9] Because this variable is consistently insignificant I exclude it in some of the following exercises that have smaller sample sizes.

Table 2
Economic voting

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Sample		Entire governments		Largest governing party	Other governing parties
Prior vote	0.29 (0.18)	0.29 (0.21)	0.16 (0.20)	0.28 (0.19)	0.67** (0.20)
Unemployment	−1.35** (0.39)	−1.37** (0.40)	−1.90* (0.89)	−1.24** (0.37)	−0.11 (0.15)
Growth	0.50 (0.79)	0.50 (0.82)	0.87 (0.95)	0.40 (0.76)	0.22 (0.34)
Inflation	−0.08 (0.12)	−0.05 (0.13)	−0.04 (0.16)	−0.03 (0.11)	0.01 (0.05)
ENP change	−1.21 (1.07)	−1.18 (1.11)	−1.45 (1.13)	−0.29 (1.17)	−0.03 (0.42)
Trend dummies		Yes			
Country dummies			Yes		
Constant	29.64* (11.05)	34.49* (12.72)	35.79* (15.12)	23.87* (9.10)	0.34 (2.31)
Observations	34	34	34	34	39
Adj. R^2	0.36	0.32	0.48	0.25	
R^2					0.36

Dependent variable is percentage of the national vote. Standard errors in parentheses for models 1–4. Robust standard errors with clustering on elections for model 5. **Significant at 0.01, *significant at 0.05.

size in this model. Model 3 adds country dummies (leaving out Slovenia) to determine whether the results are influenced by county-specific factors. Again unemployment remains a significant predictor of vote shares and even increases its substantive size.

Finally Models 4 and 5 consider whether the results are driven by small, less important parties disappearing from politics. Model 4 isolates the largest governing party (almost always the party of the prime minister), while Model 5 considers other governing parties.[10] The previous results transfer almost in tact to the largest parties, indicating that voters hold those parties most accountable for poor economic performance. Conversely, economic conditions have little effect on the vote shares of smaller governing parties. These results are reassuring as larger parties likely play a greater role in economic policy.

It is important to add that the effect of economic conditions is substantively meaningful. For each percentage point of unemployment, governments can expect to lose something more than a percentage of the vote. A 10% unemployment rate would automatically put a government 13–14 percentage points below its previous vote share, all else equal. The economic variables along with previous vote share also explain a large portion—usually more than 50%—of the variance in vote shares.

To further probe these results, I conduct a number of robustness checks. Due to collinearity between the economic variables—in particular growth and inflation are correlated at 0.77—I re-ran all of the different combinations of the main independent variables. The results are almost identical. As another check on the robustness of these results, I serially eliminated each country from Model 1. Unemployment maintains its significance in all of these regressions. The result is not driven by a few outlying cases. Finally, I consider Powell and Whitten's (1993) suggestion that economic conditions are judged relative to international baseline. Replacing the economic variables with the differences between country and region-wide levels does not alter the results appreciably.

6. Clarity of responsibility

While the results from the previous section are encouraging for an assessment of economic voting, it may be possible to explain even more variance in vote shares. This section considers whether economic voting applies to all government types equally. It has been argued that for voters to hold parties accountable, they need to be able to link them directly with policy outcomes; there must be clarity of responsibility. Clarity is usually attributed to political institutions. The main differences affecting clarity in Eastern Europe are whether governments controlled parliamentary majorities and shared power with other parties or not. Other institutional differences considered by Whitten and Palmer (1999) are not prominent in the region (Roberts, 2006).[11]

Does economic performance affect different government types in different ways. To check this possibility, I re-estimated Model 1 on separate samples of coalition, single-party, majority, and minority governments.[12]

[10] Because of multiple minor governing parties per election, I cluster the results of this estimation by election and report robust standard errors.

[11] Second chambers are unusual in the region and almost uniformly weak where they exist. Parliamentary committees are likewise quite weak.

[12] I did not test combinations of these types because of the resultant small sample sizes.

These regressions (results not shown) produce only mixed results. Unemployment negatively affects the vote share of all government types, though its effect is significant only for majority and, contrary to theory, coalition governments. Also contrary to theory, growth had a negative effect on vote shares for single-party and majority governments, though neither effect is significantly different from zero. Using the entire dataset along with interaction terms between government type and economic variables produces similar results; the interaction terms sometimes have the correct signs but are statistically insignificant.

In short, the estimations yield only weak results, perhaps because institutional differences are not large. In fact, there were only three single party majority governments, the type with the highest clarity of responsibility. Voters appear to be used to coalition and minority governments and able to pin responsibility on them. Because of these weak results and the small sample sizes, I do not consider clarity of responsibility in the following sections.

7. Timing and economic voting

In this section I turn to H3 which suggests that economic voting may be weaker early in the transition as voters either blame the previous regime for economic problems or have not learned to hold governments accountable. To test this hypothesis, I split the sample at the end of 1998. This creates a group of 1990–1998 elections and a group of 1999–2006 elections.

Table 3 presents the results of the basic economic voting model for each of the two time periods. Models 6 and 7 show that unemployment has a considerably stronger and significant effect after 1998, while its effect is weaker and significant at $p = 0.12$ before 1998 (though note the small sample size). The size of the coefficients for growth and inflation are also larger in the latter period though in no case are they precisely estimated.

The results provide support for Duch's hypothesis. Voters are better able to practice economic voting later in the transition. However, even early in the transition they are no by means helpless; unemployment is nearly significant in the early period and is substantively important. The results are more equivocal on Stokes's hypothesis that economic voting might be reversed early in the transition with poor economic performance leading to better electoral outcomes. In fact, the signs on the variables do not reverse as this hypothesis suggests. Nevertheless, insofar as economic voting is stronger later in the transition, this provides some support for Stokes's theory.[13]

Another test of this hypothesis uses the entire dataset and interacts a dummy variable for post-1998 elections with the main economic variables. These models (results not shown) indicate that later governments do suffer greater punishment for higher unemployment, lower growth, and higher inflation, though in no case are the coefficients on the interaction terms significant. Unemployment itself remains significant in these regressions.

In short, voters do become better at punishing parties and governments for poor economic results later in the transition, though even early in the transition they are not entirely incapable of doing so. Indeed, even before 1998 economic variables explain a considerable portion of the variance in vote shares and have strong substantive effects. Insofar as voters do learn to hold politicians accountable, they start from a reasonable level and improve from there.

8. Government types and economic voting

H4 suggested that economic voting might differ by party types. Powell and Whitten (1993) find that left parties tend to be punished for high unemployment and right parties for high inflation. Tucker (2006) argues that in post-communist countries the left-right distinction is less salient than the one between new and old regime parties. He finds that parties connected with the new regime are punished when the economy is performing poorly, while parties connected with the old regime are rewarded.

In this section I determine whether Tucker's theory adds to the explanatory power of the previous models.[14] I first classify parties and governments into old and new regime groups. For the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia I use Tucker's own

[13] To better test Stokes's theory—which applies only to the very start of the transition—I also isolate only the first accountability elections in each country. Even in this small sample of 10 elections, the signs of the economic variables point in the correct direction and unemployment has a nearly significant effect on vote losses.

[14] I do not look at the left/right distinction for two reasons. First, the left-right divide in Eastern Europe does not usually correspond to economic policy (Benoit and Laver, 2006). Instead, and this is the second reason, it often relates to attitudes towards communism and national emancipation. As a result, it captures much of the same substance as Tucker's distinction. In fact, coding the dominant ideology of each government as left or right—following Benoit and Laver (2006), Kitschelt et al. (1999) and others—yields an almost identical division as Tucker's new/old regime division (correlation coefficients are greater than 0.75).

Table 3
Economic voting over time

	Model 6	Model 7
Sample	Pre-98 governments	Post-98 governments
Prior vote	0.55 (0.32)	0.28 (0.24)
Unemployment	−0.89 (0.53)	−1.99** (0.55)
Growth	0.53 (0.97)	1.41 (1.34)
Inflation	−0.09 (0.14)	−0.40 (0.26)
Constant	17.84 (17.28)	33.21* (14.83)
Observations	15	19
Adj. R^2	0.35	0.47

The dependent variable is the percentage of the national vote. Standard errors in parentheses. **Significant at 0.01, *significant at 0.05.

codings. For the remaining countries I rely on Bugajski (2002).[15] The final column of Table 1 presents coding decisions for each government based on an assessment of the dominant parties in the government. Tucker hypothesizes that the effect of regime affiliation applies whether or not a party sits in government. Thus, in addition to entire governments, I also code all parliamentary parties.

The results provide qualified support for Tucker's thesis. Tucker predicts that the signs on economic variables should reverse in moving from old to new regime. Models 8 and 9 in Table 4 show some limited evidence that the two types are treated differently. For example, in line with Tucker's theory, growth hurts old regime governments and helps new regime ones, though neither effect is significantly different from zero. Contrary to Tucker's theory, however, unemployment hurts old regime governments to a greater extent than new regime ones.

Tucker's theory, however, is meant to apply without regard to incumbency and so a better test can be found in the sample of all parties in Models 10 and 11. Because there is sometimes more than one new or old regime party per election, the estimates are clustered by election and robust standard errors are reported. Controls are included for the government status of each party since, as shown earlier, governing parties are clearly punished. In these models, unemployment has a significant effect on vote shares only for the new regime parties and is not precisely estimated for the old regime parties. This supports Tucker's thesis. The growth variable reverses its sign in the expected direction, though it is not significant for either group. Inflation also reverses its sign, though in a direction contrary to Tucker's theory, and is insignificant to boot.

In short, there is some evidence that voters distinguish party types in holding parties responsible for economic conditions. In line with Tucker's theory new regime parties are more advantaged by growth than old regime ones and unemployment has a more precisely estimated effect on new regime parties, though the size and constancy of these differences are not as large as in his analysis of regions. The predominant effect is one of incumbents being held electorally accountable rather than of voters putting party type above incumbency.

9. Why accountability?

The main results from these analyses are a high degree of electoral accountability for unemployment combined with near universal punishment of incumbents. I call this combination hyperaccountability. Neither result fully explains the other. Economic factors at best explain the differences between large and small losses, but not the universality of punishment. In this and the following two sections, I try to explain these results.

First, why is there such strong electoral accountability? As noted earlier, the communist inheritance erected a number of barriers to electoral accountability. In particular, voters' lack of experience and participation in politics, the high uncertainty of the transition, and unformed party systems might make accountability difficult to practice. Why did reality subvert these expectations?

Two factors seem to matter most. First, besides its many negative legacies, communism also delivered some positive legacies for voters. In particular, it produced societies with well educated and urbanized citizens and a minimum of social exclusion (Greskovits, 1998). Evidence for this point can be found in the UN's Human Development Index (UN, 1990). This index attempts to measure the degree to which citizens have the capacities to actively control their lives. All ten countries rank considerably higher on this measure in world comparisons than on measures of income alone. That is to say, the vast majority of citizens were equipped with the skills to participate intelligently in politics if they so chose. This contrasts with the situation in other new democracies which often contain large urban and rural underclasses that lack basic education and live in tenuous material circumstances. At least for the countries considered here, most citizens had the wherewithal to understand politics.

Second, the enormous economic, political, and social changes taking place in these countries are likely to have heightened voters' attention to politics. The vast consequences of these changes may have

[15] Coding decisions are available from the author.

Table 4
Old regime and new regime effects on economic voting

	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Sample	Old regime governments	New regime governments	Old regime parties	New regime parties
Prior vote	0.31 (0.33)	−0.01 (0.29)	0.76** (0.18)	0.70** (0.12)
Unemployment	−2.71** (0.72)	−1.31* (0.51)	−0.67 (0.39)	−0.70** (0.23)
Growth	−0.97 (1.62)	1.24 (1.12)	−0.60 (0.95)	0.79 (0.43)
Inflation	−0.14 (0.21)	−0.21 (0.21)	−0.07 (0.14)	0.12 (0.08)
Government			−9.97* (3.78)	−9.58** (2.26)
Government leaver			−5.79 (5.47)	−2.47 (3.79)
ENP change			−0.22 (0.96)	0.02 (0.43)
Constant	50.27 (24.74)	40.04* (15.98)	18.13* (7.86)	10.42** (3.74)
Observations	11	18	43	71
Adj. R^2	0.59	0.28		
R^2			0.44	0.46

The dependent variable is the percentage of the national vote. Standard errors in parentheses for models 8 and 9. Robust standard errors with clustering on elections for models 10 and 11. **Significant at 0.01, *significant at 0.05.

produced citizens who considered their choices more carefully. Indeed, compared to the situation of "normal" politics in most established democracies, post-communist citizens have much greater reason to get accountability right lest they be left high and dry by incompetent or self-interested leaders. And in fact, while citizens did not participate in politics at high levels, they did follow politics to the same extent as citizens in established democracies (Rose-Ackerman, 2005, pp. 7–9). This increased attention may explain Kitschelt et al.'s (1999) finding that voters understood quite well the policy platforms of parties very early in the transition.

10. Why unemployment?

Electoral accountability means that incumbents will be punished or rewarded for their performance. But which aspect of performance is most important? Why is it that that unemployment rather than growth or inflation has the largest effect on vote choices? Contextual factors help to explain this result as well.

The importance of unemployment makes a good deal of sense considering the political history of post-communist Europe. If communist regimes prided themselves on one thing, it was their ability to achieve full employment (Baxandall, 2000). All citizens were guaranteed a job at a reasonable wage. Unemployment thus came as a great shock after the transition. While stagnant growth rates and high inflation were not unknown in communist regimes, unemployment was a brand new experience. It is not surprising that governments who presided over high rates of unemployment were punished at the polls.

This provides an interesting contrast to Remmer's (1989) study of economic voting in Latin America during a similar period of democratization and economic reform in the 1980s. She finds that the main economic variables leading to incumbent vote losses for these countries were inflation and exchange rate depreciation. This too seems logical as inflation and depreciation were the two most salient outcomes for voters at that time and place.

More generally, it suggests that it is the economic context as much as the political context which affects economic voting. By economic context, I mean those aspects of the economy that are most salient to voters. Because of communism's full employment policy, unemployment became highly salient to voters. Conversely in Latin America, experiments with populism and import substitution industrialization made inflation and depreciation headline issues. Perhaps such a consideration of economic context may explain the weaker results for economic voting in the diverse groups of industrialized states where economic context is more variable.

11. Why consistent punishment?

A final puzzle concerns the universality of electoral punishment in the region. Economic variables can at best explain the relative degrees of punishment. They cannot explain why almost no governments were rewarded. If voters were rational, there should be an equal degree of reward and punishment: above-average governments should be rewarded and below-average ones punished. Yet, there are almost no cases of rewards.

More to the point, a number of governments in the region posted fairly impressive economic figures and still were not rewarded. While all countries suffered economically at the start of the transition, most recovered fairly quickly. For all of the governments in the sample, the average levels of the economic variables in election years were respectable: growth was 3.7%, inflation 15.8% (including one value over 100%), and unemployment 11.3%.

The persistent negative vote differences can only be explained by a variable that applies across the region. One likely candidate is economic reform. All of the countries in the sample have engaged in enormous economic reforms, though at different speeds. These reforms moreover have often been unpopular because they hurt certain groups or were poorly implemented. To test whether reforms affected vote shares, I added to the dataset an index of the degree to which each government proceeded with economic reforms (EBRD, 1995).[16] When included in Model 1 (results not shown), the reform variable was far from significant.

On the other hand, it may be that the ten countries considered here are similar enough in reform rates—all did pursue market reforms—to mask the influence of this variable. Indeed, they were qualitatively different than established democracies which rarely pursued privatization and liberalization programs on the scale of these countries. The fact that reforms were often politically controversial indicates that they likely have electoral consequences. Indeed, governments often faced a tradeoff: pay the political costs of reform but reap the economic benefits later or refrain from reforms and suffer from a weaker economy. More finely grained studies may be able to parse out these subtle effects and tradeoffs.

I would suggest two other possible reasons for the universality of punishment. First, as Greskovits (1998) argues, experiences under communism and after have made protest voting a favored strategy for dealing with the hardships of transition. Under communism, voting against the incumbent or non-voting were two partially tolerated means of expressing dissatisfaction with the regime. Further, during the transition, citizens had few other means of expressing dissatisfaction. Labor unions were weak and sometimes supported reforms; distressed groups tended to be dispersed and without leaders. As a result, citizens turned to elections as one of the few avenues of expressing displeasure. Cultural factors along with organizational ones may thus explain the nearly universal tendency of voters to punish incumbents.

[16] I included both the absolute change in the EBRD general reform index as well as the relative change over the government term.

Second, one thing that most of the punished governments have in common is a high degree of corruption. Consider one of the most recent elections in the sample. In 2005, Poland's governing Democratic Left Alliance saw its vote share reduced from 41% to 11%. Virtually all commentators agreed that this disastrous result can be attributed to the government's many corruption scandals including the alleged attempt of a film producer to sell amendments to a media bill. Such anecdotes abound for Eastern European elections.

Unfortunately, the existing comparative data on corruption are inadequate for testing the hypothesis that higher corruption leads to greater vote losses. The World Bank has published ratings for each country's control of corruption at two-year intervals from 1996 to 2004. A correlation between the average of this rating over the entire period and the average vote difference in each country points in the correct direction—more corrupt countries have higher vote losses—but the correlation coefficient is significant only at the 0.13 level.

Another possibility is to look at the election summaries in the journal Electoral Studies. Of the 28 election summaries, 14 mention corruption as an important election issue. In these 14 elections the incumbents suffered an average vote loss of 20% versus a loss of 10% in the "non-corruption-oriented" elections. These results, of course, are not decisive—the election summaries only include subjective impressions—but they are suggestive. What can be said is that more investigation of the corruption link is needed.

12. Conclusions

Several results stand out from this paper. The first is that at the cross-national level, economic voting does exist in post-communist Europe. Governments who preside over high unemployment rates lose votes, all else equal, and the effect is substantively large. The result may partly quiet the fear of many observers that these new democracies are of "low quality". Voters it seems are quite capable of holding politicians accountable for economic performance early in the transition. Such accountability should give politicians a strong incentive to deliver beneficial policies rather than shirk or rent-seek.

The fact that it is unemployment of all the economic variables that matters most makes sense given the history of communism regimes. It is no surprise that citizens raised on the promise of full employment would react negatively to unemployment. This leads to the hypothesis that economic context—that is, the economic issues which are most salient to voters—may be a key part of economic voting.

A second major result in the paper is that while incumbents are punished differentially for economic performance, the overall rate of punishment is quite high. Virtually all governments are punished. I have suggested, though not proven, that economic reform, communist legacies, and particularly corruption may be standing behind these results. Massive reforms in the region have led to large opportunities for corruption as Hellman (1996) has pointed out. Few governments in the region have resisted the temptation to use state assets to reward their supporters.

The universality of punishment has strong implications for the quality of governance in the region. While economic voting should produce incentives for politicians to deliver good performance, these incentives may be mitigated by the universality of electoral punishment. If politicians know that they will not be re-elected, they have an incentive to enrich themselves while they govern. Voters with trigger fingers are likely to produce politicians with very short time horizons. While throwing the bums out is one of the essential preconditions of democracy, it cannot be automatic. Throwing all governments out will lead all governments to shirk—to enact policies that benefit themselves or their supporters. Accountability will produce better government only where governments have a reasonable chance of re-election.

This sort of punishment may in fact lead to vicious circles. For example, endemic corruption may lead voters to punish governments, but if all governments can expect to be punished then they will have no compunction to engage in corruption. This may help to explain the surprisingly high levels of corruption in the region (Krastev, 2004). A similar vicious circle may explain the surprise of a growing state sector in the region (Grzymala-Busse, 2003). Governments who know they will not be re-elected will try to use the state sector to reward their supporters whether with government jobs or contracts. Again, there may be disadvantages to punishing governments.

In the end, it is unclear which effect will be stronger. Economic voting should give governments an incentive to perform well. But knowing that they will lose votes gives them an incentive to enrich themselves while they can. More study is needed to determine how governments actually perceive these conflicting incentives.

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