

POLITICAL CULTURE VERSUS RATIONAL CHOICE: SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN SERBIA

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Abstract

This paper deals with some predictors of the general support for democracy in the light of the two competing models, cultural and rational choice, which have different implications for the possibility of the development of mass support for democracy in former communist societies. The paper aims at clarifying the importance of certain “institutional” and “cultural” variables for the general support for democracy in Serbia. The data used in the paper were collected in the post-election survey, conducted after the May 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections on a representative sample of Serbian citizens (N=1,568). The relative importance of 15 predictors was analyzed: the socio-demographic variables (respondent’s gender, age, educational level, monthly household income), the institutional variables (satisfaction with Serbian democracy and economy, evaluation of the government performance before the election, the perceived level of respect for individual freedom and the quality of voters’ view representation in elections) and the cultural variables (political tolerance, authoritarianism, nationalism and socialist egalitarianism). In the hierarchical regression analysis, the general support for democracy was first regressed on socio-demographic variables, then the cultural variables were added as well as the institutional variables in the final step. Each model had a greater explanatory power, significantly increasing the explained percent of variance. The most important predictors of support for democracy were satisfaction with Serbian democracy ($\beta=.12, p<.001$) and evaluation of government performance ($\beta=.23, p<.001$); the citizens who were more satisfied with democracy and more inclined to positively evaluate the government performance were more supportive of democracy. The concluding part discusses the implications of the obtained results for the development of democratic political culture and consolidation of democratic institutions in a transitional society.

Key words: political culture, democracy, political values, Serbia.

Introduction

It is almost a truism to say that effective functioning of a political system heavily depends on the quality of the prevailing political culture. Without the mass support for the rules of political game and consensus on the norms and principles it is based on, there is no legitimacy or stability of a political system (whether democratic or not). While this is almost self-evident in a stable or a slowly progressing society which „reproduces“ itself by socializing the citizens into its prevailing norms and values, rapid societal changes (such as an „overnight“ ending of the communist rule in the East European countries) put forth several dilemmas about the congruency hypothesis.

According to the well-known Dahrendorf’s (1990) claim that it takes six months to replace a political system, six years to transform an economic system, and sixty years to change a society, the culturalist theory of political culture and political change posits rather pessimistic expectations regarding the possibility of democratizing post-communist societies. The

proponents of this model argue that democratic political structure stems from democratic political culture and that, simply, “democracy cannot be built without democrats” (Klingeman et al., 2006, p. XI). In spite of the possible institutional changes, citizens will accept only those political and economic structures whose institutional and legal procedures are compatible with their relatively stable cultural orientations and political values. Being a product of the common (early) socialization, they can only be changed during the socialization process, under the influence of more general structural factors such as economic modernization, urbanization etc. (Almond & Verba, 1963/1989; Eckstein, 1988; Huntington, 1991; Lipset, 1959; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Individual’s political values and beliefs are heavily determined by specific social/political/economic circumstances from early childhood. After one reaches adulthood, the changes in political outlook are possible, but not that probable (Inglehart, 1990). The effects of the changed institutional context are necessarily delayed and postponed, visible only in younger cohorts or by the process of generational replacement in general population. The prevailing political culture can therefore change only slowly and in the long term, which is why it takes a long time for democracy to consolidate in a previously non-democratic country (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Klingemman et al., 2006).

The rational choice (or institutional) model, on the other hand, posits that the current social context, i.e. more recent political, economic and social events, play a more important role than early socialization. The evaluation of system performances, in economic and political terms, and the quality of citizens’ experience with the system shape the political attitudes and behaviours and contribute to the (lack of) allegiance to democratic institutions and norms (Jackman & Miller, 1996; Mishler & Rose, 2002; Muller & Seligson, 1994). Early instilled beliefs and values are not unimportant, but are strengthened or weakened by the later experiences. In a newly democratized society, citizens can and must learn to be “democrats” and that is only possible in the context of democratic civic culture and pluralism and through the experience with the democratic political process (Dalton 1994; Fleron, 1996; Niemi & Hepburn, 1995). Thus, it is not that important to create democrats as to create democracy; once established, it is highly probable that democratic institutions will produce democratic values (Fleron, 1996). Democratic political culture is hence rather the effect than the cause of democratic structure.

Although the empirical tests of the relative explanatory power of the two competing models are rather limited and mixed, each model has its own empirical *pro* and *cons*. The failure of communist regimes to transform the pre-communist political culture (Almond, 1983) and to create the new socialist man (Gray, 1979) is considered to be the major argument in favour of the primacy of the culture over structure view. In the words of Brown, “it would appear that the

dominant Czech political culture came much closer to changing Czechoslovak Communism than Czechoslovak Communism came to procuring acceptance of its official political culture” (cited in Almond, 1983, p. 137). Some more recent empirical findings support the view that the prevailing political culture in the East European countries lacks some main democratic qualities in spite of (more or less) limited experiences with democracy. Compared to the citizens of the Western democracies, the citizens of post-communist countries are less supportive of democracy (Klingeman et al., 2006; Pavlovic, 2007), less politically tolerant (Gibson, 1998; 2002; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003) and less politically active (Dekker et al., 2003). Inglehart has argued that self-expression values are an essence of the democratic political culture, showing that their acceptance in post-communist countries was lower not only compared to the Western societies, but even to poorer and less developed African and Asian countries (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel & Inglehart, 2009).

However, some studies have called into question the culturalist view that the quality of the post-communist political culture is an obstacle to democratization. Gibson (1996) showed that the support for democracy in Russia and Ukraine was “a mile wide and more than an inch deep” (p. 417), suggesting that this was not a mere case of lip service to democracy. Other studies have suggested that democratic values in some former Soviet Union countries were present “at levels the pessimists would not have expected” (Reisinger et al., 1994, p. 185) or that there were no significant differences in the acceptance of numerous political attitudes and values between the citizens of East and West Germany (Dalton, 1994). Contrary to Inglehart’s (1990) assumption of unidirectional causation – civic culture affects democracy but not *vice versa* – some researchers have shown that democratization increased the importance of pro-democratic values (Schwartz & Sagie, 2000), as well as that most civic culture attitudes did not have any significant impact on change in democracy and some of them were rather effects of democracy (Muller & Seligson, 1994). Furthermore, there is empirical evidence that the levels of political tolerance (Duch & Gibson, 1992), trust in social and political institutions (Mishler & Rose, 1997) or support for marketization and democracy (Whitefield & Evans, 1999) in post-communist countries can be explained in rational choice terms, as the products of resocialization during the period of democratization, i.e. the effects of economic and political performance evaluations.

This paper aims at clarifying the relative importance of some cultural and institutional variables in explaining the support for democracy in the post-communist Serbian society. After almost half a century of communist regime and ten years of Milosevic’s authoritarian rule, democracy was introduced in Serbia overnight in 2000. The democratic political system was implemented in the society which survived severe interethnic conflicts, international isolation,

NATO bombing and political, social and economic collapse. The studies from that period have shown that antidemocratic political attitudes and values were predominant in the Serbian population (Golubovic et al., 1995; Pantic, 2002; Pantic & Pavlovic, 2009). Some of the main features of the non-democratic political culture (e.g., authoritarianism and ethnocentrism) remained intact in spite of democratic changes and are still relatively widespread (Biro et al., 2002; Kuzmanovic, 2010; Pantic & Pavlovic, 2009). Mass protests which caused the fall of Milosevic in 2000 were rather motivated by a growing dissatisfaction with extremely poor life conditions than by intrinsic mass demands for democracy (Pavlovic, 2010). If individual's political outlook is primarily determined by relatively stable cultural orientations and political values, there was no fertile ground for the acceptance of democracy in Serbia. The prevailing political culture was marked by high authoritarianism, nationalism, intolerance etc., incongruent with the democratic political system which, according to the assumptions of the culturalist view, would result in the low support for the newly established democratic institutions and norms among citizenry. However, the opinions about the democratic political system before as well as after 2000 were quite favourable. Based on the data collected in the three waves of the World Values Survey in which Serbia participated (in 1996, 2001 and 2006), the measure of relative support for democracy, combining the acceptance of democracy and rejection of autocracy as used in similar analyses (Klingemann et al., 2006), showed that 56% of Serbian citizens were supportive of democracy in 1996 (during the Milosevic's era) and 69% of them in 2001 (after the democratic changes in 2000) (Pavlovic, 2010). The lowest support for democracy was registered during the democratization process, in 2006 (46%), while the acceptance of democracy was quite weakly linked with the acceptance of some more general pro-democratic beliefs and values (social tolerance, autonomy, gender equality, market orientation etc.). These, as well as some other studies pose questions regarding the sources of support for democracy in Serbia and the relative importance of the "cultural" versus "institutional" factors.

1. Method

Sample and procedure. The data used in the analysis were collected in a post-election survey conducted on the representative national sample of eligible voters in Serbia by the Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia. The probability-based sample with multiple stages of selection was used. It was based on the addresses from a national database of mailing addresses maintained by the Serbian Post. The total sample consisted of 3,455 households and one-individual-per-household principle resulted in the total sum of 1,568 respondents interviewed (the weighted response rate was 50.1%). The face-to-face interviews were conducted using the Computer-

Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method. Data were collected in the period from December 2012 to February 2013.

Variables and measures. The Serbian post-election study covered a wide variety of political beliefs, attitudes and values. Several fundamental political beliefs and attitudes, usually regarded as some of the main features of the democratic political outlook, often used in the post-communist political culture studies (Gibson, 1996; Dekker, 1996; Duch & Gibson, 1992) and very relevant for Serbian political context, were treated as cultural variables. These included authoritarianism, political tolerance, nationalism and socialist egalitarianism. Authoritarianism has been one of the most important concepts in explaining human political behaviour for decades, related with numerous attitudes and beliefs (see, for example, McFarland, 2010). It also bears special relevance for explaining political behaviour in Serbia (Pantic & Pavlovic, 2009; Todosijevic, 2006, Kuzmanovic, 2010), being one of the most important aspects of Serbian political culture in the past several decades. Nationalism has a special relevance in the Serbian context as well since it has not only been (more or less) the official ideology of the ruling class for decades, but one of the most important dimensions of differentiation between the supporters of the relevant political parties in Serbia (Todosijevic, 2006; Pantic & Pavlovic, 2009). Political tolerance is one of the most important components of the democratic political culture, often used in post-communist studies (Gibson, 1998; Karpov, 1999; Peffley & Rohrschneider, 2003), while socialist egalitarianism represents the general support for the economic aspect of societies liberalization, i.e. the rejection of some of the most important aspects of the former socialist political system (planned economy and economic egalitarianism).

Variables were measured in the following ways:

Authoritarianism. Six items of the scale of authoritarianism ($\alpha=.65$) were selected based on some previous studies (Todosijevic, 2006). The items represented the content of the well-known F scale (Adorno et al., 1950) and RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1988). Each item was followed by a five-point scale. The scale included items such as “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values for children” or “Authorities should censor the media”. Authoritarianism was operationalized as the first component yielded by the principal component analysis, explaining 31.18% of variance. All items showed positive factor loadings on the first component (see Appendix, Table 1).

Nationalism. Nationalistic attitudes were measured by seven items of the scale ($\alpha=.72$) covering a variety of themes that are most often the content of the nationalistic worldview (Dekker et al., 2003). A similar scale was used in some previous studies (Todosijevic, 2006). The scale included items such as “No nation has such a glorious and at the same time tragic history as

the Serbs” or “There are few nations that contributed to the world’s culture and science as ours”. The principal component analysis yielded one factor, explaining 44.31% of variance. The obtained factor scores were used as a measure of nationalism. All items showed positive factor loadings (see Appendix, Table 2).

Political tolerance. Political tolerance was measured by the least liked group method (Sullivan et al., 1979), using three items ($\alpha=.82$). Respondents were asked to (dis)agree (on a five-point scale) on whether the members of the most disliked group they had in mind should or should not be banned, allowed to organize public demonstration or nominate themselves for public office. The principal component analysis yielded one component, explaining 73.43% of variance. Factor scores were treated as a measure of political tolerance. All items showed positive factor loadings (see Appendix, Table 3).

Socialist egalitarianism. The Serbian post-election study included one item related to respondent’s general belief regarding the governmental role in economy and economic egalitarianism, which was treated as an indicator of socialist egalitarianism. Respondents were asked how strongly they (dis)agreed (1. strongly disagree/5. strongly agree) with the following statement “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels”.

The selection of institutional variables used in the analysis was guided by previous research with similar methodology and study aims (for example, Whitefield, 2005; Whitefield & Evans, 1999; Mishler & Rose, 1997) as well as the scope of the available data. Instrumental variables included several economic and political evaluations of the functioning of the Serbian democratic political system.

Evaluation of democracy. Measured by one four-point scale item “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Serbia?”.

Evaluation of economy. Respondents were asked to estimate whether the state of the economy in Serbia had become better, stayed about the same or got worse.

Government evaluation. Measured by one four-point scale item “Having in mind the results of Government, how good do you think the government has done its job, during the last 4 years (before last elections)?”.

Freedom and human rights evaluation. Respondents were asked to estimate the level of respect for individual freedom and human rights in Serbia on a four-point scale (1. no respect at all/4. a lot of respect).

Perceived representation. Respondents' evaluation of how well elections ensured that the views of voters were represented by Members of the Parliament (1. not well at all/4. very well) was treated as a measure of perceived representation.

Electoral system evaluation. Respondents evaluated the method of electing representatives as very good, good, bad or very bad.

Higher values in the afore-mentioned variables implied more positive evaluations.

Support for democracy. General approval of the democratic political system was the main dependent variable in the analysis. It was measured by a standard four-point scale (1. agree strongly/4. disagree strongly) item: "Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government".

Socio-demographic variables. Respondent's gender, age (measured in years), level of education (primary/secondary/tertiary), monthly household income (estimated on the 11-point scale, 1. up to 9,999 RSD/11. 100,000 RSD or more) and an estimated likelihood to improve the standard of living (1. very unlikely/4. very likely) were included in regression models as well.

2. Results

The data were analyzed using the hierarchical regression analysis. Support for democracy was in the first step regressed on socio-demographic variables. Cultural variables were then added in the second step, while in the third step the institutional variables were included as predictors as well. The data are shown in Table 1.

The first model explains only 4% of variance in support for democracy. Respondent's monthly household income ($\beta=.134$, $p<.001$) and an estimated likelihood of improving one's standard of living ($\beta=.130$, $p<.001$) were the only significant predictors. Other predictors controlled for, the more affluent individuals showed higher support for democracy and *vice versa*. The same applies for the respondents believing in the possibility of improving their financial standard of living. The objective as well as subjective economic status obviously influenced one's attitude towards the democratic political system. Although the socio-demographic model rather describes than explains variation in support for democracy, these findings can be interpreted as a demonstration of a deprivation or a frustration based attitude towards democracy among Serbian citizens. Not having enough means as well as thinking that one deserves more than one has can be a cause for a critique and cynical attitude towards the democratic regime, which is being blamed for the unsatisfactory standard of living and a lack of opportunities for its improvement. The importance of self-interest for the preference of democracy is quite in line with the propositions of the rational choice model.

Table 1: Hierarchical regression analysis – three models of support for democracy

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Socio-demographic factors</i>			
Gender (male)	-.041	-.043	-.037
Age	.062	.078	.066
Education	.061	.048	.033
Household income	.134 ***	.128 ***	.108 **
Likelihood to improve standard of living	.130 ***	.130 ***	.065
<i>Cultural factors</i>			
Authoritarianism		-.119 ***	-.104 **
Nationalism		-.014	-.017
Political tolerance		.020	.044
Socialist egalitarianism		-.023	-.034
<i>Institutional factors</i>			
Evaluation of democracy			.115 **
Government evaluation			.229 ***
Evaluation of economy			.012
Freedom and human rights evaluation			.020
Electoral system evaluation			.008
Perceived representation			.009
Adjusted R Square	.04	.05	.12

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The non-significant effects of gender, age and the level of education are informative as well. The differences in socialization practices and experiences related with gender and especially age are obviously not that important for allegiance to democracy. Age is considered to be one of the most relevant socialization variables, which gains special relevance in the post-communist societies. The culturalist model predicts that younger cohorts, especially those not socialized under the authoritarian regime, should be more supportive of democracy. Some empirical evidence has shown that there were generational differences in that sense (Hahn, 1991; Hagenars et al., 2003; Klingeman et al., 2006; Sieminska, 2006) and great similarity between youth in the post-communist countries and those in the old democracies (Catterberg & Zuasnar, 2010; Moreno et al., 2010; Sieminska, 2003). This finding does not support the assumptions of generational differences in the Serbian society. The level of education, systematically linked with a more liberal political outlook, does not play an important role in explaining individual differences in support for democracy.

Adding cultural variables in the model improves its explanatory power significantly (R square change = .014, $F [4, 919] = 3.54$, $p < .01$), but only slightly (5% of variance). The influence of the two economic variables remains significant even when respondent's income loses its

intensity. This can be interpreted as an argument in favour of the claim that the effect of respondent's economic status on support for democracy is, at least partly, moderated by certain dispositional and attitudinal factors, such as some of those added in this step. There is empirical evidence that nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes are related with economic and cultural deprivation in Serbia (Kuzmanovic, 1994; 2010), which could imply the indirect effects of socio-demographic characteristics through attitudes and dispositions. The data in this study partly correspond to it. Only one added variable significantly predicted the support for democracy – authoritarianism ($\beta = -.119$, $p < .001$). Higher authoritarianism was related with lower support for democracy, which is quite in line with the theoretical considerations on authoritarian personality as well as numerous research findings showing relations between authoritarianism and other attitudes and values that are antithetical to a democratic political outlook (Adorno et al., 1950; Meloen, 1993; McFarland, 2010) or the level of state authoritarianism (Meloen, 1996). It is important to note that, other predictors in model controlled for, none of the remaining cultural variables had a significant influence on the support for democracy. Out of all political attitudes and beliefs included in this study, authoritarianism seems to be by far the most important in explaining allegiance to democracy. Adorno et al. (1950) stated that political, economic and social beliefs of an individual were deeply rooted in his/her personality, which may be “regarded as *determinant* of ideological preferences” (p. 5, italics in the original). It seems that, in the case of Serbia, this holds not only for preference for democracy, but perhaps also for nationalism, political tolerance and socialist egalitarianism, which does not gain significance once the level of authoritarianism and demographics are controlled for.

Finally, adding the institutional variables significantly improves the model's explanatory power (R square change = .014, $F [4, 919] = 3.54$, $p < .01$) and doubles the percent of the explained variance (12%). The most important predictors of the support for democracy are satisfaction with government performance ($\beta = .229$, $p < .001$) and Serbian democracy ($\beta = .115$, $p < .001$) in general. Those who evaluate these more positively are more supportive of democracy, which is what would be expected under the institutional model paradigm. None of the remaining institutional factors significantly influences the support for democracy.

The influence of authoritarianism on the support for democracy remained significant after the inclusion of the institutional variables, although the intensity of influence was slightly decreased ($\beta = .104$, $p < .001$). Monthly household income was also positively related to support for democracy but additionally lost its intensity (compared to Model 2). Again, this demonstrates the indirect ways of influencing the support for democracy, through dispositions as well as some evaluations. This especially stands for the perceived likelihood of improving the standard of

living which, after the inclusion of instrumental variables, lost its significance. Political evaluations obviously moderate the effects of individual (relative) deprivation.

Conclusions

The presented data have several important implications. Bearing in mind the two competing models, empirical evidence presented here is rather ambiguous, neither discarding the explanatory power of any nor granting one's primacy. If one had to choose the most important predictor of the support for democracy in Serbia, it would undoubtedly be the institutional factor – the satisfaction with government performance. This finding can be well explained by the propositions of the rational choice model: the evaluation of system performance most significantly contributes to citizens' allegiance to the democratic system. Furthermore, it (at least slightly) moderates the effects of some structural and cultural factors.

Creating and upholding the functional Serbian democracy seems to be one way of causing allegiance to it. Two important implications stem from this. The relevance of the system performance suggests the importance of an effective functioning of the democratic regime, which implies the very important role of the political elites. Securing benefits for the many would bring the prevailing satisfaction with the system performance and, in the end, a more favourable view on democracy. On the other hand, if the support for democracy is solely influenced by self-interest and individual or group benefits, one cannot help but wonder whether it is merely a lip service to democracy, as often argued by the proponents of the culturalist model (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel & Inglehart, 2009) – only instrumental support for democracy (based on its effects) and not intrinsic support (based on democracy as a value in itself). This raises the question of stability of this type of support for democracy in a transitional society with its ups and downs in performance. If there is no deeper commitment to democracy, it is a small step from criticism of poor performance of the democratic regime to the rejection of the democratic political system.

However, at least in the Serbian political context, allegiance to democracy *is* influenced by some more general factors as well. Authoritarianism explains some variation in the preference for democracy not accounted for by institutional variables. Other things controlled for, the higher the authoritarianism the less favourable is the attitude towards the democratic political system. One of the most fundamental and general determinants of political preferences, treated here as the cultural factor, plays its part. As stated before, authoritarianism has been a very important component of Serbian political culture for decades and obviously still is, after twelve years of democracy. Furthermore, there are reasons to treat authoritarianism as a form of traditional

parochialism in the Serbian context (Biro, 2006; Kuzmanovic, 1994; Rot & Havelka, 1973), the idea not completely discarded by the original view of authoritarianism as a personality or dispositional variable (Sanford, 1973). This points to the relevance and continuity in political tradition, which speaks in favour of the cultural model.

In understanding and describing the development of support for democracy in a post-communist society, a more integral and coherent approach is needed. It would include the structural, cultural and institutional variables. Some authors argue that „instead of asking whether institutions cause culture or culture causes institutions, we should look for their joint effects“ (Elkins & Simeon, 1979, p. 143) and that political culture evolves in a “reciprocal relationship between institutions ... and values, fundamental political beliefs and implicit understandings” (Brown, 2005, p. 187). The consonance between the two is greater and more easily achieved if democratic institutions develop upward (from within the society) than downward (imposed on the society). The former statement more likely describes the Serbian situation, but nonetheless data presented here point to combined effects of the cultural and institutional variables as found elsewhere (Bennich-Bjorkman, 2007) and accurately described as a partial or dual adaptation to “external modernity and domestic reality” (Sakwa, 2005, p. 43). If there is a certain way for creating the democratic political culture, it is to be found in creating “democrats” as well as creating democracy. The two will then mutually reinforce.

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Appendix

Table 1: Authoritarianism scale – Factor loadings on the first principal component

Obedience and respect for authority are most important values for children	.702
People just reject youthful rebellious thoughts as they age	.576
Forgetting physical punishment leads to immoral conditions	.497
Authorities should censor the media	.689
Solve social problems by eliminating immoral people	.686
People can be divided into strong and weak	.524

Note: Extraction method - Principal Component Analysis; no rotation; 38.18% of variance.

Table 2: Nationalism scale – Factor loadings

The Serbs should be proud of their people	.658
Serbia has a more glorious and tragic history than other nations	.798
Serbia contributes more to world culture and science	.789
More important politicians are patriots than experts	.493
Serbia should seek peaceful reunification	.553
Schools should pay more attention to patriotic education	.647

Note: Extraction method - Principal Component Analysis; 44.31% of variance.

Table 3: Political tolerance scale – Factor loadings

Disliked group should organize public demonstrations	.884
Disliked group should nominate for public office	.909
Disliked group should not be banned	.773

Note: Extraction Method - Principal Component Analysis; 73.53% of variance.