

# Religious determinants of political participation in Poland and Romania<sup>1</sup>

*A research note*

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## Abstract

In this paper we examine the effect of religious variables on political participation in Romania and Poland. In both countries there is a dominant church and very high levels of religiosity and church attendance, in comparison to other countries from East Central or Western Europe. The literature on determinants of political participation discusses the importance of the church as an arena for learning civic skills. By analyzing survey data from the last wave of World Values Survey (2012), we find that religious values and practices influence both conventional and unconventional participation. While voting may be encouraged by participation in church activities, religious conservatism is at odds with unconventional participation, such as signing petitions.

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## **Introduction**

The connection between transitions to democracy, religion and political participation is not obvious. Transitions to democracy imply both institutional choices and the response of the population to these new institutions. Institutional choices are easier and more controllable processes than the rooting of these institutions. Lijphart(1996), Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1995 ), Mainwarring (1992, 1997) are just a few authors that researched transitions from an institutional point of view. The rooting of democratic institutions within the societal ethos is a lengthy process, and political participation is one of its key elements.

In this paper, we examine the ways in which religious variables influence political participation in Romania and Poland. As two of the most religious countries in the EU, we aim to find out whether religious values and activities influence people’s participation, both conventional (voting) and unconventional (petition signing).

The relevance of this research is twofold. First, both countries display significant levels of religiosity and church attendance, at more or less constant levels since 1989. Moreover, confidence in most political system institutions is low, while confidence in church is high. Second, the literature on determinants of political participation in democratic systems considers the church as an arena that can contribute to the learning of civic skills and, consequently, lead to increased participation. This research contributes to this literature, by

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<sup>1</sup> Work in progress. Please do not quote without permission. Some fragments of this research note have already been published elsewhere in a different form.

discussing two examples from East Central Europe - Poland and Romania – and contextualizes a body of knowledge mostly focused on the American system.

Democratic regimes depend on political participation for their validation and for the mere functioning of the regime. Positive attitudes towards the system are critical in unconsolidated democracies (Mishler & Rose, 1997). In addition to the heavy accent placed on participation understood generally, democracy also requires particular forms of political participation, such as voting (Duch, 1993). In consolidated democracies, the response of the population reflects aspects of democratic political culture such as political participation and behaviors. Successful transitions need political participation, and political participation in transitional countries requires mobilization and recruitment effort, due to the lack of democratic political culture hindered by an authoritarian regime. Among mobilizing factors, religion and churches – understood as institutionalization of religious practices, and much more than this – can be significant player, and thus can contribute to the creation of both a consolidated democracy and democratic culture.

### **Determinants of political participation**

Political participation is traditionally split into two-category taxonomy, namely conventional and unconventional participation. The acts forming the sphere of conventional participation include voting, campaign activity and party volunteer work, while unconventional participation usually encompasses petition signing, protesting and boycotting. In this paper, the emphasis is on voting and petition signing, as two of the most popular participatory acts, one from each category, conventional and unconventional respectively.

According to Pippa Norris (2002), changes in intensity and scope of political participation can be explained through four approaches, namely modernization, institutional approaches, agency theories, and Verba, Scholzman and Brady's Civic Volunteerism Model (1995).

First, modernization brings about different types of political participation, just as it adds new issues on the political agenda. Second, there are the institutional approaches, which discuss the importance of institutional arrangements, such as party politics or the electoral system, in changing the degree and coverage of political participation. Third, the so-called 'agency theories' place the responsibility for increased participation in the hands of mobilizing agents. The fourth approach, usually associated with the works of Verba, Scholzman & Brady (1995), explains political participation as a function of resources, motivation and integration: people participate because they can, they want to, or because they are asked (p.269).

### Resources

Within the category of demographics, age and gender are usually considered important. There are several findings showing that younger and older people tend to be less involved in participatory acts. On the one hand, this is attributed to the physical hindrances of older people and the high 'mobility' of the young that causes them to be less engaged (Curtis et al., 1992; Verba & Nie, 1972). On the other hand, older people have more time to participate, more resources and a higher level of social integration; young people, are also more interested in participating in unconventional and protest activities, especially during these times of intensive social networking. In Central and Eastern Europe, age may not have the same effects as in Western democracies, precisely because of the dramatic change brought about by the collapse of communism (Bernhagen & Marsh, 2007). Gender has to be taken into account because women are disadvantaged by traditional role patterns. They are often excluded from professional careers, made responsible for the 'home' and less integrated in social and professional contexts (see e.g. Van Deth & Kreuter, 1998).

Social status and resources are important predictors of political involvement. The literature shows that people with higher status participate more. Status usually includes

resources (time, money, contacts) and verbal and cognitive skills (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Furthermore, inequalities in levels of education and income can be magnified by political and organizational participation. This relation between status and participation can be found, with small variations, in most of the Western societies (Schlozman et al., 1999).

#### Integration and motivation

According to Schlozman et al. (1999), one way of bypassing the inherent inequality of status in participation is through empowering lower status citizens and their learning of civic skills through participation in non-political organizations. Social networks provide the possibility to communicate with other people having similar interests, while, at the same time, representing a training grounds for learning social skills. The most important networks tend to be those provided by family, workplace, associations and church (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). In the next section, we turn to the role played by churches in mobilizing people to participate.

Post-materialist value orientations are closely connected to values of political and social involvement and self-realization. These variables can be attributed to both a direct influence on political participation and an indirect one, mediated by involvement in associations in general (Van Deth, 1996). Once material concerns take a secondary role, people's need for expressing themselves and partaking in the decision-making process becomes more acute.

Political interest can be seen as a sign of interest in society – an indicator of social integration. Similarly, in the case of institutional trust, Bo Rothstein (2004) argues that a low level of trust in justice makes involvement in collective action more difficult.

#### **Religion and church as determinant of political participation**

Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) discuss the importance of church and church-related contexts in the formation of civic skills. While being an active member of a religious community can make one more participatory politically, not all religious groups have the same political empowerment effect. Indeed, Putnam (1993) considers the Catholic Church as an inefficient civic skills learning arena because of its hierarchical structure.

We chose to analyze the role of the church in affecting political participation because it is the only institution that is trusted in Central and Eastern Europe by the population. People actually participate in religious activities more than any other political or social events (Mishler and Rose, 1997). There are differences within Central and Eastern Europe, but overall the rate of church attendance is higher than any other participatory activity.

Furthermore, the role of the church as a segment of civil society that can lead to the creation of civic skills is significant from an ethical point of view. According to Barnes (2001), there are few political institutions that have been left uncompromised by the communist regime. For example, trade unions represent part of the communist inheritance.

#### The Civic Volunteerism Model revisited

The Civic Volunteerism Model (CVM), developed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) allows us to account for the mobilizing role of the civil society. The CVM asserts that tangible resources are not the only predictors of political participation. Political engagement and civic skills also increase political participation. Engagement is constituted by those positive beliefs and attitudes towards democracy coupled with feelings of personal political empowerment and efficacy. Civic skills are practices and experiences that familiarize individuals with the political game, and its rules of play. Writing a petition, organizing a campaign, even voting makes more sense if it is practiced. The authors show that participation in non-political organizations, such as unions, voluntary organizations and churches, creates a familiarity with the ways organizations function and give the individual a feeling of efficacy, while routinizing her in the structures of organizational functioning.

There is one significant problem with the CVM model, which lies in the authors' inability to deal with the limitations of the model imposed by the internal culture of the church. Richard Wood (1999) asserts the causal autonomy of culture and states that the internal political culture of the church is formed from its cultural strategy and its cultural base. He argues that political science and social movement literatures do not address the critical issue of church's internal structure in both limiting and affecting its effect on civic skills building.

The cultural base of a church represents those segments of participants' cultural terrain that the church purports to, those common unifying traits of the population that offers the legitimizing base for the church's actions. The cultural strategy indicates what part of community life the organization will draw upon. These two factors lead to the formation of an internal political culture, made up of shared assumptions, perceptions and symbols that facilitate the understanding of the surrounding world. The political culture affects the projection of social power and the ability to shape the public realm.

Wood (1999) details the challenges that churches face in their formation and preservation of internal political culture. First, churches need to maintain stability along both organizational lines and in terms of individual involvement. Second, the leaders need to have the ability to interpret the complex political environment. Third, the church has to act effectively in the public realm. His advice to churches is four folded. First, if the church is to be successful, there needs to be a high intensity of shared cultural elements, between the religious organization and its members. Second, the organization needs to provide sufficient capacity for ambiguity to interpret a complex world. Third, organizational culture must provide cultural resources for contestation. Fourth, the organizational culture needs to provide resources for negotiation and compromise.

Wood's approach is designed for the pluralist religious space existing in the United States. His announced goal was to determine the effectiveness of church participation in the representation of minorities. So part of his analysis will not apply to cases of dominant religion or even state religion. The overall framework, though, is useful. Cultural base and cultural strategy carry meaning when applied outside the North-American context.

Wood's model can be used to amend the Civic Volunteerism Model. The major weakness of the CVM is the assumption that initial religious motivations are converted into civic skills. This assumption underlines the presence of two consecutive conversions. First, the religious motivations that prompt a person to go to the church are converted into a process of learning civic skills. Second, once these civic skills are learnt, they are subsequently converted into political participation. Wood's analysis addresses the institutional aspect of this weakness: initial religious motivations are converted into civic skills and then into political participation in accordance with the internal political culture of the church. In addition to this aspect, there is also an individual volitional aspect, namely the intention of the individual to perform this series of conversions.

### **Data analysis**

In this paper, we investigate the effects of religious determinants on political participation. The focus is not on political preference and party choice, but rather on the decision to get involved. First, we review previous research, based on the Central and Eastern European Barometer conducted in 1991, so at the very beginning of the transition period, in order to have a point of reference. Then, we look in more details at the case of Romania and Poland, by analyzing World Values Surveys taken very recently, in 2012, and assess how religious variables influence participation. Romania and Poland were chosen as the two countries in Central and Eastern Europe that are both almost religiously homogenous, and that display the highest rates of religiosity and church attendance.

From a religious point of view, Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s paints a very diverse picture. Although religious revival was an important feature, numbers of atheists and differences in church attendance patterns are obvious. Previous research shows that in the countries with Orthodox confidants, where this church is either dominant or in minority, the evidence is even more mixed. First and foremost, one observes that in these countries political discussion is always negatively associated with church going, be it in the Romanian highly religious context or in the Albanian Muslim context. Second, one also notices differences between the secular context of Russia or some of the Baltic countries, where indeed there are no relationships between church attendance and any measure of political involvement, and the more religious contexts.

Using World Values Survey from 2012, we constructed two parallel models, for each country, Romania and Poland respectively. We had the choice of operationalizing religious determinants – our independent variables - along three lines: church attendance, religiosity, and religious conservatism. We consider that the effect of each on political participation should be explored. We did not include denomination as a separate variable, since Poland is virtually all Catholic, and Romania comes in as a second close. We opted for this tripartite categorization of religious variables because each of them measures different aspects of the religious phenomenon. Church attendance reflects the degree of involvement in church activities, thus measuring the effect of the church as a mobilizer and recruiter. The level of prayer reflects people displaying spirituality, and in situations in which prayer and church attendance go against each other in one individual case, we consider those cases to either be ritualists (people that go to church but are not necessarily spiritual) or religious people that feel disconnected from the church (along Grace Davie’s (1994) distinction between believing but not belonging). Finally, religious conservatism is used to identify those people that perceive religion as a measure of traditionalism, of value stability, a category that is most likely to not be satisfied with a democratic system, and also less prone to participate.

For dependent variables, we used intention to vote as a proxy for voting behavior, and also included petition signing as a form of unconventional participation. As recent events show (for example the Romanian change of government in November 2015 under the pressure of demonstration), unconventional acts of political participation have become rather popular everywhere in East Central Europe.

Finally, the control variables that we used include not only socio-economic indicators and demographics (resources), but also post-materialist values and political engagement, as justified in the literature we have discussed above.

The information in table 1 presents indicators of central tendency for independent and dependent variables.

Table 1. Central tendency indicators for independent and dependent variables (WVS 2012)

	Romania Mean/Median/Mode	Poland Mean/Mode
Churchattendance (min=0, max=2, 0=no church attendance) Mode	51.3% (=1), 43.4%(=2)	68.6% (=2), 24.0% (=1)
Pray (min=0, max=2, 0=no prayer) Mode	78.9% (=2)	68.6% (=2)
Religiousconservative <sup>2</sup> (min=3, max=12, 3=very conservative) Mean	7,2232 (std.dev. 2.244)	7,6040 (std.dev. 1.672)

<sup>2</sup> The religious conservative index was constructed by adding-up the 3 variables below (each measured on a 4 points scale, with 1=strongly agree, and 4=strongly disagree).

1. Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right
2. The only acceptable religion is my religion
3. All religions should be taught in public schools

Petitionsigning (dichotomous, 1=petition signing) Mode	39.6% (=1)	62.8% (=1)
Voteintention (dichotomous, 1=intention to vote) Mode	93.0% (=1)	89.9% (=1)
Materialist/postmaterialist 12-item index (min=1, max = 12, 1=materialistic) Mean	1,97 (std.dev. 1.047)	2,20 (std.dev. 0.975)
Interest in politics (min=1, max=4, 1=high interest) Mean/Median	2,85 (std.dev. .957)	2,73 (std.dev .893)

A vast majority of people say that they pray every day (almost 80% in Romania, and almost 70% in Poland), while they also frequent church (less in Romania than in Poland, but still, almost 70% say that they go to church at least weekly in Poland, compared to almost 45% in Romania). They are also fairly conservative from a religious point of view. Respondents in both countries have comparable rates of interest in politics and postmaterialist values (very low, with an average around 2, from an index with values up to 12). In both countries about 90% of respondent intend to vote, while only about 60% say that they would sign a petition in Poland compared to about 40% in Romania.

The models we ran are summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Logistic regression output for the effects of religious determinants on intention to vote and petition signing in Romania and Poland (WVS 2012)

	Romania intention to vote	Romania intention to vote	Romania petition signing	Romania petition signing	Poland intention to vote	Poland intention to vote	Poland petition signing	Poland petition signing
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Church attendance	,332	1,394	-,039	,962	<b>,587</b>	<b>1,799</b>	-,249	,780
Prayer	<b>,305</b>	<b>1,357</b>	<b>,345</b>	<b>1,412</b>	,058	1,060	,030	1,030
Religious traditionalism	-,073	,930	<b>,115</b>	<b>1,122</b>	<b>,208</b>	<b>1,231</b>	,047	1,048
Postmaterialism index	<b>,388</b>	<b>1,475</b>	<b>,254</b>	<b>1,290</b>	,206	1,229	<b>,223</b>	<b>1,249</b>
Political interest	-,197	,821	<b>-,605</b>	<b>,546</b>	<b>-,693</b>	<b>,500</b>	<b>-,563</b>	<b>,570</b>
Gender	<b>-,502</b>	<b>,605</b>	<b>-,323</b>	<b>,724</b>	,274	1,315	,219	1,244
Age	<b>,033</b>	<b>1,034</b>	<b>-,013</b>	<b>,987</b>	,012	1,013	<b>-,027</b>	<b>,973</b>
Education	<b>,253</b>	<b>1,288</b>	<b>,225</b>	<b>1,252</b>	,098	1,103	<b>,159</b>	<b>1,172</b>
Place of residence	-,188	,829	,048	1,049	-,029	,971	,013	1,013
Constant	,903	2,468	<b>-1,105</b>	<b>,331</b>	-,016	,984	<b>1,779</b>	<b>5,924</b>

Numbers in bold indicate statistical significance at .05

Our results indicate that there are influences from religious determinants on participation – either voting intention or petition signing, but they are not uniform across the two countries, or the two types of participatory acts. First of all, church attendance is only positively associated with increased voting participation in Poland, where, indeed, it seems that the church is an influential mobilizer for voting. Moreover, the correlation is identified in Romania, although at a lower level of statistical significance. The effect of church attendance is negatively associated with petition signing, albeit statistically insignificant, which suggest that religious participation may be discouraging unconventional forms of participation, while potentially mobilizing confidants for exercising more conventional acts.

Only in Romania is the effect of praying significant, and it functions similarly in both cases of vote intention and petition signing: people that pray more are also more predisposed to participate politically, irrespective of their religious participation patterns. This result may suggest a potential effect of spirituality, with people disconnecting from the church while also continuing to be individually and privately religious, and those people may be more politically conscientious people.

Religious conservatism is a variable that influences petition signing in Romania and intention to vote in Poland. In other words, people that are less conservative religiously, tend to be more involved politically in both countries, but the effect is significant only on petition signing in Romania and only on voting in Poland.

One important finding of this analysis is the strong effect of postmaterialism on both voting intention and petition signing. Except for its influence on intention to vote in Poland, which is statistically insignificant, postmaterialism is one of the strongest predictors of political participation, with individuals holding more postmaterialistic values being more inclined to participate, especially in unconventional ways. This finding is in line with previous research (Inglehart, 1990) which documents that civic skills and values are more developed in consolidated postmaterialistic societies. Indeed, postmaterialism is a sign of consolidated democracies.

Political interest, employed here as a proxy for political engagement is correlated significantly with political participation, almost in all cases (except the effect on voting in Romania), which is in line with long lasting arguments according to which more politically interested citizens are also more participatory.

Finally, the effects of demographic and socio-economic indicators are also consistent with expectations derived from the literature. Gender is a significant predictor of both measures of participation only in Romania, with women engaging in politics less than men. In both Romania and Poland, younger people are more involved in petition signing, while in Romania, older people tend to vote more. Place of residence is not a significant independent variable, but education is almost universally significant, with more educated people choosing to participate more in politics, through both conventional and unconventional acts.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we explored the effects of religious variables on political participation in Poland and Romania – two of the most religious countries in the EU, according to levels of religious identification, religiosity and church attendance. Our analysis indicates that, even when controlling for demographics, socio-economic status, political interest or postmaterialist values – all important predictors of participation – the effect of religious values is significant. Some commonalities exist between the two countries, with church attendance being positively correlated with intention to vote, but negatively associated with petition signing. This results suggests that the theory of churches becoming arenas for gathering civic skills, or places where inefficacious citizens become empowered, is only partially right; one speculation, is that churches are more like recruiting agents, rather than mobilizers. Religious conservatism is negatively associated with unconventional participation, and, in Poland, even with voting. Interestingly, in Romania, people that pray more often are more inclined to participate, both conventionally and unconventionally, which may suggest a direction for further research into the political values and motivations of religious people which do not feel represented any more by their churches. Postmaterialist values are a key predictor of participation, and so is education.

This research suggests that religion and church may affect patterns of political participation in recent democracies, and that these relationships should be explored further in different contexts and with a mixed methods approach. One very important research direction

that this paper points to, is to analyze in more depth the internal culture of churches, which, in the two countries analyzed here, at least, is a potential explanation for the results we got; both Catholic and Orthodox churches are hierarchical institutions, not particularly conducive to the learning of civic skills. The research would benefit from being replicated in religiously pluralistic contexts.

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