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White, S. and McAllister, I. (2007) *Turnout and representation bias in post-communist Europe*. *Political Studies*, 55 (3). pp. 586-606. ISSN 0032-3217

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/6131/>

Deposited on: 03 July 2009

# Turnout and Representation Bias in Post-communist Europe

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Electoral participation has been declining in post-Soviet Europe as in almost all of the established democracies. Patterns of electoral abstention in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine reflect those in other countries, but show particularly strong effects for older age. Not only do older electors vote more often, they also have distinctive views on matters of public policy, particularly on the economy but also on the Soviet system, strong leadership and hypothetical membership of the European Union. These differences are diminished but nonetheless generally remain statistically significant even when socio-economic controls are introduced. These differences may be seen as a 'representation bias' that advantages particular sections of the electorate and the views with which they are associated. The particular forms that are taken by this bias in post-communist societies may be transitory, but here as elsewhere lower levels of turnout will continue to impart a significant bias to the extent to which some views rather than others are articulated within the political process.

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Communist Europe was distinctive – among other things – for its high levels of electoral participation. Formally, there was no obligation to vote, but in practice it was difficult to avoid. Ballot boxes were taken into hospitals, airlifted to polar exploration stations and carried into people's own homes if they were unable to make it in person. According to the official figures, turnout had reached 99.99 per cent by 1984, when the last elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet took place (Soobshchenie, 1984, p. 199); six other communist-ruled nations, and a few in Africa, had already attained the magical 100 per cent (Taylor and Jodice, 1983, table 2.6). To some extent, results of this kind could be attributed to fraud, particularly the widespread practice of voting for family members; they could also be explained by the use of 'absentee certificates', which allowed potential non-voters to be removed from the register if they were thought likely to be away from home on polling day. But the evidence of former election officials, now resident in the West, was that 'genuine' levels of turnout were extremely high, and independent estimates suggested that no more than 3 per cent failed to record their vote, although the proportion was steadily increasing (Roeder, 1989, pp. 474–5; compare Karklins, 1986; Zaslavsky and Brym, 1978).

A rather different set of arrangements was introduced in 1988, allowing a choice of candidate if not yet of party, and turnout at the first of these elections in March 1989 was almost 90 per cent (White, 1991). But as it turned out, this was a short-lived peak; turnout soon began to fall across the region, not just in a newly

independent Russia, and so did other indicators of political activity – party and trade union membership, newspaper circulations, strikes and demonstrations, levels of interest in politics. And when citizens came to cast their votes, not only were they fewer in number, but they were also more likely to choose a distinctive option that became available in the early 1990s: ‘against all’ the candidates or parties. Elections themselves had changed over the same period, in a manner that helped to account for this mood of disenchantment. In particular, incumbent elites had begun to make use of their control of state media, and of the resources of their own position, to ensure the kind of outcome they wanted. Scholars warned that elections, in these circumstances, were experiencing an ‘authoritarian adaptation’ (Afanas’ev, 2000, p. 17), and that far from eliminating the alienation of ordinary people, they were ‘only deepening it’ (Zinov’ev and Polyashova, 2003, p. 8). Beliefs of this kind made it less likely that electors would bother to vote; the less they did so, the less likely in turn that elections would be regarded as an effective mechanism for articulating the concerns of ordinary citizens and constraining the exercise of power.

In this article we examine the complex of issues that relate to elections and citizen disengagement using evidence drawn from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine: all Slavic, all former Soviet republics, all members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and accounting together for about three-quarters of the area and half the population of what used to be communist-ruled Europe. We draw primarily upon the evidence of representative surveys conducted in each of these countries between 2004 and 2006, using a single agency and a common questionnaire (further details are provided in the Appendix). First of all, we set out some of the patterns that have been characteristic of participation in public life over the post-communist period. We move to a consideration of the correlates of turnout, across our three countries and in a broader comparative perspective, and then to a consideration of the extent to which the differential propensity to vote imparts a skew to the electoral process that privileges the views and interests of some sections of the society, and disadvantages others. It is not only in Eastern Europe that turnouts have been falling, and that a widening gap has opened up between the characteristics of voters and those of the electorate as a whole. Is there a ‘representation bias’ in the cases on which we focus, and what light does their experience throw on a phenomenon that has become increasingly central to public debate as well as to the concerns of political scientists internationally?<sup>1</sup>

### **Patterns of Political Engagement**

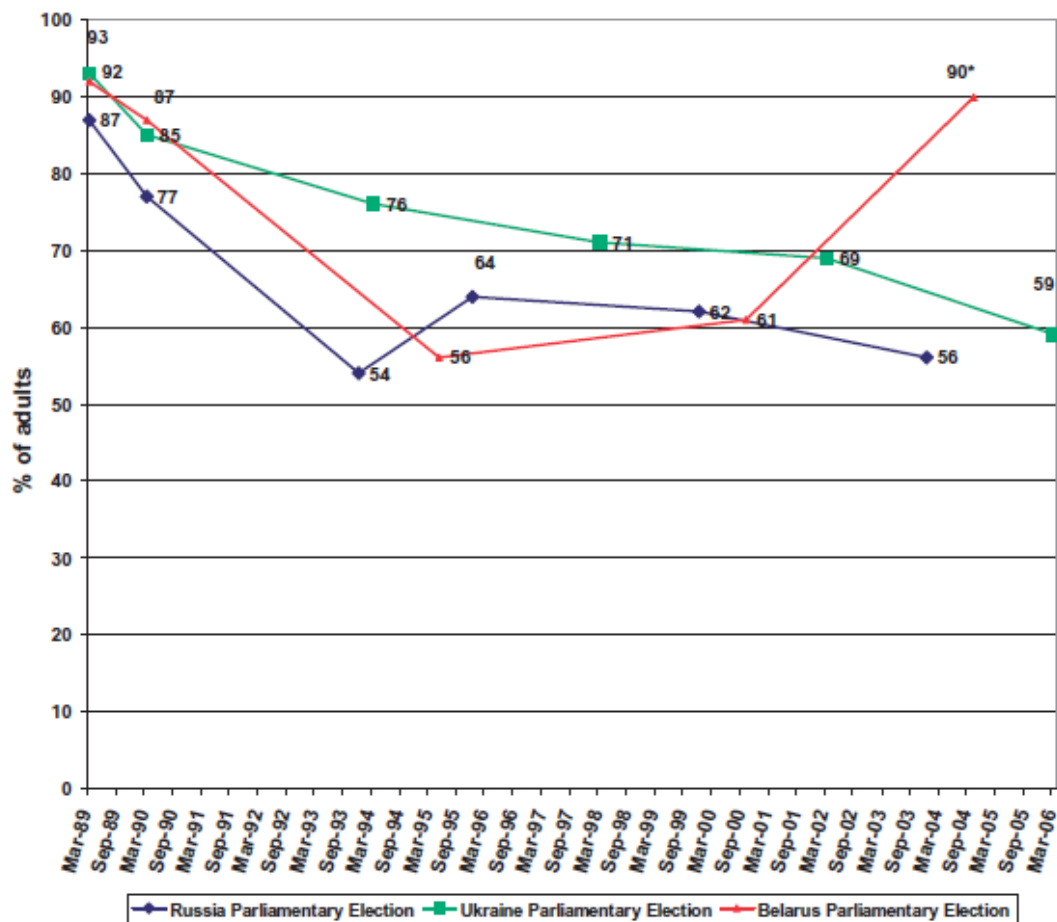
Levels of electoral participation were at record highs in March 1989, when the first largely competitive elections took place throughout a democratising Soviet Union. They had already fallen a year later, when elections took place in each of the Soviet republics (including Belarus and Ukraine as well as the Russian

Republic). Turnout fell even more sharply in December 1993, when the first-ever elections took place to a newly-formed State Duma in what was now an independent Russian Federation. The reported figure was 54.8 per cent, but this was the proportion that had 'taken part in the election' by receiving a ballot paper, not the slightly smaller number that had actually cast a vote,<sup>2</sup> and there was in any case considerable administrative pressure to ensure a turnout of at least 50 per cent in order that the new constitution, which was being put to the vote on the same day, could be confirmed. Independent estimates suggested that turnout, in fact, was unlikely to have exceeded 43 per cent (Rumyantsev, 1994, p. 217), and Yeltsin's press secretary, Vyacheslav Kostikov, himself witnessed the alteration of the results by the chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, Nikolai Ryabov, a defector from the parliamentary camp who was 'universally regarded as cunning and treacherous' (Kostikov, 1997, pp. 266–7).

This was the lowest figure recorded in the post-communist period, although turnout in the most recent Duma election, in December 2003, was not much higher than it had been ten years earlier, at 55.7 per cent (see Figure 1). In 12 of the country's 89 republics and regions, turnout in December 2003 was below 50 per cent; it was lowest of all in Russia's second city, St Petersburg, at just 44 per cent of the registered electorate. Not only this, but record numbers had voted 'against all' the parties and candidates: 4.7 per cent in the national party-list contest, and 12.9 per cent in the single-member constituencies of which the Duma is also composed – in three of them 'against all' topped the poll (calculated from constituency data in Vybory, 2004). Russia, obviously, is not the only country with declining rates of electoral participation; indeed it is 'rare within comparative politics to find a trend that is so widely generalizable' (Wattenberg, 2002, p. 29). But average turnouts over four parliamentary elections – at just over 59 per cent – place Russia near the bottom of the 23 established democracies listed in Dalton (2006, p. 40); the post-communist countries, more generally, have been 'below average' for turnout across all European countries since 1990 (Siaroff and Merer, 2002, p. 917), and have seen a 'dramatic drop in voter participation after the high rates experienced in the first transitional elections' (Kostadinova, 2003, p. 756).

The decline in political engagement has not been limited to voting. In the late 1980s, for instance, about one adult in ten was a member of the Communist party of the Soviet Union (certainly, this did not always mean voluntary membership). But by 2005, after more than a decade of post-communist politics, just one Russian in a hundred was a member of any of the multitude of parties that competed for the support of a newly enfranchised electorate. In the late communist period, similarly, 98 per cent of the workforce had been members of a trade union, or about three-quarters of the entire adult population (Table 1). By 2005, after a continuing decline, membership levels were down to 12 per cent. There has been a corresponding decline in membership of women's and youth bodies, and of the other communist mass organisations where they continue to

Figure 1: Parliamentary Election Turnout, 1989–2006



exist, without any compensating increase in newer forms of civic activity (by 2005 just 3 per cent were members of a cultural association, 2 per cent were members of a neighbourhood association and 1 per cent were involved in a charity). Here, as elsewhere, these developments were related: those who failed to vote, for instance, were half as likely to be members of a political party, and vice versa.

Lower turnouts and lower levels of engagement in public life appeared to reflect a deepening disenchantment with the political process as a whole. Responses of this kind were certainly predominant when we asked a series of questions about the kinds of changes that had taken place (in the view of our respondents) since the Soviet period. It had, they thought, become easier to practise a religion (85 per cent ‘largely’ or ‘entirely’ agreed), and to express opinions (75 per cent). It was easier to join – or not to join – any organisation (77 per cent), and to decide whether or not to take part in political life (76 per cent). But there had been less change in the extent to which ordinary people could ‘live without fear of illegal

**Table 1: Civic Memberships in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, 1990–2006**

<i>% of adults</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000/1</i>	<i>2005/6</i>
<i>Russia</i>			
Party membership	10	1	1
Trade union membership	76	19	12
<i>Belarus</i>			
Party membership	10	2	1
Trade union membership	77	38	39
<i>Ukraine</i>			
Party membership	9	1	3
Trade union membership	70	24	11

*Sources: 1990 figures are calculated from Izvestiya TsK KPSS, 2/1990: 61 and 3/1990: 116 (party memberships) and the 1990 BSE Ezhegodnik, various pages (trade union memberships). Other data are from authors' surveys (see Appendix; Russian figures are from the 2005 and Belarusian and Ukrainian figures from the 2006 surveys).*

arrest' (42 per cent thought there had been an improvement, but 33 per cent thought there had been no change), and it had actually become more difficult – in the view of our respondents – for ordinary people to exercise an influence on government policy (19 per cent thought it had become easier, but 33 per cent more difficult). Most strikingly of all, only 11 per cent thought government treated ordinary people more 'equally and fairly' than in the Soviet period; 44 per cent thought it was less likely to do so.

Election turnouts in 1989 and 1990 had been even higher in Belarus and Ukraine than in the Russian Republic, and they continued at a higher level in the post-communist period. Nonetheless, here too the tendency was for electoral participation to decline, if more irregularly, and for the vote 'against all' to increase. In Belarus, the fall was from 92 to 61 per cent at parliamentary level; there was admittedly a much higher level of turnout in October 2004, of just over 90 per cent, but this was scarcely evidence of a more general recovery as the election was combined with a referendum on a constitutional change, which meant that the entire resources of the state were committed to ensuring the highest possible level of participation. The vote 'against all' the candidates was 8.7 per cent, which was higher than in previous years (White and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2006, p. 159). In neighbouring Ukraine turnout fell from 93 per cent in March 1989 to 69 per cent in the 2002 parliamentary election, continuing a slow decline; it fell a further ten points, to 59 per cent, in what was supposedly the landmark election of March 2006.

In Belarus and Ukraine, as in Russia, levels of membership of civic associations – and most of all of political parties – have also fallen off sharply and continuously

since the late communist period (Table 1). In both of them, one adult in ten had been a member of the Communist Party in the late 1980s, but no more than three in a hundred were members of any of the political parties by 2006. Similarly, about three-quarters of all adults had been enrolled in trade unions in the late communist period, but no more than a third or so – in Ukraine, as few as 12 per cent – were members by the early years of the new century. Nor was there any evidence that Belarusians and Ukrainians were moving into civic associations of a different kind. Just over 3 and 2 per cent, respectively, were members of a cultural association; the same numbers were members of a neighbourhood association; and no more than 2 per cent were engaged in charitable activities. These were low levels of membership, not just in comparison with long-established liberal democracies, but also with other post-authoritarian countries such as Argentina and South Africa; and they were particularly low in respect of organisations that had a political character, such as parties or environmental campaigners (Howard, 2003, p. 11, pp. 58–60).

There was equally little evidence that ordinary citizens in any of the three countries were transferring their energies into unconventional forms of participation. We asked our respondents, for instance, if in the previous two years they had signed a petition, participated in a strike or taken part in a demonstration. Levels of participation, a decade or more after the end of communist rule, were exceptionally low in comparative terms, and tending if anything to decline further (see Table 2). Similar numbers – 5 or 6 per cent in Russia and Ukraine, 4 per cent in Belarus – had contacted an elected representative over the previous two years, and just 1 per cent in Russia (2 or 3 per cent in Belarus and Ukraine, respectively) had written to a newspaper; this compared with an average of 14 per cent who had contacted an elected representative among the 33 countries that were included in the first module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems dataset (see <http://www.cses.org>). Large majorities in each of the three countries expected to take part in future elections, but just 12, 9 and 10 per cent in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, respectively, thought they ‘definitely provide[d] an opportunity to influence the government of the country’, and just 15, 13 and 15 per cent thought they could ‘definitely change the course of events in the country’.

### **Participants and Non-participants**

The literature on post-communist political participation has generally accorded with a broader comparative literature in which age and education have been regarded as particularly important (see for instance Dalton, 2006, ch. 3; Norris, 2002, ch. 5). Voting in post-communist Russia, for instance, as in other countries, is associated with being older and possessing a higher education, but less often with gender or religious affiliation (Colton, 2000, pp. 40–1; White and McAllister, 1998). The comparative literature identifies a number of other factors that are likely to be important, including ethnicity, language and urban

**Table 2: Measures of Unconventional Political Participation, 1993–2004/5**

<i>% of adults</i>	<i>Signed a petition</i>		<i>Took part in challenging act</i>	
Britain	75		25	
United States	71		25	
Germany (West)	66		33	
Japan	55		13	
France	51		36	
	<i>1993</i>	<i>2004/5</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>2004/5</i>
Russia	5	3	5	4
Belarus	n.d.	3	n.d.	2
Ukraine	6	3	5	4

*Note:* A 'challenging act' included those who had engaged in at least one of the following: a lawful demonstration, a boycott, an unofficial strike or the occupation of a building. In Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, respondents were asked, 'During the past two years, have you signed a petition? Participated in a strike? Participated in a demonstration?' (the higher of these latter two figures). Russian and Ukrainian figures for 1993 are as reported in Miller *et al.* (1998, p. 98).

*Sources:* World Values Survey 1995–97 dataset; and authors' surveys (see Appendix; Belarusian and Ukrainian figures are from our 2004 surveys, Russian figures are for 2005).

residence, and attributes of a kind that enhance social networks such as marriage and labour force participation (Franklin, 2004; Gray and Caul, 2000; Patterson, 2002; Verba *et al.*, 1995). Secondary associations, such as membership of a social or voluntary group, are also important, in the tradition strongly influenced by Robert Putnam (2000) and his work on social capital. Consistent with these findings, studies of the post-communist region have found that ties with neighbours and marriage both tend to raise levels of electoral participation. For instance, 'married persons who are friendliest with their neighbors are about 25 percentage points more likely to vote than are single persons who see none of their neighbors'; the same effect is apparent in all age groups, and at all levels of education (Colton, 2000, p. 42).

We compare the characteristics of voters and non-voters in Table 3, setting our results for Belarus, Russia and Ukraine beside those for two liberal democracies, Britain and the USA. Across all five countries, the most striking result is the strong effect of age, with the young being very significantly less likely to vote than the old. The effect is clearest of all in Belarus, where more than half of those aged under 30 are non-voters, compared to just over a third in Britain and the US. By contrast, only about one in ten Belarusians aged over 60 are non-voters, which is a lower level of electoral abstention than in Russia and the United States but higher than in Britain and Ukraine, and in line with trends in the advanced democracies (Wattenberg, 2006). The effects of income and education are less consistent in the three post-communist states than they are in the two established



**Table 3: Non-voters by Socio-economic Characteristics**

	<i>Belarus</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>Ukraine</i>	<i>Britain</i>	<i>USA</i>
Male	27	28	15	17	25
Female	24	23	14	24	22
Under 30	<b>53</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>31</b>	36	34
Over 60	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	8	19
Low income	29	<b>29</b>	<b>12</b>	26	40
High income	28	<b>19</b>	16	10	12
Primary education	<b>18</b>	25	11	23	47
Higher education	23	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	17	7
City resident	27	25	<b>17</b>	19	28
Village resident	22	25	<b>9</b>	21	21
(Total non-voters)	(25)	(25)	(15)	(21)	(24)

*Source: Authors' 2004 Belarus, Russia and Ukraine surveys. Question wording was 'Which political party did you vote for during the last parliamentary elections?', showing those who reported not voting in rounded percentages for each country. Cells highlighted in bold show a statistically significant association between the two variables, judged by the values of adjusted residuals (we follow the recommendation of Miller et al. [2002, p. 133] that the 'general guideline is that those cells with adjusted residual values greater than 2 or less than -2 should be given special attention'). For Britain, data are derived from the 2005 British Election Study, CSES sample; for the USA, from the 2004 American National Election Study.*

democracies, where lower-income voters (particularly in the United States) are markedly less likely to vote than those who have a higher self-defined income (in both the United States and Britain). Similarly, there are few consistent patterns related to residence, and any observed effects are likely to be strongly correlated with socio-economic status.

We examine the importance of these various characteristics more closely in Table 4, using multivariate analysis to isolate their individual contribution to an explanation of electoral turnout or abstention. Since in each case the dependent variables are binary, logistic regression equations are estimated, with the results presented in the form of parameter estimates and standard errors. The results suggest that the models that are estimated for each of the three countries – identifying a range of personal characteristics and social networks for each of the respondents – perform quite satisfactorily in predicting who is likely to vote and who is not. The model is most effective in Ukraine, where 24 per cent of the variance is explained, falling to 20 per cent in Belarus and 16 per cent in Russia. Both personal characteristics and social networks are important in predicting abstention, in roughly equal proportions.

Turning first to personal characteristics, age and education are the most important predictors, as studies of turnout in the established democracies would lead us to expect. Indeed, with the exception of urban residents in Ukraine, who are more likely to be non-voters, age and education are the only significant pre-

**Table 4: Non-voters in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine, 2004**

	<i>Belarus</i>		<i>Russia</i>		<i>Ukraine</i>	
	<i>Est</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>Est</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>Est</i>	<i>(SE)</i>
<i>Personal characteristics</i>						
Age	-0.07**	(0.01)	-0.04**	(0.01)	-0.05**	(0.01)
Gender (male)	0.26	(0.19)	0.22	(0.14)	0.17	(0.17)
Ethnicity	-0.08	(0.26)	-0.16	(0.21)	-0.15	(0.19)
Urban resident	0.27	(0.22)	0.11	(0.16)	1.07**	(0.21)
Education (elementary)						
Special secondary	-0.64**	(0.21)	-0.12	(0.14)	-0.43*	(0.18)
Tertiary	-0.67**	(0.25)	-0.70**	(0.22)	-0.98**	(0.24)
<i>Social networks</i>						
Group memberships	-0.12	(0.15)	-0.31*	(0.14)	0.07	(0.16)
Partisan	-0.33**	(0.20)	-1.34**	(0.13)	-1.74**	(0.17)
Married	-0.48	(0.20)	0.20	(0.15)	-0.35*	(0.17)
Family size	0.10	(0.09)	-0.13	(0.06)	0.04	(0.07)
Religious	-0.42	(0.30)	-0.22	(0.21)	-0.30	(0.23)
Church attendance	-0.35**	(0.11)	-0.05	(0.08)	-0.10	(0.08)
In labour force	-0.67**	(0.19)	0.02	(0.14)	-0.67**	(0.17)
Economic position	-0.23**	(0.16)	-0.41**	(0.11)	0.14	(0.17)
Constant	3.49		3.00		1.96	
Cox and Snell R-squared	0.20		0.16		0.24	
(N)	(1,159)		(1,456)		(1,301)	

Notes: \*\*Statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

Logistic regression equations showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting non-voting. See Table A1 for details of variables and scoring.

dictors; gender or ethnicity, by contrast, have little impact. Both age and education work in the expected directions: younger people are more likely to abstain than their older counterparts, as are those with lower levels of education. The effects of age are greatest in Belarus, but also substantial in the other two countries, and in general it is more important than education. Compared to those with an elementary education (the excluded category), those with a special secondary or tertiary education were both less likely to abstain. In the case of Belarus, the two education categories were very similar in the extent to which they predicted electoral participation, but in the case of Russia and Ukraine it was those with a tertiary education who were the most distinctive in their participation, while those in the intermediate category, special secondary education, were closer to respondents with no more than an elementary education.

The lower part of Table 4 shows the relative importance of social networks in predicting the probability of voting. Most of the effects work in the way we would expect, but there are considerable variations among the three countries. The only consistent effect across all of them is partisanship, so that those who feel themselves close to a party – as in other countries – are more likely to take part in an election. However, none of the other variables is statistically significant across all of the three countries. Economic position – in the form of labour force participation and self-assessed economic position – has the strongest uniform effects; as we would expect, those who are in the labour force, and who report higher levels of economic affluence, are more likely to vote than those who are outside it (mainly pensioners, students or the unemployed), or who consider themselves to be economically deprived. There are some effects for the other aspects of social networks: in Belarus, church attendance raises levels of participation, but not in the other two countries, as does being married in Ukraine. Perhaps surprisingly, group membership generally makes little difference, other than (to a modest extent) in Russia.

### **Voting, Non-voting and Representation Bias**

Electoral turnout has immediate and important consequences in the post-communist region, in that a certain level of turnout is required if an election is to be considered valid (25 per cent in the case of Russian Duma elections, 50 per cent in the case of Russian presidential and all Belarusian elections; Ukrainian election law makes no provision either way, and in 2006 Russia dropped all such requirements). But its consequences are much greater than this, in that – here and elsewhere – a lower turnout is a less socially representative turnout. Even where electoral participation is compulsory, as in Australia, voters are likely to have a higher socio-economic status than the relatively small numbers that fail for whatever reason to cast a ballot (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999). In Belgium, compulsory voting helps to correct for the over-representation that would otherwise occur of electors with a higher education (Hooghe and Pelleriaux, 1998). In countries without compulsory voting, the skew is more pronounced. In the British general election of 2005, for instance, the overall turnout was 61 per cent, the third lowest since 1847; but among those in social classes D and E it was 54 per cent, while among those in social classes A and B it was 70 per cent (Electoral Commission, 2005, p. 25).

There are similar effects in the United States. Successive generations had done their best to eliminate inequalities based on income, race and gender, the American Political Science Association reported in 2004. But in spite of their best efforts, the evidence still suggested an ‘extraordinary association between economic and political inequality’ (APSA Task Force Report, 2004, p. 655). The result was a process that Sidney Verba and his colleagues labelled ‘participatory distortion’, one of the effects of which was that it ‘privilege[d] the needs and concerns of the

more advantaged members of society' and created a polity 'far from the ideal of equal consideration for all' (Verba *et al.*, 1995, p. 508). Indeed, in the most recent elections, the major parties and candidates have sought to widen this gap still further, by using whatever devices they can to depress turnout among the sections of the electorate they consider the most hostile at least as much as mobilising their own supporters (Miller, 2006; Overton, 2006; for a longer-term perspective see Piven and Cloward, 2000). For those who support compulsory voting, one of its main advantages is that it minimises – although it cannot entirely eliminate – this kind of bias (see for instance Hill, 2002; 2006; Lijphart, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

A differential propensity to vote would have no political significance unless the *views* of voters and non-voters were different, and remained different after other factors had been taken into account. Non-voters, as we have seen, are generally younger, reflecting an all but universal pattern; voters are likely to be older. This means that voters are more likely to have been brought up under the Soviet system, with its guarantees of full employment, low prices and social benefits. They are more likely to have acquired the voting habit during the communist years of all but compulsory participation; and they are more likely to depend on public assistance of various kinds, such as for old age, illness or handicap. We accordingly hypothesise that there will be more support among voters (who over-represent this section of the electorate) for state ownership of the economy, and relatively more support among non-voters for a market economy. We also hypothesise that there will be more support for a 'strong leader' among voters than non-voters, and more support for other characteristic features of the previous regime: we measured this by asking our respondents whether a Soviet system was desirable in principle, and whether the demise of the USSR was to be regretted. Finally, we analysed a central foreign policy issue, the possibility that each of these countries might become a member of the European Union, hypothesising again that voters would be less enthusiastic than non-voters. Each of these four attitudes is derived from several related questions, combined into a single scale; full details are given in the Appendix.<sup>4</sup>

The evidence to test these hypotheses is presented in Table 5, separately for each country. In all three countries, as we can see, non-voters are significantly more likely to support the free market, net of other circumstances, while voters favour a command economy of the traditional kind. In Belarus the difference is substantial, 1.1 points on a zero to 10 scale, and the second largest difference in the table. In relation to the European Union the results are less unambiguous, with fewer strong associations and not all of them in the expected direction. In Belarus the pattern is as hypothesised, with voters more sceptical than others about the prospect of membership; in Russia and Ukraine, however, voters were more supportive of the EU than their abstentionist counterparts, although in the case of Ukraine the difference only just reached statistical significance. EU membership would require a formal commitment to the principles of a market economy, which would tend to increase unemployment and

**Table 5: Political Attitudes by Turnout**

<i>(Zero to 10 scale)</i>	<i>Voters</i>	<i>Non-voters</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>Signif</i>	<i>(N of cases)</i>
<i>(Belarus)</i>					
Favours market	5.4	6.5	6.77	<0.00	(1,374)
Pro-European Union	6.2	6.7	4.04	<0.00	(1,374)
Pro-Soviet	7.1	5.7	10.04	<0.00	(1,374)
Favours strong leader	4.0	3.5	3.57	<0.00	(1,374)
<i>(Russia)</i>					
Favours market	4.9	5.2	2.55	0.01	(1,911)
Pro-European Union	6.0	5.8	2.45	0.01	(1,911)
Pro-Soviet	7.3	6.8	4.48	<0.00	(1,911)
Favours strong leader	4.9	5.0	1.17	0.24	(1,911)
<i>(Ukraine)</i>					
Favours market	5.1	5.7	3.66	<0.00	(1,574)
Pro-European Union	6.3	6.0	2.12	0.04	(1,574)
Pro-Soviet	6.7	6.6	0.41	0.68	(1,574)
Favours strong leader	5.2	5.2	0.37	0.71	(1,574)

*Note: Scales are scored from zero to 10; see text for details of composition.*

*Source: Authors' surveys (see Appendix).*

raise prices; but at the same time it would increase support for agriculture, and for the countryside, in ways that would be likely to benefit the older and less affluent. A mixed set of opinions is perhaps not a surprising response to this mixed pattern of gains and losses.

The remaining two attitudes are concerned with aspects of the Soviet era, in terms of wishing to see a return to the Soviet system, and a yearning for a strong leader. As we had hypothesised, there was greater support among voters than non-voters for a return to the Soviet era, especially in Belarus, where the difference between voters and non-voters was a substantial 1.4 points on the zero to 10 scale – the largest difference in Table 5. The difference between the two groups was somewhat less in Russia – half a percentage point – but was still statistically significant at the 1 per cent level. In Ukraine, the difference was just 0.1 point, and not statistically significant, but in the hypothesised direction. The hypothesis concerning the desire for strong leadership was again supported in Belarus, which has had a strong leader of its own in the post-communist period, but the differences were not significant in either of the other two countries. On these two aspects of the Soviet era, then, the effects of turnout were less clear-cut than in relation to the economy and the European Union.

These results show that there are significant variations between voters and non-voters, most of all on the central issue of a planned or market economy. But to what extent do these patterns persist when other factors have been taken into

account, especially age and education, the two main predictors of turnout? In other words, are the observed variations simply a function of other, correlated factors, or are they associated with turnout *per se*? To make this estimation, Table 6 presents two sets of results for the three countries, based on a series of regression equations. In each equation, a non-voters vs. voters variable is regressed on each of the four attitudes. The first equation is calculated without controls, and is therefore the same estimate as appears in Table 5. For example, Table 5 showed that non-voters in Belarus were more favourable to the free market than voters, by 1.1 points (6.5 minus 5.4). The same estimate appears in Table 6, this time calculated to two decimal places, giving a figure of 1.13. The second equation shows the partial coefficient when the equations take into account personal characteristics and social networks. This second estimate is accordingly the effect of turnout as such, with age, education and other confounding factors held constant. In the case of attitudes to the market in Belarus, for instance, the second estimate shows that controlling for factors of this kind reduces the impact of turnout by about half, to 0.60, but it remains statistically significant.

The principal finding of Table 6 is that the inclusion of controls removes about half of the effects of turnout on political attitudes, but that significant effects remain. Beliefs about the market, for example, remain important in Belarus and Ukraine, even when other factors have been held constant, although in Russia the small effect that is apparent without controls disappears entirely. Other notable

**Table 6: Political Attitudes by Turnout, Controlling for Personal Characteristics and Social Networks**

	<i>(Partial regression coefficients)</i>			
	<i>Market</i>	<i>Pro-EU</i>	<i>Pro-Soviet</i>	<i>Strong leader</i>
<i>(Belarus)</i>				
Non-voters, no controls	1.13**	0.52**	-1.47**	-0.70**
Non-voters, with controls	0.60**	0.22	-0.79**	-0.42*
<i>(Russia)</i>				
Non-voters, no controls	0.33*	-0.25*	-0.55**	0.12
Non-voters, with controls	0.01	-0.21	0.05	0.17
<i>(Ukraine)</i>				
Non-voters, no controls	0.69**	-0.27*	-0.07	0.05
Non-voters, with controls	0.58**	-0.41**	0.31	0.11

*Notes: \*\* Statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed.*

*Scales are scored from zero to 10; see text for details of composition. Figures are partial regression coefficients from regression equations predicting each of the four attitudes from non-voters vs. voters. Controls are personal characteristics and social networks as defined in Table 3.*

*Source: Authors' surveys (see Appendix).*

effects that remain important even when controls have been introduced are pro-Soviet beliefs in Belarus, and opposition to European Union membership in Ukraine, which actually increases in magnitude when we control for other factors. The antipathy towards a strong leader among non-voters in Belarus, evident in Table 5, also remains important when controls are introduced. The only country in which no significant effects remain is Russia: in this case, there was no effect on attitudes for turnout, net of other factors. Otherwise, what is notable is that attitudes to the market economy were more likely to differ between voters and non-voters, having controlled for other factors, than attitudes towards the European Union, the Soviet system or the principle of strong leadership.

### Some Conclusions

Does turnout matter? It has certainly attracted increasing attention as the number of participants continues to fall. The Power Inquiry suggested six reasons for concern, at least in British circumstances. In the first place, it affects the mandate to govern if nearly twice as many fail to vote as support the winning party – the British experience in 2005. More relevant to our purposes in this article, lower turnouts involve a loss of political equality because of the extent to which the turnout varies by social group, over-representing some and effectively disenfranchising others. Apart from this, there is a ‘loss of dialogue’ of a kind that helps to sustain trust in government and a sense of identification with its decisions. Political recruitment is damaged, and anti-democratic movements can more plausibly argue that they represent a section of opinion that has effectively been excluded from conventional politics. In the longer term, the increasing failure of large sections of the population to engage with the political process ‘may lead to a situation where governments are no longer effectively held to account’, and in which policies are formulated by a small coterie of supporters with ‘little reference to wider views and interests’ (Kennedy, 2006, pp. 33–5).

Again, although the literature is hardly unanimous, it has been strongly argued that ‘unequal voting participation is associated with policies that favour privileged voters over underprivileged nonvoters’, lending weight to the conclusion that ‘who votes and how people vote matter a great deal’ (Lijphart, 1997, p. 5). The American Political Science Association, in its review of the evidence, found similarly that the differential propensity of different sections of the electorate to vote and engage in other forms of political activity meant that the concerns of lower and middle-income Americans, racial and ethnic minorities and legal immigrants were ‘systematically less likely to be heard by government officials’, and that ‘government officials disproportionately respond[ed] to business, the wealthy, and the organized when they design[ed] Americans’ domestic and foreign policies’. Government, indeed, was ‘more than twice as responsive to the preferences of the rich as to the preferences of the least affluent’, and also likely

to neglect the concerns of less participatory, working-age families (APSA Task Force Report, 2004, p. 655, pp. 659–60; the discussion is extended in Hauck, 2006; Jacobs and Skocpol, 2005).

The evidence we have considered makes it clear that processes of this kind are not specific to the Western democracies. Turnout levels have also been falling in the post-communist countries, in some cases to spectacular depths – in Poland, to as low as 40.6 per cent in its September 2005 parliamentary election; in Serbia and Montenegro, to levels so low that two successive rounds of presidential elections in 2002 and 2003 were unable to produce a result of any kind because turnout had fallen below the necessary 50 per cent (*The Guardian*, 11 February 2003, p. 13). Falling levels of electoral turnout have been accompanied, as in other countries, by declining levels of membership of political parties and trade unions, low levels of membership of cultural, neighbourhood and other forms of civic association and low levels of engagement in riots, demonstrations and other forms of ‘unconventional political participation’ – it fell again in Ukraine in 2006, in spite of the willingness of many thousands to camp out in central Kyiv at the end of 2004 to secure the rerun of a disputed presidential election.<sup>5</sup>

In post-communist Europe, as in other countries, voters are not a representative sample of the entire electorate. In Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, it is age that matters most; income and education, as compared with the Western democracies, are less important. But crucially, voters are unrepresentative of the electorate in their opinions as well as their social characteristics. Older citizens are not just more likely to vote, they are also more likely to support an economy of the Soviet kind, one that is committed to public ownership, limited income inequalities and comprehensive social benefits. This means that voters are more likely to take a supportive view of many of the policies that were followed in the Soviet period than the electorate as a whole, even when their social characteristics have been held constant. Accordingly, the lower the turnout, the greater the ‘representation bias’; that is, the propensity for those who vote to over-represent some sections of the electorate, and for this reason to over-represent the views with which they are associated. As we have seen, a bias of this kind was particularly marked in relation to the economy, but it was also apparent in the views that were taken of the Soviet system, a strong leader and hypothetical membership of the European Union.

We should not necessarily expect the participatory patterns of the post-communist countries to replicate those of the Western democracies. The entire electorate, for a start, is Soviet by birth and upbringing, and all who are more than 30 years old will have completed their secondary education in the Soviet period. We should accordingly expect the voting-age population to reflect the norms of a system in which participation was all but obligatory, and older age groups to reflect a longer period of socialisation into these norms (as indeed they do). At the same time, these are societies in which familiar forms of ownership and social welfare have been disappearing, or replaced by market alternatives; unemployment has become a mass phenomenon; savings have been wiped out by inflation;



and health services have become all but inaccessible to those of limited income, such as pensioners. It would not be surprising, in these circumstances, if older generations attached even more importance than others to the kinds of support that helped to protect them from the uncertainties of life in the Soviet period, and gave expression to those views in the polling station.

Whatever specific forms of bias are apparent in the three post-communist systems we have chosen for analysis, we can certainly agree that the extent to which differences in participation affect public policy is 'vital, but desperately under-researched' (Blau, 2005, p. 241). On our evidence, it is likely that the specific effects of age will moderate as social welfare systems recover, and as an electorate brought up under Soviet socialism is gradually replaced by one brought up in different circumstances. But if low levels of turnout persist, here as in Western countries a representation bias will also continue: particular sections of the electorate will vote more often than others, their concerns will be represented more vigorously within the electoral process and their interests will be more likely to be considered sympathetically by government. Paradoxically, the political institutions of the communist period were more 'egalitarian': more or less everyone had to vote and so everyone had a roughly equal voice, even though the votes they cast were of little consequence. In the post-communist world, as in the Western democracies, electors can choose whether to vote, and on the evidence we have considered, not much more than half of them are doing so. The shape of public policy is likely in all such cases to reflect a bias in favour of those who take the trouble to record their views in the central mechanism by which the preferences of the adult population are brought to the attention of those who make choices for the whole society.

## Appendix

Our surveys were conducted by Russian Research in association with the project on 'Inclusion without Membership? Bringing Russia, Ukraine and Belarus closer to "Europe"', which is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council to Stephen White, Margot Light and Roy Allison under grant RES-000-23-0146. In Russia, fieldwork took place between 21 December 2003 and 16 January 2004 and again between 25 March and 20 April 2005. The number of respondents was 2,000 in each case, selected according to the agency's normal sampling procedures; it was representative of the population aged eighteen and over, using a multistage proportional representation method with a random route method of selecting households. Interviews were conducted face to face in respondents' homes. The sample was then weighted in accordance with sex, age and education in each region. In both cases there were 97 sampling points, and 150 interviewers were employed. Local fieldwork supervisors checked a 20 per cent sample of each interviewer's questionnaires; if in doubt, all the relevant questionnaires were checked; the standard logical checks were used during data entry and cleaning.

In Belarus, our survey was conducted under the auspices of the same agency between 27 March and 18 April 2004. The number of respondents was 1,597, selected according to the agency's normal sampling procedures; it was representative of the population aged eighteen and over, using a multistage proportional representation method with a random route method of selecting households. Interviews were conducted face to face in respondents' homes. The response rate was 66 per cent. The sample was then weighted in accordance with sex and age in each region, using the 1999 census adjusted on the basis of expert estimates as of the start of 2003. There were 288 sampling points, and 120 interviewers were employed; 10 per cent of the interviews were randomly selected for checking. Our 2006 survey was conducted on a similar basis by the Centre for Sociological and Political Research of the Belarusian State University between 5 and 19 June 2006,  $n = 1,000$ .

In Ukraine, our survey was conducted under the auspices of Russian Research between 23 March and 2 April 2004. The number of respondents was 2,000, selected according to the agency's normal sampling procedures; it was representative of the population aged eighteen and over, using a multi-level, stratified method with a random method of selection at the final stage. Interviews were conducted face to face in respondents' homes. The response rate was 67 per cent. The sample was then weighted in accordance with sex and age in each region. There were 259 sampling points, and 187 interviewers were employed; 10 per cent of the interviews were randomly selected for checking. Our 2006 survey was conducted by the same agency on similar principles between 24 April and 12 May 2006,  $n = 1,600$ .

The variables, definitions and means for the variables used in the three countries are shown in Table A1. The four political attitude items are multiple-item scales, constructed from several separate questions, all of which were strongly correlated. Beliefs about the free market are composed of three items: 'State ownership is the best way of managing an enterprise' *or* 'Enterprises are better managed by private entrepreneurs'; 'People's incomes should not differ greatly' *or* 'Everyone should be paid in accordance with their efforts'; and 'It is better to have a job which guarantees that one will not be sacked if it is less well paid' *or* 'It is better to have a well-paid job even if one can easily be sacked'. Pro-European Union beliefs combine two items: 'What is your attitude towards the aims and activities of the EU?', and 'Would you support or oppose [country's] membership of the EU?' Pro-Soviet attitudes combine two items: 'Do you agree with the following statement: "It is a disaster the Soviet Union no longer exists?"', and 'What is your opinion about cooperation between CIS countries?'. Support for a strong leader combines two items: 'To what extent do you agree that a strong, powerful leader can do more for the country than any laws?', and 'It would be better to get rid of the Duma and elections and to have a strong leader who could quickly resolve all problems'. All of the combined items were re-scaled from zero to 10.

**Table A1: Variables, Scoring, Means**

	<i>Scoring</i>	<i>Belarus</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>Ukraine</i>
<i>Turnout</i>				
Non-voters	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.17	0.27	0.20
Against all	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.09	0.05	0.03
<i>Personal characteristics</i>				
Age	Years	44.84	44.79	45.11
Gender (male)	1 = male, 0 = female	0.45	0.46	0.46
Ethnicity	1 = Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, 0 = other	0.83	0.88	0.78
Urban resident	1 = urban, 0 = rural	0.71	0.75	0.71
<i>Education (elementary)</i>				
Special secondary	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.44	0.47	0.42
Tertiary	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.27	0.16	0.24
<i>Social networks</i>				
Group memberships		0.46	0.26	0.24
Partisan	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.34	0.63	0.69
Married	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.61	0.60	0.62
Family size	Number in household	2.91	3.01	2.88
Religious	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.91	0.82	0.80
Church attendance	From a low of zero to a high of 5	2.62	2.22	2.63
In labour force	1 = yes, 0 = no	0.55	0.51	0.46
Economic position	1 = poor, 2 = average, 3 = good	1.67	1.80	1.61
<i>Political attitudes</i>				
Favours market	Zero to 10	5.73	5.00	5.25
Pro-European Union	Zero to 10	6.33	5.91	6.22
Pro-Soviet	Zero to 10	6.73	7.19	6.64
Strong leader	Zero to 10	3.88	4.92	5.22

(Accepted: 18 May 2006)

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### Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented to the 100th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 2004, the annual conference of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies, Cambridge, April 2005 and the Department of Government seminar at the University of Essex, March 2006. We acknowledge with thanks the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council under grant RES-000-23-0146 to Stephen White, Margot Light and Roy Allison, and of the Nuffield Foundation under grant SGS/32823 to Stephen White, and the assistance of Julia Korosteleva.

- 1 Something of these concerns was apparent in the proposal by the Leader of the House of Commons, Geoff Hoon, that the United Kingdom should introduce compulsory voting (*The Guardian*, 4 July 2005, p. 1), and in the analysis and recommendations of the Power Inquiry (Kennedy, 2006). In the United States, it is also apparent in the work of the Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (APSA Task Force Report, 2004; Jacobs and Skocpol, 2005). The Council of Europe, reporting on the 'Future of Democracy in Europe', identified an 'apparently widespread feeling of political discontent, disaffection, scepticism, dissatisfaction and cynicism among citizens' across the European democracies (cited in Kennedy, 2006, p. 53).
- 2 The Central Electoral Commission in Russia, and its counterparts in the other post-Soviet countries, conventionally report turnout in terms of the number who 'took part in the election' as a percentage of the registered electorate; this represents the total number who received ballot papers, but not the total number of votes cast. In the December 2003 Russian Duma election, by way of example, 60,712,300 were reported to have 'taken part in the election' (55.75 per cent of the registered electorate) but only 60,633,171 ballots were cast (55.67 per cent), a figure that was not separately reported, and of these nearly a million (948,409) were invalid ballots (*Postanovlenie*, 2004). We have sought wherever data are available to employ ballots cast as our standard measure.
- 3 Some attention has been paid, in the post-communist as well as comparative literature, to the effects of turnout on raising or lowering levels of support for parties of the left or right in the competition for party-list seats in the legislature (see for instance Bohrer *et al.*, 2000). This is not, in our view, a productive exercise in relation to political systems in which half the seats in the legislature are filled by a separate set of contests in single-member constituencies, and in which a very large share of the vote in those contests goes to independent candidates (in the Belarusian election of October 2004, only 12 of the 110 seats that were filled on polling day or in subsequent ballots went to candidates with a party affiliation; even in Russia, 67 of the 225 single-member seats in December 2003 went to independents and their share of the vote was larger than that for any of the parties). We have not considered the special case of voting in referenda: see for instance McManus-Czubinska *et al.* (2004).
- 4 The Power Inquiry rejected the calls that some politicians and commentators had made for compulsory voting to be introduced, concluding that 'Any legislation designed to compel people to take part in a process which they feel is meaningless avoids the real issue of structural failings in the political system; it will cause greater resentment, and it may well prove unworkable' (Kennedy, 2006, pp. 216–7). A focus group study has similarly found a 'largely negative reaction' to the idea of compulsory voting, although there was more support for a 'none of the above' option of the kind that already exists in the former Soviet republics we have been considering (Diplock, 2002, p. 723). There is strong opposition to compulsory voting in Russia as well, and it is strongest of all – not surprisingly – among non-voters (80 per cent overall disagreed with the idea of a fine for non-voters, but 94 per cent of those who said they never voted); see Presnyakova (2003), which is based on a national survey in October 2003 (n = 1,500).
- 5 According to a November 2005 survey by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (n = 1,265), only 27 per cent thought government officials would be 'more responsive to the needs of their constituents in the future than they [had] been in the past' (49 per cent disagreed), and only 37 per cent thought elections gave 'people like [them] a chance to influence decision-making in our country' (56 per cent disagreed, which was similar to the results that had been obtained five years earlier); see *Public Opinion in Ukraine*, 2005, pp. 16–7.

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