Resilient incumbents: Ethnic minority political parties and voter accountability

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Abstract

Are ethnic minority parties held accountable by voters for their participation in governing coalitions in the same way as parties drawing votes from the ethnic majority? Scholars have shown that incumbents in postcommunist East Central Europe are routinely punished in elections, particularly in the face of poor economic performance. However, it remains to be seen if ethnic minority political parties are similarly punished by voters when they join coalitions. I argue that ethnic minority parties are less likely to be punished than their fellow coalition members for poor economic performance, enjoying the benefits of a "captive" electorate. Using data sets of electoral and economic data at the national and subnational levels in Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia, I find that ethnic minority parties, on average, gain votes after serving in government, while mainstream parties almost always lose. This finding holds when controlling for economic factors. Additionally, I show that while mainstream incumbents are punished or rewarded accordingly for changes in gross domestic product growth, ethnic minority parties do not see their vote share being impacted. Understanding the unique role of ethnic minority parties in party systems enhances our understanding of the dynamics of political representation, party competition, and coalition building in ethnically heterogeneous states.

Keywords

accountability, elections, ethnic parties

Introduction

As communism gave way to multiparty elections, elites in East Central Europe's new democracies formed political parties purporting to represent the interests of citizens. In a region where states were created from the collapse of empires after World War I, many had ethnic minority populations that were navigating democratic politics for the first time. In some cases, minority groups chose to represent themselves based on their ethnic identity, creating a political party to stand for the group's interests. These ethnic minority parties compete with mainstream parties[1] at the national level. However, an ethnic minority party has virtually no chance of beating mainstream parties outright and becoming the ruling party on their own, as ethnic minority political parties are ultimately limited by the size of their voter base. If these parties hope to have their voices heard in government, they need to join governing coalitions with mainstream parties who draw votes from the ethnic majority. Once they have become coalition members, how do their voters judge the party's time spent in government? Are all parties held to the same standards of accountability by voters, or are ethnic minority parties evaluated differently?

This article breaks new ground by exploring whether ethnic minority political parties in postcommunist Europe are less vulnerable to electoral accountability—"the degree to which voters sanction politicians for poor performance" (Roberts, 2008)—when serving in a governing coalition as compared to their coalition partners. I look at whether ethnic minority parties that have agreed to serve in a broad governing coalition fare better in electorally competitive elections as compared to other incumbents. There is evidence in the literature that voters in postcommunist democracies retrospectively evaluate coalition governments and punish them at the ballot box for poor economic performance, to the point of "hyperaccountability." Incumbent parties almost always lose votes in an election; how much they are punished is determined by economic performance

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(Roberts, 2008). However, there is reason to believe that ethnic minority parties are different.[2] Minority voters are mobilized to vote for ethnic minority parties.[3] At least initially, they are a loyal voting bloc (Birnir, 2007a, 2007b). Mainstream voters, in contrast, are more likely to defect (Allen, 2017).[4]

I hypothesize that incumbent ethnic minority parties are less likely to be electorally punished than their mainstream counterparts for economic performance thanks to a loyal, "captive" electorate that eschews retrospective voting. I test this argument using quantitative analysis of two data sets[5] of East Central European countries that capture the party systems where electorally viable political parties represent particular ethnic minority groups in parliament. Using the national level data, I first show that, on average, ethnic minority parties increase their vote share after serving in government, while mainstream parties lose votes. Then, using an original subnational level data set, I show that ethnic minority political parties receive a vote gain over their fellow mainstream incumbents, controlling for factors typically expected to impact electoral performance. Additionally, I demonstrate that mainstream parties gain or lose votes relative to changes in gross domestic product (GDP), while ethnic minority party vote shares remain steady. Variation in the concentration of ethnic minority voters and in the performance of the economy in the subnational data allows me to exclude economic explanations: Ethnic minority party resilience is not due to economic success in the regions with more minority voters during the years that the coalition is in office.

The finding that ethnic minority parties are less susceptible to punishment at the ballot box for poor economic performance after a stint in government indicates that these parties are different from mainstream political parties and should be considered separately in our studies of party politics in countries where they have a continued presence. This is particularly important in East Central Europe, where party systems have been marked by high electoral volatility. Tavits (2008) argues that party system instability in the region is a result of "erratic" elites and leads to low voter loyalty. In a well institutionalized party system, the expectation is "there is stability in who the main parties are and in how they behave" (Mainwaring, 1998a). Electoral volatility makes election outcomes more unpredictable (Mainwaring, 1998b) and can affect the stability of interparty relations and coalitions (Mainwaring, 1998a). In a region where voters "seem to change loyalties from election to election" (Tavits, 2008), ethnic minority parties are unique: They have experienced electoral stability due to their ability to mobilize loyal voters during the uncertain transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Birnir, 2007a, 2007b). This stability could contribute to an ethnic minority party being the most reliable option for *formateurs*.[6] This may lead to their continued presence in government, supporting Ghergina and Jiglau (2016)'s contention that

incumbency does not negatively affect a minority party's ability to join a coalition. It is also interesting to note that the countries with these ethnic minority parties have demonstrated stable democratic performance since admission to the European Union (EU), whereas the more homogeneous postcommunist states have been "turning" and "swerving" toward illiberal democracy (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017).

The rest of this article is divided into four parts. First, I discuss theories that grapple with electoral accountability for economic performance and with the behavior of ethnic minority voters in new democracies. I argue that because ethnic voters are loyal voters that have been mobilized around a shared identity, ethnic minority parties are less likely to be punished for economic performance than their fellow incumbents. Second, I present data of vote gains and losses for 20 governments from three countries with nationally represented ethnic minorities in East Central Europe. I break down the data to show vote changes for *formateurs* and for junior coalition partners and discuss patterns of reward and punishment for both types of incumbents. I also identify ethnic minority parties in governments: While all other parties on average lose votes, ethnic minority parties gain. Third, I test my hypotheses using an original data set of voting and economic data from subnational units within Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. The results show that ethnic minority incumbents have a greater probability of increasing their vote share in an election than mainstream incumbents, controlling for economic performance. Additionally, while GDP growth corresponds with vote losses and gains for mainstream incumbents, it does not have a substantive effect on the vote for ethnic minority incumbents. Fourth, I conclude by discussing what can be learned from the results of this study and sketching directions for future research.

The effect of economic performance on voter decisions for incumbents

How are incumbents punished or rewarded by voters? Scholars generally agree that voters in established democracies make evaluations based on performance. Fiorina (1981) refers to this as retrospective voting. Voters evaluate the past performance of parties to make decisions about their expectations for future welfare. Thus, we can assume that voters care about how parties have performed in government and will punish or reward them accordingly. Retrospective economic voting is usually associated with electoral accountability (Roberts, 2008). The ability of voters to judge the actions of the government and reward or punish at the ballot box is important for democracy. As Key (1966) explains, "It is well that a political party cannot avoid accountability for its past performance. The only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic

regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power."

Studies that analyze individual level survey data find support for the argument that economic conditions shape the outcome of elections (for a comprehensive review, see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). Using voters' vote intentions or reported vote choice, there is evidence that they hold incumbents responsible for economic performance. When economic conditions are perceived to be good, they are kept in office. When economic conditions are perceived to be bleak, they are punished at the ballot box (Kramer, 1971; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000; Tufte, 1978). However, as Roberts (2008) argues, accountability may not be best examined at the individual level, as citizens may not accurately perceive the state of the economy or may not accurately report their voting decisions. Thus, "for elections to give politicians an incentive to produce the best policies, what really matters is that at the aggregate level these individual decisions hold governments accountable for real performance" (Roberts, 2008). For accountability to incentivize governing parties to implement good economic policies, they need to know that they will actually be rewarded when they succeed or punished when they fail.

Studies that analyze aggregate level data on accountability have had more mixed results than their individual level counterparts. While early studies (Paldam, 1991) did not find evidence, others have found support of economic effects at the aggregate level in Western European countries. Several studies (Anderson, 2000; Powell and Whitten, 1993; Whitten and Palmer, 1999) take into account the political context of each election and find that economic indicators do impact the vote for governing parties when lines of responsibility are clear. In a recent study, Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck (2014) seek to determine if consistent support for economic voting in individual level studies but mixed results in aggregate studies means that economic voting theory has committed a "micrological fallacy."[7] However, their findings refute this, finding "an unambiguous connection between GDP growth and aggregate vote share in European democratic elections."

Does this economic voting hold in the newer democracies of East Central Europe? Some scholars expect that it is less likely that we will see economic voting in postcommunist cases than in the more established democracies of Western Europe because of the uncertainty facing voters after transition (Roberts, 2008; Tucker, 2001). Voters have a large number of parties with brief histories to choose from (Birch, 2003; Rose and Munro, 2003), and this can be further complicated by party splits, mergers, and name changes. It may be hard for voters to correctly identify incumbents and hold them accountable. Additionally, the large number of economic reforms with myriad short- and long-term effects may make it difficult to identify which party is responsible.

Even where they are not expecting it, scholars again find that there is a strong relationship between economic performance and voting in the region (Fidrmuc, 2000; Pacek, 1994; Tavits, 2005; Tucker, 2002). Tucker (2001) finds that the *formateur* is more likely to be punished for poor economic performance than other incumbents. Thus, not all coalition members are punished equally by voters. Roberts (2008) demonstrates hyperaccountability, or "near universal punishment," of the largest governing party. That is, the *formateur* almost always experiences vote loss, with economic performance affecting how many votes they lose. Using updated data, Bochsler and Hanni (2019) find that in the relatively "new" democracies of Eastern Europe, it holds that "the incumbency vote is closely tied to economic performance," particularly to GDP growth.[8] Overall, we see that despite the fact that postcommunist Europe may have seemed like an unlikely place to find economic voting, the literature has consistently found that voters are holding incumbents accountable on the basis of retrospective economic evaluations.

The "captive" electorates of ethnic minority parties

As I have sketched above, scholars have demonstrated that in postcommunist states economic conditions affect how incumbent parties fare in elections. I break new ground here by investigating whether this holds for ethnic minority parties. I hypothesize that because ethnic voters are loyal voters, we can expect ethnic minority parties are more immune to electoral punishment.

Ethnic minority parties enjoy a stable voting bloc in part because of the uncertainty felt by voters during the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. During the communist period, regimes in countries like Bulgaria and Romania vociferously attacked their ethnic minorities as a way to shore up their legitimacy and win support—despite communist ideology being nominally anational. However, because ethnic identity is based on characteristics that are difficult to change, such as language or physical attributes (Posner, 2005), this identity is able to persist under authoritarianism.[9] After the communist regimes collapsed, ethnicity provided "a stable cue for political information in an environment of low political information" (Birnir, 2007a), proving to be an early mobilizer in ethnically heterogeneous East European countries (Crawford, 1996) where minorities hoped to protect their identity in a new political system[10] in which future political interactions are uncertain (Lupu and Riedl, 2012). Ethnic voters were able to coalesce around language and other cultural markers that the communist regimes had not been able to erase. Under this ethnic socialization, other members and leaders of the group become the most valuable source of political information for the ethnic minority. They initially chose to vote for the party that represented their

ethnic identity. This "stable ethnic-information shortcut" led ethnic voters to feel that they knew more about their party, on average, compared to majority voters who were choosing from a large number of parties with unfamiliar and untested positions (Birch, 2003; Birnir, 2007a, 2007b). Thus, ethnic minority voters tended to vote sincerely with their group for ethnic parties in the first election and were loyal to that party, at least initially (Birnir, 2007a, 2007b), also because ethnic parties could run on an "in-group catch-all discourse in which the ideology is considerably loosened" (Ghergina and Jiglau, 2016). Ethnicity is a salient and important dimension for these parties, whereas it is not for mainstream parties. Given the ethnic cues being received, ethnic voters sought out the party that provided meaningful representation. In contrast, while majority voters may have voted sincerely in the first elections, on average, they have been less likely to remain loyal to the mainstream party receiving their initial vote. They are more likely to switch their vote to another mainstream party, including emerging "unorthodox" parties (Pop-Eleches, 2010).

Are ethnic minority incumbents less likely to be punished for poor economic performance than mainstream incumbents? Given that ethnic minority parties are able to mobilize voters through ethnic cues to support the community, I expect that ethnic minority parties are less likely to be punished by voters due to economic performance than other governing parties, as they enjoy the continued support of voters through their ability to consistently join coalitions, providing representation in government.[11] Evans and Whitefield (1993) also expected the vote for ethnic parties to be less volatile than mainstream parties. They predicted that ethnic minority voters would use their ballot to support issues of "community defense" and thus be unlikely to switch to another party from the majority ethnic group. Birnir (2007a) shows that "in new democracies, individual ethnic voters are significantly more stable in their vote than are their non-ethnic counterparts," at least in early elections. She argues that the utility of ethnic voters is determined by whether the voter's ethnic policy preferences are close to the policy preferences of the ethnic party, as well as the ability of the ethnic party to enter the government and enact the policy. Empirically, she demonstrates that the loyalty of ethnic voters in the aggregate is maintained when these parties are able to enter the parliament and enjoy consistent access to joining governing coalitions. As long as ethnic minority voters continue to see the party elevating the status and legitimacy of their group, they will remain loyal (Birnir, 2007b)—even if that status is elevated mainly in a symbolic way by their presence in the government. This is supported by Csergő and Regelman (2017), who find that in cases where ethnic minority parties served in governing coalitions, such as in Romania and Slovakia, ethnic minority voters were motivated to support parties that could continue this

representation in government. Thus, the ability of ethnic minority parties to continue joining coalition governments is key for maintaining the loyalty of voters after the initial transition toward democracy.

I hypothesize that ethnic voters maintain their support of an ethnic party, regardless of government economic performance, despite extensive literature demonstrating pervasive retrospective economic voting in the postcommunist world. The ability of ethnic parties to successfully run in elections and join coalitions where they may be able to influence policy provides ethnic voters with an incentive to maintain their initial party preferences.[12] Birnir (2007b) posits that a possible implication of her theory of stable ethnic electorates in new democracies is that ethnic parties in governing coalitions are less likely to suffer vote loss due to poor economic performance than their coalition counterparts. However, she also notes that ethnic minority voters may eventually be incentivized to vote for economic reasons. As argued by Ichino and Nathan (2013), drawing from Conroy-Krutz (2012), voters use ethnic information, but "this does not preclude (them) from using additional information on past performance to inform their expectations of future performance when reliable information is available." Thus, ethnic voters may be supporting ethnic parties because of economic benefits directed to areas with more ethnic voters once these parties are in office. Are ethnic minority voters loyal to ethnic parties after incumbency, and if so, is it due to their ability to join coalitions, or is it due to their voters benefiting economically when their party is in office? I test this for the first time using quantitative analysis of party competition after the collapse of communism. If the voters of ethnic minority and mainstream parties are not evaluated similarly for economic performance, we can deduce that ethnic minority and mainstream parties are assessed differently by their voters. While voters may use retrospective evaluations to punish mainstream parties for poor performance based on socioeconomic outcomes, I expect that this behavior is muted for ethnic minority voters: They continue to vote sincerely for ethnic minority parties to ensure that the party continues both to be represented in parliament and to be a viable coalition partner for future *formateurs*.

H1: Incumbent ethnic minority parties will on average receive higher vote share increases than incumbent mainstream parties.

H2: Incumbent ethnic minority parties will receive an increase in their vote share over incumbent mainstream parties, controlling for economic performance.

H3: Incumbent ethnic minority parties will not be punished for poor economic performance, but incumbent mainstream parties will be.

Data and methodology

To begin exploring whether there is a difference in how voters assess ethnic minority parties when compared to mainstream parties, I examine descriptive statistics of electoral outcomes for all incumbent parties since the collapse of communism in the former Soviet satellite states where ethnic minority parties compete for seats, and where they have been successful in joining coalitions. Thus, I do not include countries that do not have ethnic minority parties that have been successful in earning parliamentary seats. The three countries that fit these parameters are Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia. Additionally, all three began their transitions to democracy in 1989, were initially laggards in the transition to liberal democracy (Vachudova, 2005), and have minority groups that were also minorities during the communist period (Rovny, 2014). I focus on parliamentary elections: since political parties elected to parliament wield almost all power over policymaking, they can shed the most light on the character of representation and accountability in these countries (Roberts, 2008).

This data set begins with the first free elections in each country (Bulgaria 1997, Romania 1996, and Slovakia 1994) and includes elections through 2018. Following Roberts (2008), I do not include the "founding" elections after the collapse of communism due to potential advantages to the communist successor party. Bulgaria's 1994 election is excluded because the country was governed by a group of experts prior to the elections. Romania's 1992 election is excluded because the elections were determined to fall short of democratic standards. 1994 is the first year for Slovak elections due to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. The ethnic minority groups with parties representing their interests in parliament are Turks in Bulgaria and Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia.[13] A table presenting all governments being analyzed can be found in the Online Appendix.[14] It identifies *formateurs* and junior coalition partners[15] and notes ethnic minority parties.

Looking at the data, we see that, in general, the incumbent coalition is almost always punished. This is not surprising, as there are general costs to governing (see Nannestad and Paldam, 2002). Nannestad and Paldam (2002) find that in established democracies, incumbent governments lose 2.14 percentage points on average from the previous election. In Central and Eastern Europe, Roberts (2008) finds that governments lose on average 14.8 percentage points. In my analysis, I find similar results. As a whole, every government in Bulgaria and Slovakia sees vote loss. One government in Romania has no change in vote share; the rest lose votes. This pattern is true for both single party and multiparty governments, with the 7 single party governments seeing an average loss of 14.39 percentage points and the 13 multiparty coalitions seeing an overall average loss of 14.35 percentage points.

If we break down the multiparty governments into their component parts of the party of the prime minister and its junior partners, we can gain additional information. The *formateur* of multiparty governments loses an average of 9.37 percentage points, while the junior partners lose an average of 2.49, which supports the findings of Tucker (2001) and Roberts (2008) that it is the *formateur* that is most likely to lose votes.

When we look specifically at ethnic minority parties, we can better understand if they are punished by voters for their participation in government in the same way that other parties are punished. The average vote decrease of all mainstream incumbents is 9.38 percentage points. However, ethnic minority parties are generally rewarded, with an average increase of 1.22 percentage points. This is not due to the fact that ethnic minority parties are always junior coalition partners: on average, mainstream junior coalition partners lose 4.48 percentage points. Of the nine instances of ethnic minority parties joining governing coalitions in this data set, only twice have they experienced any vote loss: UDMR in Romania (1.06) and Most-Hid in Slovakia (1.23), both in 2012.[16]

It is clear from the data that, at the national level, ethnic minority parties generally receive consistent or increased support after a stint in government, while all other incumbent parties are subject to continued "hyperaccountability."[17] This supports hypothesis 1 that ethnic minority parties will, on average, receive higher vote share increases after serving in government than mainstream incumbents. Punishment is not just reserved for *formateurs*, but for mainstream junior coalition partners as well. Previous studies of voter accountability in postcommunist Europe have overlooked the unique fate of incumbent ethnic minority parties at the ballot box. Roberts (2008) finds that individual incumbent parties, on average, lose 6.9 percentage points. My data set shows that when the voters for ethnic minority and mainstream incumbent parties are analyzed separately, we see greater punishment (9.38 percentage points) of individual mainstream parties, but gains by ethnic minority parties (1.22 percentage points). Overlooking this stark difference has given us an incomplete understanding of voting behavior, government formation, and political accountability in ethnically heterogeneous states.

It is possible that ethnic minority parties do not enjoy this success due to a loyal electorate that votes in support of group representation in government, but rather because their voters enjoy positive economic outcomes. Since these parties are drawing support from a narrow segment of the population, it is possible that once in government they are able to direct economic benefits to those parts of the country with a larger minority population. Ethnic minority parties are, after all, focused on securing material and other benefits specifically for their ethnic group (Gunther and Diamond, 2003), and Ichino and Nathan

Table 1. Ethnic minority party vote share NUTS 3 level maximums and minimums.

Country	Ethnic minority party	Maximum vote share (%)	Minimum vote share (%)
Bulgaria (2005)	DPS	58.0% (Kardzhali)	0.26 (Kyustendil)
Romania (2004)	UDMR	83.2 (Harghita)	0.07 (Olt)
Sovakia (2006)	SMK	26.4 (Nitra)	0.08 (Zilina)

DPS: Movement for Rights and Freedom; UDMR: Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania; SMK: Party of the Hungarian Community.

Table 2. Voter accountability.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Previous vote share	0.849*** (0.02)	0.999*** (0.02)	1.069*** (0.02)
Ethnic minority party		0.793*** (0.06)	0.156** (0.06)
Incumbent			−0.323*** (0.03)
Ethnic minority party × Incumbent			0.780*** (0.08)
GDP growth change	0.856*** (0.18)	0.879*** (0.20)	0.969*** (0.14)
Effective # of parties	0.072*** (0.02)	0.058** (0.02)	0.008 (0.01)
Gov't called early election	−0.386*** (0.06)	−0.293*** (0.05)	−0.091* (0.04)
Gov't resign	0.002 (0.04)	0.033 (0.05)	−0.042 (0.03)
Vote of no confidence	−0.511*** (0.06)	−0.477*** (0.06)	−0.543*** (0.04)
Constant	−0.187* (0.07)	−0.765*** (0.11)	−0.432*** (0.07)
	570	570	1550
Number of groups	78	78	78

Note: GDP: gross domestic product.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

(2013) highlight the importance of taking into account local geography when studying ethnic voting. I now turn to the data to find out: are ethnic minority incumbents earning more votes because, while in government, the regions where their voters are concentrated enjoy exceptional economic performance?

There is great variation in the vote share for ethnic minority parties among subnational units due to low "party nationalization." This means that although ethnic minority parties are competing for votes across the country, their appeal is more consequential where the ethnic group is territorially concentrated (Bochsler, 2006). In all three countries, ethnic minority parties did earn votes in every voting district in every election, but there is great variation across these units. To illustrate this, Table 1 presents the maximum and minimum vote shares won by an ethnic minority party within the EU's NUTS[18] 3 subnational units for the first elections included in my subnational data set.

To better investigate voter accountability in countries with successful ethnic minority parties, I constructed a database of electoral[19] and economic data at the smallest subnational unit in each country for which we have this data. Consistent data for these regions can be found between the years of 2000 and 2018, and so elections that occurred during these 18 years are included in the data set.[20] This results in data for five elections in Bulgaria, four in Slovakia, and three in Romania. The subnational units correspond to the EU's NUTS 3 level classifications. This gives us 28 provinces in Bulgaria, 42 counties in Romania, and 8 regions in Slovakia.[21] The disaggregation of national electoral results allows for greater variation, which I find to be particularly important given the relatively small size of the ethnic population in each country. However, in certain subnational units, the ethnic minority may be the majority and thus an ethnic minority party may carry a greater vote share. This disaggregated data will give better insight into the accountability of ethnic minority parties to the electorate.

The variation given to economic data is very important for testing the hypothesis that ethnic minority political parties are less likely to be punished for governing than mainstream political parties. Are ethnic minority parties performing well at the polls while their fellow incumbents are punished because the economic performance in regions with more minority voters is better? This would make sense given that voters for the ethnic Hungarian party SMK listed "living standards of people like you" and "economic and social disparities between regions" as the third and fifth "most pressing social problems" in Slovakia (Butorova et al., 2006). Ethnic minority voters may be engaging in economic voting if ethnic minority parties are able to direct economic benefits to parts of the country with more ethnic minority voters. If we can control for regional variations in economic performance, we can better understand what is at work. A table of summary statistics for

variables used in this study can be found in the Online Appendix.

The dependent variable is the natural log of the vote share within the subnational unit in the election for each incumbent party, with a control for the log of the party's previous vote share. This is following the recommendations of Whitten and Palmer (1999), who argue that it is more appropriate to use absolute vote shares as opposed to difference in vote share between elections to control for autocorrelation. Using the election vote share and including a control for the previous election vote share "shifts the focus of the model to change in government vote." Parties are coded as an ethnic minority party or not and as *formateur* or not.

I use change in GDP growth to test the hypothesis that ethnic minority parties are less likely to be punished by voters for poor economic performance.[22] I calculated GDP growth[23] for each election in each subnational unit, and then calculate change in growth from the preceding election to the election being evaluated. Data are from the European Commission.

I also include a control for the effective number of electoral parties (Laakso and Taagpera, 1979) in each subnational unit. This is important given the inconsistent party nationalization in these countries. Not all parties are as competitive in each region.[24]

Additionally, as previously mentioned, party system instability leads to parties entering and exiting the political arena. The number of parties competing in elections can be quite variable, so controlling for the effective number of parties in the election is important. The expectation is that with more parties, incumbents should lose votes due to increased competition.

Finally, I control for early elections by including several variables that account for different reasons why early elections may be called. I include a dummy for whether an early election was called for by the government.[25] In these instances, we may expect governing parties to improve their vote share. I also include dummy variables for whether the election is the result of the government resigning[26] or because of a vote of no confidence.[27] In these instances, we expect punishment to incumbents to be harsher.

The method of estimation is generalized least squares with random effects at the NUTS 3 level and robust standard errors. The first model is a baseline model with all incumbent parties and includes the economic predictor for vote share (change in GDP growth) and the controls. The second adds an ethnic minority dummy variable. The third includes all parties competing in the election with an interaction effect between dummy variables representing incumbent parties and ethnic minority parties. The fourth (all incumbents) and fifth (junior coalitions partners) models include interaction effects between the ethnic minority party dummy variable and change in GDP growth. Full results for models 1-3 are presented in Table 2. Full results for models 4 and 5 can be found in the Online Appendix.
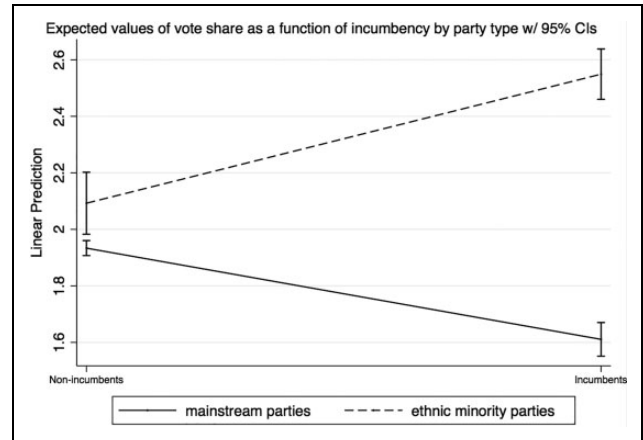

Figure 1. Interaction of incumbency and ethnic minority parties, all parties.

Results and discussion

How are incumbents held accountable by voters in Central and Eastern Europe? Are ethnic minority parties evaluated by voters in the same way as their mainstream coalition partners? My results help solve this puzzle in two ways. First, they provide further support for the finding that economic performance impacts the vote share of incumbents in elections. Second, they show that ethnic minority incumbents are exceptional: They are evaluated differently at the ballot box than mainstream incumbents.

Turning first to the impact of economic performance on all incumbents, model 1 shows the variables that affect vote shares if we do not control for ethnic minority parties. We see that an increase in GDP growth has the expected effect on vote share, as expected by the literature on retrospective economic voting in postcommunist Europe. As a region's GDP grows, so does the chance that voters in that region will support incumbents.

When we introduce a control for incumbent ethnic minority political parties, we see that they enjoy a substantive and statistically significant vote share increase over other incumbent parties, supporting hypothesis 2.[28] This indicates that ethnic minority parties are indeed evaluated differently for their time spent in government than mainstream parties. In a region of "hyperaccountability," ethnic minority parties receive vote gains over mainstream incumbents when controlling for economic effects. Model 3 provides a robustness check to this finding, by including all parties in the data set and including an interaction effect between incumbency and ethnic minority parties. This is illustrated in Figure 1. Again, we see that ethnic minority parties are being evaluated differently by voters: Mainstream parties are being punished for incumbency, while ethnic minority parties actually see an increase in votes after serving in government.

Expected values of vote share as a function of change in GDP growth by party type w/ 95% Cls
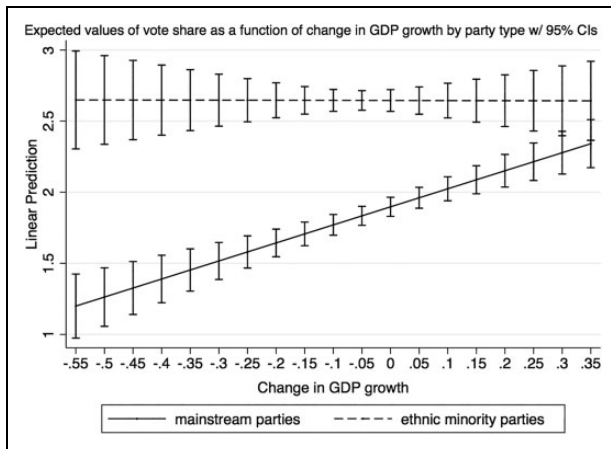
Figure 2. Interaction of change in GDP growth and ethnic minority parties, all governing parties. GDP: gross domestic product.

Expected values of vote share as a function of change in GDP growth by party type w/ 95% Cls
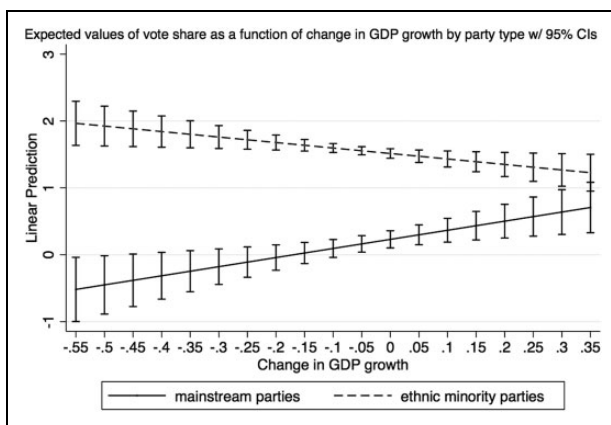
Figure 3. Interaction of change in GDP growth and ethnic minority parties, coalition supporting parties. GDP: gross domestic product.

To test the hypothesis that ethnic minority parties will not be punished for poor economic performance while mainstream incumbents will be, I return to the set of all governing parties and introduce an interaction term. Figure 2 shows the marginal effect of economic performance on vote share for all incumbent parties dependent on whether or not a party is an ethnic minority party.[29] Looking at this graph, we see that the third hypothesis is supported. Change in GDP growth does not impact vote share for ethnic minority party incumbents. These parties receive a statistically significant positive vote share, regardless of GDP growth. However, we see that for mainstream parties, the expected relationship between change in GDP and vote share is present: as GDP growth decreases, vote share decreases, and as GDP growth increases, vote share increases.

Figure 3 focuses specifically on junior coalition partners, examining the interaction effect between GDP growth and whether a party is ethnic minority or mainstream. The results further support the third hypothesis. Here, we see that mainstream parties are indeed more likely to be punished for poor economic performance (and rewarded when GDP growth is high). The small substantive effect we see of GDP growth on ethnic minority party vote is in fact in the inverse: These parties perform worse as GDP growth in the NUTS 3 unit increases.

Why do we find support for all three hypotheses and consistent evidence that ethnic minority parties are evaluated differently than mainstream parties in the data? My findings suggest that ethnic minority parties enjoy a loyal voter base that remains stable even after the initial elections, rewarding them for their ability to join a coalition. Voters are mobilized based on their minority identity and continue to vote for the party they feel best represents them. They are willing to support their party irrespective of the performance of the government while voters for mainstream incumbent parties are not. While mainstream voters eventually turned to "unorthodox" populist parties in order to protest against the mainstream parties that had been in power in the first decade and a half after communism (Pop-Eleches, 2010), ethnic minority parties have maintained their "captive" electorates. They are the most stable parties in unstable party systems and are less likely to be held accountable by their voters. Rose-Ackerman (1999) argues that these two features make a party particularly appealing to a *formateur*, and thus it should not be surprising that we consistently see ethnic minority parties joining governing coalitions led by a number of different *formateurs* in countries where they are present. It is also important to note the difference between ethnic minority and mainstream junior coalition partners: Mainstream junior coalition partners are punished for economic outcomes,[30] perhaps contributing be the generally poor performance of junior coalition partners after serving in government across Europe (Klüver and Spoon, 2019). The ability of ethnic minority parties to avoid the costs of incumbency incurred by mainstream junior coalition partners further highlights the importance of taking ethnic minority parties into account in future studies of party politics in the region.

Conclusion

In ethnically heterogeneous countries with nationally competitive ethnic minority parties, these parties are largely immune to electoral punishment for the economic outcomes of their time spent in government. While mainstream incumbents are routinely and roundly punished at the polls as part of a phenomenon called "hyperaccountability," which is amplified by poor economic performance, the vote shares of ethnic minority parties are steady. This is thanks to the stable support of a "captive" electorate and contributes to ethnic minority parties being the "cheapest" potential coalition partner for

formateurs. This helps us to understand the frequent but puzzling outcome of ethnic minority parties being invited to join coalitions despite the continued salience of ethnic political cleavages in the country. This phenomenon occurs outside of East Central Europe as well: The Swedish People's Party in Finland took part in government with *formateurs* from both the center right and the center left continuously for over three and a half decades until 2015. It is likely that in other cases outside of postcommunist Europe, ethnic minority parties that are able to continually join governments in parliamentary democracies enjoy a similar loyalty.

The findings of this article contribute to the robust debate on the impact of ethnic parties (Ishiyama, 2011) and demonstrate that these parties have a substantial impact on the party systems within which they operate: Uncovering their unique role is essential for understanding political competition and representation. They also open up many new and exciting directions for future research. If ethnic voters are not evaluating ethnic minority parties based on their performance, this could be having a profound impact on the quality of representation, the character of competition in the party system, and the opportunity to engage in rent seeking.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. I use "mainstream" to refer to parties and voters from the dominant, and in this case titular, ethnic group.
2. It is important to be clear about how "ethnic" parties are operationalized in a study (Ishiyama and Breuning, 2011). In this article, ethnic minority parties include both Ishiyama and Breuning's "exclusive" and "inclusive" name categorizations. However, I group the parties in this study together based on similarities in their positions on key issues, including ethnic, economic, and cultural. This is illustrated with Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data in the Online Appendix (Polk et al, 2017, Bakker et al, 2015).
3. Language is the shared characteristic around which a group is most likely to mobilize in Eastern Europe (Birnir, 2007a); however, groups elsewhere may mobilize around alternative characteristics.
4. This article also builds on Alonso's (2007) work on ethnonationalist parties competing in subnational level elections in the more established democracies of Western Europe and Canada. Ethnonationalist parties are different from ethnic minority parties in that ethnonationalist parties pursue independent statehood and ethnic homogeneity (Alonso, 2007), while ethnic minority parties have chosen to forgo secessionist appeals. The dynamics at play are different, particularly as the group the ethnonationalist party appeals to may be the majority in the subnational "ethnoregion." However, I argue that Alonso's finding that ethnonationalist incumbents in subnational elections are not punished in the same way as "class-based" incumbents will hold for ethnic minority incumbents in national level elections.
5. The data used in this article are accessible via the Figshare repository platform.
6. In this article, I refer to parties seeking to form a governing coalition as *formateurs* and to parties supporting a government as junior coalition partners.
7. Micrological fallacy refers to the idea that while individual voters may choose their vote on the basis of retrospective economic evaluations, the electorate as a whole does not behave like an economic voter.
8. Bochsler and Hanni (2019) show that as democracies become more established, the economy has less of an effect on how voters evaluate incumbents. Thus, the importance of retrospective evaluations may become less important in East Central Europe over time.
9. Experience with repression and violence tends to create strong and long-lasting political identification (Balcells, 2012; LeBas, 2011).
10. For more on when ethnic groups instead choose to engage in conflict, see studies by Cederman et al. (2010), Jenne (2004, 2007), and Siroky and Cuffe (2015).
11. While is some countries, the extant minority party appears to be "the only game in town," competition between two or

more minority parties is possible. However, voters maintain support for the party that is able to join coalitions and reward them accordingly.

12. The motivation ethnic parties have for joining coalitions may be different from the motivation voters have for supporting ethnic parties that join governments. The perks offered to governing ethnic parties may not be available to or passed on to voters, which warrants further study.

13. Turks in Bulgaria: approximately 8.8% of the population; Hungarians in Slovakia: approximately 8.5–9.4%; Hungarians in Romania: approximately 6.5%.

14. While I present changes in votes for governing parties, all parties receiving over 2% of the vote are included in the full data set. Vote share data is taken from the work of Roberts (2008) and from the European Election Database when available. For more recent elections, I consulted the official election results published by national governments. Please see the Online Appendix for a discussion of party coding decisions.

15. To determine which parties were part of the governing coalition, I relied on the work of Conrad and Golder (2010) and Roberts (2008) when available and consulted news reports and the literature. Only the parties that remained in government at the time of the election are included.

16. List of party names and abbreviations are given in Online Appendix.

17. These findings hold when expanding the data to include the other former Soviet satellite states which do not have politically salient ethnic minorities (Czech Republic: elections in 1996/1998/2002/2006/2010/2017; Poland: elections in 1993/1997/2001/2005/2007/2011/2015; and Hungary: elections in 1994/1998/2002/2006/2010/2014). Hungary's 2018 election is not included because Hungary was not classified as "free" by Freedom House for that year. With the combined data set for all six countries, the same patterns hold. All governments lose on average 13.36 percentage points. The *formateur* loses on average 9.14 percentage points. Coalition supporting parties lose on average 1.21 percentage points. Mainstream coalition supporting parties lose on average 1.81 percentage points; ethnic minority coalition supporting parties gain on average 1.22 percentage points.

18. Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

19. The complete data set includes election results for all parties receiving over 2% of the national vote and has over 1400 observations. Vote share data are taken from the official election results published by the national governments in each country and from the European Election Database (EED) when available. EED data are collected from original sources, prepared and made available by the NSD—Norwegian Centre for Research Data. NSD are not responsible for the analyses/interpretation of the data presented here.

20. Bulgaria: 2005/2009/2013/2014/2017; Romania: 2004/2008/2012; and Slovakia: 2006/2010/2012/2016.

21. A list can be found in the Online Appendix.

22. Because only annual data is provided for growth at the subnational level, I use values from the year of the election if the election was held in the second half of the year and from the year before if the election was held in the first half of the year.

23. I use gross domestic product (GDP) growth because Bochsler and Hanni (2019) find that growth is the most important indicator for economic voting in postcommunist Europe, with unemployment no longer a statistically significant predictor of vote choice in later time periods (Bochsler, 2006; Kriesi, 2014). Other indicators, like unemployment and inflation, are not available at the NUTS 3 level.

24. See the Online Appendix for a table illustrating effective number of electoral parties variation in subnational districts for the first elections included in the data set.

25. Slovakia: 2006

26. Bulgaria: 2013/2014/2017; Romania: 2012.

27. Slovakia: 2012.

28. The effects of GDP growth change and ethnic minority parties are robust to alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable, including absolute vote shares without taking the log and vote difference.

29. The full results of these models can be found in the Online Appendix. Model 4 includes all incumbent parties, with model 5 including just junior coalition partners. Figures 2 and 3 are reproduced in the Online Appendix with alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable.

30. Junior coalition partners may be seen as too close to the *formateur* (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013), and thus held accountable for economic performance, whereas ethnic minority parties likely can maintain a distinct identity from the *formatuer* and other coalition members.

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