

(Small) talk that matters: mapping personal and political discussion networks across Europe

In this paper I do a comparative analysis of personal and political discussion networks across a large number of polities that include long-established democracies, post-authoritarian and post-communist countries. I test the ‘communist legacy hypothesis’, according to which post-communist societies are characterized by less extensive social interactions as a result of the pervasive distrust characterizing these societies prior to the breakdown of the communist regimes.

Previous research has found significant differences in the level of political engagement and citizenship characterizing post-communist countries compared to the long-established democracies. People from Central and East European countries appear to be on average less interested, participative and engaged with politics. Although the withdrawal from public life has been at times explained by the survival of personal networks that people developed under communism, no serious examination of the differences in the social antecedents of political behavior has been undertaken. Few studies that looked at this issue found that the social surroundings in which individuals reside is different in the former communist countries: social networks tend to be smaller, less diverse, and stronger on average, while politics tend to be discussed mainly with close others (Font and Iglie, 2005). My study seeks to fill in this research gap by undertaking a systematic comparison of various social networks and habits of everyday political conversation across a large number of countries.

To this end I draw on three international surveys, namely the ‘Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy’, the ‘International Social Survey Program’, and the Comparative National Election Project. The studies feature mainly European countries that include long-established democracies, post-authoritarian and post-communist countries. They include information about personal and political discussion networks and for this reason are the ideal accessible surveys to investigate the social contexts and habits of political conversation in a comparative perspective.