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Political Culture Versus Rational Choice: Explaining Responses to Transition in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

STEPHEN WHITEFIELD AND GEOFFREY EVANS*

There has been considerable disagreement among political scientists over the relative merits of political culture versus rational choice explanations of democratic and liberal norms and commitments. However, empirical tests of their relative explanatory power using quantitative evidence have been in short supply. This article employs national probability sample surveys conducted in 1994 to assess differences between Czechs and Slovaks in the expression of democratic norms and liberal attitudes with respect to economic, political, social and ethnic issues. The applicability of an explanation focusing on long-standing cultural differences between the two countries is compared with a rational choice explanation based on national differences in their recent experiences of political and economic transition. It is shown that differences in the expression of support for marketization and democracy in the two countries can be explained relatively parsimoniously in rational choice terms. The explanatory contribution of political culture appears to relate only to a narrow range of attitudes and values.

The debate between ‘political cultural’ and ‘rationalist’ explanations, as Harry Eckstein among others has argued, is central to contemporary political science and to an understanding of political phenomena.¹ However, test cases of these fundamental and competing perspectives are not easy to find in the relevant literature.² The aim of this article is to take up the empirical challenge of evaluating the value of political cultural versus rationalist perspectives in a context which arguably affords a good test of the extent of the concepts’ usefulness – the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia – by considering which theory offers the most appropriate and efficient explanation of our data on citizens’ orientations towards liberalization.

The term ‘political culture’ is famously (or notoriously) problematic even within the camp of scholars who find the term useful. There is little agreement among its practitioners on its scope and meaning, on how it may be measured,

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¹ Harry Eckstein, ‘A Culturalist Theory of Political Change’, *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1988), 789–804.

² An exception is Mitchell A. Seligson and John A. Booth, ‘Political Culture and Regime Type: Evidence from Nicaragua and Costa Rica’, *Journal of Politics*, 55 (1993), 777–92.

or on its impact on political behaviour or political development.³ In this article we do not propose a new definition or attempt to resolve the disputes among the various adherents of different conceptions of political culture explanations; rather, we seek to investigate the applicability of the 'subjectivist' variant of political culture – arguably the most influential one in recent research. The subjective approach to political culture theory was developed most notably by Almond and Verba and more recently by Harry Eckstein.⁴ From this perspective, to explain an individual's actions or political responses in terms of culture is to assume that his/her preferences derive from normative orientations learned mainly, but not exclusively, in childhood from the family and other institutions of socialization and which are subject to relative continuity over time. Emphasis is placed on shared values, beliefs and preferences in the political sphere that have been shaped by common historical understandings. The term 'political culture' in this article, therefore, is taken to refer, as Archie Brown has put it, to 'the subjective perception of history and politics, the fundamental beliefs and values, the foci of identification and loyalty, and the political knowledge and expectations which are the product of the specific historical experience of nations and groups'.⁵

An important characteristic of a political culture, at least in this subjectivist form, is that it is shared by large categories of people. William Reisinger, for example, has argued that 'to the extent that the object of study is some form of culture, it must refer to an *entire* social grouping'.⁶ Or, as Elkins and Simeon put it, 'political culture is the property of a collectivity – nation, region, class, ethnic community'.⁷ Normally, the unit of political culture is the nation, and this national political culture, in turn, is held in some contexts to constrain the choices taken in mass level politics and, thus, to account for national differences in certain political phenomena. Where differences are observable between nations with respect to a dimension of attitudes, such as willingness to tolerate non-conformist life-styles or to allow freedom of political protest, they would be explained by a culturalist in terms of long-standing societal norms transmitted through socialization especially during individuals' formative

³ For a recent critique, see William M. Reisinger, 'The Renaissance of a Rubric: Political Culture as Concept and Theory', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 7 (1995), 328–52. See also John Street, 'Political Culture – From Civic Culture to Mass Culture', *British Journal of Political Science*, 24 (1994), 95–104; Archie Brown, 'Political Culture', in A. Kuper and J. Kuper, eds, *The Social Science Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); and Stephen Welch, *The Concept of Political Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

⁴ Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, eds, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1963); Eckstein, 'A Culturalist Theory of Political Change'.

⁵ Archie Brown, 'Introduction' in A. H. Brown and J. Gray, eds, *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 1.

⁶ Reisinger, 'The Renaissance of a Rubric: Political Culture as Concept and Theory', p. 337 (emphasis added).

⁷ David J. Elkins and Richard E. B. Simeon, 'A Cause in Search of Its Effect, or What Does Political Culture Explain?' *Comparative Politics*, 11 (1979), 127–45, p. 129.

years. Thus, a political culture explanation posits a long and complex chain of causal explanation, involving historic experiences and foci of groups, which are transmitted to individuals in a shared manner especially via childhood and official socialization leading to a particular response to a current set of political circumstances.

This form of explanation can usefully be counterposed with a rational choice one which emphasizes situational characteristics, including the social characteristics of the agent, political opportunities and recent experience as factors shaping an individual's attitudes and behaviour. In this view, individuals construct and reconstruct their political responses and behaviour on the basis of the combination of available information, resources and constraints. Such an approach is labelled 'rationalist' by Eckstein although, again, the extent and meaning of rationality is highly contested.⁸ Nevertheless, rather than expecting shared political values among national cultures resulting from the normative convergence of citizens via the socialization process on common national symbols, myths and foci of loyalty and identification, emphasis on the rational choice account is given to the importance of contemporary state context, individual endowments and opportunities for political voice. Thus, as in the example given above, where differences among nations on a dimension of political attitudes are observed, this account would focus on the immediate political context and the recent political, economic and social experiences of citizens. The aim of such an approach is to account for differences in national responses by reference to such proximal factors rather than historically entrenched cultural differences. By comparison with the political culture approach, therefore, rational choice explanation is rather direct and immediate in terms of the causal chain of processes required to produce a given attitudinal response;⁹ individuals assess a given political issue in terms of their recent experience and calculated future opportunities

The reader might at this point object to our characterization of the subjectivist variant of political culture theory. Certainly, in recent work Almond has argued against the sort of dichotomy we have just presented and in favour of an approach to political culture that takes account of institutional factors as well

⁸ Kirsten Renwick Monroe, 'The Theory of Rational Action', in K. R. Monroe, ed., *The Economic Approach to Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁹ Critics of rational choice approaches may argue that the apparent relative simplicity of the causal relationship between experience or opportunity and attitudes disappears when the high costs of the subject's making the calculation are taken into account. By comparison, oriented action is held to reduce transaction costs significantly and thus simplify the decision choice for agents. This view may be true if agents are being asked to optimize, though this is not an assumption of the notion of rational choice developed here. However, the supposed simplicity of oriented action from the point of view of transaction costs is not entirely clear; agents are still required to perform the complex task of deciding by some criterion under which of a number of possible orientations a particular current or prospective phenomenon should be subsumed. It is not at all clear that such a mental enterprise is less costly than calculations based on referral to recent experience.

as recent experience.¹⁰ As he puts it, even ‘the early advocates of political culture explanation recognised that causality worked both ways: attitudes influence structure and behaviour, and structure and performance in turn influence attitudes. There was essentially a straw man polemic.’¹¹ Almond then goes on to cite numerous studies¹² undertaken since his pioneering work with Sydney Verba which show that political culture has been subject to change and considerable ‘plasticity’.¹³ And he offers a definition of political culture which includes not only the factors present in our characterization above but also others such as ‘adult experience with governmental, social and economic performance’, concluding that the ‘causal arrows between culture and structure and performance go both ways’.¹⁴

Our view is that under such a definition, the term ‘political culture’ is essentially meaningless. This is not to say that reciprocal causal relationships are unknown to science – though Almond makes no effort to stipulate the conditions of reciprocal influence in advance of research, as a scientific approach would dictate. More importantly, if political culture means both subjective socialized orientations *and* adult experience and evaluations of performance, the term has become so broad that it is of little theoretical value. There is the suspicion that in face of evidence of the failure of the initial – perfectly scientific – specification of the term, defenders of political culture such as Almond have so diluted the concept as to make it impossible either to test or to refute. Rather than attacking a ‘straw man’ in our characterization of the subjectivist variant of political culture, therefore, we would argue that we are seeking to test a theoretical construct that may turn out to be weak or wrong against another approach which is, in advance of the test, equally subject to the possibility of failure; after all, if political culture theory is right, it is not at all evident that recent experience is very likely to explain away differences between groups with distinctive long-standing historical foci of loyalty and identification. At the very least, even on Almond’s revised definition, we would expect there to be a large residual of variance between societies to remain unexplained by recent experience – if there were not, then the value of the revised definition is even harder to see.

¹⁰ Gabriel A. Almond, ‘The Study of Political Culture’, in Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Ralf Rytlewski, eds, *Political Culture in Germany* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

¹¹ Almond, ‘The Study of Political Culture’ p. 16.

¹² For example: S. M. Lipset, and W. Schneider, *The Confidence Gap* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1983); D. Kavanagh, ‘Political Culture in Britain: The Decline of the Civic Culture’, in G. Almond and S. Verba, eds, *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1980); K. Baker, R. Dalton and K. Hildebrandt, *Germany Transformed: Political Culture and the New Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1981); S. H. Barnes and M. Kaase *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1979); and R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

¹³ Almond, ‘The Study of Political Culture’, p. 18.

¹⁴ Almond, ‘The Study of Political Culture’, p. 15.

In this sense, our explanatory strategy privileges political culture explanation; whatever is not accounted for by experience may be interpreted as evidence for the value of political culture. However, it is worth noting that the differences in the character of the two frameworks ought to incline us to prefer a rational choice account even if the two theories were equally valid in face of the evidence. If we were to apply a principle common to adjudicating between competing theories, Occam's razor, whereby simpler explanations of phenomena are preferred over more complex ones on grounds of parsimony and a desire to avoid multiplication of unnecessary causal factors, especially when the simpler ones are efficient, the advantages of the rational choice perspective are clear; as pointed out above, it requires much less complexity with respect to the causal relationship between the subject and the political object. As John Street has argued, to justify itself empirically political culture theory would have to demonstrate that it is an indispensable and decisive factor in an explanation over and above rational considerations.¹⁵ Thus, where experience and assessments of future prospects are able to account for differences between groups, we feel justified in asserting that the rational choice perspective is preferable to a political culture one.

Fortunately, for a number of reasons, a case study of the Czech Republic and Slovakia is particularly appropriate to the evaluation of the relative merits of the two approaches. Indeed, many modern political culture studies were stimulated by questions arising from the impact of communism on societies such as Czechoslovakia.¹⁶ The Czechoslovak case allows for clear hypotheses to be framed concerning cultural differences and their sources which enable the complexities of historically transmitted culture versus rational choice responses to be disentangled.

First, the two countries had distinctive political histories and national traditions before 1918, and some commentators have argued that these traditions reasserted themselves since 1989. As a result of their distinctive histories, important divergences in political orientations are evident among the peoples of the two nations. As Miroslav Kusy has observed, a stereotype of argument about Czechoslovakia was that 'Slovaks were too different from Czechs, and so their state was only an artificially and forcibly maintained entity'.¹⁷ Five areas of difference have been especially emphasized by a number of authors: Slovaks are more nationalistic, more separatist (on ethnic questions), more Christian-conservative (on individual rights and tolerance), more left-wing (on the economy), and more 'eastward-looking'.¹⁸

¹⁵ Street, 'Political Culture – From Civic Culture to Mass Culture', pp. 96–7.

¹⁶ Brown and Gray, eds, *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States*.

¹⁷ Miroslav Kusy, 'Slovak Exceptionalism', in J. Musil, ed., *The End of Czechoslovakia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995), p. 139.

¹⁸ See Kusy, 'Slovak Exceptionalism'; John Morison, 'The Road to Separation: Nationalism in Czechoslovakia', in Paul Latawski, ed., *Contemporary Nationalism in East Central Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 67–86; and Archie Brown and Gordon Wightman, 'Czechoslovakia: Revival

Secondly, and in clear contrast to this view of historically-based distinctiveness, the creation of a unified Czechoslovakia in 1918 may have signalled a departure from cultural diversity. Twenty years of inter-war democratic consent and political unity were followed by more than forty years of aggressive attempts by the communist authorities to introduce new societal norms and similar patterns of social structure across the Czech and Slovak lands. Moreover, there is considerable evidence of success in this latter regard, especially with respect to equalization in many aspects of economic, educational and demographic indicators.¹⁹ The salient political culture in the post-communist period, therefore, might be that related to the historical experience and transformations brought about *during* the political unity of the two peoples, rather than the residue of historical events before that time. Accordingly, instead of distinctive political orientations, a relative similarity in the political cultures of Czechs and Slovaks might have emerged.

Thirdly, however, contemporary evidence for similarity or diversity in the structure of attitudes among Czechs and Slovaks need not support *either* of these political culture explanations. Diversity need not be the result of continuity in political traditions – nor need similarity be accounted for by the success of communist socialization. The alternative, rational choice, account would seek to explain differences in terms of variation in the recent experiences, prospects and environment of the two peoples. One expectation of a successful political culture explanation would be that it should demonstrate that the group differences referred to by Reisinger and Elkins and Simeon are evident, despite or notwithstanding differences among group members in terms of current situation or experience. Where group differences can be accounted for in terms of current situation or experience, however, evidence for the importance of political culture would be absent and the rational choice explanation would be supported.

The strategy of the rest of the article is to assess and compare Czech and Slovak political cultures in the light of these competing approaches. Where differences in ‘political culture’ – the responses of Czechs and Slovaks to a variety of important dimensions of political issues – are observed, an attempt will be made to account for them, where possible, by reference to differences

(*F* note continued)

or Retreat’, in Brown and Gray, eds., *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States*, pp. 159–96. These authors recognize that shared political history since 1918, with a brief interlude, has resulted in convergence between the two cultures on some dimensions; none the less, they provide evidence which suggests important differences in the historical identities of the two peoples which have important political implications for their future orientations to democracy. It must also be remembered that the Czechs too have had an ambiguous attitude towards the West, particularly to Germany.

¹⁹ Milan Kucera and Zdenik Pavlik, ‘Czech and Slovak Demography’; Vaclav Prucha, ‘Economic Developments and Relations, 1918–89’; and Jiri Musil, ‘Czech and Slovak Society’, all in Musil, ed., *The End of Czechoslovakia*, pp. 15–39, 40–76, and 77–96, respectively.

in the recent experiences of individuals in the two countries. If it is possible to explain national variation in this way, we would feel justified in, if not rejecting culturalist explanations outright, then at least in claiming, by Occam's razor, that they are not *necessary* to explain observed national differences in a context in which these sorts of theories have traditionally been prevalent and that, therefore, the concept of political culture is scientifically superfluous.

The article is structured as follows: Section I uses batteries of questions in national surveys to operationalize certain key dimensions of subjective political culture and provides evidence on differences between Czechs and Slovaks on these dimensions. Important differences do emerge and these are generally – with one important exception – consistent with the expectations of those, generally political culture, theorists, who have commented on differences between Czechs and Slovaks. Section II considers evidence on recent economic and political experiences of individuals in each country. Measures of these experiences are then used as independent variables in a number of regression models which attempt to explain statistically national differences on the dimensions of political culture presented in Section I. The results of these analyses tend to support rational choice explanations, in that differences in democratic and market commitment are explained by experience – although the admittedly somewhat less pronounced disparities with respect to social and political liberalism do seem to result from long-standing differences in the countries' religious traditions and thus offer support to a political culture explanation in at least this area. Section III addresses the question of the notable exception to expected differences in attitudes: contrary to expectations (and contemporary political practice): Slovaks do not appear to be less liberal than Czechs with respect to ethnic rights. The explanation for these findings, however – explored in Section III – appears to lie in the different meanings assigned to the questions in each country which result from the very different ethnic and state-building contexts faced by the two peoples.

I. ONE POLITICAL CULTURE OR TWO (OR THREE)?

Judging only on the basis of the nature of issues most salient to *elite* politics, and from the distinctive nature of the ruling parties in the two states since 1989, there is a strong *prima facie* case for the existence of distinctive political cultures in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These divergences, at least in elite level competition, have become even more evident in the period since separation.²⁰ Consistent with many expectations of differences in political culture, the most

²⁰ Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, 'The Parting of the Ways? Explaining Ideological Cleavage Formation in the Czech and Slovak Republics', *Political Studies*, 46 (1998), 115–39; Sharon Fisher, 'Slovakia: Turning Back', *Transition, 1994 in Review*, Part I (Prague: Open Media Research Institute, 1995); Sharon Fisher, 'Prime Minister and President Grapple for Power', *Transition*, 11 (1995), 38–43; and Jiri Pehe, 'Czech Republic: A Leader in Political Stability and Economic Growth', *Transition, 1994 in Review*, Part I (Prague: Open Media Research Institute, 1995).

successful parties in the Czech Republic have chosen to compete over mainly economic questions and the ruling Civic Democratic Party has won electoral support and broad popularity by standing with a pro-market secular and pro-European stance. Although other parties have appealed to voters at different points on each of these dimensions – the Communist Party on the economic left with greater misgivings about the West, the Christian and Democratic Union/Czechoslovak People's party on more traditional Catholic social issues, and the Republican Party on nationalist and ethnic issues, especially anti-German sentiments²¹ – elite level conflict over the terms and institutions of democracy itself has been notably absent.

In Slovakia, by contrast, parties have presented a much more complex set of issues to the electorate. The national question was first put on the agenda by Slovak parties such as the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the more extreme Slovak National Party. Moreover, the latter party also defined itself in antagonism to the interests of neighbouring Hungary and to the Hungarians residing in Slovakia who constitute slightly more than 10 per cent of the population.²² This, in turn, cemented the position of the various ethnically Hungarian parties which operated electorally under a coalition.²³ These issues, however, did not push economic or social questions wholly out of political discussion: the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia was distinctly populist in its economic appeal, while the economic left was more conventionally represented by the communist-successor Party of the Democratic Left. Finally, the Christian Democratic Movement, though non-denominational, stood on an amalgam of economically right, nationalist and socially conservative positions.²⁴

From this brief description a picture emerges of the relative preponderance in the Czech Republic of support for the market, democratic norms, social and political liberalism and ethnic rights when compared with Slovakia. But to what extent is such a picture from the elite level justified at the mass level by data on citizens' beliefs? We address this issue by using data drawn from a questionnaire designed by the authors and administered to national probability

²¹ Gordon Wightman, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics', in Stephen White, Judy Batt and Paul Lewis, eds, *Developments in East European Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 51–65; Jan Obrman, 'The Czechoslovak Elections: A Guide to the Parties', *RFE/RL Research Report*, No. 22 (1992), 1–16; David Olson, 'Dissolution of the State: Political Parties and the 1992 Election in Czechoslovakia', *Communists and Post-Communist Studies*, 26 (1993), 301–14.

²² *Statistická ročenka Česka a Slovenske Federativni Republiky 1990* (Prague: 1990), p. 100, cited in Karen Henderson, 'Czechoslovakia: The Failure of Consensus Politics' (University of Leicester Discussion Paper in Politics, 1993). The largest ethnic minority in the Czech Republic are Slovaks, who have generally been well assimilated; see Jiri Pehe, 'Slovaks in the Czech Republic: A New Minority', *RFE/RL Research Report*, No. 23 (1993), 59–62.

²³ Alfred A. Reisch, 'Hungarian Ethnic Parties Prepare for Czechoslovak Elections', *RFE/RL Research Report*, No. 18 (1992), 26–32.

²⁴ Zora Butorova and Martin Butora, 'Political Parties, Value Orientations and Slovakia's Road to Independence', in Gordon Wightman, ed., *Party Formation in East-Central Europe* (London: Edward Elgar, 1995), pp. 107–33.

samples of the adult populations of both states in the spring of 1994.²⁵ Each survey contains batteries of questions indexing the core dimensions of political culture where, on the basis of expectations of mass level differences and the elite ideologies described above, citizens of the two states are expected to differ: on the extent of democratic commitment, market support, social liberalism and tolerance for diversity of opinion and life-style, and willingness to support the rights of ethnic minorities. All of these attitudes are measured using statements with five-point agree/disagree response formats, or variants thereof. In a few examples (see Table 2 below) respondents are presented with two contrasting policies and asked to say with which they agree most. Question wording was identical in the two countries except, of course, where the name of the country was referred to explicitly.

As well as comparing Czech and Slovak responses to these questions we also distinguish between ethnic Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians. In Slovakia the interests of the Hungarian minority have been pressed not only by Hungarian parties, but by the keen interest of the Hungarian government between 1990 and 1994, for whom the issue of protection of the rights of Hungarians abroad constituted one of the central political issues.²⁶ The extent to which Hungarians and Slovaks differ from or resemble one another on the various dimensions of attitudes is thus of evident relevance to any assessment of a 'Slovak' political culture.

Attitudes Towards Democracy

The first dimension on which differences between Czechs, Slovaks and Slovak Hungarians have been anticipated relates to the level of commitment to democracy among the three groups. Slovaks in particular, as a result of the relative weakness of their democratic traditions, would be expected by many commentators to exhibit weaker levels of support for democratic norms.

²⁵ Respondents were sampled from the lists of voters in the 1992 elections (access to current lists was not allowed under Czech and Slovak law), with minor augmentation using random route procedures and a small top-up sample for urban areas where the rate of non-contact due to movement was especially high. The Czech sample involved selection of 182 sampling points from which 2,104 addresses were chosen (names issued: 2,104; non-contact: 404; refusal 291; plus quota: 111; final achieved sample: 1,520; the response rate was 67 per cent of the initial sample and 83 per cent of those contacted). The Slovak sample involved selection of 215 sampling points from which 2,014 addresses were chosen; (names issued: 2,014; non-contact: 338; refusal 233; plus quota: 68; final achieved sample: 1,509; the response rate was 75 per cent of the initial sample and 86 per cent of those contacted). The surveys were directed by Lubos Rezler and Jan Hartl of the *Stredisko empirickych vyzkumu* (STEM), from its offices in Prague and Bratislava.

²⁶ Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, 'Social and Ideological Cleavage Formation in Post-Communist Hungary', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 47 (1995), 1177–204; Alfred A. Reisch, 'Hungarian–Slovak Relations: A Difficult First Year', *RFE/RL Research Report*, No. 50 (1993), 16–23.

TABLE 1 *Attitudes Towards Democracy by Ethnic Group*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
Do you agree with the <i>aim</i> of introducing democracy in the country, in which political parties compete for power	Agree	73%	59%	63%
	Disagree	26%	36%	33%
Democracy gives ordinary people more say in how the country is run	Agree	48%	42%	38%
	Disagree	29%	37%	40%
Democracy is a good means of solving social conflicts	Agree	43%	39%	46%
	Disagree	21%	32%	28%
Democracy is better for the rich in society than the poor	Agree	45%	57%	62%
	Disagree	34%	25%	18%

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses to a battery of questions by the three groups.²⁷

The evidence in Table 1 indicates that there are significant differences between the populations of the two states. These differences are clearest on the first item, in which respondents are asked to express the strength of their agreement with the *aim* of introducing democracy in their country. This question thus taps into the normative foundations of democratic support: Czechs are clearly more supportive than Slovaks, with Hungarian responses lying between the two main ethnic groups. Slovaks are also less willing to accept democracy as a good means of solving social conflicts than Czechs, although in this case, Hungarians are not significantly different from Czechs. As we have discovered elsewhere in Eastern Europe where minorities face difficulties in integrating into the democratic process – in Estonia, for example – a sense of having little say in the democratic process has been associated with a greater desire to endorse democracy as a means of resolving social conflicts.²⁸

On the remaining two items, however, ethnic Slovaks are again less likely than Czechs to believe that democracy gives ordinary people more say; but, not surprisingly given their minority status and the rhetoric of many leading Slovak politicians, Slovak Hungarians are even less likely to agree with this statement.

²⁷ The number of respondents to the questions presented in this table and those which follow fall within the following ranges: Czechs: $n = 1,456$ – $1,461$; Slovaks: $n = 1,285$ – $1,291$; Slovak Hungarians: $n = 172$ – 173 .

²⁸ Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, 'The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment', *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 485–514.

The responses of the groups to the question of whether democracy is better for the rich in society than the poor show a similar pattern: with Czechs again more committed to democracy than are either of the two Slovak groups.

Attitudes Towards the Market

Evidence on differences between the states in normative support for the market and redistributive intervention in the economy also offers support for the culturalist account. Czechs appear significantly more supportive of market principles than either Slovaks or Slovak Hungarians. But, again, the fact that Hungarians are similar to their Slovak compatriots on these items might also be taken as testimony to the importance of countrywide economic circumstances in determining the level of market support.

The variations which appeared in the relative levels of support for democracy, especially in the responses of Slovaks are, however, largely absent when considering the other items presented in Table 2 – relative levels of support for the market are remarkably similar across a whole range of measures. Thus Czechs are clearly more likely than ethnic Slovaks – and in most cases, Hungarians – to agree that governments should not intervene to secure job provision, income equality, state ownership and control over wages, prices and profits. They are also much more likely to believe that private enterprise is the best way to solve the country's problems, and that large differences in income are important for the country's prosperity. This is not to say that Czechs can be regarded as markedly *laissez-faire* on the economy: for example, the overwhelming majority believe that governments should ensure guaranteed basic incomes, and a majority also believe that governments should ensure jobs for all and a decent standard of living. It is even the case that a majority of Czechs support maintaining major public services in state ownership. However, Czechs do emerge as significantly more supportive of the free market than Slovaks.

Social Liberalism

Some political culturalists have emphasized the importance of long-standing differences between the two populations with respect to issues of social liberalism: Slovaks with their 'Eastward-looking', more orthodox and religious outlook have been regarded as having a less tolerant set of orientations. Certainly, the Slovaks in our sample were far more likely to have a religious denomination (73 per cent were Catholics) and to attend church regularly (30 per cent reported attending once a week or more often) than were the Czechs (34 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively).²⁹

Table 3 provides data on a range of questions which tap into the social liberalism dimension of political culture, covering issues such as the extent to

²⁹ Further information on the demographic characteristics of the samples can be obtained from the authors.

TABLE 2 *Attitudes Towards Markets and Government Involvement by Ethnic Group*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
The government should ensure that every person has a job and a good standard of living	Agree	66%	80%	78%
<i>or</i> The government should just let each person get ahead on their own	Agree	11%	5%	9%
The government should not concern itself with inequality	Agree	29%	40%	41%
<i>or</i> The government should try to minimize income differences	Agree	45%	39%	38%
The government should take all major industries into state ownership	Agree	47%	59%	49%
<i>or</i> The government should place all major industries in private ownership	Agree	21%	14%	15%
Individual companies should decide wages, prices and profits	Agree	29%	40%	41%
<i>or</i> The government should control wages, prices and profits	Agree	49%	42%	39%
Private enterprise is best	Agree Disagree	50% 18%	34% 30%	28% 32%
Major public services ought to be in state ownership	Agree Disagree	57% 23%	62% 17%	62% 14%
Large differences in income are necessary for prosperity	Agree Disagree	24% 42%	14% 57%	20% 52%
Profits are the best way to improve everyone's standard of living	Agree Disagree	49% 25%	42% 32%	38% 28%
Government should reduce the difference between high and low incomes	Agree Disagree	37% 37%	46% 30%	56% 19%
Government should provide a guaranteed basic income	Agree Disagree	83% 9%	88% 6%	80% 6%

TABLE 3 *Attitudes Towards Social Liberalism by Ethnic Group*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
People should be allowed to worship in their own way	Agree	86%	90%	91%
	Disagree	5%	4%	2%
Young people don't respect traditional values	Agree	13%	16%	16%
	Disagree	64%	60%	58%
Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards	Agree	48%	43%	50%
	Disagree	30%	34%	32%
People should be allowed to organize public protest against government	Agree	57%	49%	59%
	Disagree	17%	22%	15%
Homosexual relationships are always wrong	Agree	22%	14%	16%
	Disagree	44%	52%	45%
People should be more tolerant of unconventional lifestyles	Agree	44%	43%	39%
	Disagree	22%	21%	21%
This country needs government with a strong hand	Agree	31%	27%	25%
	Disagree	47%	52%	56%
People should be free to emigrate even if their skills are needed	Agree	72%	65%	64%
	Disagree	11%	18%	17%

which individuals accept diversity in beliefs and lifestyles and political practices, or express conservative social values and endorse strong (i.e. 'authoritarian') government. Although the results once again offer support to those who expect differences between the two societies, the extent of divergence is relatively weak.

Czechs are more socially liberal overall, but not by a great margin. Moreover, it is also evident from responses to particular items that the picture of Czech tolerance is by no means uniform. Slovaks, for example, appear more committed to freedom of religion than Czechs, though it is worth noting that in both countries support for this is overwhelming. Interesting as this result is, however, closer inspection indicates that it needs to be treated cautiously as an indicator of a more general tolerance. As we have seen, Slovaks as a group are considerably more religious than are Czechs. However, the background against which questions of religious toleration must be set is that of communist anti-religious ideology and activity. Support for religious freedom, therefore, is more likely to be an expression of the desire of the religious – emerging, as they are, from many years of communist repression – to obtain tolerance for their own

activities, than it is to reflect the broader principle of tolerance. For this reason, we do not interpret the finding as support for a counter-intuitive hypothesis of Slovak tolerance (nor, for obvious reasons, do we include it in the scale formed by combining the other items in the table for later analysis).

None the less, even when this item is set to one side no simple picture emerges. Slovaks of both ethnicities again appear slightly more likely to agree that young people have no respect for traditional values; and they are less likely to accept that people should be allowed to organize protest meetings against the government. But, surprisingly for a more fervently Catholic population, ethnic Slovaks are no more inclined than Czechs to be intolerant of unconventional life-styles and to favour censorship of films and magazines, and they are less likely to agree that homosexuality is always wrong.

Ethnic Liberalism

The final dimension of political culture to be examined concerns respondents' willingness to include and accept the rights of ethnic minorities. Again, one set of expectations, supported by both some historical interpretations and contemporary evidence at the level of elite action, is that ethnic Slovaks are less ethnically liberal than Czechs. It is perhaps most surprising of all, therefore, to see from Table 4 how weak the grounds for this claim are.

TABLE 4 *Attitudes Towards Ethnic Rights by Ethnic Group*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
Minority groups should have far more rights than they do now	Agree	8%	6%	72%
	Disagree	63%	72%	9%
Everyone should have the right to become a citizen regardless of their ethnic origins	Agree	43%	76%	79%
	Disagree	36%	11%	9%
The ethnic group a person belongs to should not influence the benefits they can get from the state	Agree	63%	82%	91%
	Disagree	18%	7%	2%
All minority groups should have to be taught in (country's language)	Agree	76%	90%	28%
	Disagree	11%	4%	60%

Not unexpectedly, Hungarians are vastly different in their attitudes to these issues than either majority ethnic group, whereas on average differences

between Czechs and ethnic Slovaks are only marginal – if anything, Slovaks are slightly more liberal than Czechs. On closer inspection, the distribution in the responses to specific items suggests a complex picture. Czechs and Slovaks are rather similar in the minimal support they give to the notion that ethnic minorities should have more rights – compare this with the massive level of support among Hungarians for the same proposition. Strikingly, however, Czechs are clearly less likely than ethnic Slovaks to support granting citizenship regardless of ethnic origins, or to allow people to receive state benefits without regard for their ethnic origins. Only on the question of the use of the Slovak language for teaching in schools do Slovaks exhibit clearly more illiberal responses than Czechs. The explanation of these ambiguous findings will be given further attention below.

So far, we have provided evidence that there are differences as expected on all four dimensions between the two countries and between the three ethnic groups: democratic commitment and market support display relatively clear-cut differences, while social liberalism and ethnic rights have a more mixed pattern. Particularly with respect to democratic and market support, these differences are firmly in the expected direction: Czechs are more liberal than Slovaks. However, on each of these dimensions Slovak Hungarians also appear to be much like their ethnically Slovak compatriots, suggesting the possibility that it is less culture than common national experience which may account for these differences. Moreover, on the question of ethnic liberalism, Hungarians are predictably quite different from either group, but the direction of support for ethnic rights between Czechs and ethnic Slovaks is, if anything, somewhat contrary to expectations. We now turn to evidence on why these differences might have occurred.

II. EVALUATING CZECH-SLOVAK DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC EXPERIENCE

As the introduction explained in detail, one explanation of differences between Czechs and Slovaks (and Hungarians) in their positions on the various dimensions of attitudes characterized above is that they result from long-standing national and ethnic traditions which transmit political orientations to respondents. An alternative explanation would instead emphasize variation in the current circumstances facing these groups, expressed via distinctive political and economic experiences or by the impact of differing contexts on the meaning of responses to attitude questions. The evidence above suggests support for each of these accounts: on the one hand, differences in responses are generally along the lines predicted by political culturalists; on the other, the same patterns of response could be taken to indicate the importance of current experiences and circumstances.

To evaluate empirically which of these is the case, this section looks in detail at the political and economic transition experiences of our respondents in the two countries. These experiences include: their evaluation of the recent performance of their country's political institutions, as well as their family's,

TABLE 5 *Political Experience and Involvement Among Czechs, Slovaks and Slovak Hungarians*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
People like me have no say in what the government does	Agree	71%	77%	71%
	Disagree	14%	11%	13%
Elected officials don't care much what people like me think	Agree	67%	79%	73%
	Disagree	9%	7%	7%
Government reflects the wishes of ordinary people	Agree	26%	13%	9%
	Disagree	40%	63%	69%
No point in voting because government makes no difference	Agree	10%	15%	14%
	Disagree	71%	61%	61%
The government acts for the benefit of the majority	Agree	52%	31%	26%
	Disagree	44%	65%	69%
Everyone has an influence on the election of the government	Agree	52%	45%	41%
	Disagree	46%	53%	53%
How would you evaluate the <i>practice</i> of democracy here?	Positive	40%	20%	9%
	Negative	28%	43%	64%
Do you think of yourself as a supporter of any particular party?	Yes	27%	26%	30%

and the country's, economic experience and prospects and their current assessment of the effectiveness of the functioning of the market economy. Examination of responses to these items will provide a more systematic basis for determining whether political and economic experience may account for differences on at least some of the dimensions of attitudes outlined above.

It is evident from the responses to items in Table 5 that pronounced differences exist in the political experiences and evaluations of Czechs and Slovaks. Our evidence is in this respect consistent with other studies since 1989.³⁰ Moreover, the evidence lends credibility to the account of some national differences at the normative level being the result of variation in political

³⁰ Sharon Wolchik, 'The Politics of Transition and the Break-up of Czechoslovakia', in J. Musil, ed., *The End of Czechoslovakia*, pp. 225-44.

experience. Czechs are consistently more positive in their estimation of their input into the process of government than ethnic Slovaks and, on most items, than Slovak Hungarians, though it is also apparent that on many issues the absolute level of support for the operation of the political systems among all groups is rather low.

Clearest differences emerge in response to a question that asks respondents to evaluate the 'actual practice of democracy' in the respondent's country so far, i.e. since 1989. Here, the greater incidence of elite level conflict in Slovakia is mirrored by a far greater likelihood among Slovak citizens, and not surprisingly most of all among Hungarians, to have negative views on democratic practice. Forty per cent of Czechs hold positive views about democracy in their country, compared with 20 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and only 9 per cent of Hungarians. A similar degree of difference can be seen in responses to the question of whether the government acts for the benefit of the majority in society: 52 per cent of Czechs agree with this statement compared to only 31 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and 26 per cent of Hungarians.

This picture of difference is matched, although sometimes to a lesser extent, across virtually all of the items in the table. Ethnic Slovaks are less likely to believe they have a say in what government does; they are much more likely than Czechs to believe that elected officials do not care much about what they think; they are more likely to think that there is no point in voting because the government cannot make any difference; and less likely to believe that they can have an influence on government. We can see, therefore, that evaluation of the political systems varies significantly between the two states in ways which may account for at least some of the national differences outlined in the previous section.

A similar likelihood emerges from examination of data on the economic experiences and expectations of citizens of the two states. Table 6 presents responses to questions asking people to evaluate the direction taken in their own family's and the country's living standards over the past five years and their estimation of how family and country living standards will develop in the five years to come. On each of these items, Slovaks as a whole are more negative than Czechs, and Hungarians most negative of all. Thus, 64 per cent and 72 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians respectively believe that their family living standards have fallen over the last five years compared to only 42 per cent of Czechs. Whereas 39 per cent of Czechs expect family living standards to rise in future, only 28 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and 23 per cent of Hungarians agree. Most dramatic, however, are differences in the evaluations of national economic performance. Compared to 32 per cent of Czechs who believe that the country has improved its living standards over the past five years, only 5 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and 2 per cent of Hungarians believe that this has happened. Similarly, while a majority of Czechs – 55 per cent – look forward to rising standards in the country as a whole, only 30 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and 22 per cent of Hungarians share this optimism. The same picture emerges when asking people to evaluate in the most general terms the performance of the

TABLE 6 *Economic Experience and Expectations Among Czechs, Slovaks and Slovak Hungarians*

		Czechs	Slovaks	Slovak Hungarians
Living standards of family over past five years	Risen	27%	13%	8%
	Fallen	42%	64%	72%
Living standards of family over next five years	Will rise	39%	28%	23%
	Will fall	20%	33%	35%
Living standards of country over past five years	Risen	32%	5%	2%
	Fallen	47%	87%	92%
Living standards of country over next five years	Will rise	55%	30%	22%
	Will fall	13%	33%	47%
How would you evaluate the market economy so far?	Positive	38%	16%	13%
	Negative	29%	52%	62%

market economy so far: 38 per cent of Czechs are positive, compared to only 16 per cent and 13 per cent of ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians.

The evidence about economic experience adds to that concerning political evaluations: while we cannot yet rule out the culturalist explanation of differences in orientations towards the normative items described in Section I, there is at least a strong *prima facie* case for the importance of recent experience in explaining differences. The next section seeks to provide a stricter test of the explanatory power of each of these types of account.

III. EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES BETWEEN CZECHS, SLOVAKS AND SLOVAK HUNGARIANS

In this section we attempt to decide between political cultural and circumstantial sorts of explanations of the country and group differences detailed in Section I. Our strategy is to regress measures of democratic commitment and economic and social liberalism on the measures of political, economic and social experience and evaluation. The aim is to try and account statistically for observed differences between Czechs and Slovaks in levels of commitment to democracy, the market and social liberalism. We do this by first entering variables which represent the effect of being in a particular country or ethnic group (so-called 'dummy' variables), into a regression model and then adding potential explanatory variables. If these explanatory variables account for the observed national differences, then their addition to the regression models should reduce the coefficients for country differences to statistically insignificant levels.

For example, we shall assess the extent to which individual differences in levels of democratic commitment between groups are removed by controlling for individual differences in the independent variables – the indicators of political and economic experience – and the relationship between these and nationality.³¹ Where we succeed in removing group differences by this method, it provides evidence that recent experience and evaluations of the workings of the political and economic system can explain variations in commitment, rather than long-standing national traditions as expressed through common normative orientations. However, where country differences are not removed in this way, or are removed only by reference to variables that can be taken to represent long-standing national traditions, we find evidence consistent with cultural forms of explanation.³²

The dependent variables used in these analyses are constructed from responses to groups of questions which have been combined to form summated rating ('Likert') scales. In a Likert scale, responses to the constituent items are given scores (ranging, for example, from 1 through to 5). These scores are then simply added together. It is assumed that each item is a parallel measure of the same underlying concept (although each may tap slightly different aspects of it). Because each item may contain considerable measurement error and/or specificity, a strength of Likert scaling is that it does not give too great an importance to any particular item. The internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which is an estimate of reliability related to the average inter-item correlation. Selection of scale items was done partly on *a priori* grounds, but items that were found to reduce internal consistency (as measured by alpha) were removed. This was not done, however, with some items that helped preserve the balance of the scales with regard to direction of question wording. These were retained even when their presence reduced the internal consistency of the scales (particularly the social liberalism scale), because balanced scales are less prone to the biases associated with acquiescence effects.³³

³¹ For an elaboration of this approach to cross-national analysis, the aim of which is to replace country names with theoretically relevant variables, see Adam Przeworski and H. Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Enquiry* (New York: Wiley, 1970) An illustration of this approach, also using individual level data, can be found in Evans and Whitefield, 'The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment'.

³² We also conducted analyses which included relatively stable national attributes such as the distribution of respondents across different social classes, educational levels and urban-rural residence. However, these social structural characteristics failed to make any contribution to explaining country differences (details available on request).

³³ For similar treatments of acquiescence effects in comparable data to that presented here, see Anthony Heath, Geoffrey Evans and J. Martin, 'The Measurement of Core Beliefs and Values: The Development of Balanced Socialist/Laissez-Faire and Libertarian/Authoritarian Scales', *British Journal of Political Science*, 24 (1994), 115–32. For an assessment of the consequences of the presence, or otherwise, of balanced question wording in scales, see Geoffrey Evans and Anthony Heath, 'The Measurement of Left-Right and Libertarian-Authoritarian Values: Comparing Balanced and Unbalanced Scales', *Quality and Quantity*, 29 (1995), 191–206.

Democratic commitment is measured using the four items in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha is 0.64 in the Czech Republic and 0.63 in Slovakia. Economic liberalism is measured using the ten items presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha is 0.77 in the Czech Republic and 0.71 in Slovakia. Social liberalism includes seven of the items in Table 3. Cronbach's alpha is 0.46 in the Czech Republic and 0.42 in Slovakia. The political experience scale contains the first six items shown in Table 6. Cronbach's alpha was 0.67 in the Czech Republic and 0.58 in Slovakia. All of the items used in the analyses are coded so that high scores indicate liberal positions or positive evaluations of political and economic practice. Scores on items which are inconsistent with this direction have been reversed. 'Don't know' responses are recoded to the mid-point of the scale.³⁴

In Table 7 we model differences between Czechs, ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians with respect to the democratic commitment scale. The first model, which includes only the dummy variables for country and ethnic group, restates the differences in mean scores shown in Table 1; both ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians are significantly different from the somewhat more liberal Czechs. Models 2 and 3 seek to remove these differences by introducing the political experience scale and measures of economic experience examined in the previous section.

TABLE 7 *Democratic Commitment Regressed on Country, Political and Economic Experience* †

	Model 1: Ethnic and country dummies	Model 2: Political experience	Model 3: Economic experience
Czech Republic	—	—	—
Slovaks	- 0.18**	- 0.04**	0.00
Hungarians	- 0.07**	0.02	0.04
Political experience		0.43**	
Democracy evaluation		0.22**	
Family past			0.15**
Family future			0.04
Country past			0.02
Country future			0.17**
Market evaluation			0.27**
Adjusted r^2	0.03	0.32	0.22

**Significant of $p < 0.01$.

†The values shown are standardized beta coefficients.

³⁴ If 'Don't knows' are treated as missing it reduces the size of the sample but has no marked effect on the substantive findings. Details available on request.

In Model 2, the political experience scale and the single item on how respondents evaluate the actual practice of democracy in their country so far are introduced as independent variables. As can be seen, both of these have a significant and substantial impact on levels of democratic commitment, with standardized beta coefficients of 0.43 and 0.22. The effect of the introduction of these variables is virtually to remove most of the differences between ethnic Slovaks and Czechs with respect to democratic commitment – though still statistically significant, the beta coefficient for Slovaks falls from -0.18 to -0.04 . Differences between Hungarians and Czechs are removed completely. The r^2 for Model 2 is also increased over that of Model 1 from 0.03 to a substantial 0.32.

Model 3 introduces the economic experience variables. Once again, a number of these variables are highly significant statistically – family living standards over the past five years, country living standards over the next five and evaluation of the market in practice are strongly associated with democratic commitment – and differences in the country or group variables are removed entirely. The effects of economic experience are even more effective than those of political experience at accounting for country differences, primarily because differences in economic experience between the two countries are considerably more marked than those in political experience.³⁵

We can thus account for higher levels of commitment to democracy among Czechs by comparison with Slovaks without recourse to notions of long-standing political culture. Higher levels of support for democracy in the Czech Republic appear to reflect that country's greater success in making the economic transition, resulting in materially less harsh market experiences, and its relatively straightforward democratic transition. These have resulted in less elite conflict and a greater willingness to allow citizens say in political development than has occurred in the more highly fractious political disputes found in Slovakia.

Culturalists might still want to argue that the political experience items are themselves conditioned by culture rather than experience. Indeed, Almond and Verba and others have used similar items as part of their 'civic culture' measures. There are, however, several replies to this point: first, at face value these items clearly ask about the workings of the political system *as experienced by respondents*; we therefore see no good reason to treat these responses as reflections of cultural differences. The patterns of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian responses make good sense as reflections of differences in the party systems in

³⁵ The importance of economic experiences in accounting for differences in democratic attitudes between Czechs and Slovaks is slightly at odds with our analysis of other countries in the region, where political experience was of clearly greater importance in explaining national variation in support for democracy than was economic experience. The reasons for this divergence probably lie in the particularly positive experience of the market reported by Czechs compared with all other countries we have surveyed in Eastern Europe, and the fact that until 1993 the political systems experienced by Czechs and Slovaks were the same, thus reducing the extent of experience of differences in political experience and evaluation. See Evans and Whitefield, 'The Politics and Economics of Democratic Commitment'.

the two countries and the representation available to the various ethnic groups. If political culturalists want to assume these responses reflect cultural dispositions then they need to make a good case for that assumption. Secondly, differences in democratic commitment between Czechs and Slovaks can be accounted for by economic experience without including measures of political experience in the regression model (this is because economic and political experience are themselves strongly correlated). Thirdly, if we do treat the indicators of political experience as dependent rather than independent variables in our analysis – i.e. as a cultural phenomenon to be explained rather than as an explanation of such responses – we find that differences in responses between Czechs and Slovaks are wholly explained by economic experience (details available).

It is not surprising, therefore, that a similar analytic strategy is also effective in removing differences in the levels of market commitment among the three groups which emerged from Table 2. Again, Model 1 in Table 8 demonstrates that ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians are both significantly less normatively committed to the market than are Czechs. However, when the items detailed in Table 6 are introduced into the second model as independent variables, they prove to have substantial effects. The economic experience of the family over the past five years and a general evaluation of the market in practice emerge as being particularly important in reducing differences between the group and country dummy variables, the beta coefficients for which fall from -0.21 for ethnic Slovaks to -0.04 (barely significant) and from -0.11 to -0.01 in the case of Hungarians. Again, this is consistent with the proposition that variations in levels of normative commitment to liberalization – in this case with respect to the economy – among the three groups is not the result of different long-standing traditions and orientations but the consequence of the capacity of the two states to manage the market transition successfully.

TABLE 8 *Economic Liberalism Regressed on Country and Economic Experience (OLS Regressions)†*

	Model 1: Ethnic and country dummies	Model 2: Economic experience
Czech Republic	—	—
Slovaks	-0.21^{**}	-0.02
Hungarians	-0.11^{**}	0.00
Family past		-0.19^{**}
Family future		-0.08^{**}
Country past		-0.13^{**}
Country future		-0.10^{**}
Market evaluation		-0.16^{**}
Adjusted r^2	0.04	0.22

*Significant at $p < 0.05$. **Significant at $p < 0.01$. † The values shown are standardized beta coefficients.

The same argument does not, however, explain the (admittedly smaller) differences among the groups on questions of social liberalism (shown in Table 3). The introduction of political and economic experience and evaluation as independent variables in regression analyses (details available on request) makes no dent in removing differences in the country or group dummies – in this case, in removing the relative social illiberalism of ethnic Slovaks. There is little reason for believing, therefore, that differences in levels of social liberalism result from recent experience, individual resource endowments, or evaluation of performance and prospects. Rather, as Table 9 shows, these differences between the country or groups are only removed when variation in levels of church attendance is controlled for. As we have seen, Slovaks are clearly more religious than are Czechs. This fact, which derives from long-standing differences in the two countries’ historical traditions, appears best to explain the lower levels of commitment to social liberalism among Slovaks. In this case, we conclude that differences in the two political cultures – reflecting the different historical role of Catholicism in the two countries – is the more likely explanation for small differences which emerge in responses to our questions about individual liberties, the right to protest, and tolerance of differences in lifestyles.

TABLE 9 *Social Liberalism Regressed on Country, Religious Denomination and Levels of Church Attendance (OLS Regressions)†*

	Model 1: Ethnic and country dummies	Model 2: Religion
Czech Republic	—	—
Slovaks	– 0.12**	– 0.03
Hungarians	– 0.04*	0.01
No religion		0.03
Church attendance		– 0.18**
Adjusted r^2	0.01	0.04

*Significant at $p < 0.05$. **Significant at $p < 0.01$. †The values shown are standardized beta coefficients.

To summarize: Czech–Slovak differences with respect to the major issues of economic and political liberalization appear to be the result of recent experience, resources, evaluations and circumstances rather than deeper normative orientations. However, attitudes towards various social issues involving questions of liberal rights and tolerance of disagreement and diversity do not seem to relate to economic or political experience, but rather to long-standing traditions and identities of the two states as reflected in participation in the country’s religious institutions.

IV. THE MEANING OF ETHNIC LIBERALISM

It remains only to return to an account of the unexpected differences between Czechs and Slovaks on questions of ethnic liberalism. National differences in attitudes towards ethnic rights are more complex. As we noted above, on two items (ethnic rights and language in schools), Slovaks and Czechs differ only slightly – with the latter tending to be the slightly more illiberal of the two – while Hungarians are clearly far more pro-minority rights. On the other two items, however, it is Czechs who appear to be markedly less liberal than Slovaks, while Hungarians lose much of their liberal distinctiveness. These questions focus on the rights to citizenship and state benefits of different ethnic groups.

At first glance this inconsistent pattern may seem puzzling. Nor is the puzzle removed by a regression analysis similar to the ones applied above (details available on request). It seems likely, however, that explanation for the pattern of responses results from differences in the meaning and connotations given to the ethnic rights questions for Czechs and Slovaks. For Slovaks, questions of ethnic rights elicit considerations about *Hungarians* whereas for Czechs – who have no such similarly large and distinctive group within their borders – they connect more distinctly to the *gypsy* question, and possibly even (particularly in the case of citizenship) to the rights of ethnic Germans expelled from many areas of Bohemia and Moravia after the end of the Second World War. These considerations make salient questions about the rights of gypsies (and possibly Germans) to be citizens of the Czech Republic. These differences of interpretation may therefore explain the substantial proportion of Czechs who react somewhat negatively to these issues. For Slovaks, in contrast, the rights of Hungarians to be citizens and to have rights to state benefits are not such sensitive topics.

These considerations seem to be borne out by differences in the patterns of association between attitudes towards ethnic issues in the two countries. In addition to the four questions shown in Table 4, respondents were also asked about their beliefs concerning the presence of ‘too many’ gypsies in their countries.³⁶ For Czechs, attitudes towards gypsies predict attitudes towards citizenship rights ($r = 0.20$, significant at $p < 0.01$), but for Slovaks they do not ($r = -0.02$), ns. Similarly for Czechs, but not for Slovaks, beliefs about ethnic rights in general are moderately strongly associated with attitudes towards citizenship rights ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.01$) – for Slovaks there is only a very weak association ($R = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$), whereas the link between ethnic rights in general and attitudes towards the use of the majority language for teaching in schools is very strong in Slovakia (0.54 , $p < 0.01$) but not (0.20 , $p < 0.01$) among Czechs. Finally, there is evidence that attitudes towards the use of the majority language for teaching are more closely linked with attitudes towards national independence³⁷ among Slovaks (0.25 , $p < 0.01$) than they are among

³⁶ ‘There are too many gypsies in the Czech Republic/Slovakia.’ Both ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians were more likely than Czechs to agree with this statement – perhaps because there are more gypsies in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic.

³⁷ ‘The Czech Republic/Slovakia should co-operate with other countries even if it means giving up some independence.’

Czechs (0.04, ns); a similar tendency can be observed with respect to ethnic rights in general among Slovaks (0.32 and 0.17, respectively (both $p < 0.01$)).

The issues made salient with respect to the ethnic rights question do appear to differ in the two countries, just as the groups under consideration appear to differ. Among Czechs the link is between ethnic rights, gypsies and citizenship. Among Slovaks, beliefs about ethnic rights do not link even moderately strongly with views on citizenship – probably because this is not a right from which ethnically illiberal Slovaks want to exclude the Hungarian minority (if anything, this would facilitate the possibility of secession). Similarly, because gypsies are not the group brought most obviously to mind by the question of ethnic minority rights, there is no link among Slovaks between attitudes towards citizenship rights and beliefs about the presence of undesirably large numbers of gypsies; while there are stronger links between ethnic rights and both attitudes towards national independence and the issue of language in schools among Slovaks than among Czechs.

By illustrating the different connotations of ethnic rights questions in the two countries this evidence suggests, once again, that differences in political culture conceived as general normative orientations to minority rights are not the key to understanding differences in Czech–Slovak political attitudes. What matters are differences in the circumstances faced by these two populations resulting from the presence or otherwise of challenges to the nation state and the character of the ethnic groups to be incorporated in them. These factors shift the meaning of questions about minority rights in ways which make comprehensible otherwise surprising results.

V. CONCLUSION

Our strategy in this article has been to test for the relative power of political cultural versus rational choice explanations of national differences in political attitudes. We cannot claim to have tested the relative merits of each approach conclusively – and in any case, only one way of conceiving a political culture explanation has been dealt with. None the less, much of the above analysis suggests that political culture is of less importance than current experience, expectations and the country's ethnic, political and economic environment in conditioning Czech–Slovak differences in political attitudes.

Inevitably, when comparing answers to attitude questions across national contexts there has to be considerable sensitivity to possible differences in measurement and meaning – indeed, such a difference in attitudes towards ethnic liberalism has been identified and elucidated above. In this respect, however, the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia was chosen because it appeared to offer particularly fruitful ground for comparing attitudes. Not least, the fact that the surveys were conducted by the same organization – with no contaminating effects resulting from differing ‘house styles’ – with exact linguistic comparability, and many shared nuances, makes the response frequencies more directly comparable than is often the case in cross-national

comparisons. We can have some confidence, therefore, that the differences observed between political attitudes in the two countries are substantive rather than artefactual.

Given this, we consider it is reasonable to conclude that on a number of dimensions of attitudes where differences between Czechs and Slovaks – and Hungarians – were found, and which could have been explained in terms of enduring systems of belief, they could be shown empirically to be associated with differences in transition experiences. If parsimony and testability are to be given weight when comparing explanatory accounts, there seems little reason in these cases to have recourse to the complexities of political culture.

True, rational choice does not account for all of the observed differences between Czechs and Slovaks. Those concerning social liberalism appear to relate only to frequency of church attendance – and the place of this institution, and the attachment of Slovaks to it, is best understood as part of the long-standing traditions and identities of Slovak culture. In this sense, political culture explanation has a role; indeed, it is precisely the role that Almond, in his retrospective appraisal of the value of political culture theory, is most secure in ascribing to it. As he puts it, ‘most resistant to change are attitudes, identities and value commitments associated with ethnicity, nationality and religion’.³⁸ Our evidence supports this. None the less, even this attitudinal difference was muted and not consistent across issues. Indeed, of most interest with respect to issues of social liberalism is how *little* difference there is between two communities with such marked differences in religiosity and relations with the Catholic Church. Thus even this finding might be taken as evidence of how weak this most enduring of cultural differences between Czechs and Slovaks is as an explanation of their current political beliefs.

³⁸ Almond, ‘The Study of Political Culture’, p. 22.