

# From Comrades to Citizens

## Learning Democracy While Surviving Economic Reforms

Claudiu Tufis, Political Science Department, Pennsylvania State University

### A Study of Political Culture Change

The fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s marked the beginning of a complex transition to democracy, different from all other previous transitions: the former communist countries had to simultaneously introduce democracy in the political system, adapt to market economy in the economic system, and create a civic society in the social system.

This project is based on the assumption that democratic transition and consolidation are not possible in a society that does not accept the ideals of democracy: a stable political system needs a certain degree of consistency between its basic ideology and the political values of its people.

From this perspective, the main goal of this project is to identify and describe the evolution of political culture in Romania from the beginning of the transition to the present. At the most general level, the question I am asking is: **How does political culture change? How do comrades become citizens?**

Answering this question requires:

- Identifying the patterns of political culture in Romania (defined by attitudes toward democracy, toward market economy, and trust).
- Identifying and explaining the trends displayed by the evolution of these patterns over time, since the fall of the communist regime.

### Political Culture and Democratic Consolidation

The theoretical framework of the project is defined by two main dimensions:

- Political culture, defined as “historically formed patterns of political beliefs and behavior of the members of a political system, whether a state or a smaller group”. Population subgroups are characterized by different patterns of political culture and adopt different strategies of political culture change when faced with dramatic societal changes.
- Democratic consolidation, defined as “habituation to democratic procedures and the stabilization of political behavior, practices, and attitudes that are likely to facilitate the normal functioning of democracy”. Consolidation requires the spread of democratic legitimacy, and the development of a broad-based democratic political culture.

### Previous Studies

Previous studies have often offered support for competing theories of political culture change. Moreover, almost everything we know about political culture in post-communist countries is based on data from the first years of the transition process. The literature does not offer yet a comprehensive view of the structure of the post-communist political culture at the beginning of the transition and of how this structure changed over time. With few exceptions, previous studies have offered only different snapshots of citizens’ attitudes at the time the surveys were conducted. Some authors have explicitly suggested that their findings might be time-bound and that political culture might have different structures at different points in the consolidation process.

### Identifying Patterns of Political Culture

The fundamental tool in the study of legitimacy in political science is the model defined by David Easton, consisting of objects and types of support which combine to form different dimensions of support. I use in this study a modified version of the model, which is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Political culture matrix**

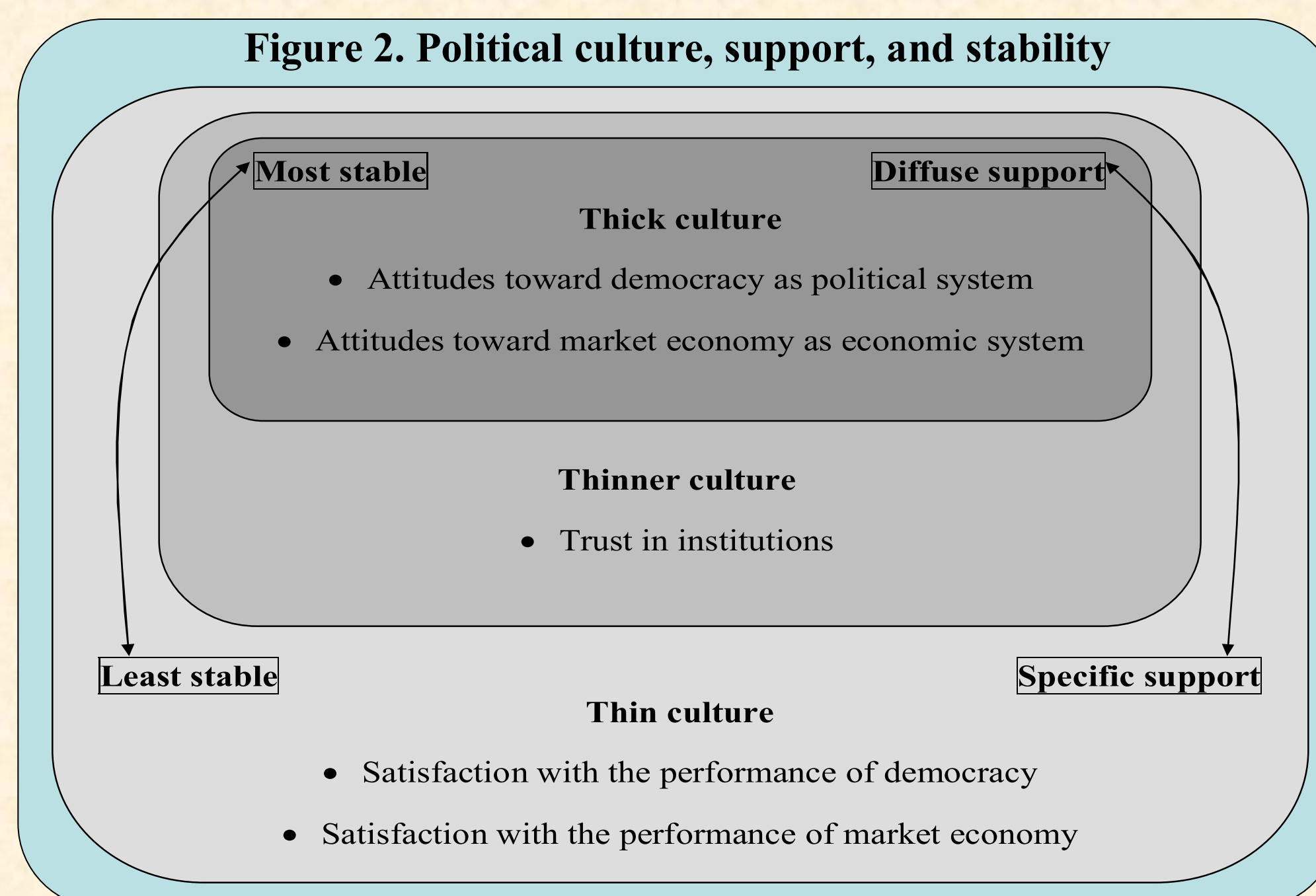
	Objects of support			
	System	Process	Policy	
Type of support	Diffuse support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes toward democracy as political system</li> <li>• Attitudes toward market economy as economic system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust in institutions</li> </ul>	N / A
	Specific support	N / A		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satisfaction with the performance of democracy</li> <li>• Satisfaction with the performance of market economy</li> </ul>

A pattern of political culture is defined by a particular configuration of attitudes in the population. The main variables I use to identify different patterns of political culture are listed in the cells of the table above:

- Indicators of diffuse support for the system, capturing the citizens’ attachment to the ideals of democracy and market economy.
- Indicators of diffuse/specific support for the process, capturing attitudes toward other political actors (the state’s institutions).
- Indicators of specific support for policies, capturing attitudes toward the system’s outputs and outcomes.

### Identifying Change in Patterns of Political Culture

Each political culture component is characterized by different degrees of resistance to change and can be placed on a continuum ranging from thick culture to thin culture. While thick political culture is rooted in the socialization process and focuses on fundamental values, thin political culture is rooted in recent history and it involves attitudes toward the current performance of the political system. These relationships are presented graphically in Figure 2.



Given the changes experienced by the citizens since the fall of the communist regime, I expect that, as time passed, people reconstructed their attitudinal systems and developed mechanisms of support for democracy and market economy different from the ones they had developed during the initial stages of transition:

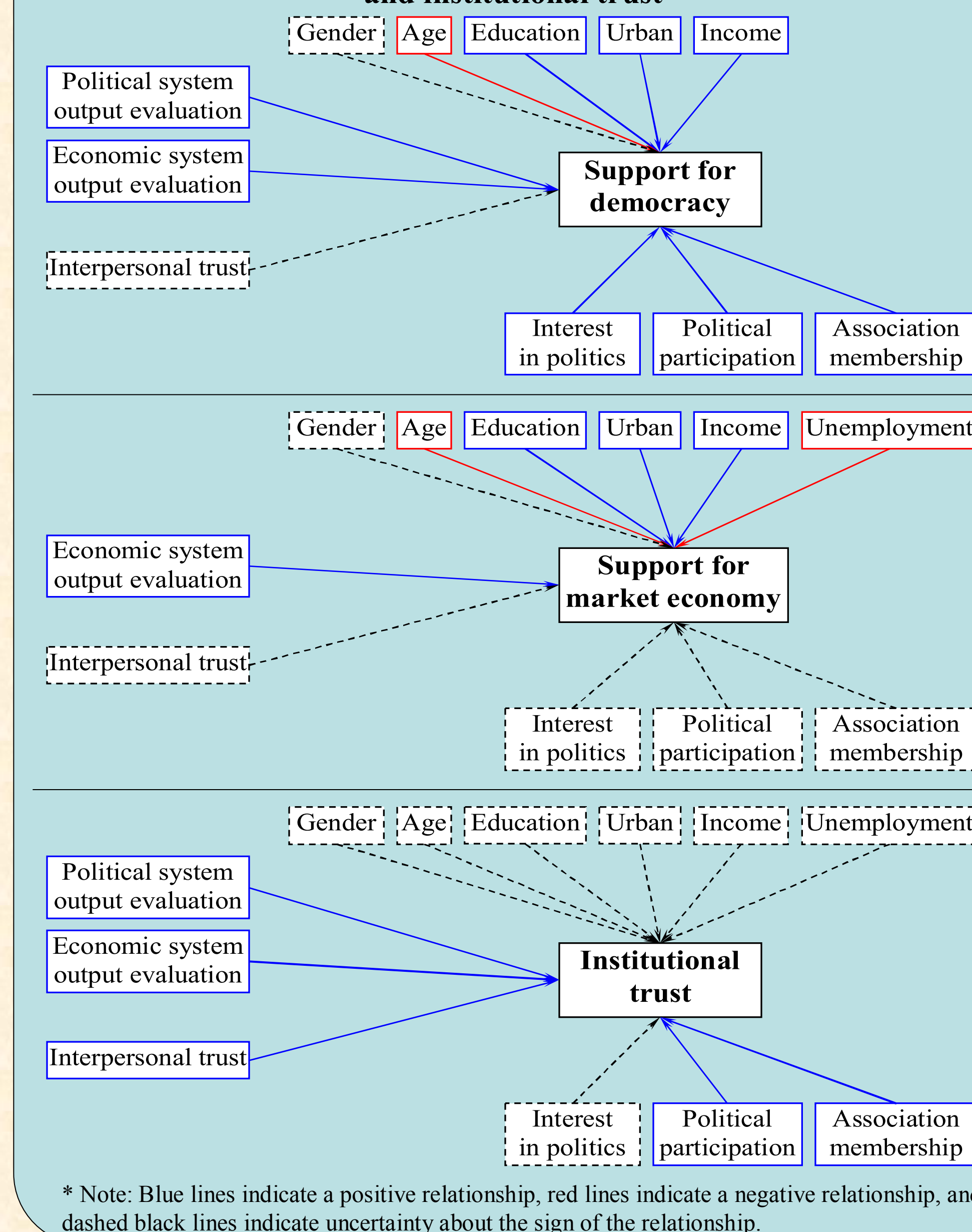
- **Hypothesis 1:** During the initial stage of the transition process, attitudes toward democracy and attitudes toward market economy had similar structures and determinants.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Over time, people began evaluating democracy and market economy separately, resulting in their attitudes having different structures and determinants.

### Explaining Patterns of Political Culture

The following hypotheses describe the relationships I expect to find in the evolution of support toward the main components of the political system:

- **Hypothesis 3:** Diffuse support for democracy remained at relatively the same levels throughout the democratic transition / consolidation.
- **Hypothesis 4:** Diffuse support for market economy started at relatively high levels, dropped significantly during the period of time in which market economy competed against alternative solutions, and finally stabilized at moderate to low levels once the neoliberal model was adopted.
- **Hypothesis 5:** Institutional trust started at moderate to low levels and decreased slowly during the transition / consolidation process.

**Figure 3. Hypothesized relationships\* between the independent variables and support for democracy, support for market economy, and institutional trust**

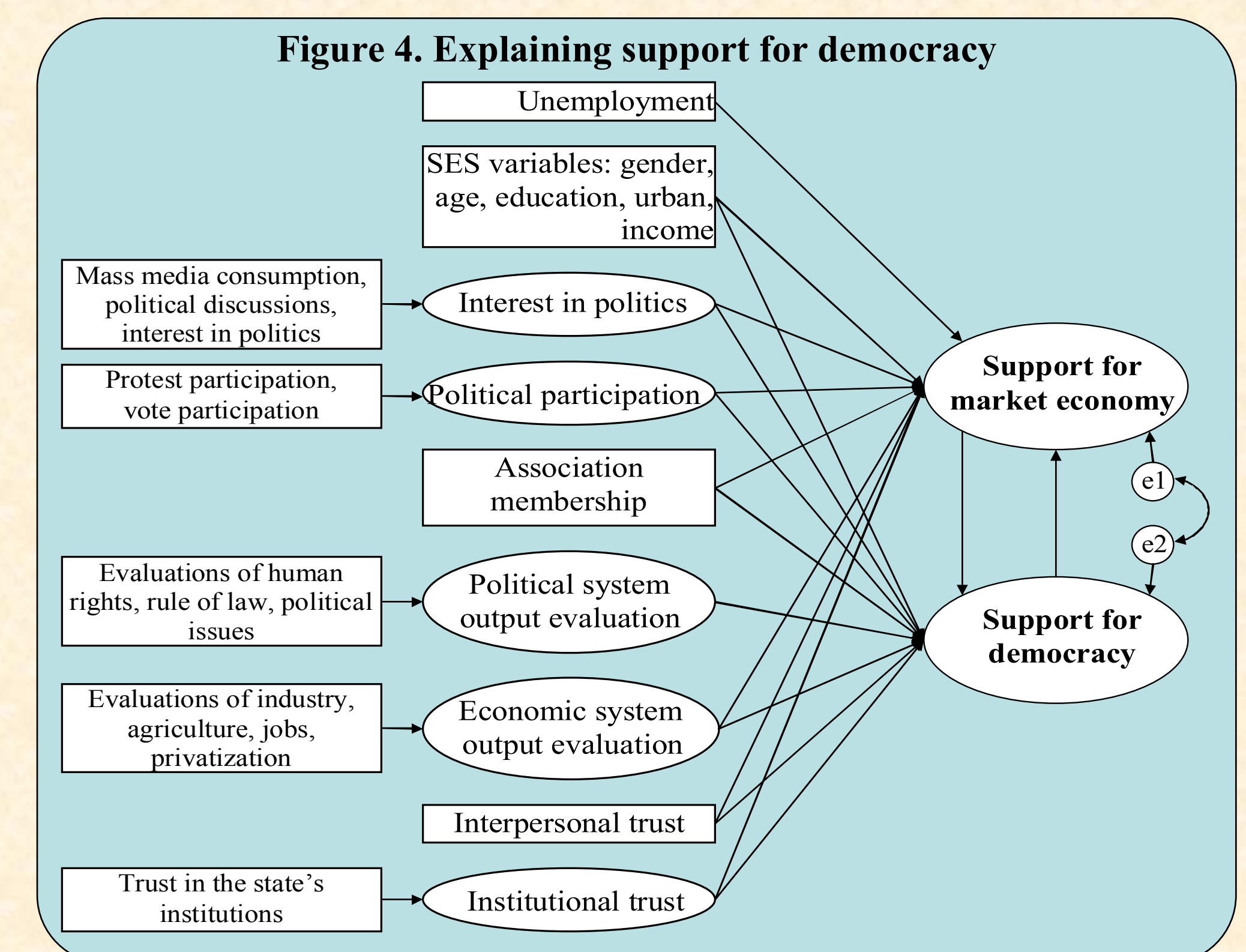


\* Note: Blue lines indicate a positive relationship, red lines indicate a negative relationship, and dashed black lines indicate uncertainty about the sign of the relationship.

Additional hypotheses are represented graphically in Figure 3. They indicate the expected effects of different groups of variables (socio-economic status, evaluations of the political and economic systems’ outputs, and involvement in politics) on the main components of political culture.

The socio-economic status variables are of particular importance, because they can be used to identify population sub-groups that are characterized by different patterns of political culture. The evolution of these patterns can be tracked over time, offering a more detailed view of political culture change.

Figure 4 (the top of the next column) combines the three models presented above into a single structural equations model, which takes into account the possible existence of an effect between the two main dependent variables: support for democracy and support for market economy. A SEM model allows estimating the size and the direction of this effect.



### Data

I analyze attitudes toward democracy and market economy and institutional trust using the following survey data (all surveys are representative at the national level and use the same sampling procedure):

- The *Public Opinion Barometer* (conducted twice a year from 1994 to 2004).
- For the years 1990 – 1993 I use a series of surveys conducted by a Romanian research team for the United States Information Agency.
- In addition to the survey data I use national and regional macroeconomic, political and social indicators that provide contextual information.

### Methods

Throughout the project I use different statistical models to estimate the parameters of interest:

- I use regression analyses to estimate the effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variables (Figure 3).
- I also use multilevel regression analyses to verify if the parameters vary by region and also to estimate the effect of the macroeconomic, social, and political indicators on support for democracy and market economy.
- To account for the theoretical relationship between support for democracy and support for market economy I use a structural equations model (Figure 4).
- The parameters estimated through these analyses will indicate the sources of support for democracy and market economy.
- The parameters for the socio-economic status variables will be used to define population sub-groups characterized by certain patterns of political patterns:
  - High support for both democracy and market economy
  - Low support for both democracy and market economy
  - High support for democracy and low support for market economy
  - Low support for democracy and high support for market economy
- The composition of these subgroups will be estimated over time and across regions, resulting in the spatial and temporal mapping of support for democracy and market economy.

### Contributions to the post-communism literature

- By analyzing political culture change over a long period of time, the project adds a temporal dimension (missing in previous studies) to our understanding of political culture in post-communist societies.
- This project analyzes political culture change during the whole process of democratic transition and consolidation. The findings will indicate whether the relationships among different components of political culture identified in previous studies continue to hold, or whether they were context-specific, depending on a particular stage during transition.
- In the field of post-communist transitions Romania is an understudied country, scholars focusing rather on the successful countries of the region (i.e. the Czech Republic, Hungary, or Poland) or on countries considered important from a policy perspective (Russia, FSU). The project will thus fill a gap in our knowledge about the region.
- By focusing on the attitudes of the citizens, this project aims at recognizing the important role society has in transitions to democracy and addresses “the missing agenda” in the literature of post-communist transitions.

### Directions for future research

The research presented here could be expanded into two main directions:

- **Comparative analysis:** While analyzing a single country offers a detailed description of the evolution of political culture that takes into account the context that framed these changes, a comparative analysis of attitudes toward democracy and market economy in different countries that experienced the same process of post-communist democratization will help identify patterns that are common across the whole Central and Eastern Europe, patterns that hold only for sub-regions of this area, and patterns that are country-specific.
- **Taking behavior into account:** Attitudes favorable to democracy and market economy are only one requirement for successful democratization. In addition to this, democracy also needs citizens to behave in a democratic manner: it needs citizens to join voluntary organizations, to vote, to get involved in the workings of the local and central government, to express their approval or discontent using only legal methods. The analysis of these types of behavior could add a new dimension to our understanding of the role of the post-communist citizens in democratic transition and consolidation.

**Advisor:**  
Michael Bernhard  
Political Science Department  
Pennsylvania State University

**Contact information:**  
Claudiu Tufis  
Political Science Department  
Pennsylvania State University  
314 Pond Lab, University Park, PA 16802

☎ (814) 863-4331  
✉ cdt130@psu.edu

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**IRB approval:**  
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