Democratization and Electoral Behaviour in Ukraine, 1989–98

The preceding five chapters have presented the principal results of this study, but little attempt has yet been made to synthesize them or to interpret their collective import. This chapter will undertake this task by first examining the effect of the individual socio-demographic variables employed in the analyses with reference to the hypotheses set out in Chapter 2, before considering their combined impact on electoral behaviour in Ukraine. In the final section, Ukrainian voting patterns will be placed in the context of electoral behaviour in other ex-communist countries in the aim of distinguishing between those aspects that are common across the region, and those specific to Ukraine.

Testing the hypotheses

Two broad explanations were elaborated in Chapter 2 to account for the effect of socio-demographic variables on voting decisions in Ukraine. It was argued that, on the one hand, people might base their vote choice on perceptions of their individual economic prospects in Ukraine’s developing market economy, and that these would be strongly influenced by age, education level, and place of residence (urban or rural). Yet it was pointed out that the majority of people would find it difficult to evaluate their economic prospects in a situation of rapid socio-economic change such as that experienced by Ukraine during the period under analysis. The other main hypothesis was that many if not most people would vote on the basis of group experiences and identifications as well as perceptions of group interest. The most important groups in this regard were predicted to be ethnic group, employment sector, region of residence, and Communist Party membership. It was further argued that, though group identification could be expected to have the greatest
impact on vote choice, different sectors of the electorate would use different strategies to make their voting decision, and that perceptions of individual interest would be important for a significant minority of the population. Finally, it was predicted that those groups most in need, and those least supportive of Ukrainian statehood would turn to clientelist electoral structures which would mobilize votes on the basis of particularistic rewards. This section aims to evaluate these complementary hypotheses. The effects of individual variables will be reviewed first, before presenting an overview of results.

(1) Ethnicity

Ethnicity appears to have exerted considerable influence on electoral behaviour in Ukraine during the 1989–98 period, both in terms of the frequency with which it figured in the vote choice models and the magnitude of the coefficients representing it. Native Russian speakers were disinclined on the whole to support the most radical candidates in the 1989 elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies, but, surprisingly, they tended to vote for the radical Democratic Bloc in the Ukrainian parliamentary elections the following year. By 1991 there was a clear relationship between Ukrainian language use and the ‘no’ vote in the all-Union referendum question, and an equally strong relationship between this variable and the ‘yes’ vote in the December referendum. The tendency of Ukrainianophones to support Chornovil’s candidacy for president and to vote against Kravchuk is consonant with these findings, for though Kravchuk sought to associate himself with Ukrainian independence, he was widely perceived as the candidate most likely to preserve close ties with Russia. Kravchuk’s nationalist credentials had been clearly established two and a half years later when he sought re-election, and again the ethnic effect was readily interpretable: in both rounds of the presidential race Ukrainian speakers were more likely to support Kravchuk and less inclined to vote for Kuchma.

Ethnicity does not seem to have played a large role in the 1994 parliamentary elections; there is evidence that Russophones voted in disproportionate numbers for the socialists, but ethnic variables were not significant in the models for other parties, nor those for Ukraine’s emerging party ‘camps’. The localized nature of the vote in these elections appears to have diminished the effect of this variable; at the constituency level other factors were evidently more important. When nation-wide party list voting was introduced in 1998, ethnic variables were more prominent. Ethnic Russians and affiliates of ‘Russian’ churches were