Executive Summary

Major outcomes of the Project on Political Transformation and the Electoral Process in Post-Communist Europe are fourfold.

- The Database

The project aimed to collect and disseminate via its website all electorally-relevant legislation from post-communist Europe since the fall of communism, as well as election results at national and constituency level and candidate data from the same period. The Project team were able to extend the list of countries for which data are provided from our initial conception. The resulting on-line database is currently available at http://www.essex.ac.uk/elections.

The database includes election laws (parliamentary and presidential election laws, country-wide regional election laws, universal electoral codes, and laws on basic guarantees) and other legislation relevant to elections (including constitutional provisions, political party laws, campaign finance laws, media laws, and others). Laws from twelve countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine) can be searched by selecting a country, an election year and one or several of twelve area topics. Laws from other post-communist countries are also provided but not included in the search by topics. A number of laws in the original language are available in pdf format.

The database provides the most comprehensive compendium of results available. There remain some gaps for the first free elections, but data for subsequent elections are available for 12 countries. Constituency level results of parliamentary elections from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine are also available. Results include all candidates in single-member constituencies (where relevant), separately for each component in mixed electoral systems. Candidate data (downloadable SPSS and Excel files) and lists of relevant internet links supplement the database.

Candidate data, including party, constituency, gender, age, and occupation are available for the Lithuanian elections of 1992, 1996 and 2000, Russia 1995 and 1999 and for the Polish elections of 1991, 1993, 1997, and 2001. Candidates in the Czech Republic (1996 and 1998) and Slovakia (1994 and 1998) are also coded for party, age, gender, and occupation and their 2002 results will be added. Hungary is coded by party, gender and element of the electoral system (other candidate data are not available). Available (incomplete) Romanian include party (winning parties in a constituency) and gender. Candidate data for Ukraine 1994 are available and partially coded, while Ukrainian 1998 data are available but not coded.

- Academic publications that have significantly advanced our understanding of elections and the electoral process in new democracies. Some findings are summarised here:

When political parties design electoral systems, their preferences are not limited to maximising their seats in the legislature, but can prioritise other benefits, such as seeking legitimacy or spreading blame for government of a country during a difficult economic transition. This explains why countries like Romania and Czechoslovakia opted for proportional representation in 1990, when a plurality system would have been more narrowly rational for the strongest parties. Moreover, electoral institutions (such as thresholds and the size of multimember districts) do not always have their textbook effects on party competition if the constitution and statutes build in other incentives that promote fragmentation. This is particularly evident in Russia.

The impact of electoral institutions in the early stages of democratisation differs in certain key respects from their impact at later stages, but they do have systematic effects which contribute to the formation of parties and the shaping of representative structures. Many electoral systems that have evolved in post-communist Europe since the early 1990s are
characterised by broad similarities with their Western European counterparts, but the mixed-parallel systems provide a distinctive type of system.

In particular, single-member constituency systems and the single-member components of mixed-parallel systems have failed to provide viable mechanisms for the consolidation of democracy. Though such systems do tend to dampen electoral volatility, they work against the institutionalisation of democratic politics, in that their single-member elements are ‘politician-enabling’ mechanisms which favour the development of clientelistic parties and encourage the multiplication of small, regionalised political support bases. Thus they do not contribute to the institutionalisation of parties and party systems.

PR has generally avoided the shortcomings for which it has been faulted in the West, such as unstable government, the perpetuation of coalitions that lack popular support, and the disproportionate power of small parties. Thresholds in particular have effectively reduced the number of parties. PR is also associated with fairer redistricting mechanisms. In many cases, however, PR has not produced the benefits for which it is praised in the West, such as higher turnout, better representation of groups (including women), and fewer votes wasted on parties that fail to enter the legislature. This causes us to question the power of the electoral system as a variable independently affecting the quality of post-Communist democracy.

The new parliaments increasingly resemble those of Western Europe in the growing dominance of professionals. However, the development of a core of professional parliamentarians is hindered in many countries by continuing defeats of incumbents and the entry of new parties into parliament. There are still quite high numbers of working class candidates, but they are mostly concentrated in populist parties and extremist parties. There are striking differences between the candidate profiles of winning and losing parties.

Although women’s representation fell markedly in the first semi-competitive and fully competitive elections, ‘contagion effects’ became apparent with the adoption of women’s quotas by the largest left-wing parties in Poland and Hungary (and more recently in Lithuania). The parties are the key to candidate recruitment, and without their action, electoral-system effects are limited. Mechanisms seen to benefit women’s representation in Western Europe such as high district magnitude and closed party lists do not make a difference at this stage.

Electoral administration is generally highly competent, though doubts remain regarding the fairness of the electoral process in Russia and Ukraine. Gerrymandering accusations however do not appear well founded. There is little formal regulation of redistricting, and existing provisions are often unclear. However, the salience of the issue is remarkably low, suggesting lack of interest and ignorance of technical matters rather than self-interested partisan abuse of redistricting procedures. Malapportionment is quite frequent, but it is largely due to bureaucratic inefficiency and/or fear of a lack of consensus and endless quarrelling in parliaments over new constituency borders.

Constitutional Courts have been active in electoral issues, particularly in Russia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Courts have often rewritten electoral legislation, not merely upheld or vetoed it. Judges use cases concerning the electoral system to elaborate on their visions of democracy, and they prioritise the stability of the system over other goods, such as representation, fairness and free competition. This bias may have long-term consequences for the perception of the courts if they come to be regarded as custodians of emerging party cartels rather than as enforcers of constitutional rights.

- The development of education, training and consultancy expertise
  These activities have included extensive training of election officials, notably in Bosnia, and of political party representatives and journalists in Romania. Advice on electoral system design has been provided in Ukraine, Bulgaria and Serbia. These skills have also had further spin-offs, including the feeding in of expertise to UK electoral administration.

- The development of a wide network of scholarly and lay contacts between those concerned with elections, electoral systems, institutional design and democratisation.