

Research Proposal: The Role of Electoral Saliency in Expatriate Voter Mobilisation

Introduction

This research project aims to identify potential differences in the electoral mobilisation and demobilisation of expatriate and domestic voter groups across electoral cycles of varying levels of saliency. The study will examine whether electoral saliency influences the turnout of expatriate and domestic voter groups differently. It will compare the patterns of electoral turnout for both voter groups in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic between 2005 and 2020. The study will then evaluate the effects of electoral saliency on the turnout of expatriate and domestic voters based on these findings.

Significance

Voter turnout is considered a key democratic indicator with many studies aiming to identify how citizen engagement with the electoral process can be maximised (Lijphart, 1999; Blais, 2006). However, few efforts have been made to distinguish the potential differences in voter turnout between expatriate and domestic voters.

Electoral saliency has been found to play a key role in explaining differences in voter turnout across electoral cycles (Stockemer, 2017). However, if electoral saliency can be shown to affect the mobilisation of domestic and expatriate voters differently, then omitting expatriate voters in future studies is a significant gap in the academic literature. The proposed research seeks to address this gap. Considering the significant proportion of the eligible voting population expats constitute in many states, their disengagement from the political process presents a problem for their respective democracies.

Academic Literature Context

As noted above, the voting behaviour of expatriate voters is under-researched in the academic literature. Existing studies have focused primarily on evaluating the efforts of political parties to mobilise their expatriate electorates (Ostergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019; Turcu & Urbatsch, 2020). This study can contribute to such findings by identifying the effects of electoral salience on the likelihood of the effective mobilisation of expatriate voter groups. Studies which do not control for electoral saliency may consequently overexaggerate the effectiveness of mobilisation campaigns aimed at expatriate voters in salient electoral cycles and underestimate their effectiveness in less salient elections (Jiang, 2017).

Hypotheses

H1: Expatriate voters show greater fluctuations in turnout as a result of changing electoral saliency than do domestic voter groups.

H1a: Expatriate voters are mobilised to a greater extent than domestic voters in salient electoral cycles – when turnout increases amongst domestic voters, turnout amongst expats increases by a more significant amount.

H1b: Expatriate voters are more likely than domestic voters to disengage from the electoral process in less salient electoral cycles – when turnout decreases amongst domestic voters, turnout amongst expats decreases by a more significant amount.

Methodology

This study will analyse secondary quantitative data concerning electoral turnout in the parliamentary elections of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary between 2005 and 2020. These countries and this time period were chosen on the basis of their relevancy to the study and shared features which simplify analysis. All three countries have significant expatriate voting populations, and all experienced a similar increase in the number of eligible expatriate voters following their entry to the EU in 2004. The three countries also have similar registration laws for expatriate voters, and none saw any major changes to their expatriate voter rights in the chosen time period.

The classification of what is meant by electoral saliency is key to understanding its effects on electoral turnout. Based on the political context of the three countries chosen for this study, electoral saliency will be linked with the election's likelihood of resulting in a significant shift in governing powers. In all three countries, electoral cycles marked by the unpopularity of the incumbent governing party witnessed the greatest levels of citizen engagement. Elections of high and low saliency will therefore differ in the sense of urgency felt by voters to change the composition of the government.

The study will then collect overall electoral turnout figures for each election, available on each country's respective government websites. In order to isolate expatriate votes from domestic votes, two further types of data will be needed. Firstly, reports carried out by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies show expatriate voter turnout as a percentage of

registered expatriate voters in each of the three countries. Secondly, voter registration data from the Foreign Ministries of each of the three countries will be considered in order to account for differences in the number of expatriate voter registrations per electoral cycle. This is significant, as in all three countries expatriates must register to vote online before each individual election. Voter registration figures for expatriate voters will therefore fluctuate depending on the level of interest in each electoral cycle, therefore further reflecting the effect of electoral saliency on expatriate turnout.

Based on the above data, the total number of expatriate votes cast per electoral cycle will be identified. Isolating this figure from the previously stated overall electoral turnout figures will give the number of domestic votes cast in each election. The turnout of both voter groups can then be compared based on these figures. This is significant in order to ensure that identified fluctuations in expatriate voter turnout are not mere reflections of fluctuations in the number of eligible expatriate voters. In controlling for expatriate population changes, the study will more effectively focus on the mobilisation and de-mobilisation of expatriate voters in the long-term.

The expected time frame for this study is as follows:

Weeks 1-2: Outline of saliency measure and evaluation of the electoral saliency of relevant elections.

Week 3: Turnout data collection.

Weeks 4-5: Data evaluation.

Week 6: Discussion of findings.

Anticipated Findings

It is anticipated that this study will identify tangible differences in the electoral mobilisation patterns of expatriate and domestic voter groups. Specifically, expatriate voter mobilisation will increase more than that of domestic voters in salient electoral cycles. Expatriate voters will also witness greater de-mobilisation than domestic voters in less salient electoral cycles. As noted above, such findings would significantly contribute to the study of voting behaviours. The study may consequently also prompt future research in the area of political sociology for those seeking explanations for the differences in expatriate and domestic voter behaviours.