

The Role of Electoral Saliency in Expat Voter Mobilisation

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Introduction

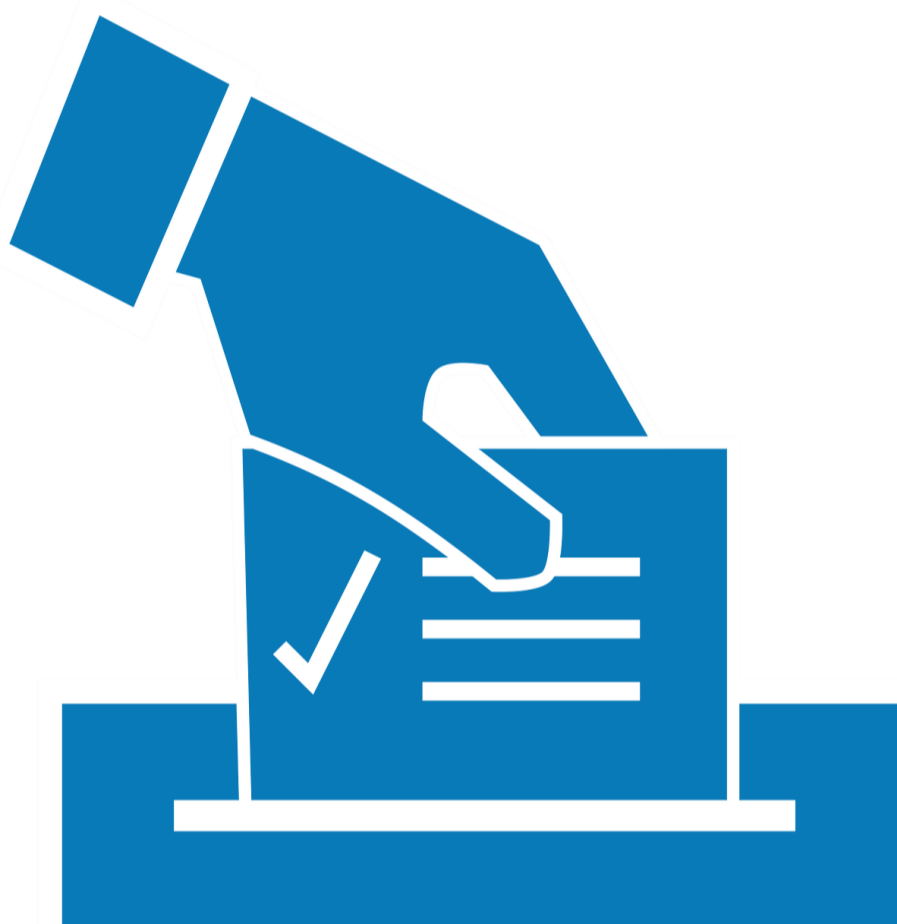
Very few efforts have been made to distinguish potential differences in the mobilisation of expat and domestic voter groups. This study addressed this gap by examining the turnout patterns of both voter groups in response to changing electoral saliency.

The study evaluated the patterns of electoral turnout for expat and domestic voters in Poland, France and the Czech Republic, focusing on a total of 23 presidential and parliamentary elections held between 2005 and 2022 in these countries. It then compared the effect of electoral saliency on both voter groups based on these findings.

Electoral Saliency: Refers to the importance or prominence of an election. Elections of high saliency are considered more high-stakes than elections of low saliency and have been linked with greater levels of political participation in a multitude of studies (Geys, 2006; Stockemer, 2016).



Expat Voter: An individual who resides outside of their native country but still votes in elections held in said country. 112 countries have granted their expat populations some voting rights; however, they represent a vastly under-researched demographic in political science literature (Sevi et al., 2019).



Methodology

Hypotheses

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

- H1a: Expat 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: Expat 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.

Saliency Measure

For the purpose of this study, electoral saliency was evaluated based on the circumstances in which each individual election took place. Elections of the highest levels of saliency were characterised as taking place in exceptional political circumstances. This included elections which:

- Took place following a period of highly controversial government rule
- Were significantly impacted by political scandals
- Took place in the context of major national or global events.

Based on the above saliency measure, all elections considered in this study were divided into two categories – elections of high saliency and those of low saliency.

References

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Findings

		Average Change in Domestic Voter Turnout	Average Change in Expat Voter Turnout*
Poland	High Saliency Elections	+ 10.41 pp	+ 196.95%
	Low Saliency Elections	- 3.77 pp	- 13.84%
Czech Republic	High Saliency Elections	+ 2.48 pp	+ 73.65%
	Low Saliency Elections	- 0.44 pp	- 3.61%
France	High Saliency Elections	- 3.54 pp	- 1.88 pp
	Low Saliency Elections	- 4.72 pp	+ 1.11 pp

*Voter turnout measured by votes cast in Poland and the Czech Republic due to lack of official data on expat populations.

The hypotheses of this study were strongly supported by data from Poland and the Czech Republic. Expat voter turnout proved more responsive to electoral saliency than did turnout amongst domestic voters in these countries.

Meanwhile, the hypotheses saw very little support from data on French elections. Saliency had a minimal effect on expat voter turnout in France - this effect was seen only in one election and the identified turnout fluctuations were much lower than in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic.

The disparities in these findings may be explained by:

- *Voting costs:* Higher voting costs may increase the effect of electoral saliency on expat turnout behaviours, with expats being more likely to pick and choose which elections they feel are worth participating in light of these costs.
- *Trends in new vs old democracies:* Voters in new democracies may be more responsive to changing electoral saliency than voters in old democracies, who face a trend of overall de-mobilisation across election cycles.

Significance

The study demonstrated the potential for a wide variety of future research:

Saliency Measure

The study adopted a unique saliency measure which proved effective in evaluating the saliency of a wide range of parliamentary and presidential elections. Further research could test the viability of this measure across a greater sample of elections, as well as investigating whether voters' perception of electoral saliency varies between countries.

Inclusion of Expat Voters

By identifying significant differences in the effect of electoral saliency on expat and domestic voter turnout in Poland and the Czech Republic, the study demonstrated the potential benefits of isolating expat voters in future research on voting behaviours.

Explanation of Results

Future studies can seek to account for the differences in our findings in Poland and the Czech Republic and our findings in France by analysing a greater sample of countries and controlling for factors such as voting costs, age of democracy and electoral systems.

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