

Summer 1 Reflective Report

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My research project analysed and compared the effect of electoral saliency on the turnout patterns of domestic and expat voter groups based on data from a total of 23 parliamentary and presidential elections held in Poland, France and the Czech Republic between 2005 and 2022. In this report, I reflect on the research process and discuss how I developed as a leader through the completion of this project, as well as through my engagement with other parts of the Laidlaw Programme this summer.

The Research Process

Structure and Methodology

I began the research process with a brief literature review in order to explain and justify my study's hypotheses. This included an evaluation of theoretical and empirical research relating to electoral saliency and a short overview of existing literature on expat voting behaviours. Having already completed a number of readings when writing up my research proposal, this part of my research was relatively quick and easy. Backed by further studies, my hypotheses remained as set out in my proposal:

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.

The next step of my research involved the defining of an appropriate saliency measure for the testing of my hypotheses. I began this process with data collection, in order to definitively establish the elections I was able to include in my study. For this, I reviewed the official electoral data published on government websites of each of the three countries I hoped to consider in the study. Having realised that data relating to Hungarian elections was unusable, I was forced to review a number of reports published by the Robert

Schuman Centre on expat voting rights to find another European country to include in my study. Looking back, this was the greatest challenge I faced in the research process. While I ultimately decided to include France in my analysis, finding an appropriate replacement for Hungary took me over a week, which in turn had a significant impact on my schedule.

After establishing the scope of my research, I began to evaluate the context in which each of the relevant elections took place. While at first this part of the process was very interesting and enjoyable, it soon became quite repetitive and time-consuming - in the time frame of about a week, I read through multiple articles on each of the 23 elections included in my study. Eventually, I was able to establish a saliency measure which worked for my entire electoral sample by linking elections of high saliency with taking place in exceptional political circumstances. This included elections which took place following a period of highly controversial rule, elections impacted by political scandals and elections which took place in the context of other major national or global events, such as national security crises. Based on this definition, I divided the elections included in this study into two categories – those of a high saliency and those of a low saliency. I was then able to complete my analysis of the turnout patterns of domestic and expat voter groups across both election types based on the electoral data I had previously collected. I did not face any further difficulties in this part of the process.

Overall Findings

The degree to which saliency impacted on expat voter behaviours varied vastly between the three countries considered by this study. My hypotheses were supported by data from Poland and the Czech Republic, with expat voter turnout proving more responsive to electoral saliency than did turnout amongst domestic voters in these countries. Poland saw the greatest levels of fluctuation in expat voter turnout in response to changing electoral saliency – expat voters were mobilised to a much greater extent than domestic voters in salient elections and disengaged from the electoral process in much greater numbers in elections of low saliency. The effect of electoral saliency was also very significant in the Czech Republic. This was in particular reflected in the mobilisation patterns of Czech expats in elections of high saliency. Meanwhile, my 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 the case of the 2017 presidential election and the identified turnout fluctuations were much lower than in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic.

The contrast between my findings in Poland and the Czech Republic and my findings in France was very interesting as I had expected a similar pattern to emerge across all three countries considered in this study. Through close collaboration with my supervisor, I was able to identify a few possible explanations for these differences – my favourite part of the research process in retrospect. Firstly, my findings may reflect the different voting costs faced by expat voters in the three countries. Higher voting costs may force expat voters to pick and choose the elections they feel are worth participating in – thereby increasing the effect of electoral saliency on their turnout behaviours. Accordingly, voting costs were identified as being higher in Poland and the Czech Republic and lowest in France. Alternatively, the findings may reflect a more general difference in the turnout patterns of voters in old and new 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.

Future Research

Based on my findings, I was able to identify numerous areas in which further studies can be carried out - the greatest achievement of my research in my view. Future studies can test the viability of my saliency measure and seek to explain the disparities between my findings in Poland and the Czech Republic and my findings in France. Most importantly, however, by identifying differences in the mobilisation patterns of expat voters in Poland and the Czech Republic my research showed the huge potential for the future inclusion of expat voters in research relating to voting behaviours. Future studies should consider other institutional or socioeconomic factors which have been linked with higher levels of voter turnout in the literature and evaluate their effect on expat voters in isolation.

Final Project vs Initial Objectives

My final project was more extensive than my initial proposal for a number of reasons. Due to data availability, I was able to extend the scope of my research to include presidential elections, having previously aimed to include only parliamentary elections in my analysis. This allowed me to test my hypotheses based on data from a significant 23 elections, improving the quality of my research and making for an interesting comparative discussion. Secondly, I was able to extend the time frame for the elections included in my study by two years. This meant I was able to analyse voting behaviours in very recent elections – an exciting development from a research perspective. The 2022 French legislative election in fact took place after the beginning of my research process and was only included after the publishing of official figures by the French government in July. Finally, the inclusion of France in my analysis was in itself

a major change from my initial proposal and had a substantial impact on the study's findings. Acting as a significant contrast to Poland and the Czech Republic, expat voting behaviours in France did not support the study's hypotheses. This contrast ultimately shaped most of the discussion and speculation in the later part of the research process.

Aside from the scope of my research, the finished project resembled my original research objectives very closely. The hypotheses were exactly the same as set out in my proposal and the methodology was carried out just as expected. I was able to remain concise and on-topic – a difficult task considering the huge potential for further research in the area of expat voting behaviours.

Leadership Development

I learned a lot about myself this summer and developed a wide range of new leadership skills.

Research

I can identify two main lessons I took out of the completion of my research project. Firstly, my difficulties with data collection in the case of Hungary gave me an incredible opportunity to practise effective decision-making and plan adaptation. I am a highly organised person and have in the past struggled when things did not go according to plan. In the context of completing my research, however, I was able to remain composed and quickly adapted to the challenges I was facing. Ultimately, the changes I was forced to make in my research had a very positive impact on my final findings - my study was more extensive, and I was able to identify a number of new areas in which further research could be carried out. This was an important lesson for me, and I will undoubtedly approach future challenges with a much more positive mindset as a result.

Secondly, working with my supervisor throughout this process taught me a great amount about the importance of effective collaboration. I am the kind of person who often prefers to work alone, not least because I prefer to stick to a more rigorous schedule and like things to be done in a certain way. Through work with my supervisor, I was able to identify a kind of collaboration which was highly compatible with my work style. While still maintaining total independence over my research and how it was to be carried out, I really appreciated the ability to seek my supervisor's guidance when I felt it was needed and it was nice to have someone to discuss my ideas with to ensure I remained on track. I am now able to appreciate how invaluable collaboration is to the effective completion of more complex tasks and know that such collaboration does not have to compromise my more independent work style.

Reflective Tasks

Completing my personal development plan was one of the most beneficial activities for my leadership development this summer. The questions asked gave me an opportunity to reflect on aspects of myself which I had never fully looked in to, very positively impacting on my self-awareness as a result. I also feel I strongly benefited from the chance to discuss these in my coaching session a few weeks into my research, having already learned a number of new things about myself during this process. Some of the most positive changes I have seen in myself this summer came from the setting out of my leadership goals in this development plan. I spent quite a bit of time coming up with my three main goals, which were highly relevant to the types of skills I wanted to develop through the Laidlaw programme as a result. Looking back, I am very proud of the work I put into the achievement of these goals over the last three months - I have taken the first steps to growing my professional network, I have become very comfortable with explaining my ideas to others and have grown to see the immense benefits of asking for help when it is needed. The development of these skills was of a huge help to me throughout the research process and will undoubtedly continue to benefit me well into the future.

I also learned a lot about myself by completing my strengths profile in advance of the summer coaching session. I really enjoyed reading through each section of the final profile and evaluating the accuracy of every characteristic as assigned to me. While the profile overall was very close to what I had expected, there were a few key outliers which I was able to identify. This was very beneficial, as it allowed me to challenge some of the misconceptions I previously had about myself. For example, one of my highest weaknesses as set out in the profile was my unwillingness to give feedback to others. After some reflection, I realised that many of the answers I gave in the strengths profile test reflected my low academic confidence at the time. I answered negatively on questions relating to giving feedback because I did not feel I was qualified to give feedback in academic settings. Further into my summer, however, I realised that in most contexts I am very opinionated, confident and quick to provide feedback on anything I do not agree with. Such reflections were very significant to my leadership development.

To conclude, this summer has been highly beneficial to my development as a leader. I am very grateful for all of the opportunities I received over the last three months and I look forward to further developing my leadership skills this coming year.