Fostering turnout?: Assessing leaders' capacity to mobilise voters

Frederico Ferreira da Silva

< First draft, please do not cite >

September, 2016

Abstract

Recent research on the personalisation of politics has clarified the importance of voters' evaluations of political leaders on voting behaviour in most contemporary Western democracies. This stream of research has provided empirical evidence for the influential role of candidates in a context of growing importance of short-term determinants of voting behaviour. However, existing literature on leader effects has dealt utterly with an impact on vote choice, neglecting the primary step of the voting decision process. If leaders have the ability to get individuals to vote for their party *versus* others, they are likely to be determinant in driving individuals to vote in the first place. This is especially important bearing in mind the generalised decline in voter turnout rates across Western democracies as a symptom of the dealignment process, which lies at the very core of the personalisation of politics thesis as one of its main causes. Yet, despite the theoretical linkage between the personalisation of politics and turnout, it is still to be determined to what extent can voters' evaluations of leaders have an effect on turnout. Also the literature on individual-level turnout has largely disregarded the role of political leaders in stimulating turnout.

In a context of growing distancing between voters and political parties, the demonstration of a positive impact of leader evaluations on turnout rates would carry positive normative implications to the personalisation of politics.

This study attempts at assessing the impact of voters' evaluations of political leaders on turnout decisions using data from 21 Western democracies, derived from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Results show a positive significant effect of voters' evaluations of candidates on turnout decisions. Moreover, they support the role of short-term vis-à-vis long-term determinants of voting behaviour.

1. Introduction

Recent research on voting behaviour has confirmed a trend towards a more candidate-centred politics, which had been commonly advocated in the media and the public discourse but had found so far only contradictory evidence in empirical studies. Namely, a thorough consideration of the temporal dimension, the effort to develop comparative analyses, and both a theoretical and methodological refinement of how to evaluate and measure the importance of voters' assessments of political leaders for voting behaviour, allowed for the finding of consistent evidence on the importance of leaders as short-term determinants of vote choice. However, these important contributions have moved straightforwardly to examining leaders' effects on vote choice without carefully considering their potential impact on the baseline decision to turn out to the ballot box. While leaders have been demonstrated to influence choice over different party options, this is likely to be preceded by an impact over turnout decisions. In impacting vote choice, leader effects can operate in two possible ways: a) capturing votes who otherwise would belong to his party's competitors or b) motivating individuals who otherwise would not vote at all to vote for his party – all else can be argued to be nothing but party effects. Therefore, just as party identification expresses a preference across parties which simultaneously drives individuals to vote and to select a given party rather than another, the likeability of a leader could act in a similar fashion – if a leader is sufficiently appealing to influence vote choice, he also could be a driver of participation in the first place.

Despite the generalised decline in turnout rates across contemporary Western democracies being pointed as a fundamental feature of the dealignment process at the origin of the personalisation of politics, establishing a theoretical relationship for the mechanism through which leaders could impact turnout decisions, it is still to be determined to what extent can voters' evaluations of leaders have an effect on turnout. Likewise, studies on individual-level turnout have largely disregarded the role of political leaders in stimulating turnout

This study aims to fill this gap shared by the personalisation of politics and the turnout literature. In this way, it attempts to offer a contribution by drawing attention to the mobilising potential of political leaders and discussing the possible relevance of a more frequent inclusion of variables accounting for voters' assessments of the candidates running for election in turnout models.

The next section problematizes the relationship between turnout and the personalisation of politics, presenting the potential mechanisms through which turnout rates can be affected by the performance of political leaders. This is followed by a brief review of the several theoretical

streams regarding individual-level turnout studies and the current state of the art on the topic. The fourth section provides a description of the data and methods used in the empirical analysis, and is followed by the results and concluding remarks.

2. Turnout and the personalisation of politics: a missing link

The personalisation of politics refers to the process through which individual political actors have been gaining increased importance compared to political parties (Karvonen, 2012). Within the framework of this thesis, over the last decades we have been witnessing a tendency towards a greater preponderance of party leaders in the political arena (Wattenberg, 1992). This has been particularly notorious in the media discourse: political content is framed around the visible faces of political parties, executives became named after their leaders, candidates' profiles are thoroughly compared, and televised debates between party leaders are discussed by media pundits as a decisive factor to the outcome of elections. Also political parties have contributed to this trend by focusing their campaign strategies in their leaders, developing increasingly individualised campaigns (Lisi & Santana-Pereira, 2014; Zittel & Gschwend, 2008); broadening their leader selection procedures to wider selectorates, ultimately resulting in the proliferation of primaries in many European political parties (Cross & Pilet, 2016; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Kenig, 2009; LeDuc, 2001); and enhancing the leader's role within the contemporary types of political parties, conceding more power and autonomy to make individualised decisions (Lobo, 2008). At the electoral system level, numerous European countries have been implementing personalising reforms, changing the electoral rules so that citizens can express their preferences for candidates and have a greater decision-power over the allocation of seats (Renwick & Pilet, 2016). Lastly, multiple studies have demonstrated that voters' evaluations of political leaders have an effect on voting behaviour (Aarts, Blais, & Schmitt, 2011; Bittner, 2011; Lobo & Curtice, 2015) and that this impact has been growing across time (Garzia, 2014).

Despite recent studies having established that assessments of party leaders do have an impact on individual vote choice, research on the personalisation of politics has not devoted attention to a former aspect of the voting decision process: the decision to turn out. The relationship between leader effects and vote choice has been drawn without any reflection on the intermediate stage where the voter decides whether to go to the polls or to refrain from voting. Since leaders were demonstrated to have an impact on voters' choice over the different parties, it seems plausible that at least some of these voters are also driven to the polls by the appeal of political leaders.

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The theoretical framework on the basis of the research which confirmed leader effects on vote choice applies similarly to individual-level turnout. Individualisation and the process of dealignment weakened the long-standing bonds between voters and political parties. Following the erosion of cleavages which structured voting behaviour, voters have become gradually detached from the set of social and political attitudes on the basis of party identification. With individualisation, group-based ideological alignments on the basis of the political cleavages have faded and with them, voters became unconstrained from the identification derived from the alignment with political parties. Alignments, and the cleavages in their origin, conditioned not only vote choice but also turnout decisions. The determinants of turnout and vote choice have historically largely coincided, which is unsurprising since motivations on the grounds of decisions upon the latter are inevitably extensive to the former. Vote choice presupposes a coherent behaviour regarding turnout since it is impossible to exercise vote choice without having cast a vote, and the reasons which drive an individual to choose a party over another are very much associated with the reasons that lead him to turn out instead of abstaining. Therefore, it follows that a structural change in the determinants of the latter element of the voting calculus are tied to transformations in the more primary stage of the decision-making process. Thus, if rather than repeatedly following party heuristics, voters have become more sensible to short-term factors in their voting choice decisions – such as candidates or performance assessments –, the same factors are likely determine turnout decisions.

Moreover, given the importance of dealignment as a key cause of the personalisation of politics, and the fact that one of the most evident symptoms of this process has been the generalised decline in voter turnout rates across contemporary Western democracies, there are theoretical reasons to expect an effect of leader evaluations on turnout decisions. The few studies which have linked dealignment with leader effects have focused exclusively on whether leader evaluations have a higher impact on swing voters, late deciders or voters without party identification (Gidengil, 2011; Lobo, 2015). The turnout dimension of the dealignment process has been surprisingly neglected thus far, although an analysis of turnout decisions with a particular focus on the impact of party leaders appears to be theoretically pertinent.

The potential of political leaders to act as mobilising agents and foster turnout has recently been acknowledged by policy-makers at the European Union level. In an attempt to increase turnout rates in the 2014 European Parliament elections, the European Parliament's political groups have decided to publicly support a lead candidate for the presidency of the European Commission, giving voters, for the first time, the possibility to select their preferred candidate when they went to the ballots. The elections for the European Parliament have historically been

poorly participated, not reaching the 50% threshold of turnout since 1999. The decision for the *Spitzenkandidaten* strategy comes with a recognition of the potential of candidates to increase the salience of the elections and mobilise more voters to cast a ballot, "raising the turnout for European elections by strengthening the link between the elections of the representatives of the citizens with the selection and election process of the head of the European executive" (European Commission, 2013: 6). A recent study assesses the impact of this initiative on turnout decisions and finds a mobilising effect of candidate recognition and campaign activity of the three most visible candidates on turnout; additionally, candidate recognition was also found to strengthen the impact of campaign activities on turnout (Schmitt, Hobolt, & Popa, 2015). Considering that an effect was found even though these are second-order elections and that arguably voters still had very limited awareness of the candidates running for election, it can be argued the effect could even be stronger in first-order elections, where campaigns are more intense and personalised (canvassing is easier, the candidates are more familiar, their presence in the media is stronger, and TV debates assume a major importance) and voters are also more prone to be recipients of political messages and information.

Noticeably, also the individual-level turnout literature has disregarded the relationship between turnout and political leaders, whether measured through voters' evaluations of leaders' personality traits or general leader evaluation scales. Apart from studies on American presidential elections (Adams, Dow, & Merrill, 2006), the role of candidates in voters' decisions on whether to turn out to vote in general elections has been ignored. This is puzzling given the importance early attributed by Campbell and his colleagues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960) to the general role of attitudes on voting behaviour and the specific consideration of attitudes towards candidates in their research. In this sense, also from the point of view of individual-level turnout literature, it would be relevant to assess to what extent do leaders impact turnout decisions.

This study explores this missing link by taking a step back in the decision-making process and addressing the effects of voters' evaluations of political leaders on turnout decisions. Its goal is to assess the impact of voters' evaluations of political leaders in their turnout decisions, hypothesising that positive evaluations of leaders stimulate individuals to participate in elections.

Addressing this question is relevant for a number of a reasons. If leaders are found to have a mobilising potential and some capacity to motivate individuals who otherwise would exclude themselves from participating in elections to turn out to vote, it can be argued that the

personalisation of politics may play a beneficial role in reconnecting voters with politics. Furthermore, the dealignment process would not necessarily mean a large-scale definitive retreat from politics but could be attenuated or even partially reversed by the positive effect of leaders.

3. Individual-level turnout models and leader effects

The literature on individual level voter turnout is divided in multiple streams of theoretical models. A sociological perspective puts the emphasis on the social determinants of voting behaviour. This branch of literature highlights the influence of socio-demographic characteristics, socialisation and group relations on turnout. Socio-demographic characteristics related to the individuals' position on the social structure determine their access to a set of resources relevant for turnout decisions. For this reason, this set of variables is at times named in the literature as the resource model. Age, education, gender, race, income, occupational status, marital status, and region, are some of the variables commonly part of these models. Since these are mainly socially determined variables, this perspective assumes a strong weight of structurally predetermined factors on turnout decisions. Another component has to do with the social relationships individuals maintain. On this account, Lipset (1967) identifies "access to information", "group pressure to vote" and "cross-pressures" as three key factors with an impact on turnout. Also Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) stress the importance of social integration for turnout. Naturally, these factors are contingent on the individuals' social position but they can also contribute to minor (or accentuate) the influence of the class determinants.

Although the former model has had a fundamental influence in the turnout literature, recent studies have been revealing a loss of importance of the social determinants in solely explaining turnout. In fact, the shortcomings of the sociological perspective were early noticed by the scholars of the Michigan School, who stressed the role of political values and attitudes as intermediates of social determinants, therefore developing the socio-psychological approach. Political knowledge, political interest and party identification are the key psychological determinants of voting behaviour. However, other attitudes such as political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions, attitudes towards candidates and parties, and ideological self-placement are also frequently included in this model. This model's contribution is still exceptionally valid for contemporary studies.

Rational choice models underline the cost-benefit analysis of turnout. According to Downs (1957), voting is costly in terms of time, money, information and opportunity costs, thus its

benefits must prevail over the costs. Typical variables included in rational choice models are past turnout (voting involves learning costs which are eliminated once an individual has developed a voting habit and has learnt about voting), closeness of the election, egotropic economic evaluations and personal benefits as a result of the election outcome. Other costs have to do with accessing the ballot box: registration requirements (Burden et al., 2009), and distance from the ballot box (Dyck & Gimpel, 2005), for example. Conversely, other mechanisms can also significantly diminish these costs – Internet voting is perhaps the most relevant in this regard (Alvarez, Hall, & Trechsel, 2009; Trechsel, 2007).

Another stream of literature focuses on the importance of mobilisation efforts endeavoured by parties, candidates, citizen groups or individuals on driving citizens to vote. Election campaigns appear as the most relevant factor in this regard since they contribute to raise awareness of political issues, create interest around political events, motivate people to vote, and by diffusing political information reduce the costs for voters to acquire it. Since this is done mainly through the media, voters' exposure to the media, campaign involvement, and political canvassing are variables usually considered. Additionally, religiosity, union and organizational membership are indicators for context where individuals may be more subject to mobilisation influences by their peers. Other contextual factors may have a mobilising effect, such as the level of importance of the election (first-order vs. second-order), the intensity of the campaign or the salience of certain political issues.

Given the variety of theoretical approaches to the problem of turnout in contemporary democracies, difficulties arise to build a balanced model which is still able to account for the multitude of factors impacting voting behaviour. Unsurprisingly, a large number of covariates are frequently included in turnout models. However, since this is a thoroughly studied topic with results accumulated as a consequence of several decades of quality research, it is now possible to select the more accurate predictors of the several models of turnout in order to build parsimonious and informative models.

Recently, Smets and van Ham (2013) have conducted a meta-analysis of individual-level research on voter turnout, accounting for 90 studies published over the first decade of this century on ten top-journals in political science and political behaviour. This is a relevant contribution in the sense that the authors analyse over 170 different independent variables and rate them as a result of their performance in the studies analysed. They define a variable's success rate as a

result of a ponderation of its *successes*[1] and the *number of tests* including this variable.[2] For this study, the variables with a success rate over 60% were pre-selected to be included in the individual-level turnout model, covering the several streams of literature on turnout which have been formerly discussed. This threshold was established for theoretical reasons since many of the theories on the basis of the inclusion of many of these variables do no longer hold pertinence; methodological reasons, since from a model estimation point of view parsimonious models tend to be preferable; and practical reasons, because the larger the number of covariates, the more likely it is that they are not going to be present in all election studies considered, thus harming comparability efforts. Admittedly, this decision comes with some caveats such as not taking into account effect size but only statistical significance, although the authors come up with a proxy measure of average effect size.

Details on the selected variables, respective coding and data are provided in the next section, together with a description of the statistic method used in the empirical analysis.

4. Data and methods

This article uses data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), a collaborative project which gathers data from worldwide post-electoral surveys through the incorporation of a common module in the National Election Studies (NES) of the participant countries. Each country's module is then compiled in the common dataset, allowing for comparability of data on elections carried in a wide range of countries in similar time periods. Modules 3 (2006-2011) and 4 (2011-2016) were used: Module 3 includes a larger number of countries because Module 4 is still being completed and does not yet include all the participant countries. Thus, whenever available, data from Module 4[3] was used because it was more recent; on the contrary, when it was not yet available, data from the Module 3 was used.

The following 21 countries and elections were included in the analysis: Spain (2012), United Kingdom (2012), Czech Republic (2010), Slovakia (2010), Portugal (2011), United States (2012), Sweden (2006), Germany (2013), Croatia (2007), Norway (2009), Poland (2011), the Netherlands (2010), Latvia (2010), Estonia (2011), Denmark (2007), Finland (2011), Ireland (2011), Iceland

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[1] "In the vote-counting procedure, each test of a hypothesis is considered a 'success' when a coefficient is statistically significant and has the hypothesized direction. On the other hand, the hypothesis test is considered a 'failure' when it is found not to be significant and an 'anomaly' when the coefficient is statistically significant but is in the opposite direction than expected." (Smets & van Ham, 2013: 346)
[2] $success\ rate = (sucesses/number\ of\ tests) * 100$
[3] Release March 20, 2015

(2013), Serbia (2012), France (2012), and Italy (2013). Countries with compulsory voting were not included.[4]

Survey research on turnout has widely documented the problem of overreported turnout (Cassel, 2003; Karp & Brockington, 2005; Silver, Anderson, & Abramson, 1986; Zeglovits & Kritzinger, 2014). In an attempt to conform to socially desirable behaviour, respondents often report that they voted when they have not, leading to biased samples which do not mirror official turnout rates. This was the case with this study's sample where in every country an overreporting of turnout rates is observable.

Additionally, whenever a pertinent variable was missing from the CSES study on a specific country, in order not to exclude this country or sacrifice the strength of the model common to all countries by excluding this variable from the analysis, I looked for a more recent version of the data in this country's NES. Every time the NES had the missing variable it replaced the country sample of the CSES, so as to have more complete and up to date data – this was the case of Portugal and Spain[5].

Although these solutions solve some practical data related problems, they also have some disadvantages. The key advantage of using CSES data is obtaining a comparable cross-country dataset which allows the researcher to apply the same model to a variety of countries. By combining the CSES dataset with data from other sources, one partially compromises this comparability. Even if the variables contained in the studies are the same, the wording of the questions and the possible answers for the subjects are differ if these more recent version of the NES are not designed to be later integrated in the CSES – that is, if they do not follow the CSES Module –, possibly raising some doubts about whether what is being measured is precisely the same. This limitation is not exclusive to the cases where we have used data from NES studies – even CSES data differs between Modules.

These constraints had implications when specifying the model. First, because of its very own comparative nature, the set of variables contained in the CSES studies is restricted. Most NES then complement the CSES Module with their own designed questions but the core set of the Module is not very extensive. Second, the inclusion of different modules plus the NES of some countries, as stated before, harms cross-country comparisons. Hence, the model specification

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[4] Whenever a theoretically relevant country was not included in either one of the CSES Modules, it was added to the sample by using its NES – this was the case with Italy and the UK. Language constraints prevented me from adding some more potentially relevant countries.

[5] On CSES Module 3 Portugal and Spain were missing the "turnout on the previous election". Spain was also missing the variable referring to the organisational membership.

implied a trade-off between the overall quality of the model – namely concerning the possible inclusion of covariates which are found in the literature on individual level turnout – and the quantity of countries included. Given that a) a key goal of this study is to develop a comparative analysis that demonstrates the generalised importance of leader effects on turnout across contemporary western democracies, and that b) the covariates not included in the model are unlikely to be related to the role played by the evaluations of political leaders in getting voters to cast the ballot but more to other competing explanations of turnout decisions, the solution adopted was one of compromise. Although it is not a fully comprehensive one, the model is still well within the standards of common scientific practice in individual-level turnout studies.

For these reasons not all of the variables pre-selected from Smets' and van Ham's (2013) meta-analysis were incorporated in the baseline model. The dependent variable *turnout* dichotomises individuals who have voted from those who have not (0: Did not vote; 1: Voted). A*ge* and *education* were the only socio-demographic variables included, given the decrease in the explanatory power of these variables documented in the literature and the fact that from Smets' and van Ham's (2013) meta-analysis, these were the only ones surpassing the pre-established threshold (socio-economic status was also above the threshold but it was not available in the datasets). Media exposure was one important variable in the mobilisation model, however it was not available in the CSES datasets, thus it was replaced by c*ampaign involvement*[6] which acts as a proxy. Another variable from the mobilisation model is *organisational membership*[7]. *Turnout on the previous election* (0: Did not vote; 1: Voted) refers to rational choice models and is the most powerful control. Voting is a learning and habit forming process and hence having voted on previous elections minimises the costs of voting for current elections and repeatedly reinforces the probability to vote along the life course, usually being highly predictive of current turnout, especially when it reports to the last elections held. *Party identification* was dichotomised into not having a party identification (0) to having a party identification (1).

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[6] "How closely did you follow the campaign?" – 1: Very closely; 2: Fairly closely; 3: Not very closely; 4: Not closely at all. This variable was not available in the British National Election Study. Instead "How often do you watch TV about politics and current affairs?" was used, with response options ranging from "0: None, no time at all; 1: Less than ½ hour per day; 2: ½ hour to 1 hour; 3: 1 to 2 hours; 4: More than 2 hours". This variable is actually a better measure of *media exposure*, which is the one originally suggested in Smets' and van Ham's (2013) meta-analysis.

[7] Organisational membership was built from compound index of the following dichotomous questions (0: No; 1: Yes): "Are you a member of a union?", "Are you a member of a business or employers' association?", "Are you a member of a farmers' association?", and "Are you a member of a professional association?". Whenever the respondent answered positively to at least one of these questions organisational membership was coded as 1; if the respondent always answered negatively organisational membership was coded as 0.

Political efficacy[8] was measured through the question "Who people vote for makes a difference?" and *political knowledge*[9] was built out of three political knowledge questions.

Political attitudes towards parties and leaders were operationalized in the variables *rating of the respondent's most liked party*[10] and *rating of the respondent's most liked leader*. The CSES, as all the NES used, asks respondents to rate parties and leaders on a 0-10 like-dislike scale. To each party and each leader corresponds a different variable. To avoid including one variable per each leader and party, which would make the results incomparable across countries and impossible to interpret, the value of the party and leader higher rated, among all options for each country, was used to create both these variables. Besides, it seems reasonable to assume that, in principle, if any party or leader is to have an impact on turnout decisions that will be the party or leader most liked by the respondent.

The use of leader thermometers is sometimes criticised because of being a relative measure, varying according to each individual's subjective value attribution to each point of the scale. It is argued that measurements of leader effects based on leader thermometers for further comparisons with the role of political parties – based on party identification – are not the most reliable. Moreover, it has been argued that it is unclear which factors voters consider when they rate parties or leaders based on their *likeability*, casting some doubts about what exactly is being measured (Fiorina, 1981: 154). However, the inclusion of both party and leader thermometers allows for comparisons using the same scale and question wording. In this way, as much as each individual's ratings are relative compared to other individuals, leader and party evaluations have the same internal consistency because they have been measured by the same standards. This is confirmed by the very high correlation (.65) between the two variables, which stresses the issue of endogeneity between party and leader effects largely reported by studies on the field.

Moreover, using thermometers to measure both party and leader evaluations allows to capture for short-term variations in party and leader likeability, which are not measured through party identification variables, designed to reflect the stability of an enduring affective relationship. In the context of pronounced decline of party identification over the past decades, larger shares of the electorate have been reporting not having an identification with any of the political parties. However, a considerable share of these individuals continues to vote, to nurture interest for

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[8] Scale from 1: Who people vote for won't make a difference to 5: Who people vote for can make a big difference.
[9] 0: All answers incorrect; 1: One correct answer; 2: Two correct answers; 3: All answers correct.
[10] This variable was not available in the Spanish and the Italian National Election Studies. Propensities to vote were used in its place and coded in the same way.

politics, and even to be quite politically sophisticated (Dalton, 2012). Non-identifiers have been shown to make short-term assessments of the performances of political parties and candidates and take them into account in their voting decision (Fiorina, 1981). The increase of swing voters and late deciders also demonstrates the growing consideration of short-term variables (Dalton, 2012; Lavine, Johnston, & Steenbergen, 2012; Lobo, 2015). In conclusion, a substantial part of the electorate does not have enduring loyalty bonds as a consequence of long-term attachments with political parties and therefore its proximity to political parties cannot be measured on a long-term basis. For this reason, the use of thermometers for both party and leader evaluations acquires pertinence because it can account for the volatility of party preferences and apply to types of voters who do not have a party identification, from the disengaged voter who sporadically is mobilised by a party or leader, to the politically independent frequent voter whose ballot is not promised to any party or leader beforehand but is contingent on progressive assessments made on the run.

5. Results

The analyses are based on a logistic regression with fixed country effects for a total of 21 countries.[11] Four models were tested: a baseline model, including all the covariates but the party and the leader thermometers; a second model including the party thermometer; a third model including the leader thermometer (and withdrawing the party); and a full model including all the covariates plus the party and leader evaluation variables. The results are presented in Table 1 and show a significant positive effect of voters' evaluations of political leaders on turnout.[12]

The results from the baseline model largely reflect what has been established in the literature. Turnout behaviour on the previous election is the strongest predictor of turnout. In fact, this is the variable with the highest impact across all the models estimated. This was expected and comes in line with the literature which perceives voting as a habit formation process which is self-reinforcing – once an individual has voted before, the costs of voting (namely concerning information barriers, in certain cases registration, etc.) in subsequent elections are lower, for example. In Smets' and van Ham's (2013) piece, this variable has an effect size of .97 on a scale ranging from -1 to +1, putting it among the strongest predictors of turnout.

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[11] *Campaign involvement* was not included in the Module 4 of the CSES and therefore was excluded from the models presented in Table 1. Nonetheless, since this variable is consider as relevant in the literature, the same model was tested with very similar results (Appendix 1).

[12] Sample weights were used, replicating the calculation method of the "Dataset Weight: Sample (C1014_1)" variable of CSES' datasets.

Also unsurprisingly, the degree of party identification and political sophistication appear to have a strong effect on turnout. The direction of the effect is as expected, placing the individuals with stronger long-term attachments with a given political party as more likely to cast a vote, as well as individuals with a higher degree of political sophistication.

The socio-demographic covariates have a minor contribution in explaining turnout, also in line with recent studies on the topic. Education is not even significant in any of the model tested.

Block 1 introduces voters' evaluations of their most liked party on a 0 to 10 likeability scale. This variable is different from party identification in the sense that it may reflect short-term attitudes towards political parties whereas party identification reflects a more or less stable attachment based on a long-term psychological identification with a political party, rooted in early socialisation (Campbell et al., 1960). In this sense, a voter may have a long-term identification with a given party but presently be unsatisfied with that party's performance and *like* other more; alternatively, she may not have a party identification at all, but at a given moment in time *like* a political party more than its competitors and be driven to vote by that feeling. These evaluations may be shaped by a number of contextual factors such as retrospective or prospective evaluations of parties' performances, chosen candidates, political events, etc. According to revisionist theories of party identification as a *running tally* (Fiorina, 1981), these short-term assessments may later on consubstantiate in transformations at the party identification level but they are primarily distinct from the concept of party identification. This distinction is confirmed by the relatively low correlation (.37) between the two variables in the dataset. Still, the introduction of the variable referring to party evaluations dampers the effect of the degree of party identification while the remaining variables remain slightly unaffected. Party evaluations are significant and have a substantial effect size: for each point increase in the party likeability scale, the chances of turning out to vote increase by 21%.

Table 1 – Logistic regression with fixed country effects (21 countries)

	Baseline model		Block 1		Block 2		Full model	
	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI
Age	1.01*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01	1.01*** (.00)	1.01– 1.01	1.01*** (.00)	1.00 – 1.01	1.01*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01
Education	1.01 (.00)	1.00 – 1.01	1.01 (.00)	1.00 – 1.02	1.01 (.00)	1.00 – 1.01	1.01 (.00)	1.00 – 1.02
Political efficacy	1.17*** (.02)	1.13 – 1.21	1.15*** (.02)	1.11 – 1.18	1.15*** (.02)	1.11 – 1.19	1.14*** (.02)	1.11 – 1.18
Party identification	3.02*** (.12)	2.79 – 3.27	2.16*** (.10)	1.97 – 2.35	2.40*** (.10)	1.21 – 2.62	2.12*** (.10)	1.94 – 2.32
Org. membership	1.43*** (.08)	1.28 – 1.60	1.43*** (.09)	1.28 – 1.61	1.44*** (.08)	1.28 – 1.61	1.44*** (.08)	1.28 – 1.61
Pol. sophistication	1.40*** (.03)	1.34 – 1.47	1.40*** (.04)	1.33 – 1.47	1.40*** (.03)	1.33 – 1.46	1.40*** (.04)	1.33 – 1.47
Turnout on the previous election	6.53*** (.28)	6.00 – 7.11	6.06*** (.28)	5.55 – 6.62	6.21*** (.28)	5.70 – 6.78	6.06*** (.27)	5.55 – 6.62
Party evaluations			1.21*** (.01)	1.19 – 1.24			1.16*** (.01)	1.13 – 1.19
Leader evaluations					1.18*** (.01)	1.15 – 1.20	1.07*** (.01)	1.04 – 1.10
N	26313		25365		25841		25176	

* p< .05; **p< .01; ***p< .001
Standard errors between brackets

In block 2, voters' evaluations of their most liked party were replaced by voters' evaluations of their most like leader, which proves to have a statistically significant impact on turnout. This results in a small increase of the effect size of the degree of party identification, although still quite distant from the coefficient of the baseline model. The other covariates remain almost unchanged. The most important conclusion to draw from the comparison of the results from block 2 with block 1 is related to the fact that party and leader evaluations have virtually the same effect size, which suggests that short-term evaluations of leaders *vis-à-vis* parties are of similar importance for turnout: for each point increase in the leader likeability scale, the chances of turning out to vote increase by 18%.

The rationale underlying block 2 and the full model derives from the assumption that voters evaluate both parties and leaders performances on the run and do not rely, at least exclusively, in their long term affiliations towards a political party. Inasmuch as leaders are perceived as secondary when compared to political parties, what is tested in the full model consists of a fairly strong test for the impact of leader evaluations on turnout. The fact that leader evaluations are still significant and have a non-negligible effect on turnout, despite probably being underestimated because of the abovementioned reasons, attests the relevance of this variable for turnout models.

In the full model, the increase in the probability to turn out for an average individual who rates his preferred leader on the first point of the scale (0) compared to an average individual who rates his preferred leader on the last point of the scale (10) is about 7 percentage points (Figure 1). Moreover, this increase is quite constant along the entire scale, therefore not being attributable to extreme values or evaluations concentrated exclusively on the negative or positive side of the scale. The histogram in the background of Figure 1 reflects the distribution of the leader evaluations variable. The distribution is substantially skewed towards the higher values of the scale given the nature of the variable, which intentionally selected the each respondent's *most liked* leader. Despite the lower amount of cases in the first points of the scale, this did not affect too much the confidence intervals. Hence, leader evaluations do have a relevant impact on the probability to turnout regardless of the introduction of strong controls such as party evaluations, party identification and turnout on the previous election. What is more, this effect is indistinguishable across the respondents' degree of party identification, supporting a global effect across the electorate. These results point towards the inclusion of voters' assessments of candidates in turnout models as a relevant explanatory variable.

Figure 1 - Effect of leader evaluations on turnout (Average Adjusted Probabilities – 21 countries)
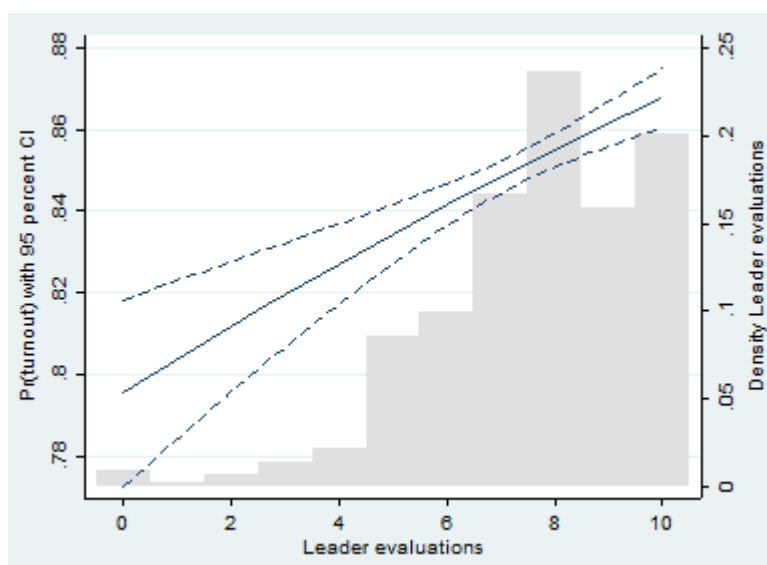
Another point worth mentioning regarding the results from the full model refers to the role of party evaluations compared to the degree of party identification. Despite the mentioned endogeneity between leader and party evaluations, the latter still has a much larger effect on turnout than the degree of party identification. Globally, these results point out the relevance of short-term assessments of both party and leaders for voters' decisions to turn out. The increase in the probability to turn out from an average individual who rates his preferred party on the first point of the scale (0) compared to an average individual who rates his preferred leader on the last point of the scale (10) is about 18 percentage points. Conversely, the increase in the probability to turn out from an average individual without party identification compared to an individual with party identification is around 8 percentage points.[13] Therefore, the effect of party identification is lower than party evaluations and is at odds with leader evaluations. Furthermore, even if we only consider the positive side of the party evaluations scale, its effect is still around 9 percentage points, thus higher than party identification. This is a relevant finding in the sense that the structural attachments towards a political party embodied in party identification are generally considered as a key variable in explaining turnout. The fact that its effects are surpassed by short-term evaluations of parties and levelled by those of leaders is revealing of the importance of short-term assessments in the process of voting decision.

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[13] For a graphic comparison of these results please refer to Figure 2, in the next section.

6. Robustness tests

In order to validate the conclusions derived from the results of the empirical analysis, a number of robustness testes were carried. Two interaction models were tested in addition to the ones presented in Table 1. They established an interaction between the party identification and leader evaluations, as well as an interaction between having voted on the previous election and leader evaluations. The rationale subjacent to these interactions is related to the dealignment theory, according to which voters without party identification are more detached from partisan bonds and thus consider more short-term factors such as the personal appeal of political leaders in their voting decisions. Voters who did not vote for the previous election are more likely to be structurally dealigned and thus more influenced by factors such as political leaders rather than party evaluations. None of the interactions yielded significant results, indicating that the impact of voters' evaluations of political leaders on the probability to turn out is independent of the voting behaviour on the previous election and affects voters irrespective of their degree of party identification.

The models presented in Table 1 were also replicated after having added the variable *campaign involvement*, which had not been previously included because this variable (nor any possible proxy) was not part of the Module 4 of the CSES, and thus its inclusion would imply a reduction of the number of countries to 14. The results for the full model are almost identical to the 21 countries solution – the overall variation in the marginal effects of the leader evaluations is smaller by 2 percentage points (Appendix 1 and 2). Global model fit improved by .03, which is likely to be due to the shrinkage of the sample of countries.

Finally, the *party identification* variable was replaced by *strength of party identification* (0: No party identification; 1: Not very close; 2: Somewhat close; 3: Very close) and the results were virtually indistinguishable.

Figure 2 depicts a graphical comparison of the marginal effects of leader evaluations, party evaluations and party identification on turnout. This allows for a better understanding of the consequences of different model estimations on the marginal effects of the key independent variables. The vertical lines represent the overall increase in the predicted probability to turnout across the variation in the scale of each variable. In the leader and party evaluations it reflects the increase from 0 until the 10th point of the leader/party like-dislike scale; for the dichotomous

measure of party identification it reflects the change in predicted probabilities from not having a party identification to having a party identification.[14]

Figure 2 - Compared marginal effects of leader evaluations, party evaluations, and party identification on turnout (full model)
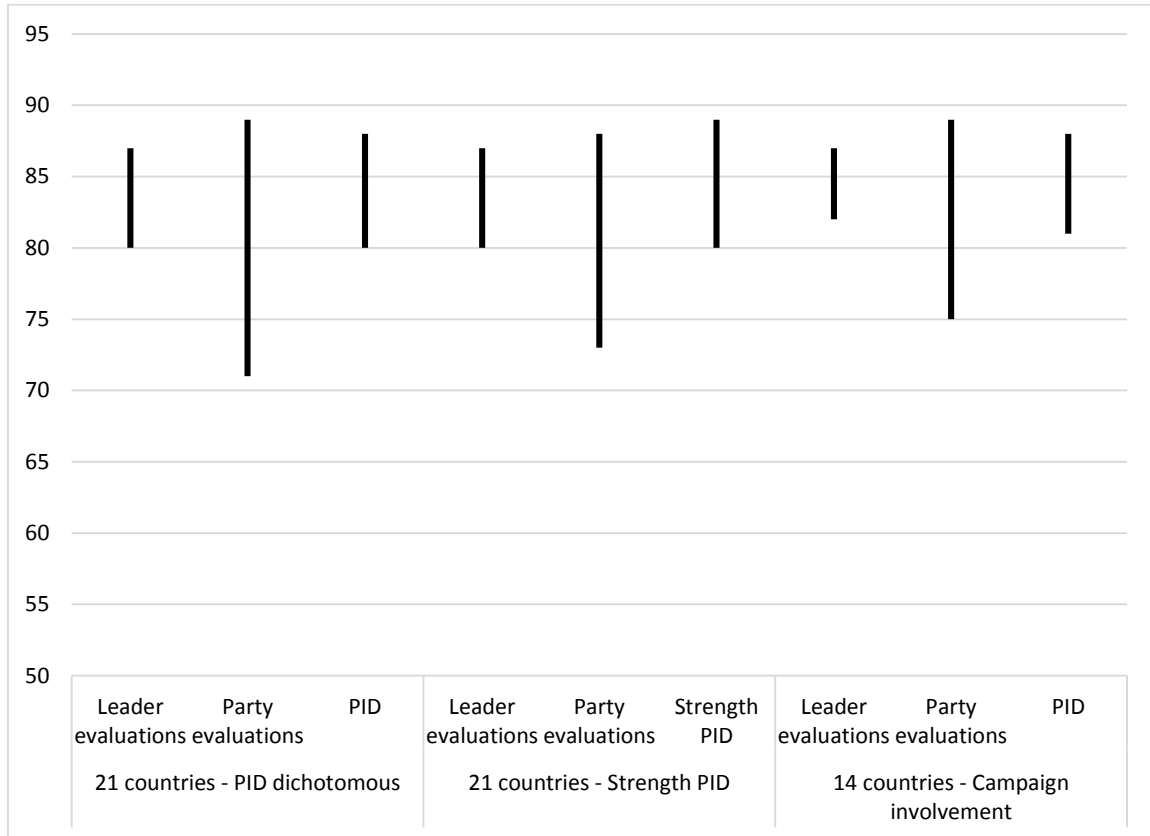
The several robustness tests confirm the results presented in section 5. Leader evaluations are statistically significant in all the models tested and its effect size varies only slightly across the different models. In addition, party evaluations prove to have a higher effect on turnout vis-à-vis party identification (regardless of how the latter is coded). Remarkably, this is true even if we consider only the positive half of the party evaluation scale (from 5 upwards).

7. Conclusions

This paper aimed at assessing the importance of voters' evaluations of political leaders on turnout with a two-fold objective: on the one hand, demonstrate that leaders have a potential

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[14] With regard to strength of party identification, the change in the predicted probabilities did not correspond to a linear increase. Predicted probabilities to turnout were 80% for non-identifiers, 89% for weak identifiers and those somewhat identified and 85% for strong identifiers. The lines in the graph report the minimum and maximum values, thus disregarding the decrease in the last category.

as mobilising political agents and thus can have positive normative implications for contemporary democracies; on the other hand, by providing evidence of a general trend common to several Western democracies where leaders have an effect on turnout, call for a more frequent consideration of variables related to candidates on turnout models.

The results have confirmed the hypothesis that leaders have an effect on turnout. Leaders were found to matter and to have substantial impacts on the probability to turn out in parliamentary elections. This 21 country analysis reveals that this trend is transversal across several Western democracies. Furthermore, leaders were found to impact turnout irrespective of voters' party identification, indicating they have a positive effect on turnout for all types of voters.

In addition, party evaluations have also been found to be a noticeably relevant predictor. Although – contrarily to leader evaluations – this was not a complete novelty among studies on the topic, its relative impact, particularly in contrast with party identification, corroborate the importance of voters' short-term considerations compared to structural determinants of turnout. This conclusion was also reinforced by the findings on the effect of leader evaluations, attesting the shift from long-term to short-term determinants of vote choice, together with an individualisation of voting behaviour, as described by the dealignment theory.

This study opens some avenues for further research on the topic. First, following this mobilising potential just described, regarding its positive normative consequences, it would be interesting to determine which aspects of voters' assessments of candidates drive them to turnout. Are these voters triggered by apolitical features or can leaders communicate party platforms more efficiently, vouch for a competent government leadership or even voice voters' demands in their public interventions in a way that develops a more personal identification than with regard to a political party? Second, as was already suggested, additional research should replicate this study using panel data to fully understand to what extent can leaders bring back into voting those individuals which have repeatedly abstained for a long period of time and, therefore, could be considered as structurally dealigned. Additionally, the use of panel data would allow for a better perception of the role of party and leader short-term evaluations across time, that is, to what extent have these variables been becoming more relevant over the past decades – in parallel with the process of dealignment – in comparison with long-term determinants of turnout. Naturally, given the scarcity of panel data, this could only be achieved in respect to fewer countries than the ones analysed here.

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Appendix

1. Logistic regression with fixed country effects (14 country model, controlling for *campaign involvement*)

	Baseline model		Block 1		Block 2		Full model	
	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI	OR	OR 95% CI
Age	1.01*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01	1.01*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01	1.01*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01	1.00*** (.00)	1.01 – 1.01
Education	1.00 (.00)	1.00 – 1.01	1.00 (.00)	1.00 – 1.02	1.00 (.00)	1.00 – 1.01	1.00 (.00)	1.00 – 1.02
Political efficacy	1.23*** (.02)	1.18 – 1.28	1.18*** (.02)	1.14 – 1.23	1.19*** (.02)	1.15 – 1.24	1.18*** (.02)	1.13 – 1.23
Party identification	2.76*** (.15)	2.48 – 3.06	2.07*** (.12)	1.85 – 2.33	2.33*** (.13)	2.08 – 2.60	2.07*** (.12)	1.85 – 2.33
Org. membership	1.40*** (.09)	1.24 – 1.59	1.42*** (.09)	1.25 – 1.61	1.42*** (.09)	1.25 – 1.61	1.42*** (.09)	1.25 – 1.62
Pol. sophistication	1.26*** (.04)	1.19 – 1.34	1.26*** (.04)	1.18 – 1.34	1.24*** (.04)	1.17 – 1.32	1.25*** (.04)	1.18 – 1.33
Turnout on the previous election	6.05*** (.33)	5.42 – 6.74	5.65*** (.32)	5.05 – 6.32	5.82*** (.33)	5.21 – 6.50	5.66*** (.32)	5.05 – 6.33
Camp. involvement	.51*** (.02)	.48 – .55	.55*** (.02)	.51 – .59	.55*** (.02)	.51 – .59	.56*** (.02)	.52 –. 60
Party evaluations			1.18*** (.02)	1.15 – 1.21			1.14*** (.02)	1.10 – 1.18
Leader evaluations					1.14*** (.01)	1.11 – 1.17	1.05** (.02)	1.02 – 1.09
N	17471		16677		17104		16522	

2. Marginal effects of leader evaluations on turnout (Average Adjusted Probabilities – 14 country model, controlling for *campaign involvement*)