

Electoral Systems, Party Mobilisation and Political Engagement

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Electoral systems are assumed to enhance political efficacy and encourage participation through party mobilisation because they create incentives for parties (or candidates) to mobilise voters. This paper makes use of survey data collected after elections in more than 30 countries, spanning a variety of party systems in both established and new democracies, to examine how party mobilisation varies across context and what difference it makes. The results demonstrate that political efficacy and behaviour are enhanced when parties mobilise voters. This is most likely to occur in systems where parties compete in a narrow issue space. In contrast, citizens are less likely to come into contact with parties in polarised systems. This has consequences for both political attitudes and engagement.

Keywords: comparative electoral studies; multi-party systems; party mobilisation; political attitudes; political efficacy; political engagement; voter turnout

A long tradition within political science has identified the importance of party mobilisation efforts for voter turnout. Such work, which has often employed an experimental approach, has tended to focus on the impact of campaign work, through various methods such as mail, telephone or doorstep on voter willingness to turn out (Gerber and Green 2000). Typically, these studies have been made within the context of a single country, usually Britain or the US (Bochel and Denver 1971). This study moves beyond a single system to compare mobilisation across more than 30 countries with different electoral systems in order to examine questions about the level and kind of mobilisation efforts that take place and what impact they have on political attitudes and engagement. This analysis is of special importance to electoral reformers who have long assumed that systematic changes have the potential to promote significant increases in citizens' engagement with, and perceived efficacy toward, the electoral process and democracy itself and hence represent a desirable course of action in times of eroding political trust and confidence.

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One of the most consistent findings in studies that examine voter turnout in a comparative perspective is that systems with proportional representation (PR) have higher turnout than plurality systems (Lijphart 1999). Although both the model specification and the selection of cases vary significantly from one study to another, proportional representation systems appear to have an advantage of anywhere between 3 per cent and 12 per cent (Blais and Carty 1990; Blais and Dobrzynska 1998; Jackman 1987).

A common explanation for this advantage is that PR systems motivate more citizens to vote because fewer votes are wasted. In addition, PR systems often produce more parties, which can lead to greater choice and possibly greater competition. Parties will contact more voters where the extra votes are more likely to produce extra seats (Cox 1999). In a more crowded electoral space with more parties competing for votes, parties should expend greater efforts in mobilising voters.

On the other hand, PR rules may mean that mobilisation efforts are less efficient than under plurality or 'winner-take-all' rules. In plurality systems, a small change in votes in a competitive district has the potential to affect the outcome of the race. Thus, the payoff for parties investing their resources in mobilisation efforts may be considerable because more can be gained or lost. In contrast, under PR, the investment in resources necessary to mobilise additional voters that will result in an extra seat is not as clear, in which case parties will have less of an incentive to mobilise voters. If parties are not as likely to invest in mobilisation efforts then PR's turnout advantage has little to do with mobilisation (see Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2008). Of course these efforts are constrained by organisational resources (i.e., funds and membership) as well as the social connectedness of the party (see Janda 1993) and knowledge and experience (Denemark 2003). Nevertheless, parties should be sensitive to the electoral rules and invest greater resources when the stakes are higher.

Despite the extensive research on electoral system and institutional features of voter turnout, we still know little about how electoral rules influence political engagement. In addition, not much attention has been paid to how institutional factors influence political activity other than voting, which takes the least amount of effort and is the most common form of participation. We attempt to fill this gap by considering how political and institutional features encourage more active forms of political participation.

Party Competition

Although past research on contextual influences on political participation has tended to focus exclusively on voter turnout, there are reasons to expect similar contextual factors to be influential on other forms of participation (for an exception see Powell 1986) in part because there tends to be a strong link between voting and other types of activity. A common explanation for voter apathy has focused on the lack of choice confronting voters. In systems with only two parties, voters may be faced with a choice between two catch-all parties that appear to offer very little difference between them. When there are greater differences between parties, electoral outcomes are likely to be more meaningful and citizens may as a result be more engaged in the process. Dalton (2008) has argued that party polarisation or the differentiation of choices

offered to voters is one of the main intervening variables linking electoral institutions to political behaviour. Kittilson and Anderson (2011) found that when parties take on more ideologically distinct positions, citizens are offered clearer choices that can, at least indirectly, influence the decision of whether or not to vote.

Citizens may also develop stronger preferences for parties that cater more specifically to them. In systems that foster extreme parties, voters develop stronger attachments (Bowler, Lanoue and Savoie 1994). Past research has also shown that voters with strong party attachments are more likely to be interested in politics and more likely to vote (Campbell et al. 1960; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978). Having a policy connection to a party can also increase the likelihood of participating (see for example Blais 2000). One theory regarding participation in politics is related to the expressive benefits one derives from engagement – in other words, citizens derive satisfaction from expressing a preference for a political party or candidate. We might think strong partisans then would derive greater satisfaction from expressing preferences through participating in politics.¹ Political participation is also likely to be affected by party activity. Political parties can help to facilitate participation by encouraging citizens to become more engaged in the political process. Cross-national studies demonstrate that party contacting increases the probability of citizens participating in the political process (Karp and Banducci 2011; Kittilson and Anderson 2011). Other studies demonstrate that party mobilisation can extend beyond voting to other campaign activities (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2003). Greater competition may also increase the chances that citizens come into contact with political parties.

Parties may devote resources in order to mobilise those who are already predisposed to support them or they may try to expand their base by converting other citizens to support their cause. Of the two strategies, party mobilisation is likely to be a more effective strategy. It is far easier to get citizens to the polls if they are inclined to support a party, than expending the effort converting voters who have already decided to vote for another party. Moreover, parties everywhere have an incentive to reduce the costs of mobilisation efforts by targeting probable voters and targeting voters that are less costly to reach. Evidence from previous analysis of cross-national data suggests that parties are more likely to pursue this mobilisation strategy than a conversion strategy (Karp, Banducci and Bowler 2008).

In polarised systems, where citizens are likely to have stronger partisan attachments, a conversion strategy is also likely to be less effective. As a result, parties may have less incentive to contact new supporters to expand their base in polarised systems. For these reasons we might expect that when the party system is ideologically polarised, efforts aimed at conversion will be less effective as voters will already be more committed to a particular party that more closely matches preferences.

The discussion above suggests that differences in electoral competition should make a difference to both citizens' attitudes and behaviour. First, a larger

¹Whiteley (1995) made a similar argument when he suggested that those who hold radical ideological beliefs gain greater satisfaction from political protest because they can express deeply held political beliefs alongside like-minded citizens.

number of parties should increase the options from which voters can choose, which should lead to a greater sense of efficacy and a greater satisfaction with the political process. This should also motivate more citizens to become politically active. Apart from the number of parties, polarisation should also affect mobilisation efforts. Given that parties engage in mobilisation (contacting efforts) where the payoff in terms of more votes (and more seats) is likely to be greatest, we might also expect parties to make less of an effort where party attachments are stronger because less effort is needed to get a potential supporter to get out and vote. Thus, in polarised systems parties should have less of an incentive to mobilise voters because less effort is needed to mobilise voters. In less polarised systems, where districts are more heterogeneous, there may be greater uncertainty about electoral support which may give parties a stronger incentive to engage in party activity.

Data

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) provides a useful source of data for testing these hypotheses. Module 2 of the CSES, which was fielded in over 40 election studies between 2001 and 2006, is the only module to include a question about party mobilisation. This analysis is based on more than 30 elections in different countries.² Contextual indicators of electoral competition include party polarisation and the effective number of parties. Polarisation is a measure of the ideological dispersion of parties along the left/right scale weighted by their size. The estimates for the location of the parties are derived from the average placement made by respondents within each nation weighted by the vote share for each party (see Dalton and Anderson 2011, 14–16). The measure is thus based on voter perceptions of where the parties are located on the ideological continuum, which is arguably more relevant than other commonly used sources such as elite or manifesto data particularly when one is interested in evaluating how well citizens feel they are being represented (Golder and Stramski 2010).

Mobilisation is measured in the CSES module by asking respondents to recall whether ‘During the last campaign did a candidate or anyone from a political party contact you to persuade you to vote for them?’³ Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between party contact and polarisation. The figure shows a strong negative relationship indicating that parties are reluctant to engage in broad-based canvassing efforts in polarised systems. The most polarised systems include Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Spain and Bulgaria. With the exception of the Czech Republic, all of these countries have low levels of contact. In comparison, party contact is very high in the Philippines, Ireland, Canada, Brazil and the US where polarisation is comparatively low. Figure 1

²The number of countries varies from one model to another since not all questions were asked in all elections studies. For specifics see notes below.

³Unfortunately, the question does not specify the nature of the contact, whether it was a personal visit, telephone call, or campaign letter. The question asks about contact from a candidate or party; therefore, we are likely to capture campaign contacts in both candidate-based and party list systems. However, we cannot distinguish who made the actual contact in order to test whether more candidate (vs. party) contacts are made in candidate-based systems or whether parties were contacting their own supporters.

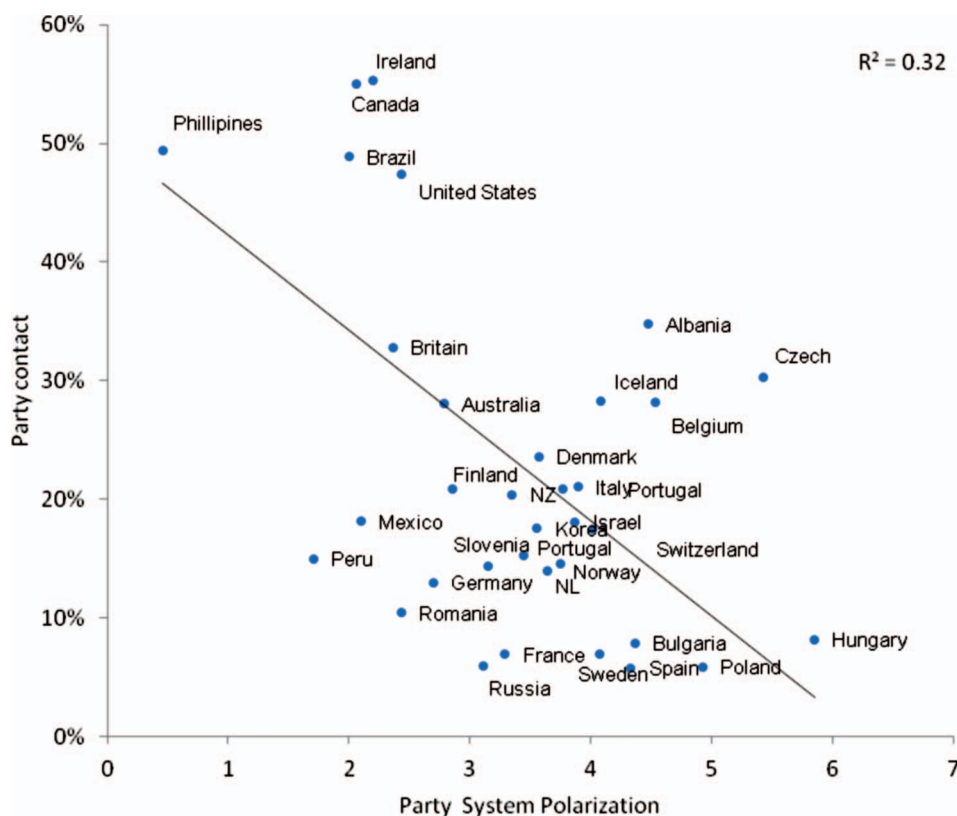


Figure 1. Party System Polarisation and Party Contact.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

suggests that parties in polarised systems may follow a more targeted strategy by contacting only their own supporters in order to mobilise them to participate. Nevertheless, there is still a considerable amount of variance in contact among countries with similar levels of polarisation. As Figure 1 illustrates relationships at the aggregate or country level only, the next step is to examine whether at the individual level and using party polarisation as a contextual variable the same relationships hold.

Explaining Party Mobilisation

To examine what factors influence mobilisation, a model is estimated that includes both contextual and individual-level variables. Along with polarisation, the model includes the following contextual variables: the effective number of parties, the candidate-party orientation of the electoral system, established or new democracy, and whether the election is only legislative, presidential, or both.⁴ The effective number of parties is based on the measure devised by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) which takes into account both the number and

⁴New democracies, candidate-based systems, and presidential elections are measured as dichotomous variables taking on a value of 1 and 0.

the size of parties within any given nation. Since candidate-based systems appear to be associated with higher mobilisation (see Figure 1), a dummy variable is used to control for these effects, where 1 indicates whether voters have the opportunity to select candidates running either in single-member districts or appearing on open lists and 0 represents closed party lists. Another dummy variable is used to control for democratic development based on earlier findings that suggest that contact is lower in new democracies (Karp and Banducci 2007). New democracies are classified as those with less than 20 years of continuous democratic rule. Most of the elections in the sample are legislative elections; only 3 of the 36 elections are presidential only, while six held presidential elections concurrent with legislative elections.⁵ Finally, a dummy variable for compulsory voting is used, based on the assumption that parties will have less incentive to contact voters when compulsory voting rules are in place.⁶

As for the individual-level determinants of party mobilisation, we include factors that are assumed to influence party activity. The CSES measure of party contact (as described above) does not explicitly ask whether parties or candidates attempted to encourage their supporters to go to the polls. Nevertheless, if parties are following this strategy then they will contact those who are more likely to support the party, such as their own partisans. On the other hand, if parties adopt a conversion strategy they should be expected to contact non-partisans who will be more easily persuaded to change their minds. This can be tested by including a measure of whether a citizen feels close to a political party, which is analogous to the measure of party identification used in the American National Election Study (Barnes et al. 1988).

Not only would we expect partisans to have stronger preferences but we would also expect parties to be more likely to contact partisans than non-partisans if their strategy is to mobilise voters. On the other hand, if parties adopt a conversion strategy they should be expected to contact non-partisans who will be more easily persuaded to change their minds. Parties may target those who are likely to vote, such as those with higher levels of education and older voters. Union membership and gender are also included in the model to assess whether parties are adopting a targeted approach.

The CSES dataset pools national election studies from a (non-random) set of countries, which means that individuals are clustered (by country) within the dataset. If individuals living within each country share common characteristics on unmeasured variables, as they are likely to do, the assumption that the error variance will be independent is violated. Because individuals are sampled from within units (countries), most conventional methods of estimation will underestimate standard errors, particularly at the macro country level, leading to a higher probability of rejection of a null hypothesis. To relax the assumption of independence, a random intercept model is used that includes both fixed effects and a random effect. Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, the xtlogit function in STATA is used to estimate a random-intercept logistic regression model.

⁵Taiwan, France and Russia held only presidential elections while Brazil, Chile, Peru, Philippines, Romania and the US held presidential elections concurrent with legislative elections.

⁶Countries with compulsory voting include Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Italy and Peru.

The results are displayed in Table 1. To facilitate the interpretation of the logit coefficients in the model, the expected probability of being contacted is reported for each of the independent variables holding all other variables constant at their mean values. As we have seen above, citizens in the most polarised systems have little chance (.08) of being contacted. In comparison, in the least polarised systems, the probability of being contacted is .41. In contrast, the coefficient for the effective number of parties fails to reach significance, indicating that electoral differentiation is more important than the quantity of choices. As Figure 1 reveals, countries with candidate-based systems (i.e., Philippines, Ireland, US) appeared to be associated with greater contact but the coefficient for candidate-based systems is not statistically significant. Citizens have little chance of being contacted in elections where the president is the only contested race. In comparison, citizens have a probability of being contacted of .20 in legislative-only contests. Most likely this reflects the fact that citizens are more likely to come into contact with parties or candidates competing within local geographic districts than candidates competing on a national basis.

As for the individual-level factors, partisans, as expected, are more likely to be contacted, which suggests that parties are adopting a mobilisation strategy rather than a conversion strategy when they contact voters. The sign for education is also positive, indicating that those with higher levels of education are more likely to report being contacted. Moreover, the effects are considerable: a person with the highest level of education is about twice as likely to be contacted as a person with the lowest level of education. Together these results indicate that parties are more likely to adopt a mobilisation strategy and target those who are already predisposed to vote.

Table 1. Explaining Party Mobilisation: Logit Coefficients

(Random Intercept Model) Individual-level	Contact		Minimum Value of Independent Variable [†]	Maximum Value of Independent Variable [†]
	Coef.	Std Error		
Close to a party	0.39***	(0.02)	0.16	0.22
Age (in 10s)	0.00	(0.01)	0.18	0.19
Female	-0.13***	(0.02)	0.19	0.17
Education	0.09***	(0.01)	0.13	0.24
Country-level				
Polarise	-0.36**	(0.18)	0.41	0.08
Candidate-based system	0.47	(0.48)	0.13	0.20
Effective number of parties	0.03	(0.14)	0.14	0.15
New democracy	0.20	(0.40)	0.17	0.20
Presidential election	-1.50**	(0.73)	0.20	0.05
Presidential election (concurrent)	-0.02	(0.67)	0.18	0.19
Compulsory voting	0.33	(0.70)	0.17	0.23
Constant	-1.47*	(0.97)		
Standard deviation of the intercept	1.08	(0.15)		
Number of countries	36			
Number of individuals	56,064			

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

[†]Probabilities are estimated holding all other variables constant at their means.

Political Attitudes and Engagement

As discussed above, party mobilisation should affect both political attitudes and engagement. Parties will contact citizens to encourage them to participate. This should serve as a reminder to citizens that their vote makes a difference, which should make them feel more efficacious. Aside from efficacy, citizens may feel a greater sense of satisfaction when they are encouraged to be part of the political process. To test these hypotheses, we rely on the following items. As a measure of political efficacy, we use the following question: 'Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a difference to what happens.'⁷ This question is the most direct measure of evaluations of the efficacy of a vote available and, thus, how the electoral system translates votes into seats. In terms of face validity, this question asks respondents to evaluate the meaningfulness of voting, a component of elections as an accountability mechanism, and, therefore, should be the most direct measure of the feelings of efficacy that can be attributed to the act of voting. Another question unique to the CSES is an item asking respondents whether they think that elections reflect the views of citizens.⁸ This measure can be interpreted as another indicator of political efficacy. The CSES also includes a more general question designed to measure attitudes about the democratic process. This measure, which asks citizens whether they approve or disapprove of the way democracy works in their country, frequently appears on Eurobarometer and World Values surveys and is intended to measure support for the political system (Karp and Bowler 2001; Norris 1999).

Figures 2a, 2b and 2c summarise responses to these measures across the countries in the sample.⁹ As can be seen by Figure 2a, there is a substantial degree of variance in satisfaction with democracy, with Denmark and Australia exhibiting the highest levels of satisfaction and Korea and Bulgaria having the lowest levels of satisfaction. As can be seen from 2b and 2c there is greater variation across countries in terms of attitudes about the importance of elections than perceptions of whether one vote matters. These figures, which also distinguish between countries with high and low degrees of polarisation, suggest that polarised countries have somewhat lower levels of satisfaction. In most of these polarised systems however, the proportion who believe their vote matters is just as high as the proportion in less polarised systems.

For political engagement we examine reported turnout as well as more active forms of political participation. This includes whether a respondent reports trying to persuade others to vote for a particular party or candidate. A third indicator, which represents more active political engagement, asks whether a respondent attended a meeting or put up a poster or showed support for a campaign in some other way.

⁷The question was not asked in the Netherlands.

⁸This question was not asked in Korea or Norway.

⁹We report the highest category of efficacy ranging on a scale of 1 to 5. Those classified as satisfied with democracy include very or fairly satisfied; similarly, those who responded that elections reflect the views of citizens very well or quite well are shown.

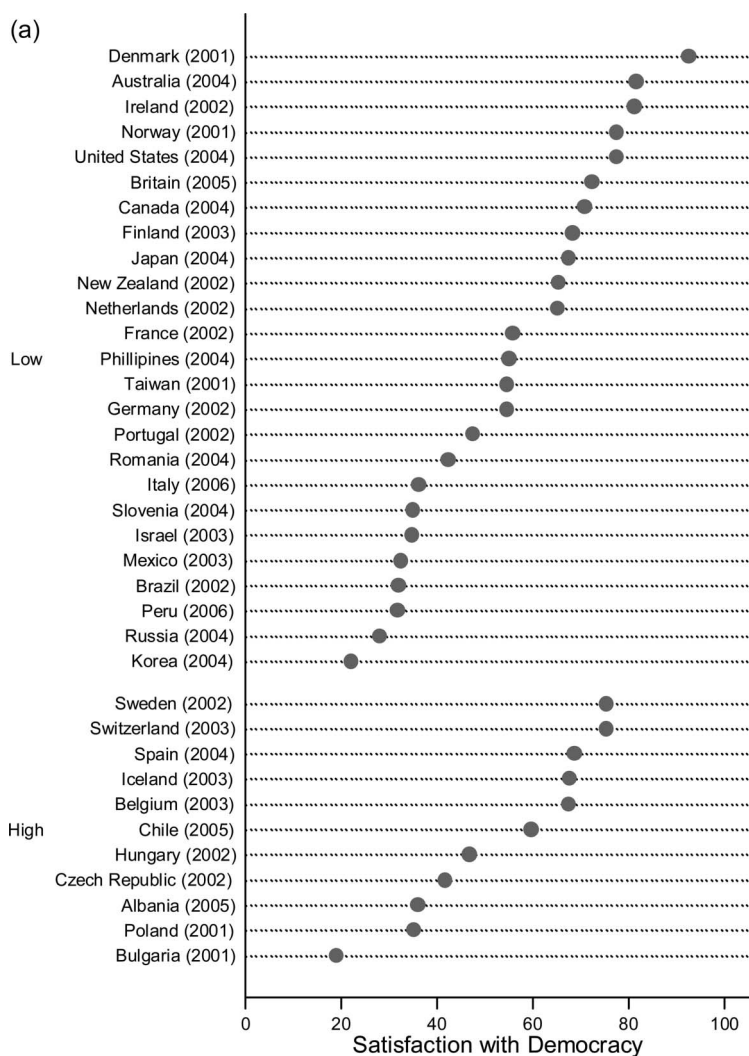


Figure 2a. Satisfaction with Democracy, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

Figures 3a, 3b and 3c summarise these measures of political engagement across countries. Voter turnout is of course the most common form of participation and varies from below 60 per cent in Poland to well over 90 per cent in the Netherlands and Denmark.¹⁰ As Figure 3c reveals, there is considerably more variation in reported turnout in the most highly polarised systems. While reported turnout is comparatively low in the US, the proportion engaging in other forms of political participation is unusually high, with over 40 per cent reporting having tried to persuade others to vote and more than a third reporting campaigning in some way. Canada has the highest proportion

¹⁰These figures are inflated when compared with official turnout; this is likely the result of over-reporting and selection bias in the surveys.

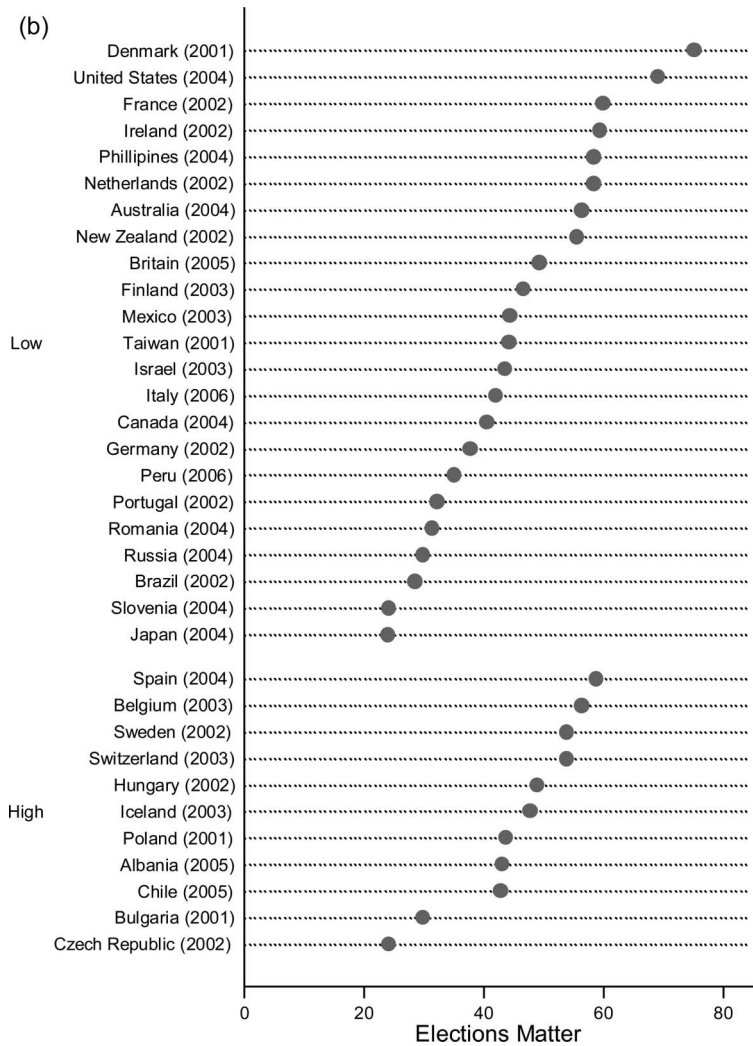


Figure 2b. Perception that Elections Matter, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

reporting trying to persuade others to vote, with more than 60 per cent, and 35 per cent report campaigning in some way (see Figure 3b). Albania is also an outlier, particularly in terms of campaign activity. In comparison, 20 per cent on average across the sample reported trying to persuade others to vote for a party or candidate while about 11 per cent reported having campaigned in some way. Less than 10 per cent reported to trying to persuade others prior to elections in Slovenia, Bulgaria, Poland, Spain, Italy and Mexico. While persuasion and campaign activity appear to be correlated, there are some exceptions. In Mexico, for example, the proportion reporting campaign activity is relatively high while the proportion reporting persuasion is comparatively low. These figures also suggest that there is more variance in engagement across countries with high levels of polarisation.

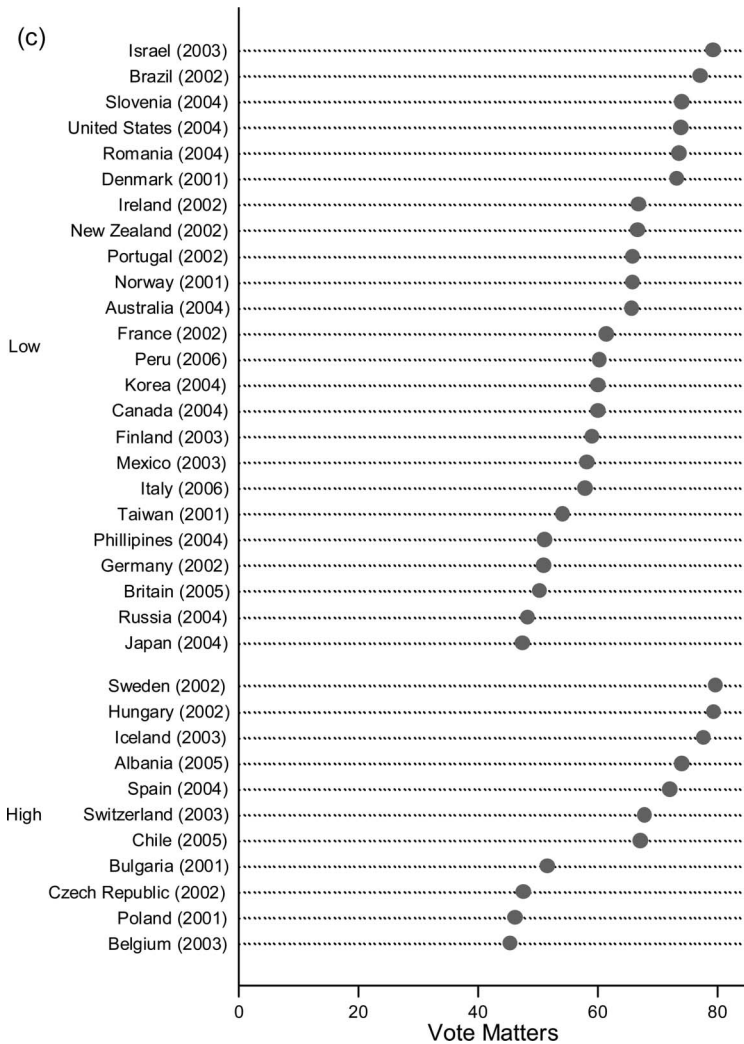


Figure 2c. Perception that Vote Matters, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

Explaining Differences in Attitudes and Engagement

The results in Table 1 suggest that parties are likely to contact individuals who are already predisposed to vote. To control for these factors, a model is estimated that includes several standard individual-level predictors of campaign activity that are routinely identified in the participation literature, such as age, gender and education. In addition, a measure of strength of preference is constructed using the party likes and dislikes scales. This measure is based on a series of items that measure evaluations of up to six parties employing a 10-point scale ranging from strongly like (10) to strongly dislike (1). The indicator of strength of preference is calculated by taking the highest value a respondent gives to a party (or two or more parties in some cases). In addition to the

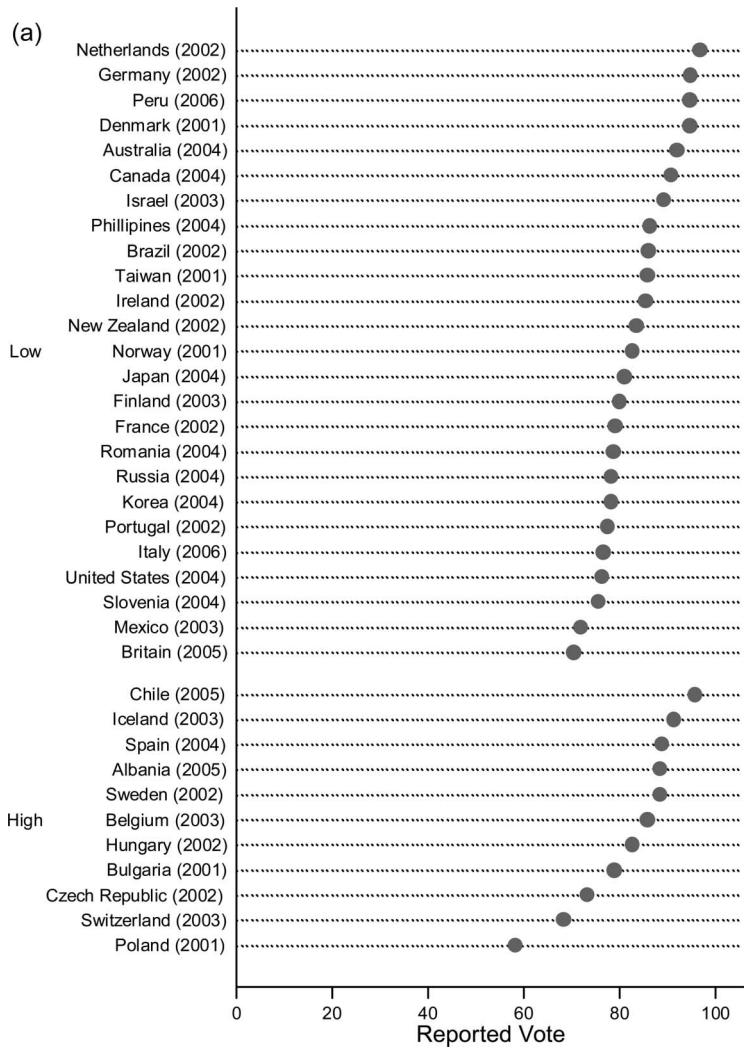


Figure 3a. Reported Vote, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

individual-level variables, the model includes the same contextual variables discussed above and included in the analysis in Table 1. All of the dependent variables are coded as dichotomous variables (as shown in Figures 2a, 2b and 2c and Figures 3a, 3b and 3c) so a random-intercept logistic regression model is used as described above.

Table 2 shows the results for political attitudes. Party contact has a positive and significant impact on both measures of political efficacy. Yet mobilisation does not appear to have any influence on satisfaction with democracy. Education is also positively associated with all three measures, indicating that those with higher levels of education are more likely to feel efficacious and more inclined to be satisfied with the political process. As for the contextual variables, the number of effective parties appears to reduce the likelihood that citizens feel

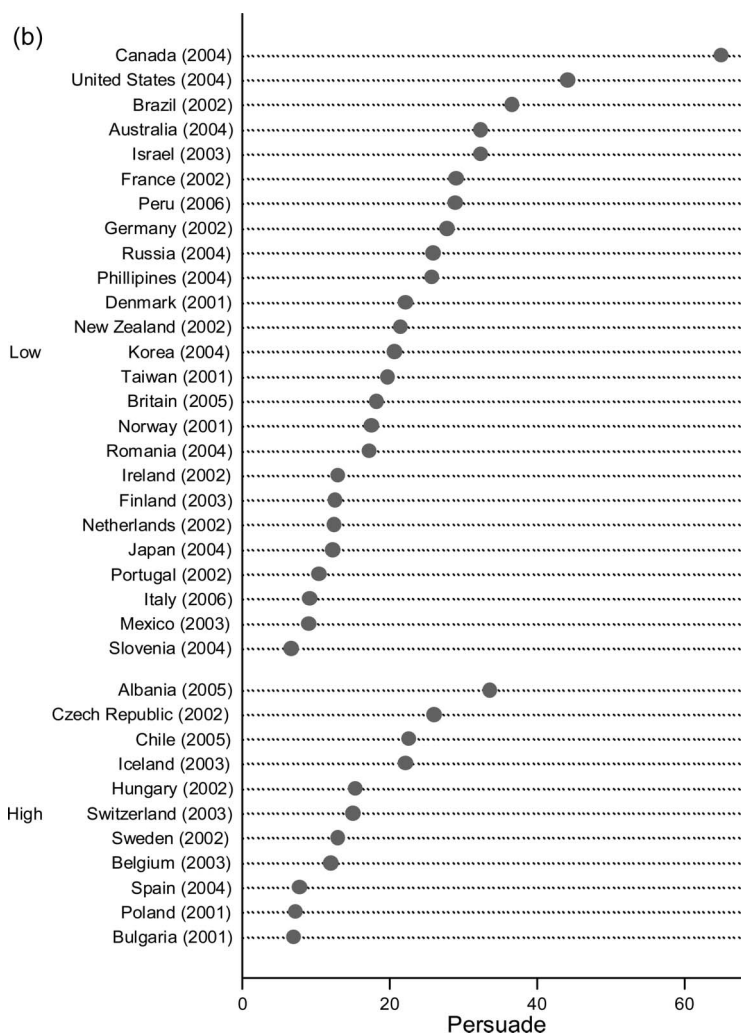


Figure 3b. Voter Persuasion, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

that elections represent the views of voters. In addition, the more parties there are, the less satisfied citizens are with the way democracy works. In newer democracies, citizens are less likely to feel satisfied with democracy and are less likely to believe that elections matter. There are, however, no significant differences in efficacy, indicating that citizens in new democracies are just as likely to believe their vote matters as those in established democracies. Neither polarisation nor candidate-based systems appear to have any direct impact on political attitudes. Compulsory voting also appears to make little difference.

Table 3 reports the findings for political engagement. Although factors associated with participation are included in the model, party mobilisation continues to have a strong and independent effect. The impact is strongest for the most active forms of engagement and weakest for voter turnout. As

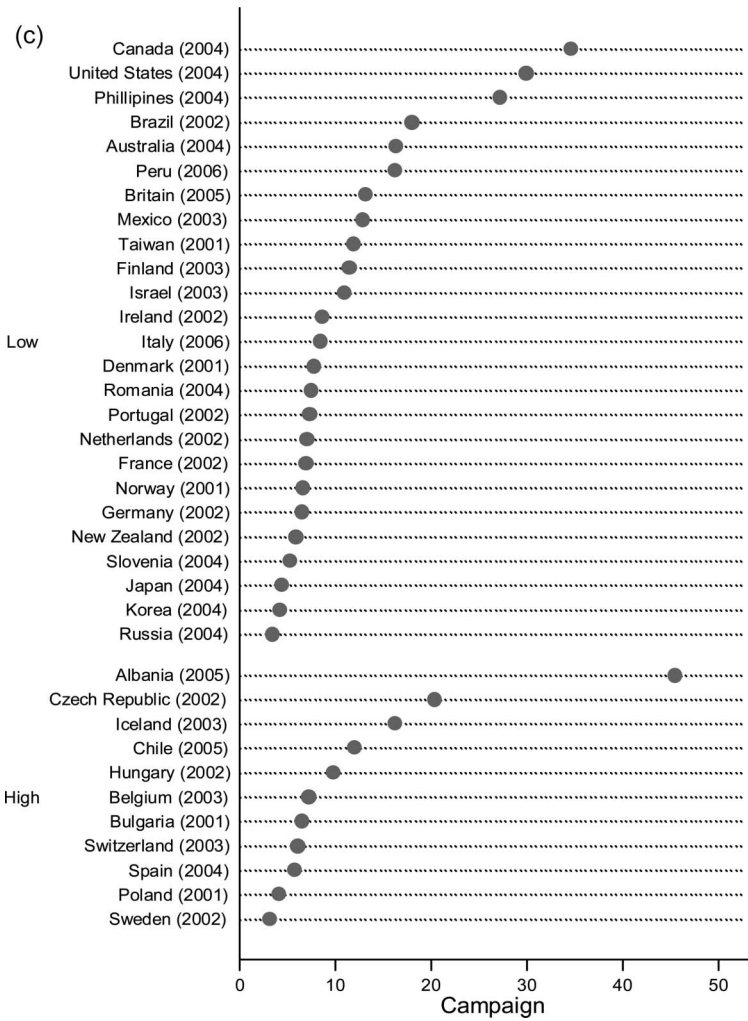


Figure 3c. Campaign Activity, by Country and Level of Polarisation.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

expected, individual-level factors such as education and party attachments are positively associated with all three measures of engagement. Age is also positively associated with voting and campaign activity. However, older persons appear to be less likely to engage in persuasive activities. Women also appear to be less likely to try to persuade others or participate in campaign activities. Both measures of political efficacy appear to have a positive influence on all forms of political participation. Of these, the belief that one's vote makes a difference is more strongly related to participation. Although satisfaction is positively related to turnout, it appears to be negatively related to persuasion and campaign activity. This suggests that dissatisfaction mobilises citizens to become more active in the political process while those who are satisfied become more complacent.

Table 2. Explaining Political Attitudes: Logit Coefficients

(Random Intercept Model)	Vote Matters		Elections Matter		Satisfaction with Democracy	
	Coef.	Std Error	Coef.	Std Error	Coef.	Std Error
Individual-level						
Party contact	0.19***	(0.03)	0.08***	(0.02)	0.02	(0.03)
Strength of preference	0.16***	(0.01)	0.16***	(0.01)	0.11***	(0.01)
Close to a party	0.42***	(0.02)	0.33***	(0.02)	0.22***	(0.02)
Age	0.00	(0.01)	-0.03***	(0.01)	-0.01**	(0.01)
Female	-0.07***	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)	-0.09***	(0.02)
Education	0.11***	(0.01)	0.03***	(0.01)	0.05***	(0.01)
Country-level						
Polarise	0.07	(0.07)	0.04	(0.08)	-0.10	(0.09)
Candidate-based system	-0.08	(0.19)	0.22	(0.20)	0.37	(0.23)
Effective number of parties	0.05	(0.06)	-0.10*	(0.06)	-0.11*	(0.07)
New democracy	-0.10	(0.15)	-0.74***	(0.16)	-1.36***	(0.20)
Presidential election	-0.20	(0.28)	0.19	(0.32)	-0.31	(0.36)
Concurrent election	0.57**	(0.26)	0.33	(0.27)	-0.03	(0.33)
Compulsory voting	-0.36	(0.28)	0.12	(0.28)	-0.02	(0.34)
Constant	-1.77***	(0.38)	-1.23***	(0.40)	0.34	(0.48)
Standard deviation of the intercept	0.41	(0.05)	0.42	(0.05)	0.53	(0.06)
Number of countries	35		33		36	
Number of individuals	51,019		46,356		51,475	

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

Table 3. Explaining Political Engagement: Logit Coefficients

(Random Intercept Model)	Reported Turnout		Persuasion		Campaign	
	Coef.	Std Error	Coef.	Std Error	Coef.	Std Error
Individual-level						
Party contact	0.43***	(0.04)	0.72***	(0.03)	1.04***	(0.03)
Vote matters	0.46***	(0.03)	0.28***	(0.03)	0.27***	(0.04)
Elections matter	0.26***	(0.03)	0.07***	(0.03)	0.21***	(0.03)
Satisfaction with democracy	0.10***	(0.03)	-0.13***	(0.03)	-0.12**	(0.04)
Strength of preference	0.15***	(0.01)	0.13***	(0.01)	0.15***	(0.01)
Close to a party	0.53***	(0.03)	0.73***	(0.03)	1.03***	(0.04)
Age	0.24***	(0.01)	-0.05***	(0.01)	0.04***	(0.01)
Female	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.27***	(0.03)	-0.26***	(0.03)
Education	0.15***	(0.01)	0.10***	(0.01)	0.08***	(0.01)
Country-level						
Polarise	-0.08	(0.10)	-0.03	(0.10)	0.01	(0.11)
Candidate-based system	-0.04	(0.26)	0.50*	(0.26)	0.33	(0.28)
Effective number of parties	-0.12	(0.08)	-0.04	(0.07)	-0.13	(0.08)
New democracy	-0.26	(0.21)	-0.43**	(0.21)	0.09	(0.23)
Presidential election	-0.11	(0.42)	0.81*	(0.42)	-0.44	(0.45)
Concurrent election	-0.19	(0.36)	0.86**	(0.35)	0.57	(0.38)
Compulsory voting	1.36***	(0.38)	0.07	(0.37)	0.41	(0.40)
Constant	-1.01**	(0.54)	-3.49***	(0.53)	-4.82***	(0.57)
Standard deviation of the intercept	0.54	(0.07)	0.54	(0.07)	0.58	(0.07)
Number of countries	32		32		32	
Number of individuals	43,678		43,840		43,189	

*** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 2 (2001–2006).

While nearly all of the individual-level variables are significant, few of the contextual variables appear to directly affect engagement. Neither polarisation nor the number of parties appears to have an impact on any of the three forms of engagement. Compulsory voting increases the likelihood of voting but none of the other contextual variables is significant. While none of the contextual variables affects campaign activity, citizens in candidate-based systems, presidential systems, and concurrent elections are more likely to engage in persuasive activities. In contrast, citizens in new democracies are less likely to try to persuade others to vote.

Conclusion

It has long been argued that electoral rules can affect both political attitudes and behaviour. This paper has examined how party competition affects how citizens come into contact with political parties and what impact party activity has on political attitudes and engagement.

The findings suggest that parties have less incentive to contact voters in systems where there is a high degree of differentiation between the parties. In such cases they may see little point in trying to convert voters from opposing parties that offer substantially different policy proposals from their own. Parties may also be more confident that they can rely on their distinct platforms to mobilise voters and forgo personal contact. In contrast, where parties compete in a more narrow issue space, a more competitive environment may exist where voters may be more easily courted. This would give parties a stronger incentive to reach out to their potential supporters in order to mobilise them. However there is little evidence that polarisation directly affects either political attitudes or engagement. This finding challenges Downs' (1957) expectation that voters are more likely to abstain when parties fail to offer a clear choice to voters. Rather, the results above suggest that the effects of polarisation are largely indirect and operate through mobilisation.

The findings also challenge some of the expectations discussed above about what impact the number of parties has on mobilisation efforts. Unexpectedly, the likelihood of being contacted by a party does not appear to be a function of the size of the party system. Citizens in two-party systems are just as likely to be contacted as those in multi-party systems. In addition, the number of parties appears to be unrelated to political engagement, suggesting that the turnout advantage seen in PR systems has little to do with multi-partyism. This suggests that, contrary to expectations, more parties do not produce a more competitive electoral environment that mobilises campaign activity. These results may explain why others have failed to find a positive relationship between multi-partyism and turnout (see Jackman 1987). If anything, multi-party systems appear to be associated with lower efficacy and lower satisfaction with democracy. This finding challenges the expectation that voters will have a greater sense of efficacy and satisfaction when they are presented with more choices. One possible explanation for this finding is that multi-partyism often results in the formation of coalition governments. Such broad-based power-sharing agreements have been shown to decrease political efficacy, presumably because voters may feel they have less say over the final outcome (see Karp and Banducci 2008).

The findings nevertheless provide consistent evidence that mobilisation affects both political attitudes and engagement. Citizens are more efficacious when they come into contact with parties. Moreover, even when controlling for efficacy, citizens who report being contacted are significantly more likely to engage in a variety of political activities. They are more likely to vote, even when controlling for other factors known to affect political participation. Party mobilisation has an even stronger influence on more active forms of participation, including trying to persuade others to vote and engaging in campaign activities. Together these findings, which are based on data from more than 30 countries and are thus one of the most comprehensive analyses to date, support the conclusion that party mobilisation, which is influenced by electoral rules and electoral competition, not only stimulates voter turnout but can also have a positive impact on political attitudes and other forms of political engagement.

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