

Article

## Do Leader Evaluations (De)Mobilize Voter Turnout? Lessons From Presidential Elections in the United States

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### Abstract

Do evaluations of presidential candidates in the US affect the level of voter turnout? Voters' affections towards presidential candidates, we contend, can either stimulate or inhibit voter inclinations to turnout. Voters are more inclined to turn out when they have positive feelings towards the candidate with which they identify because they want "their" candidate to win. But citizens may also be more likely to vote when they dislike the candidate of the party with which they do not identify. In that case, voters are motivated to prevent the candidate from being elected. Utilizing the American National Election Studies data for 1968–2020, the analysis finds that the likelihood of voting is affected by (a) the degree to which voters' affections towards the candidate differ from one another (having a clear-cut choice between options) and (b) the nature of the affections (negative or positive) towards both in- and out-party candidates.

### Keywords

leader evaluations; mobilization; presidentialization; turnout; US elections

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Leaders matter more now to electoral politics than they once did. This shift towards leader-centered electoral politics signifies the growing power of leaders vis-à-vis their political parties (Elgie & Passarelli, 2018; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Samuels & Shugart, 2010). This has been accompanied by the rise in candidate-centered campaigns and a greater focus on leader evaluations and personalities (Balmas et al., 2014). The significant comparative point is that these dynamics, which are characterized as the presidentialization of electoral politics, operate across different electoral systems and apply to parliamentary and presidential style regimes alike (Mughan, 2000; Norton, 2003; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). One conjecture is that the shifts to

the presidentialization of politics are attributable, among other things, to the joint effects of the erosion of the structural and ideological underpinnings of traditional political parties and the changing character of mass communications (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). The following investigation focuses on the American context, drawing on more than 50 years' worth of data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), and examines whether and how leader evaluations may have mobilized or demobilized voter turnout in that setting.

The article makes two main arguments: The first concerns the degree to which voters differentiate between candidates. Studies have demonstrated that voters who have clear ideological or affective evaluations of their electoral parties participate more than indifferent voters. But voters also care about political leaders when

casting their ballot. Therefore, we suggest that citizens with distinctive leader evaluations are more likely to vote than those who hold similar evaluations for the two candidates. The second argument considers the relationship between leader evaluations, partisanship, and voter turnout. Voters' affection towards party leaders, we contend, can serve as both a stimulating and inhibiting factor when it comes to turnout. The more nuanced conjecture is that the direction of the effect depends on party affiliation. Thus, we hypothesize about the differences between the effects of in-party leaders' evaluations and out-party leaders' evaluations on voters' turnout. Leaders can increase voting when voters have positive feelings towards the leader of the party they identify with because voters would want "their" candidate to win. Citizens may also be more likely to vote when they dislike the candidate of the out-party, as they want to prevent him/her from being elected. We attempt to evaluate the effect of affections towards both the in- and out-party candidates and their interactive effect.

We begin the article by describing the common predictors for voter turnout at the macro and the micro levels, then moving to portray the theoretical underpinnings of the assumed effects of leader evaluations on turnout. After introducing the data and variable measures, the analysis proceeds in three stages. The first examines the effect on the turnout of having a clear-cut choice between candidates. The second deals with evaluations of in- and out-party leaders as well as among independents and their effects on turnout. The third part delves into the more nuanced picture of interacted effects of in- and out-party leader evaluations. Our findings show that candidate evaluations clearly do matter for levels of turnout. Moreover, the effects vary according to partisanship and the type of affection the voter exhibits towards both her in- and out-party candidates. The analysis demonstrates that leader evaluations play a key role in mobilizing voters to the polls. It shows that citizens with a clear-cut choice between candidates tend to vote more than others and that people are mobilized to vote when they hold positive evaluations of their in-party candidate. Significantly, negative feelings for the out-party candidate mobilize voters only when they feel positively about their in-party candidate. The presidentialization hypothesis encourages the expectation that these effects may have become more magnified with the passage of time. The data, however, do not provide clear support for that contention. The article concludes by considering some of the broader implications of the findings.

## 2. Leader Evaluations and Turnout: Why and How?

### 2.1. Explanations for Voter Turnout

Voter turnout stood at 63% in the 1960 US presidential elections. That gradually dropped to 50% by 1996 and then experienced a modest uptick in 2020. Explanations for variations in voter participation rates

typically focus either on aggregate system-level characteristics or individual-level micro-foundations (Smets & van Ham, 2013). The pioneering investigations of Powell (1986) and Jackman (1987) both made the strong case that institutions decisively shape voter turnout rates. Jackman (1987) identified five features he thought to be particularly important: multipartyism, proportional representation (PR) electoral rules, unicameralism, electoral competitiveness, and compulsory voting. These seemed intuitively reasonable. PR systems appear "fairer," and multipartyism—the product of PR electoral rules—plausibly increases voter participation because citizens are presented with more choices. Few of these initial propositions, however, remain intact after subsequent scrutiny. Multiple studies show that the impact of PR electoral rules and multiparty arrangements on turnout is mixed at best (Blais, 2006; Geys, 2006). Rather, the presence of more parties makes the choices facing voters more complicated and outcomes harder to predict. The impact of unicameralism on turnout is also mixed. Jackman and Miller (1995) report positive effects, but then others (Blais & Carty, 1990; Radcliff & Davis, 2000) find no such effects whatsoever. Nor is there clear evidence that turnout is higher in federated systems (Stockemer, 2016). Compulsory voting rules do boost turnout but only in "old" democracies and when accompanied by sanctions (Norris, 1999). As rational choice theories would predict, turnout is indeed higher in "small" countries, when electoral districts are "small," and when elections are competitive (Franklin, 2004).

Macro-level considerations may well help to explain cross-national variations in voter turnout, but they are ill-equipped to account for within-country variations. In the case of the US, for example, federal structures have not changed, and the electoral rules and registration requirements are stable, as is the two-party system. And by no reasonable measure has the US qualified as "small." If macro-level considerations do not plausibly account for variations within country turnout, then which micro-considerations are likely important? There are several socioeconomic factors that have been amply demonstrated to be consistent predictors of individual-level variations in voter participation rates. And none is more important than education (Brady et al., 1995). Citizens with higher levels of formal participation vote more than their lesser-educated counterparts. Education is consistently related to efficacy and interest in politics. Interest, in turn, supplies the motivation to become informed, and it lowers the costs of participation. It comes as no surprise to find that education is also related, typically, to income levels, and wealthier citizens participate more than poorer ones (Verba et al., 1978). Also well documented is a persistent gender gap. That gap may be closing, but the prevailing finding is that men participate more than women, and women are substantially less likely than men to identify with a political party (Inglehart et al., 2003). Party identification, in turn, has a powerful impact both on vote choice and turnout. It provides

an affective template that helps citizens navigate their political worlds, and it provides partisans with information shortcuts about likes and dislikes (Bartels, 2000). Age also matters. Those at the front and back ends of the life cycle participate least; voting is more of a middle age sport (Glenn & Grimes, 1968). History counts, too: Voting in prior elections is a strong predictor of contemporary voter turnout (Fowler, 2006). The clear implication flowing from these collective results is that estimations of whether and how leader evaluations are related to voter turnout need to take into account these micro-foundations as well as citizens' partisan predilections.

## 2.2. Leader Evaluations, Partisanship, and Turnout: Theoretical Expectations

Much of the empirical evidence for leader effects on voting behavior has focused on vote choice (Aarts et al., 2011; Barisione, 2009; Garzia, 2012; Garzia & da Silva, 2021; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2022). These studies have demonstrated that voters consider leader-related calculations when making their electoral choices. However, if voters think of leaders and how they feel about them when casting their ballots, then these leader evaluations should also affect citizens' motivation to go to vote in the first place. Thus, leaders may play an important role in mobilizing—or demobilizing—citizens by motivating them to vote for positively evaluated leaders or against negatively evaluated leaders. Yet, despite the increasing role of leaders in electoral campaigns and voters' considerations, only little attention has been paid to what impact leader evaluations might have on voter turnout. Some recent evidence shows that leader evaluations may have had an increased impact on voter turnout in some European settings (da Silva, 2018; da Silva & Costa, 2019; da Silva et al., 2021). These studies indicate the increasing effect of citizens' evaluations of party leaders on the likelihood of voting, side by side with the declining effect of parties' evaluations. What is called for is a deeper investigation of the effect of leader evaluations in other contexts and across a much longer time span.

The idea that evaluative distances between voters matter derives from spatial theories that focus on ideological distance or issue positions (Lefkofridi et al., 2014; Simas & Ozer, 2021). Those same considerations have also been extended to candidate thermometers (Adams et al., 2006; Brody & Grofman, 1982; da Silva et al., 2021), although the findings from those investigations are inconclusive. There are several ways by which leader evaluations could be related to turnout. We begin by arguing that the way voters feel towards one leader vs. other leaders may indicate the degree to which voters face a clear-cut choice between candidates. If voters like one leader but dislike the other, then the decision of whom to vote for is relatively straightforward. The expectation is that voting is more likely because the choice is easy as the predicted benefit for the voter from one

choice over the other is clear (Downs, 1957). In cases where the voters have similar feelings towards the candidates, the scenarios are more complicated. If voters like or dislike both candidates, then electoral outcomes may be seen to be less consequential or important. For these *indifferent* citizens, there is less motivation to vote than for those voters who have sharply different evaluations of the candidates (Adams et al., 2006; Brody & Page, 1973). It could be, though, that disliking both candidates may lead citizens to abstain to a greater degree, as these *alienated* citizens lack the most basic motive to show at the polls (Brody & Grofman, 1982; Weisberg & Grofman, 1981). Our first hypothesis, therefore, concerns the impact of having a clear-cut choice on voter turnout. The empirical analysis examines this effect and compares different groups of voters: the indifferent, the alienated, and those whose evaluations are neither positive nor negative.

H1: Citizens with distinctive evaluations of the two candidates will be more likely to vote than those who hold similar evaluations of the candidates.

Another question to ask is whether and how the effect of leader evaluations might depend on party affiliation. "Political leaders enter and exit the public stage, but the parties and their symbols, platforms, and group associations provide a long-term anchor to the political system" (Lavine et al., 2012, p. 2). There are several approaches to the concept of party identification, with some scholars seeing it as a very stable trait (Converse, 1969) and others as a running tally of evaluations (Fiorina, 1981). Our main point concerns the way the effect of leader evaluations on turnout depends on the party the voter identifies with. We follow the idea of partisanship as a social identity (Tajfel et al., 1971), which is accompanied by a sense of belonging to the in-group. This, in turn, leads to both in-group and out-group biases as well as different affections towards in- and out-groups' members (Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2012). The analysis of the effect of leader evaluations, we contend, must take party identification into account because positive and negative feelings towards in- and out-party party leaders might have asymmetrical effects on voter turnout. In the past, positive feelings about political parties seem to have had a greater mobilizing effect on participation. But the contemporary evidence seems to be that feelings towards the out-party are more likely to increase voter participation (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). That same general finding also extends to the case of leader evaluations (da Silva et al., 2021). We hypothesize that both positive and negative feelings can mobilize citizens and that these effects depend on party identification. Positive feelings towards the in-party candidate may stimulate voters, while negative feelings towards their in-party candidate can have an inhibiting effect on voting. This is because voters who dislike their in-party candidate may feel cross-pressured due to their party vs. candidate preferences.

Similarly, negative feelings towards the out-party candidate can motivate citizens to vote to stop their disliked candidate from being elected, while liking the candidate of the out-party might lead these cross-pressured citizens to abstain. This is especially true in an era of polarization, in which voters may be less willing to consider voting for the candidate of the other party (Bankert, 2021).

H2a: The more citizens like the in-party candidate *ceteris paribus*, the greater the likelihood that they vote.

H2b: The more citizens dislike the out-party candidate *ceteris paribus*, the greater the likelihood that they vote.

What about those who do not identify with a party? Should their leaders' evaluations affect turnout, and if so, how? It is reasonable to conjecture that leader effects might be stronger among independents, those who do not identify with a political party. Certainly, da Silva (2018) finds that leader evaluations have a stronger effect on turnout among independents in a variety of settings. Positive feelings among independents can boost turnout, but so can negative feelings (Bankert, 2022). A variety of voting studies that report on the impact of leader effects and partisanship on turnout also report mixed results. Some report stronger leader effects among non-partisans, while others find stronger leader effects among party identifiers (Gidengil, 2011; Lobo, 2014; Mughan, 2009). Institutional settings capture long-term factors, and it might well be that the mixed findings reflect the impact of short-term leader effects factors. Different leaders, after all, compete across different elections. In the absence of clear guidance from prior results, we proceed cautiously and regard our approach as exploratory.

Lastly, we take a more nuanced approach to examine not only the effect of in-party and out-party evaluations separately but also how they interact with each other. While H2a and H2b speculate about the effect of leader evaluations when controlling for the evaluation of the other candidate, there might be an interacted effect here. The idea is that negative feelings towards the out-party can stimulate turnout, but this effect—or its size—may depend on how people feel for their own candidate. A voter who *dislikes* her in-party candidate, for example, might not be as motivated to vote by having negative feelings towards the out-party candidate as much as a voter who does like her in-party candidate. Thus, negative feelings towards the out-party candidate can motivate citizens to vote, but this might depend on the degree to which these citizens feel comfortable with their in-party candidate.

H3: The effect of the out-party's leader evaluation on turnout depends on the in-party's leader evaluation, i.e., the more citizens dislike their out-party

candidate, the more likely they are to vote, and this effect will get bigger the more they like their in-party candidate.

Exploring these conjectures in the American setting has a number of conceptual and practical advantages. First, the US qualifies as a stable two-party system. This means that voters have faced consistent partisan choices over a long duration. Together, these two attributes encourage relatively stable patterns of partisanship, and if there is one thing about which students of elections agree, it is that partisanship matters. Second, American presidential elections are candidate-centered, and so it is reasonable to suppose that candidate evaluations are likely to have a greater impact in that electoral context. Third, as a practical matter, the ANES have consistently used the very same key measures of such variables as candidate evaluations, party identification, and voter turnout over the duration of these studies. This means that findings based on such indicators are likely to be robust against variations in instrumentation effects.

### 3. Empirical Analysis: What are the Different Impacts of Leader Evaluations on Turnout?

#### 3.1. Data and Methods

The analysis relies on data from ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File between 1968 and 2020. Additional information can be found online (<https://electionstudies.org/data-center/anes-time-series-cumulative-data-file>). The empirical investigation has two main independent variables. The first is the presidential candidates' thermometer score. These measures reflect the degree to which voters have warm vs. cold feelings towards each presidential candidate. The question wording is as follows:

I would like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I will read the name of a person, and I would like you to rate that person using the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 mean that you feel favorably and warm toward the person; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you do not feel favorably toward the person and that you do not care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50-degree mark if you do not feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you do not recognize, you do not need to rate that person. Just tell me, and we will move on to the next one.

The thermometers thus can be treated as a continuous variable with 0 standing for *very much dislike* and 100 for *like very much*. Notice that the question wording invites respondents to consider qualitative distinctions within the thermometer spectrum: 0–49 scores indicate cold

feelings, 50 indicates a lukewarm affection towards the object, and 51–100 indicate warm feelings (Anderson & Granberg, 1991). Consequently, we use two versions of leader thermometers. One is a continuous variable (divided by 10) which ranges from 0 (*dislike*) to 10 (*like*), and the second is a categorical variable with three categories for each affection: *dislike* (0–49), *lukewarm* (50), and *like* (51–100).

The second independent variable is partisanship. This variable was originally measured on a seven-point scale, in which respondents were asked about their partisanship identification. The responses on this scale included: strong Democrat, weak Democrat, independent–Democrat, independent, independent–Republican, weak Republican, and strong Republican. In most analyses, we distinguish between partisans, either strong, weak, or leaner, and independents. Some of the analyses focus on in-party and out-party leader evaluations, excluding independents from the analysis. A combination of partisanship and the thermometers includes an in-party leader evaluation, i.e., the thermometer score of the party a respondent identifies with, and an out-party leader evaluation, i.e., the thermometer score of the party with which a respondent does not identify. Independents are excluded from these measures as their in-/out-party affections are indeterminate.

For reasons already outlined, the models are tested using a standard set of demographic controls, namely, age, gender, race, college degree, and income. The ANES data do not include information about past voting in some of the years, so we do not include them in the analysis here. As it happens, the inclusion or exclusion of this variable has no discernible impact on the main findings (see Tables A6 to A9 in the Supplementary File). An equalizing weight is added so that each survey counts equally in the pooled estimation. The dependent variable is Voter Turnout which is coded as 1 if the respondent voted in the last elections and 0 if she did not vote. As with other survey data, voter turnout is nearly always over-reported (Cassel, 2003); therefore, turnout rates reported in the empirical analysis are mostly higher than official turnout data in the US.

### 3.2. A Matrix of Affections Towards the Two Candidates and Its Effect on Turnout

We begin with a descriptive analysis of candidate thermometers over time. Recall that the thermometer scales can be recoded into three categories: like, lukewarm, and dislike. When applied to the Democratic and Republican candidates, that coding strategy produces six combinations of the three types of affection towards each of the two candidates. In effect, each voter can be assigned to one of the six following options:

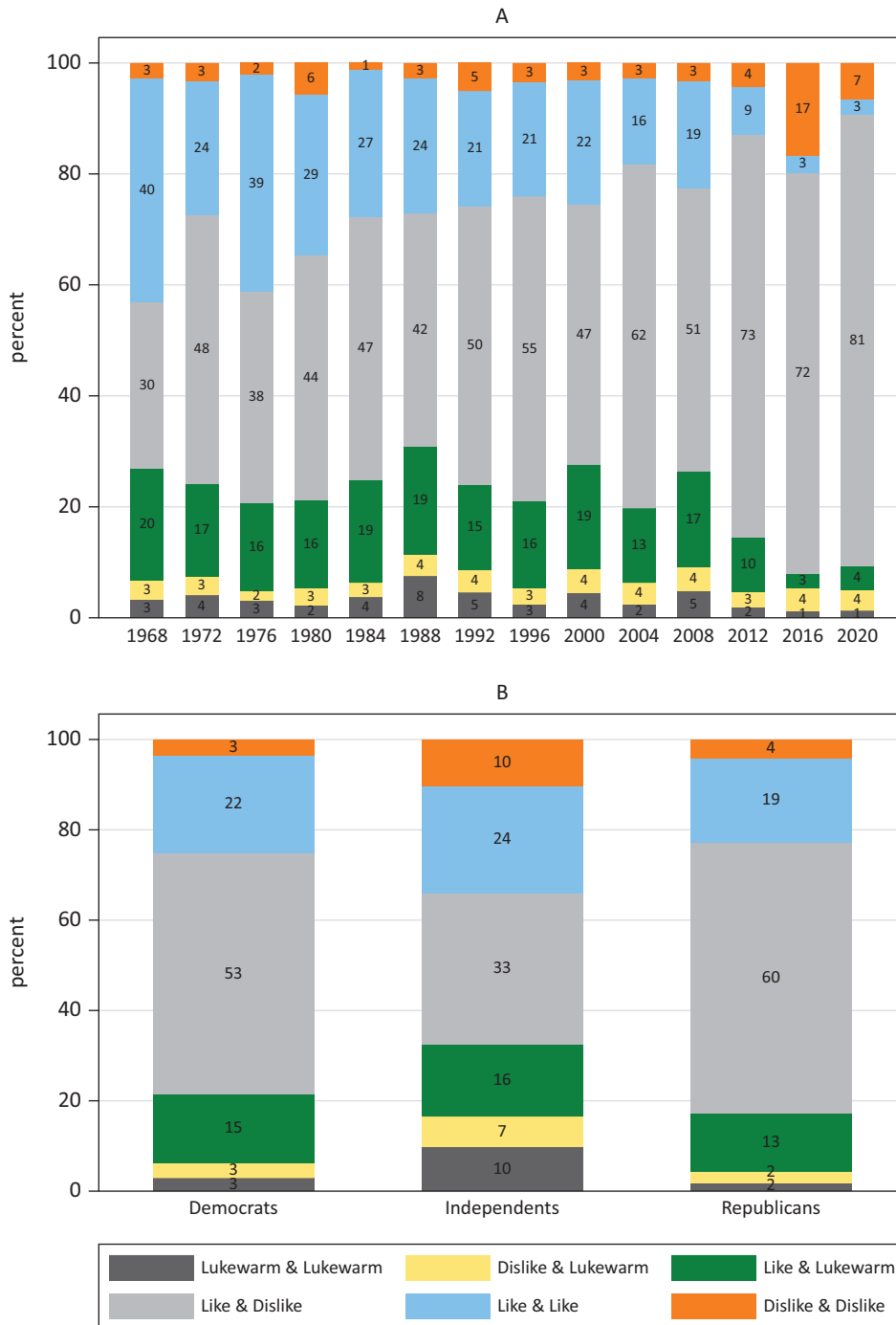
1. Lukewarm towards both candidates;
2. Dislike one candidate and be lukewarm towards the other;

3. Like one candidate and be lukewarm towards the other;
4. Like one candidate and dislike the other
5. Like both candidates;
6. Dislike both candidates.

The distributions of cases across those six categories for the period 1968–2020 are as follows: Almost 12% of the voters do not like any of the presidential candidates. They either dislike both candidates (Category 6, 4.5%), dislike one and are lukewarm towards the other (Category 2, 3.4%), or are lukewarm towards both candidates (Category 1, 3.8%). Thus, 88% of voters hold positive affection towards at least one candidate. The largest group is of voters that like one candidate and dislike the other (Category 4, 53%); 14.5% like one and are lukewarm towards the other (Category 3), and the last group of voters likes both candidates (Category 5, 21% of respondents).

Before delving into the effect of these categories on turnout per H1, the place to begin is with an overview of the distribution of these categories among the American electorate over time. This exploration speaks to the broader question of increasing polarization in US politics, not from a partisan perspective but rather as reflected in evaluations of presidential candidates. We also compare the distribution of candidate evaluations between partisans—Democratic and Republicans—and independents. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the six categories in each presidential election year from 1968 to 2020 (Figure 1, Panel A) and the pooled data for Democrats, Republicans, and independents (Figure 1, Panel B). The cross-time comparisons reveal some variance in the distributions. There is a clear trend in the data: The proportion of voters who like both presidential candidates has declined. At the same time, the group of voters who like one candidate and dislikes the other—those with a clear-cut choice—has grown. This trend seems to signify the growing affective polarization among the American electorate (Iyengar et al., 2019), but it may also reflect the polarizing effect of Trump’s candidacies.

When examining the groups by partisanship (Figure 1, Panel B), the graph indicates that the differences between Democratic and Republican partisans are modest. Those who identify as Republicans are less likely to report being lukewarm towards either candidate compared to Democrats, and they are more likely than Democrats to like one candidate and dislike the other. Independents (the middle bar) are much more likely to express lukewarm feelings towards either candidate (33% report feeling lukewarm towards at least one candidate). They are also more inclined than partisans to either like or dislike both candidates. Another difference between independents and partisans is the size of the group of respondents who sharply differentiate between candidates by liking one candidate and disliking the other candidate. This group constitutes more than



**Figure 1.** Distribution of coded candidate thermometers across election years (Panel A) and by partisanship (Panel B). Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.

half of the respondents among partisans, while among independents, it is much smaller and constitutes 33% of respondents.

The central empirical question to consider is: What effects do these candidate evaluations have on levels of voter turnout? These effects are estimated using a logistic regression model with the turnout as a dependent variable and the six groups of candidate affections described above as independent dummy variables (with the fourth group, Like & Dislike, as the refer-

ence category). Controls for age, gender, race, education, and income, as well as election fixed effects, are included. The results are reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary File. The coefficients for each group are presented in Figure 2. In accordance with H1, the group of respondents who most differentiate between candidates, i.e., those who like one candidate and dislike the other, reports the highest propensity to vote. Their calculated probability of voting is 0.84. The two other large groups of voters, those that either like the two

candidates or like one and are lukewarm towards the other, have somewhat lower vote probabilities: 0.79 and 0.76, respectively. Note that, when examining the effect among the other groups, who comprise alienated and/or indifferent voters, those who dislike both candidates or dislike one candidate and are lukewarm towards the other are more likely to vote (0.75 and 0.72, respectively) than those who feel lukewarm towards both candidates and qualify as a completely indifferent group of voters (0.60). In effect, even citizens expressing complete negativity towards the candidates are more likely to vote than the ones who report no feelings whatsoever. To be sure, these groups comprise a very small portion of the American electorate.

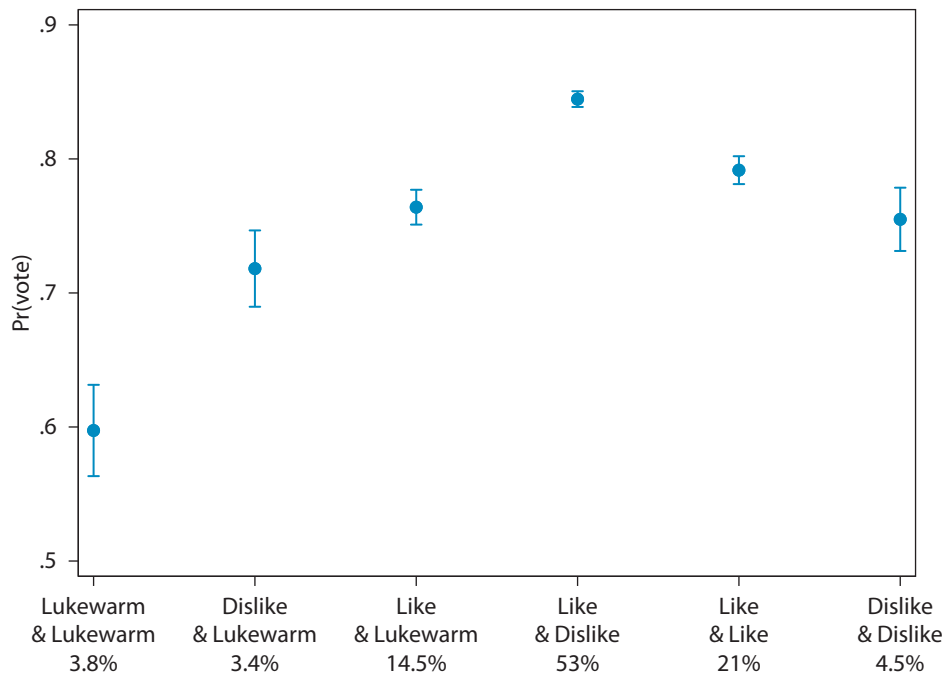
While our analyses do not aim to explain overall turnout levels (but rather the impact of leader evaluations on individual citizens), there is some evidence of an association between the distribution of leader evaluations among ANES respondents in each year and the reported turnout levels. The strongest correlation is between the share of respondents with distinctive evaluations, those who like one candidate and dislike the other, and overall turnout levels. The higher the number of respondents with this structure of evaluations, the higher the overall reported turnout in that election. Table A5 in the Supplementary File presents the full results.

### 3.3. Liking “Your” Candidate or Disliking the “Opponent”: What Mobilizes Voters?

So far, the analysis shows that citizens who differentiate between the presidential candidates are the most likely

to vote, and citizens with lukewarm feelings towards both candidates are the least likely to vote. But what the preceding analysis has not considered is the possibility that some voters might hold party affiliations that are at odds with their candidate evaluations. Among the respondents who like one candidate and dislike the other, 84% like their in-party candidate and dislike the out-party candidate, 8% dislike the in-party candidate and like the other candidate, and 8% qualify as pure independents. When combined with turnout, respondents whose affections align with party identification are more likely to vote compared to the ones with candidate evaluations that are at odds with their party identification. The implication clearly is that party identification matters for leader evaluations and that considering evaluations without taking into account partisanship ignores the possible impact on turnout of dissonance between party affinity and evaluation of the party’s current leader. Furthermore, the effect of candidate evaluations may be contingent not only on in-party evaluations but also on the evaluations of the out-party candidate. Citizens who dislike their own party’s candidate are more likely to vote if they happen to like the out-party candidate, compared to voters who dislike her.

What needs to be explored, then, is the effect of the voter’s feelings towards her in-party candidate on turnout while controlling for her feelings towards the out-party candidate. The place to begin is by considering the cross-time effect of candidate thermometers on turnout by partisanship. In this case, the analysis is based on a regression model of the pooled ANES data for the years 1968–2020. It estimates the interaction between



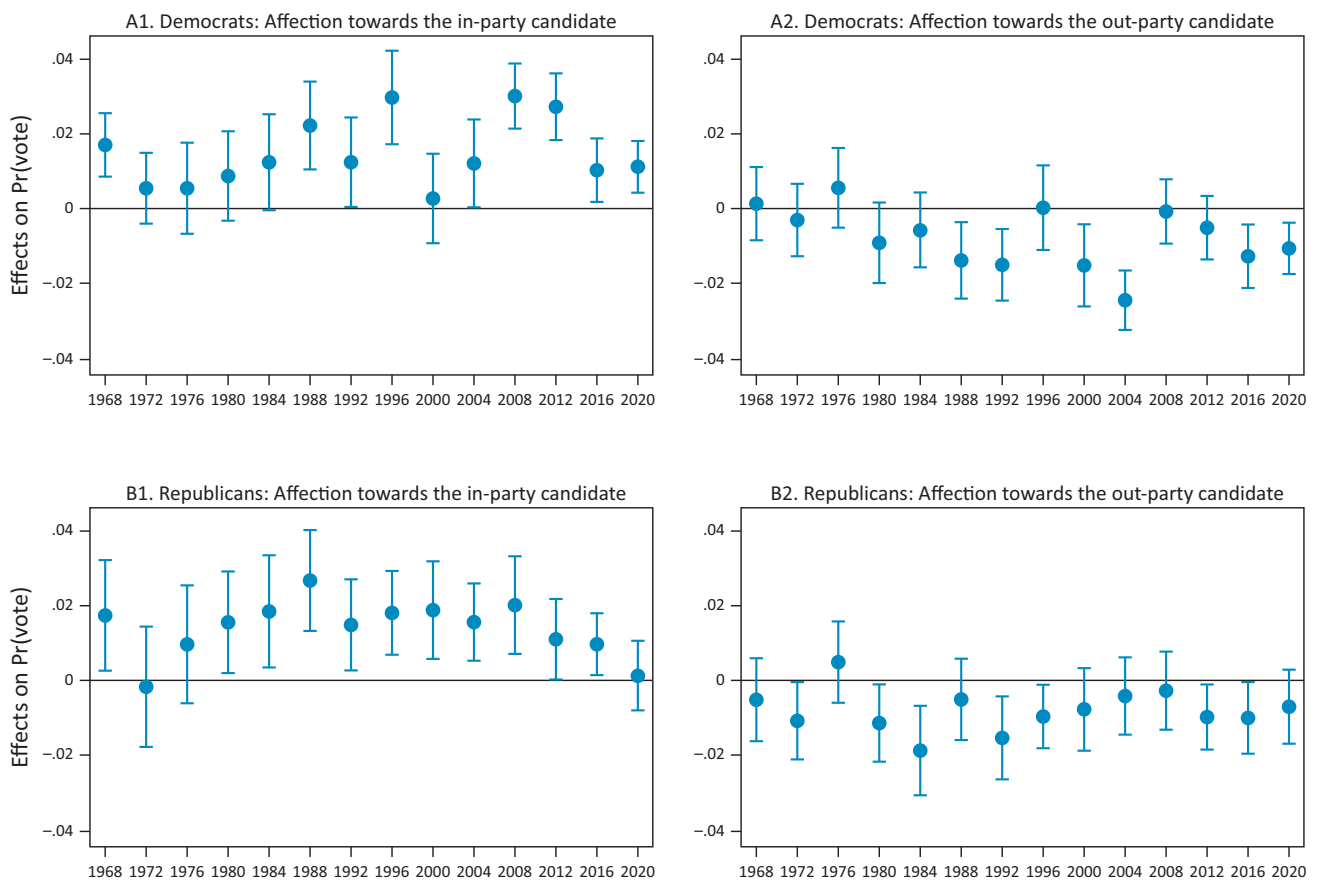
**Figure 2.** The effect of candidate evaluations on turnout. Notes: Predicted probabilities of voting for six different combinations of candidate evaluations; results are based on Table A1 of the Supplementary File; the labels on the horizontal axis indicate the share of each of the six groups in the data. Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.

candidate thermometer and election years. The analysis is conducted separately for Democrats and Republicans. The models include controls for the out-party candidate thermometers as well as for age, gender, race, education, and income, as well as election fixed effects. Full results are reported in Table A2 in the Supplementary File. Figure 3 presents the effects of candidate thermometers on their in-party voters (Panels A1 and A2 for Democrats and Panels B1 and B2 for Republicans).

Panels A1 and B1 show that affection towards the in-party candidate has an impact on Democratic and Republican partisans in the predicted direction: The more they like the in-party candidate, the more likely they are to vote, holding the evaluation towards the out-party candidate constant. However, this effect is not significant in all election years. For example, notice that positive feelings towards Obama in 2008 and 2012 significantly mobilized Democrat voters. For Republicans, positive affection towards George H. W. Bush in 1988 had a significant effect on voting. Of course, the obverse also holds: The more voters dislike the candidate of their party, the less likely they are to vote. The results support H2a, arguing that positive feelings mobilize voters while negative feelings demobilize voters, although the causal direction is not settled.

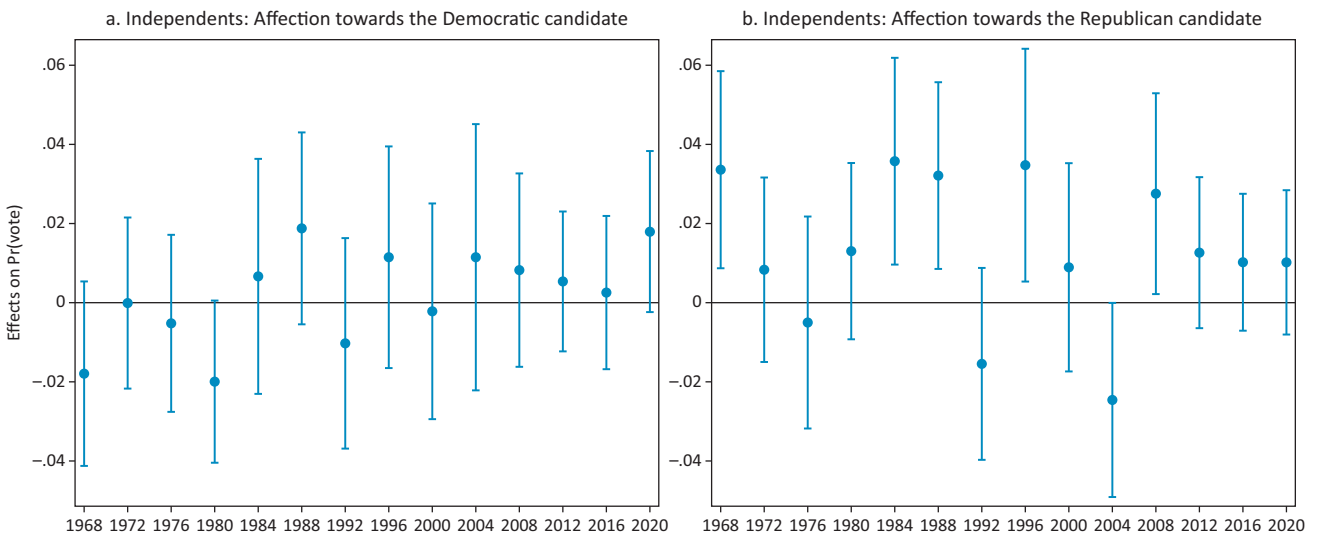
What about affection towards the out-party candidate? Panels A2 and B2 report the effect of thermometer scores for out-party candidates holding the evaluation towards the in-party candidate constant. The expectation per H2b is that liking the opposing candidate introduces dissonance with a corresponding demobilizing effect. Citizens might prefer to stay at home rather than support the candidate of the other party. Indeed, the picture that emerges is of mostly negative effects. But, not surprisingly, there is some variation between election years. For example, the more Democrats liked George W. Bush in 2004 or Trump in 2016 and 2020, the less likely they were to vote. For Republicans, liking Bill Clinton in 1992 had a negative effect on voting. The “personalization of politics” thesis suggests that candidate thermometers should matter more now than in the past. Our data, however, do not endorse that straightforward expectation. The impact of leader evaluations on turnout, if anything, appears to be relatively stable. To be sure, there are variations, but those variations might be better described as election specific.

While the effect of candidate thermometers on turnout among partisans is rather clear, for those who identify as independents, Figure 4 shows the pattern is much less consistent. In some elections, the



**Figure 3.** The effect of affection towards presidential candidates on turnout, 1968–2020. Notes: Panels A1 and A2 present the results for Democratic voters; Panels B1 and B2 present the results for Republican voters; results are based on Models 1 and 2 in Table A2 of the Supplementary File. Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.





**Figure 4.** The effect of affection towards presidential candidates on turnout among independents: (a) Democratic candidates and (b) Republican candidates. Note: Results are based on Model 3 in Table A2 of the Supplementary File. Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.

thermometer scales have a positive effect on turnout, but in others there is a negative effect. It is noteworthy that these effects tend to be significant for the Republican thermometers but not for the Democratic thermometers. For example, higher scores of the Republican thermometers increased turnout in 1984 and 1988, but in 2004 they decreased the turnout level among independents. This implies that non-partisan citizens are mobilized or demobilized by leader evaluations in a way that varies across elections.

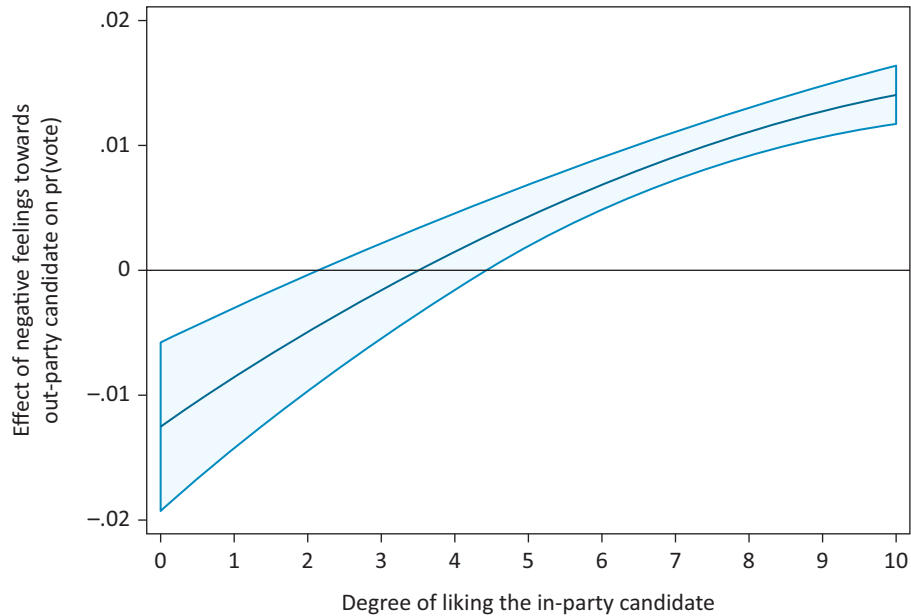
**3.4. Do Negative Feelings for Out-Party Candidates Mobilize Voters?**

The concluding section of the analysis turns to the question: Do negative feelings towards the out-party candidate mobilize voters who like their in-party candidate and voters who dislike their in-party candidate to the same degree? Indeed, the motivation to prevent a disliked candidate from winning might be the same for all. Nonetheless, it could be that this motivation applies only to voters who also have a candidate for whom they would like to vote. The impact of the interacted effect of in-party candidate and out-party candidate evaluations is evaluated with a regression model that includes the interaction between these two variables as well as demographic control variables and election fixed effects. For presentation purposes, the out-party thermometer is reversed so that higher values signify disliking the out-party candidate. Results can be found in Table A3 in the Supplementary File. The following analyses (Figures 5 and 6) are performed for Democrats and Republicans together. Separate models yield overall similar results for each group. Figure 5 presents the effect of the out-party thermometer on turnout as a function of the affection towards the in-party candidate. Here, it is clear that

disliking the out-party candidate has a positive effect on turnout, but only when respondents have positive feelings towards their in-party candidate. For those who dislike the in-party candidate, the out-party candidate has no impact on turnout. Moreover, among those who completely dislike “their” candidate, negative feelings towards the other candidate can even have a demobilizing effect, probably indicating their general dissatisfaction with both candidates. These results support H3.

One way to evaluate these findings in an even more nuanced way is to re-run a similar model but use the ordinal measures of the three-categories measure of the thermometer scales (like, lukewarm, and dislike). The results of that approach are reported in Table A4 in the Supplementary File. Panel A in Figure 6 presents the probability of voting as a function of the respondent’s affection (dislike, like, or lukewarm) towards the in-party leader (the x-axis). For each in-party effect, the graph presents the probability of voting in relation to the respondent’s affection towards the out-party leader. The circles represent respondents who dislike the out-party leader. The squares stand for respondents who are indifferent towards the out-party leaders, while the diamonds represent respondents who like the out-party leader.

The graph shows that among respondents who like the in-party candidate (the right category on the x-axis), those who dislike the out-party candidate exhibit the highest predicted probability to vote: 0.86. Thus, disliking the out-party candidate mobilizes voters compared to those who either like or are lukewarm towards the other candidate. The probability of those groups voting is 0.76 and 0.74, respectively. In effect, for respondents who like their candidate, negative feelings towards the opponent can increase their likelihood of voting by about 10 percentage points compared to others with lukewarm or positive feelings towards the out-party candidate.

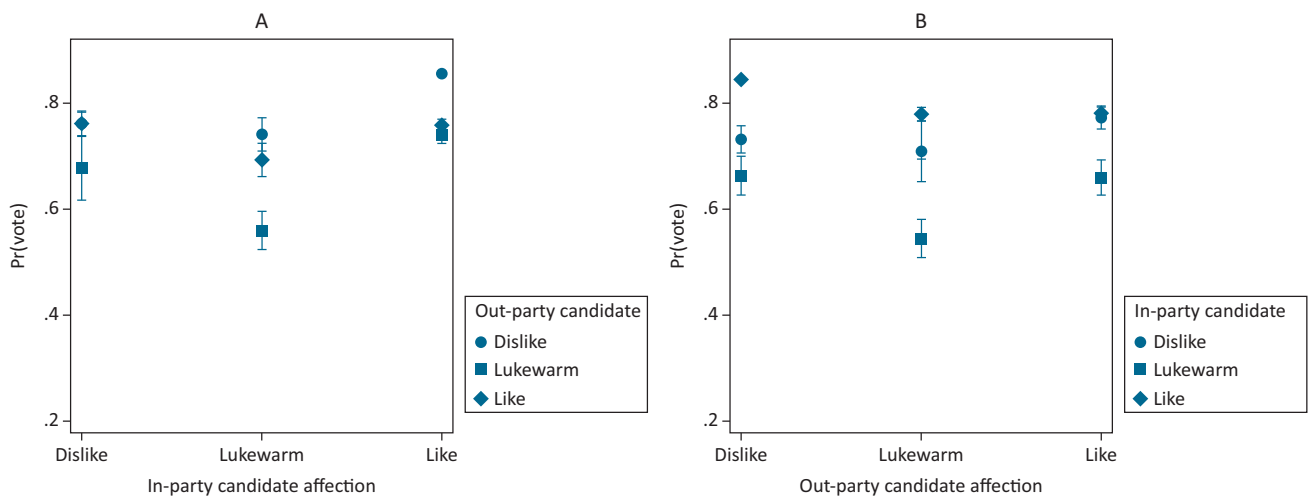


**Figure 5.** The interacted effect of in-/out-party candidate affection on turnout. Notes: The graph presents the marginal effect of negative feelings towards the out-party candidate on turnout as a function of the in-party candidates’ thermometer; results are based on Table A3 in the Supplementary File. Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.

What about voters who either dislike or are lukewarm towards the in-party candidate? In these cases, the results show that negative feelings do not have the same mobilizing effect. For both groups, it does not matter whether the voter likes or dislikes the other candidate. Liking or disliking under these conditions yields similar predicted vote probabilities. Thus, voters who do not like their in-party candidate will be more likely to vote if they like or dislike the other candidate. The significant finding here concerns the importance of having some affection, either positive or negative, for mobilizing the vote. When partisans do not like the current leader of their party, they nonetheless will be motivated to vote as long

as they have a certain affection towards the candidate of the other party. Having lukewarm feelings is related to lower levels of turnout. But both positive and negative affects towards leaders increase the probability of voting, even if they are directed towards the candidate of the party with which the voter does not identify.

Panel B in Figure 6 presents the other side of the interaction, namely, the degree to which in-party candidate evaluation depends on the out-party candidate evaluation. Here the data show that liking the in-party candidate is associated with a higher probability of voting. Yet, among respondents who like the out-party candidate, liking or disliking the in-party candidate yields



**Figure 6.** The interacted effect of in-/out-party candidate affection on turnout by categories. Note: The graph presents predicted probabilities to vote by leader evaluations based on the interacted effects specified in Table A4 in the Supplementary File. Source: Authors’ work based on ANES 1968–2020.

similar levels of turnout. In effect, these results show that having a clear-cut choice between candidates who run counter to your party affiliation leads to similar levels of turnout as voters who hold positive affections towards both candidates.

#### 4. Concluding Discussion

With the increasing focus on politicians and party leaders in contemporary politics, scholars of voting behavior have been trying to identify the various impacts that these political actors might have on citizens' political behavior. There is ample evidence that party leaders affect voters' decisions in terms of vote choice. The degree to which turnout can be affected by voters' feelings towards party leaders is underexplored, particularly so given speculations that leaders matter more now than before to electoral outcomes. Earlier investigations yielded some important insights into how leader-voter turnout dynamics might work (Brody & Grofman, 1982; Weisberg & Grofman, 1981), but those investigations were "early" in the sense that they predated the growing embrace of the presidentialization hypothesis. Moreover, their empirical findings were somewhat inconclusive. This investigation has revisited the possible connections between leader evaluations and voter turnout, and it has done so across a much greater time span using more than 50 years' worth of ANES data.

The findings reported here show that leader evaluations unequivocally do matter to levels of voter turnout in recent presidential elections in the US. But they do so in somewhat nuanced ways. We demonstrate that leader evaluations and citizens' turnout is mediated by party identification. More particularly, the evidence is that the likelihood of voting is affected by (a) the degree to which voters' affections towards the candidates differ from one another and (b) the extent of congruence between party affiliation and the voter's affections towards the presidential candidates of both parties. First, the data show that respondents who express clear preferences, that is, those who hold positive feelings towards one candidate and negative feelings towards the other, have a higher probability of voting than other voters. That is in stark contrast to voters who express no definite feelings (positive or negative) towards both candidates. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Republicans and Democrats are more likely to vote when they like their in-party candidate for the presidency. Conversely, voters of both groups are *less* likely to vote when they like the out-party candidate. That dissonance depresses voter turnout. These effects, however, are not entirely uniform; they vary in their impact across elections. And it is noteworthy that the effects are somewhat asymmetrical. Independents are more affected by their affection towards the Republican candidate, while thermometers for the Democratic candidate tend not to affect independents' likelihood of voting. That finding warrants deeper investigation. This is so not least of all because more Americans claim to

be independent. Lastly, our data reveal another noteworthy asymmetry, namely, the assumed mobilization effect among those who hold negative feelings towards the out-party candidate operates only one under one condition, namely when one likes the in-party candidate. This finding speaks to the debate on negativity and voting (Martin, 2004; Nai, 2013). Negative feelings can mobilize voters, but campaigners should be careful not to completely rely on negativity towards the other side. That calculus ignores the critical role played by voters' evaluations of the in-party candidate.

The case of the US brings with it a number of analytical advantages for investigating links between voter turnout and leader evaluations. First, the presence of a two-party system presents voters with a relatively straightforward choice set. Second, the exceptional durability of that two-party system both underpins a correspondingly consistent foundation for patterns of party identification and diminishes the likelihood that cross-time variations in voter turnout could be reasonably attributed to changes in electoral arrangements or the party system. A third advantage flows from the character of the long-running ANES itself. Patterns of stability and change are more reliably discerned with data collected over a longer time span. Equally significant, the ANES has been strikingly consistent in using the very same measures of such variables as party identification, voter turnout, and leader evaluations, which have been central to the preceding analysis. Consequently, it is unlikely that the observed variations could simply be dismissed as functions of instrumentation effects. Together, these attributes increase confidence that the data findings are robust. If the US qualifies as exceptional in these respects, then the reported findings raise other research questions: Do the same leader-voter turnout dynamics apply in other settings? Do variations in those dynamics correspond to different regime styles, electoral arrangements, or party systems? Analysts have made important recent contributions in applying a similar line of analysis to the European setting (da Silva, 2018; da Silva & Costa, 2019; da Silva et al., 2021). What is called for now is a more expansive research effort to determine what are the key system-level characteristics that gear those relationships.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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