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Potent executives: the electoral strength of prime ministers in Central Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Prime ministers in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) are commonly perceived to be weaker and less “presidential” than their Western European colleagues. In contrast, I argue that the post-communist legacy of CEE provides a more favourable context for prime ministers to develop a central characteristic of “presidential” prime ministers: a strong personal influence on voting behaviour in parliamentary elections, which provides prime ministers with the opportunity to gain autonomy within their party and cabinet. I theorise that party system instability, as well as the comparatively lower media independence and freedom, gives greater electoral potential to prime ministers in CEE than to their Western European counterparts. Consequently, prime ministers in CEE have a stronger influence on vote choice than West European prime ministers. These hypotheses are investigated using survey data from several waves of the CSES project.

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1. Introduction

Are prime ministers in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) weaker than prime ministers in Western Europe (WE)? The notion that prime ministers in CEE are weaker is widely accepted (Baylis 2007; Elgie 2012) and relies on the operationalisation of prime ministerial strength as duration in office. In this paper, I challenge this conclusion by comparing prime ministers in CEE and WE over another dimension of strength: their personal influence on individual vote choice in parliamentary elections as measure of *electoral strength*. Throughout this paper, I refer to this personal influence on citizens’ vote choice with the commonly used term *leader effect* (Mughan 2015). The increasing personalisation of electoral behaviour and personal influence of leading candidates on voting behaviour has received growing attention in recent years (Bittner 2011, 2018; Costa and Ferreira da Silva 2015; Ferreira da Silva 2018; Garzia 2014; King 2002b; Lobo and Curtice 2014), as parliamentary elections tend to more closely resemble presidential elections. I argue that a prime minister’s personal effect on voting behaviour in parliamentary elections, their *electoral strength*, can be used as a measure of a prime minister’s performance.¹ In addition, the more prime ministers gain a “presidential” role in parliamentary elections, the more authority and autonomy they may gain within their party and cabinet (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Worthy 2016).

Prime ministers in CEE are more likely to hold a presidential connection to voters than prime ministers in WE, because the comparatively lower voter alignment and party system stability in CEE provide a favourable context for presidentialised parliamentary elections (Bértoa and Mair 2012; Mair 1997; Poguntke and Webb 2005). Furthermore, elites in CEE are able to exert more influence over institutions of mass communications (Bairrett 2015; Bajomi-Lázár 2013; Dragomir 2018; Garzia 2017a).

I use several waves of Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data to study the leader effect of prime ministers across European countries. The hypothesis that will be tested is that prime ministers in CEE have a stronger direct personal effect on vote choice (leader effect) than prime ministers in WE. I employ multilevel models to test this hypothesis, analysing whether the leader effect of prime ministers varies across countries and if this variance can be attributed to a systematic difference between CEE and WE countries.

I find that the leader effect of prime ministers in parliamentary elections is significantly larger in CEE than in WE. This finding also remains robust to the exclusion of single countries and prime ministers who the literature considers to be outliers. A further analysis shows that differences between CEE and WE can be explained by differences in media freedom and party system stability. Furthermore, this paper discusses to what extent the presented findings present a puzzle for the presidentialisation thesis, since prime ministers in CEE seem unable to use their *electoral strength* to secure their survival in office.

The remaining part of the paper proceeds as follows: first, I discuss why a prime minister's personal influence on individual voting behaviour constitutes an important dimension of strength. Second, I argue that prime ministers in CEE may be electorally stronger than prime ministers in WE. Third, I discuss the selection of my cases and data. Fourth, I provide information on my statistical model and review their findings. Fifth, I draw my conclusions and outline opportunities for further research.

2. Prime ministers in Central Eastern and Western Europe

In this section, I argue that a prime minister's personal impact on vote choice, their leader effect, fosters their performance. The ability of prime ministers to personally influence vote choice is an essential aspect of "presidential" prime ministers and can provide prime ministers with the opportunity to gain autonomy within their party and cabinet.

How well individual prime ministers perform and what factors may explain differences in performance have been a long-standing interest and debate in the study of democratic government (Helms 2017; Kaarbo and Hermann. 1998; Strangio, Hart, and Walter 2013). However, it is generally accepted that prime ministers in CEE are weaker and less "presidential" than prime ministers in WE (Baylis 2007; Elgie 2012). Although the new democracies in CEE adapted well to the new system of government (Blondel et al. 2007), prime ministers in CEE stay in office for shorter periods than prime ministers in WE. This duration gap still holds true to the present day, although duration varies within CEE and in some countries prime ministers stay in office over periods that are comparable to periods in WE (Grotz and Müller-Rommel 2015). Baylis (2007) argues that a prime minister's duration in office approximates his potential to implement policies and therefore indicates his or her strength. However, a prime minister's duration in office remains a rather rough approximation of their policy performance. While a short-serving prime minister has

little time to enact policies, nothing guarantees that a long-serving prime minister will achieve more. Unfortunately, the use of policy achievements themselves is met by two major difficulties. First, assessing policy achievements comparatively over a long period of time. Second, deciding whether these achievements are attributable to the prime minister or rather to the cabinet as a whole since democratic governance in parliamentary systems is based on joint-decision making (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993).

In light of these limitations, I turn to another accessible measure of strength and “presidential” position in office: a prime minister’s personal influence on citizen’s vote choice in parliamentary elections, their leader effect.

In their seminal work on the concept of presidentialisation, Poguntke and Webb (2005) describe how parliamentary elections start to resemble presidential elections and increasingly focus on the competition among leading candidates. Together with the internationalisation of politics and growing complexity of the state these changes enable chief executives in parliamentary systems to gain increasing control and autonomy similar to presidents, even under the continuation of existing formal parliamentary procedures.

Under the growing presidentialisation of parliamentary elections, it becomes essential for prime ministers to influence voters to vote in favour of their party. This influence is commonly described as *leader effect*: the direct personal influence on vote choice in parliamentary election (Garzia 2017b; King 2002a; Mughan 2015). Weakening social cleavages and changes in communication give greater weight to the competition between leading candidates and their personality (Bittner 2011, 2018; Blondel and Thiébault 2009; Garzia 2014; Rahat and Sheaffer 2007). Performing on this dimension becomes an essential duty of prime ministers. As citizens continue to base their vote choice to a larger extent on their impression of the prime ministers and leaders who become the “chief means of engaging the political interest of publics” (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 21), parties will rely more heavily on the prime minister for political success.

In terms of recent conceptions of executive authority as leadership capital (Bennister, Hart, and Worthy 2015; Helms 2016), leader effects reach beyond reputational sources like popularity. Leader effects evidence a relational change in the leader–follower relationship (Garzia 2011) between prime ministers and the electorate, which alters the role of prime ministers and other leaders in the political processes of parliamentary systems. Curtice and Holmberg (2005) show empirically that leader effects are not a reflection of a leader’s popularity.²

Under the concept of presidentialisation, a prime minister’s presidential role in parliamentary elections may impact their position within party and cabinet (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 17) and allows them to govern past their parties. It is plausible for prime ministers to use this increased importance in parliamentary elections to foster intra-party and intra-executive presidentialisation to their own benefit. The more parties need to rely on prime ministers to engage potential voters, the more likely they will give way to the prime minister’s policy goals in order to maintain the presidential connection between the prime minister and the electorate. Prime ministers who hold a presidential connection with the electorate also hold a stronger bargaining position, because they are able to reach past their party and steer the electorate against intra-party or intra-cabinet opposition. This entails the plausible assumption that prime ministers will prefer to work towards and campaign with the policies which they themselves favour and can argue for with conviction. Worthy (2016) similarly argues that elections provide a basic measure of a prime minister’s

performance and grant them authority. Hence, I understand a prime minister's leader effect as a direct and indirect measure of strength:

- (1) Prime minister's leader effects, their *electoral strength*, are a direct measure of their "presidential" influence in parliamentary elections and relationship with the electorate. Prime minister's performance on this dimension is an essential function in increasingly presidentialised parliamentary systems.
- (2) Larger leader effects enable prime ministers to foster their autonomy within cabinet and party and govern past their party. Prime ministers with greater autonomy within their cabinet and party are likely to secure their policy goals against opposing goals of colleagues. This constitutes the additional indirect contribution of a prime minister's *electoral strength* to their overall strength.

In summary, a prime minister's leader effects provide a good indication of their strength and "presidential" position. This conception of prime ministerial strength complements duration in office as common operationalisation of performance by an additional and empirically observable component. It follows that a prime minister's strength is best understood as a combination of factors. A prime minister with a long duration in office, but without sufficient autonomy from their cabinet may achieve less in terms of policies, than an autonomous prime minister with a shorter tenure. While it is undeniable that many prime ministers in CEE have the disadvantage of their comparatively short period in office, they may enjoy advantages in other dimensions of strength. In this paper, I set out to explore differences in the electoral aspect of prime ministerial strength between CEE and WE empirically. In the next section, I theorise why such a difference between prime ministers in CEE and WE may exist.

3. Presidentialisation of parliamentary elections

In the following paragraphs, I discuss why leader effects of prime ministers are likely to be systematically larger in CEE than in WE. I argue that differences in social cleavages and resulting party system instability, as well as in media independence provide leading candidates, and in particular prime ministers, with a favourable playing ground to personally influence vote choice and discuss whether these measures differ between CEE and WE.

Poguntke and Webb (2005) identify the increasing focus on competing candidates in parliamentary elections as a key driver of presidentialisation and increasing autonomy of prime ministers. Over the past decades, electoral research has overwhelmingly secured such an increasing electoral impact of voters' perception of leading candidates in parliamentary elections (Bittner 2018; Garzia 2014, 2017b; Lobo and Curtice 2014; Mughan 2015; Wattenberg 1991). The presidentialisation of parliamentary elections is driven by societal changes and changes in communication technology, namely the erosion of societal cleavages in Western democracies and the success of television as medium of mass communication. Changes in media technology have frequently been identified as drivers of electoral presidentialisation and give individual candidates greater importance (Lenz and Lawson 2011; Mughan 2000; Sartori 1989). Recent research has shown that especially the consumption of television moderates the influence of leaders in parliamentary elections (Garzia 2017a). The more television voters' consume

the greater is the effect of leading candidate's personality on their vote choice. Electoral presidentialisation therefore shares common causes with personalisation (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007), a process in which eroding societal cleavages and the changing structure of mass communication increase the weight of individual political actors relative to political groups. With regard to these two causes of electoral presidentialisation, media structure and cleavages, CEE differs from WE.

First, the newer democracies in CEE faced several simultaneous challenges of political transformation (Lewis 2002; Tworzecki 2003; Millard 2004). Departing from the absence of political competition, dealignment has, therefore, been the starting hypothesis of party systems in these post-communist countries (Mair 1997) and this hypothesis has largely held true (Bértoa and Mair 2012). Although there is evidence for increasing organisational consolidation of party systems in CEE, alignment between voters and parties is still lacking (Weßels and Klingemann 2006). These contextual factors foster the presidentialisation of parliamentary elections and provide prime ministers in CEE with greater potential to influence vote choice. Since the link between parties and voters is weaker than in WE, voters are likely to consider individual leaders and their personalities to a greater extent than in WE when casting their ballot (Grotz and Weber 2017). Voters are more likely to identify with a specific leading candidate in a given parliamentary election than with the candidate's party as a whole. In turn the leader effects of prime ministers in CEE will likely be larger, compared to the leader effects of prime ministers in WE where the alignment between voters and parties is stronger.

Second, elites in CEE are able to exert greater influence over the media than elites in WE. Like a transformation of the party system, a transformation of media institutions in CEE was necessary after the breakdown of communism (Jakubowicz 2001). The new democracies in CEE needed to reform party- and state-owned media systems to a democratised media (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015; Splichal. 1992). Despite this transformation, a greater influence of political elites on media institutions remains (Jakubowicz 2001; Örnebring 2012) in which the media is to some extent a resource of elites and clientelistic networks. Hanretty (2010) finds that among a large number of European public broadcasters, and a few broadcasters outside of Europe, broadcasters in CEE are evaluated to be the least independent. In line with these findings (Bairrett 2015) shows how executives in CEE actively reduce media freedom to avoid public scrutiny of their actions in office. Hungary provides a particular visible case (Bajomi-Lázár 2017) in which the strategy has been described as a party colonialisation of the media (Bajomi-Lázár 2013). The pattern is not limited to countries in CEE. Dragomir (2018) shows that after the economic crisis regimes around the world have made increasing use of government funding to exert influence over media outlets. Overall, existing research supports the notion that PM are aware how media coverage of them can affect their perception among the electorate negatively. In summary, not only do media structures differ between WE and CEE, executives in CEE also continually seek to alter the public playing field in their favour. I argue that this higher degree of media influence and lower degree of media independence and freedom allow prime ministers in CEE to exert greater influence on voters than prime ministers in WE. Prime ministers should be able to use their elite position at the top of the executive to shape mass communication on their personal image and importance to their liking. Although other leading candidates may be likewise able to exert their elite influence over the media, the executive position of prime ministers

provides them with a clear advantage in political systems departing from widespread state control over media.

In conclusion, I hypothesise that due to the discussed differences in media independence and party institutionalisation the *electoral strength* of prime ministers will be larger in CEE than in WE:

H1: Leader effects of prime ministers in Central Eastern Europe are larger than in Western Europe.

While leading candidates without a position as prime minister may have fewer resources to shape media reporting to their liking, they still profit from the weakened cleavages and resulting volatile party systems in CEE democracies to the same extent. I hypothesise that their leader effect is also likely to be larger than their counterparts in Western Europe:

H2: Leader effects of other leading candidates are larger in Central Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

King (2002a) argues that voters consider party leader when casting their vote because party leaders may choose to follow their personal policy preferences over their party line and that the personality of prime ministers may influence the decisions made by their government. Consequently, the weight of prime ministers in voters' calculus may be moderated by their impact on decision making in parliamentary systems, therefore, the leader effect of prime ministers in semi-presidential systems may be weaker as executive power (Baylis 1996; Sedelius and Mashtaler 2013) is shared:

H3: Leader effects of prime ministers and other leading candidates in semi-presidential systems are smaller.

Since voters may also like a prime minister or party leader, simply because they belong to a specific party (Curtice and Holmberg 2005) I will include voters' party identifications (Campbell et al. 1966) as the main explanatory factor opposing the leader effect of prime ministers. I also include voters' education level, gender and age as further control variables.

In the following section, I discuss the selection of my cases and the available data.

4. Data and case selection

I use the harmonised Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) file (Giebler et al. 2016) as well as the fourth wave (CSES 2018) to test whether the electoral strength of prime ministers differs between CEE and WE. These data sources allow for the broadest comparison across differing countries and over time to minimise potential selection biases. Unfortunately, elections in the second CSES wave have to be excluded since voters' evaluation of leaders are not available. I further exclude presidential systems, following the definition of Elgie (2018) and non-European countries. In addition, parliamentary elections in which the prime minister did not run as a leading candidate or in which the government was led by a caretaker are excluded as well.³ I also exclude the 2009 parliamentary election in Iceland in which the prime minister came into office at less than 2 months prior to the election. It is probable that such a short time period is insufficient to prepare an electoral campaign designated to the prime minister. The final selection

encompasses 22 countries and 44 individual prime ministers. A list of included countries, elections and prime ministers can be found in [Table A1](#) in the Appendix.

My dependent variable measures whether respondents voted for the prime minister's party (1) or did vote for any other party (0). This negates differences between the parties who do not hold the office of prime minister, but eases country-comparison and allows for a more parsimonious model which focuses on the vote choice of interest. I include a number of individual-level predictors of vote choice: first, voters' thermometer evaluations of prime ministers and of party leaders of opposing parties. These thermometer evaluations range from dislike (0) to like (10). I summarise all party leaders opposing the prime minister in one variable by taking a respondents' highest evaluation of a party leader. I furthermore measure whether respondents hold a party identification with the party of the prime minister or any of the other parties. Lastly, respondents' gender, age and education level are included as control variables. To test H3 a country-level variable is created that differentiates between parliamentary and semi-presidential systems, using the classification by Elgie (2018).

The following section discusses my model strategy and results. I provide graphical results to facilitate interpretation and give full regression results in the Appendix ([Tables A2](#) and [A3](#)).

5. Analysis

I model the contextual factors of interest by employing a logistic multilevel model with a individual- and a country-level that allows for varying intercepts by country in which individual respondents are nested.⁴ The model includes a random slope for voters' evaluation of prime ministers, which allows for the influence of voters' evaluation of prime ministers to vary between each country. Whether there is a systematic variation in prime ministerial influence between CEE and WE (H1), regions who differ in media independence and party institutionalisation, is tested by a cross-level interaction (*Eval. prime minister x CEE*). I also allow for the slope of voters' evaluations of other leaders to vary by country to test whether the influence of other leaders (H2) significantly varies between CEE and WE. Non-dichotomous individual-level variables are centred on country means and standardised by two standard deviations to ease the comparison of effects. Two models are fitted: first, a main model that tests the cross-level interactions between voters' evaluation of prime ministers and CEE, as well as voters' evaluation of other leaders and CEE. Second, a semi-presidential model in which I also test whether the influence of prime ministers and other leaders significantly varies between parliamentary and semi-presidential systems (H3).⁵

[Figure 1](#) shows the estimated median effects from the main regression model. All explanatory variables, voters' evaluation the prime minister, party identification with the prime minister's party, have a statistically significant and positive effect on vote choice for the prime minister's party. In contrast voters who identify with a different party or evaluate other party leaders positively are significantly less likely to vote for the prime minister's party. The control variables age, gender and education level show no relevant influence on vote choice.

[Figure 1](#) also shows that the effect of voters' evaluation of the prime minister on vote choice, prime ministers *electoral strength*, differs systematically between CEE and WE (H1).

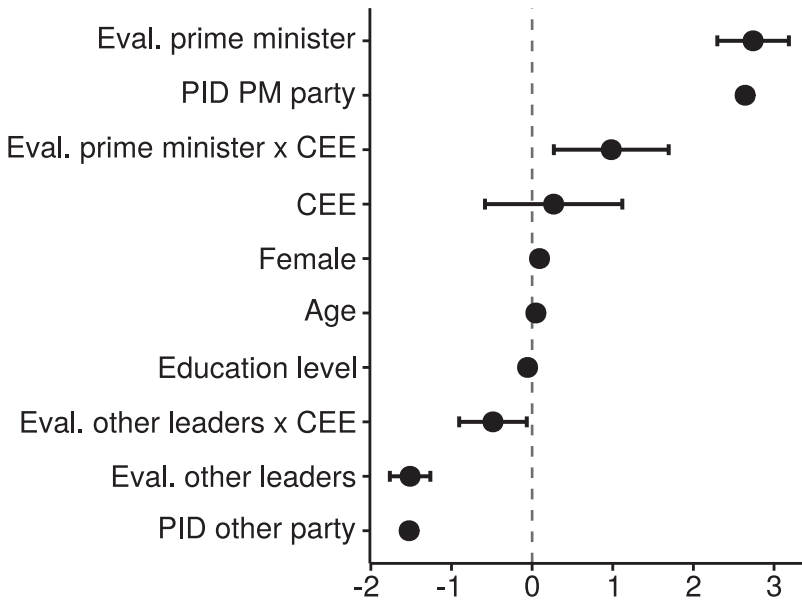


Figure 1. Estimated median effects on vote choice for the prime minister's party, 95% confidence intervals.

The respective cross-level interaction "*Eval. prime minister x CEE*" is significant. The effect is significantly larger in CEE than in WE, therefore, prime ministers in CEE have a larger personal impact on individual vote choice than prime ministers in WE. Similarly the effect of other party leaders on vote choice is also larger in CEE than in WE (H2), although the confidence interval is closer to zero. The results of both interaction effects match the previously derived expectations.

Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the interaction effect between voters' evaluation of prime ministers and CEE. The more positively voters evaluate the prime minister, the more likely they are to vote for the prime minister's party. This effect holds true for prime ministers in WE and in CEE, but the effect is larger in CEE. Prime ministers in CEE are, therefore, more "presidential" than their counterparts in WE as they have a larger direct effect on voters' decision in parliamentary elections. Due to this larger leader effect of prime ministers, parliamentary elections in CEE more closely resemble presidential elections than parliamentary elections in WE. However, it may be the case that the difference in prime ministers leader effects between the two regions is driven by differences between semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. As stated in hypothesis, three leader effects of prime ministers may be smaller in semi-presidential systems than in parliamentary systems. I test this assumption in an additional model, but find no significant difference of voters' evaluation of the prime minister between semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. Table A2 provides the results for this additional model. The inclusion of this additional interaction does also not improve how well the model fits the data. Most importantly the interaction between voters' evaluation of the prime minister and CEE remains significant.

I further substantiate these findings and test my theoretical assumptions with two additional models that analyse a moderation of leader evaluations by measures of party

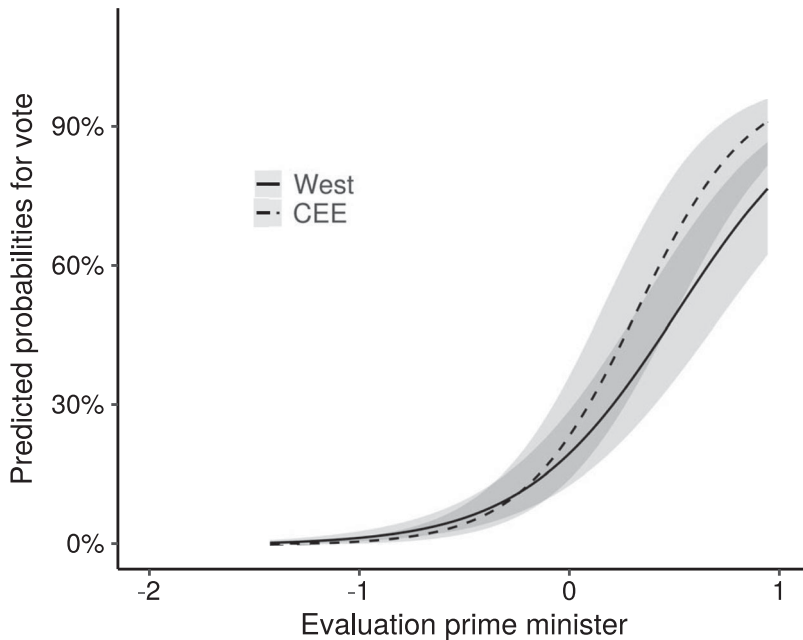


Figure 2. Interaction effect of prime minister evaluation and Central Eastern Europe on vote choice for the prime minister's party, 95% confidence intervals.

system stabilisation and media freedom. These models go beyond regional differences and explain variation in the electoral influence of prime ministers between individual countries. In order to measure the degree of media freedom in a country I use the freedom of the press index (FOTP) by Freedom House (2002–2017). This index has been shown to perform well and track other measures of media freedom (Bairrett 2015) and covers all necessary time points and countries. In political system with lower freedom of the press, prime ministers and other leaders should have more opportunities to control public perceptions and narratives of them and in turn exert more influence over voters' decisions. I rescale the original Freedom House measure from 0–100 to 0–1 and also reverse its direction so that 1 indicates maximum freedom of the press while 0 indicates no freedom. Country scores of media freedom are calculated by taking the Freedom House score that covers the election years in the data and averaging them for each country in which more than one election is observed. The studied CEE countries have on average a 0.14 lower media freedom score, see Table A5. However, within region variance exists and some WE countries rank lower on media freedom than the CEE average.

As a measure of party system stabilisation, I employ the indicator of party system closure calculated by Bértoa and Enyedi (2016), which measures the degree of stability in government formation by observing access and alteration in government, as well as whether new or familiar government coalitions emerge. Following the logic of Mair (1996, p. 102–105) parties can more easily claim the loyalty of voters when patterns of inter-party competition and government formation are established, therefore, alignments of voters should be more frequent and stable. In contrast, more open party systems should give greater opportunities for prime ministers and other leaders to re-define party brands

and previous modes of party cooperation and competition. Table A6 shows that party systems in CEE countries are considerably more open than in WE, although, as with media freedom, variance within the regions exists.

To test whether the influence of prime ministers and other leaders on vote choice is moderated by these substantial measures of regional difference I re-estimate the previous main model, replacing the dichotomous CEE indicator with the continuous measures of party system stability and press freedom. Since the resulting cross-level interaction in these additional models interacts two continuous variables on a small number of countries they are estimated in separate models and do not include random slopes, which would substantively increase complexity and in turn standard errors. Like all other non-dichotomous variables the measure of press freedom and party system closure have been mean centred and standardised by two standard deviations and are centred on the grand mean. The full regression results of these two models are provided in Table A3.

The moderating effect of press freedom on leader effects is provided in Figure 3. As visible in the interaction term “Eval. prime minister x Press freedom” if countries score one standard deviation higher on press freedom prime ministers have a 0.5 point lower influence on vote choice for their party. Reversely, prime minister exert a stronger influence in countries with lower media freedom. The influence of other leaders is likewise moderated by press freedom. In countries with higher scores of press freedom the effect of other leaders on vote choice for their party is reduced, while their influence increases with decrease in press freedom. I also find that in countries with higher levels of press freedom voters tend to be less likely to vote for the ruling party of the prime minister, although this effect is not significant on the 5% level.

Figure 4 shows the results for a moderation by party system closure. The results follow the theorised pattern: the more closed and therefore stabilised party systems are the lower is the influence of prime ministers on vote choice (Eval. prime minister x System closure), as well as the influence of other leaders. Unlike the degree of press freedom party system closure shows no tendency to influence vote choice on its own and only works as moderator.

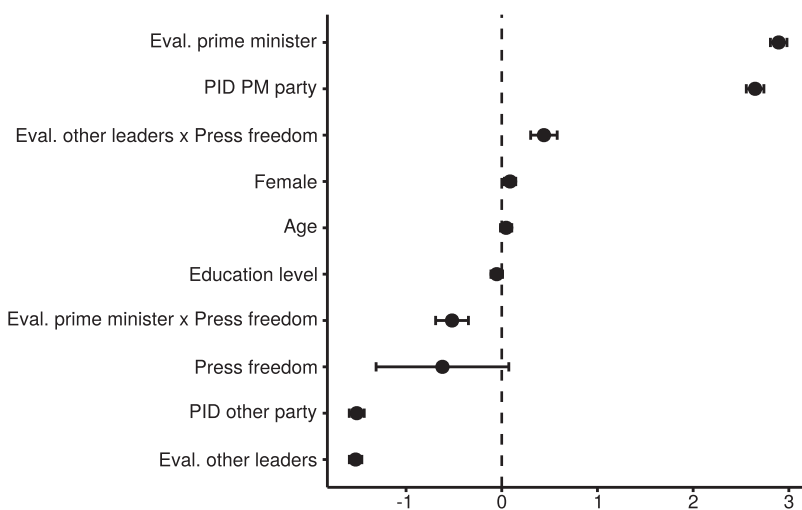


Figure 3. Press freedom model. Estimated median effects on vote choice for the prime minister’s party, 95% confidence intervals.

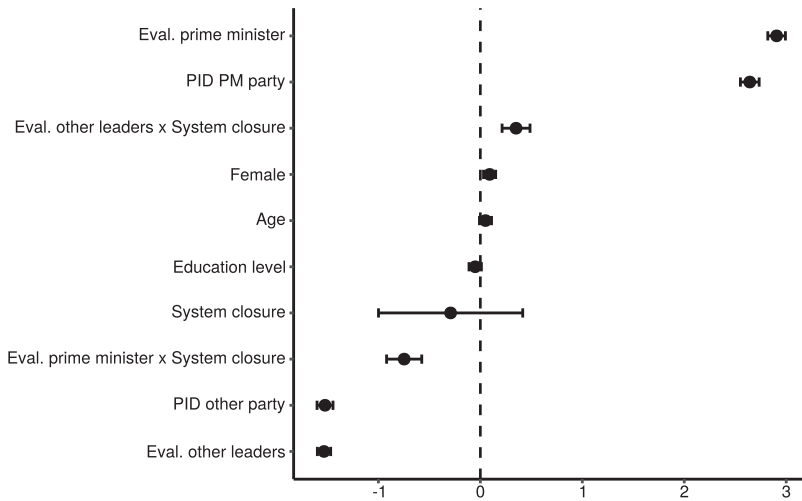


Figure 4. Party system closure model. Estimated median effects on vote choice for the prime minister's party, 95% confidence intervals.

I have shown that the leader effects of prime ministers systematically vary between CEE and WE. Prime ministers in CEE have a larger leader effect in parliamentary elections than prime ministers in WE, leading to a more presidential relation between prime ministers and the electorate in CEE than between prime ministers and the electorate in WE. A further analysis shows that drivers of this difference are likely to be caused by differences in party systems and media freedom between CEE and WE. Prime ministers enjoy significantly larger leader effects in countries with lower freedom of the press and less stabilised party systems.

In the following section, I test whether my finding on the systematic difference in leader effects between prime ministers in CEE and WE remains robust to additional tests.

6. Robustness checks

The tested cross-level interaction only entails a small number of cases on the country level, therefore, I test the robustness of my main model by excluding single countries from my analysis when estimating the cross-level interaction between voters' evaluation of the prime minister and CEE to ensure that the findings are not driven by voting behaviour in a single country. Figure 5 shows that the findings are robust and not driven by a single country under analysis. Excluding the Czech Republic or Hungary from the analysis leads to the strongest reduction in p -values,⁶ but the cross-level interaction remains significant.

I also test whether my finding that leader effects of opposing leaders are stronger in CEE than in West Europe is equally robust (see Figure A1). I find that the interaction is somewhat less robust and turns insignificant when Romania or the Czech Republic are excluded.

In his article, Baylis (2007) notes a series of prime ministers in CEE who may be considered exceptions to the prime ministerial weakness rule in the region. Since the CSES data does not cover every election between 1996 and 2016 it may be the case that

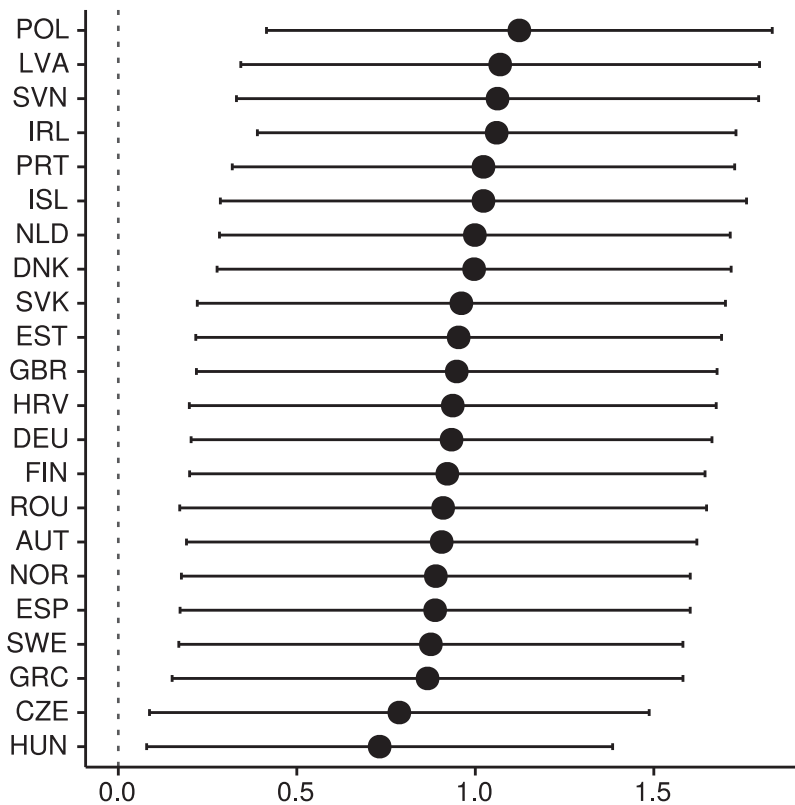


Figure 5. Leave-one-out validation of the main model. The estimated median effect of the interaction between prime minister evaluation and Central Eastern Europe on vote choice is displayed by excluded country, 95% confidence intervals.

they include an over proportional amount of prime ministers who are considered to be outliers. In this case, these exceptions as identified by Baylis may drive the interaction. However, the selection of CEE prime ministers in the used CSES data only encompasses one of the exceptions identified by Baylis: the parliamentary election in 1996 in which Václav Klaus ran as prime minister. As the robustness test in [Figure 5](#) shows the cross-level interaction holds even when the whole country is excluded, therefore, it is unlikely that the finding is driven by a biased selection of prime ministers either.

Overall the finding that prime ministers in CEE have a stronger personal electoral performance than prime ministers in WE remains robust. In the following section, I discuss how future studies on prime minister's performance and the presidentialisation of voting behaviour in parliamentary elections may depart from the presented findings.

7. Conclusion

How strong are prime ministers in Central Eastern Europe compared to their counterparts in Western Europe? I have addressed this issue by comparing their personal influence on citizens' voting behaviour in parliamentary elections. Comparing European prime ministers over this presidential characteristic, I find that prime ministers in CEE are electorally

stronger than prime ministers in WE. This pattern can be explained by the increased influence of prime ministers and other leaders in countries with less stable party systems and lower press freedom.

These findings suggest that judgements about differences in overall prime ministerial strength between CEE and WE should be based on multiple dimension. Prime ministers in CEE may on average have less time to achieve policies, especially in previous decades, but they hold a more presidential position in parliamentary systems which should strengthen their position. Rather than focusing on office duration as sole indicator of strength, this study emphasises that prime ministers have to perform on other dimensions as well and that several dimensions will benefit their policy goals. Such a view does not exclude the consideration of office duration. The time prime ministers spend in office may still limit the amount of policies they can achieve and could be understood as a necessary condition to perform. Other factors, like the here presented personal impact in parliamentary elections, support networks within the party, as well as previous executive or legislative experience may then determine how much prime ministers can achieve during their time in office. Moreover, in times of presidentialised parliamentary elections a prime minister's direct personal impact on voters is an increasingly important performance dimension – independently of policy achievements. The changes caused by presidentialisation could also provide incentives to prime minister to further reduce media independence of public broadcasters to control their public image during elections – a trend that is already visible in some countries (Rupnik 2016).

In addition, presented evidence contributes to the study of electoral behaviour and supports two assumptions of the electoral presidentialisation literature. First, the increased importance of leaders in less established party systems in which voters alignment is lower. Second, the role of media to give greater weight to leaders in parliamentary elections. Both factors provide leaders in CEE with more favourable conditions to personally affect voting behaviour. Especially prime ministers may benefit from a media system that is more susceptible to the influence of elites and which they can actively pursue to change in their favour.

The presented findings are in line with theoretical arguments of the electoral face of presidentialisation and also present a puzzle. Even though prime ministers in CEE are electorally stronger, their survival in office is in most cases shorter than the survival of prime ministers in WE. According to the presidentialisation thesis electorally strong prime ministers should be able to use their prominent position in parliamentary elections to gain autonomy within their party and their cabinet. This should plausibly make their survival in office more probable. What explanations may solve this apparent puzzle?

It may be the case that other factors enable or hinder prime ministers to use their electoral strength to gain autonomy within their party and cabinet. These factors are likely to be specific to individual prime ministers and not covered by the present analysis that focuses on differences at the regional- and country-level and does not test how effectively individual prime ministers with a presidential role can gain autonomy. In more institutionalised parties, prime ministers could struggle to gain a strong position within their party, even if they have a presidential connection to the electorate. Cabinets composed of coalitions may also moderate the opportunity of prime ministers to gain autonomy within their cabinet. Lastly, personal characteristics of prime ministers could further influence to what extent they are able to use their presidential role in

elections to their benefit. Future studies may choose to investigate such mechanisms more closely on the individual level and refine our understanding of how prime ministers use their changing role in parliamentary elections to gain leverage within party and cabinet to pursue policies and remain in office. Studying individual prime ministers in-depth under a comparative research design may provide crucial insights.

This paper has set out to extend our knowledge of systematic differences in prime minister's strength across Europe. Central Eastern European prime ministers may on average serve shorter terms in office, but they enjoy a more presidential influence in parliamentary elections than prime ministers in Western Europe. The presented evidence highlights that a prime minister's strength is best perceived as a multi-faceted concept in which prime ministers in CEE and WE may hold differing advantages.

Notes

1. Throughout the paper, I follow (Baylis 2007) and use the terms performance and strength interchangeably.
2. Table A4 in the Appendix shows that the mean popularity of prime ministers in this study differs only slightly between CEE and WE in favour of prime ministers in WE.
3. A few elections are excluded since the CSES covers a leader other than the prime minister (e.g. the president in France).
4. The following software is employed for statistical modelling: Bates et al. (2014) and Knowles and Frederick (2016).
5. The formula of both models is provided in the Appendix.
6. The p -values are 0.036 under the exclusion of the Czech Republic and 0.04 if Hungary is excluded.

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Appendix

Model specifications:

– Main model

$$Pr(\text{vote}_{ij} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\pi_{0j}\text{country}_{ij} + \pi_{1j}\text{eval PM}_{ij} + \pi_{2j}\text{eval Other Leader}_{ij} + \pi_{3}\text{PIDprimeminister Party}_{ij} + \pi_{4}\text{PIDother Party}_{ij} + \pi_{5}\text{age}_{ij} + \pi_{6}\text{gender}_{ij} + \pi_{7}\text{education}_{ij})$$

$$\pi_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{CEE}_j + \zeta_{0j}$$

$$\pi_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}\text{CEE}_j + \zeta_{1j}$$

$$\pi_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}\text{CEE}_j + \zeta_{2j}$$

where $\zeta_{0j} \sim N(0, \sigma_0^2)$, $\zeta_{1j} \sim N(0, \sigma_1^2)$ and $\zeta_{2j} \sim N(0, \sigma_2^2)$

as well as the covariances $\rho\sigma_0\sigma_1$, $\rho\sigma_0\sigma_2$, $\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2$

– Semi-presidential model

$$Pr(\text{vote}_{ij} = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\pi_{0j}\text{country}_{ij} + \pi_{1j}\text{eval PM}_{ij} + \pi_{2j}\text{eval Other Leader}_{ij} + \pi_{3}\text{PIDprimeminister Party}_{ij} + \pi_{4}\text{PIDother Party}_{ij} + \pi_{5}\text{age}_{ij} + \pi_{6}\text{gender}_{ij} + \pi_{7}\text{education}_{ij})$$

$$\pi_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\text{CEE}_j + \gamma_{02}\text{semi Presidential}_j + \zeta_{0j}$$

$$\pi_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}\text{CEE}_j + \gamma_{12}\text{semi Presidential}_j + \zeta_{1j}$$

$$\pi_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}\text{CEE}_j + \gamma_{22}\text{semi Presidential}_j + \zeta_{2j}$$

where $\zeta_{0j} \sim N(0, \sigma_0^2)$, $\zeta_{1j} \sim N(0, \sigma_1^2)$ and $\zeta_{2j} \sim N(0, \sigma_2^2)$

as well as the covariances $\rho\sigma_0\sigma_1$, $\rho\sigma_0\sigma_2$, $\rho\sigma_1\sigma_2$

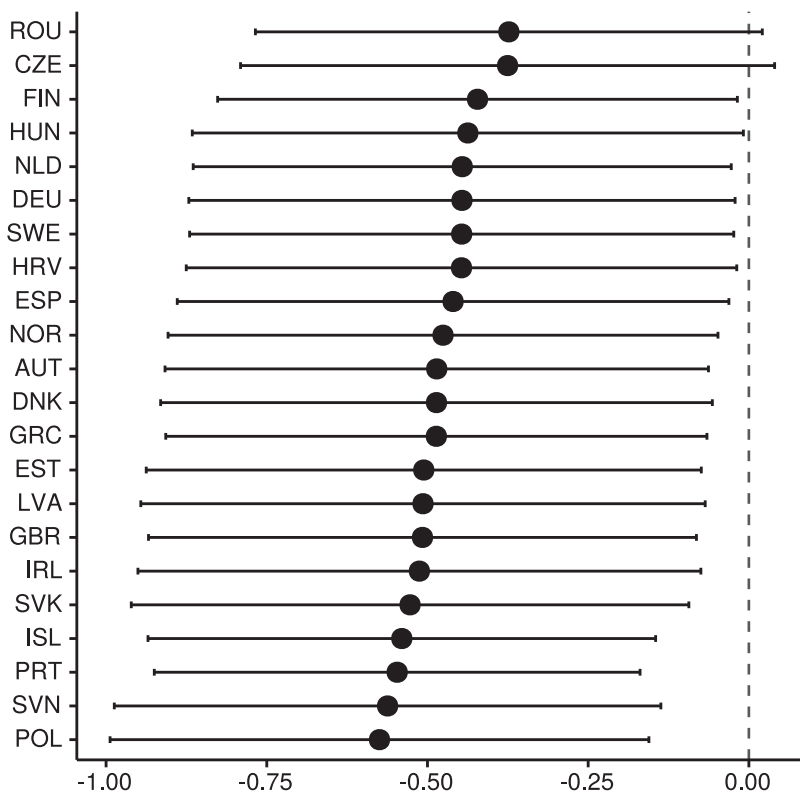


Figure A1. Leave-one-out validation of the main model. Estimated median effect of the interaction between other party leaders and Central Eastern Europe on vote choice are displayed by excluded country, 95% confidence intervals.

Table A1. List of countries, elections and prime ministers under study.

Country	Election	Prime minister
Austria	2013	Faymann
Croatia	2007	Sanander
Czech Republic	1996	Klaus
	2006	Paroubek
Denmark	1998	N. Rasmussen
	2007	F. Rasmussen
Estonia	2011	Ansip
Finland	2007	Vanhanen
	2011	Kiviniemi
	2015	Stubb
Germany	1998	Kohl
	2005	Schröder
	2009	Merkel
	2013	Merkel
Greece	2009	Karamanlis
	2015	Samaras
Hungary	1998	Horn
Ireland	2007	Ahern
Iceland	1999	Oddsson
	2007	Haarde
Latvia	2013	Sigurdardottir
	2010	Dombrovskis
	2011	Dombrovskis
	2014	Straujuma
Netherlands	1998	Kok
	2006	Balkenende
	2010	Balkenende
Norway	1997	Jagland
	2009	Stoltenberg
Poland	2013	Stoltenberg
	1997	Cimoszewicz
	2007	Kaczyński
Portugal	2011	Tusk
	2002	Guterres
	2009	Sócrates
Romania	2015	Coelho
	2012	Ponta
Slovakia	2010	Fico
	2016	Fico
Slovenia	1996	Drnovsek
	2008	Rop
	2011	Pahor
Spain	1996	González
	2000	Aznar
	2008	Zapatero
Sweden	1998	Persson
	2014	Reinfeldt
United Kingdom	1997	John Major
	2015	Cameron

Table A2. Regression results, generalised linear model with logit link.

	Main model	Semi pres. model
Fixed effects		
(Intercept)	-1.30*** (0.27)	-1.52*** (0.30)
Eval. prime minister	2.76*** (0.23)	2.71*** (0.27)
Eval. other leaders	-1.52*** (0.13)	-1.49*** (0.15)
PID PM party	2.64*** (0.05)	2.64*** (0.05)
PID other party	-1.52*** (0.04)	-1.52*** (0.04)
Age	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Female	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)
Education level	-0.06 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)
CEE	0.27 (0.42)	0.17 (0.41)
CEE × Eval. prime minister	0.96** (0.37)	0.94* (0.37)
Eval. other leaders × CEE	-0.48* (0.21)	-0.47* (0.22)
Semi pres.		0.58 (0.41)
Eval. prime minister × Semi pres.		0.12 (0.37)
Eval. other leaders × Semi pres.		-0.08 (0.21)
Random effects		
Var: Country (Intercept)	0.95	0.87
Var: Country Eval. prime minister	0.63	0.63
Var: Country Eval. other leaders	0.20	0.19
AIC	29650.31	29654.07
BIC	29800.42	29830.68
Log Likelihood	-14808.15	-14807.04
Num. obs.	50532	50532
Num. countries	22	22

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table A3. Regression results, generalised linear model with logit link.

	Press freedom model	Party system model
Fixed effects		
(Intercept)	-1.27*** (0.20)	-1.22*** (0.21)
Eval. prime minister	2.89*** (0.04)	2.91*** (0.04)
Eval. other leaders	-1.53*** (0.03)	-1.53*** (0.03)
PID PM party	2.64*** (0.05)	2.64*** (0.05)
PID other party	-1.52*** (0.04)	-1.52*** (0.04)
Age	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Female	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)

(Continued)

Table A3. Continued.

	Press freedom model	Party system model
Education level	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.05 (0.03)
Press freedom	-0.63 (0.34)	
Eval. prime minister × Press freedom	-0.52*** (0.09)	
Eval. other leaders × Press freedom	0.44*** (0.07)	
System closure		-0.30 (0.35)
Eval. prime minister × System closure		-0.75*** (0.09)
Eval. other leaders × System closure		0.35*** (0.07)
Random effects		
Var: Country (Intercept)	0.77	0.87
AIC	29905.76	29884.53
BIC	30011.73	29990.50
Log Likelihood	-14940.88	-14930.27
Num. obs.	50532	50532
Num. countries	22	22

Note: Standard errors in parantheses, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table A4. Mean evaluation of prime ministers in the regions (0, dislike – 10, like).

Region	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Central Eastern Europe	5.04	0.78	3.26	6.44
Western Europe	5.61	0.89	2.32	7.25

Table A5. Mean score of media freedom in the regions (0, not free – 1, free).

Region	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Central Eastern Europe	0.71	0.07	0.58	0.82
Western Europe	0.85	0.08	0.62	0.92

Table A6. Mean party system closure score in the regions (0, open – 100, closed).

Region	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Central Eastern Europe	38.22	9.63	21	53
Western Europe	94.62	2.71	88.5	98.4