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Political Leaders and Democratic Elections

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POLITICAL LEADERS AND DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

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Preface

The origins of this book go back to a conference in Montreal, late 1999. The team of the Canadian Election Study (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, Nevitte) invited a few colleagues from Europe (Aardal, Aarts, Schmitt) in order to identify and discuss important topics and trends in electoral research. Soon, we found ourselves discussing the apparent lack of comparative research on the importance of political leaders in elections. Political leaders – the persons leading their party in the election, who often also aim at winning government office – seemed to become ever more important in popular discourse as well as in subfields like political communication. At the same time, we realized that there has not been a lot of empirical research into the weight of political leaders in the vote decision, and that there was little comparative research.

A draft outline of topics was listed, potential contributors invited, and a new conference was planned at the University of Twente in Enschede, in May 2000. Papers were presented, and the construction of a common dataset of relevant electoral surveys prepared. A panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association later that year, in Washington, provided a forum for several contributors. Meetings in Bilbao and Mannheim followed; a book contract with Oxford University Press was secured; chapters were revised, edited, and revised once more; and by 2003 most of the work had been done. We were only two chapters short from a complete manuscript.

That was seven years ago. It took some time before we finally came to the conclusion that the missing chapters would simply remain just that. In the meantime, we faced an increasingly important dilemma between publishing the chapters as they were, and asking the authors to update their chapters with the latest figures available. In the end, we let the contributors decide. Chapters using our integrated dataset therefore ‘stop’ by 2000, whereas chapters using separate surveys extend to more recent years. In all cases, the authors have revised their theoretical groundwork in order to acknowledge the quickly growing body of literature on leaders in democratic elections.

The book could not have been finished without lots of patience – the patience of our contributors, in the first place. Quite some time after handing in their revised chapters, they were willing to go through their work once more, adding new analyses and theoretical viewpoints. We are grateful for their continued support for the project despite periods of silence on the part of the editors. Secondly, the patience of Oxford University Press has been very helpful for not losing faith in this book – Dominic Byatt and Elizabeth Suffling.

We want to extend our gratitude to Edurne Uriarte at the University of Bilbao for hosting our conference in 2001, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council of Canada and the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding our meetings in Montreal and Enschede. In the final stages, invaluable support was provided by Christophe Chowanietz at Montreal for copy-editing. Justyna Rakowska, Inge Hurenkamp, and Marloes Nannings provided assistance in putting together different parts. Last but certainly not least, Janine van der Woude at Twente pulled us through the final stages of manuscript submission.

Enschede, Montreal, Mannheim
July 2010

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Political Leaders and Democratic Elections

André Blais

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The outcome of a legislative election is typically reported in terms of *party* support. The information indicates how many votes and seats were obtained by each party. But in fact voters are faced with multiple choices which must be folded into one (Johnston 1961). They must decide which party they prefer. However, in choosing between the parties, they also choose among the policies that these parties advocate and their leaders. In a parliamentary system, one of these leaders will become the Prime Minister, and, if there is to be a coalition government, others may well become ministers. In a presidential election, voters must obviously choose among political leaders, that is, among the candidates running for office. But these candidates are almost always associated with parties and advocate a particular political agenda, and voters must therefore also think about which party and which agenda they like best.

This simple and basic fact raises the question of the relative importance of leaders. We would expect the vast literature on voting behaviour to have addressed this most basic question. Yet, surprisingly enough, the question has been largely neglected until recently.

Take *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). The book acknowledges, at the very end, that, at least in the 1956 presidential election, ‘the popular appeal of Eisenhower was unquestionably of paramount importance’ (Campbell et al. 1960: 527). But it devotes very little space and analysis to candidate evaluations. One half chapter deals with that topic (chapter 3: Perceptions of the Parties and Candidates), while two full chapters are concerned with party identification.

Another classic, *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes 1969), devoted one chapter out of twenty (and 25 pages out of 448) to leaders. Butler and Stokes conclude that leaders have demonstrable effects but that they are only one factor among many, and a less important one than the economy and various other issues. And the topic is completely absent in *Electoral Behavior: A Comparative Handbook* (Rose 1974).

Things have changed and the question of leadership gets more coverage. *The New American Voter* (Miller and Shanks 1996) has a chapter on candidates’

personal qualities and another on candidate and party performances. *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke et al. 2004) puts forward a valence voting model in which perceptions of leaders play a central role.

Despite this increasing recognition, there is little systematic comparative analysis of the impact of leaders across countries. The *Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics* (Wattenberg 1991) remains the most thorough examination of the changing role of party leaders in elections, but it deals with one specific country (the United States) with a presidential system.

More recently, two edited books have focused on the impact of leaders' personalities (King 2002*b*) and the concentration of power around leaders (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Both books provide rich and valuable information about the role of political leaders in democratic elections, but all the analyses are country-specific, except for the introduction and conclusion where the editors attempt to draw 'general' lessons.

We intend to fill what we believe to be a huge (and unjustified) gap in the literature with this book. The objective is of course to evaluate how much impact leaders have on the vote. But we assume that the leader effect varies over time, across systems, parties, and voters. We formulate hypotheses about the sources of these variations, and we use a comparative data set that allows us to systematically test these hypotheses.

1.2 WHY SHOULD LEADERS MATTER?

The short answer is that they are one component of the decision matrix. Voters choose simultaneously among the parties, the leaders, and the policies on offer.¹ Sometimes who is the leader of a given party becomes a crucial consideration.

Political leaders do not play a central role in the two main traditions in voting behaviour. The Michigan school, which goes back to *The American Voter*, focuses on political parties and particularly on voters' 'party identification'. While political leaders have a place in the Michigan analytical model, they do not receive much attention. The second school, inspired by *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957), emphasizes issues. It is closely linked to the spatial model of voting and party competition in which voters are assumed to vote for the party that best defends their interests and/or values. Downs asserts (1957: 27) that there are 'only three types of political decision-makers in our model: political parties, individual citizens, and interest groups'. From this perspective, all that voters need to know when making up their mind about how to vote is parties' overall ideology.

The questions, then, are: What would voters want to know about the leaders and how and why would that information help them make a 'rational' choice? The

literature points to two kinds of information. First, leaders' own personal views on the issues. These may differ from those of their parties. Of course, leaders play a crucial role in defining and then defending party policies, and we would expect little hiatus, in general, between the issue orientations² of the leader and those of the party. There are, however, instances where voters perceive the leader to be more concerned about a problem than the party in general, or more moderate or extreme on a particular issue than the party. When such differences occur, we would expect voters to react on the basis of their perceptions of both the leader's and the party's issue orientations.³ How often substantial deviations between perceived issue orientations of party and leader occur is an empirical question about which we still have little empirical evidence.

The second type of information concerns the personal qualities of the leaders. Why should voters care about these personal characteristics? There may be two sets of reasons. First, knowing about the personal characteristics of the leaders may be useful whenever the issue orientations of parties and/or leaders are vague or ambiguous. In those cases, personal characteristics may serve as cues about the probable action that the party (and leader) will take after the election (Cutler 2002). For instance, if a party is evasive about abortion, knowing that the leader is a devout catholic may lead the voter to infer that the leader is likely to make it difficult for women to have abortions. Second, the personal characteristics of the leaders may provide the most important piece of information about how they would behave with respect to *unforeseen* problems that are not part of the political debate at the time of the election. The point has been made forcefully by Page (1978: 232–3): 'it may be that, in an age of nuclear weapons, no aspect of electoral outcomes is more important than the personality of the president, which might well determine how the United States would react in an international confrontation'. For instance, if the voter favours a hawkish position in foreign policy, he/she may have greater confidence in a candidate who generally appears to be strong and firm. The person then infers that the leader with the 'right' set of characteristics is likely to react 'correctly' in most situations.

What are these personal characteristics that voters may care about? We may distinguish three kinds of characteristics. The first is the *socio-demographic* profile of the candidates. Even the Michigan school paid close attention to the impact of Kennedy's religious denomination (catholic) in the 1960 American presidential election (Converse 1966). There is a vast literature on the impact of the gender of candidates on vote choice (see Hayes and McAllister 1997; McDermott 1997; Banducci and Karp 2000; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Herrson et al. 2003; Koch 2008). The question raised here is whether voters tend to vote for candidates who share their own socio-demographic profile, possibly because they believe that those candidates are likely to address problems in the same way as they would personally.

Some personal characteristics are of an 'objective' nature: one's gender, occupation, region, or religion. Others are of a more subjective nature. They have been

labelled traits (see Miller et al. 1986; Bean and Mughan 1989). Kinder et al. (1980) have argued that voters evaluate candidates on two basic dimensions: competence and trustworthiness (sometimes called character). The former can be decomposed into intellectual and leadership ability, and the latter into integrity and empathy (Kinder 1986; Johnston et al. 1992).⁴ While these two traits, competence and trustworthiness, are personal characteristics of individual candidates, it could be argued that the latter is more personal than the former. The reason is that competence is very much associated in the public mind with experience. The implication is that incumbent candidates, who obviously have greater experience with the job of being a prime minister or a president, usually have an edge with respect to competence (Page 1978: 235; Johnston et al. 1992: 178). Because incumbents are more likely to be perceived as competent (which is an important reason why incumbents tend to be re-elected), it could be argued that competence is not a 'purely' personal characteristic.

These distinctions raise additional questions. The first concerns the relative weight of competence and trustworthiness in voters' overall evaluations of leaders. Their import may well vary across systems, parties, and voters. The second question concerns the link between the socio-demographic profile of leaders and their perceived traits. There is a substantial literature, for instance, on the nature and amount of stereotyping of male and female candidates (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

There are thus good reasons why voters may make up their mind how to vote on the basis of perceptions not only about parties and issues but also about the political leaders. How much actual weight feelings about the leaders have on vote choice is the central question that is addressed in this book. That weight, of course, is likely to vary depending on the context of the vote and the kind of voters. Our inquiry thus consists in specifying the contextual factors that make leaders a more or less powerful variable in vote choice.

1.3 WHEN, WHERE, AND FOR WHOM DO LEADERS MATTER?

The first issue to be tackled is whether leaders are becoming more important over time. The main hypothesis is that 'election outcomes are now, more than at any time in the past, determined by voters' assessments of party leaders' (Hayes and McAllister 1997: 3).

Why should we expect such an evolution? Two interrelated factors are usually invoked: the personalization of politics and party dealignment. The greater personalization of politics is typically linked to the growing importance, over the last half-century, of television for political communication. Two arguments are made in this respect. First, more and more people rely on television as their main

source of information about the election. Second, television focuses to a larger extent on the leaders and their personal qualities than radio and newspapers do.⁵

The second reason why many analysts believe that political leaders have become more important is the decline of partisan loyalties. The decline of party identification has been largely documented in the United States (see, especially, Wattenberg 1998).⁶ In Europe, the situation is more ambiguous. Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) report no smooth and uniform decline across Western Europe. They indicate, however, that even though there are substantial variations in the pattern observed across countries, the findings 'generally point to a decline in partisanship across Western Europe' (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995: 101).

The reasoning is that if the number of partisans tends to decline, there is greater room for other factors, most especially political leaders, to affect vote choice. Partisans tend to support the same party at every election, whatever the issues or the leaders. Those without partisan ties are more likely to consider all the options, and to look especially at how they feel about the various leaders.

Whether leaders have or have not become more important over time, we should also expect systematic differences between countries. Following the reasoning elaborated above, we would predict leader evaluations to count more in those countries where television plays a prominent role and less where newspapers, in particular, are still very important. Likewise, the weight of leaders should hinge on the overall strength of partisan loyalties: the weaker these loyalties, the greater the expected effect of leaders.

This is not all. Theoretically at least, the relative importance that voters attach to political leaders in making up their minds how to vote should depend on the relative personal power that these leaders can exercise. Voters should care about leaders most especially in those countries where these leaders enjoy considerable leeway in tilting policymaking in certain directions.

This raises the question about which institutional setting is likely to increase the personal power of political leaders. We would argue that it is in parliamentary systems with one-party majority governments that political leaders, that is, prime ministers, are the most powerful. Where power has to be shared between two or more parties, in a parliamentary system with coalition or one-party minority governments, political leaders are unlikely to have as much political clout. As for presidential systems, power is divided between the president and the legislature. Hence, the most powerful political figures to be found are the prime ministers of countries such as Australia, Britain, and Canada.⁷

From that perspective, leader evaluations should play a greater role in Westminster-style countries than in presidential systems such as the United States. However, there is a countervailing factor in presidential systems: voters are allowed at least two votes, one for the president and one for the legislature. It is thus possible for voters to express different preferences with their two votes. People can focus on the parties for the legislative election and on the individual candidates for the presidential election. And on the ballot they are explicitly

invited to indicate which *candidate* they support. As a consequence, even though presidents may be less powerful, in relative terms, than prime ministers of Westminster-style countries, leadership considerations may well matter as much (if not more) in presidential systems. The real important difference should therefore be between countries with minority or coalition governments, which are typical in continental Europe, on the one hand, and presidential and Westminster-style systems, which are typical in Anglo-American countries, on the other hand. We should observe stronger leader effects in the latter group.⁸

Should we also expect systematic differences across parties within the same country? Do leaders matter more for some parties than for others? We think so. At the same time, we expect leader effects to vary more across countries than across parties. The reason is that we believe that the relative import of leaders depends first and foremost on institutional variables, such as whether there is a presidential or parliamentary system, which tend to be country-specific. That being said, the impact of leaders should also vary across parties.

The first distinction that comes to mind is that between *new* and *established* parties. We would expect leaders to matter more for the former than for the latter. The reason is that it takes time for supporters of a party to develop stable loyalties towards that party (Converse 1969). As a consequence, party identification is likely to be weaker among supporters of new parties, which leaves more room for other considerations such as leader evaluations.

A related question is whether leader effects are more pronounced for smaller parties. We do not see any reason why size, as such, should make a difference. Of course, new parties tend to be small, so that we might well observe that leader effects are more important among new and small parties. In our view, however, it should be the age of the party that matters, not its size.⁹

Another potentially relevant contrast is between ‘governing’ and ‘non-governing’ parties. A ‘governing’ party is one that has the potential to be part of the government after the election. In a parliamentary election, it is a party that could either form a single party government or be one of the partners in a coalition government. The leaders of the governing parties have a real chance of exercising power, and voters may well want to take into account how they feel about them when they decide how to vote. Leaders of non-governing parties will not exercise power, and it should matter less whether they are competent and trustworthy or not.

If we make a final distinction between ‘ideological’ and ‘non-ideological’ parties, we would predict leader effects to be stronger among the latter. Ideological parties should attract or repel voters on the basis of the specific set of ideas that they promote. The individual qualities of the leader should count more for parties with more ambiguous issue orientations.

It is important to point out that a party may well have different characteristics with contradictory implications. A new party, for instance, may be unlikely to participate in government and may tend to be ideologically oriented. Its young age

may heighten leader effects, but its ideological orientation and its non-governing nature may depress them. It is thus crucial to take into account these characteristics simultaneously.

Leader effects may vary across parties but also across leaders. We have chosen to focus on two important questions in this regard. The first is whether leader effects are symmetrical or not. More concretely, are voters equally attracted to popular leaders and repelled by unpopular ones?

The asymmetry hypothesis has been examined particularly in the economic voting literature. Bloom and Price (1975), especially, have argued that the incumbent party is punished in economic downturns but is not rewarded when the economy is doing well. However, the hypothesis has been shown not to hold at the individual level (Kiewiet 1983; Lewis-Beck 1988). The asymmetry hypothesis is directly related to the 'negativity' thesis, according to which people are more affected by what they dislike than by what they like (Jordan 1965; Lau 1985) and are thus essentially making up their mind 'negatively', through a process of eliminating all the parties that they do not want. Surprisingly, the negativity or asymmetry hypothesis has not yet been tested with regard to leader effects. We believe this is an important gap in the literature.

The second question is whether new leaders, those who run (as party leaders) for the first time, are evaluated differently from old ones. In fact, there are two questions to be addressed here. The first is whether being a new leader is a bonus or a handicap. It could be a bonus if it is the case that the more voters get to know a leader the more critical they become because the exercise of power tends to create more enemies than friends (Riker 1982) and/or because media coverage of politicians is typically negative (Patterson 1993). Then again, being a new leader could be a handicap if voters believe that it is crucial for leaders to have some experience and are inclined to have less trust in inexperienced leaders. For instance, it would seem that in Canada each leader's popularity declines from one election to the next (Clarke et al. 1991), which suggests that newness is an advantage.

Newness could matter in a different, indirect, way. Voters are likely to feel less informed about new leaders than about old ones, who have been around for some time. Because they feel more informed about them and are thus more confident about their judgements, voters could attach greater weight to their evaluations of established leaders (Alvarez 1996; Blais et al. 2001).

Finally, and perhaps more fundamentally, it may well be that some kinds of voters pay greater attention to leader characteristics than others. The conventional wisdom is that leader evaluations carry the most weight among voters who are politically uninformed and unsophisticated. That conventional wisdom has been aptly summarized by Carmines and Stimson (1980: 79): 'The common – indeed universal – view has been that voting choices based on policy concerns are superior to those based on party loyalty or candidate images. Only the former represent clearly sophisticated behavior'.

In the United States that assumption has not been supported by empirical evidence. Miller et al. (1986) show that college-educated voters volunteer more personal comments about the candidates than do less-educated voters.¹⁰ Similarly, Glass (1983) demonstrates that the candidates' personal attributes have as much impact on the vote of the highest educated as that of the least educated. This being said, the hypothesis has not been systematically examined outside the US context.

Another important voter characteristic that could condition the magnitude of leader effects is media consumption. The growing personalization of electoral politics is typically attributed to the growing prominence of television. From that perspective, we would expect voters who are more exposed to television to be more sensitive to leaders' personal qualities. There is some evidence to support that hypothesis, but only in the North American context. In the United States, Keeter (1987) found that the candidates' personal qualities have a greater weight on vote choice among those for whom television news is the main source of information about the election. In Canada, those who are more exposed to media coverage of the election tend to attach greater importance to leader evaluations, especially as the campaign progresses (Mendelsohn 1996; Gidengil et al. 2001).

In the same vein, it would seem logical to assume that the leaders' personal qualities matter much more for those without long-term attachment to any party. To the best of our knowledge, that conventional wisdom has never been put to empirical test.

1.4 OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book is the product of a vast collaborative research effort involving colleagues from nine countries – Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United States – where national election studies have been collected over an extended period of time. Because these data sets cover a long period of time, it is possible to put to systematic test the conventional wisdom that leaders have progressively become more important. These countries also offer a rich variety of characteristics in terms of media structure and political institutions, which enable us to examine the hypotheses elaborated above about the contextual factors that could increase or depress the relative importance of leaders.

Throughout the book, the emphasis is put on the comparative analysis of leader effects on the vote. We believe that leaders are an important component of vote choice and that this component has been neglected in the literature. But we are also convinced that leaders are not always important and that it is our task to specify when, where, and for whom they matter more and less.

This is why we have decided to pool together election studies from nine different countries and over an extended period of time. This gives us a total of sixty-eight different elections and a total of forty-two different parties and leaders for which we can estimate leader effects on vote choice. Each case is inherently interesting but the focus in this book is on variations across cases and on the analysis of systematic patterns about the conditions that increase or decrease the import of leaders on the vote.

Our main and common source of data is thus the pooled data set covering sixty-eight different elections in nine different countries. We also use, whenever possible and useful, the merged data set of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, whose common module I contained a specific question about leader evaluations. That second data set provides additional information to estimate leader effects.

We are thus covering a great variety of cases, which allows us to offer a broader perspective than previous studies. Our analyses deal with established Western democracies, roughly in the period 1970–2000. Only future research will establish whether the patterns unravelled here hold more generally across time and space.

The standard assumption in the literature is that political leaders are becoming more important because of the growing role of television, which contributes to the personalization of politics. Chapter 2 takes a close look at this evolution. Ohr ascertains the pattern and magnitude of that evolution. Has television become the prominent source of information everywhere? If so, at what point in time did it become prominent? And how important are the differences among the countries? The chapter also examines and assesses the empirical evidence as to whether media coverage of elections has become more personalized and as to whether coverage is more personalized on television than in the print media.

We then move to an overall examination of party leader effects on the vote. Chapter 3 compares the relative impact of party and leader ratings on the vote in different countries and over time. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the set of countries where we expect party leaders to matter most, that is, in the Westminster systems and the United States. McAllister and then Wattenberg assess the relative weight of the leaders in vote choice across numerous elections, determine whether their importance increases over time, and highlight the most striking findings about the nature of the party leader vote in Anglo-American democracies.

In chapters 6–9, we examine under what conditions leader effects tend to be the greatest or the smallest. In chapter 6, Curtice and Hunjan identify in what kinds of systems party evaluations matter most and least. Aardal and Binder (chapter 7) then look at variations across parties to determine if there are some types of parties where leader effects are most apparent. This is followed by Nadeau and Nevitte (chapter 8), who focus on variations across leaders; Nadeau and Nevitte enquire how leader characteristics such as their gender and age affect their overall ratings as well as the relationship between these ratings and vote choice. Finally, in chapter 9, Gidengil ascertains which types of voters, if any, are more susceptible to vote on the basis of how they feel about the leaders.

Chapters 10 and 11 seek to advance our understanding of how leader effects take place. In chapter 10, Aarts and Blais put to the test the ‘negativity’ thesis according to which negative leader evaluations matter more than positive ones, that is, people vote more against the leaders they dislike than for those they like. Finally, Ohr and Oscarsson take a closer look at the kinds of traits and images that shape voters’ overall impressions of the leaders.

NOTES

1. In all electoral systems, except closed list proportional representation (PR), local (constituency) candidates are another component of the decision matrix.
2. Issue orientations include both issue positions and issue emphases (see Stokes 1966b for this crucial distinction).
3. We would expect the relative importance attached to the leader’s issue orientations to hinge on the perceived personal power of the leader in cabinet or parliament.
4. From a more intuitive perspective, Page (1978) had earlier suggested four dimensions: competence (including knowledge and experience), warmth, activity, and strength. The last two correspond to leadership abilities, while warmth resembles empathy. Page also had honesty among a variety of other personality traits.
5. It is also sometimes argued that television sets the overall tone of election coverage, that radio and newspapers have come to follow the trend imposed by television.
6. For a contrary perspective, see Bartels (2000).
7. For an account of the considerable power of the prime minister in Canada, see Savoie (1999). We are not arguing, of course, that the prime minister of Australia or Canada is more powerful, in absolute terms, than the president of the United States. Our point is rather that the prime minister has greater relative influence, compared with other political actors in the same country, than that of the president.
8. This distinction overlaps to a good extent with that between proportional representation and non-PR systems, since the former very rarely produces one-party majority government (see Blais and Carty 1987). I would argue, however, that what really matters is the type of government and not the electoral system as such.
9. However, larger parties tend to be more powerful than smaller ones. Thus, their political leaders are likely to play a more important and visible role which – indirectly – might render their characteristics and qualities more consequential for vote choices.
10. A similar pattern is observed in Canada by Brown et al. (1988).

Changing Patterns in Political Communication

Dieter Ohr

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Political communication has undergone dramatic changes during the last decades. Western democracies are seen as moving towards a ‘media-centred democracy’ (Swanson and Mancini 1996a: 247) and election campaigns more and more come close to the modern model of campaigning. Its key attributes encompass an expanding reliance on technical experts and professional advisers, a growing detachment of political parties from citizens, the development of autonomous structures of communication, and an enhanced personalization of politics (Swanson and Mancini 1996a: 249; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell 2002). Regarding this scenario, which is often viewed as a process of Americanization,¹ the claim of a *personalization of politics* is probably the most controversially discussed facet. Have political leaders in fact become more important in media-centred democracies and do they really play a more prominent role in the modern model of campaigning than formerly? In a presidential system like that of the United States, personalization is more or less the natural state of affairs, with ‘candidate-centred’ election campaigns, a highly personalized media coverage of politics, and an electorate for whom the candidates’ personal qualities play a significant role when casting the ballot. It has also been shown that US presidential candidates have attained an even greater relevance in American politics and for American voters during the last decades (Wattenberg 1991; see also Keeter 1987).

It is less clear, however, whether and to what degree the personalization of politics or a state of ‘candidate-centred politics’, which is established for the presidential system of the United States, can and will also be reached in parliamentary democracies. Whereas in presidential systems institutional arrangements clearly turn the citizens’ focus towards the candidates’ personal qualities, parliamentary systems direct the voters’ attention more to the ‘whole package of party policies, platforms, and candidates, rather than personalities’ (McAllister 1996: 286). In fact, there are a number of contextual variables, such as the nature of the electoral system, the structure of party competition, the regulation of campaign activities, the national political culture, and last but not least the national media system, which might affect the dynamics of the postulated development in the direction of a greater importance of political leaders in parliamentary democracies. But it has been argued

that transnational trends towards a media-centred society have been so massive and sufficiently uniform across most countries that even in parliamentary and party-dominated democracies political leaders would have gained importance to some degree – with respect to their coverage in the mass media, their role in election campaigns, and, consequently, in the voting calculus of the citizens. According to this view, political leaders in parliamentary democracies would have acquired a position similar to the leaders in a presidential system, which is, in essence, what the *presidentialization thesis* is about (cf. Mughan 2000).²

As changes in political communication are assumed to be one central cause for the postulated personalization and presidentialization of voting behaviour, it is imperative to characterize these changes in detail.³ Therefore, the focus in this chapter will be on *the empirical basis of hypotheses on personalization and presidentialization with respect to election campaigns and the media coverage of politics*. As a first step, we begin by presenting some of the main arguments behind the notion that political communication has become more personalized in the advanced democracies in general and more presidentialized in the parliamentary, party-dominated democracies in particular. We then consider whether and why a more ‘candidate- or leader-centred’ presentation of politics should have an impact on the political judgements of voters.

In a second step, empirical evidence will be presented which should shed some light on the degree of personalized and presidentialized political communication in advanced democracies. First, the focus will be on the structural changes in the media systems of Western democracies that have occurred during the last decades, such as the spread of television, and which are likely to have fundamentally altered the rules of the game for the mass media coverage of politics. Second, we will assess to what extent the main communication media, that is, television and the press, have changed their coverage of politics in terms of personalization and/or presidentialization.

2.2 CHANGES IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND LEADER EFFECTS ON ELECTORAL CHOICE

The long-term changes of the mass media systems and of election campaigns are closely related to a number of other secular changes over time. Complexity in advanced societies is said to have risen dramatically, partly as a consequence of functional differentiation processes (Mancini and Swanson 1996). Seen from this perspective, to follow and to comprehend politics has become increasingly difficult for many citizens. As a result, there is more than ever a need for institutions such as the media to reduce this complexity. Assuming that such powerful mass media exist and assuming further that personalizing the coverage of politics is a

suitable means to reduce this complexity, political complexity in advanced societies may eventually, through a rather indirect process, contribute to stronger personalization in the media coverage of politics.

The development towards the 'media democracy' comprises a wide variety of subdevelopments (cf. Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Schulz et al. 2000; Schulz 2008; see also Asp and Esaiasson 1996). A tremendous expansion in the supply of political information has been observed, starting with the spread of television (see Figure 2.1) and proliferation of commercial TV channels throughout most advanced democracies (see Table 2.1), leading to a state of multichannel competition in each of these systems and, recently, the development of the Internet. As a result of this mass media expansion, media consumption has also increased, though not quite proportionally. With respect to political information seeking, the number of recipients using television as the preferred medium has clearly risen and has by far surpassed the press at the end of this process (see Figure 2.2).

It is expected in general that political broadcasting in a competitive media system increasingly follows news values such as conflict, negativism, and personalization. If there is in fact a change in political journalists' coverage of politics and politicians towards *negativism* and *conflict* (for Germany see Kepplinger 1998; Reinemann and Wilke 2007: 107; for the United States and the press in particular see Patterson 1993, 2002; for the United Kingdom see Mughan 2000: 69), it may have an impact on the public perception of political leaders. An increase in negative evaluations may thus well be an important factor in accounting for the decrease in leader popularity during the last decades, since charges concerning a candidate's reputation may have become more credible in part because 'they are now reported through a largely nonpartisan press' (Wattenberg 1991: 81). Declining leader popularity has in fact been observed not only for the United States (Wattenberg 1991: 66; see also Patterson 2002) but also for Germany (Schmitt and Ohr 2000).

Personalization is a likely development not only due to the constraints of intense competition in the media system. It corresponds perfectly to the 'logic' of the medium of television. Since television is by definition a medium for which pictures are indispensable, personalizing the coverage of politics has a structural advantage compared with the coverage of political programmes or political institutions such as the political parties. Visualization is the most important format criterion of television. This constraint furthers personalization in television broadcasting of politics at the expense of more abstract issues and institutions. Moreover, in addition to the visualization requirement, keeping matters simple and lively simultaneously is more important in a media system with enhanced competition. Again, personalizing the television coverage of politics may be one appropriate strategy in this respect.

It is one thing to account for the relationship between changes in political communication, such as the spread of television in general and commercial television in particular, and the *personalization* of the media coverage of politics.