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EDITED BY Marina Costa Lobo & John Curtice

PERSONALITY POLITICS?

*The Role of Leader Evaluations
in Democratic Elections*

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Introduction

Marina Costa Lobo and John Curtice

Whenever elections are fought, it is often the case that the media attribute to leaders and leadership a key role in the outcome. Be it in presidential elections in the United States or a parliamentary election in Britain, journalists and pundits alike debate at considerable length the relative merits of different candidates, their personal characteristics, and the importance of the TV debates for clinching the election. Yet, the ubiquity of leaders in the public discourse on politics and elections contrasts considerably with the role that has been attributed to leaders in the field of political behaviour, and political science more generally. To a significant extent, the study of democracy, be it from the perspective of institutions or individuals, has been implicitly about the study of how to constrain abuses of power, as well as excessive concentration of power in the hands of one leader (Ruscio 2008). As a result, the role of leaders has not been at the centre of political studies. In the electoral studies literature, it is often assumed that electors' behaviour should depend mainly on their political outlook, and/or that they concern themselves exclusively with social identities and political issues, rather than on leaders as cues for voting, presumably because social anchors and issues are seen as political cues, whereas leaders are not. Yet, a long standing tradition of the study of leadership in political studies does exist, ranging from Weber's definition of charismatic leadership to Burns' distinction between transactional vs. transformational leadership (Weber 1968; Burns 1978).

More recently, the study of leaders' impact has been growing, as well as the debate on the importance which they have in European democracies. Studies of the relationship between leaders, their parties, and political institutions have argued that European democracies have become increasingly personlized, that is, that irrespective of the formal constitutional position, party leaders rather than political parties are now the decisive actors in the political system. Inter alia, this has been documented through the increasing personalization of political campaigns, the growing control of political parties exercised by

leaders, and the increased power of prime ministers within governments (Poguntke and Webb 2005; McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010).

Authors who stress that the presidentialization of politics is happening argue that this phenomenon is a corollary of several factors. First, modernization and the consequent individualization of society have led to a loosening of social structures that used to bind individuals to a preordained set of social and political attitudes and behaviours. The increasing patterns of social fluidity mean that parties find it difficult to perform a linkage function between electors and institutions. In such a context, it is sometimes argued that voters have become dealigned with voting choices based on issues and leaders rather than relying on party as heuristics (Dalton, Wattenberg, and McAllister 2000). Accordingly, this decline in structures and long-term forces that shape electors' loyalties to political parties has had a large impact in raising the importance of leaders both for party organization and for the way elections are fought.

Secondly, the continuous and growing mediatization of the political process, which is especially pronounced during the campaign periods, has been established (Swanson and Mancini 1996). This trend is seen as a factor in the rising importance of leaders in elections, namely, an emphasis on the candidate, and their personal campaign organization, and is happening both in the United States and across Europe (Farrell 2006, 123). The widespread use of televised debates among the main party candidates has arguably contributed to the centrality of leaders during campaigns (LeDuc, Niemi, and Norris 1996; Garzia 2011).

Thirdly, the overall downsizing of the state since the late 1980s, and globalization, has paradoxically led to a more central and visible role for leaders, as they act as states' representatives across the globe in international forums (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 16).

Fourthly, internal party change has furthered personalized politics. Parties have responded to exogenous pressures for more visibility to candidates with reforms that further reinforce the role of leaders, for example, the introduction of direct election of leaders (Cross and Blais 2012). Nonetheless, the evidence which has been gathered on the importance of leaders in the field of electoral behaviour has been less consensual, as we will present here.

If leader effects are found to matter, how should we interpret this development for the future of democracy? The answer to that question hinges on the nature of leader effects per se, as well as the degree to which the electorate is sophisticated. If we find that leader effects are a proxy for party identification, then by and large, attachment to a leader reflects prior party identification. It is simply party identification by other means, in an age of TV democracy. Liking a leader is a reflection of the electors' perceptions of that leader's political views, their political choices, and their competence for

office. Proper research which carefully models for endogeneity and considers multicausality should make it possible to measure the degree to which leader effects are in effect explained by prior party identification.

Using the leader as a cue for voting may not be a negative development for democracy, even if we consider a dealigned electorate. Provided the electorate is sophisticated, this could even be welcomed as a positive change. An informed electorate will seek information on leaders' political views and policy preferences before making a choice. Such a change would thus be representative of a new relationship between the electorate and politicians, whereby the latter are much more closely monitored. They cannot expect the electorate's loyal vote one election after the next, simply because they stand for a given party. It is a model of voting which approximates the rational choice model (Dalton and Klingemann 2007, 11).

On the other hand, of course, if it is found that leader effects are contingent on media displays of the candidates, that is, the extent to which they appear on television, the way they look, and their personal characteristics, then it is likely that leader effects are a worrying sign of negative changes in the nature of democracy. In such a context, the rise of leader effects would have to be seen as a sign of a depoliticization of elections, which would cease being about issues and political choices, and instead become a 'beauty contest' between politicians. Naturally, if the electorate using leader effects has very little information on political issues, the likelihood that leaders are being used as proxies for political issues declines, and the chances that they are being chosen for their looks and charm on television increases.

What We Know So Far

We start from the premise that, as has been amply shown elsewhere, how people vote is decreasingly determined by their location in the social structure (such as their social class or religious membership) or by a long-term sense of loyalty to a political party (Dalton et al. 2000; Dalton 2002; Thomassen 2005). Whereas in the 1960s social cleavages explained 30% of the variance in electoral choice, in the mid-1980s that value had declined to 10%. Recent studies (Franklin 2009; 2010) find the set of Western countries to have ended the twentieth century with variance in party choice explained by social structure in single digits (in the United States, the corresponding variance explained reaches 12% only).

Correspondingly, short-term factors, such as issue positions (Borre 2001; Knutsen and Kumlin 2005) and evaluations of the economy (Kiewiet and Rivers 1984; Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000), have become more important.

As part of this process, evaluations of party leaders have supposedly become more important too.

There has been no consensus in attempts to measure the impact of leaders. Some authors contend that supposedly parliamentary elections are now effectively presidential contests (Clarke et al. 1979; Graetz and MacAllister 1987; Bean and Mughan 1989; Glaser and Salmon 1991; Stewart and Clarke 1992; Mughan 1995; Mughan 2000; Clarke et al. 2004). However, this claim is far from uncontested. Some studies cast doubt on whether evaluations of leaders have ever had much impact on either individual voters or election outcomes (Bartle 2002; Bartle and Crewe 2002, King 2002; for an overview, see Barisione 2009 and Karvonen 2010). The trend of presidentialization implies *the growing importance* of leaders, and thus can only be tested through a longitudinal analysis of voting behaviour. The few such studies that have actually empirically tested the claim that leader evaluations have become more important over time reach quite cautious conclusions (Curtice and Holmberg 2005; Brettschneider et al. 2006). Two recent additions to the literature have been published most recently. An edited volume by Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt, *Political Leaders and Democratic Elections*, uses election surveys over the past fifty years to understand the impact of political leaders on voting decisions in nine democracies (the United States, Britain, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Australia). It covers topics such as the impact of the rise of TV politics, and investigates the relationship between institutional variation and leader effects. Due to its longitudinal dataset, the authors are able to test the 'presidentialization' hypothesis and conclude that the characteristics of political leaders, parties, and indeed, voters themselves, are actually not important for voting patterns. These findings are contrary to those of another recent study by Bittner (2011), where the author—also using a longitudinal dataset with election studies between 1968 and 2006 in Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States—reaches the conclusion that leader effects matter. Using character traits as independent variables in the large pooled dataset, in a fully comprehensive model of voting behaviour, it is found that leaders are systematically a relevant factor for vote choice. Not only that, but leaders also have a relevant impact on party success and electoral outcomes. Thus, even with the more recent studies, the controversy over the presidentialization thesis has not been resolved.

Not least of the reasons for this dispute are the methodological challenges that surround any attempt to study leader effects, especially the issue of endogeneity (Andersen and Evans 2003; Clarke et al. 2004; Evans and Andersen 2005). Part of the reason for the disagreement on the magnitude of leader effects seems to stem from the differences in the way in which authors estimate leader effects, and how they attempt to isolate those from party identification, ideological effects, and other short-term factors. Meanwhile, if

party leaders have indeed become more influential in shaping the electoral appeal of their parties, attempts to ascertain their impact independently of the appeal of their parties might simply be misguided.

In any event, it is doubtful whether sweeping claims about the presidentialization of elections should be made without any regard to the political and social context within which elections take place. For example, most past research has focused on consolidated democracies, largely ignoring the experience of younger democracies.¹ However, partisanship is generally lower in newer democracies (van Biezen and Mair 2002). So, if short-term forces such as leader evaluations matter more where the electorate is less socially anchored or partisan, we might expect leaders to have a greater impact on voting behaviour in such democracies. Certainly, where the role of leader evaluations has been examined in studies of newer democracies, their impact emerges as not insubstantial (Gunther and Montero 2001; Lobo 2006; Rudi 2009).

Equally, even amongst consolidated democracies themselves, the impact of leader evaluations seems to vary according to the political context. At the macro level, leaders matter more in presidential and semi-presidential regimes than in parliamentary ones. In a parliamentary context, however, as might be expected, leadership evaluations appear to matter more where a majoritarian electoral system is in place, where the battle for power is focused on two parties (Curtice and Holmberg 2005; Curtice and Hunjan 2007), or on the type of parties which exist as catch-all vs. electoralist (Lobo 2008). Indeed, the political context may matter considerably for leader effects. In this area, there is still a lot of untested hypotheses, some of which are dealt with in this book, especially in what concerns the impact of coalition vs. single party governments on leader effects (Formichelli) and the relationship between degree of party system polarization and leader effects (Lachat).

At the micro level, there have been considerable advances in the field of political psychology researching the way in which electors make political choices, and the way that preferences on leaders are formed and influence voting decisions (Lau and Redlawsk 2006), whether candidates' traits trump political platforms (Bittner 2011), and the extent to which emotion and reason are independent and influence political attitudes towards leaders (Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007). In electoral studies, there has been substantial research carried out on the link between media (and especially TV) exposure and leader effects, as well as on the link between political sophistication and the importance attributed to leaders. The advent of mass media

¹ Even Aarts et al. (2011) is only a partial exception to this rule. It includes just one younger democracy, Spain, alongside the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway.

communication has placed television at the centre of political campaigns. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, beginning in the United States, television has led to a personalization of the parties' images. Related to this hypothesis is one which connects degree of political sophistication and leader effects. However, there has yet been little consensus on the degree to which high levels of TV exposure or low levels of political sophistication magnify leader effects (Gidengil et al. 2000; Kroh 2004), although most studies point to relatively small effects.

On the issue of political sophistication, the initial hypothesis posited that those with little information on the issues at stake in a campaign would be more inclined to vote according to their sympathies towards a given candidate. However, recent research has begun to show that, on the contrary, it is those with most political knowledge that tend to be more sensitive to leader effects (Gidengil et al. 2000; Kroh 2004; Bittner 2011). An interesting hypothesis was put forward by Clarke et al. (2004, 174–176), which nonetheless could not be fully proven: that leader effects might follow a curvilinear pattern, with voters with moderate levels of political expertise experiencing the largest effect. Leader effects would be lowest for voters with low levels of expertise, since they are unhinged and no type of political cues would affect them. Effects would also be lower at the high end of voter sophistication, since these rely on other sources of information that require higher levels of expertise.

Our Goals

This book assesses the role that voters' perceptions and evaluations of leaders play nowadays in democratic elections. We will present evidence from an array of countries with diverse historical and institutional contexts, and employ innovative methodologies, in order to assess the importance of leaders in democracies worldwide. Careful consideration of leader effects in different contexts will enable us to respond to a series of interconnected questions which have been left largely unanswered in the existing studies: Do leader effects make a relevant contribution to variance explained in a multicausal model of voting? Where do leaders effects come from? In which institutional contexts are leader effects more important? To which kinds of voters are leaders a more prominent factor for voting behaviour? And what do leader effects stand for? Taken together, we will be able to answer the fundamental question about leader effects in old and new democracies: namely, to what extent are they a sign of a new, more rational, relationship between the electorate and the political realm, or whether they symbolize the debasing of politics in the contestation of elections.

We therefore propose to analyse the impact of evaluations of European leaders on voting behaviour and election outcomes across different contexts, over time, and amongst different kinds of voters, paying attention to the younger democracies of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, as well as consolidated industrial democracies. In so doing, we seek to move the goalposts of debate on leader effects from the question of magnitude to the question of contexts. Ultimately, we will determine whether the role leaders play enhances or damages the electoral process, and so we will be able to contribute to the debate on the quality of democracy in electoral democracies today.

The breadth of countries and periods being analysed in this book should be considered as one of its main strengths. Taking all the chapters together, leader effects in the following countries are analysed in a comparative perspective: Australia, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Ukraine, and the United States. Individual chapters focus exclusively on one country, normally from a longitudinal perspective, namely, Croatia, France, and Switzerland. The period covered ranges from the 1980s until the first decade of the twenty-first century, thus covering circa three decades of electoral politics. In what follows, we describe each Section in the book and provide a brief account of each chapter's goals.

Political or Not? Where do Leader Evaluations Come from?

In this Section, chapters will unpack the meaning of leader evaluations. Are leader evaluations a proxy for ideology or party identification? Or are they derived from other sources? Extant literature on the topic is scarce and often non-comparative. In the first chapter, Amanda Bittner analyses the origins of personality traits. The main goal is to answer the question of where do the perceptions on leaders actually come from? How are they formed?

Drawing on existing research on the US case, the author builds a hypothesis that links partisan stereotypes to personality traits. For the American voter, it has been determined that Democrats are perceived as more compassionate and empathetic, while Republicans are considered to be tougher and stronger leaders. If party labels are traditionally associated with certain personality traits, then we would expect these stereotypes to feed back into perceptions of political candidates. The main goal of the chapter is to apply this hypothesis in a comparative context. To that end, the author built a database including thirty-five election studies from seven countries spanning three decades ('80s, '90s, '00s), pooled together to look at the evaluations of leaders' traits across a number of institutional environments. Thus, not only is the analysis

across countries, but it is also across time, with several elections per country included. This gives the research both enormous breadth and depth. The chapter ends by testing whether partisan stereotypes are a cue primarily for less sophisticated voters.

The second chapter has a similar focus on the ‘origins’ of perceptions of leaders. Sascha Huber explores the interdependency of personal and political factors in explaining judgements on politicians. To assess the causality of factors, the author carried out an experimental study—considered ideal because it enables the manipulation of the information that is accessible to each sample group in order to determine which factors are causal, and preclude endogeneity. The experiments were conducted with two objectives: the first was to disentangle the relationship between political and apolitical factors in the formation of judgements on political leaders. In this part of the chapter, the questions asked are the following: First, do voters infer character traits from the political positions of leaders or vice versa? Second, do voters adjust their judgements about character traits to their political assessment of leaders or vice versa? Answering these questions allows for a better understanding of the thought processes which characterize electors’ views on policies. The second objective of the chapter is to analyse the institutional effects of parliamentary and presidential elections on the influence of character assessments on vote choices. To this end, three experiments were conducted with 286 subjects in Germany, 313 subjects in France, and 347 subjects in Sweden. Sascha Huber takes us through the experiments, where specific types of information are given or withheld to groups of respondents before they are asked to make a character judgement, or simulate a vote choice. Such innovative methodology allows for strong causal inferences on the meaning of perceptions of leaders.

Systematic or Not? When do Leader Evaluations Matter?

In this Section, the relationship between leader evaluations and the institutional setting in which they occur is examined. It has been shown that leadership evaluations matter more where a majoritarian electoral system is in place or where the battle for power is focused on two parties (Curtice and Holmberg 2005). However, other institutional variables may be included which may be considered relevant mediators of leader effects. Candidates for inclusion as macro variables include: political institutions, electoral rules, and party systems; age of democracy; single and coalition government; and party polarization.

In chapter 3 John Curtice and Marco Lisi investigate how institutional designs shape the impact of leaders on party choice. Using the CSES dataset, it includes thirty-seven election studies held in twenty-nine countries. The first and most important proposition that they test is whether leadership

evaluations now have just as much influence on the way that people vote in parliamentary elections as they do in presidential ones. Next, the authors test the sub-hypothesis that in certain types of parliamentary elections—namely, those using a majoritarian electoral system or those where a two-party system exists—leaders will matter as much as in presidential elections. They further distinguish between parliamentary elections held in parliamentary systems and those held in semi-presidential regimes. In the last section of the chapter, the authors test the relationship between the strength of party identification and leader effects.

In the next chapter Solidea Formichelli investigates the importance of party system format for the strength of leader effects, across eighteen European Member States, in a period of time that ranges from 1990 to 2006. Two inter-related hypotheses are tested, namely, that moving from a two-party system to a multiparty system, the leaders' impact on voting behaviour will increase, and that moving from a one-party to a coalition government, a similar impact occurs. The analysis proceeds in the following way: first, a model is built to compare the explanatory power of an exclusively sociopolitical model of voting behaviour with one where the leaders' impact on voting behaviour is added to the model to determine the significance of leader effects in the model. Then, the previous analysis is rerun, this time, controlling for the effects of the party system. This chapter breaks new ground, not only due to the theoretical question which is asked, often assumed but never tested thoroughly, and also due to the size of the database which was constructed, which is also thoroughly representative of the European voter.

Roman Lachat's chapter focuses on the 2007 Swiss parliamentary elections and researches the effects of ideology and leader effects on voting propensities, controlling by political sophistication and electoral competitiveness. At the micro level he tests the hypotheses that the importance of ideology should vary negatively with the importance of leaders on voting propensities and that political sophistication should vary positively with the impact of ideological distances. At the macro level, Lachat expects competitiveness to vary negatively with leader effects.

Sophisticated or Uninformed Electors? Who Takes Leader Evaluations into Account?

This Section of the book addresses the issue of which voters are more prone to use leaders in their vote calculus. There is good reason too to anticipate that evaluations of leaders affect the behaviour of some voters more than others. Past research has suggested that candidates may matter more for voters with low levels of political sophistication (Gidengil et al. 2000; Bartle 2002). Using a variety of country cases and innovative methodologies, the chapters in this

Section analyse the profile of voters who are influenced by leaders, namely, in terms of political sophistication, type of media exposure, and degree of party identification.

Guillem Rico's chapter seeks to understand the relationship between degree of political sophistication and media exposure on the one hand, and leader evaluations and party choice on the other hand. Those who have relatively little political sophistication would be expected to rely more on trait characteristics for their judgement on leaders, rather than sophisticates, who would rely more on party cues or other political factors both for party and vote choice. Similarly, the less sophisticated would be expected to use leaders as a cue for voting to a greater extent. The analysis is longitudinal, using individual data from four Spanish general elections between 1982 and 2008, thus allowing the author not only to test the importance of individual characteristics on the components of leader evaluations and vote choice, but also to test whether these effects have increased over time.

The next chapter, by Marina Costa Lobo, investigates the importance of leader effects for the dealigned electorate. The goal of the chapter is to test whether those who have no party identification, individuals who decided who to vote for during the campaign, and also those who switch party vote from one election to the next, tend to give more importance to leaders. The assumption is that leaders will be more important for electors with only a weak relation to parties. The data used to test these interrelated hypotheses are gathered from recent election studies in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, countries chosen due to their differences in the aggregate level of dealignment: Italy is a case of modest dealignment, Spain is an intermediate case, and Portugal is a democracy wherein a large percentage of the electorate is dealigned.

Competence or Character? What about Leaders Matters?

The fourth and final Section of the book explores the dimensions of affect for leaders. Are leader effects synonymous with personality traits or are they a heuristic device for prime ministerial performance abilities? Do they epitomize the debasing of politics, the end of the importance of issues, and the transformation of politics into 'beauty contests'? Previous studies have not been completely decisive on these issues. We will seek to present evidence using diverse methodological techniques and different countries which illuminate this aspect of the importance of leaders.

Michael Lewis-Beck and Richard Nadeau investigate leader effects in the French presidential elections between 1988 and 2007. As the authors note, the importance of the presidential figure in France 'stands as a given', but has seldom been systematically addressed. The French case has been very rarely included in edited volumes on leader effects. In this chapter, the

authors start by assessing the magnitude of leader effects across the three decades of presidential voting, in the first- and second-round of the presidential contest, for the mainstream parties of French politics. The particularities of this two-round election system, with only the two most voted candidates in the second-round, justify the analysis: it is expected that leaders' effects increase from the first- to the second-round. Next, Lewis-Beck and Nadeau use the leader thermometers as dependent variables in order to establish what explanatory factors lay behind these attitudes towards leaders. Are these mostly proxies for ideology or issue positioning, or do character traits actually bear on the importance of leaders? The last section of the chapter deals with Le Pen, the leader of the extreme-right wing Front National party, who reached the second-round of presidential elections in 2002. The leader effects for the Le Pen voters are presented as a test of whether these effects are stronger in this type of party.

Gheorghiță analyses leader effects in Romania across two decades. In Central and Eastern Europe, party systems tend to be weakly anchored in society, and leaders have traditionally assumed a prominent role in politics. There are lower levels of political involvement, weak party identification, and high electoral volatility. Together, these factors constitute favourable terrain for the personalization of politics. The data employed are of two types: the Public Opinion Barometers which measure vote intention for legislative and presidential elections, declared confidence in the political leaders, and several sociodemographical variables; and a pre- and post-election panel carried out during the 2004 legislative elections. The analysis is conducted first from a longitudinal perspective using the Barometer data, testing the association between leaders, political events, and voting intention. For the 2004 survey data, a model was built in order to measure the magnitude of leader effects. In the last part of the chapter, Gheorghiță employs a strategy very similar to the one adopted by Nadeau and Lewis-Beck in order to understand the importance of candidate traits vis-à-vis other factors in the leader scales. These models are rerun, distinguishing between electors' political knowledge.

The last chapter in the volume is an investigation of the role of emotions in leadership effects. Tatjana Rudi starts from the premise, similar to the one Gheorghiță presents, that in Central and Eastern European democracies, due to the relatively unanchored nature of the electorate, leaders matter quite substantially for vote choices. Her research distinguishes between the affective vs. cognitive nature of perceptions of leaders, with the author expecting a combination of those types of factors to explain the leader thermometers. The chapter proposes to test several hypotheses. At a basic level, it seeks to test the importance of emotions about leaders for vote choice. The enthusiasm scale is expected to be more important as a predictor for parties which are well known to the electorate, that is, the government