

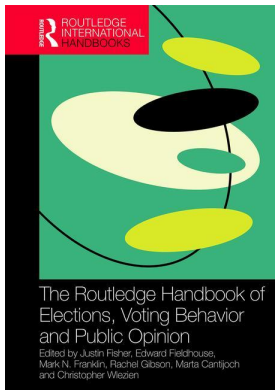
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### **Politics, media and the electoral role of party leaders**

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## POLITICS, MEDIA AND THE ELECTORAL ROLE OF PARTY LEADERS

*Anthony Mughan and Loes Aldering*

### Introduction

The leaders of political parties are seen as key figures in the democratic political process as they take primary responsibility for organizing their parties' efforts to win elections and, if victorious, for governing the people and the country they have been chosen to serve. Interestingly, however, the conventional wisdom has been that, with the exception of presidential candidates in the US, these same key political figures exert very little influence on election outcomes given their limited impact on individuals' vote choice. Essentially indistinguishable in the eyes of voters from the party they represented, party leaders failed to influence the vote independently of the strong, social cleavage-based partisan loyalties that were the norm for much of the post-1945 period. Put differently, party leaders in parliamentary systems of government were dismissed as at best bit players in the larger election drama (Butler and Stokes 1969). More recently, however, perceptions have changed dramatically and the study of the electoral effects of party leaders is a growth area in the study of democratic mass political behavior (Bean and Mughan 1989; Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2011; Bittner 2011).

Two particular developments are generally offered to explain the emergence of parliamentary party leaders as electoral forces in their own right. The first concerns a fundamental change in the electorate and the second in the media environment in which elections take place. Let us take the changing electorate first. Over the last several decades, voters' loyalties to political parties have generally weakened as the social cleavages on which those affiliations were based have become less salient. In addition, many voters have become disillusioned with established parties' performance in office (Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Commonly referred to as "partisan dealignment," this process undermined the tendency to vote out of long-term habitual party loyalty and made way for election-specific, or short-term, forces to exercise a greater influence on the vote decision (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). As originally expounded in the context of US presidential elections, prominent among these short-term forces were policy issues and candidates (with parliamentary party leaders being the functionally equivalent competitors for the position of chief executive) (Campbell et al. 1966). The door was thus opened wider to election-specific influences on the vote decision and party leaders stepped over the threshold (McAllister 2007).

The second common reason given for enhanced leader effects in parliamentary elections is the transformed media environment in which these contests now take place. In particular,

television gradually displaced newspapers and other communication forms as political parties' preferred campaigning medium and voters' principal source of political information. This shift partly reflected changing media consumption patterns in the country at large and partly reflected the desire of increasingly catch-all political parties to reach beyond their traditional support base to attract votes. Not only did television allow them to reach unprecedented numbers of voters, but it did so when they were in the comfort of their living rooms with their partisan defenses relatively low. The cost, though, was that parties had to adapt their campaigning strategies to the presentational "logic" of their new communications medium of choice (Altheide and Snow 1979). In particular, parties had to come to terms with television being a medium of communication that is better suited to the projection of personality than the discussion of complex issues. Thus, the foundations of a new prominence role for party leaders in a television age were laid.

Leaving these foundations aside, the key question that these developments pose for political scientists relates ultimately to the nature of leader effects. What is it about party leaders that gives them "added value" in the eyes of voters and what determines the extent of this value? The answers to these questions are not simple since electoral effects vary according to the leaders themselves, as well as across space and time. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore some of the major sources of this variation.

### **Leader effects**

If only by virtue of their position of institutional leadership, party leaders can influence any number of political outcomes. They are usually, for example, the principal driving force behind government formation as well as policy proposals and outcomes. In specifically electoral terms, however, there are two major effects that they can have on voters. On the one hand, there is a reinforcement effect whereby, through their personality or actions, they strengthen partisan loyalties to the party that they lead in the election. On the other hand, there is a defection effect. This can be defined as the "added value, in electoral terms, that a specific ... candidate is able to bring his/her party or coalition through the effectiveness of his/her public image as appraised at that specific time" (Barisione 2009: 474). That is, through their personality or actions, a party leader persuades partisans of other parties to leave the party for which they usually vote (or for which they voted in the last election) to cast their ballot for the party he/she leads. Given that the conventional wisdom is that election campaigns, and the specific medium of newspapers in particular, reinforce political attitudes and behaviors rather than change them (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Butler and Stokes 1969), this chapter focuses primarily on the dynamics of defection. Our starting point is that this dynamic is now common, but it is not uniform in strength across all leaders, at all times or in all places. Rather, we argue, the magnitude of leader effects varies with the personalities of the leaders themselves, their institutional environment and media coverage of them.

### **Personality**

The unanimous consensus is that it is the psychological variable of personality that draws voters to party leaders. The public values certain personality characteristics in its political leaders and these can be sufficiently attractive to persuade voters to deviate from habitual voting choices and cast their ballot for another party. Personality itself is conceptualized either as overall affect for the leader or as a set of character traits that, for voters at least, suit her/him to the position of chief executive and leader of the government. In the former case, affect is measured by voters giving each party leader a score on a thermometer scale ranging from 0 to 10 and usually

anchored by “strongly dislike” and “strongly like” respectively. In the latter case, voters ascribe to party leaders’ individual character traits, like competence, deemed desirable in a chief executive.

This emphasis on leader personality has led to their coming to enjoy an increased electoral influence over time, a process labeled the “personalization” (or sometimes even “presidentialization”) of politics. This “personalization” thesis has sometimes been misinterpreted as implying that the electoral impact of party leaders increases with each passing election. But while there is some evidence of such an upward trend in leader effects over certain periods of time in Australia (Hayes and McAllister 1997), Britain (Mughan 2000) and the United States (Wattenberg 1994), other studies have challenged this conclusion and claim to show a decrease or no change in their magnitude either within single countries over time (Clarke et al. 2004; Gidengil and Blais 2007) or cross-nationally (Aardal and Binder 2011). Even when the attractiveness of leaders to voters is measured in the same way, this disagreement is only to be expected. For a start, there is variation in the popularity of party leaders both relative to each other and over time for the same individual. Such variance means that, depending on the larger context of specific elections, the ability of a leader to attract defectors from another party can go down as well as up. It may be, for example, that other electoral forces, like the state of the economy or involvement in a foreign war, can come to the fore and overshadow party leaders in one election more so than was the case previously.

When it comes to the character traits that attract voters to the leaders of parties other than the one they consider to be their own, no definitive list of such traits has been identified so that different studies rely on different traits to measure the attractiveness of leaders to voters. However, one comprehensive attempt to compile a set of traits from the literature and to test for their presence in Dutch newspaper articles has come up with the following list: political craftsmanship (including competence), vigorousness (including strong leadership), integrity, communicative skills and consistency (Aaldering and Vliegenthart 2015). When it comes to the question of the electoral impact of specific character traits, however, there are several areas of disagreement in the literature. One such area pits those who take the view that voters look for the same uniform set of traits in all party leaders (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986) against those taking the position that the traits that are important for voters can vary over leaders and for the same leader over time (Hayes 2005). A second area of disagreement concerns which traits matter most to voters who fall prey to the influence of a leader of a party other than the one that usually commands their loyalty. One side advocates for the primacy of performance-related traits as competence and reliability (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk 1986) and others claim to show the greater persuasive power of character-related traits, like integrity and empathy (Bittner 2011). Finally, there is the question of the relative potency of perceived positive or negative leader traits in encouraging voting defection among party loyalists. Those who opt for the primacy of negative evaluations base their argument on prospect theory in social psychology, which holds that voters respond more strongly to negative impressions of political parties and their leaders than to positive ones (Klein 1991). Other studies, in contrast, show empirically that the pull-factors in a party leader’s image are more influential for voters than the push-factors (see, for example, Aarts and Blais 2011).

But commonly being based on studies of single elections at single points in time, these contrasting conclusions tend to ignore change over time in either leader images or the impact of specific leader traits on voters. If only for this reason, they probably represent false dichotomies that disguise a more complex reality. Put differently, the characteristics desired in a leader likely change with the circumstances of individual election contests. Being competent might be a trait valued in a context taking place in hard times, but being caring could well trump competence

when times have improved. In the bitterly fought 1983 British general election, for instance, the perception that the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, and opposition leader, Michael Foot, were caring mattered little for voting patterns. By contrast, the same perception of Prime Minister Thatcher in the less polarized 1987 contest played a significant and substantial role in persuading Labour identifiers to vote Conservative (Mughan 2000: 67–68). It is probably no coincidence that contributing to this change were Mrs. Thatcher's great efforts between the two contests to moderate her public image so as to appear less strident, more understanding and more sympathetic to voters. Among these efforts were changes in dress and hair style as well as voice lessons to lower her natural pitch level and moderate what was described as a “grating, relentless monotone that drove half the nation into paroxysms of irritation” (Young 1991: 429).

### ***Political institutions***

If the party leaders themselves are an important source of variation in the magnitude of leader effects in democratic elections, so too is the institutional architecture within which those elections take place. This architecture is, of course, highly complex and many parts of it may offer opportunities for party leaders to influence voters. Compulsory voting, for example, is likely to bring to the polls a considerable number of voters who lack deep party loyalties or interest in the election. Under such conditions, one might expect the impact of factors such as the personality of the party leaders to have a greater influence on voting behavior. There is any number of such possible institutional influences so limitations of time and space lead us to focus on three of the most widely recognized of them: regime type, electoral/party systems and political parties.

### ***Regime type***

Institutions matter for leader effects and perhaps the most important institutional difference conditioning them is form of government, presidential or parliamentary (Ohr and Oscarsson 2011). Two dimensions of difference would seem to be particularly relevant here. First, in presidential systems, the party leader stands for the position of chief executive separately from the rest of the party's office seekers and voters choose directly between the competing candidates in a nationwide vote. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the road to the position of chief executive (prime minister, chancellor, or whatever) is indirect. The would-be chief executives stand for election in just one single- or multi-member district and as one among many representatives of a political party seeking office; voters do not get the chance to vote directly for their next head of government. Instead, the choice is made after the election is over and the distribution of parliamentary seats determined. The leader of the party best able to command a majority is elevated to the position of chief executive by the parliamentary majority. In other words, leader effects are likely to be stronger in presidential than parliamentary systems because voters choose an individual, who is nonetheless the most prominent representative of a party, in the former, and a party in the latter (Wattenberg 1991).

Second, presidents are elected for a fixed period, can claim to have received a personal mandate and need not always carry their party along if they are to govern effectively. Prime ministers, in contrast, need to maintain majority support in the legislature to govern, which means that they are less autonomous and less easily held responsible for the actions or inactions of the government they head. Blame is relatively easily shifted to the likes of incompetent cabinet colleagues, recalcitrant coalition partners or an uncooperative legislature. Relatively isolated, presidents are less able to shift blame in this way and are more readily held accountable by voters for political outcomes, thereby functioning under normal circumstances as a bigger

influence on the vote for themselves or their party. The notion of “presidentialization” captures the argument that prime ministers have become like presidents in terms of now having the possibility of enjoying an electoral influence in their own right and of being far more important cues for voters than other senior figures in their party (Mughan 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2007).

### *Electoral/party systems*

Institutional differences within parliamentary regimes can also influence whether the magnitude of leader effects is more or less similar to that found in presidential regimes. Majoritarian electoral systems tend to produce two-party systems and single-party governments, whereas proportional systems promote multiple parties and coalition governments. Leader effects are stronger in the former precisely because the leaders of single-party governments can be held more readily accountable for the successes or failures of their government; blame cannot be diverted onto others so easily and, in addition, there is no need to share the credit for political successes (Curtice and Hunjan 2011).

A second characteristic of party systems potentially relevant to the magnitude of leader effects is the ideological character of the parties themselves. Where parties are deeply rooted in social cleavages and ideologically distinctive, there is little likelihood that relatively transient influences like party leaders will disrupt habitual voting loyalties. This is probably the main reason these leaders were not taken seriously as electoral forces prior to the onset of partisan dealignment. Starting in the last part of the twentieth century, however, political parties in most Western democracies became more alike in terms of their political ideologies and goals for society (Franklin, Mackie and Valen 1992). This transition from “mass-based” to “catch-all party” systems weakened habitual voting loyalties and encouraged the emergence of party leaders as potentially potent electoral forces in their own right (Costa Lobo 2014). The converse is also true, of course. The greater the ideological divergence between parties, the less room there is for short-term influences on the vote, like party leaders (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2011).

### *Parties still matter*

The focus on party leaders implies a diminished role for the institution of the political party in shaping the electoral calculus of voters, but its decline should not be overstated. Partisan dealignment notwithstanding, the majority of voters continue to demonstrate a long-term commitment to a particular party and this identification still has a very strong influence on their vote (Bittner 2011). Along with leader evaluations, for example, party identification lies at the core of the recently floated valence model of voting (Clarke et al. 2004). But party is also an important short-term influence on the vote and election-specific evaluations of parties have non-trivial implications for the magnitude of leader effects. The norm is for individual party leaders to be treated as separate entities in the leader effects literature, but it turns out that electoral impact is substantially stronger when they are conceptualized not as stand-alone stimuli, but as objects that voters evaluate relative to the parties on offer in the election. Of course, leaders affect the vote when they are treated as stand-alone stimuli, but defection is substantially more likely when voters like the leader of another party in that election more than they like their own party; the greater this gap, the greater the likelihood of defection at the polls to the favored leader’s party (Mughan 2015). To be sure, leaders matter, but the fact that political parties remain a continuing multifaceted reference point for voters should not be lost from sight in discussions of leader effects.

## **Media**

As the principal information source for voters, the mass communications media lie at the heart of the electoral calculus of voters. Initially, the dominant medium of communication between governors and governed was the newspaper and early research found that it tended to reinforce long-standing political predispositions and behaviors rather than to change them. The reason was a combination of voters exposing themselves only to newspapers that echoed their existing political biases and their having defensive psychological mechanisms, like selective recall, that shielded these biases against discordant information (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954; Butler and Stokes 1969). With the primary intent of reinforcing their electoral support rather than changing it in a world where partisan loyalties ran deep, political parties mostly controlled their media environment.

In more recent years, this control has been seriously eroded by the emergence of television as voters' preeminent source of political information and, consequently, as an important influence on their attitudes and behaviors. The essential problem for political parties generally is that they cannot control this medium and state-licensed broadcasters are commonly required by law to be impartial between them in their political coverage (Gunther and Mughan 2000). Thus, not being able to control the new medium, parties had to adapt to its logic as the first step in harnessing its power to their own electoral ends. This adaptation entailed above all a shift from a pattern of political communication dominated by a party logic in which political parties played the major role in determining what is politically newsworthy to a media logic in which a wholly different style of political communication built around personalized coverage, visualization, simplification, negative coverage, horse race coverage and framing politics as conflict is the norm (Altheide and Snow 1979; Mazzoleni 1987). For the purposes of this chapter, the most important consequence of this switch in the pattern of political communication was an enhanced role for party leaders in the media coverage of politics in general and election campaigns in particular. The reasons for this "personalization" of television coverage of politics are simple. The majority of political coverage takes place through news programs and television newscasts that lend themselves to short, snappy sound bites and the projection of personality more than to the outline and discussion of complex political issues. Additionally, television needs a (familiar) visual image to cover political news stories (McAllister 2007). Moreover, the more authoritative the person behind the visual image, the better the television so that party leaders became preferred over other senior political figures. Inevitably, the party leader became the spokesperson and public face of the party. In the process, the content of media coverage of election campaigns shifted. Less attention was paid to parties' proposals, performance and policy plans and more to their leaders, but with a focus less on their political credentials, issue positions and promises and more on such non-political characteristics as family, personal appearance, life-style, upbringing and religion (Langer 2007).

The upshot of these changes in the media landscape is that the party choice of the many voters has come to be influenced by televised leader images. The strongest direct evidence for such a media effect comes from the United States where sophisticated experiments have demonstrated not only that presidential candidates have an electoral impact through voters' exposure to them on television, but they have also identified the psychological mechanisms through which this impact makes itself felt. These mechanisms are labeled priming and framing. Priming entails that "news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments" (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007: 11). Framing, by contrast, involves television in presenting political and social problems in such a way as to place blame on different sets of actors and institutions. For example,

unemployment can be framed in the media as a product of presidential policies or as the result of economic developments. In the case of the former, voters could well lay the blame for unemployment at the president's door and decide not to vote for him (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1992). Although comparable systematic evidence regarding the role of priming and framing on leader effects in parliamentary elections is lacking, there are indications that here too television plays an important role in shaping voters' perceptions of politicians and the credibility of their messages. One quasi-experimental study of BBC and ITV news broadcasts in Britain, for example, found that leader effects were not dependent on the informational content in the news reports. Instead, if a party succeeds in convincing voters that the television news is biased in favor of a rival, then this perception of bias will result in a stronger electoral impact for the leader whose party is deemed the victim of this bias (Mughan 1996).

The importance of television for leader effects is nowhere more apparent than in the evolution of the institution of the televised leader debate. Starting with the famous 1960 confrontation in the US between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, debates have been a continuous and integral part of presidential election campaigns there since 1976. As well, the contagion has spread. A clear indication that political parties now give a more prominent electioneering role to their leader is that debates between party leaders have now taken root in 14 other democracies, most of them parliamentary systems without the popular election of a president (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Kenya, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Uruguay). There is also convincing evidence that these debates are important and consequential for voters. For example, they help voters to position parties on policy issues more accurately (Van der Meer, Walter and Aelst 2016). Additionally, they influence how heavily voters rely on their perception of leaders' personalities in their evaluations of them (Druckman 2003). There is even some preliminary evidence to suggest that televised debates might constitute the most influential television broadcast form for voters, albeit perhaps only in a system where paid political advertising is illegal. Despite 2015 being only the second British general election to include leader debates, a survey of over 3,000 people found that 38 percent of them claimed to be influenced by them as compared to 23 percent who were influenced by TV news coverage and 10 percent by party political broadcasts (BBC News 2015). This pattern of responses is, of course, no more than suggestive, not least because the "influence" it measures does not indicate whether, and in what measure, these debates reinforce or undermine long-standing attitudes and behaviors. Nonetheless, it does suggest that the interaction between party leaders and the media has become a potent electoral force that we are only beginning to understand.

A good starting point might be the improved specification of the characteristics of voters who are susceptible to mediated leader images when making their vote decision. To be sure, something is known about the psychological processes, like priming and bias perception, that help to translate leader evaluations into an actual voting decision, but there is little agreement on the political and sociological characteristics of those succumbing to the pull of the party leaders. The conventional wisdom used to be that political leaders are most central to the decision making of unsophisticated voters: "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 represents clearly sophisticated behavior" (Carmines and Stimson 1980: 79). Some empirical evidence is consistent with this view, showing that leader effects are indeed strongest among less educated or politically sophisticated voters (Gidengil 2011). The explanation of this finding is usually that leader effects can be considered as heuristics or shortcuts for voters who lack the reasoning capacity and/or political knowledge to make a decision based on "policy concerns." However, other scholars find precisely the opposite and show that



leader effects are actually strongest for more highly educated and politically sophisticated voters (Bittner 2011; Lachat 2014). Their explanation is that leader effects are not just shortcuts. Rather, the evaluation of a leader is based on the voter's assessment of how well the leaders performed, or would perform, in office so that the "process of leader evaluation is complex – perhaps more so than we think" (Bittner 2011: 54). Closer analysis of the increasingly popular televised leader debates should help to adjudicate between such conflicting conclusions.

### **Future research**

One of the more consequential electoral developments in recent decades has been the generalized growth of the importance of party leaders as electoral forces in their own right. From an initial consensus that they used to matter little to not at all in parliamentary elections in particular, the argument has been made that they can even be the difference between victory and defeat for their party in closely fought elections (Bean and Mughan 1989, but see King 2002). To argue for leaders' independent electoral impact, however, is not to imply that this impact is uniform across them, time or space. Rather, the central theme of this chapter is that the magnitude of leader effects is conditional on a number of factors and, among them, we have examined briefly the personalities of the leaders themselves, the political institutions in which leaders operate, the parties in the election and the media. But this "conditionality research" is only in its infancy; much remains to be done to specify the conditions shaping the magnitude of leader effects and we would like to conclude this chapter with some suggestions for future areas of research. Reflecting much of what has already been written on the subject of leader effects, we will focus on the personalities of the party leaders and the media, both old and new.

Dating from at least Max Weber's writings on charismatic leadership, the importance of personality for the political relations between leaders and led has been recognized and this tradition has defined leader effects studies to this point. Voters respond to party leaders as individuals they like or dislike, respect or disrespect, and so on. But if leaders have increasingly become the public face of the party, then the question inevitably arises as to whether voters' reactions to them have a political as well as personality content. Especially the longer they stay at the head of their party, do leaders' images become defined by their party's traditional ideological stance or its current policy positions as much as (or even more than) by their personalities? A case in point is if voters do indeed defect because, in the context of a specific election, they like the leader of another party more than they like their own party (Mughan 2015), what can be the basis of their choice to defect? After all, if political parties do not have personalities, it can't be personality that is being compared in the voter's mind. Voter preferences must be based, at least partly, on other criteria and surely political criteria can be expected to loom large here.<sup>1</sup> Thus, future research should "politicize" leader effects instead of just continuing to "psychologize" them. This is not to say that the latter are not important to voters, but the possibility should be entertained that both politics and psychology play a role in conditioning leader effects so that the interesting question becomes under what conditions one becomes more powerful than the other in affecting the vote decision.

A second area in which we still need to learn a lot more is the interaction between media, party leaders and the vote. Media can be divided into "old" and "new" forms. Television is the predominant "old" medium and we still know little about its role in promoting leader effects in parliamentary elections in particular. Part of the reason is methodological. Experiments (commonly used in the United States but less so outside) could be used, for example, to investigate the relative potency of negative and positive character traits. The effects of debates are also largely unknown. It was mentioned earlier that many more British voters claimed to be influenced by

them than by other televised political broadcasts, but is their effect to reinforce habitual party loyalties, promote defection from them or both? “New” media are more commonly referred to as social media and are becoming more central components of parties’ campaign strategies and tools for communicating (often interactively) with voters (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2007). In addition, we know that voters use them to discuss political issues and express their political preferences (Tumaşjan et al. 2011). But how does the use of social media relate to leader effects? To be sure, leaders’ use of social media affects voters; for example, candidates for political office in the Netherlands won more votes when they used Twitter (Kruikemeier 2014). The early evidence suggests, however, that they may personalize the voting decision less than television insofar as online news seekers are systematically less likely to base their voting decision on presidential candidates’ personality assessments as compared to television viewers (Holian and Prysby 2014). But many interesting and important questions remain unaddressed. How, for example, do parties and their leaders use social media? What form does the presentation of party leaders take in them? And with what effect? Which methods of internet use are most conducive to the promotion of leader effects? These are some of the pressing questions in the study of social media and leader effects.

### Note

- 1 There may be a relationship, for example, insofar as perceptions of a leader’s character influences perceptions of her/his performance in office. Another take comes from Costa Lobo and Curtice (2014), who conclude that leader personality evaluations originate largely in political considerations so that voters are more influenced by those evaluations in political environments where leaders are more influential, i.e., that it is rational behavior for voters to be influenced by leaders’ personalities.

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