

## CHAPTER 30

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# THE PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS

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IN a trend that has been shared by all of the liberal democracies, politics has become increasingly personalized. It is now commonplace for governments to be named after their leader, rather than after the party that holds office, particularly if the party and its leader have won successive elections. This phenomenon is often traced to the election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980, two strong, charismatic leaders whose profile within the electorate easily eclipsed that of their respective parties. However, it is often forgotten that the earliest post-war manifestation of a leader surpassing the popularity of his party was Pierre Trudeau's election as Canadian prime minister in 1968, when newly enfranchised younger voters responded to the new prime minister's "swinger" image by giving birth to "Trudeaumania".

Nor is the trend towards the personalization of politics restricted to presidential systems, its traditional institutional home. The popular focus on leaders now appears commonplace across almost all of the major parliamentary systems, where parties once occupied center stage. The focus on leaders within parliamentary systems has been so marked over the past two decades that it has spawned a large literature that variously labels it the "presidentialization of politics" (Mughan 1993; Poguntke and Webb 2005), "institutional presidentialization" (Maddens and Fiers 2004), and "presidential parliamentarism" (Hazan 1996). Despite the diverse labels, the common underlying theme of these works is that the operation of democratic systems is experiencing fundamental change, without any concomitant change in their formal institutional structures.

Explanations for the personalization of politics vary, but one that is often advanced is the growth of the electronic media and its consequences for politics, particularly in the conduct of national elections (Bowler and Farrell 1992; Glaser and Salmon 1991). The electronic media are seen as crucial in shaping the way that governments communicate with voters and in how they seek to convert them. At the same time, party leaders exploit their exposure in the electronic media in order to attract votes. Whatever the importance of the media in this process, no single explanation accounts for the increasing personalization of politics in democratic societies, and it is clear that a complex and multi-causal process is at work. This chapter examines the evidence for leaders becoming more important, and reviews the explanations that are advanced to explain it. The final section examines the potential consequences of this change.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 LEADERS AND DEMOCRACY: THE EVIDENCE

Considerable impressionistic evidence supports the idea that leaders have become more important in democratic societies. Studies of election campaigns routinely find major party leaders gain consistently stronger recognition as polling day draws closer, while the visibility of minor party leaders exhibits little change (Bartels 1988; Miller et al. 1990; Page and Shapiro 1992). However, rigorous tests of the proposition are rare, for three reasons. First, collecting consistent overtime data is difficult, and making such estimations across a range of countries even more so. Second, since the personalities (and the popularity) of leaders changes continuously, observing any consistent trend becomes fraught with methodological problems as leaders fade in and out of the public's view. Third, the types of qualities that voters see as most important in their leaders has changed, and at least part of that change may well be a consequence of increases in voters' levels of education, as much as other changes (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986).

Substantial evidence supports the view that leaders are increasingly visible to the mass public during elections.<sup>2</sup> Particularly important is the mass media's propensity to mention candidates rather than the parties to which they belong during elections campaigns. Table 30.1 shows the ratio of candidate to party mentions for five advanced democracies for periods ranging from 1952 onwards. The results show that in four of the six countries there is a marked and consistent trend towards more candidate than party mentions in news stories. For example, in the 1952 US presidential election there were 1.7 candidate mentions for every one party mention;

<sup>1</sup> For longer discussions of these issues, see McAllister (1996, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Wattenberg (1991; updated in McAllister 1996: 291) shows an increasing likelihood that voters will refer to economic evaluations in their mention of US presidential candidates.

Table 30.1 The Ratio of Candidate to Party Mentions during Elections in Five Democracies

	United States	United Kingdom	Austria	France	Canada
1952	1.7				
1956	2				
1957					1.2
1958		0.7			
1959					1.3
1960	3				
1964	3				
1965				4.3	
1966		0.8	0.4		
1968	3.6				1.7
1972	3.6				
1974		0.9		4.4	2
1975			0.4		
1976	4.5				
1980	5.2				
1981				3.7	
1983		1.3			
1984					1.1
1986			1		
1987		1.1			
1988	5.2			5.4	
1992		1.1			
1995			1.3	5.6	
1996	5.6				
1997		1.3			1.6

Source: Dalton, McAllister, and Wattenberg (2000, table 3.6)

by the 1996 election this ratio had increased to 5.6 candidate mentions for each party mention, more than a threefold increase. There was also a threefold increase in Austria between 1966 and 1995, and an almost twofold increase in the United Kingdom. The only exception to the upward trend is Canada.

Other research comes to similar conclusions. Evidence from parliamentary systems directly relating the popularity of leaders to the probability of voting for a party show consistently strong effects, although of a much lesser degree than is often supposed once other factors are taken into account (for a discussion, see Holmberg and Oscarsson 2006). Graetz and McAllister (1987) used summary (thermometer)

scores of the party leaders in the 1974, 1979, and 1983 British general elections to show that while leader evaluations had a major impact on defection and conversion between the parties, the net effect on the three election outcomes was comparatively small. The largest effect was in 1983, when the relative standing of the two major party leaders—Margaret Thatcher and Michael Foot, both of whom were from the radical wings of their respective parties—influenced the vote by about 4 percent. In a comparative study of Australia and Britain, Bean and Mughan (1989, 1174) reach similar conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

Interest in the electoral appeal of political leaders comes at a time when scholarly research has concluded that the way in which a voter accumulates information about a candidate—personal as well as political—is an essential tool that enables her to make judgments about the suitability of the competing candidates for elective office. Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk's (1986) study of how US voters viewed presidential candidates between 1952 and 1984 found that "the overall basic structure employed in candidate appraisals" remained stable over the period of the surveys. However, there was a trend towards such attributes as competence, integrity, and reliability becoming more important over the period. There was also some evidence that non-political, personal mentions had decreased overtime, although the authors concluded that much of that change could be attributed to the diverse personalities of the candidates being evaluated rather than to any underlying structural change in how voters evaluate candidate traits.

Similar findings have come from research by Wattenberg (1991; see also Huang and Price 2001; Keeter 1987; McAllister 1996, 291) who examined the proportion of US voters who mentioned economic, partisan, and sociological factors for voting either for or against a presidential candidate over a forty-year period. In line with the decline in partisanship, the proportion of the American electorate who spontaneously evaluated the candidates along partisan lines declined from around one-third in 1952, to just 14 percent in 1992. Sociological factors, such as group-related mentions, remained relatively constant over the period. The major change was the proportion of respondents who mentioned economic factors in their evaluations of presidential candidates, rising from 13 percent of all voter evaluations in 1968 to 57 percent in 1992. This supports the contention that political leaders have become electorally important in their own right, by personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties.

These findings derive, of course, from a presidential system. Do they also hold for parliamentary systems as well? Bean (1993, 129) suggested that they do, and provided evidence from Australia and New Zealand to support his assertion. His caveat is that in presidential systems, candidates act as surrogates for their parties and as a consequence absorb the programmatic traits that would otherwise be the responsibility of their party. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, since parties are stronger and more disciplined, leaders are more likely to be evaluated on their non-political, personal qualities. In their study of Australia, Britain, and the United States, Bean

<sup>3</sup> See also the country chapters in Poguntke and Webb (2005).

and Mughan (1989) found evidence to support this proposition, although the differences they detect were not large. As a result, Bean (1993, 129) concluded that the weight of performance evaluations on the vote is similar “across both national and temporal boundaries, for parliamentary as well as presidential political systems and for many different individual political leaders, whether they have stronger or weaker images and whether they are incumbents or non-incumbents.”

In shaping electoral outcomes, leaders clearly matter, though by a much lesser margin than is often supposed, once a wide range of other factors are taken into account. There is also substantial evidence that voters judge candidates against certain traits that enable them to make a summary evaluation about the likely performance of the candidate if he or she is elected to office. However, much of the evidence is country-specific, and firm conclusions are complicated by the changing personalities involved and by the specific events and circumstances surrounding particular elections. While the evidence is therefore tentative, it does suggest that voters in parliamentary systems are becoming more candidate-centered in their voting, compared to voters in presidential systems. At the same time, it would appear that voters in presidential systems are evaluating candidates in a more instrumental and less partisan way. In the sections that follow, some explanations for these trends are advanced.

## 2 INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Variations in institutional arrangements have clear and important effects on the nature and style of political leadership, with the major distinction being between presidential and parliamentary systems (McAllister 1996).<sup>4</sup> Almost all presidents are popularly elected, usually by means of direct election, or occasionally through some form of electoral college.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the electoral system, presidential systems conform to Verney’s (1959, 75) defining characteristic of the type, namely, that “the executive is responsible to the electorate.” Presidentialism generally encourages individual responsibility, since executive authority resides with an individual who is elected to the position for a fixed period of time. In addition, party discipline is often weak in presidential systems, since the president’s political survival does not depend on the unity of the governing party.

<sup>4</sup> Within the established and newly emerging democracies, the major distinction in executive leadership is between presidentialism and parliamentarism. Countries that have had interrupted periods of democratic government often display the characteristics of both systems, at different points in time, such as Bangladesh. Other countries have adopted hybrid constitutional systems. Among the established democracies, Switzerland is perhaps the most difficult country of all to classify; France is also a difficult case.

<sup>5</sup> An exception is Taiwan, where the president is elected for a six-year term by the National Assembly; the sole purposes of this body are to select the president and to amend the constitution, although it also has the power to recall the president in certain circumstances.

Among parliamentary systems, there is a distinction between systems that have coalition arrangements, a pattern that is found throughout Europe (Laver and Schofield 1990), and those (mainly democracies in the Westminster tradition) that have majoritarian arrangements. Parliamentary arrangements encourage collective responsibility, so that the executive is both dependent upon the confidence of the members of legislature and accountable to them. The operation of parliamentarism also encourages party government, so that in contrast to presidential systems, party discipline is a primary factor in maintaining executive authority (Katz 1986). In parliamentary systems, parties frequently go to considerable lengths to retain the loyalty of their elected members, and to ensure party discipline, since these are the attributes on which their political survival rests (Bowler, Farrell, and Katz 1999).

Presidential systems have fixed terms for their leaders, so retaining office is not normally dependent upon the day-to-day confidence of the legislature. This permits presidents greater flexibility in formulating and implementing policy without the risk of an unexpected election to upset their plans. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the survival of the executive depends upon the confidence of the legislature. The executive can therefore be removed at any time by the legislature, usually following the passing of a vote of no confidence. In practice, this means that a prime minister must make it a priority to retain the confidence of his or her party colleagues and to more carefully refine his or her performance in office, since the date when the government will be judged by the electorate at the polls is less certain.

It follows that presidents have much greater executive authority than their prime ministerial counterparts, and they also have more autonomy in their ability to shape policy—though not necessarily in their power to implement it. While we need to distinguish effects which can be attributed to specific personalities, there is clear evidence that the post-war operation of parliamentary systems has moved closer to this presidential model. Like presidents, many post-war British prime ministers have accumulated considerably greater power and authority when compared to their pre-war counterparts (King 1994; Rhodes 1995). In many Westminster systems, it is often argued that government based on collective cabinet responsibility has been undermined by these changes, in part by the increased complexity of modern decision making, but also by the centralization of prime ministerial authority. Moreover, in majoritarian parliamentary systems, the prime minister now exercises unprecedented power in shaping ministerial careers, a crucial tool in ensuring compliance and centralizing authority.

The type of electoral system also can influence the nature and direction of political leadership, although it is difficult to measure and highly variable across countries. Electoral systems are easily manipulated by politicians and parties since they are rarely constitutionally embedded, unlike presidentialism or parliamentarism.<sup>6</sup> There is increasing debate about electoral reform in the established democracies, such as Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Israel, the UK, and Canada; this is in addition to debates

<sup>6</sup> Sartori has characterized the electoral system as “the most specific manipulative instrument of politics” (1976, 273).

about the electoral systems most suited to the wide range of newly democratizing countries (see Taagepera 2002). Among the list of items that feature in these deliberations is the nature and degree of linkage between politicians and voters. This is viewed as a major factor behind the recent fashion for mixed systems, whose principal virtue is supposedly that they represent a balance between the proportionality found in multi-member systems, while preserving the personal link between the politician and the voter (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001).<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, electoral systems are evaluated for their ability to “represent” social and ethnic groups. More recently, attention has shifted to the choice that is offered to voters, the consequences of such choice for democratic stability, and in the way that voters exercise their choices to evaluate candidates (Farrell and McAllister 2006). Electoral systems that permit voters to discriminate between candidates have more potential for leaders to influence the vote than, for example, party list systems where parties determine the order of candidates. The main distinction is between ordinal systems (such as preferential systems like STV) where voters have more choice, either by selecting multiple candidates or by rank ordering them, and categorical ballots (such as closed list) where voters have few choices in determining the fate of individual candidates (Bowler and Farrell 1993; Shugart 2001).

The new democracies of central and eastern Europe represent a special case in the role of political institutions in shaping political leadership. The autocratic nature of the old communist regimes has been a legacy that many have found difficult to leave behind, and political instability and economic stress have combined to influence many voters to seek a “strong leader” to overcome their problems. This has been most notable in Russia, where Valdimir Putin has exploited this widespread popular desire in order to centralize political authority (Rose and Munro 2002). Across most of the post-communist societies, institutional arrangements (whether presidential or parliamentary) often matter less than particular individuals and the constellation of issues that shape political conflict (Baylis 1996). However, research by Beliaev (2006) in twenty-two post-communist societies has concluded that presidential systems with stronger executive powers have fared worse in democratic performance compared to either parliamentary systems or presidential systems with weak executive powers.

The nature of legislative, executive, and electoral institutions moulds the style and substance of political leadership within a country. However, many of the changes in political leadership that are taking place, particularly in parliamentary systems, occur in the absence of any significant institutional change. This holds in countries such as Britain, that have unwritten, evolving constitutions, as well as in countries with formally defined constitutional rules. There has been a changing interpretation of the formal and informal rules that govern how politics operates with respect to political leaders. While there are instances of institutional reforms that promote the person-

<sup>7</sup> In Italy, the 1994 move from PR to a mixed system appears to have greatly enhanced the role of the main leaders, since the winner almost invariably becomes the prime minister. In Germany, Klingemann and Wessels (2001) show that in the single-member district ballot, there is a sizeable personal vote for candidates.

alization of politics—electoral reform, for example, or the direct election of the prime minister in Israel—such examples are few. In the next three sections non-institutional explanations for the personalization of politics are evaluated.

### 3 THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND PERSONALIZATION

Many of the observed changes in the role of political leaders in the established democracies is traced back to the growth of the electronic media, and especially television during the 1950s and 1960s. In the early years of television's development, relatively few resources were devoted to the coverage of politics, which was seen as not well suited to the new medium (Patterson 1993). That view changed rapidly as the potential of television to market politics to voters became apparent (Schudson 2002). In the 1952 US presidential election campaign, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the successful candidate, made extensive use of television advertising for the first time. His exposure on television is credited with portraying him to voters as a warm and friendly personality, in contrast to his opponent, Adlai Stevenson, who refused to follow suit and appeared aloof and detached (Barkin 1986; West 2001).

While television had an early role in US politics, it was slower to demonstrate its potential in the major parliamentary systems. Nevertheless, by the 1960s the television coverage of politics—and especially political leaders—was established, and television began to influence the way in which voters viewed their leaders. In Britain, the 1964 general election was the first to be systematically covered by television;<sup>8</sup> perhaps coincidentally, it was the first election in Britain where analysts used the term “presidential” to describe the character of the campaign (Mughan 2000, 27). Similar findings showing the link between television and personalization have been observed in other parts of Europe, although the effects are uneven, and often contingent on the types of personalities involved, the electoral context, and the issues that dominate during the campaign (Kaase 1994; Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2001). By the late 1960s, television was an indispensable tool for modern election campaigning in virtually all of the established democracies (Bowler and Farrell 1992; Norris et al. 1999).

One indication of the profound nature of the impact of television on political leaders is the increasing importance of televised leaders' debates during national election campaigns (Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon 1992). The first debate was held in the United States between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon during the 1960 presidential election campaign and is credited with winning Kennedy the presidency.

<sup>8</sup> The two major parties were allocated seventy-five minutes each of free television broadcasting (McAllister 1985).



In the words of one television executive at the time, “Kennedy was bronzed beautifully...Nixon looked like death” (quoted in Druckman 2003, 563). The next televised leaders’ debate was not until the 1976 election, when Gerald Ford debated with Jimmy Carter. The two 1976 debates were seen as significantly increasing not just the personal profiles of the two major candidates, but in improving voters’ knowledge of the issues (for a review, see Holbrook 1999).

Largely as a consequence of the US experience with televised debates, by the 1980s the idea of a leaders’ debate had spread to the established parliamentary democracies. Of forty-five democracies that were examined in the mid-1990s, all but four had held a leaders’ debate at the immediate past election (LeDuc, Niemi, and Norris 1996, 45–8). Perhaps the only established parliamentary democracy where a leaders’ debate is consistently resisted is Britain.<sup>9</sup> In most other countries, the debate is now an established and formal part of the election campaign, the only point of disagreement between the parties being the number of debates and their closeness to polling day, with the incumbent wishing to minimize the risks of a live television debate by having fewer and earlier debates, the challenger wishing to maximize it by later and more frequent debates (Schroeder 2000).

The new democracies of central and eastern Europe have been quick to utilize television for political purposes. With many of these countries still in the early stages of democratic consolidation and with fragmented, unstable party systems and voters who exhibit few partisan loyalties, the media has exercised an undue influence in shaping election outcomes. In Russia, the pro-Putin state television network had a major influence on the outcomes of the 1999 parliamentary and 2000 presidential elections (White and McAllister 2006; White, Oates, and McAllister 2005). It is hardly surprising, then, that across many of the new democracies, media laws and the accompanying financial arrangements are a major source of dispute among politicians (Veltmer 2006).

Television’s concentration on the personalities of the political leaders and the way in which it uses those personalities to frame political issues and events has several explanations. The most obvious is how television presents information to its viewers. Because of the way in which it communicates information through visual images, it is easier for television to disseminate information through a familiar personality rather than through an abstract document or an institution (Glaser and Salmon 1991; see also Ranney 1983). In turn, these visual images make it easier for viewers to develop a rapport with the politicians they see on television, and to empathize with their goals. Viewers may place themselves in the role of the candidates they see on television, or in the role of the interviewers who interrogate them, and as a consequence gain a better understanding of the politician’s views. For television, political leaders represent a convenient visual shortcut to capture and retain the viewer’s attention, particularly if the information overlaps with the leader’s personality.

<sup>9</sup> In defense of not having a formal debate, it is usually argued that scrutiny of party policies and the competence of the leaders is best left to professional media interviewers. Schudson (2002, 264) observes that British television interviewing style, “once formal and deferential” has changed to being “aggressive and critical.”

While it is tempting to see television as the prime mover behind the personalization of politics, political parties also play a key role in the process. Parties find it easier to market political choices to voters through a familiar personality, who can promote the party's policies much more effectively to voters when compared to the simple dissemination of a press release or through the publication of a policy document. When framed within the visual context of television, the leader can promote the policy and then be questioned by an interviewer, who vicariously represents the interests of voters, further heightening popular interest in the policy. When the party is in government, the reinforcement of policy and personality that television can deliver—emphasizing such values as authority and competence—can enhance the already substantial advantages that accrue to incumbency, benefiting the government's popularity (McAllister 1996).

The desire of voters to hold governments accountable for their actions provides a further explanation for the emphasis on the personalities of the leaders. Voters prefer to hold an individual accountable for government performance (or, occasionally, for the performance of the opposition), rather than an abstract institution or a political ideal (Bean and Mughan 1989). This tendency is more important in a parliamentary system, where collective cabinet responsibility and the fortunes of the government as a whole may blur accountability in the eyes of the public. Personalization can be especially problematic in a coalition arrangement where accountability is more difficult to assign. By focusing attention on the prime minister as the individual who is accountable for the government's collective performance, the public finds it easier to deliver reward or punishment, when compared to an abstract collectivity. As a result, there is a general trend towards a stronger correlation overtime between prime ministerial popularity and the public's rating of government in both Australia and Britain (Lanoue and Headrick 1994; McAllister 2003).

#### 4 TELEVISION AND “POLITICAL PRIMING”

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A further refinement on the way in which television projects the personalities of political leaders is the phenomenon of “political priming.” Political priming is the process by which leaders are evaluated by voters, based on a leader's performance on the issues that are considered to be of importance to voters. Since voters cannot make an exhaustive evaluation of all aspects of a leader's performance, “their evaluations depend on a modest sample of what they know, and a sample of convenience at that” (Kinder 1998, 181). Typically, voters focus on a small number of issues, which are systematically linked to the leader and their performance on those issues continuously evaluated (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). As new information

emerges about political leaders and their performance, this modifies how voters view the leader's key personality traits. Ultimately, such popular evaluations of political leaders, aggregated over a period of time, come to influence electoral outcomes (for a review, see Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

Political priming is consistently important in presidential systems, since the exclusive focus on the president provides the electronic media with the greatest opportunity to evaluate presidential performance across a wide range of issues, domestic and international. Not surprisingly, most research on priming in presidential systems comes from the United States (for a review, see Kinder 1998).<sup>10</sup> Priming also takes place in parliamentary systems, by focusing on the prime minister, but the evaluation of prime ministerial performance is more difficult if there is one or more opposition leaders whose performance must also be taken into account by the public. The extreme case is a multi-party system where there are several political leaders, and in these instances the media must provide a distinct message about the performance of each (Gunther and Mughan 2000).

Television has a central role to play in determining how and in what way this priming takes place, by shaping how the issue is framed and presented to the public. Television news executives decide whether or not to focus on a particular issue or event. Since the range of potential issues is vast, from moral issues like abortion or euthanasia, to economic issues involving inflation or general economic management, television must make a choice on which ones to concentrate on. What the media decides, and how often they choose to cover a topic in their news stories, plays a key role in making an issue politically salient, by priming voters on it (Mutz 1992). The decisions that the electronic media take can even determine whether or not voters are likely to have a view on the issue in the first place. Television can imply that a leader is responsible for creating a problem in the first place. Even if the leader is not responsible for creating the problem, as in the case of a natural disaster, then the leader can be held responsible if it is not solved (Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Kinder 1998).

Political priming by the media occurs most frequently on issues of war or peace, or foreign policy, where the options are clear and where the performance of the leader in handling the issue is easily understood within the electorate. Several studies show the importance of the electronic media in shaping the performance of the United States president on such issues as the 1991 Gulf War and the bombing of Iraq (Edwards and Swenson 1997; Krosnick and Brannon 1993), and European studies have shown the importance of priming on such issues as European integration, where there is also a clear choice (de Vreese 2004). Priming is obviously more difficult if the issues are complex, particularly where they involve economic management, and if it is an issue on which party cues are weak. In contrast, the growth in education in the second half of the twentieth century provides voters with more cognitive skills with which to process the necessary information, thus diminishing uncertainty and risk in the process of priming (Alvarez 1997).

<sup>10</sup> An exception is de Vreese's (2004) study of Norway, and Gidengil et al. (2002) in Canada.

Does the way in which television portrays leaders and their personal characteristics influence the vote? There is little doubt that the presence of the visual images and non-verbal cues conveyed by television has significant effects on how voters evaluate candidates. Druckman (2003; see also Graber 2001) conducted an experiment to show that those who saw a visual replay of the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debate reacted differently to those who listened to the audio version. Those who saw the visual version placed greater reliance on their personal perceptions of the candidates than those who listened to the audio version. Nevertheless, generalized conclusions are problematic, because of the complexities involved in evaluating the direct electoral influence of television (Miller and Krosnick 2000). We can say with certainty that while television exposure is a necessary condition to ensure a leader's electoral competitiveness, it is not a sufficient condition for his or her electoral success.

## 5 THE DECLINE OF PARTIES AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Popular perceptions of political leaders are usually traced back to political socialization, and to the experiences of adolescents in the years before they join the active electorate (Conover and Searing 2000; Jennings and Niemi 1974). This process of socialization is also linked to the emergence of partisanship, and across most of the established democracies for which reliable data are available how people view their leaders is strongly associated with feelings of partisan attachment (Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). The link between partisan attachment and leader image is particularly strong in parliamentary systems. Some of the earliest voting studies in Britain found that citizens' views of the party leaders were associated with the popular images of the parties themselves, to the extent that they were almost indistinguishable (Milne and Mackenzie 1954; see also Butler and Stokes 1974). Similar findings emerge from other parliamentary systems (Bean 1993; Graetz and McAllister 1987).

If partisanship is declining, then it follows that how voters view their leaders will also change significantly as a result. The widespread partisan dealignment in most advanced democracies in the past several decades is the most profound change that has taken place in voting behaviour since the 1920s (Clarke and Stewart 1998; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Webb, Farrell, and Holliday 2002). With weaker partisan loyalties, and in the absence of strong social links to specific parties, such as class or religion, voters are more likely to switch their vote between elections, or to abstain. In these circumstances, weaker voter attachments to parties should enhance the role of the leader in both the mobilization and conversion of the vote. In the absence of party cues, voters will rely more heavily on the appeal of the candidates' personalities in order to decide their vote.

In line with many other social and technological changes in the advanced democracies, the traditional concept of the mass party has been in decline for more than half a century, most notably in the Westminster systems where they first originated (Scarrow 2000). The decline of parties as mass organizations and the increasing difficulty that parties encounter in mobilizing the vote has often shifted citizens' attentions away from local election campaigns and towards the national political stage, a trend that has been hastened by the growth of the electronic media. At the same time, the major parties have shifted their emphasis during election campaigns from local candidates to national political leaders, in turn elevating to high office those who they believe will exercise the maximum geographical and social appeal to voters (McAllister 1996). As a result, there is now less emphasis on a party's policies than in the past, and more emphasis on the personalities of the leaders who will have to implement those policies if they win election (Wattenberg 1991, 13–30).

A further change in the political context that influences the role of leaders in electoral choice is the decline of electoral participation. Turnout has declined across the established democracies (Blais 2000 and chapter in this volume; Wattenberg 2002), and after an initially high level, among the newly democratized post-communist states as well (Kostadinova 2003). The assumption is that declining turnout will enhance the role of the president or the prime minister, by focusing greater attention on the leader's role in mobilizing the vote, above and beyond party considerations. In addition, the decline in electoral participation should produce voters who may be more motivated by economic self-interest in reaching their voting decision, since their more apathetic counterparts would abstain. This conclusion is in line with findings which show that the greater propensity of late deciding voters in Australian, British, and US elections are more likely to be rational and calculating, rather than capricious or disinterested. In such a context, the role of the leader in framing and promoting policies to attract these voters may well become more important over the course of time (McAllister 2002).

This change in the partisan and electoral context has several important consequences for the personalization of politics. First, political leaders are now important not just for voter conversion, but for mobilization as well, traditionally the major function of the political parties. To the extent that voters respond to the personalities of the leaders (either positively or negatively) their probability of voting will increase. Second, leaders now hold their positions by virtue of a personalized mandate, rather than because of a support base within the party (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 9). This means that leaders can appeal to voters over the heads of the party, bypassing party factions and activists.<sup>11</sup> Third, once a leader is popularly elected, the personalized mandate that he or she possesses will convey considerable policy autonomy, with little or no recourse to the party machinery (see Poguntke and Webb 2005 for longer discussion).

<sup>11</sup> As Poguntke and Webb (2005, 22) note, this is both an advantage and a disadvantage: "as long as they can ride the tiger of an increasingly fickle public opinion, they can 'go it alone'; once public support begins to dwindle, however, they are left with few allies."

## 6 THE CONSEQUENCES

There is little doubt that politics has become more personalized over the past half-century. The trend is especially pronounced within the established parliamentary democracies, where the character and style of election campaigning, the presentation and promotion of policies, and the executive authority of the prime minister have all changed markedly from what was observed a generation earlier. The phenomenon of personalization has also emerged in the former post-communist states, although here its origins lie in the lack of confidence in political institutions engendered by the communist legacy, which has given greater prominence to political personalities (Rose and Mishler 1994). While the causes of the personalization of politics are numerous and complex, it does appear that international trends in political communications have become so uniform and pervasive that they dwarf all other explanations (Negrine 1996; Schudson 1995).

What are the consequences of the personalization of politics for electoral politics? The trend towards the emphasis on leaders is likely to further exacerbate the decline in political parties, since their programmatic function is being steadily absorbed by the major party leaders who, in any event, hold a personalized rather than a party mandate. There may be greater electoral volatility, which is already occurring as a result of partisan dealignment and the declining political influence of social structure (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). As leaders come and go, and electoral mobilization and conversion comes increasingly to depend on political personality rather than party program, there is scope for even more electoral volatility. At the same time, election campaigns will become more important in determining outcomes, featuring personal images as much (or more than) parties and policies; this is already a trend which is one of the more visible consequences of personalization (Bowler and Farrell 1992; Mancini and Swanson 1996).

What are the consequences of the personalization of politics for democratic governance? First, leaders will enjoy much greater autonomy in policy making because of their personalized mandate; a dramatic recent example was the commitment of troops to Iraq by Australia and Britain, largely as a consequence of their respective prime ministers' personal commitment to the US president, George W. Bush. Second, the increasing presidentialization of parliamentary systems will lead to demands for institutional reform to accommodate these new practices. One example has been calls for the direct election of the prime minister (Maddens and Fiers 2004). To date, this was implemented only in Israel, between 1992 and 2001 (Hazan 1996), but it has been considered in countries as diverse as Japan, the Netherlands, and Italy.<sup>12</sup> The motivation behind the proposal is to prevent the parliamentary system from being undermined by an undue emphasis on the

<sup>12</sup> The major consequence in Israel appears to be a weakening of the parties, and what Arian and Shamir (2001, 706) call "the privatization of the electoral system."

personalities of the major party leaders, and a consequent weakening in the legitimacy of the parliamentary system itself.

The personalization of politics has also progressed significantly in the parliamentary democracies. With the profound political changes that will result from internet communication technology, the next decades may see at least as much change in political leadership as the past few decades. Since the main changes in political leadership that have occurred are in style and informal convention rather than in legal rules, we can expect greater pressure to reform institutional structures in order to curb personal political authority and personalized mandates; some embryonic attempts have already been made in that direction. But in the absence of any radical changes, the personalization of politics will remain a—and perhaps *the*—central feature of democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

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# PARTY POLITICS

Special Issue: Political Parties and Political Development: A New Perspective

Guest Editor: Russell J. Dalton and Ian McAllister

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## POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

A New Perspective

*Russell J. Dalton and Ian McAllister*

Forty years ago, Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner edited the classic study, *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton University Press, 1966). This volume launched the modern behavioral study of political parties as agents of political development. The predominant view was that the institutionalization and expansion of parties was an essential element of democratic politics, and thus party development was a foundation of political development. To some extent, the European history of party development was suggested as a model for new democracies.

Today, our images of parties and political development have changed. Few party systems in the developing world have followed this projected course of institutionalization, with strengthening voter bases, growing mass memberships, expanding organizational structures and growing importance in organizing government. The developing democracies of Latin America seem mired in a pattern of weak political parties. The new third-wave democracies in Eastern Europe and East Asia also provide limited evidence that parties are developing as previously envisioned in the party literature. In short, few of these new democracies appear to be following the trend of institutionalization and mass party development that occurred in the evolution of Western democracies over the past century.

At the same time, political parties are following a different course in the established Western democracies. After the expansion of mass parties and all that this implied, many features of these mobilizing political parties are eroding. Most notably, identification with parties and trust in parties is declining, and party membership and participation in election campaigns is eroding. Other trends are eroding the parties' role as agents of political representation and political choice. The dealignment of contemporary party systems is apparent in West Europe, North America and other advanced industrial democracies.

This special issue of *Party Politics* examines the theme of parties and political development on the 40th anniversary of the original LaPalombara and Weiner volume. This special issue has two broad goals. First, there has

been a tremendous expansion of empirical research on political parties, especially research on new third-wave democracies. Many of the articles that follow draw upon the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project that surveyed public opinion in more than 50 national election studies. Articles examine the characteristics of contemporary parties at the electoral level, parties as organizations and parties as governing institutions, across a wide range of established and new democratic nations. These empirical articles provide comprehensive descriptions of parties and their voters in contemporary democracies.

Second, this special issue offers a new understanding of the relationship between parties and political development. If the expansion and institutionalization of parties has diminished in new democracies, what factors explain these patterns? The contributors consider the changing social role of parties vis-à-vis other political actors: the media, the intervention of the state into party politics through funding and regulation, and the changing nature of citizens in contemporary democracies. Understanding the causal processes at work in contemporary party systems can lead to a better understanding of the implications of current patterns for political development in new democracies.

We owe thanks to many people who assisted in the preparation of this special issue. Ivan Doherty generously hosted our conference at the National Democratic Institute in Washington, D.C. We benefited from his hospitality and comments, and the feedback we received at the conference; we hope this research also makes at least a small contribution to the democracy-building activities of NDI. Additional funding for the conference was provided by the National Science Foundation (SES-0432239) and the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California, Irvine. We also thank David Farrell, Susan Scarrow, Herman Schmitt, W. Philip Shively, Paul Webb and the anonymous reviewers of *Party Politics* for their contributions.

Finally, two main conclusions emerge from the articles in this special issue. First, we find great diversity in how parties and party systems have emerged and how they operate within the new democracies. There is no single model, and new democracies often seem to be following a different trajectory than party development in the Western democracies. For the most part, this diversity can be traced to differences in political development, to political culture and to transition experiences to democracy. Second, while this diversity was not envisaged by LaPalombara and Weiner, their conclusion that parties are essential to modern stable democracy remains as true today as when their study appeared 40 years ago.

The results suggest that both critics and proponents of the personalization thesis got it partially right. Leader effects did not increase over time, but their relative importance did: leader images came to matter more as party attachments came to matter less. Partisan dealignment is the key contextual dynamic in downplaying the electoral impact of partisan attachments vis-à-vis leaders evaluations. Partisan dealignment is recurrently presented in the literature as a main driver of the "personalization of politics". Yet, on the one hand, the claim that leader effects on voting behaviour are increasing across time is short on comparative evidence. On the other hand, there is limited empirical evidence that such increase is due to dealignment. The personalization of politics 25. political relevance of civil society institutions (these shifts were buffered more in some nations than in others). Changes included the transformation of domestic industrial sectors and careers (growth in service and information industries and declines in union manufacturing labor), related personal instability in career and lifestyles, and rising levels of personal stress and sense of responsibility for choices and consequences (Beck 2006; Bennett 1998). Democrats for an unprecedented second time in the elections of 2010 was crowned with the ironic campaign slogan that the Moderates (a Center Right party) were the "true labor party." Typical of a move toward a politics of personal