

Big expectations, small outcomes: The impact of leaders' personal appeal in the 2004 Greek election

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Abstract

The 2004 Greek election provides an interesting case study for examining the impact of party leaders on the vote. A change in governing party leadership a few months before polling day had two important implications. First, it generated a highly favourable context for the emergence of decisive leadership effects. Second, it made it feasible to grasp empirically how voters form their evaluations of new leaders. Regarding the first question, the findings indicate that even in the most favourable environment the impact of leadership evaluations on the overall electoral outcome is only slight. Regarding the second, it seems that the change of leader at the start of an election campaign can be a mixed blessing. Whereas it can help a party to divert media and public focus from other less favourable issues, the party pays a corresponding price when its new leader has to learn the job in the full glare of an election campaign. © 2008 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

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The idea that party leaders affect election outcomes is entrenched in both parliamentary and presidential democracies. Indeed, it seems that only political scientists still dispute the electoral importance of leaders' appeal.¹ This consensus among media consultants, pollsters and campaign managers — “all asserting the importance of their contribution by emphasising the role of leaders' qualities on vote decision” (Miller

and Shanks, 1996, p. 415) — is supported by two well-known factors. First, the leading role that television has acquired in the dissemination of political information has switched attention from parties' platforms to their leaders (Mughan, 2000; Kaase, 1994; Crewe and King, 1994a,b). The parties, in turn, have rapidly adjusted to this new political reality and profoundly altered their campaign strategies, encouraging this new tendency. Second, as a result of the weakening of the electoral significance of class and of voters' gradual dealignment, party leaders and political issues (as basic components of short-term electoral factors) have become strong determinants of political outcomes. In short, leaders seem to be more important than they were in the past.

To this rule, Greece is no exception. With political commentators exalting the importance of the relative

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¹ In effect, scholars engaged in the analysis of leadership effects seem to be divided into those arguing that leadership evaluations constitute a strong determinant of vote choice (Andersen and Evans 2003; Evans and Andersen 2005; Clarke et al., 2000, 2004; Clarke and Stewart, 1995; Hudson, 1984) and those suggesting that the absolute impact of voters' assessments of leaders on electoral outcomes is usually only marginal (Bartle and Crewe, 2002; King, 2002a,b; Crewe and King, 1994a,b; Bartels, 2002; Wattenberg, 1991).

appeal of party leaders in voters' decisions, leadership-orientated opinion-poll questions are frequently cited as key indicators of parties' electoral fortunes. This trend became explicitly clear in the 2004 election which was marked by an unprecedented event. Facing almost certain loss of office for the first time since 1993, the ruling socialist party, the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (*Panellenio Sosialistiko Kinema*, henceforth PASOK), resorted to a political manoeuvre aiming to increase its limited chances of electoral success. At that time, having won two successive electoral battles, the party leader, Costas Semites, was considered to be its greatest electoral asset. Yet, as an indication of the widespread belief about the salience of leaders in the electoral context, the party felt forced to replace him only two months before polling day. At such a critical moment, when the aim of re-election could justify the means of succession, intraparty procedures were largely ignored and the new leader, George Papandreou, former minister of foreign affairs and first-born son of the party's founder, was chosen to be the only candidate for the leadership.² At that instance, the right-wing opposition party, New Democracy (ND), was headed by a young moderate politician, Costas Karamanlis, also descending from a historical political family, who had been in the party's leadership since 1997.³

It was the first time in Greek parliamentary history that such a tactical manoeuvre was attempted by the ruling party. Undoubtedly, its aim was twofold. First, in a rather unfavourable period for the socialists, PASOK managed to be the principal agenda setter since its leadership change became the primary focus of media coverage. Second, against an undoubtedly popular

leader with a particularly friendly image, PASOK could now counterpoise its own 'tramp-card': a well-liked politician belonging to the same political generation, with a rather satisfactory record in the halls of government. Although early survey findings showed a remarkable come-back for PASOK, challenging, the then widespread conviction that the electoral result was a foregone conclusion, during the last month the trend was reversed and the margin widened in favour of the conservative party. At the election itself, New Democracy's 45.36% of the vote share gave the party a safe majority of 178 out of 300 seats, whereas PASOK's 40.55% provided it with no more than 112 MPs.

Making use of this particular aspect of the election, the purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to estimate the extent to which PASOK gained by its leadership change. Would the overall outcome have been any different had Semites fought the election? This is a simple counterfactual question, directly related to the context of Greek elections. It is worth exploring it, however, because it constitutes the first explicit effort to examine the aggregate electoral impact of leaders' personal appeal in this country in a systematic way. Moreover, it involves a more general question related to the study of leadership evaluations: in these most favourable circumstances for the role of leaders on election outcomes, how great can leadership effects be?

The findings from the empirical examination of the first question lead to a second task related to a more general issue, namely, the process through which voters form their evaluations of leaders. Given that Papandreou assumed PASOK's leadership only two months before the election whereas Karamanlis was already established in this post for almost seven years, this particular instance provides a natural quasi-experimental context that helps to look at the different ways in which leaders are evaluated by the electorate as a result of their differing lengths of time in post. This question also has important implications regarding parties' campaign strategies. Whereas parties often change their leaders after an unfavourable electoral result, they seldom do so before the election to avoid a pending defeat. Instead of theorising about this strategy, it seems worth exploring empirically its electoral consequences in a context where it has been employed.

The paper is divided into four sections. After briefly referring to some inherent methodological problems related to the study of leadership effects, we provide a short description of the model specification and the measurement strategy. This is followed by an analysis of the results which is divided into two subsections: one evaluating the magnitude of leadership effects on

² This succession might bring to mind similar instances in other countries, as, for example, the 1990 change of Conservative leader in Britain. Nevertheless, there are major differences. Margaret Thatcher left her party much longer before the next election than Semites did. This gave to the new Conservative leader more time to expose his political ideas and reveal his personal leadership virtues than Papandreou had. Perhaps this might be one reason that whereas this move resulted in the 1992 third consecutive Conservative victory, it was not crowned with success for the party that inspired it in the Greek case. Furthermore, in the case of the British Conservatives, Thatcher did not leave voluntarily but rather was ousted by the party. By contrast, in PASOK's case, the change was a voluntary 'sacrifice' of its leader in a final effort to improve PASOK's limited chances of remaining in power.

³ ND's leader, Costas Karamanlis, nephew of the party's originator, Constantine Karamanlis, gained the leadership of the party one year after its defeat in the 1996 election and, after experiencing a bitter defeat in 2000 by a margin of only 70,000 votes (1%), eventually managed to bring his party to power four years later, at the election that is the subject of this paper.

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