



Fostering turnout?: Assessing party leaders' capacity to mobilize voters

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1. Introduction

Recent research on voting behaviour has confirmed the existence of a trend towards candidate-centered politics. While long ago the media and public discourse had emphasized the role of individual political actors in contemporary politics, such claims had only found mixed evidence in empirical studies. More recently, a thorough consideration of the temporal dimension, the effort to develop comparative analyses, and both theoretical and methodological refinements, produced consistent evidence on the importance of leaders as determinants of vote choice (Garzia, 2014; Lobo and Curtice, 2015). However important, these contributions have moved straightforwardly to examining leaders' effects on vote choice without carefully considering their potential impact on the baseline decision to turn out to the ballot box. While leaders have been demonstrated to influence choice over different party options, this is likely to be preceded by an impact over turnout decisions. In impacting vote choice, leader effects can operate in two possible ways: a) capturing votes who otherwise would belong to his/her party's competitors or b) motivating individuals who otherwise would not vote at all to vote for his/her party. Therefore, just as party identification expresses a preference across parties which simultaneously drives individuals to vote and to select a given party rather than another, attitudes towards leaders could act in a similar fashion – if a leader is sufficiently appealing to influence vote choice, she also could be a driver of participation in the first place.

At the policy-making level, the capacity of leaders to connect with the electorate, counterbalance disengagement trends and mobilize voters to go to the ballots seems to be more widely recognised, as illustrated by the recent *Spitzenkandidaten* initiative. In an attempt to increase turnout rates in the 2014 European Parliament elections, the European Parliament's political groups have decided to publicly support a lead candidate for the presidency of the European Parliament. In what constitutes an example of the importance attributed to individual political actors in contemporary politics – even at the transnational level –, for the first time voters were given the possibility to have a say on which candidate they wanted ahead of the European Commission. Facing increasing Euroscepticism and disengagement in European elections, this was perceived as an effective strategy to enhance EU democracy and promote more participated elections in a context of personalization of politics.

The generalized decline in turnout rates across contemporary Western democracies is a symptom of the dealignment process at the origin of the personalization of politics, establishing a theoretical relationship for the mechanism through which leaders could impact turnout decisions. Yet, it is still to be determined to what extent can voters' evaluations of leaders have an effect on turnout. Likewise, studies on individual-level turnout have largely disregarded the role of political leaders in stimulating electoral participation.

This study aims to fill this gap shared by the personalization of politics and the turnout literature. In this way, it attempts to offer a contribution by drawing attention to the mobilizing potential of political leaders and discussing the possible relevance of a more frequent inclusion of variables accounting for voters' assessments of the candidates running for election in turnout models.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section problematizes the relationship between turnout and the personalization of politics, shedding light on the potential mechanisms through which turnout rates can be affected by the performance of party leaders. The third section describes the data and methods used in the empirical analysis. The fourth section presents the main results, followed by a section including various robustness tests. Section 6 extends the results' section by exploring potential contextual effects of the political and electoral system as moderators. Finally, the conclusions of the study are discussed in the last section.

2. Turnout and the personalization of politics: a missing link

The personalization of politics refers to the process through which individual political actors have been gaining increased importance compared to political parties (Karvonen, 2010). Within the framework of this thesis, over the last decades we have been witnessing a tendency towards a greater preponderance of party leaders in the political arena (Wattenberg, 1991). This has been particularly notorious in the media discourse: political content is framed around the visible faces of political parties, executives became named after their leaders, personality profiles are thoroughly compared, and televised debates between party leaders are discussed by media pundits as a decisive factor to electoral outcomes. Also political parties have contributed to this trend by focusing their communication strategies in their leaders through the development of increasingly individualized campaigns (Lisi and Santana-

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Pereira, 2014; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008); broadening their leader selection procedures to wider selectorates, ultimately resulting in the proliferation of primaries in many European political parties (Cross and Pilet, 2016; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Kenig, 2009); and enhancing the leader's role within the contemporary types of political parties by conceding them more power and autonomy to make individualized decisions (Lobo, 2008). At the electoral system level, numerous European countries have been implementing personalizing reforms, altering electoral rules so that citizens can express their preferences for candidates and have a greater decision-power over the allocation of seats (Renwick and Pilet, 2016). Lastly, multiple studies have demonstrated that voters' evaluations of political leaders have an effect on voting behaviour (Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2013; Lobo and Curtice, 2015) and that this impact has been growing across time (Garzia, 2014; Garzia et al., 2018).

Despite recent studies having established that assessments of party leaders do have an impact on individual vote choice, research on the personalization of politics has not yet devoted attention to a former aspect of the voting decision process: the decision to turn out. The relationship between leader effects and vote choice has been drawn without any reflection on the intermediate stage when the voter decides whether to go to the polls or to refrain from voting. Since leaders were demonstrated to have an impact on voters' choices over different parties, it seems plausible that at least some of these voters are also driven to the polls by the appeal of political leaders.

The theoretical framework underlying research confirming leader effects on vote choice applies similarly to individual-level turnout. Individualization and the process of dealignment weakened the long-standing bonds between voters and political parties. Following the erosion of cleavages which structured voting behaviour, voters have become gradually detached from the set of social and political attitudes in the origin of party identification. With individualization, group-based ideological alignments on the basis of the political cleavages have faded. This has led voters to become increasingly unconstrained from the identification bonds resulting from previous alignments with political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Dalton, 2012). Dalton (2002, 30–31) estimates the number of individuals who identify with a political party to have declined, for example, about 18% in Sweden, 16% in the United States, 15% in Germany, and 14% in France, in just a few decades. Alignments, and the cleavages in their origin, conditioned not only vote choice but also turnout decisions. The determinants of turnout and vote choice have historically largely coincided, which is unsurprising since motivations on the grounds of decisions upon the latter are inevitably extensive to the former. Vote choice presupposes a coherent behaviour regarding turnout since it is impossible to choose between parties without having cast a vote, and the reasons which drive an individual to choose a party over another are very much associated with the reasons that lead him/her to turn out instead of abstaining. Therefore, it follows that a structural change in the determinants of the latter element of the voting calculus are tied to transformations in the more primary stage of the decision-making process. Thus, if rather than repeatedly following party heuristics, voters have become more sensible to short-term factors in their voting choice decisions – such as candidates or performance assessments –, the same factors are likely to determine turnout decisions.

Moreover, given the importance of dealignment as a key cause of the personalization of politics, and the fact that one of the most evident symptoms of this process has been the generalized decline in voter turnout rates across contemporary Western democracies (Blais and Rubenson, 2013), there are theoretical reasons to expect an effect of leader evaluations on turnout decisions. The few studies which have linked dealignment with leader effects have focused exclusively on whether leader evaluations have a higher impact on swing voters, late deciders or voters without party identification (Gidengil, 2011; Lobo, 2015). The turnout dimension of the dealignment process has been

surprisingly neglected thus far, although an analysis of turnout decisions with a particular focus on the impact of party leaders appears to be theoretically pertinent.

The potential of political leaders to act as mobilizing agents and foster turnout has recently been acknowledged by policy-makers at the European Union level. The elections for the European Parliament have historically been poorly participated, not reaching the 50% threshold of turnout since 1999. The decision for the *Spitzenkandidaten* strategy in the 2014 European Parliament elections, comes with a recognition of the potential of candidates to increase the salience of the elections and mobilize more voters to cast a ballot, “raising the turnout for European elections by strengthening the link between the elections of the representatives of the citizens with the selection and election process of the head of the European executive” (European Commission, 2013, 6).

A recent study assesses the impact of this initiative on turnout decisions and finds a mobilizing effect of candidate recognition and campaign activity of the three most visible candidates on turnout; additionally, candidate recognition was also found to strengthen the impact of campaign activities on turnout (Schmitt et al., 2015). Having found such effects in second-order elections, where arguably voters still had very limited awareness of the candidates running for election, it can be argued the effect could even be stronger in first-order elections. In the latter type, campaigns are more intense and personalized (canvassing is easier, the candidates are more familiar, their presence in the media is stronger, and TV debates assume a major importance) and voters are also more prone to be recipients of political messages and information.

Noticeably, also the individual-level turnout literature has disregarded the relationship between turnout and political leaders, whether measured through voters' evaluations of leaders' personality traits or general leader evaluation scales. Apart from studies on American presidential elections (Adams et al., 2006), the role of candidates in voters' turnout decisions in general elections has been largely ignored. This is puzzling given the importance early attributed by Campbell and his colleagues (Campbell et al., 1960) to the general role of attitudes on voting behaviour and the specific consideration of attitudes towards candidates in their research. Furthermore, within the framework of these psychological models, attitudinal elements have often been demonstrated to be associated with turnout, as is the case with attitudes towards the EU (Kentmen-Cin, 2017) and voting and elections (Blais, 2014). Therefore, attitudes towards party leaders, as increasingly relevant actors in contemporary politics, could also play a role in citizens' turnout decisions. In this sense, also from the point of view of individual-level turnout literature, it would be relevant to assess to what extent do leaders impact turnout decisions.

This study explores this missing link by taking a step back in the decision-making process and addressing the effects of voters' evaluations of party leaders on turnout decisions, hypothesizing that positive evaluations of leaders stimulate individuals to participate in elections. In addition, in line with previous research that demonstrated that, on vote choice, leaders may have a differentiated impact across respondents' degree of dealignment (Gidengil, 2011; Lobo, 2015), it tests whether such leader effects on turnout are stronger on particularly dealigned voters, i.e., those lacking a party identification. Further, it also tests whether these effects are stronger for individuals who have been abstaining in past elections. The reasoning being that individuals who did not vote for the previous election are more likely to be structurally dealigned and thus more influenced by factors such as political leaders rather than party evaluations. With these theoretical expectations in mind, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

H1. Voters' evaluations of party leaders have a positive effect on their probability to turn out.

H2. Leader effects on turnout are particularly impactful on independent voters.

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