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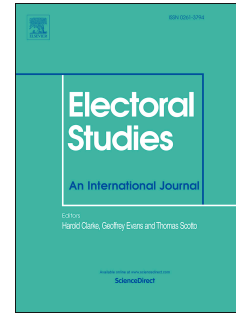
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The (ir)rationality of mediated leader effects

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Abstract:

There is a lively debate whether to consider vote decisions based on leader evaluations a threat to democracy, as this has long been assumed to constitute irrational decision-making behavior. Empirical evidence indicating that leader effects are not necessarily expressions of irrationality has recently mounted up, though skepticism towards leader effects remains resilient especially when considering voters being influenced through media coverage of party leaders. This paper studies some of the core assumptions of the 'irrationality of leader effects' thesis, by testing the conditionality of mediated leader effects based upon four voter characteristics: education, political interest, ideological distance to the leader's party and political cynicism. Two datasets are combined: a manual content analysis of leadership images in television coverage and a five-wave panel-dataset in the four months preceding the 2012 Parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. The results are mixed: on the one hand, being influenced by leadership images through the media is not a shortcut for voters who are incapable of understanding politics, while ideological considerations and other political attitudes are not completely excluded from the decision-making process, but, on the other hand, mediated leader effects are found to be strongest for voters who care least about politics. Thus, the empirical evidence can be brought to bear on both sides of the discussion, and, hence, does not conclusively settle the issue how mediated leader effects must be considered in relation to the irrationality of the vote decision.

Keywords:

party leaders; media; electoral behavior; panel data; content analysis; moderation; rational voting behavior

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