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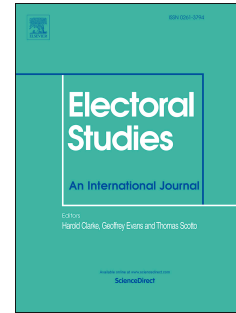
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Leaders Always Mattered: The Persistence of Personality in Canadian Elections

Amanda Bittnerⁱ

Abstract: Did Canadian voters choose Justin Trudeau in 2015, or did they choose the Liberal Party? Did British voters choose David Cameron in 2014, or did they choose to be led by a Conservative? In parliamentary systems around the world, no direct link exists between voters and leadership candidates in the way they are connected in presidential systems, and yet, studies suggest that voters consider party leaders when casting their ballot (Bittner 2011), and that this connection between the vote and the leader of the party is becoming increasingly important (Mughan 2000; Poguntke & Webb 2005). Scholars of comparative party systems and institutions have pointed to declining partisanship, increased voter volatility, and the changing nature of media and campaigns as the key reasons for the “presidentialization” of politics and the increasing importance of leaders in the minds of voters. There is mixed evidence for this phenomenon, however, and while in some countries (such as Israel), the pattern of increasing personalization is clear (Rahat & Sheaffer 2007), in others (such as Germany), personalization does not appear to be there (Kaase 1994; Kriesi 2011). Most (although not all) studies of presidentialization focus their analyses on Europe, and yet there are plenty of non-European parliamentary systems we can (and should) assess as well, to determine whether presidentialization is a global phenomenon as some suggest. This paper turns to Canada. What is the relationship between voters and party leaders in the Canadian context? Do party leaders in Canada matter? How and why? And has this relationship changed over time? Are we seeing a presidentialization of Canadian elections? This paper assesses the role of leaders in Canadian elections over time, using Canadian Election Study Data from 1984 to 2015. The data suggest that party leaders matter, but that this has always been the case in Canada: elections are not becoming more personalized over time.

Keywords: Personalization; presidentialization; personality; Canadian elections; party leaders

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