The personalization of politics in Western democracies: Causes and consequences on leader–follower relationships

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ABSTRACT

The article provides an assessment of the most recent literature on political leadership by focusing on its effects on voters' cognition and behavior, in the light of the ongoing *personalization* of politics. The changing role of political leaders in contemporary democracies is assessed through a perspective aimed at linking leadership theory and political science. One of the major consequences of the personalization of politics seems to lie in the changing expectations of voters with respect to the personal profile of their leaders. This is due to the *lowering* effects of television and parallel attempts by leaders to appeal voters on the basis of perceived similarities. As to the leaders' effect on individual voting behavior, we highlight the various reasons that can enhance (or constrain) the role of party leaders' image in the voting calculus. Implications and directions for further research are discussed in the concluding section.

1. Introduction

The field of contemporary "personality and politics" analysis (Greenstein, 1969) traces its origins back to Harold Laswell's (1930) *Psychopathology and Politics*, in which the categories of psychology are applied for the first time to the study of political personality. Of particular interest to this early literature is the effect of psychopathology on political behavior. Good examples of the sort are George and George's (1956) analysis of Colonel Edward House's influence on Woodrow Wilson, and the various studies of the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), whose main focus was on Nazism and the psychological characteristics of its leaders. Within political science, the best illustration of this approach is James David Barber's (1977) classification of character structures of the American presidents. Despite many attempts, however, none of these studies has been able to link systematically a specific personality trait or characteristic to the emergence of a successful and effective leadership.

The lack of necessary evidence to trace a profile of the leader for all seasons led the research back to Max Weber's (1922) concept of *charismatic leadership*, which, according to the German sociologist, can exist only as long as it is *recognized* by followers. This renewed attention to the environmental conditions that facilitate (or constrain) the emergence of a political leadership (Blondel, 1987) gave impetus to a different line of research based on transactional models (Hollander, 1992). In this perspective, the processes of interpersonal influence are not to be interpreted in virtue of objective characteristics of the situation, but instead on the basis of the respective perceptions and expectations of leaders and followers. According to this approach, the crucial requirement for a political leader is not that of effectively possessing certain personal attributes — quite to the contrary, the task is to let followers believe it.

This task has become even more important in recent times in the light of the ongoing process of *personalization* of politics in Western democracies. Leaders have in fact gained center stage with respect to political communication due to the intertwined effect of technological innovations in the media and organizational change within their own parties. This has made in turn political leaders increasingly visible, and therefore subject to constant scrutiny by the public. One of the major consequences of the process lies in the changing ways in which followers (e.g., voters) perceive and evaluate their leaders. As we shall see, media's ubiquitous focus on individual leaders – and on leaders as individuals – have in fact provided the public with the chance to judge them *as persons*, thus allowing the application of cognitive frameworks usually employed in everyday life to the process of leader appraisal. As a result, there has been a shift from an idealized conception of political leaders to one in which attention is paid first and foremost to the leaders' ability to identify with their own public. In this sense, a symbolic *closeness* to the masses has become a necessary condition for emergence and electoral success of a political leadership.

Another key consequence of the personalization of politics lies indeed in the growing impact of leaders' personality on individuals' vote behavior. The decline of social and partisan alignments occurred in almost every advanced industrial democracy during the last decades has in fact made way for short-term forces (e.g., candidates, issues, performance evaluations) to influence voting choices to a greater extent than it was the case three or four decades ago — this influence being more pronounced in presidential systems than in parliamentary ones. Once again, the role of technological innovations and party change emerges as crucial in the process — the latter being responsible of an increased personalization of the political and electoral supply, as presented and further amplified by the former.

This article is structured as follows: we begin by analyzing the changing content of contemporary political leadership due to the process of *personalization* common to all advanced industrial democracies (Section 2); then, we will discuss its major effects on voters' political cognition (Section 3) and behavior (Section 4) in turn; implications and directions for further research will be discussed in the concluding section.

2. The personalization of politics

In the last half century, there is little doubt that political leaders have increasingly gained importance to both political communication and electoral competition *vis-à-vis* their parties in almost every Western democracy. Impressionistic evidence of this trend include the substitution of leader images for party symbols during election campaigns (McAllister, 1996); the media's increasing propensity to mention candidates rather than the parties they belong to (Dalton, McAllister, & Wattenberg, 2000); and the tendency to portray executives in a personalized fashion — these being routinely labeled after the name of their leaders (Bean & Mughan, 1989). Hypothetically, this should have made in turn more relevant "the role of individual politicians and of politicians as individuals in determining how people view politics and how they express their political preferences" (Karvonen, 2010: 1–2).

In 1991, Martin Wattenberg announced the beginning of a new era in politics, referring to it as *candidate-centered politics* (Wattenberg, 1991). His longitudinal analysis of U.S. presidential elections held between 1952 and 1988 supported empirically the impressionistic evidence, by highlighting a major shift in the electorate's attention from political parties and issues to specific political, and particularly presidential, candidates. Such shift is accompanied by a greater importance of their personal characteristics, as opposed to more political ones, in the eyes of voters.

In the last decade, a growing number of studies have concentrated on the increasingly tighter relationship between politicians' personality and the functioning of representative democracy, and in particular on the process of *personalization* of politics (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007; Rahat & Shaefer, 2007). According to Rahat and Shaefer (2007), the personalization of politics should be seen as "a *process* in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat & Shaefer, 2007: 65). Similarly, Karvonen puts at the core of his personalization hypothesis the notion that "individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities" (Karvonen, 2010: 4).

Generally speaking, the personalization of politics could be seen as part of a more widespread process of *individualization* of social life (Bauman, 2001), on the basis of which people tend to perceive themselves and others first and foremost as individuals rather than as representatives of collectivities and groups. However, a number of more specific causes have been advanced for increasing personalization in the political process, from both macro-institutional (e.g., institutional arrangements, electoral laws) and micro-behavioral (e.g., distrust in representative institutions) perspectives (for a review, see: McAllister, 2007). Here, we will concentrate on what the present literature regards as the two most crucial causes of the process: (i) the changing structure of political communication due to the emergence of television; and (ii) the parallel erosion of traditional cleavage politics. Already in 1960, Edwin C. Hargrove observed that:

> "as the old politics of class and ideological conflict declines in Europe, as television becomes the chief means of political information for the public…power will increasingly become visible to people through popular leaders and these leaders will be the chief means of engaging the political interest of publics" (cited in Poguntke & Webb, 2005: 21).

Fifty years after these 'prophetic' words, few would cast doubts over the crucial role exerted by electronic media, and television in particular, in the personalization of contemporary politics. The changing structure of mass communications has been central in emphasizing the role of political leaders at the expense of parties, making the latter "more dependent in their communications with voters on the essentially visual and personality-based medium of television" (Mughan, 2000: 129). As explained by Davis (1990),