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To cite this article: Diego Garzia , Frederico Ferreira da Silva & Andrea De Angelis (2020): Partisan dealignment and the personalisation of politics in West European parliamentary democracies, 1961–2018, West European Politics, DOI: [10.1080/01402382.2020.1845941](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1845941)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1845941>

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 [Published online: 02 Dec 2020.](#)




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## Partisan dealignment and the personalisation of politics in West European parliamentary democracies, 1961–2018

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### ABSTRACT

Partisan dealignment is recurrently presented in the literature as one of the main drivers of the ‘personalisation of politics’. Yet, on the one hand, the claim that leader effects on voting behaviour are increasing across time is short on comparative evidence. On the other hand, there is limited empirical evidence that such an increase is due to dealignment. This article explores the longitudinal relationship between partisan dealignment, leader effects and party choice, through a novel dataset pooling 109 national election surveys collected in 14 Western European parliamentary democracies across the last six decades. The results show that leader effects increased over time as a function of the decline of party identification. Additional panel evidence from selected countries shows that partisan dealignment is responsible for increasing leader effects on party choice at the individual level. The longitudinal dimension of this study contributes to the most contested aspect of the personalisation of politics debate.

**KEYWORDS** Dealignment; leader effects; party identification; personalisation of politics; voting behaviour

The centrality of political leaders in contemporary democracies has been sustained by an increasing amount of research in political science. From an institutional point of view, research documents a transformation in the structure and organisation of modern political parties in favour of the leadership position. From the rise of catch-all parties to the emergence of personal parties, contemporary party scholars ascribe a more prominent role to party leaders both within party organisation and as executives in government. This describes a trend towards the *presidentialisation* of party structures (Passarelli 2015; Poguntke and Webb 2005).<sup>1</sup> Political

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1845941>.

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communication studies put the emphasis on the centrality of leaders in contemporary election campaigns, as a result of the increased visibility of these actors in a television-based *mediatisation* of politics (Esser and Strömbäck 2014). Finally, a voting behaviour perspective investigates the electoral impact of political leaders as a function of increased voters' consideration of candidate evaluations in their vote choice (Garzia 2017) or turnout decisions (Silva *et al.* 2019).

In turn, the literature identifies three main strands of research claimed to drive an increase in leader effects on voting behaviour. By resorting to the admittedly limited amount of longitudinal variation in the most recent decades, institutional-level analyses have linked the increasing concentration of power both within cabinets – at the Prime Minister position (Berz 2019) –, and within political parties – at the party leadership level (Silva 2019) –, to increasing leader effects on individual voting behaviour. Moreover, this strand has also investigated differences across regime types and electoral systems (i.e. Curtice and Lisi 2014). A second strand of research derives from the process of mediatisation, focussing specifically on how media change has altered parties' political communication strategies and transformed voters' patterns of consumption of political information. With television becoming voters' preferred source of political information, parties adapted by using this medium as a main channel of political communication (Mughan 2000). By prioritising personality at the expense of substantive programmatic goals, television forced campaigns to adapt to this 'personality-based' medium (Hayes 2009). A recent longitudinal analysis of election study data from 14 parliamentary democracies finds that a television-centered media diet corresponds to a higher relevance for party leader evaluations in the voting calculus (Garzia *et al.* 2020). Finally, a third strand links the process of partisan dealignment to leader effects. The social transformations that occurred in the second half of the last century paved the way for a shift from long-term to short-term determinants of voting behaviour. Rising levels of education, political interest and sophistication contributed to the emancipation individuals from the partisan cues on which they used to rely. With voters autonomous from these decisional cues, the functional utility of party identification decreased, as voting decisions became increasingly individualised (Dalton *et al.* 2000).

In a context of progressive dealignment and pervasive mediatisation of politics, researchers have argued that voters give more consideration to short-term factors such as the evaluation of leaders in their voting decisions. Despite the advances brought about by research on this topic, existing studies have only been able to provide cross-sectional evidence of the relationship between dealignment and leader effects (Gidengil 2011; Lobo

2014; Mughan 2009). Hence, two core points of the personalisation of politics thesis remain to be properly addressed, namely the dynamic interplay of party and leader effects, and its temporal dimension. Unlike the institutional and the media strands, a micro-level longitudinal analysis on partisan dealignment and leader effects on voting behaviour is viable given the wider availability of measures of partisanship and leader evaluations in national election studies since the 1960s.

We move from the notion that the increasing influence of leaders can only be conceived as a function of the weakening electoral role of parties and party cues. Such a theoretical stance, in coherence with dealignment premises, posits that leaders have not necessarily come to matter more *per se*. Rather, they matter more because parties have come to matter less, leaving room for other (short-term) factors to intervene in voting decisions. These dynamics of electoral change can only be untangled adopting a long-term and comparative perspective. On the one hand, neither the synchronic nor the short-to-medium term would offer the inter-generational ‘historic’ breadth that our argument demands. On the other hand, only considering a large sample of heterogeneous party systems would satisfy its generality. To test this expectation, we compiled a unique pooled dataset featuring 109 post-election studies fielded in 14 Western European parliamentary democracies over the last 6 decades (1961–2018). Our dataset overcomes the limitations of existing comparative projects, i.e. unavailability of simultaneous measures of leader evaluations and party identification, intra-generational perspective and limited contextual variation. This allows us to tackle the main limitations identified in previous studies, which have either investigated a larger number of countries without a longitudinal dimension (Bittner 2011; Curtice and Lisi 2014; Gunther *et al.* 2016) or adopted a longitudinal approach but focussing on a smaller number of cases restricted to a shorter time span (Curtice and Holmberg 2005; Garzia 2014; Holmberg and Oscarsson 2011; Karvonen 2011; King 2002).

The main research question guiding this article is the following: *Have party leader evaluations become a stronger determinant of party choice in parliamentary democracies across the last six decades?* Our empirical analysis offers evidence that, indeed, the relevance of party leader evaluations in the voting calculus has increased over time, as a function of the decline of party identification. Additional panel evidence from selected countries shows that partisan dealignment is responsible for increasing leader effects on party choice at the individual level.

## **Partisan dealignment and leader effects: an overview**

Over the last decades, the trajectory of voting behaviour in Western democracies has undergone the loosening of social encapsulation. The

development of advanced industrialism in the mid-twentieth century, the expansion of educational opportunities, the evolution of mass media bolstering access to information also beyond partisan channels and a changing social structure and concomitant value change, have all contributed to a shift from *partisan* to *cognitive* forms of mobilisation (Dalton 2007). This process carries important theoretical implications for the study of voting behaviour insofar as it challenges the dominant paradigm in electoral research. In the social-psychological model of voting, political issues, events and candidates are presented to voters and interpreted by them in partisan terms (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2008; Thomassen 2005). Because these factors come towards the end of the Michigan's funnel of causality, they are allegedly filtered by long-term partisan predispositions, and as such they are not important *per se* but only *through* the partisan lens. However, in the sense that mobilisation becomes independent of political parties and moves from being partisan to being cognitive, voters too become self-sufficient in formulating their assessments of political candidates, and in reflecting about political issues or events. Hence, in a context of cognitive mobilisation, the functional utility of partisan cues decreases substantially, as skilled voters are capable of independently interpreting political information at relatively low cost.

In a context of erosion of cleavage voting and partisan dealignment, where voters no longer rely exclusively on partisan cues to interpret political information, short-term cognitive factors have been gaining importance within the voting calculus too. However, the empirical evidence gathered so far is yet unable to provide conclusive evidence in favour of the personalisation thesis when it comes to voting behaviour. The main charge relates indeed to the inexistence of a clear trend towards a greater electoral importance of leaders across time (King 2002). This is a fundamental proposition because the personalisation of politics does not only postulate that *leaders matter* but that their importance *has been growing* over time (Rahat and Kenig 2018). An early longitudinal analysis of election study data collected in six established European democracies between 1961 and 2001 concluded that voters' evaluations of party leaders were 'as important or unimportant now as they were when they were first measured' (Curtice and Holmberg 2005: 250). Taking into account a wider number of countries and more recent election studies, Holmberg and Oscarsson's (2011) comparative study eventually unfolded 'minor' upward trends in half of the countries included in their analysis.

However, a key point of these studies is that they have longitudinally analysed leader effects *disconnected from the role of partisan dealignment*. In doing so, they provide little information about how one of the most structural transformations in party politics in the last century may have

played a role in favouring leaders at the expense of parties. This is an important caveat, since partisan dealignment is deemed to play a central role in the personalisation of politics. If, as the theory suggests, leader effects increase as a function of dealignment, the former must be analysed in relationship to an eventual decline in partisan voting. The few studies investigating this association in less than a handful of countries show some evidence of a stronger impact of leaders for dealigned voters but fail to do so in a longitudinal perspective (Gidengil 2011; Holian and Prysby 2014; Lobo 2014; Mughan 2009).

In line with the social-psychological model of voting, a unidirectional flow of causation from party identification to leader evaluation is assumed in virtually all available studies. In this approach, the predictive capacity of leadership effects is weighed against that of socio-demographics, political predispositions and attitudes. In other words, leaders are treated as a residual category within the so-called 'improved-prediction strategy' (Crewe and King 2002: 185–186; King 2002: 17–19). While this may be an appropriate framework in a context of diffuse partisanship, we argue that such a setting is inadequate to model vote choice in a context of marked dealignment, where parties have lost primacy and short-term factors are claimed to affect vote choice independently of partisan attachments. Dealignment and growing cognitive mobilisation have increased the amount of apartisan self-sufficient voters, who take into further consideration candidates or issues in voting decisions, instead of long-term partisan attachments. Works in the 'revisionist' tradition of party identification have already shown that the relationship between partisanship and attitudes towards the candidates is actually bidirectional (Page and Jones 1979). Some studies have even gone as far as to contend that leaders may now play a role in personalising party identification (Garzia 2013; Rapoport 1997). In other words, not only do leaders have a direct effect on voting behaviour as has been demonstrated by several studies, they also seem to exert an indirect effect through partisanship (Garzia and De Angelis 2016). Hence, partisan dealignment has led to less people identifying with parties, and even those that identify might increasingly do so because they develop a sort of attachment *through* the leader.

The fundamental premises of the improved-prediction strategy are also challenged by the transformations that have occurred in political parties and the mediatisation of politics. On the one hand, with the erosion of cleavage-based voting and the decline of class-mass parties, the building block of the improved-prediction strategy (i.e. the predictive power of socio-demographics and political predispositions) crumbled. On the other hand, catch-all parties' electoral strategy is less reliant on long-term attachments anchored in ideological grounds. Instead, they have adapted

to a context of dealignment and mediatisation of politics, by using television to prime leaders' characteristics instead of substantial programmatic goals (Garzia *et al.* 2020; Hayes 2009; Mughan 2000).

For these reasons, we sustain that studying why leaders have become more important across time must not be dissociated from the study of how parties have become less important for voting decisions. If partisan dealignment is at the origin of the personalisation of politics, as the theory indicates, leaders can have only become more relevant as much as parties have lost relevance. Hence, since theoretically these trends develop in parallel, a longitudinal analysis of leader effects across time should be carried out in connection with partisan dealignment. Certainly, if dealigned voters have increased across time, the overall impact of partisanship on voting should have decreased accordingly. Consequently, leader effects should emerge as increasingly relevant, as a function of the relative impact of leaders *versus* partisanship in the voting calculus.

## Data and descriptive evidence

We address the gaps and limitations in the existing literature with our original pooled dataset including 109 national election studies from 14 Western European democracies conducted in the period 1961–2018. This dataset strikes a balance between longitudinal scope and geographical breadth, improving on existing projects such as *The European Voter* (featuring only six countries over the period 1961–2001) and the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (featuring a larger pool of countries but covering only the last two decades). This will allow us to test the importance of party leader evaluations on voters' behaviour across the longest time-span investigated so far. Country selection applied the following criteria. First, we restricted our sample to parliamentary democracies, as this is where a trend towards an increase in importance of party leaders is expected to occur – in presidential systems, candidates have always been pivotal. Second, we focussed on Western European countries, as they have longer experience of democratic elections (and national election study projects). Finally, amongst these countries, we only included the studies featuring party leader evaluations and party identification as these are our key independent variables. [Table 1](#) summarises the number studies included for each of the countries under analysis (a detailed list is presented in [Online Appendix A](#)).

As exposed in the previous sections, a fundamental proposition of the personalisation of politics and a theoretical cornerstone of the present study relates to the existence of a trend towards partisan dealignment common to modern Western democracies. Although this is not an unstudied topic, most of the academic works on partisan dealignment only take into account a reduced number of countries and are only a little

**Table 1.** National election studies included in the analysis.

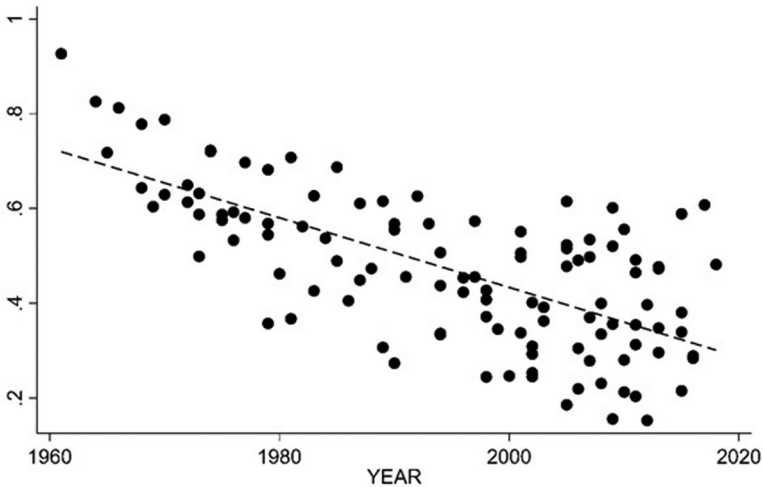
Country	Period	Time points
Austria	2013	1
Denmark	1971–2011	8
Finland	2003–2015	4
Germany	1961–2013	14
Greece	1985–2012	5
Ireland	2002–2016	4
Italy	1985–2018	9
Netherlands	1986–2012	9
Norway	1981–2013	9
Portugal	1985–2015	7
Spain	1979–2016	9
Sweden	1982–2010	9
Switzerland	1995–2015	6
United Kingdom	1964–2017	15

informative with regard to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (e.g. Berglund *et al.* 2005; Dalton 2000; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995).<sup>2</sup> More comprehensive data on partisan dealignment is thus necessary to get an unobstructed view of its relationship with the personalisation of politics.

Given the large comparative scope of our analysis, we are confronted with issues of item consistency. Inevitably, our partisanship measure relies on the different questions that each national election study project felt adequate to capture the political identities of the respondents in a given nation. However, we still operate in conditions of conceptual homogeneity, since all the national election studies included in our dataset tackled respondents' *feelings of closeness* to a political party – a widely available indicator signalling a long-term affective relationship, which can be meaningfully distinguished from vote choice. In the large majority of countries under analysis, respondents were offered the possibility to signal the strength of their closeness to a specific party on a three-point scale (1. only a sympathiser; 2. close to the party; 3. very close to the party). In Figure 1, we plot the proportion of respondents declaring themselves close or very close to a political party in each of the election studies under analysis. The figure provides evidence of a steady partisan dealignment in West European parliamentary democracies. It reveals a decrease of about 40 percentage points in the share of people reporting to feel close/very close to a political party over the last six decades. This depicts a rather clear trend towards partisan dealignment, confirming previous results.

Yet, such a clear trend does not prove that partisan attachments became electorally less important (nor that leaders came to matter more). In order to do so, we must introduce vote choice into the picture and look at how much it is influenced by partisanship and leader evaluations, respectively. To measure the importance of leader evaluations on vote choice, we choose thermometer scores over leaders' personality traits, as



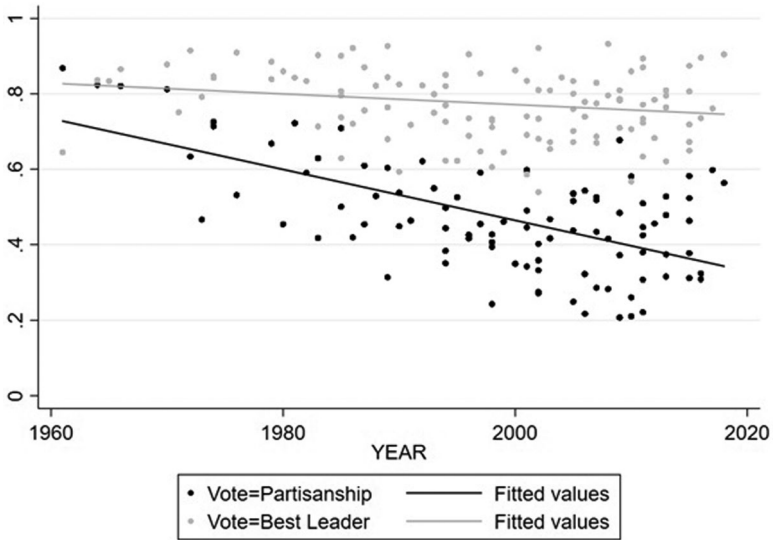


**Figure 1.** Percentage of party identifiers in Western Europe, 1961–2018.

they have now become ‘the most frequently included type of question about leaders in election studies’ (Bittner 2011: 16).<sup>3</sup> Despite inevitable differences in question wording across countries, most of the studies allowed respondents to probe their feelings towards major parties’ leaders on a 0 (dislike) to 10 (like) thermometer scale. Detailed question wording and recoding strategy are presented in [Online Appendix B](#).

[Figure 2](#) shows the proportion of voters casting a vote for the party of the leader they like the most (grey dots) and for the party they feel close or very close to (black dots) in each election study. Note that the bivariate configuration of this analysis allows respondents to be included in both categories (i.e. voting for the leader they like the most *and* the party they feel close to). Overall, our claim of a decrease in the relative importance of partisan alignments in structuring voting behaviour seems to be confirmed. Over these six decades, the percentage of individuals who voted in line with their party identification decreased around 40 percentage points. This decline is of the same magnitude of that previously observed regarding partisanship in [Figure 1](#), suggesting that this is not a consequence of increased volatility from partisans but rather the result of a mere decrease in the number of partisans.<sup>4</sup> Decisively, partisanship is much less of an important factor for vote choice today.

[Figure 2](#) also presents initial evidence for the relationship between leader evaluations and party choice. At first glance, it would seem to suggest that leaders have always mattered – even in the golden age of partisan alignment – considering that the proportion of votes for the top-rated leader was always larger than the proportion of partisan votes, and that this proportion is fairly stable at a very high level.



**Figure 2.** Partisanship and leader evaluations as determinants of party choice, 1961–2018.

At this point, based on the descriptive evidence presented so far, a critique can be posed to the personalisation of politics and our argument. To the extent to which leader evaluations are coloured by partisan lenses, then these should have accompanied the decreasing trend of partisanship as a determinant of voting behaviour over time. However, the percentage of voters who voted for their top-rated leader has remained virtually the same over this period. Therefore, we argue that [Figure 2](#) provides evidence to sustain a hypothesis that the declining impact of partisanship on voting corresponds to a growing *independent* effect of leaders on voting. Whereas in the 1960s people may have voted for their party *and* its leader – in the lines of the funnel of causality –, nowadays more and more individuals seem to vote in favour of the leader they like the most, regardless of whether he/she is the leader of their party. This statement deserves a rigorous and multivariate assessment, which is the focus of the next section.

### Analytical strategy

Cross-sectional analyses of voting behaviour in multi-party systems usually rely on conditional logit estimation (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Van der Eijk *et al.* 2006). However, this approach is suboptimal in the context of our analysis because it is unable to take into account the varying set of parties available to voters across countries, as well as within countries across time.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, we preferred a modelling strategy that relaxes the assumption of homogeneous choice-sets by estimating logistic

regression models on a ‘stacked’ data matrix. In this design, the dependent variable vote choice, instead of a nominal configuration of the several parties running for election in a country in an election year, consists in a binary choice (0: did not vote for this party; 1: voted for this party) of vote for a generic party, repeated as many times per respondent as the number of parties contesting that specific election. This option has the advantage of allowing for the consideration of vote choices for any of the political parties available in a given election. These assets explain why this approach is the standard modelling practice in cross-national research on leader effects on vote choice (see, for example: Aarts *et al.* 2011; Curtice and Lisi 2014; Garzia 2014).

The key covariate in our model is voter evaluation of party leaders measured through feeling thermometers ranging from 0 (dislike) to 10 (like). The model also includes a continuous measure of closeness to the party (0: not close to that party; 1: only a sympathiser; 2: fairly close; 3: very close).

As much as partisanship and leader evaluations are important determinants of the vote, they do not fully account for the whole range of possible factors intervening in the voting calculus. There is a multitude of short-term issues and long-term ideological factors potentially influencing electoral decisions. Given the impossibility of accounting for all these issues over a time span of decades in our large pool of countries, we have taken into account the proximity of voters and parties on the left-right continuum in the multivariate model estimation. We rely on Inglehart and Klingemann’s (1976: 244) conception of the left-right dimension ‘as a super-issue which summarises the programmes of opposing groups’.<sup>6</sup> We calculate our left-right proximity measure as the distance in absolute value between the voter’s self-placement on the left-right continuum and the position assigned to each of the parties on the same 10-point scale. The resulting left-right proximity variable ranges from 0 (maximum proximity) to 10 (maximum distance). From an econometric point of view, this measurement strategy implies that left-right proximity is expected to exert a negative effect in a model of vote choice (i.e. lower party-voter distance on the left-right scale increases the chances to vote for that party).<sup>7</sup>

Controlling for left-right proximity gains relevance in light of the possibility that leader evaluations may be correlated with the issues they stand for. Leader effects could be an artefact of candidates’ increasing ability to associate with certain issues or policy stances in the eyes of voters, especially in a television-dominated era of highly personalised political communication. For example, Hart (2015) highlights the ability of American Presidential candidates to control the economic narrative and capitalise on it during the campaign. Wattenberg (1986) too, finds

**Table 2.** The effect of partisanship and leader evaluations on vote choice across time.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Year	-.004*** (.000)	-.001** (.000)	-.008*** (.001)	-.005*** (.001)
LR-Proximity	-.899*** (.007)	-.903*** (.007)	-.898*** (.007)	-.902*** (.007)
Partisanship	.687*** (.004)	.838*** (.016)	.687*** (.004)	.840*** (.016)
Leader evaluation	1.030*** (.007)	1.031*** (.007)	.813*** (.027)	.800*** (.027)
Partisanship *Year	–	-.004*** (.000)	–	-.004*** (.000)
Leader evaluation *Year	–	–	.005*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Constant	-2.163*** (.041)	-2.291*** (.042)	-1.994*** (.046)	-2.114*** (.047)
Pseudo R-squared	.51	.51	.51	.51
Log-likelihood	-158498.61	-158388.80	-158463.21	-158350.33
N (combinations)	667328	667328	667328	667328
N (respondents)	126582	126582	126582	126582

Note: Table entries are standardised logistic regression coefficients. Models include fixed effects at the country and year level. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered robust at the respondent level.

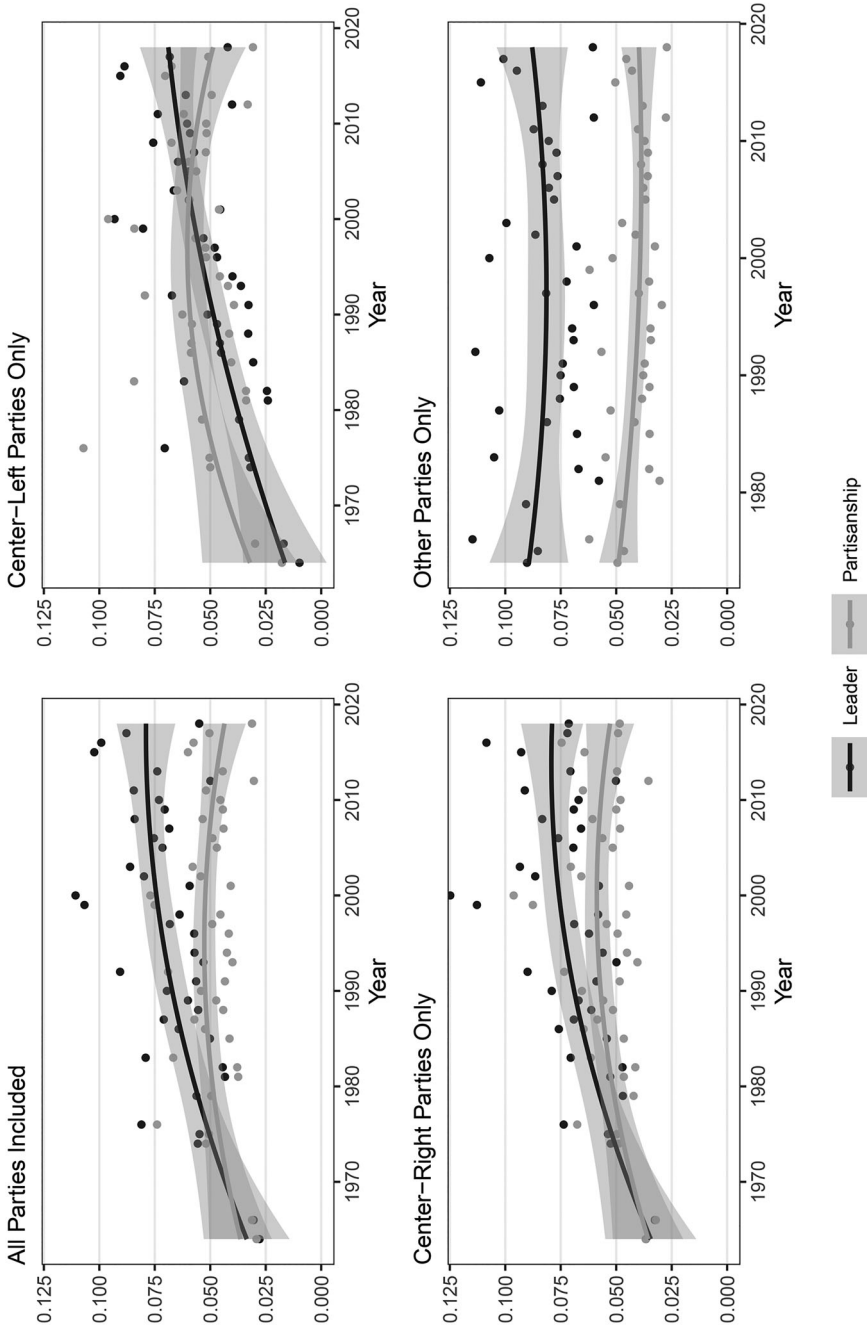
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

evidence of issues being increasingly associated with candidates rather than political parties. From the literature on issue voting, we know that political issues have grown more important across time (Franklin 1985; Lewis-Beck 1990). As short-term factors, issues have also become more important in explaining voting behaviour as a result of dealignment. Hence, it is important to investigate whether the effects of leaders are not simply ‘messenger effects’ signalling those issues to voters.<sup>8</sup>

### Party and leader effects on vote choice: a multivariate assessment

Table 2 shows the estimates stemming from our logistic regression models. Standard errors are clustered robust at the respondent level to account for the multiple observations per respondent within the stacked data matrix framework. We also include fixed effects at both country and year level to control for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and across time within countries.<sup>9</sup> The coefficients are standardised to facilitate comparison across predictors.

In Model 1, our baseline model, we assess the impact of the different coefficients on individual vote choice.<sup>10</sup> Among all predictors considered and for the entire time span, voters’ evaluations of party leaders appear to have a very strong and statistically significant effect on individuals’ voting decisions. However, this is only a cross-sectional picture of the explanatory power of these variables. Our interest here lies in the understanding



**Figure 3.** Partisanship and leader effects on the vote across different parties.

of how they evolved over time in light of the discussed socio-political transformations of the last century. Therefore, we added a time interaction between both partisanship and leader evaluations with the election year to capture possible time-variations in effects. The results are consistent with the theoretical expectations laid out and robust to the alternative (Models 2 and 3) or combined inclusion (Model 4) of the interaction terms. The relationship between partisanship and individual vote choice has weakened throughout time, whereas the statistical impact of voters' evaluations of leaders has grown. These relationships are better perceived when their average marginal effects are graphically represented.

Figure 3 presents the marginal effects of partisanship and leader evaluations on the vote across time, distinguishing between a model featuring all political parties simultaneously (as in Model 4 of Table 2), and three models alternatively estimating the same relationships focussing on voters for the mainstream centre-left (social-democratic) parties, mainstream centre-right (Christian/conservative) parties and other parties in turn.<sup>11</sup> The marginal effects plot for the full sample (upper-left quadrant in Figure 3) reflects the results of Table 2, as it shows a contrasting temporal development of both predictors. Throughout time, there has been a decrease in the role of partisan attachments in guiding individuals' voting behaviour in West European parliamentary democracies. This decline happens alongside the well-documented trends of partisan dealignment. An increasingly dealigned electorate does not base electoral choices in long-term party allegiances and is more permeable to the influence of other factors over voting decisions. Propelled by partisan dealignment and an increasingly personalised pattern of party competition, leader assessments earned a more important consideration in the minds of voters, as their estimated impact has grown across time – even when controlling for party-voter proximity on the left-right scale. More importantly, these assessments appear to be increasingly independent from partisan attachments over time, contradicting the endogeneity assumptions of the Michigan's funnel of causality. On average, the growth in leader effects was similar in magnitude to the decline of effects of partisanship over the same period. In sum, the personalisation of voting behaviour – translated into increasing leader effects on vote choice – seems to have taken place hand-in-hand with the decreasing importance of partisanship in structuring vote choice.<sup>12</sup>

### Party and leader effects across different party families

The literature has brought to attention the existence of possible party-related differences in the degree to which leaders exert an impact on

individual electoral decisions. Some studies suggest leader effects to be stronger amongst mainstream parties, as they have been the most affected by dealignment (Aardal and Binder 2011; Bittner 2011; Lobo 2008). We follow these intuitions and expand the analysis by considering a larger pool of countries and a longitudinal outlook that allows the tracing of the development of these processes across time. We unpack these relationships by alternatively estimating the same models for votes of centre-left mainstream parties (upper-right quadrant in Figure 3), centre-right mainstream parties (lower-left quadrant), and other parties (lower-right quadrant).

Regarding centre-left parties, we notice a stark reversal in the importance of both predictors across time. Partisanship has traditionally been very important in explaining vote choice for the centre-left. Mass parties have grounded their support base along strong ideological lines, more than in leadership. A decline in partisanship effects has already been observable since the 1960s, when the sociopolitical processes described in the introductory sections began depriving mainstream parties of their electoral base. In parallel, this was matched by an increase in the importance of leaders. The two predictors become undistinguishable in the late 1990s. At this stage, centre-left mass parties had already undergone a process of party change, going catch-all to try to appeal to a broader electorate by de-emphasising *classe gardée* and relativising ideological considerations. Influential leaderships, such as Tony Blair's over the British Labour Party, often played an important role in this process, setting new programmatic agendas aimed at targeting the median voter by advocating a style of valence politics going beyond left-right ideological considerations. In the twenty-first century elections, the effect of voters' evaluations of leaders for centre-left parties overcomes partisanship effects and leaders appear about as important today in explaining vote choice as partisanship was in the 1970s.

The picture is somewhat different for centre-right parties. In these parties, leaders played a relevant role alongside partisanship earlier on. In fact, until the mid-1970s the influence of the two predictors was virtually undistinguishable, in a setting reflecting potential endogeneity which is compatible with the Michigan funnel of causality. Since the 1980s the two variables have become progressively independent from each other, as partisanship effects decline and leader effects become more important across time. This decade is concurrent with a process of reconfiguration of conservative parties' ideological background with the intention of appealing to a larger electorate, much like centre-left parties did later on in the 1990s. This period coincides with the leaderships of very notorious Conservative leaders associated with the emergence of neoliberalism, such

as Margaret Thatcher or Helmut Kohl, popular personalities whose agendas possibly captured many votes for their parties. The difference with the centre-left regarding the relative importance of both predictors may be related to the more complex cleavage structure of centre-right parties compared to the centre-left whose main axis of political conflict lies in the capital-workers divide (Bartolini 2000). As a result of the earlier importance of centre-right party leaders, more than an absolute increase in leader effects, we observe a growth in the *relative* importance of leaders vis-à-vis partisanship in structuring the vote for centre-right parties.

When it comes to those voters casting a ballot for non-mainstream parties, the situation is somewhat more intricate. This group features diverse parties potentially focussing their political appeal on idiosyncratic issues, whose influence our data is unable to capture. While partisanship and leader evaluations are certainly important predictors of voting behaviour for these parties too, we are likely not accounting for more important factors in our models when it comes to these political parties. Therefore, the high leadership effects on the vote for these parties must be interpreted with caution, as they are possibly the result of model under-specification and the fact that, because younger and not as cleavage-based, partisanship has never played an equally relevant role for these parties. In fact, the decrease in the predictive ability of partisanship on individual vote choice appears to happen exclusively in mainstream parties, as a consequence of the uneven partisan dealignment among these parties. In explaining vote choice for other parties, the impact of partisanship remains stably low.

Overall, these findings provide evidence of the relationship between partisan dealignment and the declining impact of partisanship on vote choice. Having lost their core pool of partisans, mainstream parties can no longer rely on the mobilising role of partisanship for electoral support. Therefore, they resorted to alternative strategies to establish a link with voters and remain electorally relevant. In times of individualisation, personalisation and mediatisation through television, placing the emphasis on party leaders appears functional to counterbalance the erosion of their electoral basis in a context of disintermediation. This implies personalising political communication, adapting internal party organisation, pondering candidates' profiles and developing electoral strategies centred around party leaders (Lobo 2014; McAllister 2007).

### **Partisan dealignment as a driver of personalisation: evidence from selected panel data**

Our approach has so far investigated long-term changes in the determinants of voting behaviour based on repeated cross-sectional data. With

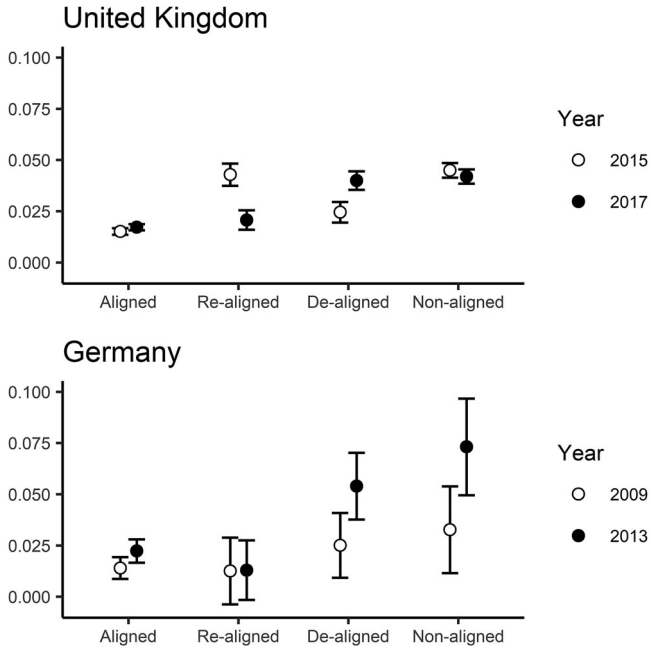


this design, admittedly, we cannot exclude that the decline in partisan voting and the simultaneous personalisation of vote choices are two largely unrelated long-term processes unfolding at about the same time. However, if dealignment and personalisation are to be conceived as causally linked, we should then be able to detect that individual-level changes in partisan attachment correspond to a change in the magnitude of leader effects.

Driven by this expectation, we have deployed an empirical test relying on panel data from selected countries. Given the scarcity of ‘long panels’ for electoral research, we decided to restrict our attention to Germany and the United Kingdom – two countries with significant variation in terms of electoral system and size of the party system, and whose respective election study projects feature a panel component bridging the latest two elections covered in our pooled dataset (German Long-term Panel 2009–2013; British Election Study Internet Panel 2015–2017). The analytical choice to focus on short-term effects poses a highly demanding test of our baseline hypothesis, which aimed at capturing long-term change. Our operationalisation strategy matches the previous analyses, in that we rely on the same variables, coding decisions and modelling strategy. This time, however, we have decided to split the country samples into four sub-groups of voters, namely: *aligned* voters, (they declare themselves close/very close to a political party in two subsequent elections); *re-aligned* voters (they declare themselves independent in the first election under analysis and become partisan in the subsequent election); *de-aligned* voters (they declare themselves partisans in the first election and become independent in the subsequent election) and *non-aligned* voters (they declare themselves independent in both elections under analysis). We track the same voters and exploit the intra-group longitudinal variation in order to exclude third omitted confounders of the relationship between partisan attachment, leader evaluations and voting decisions in turn. By distinguishing between de-aligned and non-aligned voters, in particular, we can exclude the possibility that the growth in leader effects is entirely driven by a larger share of non-aligned new voters within the electorate in the later period, rather than by older voters losing their partisan attachment. Our main expectations are that leader effects will be higher for aligned voters as compared to dealigned voters, and, also importantly to our thesis, that de-aligned voters will register an increase in leader effects in the second election under analysis. [Table 3](#) reports the frequency distributions for our four-fold typology in the British and German datasets, respectively, while [Figure 4](#) shows the marginal effect of leader evaluations on vote choice for each country/election/sub-group under analysis.

**Table 3.** Frequency distribution of the partisanship typology: Britain and Germany.

	Britain (2015–2017)		Germany (2009–2013)	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Aligned	67.2	(3,532)	75.9	(529)
Re-aligned	7.2	(377)	11.8	(82)
De-aligned	8.6	(454)	7.2	(50)
Non-aligned	17.0	(895)	5.1	(36)
Total	100.0	(5,258)	100.0	(697)

**Figure 4.** Marginal leader effects across the partisanship typology: Britain and Germany.

The findings from the panel data analysis converge with the previous cross-sectional evidence. First, both in the British and the German case, we find that in both considered elections the marginal effects for leaders' ratings are substantially lower for aligned voters than for non-aligned voters. This matches the theoretical expectations derived from the personalisation of politics thesis and previous cross-sectional evidence comparing leader effects between partisans and non-partisans (Gidengil 2011; Lobo 2014). Second, we observe in both countries a nearly two-fold increase in the marginal effect for de-aligned voters across elections. These results suggest that the demise of party identification at the individual-level corresponds to a growing influence of leadership evaluations on voting decisions. The magnitude of change, also considering a time

span of only two consecutive elections, is substantial and illustrates the causal direction in the relationship between partisan dealignment and the personalisation of vote choices, with the latter seemingly driven by the former.<sup>13</sup>

## Concluding remarks

This article has addressed two fundamental gaps in the study of personalisation of electoral politics. On the one hand, it proposed investigating if the theoretical link between dealignment and leader effects is empirically observable. On the other hand, it aimed at providing definitive evidence on the longitudinal dimension of the personalisation of politics at the electoral level. The analysis was carried out using an unprecedentedly large comparative dataset, compiled for the purposes of this study and providing longitudinal data spanning over six decades across 14 established parliamentary democracies.

The findings of this article demonstrate how, over the last half century, an increasingly dealigned electorate progressively moved away from party-centered patterns of voting into a more individualised style of decision making. Parties have faded away as collective identities and agents of political mobilisation in contemporary democracies. We show that they have been replaced to a large extent by their leaders as the prism through which voters relate to politics in times of dealignment.<sup>14</sup>

Noticeably, not only the process of dealignment is crucial in deeming leaders more important in the individual voting calculus, it is also fundamental in making leader effects independent from partisan attachments. As party dealignment progresses and partisanship becomes rarer in West European electorates, leader evaluations maintain their relevance in explaining vote choice, proving increasingly exogenous to partisan lenses. This suggests that the Michigan-based funnel of causality paradigm may have been challenged by a growing candidate centeredness of the electoral process, empirically observable in the last decades of the period under analysis. In fact, this is likely the reason why previous studies – whose time-span does not go beyond the 2000s – were unable to identify a growing trend in leader effects across time. The nearly two decades of elections added in our empirical analysis correspond to the heyday of personalised voting behaviour. As such, their inclusion may have been crucial for the recognition of a longitudinal temporal development of these relationships. Not least importantly, our positive findings also stem from the joint consideration of leadership and partisanship effects across time – something that has been overlooked in previous studies. While leader effects increase across time, this trend is clearly magnified by the concurrent decline of partisanship effects on individual vote choice. This article

thus makes both a methodological – by extending the time-span – and a theoretical contribution – by considering the relative conjoint effects of partisanship and leader – to the study of the personalisation of vote choice in Western democracies.

## Notes

1. We follow Elgie and Passarelli's (2019) discussion of the theoretical and conceptual differences in the use of the term 'presidentialisation' between Poguntke and Webb (2005) and Samuels and Shugart (2010). As the focus of our contribution is on the determinants of voting behaviour at the individual level, we decided not to rely on Samuels and Shugart's notions, which 'have a narrow focus on constitutional presidentialisation and party presidentialisation' (Elgie and Passarelli 2019: 116). Instead, we favour Poguntke and Webb's conceptualisation as 'a more general idea of presidentialisation that results from a much broader process of social and political change' (*ibid.*). Our 'personalisation' notion can thus be equated to the 'electoral face' of presidentialisation. The theoretical link between partisan dealignment and growing leader effects also fits within Poguntke and Webb's (2005: 15–16) theoretical framework, placing the 'erosion of traditional social cleavage politics' as a cause for presidentialisation.
2. An important exception is a recent study by Dalton (2013), including data until 2010 for ten Western European parliamentary democracies.
3. Leadership traits might potentially allow for a more exogenous estimation of leader effects on vote choice, and thus be a preferable baseline option. However, recent research has noted that trait evaluations are also permeable to partisan stereotypes, ideological predispositions and previous voting habits (Bittner 2011; Garzia 2017; Holian and Prysby 2014). More importantly, though, as leader thermometers are more widely available across national election studies, they enable a broader longitudinal and cross-country comparative analysis of the relationship between dealignment and personalisation. Based on Bittner's (2011) extensive survey of election studies featuring measures of party leader trait batteries, the use of the latter instead of leader thermometers in the current study would imply a drop in our sample from 109 to 17 election studies, rendering impossible a longitudinal and comparative analysis.
4. Partisan loyalty is indeed above 90 per cent throughout the whole time series.
5. In particular, varying choice sets threaten the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives assumption that is invoked in conditional logit models. Relaxing this assumption requires modeling the variations in the choice sets. Therefore, we experimented with different conditional logit configurations that allow for variation in voters' choice sets by interacting a choice-set indicator with each alternative-specific covariate (i.e. leader evaluations, partisanship, ideological proximity). This produces estimates that are choice-set-specific, but this comes at the cost of misleading generalisations. For instance, the choice set configurations usually involve one or two specific countries and therefore convey the effect of idiosyncratic context rather than the absence or presence of certain party families. Moreover, these models involve unbearable complexity. In fact, our argument of the diachronic

increase in the relative importance of leaders and parties would also demand a triple interaction to model the change of the coefficients of interest over time. While this would represent a feasible option for analyses of the dynamics of a single party system, or in the synchronic variation across party systems, in our long-term comparative setting a more pragmatic approach is preferable.

6. We acknowledge that this approach is not without caveats, but it has the undeniable merit of offering a feasible measure of ideological proximity across electoral studies spanning over six decades in multiple countries.
7. Due to the lack of relevant questions – either self- or party- placement – it was impossible to compute ideological proximity for the respondents featured in the following studies: Denmark 1973; Germany 1961, 1972, 1980 and 1994; Portugal 2011; United Kingdom 1970 and 2010. All these studies are thus excluded from the multivariate analyses that follow.
8. Admittedly, our model specification is parsimonious, which results from the constraints of the stacked data matrix framework. The inclusion of further controls at the respondent level poses a problem since socio-demographic variables are constant at the party-respondent level. However, since the effects of these variables can be claimed to be indirectly accounted in the sense that they are largely subsumed into party identification and ideological self-positioning, we are confident that such a parsimonious model is nonetheless satisfactory.
9. These include contextual differences as well as inconsistencies in question wording across countries and elections.
10. The difference in the N of party\*respondent combinations and the N of respondents is due to the stacked data matrix framework. In our sample, on average, each respondent observation was repeated 5,27 times, that is, the mean number of parties included in each election study.
11. The party families were coded according to the Comparative Manifesto Project classification.
12. Note that the results hold regardless of institutional-level variation in electoral systems (proportional vs. majoritarian/mixed) and regime type (parliamentary vs. semi-presidential).
13. Leader effects are also found to increase significantly for de-aligned voters in a panel model with fixed-effects at the individual level. However, this model would reduce the pool of voters considered in the analysis to only those experiencing a change in the variables of interest, resulting in a very small effective sample. For this reason, we present the more comprehensive evidence provided in Figure 4.
14. Noticeably, our results are on the conservative side. With leaders increasingly responsible for shaping partisan identifications – as previous studies have demonstrated (Garzia 2013; Rapoport 1997) – it is likely that leaders matter even more overall.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Russell J. Dalton, Alexander H. Trechsel, and the two anonymous reviewers of *West European Politics* for their comments and suggestions. We are also grateful to Federico Vegetti for his assistance with data harmonisation and management. An earlier version of this manuscript has been

developed during Diego Garzia's research stay at the University of California, Irvine. That version has been presented at the 2018 Southern California Political Behavior Conference at the University of California, Riverside, and published in the CSD Working Paper Series of the University of California, Irvine.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation under Grant PZ00P1167997.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available. Our dataset is composed of 109 merged National Elections Studies (NES), all available online with the national producing institutions.

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