Negative personalization and voting behavior in 14 parliamentary democracies, 1961–2018

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ABSTRACT

Existing research has begun to tackle the electoral consequences of affective polarization through the lens of negative partisanship. However, not equal attention has been paid to voters' polarized opinions toward political leaders and their impact on electoral behavior. This paper offers a comparative, longitudinal assessment of the relationship between negativity towards party leaders and vote choice in multi-party systems. We develop our negative personalization hypothesis and test it empirically on an original pooled dataset featuring 109 national election surveys from 14 Western European parliamentary democracies collected over the last six decades. Our findings confirm the existence of a robust relationship between negative party-leader evaluations and vote choice. Furthermore, the results demonstrate a sizable growth in the incidence of negative personalization across time, now of a magnitude that compares to that exerted by in-party-leader evaluations. This finding constitutes a central innovation adding to the personalization of politics literature.

1. Introduction

In the last decade, a scholarly debate has arisen over whether—and to what extent—mass publics are polarized (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). With scholars increasingly concerned about polarization within the electorate, "more attention has been focused on how much citizens despise the opposition, as well as how much they like their own candidate" (Mutz, 2007: 621). Indeed, existing scholarship documents growing negative feelings toward opposing parties and candidates, with very little change in the degree of positive feelings toward one's own (Iyengar et al., 2012; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). In other words, voters seem to like their chosen party—and its leaders and candidates—no differently than before, but dislike rival parties more over time. A large body of research has investigated the origins and causes of affective polarization in the US (Iyengar et al., 2019) and in Europe (Reiljan, 2019; Wagner, 2020). More recently, a parallel strand in the literature has begun to tackle the electoral consequences of mass polarization through the lens of *negative partisanship* theory. This theory builds on the idea that "negative evaluations are not simply the bipolar opposite of positive ones. They may have distinct antecedent and consequences" (Medeiros and Noel, 2014: 1023). Existing research has uncovered the autonomous power of negative out-party evaluations to affect patterns of vote choice at the individual level (Medeiros and Noel,

2014; Caruana et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2015; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Mayer, 2017; Bankert, 2020). However, as Druckman and Levendusky (2019: 115) have recently noted, "when people think about the other party, they think primarily about political elites". Against this background, however, comparative analyses of voters' polarized opinions toward political leaders and their impact on electoral behavior are only slowly emerging. This is, to some extent, surprising, given the widespread *personalization of politics* in Western democracies (Garzia, 2014; Rahat and Kenig, 2018).

Nowadays, it is commonplace for leaders to replace party symbols during election campaigns also thanks to the media's increasing propensity to focus on leaders rather than the parties they lead. The result of this process of personalization is a new style of political competition in which a marked increase can be observed in 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). Over the last three decades, a growing body of electoral studies has been dedicated to determining and measuring the importance of voters' evaluations of party leaders for electoral decisions. While initial evidence pointed toward mixed findings (King, 2002; Karvonen, 2010), more recent comparative research—including the latest elections and adopting more refined methodological approaches—has demonstrated that the impact of leader evaluations on vote

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choice has by and large increased across time (Garzia et al., 2020a; Garzia et al., 2020b).

Even if inadvertently, the notion that individuals are brought to vote for a certain party by the popularity and positive appeal of its leader underlies most of the existing literature. As aptly summarized by Barisione (2009), "where there is low popularity, there cannot be a positive leader effect". Yet, this does not exclude the possibility that increasingly unappealing leaders may affect voting behavior in different ways. Following the theoretical coordinates defined by the negative partisanship literature, we contend that negative evaluations of (out-party) political leaders may also act as a significant driver of the vote, acting alongside positive (in-party) leader evaluations. Our expectation is grounded on two parallel developments previously highlighted as central socio-political drivers of the personalization of politics. Much in the same way as an increasingly dealigned electorate turns to short-term heuristics—such as party-leader evaluations—when choosing whom to vote for, the widespread operation of negativity biases at the individual level supports the idea that the same heuristic could impact decision-making both ways (Soroka, 2014).

At the same time, the changing structure of mass communications in the second half of the twentieth century 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). While media exposure has been shown to moderate the effect of positive leader evaluations on vote choice (Garzia et al., 2020a), the spread of negative campaigning to Western Europe in a context of intense political personalization leads us to expect a corresponding increase in the ability of negative evaluations to affect patterns of party choice over time. We move from these premises and address their most notable implications regarding the possibility that the weakening of partisan alignments—and an increasingly confrontational style of campaigning and political communication—could all be leading to the development of a distinctive form of "negative personalization" in voters' behavior.[1] In particular, we hypothesize that negative evaluations of leaders of opposing parties increase our ability to predict voting for a given party net of the effect of (positive) evaluations of its leader. Importantly, we note that our negative personalization hypothesis is longitudinal. Besides their independent impact on voting, in fact, we also expect negative evaluations to matter more over time.

Such negative personalization is not contrary to the personalization of politics thesis; it merely advances a different mechanism through which leaders may have become important to electoral outcomes. While the personalization literature has unanimously—and almost mechanically—concentrated on the role of *likes* in driving vote choices, there are grounds to believe that strong personalization—coupled with several pervasive socio-political trends currently at work—could lead to a heightened, independent role for *dislikes* in political behavior. Such an inquiry into the "power of the dark side" (Caruana et al., 2015) contributes to the burgeoning literature on affective polarization and its electoral consequences by looking at one of its understudied faces—namely, voter evaluation of party leaders. We will concentrate on established parliamentary democracies since the personalization trend originates within non-presidential systems. Our empirical analysis relies on a large-scale, cross-national-survey-data harmonization effort resulting in an unprecedented dataset that pools 109 national election surveys from 14 Western European parliamentary democracies collected over the last six decades (1961–2018).

Despite its extensive comparative and longitudinal scope, this article nonetheless is a preliminary attempt to address what remains a broad, mostly unexplored, aspect of political behavior. For instance, we do not claim to specify an empirical model that accounts for the origins and causes of the negative personalization of vote choices. In a similar vein, we limit our analysis to only one of the many potential behavioral consequences of this process (i.e., party choice). More modestly, we aim at drawing attention to a—so-far unappreciated—dimension of political polarization that is likely to carry important normative consequences and broader implications in political contexts increasingly shaped by negative campaigning and the pervasive personalization of the political competition.

2. A theory of negative personalization

A steady decline of party identifications has been observed throughout the last decades across West European parliamentary democracies (Garzia et al., 2020b). This has resulted, in turn, in an electorate less reliant on partisan cues. With the mass media becoming the principal source of knowledge about the political process (Albright, 2009), the discourse that reaches citizens through the media has turned into the "major means by which citizens learn the rationales for opposing perspectives" (Mutz, 2007: 621).

Albeit not a new phenomenon, many elements seem to suggest that negative campaigning no longer is an exclusively American phenomenon but is also on the rise in a large number of democracies worldwide (Nai and Walter, 2015). The prominence of negative campaigning in West European democracies, has been confirmed by comparative analyses (Walter et al., 2014; Valli and Nai, 2020) and case studies on countries such as Austria (Dolezal et al., 2015), Germany (Maier, 2015), Italy (Seddone et al., 2019), the Netherlands (Walter, 2014), and Switzerland (Bol and Bohl, 2015). Importantly, the increased salience of negativity in the news appears less a consequence of the proclivities of individual journalists, but "of the entire structure of journalism, as well as of the mediums themselves—newspapers, but especially television" (Soroka, 2014: 20). Research in political communication shows that television portrayals of political discourse are generally more negative than those of newspapers (Pruysers and Cross, 2016). Even if television carries the same information, its emotional impact differs from print. By prioritizing candidates' personality over parties and ideologies, television favors superficial coverage, communication through visual objects instead of abstract concepts, and appeals to emotions even through non-verbal communication. As Langer (2007) points out, "intimate" exposure to political leaders—far easier through televisual media than in print—may intensify mistrust. According to Mutz (2007: 633), the "in your face" discourse on television "intensifies citizens' negativity toward those people and ideas that they dislike". It should thus "come as no surprise that citizens begin to hate the leaders of the opposition parties" (Smith and Searles, 2014: 85). Interestingly, such discourse undermines the legitimacy of reviled politicians but has no effect on the legitimacy of preferred ones (Mutz, 2007; Levendusky, 2013).

This uneven dynamic is possibly even more germane in the digital age. According to Gurevitch et al. (2009: 175–6), "the new media ecology makes it easier to establish partisan patterns of media access by creating more scope for selectivity and more opportunities for group herding and opinion polarization". Indeed, an incidental consequence of the spread of broadband connections has been more partisan media consumption (Lelkes et al., 2017). Moreover, because users can readily tailor news content to their preferences online, most notably via social media, the opportunity to consistently self-select into negative stories over positive ones emerges (Himelboim et al., 2014; Kätsyri et al., 2016). In a comparative analysis of negative information on social media and traditional media outlets online among 27 European countries, Ceron (2015: 494) concludes that the consumption of news from social media strongly enhances the likelihood that users bump into negative information. Regarding party leaders specifically, a case study of the 2013 Italian election shows that citizens more exposed to political information on Facebook tend to form more negative perceptions of

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[1] We borrow the term from a research note on changing patterns of political communication in the Canadian case by Pruysers and Cross (2016: 540). They define negative personalization as "an emphasis on opposing party leaders in campaign communication more so than on the parties that they lead".

party leaders (Barisione et al., 2014).

Citizens are responsive to the political environment, which they read through the political communication available to them (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1997). To the extent that contemporary political broadcasting "increasingly follows news values such as conflict, negativism, and personalization … it may have an effect on the public perception of political leaders" (Ohr, 2011: 13). Consequently, growing negativity in political communication should correspond to a commensurate response among voters. In fact, public opinion in many European democracies became affectively polarized (Reiljan, 2019; Gidron et al., 2020; Hobolt et al., 2020; Wagner, 2020). Growing antagonism toward out-groups "is not merely evident in Europe, but in many cases even more intense compared to the United States" (Reiljan, 2019: 17). Recent studies have clarified that affective polarization primarily translates into negative opinions of opposing elites (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019), a finding that anticipates that European electorates may be particularly averse to out-party leaders.

Research in political psychology has convincingly demonstrated the operation of a positive–negative asymmetry effect in impression formation. In other words, whenever good and bad are equally present, the psychological effects of bad impressions outweigh those of the good ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). According to Caruana et al. (2015: 774) "a negativity bias exists, such that individuals react more strongly to negative than positive information; they are more likely to pay attention to it, more likely to remember it and likely to weight it more heavily when making decisions".

Only recently has electoral research started explicitly examining the consequences of negativity on vote choice, mainly through the lens of *negative partisanship.* This concept moves from the social-psychological notion that hostility toward the out-group can independently drive support for the in-group. Existing scholarship shows that attitudes are not necessarily reciprocally activated, as positive attitudes toward one side may not result in negative attitudes toward the other—and vice versa (Conover and Feldmann, 1981). Indeed, Abramowitz and Webster (2016) demonstrate that partisans' feelings about their own party and the opposing party are largely independent of one another. If negative evaluations are conceived differently from mere bipolar opposites of positive ones, they can be thought of as having distinct antecedents and consequences (Cacioppo and Berntson, 1994).

While positive party identification reflects long-standing social cleavages, negative party identification relates more closely to a blend of short-term political and ideological factors. Because of their different origins (and even in the presence of positive identifications), negative identifications do exert an impact on vote choice. The existing works on the topic confirm this intuition and highlight an independent relationship between negative partisanship and vote choice even after controlling for positive identifications, both in the United States (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Bankert, 2020) and in Western Europe (Medeiros and Noel, 2014; Mayer, 2017; Boonen, 2019).

Against the background of a rapidly growing body of research dealing with the effect of negative *party* evaluations on vote choice, systematic assessments of the role of negative *leader* evaluations are scarce—this being especially the case for comparative analyses. The "hostility hypothesis" was first put forward by Maggiotto and Piereson (1977) in their analysis of American National Election Study data from the period 1964–1974. In the conclusions of their seminal study, they note that "evaluations of the opposition are independent, long-term factors which improve both our ability to explain and predict electoral behavior" (ibid.: 745). Similar findings were presented by Kernell (1977) in his analysis of the impact of presidential (dis)approval on US mid-term elections held in the period 1946–1966 (see also: Lau, 1982). The lack of more recent studies on the American case is coupled with the scarcity European case studies and comparative analyses. Among the few exceptions, Soroka's (2014) study of the US and Australia shows that negative trait evaluations predict vote choice better than positive ones. In contrast, in a study focusing on positive versus negative

thermometer evaluations of party leaders, Aarts and Blais (2011) find that while negative leader evaluations are significantly related to vote choice, even after controlling for positive evaluations, the latter emerges as a stronger correlate of vote choice in multi-party elections. Importantly, no existing comparative study has yet tackled the impact of negative leader evaluations on voting behavior in longitudinal perspective.

In this study, we put forward the notion of negative personalization and test its electoral face against an unprecedented set of comparative election-study data collected over the last six decades. Our intuition grounds on the idea that an increasing confrontational style of campaigning and communication in a context of intense political personalization could be leading the development of a distinctive form of negative personalization in voters' behavior. By negative personalization, we refer to *the increasing tendency for voters' party choice to be shaped by their negative evaluations of the leaders of other parties.* Over the most recent decades, the spread of negative campaigning and the resulting trend toward affective polarization have made political opponents increasingly disliked by voters (Iyengar et al., 2019). By priming conflictual forms of political communication and competition, parties and the media have progressively hindered patterns of voting "for".

Existing research has already uncovered the electoral effect of negativity through the lens of negative partisanship. Yet, studies within the personalization of politics framework have documented that parties' appeal to voters is progressively shaped by their own leaders' image (Curtice and Holmberg 2005). Indeed, it has been argued that nowadays, political leaders have become important in their own right "by personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties" (McAllister 2007, 574). Hence, based on the way in which negative out-party evaluations have been shown to affect party choice, we hypothesize that negative out-party-leader evaluations also matter for vote choice, net of the impact of positive party and leader evaluations. And indeed, we expect this to be increasingly the case due to the interactive effect of the negative campaigning and the affective polarization upward trends. Because of its tight focus on the determinants of voting behavior, our exploratory analysis will concentrate on the relationship between negative personalization and vote choice—thus leaving to future research the task of elaborating on the broader connection between changing patterns of political communication and election outcomes.

3. Data

Comparative research on the personalization of voting behavior has been hampered by the dearth of cross-national longitudinal data. Existing cross-national projects have either overlooked leader evaluations (e.g., European Election Study) or cover an insufficient time span to track the longitudinal development of the personalization trend (e.g., Comparative Study of Electoral Systems). Previous longitudinal exercises have thus relied on suboptimal data, either concentrating on a restricted number of country cases (Karvonen, 2010; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011) or limiting the analysis to a few decades (Garzia, 2014).

To address such limitations, we have carried an *ex-post* harmonization of existing cross-sectional survey data on national elections. Contrasting with *ex ante* harmonization projects, this strategy aims to render equivalent survey data that was not originally designed to be comparable. Despite the complexity of this procedure, which seeks to improve survey comparability across countries and over time—namely, data collected in different geographical contexts, in several original languages, and over an extended span of time, thus entailing some degree of measurement error—recent contributions have established methodological standards for this process, as well as demonstrating its validity (Dubrow and Tomescu-Dubrow, 2016; Tomescu-Dubrow and Slomczynski, 2016). We have followed methodological guidelines on *ex-post* survey-data harmonization and made the original question-wording, answer categories and recoding strategy for harmonization of our key

variables available (see Appendix A2). To reduce measurement error and maximize the total number of elections included in our analyses, we have harmonized only a restricted set of variables based on conceptually equivalent data. While we acknowledge that *ex-post* survey-data harmonization has limitations, it nonetheless represents the only opportunity to pool a data resource to analyze the development of the personalization of voting behavior over the necessarily extended period of time.

Our large-scale harmonization effort has resulted in a pooled dataset featuring a total of 109 national election studies conducted over the last six decades in 14 West European parliamentary democracies. The country-case selection for our harmonized dataset followed a set of pre-defined criteria. We restricted our sample to parliamentary democracies, as these constitute the most theoretically relevant cases to test the personalization hypothesis (in presidential systems, leading candidates have always been pivotal). We concentrated on Western European countries due to their longer experience with democratic elections and national election-study projects. Finally, among these countries, we only included those studies that feature party-leader evaluations, as these constitute our key independent variables. To maximize the longitudinal scope of our contribution, we resorted to feeling thermometers of party leaders over measures of leaders' personality traits as the former has now become, by far, "the most frequently included type of question about leaders in election studies" (Bittner, 2011: 16). Notwithstanding occasional differences in question-wording across countries, a large majority of the studies allowed respondents to rate their feelings toward major-party leaders on a 0 (dislike) to 10 (like) scale, thus ensuring cross-national measurement equivalence and controlling for the reliability and face validity of the constructs (see Appendix A2). The full list of election studies included in our pooled dataset is presented in Table 1, while a detailed study description is presented in Appendix A1.

As a preliminary step, we explored the evolution of voter evaluation of party leaders across time. To that purpose, for each election under analysis, we calculated voters' mean evaluation of all leaders featured in the feeling-thermometer battery of each election study. These leaders are selected by the coordinators of national election studies based on their electoral relevance, so we rely on them for the measures plotted in Fig. 1. Note that these mean scores are aggregated at the election level, to account for diverse sample sizes and plot unbiased fit lines. Taking the sample as a whole, there is a statistically significant decrease of about 0.024 units in the mean leader-evaluation scale for each year that passes. This means that, across this 60-year period, on average, mean leader evaluations decreased by about 1.5 points on a 0–10 feeling-thermometer scale. Along the closing decades of the previous century, mean leader evaluations moved progressively from positive (i.e., above the mid-point of the scale) to negative values. In sum, across time, voters have turned more cynical toward party leaders, who have become, on average, generally disliked.

Table 1
List of national election studies included in our pooled dataset.

| Country	Year
Austria	2013
Denmark	1971, 1973,1994, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011
Finland	2003, 2007, 2011, 2015
Germany	1961, 1965, 1972, 1976, 1980, 1983, 1987, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013
Greece	1985, 1989, 1996, 2009, 2012
Ireland	2002, 2007, 2011, 2016
Italy	1985, 1990, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2018
Netherlands	1986, 1989, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2010, 2012
Norway	1981, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013
Portugal	1985, 1993, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2015
Spain	1979, 1986, 1989, 1996, 2000, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2016
Sweden	1982, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010
Switzerland	1995, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015
United Kingdom	1964, 1966, 1970, 1974(2), 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017
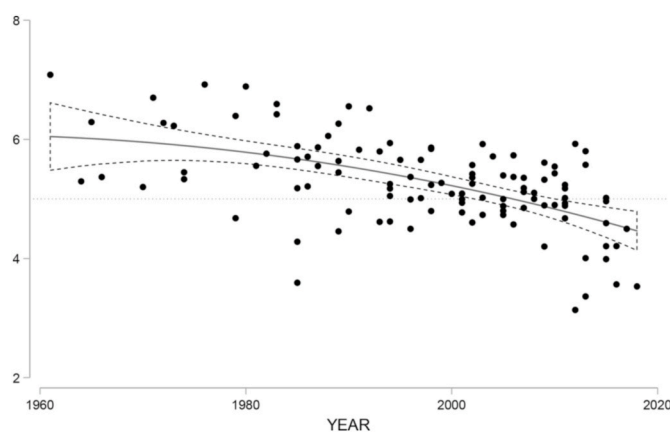
Fig. 1. Mean party leader evaluation by election study.

4. Measurement strategy

The picture that emerges from this preliminary exploration of the data is consistent with a long-term trend of increasing distrust in political parties and their leaders across the Western world (Dalton and Weldon, 2005; van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2016). However, existing analyses of affective polarization suggest that this development is linked to voters' tendency to dislike increasingly those political actors they do *not* support. To assess the extent to which this is actually the case for the countries at hand, we need measures able to tap comparatively voters' feelings toward the leader of their party vs. his or her competitors.

Operationalizing this dynamic in two-party systems is simplified by the dichotomous structure of party competition, opposing evaluations of the in-party-leader to evaluations of a *single* out-party competitor. The procedure most commonly adopted by studies on negative partisanship in the US, for example, concentrates on the growing differences between partisans' evaluations of the in-party and out-party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). We aim to apply the same rationale to measure negative personalization in multi-party parliamentary democracies. While the operationalization of the in-party leader remains equally straightforward in multi-party systems (i.e., the thermometer score assigned to the leader of the party the respondent voted for), their complexity renders more intricate the definition of the out-party. As each party is potentially in dispute with a multitude of other competitors, we cannot isolate a single target of out-party contempt. This obstacle is also tied to potential modeling solutions, as it is also unfeasible to model the main competitor for each in-party, taking all voters into account simultaneously. For this reason, we propose a measurement strategy for out-party-leader evaluations that bears the advantage of considering the entire party-supply available in the election studies. To this purpose, we compute a variable consisting of the mean thermometer evaluation of all the leaders of parties the respondent did *not* vote for. Fig. 2 shows the mean value of our out-party leaders' evaluation variable by election study and contrasts it with the mean value of in-party-leader evaluations over the period of analysis.

Over the nearly six decades of analysis, the evaluations of in-party leaders appear quite stable. In-party leaders remain fairly positively evaluated, scoring, on average, between 7 and 8 points on the 0–10 feeling-thermometer scale. On the contrary, mean evaluations of out-party leaders have decreased more substantially across the same period. On average, evaluations of all other leaders decreased by one point and a half in the feeling-thermometer scale. This also translates into a qualitative change from overall positive mean evaluations to negative ones, since the mean evaluation of all other leaders dropped below the mid-point of the scale in the most recent decades. The more general implications of these trends for our argument can be better understood by comparing these results with Fig. 1. The latter was the
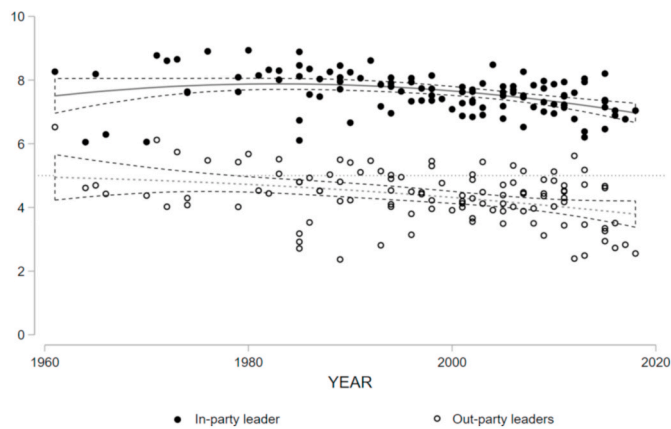
Fig. 2. Mean in-party vs. out-party leader evaluations by election study.

departing point for our inquiry and depicted a steady decline in the mean evaluations of all party leaders from 1961 to 2018. From Fig. 2, we can appreciate that such a decline is almost entirely attributable to the decrease in mean evaluations of out-party leaders. In fact, the two aggregate-level variables correlate at 0.93, revealing an extreme correspondence between the two downward trends.[2]

The aggregate-level evidence from Fig. 2 suggests that voter evaluations of in-party vs. out-party leaders may have developed independently across this period. Such an impression is indeed backed up by the individual-level data. We inspected the cross-time independence of the two variables utilizing an analysis of their correlation controlling for the total number of party leaders rated by each individual and for each election study's sample size. Considering the whole timeframe, the individual-level partial correlation between voters' evaluations of the in-party leader and all other out-party leaders is $-.04$, suggesting a high level of independence. Once we break down the partial correlations by decade, it becomes more apparent that the two variables became increasingly independent across time (1960s: -0.13; 1970s: -0.08; 1980s: -0.10; 1990s: -0.01; 2000s: -0.03; 2010s: -0.01).

This examination supports our original theoretical expectation about the growing independence of the two concepts, motivating a more detailed analysis of their respective relationship with voting behavior. As negative evaluations of opposing party leaders become increasingly independent from positive assessment of one's party leader across time, we can expect both to have a statistically significant effect on vote choice. To assess the extent to which their respective patterns of statistical association have grown over time, we now resort to multivariate longitudinal modeling.

5. Model specification

Our dependent variable (party choice) comprises a varying set of parties available to the electorate across countries, as well as within countries across time. Party-system size and composition are different across European countries. Moreover, all European party systems have experienced compositional changes over the last six decades. This imposes severe constraints on the analysis. Modeling vote choice comparatively and longitudinally remains a challenge in voting-behavior research—one for which there is no unequivocal solution (Alvarez and Nagler, 1998). Empirical analyses of negative voting in multi-party systems propose different methodological approaches to deal with this problem (e.g., multinomial and conditional logit). However, they all boil down to a single solution, invariably requiring an artificial reduction in the party-supply. For example, Mayer (2017)

restricts the analysis to a limited number of party families to estimate a multinomial regression of loyal partisan voting. Medeiros and Noel (2014) restrict the party-supply even further—namely, to the leading competitors on the right and the left of the political spectrum—followed by a series of country logistic regressions opposing vote for the principal right-wing party to vote for the leading left-wing contender. McGregor et al. (2015), instead, dichotomize between respondents' preferred party and least preferred party. To measure negative personalization, however, the exclusion of less electorally relevant or more ideologically extreme parties can prove problematic, as we still know very little about the types of parties potentially more relevant for negative personalization. To be sure, we do not know if voters are more negatively impacted by evaluations of the in-party's direct competitors or, for example, by ideologically antithetical challengers who may threaten the established structure of competition.

A methodological alternative consists in relaxing the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives assumption that is invoked in discrete choice models. This requires modeling the variations in the choice sets. This, in turn, involves the specification of different conditional logit configurations that allow for variation in voters' choice sets by interacting a choice-set indicator with each alternative-specific covariate (e.g., in-party-leader evaluation, ideological proximity). However, these models involve unbearable complexity. In fact, our argument of the diachronic increase in the relative importance of party-leader evaluations on vote choice would also demand a series of triple interactions 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.

On these grounds, we decided to relax the assumption of homogenous choice sets and allow for the consideration of vote choices for any available party.[3] Accordingly, we restructured the dataset into a stacked data matrix by reshaping the data 'wide to long' to achieve observations defined at the individual*party level. In this way, we can jointly consider in the analysis vote choices for all available political parties—as well as the evaluation of all party leaders running in a given election. Furthermore, in this restructured data matrix, we can account for varying choice sets across countries and within countries across time by means of country and election fixed effects. These features have made stacked data matrix analyses increasingly popular in comparative electoral research (van der Eijk et al., 2006) and especially well-suited for longitudinal analyses of leader effects in multi-party systems (Aarts and Blais, 2011; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011; Garzia, 2014). In this design, the dependent variable—vote choice—assumes a binary format instead of a nominal configuration of the several parties running for election in a country in an election year. This binary choice (0: did not vote for this party; 1: voted for this party) in relation to a generic party can be repeated as many times per respondent as the number of parties contesting that specific election. All covariates included in our model are measured likewise at the individual*party level.

We have two key independent variables. The first covariate is the classic feeling thermometer, capturing the extent to which respondents like the leader of each corresponding respondent-party combination. This is the standard measure used to estimate leader effects in the literature. It taps the relationship between the degree of approval of a given leader and the chances of casting a vote for his or her own party, and thus serves as a measure of *positive personalization*. The second covariate is the out-party leaders' evaluation variable consisting of the mean of the evaluations of all other party leaders, apart from the one included in the former variable. This serves as a measure of *negative*

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personalization, as it taps the extent to which voting for a given party is related to voters' negative feelings toward the leaders of the other parties. Take as an example the case of a fictional voter in a three-party system in Table 2.

This voter attributes a higher score to the leader of the party voted for (Party 1). As such, the relationship between the party-leader thermometer score (i.e., positive personalization) and party choice is positive. The calculation of the mean value for out-party leaders also varies across stacks. Its value is lower for Party 1 (i.e., respondent likes the leader of the party voted for better than his or her competitors) than for the other parties (i.e., respondent likes overall better the leader of other parties than those of Parties 2 and 3 respectively). Since our negative personalization variable is a simple average of all (but the corresponding party-respondent combination) leader scores on the feeling thermometer, it uses the same scale of the original feeling thermometer, ranging from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like). That is, the more negatively other leaders are evaluated (i.e., the lower the mean score on the negative personalization variable), the more likely is a respondent to vote for the party of that party-respondent combination. On these bases, the relationship between negative personalization and party choice is expected to be negative.

Our multivariate model also controls for the confounding effect potentially stemming from voters' negativity towards the parties of the opposing leaders (which could drive in turn negativity towards leaders themselves). To this purpose, comparative analyses of negative partisanship have so far relied on a combination of two sets of variables, namely, an item tapping the parties for which respondents state they would never vote for; and a battery of party feeling thermometers, used to capture below mid-point scores given to political parties (Medeiros and Noel, 2014; Caruana et al., 2015; Mayer, 2017). However, the simultaneous availability of this set of variables is quite rare in national election studies. From the 109 studies composing our sample, only 28 include both these variables. Measuring negative partisanship in these terms would thus imply a dramatic reduction in sample size and in the comparative longitudinal scope of the analysis, which would be restricted to 7 countries and less than two decades (2000–2017). Furthermore, this limitation in our dataset cannot be overcome by resorting to alternative comparative longitudinal data sources, who also lack the necessary variables.

Preserving a comparative longitudinal focus under these analytical constraints requires striking a balance between measurement homogeneity and data availability, without sacrificing conceptual validity. In the impossibility of using the standard measurement strategy, we indirectly control for negative partisanship using positive partisanship and ideological antagonism, which have been consistently confirmed as the two key components of this concept. On the one hand, we know that negative partisanship is fueled by an affective component towards the in-group, motivating partisan animosity towards an out-group (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Therefore, we account for this component with a variable tapping respondents' strength of closeness to a political party (0. Not close to a given party; 1. Only a sympathizer; 2. Fairly close; 3. Very close). On the other hand, previous research clarifies that negative partisanship is not the mere bipolar of positive partisanship. As Caruana and colleagues highlight, "negative attitudes may be held alone without necessarily entailing a corresponding positive attitude on the opposing side" (2015: 774). As such, apart from the affective component

accounted for by positive partisanship, negative partisanship also entails a cognitive dimension composed by respondents' ideological antagonism towards political parties (Medeiros and Noel, 2014: 1026). We measure this cognitive component through 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 11-point scale.[4]

6. Results

With this set of variables, we proceed to analyze their respective relationship with vote choice utilizing a multi-level logistic regression model with fixed effects at the election-study level to account for unobserved heterogeneity across surveys as a function of different sample sizes and election-specific factors (i.e., geographical and temporal variation). We compute clustered robust standard errors at the party-respondent level to account for heteroscedasticity within individuals resulting from the inclusion of multiple observations per respondent in the stacked data matrix framework. The results are presented in Table 3.

The first model only features the basic leader feeling thermometer, which bears a significant positive relationship with vote choice. In congruence with the literature on the personalization of voting behavior, we observe a positive correlation between party-leader scores on the feeling thermometer and the probability to vote for their party. In the second step, we introduce the mean leader evaluation of out-party leaders, that is, our negative personalization measure. Recall that since negative personalization is coded from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like), we expect a negative association with vote choice, whereby lower evaluations of other leaders increase the likelihood to vote for a given party. Both variables hold a significant association with the vote of a similar magnitude. This result confirms our expectation that negative personalization has an independent relationship with the vote, even when controlling for positive personalization. Importantly, such estimates are robust to the inclusion of the party identification and ideology controls in the third model. This suggests that negative personalization is not the product of stronger party identifications, which could prompt negativity toward political foes. Likewise, it also asserts that negative personalization is independent of ideological divergences between voters and the leaders' parties. As argued before, ideological antagonism is a strong motivator of negative partisanship (McGregor et al., 2015).

In the full model, we interact our personalization variables with the election year (rather than a more encompassing time measure) to provide a fine-grained picture of their longitudinal relationship with vote choice. Both interaction coefficients are statistically significant. However, the magnitude of negative personalization's interaction term displays an over-two-fold increase compared to that of positive personalization. We should also note that, based on their main effects, positive personalization was much more substantial than negative personalization at the beginning of the timeframe. However, based on an interpretation of the interaction coefficients, we can anticipate that the statistical impact of the latter increases substantially more over time.

To illustrate this reasoning, in Fig. 3, we plot the average marginal effects from the cross-time interactions of both measures of personalization. To ease interpretation of the plot, we reverse the sign of the negative personalization variable. While the average marginal effect of both variables on the vote increases across time, the growth is far more

Table 2
Measuring party leader evaluations in a stacked data matrix.

	Vote Choice	Leader Thermometer	Positive Personalization	Negative Personalization
Party 1	1> (Yes)	8	8	3
Party 2	0 (No)	4	4	5
Party 3	0 (No)	2	2	6

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[4] For the purposes of additional robustness tests, we have also defined a variable tapping the mean ideological distance between the respondent and all other parties beyond the one at hand in each given party-respondent combination. Inclusion of this variable in our statistical models bears virtually no effect on the parameters of interest. In turn, this allows us to rule out the possibility that negative personalization is driven by increasing ideological distance over time between respondents and the parties they do not support.

Table 3
Positive personalization, negative personalization, and vote choice.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Positive personalization	5.501***	5.901***	4.217***	3.303***
	(.016)	(.017)	(.023)	(.093)
Negative personalization	–	−4.793***	−3.841***	−1.980***
		(.017)	(.026)	(.098)
Partisanship	–	–	3.584***	3.580***
			(.020)	(.019)
Ideology	–	–	−3.592***	−3.583***
			(.028)	(.028)
Positive personalization*Year	–	–	–	.022***
				(.002)
Negative personalization*Year	–	–	–	-.047***
				(.002)
Year	.003***	-.006***	-.013***	-.005***
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.001)
Constant	−4.469***	−2.421***	−1.159***	−1.530***
	(.028)	(.021)	(.038)	(.068)
Log likelihood	−348536.33	−319404.55	−165978.27	−165810.07
Wald χ2	160452.77	179753.75	98281.91	99190.15
AIC	697104.7	638843.1	331994.5	331662.1
BIC	697293.3	639043.5	332211.3	331901.8
N(respondents)	186,857	185,590	126,248	126,248
N(observations)	975,840	974,573	666,994	666,994

Note: Cell entries are HLM regression coefficients on a stacked data matrix. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered robust at the respondent-level. All models include year and country fixed effects. Party identification was recoded into a dichotomous measure (0. Not close to a given party/Only a sympathizer; 1. Fairly close/Very close). All other variables have been rescaled to 0–1. ***p < .001.
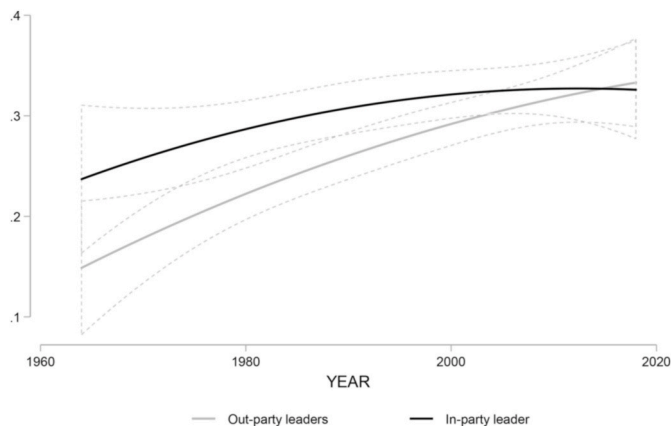

Fig. 3. Cross-time impact of positive and negative personalization: average marginal effects.

pronounced concerning negative personalization—up to the point that it now appears as important as positive personalization for vote choice.

These findings carry two fundamental implications. First, they confirm the ever-present but often empirically unsubstantiated claim that leader evaluations are an increasingly relevant driver of voting behavior. The personalization of voting behavior implies a longitudinal growth in the impact of voters' evaluations of leaders on the voting-decision process. The findings of this study, anchored in the most extended timeframe and broadest set of countries used to test the personalization-of-voting-behavior hypothesis, offer conclusive results to a literature that has long struggled with mixed findings stemming from insufficient data. Second, we reveal an entirely novel dimension of leader effects by uncovering the importance of negative personalization. Not only do we show that this new element has a strong relationship with vote choice independently of positive personalization, but we also demonstrate that the magnitude of this association significantly grows across time—even more so than the standard (positive) personalization effects measured through feeling thermometers. These results confirm the hypotheses put forward under our negative personalization theory. The personalization of voting behavior appears, thus, composed of two types of leader effects: positive and negative. However, when we concentrate on the longitudinal argument, negative leader effects seem to play the bigger part in cross-time personalization.

7. Robustness

The results of the multivariate analysis were subjected to a thorough set of robustness tests tackling, in turn, model specification, measurement strategy, case selection and idiosyncratic variations in the party-supply across countries and elections.

7.1. Model specification

Our results could be biased by potential heterogeneity in the decision-making process at the individual level. We have thus re-estimated our multi-level model with an additional random-intercept at the individual level to account for the double-nested structure of our data (i.e., respondent*party combinations nested within respondents nested within elections). Results are presented in column 1 of Table 4 and highlight virtually no variance at the individual level. The results concerning our measures of positive and negative personalization remain robust to this three-level specification.

Table 4
Robustness to model specification and measurement strategy.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	3-level HLM	Weighted HLM	Aarts & Blais
Positive personalization	3.357***	3.243***	2.262***
	(.091)	(.091)	(.063)
Negative personalization	−2.376***	−2.353***	-.267* (.107)
	(.124)	(.112)	
Partisanship	3.589***	3.552***	3.700***
	(.017)	(.018)	(.017)
Ideology	−3.608***	−3.571***	−3.845***
	(.028)	(.028)	(.027)
Positive personalization*Year	.023*** (.002)	.023*** (.002)	-.002 (.002)
Negative personalization*Year	-.040*** (.003)	-.040*** (.003)	-.030*** (.003)
Year	-.011** (.004)	-.011* (.004)	-.004 (.004)
Constant	−1.242**	−1.117**	−1.008* (.420)
	(.404)	(.392)	
Var(election)	.115 (.018)	.107 (.017)	.130 (.021)
Var(respondent)	.000 (.000)	–	–
Log likelihood	−164077.01	−160893.14	−171758.22
Wald χ2	107862.15	108229.88	107057.47
AIC	328198.0	321830.3	343560.4
BIC	328449.1	322081.2	343811.5
N(respondents)	126,248	126,246	126,582
N(observations)	666,994	662,667	667,328

Note: ***p < .001 **p < .01 *p < .05.

7.2. Measurement strategy

The relative impact of leader evaluations on vote choice could be affected by the electoral relevance of their respective parties. For example, voters can strongly dislike leaders of fringe parties, but if these parties have little chance of making it into power, such negative attitudes may be relatively indifferent to their voting calculus. Hence, we adapted the measure previously used for negative personalization to take into account the electoral relevance of each party. Instead of a simple mean, we weighted the thermometer scores of leaders by their party vote share in each respective election. The results are presented in column 2 of Table 4 and confirm the robustness of our findings to the consideration of parties' electoral relevance.

We also consider alternative operationalizations of our positive and negative personalization variables. Aarts and Blais (2011) operationalize positivity and negativity by first recoding the original leader thermometer scores to a −5 (most negative) to +5 (most positive) interval, in which 0, the central point, is equal to a neutral evaluation. Next, they build two new variables regarding the cut-off point determined at the central point of the scale. Negativity varies from 0 (not negative at all) to 5 (very negative) and captures those instances in which respondents ascribe a negative score to a party leader, i.e., below 5. Conversely, positivity varies from 0 (not positive at all) to 5 (very positive) and captures those instances in which respondents ascribe a positive score to the party leader, i.e., above five. This way, the negativity variable is used to measure "by how much the inclination to vote for a party decreases when one moves from a neutral rating to a more negative rating, and the positivity variable indicates how much that inclination increases when one moves to a more positive rating" (Aarts and Blais, 2011: 172). We relied on their alternative measurement strategy and re-estimated our statistical model. The results presented in column 3 of Table 4 confirm the observed cross-time increase in the relationship between negative personalization and vote choice.

7.3. Case selection

We performed Leave-One-Out Cross-Validation (LOOCV) tests by re-estimating our model, alternatively excluding countries from the sample to inspect whether potential outliers could bias the results. The
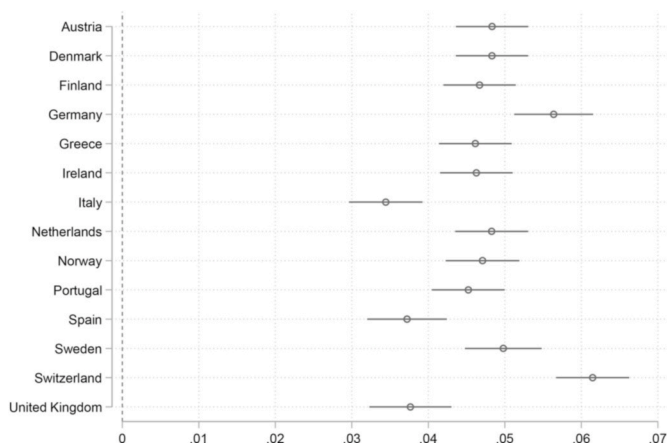

Fig. 4. Negative personalization across time: One-by-one exclusion of country cases.

identified negative personalization trend is robust to case selection, as shown in Fig. 4 below.

7.4. Party-system features

The results could also be due to the expansion of the party-supply over time. Our dataset reflects a cross-time increase in the number of relevant parties/leaders considered in the respective national election studies.[5] Growth in the number of adversary parties could affect the overtime relationship between negative personalization and vote choice both ways. On the one hand, a higher number of competitors might provide a structural incentive for disliking a larger number of them. On the other hand, a larger choice set may dilute voters' negativity towards the main opponent of their own party. To address this issue, we have re-estimated our model by progressively excluding more congested elections. We begin by excluding from the analysis the most congested election, i.e., the Dutch election of 2006, featuring 12 party stacks. We then excluded all elections featuring 11 or more parties, then those with 10 or more, and so on. The interaction coefficient between out-party-leader evaluations and time remains negative and significant regardless of the density of the party-supply in the elections under analysis (see Table 5).

Finally, the results could be driven by the disproportionate weight of selected party families. For example, disliked parties/leaders may recurrently belong to specific party families or, alternatively, more negative voters could be concentrated in a particular party family. For this reason, we estimated a series of HLM logistic regressions modeling the vote for parties belonging to each of the leading party families. This alternative specification fits an unstacked data structure, and thus bears the additional advantage of allowing the inclusion of socio-demographic controls (i.e., age, gender, levels of educational attainment and interest in politics). The results are plotted in Fig. 5 and show that out-party-leader evaluations have turned into an increasingly more influential driver of electoral choice for all main party families.

8. Discussion and conclusions

Utilizing a comparative and longitudinal focus, our empirical assessment of the negative personalization hypothesis brings forward several novel insights. Theoretically, we contribute to delimiting the concept of negative personalization as applied to voting behavior research. We propose an updated theoretical outlook on the

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[5] The mean number of parties included in the 1960s surveys equals 2.45 while the same figure rises monotonically up to 5.59 in the most recent decade.

Table 5
Positive and negative personalization across time, by maximum number of parties in stack.

Max N (parties)	Positive personalization *Year	Negative personalization *Year	N (elections)	N (countries)
12	.02***	-.05***	84	14
11	.02***	-.05***	83	14
10	.02***	-.05***	81	14
9	.02***	-.05***	78	14
8	.02***	-.05***	74	14
7	.02***	-.04***	63	14
6	.02***	-.04***	49	11
5	.03***	-.03***	41	9
4	.04***	-.03***	26	5
3	.09***	-.08***	18	3
2	.05	-.05*	3	2

Note: ***p < .001 *p < .05.

personalization of politics thesis, by conceptualizing the impact of voters' evaluations of party leaders on the vote not only from a positive preconception. An extensive body of research has already shown that leader evaluations exert an impact on voting behavior. Besides adding more definitive evidence on the long-debated cross-time increase in leader effects on the vote, this study adds to an understing of the two-fold nature of such effects, which can also be negative.

Our data extend the breadth of countries and the timeframe considered by the scarce cross-sectional works on negativity and voting behavior. Our findings confirm the existence of a statistically significant and robust relationship between negative party-leader evaluations on vote choice. Furthermore, the results demonstrate a sizable growth in the impact of negative personalization across time, now of a magnitude that compares to that exerted by in-party-leader evaluations. This finding constitutes a central innovation adding to the personalization of politics literature, which has for long assumed that the growing centrality of party leaders in voters' decision-making process stems (only) from the increasing likeability of political leaders, substantiated into charismatic leader–follower relationships (Barisione, 2009; Garzia, 2011).

Academics and pundits alike have long debated the normative implications of the personalization of politics. Some worried that centering politics—and voting behavior more concretely—around political leaders, their images and personalities, could entail a deterioration in the quality of the democratic process (Page, 1978). A shift from a party-centered, ideologically grounded form of decision-making for voting into one that is more individualized—in which evaluations of party leaders become a central determinant of vote choice—appears to go against the traditional ideals of party-based democratic representation. Classic political science accounts thus cast voting decisions that rely on policy-based issues as morally superior to and more normatively desirable than those based on candidate images (Carmines and Stimson, 1980).

On the other hand, political psychology literature maintains that candidate assessments can be employed by voters as low-cost informational devices to make policy-related inferences about future job performance (Miller et al., 1986; McCurley and Mondak, 1995), particularly in situations of upcoming uncertainty (Popkin, 1991). Furthermore, as the mobilizing potential of political parties fades away, leaders' ability to speak to the least predisposed to be politically involved, maintaining a certain level of political engagement and participation may work to the benefit of the democratic process, reaching to individuals who would otherwise retreat from politics at all (Silva et al., 2019).

The conclusions of this study speak directly to this debate. The importance of negativity in voters' evaluations of political leaders—translating directly into voting-behavior patterns—appears more congruent with a setting of generalized affective polarization. Such a setting anticipates a type of decision-making grounded not necessarily on *choosing the best* political alternative but rather on *avoiding the worst*. Voters tend to react to the surrounding socio-political environment. An increasingly confrontational style marked by negative campaigning, assisted by partisan media outlets, and fostered more recently by social media bubbles has characterized electoral contests over the last decades. Negative patterns in political communication may have resonated with voters, tainting the rationale underlying their voting-behavior patterns. If the quality of democratic representation was questionable under the assumption that citizens cast a vote *for* a given political leader, such
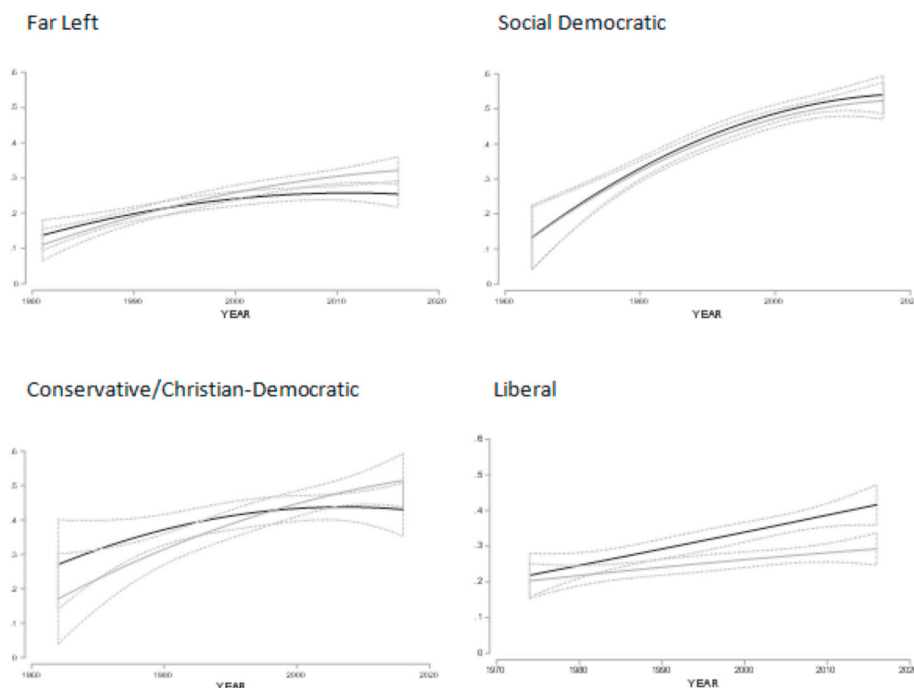

Fig. 5. Positive and negative personalization across time, by party family.

concerns are even more justifiable if citizens vote primarily *against* a given candidate. Contrary to the more immediate expectation that the personalization of politics might be the fruit of more effective political marketing, savvy campaigners and political parties' investment in tailoring candidates to their constituents' preferences, there seems to be a darker and perhaps more significant side to the personalization process.

The findings of this study open up a new research agenda on the behavioral dimension of personalization. Having demonstrated the theoretical relevance and the empirical foundations of the concept of negative personalization, much remains unknown about its potential causes, as well as the conditions under which it is most likely to occur. Further research should seek to identify the factors driving negative personalization, to provide micro-level insights into the segments of the electorate more prone to base voting choices on negative considerations and generate macro-level evidence of the types of parties and leaders benefiting the most from this peculiar personalization pattern. Ideally, prospective studies will draw on panel data to address issues of causality that our current longitudinal large-scale harmonization approach is unable to answer. A better understanding of all these aspects could offer, in turn, a deeper understanding of the personalization of politics and its long-term consequences for democratic representation in the age of disintermediation.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Acknowledgement

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102300.

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