

# Personalization of Party Politics? Reevaluating the Role of Leaders in Voting Decisions

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## Abstract

The decline of party loyalties and the spread of television have led to the concerning expectation of increased leader relevance in voters' decisions. Using a large collection of national election studies over the last six decades, I find that there is no increase in leader importance over time, but a drop in party relevance in the 1990s followed by a gradual party comeback. I find little support for media affecting this trend. Instead, I find support for the trend aligning with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist ideology, which left parties with-out a vital cleavage on which to structure electoral competition, the decline of traditional class cleavages, and the subsequent changes in party strategy. My findings suggest that behavioral personalization is much less pronounced, a cautionary interpretation of the role of media, and a larger role for issue politics in voting decisions.

## Keywords

personalization of politics, political parties, political leaders, elections, voting behavior, political cleavages, behavioral personalization, media effects

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In elections, citizens delegate governing power by expressing their preferences on a ballot. In doing so, voters must choose the party they like most while also considering the party platform and party leader they prefer (Blais, 2011). How much do leaders weigh in this choice? Since leader evaluations influence voter decisions, analyzing their relevance is an important question in itself. This issue gains even more significance given the potential implications of leaders' increasing influence for the quality of democratic representation.

A focus on leaders' characteristics may not necessarily reflect the substantive issues at stake in an election. Personalistic and unqualified demagogues may supplant programmatic platforms. Charisma may contribute to policy efficiency, but it does not necessarily translate into meaningful disagreement over socioeconomic or other critical issues that elections are meant to resolve, and it may lead to democratic breakdown (Hollyer et al., 2023). Even if leader evaluations are partly political (Huber, 2015), politically irrelevant factors such as a leader's appearance and family life significantly affect voter assessments (Hayes et al., 2014; Lenz & Lawson, 2011; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2011). The distorting influence of political leaders has long been a concern in democratic theory, troubling scholars in different forms over time (for a recent discussion, see Achen & Bartels, 2017).

The most prominent theoretical expectation regarding leader relevance is the behavioral personalization of the public, in which leaders have gained increasing importance for vote choice relative to parties (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Three main factors contribute to this trend. Institution-ally, society has undergone a process of individualization that prioritizes individuals and leaders over groups and parties (Bennett, 2012; Karvonen, 2010). In the political sphere, party identification and membership have declined (Dalton, 2000; Schmitt & Holmberg, 1995; Wattenberg, 1994). As parties have become less central, other factors, such as leaders, have gained prominence (Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2014). Second, the increasing importance of media, particularly television, has amplified leader visibility in political life (Esser & Stromback, 2014; Mughan, 2000). Television, in particular, favors leaders over parties by giving them greater space and attention (Swanson & Mancini, 1996; Wattenberg, 1994). Third, parties themselves have increasingly emphasized their leaders in political communication and electoral campaigns, often presenting them as the central figure of the party's message and identity (Kriesi, 2012; Renwick & Pilet, 2016).

Given the strong theoretical expectation of the individualization of politics, the empirical literature has primarily focused on identifying linear trends in the relevance of parties and leaders for vote choice. This approach would be sufficient if strong empirical confirmation of these expectations were found. That is, if studies consistently showed an increasing emphasis on leaders over parties. However, the existing literature presents mixed findings. For example, Quinlan and McAllister (2022) and Daoust et al. (2019) find no trend in leader

relevance, [Garzia et al. \(2020a\)](#) report an increase, while [Aardal and Binder \(2011\)](#) and [Nadeau and Nevitte \(2013\)](#) argue for a decline. These inconsistencies already suggest that additional factors may influence party and leader relevance in vote choice.

In this paper, I analyze the relative importance of leaders versus parties for vote choice in three parts. First, I estimate the time trend in the relative importance of leaders and parties over the past six decades. I assemble one of the largest collections of national election studies ever used in this context, covering 18 countries, 122 elections, and over 170,000 unique respondents. I depart from existing literature by investigating possible non-monotonic shifts in party and leader relevance and by employing a multinomial choice model of utility maximization, which reflects the decision-making context voters face and accounts for unobserved and observed heterogeneity at the country, election, and party levels, factors that have not been jointly considered in previous studies.

I find that, overall, there is no significant monotonic trend in the relative importance of parties and leaders, nor is there an increasing emphasis on leaders. Instead, there is a significant decline in party importance in the 1990s, the most substantial shift in the party versus leader balance in the past six decades, followed by a gradual resurgence of party influence. Contrary to the expectations of behavioral personalization, leader influence is no stronger in the 2010s than it was in the 1960s or at its lowest point in the 1980s. Moreover, direct leader influence is, and remains, small compared to party influence.

Second, I examine whether media use, particularly television, might explain the observed variation in the relative importance of parties and leaders. I find a correlation between television use and party influence, consistent with the expectation that television increases leader effects relative to party relevance. However, the data show a decline in television use in the 1990s, which, if anything, would have increased rather than decreased party relevance during that period. I also explore whether television influences party and leader relevance through changes in voter perceptions of them, and whether the combined effect of television and newspaper use could explain the observed trends. I find that media use may account for at most one-tenth of the 1990s drop in party versus leader relevance.

Third, I investigate what might have instead driven the changes in the effect of parties and leaders on voting decisions over time. Recognizing that voting behavior over six decades is undoubtedly shaped by a wide range of political, social, and cultural factors, I find that the main shifts in party and leader relevance align with major historical events, mainly within Europe, and subsequent changes in party strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The decline in party influence in the 1990s follows the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communist ideology as a viable alternative to the liberal economic model. The disappearance of communism left parties without one of

the most significant programmatic divides, and voters had fewer reasons to vote along party lines. The data align with historical events of the time, when one of the most fundamental societal cleavages, the divide between communism and liberalism, suddenly disappeared. Many political actors came to view economic and political liberalism as the only legitimate model of governance. For others, disillusionment with the socialist bloc led to weaker support for leftist policy alternatives and decreased political engagement.

During this period, many parties, particularly communist parties, either disappeared or saw their intellectual and electoral support drastically diminished, further weakening party-based voting. Differences between parties were either rendered irrelevant as communist parties lost credibility or were downplayed in the minds of voters. Whereas voters had previously placed significant weight on programmatic differences, these distinctions became less meaningful.

A Third Way emerged as an alternative to both traditional socialism and neoliberal capitalism (Giddens, 2013). Social democratic parties, which became increasingly dominant, shifted toward the center, abandoning state-led economic planning and adopting market-friendly policies, thereby reducing the ideological gap between left and right. As parties ceased to offer clear programmatic alternatives, leaders became an important differentiating factor.

Parties increasingly relied on popular and charismatic leaders to convey their new ideological message. For example, Tony Blair in the United Kingdom centered Labour around his personal leadership rather than its socialist heritage, rebranding it as New Labour, while Gerhard Schroder in Germany relied heavily on his personal appeal in electoral campaigns. As a result, charismatic leadership gained importance relative to party platforms.

More broadly, this period coincided with the decline of traditional class cleavages, as described by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), and the emergence of new political issues that had weaker connections to party support (Franklin et al., 1992; Inglehart, 1971). This change is also compatible with the decline in party influence in the 1990s, although the transformation of cleavage structures had already begun earlier.

Following this decline, we observe a slow but steady recovery of party influence, suggesting a possible reorganization of the party system around new cleavages. Left parties, in particular, became increasingly pragmatic. The most prominent example is the tenure of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, during which Labour fully embraced market-friendly policies while maintaining social justice commitments. Over time, parties realigned along the left-right divide, reasserting redistribution, taxation, and social welfare as key programmatic differences.

Despite the initial shock of the Eastern Bloc's collapse, societies soon realized that fundamental political disagreements persisted, not only over classic issues of redistribution and fairness, but also over emerging issues such

as environmental protection and immigration, which increasingly overlapped with traditional ideological divides. The recovery of party influence suggests that, despite perceptions to the contrary, meaningful ideological differences remained and became more salient once the initial post-Cold War disruption subsided. Today, parties appear to have regained their relevance, perhaps not to their peak levels, but at least to the levels observed in the 1960s and 1970s.

I find multiple pieces of evidence compatible with the time trend being driven by historical events and the associated changes in party structure. First, I find that most of the variation in the relative influence of parties over leaders is due to changes in party influence rather than changes in leader influence. This suggests that explaining the time trend requires focusing primarily on party-related factors rather than leader-related ones. Second, I find that the decline in party relevance in the 1990s was significantly larger among left-leaning voters. These voters were most likely to experience party detachment, given that they had been closest to the communist parties that lost their defining ideological foundation. Third, I find that Germany experienced a larger decline in party relevance in the 1990s than other countries. Germany is the only country that had been physically divided along the communist-liberal cleavage and where the experience of National Socialism shifted the decline in cleavage-based voting to the 1990s (Franklin et al., 1992). Fourth, I find that the relevance of the left-right scale was likely lower in the 1980s and 1990s than before. Additionally, the 1990s witnessed significant transformations in party issues. For example, the two most important contemporary categories in comparative party manifestos, environmental protection and social justice, showed some of their largest aggregate increase in relevance during the 1990s.

While this paper highlights the collapse of the Cold War and the subsequent reorganization of cleavage-based politics as a central element, this period also featured other significant political and social transformations that may have contributed to changes in voting behavior. These include declining levels of political trust and civic engagement (Dalton, 2004; Putnam, 2000), as well as the rise of post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1997). Rather than offering a comprehensive account of all these shifts, the paper focuses on the post-Cold War cleavage change because of its direct link to programmatic party competition, which is central to explaining variation in the relative relevance of parties and leaders for voters. Still, these broad societal trends may have amplified or shaped the timing and magnitude of the changes observed.

Substantively, my results show that rising behavioral personalization is perhaps less pronounced than what institutional and media personalization may lead one to expect. Just because institutional and media personalization in politics has increased does not necessarily mean it has translated to the same extent on the demand side of politics, which is, in how much leaders affect voting decisions. Certainly, leaders do influence voting decisions. However, their direct impact remains secondary to that of parties and does not show an

increase over time. These results support a minimalist interpretation of the behavioral personalization story (e.g., Aardal & Binder, 2011; Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Dentler et al., 2024; Dinas, 2008; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002; Quinlan & McAllister, 2022).

The results also suggest a cautionary interpretation of the role of media, particularly television, in behavioral personalization. While media can influence the personalization of voting behavior, media use alone cannot explain the main changes in the relative importance of parties and leaders in voting decisions over the last six decades. The fact that shifts in the relative importance of parties and leaders align with expectations based on major historical events and subsequent changes in party strategies strengthens this interpretation, and suggests that issue- or cleavage-based politics still plays a crucial role in voting decisions (Franklin et al., 1992; Inglehart, 1971; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

## Parties Versus Leaders

One of the most prominent expectations regarding the effect of parties and leaders on voting behavior has been the individualization or personalization of politics, in which leaders play an increasingly important role in vote choice compared to parties (Karvonen, 2010; Swanson & Mancini, 1996). This trend aligns with the decline of party identification and partisan ties (Dalton, 2000; Schmitt & Holmberg, 1995) and a broader individualization of social life driven by modernization, which emphasizes the individual over the group (Karvonen, 2010), leading to a decrease in group identification and a corresponding increase in personal values (Bennett, 2012). Leaders have also expanded their influence over policy, aligning parties more closely with their policy positions (Scarrow et al., 2000).

The personalization of politics operates across three domains: institutional, media, and behavioral (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). Institutional personalization refers to formal changes in political rules and procedures that enhance the role of individuals at the expense of parties or collective actors. These include, for example, the direct election of prime ministers or presidents in systems that previously relied on parliamentary appointment (Mughan, 2000; Poguntke & Webb, 2005), and electoral reforms that allow or encourage voters to choose individual candidates rather than party lists, such as open-list systems, preference voting, or candidate-centered ballots (Pilet & Cross, 2014; Renwick & Pilet, 2016). Within political parties, the adoption of more inclusive leadership selection methods, such as primary elections or member-wide votes, can also increase personalization by reinforcing the centrality of the leader within the party structure (Poguntke et al., 2016; Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

As noted by Poguntke and Webb (2005), these trends suggest a growing concentration of power in individual leaders even in parliamentary systems. However, others have emphasized the constraining role of executive format and separation of powers, arguing that true presidentialization, as a shift in the balance between parties and leaders, depends primarily on whether a system is presidential, semi-presidential, or parliamentary (Samuels & Shugart, 2010, 2014). In this perspective, institutional context shapes the extent and meaning of personalization, and the mechanisms at work differ across regime types.

Media personalization refers to the intensified focus on individual candidates and leaders rather than parties or cabinets. Media have assumed a larger role in the political space (Esser & Stromback, 2014; Mughan, 2000). Television, in particular, plays a crucial role because it more easily presents individuals than complex organizations or ideas (Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Televised debates, photo opportunities, and personalized interviews have become widespread (McAllister, 2011; Swanson & Mancini, 1996), and the frequency of candidate mentions in election coverage has increased (Dalton et al., 2000). Electoral campaigns have increasingly centered on candidates, with voters focusing less on policies and more on the leaders who will implement them (Wattenberg, 1994).

In addition to these domains, the literature also distinguishes between centralized and decentralized personalization, depending on whether personalization is concentrated in a single leader or dispersed among many individual politicians (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). This article focuses specifically on centralized personalization, examining the role of national party leaders in shaping vote choice.

Despite strong evidence that leaders have gained importance over parties in institutions and the media, the analysis of behavioral personalization, the extent to which leaders have become more influential in determining voting behavior compared to parties, has yielded mixed findings.<sup>2</sup> So much so, that some scholars suggest that the individualization of voting behavior may be lagging behind the broader individualization of politics and society (Rahat & Kenig, 2018; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007), and a *leaders minimalist school* argues that the leader effect may be limited and primarily indirect.

Early analyses of behavioral personalization include King (2002), who examined the number of elections determined by leaders versus those that were not, finding no significant change over time. Poguntke and Webb (2005) reported anecdotal evidence suggesting a possible increase in leaders' influence but found no systematic time trends. Other studies analyzing leader effects election by election reveal fluctuations over time without a consistent pattern (Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010). Some research has interacted leaders' effects with time, generally finding no change but with some evidence of increasing influence in certain countries (Garzia, 2014; Wagner & Weßels, 2012). A few studies even suggest

a possible decline in the impact of leaders on voting behavior over time (Aardal & Binder, 2011; Nadeau & Nevitte, 2013). Similarly, studies focused on individual countries also report mixed results (Bittner, 2018; Gidengil & Blais, 2016; Hayes, 2009; Lobo & Ferreira da Silva, 2018).

The variation in findings may stem from differences in the countries studied, the time periods examined, and the methodologies employed. Many studies analyze small sets of countries over non-overlapping, short timeframes and use diverse statistical methods, ranging from simple correlations between leader likability and vote choice to binomial logistic regressions, which capture different aspects of voters' decision-making processes. Additionally, these studies may be biased toward finding null results because they account for heterogeneity at the country, election, and party levels by conducting separate analyses for each. This approach limits the ability to detect time trends, as it does not consider all existing variance simultaneously.

More recent research has examined larger sets of countries and extended time periods. Daoust et al. (2019) and Quinlan and McAllister (2022) adopt a different approach by focusing on incongruent voters, those who prefer a leader from a party that is not their most liked. Both studies analyze data starting in 1996 and find no significant time trends. While their approach is insightful for assessing trends over time by concentrating on voters who must compromise between party and leader preferences, its generalizability is limited because it excludes the many voters who align with their most-liked party and leader. Garzia et al. (2020a) compare leader likability with party closeness, finding a linear increase in the former and a decrease in the latter. Their study is innovative in emphasizing that leader effects should be assessed relative to party effects in understanding voting decisions, an insight that is central to the approach I adopt in this paper. Still, comparing likability across all leaders with identification for only one party may omit crucial information, as I discuss in the next section.

## Data

I compile national election studies from four of the most authoritative sources. In chronological order, I use the European Voter Database (Thomassen, 2005), which includes six European countries from 1961 to 2001, the Leadership Project dataset (Aarts et al., 2013), which adds two non-European countries from 1968 to 2001, The True European Voter dataset, which collects European national election studies from 1961 to 2013 (Schmitt, 2021), and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Modules 1–5 second advanced release (CSES, 2019, 2020), covering elections from 1996 to 2019.<sup>3</sup>

Conditional on data availability, I include all lower house elections in parliamentary systems across the four datasets, excluding elections that do not present a multinomial choice (i.e., when only two parties compete), elections

with binomial voting, parallel voting, and compulsory primaries, elections in countries classified as not free by [Freedom House \(2020\)](#) elections where more than half of respondents do not report their party choice, and cases where coding refers to coalitions rather than parties. I include overlapping elections in the four collections only once, as they almost always draw survey data from the same original national election study.<sup>4</sup> The [Supplemental Material A](#) provides a list of countries, elections, and data sources in the aggregated dataset. In total, the dataset spans over six decades (1961–2019), covering 18 countries, 122 elections, and more than 170,000 unique respondents. This dataset is among the largest used in studies of behavioral personalization, making it well suited for analyzing potential nonlinear time trends and reducing bias from uncontrolled heterogeneity.

My main dependent variable is self-declared vote choice in post-election surveys. My main independent variables are leader and party feeling thermometers. Respondents were asked to rate how much they like the major parties and leaders competing in the election on the same scale, typically from 0 to 10.<sup>5</sup> This allows for a direct comparison of the effects of party and leader appreciations on voting behavior. The likability questions for leaders and parties were designed so that, despite being collected in different countries and national election studies and conducted in the respondents' original language, they maintain equivalent substantive meaning.

Previous studies of behavioral personalization have sometimes used the most liked party versus the most liked leader as independent variables. My measure is analogous to theirs but extends preferences over parties and leaders to all the most relevant parties in each election. Other studies of behavioral personalization have compared leader likability to party identification rather than party likability, arguing that party identification effectively captures voters' attachment to parties.

However, if leader likability adequately reflects voter preferences for leaders, there is no reason not to believe that party likability similarly captures voter preferences for parties.

This raises the question of what party identification measures and how it differs from party (and leader) likability. The concept of party identification is based on the idea that individuals develop a psychological attachment to a political party, which in turn influences their electoral choices ([Campbell et al., 1954](#)). Partisanship is a form of social identity ([Greene, 1999](#); [Huddy, 2001](#)). Its most distinctive feature is its temporal stability, reflecting a durable orientation in political identification ([Weisberg & Rusk, 1970](#)). The idea of partisanship was developed in the US as a central element of political identity ([Campbell, 1980](#)). Early scholars questioned the direct translatability of the same concept to multiparty systems, where party systems and political loyalties are less stable and more instrumental, less identity-based and more policy-based ([Baker et al., 1981](#); [Budge et al., 2024](#); [Richardson, 1991](#)).

Nevertheless, most research accepts that persistent partisan orientations, distinct from vote choice, can be observed across contexts (Dalton & Weldon, 2007).

Party identification is generally viewed as a heuristic that structures political information (Dalton & Weldon, 2007). It serves a functional role by helping individuals manage the complexity of politics (Dalton, 2007; Wattenberg, 2009). As voters become more politically sophisticated, reliance on partisan cues may decline (Shively, 1979). This dynamic underlies the process of partisan dealignment, which is particularly pronounced among the more educated and politically engaged (Dalton, 2000; cf. Milner, 2002). In this context, mass media have increasingly replaced parties as key providers of political information (Dalton & Weldon, 2007).

Recent scholarship has shifted attention to the need to consider both the in-group, namely the party a voter may identify with, and the out-group, namely the set of alternative parties (Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012).<sup>6</sup> Party (and leader) likability do exactly this with the use of feeling thermometers. Feeling thermometers were introduced by Weisberg and Rusk (1970) to recover preference rankings over candidates. As noted, “the use of the thermometer question constitutes one of the simplest means of obtaining preference orders over a large number of alternatives in a survey of the mass public” (Weisberg & Rusk, 1970, p. 1169). The underlying assumption is that respondents assign higher scores to more preferred alternatives, thus allowing researchers to record responses across many options in a *neutrally worded* format (Weisberg & Rusk, 1970). Accordingly, party (and leader) thermometer scores are used to measure preferences over political alternatives, and they may capture more short-term influences on vote choice, as they reflect current evaluations that can fluctuate across election cycles (e.g., Dalton, 2007).

Leader likability refers to the same underlying concept as party likability, but applied to individual leaders. Analogously, it is intended to capture voters’ preferences among alternative leaders. Certainly, as with party identification and party likability, leader likability may not fully reflect all aspects of leader evaluations through a single score. Still, it is shaped by leaders’ policy-relevant attributes such as competence, policy positions, and partisanship (e.g., Funk, 1999; Huber, 2015), as well as by broader personal characteristics such as warmth, empathy, and charisma (e.g., Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2011).

I use party likability rather than party identification against leader likability for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, when comparing the effects of two measures, it is crucial that they be as similar as possible. This condition holds for party and leader likability, which are measured identically, but not for party identification and leader likability. Additionally, comparing party and leader likability allows for the use of a multinomial framework

based on econometric theory, in which preferences over all relevant alternatives are considered. In contrast, party identification, which applies to only one party, permits differentiation only between the party a voter identifies with and all others. This assumption is a strong simplification of the preferences that voters may have over different parties. This approach would not allow to account for important phenomena such as strategic voting, given that any second choice would be assumed to be equally preferable for the voter. In models of voting behavior, it is scarcely credible that voters may be indifferent over all parties but one. Indeed, the distribution of party likability scores across parties that voters do not identify with demonstrates that this is not the case. Analogously, this approach would not allow to input a party preference for voters who do not identify with any party. This issue is particularly salient in a time-trend analysis, as the proportion of voters who report no party attachment has increased over time, but they may still have preferences over parties (Dalton, 2000).

Empirically, in analyzing the effect of leaders and parties on voting behavior, evaluations of leaders and parties, whether in the form of likability scores or identification, are endogenous to each other (Bartels, 2002). Still, in an analysis focused on changes over time, what matters is that the degree of endogeneity between the independent variables remains stable over time. I examine the extent to which party likability, leader likability, and party identification explain each other over time using linear regressions in Table 1. I estimate coefficients for the independent variables separately for each decade and report the change in coefficient estimates. To account for the multilevel nature of the data, I include country fixed effects and country slope fixed effects, recognizing that the dataset is unbalanced at the country level and that party and leader likability may be influenced by the electoral system. The results indicate that the relationship between party and leader likability remains stable over time, whereas there are significant changes in how party likability and leader likability explain party identification.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even from a purely empirical perspective, party and leader likability are suitable for a direct comparative time-trend analysis as they remain stable over time, whereas party identification and likability are less so.<sup>8</sup>

The national election studies also report information on respondents' nationality, self-placement on the left-right scale, their placement of parties on the same scale, and demographic weights. Additionally, some national election studies collected data on respondents' frequency of media consumption or reported attention to news, either in general or during the campaign, for newspapers, radio, television, and the internet, which I use in the analysis.

## Analysis

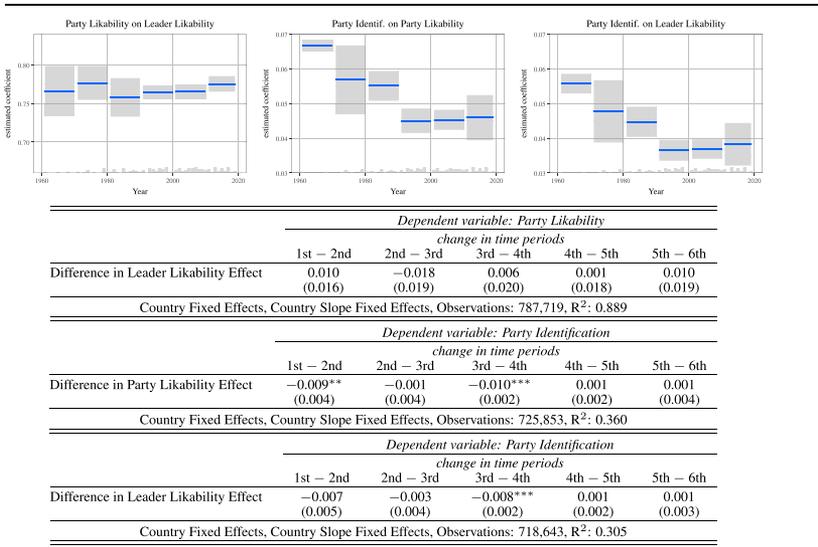
To test the relative importance of the parties and leaders over time, I adopt a standard multinomial choice model of utility maximization, accounting for unobserved and observed heterogeneity at the country, election, and party level. At each election, the utility that voter  $i$  gets from party  $j$  out of the set of possible parties  $J$  is:

$$U_{ij} = (\beta_P + \rho_c) * P_{ij} + (\beta_L + \lambda_c) * L_{ij} + \alpha_j + \epsilon_{ij}$$

$P_{ij}$  and  $L_{ij}$  are the parties' and leaders' likability scores respectively. The coefficients  $\beta_P$  and  $\beta_L$  represent the weights that voter  $i$  places on parties' and leaders' likability. Thus, a high coefficient would mean that the parameter importantly affects vote choice, whereas a null value would mean that the parameter has no effect on vote choice. The set of  $J$  alternatives is election specific, and the index  $j$  represents a single alternative, that is a party running in an election. Thus, the same party running in multiple elections is considered tantamount to a different party (alternative).

The terms  $\rho_c$  and  $\lambda_c$  are country slope fixed effects for the likability of parties and leaders. Adding them is a way to account for the multilevel nature

**Table I.** Party Likability, Leader Likability, and Party Identification



Note. OLS models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Figures report the predicted value of the estimated coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Tables report the difference in the effect between time periods. Full regression results in Table I2 in the Supplemental Material. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

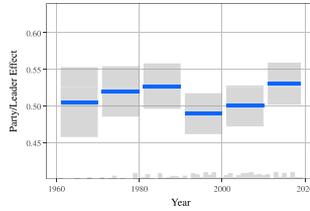
of the data and for the non-balanced data at the country level. They control for systematic differences in the effect of party and leader between countries (Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Curtice & Hunjan, 2011; Curtice & Lisi, 2015; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011). Including country slope fixed effects permits to identify in the  $\beta_P$  and  $\beta_L$  coefficients their possible fluctuation over time from within countries variation.

The terms  $\alpha_j$  are choice specific fixed effects. They capture unobserved heterogeneity at the party-election level and control for the fact that voters may self-report a choice for a party for reasons that go beyond the observed likability of the parties and their leaders. For example, voters may tend to report a party choice for an incumbent that has governed well in the precedent period, regardless of how much they like that party and its leader. Likewise, local candidates may also enter voters' utilities (Blais & Daoust, 2017; Roy & Alcantara, 2015). The choice specific fixed effects control for systematic differences in the desirability of the local candidates, while idiosyncratic and district specific differences are incorporated in the individual error terms. Importantly, the choice specific fixed effects, coupled with the likability scores, also control for possible party strategies such as movements in the political spectrum or the type of leaders that parties may select. In fact, if a party moves in the political spectrum to attract a different and possibly larger set of voters, or if a party select a more or less charismatic leader to appeal in a different way to voters, then these changes will be captured for their systematic part by the terms  $\alpha_j$ , and for their individual part by possible changes in the individual likability of parties and leaders, without affecting the weights that parties' and leaders' likability scores have in the utility calculation of voters.

I estimate this model with the multinomial logit conditional likelihood model of Chamberlain (1980), and report the change in the log-odds of choosing party  $j$  versus party  $j'$  supposing a hypothetical shift in which party  $j$  increases its party likability of one unit and decreases its leader likability of one unit.<sup>9</sup> This difference highlights the relative weight of the party and leader on vote choice, which I call the party versus leader effect. A decreased log-odds would signal that the leader has become more important, and the bigger the decrease the bigger the difference between leader and party, and vice versa.

To derive testable hypotheses, it is necessary to assume a functional form. I analyze a 10-year segment model, where the effect of the independent variables remains constant within each decade. This approach allows for testing differences in effects across time periods by looking at differences between segments.<sup>10</sup> Table 2 presents the difference in party versus leader effects, with each segment in the graph representing the average effect for that period. The accompanying table reports the difference in this effect between consecutive time periods.

**Table 2.** Party Effect versus Leader Effect on Vote Choice



	<i>Dependent variable: Vote Choice</i>				
	<i>change in time periods</i>				
	1st – 2nd	2nd – 3rd	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect	0.014 (0.022)	0.007 (0.014)	-0.037*** (0.011)	0.010 (0.008)	0.030*** (0.009)
Country Slope Fixed Effects ( $\rho_c, \lambda_c$ ), Election-Choice Fixed Effects ( $\alpha_j$ ), Observations: 787,719, R <sup>2</sup> : 0.282					

*Note.* Multinomial conditional logit models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Figure reports the predicted value of the estimated coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Tables report the difference in the effect between time periods. Full regression results in [Table 16 in the Supplemental Material](#). \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

The graph shows that the relative effect of party and leader on vote choice does not follow a linear or even monotonic trend over time. The effect remains stable until the 1990s, when it significantly declines, indicating a substantial decrease in the influence of party versus leader on vote choice during that decade. Subsequently, party influence recovers to its initial levels relative to leader influence. Notably, the 1990s decline represents the largest significant change in the relative importance of parties and leaders for vote choice in the past six decades. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the relative effect of parties and leaders in the 2010s compared to the 1960s or 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Overall, this indicates that there is no systematic increase in the effect of leaders relative to parties on vote choice over time.

I show in [Section C of the Supplemental Material](#) that the time trend remains consistent when alternative functional forms are assumed, and in [Section D](#) that the results hold when modifying the thresholds for the segments. Additionally, I demonstrate in [Sections E, and F](#) that the results are robust to incorporating policy distance between voters and parties in the voters’ utility function, and restricting the analysis to the three largest parties in each election, respectively.

It is important to note that it is not feasible to estimate precise turning points for the party versus leader effect given that there is not an observation for every country in every year, as elections typically occur every 4 or 5 years. Still, both the additional analyses in the appendix, and in particular the spline models in [Table C1 in Section C of the Supplemental Material](#), which allow for flexible thresholds and consistently place the minimum for party relevance

between 1996 and 1998, and the theory (Blair and Schroder only coming to power at the end of the 1990s, the ‘Third Way’ book by Anthony Giddens only published in 1998, etc.) point to a possible minimum for the party versus leader effect in the second part of the 1990s or possibly the early 2000s.

Regarding the magnitude of the effects, the significant shifts in the influence of parties and leaders in the 1990s and their subsequent rebound would have led to a relative change in party vote share of up to a few percentage points for the largest parties and up to 10% for the smallest parties, an amount sufficient to alter the balance of power in parliament.<sup>12</sup> In cases of close electoral results, these changes could have influenced government formation. For example, in the 2013 German parliamentary elections, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) narrowly missed the 5% vote share threshold required to gain seats in the Bundestag. As a result, its traditional ally, the Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), was unable to form a center-right government, having won only 49.2% of the seats. In a counterfactual scenario where the relative effect of party influence had remained at the low levels of the 1990s, specifically, if the weight of parties and leaders in Germany in 2013 had been the same as in 1998, the FDP would have received 8.7% of the vote and secured parliamentary representation. Although the CDU/CSU would have lost some seats, together with the FDP they would have held a parliamentary majority with 50.6% of the votes, potentially altering the government formation negotiations that instead resulted in the grand coalition between the CDU/CSU and the center-left Social Democratic Party.

## The Role of Media

Having established the time trend in the effect of parties and leaders on vote choice, I now turn to the most prominent explanation for the increasing relevance of leaders, which centers on the role of media, and particularly television. The question, then, is whether media use can still explain the observed trend, even if the relative effect of leaders versus parties does not increase monotonically over time.<sup>13</sup>

I begin by examining whether media use correlates with the strength of party and leader effects on voting. I use data on respondents’ media consumption, specifically, their use of newspapers, radio, television, and the internet for news, from the same national election surveys used earlier, though media use was recorded in only a subset of these surveys.<sup>14</sup> Table 3 reports the interaction effects between party and leader likability and media use in vote choice models.<sup>15</sup> Consistent with existing literature, television use correlates with a weaker party effect, implying a relatively stronger leader effect. By contrast, newspaper use reduces leader influence, while internet and radio use show no significant correlation. Thus, conditional on voters’ preferences for

parties and leaders, television use appears to increase the effect of leaders on voting decisions, while newspaper use strengthens the effect of parties. Clearly, this potential effect is likely constrained by self-selection, as voters who are more attentive to leaders may be more inclined to watch television, which gives greater visibility to leaders.

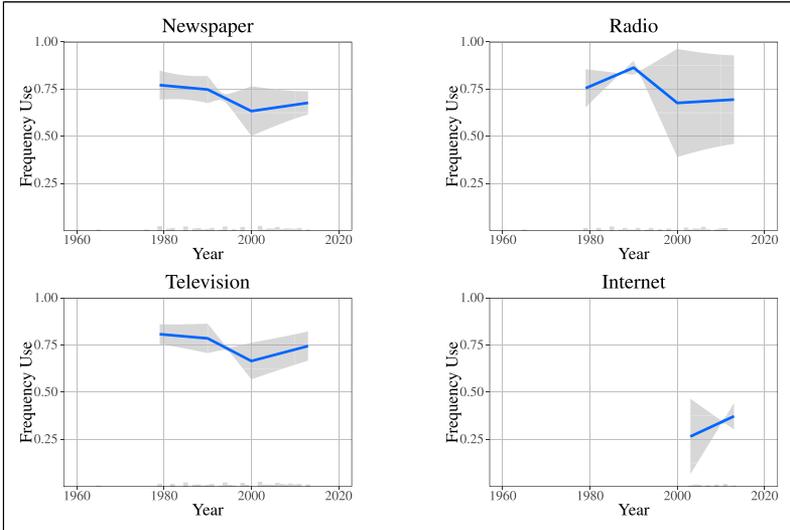
However, even though media use correlates as expected with party and leader effects on vote choice, the time trend of media consumption is inconsistent with the observed changes in party and leader effects on voting. [Figure 1](#) presents the frequency of media use over time for the four media types. The trends in media consumption are non-monotonic, and, notably, television use, the medium most strongly associated with leader influence, declines in the 1990s. Given that television viewers exhibit a weaker party effect, this decline should, if anything, have led to an increase in party relevance in the 1990s. However, the previous section showed that party relevance declined during this period.<sup>16</sup>

The media effect may be coming instead from newspaper use. The decline in newspaper consumption in the 1990s, followed by a possible rebound, aligns with the observed party-versus-leader trend, given that newspaper use is associated with a weaker leader effect. This is consistent with the idea that television and newspaper use counterbalance each other, meaning that the relative difference between television and newspaper consumption determines the shift in leader versus party effects on voting ([Garzia et al., 2020b](#)). I test this possibility in [Table 4](#), where I conduct the same analysis but use as the explanatory variable the “Newspaper/Television-Centrism”, defined by

**Table 3.** Party and Leader Likability Interaction With Media Use

	Dependent variable: Vote choice			
	(1 - newspaper)	(2 - radio)	(3 - television)	(4 - internet)
Party likability	0.009	0.0003	-0.024***	0.014
* media use	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.019)
Leader likability	-0.014*	-0.008	0.001	-0.021
* media use	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.020)
Country slope fixed effects ( $\rho_c, \lambda_c$ )	✓	✓	✓	✓
Election-choice fixed effects ( $\alpha_i$ )	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	248,206	180,954	269,323	46,212
R <sup>2</sup>	0.287	0.292	0.284	0.290

Note. Multinomial conditional logit models with robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 1.** Media use

Note. 10 year segment spline models. Predicted value for the frequency of use of, or reported attention to, news in the media, either in general or during the campaign, with 95% confidence intervals. Country fixed effects, and country clustered standard errors. Full regression results in [Table D5](#), [Table D6](#), and [Table D7](#) in the Supplemental Material.

[Garzia et al. \(2020b\)](#) as the difference between respondents' frequency of television and newspaper use.

Newspaper/Television-Centrism negatively correlates with party likability, while its effect on leader likability is not significant. That is, a greater relative reliance on television over newspapers is associated with a weaker party effect on vote choice. However, examining the time trend of this measure in [Figure 2](#), we observe a roughly steady state over time, with even a possible slight decline in the 1990s which, if anything, should have increased party relevance in that decade. In either case, this contradicts the main time trend for parties and leaders established in the previous section.

Another way in which media use could influence vote choice is by shaping voters' likability perceptions of parties and leaders. Television, for example, could enhance leaders' likability without necessarily altering how much likability influences voting behavior. In a multinomial choice setting, what matters for voters is the relative likability of leaders and parties. Thus, a change in how much voters like leaders or parties, rather than a change in the relative weight of these preferences, could shift their effect on vote choice.

The effect on vote choice is a function of the difference between the likability of the chosen alternative and the average likability of the unchosen alternatives. I test whether media use correlates with this measure for parties

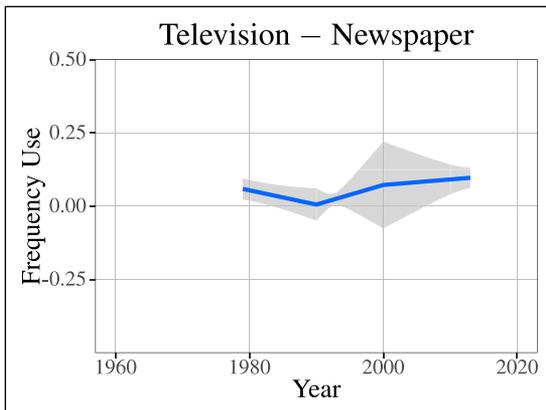
**Table 4.** Party and Leader Interactions With Media Use Effects

	Dependent variable: Vote choice (1 - television – newspaper)
Party likability * media use	–0.017** (0.007)
Leader likability * media use	0.011 (0.007)
Country slope fixed effects ( $\rho_c, \lambda_c$ )	✓
Election-choice fixed effects ( $\alpha_i$ )	✓
Observations	226,692
R2	0.290

Note. Multinomial conditional logit models. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

and leaders in Table 5. The results show that television use correlates most strongly with relative changes in party and leader likability. Based on this, I estimate the impact of television-induced likability shifts on party and leader effects by simulating a counterfactual scenario in which television use affects vote choice through changes in relative party and leader likability.

To do so, I input the implied changes in likability due to television consumption shifts into the multinomial vote choice model. The results indicate that the change in television use in the 1990s would reduce the log-odds of the party-versus-leader effect by 0.002. Even assuming no self-selection

**Figure 2.** Media use

Note. 10 year segment spline models. Predicted value for the frequency of use of, or reported attention to, news in the media, either in general or during the campaign, with 95% confidence intervals. Country fixed effects, and country clustered standard errors. Full regression results in Table D8 in the Supplemental Material.

**Table 5.** Media Effects on Party and Leader Likability.

	(1 - newspaper)	(2 - radio)	(3 - television)	(4 - internet)
Dependent variable: Party likability choice –avg. Party likability not choices				
Media use	0.054 (0.034)	0.253*** (0.034)	0.675*** (0.036)	–0.367*** (0.079)
Constant	4.133*** (0.023)	4.206*** (0.018)	3.625*** (0.027)	3.981*** (0.029)
Observations	50,589	36,341	53,506	10,930
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0001	0.002	0.007	0.002
Dependent variable: Leader likability choice –avg. Leader likability not choices				
Media use	0.063* (0.035)	0.427*** (0.036)	0.765*** (0.038)	–0.453*** (0.082)
Constant	3.358*** (0.024)	3.355*** (0.019)	2.751*** (0.030)	3.261*** (0.029)
Observations	50,946	36,722	53,790	10,879
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0001	0.004	0.008	0.002

Note. Ordinary least squares models. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

effects, meaning that this estimate is at its theoretical maximum, subtracting the possible effect of television from the 1990s drop observed in the general model (0.037) would still leave a remaining drop of 0.035, which remains statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level. This suggests that any potential television effect mediated through changes in likability may account for only a minimal portion of the decline in party relevance in the 1990s, and the observed drop remains highly significant even after discounting this possibility.

Overall, while media use correlates with party and leader effects on vote choice, the actual time trend of media consumption is not consistent with the observed changes in party and leader relevance. Media use is compatible with the 1990s decline in party effect only if one considers its possible impact on voters' likability perceptions of parties and leaders. However, even under this assumption, media consumption can explain only a minor portion of the observed decline. Thus, media use cannot account for the broader changes in party and leader effects on voting behavior.

## Support for an Alternative Explanation

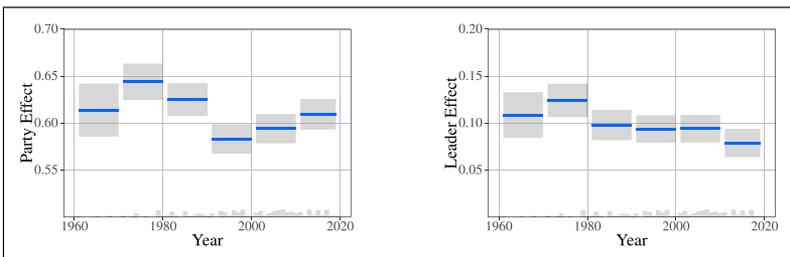
In this section, I provide supporting evidence suggesting that the time trend in the relative importance of parties and leaders for vote choice may result from the collapse of communism and the rise of the Third Way, which blurred ideological distinctions and elevated charismatic leaders, but parties gradually regained relevance as new cleavages emerged.<sup>17</sup>

A first evidence is that the party should be responsible for most of the variation in the party versus leader effect. If the decrease in the 1990s and the subsequent recovery resulted from parties losing an important cleavage that structured party competition, we would expect the effect of parties to show a larger and analogous trend to the overall trend in the relative effect of parties versus leaders.

I separately report the coefficient estimates for the party effect and the leader effect on vote choice from the main model in [Table 2](#) in [Figure 3](#). In the left panel, the party effect follows a trend similar to the overall trend in the relative effect of parties and leaders. Indeed, the party effect shows a sharp decline in the 1990s. In contrast, the leader effect, shown in the right panel, exhibits less fluctuation over time and no significant change in the 1990s. This indicates that the overall time trend observed in [Table 2](#) is driven primarily by changes in the party effect rather than changes in the leader effect.

A second evidence is that the decline in the 1990s should be more pronounced for left voters than for other voters. While the communist-anti-communist divide may have been relevant for all voters on the left-right spectrum, only left voters experienced the collapse of the ideology closest to them, which may have led to a larger decline in voting decisions based on party characteristics. Left parties, in particular, suffered a direct reputational hit following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. Right-leaning voters may have already been convinced that there was no viable radical left alternative, whereas for left voters, the actual collapse served as a much more forceful demonstration of the non-viability of communism.

I report the party versus leader effect separately for voters who place themselves in the first quartile of the left-right spectrum at each election and for the remaining voters in [Table 6](#).<sup>18</sup> The table shows that the decline in the 1990s is present for left voters and is significantly larger for them than for the



**Figure 3.** Party effect and leader effect on vote choice

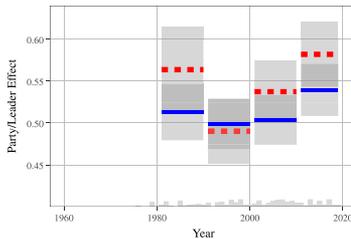
Note. Predicted value of the estimated coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Full regression results in [Table I6](#) in the [Supplemental Material](#).

remaining voters. Indeed, the drop for the remaining voters is small and not statistically significant. After the drop, the trend follows the expected pattern, with left voters’ reliance on parties recovering to pre-collapse levels, suggesting that the underlying ideological divide resurfaced around new issues.

I test the robustness of these findings by altering the threshold that distinguishes left voters from the remaining voters in the [Supplemental Material G](#). When defining left voters as those in the most left-leaning 15% of the spectrum instead of the 25%, the difference in the drop compared to other voters increases, whereas when defining left voters as those in the most left-leaning 35%, the difference decreases and becomes non-significant. These results align with expectations, indicating that the decline is more pronounced among the most extreme left voters.

A third evidence supporting the theoretical interpretation is that if the end of the communist alternative triggered the decline in the 1990s, some countries should have been more affected than others. In particular, Germany can be considered one of the countries most historically impacted by the communist versus anti-communist divide. Germany was physically divided along ideological lines during the Cold War. Additionally, the landmark study on the decline of cleavage politics by [Franklin et al. \(1992\)](#) identifies Germany

**Table 6.** Party Effect versus Leader Effect on Vote Choice, Left Voters Versus Other Voters



	<i>Dependent variable: Vote Choice</i>		
	<i>change in time periods</i>		
	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect, Difference Left Voters Versus Other Voters	-0.059** (0.028)	0.042** (0.021)	0.008 (0.021)
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect, Left Voters	-0.073*** (0.026)	0.047** (0.019)	0.044** (0.019)
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect, Other Voters	-0.014 (0.012)	0.004 (0.010)	0.035*** (0.010)

Country Slope Fixed Effects ( $\rho_C, \lambda_C$ ), Election-Choice Fixed Effects ( $\alpha_j$ ), Observations: 660,646,  $R^2$ : 0.282

Note. Multinomial conditional logit models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Figure reports the predicted value of the estimated coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Voters in the left quartile by election in red dotted line, remaining voters in blue line. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Tables report the difference in the effect between time periods. Full regression results in [Table I7 in the Supplemental Material](#). \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

as a special case, where the effects of social structure were frozen by the experience of National Socialism, anticipating a decline in cleavage-based voting in the 1990s. Therefore, we should expect the 1990s drop to be more pronounced in Germany than in other countries.<sup>19</sup>

I report the party versus leader effect separately for Germany and the other countries in Table 7.<sup>20</sup> The table shows that the decline in the 1990s is significantly greater for Germany than for the other countries. Importantly, the fact that the other countries also exhibit a significant decline in the 1990s indicates that the overall trend is not driven exclusively by Germany. Similar to what was observed for left voters, after the 1990s drop, the effect for Germany recovers, albeit with a longer lag, suggesting a resurgence of parties.

A fourth evidence concerns the types of arguments parties emphasize. If the 1990s decline in party versus leader influence on vote choice resulted from the sudden disappearance of a major left-right cleavage, and if party recovery occurred as parties reorganized around new left-right issues, then we would expect the relevance of left-right partisan disagreement to follow a similar pattern.

I report the relevance of the left-right scale over time, measured as the share of party pledges related to the left-right divide weighted by party seat share, in the first panel of Table 8.<sup>21</sup> I use party pledges coded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP, Budge (2001)). The left-right relevance measure follows the definition by Budge and Laver (1992).

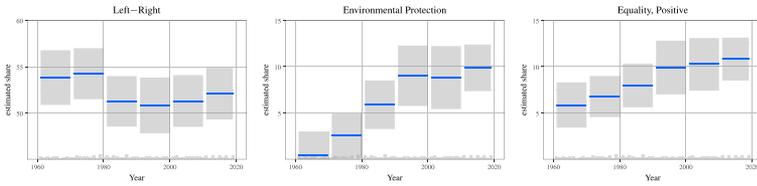
**Table 7.** Party Effect versus Leader Effect on Vote Choice, Germany Versus Other Countries

	Dependent variable: Vote Choice				
	change in time periods				
	1st – 2nd	2nd – 3rd	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect,	-0.048	-0.042	-0.082*	0.004	0.185***
Difference Germany Versus Other Countries	(0.058)	(0.053)	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.041)
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect, Germany	0.027	-0.029	-0.116***	0.015	0.207***
	(0.049)	(0.051)	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.040)
Difference in Party Effect Versus Leader Effect, Other Countries	0.075**	0.013	-0.034***	0.010	0.021**
	(0.030)	(0.014)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.009)

Country Slope Fixed Effects ( $\rho_{c_i}, \lambda_{c_i}$ ), Election-Choice Fixed Effects ( $\alpha_i$ ), Observations: 787,719; R<sup>2</sup>: 0.282

Note. Multinomial conditional logit models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Figure reports the predicted value of the estimated coefficient with 95% confidence intervals. Germany in red dotted line, other countries in blue line. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Tables report the difference in the effect between time periods. Full regression results in Table 18 in the Supplemental Material. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 8.** Comparative Manifesto Project: Category Shares Over Time



<i>Dependent variable: Left-Right Share in CMP (%)</i>					
<i>change in time periods</i>					
	1st – 2nd	2nd – 3rd	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Share	0.420	-2.979*	-0.437	0.467	0.797
	(1.347)	(1.523)	(1.620)	(1.703)	(1.605)
Country Fixed Effects, Observations: 302, R <sup>2</sup> : 0.987					
<i>Dependent variable: Environmental Protection Share in CMP (%)</i>					
<i>change in time periods</i>					
	1st – 2nd	2nd – 3rd	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Share	2.090***	3.319***	3.131**	-0.196	1.052
	(0.679)	(0.976)	(1.552)	(1.887)	(1.639)
Country Fixed Effects, Observations: 299, R <sup>2</sup> : 0.655					
<i>Dependent variable: Equality Positive Share in CMP (%)</i>					
<i>change in time periods</i>					
	1st – 2nd	2nd – 3rd	3rd – 4th	4th – 5th	5th – 6th
Difference in Share	0.913	1.197	1.934	0.372	0.542
	(0.875)	(1.018)	(1.447)	(1.696)	(1.448)
Country Fixed Effects, Observations: 299, R <sup>2</sup> : 0.742					

Note. OLS models with robust standard errors in parentheses. Figures report the predicted share with 95% confidence intervals. Density of observations on the horizontal axis. Tables report the difference in the share between time periods. Full regression results in [Table 19](#), [Table 110](#), and [Table 111](#) in the Supplemental Material for the Left-Right Share in CMP, Environmental Protection Share in CMP, and Equality Positive Share in CMP respectively. \* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

The results show that the left-right dimension was highly relevant until the 1970s, declined in the 1980s, and slightly increased after 2000. While this trend is broadly consistent with the predicted changes over time, it does not precisely match them. However, the left-right scale encompasses multiple issues beyond those related to the communism versus capitalism debate, so an exact match is not necessarily expected. What matters is that the left-right scale follows a similar trend and is compatible with the decline in the 1990s.

Regarding the possible emergence of new left-right issues after the 1990s decline, [Table 8](#) shows a slight increase in the relevance of the left-right divide, but the rise is not statistically significant. Still, this lack of significance may result from the nature of the left-right measure in the CMP rather than from an absence of new left-right issues. The CMP measure was developed in 1990 by [Budge and Hofferbert \(1990\)](#) and includes categories that were relevant to the left-right divide at that time. However, the policy areas that define left and right may have changed over time. For example, the CMP left-right measure does not include the two largest contemporary CMP categories, environmental protection and social equality, even though most scholars would likely agree that both issues are now central to the left-right divide.

I report in the second and third panels of [Table 8](#) the change over time in the share of party pledges related to these two categories, environmental protection and social equality. Both categories show their largest aggregate increase in the 1990s, consistent with the idea that after the initial shock of the end of communism, parties reorganized around new programmatic divides within the left-right spectrum.

## Conclusion

This study challenges the expectation that voting behavior has become increasingly leader-centered over time. I show that part of the conflicting evidence in the current literature stems from historical events that have generated a nuanced pattern. My contribution clarifies the nature of this pattern and presents a more comprehensive picture of electoral behavior over time. What has been interpreted as positive, null, or negative trends in the personalization of politics is, in fact, driven by historical events that shape people's perceptions of parties and leaders. No single narrative fits all periods.

While institutional and media personalization suggest a steady rise in leader influence, my findings indicate that party relevance has fluctuated rather than declined in a linear fashion. The most significant shift occurred in the 1990s, when party influence temporarily weakened before gradually resurging. This pattern is inconsistent with a simple narrative of leader dominance and instead aligns with major historical disruptions, most notably the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the communism versus anti-communism divide, the decline of traditional political cleavages, and the subsequent ideological restructuring of parties.

Additionally, my analysis shows that media use, and television in particular, cannot account for these shifts. Although media consumption correlates with differences in party and leader effects, it explains only a trivial portion of the observed changes. This is not to say that institutional or media personalization has no effect on behavioral personalization. Campaigns have become, and continue to be, more candidate-centered, and the use of television correlates with a larger leader influence. However, the data suggest that these are not the major drivers of changes in the relative importance of parties and leaders for voting behavior over the last six decades.

Instead, I find evidence that the determinants of party and leader relevance are structural: the weakening of ideological cleavages in the 1990s, the reorganization of party competition in the post-Cold War period, and the eventual realignment of electoral politics around new programmatic divides.<sup>22</sup> This indicates that leader-centered politics may not have the effects predicted by the behavioral personalization thesis simply because stronger forces dominate it, namely cleavage-based and party-based politics.<sup>23</sup> This suggests a more cautious view of the role of media in behavioral personalization and

aligns more closely with a *leaders minimalist* school than with a *leaders matter* school (e.g., Aardal & Binder, 2011; Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Dentler et al., 2024; Dinas, 2008; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002; Quinlan & McAllister, 2022).

Three final considerations concern the consistency of the findings with existing literature, as well as the temporal and geographical scope of the analysis. The time trend I identify differs from existing literature, which has typically examined only linear changes over time. My finding that there is no increase in the relevance of leaders for vote choice in the 2010s compared to the 1960s or 1980s, even when allowing for non-linear variation in the relative importance of parties and leaders, is consistent with the results of Daoust et al. (2019) and Quinlan and McAllister (2022) for the subset of incongruent voters. By contrast, although my methodological approach and set of elections are most similar to those in Garzia et al. (2020a), my findings diverge from their conclusion that leader effects have increased over time. This discrepancy primarily stems from differences in the measurement of party effects. Garzia et al. (2020a) compare party identification with leader likability, whereas I compare party likability with leader likability. While both party identification and likability capture relevant aspects of parties from the voter perspective, as discussed in the Data Section, the party thermometer score not only reflects preferences across all available alternatives but also has the advantage of being conceptually aligned with the leader thermometer score, with which it also shows a more stable relationship over time, an element that may be crucial when analyzing relative trends of parties and leaders over time.

Regarding the temporal scope of the analysis, I collected the largest set of national election studies I could find in the existing literature. Nonetheless, coverage of elections before 1980 remains limited, with data available for only a few countries and sometimes in a non-continuous manner. As a result, estimates for this earlier period may be overly influenced by factors specific to individual elections. Although I include these elections in the analysis and report the results, I do not draw substantive inferences for the period before 1980.

Another limitation of analyzing long-term trends is the breadth of potential explanatory factors. I provide multiple forms of supporting evidence for an alternative interpretation of the time trend and rule out the most credible existing explanation based on media effects. Still, the analysis cannot account for every conceivable alternative. Any such explanation, however, would need to meet the empirical constraints established in this paper. In particular, the end of the Cold War is arguably the most significant historical event of the late 20th century, and any alternative explanation would need to justify why the sharp drop in party relevance coincides with the disappearance of the communism versus anti-communism cleavage but is not shaped by it.

Regarding the geographical scope of the analysis, while the main analyses on time trends and media effects are broadly applicable and consistent with the scope of general theories of behavioral personalization and media influence, the theoretical explanation I offer for the observed variation applies more directly to the European context. Only four non-European countries could be included in the analysis. Additionally, the political developments and ideological realignments that followed the end of the Cold War, the collapse of communist parties, and the restructuring of traditional cleavages were specific to Europe and shaped the region's party systems in distinctive ways. These historical dynamics provide a compelling explanation for the patterns observed in the data but may be less relevant outside of Europe, where party structures and the legacy of ideological divides evolved differently. This is reflected in a somewhat different time trend for non-European countries.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, my findings suggest that political parties remain the dominant force in structuring electoral behavior. While leaders influence vote choice, their direct effect remains secondary to that of parties, and there is no long-term increase in leader importance. This supports a minimalist interpretation of behavioral personalization, emphasizing that institutional and media-driven personalization, even though it may in part translate into behavioral personalization, it does not necessarily translate into a fundamental shift in how voters make decisions. Issue- and cleavage-based politics remain central to electoral behavior, reinforcing the continued relevance of party competition in democratic systems.

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## Data Availability Statement

Replication materials are available at [Albarellò \(2025\)](#).

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. I discuss the relevance of this explanation for European and non-European democracies in the Conclusion.
2. I refer to behavioral personalization as what some scholars have termed the supply side of behavioral personalization, while the demand side refers to changing leader behavior.
3. Most elections in the second module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems did not include leader likability questions and are therefore excluded from the dataset. I also checked the consistency of the early elections with the original national election studies where available and corrected inconsistencies in Ireland 2007; Norway 2001 using the original surveys from [Marsh and Sinnott \(2008\)](#) and the [Institute for Social Research \(2008\)](#), respectively.
4. I checked for possible differences in effects across datasets by analyzing elections with overlapping coverage among the four sources. The risk of systematic differences is limited by the fact that these datasets typically draw on the same national election studies, which are usually conducted by the same teams over time. This ensures consistency, especially within countries, which is the variation I exploit in the analysis. Moreover, the key survey items on party and leader likeability and vote choice are simple and standardized, further reducing the likelihood of systematic differences. The largest overlap is between the True European Voter dataset and the other three (European Voter Database, Leadership Project, and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems), which otherwise have limited overlap among themselves. There are 37 elections with overlapping coverage, 26 of which report identical data. I stack the observations for these 37 elections from the True European Voter dataset and the other three datasets, and estimate the baseline model with an interaction term for the True European Voter dataset. I report the results in Table II of the Supplemental Material and find no significant differences in the estimated effects of parties and leaders. I replicate the analysis excluding the 26 duplicated elections and include an interaction with time to test for possible temporal heterogeneity. Again, all interaction terms are null.
5. Some national election studies used different scales, such as  $-5$  to  $5$  in Sweden or  $0$  to  $100$  in the Netherlands, Norway, and Canada. These cases are rescaled to the

- 0 to 10 scale. Importantly, within each election, all surveys use the same scale for party and leader likability and employ an analogous question framing.
6. This is standard practice, for example, in the literature on affective polarization, where positive affect toward a preferred party is the first component and negative affect toward other parties is the second (e.g., [Wagner, 2021](#)).
  7. The magnitude of the effects on party likability and party identification are not directly comparable, as party likability is measured on a 0 to 10 scale, whereas party identification is measured on a 0 to 1 scale.
  8. I discuss the robustness of these findings to changing thresholds in [Section D of the Supplemental Material](#).
  9. I report the full model description in the [Supplemental Information B](#).
  10. This approach draws on critiques such as [Lebo and Weber \(2015\)](#), who argue that models applied to repeated cross-sectional or panel data often overlook the dynamic properties of time series. By smoothing temporal variation, I reduce sensitivity to year-specific idiosyncrasies and allow the model to recover more substantively meaningful trends. This strategy builds on a well-established literature that advocates spline smoothing to model temporal dynamics in political and social data (e.g., [Beck & Jackman, 1998](#); [Hastie, 2017](#); [Keele & Kelly, 2006](#)). I demonstrate the robustness of the results to alternative smoothing functional forms in [Section C of the Supplemental Material](#).
  11. The p-values for the differences in effect are 0.377 and 0.785, respectively. Given the small number of elections before 1980, I interpret the results from that period with caution.
  12. Since the choice fixed effects in the conditional likelihood model are not estimated, predicted probabilities cannot be calculated directly. Instead, counterfactual scenarios can be analyzed.
  13. For brevity, I show and discuss in this section only the results without changing the thresholds, but all results are consistent when changing thresholds, as discussed in [Section D of the Supplemental Material](#).
  14. Specifically, media use measures the frequency of media consumption or reported attention to news, either in general or during the campaign. Importantly, this is the same measure used in most studies of media effects on leader influence on voting, as these studies also rely on the same original national election surveys.
  15. The lower-order interaction terms for party and leader likability are included in the election slope fixed effects, while the lower-order interaction term for media use is constant across choices.
  16. The decline in media use for news, both television and newspapers, suggests that voters lost interest in party politics during this period. This aligns with the alternative explanation presented in the introduction and analyzed in the next section.
  17. For brevity, I show and discuss in this section only the results without changing the thresholds for the segment models, but all results are consistent when changing thresholds, as discussed in [Section D of the Supplemental Material](#).

18. The left-right ideological position of respondents was not included in the earlier surveys, which limits the time span of the analysis.
19. Another country that could have been particularly affected is Italy, given the strength of its Communist Party. However, election coverage in the dataset is incomplete, with only three Italian elections included. In contrast, the dataset covers all West German elections from 1961 to 2017, with the exception of the 2002 election.
20. For Germany, I only consider its western part, both before and after reunification, to ensure a consistent sample of voters.
21. This analysis includes all elections coded by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) for the 18 countries in the main analysis.
22. As noted in the introduction, other factors may correlate with these dynamics, such as declining levels of political trust and civic engagement, and the rise of post-materialist values.
23. There may be several reasons for this. For example, candidate-centred campaigning may reflect media logics and strategic adaptations by parties, but these changes may be largely symbolic or tactical rather than substantive shifts in the basis of electoral decision-making. Alternatively, voters may recognize the centrality of leaders in campaign rhetoric but still anchor their vote choices in deeper ideological or policy-based evaluations, especially in multiparty systems where party labels remain central to coalition politics and legislative behavior. Unpacking this is an interesting avenue for future research.
24. See [Supplemental Material H](#) for further discussion.

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