

Workshop Title:

“European Leaders and Democratic Elections”

Workshop Directors:

Marina Costa Lobo, Social Sciences Institute- University of Lisbon, Portugal
John Curtice, University of Strathclyde, UK

Abstract

It has been argued that evaluations of party leaders have become more important in determining both how individual people vote and the overall outcome of elections. This process can be regarded as part of a wider process of the presidentialisation of European democracies and to be the product of the declining influence of social structure and partisanship on voting behaviour.

However the claim has been widely contested, is subject to considerable methodological dispute, and has been little tested beyond the confines of the consolidated democracies. Equally, whether leadership evaluations matter more for some kinds of voters than others has been little explored.

We welcome papers that examine whether the impact of leadership evaluations has become greater over time; the degree to which leaders control party strategies/ appeals; how far the impact of leader evaluations varies across the whole range of social and political contexts that exist in Europe; whether leader evaluations matter more for some kinds of voters than others; and the methodological difficulties involved in assessing this impact.

Outline and Relation to Existing Research

There is considerable debate about the importance of leaders in European democracies. Studies of the relationship between leaders, their parties and political institutions have argued that European democracies have become presidentialised, i.e. that irrespective of the formal constitutional position party leaders rather than political

parties are now the decisive actors in the political system. Inter alia, this has been documented through the increasing personalisation of political campaigns, the growing control of political parties exercised by leaders, and the increased power of Prime Ministers within governments (Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

Meanwhile, numerous studies have suggested that how people vote is decreasingly determined by their location in the social structure (such as their social class or religious membership) or by a long-term sense of loyalty to a political party (Dalton, 2002; Dalton et al, 2000; Thomassen, 2005). Correspondingly, it has been argued that short-term factors, such as issue positions (Borre, 2002; Knutsen and Kumlin, 2005) and evaluations of the economy (Kieweit, 1984; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000) have become more important. As part of this process evaluations of party leaders have supposedly become more important too – with the result that supposedly parliamentary elections are now effectively presidential contests (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Clarke et. al. 1979; Clarke et.al. 2004; Glaser and Salmon, 1991; Graetz and MacAllister, 1987; Mughan, 1995; Mughan, 2000; Stewart and Clarke, 2000).

However, this claim is far from uncontested. Some studies cast doubt on whether evaluations of leaders have ever had much impact on either individual voters or election outcomes (King, 2002; Bartle 2002, Bartle and Crewe, 2002). Meanwhile the few longitudinal studies that have actually empirically tested the claim that leader evaluations have become more important over time reach quite cautious conclusions (Curtice and Holmberg, 2005, Brettschneider et. al. 2006).

Not least of the reasons for this dispute are the methodological challenges that face any attempt to study leader effects, especially the issue of endogeneity (Andersen and Evans, 2003; Evans and Andersen, 2005; Clarke et al, 2004). Part of the reason for the disagreement on the magnitude of leader effects seems to stem from the differences in the way in which authors estimate leader effects, and how they attempt to isolate those from party identification, ideological effects and other short-term factors. Meanwhile if party leaders have indeed become more influential in shaping the electoral appeal of their parties, attempts to ascertain their impact independently of the appeal of their parties might simply be misguided.

In any event it is doubtful whether sweeping claims about the presidentialisation of elections should be made without any regard to the political and social context within which elections take place. For example, most past research has focused on

consolidated democracies, largely ignoring the experience of younger democracies¹. However, partisanship is generally lower in newer democracies (van Biezen and Mair, 2002). So, if short-term forces such as leader evaluations matter more where the electorate is less socially anchored or partisan, we might expect leaders to have a greater impact on voting behaviour in such democracies. Certainly where the role of leader evaluations has been examined in studies of newer democracies, their impact emerges as not insubstantial (Gunther and Montero, 2001, Lobo, 2006).

Equally, even amongst consolidated democracies themselves, the impact of leader evaluations seems to vary according to the political context. As might be expected, leadership evaluations appear to matter more where a majoritarian electoral system is in place or where the battle for power is focused on two parties (Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Curtice and Hunjan, 2007). Meanwhile Lobo (forthcoming) demonstrates that leader evaluations matter more for catch-all parties than mass-based parties. We might hypothesise too that leader evaluations will matter more where parties are close together ideologically than when they are far apart.

Meanwhile, there is good reason too to anticipate that evaluations of leaders affect the behaviour of some voters more than others. For example, if short term forces have indeed become more important in voting behaviour as a result of the decline of partisan loyalties, we should find that leadership evaluations play a greater role in the voting decisions of those who profess weak partisanship (or none at all). However, there is very little research on the relative importance of leadership evaluations for different kinds of voters (for an interesting exception see Kroh, 2004).

The aim of this workshop, therefore, is to analyse the impact of evaluations of European leaders on voting behaviour and election outcomes across different contexts, over time, and amongst different kinds of voters, paying attention to the younger democracies of southern, central and eastern Europe as well as consolidated democracies of western Europe. It will also address the methodological issues and difficulties that arise in analysing the impact of leader evaluations on voting behaviour.

¹ Even Aarts et al, (forthcoming) is only a partial exception to this rule. It includes just one younger democracy, Spain, alongside the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway.

Participants and type of paper

We expect the workshop to attract the participation of students of electoral behaviour and political parties. This community is a large one. We will call, in particular, for papers that examine:

- whether the impact of leader evaluations has become stronger over time.
- the degree to which leaders control party strategies/ appeals- and whether this has changed over time.
- the relative impact of party leaders vis-à-vis other short-term factors in explaining vote choice
- whether leadership evaluations matter more for some kinds of voters than others.
- the methodological difficulties of studying the impact of leader evaluations
- whether the impact of leader evaluations depends on the social and political context or the character of political parties

We propose to give priority to papers that compare two or more European democracies, and in particular those that compare the role of leader evaluations in younger democracies with that in the consolidated democracies. We would like to prepare a special issue for an academic journal with updated versions of the workshop proceedings.

Funding

The workshop organizers will apply for funding with the Fulbright Commission and the British Council in Portugal in order to sponsor the workshop participants' travel expenses.

Biographical Notes

Marina Costa Lobo is Political Science Researcher at the Social Sciences Institute of the University of Lisbon. She is co-director of the Portuguese Election Study since 2001, and a co-editor of the journal *South European Society and Politics* (SESP) since 2008. Recent publications include *Portugal at the Polls* (Ma: Lexington Press) with A. Freire and P. Magalhães and articles in *Electoral Studies* and *Party Politics*.

John Curtice is Professor of Politics at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. He was co-director of the British Election Study from 1983 to 1997, is a former member of the steering committee of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Project, and has been a co-editor of the *British Social Attitudes* series since 1994. Recent publications include *The Rise of New Labour* (with A. Heath and R. Jowell) and *Has Devolution Delivered?* (ed. With C. Bromley, D. McCrone and A. Park).

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