

OXFORD

# Political Leaders and Democratic Elections

edited by  
Kees Aarts, André Blais,  
and Hermann Schmitt

COMPARATIVE POLITICS

# Political Leaders and Democratic Elections

Edited by

KEES AARTS, ANDRÉ BLAIS, and HERMANN SCHMITT

**ecpr**

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© The several contributors 2011

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

First published 2011

First published in paperback 2013

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose the same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-925900-7 (Hbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-965056-9 (Pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by

MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and  
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials  
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

# POLITICAL LEADERS AND DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS

## List of Figures

---

Figure 2.1.	Number of TV sets per 1,000 inhabitants for the nine countries	18
Figure 2.2.	Relative importance of television and newspapers for political information in Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom	19
Figure 2.3.	Ratio of candidate and party mentions in election stories	23
Figure 2.4.	Coverage of the chancellor candidates in German quality newspapers, 1949–2005	25
Figure 2.5.	Coverage of political leaders' traits in German quality newspapers, 1953–2005	26
Figure 2.6.	Coverage of political leaders in Swedish television news, 1979–99	30
Figure 3.1.	Party leader effects on the vote ( <i>b</i> -values)	48
Figure 3.2.	The relationship between manifesto polarization and leader effects on the vote across twenty-five elections in four countries ( <i>b</i> -values)	49
Figure 4.1.	Ministerial resignations since 1945	56
Figure 4.2.	Television sets per 1,000 population, 1965–2005	62
Figure 4.3.	Voters watching the leaders' debates	63
Figure 4.4.	Non-partisanship in Australia, Britain, and Canada	65
Figure 4.5.	'Very strong' partisans in Australia, Britain, and Canada	65
Figure 4.6.	Turnout in Britain and Canada since 1945	66
Figure 4.7.	Voters' ratings of prime ministers	70
Figure 4.8.	Party leader ratings in Australia	71
Figure 4.9.	Party leader ratings in Britain	72
Figure 4.10.	Party leader ratings in Canada	73
Figure 10.1a.	Percentage of negative and positive leader ratings per election and per country	173
Figure 10.1b.	Percentage of negative and positive leader ratings per election and per country (continued)	174
Figure 10.2a.	Impact of negative and positive leader ratings on vote choice, per election and per country	175
Figure 10.2b.	Impact of negative and positive leader ratings on vote choice, per election and per country (continued)	176

## List of Tables

---

Table 2.1. Diversity of the television market from 1980 to 1994	21
Table 2.2. Dimensions of personalization and presidentialization in the presentation of politics	22
Table 2.3. Coverage of the chancellor candidates on German television, 1990–8	28
Table 3.1. Voting probabilities for combinations of party and party leader ratings	39
Table 3.2. Country-by-country voting probabilities for combinations of party and party leader ratings	40
Table 3.3. Party leader and party rating correlations (Pearson's $r$ ), logistic effects of party leader, and party ratings on the vote ( $b$ )	44
Table 3.4. Party leader effects on the vote in twenty-four countries	46
Table 3.5. Party leaders as potential vote-getters for their parties (per cent)	47
Table 4.1. Changes in parliamentary terms since 1945	58
Table 5.1. Per cent voting consistent with candidate preference (two-party voters only)	79
Table 5.2. Presidential candidate popularity among voters, 1952–2000	81
Table 5.3. Personality evaluations of major presidential candidates, 1952–2000	84
Table 5.4. The distribution of personal, policy, and partisan like/dislike comments about major presidential candidates, 1952–2000 (in per cent)	87
Table 5.5. Candidates compared with their parties among voters, 1952–2000	89
Table 6.1. Elections analysed	95
Table 6.2. The role of leader and party evaluations in presidential and parliamentary elections	96
Table 6.3. The relative importance of leader and party evaluations in presidential and parliamentary elections after controls	97
Table 6.4. The role of leader and party evaluations in different types of parliamentary election	98
Table 6.5. How proportional elections differ	99
Table 6.6. Parliamentary elections in presidential and parliamentary systems	99

Table 6.7.	Larger and smaller parties	100
Table 6.8.	Party system and larger parties	101
Table 6.9.	Regression model of relative importance of leadership evaluations and type of parliamentary election	101
Table 6.10.	How the role of leadership evaluations varies by type of electorate	103
Table 6.11.	Further regression models of relative importance of leadership evaluations	103
Table 7.1.	Explained variance (Nagelkerke's $R^2$ ) of leader evaluation on party choice	116
Table 7.2.	Correlation matrix for party characteristics ( $N = 265$ ); Pearson's $r$	117
Table 7.3.	Bivariate correlations between leadership effects and party characteristics ( $N = 248$ ); Pearson's $r$	118
Table 7.4.	Means and standard deviations of leader effect over time, size, age, and governing status by cluster	120
Table 7.A.1.	Party families by cluster	124
Table 7.A.2.	Individual parties by cluster	125
Table 8.1.	Leader characteristics by country	134
Table 8.2.	Leader characteristics across time and country	135
Table 8.3.	Leader impact and evaluation across time and country	136
Table 8.4.	Leader characteristics by evaluation, and impact on the vote	138
Table 8.5.	The determinants of leader evaluations	140
Table 8.6.	The determinants of leader impact on the vote	141
Table 8.A.1.	Countries and elections in the study	146
Table 9.1.	Exposure to television and leader effects	154
Table 9.2.	Intensity of partisanship and leader effects	155
Table 9.3.	Time of vote decision and leader effects	156
Table 9.4.	Political engagement and leader effects	157
Table 9.5.	Education and leader effects	159
Table 10.1.	The impact of indifference, negativity, and positivity in the 1998 Australian election	178
Table 10.2.	The impact of negative and positive evaluations of some leaders in the 1998 Australian election	179
Table 10.A.1.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Australia	183

Table 10.A.2.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Canada	183
Table 10.A.3.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Germany	184
Table 10.A.4.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: the Netherlands	184
Table 10.A.5.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Norway	185
Table 10.A.6.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Spain	185
Table 10.A.7.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: Sweden	186
Table 10.A.8.	Effects of positive and negative party and leader evaluations on vote choice: the United States	186
Table 11.1.	Evaluation of political leaders' traits (arithmetic means, trait variables scaled from 0 to 1)	194
Table 11.2.	Political leaders' traits and global evaluations (dependent variable: global evaluation; OLS regression, beta-coeff.)	200
Table 11.3.	Effects of political leaders' traits on the vote: controlling for party identification (OLS regression, beta-coeff.)	206
Table 11.4.	Politically relevant versus non-political leader traits	210



## COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Comparative Politics is a series for students, teachers, and researchers of political science that deals with contemporary government and politics. Global in scope, books in the series are characterized by a stress on comparative analysis and strong methodological rigour. The series is published in association with the European Consortium for Political Research. For more information visit [www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr](http://www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr)

The Comparative Politics series is edited by Professor David M. Farrell, School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin and Kenneth Carty, Professor of Political Science, University of British Columbia.

### OTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES

Democracy within Parties  
Candidate Selection Methods and  
Their Political Consequences  
*Reuven Y. Hazan and Gideon Rahat*

Party Politics in New Democracies  
*Edited by Paul Webb and Stephen White*

Intergovernmental Cooperation  
Rational Choices in Federal Systems and Beyond  
*Nicole Bolleyer*

The Dynamics of Two-Party Politics  
Party Structures and the Management of Competition  
*Alan Ware*

Cabinets and Coalition Bargaining  
The Democratic Life Cycle in Western Europe  
*Edited by Kaare Strøm, Wolfgang C. Müller, and Torbjörn Bergman*

Redistricting in Comparative Perspective  
*Edited by Lisa Handley and Bernard Grofman*

Democratic Representation in Europe  
Diversity, Change, and Convergence  
*Edited by Maurizio Cotta and Heinrich Best*

Losers' Consent  
Elections and Democratic Legitimacy  
*Christopher J. Anderson, André Blais, Shaun Bowler,  
Todd Donovan, and Ola Lishaug*

The Presidentialization of Politics  
A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies  
*Edited by Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb*

Environmental Protest in Western Europe  
*Edited by Christopher Rootes*

Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices  
The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies  
*Russell J. Dalton*

Citizens, Democracy, and Markets Around the Pacific Rim  
Congruence Theory and Political Culture  
*Edited by Russell J. Dalton and Doh Chull Shin*

Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe  
*Piero Ignazi*

## Preface

---

The origins of this book go back to a conference in Montreal, late 1999. The team of the Canadian Election Study (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, Nevitte) invited a few colleagues from Europe (Aardal, Aarts, Schmitt) in order to identify and discuss important topics and trends in electoral research. Soon, we found ourselves discussing the apparent lack of comparative research on the importance of political leaders in elections. Political leaders – the persons leading their party in the election, who often also aim at winning government office – seemed to become ever more important in popular discourse as well as in subfields like political communication. At the same time, we realized that there has not been a lot of empirical research into the weight of political leaders in the vote decision, and that there was little comparative research.

A draft outline of topics was listed, potential contributors invited, and a new conference was planned at the University of Twente in Enschede, in May 2000. Papers were presented, and the construction of a common dataset of relevant electoral surveys prepared. A panel at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association later that year, in Washington, provided a forum for several contributors. Meetings in Bilbao and Mannheim followed; a book contract with Oxford University Press was secured; chapters were revised, edited, and revised once more; and by 2003 most of the work had been done. We were only two chapters short from a complete manuscript.

That was seven years ago. It took some time before we finally came to the conclusion that the missing chapters would simply remain just that. In the meantime, we faced an increasingly important dilemma between publishing the chapters as they were, and asking the authors to update their chapters with the latest figures available. In the end, we let the contributors decide. Chapters using our integrated dataset therefore ‘stop’ by 2000, whereas chapters using separate surveys extend to more recent years. In all cases, the authors have revised their theoretical groundwork in order to acknowledge the quickly growing body of literature on leaders in democratic elections.

The book could not have been finished without lots of patience – the patience of our contributors, in the first place. Quite some time after handing in their revised chapters, they were willing to go through their work once more, adding new analyses and theoretical viewpoints. We are grateful for their continued support for the project despite periods of silence on the part of the editors. Secondly, the patience of Oxford University Press has been very helpful for not losing faith in this book – Dominic Byatt and Elizabeth Suffling.

We want to extend our gratitude to Edurne Uriarte at the University of Bilbao for hosting our conference in 2001, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Council of Canada and the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) for funding our meetings in Montreal and Enschede. In the final stages, invaluable support was provided by Christophe Chowanietz at Montreal for copy-editing. Justyna Rakowska, Inge Hurenkamp, and Marloes Nannings provided assistance in putting together different parts. Last but certainly not least, Janine van der Woude at Twente pulled us through the final stages of manuscript submission.

Enschede, Montreal, Mannheim  
July 2010

## List of Contributors

---

**Bernt Aardal**, Senior researcher at the Institute for Social Research, Oslo

**Kees Aarts**, Professor of Political Science at the University of Twente and Scientific Director of the Institute of Innovation and Governance Studies

**Tanja Binder**, formerly doctoral candidate in the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin, research unit Democracy: Structures, Performance, Challenges

**André Blais**, Canada Research Chair in Electoral Studies, Department of Political Science, University of Montreal

**John Curtice**, Professor of Politics University of Strathclyde

**Elisabeth Gidengil**, Professor of Political Science at McGill University and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship

**Sören Holmberg**, Professor of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg

**Sarinder Hunjan**, formerly Research Assistant, Social Statistics Laboratory, University of Strathclyde

**Ian McAllister**, Professor of Political Science in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University

**Richard Nadeau**, Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Montreal

**Neil Nevitte**, Professor of Political Science, University of Toronto

**Dieter Ohr**, Professor of Methods of Empirical Social Research, Free University Berlin

**Henrik Oscarsson**, Professor of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg

**Hermann Schmitt**, Professor of Political Science at the Universities of Manchester and Mannheim and Research Fellow at MZES

**Martin P. Wattenberg**, Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine

# Contents

---

<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xii
1. Political Leaders and Democratic Elections <i>André Blais</i>	1
2. Changing Patterns in Political Communication <i>Dieter Ohr</i>	11
3. Party Leader Effects on the Vote <i>Sören Holmberg and Henrik Oscarsson</i>	35
4. Political Leaders in Westminster Systems <i>Ian McAllister</i>	52
5. US Party Leaders: Exploring the Meaning of Candidate-Centred Politics <i>Martin P. Wattenberg</i>	76
6. Elections as Beauty Contests: Do the Rules Matter? <i>John Curtice and Sarinder Hunjan</i>	91
7. Leader Effects and Party Characteristics <i>Bernt Aardal and Tanja Binder</i>	108
8. Leader Effects and the Impact of Leader Characteristics in Nine Countries <i>Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte</i>	127
9. Voter Characteristics and Leader Effects <i>Elisabeth Gidengil</i>	147
10. Pull or Push? The Relative Impact of Positive and Negative Leader Evaluations on Vote Choice <i>Kees Aarts and André Blais</i>	165
11. Leader Traits, Leader Image, and Vote Choice <i>Dieter Ohr and Henrik Oscarsson</i>	187
<i>References</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	237

---

# Political Leaders and Democratic Elections

*André Blais*

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The outcome of a legislative election is typically reported in terms of *party* support. The information indicates how many votes and seats were obtained by each party. But in fact voters are faced with multiple choices which must be folded into one (Johnston 1961). They must decide which party they prefer. However, in choosing between the parties, they also choose among the policies that these parties advocate and their leaders. In a parliamentary system, one of these leaders will become the Prime Minister, and, if there is to be a coalition government, others may well become ministers. In a presidential election, voters must obviously choose among political leaders, that is, among the candidates running for office. But these candidates are almost always associated with parties and advocate a particular political agenda, and voters must therefore also think about which party and which agenda they like best.

This simple and basic fact raises the question of the relative importance of leaders. We would expect the vast literature on voting behaviour to have addressed this most basic question. Yet, surprisingly enough, the question has been largely neglected until recently.

Take *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960). The book acknowledges, at the very end, that, at least in the 1956 presidential election, 'the popular appeal of Eisenhower was unquestionably of paramount importance' (Campbell et al. 1960: 527). But it devotes very little space and analysis to candidate evaluations. One half chapter deals with that topic (chapter 3: Perceptions of the Parties and Candidates), while two full chapters are concerned with party identification.

Another classic, *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes 1969), devoted one chapter out of twenty (and 25 pages out of 448) to leaders. Butler and Stokes conclude that leaders have demonstrable effects but that they are only one factor among many, and a less important one than the economy and various other issues. And the topic is completely absent in *Electoral Behavior: A Comparative Handbook* (Rose 1974).

Things have changed and the question of leadership gets more coverage. *The New American Voter* (Miller and Shanks 1996) has a chapter on candidates'

personal qualities and another on candidate and party performances. *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke et al. 2004) puts forward a valence voting model in which perceptions of leaders play a central role.

Despite this increasing recognition, there is little systematic comparative analysis of the impact of leaders across countries. The *Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics* (Wattenberg 1991) remains the most thorough examination of the changing role of party leaders in elections, but it deals with one specific country (the United States) with a presidential system.

More recently, two edited books have focused on the impact of leaders' personalities (King 2002b) and the concentration of power around leaders (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Both books provide rich and valuable information about the role of political leaders in democratic elections, but all the analyses are country-specific, except for the introduction and conclusion where the editors attempt to draw 'general' lessons.

We intend to fill what we believe to be a huge (and unjustified) gap in the literature with this book. The objective is of course to evaluate how much impact leaders have on the vote. But we assume that the leader effect varies over time, across systems, parties, and voters. We formulate hypotheses about the sources of these variations, and we use a comparative data set that allows us to systematically test these hypotheses.

## 1.2 WHY SHOULD LEADERS MATTER?

The short answer is that they are one component of the decision matrix. Voters choose simultaneously among the parties, the leaders, and the policies on offer.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes who is the leader of a given party becomes a crucial consideration.

Political leaders do not play a central role in the two main traditions in voting behaviour. The Michigan school, which goes back to *The American Voter*, focuses on political parties and particularly on voters' 'party identification'. While political leaders have a place in the Michigan analytical model, they do not receive much attention. The second school, inspired by *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Downs 1957), emphasizes issues. It is closely linked to the spatial model of voting and party competition in which voters are assumed to vote for the party that best defends their interests and/or values. Downs asserts (1957: 27) that there are 'only three types of political decision-makers in our model: political parties, individual citizens, and interest groups'. From this perspective, all that voters need to know when making up their mind about how to vote is parties' overall ideology.

The questions, then, are: What would voters want to know about the leaders and how and why would that information help them make a 'rational' choice? The

literature points to two kinds of information. First, leaders' own personal views on the issues. These may differ from those of their parties. Of course, leaders play a crucial role in defining and then defending party policies, and we would expect little hiatus, in general, between the issue orientations<sup>2</sup> of the leader and those of the party. There are, however, instances where voters perceive the leader to be more concerned about a problem than the party in general, or more moderate or extreme on a particular issue than the party. When such differences occur, we would expect voters to react on the basis of their perceptions of both the leader's and the party's issue orientations.<sup>3</sup> How often substantial deviations between perceived issue orientations of party and leader occur is an empirical question about which we still have little empirical evidence.

The second type of information concerns the personal qualities of the leaders. Why should voters care about these personal characteristics? There may be two sets of reasons. First, knowing about the personal characteristics of the leaders may be useful whenever the issue orientations of parties and/or leaders are vague or ambiguous. In those cases, personal characteristics may serve as cues about the probable action that the party (and leader) will take after the election (Cutler 2002). For instance, if a party is evasive about abortion, knowing that the leader is a devout catholic may lead the voter to infer that the leader is likely to make it difficult for women to have abortions. Second, the personal characteristics of the leaders may provide the most important piece of information about how they would behave with respect to *unforeseen* problems that are not part of the political debate at the time of the election. The point has been made forcefully by Page (1978: 232–3): 'it may be that, in an age of nuclear weapons, no aspect of electoral outcomes is more important than the personality of the president, which might well determine how the United States would react in an international confrontation'. For instance, if the voter favours a hawkish position in foreign policy, he/she may have greater confidence in a candidate who generally appears to be strong and firm. The person then infers that the leader with the 'right' set of characteristics is likely to react 'correctly' in most situations.

What are these personal characteristics that voters may care about? We may distinguish three kinds of characteristics. The first is the *socio-demographic* profile of the candidates. Even the Michigan school paid close attention to the impact of Kennedy's religious denomination (catholic) in the 1960 American presidential election (Converse 1966). There is a vast literature on the impact of the gender of candidates on vote choice (see Hayes and McAllister 1997; McDermott 1997; Banducci and Karp 2000; Sanbonmatsu 2002; Herrson et al. 2003; Koch 2008). The question raised here is whether voters tend to vote for candidates who share their own socio-demographic profile, possibly because they believe that those candidates are likely to address problems in the same way as they would personally.

Some personal characteristics are of an 'objective' nature: one's gender, occupation, region, or religion. Others are of a more subjective nature. They have been



labelled traits (see Miller et al. 1986; Bean and Mughan 1989). Kinder et al. (1980) have argued that voters evaluate candidates on two basic dimensions: competence and trustworthiness (sometimes called character). The former can be decomposed into intellectual and leadership ability, and the latter into integrity and empathy (Kinder 1986; Johnston et al. 1992).<sup>4</sup> While these two traits, competence and trustworthiness, are personal characteristics of individual candidates, it could be argued that the latter is more personal than the former. The reason is that competence is very much associated in the public mind with experience. The implication is that incumbent candidates, who obviously have greater experience with the job of being a prime minister or a president, usually have an edge with respect to competence (Page 1978: 235; Johnston et al. 1992: 178). Because incumbents are more likely to be perceived as competent (which is an important reason why incumbents tend to be re-elected), it could be argued that competence is not a 'purely' personal characteristic.

These distinctions raise additional questions. The first concerns the relative weight of competence and trustworthiness in voters' overall evaluations of leaders. Their import may well vary across systems, parties, and voters. The second question concerns the link between the socio-demographic profile of leaders and their perceived traits. There is a substantial literature, for instance, on the nature and amount of stereotyping of male and female candidates (Sigelman and Sigelman 1982; Sanbonmatsu 2002).

There are thus good reasons why voters may make up their mind how to vote on the basis of perceptions not only about parties and issues but also about the political leaders. How much actual weight feelings about the leaders have on vote choice is the central question that is addressed in this book. That weight, of course, is likely to vary depending on the context of the vote and the kind of voters. Our inquiry thus consists in specifying the contextual factors that make leaders a more or less powerful variable in vote choice.

### 1.3 WHEN, WHERE, AND FOR WHOM DO LEADERS MATTER?

The first issue to be tackled is whether leaders are becoming more important over time. The main hypothesis is that 'election outcomes are now, more than at any time in the past, determined by voters' assessments of party leaders' (Hayes and McAllister 1997: 3).

Why should we expect such an evolution? Two interrelated factors are usually invoked: the personalization of politics and party dealignment. The greater personalization of politics is typically linked to the growing importance, over the last half-century, of television for political communication. Two arguments are made in this respect. First, more and more people rely on television as their main