Centralized personalization at the expense of decentralized personalization: the decline of preferential voting in Belgium (2003-2014)

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Introduction

It is often asserted that personalization, which refers to a shift in attention from collective actors to individuals, has become a structural feature of many Western democracies (McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010). Personalization is a broad and diffuse concept, however. A first major distinction refers to the kind of arena in which personalization takes place: in the media, in parties and in government or in the electorate. A second distinction is based upon the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general (‘decentralized’ personalization) or a handful of top politicians (‘centralized’ personalization) (Balmas et al., 2012).

Beyond its multi-faceted nature, one of the implicit assumptions about personalization of politics is that it is growing, meaning that individual politicians have become more important at the expense of institutions. More precisely, previous studies on the topic have mostly provided evidence of stronger personalization, while cases of no real change or of depersonalization have been exceptional (Karvonen, 2010; Adam and Maier, 2010; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). One of the main signs of the personalization of
politics over the last decades has been the (growing) use of preferential voting (Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann, 2012).

In that respect, the recent elections in Belgium’s flexible list system may appear as counterintuitive. Belgian voters may decide between two options: casting a list vote without marking any preference for any candidate, or casting a preference vote in favor of one or several candidates. In 1919, only a minority of voters were opting for preference votes (15 %). But over the years, the use of preference votes has been growing. There were 33 % of voters to cast such a vote in 1961, 48 % in 1981 and 66 % at its top in 2003. But over the last ten years, the share of voters casting a preference has constantly gone down. At the last federal elections, only 57 % of all valid ballots were marked with at least one preference vote (Wauters et al., 2015). This declining use of preference voting seems to be in contrast with the common idea of personalization as a growing pattern of contemporary politics. This is especially remarkable in Belgium, that has before been typically labeled as a clear ‘positive case’ of the personalization hypothesis (Karvonen, 2010: 102-103).

In this article, we examine this puzzle and we show that the explanation is to be found in the multi-faceted nature of the concept of personalization itself. The distinction made by Balmas and her colleagues (2014) between ‘centralized’ personalization (only the leader of a party or a government becomes more important) and ‘decentralized’
personalization (with power and attention shifting from party and/or government to a large group of politicians) runs through the different arenas.

Stemming from this distinction, we show in this article that the decline in the use of preference votes in Belgium is for a large part to be explained by the diverging fate of centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization remains a growing pattern of contemporary electoral politics in Belgium. Leaders are still able to attract a lot of preference votes. Decentralized personalization, however, is going down and this could explain the decline in the use of preference votes. Candidates other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to attract preference votes. When voters have not the opportunity to vote for a top leader in their electoral district, they are more and more inclined to opt for a list vote, rather than for a preference vote for another, less prominent, politician. This trend is reinforced by the growing success of newer parties. Such parties have even more difficulties to attract preference votes for lay candidates. By definition, newer parties have fewer candidates that are already familiar to voters that they could put on the ballot box. Only the leader, and perhaps a few other candidates, within these newer parties have gained some visibility. As a consequence, for many voters, only the leader of the party is well-known and is attracting preference votes.
These findings, we believe, are important beyond the specific case of Belgium. The recent distinction made by Balmas et al. (2014), and similar distinctions under different names by a few other authors (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), have conceptually clarified the concept of personalization. But they have not yet discussed its empirical implications. Implicitly, it was assumed that the idea of personalization as a growing pattern of contemporary politics would apply to both centralized and decentralized personalization. With this study, we show that the two trends may not always go hand in hand. Rather, it seems that while centralized personalization may be on the rise, decentralized personalization is not following the same trend. Party leaders are undoubtedly central figures in contemporary politics. By contrast, other, less prominent politicians, do not seem to remain under the spotlights. It could even be argued that the growing attention for leaders happens at the detriment of other politicians.

In the following sections, we explore these claims in three steps. First, the scholarly debates on personalization are presented and discussed, paying specific attention to the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization. In the second section, the puzzle of the declining use of preference votes in Belgium over the last decade is described. And in the third section, we provide explanations for this puzzle. Besides our central hypothesis that deals with the distinction between centralized and
decentralized personalization, we also test two alternative explanations: the declining number of incumbents on the electoral lists, as well as the role of newer parties that have fewer well-known candidates beyond their leader.

The debate on the personalization of politics

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing scholarly attention for the personalization of politics. This concept could be broadly defined as ‘the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities’ (Karvonen, 2010: 4). Yet, beyond this general definition, much clarification is required. As Van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2010) note, there is confusion about the concept of personalization. A distinction can be made either on the basis of the sphere in which personalization takes place or on the basis of the number of politicians it applies to.

A first element of diversity concerns the sphere of politics that is being personalized. Most attention is given to three spheres: parties and government; the media; and the electorate.
With regard to the first sphere - parties and government - Poguntke and Webb (2005), building on work by Foley (2000) and others, analyze what they call the ‘presidentialization’ of parliamentary democracies: the increasing empowerment of leaders both in government and in political parties. The traditional intermediary structures of political parties, such as delegate conventions, constituency party organizations, and parliamentary party groups have lost power and influence. Leaders now steer their parties with more autonomy than some decades ago. This has often been achieved by empowering disorganized rank-and-file party members at the expense of organized mid-level elites (Katz and Mair, 1995: 20–21; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Pilet and Cross, 2014).

Regarding the second sphere – the media – television broadcasting has by definition increased the visibility of individual politicians: it is necessary to put a face on the party message when appearing on the screen, whereas non-personalized messages were much easier to convey in the written press (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Studies mainly focus on the shift in the number of references made to parties and to individual politicians in the media, but could not always confirm a trend over time (Kriesi, 2012). Others focus on the privatization of politics – ‘the shifting boundaries between the public and the private’ (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 205) – and the fact that the media now
report not only politicians’ political activities, but also their private lives (e.g. Langer, 2007).

The third sphere, also the one we focus upon in this article, is the electorate, and more in particular their voting behavior. The (increasing) importance of individual politicians in elections is probably the most extensively studied aspect of personalization. Since the late 1980s-early 1990s, there has been a growing body of literature trying to assess the impact of politicians on vote choice. Two landmark publications in that respect have been Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina’s *The Personal Vote* (1987) and Wattenberg’s *The Rise of Candidate-Centred Politics* (1991). Since then, several books and articles have been looking at the personalization of elections (Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Kaase, 1994; Marsh, 2007; Garzia, 2012).

Personalities has been among the many short-term factors that have been explored in election studies, when structural and long-term voting determinants such as social class, religion or party identity were losing explanatory power (e.g., Dalton et al., 1984; Franklin et al., 1992; McAllister and Rose, 1986; Van der Brug et al., 2009).

In addition to the debate about the various spheres of politics that personalization could affect, a second conceptual discussion has been on the number and role of politicians that are benefiting from this new pattern of contemporary politics. The
central idea is that a distinction has to be made between personalization that would concern all politicians in general and personalization that would have implications for political leaders only. In studies of personalization of voting behaviour, some analysts examine the degree to which perceptions of party leaders motivate voting decisions (Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009), while others look at the impact of candidates in general (Caprara, 2007; Marsh, 2007; Mattes and Milazzo, 2014; Norton and Wood, 1990). Similarly, in studies of personalization in media coverage of politics, some focus on party leaders (Langer, 2007; Mughan, 2000), others on all candidates (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

A few authors have recently tried to theorize this distinction. Andeweg and Van Holsteyn (2011) refer to first-order (leader) versus second-order (candidate) personalization. Kriesi (2012) has proposed to differentiate between generalized (all politicians) and concentrated (leaders only) personalization in his analysis of election coverage. In a similar way, Van Aelst and colleagues (2012) made the distinction between generalized and concentrated visibility in the news. But the most extensive conceptual discussion of this distinction is provided by Balmas et al. (2012). They separate centralized and decentralized personalization: Centralized personalization ‘implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party, cabinet) to a single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister, president)’, while decentralized
personalization ‘means that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g. candidates, members of parliament, ministers)’ (Balmas et al., 2014: 37). They also argue that these two facets of personalization may be present in the three spheres of politics mentioned above: parties and government, the media and elections, as well as via institutional reforms such as the strengthening of preference votes in PR list systems (decentralized personalization) or the direct elections of mayors or prime ministers (centralized personalization).

Although the conceptual distinction by Balmas and colleagues is well developed and empirically supported, some lacunas in the debate can be identified. First, little is known on the decentralization of personalization in terms of voting behavior. This is mainly because scholars seldom study leaders and non-leaders simultaneously. In contrast with the large and growing literature on the role of leaders in voting behavior, there are few studies that focus explicitly on the importance of other candidates (but see Karvonen, 2010: 51-63; Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010; Thijsen, 2013). Also in the well documented Israeli case empirical evidence on decentralized personalization is lacking. According to the authors ‘because this concept has been hardly discussed in previous studies of elections’ (Balmas et al., 2014: 16).
Second, the relationship between the two types of personalization is not totally clear. Implicitly, Balmas and her colleagues (2014) seem to assume that the growing personalization of politics affects both the centralized and decentralized forms of personalization. They also depict each form of personalization as mainly going against the party, but not against each other. Poguntke and Webb’s (2005) argument about the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies, in contrast, more explicitly suggests that leaders are gaining ground at the expenses of other politicians. In the words of Balmas et al. (2014), it would mean that an increase of centralized personalization would lead to a decrease of decentralized personalization. In this study we will explore how both types of personalization relate to each other by conducting a detailed analysis of preferential voting behavior over time.

Research questions and hypotheses

We use the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization to study the evolution of preferential voting in Belgium over the last ten years. More precisely, we study the federal elections of 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014. Belgium’s flexible list system offers voters the opportunity between casting a list vote or marking a preference vote for one or several candidates within the same list. As such,
preferential voting functions as a good indicator of personalization, as has also extensively been argued by Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann (2012) on the Danish case. Since 2007, at each election in Belgium, fewer people cast a preference vote, and more people cast a list vote. Figure 1 clearly shows the decline of the share of valid ballots marked with at least one preference vote over the last decade. The decline is visible for federal elections (Chamber and Senate\(^1\)) as well as for regional elections (Flanders and Wallonia). The share of voters casting a preference vote in 2014 is back down to the level reached twenty years earlier, in 1995. These shares reached their peak in 2003 (with 66.5 % of voters casting a preference vote for the Chamber) and in 2004 (62.5 % for the Flemish Parliament, and 63.6 % for the Walloon Parliament). In the most recent elections (in 2014), the shares of ballots marked with a preference vote went down to 57 % for the federal Chamber, 55.2 % for the Flemish Parliament and 57.5 % for the Walloon Parliament.

[ Insert Figure 1 ]

In order to address this evolution that goes against the argument of a generalized personalization trend, we proceed in two steps. First, we look at how centralized and

\(^1\) Since 2014, there are no longer direct elections for the Senate. The Senate is now indirectly composed of members of regional parliaments.
decentralized personalization do interact in preference votes cast in Belgium between 2003 and 2014. The core argument is that the decline in preference votes is mostly to be attributed to the reduced interests of Belgian voters for lay candidates, i.e. those that are not party leaders. This expectation is based on the presidentialization argument of Poguntke and Webb (2005). Their claim that party leaders become more powerful and more visible would mainly affect other politicians in the party rather than the party as an institution. In fact, when leaders become more important in electoral campaigns, and voters identify the party with its leader, both the leader and the party can gain in prominence and popularity. In addition, if the public becomes aware ‘that it is the leader who decides what the party is and what it stands for’ (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 351), other candidates of the party become less attractive as they have less influence on the policy of the party. Each and every party has only one leader, but the Belgian territory is divided into several multimember districts and candidates can only run in one district. Consequently, in all districts but one, voters do not have the opportunity to vote for the leader of their preferred party. The expectation is that in these districts, more and more voters would cast a list vote rather than mark a preference for other ‘ordinary’ candidates. Such an evolution would confirm that it is a decline in decentralized personalization that is explaining the lowering share of Belgian voters casting a preference vote. This core expectation will
be first addressed below through a more descriptive approach that compares the share of preference and of list votes in districts with and without an electoral leader.

Next, we rely on a more explanatory approach that tries to explain the total share of preference votes received by each list in the various districts and for the various elections covered in the article (2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014). The first line of argument is about the growing importance of leaders, and therefore a test of centralized personalization. It leads to formulate two expectations. First, we would expect that the share of preferences votes would be higher for list on which one electoral leader is running. Second, assuming that the weight of leaders has grown over time, we expect that the impact of electoral leaders on the share of preference votes obtained by each list-in-a-district has grown over the period covered (2003-2014). These two arguments lead to the following three hypotheses.

H1a. Lists with an electoral leader obtain a larger share of preference votes than lists with no electoral leader.

H1b. The positive impact of lists with an electoral leader on preference votes has grown over time (centralization).
H1c. The negative impact of lists without an electoral leader on preference votes has grown over time (decentralization).

But the argument about the growing impact of centralized personalization is not the only element that could theoretically help explaining the recent decline of preference votes in Belgium. Earlier research has pointed out that contextual factors play a large role in determining preferential voting behavior (André et al., 2012; Elmelund-Praestekær and Hopmann, 2012). In particular, two contextual factors may have contributed to the downward trend: changes in the rules of the electoral system and the recent electoral success of newer parties. We include them into our analysis as potential alternative explanations.

First, over the last years, a change in the formal rules has modified the access for incumbents to candidate lists. Earlier studies on the use of preference votes in Belgium (André et al., 2012; Put and Maddens, 2015) have shown that the presence of incumbents on the list of candidates has a positive effect on the use of preference votes. A change to the legislation, however, has reduced the capacity of parties to fill in their lists with a lot of such candidates. Since 2007, it is no longer possible for the same person to be simultaneously a candidate for different assemblies elected at the national level (in particular to run for both the Chamber and the Senate) and since
2014, an incompatibility between candidacy at the national level and the regional and European level has been introduced, in case national, regional and/or European elections are held on the same day. As a consequence, the share of incumbent Members of Parliament or ministers on the list is harder to maintain. Between 2003 and 2010, not much has changed, however, as regional incumbents were asked by their party to take up a position on the list for the national elections (held on another day than the regional elections), even if they were not interested in getting elected.

The number of ‘unique’ incumbents has gone up from 265 in 2003 until 331 in 2010.\(^2\)

In 2014 the number of incumbents on the list of the Chamber dropped to 152, because both regional and national elections were held at the same day and politicians no longer had the possibility to be a candidate for both elections (Smulders, Put and Maddens, 2014). The average number of incumbents on a list in 2014 was lower than two, while for previous Chamber elections it was close to four. This trend might explain a lower amount of preferential votes over time, or in the terminology of this paper: a decline in decentralized personalization. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2a. Lists with a higher proportion of incumbents receive a higher proportion of preferential votes.

\(^2\) Because Belgium is a federal country with a bi-cameral system, it has a relative high number of regional (Walloon, Brussels, Flemish) and federal MPs (Chamber, Senate).
H2b. The decline of incumbents on the candidate lists has contributed to the decline of preferential votes over time.

Another contextual factor that may also has contributed to the downward trend in preferential voting is the electoral success of newer parties like N-VA (Flemish nationalists), PTB-PVDA (radical left), PP (populist radical right) and FDF (Francophone regionalists). Previous studies have shown that traditional parties (Christian-democrats, socialists and liberals) tend to fare a larger proportion of preference votes (Wauters et al., 2015; André et al., 2013). This also comes forward from Figure 2. Traditional parties (in black in Figure 2) (either Christian-democrats (CDH and CD&V), social-democrats (PS and SP.A) or liberal-democrats (MR and OpenVLD) obtain clearly more preference votes than newer parties (in grey). The average for all traditional parties is 67.1%, while the percentage preference votes for new parties is only 44.5%.

[ Insert Figure 2 ]

One element of explanation has already been mentioned above: incumbents and also local politicians attract preference votes. Since traditional parties are better-established they have more ministers, parliamentarians, and especially much more
politicians with local mandates among their candidates. Usually, within newer parties, only the leader has some notoriety within the electorate. In the last two elections in Belgium (2010 and 2014), these newer parties have been on the rise. N-VA became the largest party in the country in 2010 and strengthened its electoral leadership in 2014. In 2014, three smaller new parties have gained their first seats in the federal parliament: PTB-PVDA, PP and FDF. As the newer parties grow electorally, the overall share of preference votes would decline taking into account that newer parties have fewer voters opting for preference votes.

H3a. New parties get less preferential votes than traditional parties

H3b. The electoral success of new parties contributes to the decrease of preferential votes over time.

The fact that newer parties attract fewer preferential votes in general, might be true with the exception for the electoral leader. New parties might depend more on their leader than other parties. For instance, in the 2003 campaign the leaders of smaller parties took a larger share of the media attention for their party than leaders of traditional parties (Van Aelst, 2007). In exceptional cases these new parties are even

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3 FDF used to be in cartel with MR but ran alone in 2014, for the first time since 1995, and won two seats in the Chamber.
named to their leader, such as the Flemish ‘Lijst Dedecker’ and the Dutch ‘Lijst Pim Fortuyn’. In addition, it can also be stated that because it takes time to develop stable party loyalties, party identification tends to be weaker in new parties, leaving more room for leader effects among voters (Aardal & Binder, 2011). New parties also tend to be less organized and structured than established parties, which would benefit again the party leaders who enjoy more freedom of maneuver.

In addition, Aardal & Binder (2011) also give arguments why a stronger leader effect among new(er) parties might be peculiar to rightist new(er) parties. Right or centre-right parties usually are more hierarchically structured with on top of the pyramid a strong leader, who is very powerful both inside and outside the party. This contrasts with the anti-authoritarian stance of younger parties at the left side of the political spectrum, most notably the green parties. In some cases, their position against strong leadership is even translated in different forms of collective and rotated leadership.

Therefore, we additionally formulate the following general and more specific hypotheses:

H4a. The electoral leader effect (H1b) on preferential votes is stronger for lists of new(er) parties in general;
H4b. The electoral leader effect (H1b) on preferential votes is only stronger for lists of rightist new(er) parties.

Methodology

In the next section, these various factors are tested by analyzing the use of preference votes in Belgium over the last decade. The federal elections of 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014 are studied. For each, we look at the share of preference votes for each list of those parties that won at least one seat nationwide in the 11 electoral districts. We have in total 319 lists for 16 parties. We start with a more descriptive analysis that looks at whether having an electoral leader on the list makes a difference in the share of preference votes that the list has obtained. The shares of valid ballots for a party in a district are examined taking into account whether the list had an electoral leader among the candidates or not.

After this first descriptive part, the second part of the analysis is more explanatory. The goal is to see what factors do account for the share of preference votes that a list-in-a-district obtains. The empirical analysis is based on the official election results for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives for the election years 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014. As dependent variable, we take the proportion of preferential votes for a party in a
district for a specific election year. The entire country is divided into 11 districts. For each party, we calculate the proportion of preference votes it obtains in each district. These proportions function as dependent variable for our analysis.

Besides the election year (variable ‘Time’ in Table 1), we include in our model three independent variables which are relevant from a theoretical perspective: (presence of an) electoral leader, percentage of incumbents, and type of party.

As for electoral leader, our analysis splits all parties-in-a-district into two categories: those with the electoral leader of a party on the list in that district (referring to centralized personalization) and those without (referring to decentralized personalization). This dummy variable is named ‘List electoral leader (EL)’ and has a value of 1 if the electoral leader was a candidate for the party in the district at stake.

The electoral leader is operationalized here as the person who participated to the final television debate at the end of the electoral campaign. In order to guarantee comparability, we always analyze the debate on the public television chains (one Flemish and one Francophone chain). In most cases, but not always, this person coincides with the party chairman (see also: Pilet & Wauters, 2014). In eight out of 57 cases, the electoral leader is not the party chairman (but mostly a prominent member

\[^4\] Only at the 2007 elections, there was no general final debate on the public television in Flanders. Alternatively, we take (only for these elections) the general debate which was broadcasted by the commercial television. For other election years, not always a final debate was held by the commercial broadcaster, which renders them not suitable for an analysis over time.
of the government playing a leading role in the electoral campaign). For smaller parties
not invited for this television debate, we always take the party chairman.

The percentage of incumbents is also calculated for each party in each district. We take
into account the incumbent members of the Chamber, but also candidates who are at
the moment of the elections a member of the Senate or of one of the regional
parliaments. Also ministers (either at the federal or regional level) were considered as
incumbents. This variable is named ‘%-Incumbent (%INC)’.

Finally, for the type of party, we use a dichotomous variable (labelled ‘Traditional party
(TP)’): either traditional party or new party. Traditional parties are the three older
party families that have already been created in the 19th century: Christian-democrats,
socialists and liberals. These parties have dominated all Belgian cabinets since the
adoption of universal franchise in Belgium in 1893 and have together delivered all
Belgian Prime ministers. Since almost all Belgian parties are split up in a separate
Flemish party and a French-speaking party, this category contains six parties. All the
other parties are considered as new parties. We further distinguish between new left
and right parties, which we define as parties respectively at the left\(^5\) and the right\(^6\) of
the established parties (i.e. CD&V/CDH, sp.a/PS and Open-VLD/MR). By looking at this
variable, we will be able to assess the differential effect of the success of new parties.

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\(^5\) Ecolo, Groen, PTB and PVDA

\(^6\) FN, PP and Vlaams Belang
Empirical analysis

Descriptive analysis

Does the presence of an electoral leader on a list makes a difference in the proportion of voters opting for a preference vote? We know from Figure 1 that preferential voting in general is in decline. For a more detailed analysis, we split up the valid vote ballots into three categories: list votes (i.e. a vote for the party instead of for candidates), preferential votes for the head of list (irrespective of whether also votes for other candidates were casted), and preferential votes for other candidates than the head of list.

[ Insert Figure 3 ]

Figure 3 sketches a very revealing picture in two ways. First of all, the percentages of list votes (in black) gradually grow for parties in districts without an electoral leader (bars labeled ‘other’). While this percentage was still below 40 % in 2003, it is now (in 2014) above 50 %. In districts where an electoral leader is present on the list (bars labeled ‘leader’), on the contrary, the same evolution could not be found. Instead, for these districts figure 3 shows a pattern of stability: about 33 %, both in 2003 and 2014.
This indicates that the weakening in preferential voting is mainly due to a decline in decentralized personalization.

Secondly, we observe that in districts with a leader, the share of votes going to the head of list (in grey) gradually increases (with 2010 as an exception). In 2003 on average about 40% of the voters voted for the head of list in these districts, while in 2014 more than 50% of voters did so. In contrast, for the other districts, stability in terms of votes for the head of list can be noted.

If we combine these two insights, we can state that in districts with an electoral leader, voters do not more often cast a preference vote (instead of a list vote), but preference voters are more likely than before to choose the head of list. In districts without an electoral leader, the inverse appears to be true: voters are not more likely nor less likely to vote for the head of list, but they increasingly vote for the party, at the expense of preference votes for ordinary candidates. Perhaps, the list vote functions here as a sort of surrogate for a vote for the leader who is not allowed to be a candidate in this district.\(^7\)

*Explanatory analysis*

\(^7\) Note that also the opposite might be true: a preferential vote only for the electoral leader functions as a surrogate for a vote for the party. At the 2014 Chamber elections, for instance, in general 36% of preference voters voted only for the head of list, and in districts with electoral leaders, this percentage raised to about 50% (Wauters et al, 2015). These voters do not cast additional votes for other candidates, but simply tick the ballot of the head of list.
We now move over to the explanatory analysis. Here, we focus again on the general variable, i.e. the proportion of preferential votes cast (which is the complement of the proportion of list votes) by party in a district. We use a multilevel model with 319 individual lists at the first level and 16 parties at the second level (Table 1). We test four models: a model with time and the three main explanatory variables: electoral leader, incumbency and traditional party (M1), the same model with interactions between leader and year of election (M2), a model in which we have add interactions between incumbency and year of election (M3), and finally a model in which we have added an interaction between leader and traditional party (M4). In each of the models we include fixed controls for district to control for factors such as district magnitude and party system fragmentation.

[ Insert Table 1]

The multivariate analysis confirms the general decrease of the proportion of preferential votes in the last federal elections. Generally speaking individual candidates received, compared to 2003, fewer preferential votes in 2007, and even much fewer in 2010 and 2014. In total, the share of preference votes went down from 66.5 % in 2003 to 61.3 % in 2007, 57.5 % in 2010 and 57.0 % in 2014. Personalization in general appears to decrease over the last decade. However, this decrease is
neutralized on lists with an electoral leader. Lists with an electoral leader score significantly higher on preferential votes than lists without such a leader (\(B = 11.17^{***}\) in Model 1 (M1)). This general finding confirms H1a. Moreover, we may also observe that the importance of electoral leaders has grown over time (H1b and H1c). More precisely, their impact has been particularly strong in 2014 as revealed by the interaction of ‘lists with an electoral leader’ and ‘time’ in model 2. The conditional effect of a list with an electoral leader is significantly stronger in 2014 (\(B_{\text{cond}} = 6.20+13.22 = 19.42^{***}\) in M2) than in 2003 (\(B_{\text{cond}} = 6.20\) in M2). This is clearly visualized in the interaction plot in Figure 4.

[ Insert Figure 4 ]

It seems that voters who cannot cast a vote for the electoral leader choose to vote for the party rather than for another candidate on the list. Obviously, we cannot strictly prove that the latter is causing the former, but it is intriguing that the two complementary evolutions appear at the same time and go in opposite directions. Moreover, we can make the complementary causal linkage between the two forms of personalization more plausible if we control for the effect of alternative explanations.

Firstly, it might be that the underlying explanation of this diverging personalization trends is related to changes in the Belgian electoral system (H2b). Because electoral
leaders are almost always incumbents, the electoral leader effect could be a derivative of a more general incumbency effect. Given that from 2007 onwards candidates can no longer simultaneously run for different elections and given that in 2014 both regional and federal elections were held on the same day, the number of incumbents that are available for the Chamber lists decreased substantially. As a consequence the proportion of preferential votes would go down. As could be expected, lists with a higher percentage of incumbents receive more preferential votes (B= 0.19*** in M1). Interestingly, this effect becomes stronger in the elections of 2010 (B_{cond}= 0.01+0.28= 0.29*** in M3) and 2014 (B_{cond}= 0.01+0.29= 0.30*** in M3). Especially in 2014, when both regional, federal and European elections were coinciding and candidates could participate in only one of them, this strong conditional effect could be the result of the dilution of a smaller group of incumbents over more electoral lists. This effect can be seen as a prove that also decentralized personalization is on the rise. However, even more importantly, the incumbency effects do not discard the important bonus in terms of preferential votes for lists with electoral leaders. The effects for lists with an electoral leader stay almost intact in model 3 where we introduce the incumbency and time interactions. Again, in particular in 2014, the effect of the electoral leaders remains highly significant.
In models 3 and 4 we test a second alternative explanation: the decreasing electoral appeal of established parties who traditionally attract most preference votes. If newer challenger parties are becoming increasingly popular, this could have a negative effect on the proportion of preferential votes, because newer parties have fewer local and national incumbents on their lists. Indeed, both leftist and rightist new(er) party lists generally receive much smaller proportions of preferential votes. The effects are very strong (B = -16.30*** and B = -22.55*** in M3). Moreover, given that the effect does not differ significantly over time and given that the support for traditional parties has declined substantially in the last elections, the decreasing electoral appeal of the traditional parties definitely is a credible explanation for the decreasing preferential vote proportion. However, also this alternative explanation does not overrule the importance of the positive ‘list with electoral leader’-effect. On the contrary, the popularity of newer parties seems to strengthen the electoral leader effect, as the effect of the variable ‘list electoral leader’ is stronger among the lists of the traditional parties (cross-level interactions B = 3.35 and 8.90*** in M4). However, because only for the rightist new(er) parties the interaction is statistically significant we find confirmation for the more specific H4b. Moreover, our findings are very robust, as the model remains analogous if the lists of the N-VA, the strongest challenger party, are eliminated from the dataset (not in table).
In sum, the diminishing electoral appeal of the traditional parties seems both to lead to a decrease of decentralized personalization as well as to an increase of centralized personalization. Since, no alternative explanations account for this finding, it seems highly plausible that there exists a negative causal relationship between the two.

Conclusion

While personalization seems to imply a general notion of steady growth, our longitudinal analysis of Belgian election data points out that actually increase as well as decline are involved. The kind of personalization (centralized versus decentralized) is of crucial importance in this respect. Over the last four Belgian federal elections the number of preferential votes has decreased. However, when we look at the kind of preferential votes that are casted we noted two opposite trends: the degree of decentralized personalization –voting for ordinary candidates- has gone down significantly, while the degree of centralized personalization –voting for party leaders- has increased significantly.

Our findings suggest that centralized personalization, the increasing electoral appeal of the leaders, might be a cause of the decline in decentralized personalization. The underlying logic is simple: many voters want to vote for the electoral leader who is the
figurehead of the party in the election, but they cannot because the leader is not on
the ballot list in their district. In this situation they prefer to vote for the party instead
of voting for another candidate who does not have the same appeal as the electoral
leader. Furthermore, while personalization is often perceived to be a cause of party
dealignment, our analyses seem to indicate that notably the dealignment of the
traditional parties goes together with a decrease of decentralized personalization and
an increase in centralized personalization. The broader consequence of this finding is
that the democratic legitimacy of other members of the party is further diminished, at
the expense of the leader. Most votes are inspired by an evaluation of a handful
electoral leaders, even if in practice voters cannot vote for them. These findings
corroborate Poguntke and Webb’s idea of a presidentialization of politics in
parliamentary democracies. Leaders are being reinforced at the expense of individual
politicians (Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

The obvious question is how much these findings are exportable beyond the case of
Belgium. There are a few peculiarities on preferential voting in the Belgian electoral
system. First, the Belgian electoral system does not allow leaders to run as candidate
all over the country. Second, Belgian voters have the opportunity to decide between a
list vote and a preference vote for one or several candidates. They are not forced to
cast a preference votes for at least one candidate.
These two elements could lead some to wonder whether our findings are only applicable to Belgium. A more careful look at lists PR electoral systems in Europe, however, shows that the Belgian rules are not so uncommon. On the first aspect, the question is whether there is a nationwide tier with the same list of candidates running all across the country. In only four European countries this is the case: Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary and Slovakia. In the vast majority of countries using list PR, candidates are running in only one district, and not nationwide. In these countries, the situation of a voter motivated by the party leader but not finding his name on the ballot in his district is therefore rather common, and the tension between centralized and decentralized personalization can also be found there.

On the second dimension – compulsory versus optional preference voting, it also appears that Belgium is not a unique case. Besides Belgium, there are seven countries where preferential voting is optional: Austria, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and evidently Belgium. In other words, in several countries voters that do not find the name of the party leader on their ballot could decide not to cast any preference vote at all. As the weight of party leaders is

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8 Details of European electoral systems could be found on the website of the project Electoral System Changes in Europe (ESCE): [http://www.electoralsystemchanges.eu/](http://www.electoralsystemchanges.eu/)

9 Formally-speaking, the Dutch territory is divided into several subnational districts and parties are allowed to present different lists in each of the districts as well as identical lists everywhere. In practice, Dutch parties opt for the latter and present (almost) identical lists in all districts.
increasing, there would be a growing proportion of ballots without any preference votes. It would definitely be worth verifying whether the evolution illustrated here is indeed also found in other European countries.

Finally, beyond question of the electoral system, there is also another point on which findings in the Belgian case could be relevant comparatively, namely the impact of newer parties on the prominence of centralized personalization over decentralized personalization. Newer parties have less prominent candidates and their leaders are therefore more important as they are the only ones known by a large share of the electorate. As a consequence, they have more voters who opt for a list vote when the leader is not on their ballot in their district. The emergence of newer parties has been strong in Belgium over the last two elections, but the growth of these newer players is not unique to Belgium. In many European countries, they are on the rise, while traditional parties are facing difficult times. One could see it in Greece with Syriza, in Spain with Podemos and Ciudadanos, in Italy with the 5-stars movement, in Finland with the Finns Party, in the Netherlands with Geert Wilders’ PVV, in Denmark with the Liberal Alliance, in Sweden with the Sweden Democrats. Many of these newer parties rely upon one or two popular leaders, rather than on a broad base of experienced politicians. They have less MPs and also fewer locally anchored politicians to boost the party. Therefore, their success would overall fasten the growth of centralized
personalization at the expenses of decentralized personalization. Previous studies showed that for some new parties, such as the ecologist parties, leader effects were less prominent Aardal & Binder (2011). Perhaps, the recent flux of new parties differs from the rise of the green parties, in the sense that the former are embracing strong leadership more than the latter. Our study indicates that in particular for new(er) parties on the right side of the political spectrum political leaders are more important to attract preferential votes. Future studies on different types of new parties are needed to confirm this thesis for the left populist parties that are on the rise in many European countries.

All these elements lead us to believe that what has been observed in Belgium is not unique. Personalization may indeed be going up to some extent. But, going back to the distinction proposed by Balmas and colleagues (2014), not all forms of personalization are on the rise. We find that in terms of voting behavior centralized personalization is growing, while decentralized personalization is going down simultaneously. In that sense, an overall decline in candidate voting could actually be a sign of a further personalization of politics rather than contradicting it.
List of references


Table 1. Multilevel model: Proportion of preferential votes Belgian federal elections 2003-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUAL LIST</th>
<th>M1 Coef.</th>
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<th>M2 St.Er.</th>
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Intercept & Fixed District Controls Only-model: CONSTANT= 64.59 (3.68); σ PARTY= 12.67 and σ LIST= 8.15; 319 lists and 16 parties. *: P<0.10; **: P<0.05; ***: P<0.01
Figure 1. Share of valid ballot marked with at least one preference vote for the elections of the federal Chamber of Representatives, the federal Senate, the Flemish Parliament and the Walloon Parliament (1995-2014).

Source: Own analyses on official election results
Figure 2. Average percentage of preference votes per party in a district (Chamber elections 2003-2014).

Source: Own analyses on official election results.
Figure 3. Percentage of list votes, preference votes for head of list and preference votes for other candidates, split up in districts with an electoral leader (‘leader’) and districts without an electoral leader (‘other’), 2003-2014.

Source: Own analyses on official election results
Figure 4. Interaction plot of electoral leader and election year 2003-2014.