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Leader Change, Time in Office and the Determinants of Voter Perceptions

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There is a significant literature on the role of both parties and leaders in electoral politics and a broad understanding of the strength of the relationship between the two in voters' minds. However, less has been done to determine if there is systematic variation in whether voters see a party and its leader as one and the same. I address this question by using the Comparative Study of Electoral System to measure the impact of leader changes on voter perceptions. I find that new leaders are less likely to be evaluated according to the party they represent, with some evidence that maintaining the same leader over a long period of time increases the association between leader and party.

Keywords: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Leader Evaluations, Party Organisation, Political Parties, Presidentialisation, Voter Perceptions

Angela Merkel has been the chancellor candidate for the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in every election since 2005. Whereas, their main rivals the Social Democratic Party (SPD) have fielded a different candidate every time. There are examples across various democracies of parties who maintain the same leader over consecutive elections and parties who regularly change. While recent research has shown that leader changes matter for how parties' policies are understood (Somer-Topcu, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019), there is limited information on how they affect voters' perceptions of the relationship between party and leader. For example, are evaluations of Angela Merkel and the CDU more likely to align because of her longevity in the role compared with the instability of the SPD leadership?

This article examines the determinants of voters' evaluations of party leaders. Although there is a substantial literature on this, little attention has been paid to how a change in leader could impact the evaluation process. We know that voters' opinions of a leader's party play a substantial role in how they evaluate that

leader. However, we have a limited understanding of when party evaluation would matter more, or less, for leader evaluations across elections and countries. This article offers a solution to this puzzle by taking into account leader changes.

There is currently a burgeoning literature on the importance of individual actors in electoral politics (Adam and Maier, 2010). Key to this literature is the attempt to disentangle leaders and parties in the minds of voters (van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010; Garzia, 2013a,b; Bellucci *et al.*, 2015; Garzia and De Angelis, 2016). This is an important task because voting behaviour models often rely on the assumption that party and leader evaluations are exogenous. If taking into account leader changes show there is spill over between the two measures, this casts doubt on the relatively unimportant role leader effects supposedly play in the electoral calculus. Additionally, previous research (Wagner and Weßels, 2012) has suggested that congruence between party and leader is electorally beneficial for parties. So, understanding if parties can make changes to encourage this could have practical implications. Furthermore, as the leader is the person who will primarily represent the party, and in many contexts is competing to become prime minister, the extent to which voters associate her with their party has implications for how easy it may be for a leader to either embrace or reject their party's image.

The main expectation of this article is that leader changes can impact the extent to which the leader and party are evaluated similarly. A party and its leader are connected in a variety of ways: leaders have an impact on their party's organisation and policy stances, and feature heavily in election campaigns and the media. Evidence suggests that voters are keenly aware of this (Sommer-Topcu, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez and Sommer-Topcu, 2019). However, research has also shown that leader changes can impact perceptions of both. This allows for the possibility that the extent to which leaders and their parties are perceived as connected can alter according to whether there has been a change in leadership.

To address these expectations, I use modules 1, 3 and 4 of the Comparative Study of the Electoral Systems (CSES) from 1996 to 2016 including 26 countries and 55 elections. Module 2 was omitted from the analysis because it does not include leader evaluations. These data are ideal for studying this topic as it enables comparison on a large scale over multiple elections. It also includes a relatively wide number of respondent characteristics that are theoretically appropriate to this topic, reducing the potential for estimation bias.

I show that while voters are very likely to evaluate parties at the same, or a similar level, to leaders, it varies depending on whether the leader is new or not. Additionally, leaders who represent a party across several elections are more likely to be evaluated at a similar level to their party, although this relationship is not entirely linear.

This article is structured as follows. First, I review the literature on parties and their leaders. Secondly, I establish my contribution to the literature by proposing

the importance of leader change. Thirdly, I outline my theoretical framework and use this body of literature to form my hypotheses. After this I introduce the data and methodology employed. Fourthly, I move on to the findings in two stages: first discussing the effects of a new leader on voters' evaluations of them and secondly, the effect that length of time in office has on this relationship. Finally, I discuss the implication of these findings and offer some suggestions for further research.

1. Parties and their leaders

Parties and their leaders are fundamental to the study of electoral politics and there is a substantial literature on both. Traditional models of voting behaviour, such as the Michigan Model, point to the importance of political parties for attitude formation and ultimately vote choice (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). Multiple subsequent studies have confirmed these findings, often claiming the impact of other factors, such as leaders, to be minimal (King, 2002; Karvonen 2010; Curtice and Hunjan, 2013). For example, Holmberg and Oscarsson (2013) analyse the importance of party effects on vote choice in 30 countries, noting that they are so strong in some countries as to render leader effects trivial.

However, more recent studies provide evidence that leaders are potentially more important than previously thought (Evans and Andersen, 2005; Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Bittner, 2018; Mellon *et al.*, 2018). The work of Garzia (2012, p. 177) is particularly assertive on this point, claiming that previous studies have overlooked the extent to which there is reciprocal causation. In other words, the extent to which leaders could inform voters' views of parties rather than the other way around has been underestimated. This body of literature points to the extent to which it is possible for party and leader to be entangled in voters' minds. There is a particular focus on parliamentary democracies, where the concept of 'presidentialization' has been put forward. Here, scholars posit that parliamentary democracies are coming to resemble presidential democracies with regards to the power of leaders, potentially resulting in autonomy from the party and the personalisation of the electoral process (Webb and Poguntke, 2013; Ferreira da Silva, 2019).

Regardless of the causal direction—whether leaders influence parties or the other way around—it is clear from the literature that leader and party are closely associated with one another and should therefore receive similar evaluations. It is not necessary to make claims regarding causal direction in order to analyse the extent of the relationship. Several studies use cross-sectional data to measure this, all reinforcing its strength (Tverdova, 2010; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2013; Daoust *et al.*, 2021). Wagner and Weßels (2012) suggest that party and leader evaluations are not competing, but reinforce one another. Leaders regarded as

the personification of their party are more likely to enhance the party message and therefore a match between leader and party is not only likely, but also desirable from the party's perspective.

Putting this into the context of surveys, if a voter rates a party 10 out of 10, it is highly unlikely that his evaluation of the party's leader would be 4, for example. Although it should be possible to maintain contrary views of a party and its leader, there is little reason for respondents to do so and evidence that in fact it is cognitively easier to see both as matching (Davies and Mian, 2010). The way in which voters collect information reaffirms this viewpoint: parties and their personnel are repeatedly shown side by side (Wagner and Weßels, 2012). For example, the change in ideological position of the Labour party in the 1990s is often attributed to Tony Blair's leadership. Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019) provide evidence that voters take notice of these changes, particularly when parties are led by a new face. This suggests that attitudes towards a party and its leader can move in parallel. Additionally, the persistence of partisanship reinforces the connection between institution and individual. Even when controlling for party thermometer score and ideology, partisanship is dominant: right-wing identifiers prefer right-wing leaders and vice versa for left-wing identifiers (Bittner, 2011). Furthermore, leaders from different parties are often viewed as adversaries competing against one another, and widespread partisan loyalty increases this perception (Schoen, 2007).

Bittner (2011) utilises data from seven advanced democracies over a period of 40 years. Looking at the impact of voter characteristics on leader evaluations she finds that socio-demographic variables have a relatively limited impact. They are dwarfed by the influence of party identity and ideology, which play a major role in evaluations of both leaders' character and competence. Bittner's findings suggest that voters' attachment to a party is highly related to assessments of that party's leader; as a result, socio-demographic variables are unlikely to matter much when this is accounted for.

Wagner and Weßels (2012) use post-election studies to look at the relationship between leader and party evaluations in Germany from 1998 to 2009 and find a marked increase in the correlation coefficient (from 0.69 to 0.78). This demonstrates a coevolution of party and leader evaluations. Even if parties have a leader who is particularly liked or disliked at any given election, party evaluations usually fit accordingly. This is in line with findings by Tverdova (2010) who finds that of those who feel represented by a party and a leader, 80% feel represented by the leader of the party they feel represented by Daoust *et al.*'s (2021) use three waves of the CSES to look at whether voters usually prefer the leader from their preferred party. They find that most voters have congruent preferences. In fact, there is no country where incongruent voters are the majority, although it ranges from around 35% in Switzerland to around 5% in Hungary.

In addition to observational studies, van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2010) use counterfactual thought experiments asking respondents to assess whether they would change their vote for a party if the candidate of that party changes. Although they do not focus on leaders, there is another way of measuring the relationship between party and person in the minds of voters. If they are strongly associated, then a different candidate should not have a substantial impact on vote choice because individuals that represent a party should all be viewed in a similar light. Accordingly, they find that most voters put party over person. This is moderated by, predictably, party identification. Those who are party identifiers are more likely to stick with the party regardless of the candidate.

However, given the decline in the number of party identifiers across multiple democracies, many voters will now have to look elsewhere when it comes to evaluating leaders (Dalton, 2012; Garzia, 2013*b*). If party identity cannot be relied on to the same extent, then current evaluations towards parties, which are more likely to be informed by short-term factors, are likely to play a larger role. In a context where party identity is less commonplace, it is less likely to limit the effects of party evaluations on leader evaluations (Schoen, 2007). Therefore, we can expect more unstable factors such as leader changes to feature in how voters perceive the relationship between party and leader.

Although leaders and parties are widely regarded as matching in the minds of voters, previous studies have either been limited to single or a small number of cases. Or, in the case of Daoust *et al.* (2021), the focus is different from what I intend in this article. Their study focuses on what determines whether voters prefer a leader from a different party. In this article, I have a broader scope: what moderates whether voters regard party and leader as interconnected, not just for the party they prefer, but for all parties and leaders evaluated. Despite the prevalence of questions on both leaders and parties in surveys (Bittner, 2011, p. 28), to the knowledge of this author, this question has never been directly addressed. In addition to this, studies often omit factors regarding the leaders which are exogenous to how voters perceive them. I draw on recent research (Somer-Topcu, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019) to show the role we can expect leader changes to play in the process of evaluating leaders.

2. Party leader changes and voter perceptions

As shown above, we would expect voters to rely heavily on their attitude towards a party when evaluating its leader. However, it is reasonable to expect that whoever the current leader is can impact the extent to which they are associated with the party. For example, using data from the 2011 Finnish election, Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund (2014) show that the popular leader of the True Finn party, Timo Soini, due to a concentration of power, was able to maintain unity

among party candidates, leading to a coherent party message fashioned in his image. The party's initial success gives credence to Wagner and Weßels's (2012) notion that a party leader should be the personification of his party.

Current research on the extent to which voters change how they evaluate leaders from election to election provides an inconclusive explanation of why this is the case. Using data from German election studies, Schoen (2007, p. 329) suggests that elite actions may play a role: 'the minimal correlations between candidate evaluations in 1994 coincide with the nomination of a not very well-known politician by the Social Democrats'. Additionally, looking at the same country, Wagner and Weßels (2012) show fluctuation in the extent to which the means of party and leader evaluations match. While they note that both change relative to each other across elections and between parties, they offer no systematic explanation as to why this is the case.

Therefore, it is probable that in order to make progress on our understanding of the extent to which parties and leaders are entangled in the minds of voters, more attention should be paid to the aspects of leadership that are exogenous to how voters perceive them. A simple measure of this is to look at how the nature of leader evaluations changes when the leaders themselves change. This is pertinent, because if leader change can alter the underlying determinants of leader evaluations then not only does it show that voters are aware of the personnel change itself, but also of the consequences this can have for extent to which a leader is the product of her party. To dissociate leader and party in light of a leadership change is a rational perspective on behalf of the voter, because new leaders are less likely to have had time to make the institutional and programmatic changes that mould the party in their image.

Recent research has highlighted the overlooked importance of leader changes on voters' perceptions. For example, drawing upon data from seven parliamentary European democracies, Somer-Topcu (2017) shows that when parties change leader, voter disagreement surrounding party policy decreases. In other words, increased attention on the leader and party following a change in personnel results in a renewed awareness among voters. In addition to this, Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019) apply the role of leader change to party ideology also finding that change can increase the accuracy of voter understanding of parties' ideological position.

I build on this by applying this mechanism to voter evaluations of party leaders. The central argument regarding the causal mechanism across the two aforementioned studies is that leader change is informational. There is likely to be an increased media focus on a new leader and a sense of renewal, where the new leader can contrast their approach to their predecessors (Somer-Topcu, 2017, p. 68). In the context of this article, the informational role that a leader change plays is to clarify the separation of leader and party as political objects. The longer

leaders are in power the more they become indistinguishable from the party they represent. To evaluate party and leader as the same is the more accurate option in this case, given the impact leaders' have on their party (Bittner, 2011). A leader change initiates a period in which leaders can be evaluated on a more independent basis, although given the prominence of parties in political life, their influence is still considerable.

A new leader brings with them a considerable amount of uncertainty when it comes to the direction of the party they lead. Furthermore, this uncertainty is compounded by the fact that new leaders are likely to attract more media attention (Gomibuchi, 2001) and use this exposure to distance themselves from the party's direction under the previous leader. New leaders are also often appointed following electoral failure, increasing the likelihood that the new leader is going to want to distance themselves from certain actions that occurred prior to their appointment. As we know that leader change leaders can affect voter's perceptions, they are likely to recognise that party and leader are not as aligned when a new person is at the head of the party. As such, hypothesis 1 has been formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Voters are less likely to evaluate new leaders according to how they evaluate the leaders' party.

It is reasonable to expect that the effect of having the same leader will increase from election to election. It can take time for leaders to instigate changes to the party organisation and programmes, therefore, voter evaluations of party and leader may take several election cycles to align. Contrarily, a new leader at every election offers less continuity to voters, and the media spotlight on a new face may encourage voters to assess party and leader differently. In addition to this, Schoen (2007) provides evidence that the repeated exposure of election campaigns brings attitudes towards parties and leaders into line with one another. Fielding the same leader at every election is likely to have the same effect, but over a longer period.

Hypothesis 2: The longer a party leader remains in office the more similarly voters evaluate them to the party they represent.

3. Data and methods

This article uses three modules of the CSES, from 1996 to 2016. All surveys included in the CSES are post-election. Module 2 has been excluded because there is no question on leader evaluations. As I am interested in legislative elections in parliamentary democracies, countries that use presidential or semi-presidential systems have been excluded from the analysis. Subsequently, the data used

include 26 countries and 55 elections. These are listed in full, along with all party leaders, in Supplementary Appendix 1.

In order to measure the specific relationship between respondent and leaders across different parties, the data were then transformed into a stacked matrix. As a result, the units of analysis become respondent*leader combinations. As advised in previous studies, the models presented were estimated with clustered robust standard errors in order to account for intra-class correlation (van der Eijik, 1996; Garzia and De Angelis, 2016). All models are multi-level linear models with random intercepts where individual responses are nested within individuals, which are nested within elections.

In order to capture voters' perceptions of party leaders, the first dependent variable is a like–dislike scale where respondents are asked to evaluate leaders from 0 to 10. Secondly, the absolute difference between party and leader evaluations is calculated from this and recoded so that 10 is where respondents have scored party and leader the same and 0 the opposite. Furthermore, the three key independent variables measure party evaluations (using party thermometer score) and leader change. The former is measured on the same scale as leader evaluation, with 0 representing completely negative and 10 representing completely positive opinions. New leader is a dummy variable measuring whether a party went into the current election with the same leader it had at the previous election or not. In addition to this, length since leader change is measured through the variable time in office, which is a count of the number of months since a party last changed leader. Information on leaders was obtained from relevant secondary literature and online newspaper archives.

In addition to using hierarchical models, control variables have been included at both the individual and party level in order to account for estimation bias concerning the effect of both party thermometer score and new leaders. First, beyond party thermometer score, party identity and ideological proximity are two additional ways in which voters are likely to use their opinion of the party to evaluate the party's leader. Party identity is simply a dummy a variable where respondents have been asked the question 'Which party do you feel closest to?'. This was then coded accordingly for the party of each leader respondents evaluated. Ideological proximity was the result of subtracting respondents' own score on a scale of 0–10, where 0 represents furthest left and 10 represents further right, from the score given to parties on the same scale. This was then recoded so 0 represents no distance from the party ideologically, and 10 represents the most.

Political knowledge is included as a control as it is likely to factor in how much respondents know about, and therefore the extent to which they can accurately evaluate, a leader. Political knowledge scores are obtained from the number of correct answers to questions in the CSES asking about the politics of the country the respondent is from. In modules 1 and 3 of the CSES, a fewer number of

questions are included compared with module 4. As a result, the scores have been standardised in order to compare across modules. Additionally, socio-demographic controls are included at the individual level with age measured in years, education measured on a 5-point scale where 0 represents no schooling and 4 represents university education, and gender as a dummy variable with 0 for male and 1 for female.

Finally, at the party level, I control for party size. This is to account for the fact that parties of different sizes are often regarded differently by both voters and more importantly the media. As a result, leaders of smaller parties are less likely to receive attention, presenting the possibility that voters are unaware that there has been a change in leader. To control for this, I include a variable measuring the vote share for each party. Descriptive statistics on all variables are included in Supplementary Appendix 2.

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the correlation between party and leader evaluations for each election included in the sample. The average correlation between leader and party is 0.78 with a standard deviation of 0.07. Correlations range from 0.91 in the 2015 Turkish election to 0.59 in the 2011 Swiss election. There are some countries where it is likely that the association between leader and party is generally lower, such as Switzerland, where for 2007 and 2011 correlation was 0.59 and 0.61,

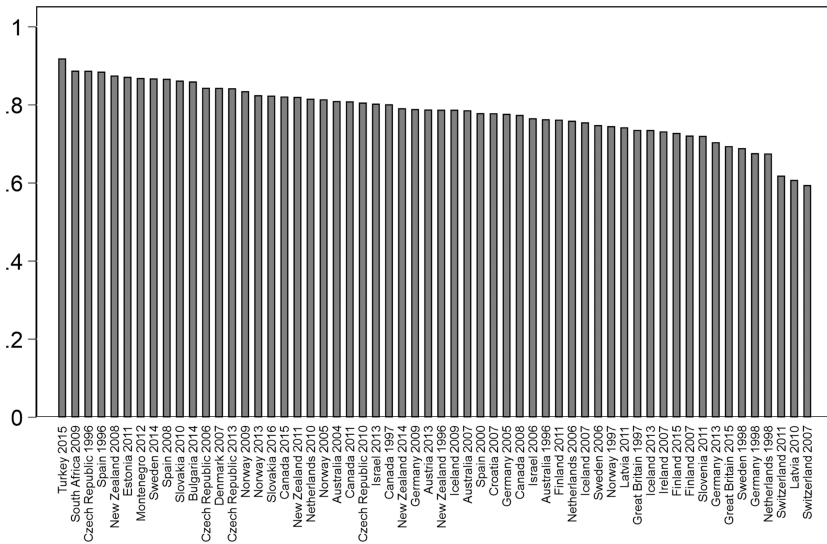


Figure 1. Correlation between party and leader evaluation by election.

respectively. Equally, there are also countries where correlation is likely to be generally higher, such as Slovakia, where correlation in 2010 and 2016 was 0.86 and 0.82, respectively.

Nonetheless, there is a clear variation between elections, which requires further multivariate analysis. To this end, I have constructed a multi-level linear model looking at the determinants of leader evaluations. The results of this can be seen in Table 1. First, as expected, party thermometer has a positive and significant impact on leader evaluations: the higher you evaluate a party the higher you are likely to evaluate that leader’s party. This also applies to party identity, where identifying with a party increases the likelihood of giving the leader a higher evaluation. Furthermore, leader evaluations are in part explained by ideological proximity, where considering yourself as ideologically aligned with a party generally increases your favourability towards the leader of that party. One drawback of this data is that there is no separate ideological scale on which respondents can place leaders. Therefore, it is possible that the model is underestimating the extent to which ideology plays a role given that there are numerous examples of leaders whose ideological outlook differs substantially from their party mainstream.

However, it is possible to account for whether a leader is new or not, and the results suggest that this fact has an impact on how voters evaluate leaders. To measure this, I have included two regression models, one restricted to evaluations of old leaders and one to evaluations of new leaders. The findings across both models are relatively similar, with some notable differences. Most importantly,

Table 1 Determinants of leader evaluations

	Old leader		New leader	
Party thermometer	0.76***	0.02	0.68***	0.02
Pid	0.25***	0.06	0.35***	0.06
Distance	-0.08***	0.01	-0.07***	0.01
Knowledge	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01
Party size	-0.002	0.01	0.001	0.005
Age	0.005***	0.001	0.005***	0.001
Female	-0.02	0.02	0.06*	0.03
Education	0.02	0.01	0.03**	0.01
Constant	1.29***	0.17	1.43**	0.12
N (elections)	53		54	
N (respondents)	49,692		50,767	
N (observations)	112,880		97,140	

Notes: Random intercept model. Table entries are unstandardised coefficients with random intercepts at election and respondent level. Clustered standard errors in parenthesis.

* p < 0.05;
 ** p < 0.01;
 *** p < 0.001.

the party thermometer coefficient is greater for old leaders than it is for new leaders. This suggests that party and leader evaluations are less likely to match when a new leader is in place, confirming hypothesis 1. In addition, party identity has more of an impact on evaluations of new leaders, in addition to all socio-demographic being positive and significant. The model is limited by data restrictions, and more variables should be tested in future research to understand whether they increase in importance as party thermometer decreases in importance when a new leader is in place. Nonetheless, the increased magnitude and higher number of significant variables suggest that voters are less reliant on party thermometer when evaluating new leaders, and other characteristics come into play.

Although these results suggest a difference in the way voters evaluate old and new leaders, the binary measure used here is crude and unable to detect a more complex relationship between evaluations and whether the length of time since there has been a change in leader has an impact. To this end, Table 2 looks at the percentage of leaders that are evaluated at the same, lesser and greater level as their parties by the length of time they have been in office. In keeping with expectations from hypothesis 2, 41.2% of leaders who have been in office between 10 and 14 years are evaluated the same as their party, compared with 37.5% of those who have led less than 5 years. However, leaders who have been in office 15 years or more are in fact less likely than newer leaders to be perceived as matching their parties, suggesting a quadratic relationship. This is perhaps due to a higher proportion (37.7%) evaluated as better than their parties and potentially speaks to a link between longevity and wider popularity.

To provide a multivariate test of hypothesis 2 and investigate the potentially quadratic relationship between time in office and matching party–leader evaluations, a regression of the absolute difference between the two evaluations has been calculated, with time in office measured in months as the key independent variable. The controls included are the same as in the model above. Both time in office and time in office² are included to account for a potentially non-linear relationship. Table 3 shows that the former measure is statistically significant and in

Table 2 Percentage of leaders rated equally, less, or better, than their parties, by time in office

	Time in office			
	0–4 years	5–9	10–14	> 15
Leader=Party	37.5	39.7	41.2	36.9
Leader<Party	29.9	25.6	24.6	25.4
Leader>Party	32.6	34.7	34.2	37.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3 Determinants of matching leader-party evaluations

Time in office	0.02***	0.001
Time in office ²	-3.24	1.73
Pid	0.23***	0.08
Distance	-0.001	0.01
Knowledge	0.03***	0.01
Party size	0.003*	0.001
Age	-0.0001	0.0004
Female	0.01	0.01
Education	0.01	0.01
Constant	8.64***	0.05
No. (elections)	55	
No. (respondents)	50,414	
No. (observations)	201,656	

Notes: Random intercept model. Table entries are unstandardised coefficients with random intercepts at election and respondent level. Clustered standard errors in parenthesis.

*p < 0.05;
 **p < 0.01;
 ***p < 0.001.

a positive direction, suggesting that the effect increases over time: the longer a leader is in office the more likely they are to be evaluated at the same level as their party. However, the predictive margins displayed in Figure 2 confirm that this relationship is quadratic. Although leaders become gradually more associated with

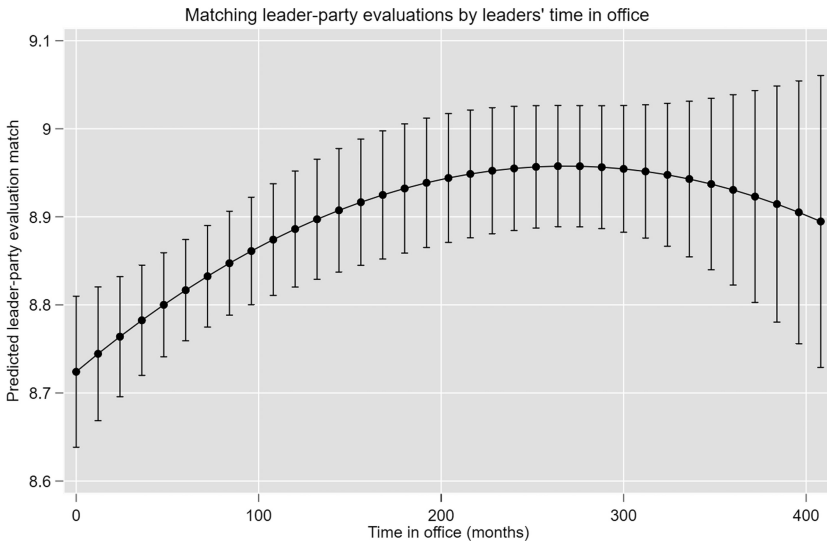


Figure 2. Predictive margins for time in office.

their parties to begin with, once they have been in office longer than 15 years, this relationship stabilises, with some evidence to suggest that it decreases when leaders have been in office a considerable amount of time.

To summarise, leader changes have a significant impact on the extent to which leaders and parties are entangled in voters' minds. As previous studies have suggested (Somer-Topcu, 2017; Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019) voters perceptions alter when parties change leader. My findings provide evidence that how voters evaluate leaders can change depending on whether the leader in question is new or not. New leaders are less likely to be judged according to the party represent, and the reverse is true for leaders who stood at the previous election. In addition, the length since leader change is also of importance. However, this relationship is not simply linear and does not necessarily hold for long-time leaders.

5. Discussion

Analysing the impact of leader changes in political science is not new. However, previous studies that aim to disentangle the complex relationship between leaders and parties in the minds of voters are surprisingly agnostic with regards to the impact of how long a leader has been in her post. In this article, I address the question of whether leader changes can alter the way in which voters evaluate leaders. While, given a change in personnel, we should expect the evaluations to change, little research has been conducted into how the process of evaluation changes. By looking at the impact of party thermometer on leader evaluations, I find that leaders who are in office over several election cycles are more closely associated with that party, although for leaders who exceed several decades, this relationship begins to break down. This means that newer leaders can expect a longer period in office to coincide with their image coming to 'fit' that of their party's.

Along with the work of Garzia (2012, 2013a,b) and other recent studies (Kriesi, 2012; Costa and Ferreira da Silva, 2015; Lobo and Ferreira da Silva, 2018; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2019), these results cast doubt on the perceived unimportance of leaders in electoral politics. As I show, depending on whether a leader is new or not, party and leader evaluations can be more, or less, aligned. As such, the effect of a leader who has represented their party over several elections is likely to be underestimated by vote choice models, because of how closely their evaluations correlate with their party's. Furthermore, leader changes need not be the only events that impact the voters' perception of the relationship between leader and party: party splits, personal scandals or the appointment of radical leaders are all possible avenues to explore when it comes to future research attempting to disentangle leader from party.

As these findings support previous research showing that leader changes can influence voter perceptions, there are a multitude of potential questions arising from this that require scholarly attention. For example, Wagner and Weßels (2012) pointed to the importance of leader and party matching when it comes to vote choice. My findings suggest that new leaders are at disadvantage here: they are not perceived to fit their parties to the same extent as leaders who have spent a longer time in the role. However, if a party has become particularly unpopular a new leader could seize on their advantage of having some perceived distance from that party in order to turn its fortunes around. Regardless of the direction that future research takes concerning the role of leaders in electoral politics, it is clear that both voter perceptions *and* facts concerning the leader that are exogenous to this need to be taken into account to further our understanding of their place in voters' attitude formation and vote choice.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Parliamentary Affairs* Online.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to report.

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