Non-alignment of party and leader sympathies: Do voters follow the party or the leader?

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Abstract

There is a common conception that party leaders have come to play a very significant role in the decision-making process of voters. However, the literature on the impact of leadership effects on vote choice provides no consensus in support of this claim. One problem about much of the research is that the causal direction between leader sympathy and party support is problematic, and the cross-sectional designs of many studies have seemed inadequate to the task of resolving the issue. In this paper we propose a novel solution. Many studies contain data on leader and party sympathies. We explore these, and in particular examine instances in which a voter thinks the party with the best leader is not the best party, or the best party does not have the best leader. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the European Voter project we ask: in such situations do voters follow the party or the leader? The findings suggest that, contrary to the ‘leaders matter’ argument, voters more often follow the party rather than the leader and there appears to be no consistent change in this tendency over time, but rather some trendless fluctuations.

Keywords: personalisation of politics, party leaders, causal direction, non-alignment of party and leader sympathies
1. Introduction

The common conception that party leaders have gained in importance at the expense of political parties in the decision-making process of the electorate is not uniformly supported by empirical evidence. There is certainly ample reason to believe that party leaders do make a difference in elections considering that motivations that bring voters to the polls have undergone large transformations in recent years. Moreover, the ways in which politics is presented has often changed the focus from parties to individual candidates whose character and competence have become much more important in a personalised campaign style and elections appear to have been turned into ‘beauty contests’ in which party leaders compete primarily in terms of image and style. Televised leadership debates and intense media campaigns attempt to convey information via individuals rather than focusing on complex policy issues. However, despite these reasons for leaders to matter, empirical results are rather mixed and do not lend consistent support to the ‘leaders matter’ argument. Findings vary between as well as within countries; some suggest that leaders may have been the decisive force that tipped the balance in favour of one party over another whereas others maintain that leader effects are negligible and do not add much to our understanding of voting behaviour.

One reason for this mismatch is the intimate relationship between party support and leader sympathy. The causal direction between the two is either disregarded or not sufficiently addressed. In the absence of rich panel data, it is almost impossible to settle on the way the causal arrow points, and such data would likely give us a window on just one or two countries at particular points in time. If we were to believe that leaders matter then we would have the causal arrow run from leader to party sympathy. If, however, closeness to/affiliation with a political party were still strong predictors of vote choice, then we would expect the causal direction to run from party to leader sympathy. This paper proposes a novel approach of disentangling the causal relationship by using the extensive sets of cross-sectional data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the European Voter (EV) project. Using party and leader sympathies, it aims to explore casual patterns by focussing on cases where party and leader evaluations diverge. For most voters the best party has the best leader, but for a significant groups of voters this is not the case. The analysis will address the following questions. First, if party and leader sympathies are not aligned, do voters follow the party or the leader? Second,
do we find a pattern or trend over time in this tendency? Our findings suggest that voters follow the party far more than proponents of strong leadership effects would lead us to suspect. Only in one country do voters follow the leader rather than the party and even in parliamentary systems with rather strong heads of the executive, we do not see voters following the leader. Moreover, looking at EV data over time, we do not find an increase in voters following the leader but rather some trendless fluctuations.

The paper will be structured as follows. First, we will provide a brief summary of the literature on leadership effects showing that empirical findings do not consistently support the ‘leaders matter’ argument. The following section will then in more detail look at the problem of causality and discuss several ways of disentangling the close causal relationship between party support and leader sympathy before proposing a novel approach of addressing this issue. The next section will look at data availability and outline the applied methodology and data preparation techniques. We will then discuss findings by presenting graphs that look at the non-alignment of party and leader sympathies over time as well as across countries. The final section will conclude and summarise the main findings.

2. Literature review

Even though early election studies such as in the UK (from 1964), Sweden (from 1979) and Germany (from 1961) have asked about party leaders in one way or another, little attention was paid to their potential influence on vote choice. Interest in their impact, however, grew in response to the emerging literature on the personalisation of politics and the ‘presidentialisation thesis’ (Mughan, 2000; Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Wattenberg, 1991), which argues that individuals have gained in importance at the expense of collective identities and that parliamentary systems increasingly follow a presidential logic of governance through which leadership is becoming more central and powerful.

Scholarly work on party leadership effects is based on two assumptions. First, with politics having become increasingly personalised, voters are paying more attention to individuals rather than collective identities. Voters in parliamentary systems with majoritarian electoral systems such as in the UK, are arguably more

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2 Some surveys include simple like-dislike questions whereas others probe further for the nature of leadership effects by asking what it is that respondents like or dislike about leaders (trait analysis).
susceptible to leadership effects because they choose parties on the basis of potential candidates for the executive post rather than considering the merits and policy platforms of their respective parties (Bean & Mughan, 1989; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 1979; Graetz & McAllister, 1987; Jenssen & Aalberg, 2006; Mughan, 2009; Stewart & Clarke, 1992). Yet, findings on this assumption are mixed within and across countries (see mixed findings on the UK: Bartle & Crewe, 2002; as against Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2004; Stewart & Clarke, 1992).

One might also argue that leaders matter less under majoritarian systems because voters are only faced with a choice of two policy platforms and are thus more likely to vote on the basis of issue preferences rather than party leaders. Leaders might be more important under PR systems because the choice is often between a lot more than two rival parties, so voters fall back on their respective leaders. Second, as fewer people identify with political parties, voters are searching for new shortcuts to obtain relevant information about whom to vote for, with party leaders arguably being the most prominent. Again, results are mixed with some finding no evidence in support of this claim (Curtice, 2003; Curtice & Blais, 2001) while others suggest that it is voters with strong party affiliations who display intense feelings towards party leaders (Karvonen, 2010) whereas the expectation would be that leaders matter more to those with weaker party affiliations.

Based on the assumptions that leaders matter more when vote choice is based on who will become the next Prime Minister and for those who display weak partisan affiliations, the literature on party leaders can generally be divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who argue in favour of direct leader effects, even going so far as to suggest that “public reactions to the leaders had sizable effects on electoral choice” (Stewart & Clarke, 1992, p. 447). Bean and Mughan (1989) argue that specific leader traits may have decided over victory and defeat at the 1987 Australian election with both Lobo (Lobo, 2006, 2008) and Clarke et al. (2004) also being strong supporters of leader effects. On the other hand, there are those who oppose the notion of leader effects with King (2002, p. 220), for example, noting that “personality factors determine election outcomes far less often than is usually, indeed almost universally, supposed”.

As one can easily see, there is still no consensus on whether and when leaders can make a difference and more importantly, what are the causal mechanisms that explain their influence. Little agreement has been reached as to whether leaders have
a direct effect on vote choice or whether this is mediated, or even mitigated, via the party as a whole. One also has to bear in mind that parties themselves take a vested interest in choosing an interesting and likeable person as their party leader in the first place. But how do we know whether voters like (and thus vote for) a party because they like its leader (leader effect) or whether they like a leader simply because he or she comprises part of the overall party package (party effect). Put differently, we need to acknowledge the fact that the relationship between leader approval and party support is a conditional and interdependent one and that we cannot ignore the intimate causal relationship between the two (Marsh, Sinnott, Garry, & Kennedy, 2008; Midtbø, 1997). Even though this appears to be mostly a UK phenomenon where party choice nowadays is arguably identical with voting for the next Prime Minister, the same case may be made for Germany where, despite a multi-party system, only the two largest parties will compete for providing the next head of the executive.

3. Theories of voting behaviour and the causal ordering of explanatory factors

Among other things, studies of voting behaviour vary in the extent to which they allow that parties and leaders can be separated in voters’ minds. Initially, affiliations with political parties were assumed to enter rather early into the decision-making process of the electorate while leaders were believed to play a marginal (if any) role. Early studies thus argued that voters were motivated by their partisan affiliation and expected to vote on the basis of such long-term predispositions, not necessarily disregarding but possibly downplaying the role of party leaders (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Rational choice theories of voting behaviour pioneered by Downs’ (1957) model of proximity voting is mainly concerned with party positioning and voter proximity, again leaving little room for leaders to matter. More recent work has focused attention on valence issues, party competence and leader performance while also looking at how voters acquire and process information to arrive at competent vote choices on the day of the election. Put succinctly, scholars have moved away from assuming vote choice to be mainly based on long-term predispositions, but have rather concluded that short-term forces such as party leaders may have come to play a greater role in explaining voting behaviour. This does not mean, however, that long-term predispositions such as affiliations with political parties are no longer meaningful at all in predicting/explaining vote choice. Instead, it suggests that importance of party
affiliations relative to short-term forces such as party leaders has changed, bearing in mind the idea that feelings of closeness towards parties should be brought back into the equation in the form of their leaders (Barisone, 2009; Garzia, 2011). In other words, party and leader sympathies cannot be looked at in isolation because they may be simultaneously determined by each other. The causal direction can plausibly run either way, making an accurate estimation of leadership effects difficult. Before discussing ways to disentangle the intimate causal relationship between party support and leader sympathy, the following section will focus on how the literature has dealt with this issue so far and the theoretical assumptions that underpin different types of leadership effects.

3.1. Theoretical assumptions: funnel of causality and recent challenges

Generally speaking, studies of voting behaviour are interested in how voters arrive at their vote choice and establishing the underlying processes and causal mechanisms that lead to their final decision. Long-term predispositions causally prior to more-short term forces were initially believed to be most influential whereas later accounts have argued that short-term forces such as party leaders may assume a much greater role in the decision-making process of the electorate. The main difference between early studies and later theories of voting behaviour is the point in time at which factors enter into decision-making calculus of voters. Put differently, the causal ordering of factors assumed to have an influence on vote choice varies among different theories.

Early studies of voting behaviour are based on the famous ‘funnel of causality’ in which proximate factors on vote choice are subject to explanations in terms of temporarily, and thus causally, prior forces (Campbell et al., 1960). More specifically, evaluations of party leaders might be in part explained by more general long-term partisan loyalties that existed long before a leader emerged as the “face” of a party. In line with the funnel of causality, Miller and Shanks (1990, 1992, 1996) developed a comprehensive recursive model, arranging commonly assumed factors that influence vote choice into six distinct causal stages. Based on the assumption that factors assigned to each stage may influence those in later stages, but not vice versa, they produced an elaborate and empirically testable model that accounts for both direct and indirect effects of several factors.
For so long as vote choice was assumed to be based on long-term predispositions, the impact of short-term forces such as party leaders received much less attention. Even though the funnel of causality was originally proposed for the American context with its two-party presidential system, it can easily be applied to parliamentary and multi-party systems. Not surprisingly, leaders did appear in the funnel of causality, albeit at the very last stage. In other words, evaluations of party leaders were considered most proximate to vote choice and causally prior factors such as party identification or economic evaluations were assumed to influence factors that appeared later in the causal ordering. The way in which voters viewed or evaluated leaders was in large part determined by what they thought of the party that they represented. Put simply, the causal arrow was assumed to run from party to leader sympathies and not much credit was given to a potentially direct effect of leaders on vote choice.

However, recent changes in the ways in which politics is presented and motivations that bring voters to the polls, the causal ordering originally proposed in a time of stable and long-term preferences may no longer be valid. Proponents of the ‘leaders matter’ argument would make a case for leaders to have a direct effect on vote choice, independent of how voters view the party. This would suggest that evaluations of long-standing and well-established parties might no longer precede those of their more ephemeral leaders in the decision-making process of the electorate, or at least feature in the voter’s mind to similar degrees. In today’s highly personalised campaign and political environment, the causal arrangement of factors assumed to influence vote choice inevitably requires adjustments to account for the potential impact of short-term forces. However, one needs to be very careful in defining the correct causal ordering which may not be applicable to all electoral circumstances and/or countries. For instance, Bartle and Crewe (2002) proposed a somewhat different, yet problematic, causal ordering in their contribution to King’s (2002) collection. They argue that “while party and leadership images are caused by the same variables, they do not in turn “cause” each other” (Bartle & Crewe, 2002, p. 80), thus to a degree ignoring the fact that party and leadership evaluations may be simultaneously determined by each other. Generally speaking, they opt for the possibility that party and leader sympathies separately lead to vote choice. This is where problems arise. If party and leader sympathies are simultaneously determined by each other, how can we separate their influence on vote choice? More specifically,
if we cannot determine which way the causal arrow points, how can we be certain that we are estimating a direct leadership effect, independent of how voters view the party? There are several ways to disentangle the close causal relationship between party and leader sympathies, some of which require experimental design studies or panel data to determine the correct causal ordering of the two. A novel approach proposed in this paper is straightforward, yet powerful, as it is based on like-dislike scores obtained from extensive cross-sectional data and by doing some simple calculations, we are able to determine whether voters are more inclined to follow the party or the leader when sympathies towards them do not coincide.

3.2. Analytical tools and statistical methods: experimental design studies, panel data and Granger causality tests

Empirical findings on the impact of party leaders on vote choice is mixed and does not consistently support the common conception that leaders have recently gained in importance. To understand why this is the case, we need to take a closer look at how scholars have approached the problem of reverse causation between party and leader sympathy. While some have ignored the possibility of their simultaneous determination (Bartle & Crewe, 2002), others have sought to address the close causal relationship by using a variety of different methods.

For example, to gain internal validity of the research, experimental design studies on leadership effects would allow for the isolation of an effect of leader popularity from that of party popularity. Experiments are particularly useful when one wishes to isolate the effect of a single independent variable when two are highly correlated (Kinder & Palfrey, 1993). The researcher would be in full control of treatment and control groups, which would allow him or her to clearly identify cause and effect. Moreover, an experimental design study ensures that the effect, if any, occurs during the data-generating process. Jenssen and Aalberg (2006) conducted an experimental study during the 2001 Norwegian election which is backed up by a short-panel from the 2001 Norwegian election survey. Transcripts of leaders’ speeches were given to actors who were then asked to deliver them as identically as possible to the original performance. However, their use of first time voters limits the generalisability of their results. Their approach is nonetheless a first attempt to disentangle the causal dynamics between party and leader sympathies by using experimental studies. They find that when evaluating both content of the speech and
party popularity, participants were influenced by who presented the message, the leader of the party or backbenchers.

Ideally, we would like to work with panel data to trace changes in party and leader sympathies over time within the same respondents. Considering that we are in the position of having almost equally good theories about which way the causal arrow points (i.e. from party to leader or vice versa), we need to rely on some formal testing about which comes first. Since their introduction almost fifty years ago, Granger causality tests remain the most popular methodology for investigating the causal relationship between two variables. Bearing in mind that the researchers requires access to panel data, only very few scholars have reverted to this technique with regard to party and leader sympathies (Harrison & Marsh, 1994; Jenssen & Aalberg, 2006; Midtbø, 1997). The general idea behind Granger models is that we want to regress a variable Y on its lagged values and on the lagged values of an additional variable X. The null hypothesis that X does not Granger cause Y can be rejected if one or more of the lagged values of X is shown to be significant. In the case of party and leader sympathies and based on the notion that cause precedes effect, the correlation between party liking in an election at time t and leader liking in an election at time t-1 should provide some indication about the underlying causal direction. We would run the following two regressions.

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) \quad \text{Party liking}_t &= \alpha_1 \text{leader liking}_{t-1} + \alpha_2 \text{party liking}_{t-1} + \varepsilon \\
(2) \quad \text{Leader liking}_t &= \beta_1 \text{leader liking}_{t-1} + \beta_2 \text{party liking}_{t-1} + \nu
\end{align*}
\]

We would then check whether the lagged leader liking in (1) and/or the lagged party liking in (2) are significantly different from zero. Put differently, if leader liking at time t affects later popularity of a party at time t+1 (controlling for party liking at time t) but party liking does not affect leader popularity at time t+1 (controlling for leader liking at time t+1), then we can argue that the causal direction runs from leader to party. Due to data limitations in terms of length of time series and the number of variables, however, such an analysis is rather difficult to conduct.

The novel approach presented in this paper does not require panel data but relies on simple cross-sectional surveys that provide information on leader and party evaluations. We expect these to be correlated, and indeed they are, but as we have discussed above, this correlation tells us nothing about the process underlying the
association: which precedes which. One way to assess which direction is more plausible is to look at what happens when party and leader sympathies are not aligned. Are people more inclined to vote for the party that is most highly rated, or for the leader? If the former, that would suggest that party mattered more, if the latter, that leaders mattered more. Moreover, this arguably can be applied not just to those voters where the two are not aligned but also but perhaps also to those voters for whom party and leader are aligned.. Operationally, the idea is as follows. Based on party and leader sympathy scores, a voter may rank one party and its leader top. In this case we would expect this person to vote for that party. But when party and leader evaluations coincide, we cannot make valid statements about the importance of the two, that is do leader evaluations influence those of party or is it the other way around? This is also the case when neither is rated highly. But what happens if ratings for a favourite party and leader diverge? Those who argue that leaders have in fact become more important in voters’ minds would expect voters to follow the leader. Conversely, if party predispositions were still the dominant driving force behind vote choice, then we would expect voters to follow the party. To sum up, we can use the cases where sympathies are not aligned to determine the separate influence of each.

4. Dataset and methodology

Data comes from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the European Voter (EV) project. Main focus will be on parliamentary systems because presidential systems by their very nature place much more attention on individuals considering that the executive is directly elected. If recent arguments put forward in the literature on leadership effects such as that leaders in parliamentary systems now pursue a presidential form of governance through which leadership is becoming more central and powerful turn out to be correct (Mughan, 2000; Poguntke & Webb, 2005), then we would find voters in parliamentary systems to be equally likely to follow the leader rather than the party when deciding whom to vote for when compared to voters in presidential systems. Thanks to the vast range of countries participating in the CSES study, we are able to include presidential cases such as the US, Poland and France which can be used as a baseline category when comparing voting behaviour with that in parliamentary systems.

Ideally, CSES has asked the same questions about parties and leaders across countries and over time, thus allowing for straightforward comparability of the
results\textsuperscript{3}. However, wave two did not include questions about party leaders so the data will be limited to waves one (1996-2001) and three (2006-2011). The European Voter project is a collaborative programme combining election surveys from six European countries into one harmonised database (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK). The advantage of using CSES data lies in its focus on elections in parliamentary systems, combining a total of 15 countries in Europe in addition to elections in Australia, Canada and New Zealand as well as some elections in presidential systems such as France, Poland and the US. The EV project, on the other hand, allows us to observe potential patterns over time as data for some countries has been collected since the early 1960s (see Appendix for data availability).

To sum up, CSES data will be used to demonstrate that voting behaviour according to party and leader sympathies in parliamentary systems has not (yet) reached the level of “leader voting” found in presidential systems. A second analysis seeks to demonstrate that we do not observe any linear patterns over time, but merely some trendless fluctuations. The common conception that leaders have assumed a greater role in the decision-making process of voters in parliamentary systems does not support that this has been on the rise over the last few decades.

The measured used here are common and simple ones.\textsuperscript{4} Party and leader sympathies are measured by standard 11-point thermometer scales, ranging from “strongly dislike” to “strongly like” at the minimum of (0) and maximum (10) scale points respectively. Combining data from the CSES and EV databases, the analysis covers 65 parliamentary and 6 presidential elections across 22 countries.

First, variables for maximum leader liking scores are created for each respondent on the basis of the 0-10 like-dislike scale. Second, the number of ties for more than one most-liked leader for each respondent is calculated: some respondents rated more than one leader at the same point on the scale, and rated no other leader more highly. The same calculations are done for party sympathy scores. Vote choice is understood as the choice between a number of alternative electoral options, which

\textsuperscript{3} Parties: “I’d like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means that you strongly like that party.”

Leaders: “And what do you think of the presidential candidates/party leaders? After I read the name of a presidential candidate/party leader, please rate them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that candidate and 10 means that you strongly like that candidate.”

\textsuperscript{4} The author wishes to thank Professor Michael Marsh for providing her with relevant Stata code to conduct the analysis.
generally ranges between four and nine, depending on the nature of the election and the type of electoral system in place. Respondents who did not cast a ballot are excluded. The data is then stacked by party from wide to long format to obtain respondent*party combinations. Overall, the analysis includes 554,697 voter-party dyads as units of analysis for the CSES sample and 149,394 for EV data. As shown in Table 1, from the dataset thus obtained, we can calculate the amount of voters that voted for a party if neither leader nor party are rated best, if leader is rated best, but not his or her party (leader driven model), if party is deemed best, but not its leader, (party-driven model) and if both party and leader are considered best.

Table 1: Party and leader ties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Best</th>
<th>Leader Best</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Neither best</td>
<td>Best leader, not best party</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Best party, not best leader</td>
<td>Both best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two final points are worth mentioning. First, one has to bear in mind that ‘best’ here includes cases were more than one leader or party is in joint first place in terms of evaluations. And second, we need to take a closer look at the number of observations in the off diagonal categories, which can be quite low when compared to cells on the main diagonal (where neither, or both are 'best'.) Once the dataset has been stacked by party, the number of observations is much higher in columns one and four but still large enough in columns two and three to allow for a meaningful interpretation of the results.

To sum up, we are interested in determining whether voters are more likely to follow the party or the leader when sympathies towards them are not aligned. If either party and leader are rated top or neither is deemed best, we cannot separate the causal direction between the two. If, however, party and leader sympathies do not coincide, we can assess the separate influence of each, thereby answering the question whether voters are more likely to follow the party or the leader when deciding whom to vote for. If the literature on leadership effects is correct in assuming that leaders have overwhelmed their respective parties in serving as vital information shortcuts then we would find more voters following the leader rather than the party. If, on the other hand, parties were still the predominant voting cue then we would have voters following the party. Finally, if the ‘leaders argument’ holds we should find an
increase over time in voters following the leader rather than the party.

5. Results

5.1. CSES data: analysis across countries

We can now look at the results obtained from the four cell table (Table 1). We will focus on voting behaviour when the party is rated best but not its leader (follow the party) and when the leader is rated highly but not his or her party (follow the leader). First, we will look at data from the CSES to determine whether voters in parliamentary systems in similarly high numbers follow the leader when compared to presidential systems which are represented by Poland, France and the US. If voters are more inclined to choose parties on the basis of potential candidates for the executive post, we should find a high proportion of voters opting for a party when the leader is rated best but not his or her party. Figure 1 plots the percentage of voters choosing a party when the party is rated best (x-axis) against the percentage of voters choosing a party when the leader is deemed best (y-axis). The graph includes both parliamentary and presidential systems and is shown by government type where the black + indicates parliamentary systems and the red + refers to presidential systems. As one can easily see, voters follow the party far more often than the recent literature on leadership effects would lead us to suspect. In most cases the percentage following the party is greater than that following the leader. In only one case do voters follow the leader rather than the party. This is the US, a presidential system. We can now compare presidential and parliamentary systems.

Thus, it comes at no surprise that the symbol in the top left corner represents voting behaviour in the US which may undoubtedly be characterised as one of the most highly personalised systems in the dataset. In all other countries, be they parliamentary or presidential, voters are far more likely to follow the party rather than the leader when sympathies towards them are not aligned. Even in countries with strong heads of the executive such as Germany or those with majoritarian systems such as in the UK where voters are now arguably voting on the basis of who will become the next Prime Minister we find a higher percentage of voters following the party rather than the leader (Germany 2009: 67% versus 31%; UK 1998: 59% versus 27%).

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5 The analysis has also been conducted on Russia but its status as an advanced parliamentary democracy has often been called into question.
One argument put forward by proponents of the ‘leaders matter’ school suggests that voters are now more likely to choose parties on the basis of what they think of potential candidates for the prime ministerial candidates or on the basis of what they think of them more generally, expressed in positive or negative feelings towards them rather than choosing on the basis of party. The previous analysis provides little support for this. A second argument is that leader-based voting has increased over time. Data from the European Voter project may include only very few countries, but it does cover elections over a prolonged period of time. This allows us to check whether voters have gradually become more inclined to vote for the leader rather than the party when sympathies towards them are not aligned. Figure 3 again plots the percentage of voters choosing a party when the party is rated best (x-axis) against the percentage of voters choosing a party when the leader is deemed best (y-axis). This time, graphs are shown by decade with the final graph combining all data points. The overall pattern is much the same as that shown above, which provides some confirmation of that result. More importantly, there does not seem to be any trend discernible, but only some trendless fluctuations. The vast majority of voters have
followed the party rather than the leader and this appears to not have changed substantially over time. Most cases are consistently in the bottom right hand corner of the chart. Unfortunately, we do not have many data points for the 1960s but one can nevertheless see that the percentage voting for a party when the party is rated best, but not its leader, remains high throughout the time period covered.

**Figure 2:** EV, by decade

![Voting Behaviour Chart](image)

*Figure 3* distinguishes by decade and does not look at trends over time for separate countries covered by the EV project. To gain a better picture about possible trends over time within each country, we will look at them separately. To save space and because we have the most data points in time for these countries, we will focus on Germany, the UK and Sweden. The picture does not look vastly dissimilar for Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands. *Figure 4* shows the trend for Germany where the earliest point in time dates as far back as 1961. Red diamonds on the left refer to those following the leader whereas green circles on the right indicate those following the party. So pervasive is the role of parties in Germany that many scholars have referred to the concept of a *Parteienstaat*, or ‘party state’. However, the position of the German chancellor has attracted much attention in recent years which can be seen
for example in the introduction of televised leadership debates which were first held at the 2002 election upon request by the leader of the Social Democrats, Gerhard Schroeder. It comes as a surprise then that there does not appear to be any discernible pattern but fluctuations remain rather trendless. To be fair, at elections in 1990 and 1998 voters appear to have opted in greater numbers for the party when the leader was rated best, but these figures are similar to those in 1976. To sum up, in a country where the head of the executive has gradually assumed a more powerful role, voters still tend to opt for the best party rather than the beast leader.

**Figure 3:** EV data on Germany, by election year

But what does the picture look like when we look at data from a country with a majoritarian electoral system where vote choice ultimately revolves around who will most likely be the next Prime Minister. Similarly to Germany, most votes are cast for the two largest parties so again, contrary to the ‘leaders matter’ matter argument, we can identify a rather similar pattern in the UK as can be seen in Figure 5. If at all, we find some leader-centred voting in earlier time periods, especially in 1970, but thereafter, the picture reverts back to voting for a party when the party is deemed best but not its leader. Even in an election where an individual successfully transformed
the image and electoral appeal of a political party, Tony Blair’s personal ascendancy over John Major only constituted a modest net contribution to Labour’s victory at the polls (Bartle & Crewe, 2002).

**Figure 4**: EV data on the UK, by election year

![Graph showing EV data in Great Britain](image)

Finally, we look at data from Sweden with its flexible list-PR system where voters cast votes for lists as well as preference votes for individual candidates. **Figure 6** presents the most straightforward picture. Not only does it show that voters follow the party rather than the leader when sympathies towards them are not aligned, but also no changes whatsoever over time. The picture looks almost identical for Norway (results not shown).
Figure 5: EV data on Sweden, by election year

The results obtained from the CSES as well as from the European Voter project have clearly indicated two things. First, voters follow the party far more often than the literature on leadership effects would lead us to suspect. More precisely, when sympathies towards parties and leaders do not coincide, voters are far more likely to follow the party rather than the leader, even in countries with strong heads of the executive. Only voters in the US appear to follow the leader rather than the party, which should come at no surprise given their highly personalised campaign style. Second, this has not changed over time, but has remained rather stable. Of course, there may be the odd election where one party leader may be regarded as ‘added value’ to his or her party by attracting additional votes due to their personality or specific character traits. But this appears to be an exception to the rule.

6. Discussion

The literature on leadership effects presents a puzzle. On the one hand, there is ample reason to believe that party leaders have gained in importance at the expense of long-established political parties. On the other hand, empirical evidence does not consistently support this. One reason for this disparity is the close causal relationship
between party support and leader sympathy which has often been overlooked or not correctly addressed. This paper has proposed a novel approach of disentangling the intimate causal relationship between the two by analysing cross-sectional data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the European Voter project. We sought to determine how voters behave when sympathies towards parties and leaders are not aligned. In such situations, do voters follow the party or the leader? CSES data has shown that voters in all countries, regardless of government type, follow the party rather than the leader, except for the US with its highly personalised campaign style and an exceptionally strong individual as the executive. This even holds for countries with majoritarian electoral systems such as Canada and the UK where leadership effects are arguably more pronounced. Data from the European Voter project has shown that we do not find an increase in leader-based voting over time but rather some trendless fluctuations. Even in Germany where the position as Chancellor has become more powerful in recent years do we find voters following the party rather than the leader when sympathies towards them do not coincide.

Future research on party leaders should be careful when estimating the impact of party leaders on vote choice, bearing in mind the close and intimate causal relationship between party support and leader sympathy. Ideally, we would want to work with panel data to observe a change in voting behaviour over time within the same respondents. However, in absence of such data, the simple, yet powerful method presented in this paper is a nice way of showing that voters follow the party far more often than the literature on leadership effects would lead us to suspect. This method has looked at parties overall, disregarding the size of the party or seat share in parliament. Further calculations should also bear in mind voter heterogeneity, possibly looking at the age of respondents or timing of vote decision.
Appendix

Table 1: Data availability by country and year (CSES and European Voter datasets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Parliamentary systems</th>
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<th>Presidential systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Years for which data is available on SYMP and SYMPL</td>
<td>CSES</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>USA</td>
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<td>Poland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>1996, 2006</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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References


