



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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From party to leader mobilization? The personalization of voter turnout

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Ferreira Da Silva, F., Garzia, D., De Angelis, A. (2021). From party to leader mobilization? The personalization of voter turnout. *PARTY POLITICS*, 27(2), 220-233 [10.1177/1354068819855707].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/1037459> since: 2026-01-15

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819855707>

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# **From party to leader mobilization? The Personalization of Voter Turnout**

## **Abstract**

Partisan dealignment has been frequently advanced as a pivotal driver of the personalization of voting behavior. As voters' long-term attachments with parties eroded, it is argued that partisanship has lost predictive ability to short-term factors, like voters' evaluations of party leaders. Such theoretical reasoning has been applied recurrently in research dedicated to explaining vote choice. However, we hypothesize that dealignment can downplay partisanship's impact vis-à-vis leaders in the same way regarding turnout decisions.

This article aims at demonstrating the importance of voters' evaluations of party leaders in their probability to turn out in parliamentary elections through a novel dataset pooling 52 national election surveys from 13 Western European parliamentary democracies between 1974-2016. The results confirm the increasing relevance of leaders in explaining turnout decisions and a decline of partisanship's mobilizing ability. These trends are further accentuated amongst individuals with a television-dominated media diet, demonstrating the role of media change in driving this process.

**Keywords:** Personalization; turnout; party leaders; elections; dealignment

## Introduction

Political leaders have become important actors for the outcome of elections even in parliamentary democracies (Bean & Mughan, 1989). Leaders are no longer perceived by voters as mere party figureheads, they matter as political actors on their own, as worthy of assessment as many other factors when deciding who to cast a vote for. As the erosion of cleavage-based voting emptied much of Western political parties' loyal support base, vote choice is now claimed to be less influenced by longstanding partisan attachments and increasingly impacted by evaluations of the leaders running for election (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2014). Such transformations fit into what has been designated as the *personalization of politics*, a process describing the increasing relevance of individual political actors at the expense of collective political organizations such as political parties (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007).

Personalization may be found in different political arenas: institutions, media, and individuals' political behavior (Pedersen and Rahat, this issue). This article concentrates on the behavioral arena and specifically the personalization of voting decisions, designating a higher consideration of individual political actors in the mechanisms guiding voters' political participation. Importantly, personalization may take place at different levels (Pedersen and Rahat, this issue) being either centralized or decentralized (Balmas et al., 2014). The first concerns a type of personalization occurring at the top of parties' structures, more specifically at the leadership positions. Contrarily, decentralized personalization corresponds to a greater relevance of politicians who are not party or executive leaders, such as candidates, members of parliament or ministers. Given that it explicitly focuses on party leaders' effects on the vote, this study explicitly explores centralized personalization.

The concept of personalization has not been received without controversy – in particular, the very notion of personalization *as a process*, implying the progressive enfeebling of political parties as collective bodies, whereas individual political actors became more relevant in the political arena. By this prism, a few studies have challenged the existence of a personalization in its multiple dimensions (Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002; Kriesi, 2012) or, more concretely, the claim that leaders have become more important in the voting calculus than ever before (Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011). Despite these examples of mixed evidence, stemming largely from varying methodological approaches and limited scope of analysis, more recent pieces of evidence relying on larger data sets seem to converge in support of a personalization of voting behavior (Garzia, 2014; Garzia et al., 2018; Lobo & Curtice, 2014; Mughan, 2015; Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Two sets of socio-political developments are claimed to be at the core of the emergence of this phenomenon. First, the transformations in the structure of mass communication in Western societies brought about by the massification of television as primary source of political information. The audiovisual character of televised communication primes voters with images of individual political actors at the expense of relatively more abstract ideological factors (Sartori, 1989). Voters are now more responsive to visual imagery and non-verbal information, and form personality perceptions of the leaders which are used as cues to evaluate them, ultimately influencing their voting decisions – in some cases, such effects even overwhelm those stemming from issue-related considerations (Druckman, 2003; Rosenberg et al., 1986; Todorov et al., 2005). Political parties have adapted their campaigns in response to this new personality-based medium and placed leaders at the forefront of a new type of personalized political communication (Hayes, 2009).

Second, the post-war socio-political changes decisively contributed to the erosion of the cleavages underlying structural partisan alignments. The rise of the Welfare State reduced the potential for political conflict by reducing inequality, promoting higher levels of general well-being and providing citizens with a safety net. The post-war period has also led to an expansion of educational resources, increasing levels of interest in politics and political knowledge among the general population, thus decreasing individuals' dependency on partisan cues to interpret and process political phenomena. This new setting downplayed party mobilization in favor of what has been designated as cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 2007).

A major consequence of these processes has been the steady decline of partisan attachments in advanced industrial democracies since the 1970s (Dalton, 2000). The social and political context of the second half of the twentieth century has decisively contributed to downplaying the role of partisanship and to highlighting the importance of party leaders as short-term drivers of voting behavior (Garzia, 2014). Partisanship is considered one of the most important drivers of electoral participation at the individual level (Bartels, 2000; Budge & Farlie, 2010; Clarke et al., 2004; Heath et al., 1985). Indeed, the legacy of psychological models has conferred to attitudes and psychological predispositions towards political parties a paramount role in the explanation of voters' turnout decisions (Campbell et al., 1960; 1966). This stream of literature posits that individuals are largely driven to the polls by their long-standing affective bonds with political parties. Beyond acting as a key element of political identity in driving turnout, partisanship is also claimed to fulfill a functional role for many citizens, serving as a perceptual screen for otherwise too complex political phenomena. The same sort of reasoning is accompanied by rational-choice accounts of party identification (Fiorina, 1981; 1990). As such,

partisanship constitutes a central feature of party mobilization. Dalton (2000: 21) synthesizes partisanship's impact on turnout noting that "partisans are more easily mobilized by political parties to turn out at the polls, and feel a stronger sense of personal motivation to support their preferred parties and candidates". In their comparative study of seven democracies, also Budge and Farlie (2010: 114) found it to be the variable with "the most consistent and strongest relationship with turnout". Hence, partisanship has been widely recognized as a core element of party mobilization in Western democracies but as the number of partisans has steadily decreased over the last decades, other factors may be becoming increasingly relevant in explaining turnout decisions.

Could party leaders have filled the gap left vacant by partisanship in driving voters to the ballot box? In other words, is party mobilization as important today as it once were, or as with vote choice, has its chief role in explaining vote choice been replaced by short-term forces such as evaluations of party leaders in the current context of personalized politics? This study aims at answering these questions by asserting whether voters' evaluations of party leaders matter for turnout decisions not only in presidential but now also in increasingly personalized parliamentary democracies. Further, it aims at demonstrating that the importance of leader evaluations for turnout decisions links to a process of partisan dealignment and media change through which an overtime decrease in party mobilization (i.e., partisanship's ability to bring voters to the ballot box) corresponds to an increase in leader mobilization. In addition, we explore the potential mechanisms through which leaders may exert a mobilizing effect.

Our empirical analysis makes use of an original dataset pooling 52 national election studies from 13 Western European democracies in the period 1974-2016. This large pool of data allows to track down the development of these processes over time and to compare across a wide range of parliamentary democracies. In doing so, this study goes beyond previous exploratory research on leader effects on turnout which has adopted a restricted time-frame and lacked contextual variation and important explanatory variables.

### **Leader effects on turnout: Theory and measurement**

The American literature has long established that evaluations of presidential candidates do matter for turnout decisions (Brody & Grofman, 1982; Weisberg & Grofman, 1981; Zipp, 1985). The characteristics of presidential systems put individual actors on the spotlight of political and media discourse. In fact, even what is perhaps the most skeptical theoretical account of the independent effect of candidates on voting behavior recognizes that short-term sources of

political stimulation are the primary cause of variation in electoral turnout, such as “popular candidates [who] may stimulate widespread enthusiasm” (Campbell, 1966: 41).

The literature on leader effects in US presidential elections, however, is not motivated by the same socio-political changes leading to the personalization of politics in parliamentary systems. The architecture of presidential systems favors a candidate-centered type of politics (Wattenberg, 1991) particularly in the heavily mediatized and television-dominated American context, so it has always come as straightforward that leaders should play a role not only in vote choice but also in electoral mobilization. Therefore, studies on leader effects in the US largely precede the transformations described in the previous section, going back to classic theoretical traditions of studying voting behavior, namely, psychological affection and rational choice theory. The investigation of the mechanisms underlying leader effects on turnout has sparked empirical research much throughout the 1970/80s (Brody & Page, 1973; Weisberg & Grofman, 1981; Brody & Grofman, 1982). Although such literature may not be very informative about the reasons why leader mobilization could have taken the space of partisan mobilization in parliamentary democracies, it is enlightening about the conditions and mechanisms through which political leaders impact turnout decisions and, in specific, about how to effectively measure these effects.

Michigan’s socio-psychological models highlight the importance of attitudinal and psychological predispositions in guiding voting behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; 1966). Voting is conceived as a result of psychological affection, and it is precisely this sense of attachment that renders the notion of party identification so important. Under this theoretical framework, voters choose who to vote for (or choose whether to cast a vote or not in the first place) provided they are psychologically involved with any of the runners for election. Therefore, in order to be mobilized to vote, individuals must acknowledge or expect a psychological benefit from participation. Applying this reasoning to leader effects on turnout, this means that individuals’ attraction to one or more of the leaders is a necessary precondition for participation. If they feel negative about all of the leaders, they will eventually lack the psychological involvement necessary to motivate electoral participation. This type of abstention has been named in the literature as abstention by *alienation* (Brody & Grofman, 1982; Brody & Page, 1973; Weisberg & Grofman, 1981) and stems from “disgust with the alternatives proffered by the parties” (Converse, 1966: 24). Interestingly, this type of abstention can be linked to what has been described as “negative personalization”, reflecting the negative appeal of the leaders running for election (Pruysers & Cross, 2016; see also Helboe-Pedersen & Rahat in this special issue).

Differently from social-psychological approaches, rational choice models perceive voting as a function of an individual cost-benefit analysis (Downs, 1957). Since voting is an eminently irrational endeavor – given the extreme unlikelihood of an individual’s vote affecting electoral outcomes and the opportunity costs associated with the act of voting – individuals must find incentives or anticipate some personal benefits from participation. The decision to vote is thus subject to a calculation in which the expected utilities from casting a ballot compensate the costs. For leader effects, this implies that there must be an expected differential between leaders recognized by voters for them to attach a degree of importance to the choice between leaders. If the voter perceives no differences between the alternatives presented, then the expected differential is zero. Being indifferent to who wins the contest would then lead the rational voter to abstain because there is no return from electoral participation (Downs, 1957: 39)<sup>1</sup>. Based on existing theorization, this designates abstention by *indifference*, resulting from a “perceived lack of choice between the candidates” (Brody & Page, 1973: 2).<sup>2</sup>

Both theories are hardly exclusionary. Campbell (1966: 41) acknowledges the importance of the differentiating between party-leader alternatives in avoiding abstention by *indifference*. Conversely, the downsian model posits that an *alienated* individual who feels negative about all leaders will be *indifferent* because he or she expects no utility from voting.

Despite the reported longstanding tradition in the American context, leader evaluations have not yet captured due scholarly attention regarding their effect on turnout in parliamentary elections. In this article we argue that this chief role of partisanship in driving electoral participation in West European parliamentary systems has been challenged by the very same socio-political transformations that have paved the way for the personalization of politics. As partisan dealignment dramatically decreased the number of individuals reporting to identify with a political party, this growing share of non-identifiers is no longer subject to mobilization in terms of partisan attachments. While the number of non-identifiers increases, so does the room for other factors to intervene as drivers of turnout. Dealignment is claimed to carry a shift from long-term to short-term determinants of voting behavior. Rather than relying on their once stable affective bonds with political parties or on patterns of social mobilization rooted in class or group belongings, voters are increasingly making their decisions individually and on-the-run,

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<sup>1</sup> For variations of these propositions see (Downs, 1957, ch. 14).

<sup>2</sup> Weisberg & Grofman (1981) advance with a third type of abstention, by *satisfaction*, which reflects an equally high level of satisfaction with all candidates. This can be considered as a sub-type of *indifference*: if all candidates are equally good it is indifferent who wins, hence the rational decision being to abstain. For this reason, we do not consider it as a type on its own and do not include it in the hypotheses-testing. However, we do take it into account as a robustness test and model it in Table A1 in the appendix.

taking into account short-term election-specific aspects. In this regard, media change and the context of personalized politics turns party leaders into privileged actors. In other words, as media change and partisan dealignment led to the personalization of vote choice, these same processes have had similar effects on turnout by creating a favorable context for a higher relevance of party leader assessments. A setting dominated by party mobilization may be followed by a new paradigm of leader mobilization.

It has been claimed that West European democracies have increasingly come to resemble presidential systems' *modus operandi*, thus "presidentializing" what once were pure parliamentary systems (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). For these reasons, evaluations of party leaders may now play a role in voter turnout amongst the European electorate as well. Yet, the relationship between the personalization of politics and turnout has been overlooked in the literature. The restricted number of previous studies applying this theoretical framework to West European parliamentary democracies indeed find an effect of leader evaluations on voters' turnout decisions. Silva & Costa (2019) found an effect of warmth personality traits' evaluations of party leaders on voters' turnout decisions. Silva's (2018) large-N comparative analysis shows the effects of leaders on turnout to be stronger among dealigned voters. However, these studies do not address the totality of the puzzle laid out so far. First, they focus on restricted time-periods, impeding longitudinal inferences about the temporal development of the hypothesized decrease in party mobilization and increase in leader mobilization. Second, they do not discuss the mechanisms through which leaders may impact turnout decisions. Third, they do not take into account the role of the transformations in the structure of mass communication in the longitudinal development of this process.

In this article, we depart from both psychological affection and rational choice theories to assess leader effects on turnout decisions in West European parliamentary democracies. In sum, one can expect that when voters have a strong sense of psychological affection towards a leader and/or are able to identify clearly a preferred leader choice vis-à-vis the alternatives ones, leaders are more likely to produce a mobilization effect on electoral participation. With these expectations in mind, the type of effects leaders exert on turnout can be posed in terms of effects on abstention by *alienation* or *indifference*. The following hypotheses will guide the empirical analysis:

*H1: Voters' evaluations of party leaders have an effect on their decisions to turn out*

*H2: There has been an increase across time in the effect of voters' evaluations of party leaders vis-à-vis the effects of partisanship on turnout decisions*

*H3: A televised-based media diet potentiates leader effects and dampers partisanship effects on turnout*

## **Data and methods**

This study relies on a large-scale harmonization project pooling 52 distinct national election studies from 13 Western European parliamentary democracies conducted in the period 1974-2016. Already existing comparative datasets have either neglected leader evaluations (i.e., European Election Study) or voters' exposure to political information in the media (i.e., Comparative Study of Electoral Systems), thus making this pooled solution the best viable option to answer the research questions at hand. The current set of elections includes every election study featuring the key variables of interest to conduct this analysis. Our dataset allows for the first ever longitudinal account of the impact of leader evaluations on turnout decisions, spanning for over 40 years' worth of elections surveys. While an ideal analysis of the phenomenon would go back to the mid-twentieth century (Karvonen, 2010), available survey data does not reach so far back in time. The selection of countries applied the following set of pre-established criteria. First, the sample was restricted to parliamentary democracies, as this is where a trend towards an increase in the importance of party leaders is expected to occur – in presidential systems, leaders have always been pivotal. Second, we focus exclusively on Western European countries, as they have longer experience with democratic elections (and national election study projects). Finally, amongst these countries, we only included the studies featuring party leader evaluations, party identification and variables reporting voters' exposure to political information in the media, as these are our key independent variables. Table 1 summarizes the number of studies included for each of the countries under analysis.

< Table 1 about here >

Except for the British electoral studies, which go back to the mid-1970s, a comparative assessment is only made possible in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The different time periods across countries are

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<sup>3</sup> Due to its distinct electoral system and since it is the only case reaching back to the 1970s, all models were re-estimated without the UK. The results hold virtually unchanged. Please refer to Table A7 in the appendix.

controlled for in our statistical models. However, by being unable to consider the entire time trend theoretically relevant for the personalization of politics thesis (since the 1960s), and due to the shorter time span considered in many of the countries in our sample, the analysis is likely to underestimate the effects of leaders on turnout. On these grounds, our findings remain on the conservative side.

The dependent variable dichotomizes turnout into 1: individuals who declare to have cast a vote; and 0: otherwise. Socio-demographic controls include age (numeric), gender (0: Male; 1: Female), educational level (as measured by ISCED 1997 categories), religiosity (1: Never goes to church/not at all religious; 2: Less than once a month/not very religious; 3: Once a month or more/somewhat religious; 4: Once a week or more/very religious), union membership (0: Not a member; 1: Member). Interest in politics was coded on a 4-point scale (1: Not at all interested; 2: Not very interested; 3: Fairly interested; 4: Very interested). Ideology was recoded from an original 0 (Right) to 10 (Left) scale into the following: 1. Missing; 2. Far-left 3. Centre-left; 4. Centre; 5. Centre-right; 6. Far-right.<sup>4</sup>

Leader evaluations are measured through a feeling thermometer where 0 stands for “does not like the party leader” and 10 for “likes the party leader” – this is the basis for the key independent variables constructed to measure leader effects on turnout (see Table A8 in appendix for detailed question wording and recoding strategy). Partisanship is dichotomized into 1: individuals who identify with a political party; and 0: individuals who do not identify with any political party.

The long-term comparative nature of our dataset carries the caveat of depending on the availability of indicators across a relatively large number of countries and across a wide time-period. This imposes restrictions on the breadth of controls which may be included in the model without sacrificing the cross-time comparative virtues of the dataset. We acknowledge the lack of relevant standard controls used in individual-level turnout studies. However, the inclusion of further controls would substantially hinder the number of countries and time-points considered.

The characteristics of our dataset also might raise potential issues of comparability and of item consistency. Namely, our measure for partisanship stems from different questions applied to capture respondents’ political identity in the multiple national election study projects. Nevertheless, we still operate under conditions of conceptual homogeneity, since all national

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<sup>4</sup> Recoding procedure of 0-10 Left-Right scale: Far Left (0, 1, 2); Centre-left (3, 4); Centre (5); Centre-right (6, 7); Far Right (8, 9, 10).

election studies included in our dataset tapped respondents' *feelings of closeness* to a political party as an indicator of a long-term affective relationship with a political party.

A similar approach holds for our measures of voters' exposure to political information in the media (details on the question wording and recoding procedure for these variables are available for newspapers and television on Tables A9 and A10, respectively, in the appendix). The harmonization of these variables followed the same principle of conceptual homogeneity, as they a) indicate a frequency of media usage; b) tap media usage to collect political information; c) capture this consumption for both TV and newspapers. Different measurement scales were allowed in order to expand the pool of election studies considered, spanning from more refined measures (e.g., asking subjects to report news exposure on a given media in number of days per week) to minimally satisfactory scales (e.g., four values ranging from "never" to "everyday").

This minimum-common-denominator approach is grounded on the idea that every respondent can be classified in terms of what media represents their most important source of political information. While in the remaining models we use the raw measures of exposure to political information in the newspapers and on television as controls (measuring frequency of exposition to each medium in the following scale: 1. Always/6-7 days a week; 2. Often/3-5 days a week; 3. Rarely/1-2 days a week; 4. Never/0 days a week), we use a more robust and complex measure to test the proposition of H3. In this case, we are particularly interested in the *composition* rather than the mere *quantity* of media usage. Such an approach allows for the consideration of possible overlaps in exposure to different media for political information, as highly interested citizens are likely to use more than one media source to collect information about politics. Therefore, it is important to take into account the consumption of multiple media sources, as in such cases the visual effects of heavy exposure to television news may be counterbalanced by strong newspaper reading. On the contrary, even occasional exposure to televised political information may leave a strong personalizing imprint on lowly-interested citizens when not counterbalanced by newspaper readership.<sup>5</sup> Hence, following the recommendation of Shehata and Strömback (2011) we posit that a more refined measure of political information consumption is required to account for multiple media diets, grounded on potentially different

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<sup>5</sup> We do not claim that the direct appeal of leaders is necessarily more effective among lowly-interested individuals but instead that, through the exclusive consumption of televised political information, the visual stimuli may prime voters with leaders' images and indirectly affect their voting decisions via a mediation procedure (Hayes, 2009; McLeod et al, 1983; Mendelsohn, 1996). Existing studies provide only mixed evidence as to the direct relationship between education and political sophistication and leader effects on vote choice (Bittner, 2011; Gidengil, 2011; Mughan, 2000; Rico, 2014). However, the influence of televised political information particularly among the unsophisticated is grounded on a substantial body of political communication literature (i.e., Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Lenz & Lawson, 2011).

degrees of newspaper/television consumption as the source of political information. For this purpose, we developed a modified version of their original measure of newspaper- and television-centrism. While they operationalize it as the difference between the average amount of total newspaper reading minus the average amount of total television viewing for each of the countries under analysis, we apply the same rationale to construct a similar measure at the individual-level. Individuals who are more frequently exposed to political information on newspapers than on television were assigned a value of -1 (newspaper-centric respondent), individuals reporting the same frequency of news collection for newspapers and television were assigned a value 0 (balanced consumption of newspapers and television news), and individuals who are more frequently exposed to political information on television than on newspapers were assigned a value 1 (television-centric individuals). Noticeably, this approach has the advantage of not carrying problems of news exposure overreporting (Prior, 2009). This variable will be used as a moderator for the effects of partisanship and leader evaluations on turnout across time, as posed in H3.

The effects of leaders on turnout are measured through a set of variables tapping the two possible mechanisms found in the literature, according to which leaders may have an impact on turnout. The assessment of *alienation* is carried using the same methodology employed by Brody and Page (1973), as well as Weisberg and Grofman (1981), i.e., considering respondents' attitudes towards their *most liked* leader. In this case, the higher a respondent rates their most liked leader, the more likely she is to be psychologically mobilized by the leader's appeal and turn out. If even the respondent's preferred leader rates poorly, she is likely to abstain by alienation. On the other hand, the operationalization of *indifference* implies a transformation of the original feeling thermometer variable into a new one taking the rating of the *most liked* leader and subtracting from it the ratings of the *second most liked* leader, *third most liked* leader, etc., adding up the differences between each pair (Baltz & Nevitte, 2017). This can be illustrated by the following equation, where H is the term for the level of net differential affect towards the  $\ell$  leaders.

$$H = (\ell_1 - \ell_2) + (\ell_1 - \ell_3) + (\ell_1 - \ell_4) + \dots + (\ell_1 - \ell_x)$$

In theory, H has value 0 in case of complete indifference between all party leaders, and has no upper boundary, depending on the number of parties/leaders running for election in a given country at a given point in time. This variable captures the extent to which subjects acknowledge

*differences* between the leaders running for election: the higher the difference (H), the more likely the individual is to turn out. Each hypothesis will be thus tested both in terms of leaders' impact on turnout through reduction of abstention by *alienation* and *indifference*.

## Results

To assess whether leaders do have an impact on turnout decisions, we proceed by modeling the importance of voters' evaluations of party leaders on the probability to turn out in parliamentary elections in West European democracies. We do so by estimating hierarchical logistic regression models with random-intercepts for each election study. In this way, we control for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and across time within countries. The results of the models are presented in Table 2. In Model 1, the effects of leader evaluations on tackling abstention by alienation were estimated using the *most liked leader* measurement. In Model 2, the effects of leaders on tackling abstention by *indifference* were estimated using the sum of the differences between leaders (H).<sup>6</sup>

< Table 2 about here >

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<sup>6</sup> These models have been re-estimated using different measures of partisanship. For one thing, one could charge that our partisanship variable does not tap the extent to which a voter feels close to the party of their most liked leader. In Table A2, in the appendix, we address this point by adding an additional variable controlling for whether respondents identify with such party. The strong patterns of covariance between these two partisanship variables ( $r=.65$ ) signal that voters feel – more often than not – close(r) to the party of their preferred leader. Probably as a result of such strong correlation, the results hold virtually unchanged regarding our variables of interest (magnitude of change indicated between parentheses  $\Delta$ ): Model 1, coefficient for most liked leader is .356\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.024$ ); Model 2, coefficient for difference between leaders is .447\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.070$ ); Model 3, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .005\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.001$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship\*Year is -.006\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.003$ ); Model 4, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .012\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.007$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship\*Year is -.005\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.001$ ). To further test the robustness of our findings, we also relied on a different measure of strength of partisanship, going beyond our parsimonious binary operationalization. In Table A4, in the appendix, we use a categorical measure of strength of partisanship (0. Does not identify with the party of the most liked leader; 1. Weakly identifies with the party of the most liked leader; 2. Moderately identifies with the party of the most liked leader; 3. Strongly identifies with the party of the most liked leader), instead of the dichotomous measure used in Table 2. Again, the results hold virtually unchanged for our variables of interest: Model 1, coefficient for most liked leader is .345\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.035$ ); Model 2, coefficient for difference between leaders is .438\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.079$ ); Model 3, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .006\*\*\* ( $\Delta=-.002$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship\*Year is -.006\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.003$ ); Model 4, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .012\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.007$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship\*Year is -.005\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.001$ ). Note that in every instance, the patterns of statistical significance of our estimates remain unchanged.

The results by and large confirm the existence of a positive effect of voters' evaluations of party leaders on their probability to turn out. Regardless of the measures adopted, leaders have a meaningful impact on voters' turnout decisions. However, the H measure, capturing the impact of the differences between leaders on reducing abstention by indifference, appears to have a more substantial effect. Noticeably, the effect size of both variables is comparable to that of partisanship. This comes as particularly evident through an analysis of their marginal effects in Figure 1.

< Figure 1 about here >

Using a most liked leader measurement, the impact of voters' evaluations of leaders is almost the same size of partisanship effects. However, using the H measurement, the effect of leaders becomes slightly larger than partisanship's. Given the discussed longstanding relevance of partisanship as a cornerstone predictor in individual-level turnout models, its equally relevant impact *vis-à-vis* leader evaluations is revealing about the importance of the leaders. Indeed, they can exert a significant impact on reducing both abstention by *indifference* and *alienation*, thus proving to be important actors in mobilizing individuals for electoral participation. These results demonstrate that a) appealing leaders can motivate individuals to turnout, impeding abstention by alienation, and b) whenever voters identify differences in their evaluations of leaders, their reduced indifference yields an increased probability to turn out. Both these outcomes provide evidence in favor of confirming H1.<sup>7</sup>

A fundamental aspect of the personalization of politics thesis is its longitudinal, temporal dimension. It is essentially what distinguishes a context of personalization from a context of personalized politics. Personalization designates a diachronic process through which individual political actors came to matter more over time while the centrality of the political group declines over the same period (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Therefore, the claim that there has been a personalization of voter turnout is contingent on the demonstration of empirical evidence demonstrating an increase over time in leader effects on turnout. The existence of such

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<sup>7</sup> We have also investigated the possibility of differentiated effects for partisans and non-partisans by adding to these models an interaction between partisanship and their respective measurement of leader effects. Although the interaction terms resulted negatively significant, suggesting that leaders matter more for dealigned voters, such effects did not resist cross-validation robustness tests. An outlier country was found to be driving the results of these interactions, which turn not significant once the outlier is excluded from the sample. Therefore, feeling unconfident about the robustness of such interactions, we decided to exclude it from the results.

longitudinal trend is investigated through Models 3 and 4 in Table 2 by interacting both partisanship and, alternatively, each of the leader evaluation measures with the year in which every election took place. Our initial expectations are confirmed by the negative significant interaction between partisanship and year and the positive significant interaction between both measures of leader evaluations and year.<sup>8</sup>

All our models were subject to Leave-One-Out-Cross-Validation (LOOCV) tests (see robustness section below for additional details). These tests consist of rerunning the regressions multiples times by excluding one country from the sample at the time, to exclude that an outlier is driving the results.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, in Model 4, referring to the H measure of leader effects on abstention by indifference, the cross-time interactions did not hold after this test. Thus, the results for indifference can be considered not robust. Concerning Model 3, the interaction between partisanship and year is also not robust – the effect of partisanship on turnout is rather stable across this time period. The effects of voters' evaluations of their most liked leader on turnout, however, are robust. For this reason, we have plotted the marginal effects of these interactions exclusively for Model 3, regarding the most liked leader measure for alienation (Figure 2).

< Figure 2 about here >

Figure 2 is illustrative of the reverse trends of the relative decline of party mobilization and the steep increase of leader mobilization since the mid-1970s. The impact of voters' evaluation of party leaders on turnout has been noticeably growing over the period of analysis. At the same time, while party mobilization can be claimed not to have declined over this time period, it has lost much *relative* importance as a driver of turnout decisions. In other words, we are not witnessing an actual decline of partisanship's effects over time but rather a decline of its relative impact *vis-à-vis* the growing effect of leaders. While leaders become more important for turnout decisions, partisanship effects do not follow that trend and have even been surpassed by the impact of voters' evaluations of leaders. It adds that much of partisanship's impact may actually be the result of processes of identification through leader sympathies, as previous research has

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<sup>8</sup> All models interacting with year were re-estimated excluding countries with a single data point (Austria, Denmark and Ireland). The results hold virtually unchanged. Please refer to Table A6 in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup> A less conservative version of this test was carried by excluding each election study at the time from the sample (instead of country). In this case no outliers were found to be influencing the results.

documented (Garzia, 2013). As such, the relative stability of the impact of partisanship may be overestimated.

The fact that this trend holds only for the most liked leader measure is revealing about the potential of leaders as actors able to counter the developing trends of alienation, political apathy and overall disengagement. Leaders can be active mobilizing forces in tackling abstention by alienation. Overall, these results support H2 with regard to the most liked leader measure for leader effects on abstention by alienation.

Finally, we aimed at ascertaining the role of individuals' media diet in this process. Mediatization is pointed as a cause of the personalization of politics. Television is a personality-based medium which primes individual political actors at the expenses of abstract concepts, political programmes or ideologies. In this way, different media diets may promote the individual consideration of distinct aspects for electoral participation. Such a possibility is investigated in the models featured in Table 3 using the already presented measures of newspapers-/television-centrism. The sample was split for each measure of leader effects into individuals who have a newspaper-centered media diet (i.e. report being more frequently exposed to political information in the newspapers than on television), or who have a balanced diet (i.e., report being equally exposed to both mediums)<sup>10</sup> – Models 1 and 3 respectively; and individuals with a television-centric media diet (i.e. report being more frequently exposed to political information on television than in the newspapers) – Models 2 and 4 respectively. The same time-interaction models were run on both samples to capture the development of the process over time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> We decided to pool individuals with a balanced media diet into the newspaper-centric category for two reasons. First, newspaper-centric individuals are underrepresented in the sample and, in this way, we can achieve a better balance between both sub-samples, which is desirable for estimation purposes. Second, this poses a more robust test to the hypothesis: individuals with a balanced media diet are at least equally exposed to television and thus are more likely to be led to prime leaders in disfavor of partisanship more than *purely* newspaper-centric individuals. That is, this option is more likely to overestimate the effects for the newspaper-centric sub-sample than the alternative, and therefore it offers a more conservative stance on the mediator influence of exposure to televised news on leader effects on turnout.

<sup>11</sup> As before, these models have been re-estimated using different measures of partisanship. In Table A3, in the appendix, we add an additional variable controlling for whether respondents identify with the party of their most liked leader. The results hold virtually unchanged regarding our variables of interest (magnitude of change indicated between parentheses  $\Delta$ ): Model 1, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .003\* ( $\Delta=.001$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.003\* ( $\Delta=-.001$ ); Model 2, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .007\* ( $\Delta=-.001$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.009\* ( $\Delta=-.004$ ); Model 3, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .011\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.000$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.003\* ( $\Delta=.000$ ); Model 4, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .013\*\*\* ( $\Delta=.000$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.008\* ( $\Delta=.000$ ). In Table A5, in the appendix, we also use a measure of

Models 1 and 3 refer to newspaper-centric individuals. In Model 1, featuring the most liked leader measure of leader effects, none of the cross-time interactions is significant. As for Model 3, featuring the H measure of leader effects, the interactions are significant in the same direction as in previous models.

Models 2 and 4 include television-centric individuals. In both these models, regardless of the measure of leader effects adopted, there is a significant interaction term in the expected direction, confirming the previous results on the longitudinal assessment of personalization: there is a decrease over time on the relative impact of partisanship and an increase over time on the impact of voters' evaluations of party leaders on turnout. However, again, the results of Models 3 and 4, for the H measure of leader effects, did not pass the LOOCV tests and therefore are not robust. Based on this result, we cannot conclude that mediatization fosters leader effects on abstention by indifference. Models 1 and 2 however, referring to abstention by alienation, are robust and therefore we proceed with plotting the marginal effects for the interaction terms for both newspaper-centric and television-centric individuals (Figure 3 for most liked leader measure).

< Table 3 about here >

< Figure 3 about here >

While the increase in leader effects is clear regardless of the chosen model, once we concentrate on newspaper-centric individuals, this increase is overshadowed by a similar importance of partisan attachments over the same period.

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strength of partisanship (0. Does not identify with the party of the most liked leader; 1. Weakly identifies with the party of the most liked leader; 2. Moderately identifies with the party of the most liked leader; 3. Strongly identifies with the party of the most liked leader), instead of the dichotomous measure used in Table 2. Again, the results hold virtually unchanged for our variables of interest (magnitude of change indicated between parentheses  $\Delta$ ): Model 1, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .004\*\* ( $\Delta = -.002$ ) and interaction coefficient for strength of partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.004\*\* ( $\Delta = .002$ ); Model 2, interaction coefficient for most liked leader\*Year is .007\*\*\* ( $\Delta = -.001$ ) and interaction coefficient for strength of partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.007\*\*\* ( $\Delta = .002$ ); Model 3, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .012\*\*\* ( $\Delta = .008$ ) and interaction coefficient for strength of partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.004\* ( $\Delta = -.001$ ); Model 4, interaction coefficient for difference between leaders\*Year is .013\*\*\* ( $\Delta = .007$ ) and interaction coefficient for partisanship (most liked leader's party)\*Year is -.006\*\* ( $\Delta = -.002$ ).

In contrast, the marginal interaction effects for television-centric individuals clearly show, on the one hand, a steeper increase in the effects of leaders across time and, at the same time, a decrease in the impact of partisanship towards the last decades of the time period. The *decalage* of leader effects vis-à-vis partisanship effects stands out in this setting. The differences across samples in the longitudinal trends of leader and partisanship effects on turnout support the thesis that exposure to political information on television fosters leader effects over abstention by alienations, fostering turnout and thus confirming the proposition expressed in H3.

### **Robustness**

*Leave-one-out cross-validation tests.* To address the possibility that an extreme case might be driving our results, we carried leave-one-out cross-validation tests by excluding one country at the time from our sample. The results proved robust in every circumstance except for those previously highlighted: all interaction models involving the H measure of leader effects on abstention by indifference. Details on cross-validation tests available in the appendix (Figures A1 to A4).

*Abstention by satisfaction.* A third potential source of abstention by *satisfaction* was advanced by Weisberg and Grofman (1981). This type of abstention occurs when the subject is satisfied with all the major leaders. If there is reasonable satisfaction with all the major alternatives presented, there is no incentive to vote – either way, the outcome will please the subject. Abstention by *satisfaction* can thus be perceived as a form of rational non-voting. Note that *satisfaction* can configure a sub-type of abstention by *indifference*: if all leaders are equally good it is indifferent who wins, hence the rational decision being to abstain. For this reason, it was considered as a robustness test, rather than a measure on its own. *Satisfaction* was operationalized by calculating the average thermometer score of all leaders running for election. If all leaders collect high ratings, the average shall be high and the subject shall be satisfied with any electoral outcome and thus not turn out. If at least some leaders are poorly rated, the average shall be lower and the subject can be said to be unsatisfied and thus turn out to signal its preferences.

The whole empirical analysis was replicated using this measure. However, leader effects on abstention by satisfaction were significant in the main effects model but not significant in any of the interaction models tested. The significant results for *satisfaction* can be consulted in the Table A1 in the appendix.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This article aimed at demonstrating the growing importance of voters' evaluations of party leaders for individual-level turnout decisions within the current context of partisan dealignment, mediatization and personalization of politics. Its conclusions challenge the dominant status of partisanship as the most important predictor of electoral participation. As fewer individuals have been reporting a longstanding attachment to a political party, these bonds are no longer able to explain electoral turnout in the same degree as in the mid-twentieth century. Partisanship now shares a prominent role in the explanation of individual-level turnout with short-term predictors that gained importance in the wake of the socio-political transformation that marked the last decades in West European democracies. The times in which "the decision to vote or not in a given election [was] determined for the most part by fairly stable attitudes toward the act of voting itself and only secondarily affected by election-specific variables (candidates, issues, etc.)" (Markus & Converse, 1979: 1057) seem now long gone. The results of this study show that leader evaluations hold, at least, just as much importance as partisanship in predicting individual-level turnout. What is more, it has been demonstrated that this is the result of a diachronic process in which partisan mobilization has been losing weight in relative terms and leader mobilization has been gaining more relevance – a process which can be designated as personalization of turnout.

In this way, the current study contributes to a much-neglected dimension of behavioral personalization related to the role of leaders in influencing not only vote choice but also turnout decisions in currently highly personalized parliamentary elections. This study expands on previous exploratory research in three ways: a) by providing the first longitudinal account of the phenomenon, demonstrating that this is a process of personalization; b) by shedding light on the role of media change in the development of this process; and c) by exploring the potential mechanisms through which leaders exert an impact on turnout.

The implications of such findings are particularly relevant in the current context of disengagement, discontent and skepticism towards political parties (Mair, 2013). As electoral turnout has been decreasing much throughout all West European countries (Franklin, 2004; Wattenberg, 2002), a great deal of it has been attributed to the simultaneous decline in partisan attachments (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Flickinger & Studlar, 1992; Heath, 2007). The confirmation that leaders have the ability to act upon this problem by bringing voters to the ballot box through their personal appeal is a positive countertrend. Even if leaders' mobilizing potential may not be sufficiently effective to compensate for the entire decrease in turnout

registered over the last decades, our results show that such decline could have been probably steeper had it not been for the growing relevance of leaders' assessments in the voting calculus.

However, leader evaluations' role in fostering turnout may come with the caveat of more volatile turnout rates. If turnout becomes increasingly dependent on the personal characteristics of parties' frontrunners, and electoral participation more subject to the influence of short-term factors, turnout rates may be subject to higher variation across elections. Moreover, ultimately a personalization of voter turnout may endanger the structuration of party competition by yielding electoral participation more dependent on the selection of political personnel. For example, parties may be incentivized to select leaders who are perceivable as particularly appealing to the electorate, heightening their profile and power within party organization, and further personalize electoral campaigns to give them more visibility and thus capitalize on their mobilizing potential. In fact, these trends have already been registered as a consequence of the personalization of vote choice (Dalton et al., 2011).

The conclusions of this study open various possible avenues for further research. For example, it would be interesting to investigate whether the same conclusions are extensible to decentralized personalization. Are evaluations of local candidates also important in fostering turnout? As decentralized personalization becomes ever more pervasive in Western societies and voters are increasingly given the possibility to actively select their representatives as a consequence of personalization at the electoral system level, there are grounds to hypothesize that similar findings could be observable.

Another implication, and possible research focus, concerns the role of negative leader evaluations in stimulating turnout. Recent electoral contests, such as the 2017 French Presidential Elections, have demonstrated how negativity towards a party leader can motivate individuals to turn out more (voting for a rival party) specifically to prevent that leader from getting elected. As contemporary elections become more tainted by affective polarization and negative partisanship, we can expect such cases to become increasingly frequent, anticipating a darker side on the personalization of turnout.

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**Table 1** – Countries and election studies included in the analysis

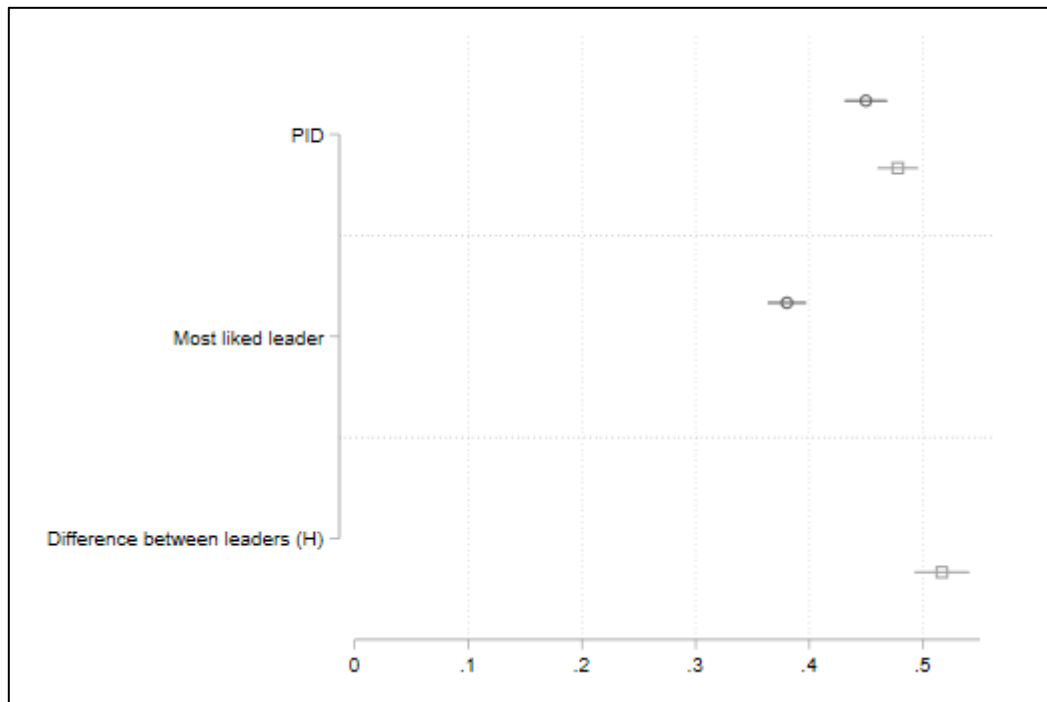
<b>Country</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Time Points</b>
Austria	2003	1
Denmark	2005	1
Finland	2003-2015	4
Germany	2002-2013	3
Greece	1985-1996	2
Ireland	2007	1
Italy	1985-2013	6
Netherlands	1986-2010	7
Portugal	1985-2015	7
Spain	2000-2016	5
Sweden	1985-2010	8
Switzerland	2007-2015	3
United Kingdom	1974-2015	4
Total		52

**Table 2** – The impact of voters’ evaluations of party leaders on turnout decisions – effects on abstention by alienation and indifference: HLM estimation

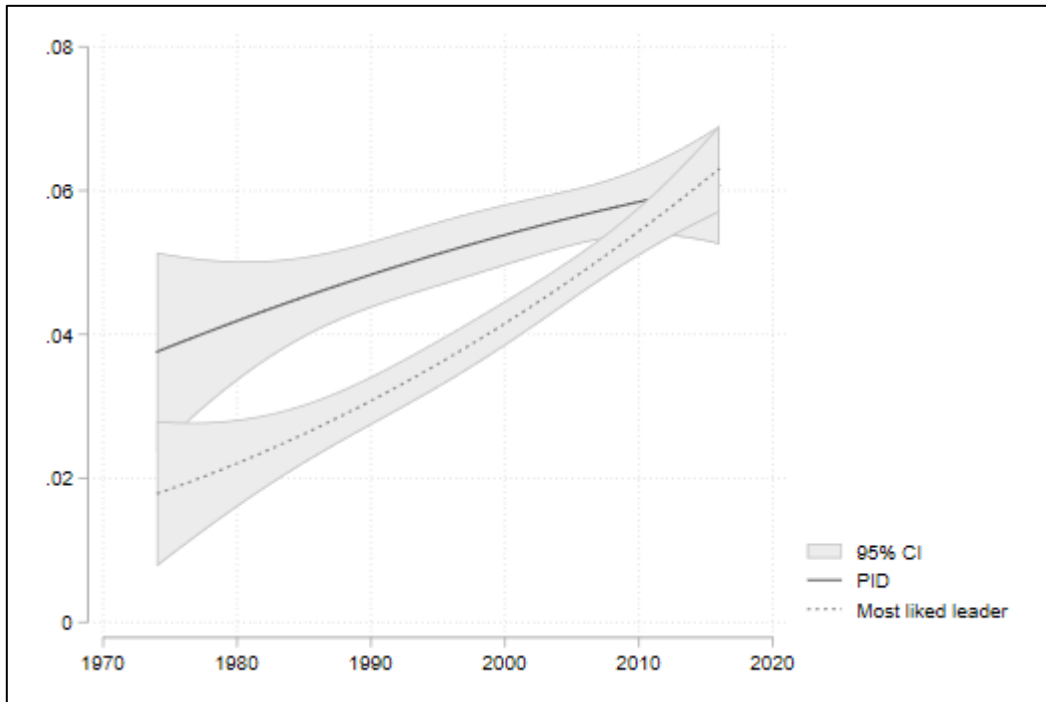
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Age	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Gender	.029 (.018)	.059** (.017)	.028 (.018)	.058** (.017)
Education	.160*** (.014)	.118*** (.013)	.160*** (.014)	.117*** (.013)
Religiosity	.015 (.009)	.023* (.009)	.014 (.009)	.023* (.009)
Union membership	.259*** (.026)	.258*** (.025)	.259*** (.026)	.259*** (.025)
Interest in politics	.511*** (.019)	.517*** (.018)	.509*** (.019)	.518*** (.018)
Ideology	.137*** (.006)	.184*** (.006)	.136*** (.006)	.184*** (.006)
Television	-.117*** (.009)	-.136*** (.009)	-.115*** (.009)	-.135*** (.009)
Newspapers	-.085*** (.009)	-.069*** (.009)	-.085*** (.009)	-.069*** (.009)
Partisanship	.450*** (.010)	.478*** (.009)	.561*** (.036)	.597*** (.035)
Leaders: Most liked leader	.380*** (.009)	-	.258*** (.024)	-
Leaders: difference between leaders (H)	-	.517*** (.012)	-	.369*** (.038)
Leaders: Most liked leader*Year	-	-	.004*** (.001)	-
Leaders: difference between leaders (H)*Year	-	-	-	.005*** (.001)
Partisanship*Year	-	-	-.003** (.001)	-.004*** (.001)
Year	-	-	-.023 (.012)	-.026* (.013)
Constant	.269*** (.149)	.025 (.155)	.901* (.363)	.740* (.380)
Log-likelihood	-41568.04	-45016.10	-41548.58	-45000.37
Wald chi-2	9432.80	10819.16	9436.82	10838.80
AIC	83162.08	90058.2	83129.15	90032.75
BIC	83286.63	90183.31	83282.45	90186.73
N (elections)	52	52	52	52
N (observations)	107037	111697	107037	111697

Note: Table entries are Hierarchical Logit Model (HLM) coefficients with a random intercept for each election study in our sample. Standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients of partisanship and leader evaluations variables are standardized. \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 1** – Party and leader effects on turnout: comparison of the marginal effects of partisanship and both measurements of leader effects



**Figure 2** – Partisanship and leader effects on turnout across time: marginal effects of the interaction between partisanship and year, and most liked leader and year



**Table 3** – The moderator role of media on the process of personalization of turnout: HLM estimation with split samples according to respondents' media diet

	<i>Most liked leader</i>		<i>H</i>	
	NP-centric (1)	TV-centric (2)	NP-centric (3)	TV-centric (4)
Age	.006*** (.001)	.007*** (.001)	.007*** (.001)	.006*** (.001)
Gender	.000 (.026)	.058* (.025)	.030 (.025)	.087*** (.024)
Education	.142*** (.019)	.178*** (.020)	.104*** (.018)	.133*** (.019)
Religiosity	.017 (.014)	.004 (.013)	.030* (.013)	.010 (.012)
Union membership	.245*** (.036)	.285*** (.038)	.240*** (.035)	.290*** (.037)
Interest in politics	.516*** (.028)	.478*** (.026)	.533*** (.027)	.480*** (.024)
Ideology	.132*** (.009)	.140*** (.008)	.176*** (.008)	.191*** (.008)
Television	-.055** (.021)	-.053** (.020)	-.057** (.021)	-.068* (.019)
Newspapers	-.162*** (.022)	-.149*** (.019)	-.164*** (.022)	-.124*** (.019)
Partisanship	.498*** (.050)	.611** (.054)	.555*** (.048)	.627*** (.052)
Leaders: Most liked leader	.312 (.036)	.212*** (.033)		
Leaders: difference between leaders (H)			.376* (.059)	.354*** (.050)
Leaders: Most liked leader*Year	.002 (.001)	.006*** (.001)		
Leaders: difference between leaders (H)*Year			.004* (.002)	.006*** (.002)
Partisanship*Year	-.002 (.001)	-.005** (.002)	-.003 (.001)	-.004** (.002)
Year	-.023 (.012)	-.022 (.012)	-.027* (.013)	-.025* (.012)
Constant	.985* (.388)	.970** (.363)	.798* (.402)	.797* (.380)
Log-likelihood	-19975.53	-21866.48	-21295.96	-23688.62
Wald chi-2	4830.73	4527.34	5596.30	5130.75
AIC	39383.05	43764.95	42623.91	47409.23
BIC	39525.05	43907.36	42766.58	47552.33
N (elections)	52	52	52	52
N (observations)	52828	54209	55091	56606

Note: Table entries are Hierarchical Logit Model (HLM) coefficients with a random intercept for each election study in our sample. Standard errors in parentheses. The coefficients of partisanship and leader evaluations variables are standardized. \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 3** – Partisanship and leader effects on turnout across time for newspaper- and television-centric individuals: marginal effects of the interaction between partisanship\*year, and most liked leader\*year

