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Different shades of leadership A comparative assessment of leaders' traits in explaining the vote for Populist Radical Right parties

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Different shades of leadership

A comparative assessment of leaders' traits in explaining the vote for Populist Radical Right parties

Abstract

Populist Radical Right parties (PRR) have gained prominence in many European countries, with leadership often considered a key factor in their electoral success. Despite this, limited research has explored how voters' perceptions of leaders' traits influence support for PRR parties. This study delves into the impact of perceived leaders' traits on the vote for PRR parties, using original survey data collected during recent general elections in six European countries (Italy 2022, France 2017, Germany 2017, Austria 2017, UK 2017, Netherlands 2017). Combining descriptive findings and regression analyses, our results reveal three key insights: 1) Voters differentiate among leaders' traits, with the influence of each trait varying across different party types; 2) the effect of leader's perceptions on all traits is significant also after taking into account party identification; 3) PRR parties are particularly adept at attracting voters based on positive assessments of leaders' strength and empathy, more so than other party types.

Keywords

Personality traits; PRR parties; populism; voters; leaders

Introduction

Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties are now key players in European politics, often participating in – or even leading – government coalitions. Although the research on the factors shaping their electoral success (e.g., Golder 2016) is extensive, some aspects remain however understudied. One aspect, in particular, lies at the core of our analysis: the impact of party leaders and, more specifically, how voters' evaluations of them influence their likelihood to vote for a PRR party.

In fact, while the scientific literature often emphasizes the importance of (charismatic) leaders for PRR party success, focusing mainly on objective leader characteristics within party organizations (Kefford and McDonnell 2018; Eatwell 2018), less attention has been given to subjective perceptions. The few studies in this field (e.g., Michel et al. 2020; Van der Brug and Mughan 2007), however, rely on generic like-dislike scales, failing to pinpoint specific leadership traits crucial for PRR party support. This is unfortunate, given that a growing literature on the personalisation of politics has advocated for a more nuanced assessment of leaders' evaluation (e.g., Costa and Ferreira da Silva 2015). Therefore, while leadership appears pivotal for PRR parties, there remains limited insight into how leader evaluation influences voting behaviour for PRR parties.

This paper aims to fill this gap, adopting an operationalization of leaders' subjective evaluation which goes beyond the like-dislike dimension. It thus investigates how different perceived leaders' traits are associated with the vote for PRR parties, comparing PRR parties with both Populist Radical Left parties (PRL) and mainstream parties. Relying on survey data from the Issue Competition Comparative Project (De Sio et al. 2019) in 6 West European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, UK), we test the effect of leaders' evaluations on four main leaders' traits (i.e., competence, leadership, empathy, and integrity) on vote choice for PRR, PRL, and mainstream parties. Results show that not all leader's traits are associated with the vote for PRR parties. This confirms that more than a general evaluation of leaders, voters tend to judge leaders on several aspects and, most importantly, these aspects are not equally relevant for different party types. In particular, our results show that perceived leaders' strength and empathy are distinctive features of the vote for PRR parties.

The paper is structured as follows: we first review the literature on the personalization of politics and leader's effect; we then discuss the role of leaders' traits in explaining voting behaviour; in section four we outline our hypotheses; data and methods are discussed in section five, while the main findings are presented in section six, before the concluding section.

Background

The prevailing view in the literature recognises that the role of leaders in politics has noticeably increased over the last decades. According to many, this is part of a process of personalization of politics that has been affecting Western societies for decades now (Lobo and Curtice 2014). Among the many reasons behind the personalisation of politics, partisan dealignment appears as the most relevant one (Garzia et al. 2022). With the weakening of the traditional cleavages, voters are nowadays much less constrained by social boundaries. Crucially, as a consequence of cognitive mobilization processes, thanks to increased access to education and information, voters have become less reliant on partisan cues and more engaged with politics on an individual base (Dalton 2007). While in the classic Michigan model party identification was a crucial element of the funnel of causality, capable to filter short-term antecedents of the vote such as issues and leaders' evaluations, these variables are now seen as having an effect on vote choice on their own, independently from party closeness and party identification (Garzia et al 2022). Although the literature is still divided¹, the predominant view is that the effect of short-term factors such as leaders' evaluation has increased over time.

Importantly, the effect of leaders is not the same across different party types. Mainstream parties, for example, have been found to be more likely to be affected by leader's evaluations, compared to anti-establishment parties (Aardal and Binder 2011; Bittner 2011; Lobo 2008). As mainstream parties are less and less able to distinguish themselves on the basis of ideological distance and policy differentiation, they have to rely on a strong distinctive leadership to attract voters. Anti-establishment parties, instead, are more likely to be in opposition (De Vries and Hobolt 2020), a status that allows them to adopt more radical positions or even to behave irresponsibly (Sartori 1966), to signal their difference from the mainstream.

When we come to the populist/non populist distinction, the literature has often emphasized the role of leaders as particularly relevant for the success of PRR parties (Eatwell 2018; Lubbers et al. 2002). In part this may be simply due to their relative newness, a condition that makes them less reliant on an established party brand, and more on the eccentric communication style of their leaders, a feature that is necessary, in the early stages of the life cycle of a party, to attract media attention (Aaldering 2018). In part this is due the fact that many PRR parties appear as personal parties, organised around strong charismatic leaderships (Rahat 2024). Charisma should be intended in the Weberian sense, as a

¹ For example, Quinlan and McAllister argue that “the kind of effect and the extent of leaders' impact on the vote are contested” (2022: 26). Influential studies, from King (2002) to Karvonen (2010) have found, at best, mixed evidence on leadership effects on vote choice. As Quinlan and McAllister themselves argue, in general “party favorability aligns with vote choice more often than leader favorability” (2022: 33).

relationship between leader and followers, rather than a characteristic of the individual leader. In this sense, charisma is attributed by followers to the leader, because of the latter's exceptionalism, which is able to convey direct electoral support, as shown for leaders of several populist parties (Van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Ideology also plays a part here. As PRR parties have an authoritarian vision of society, related to a "general disposition to glorify, to be subservient to and remain uncritical toward authoritative figures of the ingroup" (Adorno et al 1969, as cited in Mudde 2007, 22), this might be reflected also in a deferential and unconditional obedience to the party leader.

Empirical evidence, however, is inconclusive and warrants more empirical validation than the normal assumption that voters of populist parties are naturally more leader-centred. For instance, in the Netherlands, Van der Brug and Mughan (2007) found that, while evaluations of party leaders are highly relevant for electoral choices, the leader effect is not stronger for PRR than for other parties. At the same time, in Finland "the perceived competence and image of the party leader was more important for True Finns voters than other voters, while performance assessments and programmatic evaluations of the party were of much less importance" (Kestilä-Kekkonen and Söderlund 2014: 657). However, in countries where populism is more spread across the left-right spectrum, and less distinctively identified with radical-right parties, such as Czech Republic or Slovakia, the evidence goes in the opposite direction (Gyárfášová and Hlatky 2023).

This uncertainty is in itself puzzling, given the emphasis that the literature has often assigned to the role of leader's evaluations for the success of PRR parties. In this sense, an aspect that might help explaining the heterogeneity of these results is the use of generic like/dislike scales, an element which limits our capacity to discern different voters' motivations behind similar levels of likeability (Costa and Ferreira da Silva 2015).

Therefore, we explicitly focus on the effect of leaders' evaluations on different traits on the vote choice for different types of parties. In so doing, we generate empirically testable hypotheses which connect specific leaders' traits to the three types of parties. But before doing so, we first need to clarify which personality traits might be relevant in the mind of voters when they cast their ballot.

Which leadership? Leaders' personality traits and voting behaviour

Recent scholarship on the personalization of politics has often advocated for a more nuanced assessment of leaders' evaluations (Costa and Ferreira da Silva 2015; Ferreira Da Silva and Costa, 2019). Nevertheless, the studies using a more nuanced approach to the analysis of leaders' effect on vote choice that goes beyond the use of classical like/dislike scales remain limited. One reason for this

is that the use of personality traits instead of general thermometer scales has led to the development of different survey items to gauge leaders' traits in different contexts, making it challenging to develop a common ground for comparative studies.

Given these limitations, one might ask whether perceived leaders' personality traits should be preferred to generic thermometer scales. We give a positive answer to this question, as in our perspective the advantages of using of perceived leaders' traits rather than thermometer scales outweigh the limitations.

The first advantage is theoretical, and it is the most relevant one for our study. Different traits might be relevant to different leaders and thus appeal different segments of the electorate. For example, some studies have shown that competence seems to be more relevant for right-wing voters, while other traits (such as warmth and empathy, see below) are more important for left-wing voters (e.g., Bittner, 2011). Crucially, the effect of leader's evaluations detected by previous scholarships on the basis of generic like/dislike measures (be these effects substantially identical or divergent across different party types) might well be driven by different considerations among different types of electorates.

This argument aligns well with recent advancements in social and political psychology which have shown that there is not, in principle, a predetermined set of characteristics which make certain traits more desirable than others (Haslam et al, 2020; Steffens et al., 2016; Mols et al., 2023). Two elements are crucial. First the recognition of the leadership (and the definition of what makes a leadership effective) is more likely to occur when individuals share a strong social identity. Leadership is a social construction, in which social identities and in-group vs. out-group considerations play an important role. Second, the relevance of leadership traits is context-dependent. When expressing their support and appreciation for a leader, voters might have in fact in mind different set of considerations (and different traits might come up as more or less desirable, given the specific context in which the leadership is assessed).

While we do not delve into the interaction between social identities and voters' perceptions of desirable leaders' traits, our analysis is a first step into incorporating a more nuanced approach to leaders' evaluations: by differentiating across different traits and elaborating expectations about how perceived leaders' traits should affect the vote for different kind of parties we explicitly recognize that specific traits might be relevant for some voters, but not for others. At the same time, we also acknowledge that evaluations on certain traits can have an effect on the vote choice for some parties, but not for others.

The second advantage is operational. When analysing the association between vote choice and leaders' evaluations, there could clearly be an endogeneity problem. While voters could be more likely to vote for a party when they positively evaluate its leader, the reverse association is also plausible: a party leader is more likely to be positively evaluated by party supporters. While, as we shall see, this problem cannot be fully addressed with cross-sectional data, existing studies provide evidence that this issue does not significantly bias results concerning the association between the dependent variable vote choice and the independent variable leaders' evaluation (Van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Furthermore, and most relevantly for our argument, compared to leaders' evaluations, leaders' traits reduce the problems of endogeneity between leaders' evaluation, partisanship, and party choice. Leaders' traits have been found to be more exogenous to both partisanship and party choice, which means that they can more reliably isolate the effect of leaders on voting behaviour (Bittner, 2011; Johnston, 2002; Holian and Prysby, 2014; see also Ferreira Da Silva and Costa, 2019).

While there are clearly good reasons to use leaders' traits to investigate the effect of leaders' evaluations on voting for PRR parties vis à vis other parties, two more aspects need to be addressed before moving to our expectations. First, in what ways can personality traits affect voting behaviour? Second, which personality traits are the most relevant for voting behaviour?

Regarding the first question, Holian and Prysby (2014) identify three reasons that make leaders' traits particularly relevant for leaders' evaluations among voters. First, considering that voters have limited knowledge about leaders, leaders' traits are easily accessible information on which voters can rely to form their own evaluation. As Ferreira Da Silva and Costa (2019, p. 119) put it, "traits operate as shortcuts to assessments of candidates, providing valuable cues regarding the future job performance of the contenders at low cost". Second, electoral campaigns are increasingly focused on leaders. The centrality of leaders in electoral campaigns makes their personal characteristics important elements on which parties compete, and voters use these traits to assess the best profiles for holding office. Third, being aware of leaders' personality traits might allow voters to assess in advance how leaders would react to and operate in situations of uncertainty.

As for our second question (which personality traits are most relevant for voting behaviour?), the debate is still open. The scholarly literature has identified a huge variety of traits that might be relevant for leaders' evaluations (e.g., fairness, honesty, competence, etc.). This great variety makes it difficult to identify which specific characteristics might be most relevant in evaluating a leader. At the same time, as we argued above, what makes some traits relevant for the leadership is somehow context-dependent. This problem is compounded by the fact that the different traits of leaders are not consistently measured across different surveys (Ferreira Da Silva and Costa 2019). However, existing research suggests that voters are not able to recognize all the traits on which candidates can

hypothetically be evaluated (e.g., Holian and Prysby 2014; Johnston 2002) and they tend to simplify the reality, perceiving some traits more similarly than others. This implies that leaders' traits might be clustered on some kind of more general dimensions, something that the literature has widely investigated.

A first approach collapses all leaders' traits into a generic like-dislike dimension (Lau, 1985; Lodge et al., 1989; Hayes, 2009). The latter, of course, has the advantage of simplifying the configuration of leaders' personality traits and easing comparability across different contexts. However, it does not allow us to identify which specific traits are more relevant for voting behaviour. The Stereotype Content Model (SCM) (Fiske et al., 2002), instead, has provided a different framework to understand how individuals perceive and evaluate other people in society. The framework is based on two universal dimensions that individuals use in their evaluations of other people and groups: warmth and competence. The latter are considered universal dimensions of social perception, as evidence suggests that individuals spontaneously classify other people (or groups) along these two dimensions. This categorisation of leaders' traits has been recently used in studies about the effects of leaders' evaluations on voting behaviour and voter turnout (e.g., Costa and Ferreira Da Silva, 2015; Ferreira Da Silva and Costa, 2019).

Finally, Kinder (1983) identified four key dimensions of leaders' personality: competence, leadership, integrity, and empathy. This categorisation has been used (also in modified versions) by a large part of the subsequent literature. And, most importantly, it has been found to account for most of the variance in candidate perceptions (Laustsen and Bor, 2017; McGraw, 2011). As a consequence, we rely on this four-dimensional structure of leaders' traits to assess the effect of leaders' evaluations on the vote for PRR parties.

Leaders' personality traits and voting patterns for PRR, PRL, and mainstream parties

Building on this literature, our first expectation concerns the trait of competence (leader is 'competent', 'knowledgeable'). In particular, we posit that:

H1: Competence should be associated less strongly with the vote for populist parties, both on the left and on the right, rather than for mainstream parties.

We ground our first expectation on two different, but connected, strands of literature. First, as also discussed above, mainstream parties are more likely to serve as governing parties, which might give them the opportunity to present themselves as problem-solvers, i.e., competent in getting things done.

In fact, they have been found to be more likely to adopt problem-solving strategies during elections, emphasizing policy objectives that are non-divisive among voters and leveraging their technical skills and competence to mobilize voters (De Sio and Lachat, 2020). On the contrary, populist parties (be them PRR or PRL parties) have a lower record as governing parties and are more likely to be found in opposition. In this sense, they are ‘less experienced’ and can hardly claim superior competence in dealing with a country’s problems compared to mainstream parties. As a consequence, leaders of mainstream parties might have greater opportunities as compared to those of populist parties to get rewarded based on their alleged competence. Second, perceived competence is associated with a more reflective, somehow rational evaluation of leaders. In fact, highly educated people are more likely to consider competence a desirable attribute of a leader and, consequently, more likely to be influenced by competence evaluations in their vote choice (Kinder et al., 1980). At the same time, highly educated and cognitively skilled individuals are also more likely to vote for mainstream parties.

As for the strength trait (leader is ‘strong’, ‘inspiring’), we expect that:

H2: The appeal for a strong leader should be a stronger predictor of the vote for PRR parties compared to both mainstream and PRL parties.

As seen above, the existing literature has recurrently emphasised that strong leadership is particularly important for PRR parties (e.g., De Lange and Art 2011; Rooduijn 2015). Along the same line, a strong leadership has been identified as a key ingredient for the success of PRR parties by several scholars (e.g., Mény and Surel 2002; Eatwell 2018). Leaders such as Geert Wilders of the PVV in the Netherlands or Jean Marie Le Pen of the FN in France have been considered to leverage (at least to some extent) their image of strong leaders to gain votes (Kefford and McDonnell 2018). More recently, Donovan (2021) has empirically shown that illiberal stances of voters are associated to the vote for specific PRR parties. Amongst these stances, the general preference for unchecked, strong leaders has been found to differentiate PRR party supporters from all the others.

Concerning empathy trait (leader is ‘compassionate’, ‘cares about people’), we expect that:

H3: Empathy is associated more with the vote for PRR and PRL parties than for the vote for mainstream parties; at the same time, we expect empathy to be associated more with the vote for PRL than for the vote for PRR parties.

First, empathy is specifically related to non-political traits and, therefore, connected “to the ability of leaders to create an empathic relationship with the voters, their personal appeal and characteristics” (Ferreira Da Silva and Costa 2018, 5). This affective dimension of personality evaluation is more immediate and not filtered by the lens of rationality (Cuddy, Glick, and Beninger 2011). As a consequence, this dimension might be more relevant to evaluate leaders for low-skilled and less-

educated people (that is to say, those segments which are more attracted by populist parties, both on the left and on the right). Second, and perhaps most importantly, populists pursue an unmediated relationship with the people, and populist leaders seek to portray themselves as ordinary people, speaking and thinking like the common people (Eatwell 2018). Additionally, they portray themselves as caring about the fate of the good people, as opposed to mainstream parties and leaders, who are depicted by populists as only being concerned about their own personal interests (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Mols and Jetten 2020). At the same time, however, the scholarly literature has shown that empathy and warmth are associated more with the electoral support for left-wing parties, than for right-wing ones (Bittner, 2011).

Finally:

H4: We expect integrity (leader is ‘honest’, ‘moral’) to be associated more with the vote for PRR and PRL parties than for the vote for mainstream parties.

Our argument here is based on the idea that populism is intrinsically connected to anti-elitism. Populist rhetoric is essentially directed against the corrupt political elites which are accused to betray the interests of the pure, honest, people. Political elites are then depicted as “arrogant, selfish, incompetent and often also corrupt” (Rooduijn 2015: 4). Furthermore, populist voters as well are characterized by a shared sense of anti-elitism, as they tend to be sceptical of professional politicians and supportive of ordinary people in positions of power (Akkerman et al. 2014). This suggests that perceived honesty may be more highly valued by populist voters than by mainstream ones, and thus a stronger predictor of the vote for populist parties (both on the left and on the right) than for mainstream parties.

Data and methods

We test our hypotheses relying on the data provided by the Issue Competition Comparative Project (i.e., ICCP, De Sio et al. 2019). CAWI surveys were carried out in 6 Western European Countries (Austria 2017, France, 2017, Italy 2022, Germany 2017, Netherlands 2017, United Kingdom 2017) in the two weeks preceding the general election in each country. Our dependent variable is operationalized using the intentions to vote for a given party in the upcoming elections (1=R intends to vote for the party; 0=R does not intend to vote for the party). Our focal predictors, instead, are the leaders’ traits, measured based on survey questions asking respondents whether each party leader was deemed to be competent, honest, empathic, strong (1=Yes; 0=No). Respondents who explicitly stated that they didn’t know how to evaluate the leader on a specific trait were coded as 0.5 to avoid losing

observations. Leaders' traits thus vary within each individual, meaning that each respondent was surveyed about each specific party leader and across all the leaders' traits.

Rather than running party-specific models, to assess the effect of each leader's trait on the R's intention to vote for the party, we carried out our analyses at a more abstract level, implementing a generic model of voting. To do so, we stacked both our dependent and key independent variables by party, a procedure that resulted in an expanded data matrix (i.e., $R_s * \text{Number of parties}$), with each row now corresponding to a party-voter dyad. In this structure, each party-voter dyad aims at capturing the relation between the respondents and each political party available in the party system (Van der Eijk et al. 2006). In this way, we will be able to estimate the generic effect of each leader's trait on the overall vote calculus of voters (rather than estimating party specific effects).

To test our hypotheses, we then included a categorical variable distinguishing PRR parties from mainstream and PRL ones. While our primary focus is on PRR parties, rather than comparing PRR parties with all other parties together, we have chosen to distinguish between mainstream and PRL parties. This distinction is made because PRL parties, due to their populist nature, share significant characteristics with PRR parties. We identified populist parties (on the left and on the right) based on the PopuList classification.² This variable will be then used in interaction with leaders' traits to estimate the specific effects of leaders for each party type.³

Together with our four focal predictors and our variable separating PRR from mainstream and PRL parties, we also included several control variables that are usually associated with the vote. First, we included a variable for party identification, operationalised in the stacked data matrix as dummy variable (1=R identifies with a given party). As we have already noticed above, the extensive literature on the personalization of politics is widely supportive of the idea that the increased role of leaders is connected to the decline of party identification. If this is true, then the effect of leaders' traits on vote choice should emerge independently from party identification.

Additional controls have been added for standard socio-demographic variables (gender, education, living standards, interest in politics, and ideological position). Age is a categorical variable (1=18-29; 2=30-44; 3=45-54; 4=55-64; 5=+65), while gender is a dichotomy, with a value of 1 for females and 0 for males. Education includes three categories: 1= Primary; 2=Secondary; 3=Tertiary. Living

² We extensively followed the PopuList classification (see: <https://popu-list.org/>), with the only exception being the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy. Although the PopuList categorizes the M5S as a populist party without clear left or right affiliation, scholarly literature recently views it as a left-wing populist, particularly during the period of the study's elections (2022), when it was perceived to have shifted leftward (Chiaromonte and De Sio, 2024). In light of this, our main analyses classify the M5S as a PRL party. Nevertheless, we also conducted analyses treating it as a mainstream party, yielding results largely consistent with those presented in subsequent sections.

³ While PRR parties are present in all the countries covered in this study, PRL parties are present in all countries except two, namely Austria and the UK. As a result, in these last two countries, comparisons will be made between PRR parties and mainstream parties.

standards, instead, measure the (perceived) economic conditions of respondents on a 7-point scale (1=Respondent lives in a poor family; 7=Respondent lives in a rich family). Finally, the ideological position is a categorical variable, with 1=Left, 2=Centre, 3=Right, 4=Not positioned. These variables, however, do not vary within each individual (i.e., they are constant within each individual and, therefore, across all the party-voter dyads within each respondent). As a consequence, it is not possible to estimate their effect including them in our models as they are. We follow here a standard practice in analysing electoral data organized in a long format (Van der Eijk et al., 2006; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009). For those variables which are constant for each individual, synthetic variables are used in our models; these variables measure the affinity between respondents with certain characteristics and each political party. These affinity measures (i.e., *y-hats*) derive from the predicted probabilities of multiple party-specific bivariate logit regressions predicting vote choice based on the specific characteristics of the respondent (Van der Eijk et al., 2006). For each respondent-party dyad, the predicted probability is calculated that a certain respondent characteristic will produce the outcome (e.g., the predicted probability that women voted for Party A). These predicted probabilities are then used in the regression analyses to assess the overall impact of each of these variables on vote choice. On the whole, these affinity measures can be understood as indicators that capture the overall impact that each has on the dependent variable.

Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we relied on a series of binomial logistic regressions to estimate the effect of leaders' traits on the intention to vote for a party. Finally, all the models presented in this paper include country fixed effects to account for country-specific heterogeneity and have been estimated with standard errors clustered at the level of each individual to reduce biases due to the inflation of the number observations.

Results

Before delving into the details of our hypotheses, Figure 1 briefly summarizes how different leaders (grouped by party type) are evaluated by the pool of respondents in each of the six countries covered by our study. Some interesting data, even if in a purely descriptive context, emerge quite clearly. First, despite a strong leadership is often associated with PRR parties, PRR leaders are not perceived as such in all the six countries. Strength is a trait recognized in the leaders of PRR parties in two of the six countries, namely Austria and Italy. In two other countries, however (the Netherlands and France), PRR leaders are perceived as relatively stronger than mainstream leaders but relatively weaker as

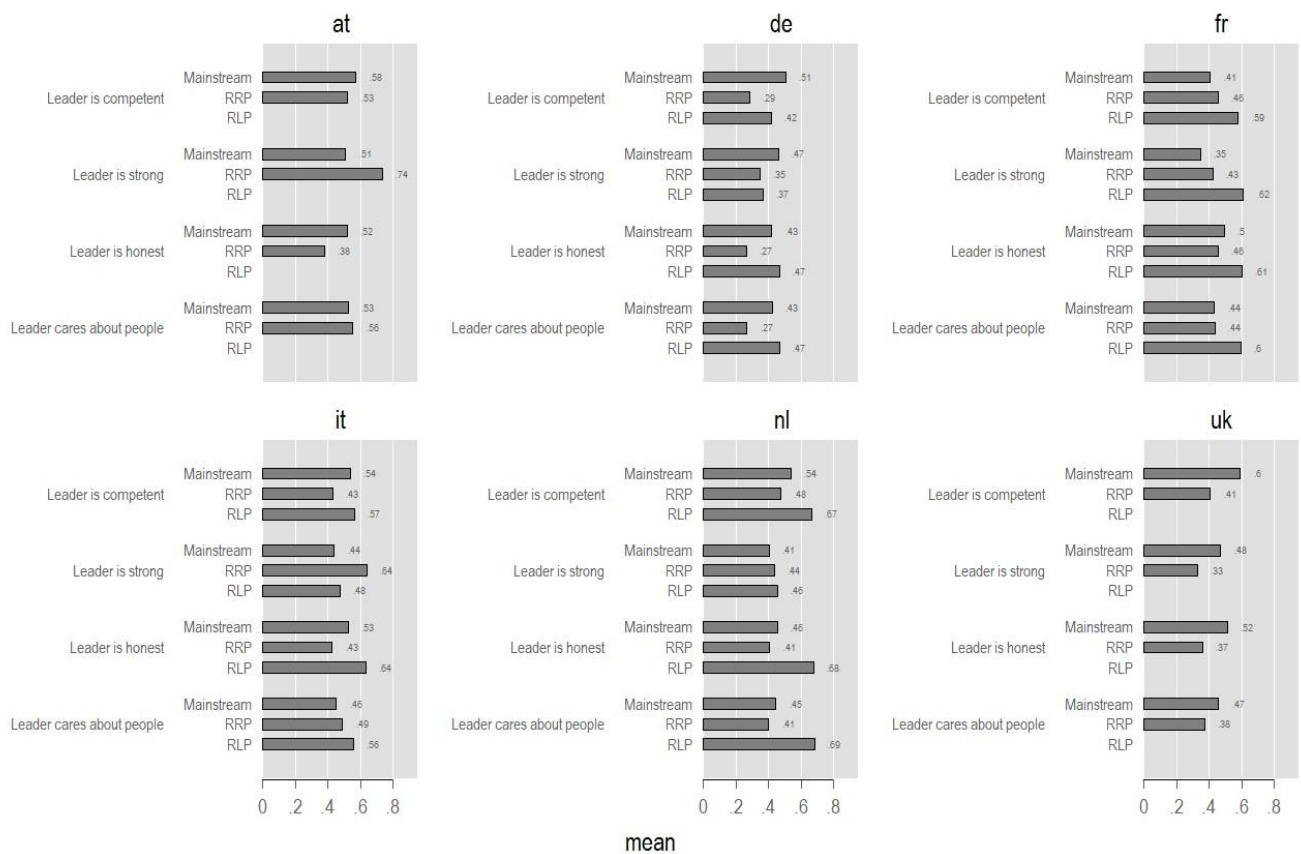
compared to left-wing populists. The case is different in Germany and the United Kingdom: here, in fact, mainstream leaders are perceived as the strongest ones.

Similarly, the trait of competence, usually associated with mainstream parties, is only partially considered a privileged feature of mainstream leaders. This is the case in Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom. However, in Italy and the Netherlands mainstream leaders are perceived as relatively more competent compared to PRR leaders, but not compared to left-wing populist leaders. In France, on the other hand, mainstream leaders are the ones considered the least competent overall (and they score relatively lower compared to mainstream leaders also in other countries). This data is only partially surprising, considering that the 2017 presidential elections in France effectively marked the crisis of traditional mainstream parties such as the Socialists and the Republicans, making way for Macron's political project.

The assessment of the leader's honesty, on the other hand, follows a similar pattern in all six countries. Specifically, left-wing populist leaders are more appreciated for their honesty, both compared to PRR parties and mainstream ones. Left-wing populist parties are followed by leaders of mainstream parties, and only lastly by right-wing radical parties. Therefore, the latter do not seem to have been able to establish themselves in public opinion as more honest leaders than others, despite the anti-elitist rhetoric that characterizes them.

Finally, the trait of empathy follows the same dynamics in Germany, France, and the Netherlands: here, left-wing populist leaders are perceived as relatively more empathic than both mainstream and PRR parties (which are among the least successful in this regard). This figure is apparent in the United Kingdom as well, where mainstream leaders are perceived as more empathic than PRR parties. The situation, instead, is different in Austria and Italy, where PRR leaders are seen as more empathic than mainstream parties (although in Italy, left-wing populists are rated higher in empathy).

Figure 1 – Evaluations of leaders’ traits in 6 Western European countries.



While these data gave us a broad picture about how different leaders are evaluated by voters, they do not tell us anything about how voters use these evaluations in their electoral behaviour. To investigate this research question (and to test our empirical hypotheses), we in fact need: 1) to understand whether leaders’ traits influence the vote choice; and 2) whether these alleged effects vary depending on the party type. We address these two points in Table 1, which depicts the results of our main analyses. Our first regression model (Model 1) includes control variables only, i.e., socio-demographic variables, party identification, and the variable that distinguishes mainstream parties from populist parties on the left and on the right. Thus, this model will serve as a baseline model to assess the quality of our data and as a point of reference to compare the overall effects of leaders’ traits on the vote. Our results here are substantially reassuring. First, all the logit coefficients for the socio-demographic variables are statistically significant, thus meaning that structural variables do have an impact on the vote calculus of voters. Second, we find a strong and highly significant effect for party identification (logit=4.34). Finally, the overall fit of the model is quite good, with a Pseudo-R2 which is equal to 0.37.

In Model 2, together with control variables, we plugged in the models our focal predictors: the four leaders' traits. For each trait, we find a positive and highly significant effect, a result that is fully consistent with the existing literature on the effect of leader's evaluations on vote choice. Specifically, the traits of competence and empathy are the ones that appear to be the strongest ones (the logit coefficients are, respectively, 1.452 and 1.123). These two leaders' characteristics are followed by leader's strength (logit=0.974) and honesty (logit=0.450). Furthermore, it is worth to be noticed that the inclusion of these four variables in the list of covariates significantly improved the performance of the model. Compared to Model 1, where we found a pseudo-R²=0.37, in Model 2 the estimated pseudo-R² is equal to 0.46. This seems to confirm that individual evaluations of party leaders do have an effect on their own merit and independently from party identification.

If leaders' evaluations are confirmed to be independent predictors of vote intentions, do their effect unfold differently depending on party type? Are PRR parties more likely to benefit from a specific trait? To answer these questions and to test our hypotheses, we run a series of interactive models (Models 3, 4, 5, 6), in which each leader trait is individually interacted with party type. In particular, in Model 3 we let the competence trait interact with party type, while interaction terms between party type and strength, empathy, and honesty are estimated, respectively, in Models 4, 5, and 6. To ease the interpretation of the interaction terms, the marginal effects of each leader trait are plotted against the party type in Figure 2.

As visible in Figure 2, top-left panel, our first hypothesis is not confirmed: we expected that mainstream parties should have been more likely to capitalize on the trait of competence, given their experience as governing parties. However, our data show that there is no significant difference across different party types: mainstream parties are as likely as PRR parties and PRL parties to gain votes when considered competent. In line with our second hypothesis, instead, we found that perceived leaders' strength is more strongly associated with the vote for a PRR party than for either a mainstream or PRL party. This result is clearly visible in Figure 2, top-right panel, which then aligns with what the literature suggests about the appeal for a strong leader among voters of PRR parties. In particular, this finding tells us that when voters rate leaders of PRR parties comparatively better for their strength, they are more likely to vote for this kind of parties. At the same time, those who think that the leaders of PRR parties are not comparatively stronger than others, are less likely to vote for them. Our third hypothesis concerns the effect of perceived leader's empathy on voting behaviour. In particular, we expected that perceived leader's empathy should be associated more with the vote for PRR and PRL parties than for the vote for mainstream parties; at the same time, we expected perceived empathy to be associated more with the vote for PRL than for the vote for PRR parties. Our interactive model partially supports our hypothesis (Figure 2, bottom-left panel): PRR parties are

significantly more likely to capitalize on the fact that their leaders are perceived more empathic as compared to mainstream parties; however, they are as likely as PRR parties to be electorally rewarded by their perceived leaders' empathy. Finally, as for our fourth hypothesis, no significant difference is detected in the effect of perceived leaders' honesty on the vote across different party types (Figure 2, bottom-right panel). As a consequence, H4 should be clearly rejected.

As a final step in our analysis, we also estimated together the interactions between each leader's trait and different party types. Results of this regression model, displayed in Table 1, Model 7, are fully consistent with the analyses that have been presented above.

On the whole, our results have confirmed that indeed the evaluations of leaders on very specific characteristics are key factors affecting the vote calculus of voters. At the same time, they confirmed one of the basic arguments of this paper: more than a general evaluation of leaders, voters tend to judge leaders on several aspects and, most importantly, these aspects are not equally relevant for different party types. Finally, and relating to our hypotheses concerning the specific case of PRR parties, our results have clearly shown that two leaders' traits are somehow distinctive features of the electoral support for PRR parties: first, perceived leaders' strength, something that clearly resonates with the classical idea of the appeal of a strong leader on the right; second, perceived leaders' empathy, which might be instead more connected with the people-centric rhetoric of PRR parties, in fact based on the claim of an unmediated relationship between the leader and the common people.

Figure 2 – Effect of perceived leaders’ personality traits on the intentions to vote for different party types (95% CIs). *Note:* Effects are based on Model 7 of Table 1.

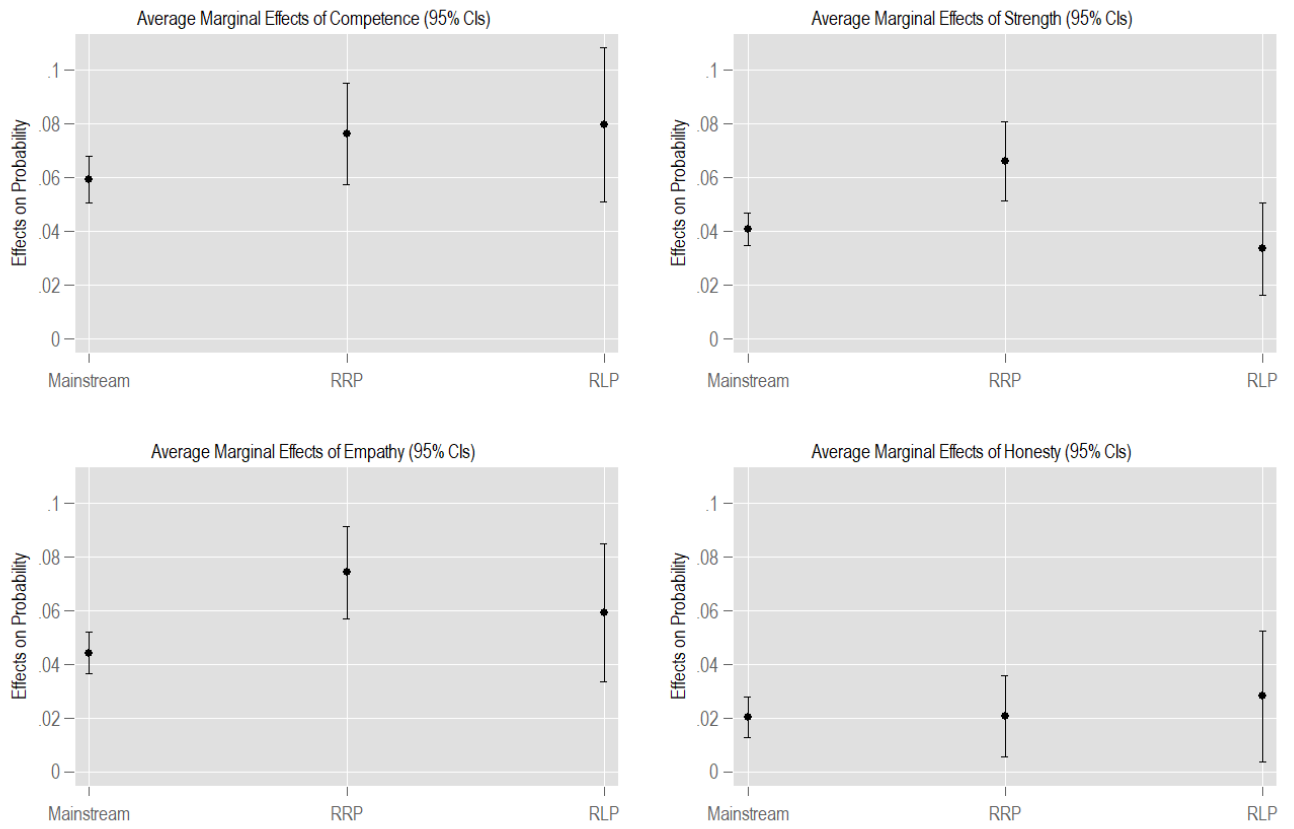


Table 1 – Logistic regression of vote choice. *Note:* Full model specifications available in Table A1 of the Appendix

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party id.	4.340*** (0.0617)	3.671*** (0.0665)	3.660*** (0.0665)	3.662*** (0.0666)	3.660*** (0.0666)	3.665*** (0.0666)	3.654*** (0.0666)
Party type							
Mainstream	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline
PRR	0.232*** (0.0455)	0.337*** (0.0509)	-0.155 (0.157)	-0.137 (0.135)	-0.197 (0.141)	0.107 (0.119)	-0.477* (0.190)
PRL	0.498*** (0.0731)	0.203** (0.0738)	-0.111 (0.242)	0.253 (0.151)	-0.102 (0.256)	-0.0365 (0.226)	-0.224 (0.308)
Leader's traits							
Competence		1.452*** (0.0857)	1.278*** (0.098)	1.436*** (0.0851)	1.423*** (0.0854)	1.440*** (0.0860)	1.349*** (0.101)
Strength		0.974*** (0.0605)	0.977*** (0.0608)	0.885*** (0.0688)	0.964*** (0.0604)	0.974*** (0.0606)	0.931*** (0.0709)
Honesty		0.450*** (0.0727)	0.451*** (0.0727)	0.456*** (0.0726)	0.462*** (0.0725)	0.359*** (0.083)	0.465*** (0.0881)
Empathy		1.123*** (0.0761)	1.118*** (0.0762)	1.108*** (0.0759)	0.977*** (0.083)	1.133*** (0.0765)	1.009*** (0.0889)
Interactions terms							
PRR*Competence			0.604*** (0.179)				0.190 (0.214)
PRL*Competence			0.374 (0.266)				0.335 (0.312)
PRR*Strength				0.617*** (0.160)			0.401* (0.174)
PRL*Strength				-0.0614 (0.182)			-0.223 (0.200)
PRR*Empathy					0.687*** (0.166)		0.488* (0.199)
PRL*Empathy					0.368 (0.277)		0.242 (0.311)
PRR*Honesty						0.326* (0.149)	-0.0447 (0.180)
PRL*Honesty						0.296 (0.251)	0.130 (0.285)

Intercept	-9.210*** (0.282)	-10.86*** (0.324)	-10.78*** (0.323)	-10.85*** (0.325)	-10.77*** (0.324)	-10.80*** (0.324)	-10.77*** (0.325)
<i>N</i>	56805	56805	56805	56805	56805	56805	56805
pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.371	0.463	0.463	0.464	0.464	0.463	0.464

Note: The estimations include country-fixed effects (not displayed). Standard errors are reported in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Conclusions

As the scientific literature has increasingly pointed to the increased role of political leaders in the last decades, it has become crucial to understand the extent to which leaders' evaluations can affect electoral performances of political parties. In this paper we investigated this issue, specifically focusing our attention on leader's effect on the electoral success of PRR parties. In so doing, we leveraged comparative survey data including six Western European countries, and we elaborated empirically testable hypotheses about the way in which specific leaders' characteristics can impact the electoral performance of a political party.

Differently from the existing literature, we did not focus on how a general evaluation of the leaders can affect electoral choices. Rather, we focused our attention on four different leaders' traits, in fact arguing that more than a general evaluation of leaders, voters tend to judge leaders on several aspects. We thus investigated the effect of our four key leaders' traits (competence, strength, empathy, and honesty) on voting behaviour, and we differentiated these effects for three different party types (namely, mainstream parties, PRR parties, and PRL parties).

Our results confirm three important things: first, voters in fact are able to differentiate across different leaders' traits, and the weight of each leader's perceived trait on voting behaviour varies across different party types. Second, the effect of leader's perceptions (on all four traits) is significant also after taking into account party identification. Third, and more specifically related to PRR parties, two leader's traits, strength and empathy, have an effect on vote choice that is significantly stronger for PRR parties than for mainstream and PRL parties. On the other hand, no significant difference is detected between party types in relation to honesty and competence.

These results are consistent with a consolidated stream of literature. As party dealignment has made voting decisions increasingly individualised and fluid, vote is now driven by short-term considerations, such as leaders' assessment. We contribute to this literature by warning that not all aspects of leadership are equally influential, nor are they equally influential for all parties.

It is rather straightforward to explain why voters of PRR parties are particularly sensitive to leader's strength and empathy. These aspects are coherent with the more or less explicit authoritarian tendencies of these parties and with their anti-establishment rhetoric, as discussed in the previous pages. However, we can probably learn something also from the hypotheses that were not confirmed by our analysis. First, competence is not a specifically desirable character of leadership for mainstream parties only. As PRR (and PRL) parties get closer to government, or even become part of the government, voters seem to normalise these parties, asking their leaders to present themselves as credible policy makers and problem solvers, instead of just being agents of popular protest against the incumbent elites. In a similar vein, an increased attention of the media system to political scandals and public money misuse have made voters' attention to the issue of elites integrity transversal to populist and non-populist parties.

These speculations are clearly in search for further confirmation. In particular, we believe that three aspects deserve to be explored more systematically than we do in the present work, both cross nationally and longitudinally. First, as PRR parties approach government responsibilities, some of the personality traits of their leaders might gain or lose importance, making these parties look closer to their mainstream competitors. New data on PRR parties having completed a legislature in government will allow to assess this expectation. Second, polarization might well play a role in the way citizens perceive political leaders. As the literature on social identification teaches, leadership results from a process of effective "identity entrepreneurship" (Mols et al. 2023). In times of growing polarization, some attributes might be more relevant than others to build an effective ingroup feeling, and thus have a particularly strong effect on vote choice. Third, many studies have discussed the impact of a changing media environment on leadership styles. Social networks have clearly empowered leaders over party organizations, and profoundly changed the way citizens relate to holders of public offices. Our research shows that voters' evaluations of leaders are not unidimensional. Future studies may tell us whether different media environments (more or less polarized, more or less dominated by digital media) induce leaders to insist on different traits, and voters to be more or less responsive to one trait or another.

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