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## Party Leaders in the Media and Voting Behavior: Priming Rather than Learning or Projection

JANET TAKENS, JAN KLEINNIJENHUIS, ANITA VAN HOOF,  
and WOUTER VAN ATTEVELDT

*The prominence of party leaders in the media is one of the presumed causes of leader effects (i.e., the influence of party leader evaluation on the voting decision). Yet there is scant knowledge of the relationship between attention for party leaders in the news and the weight of party leader evaluations in the voting decision. This study fills this research gap by examining the effect of exposure to personalized coverage on the weight of party leader evaluations in the voting decision. Based on priming theory, exposure to personalized coverage is expected to make voters weigh leader evaluations more heavily in their vote decision. The study is based on a content analysis of the coverage of the 2010 Dutch election campaign and an 11-wave panel survey. Therewith the hypotheses are tested in a dynamic natural media environment. The analyses demonstrate that leader effects do occur. Voters use leader evaluations in their voting decision, even when controlling for the lagged vote, party evaluations, and issue agreement. Our data also support the hypothesis that personalized media coverage primes personalized voting behavior, even when controlling for learning and projection. Voters weigh leader evaluations more heavily in their vote decision and party evaluations and issue agreement less heavily when they are exposed to more personalized coverage.*

**Keywords** priming, leader effects, personalization, projection, learning

According to the personalization thesis, individual political actors—such as party leaders—have become more prominent in different areas (Karvonen, 2010), such as the political arena, the media, and voting behavior (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). Personalization in *voting behavior* refers to “citizens’ increased emphasis on the candidates, at the expense of considering collective group-identity variables such as social groups and political parties [in the voting decision]” (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007, p. 68). The prominence of party leaders in voting behavior has been referred to as a *leader effect* (i.e., the effect of the evaluation of party leaders on the voting decision; King, 2002). However, studies have failed to find a linear trend in the size of leader effects (Adam & Maier, 2010; Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002), as the personalization thesis

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assumes. Moreover, studies on leader effects show large within-country and across-country variations in the size and significance of leader effects (Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002).

The prominence of party leaders in the media is one of the presumed causes of the prominence of party leaders in the voting decision (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). The degree of personalized media coverage might, in other words, explain the variation in the size of leader effects. However, the relationship between personalized media coverage and personalized voting behavior has never been tested (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). To gain a better understanding of the relationship between the prominence of party leaders in the media and voting behavior, we must investigate the relationship between voters' exposure to personalized coverage and the importance of party leaders in their voting decision. This study examines personalized voting behavior (leader effects) as well as the influence of personalized media coverage on personalized voting behavior.

Various studies point toward an effect of news exposure on the way individual voters evaluate politicians (Lenz & Lawson, 2011; Prior, 2006). Few studies have examined the relationship between news consumption and personalized voting behavior (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2002; Mendelsohn, 1996). However, there is scant knowledge of the relationship between attention for party leaders in the news and the weight of party leader evaluations in the voting decision.

The contribution of this article is fourfold. First, it confirms priming effects of personalized news coverage on personalized voting behavior. It shows that the *mere attention* for party leaders in general makes leader evaluations weigh heavier in the vote intention. Since this has not been empirically tested before, it adds to our understanding of the relationship between personalization in the media and personalization in voting behavior. Second, it tests priming against two alternative explanations to which recent literature has pointed—learning (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012; Lenz, 2009) and projection (Hart & Middleton, 2014)—by taking the time aspect into account. So it is the first study to examine the effects of priming, learning, and projection simultaneously. Third, it does so within the complexity of the real news media situation based on longitudinal news media data and a panel survey. Finally, we show that priming effects of personalized news coverage remain significant after inclusion of the tone of the news about party leaders.

The study of the prominence of party leaders in the news and in voting behavior is important not only in presidential campaigns which are considered a test of character (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) but—in spite of the central role of parties and collective identities (Karvonen, 2010)—also in parliamentary elections. Voting based on leader evaluations “directly contradicts the basic logic of parliamentary systems in which the party, not the candidate, stands at the center of the political process” (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007, p. 66). Voting based on leader evaluations instead of evaluations of political parties and their issue stances is consequently considered a suboptimal decision method (e.g., Swanson & Mancini, 1996). Therefore this study is conducted in the context of a parliamentary system—that of the Netherlands.

## Personalized Voting Behavior: Leader Effects

Before testing whether personalized media coverage strengthens the effect of leader evaluations on vote intention (personalized voting behavior), we have to establish that personalized voting behavior occurs. The literature on personalization makes a distinction between *centralized* personalization (a focus on prominent politicians) and *decentralized* personalization (a focus on individual politicians other than these prominent ones; Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenhav, 2014). Studies have shown that especially those politicians with a high level of charismatic skills and political resources are covered in the news (Sheafer,

2001). In voting behavior, centralized personalization can be equated with the earlier mentioned *leader effects*. This study focuses on *centralized* personalization in the news and the voter's mind (i.e., the voting decision).

Although there is a widespread belief that the importance of leader evaluations in the voting decision is increasing, evidence from empirical studies regarding personalization in voting behavior in parliamentary elections is at best mixed (Adam & Maier, 2010; Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Hayes, 2009; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002). However, even when specific campaigns are more personalized than others in the absence of such a trend, the question as to the size of the effect of leader evaluations on the vote remains important.

Few studies have assessed personalized voting behavior in parliamentary elections (Adam & Maier, 2010). The limited number of studies which have been conducted in the context of parliamentary elections have shown that leader evaluations do affect the voting decision (e.g., Aarts & Blais, 2011; Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Vetter & Gabriel, 1998). We consequently expect that voters are more likely to vote for a party whose party leader they evaluate more positively.

*H1: Leader effect: Respondents' leader evaluations have a positive effect on the intention to vote for the party represented by that leader.*

For party leader evaluations to affect the voting decision, voters have to be able to distinguish party leader evaluations from party evaluations. Some scholars argue that voters are hardly capable of doing so (e.g., Aarts, 2001; Kaase, 1994; King, 2002; Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010). The opposing view holds that voters do make genuine evaluations of party leaders and that this is both rational and opportune behavior. Curtice and Holmberg (2005, p. 235) argue that "it would seem quite rational to decide how to vote on an assessment of the overall trustworthiness and competence of a party leader rather than the detailed promises made by a party at election time." In the context of elections with new candidates entering the stage and old candidates holding new issue positions, leader evaluations are not likely to be static. That is not to say that voters judge leaders independent from their political parties but that repeated measurements of both leader evaluations and party evaluations are required to show that voters can distinguish party leaders from the parties they represent.

### **The Effect of Personalized Media Coverage on Personalized Voting Behavior**

Voters make evaluations based on newly acquired and readily accessible information from the mass media (Zaller, 1992). Priming theory asserts that "by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Miller and Krosnick (2000) argue that attention for a certain object does not just increase the accessibility of this object, but that voters perceive this object as being more important. Likewise, Althaus and Kim (2006) show that priming effects in real-world, complex information environments result from the cumulative exposure to news that is perceived as relevant or applicable in judgmental tasks, even in the absence of very recent primes. Chong and Druckman (2007, p. 115) equate this priming effect of changing weight due to "changes in accessibility and applicability" with framing. Similar conclusions about the role of the mass media in changing the weight of criteria to judge political parties can be drawn from theories on issue ownership theory (Budge & Farlie, 1983) and second order

agenda setting (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004). These theories claim that mass media change the emphasis that is placed on criteria to judge political parties by respectively emphasizing political parties' "owned" issues or political parties' attributes.

However, there is scant knowledge of the relationship between attention for party leaders in the news and the weight of party leader evaluations in the voting decision. Mendelsohn (1996, p. 119) did find some "underwhelming" evidence that the mere *amount of political news coverage* to which voters were exposed made trust in party leaders a more important vote determinant. During the course of election campaigns, the size of leader effects has been shown to increase (Schoen, 2007). Studying German federal elections between 1980 and 2002, Schoen (2007, p. 334) comes to the conclusion that "[c]andidate priming changed the parties' vote shares and in some cases even altered the partisan balance." However, he did not take into account whether the candidates were primed by the media. Gidengil and colleagues (2002) showed that news exposure amplified leader effects in the context of Canadian elections. Exposure to personalized coverage is therefore expected to make evaluations of party leaders more important in the voting decision. If the overall attention for party leaders *across parties* increases at the expense of the attention for parties, we expect that the importance of evaluations of party leaders as a vote determinant increases.

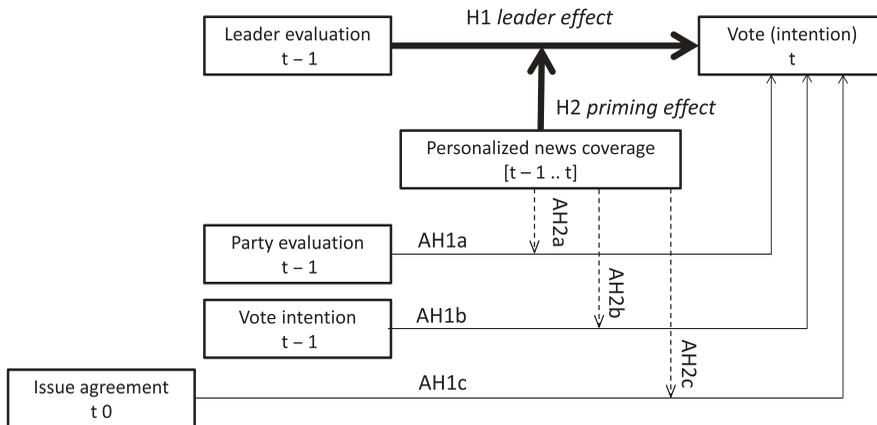
*H2: Priming effect: The influence of leader evaluations on the intention to vote for a party is stronger for voters who are exposed to more personalized coverage.*

### ***Control Variables to Rule Out Competing Explanations***

Figure 1 illustrates the model that we put to the test. For a robust test of the leader effect hypothesis (H1) and the priming hypothesis (H2), we need to include other variables in order to rule out alternative explanations. The leader effect hypothesis (H1) and the priming effect hypothesis (H2) are shown as solid arrows in Figure 1 alongside dotted arrows for alternative explanations.

The leader effect hypothesis is tested in the context of other known determinants of voting behavior (i.e., party evaluations, issue agreement, and the lagged vote intention). Since previous research has shown that respondents' party evaluations and party affiliations affect the vote (e.g., Rahn, 1993), party evaluations are included in the model as a control variable. Second, the lagged vote is included as a control variable since voters who intended to vote for a certain party last week are more likely to vote for that party again this week. The lagged vote encompasses long-term factors influencing the vote such as sociodemographic factors and earlier changes in evaluations (Achen, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007). This makes it redundant to add sociodemographic factors to our model. Third, issue agreement with a party at the start of the campaign is included as a control variable to explain this week's vote intention. Obviously, voters take agreement with a party's issue positions into account when deciding on their vote (e.g., Aarts, McDonald, & Rabinowitz, 1999; Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008; Belanger & Aarts, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007).

The priming effect hypothesis (H2) should also be tested alongside three additional interaction effects that allow for a test of two alternative explanations (i.e., projection and learning). A side effect of the priming of a specific decision criterion is that the vote will be based less on other criteria (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). Personalized news coverage is



**Figure 1.** The leader effect and the priming effect of personalized news coverage on vote (intention). *Note.* Personalized voting behavior, defined as the impact of prior leader evaluation on vote intention, (H1) is strengthened by personalized news (H2 *priming*). The dotted auxiliary hypotheses AH1a, AH1b, and AH1c maintain that the leader effect (H1) can be distinguished from the effects of prior party evaluation, prior vote intention, and prior issue agreement. The dashed auxiliary hypotheses AH2a, AH2b, and AH2c refer to the secondary priming effect that personalized news is expected to render the latter considerations *less* important.

therefore expected to *diminish* the effect of prior party evaluation, prior vote intention, and prior issue agreement on one's current vote intention, as is shown in Figure 1.

Lenz (2009) showed that the news enables voters to learn about the issue positions of candidates, as a result of which they increasingly base their vote on their agreement on issues with the candidates. He refers to “changes in vote choice or candidate evaluations induced by such learning” as learning effects (Lenz, 2009, p. 823). If personalized news indeed fosters *issue learning* (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012; Lenz, 2009) then a *stronger* effect of issue agreement on the vote as a result of personalized coverage is to be expected, rather than a *weaker* impact as predicted by priming.

The priming hypothesis assumes that leader evaluations were already in place before they were primed by personalized news. The *projection hypothesis* assumes the reverse causal order. It holds that “news causes voters to align their overall approval with issue approval” (Hart & Middleton, 2014, p. 582). Voters exposed to personalized news would selectively align leader evaluations, party evaluations, and issue agreement with their prior overall approval as measured by their prior vote intention. Hart and Middleton (in press) use a two-wave panel survey-embedded experiment with lagged independent variables measured in the first wave of the panel study to arrive at an unbiased estimation of priming effects in spite of projection. They show that the causal arrow runs from issue approval to overall approval (priming), not vice versa (projection).

The current article concentrates on priming effects of the amount of personalized coverage, thereby leaving aside effects of other news aspects. However, a simple post hoc test may reveal whether priming effects remain stable once the research model has been extended by a powerful news effect on vote choice according to previous research, which is the effect of the tone of the news (Hopmann, Vliegthart, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2010), and especially the effect of attributions of either successes or failures to party leaders (horse-race news) on voters (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007).

## Method

Panel survey data, preferably real-world data about a complex information environment (Althaus & Kim, 2006), are required to estimate the leader effect (H1) and the priming effect (H2) in spite of the possibility of reversed causation resulting from learning (Lenz, 2009) or projection (Hart & Middleton, 2014). Such longitudinal real-world data are provided by a daily content analysis and an 11-wave weekly panel survey in the complex information environment of the 2010 Dutch national election campaign.

The Netherlands is a multiparty parliamentary democracy with an open list system, which means that voters elect a political candidate belonging to a certain party. Many parties compete for the vote as a result of the low electoral threshold. Voters can choose from many newspapers and television news broadcasts, which means that the operationalization of exposure to personalized coverage should take into account differences between both voters in media exposure and between media in personalized coverage. Although the degree of personalized coverage in the Netherlands is lower than in France, Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom but higher than in Switzerland (Kriesi, 2012), centralized personalized news coverage has been increasing (Kriesi, 2012; Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans, 2011). Preferential voting for candidates lower down on party lists (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012) instead of for one of the party leaders amounts to roughly 20% only. These circumstances make the Netherlands a suitable case for studying the influence of personalized media coverage on personalized voting behavior.

### *News Data Selection*

The coverage of one public and one commercial news broadcast, four subscription newspapers, two free dailies, and one news Web site was analyzed in this study. All articles covering national politics from the day on which the government resigned and new elections were announced, February 19, 2010, until Election Day, June 9, 2010, were included. The newspaper articles ( $N = 5,742$ ) and the transcripts of the news broadcasts ( $N = 386$ ) were obtained from the news producers. The news Web site items were acquired from the Web site ( $N = 496$ ). All articles in which either a political actor or a political issue (e.g., unemployment or state finance) was mentioned were included in the study. We coded the headline and the lead of the newspaper articles, the introduction by the news anchor and the text of political commentators of the television news transcripts, and the integral text of the items of the news Web site.

### *Content Analysis*

The content of political news coverage was manually coded during the election campaign by a team of intensively trained coders. The news texts were coded at the level of propositions. The coded propositions systematically describe the relationship between objects in the texts (i.e., political actors and issues) and the direction of this relationship in the form of *subject/direction/object*. The operationalization of the degree of personalized coverage is based on the occurrences of party leaders and other political actors in these coded propositions. Three examples of sentences containing centralized personalized coverage read as follows (Geert Wilders is the party leader of an anti-immigrant party):

1. "NGOs criticize Geert Wilders" (NGOs/-1/Geert Wilders)
2. "Geert Wilders wins first TV debate" (reality/+1/Geert Wilders)
3. "Geert Wilders proposes burqa ban" (Geert Wilders/-1/burqa).

The second proposition is an example of news about success and failure (i.e., horse-race news). This allows us to test whether priming effects remain stable once the research model has been extended with this powerful news variable. For other uses of this method, see, for example, Van Atteveldt (2008).

*Centralized* personalized coverage is conceptualized as the relative attention for party leaders (across parties) set against the attention for any political actor, including aggregate-level political actors like political parties (across parties). The level of centralized personalized coverage was calculated by dividing the number of propositions that mention a party leader by the number of propositions that mention any party actor (e.g., the party name, the party leader, or another party representative) (cf. Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012, for a discussion of this measure).

Whether *success or failure* was attributed to party leaders was measured by the number of propositions that contained descriptions of party leaders' successes or failures (in other words, with the horse race; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007). The measure was calculated by extracting the number of propositions that mention failure from the number of propositions that mention success and dividing the result by the total number of propositions mentioning success or failure.

The coding was conducted by 12 coders, none of whom belonged to the team of researchers. Most of the coders had extensive experience in coding political news coverage. The other coders were intensively trained before they started coding. To be able to conduct the inter-coder reliability analysis, 6 coders coded the same 128 texts. Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  for interval data was calculated to measure inter-coder reliability. The articles formed the measurement units. Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  amounted to .91 for the identification of personalized coverage, which is a good score, and .75 for the tone of the news about success and failure, which is a satisfactory score.

### ***Construction of the Media Variables***

Memory for old news decays over time, as does the effect of old news (Chong & Druckman, 2010), although cumulative exposure can generate strong priming effects even in the absence of recent primes (Althaus & Kim, 2006). Consequently, the decaying effect of the news was taken into account by using an exponential decaying measure of personalized news coverage (e.g., Fan, 1988; Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber, & Fan, 1998; Kleinnijenhuis, & Fan, 1999). We used a decay rate with a half-life time of a week, based on a study by Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995), who found that the probability of retrieving campaign information is decreased by half after a week.<sup>1</sup>

Exposure to personalized coverage is constructed separately for each voter based on the content of the media of his or her choice as a *cumulative* weighted average of the most recent news and earlier news. The respondents were linked to the content of the news of their choice based on the precise time and date at which they filled out the questionnaires. The content of the news that they consumed was measured by calculating the mean value of the media variables in the mix of media that a respondent consumed.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Public Opinion Data: Panel Survey***

A panel survey was designed to track the dynamics in leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention and to test the leader effect hypothesis and the priming effect hypothesis. The public opinion data consist of an 11-wave Internet panel survey conducted by Intomart GfK. The data for the first 10 waves were collected weekly in the period between April 6,

2010, and June 8, 2010, and the data for the last wave were collected in the three days after the elections held on June 9. A nationally representative sample of Dutch citizens of voting age was drawn from Intomart GfK's panel. The re-contact rates varied between 58.40% and 84.60%. The number of respondents included in this study varied from a maximum of 1,210 in the first wave to a minimum of 836 in the last wave.<sup>3</sup> The survey was used to measure vote intention, leader and party evaluations, issue agreement, and attention to the different media under study.

*Vote intention.* The respondents were questioned weekly about their vote intention. They were asked, "For which party would you vote if the elections were held today?" For undecided respondents, the parties for whom they were considering to vote were included. For respondents who were uncertain about whether they would vote, the answer to the question as to which party they would vote for if they were obliged to vote was used. The vote is a dichotomous variable, whereby 1 indicates that a respondent intended to vote for a certain party, while a 0 indicates that they did not intend to do so. In the week after the elections the actual party voted for was used as a measure.

*Leader evaluation.* Leader evaluation was measured by summing the scores on the responses to three propositions about party leaders. The propositions are as follow: (1) [Party leader's name] would be a good prime minister, (2) [Party leader's name] is well aware of what happens in society, and (3) [Party leader's name] is reliable. These questions were repeated weekly for the leaders of each of the six largest parties. The respondents answered by means of a 5-point Likert scale. These three items form a reliable scale with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .87. The score was transformed to a score between -1 and 1.

*Party evaluation.* Party evaluation was measured by summing the scores on the responses to two propositions about parties. The propositions are as follow: (1) [Party's name] would be a good governing party and (2) [Party's name] keeps its promises. These questions were repeated weekly for each of the six largest parties. These two items form a reliable scale with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .77. The score was transformed to a score between -1 and 1.

*Issue agreement.* To measure issue agreement the respondents were first asked with which issue they associated different political parties. They could choose from a list of 20 issues. Second, they were asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the degree to which they agreed with the parties on that issue. These questions were asked once, in the first wave. The measure was transformed to a score between -1 and 1 by subtracting the mean score of a respondent's agreement with all parties and dividing the result by the maximum score. So, issue agreement refers to a respondent's agreement on the issue which he or she perceives to be a party's most important issue in comparison to his or her agreement with other parties on their most important issues.

*Interaction terms.* The interaction terms were constructed by multiplying the values of the interacting variables (e.g., personalized coverage with the values of respondents' leader evaluations) to test H2. This resulted in measures with values ranging from -1 to 1.

*Media consumption.* To be able to link respondents' opinions to the news coverage that they were actually exposed to, as described in the section on the construction of the media variables, the respondents were asked to select the newspapers, news broadcasts, and news Web sites that they had accessed in the previous week.

### Method of Analysis

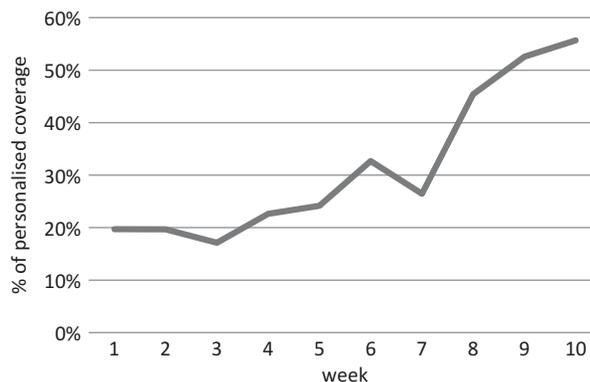
The main goal of the analysis is to measure the effect of leader evaluations (leader effect) and the interaction effect of attention to personalized coverage and leader evaluations on vote intention (priming effect). The data has a three-level structure. A total of 61,740 observations are cross-nested within parties ( $N = 6$ ), waves ( $N = 10$ ), and respondents ( $N = 1,443$ , i.e., the number of respondents who participated in at least two of the waves). We applied a multilevel analysis with random intercepts that takes the variance across parties, waves, and respondents into account, since separate analyses per party or per week would underestimate the variance in the independent variables that is required to estimate their effects. We used the LME4 package in R (Bates & Sarkar, 2007) to estimate random intercepts models in which intercepts might vary at three levels, so as to reveal differences among individual parties, waves, and respondents.<sup>4</sup> Because the dependent variable, vote (or vote intention) of a certain respondent to vote for a certain party in a certain week, is dichotomous, a *logistic* multilevel analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. Since all the tested models include lagged variables, only 10 of the 11 waves are included in the analysis.

## Results

### Dynamics in Personalized Coverage

Figure 2 shows the degree of centralized personalized coverage over time. The figure shows a sharp increase in the average degree of personalized coverage from 20.1% in the first wave to 55.7% in the last wave before the elections.

In the run-up to the elections, the media increasingly focus on party leaders rather than the parties they represent or other individual politicians. The graph also shows three peaks. The first peak, at the start of the campaign, is related to an unexpected leadership change within the social democratic party, PvdA. The second peak (week 6) is related to fierce criticism toward this new leader, Job Cohen, and internal criticism toward the anti-immigration politician Geert Wilders (PVV). The peak at the end of the campaign is mainly related to televised election debates, the first of which was tellingly advertised as the “prime minister’s debate.” This graph suggests that the degree of personalized coverage depends on political events like changes in party leadership and media events like televised election debates.



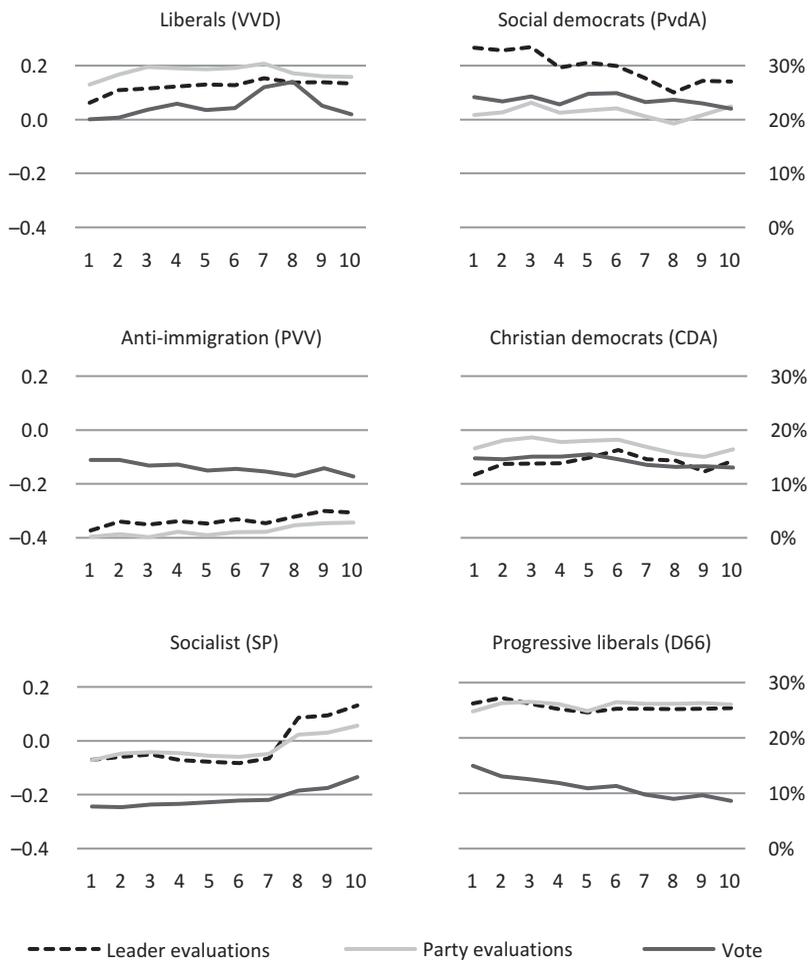
**Figure 2.** Degree of centralized personalized coverage during the 2010 election campaign.

### Dynamics in Party Evaluations, Leader Evaluations, and Vote Intention

Figure 3 shows the dynamics of leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention. The results per party give a detailed insight in the co-variation of the evaluations of parties and their leaders and the intention to vote for a party. Leader evaluations and party evaluations are presented at the vertical axis on the left (standardized scores ranging from  $-1$  to  $1$ ) and the vote intention in percentages is presented at the vertical axis on the right.

The graphs show that leader evaluations and party evaluations are related but that they do diverge. Then-prime minister, Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA) and his successor, Mark Rutte (VVD) are, for example, less popular than the parties they represent. The leader of the PvdA, Job Cohen, is much more popular than the party he represents.

The graphs additionally show that neither party evaluations nor leader evaluations are static. The evaluations of leaders vary more than the evaluations of parties (mean  $SD$  is respectively  $0.04$  and  $0.02$ ). The graph also shows the dynamics in the vote intention.



**Figure 3.** Leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention per party over time. *Note.* The left y-axis shows party evaluations and leader evaluations, which scores were both transformed to scores between  $-1$  and  $1$ . The right y-axis contains the intention to vote for a certain party in percentages.

In most cases, the evaluations of leaders and the parties they represent co-vary with the intention to vote for that party. For example, the strong improvement in the evaluation of the SP leader, Emile Roemer, and the weaker improvement in the evaluation of the party three weeks before the election translate into an increased intention to vote for the SP. The appreciation of the PvdA leader, Job Cohen, seems to have a strong bearing on the intention to vote for the PvdA, despite relatively stable party evaluations.

### *Model Testing*

Hypothesis 1 stated that leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on the vote (leader effect), while Hypothesis 2 stated that this leader effect is stronger for people who are exposed to more personalized coverage (priming effect). Table 1 presents the results of the multilevel analysis testing these hypotheses. The coefficients are logistic regression coefficients. The AIC-scores presented in the bottom row provide information on the fit of the model, with lower values indicating a better fit.

To measure to which degree the different levels account for variation in vote intention, we calculated the intraclass coefficients based on the variance as presented in the empty model (Model 1 in Table 1). These coefficients can be calculated by dividing the variance at each level by the total variance in the model ( $0.12 + 0 + 0.17 = 0.29$ ). Sixty percent of the variance in vote intention can be explained at the level of parties ( $0.17/0.29 = 0.60$ ) and 40% can be explained at the level of respondents ( $0.12/0.29 = 0.40$ ). The wave does not add to the explanation. So, no less than 40% of the variation in vote intention stems from differences between respondents, which warrants an individual-level approach to the effect of personalized news coverage on personalization in voting behavior.

Model 2 offers a test of the leader effect hypothesis. This model shows that leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on vote intention, after controlling for the lagged vote intention, party evaluations, and issue agreement.<sup>5</sup> This confirms Hypothesis 1. Voters use leader evaluations to come to their voting decision. The more they appreciate a party's leader, the more likely they are to vote for the party that leader represents. The leader effect comes on top of effects of the lagged vote, party evaluation, and issue agreement. Recent changes in party evaluations matter, which underlines the importance of treating party evaluations as non-static variables. Agreement with parties' issue stances, measured at the start of the campaign, also keeps drawing voters during the campaign.

In Model 3, interaction terms are added to test the priming hypothesis. Model 3 shows that the interaction term of leader evaluations and personalized coverage has a significant positive effect on the vote, which confirms Hypothesis 2. Voters who are exposed to news that is more personalized weigh leader evaluations more heavily in their voting decision.<sup>6</sup> Other considerations become temporarily less important. Personalized news *weakens* the impact of prior party evaluation ( $p < .10$ ), prior vote intention ( $p < .01$ ), and prior issue agreement ( $p < .10$ ).

The AIC-score difference between Models 2 and 3 amounts to 34, which indicates that Model 3 outperforms Model 2 (Burnham & Anderson, 2002). The inclusion of the interaction terms in our model leads to a better fitted model. So, both our hypotheses are confirmed. Respondents consider leader evaluations in their voting decision and they weigh them more heavily when they are exposed to more personalized coverage. The research model with lagged independent variables guarantees that the priming effect is not an artifact of reverse causation through projection (Hart & Middleton, 2014).<sup>7</sup> Neither is the priming effect an artifact of learning (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012; Lenz, 2009) since personalized news does not strengthen the effect of issue agreement at the start of the campaign,

**Table 1**  
Explanations of vote (intention)

|  | Model 1             | Model 2            | Model 3            | Model 4            |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Constant                                 | -1.79***<br>(-0.17) | -3.93***<br>(0.12) | -4.03***<br>(0.14) | -4.06***<br>(0.14) |
| <b>H1:</b> Leader evaluation t-1         |                     | 0.72***<br>(0.08)  | 0.30*<br>(0.18)    | 0.23*<br>(0.18)    |
| Party evaluation t-1                     |                     | 1.00***<br>(0.09)  | 1.30***<br>(0.19)  | 1.35***<br>(0.19)  |
| Vote intention t-1                       |                     | 4.82***<br>(0.04)  | 5.30***<br>(0.10)  | 5.29***<br>(0.10)  |
| Issue agreement t0                       |                     | 1.40***<br>(0.09)  | 1.74***<br>(0.22)  | 1.77***<br>(0.22)  |
| Personalized news t-1..t0                |                     |                    | 0.27<br>(0.24)     | 0.28<br>(0.25)     |
| <b>H2:</b> Personalized news t-1..t0*    |                     |                    | 1.30**             | 1.48**             |
| Leader evaluation t-1                    |                     |                    | (0.49)             | (0.49)             |
| Personalized news t-1..t0*               |                     |                    | -0.91*             | -1.04*             |
| Party evaluation t-1                     |                     |                    | (0.53)             | (0.53)             |
| Personalized news t-1..t0*               |                     |                    | -1.43***           | -1.39***           |
| Vote intention t-1                       |                     |                    | (0.27)             | (0.27)             |
| Personalized news t-1..t0*               |                     |                    | -0.99              | -1.04*             |
| Issue agreement t0                       |                     |                    | (0.57)             | (0.57)             |
| Success & Failure news leader<br>t-1..t0 |                     |                    |                    | 0.18***<br>(0.04)  |
| Variance (respondent)                    | 0.12                | 0.00               | 0.00               | 0.00               |
| Variance (wave)                          | 0.00                | 0.01               | 0.00               | 0.00               |
| Variance (party)                         | 0.17                | 0.07               | 0.07               | 0.06               |
| AIC                                      | 51661               | 17710              | 17676              | 17660              |

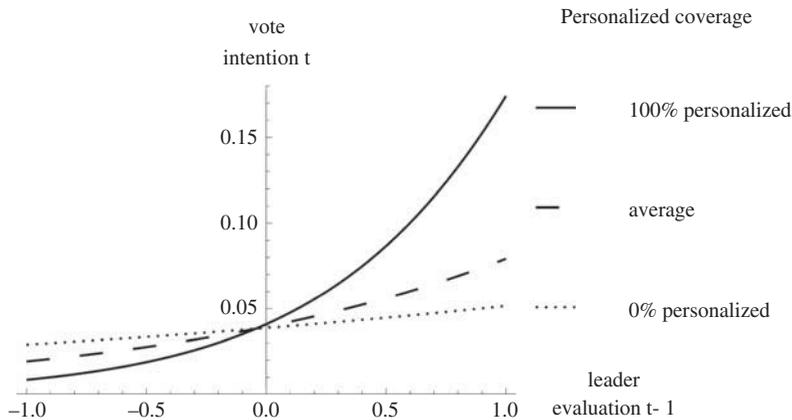
*Notes.* All independent variables and the dependent variable vary between respondents, between waves, and between parties, except for issue agreement, which does not vary between waves. The standard errors are presented between brackets.  $N$  observations = 61,740,  $N$  respondents = 1,443,  $N$  waves = 10,  $N$  parties = 6.

•  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

which would have been the case if personalized news simply facilitated voters to learn more about the issue positions of the candidates. Note that the insignificant main effect of leader evaluation and the significant interaction with personalized news in Models 3 and 4 show that party leaders are important indeed but only when they become newsworthy.

The post hoc test in Model 4 reveals that priming effects remain significant once horse-race news, or attributions of successes rather than failures to party leaders, is included in the research model. Significant coefficients in Model 3 remain significant in Model 4, although attributions of success and failure to party leaders add significantly to the explanation, which is also reflected in the AIC difference of 16 between Models 4 and 3.

Figure 4 graphically shows the interaction effects of respondents' leader evaluations and personalized coverage on the intention to vote for a certain party. The x-axis shows the



**Figure 4.** The interaction effect of leader evaluations and personalized coverage on vote (intention). *Note.* The graph shows the interaction effect of respondents' prior leader evaluations and personalized coverage on the intention to vote for a certain party. The x-axis shows the evaluation of a leader and the y-axis shows a voter's probability to vote for a certain party. The regression lines assume mean values on the variables from regression equation (3) that are not visualized. The regression lines show the values for voters who are exposed to different levels of personalized coverage.

evaluation of a leader, ranging from very negative evaluations (−1) to very positive evaluations (+1). The y-axis shows a voter's probability to vote for a certain party. The regression lines show the values for voters who are exposed to different levels of personalized coverage. The variables in the model that are not included in Figure 4, the lagged vote, party evaluations, and issue agreement, were substituted by their mean values, which applies to nonpartisan voters who are not predisposed to vote for a specific party for reasons other than their leader evaluation. To understand why the maximum value of vote probability in Figure 4 amounts to 17.4% only, it should be noted further that the probability to vote for a specific party in a highly fragmented multiparty system like the Netherlands is low. The winning VVD received only 20.5% of the votes. The PvdA, which came second, received just 0.9 percentage points fewer votes, which shows that small changes in vote probability can be decisive.

Figure 4 shows that attention to personalized coverage amplifies the strength of the effect of leader evaluations on the vote. When a voter is exposed to more personalized coverage, the probability to vote for a liked leader's party further increases, while the probability to vote for a disliked leader's party further decreases. The probability to vote for a strongly liked leader's party increases by 12.2% if a nonpartisan voter is exposed only to personalized coverage (17.4%) instead of no personalized coverage at all (5.2%). This difference of 12.2% is many times higher than the difference between the vote percentages of the parties which came first and second in the elections, which amounted to 0.9 percentage points. The probability to vote for a strongly disliked leader's party decreases by 2.0% if a voter is exposed only to personalized coverage (0.9%) instead of no personalized coverage at all (2.9%). This leads to the conclusion that personalized coverage amplifies leader effects.

In conclusion, the influence of leader evaluations on vote intention is stronger for voters who were recently exposed to more personalized coverage. Personalized coverage amplifies leader effects. Highly liked leaders benefit from a focus on leaders in the news, while disliked leaders are harmed by it.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed at a better understanding of the relationship between voters' exposure to personalized coverage and the importance of party leaders in their voting decision. By using data from a real-world media environment, we provided empirical evidence for the existence of leader effects and the influence of personalized news coverage on the voting decision. By ruling out alternative explanations, learning or projection, we contribute to the recent debate about the significance of priming as an explanation of media effects.

This study showed that party leaders become more prominent in campaign coverage in the run-up to the elections. The analysis suggests that campaign events induce attention for party leaders. These events include party leader changes and internal turmoil. Moreover, Reinemann and Wilke (2007) were right in explaining personalization when they stated in their article title, "It's the debates, stupid!". The sharpest rise in personalized coverage appeared when the televised "prime minister" debates started. So, the degree of personalized coverage varies depending on campaign events in the political arena, like party leader changes, internal turmoil which politicians initiate and media magnify, and televised debates organized by the media. The influence of televised debates is in line with Takens, van Atteveldt, van Hoof, and Kleinnijenhuis (2013), who showed that television coverage is more personalized than newspaper coverage.

The dynamics of party evaluations, leader evaluations, and vote intention could be measured due to the availability of a 10-wave weekly panel survey. Leader evaluations and party evaluations have been shown to be related but distinguishable. Some leaders are clearly more liked than the parties they represent, while others are clearly not as popular as their parties are. Moreover, leader evaluations and party evaluations are not static. Party leader evaluations and leader evaluations fluctuate in the short period of time of an election campaign because new politicians enter the stage, conflicts arise, and crises emerge. The evaluations of leaders and the parties they represent converge and diverge during the election campaign. This implies that they can vary autonomously. These findings show that the assumption that voters cannot separate leaders from the parties they represent is not correct. It is therefore important to treat both party evaluations and leader evaluations as separate and variable vote determinants.

The analysis further shows that party leaders do matter in the voter's mind. Leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on vote intention, which confirms the *leader effect hypothesis*. This is in line with other studies in Western European parliamentary democracies (e.g., Curtice & Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2011; Vetter & Gabriel, 1998). By controlling for the lagged vote, respondents' party evaluations, and issue agreement, and by taking the multilevel structure of the data into account, a conservative test was used. However, the effect of voters' leader evaluations has been shown to affect vote intention, even when taking party evaluations, prior vote intention, and issue agreement into account too. In conjunction with the finding that party evaluations and leader evaluations show divergent dynamics, this study makes a strong case for the distinguishability of leader effects.

The main question of this study is whether voters weigh leader evaluations more heavily when they are exposed to news about leaders. Exposure to personalized coverage indeed strengthens the effect of leader evaluations on vote intention, thereby confirming the *priming hypothesis*. Exposure to more personalized coverage makes voters who think highly of a leader become even more likely to vote for that leader's party, while it makes voters who do not appreciate a leader become less likely to vote for that leader's party. The probability to vote for a strongly liked leader's party increases by 12.2% if a nonpartisan voter is exposed only to personalized coverage instead of no personalized coverage at all. This increase is

many times higher than the difference between the vote percentages of the parties which came first and second in the elections. The priming effect shows up week by week in the Dutch election campaign of 2010 with many parties and many media, thus in a real-world complex information environment in which priming effects are far from trivial (Althaus & Kim, 2006).

A post hoc test additionally reveals that priming effects remain stable when effects of horse-race news, news about attributions of success and failure about party leaders (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, Oegema, & de Ridder, 2007), are included. This confirms that both visibility in the news and the tone of the news matter to voters (Hopmann et al., 2010). So, the prominence of party leaders in the news influences the prominence of party leaders in the voter's mind. Alongside the attribution of success or failure of party leaders in the news, personalized news affects voting behavior.

The longitudinal design of this study moreover allowed us to show that the priming effect of personalized news is neither caused by issue learning (as observed by Lenz, 2009) nor by projection (see also Hart & Middleton, 2014). The priming effect of personalized news that was found is not based on prior issue agreement, as both the issue learning hypothesis (Elmelund-Præstekær & Hopmann, 2012; Lenz, 2009) and the projection hypothesis (Hart & Middleton, 2014) assume. Actually, personalized news coverage diminishes rather than strengthens the effect of *prior* party evaluations, *prior* vote intention, and *prior* issue agreement on one's current vote intention.

The issue learning hypothesis and the projection hypothesis would be confirmed if party leader evaluations primed by personalized news would exactly correspond with prior issue agreement. However, this was not the case. Apparently, party leader evaluations in the Dutch elections of 2010 did not simply reflect prior issue agreement. One may expect that personalized news would foster issue learning in an issue-driven campaign in which horse-race news does not play an important role and in which voters' issue positions remain stable, thus creating a situation in which party leaders merely reiterate their party's issue positions to mobilize latent voters. Projection is also more likely to occur in issue-driven campaigns. When issues seem to matter more, it is more likely that party leader evaluations are brought in line with issue agreement with their parties. In addition, projection is more likely in case of unfamiliar party leaders, like new leaders, since voters cannot evaluate them well in their own right. Further research is required to explore under which circumstances projection or learning does take precedence over priming.

We showed that personalized media coverage affects personalized voting behavior at the individual level. This finding helps us to understand the effect of media personalization on personalization in voting behavior at the aggregate level. The size and significance of leader effects show large within-country and across-country variation (Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002). The findings of this study help us to understand this variation. Further research should focus on the question as to the extent to which exposure to personalized coverage can explain these differences. The influence of the prominence of party leaders in the media arena on the prominence of party leaders in the public arena also raises questions regarding its influence on the prominence of party leaders in the political arena. Although Rahat and Sheafer (2007) showed that personalization in politicians' behavior followed media personalization, this study showed that campaign events initiated by political parties, like leader changes, can in turn also induce the media to focus on party leaders.

This study is the first to show that personalized coverage strengthens the effect of leader evaluations on vote intention. Media have the power to increase the prominence of party leaders in the electoral process in a multiparty parliamentary democracy. In presidential elections, voters have to elect a president, and in parliamentary systems voters have to

elect a party (or, in democracies with an open list system, an individual politician that very explicitly represents a certain party). It is assumed that parties are “serving as proxies for a constellation of policy priorities and issue positions” (Hayes, 2009, p. 232), and party leaders are not. Democratic elections as a means to find out which policies are supported by the people consequently come under pressure if party leaders become a prominent factor in the voting decision.

## Notes

1. Other studies on news effects have applied a decay rate with a half-life time of one day (Jasperson et al., 1998). We additionally tested our model while applying a decay rate with a half-life time of a day instead of a week. Although the model yielded the same significant effects running in the same direction for each of the included variables, the size of the effect of personalized coverage and the interaction effect of personalized coverage and leader evaluations was smaller in the one-day decay rate model than in the one-week decay rate model. This implies that the priming effect of personalized coverage lasts longer than one day.

2. Consider respondent R who reported using media A and B. Both A and B only covered politics yesterday and precisely two weeks ago. A and B published 11, respectively 6, propositions about parties on both days. Yesterday, 7, respectively 3, of these included the party leaders, as compared to 5, respectively 2, two weeks ago. A half-life time of a week means that the news of precisely two weeks ago is weighted by  $0.5 \times 0.5 = 2^{-14/7} = 0.25$ . Yesterday's news is weighted by  $2^{-1/7} = 0.91$ . R's personalized coverage measure amounts consequently to  $\frac{0.91(7+3)+0.25(5+2)}{0.91(11+6)+0.25(11+6)} = 0.55$ .

3. A total of 1,433 respondents met the criteria to be included in this study. They participated on average in 7.2 of the 11 waves. On average, 76.4% of the respondents who completed the questionnaire in the first wave completed the questionnaire in the successive waves. Panel attrition, as measured by 11 minus the number of waves in which a respondent participated, did not correlate with the dependent variable ( $r = 0.002$ ) and had very low correlations with the independent variables in H1, H2, and the auxiliary hypotheses (maximum  $r = 0.020$ ), although panel attrition tests showed a low negative correlation with political knowledge and exposure to (personalized) news ( $r = -0.07$ ). Only respondents who participated in at least two waves were included. Respondents who were not exposed to at least one news medium, respondents who did not intend to vote, and respondents who did not associate political parties with any issue were excluded from the analysis for that specific wave. The postelection wave is a representative sample from the Dutch population, in spite of these inclusion criteria and panel attrition, since party choice of the included respondents in the postelection panel survey wave does not differ from expectations based on actual electoral choice on June 9, 2010 ( $\chi^2 = 8.690$ ,  $df = 5$ ,  $p = 0.122$ ).

4. A model with both random intercepts and random slopes was also tested. The model yielded similar results. However, minor convergence problems arose due to the larger number of parameters. Therefore the random intercepts models were presented in this article.

5. To check for possible multicollinearity problems, the dependence of each of the independent variables on the other independent variables in the model was assessed by calculating tolerance levels. Especially the tolerance levels of respondents' prior party evaluations (0.06) and its interaction term with personalized coverage (0.06) in Model 3 show that the explained variance in these variables due to the other variables is high but still acceptable, assuming that the proportion of the variance which is due to measurement errors does not exceed these values.

6. We additionally tested the same model while including the degree of personalized coverage *per* party instead of *across* parties. The degree of personalized coverage *per* party has a weaker effect on the strength of the effect of leader evaluations than the degree of personalized coverage *across* parties. This finding justifies the inclusion of the degree of personalized coverage *across* parties in our model.

7. Whether projection occurs is interesting, although the research design with lagged independent variables guarantees that the established priming effect is not an artifact of possible reverse

effects. Model 2 from Table 1 was also estimated with leader evaluation (at the current time  $t$ ) rather than vote intention as the dependent variable, with a linear rather than a logistic model, and with the postselection wave excluded in which leader evaluation was not measured. The estimates show a small but significant reverse projection effect of prior vote intention onto current leader evaluations in addition to the priming effects in Table 3.

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