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Between centralized and decentralized personalization: the use of preferential voting in Belgium

VERY FIRST DRAFT

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1. Introduction

It is often asserted that personalization, which refers to a shift in attention from collective actors to individuals, has become a structural feature of many Western democracies (McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010). Personalization is a broad and diffuse concept. One major distinction refers to the kind of arena in which personalization takes place: in the media, in parties, in parliament or in the electorate. Beyond its multi-faceted nature, one of the implicit assumptions in studies of the personalization of politics is that it is growing, that personalization is becoming more and more central. More precisely, previous studies on the topic have provided either evidence of stronger personalization or of no real change (Karvonen, 2010; Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). But none have been pointing at a possible depersonalization of politics. The idea that weight of personalities in politics would be reduced is not seen as a credible hypothesis.

In that respect, the recent elections in Belgium may appear as counter-intuitive. One of the main signs of the personalization of politics over the last decades has been the growing use of preferential voting. Belgian voters may decide between two options: casting a list vote without marking any preference for any candidate, or casting a preference vote in favor of one or several candidates. In 1919, only a minority of voters were opting for preference votes (15pc). But over the years, the use of preference votes has been growing. They were 33pc of voters to cast such a vote in 1961, 48pc in 1981 and 66pc in 2003. But over the last ten years, the share of voters casting a preference has constantly gone down. At the last federal elections, only 57pc of all valid ballots were marked with at least one preference vote (Wauters et al., 2015). In regard to the idea that the personalization of politics is a

growing pattern of contemporary politics, the declining use of preference vote is counter-intuitive.

In this article, we examine this puzzle and we show that the explanation is to be found in the multi-faceted nature of the concept of personalization itself. Recently, Balmas and her colleagues (2014) have proposed to make a distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization. The distinction is based upon the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general or a handful of top politicians. In the first case the authors speak of 'decentralized' personalization, with power and attention shifting from the institution (party, government) to a large group of elite politicians, while in the case of 'centralized' personalization only the leader of a party or a government gets becomes more important. This distinction between both types of personalization runs through the different arena's, as Balmas et al (2014) show extensively. For instance, in the media arena the focus can shift from parties to a few popular politics or to individual politicians in general (Van Aelst, Sheaffer & Stanyer, 2012; Kriesi, 2012).

Stemming from this distinction, we show in this article that the decline in the use of preference votes in Belgium is for a large part to be explained by the diverging fate of centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization remains a growing pattern of contemporary electoral politics in Belgium. Leaders are still able to attract a lot of preference votes. What is going down and could explain the decline in the use of preference votes is decentralized personalization. Other candidates, those that are not leaders, appear to have more and more difficulties to attract preference votes. When voters have not the opportunity to vote for a top leader in their electoral district, they are more and more to opt for a list vote, rather than for a preference vote for another, less prominent, politician. This trend is even reinforced by the growing success of newer parties. Such parties have even more difficulties to attract preference votes for lay candidates. For many voters, only the leader of the party is well-known and is attracting preference votes.

These findings, we believe, are important beyond the specific case of Belgium. The recent distinction made by Balmas et al. (2014) but also, under different names, by a few other authors (van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), have conceptually clarified the concept of personalization. But they had not discussed its empirical implications. Implicitly, it was assumed that the idea of personalization as a growing pattern of contemporary politics would apply to both centralized and decentralized personalization.

With this study, we show that the two trends may not go hand in hand. Rather, it seems that while centralized personalization may be on the rise, decentralized personalization is not following the same trend. Party leaders are undoubtedly central figures in contemporary politics. By contrast, other, less prominent politicians, do not seem to remain under the spotlights. It could even be argued that the growing attention for leaders happen at the detriment of other politicians.

In the following sections of this article, we explore these claims in three steps. First, the scholarly debates on personalization are presented and discussed, paying specific attention to the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization. In the second section, the puzzle of the declining use of preference votes in Belgium over the last 10 years is described. And in the third section, we provide explanations for this puzzle. The main elements of explanations are the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization, as well as the role of newer parties that have fewer well-known candidates beyond their leader.

2. The debate on the personalization of politics

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing scholarly attention for the personalization of politics. This concept could be broadly defined as “the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen 2010: 4). Yet, beyond this general definition, much clarification is required. As van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2010: 628) note, “There is confusion about the concept of personalization.”

A first element of diversity within the existing literature concerns what sphere of politics is being personalized. Most attention is given to three spheres: parties and government; the media; and elections.

With regard to the first sphere, Poguntke and Webb (2005), building on work by Foley (2000) and others, analyse what they call the “presidentialization” of parliamentary democracies: the increasing empowerment of leaders both in government and in political parties. The traditional intermediary structures of political parties, such as delegate conventions, constituency party organizations, and parliamentary party groups have lost

power and influence. Leaders now steer their parties with more autonomy than some decades ago, an outcome that has often been achieved by empowering disorganized rank-and-file party members over organized mid-level elites (Katz and Mair 1995: 20–21; Cross and Katz 2013; Hazan and Rahat 2010; Pilet and Cross 2014).

Regarding the second sphere – the media – television broadcasting has by definition increased the visibility of individual politicians: it is necessary to put on face on the party message when it has to appear on screen, whereas non-personalized messages were much easier to convey in the written press (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1997). Many studies code references made to parties and to individual politicians in the media during electoral and between election campaigns (Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis 2000). Others focus on the privatization of politics – “the shifting boundaries between the public and the private” (van Aelst et al. 2012: 205) – and the fact that the media now report not only politicians’ political activities, but also their private lives (Reinemann and Wilke 2007; Langer 2006).

Finally, many authors have been looking at the increasing importance of individual politicians in elections. This aspect is probably the most extensively studied. Since the late 1980s-early 1990s, there has been a growing body of literature trying to assess the impact of politicians on vote choice. Personalities has been among the many short-term factors that have been explored in election studies when structural and long-term voting determinants such as social class, religion or party identity were losing explanatory power (e.g., Dalton and Flanagan 1984; Evans 1999; Franklin *et al.* 1992; Beck *et al.* 1984; McAllister and Rose 1986; van der Brug *et al.* 2009).). Two landmark publications in that respect have been Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina’s *The Personal Vote* (1987) and Wattenberg’s *The Rise of Candidate-Centred Politics* (1991). Since then several books and articles have been looking at the personalization of elections (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley 2004; Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009; Curtice and Holmberg 2005; Kaase 1994; Marsh 2007; Garzia 2012).

In addition to the debates about the various spheres of politics that personalization could affect, a more recent conceptual discussion has been on the number and role of politicians that are benefiting of this new pattern of contemporary politics. The central idea is that a distinction has to be made between personalization that would concern all politicians in general and personalization that would have implications for political leaders only. In studies of the personalization of voting behaviour, some analysts examine the degree to which perceptions of party leaders motivate voting decisions (Aarts et al. 2011;

Bittner 2011; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, and Whiteley 2004; Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009), while others look at the impact of local politicians (Caprara 2007; Marsh 2007; Mattes and Milazzo 2014; Norton and Wood 1990). Similarly, in studies of personalization in media coverage of politics, some focus on coverage of party leaders (Langer 2007; Mughan 2000), others on coverage of all candidates (van Aelst et al. 2008).

A few authors have recently tried theorizing this distinction. Andeweg and van Holsteyn (2010) refer to first-order (leader) v. second-order (candidate) personalization. Kriesi (2012) has proposed to differentiate between generalized (all politicians) and concentrated (leaders only) personalization. Looking more specifically at the coverage of candidate in the media during campaign, Van Aelst and his colleagues made the same kind of distinction (Van Aelst et al., 2012). They talk of generalized and concentrated visibility (see also Rahat and Sheafer, 2007).

But the most extensive conceptual discussion of this distinction is provided by Balmas and her colleagues (2012). They separate centralized and decentralized personalization: “Centralized personalization implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party, cabinet) to a single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister, president)”; “Decentralized personalization means that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g. candidates, members of parliament, ministers)” (Balmas et al. 2014: 37). They also argue that these two facets of personalization may be present in the three spheres of politics mentioned above: parties and government, the media and elections, as well as via institutional reforms such as the strengthening of preference votes in PR list systems (decentralized personalization) or the direct elections of mayors or prime ministers (centralized personalization).

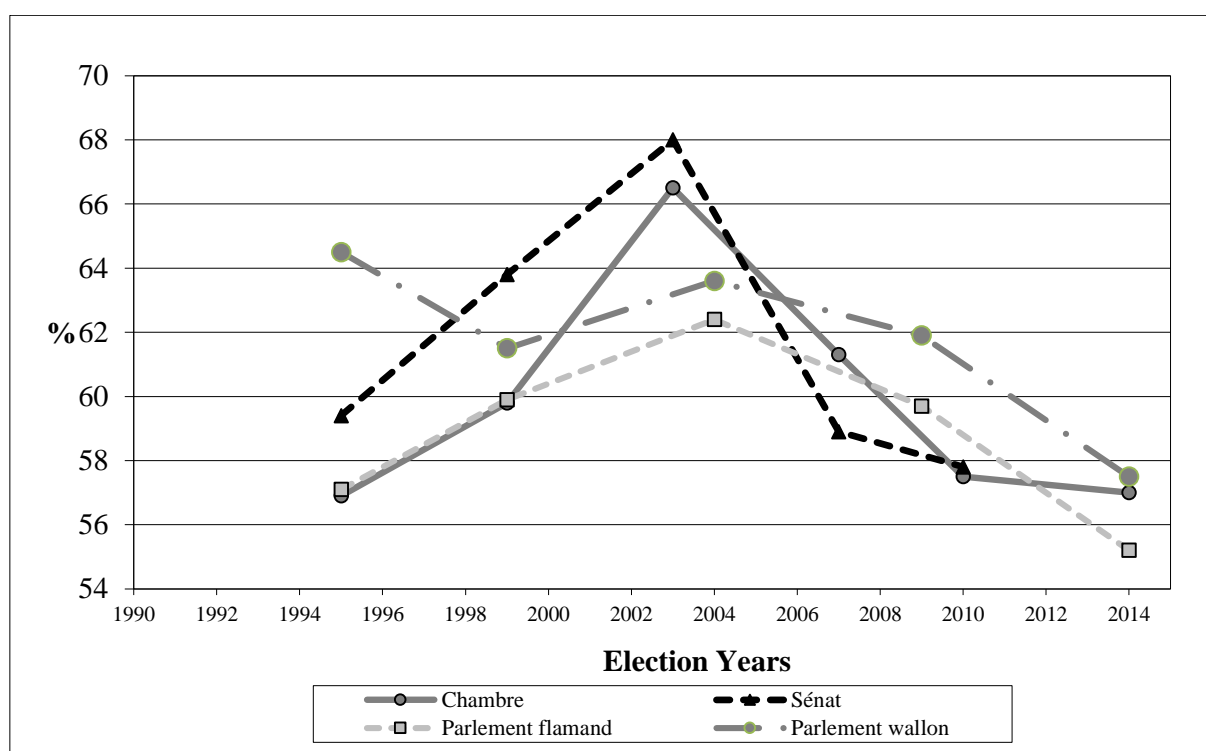
However, what they do not discuss is whether the two facets of personalization are empirically of the same magnitude, or whether one has been more on the rise than the other. Implicitly, Balmas and her colleagues seem to assume that the growing personalization of politics would affect both the centralized and decentralized forms of personalization. Other authors do not appear to come to the same conclusion. Poguntke and Webb’s argument about the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies is that leaders are gaining ground at the expenses of other politicians. In the words of Balmas et al., it would mean that centralized personalization would be strengthened while decentralized personalization would diminish.

3. Preferential voting in Belgium: Centralized vs. Decentralized Personalization

What we propose in this paper is to use the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization to study the evolution of preferential voting in Belgium over the last ten years. Belgium's flexible list system offers voters the opportunity between casting a list vote or marking a preference vote for one or several candidates within the same list. As we have explained in the introduction, the recent evolution in the share of voters that opt for the latter option is counter-intuitive. There are fewer voters who are casting one or several preference votes, and therefore more voters casting a list vote. Figure 1 clearly shows the decline of the share of valid ballots marked with at least one preference vote over the last decade. The decline is visible for federal elections (Chamber and Senate¹) as well as for regional elections (Flanders and Wallonia). The share of voters casting a preference vote in 2014 is back down to the level reached twenty years earlier, in 1995. These shares reached their peak in 2003 (with 66.5 % of voters casting a preference vote for the Chamber) and in 2004 (62.5 % for the Flemish Parliament, and 63.6 % for the Walloon Parliament). In the most recent elections (in 2014), the shares of ballots marked with a preference vote went down to 57% for the federal Chamber, 55.2% for the Flemish Parliament and 57.5% for the Walloon Parliament.

¹ Since 2014, there are no longer direct elections for the senate. The senate is indirectly composed of members of regional parliaments.

Figure 1 : Share of valid ballot marked with at least one preference vote for the elections of the federal Chamber of Representatives, the federal Senate, the Flemish Parliament and the Walloon Parliament (1995-2014)



The core hypothesis we propose to test here is that this decline would be mostly explained by the reduced interests of Belgian voters for lay candidates, for those that are not leaders. Each and every party has only one leader but the Belgian territory is divided into several multimember districts. And candidates can only run in one district. Therefore, in all districts but one, voters do not have the opportunity to vote for the leader of the party they support. The expectation is that in such circumstances, more and more voters would cast a list vote rather than mark a preference for other candidates. Such an evolution would confirm that it is decentralized personalization that is explaining the lowering share of Belgian voters casting a preference vote. The counter-argument would be that the presence (or the absence) of a party leader does not make any difference for the share of voters casting preference votes across lists and across districts.

Apart from this core hypothesis, there could be other factors that may come into play in understanding the recent decline of preference votes in Belgium. Especially, two contextual factors may have contributed to this downward trend: the recent evolutions of the Belgian legislation on candidacy and the recent electoral success of newer parties.

First, over the last years, two legal evolutions have modified the access to candidacy for federal and regional elections in Belgium. Earlier studies on the use of preference votes in Belgium (André et al., 2012; Put and Maddens, 2014) have shown that the presence of incumbents and of local politicians (mayors, aldermen) on the list of candidates are increasing the use of preference votes. Two recent changes to the legislation have reduced the capacity of parties to fill in their lists with a lot of such candidates. First, since 2007, it is not longer possibility for the same person to be candidate simultaneously for several elections (in particular to run for the Chamber and for the Senate). And it could indeed be observed that the share of candidates who are incumbent MPs has declined over the last ten years². In addition, the Walloon region has adopted a rule limiting to 25pc for each party the proportion of members of the Walloon Parliament who could hold at the same time a local mandate of mayor or alderman. A direct consequence of this change has been a reduction in the share of candidates for Walloon elections that are holding a local mandate. Both changes have as consequence that the overall presence of well-established politicians on list of candidates for regional and federal elections is being reduced. And therefore, one may expect that this would contribute to the decline in the use of preference votes.

Another contextual factor that may also have contributed to the downward trend in preferential voting is the electoral success of newer parties like N-VA (Flemish nationalists), PTB-PVDA (radical left), PP (populist radical right) and FDF (Francophone regionalists). Previous studies have shown that traditional parties (Christian-democrats, socialists and liberals) tend to fare a larger proportion of preference votes. One element of explanation has already been mentioned above: incumbents and local politicians attract preference votes. And traditional parties are better-established and have, therefore, more incumbents, local politicians and also ministers among their candidates. Usually, within newer parties, only the leader has some notoriety within the electorate. Moreover, newer parties tend to attract more protest votes than traditional parties that are more associated to the establishment by dissatisfied voters (Hooghe et al., 2011; Rihoux, 2003; Swyngedouw and Abts, 2011). And personalization could be said to be less central in the voting decision of protest voters. In the last two elections in Belgium (2010 and 2014), these newer parties have been on the rise. N-VA became the largest party in the country in 2010 and confirmed

² A bivariate correlation between the year of Elections and the share of incumbents among all candidates shows a coefficient of -.222 (sign at 0.001 level).

its leadership in 2014. In 2014, three other new parties have gained their first seats in the federal parliament: PTB-PVDA, PP and FDF³. As the newer parties grow electorally, the overall share of preference votes would decline taking into account that newer parties have fewer voters opting for preference votes.

In the next section, these various factors are taken into account in the analysis of the use of preference votes in Belgium over the last decade. First, the core hypothesis about the decrease in decentralized personalization is explored. The shares of valid ballots are examined taking into account whether the list had an electoral leader among the candidates or not. Second, the core hypothesis about the role of leaders in attracting preference votes is confronted to the above-mentioned alternative explanations for the recent decline in preference votes (fewer established politicians on the lists and success of newer parties) through a multivariate regression.

4. Empirical analysis

We first describe the evolution of preferential voting more into detail. We know from Figure 1 that preferential voting in general is in decline. For a more detailed analysis, we split up the valid vote ballots into three categories: list votes (i.e. a vote for the party instead of for candidates), preferential votes for the head of list (irrespective of whether also votes for other candidates were casted), and preferential votes for other candidates than the head of list. We conduct an analysis of the average percentages of each type of vote calculated by party in a district. Our analysis splits all parties-in-a-district into two categories: those with the electoral leader of a party on the list (referring to centralized personalization) and those without (referring to decentralized personalization). The electoral leader is defined here as the person who participated to the final television debate at the end of the electoral campaign. Often, but not always, this person coincides with the party chairman. For smaller parties not invited for this television debate, we take the party chairman. We limit our analysis to the federal Chamber of Representatives and conduct an analysis over time (from 2003 until 2014).

³ FDF used to be in cartel with MR but ran alone in 2014, for the first time since 1995, and won two seats in the Chamber.

Figure 2: Percentage of list votes, percentage of preference votes for head of list and percentage of preference votes for other candidates, calculated on the total amount of votes for a party in a district, split up in districts with an electoral leader ('leader') and districts without an electoral leader ('other'), 2003-2014

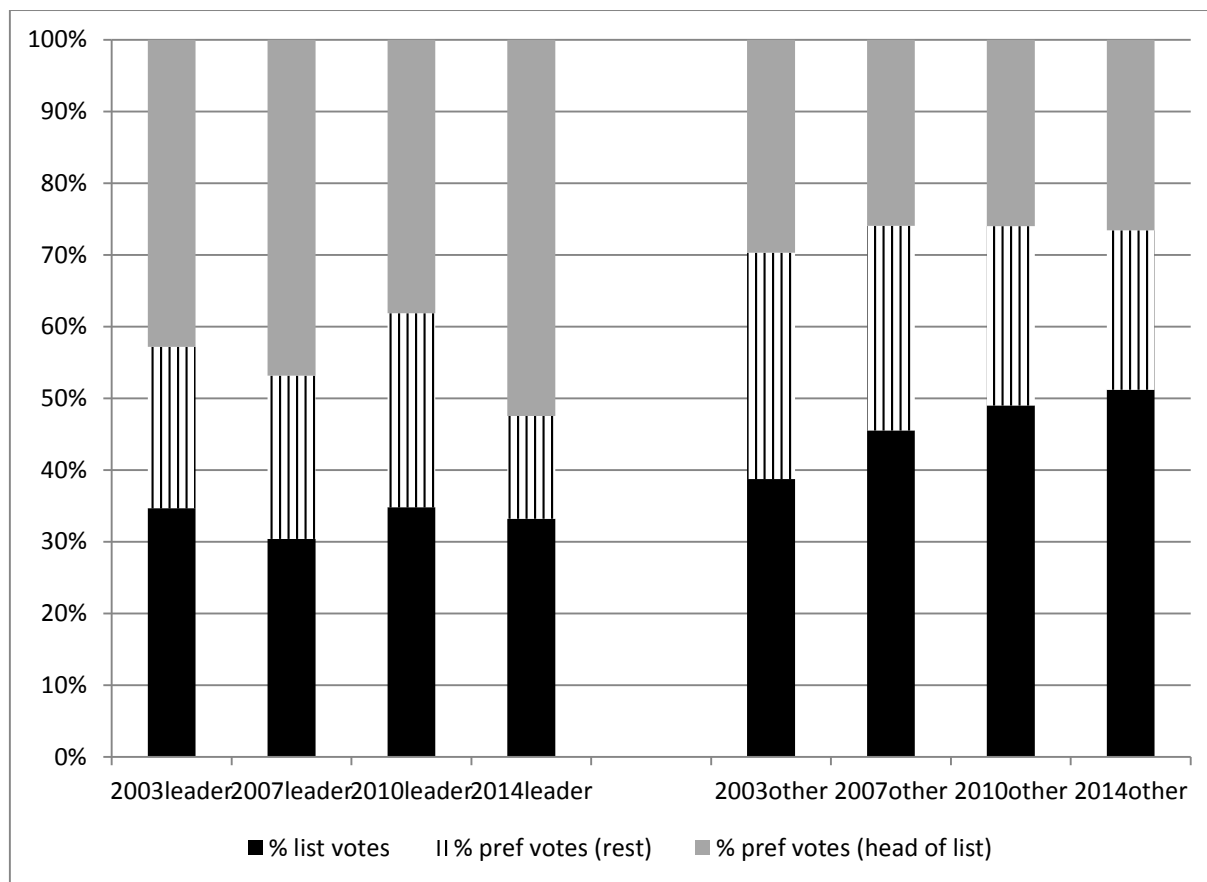


Figure 2 sketches a very revealing picture in different perspectives.

First of all, the percentages of list votes (in black), which constitutes the inverse of the variable showed in Figure 1, gradually grow for parties in districts without an electoral leader. While this percentage was in 2003 still below 40 %, it is now (in 2014) above 50 %. In districts where an electoral leader was on the list, on the contrary, the same evolution could not be found. Instead, these diagrams show a pattern of stability: about 33 % both in 2003 and 2014. This shows that especially on the side of decentralized personalization a weakening in preferential voting could be noted.

Secondly, we observe that in districts with a leader, the share of votes going to the head of list (grey diagrams) gradually increases (with 2010 as an exception). In 2003 on average about 40 % of the voters voted for the head of list in these districts, while in 2014 more than

50 % of voters did so. In contrast, for the other districts, stability in terms of votes for the head of list could be noted.

If we combine these two insights, we can state that in districts with an electoral leader, voters are not more likely to cast a preference vote (instead of a list vote), but those voters that already casted a preference vote, are more likely than before to choose the head of list. In districts without an electoral leader, the inverse appears to be true: voters are not more likely nor less likely to vote for the head of list, but they increasingly vote for the party. Perhaps, the list votes function here as a sort of surrogate for a vote for the leader who is not on the candidate list in this district.

Table 1. Multilevel model: DV: Proportion of preferential votes in Belgian federal elections 2013-2014; 319 lists and 16 parties

	M1		M2		M3		M4		Full model M5		M6		
	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	
INDIVIDUAL LIST													
Time	2003	Ref.			Ref.		Ref.		Ref.		Ref.		
	2007	-4.77***	1.40	-5.73***	1.44	-2.11	2.05	-7.15***	2.11	-3.57	2.58	-2.62	2.58
	2010	-7.69***	1.37	-8.66***	1.42	-7.95***	2.05	-12.31***	2.15	-12.04***	2.67	-11.13***	2.67
	2014	-6.96***	1.42	-8.75***	1.47	-8.97***	2.07	-11.47***	2.10	-11.91***	2.62	-10.32***	2.63
List Electoral Leader (EL)		11.26***	1.58	4.54*	2.69	4.59*	2.65	5.06	2.67	5.07*	2.63	13.78***	2.05
	EL 2007			6.55	4.68	4.64	4.67	6.20	4.65	4.32	4.63		
	EL 2010			7.23*	4.08	7.13*	4.03	6.09	4.05	6.05	4.01		
	EL 2014			14.49***	3.97	14.41***	3.92	13.71***	3.93	13.65***	3.87		
Flemish List (FL)		-3.83*	1.83	-3.85*	1.82	5.68*	2.50	-3.60*	1.84	5.18*	2.51	5.33**	2.56
	FL 2007					-6.62*	2.71			-6.48**	2.66	-6.76**	2.68
	FL 2010					-1.53	2.65			-0.96	2.64	-1.32	2.67
	FL 2014					0.36	2.66			0.57	2.63	0.20	2.67
%-Incumbent (%INC)		0.27***	0.06	0.26***	0.05	0.26***	0.05	0.09	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.08	0.10
	%INC 2007							0.11	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.10
	%INC 2010							0.26**	0.13	0.27**	0.12	0.31**	0.10
	%INC 2014							0.39**	0.16	0.39**	0.15	0.43***	0.14
%-Mayor (%MAY)		0.11*	0.06	0.09	0.06	0.11*	0.06	0.18	0.11	0.18*	0.11	0.22**	0.11
	%MAY 2007							-0.02	0.16	-0.01	0.16	-0.04	0.16
	%MAY 2010							-0.07	0.15	-0.06	0.15	-0.12	0.15
	%MAY 2014							-0.24*	0.14	-0.22	0.14	-0.25*	0.14
PARTY													
Traditional Party (TP)		15.47***	2.22	15.71***	2.22	15.39***	2.22	15.50	2.23	15.10***	2.27	15.39***	2.32
CROSS-LEVEL EL * TP												-6.28**	3.01
CONSTANT		37.11***	4.13	37.89***	4.14	45.09***	2.07	39.95***	4.34	47.65***	2.44	46.48***	2.48
σ PARTY		3.08	0.79	3.10	0.79	3.10	0.79	3.14	0.80	3.19	0.81	3.27	0.82
σ LIST		8.34	0.34	8.17	0.33	8.06	0.33	8.03	0.33	7.91	0.32	8.01	0.33
Log Likelihood χ^2		-1139.77		-1133.24		-1129.04		-1128.28		-1123.92		-1127.98	

Intercept Only-model: CONSTANT= 52.54 (3.09); σ PARTY= 12.13 and σ LIST= 9.93

*: P<0.01; **:P<0.05; ***P<0.01

We now move over to the explanatory analysis. Here, we focus again on the general variable, i.e. the percentage of preferential votes cast (which is the inverse of the percentage of list votes). We use a multilevel model with 319 individual lists at the first level and 16 parties at the second level (Table 1).

The multivariate analysis confirms the general decrease of the proportion of preferential votes in the last federal elections. Interestingly, this decrease is neutralized on lists with an electoral leader. Lists with an electoral leader score significantly better than lists without such a leader ($B = 11.26^{***}$ in M1). This compensatory effect is particularly strong in 2014 as revealed by the interaction of 'lists with an electoral leader' and 'time' in model 2. The conditional effect of a list with an electoral leader in 2014 is significantly stronger in 2014 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 4.54 + 14.49 = 19.03$ in M2) than in 2013 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 4.54$ in M2). This is clearly visualized in the interaction plot in appendix (figure X). The obvious explanation for this 2014-effect is that the federal election of 2014 was organized simultaneously with the regional elections and European elections. Given that candidates can only participate in one election at the time, electoral talent is diluted over the different lists.

However, as mentioned before, there are also other possible explanations for the decreasing proportions of preferential votes over time. In models 3 and 4 we verify whether this could be due to the adoption of new electoral rules in 2007. In 2007 a rule was implemented according to which well-known incumbent candidates could only be played out once, while before it was still possible to field them both on the list of the Senate and on the list of the Chamber. Consequently, the number of incumbents available for the Chamber lists decreased substantially in 2007. Moreover, given that the electoral campaign in 2007 focused on the struggle between the leaders of three Flemish parties, all aspiring to be chancellor and given that all of these leaders were fielded on the Senate list, the most attractive incumbents were not available for the Flemish Chamber lists. Consequently, we expect the proportion of preferential votes on the lists for the Chamber elections to drop significantly in Flanders. This indeed proves to be the case as the conditional effect of a list in Flanders in 2007 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 5.68 - 6.62 = -0.94$ in M3) is significantly lower than it was in 2003 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 5.68$). The effect of the proportion of incumbents is only significantly stronger in 2010 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 0.09 + 0.26 = 0.35$ in M4) and 2014 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 0.09 + 0.39 = 0.48$ in M4) which again seems to point at some kind of dilution effect. Due to the fact that for instance in 2014 both

regional, federal and European election were coinciding and candidates could only participate one and only one election, electoral appeal is diluted. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. However, the most important observation in this context is that the effect of 'List with electoral leader' remains intact after controlling for the effect of changes in the electoral rules (see model 5).

In the full model 5 we also test a third alternative explanation: the decreasing electoral appeal of the traditional parties. If newer challenger parties are becoming increasingly popular this could have a deflationary effect on the proportion of preferential votes because newer parties are more often ideologically based and their recruitment base is generally more limited. Indeed, traditional party lists generally receive higher proportions of preferential votes. The effect is very strong ($B = 15.10$ in M5). Moreover, given that the effect does not differ significantly over time and given that the support for traditional parties has declined substantially in the last elections, the decreasing electoral appeal of the traditional parties definitely is a credible explanation for the decreasing preferential vote proportion. However, also this alternative explanation does not overrule the importance of the positive 'list with electoral leader'-effect. On the contrary, the variable 'traditional party list' seems to strengthen the electoral leader effect as the latter effect is smaller among the lists of the traditional parties (cross-level interaction $B = -6.28$ in M6). Interestingly, the model remains analogous if the lists of the N-VA, the strongest challenger party, are eliminated from the dataset. In sum, the diminishing electoral appeal of the traditional parties seems both to lead to a decrease of decentralized personalization as well as a an increase of centralized personalization.

Conclusion

[to be expanded]

While personalization seems to imply a notion of steady growth, our longitudinal analysis of Belgian election data points out that actually increase as well as decline are involved. Over the last four Belgian federal elections the degree of decentralized personalization –voting for

ordinary candidates- has decreased significantly, while the degree of centralized personalization –voting for party leaders- has increased significantly. Although further research should collaborate this, our findings suggest that the increasing electoral appeal of the leaders –centralized personalization- might be a cause of the decline in decentralized personalization. The underlying logic is simple: many voters want to vote for the leader who is the figurehead of the party in the election, but they cannot because the leader is not available in their district. In this situation they prefer to vote for the party instead of voting for another candidate who does not have the appeal of the leader. Furthermore, while personalization is often perceived to be a cause of party dealignment, our analyses seem to indicate that notably the dealignment of the traditional parties leads to a decrease of decentralized personalization and an increase in centralized personalization. Research in other electoral contexts should establish whether this finding is strictly related to a context where a niche parties become mainstream parties or whether this is observation is more generally valid?

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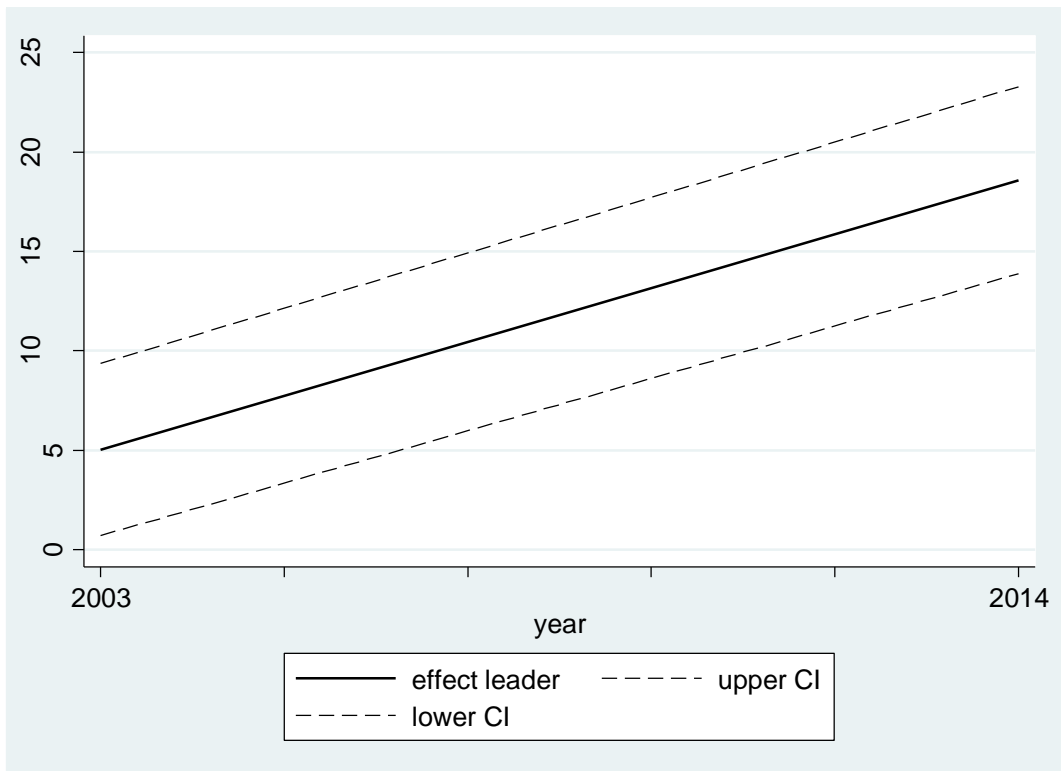
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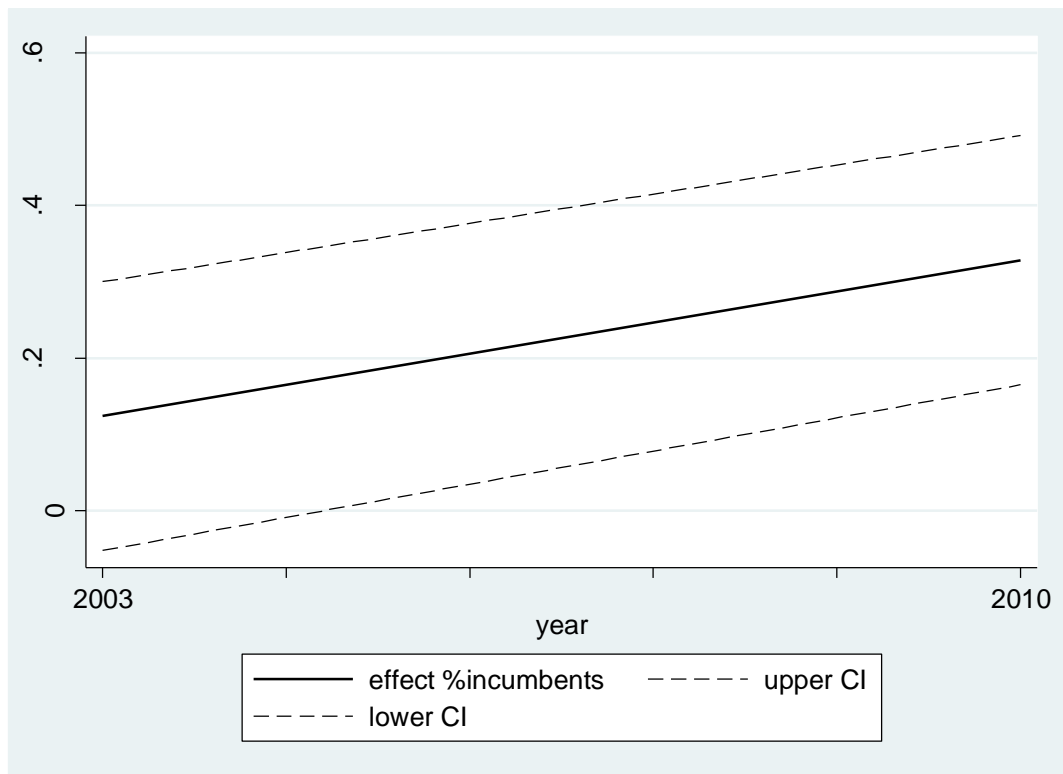
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APPENDIX

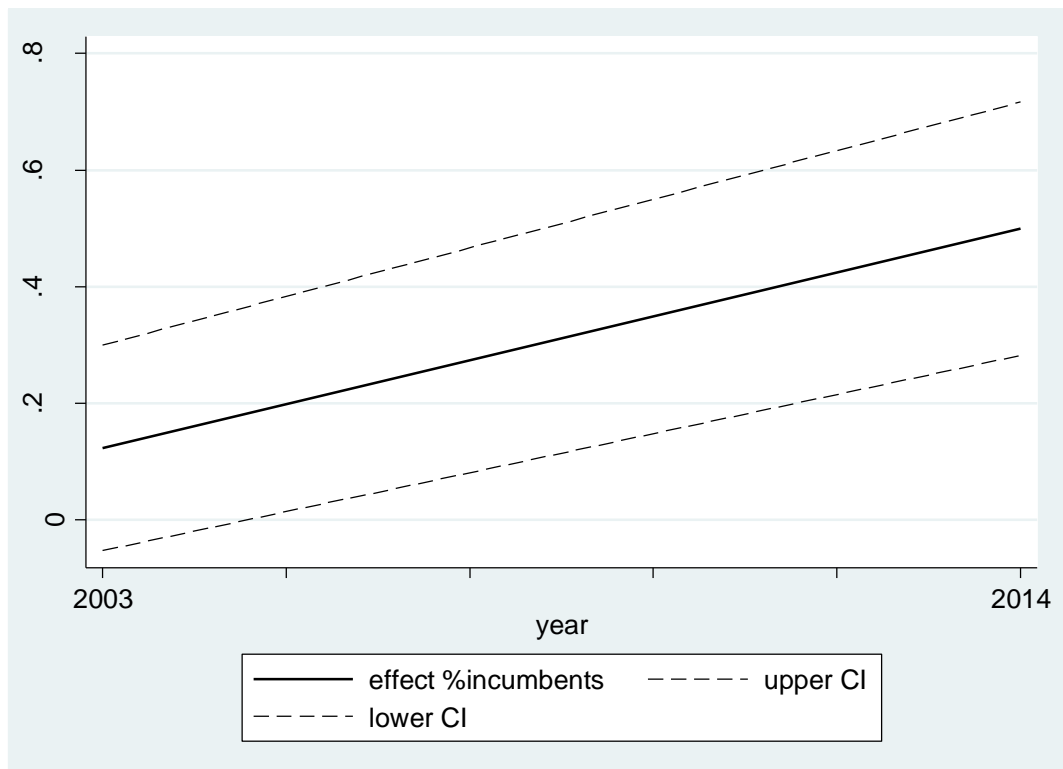
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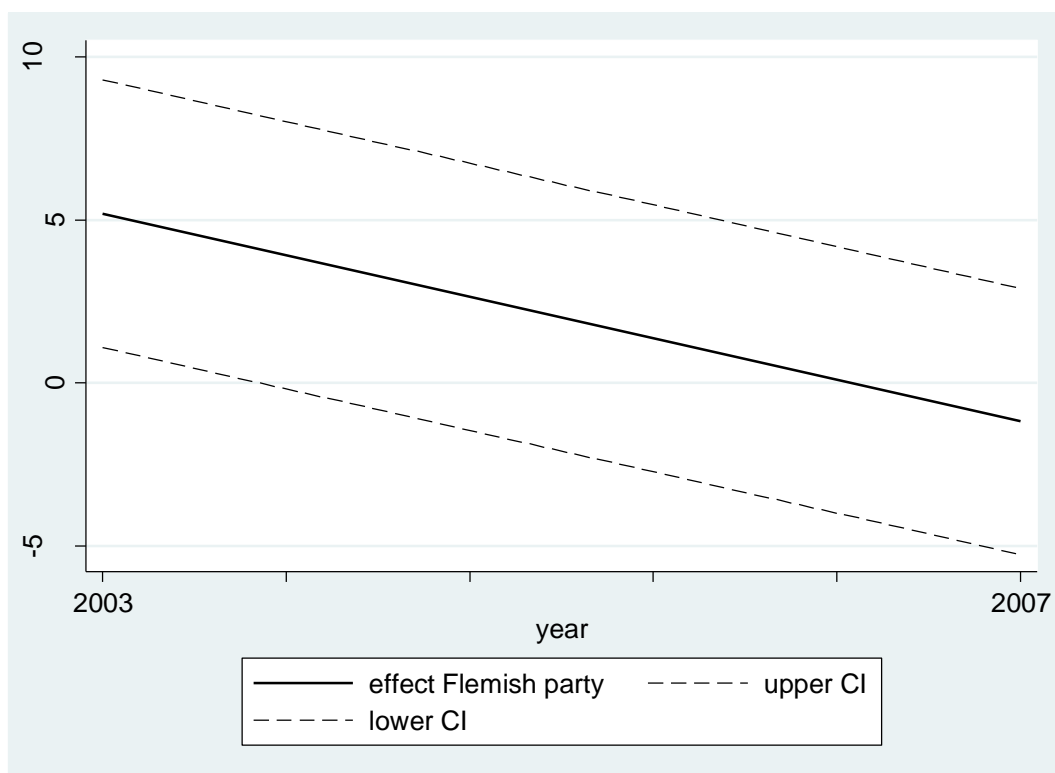
%Incumbent 2010



%Incumbent 2014



Flemish List 2007



Flemish List 2010

