INTRA-PARTY COMPETITION AND PREFERENCE VOTING IN LOCAL ELECTIONS

PERSONALIZATION AT DIFFERENT LEVELS?

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Abstract

Despite claims of an increasing personalization of politics, the use of preference voting (a straightforward indicator of personalization in voting behavior) has declined in the local elections in Flanders (Belgium) since 2006. We will search for explanations for this remarkable decline in preference voting by engaging in a conceptual discussion on the different types of personalization. Findings from national elections (which are largely mediatized and to a large extent focused on a handful prominent politicians) cannot simply be transferred to the local level. More in particular, we will argue that in a multi-level context personalization can take place at different policy levels, which could have an impact on each other. Therefore, analysts should not only focus on the number of people to which the process of personalization applies (which is usually, but inaccurately called the 'level' of personalization), but also at which policy level it takes place and how processes at one policy level have an impact on other policy levels.

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1. Introduction

Preference votes are one of the key features of most List Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems. In an 'open list' PR system, preference votes entirely determine which party candidates are elected, while in the 'flexible list' variant, this is most often done by a combination of preference votes and list votes (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2005). In these 'flexible list' PR-systems, voters have the choice between supporting the list as a whole or voting for one or more candidates of that list. Candidates on top of the list receive in such a system list votes in addition to their own preferential votes, which increases their chance to become elected. Where the percentage of preferential votes is low, the number of list votes to distribute is large and consequently, the list order (rather than the amount of obtained preference votes) is often decisive, making the system resembling a closed-list system (in which voters have no impact on which party candidates will become elected). In elections where the percentage of preferential voters is high, the system will be more like an open-list system, and the influence of the party elite will be lower. It is thus highly relevant to investigate the use of preference votes in flexible list-systems (Wauters, Thijssen, and Erkel 2020).

At the same time, preference votes are a generally considered a good indicator to measure personalization of voting behavior (Karvonen 2010, Wauters et al. 2018). This concept denotes a shift in importance from parties to individual politicians. More voters casting a preference vote for one or more individual candidates instead of a list vote for the party, is an obvious sign of individuals gaining importance at the expense of parties.

Apart from research on who casts a preference vote (e.g. André, Wauters, and Pilet (2012), Thijssen, Wauters, and Van Erkel (2018)) and which candidates obtain (more) preference votes (than others) (e.g. Marien, Schouteden, and Wauters (2016), Maddens and Put (2013), Schoultz and Papageorgiou (2019), van Erkel, Van Aelst, and Thijssen (2018)), also the extent to which preference votes are cast (and variation therein) has been a major focus of research attention (Thijssen, Wauters, and Van Erkel (2018), Wauters, Thijssen, and Erkel (2020), Gendźwiłł and Marcinkiewicz (2019)). It is this final element that will further be investigated in this paper. Despite claims of an increasing personalization of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2007, McAllister 2007), the percentage of voters that is casting a preference vote (which is considered to be a good proxy to measure personalization) has been declining in recent elections in Flanders/Belgium, both at the national and at the local level (Wauters et al. 2018). In case of the national elections, this

remarkable phenomenon has been explained by a rise in 'centralized' personalization (centering around party leaders) at the expense of 'decentralized' personalization (focusing on rank and file candidates) (Wauters et al. 2018, Balmas et al. 2014) resulting in an overall decrease of preference voting. By focusing on party leaders (who are not present on the ballot list in each electoral district), parties and media alike incentivize voters in parliamentary elections to opt for a list vote (as a surrogate vote for the absent party leader) rather than a preference vote for one of the local politicians.

This paper has two aims. First, we will focus on the local elections and search for explanations for the remarkable decline in preference voting there. Findings from the national elections (which are largely mediatized and to a large extent focused on a handful prominent politicians) cannot simply be transferred to the local level. Secondly, we engage in the conceptual discussion on the different types of personalization. More in particular, we will argue that in a multi-level context personalization can take place at different policy levels, which could have an impact on each other. Therefore, analysts should not only focus on the number of people to which the process of personalization applies (which is usually, but inaccurately called the 'level' of personalization), but also at which policy level it takes place and how processes at one policy level have an impact on other policy levels. As such, we contribute to the conceptual literature on personalization, and at the same time, we provide more insights to explain evolutions in preference voting at the local level.

More in particular, we will analyse the evolution in the use of preference votes in every municipality in Flanders from 2006 until 2018. We will analyse all party lists that has been presented on the occasion of these elections, in total 4,749 lists over these three elections. A distinction will be made between three forms of personalization: centralized and decentralized personalization at the local level, and centralized personalization at the central level. We hope in this way to shed more light on the remarkable decline of preference voting at the local level (and its causes) and hope to come to a more fine-grained conceptualisation of personalization taking into account different policy levels.

This paper starts with a discussion of the role of preference votes in Belgium's flexible list PR-system. Then, we discuss the concept of personalization: both as a concept on its own, and in relation to the evolutions in preference voting. In the methodology section, we explain the data we used, i.e. percentages of preference votes of lists per municipality for three consecutive local elections between 2006 and 2018, and the control variables we include in the multivariate analyses.

Our results show that the conceptual distinction between the different types of personalization is helpful in explaining the decline in preference voting at the local level. Decentralized personalization at the local level has especially declined, while centralized personalization at the local level and national personalization (both centralized and decentralized) have stimulated list voting when no mayor or MP was on the candidate list.

2. Personalization of politics

Several observers have the impression that politics in Western countries has become increasingly focused on individual politicians the last few decades. This phenomenon is called 'personalization', which refers to a shift over time in attention and/or power from collective actors (such as parties and institutions) to individuals (Karvonen 2010, Cross, Katz, and Pruysers 2018, Rahat and Kenig 2018, Rahat and Sheafer 2007). There are some good reasons to expect a trend of personalization over time: the socio-economic and technological modernization of society, the diminishing relevance of classic social structures based on class or religion, and the increased impact of (social) media (Karvonen 2010) are believed to be drivers for personalization.

Although it is often stated that personalization is a core and undisputable trend in contemporary politics, scholars are highly divided on this topic, and not all empirical results point in the same direction (Wauters et al. 2018). Studies are divided between those who prove that politics has been personalized over the last decades (Garzia 2012, Renwick and Pilet 2016, McAllister 2007), and those demonstrating that there is no clear evidence of such an evolution (Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2011, Karvonen 2010, Kriesi 2012).

These contradictory results could be linked to the fact that personalization is a broad concept covering a wide variety of practices and evolutions. A distinction can be made between the arena, the level and the character of personalization (Pedersen and Rahat 2019). This distinction is important as different dimensions can occur simultaneously, apart from each other, or not at all.

As for the **arena** (or locus) of personalization, different arenas in which personalization could take place can be distinguished: in the media, in parliament, in institutional rules, and in electoral behaviour (Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2012, Balmas et al. 2014). It could refer to behaviour of either voters or politicians (Pedersen and Rahat 2019, Rahat and Sheafer 2007). We will focus here on electoral behaviour of voters. The share of preference votes that are casted (compared to

the share of list votes) is generally considered a good indicator of personalization among voters in the electoral arena (Karvonen 2010, Wauters et al. 2018).

Secondly, the **character** of personalization refers to how this phenomenon manifests itself. Two distinctions are relevant in this perspective. The first is between individualization and privatization, with the former referring to an increased focus on individual politicians in general, and the latter to an increased focus on the private life of politicians including their family and personal life (Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2012). The second distinction concerns the tone and direction of personalization and is especially relevant in a media context: either positive personalization highlighting the own personal attributes, or negative personalization according to which other individual politicians and their individual traits are attacked (Pedersen and Rahat 2019, Garzia and Ferreira da Silva 2021, Pruysers and Cross 2018). For our purposes here, these (sub-)dimensions are less relevant, as we are not focussing on privatization nor on negative accounts of personalization.

The final distinction is made by the **level** (or focus) of personalization. This distinction refers to the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general, including also backbenchers for instance ('decentralized personalization') or a handful of top politicians, typically party leaders and prime ministers ('centralized personalization') (Balmas et al. 2014, Wauters et al. 2018). Here again, these two dimensions could occur simultaneously, one at the time, not at all, or they could, as Wauters et al. (2018) demonstrated, hinder each other.

We posit here that especially in a multi-level context, the level of personalization could refer to yet another aspect than only the number of people it applies to. In a context of voting behaviour in local elections, 'centralized personalization' could refer (just as in the context of national elections) to the national party leader, but also to the local party leader (the incumbent mayor, or the head of the list in a municipality). Personalization at a higher policy level can have repercussions on other (lower) policy levels, while at the same time, also personalization at the lower policy level itself could have an impact. Therefore, in our view, the level of personalization is not the most appropriate term to refer to 'centralized' versus 'decentralized' personalization. We propose to use again the term 'focus' for these phenomena, and to reserve the term 'level' for the distinction between 'national personalization' versus 'local personalization'. This brings us to four combinations of personalization: centralized national personalization (national party leader), decentralized national personalization (MPs, prominent national party figures), centralized local personalization (local party leader or (candidate) mayor) and decentralized local personalization (local candidates).

Apart from the analysis of Helboe Pedersen and Vanheerde-Hudson (2019) who consider constituency (i.e. local) orientation of national MPs as a form of personalization, the relationship between personalization at different policy levels has been underexposed. While the analysis of Helboe Pedersen and Vanheerde-Hudson (2019) was focused on the behaviour of MPs, we concentrate on behaviour of voters in local elections.

Table 1 Conceptual framework on multi-level personalization in an electoral context

Policy level ('level')	Number of people ('focus')	
	One or a few	Many individual people
National	'Centralized national' e.g. party leader	'Decentralized national' e.g. incumbent MPs
Local	'Centralized local' e.g. (candidate) mayor	'Decentralized local' e.g. local councillors

The question that comes to fore is how these combinations relate to each other and impact on each other. To these ends, we will conduct a study on the use of preference votes in local elections in Flanders which we will be introduced in the next section. As it is not always easy to disentangle in this context 'centralized national personalization' from 'decentralized national personalization' and as the number of observation of 'centralized national personalization' is low, we often merge these two categories into one, i.e. 'national personalization'.

3. Preference voting in flexible list PR-systems

Based on the electoral formula, electoral systems can be divided into three broad groups: majoritarian systems, systems of proportional representation (PR) and mixed systems (Farrell 2011, Reilly, Ellis, and Reynolds 2005). In majoritarian systems, typically a candidate who obtains most votes is elected, while in PR-systems, the aim is to provide equivalence between the share of votes of parties and their share of seats in parliament. In PR-systems, seats are first distributed among parties. How these seats are then divided between candidates of the same party, is another crucial question. There are three possible variations: an open list PR-system in which seats are entirely distributed based on preference votes, a closed list PR-system in which seats are entirely distributed according to a list order determined by the party, and a flexible list PR-system which combines elements of both open and close list systems (Carey and Shugart 1995).

Precisely flexible list PR-systems are the major focus of our attention here. More in particular, we will focus on Belgium's flexible system, in which voters have the choice between casting a list vote (for the party) or one or more preference votes (for candidates on the same party list). Preference votes have a formal impact on who will become elected. All candidates reaching the eligibility number on the basis of their preference votes automatically obtain one of the party seats. In general, however, only a handful of candidates reach that number. For all other candidates, list votes are then added to their preference votes until they reach the eligibility number. But here, the order of the list is followed: the first candidate on the list receives as much list votes as needed to reach the eligibility number, then the remaining list votes are given to the second candidate, and so on. This is repeated until all list votes are used. If all list votes are exhausted and if not all seats for the list are yet assigned, then (and only then) the remaining seats go to the candidates with the largest number of preference votes. In that case, candidates are elected on the basis of their preference votes only, and 'jump over' higher listed candidates. But this only happens sporadically in national elections (Put, Smulders, and Maddens 2014, Wauters, Thijssen, and Van Erkel 2020). As a result, the order of the candidate list as determined by the parties is almost always decisive. Therefore, Belgian's electoral system is sometimes characterized as a 'closed-list system in disguise' rather than as a 'flexible list system' (Crisp et al. 2013).

This, of course, also depends on the total number of list votes. If voters make extensively use of the possibility of preference voting, then there are not many list votes to distribute and hence, the list order is less decisive. In this situation, the electoral system resembles an open list PR-system, in which preference votes have a large impact on who will become elected. If, on the contrary, not many voters cast a preference vote, the number of list votes is high and the list order highly decisive. Then this looks like a closed list PR-system in which parties decide who obtains a seat. Therefore, it is highly relevant to investigate to what extent voters make use of the possibility to cast a preference vote.

Apart from the formal role that preference votes play in the distribution of seats among party candidates (see above), they are relevant for yet two other reasons.

First, even if candidates are not elected on the basis of their preference votes, they still can benefit from obtaining many preference votes. It has been demonstrated that candidates with many preference votes have a higher chance to appear on the candidate lists at the next elections, and to obtain a high list position (increasing the chance to become elected) (André et al. 2017).

Second, preference votes are an important criterion when executive mandates are distributed among elected politicians (Folke, Persson, and Rickne 2016). This is particularly the case at the

local level, where mayors and aldermen are often the 'vote champions' of their party. Local party sections can decide quite autonomously who will become mayor and alderman, and it has been demonstrated that they look first and foremost to the number of preference votes of a candidate as a criterion to decide who will be nominated (Olislagers and Steyvers 2013).

4. Decline in preference voting and explanations from the personalization literature

Table 2 shows the percentage of voters casting a preference vote in local elections in Flanders (Belgium). This percentage has decreased over the last few local elections: from 83% in 2006 to 77% in 2018. This evolution is clearly at odds with the often assumed general personalization trend (McAllister 2007): there is a decline in preference voting instead of an increase.

Table 2: Percentage of voters casting a preference vote in local elections, 2006-2018

Election year	% of voters casting a preference vote
2006	83,31
2012	78,84
2018	77,72

Source: own calculations based on the official results of the local elections, all voters

As an explanation for this rather surprising evolution, we can point to a similar evolution at the national level. Indeed, also for recent parliamentary elections in Belgium, the share of preference voting has been decreasing. This has been explained by distinguishing between two different types of personalization: centralized versus decentralized personalization (Wauters et al. 2018). The analysis demonstrated that in electoral districts where the party leader is a candidate, the share of casted preference votes increased, while in the other districts (where other candidates are on top of the list), this share declined (Wauters et al. 2018). Voters cast a vote for the party leader when (s)he is a candidate in their district ('centralized personalization'). If they are living in another district, however, they cast a list vote, as a sort of surrogate vote for the leader who is not on the ballot list in their district. Consequently, the share of preference votes in these districts decreases. In sum, the strong effect of centralized personalization has a negative impact on decentralized personalization, causing a decline in the total percentage of preference votes.

For local elections, this explanation is less easy to apply, however. Local elections are held in one single electoral district per municipality, so negative effects on preference voting by a local leader

elsewhere could not occur. And if there would be a negative effect of the personalization around the national party leader, then we can expect this effect to occur in all municipalities.

This brings us to the central research question of this paper: Why is there a decline in the use of preference voting at the local level? And what is the role of different forms of personalization in this perspective?

5. Methodology

This paper studies the dynamics of preference voting in the local elections of Flanders, a region in the northern part of Belgium. Flanders consists of 300 municipalities. Every municipality holds its local elections every six years except for some special cases, such as Herstappe and Zuienkerke (who did not hold an election in respectively 2012 and 2018, because only one party presented a list of candidates). This paper focuses on three consecutive local elections, namely, 2006, 2012 and 2018.

In order to keep the data consistent over time, Herstappe and Zuienkerke are excluded from the study. In 2018, there were a handful of mergers of municipalities: 15 municipalities merged into 7 new merged municipalities. Because we have data on all these municipalities (albeit for 2018 only on a higher level together with the municipalities they merged with), we decided to keep all these municipalities in our sample. For 2018, we take for every (old) municipality the share of preference votes in the new, merged municipality.

For each of the elections in the research period, we calculated the percentage of casted preference votes per party per municipality. We have 1467 party lists from the 2006 local elections, 1658 from the 2012 elections and 1624 from the 2018 elections in our research population, which counts in total 4749 party lists.

We first conduct a descriptive analysis, in which we distinguish between three types of ballots (and corresponding voters): voters casting a list vote (which is the opposite of voters casting one or more preference votes, presented in Table 2 above), voters casting a preference vote for the head of list (capturing 'centralized local personalization') and voters casting one or more preference votes for candidates lower down the list (which refers to 'decentralized local personalization'). Together they make 100 % of all voting ballots for a party.

We assume that the share of list votes is partially driven by centralized personalization. A similar reasoning as for national elections is made: voters voting for a party out of sympathy for the national party leader and/or national party figures (typically MPs) cannot vote for these national politicians if they do not live in the same municipality as these politicians and therefore opt for a list vote as a surrogate. In order to test this, we additionally run linear regressions with the three types of voting ballots as dependent variables, and with the presence of a national MP as independent variable. Given the small number of national party leaders (6 or 7 depending on the delineation, which means that less than 0,5 % of all lists have a national party leader on it), we focus on lists with MPs (which generally also include national party leaders) to capture 'national personalization'. Respectively 160, 155 and 155 party lists comprised at least one national MP in the local elections of respectively 2006, 2012 and 2018.

We add to these analyses a number of control variables that have proven to affect the use of preferential voting. First of all, we add a similar variable indicating whether or not the incumbent mayor was on the list. Previous research has shown that mayors obtain more preference votes than other candidates on the list (Put and Maddens 2015), which leads us to the expectation that lists with mayors will attract more preference votes. Next, since established parties with many well-known figures attract more preference votes than newer parties (Wauters, Thijssen, and Erkel 2020), we also add party dummies to these models. Finally, some specific factors for preference voting in local elections are added: population density (more preference voting in rural areas), electronic voting (more preference voting if electronic voting instead of voting by paper and pencil is used), number of parties (more preference voting if number of parties is limited) (Wauters, Verlet, and Ackaert 2012).

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive analysis of trends in preference voting

We will start with a descriptive analysis of the evolution of the use of preference votes. In Table 2 (see above), we already gave a the general evolution of preference voting. Here, we make a distinction between three kinds of voting ballots: those with list votes, those with preference votes for the head of list, and those with preference votes for candidates lower down the lists.

Table 3: Percentage of voters casting a preference vote in local elections, 2006-2018

Election year	% of voters casting a list vote	% of voters casting a vote for head of list	% of voters casting a vote for other candidates
2006	14,52	43,89	41,59
2012	19,66	43,34	37,00
2018	20,68	44,28	35,04

Source: own calculations based on the official results of the local elections, all voters

Table 3 and Figure 1 clearly show that voting ballots with a preference vote for the head of list and ballots with preference votes for other candidates outnumber voting ballots with list votes. While the former two categories each count separately about 40 % of all ballots, ballots with list votes only amount to 20 % or less of all ballots.

Figure 1: Percentage of voters casting a preference vote in local elections, 2006-2018
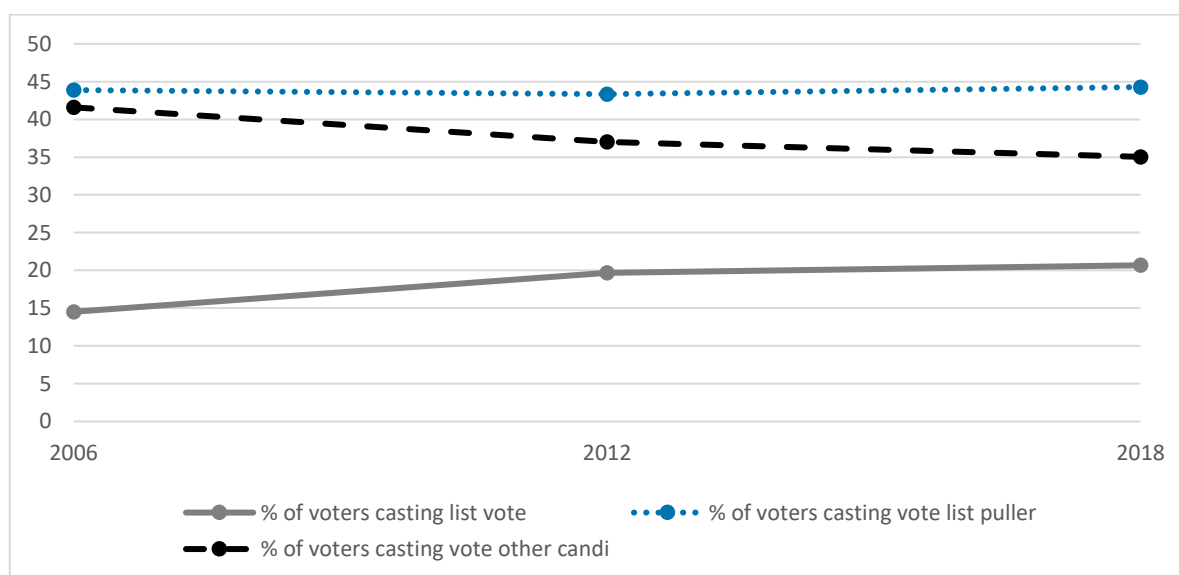
At the same time, Table 3 and Figure 1 also give nice insights on the evolution over time. We already knew that the percentage of list votes (the inverse of the general percentage of preference votes reported in Table 2) has increased from about 14 % in 2006 to more than 20 % in 2018. The distinction we made between the kind of preference votes points us to possible explanations for the rise in list votes. The percentage of ballots with a preference for the 'list puller' have remained quite stable over time: 43,89 % in 2006 hardly differs from 44,28 % in 2018. Conversely, for the percentage of ballots containing preference votes for other candidates than the head of list, a marked decline can be noted. Whereas in 2006 still 41,59 % of all ballots contained a preference

for these rank and file candidates, this percentage was only 35,04 % in 2018 anymore. If we translate this in personalization terms, it seems that the general decline in preference voting is rather due to decentralized personalization (or the lack of it) than to centralized personalization (that remained remarkably stable).

6.2 Explanatory analyses of preference voting

Up to now, the focus has been mainly on explanations based on personalization at the local level. But as indicated above, we expect also the national level to have an impact on local elections. In this part, we will test whether the presence of MPs (who are by definition active on the national or regional level) has an impact on the use of preference voting, and whether a change over time has taken place.

Table 4: Linear regression explaining resp. percentage of list votes, percentage of preference votes for head of list and percentage of preference votes for other candidates on the list, for the 2018 local elections

	List votes		Pref votes for list puller		Pref votes for other candi	
	B	sign	B	sign	B	sign
Constant	19,075		44,532		36,393	
Party (ref= OVLD)						
Sp.a	3,244	**	-2,415	°	-,830	(ns)
N-VA	11,431	***	-4,247	***	-7,184	***
CD&V	-5,161	***	2,004	°	3,157	**
Groen	15,369	***	-11,041	***	-4,328	**
VB	23,697	***	-5,365	***	-18,332	***
Local party	2,680	**	1,930	°	-4,610	***
Population density	,001	**	-,002	**	,001	(ns)
Electronic voting	-5,785	***	-,754	(ns)	6,540	***
No of lists	,759	***	-,707	***	-,052	(ns)
MP on list / head of list	-4,650	***	10,477	***	-5,828	***
Mayor on list / head of list	-6,597	***	12,017	***	-5,420	***
Adjusted R²	0,56		0,29		0,25	

*** p < 0.001 ; ** p < 0.01 ; * p < 0.05 ; ° p < 0.1

First, we investigate whether the presence of national politicians on local lists has an impact on the use of preference voting. Table 4 clearly shows that this is indeed the case. We report the results for the most recent local elections (those of 2018), but similar patterns appear for the previous two local elections. When it comes to the percentage of voters casting a list vote (first two columns), we see that the presence of an MP on the list has a significant negative effect (coefficient of -4.650). This means that in municipalities with an MP on the candidate list, the percentage of voters casting a list is about 4,6 % lower than in municipalities without an MP (everything else equal).

For the analysis of the two different types of preference votes (columns 3 and 4, and 5 and 6 in Table 4), we refine the variable to a variable indicating whether or not an MP was head of list, since it matters here which position on the list the MP occupies (head of list or not). Here again, we find significant effects for the presence of a national MP. When an MP is on top of the list, the percentage of voters casting a preference vote for this top candidate is larger (compared to party lists without an MP). Conversely, the percentage of voters casting a preference vote for other candidates than the head of list is significantly lower for party lists with an MP as head of list (compared to party lists without MP on top).

This proves that national actors (MPs in this case) have an impact on the use of preference votes in local elections. This is not an entirely new finding, but it is striking to note that their presence could both have positive effects (on the general use of preference votes and on preference voting for heads of list) as well as negative effects (on preference voting for other candidates than the head of list). This is only one part of the story. The central argument we tried to make based on the personalization thesis (see above) is that there has taken place an evolution over time: we hypothesize that the influence of national MPs on local preference voting has become stronger over time. We will now discuss the results of these analyses.

In Table 5, we include all observations for the three consecutive local elections in our analysis, and we add interaction terms between the presence of an MP and the election year in order to check whether the effect of the presence of MPs has changed over time.

Table 5: Linear regression explaining resp. percentage of list votes, percentage of preference votes for head of list and percentage of preference votes for other candidates on the list, for the 2006, 2012 and 2018 local elections (with interaction terms)

	List votes		Pref votes for list puller		Pref votes for other candi	
	B	sign	B	sign	B	sign
Constant	18,004		45,448		36,599	
Party (ref= OVLD)						
Sp.a	2,671	***	-1,402	(ns)	-1,215	°
N-VA	13,077	***	-5,308	***	-7,658	***
CD&V	-4,298	***	1,932	**	2,753	***
Groen	14,738	***	-10,220	***	-4,647	***
VB	22,897	***	-4,258	***	-18,793	***
Local party	2,776	***	2,183	***	-5,015	***
Population density	,003	***	-,003	***	,001	(ns)
Electronic voting	-6,914	***	,089	(ns)	6,811	***
No of lists	,886	***	-,823	***	-,041	(ns)
MP on list / head of list	-5,248	***	11,212	***	-5,954	***
Mayor on list / head of list	-6,111	***	11,065	***	-5,063	***
Year (ref = 2018)						
2006	-5,331	***	-,934	*	6,223	***
2012	-,777	*	-,796	°	1,528	***
MP on list/head * 2006	2,526	*	-3,283	°	1,024	(ns)
MP on list/head * 2012	,234	(ns)	-1,423	(ns)	1,528	(ns)
Adjusted R²	0,61		0,28		0,30	

*** p < 0.001 ; ** p < 0.01 ; * p < 0.05 ; ° p < 0.1

Both for the percentage of list votes and the percentage of votes cast for the head of list (colums 1-4 in Table 5), significant interaction effects can be noted, but only for the 2006 elections. The negative effect of MPs on list votes was less strong in 2006 (positive interaction term), and the positive effect on preference votes for the list puller was less strong in 2006 (negative interaction term). This suggests that the effect of national personalization (presence of a national MP on a local list) has increased over time. We should make two nuances, however. First, our results only shows a significant difference between the situation in 2006 and that in 2018, and not between 2012 and 2018. Apparently, the evolution has either taken place earlier in time (end of the first decade of 2000) or needs time to fully realize its potential. Secondly, no significant differences over time could be noted for preference votes for candidates lower down the list.

Below, we plot the interaction terms for each of the three dependent variables we investigate.

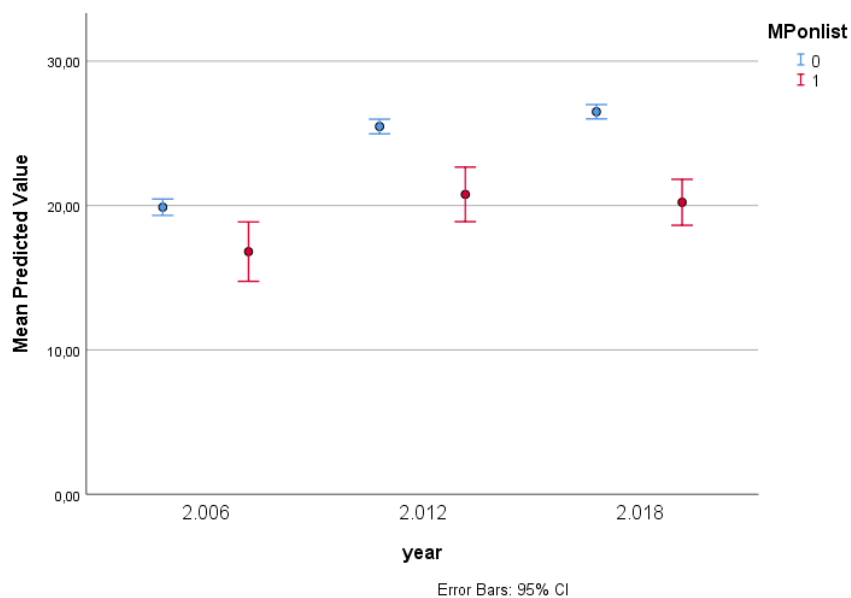Figure 2: Plot of interaction terms MP on list and election year; for percentage of list votes

Figure 3: Plot of interaction terms MP as head of list and election year; for percentage of preference votes for head of list
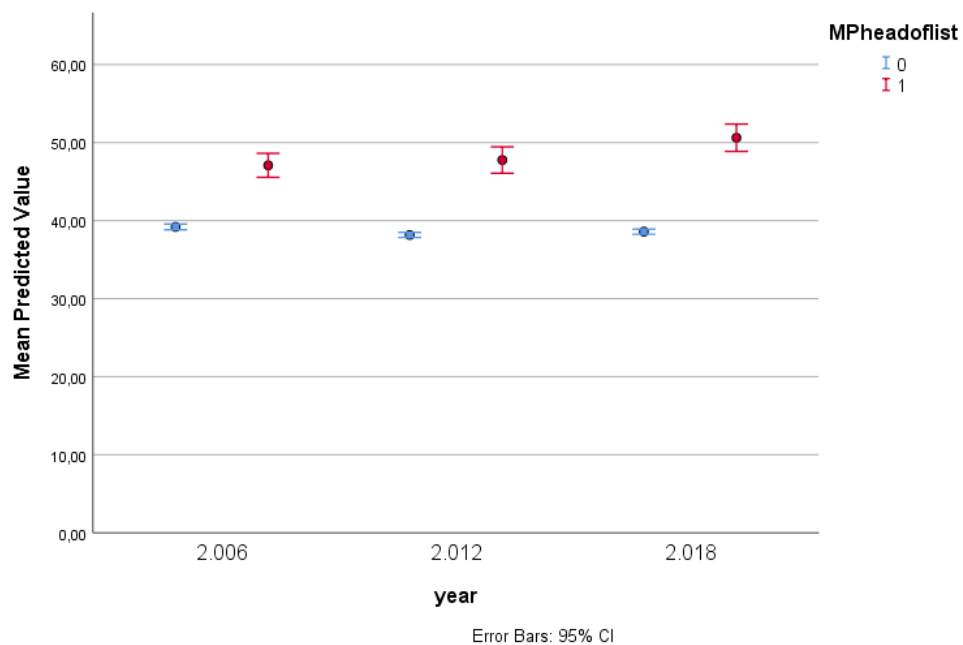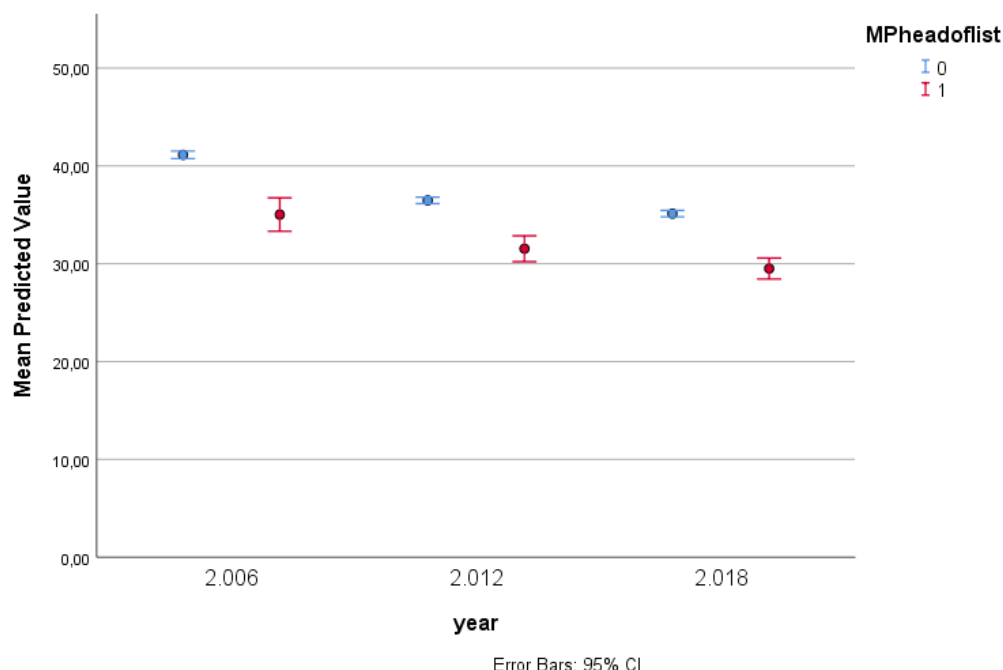
Figure 4: Plot of interaction terms MP as head of list and election year; for percentage of preference votes for other candidates than the head of list

Error Bars: 95% CI

Figures 2 and 3 clearly demonstrate that the effect of the presence of an MP becomes stronger over time. The gap between the confidence interval of having an MP on (top of) the list versus not having an MP on (top of) the list grows election after election. For the percentage of preference votes for other candidates than the list puller, the gap remains more or less constant through time, when it comes to the effect of national MPs. Earlier, however, we demonstrated that the evolution in this kind of preference votes could be linked to increasing preference voting for (local) heads of lists.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we searched for explanations for the remarkable decline in preference voting in the local elections in Flanders. This is generally considered to be a good indicator of personalization trends. While one would expect an increase due to often claimed trends of personalization, we see a clear decline in this form of personalized voting behavior from 2006 onwards. Explanations from the national elections (which are largely mediatized and to a large extent focused on a few prominent politicians) cannot simply be transferred to the local level.

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More in particular, we analyzed the evolution in the use of preference votes for all party lists in every municipality in Flanders from 2006 until 2018. The aim was to detect patterns in the evolution of preference voting in Flemish municipalities.

We have two main explanations for the remarkable overall decline in preference voting, which could both be linked to concepts of personalization.

First, not all kinds of preference voting ballots have declined in number. While the percentage of ballots containing a preference for the head of list has remained constant over time, we could note a clear decline in the percentage of ballots with only preference votes for candidates lower on the list. This means that 'local centralized personalization' (focussing on personalization around local leaders) remained constant over time (or even slightly increased), while 'local decentralized personalization' (centring around local rank and file candidates) has declined. We witness not so much a general depersonalization at the local level, but a depersonalization of candidates lower down the list.

Second, we have also clearly demonstrated that national figureheads have an impact on the use of preference votes at the local level. When national MPs are on the (head of the) list, the percentage of list votes and the percentage of preference votes for other candidates than the head of list is lower, while the percentage of preference votes for the head of list is higher. Moreover, we have demonstrated that this effect becomes stronger over time. If an MP is on the list, voters increasingly cast a preference vote for that MP (who is often at the head of the list) and not for other candidates. If the MP is not on the list, voters increasingly cast a list vote, as a surrogate for the national figureheads of the party who are not on the candidate list in that particular municipality.

These findings point us to the necessity to reconceptualise one dimension of the personalization concept, more particularly the level of personalization. This distinction refers to the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general, including also backbenchers for instance ('decentralized personalization') or a handful of top politicians, typically party leaders, prime ministers and mayors ('centralized personalization') (Balmas et al. 2014). But in a multi-level context, the level of personalization could refer to yet another aspect than only the number of people it applies to. In a context of voting behaviour in local elections, 'centralized personalization' for instance could refer (just as in the context of national elections) to the national party leader, but also to the local party leader (the incumbent mayor, or the head of the list in a municipality). Personalization at a higher policy level can have repercussions on other (lower) policy

levels, while at the same time, also personalization at the lower policy level itself could have an impact. Therefore, in our view, the level of personalization is not the most appropriate term to refer to 'centralized' versus 'decentralized' personalization. We propose to use again the term 'focus' for these phenomena, and to reserve the term 'level' for the distinction between 'national personalization' versus 'local personalization'. This brings us to four combinations of personalization: centralized national personalization (national party leader), decentralized national personalization (MPs, prominent national party figures), centralized local personalization (local party leader or (candidate) mayor) and decentralized local personalization (local candidates).

Future research on local elections in other contexts and countries should further elaborate and test the interaction between these kinds of personalization based on the level on which the personalized actors are operating.

One final remark is that the Flemish regional government has recently decided to abolish the list vote for the next local elections in 2024, in order to give voters more power at the expense of parties. While this reform is a form of institutional personalization (adapting the rules of the local electoral system), the question is not so much whether but rather what kind of personalization voting behaviour will undergo: will it rather benefit heads of list ('local centralized personalization') or candidates lower down the list ('local decentralized personalization')? and what will be the impact of national candidates ('national personalization') on the type of preference voter? Also these questions could further be investigated in future research.

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