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# **Elections as Beauty Contests: Do the rules matter?**

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## **Elections as Beauty Contests: Do the rules matter?**

John Curtice

### **Abstract**

Leaders have become the human face of election campaigns. This has led to the suggestion that many voters now vote for the party leader they like best rather than the party they prefer. However, people would seem more likely to vote for the leader rather than the party in presidential elections rather than parliamentary ones, and amongst parliamentary elections themselves when a majoritarian rather than proportional electoral system is used. In addition we might expect these propositions to be particularly true if few people have a strong party identification and many people watch a lot of television news. This paper uses the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project data to assess whether there is any systematic evidence to support these expectations.

## **Introduction**

It has become quite common in discussions of how the electoral process has developed over recent decades to suggest that democratic elections have become 'presidentialised'. Not only is the outcome of presidential elections increasingly influenced by voters' evaluations of the candidates rather than their parties (Wattenberg, 1991) but equally the way that people vote in parliamentary elections is also supposedly a reflection of what they think of the potential candidates for prime minister rather than the respective merits and policy platforms of the political parties (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Clarke et al, 1979; Graetz and McAllister, 1987; Stewart and Clarke, 1992; Mughan, 2000). This change has come about, it is argued, both because of changes in the way that elections are fought and in the motivations that voters bring to the ballot box.

In making this claim it is also sometimes argued that some forms of parliamentary election are more susceptible to this trend than others. Under proportional electoral systems in which seats are allocated in at least broad proportion to votes won, who forms the next government may well be determined as much by post-electoral coalition bargaining as it is by who wins most seats. So if elections held under such systems do not determine who forms the government then there would seem less incentive for voters to decide for whom to vote on the basis of who might be the best head of government. In contrast under majoritarian systems that either formally or in practice tend to ensure that bigger parties secure a significantly larger share of the seats than they do of the votes such that one party may well win an overall majority (Lijphart, 1999), elections have traditionally been regarded as a choice between alternative governments. Under these circumstances the incentive for voters to take into account their evaluations of the party leaders in deciding how to vote would seem to be much greater.

Although such claims may commonly be made (see also Glaser and Salmon, 1991; Mughan, 1993; Mughan, 1995; Swanson and Mancini, 1996), the argument that evaluations of leaders have come to have a greater influence in presidential elections is far from uncontested (Bartels, 2002; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Miller and Shanks, 1982; Shanks and Miller, 1990; Shanks and Miller, 1991) while there are certainly doubts about their importance in parliamentary contests (Bartle and Crewe, 2002; Kaase, 1994; King, 2002; Klingemann and Wattenberg, 1992). One of the problems is the relative paucity of research on the impact of leader evaluations on voting behaviour in parliamentary democracies (MacAllister, 1996). Moreover most of the studies that have been conducted to date confine their analysis to one or at best a couple of countries. True, one recent important study covered six countries but it consists of six separate studies rather than a formal systematic comparison of the countries in question (King, 20002). In short, no systematic test across a range of polities has been conducted of the proposition that leader evaluations now play as important a role in voters' choices in parliamentary elections as they allegedly do in presidential elections. To our knowledge there is a simple reason for this – the necessary data have simply not existed until now.

This paper is a first step at filling some of this gap. It uses data on leadership evaluations, party evaluations and voting behaviour collected on a systematic basis across a range of countries by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project

(<http://www.umich.edu:80/~nes/cses/cses.htm>) to provide a direct test of the claim that parliamentary elections now resemble presidential contests in the degree to which leader evaluations affect the way that people vote and an examination of the argument that this is particularly true of parliamentary elections held under majoritarian electoral systems. In so doing we also undertake some analysis of the validity of the arguments (outlined in the next section) as to why this should be the case. And we find only limited support for the claim that parliamentary elections have become beauty contests between party leaders.

### **The Presidentialisation Thesis**

As we have already suggested, there are two strands to the argument that parliamentary elections have been turned into presidential contests. One refers to developments in the way that elections are fought while the other refers to changes in the motivations that voters bring to the ballot box. We will describe each of these briefly in turn.

The first argument is essentially a claim that parliamentary elections are increasingly being fought as if they were presidential contests. The demands and opportunities created by television in particular have ensured that the reporting of election campaigns has come to be concentrated increasingly on the activities of leaders. Television, it is argued, needs relatively accessible visual images to project messages, and the personality of a politician provides an image that no party manifesto can ever hope to match. At the same time, television cannot necessarily afford to have camera crews following a wide range of leading party politicians on the campaign trail and thus it tends to focus on the activities of the leader. The parties themselves respond to these pressures by focusing their campaigns on their leader, whose image and personality can after all be conveyed across the nation by television in a manner that cannot be achieved by any other means of communication. The parties may even agree to their leader participating in a televised debate with all the other party leaders, debates that are similar in style to those which have now become a fixture of US presidential elections, while the print media are not immune to the increased focus of election campaigns on leaders (Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg, 2000: 51). In short, election campaigns have in effect become gladiatorial contests between the party leaders fought out on the small screen.

The second argument in contrast refers to relatively well worn themes about how voters' motivations and behaviour have changed. At its heart is the claim that modern electorates have experienced a process of partisan dealignment. According to this thesis, voters now largely lack the strong emotional attachment to a political party that many of them once enjoyed, an attachment that helped bring about the development of party identification theory (Campbell et al, 1960). For voters with a strong party attachment or identity, political parties were a vital cue, shaping their views about both policies and leaders. Thus, for example, they would be inclined to favour a particular policy position if it were adopted by the political party with which they identified, while they would be likely to oppose it if it were proposed by some other party. And equally, they would tend to like a party leader, irrespective of their personal qualities, if that leader were the leader of their own party, and to dislike them if they were leading a different party.

For so long as voters had motivations like these, leadership evaluations could have little or no independent impact on voting behaviour. They were after all simply derivative of party identification. But if, as has been widely argued has happened (Dalton, 2000; Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992; Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995), fewer voters now have a strong party identification, not least perhaps because in the television age voters are exposed to a wider range of messages than was previously the case, then other possible influences can be expected to play a role in their decision about how to vote. Amongst those other influences might be what they think about the issues at stake or of the merits of the alternative leaders with whom they have been presented. And of course they have every incentive to focus on the latter if indeed the first argument that leaders themselves have become more prominent in election campaigns is correct.

These arguments suggest that our analysis should take into account two features of a country's electorate in our analysis as well as the institutional rules. The first is how pervasive television is as means of political communication. The second is the incidence of strong party identification. The more that people watch television and the less that they identify strongly with a party the more that they can be expected to take leadership evaluations into account.

## **Data and Method**

To test these propositions we use data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project (<http://www.umich.edu:80/~nes/cses/cses.htm>). This project is a voluntary collaboration between national election studies across the world. Each country devotes about ten minutes of questionnaire time to asking a module of questions in a common format while at the same time also collecting a range of commonly coded socio-economic background information. In each case the data are collected as soon as possible immediately after an election has been held. This means of course that rather than being undertaken at one point in time the data collection is spread across a number of years. In our case we are analysing data collected by the first CSES collaboration between 1996 and 2002.

This first wave of collaboration provides us with relevant data for no less than 40 elections in 29 countries.<sup>1</sup> Some of these elections are presidential, some parliamentary. Some of the latter are held using a majoritarian electoral system, others a more proportional one. This means we can examine systematically how far the relationship between leader evaluations and vote choice varies according to the electoral rules in force at an election. No longer are we forced to rely on just one or two examples of the use a particular electoral rule. In each case we have the luxury of a number of examples, giving us a much better chance of assessing just how generalisable are the propositions that we are assessing.

The CSES project collected three simple but crucial pieces of information of relevance to our purposes here. First, respondents were asked to state on a scale ranging from 0 to 10 how much they liked or disliked each of the main party leaders. Normally,

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<sup>1</sup> This tally of 40 elections includes six instances where both a parliamentary and a presidential election was held on the same date and details of how respondents voted are available for both.

evaluations of up to six party leaders were collected in each country, these being the leaders whose party enjoyed significant representation in that country's legislature or the presidential candidates who were expected to win more than a small share of the vote. The relationship between these evaluations and vote then provides us with our crucial indicator of the impact of leadership evaluations on vote.

Second, using exactly the same scale the CSES project also asked respondents how much they liked or disliked each of the main political parties. We have seen that the presidentialisation thesis argues that evaluations of leaders comprise one of the factors that have come to replace evaluations of parties in determining how people vote. This implies that rather than just looking at the variation between countries in the relationship between leadership evaluations and vote, we should be examining the variation in the relative importance of leadership and party evaluations. By deploying the party like and dislike data in addition to the leader like and dislike data, we can adopt this approach.

Finally, the CSES project also collected data on both the direction and strength of party identification in a systematically comparable manner across countries. These data enable us to assess one of the claims of the presidentialisation thesis about why leadership evaluations may have come to matter in parliamentary elections. We use here a measure of strength of partisanship. Those respondents who said that they felt close to a particular party were asked, 'Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?'. This provides us with an indicator of incidence of strong partisanship, that is the proportion who said they were either 'very' or 'somewhat' close.

The CSES project did not however collect one of the pieces of information that we need, that is the degree to which voters are exposed to television coverage of political affairs. For this we rely on information collected by the third wave of the World Values Study, which asked its respondents how many hours a week they watched television. Our indicator of the degree to which a country's electorate is exposed to television is the proportion who say that they watch television for three hours or more a day. Note that as the question asked by the World Values Study refers to television watching in general rather than watching television news in particular, we have to assume that where the incidence of watching television in general is relatively high so also in the propensity to watch the news on television. We should also note that these data are unavailable for 12 of our 29 countries.

How then do we deploy these data? It should by now be apparent that we have information on leader and party evaluations for each of the main parties at each of 32 elections in 29 countries. But not all of these party leaders have an equally realistic chance of becoming Prime Minister (or indeed President). Those who lead big parties, and perhaps particularly those who lead one of the two largest parties in a country, are far more likely to become the head of government than are those who lead a small party. So it would not be surprising if voters were more likely to take more notice of their evaluations of the leaders of big parties in deciding how to vote than they do their evaluations of leaders of smaller parties. And of course, it might be the case too that a leader of a small party finds it more difficult to convert personal popularity into votes because of strategic disincentives to voting for a small party. So we have to allow for the possibility not that all leader evaluations matter as much in parliamentary elections as they do in presidential ones (or in parliamentary elections using a majoritarian electoral system as in presidential ones) but rather that evaluations of those party leaders with a

chance of becoming Prime Minister matter as much as do evaluations of presidential candidates.

This suggests then that we require a data structure that allows us to examine how the role of leadership evaluations in the voting decision varies according to the characteristics of both countries and parties. To exploit this opportunity we adopt a very simple two stage approach. In the first stage we acquire an estimate of the impact of leadership evaluations and party evaluations on vote for each party in each country. This is done by undertaking a multiple linear regression of vote, dichotomised as 1 if the respondent voted for the party in question and 0 otherwise, against leader and party evaluations using the individual level data for the relevant country.<sup>2</sup>

It is these coefficients that then become the focus of our analysis in the second stage.<sup>3</sup> We analyse how the coefficients vary according to the characteristics of the party, election, and country in question. For each country we have the level of strong party identification (derived from the relevant CSES data set) and level of television viewing (derived from the World Values Study). We have divided our 38 elections into presidential and parliamentary contests and then coded the electoral system used in the latter according to whether it is primarily majoritarian, proportional or mixed. The last of these categories typically refers to those countries in which some seats are allocated according to a majoritarian principle, some by a proportional method and where the latter are not allocated such as to overcome the disproportionality generated by the outcome in the former.<sup>4</sup> Details of how we have classified each country's electoral system can be found in Table 1 below. Meanwhile we also have available to us the share of the vote

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<sup>2</sup> We are course aware that normally a logit or probit procedure would be preferable in the analysis of a dichotomous dependent variable. Linear regression gives us however a more easily interpreted metric for the second stage of our analysis described in the next paragraph.

<sup>3</sup> An alternative procedure would have been to have been to 'stack' the CSES data set so that each combination of party and respondent was represented as a case (see van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), and then to ascertain the impact of electoral system and party size on the relationship between vote and leader evaluations by fitting relevant interaction terms such as leader evaluation \* toptwo party \* majoritarian electoral system. This procedure could not however be applied to our examination of the impact of exposure to television (because our data on television watching come from a different source) while the range and complexity of the interaction terms that would have had to be fitted would have made our data analysis far more complex.

<sup>4</sup> Our principle sources of information on the characteristics of each country's electoral system were Reynolds and Reilly (1997) and Blais and Massicote (2002), supplemented where necessary by consultation with a range of appropriate Internet sites. Note that the mixed category does not include those two-tier electoral systems, such as that used in Germany, in which the disproportionalities created by one tier are wholly or largely corrected by the allocation of seats in the other tier. Although such systems may mix different principles for allocating seats in the two tiers, the final allocation of seats reflects the proportionate principle as much as it does in any other proportional system.



won by each party in our 40 elections, thereby enabling us to distinguish between the two largest parties in each country from the remainder.<sup>5</sup>

In the event we were able to implement this procedure successfully for 27 parties contesting nine presidential elections and 133 parties contesting 31 parliamentary ones.<sup>6</sup> Details of the countries that are included and how their elections have been classified are given in table 1.

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<sup>5</sup> Regional parties that fought in seats in only part of a country (such as the Canadian Bloc Quebecois) are excluded from the analysis as the relationship between both vote and both leader and party evaluations could be affected by the inability of some voters to vote for that party. Parties that fought in an electoral alliance (such as the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Christian Socialist Union (CSU) in Germany) are analysed as one party, using the party and leader evaluations for the largest partner (or in the case of the German CSU/CDU where there is a clear territorial demarcation between the areas that they contest, the CSU party evaluations for voters in Bavaria and the CDU party evaluations elsewhere).

<sup>6</sup> Note that apart from the six instances where both a parliamentary and presidential elections was held on the same day, there are three countries where data for more than one election held on different days is available. Some parties are thus represented more than once in our data set and contribute more than one to the tally of parties reported here.

**Table 1. Countries and Type of Election**

*Presidential Elections*

Belarus	Peru
Israel*	Romania
Lithuania	Taiwan
Mexico	USA

*Parliamentary Elections*

*Electoral System*

<i>Proportional</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>Majoritarian</i>
Czech Republic	Japan	Australia
Denmark	Russia	Canada
Germany	South Korea	Great Britain
Hungary	Taiwan	USA
Iceland	Ukraine	
Israel		
Mexico		
New Zealand		
Netherlands		
Norway		
Peru		
Poland		
Portugal		
Romania		
Slovenia		
Spain		
Sweden		
Switzerland		

\* Direct election of Prime Minister

**Results**

The first proposition that we have to test is that leadership evaluations now have just as much influence on the way that people vote in parliamentary elections as they do

in presidential ones. Equally we also have a more refined claim that leadership evaluations have as much influence on voting behaviour in those parliamentary elections held under a majoritarian electoral system as they do in a presidential election.

Table 2 provides a simple test of these two propositions. In the first column it shows the mean partial regression coefficient we obtained across all parties for the impact of party evaluations on vote choice in presidential elections and in parliamentary ones, the latter broken down by the type of electoral system used. In the second column we show the equivalent statistic for leader evaluations

**Table 2. Impact of Leader and Party Evaluations by Type of Election**

	Mean Partial Regression Coefficient ( $\times 10^2$ ) for		
	Party Evaluations	Leader Evaluations	
Presidential Elections	.33	.36	(27)
Parliamentary Elections	.51	.15	(133)
<i>Electoral System</i>			
<i>Proportional</i>	.51	.15	(97)
<i>Mixed</i>	.49	.13	(23)
<i>Majoritarian</i>	.59	.24	(13)

However we look at the table, there is clearly no support for either of our two propositions. On average leader evaluations appear to be as important as party evaluations in presidential elections. In parliamentary elections they do not have even one third of the influence of party evaluations. And even where a majoritarian electoral system is in place, leader evaluations are not even as half as important as party evaluations. Meanwhile, we have almost exactly the same figures for mixed systems as we do for proportional ones. Parliamentary elections remain very different in character from their presidential counterparts.

Mind you we should not run away with the idea that leadership are always relatively important even in presidential elections. There is considerable variation amongst our examples. Leadership evaluations are clearly relatively important in the US where the coefficient for leadership evaluations is, at .93, more than twice as large as the coefficient for party evaluations (.39). At the other end of the spectrum is Mexico where leadership evaluations apparently have no discernible impact on vote choice at all. So even presidential elections are not always personal. The tendency of such elections to focus voters' attentions on the attributes of candidates rather than their parties is a tendency rather than an invariant rule.

One result does though fit what we might have expected. This is that leader evaluations seem to matter more in majoritarian systems than in proportional ones. However we should note that so also do party evaluations. Indeed the difference between the impact of leader and party evaluations is almost the same in majoritarian electoral systems as it is under proportional ones. So the relative impact of leader evaluations appears to be no greater in majoritarian systems than in proportional ones.

Still, perhaps we should bear in mind that we suggested that leader evaluations would matter more for those parties whose leader was a likely contender for the post of Prime Minister, and that the presidentialisation of parliamentary elections might only be in the impact that leader evaluations have on support for larger parties. So in Table 3 we repeat our analysis of parliamentary elections but this time looking only at those two parties occupying first and second place at each election.

**Table 3 Impact of Leader and Party Evaluations for Top Two Parties in Parliamentary Elections by Type of Electoral System**

Type of Electoral System	Mean Partial Regression Coefficient ( $\times 10^2$ ) for		
	Party Evaluations	Leader Evaluations	
Proportional	.68	.26	(34)
Mixed	.69	.24	(10)
Majoritarian	.62	.28	(8)
All	.67	.26	(54)

Leader evaluations do indeed seem to be rather more important here than they did in Table 2. But they still nothing like approach the relative impact that that table indicated they have in presidential elections – not least because party evaluations also matter more in this table than they did in the lower half of Table 2. At most what we can argue from Table 3 is that party evaluations are somewhat relatively more important where a majoritarian electoral system is in place than where a proportional one is used. The difference between the regression coefficient for party and leader evaluations is, at .34, somewhat smaller for majoritarian systems than the equivalent figure for proportional ones (.42).

So we have at most found but limited evidence that the role of leader evaluations in vote choice may be somewhat more important in parliamentary elections where a majoritarian electoral system is in place than where a proportional one is used, even if their relative impact does not approach that found on average in presidential systems. But the fact that even this only becomes apparent when we confine our attention to the two largest parties in a country suggests that perhaps what matters is not the electoral system that is being used but the character of the competition between the parties. If two parties clearly dominate the electoral map such that elections are clearly primarily a choice between two major parties then perhaps leader evaluations will matter more irrespective of the kind of electoral system that is being used.

We might define as a two-party system any polity where the two largest parties each secure at least 30% of the vote while no other party manages to win as much as 20%, a condition that is not only satisfied in all our majoritarian countries apart from Canada but also in four countries with proportional systems (Germany, Hungary, Spain and Portugal) together with one with a mixed system (South Korea). However there is no evidence that leader evaluations matter more in the five non-majoritarian countries with two-party systems. At .76 the mean coefficient for leader evaluations is actually both higher than it is in other non-majoritarian countries (.65) while that for leader evaluations is rather lower (.22 v .27).

We have then cast considerable doubt on the validity of the presidentialisation thesis. But this does not necessarily mean that all of the underlying premises of that thesis are incorrect. It might still be true that leader evaluations matter more in those countries where fewer voters have a strong party identification. And equally it may also be true that leader evaluations matter more of voters see a lot of their leaders on television. It is to these two questions that we now turn.

**Table 4 Correlation between impact of Leader and Party Evaluations and incidence of strong partisanship**

	Correlation between partial regression coefficient And % with strong party identification			
	Party Evaluations	Leader Evaluations	Party-Leader Evaluations	
Presidential Elections	.40	.52	-.10	(27)
Parliamentary Elections	.25	-.07	.28	(122)
<i>Kind of Party</i>				
<i>Toptwo</i>	.07	-.05	.08	(50)
<i>Other</i>	.44	-.10	.49	(72)

First of all we look at how far the impact of leader evaluations on vote varies according to the proportion of people in a country with a strong party identification. Table 4 shows the correlation between the % of people in a country who say they are very or somewhat close to a party and (a) the partial regression coefficient for party evaluations, (b) the partial regression coefficient for leader evaluations, and (c) the difference between (a) and (b). In the case of (a) and (b) a positive coefficient indicates that the evaluation in question has a stronger impact on vote choice the more strong party identifiers there are, while in the case of (c) a positive coefficient indicates that party evaluations are relatively more important than leader evaluations the more party identifiers there are. These coefficients are shown separately for presidential and parliamentary elections and amongst the latter separately for those parties that comprise the top two parties in their country, and the remainder.

As we would expect, party evaluations are indeed more strongly related to vote choice where there is a large proportion of strong party identifiers, although in parliamentary democracies this effects appears confined to smaller parties. But contrary to what we would expect given the arguments of the presidentialisation thesis, leader evaluations are also more strongly related to the vote where there are more strong party identifiers. However, this latter point is not true in parliamentary elections and so here at least there is some suggestion that for smaller parties at least the relative impact of leader evaluations is greater where there are fewer party identifiers, as confirmed by the positive correlations in the third column of Table 4.

So once again we can at best find limited evidence to support the claims of the presidentialisation thesis. Nowhere have we uncovered a strong negative relationship between the incidence of strong party identification and the impact of leadership evaluations on vote choice. We have best some limited evidence that leadership evaluations may be relatively more important in parliamentary elections where there are fewer partisans, but even so this effect seems largely confined to those party leaders who have little prospect of actually becoming prime minister.

**Table 5 Correlation between impact of Leader and Party Evaluations and incidence of heavy television watching**

	Correlation between partial regression coefficient And % heavy TV watching			
	Party Evaluations	Leader Evaluations	Party-Leader Evaluations	
Presidential Elections	-.58	.47	-.77	(23)
Parliamentary Elections	-.17	.26	-.28	(74)
<i>Kind of Party</i>				
<i>Toptwo</i>	-.20	.36	-.33	(34)
<i>Other</i>	-.18	.20	-.24	(40)

What of the second causal process put forward by the presidentialisation thesis? In Table 5 we show the equivalent analysis to that in Table 4 but looking instead at the relationship between our partial regression coefficients and vote in that subset of our countries for which we have information from the World Values Study on the proportion of people who watch television for three or more hours a day. If the presidentialisation thesis is correct we would expect to find a negative correlation between the incidence of heavy television watching and the impact of party evaluations, but a positive one between television watching and leader evaluations. And, as Table 6 shows, this indeed is precisely what we find, both for presidential and parliamentary elections and also for both bigger and smaller parties. It appears that heavy exposure to television is indeed associated with a greater personalisation of the political process.

**Table 6 Regression Analysis of Difference between impact of Leader and Party Evaluations in Parliamentary Elections**

	Beta Coefficients	
	Model 1	Model 2
Toptwo Party	.713 *	.339 *

% strong party id	.410 *	-
% heavy TV watchers	-	-.193
Interaction between		
Toptwo Party and % strong party id	-.422	-
Toptwo Party and Majoritarian System	-.187 *	-.281 *
R <sup>2</sup>	20%	22%

\* significant at the 5% level

However even this apparent evidence in support of the presidentialisation thesis needs to be treated with caution. For further analysis reveals that high levels of television watching are more common in those countries with majoritarian electoral systems, where as saw earlier the relative impact of leader evaluations is rather stronger so far as the principal competitors for power are concerned at least. And indeed if we construct a formal model of the relationship between the incidence of heavy TV watching and the difference between our party and leader coefficients while controlling for the other apparent patterns we have found amongst our parliamentary elections, then we find that the relationship is no longer significant. This can be seen in the second model shown in Table 6, which also includes whether a coefficient is for one of the top two parties in a country and whether it is for one of the top two parties in a majoritarian system. Both of our controls are significant – party evaluations are relatively more important for top two parties in general but less important where a majoritarian system is used thereby affirming our earlier conclusions. But the level of heavy television watching is not. This of course does not disconfirm our finding in respect of presidential elections but it suggests that there are clear limits to the personalisation of politics that may be induced by heavy television exposure.

The first model in table 6 provides a more formal confirmation of our findings in respect of the impact of high levels of strong party identification amongst our full set of parliamentary elections. Again we see that the relative impact of party evaluations is higher in respect of the top two parties in a country while leader evaluations are relatively more important where such a party is competing under a majoritarian electoral system. Meanwhile we find that leader evaluations are relatively less important is there is a low incidence of strong party identification but that this is attenuated (if not significantly so) in the case of top two parties.

## Discussion

We have found very little evidence to support the claim that parliamentary elections have become presidential contests. Leader evaluations clearly have far less influence on the way that people vote in parliamentary elections than they do in presidential contests. True there is some evidence that leader evaluations may be a little more important when voters are deciding whether to vote for one of the two big parties in a majoritarian electoral system than is the case under more proportional systems, but they



still do not approach the level of importance often found in presidential elections. Meanwhile we have found only limited support for two of the causal processes that are thought to be responsible for the presidentialisation of parliamentary elections, viz. that leader evaluations are relatively more important when party identification is low and attention to television is high. It appears that we should concur with Dalton and Wattenburg (2000) that the institutional form of parliamentary elections severely inhibits the degree to which voters are ever likely to use leader evaluations as a basis on which to decide how to vote.

However, we do not want readers simply to come away with the impression that our research shows that leaders have little electoral relevance in countries that hold parliamentary elections. We have in effect been examining claims that voters' evaluations of leaders' personalities have become more important than their impressions of political parties as a cue in the voting decision. But arguably such an expectation is always likely to be a misguided one in a parliamentary democracy. It might make sense in a country like the United States with a weak party system as well as a presidential system to conceive of leaders demonstrating their importance by campaigning separately from their parties. But in a parliamentary democracy a powerful leader can be expected to demonstrate their influence by being able to shape the image of the party that they lead. If this is the case then leaders matter not because of their ability to win votes independently of their party on the basis of their personal appeal but rather because they can have a decisive impact on voters' evaluations of the parties that they lead.

Such a perspective does not deny the possibility of a presidentialisation thesis. But it is one of a rather different kind to that analysed here. If parties' sources of electoral support are determined less strongly now by traditional sociological and ideological cleavages, they may well have more incentive and indeed opportunity to change the image that they portray in the hope of increasing their support (Kircheimer, 1966; Epstein, 1967). Meanwhile as the decline of traditional social ties brings about a decline in the role of the mass party and the dominance of television in election campaigns makes national election campaigns centred around leaders the most important part of any party's campaign, so leaders may well find themselves better able to influence what the electoral strategy and appeal of their party should be (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Scarrow, Webb and Farrell, 2000). If these suppositions are correct, then amongst parliamentary democracies at least presidentialisation may take the form of more powerful leaders better able to shape and reshape the images of their parties in their own likeness rather than the advent of leaders whose appeal is different and distinct from that of their parties.

But testing such a thesis would require a very different approach to that adopted here. First we would need to examine whether party leaders have become more powerful in shaping the electoral strategy of their parties. For that there does indeed appear to be some evidence (Katz and Mair, 1995; Farrell and Webb, 2000; Scarrow, Webb and Farrell, 2000). And second we would need to examine whether the images that voters have of leaders have in fact become more similar to those that they have of parties. So far as we are aware this second step has not been taken, and indeed we suspect that in most if not all countries it is unlikely that the necessary data exist to do so.

## **Conclusion**

This paper casts severe doubt on claims that evaluations of leaders are now as important as evaluations of parties in voters' electoral calculus in parliamentary democracies. It even finds that there is only limited evidence that this is true of those parliamentary democracies that have a majoritarian electoral system. In parliamentary democracies at least, voters' evaluations of leaders have not as yet at least become a substitute for their evaluations of parties in deciding how to vote. It may be possible to become president simply by persuading voters to like yourself and ignore your party, but becoming prime minister still primarily involves persuading voters to like your political allies rather than just yourself

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