Conservative Party Leaders Are More ‘Competent’ and Left Party Leaders Have More ‘Character’? The Role of Partisan Stereotypes and Evaluations of Party Leaders on Vote Choice


Amanda Bittner, Memorial University
abittner@mun.ca

Introduction

Both campaign organizers and the media appear to agree that voters’ perceptions of party leaders have an important impact on the vote: substantial effort is made to ensure that leaders look good, that they speak well, and that they are up in the polls. Media reports during election campaigns focus on the horserace and how leaders are perceived in the public eye. In contrast, the academic literature is much more divided. Some suggest that leaders play an important role in the vote calculus, while others argue that in comparison to other factors (such as partisanship and the economy) perceptions of leaders have only a minimal effect.

There is also substantial disagreement about how it is that voters actually evaluate candidates in the first place. Scholars have made very different conclusions about the types of factors that influence voters’ evaluations of leaders. Existing studies point to divergent sets of factors, including voter demographics (Cutler 2002), partisanship and ideology (Bartels 2002; Graetz and McAllister 1987), and policy/issue related factors (Rusk and Weisberg 1972; Weisberg and Rusk 1970).

In addition to these “background” factors, some scholars have noted that the party label itself provides cues to voters when they lack information, and that even when other types of information are available, voters continue to rely upon a “partisan stereotype” in inferring candidates’ issue positions. Recent research (Hayes 2005) suggests that the impact of the partisan stereotype extends beyond issue positions to impressions of candidates’ personality traits as well. Individuals’ characteristics are judged in light of a partisan stereotype, as Democrats are perceived to be more compassionate and empathetic, while Republicans are considered to be tougher and stronger leaders. While these findings are specific to the United States, it is reasonable to expect that the existence and reliance upon a partisan stereotype extends to candidate evaluation beyond US borders. Drawing from comparative party systems literature, it is conceivable that perceptions of party leaders’ personalities are grounded in more universal perceptions of fundamental political values (such as attitudes towards authority) and linked to the positioning and competition of parties within party systems.

What is the effect of leader evaluations on vote choice? Do voters outside of the American context perceive leaders through a partisan lens? If so, does the reliance upon a partisan stereotype have an effect on vote choice? These are the questions that guide this research project.

Problematically, the literature on party leaders is diverse and non-cumulative. Existing studies have been based primarily upon the analysis of only a single election in a single country, and scholars have relied upon different survey questions in varying formats to inform their conclusions. As a result, the literature on the evaluation of party leaders is inconclusive, both in terms of sources and effects of leader evaluations. In order to move forward, what is required is a larger study, comparative across both time and space.

This paper incorporates data from 35 election studies across seven countries with varying institutional environments: Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States. By pooling these data and examining the impact of leaders on a larger (comparative) basis, this study takes both a broad and in-depth look at evaluations of party leaders. The results suggest that leaders have a discernible and important impact on the vote, and that a partisan stereotype does indeed exist outside of the United States:
leaders of Conservative Parties are perceived to be more “competent,” possessing traits such as strength of leadership, while leaders of Left Parties are perceived to have more “character,” seen to be more trustworthy and compassionate. Furthermore, it appears that the impact and importance of specific leaders’ traits is directly linked to the nature of these cross-national partisan stereotypes.

Background

Cues and Stereotypic Thinking

In one of the earliest studies of voting behaviour, Berelson et al. (1954) observed the lack of interest and knowledge among the majority of voters, and found that both were closely associated with education—that is, that the more educated tended to be more interested in and more knowledgeable about politics (1954:25). These findings were not only confirmed, but also reinforced in Converse’s (1964) seminal work, in which he found that the mass public had little understanding of basic political concepts (e.g. left and right dimensions), and that the political ideas that voters did possess lacked constraint or consistency both horizontally (across ideas) and longitudinally (over time). The implications of these findings were devastating for notions of democracy which expected individuals to have some basic understanding of politics in order to be able to articulate their own interests: what is the point of democracy if citizens lack coherent attitudes and beliefs?

Political scientists’ discussions of citizens’ and voters’ processes of reasoning rely heavily on two main arguments or factors affecting reasoning. The first is drawn from cognitive psychology, and suggests that “people have well-defined cognitive limits” (Lau and Sears 1986). Essentially, people do not have a very large active memory, and they generally focus their attention narrowly in many aspects of the environments they are in. This suggests that even if individuals were to make concerted efforts to incorporate more information into their considerations of political events and issues, they may not ever be able to achieve the levels of information that would satisfy traditional views of democratic requirements. Thus it is not simply the case that individuals aren’t trying hard enough, but it may be the case that it is not possible to achieve high levels of knowledge.

The second main factor or consideration, drawn from economic and social science literature, is the notion that people are rational individuals who seek to maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs (Downs 1957). Jeffery Mondak summarizes this perspective nicely, suggesting that “correct decisions are preferable, but precision brings inefficiency; the citizen can form reliable judgments while simultaneously conserving valuable cognitive resources” (Mondak 1993). Thus regardless of whether or not citizens are capable of incorporating more information into their decisions, it is probably not rational to focus heavily on information gathering. It is more rational to try to come to a conclusion based on as little information (and as little effort) as possible.

It is out of these two literatures that political scientists have come to some understanding of how voters cope with their cognitive limits, as well as the necessities of efficiency, to make reasoned decisions. Scholars have turned to concepts developed in cognitive psychology with regards to the storage and retrieval of information. Pamela Conover and Stanley Feldman (1989) suggest that because of their limited capabilities of dealing with information, people use information that is already stored to arrive at their decisions. Indeed, many scholars suggest that individuals are able to make use of information shortcuts, or heuristics, to come to reasoned decisions (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Lau and Redlawsk 1997).

Among the many heuristics that individuals may make use of (see Lau 2003 for a detailed description of different types of heuristics), two are particularly pertinent in the evaluation of party leaders. First is the application of partisan and ideological schemata—which suggests that individuals will categorize candidates with whom they are relatively unfamiliar according to political schemata, and will assume that new information is consistent with existing schemata, and then will apply a “category-based affect” (Lau 2003). Second, individuals may also apply person stereotypes, in which factors such as age, gender, race, and the way that a person looks will inform the individual’s impression of the candidates. Thus, “since women are traditionally seen as more compassionate than men, women candidates are often seen to be more competent on, or more concerned with, compassion issues such as helping the poor or advocating for children” (McDermott 1998).

Rahn suggests that “our notions about what groups are like strongly influence how we appraise individual members of these groups” (1993), and that “in partisan elections, the most powerful cue provided by the
political environment is the candidate’s membership in a particular political party. Even if voters know nothing else about a candidate, the ballot provides them with one important piece of information” (1993). The party label, therefore, provides information to voters that will assist in the decision-making process. This partisan stereotype is different from the effect of the voter’s own partisanship. Conover and Feldman (1989) note that voters will rely upon their own partisanship to make inferences about candidates’ positions as well. This projection effect occurs in extremely low information settings, where voters will project their own issue positions (and/or partisanship) onto their preferred candidate.

The effect of the partisan stereotype is different from a projection effect, in that the label of the candidate provides information to the voter, information that the voter then uses to ascribe issue positions to that candidate. Thus the idea is that in low-information settings, that is, where voters lack the information that would allow them to wade through competing candidates’ issue positions and platforms in order to decide who to vote for, they will rely upon readily available cues (including the party label of the candidate) in order to be able to assign issue positions and make decisions (Conover and Feldman 1989; McDermott 1997, 1998, 2005; Kinder 1978; Rahn 1993).

What are the Stereotypes About Parties?

Rahn suggests that the use of partisan stereotypes may be a fairly reliable way to “simplify the political environment” (1993), because parties differ in what are largely predictable ways. Hayes notes that party leaders are perceived to have strengths in certain personality traits in the American context (Hayes 2005), and puts forth a theory of “trait ownership,” much like theories of “issue ownership” that have emerged in voting behaviour literature both inside and outside the United States (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989). The idea is that certain executive characteristics have policy content, and much as parties tend to “own” issues, their party leaders tend to “own” related traits. Petrocik describes the division of issue ownership in the United States:

Democrats are seen as better able to handle welfare problems. Perceptions of the parties on social issues (e.g. crime and protecting moral values) favor the GOP. The data also document the GOP’s hold on foreign policy and defense through the late 1980s. Opinions were mixed on economic matters, but were generally a GOP asset (by an average of about 13 points). Government spending, inflation, and taxation were also Republican issues (Petrocik 1996).

Because parties have an advantage in their issue areas, candidates will emphasize their party’s issues (Petrocik 1996; Petrocik et al. 2003; Sides 2006; Simon 2002), and because of the heavy focus on leaders in the media (Gidengil and Everitt 2000; Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996), issue ownership is translated into the ownership of related personality traits. Unless shown otherwise, “voters will usually assume that a Democratic candidate is more liberal than conservative, that he/she favors social programs over defense programs, while Republicans are, for the most part, defense “hawks” who support lower taxes and smaller government” (McDermott 1998). Brought to the level of specific personality traits, “Republicans appear to own leadership and morality, while Democrats own compassion and empathy” (Hayes 2005).

These perceptions about the types of characteristics leaders ought to possess may have their origins in basic political attitudes. John Ray notes that Conservatives “…believe that man is not naturally good, are superstitious, and prefer hierarchical social structures. They think highly of order, authority, and duty” (1973). Thus, that Conservative leaders are perceived in greater numbers to possess traits related to order, authority, and duty suggests something about the way that individuals link parties to basic values and attitudes. In The Authoritarian Personality, Adorno and his colleagues note the susceptibility of certain types of personalities towards authoritarian values. They suggest that “…it will be granted that opinions, attitudes, and values depend on human needs, and since personality is essentially an organization of needs, then personality may be regarded as a determinante of ideological preference” (Adorno et al. 1950, emphasis in original). While Adorno et al. do not specifically address the nature of our evaluations of political party leaders, their observation does point to an important link that can be drawn between individual political views and the way that we perceive party leaders—in particular, the way that we feel leaders should be.
Right of centre parties, therefore, also ought to be seen as more conservative than liberal, and more supportive of lower taxes and smaller government. Taking this argument one step further, then, we ought to expect right of centre party leaders to have strengths in leadership and morality, while left of centre leaders should possess traits like compassion and empathy. There is no reason to believe that the partisan stereotype should apply only in the American context. Parties play up their strengths in election campaigns around the world, and thus a similar effect ought to exist across national boundaries. Finally, we ought to expect that the less sophisticated voters should evaluate leaders according to the partisan stereotypes the most: “since this information is readily available while other political information is costly, we would expect voters in low information conditions to use these cues when voting” (McDermott 1998).

Why Should We Focus on Leaders?

Dating from the earliest years (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1960), most studies of voting behaviour have pointed to the critical role played by long-term forces: party identification, ideological beliefs, and the socio-economic or demographic characteristics of voters. Authors suggest that who we are as people—characteristics intrinsic to how we grew up and how we were socialized—affects how we vote. Thus, for example, gender affects vote choice and issue attitudes (Almond and Verba 1963; Gidengil et al. 2003; Inglehart and Norris 2000); as does partisanship (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002); and other socio-demographics (Bartels 1996; Cutler 2002).

While the importance of stable and long-term forces is fundamental to understanding voting behaviour, a comprehensive look at voters’ decisions must also consider “short-term” forces. Stokes, Campbell and Miller (1958) note that short-term fluctuations in vote choice and preferences cannot be accounted for by long-standing predispositions: we do not usually switch our sex between elections, nor do we suddenly have a different ethnic background, therefore these things can’t really explain why our preferences change. Partisanship, while it moves a little bit, is a fairly static and long-term identification as well (Green et al. 2002; Johnston 2006). Stokes and his colleagues (1958) suggest that candidates and issues can account for change where factors such as partisanship and gender cannot.

Stokes (1966) later echoes these earlier comments, suggesting that party identification is not sufficient to explain shifts in vote choice, because it does not really change, while the evaluation of leaders is constantly shifting, and thus has greater potential for explaining fluctuations in the vote. Miller and Shanks (1996) support these arguments for the inclusion of short-term forces in vote models with their updated version of Campbell et al.’s (1960) “funnel of causality,” the block recursive model, in which both long-term and short-term forces have their proper places in models of vote choice. The block recursive model they advance organizes explanatory variables into a series of themes (blocks). These themes are organized and entered into vote models in order from most removed from the vote (demographics) to most proximal to the vote (evaluations of party leaders). The idea is that by entering groups of variables in their proper order, we can allocate an appropriate role to variables for both their direct and indirect effects on the vote. Miller and Shanks put leaders evaluations in the final block of their model of vote choice.

While all of these observations point to reasons why we ought to include evaluations of leaders in vote models, they do not necessarily explain how much evaluations of leaders affect the vote, or why voters focus on leaders in the first place. One often-cited reason for the importance of leaders in vote choice is the media focus on party leaders and the “horserace” during election campaigns. A number of scholars have observed that media coverage of election campaigns tends to prime leaders, which has the effect of encouraging voters to base their attitudes more heavily on leaders than other factors (Gidengil et al. 2000; Gidengil and Dobrzynska 2003; Mendelsohn 1993, 1994, 1996). The idea is that since the media focus so heavily on leaders’ personalities—what they are doing, saying, and where they are in the “race”—it is natural that as consumers of the media, voters are also likely to focus heavily on party leaders when making their choice at the ballot box.

In addition to the effect of media priming, it has also been suggested that deciding how we feel about others is a relatively “easy” process. People evaluate others regularly in everyday life: Cottrell et al. (2006:2) suggest that “humans, as discriminately social creatures, make frequent judgments about others’ suitability for interdependent social relations.” They suggest that as individuals, we only have so much time, and cannot be friends with everybody; therefore we must make judgments as to whether or not we think others are worth our
reflecting a different category or topic, with link “schema,” can be likened to a series of hierarchical storage cabinets in our minds, each cabinet essentially stored in our minds in what are known as “schemata” which our mind stores and processes information. Cognitive psychology research suggests that information is general “categorical thinking” on the part of individuals. That is, in order to make the world ordered, meaningful, and Bodenhausen traits in others, as part of a larger study of the human psyche and our perceptions of our environment have spent years assessing personality traits of individuals, of leaders, and how as a society we perceive those evaluations affect vote choice. Furthermore, a look at the evaluations of actual traits rather than feeling thermometers may help to clarify the role of leaders in elections, since no matter how voters are using leaders as a “shortcut” to help them make the vote choice. Less informed voters, who lack the knowledge or political sophistication required to make voting decisions based on policy, decide whether or not they like the party’s leader, and vote for the party largely on that basis. This mirrors the notion put forth by Sniderman et al. (1991), who suggest that people can figure out what they oppose or support if they can simplify their options, and that among the less educated, affect (or how you feel towards something or someone) plays a significant role in explaining policy preferences. Essentially, you may not know a lot about a candidate, but with relative ease you can decide whether or not you like him or her, and you can therefore simplify your vote choice by acting on that feeling.

Leaders’ Traits

The bulk of the discussion of the impact of leaders to date has focused on the impact of overall attitudes towards leaders on election outcomes: essentially, the net effect of “feeling thermometers” on vote choice. And while some scholars have looked at the role of traits themselves (Bartels 2002; Bean 1980, 1993; Gidengil et al. 2006; Johnston 2002; Johnston et al. 1992), a more systematic assessment of the role of personality traits is necessary in order to really understand both how people evaluate leaders’ personalities, and how those evaluations affect vote choice. Furthermore, a look at the evaluations of actual traits rather than feeling thermometers may help to clarify the role of leaders in elections, since not only is the thermometer a very general measure, it also may not be the most reliable source of information about voters’ evaluations of leaders. As Johnston notes, the feeling thermometer “...carries too much nonpersonality freight. Even with party identification and the like controlled, it is still infused with party, group and policy judgments...” (2002: 174). By focusing solely on traits, we may get a more precise picture of what voters think about when they evaluate leaders and how those evaluations affect vote choice. Furthermore, we can gain greater insight into which traits matter most—is it traits relating to intelligence and strength of leadership or honesty and trustworthiness?

There is a rich literature on “person perception” in cognitive and political psychology. Scholars in these fields have spent years assessing personality traits of individuals, of leaders, and how as a society we perceive those traits in others, as part of a larger study of the human psyche and our perceptions of our environment. MacRae and Bodenhausen (2000) suggest that the perception of personality traits in others takes place as a part of general “categorical thinking” on the part of individuals. That is, in order to make the world ordered, meaningful, and predictable, we think categorically about others. Much of this is subconscious, and the result of the way in which our mind stores and processes information. Cognitive psychology research suggests that information is stored in our minds in what are known as “schemata” (Lau and Sears 1986). Schemata, the plural form of “schema,” can be likened to a series of hierarchical storage cabinets in our minds, each cabinet essentially reflecting a different category or topic, with links in between categories.
Each schema in the mind affects the way in which we gather new information, as well as how we call up old information (Lodge and Hamill 1986). Scholars have suggested that schemata play an important role in how we perceive and interact with the world: they provide categories for labeling people, events, and places, they influence what information gets both stored in and recalled from memory, and they allow us to integrate what we already know into our interpretations of new circumstances where we lack a complete picture—essentially, in new situations, they allow us to “fill in the blanks” with information we already have (Conover and Feldman 1989; Lodge and Hamill 1986).

It has been suggested that the process of evaluating political candidates and party leaders fits within the schemata framework. Kinder et al. (1980) suggest that voters agree on the traits that an ideal president should possess. They argue that voters then use this “presidential prototype” or schema as a shortcut to decision-making. The idea is that voters apply existing categories (the prototype) to the leadership candidates and evaluate the candidates based on the traits that an ideal candidate should possess. It is as if the voter opens up his/her filing cabinet, takes out the file labeled “presidential prototype” and checks to see whether the candidate’s traits match the traits inside the file. A comparison is made between the individual candidates running in the election and the ideal.

In the Canadian context, Brown et al. (1988) assess the extent to which the concept of schemata applies to the way Canadian voters evaluated the traits possessed by party leaders during the 1984 Federal election. They find that schemata or prototypes of leaders get used repeatedly, as voters consider the same types of factors when evaluating all of the leaders. This finding suggests that looking more closely at the role of trait evaluations on vote choice is a useful exercise, as it would allow us to get a deeper insight into the way in which voters think “categorically” about leaders. Rather than just looking at overall feelings towards a leader, by looking at traits we might be able to gain a deeper understanding of how people evaluate leaders.

Early in the study of person perception and leadership candidates, Kinder et al. (1980) suggested that the presidential prototype consists of two main types of qualities: personality and performance. Since this time, a number of scholars have expended a substantial amount of time to determine the extent to which these categories or dimensions of traits really are the dimensions that voters think about, or whether traits more realistically fit into other, different, dimensions. Over the years, scholars have suggested that voters evaluate traits in categories numbering anywhere from two to twelve (see, for example, Bean 1993; Bean and Mughan 1989; Brettschneider and Gabriel 2002; Brown et al. 1988; Glass 1985; Johnston 2002; Kinder 1983, 1986; Kinder et al. 1980; Miller et al. 1986; Stewart and Clarke 1992), with the majority suggesting that traits fall into some combination of the following four main categories: integrity; competence; leadership; and empathy.

More recently, cross-national, over-time examination of trait evaluations in election studies suggests that it makes the most sense to think about traits as falling within two main “umbrella” dimensions: competence and character (see Bittner 2008, for a more complete review of the literature and detailed data analysis). A typology based on these two dimensions refines the existing literature: the competence dimension broadly includes traits falling in both the “leadership” and “competence” dimensions listed above, and the character dimension includes traits which had previously been thought to belong in both the “integrity” and “empathy” dimensions. The labels themselves do not signify substantively different understandings of the way in which voters perceive party leaders: they represent a collapsing of the four previous dimensions into two, based on patterns and correlations in the evaluations of party leaders of 35 different election studies.1 Because the dimensions themselves do not change, even if the specific traits within them might differ slightly from year to year, looking at traits in this way allows us to consider evaluations of leaders’ character and competence, regardless of the

1 Organizing and conceptualizing traits into overarching dimensions is particularly valuable in that it facilitates longitudinal assessment of the evaluation of leaders’ traits where it otherwise would not be possible. One of the main difficulties with assessing voters’ evaluations of leader traits over time is the extent to which surveys change over time. These changes are not a characteristic of only Canadian Election Studies, but of all election studies. Question formats change, the types of traits that respondents are asked to evaluate change, and (obviously) leaders change, which makes isolating and examining patterns in evaluations a real challenge. While previous research suggests that question format does have an effect on our understanding of the effect of trait evaluations (Bittner 2007a), these effects are not so substantial to preclude longitudinal analysis of traits even with the changes in question format over time.
changes that have taken place in the question format. This will allow us to gain a better understanding of evaluations and the impacts of those evaluations.

How Much Do Evaluations of Leaders Affect Vote Choice?
Exactly what kind of impact leaders have on vote choice is not clear. The literature is, as noted earlier, limited, and where scholars have attempted to answer this question, conclusions are mixed. Blais et al. (2002) noted that leaders played a crucial role in vote choice for 21% of voters in the 2000 Canadian election, but suggest at the same time that leaders had a small net impact on the vote. Johnston et al. (1992) assess the role of traits in the 1988 Canadian election, and suggest that perceptions of competence may have played a pivotal role in the election.

Later, Johnston (2002) examines the impact of traits in Canada and finds that the net effects on the vote range anywhere from 0-2%, depending on the election. Bartels (2002) looks at the effect of leaders’ traits in American elections from 1980 to 2000, and finds that the net impact of leaders traits on the vote varies by election, and ranges from approximately 0.5% to 3.5%. In an earlier piece, Stokes (1966) suggested that leadership provides the main source of dynamism in elections, and that the impact of candidates led to a net partisan advantage ranging anywhere from 2% to 8%.

Bartle and Crewe note in the British context that the effect of personal traits was small. They suggest that "leadership effects may well matter, but not by very much and not very often" (2002:93). Bean and Mughan (1989), however, argue that the variation in distribution of leaders’ traits can affect the balance of the party vote. They suggest that traits may have resulted in the “difference between victory and defeat” for the Australian Labor party in 1987. Their research found that traits gave a net 5.8% vote advantage to the British Conservatives and a net 3.7% advantage to Labor in Australia. Taken as a whole, the results of these analyses indicate that leaders’ personality traits can have an impact anywhere from 0 to 8%, and that the net impact on the electoral result varies depending on the importance of traits in the given election, as well as the distribution of perceptions of leaders’ traits in that year: a leader may have been perceived way ahead of the group on a particular trait, but if voters are focusing mainly on an issue during the election, the leader’s advantage on that trait may not have an impact at all. On the other hand, if traits are really important in a given election, even the slightest perceived advantage can translate into votes.

This brings us to the question of the relative importance of traits compared to other factors affecting vote choice. In the French context, Pierce (1995) suggests that the leader is one factor among many, and downplays the importance of leaders. Winham and Cunningham (1970) find in the Canadian context that leader preferences and evaluations had a greater impact on vote choice among voters not identifying with a particular party. In contrast, they find that partisans generally tend to vote for their party, regardless of their evaluations of the party leaders. Bean (1993) makes similar findings, suggesting that leader effects are small compared to partisanship and other factors, but argues that in a close race, leader effects can be decisive.

In contrast to those claiming that leaders usually do not have a large impact, Banducci and Karp (2000) find that evaluations affect vote choice, even when other factors are controlled for. Glass looks at US elections, and his findings take the importance of leaders one step further. He states, “in short, looking at all voters, personal attributes had as large or a larger impact than policies on their vote in five out of seven elections” (1985: 530). It seems as though leaders may have an important role in influencing vote choice, even relative to other “decisive” factors like partisanship, issue attitudes, and ideological views. Stewart and Clarke (1992) argue that in fact, leaders are more important than they are being given credit for.

Thus we are left with three key questions: what is the effect of leader evaluations on vote choice? Do voters outside of the American context perceive leaders through a partisan lens? If so, does the reliance upon a partisan stereotype have an effect on vote choice? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Method
To better understand the role of leaders in elections, a comparative analysis is necessary. I argue that in large part, the reason for the lack of agreement in the literature is the nature of the studies that have been conducted...
to date—they have largely been based on single elections, and studies often examine distinct survey questions. I suggest that by looking at a common set of variables across countries and over time, we will get more conclusive evidence about the origins of evaluations of leaders’ traits and the impact of those perceptions on elections.

This analysis is based on 35 election studies from a total of seven countries with useable closed-ended questions about leaders’ traits. Concatenating these studies results in a dataset with over 186,000 respondents, and over 400 variables all coded in a similar format. Crucial variables to this analysis include evaluations of leaders’ traits, and in addition to trait evaluations, the dataset incorporates variables such as party and leader thermometers, demographic variables, attitudes towards issues, vote choice, partisanship, media exposure, and political sophistication.

In the first phase of the analysis, traits acted as the independent variable, in order to determine the existence of a partisan stereotype in the evaluation of leaders’ traits. A series of regression analyses were conducted in order to determine the impact of the party label on evaluations of leaders’ character and competence. The next step was to focus on the impact of leaders’ traits, thus traits moved from being the dependent variables to independent variables. Vote choice was regressed on a number of factors, including leaders traits, in order to assess the impact of traits. Finally, the impact of political sophistication was assessed, in order to determine the extent to which voters with lower levels of sophistication were more likely to use the partisan stereotype, as well as the impact of leaders for voters based on their level of political sophistication. The following section assesses the results of the analyses.

Results

The data indicate that indeed, individuals do perceive leaders through a partisan lens, and that this partisan stereotype is not merely an American phenomenon. Voters perceive the leaders of Conservative and Left parties as having party-specific personality strengths, and these perceptions are based solely on the party label of the leader. Conservative leaders are rated more positively on the Competence dimension, while Left party leaders are rated more positively on the Character dimension. This partisan stereotype exists even when we control for the partisanship of the voter, thus it is not simply a projection effect where those feeling an affinity to the Left party imagine that their leaders must display these characteristics. Partisans of different parties see the leaders in the same stereotypic way.

Conservative leaders are more “competent,” Left leaders have more “character”

The data indicate that indeed, individuals do see party leaders based on a partisan stereotype. Leaders of Left parties are rated more highly on the character dimension, and leaders of Conservative parties are rated more highly on the competence dimension. Figure 1 illustrates this trend, through the use of box plots: the left hand side of the figure depicts evaluations of competence of the leaders of the three main party types, while the right side depicts evaluations of character. The line in the middle of each box represents the median evaluation of the leaders’ competence or character.

<Figure 1 about here>


3 For a complete list of the original question wording of all variables included in the analyses, see Bittner (2008). All trait evaluations were recoded on a common 0-1 scale with evaluations separated by leader (with a value of 1 reflecting the most positive evaluation of a given leader on the trait). Similar traits, regardless of original question wording, were given the same label, in order to permit large-scale analysis. To build the dataset, separate questions from separate studies that were considered to have the same root (as seen in Table 2.4) were coded under the same trait. For example, “strong leadership” and “leadership” were both recoded as “leadership” even though the question wording was slightly different in the two studies. In this fashion, it was possible to merge all of the separate studies together, in order to have many respondents evaluating leaders on the “same” traits. This led to a total of 55 separate traits to be analyzed.
As the figure makes clear, there are distinct differences in how respondents perceive leaders on the two dimensions. While the lines display medians, the mean evaluations of leaders on the two dimensions tell the same story. The average competence rating is 0.584 for Conservative leaders, 0.572 for Centre-Left leaders, and 0.534 for Left leaders. The average character rating is 0.537 for Conservative leaders, 0.542 for Centre-Left leaders, and 0.644 for Left leaders.

Table 1 expands on the trends in Figure 1. The Table depicts the results of a stacked regression analysis, in which evaluations of the character and competence of leaders of the three main party types were regressed on dummy variables indicating the party label of the leader.

The coefficients are statistically significant, and illustrate that Conservative leaders are rated slightly more negatively than Centre-Left leaders on the Character dimension, while Left leaders are rated substantially more positively than Centre-Left leaders on this same dimension. At the same time, Conservative leaders are rated more positively on the Competence dimension, and Left leaders are rated more negatively than Centre-Left leaders on this dimension.

Furthermore, analysis of the traits within dimensions suggests that these relationships are not simply inflated by perceptions of leaders on a particular trait. Table 2 lists the results of T-Tests performed to determine the difference in means between leaders on the ten most frequently asked personality traits. All coefficients are statistically significant with the exception of one, and indicate that not only do voters assess leaders within a partisan stereotype on dimensions as a whole, but that they do so with regards to specific traits as well.

Each column in the table represents a comparison between leaders of two of the three party types. The third column, which compares evaluations of Conservative leaders with evaluations of Left leaders, displays perceptions of the stereotypes most clearly. That is, Conservative leaders score substantially higher than Left leaders on the traits leadership, knowledgeable, intelligent, inspiring, and arrogant, while Left leaders are rated more positively than Conservative leaders on the traits cares, honest, compassionate, trustworthy, and moral. Evaluations of Centre-Left leaders generally fall somewhere in between the two, where Left leaders still rank more highly on character traits, and Conservative leaders rank more highly on some competence traits, but not all of them.  

That Left leaders are perceived more positively on the character dimension and Conservative leaders are perceived more positively on the competence dimension is not simply a pattern of one or two elections in one or two countries. Indeed, generally speaking, where respondents were asked to evaluate leaders from all three party types, the pattern holds for nearly all elections, as evidenced by Figures 2 and 3. These Figures depict the ratings of leaders of the three major parties, in comparison to the grand mean for ratings of the leaders of all the parties included in each election study.

This result might provide some insight as to the lack of historical “success” of centre-parties, as noted by Blais (2005). If voters’ evaluations of party leaders do play an important role in the electoral success of a party, then Centre parties might be at a disadvantage on all fronts—Party leaders on either side appear to be evaluated more positively on some trait, leaving the Centre Party with a lack of overwhelmingly supportive evaluations of its leadership. This is something that should be studied in greater detail in the future.
When Left leaders are not included in the choice set, the pattern is not quite as stark. Indeed, as Figures 4 and 5 illustrate, the leaders of the Conservative and Centre-Left parties are more closely matched in their likelihood to be perceived more positively than other leaders on both dimensions. This applies even when leaders of Left parties form part of the choice set in the election but respondents in the election study are not asked to evaluate them: in the 1968 Canadian election, respondents were not asked to evaluate the competing leader of the New Democrat Party (a Left party), and in that election respondents perceived the Liberal (Centre-Left) Pierre Trudeau more positively on the competence dimension, and the Conservative Robert Stanfield more positively on the character dimension. It appears that the act of comparison might make a difference in activating respondents’ perceptions of the partisan stereotype.

<Figures 4 and 5 about here>

The act of comparison is an explicit part of the activation of cues, according to Conover (1981). She suggests that voters will look at a field of candidates and note the obvious differences between them, including differences of partisanship. She states: “contextual factors such as the minority status of one candidate as compared to others—be it ideological, partisan, racial, or sexual in nature—may encourage voters to apply the stereotype associated with the minority group to the individual…the "conservative label", for example, should be a more salient cue in a field of candidates in which one is a conservative and the rest are moderates and liberals” (1981: 433).

These findings support others who suggest that the act of comparison is key. Rahn et al. (1990) run their candidate models in two ways: first, separately for each candidate; and second, using comparative scores for judgments. They find that the comparative model is more accurate and suggest that “the entire judgmental process appears to be comparative” (1990: 119). While Rahn et al.’s use of a comparative measure of evaluations to understand voter perceptions is reasonable in the American two-party system, in a multi-party system it makes more sense to code traits in relation to one leader at a time, as I have done in this study.

It is not entirely clear what exactly is activating this partisan stereotype. What is clear, however, is that this partisan stereotype is not simply partisanship by another name. In fact, when we control for the partisanship of the voter, the extent to which individuals perceive leaders within the partisan stereotype framework becomes even more evident. Table 3 lists the results of a stacked regression analysis, in which evaluations of character and competence of the three main party leaders were regressed on a series of “partisan” dummy variables. A dummy variable was created for the party label of each leader, and this variable was interacted with dummy variables for the partisanship of the voter. There are five groups of partisans—Centre-Left, Conservative, Left, Non-Partisans (those claiming to be either Independents or to have no partisan affiliation), and Partisans of “Other” Parties. The coefficients in the table represent the ratings of the leaders of each of the three main party types, among groups of partisans.

First, there is an overwhelming effect of individual-level partisanship. That is, all partisans view the leader of their own party most positively. Individuals identifying with a Conservative party view Conservative leaders most positively on both dimensions, those claiming an affiliation with a Centre-Left party rate Centre-Left leaders most positively on both dimensions, and Left partisans perceive their own party leaders most positively on both dimensions. After their own leader, however, partisans of the three main parties rate Conservative leaders more highly on competence, and Left leaders more highly on character. So while voters still perceive the leader of their own party most positively, they rate the remaining leaders according to the partisan stereotype.

Among both non-partisans and “other” partisans, perceptions of leaders follow the stereotype most clearly. Non-partisans rate Left leaders more positively on the Character dimension, and Conservative leaders more positively on the Competence dimension. Partisans of other parties do the same. That this dynamic exists among non-partisans and “other partisans” provides the greatest indication that voters really do perceive leaders according to a partisan stereotype, and that this is not simply about voters perceiving the leaders of their own parties in a positive light. Furthermore, these models include sampling weights and fixed effects in
order to ensure that no one study is skewing the results. The results of this analysis tell us that generally speaking, voters believe that Conservative leaders are the most competent, and that Left leaders have the most character.

**Vote Models: The Relative Importance of Traits in Voting for Three Main Parties**

Scholarship thus far is inconclusive as to the relative effect of leader evaluations on vote choice, and the question of how much leaders affect electoral outcomes once partisanship, issue attitudes, and socio-demographic variables are accounted for is still up in the air. The analyses presented in this paper lead to two main conclusions: first, that leaders’ traits do affect the vote calculus, and character has a weightier impact than competence; and second, that evaluations of party leaders have a discernible effect on the outcome of elections.

To gauge the impact of leaders’ traits on vote choice, it was necessary to run analyses with vote choice as the dependent variable, and traits (among other explanatory factors) as independent variables. I ran standard logit models, multinomial logit models, and stacked logit models, with different “combinations” of party vote in the dependent variable, as a fact-finding mission. A number of interesting findings emerged from these preliminary analyses. Most importantly, while the sizes of coefficients differed across models, the general patterns (which I will describe in a moment) were about the same, suggesting that the conclusions I draw from this cross-national dataset are about right. The model I am most comfortable with is a logit model where the dependent variable coded as 0/1: where vote for the party in question is 1 and vote for any other party is coded as 0. I ran three main analyses with vote for the three main party types as dependent variables, looking at vote choice for the Conservative Party/Other; Centre-Left Party/Other; and Left Party/Other.

This model is preferable to a multinomial logit model because of the drastically reduced sample size in the MNL setup: all those not voting for one of the parties embedded in the dependent variable (either Conservative, Centre-Left, or Left) are dropped from the analysis, and therefore the corresponding number of empty cells was substantially higher in the MNL setup. Furthermore, having a setup with all of the parties across all of the countries in the model gets messy and makes less sense, since no voter faced all of those choices when they went to the ballot box. Finally, the sizes of traits coefficients were largest in the MNL setup (whether two parties or three parties made up the DV), perhaps because of the nature of the choice between specific parties. The coefficients in the three logit models were smaller, thus providing a more conservative estimate of the impact of leaders. I prefer to understate rather than overstate the impact of traits. The estimations are depicted in Tables 4 through 6, respectively.

<Table 4 about here>

The model is based on the Miller and Shanks (1996) update of the “funnel of causality.” While the results presented in Tables 4 through 6 are not really from a pure block recursive model, sets of variables were added to the logistical model in blocks, from the most long-term to most short-term forces, to control for prior variables and to illustrate the effects of the more proximal variables. Thus column 1 lists coefficients and standard errors for socio-demographic variables and partisanship, column 2 incorporates the addition of ideological self-placements and issue-attitudes, column 3 includes evaluations of the leader of the party in question, column 4 includes evaluations of a second party leader, and column 5 includes evaluations of the third party leader. The models include leader evaluations of only the three most prevalent party types, mainly because of the drastic reduction in sample size if we incorporate any additional leaders into the model.

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6 For details about sampling weights, see Bittner (2008).
8 Scholars in the past have utilized a number of different statistical models to uncover the impact of leaders, using anything from simple Ordinary Least Squares linear regression models, to logit, probit, multinomial logit, stacked regression analyses, and montecarlo simulations. Since the dependent variable is binary, I eliminated the linear OLS model from my “toolkit.” Furthermore, a number of scholars (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Dow and Endersby 2003; Kropko 2008; Long 1997) have argued that logit models are more appropriate for modeling vote choice than are probit models, so I eliminated probit models as well.

7 As is immediately obvious, even incorporating evaluations of the leader of the third most common party type, the Left party, leads the number of observations included in the model to drop considerably. There are substantially more respondents across the election studies incorporated in this analysis who evaluated the Conservative and Centre-Left Party leaders but did not evaluate Left Party leaders.

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Bittner ECPR 2009  11
What becomes immediately evident from the tables is that leader evaluations matter. All variables (with the exception of age) are coded on a 0-1 basis. Socio-demographic and partisanship variables are binary, while ideology, issue attitudes, and leader evaluations are scalar and range from 0-1, as described earlier. Comparing coefficients at their face value is largely feasible, as a result. The coefficients for leader evaluations are always larger than those for both socio-demographics and issue attitudes, and are often even larger than ideology and partisanship. Even with all of these other variables incorporated in the model, leader evaluations have a sizable impact on vote choice.

Furthermore, and perhaps more interestingly, the data indicate that not all traits matter in the same way: character evaluations appear to have a larger impact on vote choice than evaluations of leaders’ competence. This may disappoint those who would have voters consider nobler factors like policy stances and platforms when deciding which party to vote for. It is perhaps problematic that leaders’ traits appear to matter more than issues, but surely a leader’s competence ought to have a larger effect on vote choice than his or her character? These data do confirm earlier results based on fewer election studies (Johnston 2002), suggesting that character is more important than competence. Johnston et al. (1992) also find that character evaluations influence overall “feelings” towards a leader more than competence evaluations.

Table 7 illustrates more clearly the relative impacts of leaders’ character and competence on vote choice. The values listed are changes in the probability of vote for the party with a change in the evaluation of the leaders’ character and competence from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. Thus when holding all other variables in the models at their means, voters were 46% more likely to vote for the Conservative party if they evaluated the Conservative party leader one standard deviation above the mean Conservative rating on character, compared to those giving the leader a rating one standard deviation below the mean. A similar change in the competence rating led to a 32% increase in the likelihood of voting conservative, while a similar change in the evaluations of both traits led to nearly a 70% increase in the probability of a Conservative vote.

The effects of evaluations have a similar impact on vote for the Centre-Left parties. A change in the evaluation of the Centre-Left party leaders’ character from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean leads to a 43% increase in the probability of voting for the Centre-Left party, while a similar change in the evaluation of the leaders’ competence leads to a 20% increase in the probability of a Centre-Left vote. The combination of the two leads to a 70% increase in the probability of a Centre-Left vote. These changes occur while holding partisanship, issue attitudes, and ideological self-placements at a constant—while these are hypothetical simulations, they illustrate that evaluations of party leaders have an effect on vote choice, as well as showing the over-arching influence of the leaders’ character.

Not all traits have an equal impact, nor do the traits of different leaders. With respect to voting for the Conservative and Centre-Left party leaders, positive evaluations of the opposing leaders’ character and competence lead to a reduction in the probability of vote for the party in question. However, positive evaluations of the Conservative leader have a greater impact on vote for the Centre-Left party than positive evaluations of the Centre-Left leader on vote for the Conservative party. In particular, evaluations of the Conservative leaders’ competence weigh in a lot more heavily than evaluations of the Centre-Left leaders’ competence.

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8 Differences were generated using Long and Freese’s add-on for Stata, SPost (Long 1997; Long and Freese 2005). SPost was used over Clarify to calculate first differences because the data and corresponding analyses were weighted, and Clarify does not allow the use of probability/sampling weights in its simulations.

9 All variables in the model were held at their means, including partisanship. The resulting estimate of the effects of leaders’ traits are therefore simulations based on a fictional “multi-party” partisan, made up of all PID variables in the model. Later, in Table 7, simulations are run for different groups of partisans.
That evaluations of leaders have differing impacts on vote choice becomes even more clear when we look at the impact of evaluations of Left party leaders on the vote. As seen in Table 7, the predicted probability of a vote for the Left party with a change in ratings of the leaders of any of the three main parties (including the Left party leader!) is substantially diminished (i.e. the values in column 3 are considerably smaller than the values in the first two columns).

These results support earlier findings suggesting that leaders have a larger impact on vote choice for “main” parties, and less of an impact for third or smaller parties (Johnston 2002). And indeed, it does appear that these results are about the size of parties, and do not simply reflect the fact that Left leaders in particular matter less. Similar vote models run for Right parties have equally small (and even smaller) predicted probabilities for evaluations of leaders’ traits, as do vote models for centre-right and sectional parties.10

Returning to the values presented in Tables 4 through 6, it appears that not only do evaluations of leaders have an impact on vote choice, but they also appear to have an effect that rivals partisanship and individuals’ ideological views. When looking at the overall size of coefficients, it is clear that non-moving socio-demographic variables have very little effect on vote choice compared to other variables. Furthermore, most of the socio-demographic variables do not approach traditional levels of statistical significance. The variables as shown are not really significant, but recall that this complement of socio-demographic variables is not ideal and probably understates the effect of core socio-demographic indicators.

After socio-demographic variables, issue attitudes play the second least important role in affecting vote choice. While most of the coefficients are statistically significant, they are quite small, with a much smaller impact on vote choice. The impact is not negligible, however, and Table 8 illustrates the isolated effect of changes in issue attitudes (from the most conservative position (0) to the most liberal position (1)) on the probability of vote for the three main parties. The impact of issue attitudes ranges from a 3% difference in the probability of voting for a party (the Left party) to just under 13% change in the probability of voting for a party (Conservative).

Ideology, partisanship, and evaluations of party leaders have the largest impact on vote choice. As Table 8 illustrates, when we compute changes in these independent variables, while holding all others at their means, the difference in probability of vote for one of the three major parties is striking. Ideology appears to have an impact greater than Conservative partisanship (when compared to non-partisanship), but this is probably largely the result of a measurement artifact: ideology is coded on a 0-1 scale, but the difference between 0 and 1 (most right and most left) is substantially larger than the difference between 0 and 1 (non-partisan and Conservative partisan) on the Conservative PID variable. There are many who consider themselves Conservative partisans that would not place themselves on the furthest point to the right of the ideological scale. Indeed, when we compare the effects of identification with a Conservative Party to identification with a Centre-Left party, the effect of partisanship is clearer: Centre-Left partisans are 42% less likely to vote for the Conservative party than Conservative partisans, all else being equal. Similarly, Left partisans are nearly 73% less likely than Centre-Left partisans to vote for the Centre-Left party. Party Identification plays a major role in determining vote choice.

The most important comparison to be made, however, is a comparison between the values in Table 8 and the values in Table 7. The predicted increase in the probability of vote for a Centre-Left Party, for example, is nearly 64%, with a two-standard deviation increase in the rating of the Centre-Left leaders’ traits, while all other variables (including partisanship) are held at their means. The comparable for the effect of partisanship is the predicted probability of vote for the Centre-Left Party among Conservative identifiers versus Centre-Left identifiers. Centre-Left partisans are 60% more likely to vote for their party than are Conservative partisans, with all other variables (including leader ratings) held at their means. These values suggest that a large jump in ratings of a leader can have an effect on as large a scale as partisanship. In the real world, however, the number of people who rate a leader two standard deviations apart, all other things equal, is probably substantially smaller.

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10 Results not shown, but changes in the predicted probabilities of vote for these minor parties range from 0.04 to 0.12 with positive evaluations of party leaders’ traits.
than the number of people identifying with two different parties. So while the effect of leader ratings looks like it might be similar to the effect of partisanship, the real effect is likely much smaller.

Partisanship also has the effect of intensifying the influence of party leaders: partisans who positively evaluate the leader of their own party are even more likely to vote for their own party than are partisans who evaluate the leader of their own party poorly. Table 9 illustrates this effect. In the first block of column one, for example, we see that Conservative partisans who evaluate the Conservative leader one standard deviation above the mean character rating and the mean competence rating are 73% more likely to vote Conservative than are Conservative partisans who rate their leader one standard deviation below the mean on the two traits. In the second block of column two, we see that Centre-Left partisans giving their leader a rating one standard deviation above the mean rating on both traits are 70% more likely to vote for the Centre-Left party than are Centre-Left partisans who rate their leader one standard deviation below the mean on the two traits.

<Table 9 about here>

This pattern continues in the third block of the third column, where Left partisans evaluating their leader one standard deviation above the mean rating on the two traits. The comparable figures for Centre-Left and Left partisans are 70% and 37%, respectively. Among non-partisans, the effects of ratings of Conservative and Centre-Left leaders' character and competence are even stronger: those giving Conservative leaders higher ratings on both dimensions are nearly 79% more likely to vote for the Conservative party, and those rating Centre-Left leaders higher on both dimensions are just over 72% more likely to vote for the Centre-Left party.

The Impact of Political Sophistication: Leaders and Partisan Stereotypes Not Just a Shortcut or Cue for the Least Informed

The literature on stereotyping and the use of cues, including partisan cues, suggests that voters will tend to make use of them in situations of low-information. McDermott suggests that “even in low-information elections, voters inadvertently obtain basic information about the candidates such as party identification and incumbent/challenger status. Cues such as these can help voters make decisions in an otherwise uncertain situation. Through past experience and stored knowledge, voters can make reasonable assumptions about the ideology of a candidate based on associations with salient political or social groups. In other words, voters use candidate cues as cognitive shortcuts…” (1997). While McDermott suggests that the shortcuts will allow voters to guess the views of candidates, it is reasonable to assume that voters will also employ the shortcuts to allow them to interpret traits as well.

Thus the less knowledgeable should rely on the use of shortcuts more—that is, individuals with lower levels of political sophistication ought to perceive leaders through the lens of the partisan stereotype more than those with higher levels of political sophistication, because they lack the information that would allow them to distinguish leaders from the party label. In fact, this is not the case. These data show that the more politically sophisticated perceive leaders more in line with the stereotype than do the less sophisticated. These results suggest that the partisan stereotype is not simply an information shortcut or heuristic assisting less informed voters to wade through competing candidates, but that something different is taking place.

Figure 6 replicates the graphs in Figure 1, this time according to the political sophistication of the voter. The graph on the left compares competence ratings of the three main party leaders among the least politically sophisticated 25% of voters, and the most politically sophisticated 25% of voters. The graph on the right does the same for ratings of the leaders' character. The box plots indicate that those with a higher level of political sophistication are more likely to perceive the leaders as conforming to the partisan stereotype than the least sophisticated. The lines in the middle of the box plots mark the median rating for each leader on this dimension, and the mean ratings fit the same pattern. Among the least politically sophisticated, respondents gave Conservative leaders an average rating of 0.582, Centre-Left leaders an average rating of 0.591, and Left leaders an average rating of 0.552. Among the most sophisticated, respondents gave Conservative leaders an average rating of 0.615, Centre-Left leaders an average rating of 0.562, and Left leaders an average rating of 0.488. The perceived differences between party leaders are stronger, and more clearly illustrate that Conservative leaders are most highly rated on competence.
The same dynamic can be seen in the left side of the figure as well. Within the least politically sophisticated group of respondents, the Conservative leader gets an average character rating of 0.529, the Centre-Left leader gets an average of 0.547, and the Left leader gets an average of 0.604. Among the most politically sophisticated, the distinctions between leaders are greater: Conservative leaders get an average rating of 0.526, Centre-Left leaders get an average rating of 0.533, and Left leaders get an average rating of 0.648. Thus while both groups (less sophisticated and more sophisticated) rate the Left leader most highly on character, the more sophisticated rate the Left leader more highly, and they rate the leaders of the other two parties slightly lower than do the least sophisticated.

These results hold when we control partisanship as well: respondents with higher levels of political sophistication perceive party leaders through the lens of the partisan stereotype more than those with lower levels of political sophistication. Table 10 replicates the stacked regression analyses presented in Table 3, this time by level of political sophistication. As the table indicates, partisans still view the leader of their own party most favourably, regardless of their level of political sophistication. Furthermore, the impact of partisanship is stronger among the more politically sophisticated: those with higher levels of political sophistication rate the leader of their own party even more favourably than do those with lower levels of political sophistication.

While the effect of partisanship is stronger among the more sophisticated, the effect of the party label is also stronger. Table 10 includes a series of arrows indicating where the size of coefficients conforming to the partisan stereotype grows as we move from the less sophisticated group to the more sophisticated group. These arrows indicate that more sophisticated respondents almost always give higher stereotypic ratings to party leaders than do less sophisticated respondents. For example, among non-partisans, the less sophisticated respondents give Left party leaders a rating 0.065 points higher than the reference group (ratings of the Centre-Left leader among “other” partisans). Meanwhile, the most sophisticated non-partisans give Left party leaders a rating 0.132 points higher than the reference group. Similarly, the most sophisticated non-partisans give a rating 0.086 points higher than the reference group, while the coefficient for the least sophisticated non-partisans is 0.010 (and does not reach traditional levels of statistical significance). With few exceptions, the more sophisticated are more likely to rate leaders consistent with the partisan stereotype.

Among Left partisans the effect is particularly interesting. Although all rate their own leader most positively on the character dimension, regardless of level of political sophistication, on the competence dimension something very different happens. Less politically sophisticated Left partisans give their own leader the highest rating on competence. More sophisticated Left partisans give their own leader a lower rating than less sophisticated partisans, but they also give the highest rating to the Conservative leader. This suggests that the impact of the stereotype is even larger than partisanship among the most sophisticated Left partisans!

That the most politically sophisticated tend to perceive leaders in a manner most consistent with the partisan stereotype suggests that the stereotype is not simply a tool utilized by the least informed in order to be able to distinguish between party leaders. Rahn (1993) does note that individuals are likely to continue to rely upon the partisan label even when other types of information about candidates are available, suggesting that increasing levels of information do not necessarily change the preferred sources of information among those evaluating candidates. Furthermore, these findings conform with findings of previous scholars who have noted that the more sophisticated tend to use information shortcuts just as much as or even more than the least sophisticated (Cutler 2002; Sniderman et al. 1991). It is possible, however, that the party leaders themselves actually do conform to the partisan stereotype: that the most sophisticated, possessing greater amounts of information about these leaders, are able to assign ratings that more closely match the “truth,” and that this truth just happens to fit the stereotype. Arguably, for example, parties might select certain “types” of people as leaders—these types may fit the stereotype. More research is needed before we can really determine what exactly is happening. What seems fairly clear, however, is that the partisan stereotype is not simply a shortcut for the least informed.

Do leaders act as information short-cuts, helping the less knowledgeable decide how to vote? Or do they provide a source of information about performance in office that only the more sophisticated can truly integrate
adequately into vote choice? It looks like it might actually be a bit of both: the impact of leader evaluations varies by level of political sophistication, and the patterns suggest that leader evaluations may act as a shortcut for the least politically sophisticated, and may also provide a complex and “higher” set of information for the most sophisticated.

The analyses presented in Tables 4 to 6 were re-run separately by respondents’ levels of political sophistication. Because of the substantial drop in sample size, and the limited impact of leader evaluations on vote for the Left party, the analyses were limited to two dependent variables: vote choice for a Conservative Party and vote choice for a Centre-Left party. Tables 11 and 12 list the results of these analyses.

Those with a higher level of political sophistication evaluate a larger number of factors overall. This comports with research suggesting that the more politically sophisticated consider a greater number of factors in the vote calculus (Cutler 2002; Sniderman et al. 1991). In Table 11, the number of coefficients achieving traditional levels of statistical significance among the less sophisticated is ten, compared to twelve among the more sophisticated. In Table 12, the numbers are eight and twelve, among the less and more sophisticated, respectively.

Second, for most variables, coefficients are larger among the more sophisticated than the less sophisticated, suggesting that not only do the more sophisticated consider more factors overall, the factors that they do consider also play a more weighty role in the voting calculus. Among both groups, socio-demographic variables continue to have a minimal effect on vote choice, but partisanship matters more among the more sophisticated, ideology and issue attitudes matter more among the more sophisticated, and leaders also matter more among the more sophisticated.

To isolate and better understand the impact of leader evaluations within the two groups, I show first-difference calculations in Table 13, exactly like those in Table 7 for the full sample. All independent variables were held at the sample mean, and then the change in predicted probability of vote was generated, based on a change in evaluations of leaders’ character and competence, from one standard deviation below the mean rating to one standard deviation above the mean. Essentially, I ran hypothetical changes in evaluations through the models in Tables 11 and 12. Table 13 lists the changes in probability of vote for either the Conservative Party or Centre-Left party, according to level of political sophistication.

For both Conservative and Centre-Left party vote choice, the simultaneous change in evaluations of both character and competence had a larger impact on the probability of vote among the most informed. For example, among the highly informed, those giving the Conservative leader a rating one standard deviation above the mean on both character and competence were nearly 70% more likely to vote for the Conservative party than those giving the leader a rating below the mean. This is compared to a change in the probability of vote for the Conservative party of 62% among the least informed. The pattern holds across the board. Overall, traits affect vote choice more among the more informed.

Among all groups, character still has a greater impact on vote choice than competence, much as it does when we look at the sample as a whole. However, there are subtle differences between sophistication groups as to the extent to which the traits influence vote choice: evaluations of the Conservative leaders’ character have a greater impact among the less sophisticated, while evaluations of the Centre-Left leaders’ character have a greater impact among the more sophisticated. Evaluations of the Conservative leaders’ competence have a greater impact among the more sophisticated, while evaluations of the Centre-Left leaders’ competence have a greater impact among the less sophisticated.

Thus it seems that the partisan stereotype identified earlier, in which Conservative leaders are evaluated more positively in terms of competence, and Left leaders are evaluated more positively in terms of character,
Centre-Left leaders somewhere in between the two (thus Centre-Left leaders are viewed more positively on character than are Conservative leaders), actually gets translated into an associated effect on vote choice, among the most informed. The most informed are not only more likely to evaluate leaders according to these partisan stereotypes, but they are also more likely to translate these partisan stereotypes into the voting decision. While character has a greater influence on vote choice than competence for all voters, the more sophisticated are more influenced by the Conservative leaders’ competence than are the less sophisticated, and are also more influenced by the Centre-Left leaders’ character than are the less sophisticated.\(^{11}\)

Although all respondents appear to think in terms of the partisan stereotype, it is the most sophisticated that really apply it to vote choice. Even among the less sophisticated, however, leader evaluations still matter a great deal. It appears that the less informed are also making note of leaders’ personalities when deciding which party to vote for, although perhaps not in as complex a fashion as those voters with higher levels of political sophistication.

Conclusions

Past studies of the origins of leader evaluations have pointed to the influence of the party label as a cue to be used in low-information settings, allowing individuals to ascribe issue positions to candidates when actual positions are not known (Conover and Feldman 1989). Other research on stereotypes and heuristics has suggested that individuals will use information available to them (including partisan, racial, and gender stereotypes) in order to formulate opinions and make decisions when other types of information are not available (McDermott 1997, 1998; Rahn 1993). As such, it seemed reasonable to expect that voters, especially less sophisticated voters, would rely upon the party label in order to evaluate party leaders.

This paper has illustrated that indeed, the party label does transmit information to voters, and a partisan stereotype does exist: respondents perceive leaders of Left parties more positively on the character dimension, and they perceive leaders of Conservative parties more positively on the competence dimension. Generally speaking, even when controlling for the partisanship of the voter, individuals continued to perceive party leaders as examples of the partisan stereotype. In addition to confirming the importance of the partisan stereotype in influencing voters’ evaluations of leaders, the data suggest that voters’ evaluations of leaders’ personalities play a major role in influencing vote choice. The analyses show that voters’ perceptions of leaders play a role that is larger than the effect of either socio-demographic characteristics or attitudes towards policy issue areas, and are more on par with the effects of ideology and partisanship. That is, if we take the simulations at face value, leaders play one of the most fundamental roles in determining how we vote, in seven different countries over 35 separate election studies. The analyses presented suggest that leaders matter, and that under certain circumstances, they can matter a lot.

In contrast to expectations, however, neither the partisan stereotype nor the evaluation of party leaders appear to simply be tools used by the least informed in order to compensate for a lack of information. The most politically sophisticated segment of the sample evaluates party leaders in a fashion that conforms most strongly with the partisan stereotype, providing Left leaders with even higher character ratings and Conservative leaders with even higher competence ratings than the less sophisticated group. Furthermore, the data indicate that sophisticated voters translate their evaluations of party leaders into vote choice in a way that most conforms with the partisan stereotype. The more sophisticated are more influenced by the Conservative leaders’ competence than are the less sophisticated, and are more influenced by the Centre-Left leaders’ character than are the less sophisticated. What is not known is why. If it is not simply an information shortcut, what exactly is going on? Why do more informed individuals make use of the stereotype more than less informed individuals? More research is needed.

\(^{11}\) Similar analyses were run with vote for the Left Party as the dependent variable, to ascertain the effects of evaluations of leaders on the Left vote, but half of the values were not statistically significant, leaving it difficult to find any patterns in the data. It seems that the main factor influencing the Left vote is identification with the Left party.
References


