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Centralized personalization at the expense of decentralized personalization : the decline of preferential voting in Belgium (2003-2014)

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**Centralized personalization at the expense of decentralized personalization.
The decline of preferential voting in Belgium (2003-2014).**

Journal:	<i>Party Politics</i>
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Keywords:	Personalization, Presidentialization, Leaders, Preferential voting, Belgium
Abstract:	<p>It is often assumed that personalization is becoming more central in voting behavior in modern democracies. Starting from the atypical Belgian case, which shows a remarkable decline over time in one of the indicators of personalization, i.e. preferential voting, we further develop the crucial relationship between two dimensions of personalization: 'centralized' and 'decentralized' personalization. First, we show that the former (which refers to a handful of political leaders who become more important) is rising, while at the same time the latter form of personalization (with power and attention shifting to a large group of individual politicians) is decreasing. Candidates other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to attract votes. This negative relationship holds, even when we control for measures of electoral reform and the newness of parties. Our results also show that leadership effects are stronger in new parties.</p>

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9 **Centralized personalization at the expense of decentralized**
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11 **personalization. The decline of preferential voting in Belgium**
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13 **(2003-2014).**
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19 **Abstract**
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22 It is often assumed that personalization is becoming more central in voting behavior in
23 modern democracies. Starting from the atypical Belgian case, which shows a
24 remarkable decline over time in one of the indicators of personalization, i.e.
25 preferential voting, we further develop the crucial relationship between two
26 dimensions of personalization: 'centralized' and 'decentralized' personalization. First,
27 we show that the former (which refers to a handful of political leaders who become
28 more important) is rising, while at the same time the latter form of personalization
29 (with power and attention shifting to a large group of individual politicians) is
30 decreasing. Candidates other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to
31 attract votes. This negative relationship holds, even when we control for measures of
32 electoral reform and the newness of parties. Our results also show that leadership
33 effects are stronger in new parties.
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Keywords

Personalization, presidentialization, leaders, preferential voting, Belgium

Introduction

It is often asserted that personalization, which refers to a shift in attention from collective actors to individuals, has become a structural feature of many Western democracies (McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010). Personalization is a broad and diffuse concept, however. A first major distinction refers to the kind of arena in which personalization takes place: in the media, in parties and in government or in the electorate. A second distinction is based upon the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general ('decentralized' personalization) or a handful of top politicians ('centralized' personalization) (Balmas et al., 2012).

Beyond its multi-faceted nature, one of the implicit assumptions about personalization of politics is that it is growing, meaning that individual politicians have become more important at the expense of institutions. More precisely, previous studies on the topic have mostly provided evidence of stronger personalization, while cases of no real change or of depersonalization have been exceptional (Karvonen, 2010; Adam and Maier, 2010; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). One of the main signs of the personalization of

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9 politics over the last decades has been the (growing) use of preferential voting
10 (Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann, 2012).

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13 In that respect, the recent elections in Belgium's flexible list system may appear as
14 counterintuitive. Belgian voters may decide between two options: casting a list vote
15 without marking any preference for any candidate, or casting a preference vote in
16 favor of one or several candidates. In 1919, only a minority of voters were opting for
17 preference votes (15 %). But over the years, the use of preference votes has been
18 growing. There were 33 % of voters to cast such a vote in 1961, 48 % in 1981 and 66 %
19 at its top in 2003. But over the last ten years, the share of voters casting a preference
20 has constantly gone down. At the last federal elections, only 57 % of all valid ballots
21 were marked with at least one preference vote (Wauters et al., 2015). This declining
22 use of preference voting seems to be in contrast with the common idea of
23 personalization as a growing pattern of contemporary politics. This is especially
24 remarkable in Belgium, that has before been typically labeled as a clear 'positive case'
25 of the personalization hypothesis (Karvonen, 2010: 102-103) .

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28 In this article, we examine this puzzle and we show that the explanation is to be found
29 in the multi-faceted nature of the concept of personalization itself. The distinction
30 made by Balmas and her colleagues (2014) between 'centralized' personalization (only
31 the leader of a party or a government becomes more important) and 'decentralized'
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9 personalization (with power and attention shifting from party and/or government to a
10 large group of politicians) runs through the different arenas.

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13 Stemming from this distinction, we show in this article that the decline in the use of
14 preference votes in Belgium is for a large part to be explained by the diverging fate of
15 centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization remains a
16 growing pattern of contemporary electoral politics in Belgium. Leaders are still able to
17 attract a lot of preference votes. Decentralized personalization, however, is going
18 down and this could explain the decline in the use of preference votes. Candidates
19 other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to attract preference
20 votes. When voters have not the opportunity to vote for a top leader in their electoral
21 district, they are more and more inclined to opt for a list vote, rather than for a
22 preference vote for another, less prominent, politician. This trend is reinforced by the
23 growing success of newer parties. Such parties have even more difficulties to attract
24 preference votes for lay candidates. By definition, newer parties have fewer
25 candidates that are already familiar to voters that they could put on the ballot box.
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27 Only the leader, and perhaps a few other candidates, within these newer parties have
28 gained some visibility. As a consequence, for many voters, only the leader of the party
29 is well-known and is attracting preference votes.
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9 These findings, we believe, are important beyond the specific case of Belgium. The
10 recent distinction made by Balmas et al. (2014), and similar distinctions under different
11 names by a few other authors (Van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), have
12 conceptually clarified the concept of personalization. But they have not yet discussed
13 its empirical implications. Implicitly, it was assumed that the idea of personalization as
14 a growing pattern of contemporary politics would apply to both centralized and
15 decentralized personalization. With this study, we show that the two trends may not
16 always go hand in hand. Rather, it seems that while centralized personalization may be
17 on the rise, decentralized personalization is not following the same trend. Party
18 leaders are undoubtedly central figures in contemporary politics. By contrast, other,
19 less prominent politicians, do not seem to remain under the spotlights. It could even
20 be argued that the growing attention for leaders happens at the detriment of other
21 politicians.
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39 In the following sections, we explore these claims in three steps. First, the scholarly
40 debates on personalization are presented and discussed, paying specific attention to
41 the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization. In the second
42 section, the puzzle of the declining use of preference votes in Belgium over the last
43 decade is described. And in the third section, we provide explanations for this puzzle.
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50 Besides our central hypothesis that deals with the distinction between centralized and
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9 decentralized personalization, we also test two alternative explanations: the declining
10 number of incumbents on the electoral lists, as well as the role of newer parties that
11 have fewer well-known candidates beyond their leader.
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18 **The debate on the personalization of politics**

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23 Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing scholarly attention for the
24 personalization of politics. This concept could be broadly defined as ‘the notion that
25 individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and
26 collective identities’ (Karvonen, 2010: 4). Yet, beyond this general definition, much
27 clarification is required. As Van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2010) note, there is confusion
28 about the concept of personalization. A distinction can be made either on the basis of
29 the sphere in which personalization takes place or on the basis of the number of
30 politicians it applies to.
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44 A first element of diversity concerns the sphere of politics that is being personalized.
45 Most attention is given to three spheres: parties and government; the media; and the
46 electorate.
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9 With regard to the first sphere - parties and government - Poguntke and Webb (2005),
10 building on work by Foley (2000) and others, analyze what they call the
11 'presidentialization' of parliamentary democracies: the increasing empowerment of
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13 leaders both in government and in political parties. The traditional intermediary
14
15 structures of political parties, such as delegate conventions, constituency party
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17 organizations, and parliamentary party groups have lost power and influence. Leaders
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19 now steer their parties with more autonomy than some decades ago. This has often
20
21 been achieved by empowering disorganized rank-and-file party members at the
22
23 expense of organized mid-level elites (Katz and Mair, 1995: 20–21; Hazan and Rahat,
24
25 2010; Pilet and Cross, 2014).
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32 Regarding the second sphere – the media – television broadcasting has by definition
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34 increased the visibility of individual politicians: it is necessary to put a face on the party
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36 message when appearing on the screen, whereas non-personalized messages were
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38 much easier to convey in the written press (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Studies
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40 mainly focus on the shift in the number of references made to parties and to individual
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42 politicians in the media, but could not always confirm a trend over time (Kriesi, 2012).
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45 Others focus on the privatization of politics – 'the shifting boundaries between the
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47 public and the private' (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 205) – and the fact that the media now
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9 report not only politicians' political activities, but also their private lives (e.g. Langer,
10 2007).

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13 The third sphere, also the one we focus upon in this article, is the electorate, and more
14 in particular their voting behavior. The (increasing) importance of individual politicians
15 in elections is probably the most extensively studied aspect of personalization. Since
16 the late 1980s-early 1990s, there has been a growing body of literature trying to assess
17 the impact of politicians on vote choice. Two landmark publications in that respect
18 have been Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina's *The Personal Vote* (1987) and Wattenberg's
19 *The Rise of Candidate-Centred Politics* (1991). Since then, several books and articles
20 have been looking at the personalization of elections (Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al.,
21 2009; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Kaase, 1994; Marsh, 2007; Garzia, 2012).
22 Personalities has been among the many short-term factors that have been explored in
23 election studies, when structural and long-term voting determinants such as social
24 class, religion or party identity were losing explanatory power (e.g., Dalton et al., 1984;
25 Franklin et al., 1992; McAllister and Rose, 1986; Van der Brug et al., 2009).
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46 In addition to the debate about the various spheres of politics that personalization
47 could affect, a second conceptual discussion has been on the number and role of
48 politicians that are benefiting from this new pattern of contemporary politics. The
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9 central idea is that a distinction has to be made between personalization that would
10 concern all politicians in general and personalization that would have implications for
11 political leaders only. In studies of personalization of voting behaviour, some analysts
12 examine the degree to which perceptions of party leaders motivate voting decisions
13 (Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; Clarke et al., 2004; Clarke et al., 2009), while others
14 look at the impact of candidates in general (Caprara, 2007; Marsh, 2007; Mattes and
15 Milazzo, 2014; Norton and Wood, 1990). Similarly, in studies of personalization in
16 media coverage of politics, some focus on party leaders (Langer, 2007; Mughan, 2000),
17 others on all candidates (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

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30 A few authors have recently tried to theorize this distinction. Andeweg and Van
31 Holsteyn (2011) refer to first-order (leader) versus second-order (candidate)
32 personalization. Kriesi (2012) has proposed to differentiate between generalized (all
33 politicians) and concentrated (leaders only) personalization in his analysis of election
34 coverage. In a similar way, Van Aelst and colleagues (2012) made the distinction
35 between generalized and concentrated visibility in the news. But the most extensive
36 conceptual discussion of this distinction is provided by Balmas et al. (2012). They
37 separate centralized and decentralized personalization: Centralized personalization
38 'implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party, cabinet) to a
39 single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister, president)', while decentralized
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9 personalization 'means that power flows downwards from the group to individual
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11 politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g. candidates, members of
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13 parliament, ministers)' (Balmas et al., 2014: 37). They also argue that these two facets
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15 of personalization may be present in the three spheres of politics mentioned above:
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17 parties and government, the media and elections, as well as via institutional reforms
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19 such as the strengthening of preference votes in PR list systems (decentralized
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21 personalization) or the direct elections of mayors or prime ministers (centralized
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23 personalization).
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28 Although the conceptual distinction by Balmas and colleagues is well developed and
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30 empirically supported, some lacunas in the debate can be identified. First, little is
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32 known on the decentralization of personalization in terms of voting behavior. This is
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34 mainly because scholars seldom study leaders and non-leaders simultaneously. In
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36 contrast with the large and growing literature on the role of leaders in voting behavior,
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38 there are few studies that focus explicitly on the importance of other candidates (but
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40 see Karvonen, 2010: 51-63; Van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010; Thijssen, 2013). Also in
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42 the well documented Israeli case empirical evidence on decentralized personalization
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44 is lacking. According to the authors 'because this concept has been hardly discussed in
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46 previous studies of elections' (Balmas et al., 2014: 16).
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9 Second, the relationship between the two types of personalization is not totally clear.
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11 Implicitly, Balmas and her colleagues (2014) seem to assume that the growing
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13 personalization of politics affects both the centralized and decentralized forms of
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15 personalization. They also depict each form of personalization as mainly going against
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17 the party, but not against each other. Poguntke and Webb's (2005) argument about
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19 the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies, in contrast, more explicitly
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21 suggests that leaders are gaining ground at the expenses of other politicians. In the
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23 words of Balmas et al. (2014), it would mean that an increase of centralized
24
25 personalization would lead to a decrease of decentralized personalization. In this study
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27 we will explore how both types of personalization relate to each other by conducting a
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29 detailed analysis of preferential voting behavior over time.
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37 **Research questions and hypotheses**

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41 We use the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization to study
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43 the evolution of preferential voting in Belgium over the last ten years. More precisely,
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45 we study the federal elections of 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014. Belgium's flexible list
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47 system offers voters the opportunity between casting a list vote or marking a
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49 preference vote for one or several candidates within the same list. As such,
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9 preferential voting functions as a good indicator of personalization, as has also
10 extensively been argued by Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann (2012) on the Danish
11 case. Since 2007, at each election in Belgium, fewer people cast a preference vote, and
12 more people cast a list vote. Figure 1 clearly shows the decline of the share of valid
13 ballots marked with at least one preference vote over the last decade. The decline is
14 visible for federal elections (Chamber and Senate¹) as well as for regional elections
15 (Flanders and Wallonia). The share of voters casting a preference vote in 2014 is back
16 down to the level reached twenty years earlier, in 1995. These shares reached their
17 peak in 2003 (with 66.5 % of voters casting a preference vote for the Chamber) and in
18 2004 (62.5 % for the Flemish Parliament, and 63.6 % for the Walloon Parliament). In
19 the most recent elections (in 2014), the shares of ballots marked with a preference
20 vote went down to 57 % for the federal Chamber, 55.2 % for the Flemish Parliament
21 and 57.5 % for the Walloon Parliament.
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[Insert Figure 1]

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47 In order to address this evolution that goes against the argument of a generalized
48 personalization trend, we proceed in two steps. First, we look at how centralized and
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52 ¹ Since 2014, there are no longer direct elections for the Senate. The Senate is now indirectly composed
53 of members of regional parliaments.
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9 decentralized personalization do interact in preference votes cast in Belgium between
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11 2003 and 2014. The core argument is that the decline in preference votes is mostly to
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13 be attributed to the reduced interests of Belgian voters for lay candidates, i.e. those
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15 that are not party leaders. This expectation is based on the presidentialization
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17 argument of Poguntke and Webb (2005). Their claim that party leaders become more
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19 powerful and more visible would mainly affect other politicians in the party rather
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21 than the party as an institution. In fact, when leaders become more important in
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23 electoral campaigns, and voters identify the party with its leader, both the leader and
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25 the party can gain in prominence and popularity. In addition, if the public becomes
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27 aware 'that it is the leader who decides what the party is and what it stands for'
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29 (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 351), other candidates of the party become less attractive
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31 as they have less influence on the policy of the party. Each and every party has only
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33 one leader, but the Belgian territory is divided into several multimember districts and
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35 candidates can only run in one district. Consequently, in all districts but one, voters do
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37 not have the opportunity to vote for the leader of their preferred party. The
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39 expectation is that in these districts, more and more voters would cast a list vote
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41 rather than mark a preference for other 'ordinary' candidates. Such an evolution
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43 would confirm that it is a decline in decentralized personalization that is explaining the
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45 lowering share of Belgian voters casting a preference vote. This core expectation will
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9 be first addressed below through a more descriptive approach that compares the
10 share of preference and of list votes in districts with and without an electoral leader.
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16 Next, we rely on a more explanatory approach that tries to explain the total share of
17 preference votes received by each list in the various districts and for the various
18 elections covered in the article (2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014). The first line of argument
19 is about the growing importance of leaders, and therefore a test of centralized
20 personalization. It leads to formulate two expectations. First, we would expect that
21 the share of preferences votes would be higher for list on which one electoral leader is
22 running. Second, assuming that the weight of leaders has grown over time, we expect
23 that the impact of electoral leaders on the share of preference votes obtained by each
24 list-in-a-district has grown over the period covered (2003-2014). These two arguments
25 lead to the following three hypotheses.
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H1a. Lists with an electoral leader obtain a larger share of preference votes than lists
with no electoral leader.

H1b. The positive impact of lists with an electoral leader on preference votes has
grown over time (centralization).

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9 H1c. The negative impact of lists without an electoral leader on preference votes has
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11 grown over time (decentralization).
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16 But the argument about the growing impact of centralized personalization is not the
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18 only element that could theoretically help explaining the recent decline of preference
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20 votes in Belgium. Earlier research has pointed out that contextual factors play a large
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22 role in determining preferential voting behavior (André et al, 2012 ; Elmelund-
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24 Præstekær and Hopmann, 2012). In particular, two contextual factors may have
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26 contributed to the downward trend: changes in the rules of the electoral system and
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28 the recent electoral success of newer parties. We include them into our analysis as
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30 potential alternative explanations.
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35 First, over the last years, a change in the formal rules has modified the access for
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37 incumbents to candidate lists. Earlier studies on the use of preference votes in Belgium
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39 (André et al., 2012; Put and Maddens, 2015) have shown that the presence of
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41 incumbents on the list of candidates has a positive effect on the use of preference
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43 votes. A change to the legislation, however, has reduced the capacity of parties to fill
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45 in their lists with a lot of such candidates. Since 2007, it is no longer possible for the
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47 same person to be simultaneously a candidate for different assemblies elected at the
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49 national level (in particular to run for both the Chamber and the Senate) and since
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9 2014, an incompatibility between candidacy at the national level and the regional and
10 European level has been introduced, in case national, regional and/or European
11 elections are held on the same day. As a consequence, the share of incumbent
12 Members of Parliament or ministers on the list is harder to maintain. Between 2003
13 and 2010, not much has changed, however, as regional incumbents were asked by
14 their party to take up a position on the list for the national elections (held on another
15 day than the regional elections), even if they were not interested in getting elected.
16 The number of 'unique' incumbents has gone up from 265 in 2003 until 331 in 2010.²
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18 In 2014 the number of incumbents on the list of the Chamber dropped to 152, because
19 both regional and national elections were held at the same day and politicians no
20 longer had the possibility to be a candidate for both elections (Smulders, Put and
21 Maddens, 2014). The average number of incumbents on a list in 2014 was lower than
22 two, while for previous Chamber elections it was close to four. This trend might explain
23 a lower amount of preferential votes over time, or in the terminology of this paper: a
24 decline in decentralized personalization. This leads to the following hypothesis:
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46 H2a. Lists with a higher proportion of incumbents receive a higher proportion of
47 preferential votes.
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52 ² Because Belgium is a federal country with a bi-cameral system, it has a relative high number of regional
53 (Walloon, Brussels, Flemish) and federal MPs (Chamber, Senate).
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9 H2b. The decline of incumbents on the candidate lists has contributed to the decline of
10 preferential votes over time
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16 Another contextual factor that may also has contributed to the downward trend in
17 preferential voting is the electoral success of newer parties like N-VA (Flemish
18 nationalists), PTB-PVDA (radical left), PP (populist radical right) and FDF (Francophone
19 regionalists). Previous studies have shown that traditional parties (Christian-
20 democrats, socialists and liberals) tend to fare a larger proportion of preference votes
21 (Wauters et al, 2015; André et al., 2013). This also comes forward from Figure 2.
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23 Traditional parties (in black in Figure 2) (either Christian-democrats (CDH and CD&V),
24 social-democrats (PS and SP.A) or liberal-democrats (MR and OpenVLD) obtain clearly
25 more preference votes than newer parties (in grey). The average for all traditional
26 parties is 67.1 %, while the percentage preference votes for new parties is only 44.5 %.
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42 [Insert Figure 2]
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46 One element of explanation has already been mentioned above: incumbents and also
47 local politicians attract preference votes. Since traditional parties are better-
48 established they have more ministers, parliamentarians, and especially much more
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9 politicians with local mandates among their candidates. Usually, within newer parties,
10 only the leader has some notoriety within the electorate. In the last two elections in
11 Belgium (2010 and 2014), these newer parties have been on the rise. N-VA became the
12 largest party in the country in 2010 and strengthened its electoral leadership in 2014.
13 In 2014, three smaller new parties have gained their first seats in the federal
14 parliament: PTB-PVDA, PP and FDF.³ As the newer parties grow electorally, the overall
15 share of preference votes would decline taking into account that newer parties have
16 fewer voters opting for preference votes.
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30 H3a. New parties get less preferential votes than traditional parties

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32 H3b. The electoral success of new parties contributes to the decrease of preferential
33 votes over time .
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39 The fact that newer parties attract fewer preferential votes in general, might be true
40 with the exception for the electoral leader. New parties might depend more on their
41 leader than other parties. For instance, in the 2003 campaign the leaders of smaller
42 parties took a larger share of the media attention for their party than leaders of
43 traditional parties (Van Aelst, 2007). In exceptional cases these new parties are even
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51 ³ FDF used to be in cartel with MR but ran alone in 2014, for the first time since 1995, and won two seats
52 in the Chamber.
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9 named to their leader, such as the Flemish 'Lijst Dedecker' and the Dutch 'Lijst Pim
10 Fortuyn'. In addition, it can also be stated that because it takes time to develop stable
11 party loyalties, party identification tends to be weaker in new parties, leaving more
12 room for leader effects among voters (Aardal & Binder, 2011). New parties also tend to
13 be less organized and structured than established parties, which would benefit again
14 the party leaders who enjoy more freedom of maneuver.
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22 In addition, Aardal & Binder (2011) also give arguments why a stronger leader effect
23 among new(er) parties might be peculiar to rightist new(er) parties. Right or centre-
24 right parties usually are more hierarchically structured with on top of the pyramid a
25 strong leader, who is very powerful both inside and outside the party. This contrasts
26 with the anti-authoritarian stance of younger parties at the left side of the political
27 spectrum, most notably the green parties. In some cases, their position against strong
28 leadership is even translated in different forms of collective and rotated leadership.
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39 Therefore, we additionally formulate the following general and more specific
40 hypotheses:
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46 H4a. The electoral leader effect (H1b) on preferential votes is stronger for lists of
47 new(er) parties in general ;
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9 H4b. The electoral leader effect (H1b) on preferential votes is only stronger for lists of
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11 rightist new(er) parties.
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14 15 **Methodology** 16

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20 In the next section, these various factors are tested by analyzing the use of preference
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22 votes in Belgium over the last decade. The federal elections of 2003, 2007, 2010 and
23
24 2014 are studied. For each, we look at the share of preference votes for each list of
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26 those parties that won at least one seat nationwide in the 11 electoral districts. We
27
28 have in total 319 lists for 16 parties. We start with a more descriptive analysis that
29
30 looks at whether having an electoral leader on the list makes a difference in the share
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32 of preference votes that the list has obtained. The shares of valid ballots for a party in
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34 a district are examined taking into account whether the list had an electoral leader
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36 among the candidates or not.
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41 After this first descriptive part, the second part of the analysis is more explanatory. The
42
43 goal is to see what factors do account for the share of preference votes that a list-in-a-
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45 district obtains. The empirical analysis is based on the official election results for the
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47 Belgian Chamber of Representatives for the election years 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014.
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49 As dependent variable, we take the proportion of preferential votes for a party in a
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9 district for a specific election year. The entire country is divided into 11 districts. For
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11 each party, we calculate the proportion of preference votes it obtains in each district.
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13 These proportions function as dependent variable for our analysis.
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16 Besides the election year (variable 'Time' in Table 1), we include in our model three
17
18 independent variables which are relevant from a theoretical perspective: (presence of
19
20 an) electoral leader, percentage of incumbents, and type of party.
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23 As for electoral leader, our analysis splits all parties-in-a-district into two categories:
24
25 those with the electoral leader of a party on the list in that district (referring to
26
27 centralized personalization) and those without (referring to decentralized
28
29 personalization). This dummy variable is named 'List electoral leader (EL)' and has a
30
31 value of 1 if the electoral leader was a candidate for the party in the district at stake.
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35 The electoral leader is operationalized here as the person who participated to the final
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37 television debate at the end of the electoral campaign. In order to guarantee
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39 comparability, we always analyze the debate on the public television chains (one
40
41 Flemish and one Francophone chain).⁴ In most cases, but not always, this person
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43 coincides with the party chairman (see also: Pilet & Wauters, 2014). In eight out of 57
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45 cases, the electoral leader is not the party chairman (but mostly a prominent member
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50 ⁴ Only at the 2007 elections, there was no general final debate on the public television in Flanders.
51 Alternatively, we take (only for these elections) the general debate which was broadcasted by the
52 commercial television. For other election years, not always a final debate was held by the commercial
53 broadcaster, which renders them not suitable for an analysis over time.
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9 of the government playing a leading role in the electoral campaign). For smaller parties
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11 not invited for this television debate, we always take the party chairman.

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13 The percentage of incumbents is also calculated for each party in each district. We take
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15 into account the incumbent members of the Chamber, but also candidates who are at
16
17 the moment of the elections a member of the Senate or of one of the regional
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19 parliaments. Also ministers (either at the federal or regional level) were considered as
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21 incumbents. This variable is named '%-Incumbent (%INC)'.
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25 Finally, for the type of party, we use a dichotomous variable (labelled 'Traditional party
26
27 (TP)': either traditional party or new party. Traditional parties are the three older
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29 party families that have already been created in the 19th century: Christian-democrats,
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31 socialists and liberals. These parties have dominated all Belgian cabinets since the
32
33 adoption of universal franchise in Belgium in 1893 and have together delivered all
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35 Belgian Prime ministers. Since almost all Belgian parties are split up in a separate
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37 Flemish party and a French-speaking party, this category contains six parties. All the
38
39 other parties are considered as new parties. We further distinguish between new left
40
41 and right parties, which we define as parties respectively at the left⁵ and the right⁶ of
42
43 the established parties (i.e. CD&V/CDH, sp.a/PS and Open-VLD/MR). By looking at this
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45 variable, we will be able to assess the differential effect of the success of new parties.
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52 ⁵ Ecolo, Groen, PTB and PVDA

53 ⁶ FN, PP and Vlaams Belang
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Empirical analysis

Descriptive analysis

Does the presence of an electoral leader on a list makes a difference in the proportion of voters opting for a preference vote? We know from Figure 1 that preferential voting in general is in decline. For a more detailed analysis, we split up the valid vote ballots into three categories: list votes (i.e. a vote for the party instead of for candidates), preferential votes for the head of list (irrespective of whether also votes for other candidates were casted), and preferential votes for other candidates than the head of list.

[Insert Figure 3]

Figure 3 sketches a very revealing picture in two ways. First of all, the percentages of list votes (in black) gradually grow for parties in districts without an electoral leader (bars labeled 'other'). While this percentage was still below 40 % in 2003, it is now (in 2014) above 50 %. In districts where an electoral leader is present on the list (bars labeled 'leader'), on the contrary, the same evolution could not be found. Instead, for these districts figure 3 shows a pattern of stability: about 33 %, both in 2003 and 2014.

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9 This indicates that the weakening in preferential voting is mainly due to a decline in
10 decentralized personalization .
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13 Secondly, we observe that in districts with a leader, the share of votes going to the
14 head of list (in grey) gradually increases (with 2010 as an exception). In 2003 on
15 average about 40 % of the voters voted for the head of list in these districts, while in
16 2014 more than 50 % of voters did so. In contrast, for the other districts, stability in
17 terms of votes for the head of list can be noted.
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21 If we combine these two insights, we can state that in districts with an electoral leader,
22 voters do not more often cast a preference vote (instead of a list vote), but preference
23 voters are more likely than before to choose the head of list. In districts without an
24 electoral leader, the inverse appears to be true: voters are not more likely nor less
25 likely to vote for the head of list, but they increasingly vote for the party, at the
26 expense of preference votes for ordinary candidates. Perhaps, the list vote functions
27 here as a sort of surrogate for a vote for the leader who is not allowed to be a
28 candidate in this district.⁷
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44 *Explanatory analysis*
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49 ⁷ Note that also the opposite might be true: a preferential vote only for the electoral leader functions as
50 a surrogate for a vote for the party. At the 2014 Chamber elections, for instance, in general 36 % of
51 preference voters voted only for the head of list, and in districts with electoral leaders, this percentage
52 raised to about 50 % (Wauters et al, 2015). These voters do not cast additional votes for other
53 candidates, but simply tick the ballot of the head of list.
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9 We now move over to the explanatory analysis. Here, we focus again on the general
10 variable, i.e. the proportion of preferential votes cast (which is the complement of the
11 proportion of list votes) by party in a district. We use a multilevel model with 319
12 individual lists at the first level and 16 parties at the second level (Table 1). We test
13 four models: a model with time and the three main explanatory variables: electoral
14 leader, incumbency and traditional party (M1), the same model with interactions
15 between leader and year of election (M2), a model in which we have add interactions
16 between incumbency and year of election (M3), and finally a model in which we have
17 added an interaction between leader and traditional party (M4). In each of the models
18 we include fixed controls for district to control for factors such as district magnitude
19 and party system fragmentation.
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35 [Insert Table 1]
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38 The multivariate analysis confirms the general decrease of the proportion of
39 preferential votes in the last federal elections. Generally speaking individual
40 candidates received, compared to 2003, fewer preferential votes in 2007, and even
41 much fewer in 2010 and 2014. In total, the share of preference votes went down from
42 66.5 % in 2003 to 61.3 % in 2007, 57.5 % in 2010 and 57.0 % in 2014. Personalization in
43 general appears to decrease over the last decade. However, this decrease is
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9 neutralized on lists with an electoral leader. Lists with an electoral leader score
10 significantly higher on preferential votes than lists without such a leader ($B = 11.17^{***}$
11 in Model 1 (M1)). This general finding confirms H1a. Moreover, we may also observe
12 that the importance of electoral leaders has grown over time (H1b and H1c). More
13 precisely, their impact has been particularly strong in 2014 as revealed by the
14 interaction of 'lists with an electoral leader' and 'time' in model 2. The conditional
15 effect of a list with an electoral leader is significantly stronger in 2014 ($B_{\text{cond}} =$
16 $6.20 + 13.22 = 19.42^{***}$ in M2) than in 2003 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 6.20$ in M2). This is clearly visualized
17 in the interaction plot in Figure 4.
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30 [Insert Figure 4]
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34 It seems that voters who cannot cast a vote for the electoral leader choose to vote for
35 the party rather than for another candidate on the list. Obviously, we cannot strictly
36 prove that the latter is causing the former, but it is intriguing that the two
37 complementary evolutions appear at the same time and go in opposite directions.
38 Moreover, we can make the complementary causal linkage between the two forms of
39 personalization more plausible if we control for the effect of alternative explanations.
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49 Firstly, it might be that the underlying explanation of this diverging personalization
50 trends is related to changes in the Belgian electoral system (H2b). Because electoral
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9 leaders are almost always incumbents, the electoral leader effect could be a derivative
10 of a more general incumbency effect. Given that from 2007 onwards candidates can no
11 longer simultaneously run for different elections and given that in 2014 both regional
12 and federal elections were held on the same day, the number of incumbents that are
13 available for the Chamber lists decreased substantially. As a consequence the
14 proportion of preferential votes would go down. As could be expected, lists with a
15 higher percentage of incumbents receive more preferential votes ($B = 0.19^{***}$ in M1).
16 Interestingly, this effect becomes stronger in the elections of 2010 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 0.01 + 0.28 =$
17 0.29^{***} in M3) and 2014 ($B_{\text{cond}} = 0.01 + 0.29 = 0.30^{***}$ in M3). Especially in 2014, when
18 both regional, federal and European elections were coinciding and candidates could
19 participate in only one of them, this strong conditional effect could be the result of the
20 dilution of a smaller group of incumbents over more electoral lists. This effect can be
21 seen as a prove that also decentralized personalization is on the rise. However, even
22 more importantly, the incumbency effects do not discard the important bonus in terms
23 of preferential votes for lists with electoral leaders. The effects for lists with an
24 electoral leader stay almost intact in model 3 where we introduce the incumbency and
25 time interactions. Again, in particular in 2014, the effect of the electoral leaders
26 remains highly significant.
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9 In models 3 and 4 we test a second alternative explanation: the decreasing electoral
10 appeal of established parties who traditionally attract most preference votes. If newer
11 challenger parties are becoming increasingly popular, this could have a negative effect
12 on the proportion of preferential votes, because newer parties have fewer local and
13 national incumbents on their lists. Indeed, both leftist and rightist new(er) party lists
14 generally receive much smaller proportions of preferential votes. The effects are very
15 strong ($B = -16.30^{***}$ and $B = -22.55^{***}$ in M3). Moreover, given that the effect does
16 not differ significantly over time and given that the support for traditional parties has
17 declined substantially in the last elections, the decreasing electoral appeal of the
18 traditional parties definitely is a credible explanation for the decreasing preferential
19 vote proportion. However, also this alternative explanation does not overrule the
20 importance of the positive 'list with electoral leader'-effect. On the contrary, the
21 popularity of newer parties seems to strengthen the electoral leader effect, as the
22 effect of the variable 'list electoral leader' is stronger among the lists of the traditional
23 parties (cross-level interactions $B = 3.35$ and 8.90^{***} in M4). However, because only for
24 the rightist new(er) parties the interaction is statistically significant we find
25 confirmation for the more specific H4b. Moreover, our findings are very robust, as the
26 model remains analogous if the lists of the N-VA, the strongest challenger party, are
27 eliminated from the dataset (not in table).
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9 In sum, the diminishing electoral appeal of the traditional parties seems both to lead to
10 a decrease of decentralized personalization as well as to an increase of centralized
11 personalization. Since, no alternative explanations account for this finding, it seems
12 highly plausible that there exists a negative causal relationship between the two.
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21 **Conclusion**

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24 While personalization seems to imply a general notion of steady growth, our
25 longitudinal analysis of Belgian election data points out that actually increase as well as
26 decline are involved. The kind of personalization (centralized versus decentralized) is of
27 crucial importance in this respect. Over the last four Belgian federal elections the
28 number of preferential votes has decreased. However, when we look at the kind of
29 preferential votes that are casted we noted two opposite trends: the degree of
30 decentralized personalization –voting for ordinary candidates- has gone down
31 significantly, while the degree of centralized personalization –voting for party leaders-
32 has increased significantly.
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45 Our findings suggest that centralized personalization, the increasing electoral appeal of
46 the leaders, might be a cause of the decline in decentralized personalization. The
47 underlying logic is simple: many voters want to vote for the electoral leader who is the
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9 figurehead of the party in the election, but they cannot because the leader is not on
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11 the ballot list in their district. In this situation they prefer to vote for the party instead
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13 of voting for another candidate who does not have the same appeal as the electoral
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15 leader. Furthermore, while personalization is often perceived to be a cause of party
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17 dealignment, our analyses seem to indicate that notably the dealignment of the
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19 traditional parties goes together with a decrease of decentralized personalization and
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21 an increase in centralized personalization. The broader consequence of this finding is
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23 that the democratic legitimacy of other members of the party is further diminished, at
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25 the expense of the leader. Most votes are inspired by an evaluation of a handful
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27 electoral leaders, even if in practice voters cannot vote for them. These findings
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29 corroborate Poguntke and Webb's idea of a presidentialization of politics in
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31 parliamentary democracies. Leaders are being reinforced at the expense of individual
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33 politicians (Poguntke and Webb, 2005).
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39 The obvious question is how much these findings are exportable beyond the case of
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41 Belgium. There are a few peculiarities on preferential voting in the Belgian electoral
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43 system. First, the Belgian electoral system does not allow leaders to run as candidate
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45 all over the country. Second, Belgian voters have the opportunity to decide between a
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47 list vote and a preference vote for one or several candidates. They are not forced to
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49 cast a preference votes for at least one candidate.
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9 These two elements could lead some to wonder whether our findings are only
10 applicable to Belgium. A more careful look at lists PR electoral systems in Europe,
11 however, shows that the Belgian rules are not so uncommon.⁸ On the first aspect, the
12 question is whether there is a nationwide tier with the same list of candidates running
13 all across the country. In only four European countries this is the case: Austria, the
14 Netherlands⁹, Hungary and Slovakia. In the vast majority of countries using list PR,
15 candidates are running in only one district, and not nationwide. In these countries, the
16 situation of a voter motivated by the party leader but not finding his name on the
17 ballot in his district is therefore rather common, and the tension between centralized
18 and decentralized personalization can also be found there.
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32 On the second dimension – compulsory versus optional preference voting, it also
33 appears that Belgium is not a unique case. Besides Belgium, there are seven countries
34 where preferential voting is optional: Austria, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg,
35 Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Sweden, and evidently Belgium. In other words, in
36 several countries voters that do not find the name of the party leader on their ballot
37 could decide not to cast any preference vote at all. As the weight of party leaders is
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47 ⁸ Details of European electoral systems could be found on the website of the project Electoral System
48 Changes in Europe (ESCE): <http://www.electoralsystemchanges.eu/>

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50 ⁹ Formally-speaking, the Dutch territory is divided into several subnational districts and parties are
51 allowed to present different lists in each of the districts as well as identical lists everywhere. In practice,
52 Dutch parties opt for the latter and present (almost) identical lists in all districts.
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9 increasing, there would be a growing proportion of ballots without any preference
10 votes. It would definitely be worth verifying whether the evolution illustrated here is
11 indeed also found in other European countries.
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15 Finally, beyond question of the electoral system, there is also another point on which
16 findings in the Belgian case could be relevant comparatively, namely the impact of
17 newer parties on the prominence of centralized personalization over decentralized
18 personalization. Newer parties have less prominent candidates and their leaders are
19 therefore more important as they are the only ones known by a large share of the
20 electorate. As a consequence, they have more voters who opt for a list vote when the
21 leader is not on their ballot in their district. The emergence of newer parties has been
22 strong in Belgium over the last two elections, but the growth of these newer players is
23 not unique to Belgium. In many European countries, they are on the rise, while
24 traditional parties are facing difficult times. One could see it in Greece with Syriza, in
25 Spain with Podemos and Ciudadanos, in Italy with the 5-stars movement, in Finland
26 with the Finns Party, in the Netherlands with Geert Wilders' PVV, in Denmark with the
27 Liberal Alliance, in Sweden with the Sweden Democrats. Many of these newer parties
28 rely upon one or two popular leaders, rather than on a broad base of experienced
29 politicians. They have less MPs and also fewer locally anchored politicians to boost the
30 party. Therefore, their success would overall fasten the growth of centralized
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9 personalization at the expenses of decentralized personalization. Previous studies
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11 showed that for some new parties, such as the ecologist parties, leader effects were
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13 less prominent Aardal & Binder (2011). Perhaps, the recent flux of new parties differs
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15 from the rise of the green parties, in the sense that the former are embracing strong
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17 leadership more than the latter. Our study indicates that in particular for new(er)
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19 parties on the right side of the political spectrum political leaders are more important
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21 to attract preferential votes. Future studies on different types of new parties are
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23 needed to confirm this thesis for the left populist parties that are on the rise in many
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25 European countries.
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30 All these elements lead us to believe that what has been observed in Belgium is not
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32 unique. Personalization may indeed be going up to some extent. But, going back to the
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34 distinction proposed by Balmas and colleagues (2014), not all forms of personalization
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36 are on the rise. We find that in terms of voting behavior centralized personalization is
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38 growing, while decentralized personalization is going down simultaneously. In that
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40 sense, an overall decline in candidate voting could actually be a sign of a further
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42 personalization of politics rather than contradicting it.
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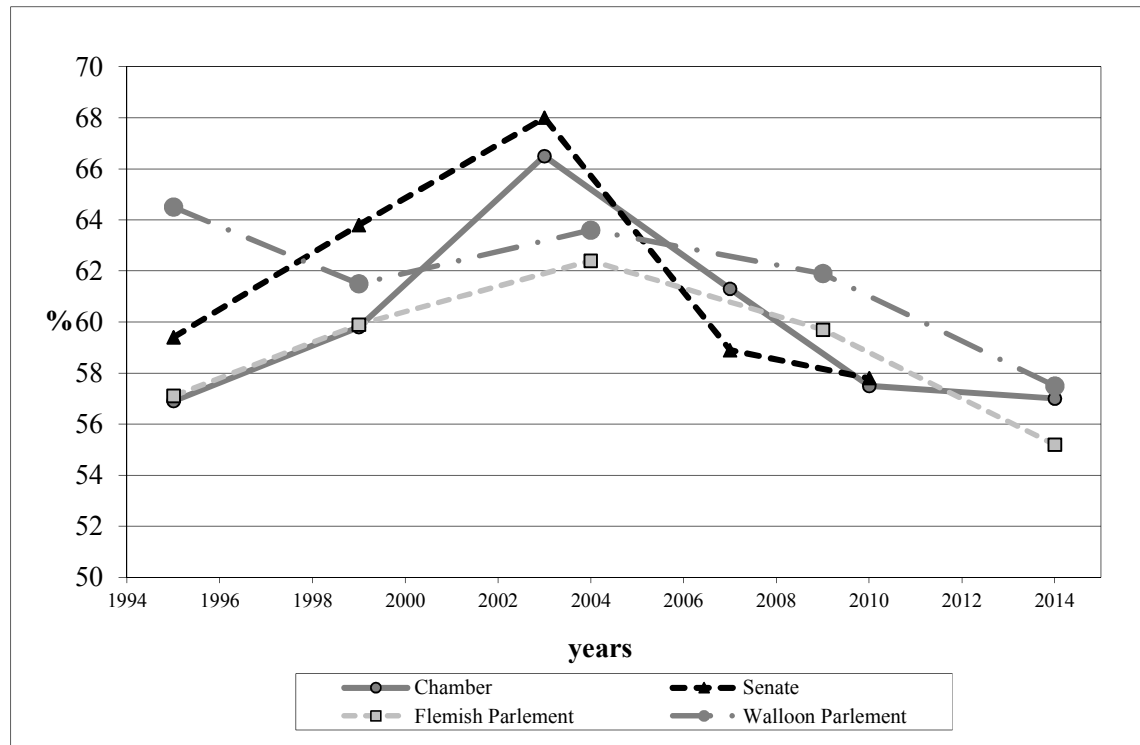
Table 1. Multilevel model: Proportion of preferential votes Belgian federal elections 2003-14

		M1		M2		M3		M4	
INDIVIDUAL LIST		Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.	Coef.	St.Er.
TIME	2003	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
	2007	-4.96***	1.10	-5.61***	1.12	-7.87***	1.61	-7.71***	1.58
	2010	-7.78***	1.05	-8.22***	1.08	-12.71***	1.64	-12.53***	1.61
	2014	-8.12***	1.19	-9.83***	1.22	-13.63***	1.69	-13.41***	1.66
LIST ELECTORAL LEADER (EL)		11.17***	1.25	6.20***	2.09	6.46***	2.04	3.38	2.36
	EL 2007			4.40	3.64	4.32	3.57	5.02	3.53
	EL 2010			2.53	3.16	1.52	3.10	1.56	3.05
	EL 2014			13.22***	3.07	12.48***	3.01	11.04***	3.00
%-INCUMBENT (%INC)		0.19***	0.05	0.17***	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.07
	%INC 2007					0.14	0.08	0.13	0.07
	%INC 2010					0.28***	0.08	0.28***	0.08
	%INC 2014					0.29**	0.10	0.29***	0.10
TRADITIONAL PARTY		Ref.		Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
LEFT NEW PARTY (LNP)		-16.35***	2.23	-16.63***	2.26	-16.30***	2.25	-16.60***	2.28
RIGHT NEW PARTY (RNP)		-22.36***	2.03	-22.78***	2.05	-22.55***	2.05	-23.49***	2.08
CROSS-LEVEL EL * LNP								3.35	2.87
CROSS-LEVEL EL * RNP								8.90***	2.76
FIXED DISTRICT CONTROL									
CONSTANT		75.36***	2.38	76.38***	2.38	79.14***	2.54	79.28***	2.52
SIGMA PARTY		2.83	0.70	2.91	0.72	2.93	0.73	2.97	0.73
SIGMA LIST		6.43	0.26	6.22	0.25	6.07	0.25	5.97	0.24
LOG LIKELIHOOD CHI²		-1058.74		-1048.86		-1041.61		-1036.51	

Intercept & Fixed District Controls Only-model: CONSTANT= 64.59 (3.68); σ PARTY= 12.67 and σ LIST= 8.15; 319 lists and 16 parties. ;*: P<0.10; **: P<0.05; ***: P<0.01

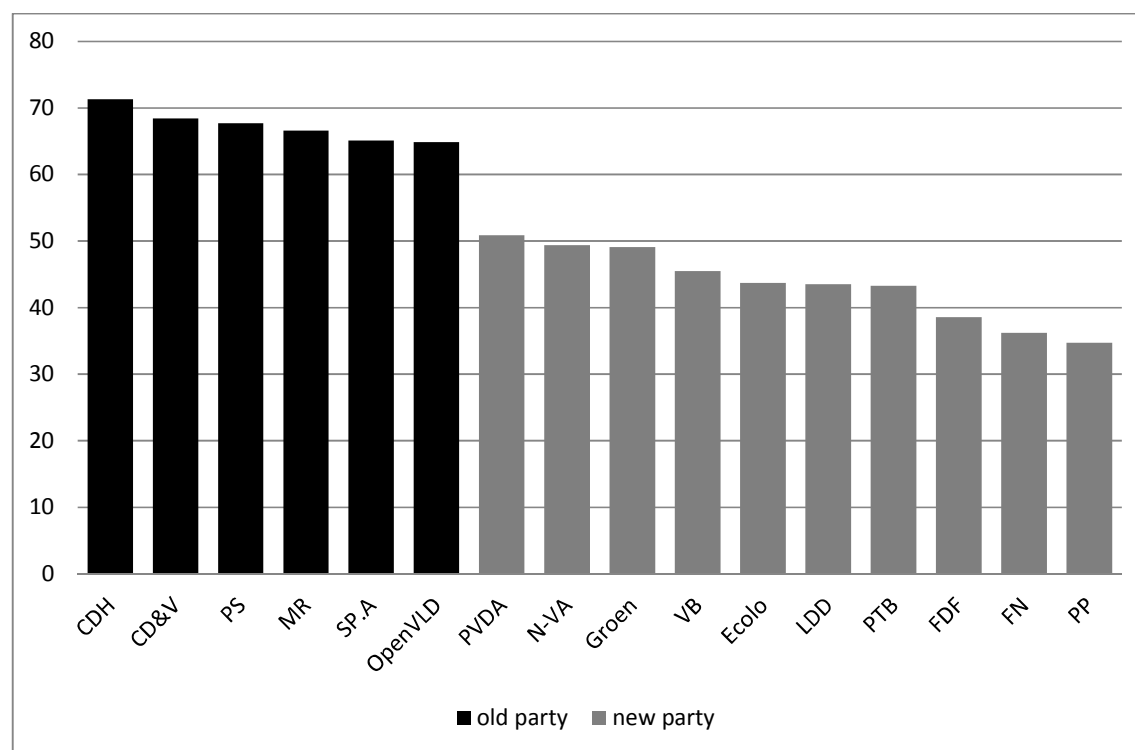
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Figure 1. Share of valid ballot marked with at least one preference vote for the elections of the federal Chamber of Representatives, the federal Senate, the Flemish Parliament and the Walloon Parliament (1995-2014).



Source: Own analyses on official election results

Figure 2. Average percentage of preference votes per party in a district (Chamber elections 2003-2014).

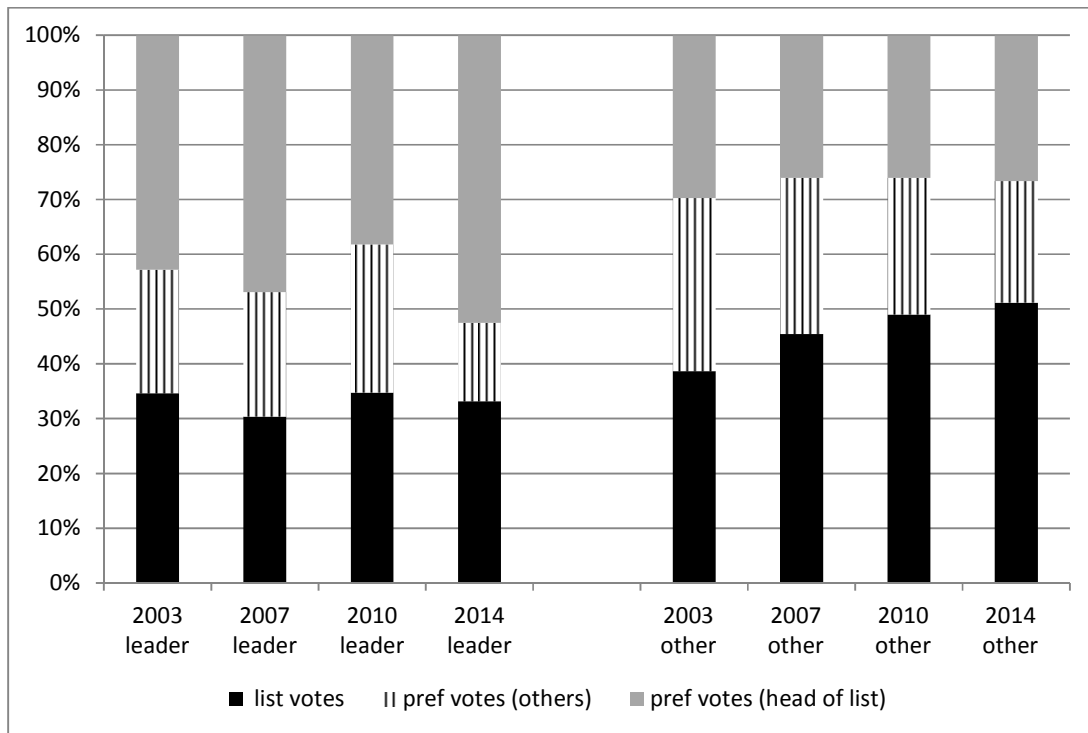


Source: Own analyses on official election results

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Figure 3. Percentage of list votes, preference votes for head of list and preference votes for other candidates, split up in districts with an electoral leader ('leader') and districts without an electoral leader ('other'), 2003-2014.



Source: Own analyses on official election results

view

Figure 4. Interaction plot of electoral leader and election year 2003-2014.

