

Garzia, Diego:

**PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS
AND ELECTORAL CHANGE.**

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Exploring the personalization of politics is in fashion. Candidate-centred politics is being discussed, and scholars are increasingly focusing on party and government leaders. Evidence of the trend is the growing body of literature that explores the roots, manner, outcomes, and consequences of personalized politics. One of the latest contributions to the discussion is the book *Personalization of Politics and Electoral Change* by Diego Garzia, published in 2014.

Though the personalization of politics as a concept was developed in the United States and targets the presidential political system, the two-party system and a majoritarian electoral system, scholars have often adapted the concept and its operationalization for European parliamentary systems. Currently, though, studies of the personalization of politics in post-communist countries is lacking. Garzia's book is no exception to the trend. Its focus is on the established parliamentary democracies of Europe, particularly case studies of Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands. The choice of these three countries, which are sharply different in terms of their electoral systems, the size of their party systems, and the structure of political competition, allows many of the crucial variations in the structure of democratic politics to be highlighted.

Interest in the transformation of politics effected by personalization extends mostly into three dimensions: the institutional dimension, the behavioural dimension, and

the media dimension. The book's focus is on the psychological forces that drive voting, that is, the role played by political leaders in shaping voter choice in parliamentary elections. Garzia thus mainly treats the consequences of behavioural personalization and goes some way to filling the current gap that the difficulties of operationalization have left in the personalization literature.

The book's 137 pages are divided into five chapters, complemented by numerous tables and figures. The first chapter introduces the concept of the personalization of politics in parliamentary democracies. Garzia cites definitions of the personalization of politics by Rahat and Sheaffer, Karvonen, McAllister, Poguntke and Webb, and others who are experts in the area. He points to the substitution of images of party leaders for party symbols in election campaigns as impressionistic evidence that this trend is underway, along with the media's increasing propensity to refer to leading candidates rather than the parties to which they belong. He lists three driving forces behind the personalization process: voters, the media, and political parties. This contrasts with the existing literature, which often cites only two – voters, and parties (or leaders). Garzia identifies the deep transformation of parties and the changing structure of mass communication (chiefly, the expansion of television) as key processes, or roots, in the personalization of politics. Individualization, which other literature lists as the second-most important process in personalization, is mentioned only marginally in connection with the spread of education. The chapter introduces the empirical evidence that has been marshalled so far. Garzia also here presents the political systems of the three countries selected for analysis.

Although existing studies are sceptical about the increased relevance of party leaders on voting over time, the trend towards personalization in politics is generally recognized. Garzia attempts to bring forth new

evidence, and to describe the attitudinal, behavioural, and electoral consequences that have ensued in Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands (Chapters 2–4). The first of these, attitudinal consequences, are assessed via party identification and partisanship (using the method of stacked data matrices). Social modernization and technological innovations have led to new forms of interest representation and political communication that have substantially affected the role played by parties in the democratic process. In turn, this has altered their relationship to voters. Empirical studies have shown the most widespread political schema in use by voters is that based on leaders. Data show the trend towards personalization is most pronounced in written. These findings accord well with the notion of candidate-centred politics, in which voters shift their attention from political leaders, ideologies, and performance assessments that are inherently political and require more sophistication, two-party leaders who, by contrast, may be evaluated easily using the same perceptual strategies constantly employed in everyday life.

Chapter 3 deals with behavioural consequences. Empirical research into the leader effect on democratic elections has not yet achieved a consensus as to its actual contours. Garzia provides a reassessment of the leader effect on voting behaviour in Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands over the last three decades. He takes into account the endogenous relationship between partisanship and party leader evaluations, utilizing single-equation models. But no safe conclusion as to the relative effect of partisanship or leader evaluation on the vote may be drawn without taking into account a potential source of bias: the inability to control for the repeatedly highlighted endogeneity between predictor variables. Accordingly, an instrumental variable approach is used as well. Garzia notes that voter attitudes towards party leaders are the most relevant factor in each and every

statistical model, overcoming partisanship as well as retrospective assessments of the economy and ideological proximity. Sociocultural variables, by contrast, appear to play little, if any, role. Once endogeneity has been taken into account, the electoral effect of leader evaluations appears to be much stronger than is often observed.

The main focus of the fourth chapter is on the micro-level determinants of the electoral outcome (Electoral Consequences). The author is interested in the effect of voter evaluation on political leaders. He employs a counterfactual strategy that asks and answers ‘What if?’ questions. While the current literature is replete with case studies, Garzia provides a fully comparative assessment of leader effects on election outcomes. However, his purely descriptive analysis would seem to disconfirm the simplistic idea that the most popular leader always wins the election. To answer crucial questions and obtain comprehensive results, Garzia employs multivariate statistical techniques. The findings presented make it plausible to conclude that the personalities of leaders do matter in the outcome of democratic elections. This sharply contradicts findings from studies that show the impact of leaders as merely residual. It is crucial to understand that the impact of leaders on the electoral fortunes of their parties depends upon voters’ comparative assessment of the available alternatives.

The last chapter covers Normative and Empirical Implications. The author summarizes the theoretical bases of the concept of candidate-centred politics and empirical findings to do with the attitudinal, behavioural, and electoral consequences in Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands. Garzia argues that the personalization of politics is an important current trend and sometimes rejects the existing literature that takes a negative view of this trend.

Diego Garzia holds a PhD in ‘Comparative and European Politics’ from the University of Siena (Italy). He is currently a Research Fellow at the European Union Democracy Observatory. The long-term focus of his research is on the drivers of voter choice in Western Europe. Garzia is particularly interested in the personalization of politics and its effects on voting behaviour at the individual level. He has authored several academic papers and professional reports

on the topic, including articles published in *Electoral Studies*, *Political Psychology*, *Party Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *West European Politics*. Garzia currently sits on the Steering Committee of the Italian Political Science Association (SISP) and is a member of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES).

Marcela Voženílková
Faculty of Social Studies
Masaryk University Brno