



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Do Leadership Changes Improve Electoral Performance?

Helboe Pedersen, H.; Schumacher, G.

Published in:

The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Helboe Pedersen, H., & Schumacher, G. (2015). Do Leadership Changes Improve Electoral Performance? In W. Cross, & J-B. Pilet (Eds.), *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective* (pp. 149-164). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Do Leadership Changes Improve Electoral Performance?

Helene Helboe Pedersen, Aarhus University
Gijs Schumacher, University of Southern Denmark

Published as:

Pedersen, H. H., & Schumacher, G. (2015). Do Leadership Changes Improve Electoral Performance? In W. Cross & J. B. Pilet (Eds.), *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Abstract

Does changing the leader improve a party's electoral performance? And does it matter who for electoral performance who selects the leader? We hypothesize that in parties with inclusive selectorates leadership change is beneficial because the competition for the leadership is more open, receives more media attention and provides the means for the new leader to demonstrate her qualities. At the same time, a contest for the leadership position highlights party disunity which may reduce electoral support for the party. Also the effect of leadership change may disappear over time because media attention fades away after the election or because it takes time for the leader to make her mark.

Our results demonstrate that after parties changed their leader they enjoy a short-term bump in support measured by opinion polls, especially in parties with an inclusive selectorate. However, parties that changed leader do not do better at the next election.

Every step of the modern party leader is scrutinized by the media, the public and her opponents. Everything - from modernizing the party's policy agenda to choosing the color of a dress or a tie – is discussed in detail by pundits. A party's electoral failure is often attributed to the 'lack of leadership' shown by the party leader and often leads to the dismissal of the party leader (Ennsner-Jedenastik and Schumacher, *this volume*). Reversely, a party's success is generally attributed to the character or competence of the party leader. As for the causal effect of voters' leadership evaluation on vote choice some studies find that leadership or more precisely leader personality traits do not matter at all or not much (Bartels 2002; King 2002; Stewart and Carty 1993). However, more recent studies confirm that leadership and leadership personality does matter for vote choice (Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2012; Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2014; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013; Jenssen & Aalberg, 2006) with the impact of the leader on vote choice moderated by the electoral system (Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2011; So 2012) and party type (Lobo 2008). The implication is that when parties perform poorly in elections or opinion polls, a change in leadership may improve their performance. This – besides other factors – makes leadership selection one of the most crucial issues for political parties to handle. Not only do they need to consider who to select but also how to select them which potentially influences the leader's position within the party as well as her relationship with voters. In this chapter we analyze whether it matters *how* leaders are selected. In other words, are leaders selected by members more or less successful in elections than leaders selected by conference delegates, a party council or the parliamentary party? Also, does it matter whether a leadership selection was contested or not?

Such questions have been discussed in committees and working groups of many parties. Does a leadership election among the members mobilize or split the membership base? Will a "democratically" elected leader be perceived as more legitimate and therefore be more successful (Poguntke and Webb 2005)? Will the media interpret the election as more democratic and therefore better, or will the media emphasize the party's disunity and dig up nasty facts about the candidates for the leadership? Parties are increasingly expanding their selectorates (Pilet and Cross 2014, Kenig 2009), but they also worry about the consequences. For example, the Dutch Liberal Party's (VVD) leadership was anxious about the electoral consequences and party unity after and during the close race between eventual winner and current Prime Minister Mark Rutte and the popular right-wing minister for Immigration and Integration Rita Verdonk. The Dutch Labour party (PvdA) organized a leadership vote in 2012 in which it forced the candidates not to criticize each other and to continuously display signs of friendship and unity. In sum, parties worry whether open leadership selection procedures and the contestation for the leadership position have positive or negative consequences for the party's electoral performance.

We investigate the consequences of different leadership selection procedures for the public support of a party using the party leadership data collected for this volume which includes information about when a change of leadership happened, electoral results, and selection procedures. We distinguish between a short-term (immediately after the leadership change) and a long-term (the first election after the leadership change) effect.¹ To analyze the short-term effects we use poll data showing monthly changes

¹ We also analyze a longer-term effect by analyzing leadership evaluation as a dependent variable using various waves of the Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems data and selectorate type as an independent variable. We find no statistically significant relationship between selectorate type and leader evaluation controlling for party

in the popular support of parties in four countries: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands², Norway, and Denmark. By using data on leadership change, the selectorate and whether the elections were contested or not, we find that leadership changes have a positive effect on the party's poll rating, especially when these elections were (1) contested and (2) when the selectorate consisted of the party's membership. But these effects disappear after a few months. To analyze the long-term effects we use the party's electoral performance in votes as a dependent variable, and selectorate type, leadership change and leadership contestation as independent variables. Here we find no statistically significant results. This analysis verifies that indeed the effects of leadership change in interaction with selectorate or contestation disappear over time. This demonstrates that, at the very least, leadership elections conducted by the membership and contestation for the leadership position do not have a *negative* impact on the party's performance. If the leadership election is close in time to the national election, membership-based leadership elections and contestation for the leadership position may even have a positive impact on the party's performance.

The importance of the party leader

That party leaders matter to electoral outcomes will come as no surprise to most political spectators. Many remember and understand elections as battles between typically two competing candidates: Obama versus Bush, Blair versus Major, Schröder versus Kohl. These examples show that focus on party leaders is not only prominent in presidential systems, such as the United States, or two-party-systems, such as the United Kingdom, but also in multi-party-systems such as Germany. Complicated elections with many parties and coalition governments are still framed in a personalized manner bringing party leaders in focus. There may at least be two reasons why elections are understood as a competition between party leaders. The first is the mediatization of politics, where politics is transformed into a show. The media portray elections as a horserace between prominent figures (Poguntke and Webb 2005) to maximize news values such as drama, conflict and a personalized angle. It follows from this perspective that the focus on party leaders is a relatively new phenomenon or at least that it has intensified as the importance of mass media has increased. The second possible reason for a focus on party leaders is that we as human beings and social creatures are used to, and experienced in, taking cues from the appearance of 'strangers' (Bittner 2011; Laustsen 2014). Taking cues from the personal traits of party leaders is therefore a relatively easy way of forming political preferences. This does not have to be a deplorable shortcut for less informed voters. Cues about the personality of political leaders may be valuable insights in a messy political process where many decisions cannot be foreseen in the party program. Indeed studies show that it is the more politically knowledgeable voters who take the personality of party leaders most into account when making decisions about how to vote (Bittner 2011;

size. But sometimes there are very long spells between selection of the leader and the evaluation of the leader in one of the CSES waves. For example, in the first CSES wave Helmut Kohl is still the leader of the German Christian Democrats (CDU), but was elected to that position 25 years before the 1998 election. In between that period so many other variables could have influenced the 1998 evaluation that it is likely that our analysis suffers from omitted variables bias. Therefore, we do not report these results here. They are available upon request.

² The Netherlands are not part of the dataset in this book but the selectorate variable was collected by one of the authors of this chapter (GS). We had poll data from very few countries in the dataset and therefore we added the Netherlands to this analysis.

Cutler 2002). According to this perspective party leaders have always been important and though the media may have made information about party leaders more accessible it is not the media but fundamental human skills that make personality traits of party leaders important for votes.

Exactly how political leaders influence the electoral success of political parties is debatable. King (2002) concludes – on the basis of a cross-temporal comparison of elections in the US, UK, France, Russia, Canada and Germany - that leader personality traits are by and large unimportant for electoral outcomes. In a review of seven studies Bittner concludes that party leaders have an impact anywhere between 0 and 8 per cent (2011:94). In her own study of 35 elections in seven countries– which is probably the most comprehensive one so far –she finds that party leaders do indeed have an independent impact on electoral results and though the significance of the impact varies across political systems leaders matter in all institutional environments. A recent edited volume on this topic reaches similar conclusions (Aarts, Blais, and Schmitt 2011). Using a new methodological approach Garzia (2012) even concludes that the impact of leadership evaluations is much greater than we have assumed until now. Finally, Lobo (2008) finds – also in a country-comparative study – that the impact of the leader depends on the party type so that the voters for mass parties are less influenced by the popularity of the party leader than voters for catch-all parties. Thus, similar to Bittner’s finding regarding political institutions, party types may influence the importance of the party leader. Nonetheless, leaders matter for both party types. These results suggest that parties should be clever when they select new leaders and a change of leadership may be a way out of electoral misery.

Electoral prospects of leadership change

Whereas systematic studies of party leaders’ impact on electoral results are still somewhat scarce, empirical investigations of the electoral consequences of a change in leadership are almost nonexistent. Two important contributions focus explicitly on the impact of leadership change. First, Stewart and Carty (1993) study to what extent party leadership change boosts the electoral performance of Canadian provincial parties. The results are mixed. Overall leadership changes do not seem to have any impact, however behind this null-finding hides great diversity between parties in and out of office and between leadership elections based on low and intense levels of competition.

Second, So (2013a) argues that the impact of leadership change depends on the electoral system. She argues that in majoritarian systems– often with a two-party system – leaders receive all the blame when the party loses and therefore the leader is more likely to be replaced if the party performs badly. Leader replacement is also a less risky strategy in a majoritarian system, where voters have to turn to the other side of the political space if they are dissatisfied with the new leader. In contrast, in proportional systems the link between parliamentary seats and in-government status is less straightforward due to coalition formation. Therefore the impact of party leaders on the vote is less crucial for the success of the party. Party leaders in proportional systems are therefore less likely to be replaced and a possible replacement will also be more risky since voters have neighboring parties to turn to if they are dissatisfied with the new leader. Hence, So (2013a) finds that leadership change is only a preferable electoral strategy for parties in opposition in majoritarian systems.

Based on this state-of-art we are most likely to make the vague conclusion that leadership change matters sometimes, whereas So has qualified this ‘sometimes’ by taking the political institutions into account we would like to add how the intra-party circumstances are important to the impact of a leadership change, how a change of leadership may have a direct as well as an indirect impact on the electoral results, and for how long a leadership change impact may survive in the political competition for votes.

Why leadership change may improve a party’s electoral performance

A leadership change produces four interrelated processes: re-evaluation of the party by voters, media attention, contestation by party elites and positive feedback effects due to the leadership change procedure. We discuss each mechanism and the hypotheses they produce.

First, a leader is replaced for some reason. Sometimes a leader dies or steps down for health reasons. But most often a leader is replaced because of poor performance in elections or in government (Andrews and Jackman 2008; Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller 2011). In this case many voters have negative associations with the outgoing party leader. The event of changing the party leadership triggers voters to re-evaluate their opinion of the party because a crucial aspect of the party’s image and appeal has changed. Of course a new leader may be even more negatively evaluated by voters than the outgoing leader. Or the new leader may be unknown and voters have no opinion of her. On average, however, we expect parties to select a leader who is slightly better evaluated by voters than the outgoing leader. It would hardly be rational to replace an incumbent with an even more unpopular replacement. Because voters are forced to re-evaluate and because it is likely that at the time of leadership change the replacement is better evaluated than the outgoing leader, we expect leadership change to improve the party’s electoral performance (H1).

Second, when a party changes its leader media attention for the party will increase. The party will enjoy a larger share of the broadcast and newspaper agenda allowing the party to promote its leadership candidates and take the opportunity to talk about the issues it tries to promote and believes to be beneficial for the party. Thus, from an agenda-setting perspective a change of leadership provides a window of opportunity in inter-party issue competition. The increase in media attention reinforces voter re-evaluation, which leads us to further support H1.

But – as discussed throughout this book – parties differ in how they select their leaders. Some leaders appoint a “crown-prince” who takes over the leadership without a vote or even a consultation with other party members. Other parties leave the selection to the party elite in the form of the parliamentary party group or a party council. Most parties, however, have conference delegates selecting the party leader in a major party conference. But, as indicated, parties are moving to more inclusive methods, most often letting party members – or even party supporters – select the new leaders (Cross and Blais 2012). The selection procedure is likely to affect the impact of a leadership change on party performance as the process of leadership change takes longer, is more public and receives more media attention the more inclusive the selection procedure is (e.g. selection by supporters or members). Clearly, the “crown-prince” receives relatively little attention: his elevation was

long expected and undisputed. Media will focus on this leadership change only for a few days. In contrast, big leadership contests with various candidates and a one-member-one-vote system take longer and produce multiple perspectives and outlooks for the media to focus on. Moreover, media might even produce more favorable news items about democratic leadership elections than coronations of “crown-princes”. We expect this increased media attention to further reinforce H1. In sum, we expect leadership changes in parties with more inclusive selectorates (primarily members) to have a larger impact on the party’s electoral performance than in parties with a more exclusive selectorate (conference, parliamentary group, party council) (H2).

Third, we also expect contestation for the leadership position to matter. An election between two candidates equally well-known and equally likely to win will attract more attention by media and voters than an election between a good candidate and a clown with no chance to win. Leadership elections in a one-member-one-vote selectorate differ in their level of contestation (see Kenig and Rahat this volume), but elections may also be contested in selectorates consisting of conference delegates and parliamentary groups. Hence, contestation is not perfectly correlated to the inclusiveness of selectorates, and is a substantively different mechanism. Contestation may further reinforce media attention and voter re-evaluation and therefore may enhance the party’s electoral performance (H3). On the other hand, contestation may also have a negative impact on a party’s electoral performance. Contestation between two or more candidates shows that the party is disunited and thereby may blur the party’s agenda in the perspective of voters. Contestation may motivate opposing candidates to engage in negative campaigning, which may affect voters’ evaluation of the character and competence of both the winning and the losing candidate. In the worst case a strongly contested election may even bring about a party split, which may also divide the party’s electorate.

Fourth, elections produce certain feedback effects that may strengthen a party’s electoral performance. For example, politicians often receive better evaluations after they have won an election, even from voters who voted for another candidate (Beasley and Joslyn 2001). Also, Poguntke and Webb (2005) argue that a direct election among the party rank-and-file will provide the party leader with more legitimacy and thus also autonomy. A leader selected by an inclusive selectorate may thus be perceived positively by voters who prefer a leader elected by what they see as a democratic and legitimate procedure. Furthermore, a broad based selectorate including ordinary members, and perhaps even supporters, may be more capable of identifying a broadly appealing leader rather than an ideologically motivated activist who may be more concerned with policy positions and loyalty rather than communication skills and personal character (Lobo 2008; So 2012). Hence, the selection procedure may influence the type of leader elected and thus also the impact that this leadership change will have on support for the party.

The mechanisms we have outlined here are likely to have short-term as well as long-term effects. But since different mechanisms are likely to have different effects over time, we are able to differentiate between them based on the short and long term effects of leadership change and contestation. Especially increased media attention - which we have argued will be strongest when there is a direct election among the members and/or the election is contested - is likely to produce short term effects since the media will soon move attention towards other issues when the new leader has taken her

position. In contrast if a membership ballot systematically results in the selection of leaders who are better at appealing to the public and can take their position based on a more legitimate mandate the positive impact of a leadership change should also have long term effects. The same logic applies for contestation, if it results in enduring party conflict it may reduce public support for the party in the long run. Hence, we expect the impact of leadership change and contestation to be strongest in the short run when it is covered by the media.

In sum, leadership change triggers attention and re-evaluation by voters which may enhance a party's electoral performance (H1). There is more attention if elections are contested – which has a positive (H3) or negative (H4) effect - and/or take place in a party with a more inclusive selectorate (H2). But with time attention also fades away (H5). Also, with time new leaders make mistakes, and may even repeat the mistakes made by their predecessors. On the other hand, the effect of a party leader change may take place much later as it takes time for leaders to change the party's agenda, to put together a competent team of advisors and to find the right tone to counter the party's rivals. Consequently, we suggest that we will find different effects for our hypotheses in the short-term and the long-term. To analyze this we evaluate our hypotheses using two different units of analysis. First, operationalizing the short-term effect, our unit of analysis is the party's standing in monthly opinion polls. Second, for operationalizing the long-term effect, our unit of analysis is the party's electoral performance at a national election. As we need to use slightly different regression setup and variables for the two analyses we separate them into two separate sections and discuss the research design separately.

- H1** Leadership change improves the party's electoral performance.
- H2** In parties with inclusive selectorates leadership change has a stronger positive effect on the party's electoral performance.
- H3** Contested leadership elections have an positive effect on the party's electoral performance
- H4** Contested leadership elections have an negative effect on the party's electoral performance
- H5** The impact of leadership change and contestation decreases over time

Does Changing the Leader Influence the Short-Term Popularity of a Party?

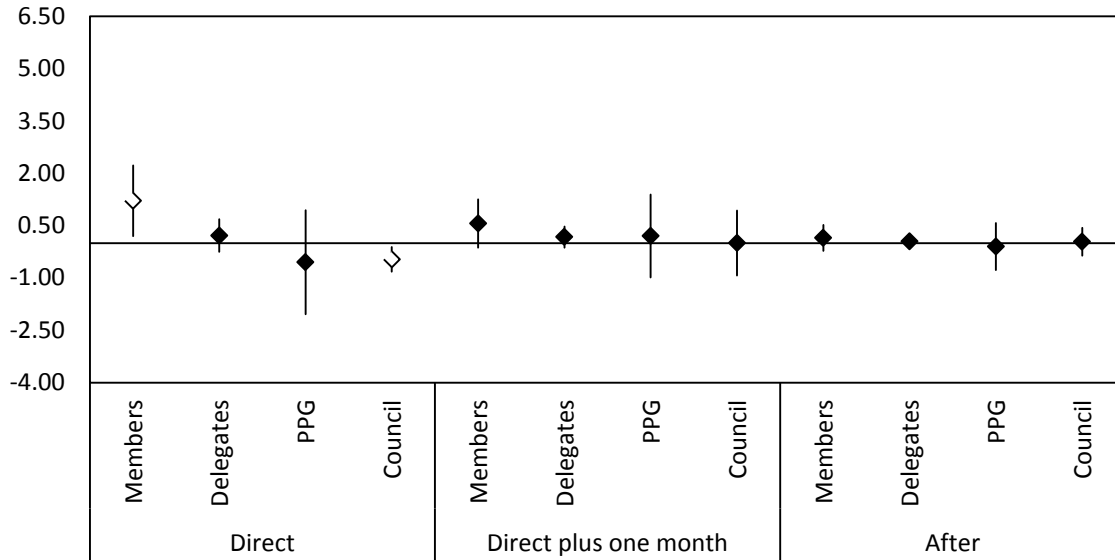
We used historical data on party's standing in monthly opinion polls (Askham-Christensen 2012). Such data are only publicly available to a limited extent. Hence we can only compare the UK, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands (after 2000). For all parties in our dataset (22) we collected polls up to 5 months before and after the leadership change. With some missing values this totals 1058 observations clustered in 103 leadership change episodes. Even though we only utilize a limited set of countries from the dataset, the number of clustered observations should allow us to make reliable inferences for the larger set of democracies. Our dependent variable is the monthly change in the percentage of the vote for the party predicted by the opinion polls. We have three independent variables of interest. First, leadership change, which is a dummy variable indicating in which month the change took place (1) and in which month there was no change (0). Second, we created a contest variable. Theoretically, we expect a difference between walkovers and competitive elections. So we coded elections as competitive (1) or not (0). Our criterion is that a race was competitive if the winning candidates received less than 75% of the votes on the first ballot. Choosing a quantitative criterion to divide competitive races from

non-competitive races is to some extent – we admit - arbitrary. We therefore experimented with different cut-off levels and report these in the results section. Third, we use the selectorate variable constructed in the dataset. Originally the variable distinguished between seven categories of selectorates: all voters, party members, party delegates to party conferences, a party council, parliamentary party group, self-appointed leader, and leaders selected by the incumbent leader. The most inclusive selectorate - the voters – is hardly used: only eight times in the full dataset and not at all in our reduced sample. Similarly, the most exclusive selectorate: leader appointment, is also not part of our reduced sample. This means that we end up distinguishing between selection by (1) party members, (2) conference delegates, (3) the parliamentary party group and (4) a party council.

We begin by comparing bivariate relationships between the dependent variable and each independent variable before moving to multivariate analyses. First, we compare polls in month with no leadership change to polls in months with leadership change. We find that parties poll 0.3 percent higher in the month of a leadership change than in the other months. This difference is statistically significant and supports our hypothesis (H1) that leadership change improves the party's electoral performance. Second, we compare the change in polls at the month of leadership change for parties with different selectorates (see figure 1: Direct). We find that parties with a members-selectorate experience on average an increase in poll ratings in the months of leadership change compared to months with no change of leadership and the differences between membership selectorate and the other procedures is significant. Parties that change leaders by other procedures do not seem to benefit from a change. Actually changing the leader by a party council seems to harm the party. Third, we compare polls from the month before to those one month after the leadership change to show very short term changes (Direct plus one month in figure 1). Over this short term, parties that have a membership selectorate still tend to benefit from a leadership change but the difference between the procedures is not significant. Finally in our fourth comparison, we compare the polls five months before and five months after the leadership change. Here the positive impact of a change seems to vanish for all parties including those with a membership ballot. Hence, the positive impact of a leadership change fades out over a relatively short time frame indicating that the potential media attention caused by a leadership election does not transform into stable changes of party preferences.

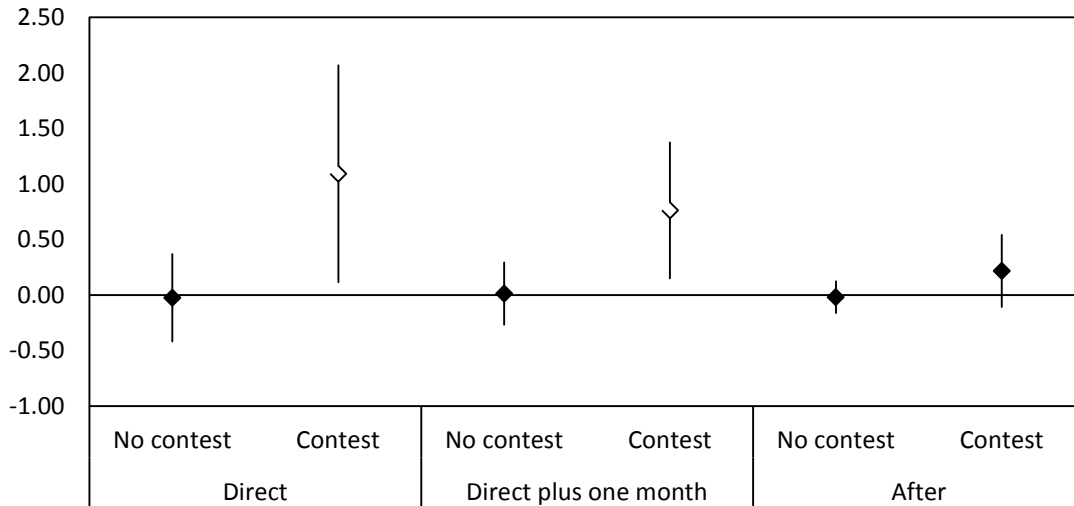
Next, we look at the change in opinion polls for contested and uncontested leadership elections (see figure 2). As in figure 1 we look at three different time periods: (1) the month of the leadership election, (2) one month before the election and one month after election, and (3) 5 months before the election compared to 5 months after the election. We find that a contested election significantly increases a party's standing in the poll by 1% in the month of the leadership election. This supports the hypothesis (H3) that contested elections have a positive effect on party performance in the polls. As in figure 1, we also see in figure 2, that the effect of contestation becomes weaker over time (one month after the election and 5 months after the election). This supports the hypothesis (H5) that the effect of contestation decreases over time.

Figure 1. Effect of leadership change on opinion polls by selectorate type



White diamonds indicate mean differences that are significantly different from zero at $p < .1$. The figure illustrates three comparisons. In the 'direct' comparison polling results in months with leadership change are compared to polling results in months with no change of leadership. In the 'direct plus one month' comparison poll results from one month before the leadership change are compared to poll results from one month after the leadership change. Finally, in the 'after' comparison party support in polls five months before the leadership change is compared to party support in polls estimated five months after the leadership change.

Figure 2. Effect of leadership change on opinion polls by contestation



White diamonds indicate mean differences that are significantly different from zero at $p < .1$. The figure shows three comparisons. In the 'direct' comparison poll results in months with a leadership election is compared to months with no leadership election. In the 'direct plus one month' comparison poll results in the month before the leadership election is compared to poll results in the month after the election. Finally, in the 'after' comparison poll results in five months before the leadership election is compared to poll results in five months after the election.

We study these differences more systematically by means of time-series cross-sectional analysis of all polls we obtained around each leadership change (103 changes, total of 1058 observations) in our data. We choose a standard set-up by regressing the change in polls on a lagged level dependent variable to address serial correlation and utilizing panel-corrected standard errors which addresses level differences between panels (Beck and Katz 1995). We run several analyses (see table 1).

In model 1 we only add leader change (month of leader change) as an independent variable. This effect is not significant and provides no support for our first hypothesis. In model 2, we look at the contestation variable. The dummy variable is positive and strongly significant as expected from the mean comparison in figure 2. Hence, on the short term parties tend to benefit from the attention a contested election is expected to create and the result supports our third hypothesis.³

In model 3 we analyze whether the effect of leadership changes differs by selectorate type. This is expressed by the interaction effects at the bottom of model 3. Contestation is closely correlated to the leadership selection procedure and therefore not included in model 3. We use membership selectorate as the base for comparison and find as expected that the impact of a leadership change is smaller for more exclusive procedures (selection by conference delegates and the PPG) compared to a membership ballot. However, there is no significant difference between having members or a party council select a new leader though the coefficient supports the pattern found in figure 1. Hence, we find some support for hypothesis (H2) that inclusive procedures increase the impact of a change.⁴

Table 1. Time-series cross-sectional analysis of changes in polls

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Polls (t-1)	-.018* (.006)	-.019* (.006)	-.018* (.006)
Leader change	.340 (.235)		1.405* (.516)
Contest Selectorate (ref = members)		1.19* (.404)	
Conference			.136

³ We ran additional analyses using different cut-off points for our contestation variable. Instead of 75% of the vote for the winning candidate, we used 90% and 95% of the vote as the cut-off between 0 and 1. In these analyses we find no result for contestation. This suggests that there must be a serious candidate that picks up more than 10% of the vote for contestation to matter.

⁴ As mentioned the level of contest is closely related to selection procedure. 23 out of the 26 contested elections are found within the categories of membership or delegate selectorates. But if we add contest as a variable to model 4, the impact of contest is still positive but much smaller and not significant. The differences in the interaction terms remain significant at the 0.1 level and interestingly the difference between the delegates and membership remains. Hence, we find most support of H2 that the impact of a leadership change depends on the selection procedure, rather than an independent effect of contested leadership changes. Contest is, however, closely related to the selection procedure which makes the two factors difficult to isolate from each other.

			(.189)
Council			-.250
			(.448)
PPG			.012
			(.282)
Selectorate x Leader change			
Deleg X Lead Change			-1.260*
			(.591)
PPG X Lead Change			-1.849*
			(-.909)
Council X Lead Change			-1.513
			(1.459)
N	1058	1058	1058
R2	.01	.02	.02

* p <.05, † p <.1. Note that we report unstandardized interaction effects in model 4.

At least in the short run parties benefit from calling an election among their members. This may be due to increased media attention which should then disappear over time. Also membership elections may actually result in “better” leaders that are more charismatic and have a strong intra-party mandate. If this is the case the impact of a leadership change should not disappear over time.

Does Changing the Leader Improve Electoral Performance?

Now we evaluate our expectations for the longer term. For this we utilize the main dataset of this volume. The data set includes information about changes of party leadership in 111 political parties from 15 countries and covering 1965 to 2012. The unit of analysis is a specific party in an election year, due to some recoding and missing variables we are left with approximately 800 observations.⁵ We use the information on a party’s electoral performance from the data set and our dependent variable is the change in the party’s vote share. Similar to our previous analysis we use the data on selectorate with membership election as the most inclusive procedure. In contrast to our analysis of polls, the larger sample we use here includes leadership appointment as the most exclusive procedure.⁶ This last category did not exist among the parties included in the poll analyses.⁷ Further we include dummies for leadership changes and contestation. Hereby we have measures for the main variables (leadership change, selection procedure and election results) to test our expectations.

⁵ Some parties change their party leader several times in one year. We here just register if there was a change or not which leaves us with 550 changes.

⁶ This is a recoding of the original seven categories. We excluded the voters as a selectorate as it only appeared seven times in our dataset. Further we excluded categories of others, as it was not clear how to interpret them as more or less inclusive. This means that we excluded 171 observations. Finally, in 34 cases it was not possible to determine who was eligible to select the leader.

⁷ For that reason we also tested our general findings against a model in which we only include Norway, UK and Denmark. This model is the best comparison we can make to the model tested in the previous section. The results of this smaller sample were similar to that of the main model reported in Table 2.

We run a time-series cross-sectional model similar to the analysis in the previous section, now taking election results at the last election as a lagged dependent variable. Furthermore, we add various controls, because the link between a change of leader and an electoral result three years after can be difficult to establish as many things happen in politics in three years. We try to control for these events by adding opposition/government status and the change in electoral results at the last election as independent variables.

In model 1 we only add leadership change and the two control variables to the model. In this model leadership change is insignificant. Once we add the selectorate variables and the interaction between leadership change and selectorate (model 2), we find that leadership changes do not matter to electoral performance for any type of selectorate. This contradicts our second hypothesis. In model 3 we only include the contest variable dummy besides controls. Again, this has no significant impact on the electoral results. The full model (model 4) allows us to draw inferences for the leadership change variable. We find that the type of selectorate makes no difference for the effect of leadership change. In contrast to the short term results displayed in table 1, the long term results in table 2 indicate - if anything - that centralized procedures where the leadership appoints the new leader is the best choice for parties changing leader. In the short term parties may benefit from the attention open democratic elections attract, but in the long run parties benefit from closed procedures which do not illuminate party disagreements or fundamentally shake the intra-party balance of power.

Table 2. Time-series cross-sectional analysis of changes in election results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Change of leader	-.584 (.413)	-1.800 (1.098)	-.728 (.472)	-2.156 ⁺ (1.173)
Leadership contest			.387 (.624)	.563 (.653)
Election results last election	-.075* (.017)	-.104* (.019)	-.074* (.017)	-.105* (.020)
Government party	-2.439* (.462)	-2.541* (.481)	-2.417* (.463)	-2.517* (.482)
Selectorate(ref=Members)				
Conference		-.471 (.999)		-.481 (.999)
Council		-1.115 (1.311)		-1.114 (1.312)
PPG		-1.150 (1.290)		-1.162 (1.291)
Leader		-2.898 (2.175)		-2.926 (2.177)
Change x Selectorate				
Change x Conference		1.042 (1.218)		1.219 (1.236)
Change x PPG		2.313 (-1.575)		2.439 (-1.583)
Change x Council		.731 (1.698)		.937 (1.715)
Change x Leader		6.947 (4.484)		7.329 (4.506)
R2	.08	.08	.08	.08
N	796	787	796	787

* p <.05, ⁺ p <.1. Note that we report unstandardized interaction effects in models 2 and 4.

Conclusion

Does a change of leader improve the public support of a party? And does it matter for the party's electoral performance *how* the leader was selected? We know from the literature that party leaders matter to vote choice but almost no studies exist on how a change of leader impacts on a party's electoral results. And even though great reforms have been made in many parties regarding how they select their leaders, often motivated by a wish to attract more members, we have no prior knowledge of how these reforms may influence the party in terms of winning elections.

Our analyses show variation in the effect of leadership changes for parties with different selectorates. We have discussed four mechanisms - voter re-evaluation, media attention, contestation and feedback effects – which may explain this variation. First, we expected leadership change to have a positive effect on a party's performance due to increasing attention and perhaps getting rid of an unsuccessful leader. In the short-term we found weak evidence for this hypothesis, over the long-term we found no evidence for this hypothesis. The short-term effects seem to disappear after a few months, which explain the absence of any long-term effects.

Second, we expected the effect of leadership change to be more pronounced in more inclusive selectorates where the media attention should be greater and the winning leader may have demonstrated crucial qualities in terms of the ability to attract the votes of members. We do find evidence for this in the short-term analysis. Leadership changes in the one-member-one-vote category do have a positive significant effect, which we did not find for the other categories. But in the long run it does not seem to matter how leaders were elected. This provides most support for the media mechanism since the attention of the media will disappear while the personality of a leader is more likely to be constant.

Our third and fourth hypotheses concern the effect of contestation on electoral performance. Some selectorate types are much more likely to produce contestation than others so it is difficult to evaluate the impact of contestation. We argued that contestation may increase media attention and therefore increase public support, but on the other hand we also argued that contestation will expose party disagreements which may decrease public support. In the short-term analysis we find that contestation is good for the party's standing in the polls confirming H3. For the long-term analysis we find that contestation has no effect.

To sum up, we can conclude that changing the leader of a party does not have a negative impact on the electoral performance of a party. Rather, it may have short term positive effects. This positive effect fades over time as the media and voters turn attention towards other issues. This tendency exists independently of how the new leader was elected. Party leaders may be crucial for party performance but it is very difficult for parties to institutionalize strategies for selecting the “best” leader.

References

- Aarts, Kees, André Blais, and Herman Schmitt. 2011. *Political Leaders and Democratic Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Andrews, Josephine T., and Robert W Jackman. 2008. "If Winning Isn't Everything, Why Do They Keep Score? Consequences of Electoral Performance for Party Leaders." *British Journal of Political Science* 38(04): 657–75.
- Askham-Christensen, Jacob. 2012. *The Logic of Political Competition and Government Responsiveness in Parliamentary Systems*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2002. "The Impact of Candidate Traits in American Presidential Elections." In Anthony King (ed.), *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beasley, Ryan K., and Mark R. Joslyn. 2001. "Cognitive Dissonance and Post-Decision Attitude Change in Six Presidential Elections." *Political Psychology* 22(3): 521–40.
- Beck, Nathaniel, and Jonathan N Katz. 1995. "What To Do (And Not To Do) With Time-Series Cross-Section Data." *American Political Science Review* 89(September): 634–47.
- Bittner, Amanda. 2011. *Platform or Personality?: The Role of Party Leaders in Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cross, William, and A. Blais. 2011. "Who Selects the Party Leader?" *Party Politics* 18(2): 127–50.
- Cutler, Fred. 2002. "The Simplest Shortcut of All: Sociodemographic Characteristics and Electoral Choice." *The Journal of Politics* 64(2): 466-490.
- Enns-Jedenastik, Laurenz, and Wolfgang C Müller. 2013. "Intra-Party Democracy , Political Performance , and the Survival of Party Leaders : Austria , 1945 – 2011." *Party Politics* doi: 10.1177/1354068813509517 .
- Garzia, Diego. 2012. "Party and Leader Effects in Parliamentary Elections: Towards a Reassessment." *Politics* 32(3): 175–85.
- Kenig, Ofer. 2009. "Classifying Party Leaders' Selection Methods in Parliamentary Democracies." *Journal of Elections , Public Opinion & Parties* 19(4): 37–41.
- King, Anthony. 2002. *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Laustsen, Lasse. 2013. "Decomposing the Relationship Between Candidates' Facial Appearances and Electoral Success." *Political Behavior* doi: 10.1007/s11109-013-9253-1 .

Lobo, Marina Costa. 2008. "Parties and Leader Effects. Impact of Leaders in the Vote for Different Types of Parties." *Party Politics* 14(3): 281–98.

Poguntke, Thomas, and Paul Webb. 2005. *The Presidentialization of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

So, Florence. 2012. *Party Leadership Selection in Parliamentary Democracies*. UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Stewart, David K., and R. K. Carty. 1993. "Does Changing the Party Leader Provide an Electoral Boost? A Study of Canadian Provincial Parties: 1960–1992." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 26(2): 313–30.