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8 PARTY LEADERS IN THE MEDIA AND THE VOTER'S MIND²⁷

8.1 Personalisation

According to the personalisation thesis, 'individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2010: 4). This increased importance of individual political actors has been noticed in the political arena, in the media, and in voting behaviour (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007). The prominence of individual politicians in these different arenas is assumed to be interdependent. Karvonen (2010: 85), for example, states that '[i]t would be difficult to picture the rise to prominence of the personalization thesis without major changes in the media landscape surrounding politics'. Media personalisation is believed to have a pervasive influence on the behaviour of both politicians and voters. Rahat and Sheafer (2007) indeed showed that media personalisation preceded personalisation in the behaviour of politicians. Yet, it has not been tested whether media personalisation influences personalisation in voting behaviour (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007).

The literature on personalisation makes a distinction between centralised and decentralised personalisation (Balmas et al., in press). *Centralised personalisation* refers to a focus on prominent political leaders like presidents, prime ministers, and party leaders, while *decentralised personalisation* refers to a focus on individual politicians other than these prominent ones, like MPs (Balmas et al., in press). This distinction between centralised and decentralised personalisation can be applied to personalisation in different arenas. Van Aelst et al. (2012: 6), for example, distinguish between the 'general visibility' of politicians and the 'concentrated visibility' of a few prominent politicians in the news. Studies have shown that especially those politicians with good charismatic skills and political resources are covered in the news (Sheafer, 2001; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer, 2006). In voting behaviour, centralised

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personalisation can be equated with so-called *leader effects*, i.e. the effect of the evaluation of individual party leaders on the voting decision. The study of the prominence of party leaders in the news and in voting behaviour is especially important in the context of parliamentary elections 'with its traditional emphasis on the role of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2010: 2). This study therefore focuses on *centralised* personalisation in the news and the voter's mind, operationalised as the prominence of party leaders.

Knowledge on the relationship between the prominence of party leaders in the media and the importance of party leader evaluations in the voting decision is important, since it is precisely personalisation in voting behaviour that has been fiercely criticised. Personalisation in voting behaviour refers to 'citizens' increased emphasis on the candidates, at the expense of considering collective group-identity variables such as social groups and political parties [in the voting decision]' (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007: 68). Voting based on leader evaluations 'directly contradicts the basic logic of parliamentary systems in which the party, not the candidate, stands at the center of the political process' (Rahat and Sheafer, 2007: 66). Voting based on leader evaluations instead of evaluations of political parties and their issue stances is consequently considered a suboptimal decision method (e.g. Swanson and Mancini, 1996).

As noted before, one of the presumed causes of personalisation in voting behaviour is media personalisation. To gain a better understanding of the relationship between media personalisation and personalisation in voting behaviour we have to investigate the relationship between attention to personalised coverage and the importance of party leaders in one's voting decision. The central research question of this study is whether exposure to *personalised coverage* affects *personalised voting behaviour*.

8.2 Dynamics in leader evaluations

In the scholarly debate on the role of leader evaluations in the voting decision, the relation between leader evaluations and party evaluations takes an important place. Some scholars argue that voters hardly distinguish between evaluations of party leaders and evaluations of the parties

these leaders represent (e.g. Aarts, 2001; Kaase, 1994; King, 2002; Van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010). Kaase (1994: 214), for example, states that '[t]he partisan coloring of the candidates leads to a situation where a separation of candidate preference and party preference by voters is highly unlikely'. The opposing view holds that voters do make genuine evaluations of party leaders and that this is both rational and opportune behaviour. Curtice and Holmberg (2005: 235) argue that 'it would seem quite rational to decide how to vote on an assessment of the overall trustworthiness and competence of a party leader rather than the detailed promises made by a party at election time'. It is also easier for voters 'to hold an individual leader accountable than an institution such as a party' (Dalton et al., 2002: 55). That is not to say that voters judge leaders independent from their political parties but that voters can distinguish party leaders from the parties that they represent.

To be able to assess whether leader evaluations have an effect on vote intention that can be distinguished from the effect of party evaluations, the dynamics of leader evaluations and party evaluations have to be analysed over time. Unfortunately, leader evaluations are often treated as a static vote determinant. Yet, in the context of elections with new candidates entering the stage and old candidates holding new issue positions, leader evaluations are not likely to be static. The dynamic development of leader evaluations does not exclude the possibility that partisanship or party evaluations have influenced party leader evaluations before the start of the campaign. Yet, divergent fluctuations in party evaluations and leader evaluations would show that voters do distinguish between party evaluations and leader evaluations.

RQ 1: Do leader evaluations and party evaluations vary in the short period of time of an election campaign?

8.3 Personalised voting behaviour: leader effects

There is a widespread belief that the importance of leader evaluations in the voting decision is increasing. Yet, evidence from empirical studies regarding personalisation in voting behaviour in parliamentary elections is at best mixed (Adam and Maier, 2010; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002). Studying

personalisation in six Western European parliamentary democracies between 1961 and 2001, Karvonen (2010: 73) comes to the conclusion that 'the data do not support the hypothesis that the importance of leader evaluations for party choice has grown over time'. Yet, also if specific campaigns are more personalised than others in the absence of such a trend, the question as to the size of the effect of leader evaluations on the vote remains important.

Few studies have assessed personalised voting behaviour in parliamentary elections (Adam and Maier, 2010). The limited number of studies which have been conducted in the context of parliamentary elections have shown that leader evaluations do affect the voting decision (e.g. Aarts and Blais, 2011; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Vetter and Gabriel, 1998). Curtice and Holmberg (2005: 240) conclude based on an analysis of a series of surveys in six Western European parliamentary democracies that 'it is indeed usually the case that the more someone favourably rates a party leader, the more likely they are to vote for that leader's party'. We consequently expect that voters are more likely to vote for a party whose party leader they evaluate more positively.

H 1: Leader effect: Respondents' leader evaluations have a positive effect on the intention to vote for the party which that leader represents.

8.4 The effect of personalised media coverage on personalised voting behaviour

Voters make evaluations based on newly acquired and readily accessible information from the mass media (Zaller, 1992). Priming theory asserts that attention in the mass media for an object, like a political actor, an issue, or an attribute, makes this object more readily accessible in the voter's mind, which increases the likelihood that this object is utilised when making a decision (Iyengar et al., 1982). Miller and Krosnick (2000) argue that attention for a certain object does not just increase the accessibility of this object but that voters perceive this object as more important and that they consequently place more emphasis on this object in their evaluation. Chong and Druckman (2007: 115) equate this priming effect of changing weight due to 'changes in accessibility and applicability' with framing. Similar conclusions about the role of the

mass media in changing the weight of criteria to judge political parties can be drawn from theories on issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie, 1983) and second order agenda setting (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004). These theories claim that mass media change the emphasis that is placed on criteria to judge political parties by respectively emphasizing political parties' 'owned' issues or political parties' attributes.

The salience of certain objects in the news can change the weight that is assigned to criteria to judge actors like political parties. Yet, little is known about the relationship between attention for party leaders in the news and the weight of party leader evaluations in the voting decision. The size of leader effects has been shown to increase during the course of election campaigns (Schoen, 2007). Studying German federal elections between 1980 and 2002, Schoen (2007: 334) comes to the conclusion that '[c]andidate priming changed the parties' vote shares and in some cases even altered the partisan balance'. Yet, he did not take into account whether the candidates were primed by the media. Mendelsohn (1996: 119) did find some 'underwhelming' evidence that the mere *amount of political news coverage* to which voters were exposed made trust in party leaders a more important vote determinant. Gidengil et al. (2002) showed that news exposure amplified leader effects in the context of Canadian elections. Yet, Mendelsohn's suggestion that the level of personalised coverage increased the importance of leader evaluations during the campaign was not empirically tested in either of these studies.

Based on the hypothesis that the salience of certain objects, like politicians and their attributes, can increase the weight that is assigned to earlier evaluations of these objects, exposure to personalised coverage is expected to make evaluations of party leaders more important in the voting decision. We expect to find a priming effect of the degree of personalised coverage *across parties*. If the overall attention for party leaders increases at the expense of the attention for parties, we expect that the importance of party leaders as a vote determinant increases. This priming effect should be distinguished from an effect of attention for a *certain party's* leader in the news on the weight that is assigned to the evaluation of that party leader.

H 2: Priming effect: The influence of leader evaluations on the intention to vote for a party is stronger for voters who are exposed to more personalised coverage.

The model that will be tested is shown in *Figure 8.1*. We test 1) whether a respondent's evaluation of a party's leader affects the intention to vote for this party (*leader effect*) and 2) whether the size of this leader effect is influenced by the degree of personalised coverage in the media of one's choice (*priming effect*). The leader effect hypothesis was tested by measuring the effect of respondents' evaluations of a party's leader on the intention to vote for that party. The priming hypothesis was tested by measuring the interaction effect of the degree of personalised coverage, measured across parties, and a respondent's evaluation of a certain party's leader on the intention to vote for that party. A ten-wave weekly panel survey containing detailed information on media exposure and a content analysis provide powerful means to track the dynamics in exposure to personalised coverage, leader evaluations, and vote intention and to test our hypotheses.

Previous research has shown that respondents' party evaluations and party affiliations affect the vote as well (e.g. Rahn, 1993). Additionally, voters take agreement with a party's issue positions into account when deciding on their vote (e.g. Aarts et al., 1999; Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Belanger and Aarts, 2006; Fournier et al., 2003). Therefore, respondents' party evaluations and agreement with a party's issue positions are included in the model as control variables. Finally, the lagged vote is included as a control variable since voters who intended to vote for a certain party last week are more likely to vote for that party again this week. The lagged vote encompasses long-term factors influencing the vote such as socio-demographic factors and earlier changes in evaluations, issue agreement, and personalised coverage (Achen, 2000; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007b). This makes it redundant to add socio-demographic factors to our model.

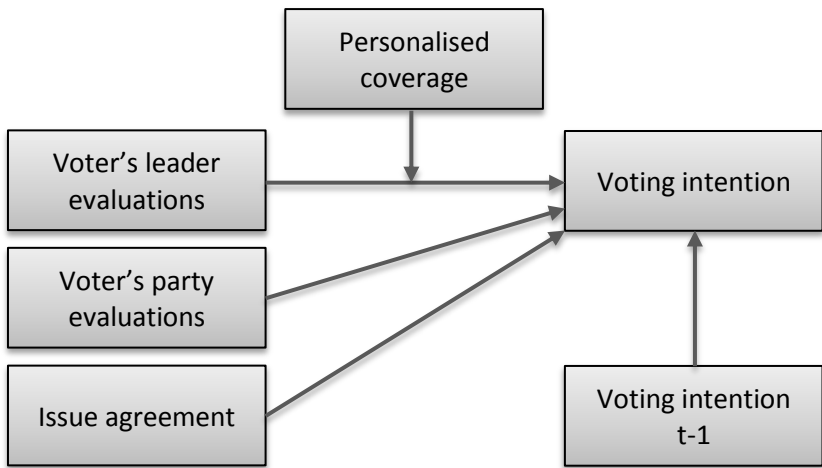


Figure 8.1 *Effect of personalised news coverage on personalised voting behaviour*

8.5 Method

The model was tested by combining media coverage data and public opinion data. A content analysis was used to analyse news content, while a 10-wave weekly panel survey was used to collect the public opinion data. The model was tested in the context of the 2010 Dutch national election campaign. The Netherlands is a multiparty parliamentary democracy with an open list system, which means that voters elect a political candidate belonging to a certain party. The degree of personalised coverage is lower than in France, Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom but higher than in Switzerland (Kriesi, in press). Yet, centralised personalised news coverage has been increasing (Kriesi, in press; Vliegenthart et al., 2011). These circumstances make the Netherlands a suitable case for studying the influence of personalised media coverage on personalised voting behaviour.

8.5.1 NEWS DATA SELECTION

The coverage of one public and one commercial news broadcast, four subscription newspapers, two free dailies, and one news website was analysed in this study. All articles covering national politics from the day at which the government resigned and new elections were announced, February 19, 2010, until Election Day, June 9, 2010, were included. The newspaper articles ($N=5,742$) and the transcripts of the news broadcasts ($N=386$) were obtained from the news producers. The news website items were acquired from the website ($N=496$). All articles in which either a political actor or a political issue (e.g. unemployment or state finance) was mentioned were included in the study. We coded the headline and the lead of the newspaper articles, the introduction by the news anchor and the text of political commentators of the television news transcripts, and the integral text of the items of the news website.

8.5.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content of political news coverage was manually coded by a team of intensively trained coders. The news texts were coded at the level of propositions. The coded propositions systematically describe the relationship between objects in the texts, i.e. political actors and issues, and the direction of this relationship in the form of *subject / direction / object*. The operationalisation of the degree of personalised coverage is based on the occurrences of party leaders and other political actors in these coded propositions. For a full account of the this method see for example Van Atteveldt (2008).

Centralised personalised coverage is conceptualised as the relative attention for party leaders (across parties) opposite the attention for any political actor, including aggregate level political actors like political parties (across parties). The level of centralised personalised coverage was calculated by dividing the number of propositions that mention a party leader by the number of propositions that mention any party actor (i.e. the party name, the party leader, or another party representative). Two examples of sentences containing concentrated personalised coverage read as follows: 'NGOs criticize Geert Wilders [party leader anti-

immigration party]' (*NGOs* / -1 / Geert Wilders) and 'Geert Wilders wins the debate' (*reality* / +1 / Geert Wilders).

The coding was conducted by twelve coders, none of which belonged to the team of researchers. Most of the coders had extensive experience in coding political news coverage. The other coders were intensively trained before they started coding. To be able to conduct the inter coder reliability analysis six coders coded the same 128 texts. Krippendorff's α for scale variables was calculated to measure inter coder reliability. The articles formed the measurement units. Krippendorff's α amounted to .91 for the identification of personalised coverage, which is a good score.

8.5.3 CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEDIA VARIABLES

Memory for old news decays over time, and so does the effect of old news (Chong and Druckman, 2010). Therefore the decaying effect of the news was taken into account by using an exponential measure of the different news variables (e.g. Fan, 1988). We used a decay rate with a half-life time of a week, based on a study of Lodge et al. (1995), who found that the probability of retrieving campaign information has decreased by half after a week. This means, for example, that yesterday's news was weighted by 0.91, the news of a week ago is weighted by 0.5, and the news of two weeks ago is weighted by 0.25.

Exposure to personalised coverage is constructed separately for each voter based on the content of the media of his or her choice as a *cumulative* weighted average of the most recent news and earlier news. The respondents were linked to the content of the news of their choice based on the precise time and date at which they filled out the questionnaires. The content of the news that they consumed was measured by calculating the mean value of the media variables in the mix of media that a respondent consumed.

8.5.4 PUBLIC OPINION DATA: PANEL SURVEY

A panel survey was designed to track the dynamics in leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention and to test the leader effect hy-

pothesis and the priming effect hypothesis. The public opinion data consist of a ten-wave internet panel survey conducted by *Intomart GfK*. The data were collected weekly in the period between April 6, 2010 and June 8, 2010. A nationally representative sample of Dutch citizens of voting age was drawn from *Intomart GfK's* panel. The response rates for survey completion (RR1) varied between 58.40% and 84.60% percent (AAPOR, 2009). The number of respondents included in this study varied from a maximum of 1,210 in the first wave to a minimum of 836 in the last wave.²⁸ The survey was used to measure vote intention, leader and party evaluations, issue agreement, and attention to the different media under study.

Vote intention. The respondents were questioned weekly about their *vote intention* by asking 'For which party would you vote if the elections were held today?' For undecided respondents, the parties for whom they considered to vote were included. For respondents who were uncertain about whether they would vote, the answer to the question as to which party they would vote for if they were obliged to vote was used. The vote is a dichotomous variable, whereby 1 indicates that a respondent intended to vote for a certain party, while a 0 indicates that they did not intend to do so.

Leader evaluation. Leader evaluation was measured by summing the scores on the responses to three propositions about party leaders. The propositions are: a) [Party leader's name] would be a good prime minister, b) [Party leader's name] is well aware of what happens in society, and c) [Party leader's name] is reliable. These questions were repeated weekly for the leaders of each of the leaders of the six largest

²⁸ On average 1,376 participated in each of the waves. Averagely, 76.4 percent of the respondents who completed the questionnaire in the first wave completed the questionnaire in the successive waves (RR1). The average number of respondents who were included in the final dataset amounted to 1,027. A number of respondents were removed from the final dataset. Only respondents who participated in at least two waves were included. The initial wave was excluded from the analysis because the lagged vote could not be calculated. Respondents who were not exposed to at least one news medium, respondents who did not consider to vote, and respondents who did not associate political parties with any issue were excluded from the analysis for that specific wave.

parties. The respondents answered by means of a 5-points Likert scale. These three items form a reliable scale with a Cronbach's α of .87. The score was transformed to a score between -1 and 1.

Party evaluation. Party evaluation was measured by summing the scores on the responses to two propositions about parties. The propositions are: a) [Party's name] would be a good governing party. b) [Party's name] keeps her promises. These questions were repeated weekly for each of the six largest parties. These two items form a reliable score with a Cronbach's α of .77. The score was transformed to a score between -1 and 1.

Issue agreement. To measure issue agreement the respondents were first asked with which issue they associated different political parties. They could choose from a list of twenty issues. Second, they were asked to indicate on a 5-points Likert scale to which degree they agreed with the parties on that issue. These questions were asked once, in the first wave. The measure was transformed to a score between -1 and 1, by subtracting the mean score of a respondent's agreement with all parties and dividing the result by the maximum score, 3.64. So, issue agreement refers to a respondent's agreement on the issue which he or she perceives to be a party's most important issue in comparison to his or her agreement with other parties on their most important issues.

Interaction term. The interaction term was constructed by multiplying the values of personalised coverage with the values of respondent's leader evaluations. This resulted in a measure with values ranging from -1 to 1.

Media consumption. To be able to link respondents' opinions to the news coverage that they were actually exposed to as described in *section 2.3* the respondents were asked to select the newspapers, news broadcasts, and news websites that they consumed in the previous week.

8.5.5 METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The goal of the analysis is to measure the effect of leader evaluations (*leader effect*) and the interaction effect of attention to personalised coverage and leader evaluations on vote intention (*priming effect*). The data has a three level multilevel structure. 55,482 observations are cross-nested within parties ($N=6$), waves ($N=9$), and respondents ($N=1,428$, i.e.

the number of respondents who participated in at least two of the waves). Because of the cross nested multilevel structure of the data, we conducted a multilevel analysis, which was conducted in R by means of the LME4 package (Bates and Sarkar, 2007). By estimating random intercepts models, we took into account that the intercepts might vary at three levels. Because the dependent variable, the intention to vote for a certain party, is dichotomous, a *logistic* multilevel analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. Since all the tested models include lagged variables, only nine of the ten waves are included in the analysis.

8.6 Results

8.6.1 THE DYNAMICS IN PERSONALISED COVERAGE

Before answering the research question and testing the hypotheses, the dynamics of the degree of personalised coverage are discussed. *Figure 8.2* shows the degree of centralised personalised coverage over time. The figure shows a sharp increase in the degree of personalised coverage from 20.1 percent in the first wave to 55.7 percent in the last wave. When the elections are approaching, the media increasingly focus on party leaders rather than the parties that they represent. The graph also shows three peaks. The first peak, at the start of the campaign, is related to an unexpected leadership change within the *PvdA*. The second peak (week 5) is related to fierce criticism towards this new leader, Job Cohen, and internal criticism towards the anti-immigration politician Geert Wilders (*PVV*). The peak at the end of the campaign is mainly related to televised election debates, the first of which was tellingly advertised as the ‘prime minister’s debate’. This graph suggests that the degree of personalised coverage depends on political events like changes in party leadership and media events like televised election debates.

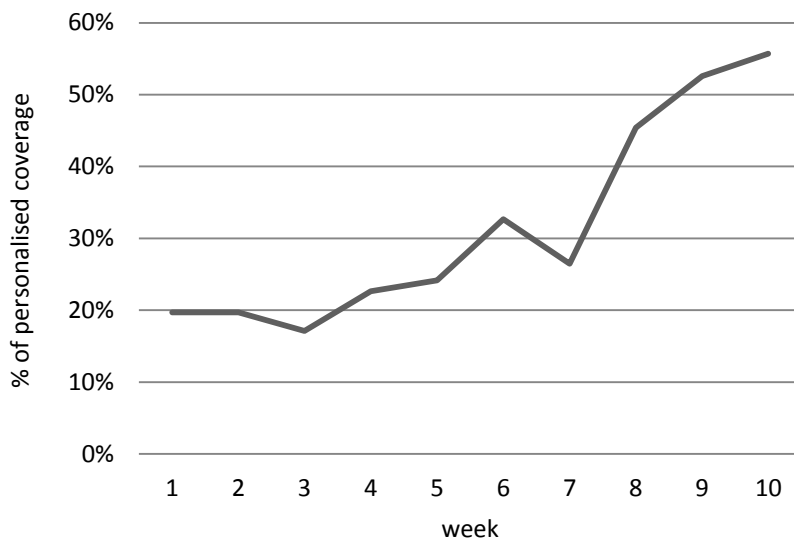
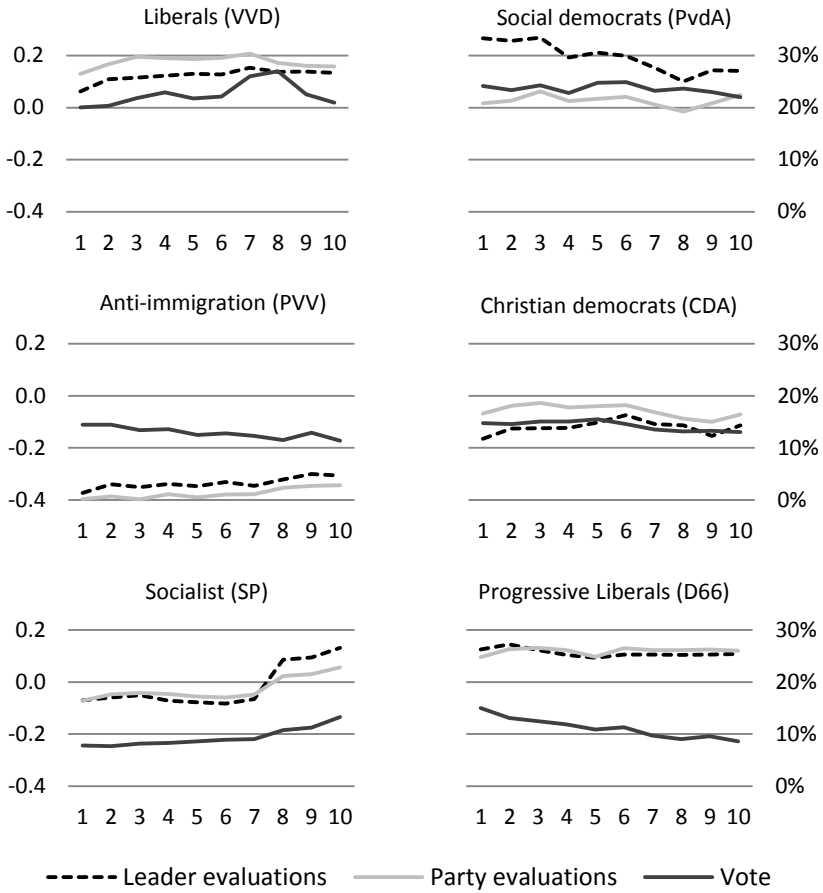


Figure 8.2 *Degree of personalised coverage during the 2010 election campaign*

8.6.2 THE DYNAMICS IN PARTY EVALUATIONS AND LEADER EVALUATIONS

Figure 8.3 shows the dynamics of leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention (RQ 1). The results per party give a detailed insight in the co-variation of the evaluations of parties and their leaders and the intention to vote for a party. Leader evaluations and party evaluations are presented at the vertical axis at the left (standardised scores ranging from -1 to 1) and the vote intention in percentages is presented at the vertical axis at the right. The graphs show that leader evaluations and party evaluations are related but that they do diverge. The prime minister of that day, Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA) and his successor, Mark Rutte (VVD) are, for example, less popular than the parties that they represent. The leader of the PvdA, Job Cohen, is much more popular than the party he represents.



Note. The left y-axis shows party evaluations and leader evaluations, which scores were both transformed to scores between -1 and 1. The right y-axis contains the intention to vote for a certain party in percentages.

Figure 8.3 *Leader evaluations, party evaluations, and vote intention per party over time*

The graphs additionally show that neither party evaluations nor leader evaluations are static. The evaluations of leaders vary more than the evaluations of parties (mean SD is respectively 0.04 and 0.02). The eval-

uations of the only two new party leaders, Job Cohen (*PvdA*) and Emile Roemer (*SP*) vary most (*SD* is respectively 0.06 and 0.08).

The graph also shows the dynamics in the vote intention. In most cases, the evaluations of leaders and the parties that they represent covary with the intention to vote for that party. For example, the strong improvement in the evaluation of the *SP* leader, Emile Roemer, and the weaker improvement in the evaluation of the party three weeks before the election translate into an increased intention to vote for the *SP*. The appreciation of the *PvdA* leader, Job Cohen, seems to have a strong bearing on the intention to vote for the *PvdA*, despite of relatively stable party evaluations. Both leader evaluations and the intention to vote for the *PvdA* decrease eight weeks before the election, further decrease five weeks before the election, and increase again three weeks before the election.

8.6.3 MODEL TESTING

Hypothesis 1 stated that leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on the vote (*leader effect*), while *hypothesis 2* stated that this leader effect is stronger for people who are exposed to more personalised coverage (*priming effect*). *Table 8.1* presents the results of the multilevel analysis testing these hypotheses. The coefficients are standardised regression coefficients. The AIC-scores presented in the bottom row provide information on the fit of the model, with smaller values indicating a better fit.

To measure to which degree the different levels account for variation in vote intention, we calculated the intra-class coefficients based on the variance as presented in the empty model (*Model 1* in *Table 8.1*). These coefficients can be calculated by dividing the variance at each level by the total variance in the model ($0.12 + 0 + 0.18 = 0.30$). Sixty percent of the variance in vote intention can be explained at the level of parties ($0.18 / 0.30 = 0.60$) and 40 percent can be explained at the level of respondents ($0.12 / 0.30 = 0.40$). The wave does not add to the explanation. So, no less than 40 percent of the variation in vote intention stems from differences between respondents, which warrants an individual level approach to the effect of personalised news coverage on personalisation in voting behaviour.

Table 8.1 *Explanations of vote intention*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	-1.79 *** (0.17)	-4.01 *** (0.12)	-4.06 *** (0.10)	-3.85 *** (0.14)
Lagged vote		4.87 *** (0.05)	4.83 *** (0.10)	4.83 *** (0.10)
Party evaluation		2.83 *** (0.07)	2.08 *** (0.10)	2.07 *** (0.10)
Issue agreement		0.98 *** (0.10)	0.92 *** (0.10)	0.92 *** (0.10)
Leader evaluation			1.14 *** 0.09	0.72 *** (0.16)
Personalized news				-0.27 ** (0.22)
Interaction term				0.51 * (0.44)
Variance (respondent)	0.12	0.00	0.02	0.02
Variance (Wave)	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Variance (Party)	0.18	0.08	0.07	0.07
AIC	46,659	15,514	15,425	15,419

Note. The coefficients are standardised regression coefficients. The standard errors are presented between brackets.

N observations = 55,482, N respondents = 1,428, N waves = 9, N parties = 6

* $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

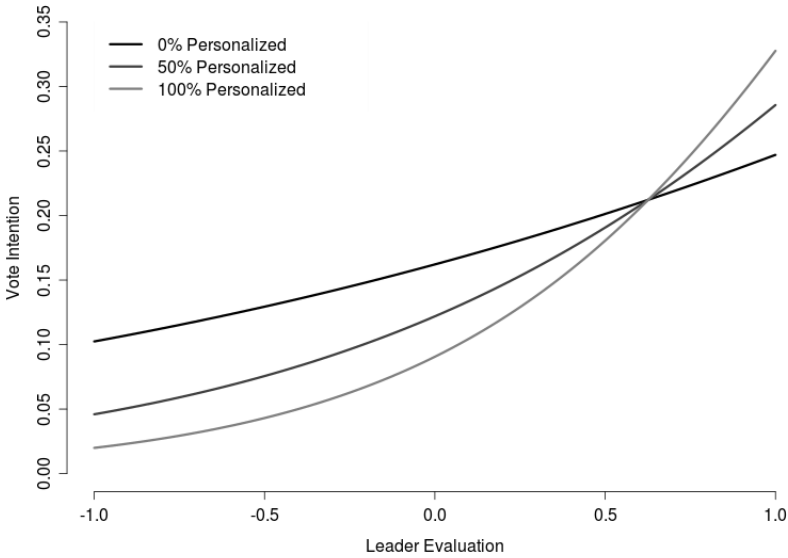
Model 2 shows the effects of the control variables. The lagged vote, party evaluation, and issue agreement have a significant effect on vote intention, as expected based on previous research. Recent changes in party evaluations matter, which underlines the importance of treating party evaluations as non-static variables. Agreement with parties' issue stances, measured at the start of the campaign, also keeps drawing voters during the campaign.

In *model 3*, voters' leader evaluations are added to test the *leader effect hypothesis*. This model shows that leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on vote intention, after controlling for the lagged vote intention, party evaluations, and issue agreement. This confirms *hypothesis 1*. Voters use leader evaluations in their voting decision. The more they appreciate a party's leader, the more likely they are to vote for

the party which that leader represents. In *model 4* the interaction term is added to test the *priming hypothesis*. *Model 4* shows that the interaction term of leader evaluations and personalised coverage has a significant positive effect on the vote, which confirms *hypothesis 2*. Voters who are exposed to news that is more personalised weigh leader evaluations more heavily in their voting decision.

The AIC-score difference between *model 2* and *3* amounts to 89 and the AIC-score difference between *model 3* and *4* amounts to 6, which indicates that *model 3* outperforms *model 2* and that *model 4* should be preferred over *model 3* (Burnham and Anderson, 2002). The inclusion of the interaction term in our model leads to the best-fitted model. So, both our hypotheses are confirmed. Respondents consider leader evaluations in their voting decision and they weigh them more heavily when they are exposed to more personalised coverage.

Figure 8.4 graphically shows the interaction effect of respondents' leader evaluations and personalised coverage on the intention to vote for a certain party. The x-axis shows the evaluation of a leader, ranging from very negative evaluations (-1) to very positive evaluations (+1). The y-axis shows a voter's probability to vote for a certain party. The regression lines show the values for voters who are exposed to different levels of personalised coverage. The variables in the model that are not included in *Figure 8.4*, the lagged vote, party evaluations, and issue agreement, were substituted by their mean values. To understand why the maximum value of vote probability in *Figure 8.4* amounts to 32.8 percent only, it should be noted that the probability to vote for a specific party in a highly fragmented multiparty system like the Netherlands is low. The winning *VVD* received only 20.5 percent of the votes. The *PvdA*, which came second, received just 0.9 percentage points less votes, which shows that small changes in vote probability can be decisive.



Note: The graph shows the interaction effect of respondents' leader evaluations and personalised coverage on the intention to vote for a certain party. The x-axis shows the evaluation of a leader and the y-axis shows a voter's probability to vote for a certain party. The regression lines show the values for voters who are exposed to different levels of personalised coverage.

Figure 8.4 *The interaction effect of leader evaluations and personalised coverage on vote intention*

Figure 8.4 shows that attention to personalised coverage amplifies the strength of the effect of leader evaluations on the vote. When a voter is exposed to more personalised coverage, the probability to vote for a liked leader's party further increases while the probability to vote for a disliked leader's party further decreases. The probability to vote for a strongly liked leader's party increases with 8.1 percent if a voter is only exposed to personalised coverage (32.8 percent) instead of no personalised coverage at all (24.7 percent). This difference of 8.1 percent is many times higher than the difference between the vote percentages of the parties which came first and second in the elections, which amounted to 0.9 percentage point. The probability to vote for a strongly disliked lead-

er's party decreases with 8.2 percent if a voter is only exposed to personalised coverage (2.0 percent) instead of no personalised coverage at all (10.2 percent). This leads to the conclusion that personalised coverage amplifies leader effects. Additionally, the probability to vote for a party with a leader to which a voter is indifferent decreases with 7.2 percent when this voter is only exposed to personalised coverage (9.1 percent) instead of no personalised coverage at all (16.2 percent) (cf. negative regression coefficient of personalised coverage in *Table 8.1*).

In conclusion, the influence of leader evaluations on vote intention is stronger for voters who were recently exposed to more personalised coverage. Personalised coverage amplifies leader effects. Highly liked leaders benefit from a focus on leaders in the news, while it impairs disliked leaders.

8.7 Conclusion and discussion

This study showed that party leaders become more prominent in campaign coverage when the elections are coming closer. The analysis suggests that campaign events induce attention for party leaders. Those events include party leader changes and internal turmoil. Moreover, Reinemann and Wilke (2007) were right in explaining personalisation when they stated 'It's the debates, stupid!'. The sharpest rise in personalised coverage appeared when the televised 'prime minister' debates started. So, the degree of personalised coverage varies depending on campaign events in the political arena, like party leader changes, internal turmoil which politicians start and media magnify, and televised debates organised by the media. The influence of televised debates is in line with the study presented in *chapter 6*, which showed that television coverage is more personalised than newspaper coverage.

The dynamics of party evaluations, leader evaluations, and vote intention could be measured due to the availability of a ten-wave weekly panel survey. Leader evaluations and party evaluations have been shown to be related but distinguishable. Some leaders are clearly more liked than the parties that they represent, while others are clearly not as popular as their parties are. Moreover, leader evaluations and party evaluations are not static. Party leader evaluations and leader evaluations change in the short period of time of an election campaign because

new politicians enter the stage, conflicts arise, and crises emerge. The evaluations of leaders and the parties that they represent converge and diverge during the election campaign. This implies that they can vary autonomously. These findings show that the assumption that voters cannot separate leaders from the parties that they represent is not correct. It is therefore important to treat both party evaluations and leader evaluations as separate and variable vote determinants.

The analysis further shows that party leaders do matter in the voter's mind. Leader evaluations have a significant positive effect on vote intention, which confirms *the leader effect hypothesis*. This is in line with other studies in Western European parliamentary democracies (e.g. Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011; Vetter and Gabriel, 1998). By controlling for the lagged vote, respondents' party evaluations, and issue agreement, and by taking the multilevel structure of the data into account, a conservative test was used. Yet the effect of voters' leader evaluations has been shown to affect vote intention, even when taking party evaluations into account too. In conjunction with the finding that party evaluations and leader evaluations show divergent dynamics, this study makes a strong case for the distinguishability of leader effects.

The main question of this study is whether voters weigh leader evaluations more heavily when they are exposed to news about leaders. Exposure to personalised coverage indeed moderates the effect of leader evaluations on vote intention, thereby confirming the *priming hypothesis*. Exposure to more personalised coverage makes voters who think highly of a leader become even more likely to vote for that leaders' party, while it makes voters who do not appreciate a leader become even less likely to vote for that leader's party. In other words, personalised coverage amplifies leader effects. So, the prominence of party leaders in the media influences the prominence of party leaders in the voter's mind.

We showed that personalised media coverage affects personalised voting behaviour at the individual level. This finding helps to understand the effect of media personalisation on personalisation in voting behaviour at the aggregate level. Studies on leader effects show large within country and across country variation in the size and significance of leader effects (Karvonen, 2010; King, 2002). The findings of this study can help to understand this variation. Further research should focus on the

question as to the extent to which exposure to personalised coverage can explain these differences. The influence of the prominence of party leaders in the media arena on the prominence of party leaders in the public arena also raises questions regarding its influence on the prominence of party leaders in the political arena. Rahat and Sheafer (2007) showed that personalisation in politicians' behaviour followed media personalisation. Yet, this study showed that campaign events initiated by political parties, like leader changes, can in turn also induce the media to focus on party leaders.

This study showed for the first time that personalised coverage moderates the effect of leader evaluations on vote intention. Media have the power of increasing the prominence of party leaders in the electoral process in a multiparty parliamentary democracy. In presidential elections, voters have to elect a president, in parliamentary systems voters have to elect a party (or, in democracies with an open list system, an individual politician that very explicitly represents a certain party). It is assumed that parties are 'serving as proxies for a constellation of policy priorities and issue positions' (Hayes, 2009: 232), *and* party leaders are not. Democratic elections as a means to find out which policies are supported by the people consequently come under pressure if party leaders become a prominent factor in the voting decision.

