

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

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**Bram Wauters**

Ghent University, Belgium

**Peter Thijssen and Peter Van Aelst**

University of Antwerp, Belgium

**Jean-Benoit Pilet**

Free University of Brussels (ULB), Belgium

## Abstract

For more than two decades, scholars have been debating the so-called personalization of politics. Some studies confirm such an evolution, while others demonstrate that evidence of personalization is at best mixed, or even absent. This article aims at shedding a new light on this controversy by looking at the evolution of the use of preferential voting in Belgium. Preferential voting has been constantly growing, but since 2007, the trend has been reversed and fewer voters decide to cast a preferential vote. We argue that this decline is not evidence against personalization. Rather, it illustrates the need to distinguish conceptually and empirically between two dimensions of personalization: ‘centralized’ and ‘decentralized’ personalization. The decline in the use of preference votes is not related to a decline in the former (which refers to a handful of political leaders). Instead, it is due to the decline of the latter form of personalization (referring to a large group of individual politicians). Candidates other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to attract votes. This negative relationship holds, even when we control for measures of electoral reform and the newness of parties. Our results also show that leadership effects are stronger in new parties.

## Keywords

Belgium, leaders, personalization, preferential voting, presidentialization

## Introduction

Over the last two to three decades, scholars have been debating about the personalization of politics. This broad concept refers to a shift in attention from collective actors to individuals (Karvonen, 2010; McAllister, 2007). Yet, this concept is subject to many controversies. The main one is about its empirical reality. Scholars are divided between those who support the idea that politics have been personalized over the last decades in Western democracies (Garzia, 2012; Lobo and Curtice, 2015; McAllister, 2007; Renwick and Pilet, 2016; Wattenberg, 1991), and those providing contradictory evidence showing that there is no robust evidence of such an evolution (Aarts et al., 2011;

Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012).

But for several scholars (Balmas et al., 2014; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; van Aelst et al., 2012), the reason for these divergent findings lies in the lack of conceptual clarity. Indeed, personalization is a broad and diffuse concept.

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### Corresponding author:

Bram Wauters, Research Group GASPAR, Ghent University, Universiteitsstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.  
Email: bram.wauters@ugent.be

A first major distinction refers to the kind of arena in which personalization takes place: in the media, in parties and in government or in the electorate. A second distinction is based upon the number of people the process of personalization applies to: either politicians in general ('decentralized' personalization) or a handful of top politicians ('centralized' personalization) (Balmas et al., 2014).

The last distinction, in particular, may account for part of the divergent findings on the existence of trends towards more personalized politics. Actually, centralized and decentralized personalization may contradict each other. The empowerment of party leaders may come at expenses of the visibility of other, less prominent politicians. It is precisely what Poguntke and Webb (2005) have hypothesized in their book on the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies.

The present article provides a contribution to this debate. We study the use of preferential voting in the Belgian federal elections. Belgian voters may decide between two options: casting a list vote without marking any preference for any candidate, or casting a preference vote in favour of one or several candidates. In 1919, only a minority of voters were opting for preference votes (15%). But over the years, the use of preference votes has been growing. There were 33% of voters to cast such a vote in 1961, 48% in 1981 and 66% at its top in 2003. But over the last 10 years, the share of voters casting a preference has constantly gone down. At the last federal elections, only 57% of all valid ballots were marked with at least one preference vote (Wauters et al., 2015). This declining use of preference voting may, at the first sight, be interpreted as new evidence against the claim of a universal personalization of politics. However, as we show in our analyses, one has to dig deeper into this evolution of preferential voting in Belgium by mobilizing Balmas and colleagues' distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization (Balmas et al., 2014).

Stemming from this distinction, we show in this article that the decline in the use of preference votes in Belgium is for a large part to be explained by the diverging fate of centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization remains a growing pattern of contemporary electoral politics in Belgium. Leaders are still able to attract a lot of preference votes. Decentralized personalization, however, is going down and this could explain the decline in the use of preference votes. Candidates other than party leaders appear to have growing difficulties to attract preference votes. When voters have not the opportunity to vote for a top leader in their electoral district, they are more and more inclined to opt for a list vote, rather than for a preference vote for another, less prominent, politician. In other words, when there is no possibility for centralized personalization, it is the party that is being strengthened, and the decline in personalization is due to a decline of decentralized personalization. This trend is reinforced by the

growing success of newer parties. Such parties have even more difficulties to attract preference votes for lay candidates. By definition, newer parties have fewer candidates that are already familiar to voters. Only the leader, and perhaps a few other candidates, within these newer parties have gained some visibility. As a consequence, for many voters, only the leader of the party is well known and is attracting preference votes.

These findings, we believe, are important beyond the specific case of Belgium. The recent distinction made by Balmas et al. (2014), and similar distinctions under different names by a few other authors (Kriesi, 2012; Van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010) have conceptually clarified the concept of personalization. But they have not yet discussed its empirical implications. With this study, we show that the two faces of personalization (centralized and decentralized) may not always go hand in hand. Rather, it seems that while centralized personalization may be on the rise, decentralized personalization is not following the same trend. Party leaders are undoubtedly central figures in contemporary politics. By contrast, other, less prominent politicians do not seem to remain under the spotlights. It could even be argued that the growing attention for leaders happens at the detriment of other politicians.

In the following sections, we explore these claims in the three steps. First, the scholarly debates on personalization are presented and discussed, paying specific attention to the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization. In the second section, the puzzle of the declining use of preference votes in Belgium over the last decade is described. In the third section, we provide explanations for this puzzle. Besides our central hypothesis that deals with the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization, we also test two alternative explanations: the declining number of incumbents on the electoral lists as well as the role of newer parties that have fewer well-known candidates beyond their leader.

## The debate on the personalization of politics

Over the last 20 years, there has been a growing scholarly attention for the personalization of politics. This concept could be broadly defined as 'the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities' (Karvonen, 2010: 4).

Starting from this general definition, studies on the personalization of politics have burgeoned over the last two decades. Interestingly, the main conclusion, which one could reach at this stage, is that there is clearly no consensus on whether personalization could be confirmed empirically. The few authors that have tried to review most of the literature on the topic come to the same conclusion. Karvonen, for instance, provides in his book summary tables

of about 26 publications and shows that there are as many confirming a personalization of politics than finding no support for this hypothesis (Karvonen, 2010: 7–9, 11–13, 15–19). Going himself into first hand empirical data, he concludes that evidence ‘does not support the notion that there has been a clear and pervasive trend towards personalization among parliamentary democracies’ (Karvonen, 2010: 101). Examining studies of personalization of politics in the media, in the institutional architecture of democratic politics and in the behaviours of politicians and voters, Balmas et al. also show that support for the personalization thesis is ambivalent (Balmas et al., 2014: 38). For the purpose of this article, we have ourselves reviewed 40 publications on the personalization of politics. They divide almost perfectly between those confirming empirically a growing personalization (18) and those disconfirming it or showing mixed evidence from one case to the other (22). In the first category, one can find studies by, among others, Bean and Mughan (1989), Lobo and Curtice (2015), Garzia (2012), Renwick and Pilet (2016), Swanson and Mancini (1996) or Plasser and Lengauer (2008). In the later, we find the work of, among others, Kriesi (2012), Kaase (1994), Aarts et al. (2011), Bittner (2011), Curtice and Holmberg (2005), Wilke and Reinemann (2001) or Brettschneider and Gabriel (2002).

According to Rahat and Sheaffer, part of the explanation for these diverging findings comes from a lack of conceptual clarification: ‘it is more likely that inconsistent results stemmed from different theoretical and operational definitions of personalization’ (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007: 77). Focusing on the literature of the personalization of media coverage of politics, Van Aelst et al. come to the same conclusion: ‘This is due in no small part to a lack of conceptual clarity and an absence of common operationalizations which are a major cause of the unclear or conflicting conclusions about the personalization of political news’ (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 203).

A first element of diversity concerns the sphere of politics that is being personalized. Most attention is given to the three spheres: the parties and government, the media and the electorate.

With regard to the first sphere – parties and government – Poguntke and Webb (2005) analyse what they call the ‘presidentialization’ of parliamentary democracies: the increasing empowerment of leaders both in government and in political parties. The traditional intermediary structures of political parties, such as delegate conventions, constituency party organizations and parliamentary party groups, have lost power and influence. Leaders now steer their parties with more autonomy than some decades ago. This has often been achieved by empowering disorganized rank-and-file party members at the expense of organized mid-level elites (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Katz and Mair, 1995: 20–21; Pilet and Cross, 2014).

Regarding the second sphere – the media – television broadcasting has by definition increased the visibility of

individual politicians: it is necessary to put a face on the party message when appearing on the screen, whereas non-personalized messages were much easier to convey in the written press (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Studies mainly focus on the shift in the number of references made to parties and to individual politicians in the media but could not always confirm a trend over time (Kriesi, 2012). Others focus on the privatization of politics – ‘the shifting boundaries between the public and the private’ (Van Aelst et al., 2012: 205) – and the fact that the media now report not only politicians’ political activities but also their private lives (e.g. Langer, 2007).

The third sphere, also the one we focus upon in this article, is the electorate, and more in particular their voting behaviour. The (increasing) importance of individual politicians in elections is probably the most extensively studied aspect of personalization. Since the late 1980s–early 1990s, there has been a growing body of literature trying to assess the impact of politicians on vote choice. Two landmark publications in that respect have been Cain et al.’s *The Personal Vote* (1987) and Wattenberg’s *The Rise of Candidate-Centred Politics* (1991). Since then, several books and articles have been looking at the personalization of elections (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Garzia, 2012; Kaase, 1994; Marsh, 2007). Personalities have been among the many short-term factors that have been explored in election studies, when structural and long-term voting determinants such as social class, religion or party identity were losing explanatory power (e.g. Dalton et al., 1984; Franklin et al., 1992; McAllister and Rose, 1986; Van der Brug et al., 2009).

In addition to the debate about the various spheres of politics that personalization could affect, a second conceptual discussion has been on the number and role of politicians that are benefiting from this new pattern of contemporary politics. The central idea is that a distinction has to be made between personalization that would concern all politicians in general and personalization that would have implications for political leaders only. In studies of personalization of voting behaviour, some analysts examine the degree to which perceptions of party leaders motivate voting decisions (Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; Clarke et al., 2004, 2009), while others look at the impact of candidates in general (Caprara, 2007; Marsh, 2007; Mattes and Milazzo, 2014; Norton and Wood, 1990). Similarly, in the studies of personalization in media coverage of politics, some focus on party leaders (Langer, 2007; Mughan, 2000) and others on all candidates (Van Aelst et al., 2008).

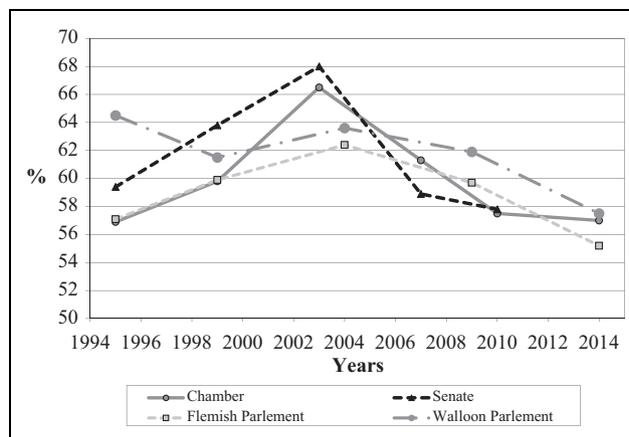
A few authors have recently tried to theorize this distinction. Andeweg and Van Holsteyn (2011) refer to the first-order (leader) versus second-order (candidate) personalization. Kriesi (2012) has proposed to differentiate between generalized (all politicians) and concentrated

(leaders only) personalization in his analysis of election coverage. In a similar way, Van Aelst et al. (2012) made the distinction between generalized and concentrated visibility in the news. But the most extensive conceptual discussion of this distinction is provided by Balmas et al. (2014). They separate centralized and decentralized personalization; centralized personalization ‘implies that power flows upwards from the group (e.g. political party and cabinet) to a single leader (e.g. party leader, prime minister and president)’, while decentralized personalization ‘means that power flows downwards from the group to individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g. candidates, members of parliament and ministers)’ (Balmas et al., 2014: 37). They also argue that these two facets of personalization may be present in the three spheres of politics mentioned earlier: parties and government, the media and elections, as well as via institutional reforms such as the strengthening of preference votes in proportional representation (PR) list systems (decentralized personalization) or the direct elections of mayors or prime ministers (centralized personalization).

## Research questions and hypotheses

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

We argue that this configuration is a very good case to address the controversy about the empirical existence of a personalization of politics. It shows the usefulness of more conceptual clarity in this field of research. At the first sight, one could consider that the decline of preferential voting in



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

Source: Own analyses on official election results.

Belgium since 2007 provides evidence against personalization. But, as we show below, the picture is different when one makes the distinction between centralized and decentralized personalization.

The core argument is that the decline in preference votes is mostly to be attributed to the reduced interests of Belgian voters for lay candidates, that is, those that are not party leaders. This expectation is based on the presidentialization argument of Poguntke and Webb (2005). Their claim that party leaders become more powerful and more visible would mainly affect other politicians in the party rather than the party as an institution. In fact, when leaders become more important in electoral campaigns, and voters identify the party with its leader, both the leader and the party can gain in prominence and popularity. Other candidates of the party become less attractive as they have less influence on the policy of the party.

The problem is that each and every party has only one leader, but the Belgian territory is divided into several multi-member districts and candidates can only run in one district. Consequently, in all districts but one, voters do not have the opportunity to vote for the leader of their preferred party. The expectation is that in these districts, more and more voters would cast a list vote rather than mark a preference for other ‘ordinary’ candidates. Such an evolution would confirm that it is a decline in decentralized personalization that is explaining the lowering share of Belgian voters casting a preference vote. This core expectation will be first addressed below through a more descriptive approach that compares the share of preference and of list votes in districts with and without an electoral leader (EL).

Next, we rely on a more explanatory approach that tries to explain the total share of preference votes received by each list in the various districts and for the various elections covered in the article (2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014). The first line of argument is about the growing importance of leaders

and, therefore, a test of centralized personalization. It leads to formulate two expectations. First, we would expect that the share of preference votes would be higher for lists on which the EL is running. Second, assuming that the weight of leaders has grown over time, we expect that the impact of ELs on the share of preference votes obtained by each list-in-a-district has grown over the period covered (2003–2014). These two arguments lead to the following three hypotheses.

**H1a:** Lists with an EL obtain a larger share of preference votes than lists with no EL.

**H1b:** The positive impact of lists with an EL on preference votes has grown over time (centralization).

**H1c:** The negative impact of lists without an EL on preference votes has grown over time (decentralization).

But the argument about the growing impact of centralized personalization is not the only element that could theoretically help explaining the recent decline of preference votes in Belgium. Earlier research has pointed out that contextual factors play a large role in determining preferential voting behaviour (André et al., 2012; Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann, 2012). In particular, two contextual factors may have contributed to the downward trend: changes in the rules of the electoral system and the recent electoral success of newer parties. We include them into our analysis as potential alternative explanations.

First, over the last years, a change in the formal rules has modified the access for incumbents to candidate lists. Earlier studies on the use of preference votes in Belgium (André et al., 2012; Thijssen, 2013; Put and Maddens, 2015) have shown that the presence of incumbents on the list of candidates has a positive effect on the use of preference votes. A change to the legislation, however, has reduced the capacity of parties to fill in their lists with a lot of such candidates. Since 2007, it is no longer possible for the same person to be simultaneously a candidate for different assemblies elected at the national level (in particular to run for both the Chamber and the Senate), and since 2014, an incompatibility between candidacy at the national level and the regional and European level has been introduced, in case national, regional and/or European elections are held on the same day. As a consequence, the share of incumbent Members of Parliament or ministers on the list is harder to maintain. Between 2003 and 2010, not much has changed, however, as regional incumbents were asked by their party to take up a position on the list for the national elections (held on another day than the regional elections), even if they were not interested in getting elected. The number of ‘unique’ incumbents has gone up from 265 in 2003 until 331 in 2010.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the number of incumbents on the list of the Chamber dropped to 152, because both regional and national elections were held at the same day, and politicians no longer had the possibility to be a

candidate for both elections (Smulders et al., 2014). The average number of incumbents on a list in 2014 was lower than two, while for previous Chamber elections, it was close to four. This trend might explain a lower amount of preferential votes over time. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**H2a:** Lists with a higher proportion of incumbents receive a higher proportion of preferential votes.

**H2b:** The decline of incumbents on the candidate lists has contributed to the decline of preferential votes over time.

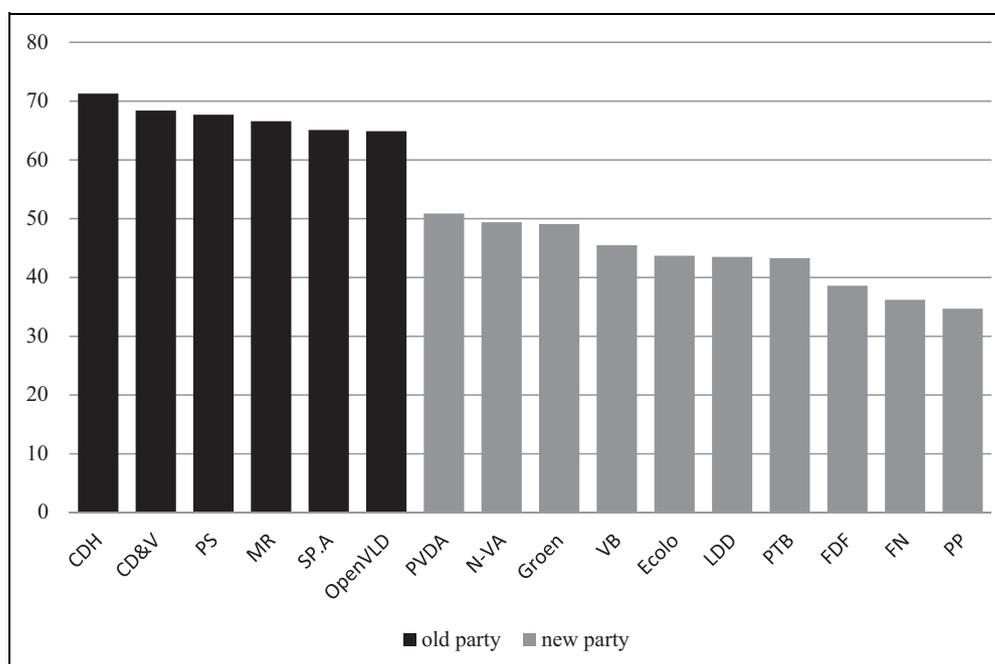
Another contextual factor that may also contributed to the downward trend in preferential voting is the electoral success of newer parties like N-VA (Flemish nationalists), PTB-PVDA (radical left), PP (populist radical right) and FDF (Francophone regionalists). Previous studies have shown that traditional parties (Christian-democrats, socialists and liberals) tend to fare a larger proportion of preference votes (André et al., 2012; Wauters et al., 2015). This also comes forward from Figure 2. Traditional parties (in black in Figure 2) either Christian democrats (CDH and CD&V), social democrats (PS and SP.A) or liberal democrats (MR and OpenVLD) obtain clearly more preference votes than newer parties (in grey). The average for all traditional parties is 67.1%, while the percentage preference votes for new parties is only 44.5%.

One element of explanation has already been mentioned earlier: incumbents and also local politicians attract preference votes. Since traditional parties are better-established, they have more ministers, parliamentarians and especially much more politicians with local mandates among their candidates. Usually, within newer parties, only the leader has some notoriety within the electorate. In the last two elections in Belgium (2010 and 2014), these newer parties have been on the rise. N-VA became the largest party in the country in 2010 and strengthened its electoral leadership in 2014. In 2014, three smaller new parties have gained their first seats in the federal parliament: PTB-PVDA, PP and FDF.<sup>3</sup> As the newer parties grow electorally, the overall share of preference votes would decline taking into account that newer parties have fewer voters opting for preference votes.

**H3a:** New parties get less preferential votes than traditional parties.

**H3b:** The electoral success of new parties contributes to the decrease of preferential votes over time.

The fact that newer parties attract fewer preferential votes in general might be true with the exception for the EL. New parties might depend more on their leader than other parties. For instance, in the 2003 campaign, the



**Figure 2.** Average percentage of preference votes per party in a district (Chamber elections 2003–2014).  
Source: Own analyses on official election results.

leaders of smaller parties took a larger share of the media attention for their party than the leaders of traditional parties (Van Aelst, 2007). In exceptional cases, these new parties are even named to their leader, such as the Flemish ‘Lijst Dedecker’ and the Dutch ‘Lijst Pim Fortuyn’. In addition, it can also be stated that because it takes time to develop stable party loyalties, party identification tends to be weaker in new parties, leaving more room for leader effects among voters (Aardal and Binder, 2011). New parties also tend to be less organized and structured than established parties, which would benefit again the party leaders who enjoy more freedom of manoeuvre.

In addition, Aardal and Binder (2011) also give arguments why a stronger leader effect among new(er) parties might be peculiar to rightist new(er) parties. Right or centre-right parties usually are more hierarchically structured with on the top of the pyramid a strong leader, who is very powerful both inside and outside the party. This contrasts with the anti-authoritarian stance of younger parties at the left side of the political spectrum, most notably the green parties. In some cases, their position against strong leadership is even translated in different forms of collective and rotated leadership. Therefore, we additionally formulate the following general and more specific hypotheses:

**H4:** The EL effect (hypothesis 1b) on preferential votes is stronger for lists of new(er) parties in general.

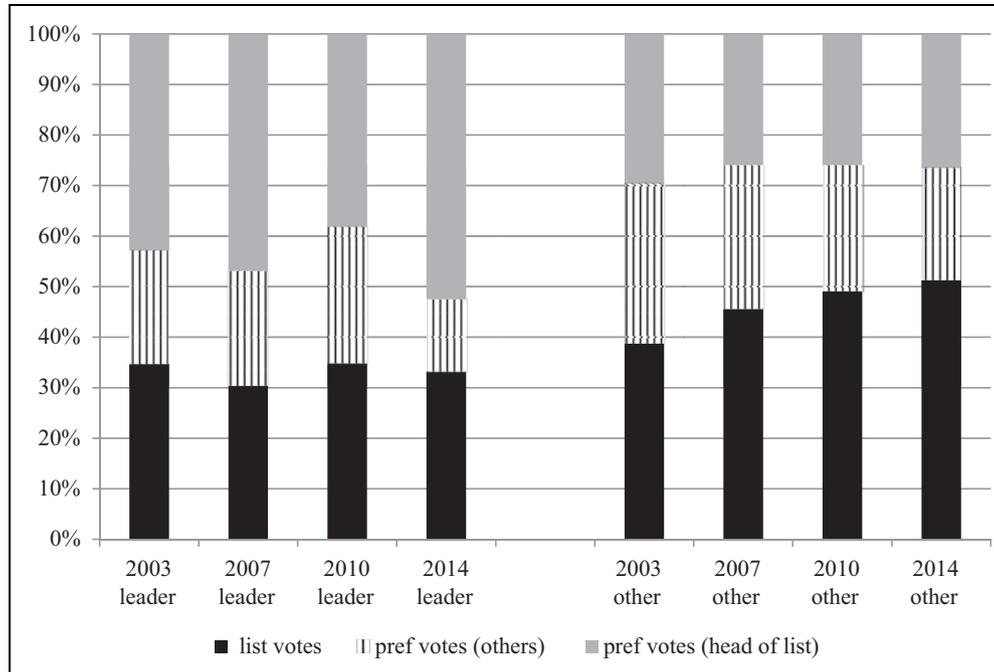
**H4b:** The EL effect (hypothesis 1b) on preferential votes is only stronger for lists of rightist new(er) parties.

## Methodology

In the following section, these various factors are tested by analysing the use of preference votes in Belgium over the last decade. The federal elections of 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014 are studied. For each, we look at the share of preference votes for each list of those parties that won at least one seat nationwide in the 11 electoral districts. We have in total 319 lists for 16 parties. We start with a more descriptive analysis that looks at whether having an EL on the list makes a difference in the share of preference votes that the list has obtained. The shares of valid ballots for a party in a district are examined taking into account whether the list had an EL among the candidates or not.

After this first descriptive part, the second part of the analysis is more explanatory. The goal is to see what factors do account for the share of preference votes that a list-in-a-district obtains. The empirical analysis is based on the official election results for the Belgian Chamber of Representatives for the election years 2003, 2007, 2010 and 2014. As dependent variable, we take the proportion of preferential votes for a party in a district for a specific election year. The entire country is divided into 11 districts. For each party, we calculate the proportion of preference votes it obtains in each district. These proportions function as dependent variable for our analysis.

Besides the election year (variable ‘Time’ in Table 1), we include in our model three independent variables that are relevant from a theoretical perspective: presence of an EL, percentage of incumbents and type of party.



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

Source: Own analyses on official election results.

As for EL, our analysis splits all parties-in-a-district into two categories: those with the EL of a party on the list in that district (referring to centralized personalization) and those without (referring to decentralized personalization). This dummy variable is named 'List EL' and has a value of 1 if the EL was a candidate for the party in the district at stake.

The EL is operationalized here as the person who participated to the final television debate at the end of the electoral campaign. In order to guarantee comparability, we always analyse the debate on the public television chains (one Flemish and one Francophone chain).<sup>4</sup> In most cases, but not always, this person coincides with the party chairman (see also Pilet and Wauters, 2014). In 8 out of 57 cases, the EL is not the party chairman (but mostly a prominent member of the government playing a leading role in the electoral campaign). For smaller parties not invited for this television debate, we always take the party chairman.

The percentage of incumbents is also calculated for each party in each district. We take into account the incumbent members of the Chamber, but also candidates who are at the moment of the elections a member of the Senate or of one of the regional parliaments. Also ministers (either at the federal or regional level) were considered as incumbents. This variable is named '%INC'.

Finally, for the type of party, we use a dichotomous variable (labelled 'traditional party (TP)'): either TP or new party. Traditional parties are the three older party families that have already been created in the 19th century: Christian democrats, socialists and liberals. These parties have

dominated all Belgian cabinets since the adoption of universal franchise in Belgium in 1893 and have together delivered all Belgian prime ministers. Since almost all Belgian parties are split up in a separate Flemish party and a French-speaking party, this category contains six parties. All the other parties are considered as new parties. We further distinguish between new left and right parties, which we define as parties, respectively, at the left<sup>5</sup> and the right<sup>6</sup> of the established parties (i.e. CD&V/CDH, SP.A/PS and OpenVLD/MR). By looking at this variable, we will be able to assess the effect of the success of new parties.

## Empirical analysis

### Descriptive analysis

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

Figure 3 sketches a very revealing picture in two ways. First of all, the percentages of list votes (in black) gradually

**Table 1.** Multilevel model: proportion of preferential votes Belgian federal elections 2003–2014.

Individual list	M1		M2		M3		M4	
	Coefficient	Standard error.						
Time								
2003	Reference category (Ref.)							
2007	-4.96***	1.10	-5.61***	1.12	-7.87***	1.61	-7.71***	1.58
2010	-7.78***	1.05	-8.22***	1.08	-12.71***	1.64	-12.53***	1.61
2014	-8.12***	1.19	-9.83***	1.22	-13.63***	1.69	-13.41***	1.66
List EL	11.17***	1.25	6.20***	2.09	6.46***	2.04	3.38	2.36
EL 2007			4.40	3.64	4.32	3.57	5.02	3.53
EL 2010			2.53	3.16	1.52	3.10	1.56	3.05
EL 2014			13.22***	3.07	12.48***	3.01	11.04***	3.00
%INC	0.19***	0.05	0.17***	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.07
%INC2007					0.14	0.08	0.13	0.07
%INC2010					0.28***	0.08	0.28***	0.08
%INC2014					0.29**	0.10	0.29***	0.10
Traditional party	Reference category (Ref.)							
LNP	-16.35***	2.23	-16.63***	2.26	-16.30***	2.25	-16.60***	2.28
RNP	-22.36***	2.03	-22.78***	2.05	-22.55***	2.05	-23.49***	2.08
Cross-level EL × LNP							3.35	2.87
Cross-level EL × RNP							8.90***	2.76
Fixed district control								
Constant	75.36***	2.38	76.38***	2.38	79.14***	2.54	79.28***	2.52
$\sigma$ party	2.83	0.70	2.91	0.72	2.93	0.73	2.97	0.73
$\sigma$ list	6.43	0.26	6.22	0.25	6.07	0.25	5.97	0.24
Log likelihood $\chi^2$	-1058.74		-1048.86		-1041.61		-1036.51	

Note: Intercept and fixed district controls. Only-model: constant = 64.59 (3.68),  $\sigma$  party = 12.67 and  $\sigma$  list = 8.15, 319 lists and 16 parties.

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

EL: electoral leader; %INC: %-incumbent; LNP: left new party; RNP: right new party.

grow for parties in districts without an EL (bars labelled 'other'). While this percentage was still below 40% in 2003, it is now (in 2014) above 50%. It means that, in the absence of a party leader, decentralization is indeed going down. Other candidates cannot compensate for the absence of a leader as they used to do in 2003. It confirms the greater weakness of decentralized personalization over the period 2003–2014. By contrast, in districts where an EL is present on the list (bars labelled 'leader'), the same evolution could not be found. List votes are overall stable: about 33% of all ballots, both in 2003 and 2014. It means that when the leader is present on the ballot, parties are not strengthened and overall personalization does not go down. Moreover, we observe that in districts with a leader, the share of votes going to the head of list (in grey) gradually increases (with 2010 as an exception). In 2003, on average about 40% of the voters voted for the head of list in these districts, while in 2014, more than 50% of voters

did so. In contrast, for the other districts, stability in terms of votes for the head of list can be noted. It means that when the leader of the party is on the ballot, centralized personalization goes up.

If we combine these two insights, we can state that in districts with an EL, voters do not more often cast a preference vote (instead of a list vote). Overall personalization is stable. But looking at the kind of preference votes expressed, we see that it is more often in favour of the party leader when he/she is on the ballot. This element would confirm the idea of a growth in centralized personalization. By contrast, in districts without an EL, the inverse appears to be true: voters are not more likely nor less likely to vote for the head of list, but they increasingly vote for the party (= overall decline of personalization). We see that preference votes for less prominent candidates in particular are going down (= decline in decentralized personalization).<sup>7</sup>

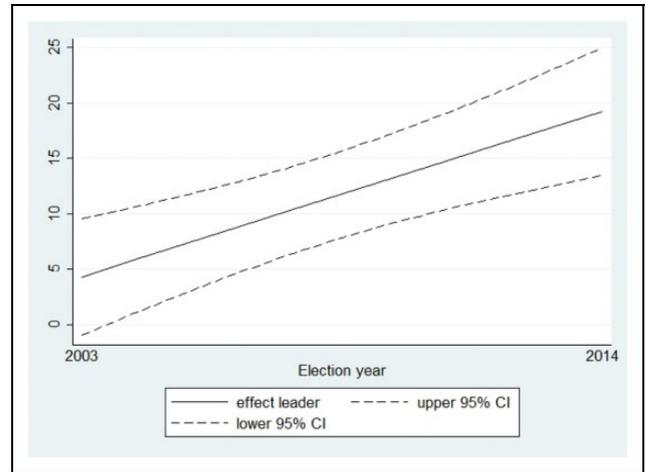
### Explanatory analysis

We now move over to the explanatory analysis. Here, we focus again on the general variable, that is, the proportion of preferential votes cast (which is the complement of the proportion of list votes) by party in a district. We use a multilevel model with 319 individual lists at the first level and 16 parties at the second level (Table 1). We test four models: a model with time and the three main explanatory variables, such as EL, incumbency and TP (M1), the same model with interactions between leader and year of election (M2), a model in which we have added interactions between incumbency and year of election (M3) and finally a model in which we have added an interaction between leader and TP (M4). In each of the models, we include fixed controls for districts to control for factors such as district magnitude and party system fragmentation (Thijssen, 2013).

The multivariate analysis confirms the general decrease of the proportion of preferential votes in the last federal elections. Generally speaking, individual candidates received, compared to 2003, fewer preferential votes in 2007, and even much fewer in 2010 and 2014. In total, the share of preference votes went down from 66.5% in 2003 to 61.3% in 2007, 57.5% in 2010 and 57.0% in 2014. Personalization in general appears to decrease over the last decade. However, this decrease is neutralized on lists with an EL. Lists with an EL score significantly higher on preferential votes than lists without such a leader ( $B = 11.17^{***}$  in model 1 (M1)). This general finding confirms hypothesis 1a. Moreover, we may also observe that the importance of ELs has grown over time (hypotheses 1b and 1c). More precisely, their impact has been particularly strong in 2014 as revealed by the interaction of ‘lists with an EL’ and ‘time’ in model 2. The conditional effect of a list with an EL is significantly stronger in 2014 ( $B_{\text{cond}} = 6.20 + 13.22 = 19.42^{***}$  in M2) than in 2003 ( $B_{\text{cond}} = 6.20$  in M2). This is clearly visualized in the interaction plot in Figure 4.

It seems that voters who cannot cast a vote for the EL choose to vote for the party (depersonalization) rather than for another candidate on the list (decentralized personalization). These findings, however, need to be confirmed when controlling for alternative explanations of the overall decline in the use of preference votes.

First, it might be that the underlying explanation is related to changes in the Belgian electoral system (hypothesis 2b). Because ELs are almost always incumbents, the EL effect could be a derivative of a more general incumbency effect. Given that from 2007 onwards, candidates can no longer simultaneously run for different elections and given that in 2014, both regional and federal elections were held on the same day, the number of incumbents that are available for the Chamber lists decreased substantially. As a consequence, the proportion of preferential votes



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

would go down. As could be expected, lists with a higher percentage of incumbents receive more preferential votes ( $B = 0.19^{***}$  in M1). Interestingly, this effect becomes stronger in the elections of 2010 ( $B_{\text{cond}} = 0.01 + 0.28 = 0.29^{***}$  in M3) and 2014 ( $B_{\text{cond}} = 0.01 + 0.29 = 0.30^{***}$  in M3). Especially in 2014, when both regional, federal and European elections were coinciding and candidates could participate in only one of them, this strong conditional effect could be the result of the dilution of a smaller group of incumbents over more electoral lists. This effect can be seen as evidence that also decentralized personalization is on the rise in relative terms. But because there are fewer incumbents on the ballot, the overall share of preference votes goes down. However, even more importantly, the incumbency effects do not discard the important bonus in terms of preferential votes for lists with ELs. The effects for lists with an EL stay almost intact in model 3 where we introduce the incumbency and time interactions. Again, in particular in 2014, the effect of the ELs remains highly significant.

In models 3 and 4, we test a second alternative explanation: the decreasing electoral appeal of established parties who traditionally attract most preference votes. If newer challenger parties are becoming increasingly popular, this could have a negative effect on the proportion of preferential votes, because newer parties have fewer local and national incumbents on their lists. Indeed, both leftist and rightist new(er) party lists generally receive much smaller proportions of preferential votes. The effects are very strong ( $B = -16.30^{***}$  and  $B = -22.55^{***}$  in M3). Moreover, given that the effect does not differ significantly over time and given that the support for traditional parties has declined substantially in the last elections, the decreasing electoral appeal of the traditional parties definitely is a credible explanation for the decreasing preferential vote proportion. However, also this alternative explanation does

not overrule the importance of the positive 'list with EL'-effect. On the contrary, the popularity of newer parties seems to strengthen the EL effect, as the effect of the variable 'list EL' is stronger among the lists of new parties (cross-level interactions  $B = 3.35$  and  $8.90^{***}$  in M4). However, because only for the rightist new(er) parties the interaction is statistically significant, we find confirmation for the more specific hypothesis 4b. Moreover, our findings are very robust, as the model remains analogous if the lists of the N-VA, the strongest challenger party, are eliminated from the dataset (not in table).

In addition, the diminishing electoral appeal of the traditional parties seems to lead to an overall decline of personalization that could be decomposed into a decrease of decentralized personalization and to an increase of centralized personalization.

## Conclusion

There has been considerable attention for the personalization of politics in recent decades. Evidence of whether such a trend is empirically supported or not remains mixed. The use of preference votes by Belgian voters is a good illustration of it. Since 1919, a growing proportion of ballots has been marked with at least one preference vote for candidates. But over the last four federal elections, this trend has been reversed.

This article has shown that this evolution should not lead too rapidly to the conclusion that Belgium is a new case against the personalization of politics. The kind of personalization (centralized vs. decentralized) is of crucial importance in this respect. When we look at the kind of preferential votes that are casted, we noted two opposite trends; the degree of decentralized personalization – voting for ordinary candidates – has gone down significantly, whereas the degree of centralized personalization – voting for party leaders – has increased significantly.

These findings clearly show the need to clarify and specify the concept of personalization. An overall decline in personalization (illustrated by a decline of preference votes) could actually hide two diverging trends: a growth in centralized personalization driven by the presence of party leaders on the ballot and a decline in decentralized personalization attested by the decline in preference votes in the absence of an EL.

The underlying logic is simple; many voters want to vote for the EL who is the figurehead of the party in the election, but they cannot because the leader is not on the ballot list in their district. In this situation, they prefer to vote for the party instead of voting for another candidate who does not have the same appeal as the EL. Furthermore, while personalization is often perceived to be a cause of party dealignment, our analyses seem to indicate that notably the dealignment of the traditional parties goes together with a decrease of decentralized personalization and an

increase in centralized personalization. The broader consequence of this finding is that the democratic legitimacy of other members of the party is further diminished at the expense of the leader. Most votes are inspired by an evaluation of a handful of ELs, even if in practice voters cannot vote for them. These findings corroborate Poguntke and Webb's idea of a presidentialization of politics in parliamentary democracies. The reinforcement of leaders comes at the expense of less prominent politicians, even more than at the expenses of the party (Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

The obvious question is how much these findings are exportable beyond the case of Belgium. There are a few peculiarities on preferential voting in the Belgian electoral system. First, the Belgian electoral system does not allow leaders to run as candidate all over the country. Second, Belgian voters have the opportunity to decide between a list vote and a preference vote for one or several candidates. They are not forced to cast preference votes for at least one candidate.

These two elements could lead some to wonder whether our findings are only applicable to Belgium. A more careful look at lists PR electoral systems in Europe, however, shows that the Belgian rules are not so uncommon.<sup>8</sup> On the first aspect, the question is whether there is a nationwide tier with the same list of candidates running all across the country. In only four European countries, this is the case: Austria, the Netherlands,<sup>9</sup> Hungary and Slovakia. In the vast majority of countries using list PR, candidates are running in only one district and not nationwide. In these countries, the situation of a voter motivated by the party leader but not finding his name on the ballot in his district is, therefore, rather common, and the tension between centralized and decentralized personalization can also be found there.

On the second dimension – compulsory versus optional preference voting-it also appears that Belgium is not a unique case. Besides Belgium, there are seven countries where preferential voting is optional: Austria, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Sweden. In other words, in several countries, voters that do not find the name of the party leader on their ballot could decide not to cast any preference vote at all. As the weight of party leaders is increasing, there would be a growing proportion of ballots without any preference votes. It would definitely be worth verifying whether the evolution illustrated here is indeed also found in other European countries.

Finally, beyond question of the electoral system, there is also another point on which findings in the Belgian case could be relevant comparatively, namely the impact of newer parties on the prominence of centralized personalization over decentralized personalization. Newer parties have less prominent candidates, and their leaders are, therefore, more important as they are the only ones known by a

large share of the electorate. As a consequence, they have more voters who opt for a list vote when the leader is not on their ballot in their district. The emergence of newer parties has been strong in Belgium over the last two elections, but the growth of these newer players is not unique to Belgium. In many European countries, they are on the rise, while traditional parties are facing difficult times. One could see it in Greece with Syriza, in Spain with Podemos and Ciudadanos, in Italy with the 5-stars movement, in Finland with the Finns Party, in the Netherlands with Geert Wilders' PVV, in Denmark with the Liberal Alliance and in Sweden with the Sweden Democrats. Many of these newer parties rely upon one or two popular leaders, rather than on a broad base of experienced politicians. They have fewer MPs and also fewer locally anchored politicians to boost the party. Therefore, their success would overall fasten the growth of centralized personalization at the expenses of decentralized personalization. Previous studies showed that for some new parties, such as the ecologist parties, leader effects were less prominent (Aardal and Binder, 2011). Perhaps, the recent flux of new parties differs from the rise of the green parties, in the sense that the former is embracing strong leadership more than the latter. Our study indicates that in particular for new(er) parties on the right side of the political spectrum, political leaders are more important to attract preferential votes. Future studies on different types of new parties are needed to confirm this thesis for the left populist parties that are on the rise in many European countries.

All these elements lead us to believe that what has been observed in Belgium is not unique. They lead us to call, along with other scholars (Balmas et al., 2014; Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012) for a more fine-grained conceptualization and operationalization of the concept of personalization.

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### Notes

1. Since 2014, there are no longer direct elections for the Senate. The Senate is now indirectly composed of members of regional parliaments.
2. Because Belgium is a federal country with a bicameral system, it has a relative high number of regional (Walloon, Brussels and Flemish) and federal MPs (Chamber and Senate).
3. FDF used to be in cartel with MR but ran alone in 2014, for the first time since 1995, and won two seats in the Chamber.

4. Only at the 2007 elections, there was no general final debate on the public television in Flanders. Alternatively, we take (only for these elections) the general debate that was broadcasted by the commercial television. For other election years, not always a final debate was held by the commercial broadcaster, which renders them not suitable for an analysis over time.
5. Ecolo, Groen, PTB and PVDA.
6. FN, PP and Vlaams Belang.
7. Note that totally separating a party vote from a personal vote for the leader is not straightforward. A preferential vote for the first candidate on the list may function as a surrogate for a vote for the party. At the 2014 Chamber elections, for instance, in general 36% of preference voters voted only for the head of list, and in districts with electoral leaders, this percentage raised to about 50% (Wauters et al., 2015). These voters do not cast additional votes for other candidates but simply tick the ballot of the head of list.
8. Details of European electoral systems could be found on the website of the project Electoral System Changes in Europe: <http://www.electoralsystemchanges.eu/>
9. Formally speaking, the Dutch territory is divided into several subnational districts and parties are allowed to present different lists in each of the districts as well as identical lists everywhere. In practice, Dutch parties opt for the latter and present (almost) identical lists in all districts.

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### Author biographies

**Bram Wauters** is professor at the Department of Political Science of the Ghent University, where he leads the research group GASPAR. His research interests include political representation, elections and political parties, with specific attention for diversity. He has recently published on these topics in journals such as

*International Political Science Review*, *Political Studies*, *Government & Opposition*, and *Politics & Gender*.

**Peter Thijssen** is professor in political sociology at the department of political science, University of Antwerp and senior member of the research group Media, Movements and Politics (M2P). His research focuses on political participation, public opinion and the politics of solidarity. Most recently he has published in academic journals such as *British Journal of Sociology*, *Electoral Studies* and *Local Government Studies*.

**Peter Van Aelst** is a professor in political communication at the University of Antwerp (Belgium) and a founding member of the research group 'Media, Movements and Politics' ([www.M2P.be](http://www.M2P.be)). His research deals among others with election campaigns, personalization, and (new) media and political agenda-setting.

**Jean-Benoit Pilet** is professor of political science at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). He works on elections, electoral systems, political parties, Belgian politics and representation. He has recently published, with Alan Renwick, « Faces on the ballot. The personalization of electoral systems in Europe » (2016) and, with William Cross, « The Politics of Party Leadership. A cross-national perspective » (2016).