

The revolution of personal leaders

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The rise of personal leaders has produced a Copernican revolution in party politics. Party heads are becoming the centre of party organization, and they often contribute to the party's founding or creation. They are becoming essential to winning elections, in a phase in which electoral choice, rather than being determined by ideological belonging, is strongly influenced by the personal appeal of the candidates. Following the steps of the US political parties (Lowi, 1985), they are becoming the *dominus* of governmental activities, by developing a direct – and not mediated by parties – relationship with citizens. The emergence of 'personal leaders' is the expression we use to describe both the political reinforcement of individual leaders and the direct relationship they share with citizens.

The shift of power in political parties is very important because it tells us something about how democracy is changing. However, there are two additional reasons for a special issue on party leaders. First, it represents a theme that is still neglected in political science, probably because of the reluctance to analyse the phenomenon of leadership, which has been considered – from both an etymological and a normative point of view – to be in tension with the idea and practice of democracy (Sartori, 1987). Indeed, the word 'leader' reminds us of a form of monocratic rule that appears to contrast with democracy as the 'rule of demos'. This has led to clear underdevelopment of the discipline, so that we are still very far from an adequate theoretical understanding and empirical investigation of the phenomenon of 'democratic leadership'.

The second motivation concerns the special position of Italy in the international landscape. Looking at the contributions collected in this issue, Italy appears to be both exceptional, and yet in the vanguard. In this country we have had the clearest model of the personal party (Calise, 2010 [2000]), Berlusconi's Forza Italia, followed by many attempts to replicate its prototype both on the centre-right and the centre-left. Italian governments have been regarded as an 'ideal type' of presidentialization, with a long-established tradition of 'integral parliamentarism' (Miglio, 1987) giving way to this new position as front-runner of the age of personalization. Moreover, Italy is also an extreme case in terms of new procedures for selecting party leaders, with more inclusive methods creating a direct link

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between the leader and party members, or simple party supporters. Yet, if Italy is a true laboratory of personalization of party politics, there is also much evidence that such a phenomenon is impacting on a wide range of Western democracies.

The aim of this special issue is therefore to extend the range of empirical investigations of this relevant and cross-national process. The first article sets out an extensive framework on party leaders in 13 democracies, focussing on new procedures for the selection of party chairs, centralization of power in political parties, and the new role of party leaders in the legislative and governmental arenas. Musella provides comparative data on how personalization has affected political parties in parliamentary democracies, leading to the prevalence of monocratic power over oligarchies. From this perspective, despite the sharp differences in terms of structures and incentives offered by parliamentary regimes (Sartori 1994), European democracies are becoming more similar to presidential ones in manifesting the centrality of leaders. What deserves particular attention is the enlargement of selectorates for the choice of party chiefs, thus increasing the popular legitimacy of the highest party office, as well as the number of powers that now lie in the hands of the leader to control fundamental aspects of party life. Among these, candidate nomination for different levels of government is often a prerogative of the leader. Thus, if Schattschneider stated ‘who can make the nomination is the owner of the party’ (1942: 101), we might assume that in several contemporary cases the party is the creature of its leader. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that the leader may obtain obedience from party affiliates during legislative lawmaking. Indeed, as will be shown, this remains a field where the strength of party leaders is being seriously tested (Musella, 2012a, b; Webb *et al.*, 2012).

The other articles in this issue focus on national systems in order to extend our understanding of how and to what extent party organization is changing in terms of the leader-centredness – or presidentialization if you will – of political parties in different countries.

Poguntke and Webb (2005) come back to their well-known thesis of the *Presidentialization of Politics*, by looking at Germany and the United Kingdom in order to reflect on the implications for the thesis of recent developments there. Party leaders are continuing to receive a sort of personal mandate from citizens, and this seems to enable them, as the authors put it, ‘to feel that they can bypass the wishes of the party (if necessary) in setting the direction of the party and the government (when in power)’. More particularly, in Germany the move from a highly asymmetric red–green coalition to a Grand Coalition with strong partners has not prevented an increase in the political resources available to the Chancellor, whether these are the material resources available through the Chancellor’s office, a partial change in the recruitment patterns to ministerial office, the outsourcing of policy formulation, or the impact of the financial crisis. In the United Kingdom, the experience of coalition government served to constrain the power of the Prime Minister within the executive, whereas simultaneously extending the autonomy he enjoyed from his own party. The surprise majority gained by David Cameron’s Conservatives in the general election of 2015 promises to reverse

this development. Nevertheless, underlying long-term structural changes mean that the overall trend in the direction of presidentialization has not been interrupted in these countries, notwithstanding changes in their governing formats.

This special issue also opens a window to the East European area. The article by Vít Hloušek provides fascinating evidence from countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia of the trend towards centralizing internal party decision-making procedures, as well as the emergence of strong personalities in the role of party leader. By considering some peculiarities of the post-Soviet political environment, and in particular the absence of strong alignments between the electorate and parties, the author also considers the distinctive paths towards the presidentialization of political parties in these countries, either through the transformation of traditional mass political parties – that is, the passage from collective leadership to strong leaders – or by the creation of new presidentialized parties *ab initio*, taking full advantage of the ‘electoral earthquakes’ that have brought new opportunities for anti-establishment and protest parties in some cases. However, this presidentialization of so many parties in East European countries does not necessarily produce greater dominance of the legislative arena by prime ministers, because – and this is a point that is often returned to in this special issue – it is accompanied by an increased level of fragmentation of the party system. Indeed, this points to a theme on which political science thus far failed to reflect sufficiently, which is to say the connection between personalization of politics and the degree of instability of party systems. The nature of the challenge this represents for our democracies is something that continues to puzzle and concern us.

The article by Calise reflects on the past and present of Italian personal parties. The country that represented one of the best examples of party government on the international scene, that saw both the long dominance of the Democrazia Cristiana and the presence of the largest Communist party in the West, found in Silvio Berlusconi a radical shift from republican traditions. The party he founded and conducted was the first experiment in Europe of the direct translation of a commercial enterprise from the world of markets to the world of politics, and remained his political creature after the phase of institutional consolidation. Forza Italia represented a new model of party as an organization created and completely dominated by its leader. During the Italian Second Republic, this model was imitated both in centre-right and centre-left coalitions, so that, although many differences could be identified between the FI prototype and other personalized parties, there are numerous parties that show a strong concentration of formal and/or informal power in the hands of the founder-leader. Although we recognize the extraordinary influence of Berlusconi’s founding model on the development of Italian political parties, we can also observe many variations and deviations from it. Indeed, Italy remains exceptional in presenting such a numerous and diversified showcase of personal parties. Yet, as Calise shows in his contribution to this issue, ‘after sharing, through its various steps of evolution, the form and status of a

corporate body, the party organization is falling prey to the virus of personalization which is invading so many realms of contemporary life' [2015].

Personalization is not a contingent factor in the countries analysed here, but rather, it appears to indicate a structural change to the benefit of leaders. We do not know what this might mean for the future of political parties, nor what the long-term impact of this process on democracy will be. However, what now seems eminently clear is that the century that has just started will be the age of personalization, just as the previous one was the century of mass collective actors – a trend that political science has a duty to consider with greater attention.

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