

The Party and the Person

**The Impact of Personalist Leadership on the Electoral
Success of Newly Established Right-Wing Populist Parties**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of right-wing populist parties. Drawing on Pappas' (2016) binary definition of personalist leadership as well as on a broader body of academic literature on personalism and right-wing populist parties, the expectation is formulated that a personalist leadership style increases the electoral support of (newly established) right-wing populist parties.

The hypothesis is tested using a medium-N comparative cross-case analysis comparing right-wing populist parties with a personalist leadership style to those without a personalist leadership style. Based on the analysis, this thesis finds no evidence for a substantial effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of right-wing populist parties.

Introduction

The centrality of charismatic leadership for populist parties is a commonplace in the literature on populism (McDonnell, 2016; Carter, 2005), but there is significant ambiguity surrounding the concept of charismatic leadership and its function for populist parties (Pappas, 2016). As shown by for example Michel et al. (2020), the study of charismatic leadership suffers from the fact that the concept of charisma is traditionally not well-defined in the scholarly literature; instead, it is typically expressed in broad, vague, empirically unfalsifiable or even tautological terms (Michel et al., 2020; Pappas, 2016).

One way to conceptualize the central role of charismatic populist leaders is through the phenomenon of personalism (Pappas, 2011). The behavioral personalization of politics thesis “describes a process through which individual political actors have gained relevance at the expense of collective political organizations such as political parties” (Michel et al., 2020, p.276); a notion which has almost become a cliché in political science (McAllister, 2019).

However, even when considering the narrower concept of personalism, the effects of a personalist leadership style on the success of political parties are contested in the literature (e.g. Ignazi, 2003; Gunther & Diamond, 2005). On the one hand, a notable body of literature takes personalism to be detrimental to party strength, because it undermines institution-building and makes parties wholly dependent on one person, thus making parties with a personalist leader unlikely to survive beyond their exit (Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Kostadina & Levitt, 2014; Loxton & Levitsky, 2018; Cheibub & Nalepa, 2020). On the other hand, personalism is often taken to boost the electoral success of parties – populist parties in particular (Ignazi, 2003; McDonnell, 2016; Michel et al., 2020). Some scholars even go so far as to suggest that new political parties benefit from a degree of personalism to become sufficiently established as political organizations (Van Dyck, 2018; Poguntke and Webb, 2018).

These conflicting notions have led to the formulation of the following research question: *What is the effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of populist parties?* Gaining a better degree of insight into the effects of different leadership styles will allow for more accurate predictions about populist parties’ electoral fortunes. Furthermore, it will allow politicians, party strategists and party members - populist or otherwise - to make more informed choices for or against particular leadership styles.

This thesis relies in large part on Pappas’ (2016) framework of charismatic leadership to conceptualize a personalist leadership style. According to him, political charisma consists

of two components: personalism and radicalism (p.3). The component of personalism meanwhile, is characterized by 1): supreme personal authority over the party and 2): a direct, unmediated relationship between the person of the party leader and the electorate (ibid.). Because of feasibility constraints, the study will use proxy indicators to measure the two components of personalism identified by Pappas.

The remainder of this thesis has been structured in the following way. First, inventory will be taken of the academic state-of-the-art concerning charismatic leadership in general and personalist leadership in particular, which will then be used to formulate a theoretical expectation on the effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of populist parties. Subsequently, this thesis will test whether the expectation holds up by conducting a medium-N comparative cross-case analysis, comparing populist parties with a personalist leadership style to those without a personalist leadership style in order to come to an answer to the research question.

Literature review

There is a broadly shared notion in the literature that charismatic leadership is central to the success of populist parties – more crucial in fact than for the success of other types of political parties (McDonnell, 2016; Pedahzur & Brichta, 2002). For example, Betz (1998) contends that *only* charismatic leaders are “capable of setting the political and programmatic direction” (p.8) for right-wing populist parties, whereas Carter (2005) theorizes that strong and charismatic leaders are needed to maintain discipline in what she describes as a notoriously unstable type of party. As such, the role of the populist party leader is more frequently expressed in terms of charisma than is the role of the non-populist party leader, contrasting the charismatic leadership style of populists with the “formal” or “legal-rational” leadership style of more traditional political parties (van der Brug & Mughan, 2007; Pappas, 2016).

Some scholars have emphasized macro-structural or external factors as the likely driver behind right-wing populist success, but this perspective is challenged by a growing body of literature that emphasizes micro-organizational or internal factors, whereby particular explanatory significance is attached to charismatic leadership (Goodwin, 2006). For example, Lubbers et al. (2002) found that sociological explanations of right-wing populist party success (e.g. systemic anti-immigrant attitudes) did not explain variation in electoral support very well, whereas political factors such as the presence of a “charismatic leader” were of significant

importance in explaining this variation (p.371). The logic behind the micro-organizational perspective is perhaps best summed up thusly: “Irrespective of how favourable the breeding ground and the political opportunity structure, [...] it is still up to the populist radical right parties to profit from them” (Berman, 1997, p.102).

Whether charismatic leadership is a defining component of populism or merely a common feature is subject to scholarly disagreement. While some authors consider charismatic leadership to be one of the defining components of populism (Pappas, 2016), others maintain that it is merely a common feature; charismatic leadership not being exclusive to populist parties (Zaslave, 2008; Michel et al., 2020) nor, as some contend, a necessary feature for a party to be considered populist (Mudde, 2004; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007; McDonnell, 2016). According to Mudde (2004), charisma “facilitate[s] rather than define[s] populism” (p.545). This resonates with the “personalization of politics” thesis, which maintains that modern politics in general is more about the person of the leader than about the policy platform or ideological identity of political parties (McAllister, 2007; Musella, 2015). However, the extent to which leader effects are greater for populist parties than for more traditional parties is subject to scholarly debate. Contrast van der Brug and Mughan (2007), who found little support for the idea that leaders of right-wing populist parties shaped electoral outcomes, with Michel et al. (2020), who found significantly stronger leader effects for right-wing populist parties than for other types of parties.

The concept of charismatic leadership is criticized for a lack of conceptual clarity and for not being empirically falsifiable (Pappas, 2016; Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug & Mughan, 2007). Charismatically led parties have been described as “those in which there is a total symbiosis between the leader and the organizational identity” (Panebianco, 1988, in: Pedahzur & Brichta, 2002), but there is no single agreed-upon definition of charismatic leadership used in the literature. If charismatic leadership is indeed a feature that facilitates rather than defines populism, it is worthwhile to empirically assess the extent of the impact of a charismatic leadership style on the fortunes of populist parties, but this is only possible by defining what constitutes charismatic leadership.

Pappas (2016) formulated a response to this critique by separating the concept of charismatic leadership into two constituent components that allow for empirical falsification. According to Pappas, political charisma consists of two components: personalism and radicalism, both of which may be further broken down into two components each. The

concept of radicalism consists of: (1) the subversion and delegitimation of existing authority structures and (2) the introduction of a novel worldview. The concept of personalism meanwhile, consists of: (1) supreme personal authority over the party and (2) a direct, unmediated relationship between the person of the party leader and the electorate.

For the purposes of this thesis, personalism is the more relevant component of Pappas' binary definition of charisma. This is because radicalism is a substantive feature of populist parties, rather than a direct expression of a leadership *style*. In other words, radicalism refers to ideology, whereas personalism refers to micro-organizational factors. Additionally, the inclusion of radicalism as a component of political charisma may fit the concept well to populist leaders, but does not allow for the existence of charismatic leaders of less radical (non-populist) political persuasions, which seems at odds with the common-sense interpretation of political charisma. Moreover, Pappas' definition of personalism more closely matches Panebianco's definition of charismatic leadership than does his definition of radicalism.

Pappas' binary definition of personalism finds resonance in the literature, in which both the supreme personal authority of the party leader within the party (Kostadina & Levitt, 2014; Loxton & Levitsky, 2018) as well as the direct relationship between the party leader and the electorate (Gunther, 2005; Gunther & Diamond, 2003; Andrews-Lee, 2020) are commonly cited as the main indicators of a personalist leadership style. At the same time, Pappas' definition of personalism does not include a component which is often seen as an integral part of the concept in the context of political parties: a weakly structured party organization (Kostadina & Levitt, 2014; Gunther, 2005). However, recent literature has challenged the fact that a weakly structured organization is a necessary component of personalism (Van Dyck, 2018; Loxton & Levitsky, 2018), and Pappas' omission of considerations of party strength from the definition of personalism allows for the theoretical co-existence of a personalist leadership style with both weakly and strongly organized parties. Similarly, it is not evident from the literature that a concept of personalism must contain both components identified by Pappas (2016). Ansell and Fish (1999) for example, theorize about a so-called non-charismatic personalism, in which leaders have great personal authority but not the ability to "inspire or transform their followers" (p.283). In Pappas' terms, this concept of non-charismatic personalism consists of only one of the two components of personalism, namely supreme personal authority over the party. Following this logic, it may be said that Pappas does not

identify the phenomenon of personalism per se, so much as the phenomenon of *charismatic* personalism.

The two components of personalism identified by Pappas (2016) are commonly cited as especially relevant to the success of populist parties, and right-wing populist parties in particular (e.g. Carter, 2005). A strong, authoritarian internal leadership style is beneficial to the survival of newly established parties, as such a leader is better equipped to prevent schisms (Van Dyck, 2018). This is especially relevant to the successful institutionalization of new populist parties (De Lange & Art, 2011). Carter (2005) contends that the authoritarian internal leadership style is particularly relevant for right-wing populists, as such parties are “especially prone to factionalism and infighting” (p.65). Likewise, the direct, unmediated relationship between the person of the party leader and the electorate is held to be especially important for populist parties, because the claim to represent the “pure people versus the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, p.543) that is central to populism’s thin ideology is strengthened by an apparently non-political and commonsensical mode of communication (Zaslove, 2008). Moreover, such a direct, unmediated relationship between leader and electorate is especially important to newly established parties, because such parties lack a strong electoral brand, and “popular leaders substitute for strong brands in many new parties” (Van Dyck, 2018). Given the proliferation of new populist parties in the past three decades (Mudde, 2004), this leadership role is relevant to them in that sense as well – at least in the medium-term.

Finally, a common assumption in the literature is that a personalist leadership style is beneficial to newly established parties but more detrimental to older parties that are already established and institutionalized. Whereas a personalist leader can be a source of strength during the party building phase by helping to establish a solid electoral support base (Loxton & Levitsky, 2018; Van Dyck, 2018; Harmel & Svasand, 1993), a party that seeks to survive its leader’s inevitable exit must invest in longer-term assets to maintain this support base and to ensure durable electoral support, which is not always facilitated by the overbearing presence of a personalist leader (Loxton & Levitsky, 2018; Harmel & Svasand, 1993).

Because most of the academic literature on charismatic populist leadership focuses on right-wing populism as opposed to for example left-wing populism (e.g. Carter, 2005; Betz, 1998; Lubbers et al., 2002), this thesis limits itself to the study of right-wing populist parties as well. It is unclear from the literature to what extent the conclusions considered above may be generalized to other types of populist parties.

These considerations from the literature have led to the formulation of the following hypothesis: *A personalist leadership style increases the electoral support of (newly established) right-wing populist parties.* This hypothesis will be operationalized and tested in the following chapters.

Research design

To test this hypothesis, the study will conduct a medium-N comparative cross-case analysis, comparing the election scores of right-wing populist parties with a personalist leadership style to those without a personalist leadership style.

Case selection

This study draws on the PopuList to identify the total population of European right-wing populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2019). This is because it is more reliable to use a consensus coding rather than my own single coding, especially given the fact that the PopuList “has been thoroughly peer-reviewed by more than 80 academics” (ibid.). It also makes the study more feasible, as using the PopuList allows for bypassing the laborious process of manually coding parties as right-wing and populist.

To be included in the PopuList, parties must have met the minimal threshold of 2% electoral support OR 1 seat in parliament (Rooduijn et al., 2019). This causes the least successful cases to be excluded from the analysis, potentially skewing the findings of the study, but for the purposes of this thesis it is not feasible to include each and every political party no matter how insignificant their electoral relevance. As such, this study applies only to cases which are already minimally successful in gaining votes or seats, and cannot provide insight into the role of personalist leaders for parties that have yet to reach this threshold.

Limiting the analysis to the European context included in the PopuList is a conscious decision based on the observation that the continent contains the largest proportion of mature, well-functioning democracies. Cases within the European context are also expected to compare well, as all European democracies are parliamentary or semi-presidential democracies and the vast majority (excluding France and the UK) use some form of proportional representation.

All parties that are checked as both populist and right-wing in the Populist are selected for analysis, including borderline cases such as the Dutch Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), as these are commonly understood to be populist as well (e.g. Vossen, 2010). This group of parties is understood to make up the total population of European right-wing populist parties extant after 1989. As this study concerns newly-established right-wing populist parties, the parties will be analyzed for the first four parliamentary elections in which they participated. Consequently, an additional requirement for a party to be included in the case selection is the ability to have participated in at least four elections. Accordingly, parties that have been extant for a period in which fewer than four national elections can have been held will not be included in the selection. This leads to a final case selection of 28 right-wing populist parties, spread across 18 European countries.

Parties that have rebranded themselves (e.g. *Vlaams Belang* (VB) which used to be called *Vlaams Blok*) while maintaining much of their internal organizational structure are considered to be a continuation of the previous party, and as such does not constitute a separate case in the analysis. On the other hand, parties that have been created by separatists from other parties (e.g. the *Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* (BZÖ), which was created by dissidents from the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ)) will be considered separate parties. This decision is based on the assumption that, while such a party will doubtless have considerably more experience and visibility than a completely new outsider party, it still has to build much of its internal organization and electoral appeal largely from scratch (Demirkol, 2014).

Operationalization

For the operationalization of the independent variable of a personalist leadership style, parties will be scored on personalism based on the two components of personalism identified by Pappas (2016): (1) supreme personal authority over the party, and (2) an unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate. As it is possible for a party to score positively on one of the two components but not the other, the independent variable will obtain a natural three-point scale or “personalism score”: parties may be non-personalist, partly personalist or fully personalist. The degree to which a party is personalist will be assessed separately for each election under analysis, to account for a possible change in leadership style within the party from personalist to non-personalist or vice versa over the course of the examined time period.

The first component of personalism, i.e. supreme personal authority over the party, is measured by three proxy indicators that are taken to indicate “highly centralized authority structures, the absence of clear bureaucratic characteristics, and the leader’s untrammelled control over subordinates” (Pappas, 2016, p.3). The first indicator of supreme personal authority is a relative lack of bureaucratic characteristics. To wit: a body of members as well as a party congress with decision-making power that may be convened without the leader’s initiative and which is accessible to all party members - at least statutorily. Data on these characteristics will be collected from party statutes and the archived party website or, if these are unavailable, from secondary literature. If any one of these bureaucratic characteristics is not present, this is understood as indicative of supreme personal authority. The second indicator of supreme personal authority is the absence of meaningful leadership contestation. If there is no recorded competition for the party leadership, as evidenced by a lack of news articles concerning leadership contestation, or if the leader is statutorily nominated as party leader for life, this is taken as indicative of supreme personal authority. While this does not preclude the possibility of behind-the-scenes leadership contestation, it is assumed that any meaningful competition for the leadership position is difficult to keep behind closed doors. Meanwhile, informal leadership contestation outside official internal organizational arrangements are *not* taken as meaningful leadership contestation, as such insurgencies do not preclude the presence of a leader with supreme personal authority – in fact, insurgencies in personalistically led parties have often resulted in the expulsion of the insurgent elements from the party. The third indicator of supreme personal authority is the fusion of leadership roles in contexts where such a fusion is not common. While in some contexts it may be common practice for the same person to hold the position of party chair and party leader simultaneously (for example), more often it is not, in which case such a combination of functions is indicative of supreme personal authority. To check whether such a fusion of leadership roles is indeed uncommon practice, the command structure of the four largest parties of the relevant countries will be checked; if a fusion of leadership roles occurs in at least two of these parties, it may be reasonably concluded that it is not uncommon practice for a party leader to hold multiple leadership roles at once in that particular context, in which case a combination of functions is *not* indicative of supreme personal authority. If two or more of the three indicators identified above point towards the party leader having supreme

personal authority, the party will be coded positively on the component of supreme personal authority.

The second component of personalism, i.e. an unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate, is measured by another proxy indicator: a higher proportion of leader mentions than of party mentions in google search hits in the year leading up to the election (or between the last election and the subsequent election when two elections are held less than a year apart). While this is clearly not a direct measure of the unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate, it is taken to be representative of the attention received by the party leader vis a vis the party itself, which in turn is assumed to reflect the probability of a leader-centered communication dynamic. Google search hits are an appropriate measure for the national attention received by the party leader vis a vis the party, as the bulk of google search hits consists of articles or social media expressions written by or about the party or the party leader. As such, if a higher proportion of leader mentions than of party mentions is measured, the party will be coded positively on the “unmediated relationship” component *for that specific election*.

One problem with data collection for this proxy indicator relates to the fact that many of the analyzed parties were extant before the internet became the primary vector of communication and information dissemination, resulting in a relative dearth of search results for the period before the year 2000. As such, a comparatively lenient minimal validity requirement of at least 10 google search results for either the leader or the party is used. Still, this requirement has caused some cases to be omitted from the analysis. When all four elections for a specific party were problematic, the subsequent election was taken as representative if there was sufficient reason to assume that the later election was similar to earlier elections in terms of the relationship between the leader and the electorate.

Another problem relates to the fact that google limits the maximum number of search results. In those cases where the maximum number of search results is reached, the results with omission of similar results is taken as representative. The problem with this is that google’s algorithm decides which results to omit and as such, it is not clear whether the measure is representative of the actual number of relevant search hits or rather of the algorithm’s processes. However, given the fact that the omitted results are typically comprised of duplicates and irrelevant results, it is assumed that the results will be representative in most

cases. Moreover, only a small percentage of cases suffered from this problem, as most did not reach the maximum number of search results, making this a relatively minor issue.

In spite of its apparent limitations, this proxy indicator possesses a certain face validity. Right-wing populist parties that are typically considered to be personalist display a considerably higher proportion of leader mentions than of party mentions. Examples of this include the Bulgarian *Ataka* (Kostadina & Levitt, 2014), which obtained higher leader mentions than party mentions for each election under analysis, as well as the *Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) (van Leeuwen et al., 2020), which scored higher leader mentions than party mentions in all but one election. Conversely, parties that are often considered to be less personalist, such as the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) and the Hungarian Fidesz during its first decade (Garcia, 2021), display a lower proportion of leader mentions, with both parties obtaining higher party mentions than leader mentions for all analyzed elections. There are a number of deviant cases however, the most significant being the French *Front National* (FN), which is considered to be “markedly personalist” (Pappas, 2012), but only obtained higher leader mentions in one election, yielding an unexpected “partly personalist” score for FN. These deviant cases appear to be relatively few, however. Because expert surveys (i.e. the CSES; CHES and Global Party Survey) do not provide any closely related variable or concept, it was not possible to obtain anything more than face validity for this proxy indicator.

Another proxy indicator for an unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate was initially planned to be included for parties extant after 2006 but was eventually not included, namely: a higher number of leader followers than party followers on twitter. While this is arguably a better measure of the relationship between the party leader and the electorate as the relationship between user and follower on twitter may be said to resemble the relationship between leader and electorate, it suffered from data availability issues: an insufficient amount of twitter pages was archived for the cases included in the analysis and as such, this proxy indicator could not be included.

For the operationalization of the dependent variable of electoral support, the analysis takes stock of national election scores for the first four consecutive elections after and including the election in which the party first attained representation in parliament. The decision to analyze four elections is based on the notion that parties that participate for fewer than four elections are ephemeral (Rose & Mackie, 1988): a party that performs well in one or two elections may simply be a one hit wonder. As such, recording a single high election

score *without* taking into account later election scores does not necessarily tell us much about the effect of personalism on electoral support. On the other hand, parties that are extant after five elections may be said to have moved beyond the “newly established” phase which is the subject of this analysis. Parties that collapse electorally before having participated in four elections will be included, whereby elections in which they did not participate will be coded as 0% electoral support. Parties that collapse organizationally before having participated in four elections will be included only for the elections during which they were extant, but their organizational collapse will be captured by a dummy variable on party survival. Electoral support will be measured as the percentage of votes obtained by each party for each of the four elections under analysis. Data on parties’ electoral representation will be collected from the website of the national parliament of the country in which the party operates or from the national statistics bureau.

Another dependent variable is included as well: party survival after four elections. Party survival is measured both as a dummy variable where a party is coded as either having survived or not based on whether or not the party was extant as an organization at the time of the fourth election, as well as by assessing the party’s election score in the fourth election measured as the percentage of votes obtained.

Analysis

The unit of analysis is the party per election, that is to say: one observation is a single party in a single election. For each case, its personalism score and level of electoral support will be determined. First, the study will test whether the normality assumption holds for the distributions. If so, a hierarchical linear regression will be used to test to what extent the variance in election scores is explained by the party’s personalism score after controlling for potential confounding variables. Additionally, the difference between the means of non-personalist and personalist cases will be assessed by using an independent samples t-test, and a hierarchical linear regression will be used to test the effect of personalism score on party survival. If the normality assumption does not hold, a nonparametric test will be selected.

A number of control variables will be included in the analysis. These variables are possible confounders that are understood to have an effect on election scores. Failing to control for these variables would possibly lead us to conclude the presence of an effect of personalism when it is actually related to other factors. The control variables are: the

proportionality of the country's electoral system measured as district magnitude according to the OECD QoG dataset (Teorell, 2021); the level of support the party enjoyed during its first election participation; whether the case represents the first, second, third or fourth election in which the party participated; and whether or not the party has participated in government during the term leading up to the election. In addition, other national background variables that are sometimes taken to influence support for (right-wing) populist parties will be controlled for. These are: national poverty rate; national unemployment, Gini coefficient and the percentage of foreign-born population (Voss, 2018). Data for the first three of these variables are taken from the World Bank database (2021), whereas data on the country's immigrant population is taken from the OECD database, supplemented with World Bank data for the missing years. For missing values, the closest data point is understood to be representative. If there are two datapoints at equal distance from the missing value, then the average of these two datapoints is taken as representative. This is justified based on the fact that these background variables are not subject to many dramatic or sudden changes.

Results

Operationalization of the variables yields a valid N of 86, with 33 non-personalist cases, 32 partly personalist cases and 21 fully personalist cases, which is a sufficient sample size for a linear regression analysis to be conducted. The residuals are normally distributed and there are no indications of multicollinearity for the predictor variables.

Most parties attain a relatively consistent personalism score, with 18 of 28 parties attaining a single personalism score for all analyzed elections and a further 8 obtaining an aberrant personalism score in only one election. This leaves two parties with a personalism score that is split evenly across elections: the Slovak *Sloboda a Solidarita* (SaS) and the Czech *Sdružení pro Republiku - Republikánská Strana Československa* (SPR-RSČ). The data shows that parties with a non-personalist score are never fully personalist and vice versa, but several parties that are either non-personalist or fully personalist in at least one election score as partly personalist in other elections. Looking at the descriptive statistics, it is evident that the mean election score is slightly higher for fully personalist parties than for partly personalist and non-personalist parties, with a mean election score of 9,15 for fully personalist parties; 8,81 for partly personalist parties and 8,53 for non-personalist parties (see table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Personalism score	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Not personalist	33	8,53	9,29	0	33,83
Partly personalist	32	8,81	8,68	0,03	41,07
Fully personalist	21	9,15	6,08	0	19,48
All cases	86	8,81	8,29	0	41,07

While at face value this seems to indicate a slightly better electoral performance for personalist parties, the difference in election scores is small. Moreover, the spread is much higher for non-personalist and partly personalist parties than for fully personalist parties. This observation is also borne out by the highest election scores, which are actually higher for non-personalist and partly personalist parties than for fully personalist parties.

The data presents a diverse picture. Among the non-personalist parties, the PiS scores consistently high from its second election onward, with election scores ranging from 26,99% to 32,11%. At the same time, plenty of non-personalist parties score low, the Croatian *Hrvatski Demokratski Savez Slavonije i Baranje* (HDSSB) most consistently so, with a score ranging from 1,25% to 3%. Other low-scoring non-personalist parties include the Finnish *Perussuomalaiset* (PS) and the Polish *Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko-Narodowe* (ZChN). The only non-personalist party to score 0% is the BZÖ in 2017. The highest measured election score of 41,07% is obtained by the partly personalist party of Fidesz in 2002, while the partly personalist party with the lowest score is the Hungarian *Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja* (MIÉP) in 2010 (0,03%). Among the fully personalist parties, the French *Mouvement Pour la France* (MPF) scores persistently low, never gaining more than 2,38% and dipping to 0% in 2012. Most fully personalist parties score decently however, with scores of at least 5%. Notable parties in this group are the PVV, SaS, Ataka and the Romanian *Partidul România Mare* (PRM), which also obtained the highest score of any fully personalist party with 19,48%. Interestingly, the SaS performed noticeably better in elections when it was a fully personalist party than in elections when it was only a partly personalist party (12,14% and 12,10% compared to 5,88% and 6,22% respectively), which is especially interesting given the fact that the SaS alternates between being a fully personalist party (in 2010 and 2016) and partly personalist party (in 2012 and 2020).

Table 2. Regression coefficients.

	Model 1
(Intercept)	1,22 (11,48)
Personalism score	0,86 (1,5)
Government participation	6,46 (3,14)
Election number	1,72 (0,96)
Country GINI coefficient	0,22 (0,41)
Country poverty rate	2,17 (2,86)
Country unemployment rate	-0,58 (0,34)
Foreign-born population	-0,45 (0,19)
First election support	0,69 (0,32)
District magnitude	-0,3 (0,03)
R2	0,29
Adjusted R2	0,18
N	86

Note: Hierarchical linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ***p < 0,001, **p < 0,01, *p < 0,05.

Using a hierarchical linear regression analysis yields a non-significant regression coefficient for personalism score of 0,86 after controlling for potential confounding variables (see table 2). Interestingly, the coefficient of personalism score *after* controlling for potential confounding variables is considerably higher than the coefficient of personalism score *before* controlling for potential confounding variables, which is 0,31. This means that the effect of personalism on election score appears smaller as a result of one or more background variables having a depressing effect on election scores.

Alternative measures of personalism likewise show no substantial effect. When using a hierarchical linear regression analysis for the two components of personalism separately,

neither component has a large or significant effect on election score after controlling for potential confounding variables: the “supreme personal authority” variable yields a non-significant regression coefficient of 0,46 and the “unmediated relationship between party and electorate” variable yields a non-significant regression coefficient of -0,31. The same holds true when using the variable of personalism score to create a new dichotomous independent variable. This can be done in two different ways. The first is by creating the variable “any personalism”; a variable which includes the group of non-personalist parties on the one hand and the group of partly personalist and fully personalist parties on the other. The second is by creating the variable “most personalism”; a variable which includes the group of non-personalist and partly personalist parties on the one hand, and the group of fully personalist parties on the other. For both of these variables, a hierarchical linear regression analysis shows no statistically significant effect after controlling for potential confounding variables, with the “most personalism” variable yielding a regression coefficient of 0,05 and the “any personalism” variable yielding a non-significant regression coefficient of 1,98, which is the largest effect found in this analysis.

Using an independent samples t-test, the mean election score of non-personalist and partly personalist parties combined ($M = 8,67$; $SE = 1,11$) is slightly lower than the mean election scores of fully personalist parties ($M = 9,15$; $SE = 1,33$). For this “most personalism” variable, the difference of 0,48 is not statistically significant, $t(49,95) = -0,28$, $p = 0,78$. Likewise, the mean election scores of non-personalist parties ($M = 8,53$; $SE = 1,62$) is slightly lower than the mean election scores of partly personalist and fully personalist parties combined ($M = 8,94$; $SE = 1,06$). For this “any personalism” variable, the difference of 0,41 is likewise not statistically significant, $t(58,57) = -0,22$, $p = 0,83$.

Similarly, a party’s personalism score has no significant effect on its survival, either measured as a dummy variable or by assessing election scores for the fourth election. When using a dichotomous variable of whether a party has survived by the fourth election or not, personalism score yields a non-significant regression coefficient of -0,34, while using election scores, personalism score yields a non-significant regression coefficient of -,036. The negative effect is small and non-significant. With only 5 parties not surviving the 4th election, the population of failed parties is perhaps simply too small for any significant effect to occur, especially as those parties that did not survive are almost exactly evenly divided between the

fully personalist and non-personalist party types. It is, however, interesting to note that all parties that were partly personalist in at least one election did survive.

In sum, while personalism has a positive effect on election score in the population under analysis, the effect is small and not statistically significant. Alternative measures of personalism likewise show no substantial or statistically significant effect on election score, nor do the individual components of personalism show a substantial or significant effect when analyzed separately. Similarly, a party's personalism score has no significant effect on its survival. What these findings mean for the hypothesis will be discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the research question: *What is the effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of populist parties?* Based upon a medium-N comparative cross-case analysis comparing right-wing populist parties with a personalist leadership style to those without a personalist leadership style, this thesis found no substantial effect of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of populist parties.

In his attempt to reconcile the notion of charismatic leadership and the personalization of politics thesis, Pappas' (2016) binary and empirically falsifiable definition of charisma provided an apparently useful framework to analyze charismatic leadership and, more specifically, what is arguably its most salient component: the phenomenon of personalism. Based upon an examination of the literature on personalism as well as on right-wing populist parties, it was expected that a personalist leadership style increases the electoral support of (newly established) right-wing populist parties.

However, the analysis conducted in this thesis found no substantial evidence to support the hypothesis that a personalist leadership style increases the electoral support of (newly established) right-wing populist parties. While personalism does have a positive effect on election score, the effect is small and not statistically significant.

It is possible that these findings are the result of issues of measurement rather than of theory. First, due to feasibility concerns, the sample size used in the analysis was limited, potentially impacting the validity of the results. It was not possible to include all right-wing populist parties, nor even all European right-wing populist parties, and consequently, parties of inconsequential electoral relevance were omitted from the analysis. If these electorally unsuccessful parties are predominantly of the same type, this omission may have influenced

the results and potentially skewed them in one direction or other. Moreover, several parties were excluded from the analysis because of a lack of data on one or both of the components of personalism or because the party in question only became populist quite late in their lifespan, eliminating them from the relevant category of newly established right-wing populist parties (see appendix), potentially skewing the results further. The positive effect found in the analysis might have been larger or more significant if a larger population had been analyzed, but this is of course purely speculative.

Second, the analysis relied on proxy indicators to identify the two components of personalism described by Pappas, and it is possible that the used proxy indicators are not appropriate representations of the phenomena they sought to measure. In particular, the proxy indicator for the unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate is potentially problematic, as the ratio of news mentions between the party and the party leader does not necessarily indicate a particular type of relationship between the party leader and the electorate; rather, it may be a corollary of particular patterns of media reporting. Inclusion of the twitter measure would have ameliorated this issue somewhat, as twitter follower patterns are arguably more indicative of a particular type of relationship between leader and followers, but that measure suffered from the problem of data availability over the relevant time period. Moreover, the news mentions measure suffered from data availability problems as well. If it is indeed the case that this proxy indicator is not a proper representation of the phenomenon it sought to measure, then the entire categorization of parties as personalist and non-personalist is suspect, and the results of the analysis have comparatively little bearing on the hypothesis.

Third and finally, it is possible that the time period of four elections is too short to properly observe the effects of a personalist leadership style on the electoral support of populist parties. Some parties, such as Ataka, the SPR-RSČ, the *Partidul Unității Naționale a Românilor* (PUNR), and the *Slovenská Národná Strana* (SNS) collapsed electorally sometime shortly after the fourth election. Of course, it is unclear to what extent this is representative of a pattern directly related to the phenomenon of personalism, but the selected time period may nevertheless have had an impact on the results of the analysis.

On the other hand, it is likewise possible that the measures used in this thesis are in fact appropriate and the theoretical expectations based upon the literature review are simply not correct. The fact that this study found little evidence for the hypothesis that newly

established right-wing populist parties with a personalist leadership style perform significantly better than those without a personalist leadership style, could mean that they simply *do not* perform substantially better electorally. Indeed, right-wing populist parties that are organized in a traditional and non-personalist manner often perform well electorally and become established parties in their own right. Notable examples of this include the PiS, *Dansk Folkeparti* (DF), and *Lega Nord* (LN). Meanwhile, parties that are clearly personalist are not guaranteed success, as evidenced by the electoral decline of parties such as the MPF and the SPR-RSČ. At the same time, personalist parties do not perform *worse* than non-personalist parties either. But while it is true that successful populist parties with a personalist leadership style, such as the PVV, the FN and SaS, clearly stand out in the public imagination, there is perhaps more to their success than simply their personalist leadership.

If we accept the latter, this leads to the conclusion that personalist leadership by itself is not as crucial a factor to the success of right-wing populist parties as some scholars contend. This matches the conclusion of Van der Brug & Mughan (2007) about the negligible importance of charismatic leadership for populist parties as defined in the Weberian sense. This does not preclude the possibility that personalism may still play a role in the success of such parties in conjunction with other, as yet to be identified factors - structural or otherwise. Whether this role is one of assistance or of handicap might very well depend on the interaction between a personalist leadership style and these other factors. One potential factor of interest is the radicalism that Pappas identifies as the counterpart of personalism in the constitution of charismatic leadership. Alternatively, it might be the case that the phenomenon of personalist leadership is beside the point and that the success of right-wing populist parties depends largely or entirely on non-organizational factors.

Suggestions for future research

The findings of this thesis may provide impetus for further research. First, the operational weaknesses inherent in this study warrant further testing of the hypothesis that a personalist leadership style increases the electoral support of (newly established) right-wing populist parties. One obvious improvement on the study conducted here is the acquisition of a larger and more diverse sample size by including electorally insignificant or non-European parties. Alternatively, as right-wing populist parties continue to thrive and make inroads into the party systems of (Western) democracies, the potential sample size will increase organically over

time: a significant number of right-wing populist parties has emerged over the course of the past decade; parties that were as of yet too young and unfixed to be included in the analysis conducted in this thesis. Reproducing this analysis with newer parties has the added benefit of greater data availability, particularly when it comes to twitter followers as proxy indicator for the unmediated relationship between the party leader and the electorate. Arguably however, such a course will not be worthwhile for another decade.

In the broader scholarly discussion on the effects of personalist leadership, it is worthwhile to consider the constellation of factors within which personalist (or indeed, charismatic) leadership is embedded. If there is indeed an effect of personalist leadership on the fortunes of (populist) parties, it is perhaps context-dependent and it may not be possible to consider personalism in isolation from other structural factors, be they organizational, ideological or cultural. This thesis has attempted to do just that by limiting the analysis to newly-established right-wing populist parties, but perhaps an even more finely-tuned analysis is warranted. For the moment, the academic discussion on personalist leadership and its impact on the fortunes of political parties is ongoing.

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Appendix A: List of analyzed parties

Acronym	Name	English name	Country	Personalism 1st election ¹
BZÖ	Bündnis Zukunft Österreich	Alliance for the Future of Austria	Austria	Partly personalist
DN	Démocratie Nationale	National Democracy	Belgium	Partly personalist
VB	Vlaams Belang	Flemish Importance	Belgium	Partly personalist
Ataka	Ataka	Attack	Bulgaria	Fully personalist
HDSSB	Hrvatski Demokratski Savez Slavonije i Baranje	Croatian Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja	Croatia	Not personalist
SPR-RSČ	Sdružení pro Republiku - Republikánská Strana Československa	Rally for the Republic-Republican Party of Czechoslovakia	Czech Republic	Partly personalist
DF	Dansk Folkeparti	Danish People's Party	Denmark	Not personalist
FrP	Fremskridtspartiet	Progress Party	Denmark	Fully personalist
PS	Perussuomalaiset	Finns Party	Finland	Not personalist
FN	Front National	National Front	France	Partly personalist
MPF	Mouvement Pour la France	Movement for France	France	Fully personalist

¹ Absent data for the first election, the first election for which data was available is reported.

LAOS	Laikós Orthódoxos Synagermós	Popular Orthodox Rally	Greece	Partly personalist
Fidesz	Magyar Polgári Szövetség	Hungarian Civic Alliance	Hungary	Partly personalist
MIÉP	Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja	Hungarian Justice and Life Party	Hungary	Partly personalist
LN	Lega Nord	Northern League	Italy	Not personalist
ADR	Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei	Alternative Democratic Reform Party	Luxembourg	Not personalist
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid	Party for Freedom	Netherlands	Fully personalist
LPF	Lijst Pim Fortuyn	List Pim Fortuyn	Netherlands	Fully personalist
LPR	Liga Polskich Rodzin	League of Polish Families	Poland	Not personalist
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	Law and Justice	Poland	Not personalist
ZChN	Zjednoczenie Chrześcijańsko- Narodowe	Christian National Union	Poland	Not personalist
PRM	Partidul România Mare	Greater Romania Party	Romania	Fully personalist
PUNR	Partidul Unității Naționale a Românilor	Romanian National Unity Party	Romania	Not personalist
SNS	Slovenská národná strana	Slovak National Party	Slovakia	Not personalist
SaS	Sloboda a Solidarita	Freedom & Solidarity	Slovakia	Fully personalist

SNS	Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka	Slovenian National Party	Slovenia	Partly personalist
SDS	Slovenska Demokratska Stranka	Slovenian Democratic Party	Slovenia	Fully personalist
NyD	Ny Demokrati	New Democracy	Sweden	Not personalist

Appendix B: Notes on data collection and analysis

Not all parties that were listed in the PopuList were included in the final analysis.. Insufficient data was available on the following parties, as the parties lacked a website or statutes that were available online: Rassemblement pour la France (RPF), Lega d’Azione Meridionale (LAM) and Freiheits-Partei der Schweiz (FPS). Liga Veneta (LV) was excluded as it is considered a part of Lega Nord. The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP), and Norwegian Fremskrittspartiet (FrP) were not included either, as these parties only became populist later in their lifespan and as such do not classify as newly established right-wing populist parties. For the Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei (ADR), a later election was selected in lieu of earlier missing variables, as the later election provided a very similar case to earlier elections, with the same leader and the same electoral platform.

When a party was extant as a political organization for the analyzed election but did not actively participate in the elections, they were scored as obtaining 0,00%.

Appendix C: Secondary literature

For cases for which party statutes were unavailable, the following literature was used to code parties on supreme personal authority.

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