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Personalist ruling parties in democracies

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ABSTRACT

This study introduces a new data set on personalism in ruling parties across the world's democracies. We conceptualize party personalism as *the extent to which parties are vehicles to advance leaders' personal political careers such that the leader has more control over the party than do other senior party elites* and compare this concept with related ones. After describing the measurement strategy and demonstrating measurement reliability and validity, we show the global and historical patterns of ruling party personalism in the past three decades. We then use this measure to examine whether personalist ruling parties shape two outcomes relevant to the quality of democracy: political polarization and citizen satisfaction with democracy. We show that when leaders backed by a personalist political party win power, political polarization increases; we do not find that party personalism influences citizen support for democracy, however. Our findings suggest that the election of leaders supported by personalist political parties sets in motion meaningful political changes, though not in all the domains observers have proposed. We close this study by discussing additional areas in which our data can be used in future research.

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KEYWORDS Political parties; democracy; personalism; polarization; measurement model

Introduction

Many observers have assessed that the personalization of politics is a defining theme of contemporary democracy.[1] Scholars see it as the "central feature of democratic politics in the twenty-first century,"[2] marking a major political shift in the world's democracies.[3] Though the personalization of politics is a multi-faceted concept,[4] it fundamentally captures the growing importance of individual political actors "at the expense of parties and collective identities".[5] The personalization of politics can manifest itself in a variety of areas, ranging from political campaigns to media reporting to political institutions.[6]

Researchers point to a variety of causes of such personalization, including institutional changes (such as electoral reforms), the evolving media landscape, and the decline of traditional parties and citizen political engagement.[7] Particularly in

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Western democracies, dealignment has facilitated personalization, with leaders' personal popularity playing an increasingly important role in the electoral success of their parties.[8] Technological changes, such as the advent of television and increasingly the Internet and social media[9], further facilitate personalization by offering political actors a direct way of connecting with voters.[10] Social structures, such as class and religious affiliations, also appear to matter less to citizens while the personality of the political leadership takes a more pronounced role.[11] Even collective action has grown more individualized, with ideology and group loyalties less valuable to citizens for structuring mobilization than personal lifestyle values.[12]

Despite broad assertions that politics has grown more personalized in recent decades, empirical evidence to support this trend is less robust and consistent than one would assume.[13] Systematic evidence of personalization appears to be quite strong with respect to media coverage, for example, but weaker or more ambivalent in areas like political behaviour and election campaigns.[14] Moreover, personalization is not afflicting countries evenly. There is evidence (primarily from longstanding democracies), for example, that voter perceptions and actions are increasingly focused on individual political actors instead of collective groups, yet there is substantial variance from one country to the next.[15] Likewise, in many regions like Western Europe there is no clear pattern over time in terms of personalization of political parties, although country-level trends are apparent.[16] The mixed evidence may be a product of variation in the sample and time period selected, the specific facet of personalization under analysis, and/or how it is conceptualized and measured.[17]

At the same time, while a number of scholars suggest that the personalization of politics may be harmful for the quality of democracy,[18] analyses have stopped short of empirically evaluating this relationship.[19] Rahat and Kenig point out, for example, that there is good reason to be concerned about the rise of personalization for democratic politics. As they write, "[t]he shifting of Turkey and Hungary in the 2010s toward illiberal models of democracy is concomitant with the leadership dominance of Erdogan and Orban respectively."[20] That said, they note that the literature lacks consensus in terms of whether personalization is harmful or beneficial to democracy. Adam and Maier take this further to suggest that empirically addressing this relationship is critical to moving the literature forward.[21]

To help researchers weigh in on these and other debates, this study introduces a new data set: "The Personalist Political Parties Data Set". Political parties are a key institution in any democracy and a useful focal point for evaluating political personalization and its impact. We put forth that political parties are more personalist when the party exists to promote and further the leader's personal political career, such that the leader has more control and power over the party than do other senior party elites in advancing policy and making personnel decisions.

Our data capture levels of personalism in the political parties of democratically elected leaders in 106 countries worldwide from 1991 to 2020. In this way, they shed light on patterns of personalism in ruling parties around the globe over roughly three decades.[22] The data show, for example, that when accounting for other factors, party personalism has steadily increased globally since the turn of the century, and that some regions (such as Eastern Europe) feature higher party personalism than others (such as East or South Asia).

Importantly, our data assess personalism in the party of the incumbent leader prior to the leader's ascension to the leadership post. Doing so enables researchers to

evaluate the consequences of personalist parties for outcomes that may be endogenous to larger leadership strategies once the leader wins office (and the party becomes the "ruling" party), such as incumbent power grabs that undermine democracy. This differentiates our data from the handful of existing data sets on personalist political parties, which – while offering a meaningful contribution – cover a substantially smaller set of countries and capture dynamics that transpire after the leader's assumption to power.[23]

In this way, our data capture *personalized* politics – specifically, the extent to which a ruling party is personalist – as opposed to the process through which politics grows more personalist over time (i.e. the *personalization* of politics). We thus build on work by Pruysers, Cross, and Katz[24], who emphasize that the literature often ignores the importance of personalism itself and instead focuses primarily on documenting longitudinal changes. Looking at personalized politics is desirable in this context because the same action that leaders take to personalize – or change – the party once they are in office may also be interpreted as harmful for the quality of democracy. That is, the process of personalizing the political arena once in power may be the very mechanisms by which incumbents undermine democracy. We see our data on ruling party personalism, therefore, as a first step towards better understanding the implications of personalism for democratic politics, particularly for explaining the behaviour of leaders, including their attempts to undermine democracy, once they are selected the chief executive of the state.

We illustrate the utility of our data set by examining how personalist ruling parties influence two outcomes relevant to the quality of democracy: political polarization and citizen satisfaction with democracy. We demonstrate that when leaders backed by a personalist political party win power, political polarization increases; this does not influence citizen support for democracy, however. Our findings suggest that the election of leaders supported by personalist political parties sets in motion meaningful societal political changes, though not in all the domains observers have proposed.

We begin this study by discussing how we conceptualize personalist political parties, before showing how our concept differs from related ones. We then detail the measurement strategy, along with descriptive patterns related to our measure of ruling personalist political parties. We use this measure to examine whether personalist ruling parties influence the indicators of democratic quality. Lastly, we close by offering insight into additional areas in which our data can be used in future research.

Conceptualizing personalist political parties

Our conceptualization of personalist political parties builds on early work. Janda, for example, states that personalist parties are those in which leaders establish the party to consolidate and legitimize their power. From this perspective, personalism is the "extent to which new party militants seem motivated by 'personalism' or the charismatic qualities of the party leader."[25] Similarly, Kostadinova and Levitt define personalist parties as party organizations that are weakly structured by design and feature a dominant leader.[26] As Gunther and Diamond point out, such parties are primarily a tool for helping the leader win elections and secure power, existing to advance the ambitions of the leader rather than promote a particular policy agenda.[27] Using these insights, we define party personalism as: *the extent to which parties are vehicles to advance leaders' personal political careers such that the leader has more control*

and power over the party than do other senior party elites in advancing policy and making personnel choices.[28]

Personalist parties, perhaps unsurprisingly, are less resilient to leadership transitions than their non-personalist counterparts, which have a greater "ability to survive a first generation of leaders".[29] Because personalist parties are vehicles centred on their leader, they are more likely to dissolve upon the leader's departure.[30] This differentiates personalist parties from dynastic parties, which are better able to survive leadership transitions.[31]

A tell-tale indicator of a personalist party is whether the leader helped found it. As Calise points out, leaders' control of a party that they themselves created exemplifies extreme party personalization.[32] This is consistent with research by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz on party creation in authoritarian environments, where the leader's establishment of a new political party just prior to or after assuming power is an indicator of greater personalism.[33] They show that when autocratic leaders create their own political party it is usually part of a larger strategy of power concentration.

Related concepts and measures

Our conceptualization of personalist parties is related to but distinct from existing scholarship on the "presidentialization of politics", which describes the trend towards personalism in liberal democracies.[34] This scholarship argues that the decline in the importance of political parties has not been confined to presidential political systems, which encourage individual responsibility and where party discipline tends to be weak. Instead, it is also a feature of parliamentary systems where leaders (in theory) should have no meaningfully separate political identity in the eyes of voters. Our definition is perhaps most like Mughan, who defines "presidentialization" as, "movement over time away from collective to personalized government, movement away from a pattern of governmental and electoral politics dominated by the political party to one where the party leader becomes a more autonomous political force".[35] Scholars have been quick to emphasize that presidentialization and personalization are not synonymous processes, but interpretations of how and why vary based on how scholars conceptualize both.[36] We acknowledge the likely overlap between presidentialization and personalist political parties, maintaining our focus on the latter for analytical clarity.

Our conceptualization of personalist parties speaks to themes in the literature on political party and leadership characteristics, as well, in ways that are important to highlight. The concept of party institutionalization, for example, emphasizes (among other things) the extent to which parties have strong societal roots and are organizationally independent of their leader.[37] Personalist parties, therefore, share some features of parties that are not institutionalized. The organizational structure in personalist parties is "light", and any grassroots networks are often superficial and/or fleeting.[38] As Janda points out, when the organization is simply the personal instrument of a leader, party institutionalization will be limited.[39] This is consistent with research on authoritarian regimes, which frames party institutionalization as the process through which power is "depersonalized".[40] While not all parties that lack institutionalization are personalist in nature, personalist parties lack institutionalization by design.

Scholars have developed several strategies for measuring various components of party institutionalization. Most approaches have focused on legislative (lower

chamber) seat (electoral) volatility, in some instances separating the change in vote for existing parties from the entry (exit) of new (existing) parties.[41] Others emphasize different facets of party institutionalization instead. Mainwaring and Torcal, for example, measure "roots in society" using cross-sectional surveys of ideological voting.[42] Though this strategy limits generalization, they conclude that personalist voting for "outsiders" is related to "roots in society". There have also been efforts to capture party institutionalization using expert judgments about internal organizational features (party branches and platforms), whether party members vote with the party, and whether the party's linkage strategy is more clientelistic or programmatic.[43] These data exist at the level of the party system, however, not at the level of the individual party. Lastly, though the sample is autocracies, Meng measures party institutionalization by looking at the number of leader turnovers autocratic ruling parties have survived and their duration following the departure of their founding leader.[44]

Our conceptualization of personalism in ruling parties shares themes from the literature on "political outsiders", "anti-system candidates", and "populists", as well.[45] In their bid for power, leaders of personalist parties may position themselves as coming from outside the traditional political establishment, expressing a disdain for politics as usual and promoting a populist agenda. Examples include Hugo Chavez of Venezuela (backed by the Fifth Republic Movement) and Andrej Babis of the Czech Republic (backed by Action by Dissatisfied Citizens). In this way, the election of leaders backed by personalist parties often signals dissatisfaction with traditional parties and the status quo, just as the rise of political outsiders, anti-system candidates, or populists does. That said, scholars are quick to emphasize that these concepts are not interchangeable.[46] Coming from outside or being against the system or a populist tells us about characteristics of leaders and the policies they support, not the structure of the party organization that backs them. Take Macky Sall of Senegal for example, whose support party – the Alliance for the Republic – ranks high on our measure of party personalism, yet who most observers would not consider a political outsider or populist.

Scholars have engaged in a handful of efforts to measure the phenomenon of "outsider" candidates. To begin, Mainwaring and Torcal open the door for such a task by identifying prominent cases of "outsider" candidates.[47] Samuels and Shugart develop these ideas more deeply by collecting data on the career paths of elected leaders, focusing on whether the executive has previously been a party leader or cabinet member.[48] Carreras also identifies outsider winning candidates, building on Samuels and Shugart's data collection.[49] We see our project as useful for gaining insight into the ways in which leaders of personalist parties do and do not overlap with "outsider" candidates.

To summarize, there is a large literature devoted to concepts related to personalism in ruling political parties and accompanying efforts to measure them. Our study is the first, however, to offer high coverage cross-national, time-series data that directly captures levels of personalism in the political parties of democratically elected incumbents. With this background in mind, we now discuss our measurement approach.

Measuring personalism in ruling political parties

Defining personalism in ruling political parties is straightforward; capturing it in practice, however, requires greater attention. Two challenges arise when choosing

observable indicators of party personalism. First, observed signs of personalism in the ruling party (such as greater leadership control over personnel or policy decisions vis-a-vis other party elite) are often endogenous to larger leadership strategies once the leader wins office (and the party becomes the "ruling" party). Second, such observable signals are often the outcome of unobservable bargaining processes. Elites with little power are unlikely to publicly challenge a strong leader, just as a weak leader is unlikely to propose policies that counter the preferences of a powerful party elite. As a result, observing "no challenge" to the moves of the leader or the ruling party elite could mean either leader-elite agreement, a powerful leader, or a powerful elite.

For these reasons, we are careful to identify indicators of ruling party personalism that skirt these challenges. In stark terms – which gloss over the ambiguity present in many real-world cases – we seek to classify whether the "party picks the leader" or "the leader picks her/his party". We believe this is an observable manifestation of the extent to which the party or the leader has greater relative power and that it can be coded objectively. In practice this concept is continuous. Personalist ruling parties, we propose, are those where the leader has greater control over the party than do other senior party elites. Our data include both a binary indicator of whether the chief executive created the support party and a continuous measure of personalism based on eight indicators (including the binary indicator) of how the leader participated in the support party prior to becoming chief executive.

Our approach lays out a clear set of coding rules to capture objective facts about the leader and her/his party, which we organize into case narratives and data points. Our sample includes all chief executives in democracies who are in office in January of a calendar year from 1991 to 2020. The sample of democracies is from updated data on regime type from Geddes, Wright, and Frantz.[50]

First, we identify de facto democratic leaders and the party that supports their candidacy in their initial election to the chief executive position (if there is a party). We define a leader as the de facto chief executive (i.e. president or prime minister) of a national-level democratic government. We exclude chief executives who were technocratic appointments following resignations (e.g. Ertha Pascal-Trouillot in Haiti and Shahabuddin Ahmed in Bangladesh) because they were not elected. But we include appointed prime ministers backed by leading parties in a parliamentary government and include vice presidents who are elected to their vice-presidential positions but who are constitutionally appointed chief executive following incumbent resignations (e.g. Alejandro Maldonado in Guatemala). In both types of cases, the chief executive was either selected by a government-leading party that was elected or is elected to a position that is part of the constitutional succession (i.e. Vice President). The sample encompasses 542 leaders in 106 countries with democratic governments.

We define a support party as a political organization, mass movement, or civic association that openly mobilizes voters to help elect candidates to office using its name or label. We identify support parties based on their backing of a candidate in the first or second round of a national election from which the chief executive is selected. Support, in our definition, includes openly identified speech, financial backing, and/or organizational resources. In contrast to "off-the-shelf" data such as the Database of Political Institutions (DPI), we identify the main party that backs election bids of nominally independent candidates.[51] For example, while DPI codes Alvaro Uribe as a nominal "independent" in Colombia, the Conservative party was the largest political party backing his candidacy in the first round of executive elections even

though Uribe was not a formal member of this party at the time of the election. We thus treat the Conservative party as Uribe's support party. Finally, we match this data with the PartyFacts ID codes[52] and the parties coded in the Varieties of Parties data set.[53]

Next, we describe the history of the relationship between the leader and the party in a narrative (see Appendix G). The narrative description is qualitative data that captures the complexity of real-world politics across a range of formal institutional settings and party systems. It includes all the relevant information necessary to code the data we are interested in, as well as the reference material from the qualitative sources we employed to collect the information in it.

Using these narratives, we recorded quantitative data on the following eight objective, systematic indicators of personalism in the ruling party:

- Create party: Did the leader create the political party that backed them in the election for chief executive? (binary)
- National appointment with electing party: Did the leader hold a national appointed position with the electing party prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- National elected with electing party: Did the leader hold a national elected position with the electing party prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- Party leadership position with electing party: Did the leader hold an appointed position with the electing party (e.g. party leader or treasurer) prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- Local appointed with electing party: Did the leader hold an appointed local position with the electing party prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- Local elected with electing party: Did the leader hold an elected local position with the electing party prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- Prior independent: Did the leader hold a political office or run as a losing candidate for the chief executive position as a political independent (i.e. without backing from an established political party) prior to being selected chief executive? (binary)
- Party experience: How long has the leader been in an established electing political party prior to assuming office?[54] (binary)

The items record information about the leader and the party with which they were elected by looking at the history of their relationship, including whether the leader created or helped form the party and whether the leader served in political positions with that party prior becoming leader.[55] The items therefore capture objective information on the pre-history of the leader-party relations; and because they record information that chronologically preceded the leader's stint in power as the executive, the items do not contain information about how the leader behaves once in office as the chief executive.

In the real world of democratic politics, coding the relationship between incumbent leaders and their support parties is not straightforward. While many democratic leaders rise through the ranks of an established party, departures from this pathway take a variety of forms. Some democratic leaders emerge from an established party but quit that party to start a new one that propels them to victory (such as Emmanuel Macron in France). Other candidates sidle up to an established party just prior to an election after having served years in local elected office (such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines) or as political outsiders (such as Donald Trump in the United States). And

still others start their own party as an electoral vehicle during the first election campaign in which the leader wins (such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela), or start a new party that wins legislative seats prior to boosting the candidate to national executive office (such as Evo Morales in Bolivia). Leaders may even establish a party, win the executive with that party, but then abandon it soon after inauguration (such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Bingu wa Mutharika in Malawi). Our coding scheme captures systematic information on these (and other) party pathways to democratic leadership.

The information can be structured in various ways. For example, researchers can use one of the indicators to measure a narrow concept, such as new party creation, in theory testing; or the researcher can aggregate the indicators to measure a broader concept, such as a personalist party, for applied research. We offer an illustration that employs latent variable techniques to the data to measure personalism in ruling parties and then use the constructed measure in an application.

A measurement model

Measurement models improve empirical testing of theoretical concepts by providing a principled way of aggregating multiple measures of a similar concept, which may contain measurement error.[56] We employ a 2-parameter logistic (IRT-2PL) model, where i indexes leaders, t indexes calendar years, and j indexes the eight items that we treat as observable indicators of personalism.[57]

$$Pr(y_{j,i,t} = 1|personalism_{i,t}) = logit(\delta_j + \beta_j personalism_{i,t}) \quad (1)$$

In this equation, δ_j is the difficulty parameter; β_j is the discrimination parameter for item j; and the logit function is a logistic transformation of the data. The equation estimates $personalism_{i,t}$, which is the estimated degree of party personalism for each leader-year. The difficulty parameter (δ_j) reflects the extent to which leaders, on average, are observed to have political experience that corresponds with one of the items, while the discrimination parameter (β_j) reflects the extent to which one item predicts another item.

Figure 1 shows the information for the eight items in the latent estimate of *party personalism*, or θ. The left plot shows the estimates for the item discrimination parameters, β_j: higher values indicate more information in the latent estimate over a smaller range of θ values.[58] The right plot displays the estimated item "difficulty" parameters, δ_j: larger values indicate items for which observations have a higher estimate of θ. If the model accurately estimates latent *party personalism*, more "difficult" items are those for which an observation must be highly personalist to observe a 1 for this item. This parameter shows where the model splits high and low *party personalism* cases at a particular point in the latent space.

The left plot of the discrimination parameters indicates that some items, such as Local appointed, Party experience, and Create party, provide more information to the estimated measure of party personalism than other items, such as Local elected, Party leadership, and Prior independent. This means the party personalism measure contains more information from the former three indicators than the latter three. Even though some items provide more information to the latent estimate, all item discrimination estimates in the left plot are statistically significant, which indicates that they add information and should be included in the model.

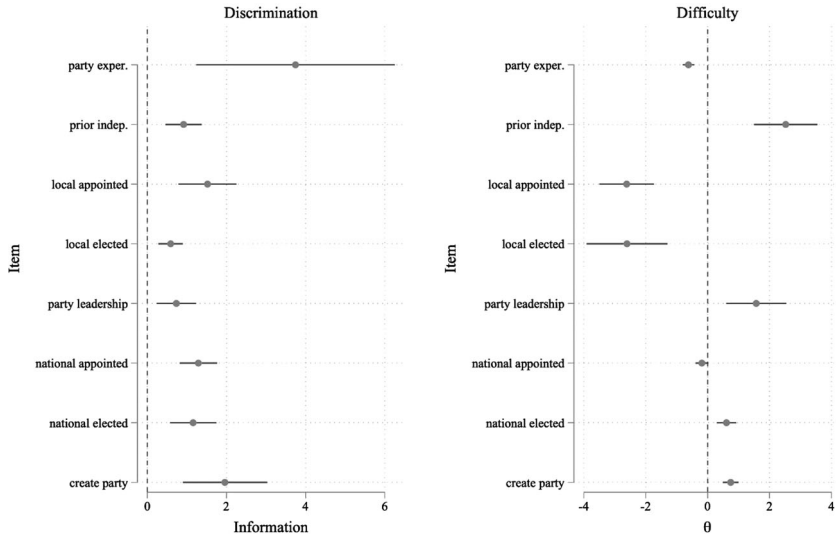

Figure 1. IRT-2LP, item discrimination and difficulty parameter estimates.

The right plot shows that items fall all along the latent space θ (horizontal axis in the right plot). Item estimates with a negative estimate, such as Local elected and Local appointed, are helpful for separating parties with moderately low personalism from parties with very low personalism. Similarly, items with a positive estimate, such as Prior independent and Party leader, separate parties with moderately high personalism from parties with very high personalism. Finally, items with estimates close to zero, such as Create party or Party experience, separate parties with medium high personalism from parties with medium low personalism.

Appendix D assesses the internal consistency, reliability, face validity, and external validity of the new measure of ruling party personalism. We demonstrate high internal consistency and reliability, document validity, and show both convergent and divergent external validity across temporal and cross-sectional dimensions of the data.

Information in the data used to check the external validity of the latent measure comes from expert-coding[59] and we cannot be sure that expert coding does *not* reflect information about the behaviour of leaders once they gain power. In contrast, our latent measure of party personalism uses objective indicators from information that pre-dates leaders' ascendancy to the chief executive position. Thus, the latent measure we construct cannot reflect information from the leaders' behaviour in office. This means the latent measure can be employed in applied research as an exogenous phenomenon to *explain* leaders' behaviour once in office, including further efforts to personalize the party or undermine democracy. We revisit this point later when we examine whether ruling party personalism shapes political polarization and citizens' support for democracy.

A look at the data: descriptive patterns in ruling party personalism

Figure 2 shows the global pattern of ruling party personalism from 1991 to 2020. The top map shows the pattern of democracy, where dark blue indicates that the country

has been a democracy for the entire period (e.g. Australia, Brazil, India, and Poland) while lighter blues show that country has been a democracy for only part of the period (e.g. Malaysia (2018–2020), Mexico (2000–2020), and Turkey (1991–2016)). Finally, countries that have remained dictatorships throughout the period, such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Zimbabwe do not appear on the map of democracies.

The bottom map in Figure 2 shows the average level of party personalism in ruling parties globally for these democracies. There is quite a bit of regional variation, with some regions (such as Eastern Europe) exhibiting greater party personalism than others (such as East and South Asia). At the country level, Indonesia, Mali, and Ukraine have relatively high levels of party personalism while countries such as Argentina, India, Italy, and the U.S. have middle levels. Australia, Norway, and the U.K. are among those with the lowest levels. In short, the level of personalism in the incumbent party varies substantially within all regions of the world as well as across regions.

Figure 3 shows how the level of ruling party personalism and the share of democracies with a leader who created their own party varies over time. The grey bars in the left plot illustrate that leaders who created their own party were most common during the early 1990s. This makes sense because many democracies in the sample were new democracies during this period, having recently transitioned from autocratic rule, often single-party rule. In these countries, democratic leaders frequently played a significant role in helping to form new democratic parties, many from opposition organizations. That victorious parties will often be relatively new, by construction, in newer

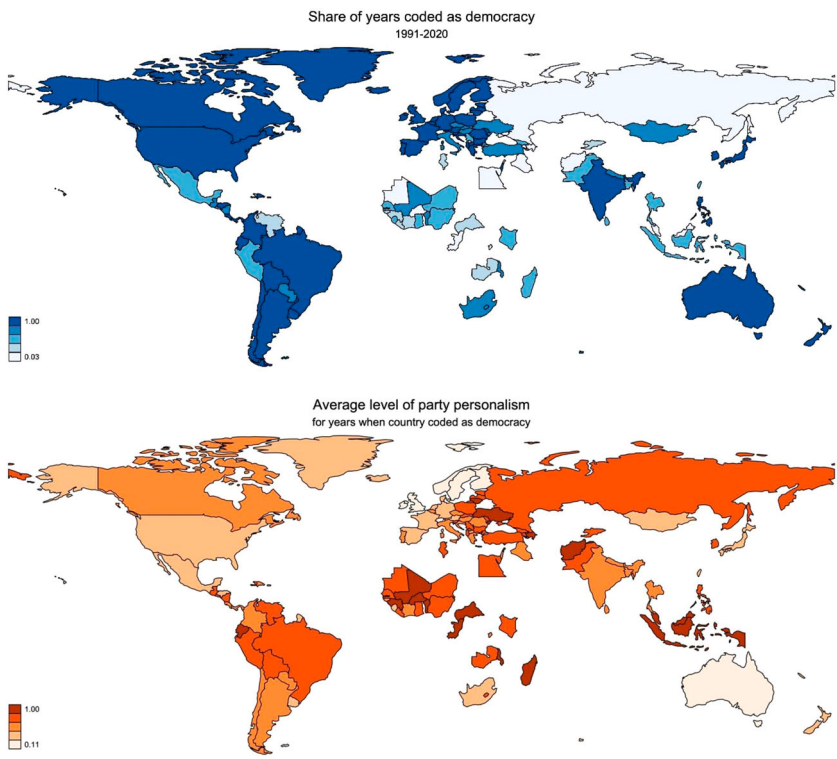

Figure 2. Ruling party personalism in democracies, global patterns.

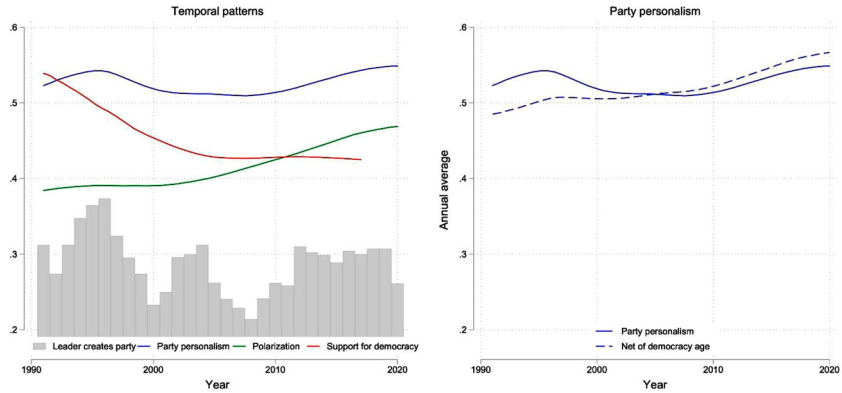

Figure 3. Ruling party personalism in democracies over time.

democracies bears emphasis because, for this reason, the measure of party personalism will be higher in new democracies. Given the items we use to construct the measure, which incorporate *pre-electoral* information and not post-electoral behaviour, this is inevitable. Therefore, in applied analysis we encourage users to adjust for the *age of democracy*.

The blue line depicting the average level of party personalism across time shows that party personalism is slightly higher in the early 1990s and declines afterwards until about 2012 after which point party personalism increases. This pattern stands in contrast to two behavioural trends related to democracy – polarization and citizen' support for democracy (we discuss these dynamics in the following section) – which are increasing (decreasing in the case of support for democracy) over the past three decades.

The right plot shows the time trend in ruling party personalism with the solid line (same as the blue line in the left plot) and contrasts this with the time trend once we adjust for the age of the democracy. The dashed line, which adjusts for democracy age, shows a lower level of ruling party personalism in the 1990s, which makes sense because there are many new democracies in this decade. Once we adjust for democracy age, ruling party personalism is generally increasing over the past three decades – a similar trend to that for polarization.

The consequences of personalist ruling parties

This section examines how ruling party personalism shapes two factors that some theorize contribute to democratic erosion and collapse[60]: political polarization and citizen support for democracy. These two phenomena are plausible outcomes of personalist ruling parties, particularly when we measure personalism using pre-electoral information about the leader and the party that propelled them to power. Leaders of highly personalist parties may be more likely than those without personalist parties to use policy and personnel choices, as well as inflammatory rhetoric, to further increase political polarization. One could expect, in turn, that these behaviours of leaders once in office may diminish citizens' support for democracy, particularly when leaders undermine the legitimacy of political opponents or democratic institutions such as courts, legislative bodies, and independent media.

To test these ideas, we utilize data on these concepts from two sources: V-Dem for a political polarization measure and Claassen for data on citizen support for democracy.[61] The data for political polarization and support for democracy are annual so we examine how they change over the course of leaders' tenure. For this analysis, we adjust for initial level of polarization or support for democracy ($Y_{t=0}$); and we only examine the changes in the outcome starting in the year after the leader was selected into executive office.

First, we look at the broad data patterns with t-tests using a crude indicator of ruling party personalism: whether the leader creates the political party that backed them in the election campaign.[62] Figure 4 shows two sets of these tests that each yield significant differences: leaders who create their own party produce higher polarization once in power than leaders chosen by their party; and leaders who create their own parties rule over citizens who indicate less support for democracy. In short, party creation is associated with both outcomes in the expected direction.

Next, we assess these relationships with the goal of providing more plausible causal estimates. We test a series of linear models that adjust for initial or lagged levels of the outcome as well as for age of democracy. For each outcome, we examine the latent *party personalism* index.[63]

The top panel of Table 1 shows the result for polarization. First, we test a model that adjusts for democracy age and the initial level of political polarization, measured in the year the leader was selected into office.[64] These tests can be interpreted as estimating whether party personalism shapes the evolution of polarization after leaders come to power: do leaders with personalist parties boost polarization from the level they "inherited" more than those with less personalist parties? Next, we test a specification with additional covariate adjustments: election year, presidential system, and a time trend. Columns (3) and (4) report tests that adjust for the lagged level of polarization, which can be interpreted as a test of whether leaders back by more personalist parties *increase* polarization more than leaders backed by less personalist parties.

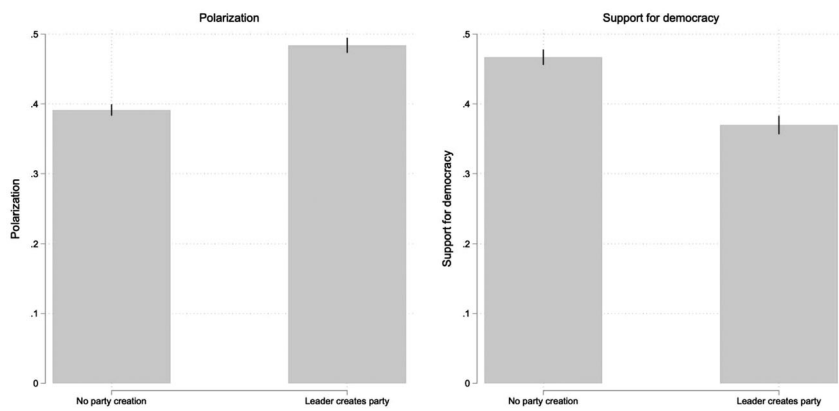

Figure 4. Personal party creation and behavioural consequences. Note: Polarization and support for democracy measured on (0,1) scale. Vertical bars depict average levels in each group and vertical lines depict 95% confidence intervals around the mean. All group mean differences are statistically different from each other at the 0.01 level.

Table 1. Party personalism, polarization, and support for democracy.

	A: Polarization subsequent to leader-election year			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Party personalism	0.0234*	0.0181*	0.0101*	0.0077*
	(0.0085)	(0.0084)	(0.0037)	(0.0037)
$\text{Polarization}_{t=0}$	0.8246*	0.8195*		
	(0.0091)	(0.0088)		
$\text{Polarization}_{t-1}$			0.8658*	0.8626*
			(0.0047)	(0.0045)
Democracy age	✓	✓	✓	✓
Initial democracy level	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional covariate adjustment		✓		✓
N □ T	2304	2304	2305	2305
Countries	102	102	103	103
	B: Support for democracy subsequent to leader-election year			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Party personalism	0.0144	0.0176	−0.0009	−0.0004
	(0.0137)	(0.0135)	(0.0032)	(0.0032)
$\text{Support for democracy}_{t=0}$	0.9054*	0.9002*		
	(0.0168)	(0.0176)		
$\text{Support for democracy}_{t-1}$			1.4424*	1.4411*
			(0.0327)	(0.0324)
$\text{Support for democracy}_{t-2}$			−0.4586*	−0.4579*
			(0.0323)	(0.0321)
Democracy age	✓	✓	✓	✓
Initial democracy level	✓	✓	✓	✓
Additional covariate adjustment		✓		✓
N □ T	1493	1493	1585	1585
Countries	88	88	92	92

Note: All specifications adjust for age of democracy (log) and initial level of democracy. Additional covariate adjustments in (2) and (4): time trend, election year, and presidential (parliamentary) system. Newey-West errors in (1)–(2). Cluster-robust errors in (3)-(4). * $p < 0.05$.

Across all specifications, the estimate for party personalism is positive and significant, indicating that ruling party personalism increases polarization once leaders are in power. The estimates in the first two columns suggest that it increases polarization from its initial level by about 2.3, which is roughly 14% of one standard deviation in the distribution of polarization. The estimates from the lagged outcome models in (3) and (4) represent an increase in polarization of about 30% of one standard deviation (in differences).

This finding is important because work by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer[65], Somer, McCoy, and Luke[66] and Svolik[67] shows that increasing polarization raises the risk of democratic decay and breakdown. For example, Svolik argues as societies grow more polarized, people become willing to tolerate abuses of power and sacrifice democratic principles if doing so advances their side's interests and keeps the other side out of power.[68] Polarization, in other words, increases the risk of democratic decline. The ruling party personalism data thus provides early warning of growing risks to democracy.

The bottom panel of Table 1 reports results from tests of support for democracy. Again, we adjust for the initial level of support for democracy and only examine how support for democracy changes from this baseline over the course of leaders' tenures. And the latter two columns report results from specifications that adjust for

lagged levels of support for democracy.[69] None of the estimates are statistically significant. These results suggest there is little association between ruling party personalism and subsequent changes in the level of support for democracy. One reason may be that partisan supporters of personalist parties are, in fact, quite satisfied with democracy when their party is in power while those who support the opposition view democracy more dimly when their party is out of power.[70] The data on citizen support for democracy we use here does not measure the partisanship of voters and thus cannot assess these possibilities.

Do polarization and support for democracy cause selection into personalist parties?

The tests reported in Table 1 account for the initial (or lagged) level of the outcome variable (polarization and support for democracy) to ensure that the estimated effect of ruling party personalism is not capturing this prior factor that might cause selection into more personalist parties. This approach also enables us to interpret – in the case of polarization and support for democracy – how ruling party personalism shapes subsequent outcomes once the leader is in office. However, this approach does not answer the question of whether polarization or citizen support for democracy cause selection into personalist parties in the first place. For example, as societies become more politically polarized, division into rival groups may boost the popularity of parties with high personalism, causing selection into high party personalism. Or declining satisfaction with established parties might lead to both less support for democracy and the rise of personalist parties.[71]

To assess these possibilities, we test whether the prior trend in these factors predicts selection into party personalism *in the selection year*. To do this, we examine the change in the level of polarization and support for democracy prior to the selection year.[72] Table F-1 in the Appendix reports the results of these tests for prior change in polarization and support for democracy (separately).[73] We find little evidence that rising polarization or declining support for democracy prior to the selection year is correlated with ruling party personalism.[74]

Thus, while the findings in Table 1 suggest that polarization may be a consequence of ruling party personalism, neither changing levels of polarization nor citizens' support democracy appear to presage it.

Conclusion

This article introduces original data on the relationship between de facto executives in democracies and the parties that initially brought them to power. We construct and test a measurement model that yields a time-varying measure of ruling party personalism using information recorded from detailed case narratives. We then show that this measure is reliable and valid. Finally, we examine whether ruling party personalism is related to two outcomes relevant to the quality of democracy: political polarization and citizen' support for democracy. We find that personalism in the ruling party increases political polarization. We find little evidence, however, that it decreases subsequent citizen support for democracy. These results have clear policy implications: those countries where a leader comes to power with the backing of a personalist party see political polarization rise and thus may also face an elevated risk of democratic

decay. In other words, this clear, objective indicator provides early warning that may help democracy practitioners prioritize their allocation of resources to countries at greater risk of democratic decline.

More broadly, this new data set will be of use in applied research. Our strategy for measuring personalism in ruling parties relies on case-specific, historical information on the relationship between elected leaders and the parties that back them in an election. The information used to code personalism, in this framework, does not rely on information culled from the strategic behaviour of leaders once in office; rather it reflects information that precedes the leaders' behaviour once in office as the chief executive. In applied research that, for example, examines democratic backsliding and breakdown, the measurement of ruling party personalism is both chronologically and causally prior to the observed political events used to identify outcomes to be explained. Importantly, ruling party personalism is not endogenous to incumbents' strategic behaviour aimed at survival in office. This approach contrasts with common behavioural measures of polarization and public support for democracy, which may be endogenously shaped by elected leaders' strategic manipulation of voter information and beliefs once in office. While the coding procedure and measurement of ruling party personalism does not necessarily rule out all threats to inference from omitted variables, it nonetheless addresses threats to inference from unobserved strategic incumbent behaviour.

Notes

1. Garzia and da Silva, "Personalization of Politics"; Rahat and Kenig, *From Party Politics*.
2. McAllister, "The Personalization of Politics," 585.
3. Renwick and Pilet, *Face on the Ballot*. Scholars have also pointed to (and documented) a rise in personalism in autocracies around the globe, e.g. Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, "The Global Rise"; Shirk, "China in Xi"; Hanson and Kopstein, "Understanding the Global."
4. Marino, Diodati, and Verzichelli, "The Personalization of Party."
5. Karvonen, Lauri, *The Personalization of Politics*, 4. For typologies of different types of personalization, see Rahat and Sheafer, "The Personalization(s) of Politics"; Balmas et al., "Two Routes."
6. For reviews of this literature, see Garzia and da Silva, "Personalization of Politics"; Pruysers, Cross, and Katz, "Personalism, Personalization."
7. Mair, "Party politics"; Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans*; van Biezen, "The Decline in Party"; Balmas et al., "Two Routes"; Renwick and Pilet, *Face on the Ballot*; Liddiard, "Are Political Parties"; Garzia and da Silva, "Personalization of Politics"; Berman and Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline."
8. Garzia and da Silva, "Personalization of Politics."
9. Hermans and Vergeer, "Personalization in E-Campaigning."
10. Kruikemeier et al., "Getting Closer."
11. Blondel and Thièbault, *Political Leadership*; Garzia, da Sliva, and De Angelis, "Partisan Dealignment."
12. Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics."
13. Kriesi, "Personalization of National Election"; Adam and Maier, "Personalization of Politics."
14. Adam and Maier, "Personalization of Politics."
15. Rahat and Kenig, *From Party Politics*; Pedersen and Rahat, "Political Personalization."
16. Marino, Diodati, and Verzichelli, "The Personalization of Party."
17. Adam and Maier, "Personalization of Politics;" Holtz-Bacha, Langer, and Merkle, "The Personalization of Politics," 155; Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer, "The Personalizations."
18. See, for example, Balmas et al., "Two Routes;" Cross, Katz, and Pruysers, *The Personalization*; Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System."

19. Adam and Maier, "Personalization of Politics," 239. This is line with the broader research agenda on personalization, which has paid substantial attention to its causes, but less so its consequences and implications. See Cross, Katz, and Pruysers, *The Personalization*.
20. Rahat and Kenig, *From Party Politics*, 263.
21. Adam and Maier, "Personalization of Politics," 238.
22. Our data capture the level of party personalism for different ruling parties in the same country, different ruling parties in different countries, and for different leaders of the same party. For example, the data show that the U.S. Republican Party when Donald Trump was president (starting in 2017) was more personalist than the Democratic Party when Barack Obama was president (starting in 2009); and the Republican Party under Trump was more personalist than the Republican Party when George W. Bush was president (starting in 2001). Further, the U.S. Republican Party under Trump was more personalist than the Liberal Party in Canada when Justin Trudeau assumed power (starting in 2015); but the Liberal Party in Canada is more personalist under Trudeau than when Jean Chretian assumed power (starting in 1993).
23. Rahat and Kenig, *From Party Politics*; Marino, Diodati, and Verzichelli, "The Personalization of Party." Our data set includes more than four times as many countries as data from Rahat and Kenig, *From Party Politics*, and Marino, Diodati, and Verzichelli, "The Personalization of Party", which include 26 and 17 countries, respectively.
24. Pruysers, Cross, and Katz, "Personalism, Personalization," 3.
25. Janda, *Political Parties*, 39.
26. Kostadinova and Levitt, "Toward a Theory," 492.
27. Gunther and Diamond, "Species of Political Parties."
28. The goals and the tactics of the leader likely vary from one leader to the next, shaped by the environment the leader is operating in. As such, party personalism does not by definition suggest charismatic or clientelist elite-voter linkages, see Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens." It is possible for personalist parties to feature non-charismatic leaders, e.g. see Ansell and Fish, "The Art", just as it is possible for clientele networks to involve institutionalized and impersonal political parties, e.g. see Kitschelt, "Linkages between Citizens." Better understanding the relationship between party personalism and elite-voter linkages is an empirical question for future research.
29. Randall and Svåsand, "Party Institutionalization," 11.
30. Kefford and McDonnell, "Inside the Personal Party."
31. Dal Bó, Dal Bó, and Snyder, "Political Dynasties"; Chhibber, "Dynastic Parties"; Querubin, "Family and Politics"; Smith and Martin, "Political Dynasties."
32. Calise, "The Personal Party."
33. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*.
34. Mughan, "Party Leaders"; Mughan, *Media and the Presidentialization*; Samuels and Shugart, "Presidentialism, Elections and Representation"; McAllister, "The Personalization of Politics"; Poguntke and Webb, *The Presidentialization of Politics*; Webb, Poguntke, and Kolodny, "The Presidentialization."
35. Mughan, *Media and the Presidentialization*, 7.
36. Passarelli, *The Presidentialization*; Pruysers, Cross, and Katz, "Personalism, Personalization;" Marino, Diodati, and Verzichelli, "The Personalization of Party."
37. Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System." Note that here we discuss party institutionalization, which has to do with characteristics of an individual party, as opposed to party system institutionalization, which pertains to characteristics of a system of parties.
38. Kefford and McDonnell, "Inside the Personal Party."
39. Janda, *Political Parties*.
40. Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*; Reuter, "Why Do Ruling Parties."
41. Powell and Tucker, "Revisiting Electoral Volatility."
42. Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System."
43. Bizzarro, Hicken, and Self, "The V-Dem Party Institutionalization."
44. Meng, *Constraining Dictatorship*.
45. Levitsky, "Fujimori and Post-Party"; Gunther and Diamond, "Species of Political Parties"; Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System"; Barr, "Populists, Outsiders"; Samuels and Shugart,

Presidents, Parties; Kostadinova and Levitt, "Toward a Theory;" Carreras, "Institutions, Governmental Performance."

46. Kostadinova and Levitt, "Toward a Theory;" Levitsky, "Fujimori and Post-Party"; Barr, "Populists, Outsiders." For this reason, our measurement strategy is careful to disentangle these concepts by, for example, collecting data on leaders' participation – prior to being selected national executive – in established and new political parties.
47. Mainwaring and Torcal, "Party System."
48. Samuels and Shugart, *Presidents, Parties*.
49. Carreras, "Outsider Presidents"; Carreras, "Institutions, Governmental Performance"; Samuels and Shugart, *Presidents, Parties*.
50. Geddes, Wright, and Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work*. Their data spanned the years 1946 to 2010; and our updates include a dichotomous coding of dictatorship and democracy through January 2020.
51. Sufficient but not necessary indicators of a supporting party include: an identifiable group of individuals and/or an identifiable wealthy individual who finances and provides organizational resources to both a party and the eventual winning candidate's campaign even though the candidate labels her/himself as an independent; an eventual winning candidate has the backing of a party for which this candidate is the sole candidate in the final round of an election even though the candidate labels her/himself as an *independent*; and a party openly supports the eventual winner in the first round, even though the party did not stand its own candidate, the winner did not belong to the party, and the candidate labels her/himself as an *independent*. We thus code only a handful of true independent candidates who did not receive support from an identifiable party during an election campaign.
52. Döring and Regel, "Party Facts."
53. Luhrmann et al., "Codebook Varieties of Party"
54. The indicator takes the value of 1 if the leader has served for more than 10 years in a party (top two-thirds of the distribution for leaders who do *not* create their own party) that has been in existence for at least 45 years (top half of the distribution for leaders who do *not* create their own party) prior to the leader being selected chief executive.
55. We discuss the theoretical link between each indicator and latent personalism in Appendix B. A handful of chief executives are not backed by political parties. We code information for these leaders, who, conceptually, cannot be constrained by the party that launched them to power: these leaders have no party and thus the most diminished form of a non-personalized party. To allow users to incorporate party personalism in applied analysis, we code these leaders as having no party; the indicators for these leaders reflect higher levels of party personalism. Applied users of the data may choose to omit these leaders; see Appendix B (2.1).
56. Treier and Jackman, "Democracy as a Latent"; Martin and Quinn, "Dynamic Ideal Point Estimation"; Pemstein, Meserve, and Melton, "Democratic Compromise."
57. See Appendix Table C-1 for the summary statistics of the eight items and the latent estimate. To identify the model, we set $\text{Var}(\theta)$ to 1.
58. To gauge the relative information provided by the items, we transform the discrimination parameter estimates onto a linear scale using an inverse logit function.
59. See, for example, the Varieties of Parties data set and Rhodes-Purdy and Madrid, "The Perils of Personalism."
60. See, for example, Foa and Mounk, "The Signs of Deconsolidation"; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization and the Global"; Somer, McCoy, and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization"; Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy"; Claassen, "Does Public Support Help."
61. Political polarization is an annual, expert-coded measure of whether *society is polarized into antagonistic political camps* (v2cacamps from V-Dem v.10). For an application using this polarization measure, see Somer, McCoy, and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization." Support for democracy is an annual latent estimate aggregated from global and regional polling data; see Claassen, "Does Public Support Help."
62. Appendix Figure E-3 shows the patterns for the continuous party personalism index.
63. See Appendix Table E-1 for the summary statistics. Appendix Table E-2 shows the split samples for leaders who created their party versus the leaders who did not.
64. Tests indicate serial correlation; see Arellano and Bond, "Some Tests of Specification." The lagged dependent variable models in (3) and (4) correct for this; when omitting the lagged

outcome we report Newey-West errors that allow for AR(1). Cluster-robust errors reported in (3)-(4), clustered on leader-spell. See Appendix Table E-3 for dynamic panel estimates that provide similar results.

65. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer, "Polarization and the Global."
66. Somer, McCoy, and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization."
67. Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy."
68. Ibid.
69. Tests indicate that adjusting for two lags of the dependent variable corrects for serial correlation.
70. Reproduction files also show that there is substantial missingness in the support for democracy data, especially in the early 1990s; throughout the sample period there is more missingness in countries that tend to have more personalist parties.
71. See, for example, Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties Without Partisans*; Dietz and Myers, *From Thaw to Deluge*.
72. The first year a leader enters the data set is the first calendar year in which the leader held executive office in January. Leaders are therefore selected into office (i.e. they win elections) in the year prior to appearing in the data. For example, Viktor Orbán was first selected Prime Minister of Hungary in May 1998; and 1999 is the first year he is executive in Hungary in January. His candidacy during the election in 1998, however, may have contributed to polarization in 1998. So, we look at the trend in polarization for the three years prior to 1998 (i.e. 1995–1997) to test whether this trend predicts party personalism. Denoting the selection year as *t*, we calculate the *polarization trend* as: $polarization_{t\text{-}1} - polarization_{t\text{-}3}$. The specification adjusts for democracy age, initial level of democracy, presidential system, and the outcome level in *t*-3.
73. We test models without fixed effects (FE), with year-FE, and with country- and year-FE.
74. However, if we simply test whether the lagged levels of support democracy are jointly correlated with party personalism, we find some evidence when omitting country fixed effects.

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