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Is there a friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders?

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Abstract

The friends-and-neighbors effect, which refers to voters' tendency to support politicians near hometown areas, has not yet been tested systematically for party leaders. Linking a built-for-purpose dataset on 266 leaders to a sample of 380,208 voters from 50 country elections in 19 parliamentary democracies drawn from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project, this article examines the effect of party leaders' local proximity on voters' leader evaluations and voting intentions. I hypothesize that leaders receive more positive evaluations and electoral support from voters in the district where they run for election. The results show that shared district increases voters' sympathy for leaders and their inclination to vote for the party of 'near' leaders. While the location of party leaders affects voters in all electoral systems, I find that the friends-and-neighbors effect on leader evaluations and party vote choice is stronger in systems with personalized, preferential and combined ballots.

Key words: Party leaders, friends-and-neighbors effect, local ties, leader evaluations, CSES

Introduction

Is there such a thing as a friends-and-neighbors effect for leaders of political parties? Does the local proximity of party leaders affect their popularity among voters from the same region? Previous literature has extensively discussed and examined the importance of leaders' socio-demographic characteristics – such as gender, age and ethnicity – in politics and voting behavior (Sigelman et al. 1995; Banducci and Karp, 2000; Cutler, 2002; O'Brien, 2019; Sevi, 2020). Given the current trend towards personalization of politics (e.g. McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010) and most notably the centralized type in which power flows from collective actors (e.g. political parties, parliaments, cabinets) to only a few political leaders (Balmas et al., 2014), it is not surprising that party leaders have become crucial determinants in understanding politics and explaining the vote (e.g. Garzia, 2014; Da Silva, 2018; Da Silva et al., 2019).

However, empirical evidence about the actual impact of party leaders on the election outcome remains mixed (Barisione, 2009; Dinas, 2008; Quinlan and O'Malley, 2018). The conclusion of many scholars is that the electoral effect of party leaders is not necessarily growing over time either (Bittner, 2018; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011; Karvonen, 2010). While various party leader traits have already been examined, not a single study has investigated the role of leader location. I argue that the local proximity of party leaders for voters is an important piece of the puzzle that is still missing from the literature on leader effects.

Similar to gender, age and ethnicity, location is often considered a strategic asset of potential leaders by selectorates for party leadership contests. In June 2017, the Finnish party Green League elected its new party leader. Whereas the party claimed that there were no ideological differences between the nominated candidates, 33-year old male candidate Touko Aalto from the city of Jyväskylä stood out as a candidate who wanted to deviate from the traditional geographical profile of the party with leaders typically based in Helsinki (Yle Uutiset, 2017). After winning the leadership selection, Aalto reiterated that he wanted to strengthen the position of Green League outside of capital Helsinki. This anecdote from Finnish politics suggests that parties and voters are sensitive to the location of party leaders in a similar manner as how they respond to the geographical profiles of election candidates.

Indeed, there is ample evidence that voters consider local ties to be crucial traits for candidates (e.g. Childs and Cowley, 2011; Roy and Alcantara, 2015; Campbell et al. 2019). Earlier work has also demonstrated the importance of local ties in explaining individual candidates' vote shares (Tavits, 2010; Put and Maddens, 2015; Jankowski, 2016). Moreover, a rich literature on

friends-and-neighbors voting shows that candidates in various electoral settings receive more electoral support in and around their hometown area than elsewhere (e.g. Key, 1949; Tatalovich, 1975; Rice and Macht, 1987; Gimpel et al., 2008; Arzheimer and Evans, 2012; Herron and Lynch, 2019; Put et al., 2020).

In this article I examine whether party leaders, analogous to the already well-established localism effect for candidates, receive more positive evaluations and more electoral support among voters from their own region. By offering the first empirical analysis on the effect of location for party leaders, this article contributes to the scholarly understanding of leader effects and the role of localism in elections. The party leader's location is identified here as *the electoral district where the leader runs for parliamentary election*. The expectation is that voters who share their electoral district with a given party leader evaluate this 'locally based' leader more positively, and are more inclined to vote for that leader's party. Even though the party leader is a national political figure who draws attention from national media, embodies the party in its entirety and is therefore not expected to follow a strictly localized campaign strategy, voters are generally more aware of the location of party leaders than is the case for rank-and-file candidates. This is the result of more media attention – again in line with centralized personalization – and because of the fact that those prominent politicians are highly visible during the campaign as the electoral leaders of their party in the district. This will translate into more sympathy towards the party leader among those electoral district voters.

I first investigate how the location of party leaders across 19 countries and 50 elections affects voters' sympathy for party leaders and their party vote choice. While a first set of OLS regression models analyzes the effect of shared electoral district on voters' evaluation of leaders, a second set examines the effect of shared district on party vote choice. To address endogeneity concerns regarding leader location and party popularity, an additional analysis is offered based on a more restricted sample of volatile voters (i.e. voters who reported switching parties since the previous election) only. Second, I examine whether the strength of the friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders is conditional on three contextual variables: the urban-rural environment of voters, district magnitude and the electoral system's ballot structure. To this end, I run four-level hierarchical linear models with cross-level interaction effects between shared electoral district and these three contextual variables.

Why the location of party leaders matters to voters

A variety of scholars argue that politician-voter congruency has become an important factor to explain voting decisions in recent decades. The rising focus on individual political actors at the expense of collective actors, coined as the personalization of politics (McAllister, 2007; Karvonen, 2010), increased scholarly attention to politicians' personal traits as potential voter heuristics. Voters can develop an image of a politician's personality based on subjective and objective characteristics. As regards subjective traits, perceptions of competence, integrity, reliability or appeal have all been shown to drive voter evaluations (Miller and Miller, 1976; Pancer et al. 1999).

However, evaluations can also be based on objective characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age or location. Certain groups of voters are driven by an identity logic and are more inclined to support candidates or party leaders who are similar to them as regards mentioned characteristics. As van Erkel (2019) argues, voting based on similarities can be explained by social identity theory (Plutzer and Zipp, 1996) as well as the logic of descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967). While the former posits that citizens feel more affection for politicians from their own social group, the latter implies that citizens are more likely to vote for similar politicians as they are a 'safer bet' in terms of representing their ideas and interests (McDermott, 2009).

Similar to the more commonly studied personal characteristics, a politician's location offers an attractive informational shortcut to infer what kind of behavior in terms of political representation or leadership can be expected (Shugart et al., 2005). Voters' location might constitute an important part of their social identities, which can be activated when local politicians step forward during election campaigns (Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Jacobs and Munis, 2019). Local politicians can also be expected to properly defend and represent the interests of a given territory (Childs and Cowley, 2011; Campbell et al., 2019).

The concept of friends-and-neighbors voting (Key, 1949), where politicians receive considerably higher levels of support in and around their home areas than elsewhere, is directly related to that logic of politician-voter similarities. Empirical studies show that geographical proximity is a crucial trait from the voter perspective (e.g. Johnson and Rosenblatt, 2007; Campbell and Cowley, 2014). While these studies mainly focus on the localness of candidates, a similar case can be made for the importance of location for party leaders. Several studies show that the attractiveness of similar socio-demographic characteristics also holds for party leaders (Banducci and Karp, 2000; Cutler, 2002; Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004).

To the best of my knowledge, not a single study has investigated the role of location or local ties for party leaders. This empirical gap is surprising, as location appears to be one of the most crucial objective traits for election candidates when it comes to attracting voters (e.g. Childs and Cowley, 2011; Roy and Alcantara, 2015; Campbell et al. 2019; Tavits, 2010; Put and Maddens, 2015; Jankowski, 2016). The mechanism via which location increases electoral support might differ between rank-and-file candidates and party leaders. The former group consists of politicians who, in order to seek election, emphasize their commitment to local needs and affinity with local identities. In multimember districts, candidates often carve out electoral (geographic and non-geographic) constituencies by exhibiting personal attributes that distinguish them from a large number of competitors (André and Depauw, 2018). For rank-and-file candidates, location might indeed constitute a useful heuristic device to define particularistic interests that coincide with a given geographical region (e.g. municipality, city, province, region or electoral district). The cultivation of personal votes based on local ties will require intense campaigning in the candidates' local area, in order to raise voters' awareness of their local ties.

Party leaders, by contrast, are crucial electoral assets that personify the ideological positioning of their parties (Wattenberg, 1991; McAllister, 2007). They act as coordinators, controlling representative actions of their parties' executive and legislative office-holders and provide linkage with local party sections and individual party members (Cross and Pilet, 2015). As a result, these leaders simultaneously need to bring together all intra-party actors as well as craft an image that attracts the largest possible number of voters (Louw, 2005). By default, party leaders are national political figures for whom 'local ties' might not be a strategically interesting trait to overemphasize, as the group of citizens who feel they are not similar with the party leader in terms of location is considerably larger than the group who feels more similar.

With regard to party leaders, I argue that it is not necessary to strongly emphasize their local ties to a given area during the electoral campaign. Whereas voters generally have very little information about regular rank-and-file candidates (Dolan, 2004), party leaders have been taking the political center stage for decades which has automatically created more awareness about their objective characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity. The same holds for the location of party leaders, and citizens who are aware of their local similarity with a party leader might consider it as an important component of the voting calculus, next to subjective perceptions of competence, reliability and personal appearance. In this sense, an examination of the role of location for party leaders is a much more stringent test of the theory of friends-

and-neighbors voting as for these prominent figures, political information is arguably highest (Dassonneville et al., 2021). In a first hypothesis, I expect that shared location between voters and party leaders increases sympathy towards the leader.

H1. *Voters evaluate party leaders from the same location more positively.*

While scholarly consensus is strong on the general idea that party leaders have become central actors in the way politics is played out, the effect of those leaders on the vote choice remains debatable. For instance, Quinlan and O'Malley (2018) show that popular leaders do not necessarily lead to electoral success. In a similar vein, the effect of shared location might be stronger for leader evaluations, which come before the actual voting decision. Indeed, several studies indicate that party leaders rarely have a decisive impact on the election result (Dinas, 2008). More recently, McAllister and Quinlan (2019) demonstrated that only one fifth of the electorate is motivated by party leaders, which is considerably lower than the number of voters motivated by parties. As a result, we formulate a second and separate hypothesis on the effect of shared location on party vote choice. Following the theoretical argument that voter-leader congruency in terms of objective characteristics affects voting decisions, the increased level of sympathy for nearby located party leaders could then translate into increased electoral support for the parties of those leaders.

H2. *Voters are more inclined to vote for parties whose leaders are from the same location.*

Whereas the above hypotheses argue the existence of a general friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders, extant research suggests that leader effects in general are conditional on institutional factors or specific voter characteristics (Barisione, 2009; Lobo, 2015). Specifically with regard to local ties of party leaders, the effect on evaluations and vote choice might be conditional on two contextual variables: the urban-rural nature of the local voters' environment, and the nature of the electoral system. First, friends-and-neighbors voting tendencies are more prevalent among voters in rural areas, where a stronger sense of community exists (Fenno, 1978; André et al., 2012). Urban voters, on the contrary, are less sensitive to place-based identities and less attached to local communities (Nemoto and Shugart, 2013), and move around more frequently than their rural counterparts (Hicken, 2007). This leads to more individualized voting behavior and less dependence on voting cues such as local ties of politicians.

H3. *Voters in rural areas are more affected by shared location with party leaders in their leader ratings and party vote choice than other voters.*

Second, a rich literature shows that the importance of localism in electoral behavior depends on the incentives imposed by electoral institutions (e.g. Fiva and Halse, 2016; Pilet et al., 2012; Shugart et al., 2005). Also with regard to the role of local ties for party leaders, I expect to see a mediating effect by at least two electoral system dimensions: district magnitude and ballot structure. District magnitude refers to the number of seats that are being allocated in a given electoral district. Revisiting the classic debate on local representation and electoral systems (see, for instance: Farrell, 2001), SMDs incorporate a much stronger sense of local representation. Whereas in SMDs “geographical representation is an institutional matter” (Latner and McGann, 2005), this is not the case in MMDs that might be too large and heterogeneous to function as a geographic community of interest (André and Depauw, 2018). Therefore, friends-and-neighbors effects might be less important when looking at the higher range of district magnitude.

H4. *The effect of shared location with party leaders is smaller for voters in large districts than for voters in small districts.*

Ballot structure refers to “how voters cast their votes” (Farrell, 2001: 6). This electoral system dimension specifies the physical operation that voters need to do to cast their vote (Bosch and Oriols, 2014): choosing a candidate, casting a list vote, ordering candidate names, and so on. Several typologies have been developed in the literature to list the possible categories of ballot structure. The most common in the literature identifies six types (Bosch and Oriols, 2014): personalized ballots, which contain no party lists and allow voters to choose the name of the candidate (e.g. first-past-the-post systems); preferential ballots, referring to situations where voters are required to rank-order candidates (e.g. alternative vote, single-transferable vote); closed lists, offering voters a choice between lists of candidates that cannot be changed; ordered lists, where voters can change the order of candidates on the list using preferential votes (e.g. flexible-list); open lists, where only the number of preferential votes count towards the allocation of seats to candidates; and finally combined ballot structures (e.g. mixed member proportional systems). Among these types of ballot structures, I hypothesize that voters in closed lists stand out as they are not able to tick the box next to the name of the leader.

H5. *The effect of shared location with party leaders is smaller in electoral systems with closed list ballot structures.*

Research design

To investigate the effect of voter-leader congruency in terms of location, an original dataset was built by linking biographical data on 266 party leaders in parliamentary democracies with 380,208 observations indicating the vote choice and evaluation of party leaders by voters. Voter samples on 50 elections in 19 different countries were derived from Modules 1, 3, 4 and 5 from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project.¹ The names of party leaders were identified from the appendices of the CSES Modules. Finally, party leader data on location was collected from official election results, and more specifically based on information regarding the electoral district in which the party leader ran for parliamentary election.

Whereas information on the age and gender of party leaders is readily available online via newspaper articles, biographies and personal campaign websites, it appears more difficult to find details on their regional affiliation or location. However, in most political systems party leaders also run for political office themselves by participating in parliamentary elections. In districted electoral systems, leaders need to choose a particular electoral district to present themselves for election to voters. Even though party leaders are heavily present at the national level during campaigns and in between elections, by picking one particular electoral district over the others, party leaders indicate their locational background.

Arguably, leaders will be more likely to present themselves as agents of local representation in a particular area because they have strong local ties to that area (i.e. lives or lived there, locally born there or has family living there). However, as electoral laws often allow candidates to choose freely in which electoral district they want to run for parliament, party leaders might, for strategic reasons, also consider switching to districts in which they have no local connection. For instance, UKIP leader Nigel Farage ran from a variation of constituencies over seven different UK Parliament elections. But even in those cases where party leaders have no strict connection to the electoral district, one can expect that local voters are more sympathetic towards non-locally rooted party leaders who run in their district. After all, these leaders are national, often influential politicians who present themselves as future agents of local representation, who are sensitive to the area's interests during the campaign.

By following this empirical strategy, the current study approaches the concept of local ties differently compared to previous research on candidate localism. More commonly used measures are local-level political experience (e.g. Put and Maddens, 2015) and local birthplace (Tavits, 2010). As indicated earlier, I contend that prominent politicians such as party leaders

¹ Module 2 was excluded since it does not include survey items on leader evaluations.

are able to attract voter sympathy and electoral support in an electoral district even without holding more direct local ties, such as local office or being a local native, in the district. The systematic collection of data on the birthplace of all 266 party leaders included in this study allows to test whether the results differ by looking at non-district born and district born leaders separately. While the results reported in the main text are based on the full sample, the Online Supplemental Material includes split sample analyses limited to each of the two categories of leaders separately.

The empirical strategy of looking at electoral districts to identify leaders' location has a number of implications for the number of included country cases and the research design in general. *First*, electoral systems with nationwide constituencies (e.g. Slovakia, Netherlands, Israel) are excluded as the lack of electoral districting in these cases does not allow to link party leaders with a specific set of voters surveyed in the CSES modules. *Second*, in the case of mixed-member electoral systems, party leaders can run for election in one of the single-member districts or on the party list (or both). As the single-member districts in these systems are meant to ensure local representation and the PR tier to ensure proportionality (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2018), only those party leaders are included in the analysis who ran from a single-member district in country elections using mixed-member electoral systems. This implies that for some country elections, party leaders who are running from a single-member district are included in the analysis whereas other leaders are not because they appear only on a party list. For instance, in the 2014 New Zealand parliamentary elections, National Party leader John Key (Helensville) and Labour Party leader David Cunliffe (New Lynn) both ran from single-member districts, but New Zealand First leader Winston Peters and ACT New Zealand leader Jamie Whyte ran from the party list and were therefore omitted.

Third, I exclude countries where candidates are allowed to run in several electoral districts simultaneously, such as Sweden and Greece. When allowed, party leaders might pick several locations strategically and later choose which seat to represent, after which the relinquished seat is assigned to another candidate on the party list. For instance, the Greek electoral law allows candidates to run from different electoral districts. In the September 2015 parliamentary elections, SYRIZA party leader Alexis Tsipras decided to run from the electoral districts of Heraklion (Crete) and Larissa (Thessaly region), after his main opponent Vangelis Meimarakis, party leader of New Democracy had decided to add Heraklion as a second district, next to his 'traditional' electoral district Athens B. This type of district flexibility does not allow to

empirically establish an exclusive link between a party leader and a set of district voters, as required by the research design.

Fourth and finally, some country cases or individual party leaders were excluded for ad hoc reasons, such as no data available on leader evaluations (e.g. Austria 2008 in Module 3), a party with two leaders (e.g. Slovenian People's Party in 2008, Green Party in New Zealand 2008), or leaders who could not be matched perfectly with district voters in CSES (e.g. for the Estonia parliamentary elections of 2011, the CSES Module 3 appendix gives the same code to voters from the three separate districts of Tallinn).

In light of all these considerations, country election cases were not randomly chosen, but rather based on data availability (i.e. official election results with details on candidates per district) and electoral laws. Nevertheless, the sample of 50 country elections is diverse as it includes elections taking place in established and new democracies, using different types of electoral systems. In addition, the selection of country election cases into the analysis is not correlated with either the independent variable of interest (i.e. shared district) or the response variables (i.e. leadership evaluation). Table A and Table B in the Online Supplemental Material provides an overview of the country elections included in the analysis, along with the number of observations per country sample.

The two response variables in this study are voters' party leader evaluations and their party vote choice. First, the included CSES modules ask voters how much they like a party leader on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (dislike very much) to 10 (like very much). Respondents were asked to evaluate party leaders of the several parties in their country's election, leading to a stacked dataset of multiple leader evaluation scores for each of the respondents. Second, party vote choice is a dummy variable indicating whether a respondent voted for a leader's party (1) or not (0).² To be clear, also for this second response variable a stacked dataset is constructed, with multiple observations per respondent. Any unique respondent only has one row with a 1 on vote choice. In relation to the independent variable of interest (i.e. shared district), four different types of respondents are theoretically possible and empirically available in the data:

² In the case of single-member district electoral systems included in the sample (i.e. Alternative Vote in Australia, FPTP in the UK and Canada, and the majoritarian tier in the mixed-member system of New Zealand, Lithuania and Hungary), the presence of a party leader in the district automatically implies that the leader is the only candidate for the party running in that district. In those cases, the party vote choice equals a direct vote for the party leader. This does not hold true in multimember district systems, where in some cases voters cast a list vote (closed list PR, flexible list PR), are required to order candidates (STV), or vote for other candidates on the list of the leader (open list PR, flexible list PR).

voters who vote for a party (vote choice = 1) or not (vote choice = 0), and share their district with the leader of that party (shared district = 1) or not (shared district = 0).

The independent variable of interest is ‘shared district’, a dummy that measures whether respondents voted in the same district as where the leader which they are evaluating was running. The CSES modules register the primary electoral district in which respondents voted. The names of these districts as presented in the CSES module appendices were cross-checked with the names of the electoral districts on the official election results websites. In the pooled dataset of voter-leader pairs (n=380,208), 7.21% are cases of respondents who voted in the same electoral district as the leader they are evaluating. The sample share of same district voters strongly varies over country elections depending on the number of electoral districts in the country and the number of party leaders included in the analysis. More specifically, the share of same district voters in the samples of country elections using single-member districts (FPTP, Mixed Member) is on average only 0.83%. This is substantially lower than for country election samples using multi-member districts, where this can amount to even 30% such as in the 2014 parliamentary elections in Latvia, which uses five districts ranging from 13 to 32 seats in size to elect the 100 members of the Saeima. A full overview of these vote shares per country case is included in Table A (for party leader ratings) and Table B (for party vote choice) of the Online Supplemental Material, along with the number of observations and number of included party leaders.

The empirical section consists of two parts. The first part focuses on detecting and estimating the friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders, controlling for respondent and leader characteristics. The second part tests the conditional effect of three contextual variables: urban-rural environment of voters, district magnitude and ballot structure.

As regards the first part, the modeling strategy follows the example of Sevi (2020), who focuses on the role of leader age and presents two sets of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with two-way clustered standard errors by respondent and leader.³ Similarly to the leader age study, country and party family fixed effects are included to account for any unobserved heterogeneity related to differences between countries or party families in terms of the importance of leader location. Moreover, control variables include the gender of the respondent and leader, age of the respondent, absolute age difference between voter and leader (in decades)

³ Two-way clustering is implemented as the dataset contains more than one observation per respondent and leader in the data.

and a dummy variable indicating whether voter and leader have the same gender. I also control for party identification with a dummy variable indicating whether the voter identifies with the leader's party. The party identification variable is created by using the survey item 'Are you close to any political party?' included in the CSES Modules. If the answer was yes and if the respondent responds to the subsequent question 'Which party do you feel closest to?' by mentioning the name of the party of the evaluated leader, then the party ID dummy variable is 1. Finally, I control for education, incumbency status of the party and voter's income levels. The original CSES measurement of respondents' education was done by using an 8 or 9 point scale, which was then recoded in three educational categories similar to earlier work using CSES data (e.g. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2012): (1) Low education: possessing an incomplete secondary education to no education at all; (2) Medium education: completed secondary education and those who did not attend university; (3) High education: those who have attended university (degree completed or not). Incumbency status of the party is measured using a dummy variable which indicates if the party of the leader was in government at the time of election or not. The household income variable (in quintiles) present in all CSES Modules is included to control for respondents' income levels.⁴

An alternative modeling strategy to estimate the friends-and-neighbors effect while simultaneously controlling for voter and leader characteristics is to treat voter responses as being nested within crossings of respondents and party leaders. For the sake of robustness, results of cross-classified multilevel models analyzing party leader evaluations and party vote choice are also reported in the Online Supplemental Material, and compared to the results of the OLS models with two-way clustered standard errors reported in the main text.

Finally, the location of a party leader could be endogenous to party popularity in the district. It could be argued that parties do not recruit leaders randomly, but rather in areas where the party already achieved high levels of popularity. All other things equal, we can expect that politicians living in party strongholds are more likely to climb the intraparty ladder, as there is a higher availability of political offices and a stronger concentration of party activists in their local party sections. A more restricted party vote choice model is presented in the Online Supplemental Material to make a more convincing claim that local party leaders indeed attract local voters based on their shared location. The empirical strategy in this additional model is to restrict the

⁴ This variable shows a considerable share of missing values among respondents per country election (and was not included in the Australia 2019 sample). In both the leader rating as party vote choice models, about 20% of the observations contain missing values which leads to a substantial drop in the sample size. For this reason, I report the models with the income variable included in the Online Supplemental Material (Table C and Table F).

sample to those country election cases where the identity and location of at least one party leader has changed from one election to the next. Based on the recall question about vote choice in the previous election – which is included in CSES Modules 3, 4 and 5 – I identify voters who reported having switched parties over the two consecutive elections where a leadership location change has occurred. Subsequently, I estimate the effect of shared location on the probability that those volatile voters support the party of a local party leader.

Regarding the second part of the empirical section where the focus lies on the role of contextual variables, a set of four-level hierarchical models is estimated with voter responses (i.e. evaluations or party vote choice) (Level 1) nested in respondents (Level 2), which are in turn nested in electoral districts (Level 3), which are finally nested in country elections (Level 4). To gauge the urban-rural environment of respondents (Level 2), I use the CSES survey item on ‘rural or urban residence’ which indicates whether the respondent lives in a 1) rural area or village, 2) small or middle-sized town, 3) suburbs of large town or city, and 4) large town or city. The effect of district magnitude (logarithmically transformed) is estimated at the electoral district level (Level 3). In the sample, magnitude ranges from 1 (in FPTP, AV and MMD systems) to 47 (Lisbon district in the 2009 and 2015 Portuguese closed list PR elections). Finally, ballot structure is included as a Level 4 categorical variable, which distinguishes between the six types of ballot structures identified by Bosch and Orriols (2014): personalized, preferential, closed list, ordered list, open list and combined ballots. In order to test H3, H4 and H5, I estimate cross-level interaction effects between the shared district variable and each of the three contextual variables.

Results

Estimating the effect of shared location on leader evaluations and party vote choice

To begin with, I discuss the results of the OLS models analyzing the effect of shared district on the evaluation of party leaders, which are reported in Table 1. Model 1.1 indicates the bivariate relationship between shared district and leader rating, suggesting that a similar location for voter and leader leads to a 0.3 point increase on the 11-point scale. This finding is in line with H1.

Model 1.2 reports the results of a model including control variables. Taking into account other voter-leader similarities in terms of age and gender, and controlling for shared party identification, voters’ educational levels and the incumbency status of the party of the leader,

voters still evaluate party leaders from their own electoral district more positively (0.246 point increase in rating). In fact, the coefficient for shared location is larger than for shared gender. The coefficient for age difference does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels. A voter that identifies with the evaluated leader’s party assigns on average 3.6 more points to the party leader. In sum, Model 1.2 again brings support for H1 and confirms the importance of location similarities in the evaluation of politicians by voters.

Table 1: Voters like party leaders running from the same district. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models of leader evaluations.

	(1.1)	(1.2) + Controls
Same district	0.298*** (0.050)	0.246*** (0.046)
Age difference		0.021 (0.014)
Same gender		0.152*** (0.034)
Shared party ID		3.607*** (0.088)
Respondent : female		0.214*** (0.034)
Respondent : age		0.000 (0.001)
Leader: female		0.004 (0.156)
Education (low)		-0.037 (0.088)
Education (Medium)		-0.054 (0.057)
Government party		-0.142 (0.142)
Constant	4.500*** (0.246)	3.939*** (0.227)

Party family fixed effects	Included	Included
Country fixed effects	Included	Included
N	380,208	380,208
R ²	0.04	0.14

Standard errors are indicated between brackets and are two way clustered by respondent and party leader * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

The Online Supplemental Material presents a battery of robustness checks for the leader rating models presented in Table 1. In Table C, the income of respondents is added as an additional control variable, which leads to a significant drop in the number of observations (from 380,208 to 305,922). The results are substantively similar, with an increase in leader evaluation score of 0.238 among voters who share their district with a party leader. Table D presents the results of split sample analyses of ratings for leaders who were born in the same district as where they ran for election and those who were not. The effect of shared location is larger in the case of locally born leaders (0.287) than for non-district born leaders (0.216). In both cases, location is clearly the most important leader trait for ratings by voters. Finally, I also report the result of a cross-classified multilevel model for party leader ratings where voter responses are nested within crossings of voters and party leaders (see Table E). Again, the estimated effect of same district (0.236) is highly similar to the effect reported in Table 1. A notable difference in the results is that age difference does reach statistical significance in the cross-classified models.

Table 2 reports the results of OLS models analyzing party vote choice.⁵ Model 2.1 shows a significant bivariate relationship between shared district and party vote choice, where voters are 3.9% more likely to vote for the party of the ‘local’ party leader. When controls are added in Model 2.2, the coefficient of interest decreases but remains statistically significant. Controlling for other similarities and relevant leader and voter characteristics, voters are 2.8% more likely to support the party of a leader running in the same district. Notice also that in Model 2.2, location is the only objective leader trait that yields a significant effect on party vote choice amongst CSES respondents.

⁵ Following Angrist and Pischke (2009) and Sevi (2020), I use OLS instead of binary logit to analyze the dichotomous response variable ‘vote choice’, as the coefficients of such a linear probability model can be interpreted directly in terms of probability change. The vote choice models only includes respondents who indicated to have casted a vote in the election.

Table 2: Voters vote for parties of leaders running in the same district. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models of vote choice.

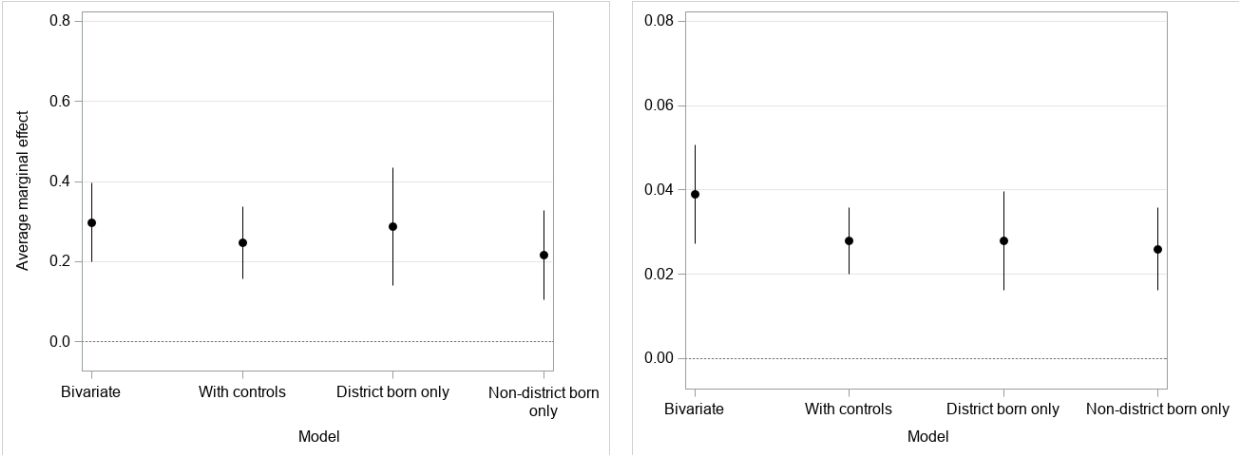
	(2.1)	(2.2) + Controls
Same district	0.039*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.004)
Age difference		-0.001 (0.001)
Same gender		0.002 (0.002)
Shared party ID		0.733*** (0.010)
Respondent : female		0.005* (0.002)
Respondent : age		-0.000 (0.000)
Leader: female		-0.012 (0.010)
Education (low)		0.012* (0.005)
Education (Medium)		0.005 (0.003)
Government party		-0.011 (0.010)
Constant	0.237*** (0.0)	0.150*** (0.020)
Party family fixed effects	Included	Included
Country fixed effects	Included	Included
N	321,100	321,100
R ²	0.05	0.36

Note: Standard errors are indicated between brackets and are two way clustered by respondent and party leader * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Similar to the analyses on leader ratings, I provide additional robustness tests in the Online Supplemental Material. With the addition of the income variable in Table F (and subsequent reduction of observations to 262,592), we find an almost identical effect for shared location (0.029 or 2.9% increase in linear probability of voting for the party of the leader). In contrast with the split sample analyses for leader ratings, the results for locally born and non-locally born leaders (Table G) are highly similar with regard to their ability to attract local voters to their party. This suggests that even in those cases where there is no strict local connection to the district, a party leader is able to attract an equal level of electoral support. Finally, also the cross-classified model in Table H leads to the conclusion that voters are 2.7% more likely to vote for the party of a leader if that leader runs in their district.

In Figure 1, I summarize and visualize the results of the different models presented in the main text and the split sample analyses in the Online Supplemental Material by plotting the average marginal effects⁶ of shared districts on leader rating and party vote choice. The results for the leader rating models indicate that the effect of shared district is consistently significant and estimated to lead to a 0.20-0.30 increase in leader evaluation scores. The vote choice models indicate a 2-4% increase in the linear probability of voting for the party of the evaluated leader.

Figure 1: Average marginal effects of voters and leaders sharing electoral districts on voters’ leader evaluation and party vote choice.



Note: The figure shows the average marginal effect and 95 percent confidence intervals of shared districts presented in the eight models presented in Table 1 and 2.

⁶ As none of the reported OLS models include non-linear relationships or interactions involving the independent variable of interest, the regression coefficients estimates are easily interpretable as the average change in the outcome variables.

A more restricted sampling strategy was followed to address the potential endogeneity problem between the location of party leaders and the degree of electoral support in that location. Table I in the Online Supplemental Material reports the results of the party vote choice model using the restricted sample of volatile voters in country elections where the identity and location of at least one party leader has changed. By limiting the analysis to those voters who reported to have voted for a different party in the previous election, I examine whether these volatile voters were more inclined to vote for the party of a leader who is running in their district. I find that this particular subgroup of voters is 2.9% more likely to indeed support a party of which the leader runs in their district. This effect size is remarkably similar to those reported in Figure 1, which strengthens confidence about the results estimated in the earlier models based on the full sample. Table J in the Online Supplemental Material reports the included country elections and number of observations (leaders and voter responses) in this restricted party vote choice model. Finally, Figure A and Figure B in the Online Supplemental Material provides robustness checks for the models with control variables reported in Table 1 and Table 2, where I leave one country case out of the analysis at a time to verify whether the results are driven by any particular country. Both for the leader evaluation and vote choice results, these additional models indicate that the effect of shared district consistently differs from zero, regardless of which country is left out of the analysis.

Analyzing the conditional effect of electoral systems and district magnitude

Under which circumstances does the friends-and-neighbors effect materialize? The second part of the empirical section focuses on the role of three contextual variables: the urban-rural environment of voters, the number of seats in the district where leaders run for election, and the ballot structure. Table 3 presents the results of six hierarchical linear models, analyzing leader evaluations (Models 3.1-3.3) and party vote choice (Models 3.4-3.6) respectively. In order to analyze the potentially mediating role of the mentioned three contextual variables, I add cross-level interaction effects to the statistical models.

With regard to the local environment of voters (Table 3, Model 3.1 for leader evaluation and Model 3.4 for party vote choice), we find weak support for the hypothesis that voters in rural areas (the reference category in the regression models) are more inclined to show higher support for party leaders from their own area. Leader evaluations are not affected by the urban-rural nature of their place of residence. As regards party vote choice, voters in suburban areas and

small towns are less inclined to be persuaded by a local leader in their party vote choice as compared to voters in rural areas. While this finding is in line with H3, the hypothesis does not hold for voters in cities. With regard to district magnitude, only the party vote choice model (Table 3, Model 3.5) provides empirical evidence in line with H4. The results suggest that, as district magnitude increases, the effect of shared location with party leaders significantly decreases. Put another way, voters in larger districts are less inclined to take into account the fact that a party's leader runs for election in their electoral district.⁷

Finally, the ballot structure of the electoral system in place clearly changes the role of shared location. The leader evaluations model (Table 3, Model 3.3) shows that shared location increases evaluation scores in all types of ballots, but even more so in electoral systems with personalized, preferential and combined ballots when compared to the reference category of closed list systems. Model 3.6 in Table 3, which reports the results regarding party vote choice, provides a very similar conclusion and shows that ballot structure clearly conditions the impact of having 'nearby' leaders on the party vote choice. Contrary to H5, where it was expected that closed list ballots would stand out as these represent the most party-centered category and do not allow voters to check the box next to the name of the party leader, the relevant empirical distinction seems to be with the broader family of list proportional representation systems. Even though voters in those systems might be seduced to like leaders more if they run in their own district or even to vote for their party, the friends-and-neighbors effect for leaders appears stronger to personalized (limited to FPTP systems in the study's sample), preferential (AV, STV) and combined ballots (MMP, but the majoritarian tier), which are all – apart from the STV system in the Irish elections – cases where the party vote choice coincides with a direct vote for the party leader.

⁷ When including the highly correlated district magnitude and ballot structure and their respective cross-level interactions with shared location simultaneously in the party vote choice model (not reported in the text), the interaction effect between district magnitude and same district disappears.

Table 3: Hierarchical linear models of leader ratings and party vote choice.

	Leader evaluation			Party vote choice		
	(3.1)	(3.2)	(3.3)	(3.4)	(3.5)	(3.6)
Intercept	4.149*** (0.083)	4.051*** (0.123)	3.723*** (0.20)	0.103*** (0.006)	0.121*** (0.008)	0.071*** (0.013)
<i>Level 1 predictors</i>						
Same district	0.231*** (0.043)	0.516*** (0.054)	0.115*** (0.033)	0.034*** (0.005)	0.114*** (0.006)	0.012*** (0.003)
Shared party ID	3.762*** (0.016)	3.671*** (0.016)	3.672*** (0.016)	0.707*** (0.002)	0.707*** (0.002)	0.707*** (0.002)
Government party	0.353*** (0.019)	0.353*** (0.019)	0.353*** (0.019)	0.032*** (0.003)	0.032*** (0.003)	0.032*** (0.003)
<i>Respondent level predictors</i>						
Respondent: age	0.001** (0.000)	0.001* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
Respondent: female	-0.106*** (0.009)	-0.106*** (0.009)	-0.107*** (0.009)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)
Education (low)	-0.175*** (0.013)	-0.167*** (0.013)	-0.159*** (0.013)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)
Education (Medium)	-0.136*** (0.011)	-0.132*** (0.011)	-0.130*** (0.011)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)

Living in small town	-0.047***		0.000
	(0.014)		(0.002)
Living in suburban area	-0.065***		0.000
	(0.017)		(0.002)
Living in city	-0.074***		-0.002
	(0.014)		(0.002)
<i>District level predictors</i>			
DM (Log)		0.032	-0.012***
		(0.060)	(0.004)
<i>Country election level predictors</i>			
Personalized ballot		0.456	0.088***
		(0.297)	(0.019)
Preferential ballot		0.421	0.056***
		(0.291)	(0.020)
Ordered ballot		0.129	0.021
		(0.264)	(0.018)
Open ballot		0.510	0.011
		(0.267)	(0.018)
Combined ballot		0.337	0.026
		(0.286)	(0.018)
<i>Cross-level interaction effects</i>			

Same district * small town	-0.005			-0.013*		
	(0.057)			(0.006)		
Same district * suburban area	-0.090			-0.021**		
	(0.060)			(0.006)		
Same district * city	0.002			-0.008		
	(0.051)			(0.005)		
Same district * DM (log)		-0.116***			-0.033***	
		(0.019)			(0.002)	
Same district * personalized			1.376***			0.198***
			(0.185)			(0.023)
Same district * preferential			0.665***			0.088***
			(0.108)			(0.012)
Same district * ordered			0.046			0.007
			(0.046)			(0.005)
Same district * open			0.080			0.003
			(0.046)			(0.004)
Same district * combined			0.760***			0.218***
			(0.103)			(0.012)
$\sigma_{Country\ elections}^2$	0.149*	0.159*	0.143*	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
	(0.067)	(0.070)	(0.072)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
$\sigma_{Districts}^2$	0.689***	0.690***	0.696***	0.006***	0.006***	0.005***

	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
$\sigma_{respondents}^2$	0.639***	0.639***	0.644***	-0.014***	-0.014***	-0.014***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Residual	6.318***	6.318***	6.315***	0.101***	0.101***	0.101***
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
N (Country elections)	50	50	50	50	50	50
N (Districts)	202	202	202	202	202	202
N (Respondents)	81,337	81,337	81,337	68,057	68,057	68,057
N (Responses)	380,208	380,208	380,208	321,100	321,100	321,100

Note: Standard errors are indicated between brackets * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Conclusion

Earlier research on the role of location in electoral behavior provides convincing evidence that a politician's local ties constitutes a crucial factor in the vote calculus. Yet scholars have mainly focused their empirical efforts on *candidates* and remained silent on the importance of location for *party leaders*. In line with the personalization of politics thesis, party leaders have become ever more central actors in contemporary political systems. They are highly visible politicians, take on crucial responsibilities within and beyond their political party, and count as the main attraction pole during election campaigns. Voters know a great deal about these party leaders, especially compared to the more limited information that they have on rank-and-file candidates in general elections.

In this article, I argued that centralized personalization should lead to a friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders, even for those leaders who do not necessarily have 'authentic' local ties in that district. Contrary to rank-and-file candidates, party leaders do not necessarily have to emphasize their local ties during the campaign to be more successful in the district where they run for election. They are generally more well-known because of higher media attention for these prominent politicians. Therefore, voters are more likely to be aware of their objective traits such as gender, age category and location, which permits an important effect of voter-leader congruency on sympathy for leaders and electoral support for their parties.

The regression models indeed show support for the existence of such a friends-and-neighbors effect for party leaders. When evaluating party leaders, voters express more sympathy if those leaders ran for election in the same electoral district as where they vote. In addition, a leader's location is clearly included as an important factor in the vote calculus, as the models also show that shared districts between voters and leaders increases the probability of voting for the leader's party. Even the analysis focusing on a more restricted sample of volatile voters points in the same direction, which brings even more convincing evidence that the empirical results are not driven by the potentially endogenous relationship between party leader location and party popularity in that location.

In line with the earlier literature on friends-and-neighbors voting effects, I hypothesized that this effect is conditional on specific geographical and institutional factors, such as the urban-local environment in which voters reside, the size of the electoral district in which the leader runs for election, and the type of ballot structure adopted in the electoral system. The first two contextual variables did not entirely affect the results in the hypothesized manner. The local

environment of voters only impacted the party vote choice in the sense that voters in small towns and suburban areas are more likely to take into account shared location with a party leader when casting a vote. The hypothesized effect of district magnitude is only confirmed for the party vote choice models. The third contextual variable, ballot structure, clearly mediates the friends-and-neighbors effect. Voters in all electoral systems like leaders more when they are local. However, the impact on leader evaluations and the actual vote choice is strongest in systems with personalized, preferential and combined ballot structures. Put differently, especially in those highly ‘personalized’ electoral systems where a shared location implies that a vote for the party coincides with a vote for the party leader, location seems to matter the most.

This contribution adds to the growing literature on leader effects by being the first effort to look at the role of location for party leaders. Empirical evidence on the impact of leaders on the vote is mixed. In a similar vein, the results of this cross-national study present a nuanced picture. Yes, party leaders are more popular in their local areas and are able to draw higher levels of electoral support, but the institutional-electoral context matters.

Future research efforts might focus on a more fine-grained and small N study of party leader trajectories in local areas, and ask whether the selection of a party leader in a given area has indeed led to the organizational and electoral breakthrough of the party in the long run. The article has mainly focused on the location of party leadership and its direct effects in terms of inter-party electoral competition. These findings might also have important implications for intra-party politics, more specifically parties’ selection strategies in terms of leadership. The increased popularity of party leaders among local voters implies that the strategic selection of leadership location allows to develop a stronger local platform for the party, even in an area where the party has not yet performed particularly strong. Even if the effect on the election outcome is not immediately visible, leaders seem to foster local enthusiasm which might lead to an increase of party membership, activism levels and increased vote shares in the longer run.

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