Partisan Intensification in Campaigns: Proof of Concept?

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1. Introduction

In most electoral campaigns, the lead for the frontrunning party or candidate shrinks (Johnston/Lachance 2022; Le Pennec/Pons 2023). Explanatory mechanisms ranging from individual psychology to institutional constraints have been proposed. Until recently, most of the propositions pertained to US Presidential campaigns. Although these accounts are typically framed in universal terms, the suspicion lingers that they presuppose contextual elements peculiar to that country. And even for the US, the relevant microdata either did not exist or were not exploited. This paper attempts to close the data gap with daily evidence on vote intention and other psychological indicators from thirteen elections in three countries.

Its starting point is a simple and plausible model proposed by Erikson and Wlezien (2012). Its critical dynamic is that pressure from the campaign intensifies preference**s.** Variances in preferences across individuals within time units – days or weeks – increase from one time unit to the next. This empties out the middle, such that the proportion of weakly motivated citizens shrinks. Unsurprisingly, this reduces the proportion of the electorate available for further persuasion and this shrinkage may entail a damping of flux in intentions. More critical for my purposes, however, is that the same process pulls the distribution of expressed vote intention toward the trailing party, and can do so quite without any shift in the median for underlying preferences. I elaborate the model and test it with campaign-wave rolling cross-sections in the US, Germany, and Canada.

2. The Model

2.1 The US Original

In US Presidential campaigns, the advantage for the frontrunning candidate usually shrinks (Wlezien/Erikson 2002; Campbell 2008; Erikson/Wlezien

2012). The opposite happens only once in every five US elections (Campbell 2008). A broadly similar pattern travels abroad, according to Johnston and Lachance (2022, Table 3): in a five-country comparison the dominant pattern appears about 80 percent of the time.

Additionally, vote intentions in the US tend to stabilize as the campaign nears the end (Wlezien/Erikson 2002). This is particularly clear relative to the disruption produced by the Democratic and Republican conventions (Campbell et al. 1992; Hagen/Johnston 2007). Thereafter, the scope for disruption by short-term shocks such as debates shrinks (See, for example, Wlezien/Erikson 2012, Figure 7.2).

To account for these patterns, Erikson and Wlezien (2012) posit a model with complementary implications for preference intensity and partisanship. Campaign shocks enrich the information environment, with special benefit to initially poorly informed citizens (Figure 7.3: see also Le Pennec/Pons 2023, Table A.4). The shocks' cumulative effect is to intensify preferences, not weaken them. This can be thought of increasing variance in feelings about the major-party candidates (Erikson/Wlezien 2012: 53-55). Density in the tails of the distribution grows at the expense of the middle. And it is in the middle, obviously, where persuadable persons are to be found. As the proportion around the median shrinks, the scope for aggregate flux also shrinks. Put another way, to induce a vote shift of a given size would require a stronger external shock at the end of the campaign than at the beginning.

As preferences intensify, they pull vote intentions toward balance, which also narrows the gap between the frontrunner and the next largest party. Imagine a preference distribution whose median is some distance from the threshold of partisan equibalance. Holding the location of the median constant but increasing the variance of the distribution increases the share of the distribution on the other (trailing) side of the threshold (Erikson/Wlezien 2012, Figure 3.2). Meanwhile, the campaign also primes partisanship (Ibid., Table 7.2 and Figure 7.4; see also Kaplan et al. 2012). Ex hypothesi, there is more partisan slack to prime for the trailing party than for the frontrunner.[1] In the typical case, then, activation of partisanship pulls the result toward balance (55-57).

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1   For a review of the ways this may be so, see Johnston and Lachance (2002: 2).

2.2 Complications in the evidence

The body of relevant evidence is not large but it exhibits certain regularities at odds with the basic model. Already mentioned is the fact that leads widen about one time in five in both the US and abroad. This reminds us that campaigns are open to contingent forces. More tellingly, certain of the predictions in the model are flatly contradicted, at least in the majority of cases.

The mainstream pattern depends on the baseline. For the US, the major disrupter between early summer and Election Day is the succession of Democratic and Republican nominating conventions. These events create a massive media focus on one party at a time and, in earlier years at least, very positive coverage. As one convention follows the other the coverage bias induces alternating swings, the like of which never recur in the following weeks. Where the convention period is the baseline, then, flux is bound to shrink. When the focus is on the last 60 days, the traditional definition of the US general-election campaign, the pattern seems to be the reverse. Henderson and Hillygus (2016), who capture the fixing of vote intentions with a hazard model estimated across a multi-wave panel, find that a disproportionate share of the post-convention fixing occurs in the last two or three weeks. Le Pennec and Pons (2023), with a different estimation setup and a multi-country data set, find the same pattern.

Similarly problematic is the claim that campaign volatility mainly primes pre-existing partisanship. Erikson and Wlezien (2012) show this with probit coefficients (Table 7.2) and defection rates (Figure 7.4) estimated from Gallup poll data over fifteen elections. Again, however, the baseline problem appears. The greatest gains in partisan consistency come around the nominating conventions. For Democrats, defection rates do not decrease any further. And in a note to Table 7.2, Erikson and Wlezien observe that the predictive power of party identification shrinks one time in five. The multi-country evidence in Le Pennec and Pons (2023: 30) comes down on the other side:

> … vote choice formation results less from activating one's pre-existing partisan ties than severing them.

More generally, Le Pennec and Pons raise the possibility that intensification patterns are contingent on context. One obvious contextual factor is whether the system is parliamentary or presidential. According to Jennings

and Wlezien (2015), preferences crystallize earlier in parliamentary elections than in presidential ones. They surmise that leaders of parliamentary parties may need less introduction than freshly nominated Presidential candidates. But Le Pennec and Pons (2023) find that gains in crystallization are smaller in the US than elsewhere. This could be yet another instance of the baseline problem: where Le Pennec and Pons use a 60-day window, Jennings and Wlezien use a 200-day one. Then again, Le Pennec and Pons look at a mixed bag of US contests, but only at the lower house in the other countries.[2] Another factor may be the number of realistic alternatives faced by voters. Binary choices, as in the US, may admit less scope for campaign effects. For one, they have no room for strategic updating. Multi-party campaigns, contrariwise, can update the strategic landscape, and this too may disrupt an otherwise orderly intensification of preferences. Additionally, multipartism reflects higher dimensionality in the space of issues than does bipartism (Taagepera/Grofman 1985), and this too may make campaigns more disruptive.

Critically, almost none of the evidence in hand delves deeply into the mechanisms inside voters' heads. There is none for indicators of strength of preference, as might be indicated by feeling thermometers or their equivalent. There is evidence for partisan activation, but only for impact on vote intention. Nothing has been demonstrated about pathways for that activation. In particular, none of the studies examines the day-to-day evolution of preference intensity, as an object in its own right or as a link in a causal chain. This is the task of the rest of this paper.

3. Research Questions

3.1 Core implications

The Erikson-Wlezien model may not travel well outside the US and may not work in the granularity of the US campaign's last two months. But it is testable, and this makes it an appropriate starting point. If it fails, or where it fails, there remains the question of why it does so. I begin by identifying the model's observable implications. Along the way, other relevant but ancillary questions pop up.

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2 Two-thirds of the US cases are presidential elections, however. The others include three for state governor, four for the House, and three for the Senate.

At bottom, the model embodies an informational theory of campaigns, in the spirit of Alvarez (1997). To the extent that intensification responds to enhanced information, we should ask: information about what or whom? One obvious answer is, about Presidential candidates or, in parliamentary systems, party leaders. The case seems especially clear for the US presidency, where at least one major-party candidate is typically new to the role. Sometimes both are new, as in 2008. The informational effect can also include issues (Lenz 2009, 2012; Matthews 2017), but here the patterns tend to be specific to each campaign and there is disagreement over the underlying mechanisms. The first implication, then, is:

(1) Leader/candidate preferences should intensify over the campaign.

Among potential information channels, political parties can always be counted on to occupy the ground. And just as party identification becomes more closely aligned with vote intention, so should we expect it to be increasingly associated with leader evaluations. The second implication is:

(2) The coefficient of leader preference on party identification should increase with campaign time.

Indeed, leader evaluation is a chief pathway for identification dynamics to do their work. As the variance in leader evaluation increases through partisan activation, an increasing share of the total impact of partisanship on the vote should be mediated by leader-evaluation pathway. From this it follows that:

(3) The coefficient for the total impact of partisanship on vote intention (the coefficient in a bivariate setup) should increase at a faster rate than coefficient for direct impact (in a setup that also includes the feeling thermometers).

These all seem like obvious entailments of the general scheme. Two other possibilities are of interest but do not seem to be clearly entailed by the scheme, although they operate within its spirit, so to speak. First, as information accumulates, does its redundancy also increase, such that its marginal effect diminishes? If it does, the rate of gain in intensification, and in its component parts, may also diminish. Second, does the marginal impact of leader evaluation remain constant as that evaluation aligns with underlying partisanship? In this case, leader evaluation will still become more consequential, in the sense that its constant marginal effect channels a wider range of variation. But we can also imagine a diminished effect if an issue

that cuts across the partisan divide is primed. Even an issue that defines the party divide can have this effect: a campaign that emphasizes the policy costs of responding to the enhanced personal appeal of its opponent may cause that appeal to become less important. Leader evaluation does not occur in a vacuum and party identification may not by itself completely offset issue considerations. This suggests that the empirics should address the following question:

(4) Does the impact of leader preference also intensify? Or is the impact mainly the result of increased variance in the preference distribution?

3.2 Cross-national comparison

As mentioned, the record already shows that campaign dynamics vary across countries, and may do so for the mechanics of leader preferences. As moderators of campaign dynamics, three contextual factors seem relevant: the volume of pre-campaign information about candidates for the highest executive office; the effective number of competitive political parties; and the degree of polarization.

3.2.1 Candidate/leader selection

The most obvious distinction is between presidential and parliamentary ones. Jennings and Wlezien (2015) show that vote intentions converge on the election-day pattern more quickly in the latter than the former, reflecting greater continuity in party leadership. Not only do the parliamentary leaders tend to persist in their roles but they are also the product of an ongoing institutionalized project. And a new leader is likely already to have an established parliamentary reputation and a history of cabinet office. In a given election a leader is less likely than a corresponding US Presidential candidate to be new to the audience.

In each country. these claims must be qualified by internal variation and organizational trends. The ostensibly open-ended US primary system was actually quite controlled. An 'invisible primary" pre-selects a favoured candidate, which the weakly institutionalized primary-election system then endorses (Cohen et al. 2008). On the Republican side the vetting process arguably broke down in 2008, however, and did so again in 2016. Trends in Canada may parallel those in the US. In the late 20th century, party leaders

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were chosen by delegated conventions that were quite closely managed. In this century, selection has evolved toward universal systems with low barriers to entry for candidates and for prospective members of the party selectorate. Over the same period, new leaders who lose their first election are increasingly unlikely to get a second chance. Impressionistically, the trend seems to be toward successors with short resumes. In Germany, losing candidates for Chancellor also no longer get a second chance. But they are almost always the current party president.

3.2.2 The effective number of parties

In contrast to the US, Canada and Germany are multi-party systems. Partisanship as such may be more fungible, such that attachment to specific parties is less constraining than in the US (Shively 1972; Bartolini/Mair 1990). Although attention typically focuses on the two main rivals, the mere presence of other alternatives creates a permanent stochastic possibility that is simply absent in the US. This possibility may threaten one side more than the other, and the direction of the threat may vary across elections. In Canada, this occasionally creates changes in the overall standing of the sides. In 1993, the identity of the advantaged party of the right changed during the campaign. The same thing happened on the left in both 2011 and 2015.

Even where parties do not change their relative viability, a multi-party campaign can change the strategic landscape. In Germany, strategic considerations include "coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting" about the prospective formateur (Bargsted/Kedar 2009; Duch et al. 2010; Cox 2018), and "compensation voting" about the ideological centrism of the cabinet (Kedar 2005). Also in play is the vote to seat transition at the threshold, so-called "insurance" voting (Meffert/Gschwend 2010).[3] Although Canadian governments comprise only a single party, variants on the German themes are visible in Canada – or at least are talked about (Blais 2002). The main talking point is tension between the centre and left over vote to seat transitions. On both left and right, the Canadian challenges often also embody a version of coalition targeting. The NDP sometimes positions itself as a signal to prospective Liberal cabinets to shift left. In 1993 and 2019, similar considerations appeared on the right.

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3 Lest these considerations seem fanciful, see Huber and Welz (2022) and Partheymüller and Johnston (2022).

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3.2.3 Polarization

In the US, the biggest story has been about polarization in both issues (McCarty et al. 2007) and partisan feeling (Iyengar et al. 2012). In Canada too, both kinds of polarization have increased (Johnston 2023). Polarization may make coefficients for party identification stronger overall but compress the scope for further gains induced by the campaign.

Germany may exhibit a different pattern. The core of the system has arguably depolarized, not least through government formation. In particular, two of the four German campaigns in my dataset follow grand coalitions, and this may scale back the partisan tone of the subsequent campaign. The German system has polarized in other ways, to be sure. Gaps on the flanks have widened with the presence of the Left and AfD. But for the broad mass of voters these parties have increased the pressure for cooperation and convergence among the system's core parties.

4. Data and Estimation Strategy

4.1 The rolling cross-section

The ideal platform for answering these research questions is the rolling cross-section (hereafter RCS, Johnston/Brady 2002). Its critical feature is that each day of fieldwork is a random draw from time. The initial sampling frame is randomly divided into daily replicates, and the date on which each is released to field is also a random draw. From the initiation of fieldwork some number of days is required for the average accessibility of respondents to reach a de facto equilibrium (Johnston/Brady 2002, Figure 1). Once this is reached, anything that distinguishes the respondents interviewed on a given day from the respondents for any other day is just the passage of time. The processes that unfold in that passage range from intrapsychic – as respondents grow more interested in the campaign, for example – to global, for instance the Global Financial crisis, which occurred in the middle of the 2008 US and Canadian campaigns. By comparison with standard cross-sections, randomization of data collection with respect to time enables causal inference for some processes and is helpful, if not dispositive, for others.

It is also desirable that the datasets are as representative of the electorate as realistically possible. The datasets in this paper are: for the US, from the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES), 2000-8; for Canada,

from the Canadian Election Studies (CES), 1988-2019; for Germany, the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), 2005-17, RCS component. Sample selection was by random digit dialling (RDD), or a close variant. Phone numbers released to field were kept open for several days, with a strict callback protocol. Most interviews in the datasets were conducted by landline telephone. The RDD mode faced increased challenges, with compliance beginning to drop in the 1990s and coverage in the 2000s. In response, the CES acquired an online component in 2015, and these data seem to have successfully mimicked the temporal patterns of RDD counterparts (Breton et al. 2017). Despite the changes, the record of these surveys in predicting the result has been good all along, with no evidence of decay (Johnston/Lachance 2022, Appendix Table A1).

This paper focuses on the last 60-65 days or fewer before the election date. This is – or was – the de facto duration of a US general campaign (Campbell 2008). The increased frontloading of US campaigns is mainly in the nomination stage and 65 days is close to the outer boundary for official campaigns in Germany and Canada. For those countries, the number of days in the datasets roughly follow the pattern in the campaign, subject to constraints in getting the survey into the field.[4] Fieldwork durations range from 35 to 73 days in Germany and from 31 to 62 days in Canada.

4.2 Leader preference

I capture intensity of feeling about party leaders or candidates with the conventional feeling thermometer. In the US and Canadian cases, the original coding is from 0 to 100. For Germany, the range is -5 to +5. In all cases the thermometer is rescaled to range from -1 to +1. Consistent with the practice in Erikson and Wlezien (2012), I subtract the rating of the "left" leader/candidate from the "right" counterpart. This creates a range of -2 to +2.

Most of the time, the identification of the "right" and "left" alternatives is straightforward: Republican and Democrat in the US, CDU/CSU and SPD in Germany, and Conservative and Liberal in Canada. We may dispute how much the extreme language of left and right characterizes some of these

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4 In Canada in 2008 a snap election call caught everybody off guard, such that the CES team was unable to regulate sample release at the usual standard; this year is dropped from the analysis.

actors. But two things are clear: these are almost always the viable parties for government, on a single-party basis for the US and Canada or as rival formateurs in Germany; and the relative positioning of the alternatives is always the same. The exceptions – all of them partial – are in Canada. In 1993, an insurgent named Reform (later renamed the Alliance) displaced the Conservatives on the right. This became clear only after the election; for the 1993 campaign itself, the focus was on the Conservative leader. For 1997 and 2000, however, the Reform leader represents the "right." In 2003, the two conservative parties merged and thereafter the candidate on the right is the Conservative leader. In 2011 the NDP, an established party of labour that sits to the left of the Liberals, surged and emerged as the official opposition. As with 1993, this was not anticipated and for the entirety of the campaign the alternatives treated as viable were the traditional rivals. In 2015, however, the NDP entered as the presumptive alternative to the Conservatives and is treated as such here. In 2019, with the Liberals now back in power, all parties reverted to their traditional positioning.

4.3 Vote intention

Vote intention follows the logic of leader ratings, with the focus being on the left and right alternatives. As with ratings, the exact identity of the alternatives shifts for the Canadian case, on the right in the 1990s and on the left in the 2010s. Respondents who intend to vote for any other party, along with respondents who intend to abstain or who have not yet formed a preference, are placed in an "other/none" category in the middle. This reflects the fact that campaigns are as much about mobilizing the vote as about conversion across the divide.

4.4 Party identification

In all three countries, individuals' party loyalty is captured with a question that refers to a stable self-concept, with non-partisanship validated in the stem of the partisanship battery. Respondents are placed by their response to the stem only. Although gradations of partisan intensity, including assignment to a side in the follow-up items, are informative for certain purposes (Baker/Renno 2019), they are also more susceptible than the stem to post-treatment bias (Brody/Rothenberg 1988); for this paper, the

priority is to minimize possible endogenization of external forces. As with the vote, supporters of small parties are treated as non-partisans, along with actual non-partisans. Partisanship is treated as a continuous variable, with augmented non-partisanship the middle category. This simplifies graphical presentation. Fortunately, the impact of shifts across the boundaries sides and the middle are roughly symmetrical. The fact that the 'middle' is more heterogeneous in Germany and Canada than in the US is pertinent to this paper's objectives. That heterogeneity creates the possibility, as outlined above, of strategic shifts and of impact from ideological variation off the normally-dominant left-right dimension.

4.5 Estimation strategy

The basic exhibit features some quantum plotted over consecutive days or weeks, separately by country and election year. Separation by year is necessitated by the varying durations of Canadian and German campaigns. In those countries, interaction between within-campaign durations and between-campaign shifts can create the appearance of a general campaign pattern, a false positive or negative. For the intensification of leader preference, I plot the day-to-day progression of standard deviations (SD) in the left-right leader ratings. The evolution in the over-time impact from party identification on the left-right rating difference is tested by regressing ratings on identification over consecutive periods. For reasons of statistical power, respondents are grouped into consecutive weeks. For the impact of leader ratings on vote intention, the test is a regression analysis of the vote intentions on leader ratings, again over consecutive weeks. Where vote intention is the dependent variable, estimation is by ordinary least squares (OLS). As already mentioned, not much asymmetry appears between the sides, such that OLS provides a reasonable representation of outcomes and simplifies the graphics. For the mediation of partisan impact by leader ratings, I estimate the impact of party identification twice. First come coefficients from bivariate regressions of vote intention on party identification, by week. This is equivalent to a reduced form, where the impact captured by the coefficient includes all possible pathways of effect. Then I open a pathway by adding the leader-rating difference to the estimation. The resulting coefficient on party identification now indicates the factor's unmediated, direct impact. Of course, other mediators are in play and are absorbed in this residual coefficient, but they are not of central interest

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here. The focus is on evolving leader/candidate evaluations as the critical pathway. To the extent that it is not critical, it points to other campaign factors of possible relevance.

5. Results

5.1 Variance in leader evaluation

The evidence for all three countries is in Figure 1. The pattern for the US is clear, and consistent with the Erikson-Wlezien supposition. Gains in evaluative intensity are particularly great for 2000 and 2008, a 10 percent gain relative to the baseline. Gains are not so sharp in 2004, although they are nonetheless clear. Arguably, the story for that year is that the race was polarized from the start. In every year, intensification accelerates toward the end, with the bulk of the gain occurring in the last three weeks.

The pattern in Germany has some affinity with the US one, but only episodically. The 2005 election lies exactly on the US pattern: a clear gain overall and acceleration toward the end. The trend in 2013 is deceptively gradual but clearly upward. The 2009 election may be similar, in that there seems to be a gain at the end. But a simpler interpretation is that the 2009 fluctuation is trendless. Trendless flux, and very little flux of any sort, is even more characteristic of 2017. The dominant pattern is variation between elections, as a reflection of the makeup of the incumbent coalition. The 2005 incumbent was a coalition of the left, and the campaign brought a reinvigoration of the SPD and its Chancellor candidate (Schmitt-Beck/ Faas 2006). This produced a standoff in which the only realistic coalition included both major parties. This undermined partisan signalling in the next, 2009 election. The close alignment of the Chancellor candidates in dealing with the 2008 global financial crisis made it hard for them to find fault with each other. Accordingly, polarization of feeling abated. Ironically, this same election enabled a right-wing coalition to form, such that by 2013 feelings had polarized again. As a further irony, the 2013 campaign forced the chief antagonists back into another grand coalition. This pushed polarization of feeling in 2017 back down to its 2009 level.

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Figure 1: Intensification of opinion on party leaders
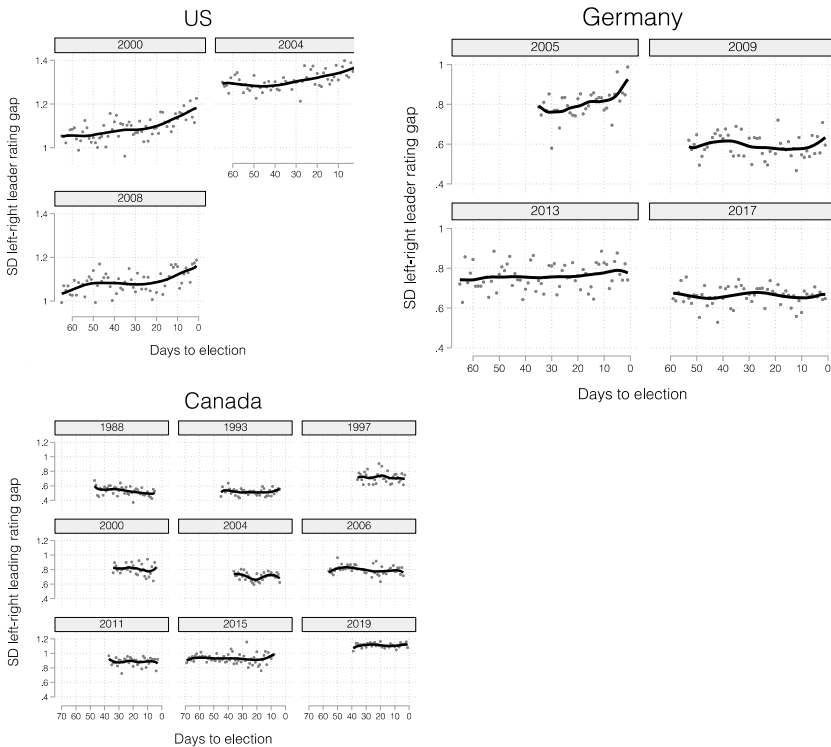
Data points are daily readings of standard deviations of leader ratings. Smoothing by loess, bandwidth = 0.50.

In Canada almost all of the action is between campaigns. Across campaigns, gaps in judgment on party leaders have widened dramatically. Although it is unwise to compare levels across countries, it is striking that in the 1990s, Canadian polarization seems lower than the lowest levels for Germany. By 2019, the level rivals that in the US. But there is no pattern of intensification of feeling within campaigns. If anything, the opposite is true.

5.2 Impact of partisanship on leader evaluation

Unsurprisingly, the pattern for the priming of partisanship for candidate evaluation is roughly the same as for overall intensification of feeling,

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according to Figure 2. As before, the US exhibits the most consistent with-in-campaign patterns. The German pattern varies across campaigns, but signs of priming are visible, if episodically. For Canada, the variance is, again, more between campaigns than within them.

Figure 2: Priming of party identification
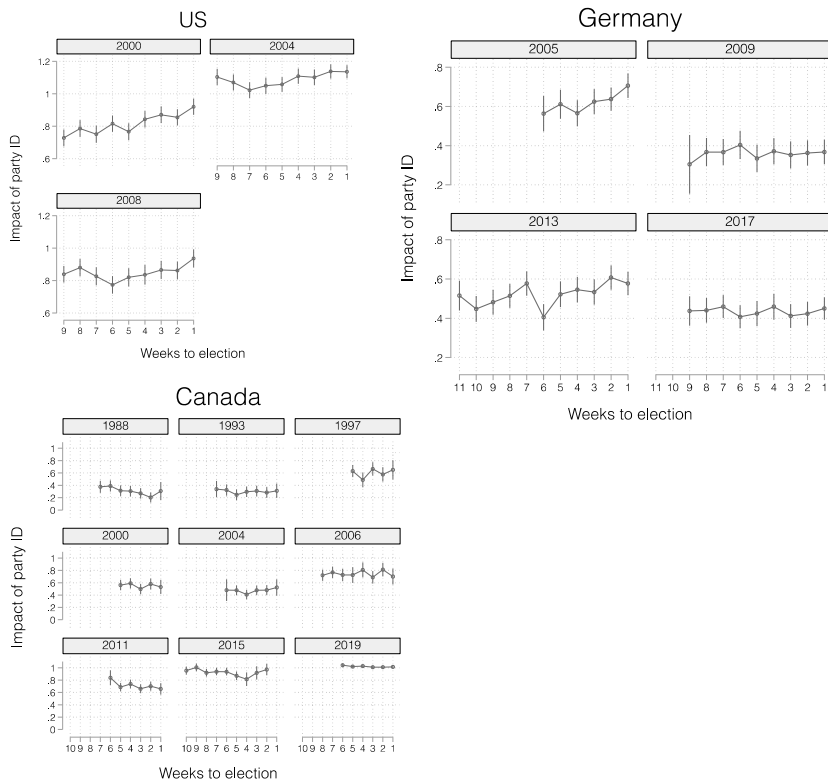
Data points are marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals of party identification on feeling thermometer, by week. Underlying estimation by OLS.

The priming evidence also reveals interpretable exceptions to the generaliz-ations. In the case of the US, there are temporary reversals in the general pattern of intensification. Where in 2000, the conventions were complete by the middle of August, in both 2004 and 2008, the nominating conventions extended into what is usually viewed as the general campaign period. In 2004, the (incumbent) Republican convention ended only four days before

the campaign's unofficial start. In 2008, the Republicans concluded their convention three days after the usual start date. The effect was to bring the chaos of the nomination sequence into a week that normally sees the restoration of partisan order, so to speak. Order was ultimately restored, as per Erikson and Wlezien, but on a slightly delayed timetable.

In Germany, the pattern for 2005 occasions no surprise: the intensification in Figure 1 reflects consistent priming of partisanship, on the US model. The same is true for 2013, a pattern that is clearer here than in Figure 1. The flat lines for 2009 and 2017 prove the rule, as these were campaigns that followed four years of grand coalition. And Canada sees partisan priming increase over the decades to reach impact on the same scale as in the US. Within campaigns, however, the pattern is a flat line.

5.2.1 Impact of leader evaluation on the vote

In none of the three countries does leader evaluation become consistently more predictive of the vote, according to Figure 3. In the US, the opposite may happen. A decline in marginal impact is detectable in 2000 and quite clear in 2008. In Germany, two of the four elections hint at amplification and one, at the opposite pattern. The typical Canadian pattern is of trendless flux. That said, in 1988 and 1997 there is a hint of decay (although confidence bands overlap between early and late readings). Only for 2019 is there clear amplification of leader effects.

5.2.2 Mediation of partisan activation

The mediation of partisan activation as it travels to vote intention is the subject of Figure 4. Each panel in the figure has two plots. The higher of the two shows the "total" impact, coefficients for bivariate regression of vote intention on party identification, week by week. The "total" coefficient includes impact that is indirect, notably from the partisan content in the impact of leader of evaluation (Figures 2 and 3). The lower plot shows the impact of party identification in a setup that also includes those same leader ratings. Here, the leader-rating element in the partisan effect is removed by statistical control. The direct impact is always much smaller than the total impact. The focus here is not solely on the mere fact of mediation; the critical question is whether the mediation grows over the campaign. To the extent that it does, we should see gains in the total partisan effect but none

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or only smaller gains in the direct effect. This should manifest itself as a widening gap between the "total" and the "direct" plots.

Figure 3: Impact of leader ratings
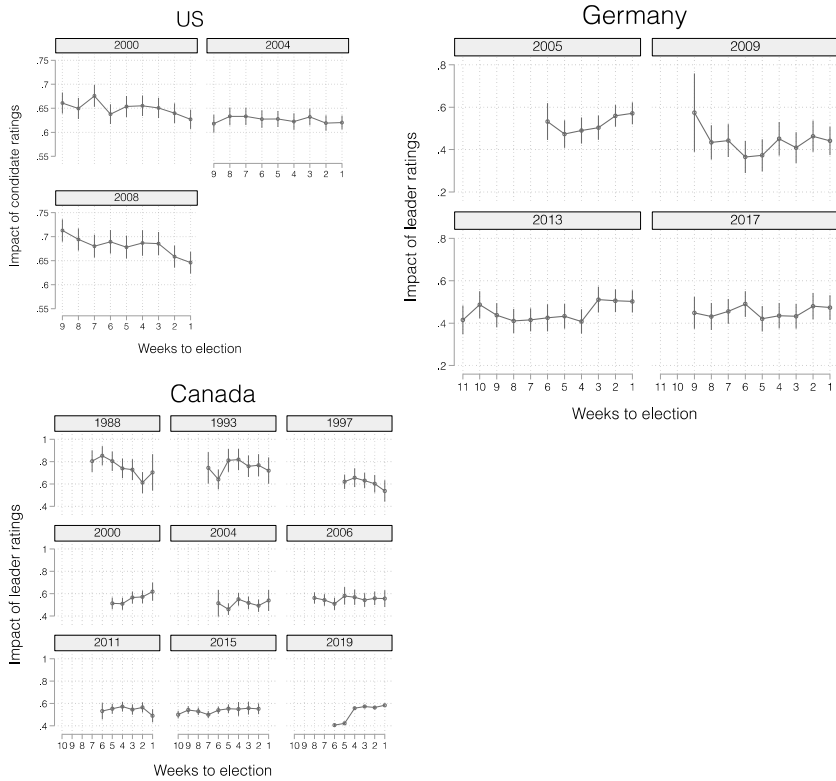
Data points are marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals of leader ratings on vote intention by week, by week. Underlying estimation by OLS.

Figure 4: Party identification: direct and indirect effects
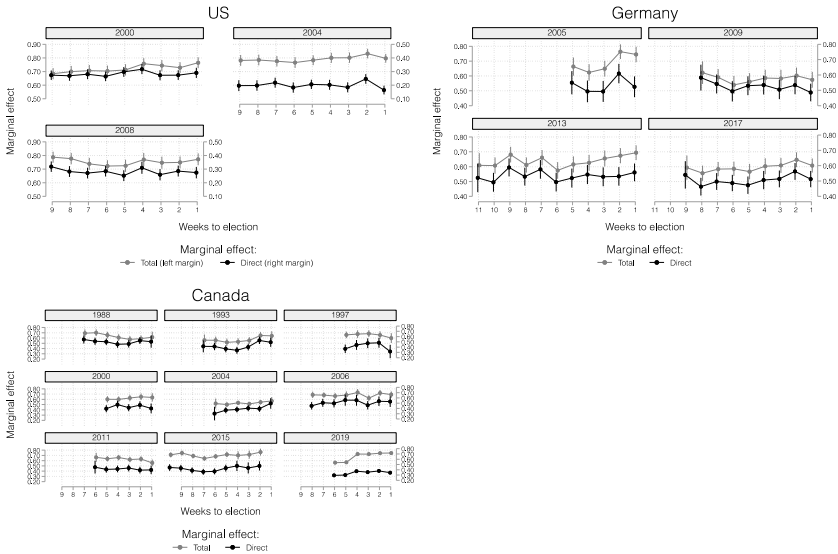
Data points are marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals of party identification on vote intention, by week, with and without control for leader rating. Underlying estimation by OLS.

Begin with the US panel. Note first that the left and right margins are on different scales. The vertical range is the same for each – 0.4 points – but the minima and maxima are different. This reflects the fact that in the US impact from party identification is massively mediated by leader ratings, such that the gap between the lines is always great. Where total effects fluctuate around 0.8, direct effects tend to be between 0.2 and 0.3. If the both lines were on a common scale that encompassed these extremes, dissimilarity between their within-campaign trajectories would be barely detectable. The key is to find ranges that enable comparison but that always remind the viewer that the plot for direct effects has the lower values.

The only US plot that conforms completely to expectations is for 2000. Where the total partisan effect increases by about 0.1 from start to finish, the direct partisan effect does not grow at all. In the other two years the gap widens but not in the way we expect. Here, the widening appears because the direct effect of partisanship shrinks. It may be true that candidate

ratings increasingly absorb partisan considerations but their dynamic effect is nullified by the trade-off identified in the juxtaposition of Figures 2 and 3.

When we turn to Germany, the first thing to meet the eye is that the cross-sectional gaps between the total and the mediated effect are smaller than in the US. Where control for US candidate ratings cuts the party coefficient by about 0.5 units (slightly less in 2000), the reduction for Germany is on the order of 0.1 to 0.15. Thanks to this, both German plots can be placed on the same vertical scale, 0.4 to 0.8. When the incumbent is a "normal" coalition with an ideological tilt – 2005 and 2013 – the total partisan effect in Germany rivals that for the US (even if a smaller proportion of that total comes through the leader pathway). Even so, this proportion is greater than when the incumbent is a grand coalition. In those years, the direct effect of partisanship is about the same as ever (and larger than in the US) but is not much augmented by feelings about leaders.

Canada is quite another story. First, the general gap between total- and direct-effect estimations has widened. In the earlier years, the Canadian pattern was like the German one: a reduction of 0.1 to 0.15. With time, the gap widened, such that by 2011 and 2015 the gap was around 0.2. In 2019, the gap rivalled those in the US, around 0.35 to 0.4. This is consistent with the secular increase in the priming of party identification, revealed in Figure 2. To accommodate this trend, the Canadian graphs always have the same scale for both plots, with an unfortunately large range of 0.6. And like the US in 2000, the 2019 campaign widened the gap: it started around 0.2 (the same gap as in 2015) and ended around 0.4. The 2019 pattern is a compound of forces already identified: Figure 2 shows that the partisan content of leader ratings increased over the years; Figure 3 shows that the impact of those ratings on the vote increased over the 2019 campaign itself, in contrast to most earlier years. Two things about Canada in 2019 distinguish it from the US, however: the widening of the gap exceeds that in the US and it takes place closer to the campaign's start.

6. Conclusion and discussion

6.1 Recapitulation

Summary judgment on the model is mixed at best. It works in some elections, in some countries, and in some of its parts. But it misses as much

as it hits, and only some of the misses can be covered by counterfactuals to the US original. Here is the score card:

(1) Do judgments on the chief competitors for executive office routinely intensify? In the US and Germany, they do. In Canada (with the exception of 2019) they do not.

(2) As judgments intensify, does this involve partisan activation? In the US, the answer is yes. In Canada, it is no. In Germany, partisan activation occurs where the incumbent coalition is headed by only one of the major parties, otherwise not. The US/Germany contrast actually vindicates the model. The Canadian case does not.

(3) Does the marginal impact of leader ratings on vote intention increase? Basically no. In the US, the marginal effect shrinks two times in three. It also shrinks in Canada in 1988 and 1997. Only in Germany does the expected pattern appear, again conditional on whether the incumbent coalition leaned off centre. Oddly, the one instance of clear gains in impact is Canada in 1997.

(4) Do leader ratings mediate gains in partisan activation for vote intention? The answer is mixed to negative. Twice in Germany and once in Canada there is a hint of such mediation. In the US, the expected pattern occurs only in 2000.

6.2 Discussion

The impact of campaigns does not seem to be universal. Rather, it depends on context. The most encompassing difference is between the US and the parliamentary systems. We cannot distinguish if the essential thing is parliamentarism as such, or the multipartism that characterizes both Germany and Canada. Whatever the cause, leader ratings are less polarized in both Canada and Germany than in the US. Priming of party identification is also less consistent in the parliamentary cases. This is true for both the impact of partisanship on leader ratings and for the totality of partisan impact on vote intentions.

Contextual factors also operate at a meso level to produce variation within each case. In Germany, dynamics are contingent on the makeup of the outgoing coalition: the less polarized government makeup in the old Bundestag, the less partisan the succeeding election campaign. In Canada, party politics are undergoing a qualitative change, with follow-on implica-

tions for campaign dynamics. Partisan feeling is intensifying, such that its net impact now rivals that in the US, at least the US level of the 2000s.

The supposed US pattern may not apply universally even in that country. In our data, it appears only in 2000. Although it is true for each campaign that partisanship is increasingly primed in leader evaluations, leader evaluations do not necessarily maintain their impact on vote intentions. The further implication is that the impact of partisanship, while always important, does not necessarily grow towards the end. Comparison of the 2000 and 2004 campaigns may be instructive: in 2004 partisanship was so potent from the start that its impact had little room to grow. Elections since 2008 may have become more like that in 2004. Although we do not have the microscopic detail on voter psychology that the NAES reveals, we do know that campaigns lost dynamic juice over the 2010s. Outcomes have become more precisely predictable from the previous election (Sides et al. 2022, Figures 8.2 and 8.3) and campaign dynamics have flattened.[5] On the same path, outcomes have become closer, and not just in the presidential arena. As a result, small shifts can have huge consequences. This combination, which reflects polarization, may also fuel that very polarization (Lee 2016), a positive feedback loop. Canada may be moving in the same direction. For the moment, this has made Canada in 2019 look like the US in 2000.

The general point stands for all the systems: campaign dynamics cannot be detached from their contexts. Some differences across systems abide, but within a given institutional endowment, contexts shift as the structure of party politics shifts.

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5 The last generalization is from analyses of published polls by election cycle, 1980-2020, by the author. Plots available from the author on request.

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