

# Leader Traits, Leader Image and Vote Choice<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Secular changes are taking place in the way how election campaigns are conducted (Mancini/Swanson 1996) and how politics is portrayed in the mass media of advanced democracies. Political communication is said to have become more personalized during the last years – at the expense of abstract institutions such as the political parties. In parliamentary democracies in particular the coverage of politics in the major mass media appears to have moved towards a more presidentialized direction (Mughan 2000). If such changes are in fact occurring, it seems likely that gradually the criteria voters utilize in arriving at their voting decision will shift towards the characteristics of political candidates. The more ‘personalized’ voters decide the more important will be the criteria on which their judgement of political leaders is based. Is this basis a superficial image of political candidates or do voters instead build their judgement of leaders according to more rational criteria such as leaders’ competence to solve a nation’s urgent political problems, or the candidates’ leadership qualities? Obviously, the recruitment of democratic political leaders and the quality of democratic government both are heavily dependent on how this question can be answered.

For the presidential system of the United States it could be demonstrated that *politically relevant, performance oriented criteria* play an important role for the overall judgement of political candidates and for vote choice. Conversely, strictly personal, non-political candidate characteristics were of only minor importance (Miller et al. 1986). In analyzing the effect of individual leader traits on overall leader evaluations it emerged for the United States that performance relevant criteria had a much greater impact than the more superficial and apparent leader characteristics (Miller et al. 1986: 534). Competence, reliability, and honesty proved to be more important for a leader’s overall judgement than his appearance, with competence as the primary dimension used by citizens throughout the 1952-1984 period

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will appear as a chapter in: Kees Aarts, André Blais, and Hermann Schmitt (eds.), 2006: Political Leaders and Democratic Elections, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Miller et al. 1986: 535). A similar assessment concerning the weight of performance relevant criteria such as competence and integrity has been arrived at by Bean (1993). He suggests that findings such as these apply "...across both national and temporal boundaries, for parliamentary as well as presidential political systems and for many different individual political leaders, whether they have stronger or weaker images and whether they be incumbents or nonincumbents" (Bean 1993: 129).

It will be asked in this chapter whether this description for the role of leader characteristics does in fact equally apply to parliamentary systems where political parties are traditionally stronger than in a presidential system. Do, for instance, performance related criteria such as a leader's competence or his or her integrity inform the overall judgement of a political leader in a parliamentary democracy in the same way as in a presidential system? And which of these leader attributes exert, in the end, the greatest influence on the voting decision itself?

In order to come up with empirical evidence pertaining to these questions, in this chapter the content of political leaders' images and their potential impact on voters' judgements of leaders and on the final vote will be analyzed. It will be asked, in a first step, how leaders' global evaluations in the general public are constituted. In following this perspective, it will be explored how a leader's *overall, global evaluation* in the electorate depends on how his or her individual traits are perceived. Concerning the relationship between leaders' evaluations in the public and the eventual vote choice, it will be examined in a second step which of the individual traits are most closely related to the *vote decision*. When analyzing the impact of leader traits, we will focus on 'direct' effects, that is "... the influence that a leader or candidate exerts on voters by virtue of who he or she is, how he or she appears and how he or she publicly comports him or herself" (King 2002: 6).<sup>2</sup>

Since our aim is to determine in which way the character of the political system affects the criteria voters use in reaching their political judgements, it is essential, first, that there be enough variation of the type of the political system. Secondly, comparing across systems presupposes that the set of leader attributes is more or less the same and that the indicators used to tap these attribute dimensions are similar to a sufficient degree. In combining both the criteria of system variation as well as data availability we decided to focus our empirical analyses on three countries and three fairly different political systems, namely the presidential system of the United States (Foster/Muste 1992; Nimmo 1996) and the two parliamentary systems of Australia (Hughes 1992; McAllister 1992, 1999; Simms 1996) and Sweden (Esaiasson 1992). Australia and Sweden both are parliamentary democracies. These two democracies are similar to the extent that in both systems the political parties still hold a very strong position (for Australia see McAllister 1999, 2002). Class structure is another variable which differentiates Australia and Sweden from the United States, but presumably also Sweden from Australia since at least until the end of the 1960s Sweden outstripped most other countries in terms of the strength of class voting (Asp/Esaiasson 1996: 76; Oskarson 1992). The Australian political system differs from the Swedish system as it is in the Westminster tradition with majority representation. Australia might come fairly close to a presidential system as a majoritarian system implies a tendency towards a greater weight of the two top leaders (Mughan 2000: 16). Moreover, the USA, Australia, and Sweden might be different

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<sup>2</sup> By contrast, *indirect* leader effects would relate to such leader impacts as the transformation of a party's ideology or image (King 2002: 5).

with respect to how election campaigns are conducted. Tendencies toward an ‘americanization’ and candidate-centering of election campaigns seem to be quite weak in Sweden (Asp/Esaiasson 1996: 76). In taking together these criteria, the United States without doubt are the ideal type of a presidential, candidate-centered system and Sweden is the ideal type of a still party-dominated system (for differences between presidential and parliamentary systems see McAllister 1996; Mughan 2000). All in all, these three countries selected for comparison should be sufficiently distinct on a number of criteria which are likely to affect the content as well as the impact of political leaders’ images on voters’ judgements and decisions. Besides, only for these three nations among the nine nations analyzed in this book leader trait measures are available which are comparable to a sufficient degree.

In addition to the main task of this chapter which is the comparative analysis of leader traits we will also touch upon the question of whether strictly *non-political* leader attributes such as the outer appearance or the family life are in fact relevant determinants of leader evaluations as it is sometimes suggested in the context of hypotheses on the personalization of politics. Since non-political leader qualities are not commonly measured in election studies, this part of the empirical analysis will be confined to Germany.

#### LEADER EVALUATIONS: TRAITS AND DIMENSIONS IN THE LITERATURE

When it comes to analyzing how leader images are constituted,<sup>3</sup> image perception of political leaders in the electorate often is conceived in a dichotomous way. Leader traits are thus commonly distinguished into *politically relevant* and *performance related* attributes on the one hand and *personal, non-political* attributes on the other hand. Politically relevant or performance related attributes comprise traits such as a leader’s competence, leadership qualities, knowledge, or political integrity. Personal attributes subsume a leader’s looks, or his or her family life.<sup>4</sup> The politically relevant attributes have clearly received the most intensive treatment in past research, with differentiated measurements whereas the non-political dimension is either not measured at all or only very roughly.

Miller et al. (1986) use for their analysis of leader traits the open-ended statements of the American national election studies and they distinguish five dimensions (Miller et al. 1986: 528). As a first dimension competence encompasses a candidate’s intelligence, his or her comprehension of political issues, the ability as a statesman, or political experience. Secondly, integrity refers to the trustworthiness of a politician, his or her sincerity and honesty whereas, thirdly, reliability relates to a leader’s capacity to credibly realize his or her political programme. Therefore, to be reliable (or credible) a candidate has to appear as “dependable”, “hardworking”, or “decisive”. Reliability here is understood as “... trust in terms of capability rather than honesty” (Miller et al. 1986: 528). Charisma is a fourth category which includes a candidate’s leadership qualities, or the ability to communicate with people. A fifth and last

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<sup>3</sup> According to Nimmo and Savage (1976) a candidate’s *image* should be defined as the voter’s perception “... based on both the subjective knowledge possessed by voters and the messages projected by the candidates” (Nimmo/Savage 1976: 8).

<sup>4</sup> Image components have also been distinguished into political role attributes and stylistic role attributes (Nimmo/Savage 1976).

category involves entirely personal, more or less non-political qualities of a candidate such as his or her age or the outer appearance.

Funk (1996) argues that three separable dimensions are important to cover the space of leader evaluations, namely competence, trustworthiness (or integrity) and warmth (or sociability). In another analysis Funk (1999) uses the closed format trait statements of the American national election studies which, essentially, only contain measurements for political attributes. These trait statements were developed by Kinder (1986) and they are intended to measure four broad dimensions of leader evaluation which are fairly similar to those of Miller et al. (1986), namely *competence*, *leadership*, *trustworthiness*, and *empathy* (Shanks/Miller 1990: 201).<sup>5</sup> It were possible, of course, to differentiate further or to consider still other attributes but we believe that these four dimensions cover the main politically relevant and performance related aspects of leader evaluation and we will therefore use in our own empirical analyses this classification of leader traits as the frame of reference. For the comparative part of our analysis the focus will thus be on competence, leadership, trustworthiness, and empathy. In addition, in the last part of the empirical analyses we will also concentrate on the distinction between performance related criteria and personal, non-political criteria.<sup>6</sup>

#### A FEW CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROLE OF LEADER TRAITS

If we assume politically rational voters (Downs 1957) *performance related criteria* such as a leader's competence and/or his or her leadership qualities and integrity generally should be the principal criteria according to which political leaders are evaluated. The political utility income citizens expect to receive will be the higher the more a leader is competent to tackle and solve a nation's urgent problems. It is equally important for citizens' political benefits that leaders can be trusted, in the sense that they keep their promises and also in the sense that leaders can be depended and relied upon if sudden crises should arise.<sup>7</sup> Finally, leaders are also expected to care for the particular needs of citizens. Therefore, these performance related trait dimensions should empirically prove to be as substantial, if not as the most important determinants of a leader's image. And they should have a noticeable effect on the vote decision as well – *quite independently from the type of the political system*. In taking this general expectation as our baseline hypothesis, differences in the role of leader traits between political systems could nonetheless be possible, though. We will therefore examine whether leaders' traits play different roles in a presidential system as that of the United States or in parliamentary systems like Australia or Sweden.

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<sup>5</sup> Bean (1993) uses seven dimensions, namely "competence", "integrity", "strength", "harmony", "general likability", "other personal", and "policy/party/group" references (115).

<sup>6</sup> The distinction between political and non-political traits is more complicated than it appears at first sight: "... references to the leader's personal characteristics can also be seen as 'instrumental' in a broader sense. The leader's experience, his intelligence, his sincerity, his calmness, his eloquence, his likeability – or his shortcomings by these standards – can be regarded as qualities which will affect the likelihood of his achieving goals which electors value" (Butler/Stokes 1974: 357-358).

<sup>7</sup> "Traits such as integrity, reliability, and competence are hardly irrational, for if a candidate is too incompetent to carry out policy promises, or too dishonest for those promises to be trusted, it makes perfect sense for a voter to reject a politician regardless of his or her party" (Dalton 2000: 338).

While it is not difficult to give an explanation why and how the *overall effect of leader evaluations* on vote choice should depend on the type of the political system, this is by no means as obvious when it comes to a possibly different role of *individual leader traits* in different political systems. With respect to overall leader effects, conventional wisdom would suggest that leader evaluations are most important in a presidential system, as there the candidates can act more independently from their parties than their counterparts in parliamentary systems. Moreover, presidential candidates receive more attention in the mass media's coverage of politics which may in part be due to the fact that political parties in a presidential system are generally weaker compared to most parliamentary systems. Conversely, the weight of political leaders for voters' choice should be the smallest in parliamentary systems, in particular if political parties still maintain a strong position. Having said this, one would expect the greatest leader effects on the vote for the United States and rather small effects for still party-dominated political systems such as Sweden or Australia although a majoritarian system of the Westminster type like Australia might come fairly close to a presidential system.

It is quite another question, however, whether the type of the political system – presidential system vs. parliamentary system, and further differentiating the latter according to party dominance or the electoral system – should also affect the weight with which individual leader traits inform the global evaluation of candidates in the public or whether particular traits make a difference to the eventual voting decision. Is, for instance, the individual character or the personal style of leaders more important in presidential than in parliamentary systems (McAllister 1996: 283)? Does a candidate's empathy or emotional warmth count more than his or her competence to solve the country's political problems in a candidate-centered system such as the United States than in a party-dominated system such as Sweden? And if so, how could this be accounted for?

Bean suggests that the role of leader qualities in a presidential system is intimately related to political programmes and political issues: "Whereas in parliamentary systems, policies are typically associated with parties rather than party leaders, presidential contenders in the American political system have a rather different role. In some senses they themselves virtually act as surrogates for political parties, personally espousing a full program of policies ..." (Bean 1993: 117-118). Therefore, in a presidential system the candidates would be evaluated across the whole range of criteria, their positions on political issues, their competence to solve the nation's important problems, and their traits as a person. By contrast, in a parliamentary, party-dominated democracy some of these criteria might rather be ascribed to the domain of the political parties, for instance political issue positions or the competence to solve urgent problems. Leaders in party-dominated systems might thus primarily be evaluated in terms of their integrity or their empathy, traits which can plausibly only be related to a leader as a person and not to political issues or to the party domain.

Another consideration refers to the president's specific role and tasks in a presidential system in comparison to those of a prime minister in a parliamentary democracy. Whereas in a parliamentary democracy a weak leader may be simply *primus inter pares* within a cooperative government – and thus not be able to cause much damage –, in a presidential system strong leadership is virtually indispensable. Therefore, leadership qualities may well be the crucial yardstick for the candidates in a presidential system.

As far as the potential electoral impact of non-political leader traits such as a candidate's looks or his or her family life is concerned, it should mainly be dependent, first, on the "uniqueness of particular candidates" (Miller et al. 1986: 529) and, secondly, on the degree with which non-political leader attributes receive emphasis in mass media coverage. In this perspective no systematic difference between a presidential and a parliamentary system would be expected concerning the weight of non-political traits. But to the extent that personalization of media coverage has already more progressed in a presidential system one would assume that non-political attributes receive greater emphasis there. As a result, these personal candidate traits could, then, count more for the vote decision in presidential systems.

## DATA

For the *United States* we draw on the American national election studies (ANES) for the four presidential elections of 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000. In order to measure leader traits, in principle the open ended questions of the ANES could have been used. However, as for Australia and for Sweden open ended questions are only available for a few elections during the 1980s (Australia) or not at all (Sweden), closed format had to be the choice in order to render the country analyses comparable. With only minor changes over time, in the ANES a set of leader traits such as "intelligent", "knowledgeable", "inspiring", "provides strong leadership", "moral", "compassionate", or "really cares about people like you" has been measured which should constitute "... a fair sampling from the broader range of personal qualities that might conceivably be relevant to prospective voters" (Bartels 2002: 47). These traits closely resemble those categories used by Miller et al. (1986) on the basis of the open ended candidate questions of the ANES (for further information on the traits such as the question wording see the appendix). Unfortunately, since the closed format statements we utilize do not explicitly contain strictly personal, non-political candidate characteristics, the distinction between political and non-political attributes cannot be analyzed for the United States when using these data.

The *Australian* national election studies include measures for leader traits which are virtually identical to the US measures. In addition to the US studies there are also trait measures available for the "reliability" of the Australian political leaders (see the appendix).

In the *Swedish* national election studies (SNES) the leader trait measures for the three national elections of 1988, 1991, and 1998 are very similar to the measures employed in the US election studies. Four traits have been identified as comparable, namely "knowledgeable", "inspiring", "reliable", and "knows the thoughts and opinions of ordinary people". As in the 1994 SNES trait measures are not available, the SOM survey which is a post election mail survey has been drawn on instead for this year. The trait items in the SOM survey come fairly close to those of the SNES. To check whether this decision might influence the results, for the election year 1991 we have used both the SOM survey and the national election study (see the appendix).

For *Germany* the availability of measures on leader traits is not quite as good as it is especially for the United States or Australia. Whereas in the recent past leader traits have been asked for a series of German state elections (Ohr/Klein 2001; Klein/Ohr 2002), for national

elections to the German national parliament, the Bundestag, differentiated candidate items are only available for the national election of September 1998. As in the German part of the CSES study a relatively large and differentiated set of trait measures has been asked, the downside of only one suitable data set is by far compensated (see the appendix). Only for Germany it is possible to examine simultaneously the relative importance of role relevant leader traits on the one hand and personal, non-political traits such as a leader's looks on the other hand.

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

Starting with the four *US presidential elections* of 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000, in Table 1 the average evaluation for each individual trait dimension is depicted for each presidential candidate of the two major American parties. For each election year the third column shows the difference in the arithmetic means of both presidential candidates. The overall impression appears to be that the image of US presidential candidates is fairly good. By and large, the candidates are viewed as competent, as capable to lead the nation, and as trustworthy. There are only a few exceptions to this overall pattern, for instance the evaluation of Bill Clinton's trustworthiness which is considered as rather low.

Relatively large differences between the presidential candidates can be found in 1992 and in 1996. In 1992 the incumbent George Bush sen. (Rep.) lost the presidential election against his contender Bill Clinton (Dem.). The trait pattern in Table 1 gives a first clue to the potential reasoning in the American electorate. In comparison to the incumbent, Clinton appeared as the more capable leader and as having more empathy, that is as a leader who really cared about his fellow citizens to a clearly higher degree than Bush. Conversely, as far as the trustworthiness of both candidates is concerned, Clinton's public assessment was markedly worse than that of the incumbent Bush, thus probably reflecting the continuous media coverage of the former's past. A similar pattern comes into view for the presidential election in 1996. Again, Clinton was evaluated as a political leader who cared more intensely about his fellow citizens than the Republican candidate Dole. And in 1996 Clinton appeared even less trustworthy, thus increasing the difference to his Republican challenger. The extremely close presidential election in 2000 is reflected in the trait pattern for the presidential candidates Al Gore (Dem.) and George W. Bush (Rep.). None of both candidates enjoyed a clear advantage with respect to his public image. Whereas Gore appeared as somewhat more knowledgeable and intelligent ("cognitively competent"), as well as a politician who cared about his fellow citizens ("empathy"), Bush was rated higher on his leadership qualities.

Coming to *Australia* and the four elections to the House of Representatives, a first glance at Table 1 reveals that, overall and quite similar to the United States, Australian political leaders receive fairly good evaluations in the electorate. Furthermore, the differences between the Australian political leaders lie in the same range as those between the US presidential candidates. And in both systems political leaders are perceived as widely different if specific circumstances apply. Apart from these first general observations, there are some noteworthy patterns for individual elections in Australia. Paul John Keating, Prime Minister for the Labor Party since 1991 and being the incumbent in 1996, was evaluated as a strong and capable

leader who in this year clearly outperformed his contender, John Howard from the Australian Liberal Party, in terms of his leader potential. By contrast, Howard fared much better than Keating with respect to his trustworthiness, reliability, and empathy. In 1998 Howard again received lower assessments on his leadership qualities in comparison to his competitor who was then Kim Christian Beazley, Labor Party, the Australian leader of the opposition since 1996. But in 1998 these poor evaluations of Howard also extended to the remaining attributes so that his Labor contender performed better across all traits. Interestingly, in 2001 the evaluation for the leadership trait is reversed. Now, Howard who had been Prime Minister for the Liberal Party since 1996, was seen to possess markedly higher leadership capabilities than his Labor challenger Beazley.

Drawing a first, preliminary conclusion when inspecting the elections in 1996, 1998, and 2001, it appears as not very likely that evaluations of leader traits in Australia could prove as decisive for the election outcomes. Despite large differences between the candidates, often in favour of Howard's challenger, John Howard and his Liberal Party won all three Federal elections for the House of Representatives.

The story of leader image in *Sweden* during the 1990s revolves around the leaders of the two biggest parties, Ingvar Carlsson of the Social Democrats, and Carl Bildt of the Conservative party. Bildt was appointed as party leader shortly after the Conservative party's defeat in the 1985 election. Carlsson's debut was far more unexpected. He became party leader and prime minister over-night directly after the assassination of prime minister Olof Palme in 1986 – an event that paralyzed domestic politics in Sweden for the following years. After this shock, the sympathies for the Social Democratic party and its new leader grew to record high levels. In the continuing tracking of party leader popularity in Sweden, Carlsson's score in 1986 and 1987 is still the all-time-record (see Holmberg/Weibull 2002). The Social Democrats won a comfortable victory in the 1988 general election (43.2 per cent) and could form a minority government with the parliamentary support of the Communist party. The electoral victory is well reflected in voters' perceptions of Bildt and Carlsson. In 1988, Ingvar Carlsson was considered as a more "reliable", more inspiring leader ("leadership"), more knowledgeable than Bildt ("cognitive competence"), and he was considered much more in touch with ordinary people ("empathy").

Three years later, in the 1991 election, there was a much tighter race between the two contenders in all respects. Bildt scored higher on all leader traits than he did in 1988, and was now considered a more inspiring leader (SNES data) than Carlsson as well as a stronger leader (SOM data). Although Carlsson still had the upper hand with respect to his "empathy", this could not help the Social Democrats avoiding the worst election result since 1932 (37.7 per cent). Although Bildt had had a slow start winning the sympathies of his own party sympathizers and the Swedish electorate, he now became the prime minister of a non-socialist four party coalition that also included a newcomer in the Swedish Riksdag, the Christian Democratic party.

Once the images of Carlsson and Bildt had become established during the years 1986-1991, they were very stable between the 1991 and 1994 election, according to the SOM-institute. A moderate shift is revealed for the leadership qualities which were rated somewhat higher for the leader of the opposition, Ingvar Carlsson, in 1994 than three years earlier. A rapidly worsening national economy and increasing unemployment helped the Social

Democrats back to power in the 1994 election. Prime minister Ingvar Carlsson announced his resignation in 1995, and Göran Persson became the new leader of the Social Democrats. In Persson's first election campaign 1998, the much more experienced and well known Carl Bildt became his opponent. The themes of the election were focussed on social welfare policies, especially health care, lower education, and child care. In his last election as party leader, Bildt received his highest scores on "reliability" (.63), "leadership" (.55) and "cognitive competence" (.85). But during his thirteen years as party leader for the Conservative party, he never has managed to improve his ratings with respect to his "empathy". In 1998, Bildt enjoyed an overall much more positive evaluation than the newcomer Persson and managed again – the third election in a row – to win more voters over to the Conservative party. But that was not enough to win majority for a new non-socialist coalition. Persson could secure parliamentary support for his minority government mainly from the Green party and the Left party.

TABLE 1 *Evaluation of Political Leaders' Traits (arithmetic means, scaled from 0 to 1)*

## US Presidential Elections, 1988-2000

|                      | 1988             |                    |        | 1992             |                    |         | 1996             |               |         | 2000          |               |         |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------|------------------|--------------------|---------|------------------|---------------|---------|---------------|---------------|---------|
|                      | Dukakis<br>(Dem) | Bush sen.<br>(Rep) | Diff.  | Clinton<br>(Dem) | Bush sen.<br>(Rep) | Diff.   | Clinton<br>(Dem) | Dole<br>(Rep) | Diff.   | Gore<br>(Dem) | Bush<br>(Rep) | Diff.   |
| Cognitive Competence | 0.68             | 0.67               | 0.01   | 0.69             | 0.68               | 0.01    | 0.72             | 0.71          | 0.01    | 0.70          | 0.61          | 0.09**  |
| Leadership           | 0.50             | 0.47               | 0.03** | 0.56             | 0.49               | 0.07**  | 0.53             | 0.51          | 0.02    | 0.53          | 0.58          | -0.05** |
| Trustworthiness      | 0.64             | 0.64               | 0.00   | 0.48             | 0.62               | -0.14** | 0.40             | 0.68          | -0.28** | 0.65          | 0.65          | 0.00    |
| Empathy              | 0.60             | 0.53               | 0.07** | 0.61             | 0.48               | 0.13**  | 0.54             | 0.47          | 0.07**  | 0.54          | 0.46          | 0.08**  |
| $n_{\max}/n_{\min}$  | 1165/1133        | 1185/1162          |        | 1326/1294        | 1353/1348          |         | 1032/1025        | 1022/1003     |         | 1110/1070     | 1098/1033     |         |

## Australian Elections to the House of Representatives, 1993-2001

|                      | 1993             |                 |         | 1996             |                 |         | 1998             |                 |        | 2001             |                 |         |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|------------------|-----------------|---------|------------------|-----------------|--------|------------------|-----------------|---------|
|                      | Keating<br>(Lab) | Hewson<br>(Lib) | Diff.   | Keating<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) | Diff.   | Beazley<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) | Diff.  | Beazley<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) | Diff.   |
| Cognitive Competence | 0.74             | 0.72            | 0.02*   | 0.76             | 0.69            | 0.07**  | 0.69             | 0.67            | 0.02** | 0.68             | 0.69            | -0.01   |
| Leadership           | 0.58             | 0.47            | 0.11**  | 0.61             | 0.47            | 0.14**  | 0.55             | 0.41            | 0.14** | 0.46             | 0.53            | -0.07** |
| Trustworthiness      | 0.50             | 0.59            | -0.09** | 0.46             | 0.69            | -0.23** | 0.64             | 0.61            | 0.03** | 0.57             | 0.52            | 0.05**  |
| Reliability          | 0.43             | 0.52            | -0.09** | 0.45             | 0.62            | -0.17** | 0.58             | 0.51            | 0.07** | -                | -               |         |
| Empathy              | 0.48             | 0.54            | -0.06** | 0.47             | 0.64            | -0.17** | 0.65             | 0.57            | 0.08** | 0.63             | 0.59            | 0.04**  |
| $n_{\max}/n_{\min}$  | 2496/2436        | 2486/2435       |         | 1362/1344        | 1369/1349       |         | 1350/1336        | 1369/1344       |        | 1435/1402        | 1434/1408       |         |

## Swedish Elections to the Riksdag, 1988-1998

|                                    | 1988                        |                        |        | 1991                        |                        |         | 1994                        |                        |         | 1998                      |                        |         |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------|---------------------------|------------------------|---------|
|                                    | Ingvar<br>Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Carl<br>Bildt<br>(Con) | Diff.  | Ingvar<br>Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Carl<br>Bildt<br>(Con) | Diff.   | Ingvar<br>Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Carl<br>Bildt<br>(Con) | Diff.   | Göran<br>Persson<br>(Soc) | Carl<br>Bildt<br>(Con) | Diff.   |
| Cognitive Competence               | 0.81                        | 0.69                   | 0.12** | 0.78                        | 0.77                   | 0.01    | -                           | -                      |         | 0.72                      | 0.85                   | -0.13** |
| Leadership                         | 0.51                        | 0.36                   | 0.15** | 0.40                        | 0.46                   | -0.06** | -                           | -                      |         | 0.35                      | 0.55                   | -0.20** |
| Reliability                        | 0.66                        | 0.48                   | 0.18** | 0.61                        | 0.55                   | 0.06**  | -                           | -                      |         | 0.50                      | 0.63                   | -0.13** |
| Empathy                            | 0.66                        | 0.33                   | 0.33** | 0.57                        | 0.39                   | 0.18**  | -                           | -                      |         | 0.44                      | 0.36                   | 0.08**  |
| n <sub>max</sub> /n <sub>min</sub> | 600/574                     | 568/547                |        | 586/564                     | 575/557                |         |                             |                        |         | 482/467                   | 478/464                |         |
| SOM data                           |                             |                        |        |                             |                        |         |                             |                        |         |                           |                        |         |
| Cognitive Competence               | -                           | -                      |        | 0.74                        | 0.76                   | -0.02   | 0.72                        | 0.76                   | -0.04** | -                         | -                      |         |
| Leadership                         | -                           | -                      |        | 0.43                        | 0.55                   | -0.12** | 0.49                        | 0.58                   | -0.09** | -                         | -                      |         |
| Trustworthiness                    | -                           | -                      |        | 0.65                        | 0.55                   | 0.10**  | 0.67                        | 0.55                   | 0.12**  | -                         | -                      |         |
| Reliability                        | -                           | -                      |        | 0.60                        | 0.51                   | 0.09**  | 0.64                        | 0.53                   | 0.11**  | -                         | -                      |         |
| n <sub>max</sub> /n <sub>min</sub> |                             |                        |        | 713/696                     | 709/694                |         | 901/873                     | 888/867                |         |                           |                        |         |

\*\* :  $\alpha \leq 0.01$ ; \* :  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  (two tailed).

Only those respondents are included in the analysis who voted for either the presidential candidate of the Democratic party or for the Republican candidate (USA), for the Labor Party or for the Liberal Party (Australia), for the Social Democratic Party or the Conservative Party (Sweden). For question wordings and operationalizations see the appendix.

Data: USA: American National Election Studies (ICPSR Study No. 9196, 6067, 6896, 3131); Australia: Australian Election Study (SSDA Study No. 763, 943, 1001, 1048); Sweden: Swedish National Election Study 1988 and 1991 (pre-election interviews); SOM surveys 1991 and 1994 (post election mail surveys); Swedish National Election Study 1998 (post-election interviews). When using the US election studies, leader traits were taken from the pre-election surveys, vote choice from the post-election surveys.

Having got a first impression of the trait measures for each nation, we will analyze in the next step in which way the *overall evaluation* of political leaders is constituted by the individual leader traits. Table 2 presents regression analyses with each leader's global evaluation as the dependent variable and the individual trait dimensions as the explanatory variables.

TABLE 2 *Political Leaders' Traits and Global Evaluations (OLS Regression, Beta-coeff.)*

US Presidential Elections, 1988-2000

|                     | 1988             |                    | 1992             |                    | 1996             |               | 2000          |               |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|                     | Dukakis<br>(Dem) | Bush sen.<br>(Rep) | Clinton<br>(Dem) | Bush sen.<br>(Rep) | Clinton<br>(Dem) | Dole<br>(Rep) | Gore<br>(Dem) | Bush<br>(Rep) |
| Cogn. Competence    | ns               | 0.09**             | ns               | ns                 | 0.06**           | ns            | ns            | 0.18**        |
| Leadership          | 0.45**           | 0.34**             | 0.33**           | 0.32**             | 0.29**           | 0.32**        | 0.32**        | 0.21**        |
| Trustworthiness     | 0.12**           | 0.19**             | 0.25**           | 0.15**             | 0.36**           | 0.17**        | 0.23**        | 0.16**        |
| Empathy             | 0.25**           | 0.29**             | 0.28**           | 0.41**             | 0.27**           | 0.38**        | 0.35**        | 0.35**        |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | .50              | .59                | .57              | .63                | .76              | .56           | .60           | .56           |
| N                   | 1098             | 1136               | 1267             | 1341               | 1018             | 994           | 1014          | 976           |

Australian Elections to the House of Representatives, 1993-2001

|                     | 1993             |                 | 1996             |                 | 1998             |                 | 2001             |                 |
|---------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
|                     | Keating<br>(Lab) | Hewson<br>(Lib) | Keating<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) | Beazley<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) | Beazley<br>(Lab) | Howard<br>(Lib) |
| Cogn. Competence    | ns               | ns              | -0.10**          | ns              | ns               | ns              | ns               | ns              |
| Leadership          | 0.23**           | 0.30**          | 0.27**           | 0.33**          | 0.28**           | 0.23**          | 0.30**           | 0.28**          |
| Trustworthiness     | 0.22**           | 0.15**          | 0.28**           | 0.18**          | 0.20**           | 0.25**          | 0.29**           | 0.33**          |
| Reliability         | 0.24**           | 0.20**          | 0.14**           | 0.23**          | 0.14**           | 0.17**          | -                | -               |
| Empathy             | 0.24**           | 0.23**          | 0.26**           | 0.13**          | 0.14**           | 0.25**          | 0.20**           | 0.28**          |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | .66              | .57             | .59              | .57             | .43              | .63             | .47              | .65             |
| N                   | 2342             | 2288            | 1331             | 1318            | 1314             | 1319            | 1371             | 1378            |

## Swedish Elections to the Riksdag, 1988-1998

|                     | 1988              |                | 1991              |                | 1994              |                | 1998             |                |
|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|
|                     | Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Bildt<br>(Con) | Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Bildt<br>(Con) | Carlsson<br>(Soc) | Bildt<br>(Con) | Persson<br>(Soc) | Bildt<br>(Con) |
| Cogn. Competence    | 0.16**            | 0.07*          | 0.21**            | 0.12**         | -                 | -              | 0.20**           | 0.17**         |
| Leadership          | 0.36**            | 0.30**         | 0.29**            | 0.26**         | -                 | -              | 0.28**           | 0.36**         |
| Reliability         | 0.44**            | 0.46**         | 0.37**            | 0.36**         | -                 | -              | 0.39**           | 0.28**         |
| Empathy             | ns                | 0.14**         | 0.10**            | 0.21**         | -                 | -              | 0.10**           | 0.16**         |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> | .61               | .64            | .59               | .54            |                   |                | .59              | .48            |
| N                   | 545               | 511            | 551               | 531            |                   |                | 443              | 449            |
| SOM data            |                   |                |                   |                |                   |                |                  |                |
| Cogn. Competence    | -                 | -              | 0.15**            | ns             | 0.10**            | ns             | -                | -              |
| Leadership          | -                 | -              | 0.32**            | 0.34**         | 0.27**            | 0.34**         | -                | -              |
| Trustworthiness     | -                 | -              | 0.24**            | ns             | 0.25**            | 0.14**         | -                | -              |
| Reliability         | -                 | -              | 0.21**            | 0.46**         | 0.24**            | 0.32**         | -                | -              |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup> |                   |                | .58               | .54            | .55               | .51            |                  |                |
| N                   |                   |                | 691               | 684            | 852               | 858            |                  |                |

\*\* :  $\alpha \leq 0.01$ ; \* :  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  (two tailed); ns: not significant.

Only those respondents are included in the analysis who voted for either the presidential candidate of the Democratic party or for the Republican candidate (USA), for the Labor Party or for the Liberal Party (Australia), for the Social Democratic Party or the Conservative Party (Sweden). For question wordings, operationalizations, and estimation procedures see the appendix.

Data: see Table 1.

Beginning with the United States, it can be seen that there is a close association between individual traits and the overall judgement of the presidential candidates. For each election and each candidate explained variance is equal to fifty percent or higher. There are, at least, three different explanations why the associations between individual traits and global evaluation are uniformly high. First, one could argue that all of these traits measure in fact the important determinants of a leader's overall evaluation. Therefore, individual attributes would inform the overall evaluation of a leader. Here, the causal direction would flow from trait judgements to global evaluations (Funk 1999: 706). Conversely, it might be stated that a large part of the electorate has not much information on political candidates. Hence, it could appear as likely that individual trait attributes are inferred from the global impression. Finally, individual trait attributes and global evaluations could both be due to third variables, for instance to the exposure to the election campaign. If at all, a definite solution to this causality problem could only be attained in a longitudinal design. As we are confined to work with cross-sectional data, we have to content ourselves with a somewhat more modest aim: A strong relationship between individual leader evaluations and leaders' global judgements can be taken as a weak indication that the overall evaluation – and eventually the vote – is indeed affected by individual trait evaluations. In addition, since our comparative analysis is based exclusively on politically relevant and performance related leader traits, it would give some support to the notion that political leaders are judged in fact according to 'rational' standards.

On the whole, the first part of Table 2 reveals a straightforward message. With only one exception, for all four presidential elections “leadership” and “empathy” are the two most important characteristics of the candidates’ global image. “Trustworthiness” certainly is an important facet of the presidential candidates’ images but it only reaches the third rank. “Cognitive competence” plays a relatively minor role. How can these observations be related to the well-documented finding that competence and integrity (which is trustworthiness for all practical purposes) are the most important traits for a leader’s public standing (Miller et al. 1986; Bean 1993)? First, it may be questioned whether, conceptually as well as empirically, competence and leadership are really separate trait dimensions in the public’s perception. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to view competence as a broader concept. In this perspective, competence should therefore also subsume more general leadership and managerial qualities (see also Miller/Shanks 1996; Funk 1999), not only a leader’s perceived ability to solve urgent political problems. For this reason the pattern in the first part of Table 2 corresponds fairly well to common wisdom since leadership qualities certainly tap an essential subdimension of leader competence.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, “*cognitive* competence” which is measured by the two indicators “intelligent” and “knowledgeable” is conceptually much more narrow than a leader’s competence in general.

What may appear as surprising if compared with the conventional empirical wisdom is our finding that “empathy” is a stronger determinant of a leader’s overall judgement than “trustworthiness”. In the perspective of voter rationality both attributes appear as equally indispensable so that theoretically there is no convincing argument in favour of either “trustworthiness” or “empathy”. Since “trustworthiness” is in part measured by a candidate’s perceived morality, in 2000 only by morality, it seems possible that the connotation of morality is too narrow in order to capture the entire meaning of trustworthiness. Consequently, the relationship between trustworthiness and a leader’s global evaluation as it emerges from the first part of Table 2 may be a rather conservative estimate of the ‘true’ importance of trustworthiness.

In gauging the importance of individual traits, we have focussed on the regression coefficients of the trait variables. *In this perspective*, a trait is the more important for the overall image the larger the coefficient, that is, the larger the slope of the ‘evaluation curve’. Viewed from this angle, “cognitive competence”, for instance, is not especially important for a leader’s global evaluation. Clearly, this result and the related interpretation are both due to the fact that US presidential candidates, as well as political leaders in Australia and in Sweden, are almost uniformly considered as “cognitively competent”. Since leader traits such as “cognitive competence” have thus only a small variation in the electorate, there is not much

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<sup>8</sup> To gauge the dimensionality of the leader traits, confirmatory factor analyses were conducted for the US presidential elections and the Australian elections (LISREL 8.52; maximum likelihood estimation). These factor analyses (no table) clearly show, first, that a complex factor structure of three or four dimensions has a far better fit to the data than simple structures. In almost all cases a model with four dimensions performs best (with the indicators for “reliability” excluded in the Australian case). According to these analyses “intelligent” and “knowledgeable” build a first dimension, “strong leadership” and “inspiring” a second dimension, “moral” and “honest” a third one, and, finally, “compassionate” and “cares” the fourth dimension. The first dimension could be interpreted as a leader’s “cognitive competence”, the second dimension as his or her “leadership qualities”, the third dimension as “trustworthiness”, and the last dimension as “empathy” or “warmth”. Yet it should be noted that in order to get statistically reliable results more trait indicators would be necessary. For this reason statistical analyses can only provide very weak and, at best, supplementary support for our approach to measure dimensions of leader evaluations.

room left for an important effect upon the overall image in a regression analysis. It would be rather strange, yet, to maintain that in general “cognitive competence” does not count when a political leader is to be evaluated. A political leader who were regarded as *not* being intelligent would almost certainly face severe problems with respect to his public image. Obviously, an effect such as this could only show up in a statistical analysis if the specific trait indicator covered the whole theoretical range of the dimension. This qualification should be kept in mind when comparing ‘conventional wisdom’ to our results and interpretations.

An interesting observation can be made in Table 2, in particular with respect to the presidential elections in 1996. A trait seems to be the more important, the less this attribute is seen as being part of a candidate’s image. Clinton received very low marks with respect to his trustworthiness by the American electorate, but this attribute proves to be the most important facet of his global image. There is in fact only one presidential candidate for whom trustworthiness is the most important facet of the overall image, Bill Clinton in 1996. Conversely, Bush sen. was seen as a politician who did not care very much about his fellow citizens (“empathy”), and this attribute emerges as by far the most important determinant of his global evaluation in 1992. In a similar manner, this rule applies to Dole in 1996 who also appeared as not particularly empathetic. Again, this trait is the most important determinant of his overall image perception. Only in one instance, for George W. Bush in 2000, has “cognitive competence” a relevant effect on a leader’s overall image. With respect to this particular attribute Bush receives the lowest assessment of all presidential candidates between 1988 and 2000.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps these observations could be generalized in terms of the salience of a leader’s individual traits and its potential impact on a leader’s global evaluation. Why a trait is especially salient for a candidate in a particular campaign may have several reasons: The perceived absence of a trait could be one aspect,<sup>10</sup> intensive media coverage a second, as the trustworthiness dimension for Bill Clinton demonstrates. If salience is high for an individual trait, it appears then as likely that this trait exerts an important effect on the overall judgement.

Turning to *Australia*, the content of the prime minister candidates’ global evaluations appears to be more varied than in the United States (middle part of Table 2). Clearly, similar to the USA leadership is important in each election for the overall judgement of a candidate as well as is empathy. The differences between the effects of individual trait dimensions on global evaluation are not very large in Australia, however. Apart from cognitive competence, leadership, trustworthiness, reliability, and empathy all affect the candidates’ overall image with almost the same strength. To render the analyses sufficiently comparable across the nations, all regression analyses for Australia have also been estimated with the reliability dimension *excluded*. Since reliability can be interpreted as an aspect of trust in the capability sense (Miller et al. 1986: 528), it is only natural, then, that trustworthiness which refers to another aspect of trust, namely honesty, appears as a still more important determinant of a leader’s overall image in this case (no table). But whether or not reliability is included as a potential determinant of global leader evaluation, trustworthiness seems to count more when

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<sup>9</sup> This observation is perfectly consistent with some of the literature on “negativity effects” (cf. chapter 11) which underscores the particular relevance of negative evaluations.

<sup>10</sup> Bean and Mughan are more cautious when stating that the precise qualities which have an effect are poorly predicted by their distribution among voters (Bean/Mughan 1989: 1173-1174).

accounting for the political leaders' images in Australia than in the United States.<sup>11</sup> As for the United States we find some indications for Australia as well that the perceived absence of a leader trait increases this trait's salience and, consequently, its impact on the global evaluation of the respective leader. John Howard's perceived leadership qualities in 1996 illustrate this mechanism.

The effects of individual traits on leaders' global evaluations for *Sweden* are documented in the lower part of Table 2. For the SNES as well as for the SOM data, leadership qualities have strong and robust effects over time. In this respect the Swedish pattern is fairly similar in particular to the US findings. The greatest effect, though, on a leader's overall image goes back to "reliability" ("pålitlig"), a trait which could not be drawn on for the US analyses and which was moderately important in the Australian case. Reliability exerts a great impact on both Swedish leader's overall images in 1988 which was only two years after the assassination of Olof Palme. Yet, this high relevance of reliability for the global evaluation is not restricted to a truly exceptional historical situation as the coefficients for the other elections demonstrate. When using the SOM surveys for 1991 and 1994, the effects for reliability are somewhat smaller. However, it should be noted that the Swedish indicator for "trustworthiness" ("ärlig" which can be translated with "honest") is linguistically close to "pålitlig", and both words could be used almost interchangeably in the Swedish language. In addition, despite controlling for "trustworthiness", in 1991 "reliability" is by far the most important facet of the image of Conservative party candidate Carl Bildt.

To summarize our findings for the content of political leaders' overall images in the electorates of the United States, Australia, and Sweden, there are two aspects worth mentioning. First, *the overall image of the top political leaders is clearly structured by politically relevant and performance related leader traits in each of the three political systems*. Explained variance is uniformly high when the leaders' global evaluation is accounted for by these individual traits. Our findings are thus in line with the assumption that political leaders' evaluations in the electorates of Western democracies are based on politically 'rational' criteria. Secondly, in which way the overall image receives its structure and its content does differ between the systems, though. In Australia, leader image is broadly based on various political traits which have almost equal importance. By contrast, in the United States and Sweden we find some of the leader traits to be more influential than others. Whereas in the United States leadership and empathy are the most conspicuous facets, in Sweden reliability counts most when it comes to evaluating political leaders.

In analyzing the relationships between individual leader traits and leaders' global evaluation, we have focussed on how the overall leader image is constituted. In this perspective it is not necessary to control for variables such as citizens' party identification. This is quite different when the potential electoral impact of leader traits on the vote decision is to be ascertained. To evaluate correctly how important individual leader traits are for the vote choice presupposes that further potential explanatory variables are incorporated in the analysis. Therefore, in order to estimate effects of leader traits on the vote, one has to control

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<sup>11</sup> The small but significant coefficient for Labor candidate Keating's "cognitive competence" in 1996 has the wrong sign which would indicate that the higher Keating's perceived intelligence and knowledge the lower the score on his global evaluation. A possible interpretation, yet an admittedly ad hoc one, could be that "cognitive competence" in some contexts might be understood as an attribute which refers to a leader's being primarily theoretically oriented – in contrast to the quality of being a strong leader.

for party identification, because at least some of the traits "... are closely related to party sentiments ... and are therefore most susceptible to elimination in a more properly specified model" (Bean 1993: 125).

In an analysis of the potential effect of leader trait evaluations on the vote it also has to be decided whether leader traits should be separately operationalized, that is taking each leader separately, or whether perceptions of competing candidates should rather be combined, for instance by building a differential (Bean/Mughan 1989: 1168). Bean and Mughan present evidence for Australia and Britain which indicates that individual trait evaluations of competing leaders are only weakly correlated (1169). This result supports the practice to analyze leader traits and their effects on the vote separately for each candidate. By contrast, in using trait differentials in regression analyses it were implied for each trait that the effect on vote choice is the same for both candidates. Furthermore, since it cannot be excluded that there are differences between incumbents and challengers or between candidates with different ideological orientations we have chosen to estimate models with separate traits for each candidate (Table 3).

As Table 3 (first part) demonstrates for the *US* data, the effect pattern does, by and large, not change much if the dependent variable is vote choice instead of global image evaluation and if, additionally, it has been controlled for party identification. Performance related leader traits thus appear to play a role for the decision which presidential candidate to vote for. And again, as a rule, leadership qualities and empathy exert the strongest impact. There is only one exception to this general rule: Analogous to the model for the overall candidate image, in 1996 trustworthiness for Bill Clinton, the presidential candidate of the Democratic party, is the main determinant among the traits in explaining the vote choice. Clinton received low marks for his trustworthiness and his bad moral reputation was then transferred to the eventual choice at the presidential election. As far as differential effects between candidates are concerned, leadership qualities and empathy count for the Democratic as well as for the Republic candidate.<sup>12</sup>

For *Australia* we also find a fair number of leader trait effects on the vote to be significant (Table 3, second part). Similar to the pattern for candidates' overall image, there are no clear differences between the trait dimensions as far as the effect on party vote is concerned. If we compare the Australian models for vote choice to the US models it is apparent that the effects of individual leader traits on the party vote are somewhat smaller in Australia. Conversely, explained variance for the Australian vote models is higher in comparison to the USA which indicates that the effect of party affiliation on the vote is more important in the Australian system than it is in the United States. This result without doubt reflects the fact that the Australian parties have been quite successful in retaining a strong position within the Australian electorate (McAllister 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that the signs of the regression coefficients are expected to be negative for the Republican candidate as the dependent vote variable has been coded "1" for the Democratic candidate and "0" for the Republican candidate.

TABLE 3 *Effects of Political Leaders' Traits on the Vote  
Controlling for Party Identification (OLS Regression, Beta-coeff.)*

US Presidential Elections, 1988-2000

|                      | 1988    | 1992                 | 1996    | 2000    |
|----------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|---------|
|                      |         | Democratic candidate |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | ns                   | 0.06**  | ns      |
| Leadership           | 0.17**  | 0.15**               | 0.10**  | 0.15**  |
| Trustworthiness      | ns      | 0.15**               | 0.20**  | 0.09**  |
| Empathy              | 0.13**  | 0.05*                | 0.17**  | 0.11**  |
|                      |         | Republican candidate |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | ns                   | ns      | ns      |
| Leadership           | -0.18** | -0.12**              | -0.06*  | -0.14** |
| Trustworthiness      | -0.08** | ns                   | ns      | -0.07** |
| Empathy              | -0.22** | -0.25**              | -0.17** | -0.13** |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>  | .60     | .64                  | .70     | .66     |
| N                    | 1098    | 1272                 | 994     | 930     |

Australian Elections to the House of Representatives, 1993-2001

|                      | 1993    | 1996              | 1998    | 2001    |
|----------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------|
|                      |         | Labor candidate   |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | -0.06**           | ns      | ns      |
| Leadership           | 0.03*   | 0.05*             | 0.11**  | 0.07**  |
| Trustworthiness      | 0.07**  | ns                | ns      | 0.07**  |
| Reliability          | 0.07**  | 0.12**            | ns      | -       |
| Empathy              | 0.05**  | 0.07**            | ns      | ns      |
|                      |         | Liberal candidate |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | ns                | ns      | ns      |
| Leadership           | -0.03*  | -0.06**           | ns      | -0.13** |
| Trustworthiness      | ns      | ns                | ns      | -0.10** |
| Reliability          | -0.09** | -0.09**           | -0.15** | -       |
| Empathy              | -0.07** | -0.07**           | -0.10** | ns      |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>  | .76     | .75               | .72     | .75     |
| N                    | 2355    | 1296              | 1303    | 1370    |

## Swedish Elections to the Riksdag, 1988-1998

|                      | 1988    | 1991                     | 1994    | 1998    |
|----------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|---------|
|                      |         | Social Democratic leader |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | 0.10**                   | -       | 0.09**  |
| Leadership           | ns      | 0.07**                   | -       | ns      |
| Reliability          | 0.30**  | 0.19**                   | -       | 0.24**  |
| Empathy              | ns      | ns                       | -       | ns      |
|                      |         | Conservative leader      |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | ns      | -0.08**                  | -       | -0.06** |
| Leadership           | ns      | -0.08**                  | -       | -0.08** |
| Reliability          | -0.15** | -0.10**                  | -       | -0.10** |
| Empathy              | -0.08** | -0.13**                  | -       | -0.09** |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>  | .66     | .68                      |         | .66     |
| N                    | 495     | 519                      |         | 407     |
|                      |         | Social Democratic leader |         |         |
| SOM data             |         |                          |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | -       | ns                       | ns      | -       |
| Leadership           | -       | 0.07**                   | ns      | -       |
| Trustworthiness      | -       | 0.09**                   | 0.09**  | -       |
| Reliability          | -       | ns                       | 0.08**  | -       |
|                      |         | Conservative leader      |         |         |
| Cognitive Competence | -       | ns                       | ns      | -       |
| Leadership           | -       | -0.07**                  | ns      | -       |
| Trustworthiness      | -       | ns                       | ns      | -       |
| Reliability          | -       | -0.14**                  | -0.15** | -       |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>  |         | .79                      | .75     |         |
| N                    |         | 685                      | 867     |         |

\*\* :  $\alpha \leq 0.01$ ; \* :  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  (two tailed); ns: not significant.

Only those respondents are included in the analysis who voted for either the presidential candidate of the Democratic party or for the Republican candidate (USA), for the Labor Party or for the Liberal Party (Australia), for the Social Democratic Party or the Conservative Party (Sweden). For question wordings, operationalizations, and estimation procedures see the appendix.

Data: See Table 1.

Finally, the third part of Table 3 shows the effects of individual leader traits on the two party vote for *Sweden*. Perhaps contrary to what one might assume for the Swedish political system where the political parties traditionally have had a strong position, we find remarkable effects for individual trait dimensions of leader evaluation on the vote choice even if it is controlled for party identification. As could be expected from the analyses of global evaluation, a leader's "reliability" plays a particularly important role as well for the Swedish party vote. This holds especially in 1988, only two years after the assassination of Olof Palme. In that year, "reliability" is the sole trait of the Social Democratic candidate Ingvar Carlsson which is significantly related to the party vote. But, again, it is not simply the exceptional situation in the aftermath of the assassination. In each election year, amid all trait dimensions "reliability" has by far the greatest effect on the voting decision.

When comparing our findings for vote choice as a dependent variable between the United States, Australia, and Sweden it should be noticed that these results are conditional on how it is controlled for further determinants of the vote such as long-term predispositions. Obviously, party identification, the control variable we have used in our multivariate analyses, is only one competing explanatory variable beside leader traits. It cannot be excluded that we would have come to other patterns of trait effects if we had included specific determinants for each country, for instance ideological orientations in Sweden or race in the United States. And we could have devised alternative operationalizations of citizens' long-term party attachment in addition. We thus can not and do not claim to have documented the 'true' effects of leader traits on the vote in Table 3. To that extent, we should focus in our interpretations not on the absolute levels of the trait effects but rather on the possibly diverging patterns between the political systems.

To sum up, *performance related leader traits such as leadership qualities, trustworthiness, reliability, and empathy clearly have a discernible impact on the voting decision in Western democracies*. No matter whether the presidential system of the United States or parliamentary systems like Australia or Sweden are under scrutiny, in each election and for each candidate we find significant effects for political leader traits on the vote in our multivariate analyses. In so far, these findings give some support to the notion that voters utilize 'rational' criteria of leader evaluation when casting their ballot. Having said this, there are also differential patterns of leader effects in the three nations we have studied. These differential patterns seem in part to be due to the system type as the strong effects for leadership qualities in the United States indicate. Leader effects also vary strongly over time, however. Whether and to what degree individual traits become salient thus clearly depends on the specific historical context. The effect of Bill Clinton's perceived "trustworthiness" or the role of "reliability" in Sweden are striking illustrations of a varying salience according to historical context.

#### POLITICAL VERSUS NON-POLITICAL LEADER TRAITS

Up to this point of our analyses we have focussed solely on leader traits which are without exception politically relevant. Cognitive competence, leadership qualities, trustworthiness, reliability, or empathy all are more or less directly related to a voter's political utility income. In the last step of our empirical analyses we will attempt to shed some light on the question of whether truly non-political leader traits have attained some relevance for the voting decision as is often claimed by advocates of a personalization of politics. Since in past research it has not been common to operationalize non-political traits in election studies, we will confine our analysis to the German national election in 1998 (see Klein/Ohr 2000, 2001). In the 1998 German election study three different indicators have been asked which are supposed to measure different facets of leadership or managerial qualities. A leader's ability to "get his own way", "to balance diverging interests", or "to give politics a clear course" all point to the leadership dimension. The problem solving capability of the two chancellor candidates is covered with two indicators which should measure a candidate's skill with respect to the economy. A candidate's "trustworthiness" is measured straightforwardly by means of directly naming this attribute to the respondents. Fairly similar to the US measure it has also been

asked to what degree a candidate “cares” about his fellow citizens in order to tap the “empathy” dimension.

In comparing both chancellor candidates, the differences with respect to leadership qualities are significant but not that large (see Table 4, first part). By contrast, as far as the competence in the economic area is concerned, the incumbent Helmut Kohl receives markedly worse evaluations than this contender Gerhard Schroeder.

A particular feature of the German part of the CSES study are three measures which tap political style (“convincing appearance”) as well as strictly personal, non-political attributes such as a candidate’s family life or his physical attractiveness. With the German data it is possible therefore to explicitly test the relative weight of political versus non-political leader traits for a parliamentary democracy. Table 4 reveals clear differences between the two chancellor candidates with respect to “physical attractiveness” and “family life”. The family life of Gerhard Schroeder who divorced for the third time is rated more negatively than that of Kohl while Schroeder is seen as the more attractive candidate.

The second part of Table 4 displays the relationships between the individual leader traits and the global evaluation for both chancellor candidates. Overall, the relationship between candidate traits and the overall image is weaker than it proved to be in the United States, Australia, or in Sweden. This difference might indicate that leader images in the German public are not quite as firmly structured or as coherently organized as in the United States, Australia, or in Sweden. However, since German chancellor candidates are well-known in the public for several years, it seems more plausible, then, that some of the German indicators do not measure the theoretical constructs as well as this is the case for the three other systems.

For both chancellor candidates perceived competence to solve the problems of the German economy has a considerable impact on the overall image. Even more important for both candidates is their “trustworthiness”. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, indicators of personal, largely non-political traits are revealed as being fairly important in the multivariate analysis of the German data. Both candidates are valued the more positive in global terms the more they are perceived as physically attractive. For Gerhard Schroeder, in addition, there is a strong effect of his family life on his overall judgement, a trait which is certainly not directly performance related. Since Schroeder divorced for the third time and married again not long before the national election in 1998, here again a saliency effect is likely to be at work which may be ascribed to an intensive media coverage.<sup>13</sup>

Fairly similar to the patterns for the USA, Australia, and Sweden, the picture for Germany does not change much if actual vote choice is taken as the frame of reference instead of global image evaluation. The third part of Table 4 reveals for the German data that the measures for competence and trustworthiness largely keep their importance. For both German chancellor candidates trustworthiness as well as their competence with respect to the economy are significantly related not only to the overall image but also to the voting decision. However, traits which belong to the non-political criteria lose most of their relevance. Only the public evaluation of SPD candidate Schroeder’s family life is still significantly related to party

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<sup>13</sup> The small negative effect of the family trait for Helmut Kohl should not be interpreted substantively. As the first part of Table 4 reveals, Kohl’s family life has been evaluated as extremely positive and reaches a mean evaluation of 0.92 where 1.00 is the theoretical upper limit. This particular trait thus has almost no variance which makes it difficult to obtain a reliable estimate.

choice thus giving at least weak support to the notion of specific personalization in German electoral behaviour (Klein/Ohr 2000, 2001). It can be only be speculated how much weight such non-political traits would have reached in the United States, in Australia, or in Sweden. For the United States one would expect that strictly personal, non-political attributes are important at least to some degree if the findings of Miller et al. (1986) or Keeter (1987) can be transferred to recent presidential elections.

TABLE 4 *Politically Relevant versus Non-political Leader Traits*

Evaluation of German Political Leaders' Traits, 1998 (arithmetic means, scaled from 0 to 1)

|                            | Kohl<br>(CDU/CSU) | Schroeder<br>(SPD) | Diff.   |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Managerial Qualities       | 0.68              | 0.71               | -0.03** |
| Competence for the Economy | 0.45              | 0.65               | -0.20** |
| Trustworthiness            | 0.64              | 0.63               | 0.01    |
| Empathy                    | 0.57              | 0.65               | -0.08** |
| Convincing Appearance      | 0.69              | 0.78               | -0.09** |
| Family Life                | 0.92              | 0.55               | 0.37**  |
| Physical Attractiveness    | 0.31              | 0.61               | -0.30** |
| $n_{\max}/n_{\min}$        | 1176/1090         | 1160/1069          |         |

Global Evaluations and German Leader Traits, 1998 (OLS Regression, Beta-coeff.)

|                            | Kohl<br>(CDU/CSU) | Schroeder<br>(SPD) |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Managerial Qualities       | 0.07*             | ns                 |
| Competence for the Economy | 0.18**            | 0.26**             |
| Trustworthiness            | 0.29**            | 0.30**             |
| Empathy                    | 0.16**            | ns                 |
| Convincing Appearance      | 0.07*             | ns                 |
| Family Life                | -0.06*            | 0.14**             |
| Physical Attractiveness    | 0.12**            | 0.11**             |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>        | .45               | .37                |
| N                          | 985               | 957                |

Effects of German Political Leaders' Traits on the Vote, 1998  
Controlling for Party Identification (OLS Regression, Beta-coeff.)

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|                            | Schroeder (SPD) |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Managerial Qualities       | ns              |
| Competence for the Economy | 0.19**          |
| Trustworthiness            | 0.11**          |
| Empathy                    | ns              |
| Convincing Appearance      | ns              |
| Family Life                | 0.06*           |
| Physical Attractiveness    | ns              |
|                            | Kohl (CDU/CSU)  |
| Managerial Qualities       | ns              |
| Competence for the Economy | -0.15**         |
| Trustworthiness            | -0.17**         |
| Empathy                    | ns              |
| Convincing Appearance      | ns              |
| Family Life                | ns              |
| Physical Attractiveness    | ns              |
| Adj. R <sup>2</sup>        | .54             |
| N                          | 970             |

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\*\* $\alpha \leq 0.01$ ; \* $\alpha \leq 0.05$  (two tailed); ns: not significant.

Only those respondents are included in the analysis who voted for either the Social Democratic Party (SPD) or for the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU). For question wordings, operationalizations, and estimation procedures see the appendix.

Data: German National Post Election Study 1998 (CSES, ZA-No. 3073).

## CONCLUSION

In public discussions of the personalization of politics and voting behaviour it is often feared that citizens increasingly base their political judgements and their eventual voting decision on superficial, media-built images of political leaders. In this perspective, the democratic mechanism to choose the most capable and the most responsible leaders is believed to have eroded during the last decades.

The empirical analyses we have presented in this chapter do not lend much support to this rather pessimistic scenario. With the United States, Australia, and Sweden we have analyzed three clearly distinct types of Western democracy – a presidential system on the one hand and two different types of parliamentary systems on the other hand which both have their specific traditions and institutional rules. And for each of these three democratic systems and each election under scrutiny we have found such leader traits as leadership capabilities, trustworthiness, reliability, and empathy to be closely related to the overall image of political leaders as well as to the eventual voting decision. Therefore, our baseline hypothesis concerning the role of leader traits in different political systems is, all in all, confirmed: *Politically relevant and performance related leader traits are important criteria for voters' political judgements and decisions, and this importance is fairly similar across the political*

*systems we have analyzed.* This does not exclude, though, that some differences do exist between the systems as far as the role of individual leader traits is concerned. *Which* of the political and performance related leader traits prove to be most important for a candidate's overall image or for the vote varies between the systems but also over time and according to the specific context of an election.

It is in line with our baseline hypothesis and our comparative findings that in the German context non-political leader traits such as physical attractiveness exert a rather modest impact on leaders' evaluations and the vote when contrasted to the influence of politically relevant leader traits.

In sum, our findings are able to shed some light on the *content* of a possible personalization of voting behaviour. While it is still controversially discussed of whether leader evaluations have in fact become more important for the vote over time, our analyses clearly corroborate the notion that leader evaluations and their effect on the vote in the electorate are firmly based on politically 'rational' considerations – be it in a presidential or in a parliamentary system.

## APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING, CODING, ESTIMATION

### Leader Traits

#### *USA:*

Traits: Intelligent, knowledgeable, provides strong leadership, inspiring, moral, honest, compassionate, really cares about people like you.

“I am going to read a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. For each, tell me whether the word or phrase describes the candidate I name. Think about Al Gore. In your opinion, does the phrase “he [is] ...” describe Al Gore extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all” (Wording in 2000, ICPSR No. 3131; wordings in the other election studies are virtually identical).

Coding: from “0” (not well at all) to “1” (extremely well).

#### *Australia:*

Traits: Intelligent, knowledgeable, provides strong leadership, inspiring, moral, honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, sensible, compassionate.

“Here is a list of words and phrases people use to describe party leaders. Thinking first about John Howard, in your opinion how well does each of these describe him – extremely well, quite well, not too well or not well at all?” (Wording in 2001, SSDA Study No. 1048; wordings in the other election studies are virtually identical).

Coding: from “0” (not well at all) to “1” (extremely well).

#### *Sweden:*

Traits: knowledgeable, inspiring, reliable, knows the thoughts and opinions of ordinary people (SNES); knowledgeable, strong leader, inspiring, honest, reliable (SOM).

SNES: “We will continue with party leaders. I will now read a few words and expressions which can be used to describe different attributes of the party leaders. I would like you to tell how appropriate you think each of them is when you think of [party leaders]. Thinking about [party leader]..., how appropriate do you consider the following statement?”

Coding: from “0” (very inappropriate) to “1” (very appropriate).

SOM: “Below, you find a number of expressions that can be used to describe the party leaders’ different traits. How appropriate do you think they are when you think of [leaders]?”

Four alternatives: “very appropriate”, “rather appropriate”, “not very appropriate”, “not appropriate at all”.

Coding: from “0” (not appropriate at all) to “1” (very appropriate).

#### *Germany:*

Traits: gets his own way, balances diverging interests, gives politics a clear course, good concept to boost economy, good concept to fight unemployment, trustworthy, cares for the well-being of his fellow citizens, convincing appearance, has his private life under control, attractive.

“At the last national election Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schroeder were the two chancellor candidates. I am going to read you some attributes. Please tell me by using a scale from 1 to 5 how strongly these attributes apply to Helmut Kohl or Gerhard Schroeder. A value of 1 indicates that an attribute does not apply at all to the politician, 5 indicates, that an attribute would apply completely to the politician. You can grade your opinion by choosing the values in between”.

Coding: from “0” (does not apply at all) to “1” (applies completely).

#### *Evaluative Dimensions*

The dimension variables have been built as an additive index (arithmetic mean) of the individual trait variables.

#### *USA:*

Cognitive Competence: intelligent, knowledgeable (1996: only knowledgeable)

Leadership: leadership, inspiring (2000: only leadership)

Trustworthiness: moral, honest (2000: only moral)

Empathy: compassionate, cares (1996, 2000: only cares)

#### *Australia:*

Cognitive Competence: intelligent, knowledgeable

Leadership: leadership, inspiring

Trustworthiness: moral, honest (1993: only moral; 2001: honest, trustworthy)

Reliability: reliable, dependable  
Empathy: sensible, compassionate

*Sweden:*

Cognitive Competence: knowledgeable  
Leadership: inspiring (SOM data 1991 and 1994: strong leader, inspiring)  
Trustworthiness: honest (SOM data 1991 and 1994)  
Reliability: reliable  
Empathy: knows the thoughts and opinions of ordinary people

*Germany:*

Managerial Qualities: gets his own way, balances diverging interests, gives politics a clear course  
Competence for the Economy: good concept to boost economy, good concept to fight unemployment  
Trustworthiness: trustworthy  
Empathy: cares  
Convincing Appearance: convincing appearance  
Family Life: private life under control  
Physical Attractiveness: attractive

## Global Leader Evaluation

*USA:*

“I’d like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I’ll read the name of a person and I’d like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. The feeling thermometer can rate people from 0 to 100 degrees. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable toward the person. Rating the person at the midpoint, the 50 degree mark, means you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don’t recognize, you don’t need to rate that person. Just tell me and we move on to the next one” (Wording in 2000, ICPSR No. 3131; wordings in the other election studies are virtually identical).  
Coding: from “0” to “1”.

*Australia:*

“Again using a scale from 0 to 10, please show how much you like or dislike the party leaders. Again, if you don’t know much about them, you should give them a rating of 5. How do you feel about Kim Beazley?”. (Wording in 2001, SSSA Study No. 1048; 1993: “... please show how favourable or unfavourable you feel about the party leaders”).  
Coding: from “0” (strongly dislike) to “1” (strongly like).

*Sweden:*

SNES (face-to-face interview with showcard): “On this card there is a kind of scale. I would like you to use it in order to state how much you like or dislike the different parties. If you like a party, you use the “plus” figures. The better you like a party, the higher the figure. For parties you dislike, use the “minus” figures. The more you dislike a party, the higher the minus figure. The zero point on the scale indicates that you neither like nor dislike a party. Where would you place [party]? Using the same scale for the party leaders, where would you place [party leaders]?”.  
SOM (mail questionnaire): “This question is about how one in general likes or dislikes the political parties. Where would you place the different parties on the following scale? [parties]. And if you use the same scale for the party leaders, where would you place [party leaders]?”.  
The dislike-like scales run from -5 (dislike strongly), over 0 (neither like nor dislike) to +5 (like strongly) in both the SNES and SOM studies.  
Coding: from “0” (dislike strongly) to “1” (like strongly).

*Germany:*

“Please tell, how much you like or don’t like some of the German politicians. Beginning with Helmut Kohl, where would you categorize him if 1 means that you don’t like him at all and 11 means that you like him very much?”.  
Coding: from “0” (don’t like him at all) to “1” (like him very much).

## Vote Choice and Party Identification

*Vote choice* has been operationalized as the vote for the two main presidential candidates (USA) or the main parties (Australia, Sweden, Germany). Voting for the presidential candidate of the Democratic party (Australia: for the Labor Party, Sweden: for the Social Democratic party, Germany: for the Social Democratic party) has been coded as “1”, casting the ballot for the candidate of the Republican party (Australia: for the Liberal Party, Sweden: for the Conservative party, Germany: for the CDU/CSU) as “0”. All other respondents have been excluded. *Party identification* has been constructed with two dummy variables. Volunteering a party identification for the Republican party has been coded with “1” on the Republican dummy variable, respondents identifying with the Democratic party (or another party) or respondents without a party attachment (“independents”) or respondents who did not volunteer an explicit party attachment (including DK) have been coded with “0”. Explicit refusals have been excluded from the analysis. The second dummy variable for Democratic party attachment has been built accordingly. The same logic has been applied when coding the dummy variables for party identification for Australia, Sweden, and Germany.

## Estimation procedure for OLS regressions

In estimating the regression equations for Tables 2, 3, and 4 we have used one common procedure. In a first step, regression equations have been estimated with all potential predictor variables included, for instance with all trait variables available in an election year. In a second step, the equations have been reestimated by including only those predictor variables which proved to be significant ( $\alpha \leq 0.05$ ; two tailed test) in the first step. If predictor variables were still not significant in the second step these variables have been excluded and the equation has once more been reestimated.

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