



# A Return to Civic and Political Engagement Prompted by Personalized Political Leadership?

GIANPIETRO MAZZOLENI

**Keywords** political leadership, personalization, political engagement, charismatic leadership, symbolic politics

Average news consumers prefer to read about other people, not about abstract groups or remote bureaucracies and government agencies. *To cater to these preferences, news stories, especially those that appear on television, are routinely framed from the point of view of central actors.* News consumers see an individual in action and are given information about his or her feelings and reactions. Personal motives and mistakes are analyzed. Inevitably, stories about groups are transformed into stories about group leaders. (Davis, 1990, p. 169, emphasis added)

From the standpoint of news consumers it has long been known that, as newsmakers, persons are preferred over institutions. The news media discovered this truth as soon as they were established and faced the need to attract readers. Accordingly, the media have long depicted reality and politics in “personalized” terms. The process of mediatization of the political arena (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) has increased dramatically the extent of personalization in all of the political domains, from government to party politics, to political communication, and to the motivations of the electorate.

The success of personalization reflects not only the power of mass media to shape political cultures in different national and institutional contexts but also, and especially, the need of both the political institutions and the citizens to refer to a physical symbol of political power. This seems to be a pattern that dates back to ancient history. The Pharaohs, Alexander the Great, the Roman Emperors, the Popes, the Kings, Napoleon, Lenin, Hitler, all have represented the embodiment of their personal achievements and of the institutions they commanded.

It is also true that ideologies are the engines of human history and of political action. They are powerful means of simplifying reality and sources of motivations that prompt people to take sides and participate in the struggle for power or simply to be concerned for and contribute to the welfare of their communities.

Gianpietro Mazzoleni is Associate Professor of Sociology of Mass Communication at the Università di Genova.

Address correspondence to Gianpietro Mazzoleni, DiSA-Dipto. di Scienze Antropologiche, Università di Genova, Via Balbi 4, I-162126 Genova, Italy. E-mail: gianmaz@tin.it

The decline of the ideologies that marked most of the political history of the 20th century and the crisis of identity of liberalism itself have produced a state of diffuse “secularization” that mingles with other related phenomena—such as disaffection, repulsion, disengagement from old forms of political action, refusal to vote, and so on—to produce a situation that has been described as an escape into individualism. This state has been noted especially among the younger generations.

I conjecture that in many contemporary democracies this demand for “personalized leadership” is one of the major factors explaining citizens’ political motivations and participation in the political arena.

Of course, the concept of political participation itself needs to be rethought. Its current meaning is mostly linked to the electoral process, to the struggle for power and leadership in national or local contests. Most of the literature in political science concerning participation focuses on the act of voting by citizens, who thereby participate in the political system by casting their ballots in favor of candidates for office. There is merit to scholarship that extends the scope of participation to areas of political involvement that go beyond elections. Nevertheless, my observation of typical European political and cultural contexts suggests the desirability of continuing to focus in this article upon the traditional processes of political participation manifest in elections.

This is not to deny that civic engagement, community-centered politics, and volunteerism are themselves forms of political participation. According to the “old” political thinking, these are patterns of “prepolitical” action, similar to the early charismatic stages of political movements, which eventually take on more institutionalized forms such as those of political parties.

## **The Concept of Personalized Leadership**

When a person becomes a leader, a player in the political process, the leader extends the character (or charisma) of his or her personality to the entire process, setting the leader against the collective subjects such as the parties and any collegial form of authority (Cavalli, 1992). Democracy governed by a leader is a form that reflects the modernization processes, in particular that of mass communication. The disappearance of traditional partisan cleavages that long characterized political action in many Western democracies has contributed to placing political leadership at the forefront of the political stage.

However, personalized leadership is also a product of institutional factors, as in the cases of the United States and France, just to mention two major Western presidential systems. Especially in the last decade, we can observe in many democracies, old and new, several signals of a drift toward heightening the importance of personalized leadership. Presidentialism—that is, the possibility for citizens to choose the president or the prime minister by direct vote—is a recurrent issue in the debate over institutional reforms in countries where proportional and indirect voting is the existing (and often criticized) system. It is emblematic that the countries of the former Soviet empire have swiftly adopted presidential systems.

The presidential trend couples with the tendency of political parties to dilute or lose their traditional commitments to distinctive and defining ideologies and, instead, to assume a more variable, changing identity mostly achieved through personal appeal and political cunning of their leaders. The rise of single issue movements and the bursting of flash parties are very often linked to prominent or controversial personal leadership. These, too, are examples of the trend toward the personalization of the political arena.

In Italy, Berlusconi, a politician with strong personal appeal (and wealth), founded overnight a “flash party” (then transformed into a stable political force), won a general election, and became prime minister. In the United Kingdom, the traditional highly personalized premiership assumed new visibility with the victory of Tony Blair, a leader keen to implement shrewd communication tools. In Austria, Joerg Haider, a regionally based populist leader, nearly succeeded after only a few years in getting hold of the federal government.

All of these leaders have shown the capacity to command strong popular support, to gather broad consent, to mobilize crowds on controversial issues, and to induce hundreds of thousands of voters to resist the growing temptation to abandon political engagement and to express their emotional involvement (pro or against) by turning out at the polls to cast their vote.

### **Participation in Symbolic Politics?**

How the personal appeal of leaders prompts citizens to take part in the political game is open to discussion and needs to be investigated on a comparative level. One approach is to consider this kind of political participation as “expressive” rather than “instrumental” participation. Both kinds of participation have been taken into account by political scientists in explaining citizens’ motivations, with instrumental participation being the stronger motivation in local, grassroots politics and expressive participation being more connected to the ritual, symbolic, ideal, ideological, and communicative dimensions of political action. The appeal of personalized political leadership may well induce citizens to participate in campaigns and elections for reasons and motivations that have to do with the expressive sphere of political choice.

A venerable example is the massive vote of French voters in the late 1950s for Gen. Charles de Gaulle, independently of their partisan beliefs and traditions, because they saw in his person (a quite strong personality indeed) the symbol of the resurrection of the nation struck by the Algerian war. A more recent example is Berlusconi’s personal success in the 1999 European election. In spite of the fact that 30% of voters did not go to the polls, he received a record 6 million personal votes, managing to keep turnout from falling to the lowest levels ever. The European election was anything but central to Italian voters’ interests; Berlusconi transformed the election into a national referendum on his personal leadership.

The success of personalized leadership also is demonstrated in the rise of turnout when voters are called to vote directly for a city mayor. In addition to being associated with concrete local issues, the figure of the first citizen of the community is clearly a personalized one, the representation of the community, someone with whom it is easy to identify.

Several examples from other political contexts also illustrate the validity of the expressive pattern in political participation. John Zaller’s (1998) argument that the “politics of substance,” peace, prosperity, and moderation were the real reasons for Clinton’s presidential support during the Lewinsky crisis seems, at first glance, to contradict the assumptions made here about the force of expressive, symbolic politics. Apart from the obvious differences between the U.S. and European political contexts and cultures, I believe that the expressive and instrumental motivations underlying citizens’ decisions to perform political acts such as going to the polls are not mutually exclusive; they can well coexist and shape political participation.

We do not yet know enough about the weight of expressive and instrumental fac-

tors in prompting people to participate. I suspect that the “politics of substance” may be a sufficient motivation for presidential support in the opinion polls but an insufficient factor to motivate people to leave their homes and go to the voting sites. This may be especially true in contexts (such as many European ones) where people increasingly distrust governments, political forces (including trade unions), and politicians. In contrast, appeals to symbolic politics, to political emotions and the deeper needs of personal and subcultural identification (as in Haider’s case)—particularly when boosted by media hype and/or staged through marketing and show-biz techniques—may well be a sufficient force to drive substantial sectors of lukewarm electors to cast a ballot in favor of political players. This is especially true in the case of politicians who are skilled at using the tools of communication and have insight into voters’ demands and feelings, and at a time such as the present when the declining influence of party politics and traditional ideologies has left a void in voters’ allegiances. In effect, voters have orphaned and look for new political “parents.” In modern (or, if you prefer, post-modern) times, the successful leaders—strong personalities, mediagenic characters, communication wizards—seem to provide the answer to the many electorates’ demand for leadership.

These are just a few thoughts on the importance of personalized leadership in political participation through voting, which is one form of civic engagement, perhaps the only one at certain political and cultural latitudes. Of course, my hypothesis could be best verified or invalidated through comprehensive cross-national investigation, and I would welcome the opportunity to launch such an effort.

## References

- Cavalli, L. (1992). *Governo del leader e regime dei partiti* [Government of the leader and party regime]. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Davis, D. K. (1990). News and politics. In D. L. Swanson & D. Nimmo (Eds.), *New directions in political communication* (pp. 147–184). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Mazzoleni, G., & Schulz, W. (1999). “Mediatization” of politics: A challenge for democracy? *Political Communication*, 16, 247–262.
- Zaller, J. (1998). Monica Lewinsky’s contribution to political science. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 31, 182–189.