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Political Leaders in Westminster Systems*

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There is little doubt that political leaders have become more politically important over the past half century, although the extent which their electoral influence may have increased remains a matter of debate. This fundamental change in the role of political leaders has been especially pronounced in parliamentary systems based on the Westminster model. In parliamentary systems, the promotion of leader images during national election campaigns is now as prominent—perhaps even more prominent—than party symbols, leading some to argue that the Westminster system is converging with its presidential counterpart (Mughan, 2000). In parallel with this change, governments and sometimes even oppositions are routinely labeled after the leader by the media and by the public, rather than after the party they lead (McAllister, 1996).

The defining moment in this change is often traced to Margaret Thatcher's accession to office in Britain as the first 'conviction politician' of the postwar years. However, it is often forgotten that Pierre Trudeau's election as Canadian prime minister in 1968 led to the 'Trudeaumania' phenomenon which is perhaps the earliest manifestation of a prime minister's popularity surpassing that of his or her party. Since the 1990s, it has become more commonplace for governments or parties to be named after their leader. In Germany, the popularity of Helmut Kohl and more recently Gerhard Schroder has at various times easily eclipsed the parties they lead, as has the popularity of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Tony Blair in Britain.

The changing role of prime ministers has not only occurred in terms of their public profile within the electorate. In the context of their capacity to influence policy, postwar prime ministers in Westminster systems have accumulated considerably greater power and authority when compared to their prewar counterparts (King, 1994; Rhodes, 1995). In many Westminster systems, it is often argued that cabinet government based on collective responsibility has been undermined, in part by the increased complexity of modern decision-making, but also by a conscious effort to centralize prime ministerial authority. Moreover, in majoritarian systems such as that of Australia and Britain, the prime minister now exercises unprecedented power in shaping ministerial careers, a crucial tool in ensuring compliance and centralizing authority.

The *prima facie* evidence suggests, then, that prime ministers and opposition leaders have replaced many of the roles historically played by political parties in ensuring the efficient operation of the parliamentary system. This chapter examines the evidence to support this observation in Australia, Britain and Canada, focusing especially on the presidentialization hypothesis. However, a major task of the chapter is also to outline some of the factors which have led to a greater focus on prime ministers, and in this, these are divided between exogenous factors, such as the changing role of television, and institutional changes, such as the increasing complexity of public policy.

Australia, Britain and Canada are particularly appropriate case studies. Although all three operate political systems which have a common origin in the Westminster model, they vary considerably in how that model has evolved to cope with their differing circumstances. Both Australia and Canada adopted federal systems, although there the similarity ends. In Australia, the power of the majority party is tempered by the influence of the upper house, the Senate. Originally conceived of as the 'state's house' — a house of review in which the states' aims would balance those of the parties — in recent years the control of the Senate by the opposition parties has effectively meant that the government must either drop or radically alter its more controversial legislation if it wishes to see it implemented (Sharman, 1999).[1]

In neither Britain nor Canada is their such an institutional impediment to majority rule. In Britain the governing party can count on implementing its legislative program. The House of Lords represents no major impediment to the government putting its policies into law, and in the rare occasions when its lower house majority has been so small as to place its legislative program in jeopardy, an election has been called.[2] In Canada the federal government is effectively independent of the provinces in the areas in which it has jurisdiction; when negotiation takes place, it is generally in the areas of provincial jurisdiction when the provinces are seeking federal financial support. In both Australia and Canada, then, prime ministerial authority must take account of federalism in realizing their policy goals, and in the former, this means the constraint placed on such authority by the upper house.

1 Parliamentary Systems and Political Leaders

Institutional arrangements influence many aspects of the operation and functioning of political systems, but what has been less well-recognized is the

influence that institutional arrangements have on the style and content of political leadership. Some institutional structures are clearly more conducive to the leaders gaining greater prominence than others. The major distinction in executive leadership is, of course, between their presidential and parliamentary forms, or what Lijphart (1994) characterizes as majoritarian versus consensus democracy. Both systems have specific consequences for the ways in which their respective political leaders operate, and for their profile and image with the electorate. There are also major variations between parliamentary systems which impact on political leaders, five of which are discussed below.

No conflict between the legislature and the executive. Perhaps the most distinctive difference between parliamentary and presidential systems is while the executive is elected by and responsible to the electorate in a presidential system, in a parliamentary system the executive is formed from, and depends for its continuing survival upon, the legislature.[3] In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the executive depends for its survival on the confidence of the legislature. Indeed, in most cases the prime minister is selected by the legislature, although in practice this will normally be the leader of the majority party or, in coalition governments, the leader of the party with the most seats. The executive can therefore be removed at any time by the legislature, usually after a vote of no confidence.

In practice, this means that a prime minister must make it a priority to retain the confidence of his or her party colleagues and to refine carefully his or her performance in office, since the date when the government will be judged by the electorate at the polls is less certain. The prime minister, therefore, is under constant threat of having her position undermined, with particular consequences for the way in which she exercises authority. The prime minister has to exercise strong leadership over the parliamentary party, to ensure discipline and loyalty. One way to maintain discipline is through the party whips, who secure the attendance of members for votes; another is by performing well during prime minister's question time (or question period in Canada).

Majoritarian. A second characteristic of parliamentary systems, notably those based on the Westminster model, is that they usually have majoritarian arrangements (Lijphart, 1994), although a significant number of European democracies maintain coalition forms of government (Laver and Schofield, 1990). Majoritarian arrangements lead most directly to providing the prime

minister with an appropriate public forum from which to gain prominence, while the high turnover in coalition-based systems inevitably reduces the power of the leader and their public profile. The extreme case of the latter is Italy, where the institutional structures are explicitly designed to reduce the power of the leader through high rates of government turnover. Moreover, in coalition governments, the leader may have difficulty in securing the loyalty of a diverse range of parties, as has been the case in Israel (Hazan, 1997).

Responsible government. The notion of responsible government lies at the heart of the Westminster model of government. Collectively, responsible government means that ministers must take responsibility for the performance of the government; individually, ministers must answer for the conduct of the departments they represent in parliament. While responsible government also operates in the presidential model, this takes place through individual responsibility, so that one person forms the executive for a fixed period of time; even members of the president's own party may vote against whatever measures he or she proposes, without undermining the day-to-day operation of the system or risking a split within the incumbent party (Lijphart, 1994).

The notion of responsible government has undergone considerable change in the Westminster democracies during the course of the past century. Collective cabinet responsibility has often been weakened and dissent tolerated on specific issues, such as entry into the European Union in Britain, or separatism in Canada. Individual responsibility has now been expanded in most Westminster systems to include senior public servants as well as ministers, as public policy has become more complex and direct responsibility for policies more diffuse (Woodhouse, 1994).

The patterns of ministerial resignations since 1945 in Australia, Britain and Canada shed some light on the operation of responsible government. The results in Figure 1 suggest that, if anything, ministers are becoming more prone to resign, although many of these resignations involve some form of personal impropriety, rather than ministerial incompetence or maladministration. What the patterns do show is the predominant influence of the prime minister in the operation of responsible government. In Britain, for example, both Harold Wilson during his first ministry (between 1964 and 1970) and John Major (between 1990 and 1997) were less minded to tolerate impropriety than other prime ministers, and therefore did not protect their ministers if they became the subject of allegations. Similarly, the large number of resignations during the

Whitlam ministry (1972 to 1975) in Australia reflects the character of the prime minister and his relationship with his ministers. And in Canada, the large number of resignations during the Mulroney ministry was a consequence of the government's aggregative privatization policies and the often disorderly way in which they were pursued.

The role of the prime minister is therefore central in how responsible government operates; he or she may choose to include or exclude particular actions under the doctrine, thereby determining the minister's fate. The fact that there is general agreement about the weakening of the doctrine in recent years, tends to support the argument that prime ministerial power has increased, and that it is the prime minister, rather than the parliament, which determines how the doctrine is implemented (Kam, 2000). The second factor is the role of the mass media; as Figure 1 shows, ministerial resignations have increased considerably since 1945, despite the apparent weakening of the doctrine; this 'is certainly a function of closer press scrutiny of government ministers as people, if not a closer scrutiny of their policies' (Dowding and Kang, 1998: 425).[4]

Figure 1: Ministerial Resignations Since 1945
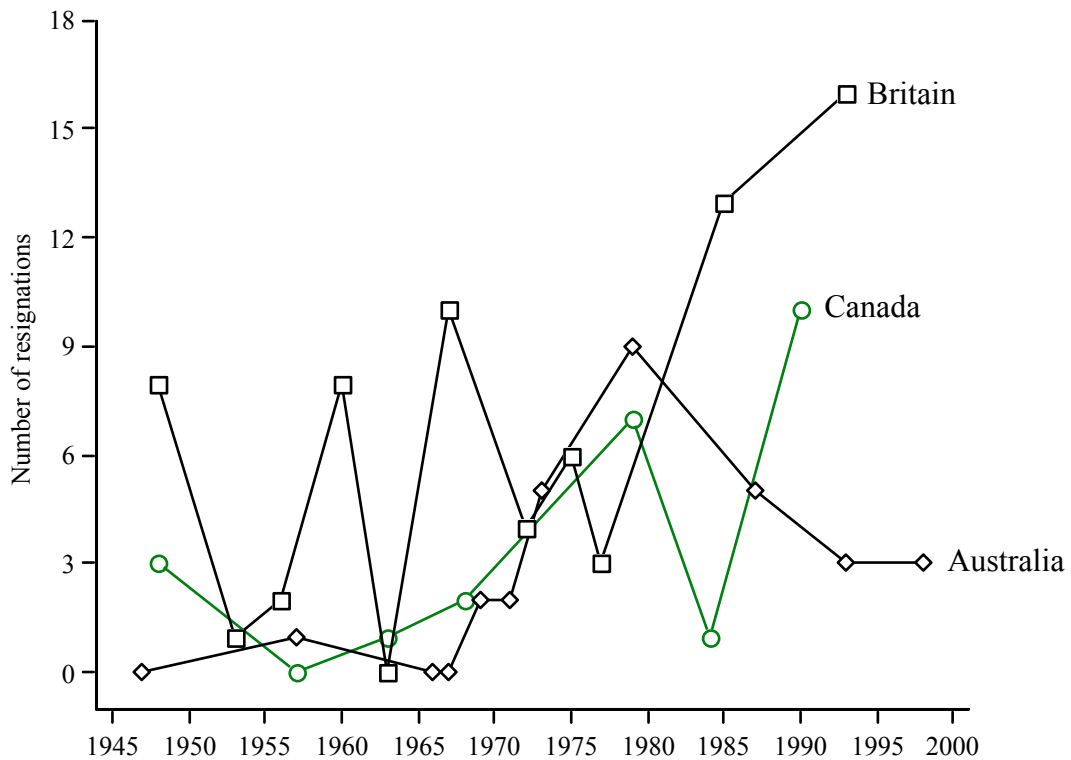
Note   Only resignations which involved some form of impropriety or political conflict are included.

Party discipline. Studies of party cohesion generally assume that political parties in parliamentary democracies are more cohesive and programmatic than their counterparts in presidential systems (Diermeier and Feddersen, 1998). Cohesion is frequently measured by parliamentary dissent, in the form of crossing the floor or roll-call voting. In Britain, for example, crossing the floor of the House of Commons is relatively common (Norton, 2000). By contrast, in Australia parliamentary dissent is almost unknown, and in the rare occasions on which it occurs results in a defection to another party, or de-selection at the next election. Australian backbench parliamentarians display their opposition to the party's program in the party room, though invariably these occasions are widely reported in the media.

Party cohesion and discipline is central to the programmatic function of parliamentary parties—the implementation of a legislative program which forms the basis of voters' evaluations of the government performance, and their prospects for re-election. Cox and McCubbins (1993) argue that legislators establish structures and procedures to ensure that this occurs with the minimum of dissent or difficulty. Prime ministers allocate rewards and punishments in order to ensure the passage of the legislative program. The increasing range and complexity of a government's legislative program places even greater importance on the ability of the prime minister to deal with dissent. Much of this has been shown to be a consequence of the leader: strong leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher, have witnessed less dissent within their own party despite their strong majorities, compared to leaders such as Edward Heath, who experienced considerable dissent. Another factor ensuring compliance is the increasing party-related backgrounds of legislators, making them more dependent on the prime minister for career advancement (Riddell, 1993).

Maximum terms for the government and the legislature. In contrast to presidential systems, parliamentary systems have maximum periods between elections, with the timing of the election usually residing at the discretion of the prime minister. In most cases, the prime minister may call an election if the government loses a vote of confidence in the legislature, or if the parliamentary term is coming to an end and the prime minister considers the time propitious to dissolve parliament. The result is that the governing party must exercise a strong degree of discipline over their members in order to ensure that they

retain office (and conversely, the opposition party must do the same, in order to be seen as a credible alternative). The prime minister, therefore, has a major influence in being able to determine the date of the election, and the prerogative of dissolution is often viewed as a major threat that can be used against dissident members.

Various observers have interpreted the power to recommend a dissolution as a major means of ensuring discipline within the prime minister's own party (Huber, 1996). Although this power is often regarded as a bluff—a divided government would have more to lose as a result of an election than the opposition—it is also the case that in Australia, Britain and Canada no postwar government has lost a no confidence motion due to dissent by its own members. The power of dissolution is therefore an important threat which can be used to quell dissent among members of the governing party, who may be seeking to change the government's legislative program. Nevertheless, dissent can only be taken so far, since at the end of the day, the dissenters are dependent on the party for re-election and for career advancement (Carey and Shugart, 1995).

The length of the parliamentary term, of course, has implications for the power of the prime minister. A study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 1993 found that all but 17 of 148 democracies have four or five years as their maximum lower house term (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1993). Only 13 countries have a three year term, prominent among them Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, and only one country—the US—has a two year term. At the other end of the scale, only three countries have a six year term. It might be expected that shorter terms would enhance the role of the prime minister in a parliamentary system, by making the prospect of an election ever closer, and the need for unity and discipline ever greater.

Notwithstanding partisan dealignment and increased electoral volatility, which might lead to shorter terms since the governing party would be less likely to hold a secure majority, it would appear that the parliamentary terms in Australia, Canada and Britain have actually increased over the past half century (Table 1). In Australia, the average parliamentary term has increased by just under two days at each successive election, in Canada by four days, and in Britain by just over six days. In the case of Australia, for example, a parliamentary term in the 1990s could be expected to be over a month longer than a term at the end of the 1940s, in the context of a three year maximum

term. In Britain, the difference is even greater in relative and absolute terms—just over three months, over a five year maximum term.

Table 1: Changes in Parliamentary Terms Since 1945

	Inter-election change (weeks)	Period	(N timepoints)
Australia	0.245	1945-2001	(22)
Britain	0.879	1945-2001	(15)
Canada	0.578	1945-2000	(17)

Note   The per annum change is the change based on an ordinary least squares regression line.

Explanations for this finding must remain speculative, but the comparable trends in each of the three countries suggests some commonality. One possible explanation is the enhanced role of the prime minister, and his or her increased power to determine the date of election. Since it is obviously in the interests of the prime minister to delay an election until the last possible moment—maximizing the period in office and the opportunities to implement the government's legislative agenda, the prime minister will obviously to increase the term wherever possible. The data in Table 1 are suggestive of this having taken place over the last half century.

2 The Presidentialization of Westminster Systems?

The relentless pace of global change has led to the hypothesis that parliamentary systems are becoming more presidential in character, style and operation, as the environments within which they operate become more uniform. In parliamentary systems, the development of the mass media, the increasing complexity of government and party policies, weakening social and partisan loyalties and declining turnout, have all contributed to focus more popular attention on the role of the prime minister, and to a lesser extent, the opposition leader. In this view, what is occurring is a presidentialization of the role of the prime minister in the Westminster democracies. While it is a trend that could apply to all Westminster systems, it is seen as having progressed farthest in Britain, becoming established under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and being reinforced by Tony Blair since 1997 (Mughan, 2000).

Descriptions of this apparent shift in the nature and function of parliamentary systems has attracted a wide variety of terms. Most frequently used is the 'presidentialization' or 'electoral presidentialization' of parliamentary systems (Mughan, 2000: 130), but other terms, such as 'semi-presidentialism', 'semi-parliamentarism', 'presidential parliamentarism' and 'prime ministerialism' have appeared (for a review, see Elgie, 1997). Whatever the description that is applied, all share the common theme that parliamentary government—with political power being exercised through collective cabinet responsibility—has now given way to political power which is wielded by a single political figure—a president operating within a nominally parliamentary system.

Beyond largely impressionistic evidence to support the presidentialization view—the naming of governments or parties after the leaders, as noted earlier—rigorous tests of the hypothesis using electoral data are rare. Suggestive evidence in support of the hypothesis comes from a study by Lanoue and Headrick (1994) which used aggregate data from 1953 until 1987 to examine the relative importance of prime ministerial popularity, economic evaluations and specific events on the government's lead in the polls. The authors concluded that there was an incremental increase in the importance of the prime minister, which began in the 1960s, well before the advent of the Thatcher era. This they regarded as important, since Thatcher's steep rise in personal popularity after winning the Falklands War in 1982 tended to obscure longer term trends. Lanoue and Headrick conclude that 'the 1960s ushered in a new perspective on parties and prime ministers, one in which public opinion towards the governing party and its leader were more closely tied to one another.' (p.202).

The major study of presidentialization in Britain has been conducted by Tony Mughan (2000). In surveying the role of prime ministers in Britain since the 1960s, he draws an important distinction between presentation and impact. Mughan argues that there is little doubt that in their public persona, prime ministers are now more prominent than ever before, but that the case for the prime minister having more impact on the vote is less easy to evaluate. After analyzing a range of British Election Studies, Mughan concludes on this point that 'prime ministerial candidates are generally a more substantial influence on the vote than campaign issues … having the right leader can mean the difference between victory and defeat for a party in closely fought contests' (p.129).

One of the major difficulties in evaluating the presidentialization argument is to distinguish between the effects attributable to the incumbent, and those that are associated with the office. Since a relatively small number of cases are available for analysis, this is a major concern. Margaret Thatcher, for example, had a central presence in the British political system during the 1980s, easily eclipsing that of her successor, John Major, during the early 1990s. Equally, Tony Blair has had a major impact on British politics. The presidentialization hypothesis assumes that the influence of the leader will increase incrementally with the passage of time, other things being equal, since the prime minister's popularity and influence is being shaped by a wide range of exogenous factors, such as the mass media and administrative change, which give rise to institutional convergence.

By contrast, the incumbency hypothesis suggests that prime ministerial popularity and influence will vary with the characteristics of the leader in question, and may go up or down, depending on his or her popular image. In an analysis of prime ministerial approval between 1979 and 1996, Clarke, Ho and Stewart (2000) find support for the incumbency hypothesis, with the impact of prime ministerial approval declining significantly with the replacement of Thatcher by Major. However, Thatcher's popularity may have been affected by the legacy of British success in the Falklands War. There is no doubt that prior to the Argentine invasion, the Thatcher government was immensely unpopular, and following the war the government's increased popularity carried it to a decisive win in the 1983 general election. However, while Mishler et al (1989), Norpoth (1987) and Clarke et al (1990) argue that her increased popularity occurred as a consequence of the Falklands War, Sanders et al (1987) argue that economic reforms were at the heart of the change.

Events such as the Falklands War, along with terrorist incidents, are idiosyncratic; there are few partisan advantages to be derived from them, other than the advantage conveyed by incumbency. A substantial US literature has emerged to examine the electoral consequences of international crises, suggesting that such events focus attention on the elected leader, enhancing their status and authority in the eyes of the public (Ostrom and Simon, 1985). Nichelsburg and Norpoth (2000) conclude that foreign policy, at least during the Ford through to the Clinton administrations, was as important in determining presidential popularity as economic policy: 'the chief executive must be commander-in-chief and chief economist in nearly equal measure' (p.329). It would be reasonable to surmise, by implication, by the effect of

international crises would affect the role of the prime minister in a parliamentary system in much the same way.

The evidence to support the presidentialization hypothesis is therefore mixed. The central difficulty is distinguishing between idiosyncratic events and personalities from broadly-based, long term institutional trends which may also play their part in shaping the nature of executive power and bringing about convergence. Moreover, when several of these factors compound one another—as was the case, for example, in the combination of the Falklands War and the personality of Margaret Thatcher—it is difficult to gauge what is a discernible shift in executive power due to the specific circumstances of the time, and what is due to long-term patterns of change. Following Elgie (1997), the following two sections distinguish between these range of factors in terms of their exogenous influence on leadership, and institutional influences.

3 Exogenous Influences on Leadership

The potential range of external influences on executive power—those which fall outside the day-to-day operation of political institutions—is, of course, vast. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify four major external factors which help to shape the context within which power is exercised and have the potential to alter significantly the nature of prime ministerial authority. The most obvious is the role of television and its associated effects on how electoral campaigns are conducted and major political events presented to the electorate. Long term changes within the mass public are also important, and two factors are identified here—partisan dealignment and the decline in electoral participation. Finally, the internal dynamics of parties, and more particularly the decline in party organization, has indirect consequences for the context within which executive power is exercised.

The Role of Television. Many of the changes that have been observed in the role of the prime minister in Westminster systems have been traced back to the growth of the electronic media, and especially television, in the 1950s and 1960s. In the early years of television's development, the new media gave scant attention to politics, but as their coverage of politics—and especially political leaders—increased, so too did the way in which voters viewed their leaders. In Britain, for example, party political broadcasting on television was introduced in the 1950s, but it was not until the 1964 general election that it came into its own, when the two major parties were allocated 75 minutes each of free

television broadcasting (McAllister, 1985). Perhaps coincidentally, this general election was the first in Britain where the term 'presidential' was used to describe the character of the campaign (Mughan, 2000: 27).

During the period for which election data are available in the three Westminster systems, the proportion of the population with access to television sets increased substantially, most notably in Canada, where the proportion almost doubled between the early 1970s and the late 1990s (Figure 2). The trend for Australia and Britain shows less steady growth; nevertheless, in Britain, almost twice as many people had access to a television set in 2001 than was the case in 1964.[5]

Figure 2: Television Penetration
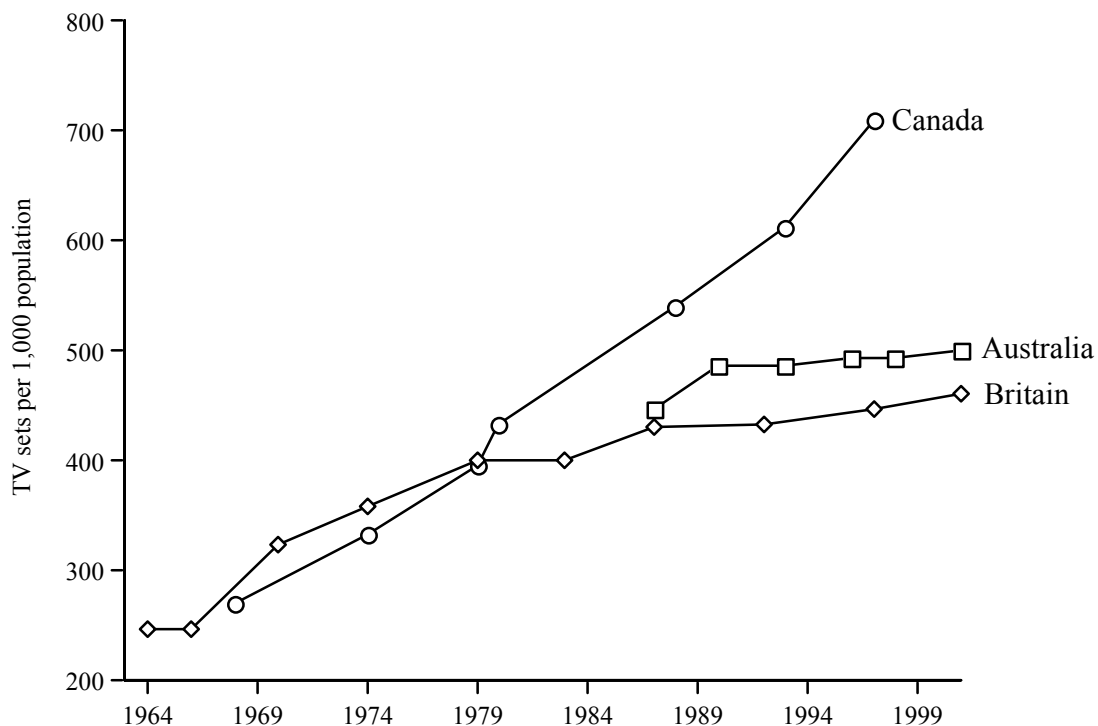
Sources

Starting in the 1960s, television rapidly became an indispensable tool for modern election campaigning (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Norris et al, 1999). Indicative of this change has been the increasing importance of televized debates between the leaders during election campaigns, starting in the United States with the debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election campaign. Since then, the idea of a leaders' debate has spread across the established democracies. Of 45 democracies which were

examined in the mid-1990s, all but four had a leaders' debate at the immediate past election (LeDuc et al, 1996: 45-48). This represents a substantial increase on the previous survey, which found that in the late 1970s, a leaders' debate took place in just seven of 21 parliamentary systems (Smith, 1981).

Australia and Canada have an established history of mounting leaders' debates, while the parties in Britain have generally resisted calls to have a formal leaders' debate.[6] In Australia, the first televised debate was held in 1984, but not in the subsequent 1987 election; since 1990, the debate has become an established and formal part of the election campaign, the only point of disagreement between the parties being whether to have one or two debates, with the incumbent wishing the minimize the risks of a live television debate, the challenger wishing to maximize it. In Canada, televised leaders' debates have also become an integral part of the election campaign, starting with the first debate in 1968; by convention, one debate is usually held in English, and one in French (Le Duc, 1990, 1994).

The proportion of voters watching the televised leaders' debates in both Australia and Canada has been declining. In Australia the highpoint occurred in 1993, when seven out of 10 voters said that they had watched at least one of the two debates held during the election. This declined to 58 percent in 1996, and in 2001, just four out of every 10 voters said that watched the debate between John Howard and Kim Beazley (Figure 3). There is a similar pattern in Canada: the highpoint was the 1984 election, when no less than 89 percent watched the debate between John Turner and Brian Mulroney, but the proportion watching each debate has declined since, to 44 percent in 1997, and 45 percent in 2000.

Figure 3: Voters Watching the Leaders' Debates

The media's intense focus on leaders in its political reporting has several explanations. The most obvious is the nature of the electronic media, especially television, and the way in which information is presented to media consumers. In general, the media find it easier to disseminate visual and oral information through a familiar personality rather than through a document or an institution (Glaser and Salmon, 1991; see also Ranney, 1983). As individuals themselves, viewers are more likely to develop a rapport with the individuals they see in the mass media, and to empathize with them and the goals they espouse. Viewers may place themselves in the role of the individuals they see, or in the role of the interviewers, and as a consequence gain a better understanding of the leader's views. For the mass media, too, party leaders are a convenient visual shortcut to capture and retain the viewer's attention.

Political parties also find it advantageous to highlight their political leaders and to ensure that they remain centrestage. Parties find it easier to market political choices to voters through an individual, who can promote a particular policy much more effectively when compared to the simple dissemination of a press release or the publication of a policy document. Such a policy can be

promoted by the leader who can also be questioned or debated with by an interviewer, vicariously representing voters, further heightening popular interest. Particularly where the party is in government, the promotion of the leader's personality characteristics can enhance the advantages that accrue to incumbency, further benefiting the party's electoral standing among voters.

The ability of voters to hold governments accountable for their actions provides a further explanation for their emphasis on leaders. Voters prefer to hold an individual accountable for government performance (or, occasionally, for the performance of the opposition), rather than an abstract institution or a political ideal (Bean and Mughan, 1989). This is more important in a parliamentary system, where collective cabinet responsibility and the fortunes of the government as a whole may blurr accountability in the eyes of the public. By focusing attention on the prime minister as the individual who is accountable for the government's collective performance, the public find it easier to deliver reward or punishment, when compared to an abstract collectivity.

Partisan Dealignment. A second general change in the political context within which leaders operate, and one which has direct consequences for them, is the widespread partisan dealignment that has occurred across all of the advanced democracies in the past several decades (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Webb, Farrell and Holliday, 2002). The extent of partisan dealignment in Australia, Britain and Canada is illustrated in Figures 4 and 5. The proportion of respondents eschewing a party identity in all three countries has increased significantly, most dramatically in Canada, where one in four voters fell into this category in the 1997 election (Figure 4).[7] In Australia and Britain, the growth is more modest, although in both countries the proportion of non-partisans has more than doubled during the period for which data are available. The decline in the proportion of voters describing themselves as 'very strong' partisans (Figure 5) has been very similar across the three countries, at between 10 and 16 percent of the electorate.

Figure 4: Non-Partisanship in Australia, Britain and Canada
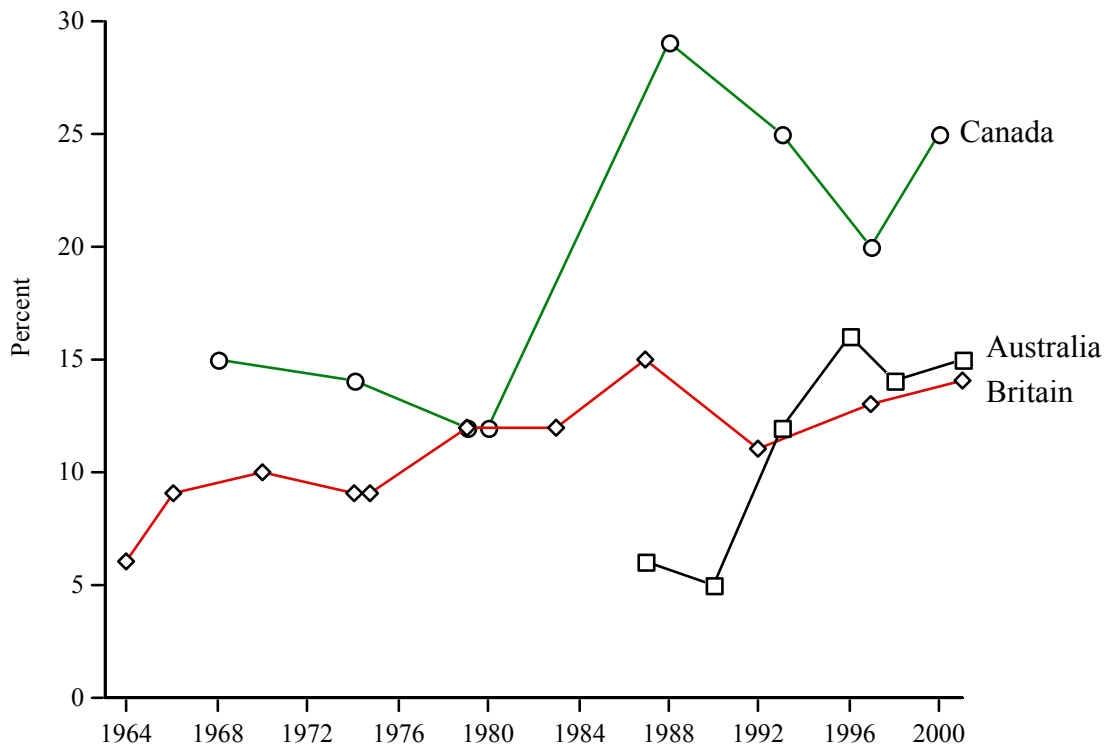
Source: Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

A major consequence of partisan dealignment is heightened electoral volatility. With weaker loyalties to the major political parties, and in the absence of strong bonds anchoring them to specific parties, voters are 'set politically adrift and subject to volatile election swings' (Wattenberg, 1991: 2). Weaker voter attachments enhance the role of the leader in both the mobilization and conversion of the vote.[8] In the absence of party cues, voters may rely more heavily on the appeal of the leader's personality in order to shape their vote.   For example, during the 2001 British general election, with an historically low turnout in prospect, the Labour leader, Tony Blair, was used extensively to both encourage voters to participate in the election, as well as to cast their vote for Labour.

**Figure 5: 'Very Strong' Partisans in Australia, Britain and Canada**
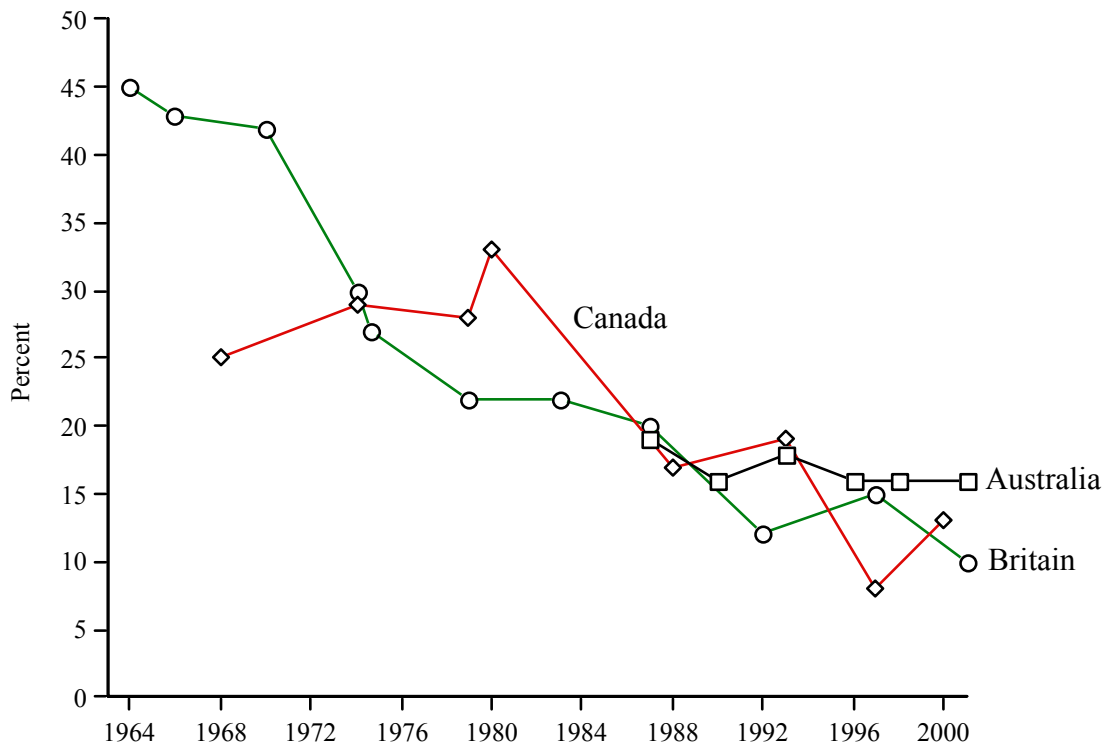
Source: Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

Declining Electoral Participation. In line with changes in electoral participation in most of the advanced democracies, turnout has been declining in Britain and Canada (in Australia, the system of compulsory voting means that traditional measures of turnout have little relevance and since 1955, turnout has varied little from a mean of 95 percent of the electorate). In both countries, the decline in turnout has been especially precipitous in the last decade, following a prolonged period of gradual decline. The turnout of 59.4 percent in the 2000 British general election, for example, was the lowest since the 'khaki' election of 1918, itself an election marked by postwar adjustment, women's enfranchisement and an almost threefold increase in the size of the electorate. In Canada, the turnout of 61.2 percent in the 2000 election was by far the lowest of any postwar federal election, lower even than the 69.3 percent turnout recorded in the 1980 election.

The assumption is that declining turnout will enhance the role of the prime minister, by focusing greater attention on the leader's role in mobilizing the vote, above and beyond party considerations. In addition, in voluntary voting systems such as Britain and Canada's, we might expect that the decline in electoral participation would result in fewer voters turning out to the polls, but ones who would be more motivated by economic self-interest in reaching their

voting decision. This conclusion is in line with findings which show that the greater propensity of late deciding voters in Australian, British and US elections are more likely to be rational and calculating, rather than capricious or disinterested. In such a context, the role of the leader in framing and promoting policies to attract these voters may well become more important over the course of time (McAllister, 2002).

Figure 6: Turnout in Britain and Canada Since 1945
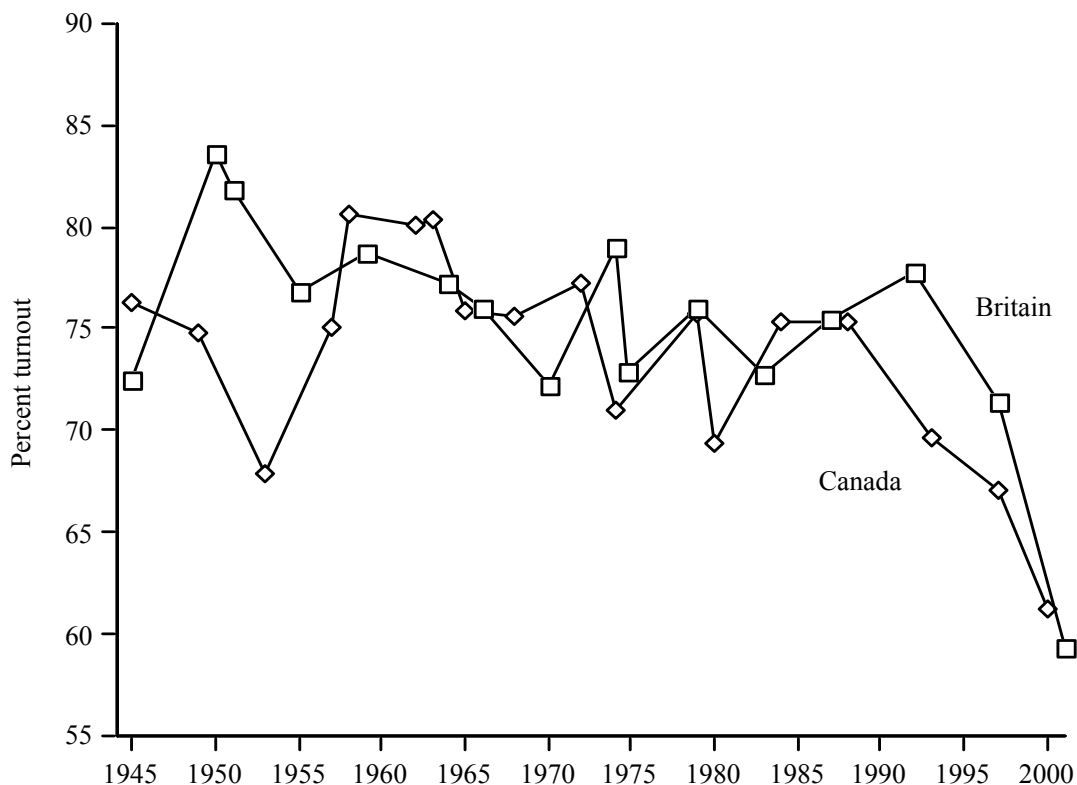
Source: International IDEA.

The Decline of Party Organizations. In line with many other social and technological changes in the advanced democracies, the traditional concept of the mass party has been in decline for more than half a century, most notably in the Westminster systems where they first originated (Scarrow, 2000). The decline of parties as mass organizations and the increasing difficulty that parties encounter in mobilizing the vote has shifted voters' attentions away from local election campaigns and towards the national political stage. In parallel with this change, the major parties have often shifted their emphasis from local to national political leaders, in turn elevating to high office those who they believe will exercise the maximum geographical and social appeal to voters. As a result, leaders are selected as much for their popular appeal as for their policy skills or political acumen.

This change means that is there is now less emphasis on a party's policies than in the past, and more emphasis on the personalities of the leaders who will have to implement those policies if they win election. In turn, there is research to indicate that voters evaluate the personal images of the leaders in terms of their capacity to implement policy (Wattenberg, 1991: 13-30). In practice, the information that a voter accumulates about a leader is an essential tool that enables the voter to reach a judgement about the capacity of the various candidates to achieve their policy goals. While most of the research which has analyzed candidate images and their underpinnings comes from the United States, there is no reason to suppose that the findings do not also apply to parliamentary systems as well.

While declining organizational capacity may enhance the role of the leader, by enabling him or her to appeal to the broad mass of voters over the heads of their party, there are also dangers. Declining branch memberships can facilitate the takeover of the party by ideologically driven activists. This occurred most dramatically in Britain in the 1980s, when leftwing activists dominated many Labour branches, selecting leftwing election candidates and imposing electorally disastrous polices, most notably unilateral nuclear disarmament. Leftwing entrism within the Labour Party was one of the causes of the Labour split in 1982 and the formation of the Social Democrat Party (Crewe and King, 1997). A similar process occurred in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, where 'branch-stacking' by ethnic groups caused a succession of difficulties for Labor in its policies towards Australia's diverse ethnic electorates.

4 Institutional Explanations

Institutions shape the operation of prime ministerial authority in various ways—through the rules of electoral competition, or parliamentary procedure, for example. As with the endogenous explanations for executive power, the range of potential candidates for inclusion in this list is vast. The two main factors focused on here are those which recur most frequently in the literature, and which are closest to the types of executive power exercised by the prime minister—the increasing complexity of decision-making, and the role of the public service in that process.

The Complexity of Decisionmaking. Public administration studies have identified some of the factors internal to government which may enhance the role and authority of the prime minister. In a comparative study of the Western

democracies, King (1995) identified the major factors as the ability to control the careers of other ministers, which is greater in a single governing party with a parliamentary majority than in a coalition, and the public visibility of the leader. On the latter, King argued that if the prime minister's visibility was high, then he or she would have a greater propensity to influence policy: 'if the prime minister is going to be held responsible for what happens, he is likely to want to be responsible' (p.158).[9]

In a study focused on Britain, Rhodes (1995) distinguishes between six types of prime ministerial influence within the cabinet, ranging from the lowest, where power is characterized by bureaucratic co-ordination, to the highest, which he terms monocratic government. The highest level, which equates most closely with presidentialization, is distinguished by 'a general ability to decide policy across all issue areas in which he or she takes an interest; by deciding key issues which subsequently determine most remaining areas of government policy; or by defining a governing ethos or "atmosphere" which generates predictable and hard solutions to most policy problems' (p.15).

While it is obvious that the increasing complexity in the range and type of decisions that government must take enhances the power of the prime minister, the institutional context for decision-making also varies as a consequence of leadership style (Elgie, 1997). A distinction is often made between leadership that relies on the charismatic appeal of the prime minister over collegial discussion, as opposed to collective decision-making which emphasizes consensus decisions (Kavanagh, 1990). Evaluating how leadership styles influence the role of the prime minister over an extended period, net of other factors, is of course difficult. However, if there is a general awareness that decision-making is becoming more complex, then we might expect that parliamentary parties (which normally select prime ministers) will want to choose leaders who rely more on charisma than on collegial consensus.

The Role of the Public Service. In all three countries under examination, prime ministerial authority has been enhanced by a compliant and (at least in the case of Australia) a more politicized public service. The Westminster tradition of a career public service in which advice to ministers is 'fearlessly and impartially given' has been replaced by a senior cadre of political appointees. This process has gone furthest in Australia, where it is often argued that the policy agenda of the Liberal-National conservative government elected in 1996 has been assisted by a compliant public service. One view of this compliance, put forward by

Pusey (1991), is that a small group of senior bureaucrats with economic rationalist views were prepared to implement the government's agenda against the wishes of the mainstream public service, who possessed more traditional economic views. A contrary view was that generational change within the political and bureaucratic elite resulted in the creation of a shared set of policy goals, which enabled the public service to promote the government's agenda (Dunn 1997).

While there are debates about the level of politicization of the public service, it is clear that the way in which the public service operates, the types of decisions its members must reach, and the advice that they provide to ministers, have changed profoundly over the past two decades. Bureaucrats now have an important strategic role in decision-making, and one which increasingly blurs the distinction between party-appointed ministerial advisors and career public servants. In addition, the proliferation of think tanks, often with strong partisan attachments, provides a further source of strategic policy advice (Stone, 1996). The ability of the prime minister to derive strategic advice from these sources should, in principle, result in a greater concentration of executive authority.

5 Rating the Leaders

To what extent has there been a change in voters' ratings of prime ministers in the three countries, during the period for which survey data is available? If the presidential hypothesis were to be confirmed, we would expect a gradual increase in leader ratings, as leaders gain greater prominence and find correspondingly greater support within the electorate. The evidence provides little support for the presidentialization hypothesis, at least in so far as voters' ratings of the leaders are concerned (Figure 7). In Britain, where the longest period of data is available, the overall trend between 1964 and 2001 shows two significant peaks, in 1983 for Margaret Thatcher following the Falklands War, and for John Major in 1993, just after he became prime minister. There are also several low points since 1964, notably for Edward Heath in the two 1974 elections, and for John Major in the 1997 election, which he lost to Tony Blair. Overall, there is no discernible trend over the extended period of the surveys.

**Figure 7: Voters' Ratings of Prime Ministers**
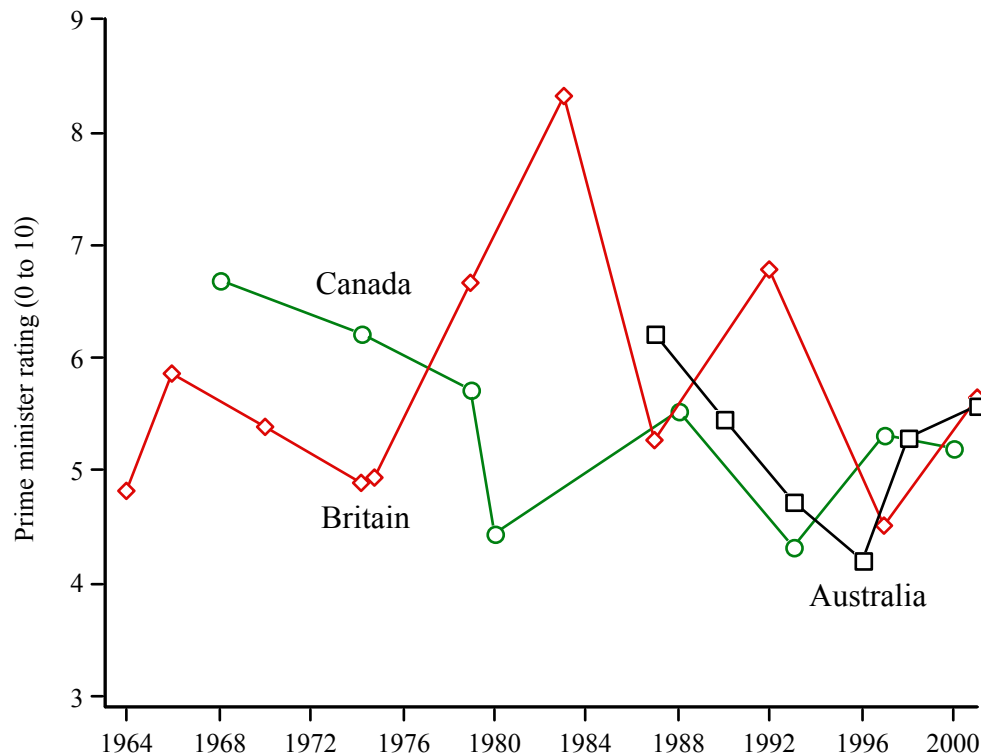
Note   Figures are the mean prime minister ratings on zero to 10 scales.

Source   Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

Canada shows a general decline in the ratings of the prime ministers from 1968, with the exception of Brian Mulroney's 1988 rating, and the most recent rating, that of Jean Chretien in 1997. The overall decline in Canadian prime ministers' ratings is just under two points on the zero to 10 scale over the 29 year period. Part of the explanation for the trend is that it begins at the start of the Trudeau period in 1968 and shows the slow decline in his popularity; another explanation is the unpopularity of three leaders: Joseph Clark in 1980, and Kim Campbell in 1993 who was barely more popular by that time than Brian Mulroney, the unpopular leader she replaced.

In Australia the trend is much shorter—from 1987 to 2001—and therefore more difficult to interpret. The period begins in the twilight years of the Hawke government; Hawke has been one of the most popular prime ministers of the postwar era, but by the late 1980s a series of economic difficulties had undermined his popularity which began to decline. His successor, Paul Keating, was one of the most unpopular postwar prime ministers, but he was followed by John Howard, who maintained—and even increased—relatively high popularity ratings (McAllister, 2003). The Australian trend is too short to provide any indication of general trends in the ratings of the prime ministers.
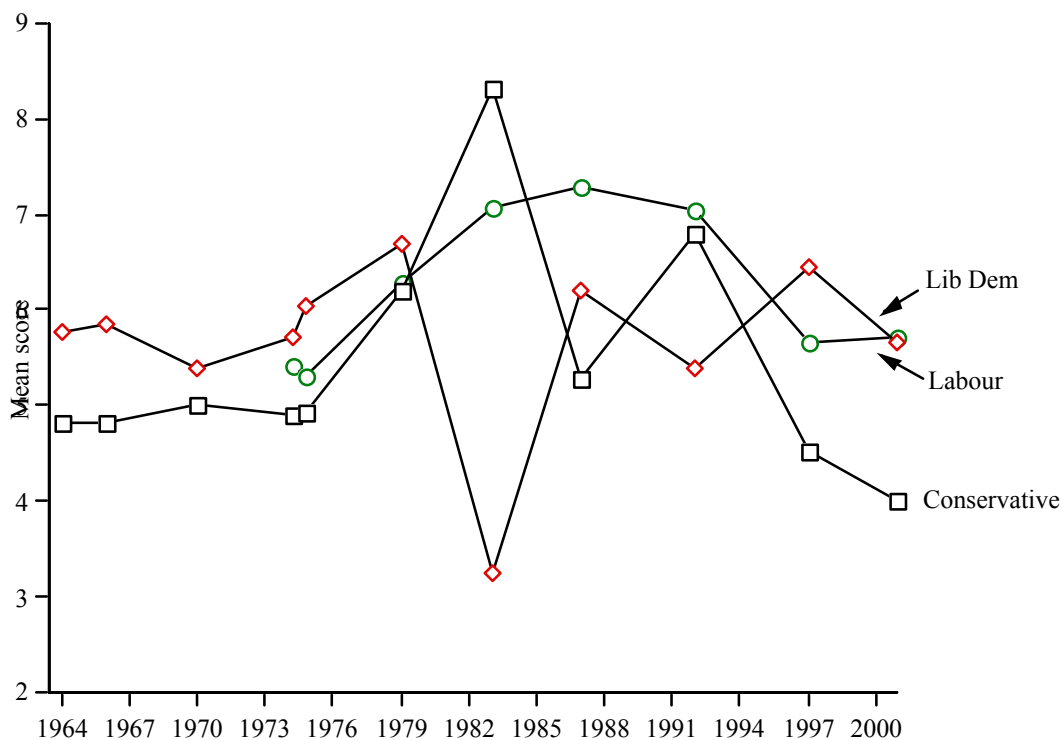
Figure 8: Party Leader Ratings in Australia
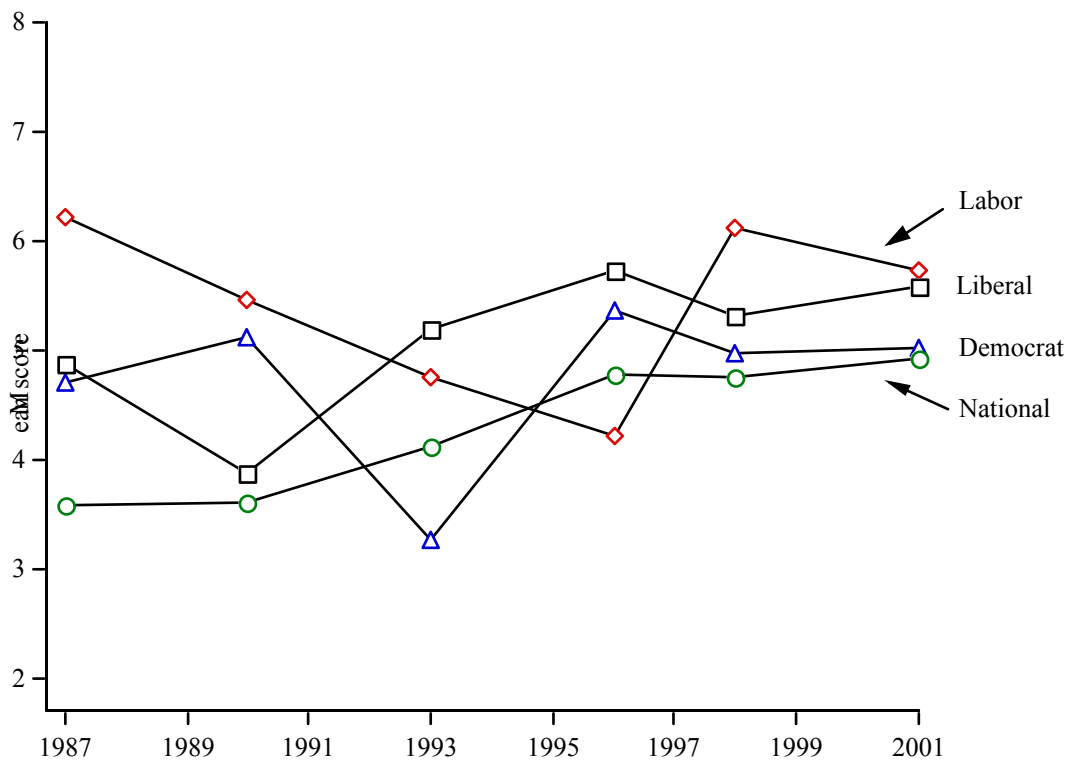
Note Figures are the mean leader ratings on zero to 10 scales.

Source Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

One possibility to explain these patterns, of course, is that the leader ratings are strongly related to partisanship, so that the results in Figure 7 are a consequence of the shifting support for parties. This possibility is explored in detail in Figures 8, 9 and 10 which show leader ratings for the major parties in each of the three countries. In Australia, the ratings for Labor leaders follow the general pattern shown earlier, with support for Bob Hawke and then Paul Keating in decline during the late 1980s and early 1990s, followed by an increase with the accession of Kim Beazley to the leadership. However, the Liberal and National leaders (the two parties they represent have been in almost permanent coalition since 1923) show a consistent upward trend. The Australian Democrats, a minor party formed in 1977 which has won election only to the upper house and with a high turnover of leaders, shows an inconsistent pattern.

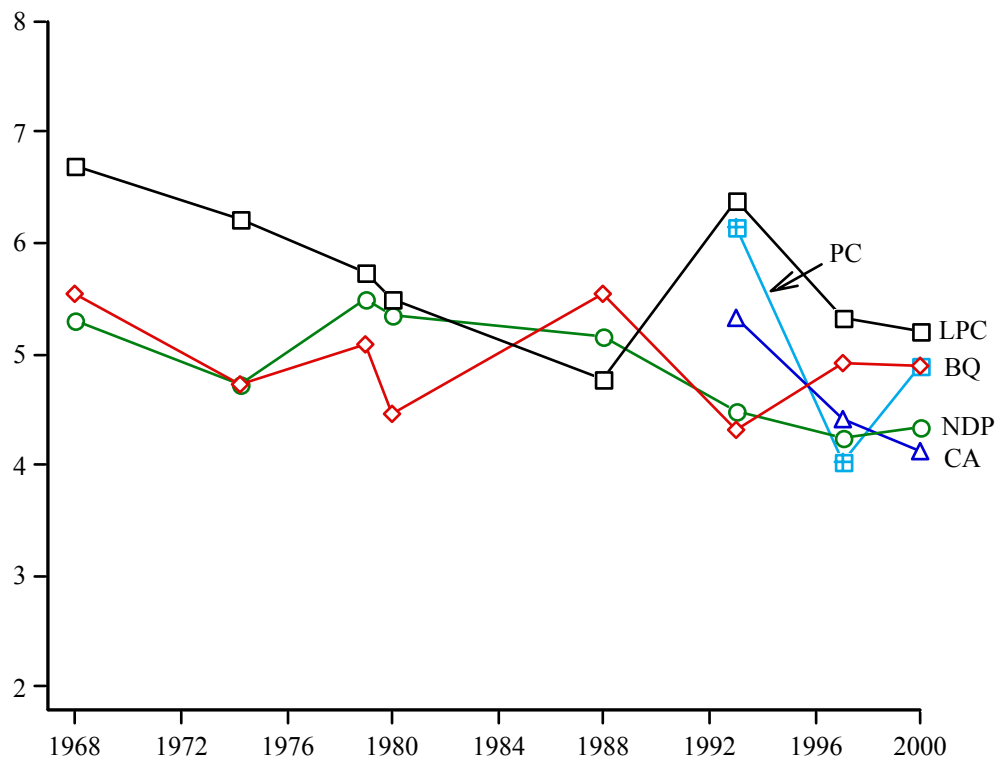**Figure 9: Party Leader Ratings in Britain**

Note   Figures are the mean leader ratings on zero to 10 scales.

Source   Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

In Britain, Labour leaders have remained consistent in their ratings (Figure 9), with the notable (and disastrous) exception of Michael Foot in the 1983 general; Foot's leftwing policies, particularly on unilateral nuclear disarmament, led the party to its worst electoral defeat since 1931. As we noted earlier, Margaret Thatcher's exceptional popularity following the Falklands War resulted in a dramatic peak in popularity for the Conservatives followed by a decline to 2001, when William Hague emerged as the most unpopular Conservative leader since Sir Alec Douglas-Hume in 1964. The Canadian results (Figure 10) show the least variance attributable to party. The most popular leader was, of course, Pierre Trudeau, who was prime minister from 1968, when the trend data start. His popularity, however, declined incrementally thereafter. The Liberal Party's fortunes also show an improvement in 1993, when Jean Chretien became prime minister.

Figure 10: Party Leader Ratings in Canada

Note   Figures are the mean leader ratings on a zero to 10 scales.

Source   Combined Leaders' stacked dataset.

6 Conclusion

The role of the prime minister in Westminster systems has changed significantly over the past half century. In the immediate postwar years the prime minister's fate was inextricably bound up with that of his or her party; enduring voting patterns, the strength of the party system, and stable institutions of government all combined to ensure that the prime minister was the 'first among equals' and nothing more. The first questioning of this traditional model of prime ministerial authority came with the widespread use of television in the 1960s and 1970s to cover elections and politics in general. Declining election participation and partisan dealignment have further suggested that a transition may be underway. Institutional changes to the public service and the increasing complexity of modern decision-making have further served to concentrate power in the executive.

More than half a century on, the debate is not whether the prime minister remains the 'first among equals', but whether he or she is now a president, with all of the executive power associated with that position. The evidence presented here, rudimentary though it is in terms of the variables used, period

of coverage and limited number of countries, suggests a complex pattern. The exogenous influences on the role of the prime minister, particularly the growth of television and the effective replacement of the party label by the leader's name in the public's mind, all suggest that there is a much enhanced role for the leader. By contrast, the empirical evidence relating to the operation of responsible government and patterns of ministerial resignations, and voters' ratings of the leaders themselves, suggest a highly variable pattern.

This ambiguous conclusion indicates the difficulties in distinguishing between systemic changes in the Westminster systems and idiosyncratic changes due to the characteristics of a particular leader. This is particularly acute when only three countries are being analyzed, and there are a limited range of elections. Perhaps the answer is that systemic changes to the operation of parliamentary democracies based on the Westminster model do promote a centralization of power in the prime minister, but that the change is gradual and in some cases outweighed by the personalities involved. For example, Margaret Thatcher was a strong prime minister with some presidential characteristics, while her successor, John Major, was more traditional in his approach to the role. The personality of the leader is perhaps as important—or more important—than the duties and responsibilities of the position. In short, the personality of the leader is greater than the strength of the trend.

Footnotes

1   This change in the role of the Australian Senate came about in 1949, when the electoral system was changed from the alternative vote to proportional representation. Since the early 1970s, the increasing propensity of governments to call double dissolution elections, in which the whole Senate in up for re-election, and the electoral threshold is correspondingly lower, has aided the election of minor parties and independents (Farrell, McAllister and Mackerras, 1995).

2   The main exception was the Labour government between October 1974 and 1979, when its majority disappeared. In this case, strategic alliances were forged both with the Liberals and the Ulster Unionists, although the eventual outcome was the calling of a general election in 1979.

3   Here, too, there are important caveats. While most presidents are popularly elected, either through a direct election, as in Austria or Poland, some are indirectly elected through some form of electoral college, as in Argentina, Finland and the United States. Some countries restrict the right of presidents to stand for re-election while the terms of office vary considerably; four or five year terms are the norm for most countries, but they range up to seven years in France and Ireland.

4   In Australia, there were five ministerial resignations between 1945 and the end of the McMahon ministry in 1972, but 25 resignations between the start of the Whitlam ministry in 1972 and 2001. In Britain, there were 29 resignations between 1945 and the end of the first Wilson ministry in 1970, and 42 resignations between the Heath ministry and the end of the Major ministry in 1997 (Dowding and Kang, 1998: 418). Resignations are defined as those which involved some form of impropriety, rather than resignations upon retirement or as a result of ill-health.

5   The empirical evidence that this increase is related to political leadership is limited. In Australia and Britain, the correlation between the prime minister's leader rating and the proportion of TV sets is 0.04 (statistically significant at $p<.000$) and 0.06 ($p<.000$), respectively, but in Canada the same figure is -0.11 ($p<.000$).

[6]   In defence of not having a formal debate, it is usually argued that scrutiny of party policies and the competence of the leaders is best left to professional media interviewers.

[7]   The 1988 figure of 29 percent is the result of a change in the question wording, from ' Do you think of yourself as Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Reform, Bloc Quebecois or what? ' to 'Do you think of yourself as Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Reform, Bloc Quebecois or none of these?' The substantial jump in nonpartisans in 1988 is therefore a methodological artifact (Blais et al, 2001).

[8]   A third possible factor, though difficult to measure and highly variable across countries, is the role of the electoral system. Electoral systems which permit voters to discriminate between candidates have more potential for leaders to influence the vote than, for example, party list systems.

[9]   Two other factors, which King does not weigh as highly, are the legacy of history and whether the government is based in a single party or on multiple parties.

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