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Published in:
Political Behaviour in Contemporary Finland: Studies of Voting and Campaigning in a Candidate-Oriented Political System

DOI:
[10.4324/9781003452287-13](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003452287-13)

Published: 01/01/2024

Document Version
Final published version

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[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:
Söderlund, P. (2024). Party and Candidate as Objects of Electoral Choice. In Å. von Schoultz, & K. Strandberg (Eds.), *Political Behaviour in Contemporary Finland: Studies of Voting and Campaigning in a Candidate-Oriented Political System* (pp. 157). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003452287-13>

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11 Party and Candidate as Objects of Electoral Choice

Peter Söderlund

Introduction and theory

Scholars often presume that “voters are thinking about and choosing between parties” (Marsh, 2007, 504). In Finland, parties are, indeed, central actors of political representation and the choice between political parties is a real and substantial one for many of the voters (von Schoultz, 2018). However, the voters in Finland are formally not asked to make a choice between political parties. Instead, the parties present lists with multiple candidates at the district level and the voters then formally choose one candidate from within a party list. Candidate choice and party choice are, thus, intertwined. First, the total number of preference votes determines the final rank order of the candidates on that list, and eventually who is elected. Second, the intraparty preference vote is also counted as a vote for the party list to which the candidate belongs. This means that the votes for all candidates are pooled to determine the total number of seats allocated to a party list. Hence, the voters cast preference votes that determine both which candidates win seats and how many seats the parties win at the district level (Carey & Shugart, 1995, 421; Cox, 1997, 42; von Schoultz, 2018).

In this kind of electoral system, both candidate and party are the objects of electoral choice (Marsh, 2007). The relative importance of party and candidate varies among voters, however. Some voters think party choice is more important than candidate choice and pay greater attention to party reputation, while others prefer to evaluate candidates and rely on candidates’ personal reputations for making judgements and reaching decisions. This chapter will describe and explain both a) to what extent voters vote for candidates rather than for parties and b) the attitudes towards preference voting for individual candidates in Finland. First, the aim to examine the relative importance of candidate and party in people’s voting decisions is interesting given the fact that Finland has a relatively person-centred electoral system in an international perspective (Söderlund, 2016). With survey data, it is possible to measure if candidate was the most important factor, or if personal voting is nested within, and so subsidiary to, party voting among the voters (see Marsh, 2007, 501). Since survey data from multiple post-election surveys are available, it is also possible to examine if a trend of personalization of electoral choice can be detected between 2003 and 2019.

Second, it is also relevant to know what the Finns themselves think of the current system with mandatory preference voting. Another option would be to allow preference voting to be optional while a party vote would suffice like in many other countries. In that case, if the voter opts not to cast a preference vote, he or she would delegate the party, or those who cast preference votes, to decide the order in which candidates will be elected (Shugart, 2005, 43). Yet, Finns have cast a single preference vote since 1955 and they are, therefore, accustomed to choosing between candidates within a party list (Raunio, 2005, 475–476). To explain the incidence of personal voting and attitudes towards preference voting, sociodemographic, cognitive, and affective variables will be tested.

On a general level, focusing on personal voting is highly interesting considering the ongoing debate about the personalization of politics over the past decades. During the era of party democracy, which lasted roughly from the late 19th century to the 1960s, there was a powerful and stable relationship of trust between voters and political parties. A piece of evidence for a stronger bond is that turnout in Finnish parliamentary elections peaked in the 1960s at about 85 percent. Over the later decades, there has been a growing role of persons and personalities in politics at the expense of collective platforms in western democracies (Manin, 1997). Broadly defined, personalization of politics refers to a trend in democratic politics that marks a shift of focus from collective political actors (e.g., political parties, parliaments and governments) to individual actors (e.g., prime ministers, party leaders and individual politicians) (Karvonen, 2010). We can distinguish between at least three types of personalization: institutional, media, and behavioural (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007). Within each of these broad categories, personalization can be characterized, on the one hand, as centralized (greater weight on party leaders, prime ministers, and presidents) and, on the other hand, as decentralized (greater dispersion of influence to individual candidates, members of parliament, and ministers) (Balmas et al., 2014). In this chapter, focus is on “decentralised behavioural personalization of voters” which “implies that voters vote more on the basis of their evaluations of individual candidates (not specifically the party leaders), and less on the basis of their evaluations of parties and their identification with them” (Balmas et al., 2014, 40).

Proportional representation systems that combine party lists with preference voting for individual candidates within lists (open and flexible lists) create opportunities for both personal voting and party voting (Colomer, 2011, 14). People who cast a “personal vote” or engage in “personal voting” evaluate candidates and then cast a vote for a candidate based on who the candidate is, what she has done, or what she might do. Such candidate-centred voters are highly influenced by the personal stands, merits, and attributes of the candidates rather than their party affiliation (Marsh, 2007, 501). Citizens can employ different strategies to reach their voting decisions concerning candidates. Such decision-making strategies may include everything from intricate retrospective evaluations of accomplishments in office and congruence on issue positions to cognitively less-demanding evaluations of personal traits or candidates’ sociodemographic background (McDermott, 1998). In contrast, “party vote” or “party voting” refers here to party reputation

being the sole criterion when voters fill in the ballot paper. These party-centred voters are mainly preoccupied with making comparative judgements of parties (e.g., ideological platform, issue positions, and past performance) (Slosar, 2011) or they might rely on simple cues such as party identification acquired through early socialization to decide which party to vote for (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006, 9–12).

The influence of individual candidates on election outcomes in parliamentary democracies is disputed. The question is if, and if so to what extent, there exists a pure personal vote completely independent of a partisan base for electoral support (see Carsey et al., 2017). We have to bear in mind that party-centred evaluations and candidate-centred evaluations are not necessarily in conflict with each other. Most voters probably take both party and candidate considerations into account in their electoral decisions. But the question is one of degree. Candidate evaluations exert a direct influence on party choice if voters decide based on feelings towards candidates alone and a vote for a candidate is also a vote for that candidate's party. Candidate evaluations have an indirect influence on party choice if qualitatively strong individual candidates give a party greater electoral appeal (Rosema, 2006, 474–475).

Another possibility is that personal voting is nested within party voting. In that case, voters do discriminate between different candidates and place emphasis on personal qualities, but only among candidates who stand for tolerable and viable parties (Karvonen, 2010, 51; Marsh et al., 2008, 223–224). The voter's main priority is, thus, to decide which party to support based on the collective reputation of the party while the choice of candidate is of secondary importance. But, voters are not blind to differences within the parties and they might prefer representatives from a certain geographical area or who represents a certain interest group (or faction) formed around a shared interest (Katz, 1986, 86). There is likely a mix of evaluations of personal reputation of the candidate and the collective reputation of the party. This should especially be the case if voters are encouraged to make comparative judgements both between parties and between candidates (as in Finland where each voter must formally cast a preference vote for an individual candidate).

How can we measure whether personal voting dominates party voting? Political scientists have in a variety of ways asked voters to identify what influences their vote choices. One example is to ask the voters the straight question whether party or candidate was the most important factor in their voting decision (Karvonen, 2010; Marsh, 2007). Another question is if they would still have voted for a specific candidate had he or she ran for any of the other parties (Marsh, 2007; van Holsteyn & Andeweg, 2010). Some voter surveys include a battery of survey questions where voters report to what extent different candidate characteristics mattered for their vote choice and based on that it is possible to capture the extent of candidate evaluations in voting decisions (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2014). Surveys can also ask questions to probe attitudes about the electoral system (Fournier et al., 2011), including the system of preference voting.

There should be significant degrees of heterogeneity amongst voters in terms of which types of considerations dominate electoral decisions and the willingness to cast intraparty preference votes, particularly in an electoral system where both

party and candidate matters. In addition to giving a depiction of how voters think, we certainly also want to explain which types of voters think and behave in a certain way. Various explanations have been offered for inter-individual differences. van Holsteyn and Andeweg (2010) found that low education, low political knowledge, weak party identification, and late deciding predicted why voters put person above party in the Netherlands. Karvonen (2014) observed that middle-aged, less politically knowledgeable and interested, partisan independents, and ideological centrists were more likely to stress candidate over party in the 2007 and 2011 Finnish parliamentary elections. Wauters et al. (2020) presented four theoretical models to explain the propensity to cast a preference vote (since preference voting is optional in several countries). (1) The resource model assumes that voters who possess personal resources such as higher education and political interest are more inclined to familiarize themselves with and choose a specific candidate. (2) The identity model states that voters are more likely to cast preference votes for candidates with whom they identify, for example, based on age and gender. (3) The proximity model implies that people vote for candidates whom they personally know or whom they feel familiar with via media or group affiliations. (4) The instrumental model refers to strategic motives of voters whom under certain conditions want to impact the allocation of seats in favour of certain individual politicians.

Sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables are, of course, often included in models of candidate-based voting. But, such effects appear to depend on the context. For example, the effects of age, gender, education, and occupation on the probability of voting for a person vary widely (negative, positive, and null effects) in the Nordic countries (Bengtsson et al., 2014). Marsh (1985, 372) for his part stressed both electors' capacities and resources (e.g., education) and electors' psychological orientations to politics (e.g., party attachment and political trust) in a review of why some voters are more inclined to express an explicit preference for particular candidates. Hence, a prominent explanation is that voters differ according to their level of political sophistication. People with cognitive limits have a harder time to process information and form opinions about policy and performance of collective actors. It takes less political information or expertise to vote on the basis of candidates' personal characteristics. Party considerations should, therefore, dominate electoral decisions among the politically sophisticated, while the relative weight of candidate considerations should be greater among the less politically sophisticated (Slosar, 2011). Further, party identification largely structures political attitudes and vote choice. It is an affective factor that should influence the relative weight of party and candidate considerations. People who have formed an emotional or habitual attachment to a certain party, and feel represented by this party, are, therefore, more likely to think that party comes first and that candidate choice is secondary (Tverdova, 2011).

We should bear in mind, however, that candidate evaluations in an absolute sense may increase with party identification (and political sophistication). According to Marsh (1985, 372), "voters need to be closely involved with a party before differences within that party and its candidates become sufficiently visible, leading to the use of the preferential vote". Finally, people in the ideological fringes are

likely to endorse collectivist rather than individualist orientations. As with partisanship, candidate considerations should be the weakest among voters whose vote choice is rooted in ideological considerations (Gidengil 2011, 150). This means that the more ideologically extreme are more likely to engage in party voting, while moderates are more candidate-oriented. Left–right ideological extremism has often been included in models of the relative strength of party- and candidate-based voting (Bengtsson et al., 2014; Karvonen, 2014).

Descriptive trends

This section first describes the extent to which Finnish voters 2003–2019 deemed candidates as more important objects of electoral support than parties. Two survey items measure candidate-centred voting. While the first item has been included in all five post-election surveys, the second has only featured in three surveys. The two questions are:

- For your vote choice, which was ultimately the more important, the party or the candidate?
- If your candidate had been running for any of the other parties, would you still have voted for him/her?

Is the act of voting among taking place primarily through the prism of parties or candidates? The relative balance of party and candidate considerations varies among people. Figure 11.1 shows that in 2003 about half of the respondents reported party was more important and the other half that candidate was more important. While the number of candidate-centred voters increased by four percentage points in 2007, a shift occurred in 2011 when 55 percent reported that the party was the more important factor influencing their vote choice. The number of voters saying that candidate was more important has been below 45 percent in the 2010s.

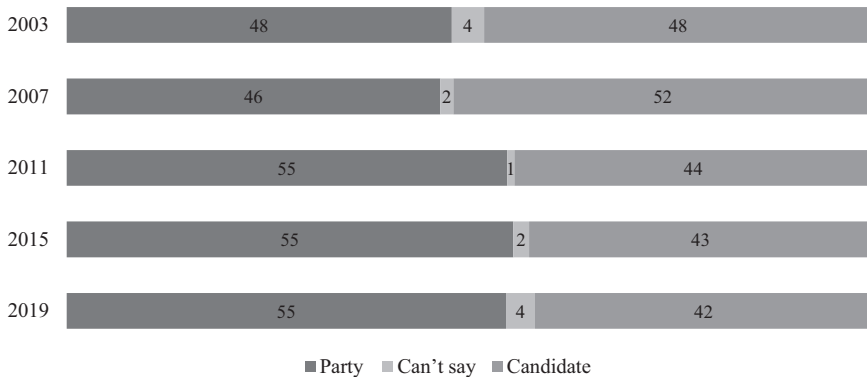


Figure 11.1 Party or candidate more important for vote choice (%).

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

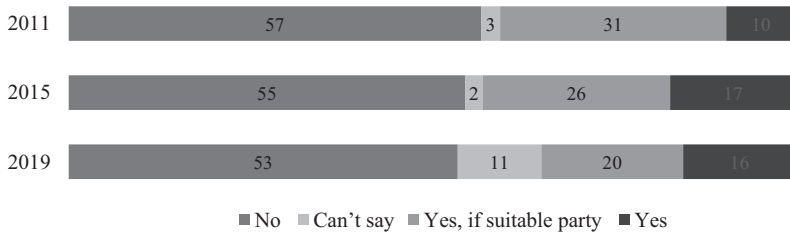


Figure 11.2 Readiness to vote for same candidate if stood for different party (%).

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

It is generally believed that the meteoric rise of the populist Finns Party (formerly known as the True Finns) in the 2011 “protest” election led to greater emphasis on parties as collective actors (Karvonen, 2014, 129).

Figure 11.2 includes the second indicator of personal voting, readiness to vote for the same candidate even if she stood for a different party. These numbers affirm that party has been weighted more strongly by a small majority in the 2010s. More than half of the respondents would not have voted for the same candidate if he or she had been running for any of the other parties. A small decrease in the number of party-centred voters, from 57 to 53 percent, can be detected during the 2010s. Twenty to thirty percent would have voted for the same candidate only if the other party would have been deemed acceptable. At most, 17 percent would still have voted for the same candidate irrespective of party label. These results indicate that to a large extent candidate voting is nested within, and so subsidiary to, party voting.

Next the focus is on Finnish voters’ attitudes towards the practice of casting preference votes for individual candidates. How content are Finnish voters with the system of preference voting? Two survey items capture electoral system attitudes although one of these has been included three of five post-election surveys and the other question only once. The respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- If a voter so wished, he/she should be able to vote only for a party in parliamentary elections without having to choose a candidate
- Even though voters vote for a party in elections in many other countries, it is important to me to be able to vote for a candidate in parliamentary elections

Finnish voters seem to treasure highly the possibility to vote for an individual candidate. The numbers are relatively stable for the past decade in terms of the first indicator. Over 50 percent have opposed the idea of Finns being able to vote only for a party without having to choose a candidate (see in Figure 11.3). “Strongly disagree” responses are somewhat less frequent and “somewhat disagree” more frequent in 2019 compared to the previous years. In contrast, a minority, about

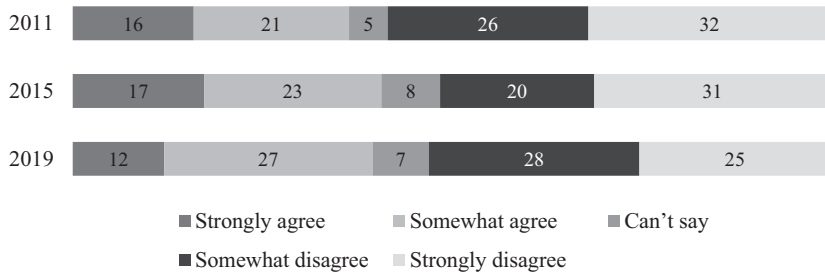


Figure 11.3 Should be able to vote only for party without having to choose candidate (%).

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

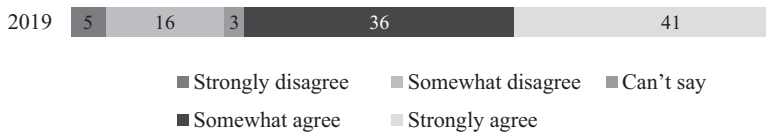


Figure 11.4 Important for me to be able to vote for candidate (%).

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

four in ten, would not mind if it was voluntary to vote for a candidate. The final item was only included in 2019. While the former question was more about whether people in general would not have to vote for a candidate, the latter asked for how important for the respondent herself to vote for a candidate. For as many as four-fifths it was personally important to be able to vote for a candidate. Thirty-six percent somewhat agreed and 41 percent strongly agreed with the statement (see Figure 11.4). Hence, candidates are central objects of electoral support for Finnish voters.

Explanatory analyses

This section examines who the candidate-centred voters are. The dependent variables – the outcomes that I wish to explain – are identical to those in the descriptive part. By means of multivariate regression analysis, I estimate to what extent various individual-level factors explain the variability in the outcome variables. While there are multiple sources of personalized behaviour, this chapter focuses on a limited set of independent variables. The independent variables are standard variables often included in studies of political behaviour and attitudes: gender, age, education, political interest, party identification, and left-right position. Their effects on candidate-based voting were discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Multinomial regression models are estimated for the two first dependent variables: “party or candidate more important for vote choice” and “readiness to vote for same candidate if stood for different party”. Don’t know or can’t say responses are included in the analyses. Therefore, the first dependent variable has three categories and the second dependent variable has four categories. Multinomial regression is an extension of logistic regression that is used when a categorical outcome variable has more than two values that cannot be meaningfully ordered. Second, ordinal regression models are used to describe the relationships between the explanatory variables and the two dependent variables that measure attitudes towards preference voting for individual candidates. Hence, the dependent variables were recorded on an ordinal scale running from strongly disagree to strongly agree with can’t say as a middle response. Data from multiple surveys are pooled and a survey year dummies are added.

I start with examining trends in person-centred voting and willingness to cast preference voting when controlling for individual-level variables. The first dependent variable featured in all five post-election surveys, while the second and third dependent variables were only included in three latest post-election surveys. Since the fourth dependent variable (candidate choice important) was only included in 2019, there is no temporal estimate. Year dummies are included to capture variations in responses over time.

The marginal effects presented in Figure 11.5 show by how many percentage points the likelihood of giving certain responses has increased (above zero) or decreased (below zero) in a given year. The year 2011 is the reference category to

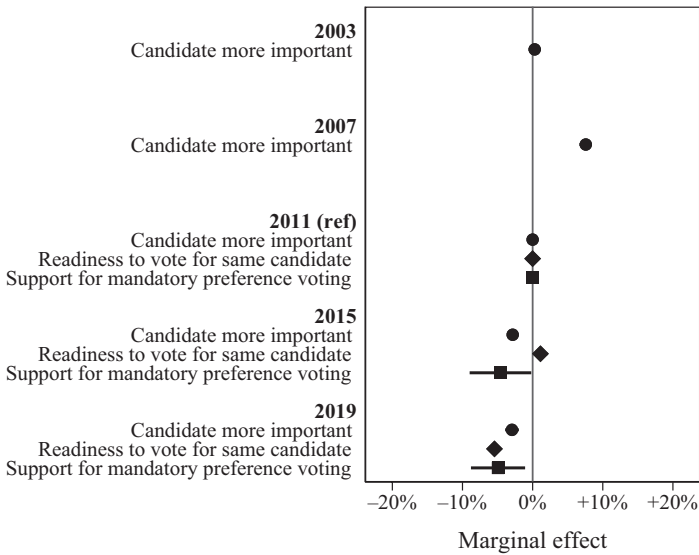


Figure 11.5 Marginal effects of year.

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

which the other years are compared. The first set of marginal effects (solid circles) indicate the predicted incidence of reporting that candidate was more important than party. Finnish voters were in 2007 most likely to report they thought candidate was more important than party for their vote choice. In 2015 and 2019, party was perceived to be more important than candidate for their vote choice although the change is only three percentage points compared to 2011. Second, readiness to vote for the same candidate (solid diamonds) combines two responses: would have voted if the candidate ran for a suitable party and would have vote irrespective of party. The likelihood to follow the candidate (relative to the outcome “would not have voted for the same candidate”) increased only slightly in 2015 and then decreased by six percentage points in 2019 relative to 2011. Third, support for mandatory preference voting (solid squares) combines somewhat agreed and strongly agreed. The likelihood of being positive to preference voting is about five percentage points lower in 2015 and 2019 compared to 2011. To summarise, voters appear to have become more party-oriented in the 2010s.

I begin by looking at the two first dependent variables for voting behaviour. The average marginal effects for the individual-level variables are reported in Figures 11.6 and 11.7. Each independent variable has a reference category to which the other categories are compared. In terms of the first sociodemographic variable, there does not appear to be any gender effects. In a previous study of candidate

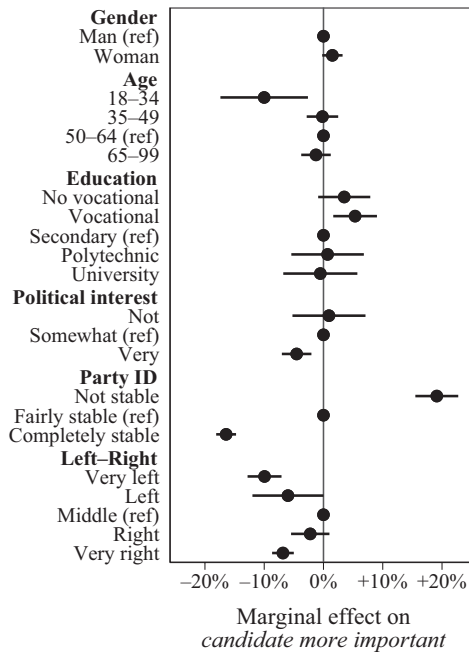


Figure 11.6 Predicting whether candidate is more important for vote choice.

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

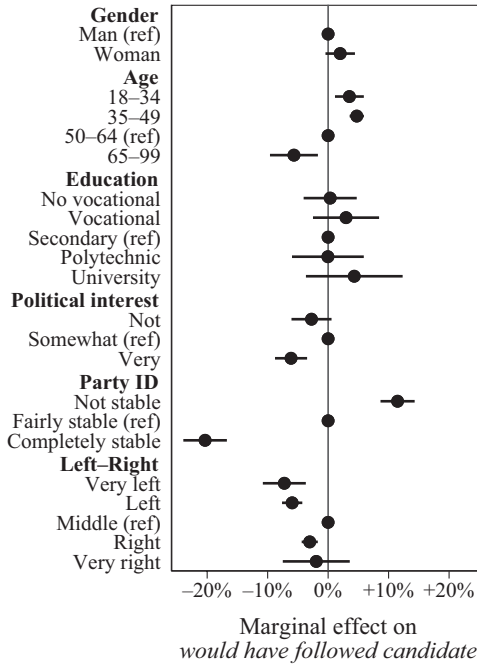


Figure 11.7 Predicting readiness to vote for same candidate if stood for different party.

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

supply and success in Finland, register data revealed that over the past two decades around 40 percent of the nominated candidates have been women, and the share of elected women candidates has increased from 37 to 47 percent (von Schoultz et al., 2020, 107). The “identity model” (Wauters et al., 2020) would lead us to believe that women would be likely to cast a preference vote for a candidate of the same gender. However, here I find no evidence that women have been more candidate-centred than men (and thus being potentially more apt to support women candidates).

Age does not have a consistent independent effect on the two outcomes regarding candidate being more important than party and readiness to vote for the same candidate even if she stood for a different party. Those in the youngest age group were less likely to vote for a candidate rather than a party, while there were no differences between the remaining age groups. In contrast, people under 50 years were more likely to report they would have voted for the same candidate had he or she ran for another party (Figure 11.7). A likely explanation regarding the latter finding is that older voters have been socialized into voting for a particular party over the decades, particularly in the previous century when the parties and the social groups they represented were more salient in the minds of the voters. Older voters who develop a sense of party identification become habitual voters who

are more likely to vote for the same party in sequential elections (Dassonneville, 2017). Hence, older voters remain loyal to the same party instead of supporting an individual candidate irrespective of party label.

Formal education does not explain candidate voting: the confidence intervals for all but one of the estimates cross the zero line (i.e., statistically insignificant). Subjective political interest is an alternative measure for political sophistication since education does not always lead to political engagement: educated people can be apolitical and less educated people can be highly engaged in politics. Political interest does explain the relative weight of candidate and party considerations. Among politically interested Finnish citizens, party considerations appear to outweigh candidate considerations. Such political sophisticates are thought to have the ability to process cognitively demanding considerations relating to policy and performance. Party-centred voters have been recognized to be mainly concerned about party characteristics (e.g., ideological platforms, issue positions, and past performance) (Slosar, 2011).

The results show that strong party identifiers (i.e., stable party identification) report that party is more important than candidate. As pointed out in the theoretical section, partisans have formed an emotional or habitual attachment to a certain party and feel represented by this party. In contrast, political independents with a weak party identification regard candidate as more important than party. The latter make independent political decisions with less emphasis on cues provided by social reference groups. They are, as expected, also more likely to respond they would have voted for the same candidate if he or she would have been on the list of another party. Political independents who engage in candidate-based voting are generally considered to be more likely to defect across party lines (Karvonen, 2004, 210; McAllister, 2007, 584). Data for Finland already in the beginning of the 1990s showed that voters who reported that candidate was of primary concern were more volatile than party-centred voters (Pesonen et al., 1993, 80–82).

Ideological left-right self-placement also has a substantive and significant effect when it comes to explaining object of electoral choice (Figure 11.6) and willingness to disregard the candidate's party affiliation (Figure 11.7). Groups on the ideological fringes – particularly those to the left – can be expected to adhere more to collective values and ideological considerations should dominate their electoral decisions. Voters in the middle of the ideological left-right scale are most likely to be candidate-centred, as previously demonstrated (see Karvonen, 2014, 132).

The estimates from the analysis of the two final dependent variables are presented in Figures 11.8 and 11.9. These dependent variables measure support for (mandatory) preference voting and thinking that candidate choice is important. Few of the estimates are statistically different from zero, however. Women were less enthusiastic about mandatory preference voting than men. Age has the strongest effect in terms of attitudes towards preference voting. The willingness to cast a preference vote was strongest among the oldest respondents and weakest among the youngest respondents. Older voters have manifestly over the years become familiar with the party supply and candidate supply and thus have developed more

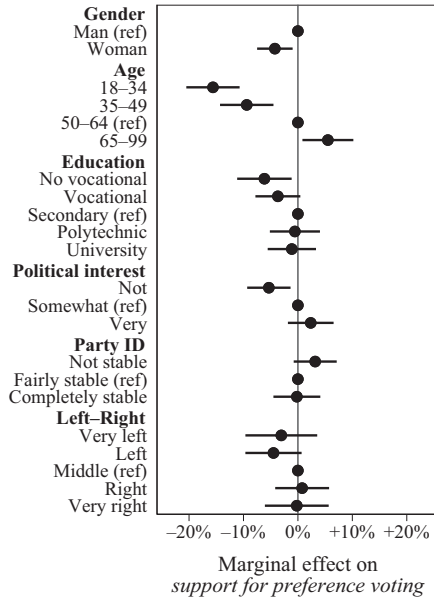


Figure 11.8 Predicting support for mandatory preference voting.

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

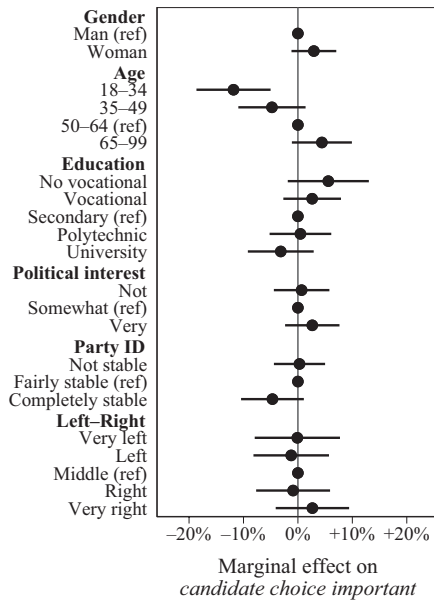


Figure 11.9 Predicting candidate choice is personally important.

Source: Finnish National Election Study 2003–2019.

positive attitudes of the present electoral system with preference voting. Those with lowest education and those with lowest political interest supported to lesser extent mandatory preference voting, but by and large there are no systematic differences. Ideological self-placement does neither matter in terms of willingness to cast preference votes.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to describe and explain party- and candidate-based voting in Finland. Both intraparty and interparty competition are central features of Finnish electoral politics. Formally, the voters cast their votes directly for a candidate and indirectly for a party because the intraparty preference vote is pooled at the party level to determine the allocation of seats among parties. It is therefore of little surprise that the results presented in this chapter showed that both party and candidate are relevant in the voters' decision-making processes. In the 2010s, 55 percent reported party was more important than candidate in their voting decision and roughly the same amount would not have vote for the same candidate if he or she had been running for another party. Finland does not deviate much from Ireland, another candidate-centred system where different measures have suggested that around 40 percent of the voters are candidate-centred (Marsh, 2007, 520).

With the declining importance of party, and increasing personalization of electoral choice, voters have become increasingly likely to emphasize candidate choice and be more responsive to personal attributes of individual candidates in the process of forming voting preferences. On a general level, this study has contributed to the assessment of the adequacy of the personalization thesis by examining the relative importance of candidate considerations in vote choice over time. Yet, a limitation of this chapter was the relatively short time frame, from 2003 to 2019, and therefore, it cannot give a full account of whether candidate evaluations have come to exert greater influence on vote choice over time. Karvonen (2014, 129) did, however, notice that from 1983 until 2007, "there was a steady, albeit by no means dramatic, increase in the share of those who reported that candidate weighed more heavily than party", but that "the 2011 election brought about a change in this regard" mainly due to the rise of the populist Finns Party. This study affirms that voters had become even more party-centred by 2019, although it does not represent a dramatic shift. Party is undeniably still a very important factor in accounting for vote choice in parliamentary democracies in general as well as in Finland despite the latter's candidate-centred electoral system.

At the individual level, the relative weight of party and candidate considerations vary between different types of voters. In particular, party identification and ideological (left-right) extremeness best explained why party considerations dominate candidate considerations among some people. Voters who had developed a stable party identification, and those in the ideological fringes, tended to emphasize party, probably due to their heightened awareness of parties' policy positions and performance record. These findings are by no means self-evident as party identifiers and ideologically aware have been theorized to be more likely to process information

about candidates (see Marsh, 1985) and empirical support has been mixed when comparing effects on the probability of voting for a candidate in different countries (e.g., Bengtsson et al., 2014). In this study, politically interested respondents were as well more likely to emphasize the importance party and less likely to switch parties (had the candidate been nominated by another party). The findings correspond to the theoretical prediction that the more informed a person is, the more clear and stable preferences this person holds. This is also in line with the presumption that voters lacking knowledge and information give less weight to ideology and performance and more weight to personality (Slosar, 2011). Younger respondents, who are less likely to have formed an affective bond to a certain party, were also more likely to follow a candidate to another party.

Finally, even though the party brand still matters, Finnish voters still treasure the ability to cast a preference vote for an individual candidate. Particularly older voters are in favour of preference voting. The popularity of the current electoral system is expected given that preference voting has been applied for more than hundred years in Finland. Considering the current debate – or rather the lack thereof – the open list proportional representation system is likely to be around for many years to come and that there will be a mix of party- and candidate-centredness both among candidates and voters.

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