

# The Electoral Connection Revisited: Introduction to the Special Issue

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/psrev)Corentin Poyet<sup>1</sup>  and Mihail Chiru<sup>2</sup> 

## Abstract

Introduction to a symposium: ‘The electoral connection revisited: personal vote-seeking efforts’

## Keywords

representation, electoral connection, personalization of politics, campaigning, vote-seeking

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## Introduction

The decline of parties as primary vehicles of interest aggregation and substantive representation has been paralleled in many European democracies by a multifaceted phenomenon, generally referred to as the personalization of politics (Balmas and Sheaffer, 2016; Rahat and Kenig, 2018). Personalization, usually defined as an increased relevance of individual politicians at the expense of parties over time (Pruysers et al., 2018: 5), manifests itself at institutional, media and behavioural levels (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007).

While cross-national evidence regarding institutional personalization, reflected in reforms of electoral systems (Renwick and Pilet, 2016), candidate selection (Cross et al., 2016) and party leadership selection processes (Cross and Pilet, 2015) is hard to ignore, there is significantly more controversy around behavioural personalization (Wauters et al., 2018) and media personalization (Kriesi, 2012).

The articles in this special issue revisit the electoral connection in five European countries, and in so doing they contribute to the literature on institutional and behavioural personalization. Behavioural personalization refers to the extent to which party leaders and chief executives dominate politics more than before (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), the increased usage of personalized campaign strategies by legislators and ordinary candidates (De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Zittel and Gschwend, 2008) and the salience of

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<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland<sup>2</sup>Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

### Corresponding author:

Corentin Poyet, Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Kanslerinrinne 1, 33014 Tampere, Finland.

Email: [corentin.poyet@tuni.fi](mailto:corentin.poyet@tuni.fi)

leaders and other individual politicians in vote choice (Karvonen, 2014; Martin, 2010). As opposed to studies that focus on the presidentialization of party politics (i.e. leader-centred personalization), in this special issue, we concentrate on decentralized personalization (Balmas et al., 2014). Thus, we evaluate how candidates and MPs in Finland, France, Hungary, Italy and Romania signal their responsiveness to constituents and the extent to which voters reward such signals.

The changes brought by institutional and behavioural personalization affect representation linkages and have the potential to amplify the clash between individual/dyadic and collective representation patterns (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Weissberg, 1978). On the one hand, collective representation highlights the role of parties as the main agent of representation. MPs are defined by their collective action as members of a cohesive team working to implement a policy programme which caters to the preferences of all those who vote for the party. On the other hand, in the dyadic model, representatives are mainly seen as individual agents representing geographically defined constituencies (Zittel et al., 2019: 682). The former model was considered as being the rule in European legislatures (Thomassen and Andeweg, 2004). That is why, in Europe, the personalization of politics is often linked to the crisis of collective representation and the decline of trust in parties. Governing parties and opposition politicians alike have proposed institutional personalization reforms in the hope of restoring political trust and strengthening the linkages with voters (Renwick and Pilet, 2016). At a behavioural level, for individual legislators, the same crisis can translate into more demanding constituents, expecting their representatives to reach out, try to understand their concerns and priorities, and act on their behalf (André et al., 2014; Eulau and Karps, 1977).

However, even when governments implement institutional reforms designed to strengthen the link between citizens and their representatives, the tangible effects on the work of representatives remain uncertain (Renwick and Pilet, 2016). Moreover, studies examining the impact of such reforms are rare (Coman, 2012; Papp and Zorigt, 2018). Similarly, the personalization of an electoral system is not expected to have a uniform effect on MPs' and candidates' behaviour (Arter, 2018). Additional factors, such as electoral vulnerability (André et al., 2015; Heitshusen et al., 2005; Kellermann, 2016) and district features (Costa and Poyet, 2016; Willumsen, 2019) may interact with the electoral incentives.

## **The Missing Link: MPs' Vote-Seeking Behaviour in the Era of Political Personalization**

The contributions in this special issue use the lenses of decentralized personalization to revisit earlier work on legislative behaviour and campaigning, theorize recent developments and add a new layer of empirical findings related to how electoral and non-electoral incentives influence MPs' engagement in personal vote-seeking efforts and the extent to which voters reward such practices.

In Europe, early literature argued that personal vote-seeking was mostly irrelevant. Converse and Pierce (1986) applied Miller and Stokes' (1963) diamond model to France. They found that French MPs are so strictly bound to party group discipline that individual actions are hardly possible. Although this study focused on a very particular aspect of parliamentary work – roll-call voting – it had a substantial impact on the European literature by making scholars shy away from the topic for a considerable period of time (Thomassen and Andeweg, 2004). In Weissberg's (1978) terms, collective representation was supposed to be the rule in European legislatures.

Later, scholars of European legislatures started to recognize that given the importance of parties in these political systems, personal vote-seeking behaviours would likely occur in other forms than by advertising distinct ideological positions that can harm the value of the party label (Thomassen, 1994). Zittel (2017: 671) explains that under party dominated legislatures, personal vote-seeking behaviour would more likely manifest as signals to territorial interests and constituents, while mostly refraining from ‘disrupting party unity or contradicting collectivist forms of representation’.

The institutional personalization reforms, which brought a proliferation of candidate-centred electoral systems in European countries (Colomer, 2011; Karvonen, 2010), also raised scholars’ interest in individual legislative behaviour. Hence, in recent times, researchers started to investigate MPs’ personal vote seeking efforts, both in and outside the parliament. Recent decades have seen the development of European studies focusing on constituency service (Arter, 2011; Costa and Poyet, 2016; O’Leary, 2011), work in committees (Raymond and Holt, 2017, 2019) and the usage of written questions (Bailer, 2011; Chiru, 2018; Martin, 2011) and private-members bills (Bowler, 2010; Solvak and Pajala, 2016) to signal territorial responsiveness.

Two salient aspects are nevertheless missing from this literature. First, they mostly ignore the role of political parties in the process of personal vote-seeking: are they enabling legislators, opposing such efforts because they fear their consequences for party unity or merely indifferent? Second, the literature rarely engages seriously with the behavioural consequences of institutional personalization reforms. The articles in this special issue pursue both directions.

## The Special Issue and Its Findings

The contributions in the special issue focus on different aspects of the three major strategies of cultivating a personal vote: position-taking, credit claiming and advertising (Mayhew, 1974). The studies pay special attention to common and country-specific trends of party decline and political personalization. The special issue addresses three interrelated questions: How do MPs deal with institutional personalization reforms? How do such reforms affect their legislative work and their campaign strategies? Do personal vote-seeking efforts get noticed and rewarded by voters? The special issue adopts a case selection strategy designated to ensure the minimal diversity of cases to facilitate theory-building (Lieberson, 1991; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 2003; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Thus, the special issue gathers five cases from Western and Eastern Europe, which have very different institutional designs and party systems, and in which electoral system reforms went in opposite directions regarding the levels of personalization.

The articles share a common theoretical anchor based on the personal vote theory but tackle their research questions empirically from two perspectives: the legislators and their legislative activities on the one hand and candidates and their electoral campaign strategies on the other. The contributions mobilize similar independent variables, among them the electoral system, district pressures, candidate selection, and personal vote earning attributes such as residence in the constituency.

In so doing, the articles are highly complementary as they allow for studying political processes related to the personal vote across the legislative and the electoral arenas. Thus, while Arter (2021) illustrates how candidate selection districts influence campaigning, intra-party competition and the ability of politicians to win votes, Russo (2021) and Chiru (2021) focus on how candidate selection attributes make legislators allocate more or less

time to constituency service. Similarly, Poyet (2021) and Papp (2020) devote significant attention to understanding how issue salience interacts with district pressures in the two arenas. While the former analyses their effect on legislative work, the latter investigates the extent to which such action is rewarded by constituents depending on the constellations of district pressures and issue salience.

In the following paragraphs, we synthesize the main theoretical arguments and empirical findings from each of the articles in the special issue. *David Arter* (2021) draws inferences about intra-party competition in Finnish parliamentary elections from the distribution of the candidate vote at the municipal level. Finland has one of the most personalized electoral systems in Europe, providing candidates with powerful incentives to cultivate a personal vote. In his article, Arter discusses the pertinence and the limits of previous literature on intra-party competition and the impact of district magnitude. Mobilizing the concepts of geographic sub-constituency and electoral constituency (André and Depauw, 2018; Grofman, 2005), he argues that the size of the districts incites candidates to limit their campaign activities to a designated area within the district boundaries and to build a ‘home turf’. His arguments find strong empirical support: Arter shows that candidates draw most of their votes from three concentric constituencies, organized around the candidate’s home municipality. In this way, Arter contributes to the literature on decentralized personalization from the angle of party organization and intra-party competition.

*Mihail Chiru* (2021) brings to light a case of electoral system personalization that did trigger behavioural consequences in the direction expected by the reformers. Thus, he is able to show that after the 2008 electoral reform in Romania, which replaced the party-centred closed-list PR with an original mixed electoral system, legislators’ constituency orientation has been modified: they started engaging more in allocation responsiveness than before. Moreover, some determinants of constituency orientation have also changed after the reform. The article’s findings are based on a careful before-and-after design in which pre- and post-reform legislators were matched on relevant characteristics (e.g. parliamentary seniority, electoral vulnerability, district magnitude, party-switching, etc.) while the various types of parliamentary questions dealing with constituency issues were differentiated based on the triggering responsiveness mechanism or the type of actor whose interests are being represented.

*Zsofia Papp* (2020) examines the electoral rewards for district-oriented policy responsiveness in Hungary, drawing on data from five consecutive parliamentary elections (1990–2010). The article focuses on policy congruence on agricultural issues: the analyses assess the extent to which voters from districts with a significant share of constituents working in agriculture reward MPs for being active in this policy domain. Papp’s longitudinal analysis illustrates that, in Hungary, there are no signs of a continuously increasing behavioural personalization. Instead, responsiveness to district demands matters in elections when the issue is of great salience, and when political turbulence deprives government parties of their former supporter base. Papp also offers a pivotal contribution to the literature by showing that the magnitude of the reward for district responsiveness is smaller than the penalizing effect suffered by legislators who are active on agricultural issues while representing a district where this interest is weak.

*Corentin Poyet* (2021) explores individual French legislators’ policy responsiveness to their constituents. France has one of the weakest parliaments in Western Europe and strong party discipline, making it a least likely case for district-oriented responsiveness. He argues that the electoral system, however, provides MPs with incentives to be responsive to district pressures. Focusing also on the issue of agriculture, he shows empirically that district-oriented policy responsiveness is widely present in the two terms analysed

(1997–2007). Thus, French legislators elected from districts with strong agricultural and fishery interests submit significantly more questions on such topics. Poyet contributes to the literature by illustrating that individual district-oriented policy responsiveness can co-exist alongside collective representation and is sometimes reinforced by party issue salience. Such responsiveness is stronger when the legislator's party assigns more salience to agriculture in its manifesto.

*Federico Russo* (2021) analyses the determinants of territorial representation in Italy in the wake of an electoral reform that went in a de-personalizing direction: the 2005 abolition of Single Member Districts and the introduction of Closed List PR with high district magnitude. The author draws on parliamentary question data from three legislative terms (2006–2018) and shows that even under an electoral system providing such low personal vote-seeking incentives, Italian legislators still devoted remarkable resources to territorial representation. Moreover, Russo shows that the most important predictors of this behaviour were the legislators' degree of personal and political rootedness in their constituencies and the extent of candidate selection decentralization.

All in all, the articles in the special issues produce two significant contributions to the legislative studies literature. First, they confirm that one cannot take for granted the role of institutional personalization reforms in strengthening the individual linkages between MPs and their constituents. While in the case of Romania, such a reform had a direct impact on MPs' behaviour, this was only visible at the level of allocation responsiveness, and not in their overall constituency service efforts. Conversely, as illustrated by Russo, an institutional reform that went in the opposite direction in the Italian case did not manage to eradicate legislators' constituency orientation. This orientation remained firmly rooted in their personal and political socialization, and continued to be facilitated by candidate selection processes. These contrasting cases also raise questions regarding the influence of latent cultural variables, such as the role of localism and personalism in these societies.

Second, the contributions show that, although faced by increased widespread distrust and the potentially destabilizing effect of behavioural personalization, parties managed, in settings as diverse as the ones studied in this special issue, to maintain a critical role in the way individual responsiveness works and in how individual voter-candidate linkages are concretely established. In the case of Finland, parties not only organize how the personal vote-seeking and personalized campaigning is conducted, but they deliberately select local candidates to ensure proper geographical coverage and maximize personal votes. Moreover, as the French and Hungarian cases show, the parties' agendas and the salience they assign to issues can reinforce the MPs' district responsiveness and increase the personal votes that can be collected for it.

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### **ORCID iDs**

Corentin Poyet  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1960-5280>

Mihail Chiru  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0811-5457>

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## Author Biographies

Corentin Poyet is an Academy of Finland postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University. His research interests include parliamentary studies, electoral systems and public policy. His work has been published in *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *Legislative Studies Quarterly* and *Parliamentary Affairs*, among others.

Mihail Chiru is a Lecturer at the Russian and East European Studies Department, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford. His main academic interests include legislative behavior and legislative organization, party politics, and electoral studies. His recent work was published in *Journal of European Integration*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *Journal of Common Market Studies*.