

The Leadership Dilemma: Examining the Impact of Strong Leaders on Parties

Despina Alexiadou* and Eoin O'Malley♣

* School of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK
(despina.alexiadou@strath.ac.uk)

♣ School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
(eoin.omalley@dcu.ie)

Abstract

Party leaders are often regarded as crucial to a party's success. Successful leaders tend to be big personalities who dominate their party's organisation, policy development, and electoral campaigns. But does that control come with a price? We test to see if such leaders damage their parties in the medium term. This happens because strong leaders might be ceded too much control of the party organisation, policy and electoral strategy. We specifically hypothesise that political parties will go through a period of leadership instability and electoral decline after strong leaders step down. Using a dataset with elections under party leaders in nine countries over a 25-year period, and a qualitative case study, we find some evidence for the theory, which should prompt further research of the question.

Introduction

Though subject to intense academic debate (Aarts et al., 2011; Garzia, 2014; Bittner, 2011), it is intuitive that a leader will affect the party's electoral performance. Politics, including electoral politics, is seen as increasingly personalised, where the focus is on the leader, and political organisations are embodied by the leader (Rahat and Kenig, 2018). However, it is not intuitive that the party's *past* leader could affect the party's current standing. If they are to, we might expect a strong leader to have a positive long-term impact. A strong leader could achieve success by building a strong party organisation, improving the party's brand, and offering a plausible policy platform. All these might be sustainable, and so offer long-term advantages to the party. But is it possible that the leader's strength actually does damage to the party visible only after she leaves the role?

Margaret Thatcher was undoubtedly a strong leader; her influence on the UK Conservative party was near-complete. She dominated the party organisation, party policy, and its electoral strategy. Under Thatcher the Conservative party got its best ever electoral results and she broadened the Conservatives' base to make it attractive to working class support that had traditionally only voted Labour. In effect she created a new coalition that maintained power for almost two decades. She resigned the party leadership in 1990, after 15 years its leader. The Conservative Party won a slim majority under her successor in the election 18 months later. It might be thought that after her period of dominance she left her party in good shape.

But there is another possible interpretation of these events. In the two decades after she left office the party struggled with internal divisions and poor election results. It committed what one prominent member characterised as 'a political suicide' (Fowler, 2008). This might have been an indirect result of her dominance. As leader she suppressed debate on issues that divided the party such as the relationship with the European Union, but those divisions remained, and festered. As leader she effectively removed any challengers, in part by outliving them, but also by sacking and demoting them. She promoted John Major as her favoured successor even though he was seen as weak and lacking charisma (Jenkins, 2007, p. 160). When he succeeded her, Major won an election the Tories were widely expected to lose, but then he struggled to stop the divisions in the party from bringing down his government.

It was noted that ‘any leader taking over the Conservative Party in November 1990 would have had a difficult ride: the party was deeply divided, and there was no clear direction for it to travel’ (Seldon and Lodge, 2011, p. xiii). When the 1997 election came the Conservative Party was annihilated by New Labour. It went through three leaders in quick succession and lost two more elections with only hints of recovery. It was 2010, two decades after Thatcher left, and with the help of the global economic crisis, before the Conservatives managed to govern again, and then only as part of a coalition.

How generalisable is the case of the British Conservative party? Do strong leaders leave their parties in worse shape in the longer term? Specifically, are the successors of strong leaders doomed to short tenures? In turn, do their parties suffer electoral costs above what would be expected? And if so, why does this happen? How do strong leaders damage their parties?

This paper seeks to answer these questions, and in-so-doing finds empirical support for the proposed theory. The paper proceeds as follows: we start our analysis providing an overview of leaders and parties, explicating the causal mechanisms of the effects of strong leaders, and developing associated hypotheses. This is followed by the data and results section. The penultimate section includes a case study to illustrate the causal mechanism. We conclude with a discussion on implications.

Parties and Leaders

If parties attempt to represent the interests of groups within society, leaders have multiple roles. They outline, and in cases, set, their party’s vision and ideology. They are the chief executive that directs and manages the organisation and its resources. That organisation converts the ideology and vision into policies and provides an electoral strategy. Leaders are usually the electoral face that the party depends on to sell the party’s policies and make a connection with the public. A strongly-performing leader may be ceded control of all these instruments, and a poorly-performing leader will, presumably, be removed. Parties, then, look to figures such as a Gerhard Schröder, Alexis Tsipras, or Margaret Thatcher who can take control of an existing party, change its course and in-so-doing, revive its fortunes.

Though it is disputed whether leaders have direct effects on party popularity and voting behaviour (Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; King, 2002; Pedersen & Schumacher, 2015) there is consensus that these indirect effects are important determinants of party

support. There are a small number of explanations for change in party support (as opposed to the overall level of party support which might be due to long term structural factors such as cleavages, electoral rules etc.). In most such theories, a crucial figure is often the party leader. The party leader sets policy positions, frames elections, and is thought of as the medium through which the party communicates its message to voters (Sides et al., 2018; Garzia, 2014). If the leader is seen as competent, the party will be seen as competent. When the party shifts policy position, it often does so as a result of the leader driving that change. When issues are activated and voters mobilised it is often because the leader chose to focus on specific issues or groups. Thus, the party leader is commonly seen as crucial to a party's electoral performance (Lobo, 2018). This explains why scholars have recently studied how leaders and leadership changes affect parties' electoral fortunes more systematically (Pedersen and Schumacher, 2015; Murr, 2015; Bittner, 2011) even if leader and party popularity are hard to separate (Aarts et al., 2011).

While most of the work on the impact of leaders has been on the vote, there is a literature on the internal structures of parties (Ceron, 2012, Dewan & Squintani, 2016). There is, especially, a small but useful literature on leadership selection including on how it affects electoral performance (Kenig, 2009; Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller, 2015). However, the comparative study of party leaders and party organisation has been particularly difficult up to now (Helms 2012) due to lack of data on party leaders that are, at least partly, independent of formal rules, as well as due to lack in testable theoretical expectations regarding the effects of leaders on their parties.

Strong leaders and their parties

If leaders matter to party performance, then the types of leaders must matter. Strong leaders are typically understood as those who concentrate power in his or her own hands and wield it decisively (Brown 2014, p. 11). These qualities are particularly useful in situations where a party's ability to move swiftly and decisively "may result in great differences in its success in vote seeking or office seeking" (Kitschelt 1994, p. 213). For instance, Kitschelt (1994) suggested the success of the southern European social democratic parties in the 1980s might have been due to their strong leadership. Empirically we should expect that strong leaders are associated with a positive bump in their party's electoral performance. But like Brown (2014)

we challenge the idea that strong leaders are the best leaders, and specifically we question whether they are, on average, good for their party.

We define a strong party leader as one who *sets and articulates the party's policies and priorities, controls the party organisation, and is central to its electoral strategy*. Parties will often allow leaders become strong because they experience electoral popularity, they may be confident that they have effective, well-defined policies, and they could enjoy the glow of media and commentariat approval. The departure of the exceptional leader might see the party simply revert to 'normal'. However, strong leaders may also damage their parties; that positive bump may come at a cost.

It is a principal-agent problem, where organisations such as parties can cede the leader too much control, which in some circumstances might be difficult to recover. While the leader and the party obviously share many interests, at times they diverge.¹ The leader may run the party for her own benefit, and her time horizon may differ from that of the party. She may favour immediate office and vote rewards rather than a slower and more sustainable growth. The damaging impact of strong leaders on their parties can happen through a variety of mechanisms in three 'faces': organisational, policy, and electoral (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Instead of strengthening the organisation strong leaders might weaken the party as it comes to depend on the leader's personal resources. Leaders are often good communicators, possessing great intelligence and political skill. Impatient to achieve results, some strong leaders will simply bypass, and hence weaken, party institutions. Deinstitutionalised parties are those which are less subject to rules, processes and standardised procedures for decision making. Advisers hand-picked by a leader rather than ones elected by a party congress will be less representative of the body of opinion within a party, and so less diverse. In many fora diversity is associated with increased deliberation and hence improved decision-making (Haire et al., 2013). But strong leadership is associated with a narrowing of decision making. For instance, Blairism led to a centralising of decision making in the UK Labour party's leader, Tony Blair, and weakened traditional policy-making institutions such as Conference.

¹ This raises the question as to who is the 'party'. Does it exist for its leaders, parliamentarians, members or its voters? We don't address this question here but assume that the party has an interest in long-term sustainability.

This can be seen to have had an impact on the policies and the type of people Labour elected, helping to disconnect Labour from the British working class (O'Grady, 2019).

Strong leaders can have an intentional damaging impact, when they attempt to stay in power by undermining and demoting talented potential successors. Strong leaders damage potential challengers using a variety of methods, including giving them no jobs, difficult jobs, or jobs where they risk irrelevancy.² When the strong leader retires she might have a chosen successor who was never a real threat to the leader, or the only 'survivors' might not be suitable as leaders. Strong leaders can therefore weaken a party's talent base.

Strong leaders often bring their parties in bold new policy directions. Indeed, leader-dominated parties are associated with policy change (Schumacher and Giger, 2018). A strong leader will try to bring about a new orthodoxy. This can happen through the suppression of debate or by intimidating those who question the strong leader's approach, weakening the underlying ties that hold the party together. Boucek (2009) argues competitive factionalism improves party policy-making. Factions, which can act as a restraint on party leaders (Ceron, 2012) are damaged, and their leaders are removed or weakened in battles with the strong leader.

When the party relies disproportionately on the leader for policy direction, it might lose its electoral edge once the leader's policy prescriptions are out-dated or have failed. His or her successor merely consolidates this solution or manages challenges to this new orthodoxy. After eight years of Reagan's leadership, George H.W. Bush was a mere manager in charge of articulating Reaganomics and defending it from attacks (Skowronek, 2011). Taking over a hollowed-out party, whose internal debates and leadership rivals had been suppressed, from someone who was the party's main 'face' and electoral asset, and which had been taken in a bold direction will be challenging. Those disputes may re-emerge, and the loss of an image as a unified party can damage the perceptions of the party's competence (Green et al., 2015). There may be a desire to row back on previous commitments. The party could lack organisational capacity for the new leader to deliver a strong performance.

This is a general theory whose main causal mechanisms relate to the three faces in Table 1. Given data constraints we cannot test for these different mechanisms, but instead just

² For example, they can use ministerial appointments to politically control and harm potential challengers (Alexiadou, 2016).

test to see if there is any link between strong leaders and their successors' performance. We derive two testable hypotheses. First:

H1: Successors to strong leaders will have shorter tenures than successors to other leaders.

Successors to strong leaders will have an uphill struggle not only because strong leaders are “hard acts to follow” as per Horiuchi et al. (2015) but also because they are handed over an organisationally weaker and more divided party, and because the successors themselves are more likely to be ‘weaker’ leaders than average. In turn, if strong leaders leave parties in a weaker position because parties have ceded them too much control in them, all else being equal, we expect that once strong leaders step down, the party will suffer electorally. Thus, we also expect:

H2: A party will perform electorally worse after the departure of a strong leader.

Our second expectation is a hard test for our theory. Typically, leadership changes improve parties' electoral performance or at the minimum have no electoral impact (Pedersen and Schumacher, 2015). Therefore, electoral losses after leadership change are surprising. One might argue that any such electoral loss is simply the outcome of the party reverting back to its historical electoral equilibrium. However, if we find that parties suffer significant electoral losses, even after accounting for the positive electoral gains strong leaders bring to the party, this is evidence that strong leaders leave their parties electorally weaker when they step down.

Conceptualising Strong Leaders and Empirical Implications

To our knowledge, this is the first empirical test of the effect of leadership type on their parties. This is a non-trivial challenge as measuring leader strength is not an easy task. In the past, researchers have either used expert surveys that code whether parties are more elite or activist-dominated (Schumacher and Giger, 2017) or have looked at the formal rules available to a party's leader, measured at one point in time (Poguntke et al., 2017). At the individual level, researchers have used leaders' tenure in office as a proxy of their strength (Horiuchi et al., 2015). However, neither party institutions nor leader tenure alone capture sufficiently leader strength.

Although the type of party, whether it is a catch-all or cadre (Katz and Mair 1993) and party statutes have a significant impact on leaders' relationship with the party, institutions

cannot account for the majority of variation in a leader's strength, as "formal structures may not tell us much about actual distributions of influence within political parties" (Poguntke et al., 2017, p. 667). Strong leaders, in particular, will be able to change the rules or skirt them, if any rules even exist.³

One operationalisation of a leader's personal, rather than institutional, strength is her tenure in office. Blondel (1980, p. 25) argued that "the single most important characteristic is the[ir] duration". Horiuchi et al. (2015) define 'great leaders' as "very long-serving founders or successful reformers of their parties" (p. 358). For them it is the longevity that makes these leaders "hard acts to follow", as successors struggle to meet the expectations set by their "formidable predecessors" (p. 359). Yet, a leader's longevity is more than a proxy of their greatness. It is the outcome of a host of factors, personal, institutional and electoral. Importantly, a leader's survival in office heavily depends on her ability to deliver good electoral results (Andrews & Jackman, 2008)⁴. It is also directly affected by the size of the electorate, the body that selects the party leader. The larger the size of the electorate, the more competitive leadership elections (Kenig et al., 2015), though there is conflicting evidence as to whether a more exclusive group that deselected makes leaders more or less secure.⁵

It is this endogenous relationship between leaders' tenure and their role in their parties' electoral fortunes that makes it particularly difficult to estimate the effect of long-tenured leaders on their parties. Leaders who are expected to underperform are removed before that underperformance manifests itself. We address this problem by operationalising *strong leaders as those who have control of the party organisation*.

We do that by using an indicator of *party leaders' control of the party organisation* provided by the PoPES expert survey (Marino et al., 2018). This is a comparative dataset that covers 16 Western European countries over 30 years (from 1985 to 2015). The indicators are constructed through an expert survey that was fielded in 2017 in 16 European countries⁶ asking experts in each country to assess the role of party leaders of political parties at each

³ For instance, Gruber et al. (2015, p. 132) find that over half the parties in their sample have no rules relating to the removal of leaders.

⁴ However, Ennsner-Jedenastik and Schumacher (2021) find that party leaders stay in office even when they deliver poor electoral results if they are able to join the government.

⁵ Ennsner-Jedenastik and Schumacher (2015) find that larger de-selectorates associated with shorter leader tenures, whereas Gruber et al., (2015) using a different dataset find support for their hypothesis that a smaller de-selectorate is associated with lower leadership job security.

⁶ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

election.⁷ After merging these data with our own data on party leaders and their tenure in office, we have information on 104 party leaders across 29 parties and nine European countries.⁸ To our knowledge, there are no other data that span over 30 years and directly code the control a party leader has of her/ his party personally.

Having as our starting point that strong leaders are those who are able to control the party organisation, we believe that an indicator of leader strength should include a measure of how much the party has ceded the leader organisational control. We use the following question from the PoPES survey: *How would you rate the control that party leaders have on party organisation?* The respondents were asked to rate the leaders from 1 to 10, where 1 means very low autonomy or control, and 10 very high autonomy or control.⁹ This indicator captures how dominant individual party leaders are in their party organisation over time. Figure 1 presents the histogram of the indicator of *control of party organisation*. The unit of analysis is party leader at each election.

[Figure 1 about here]

A direct outcome of a leader's tight control of the party organisation is her tenure in office. To the extent that strong leaders are able to suppress their competitors, and policy debate, and to the extent that they become the party's electoral brand, as discussed in Table 1, it should become harder to remove them from office, subject to the party's de-selection rules. Strong leaders should be able to stay in power for an extended period of time. In a study of prime ministers, tenure and power were found to correlate (O'Malley, 2010). Indeed, Figure

⁷ Defined as those that have received at least 5 per cent of the national vote in one election or have attained at least one per cent of the national vote in consecutive elections. The response rate was 47 per cent, which is considered adequate. Out of the 339 experts contacted, 159 responded. There is however large cross country variation in the response rate with some countries reaching as high as 80 per cent response rate (Ireland), while others being as low as three per cent (Sweden). Accordingly, we are not able to include Sweden in our analysis. For more information on the dataset and reliability tests see the report by Marino, Diodati and Verzichelli, 2018.

⁸ Austria, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, UK.

⁹ When using expert survey data, one has to be careful that the survey question holds the same meaning across countries. To test the validity of the measures used here, we compare the indicator of leaders' control of the party organisation with data compiled by Schumacher and Giger (2017) on the dominance of party leadership. The scatterplot, provided in the Online Appendix, clearly shows that the two indicators correlate significantly and most importantly we fail to find any country deviations. Moreover, in our empirical models we include country fixed effects to control for country specific deviations. This should reduce potential biases that are due to sample heterogeneity resulting from a different interpretation of the expert survey question.

2 shows there is a positive correlation between leaders' tenure and their control of the party organisation.

[Figure 2 about here]

While a leader's tenure in office is a direct product of strength, a leader's tenure depends on more factors than just her strength. Factors such as leadership de-selection mechanisms and whether the party is in government affect tenure independently (Ennsner-Jedenastik and Schumacher, 2021). Moreover, a leader's tenure can be a significant factor for augmenting a leader's power over her party. A leader who is in place for a long time has more opportunity to change rules, norms and structures within the party. Indeed, long tenure *alone* might see others concede more to a leader simply because they believe a leader is strong on the basis of her long tenure. Consequently, we expect strong leaders, operationalised as those who control the party organisation, to have both a direct effect on the party by controlling the party as an organisation, and an indirect effect mediated by their long tenure. In turn, a leader's longevity, which is a product of her strength but also of other exogenous factors, can have a moderating effect on strong leaders by further augmenting their grip of the party.

Building on the seminal works by Baron and Kenny (1986) and Imai et al. (2010), we expect strong leaders to have both a direct and an indirect effect on their successors and their parties. The direct effect runs from the tight control of the party organisation, which weakens the party as an institution. The indirect effect is through leaders' longevity in office. Strong leaders tend to stay in office for a long time. While the average tenure for party leaders in our sample is 6 years, strong leaders have an average of 7.8 years and non-strong leaders have an average of 5 years. This means that even if tenure has a moderating (i.e. interactive) effect on strong leaders by increasing the potential harm strong leaders can do to their parties over time, tenure has an even stronger mediating effect: the harm strong leaders do to their parties is mediated by their long tenure. This means that tenure is not a condition that needs to be present for leaders to harm their parties but is an outcome of strength which has a mediating role and might or might not also have a moderating effect. Figure 3 depicts the possible mediation causal path between leader strength, longevity, and their impact on the party.

[Figure 3 about here]

Accordingly, in addition to the two hypotheses above we also expect:

H3: Leaders' impact on their successors' tenure should have both a direct and an indirect effect, mediated by long tenure in office.

H4: Leaders' impact on their on the party's future electoral returns should have both a direct and an indirect effect, mediated by long tenure in office.

Empirical Models

Our first hypothesis predicts that the successors to strong leaders will have shorter tenures than average. We start by predicting successor leader survival using a Cox proportional-hazards model which predicts the probability that post-strong leaders survive in office. In addition to the survival model, we use a probit model which uses leaders by election as observation units. The advantage of this model is that it allows us to use more information in the data and conduct formal mediation analysis. Predicting a change in party leadership is theoretically and empirically similar to predicting the survival of leaders in office. The unit of analysis in these models is party leader, with a total of 75 successors.

As per Hypothesis 3, we expect the effect of strong leaders on their successors to be both a direct outcome of controlling the party organisation and an indirect, mediated by longevity in office (Barron and Kenny 1986). Accordingly, we report two different specifications: one reports the odds of successors of strong leaders surviving in office without controlling for the successors of long-tenured leaders and one that includes both the successors of strong leaders and the successors of long-tenured leaders. Given that these two indicators overlap highly¹⁰ (Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.45), we expect the coefficient of the successors of strong leaders to be lower when we include the successors of long-tenured leaders, as a part of the effect of strength is mediated by tenure (Baron and Kenny, 1986).

The mediation model (Imai et al., 2010) fits two regression models; a first stage probit model where the treatment variable (successors to strong leaders) predicts the mediator

¹⁰ Indeed, according to Barry and Kenny (1986), the first condition for identifying if a variable is a mediator instead of a moderator is to test whether the treatment predicts the mediator, which in this case it does.

variable (successors to long-tenured leaders) and a second stage probit model that predicts the probability of having a new party leader. The second stage model includes both the treatment (successors of strong leaders) and mediator (successor of long-tenured leaders) variables as well as their interactive term. We report the second stage model and the percent effect mediated. The advantage of causal mediation analysis over an interaction between the two variables of interest is that mediation analysis accounts explicitly for the possibility that part of the treatment effect is mediated, even if there is no interactive effect.

Our main explanatory indicator is *successors to strong leaders*. The *successor to a strong leader* is coded as 1 if a party leader at election t is a successor of a strong leader who stepped down during the previous electoral cycle ($t-1$). To code leaders' successors we first transform the continuous indicator of a strong leader into a binary indicator. We choose a cut-off value of seven (the mean of leader's party control is 6.7 with the values ranging from 2.5 to 9.8). We create another binary variable for the successors to leaders with long tenure. The average tenure of party leaders in our sample is six years. We use eight years or more as the cut-off point for long-tenured leaders. Typically, these leaders will have contested at least two elections and have survived them. A third of party leaders are coded as strong, which constitutes half of the leader/election observations in the sample. Forty percent of the leaders succeed strong leaders, constituting a third of the leader/election observations in the sample. Similarly, a third of leaders/elections succeed long-tenured leaders. These summary statistics are provided in Table 2.¹¹

[Table 2 about here]

We include the following controls: *strong leader*, *the age of the leader at the start of her leadership*, *lagged change in party vote* and *the size of the electorate*. We expect strong leaders to be associated with longer tenures and lower hazard rates. Similarly, leaders whose parties increased their electoral vote in the last elections should have higher chances of survival (Andrews and Jackman, 2008), as well as leaders whose parties follow closed selection rules (Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller, 2017). Finally, we include the age of the leader as younger leaders should survive longer in office. In the probit model predicting change in leadership we also include the controls *incumbent party* (Ennser-Jedenastik and

¹¹ The list of the political parties is provided in Table 1 in the Online Appendix

Schumacher, 2021), *unemployment level* and the *interaction of incumbent party and unemployment* to control for the cost of governance on party leaders.

The errors are clustered by the political party. Some of the models (Models 1-3 in Table 3, and Models 1 & 2 in Table 4) include country fixed effects for two reasons: first, there is significant country heterogeneity between leaders' tenures across countries as summarised in Table 2. Second, given that our main explanatory variable is constructed through an expert survey, the fixed effects remove any possible heterogeneity among respondents across different political systems.

According to Hypothesis 2, parties will struggle to regain their historic vote share after the departure of a strong leader. This is because over time the party has been weakened by the leader. Thus, we expect that while under strong leaders, parties will perform better than average, under the successors of strong leaders parties will perform worse than average even when we control for the effects of strong leaders. In other words, once strong leaders leave the party, their party should lose electoral support, on average more than it would, have the strong leader not been in place. If the expected negative effect between the successors of strong leaders and the electoral performance is due to damage done by their predecessor, then we should find a negative correlation between the successors and changes in the party's electoral vote, controlling for leadership change, as well as controlling for the electoral gains incurred by strong leaders.

The dependent variable for the second hypothesis is *change in the party's vote share*. The *change in Vote Share per party/ election* is calculated as vote share minus vote share in the previous election. The dependent variable is normally distributed and the unit of analysis is election-year. These data are drawn from the Varieties of Democracy (Lührmann et al., 2020). The primary explanatory variable is the *successor to strong leaders*. We report different sets of results. Model 1 tests Hypothesis 2 while models 2-6 test Hypothesis 4. Model 2 includes both the successors of strong leaders and of long-tenured leaders, Model 3 reports the associations of mediation analysis and Model 4 replicates Model 3 without country fixed effects. In Models 1-4, the unit of analysis is leader/election whereas in Models 5 and 6 the unit of analysis is party leaders.

We include the following control variables in the model: *strong leaders*, as a continuous indicator based on the expert survey, *the share of the party's vote in the last election*, whether the leader's party was an *incumbent party during the election*, the

unemployment rate, the interaction between incumbent party & unemployment and a dummy variable for the *2008 financial crisis*. Economic voting is found to be an important determinant of electoral performance in a large and significant literature (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2019).

Our dataset, which spans from 1988 to 2013, is an amalgam of a number of datasets. It builds on information from O'Brien (2015), Lührmann et al., (2020), our own coding of party leader tenure in office, and the new dataset on party leader dominance by Marino et al. (2018).¹²

Results

Table 3 reports the results on the impact of strong leaders on their successors. As per Hypothesis 1, the successors of strong leaders have 2.7 times higher odds of leaving office than the average leader (Model 1). Figure 4 provides a graphical representation of the effect. This effect goes down to 2.1 times when we include the successors of long-tenured leaders in Model 2. This indicates that part of the effect is mediated via leader's tenure, as per Hypothesis 3. These effects are robust to the inclusion of the indicator leader selectorate as well as to the exclusion of country fixed effects (models 4-6). Leader selectorate is not associated with higher odds of replacement, as predicted in the literature. Successors to long-tenured leaders face 1.7 times higher odds of leaving office earlier but this effect is not robust across models. Overall, according to Table 3, the successors of strong leaders are faced with higher odds of losing office early, as illustrated in Figure 4.

[Table 3 about here]

[Figure 4 about here]

Table 4 reports the probabilities of a party leadership change. Across the models and in line with Hypothesis 1, the successors to strong leaders are associated with a higher probability of having a new party leader. The odds of having a new party leader are twice as high for successors of strong leaders than successors of non-strong leaders. The opposite is true for strong leaders, with half the odds of leadership change. Similarly, leaders of

¹² The small number of countries is due to data availability from the expert survey.

incumbent parties have low odds of leadership change. Unlike Table 3, there is no mediation effect here through the successors of long-tenured leaders. The indicator successor to long-tenured leaders fails to reach statistical significance and it is also negative. In addition, mediation analysis in Model 5 fails to report a positive mediation effect or any moderation effects. Another difference between Tables 3 and 4, is that open selectorate is positively associated with leadership change, as predicted in the literature. Overall, Tables 3 and 4 find robust and consistent evidence in support of Hypothesis 1 but not in support of Hypothesis 3. The successors of strong leaders have higher odds of leaving office early, and this effect is largely independent of their predecessors' tenure.

Table 5 reports the results on the effects of strong leaders on their parties' electoral performance, after they step down. According to Model 1 the successors of strong leaders will typically suffer an electoral loss of almost three and half percentage points. Such a loss is six times above average (the average value for change in the electoral vote is -0.5), and twice as high as the electoral gains of having a strong leader. Importantly, the three and half point loss is not due to the party's reversal to its historical electoral equilibrium. Model 1 controls both for the electoral gains of strong leaders, but also for changes in the party leader. These findings rule out the possibility that the negative effect of the successors of strong leaders on vote share is because parties go back to 'normal' electoral performance after strong leaders leave, or that it is just a normal 'cost of ruling', which we control for. If only the presence and absence of strong leaders mattered, only strong leaders should be statistically significant. The indicator of the strong leader successor captures *only* the moment after strong leaders stepped down rather than all moments that parties do not have strong leaders. Thus, our evidence is inconsistent with the null hypothesis that previous leaders have no effect on parties' electoral fortunes.

The electoral loss suffered by the successors of strong leaders is smaller by one percentage point when we add the indicator successors of long-tenured leaders. Models 3 and 4 formally test the mediation Hypothesis (4). The models are identical with the only difference that Model 3 includes country fixed effects. These models also include the interaction between the successors to strong leaders and long-tenured leaders. Both models report similar results. The average mediation effect is a quarter of the total effect. In other words, a quarter of the effect of the successors of strong leaders on their party's vote is mediated through the long-tenure of their predecessors. These effects remain stable across models despite differences in specification or the unit of observation.

We conduct further robustness checks not reported here, such as taking different cut-off values for leader dominance and leader tenure, as well as controlling for the alternative institutional indicator on party leadership dominance constructed by Schumacher and Giger (2017). The robustness of alternative specifications suggests that the findings are real and not an artefact of the model or case selection. Finally, we inquire whether our theory is consistent with the data by checking that most successors to strong leaders are not coded as strong leaders themselves. Indeed, in our sample only two-party leaders, Aleka Papariga and Costas Simitis, are both strong leaders and successors to strong leaders.

[Table 4 about here]

[Table 5 about here]

Case study

As we established an associational relationship between leader strength and the outcome variables, the party's electoral performance and successors' tenure in the quantitative investigation, we now “focus on a case where the causal effect of X^1 on Y can be isolated from other potentially confounding factors (X^2)” such as the removal from office because of the expected poor party performance (Gerring, 2007, p. 238). In this section we present a case of a party, Indian Congress Party, under a strong leader, and outline its performance after her departure. It is a disconfirmatory case, such that if the expected relationship is not observed here it would disconfirm the hypothesised causal relationship inferred from the quantitative results.

This case is outside our quantitative empirical analysis, but we use it in part because it is one of the only cases available where a strong leader's departure was verifiably independent of their electoral performance. While it is not typical of the cases in the dataset, nor are even its more unusual features unique. For instance, the dynastic element of politics is neither unique to India nor is it common in India. Dynasties are common in developed parliamentary democracies within the dataset, and Greece, for instance, has seen dynasties at the leader level. Dominant parties were also common in other countries, such as Japan, Ireland, Italy and Sweden and patronage was a common feature of Italian politics.

Congress after Indira

At its height, the Congress Party of India was one of the pre-eminent political institutions on the planet. Its height lasted a long time before and after Indian independence in 1947.

Establishing itself ‘as the paramount power in India, its unrivalled organisational capability [was] burnished by its undisputed claim to be the party that led India to freedom’ (Komireddi, 2019, p. 26). And much of that dominance was achieved with what were charismatic leaders, not least Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi.

If Nehru had the potential for untrammelled authority and authoritarian tendencies, he was profoundly aware of the need to maintain democratic checks on leaders. The Indian Congress Party’s ‘strong’ leader was Indira Gandhi, leader from 1966 to 1984, during which time she was prime minister of India for all but three years.

Indira Gandhi seemed an unlikely strong leader. Nehru, a founding father of Indian nationalism and the state itself, had died, and a competent but uncharismatic replacement also died suddenly in 1966. The leaders of the party were unable to agree a successor, and in the end chose Nehru’s daughter. She was expected to be weak enough to be pliable, but given the respect for her father, strong enough to beat any alternative leadership contender.

Soon the ‘Syndicate’ that chose her discovered she had all her father’s steel. She took on the party elites in some key issues: the selection of the president of India and a bank nationalisation, and won. In a general election in 1971 she won a majority, and achieved popularity with her handling of the ‘liberation war’ against Pakistan that led to the setting up of Bangladesh.

By the time the Syndicate had decided she would have to be removed to protect Congress, she had already established complete dominance of the party (Komireddi, 2019, p. 33). It was clear that she ‘began to over reach herself... she became increasingly imperious...[and] set loose a process that deinstitutionalised the party and moved it toward an authoritarian regime’ (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2008, p. 30). From the mid-1970s, the party was converted into a family firm as Indira gave a central role to her son, Sanjay. All local leaders were appointed and dismissed in Delhi, and so no reason existed for an ambitious local leader in Congress to cultivate local support. There was now no countervailing force left in the party (Komireddi, 2019, p. 33).

Indira was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 for her decision to allow an assault on a Sikh holy site. Despite his young age, her son Rajiv was pressed to take over the leadership and he called for a dissolution of parliament. In that election Congress won its best

ever result, unsurprising given the reaction to Indira's assassination, and as it saw Rajiv as a fresh face. However, the party rot continued. He was implicated in a corruption scandal, but the party, devoid of any democratic organisational structure, was unable to remove him. The 1989 election saw the party lose half its seats on a nine-point swing against Congress – though it still garnered almost 40 per cent of the popular vote. But that election 'revealed that the cancer of party de-institutionalisation, launched by Indira Gandhi and not addressed by Rajiv Gandhi, left the party with "hollow battalions", an organisation less capable of generating support and delivering the vote' (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2008, p. 32).

According to one analysis 'powerbrokers and rootless leaders hold sway and deny members the right to decide who is best equipped to lead them at different levels of the polity. This in turn discourages new faces and new ideas even as it dampens the substantive policy discussion necessary to invigorate and rejuvenate the party' (Hasan, 2013, p. 116). The party's support trended downward, to a position where in 2014 it had below 20 per cent of the vote, and the Hindu Nationalist BJP could be referred to as the dominant party in India (Mitra and Schöttli, 2016).

The Indian Congress Party demonstrates that a strong leader can put in place a party culture or rules that make it difficult for the party to compete, even long after the strong leader has left the stage. Indeed, it may not manifest itself until the party comes under electoral pressure because the opposition coalesces to become more effective. The relationship is evident, and consistent with the theory, therefore not disconfirming the approach.

Conclusion

Despite the extensive literatures on party organisation and leadership, we know relatively little about *how* party leaders affect their parties. In this paper we advance the argument that strong leaders can negatively affect their parties that manifests itself *after* their departure. Using new data on party leader strength we find good support for our argument. After the departure of strong leaders, parties on average lose 3.5 points of the national vote in subsequent elections. The drop we find is on a scale with the 'cost of ruling' during an economic downturn (Cuzán, 2015). Importantly, our empirical findings suggest that strong leaders do not simply boost their parties electorally, letting them revert back to normal once they step down. Rather, their parties are likely to suffer historically lower electoral results after the leader steps down.

Even if this negative effect is lower than the cumulative positive effect strong leaders have over many elections, it can still be consequential for the party's medium and longer-term electoral performance. In addition, and consistent with our argument and expectations, the successors of strong leaders have shorter tenures than leaders who succeed non-strong leaders. Taken together our empirical findings are suggestive of an enduring impact of strong leaders, and counter to what might be the intuitive, that impact is not positive for parties.

Our data are not ideal, and restricted to a relatively small number of countries over a relatively short time period. Measuring whether a leader is strong is not easy, and it raises issues of whether measures of such things are independent of the electoral performance under the leader. However the results are robust under different models. The case study allows us to see the mechanism in action. Other examples from presidential systems indicate that the theory is applicable under other forms of government. The former president of Mexico, Felipe Calderón, left his party in considerably worse shape, having hollowed out his party PAN into it becoming a personal vehicle for his own ambitions. We can use the theory to make predictions. We might expect that Benjamin Netanyahu's dominance of Likud over time will have an impact on Likud after he leaves office. Our theory predicts that the party will be a shadow of itself, losing power, possibly for some time.

The basic argument in this paper -that when strong party leaders leave, they leave behind a party that is not as robust electorally- has an analogue in non-democracies. For instance, Baturo (2014, p. 223) found that designated successors are more likely to be toppled because "designated successors are likely to be weaker and less able to command obedience from elites and election officials than longer-serving incumbents, because prior investment into larger margins of victory and the image of invincibility can be lost." The political impact of strong non-democratic leaders is outside the scope of this article, but we might expect to see increased instability in countries following the removal of strong leaders. The theory may have also applications outside politics that could be studied in future research in any organisations for instance in academia or business. Long serving CEOs might have similar effects on their organisations. The impact of strong leaders is an area ripe for further research.

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Table 1: Outline of potential causes of damage to a party by the ‘strong’ leader

	<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Effect</i>
Institutional Face	<p>Strong leaders are ceded control of decision-making institutions, which become personalised.</p> <p>Factions, competitors, and alternative voices are suppressed as the leader’s goals become synonymous with the organisation’s goals.</p>	<p>The party’s institutions become vehicles for the leader to maintain control. It becomes more difficult to resist the demands of the leader</p> <p>The party organisation is weakened, and less robust, as talent leaves the party or is damaged by the experience.</p>
Policy Face	<p>When a strong leader’s policies are initially electorally popular, the party will commit to their leader’s preferred policies.</p> <p>The institutions, factions and policy debate are no longer available to temper the policy shift.</p>	<p>This may take the party too far from what the party’s ideal position might be.</p> <p>The party’s image and reputation are damaged by taking more extreme positions.</p>
Electoral Face	<p>Party uses the leader to connect with the public. Electoral campaigns are personalised around the leader.</p> <p>The leader may ‘over-promise’ voters what they can deliver.</p> <p>The campaigning organisation, such as canvassing teams are less needed as the leader connects directly with voters.</p>	<p>Party brand is weakened, that it only means something in connection to the strong leader.</p> <p>If those promises aren’t delivered, the party’s reputation is damaged.</p> <p>Once ‘stood down’ it is difficult to reactivate the party as a campaign organisation.</p>

Table 2: Distribution of Strong Party Leaders and their Successors Across Countries

	<i>Strong Leader</i>	<i>Strong Leader: Binary</i>	<i>Successor to Strong Leader</i>	<i>Leader Tenure</i>	<i>Successor to Long- Tenured Leader</i>
Austria	5.18	0.20	0.10	8.27	0.10
Denmark	6.50	0.50	.	10.00	0.50
Finland	5.10	0.00	0.00	5.00	0.00
Germany	6.56	0.40	0.12	9.80	0.35
Greece	7.01	0.58	0.58	11.86	0.50
Ireland	7.21	0.65	0.44	9.95	0.63
Netherlands	6.14	0.38	0.15	9.08	0.34
Portugal	7.42	0.69	0.35	8.81	0.09
Spain	7.56	0.71	0.50	13.14	0.45
United Kingdom	6.66	0.40	0.41	8.70	0.55
Total	6.75	0.51	0.35	9.93	0.38

Table 3: Proportional hazards model: tenure in office

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Successor to Strong Leader	2.7760*** (0.656)	2.1202*** (0.615)	2.4758*** (0.764)	2.1636*** (0.461)	1.9947*** (0.496)	1.8866*** (0.446)
Successor to Long Leader		1.7372* (0.529)	1.4533 (0.537)		1.1778 (0.263)	1.1197 (0.244)
Strong Leader	1.0693 (0.081)	1.0807 (0.090)	1.0589 (0.154)	1.0558 (0.072)	1.0576 (0.070)	1.0322 (0.085)
Entry Age of Leader	0.9991*** (0.000)	0.9990*** (0.000)	0.9991** (0.000)	0.9996*** (0.000)	0.9995*** (0.000)	0.9997 (0.000)
Lagged D. Vote	0.9564* (0.022)	0.9570* (0.024)	0.9364*** (0.023)	0.9760 (0.023)	0.9787 (0.024)	0.9716 (0.025)
Selectorate: closed to open			0.9988 (0.191)			0.8500 (0.113)
Country Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Observations	75	75	68	75	75	68
Robust seeform in parentheses						
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1						

Notes: The observation unit is party leaders (total of 75). Models 1-3 include country fixed effects, Models 4-6 do not. Errors are clustered by political party.

Table 4: Probit Model Predicting New Party Leader

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	New Party Leader				
Successor to Strong Leader	1.9659*** (0.472)	2.0145*** (0.461)	1.9328*** (0.391)	2.3396*** (0.438)	2.3528*** (0.763)
Successor to Long Leader		0.9167 (0.203)	0.7465 (0.148)	0.7668 (0.145)	0.7794 (0.257)
Strong Leader	0.5516*** (0.065)	0.5493*** (0.063)	0.6317*** (0.060)	0.6383*** (0.054)	0.6446*** (0.060)
Incumbent Party	0.2151** (0.139)	0.2175** (0.142)	0.2846** (0.168)	0.3337** (0.171)	0.3295*** (0.132)
Unemployment	0.9026** (0.040)	0.9027** (0.040)	0.9226** (0.031)	0.9169*** (0.024)	0.9160*** (0.024)
Incumbent*Unemp.	1.0846 (0.059)	1.0839 (0.059)	1.0689 (0.056)	1.0707 (0.050)	1.0715* (0.039)
Entry Age	1.0003 (0.000)	1.0003 (0.000)	1.0001 (0.000)	1.0002 (0.000)	1.0002 (0.000)
Selectorate: Closed to Open	1.2610** (0.121)	1.2520** (0.121)	1.1535 (0.108)		
Successor to Strong*Long Leader					0.9625 (0.471)
% of Total Effect mediated					None
Country Effects	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Constant	25.7223*** (26.759)	27.2270*** (27.821)	29.2652*** (28.352)	37.1374*** (27.817)	35.4778*** (26.048)
Observations	143	143	143	175	173
Robust seeform in parentheses					
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1					

Notes: The observation unit is leader by election . Models 1-2 include country fixed effects. Errors are clustered by political party. Model 5 reports the percent of total effect mediated by the successors of long-tenured leaders (Medeff command in Stata 15).

Table 5: Predicting party vote change

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Change in Electoral Vote					
Successor to Strong Leader	-3.3402*** (1.084)	-2.5240** (0.982)	-3.4859** (1.689)	-3.4345** (1.546)	-2.2381* (1.099)	-3.0743** (1.296)
Successor to Long-Leader		-1.8925 (1.157)	-3.0293*** (1.123)	-2.7534*** (1.047)	-3.1944** (1.218)	-2.7165* (1.334)
New Party Leader	0.9876 (1.077)	0.8878 (1.054)	0.5428 (0.860)	0.6557 (0.804)		
Strong Leader	1.5914*** (0.351)	1.5038*** (0.319)	1.4331*** (0.338)	1.4195*** (0.343)	2.1458*** (0.520)	1.9644*** (0.405)
Lagged Vote Share	-0.0769* (0.043)	-0.0758* (0.041)	-0.0795** (0.033)	-0.0772*** (0.029)	-0.0190 (0.042)	-0.0518 (0.046)
Incumbent Party	0.0622 (1.857)	0.1747 (1.808)	0.4020 (2.236)	0.4630 (2.212)	3.3007 (2.742)	3.7678 (2.900)
Unemployment	0.2045 (0.145)	0.2179 (0.150)	0.1977 (0.129)	0.1969** (0.097)	0.3818* (0.210)	0.2861** (0.109)
Incumbent*Unemp.	-0.4487* (0.221)	-0.4625** (0.224)	-0.4803* (0.263)	-0.4767* (0.252)	-1.1415*** (0.351)	-1.1235*** (0.351)
Great Recession	-1.4826 (1.045)	-1.6165 (1.051)	-1.4723 (0.920)	-1.4225 (0.882)	-0.1615 (1.460)	-0.0616 (1.079)
Successor to Strong*Long Leader			2.3414 (2.398)	1.9213 (2.027)		
% Total Effect Mediated			26%	24%		
Country Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Constant	-5.8402** (2.648)	-5.2800** (2.562)	-5.9491** (2.480)	-6.4273** (2.537)	-11.4662*** (2.789)	-9.7984*** (2.345)
Observations	173	173	173	173	74	74
R-squared	0.368	0.381	0.377	0.373	0.702	0.661
Robust standard errors in parentheses						
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1						

Notes: The unit of observation is leader/election (total of 173) in Models 1-4 and leader in Models 5, 6. Models 1-3 & 5 include country fixed effects. Models 4 and 5 report the percent of total effect mediated (Medeff command in stata 15). Errors are clustered by political party.

Figure 1: Leader control of her party organisation from PoPES expert survey)

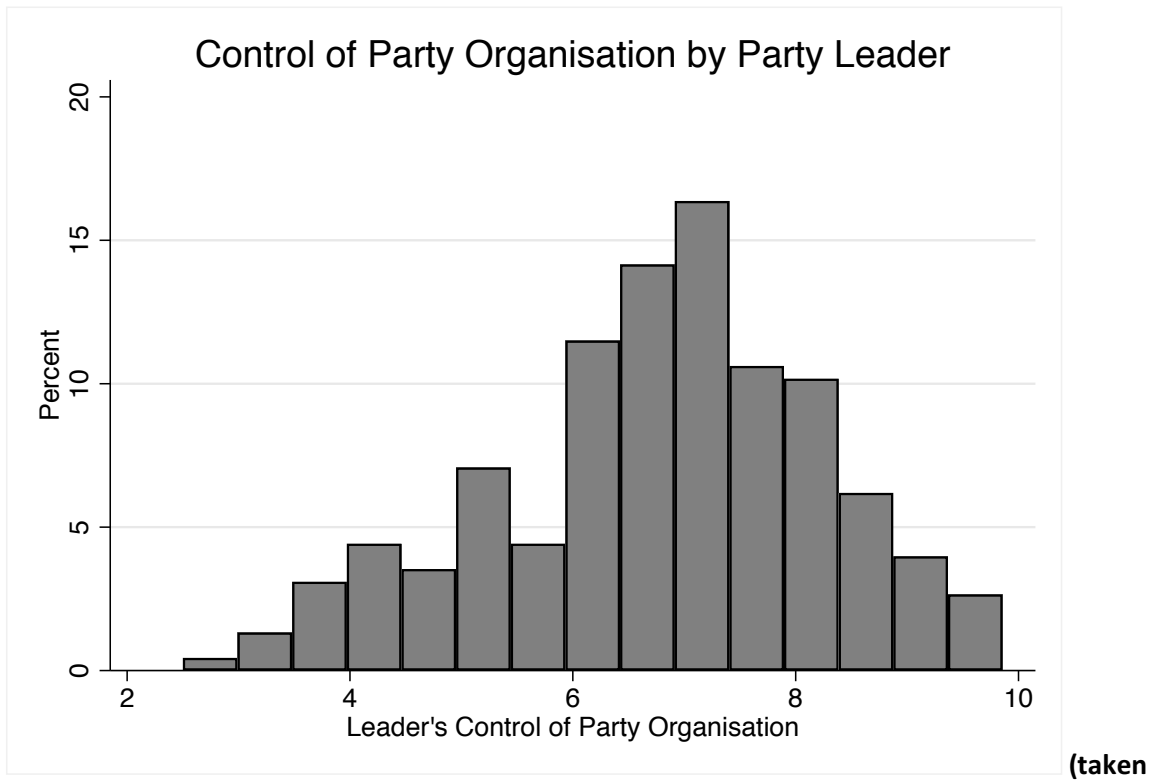


Figure 2: Party Leader Strength and Tenure

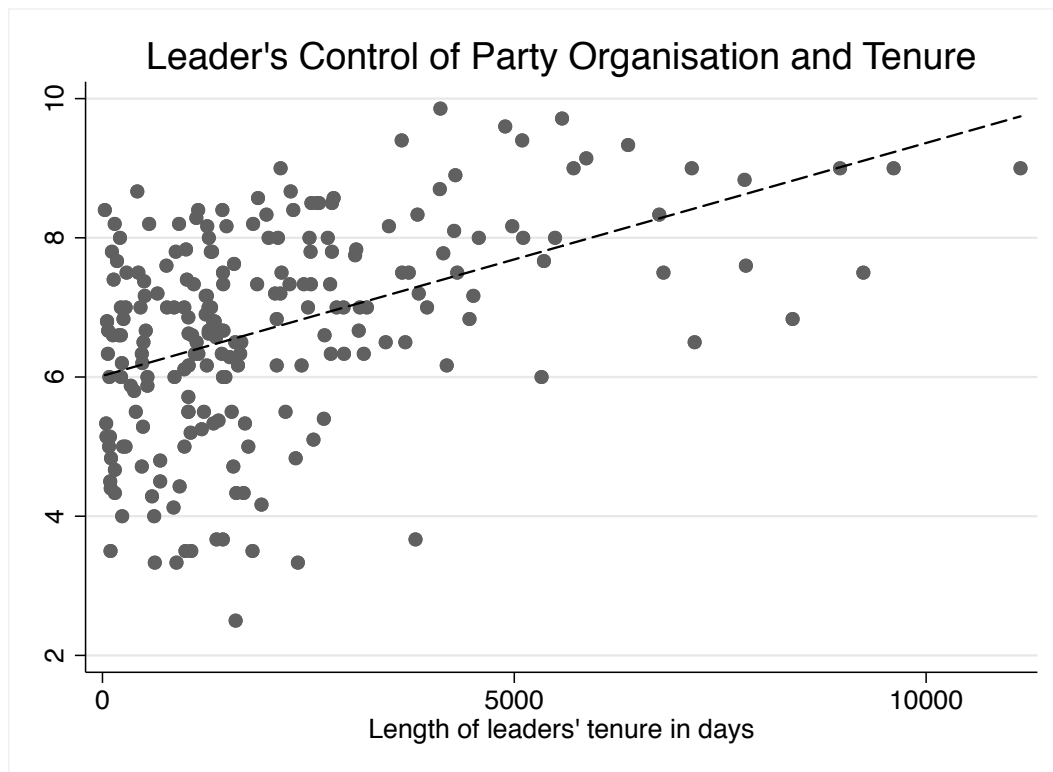


Figure 3: Direct and Indirect effects of strong leaders on the party & their successors

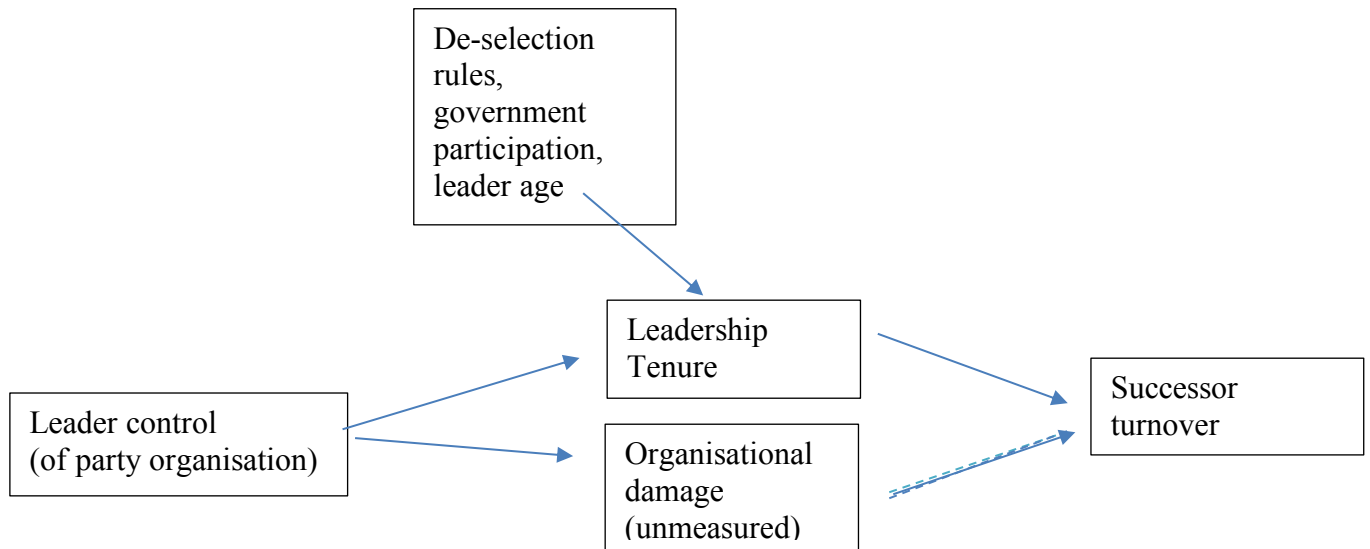


Figure 4: Survival of the successors of strong leaders

