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Leader vs. the party dilemma: the case of a party rebirth in Czechia

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ABSTRACT

Influential individuals gaining political weight at the expense of their parties are succeeding. Through case studies of two Czech parties, we explore the role of personalised party leadership. The puzzling set of events that occurred when SPD reestablished itself in response to the internal crisis in USVIT makes these parties worthy of attention. These parties are studied as part of a broader phenomenon of political personalisation. Our findings show how parties which represent cases of significant personalization operate and how personalisation changes their organisational setup and the behaviour of their voters.

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Personalisation; party organisation; leadership; newness

Introduction

Party leadership is a defining factor of how parties operate and succeed. This paper explores the impact of a party leader on two levels of party affairs: institutionally for their structures, and electorally for their voters' behaviour. A puzzling sequence of events that involved a party leader achieving repeated electoral breakthroughs with two party platforms makes us question the organisational and electoral role of the party leader. For this investigation, we draw on data from two case studies: USVIT and SPD. Both cases, founded by Tomio Okamura, shed light on the contemporary phenomenon of political personalisation. Our article does not focus on Czech politics per se, but instead provides an analysis of this broader phenomenon.

Our research interest is in line with the discussion concerning the importance of institutions versus the importance of individual actors. As such, we touch on the topic of political personalisation, a process in which "individual political actors become more prominent at the expense of collective actors and institutions" (Pedersen and Rahat 2021, 211). Notably, domestic research concerning the party leader's role within the party organisation – in particular in relation to candidate and leader selection – already

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exists (Hloušek and Kopeček 2019; Kopeček and Hloušek 2018; Kubát and Hartlínski 2020). Other scholars have shown that, although parties continue to play a crucial role, individual actors are more significant today than they were in the past (Buštková and Guasti 2019; Cabada and Tomšič 2016; Gyárfášová and Hlatky 2023; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Linek and Voženílková 2017; Poláček 2013).

For Pedersen and Rahat (2021) and others, personalisation occurs on three levels: behavioural (the behaviour of political actors and voters), institutional (the design of political institutions), and media (changes in media coverage; see also Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Poguntke and Webb 2007; Rahat and Kenig 2018). Much of the literature on personalisation also overlaps with that on intra-party democracy (IPD). IPD is directly associated with personalisation, decreasing as political actors gain more importance (Ignazi 2020; Scarrow 2005). Centralised structures in which leaders hold the majority of decision-making power increase in line with increasing personalisation (Diamond and Gunther 2001). Situating the theory of personalisation within the conceptual discussion of the contemporary political science literature, some of the work by these scholars also overlaps with work on the concept of “institutionalisation”, a theoretical perspective standing *de facto* on the opposite side of personalisation (Bolleyer and Ruth 2017; Harmel, Svåsand, and Mjelde 2019; Randall and Svåsand 2002). In our paper, we do not pay empirical attention to this process, in which parties acquire organisational systemness, stability, and thus value in the existence of the institution itself (see: Huntington 1968; Randall and Svåsand 2002). This theoretical perspective views the personalities of party founders and leaders as initially influential, with their influence over the party organisational matters decreasing over time. As such, institutionalisation is seen as a process in which the party organisation “incorporates its founders’ values and aims. [...] The organisation slowly loses its character as a tool: it becomes valuable in and of itself, and its goals become inseparable and indistinguishable from it” (Panebianco 1988, p.53). In contrast to these scholars, we conduct our case studies *vis-a-vis* the theory of personalisation, analysing the role of party leader in regard to electoral behaviour (i.e. behavioural personalisation), as well as within the party organisation (i.e. institutional personalisation), as outlined in more detail in the theoretical part of this paper.

Several researchers have also looked at these contemporary cases from angles other than the theory of personalisation – for instance, ideologically, as anti-establishment parties (see: De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Jankowski, Juen, and Tepe 2022), or organisationally, as entrepreneurial parties (Hloušek and Kopeček 2017; Morlino 1996; Paolucci 2006). Indeed, significant signs of reliance on one political entrepreneur engaging in anti-establishment rhetoric are evident in both of our case studies.

Admittedly, such anti-establishment attitudes have resonated strongly in certain segments of Czech society for some time. Some authors stress the growing public detachment from political parties, accompanied by voters seeking alternative types of participation and sharing increasing anti-party sentiments (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 25). Our cases fall exactly into this category. The political personalisation in these parties aligns with the overall detachment from political parties in wider society: where there is a demand for strong personalities over institutions, such individuals seek to utilise it.

Theoretical framework

Okamura's parties are part of a wider phenomenon in many countries, in which new parties electorally succeed at the expense of their established counterparts (Bakke and Sitter 2013, 2015). While only a fraction of these parties have survived their initial electoral breakthrough (Hanley and Sikk 2016; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020), Okamura has managed to do both: failing to survive with one party and building another organisationally distinctive but equally electorally successful party.

Many explanations for the persistence and electoral success of new parties exist in the political science literature (Arter 2016; Beyens, Lucardie, and Deschouwer 2016; Harmel and Robertson 1985; Hug 2001; Saarts 2015). Some attribute the electoral success of new parties to the parties' organisational strength (Harmel, Svåsand, and Mjelde 2019; Tavits 2013), ideology (Sikk 2011), and marketing (Henneberg and Eghbalin 2002). Others argue that the party leader ultimately affects voters' behaviour (Bittner 2011, 2018; Kalaycioglu 2002). In this paper, we pay empirical attention to the role of party leaders in affecting the institutional setup of parties and the behaviour of voters over time.

"Political personalisation" refers to the process in which the weight of the party organisation declines, while the centrality of individuals rises (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 1; Pedersen and Rahat 2021, 212). This has three dimensions: media, institutional, and behavioural (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007, 67). Although we do not treat media aspects of personalisation empirically in this study, the majority of scholars emphasise that parties (institutional) and voters (behavioural) are actually reacting to the change of the focus in the media – namely, the shift from parties to politicians (Bennett 2012; Cross, Katz, and Pruyers 2018; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Hart 1999; Katz and Mair 1996, 2018; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014;; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Mazzoleni 2000; Meyrowitz 1987; Starke, Marcinkowski, and Wintterlin 2020). Institutional personalisation is the direct result of this, occurring when an institution is reformed in a manner that increases the political weight of an individual and diminishes the centrality of the group. A change of statute that enhances the power of the person leading the institution affects the power balance. For example, granting the leader a veto on the selection of candidates would be seen as a form of centralised institutional personalisation (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 119).

Closely connected to this, behavioural personalisation affects both politicians and voters. Seen among politicians, it describes the changing behaviour towards parties. Politicians affected by this tend to take actions based on their own decisions, without coordinating with their parties. Instead, they rely on their own teams of nonpartisan advisers (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 121). Seen among voters, behavioural personalisation reflects a changing perception of politics as a competition between individuals and not between parties, resulting in changes in voting behaviour. The personal traits of individuals come before party identity or ideology. The identity of the party leader plays an increasingly significant role in voting decisions.

But what is the relationship between political personalisation and the electoral behaviour of voters? A party affected more by personalisation should encourage more direct contact between individual politicians and the electorate to mediate its relationship with voters (Cutts and Haughton 2021). These contacts can help to forge closer

relationships with potential voters and encourage more loyalty than could be achieved by collective institutions (Papp and Zorigt 2016). Any strategy employed by parties to bring their candidates closer to voters is likely to be rewarded in elections (Pennings and Hazan 2001). Having visible personalities (not merely during campaigning), instead of focusing on party messages, creates better links with the current and potential electorate.

While relatively precise in its descriptions of such mechanisms, the literature remains inconclusive on the size of the effects and their proper measurability. Some authors even argue that there has been no empirically observable increase in personalisation (Karvonen 2010). In contrast, Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis (2022) claim that the perception of increasing personalisation is primarily driven by a larger volume of overall party dealignment. To resolve this debate, Quinlan and McAllister (2022) suggest dividing voters into categories based on their prevailing loyalty to party or leader. In their large-scale comparative analysis, however, they found that the largest group (approximately 33% of voters) fell into the category of those equally inclined toward party and leader. There may exist a significant group of voters from new, weakly institutionalised parties whose personalised electoral preference is aligned with party identification.

For the analysed parties in this paper, we expect that the distribution of voter loyalty will strongly favour the leader over the party. However, our preliminary descriptive analysis (see Appendix 2) suggests that most of the voters of both parties would fall into the ambiguous category described above. Thus, these cases are likely to enhance understanding of behavioural personalisation, using indicators from electoral statistics and survey data.

The above discussion indicates that personalisation is playing a fundamental role in shaping contemporary party politics into a more individual-centred communication style. This is certainly the case in Czech politics, where personalisation is also a dominant feature (Buštková and Guasti 2019; Cabada and Tomšič 2016; Gyárfášová and Hlatky 2023; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Linek and Voženílková 2017; Pecháček 2013; Poláček 2013).

Examining the theory of political personalisation, we explore how the role of party leader influences two aspects: the institutional setup of parties and voters' behaviour. It is fairly uncommon to respond to an internal crisis in one party by founding another. It is extremely rare for that newly founded party to receive almost twice as many votes as the first party. Okamura managed to leave a party that was falling apart, re-establish himself under a different label with a newly formed base of collaborators, and succeed in bringing his new party into parliament. This unusual series of events makes Okamura's parties interesting and worthy objects of research into the impact of leadership and organisational decisions on electoral outcomes. We discuss Okamura's background in more detail later in the article.

We argue that Okamura's personality was a significant driver of this development. Our research objective is to identify how personalisation institutionally affected USVIT and SPD and the impact it had on the electoral behaviour of their respective voters. We thus derive the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the role of personalisation in the organisational structures of parties?

We consider the decision-making processes in both cases to explore the influence of personalisation on the parties' internal organisational matters. We make two hypotheses.

First, the statutes will provide party leaders with autonomy (at the expense of IPD). Second, the personnel overlap between the two parties' structures will be minimal.

RQ2: What is the role of personalisation in the electoral behaviour and loyalty of voters?

We are interested in how personalisation affects the distribution of voter loyalty between leader and party. We expect that, over time, the party will gain organisational complexity, reducing the level of personalisation, and the electoral support for the party leader will be diffused to regional-level party elites.

Data and methods

Studies of personalisation usually have to overcome the challenges of measurability (Pedersen and Rahat 2021). To a large extent, the concept cannot be clearly separated from the context of established political institutions and collective actors (e.g. parliaments, interest groups, or parties). Such research usually depends on long-term panel data analysis, which may overestimate or underestimate the size of potential indicators. This problem is particularly apparent in the context of parliamentary regimes. This paper is intended to clarify the measurability of the multifaceted phenomenon through the use of a focused case study design. The uniqueness of the case study is that it concerns a situation of a party leader succeeding twice (see Appendix 1) with two new parties (see Hug 2000; Sikk 2005), each of which had been founded without significant membership overlap or a solid organisational background. This unusual setting will help us to uncover the dynamics of personalisation.

Our analysis is divided into two parts (see Table 1). In the first, we analyse the institutional personalisation – namely, the internal organisational characteristics of the two parties. The primary data sources are party statutes and candidate lists for lower house elections in 2013 and 2017. The party statutes are operationalised by an exploration of the means of centralising decision-making processes in the context of the parties' formal and informal practices, such as the largely autonomous decision-making of the party leader regarding financial and personnel matters. The candidate lists reveal the extent of the personalisation process, and we expect to observe a relatively low overlap of members between USVIT and the newer SPD. As both parties are characterised by small numbers of regular members, we will compare their candidate lists in terms of the proportion of candidates (not necessarily members) who appear on both lists. This will reveal the extent to which the second party was not simply a rebranding of the previous organisation but rather a genuinely new political party with the same leader.

In the second part of our analysis, we will consider behavioural personalisation, with a primary focus on the electoral behaviour of voters. We will combine an analysis of

Table 1. Analysed Aspects of Political Personalization.

Personalisation Type	Concept	Analysis
Institutional	Leader's level of autonomy	Party statutes Personnel overlap between two parties' structures Unsupervised decisions made by the party leader
Behavioural	Voters' behaviour	Party popularity vis-a-vis politicians' popularity Electoral behaviour Preferential voting

aggregated data on preferential voting as provided by the Electoral Commission with opinion poll data collected by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM 2023).

In the Czech electoral system, voters can vote for up to four of the candidates on the list. The preferential voting in our cases is expected to show a specific concentration around the party leader, contrasting with the other regional leaders and parties. In other words, we expect to observe a personalisation impact when the party leader performs as an outlier – not only compared with leaders of other parties, but also in comparison with his own regional party elites. We measure the concentration of electoral support as a percentage of preferential votes cast for the leader of the regional party list. As a supportive measure, information on the difference between the percentages of preferential voters for the first and second nominees on the regional party list level is also included.

Using descriptive statistics derived from the survey data, we first analyse whether the leader's support and popularity changed over time. We operationalise "popularity" as the leader's acceptance rate among respondents over time as a percentage of those who like or do not like the politician. To depict the level of personalisation in the analysed parties, we further show Okamura's acceptance rate among those who supported USVIT or SPD. Long-term changes in the behaviour of both electorates are further explained using logistic regression models with fixed effects controlling for research waves. For both parties, we specify the model in which the dependent variable indicates the respondent's preference to vote for the analysed party, while the independent variables explain the preference and control for gender, economic status, education, age, and left–right self-identification. The dataset for USVIT consists of 20 research waves between October 2013 and September 2015 (N = 11,931). For SPD, we analysed the 53 research waves from October 2015 to November 2021 (N = 33,059).

Tomio Okamura and his parties in the context of Czech politics

As stated above, we identify both of Okamura's parties as likely cases of strongly personalised organisations. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of this situation is the sequence of events, which enables us to study changes in organisational and political strategies. Okamura's success embodied the resurrection for the Czech far right (Viatkin 2023), which had lacked representation since at least 1998, when the Republican Party of Czechoslovakia left parliament (Kopecký and Mudde 1999; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Like Okamura, Sládek, the then-leader of the Republicans, gained popularity in specific segments of society with similar policies – opposing immigration, the EU, and NATO. Building on the frustration of many Czechs regarding the political establishment and the lack of representation of their views, Okamura argued for direct democracy, such as referendums. Over time, he combined these appeals with anti-establishment, anti-ethnic minority, and anti-Muslim attitudes (Bonansinga 2015; Chytilek and Svačinová 2019; Císař and Navrátil 2018; Kubát and Hartlínski 2019; Maškarinec and Novotný 2024).

But how is Okamura (and "his" parties) situated within the broader context of the Czech political scene? The Czech party system has seen fundamental changes in the last decade. If one wanted to describe this context in a single term, it would likely be "fragmentation". The initial two decades following the change of regime in 1989 saw the country's party system remain stable, defined by competition between relatively well-established parties with clearly determined programmatic profiles (Berglund and Dellenbrant 1991;

Hanley 2008). The liberal conservative perspective of the Civic Democratic party (ODS) contended against that of the Czech Social Democratic party (ČSSD). This left–right divide, supplemented by Christian Democrats (KDU–ČSL) on centre–right and the KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), formed the basis of the then ideology–driven competition (Cirhan and Kopecký 2020). This trend – punctuated by exceptional electoral breakthroughs by small, short–lived liberal parties such as the Green Party (SZ) – lasted until the 2010 elections, which saw the beginning of a gradual, yet substantial change.

The established parties that had, until then, formed governments began to witness sharp declines in electoral support in every successive election. In turn, the proportion of parliamentary seats that they held also shrank considerably, in line with the increasing number of electoral breakthroughs achieved by new anti–establishment parties. Several social trends made this change possible, among them a deeply rooted distrust in political parties (Čermák and Stachová 2010), fuelled by revelations of corruption and clientelistic networks within established parties (Klíma 2013).

One of the first parties to successfully utilise this growing discontent with the political establishment was Public Affairs (VV), which ran on a strong anti–corruption ticket and entered the House of Deputies after the 2010 elections, together with another new party, TOP 09. This fragmenting of the party system did not cease in 2010, and the 2013 elections saw electoral breakthroughs by two new parties: Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011) and USVIT (Šárovec 2019). ANO 2011 became the second largest party, joining ČSSD and KDU–ČSL in the coalition government and completely altering the composition of the country’s party system (Havlík and Voda 2016; Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020). The 2017 elections brought even more new parties into parliament – namely, SPD, the Pirates, and the Mayors and Independents (STAN).

This constellation was cemented in 2021, with one exceptional development: for the first time since the Velvet Revolution, the traditional left–wing parties lost their representation. Neither ČSSD nor KSČM managed to receive over the electoral threshold of 5% votes. The strong position of Babiš and his ANO 2011 party, together with his possibility of cooperating with Okamura’s SPD, prompted the other parties to form two electoral coalitions. These coalitions consisted of five individual parties. The first, SPOLU (“Together”), formed a group with ODS, KDU–ČSL, and TOP 09 and targeted a more conservative electorate. Alongside SPOLU, a coalition of Pirates and STAN, under the name “Pirstan”, campaigned on a liberal–centrist platform. Both coalitions received sufficient votes to form a government, while ANO 2011 and SPD remained in opposition.

This rudimentary overview of the Czech political scene shows how the growing support for new anti–establishment parties with charismatic leaders fuelled the gradual fragmentation of the country’s party system (Cirhan and Kopecký 2024). The success of SPD is one of the major symbols of this change, representing precisely the type of party that utilised the growing protest vote against the established centrist–liberal parties and the politics that they represent.

Okamura tailored his rhetoric to fall precisely into the category of parties benefitting from this changing societal mood, and he has manifested this skill repeatedly in several electoral arenas. His political career began in 2012 with his candidacy in the Senate election. Before this, Okamura was already publicly known from the media, where he was frequently interviewed. Having a half–Japanese and half–Korean father and a Czech mother,

Okamura, as a spokesperson of the Association of Czech Travel Agencies, had a fairly privileged access to the mainstream media, invited to comment on any topic even remotely related to the travel industry or Japan. This media visibility helped him to launch his political career, which began in the Senate. Contesting as an independent without any support from the existing political parties, he acquired 30.27% of the votes in the first round. In the second round, he won the seat, receiving 66.23% of the vote. Shortly after becoming an elected senator, Okamura began to criticise the weak position of the Senate within the structure of legislative power and began searching for a broader platform which would provide him with the necessary political background in the legislature. First, he joined the senators' club, "Caucus for Reconstruction of Democracy", formed by members of the Christian and Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and independents. Shortly afterwards, he recognised the political opportunity provided by the agenda of anti-establishment rhetoric and direct democracy. Unfortunately, Okamura and VV struggled to cooperate, as the party faced multiple corruption scandals and the split of its parliamentary representation, leading to early elections for the House of Deputies in 2013 (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017). From the very beginning, Okamura, as a successful, media-savvy businessman, led his parties as his personal vehicles, as can be seen even in the changes of the party names. USVIT was established in 2013 as "Dawn of Direct Democracy". Fourteen days after being founded, the name was changed to "Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura". A year later, the party leader pledged to make the party more inclusive and open to new members. The party statutes were amended and the party leader's name was removed, reinstating the original party name. In 2015, the party experienced an organisational crisis and its name was changed again. When the majority of the MPs established a new party, in an event that Okamura described as a "coup", the name was changed to "Dawn – National Coalition".

SPD's name underwent a similar, albeit shorter, series of changes. In 2015, the party was registered as "Freedom and Direct Democracy". A year later, the party name was amended to "Freedom and Direct Democracy – Tomio Okamura". That name remained until 2019, when Okamura's name was officially removed. However, this name change was not reflected in SPD's presentation on social media, where the party leader's name remains. The main party accounts even begin with his name, with the party referred to as, "Tomio Okamura, SPD".

Empirical analysis

The structure of our analysis enables us to observe to what extent, if at all, the increase in organisational complexity moderates the role of Okamura as a party leader – both internally (institutional personalisation) and for voters (behavioural personalisation).

To explore institutional personalisation, we begin by exploring the statutes of the two parties, investigating the autonomy of different levels of the party organisation to determine the position of the party leader.¹ The sequence in which the two organisationally different parties were built leaves us in a better position to explain the role of organisational complexity.

Although USVIT's statutes emphasise the need to strengthen the principles of democracy in society, this is not reflected in the party's approach to its own IPD. It functions as a very lean and highly centralised party organisation with a strictly top-down organisational

structure (see Table 2). Statutes support the position of the party leader and the Executive Committee (*předsednictvo strany*, in Czech), who make most decisions within the party.

It is noteworthy that although the analysis of party statutes in research into the internal workings of party politics has a long history, its use is limited in the context of new (especially short-lived) parties. With this in mind, we acknowledge that the statutory rules can indicate how the party officially guides its operation, but they cannot perfectly reflect the reality of the internal functioning of USVIT, as the party was established shortly before elections. As such, the statutes were adopted to adhere to the legal obligation to register the party, but they were not applied beforehand. Previous research into USVIT's intraparty processes has highlighted that, in reality, decisions made by the party were made solely by a semi-formal circle around the party leader, who was de facto "uncontrollable and irrevocable from his position" as a result (Svačinová 2018, 160–163). Svačinová (2018, 164) mentions that, although the Executive Committee was responsible for selecting party candidates, for instance, decisions about the first positions on candidate lists were in fact made by a semi-formal group of Okamura's close associates.

Formally, the highest body in the party is the party conference. However, in reality, the party leader, together with the Executive Committee, is solely responsible for the vast majority of decisions. The Executive Committee consists of five individuals, with the party leader maintaining by far the strongest position. This strength is particularly evident when it comes to financial decisions, signing contracts, and taking out loans for the party. The unique position of the party leader is also evident in the length of their term, as deputy party leaders are only elected for a period of one year, while the party leader is elected for five years. However, how is the strong role of the party leader and the Executive Committee manifest in USVIT? In other parties, different levels of the party organisation maintain influence over crucial decisions, such as the selection of candidates and the financing of campaigns. However, in USVIT, the Executive Committee have complete control over these processes (USVIT 2014). They are also solely responsible for creating and approving candidate lists for all types of elections, and the party

Table 2. Institutional Personalisation in USVIT and SPD.

Party Name	Setup of Party Organization	Rights of Territorial Party Organisation	Rules Concerning Party Members	Party Leader's Behaviour Toward Party Organisation
USVIT	The party has practically no organisation or membership. As a result, all decisions are made by the executive committee.	Party has no registered territorial branches. The executive committee has complete control of the candidate-selection process for all types of elections.	Initially a complete ban on the recruitment of new members. The party later admitted just nine members.	Unsupervised decisions made by the party leader. Authoritative behaviour resulted in party coup against the party leader and party takeover.
SPD	Highly centralised, top-down, hierarchical organisational structure. Vast majority of decisions made by the executive committee, where the party leader enjoys right of veto.	The executive committee maintains decision-making control of territorial branches' candidate-selection, recruitment, personnel, and other crucial actions.	Highly developed screening procedure for prospective members, with 2-year probation period. The executive committee decides who is recruited and uses membership to reward loyalty.	Party leader has veto powers and controls all decisions made within the party.

provides no rights to territorial party branches. In addition, these processes – as well as the decisions on personnel and finances – lack transparency. In short, under Okamura's leadership, the party has shown no intentions of building a nationwide organisation. USVIT's statutes stipulate that the party does not have a territorial party organisational structure at all (USVIT 2013). One could say that this lack of party organisation provides the leader with the highest possible level of control over the party organisation.

On questions of party membership, USVIT is equally strict. Although members' rights in USVIT are formally compatible with those in other parties across the country (Cirhan and Stauber 2018), USVIT has never actually opened its doors to members. In its entire history, it has admitted only nine members, instead functioning as an extremely exclusive club revolving around its party leader. USVIT's approach to territorial party organisation and membership changed for the first time in 2015, when the party statutes note the establishment of regional and local party branches ("clubs") and grant them rights. However, these changes took place after a coup against Okamura. In this dramatic set of events, USVIT fell apart just two years after its electoral breakthrough. This organisational crisis was "triggered by elites' disagreements over party financing, decision-making structures, and membership recruitment strategies" (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017). Okamura's authoritative approach to decisions about USVIT's organisational expansion and its openness to new members were at the core of these disputes (ČTK 2015). At the same time, the party was facing financial difficulties, and it became evident that the party leader had been involved in withdrawing funds that the party had received from public subsidies (Stuchlíková and Nová 2015).

These disagreements resulted in conflict between party elites, which escalated into a coup against Okamura. Marek Černoch was elected MP leader at the beginning of 2015, beginning the internal factionalising of the party. Ultimately, 10 of 14 former MPs of USVIT established a new party under Černoch (and without Okamura): "Dawn – National Coalition" (ČTK 2015).

In reaction to these events, Okamura founded a new party, SPD. One would have expected this development to affect his popularity amongst potential voters. To assess this, we analysed Okamura's approval rating over time (see Figure 1). In the first part of Figure 1, it can be seen that Okamura's popularity remained steady even amongst the substantial number of respondents who supported neither USVIT nor SPD. This seems to be because Okamura was able to hold onto his widely recognised image as a successful business person. The second and third parts of Figure 1 show the views of supporters of USVIT and SPD. It is evident that there was constant and almost univocal support for Okamura in both of these groups. This finding is supported by the observation that, after the split in 2015, most of the voters who switched to the new party remained loyal to Okamura and USVIT rapidly lost electoral relevance, despite retaining its core of activists and performing internal organisational reform to guarantee them more significant autonomy and intra-party democratic rights. Thus, both parties under Okamura's leadership present extreme cases of behavioural personalisation, regardless of the ideological or organisational changes made in the respective parties' platforms.

To examine the stability and changes in the electorates of the two political parties, we specified two logistic regression models covering the whole timeframe of the study (see Table 3). The common aspects of both parties were effective in appealing to younger voters. This is largely due to the overall segmentation of the Czech party system, in

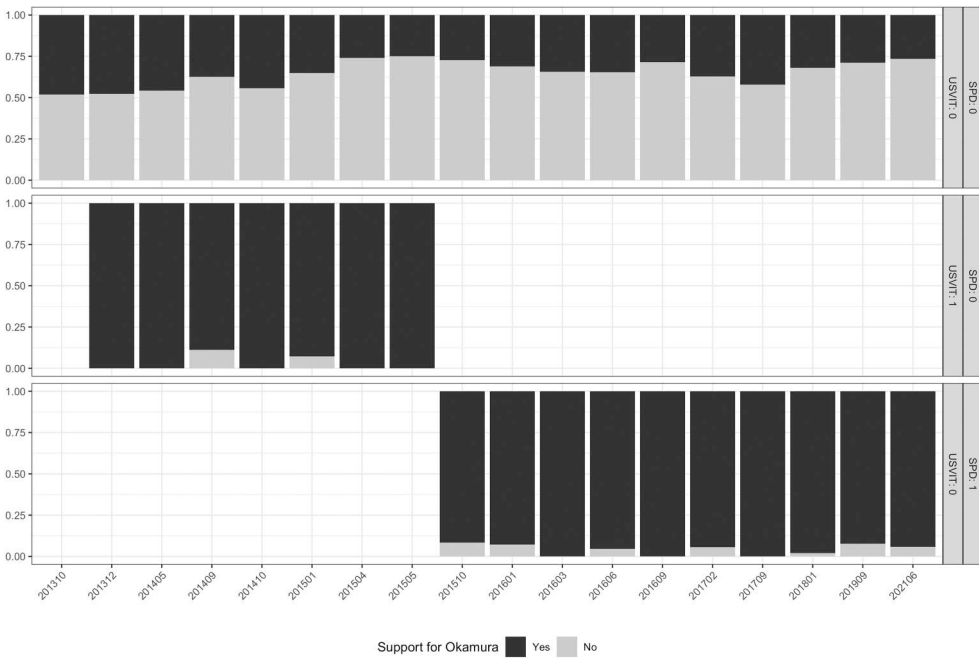


Figure 1. Approval Rate for Party Leader. Source: Authors' calculations. Data: CVVM (2023).

which older protest/dissatisfied voters tend to support KSČM or, more lately, ANO 2011. The other independent variables show a significant change between the parties, indicating the effect of radicalisation in rhetoric, moving from USVIT's appeal to direct democracy and relatively moderate Euroscepticism to SPD's strong anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiment (see also Kluknavská, Havlík, and Hanzelka 2023). The move is also associated with a decrease in support for SPD amongst voters with a right-wing self-placement. At first glance, the concentration of support amongst centrist voters could point to the party's moderate position. However, when the other explanatory variables are taken into account, the opposite interpretation seems more plausible: centrism

Table 3. Comparison of voter preferences (logistic regression with fixed effects and clustered standard errors).

	SPD (odds ratios)	USVIT (odds ratios)
log10(Age)	0.242 (0.043)***	0.202 (0.073)***
Gender	0.785 (0.036)***	0.847 (0.116)
LR: Center	1.314 (0.087)***	2.920 (0.430)***
LR: Right	0.956 (0.095)	1.694 (0.311)*
Income: Middle	1.270 (0.096)**	1.158 (0.106)
Income: Low	2.081 (0.208)***	1.309 (0.274)
Edu: Vocational	1.276 (0.120)*	1.505 (0.264)*
Edu: Secondary	1.136 (0.107)	1.278 (0.242)
Edu: University	0.753 (0.091)*	1.033 (0.216)
Num.Obs.	33059	11931
BIC	11893.7	3124.9
RMSE	0.20	0.16
Std.Errors	by: Research wave	by: Research wave
FE: Research wave	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors' calculations. Data: CVVM (2023).

combined with lower economic status and education suggests an opposition to traditional parties and an increase in populist attitudes (Voda and Havlík 2021).

Returning to the institutional aspect of personalisation, we note that Okamura learnt from some of his mistakes in “his” first party. With SPD, he built a more robust, national, and inclusive party organisation. The party registered regional, area, and local levels of territorial organisation, although all are closely tied to the decisions made by the Executive Committee. Although the party statutes, at first glance, do not deviate from the standard of other parties in the Czech context, several red flags are visible. Unlike in other Czech parties, in SPD, the Executive Committee alone decides on the vast majority of crucial matters, including the creation and approval of candidate lists for all types of elections. The same strategy is in place regarding membership: officially, prospective party members are regularly admitted; but in practice, there are several restrictions, some of which are highly unusual and strict. Perhaps the most evident is the requirement to complete a probationary period of at least two years (SPD 2021). During this time, the prospective party member has no formal membership rights. Moreover, the Executive Committee can reduce or abolish the probationary period, meaning that membership status can be given as a reward for loyalty.

In several aspects, the party leader still plays a decisive role. For instance, the leader himself approves each new member. More importantly, during internal votes of the Executive Committee, decisions are only adopted when the majority of its five members, including the party leader, reach an agreement. This *de facto* veto right gives Okamura a strong position in the party. It seems that the coup in USVIT, which was portrayed in the mainstream media as Okamura’s personal fiasco, signalled to him that parties are far from being unitary actors. As a result, when establishing SPD, Okamura created a somewhat more inclusive and open party organisation, at least at first glance, albeit with safeguards. Unlike USVIT, SPD has all the standard characteristics of a political party. However, all the decisions are still made solely by the Executive Committee, where Okamura enjoys a veto right (SPD 2021). This is also the main difference between the two parties. In USVIT, Okamura frequently made unsupervised decisions and engaged in authoritative behaviour that resulted in conflict and coups. In SPD, a more organisationally sustainable strategy has been adopted. Different levels of the party organisation have been established, but the Executive Committee makes most of the decisions and the party leader maintains his veto powers as a safeguard.

Notably, although the legal requirements compel parties to set statutory rules, informal practice may deviate from these rules. In a case of SPD, a near-breach of these rules was evident when the party parted ways with one of their most vocal and publicly visible MPs, Lubomír Volný (Čemusová 2019). Volný, together with two other MPs from the same constituency, was expelled from the party, and the entire regional branch in the Moravian-Silesian region was abruptly dissolved (Česká Televize 2019). This shows that the informal processes can carry more weight than the formal rules and that, when these informal practices are adopted, they then *de facto* function as a precedent for similar situations. Rybář and Spáč (2020, 653), whose work focuses on such incongruences between formal and informal rules in Slovak parties, add that party leaders often rely “primarily on informal and uncodified practices, primarily because for most situations regarding even the elementary intraparty decision-making process there simply are no formal rules to follow”.

Further, we focus on the personnel overlap between the two cases. Of the 14 electoral districts in the country, only in seven were former candidates of USVIT present. Concretely, only around 5% of SPD candidates were connected with USVIT (see Table 4). This demonstrates very low personnel overlap between USVIT and SPD. This supports our expectation that SPD is an organisationally distinct party, built from scratch, with minimal roots in the former structures of USVIT. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of Hájek (2019, 387–388) that 9 out of 10 SPD candidates in the 2017 elections were politically inactive and not affiliated with another party in the 2013 elections. In addition to supporting our argument regarding the organisationally distinct origins of the two parties, this also shows that SPD managed to attract many newcomers to stand in the elections under its brand.

This trend continued into the 2021 election, where the overlap of candidates did not reach more than 50%. In two regions, SPD even produced entirely new lists. This suggests that, despite SPD managing to stabilise the party organisation, the strong effect of central leadership remains evident and the nomination process cannot be perceived as fully institutionalised (Table 5).

Investigating the personnel overlap between the two cases at the level of the electoral district, we gained some insight into the difference in electoral support across the districts. We analysed the concentration of electoral support for leaders of party lists across political parties and electoral districts in the 2013, 2017, and 2021 elections. The Czech electoral system consists of 14 regional districts and voters can assign up to four preferential votes, without accumulation. Figures 2a–c show the percentage of preferential votes for the leader in every district. The difference presented as the colour of points is a measure of the distance between the district leader and the second nominee.

The comparison indicates a lower level of personalisation for both left-wing parties (KSČM and ČSSD) and KDU-ČSL. These parties rely on the tradition of mass parties with substantially larger organisations on the ground. In contrast, new and right-wing parties are typically prone to higher levels of personalised leadership or marketing based on popular personalities. Therefore, despite the structure of the electoral districts, the national party leaders represent significant outliers in terms of both inter-district comparison and intra-district competition.

For USVIT and SPD, we observe two significant trends. First, Okamura obtained the largest proportion of preferential votes, surpassing Karel Schwarzenberg (TOP 09) and Andrej Babiš (ANO 2011). This finding may be surprising to those familiar with the

Table 4. Overlap of USVIT and SPD Candidates in 2013 and 2017 Elections.

Electoral District	Total Candidates on the List	Former USVIT Candidates on SPD List	% of Former USVIT Candidates on SPD List
Jihočeský	22	3	13.64%
Jihomoravský	34	4	11.76%
Olomoucký	23	1	4.35%
Pardubický	19	1	5.26%
Středočeský	34	5	14.71%
Vysočina	20	2	10.00%
Zlínský	22	3	13.64%
All Districts*	343	19	5.54%

Source: Authors' calculations, Data: (Český statistický úřad 2023), *No former USVIT candidates were present on SPD candidate lists in the other electoral districts.

Table 5. Overlap of SPD Candidates in 2017 and 2021 Elections.

Electoral District	Total Candidates on the List	SPD Candidates from 2017 on SPD List in 2021	% of SPD Candidates from 2017 on SPD List in 2021
Hl. m. Praha	36	9	25.00
Středočeský	34	14	41.18
Jihočeský	22	6	27.27
Plzeňský	20	7	35.00
Karlovarský	14	3	21.43
Ústecký	26	6	23.08
Liberecký	17	5	29.41
Královéhradecký	20	1	5.00
Vysočina	20	7	35.00
Jihomoravský	34	11	32.35
Olomoucký	23	10	43.48
Zlínský	22	7	31.82

Source: Authors' calculations, Data: (Český statistický úřad 2023), *No former USVIT candidates were present on SPD candidate lists in the other electoral districts.

Czech political context, considering the popularity of the latter two leaders. Schwarzenberg is amongst the most charismatic and publicly visible politicians since the Velvet Revolution, having been a Senator and Minister of Foreign Affairs in two governments, as well as a presidential candidate. Over the years, Schwarzenberg has been associated with dissident circles, former president Václav Havel, and several parties – such as Freedom Union – Democratic Union (US-DEU), Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), the Green Party, and most recently TOP 09. Likewise, Babiš has for some time been one of the most publicly recognisable figures in Czech politics. A billionaire, one of the richest Czechs, and owner of several media outlets, he established ANO 2011 shortly before the 2013 election, and the party has been a success ever since. As a political entrepreneur and leader of a party that many referred to as the “business-firm party” (Cirhan 2023), he is a politician expected to receive a significant proportion of preferential votes.

On the other hand, this finding is in sharp contrast to the comparatively low median value of preferential votes for both analysed parties. This points to the very limited relevance of party organisation, serving – in this case – as only a proxy choice for Okamura's voters.

To summarise our findings regarding institutional personalisation, the cursory overview of the internal rules of USVIT and SPD demonstrate that Okamura has played a crucial role in the party organisation, at the expense of the rest of the parties. In our view, this has had (and continues to have) a major impact on these parties' fortunes and represents a strong example of institutional personalisation. Our findings are consistent with those of Rahat and Kenig (2018), showing that the power balance in both parties has been set to favour the leader. For instance, the veto right of the party leader enhances Okamura's position and can be seen as a form of centralised institutional personalisation.

In terms of behavioural personalisation, both cases show very little change over time. The leader's popularity remained a key factor in the multiple electoral successes, despite the overhaul of the membership base and relatively sharp increase in organisational complexity. The same is observable in the context of the hypothesised diffusion of popularity over newly established regional elites. Although we expected the trend of decentralisation of electoral support, our analysis of preferential voting revealed the opposite

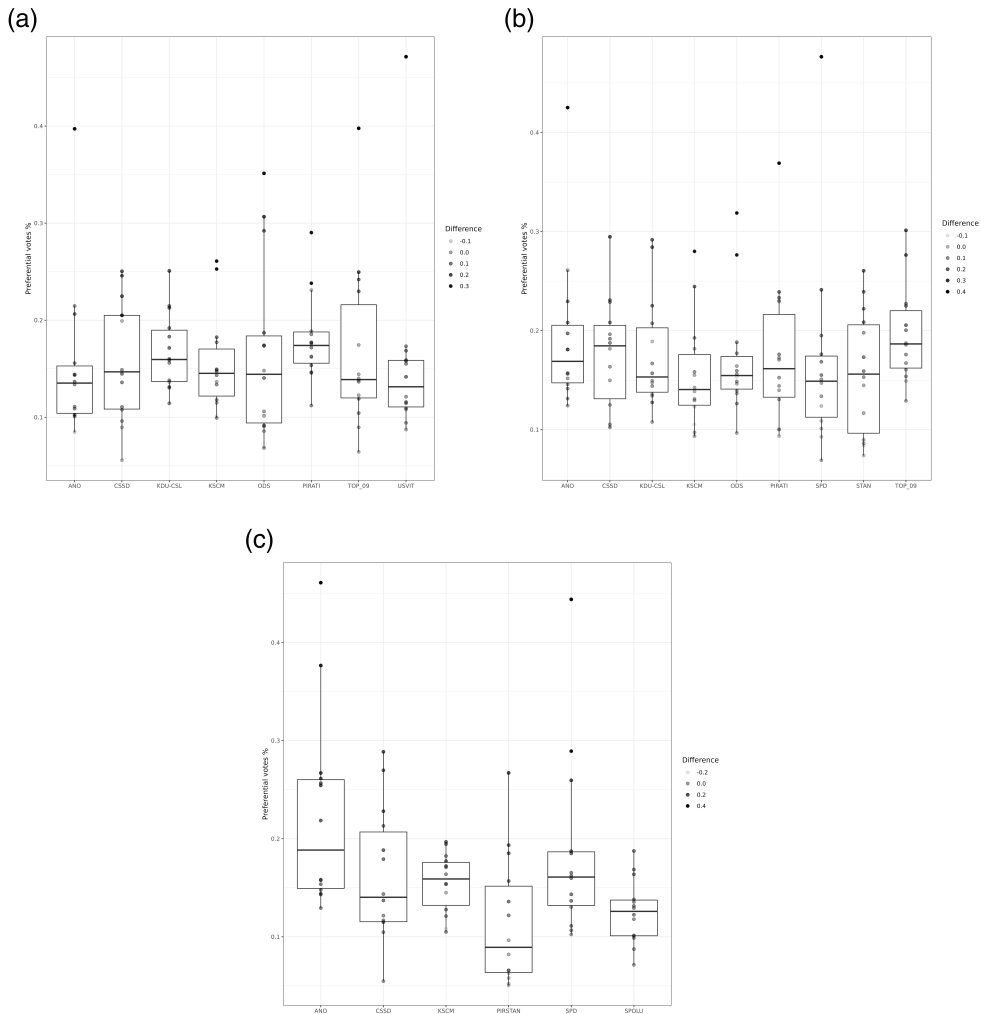


Figure 2. (a) Concentration of Preferential Votes 2013. Source: Authors' calculations. Data: Český statistický úřad (2023). (b) Concentration of Preferential Votes 2017. Source: Authors' calculations. Data: Český statistický úřad (2023). (c) Concentration of Preferential Votes 2021. Source: Authors' calculations. Data: Český statistický úřad (2023).

trend. Furthermore, we argue that voters' loyalty to the party leader remains indistinguishable from party affiliation. This can be explained as reflecting the wider trend of weakening party institutionalisation and near-irrelevance of party organisational structure. The regression analysis further explains the broader context of the changes in electoral support, reflecting the gradual radicalisation of Okamura's rhetoric – from a focus on direct democracy principles to an emphasis on anti-immigration sentiments.

Conclusions

Our findings show how parties which represent cases of significant personalisation operate and how personalisation changes their organisational setup and the behaviour

of their voters. Regarding our first research question concerning the role of institutional personalisation, we expected that the statutes would provide party leaders with autonomy at the expense of IPD. Consistent with this expectation, our findings show that the leader has played a crucial role in the structures of both parties. An investigation of the two parties' respective statutes revealed that Okamura has held a unique position within the structures of his parties, a position he enjoys at the expense of the rest of the organisation. We perceive this as a form of centralised institutional personalisation. From the very beginning, his participation in the two parties has represented a strong example of institutional personalisation (Rahat and Kenig 2018). The main difference between the two cases is that, in "Dawn", the strength of the leader's role, together with other practices, encountered resistance from the rest of the party and had catastrophic consequences.

On the other hand, in SPD, the power balance has been set to favour the leader in a more sophisticated manner. Technically, the party adheres to the same rules set by other standard parties. However, the standard party structures are overruled by practices such as the veto right of the party leader and the strong role of the Executive Committee, thus rendering them insignificant. In USVIT, Okamura's personality defined the party and was at the core of its problems. His highly authoritative approach and control over the party led to an organisational crisis. His resistance of organisational expansion, together with the financial scandals, resulted in a coup and subsequent split of the party. When establishing SPD, Okamura remedied his former mistakes and set up rudimentary organisational structures reminiscent of a standard party platform. However, he actually founded a highly centralised institution with a strict top-down hierarchy. Although different organisational levels were established, the Executive Committee makes almost all decisions, making the existence of the levels *de facto* irrelevant. Okamura maintains a strong position within SPD by holding veto power over most decisions adopted by the Executive Committee.

Also, we expected only minimal personnel overlap between the two parties' structures. Our findings were consistent with this, supporting the argument of significant institutional personalisation. Both cases are closely associated with the party leader's personality, being the main link between them. Even though both parties were established by this same individual; there is otherwise very minimal personnel overlap. Only 5% of candidates in USVIT also appeared in SPD.

Regarding our second research question concerning the role of personalisation in the electoral behaviour of voters, we expected that the party would gain organisational complexity over time, reducing the level of personalisation, and the electoral support of the party leader would be diffused to regional-level party elites.

However, the distribution of personal votes across elections did not change substantially. Thus, it can be concluded that the overall alternation of local leaders effectively prevents the process of power diffusion, as we expected. Therefore, we found little evidence supporting our expectation that, over time, the party would gain organisational complexity, which would reduce the level of personalisation.

Regarding behavioural personalisation, our findings show that voters indicated an overlapping sympathy with USVIT and Okamura. The case study clarified the mechanism by which certain parties within the party system could serve as personal platforms, even in the context of internal organisational changes.

Observing almost no distinction between the strength of sympathy to a party or party leader adds to existing literature, mainly relying on comparative sociological data, a further explanation of possible underestimation of personalisation. We showed that a significant number of voters, rather than having equally distributed preferences, strongly prefer a specific leader – regardless of their party label, party personnel, or proposed policies. This analysis of electoral behaviour partially contradicts previous findings about leader-focused voters, namely in relation to age, as we show that there is a significant group of younger voters with highly personalised voting patterns.

Measuring personalisation based on a single indicator or single data source can be problematic, and further research should take this into account. A promising avenue of future research could be the process of personalisation as a multidimensional concept, with the dimensions interacting differently across diverse types of organisations. In our view, future research into demand-side factors should empirically treat the question of Okamura’s personal appeal as a driving force behind “his” two parties.

Note

1. Decision-making structures within new Czech parties were already subject of academic research (Kopeček and Svačinová 2015; Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in figshare at [10.6084/m9.figshare.24261232](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24261232).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Electoral performance of Czech Parliamentary Parties 2013–2017

Party	Votes	Seats	+/-
ČSSD	20,45%	50	-6
ANO 2011	18,65%	47	+47
KSČM	14,91%	33	+7
TOP 09	11,99%	26	-15
ODS	7,72%	16	-37

(Continued)

Continued.

<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>+/-</i>
ÚSVIT	6,88%	14	+14
KDU-ČSL	6,78%	14	+14
ANO 2011	29,64%	78	+31
ODS	11,32%	25	+9
PIRÁTI	10,79%	22	+22
SPD	10,64%	22	+22
KSČM	7,76%	15	-18
ČSSD	7,27%	15	-35
KDU-ČSL	5,80%	10	-4
TOP 09	5,31%	7	-15
STAN	5,18%	6	+2

Appendix 2: Crosstabulation of voters' evaluation of leader and party (CVVM)

<i>Okamura</i>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<i>N</i>
<i>USVIT</i>												
0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	1
2	0	0	0	0	0	50	0	0	0	50	0	2
3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
4	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
5	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
6	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	0	0	0	3
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	0	50	0	0	2
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	33,3	0	0	33,3	33,3	3
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	81,8	18,2	11
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	75	20
<i>Okamura</i>	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	<i>N=</i>
<i>SPD</i>												
0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
1	0	0	0	0	33,3	0	0	0	0	33,3	33,3	3
2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
5	0	0	0	0	25	25	0	25	25	0	0	4
6	0	0	0	0	0	25	75	0	0	0	0	4
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	50	50	0	0	0	2
8	0	0	0	0	10	0	0	0	60	20	10	10
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	6,7	0	6,7	66,7	20	15
10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6,1	4,1	12,2	77,6	49