

Inside the personal party: Leader-owners, light organizations and limited lifespans

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Abstract

Scholars in recent decades have discussed the emergence of a new leader-dominated party type, variously described as ‘personal’, ‘personalistic’ and ‘personalist’. However, there has been no original comparative research examining whether (and how) such parties resemble one another organizationally and whether they constitute a distinct organizational type. This article does so by comparing the parties of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Clive Palmer in Australia. Based on interviews with those in the parties and party documents, we find our cases share two distinctive organizational features: (1) the founder-leader’s dominance of the party and perceived centrality to its survival and (2) the relationship between the party and members saw active members discouraged and organization at the local level was extremely limited/non-existent. Building on this analysis, we then propose three criteria for identifying other personal parties and point to the existence of a possible subtype. We conclude that the emergence of personal parties requires us to reconsider our understanding of contemporary party organizations in advanced democracies.

Keywords

cartel parties, party membership, party organization, personal parties, political leaders, political parties

Notwithstanding personalization and presidentialization trends (McAllister, 2007; Poguntke and Webb, 2005), mainstream party leaders in parliamentary democracies remain expressions of parties and their leadership depends on the party’s continued support. In recent decades, however, we have seen new and electorally successful parties which appear to be the exact opposite. Not only are they the expressions of a dominant founder-leader but their very survival seems to depend on the continued support and

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presence of that founder-leader. Examples include the parties of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Jean-Marie Dedecker in Belgium, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, Janusz Palikot in Poland, Frank Stronach in Austria, and Clive Palmer in Australia. This type of party has been variously termed by scholars as ‘personal’, ‘personalistic’ and ‘personalist’ (Calise, 2015; Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Kostadinova and Levitt, 2014). However, the internal workings of these parties remain largely ‘black boxes’ and there has been no empirical comparative research that gets inside them. Focusing on the parties founded by Berlusconi and Palmer, this study does precisely that in order to answer the following question: *Do apparently personal party organizations resemble one another in ways that clearly distinguish them from other party types?*

The article proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the theoretical background to the study and outline our approach to identifying whether the characteristics of the personal/personalist/personalistic party organization constitute a specific type.¹ We then present our cases: Palmer’s Palmer United Party (PUP) and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) and Popolo della Libertà (PDL—People of Freedom).² Thereafter, we assess whether FI/PDL and PUP resemble one another organizationally in ways that are distinct. Our analysis is based on the responses from interviews conducted with over 60 FI/PDL and PUP elected representatives, officials, candidates and grassroots members, along with an examination of relevant party documents such as statutes and rules. We find that our cases share two main organizational features that distinguish them from other party types. First, the relationship between the party and its members is one in which members are actively discouraged from being involved and ‘the party on the ground’ is either dormant or very limited (especially outside campaign time). Second, the leader’s dominance of the party and centrality to its existence and future is evident and accepted by those involved in these parties. Building on this analysis, we then set out three conditions for classifying personal parties that can be used (and refined) by researchers for other potential cases. Finally, in the conclusions, we discuss how the emergence of personal parties requires us to reconsider our assumptions about the genesis, organization and lifespans of contemporary parties.

Personal, personalistic and personalist parties

Parties created and dominated by their founder-leaders are not entirely new phenomena in advanced democracies. For example, Kostadinova and Levitt (2014) note the case of Charles De Gaulle in France as a historical instance of personalist party leadership. Nonetheless, parties like this have been far more common in other areas of the world. There are numerous references to them in the literature on third-wave democracies or new and emerging democracies (Conaghan and Espinal, 1990; Resnick, 2012; Roberts, 2002). It is the rise however of such parties in *both* emerging and established democracies that has inspired the literature on ‘personal’, ‘personalistic’ and ‘personalist’ parties. One of the key scholars of this phenomenon over the past two decades, Mauro Calise (2015: 303), describes the ‘personal party’ as ‘the most extreme case of party personalization, consisting in the full control by an individual leader of the party he has himself created’.³ The defining characteristic of these parties, of which Calise (2015: 304) says Berlusconi’s FI is the archetype, is that ‘a combination of charismatic and patrimonial resources replace the collective and legal-rational original party structure’. Gunther and Diamond (2003: 187) adopt a similar definition of FI, including it in their ‘personalistic party’ category, which they term the purest type of a wider set of ‘electoralist parties’. As regards

the personalistic party's structures and aims, Gunther and Diamond (2003: 187) state that it is 'an organization constructed or converted by an incumbent or aspiring national leader exclusively to advance his or her national political ambitions'. In addition to FI, they list as examples of personalistic parties those led by Fujimori in Peru, Joseph Estrada in the Philippines, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand. Finally, Kostadinova and Levitt (2014: 492) define the 'personalist party' by 'the presence of a dominant leader and a party "organization" that is weakly institutionalized by design'. They cite as examples of personalist parties those founded and led by Berlusconi, Chávez and Vladimir Putin in Russia.

Although they use three different terms—personal, personalistic and personalist—the studies cited above are clearly talking about the same broad phenomenon and pointing to the emergence of the same new party type. Positing a new party type of course opens up a potential minefield, especially as there is a long-standing debate within political science about how to identify them. This revolves in particular around the question of whether the criteria used should be organizational, ideological or a combination of both (Krouwel, 2006: 249–250). While not discounting the merits of ideology-based party classifications, our interest in this study lies in examining whether, and how, personal parties are *organizationally* distinct. To investigate this, we follow the advice of Koole (1996), who argues that, when formulating typologies, a useful approach is to uncover how types and sub-types differ from one another. In our study, we therefore examine how our cases compare organizationally, whether they fit the key claims about personal parties in the literature and how they resemble or differ from the five main pre-existing models of party organization: the elite party, the mass party, the catch-all party, the cartel party and the electoral-professional party (Katz and Mair, 1995; Panebianco, 1988). While there are a wide variety of party organization models, these five are arguably the most well known. By assessing how our cases compare organizationally to one another as well as to these ideal-types, we are able to consider whether these parties are as organizationally distinct as is assumed in the personal party scholarship.

To do so, we will consider the ways our parties are organized under three headings. The first two—the principal sources of party's resources and the party elite-members relationship—are taken from Katz and Mair's (1995) landmark work on party organization characteristics. The third reflects the main contention of the scholarship on personal, personalist and personalistic parties, namely, that personal party leaders have a relationship towards their party organizations in terms of dominance and perceived centrality for the party's future (and survival) that is qualitatively different from other types.

Principal source of party's resources

As van Biezen and Kopecký (2015: 2) observe, 'each ideal-type of party organization mooted by the literature' is 'associated with a particular pattern of party financing'. Elite parties were reliant on personal contacts as they had few or no members (Scarrow, 2006). According to Duverger (1964: 106), since modern parties emerged at the same time as electoral and parliamentary procedures, they were originally electoral committees whose function was to provide support and collect funds to organize a campaign. Mass parties have large labour-intensive organizations and depend on fees from their members as well as other contributions (e.g. subscriptions to the party newspaper). This organizational structure was initially created according to Duverger (1964: 107) so that socialist candidates could compete against the interests of industrialists and landowners. Catch-all

parties still rely on membership fees but also solicit funding from wider society such as corporations. Cartel parties largely fund their activities by awarding themselves increasing levels of state funding (Katz and Mair, 1995: 18). Finally, in the electoral-professional party, Panebianco (1988: 264) suggests financing will occur ‘through interest-groups and public funds’. He notes that, in contrast to mass parties, ‘members and party bureaucrats have less weight both financially speaking and as links with voters’ (Panebianco, 1988: 266). Our question therefore is whether personal parties present a new *principal* source of funding compared to the above-mentioned party types.

Relations between ordinary members and party elite

According to Scarrow (2015: 13), ‘Creating membership-based local organizations was a radical idea when it was first introduced by a few parties in the nineteenth century’. In the elite parties that existed before this ‘radical idea’ spread, membership was small (and elite). As Duverger (1964: 106) points out, ‘The quality of their members was more important than their numbers. The qualities most in demand were prestige ... and wealth’. By contrast, the membership in mass parties is large and homogeneous, with members claiming a right to control the elite, although this comes with substantial expectations of membership involvement (Katz and Mair, 1995: 18). According to Panebianco (1988: 264), ‘In the mass party described by Weber, Michels and Duverger, a crucial role is played by the apparatus, the party bureaucracy ... is used by the mass party leaders to maintain close ties with the members’. Although the catch-all party still emphasizes membership, it does not require the same degree of commitment of members, who in turn become ‘organized cheerleaders’ for elites as the independence of the parliamentary party is emphasized (Katz and Mair, 1995: 18). The cartel party continues this trend: members may have more formal rights, such as the capacity to vote for leaders (Bolloyer, 2009: 564), but their role in the party organization is diminished as mere ‘supporters’ can be given similar rights. Because the membership is atomized, it becomes more difficult for members to influence and control party elites. The membership also becomes smaller and less involved over time, with the territorial presence of parties diminishing.⁴ Panebianco’s (1988: 264) electoral-professional party is characterized by ‘weak vertical ties’ and, similar to the catch-all party, the party elites have significant authority. However, more importantly, the ‘party’s gravitational centre shifts from the members to the electorate’. In personal parties, we expect to see these trends taken much further and for there to be significantly decreased membership involvement compared to the above types. As Gunther and Diamond (2003: 187) comment about personalistic parties, ‘organization is weak, shallow and opportunistic’. We therefore should find that our parties lack a constant grassroots presence and do not provide a range of activities for members, especially outside campaign time.

Leader dominance and centrality to the party

The key claim of the literature on personal, personalistic and personalist parties regards the domination of the founder-leader over the party and his or her centrality to its very existence and survival. This dominance goes well beyond the party in office/party on the ground relationship (increasingly balanced towards the former) seen in the cartel party or that in Panebianco’s (1988) electoral-professional party, where elites have very significant authority and ‘weak vertical ties’ characterize organization. Echoing Gunther and Diamond’s conceptualization of the ‘personalistic party’ as a vehicle for a leader, Kostadinova and

Levitt (2014: 500) state that ‘a personalist party exists and functions around a prominent individual, a political entrepreneur who takes over or simply creates a party or a movement in pursuit of his or her agenda’. They explain that ‘the leader exercises far-reaching power: determining the direction and vision of party platforms and campaigns; nominating candidates for elections; deciding on the allocation of organizational resources; and wielding authority over other politicians from his or her party’ (Kostadinova and Levitt, 2014: 500). Indeed, the centrality of the leader is such that Calise (2015: 303) says the survival of a personal party depends ‘on the personal resources—financial, institutional, charismatic, and last but not the least, physical—of its founder’. In other words, these are parties that—all things being equal—are unlikely to outlive their founder-leader. As such, they are qualitatively different in their expected lifespans to previous party types. Indeed, they would not even satisfy the conditions set out for definition as a political party set out in LaPalombara and Weiner’s (1966) landmark volume *Political Parties and Political Development*. In their introduction, the authors specified that a party worthy of the name must have ‘continuity in organization—that is, an organization whose expected life span is not dependent on the life span of current leaders’ (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966: 6–7). If the personal party is indeed a new and distinct type, we should find clear evidence of a distinctive dominance and centrality of the leader to the party in our cases.

Cases and party origins

Our cases are the parties created by Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Clive Palmer in Australia. These have been selected, first, due to their apparent resemblances. Berlusconi’s party, as we have seen, is cited as an archetypal case in the literature on personal, personalistic and personalist parties, while Palmer’s appears to possess a number of key similarities as regards the role of the leader (not least the party being named after him). However, our cases also present a number of important differences that should reinforce the significance of any common organizational traits we find. These concern party age and the political contexts in which each party emerged.

Party age is particularly important. This is because if we find the same organizational characteristics in our two cases, irrespective of their differences in party age, then it is more likely that we are faced with lasting features of the personal party type.⁵ When the interviews were conducted, Berlusconi had been leader of his own party for over 15 years and most of the interviewees from Berlusconi’s party had been led by him for more than a decade. By contrast, the interviews with people in Palmer’s party took place when PUP had been around for just over 1.5 years. Hence, if our interviews across these ‘old’ and ‘new’ personal parties reveal similar findings about the role of the leader and how those in the party view him, along with the relationship between the party and the members, these would appear even more significant precisely because of such party age differences. Second, the political contexts and time periods in which our cases emerged are very different. While Berlusconi’s FI arose amidst the collapse of the early 1990s Italian party system and a moment of deep crisis for Italy, the PUP appeared within the long-running stability of the Australian political system and continued prosperity in 21st century Australia. As Max Weber et al. (1978) argued, the former context lends itself to the emergence of charismatic leaders who can dominate their parties far more than the latter. Finally, although focusing on parties in advanced democracies, our case selection allows us to compare a European and non-European party, thus overcoming the Western European bias present in much of the party scholarship (Erdmann, 2004; Wolinetz, 2002).

Although the structural conditions and contexts are thus quite different in our two cases, we find strong similarities in the dynamics that led to Berlusconi and Palmer creating their own parties. Both did so after losing the backing of a major party to which their businesses had donated large sums of money over many years. In Berlusconi's case, this was the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI—Italian Socialist Party), which had been in government alongside the Democrazia Cristiana (DC—Christian Democracy) for most of the three decades from the early 1960s to the early 1990s. In particular, the PSI leader and prime minister from 1983 to 1987, Bettino Craxi, had played a key role in helping Berlusconi keep his three national television networks in the 1980s. With the swift decline of the PSI and the DC in 1993 following the *Mani Pulite* ('Clean Hands') corruption investigations, Berlusconi suddenly found himself deprived of his main political friends. Moreover, as Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) note, he 'faced a serious debt crisis, and there was a risk that a left-wing government would take steps to reduce his near-monopolistic control of commercial television'. Berlusconi therefore began exploring from mid-1993 how he could maintain political influence, whether through supporting a new party or setting up his own. Having announced the creation of FI and his entry into politics at the end of January 1994, he led a new centre-right coalition to election victory just two months later (for a fine-grained analysis in Italian of FI's early years, see Poli, 2001). Since then, Berlusconi and his party have also headed winning alliances at the 2001 and 2008 general elections and he has served longer as Prime Minister of Italy than anyone else since the end of the Second World War (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015: 17–20; McDonnell, 2013).⁶ Moreover, his party organization and leadership model has influenced other Italian parties in their organizational and leadership choices in the intervening decades (Calise, 2015; see also the work in Italian on this by Calise (2011) and Bordignon (2013)).

The creation of PUP came after a long history for Palmer in the centre-right National Party (NP) and Liberal National Party (LNP).⁷ While the level of his involvement in these parties has been disputed, we know that he was a large financial contributor to both (Smith, 2013). Despite his generosity, Palmer's relationship with the LNP deteriorated rapidly in the months after a new LNP state government took office in Queensland in March 2012. A key turning point was when another company was chosen ahead of one of his to build a railway line. Palmer responded by initiating legal action against the state government (Edwards, 2014). Several months later, in April 2013, Palmer launched PUP. At the September 2013 federal election, PUP ran in every constituency across Australia, taking 5.5% of first preference votes in the House of Representatives and 4.9% in the Senate (Kefford and McDonnell, 2016). This result enabled it to secure three seats in the Senate (giving it the balance of power) along with one in the House of Representatives. In an electoral system that strongly favours established parties, this was the best debut performance by any new Australian party in several decades. However, the party began to unravel and its support levels plummeted, especially following a series of scandals involving Palmer's businesses in 2015. At the 2016 Federal Election, PUP failed to retain a single seat and seems extremely unlikely to recover.

Organizational characteristics of personal parties

In this section, we use the headings set out earlier—principal source of party resources; party-members relationship; leader dominance and centrality to the party—to compare our personal parties to one another and to the five ideal-types. We base our analysis on a

range of sources: original documents such as party statutes, relevant secondary literature and, most notably, interviews with those who have been in the parties and can thus provide us with a unique perspective on how these organizations function. As Van Haute (2011: 13) observes, studies of party organizations rarely involve gathering and analysing the perspectives of those within parties—a fact often lamented, but seldom redressed, by party scholars. By contrast, our study does so in considerable depth. For Berlusconi's party, we use material from semi-structured interviews and group interviews conducted across Italy between October 2009 and December 2010 with 44 elected representatives and members.⁸ For PUP, we draw on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2015 with federal or state candidates and several former high-level party figures from across Australia.⁹

Principal source of party's resources

While both FI and PUP were financially dependent on their respective founder-leader for their set-up costs, Berlusconi's party's main source of income subsequently was state funding (although the party continued also to benefit financially from its leader and his companies). In 1994, Berlusconi essentially underwrote the creation of FI by guaranteeing very large bank loans with the promise that he would be able to honour them if the party did not do sufficiently well to access state funding. His companies also provided crucial expertise, free advertising and other benefits-in-kind for the new party (Poli, 2001). After the 1994 general election, FI began to receive considerable state funding and continued to do so thanks to its position as one of Italy's most voted for parties. Between them, FI and the PDL had received almost €800m in public money by 2013 (Di Nicola et al., 2015). Nonetheless, Berlusconi and his companies continued to support the party both directly and indirectly (especially through his media outlets). To take just one example, we know that his 'Publitalia 80' advertising company donated €1.2 million to FI in 1994, €1.3m in 1997 and €8m in 2000 (Scacchioli, 2014). Berlusconi also continued to act personally as guarantor for his parties' bank loans, which were said in 2012 to amount to almost €179m (Palombi, 2012). In round terms, however, if we take the figures cited above as a guide, we can say that the principal source of party resources by 2012/2013 was no longer the founder-leader, but the public purse.

Palmer also played a crucial financial role when setting up his new party. As we can see from PUP's declaration of donations submitted to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), the founder-leader and his businesses accounted for almost all the funds it received in its first year. Around AUD\$25m of the party's AUD\$28m total income came from Palmer and his companies, with the remaining amount being electoral reimbursements (AEC, 2015). To place this level of funding in context: while PUP's income was still far behind Australia's two major parties in 2013–2014 (Keane, 2015), it was already ahead of an established 'third' party like the Greens which received around AUD\$21m in donations during the same financial year (AEC, 2015). In sum, in both our cases, we find that the initial principal source of party resources was related either directly or indirectly to the founder-leader's wealth. However, in the case of Berlusconi, while this continued to be significant, it was not the main source of resources (given the sizeable public funding the party received). In the case of PUP, however, Palmer and his companies were not only the principal source, but accounted for almost all of the party's income.

Party-members relationship

We noted earlier that cartel parties attach less importance to having active members than previous party types. Our personal parties take this much further. Although the PDL's national membership office claimed in early 2012 that it had over 1.1 million members, the picture that emerges from its official documents and the interviews is of a party that paid little attention to the grassroots and discouraged active members.¹⁰ If we look at the PDL party statute when the interviews were conducted, we find that the few provisions for the involvement of members are extremely vague. For example, article 10 of the statute says that the party may hold 'consultations and direct democratic initiatives, with the periodic involvement of citizens, supporters and members' via its Internet site (PDL, 2011). Otherwise, the impression from the statute is that the scope for members to influence party policy or internal party organization appointments is extremely limited. This impression is reinforced by the interviews with those in Berlusconi's party, which show that little attention was paid to the 'party on the ground', particularly as regards the involvement of ordinary members in the life of the party beyond election time. When asked about relations between the party and its members, Senator Enrico Musso from Genoa was very clear, saying that 'they are limited to the bare minimum'! He went on to pose the question that unless they were interested in running for election, 'why would someone join this party'?

The lack of a continuous and lasting relationship with the grassroots was explained to us by Michele Coppola (Turin city councillor), who said that contact with members was infrequent because FI/PDL was 'an extremely lean and extremely flexible party that can inflate when there are elections, but then inevitably deflates during the year because it delegates its most important activities to its institutional representatives'. As other interviewees confirmed, the party availed of ordinary members, as required, during campaigns but had very little use for them otherwise. While this rise and fall of member activity before and after elections is true to some extent for many parties—see, for example, the discussion of 'vote-seeking parties' in Wolinetz (2002: 151–152)—we found that not only is it far more dramatic in our cases but that active membership was deliberately and explicitly neither cultivated nor encouraged.

This finding is evident if we look more closely at the activities of the 'party on the ground'. For FI/PDL grassroots members, the main formal opportunities to interact outside election time with one another and with party representatives consisted of events open to the wider public (as opposed to being exclusively for members). These were held at most every 3 or 4 months in a local hotel or convention centre, and headlined by a national 'big name speaker'. As Carlo Alberto Tesserin (Veneto regional Councillor) acknowledged, an ordinary member not interested in standing for election 'has very few opportunities for involvement in the party'. Indeed, in one city of over half a million people, a grassroots member said, 'there has not been a single meeting for members in the last year'. The inactivity of the 'party on the ground' was also due to the fact that it simply lacked the physical structures to do more. Even in some of Italy's largest cities, FI/PDL had only had one branch office (usually located in the city centre). The party's meagre grassroots presence and local activity seemed to reflect Berlusconi's view of what its role should be. As Senator Guido Possa from Lombardy, who had occupied senior positions in Berlusconi's businesses and was responsible for overseeing FI grassroots in the 1990s, said of the leader, 'his ideal is a party which does not give him too much cause for concern, which basically exists to provide him with power and then it is up to him to use that power'.

The situation at grassroots level in PUP was even bleaker than in FI/PDL. On paper, the party constitution set out an organizational structure similar to that of traditional mainstream Australian parties with branches, conferences and state-based divisions. When asked in 2014 about how many members PUP had in the state of Queensland alone, Palmer insisted, 'We've got thousands of them, thousands' (SBS, 2014).¹¹ The membership had clearly defined rights that included ways for them to contribute to policymaking and to select candidates. The reality, however, was very different. PUP, like FI/PDL, made use of grassroots members as volunteers during the election campaign, but had little interest in them beyond that. The majority of those we spoke to said they had heard during the 2013 election campaign that proper local party structures would be put in place afterwards. However, this change had not happened anywhere when we conducted interviews at the beginning of 2015. A New South Wales former candidate told us that, since the end of the 2013 Federal election campaign, 'the party has created no real opportunity for the membership to get involved or to feel ownership'. When asked what opportunities the party provided for members to meet in their state, another former candidate from Victoria replied 'not a lot' and said members simply received emails and newsletters. One interviewee from Western Australia told us that they had 'had no communication in a formal sense from the party' in over a year since the Senate election, while another from the Australian Capital Territory commented, 'you are just left abandoned after the campaign'.

As was the case in FI/PDL, the lack of a PUP 'party on the ground' appeared to reflect the founder-leader's vision. A former candidate from Queensland told us that there was 'active discouragement of anything that looked like forming democratic branches. It was just not wanted'. This situation was confirmed by several key figures in the party we spoke to. As one said of Palmer, 'members were superfluous to him'. The same interviewee explained, 'Clive was fundamentally opposed to it. He really didn't want it. He didn't want these people to become organized in such a way that they became autonomous or independent of him'. Just like Coppola's description about FI/PDL above, after 'inflating' during the Federal election campaign when it sourced candidates and called for members to sign up and get involved in campaigns, PUP then 'deflated' once those campaigns were over, remaining with just the leader, those in party central office and its elected representatives in public office. A number of our interviewees said they had tried, with some initial success, to build small networks of members in their constituencies during the election campaigns. However, with no logistical or financial support from the party in central office, these efforts were doomed.

Leader dominance and centrality to the party

We again find clear similarities between our cases under this heading. In both FI/PDL and PUP, the founder-leader's dominance and centrality were formally recognized in party documents and widely acknowledged by our interviewees. As Hopkin and Paolucci (1999: 322) note, FI's original party statute was 'immediately "suspended" for three years, leaving the organization under the untrammelled control of its leader'. Thereafter, the party statutes of both FI and the PDL gave Berlusconi very considerable powers over internal party organs and candidatures, leaving no real power in the hands of grassroots members or branches. For example, according to the PDL party statute approved in 2011 (PDL, 2011), Berlusconi could convene and nominate the majority of members of all party bodies. He was also responsible for deciding all candidatures down to regional

level. Throughout both FI and the PDL's history, Berlusconi has been able to introduce new party positions (and appoint their occupants), without having to receive wider party approval. Further underlining how the party was at the behest of its leader, Paolucci (2006: 173) noted that party conferences were held 'only rarely, at the discretion of the leader, and these resemble a TV show rather than a party meeting'. In fact, only two national FI party conferences were held between 1994 and 2006 (Paolucci, 2006).

The interviewees from Berlusconi's party in 2009–2010 were all very clear that his leadership was as unquestionable as it had always been. As Senator Possa stated, 'it's obvious that this party is dominated by Berlusconi'. When asked about the relationship between party and leader, Senator Musso replied that it 'is Berlusconi's party. Berlusconi says what has to be done'. This recognition of Berlusconi's *ownership* of the party was present among all interviewees, from representatives at the highest institutional levels right down to the grassroots (on Berlusconi as 'leader-owner', see Bordignon, 2013: 78). Among the implications of this 'leader-owner' role was that, as many interviewees commented, there was no room for dissent in the party. Hence Maurizio Bucci (Friuli-Venezia Giulia regional councillor) observed, Berlusconi 'decides the party stances whether you like it or not. If you like it, you stay. If you don't, you leave. That is really clear'. On the same point, Luigi Mazzei (city councillor in Calimera, Puglia) commented, 'Anyone who does not agree with Berlusconi's leadership is out'. It is important to note that the vast majority of interviewees did not see this domination by the founder-leader as a negative characteristic of the party, but simply as how things were done (with FI/PDL's election results over time demonstrating that the model was effective).

Like Berlusconi in 1994 when he suspended the party statute for 3 years, Palmer also began his leadership by placing all formal powers firmly in his own hands for almost exactly the same length of time. PUP's 2013 Constitution stated that 'until 31 December 2016 or such other date nominated by the Interim Executive Committee, the Interim Executive Committee shall exercise all of the powers of the Executive and of all bodies set out in this Constitution' (PUP, 2013: 54). This Interim Executive Committee was entirely made up of Palmer family members. If Palmer's domination of PUP (2013: 55) was not apparent enough already, the Constitution left no room for doubt by then stipulating that '[T]he Chairman is fully authorised to exercise all powers of the Interim Executive Committee and a declaration signed by the Chairman shall be conclusive proof of the subject matter of any thing (sic) to which it relates'.

Our interviewees all acknowledged Palmer's domination of, and centrality to, the party. A former candidate from New South Wales said that 'everything was done by, approved by and controlled by Clive', adding that 'the national executive as far as anyone was aware was Clive, and the people named as executive were done so, to show there was more than just Clive, but it was a farce'. One high-level figure in the party told us that 'Clive was effectively just running the show'. Another explained how, in addition to the executive being composed of Palmer family members, the staff at party central office was almost entirely made up of trusted employees from Palmer's businesses. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that when a former candidate from Western Australia called PUP head office after the 2013 election campaign to complain that party structures at local level had not been set up, they were rebutted with the line 'well, it is Clive Palmer's party'.

One of the most striking commonalities across interviewees from both FI/PDL and PUP—again notwithstanding the significant differences in how long the leader and interviewees had been in the same party—was how many believed their party could not exist

without the leader (recalling Calise's comment about personal party survival earlier). Less than a quarter of interviewees in each party said they were sure it would have a future without the founder-leader. As one grassroots FI/PDL member commented, the party 'is born and dies with Berlusconi'. Another said that although they hoped the party would continue, they did not believe it could, adding, 'in the end, we are together because of Berlusconi'. Nunzia Brandi (Lecce city councillor) echoed the views of many others, commenting that 'Berlusconi is the party. And without Berlusconi, everything would break up'. The same picture emerged in the interviews about PUP and Palmer. A candidate from Victoria stated plainly that PUP 'would not exist without him in any shape or form' and most other interviewees offered similarly succinct answers. Those who elaborated tended to point to the lack of party structures as a key reason for their replies. For example, one candidate observed that 'if the party was serious, they would have things in place that things could continue on' (i.e. without Palmer). Another prefaced their answer regarding the party's likely lifespan by saying, 'unfortunately he (Palmer) is unwilling to let the party flourish as a normal party would'. In both cases, Berlusconi and Palmer's parties are thus seen by those within them not only as expressions of dominant leaders but as being unviable without them.

Identifying personal parties

The above analysis of FI/PDL and PUP shows that they are similar to one another and distinct from the five party organizational ideal-types. In particular, we see strong distinguishing features as regards, first, the leader's dominance of, and centrality to, the party; and secondly, the party elite-members relationship. Our findings therefore provide support for the personal party as a new party organization type. Building on this finding, we can now turn to the question of identifying other personal parties. We propose the following three main conditions that should all be present if we are faced with a personal party:

1. Personal parties have leader-owners who exert strong formal/informal control

Personal party founders like Berlusconi and Palmer behave and are accepted by those in their parties not simply as leaders but as *owners* of the party. The authority that derives from this is enshrined in party rules and/or is evident in the ways that the leader can make decisions unilaterally about the party.

2. Personal parties have recognized limited lifespans

The personal party's expected lifespan is seen by a majority of those within the party as dependent on the political lifespan of its founder-leader.¹² While the parties may last for many years under the founder-leader (as has been the case with Berlusconi), personal parties are nonetheless considered likely to be temporary parties even by those within them.

3. Personal parties have light organizations and lack a permanent active grassroots presence

Personal parties like FI/PDL and PUP attach little importance to cultivating and maintaining 'the party on the ground'. There is no interest in providing activities for members

outside campaign time and there is strong discouragement towards giving them a voice within the party.

Taken together, we believe the above three conditions are necessary and sufficient to define a party as a ‘personal party’. Other researchers may of course disagree with or wish to refine our conditions, but we think they offer a useful empirical test that can be applied to identifying potential personal parties. Let us take a concrete set of examples to see how this classification might work. In our view, the above criteria can help us distinguish between ‘personal’ parties like FI/PDL and those such as the Italian Lega Nord (LN—Northern League) or the French Front National (FN—National Front) whose leaders also exert very strong control, but whose organizations have been built to last beyond those leaders. Hence, despite the resignations in recent years of the charismatic founder-leaders of these parties, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Umberto Bossi, each party has gone on to enjoy considerable rises in support at elections and/or in polls under new leaders. We also know from work on these parties that they have had far better developed grassroots organizations than FI/PDL or PUP (Ivaldi and Lanzone, 2016; McDonnell and Vampa, 2016). Moreover, other research has found that, in the case of the LN, even when Bossi was utterly dominant in the party and viewed as ‘charismatic’, members certainly did not think that the party would fail to survive him (McDonnell, 2016). In short, these parties may rely heavily on their leaders, but they are not personal parties.

The three conditions are based on our findings under the ‘leader dominance and centrality to party’ and ‘party elite-member relationship’ headings set out previously, but not on the ‘principal source of party’s resources’. As we saw with the Berlusconi case, the ‘principal source of party resources’ is something that can change over time and so it seems unwise to keep it as an always-present feature of the personal party. Rather, we think that our findings under the ‘principal sources of party resources’ point us to a sub-type of the personal party: one created and led by an extremely wealthy individual who is able to provide extensive set-up funding for the party’s initial campaigns and *can*—but may not have to—continue doing so thereafter. Recent examples of this type may include the parties created by the billionaires Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic and Frank Stronach in Austria.¹³ Further research could investigate how these parties compare organizationally to ones with similar wealthy founders like FI/PDL and PUP and how they compare to personal parties that lack wealthy founder-leaders.¹⁴

Conclusion

In this article, we found that our two cases—Clive Palmer’s PUP in Australia and Silvio Berlusconi’s FI/PDL in Italy—shared two key features that differentiate them from the five main pre-existing party organization ideal-types: (1) leader-party relationship: The founder-leader’s dominance was enshrined in the party rules and accepted by those in the party. The party was an expression of the leader, who acted as its owner. So much so that the majority of those interviewed in both parties believed it would not survive without the leader; (2) party-members relationship: organization at local level was weak or non-existent and both leaders seemed to have discouraged grassroots involvement. Whatever the parties’ claims about their grassroots and numbers, membership in reality meant very little. Having concluded that our findings provide support for the personal party as a new party organizational type, we proposed three conditions for identifying other personal parties based on the ‘leader-party’ and ‘party-members’ relationships outlined above and

argued that our findings regarding the ‘principal source of party resources’ indicate a possible ‘wealthy founder’ subtype.

The findings presented in this article have implications for our understanding of how party organizations and systems have changed in the late 20th and early 21st century. In the final chapter of *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Angelo Panebianco (1988: 274) suggested that one possible future scenario was that we would see ‘parties completely lose their own organizational identity and appear to be only convenient tags for independent political entrepreneurs’. He believed, however, that although this might happen in the United States with its presidential system and weaker party organizations, it would be ‘improbable (at least in its extreme form) where parties began and consolidated as strong institutions’ (Panebianco, 1988: 274). Yet, as we have seen, personal parties that closely resemble Panebianco’s ‘party as convenient tag’ have emerged in the established parliamentary democracies of Australia and Italy. Indeed, as LaPalombara (2007: 149) has observed about FI, these are parties whose leadership-centric and weak grassroots organizations would not even satisfy the criteria for definition as a political party that he and Weiner had stipulated in their 1966 volume.

Finally, what is striking about the personal parties led by Berlusconi and Palmer, and other possible cases like the parties created by Wilders, Babiš and Stronach, is that they have achieved very swift electoral success and parliamentary representation. Money is surely part of the explanation for this success in the cases of parties with wealthy founder-leaders, but so too is the willingness of voters to back a party that is clearly the expression of a leader (rather than vice versa) and which may not survive his or her political career. The fact that these breakthroughs have occurred in such a variety of advanced democracies leads us to think that the rise in personal parties is linked to transnational phenomena such as public discontent with traditional parties, the personalization of politics and the growth in support for outsider political entrepreneurs who can present themselves as ‘saviours’ of the nation against entrenched elites. In other words, we may have entered an era in which personal parties, while being temporary vessels individually, are collectively becoming permanent fixtures of our party systems.

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Notes

1. To avoid the rather cumbersome ‘personal/personalist/personalistic’ label, in the remainder of the article, we will refer to these parties simply as ‘personal’. This is not intended as a judgement on the merits of the ‘personalistic’ and ‘personalist’ terms.
2. To much surprise, Berlusconi announced in late 2007 that Forza Italia (FI) would cease to exist and would be replaced by a new party (again led by him) called the Popolo della Libertà (PDL). It would comprise FI and any other political forces that wished to join. Although in 2008 the more traditional right-wing party

- Alleanza Nazionale (AN) and several very minor groups joined it, the PDL was another personal party like FI as regards the role of the founder-leader (McDonnell, 2013). Indeed, when the former leader of AN, Gianfranco Fini, complained about Berlusconi's domination of the party in 2010, he was expelled. In late 2013, Berlusconi changed the party name back to FI (this remains his party's name at the time of writing).
3. There is of course no reason why the founder-leader of a personal party could not be a woman. Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in Australia appears a likely case in point.
 4. Panebianco (1988) does not state clearly what the character of the membership is in electoral-professional parties. However, given that he juxtaposes these parties with 'mass bureaucratic' parties, and says their focus is on appealing to the 'opinion electorate', it is unlikely that the membership is class-based or can have significant involvement in the party.
 5. While some might object that Berlusconi's PDL (2007–2014) was formally a different party to Berlusconi's FI (1994–2007; 2014–present), we consider one to be a continuation of the other in terms of the role of the founder-leader (see, for example, our discussion of FI and PDL party statutes). We are not alone in doing so. In his work on party institutionalization in Italy, for example, Vercesi (2015) says that FI and the PDL should be considered 'faces of the same Silvio Berlusconi creation' and he therefore treats them 'as a single party' for his analysis.
 6. There is very useful literature in Italian over the past two decades that discusses Berlusconi and his party both specifically and within the wider context of trends in Italian politics. In particular, see Bordignon (2013), Calise (2011) and Poli (2001).
 7. The Liberal National Party was formed in 2008 when the Queensland state divisions of the Liberal Party and the National Party merged.
 8. We use material here from 36 face-to-face interviews conducted (as part of a wider, earlier project) with 22 representatives and 22 grassroots members of Berlusconi's party. These comprised (1) five semi-structured individual interviews with elected national representatives and 17 individual semi-structured interviews with elected sub-national representatives (i.e. regional and local) and (2) 12 semi-structured individual interviews and two group discussions with grassroots party members (each group discussion involved five party members). Interviews with sub-national representatives were conducted in two North-West regions (Piedmont and Liguria), two North-East ones (Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia) and one southern region (Puglia). Interviews with grassroots members were conducted in cities and provincial towns in three northern Italian regions, comprising both North-West and North-East. Members spoke on condition of anonymity. Interviews included questions about how respondents viewed the leader and his role within the party, the party's future, its organizational structure and its grassroots activities.
 9. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with interviewees from Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. Palmer United Party (PUP) interviewees spoke on condition of anonymity. The only information we provide about them therefore is the state they are from. We specifically designed the questions for PUP interviewees so that the data would be comparable with that from the interviews conducted earlier with those in Berlusconi's party (see the previous note).
 10. The number of members was provided to Duncan McDonnell by the PDL national membership office on 8 February 2012.
 11. Party membership in Australia like elsewhere has been declining for some time. The two major parties, the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party are estimated to have around 40,000 members each.
 12. It is important to note here that we are talking about *expectations* concerning the party lifespan. We do not rule out that a personal party may then continue after the founder-leader has left politics, although this does seem unlikely given his or her centrality.
 13. Babiš's party ANO (2011) took 18.7% at the 2013 general election, finishing second behind the Social Democrats. The two parties subsequently formed a coalition, with Babiš becoming Finance Minister. At the 2017 general election, ANO came first with 30% of the vote and—at the time of writing—seemed likely to form a minority government. Team Stronach received 5.7% of the vote in the 2013 general election, the highest total of any new party in Austria at a first general election since 1994. It swiftly fell apart thereafter and did not stand at the 2017 general election.
 14. There may be some overlap between the personal party created by wealthy founders and the 'business-firm party' (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999; Krouwel, 2012). According to Krouwel (2012: 352), business-firm parties—of whom Berlusconi's party is again cited as the archetype—'originate from the private initiative of a political entrepreneur and have, by and large, the structures of a commercial company'. While our two cases in this study did indeed originate in that way, FI/PDL did not retain the structures of a company. Formally, it possessed the traditional structures of a party. Moreover, Krouwel (2012: 25) claims that 'the business-firm party generates its resources from the private sector'. This is true of PUP as

we have seen, but we have also shown that FI was able to benefit—just like any successful Italian party in the 1990s and 2000s—from extremely generous state funding and that this was the principal source of its financial resources.

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