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Research Article

Follow the Leader? Leader Succession and Staff Attitudes in Public Sector Organizations

Abstract: *Public sector organizations face regular turnover in top leadership positions. Yet little is known about how such changes affect staff attitudes. The authors argue that top leader succession may influence staff attitudes, particularly when new leaders are "outsiders" and/or subordinates interact regularly with their leaders. Using a unique two-wave survey conducted within the European Commission in 2008 and 2014, this analysis tests these propositions by studying the same individuals before and after shifts in top political (commissioner) and administrative (director-general) positions. The study shows that leadership succession can trigger meaningful shifts in subordinates' stated attitudes regarding the European Commission's supranational identity. These findings are important because staff attitudes about organizational values and aims represent a key driver of individual and organizational performance.*

Evidence for Practice

- Top leader succession affects staff attitudes in public sector organizations, which can influence individual and organizational performance.
- Accounting for leader succession's impact on staff is more important when leader-subordinate distance is smaller and contacts more frequent.
- When planning leadership succession, public sector organizations should pay close attention to candidates' value (in)congruence with outgoing leaders.
- Public sector organizations should invest in (non)verbal messages to staff to increase the salience of positive differences between old and new leaders.

The role and importance of leadership in public sector organizations has attracted significant research since the pathbreaking work of Selznick (1957). Numerous studies have explored the nature and scope conditions linking leader characteristics and leadership styles to public sector performance (Jacobsen and Andersen 2015; Javidan and Waldman 2003; Tummers and Knies 2013; for a review, see Van Wart 2013), job satisfaction (Kim 2002), reform implementation (Moynihan, Pandey, and Wright 2012), and innovative behavior (Miao et al. 2018). Other scholars have also investigated when and how leaders' background characteristics relate to management styles within their units (Kassim et al. 2013). In sharp contrast, few studies have assessed the individual-level *mechanisms* underlying leaders' alleged performance effects (Zhao et al. 2016) or the influence of leader *successions* in public sector organizations (Murdoch et al. 2019). Our analysis aims to bridge these research gaps. Specifically, we build on research on leader and follower identity dynamics to argue that top leader succession impacts individuals' attitudes about an organization's core aims and values. This is an important question, as such attitudes represent a central driver of individual and organizational performance (Pratt et al. 2016).

Our theoretical argument starts from the common notion that individuals "hold on to multiple identities that are organized in a flexible and dynamic hierarchical structure of salience" (Epitropaki et al. 2017, 110). As first proposed by Lord and Brown (2001, 2004), top leaders may affect the relative salience of subordinates' multiple identities because they activate a distinct portion of subordinates' self-concept through their rhetoric, actions, and characteristics. Similar shifts in subordinates' identity salience hierarchy would also arise when the actions or positions of a new leader extend subordinates' set of identities. We argue that these changes in the relative salience of multiple identities can invoke observable shifts in individuals' attitudes regarding their organization's core values.

Clearly, top leader successions might trigger such attitudinal implications only under specific conditions. We concentrate on two moderating factors. First, a larger distance between leaders and

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subordinates has been argued to mitigate the influence that leaders have (Bass 1990; Moon and Park 2019). This arises because close leaders have more contact with subordinates (Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, and Hirst 2013; Kassim et al. 2013; Murdoch and Trondal 2013), and proximity allows for higher-quality communication (Avolio et al. 2004; Kelloway et al. 2003) as well as increased opportunities to convey expectations and provide coaching (Gittell 2001; Howell, Neufeld, and Avolio 2005). Leadership succession is therefore expected to have a stronger impact on subordinates within a closer distance to the leader. Second, evidence suggests that outsider succession is more likely to "trigger both cognitive and emotional reactions from followers" because outsiders pose a sharper contrast to, and break with, the past (Epitropaki et al. 2017, 121; see also Kunisch et al. 2017). Although any diverging impact of outsider versus insider succession on organizational performance remains hotly debated (Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz 2005; Schepker et al. 2017), its potential role as a moderator of subordinates' attitudinal responses to leader succession is included in this study as a central part of the research design.[1]

In the empirical analysis, we assess these propositions by comparing the *same* staff members across two waves of a large-scale survey conducted within the European Commission in 2008 and 2014. The dependent variable is staff members' stated attitude with respect to the Commission's strong and widely acknowledged supranational identity (Connolly and Kassim 2017; Ellinas and Suleiman 2012; Hooghe 2005). Identification of leader succession effects derives from variation in Commission staff's exposure to changes in top leader positions over the period of analysis. Since the majority of staff have no influence over who becomes their new boss, changes in top leadership are exogenous to staff working in the affected directorates. We exploit this key characteristic in a difference-in-differences research design to identify causal effects.

Our main findings corroborate that top leader succession can trigger substantively meaningful changes in Commission staff's stated attitudes regarding the Commission's supranational identity. These effects are strongest when top leader succession involves individuals from outside the organization or from institutions with attitudes known to diverge from those of the incumbent leader ("outsiders"). Furthermore, the effects are most pronounced when leader-subordinate distance is smaller and contacts are more frequent. These findings have important implications for public sector governance since staff attitudes toward an organization's core values are a central driver of individual and organizational performance. These have been linked to outcomes including job satisfaction, individual well-being, and policy preferences (Kuehnhanss et al. 2017; Pratt et al. 2016), which are all antecedents of performance. Hence, our results improve our understanding of the individual-level mechanisms underlying leaders' oft-studied performance effects (e.g., Javidan and Waldman 2003; Jacobsen and Andersen 2015) while emphasizing that "leadership matters"—also in the public sector.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Recent research has argued that psychological processes related to one's identity may be central to *how* leaders affect subordinates' behavior and attitudes (Epitropaki et al. 2017; Lord et al. 2017). The core idea is that the "refinement of one's identity is an ongoing and central aspect of organizational membership that depends, in part, on the relationship with one's supervisor" (Lord, Gatti, and Chui 2016, 125). Leaders thus are believed to have the capability to produce both short- and long-term changes in subordinates by influencing—through their rhetoric, actions, and characteristics—the relative salience of different aspects of subordinates' self-concepts. In doing so, leaders are able to affect the behavior and attitudes of their subordinates (Lord and Brown 2001, 2004).

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify three key concepts—and their relationship—at the heart of this theoretical framework: identity, self-concept, and attitudes. An individual's (personal) identity can be defined as "a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics" as well as "a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles" that are "not wholly shared with any other person" (https://dictionary.apa.org/identity). An individual's self-concept refers to one's "mental model" of the self as constructed from beliefs that one holds about oneself. Finally, attitudes are evaluations—either positive, negative, or ambiguous—about a particular object. Extensive research in psychology indicates that attitudes are closely linked to identities and self-concept by being one of the ways in which individuals express their sense of self (to themselves and others).

Building on such insights—as well as the notion that individuals' multiple identities exist "in a hierarchy of salience" (Stryker 1968, 560; see also Epitropaki et al. 2017)—we argue that leader *succession* may induce changes in individuals' identity hierarchy. This can arise either because leaders with distinct styles, rhetorical skills, attitudes, and beliefs prime or inhibit specific, preexisting aspects of the self or because leaders are able to extend the set of available aspects within subordinates' self-concept. Independent of whether we assume that the set of aspects within subordinates' self-concept is fixed or malleable, the key point is that leader succession may activate different aspects of subordinates' self-concept. This shift comes about for two main reasons. On the one hand, leaders' (non)verbal messages have relevance for subordinates' sensemaking within organizations (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003; Weick 1995). On the other hand, humans' need for belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995) makes them keen to assimilate by incorporating (parts of) the selves of significant others—such as leaders in an organizational context—into the self. Both elements entail that new leaders might influence which aspects of the self become active or are added. This, in turn, may prompt observable shifts in subordinates' attitudes, including their position relative to an organization's core values and aims.

In the context of leader succession, this line of argument is substantiated by the fact that identity work is most prominent during transition stages (Ashforth 2000; Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Transitions from one organization, role, or leader to another impose distinct normative expectations on individuals (Mainemelis, Kark, and Epitropaki 2015; Nicholson 1984). Such instability can undermine people's sense of who they are and induce self-uncertainty (Hogg 2015). The desire to resolve this uncertainty represents a powerful driver for change during transitions. New leaders thus are likely to provide vital and decisive role models in subordinates' search to reduce uncertainty during transition stages.

Even so, it remains unclear a priori whether leader succession induces shifts in subordinates' attitudes toward or away from

the perceived position of a new leader (e.g., with respect to the organization's core values and aims). Subordinates who had a good relationship with the previous leader might oppose the new leader and take dissenting positions (a *contrast* effect). Others might be more prone to ingratiating activities "for the purpose of altering (shaping) positively the evaluations or attributions of relevant others" (Liden and Mitchell 1988, 572; see also Ralston 1985), triggering opinion conformity with the new leader (an *alignment* effect). We treat the presence and direction of these shifts as an empirical issue and formulate the following general hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 1:** Top leader succession activates changes in staff members' expressed attitudes with respect to an organization's core values.

Clearly, top leader successions need not always trigger responses within subordinates. The context and characteristics of successions can moderate their impact. One such moderating factor is the distance between leaders and subordinates, which affects leaders' ability to influence subordinates' performance (Moon and Park 2019; Neufeld, Wan, and Fang 2010). Distance may thereby exist in several dimensions—spatial, social, and temporal—that are "cognitively related to each other" (Trope and Liberman 2010, 440). In an organizational setting, spatial distance could be linked to physical proximity (e.g., because of the arrangement of offices), while social distance could be connected to hierarchical proximity (e.g., the number of hierarchical levels between leaders and subordinates) (Napier and Ferris 1993). Temporal distance relates to individuals positioning themselves relative to objects in the future and/or past, which becomes important in relation to leader successions given the temporal divide between former and current leaders. Importantly, research shows that different distance dimensions "similarly affect prediction, preference, and action" (Trope and Liberman 2010, 440). More specifically, a larger distance in spatial, social, and temporal terms entails that subordinates have less contact with their leader (Gumusluoglu, Karakitapoğlu-Aygün, and Hirst 2013; Howell, Neufeld, and Avolio 2005; Murdoch and Trondal 2013). It might also reduce the quality of their communication (Avolio et al. 2004) and leaders' communication effectiveness (Kelloway et al. 2003; see, however, Neufeld, Wan, and Fang 2010). Furthermore, a larger distance limits leaders' ability to convey expectations and coach followers (Gittell 2001; Howell, Neufeld, and Avolio 2005) and increases the difficulty of monitoring compliance with directives and organizational role requirements (Moon and Park 2019; Podsakoff et al. 1984).

Overall, reduced leader-subordinate interaction frequency due to increased spatial, social, and temporal distances makes it harder for leaders to influence subordinates (Bass 1990; Moon and Park 2019; Neufeld, Wan, and Fang 2010). Applied to our setting, this leads to the prediction that leader succession at a larger spatial and social distance has less salience to subordinates and provokes less impact on their attitudes.[2]

> **Hypothesis 2:** Larger distance between leaders and subordinates weakens the effect of leader succession on staff members' expressed attitudes with respect to an organization's core values.

A second moderating factor concerns the status of the new leader as an "outsider" or "insider." This multidimensional concept often is linked to individuals' time in the organization as well as differences or similarities with other organization members (Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz 2005; Schepker et al. 2017). Insider/outsider status matters for the implications of top leader succession because leadership is "enacted in the context of a shared group membership" (van Knippenberg 2011, 1078). For instance, top leaders who are representative of an organization's identity (i.e., "prototypical of the group"; van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003, 243) are generally perceived as more effective leaders by subordinates, and they have been linked to better performance and higher job satisfaction (Cicero, Pierro, and van Knippenberg 2007; Pierro et al. 2005). In sharp contrast, out-group leaders "introduce discontinuity of identity, and as a result may be particularly likely to elicit resistance" (van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003, 278). Consequently, we expect insider or in-group leader succession to induce weaker changes in subordinates' attitudes compared with outsider or out-group leader succession.

A similar proposition is supported by the idea that outsiders' distinct background and characteristics can cause feelings of incongruence within subordinates. Outsiders often bring new perspectives and are not committed to "established strategies and policies" (Kunisch et al. 2017, 1,015). The resulting feelings of incongruence are known to trigger negative emotion (Cast and Burke 2002), which, in turn, works to move the parts of self-concept causing these negative feelings down the identity hierarchy (Epitropaki et al. 2017). Naturally, no similar responses are triggered by—or required for—insider successions. Outsider succession therefore can be expected to induce stronger shifts in subordinates' attitudes.

> **Hypothesis 3:** Outsider succession triggers stronger changes in staff members' expressed attitudes with respect to an organization's core values.

Two elements require further discussion at this point. First, shifts in staff attitudes due to leadership changes are unlikely to be driven solely by the identity effects described here. Leadership changes might also affect staff's incentives to express specific attitudes (e.g., because they want to advance in an organization) or alter hierarchical constraints on expressing specific attitudes (e.g., because leaders employ hierarchical structures to work toward a goal). Both alternatives are consistent with the hypotheses derived earlier as leadership succession would again translate into attitudinal shifts; we return to these mechanisms when discussing our main findings. Second, staff attitudes are not determined solely by a single (new) leader. Organizational structures and other (past and present) leaders likewise play a vital role. Nevertheless, our key argument is that new leaders' rhetoric, actions, and characteristics impact staff attitudes at least at the margin. The presence and strength of this influence is an empirical question, which is addressed by our analysis.

Method and Data

Context

We rely on two rounds of survey data from staff members in a large public organization—the European Commission—collected in September–November 2008 (N = 1,901; response rate = 13.6

percent) and March–April 2014 (N = 2,209; response rate = 20.8 percent). The European Commission is of interest for a number of reasons. First, it has a strong culture of hierarchical leadership (Kassim et al. 2013). The effect of leaders on subordinates thus is likely to be strong, which is important from a theoretical perspective. Second, the European Commission faces regular turnover in both top political (commissioners) and administrative (directors-general) leadership positions. While commissioners serve fixed five-year terms of office, a principle of rotating senior managerial staff, including directors-general, was introduced in March 2000. Within our period of observation, all commissioners were replaced simultaneously with the change from Barroso I to Barroso II in late 2009 (this generally also induced a change in the chief of staff, or *chef de cabinet*). A new director-general was appointed in 12 out of 28 directorates-general (DG). This creates exploitable variation in terms of which subordinates face a leader succession. Importantly, these leadership changes are exogenous to the staff members working in the affected directorates because employees generally have no input into who becomes a commissioner or director-general.

Finally, important for hypothesis 3, the European Commission context allows differentiating the effect of insider and outsider succession along two dimensions: time in organization and contrast with other organization members (Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz 2005, 983). On the one hand, approximately 80 percent of directors-general have a long working experience within the Commission, whereas recent commissioners have seldom made their way through the ranks of the Commission (Ellinas and Suleiman 2012; Kassim et al. 2013). On the other hand, the different national backgrounds of both commissioners and directors-general imply that some of these originate from countries more (or less) critical toward the Commission's supranationalism.

Sample and Procedures

Both surveys were conducted by the same research team and contain significant overlap in questions relevant to our analysis. While stringent anonymity requirements prevented inclusion of individual identifiers, we created such identifiers ourselves based on a broad range of sociodemographic characteristics (following the method pioneered in Murdoch et al. 2019). This indicates 162 unique respondents present in both samples with the same year of birth, sex, nationality (in terms of primary nationality and presence of a second nationality), and education (in terms of level, field, and international study), year of initial entry in the Commission, pre-Commission career history (career type and length), and working in the same DG.[3] Given the broad range of background characteristics and the precise overlap imposed on this broad set of characteristics, our identifiers effectively link individuals in 2008 to *themselves* in 2014, thus creating a panel data set. Using terminology from matching analysis, our approach requires that the "propensity score" accounting for all background characteristics approaches 1 for all matches. As a result, we have high confidence that it effectively concerns the same respondent at both points in time. This is confirmed by the fact that we never find more than one individual with the same 11 characteristics across both samples (more details on our data set creation and its validity are provided in appendix S1 in the Supporting Information online). Table A.1 in appendix S1 shows descriptive statistics for these 162 respondents, which constitute approximately 9 percent of the sample from the first survey wave. This table also verifies the representativeness of our sample using t-tests on respondents from the original surveys included or excluded from our analysis.

Measures

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable measures staff members' attitude toward the European Commission's supranational identity (Connolly and Kassim 2017; Ellinas and Suleiman 2012; Hooghe 2005). We operationalize this using two statements about where power should reside in the European Union (EU): (1) "The College of Commissioners should become the government of the European Union" and (2) "The member states—not the Commission or European Parliament—should be the central players in the European Union." Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) "strongly agree" to (5) "strongly disagree." We reverse the coding for the first proposition to obtain a scale in which higher numbers reflect support for a supranational power orientation in the EU. Respondents' answers on both propositions are averaged throughout the analysis (henceforth referred to as the variable "European Commission role in Europe").

Independent Variable. The European Commission is structured along a number of policy domains addressed by DGs with a political leader (commissioner) and an administrative manager (director-general). Leader succession is operationalized as a change in either the commissioner or director-general within a DG during our period of observation. A complete overview of all relevant leadership changes is included in section B of appendix S1.

Moderator Variables. Our first moderator relates to the social and spatial *distance* between leaders and subordinates. We operationalize the joint effect of both these distance dimensions using respondents' contact frequency with their leader using the question: "In order to get your job done, how frequently are you in contact with [your commissioner]?"[4] Answer options were daily, weekly, monthly, several times a year, yearly, and never. The last two responses are recoded as "infrequent" contact, while all others are recoded as "frequent" contact. Still, we show that our results are robust to alternative operationalizations of contact frequency. It should also be noted that the close cognitive relation between all psychological distance dimensions (Trope and Liberman 2010) validates our use of one proxy for multiple dimensions. Clearly, however, this implies that we cannot disentangle the effects of social and spatial distance dimensions in our analysis.

Our second moderator is *outsider* succession, which we operationalize in two ways. The first exploits incoming leaders' perceived value incongruence with outgoing leaders regarding the supranational identity of the European Commission (Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz 2005). To capture this, we define a variable "change" equal to –1 for respondents in DGs in which the commissioner/director-general in 2014 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2008. It is coded 1 if the commissioner/director-general in 2008 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2014 (and 0 in all other

instances). We thereby employ two distinct sources to define a country as critical toward the EU. The first follows Murdoch, Trondal, and Geys's (2016) use of the Eurobarometer question "For each of the following areas, do you think that decisions should be made by the national government [coded 1], or made jointly within the European Union [coded 2]?" (Eurobarometer 67.2 from 2007). The question covers 18 policy areas linked to seven policy clusters (e.g., external relations, social regulation, and economic policy), which allows defining an indicator variable equal to 1 if the share of a country's population opposing EU-level decision-making in at least one policy cluster lies more than one standard deviation above the EU27 average in that cluster.

The second source is Gravier and Roth's (2020, 16) study of bureaucratic representation in the European Commission, which interprets persistent underrepresentation of staff from a member state as reflective of "a rejection either of the EU as a whole or of the Commission in particular." Both sources allow us to develop a list of countries that are EU-critical—*either* linked to their populations' aversion to EU-level decision-making *or* linked to their lack of desire to fill national staff "quota" within the Commission. The two resulting country lists show substantial overlap and lead us to designate Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom as critical toward the EU.[5]

The second operationalization of insider versus outsider succession differentiates between changes in top political (commissioners) and administrative (directors-general) successions. Commissioners are nominated by EU member states (one per member state), evaluated by the European Parliament, and formally appointed by the Council of the European Union (which consists of EU member states' leaders). Hence, member states play a dominant role in this process, and commissioners mostly are appointed from *outside* the commission. In sharp contrast, the nomination and appointment process for directors-general is *internal* to the Commission and strongly characterized by promotion from within the organization.[6] Still, this second operationalization may be confounded by a pure positional effect since leaders' hierarchical position in our setting cannot be isolated from their outsider status.

Empirical Strategy

Our analysis rests on a difference-in-differences identification strategy comparing staff members' attitudes in DGs with particular leadership changes (i.e., the first difference between "treatment" and "control" groups) before/after these changes took place (i.e., the second, temporal difference). A graphical representation is provided in figure 1, which clarifies how this

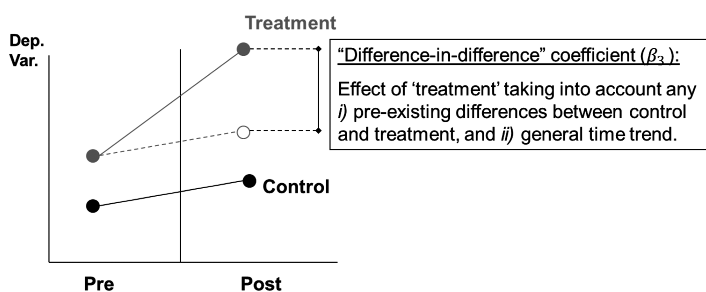

Figure 1 Graphical Illustration of Empirical Method

research design directly controls for preexisting level differences across the control and treatment groups (such as respondents' initial attitudes) and general time trends.

More formally, with subscript i representing individual respondents and subscript t designating time, the empirical model is as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_i + \beta_1\, Wave2014_t + \beta_2\, Change_i + \beta_3\, Wave2014_t * Change_i + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where $Wave2014_t$ is 1 for responses in the 2014 survey (0 for responses in 2008), and $Change_i$ is as defined in the previous section. The interaction between the two variables is our variable of interest. Its coefficient (β_3) captures whether individuals experiencing a particular leadership change develop *differently* between the first and second survey compared with individuals experiencing no such leadership change. Equation 1 includes a full set of respondent fixed effects (α_i). These capture all time-invariant aspects of respondents and imply that we derive our inferences exclusively from variation over time *within* the same respondent (thereby also controlling for their initial attitudes).[7] Finally, we cluster standard errors at the level of our observations (i.e., individual respondents) to avoid biased inferences. Clustering instead at the level where leadership changes occur (i.e., DGs) strengthens our findings, such that we report on the most conservative approach.

For the interpretation of our results, it is important to note that while leader succession is a constant for all respondents witnessing leadership transition, these respondents still differ in the nature of that transition to/from different types of leaders. Our difference-in-differences specification exploits this to identify the "leader" effect (captured by the interaction term) independent of the "transition" effect (captured by the respondent fixed effects).

Remember also that our analysis is restricted to individuals who worked in the same DG during both survey waves (see note 3). This induces two potential concerns. On the one hand, civil servants who did not move to another DG may not be a random sample of European Commission staff. While we cannot rule this out, it only affects our ability to generalize beyond this subsample and not the internal validity of the research design. Indeed, equation 1 can still identify the local average treatment effect of leadership succession *conditional on* staff members' employment stability within the same DG. On the other hand, we cannot observe why individuals did not move. One might worry that these motives—such as affect or lack of alternatives—also influence individuals' attitudes over time. Our respondent fixed effects control for this potential confound as long as respondents' motives do not change over time (otherwise, we would require that changes in nonmobility motives be uncorrelated with specific types of leadership changes).

Results

Our main findings are summarized in table 1, which consists of two panels. The top panel looks at the overall effects of leadership succession, and the bottom panel differentiates between the succession of leaders with perceived views closer to, or further from, the supranational identity of the European Commission.

Column 1 in the top panel of table 1 shows a positive relationship between leadership succession in top political positions of the

Table 1 Difference-in-Differences Results for Change in Commissioner or Director-General

Variable	Change in Commissioner			Change in Director-General
	All Perfect Matches (1)	Frequent Contact (2)	Infrequent Contact (3)	All Perfect Matches (4)
Leader change	-	-	-	-
Wave2014	0.067 (0.92)	0.070 (0.71)	0.014 (0.15)	0.066 (0.94)
Leader change * Wave2014	0.212 (1.33)	0.597 *** (3.18)	−0.214 (−0.96)	−0.115 (−0.61)
N	317	126	191	317
R^2	0.024	0.203	0.013	0.011
Leader change FROM EU-critical country	—	—	—	—
Leader change TO EU-critical country	—	—	—	—
Wave2014	0.041 (0.52)	0.113 (0.99)	0.000 (0.00)	0.061 (0.81)
Leader change FROM EU-critical country * Wave2014	0.293 (1.54)	0.505 ** (2.05)	−0.150 (−0.63)	−0.061 (−0.20)
Leader change TO EU-critical country * Wave2014	−0.099 (−0.33)	−0.779 ** (−2.22)	0.272	0.131 (0.56)
N	317	126	191	317
R^2	0.027	0.208	0.014	0.012

Notes: The dependent variable is "European Commission role in Europe," which represents respondents' views about the College of Commissioners—rather than the member states or the European Parliament—being the key player in the EU. Answers are recorded on a scale ranging from 1 ("strongly agree") to 5 ("strongly disagree"). "Leader change" equals −1 for respondents in DGs in which the top political (commissioner) or administrative (director-general) leader in 2014 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2008. It is coded 1 if the top political or administrative leader in 2008 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2014 (and 0 in all other instances). "Wave2014" is an indicator variable equal to 1 for the second wave of the survey in 2014 (0 for the first wave in 2008). "Leader change TO EU-critical country" equals 1 for respondents in DGs in which the top political or administrative leader in 2014 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2008. "Leader change FROM EU-critical country" equals 1 for respondents in DGs in which the top political or administrative leader in 2008 came from an EU-critical country, while this was not the case in 2014. "Frequent contact" refers to respondents who are in contact with the commissioner of their DG more than once a year (0 otherwise), while less frequent contact is defined as "infrequent contact." The *t*-values are based on heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors between brackets.
***$p<.01$; **$p<.05$; *$p<.1$.

European Commission and the attitudes of staff members working in the affected DGs. This general effect just fails to reach statistical significance at conventional levels,[8] but it hides considerable heterogeneity in the observed effect. Indeed, columns 2 and 3 indicate a substantively and statistically stronger impact for respondents in frequent contact with their commissioner (i.e., at least several times a year). The difference between the interaction term coefficients in both columns is statistically significant at conventional levels ($p<.01$ in all cases). This supports hypothesis 2, which states that leader succession has stronger effects when leader-subordinate distance is smaller. Given our coding of $Change_i$, the positive point estimate for individuals in frequent contact with their leaders implies that appointing a commissioner from a more EU-critical country than the previous leader (i.e., out-group leader succession) causes a decline in staff's stated supranational attitudes, and vice versa for in-group leader succession. These directional effects support the moderating role of value incongruence between incoming and outgoing commissioners (hypothesis 3).

Interestingly, column 4 shows a very weakly negative point estimate for leader successions involving the director-general (remember that we lack contact data for this type of leader). One possible explanation for the difference with column 1—consistent with hypothesis 3—is that most appointed directors-general already had a long career within the European Commission, where staff regulations require that they act in the interests of the EU. As such, they are generally considered *insiders*, and staff members may perceive little difference between incoming and outgoing directors-general (Kassim et al. 2013). Although these results may be confounded by a purely positional effect, they suggest that the combination of both dimensions of "outsiderness"—that is, arrival from outside the Commission *and* perceived value incongruence between incoming and outgoing leaders—drives our results.

Finally, the bottom panel of table 1 suggests that there are no consistent or statistically significant differences linked to the exit of commissioners from more EU-critical countries and the appointment of commissioners from more EU-critical countries. *F*-tests indicate that both point estimates—in columns 1, 2, and 3—are never significantly different from each other in absolute terms.

Overall, our findings are consistent with a theoretical framework in which the succession of close (but not distant) leaders activates different aspects of subordinates' self-concepts, which then triggers changes in staff's stated attitudes about the organization's core values. Clearly, however, our analysis cannot exclude the possibility that rational staff members strategically express specific attitudes to achieve a higher standing and/or influence with the new leader. Although such "impression management" (Goffman 1959, 238) remains consistent with new leaders' impact on subordinates' self-concept (as it requires adaptation of one's "mental model" of the self), differentiating both mechanisms empirically would entail in-depth research on the same individuals under multiple leader successions.

Robustness Checks

As a first robustness check, we replicate the analysis with an alternative operationalization of staff members' supranational attitudes. We thereby look at respondents' views on whether decision-making authority within a given policy field should be located with the European Commission rather than national governments (Murdoch, Connolly, and Kassim 2018). The question reads, "We are interested in your views on the distribution of authority between member states and the EU on a range of policies. Where should this policy be decided?" This question was asked for "agriculture," "competition," "environment," "foreign and

security," and "asylum and immigration" policies, and responses were recorded on an 11-point scale ranging from 0, "exclusively national/subnational," to 10, "exclusively EU." Our main findings are confirmed when using this alternative dependent variable (see table A.3 in appendix S1).

As a second robustness check, we include information about changes in commissioners' chef de cabinet, who plays a key role in DGs' internal functioning (Kassim et al. 2013). The results are similar to those reported for commissioners in table 1. This reflects that commissioners often select a chef de cabinet from a similar background and suggests there is no additional effect on staff attitudes from changing both the commissioner *and* the chef de cabinet (see table A.4 in appendix S1). Unfortunately, there are only a few cases in which individuals witness a change in both the commissioner *and* the director-general. Therefore, we cannot assess any additive effects of such joint leadership changes, which we consider an important avenue for future research.

A third robustness check replicates the analysis using the original answer options for our measure of contact frequency. While this imposes a linear development in the effect of contact frequency, it again leaves our main findings unaffected (table A.5. in appendix S1).

Discussion

Our analysis contributes to arguably the largest question in private and public sector leadership: do leaders matter? Leadership has frequently been linked to organizational performance (Javidan and Waldman 2003; Jacobsen and Andersen 2015). We argue that such effects arise in part because leaders have substantial implications in terms of staff members' attitudes toward their organization and its core values. This constitutes an important theoretical contribution to the public sector leadership literature, which has thus far largely ignored subordinates' attitudinal responses to leadership changes. Our empirical results confirm this individual-level impact of top leader successions, and show that it occurs particularly for outsider succession and when subordinates frequently interact with leaders.

Our analysis furthermore suggests that new leaders are equally prone to induce shifts *toward* and *at odds* with those of the organization (bottom panel of table 1). This has considerable implications for organizations intending to shift course as part of organizational change processes. Indeed, our findings imply that replacing top leaders with individuals incorporating desired future values would be equally effective as a change strategy than appointing leaders embodying current values. This contradicts insights from transference theory (Andersen and Chen 2002; Hinkley and Andersen 1996), which suggest that appointing "new leaders who are similar to prior leaders" undermines intended changes in organizational culture "because they may elicit similar expectations and self-regulatory structures in subordinates" (Ritter and Lord 2007, 1693). We consider the further elucidation of this debate a crucial issue for future work (see also van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003).

Our study also has limitations that indicate additional avenues for further research. One limitation is that our analysis could only rely on a limited number of individuals observed at two points in time. While our empirical design allowed capturing the causal effect of top leader succession on follower attitudes, the limited time series precludes a more in-depth analysis of *the exact timing* of these effects. Exploring such timing effects would increase our understanding of the role of temporal distance in leadership succession. For instance, how long after a leadership succession do follower attitudes start to shift, what is the rate of change in attitudes, and how can the speed and extent of this change be influenced by leaders? More extensive longitudinal studies on larger samples are required to address these questions.

Second, our results show clear changes in subordinates' expressed attitudes sparked by top leader succession under specific conditions. Yet such shifts in attitudes provide no guarantee that this subsequently translates into actions and contributions to implementing leaders' preferences in specific policy dossiers. Policy-related effects are naturally hard to quantify whenever individual staff members' actions and contributions are difficult to observe. Even so, this constitutes an important avenue for further research since leadership changes are generally also about changes in policy priorities, instruments, and goals.

Third, while subordinates in our setting on average display more signs of *alignment* than *contrast* effects, our data do not allow us to study their respective roles more explicitly at the individual level. From a theoretical perspective, however, our line of argument entails that individual-level effects of leader succession would differ across staff members with better/worse relationships with the outgoing leader and higher/lower predisposition toward ingratiating behaviors. Empirical validation of these propositions might be feasible in future work using experimental research designs.

Fourth, other moderators than the ones included in our analysis should be analyzed. For instance, top leader successions in our setting are part of a well-known and predictable rotation system. Given the diverging characteristics and implications of different succession processes (e.g., executive relay with preparation of an heir apparent or horse race with several candidates pitted against each other), one could evaluate whether, and to what extent, the type of leader selection process moderates the influence of top leader succession. Similarly, the European Commission's leadership rotation scheme provides no variation in the context for leader succession. In other settings, leader succession often takes place in different circumstances—such as good or poor performance. Again, these circumstances may condition the influence of top leader succession on subordinates' attitudes.

Finally, our analysis concentrates on an international organization with a multinational leadership. National backgrounds and identities are a very prominent feature of leaders in this setting. Similar effects might, however, also arise in other contexts related to other prominent features of leadership figures. This opens the door toward the analytical generalization of our argument in other contexts. For instance, within a national setting, ministers' party affiliation is an important identifier that is linked to different ideas about specific public policies. Hence, our theoretical framework would predict an observable impact of a leadership change involving a shift in party upon national civil servants' attitudes within that ministry.

Conclusion

This study argued that top leader succession can activate different aspects of subordinates' self-concept, and thereby change their attitudes toward organizational values. Our empirical findings corroborate that this arises particularly when the new leader is an outsider and when subordinates have more frequent contact with their leader. These findings not only broaden our understanding of the consequences of top leader succession, but also draw attention to one potential mechanism driving previously studied leadership effects on organizational performance (Javidan and Waldman 2003; Jacobsen and Andersen 2015).

This analysis carries significant practical implications for organizational change processes involving the appointment of new leaders. A first implication relates to the importance of succession planning. Our findings suggest that public sector organizations should pay close attention to the backgrounds of leadership candidates—and how they relate to those of the organization and outgoing leaders (Ritter and Lord 2007; van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003). Factors such as the "outsiderness" of candidates can have important consequences for the effect of top leader succession on staff members' attitudes. Our findings also reaffirm Zhao et al.'s (2016, 1736) argument that organizations can benefit from making salient "the contrast between a team's current leader and its former leader." Zhao et al. stress the relevance of such strategy "when the new leader is more transformational than the former." (1736). Our study indicates it might also be beneficial when the incoming leader is likely to be perceived by staff members as a closer match to the organization's core values than the outgoing leader (i.e., shows a higher level of group prototypicality; see van Knippenberg and Hogg 2003). A second practical implication thus is that public organizations should invest in verbal and nonverbal messages toward staff to increase the salience of positive differences—and decrease the salience of negative differences—between incoming and outgoing leaders.

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Notes

1 Other moderators are conceivable, including the leader selection process (e.g., executive relay or horse race), the context for leader succession, or the nature of a subordinate's relationship with the outgoing leader. Our focus was driven by both theoretical relevance and data availability (e.g., there is no variation in leader selection processes in our data or information about the nature of a subordinate's relationship with the outgoing leader). We return to alternative moderators in the discussion of our results.

2 Temporal distance may also matter, particularly in terms of the timing of any attitudinal effects. Unfortunately, data limitations do not allow us to explore this proposition, such that we give less attention to it here. We return to this temporal dimension in the discussion of our results.

3 We exclude individuals moving DGs between both survey waves for two reasons. First, such moves may be a choice by the staff member (which introduces self-selection concerns) and might contaminate our results with other workplace-related effects. Second, it is difficult to ascertain whether it really concerns the same individual in both survey rounds. We return to the potential implications of this sample restriction later.

4 Unfortunately, we only have this information about commissioners since the survey did not include an equivalent question about directors-general.

5 This operationalization implicitly assumes that individual leaders are perceived by their staff to share, at least to some extent, the attitudes toward the European Union that are prevalent within their member state. While such national influences are not undisputed in the academic literature (e.g., Egeberg 2012; Suvarierol 2008), top European Commission officials' appointments (Wonka 2007), position taking (van Esch and de Jong 2019; Wonka 2008, 2015), and attitudes (Hooghe 1999, 435) have at times been found to remain "greatly influenced by prior state career and previous [home country] political socialization."

6 Many commissioners have experience as ministers in their home country prior to their European appointment and thereby have been part of decision-making processes within the Council of the European Union. While this provides experience with the European institutions, participation in these processes as national minister entails defending national rather than supranational interests (Arregui and Thomson 2014; Mühlböck and Tosun 2018). As such, commissioners with ministerial experience remain much more outsiders than insiders.

7 Note that $Change_i$ is a time-invariant variable reflecting whether an individual was "treated" with a particular type of leadership change. The individual fixed effects therefore are perfectly collinear with $Change_i$. Hence, this variable drops out of the final regression equation.

8 Although commissioners are always proposed by the member states, *reappointed* commissioners might constitute a special case because of their Commission experience. Hence, we replicated our analysis excluding the eight (out of 24) commissioners who were reappointed from Barroso I to Barroso II. This leaves our main findings qualitatively unaffected, but, if anything, marginally strengthens them by making the key interaction term in column (1) statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level (see table A.2 in appendix S1).

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Supporting Information

A supplemental appendix can be found in the online version of this article at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1540-6210.