

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not the dynamics of parliamentary elections have become more *presidential* (Poguntke and Webb 2005; *contra*: Blondel e Thiébault, 2010), it is hard to deny that democratic politics is now more *candidate-centered* (Wattenberg, 1991) than ever before.

The *personalization of politics* (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011) can be interpreted as a consequence of the generalized process of transformation on behalf of traditional mass-based parties. The erosion of long-established socio-political alignments in advanced industrial democracies (Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) has apparently resulted in a progressive *individualization* of vote choices, which involves “a shift away from a style of electoral decision-making based on social group and/or party cues toward a more individualized and inwardly oriented style of political choice”, mainly based on “policy preferences, performance judgments, or candidate images” (Dalton, 1996: 346). This development has made it necessary for mass integration parties to adjust their electoral strategies in order to extend their appeal beyond the socio-ideological cleavage(s) to which they usually referred (Mair *et al.*, 2004). Such an evolution was already highlighted by Otto Kirchheimer, who observed that “the mass integration party, product of an age with harder class lines and more sharply protruding denominational structures, is transforming itself into a catch-all ‘people’s’ party” (Kirchheimer, 1966: 185). Among its key features, the catch-all party has been described as de-ideological in nature, highly flexible in terms of issue programmes, and increasingly basing its election profile on features more engaging to voters – such as the «leadership factor» (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Gunther and Diamond, 2003).

The parallel evolutions in the realm of political communication have further contributed to this development. The changing structure of mass communications has been crucial in emphasizing the role of political leaders at the expense of parties, making the latter “more dependent in their communications with voters on the essentially visual and personality-based medium of television” (Mughan 2000: 129). Personalization has been defined as “the more general, pervasive, and fundamental element in the process of change of electoral campaigns” (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Modern televised campaigns tend to focus on the personal characteristics of political actors more than on ideological and programmatic contents, thus denoting ever more the electoral competition as a *duel between leaders* (Cotta e Verzichelli, 2007).

The personalization of politics is a complex, multifaceted phenomena (Karvonen, 2010). In this paper, we concentrate on its electoral dimension – namely, the effect of political leaders’ on voters’ electoral choices. If contemporary politics has become undeniably candidate-centred, one might

suppose that “leaders’ personalities and personal characteristics may...play a large[r] part in determining how individuals vote in democratic elections” (King, 2002: 4). Against this expectation, however, the present literature falls short of a consensus when it comes to the actual importance of political leaders within individuals’ voting calculus. A number of empirical analyses provide evidence in support of the personalization hypothesis (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Clarke *et al.*, 2004; Lobo, 2006; Garzia, 2012a), whereas other studies deem leader effects as far from unequivocal (King, 2002; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Karvonen, 2010; Aarts *et al.*, 2011). In all probability, part of the disagreement is to be attributed to the difficulties in clarifying the links of reciprocal causation between leader evaluations, partisan identifications, and issue preferences at the individual level (Midtbø, 1997; Venturino, 2000).

Summing up the aforementioned contributions, McAllister (2007) identifies three key factors at the core of the personalization hypothesis: (i) a number of institutional reforms that have strengthened the role of prime ministers within the executive (*presidentialization*); (ii) the pervasive *mediatization* of politics; (iii) the progressive erosion of long-standing partisan loyalties (*dealignment*). Our analysis concentrates on the electoral effect of party leaders in the Second Italian Republic,¹ a topic that has seldom been object of thorough empirical investigation (among the few exceptions, see: Venturino, 2000; Gunther e Montero, 2001; Sani, 2002; Barisione, 2007). We consider this case study of particular interest insofar it stands as a prototype of personalization among established parliamentary democracies (Campus, 2010: 5-6). We derive this idea from the observation that all the conditions described by McAllister occurred simultaneously during the 1990s-transition: (i) the majoritarian electoral reform of 1993; (ii) the rapidly growing tendency on behalf of parties to resort to television as a result of Silvio Berlusconi’s *entering the field*; (iii) the breakdown of the post-war party system.

This paper is structured as follows. The next sections introduce our case study and the main research hypotheses. Next, we estimate the magnitude of the «direct» leader effect in Italian national elections. In line with previous studies, we find that the electoral effect of party leaders – albeit positive and statistically significant at the bivariate level – loses much of its intensity once voters’ party identification is included in the statistical model. We move then to examine the role played by party leaders in shaping such identifications. We show that,

¹ In contraposition to the First Republic, we define as “Second Italian Republic” the political phase inaugurated by the 1994 election, which is characterized by profound changes in the party system (i.e., the fall of the main governing parties due to corruption scandals, the transformation of the Communist Party [PCI] into the Democratic Party of the Left [PDS], the foundation of *Forza Italia*) and the introduction of a new electoral law.

throughout the last decades, voters' assessment of leaders' personality has become the strongest determinant of their sense of identification with political parties. This result is of particular interest, as it leads us to envisage an alternative perspective for the study of leader effects in parliamentary elections. We develop the hypothesis that leaders can bear a significant effect on the vote *through* party identification. In the last empirical section, we verify this hypothesis by means of a recursive model of voting to the main Italian parties in the 2008 general elections. The results are discussed in the concluding section.

THE PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICS IN THE SECOND ITALIAN REPUBLIC

The personalization of politics should be seen as a process in which “the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines” (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007: 65). In this sense, the Italian case stands as one of the clearest examples of personalization among established parliamentary democracies. Although the origins of this process have been traced back to the early-1980s (Pasquino, 1990), it is only with the transition to the Second Republic that Italy becomes under many respects the ideal-typical “personalized polity” (Calise, 2004).

The collapse of the old *partitocrazia* along with the introduction of a majoritarian electoral law produced the most appropriate conditions for popular figures to enter the field. In turn, the entrance of Silvio Berlusconi in the political scene ignited a severe acceleration to the process of personalization of Italian politics (Campus and Pasquino, 2006). In 1994 Berlusconi established his own personal party, *Forza Italia*, that he owns exactly as he owns the three national TV networks on which he was – and still is – able to deploy a campaign strategy strongly centered around his person (Poli, 2001). The unforeseeable triumph of *Forza Italia* in the 1994 election made the other parties increasingly dependent from television, for it immediately seemed clear that “no party could remain in the contest without heavy use of mass communication channels” (Mazzoleni, 1996: 200). This process of transformation finds its climax during the 2008 campaign, when the political offer reached unparalleled levels of personalization due to the choice on behalf of the main centre-left party, *Partito Democratico*, to center its electoral strategy on the figure of its leader and prime-ministerial candidate, Walter Veltroni (Barisione e Catellani, 2008).

The breakdown of the old party system in a context of abrupt mediatization of the political scene provides a fruitful testing ground for the study of personalization and its effects on voters' choice. In the sections that follow, we

will look at the ways in which Italian voters have responded to the growing personalization of the political supply. All the analyses herewith presented are based on ITANES post-election survey data collected between 1990 and 2008.²

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

As a preliminary step, we present a descriptive analysis of the relationship between (coalition) leaders' popularity and election outcomes, under the expectation that the more a political leader is popular among voters, the higher his chances to achieve the prime ministerial seat. This is exactly what happened in every election held in Italy in the period between 1994 and 2006 (see Table 1). Every time Silvio Berlusconi won the elections, he was more popular than his counterpart (i.e., Achille Occhetto in 1994 and Francesco Rutelli in 2001). By the same token, when Romano Prodi won the elections of 1996 and 2006, his level of popularity was overall higher than that of Berlusconi.³

Moving to the specific effects of personalization on voters' behavior, our main concern relates to the extent to which political leaders are able to affect vote choices at the individual level. In Table 2, we present the mean thermometer score assigned by ITANES respondents to the various party leaders according to the party they voted for. As it can be observed, each party leader obtains a relatively higher score among the voters of his own party. This represents a rather common finding in the study of leader effects, which witnesses the strong connection between party leader evaluations and actual vote choices (Lobo, 2006).

² The ITANES (Italian National Election Studies) Association runs a research programme on voting behaviour in Italy, the origins of which date back to the early 1990s, when the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo Research Foundation conducted two post-election surveys (1990 and 1992) within the context of a project devoted to the study of change in the Italian political system. For the 1994 elections the Cattaneo's research programme was joined by various researchers from several different universities, and in December 2007 they founded the Itanes Association. Further information is available at <http://www.itanes.org>. The analyses, interpretations, and conclusions in this paper are solely those of the author.

³ In 2008, the more popular candidate among Italian voters was the centre-left coalition's leader, Walter Veltroni. Yet the elections are won by the coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. This result can possibly be interpreted as a consequence of the profound reshuffle in the electoral offer with respect to the previous elections. Most notably, the choice of the brand-new PD to exclude several former partners from its electoral coalition (e.g., extreme-left and small center parties) has involved – on paper – a waiver quantifiable in 6.194.563 votes. For a better discussion of the 2008 election outcome, see: ITANES (2008).

Table 1 – Coalition leaders' popularity (mean thermometer score) 1994-2008

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008
Berlusconi	6.89 (2.72)	5.28 (2.87)	5.90 (2.92)	4.74 (3.00)	5.57 (3.00)
C/L Leader	4.29 (2.58)	6.20 (2.39)	5.31 (2.49)	5.46 (2.60)	5.92 (2.27)

Note: Standard error in parentheses.

Table 2 – Mean thermometer score of party leaders, 1994-2008

<i>Party Voted</i>	<i>Party Leader</i>					
	<i>RC/SA</i>	<i>PDS/PD</i>	<i>CCD/UDC</i>	<i>FI/PdL</i>	<i>AN</i>	<i>LN</i>
RC/SA	7.9	6.0	3.8	2.8	3.8	2.3
PDS/DS/PD	5.6	7.5	4.2	3.4	4.0	2.7
CCD/UDC	4.3	4.7	7.5	6.2	6.5	3.3
FI/PdL	3.9	3.9	6.9	8.3	6.9	4.1
AN [1994-2006]	3.8	3.7	6.3	7.3	8.5	3.5
LN	4.2	4.1	5.1	6.6	6.2	7.6

Note: Cell entries are mean thermometer score attributed to party leaders (in column) by voters of different parties (in row) in the period 1994-2008 (pooled data).

In spite of the clear link between party leader assessments and vote choices, descriptive analyses do not allow us to clarify *how* the former produce their effect on the latter. We cannot deduce the direction of the causal relationship, nor the components of such an effect. We can only hypothesize, as we did so far, that a positive evaluation of the leader leads voters to vote for his party. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the causal chain is running in the opposite direction. Moreover, a relevant part of the literature assigns to *party identification* a key role in explaining voters' choice in parliamentary elections – with party leader assessments substantially downsized as a result (for a review, see: King, 2002). In the following sections we shed further light on this point. Making use of multivariate statistical techniques, we will be able to quantify the relative effect of the aforementioned components (i.e., party identification and leader evaluation) within individuals' voting calculus.

THE «DIRECT» LEADER EFFECT IN THE SECOND REPUBLIC

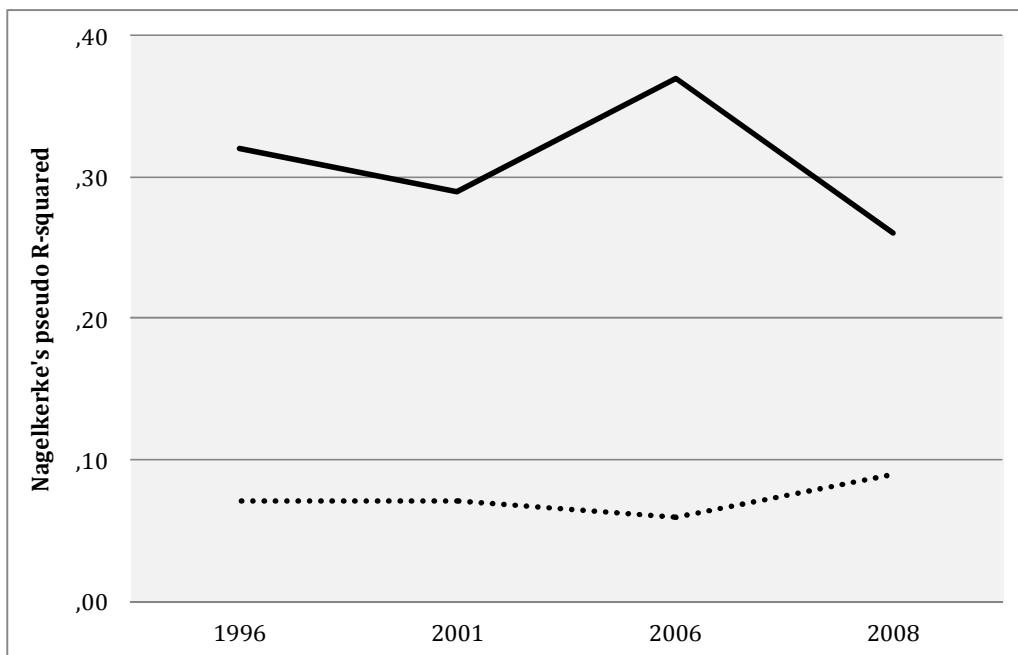
Parliamentary systems are based on the *responsible party government* model (APSA, 1950). In such model, political leaders are not supposed to play much of a role. Parties are central actors of politics, so vote choices are widely based on voters' long-term allegiances to the parties themselves (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Parisi and Pasquino, 1977). Furthermore, voters in parliamentary elections face “a structural situation where the crucial choice is between parties rather than the personal stands and qualities of prime ministerial candidates” (Dalton *et al.*, 2000: 51). Studies of parliamentary elections highlight the comparatively weak role played by leader evaluations as compared to the foremost part played by partisan identifications. In their most celebrated article, Bean and Mughan (1989) show that leaders' personality traits do have a statistically significant impact on vote choice. However, net of other factors (e.g., party identification) “leadership qualities can be seen to contribute between four and five percentage points to the explained variance” (Bean and Mughan, 1989: 1172). Similar conclusions are reported in studies of the German case (Kaase, 1994; Brettschneider and Gabriel, 2002) and on the early phase of the Second Italian Republic (Venturino, 2000).

With the aim of updating the available literature on the Italian case – taking into account the state of constant flux of its party system – we will focus on the direct electoral effect exerted by party leaders in the period between 1996 and 2008. We make use of a simplified version of the *improved prediction strategy* (Miller and Shanks, 1996; King, 2002), as employed in their analysis of German elections by Brettschneider and Gabriel (2002). At first, we have assessed the impact of leader evaluations on the vote in a bivariate regression model (solid line in Figure 1). This datum is then compared with the *net* leader effect in a

multivariate regression model that controls for the effect exerted by voters' party identification (dotted line in Figure 1). In simple terms, we analyze the extent to which leader evaluations can improve our ability to predict voters' choice net of their pre-existing partisan orientations.

Our results appear substantially in line with those from the available literature. As we find out, the impact of leader evaluations on the vote gets sharply reduced once party identification is included in the statistical model. What would seem to emerge from this analysis is the largely marginal role played by party leaders as determinants of voting behavior. According to the results presented in Figure 1, it is party identification to drive vote choices in the Second Republic. To sum up, Italian voters appear to vote for the party they identify with – which is, at the same time, the party of their preferred leader.

Figure 1 – The «direct» leader effect in Italian elections, 1996-2008



Note: Dependent variable: Vote choice (dummy). The **solid line** represents values of the Nagelkerke's pseudo R-squared from a logistic regression model where leader evaluations are included as the only statistical predictor. The **dotted line** represents the added pseudo R-squared resulting from the inclusion of leader evaluations in a model featuring already respondents' party identification.

In the sections that follow we explore in more detail the relationship between party identification and leader evaluations, trying to disentangle the links of reciprocal causation between the two. In discontinuity with the previous literature, we will concentrate on the attitudinal determinants of party identification. The aim is to test the possibility that such identification are actually *caused* by favorable leader evaluations.

GROUP MEMBERSHIP OR PARTY LEADERSHIP?

There are many routes by which voters may come to think of themselves as «partisans». However, there are essentially two explanations of this tendency in the literature: namely, the *identity* and *attitudinal* approaches (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009).

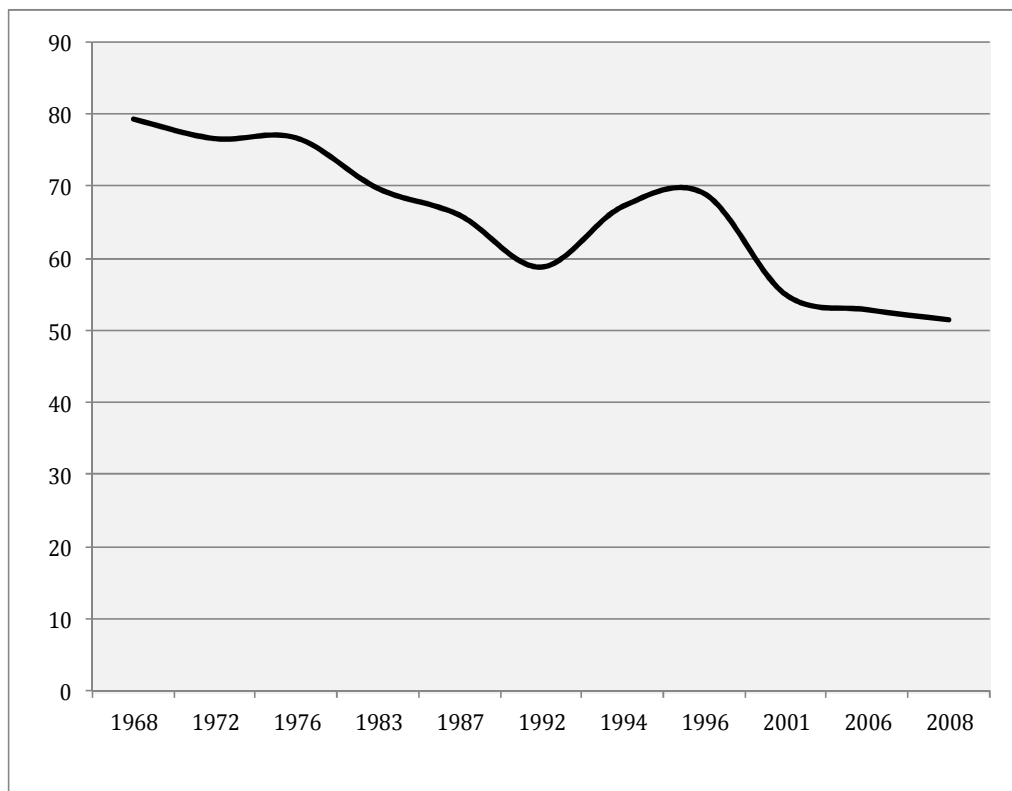
The identity approach describes partisanship as a long-term affective orientation to a political party, which is rooted in early socialization and based on an objective location in the social structure (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). The analytical usefulness of the concept lies in its relative stability and distance from the vote choice. Party identification is in fact conceived as a non-political attitude (hence supposedly immune from political and economic short-term influences), which is nonetheless able to shape the individuals' political world-view in a way that accords with their partisan orientation. On these bases, party identification is thought to be cause – but not consequence – of less stable attitudes and opinions about political objects (e.g., political events, issues and candidates). To put it sharply, the identity approach sees party identification as “an exogenous variable affecting politics but not being affected by politics” (Holmberg, 2007: 563).

However, the social identity approach represents only one explanation of partisanship: the development of favourable attitudes towards a party as a result of ideological proximity, performance assessments and leader evaluations represents another plausible explanation (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009). Already the authors of *The American Voter* spoke about the role of attitudes as “potential agents of change in the individual's basic partisan orientation” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 135). A number of subsequent studies explored in detail the dynamic relationship between party identification and short-term attitudes, demonstrating the absence of a clear causal sequence running from the former to the latter (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981).

In drawing a sharp distinction between these two approaches, we do not imply that one perspective is correct at the expense of the other. We rather believe that, like all political attitudes, party identification is responsive to the particular set of political alternatives available (i.e., the parties) in the political system (Richardson, 1991; Gunther and Montero, 2001; Gunther, 2005; Lobo, 2008).

In the First Italian Republic, the stability of party identifications was especially accentuated by the tight link between primary groups and the main parties of that time. In such context, partisanship was regarded as “a form of social embeddedness, a closure in distinctive and separate political sub-cultures and enclaves which Italian mass parties were able to bring about” (Bellucci, 2007: 58). Although the identity approach did provide a suitable explanation of the ties between voters and the (main) parties in pre-1994 Italy, the same approach does not seem appropriate for an account of the nature of mass partisanship in the Second Republic. If we concentrate our attention on the five parties actually represented in Parliament, their post-identitarian outlook emerges quite clearly. The most illuminating cases relate obviously to those defined by the literature as «personal» parties (Calise, 2000) – Silvio Berlusconi’s *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL) and Antonio Di Pietro’s *Italia dei Valori* (IdV). Both parties are connoted

Figure 2 – Percentage of Italian voters feeling close to a party, 1968-2008



Sources: Italian Mass Election Survey (1968-72); Eurobarometer (1976-94); ITANES (1996-2008).

by an almost entire dependency on the charismatic appeal of their leader and by no means oriented to a well-defined social substrata. The case of *Legha Nord* (LN) is slightly more complex. Here, the marked ethno-regionalist appeal of the party (Tronconi, 2005) corresponds to a considerably weak structure – as compared to the foremost role played by founding leader Umberto Bossi in shaping goals, strategy and policies of the party (Ignazi, 1997). With respect to the heirs of First Republic’s mass parties (i.e., Communists and Christian-Democrats), they followed the process of transformation undergone by all Western class-mass parties in the last decades, with the progressive de-attachment from the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred as the most visible consequence (Mair *et al.*, 2004). This is especially evident in the process that led the former communists to join – through a number of reconversions – the brand-new *Partito Democratico* (PD).

Notwithstanding the clear lack of solid socio-ideological bases among contemporary Italian parties, these are nonetheless entities to which a substantial proportion of the electorate still *feel close to*. Figure 2 highlights an unequivocal erosion in the proportion of party identifiers throughout the last four decades. However, it must be noted that since the early 1990s the Italian party system is undergoing an incessant evolution – an evolution that does not seem to have ended yet. These aspects make us indeed surprised of the substantial hold in the figure relative to the aggregate partisanship rate in the country. On the basis of this observation, and in line with the empirical evidence presented in earlier analyses (Venturino, 2000; Garzia, 2012b), we contend that the process of party change has transformed the nature of party identification from a mere reflection of previous social identities to the product of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects.⁴

Among the possible sources of individual attitudes, the literature assigns a crucial place to issue preferences (Downs, 1957). Yet favourable attitudes towards parties can also originate from the voters’ evaluation of other objects strongly associated with the image of parties themselves, such as their leaders (Key, 1966; Page and Jones, 1979). According to this interpretation, feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party *in the form of its leader* (Barisione, 2009). We have reasons to believe that this interpretation is particularly appropriate as applied to contemporary Italian parties. The “indistinguishable identity between

⁴ According to the original Michigan conception of party identification, favourable attitudes towards partisan objects (e.g., issues, performance, leaders) are driven by long-term loyalties based on group membership. But if it is true (as we expect) that individual feelings of partisan attachment are *not* based anymore on long-term social identities, then we can confidently assume that party identification is caused exactly by those attitudes that the identity approach conceives as consequences of previous identifications.

the leader and the party” (Poli, 2001) that always connoted Forza Italia (and now PdL), is in fact echoed in the case of other parties widely based on the charismatic appeal of their founders, such as IdV and LN (Tarchi, 2003). The predominant position of Italian leaders *vis-à-vis* their parties emerges clearly with a quick glance to the 2008 ballot paper, where all the represented parties’ symbols – including PD and UDC – feature the name of the respective leader.

Empirical evidence shows that the most diffuse political schema among contemporary Italian voters is the one based on leaders (Campus, 2000). The reason is clear: ideologies, issues, and performance assessments are inherently political, and thus require more sophistication to understand (Pierce, 1993). Party leaders, on the contrary, can easily be evaluated using inferential strategies of person perception that are constantly employed in everyday life (Rahn *et al.*, 1990). For these reasons, we hypothesize that among all possible sources of favourable attitudes towards the parties, those related to the leaders have become the strongest driver of mass partisanship in the Second Italian Republic.

THE DETERMINANTS OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN THE SECOND REPUBLIC

In this section, we will test our hypothesis focusing on the individual-level determinants of identification with Italian parties. We examine in particular the five parties actually represented in Parliament (IdV, LN, PD, PdL, UDC; for previous years, the choice of cases is based on the respective family tree). In the analysis, we go back as far as 1990 in order to compare the roots of partisanship in the Second Republic with those linking old mass parties (DC and PCI) to their constituencies. The dependent variable of our analysis is respondents’ party identification. We have generated a number of dummy variables – one per party under analysis – coding ‘1’ respondents declaring to feel close to that specific party and ‘0’ all others (i.e., apartisans as well as identifiers with parties other than the one under scrutiny). The independent variables included in the analysis correspond to the indicators that are supposed to tap both social and attitudinal partisanship. As to the former, we include the respondent’s frequency of church attendance, region of residence, social class, and trade union membership. We also control for standard socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and educational level). For what concerns the attitudinal dimensions of partisanship, our analysis include indicators related to issue proximity (measured as the distance in absolute value between the respondent’s placement of self and the

party on a left-right scale ranging from '1' to '10'),⁵ party leader evaluation (thermometer score on a scale from '1' to '10'), and retrospective economic assessment (respondent's opinion about the national economic situation in the last year, ranging from a value of '1' when very negative to a value of '10' if very positive).

Our analysis consists in two steps. In the first part, we assess the relationship between identity items and respondents' party identification during the time period under analysis. This part is aimed at showing that nowadays voters' identification with parties is only marginally due to long-term social allegiances. After having shown the weaknesses of the socio-identitarian interpretation with respect to the case at hand, we move then to a comparison of the explanatory power of various attitudinal components. In this way, we will be able to demonstrate the growing impact of leader evaluations as key determinant of party identification in the Second Italian Republic.

We have estimated twenty logistic regression models for the period 1990-2008 (one model per party/year). At first, only identity items and socio-demographic controls have been included as covariates. Table 3 presents the value of the Nagelkerke's pseudo R-squared with respect to each party and year, which we interpret as a summary measure of the strength of the relationship between voters' placement in the social structure and their sense of identification with a party.

The data presented in Table 3 would seem to speak clearly in favour of our preliminary hypothesis. In the case of the heirs of class-mass parties (PD and UDC), the weakening of the relationship between identity items and party identification across the transition is marked and substantially uniform. As to the new parties (IdV and PdL), there is no decline – but only because identity items are extremely weak predictors since the beginning of the time series. The case of LN does not present a clear pattern, but we nonetheless witness a sensible decline in the period 2006-8. As Table 3 shows, in 2008 the relationship between primary identities and party identification has become extremely weak (values of the pseudo R-squared below .10 in four cases out of five and only slightly above in the case of LN).

⁵ The literature presents several alternative interpretations of the left-right dimension's meaning at the individual level (for a review, see: Corbetta *et al.*, 2009). According to some scholars, this should be intended as a proxy for voters' long-term ideological orientations (Bobbio, 1996). Others conceive the left-right continuum as a sort of *super-issue* that summarizes the policy proposals of competing parties (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976). In this study, we decided to stick to the latter conceptualization for it provides a more easily comparable (and constantly available) measure of the distance between Italian voters and parties on the issues.

Table 3 – Social structure and party identification, 1990-2008

1990	1996	2001	2006	2008
PCI	PDS	DS		PD
.15 (955.869)	.13 (2344.500)	.08 (2013.362)	.10 (1123.923)	.04 (2030.676)
Italia dei Valori (IdV)				
-	-	.06 (193.956)	*	.07 (370.887)
DC	CCD		UDC	
.10 (184.093)	.12 (388.903)	.12 (306.085)	.07 (426.468)	.07 (406.743)
Forza Italia (FI)				PdL
-	.04 (1551.766)	.01 (2458.823)	.01 (1034.811)	.01 (1926.836)
Lega Nord (LN)				
-	.19 (939.544)	.12 (346.551)	.20 (259.673)	.13 (804.473)

Note: Cell entries are Nagelkerke's pseudo R-squared values (-2 log-likelihood in parentheses) from a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is the respondents' identification with the party under analysis (dummy). Predictors included: age, gender, educational level, frequency of church attendance, subjective social class, trade union membership.

Once ascertained the declining role of primary identities in shaping partisan identifications, we can move to an assessment of the relative effect of various attitude forces on such identifications. The statistical model includes basic socio-demographic variables and the battery of identity items already included in the first step *plus* the battery of attitude items (i.e., leader evaluation, issue proximity, retrospective economic assessment). For the sake of clarity, only the coefficients relative to the latter battery are presented in Table 4. To our purposes, it is worth noting that all coefficients are comparable in magnitude (all variables are operationalized on a 10-point scale).

Table 4 – The attitudinal determinants of party identification, 1990-2008

	1990	1996	2001	2006	2008
	PCI	PDS	DS		PD
Issues	-.559 (.075)**	-.677 (.057)**	-.948 (.078)**	-.708 (.094)**	-.441 (.056)**
Leader	.328 (.053)**	.688 (.057)**	.395 (.048)**	.472 (.062)**	.753 (.057)**
Economy	.050 (.031)	-.027 (.022)	.217 (.045)**	-.062 (.057)	.100 (.040)*
Controls (*)					
Nagelkerke's R ²	.453	.569	.517	.480	.424
N	764	1991	2093	1122	1617
	DC	CCD		UDC	
Issues	-.646 (.085)**	-.943 (.197)**	*	-.621 (.156)**	-.660 (.177)**
Leader	.180 (.054)**	.379 (.124)**	*	.843 (.122)**	.928 (.134)**
Economy	-.040 (.030)	-.020 (.069)	*	-.138 (.095)	.033 (.111)
Controls (*)					
Nagelkerke's R ²	.366	.355	*	.399	.398
N	717	1664	*	1101	1525
			FI		PdL
Issues	-	-.464 (.070)**	-.635 (.058)**	-.584 (.095)**	-.216 (.052)**
Leader	-	.696 (.068)**	.671 (.050)**	.708 (.074)**	.807 (.057)**
Economy	-	-.005 (.036)	.007 (.037)	.031 (.063)	.014 (.052)
Controls (*)					
Nagelkerke's R ²	-	.461	.493	.540	.442
N	-	1961	2291	1154	1626

Table 4 – continued...

	1990	1996	2001	2006	2008
	Lega Nord (LN)				
Issues	-	-.529 (.116)**	-.775 (.210)**	-.647 (.203)**	-.363 (.088)**
Leader	-	.813 (.106)**	.796 (.121)**	.782 (.141)**	.614 (.077)**
Economy	-	-.088 (.059)	.164 (.113)	-.115 (.122)	-.286 (.092)**
Controls (*)					
Nagelkerke's R ²	-	.585	.472	.522	.406
N	-	906	2052	1121	1533

Note: Dependent variable: Party identification (dummy). Standard error in parentheses. ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. Controls include: age, gender, educational level, frequency of church attendance, subjective social class, trade union membership (coefficients not shown)

Looking at the logistic regression estimates, it is interesting to observe that only two covariates (i.e., leader evaluations and issue proximity) report coefficients that are statistically significant in each and every model. Retrospective economic assessments, on the contrary, seem to play hardly a role. In the cases of FI and LN, party leader evaluations *always* represent the most relevant factor. In other words, what determines feelings of closeness to personal parties is first and foremost voter's evaluation of the leader.⁶

More interestingly, we find that nowadays party leader evaluations represent the strongest driver of party identification *also* in the case of former class-mass parties. As to the Christian Democrats, issue proximity plays the foremost part in the 1990s. In the last decade, it is instead favourable attitudes towards party leader Pierferdinando Casini to exert the strongest impact on individual feelings of closeness to UDC. In the case of left-wing parties (PCI, PDS, DS) we find signs of a strong effect on behalf of the leadership component

⁶ The same conclusion holds in the case of IdV with respect to the 2008 data (unstandardized logistic regression coefficients for leader evaluation and issue proximity equal to .80 and -.31 respectively).

already in 1996, but overall it is the issue component to play the biggest part in the various models. Its dominance is nonetheless put to an end in correspondence with the 2008 election.

As in 1994, the general election of 2008 took place in a widely different political context from its previous one – although this time the restructuring of the political offer was ignited by a process of aggregation (rather than dissolution) undergone by several parties. Differently from 1994, however, we have available data to explore and assess the basis on which voters developed their feelings of identification with the new parties. As it was the case with FI, we observe that individual feelings of closeness to the PdL are mostly determined by voters' evaluation of the founder of the party, Silvio Berlusconi. Even more interestingly, we find that this is the case also with respect to the PD. To understand this finding, it must be highlighted the preeminent part played by Walter Veltroni in both the foundation of PD and its electoral campaign. The personalization of the political supply on the behalf of the centre-left represented, according to some scholars, the real innovation of the 2008 campaign (Barisione and Catellani, 2008). Our data seem to demonstrate the usefulness of this strategy – at least with regard to its ability of developing in a pretty short time a feeling of closeness between a substantial number of voters and a brand-new party. But most of all, this result confirms our main research hypothesis. In a political context characterized by profound transformations in terms of actors and progressive personalization in terms of appeal, party leaders would seem to have become the crucial element of connection between parties and citizens/voters.

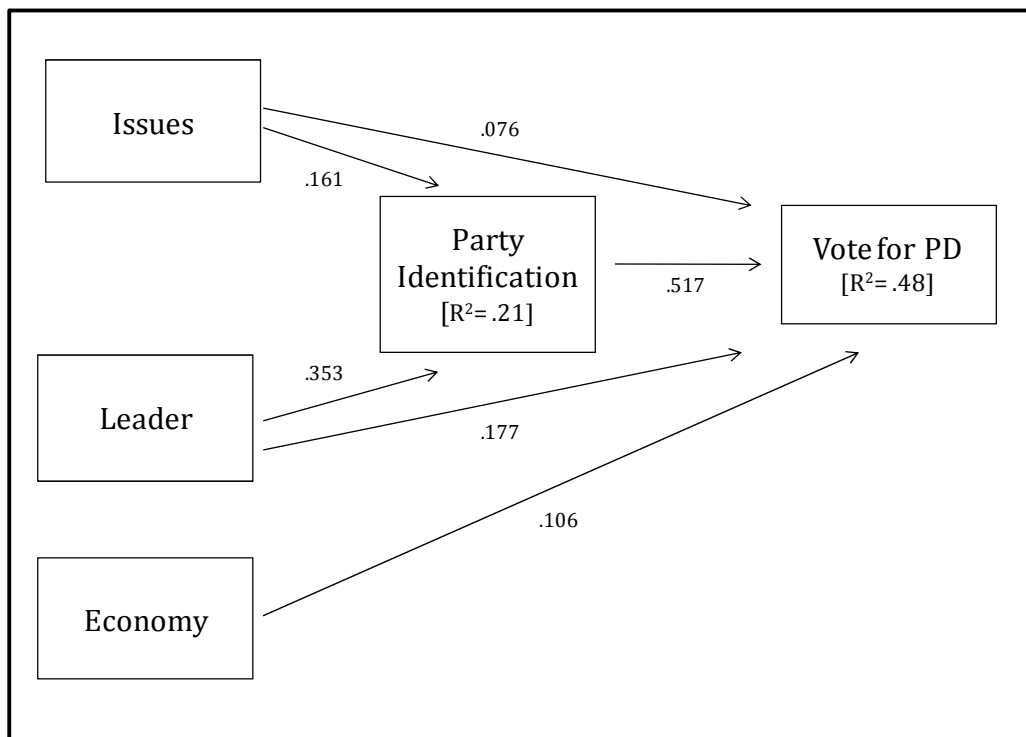
PARTY IDENTIFICATION, LEADER EFFECTS AND VOTE CHOICE: A RECURSIVE MODEL OF VOTING IN THE 2008 ELECTION

In this section we seek to quantify the actual impact of leaders on voters' choice in the light of their crucial relevance as drivers of identification with parties. As an exploratory strategy, we have concentrated on the determinants of the vote for the main two parties (PD and PdL) in the 2008 national election.

In methodological terms, we employ a *path analysis* – a statistical technique that allows to describe the multi-causal relationships between a given set of variables (for a recent application, see: Bellucci, 2006). In line with established theories of voting behavior, the recursive analysis that we present in Figure 3 places party identification at the core of the voting model. On the basis of the empirical findings collected throughout the previous sections, we assume that these identifications are shaped in turn by two key variables: party leader evaluations and party-voter proximity on issues. We hypothesize that such variables are able to exert both a direct and an indirect (as mediated by party

identification) effect on the vote (Venturino, 2000). We also include voters' opinion about the economic situation in the country, which we hypothesize to exert only a direct effect on the vote in the light of the results presented above. The proposed model controls for the effect exerted by socio-structural variables.⁷

Figure 3 – A recursive model of the vote for PD, 2008



Note: Standardized regression coefficients (OLS estimation). Controls include: age, gender, educational level, frequency of church attendance, subjective social class, trade union membership.

The results presented in Figure 3 lead to a number of valuable findings. The first one confirms the key role played by partisan identifications as drivers of vote choice at the individual level. Focusing on the case of PD, the effect of party identification emerges as the strongest factor among those considered.

⁷ The direct effect exerted by socio-structural variables on the vote is by and large negligible, with values of the pseudo R-squared equal to .01 and .04 for PdL and PD respectively.

Notwithstanding, the results highlight a powerful effect on behalf of party leaders within the proposed model. Leaders would seem to lose the “residual” position often assigned them in the previous literature. Indeed, the net electoral effect of party leaders appears substantially comparable to that exerted by party identification (see Table 5), whereas we observe a clear divergence (in terms of impact) between these covariates and the other components of the voting calculus included in the model (i.e., issue proximity and retrospective economic assessments).

Table 5 – The determinants of vote choice in the 2008 election

<i>Partito Democratico</i> (PD)	Direct	Indirect	Total
Issues	.076	.083	.159
Leader	.177	.183	.360
Economy	.106	-	.106
Party Identification	.517	-	.517
<i>Popolo delle Libertà</i> (PdL)	Direct	Indirect	Total
Issues	.097	.022	.119
Leader	.247	.184	.431
Economy	.033	-	.033
Party Identification	.424	-	.424

Note: Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients (OLS estimation)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Comparative research of leader effects in democratic elections has so far produced mixed evidence. In this sense, the Italian case does not seem to stand as an exception. Our analysis of the direct leader effect in Italian elections, as framed in the traditional social-psychological interpretation of voting, highlights the rather marginal role played by party leaders within the voting model. However, the structural context surrounding voters’ choice since 1994 differs drastically from that of the First Republic (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010) and makes us skeptical about the enduring explanatory ability of a purely socio-identitarian explanation of the vote. How could such a radical transformation of the political supply *fail* to bear an effect on Italian voters’ behavior?

We changed the analytical perspective moving from the hypothesis that voters' feelings of identification with parties may be driven by their evaluation of the respective leaders. We analyzed the determinants of party identification across the last two decades. The empirical results provide similar conclusions for both new and established parties. In line with our preliminary hypothesis, we show that in a highly personalized political context like the Second Italian Republic, party leaders have turned into the most relevant driver of individuals' party identification and (indirectly) vote choices. Yet there is a caveat to be taken into account when it comes to the generalization of our results. The role as well as the endurance of the various leaders vary substantially across the parties that we have considered. In particular, *Forza Italia* – and later, PdL – are strongly characterized by the figure of their leader Silvio Berlusconi, who somehow embodied the spirit of his own parties ever since 1994. In the case of PD, the foundation of the party (October 15, 2007) and the election of 2008 (April 13) are extremely close in time. It is thus difficult to understand whether the effect of its leader on partisans is limited to that election or if it can turn into a constant component throughout time. To answer this question, it will be necessary to incorporate our findings with those from analyses of future national elections.

This said, the results herewith presented appear of particular interest insofar they have allowed us to deepen our understanding of the personalization of Italian politics, its modalities, and its effects. Most importantly, however, we find that to different analytical perspectives do correspond widely different results. The employment of an alternative framework allows us to reflect once again on Italians' voting behavior. This study highlights, in our opinion, the need for further research in the field, taking into account all the potential perspectives and bearing in mind that they have not probably been fully explored so far.

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