

# The Rise of Party/Leader Identification in Western Europe

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the attitudinal drivers of partisanship in Western Europe, focusing in particular on the role exerted by voters' evaluation of party leaders. The cross-sectional analysis is performed on pooled national election study data from three established parliamentary democracies (Britain, Germany, and The Netherlands). Results highlight the growing statistical association between leader evaluations and voters' feelings of partisan attachment throughout the last three decades. Further analyses of selected panel data provide evidence for a causal interpretation in which voters' evaluation of party leaders plays a crucial role in shaping their feelings of attachment to parties.

**Keywords:** comparative political behavior, electoral change, party identification, personalization of politics, political psychology

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Few concepts, if any at all, have had such a big leverage in electoral research than that of *party identification*. Since its introduction in the mid-1950s (Campbell *et al.*, 1954), the concept has been subject to a considerable amount of attention and scholarly research (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Budge *et al.*, 1976; Fiorina, 1981; Richardson, 1991; Holmberg, 1994; Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Berglund *et al.*, 2005; Johnston, 2006; Bartle and Bellucci, 2009a). At the heart of this enduring interest lies the fundamental observation that voters have some kind of generalized predisposition to support a particular party over time (Miller, 1991). Although virtually all scholars agree on the need to account for these predispositions, there is widespread disagreement about its causes and how these should be interpreted and measured (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009b).

In its classical formulation, party identification was conceived as “the individual’s affective orientation to an important group object in his environment” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 121). According to the social-psychological reading, such orientation is rooted in early socialization and based on primary group memberships (race, religion, social class). Among its crucial features, party identification was said to be *stable* – that is, virtually immune from short-term forces – and it was thus considered being cause (but not consequence) of less stable attitudes and opinions about, i.e., candidates and issues (Johnston, 2006). As explained by the authors of *The American Voter*, “the influence of party identification on perceptions of

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political objects is so great that only rarely will the individual develop a set of attitude forces that conflicts with this allegiance” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 141).

However, it did not take much time before severe criticisms arose with respect to the supposed stability of party identification. Making use of richer datasets and increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques, later analyses showed that partisan ties at the individual level were much more unstable than originally thought, and indeed strongly responsive to those short-term forces that they were thought to cause (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin and Jackson, 1983). Moreover, sources of scholarly disagreement did not limit to the debate between Michigan scholars and the “revisionists” (Fiorina, 2002). Another serious matter of dispute was related to the applicability of the concept outside the United States. In fact, the very existence of partisan identifications in European multi-party systems was at the core of many critical chapters included in *Party Identification and Beyond* (Budge *et al.*, 1976). The cross-national applicability of the concept was especially contested in Thomassen’s (1976) most celebrated chapter (but see also: Crewe, 1976; Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976).

As a result of the joint endeavor of U.S. and European scholars, the debate has switched the attention from *party identification* to *partisanship* more generally. Loosely defined as “the tendency to support one party rather than another” (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009b: 1) partisanship has remained at the core of electoral research on both sides of the Atlantic in the last decades (Holmberg, 2007; Bellucci and Bartle, 2009a; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Schmitt, 2009). Many routes can lead voters to think of themselves as “partisans” (Erikson *et al.*, 2002). However, the great majority of the recent literature on partisanship seems to largely converge on an understanding of the concept based on modern attitude theory (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009a). According to this perspective, partisanship is best interpreted as a “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity [*the party*] with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 1). Such attitudinal interpretation of partisanship

is especially useful insofar it entails the possibility for voters to simultaneously develop attitudes towards more than one party, thus favoring its applicability to European multi-party systems (Pappi, 1996).

Among the drivers of attitudinal partisanship, the literature has focused on the role played by voters' issue preferences (Erikson *et al.*, 2002) and retrospective economic assessments (Bellucci, 2006) in promoting positive/negative attitudes towards the party. Aggregate partisanship rates have also been shown to respond to the style of electoral competition in a country and the politicization of the respective electorates (Holmberg, 1994; Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995; Berglund *et al.*, 2005; Schmitt, 2009).

Rather surprisingly, however, very few scholars have investigated the role played by party leaders in shaping voters' attitudes towards parties. This occurrence comes as especially astounding in the light of the pervasive *personalization* of contemporary democratic politics (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011). Conceptually, 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 the last two decades, scholarly research has widely documented leaders' increasing influence in electoral campaigns (Swanson and Mancini, 1996) as well as in party structures (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). In such context, it may well be that parties' appeal to voters have come to be increasingly shaped by their own leaders' image (Curtice and Holmberg, 2005). Indeed, it does not seem unreasonable to argue that nowadays political leaders have become important in their own right "by personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties" (McAllister, 2007: 574).

Against this background, the proposition that feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party *in the form of its leader* has been repeatedly advanced (Barisione, 2009; Blondel and Thiébault, 2010) but never put to rigorous empirical test (among the few

exceptions, see: Garzia, 2013). Hence, the aim of this paper is to fill what can be considered an unjustified gap in the literature on partisanship. I will do so through a longitudinal analysis of the relationship between party leader evaluations and individual feelings of partisan attachments in established European democracies. As in every comparative effort, case selection plays a crucial role. In order to strike a balance between needs for comparison and attention to national differences, I will focus on Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands. The choice of these three countries – connoted by sharp differences in terms of electoral system, size of the party system and structure of political competition – highlights many of the crucial variations in the structure of democratic politics, thus allowing for a broader understanding of the cross-national meaning of partisanship in European parliamentary democracies.

The paper proceeds as follows. The following section briefly reviews the available literature on partisanship in order to outline the theoretical framework and the derived research hypotheses. Data and measures are then presented. Two competing models of partisanship are empirically assessed, in turn, against the available data. The findings are then discussed, along with their foremost implications for voting behavior research, in the concluding section.

### **The personalization of politics and its consequences on the individual-level dynamics of partisanship: Theory and Hypotheses**

Albeit scant, early research bears witness of the possibility that leader evaluations can shape (or at least affect) voters' party identification. Already in 1968, V. O. Key anticipated a later, cognitive view of partisanship contending that “[l]ike or dislike of a political personality...bring shifts in party identification” (Key, 1968; quoted in Clarke *et al.*, 2004). In their seminal contribution, Page and Jones (1979) provide empirical evidence that party loyalties “do not function purely as fixed determinants of the vote; those loyalties can

themselves be affected by attitudes toward the current candidates” (Page and Jones, 1979: 1088).

The lack of further assessments of the role of party leaders as drivers of partisanship in more recent decades is all the most surprising in the light of the progressive personalization of politics in Western democracies, whose beginnings are traced right back to the early 1980s (Bean and Mughan, 1989; McAllister, 1996). At the core of the personalization hypothesis lies the notion that “individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen, 2010: 4). The idea of an increased prominence of individual politicians at the expense of collective identities – on which traditional partisan identifications are supposedly based – has clear theoretical implications for our understanding of partisanship, and it would seem to link well with established theories of party-voter relationships. Building on previous lines of research, it can be assumed that individuals’ relationship with political parties depends largely on the types of parties that are predominant in the party system at a given point in time (Gunther, 2005; Lobo, 2008). Indeed, earlier studies have documented that different party characteristics contribute to distinctive types of partisanship (Richardson, 1991; Garzia and Viotti, 2012).

Voters’ identification with European mass-based parties was strongly mediated by the formers’ belonging to separate social milieus and sub-cultures (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Thomassen, 1976). This contention, however, does not seem to hold for contemporary *catch-all* parties. In order to respond to the widespread class dealignment encountered in virtually all European democracies (Crewe *et al.*, 1977; Franklin *et al.*, 1992), traditional cleavage parties have by and large converged on the catch-all typology (Mair *et al.*, 2004). This pluralistic ideal-type is commonly distinguished by a “superficial and vague ideology, an overwhelmingly electoral orientation” and, most notably, by the “prominent leadership and electoral roles of the party’s top-ranked national-level candidates” (Gunther

and Diamond, 2003: 185). The growth of television as the major source of political information for a vast majority of voters has accentuated parties' dependence on the personal appeal of the respective leaders in their communications with voters (Mughan, 2000). In turn, the personality-based nature of television itself has further heightened the importance of the "person" at expense of more abstract entities such as issues and ideologies (Campus, 2010). Some scholars have even gone as far as contending that contemporary political leaders do not only *lead* their parties: to a certain extent, they *personify* them (Webb, 2004; McAllister, 2007; Barisione 2009; Blondel and Thièbault, 2010). In the light of these profound changes at the party level, and on the basis of the assumption postulating partisanship as a function of party characteristics, it seems plausible to envisage a strong association between individuals' partisanship and their assessment of party leaders. Indeed, this relationship can be hypothesized to have grown stronger throughout time – as the personalization hypothesis would imply.

To be fair, personalization has not only affected parties. From a political-psychological perspective, one of its crucial consequences lies in the pivotal role achieved by political leaders within voters' cognitive frameworks (Campus, 2000). Empirical research shows that the most diffuse political schema among contemporary voters is that based on leaders (Miller *et al.*, 1986; Sullivan *et al.*, 1990). In fact, individual politicians can be easily evaluated through inferential strategies of person perception that voters commonly employ in everyday life (Kinder, 1986; Rahn *et al.*, 1990). More abstract entities such as ideologies and issues, on the contrary, are inherently political and thus require more demanding cognitive efforts in order to be implemented into one's political reasoning (Shively, 1979; Pierce, 1993). Accordingly, I hypothesize that among all possible sources of attitudes towards parties (leader evaluations, issue proximity, performance assessments) those related to their leaders have by and large gained prevalence.

## Data and measures

The main data sources employed in this analysis are the series of national elections studies in our three countries, pooled by country and for each decade (see Table 1). The studies conducted in the period 1970-2001 were transformed into a comparable format as a result of the *European Voter* project (Thomassen, 2005). As for the most recent decade, all available studies have been added to the original data source by the author (see Appendix for detailed study description).

<-- Table 1 about here -->

Ever since *The American Voter*, empirical analyses of partisanship have by and large resorted to the “classic” seven-point measurement scale (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Fiorina, 1981; Bartle and Bellucci, 2009b). In order to make this operational measure applicable to European multi-party systems, however, one would be forced to narrow down the analysis to the main two parties in each country. As the percentage of identifiers with these parties has tended to decline over time (albeit with the partial exception of British Labour: see Table 2), the “middle” category would be artificially conflated by featuring not only true independents, but also respondents identifying with minor parties – an occurrence that is likely to engender serious bias in the statistical estimates.

<-- Table 2 about here -->

Against this methodological background, the analysis that follows will employ the so-called “stacked data matrices” in order to obtain a data structure defined at the level stemming from the interaction of individuals and parties (van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk *et*



*al.*, 2006). The choice to stack the data allows us to overcome the drawbacks of discrete choice models and, at the same time, permits to focus the analysis on *all* the available alternatives in each political system (van der Brug *et al.*, 2008). Following the logic of the stacked data matrix, the unit of analysis is represented by respondent\*party combinations.<sup>2</sup> The dependent variable partisanship is measured through the usual combination of survey questions tapping both the directional and the strength component: respondents are thus assigned a value ranging from '0' (not identified with the party in the specific combination) to '3' (strongly identified with that party). The resulting partisanship variable in the stacked data matrix no longer refers to a specific party, but to parties in general.

Two sets of independent variables will be subsequently included in the analysis. The first set consists in those items that are supposed to tap the cleavage-based nature of party identification. Respondents' religiousness is measured through their frequency of church attendance, whereas two different indicators are included as proxies for one's placement in the socio-economic structure: trade union membership and subjective class assessment. As to the second set, it features items related to individuals' attitudes towards relevant partisan objects. Based on the available literature on partisanship (see above), this set includes respondents' thermometer evaluation of party leaders, issue proximity<sup>3</sup>, and retrospective economic assessments (for detailed variable coding see Appendix).

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<sup>2</sup> The resulting size [ $N$ ] of the stacked data matrix equals to [ $R * P$ ] where  $R$  is the number of respondents in the dataset and  $P$  is the number of parties included as stacks. The total size of the stacked datasets is as follows:

- Britain:  $N=106.650$  [ $R=35.550$ ] [ $P=3$ : Conservatives, Labour, Liberal-Democrats]

- Germany:  $N=123.745$  [ $R=24.749$ ] [ $P=5$ : CDU/CSU, FDP, Die Grunen, Linkspartei, SPD]

- Netherlands:  $N=230.625$  [ $R=25.625$ ] [ $P=9$ : CDA, ChristenUnie, D66, GroenLinks, LPF, PvdA, SGP, SP, VVD]

<sup>3</sup> Following Inglehart and Klingemann (1976), the left-right continuum can be interpreted as a sort of "super-issue" that summarizes the policy proposals of competing parties. Issue proximity will thus be measured

Note that not all predictors are interpretable in terms of respondent\*party combinations. Indeed, only respondents' evaluation of party leaders has a direct counterpart at this peculiar level. For all other variables, it was necessary to produce *y-hats* (that is, predicted values) regressing the dependent variable partisanship on synthetic indexes of the covariates of interest through OLS, in order to produce a linear projection (at the respondent\*party level) of previously individual variables (for a more detailed discussion of this method, see: van der Brug *et al.*, 2008: 594).

### **A reassessment of the Michigan model**

As a preliminary step, this analysis must rule out a possible criticism inherent to the Michigan model itself. In its original conception, party identification acts as a powerful *perceptual screen*. Because of such psychological sense of identification, the individual “tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 133). Accordingly, partisans are thought to “like a party leader, irrespective of their personal qualities, if that leader were the leader of their own party, and to dislike them if they were leading a different party” (Curtice and Blais, 2001: 5). This argument, however, holds only as long as partisan identifications are effectively fixed in time as a result of voters' placement in the social structure, and thus immune from the effect of short-term forces (i.e., party leader evaluations). If this was really the case, then our research hypotheses would be seriously flawed from the outset.

Testing this model is relatively easy. As the Michigan conception postulates party identification as by and large mediated by voters' placement in the socio-economic structure, the model can be specified as follows:

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through the respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale, which provides a more easily comparable measure of the distance between voters and parties on the issues throughout countries and time.

$$\text{Partisanship} = f\{\text{Religiousness, Class Identity, Union Membership}\}$$

Because the dependent variable partisanship is not measured on an equal-interval scale, an ordered maximum likelihood estimation technique such as ordinal probit is preferred to linear regression (on this point, see the useful discussion in Fiorina, 1981: 103-5). The model controls for the effect exerted by voters' socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level; coefficients are not shown). Table 3 presents standardized ordered probit coefficients with respect to each country/decade.

<-- Table 3 about here -->

The results presented in the table offer almost no support for the enduring validity of an identity-based explanation of partisanship. Admittedly, all estimates are statistically significant at the  $p < .01$  level and signed as expected. However, it must also be noted an unequivocal decline of the coefficients' magnitude throughout time, which signals a progressive delignment between voters' placement in the social structure and their party identification. Moving from religiousness, the decline is only moderate in the Dutch case ( $b_{1970s}=.35$ ;  $b_{2000s}=.26$ ) whereas it appears more substantial in Germany ( $b_{1970s}=.28$ ;  $b_{2000s}=.16$ ). Also the class identity variable highlights a widespread decline. In fact, it can be observed an almost two-fold diminution of the coefficient throughout the four decades under analysis in both Britain ( $b_{1970s}=.28$ ;  $b_{2000s}=.15$ ) and the Netherlands ( $b_{1970s}=.30$ ;  $b_{2000s}=.18$ ).

Further evidence for the progressive inability of an identity-based model to "explain" voters' party identification comes from an observation of the various model-fit statistics reported in Table 3. Although discrete choice models do not offer a straightforward counterpart to the R-squared in OLS regression, measures of fit based on the overall model

chi-squared (such as McFadden's pseudo R-squared, or its adjusted Nagelkerke's version) provide a satisfactory alternative (Greene and Hensher, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Based on these measures, the overall fit of the model to the data at hand declines in an astonishingly monotonic fashion, regardless of the country under analysis and the measure under observation. Yet, steadiness of the decline is not uniform across countries. In Germany, the explanatory power of the model reports a two-fold diminution across the four decades under analysis (Nagelkerke's  $R^2_{1970s}=.09$ ;  $R^2_{2000s}=.04$ ). The decline is even more accentuated in Britain and the Netherlands. In the Dutch case, the model-fit goes down by a 3:1 ratio ( $R^2_{1970s}=.26$ ;  $R^2_{2000s}=.09$ ), while in the British case the decrease is even four-fold ( $R^2_{1970s}=.11$ ;  $R^2_{2000s}=.03$ ). Most importantly, the value of the pseudo R-squared in the last decade would appear just too low to uncritically accept the enduring validity of a Michigan-style interpretation of party identification – at least for the cases at hand and with respect to the most recent decades. If we are to find the roots of contemporary Europeans' partisanship, then we should look somewhere else than their placement within the social structure.

### **Testing the attitudinal model of partisanship**

The previous section should have settled the theoretical concern over the potential spuriousness in the association between partisanship and attitudes towards partisan objects (as driven by the simultaneous effect of socio-structural forces). The analysis can thus move towards an assessment of the relative ability of various attitude forces in predicting voters' partisanship. A structurally simple model of attitudinal partisanship can be specified as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Chi-squared measures of fit assess "the fit of the predictions by the model to the observed data, compared to no model" (Greene and Hensher, 2010: 126).

Partisanship =  $f\{ \text{Leader Evaluations, Issue Proximity, Retrospective Economic Assessments} \}$

Although there are grounds to believe that the attitudinal measures included are to some extent interrelated, checks both on the correlation matrix of the independent variables (all inter-correlations are less than  $r = .40$ ) and the variance inflation factors (reported values are all below 2) assure that their simultaneous inclusion in the model is safe from problems of multi-collinearity.

As the dependent variable is the same one employed in the previous analysis, estimation takes place once again through an ordinal maximum likelihood technique. Model estimates (standardized probit coefficients) relative to each country/decade are presented in Table 4. For reasons of cross-country comparability the model has been estimated only with respect to the three most recent decades.<sup>5</sup>

<-- Table 4 about here -->

Results from the attitudinal model provide substantial confirmation of the main research hypotheses. An assessment of the model-fit statistics highlights in fact a significantly higher explanatory power of the attitudinal model of partisanship as compared to the identity-based one. Focusing on the last decade alone, a direct comparison of the values of the Nagelkerke's pseudo R-squared reported in Tables 3 and 4 respectively (last column) lends to the following ratios: Britain: 1:12 ( $R^2_{\text{Michigan}}=.03$ ;  $R^2_{\text{Attitudes}}=.36$ ); Germany: 1:10 ( $R^2_{\text{Michigan}}=.04$ ;  $R^2_{\text{Attitudes}}=.40$ ); the Netherlands: 1:2.5 ( $R^2_{\text{Michigan}}=.09$ ;  $R^2_{\text{Attitudes}}=.24$ ).

As to the role of leader evaluations in the various models, probit coefficients are always significantly related to partisanship and, consistently with the personalization hypothesis,

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<sup>5</sup> Dutch studies did not ask respondents to evaluate party leaders on the feeling thermometer until 1986.

their magnitude highlights an unequivocal increase throughout time. When it comes to the relative effect of leader evaluation *vis-à-vis* other attitudinal forces considered, their hypothesized dominance is confirmed too. Indeed, retrospective economic assessment seems to play hardly a role. Issue proximity, on the contrary, starts the time series as a force almost paralleling that of leader evaluations. Looking at the values presented in Table 4 from left to right, however, one notes that the massive increase on the behalf of the leaders' coefficients is not paralleled by those relative to issue proximity, whose impact increases only slightly throughout the three decades under analysis.

### **Partisanship and leader evaluations: Panel dynamics**

Thus far, the analysis has highlighted a growing statistical association between voters' partisanship and their evaluation of party leaders, even taking into account the effect exerted by other relevant explanations (whose impact is now overcome by leader evaluations in each and every model). However, a potential objection to these findings may relate to the cross-sectional design employed. As far as both the dependent variable and the main predictors are measured at the same point in time, the causal dynamics underlying the relationship between partisanship and leader evaluations remain unclear. More specifically, these results do not provide enough analytical leverage for the proposition that partisanship is actually being *shaped* by voters' evaluation of party leaders. Processes of cognitive rationalization may be at work, and the growing impact of leaders on partisanship might be simply due to the increasing relevance of the formers within voters' evaluative frameworks or, even worse, to a mere statistical artifact.

The key concern of this section is thus to enhance our understanding of the ways in which partisanship and short-term attitudes towards leaders interact with each other. In turn, a further test of the attitudinal model of partisanship may provide more solid evidence for the

actual direction of the causal processes at work. Do feelings of partisanship lead to cognitive biases in voters' attention to information that is (in)congruent to their own party predispositions? Or (as it is hypothesized here) it is attitudes towards partisan objects to drive one's partisanship? Unfortunately, the data employed so far does not allow to answer satisfactorily to these questions: as long as the data are cross-sectional, "any inference about structural effects must remain weak" (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008: 85). When different political attitudes (i.e., party identification, leader evaluations) are measured simultaneously, their effects are mutually reinforcing and hence not distinguishable – this leading obviously to biased empirical estimates. Luckily, however, a number of studies among those included in the data at hand feature both a pre- and a post-electoral wave. For illustrative purposes, this section of the analysis will concentrate on two recently available electoral panels: the *British Election Study 2009-10* (pre/post-election survey) and the *German Longitudinal Election Study 2009* (rolling cross-section campaign survey with post-election panel wave).<sup>6</sup>

The use of short panels, which feature a pre- and a post-election wave collected relatively close in time (e.g., less than six months), provides a rather tough test of the personalization hypothesis. In fact, the stability of partisanship can be thought to be especially high in such a short time span. Quite to the contrary, voters assessment of party leaders might be subject to strong deviations during the electoral campaign (note that respondents are interviewed at the beginning of the campaign and re-interviewed right after the election). Showing that leader evaluations are able to "move" partisanship even in such a short time

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<sup>6</sup> These datasets have been selected on the basis of two criteria, namely *design* (i.e., pre/post-election panel survey) and *timeliness* (i.e., the most recent from each country featuring the panel design). Both datasets have been subsequently stacked following the procedure explained in the "Data and Methods" section above. As for the Dutch case, no study could be included in this section of the analysis due to the systematic lack of relevant questions (e.g., respondents' party identification) in both waves.

would certainly represent a strong evidence for a leadership-based interpretation of partisanship in European parliamentary democracies.

A first hint of the actual stability of partisanship and leader evaluations at the individual-level comes from Table 5, which presents the correlation (Pearson's  $r$  coefficients) of these two variables from both the pre- and the post-election wave in the two datasets under analysis.

<-- Table 5 about here -->

Quite surprisingly, partisanship appears even *less* stable than leader evaluations. In a sense, the figures presented in Table 5 are so impressive that a revisionist conception of partisanship might be fully vindicated on these grounds alone. However, and most importantly to our purposes, these figures do not tell much about the direction of the causal process at work. The relative instability of the two variables could be attributed to the effect of either of the two. By the same token, patterns of simultaneous covariation might relate to the effect of relevant intervening variables that the correlational design of this analysis cannot possibly take into account. For this reason, it is necessary to specify two autoregressive individual-level models of partisanship and leader evaluations that take the form of:

$$[EQ. 1] \text{ Partisanship}_{(t)} = f \{ \text{Partisanship}_{(t-1)}, \text{Leader Evaluations}_{(t-1)}, \\ \text{Retrospective Economic Assessments}_{(t-1)}, \text{Controls} \}$$



$$[\text{EQ. 2}] \text{ Leader Evaluations}_{(t)} = f\{ \text{Leader Evaluations}_{(t-1)}, \text{Partisanship}_{(t-1)}, \\ \text{Retrospective Economic Assessments}_{(t-1)}, \text{Controls} \}^7$$

In order to take full advantage of the panel structure of the data, the dependent variables are measured in the post-election wave, while the core predictors (same set for both models) are measured in the pre-election wave. This operational choice assures that the independent variables meet the important causal criterion of occurring prior in time. The inclusion of a lagged term of the dependent variable in each equation follows closely Fiorina's (1981) specification and serves as a baseline against which the net effects of partisanship on leaders and of leaders on partisanship can be measured.<sup>8</sup> A direct comparison of the leader evaluations coefficient in [EQ. 1] and the partisanship coefficient in [EQ. 2] will thus shed light on the strength, as well as the overall direction, of the causal processes underlying the relationship between the two variables of foremost interest. As usual, estimation takes place through ordered probit regression: standardized probit estimates are presented in Table 6.

<-- Table 6 about here -->

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<sup>7</sup> Issue proximity was not included in the specification of the dynamic models due to the lack of relevant questions (i.e., respondents' self-placement of the left-right scale) in the two studies at hand.

<sup>8</sup> A potential critic could charge that the inclusion of a lagged term of the dependent variable may lead to biased and inconsistent estimates as a result of its autocorrelation with the error term of the probit model. As a remedial action, Fiorina (1981) resorts to two-stage probit through the construction of instrumental variables. In this analysis, however, I am not especially concerned with the magnitude of the lagged term's coefficient, which is only included as a baseline measure against which the effect of other attitudinal forces is assessed. In the light of this, analytical strategies aimed at correcting for the level of autocorrelation (i.e., instrumental variable estimation) have not been undertaken.

A preliminary assessment of the models highlights the almost negligible role of socio-structural items in driving voters' partisanship, as testified by the rather weak magnitude of the respective coefficients. Based on the "orthodox" idea that the relationship between social structure and partisanship is a long-term one, not subject to short-term fluctuations, one could still charge that the lack of a significant independent effect on the behalf of identity items is merely due to the inclusion of a lagged term of the partisanship variable in the dynamic model (which could "absorb" the effect of the underlying social structure). For the orthodox reading to be vindicated, however, we should also find a stronger effect of partisanship on short-term attitudes than the other way around. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Indeed, the key finding emerging from Table 6 is that the relative effect of past leader evaluations on current partisanship is much stronger (standardized probit coefficients for Britain and Germany are .30 and .43 respectively) than that exerted by past partisanship on current leader evaluations (.15 and .18 respectively). On these bases, we can further substantiate the idea that nowadays it is leader evaluations to shape feelings of partisanship in European parliamentary democracies.

### **Discussion and concluding remarks**

In recent decades, political leaders have become increasingly visible to mass publics due to the ongoing process of personalization of politics common to all established parliamentary democracies. Moreover, this development has not only affected political communication. Party leaders have been found to exert a stronger effect over time in the executive branch of parliamentary democracies as well as within their own parties' structures. Some have gone as far as contending that nowadays political leaders *personify* the policy platforms of the respective parties. Against this background, the intuition that voters' party loyalties should be interpreted (also) as a function of their evaluation of the leaders has been repeatedly

advanced – and yet never put to systematic test. Indeed, empirical research on partisanship has been surprisingly reluctant in addressing this debate.

In the present study, I took up the task of reassessing the cross-national meaning of partisanship in European parliamentary systems in the light of the progressive personalization of politics that characterizes all advanced industrial democracies. Most notably, I show that the roots of partisanship have steadily moved away from society (e.g., early socialization, placement in the socio-economic structure) towards the realm of individual attitudes. What was once conceptualized as a mere reflection of long-term allegiances has nowadays turned into one of the crucial drivers of partisanship itself.

With respect to the weakening part played by socio-structural forces in shaping voters' partisanship, these findings link well with traditional interpretations of social change based on the *cleavage dealignment* thesis. As it has been repeatedly argued, social cues may still represent a potent source of political attitudes for people “who are integrated into traditional class or religious networks...but today there are fewer people who fit within such clear social categories” (Dalton and Wattenberg, 1993: 201). Nowadays the political relevance of traditional cleavage structures is markedly smaller than it was when the concept of party identification was conceived (Oskarson, 2005). Yet as Berglund *et al.* (2005) argue, “party identification should not necessarily decline in the slipstream of the decline of the relationship between social structure and party system” (Berglund *et al.*, 2005: 107). Indeed, empirical research documents that a substantial – albeit declining – proportion of citizens in established Western democracies still declares to feel close to one of the parties (Dalton, 2008). In this respect, an attitudinal interpretation of partisanship comes as especially useful for our understanding of the nature of this bond. After all, as long as party-based democracies are around, “people’s different relationships with the major actors – the parties – must be conceptualized and measured” (Holmberg, 2007: 566).

As to the relative importance of attitude forces, this study provides unequivocal confirmation of the “personalization hypothesis”. According to the empirical evidence presented here, individual politicians have in fact gained prominence at the expense of both traditional socio-economic groups and classic party features such as issues and ideology. When it comes to partisanship, voters’ evaluation of party leaders appears to have become the most powerful driver of partisan alignments at the individual-level. The relevance of this study, however, does not limit to the enduring debate on partisanship. In fact, the empirical findings presented here bear clear implications for voting behavior research. By showing that partisanship is heavily influenced by individual assessments of party leaders, our findings highlight the importance of taking into account the bidirectional arrow between these variables within the voting equation as, without this specification, the “effects of partisanship on the vote are likely to be exaggerated” (Marks, 1993: 143). It is no doubt that “huge empirical and statistical obstacles [must] be vanquished” (Mitbø, 1997: 152) in order to disentangle conclusively the role of leaders from that of their parties as determinant of voters’ choice. If any, the merit of this paper is that of having shed new light on the dynamic relationship between voters’ partisanship and party leader evaluations for future analyses of voting behavior in contemporary democracies.

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**Table 1.** Countries and elections covered, 1970-2010

<i>Britain</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>
1970	1972	1971
1974 Feb.	1976	1977
1974 Oct.	1980	1982
1979	1983	1986
1983	1987	1989
1987	1990	1994
1992	1994	1998
1997	1998	2002
2001	2002	2003
2005	2005	2006
2010	2009	2010

**Table 2.** Percentage of voters close to the main two parties among all partisans, by decade

	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>2000s</i>
<b><i>Britain</i></b>				
Labour	44.2	35.3	42.6	48.5
Conservatives	41.5	42.9	37.3	28.0
<b><i>Germany</i></b>				
SPD	54.5	47.1	40.7	38.6
CDU/CSU	39.7	43.1	40.4	37.1
<b><i>The Netherlands</i></b>				
PvdA	34.1	34.8	29.7	25.2
CDA	34.5*	31.4	28.2	28.0

(\*) Cell entry represents the sum of partisans for the three parties (KVP, ARP, CHU) that converged into CDA after the 1977 election.

**Table 3.** Social structure and partisanship: cross-sectional analysis

<i>Britain</i>	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Social Class	.28 (.01)**	.26 (.01)**	.26 (.01)**	.15 (.01)**
Union Membership	.17 (.01)**	.12 (.01)**	.12 (.01)**	.05 (.01)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.114	.081	.091	.033
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.056	.040	.045	.016
<i>N</i>	18240	22869	20940	22722
<i>Germany</i>	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Religiousness	.26 (.01)**	.20 (.01)**	.13 (.01)**	.16 (.01)**
Union Membership	.11 (.01)**	.09 (.01)**	.09 (.01)**	.08 (.01)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.091	.048	.032	.042
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.062	.034	.021	.027
<i>N</i>	24890	27575	19800	27905
<i>The Netherlands</i>	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Religiousness	.35 (.01)**	.35 (.01)**	.33 (.01)**	.26 (.01)**
Social Class	.30 (.01)**	.24 (.01)**	.19 (.01)**	.18 (.01)**
Union Membership	.07 (.01)**	.10 (.01)**	.10 (.01)**	.07 (.01)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.259	.157	.118	.087
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.201	.118	.088	.065
<i>N</i>	23814	52470	29177	53388

*Note:* Cell entries are standardized ordered probit estimates. Standard error estimates (in parentheses) are clustered robust at the individual level. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Intercepts and controls (age, gender, educational level) included, coefficients not shown. *Social Class* measures were not available in the German datasets. *Religiousness* is deliberately excluded from the analysis of British data (for a discussion of Britain's unidimensional cleavage structure, see: Oskarson, 2005).

**Table 4.** The attitudinal drivers of partisanship: cross-sectional analysis

<i>Britain</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
<b>Leader Evaluations</b>	<b>.31 (.01)**</b>	<b>.60 (.02)**</b>	<b>.85 (.02)**</b>
Issue Proximity	.36 (.01)**	.41 (.01)**	.58 (.02)**
Economic Assessment	.23 (.01)**	.06 (.01)**	.16 (.02)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.233	.318	.361
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.123	.173	.207
<i>N</i>	10338	11598	13568
<i>Germany</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
<b>Leader Evaluations</b>	<b>.85 (.03)**</b>	<b>.90 (.02)**</b>	<b>.96 (.03)**</b>
Issue Proximity	.27 (.01)**	.28 (.02)**	.41 (.02)**
Economic Assessment	.01 (.01)	.13 (.02)**	.06 (.01)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.373	.338	.399
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.226	.240	.272
<i>N</i>	10024	17524	11663
<i>The Netherlands</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
<b>Leader Evaluations</b>	<b>.49 (.02)**</b>	<b>.63 (.02)**</b>	<b>.70 (.02)**</b>
Issue Proximity	.31 (.01)**	.29 (.01)**	.31 (.01)**
Economic Assessment	.04 (.01)**	-.01 (.01)	.06 (.01)**
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.308	.256	.237
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.197	.174	.173
<i>N</i>	10257	17244	40466

*Note:* Cell entries are standardized ordered probit estimates. Standard error estimates (in parentheses) are clustered robust at the individual level. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ . Intercepts and controls (age, gender, educational level) included, coefficients not shown.

**Table 5.** Stability of partisanship and leader evaluations across two panel waves

	<i>Britain</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Partisanship	.51	.74
<b>Leader Evaluations</b>	<b>.62</b>	<b>.78</b>

*Note:* Cell entries are Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients. All coefficients are significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

**Table 6.** Partisanship and leader evaluations: Panel dynamics

	<i>Britain, 2010</i>		<i>Germany, 2009</i>	
	PID <sub>t</sub>	LEAD <sub>t</sub>	PID <sub>t</sub>	LEAD <sub>t</sub>
Religiousness	-	-	.05 (.01)**	.05 (.01)**
Social Class	.13 (.02)**	.10 (.02)**	-	-
Union Membership	.07 (.02)**	.03 (.02)	.03 (.01)**	.05 (.01)**
Party Identification <sub>t-1</sub>	.61 (.02)**	<b>.15 (.01)**</b>	.68 (.01)**	<b>.18 (.01)**</b>
Leader Evaluations <sub>t-1</sub>	<b>.30 (.03)**</b>	.70 (.02)**	<b>.43 (.02)**</b>	1.16 (.01)**
Economic Assessment <sub>t-1</sub>	.03 (.02)	.04 (.02)*	-.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)*
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.537	.421	.500	.605
McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	.343	.119	.366	.197
<i>N</i>	3935	3893	18713	18628

*Note:* Cell entries are standardized ordered probit estimates. Standard error estimates (in parentheses) are clustered robust at the individual level. \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05. Intercepts and controls (age, gender, educational level) included, coefficients not shown.

## APPENDIX – DATA SOURCES

### Britain

- 1964-2001 Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Hermann Schmitt, Bernhard Weßels and Tanja Binder. *The European Voter Dataset*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA3911 data file.
- 2005 Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whitely. *British Election Study 2005*. National Centre for Social Research. P2474 data file.
- 2010 Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart and Paul Whitely. *British Election Study 2009-10*. < <http://www.bes2009-10.org> >

### Germany

- 1961-98 Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Hermann Schmitt, Bernhard Weßels and Tanja Binder. *The European Voter Dataset*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA3911 data file.
- 2002 Jurgen Falter, Oscar Gabriel and Hans Rattinger. *Political Attitudes, Political Participation and Voter Conduct in United Germany 2002*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA3861 data file.
- 2005 *The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems: Module 3* (second advance release, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011 version). < <http://www.cses.org> >
- 2009 Hans Rattinger, Sigrid Roßteutscher, Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck and Bernhard Weßels. *German Longitudinal Election Study 2009*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA5301 (Post-election Cross-section) and ZA5303 (Rolling Cross Section Campaign Survey with Post-election Panel Wave) data files.

### The Netherlands

- 1971-2003 Bojan Todosijević, Kees Aarts and Harry van der Kaap. *Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies Integrated File 1970-2006*. DANS – Data Archiving and Networked Services. P1816 data file.
- 2006 Kees Aarts, Henk van der Kolk, Martin Rosema and Hans Schmeets. *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006*. DANS – Data Archiving and Networked Services.
- 2010 *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2010* (pre-release).



## APPENDIX – VARIABLE CODING

<i>Gender</i>	(0) male – (1) female
<i>Age</i>	in years
<i>Union Membership</i>	(0) not member – (1) member
<i>Issue Proximity</i>	scale from (0) left to (10) right

### Britain

<i>Education</i>	scale from (0) lowest to (2) highest
<i>Subjective Social Class</i>	(-1) working class id – (0) no class id – (1) middle class id
<i>Leader Evaluation</i>	scale from (0) strongly dislike to (10) strongly like
<i>Economy (Retro/Ego)</i>	(1) got a lot worse – (2) got a little worse – (3) stayed the same – (4) got a little better – (5) got a lot better

### Germany

<i>Education</i>	(1) primary – (2) secondary – (3) higher
<i>Church Attendance</i>	(0) no religion – (1) less than once a year – (2) once a year – (3) several times a year – (4) once a month or more – (5) once a week or more
<i>Leader Evaluation</i>	scale from (0) very negative view to (10) very positive view
<i>Economy (Retro/Socio)</i>	(1) bad – (2) not that fine – (3) in between – (4) good – (5) very good

### The Netherlands

<i>Education</i>	(1) elementary – (2) lower vocational – (3) secondary – (4) middle level vocational/higher level secondary – (5) university
<i>Church Attendance</i>	(0) no religion – (1) almost/never – (2) several times a year – (3) once a month – (4) two/three times a month – (5) at least once a week
<i>Subjective Social Class</i>	(1) working class – (2) upper working class – (3) middle class – (4) upper middle class – (5) upper class
<i>Leader Evaluation</i>	scale from (0) very unsympathetic to (10) very sympathetic
<i>Economy (Retro/Socio)</i>	(1) unfavorable – (2) neither – (3) favorable