

## **Issues and leaders as vote determinants: The case of Italy**

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**Abstract.** A growing literature highlights the importance of leader image as a determinant of voting in contemporary democracies, as a force now paralleling the explanatory power of traditional structural and ideological factors affecting voting choice. Yet the actual effect of leaders in the citizen's vote calculus remains uncertain because of the potential reciprocal causation between leader evaluation and other vote determinants. Thus, the extent to which voters' appreciation of leaders depends on their personality traits or on their policies, and how these forces variously influence the vote, is difficult to assess. To cope with this endogeneity problem we rely on instrumental variable estimation and two-stage regression analysis. We are able to show that in the highly polarized 2006 Italian legislative elections, the net direct effect of leaders on voting choice was actually weaker than that exerted by issue preferences.

Political science research on the role that party leaders play in the citizen's calculus of voting has increased in recent years. Scholars have documented increasing leader visibility and influence in the electoral campaigns (Swanson and Mancini, 1996), in the parties (Scarrow, Webb and Farrell, 2000) and in the executive branch of parliamentary democracies (Karvonen, 2010). Such *presidentialization of politics* (Poguntke and Webb, 2005), which assigns leaders centre stage, also impacts directly on mass political behavior, with political leaders becoming more important cues (McAllister, 2007; Aarts et al., 2011; Bittner, 2011; Garzia, 2011). Moreover, as the literature on valence politics argues (Stokes, 1992; Clarke et al., 2004; 2009; Bellucci, 2006) leader likeability contributes to the popular evaluation of their party which, with partisanship and economic considerations (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007), strongly orient voter choice.

Yet research on the personalization of politics has not reached a consensus on the *leader effect*, even concerning the impact from leaders' images on voting itself. Prevailing opinion on such an effect in parliamentary democracies has been rather skeptical (King, 2002a; Curtice and Holberg, 2005; Karvonen, 2010). Indeed, a recent assessment of party leader effects in democratic elections finds that "party effects are clearly stronger than party leader effects" (Holberg and Oscarson, 2011: 39).

Therefore, uncertainty persists regarding the relevance of leader effects, with respect to their absolute and relative impact. Here we confront this issue, maintaining that much uncertainty about the impact of leaders comes from the way the leader effect is conceptualized and measured. It has been rightly argued that a reciprocal relationship exists between voters' evaluation of leaders and their evaluation of the parties: "People tend to like leaders of parties they like and since most people tend to vote for parties they like, we have a problem" (Holberg and Oscarson, 2011: 37). Hence the difficulty in assessing leader effects, which requires one to "disentangl[e] the impact of leaders from that of the parties they lead" (Gidengil and Blais, 2007: 14). Curtice and Holberg (2005: 236) go on to observe that "the power of the leaders lies in their ability to lead and mould their party rather than their ability to appeal to voters independently of their party." Thus, the suggestion is that the electoral effect of leaders lies not only in their personal appeal, but as well in their capacity to shape the party's offer to voters in terms of political and ideological stances.

In this paper, we begin with the notion that causality between voters' assessment of party issues and party leaders is reciprocal, with X influencing Y and Y influencing X (Miller and Shanks, 1996; Macdonald et al., 1998). Such reciprocal causation generates serious difficulties when the usual regression estimation techniques are applied, namely the problem of simultaneous equation bias. Here

we cope with this endogeneity problem by using panel data and instrumental variables estimation. Through careful application of structural equation methods, in the context of real change over time, we are able to explain the extent to which voters' support for leaders depends on their parties' policies and vice-versa, and how these forces influence the vote.

We employ data from the 2006 Italian parliamentary election, for it allows an ideal natural experiment to test the hypothesis of a leader effect on voting. After the 1994 collapse of traditional cleavage parties, a new catch-all party system emerged. Voters were largely orphaned from previous partisanship, and faced a main political contender, Silvio Berlusconi, founder of Italy's largest party, *Forza Italia*, and owner of a near-monopoly private TV network. The launch of his new personal party (Calise, 2000), based on a strong, controversial usage of political marketing and television, brought about greater visibility of political leaders (Mazzoleni, 1996; Calise, 2005). In fact, voting research has uncovered an unprecedented, strong leader image effect, in particular from Berlusconi, on vote choice (Sani, 2002).

Our analysis focuses on a legislative election which saw the incumbent House of Freedom centre-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi pitted against Prodi's Union.<sup>1</sup> The electoral contest had a bipolar format, showing a heightened polarization of policy positions as revealed in the coalitions' manifestoes.<sup>2</sup> At the

beginning of the campaign centre-right trailed in the polls, showing a rather stable 5% lead for Prodi's coalition, so raising expectations of centre-left victory. To counteract, Berlusconi engaged directly in a strong television campaign, exploiting his influence on the TV channels to insure coverage. The success of the personalized Berlusconi campaign revealed itself in the quasi-draw election results: Prodi's Union won, but with only a 0.1% margin (just 24.000 votes) over Berlusconi's House of Freedom.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section we discuss the ways leaders may influence vote choice and briefly review previous research. Then, variables, definitions and operational strategies are presented. Finally, the findings of the analysis are discussed and assessed. As shall be seen, while both leaders and issues are important, the latter are much more so than previously thought.

### **Leaders and issues as determinants of vote choice: A review**

Spatial models of party competition assume that voting is best explained by the proximity of voters to party policy positions, along a continuum of alternatives (Downs, 1957). In contrast, the existing literature on the personalization of politics assigns crucial importance to the likeability of leaders perceived to be appealing or competent (McAllister, 2007; Clarke et al., 2009). Both these perspectives assume a reasoning voter, although the former relies on a notion of rational calculus while

the latter rests on heuristic reasoning. Focusing on the voters' cognitive process, there seems to be an inherent reciprocal causation between voters' perception of parties' policy outlook and the image of their leaders. Voters' issue preferences may shape the image of the party leader, just as the likeability of the leaders may affect the voters' perceptions of parties' policy stances. Miller and Shanks (1996: 207) frame this cognitive process in terms of "persuasion" effects, according to which voters adjust their own policy preferences to match the position of the party they have already chosen because of other factors. Thus, a party can be perceived closer to a voter's position because of the appeal of the party's leader. This may produce, as Macdonald et al. (1998) argue, a "rationalization" effect which contaminates voters' evaluation of a party's issue position. Voters may be induced to locate a party closer to themselves on issues because they like the party for other reasons. In this case "it is wrong to claim that issue proximity causes positive evaluation. In fact, the reverse is true: proximity follows from prior affect" (Macdonald et al., 1998: 672). Conversely, a party's position on the issues may push voters to evaluate that party's leader more favorably.

From a different perspective, King's (2002b) seminal distinction between direct and indirect effects further helps to illustrate the ambiguous covariation between these factors, at the same time shedding light on the contours of leader influence. Leaders may influence voting *directly*, via their personality, individual

characteristics and overall appeal to voters, or *indirectly*, by affecting the profile of the parties and their policy stances. Indirect influence is exerted “when a leader influences voters, not as a result anything he or she *is*, but as a result of things that he or she *does*...The leader who succeeds in changing his party’s ideology or modernizing its image is exerting influence in this indirect sense’ (King, 2002b: 4–5; italics in original). No doubt Silvio Berlusconi has exerted such influence, firstly by founding and leading the party, but secondly by shaping its policy stance and ideological appeal (Campus, 2002). As well, the 2006 centre-left leader, Romano Prodi, former President of the European Commission and founder of the Olive Tree federation in 1996, has influenced the policy outlook of the opposition centre-left coalition (the Union). Approaching the 2006 election he was called (as in 1996) by the heterogeneous *ensemble* of centre-leftist parties to mediate among centrifugal forces, on disparate issues such as pacifism, bio-ethics and taxation. Prodi, not unlike Berlusconi, was then associated in the people’s mind with the Union and its manifesto. Both leaders, therefore, contributed significantly to the shaping of the programs of their electoral coalition. The voters’ image of the party (coalition) and their perception of where it stands, may then be indirectly contaminated by the likeability of the respective leader.

Less controversial is the notion of the *direct* effect of leaders. Politicians can gain (or lose) votes due to the way in which their personality profile is perceived

by voters, *independently* of the image of the party they lead. Leaders' image – based on personality and individual characteristics – defines their overall appeal to voters (Miller et al., 1986). Previous research has shown that voters develop a mental image of political leaders as persons on the basis of a restricted number of categories namely, *competence, leadership, honesty, and empathy* (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1999; McGraw, 2003). The perceived personality traits of political leaders can also affect *directly* voters' choices (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Bean, 1993; Ohr & Oscarsson, 2011).

How can we disentangle the simultaneous effects of issue preferences and leader likeability on voting? Previous research on parliamentary democracies has mainly assessed the impact of leaders on voting choice by adopting a research design based on an *improved-prediction strategy*. That is, the method of entering sequentially variables according to the supposed causal impact of voting determinants, from long-term to short-term ones. Typically, entering the leader variable last produces a positive assessment of the impact of leader image on voting (King, 2002a). This however does not solve the inherent endogeneity between our variables of interest. Bartle and Crewe (2002) clearly acknowledge it, making the strong assumption “that, while party and leadership images are caused by the same variables, they do not in turn ‘cause’ each other”. They conclude that “...the precise relationship between leadership and party images cannot be fully



determined given the limited data available...Our bloc recursive models assume that party and leader images are located at the same stage within our model” (Bartle and Crewe, 2002: 80-81). To overcome this constraint, Clarke et al. (2004: 117) analyzed the determinants of the feelings about party leaders, finding a positive relationship with party-issue proximity. Their testing for simultaneity bias however lead them to conclude that feelings about party leaders are weakly exogenous to electoral choice.<sup>3</sup>

Our analysis overcomes the limitations stemming from the possibility of simultaneity bias, building on the Clarke et al. (2004) notion of the possible exogeneity (albeit weak) of party leader feelings. To enhance the exogeneity argument, we directly allow the possibility of simultaneity, and attempt to more strongly exogenize leader, as well as issue, variables. Relying on the 2006 ITANES Electoral Panel Study, we disentangle the reciprocal causation by examining before-and-after election panel waves, and by exogenizing both party and leadership variables via instrumental variable estimation. Our research strategy unfolds through panel and causal analysis, with: (a) formulation of a two-equation system of the reciprocal effects of leaders on issues, and issues on leaders; (b) a two-stage regression estimation of the reciprocal net effects of leaders and issues on voting; (c) final assessments of instrumented leaders and issue variables’ influence on voting within a parsimonious model of voting choice.

### **Data and measures: A baseline example**

Our individual level analysis of voter's choice is based on the ITANES Panel, carried out in two waves. The first, conducted in February 2006 before the election, interviewed face-to-face a national representative sample of voters. Of the 2005 respondents who completed the interview, 70% were re-interviewed immediately after the election, in April-May (n=1377). This post-election survey serves a baseline for estimation of a straightforward model of vote choice, following the common practice of analyzing a national election survey in a single cross-section. We begin with an assessment of the direct electoral effect of leaders and issues on vote choice, offering a parsimonious model where vote is a function of leaders' synoptic evaluation (*Leaders*) and voters' coalition utilities (*Issues*), plus a set of standard controls that describe respondents' placement in the social structure, thusly:

$$(Eq. 1) \quad \text{Vote}_t = \text{Leaders}_t + \text{Issues}_t + \text{Age} + \text{Gender} + \text{Education} + \text{SocialClass} + \text{ChurchAttendance} + E$$

It is worth explaining the measurement of *Leaders* and *Issues* in some detail, as they will serve throughout the paper. *Leaders* is a synoptic evaluation of the two leaders based on the standard thermometer question probing, on a 1-10

scale, voters' likability of the leaders. Prodi's score has been subtracted from Berlusconi's, and re-scaled 0-1 so that the lowest value of 0 means the greatest support for Prodi and the smallest for Berlusconi, and 1 means the opposite.<sup>4</sup>

In order to measure *Issues*, we operationalize party (coalition) attractiveness according to voters' issue preferences. Relying on a Downsian approach, we have calculated the voters' coalition utilities by summing the voter-coalition distance over three issues that were prominent in the campaign. Respondents were asked to place both coalitions as well as themselves on a 7-point scale for the following: taxation, immigration, worker rights.<sup>5</sup> The empirical variable *Issues* has been computed in three steps: (1) we computed for each issue the distance in absolute value between respondents' positions and that assigned to the two coalitions; (2) two additive indexes have been then created: one measuring the policy distance between each respondent and the centre-left coalition (*IssuesLeft*) and another measuring the same individual's distance to the centre-right coalition (*IssuesRight*). The indexes have values ranging between 0 (perfect match between respondent policy preference and a coalition policy position) and 18 (total mismatch); (3) finally, each voter's score for *IssuesLeft* has been subtracted from *IssuesRight* to compute *Issues*. The result has been re-scaled onto a 0-1 range, where 0 means maximum proximity to the centre-left coalition and maximum distance from the centre-right, and 1 means the opposite. Therefore

*Issues* represents a synoptic comparative utility for the voter of one coalition *vis-à-vis* the other. We note that the average value of *Issues* is .494, showing the sample is evenly balanced on coalition attractiveness.

Below follows a summary of these measures, and the other measures for this model in Eq.1 (descriptive statistics on these and other manuscript variables are available in the Appendix).

*Vote* is coded 0 for centre-left and 1 for centre-right<sup>6</sup>;

*Leaders* is a synoptic evaluation of the two leaders, with a range from 0, greatest support for Prodi, to 1, greatest support for Berlusconi;

*Issues* is a synoptic coalition utility, ranging from 0, maximum proximity to the centre-left coalition, to 1, maximum proximity to the centre-right

*Age*, is expressed in years;

*Gender* is coded 0 for male and 1 for female;

*Education* has four categories, from elementary to university degree;

*SocialClass* has 5 categories (workers, agricultural and urban self-employment, middle class, upper middle class)<sup>7</sup>;

*ChurchAttendance* has five categories, from 'never' to 'daily/weekly' attendance;

*t* = measured in the post-election wave.

*E* is the error term.

In Table 1 are the logistic regression estimates for this baseline model. This preliminary effort performs well: the variables *Age*, *Education*, *ChurchAttendance*, *Leaders* and *Issues* are statistically significant at some conventional level, and model fit is strong. Because *Leaders* and *Issues* are measured on the same 0-1 scale, we can compare their direct effect on the vote. It is noteworthy that *Leaders* appear twice as important as *Issues* ( $b_{Leaders} = 14.31$ ,  $b_{Issues} = 7.22$ ). However, as we have argued earlier, these results are likely to be biased since reciprocal causation between the two variables is at work. Moreover, the direction of the causality itself is necessarily in question, because the design is cross-sectional, using post-electoral measures to predict post-electoral measures. Our research strategy for disentangling this causality, which we pursue with vigor below, begins with utilization of the pre-election, post-election panel design that the 2006 Panel study offers. Then, it goes on to sort out the reciprocal causality by employing instrumental variables estimation within that pre/post-election panel context.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Reciprocal effects of leaders and issues in a panel context**

We have two goals. First, we want to take advantage of the panel component of the survey. Second, we want to sort out the reciprocal effects between *Leaders* and

*Issues*. To accomplish the latter goal, we must move to a two-equation system, one for *Leaders* and one for *Issues*. Let us start with the specification of the *Leaders* equation. Previous research shows that leaders' personality traits influence directly voters' evaluation of leader likeability (Kinder, 1986). Our first determinants of *Leaders* will then be the two leaders' traits indices. These indices are built from the respondents' evaluation of the extent (4 categories from not at all – coded 1 – to very much – coded 4) to which each of the two coalition leaders possesses eight personal characteristics.<sup>8</sup> *ProdiTraits* and *BerlusconiTraits* are then computed as additive scores over the eight traits, with values ranging from 8 to 32.<sup>9</sup> These traits are held to be effectively exogenous to leadership, because they are enduring personality characteristics measured prior in time, and because they leave about half the variance in leadership unaccounted for (i.e., respectively, the R-squared are .46 and .56), further suggesting that the voters became better acquainted with the leaders during the campaign. Besides leader traits, we add a *StrongLeader* variable, captured by agree-disagree answers to the statement "Italy needs a strong leader". This orientation relates to basic political attitudes – generalized distrust of politics and representative democracy – and is increasingly common as this number of politically disengaged voters is on the rise (Baldassarri, 2005). Lastly, we include as a determinant of leader likability the voters' coalition utilities, our *Issues* variable measured in the pre-election wave of the survey.

Now for the specification of the *Issues* equation itself, we include first the respondents' *LeftRight* self-placement under the obvious hypothesis that voters' ideological orientation structures their party utilities.<sup>10</sup> We then add the voters' salience of issues, measured as the respondents' rating of the importance of given issues on a 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very important) scale. These variables tap the individual propensity of voters to use issues as heuristics to make political judgments. Ideally we would have chosen to include the salience of all the issues which comprise the dependent variable. However, as all measures were not available in the data set, we relied on the salience of two issues, *UnemploymentSalience* and *CriminalitySalience*. These salience measures should influence our issue measure, if for no other reason than the fact that salience of issues helps structure thinking about the issues themselves. For example, for voters who think crime is salient, they are more likely to have an opinion on that issue. The correlation of these opinions will not be random, with respect to the issue, as would tend to be the case if it held no salience. Lastly, we include as a determinant of *Issues* the pre-election *Leaders* variable itself.

The two equations in the system to be estimated can be written as follows:

$$(Eq.2) \quad Leaders_t = ProdiTraits + BerlusconiTraits + StrongLeader + Issues_{t-1} + E$$

$$(Eq. 3) \quad Issues_t = LeftRight + UnemploymentSalience + CriminalitySalience + Leaders_{t-1} + E$$

where,

*ProdiTraits* and *BerlusconiTraits* are traits possessed by the leaders, with values ranging between 8 and 32;

*StrongLeader* has a range from 1 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree);

*LeftRight* is voter self-positioning on the 1-10 Left-Right continuum;

*UnemploymentSalience* and *CriminalitySalience* are perception of importance of problems on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (very much important);

$t$  = measured in the post-election wave;

$t-1$  = measured in the pre-election wave;

$E$  is the error term.

The equations are estimated (ordinary least squares – OLS) in Table 2 (Panel A1 and Panel B1). The model fits appear satisfactory, with adjusted R-squared of .61 and .48, respectively. These strong numbers are encouraging, given that the independent variables, mirroring to some extent causality in real time, are measured four months before the dependent variables. Furthermore, all the



independent variables but one are highly statistically significant and rightly signed. The coefficients of special concern are those of the *Issues* and *Leaders* variables in the two equations. They suggest, on their face, that the effect of *Issues* on *Leaders* well exceeds the effect of *Leaders* on *Issues*, with  $b_{\text{Issues}} = .44$ , and  $b_{\text{Leaders}} = .30$ . However, we cannot uncritically accept such a conclusion since simultaneous equation bias affects the system, throwing these OLS estimates into question.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

### **Exogenizing the effects of leaders on issues and vice-versa: Instrumental variables estimation**

This OLS bias stems from the correlation of the ordinary independent variables, *Leaders* (L) and *Issues* (I), respectively, with the equation error term (Wood and Park, 2004). Such correlation is inevitable, given the reciprocal causal link between the two. The practical solution to this problem is to replace variables L and I with proxies that will not be correlated with the error. These proxies, or instrumental variables, labeled L' and I', are constructed from available exogenous variables. Note that only exogenous variables should be used for this purpose, because they are uncorrelated with the error terms, and hence will render the instrumental variable likewise uncorrelated.<sup>11</sup>

To build the instruments, it is essential that the variables selected for the task truly are exogenous. If that criterion is not met, the procedure will not overcome the bias problem. To hold exogenous status, these variables must be caused by forces outside the system of equations, and must not be correlated with the model error terms (on these points, consult the valuable discussion in Woolridge, 2006: 525-540). Most measures of socioeconomic status conform to this standard, tending to be fixed characteristics the respondent brings to the voting booth. Also, overarching, basic attitudes, e.g., political interest or attitudes toward democracy, can achieve exogenous rank.

With these guidelines in mind, we came up with a set of variables we believe meet rather strict exogeneity conditions. First, note that they are from the pre-election wave, which ensures they meet the important causal criterion of occurring prior in time. Here is the list of available SES variables considered: age, gender, education, social class, church attendance. And, here is the list of basic attitudes considered: interest in politics, exposure to TV news from state/private, and retrospective economic evaluation. With these, we construct instruments I' and L'. However, we cannot use them all to render each instrument, because an insurmountable collinearity problem would ensue. Therefore, they were systematically separated into two groups, to guarantee their adequate statistical independence and, at the same time, maximize their predictive power as a proxy.<sup>12</sup>

The two sets of exogenous variables, respectively, correlate well with the endogenous *Leaders* variable ( $R = .41$ ) and the endogenous *Issues* variable ( $R = .42$ ). Thus, we have confidence in the quality of the two instruments, whose inter-correlation has now dropped to  $r = .35$ , down from the  $r = .68$  observed between the original variables. Further assurance of the quality of the instruments comes from a Hausman test, which indicates they are uncorrelated with their respective error terms, a key assumption for the proper use of instrumental variables.<sup>13</sup>

Substituting the new *Leaders* variable ( $L'$ ) and the new *Issues* variable ( $I'$ ) in the right-hand side of Equations 2 and 3 yields the estimates which appear in Table 2 (Panel A2 and Panel B2). Exogenizing *Issues* and *Leaders* has not affected the structure of the models, as all the other variables retain the previous impact (as can be seen in columns 1). What has changed, however, is their relative influence, with *Issues* now carrying an impact on *Leaders* ( $b_{Issues-hat} = .33$ ) over two times greater than that of *Leaders* on *Issues* ( $b_{Leaders-hat} = .15$ ). Careful treatment of the inherent endogeneity has therefore changed our reading of the reciprocal relationship between leader appeal and party/coalition utility: the likability of both Berlusconi and Prodi is significantly affected by the policy stances that their parties take (as perceived by voters) much more than the reverse.<sup>14</sup>

### **So what? Leaders and issues as determinants of voting**

Once we have properly exogenized *Issues* and *Leaders* and modeled their reciprocal causation, we can finally replace them in the initial vote choice equation (Eq. 1), incorporating as well the causally stronger pre-post design. Table 3 (Panel A) reports the logistic regression estimates. The overall model fit is acceptable [-2 Log likelihood = 755.5; Nagelkerke's R-squared = .30] and, among social structural variables, *SocialClass* and *Age* exert a significant impact on vote choice. What about the impact of *Issues* and *Leaders* on the electors' choice? While in the initial estimate (see Table 1) the *Leaders* impact was almost twice that of *Issues*, here the reverse seems true. The statistical coefficient of *Issues* ( $b_{\text{Issues-hat}} = 9.8$ ) is in fact almost two times larger than that of *Leaders* ( $b_{\text{Leaders-hat}} = 5.5$ ).

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The net effect of these exogenized *Leaders* and *Issues* variables on the vote is graphically summarized in Figure 1, which shows the predicted probability of centre-right vote according to the respondent's coalition utilities and evaluation of leaders' likeability, with all other variables in the model set at their mean value. The message conveyed is rather unequivocal. If endogeneity is taken into account,

then the effect of *Issues* dominates that of *Leaders* – this being especially the case for voters with high levels of closeness to the issues.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **Robustness tests**

In order to check the robustness of these instrumental variable findings, we have carried out several exercises. First, we replicated the analysis, attempting to take account of campaign effects. While the pre/post-election design commends itself in terms of stronger causal inference, a possible flaw could arise from the fact that we have not therefore taken into account the impact of the electoral campaign (taking place from February to April). As discussed in the introduction, this campaign was intense and could have likely affected the voters' perception of both leaders' images and party policy positions. Actually, while among voters with a centre-right or a centre-left vote propensity before the elections Berlusconi and Prodi's ratings remained rather stable during the campaign, among undecided voters we observe a clear change. For those undecided who then voted for centre-left, Prodi's evaluation increased from 5.6 to 6.7; likewise, for those undecided who then voted centre-right, Berlusconi's evaluation rose from 5.4 to 6.8 (Bellucci et al., 2010).

To take into account the possibility of this campaign influence, we exogenized *Leaders* and *Issues* as before but using exogenous variables from the second wave, *after* the election campaign. This allows any effect from the campaign to be fully absorbed in the voters' calculations. The results of this experimental analysis appear in Table 3 (Panel B). The picture remains little changed, with issue effects still dominating leader effects (8.6/6.3). Again, voters appear driven more by parties' policy stances than by leaders' images.<sup>15</sup>

The second exercise was to perform jackknife tests, to examine the stability of the instruments. After all, they are built from a selection of exogenous variables, and that selection might appear arbitrary to some. Thus, we excluded one exogenous variable at a time from the construction of the instrument, and re-estimated Eqs. 2 and 3, respectively, with these new instruments. We observe that the model adjusted R-squared barely budges; for *Leaders*, it goes from .40-.41, for *Issues* from .55-.56. Thus, the performance of the second-stage, instrumented models does not appear to rest on the presence or absence of a particular variable.

The third, and final, exercise concerns the presence of media exposure and retrospective economics as exogenous variables, in the construction of the instruments. Since one of these variables serves for the *Leaders* instrument, and the other serves for the *Issues* instrument, it might be argued that this service is arbitrary. Therefore, as a test, we simply switched their roles, so instrumenting

*Leaders* with retrospective economics, and *Issues* with media exposure (recall that both could not be included, because of collinearity). The results are confirmatory. These new instruments render about the same R magnitudes, in their correlation with the endogenous *Leaders* and *Issues* variables, when compared to the old instruments (respectively: .42 and .36). Moreover, and most importantly, when these new instruments are included in the vote model (a la Eq.3), the *Issues* coefficient continues to be almost twice that of the *Leaders* coefficient, 8.70/4.96.

In sum, from these foregoing exercises, we conclude that the instrumental variables results of Tables 2 and 3, with respect to the impact of *Issues* and *Leaders*, are robust.

## **Conclusions**

The role of political leaders has grown in contemporary democracies, and their electoral appeal is assumed to have increased. Yet, voting behavior research has not reached a consensus on the actual contours of such a leader effect, mainly due to the difficulty of disentangling the reciprocal causation among independent variables in the voting equation. In this paper we have squarely faced the task of estimating the reciprocal causal links between parties' issue position and their leaders' likeability, and of assessing how these influence the vote. The analysis has been carried out on the 2006 Italian parliamentary election, in a polity which – due

to the collapse of traditional cleavage parties and the ensuing strong personalization of politics – represents a favorable case to test the hypothesis of an enhanced leader effect on voting choice. After careful treatment of the inherent endogeneity between voters’ party utilities and leader evaluations, we find that both forces do exert an influence on voting. However, and contrary to previous research, we also find that party utilities outweigh leaders’ likeability as a determinant of the vote. This result is particularly significant given the 2006 macro-institutional and political context of the elections, which should have greatly favored the leader effect. Party competition had a bipolar format, a condition that comparative literature on parliamentary democracies argues enhances the effect of the leader on voting (Barisione, 2009). Also the electoral system, a further condition highlighted by previous research (*ibid.*) mitigated the (depressing) effect of proportional representation on leaders’ assessment by the introduction of a majority bonus. Finally, the closeness of the expected results should likewise have enhanced the electoral impact of the leaders (King 2002b).

Against this backdrop, our findings do not deny a leader effect on voting. However, the analysis of reciprocal effects has shown that the image of the leaders contributes to the voters’ perception of parties’ utilities significantly less than the extent to which issues proximity *causes* voters’ perception of the leader image. Therefore, when jointly employed to explain vote choice, party utilities direct



contribution exceeds that of the leaders' image. This is true even in a political contest – like Italy's Second Republic – where the personalization of politics has apparently come dangerously close to a populist democracy. Our findings are therefore reassuring: our conclusion is that, in the voters' eyes, leaders represent their parties and their policies more than they represent themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> A new electoral law, enacted four months before the 2006 election, reintroduced proportional representation with a non-preferential party list vote in multimember constituencies, the establishment of thresholds for seat allocation and, crucially, a majority bonus for the winning coalition. This electoral bonus, matched by a lower threshold (2% of the vote) for parties entering into coalition, represented a strong incentive for parties to join in electoral federation, declaring in advance the leader of the governing coalition and its common programme. Only 0.5% of the votes went to parties outside the two coalitions.

<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the distance of party block positions (centre-left and centre-right) on economic issues and secular-religion issues based on the electoral manifestoes shows the highest level of polarization since 1963 (Bellucci and Heath, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Clarke et al. (2004: 116-8), in their study of leadership effects in the 2001 British elections, also address the question whether feelings towards leaders may be influenced by vote preference. In diagnosing this possibility, they carry out what they refer to as a “weak exogeneity” test. The vote intention variable, as measured in the pre-election survey, is included on the right-hand side of the equation for declared vote (in the post-election survey). They find that, even controlling for this lagged dependent variable, leadership effects are still significant. A difficulty with this test, as they footnote, is that having this lagged dependent variable on the right-hand side of the equation will tend to “exaggerate the magnitude of the coefficient associated with the lagged variable, and depress the magnitude of other predictors” (Clarke et al., 2004: 129). This is one reason why this Granger-style test is considered a “weak” exogeneity test (Greene, 2003). Also, as is evident in their own comment, the test would depress the impact of the independent variable of party, so rendering impossible a balanced comparison of party vs. leader effects. Therefore, we decided to follow a stronger exogeneity test, developing a simultaneous equation model allowing for consistent estimation of reciprocal causal effects using a two-stage instrumental variables approach.

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<sup>4</sup> Prodi reports a somewhat higher mean thermometer score (4.93) as compared to Berlusconi (4.53). In addition, popular evaluations of the latter appear more polarized (st. dev. = 3.1) than is the case with Prodi (st. dev. = 2.6).

<sup>5</sup> The format of the questions reads as follows: (A) Some people say that taxes need to be reduced even through it might lead to a reduction in public services. Others say that public services need to be extended even through it might lead to more taxes. Others have intermediate opinions. Where would you place your opinion? Where would you place the centre-left coalition's position? Where would you place the centre-right coalition's position? (B) Some people say we get too many immigrants. Others say that we could accommodate more immigrants. Where would you place your opinion? Where would you place the centre-left coalition's position? Where would you place the centre-right coalition's position? (C) Some people say that in order to fight unemployment effectively we should curb state and unions' constraints in the economy. Others say that instead the state should intervene in the economy. Others have intermediate opinions. Where would you place your opinion? Where would you place the centre-left coalition's? Where would you place the centre-right coalition's position?

<sup>6</sup> Voters who did not vote for either the centre-left or the centre-right coalition have been excluded from the analysis. This operational choice is justified by the negligible proportion of this group of voters within our sample (i.e., less than one per cent; cf. Note 1) and allows a much clearer presentation of results.

<sup>7</sup> The operationalization of social class as ordinal rests on clarity of presentation concerns, as it permits us to show only one coefficient (instead of four) in the following tables. It is worth noting that the inclusion of social class as categorical rather than ordinal leaves the results virtually unchanged.

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<sup>8</sup> Personality traits considered are: resolute, responsible, reliable, skilled, competent, intelligent, expert, persevering.

<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi appears especially strong in terms of 'persevering' and 'resolute', characteristics that are widely credited to him by the whole sample of respondents (see the standard deviations) while 'reliability' appears his main weakness (see Appendix). Prodi does not seem to enjoy any particular advantage with respect to Berlusconi in terms of personality traits, and his overall score on the additive index is slightly lower than Berlusconi's.

<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale (rather than party identification) as summary measure for their long-term partisan predispositions is based on the idea that the left-right continuum "seems to provide an even more important political cue for West European publics than the liberal-conservative continuum does for Americans" (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976: 243). Analyses of the Italian case further show the limited usefulness of party identification in the study of Italians' voting behaviour (Garzia and Viotti, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Construction of the instruments goes forward in two stages. In the first-stage the endogenous dependent variable, e.g.,  $I$ , is regressed (least squares) on the selected exogenous variables. The predicted  $I$  variable from that first stage, labeled  $I'$ , becomes the instrumental variable. In the second-stage this  $I'$  is substituted into the equation, e.g., Eq. 2 for Leaders ( $L$ ) above, and then re-estimated (i.e., two-stage least squares). The same sort of procedure would repeat itself for estimated Eq. 3 for Issues ( $I$ ). The second stage parameter estimates will now have the desirable property of statistical consistency, and the reciprocal effects can be correctly interpreted. For a lucid standard treatment of instrumental variables estimation, see Kmenta (1997). For something more current, see

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Woolridge (2006). A useful example of the technique, applied to election survey research, appears in Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias (2008).

<sup>12</sup> The *Issues* instrument,  $I'$  was constructed from the following: age, gender, education, social class, church attendance, interest in politics, and retrospective economic evaluation. The *Leaders* instrument,  $L'$  was constructed from the following: age, gender, education, social class, interest in politics, exposure to TV news. Full estimation procedure is available from the authors upon request.

<sup>13</sup> As Kmenta (1997: 365) notes, the Hausman test “can be used whenever we can implement an instrumental variables estimation procedure”. To illustrate, the test examines whether the residual,  $U$  (after predicting endogenous independent variable  $Y_2$  from the selected instrumental variables) is a statistically significant predictor of the dependent variable,  $Y_1$ , when added to the specification of the original equation [e.g.,  $Y_1 = a + bY_2 + cU + e$ ]. Applying the Hausman test to the equations of Table 2, we find the residual coefficient for the *Leaders* equation does not achieve conventional statistical significance (prob.  $F = .30$ ). Similarly, the residual coefficient for the *Issues* equation does not achieve conventional statistical significance (prob.  $F = .98$ ). As well, it is worth noting that the same test, when applied to the vote equation of Table 3, likewise fails to achieve conventional statistical significance (prob.  $F = .32$ ). Thus, we cannot in any of these cases reject the null. We conclude that the instruments, as constructed, meet the necessary assumption of no correlation with the error term.

<sup>14</sup> The number of cases included in the analyses presented in Panels A2 and B2 is slightly smaller *vis-à-vis* the ordinary OLS estimations due to a number of missing values in the exogenous variables employed to build the instruments. At any rate, the exclusion of these cases from the OLS analyses (as in Panels A1 and B1) has virtually no effect on the results.

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<sup>15</sup> The post-post specification of the empirical model has resulted in the inclusion of a significantly higher number of cases (slightly less than a hundred) with respect to the pre-post specification due to a lower number of missing values on the leader and issue variables in the post-election wave. Re-estimation of the model including only respondents with valid values in both waves confirms substantially the findings presented in Table 3, Panel B.

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**Table 1.** Baseline vote model (post-election data, logistic regression)

	B	S. E.
<i>Age</i>	-.029*	.013
<i>Gender</i>	.535	.365
<i>Education</i>	-.427+	.250
<i>ChurchAttendance</i>	.364**	.123
<i>SocialClass</i>	.194	.138
<i>Leaders</i>	14.310***	1.398
<i>Issues</i>	7.221***	1.491
Constant	-.441	1.450
-2 Log Likelihood		232.8
Nagelkerke's R-squared		.883
N		798

*Note:* \*\*\*p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05; + p < .10

**Table 2.** Reciprocal effects of Leaders and Issues: (pre-post election data, OLS and 2SLS estimates)

Panel A: Leaders (dependent variable: post-election; independent variables: pre-election)

	OLS estimation		IV estimation	
	(A1)		(A2)	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
<i>ProdiTraits</i>	-.018***	.001	-.023***	.001
<i>BerlusconiTraits</i>	.018***	.002	.023***	.002
<i>StrongLeader</i>	.014*	.007	.021**	.007
<i>Issues</i>	.439***	.045	-	-
<i>Issues'</i> (exogenous)	-	-	.329***	.091
Constant	-.101	.053	-.123*	.058
Adjusted R-squared	.61		.58	
N	764		749	

Note: \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

Panel B: Issues (dependent variable: post-election; independent variables: pre-election)

	OLS estimation		IV estimation	
	(B1)		(B2)	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
<i>LeftRight</i>	.022***	.003	.045***	.002
<i>UnemploymentSalience</i>	-.024***	.006	-.036***	.007
<i>CriminalitySalience</i>	.008	.006	.008	.006
<i>Leaders</i>	.301***	.029	-	-
<i>Leaders'</i> (exogeneous)	-	-	.146**	.053
Constant	-.002	.045	-.040	.050
Adjusted R-squared	.48		.41	
N	837		813	

Note: \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05

**Table 3.** Final vote model (pre-post, and post-post election data, instrumental variables estimation)

Panel A. Vote (post-election) =  $f$ (independent variables, pre-election), IV estimation

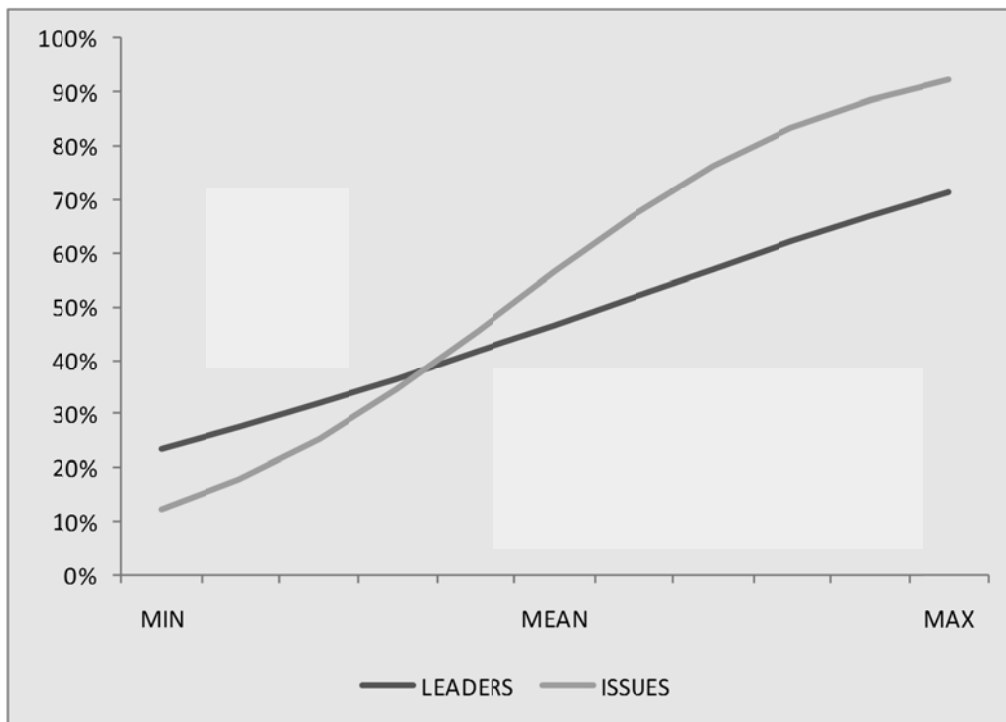
Panel B. Vote (post-election) =  $f$ (independent variables, post-election), IV estimation

	(Panel A: pre-post)		(Panel B: post-post)	
	B	S. E.	B	S. E.
<i>Age</i>	-.013*	.006	-.005	.006
<i>Gender</i>	.018	.185	.338*	.172
<i>Education</i>	.006	.127	.059	.116
<i>ChurchAttendance</i>	-.038	.067	.034	.061
<i>SocialClass</i>	.232**	.070	.146*	.063
<i>Leaders'</i> (exogenous)	5.510***	.842	6.277***	.900
<i>Issues'</i> (exogeneous)	9.844***	1.247	8.649***	1.173
Constant	-.065	.704	-1.019	.648
-2 Log Likelihood	755.5		881.4	
Nagelkerke's R-squared	.298		.269	
N	685		778	

Note: \*\*\* p < .001; \*\* p < .01; \* p < .05



**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of centre-right vote (estimates from Table 3, Panel A)



**APPENDIX.** Descriptive statistics of variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
<i>Vote</i>	771	0,0	1,0	,4293	,49530
<i>Age</i>	1377	18,0	94,0	48,6624	17,33748
<i>Gender</i>	1377	1,0	2,0	1,4989	,50018
<i>Education</i>	1376	1,0	4,0	2,3164	,90218
<i>ChurchAttendance</i>	1364	1,0	5,0	2,94	1,454
<i>SocialClass</i>	1372	1,0	5,0	3,4544	1,44314
<i>LeftRight</i>	1125	1,0	10,0	5,16	2,742
<i>StrongLeader</i>	1376	1,0	5,0	3,15	,990
<i>UnemploymentSalience</i>	1370	1,0	7,0	6,61	,990
<i>CriminalitySalience</i>	1372	1,0	7,0	6,50	1,015
<i>Berlusconi (Thermometer)</i>	1319	1,0	10,0	4,53	3,090
<i>Prodi (Thermometer)</i>	1281	1,0	10,0	4,93	2,630
<i>Leaders</i>	1275	0,0	1,0	,4772	,28231
<i>IssuesLeft</i>	892	0,0	18,0	5,4897	4,38917
<i>IssuesRight</i>	909	0,0	18,0	5,8286	4,03689
<i>Issues</i>	851	0,0	1,0	,4938	,19402
 <u>Silvio Berlusconi</u>					
<i>Reliable</i>	1281	1,0	4,0	2,24	1,033
<i>Competent</i>	1280	1,0	4,0	2,81	,968
<i>Responsible</i>	1277	1,0	4,0	2,53	,979
<i>Resolute</i>	1286	1,0	4,0	3,52	,745
<i>Skilled</i>	1287	1,0	4,0	2,95	,987
<i>Intelligent</i>	1274	1,0	4,0	3,31	,818
<i>Expert</i>	1281	1,0	4,0	3,05	,899
<i>Persevering</i>	1284	1,0	4,0	3,58	,670
*Sum 8-items	1189	8,0	32,0	24,1506	5,04371

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
<u>Romano Prodi</u>					
<i>Reliable</i>	1233	1,0	4,0	2,61	,954
<i>Competent</i>	1247	1,0	4,0	2,87	,905
<i>Responsible</i>	1226	1,0	4,0	2,83	,906
<i>Resolute</i>	1253	1,0	4,0	2,79	,880
<i>Skilled</i>	1231	1,0	4,0	2,69	,903
<i>Intelligent</i>	1250	1,0	4,0	3,17	,803
<i>Expert</i>	1260	1,0	4,0	3,00	,854
<i>Persevering</i>	1255	1,0	4,0	2,88	,853
*Sum 8-items	1115	8,0	32,0	23,0227	5,67613
<i>InterestPolitics</i>	1373	1,0	4,0	2,12	,882
<i>MediaExposure</i>	1336	-1,0	1,0	-,1800	,97259
<i>RetroEconomics</i>	1355	1,0	5,0	2,01	,883