

Partisanship, leader evaluations, and the vote

Breaking the new iron triangle in electoral research (*)

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Abstract: This paper provides an empirical assessment of the causal structure underlying the core dependent variable of electoral research (e.g., the vote) and two of its most notable predictors (e.g., party identification and leader evaluations). A critical review of traditional models of the vote highlights the need to account for the reciprocal relationship between the main predictors as well as for the potential feedback from the dependent variable. Making use of pre/post election surveys from two established parliamentary democracies in Western Europe (Britain and Italy), the empirical analysis provide evidence for a strong effect of behavior on attitudes. However, past behavior seems to exert its effect mainly on partisan attitudes, whereas party leader evaluations appear only slightly affected. The analysis also provides preliminary evidence for the existence of significant indirect effects traveling from leader evaluations to the vote *through* party identification. Evidence for the existence of the reverse channel (e.g., party identification *through* leader evaluations) appears weaker.

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1. Introduction

A pervasive phenomenon in both established and newer democracies, the personalization of politics has been subject of intense scholarly debate under a multitude of perspectives (McAllister, 2007). Studies of modern electoral campaigns have emphasized the crucial role played by individual leaders in conveying party messages to the public at large (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Mughan, 2000). Others have stressed the growing importance of leaders in the executives as well as within their own parties' structures as a result of the increasing complexity of the decision-making process in contemporary democratic systems (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005). However, when it comes to party leader effects on individual voting behavior, no such consensus has been reached (for a review, see: Garzia, 2011). Indeed, a vast majority of empirical works on the topic are virtually unanimous in interpreting party leader evaluations as a sort of residual category within the voting equation (for a review, see: King, 2002). At the heart of this dispute lies the consolidated view of voters' behavior – on which all these works are based – set forth by Campbell and colleagues in their 1960's classic *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). According to this social-psychological interpretation, vote choices are to be interpreted mainly as a function of voters' long-term allegiances (e.g., party identification), whereas more proximate influences on voting behavior (e.g., leaders, issues, performance assessments) are subject to explanation in terms of such temporally and causally prior attachments (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 24-37; Thomassen, 2005: 7-17). In other words, the Michigan model postulates party leader evaluations as a consequence of longer-term partisan identifications, with the latter at the core of the whole cognitive process leading to the individual voting choice.

In spite of its enduring (albeit often implicit) acceptance within the electoral research community, such an understanding of voting reveals a number of critical shortcomings, as identified by previous scholarship on the topic. For one thing, a number of studies have engendered growing doubts over the (hypothetically) exogenous status of party identification (for a review, see: Fiorina, 2002). As it appears, “[p]arty identification is shaping behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions at the same time as it is shaped by attitudes and perceptions” (Holmberg, 2007: 562). In the light of the pervasive personalization of politics in contemporary electoral democracies, such an argument yields support for the often advanced (and yet never put to rigorous

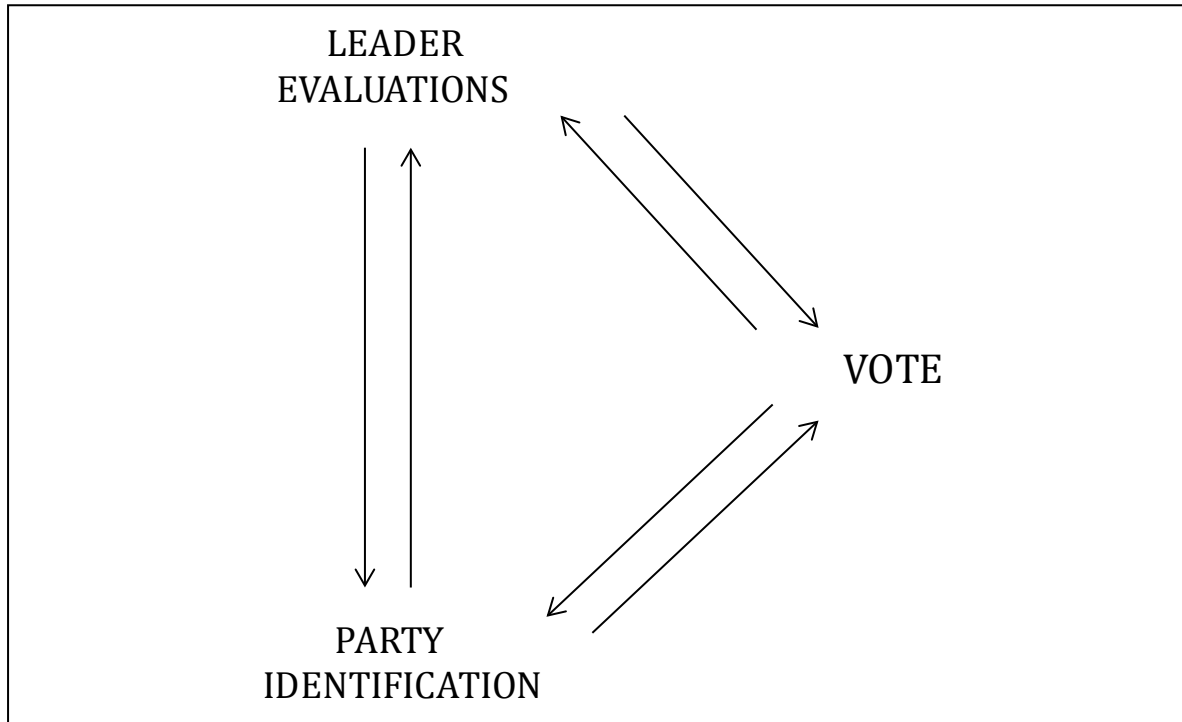
empirical test) proposition that nowadays feelings of closeness should be brought back to parties *in the form of their leaders* (Webb, 2004; Barisione, 2009; Garzia, 2011). If this was really the case, then we might be in danger of seriously underestimating the electoral effect of party leaders (Marks, 1993) whose effect on the vote could be travelling indirectly *through* party identification (Dinas, 2008). Moreover, the available literature seems to overlook another crucial issue: namely, that of a potential *feedback* from the dependent variable. In fact, the Michigan model conceives individual vote choices as a function of “the cumulative consequences of temporally ordered sets of factors” (Miller and Shanks, 1996: 192). In such framework, it is political attitudes (e.g., party identification, short-term evaluations) to drive behavior. However, more recent studies of economic voting show that individuals’ behavior also can lead to changes in attitudes (Wlezien *et al.*, 1997; Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010). The issue of reverse causation (e.g., *from* the vote choice *to* voters’ political attitudes) has been seldom recognized in empirical assessments of party and leader effects, but there are strong theoretical grounds to believe that such possibility should be taken into account.

In the light of these considerations, a new “iron triangle” of electoral research¹ would seem to take shape. Such triangle features partisanship, leader evaluations, and the vote at its edges (see: Figure 1), each one tight to each other by a strong (theoretical) link of reciprocal causation. Clearly, the very existence of a bidirectional relationship between the vote and two of its core predictors (as well as among predictor variables themselves) raises serious concerns with respect to endogeneity (van der Eijk, 2002), thus putting in question the alleged position of the various explanatory factors within the inner logic of the funnel. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to provide an empirical reassessment of the relationship between the three vertices of this triangle in order to reach a more informed understanding of the psychological dynamics underlying voters’ choice in contemporary electoral democracies. The solution advanced here consists in focusing on short-term electoral dynamics, taking advantage of pre-post election comparisons at the individual level, and making use of interaction effects to properly analyze the indirect effects of our key variables. Finally, the importance of controlling for the ballot cast at the previous elections will not be

¹ The “old” iron triangle being the one depicted in Achen (1992).

overlooked in order to disentangle the relative importance of individuals' attitudes – and to control for the causal feedback described here.

Figure 1 – The “iron triangle”



The empirical analysis will employ national election study data from two established parliamentary democracies in Western Europe: Italy and Britain. The choice of these countries, characterized by sharp differences in terms of electoral system (pure PR vs. FPTP), electoral history of parties themselves (ranging from less than two decades in Italy up to centuries in the British case), and a widely different role of party leaders in the political process, highlight many crucial variations in the structure of democratic politics, thus strengthening the robustness of the empirical findings herewith presented.

This paper will proceed as follows: next section briefly reviews the available literature on voting behavior, focusing in particular on its methodological aspects. The following section specifies our theoretical and empirical model. Next, data and case selection are introduced. The main results of the analysis are presented and then discussed in the concluding section along with their main implications for further research.

2. The Electoral Consequences of the Personalization of Politics: Evidence So Far

A widespread interpretation of contemporary voters' behavior based on the personalization of politics literature is that they "tend increasingly to vote for a person and no longer for a party or a platform" (Manin, 1997: 219). Others go even further, contending that "election outcomes are now, more than at any time in the past, determined by voters' assessments of party leaders" (Hayes and McAllister, 1997: 3). However, the common wisdom that sees popular party leaders as a fundamental electoral asset for their own parties has been fiercely contested by comparative electoral research (see, most notably: King, 2002; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Karvonen, 2010; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011). As a common denominator, the present literature rests on the classic social-psychological interpretation of voting set forth in *The American Voter*. In such framework, leader evaluations stand as a sort of residual category, as they appear "strongly mediated by such situational factors as the strength as well as the direction of partisan affiliation" (Brettschneider and Gabriel, 2002: 153).

The enduring validity of such an interpretation of voters' behavior rests on the strong assumption that party identification is relatively fixed and immune from short-term forces. However, a variety of empirical works has shown that the assumed exogeneity of partisanship is, at best, doubtful (for a review, see: Marks, 1993). In their seminal contribution, Page and Jones (1979) demonstrate 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. Even short of major realignments, party affiliations are effects as well as causes in the electoral process" (Page and Jones, 1979: 1088). Regrettably, only a few empirical analyses of leader effects have taken this conclusion into account. Some of them limit to recognize the problem of reverse causation (Crewe and King, 1994; Evans and Andersen, 2005; Dinas, 2008), while in only a bunch of cases the two-way relationship between party identification and leader/candidate evaluations is addressed empirically (Archer, 1987; Marks, 1993). It is an unfortunate occurrence, as without this specification "the effects of partisanship on the vote are likely to be exaggerated" (Marks, 1993: 143), with leader effects substantially downsized as a result (Dinas, 2008: 508).

A more fundamental critique to the Michigan model of voting lies with the way in which its authors framed it within mainstream social-psychological theories of the time,

and most notably in selective perception theory (Festinger, 1957). Indeed, the very existence of the infamous *funnel of causality* relies heavily on classic attitude-behavior theoretical models, which postulate behavior as driven by individuals' core attitudes (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Yet, more recent studies show that individuals' behavior also can lead to changes in attitudes (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In the Michigan model, voters are thought to conform their behavior (vote choice) to previous attitudes (party identification) in order to maintain cognitive consistency. By the same token, however, it could be argued that voters' are actually conforming their core attitudes to past (voting) behavior right in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. If this hypothesis was correct, then not taking into account voters' electoral history within the voting equation would lead to severe bias in terms of theoretical (as well as empirical) under-specification (see, for example: Anderson *et al.*, 2004).

Under these conditions it does not surprise the growing interest of political scientists in experimental and counterfactual analytical methods as a way to disentangle this complex set of relationships (Tomz and van Houweling, 2009; van Holsteyn and Andeweg, 2010). However, the alluring perspective of the treatments' manipulation, substantially improving the internal validity of the inference, comes at the cost of the thorny feasibility issue of dealing with comparative evidence. Thus the vast majority of counterfactual and survey experiments are practically bound to provide context-dependent results.

Indeed, virtually all comparative evidence of party leader effects on the vote relies on cross-sectional data sources (i.e., post-election surveys). However, "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 to vote recall, their effects are mutually reinforcing and hence not distinguishable – this leading obviously to biased empirical estimates. Another serious problem inherent to cross-sectional analytical strategies lies with their inability to take into account the (likely) presence of cognitive feedback running either from attitude to behavior and/or the other way around. As long as the exogenous status of party identification is taken for granted, then the presence, strength, and direction of such feedback cannot be empirically assessed. Unfortunately, scholarship on voting behavior have often failed to take into account properly the reciprocal effect of behavior on attitudes, tending to exaggerate the cross-sectional

evidence concerning e.g. the importance of party identification for short-term attitude formation and voting choice. In many cases, the presence of strong and statistically significant cross-section results are retained as evidence to support the powerful role of partisan attachment on individual political behavior, instead of a possible witness for such cognitive feedback at work.

A further point of concern relates to the structure itself of electoral survey research. In post-election surveys, respondents are asked about their vote choice few weeks (and at times few months) after the election has taken place. Even assuming that respondents' vote recall is reported sincerely, such time span may still provide them with a sufficient span of time to "shape" their attitudes in a way that conforms more closely to their past behavior. Moreover, the occurrence that political attitudes are actually being measured after the election provides further ground to believe that, if any, cognitive feedback is actually running *from* behavior *to* attitudes. As a result, concerns about the bidirectional relationship between attitudes and behavior, as well as between attitudes themselves, cast severe doubts on the usefulness of this kind of empirical strategy (cross-section) for assessing the actual contour of party and leader effects in the individual voting calculus.

A different methodological perspective would seem to allow for a direct control of the feedback effect that systematically conflate the estimates of individual attitudes. In electoral research the adoption of Simultaneous Equation Models (SEMs) specification is burgeoning. For instance, Evans and Pickup's (2010) analysis of economic voting in British elections suggests to control the endogeneity between voting choice and individuals' subjective assessment of the economy by means of a simultaneous model specification. The basic idea behind this strategy consists in adding a further equation in order to model explicitly the allegedly endogenous regressor, in order to simultaneously estimate the system and provide exogenous estimates for the variable affected by reversed causality. However, even this seemingly convincing empirical strategy has its drawbacks and can produce flawed evidence. In fact, simultaneous models have been firstly introduced in economics to model simultaneous choice problems. The classic example dates back to Haavelmo (1943) and considers the problem of the simultaneous choice of the propensity to consume (made by consumers) and the propensity to invest (made by firms). Another classical example involves the simultaneous choice of labour supply (made by workers) and wage offer (made by

firms). In such analytical setting, every equation in the SEM model has an autonomous meaning in isolation from all other equations in the system. This characteristic is often referred to as the “autonomy assumption” (Wooldridge, 2010: 239). A problematic aspect of simultaneous models is that whenever each equation in the system cannot be meaningfully interpreted as separated from the other equations, the whole system loses its causal interpretation. As Wooldridge puts it, “causality is closely tied to the autonomy requirement” (*ibid.*, 239). Such an assumption is likely to hold in those situations usually treated by economists, and more precisely whenever two different units (e.g. workers and firms) are called to make simultaneously the choice of interest. By contrast, the autonomy requirement is unlikely to hold whenever the same unit (e.g. voters) are measured to behave (e.g. voting) or to subjectively assess an issue of interest (i.e. economic situation, party leaders’ personality). In all these cases, the adoption of a SEM framework should not be interpreted as having a causal structure, and infer causality in these cases can be misleading. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the causal relationships behind the act of voting, it would seem therefore safer not to model individuals’ non-autonomous choices and attitudes by means of a structural model.²

3. Model specification

Against this background, the present study advances a different and in some respects innovative approach that grounds on three main aspects.

In the first place, we exploit the Granger’s (1969) idea that cause precedes effect – what comes after cannot have produced what comes before. Usually, this would lead to the use of panel data, but this approach is sub-optimal for an analysis of the short-term dynamics that shape individual attitudes and drive voting choice. In such context, we cannot consider even the use of panel data as fully satisfying. Willing to be suspicious about the exogenous nature of party identification, it follows that a panel structure might not be able to reveal possible sources of instability occurring in the time span between one election and the next one. On the other hand, measuring individual attitudes at a lower distance in time would allow for this possibility. Therefore we make

² One of the possible reasons for the generalized expansion of SEM applications in contexts that do not satisfy the autonomy requirement is put forward by Wooldridge (2010), who argues that “there appears to be a general misperception that “structural” and “simultaneous” are synonymous [...] [while] a simultaneous model is not necessarily structural” (Wooldridge, 2010: 241).

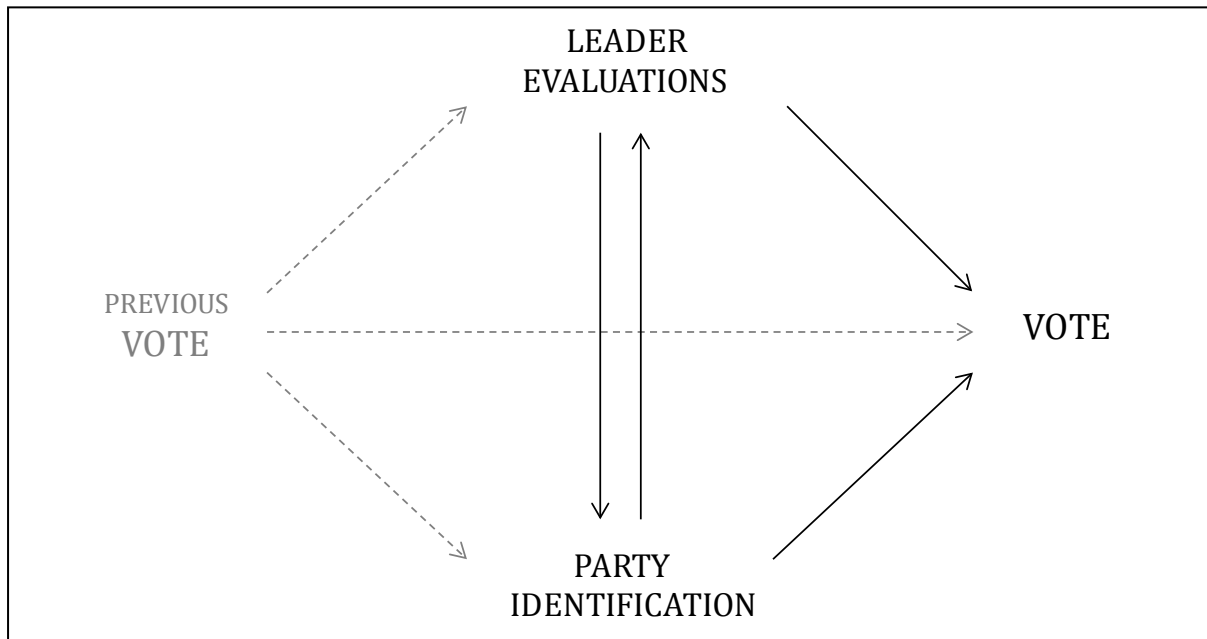
use of pre-post electoral surveys, which are able to better report the attitude dynamics in proximity to (vote) behavior. This represents a less flawed solution with respect to the cross-section option, since the measurement of the attitudes in the two time periods is delayed enough to rule out the simultaneity, leading to be somewhat more confident about the fact that what precede is not a consequence of what follows (at least with respect to the cross-sectional design).

In the second place, and in order to deal with the effect proceeding from voting behavior to the definition of individual attitudes, we avoid the SEM specification and opt for the introduction of a statistical control for respondents' voting behavior at the previous elections. The introduction of this variable is unlikely to control entirely the feedback effect; however, it allows for a significant reduction of this source of endogeneity, further showing indirectly on which attitudes the feedback effect is stronger and on which attitudes it is more nuanced. This solution also enables us not to misplace the causal structure of the model, since a simultaneous model of individual voting choice would not have fulfilled the autonomy requirement, thus losing its structural meaning. Consider the following equation (1) that takes the form of:

$$Vote_i = a_1 + a_2PidPre_i + a_3LeaderPre_i + a_4Vote_{t-1,i} + \mathbf{aX} + e_i \quad (1)$$

where: $-i$ indexes individual voters; $Vote$ represent the individual vote choice at the election under analysis; $PidPre$ represents the individual feeling of attachment toward a political party measured before the election; $LeaderPre$ is the respondent's thermometer evaluation of the party leader measured simultaneously to the previous variable; $Vote_{t-1}$ represents the respondent's vote choice at the previous election; \mathbf{aX} is a set of further statistical controls; e_i represents a random error term. By comparing the magnitude of coefficients a_2 and a_3 we can assess the relative strength of party identification and leader evaluations on individual voting behavior. As aforementioned, the reliability of our estimates is strengthened by the inclusion of the $Vote_{t-1}$ variable in order to control for the feedback effect proceeding *from* behavior *to* attitudes. Hence, under the assumption that the feedback effect is on average constant over time, we end up with an estimate proportioned to the real direct effect. Figure 2 depicts a graphical representation of this model.

Figure 2 – The “direct effects” model



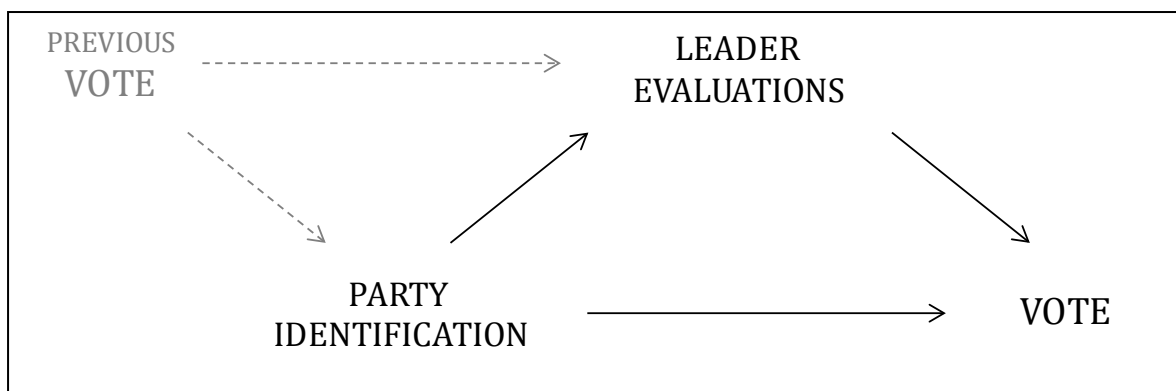
Note that Figure 2 keeps featuring a bidirectional arrow going on between party identification and leader evaluations, which cannot be disentangled through the present specification of the empirical model. Therefore, we introduce a further set of two equations that focuses on the intra-attitude relationships occurring between the main predictors of the previous equation. Recent empirical works on indirect effects (often referred to as “causal mechanisms” or “causal mediation effects”) show that interaction terms can be usefully adopted in order to investigate *how* a cause (i.e. through which specific mechanism) affects an outcome (Glynn, 2011). Therefore, while interaction terms are widely recognized by political scientists as a way to test conditional hypotheses, it is often overlooked their explanatory potential in identifying indirect effects. Grounding on the *potential outcome* framework (Imai *et al.*, 2009; 2010; Glynn 2011), we exploit the pre-post structure of the data together with interaction terms in order to isolate the relationships occurring between the party and the leader variables. To better clarify our research strategy, consider the following equation (2):

$$Vote_i = b_1 + b_2PidPre_i + b_3LeaderPost_i + b_4PidPre_i*LeaderPost_i + \mathbf{bX} + e_i \quad (2)$$

where: *LeaderPost* is the individual evaluation of party leaders as measured after the election has taken place; \mathbf{bX} is a set of further controls that includes also respondents’

voting choice at the previous election ($Vote_{t-1}$). All other variables are defined as above. Coefficient b_4 represents the effect of the interaction term between the *treatment* (e.g., party identification, as measured in the pre-election wave) and the *mediator* (e.g., party leader evaluation, as measured in the post-election wave). Being interested in disentangling all the three vertices of the triangle, we exploit the temporally antecedence of reported party identification to obtain a reliable estimate of the indirect effect exerted by this attitude on voting choice *through* changes in post-election evaluations of party leaders.

Figure 3 – Modeling the indirect effect of party identification

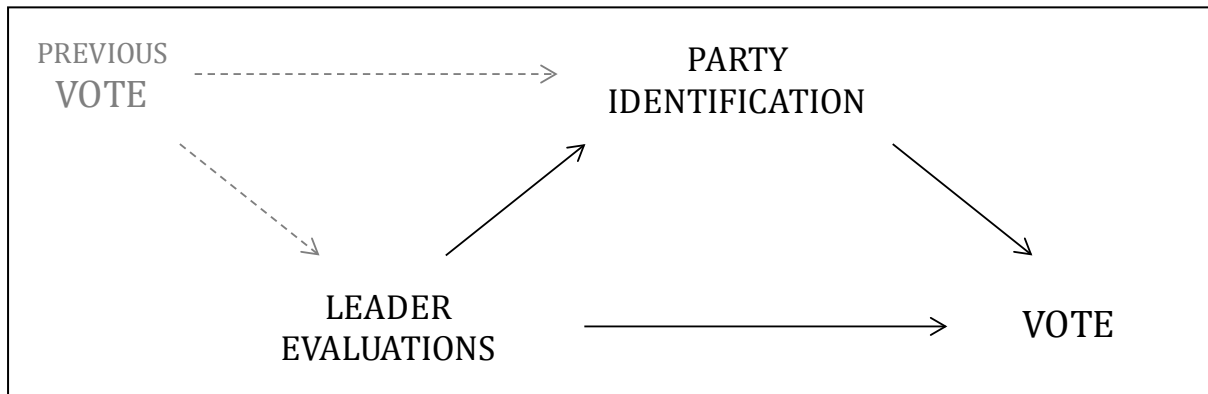


At last, we switch the timing for attitudes' measurement, introducing the following equation (3) in which the temporally antecedence of leader evaluations allows us to estimate the indirect effect proceeding from this attitude (*LeaderPre*) on voting behavior through different degrees of partisanship:

$$Vote_i = c_1 + c_2PidPost_i + c_3LeaderPre_i + c_4PidPost_i * LeaderPre_i + \mathbf{cX} + e_i \quad (3)$$

By looking at the statistical significance (and, eventually, the relative magnitude) of coefficients b_4 and c_4 we can thus focus on the indirect relationships that are occurring between these attitudes. Hence, finding a significant interaction effect would provide evidence of the existence of such indirect effects, whereas through a comparison of the magnitude of these coefficients we complete the overall depiction of the triangle, disentangling the mutual direct and indirect relationships.

Figure 4 – Modeling the indirect effect of leader evaluations



Our empirical specification, as graphically depicted in Figures 3 and 4 respectively, constitutes a reasonably tough test for two opposite views about short-term dynamics of individual attitudes driving voting behavior. On the one hand, individuals might be moved more strongly by their evaluation of the political leaders that are likely to take crucial political decision in the future (Page, 1978). Previous works on candidates' appraisal show that this evaluation is made up of two components: a rational part, linked to an objective assessment of leaders' competence, strength, and moral integrity (Kinder, 1986; Funk, 1999), and an affective part, which stems from individuals' prior beliefs and feelings of attachment to his/her political identity (Kilburn, 2005). The specification of equation (3) aims at reducing the latter component, isolating the rational (and direct) assessment of leaders' personality on voting behavior and focusing on the indirect effects traveling from personality assessments (measured before the election) to the vote *through* feelings of partisan attachment (measured afterwards).

On the other hand, the alternative (and more traditional) view sustains that party identification is the attitude driving not only voting choice, but also its more proximate influences such as i.e. party leader assessments. Accordingly, party identification is thought to exert a strong and indirect role on voting choice by making preponderant the psychological component of leaders' assessment relative to the rational one. By switching the temporal structure of the interaction term, and making temporally prior the measurement of party identification, our empirical strategy is also able to isolate the (indirect) psychological component proceeding from party identification to vote choice through leaders' assessment.

Translating this considerations in terms of the potential outcome and causal mediation frameworks, we are testing two different causal mechanisms: the first one is

likely to proceed from leader evaluations, shape individuals' party identification, and eventually (and indirectly) exert a role on vote choice. If this is the case, then we expect the coefficient c_4 of the interaction term in equation (3) to overcome the coefficient b_4 in equation (2) in terms of significance (and magnitude). The second mechanism under consideration depicts instead an individual voter sustaining the goodness of the leader because of its previous feeling of attachment to his/her party. If this is the case, then we expect coefficient b_4 to overcome c_4 .

4. Data Sources

The theoretical model will be tested, for exploratory purposes, through a comparison of Italy and the UK. The choice of these two countries responds to the crucial requirements of the Most Different System Design (MDS) of comparative research. As a matter of fact, the British and Italian political systems provide a great variability in under a number of crucial respects. At first, Britain's own first-past-the-post electoral system has resulted in its traditional two-and-a-half party system, whereas the brand-new proportional system in use in Italy since 2005 allows parliamentary representation to all parties above the 2% threshold. Secondly, the choice of these two countries contrasts a context characterized by an abrupt change in the party system as a result of the mid-1990s breakdown (Italy) with that of a much more enduring party system (UK) (Bellucci, 2006). Furthermore, and although no Western democracies has admittedly been immune from the personalization of politics, the two countries highlight crucial differences in terms of its impact on the electoral competition – still centered around parties to a substantial extent in the UK (Clarke *et al.*, 2004), almost entirely based on party (and coalition) leaders' personality in Italy (Garzia and Viotti, 2011). Overall, the British and Italian cases provide a good ground testing of our competing theories about the relative importance of partisanship and leader evaluations within voters' electoral calculus.

The data comes from two national election studies conducted in 2005 (Britain) and 2006 (Italy) respectively. The choice of these two elections is based on survey design (pre-post election studies) as much as on contingent political factors that characterized these contests. As to the former aspect, the choice to employ *short* panels is expected to favor the stability of partisan ties at the individual level, thus providing a tougher test of the personalization hypothesis. For similar purposes, we have chosen

the Italian election of 2006 for it represents the last one fought by the founding parties of the Second Republic under their original denomination. According to Converse (1969), voters' feelings of attachment to parties develops (and strengthens) with length of affiliation. Thus the choice of this specific election warrants us that the (potential) strength of partisanship within Italian voters' calculus was at its best. As to Britain, we picked 2005 (an election characterized by incumbent prime minister Tony Blair at the lowest levels of popularity; on this point, see: Clarke *et al.*, 2009) right in order to downsize for as much as possible the leadership factor within our model.

Our analysis focuses on the determinants of voting choice. Generally, political researchers face the problem of the nominal nature of their dependent variable in two ways. A possible way to deal with the operationalization of the vote choice is to assign a value 1 if the individual cast its ballot in favor of the incumbent party, and a value of 0 if the voter choose to vote for an opposing party. This approach is fairly common, for instance, in testing economic voting theories, where the performance of the incumbent is usually among the key predictors, or in two-parties political systems, such as the U.S. Another solution, more common in European electoral research, consists in making use of discrete-choice models such as multinomial logit (MNL) or probit (MNP) regression. This second solution can be problematic for at least three orders or reasons. Firstly, as this methods becomes useful especially in multiparty political systems, this models can only rarely provide reliable estimates for small parties, whose voting function is extremely skewed (van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Secondly, the label "multinomial" includes a variety of discrete-choice models that presents different peculiarities and drawbacks. In particular, both MNL and MNP modeling techniques share a similar structure with the important difference that the distribution of the error term in the former is assumed to be very simple and tractable (the Type-I Extreme Values) while for the latter is assumed to be normal (Long, 1997). Moreover, the MNL allows only the inclusion of explanatory variables varying across the observations (e.g. voters) and provides a set coefficients (i.e., one for each alternative) whose identification is heavily dependent on the "Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives" assumptions, which is unlikely to be satisfied in most political systems.

An alternative solution that has being proposed by electoral scholars consists in measuring party choice on the basis of observed electoral utilities proceeding from political parties and in "stacking" the data matrix in order to obtain a data structure

defined at the level stemming from the interaction of individuals and parties (van der Eijk *et al.*, 2006). In our analysis, we employ such transformation of the data matrix, while retaining the use of actual voting choices rather than electoral utilities. Therefore, by stacking our data, we are able to avoid the methodological and theoretical drawbacks of MNL models, and to opt for a less problematic logistic model.

Following the logic of the stacked data matrix, the unit of analysis is represented by respondent*party combinations. The dependent variable is a dummy that takes the value of 1 if respondents have voted for that party and 0 otherwise. Respondent' electoral choice at the previous national election is measured exactly in the same way. All the main predictors are already interpretable in terms of respondent*party combination. Respondents' evaluation of party leaders is tapped by the thermometer score probing their personality assessment on a 10-point scale. Party identification is measured through the usual combination of survey question 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). In order to achieve comparability of the estimates, all variables have been rescaled to have a support in [0;1].

One further remark with respect to our control variables concerns the level of analysis (respondents*parties). Some of our control variables (e.g. issue proximity, measured as the absolute difference between the respondents' placement of the self and each of the parties on the left-right scale) have a direct counterpart at this peculiar level, while others do not. For all the variables belonging to the latter class (e.g., age, gender, educational level, social class, church attendance, respondents' assessment of the country's economic situation in the last year) we have produced the so-called *y-hats* – that is, predicted values – regressing our dependent variable on synthetic indexes of the variables of interest though OLS, in order to produce a linear projection (at the respondent*party level) of previously individual variables.

5. Results

5.1. Direct Effects Model

We begin our empirical analysis with the direct effect models derived from equation (1). The analysis will focus in turn on the British and Italian cases, from which we take the move. Table 1 presents the logistic estimates of our model.

Table 1. Direct effects model (Italy, 2006)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>PidPre</i>	-	3.05 (.15)	1.73 (.17)	1.44 (.18)
<i>PidPost</i>	5.56 (.19)	-	-	-
<i>LeaderPre</i>	-	3.29 (.19)	2.91 (.19)	2.16 (.23)
<i>LeaderPost</i>	3.75 (.24)	-	-	-
<i>Vote_{t-1}</i>	-	-	1.90 (.11)	1.71 (.12)
Controls	SES	SES	SES	SES + Issues + Economy
Pseudo R-squared	.56	.34	.39	.45
N	10180	9798	9798	8123

Note: Dependent variable: *Vote* (dichotomous). Cell entries are logistic regression estimates (standard error in parentheses). Pseudo R-squared is Nagelkerke's coefficient of multiple determination. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level. SES controls include: age, gender, educational level, subjective social class, frequency of church attendance.

Model 1 resembles the conventional way of analyzing leader effects on voting behavior, as derived from the available literature. It is a fully cross-sectional analysis, with both the dependent variable (vote choice) and the main predictors measured in the post-electoral wave of the survey. One observes the conventional result: in fact, party identification dominates over leader evaluations in substantive terms (*Pid/Lead* ratio = 1.48). However, this finding cannot be accepted as such because the model from which it stems is unable to control for the likely process of cognitive feedback running from voting behavior to attitudes (that are furthermore measured *after* behavior has taken place). In order to control for the feedback of present behavior (e.g., vote choice at the election under analysis) we replace the *PidPost* and *LeaderPost* measures with their pre-election counterparts. Estimates are presented in Model 2. Such different specification of the statistical model leads to widely different results: it is now leader evaluations to overcome the strength of party identification, albeit only slightly (*Pid/Leader* ratio = .93). As it appears, the feedback from the dependent variable is actually exerting its main effects on partisan attitudes, whose strength suffers an almost two-fold diminution. By contrast, the leader variable gets only marginally affected (regression

coefficient goes from 3.75 to 3.29 across the two models). Not even these estimates are fully satisfactory though. In fact, the specification of Model 2 does only rule out the feedback stemming from *present* behavior. In the light of our theoretical discussion, however, there are grounds to believe that also *past* behavior might be affecting voters' attitudes towards parties (and leaders). Therefore, Model 3 features a statistical control that taps voters' choice at the previous national election. The inclusion of this control leads to another two-fold diminution of the party identification coefficients' magnitude (from 3.05 to 1.73), whereas leader evaluations' strength remains virtually unchanged (from 3.29 to 2.91). Overall, a strong feedback from the vote would thus seem to emerge. The operational choice to simultaneously rule out the effect of present behavior (through the pre-post structure of the data) and to control for past behavior (through the explicit inclusion of a statistical control) leads us to reasonably assert that a considerable portion of the feedback effect has been taken into account. However, one notes that the inclusion of these controls has affected party identification and leader evaluations in a highly disproportional way.

In order to strengthen the robustness of these empirical findings, we tested them against a fully specified model of voting, that includes a number of other relevant component of individuals' electoral decision such as party-voter proximity on issues and retrospective economic assessments. The results of this specification are presented in the last column of Table 1. In this model, both party identification and leader evaluations highlight a decline in the relative coefficients' magnitude and, admittedly, the decline is slightly more marked in the latter case. However, our main conclusion seems to hold: if endogeneity is properly taken into account, then leader evaluations emerge as a sharply more strong predictor of individual vote choice. As to voters' party identification, its ability to account for voters' choice appears even lower than that exerted by previous vote behavior. It could be that the true anchor of the vote (at least with respect to the case at hand) is indeed previous behavior itself.

Evidence from the British case is presented in Table 2, where the very same strategy of the analysis of the Italian data is employed. Results in Table 2 are not fully comparable to those from the Italian case. (However, it must be highlighted that our choice to include the British case in the analysis was based exactly on the idea of providing a country-comparator in which parties does play a much stronger role than individual leaders in the electoral competition and, supposedly, within voters' calculus.)

Table 2 – Direct effects model (Britain, 2005)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>PidPre</i>	-	3.82 (.12)	2.46 (.13)	2.34 (.14)
<i>PidPost</i>	4.86 (.13)	-	-	-
<i>LeaderPre</i>	-	2.53 (.15)	2.31 (.16)	2.08 (.18)
<i>LeaderPost</i>	2.94 (.18)	-	-	-
<i>Vote_{t-1}</i>	-	-	1.67 (.08)	1.65 (.08)
Controls	SES	SES	SES	SES + Issues + Economy
Pseudo R-sq.	.53	.42	.48	.49
N	8444	8252	8252	6859

Note: Dependent variable: *Vote* (dichotomous). Cell entries are logistic regression estimates (standard error in parentheses). Pseudo R-squared is Nagelkerke’s coefficient of multiple determination. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level. SES controls include: age, gender, educational level, subjective social class.

The cross-sectional evidence presented in Model 1 displays, once again, the conventional result. Party identification dominates the effect of leader evaluations with a ratio of 1.65. The former remains substantially stronger also in Model 2, where the main predictors included are replaced with their temporally antecedent counterparts. However, controlling for the effect of present behavior leads to a much stronger reduction of the party identification coefficient (from 3.82 to 2.46) as compared to the reduction in the leader evaluation coefficient (from 2.53 to 2.31). Once we control also for past behavior, in Model 3, then the statistical effect of the main covariates on the dependent variable becomes almost comparable (*Pid/Leader* ratio = 1.06), thus further confirming our previous findings with respect to the Italian case. Behavior bears a strong effect on political attitudes; however, its effect is exerted mainly on partisan attitudes, whose coefficient now almost pairs that of the leader evaluation variable. This conclusion is tested for robustness in the fully specified model of voting (Model 4). Results remain virtually identical.

5.2. Indirect Effects Model

Table 3 introduces our estimated results for the interaction effects models we have introduced in equations (2) and (3) for the Italian and the British case respectively.

Table 3 – Indirect effects model

	Italy		UK	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
PidPre	2.45 (.62)	-	3.63 (.41)	-
PidPost	-	8.36 (.67)	-	5.50 (.40)
LeaderPre	-	1.89 (.31)	-	2.28 (.24)
LeaderPost	4.63 (.30)	-	3.96 (.25)	-
Pid*Leader	-1.43 (.79) †	-4.44 (.88)	-2.13 (.61)	-2.67 (.62)
Controls	SES + Vote Previous Election + Issues + Economy			
Pseudo R-squared	.50	.62	.52	.56
N	8154	8124	6913	6861

Note: Dependent variable: *Vote* (dichotomous). Cell entries are logistic regression estimates (standard error in parentheses). Pseudo R-squared is Nagelkerke's coefficient of multiple determination. All coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% level, except those marked with an † that are not significant at the 5% level. SES controls include: age, gender, educational level, subjective social class, frequency of church attendance (only in the Italian case).

The first model investigates the indirect effect exerted by the *treatment* (in this case pre-election party identification) on the outcome (vote choice) through respondents' assessment of the party leader (the *mediator*). As it can be observed, the coefficient of the interaction term falls short of statistical significance ($p > .05$) thus signaling that party identification is not producing a systematic effect on voting choice through changes in leaders assessment. However, if we switch the temporal dynamic of attitudes' measurement, we notice that the coefficient of the interaction term becomes significant, signaling that leaders' assessment is systematically exerting an effect on voting choice through changes in partisan affiliations. In terms of the potential outcome

framework, we are inclined to infer that while attitudes towards party leaders exert a mediation effect (further than a direct one) on vote behavior, party identification does not. Therefore, only the aforementioned rational mediation hypothesis finds support for the Italian case.

The scenario is different when it comes to the British data. In this case we find evidence for an indirect effect of both partisan and leaders' attitudes on voting choice. As expected, the British case has proven itself more favorable to a party-based explanation of the voting decision. If any, and with all the methodological caveats that apply, we nonetheless observe that the interaction term's coefficient presented in Model 2 (e.g., the indirect effect of leader evaluations through party identification) is slightly stronger than that in Model 1 (e.g., the indirect effect of party identification through leader evaluations).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The view of an increasing personalization of the political process in contemporary electoral democracies has widely corroborated the idea that individual politicians have gained centrality with respect to party structures as well as in their communication with voters. However, academic research has fallen short of a consensus on whether party leader images have actually gained centrality within voters' electoral calculus. As it appears, the major source of the dispute lies in the wide (and to some extent uncritical) acceptance of the social-psychological interpretation set forth by Campbell *et al.* (1960) on the behalf of virtually all empirical analyses of leader effects.

In this paper we elaborated on this consolidated paradigm, which we specified under a number of respects. In particular, we challenged the classic view of an unidirectional effect of political attitudes on the vote behavior. Moving from a number of findings from the field of social psychology, we tested the hypothesis that behavior can exert an reverse effect (e.g., feedback) on attitudes themselves. At the same time, we tried to shed light on the dynamic interplay of attitudinal forces (i.e., party identification, leader evaluations) as drivers of such behavior.

Our empirical strategy moved from a critical assessment of the previous literature, with particular regard to the methodological aspect. We have reasons to believe that neither cross-sectional analyses (on which the wide majority of available evidence is based) nor Simultaneous Equation Models are a fully satisfactory means to

disentangle the complex set of relationship underlying our iron triangle. In a similar vein, we find panel data analysis not especially suitable for understanding short-term dynamics of attitude change. For this reason we resorted to short electoral panels, featuring the same set of respondents interviewed twice just before and right after the election. In order to make the most of such data source, we modeled individuals' vote choice as a function of their pre-election attitudes, so as to control for the feedback effect proceeding from *present* behavior. Moreover, our model controls for *past* behavior, with the aim of minimizing this second source of concern. Finally, we exploited the ability of interaction terms to provide (so far limited) evidence of causal mediation in order to shed light on the indirect effects traveling from and through attitudes to the vote.

The empirical findings of our comparative analysis suggest that once the feedback stemming from behavior is fully taken into account, then the estimated effect of attitudes gets substantially downsized. However, not all political attitudes seem to be equally affected by such feedback. The electoral impact of leader evaluations gets only slightly reduced, whereas that of party identification reports an almost two-fold diminution as compared to cross-sectional estimates. It would thus seem that voting behavior itself is as a strong anchor of individual vote behavior (and, in the Italian case, stronger) as party identification. Leader evaluations, on the contrary, emerge as a strong and significant regressor in the voting equation, whose strength parallels (and, in the Italian case, even overcomes) that of party identification.

This paper has also provided limited evidence for the existence of significant indirect effects traveling from leader evaluations to the vote *through* party identification. Evidence for the existence of the reverse channel (e.g., party identification *through* leader evaluations) appears weaker, and at any rate not statistically significant in the Italian case. These findings hint at the promising empirical solution of combining interaction terms with a pre-post data structure in order to better appraise the direction (as well as the strength) of such indirect effects of attitudes on the vote. In this respect, more methodological efforts seem in order.

Overall, this paper would appear to bring party leaders back to the central position assigned them by the "common wisdom" derived from the personalization theory. Most importantly, our findings specify the true nature of partisan attitudes within voters' political reasoning. The empirical evidence confirms the existence of such

an enduring feeling of closeness to a political party as well as its relevance within the voting equation. However, our results highlight the strong effect of past (and present) behavior as indirect drivers of partisanship. As a result, researchers should be cautious in interpreting cross-sectional estimates of partisan effects on the vote, whose strength might be actually conflated by a proper lack of statistical controls for the role played by behavior itself.

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