

The Rise of Party/Leader Identification in Western Europe (*)

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

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Introduction

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

In its classical formulation, party identification was conceived as “the individual’s affective orientation to an important group object in his environment” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). According to the social-psychological reading, such orientation is rooted in early socialization and based on primary group memberships (race, religion, social class and so on). Among its crucial features, party identification was said to be *stable* – that is, virtually immune from short-term forces – and it was thus considered being cause (but not consequence) of less stable attitudes and opinions about, i.e., candidates and issues (Johnston, 2006). As explained by the authors of *The American Voter*, “the influence of party identification on perceptions of political objects is so great that only rarely will the individual develop a set of attitude forces that conflicts with this allegiance” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 141).

However, it did not take much time before severe criticisms arose with respect to the supposed stability of party identification. Making use of richer datasets and increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques, later analyses showed that partisan ties at the individual level were much more unstable than originally thought, and indeed strongly responsive to

those short-term forces that they were thought to cause (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981; Franklin and Jackson, 1983). Moreover, sources of scholarly disagreement did not limit to the debate between Michigan scholars and the “revisionists” (Fiorina, 2002). Another serious matter of dispute was related to the applicability of the concept outside the United States. In fact, the very existence of partisan identifications in European multi-party systems was at the core of many critical chapters included in *Party Identification and Beyond* (Budge *et al.*, 1976). The cross-national applicability of the concept was especially contested in Thomassen’s (1976) most celebrated chapter (but see also: Crewe, 1976; Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Kaase, 1976).

As a result of the joint endeavor of U.S. and European scholars, the debate has switched the attention from *party identification* to *partisanship* more generally. Loosely defined as “the tendency to support one party rather than another” (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009b: 1) partisanship has remained at the core of electoral research on both sides of the Atlantic in the last decades (Holmberg, 2007; Bellucci and Bartle, 2009a; Clarke *et al.*, 2009; Schmitt, 2009). Many routes can lead voters to think of themselves as “partisans” (Erikson *et al.*, 2002). However, the great majority of the recent literature on partisanship seems to largely converge on an understanding of the concept based on modern attitude theory (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009a). According to this perspective, partisanship is best interpreted as a “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity [*the party*] with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 1). Such attitudinal interpretation of partisanship is especially useful insofar it entails the possibility for voters to simultaneously develop attitudes towards more than one party, thus favoring its applicability to European multi-party systems (Pappi, 1996).

Among the drivers of attitudinal partisanship, the literature has focused on the role played by voters’ issue preferences (Erikson *et al.*, 2002) and retrospective economic

assessments (Bellucci, 2006) in promoting positive/negative attitudes towards the party. Aggregate partisanship rates have also been shown to respond to the style of electoral competition in a country and the politicization of the respective electorates (Holmberg, 1994; Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995; Berglund *et al.*, 2005; Schmitt, 2009).

Rather surprisingly, however, very few scholars have investigated the role played by party leaders in shaping voters' attitudes towards parties (among the few exceptions, see: Page and Jones, 1979; Venturino, 2000). This occurrence comes as especially astounding in the light of the pervasive *personalization* of contemporary democratic politics (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011). Conceptually, the personalization of politics should be seen as "a process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007: 65). In the last two decades, scholarly research has widely documented leaders' increasing influence in electoral campaigns (Swanson and Mancini, 1996) as well as in party structures (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). In such context, it may well be that parties' appeal to voters have come to be increasingly shaped by their own leaders' image (Curtice and Holmberg, 2005). Indeed, it does not seem unreasonable to argue that nowadays political leaders have become important in their own right "by personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties" (McAllister, 2007: 574).

Against this background, the proposition that feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party *in the form of its leader* has been repeatedly advanced (Barisione 2006; 2009; Blondel and Thièbault, 2010) but never put to rigorous empirical test (for a recent exception, see: Garzia and Viotti, 2011). Hence, the aim of this paper is to fill what can be considered an unjustified gap in the literature on partisanship. I will do so through a longitudinal analysis of the relationship between party leader evaluations and individual feelings of partisan attachments in established European democracies. As in every

comparative effort, case selection plays a crucial role. In order to strike a balance between needs for comparison and attention to national differences, I will focus on Britain, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. The choice of these four countries – connoted by sharp differences in terms of electoral system, size of the party system and structure of political competition – highlights many of the crucial variations in the structure of democratic politics, thus allowing for a broader understanding of the cross-national meaning of partisanship in European parliamentary democracies.

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

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

Albeit scant, early research bears witness of the possibility that leader evaluations can shape (or at least affect) voters' party identification. Already in 1968, V. O. Key anticipated a later, cognitive view of partisanship contending that “[l]ike or dislike of a political personality...bring shifts in party identification” (Key, 1968; quoted in Clarke *et al.*, 2004). In their seminal contribution, Page and Jones (1979) provide empirical evidence that party loyalties “do not function purely as fixed determinants of the vote; those loyalties can themselves be affected by attitudes toward the current candidates” (Page and Jones, 1979: 1088).

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

Voters’ identification with European mass-based parties was strongly mediated by the formers’ belonging to separate social milieus and sub-cultures (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Thomassen, 1976; Parisi and Pasquino, 1977). This contention, however, does not seem to hold for contemporary *catch-all* parties. In order to respond to the widespread class dealignment encountered in virtually all European democracies (Crewe *et al.*, 1977; Franklin *et al.*, 1992), traditional cleavage parties have by and large converged on the catch-all typology (Mair *et al.*, 2004). This pluralistic ideal-type is commonly distinguished by a “superficial and vague ideology, and overwhelmingly electoral orientation” and, most notably, by the “prominent leadership and electoral roles of the party’s top-ranked national-level candidates” (Gunther and Diamond, 2003: 185). The growth of television as the major source of political information for a vast majority of voters has accentuated parties’

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

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

Clearly, party leaders cannot (and do not) matter the same in every political context and/or for all kind of parties. Drawing on the most recent literature on leader effects, and

thanks to the comparative design employed in the analysis, I am also able to test the following contextual hypotheses: (i) party leaders matter more in countries where a majoritarian (or mixed) electoral system is in place (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2011); (ii) party leaders matter more for *new* (as compared to *established*) parties (Blais, 2011).

Data and measures

The main data sources employed in this analysis are the series of national elections studies in our four countries, pooled by country and for each decade (see Table 1). British, Dutch, and German studies conducted in the period 1964-2001 were transformed into a comparable format as a result of the *European Voter* project (Thomassen, 2005). Later election studies from these countries, as well as the Italian data, have been added to the original data source by the author.

Table 1. Countries and elections covered, by decade

<i>Britain</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>
1964	1972	1968	1971
1966	1976	1972	1977
1970	1980	1976 (1975)	1982
1974 Feb.	1983	1987 (1990)	1986
1974 Oct.	1987	1996	1989
1979	1990	2001	1994
1983	1994	2006	1998
1987	1998	2008	2002
1992	2002		2006
1997	2005		
2001	2009		
2005			

Note: In parenthesis the year in which the relevant election study has been conducted

The dependent variable *partisanship* is measured through the classic seven-point scale employed ever since *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). In order to make this operational measure applicable to European multi-party systems, the analysis will concentrate on the two (former) class-mass parties in each country.¹ The choice to stick to these parties alone is grounded on the assumption that personalization has exerted its effects mostly on the relationship between voters and this type of parties. Furthermore, the parties under consideration are those who have historically attracted the biggest proportion of partisan voters (see Table 2). This is especially the case with the two main British and German parties: together, they collect more than four partisans out of five among the respective national electorates (mean value of the time series; see last column in Table 2). Even in extreme multiparty systems such as the Dutch and the Italian ones, the main class-mass parties (and their following reconversions) have been able to attract, in average, over a half of partisan voters throughout the time series. Therefore, focusing on major parties alone will provide a rather comprehensive account of the nature of partisan ties in our four countries, while at the same time clarifying to a great extent the presentation of the results.²

¹ The parties under analysis are thus *Labour* and *Conservatives* for the British case, *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and *Christlich Demokratische Union/ Christlich-Soziale Union* (CDU/CSU) for the German case, *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) and *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) for the Dutch case. In the case of Italy, the selection of cases got complicated by the abrupt changes in the Italian party system occurred in the early 1990s. Eventually, I decided to stick to the criterion of electoral relevance. With respect to the socialist family, the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) along with its major heirs (e.g., *Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, *Democratici di Sinistra*, *Partito Democratico*) have been chosen, while, on the right-hand of the political spectrum, I picked Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (since 2008: *Popolo della Libertà*) as the follower of the *Democrazia Cristiana's* (DC) electoral tradition.

² Operationally, the choice to measure partisanship on the classic seven-point scale within a multi-party context implies that the middle category will not only feature true independents, but also respondents identifying with parties other than two included in the analysis.

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

	<i>1960s</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>	<i>2000s</i>	MEAN
<i>Britain</i>						
Labour	47,2	44,2	35,3	42,6	48,5	43,6
Conservatives	40,6	41,5	42,9	37,3	28	38,1
<i>Germany</i>						
SPD	-	54,5	47,1	40,7	38,6	45,2
CDU/CSU	-	39,7	43,1	40,4	37,1	40,1
<i>Italy</i>						
Centre-Left	14,1	24,4	27,3	28	26,9	24,1
Centre-Right	52,8	42,1	35,8	13,2	24,5	33,7
<i>The Netherlands</i>						
PvdA	-	34,1	34,8	29,7	25,2	31
CDA	-	34,5 (*)	31,4	28,2	28	30,5

Note: Italian Centre-Left: 1968-1990: Partito Comunista Italiano; 1996: Partito Democratico della Sinistra; 2001-2006: Democratici di Sinistra; 2008: Partito Democratico. *Italian Centre-Right:* 1968-1990: Democrazia Cristiana; 1996-2006: Forza Italia; 2008: Popolo della Libertà. (*) Cell entry represents the sum of partisans for the three parties (KVP, ARP, CHU) that converged into CDA in after the 1977 election.

Two sets of independent variables will be subsequently included in the analysis. The first set consists in those items that are supposed to tap the cleavage-based nature of party identification. Respondents' religiousness is measured through their frequency of church attendance, whereas two different indicators are included as proxies for one's placement in the socio-economic structure (SES): trade union membership and subjective class assessment. As to the second set, it features items related to individuals' attitudes towards relevant partisan objects. Based on the available literature on partisanship, this set includes measures of issue proximity, leader evaluations, and retrospective performance assessments. A more detailed description of these variables' coding and operationalization is presented in Table 3.

Note that in order to achieve statistical comparability, all predictors have been re-scaled on a unit-range.

Table 3. Independent variables included in the analysis

Identity items	
Religiousness	<i>Frequency of church attendance (Scale from 0= Never to 1=Weekly)</i>
SES: Class Identity	<i>Subjective class assessment (Scale from 0=Working Class to 1=Middle/Upper Class)</i>
SES: Union Membership	<i>Respondent is member of a trade union (0=No; 1=Yes)</i>
Attitudinal items	
Leader Evaluations	<i>Synoptic evaluation of the main two parties' leaders based on the standard thermometer score (Scale from 0=Best score to left party's leader and worst score to right party's leader, to 1=Best score to right party's leader and worst score to left party's leader)</i>
Issue Proximity	<i>Respondent's self-placement on the left-right scale (Scale from 0=Left to 1=Right)</i>
Retrospective Economic Assessment (*)	<i>Perception of the national economic situation in the last year (Scale from 0=Got Worse to 1=Got Better)</i>

(*) In order to accommodate for the *incumbency hypothesis* of economic voting (Lewis-Beck, 1988), values of the retrospective economic assessment variable have been reversed in those elections that left parties contested as incumbents. In those cases where incumbency was shared by both parties, the prime minister's party was considered as the incumbent.

A reassessment of the Michigan model

As a preliminary step, this analysis must rule out a possible criticism inherent to the Michigan model itself. In its original conception, party identification acts as a powerful *perceptual screen*. Because of such psychological sense of identification, the individual “tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 133). Accordingly, partisans

are thought to “like a party leader, irrespective of their personal qualities, if that leader were the leader of their own party, and to dislike them if they were leading a different party” (Curtice and Blais, 2001: 5). This argument, however, holds only as long as partisan identifications are effectively fixed in time as a result of voters’ placement in the social structure, and thus immune from the effect of short-term forces (i.e., party leader evaluations). If this was really the case, then our research hypotheses would be seriously flawed from the outset.

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

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

Because the dependent variable partisanship is measured on a seven-point ordinal scale, an ordered maximum likelihood estimation technique such as ordinal probit is preferred to linear regression. The model controls for the effect exerted by voters’ socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level; coefficients are not shown). Table 4 presents estimates of the statistical model with respect to each country/decade.

Table 4. Social structure and partisanship: cross-sectional analysis

<i>Britain</i>	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Class Identity	.88 (.07)**	.61 (.03)**	.62 (.03)**	.62 (.03)**	.64 (.05)**
Union Membership	-.41 (.08)**	-.43 (.03)**	-.30 (.03)**	-.34 (.03)**	-.21 (.03)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.186	.120	.112	.105	.068
McFadden R ²	.055	.034	.033	.030	.020
<i>N</i>	1446	6481	7653	6980	5244

<i>Germany</i>	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Religiousness	.82 (.05)**	.61 (.05)**	.57 (.05)**	.61 (.04)**
Union Membership	-.33 (.05)**	-.36 (.04)**	-.31 (.04)**	-.33 (.04)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.100	.057	.048	.049
McFadden R ²	.034	.018	.017	.016
<i>N</i>	4025	4423	5999	7644

<i>Italy</i>	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Religiousness	1.51 (.08)**	1.35 (.07)**	.98 (.10)**	.47 (.07)**	.23 (.04)**
Class Identity	.33 (.09)**	.47 (.08)**	.38 (.11)**	.04 (.07)	.12 (.04)**
Union Membership	-.18 (.06)**	-.22 (.05)**	-.11 (.08)	-.45 (.06)**	-.35 (.05)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.203	.223	.106	.056	.022
McFadden R ²	.076	.082	.043	.022	.009
<i>N</i>	2403	2723	1249	2471	6585

<i>The Netherlands</i>	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Religiousness	1.51 (.10)**	1.25 (.05)**	1.28 (.08)**	.88 (.06)**
Class Identity	.59 (.14)**	.73 (.08)**	.50 (.11)**	.45 (.11)**
Union Membership	-.24 (.09)**	-.22 (.05)**	-.36 (.06)**	-.08 (.06)
Nagelkerke R ²	.253	.199	.161	.112
McFadden R ²	.128	.097	.092	.058
<i>N</i>	1315	4380	3249	2644

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

The results presented in Table 4 offer almost no support for the enduring validity of an identity-based explanation of partisanship. Virtually every estimate achieve statistical significance at the $p < .01$ level and, admittedly, all coefficients report the expected sign. Higher values of the religiousness and class identity variables point towards the “right” side of

the partisanship scale, whereas being member of a trade union increases voters' likelihood to identify with the party on the "left" side of the scale (as testified by the negative sign). However, it must also be noted an unequivocal decline of the coefficients' magnitude throughout time, which signals a progressive delignment between voters' placement in the social structure and their party identification. Moving from religiousness, the decline is only moderate in the German case ($b_{1970s}=.82$; $b_{2000s}=.61$). In the Netherlands, religiousness is more strongly related to the dependent variable; yet it must be noted an almost two-fold decline of the coefficient throughout the four decades under analysis ($b_{1970s}=1.51$; $b_{2000s}=.88$). However, the boldest evidence of decline in the association between religiousness and partisanship comes from the Italian case, which displays an impressive six-fold diminution in the coefficient's magnitude over a five-decades span ($b_{1960s}=1.51$; $b_{2000s}=.23$). Similarly to religiousness, also the class identity variable highlights a widespread decline in each and every country under analysis, and so does union membership – albeit with the exception of Italy.

Further evidence for the progressive inability of an identity-based model to "explain" voters' party identification comes from an observation of the various model-fit statistics reported in Table 4. Although discrete choice models do not offer a straightforward counterpart to the R-squared in OLS regression, measures of fit based on the overall model chi-squared (such as McFadden's pseudo R-squared, or its adjusted Nagelkerke's version) provide a satisfactory alternative (Greene and Hensher, 2010).³ Based on these measures, the overall fit of the model to the data at hand declines in an astonishingly monotonic fashion throughout decades, regardless of the country under analysis and the measure under observation. Yet, steadiness of the decline is not uniform across countries. In some instances, values of the pseudo R-squared measures report a two-fold decrease throughout the time

³ Chi-squared measures of fit assess "the fit of the predictions by the model to the observed data, compared to no model" (Greene and Hensher, 2009: 126).

series (e.g., Germany and The Netherlands), whereas in Italy the consistency of decline is just massive (Nagelkerke's $R^2_{1960s}=.20$; $R^2_{2000s}=.02$). Most important, however, is the observation that the value of the pseudo R-squared in the last decade is simply too low (Nagelkerke's R^2 below .10 in three cases out of four, and only slightly above in the Dutch case) to uncritically accept the enduring validity of a Michigan-style interpretation of party identification – at least for the cases at hand and with respect to the most recent decades. If we are to find the roots of Europeans' partisanship, then we should look somewhere else than their placement within the social structure.

Testing the attitudinal model of partisanship

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

$$\text{Partisanship} = f\{ \text{Leader Evaluations, Issue Proximity, Retrospective Economic Assessments, Religiousness, Class Identity, Union Membership} \}$$

Although there are grounds to believe that the attitudinal measures included are to some extent interrelated, checks both on the correlation matrix of the independent variables (all inter-correlations are less than $r = .70$) and the variance inflation factors (reported values are all below 2) assure that their simultaneous inclusion in the model is safe from problems of

multi-collinearity. As the dependent variable is the same one employed in the previous analysis, estimation takes place once again through an ordinal maximum likelihood technique (ordered probit). Note that all predictors are scaled on a unit-range: model estimates are therefore comparable in magnitude. The model controls for standard socio-demographic variables as well as for the effect exerted by identity items (religiousness, class identity, union membership), but the relative coefficients are not shown because they only rarely attain statistical significance; moreover, in terms of impact (e.g., magnitude) *vis-à-vis* attitudinal items, they are by and large negligible.

Model estimates with respect to each country/decade are presented in Table 5. For reasons of cross-country comparability the model has been estimated only with respect to the three most recent decades (both Dutch and Italian studies did not ask respondents to evaluate party leaders on the feeling thermometer until the 1980s).

Table 5. The attitudinal drivers of partisanship: cross-sectional analysis

<i>Britain</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
Leader Evaluations	2.12 (.09)**	3.16 (.08)**	4.48 (.10)**
Issue Proximity	1.28 (.07)**	1.44 (.07)**	1.38 (.10)**
Economy (Retro)	.42 (.06)**	.15 (.05)**	.40 (.06)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.403	.529	.538
McFadden R ²	.140	.198	.212
<i>N</i>	3527	4084	4328
<i>Germany</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
Leader Evaluations	2.83 (.12)**	3.31 (.09)**	3.24 (.09)**
Issue Proximity	1.63 (.12)**	1.03 (.09)**	1.59 (.10)**
Economy (Retro)	.29 (.13)*	.15 (.07)*	.49 (.07)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.470	.418	.454
McFadden R ²	.170	.162	.183
<i>N</i>	2218	4457	4481

<i>Italy</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
Leader Evaluations	1.85 (.27)**	2.87 (.17)**	3.01 (.11)**
Issue Proximity	1.53 (.20)**	1.41 (.13)**	1.41 (.09)**
Economy (Retro)	-.31 (.11)**	.03 (.08)	.14 (.07)*
Nagelkerke R ²	.336	.423	.451
McFadden R ²	.142	.200	.214
<i>N</i>	716	2069	5051
<i>The Netherlands</i>	1980s	1990s	2000s
Leader Evaluations	1.84 (.26)**	2.21 (.22)**	2.96 (.23)**
Issue Proximity	1.47 (.21)**	1.33 (.13)**	.96 (.16)**
Economy (Retro)	.46 (.13)**	.14 (.08)	.37 (.07)**
Nagelkerke R ²	.392	.281	.282
McFadden R ²	.206	.164	.158
<i>N</i>	1115	2626	2275

Note: Cell entries are ordered probit estimates (standard error in parentheses). ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Intercepts, controls (age, gender, educational level) and identity items (Religiousness, Class Identity, Union Membership) included, coefficients not shown.

Estimates from the attitudinal model lend substantial confirmation of the main research hypotheses. Leader evaluations are always significantly related to partisanship and, consistently with the personalization hypothesis, their statistical impact highlights an unequivocal increase throughout time. As to the relative effect of leader evaluation *vis-à-vis* other attitudinal forces considered, their hypothesized dominance is confirmed too. Indeed, retrospective economic assessment seems to play hardly a role. Issue proximity, on the contrary, starts the time series as a force almost paralleling that of leader evaluations. Looking at the values presented in Table 5 from left to right, however, one notes that the massive increase on the behalf of the leaders' coefficients is not paralleled by those relative to issue proximity, whose impact remains virtually stable throughout time in each country (with the exception of the Netherlands, where it does seem to decline in a rather monotonic fashion).

Furthermore, the estimates of the attitudinal model provide rather clear confirmation of the contextual hypothesis postulating leader effects as a function of the electoral system employed in a country. As it appears, leader evaluations are a stronger statistical predictor of partisanship in countries characterized by FPTP (Britain: $b_{2000s}=4.48$) or mixed (Germany: $b_{2000s}=3.24$) electoral system as compared to those where a proportional system is in use (Italy: $b_{2000s}=3.01$; The Netherlands: $b_{2000s}=2.96$).

Partisanship and leader evaluations: Panel dynamics in three European democracies

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

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

biases in voters' attention to information that is (in)congruent to their own party predispositions? Or (as it is hypothesized here) it is attitudes towards partisan objects to drive one's partisanship? Unfortunately, the data employed so far does not allow to answer satisfactorily to these questions: as long as the data are cross-sectional, "any inference about structural effects must remain weak" (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2008: 85). Luckily, however, a few studies among those included in our datasets feature also a pre-electoral wave. The panel data on which this section of the analysis is based comes thus from the British Election Study 2005, the Italian National Election Study 2006, and the German Longitudinal Election Study 2009.⁴ The use of short panels, which feature a pre- and a post-election wave collected relatively close in time (e.g., less than six months), provides a rather tough test of the personalization hypothesis. In fact, the stability of partisanship can be thought to be especially high in such a short time span. Quite to the contrary, voters assessment of party leaders might be subject to strong deviations during the electoral campaign (note that respondents are interviewed at the beginning of the campaign and re-interviewed right after the election). Showing that leader evaluations are able to *move* partisanship even in such a short time would certainly represent a strong evidence for a leadership-based interpretation of partisanship in European parliamentary democracies.

A first hint of the actual stability of partisanship and leader evaluations at the individual-level comes from Table 6, which presents the correlation (Pearson's *r* coefficients) of these two variables from both the pre- and the post-election wave in the three datasets under analysis.

⁴ Unfortunately, no such data is available for the Dutch case.

Table 6. Stability of partisanship and leader evaluations across two panel waves

	Britain	Germany	Italy
Partisanship	.81	.77	.62
Leader Evaluations	.79	.72	.80

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

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

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

$$\text{[EQ. 2] } \text{Leader Evaluations}_{(t)} = f\{ \text{Leader Evaluations}_{(t-1)}, \text{Partisanship}_{(t-1)}, \text{Issue Proximity}_{(t-1)}, \\ \text{Retrospective Economic Assessments}_{(t-1)}, \text{Identity Items}\}$$

In order to take full advantage of the panel structure of the data, the dependent variables are measured in the post-election wave, while the predictor variables (same set for both models)

Table 7. Partisanship and leader evaluations in three countries: Panel dynamics

	Britain, 2005		Germany, 2009		Italy, 2006	
	PID _t	LEAD _t	PID _t	LEAD _t	PID _t	LEAD _t
<i>Identity items</i>						
Union Membership	-.09 (.06)	.05 (.05)	-.09 (.05)	-.12 (.05)*	.03 (.11)	-.05 (.09)
Social Class	.36 (.07)**	-.09 (.07)	n/a	n/a	.07 (.12)	.06 (.10)
Church Attendance	n/a	n/a	.11 (.06)	-.14 (.06)*	-.01 (.11)	-.02 (.09)
Party Identification _{t-1}	5.08 (.15)**	1.31 (.12)**	5.09 (.12)**	1.04 (.09)**	3.14 (.24)**	.59 (.20)**
<i>Attitudinal items</i>						
Leader Evaluations _{t-1}	1.79 (.15)**	5.61 (.16)**	1.47 (.14)**	6.35 (.15)**	1.69 (.26)**	3.74 (.22)**
Issue Proximity _{t-1}	.63 (.13)**	.33 (.12)**	.57 (.09)**	.43 (.08)**	.52 (.21)*	1.52 (.17)**
Economy, Retro _{t-1}	-.28 (.11)*	-.20 (.10)*	-.08 (.09)	-.06 (.08)	.12 (.19)	.28 (.16)
Nagelkerke R ²	.716	.670	.617	.543	.509	.682
McFadden R ²	.342	.200	.286	.157	.256	.197
N	2354	2331	3768	3758	1028	995

Note: Cell entries are ordered probit estimates (standard error in parentheses). ** p < .01, * p < .05 Intercepts and controls (age, gender, educational level) included, coefficients not shown.

are measured in the pre-election wave. This operational choice assures that the independent variables meet the important causal criterion of occurring prior in time. The inclusion of a lagged term of the dependent variable in each equation follows closely Fiorina's (1981) specification and serves as a baseline against which the net effects of partisanship on leaders and of leaders on partisanship can be measured.⁵ A direct comparison of the leader evaluations coefficient in [EQ. 1] and the partisanship coefficient in [EQ. 2] will thus shed light on the strength, as well as the overall direction, of the causal processes underlying the relationship between the two variables of foremost interest. As usual, estimation takes place through ordered probit regression. The results are presented in Table 7.

A preliminary assessment of the models highlights the almost negligible role of socio-structural items as drivers of partisanship. With the sole exception of class identity in Britain, in fact, no other coefficient achieve statistical significance. It is a further (and rather strong) confirmation of the overall inappropriateness of a Michigan-based interpretation of partisanship in contemporary European democracies. With respect to attitudinal items, and in line with our previous findings, retrospective economic assessments hardly play a role, and their effect on partisanship falls even short of statistical significance in both Germany and Italy. The role of issue proximity is not as weak as that played by economic assessments. Nonetheless, their explanatory power lies well below that of the two key variables of interest in this analysis.

As to the relative effect of partisanship and leader evaluations, the key finding from Table 7 is that in each and every country under analysis the latter have a stronger effect on the former than the other way around. In other words, it is by and large confirmed the idea

⁵ A potential critic could charge that the inclusion of a lagged term of the dependent variable may lead to biased and inconsistent estimates as a result of its autocorrelation with the error term of the probit model. As a remedial action, Fiorina (1981) resorts to two-stage probit through the construction of instrumental variables. In this analysis, however, we are not especially concerned with the magnitude of the lagged term's coefficient, which is only included as a baseline measure against which the effect of other attitudinal forces is assessed. In the light of this, analytical strategies aimed at correcting for the level of autocorrelation (i.e., instrumental variable estimation) have not been undertaken.

that it is leader evaluations to shape feelings of partisanship at the individual-level. Interestingly enough, the magnitude of the effect of leaders on partisanship is substantially similar across countries (Britain: $b_{Leaders}=1.79$; Germany: $b_{Leaders}=1.47$; Italy: $b_{Leaders}=1.69$). The effect of partisanship on leader evaluations, on the contrary, is much more different across countries, ranging from a high of 1.31 in Britain to a low of .59 in Italy. Hence in relative terms, it can be affirmed that the impact of party leader evaluations on voters' partisanship is significantly stronger in those party systems, like that of the Italian Second Republic, characterized by relatively young parties – thus confirming our second contextual hypothesis postulating party leaders' relevance as a function of parties' age.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In recent decades, political leaders have become increasingly visible to mass publics due to the ongoing process of personalization of politics common to all established parliamentary democracies. Moreover, this development has not only affected political communication. Party leaders have been found to exert a stronger effect over time in the executive branch of parliamentary democracies as well as within their own parties' structures. Some have gone as far as contending that nowadays political leaders *personify* the policy platforms of the respective parties. Against this background, the intuition that voters' party loyalties should be interpreted (also) as a function of their evaluation of the leaders has been repeatedly advanced – and yet never put to systematic test. Indeed, empirical research on partisanship has been surprisingly reluctant in addressing this debate.

In the present study, I took up the task of reassessing the cross-national meaning of partisanship in European parliamentary systems in the light of the progressive personalization of politics that characterizes all advanced industrial democracies. Most

notably, I show that the roots of partisanship have steadily moved away from society (e.g., early socialization, placement in the socio-economic structure) towards the realm of individual attitudes. What was once conceptualized as a mere reflection of long-term allegiances (party leader evaluations) has nowadays turned into one of the crucial drivers of partisanship itself.

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

As to the relative importance of attitude forces, this study provides unequivocal confirmation of the "personalization hypothesis". According to the empirical evidence presented here, individual politicians have in fact gained prominence at the expense of both traditional socio-economic groups and classic party features such as issues and ideology.

When it comes to partisanship, voters' evaluation of party leaders appears to have become the most powerful driver of partisan alignments at the individual-level. Moreover, this analysis has confirmed a number of contextual hypotheses from the personalization of politics literature. Leaders seem to matter more in those political systems characterized by majoritarian or mixed electoral systems. However, in terms of causal effects, leaders' ability to shape voters' partisanship is especially accentuated in the case of newer (as opposed to established) parties – as made clear in the analysis of the Italian case.

The relevance of this study, however, does not limit to the enduring debate on partisanship. In fact, the empirical findings presented here bear clear implications for voting behavior research. By showing that partisanship is heavily influenced by individual assessments of party leaders, our findings highlight the importance of taking into account the bidirectional arrow between these variables within the voting equation as, without this specification, the “effects of partisanship on the vote are likely to be exaggerated” (Marks, 1993: 143). It is no doubt that “huge empirical and statistical obstacles [must] be vanquished” (Mitbø, 1997: 152) in order to disentangle conclusively the role of leaders from that of their parties as determinant of voters' choice. If any, the merit of this paper is that of having shed new light on the dynamic relationship between voters' partisanship and party leader evaluations for future analyses of voting behavior in contemporary democracies.

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