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From Group Membership to Party Leadership

The Changing Determinants of Partisanship in Italy, 1968-2008

Diego Garzia, Università di Siena

Email: garzia3@unisi.it

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Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between Italian voters and parties through an intra-country, inter-temporal comparison. Based on the idea that individuals' relationship with political parties depends largely on the types of parties that are predominant in the party system at each relevant point in time, and in the light of the profound transformations undergone by Italian parties during the 1990s transition – from *mass-based* to *catch-all* – I hypothesize that partisan attachments have shifted accordingly from a mere reflection of pre-existing social identities to the result of individual attitudes towards more visible features of the party. Results show the constantly growing part played by leader evaluations in shaping individuals' feelings of closeness to parties.

Keywords: partisanship; party leaders; party types; personalization of politics; ITANES

Introduction¹

According to the responsible party government model (APSA, 1950) parties are the vital link between various elements of the political process: they create identities, frame electoral choices, and determine the outputs of government. In this sense, democracy without political parties is simply ‘unthinkable’ (Schattschneider, 1942; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Nonetheless, political parties have been severely challenged in recent decades under many respects. Social modernization and technological innovations, in particular, have led to new forms of interest representation and political communication that affected to a substantial extent the role of parties in the democratic process, thus altering their relationship with citizens. To cope with these challenges, parties have undergone deep structural transformations.

The breakdown of cleavage alignments in advanced industrial democracies (Franklin et al., 1992) has resulted in a progressive *individualization* of vote choices, which involves ‘a shift away from a style of electoral decision-making based on social group and/or party cues’ (Dalton, 1996: 346). In the effort to expand their electoral appeal beyond the cleavage to which they usually referred (Mair et al., 2004), former *class-mass* (e.g., socialist) and *denominational* (Christian-democratic) parties have by and large converged on the *catch-all* typology (Kirchheimer, 1966). 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; see also Farrell and Webb, 2000). The parallel emergence of television as main source of political information for a vast majority of voters has further contributed to increase the visibility of political leaders at the expense of parties (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Mughan, 2000). Although any single answer to the question of how media shape politics can only be a partial one (Couldry, 2009) it is hard to deny that television-based campaigning has progressively accentuated personality factors at the expense of more substantive programmatic goals (Campus, 2010).

¹ Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the XXIV Annual Conference of the Italian Political Science Association (Venice, September 2010) and at the Political Studies Graduate Conference (Oxford, December 2010). I wish to thank all the participants for their useful remarks and suggestions. The responsibility for all the unavoidable mistakes still present remains with the author alone.

In this paper, I address one of the crucial implications of these transformation at the party-level: namely, a possibly related change in the nature of their bonds with the electorate. This idea is not new (it has been insightfully explored by, among others: Gunther and Montero, 2001; Gunther, 2005; Lobo, 2008). Differently from these studies, however, I will look into a different dimension of this link. Whereas they focused on individuals' vote choice in order to investigate the 'anchors' of partisanship, I concentrate on voters' feelings of *psychological attachment* with political parties. In spite of the recurring controversies about the enduring validity of party identification in voting behavior research (for a review, see: Budge et al., 1976; Bartle and Bellucci, 2009), there seems to be wide consensus over its ability to provide a fair measure of the bond between voters and parties (Fiorina, 2002; Holmberg, 2007). In this respect, party identification is commonly employed as a dimension of party system development (Dalton and Weldon, 2007) and stability (Scarrow, 2010).

This study derives from its predecessors the idea that individuals' relationship with political parties depends largely on the types of parties that are predominant in the party system at each relevant point in time (Gunther, 2005). Previous studies have indeed shown how specific party characteristics contribute to distinctive types of partisanship (Richardson, 1991). Mass-based parties were characterized by a tight link with their respective social milieu (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Thomassen, 1976). In the case of catch-all parties, the nature of this link can be expected to differ substantially. Indeed, I hypothesize that as a result of the process of party transformation (e.g., from mass-based to catch-all), partisan loyalties have shifted accordingly from a mere reflection of previous socio-ideological identities to the result of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects – and, more specifically, their leaders. This contention is based on a number of related occurrences, such as the widespread practice of candidate-centered campaigning on the behalf of catch-all parties (Wattenberg, 1991), the resulting increased influence of leaders in shaping the appeal of their own party (Curtice, 2003), but also the growing tendency among voters to evaluate politics in 'personal' rather than 'partisan' terms (Rahn et al., 1990; Campus, 2000).

Although these features of contemporary party politics and public opinion are easily observable in a wide majority of Western democracies, I decided to concentrate on the case of Italy and its transition from the First to the Second Republic. The disappearance of Italy's major mass-integration parties at the outset of the 1990s transition, and the intrinsically catch-all nature of the parties that took their place since the election of 1994, make Italy the perfect case for an *intra-country, inter-temporal* comparison (Campus and Pasquino, 2006)². Furthermore, an analysis of the Italian case can be relevant due to the leading role played in the last two decades by parties – such as *Forza Italia* and *Lega Nord* – well representing the *personalistic* ideal-type (Gunther and Diamond, 2003). Focusing on Italy will enable us to compare the nature and content of partisan ties across a wide-spectrum of party typologies (class-mass and denominational before 1994, catch-all and personalistic afterwards), thus providing an exemplary illustration of the role of party change in reshaping the nature and content of individual partisan alignments.

The paper proceeds as follows: I begin with a review of the relevant literature on partisanship, in order to formulate the main research hypotheses. These are tested on the case at hand through a number of multivariate statistical analyses. The major findings are then discussed along with their implications for our understanding of the changing relationship between parties and voters in contemporary democracies.

Two conceptions of partisanship (and a possible bridge between the two)

In its classic formulation set forth in *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960), party identification is described as a long-term affective orientation to a political party, which is rooted in early socialization and based on an objective location in the social structure. Due to its social-psychological (rather than political) nature, party identification is thus conceived as an *unmoved mover* (Johnston, 2006). Supposedly immune from political and economic short-term influences, it nonetheless shapes the individuals' political world-view in a way that accords with their partisan orientation. On these bases,

² 'Intra-country, inter-temporal comparisons are rather rare because there are few cases in which significant transformations have taken place within the same country affecting its 'regime'...and have produced a quite different configuration of political forces and a totally new arena for competition' (Campus and Pasquino, 2006: 26).

party identification is thought to be cause (but not consequence) of less stable attitudes and opinions about political events, issues and candidates.

However, the social-psychological approach is only one explanation of individual feelings of closeness to parties. The development of favorable attitudes towards a party as a result of ideological proximity, performance assessments and leader evaluations represents another plausible explanation (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009). Indeed, the role of short-term attitudes as ‘potential agents of change in the individual’s basic partisan orientation’ (Campbell et al., 1960: 135) was already recognized by the authors of *The American Voter*. In the late 1970s, a group of rational choice scholars advanced a systematic critique to the non-political definition of party identification set forth by Campbell and colleagues. The *revisionist* (Fiorina, 2002) conception emphasizes the importance of cognitive factors as formative aspects behind individuals’ partisan alignments. Through more sophisticated analyses of panel data, the relationship between partisan affiliations and short-term attitudes appeared rather dynamic, and no clear causal sequence from the former to the latter seemed to emerge (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981).

Although radically different under many respects, neither of these conceptions is necessarily correct at the expense of the other. As every political attitude, partisanship is to be interpreted in the light of the alternatives available in the political system at a given point in time (Crewe, 1976). Different types of parties can lead to different types of partisanship (Richardson, 1991). In this respect, the 1990s transition in Italy represents a golden chance to assess the effect of the transformations at the party level on the dynamics of partisan attachment at the individual level.

Partisanship across the First and the Second Italian Republic

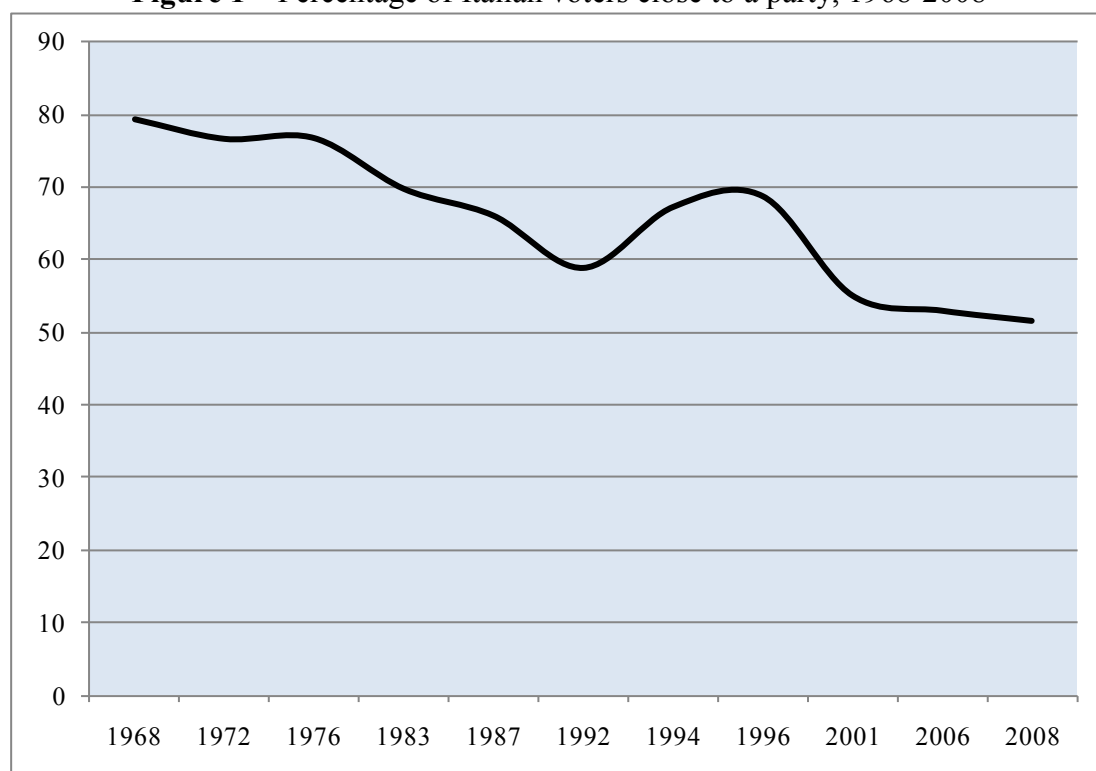
During the years of the so-called First Italian Republic (1946-1993) party identification was interpreted as ‘a social and political cleavage...the result of a sharing of cultural values, an objective location in the social structure, a membership (or closeness and trust) in secondary organisations, a territorial base. It was a form of social embeddedness, a closure in distinctive and separate political sub-cultures and enclaves which Italian mass parties were able to bring about’ (Bellucci, 2007: 57-58).

In other words, it was the tight link between primary groups and the main parties of the time (*Partito Comunista Italiano*: PCI, and *Democrazia Cristiana*: DC) to determine voters' political identities (Parisi and Pasquino, 1977). However, a number of occurrences raise doubts over the enduring ability of an identity-based approach to account for the nature of mass partisanship in the Second Republic. The disappearance of traditional mass-based parties from the Italian political scene after Tangentopoli, and the intrinsically different nature of the parties that took their place since the election of 1994, seem at odds with the reconstruction of mass partisanship based on social and political cleavages. If we concentrate our attention on the five parties actually represented in Parliament, their electoralist connotation emerges quite clearly. The most illuminating cases relate obviously to those parties defined as *personal* (Calise, 2000) or *personalistic* (Gunther and Diamond, 2003) in the literature. Both Silvio Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà* (hereafter: PdL) and Antonio Di Pietro's *Italia dei Valori* (IdV) are in fact characterized by a strong dependency on the charismatic appeal of their leader and by no means oriented to a well-defined social substrata. The case of *Lega Nord* (LN) is slightly more complex: here the marked ethno-regionalist appeal of the party (Tronconi, 2005) corresponds to a considerably weak structure – as compared to the foremost role played by founding leader Umberto Bossi in shaping goals, strategy and policies of the party (Ignazi, 1997). With respect to the heirs of First Republic's mass parties (*Partito Democratico*: PD, and *Unione dei Democratici Cristiani di Centro*: UDC), they followed the process of transformation undergone in the last decades by the wide majority of Western mass-based parties, moving progressively towards the catch-all typology (Gunther and Montero, 2001; Gunther, 2005). This is especially evident in the process that led – through a number of reconversions (Bellucci et al., 2000) – the former communists to join the brand-new PD in 2008.

Notwithstanding the clear lack of solid socio-ideological bases among contemporary Italian parties, these are nonetheless entities to which a substantial proportion of the electorate still *feel close to*. Figure 1 presents the percentage of party identifiers among Italian voters in the period 1968-2008. There is a steady downward movement, due to the spread of antiparty sentiments in the electorate at large (Sani and Segatti, 2001) that led eventually to the fall of the First Republic's *partitocrazia*. The trend reverses

after the first election of the Second Republic held in 1994. According to some, the birth of new parties (along with the entrance of new protagonists on the political scene) did ‘revitalize’ the bonds between citizens and politics (Maraffi, 2002). After a peak in 1996, however, the figure gets progressively down to roughly 50 percent. In spite of the overall negative trend, and in the light of the major restructuring undergone by the Italian party system in both early-1990s and late-2000s, one notes nonetheless that in 2008 one Italian voter out of two declares to feel close to a political party.

Figure 1 – Percentage of Italian voters close to a party, 1968-2008



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

In order to explain the substantial hold of the figure relative to aggregate partisanship in the Second Italian Republic, it seems reasonable to move the attention to the increasingly relevant part played by favorable attitudes towards parties and partisan objects in determining individuals’ feelings of closeness to the new parties. The literature assigns to *issue proximity* a crucial role in promoting positive (or negative) attitudes towards each of the parties (Downs, 1957; Budge et al., 1976). Yet another important source of attitudes towards parties is represented by *valence* issues (Stokes, 1963). Attitudes can derive in this case by either retrospective evaluations of party performance (Fiorina, 1981) or

prospective competence assessments (Bellucci, 2006). Favorable attitudes towards parties can also originate from the voters' evaluation of party leaders (Page and Jones, 1979). In the last decades, there is little doubt that party leaders have increasingly gained importance to both political communication and electoral competition *vis-à-vis* their parties in almost every Western democracy (Bean and Mughan, 1989; McAllister, 1996; Dalton et al., 2000; Lobo, 2008). In the light of this, it is not unreasonable to argue that political leaders have become important in their own right 'by personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties' (McAllister, 2007: 574). According to this interpretation, feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party *in the form of its leader* (Barisione, 2009).

This contention seems particularly appropriate as applied to contemporary Italian parties. The enduring and successful presence of Berlusconi on the political stage had a sizeable effect on the communicative strategies of other parties (Mazzoleni, 1996). The 'indistinguishable identity' between the leader and the party (Poli, 2001) that always connoted *Forza Italia* (and now PdL), is to a large extent echoed in the case of other personalistic parties such as IdV and LN (Tarchi, 2003). The predominant position of Italian leaders *vis-à-vis* their parties emerges clearly with a quick glance to the 2008 ballot paper, where all the represented parties' symbols – including PD and UDC – feature the name of the respective leader as big as it fits.

Studies performed in the late 1980s (see, for example: Mannheim and Sani, 1987) began considering the place and relative weight of party leaders within voters' attitudes and behavior, however excluding in principle the possibility that favourable leader evaluations could produce shifts in partisanship at the individual level. The breakdown of Italian party system, which made impossible the continuation of traditional identifications, led some scholars to investigate the independent role of individual attitudes towards leaders in shaping partisan attachments. In his analysis of the Italian election of 1996, Venturino (2000) finds that in two cases (*Forza Italia* and *I Popolari*) attitudes toward party leaders exerted a much stronger effect on attitudes toward their own parties than the other way around. This finding is however explained by the author based on the *presidentialization* argument (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Therefore, the preeminent role of the two leaders in question (e.g., Silvio Berlusconi and

Romano Prodi) as drivers of partisanship is interpreted in the light of their extreme relevance in the 1996 campaign (being both candidates to the premiership).

In the empirical section that follows, I reassess the relationship between party leader evaluations and partisanship based on a much wider time-span, in order to verify whether leaders matter only under certain conditions – or if they have indeed grown in importance regardless of their relative popularity, visibility, and type of party they lead.

Data and Analytical Methods

The data used in this analysis comes from the ITANES³ surveys held between 1968 and 2008. The individual-level determinants of partisanship will be assessed with respect to the five parties actually represented in Parliament (IdV, LN, PD, PdL, UDC), while for previous years the choice of cases is based on the respective *family tree*.

The dependent variable of the analysis relies on the *root question* of party identification battery in each survey⁴. I have thus generated a number of dummy variables – one per party under analysis – coding ‘1’ respondents declaring to feel close to that specific party and ‘0’ all others. The predictors included in the analysis correspond to the indicators that are supposed to tap both social and attitudinal partisanship. As to the former, I include those measures that signal voters’ belonging either to the catholic (e.g., frequency of church attendance) or the communist (e.g., social class and trade union membership) subcultures (Bellucci, 2007). Due to the historical predominance of the communist subculture in the *Red Belt* and of the catholic one in the Northern regions of the country (Parisi and Pasquino, 1977) I also control for the respondents’ region of residence. With respect to the attitudinal determinants of partisanship, the analysis include indicators related to issue proximity (measured as the distance in

³ The ITANES (Italian National Election Studies) Association runs a research programme on voting behaviour in Italy, the origins of which date back to the early 1990s, when the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo Research Foundation conducted two post-election surveys (1990 and 1992) within the context of a project devoted to the study of change in the Italian political system. For the 1994 elections the Cattaneo’s research programme was joined by various researchers from several different universities, and in December 2007 they founded the Itanes Association. Further information is available at <http://www.itanes.org>. The analyses, interpretations, and conclusions in this paper are solely those of the author.

⁴ I decided to stick to the *directional* component of partisanship alone (Holmberg, 1994) based on the main goal of this research – that is, understanding the reason why one would ‘select a response that indicated they ‘think of themselves as’ X or Y’ (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009: 201), in spite of the transient shifts to which the *strength* component is often subject (Miller, 1991).

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

The analysis consists in two steps. In the first part, I assess the ability of identity items to explain individual feelings of closeness to parties during a forty-years time span (1968-2008). The aim is to show the progressive inadequacy of an identity-based approach to account for the reasons why voters develop a feeling of closeness to one of the parties, thus hinting at the correspondingly growing part played by the attitudinal drivers of partisanship⁵. The second section of the analysis compares the relative strength of attitudinal items as statistical predictors of partisan alignments. In doing so, I will be able to highlight the increasing impact of leader evaluations as opposed to other potential sources of favorable attitudes towards the party (e.g., issue proximity, retrospective economic evaluation). This section of the analysis will be restricted to the last two decades due to data availability⁶.

Changing Determinants of Partisan Attachment in Italy: A Multivariate Analysis

Twenty-five different logistic regression analyses have been performed on data from the period 1968-2008. In every instance, the dependent variable is a dummy coding '1' the respondents identified with the party under analysis, and '0' apartisans as well as identifiers with parties other than the one under scrutiny. In the first part of the analysis, only identity items and socio-demographic controls are included in the model. Table 1 presents the regression estimates and the value of the Nagelkerke's R-squared from each model.

⁵ According to the original Michigan conception, party identification stems from a voter's objective location in the social structure. Because of such psychological sense of identification, 'the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation' (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 133). It follows that partisans would tend to like a party leader, irrespective of their personal qualities, if that leader were the leader of their own party (Curtice, 2003). If attitudes towards leaders are to be interpreted as *consequences*, then party identification must be *caused* by long-term identities (e.g., class, religious). By showing that partisanship is not shaped anymore by pre-existing social and ideological identities, I hope to provide satisfactory evidence for the independent role of short-term attitudes towards party leaders as drivers of partisan alignments.

⁶ ITANES respondents have been asked to evaluate political leaders on the thermometer score (10-points scale) only since the 1990 survey.

Table 1 – Logistic regression estimates (identity items only) – 1968-2008

	PCI <i>class-mass</i>				PDS <i>transitional</i>	DS <i>transitional</i>		PD <i>catch-all</i>
	1968	1972	1975	1990	1996	2001	2006	2008
Age	-,01 **	-,02 **	-,02 **	-,01 *	,01 *	,01	,01 *	,01 **
Gender	,25	-,15	,29	,09	-,15	-,08	,07	-,15
Education	-,89 **	-,38 *	-,14	-,37 **	,00	,13	,21 *	,28 **
Union Memb.	,78 **	,71 **	,66 **	,71 **	1,00 **	,89 **	,85 **	1,04 **
Social Class	-,37 **	-,40 **	-,47 **	-,14	,02	-,01	,00	,02
Church Att.	-,80 **	-,46 **	-,75 **	-,45 **	-,25 **	-,22 **	-,17 **	-,10 *
Region	-,33 **	-,28 *	-,17	-,31 **	-,42 **	-,46 **	-,64 **	-,22 **
Constant	2,46 **	1,99 **	2,04 **	,08	-,91 **	-2,93 **	-3,36 **	-3,41 **
Nagelkerke R²	,30	,20	,31	,15	,13	,08	,10	,04
	DC <i>denominational</i>				CCD <i>transitional</i>	UDC <i>catch-all</i>		
	1968	1972	1975	1990	1996	2001	2006	2008
Age	,01 **	,01 **	-,01 *	,00	,00	,02	,00	,00
Gender	,47 **	,32 *	-,03	-,21	-,73 *	-,54	-,25	-,46
Education	-,19 **	-,11	-,44 **	-,39 **	,29	,25	,06	-,07
Union memb.	-,06	-,25	-,26	,13	,23	,05	,33	,00
Social Class	,05	,16 *	,18 *	,25 **	,31 *	,20	,17	,10
Church Att.	,62 **	,57 **	,81 **	,39 **	,57 **	,73 **	,38 **	,60 **
Region	,26 **	-,01	,16	-,04	,08	-,18	,38	,03
Constant	-3,82 **	-4,11 **	-2,58 **	-2,59 **	-6,86 **	-8,57 **	-5,37 **	11,78
Nagelkerke R²	,21	,18	,30	,10	,12	,12	,07	,07
	FI <i>personalistic</i>				LN <i>personalistic/regionalist</i>			
	1996	2001	2006	2008	1996	2001	2006	2008
Age	-,01 *	,00	,00	-,01 *	-,02 **	,00	-,01	-,02 **
Gender	-,02	,03	-,07	-,06	-,69 **	-,52	-,41	-,15
Education	-,09	-,16 *	-,04	-,11	-,23	,04	-,22	-,28
Union Memb.	-,80 **	-,45 **	-,16	-,54	-,52 *	-,28	,35	-,14
Social Class	,12 *	,07	,06	,07	-,06	-,08	-,19	,00
Church Att.	,10 *	,07	,05	,04	,04	,06	,14	-,10
Region	,17 *	,04	,26 *	-,01	1,71 **	2,01 **	2,64 **	1,38 **
Constant	-2,19 **	-1,36 **	-1,91 **	-,75	-1,50 **	-4,45 **	-3,93 **	-1,43
Nagelkerke R²	,04	,01	,01	,01	,19	,16	,20	,13

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized *b* coefficients. Dependent variable: *partisanship* (dummy). ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

The data presented in the table confirms quite clearly my preliminary hypothesis. In the case of former mass-based parties (PCI and DC) the ability of social identity items to predict partisanship declines in a substantially uniform manner across the transition, and it eventually gets to triviality in correspondence with the last stage of these parties' transformation (i.e., between 2006 and 2008). As to the new parties (IdV and PdL), there is no decline – but only because identity items are extremely weak predictors since the beginning of the time series. The pattern of LN is less unequivocal; nonetheless we witness a marked decline in the period 2006-2008, probably due to the territorial expansion of its electorate. As Table 1 shows, in 2008 identity items are only modestly related to the dependent variable with respect to all the parties under analysis (R-squared below .10 in four cases out of five, and only slightly above in the case of LN).

Once ascertained the declining role of primary identities in shaping partisan affiliations, we can move to an assessment of the relative power of various attitude forces in determining partisanship at the individual level controlling for the effect of all others. The aim is to verify whether – in accordance with my core research hypothesis – attitudes towards the leaders have actually become the strongest statistical predictor of closeness to parties. Tables 2 and 3 present the logistic regression coefficients of the composite model, which features basic socio-demographics and the battery of social identity items already included in the first step *plus* the battery of attitude items (leader evaluation, issue proximity, retrospective economic evaluations). To our purposes, it is worth noting that coefficients related to attitude items are comparable in magnitude⁷.

The sum of identity and attitudinal items seems to explain partisanship in a substantially uniform manner throughout the period under analysis, and the model-fit is overall satisfactory. With respect to former mass-based parties, the Nagelkerke's R-squared ranges between .42 and .57 in the case of PCI/PDS/DS/PD, and between .36 and .40 in the case of DC/CCD/UDC (see Table 2).

⁷ Both leader evaluations and retrospective government evaluations are scaled on a range from '1' to '10', while the way in which issue proximity is operationalized (e.g., the distance between the self and the party on a 10-point left-right scale, in absolute value) leads to the same range of possible values.

Table 2 – Logistic regression estimates (composite model) – Mass-based parties and following reconversions, 1990-2008

	PCI	PDS	DS	PD	DC	CCD ⁽ⁱ⁾	UDC		
	1990	1996	2001	2006	2008	1990	1996	2006	2008
Gender	,403 (,236)	-,307 (,148)*	-,026 (,162)	,084 (,194)	-,163 (,157)	,014 (,223)	-,318 (,391)	-,286 (,345)	-,234 (,391)
Age	-,019 (,008)*	-,011 (,005)*	-,009 (,006)	,008 (,007)	,000 (,005)	,004 (,007)	-,000 (,013)	-,009 (,013)	-,000 (,012)
Education	-,574 (,160)**	-,085 (,099)	-,098 (,112)	,097 (,132)	,244 (,105)*	-,377 (,149)*	,326 (,257)	-,183 (,246)	,032 (,254)
Church Attendance	-,364 (,088)**	-,261 (,051)**	-,128 (,056)*	-,090 (,069)	-,112 (,050)*	,313 (,083)**	,515 (,177)**	,343 (,130)**	,429 (,165)*
Union Membership	,599 (,249)*	,515 (,156)**	,800 (,186)**	,476 (,244)	,591 (,338)	,478 (,260)	,836 (,408)*	,719 (,431)	,000 (,000)
Social Class	-,078 (,099)	,081 (,057)	-,054 (,062)	,060 (,072)	,014 (,052)	,250 (,090)**	,227 (,158)	,188 (,133)	,132 (,131)
Region of Residence	-,181 (,127)	-,194 (,084)*	-,389 (,092)**	-,613 (,120)**	-,144 (,091)	-,135 (,127)	,063 (,236)	,434 (,245)	,162 (,246)
Issue Proximity	-,559 (,075)**	-,677 (,057)**	-,948 (,078)**	-,708 (,094)**	-,441 (,056)**	-,646 (,085)**	-,943 (,197)**	-,621 (,156)**	-,660 (,177)**
Leader Evaluation	,328 (,053)**	,688 (,057)**	,395 (,048)**	,472 (,062)**	,753 (,057)**	,180 (,054)**	,379 (,124)**	,843 (,122)**	,928 (,134)**
Economic Evaluation	,050 (,031)	-,027 (,022)	,217 (,045)**	-,062 (,057)	,100 (,040)*	-,040 (,030)	-,020 (,069)	-,138 (,095)	,033 (,111)
Constant	-,798 (,825)	-3,320 (,517)**	-3,666 (,646)**	-4,450 (,806)**	-6,798 (,712)**	-2,040 (1,075)	-,661 (2,077)	-8,904 (1,536)**	6,590 (6,590)
Nagelkerke R²	,453	,569	,517	,480	,424	,366	,355	,399	,398
Chi-Square	261,174	932,242	738,239	400,337	508,633	191,226	108,684	144,674	131,652
Valid N	764	1991	2093	1122	1617	717	1664	1101	1525
Correctly Predicted	77,9%	74,1%	84,3%	80,7%	79,6%	77,6%	97,8%	95,5%	97,5%

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized *b* coefficients. Dependent variable: *partisanship* (dummy). Standard errors in parentheses. ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

⁽ⁱ⁾ Equation did not converge in 2001

Table 3 – Logistic regression estimates (composite model) – Personalistic parties, 1996-2008

	LN				FI				PDL	IDV
	1996	2001	2006	2008	1996	2001	2006	2008	2008	
Gender	-,905 (,381)*	-,442 (,434)	-,188 (,450)	-,276 (,251)	,081 (,185)	,136 (,143)	,347 (,221)	-,073 (,165)	-,988 (,451)*	
Age	-,028 (,015)	,003 (,013)	-,006 (,017)	-,021 (,008)*	-,011 (,006)	,003 (,004)	,000 (,008)	-,009 (,005)	-,008 (,013)	
Education	-,188 (,258)	,265 (,295)	,137 (,349)	-,139 (,176)	,001 (,126)	-,046 (,094)	,164 (,152)	,139 (,109)	,520 (,274)	
Church Attendance	-,149 (,119)	-,082 (,146)	-,054 (,159)	-,083 (,085)	-,012 (,066)	-,043 (,050)	-,048 (,080)	-,024 (,056)	-,089 (,126)	
Union Membership	,285 (,435)	-,009 (,617)	,982 (,568)	-,005 (,802)	-,207 (,256)	-,316 (,217)	,451 (,338)	-,393 (,531)	,000 (,000)	
Social Class	,208 (,139)	-,122 (,168)	-,270 (,178)	,004 (,081)	,113 (,069)	,027 (,054)	-,064 (,081)	,057 (,054)	,001 (,137)	
Region of Residence	,653 (,274)*	,966 (,409)*	1,751 (,632)**	,911 (,184)**	,306 (,118)*	,055 (,085)	,062 (,141)	-,008 (,097)	,091 (,249)	
Issue Proximity	-,529 (,116)**	-,775 (,210)**	-,647 (,203)**	-,363 (,088)**	-,464 (,070)**	-,635 (,058)**	-,584 (,095)**	-,216 (,052)**	-,305 (,161)*	
Leader Evaluation	,813 (,106)**	,796 (,121)**	,782 (,141)**	,614 (,077)**	,696 (,068)**	,671 (,050)**	,708 (,074)**	,807 (,057)**	,799 (,130)**	
Economic Evaluation	-,088 (,059)	,164 (,113)	-,115 (,122)	-,286 (,092)**	-,005 (,036)	,007 (,037)	,031 (,063)	,014 (,052)	,307 (,093)**	
Constant	-3,815 (1,762)*	-8,201 (1,736)**	-8,353 (2,017)**	-3,996 (1,265)**	-6,331 (,791)**	-5,789 (,650)**	-6,878 (1,043)**	-6,533 (,875)**	8,204 (8,204)	
Nagelkerke R²	,585	,472	,522	,406	,461	,493	,540	,442	,333	
Chi-Square	246,152	157,564	145,381	260,147	476,512	811,097	422,710	511,239	98,616	
Valid N	906	2052	1121	1533	1961	2291	1154	1626	1509	
Correctly Predicted	91,3%	98,3%	97,1%	93,4%	89,4%	82,2%	85,2%	82,0%	97,8%	

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized *b* coefficients. Dependent variable: *partisanship* (dummy). Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

As to the new parties, figures are substantially similar, with values of the R-squared ranging between .46 and .54 in the case of FI/PdL, and between .41 and .59 in the case of LN (see Table 3)⁸.

Moving to the regression estimates, it is interesting to observe that only two covariates present coefficients that are statistically significant in each and every model (leader evaluations and issue proximity), while retrospective government evaluations seem to play hardly a role. Less unequivocal figures are those relative to the parties belonging to the personalistic typology: FI, LN, and IdV. In these cases, in fact, party leader evaluations feature always the biggest coefficient as compared to other attitudinal items. Furthermore, the strong impact of leader evaluations is paralleled by the statistical insignificance of every coefficient relative to social identity items⁹. In other words, what seems to determine feelings of closeness to personalistic parties is first and foremost the voter's evaluation of the leader – not a surprising conclusion, after all.

A much more interesting conclusion would be that party leaders have become the strongest predictor of partisanship *also* in the case of former mass-based parties. Indeed, the data presented in Table 2 point quite clearly in this direction. As to the Christian-democrats, issue proximity plays the foremost part in the 1990s. With the entrance in the 2000s, however, it is favorable attitudes towards party leader Pierferdinando Casini to exert the strongest impact on individual feelings of closeness to UDC. This statistical evidence is in all probability linked to the massively leader-centered electoral strategy of the party in these years, and especially at the outset of 2006 election – when, for the first time, UDC campaigned as a truly catch-all party (Legnante, 2006). In the case of left-wing parties (PCI, PDS, DS) there are signs of a strong effect of the leadership component already in 1996, but overall it is the issue component to play the biggest part in the various models. Its dominance is nonetheless put to an end in correspondence with the 2008 election, to which I devote a brief dedicated discussion.

As in 1994, the general election of 2008 took place in a widely different political context from its previous one (although this time the restructuring of the political offer was ignited by a process of

⁸ The R-squared of the model appears weaker when the dependent variable is IdV partisanship, but it must be noted that this party features a comparatively much smaller number of respondents declaring a feeling of closeness towards it. The model's predictive power remains nonetheless high, with 97,8 percent of cases correctly predicted.

⁹ The same conclusion does not hold in the case of the respondents' region of residence, which emerges as strongly related with partisanship in the case of LN.

aggregation, rather than dissolution, undergone by several parties)¹⁰. Differently from 1994, however, we have available data to explore and assess the basis on which voters developed their partisan ties with brand-new parties. Somehow impressively, in fact, 51 percent of the 2008 survey respondents declared to feel close to one of the parties – this figure being substantially comparable to the datum on party identifiers in 2006 (see Figure 1). In line with the pattern already outlined for FI, we can appreciate that individual feelings of closeness to the PdL are more strongly shaped by voters' evaluation of the founder of the party, Silvio Berlusconi – a rather unsurprising conclusion, once again. Even more interestingly, however, we find that this is the case also with respect to the PD. There are strong reasons to relate this finding to the preeminent part played by party leader Walter Veltroni in both the foundation of PD and its electoral campaign. To some scholars, the personalization of the political supply on the behalf of the centre-left represented the *real* innovation of the 2008 campaign (Barisione and Catellani, 2008). This analysis seems to corroborate the usefulness of this strategy – at least with regard to its ability of developing in a pretty short time a feeling of closeness between a substantial proportion of voters (16 percent of the 2008 sample) and a brand-new party.

Overall, these findings provide a substantial confirmation of my research hypothesis, hereby highlighting the role of party transformation as the prime mover behind the changing, ever more *personalized*, dynamics of partisan alignment in the Second Italian Republic.

Concluding Remarks

Political parties are a crucial feature of contemporary representative democracies. Inasmuch voters vote for parties, these will continue retaining a significant role in framing political identities; in turn, these identities are still central in orienting voters' electoral behavior. Data from the Second Italian Republic (see: Maraffi, 2002; 2006) show that roughly four partisans out of five vote according to their party

¹⁰ Most notably, the 2008 election saw the electoral debut of *Il Popolo della Libertà* (a merger of Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale), *Partito Democratico* (made up of the parties already united in the electoral cartel *Uniti nell'Ulivo* in 2006: Democratici di Sinistra and La Margherita), and *Sinistra Arcobaleno* (an aggregation of Rifondazione Comunista and other minor extreme-left parties).

identification¹¹. What matters the most, contemporary partisanship derives its electoral relevance from the strong propensity of partisans to maintain their vote choice stable¹².

The empirical evidence presented here sheds new light on the changing ways in which partisan loyalties are shaped at the individual level. In particular, it is by and large corroborated the idea that partisanship is responsive to the set of alternatives available in the political system. The decline of ideologies and cleavage politics, the concomitant dissolution of mass-based parties (due, in the Italian case, to Tangentopoli scandals) and their replacement with an intrinsically different kind of electoralist (and to a varied extent personalistic) parties are clearly reflected in the dynamics of partisan alignment at the individual level: what was once a mere reflection of pre-existing social identities has nowadays turned into the product of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects.

With respect to attitudes themselves, I have shown the primacy of leader evaluations as statistical predictors of partisanship, as opposed to issue proximity and performance assessments. There are strong reasons to blame the ‘essentially visual and personality-based medium of television’ (Mughan, 2000: 129) for such an outcome. Television is by far the most important (and to a large extent only) source of political information to Italian voters (ITANES, 2008). Not by chance, this analysis highlights the emergence of *Forza Italia* as paradigm of the changing dynamics of partisan alignment. What matters the most, however, is that the enduring and successful presence of Berlusconi in Italian politics forced all other parties to follow suit. This contention seems to be vindicated by the strategies of parties themselves, paradigmatically exemplified by the increasingly spread practice of including leaders’ names within the party symbol. Of course, the changing content of partisan ties cannot possibly be imputed to mere changes in party symbols; rather, the latter should be interpreted as the most visible evidence of a wider and increasingly widespread strategy on the behalf of the parties to reshape their image on the basis of their leader’s.

¹¹ This datum is pretty much in line with findings from other European countries for which party identification is considered as ‘meaningful’ (Holmberg, 1994; Berglund et al., 2005).

¹² In 2006 almost 80 percent of party identifiers declared to have decided long time before the elections which party to vote for – against only 20 percent among non-identifiers (Maraffi, 2006). Again, these figures are in line with data relative to other European democracies (Richardson, 1991).

What the implications of these findings for the quality of electoral democracy in Italy? We know quite a lot about the stability of social partisanship, which tends to move slowly under the forces of modernization, secularization, social and geographical mobility (Dalton, 1996). In this respect, the First Italian Republic was a perfect case in point. But if partisan ties are increasingly shaped, as it seems, by a relatively volatile factor such as party leader evaluations, we might be in danger of great short-term fluctuations in aggregate partisanship. Based on the findings presented here, the steady erosion of partisan ties among Italian voters in the last decade cannot be interpreted through the *cognitive mobilization* (Dalton, 1984) framework. Quite to the contrary, this pattern of partisan dealignment is to be understood as an indication of voters' changing attitudes towards the new drivers of partisan alignment, that is, party leaders. There are reasons to believe that the decline in the proportion of Italian voters close to a party in the last decade is related to the progressive erosion of the image capital of the Second Republic's political elites. Yet this conclusion is only speculative, and it calls for more research on the ever more intertwined relationship between voters, political leaders, and parties in contemporary democracies.

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Diego Garzia is a PhD Candidate in Comparative and European Politics at the University of Siena and former visiting doctoral student at Oxford University. His research interests include: comparative politics, political psychology, voting behaviour, parties and elections. His most recent works have been accepted for publication in *Journal of Political Marketing*, *Political Psychology*, *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*, *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, and *The Leadership Quarterly*. He is co-editor (with Lorella Cedroni) of *Voting Advice Applications in Europe: The State of the Art* [2010].

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Appendix – Variable Codings

Gender

Male (0), Female (1)

Age

Age in years

Educational level

Elementary Sc. (1), Middle Sc. (2), High Sc. (3), University (4)

Church attendance

Never (1), 2/3 Times a year (2), Once a month (3), 2/3 Times a week (4), Every week (5)

Union membership

No (0), Yes (1)

Social class

Working Class (1), Rural petite bourgeoisie (2), Urban petite bourgeoisie (3), White collar middle class (4), Bourgeoisie (5)

Region of residence

NORTH: Val d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Trentino Alto-Adige, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia (1)

SOUTH: Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna (0)

CENTER: Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise (-1)

Left-Right placement (self and party)

Scale from 1 ('left') to 10 ('right')

Leader evaluation

Scale from 1 ('completely negative evaluation') to 10 ('completely positive evaluation')

Retrospective evaluation of national economy in the last year

Scale from 1 ('really bad') to 10 ('really well')