Partisanship in Italy: A 25-Years Assessment (*)

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Abstract. Previous studies have portrayed the personalization of politics as a consequence of the changes in the electoral market and the resulting transformations at the party level. However, empirical research has not reached a consensus on the extent to which this process has actually exerted its impact on citizens’ voting calculus. In this paper, I concentrate on the role played by leader evaluations in shaping voters’ feelings of identification with parties. Using Italy as a case study, I show the progressively more central role of party leader evaluations as drivers of partisanship at the individual level. The first part of the analysis updates a previous longitudinal study of Italian National Election Study (ITANES) data by Garzia and Viotti (2011) and puts the personalization trend to test against the thick series of key political events occurred between 2008 and 2014. The second part of the analysis takes advantage of a unique panel dataset collected in November/December 2013. The time frame of the survey allows for an unprecedented causal assessment of the effect exerted by leadership change (from Bersani to Renzi in PD) as well as party denomination change (from PdL to Forza Italia, both led by Berlusconi) on patterns of closeness to parties at the individual level. The results shed new light on the changing relationship between voters and political parties in Italy, ever more centered around the persona of the party leader.

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1. Introduction

Since its introduction in the mid-1950s, the notion of partisanship has been subject to a considerable amount of attention by electoral researchers (for a review, see: Bartle and Bellucci, 2009). 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). The progressive erosion of cleavage parties undermined the very social bases of class, religion and territory as sources of political identities, and paved the way for alternative readings of partisanship in the most recent years. On the one hand, attitudinal approaches have focused on the “instrumental” concerns that originate partisanship (e.g., most notably, issue preferences and party leadership evaluations). On the other hand, social identity theories have been used to understand “expressive” concerns that shape the nature and the behavioral consequences of partisanship (for a review, see: Huddy et al., 2015).

This paper focuses on the attitudinal determinants of partisanship. Using Italy as a case study, it aims at showing the progressively more central role of party leader evaluations as drivers of partisanship at the individual level. The first part of the analysis updates a previous longitudinal study of Italian National Election Study (ITANES) data by Garzia and Viotti (2011) and puts the personalization trend to test against the thick series of key political events occurred between 2008 and 2014. The second part of the analysis takes advantage of a unique panel dataset collected by ITANES in November/December 2013, in order to dig deeper into the causal mechanisms at the core of people’s feelings of closeness to a given party. The analysis is preceded by a short description of the Italian context and the reasons why this can be conceived a crucial case to test the “personalization of partisanship” hypothesis.

2. The Personalization of Politics in Italy, 1990-2014

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 Sheafer, 2007: 65). McAllister (2007) identifies three key factors at the core of the

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1 Parts of Sections 2 and 3 of this paper have already appeared (in Italian) as: Garzia, D. & Viotti, F. (2011), Leader, identità di partito e voto in Italia, 1990-2008. Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica 41: 411-32.
personalization hypothesis: (i) a number of institutional reforms that have strengthened the role of prime ministers within the executive (presidentialization); (ii) the pervasive mediatization of politics; (iii) the progressive erosion of long-standing partisan loyalties (dealignment). In this sense, the Italian case can be considered a prototype of personalization among established parliamentary democracies (Campus, 2010: 5-6). As a matter of fact, all the conditions described by McAllister occurred simultaneously during the 1990s-transition: (i) the majoritarian electoral reform of 1993; (ii) the rapidly growing tendency on behalf of parties to resort to television as a result of Silvio Berlusconi’s entering the field; (iii) the breakdown of the post-war party system.

Although the origins of this process have been traced back to the early-1980s (Pasquino, 1990), it is only with the transition to the Second Republic that Italy becomes under many respects the ideal-typical “personalized polity” (Calise, 2004). The collapse of the old partitocrazia along with the introduction of a majoritarian electoral law produced the most appropriate conditions for popular figures to enter the field. In turn, the entrance of Silvio Berlusconi in the political scene ignited a severe acceleration to the process of personalization of Italian politics (Campus and Pasquino, 2006). In 1994 Berlusconi established his own personal party, Forza Italia, that he owns exactly as he owns the three national TV networks on which he was – and still is – able to deploy a campaign strategy strongly centered around his person (Poli, 2001). The unforeseeable triumph of Forza Italia in the 1994 election made the other parties increasingly dependent from television, for it immediately seemed clear that “no party could remain in the contest without heavy use of mass communication channels” (Mazzoleni, 1996: 200). This process of transformation found its climax during the 2008 campaign, when the political offer reached unparalleled levels of personalization due to the choice on behalf of the main centre-left party, Partito Democratico, to center its electoral strategy on the figure of its leader and prime-ministerial candidate, Walter Veltroni (Barisione e Catellani, 2008). In the last years, further steps towards the personalization of Italian politics have included, most notably, the emergence of Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle and the new, highly personalized leaderships of PD (Matteo Renzi) and LN (Matteo Salvini). The relative importance of these leaders vis-à-vis their respective parties leads to the expectation that, if any, the relationship between individual feelings of closeness to parties and attitudes towards their leaders has grown stronger in line with the trend already unfolded by Garzia and Viotti (2011).
3. Theory and Expectations

There are many routes by which voters may come to think of themselves as «partisans». The identity approach, based in social-psychology, describes partisanship 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 (Campbell et al., 1960). The analytical usefulness of the concept lies in its relative stability and distance from the vote choice: a non-political attitude (hence supposedly immune from political and economic short-term influences), which is nonetheless able to shape the individuals’ political world-view in a way that accords with their partisan orientation. On these bases, partisanship is thought to be cause – but not consequence – of less stable attitudes and opinions about political objects (e.g., political events, issues and candidates). To put it sharply, the identity approach sees partisanship as “an exogenous variable affecting politics but not being affected by politics” (Holmberg, 2007: 563).

However, the social-psychological approach represents only one explanation of partisanship: 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). Already the authors of The American Voter spoke about the role of attitudes as “potential agents of change in the individual’s basic partisan orientation” (Campbell et al., 1960: 135). A number of subsequent studies explored in detail the dynamic relationship between party identification and short-term attitudes, demonstrating the absence of a clear causal sequence running from the former to the latter (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981).

In drawing a sharp distinction between these two approaches, one does not necessarily imply that one perspective is correct at the expense of the other. Like all political attitudes, partisanship is responsive to the particular set of political alternatives (i.e., the parties) available in the political system at a given point in time (Richardson, 1991; Gunther and Montero, 2001; Gunther, 2005; Lobo, 2008). In the First Italian Republic (1948-1994) the stability of party identifications was especially accentuated by the tight link between primary groups and the main parties of that time. In such context, partisanship was regarded as “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: 58). Although the social-psychological approach provided a suitable explanation of the ties between voters
and the (main) parties in pre-1994 Italy, the same approach does not seem appropriate for an account of the nature of mass partisanship in the Second Republic. Focusing on the four major parties actually represented in Parliament, their post-identitarian outlook emerges quite clearly. The most illuminating cases relate obviously to Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (FI) and Beppe Grillo’s Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), clearly denoted by an almost entire dependency on the charismatic appeal of their leader and by no means oriented to a well-defined social substrata. In the case of Lega Nord (LN) the marked ethno-regionalist appeal of the party (Tronconi, 2005) long corresponded 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). The central role of the party leadership – hand in hand with the “nationalization” of the party’s electoral strategy – rose further in the last years under the highly personalized leadership of Matteo Salvini. When it comes to the heirs of the Communist Party, they would seem to have followed the process of transformation undergone by all Western class-mass parties in the last decades, with the progressive de-attachment from the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred as the most visible consequence (Mair et al., 2004). This is especially evident in the process that led the former communists to join – through a number of reconversions – the brand-new Partito Democratico (PD).

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 (Bellucci and Segatti, 2010). On these bases, it can be hypothesized that the process of party change has transformed the nature of partisanship from a mere reflection of previous social identities to the product of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects. Among the possible sources of individual attitudes, the literature assigns a crucial place to issue preferences and the economy (Bellucci, 2006). Yet favorable attitudes towards parties can also originate from the voters’ evaluation of other objects strongly associated with the image of parties themselves, such as their leaders (Venturino, 2000; Barisione, 2006; Garzia, 2011; 2012). According to this interpretation, feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party in the form of its leader (Barisione, 2009). There are strong reasons to believe that this interpretation is particularly appropriate as applied to contemporary Italian parties. The indistinguishable identity between the leader and the party that always connoted FI, is in fact echoed in the case of all other parties widely based on the charismatic appeal of their leaders.
4. Partisanship in Italy: A 25-Years Assessment

In this section, I update Garzia and Viotti’s (2011) analysis of ITANES data taking into account the most recent elections not covered by their study (i.e., 2013 parliamentary election, and 2014 European Parliament election). I focus on the four major parties actually represented in Parliament (FI, LN, M5S, PD; for previous years, the choice of cases is based on the respective family tree). The dependent variable of the analysis is partisanship. I have 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 (i.e., apartisans as well as identifiers with parties other than the one under scrutiny). The independent variables included in the analysis correspond to the indicators that are supposed to tap both social-psychological and attitudinal partisanship. As to the former, I include the respondent’s frequency of church attendance, region of residence, social class, and trade union membership. I also control for standard socio-demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, and educational level). For what concerns the attitudinal dimensions of partisanship, the analysis includes indicators related to issue proximity (measured as the distance in 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 retrospective economic assessment (respondent’s opinion about the national economic situation in the last year, ranging from a value of ‘1’ when very negative to ‘10’ if very positive).

The analysis consists in two steps. In the first part, I assess the relationship between identity items and respondents’ feeling of closeness to the parties during the time period under analysis (1990-2014). This part is aimed at showing that nowadays voters’ identification with Italian parties is only marginally linked to long-term social allegiances. After having shown the weaknesses of the socio-identitarian interpretation with respect to the case at hand, I then move to a comparison of the explanatory power of various attitudinal components. In 2008, party leader evaluations emerged as the attitudinal force with the strongest impact on partisanship for each and every party under analysis (Garzia and Viotti, 2011). Based on the increasing personalization of party politics in the years that followed (see above), I expect this trend to have grown even further.

Logistic regression models have been estimated for the period 1990-2014 (one model per party/year). At first, only identity items and socio-demographic controls have
been included as covariates. Figure 1 presents the value of the Nagelkerke’s pseudo R-squared with respect to each party and year, which can be interpreted as a summary measure of the strength of the relationship between voters’ placement in the social structure and their sense of identification with a party.

**Figure 1. Social structure and partisanship, 1990-2014**

The data presented in Figure 1 speak by and large in favor of the core expectations highlighted above. In the case of PD and FI, there would seem to be a very slight increase in the last two years in the relationship between SES-items and partisanship (although one notes that the great part of the explained variance is due to the effect of sociodemographic variables such as age for PD and educational level for FI). Yet, the values of the R-squared remain very low (.07 for PD and .04 for FI in 2014). These

*Note: Figure entries are Nagelkerke’s pseudo R-squared values from a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is the respondents’ identification with the party under analysis (dummy). Predictors included: age, gender, educational level, frequency of church attendance, subjective social class (not available in 2014), and trade union membership (not available in 2014).*
values are comparable with those reported by the newest party under analysis, M5S. The case of LN does not present a clear pattern, but it is interesting to note a fifty percent drop of the R-squared across the last year – that is, in conjunction with the new leadership of Matteo Salvini. Indeed, the value for LN in 2014 corresponds to the lowest one of the party’s time series.

After having confirmed the expectation regarding the continuous trend of delignment between social structure and partisanship, I move to an assessment of the relative effect of various attitude forces. The statistical models (whose estimates are graphically summarized in Figure 2, Panels A to D below) include basic socio-demographic variables and the battery of identity items already included in the first step plus the battery of attitude items (i.e., leader evaluation, issue proximity, retrospective economic assessment). Note that all plotted coefficients are comparable in magnitude, as all variables are operationalized on a 10-point scale.

**Figure 2.** The attitudinal determinants of partisanship, 1990-2008

Panel A. PCI/PDS/DS/PD
Panel D. Movimento 5 Stelle

Note: Figure entries are logistic regression coefficients from regression model where the dependent variable is the respondents’ identification with the party under analysis (dummy). Controls include: age, gender, educational level, frequency of church attendance, subjective social class (not available in 2014), and trade union membership (not available in 2014).

The results of these analyses provide only partial confirmation of the expected personalization trend. This is certainly the case for LN (Panel C), where the effect of the new, highly personalized leadership of Matteo Salvini is magnified by the massive decline on behalf of the issue proximity coefficient in the most recent years. With regard to M5S (Panel D) one notes a steady decline in the coefficient relative to leader evaluations. Yet, and most importantly, this coefficient remains the strongest in every model, with a two-fold effect vis-à-vis issue proximity and retrospective economic evaluations (incidentally, M5S partisanship would appear the most affected by economic assessments across all parties under analysis).

When it comes to PD and PdL/FI (Panels A and B respectively) however, one can easily witness a general inversion of the trend. This is especially evident in the period between 2008 and 2013, with issues pairing the effect of leader evaluations in the case
of PD, and even gaining prevalence in the case of PdL/FI. The lack of longitudinal panel data prevents a punctual assessment of the causes of the trend’s reversal, but several potential explanations could be advanced. First of all, the findings stemming from the analysis of 2008 data should be put in context. As in 1994, the general election of 2008 took place in a widely different political context from its previous one – although this time the restructuration of the political offer was ignited by a process of aggregation (rather than dissolution) undergone by several parties. In a political context characterized by profound transformations in terms of actors and progressive personalization in terms of appeal, party leaders turned out to be the crucial element of connection between parties and citizens/voters, for both PdL (as it was usually the case with FI) and PD (for the first time in the whole time series). After five years, the two parties established themselves also in ideological terms, with the plausible consequence of boosting the effect of issues at the expense of personality evaluations. The economic crisis that unfolded in 2009 provides further support to the idea that traditional left-right economic politics (on which the issue proximity measure employed here is based) kicked back in at the expense of personality assessments. Moreover, and most importantly, PD and PdL fought the 2013 elections led by unprecedentedly unpopular party leaders (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Mean thermometer score for major parties’ leaders, 1994-2014**

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<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PCI/PDS/DS/PD</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FI/PDL</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LN</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5S</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data presented in Table 1 highlights that in 2013 Berlusconi’s popularity was at its lowest across the two decades under analysis. While the very same goes for the leadership of PD, it must be also noted that Pierluigi Bersani was the first centre-left leader to feature a mean score below 6 even among his own party supporters (Barisione et al., 2013). In such context, it does not surprise that a relatively resilient feeling like partisanship loses grip with respect to voters’ short-term evaluations of the party leadership.

The very same argument could be advanced to explain why issue proximity pairs the effect of leadership evaluations on FI partisanship in 2014 (although the leader coefficient reports a slight increase that parallels the 0.8 increase in Berlusconi’s mean thermometer score across that year). When it comes to Matteo Renzi, however, the aforementioned reasoning could be reversed. In the case of a highly popular leader (indeed, the most popular centre-left leader in the last twenty years) with widely positive evaluations also beyond his party supporters (ibid.) it is easy to understand why the coefficient further declines. In order to gather a better understanding of the actual effect of Renzi and Berlusconi as drivers of closeness to the respective parties, it is useful to turn to panel data analysis to better illustrate causal dynamics.


A growing body of available literature would seem to support the main idea put forward in this paper, namely, that party leader evaluations have become an ever more important driver of partisanship at the individual level.² The majority of these works highlight a growing statistical association between voters’ partisanship and their evaluation of party leaders, even taking into account the effect exerted by other relevant explanations. However, their findings are somehow put into question by the cross-sectional design used. As far as both the dependent variable (i.e., partisanship) and the main predictor (e.g., leader evaluations) are measured at the same point in time, the causal dynamics underlying the relationship between partisanship and leader evaluations remain unclear. Processes of cognitive rationalization may be at work, and the growing impact of leaders on partisanship might be simply due to the

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² Comparative analyses of Western European democracies include various works by Garzia (2013a; 2013b; 2014). These analyses are replicated for Southern European democracies by Lisi (2014) and for Central and Eastern Europe by Flacco (2014). Schwirz and Marsh (2013) test this argument through CSES data, while Huang (2013) bases his analysis on Asianbarometer data.
increasing relevance of the formers within voters’ evaluative frameworks. As for the few studies that addressed the issue of simultaneity with panel data (Garzia, 2013a; 2013b) there is still a problem to be signaled: namely, they lack the “exogenous shock” required to test causal effects in (natural) experimental situations. Parties and leaders do not change often, and even less so at election time. The problematic empirical implication is that parties and leaders may well have been there before the beginning of the panel study. As a result, causal mechanisms linking leader evaluations to the development of partisan ties are most likely to have taken place before the window of observation warranted by the panel study. On these bases, the ideal setting for testing the causal effect of political leaders on partisanship would seem to be that of party and/or leadership change. The reminder of this paper is devoted to the analysis of Italy in late 2013, an ideal setting to make use of exogenous change and look at its effects on partisanship.

Italy went to the polls for the general (parliamentary) election on February 24th, 2013. The problematic nature of the electoral outcome resulted in a correspondingly long process of government formation that took over two months (for a better description, see: Garzia, 2013c). On April 28th, the President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, appointed Enrico Letta as the head of unity government involving political personalities from both PD and PdL. This parliamentary majority, however, lasted only until mid-November 2013, when Silvio Berlusconi led the exit of PdL from government and the simultaneous return of the party under the original Forza Italia (FI) denomination. This occurrence led in turn to the formation of a smaller party – Nuovo Centro Destra (NCD) – that, under the leadership of Angelino Alfano, decided not to withdraw from government. Just a few weeks after, on December 7-8, the process of political change was pushed even further by the primary election for the party leadership of both PD and LN. Matteo Renzi became the new leader of PD, while Matteo Salvini became leader of LN.

The data presented in this analysis comes from a CAWI panel survey conducted by SWG in collaboration with the University of Siena and ITANES. Respondents were interviewed before the exit of PdL from government (field: 13-15 November; N=808) and again a few days after the primary elections held by PD and LN (field: 17-21 December; N=731). The redemption rate for the panel survey was a remarkably high 91%. Only the respondents accepting to be interviewed in both waves are included in the analysis. In both waves, respondents were asked to rate their degree of
“closeness” to the major Italian parties\(^3\), their thermometer score for the respective leaders and their perceived distance on the left-right scale with each of the parties under analysis. All variables are measured on a 10-point scale and operationalized as in Table 2 below.

### Table 2. Operationalization of key variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>PID(<em>{t2}) − PID(</em>{t1})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship (Δ)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main independent variables</th>
<th>LEAD(<em>{t2}) − LEAD(</em>{t1})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership evaluation (Δ)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right proximity (Δ)</td>
<td>LR_PROX(<em>{t2}) − LR_PROX(</em>{t1})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Differentials in partisanship for PdL/FI are calculated as the difference between the degrees of closeness to FI (new party) and PdL (old party). Differentials in leader evaluations for PD are calculated as the difference between the thermometer score of the new leader (Renzi) and that of the old leader (Bersani).

Before looking into the determinants of stability and the drivers of change, it is useful to have a preliminary look at the direction of change, focusing on patterns of covariance, as presented in Table 3. Note that first differences are grouped in three major categories tapping whether values of a given variable have increased, decreased, or stayed exactly the same across waves.

There appears to be a rather high degree of instability in the data presented in the table, regardless of the party and/or the measure under analysis. The point of this analysis, however, is not to explain the magnitude of change, but rather to find out to what extent change can be interpreted as a result of significant patterns of covariance across the variables of interest. Looking at Panel A, relative to PD before and after the

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\(^3\) Question wording reads as follows: *On a scale from 0 to 10, how close do you feel to each of the following parties?* One notes that question wording sacrifices “the notion of long-term partisan identity for a feeling of closeness to a party...separate from vote choice” (Dalton, 2010: 159)
election of Matteo Renzi as party leader, one notes that the degree of closeness to the party remains stable for almost half of the sample. Yet, the value presented in the last column, indicating the percentage difference between respondents who increased their reported closeness to the party across the two waves and those who decreased it, shows that the value of the partisanship variable has increased, overall, as much as nine percent across the whole sample. When it comes to the main predictors of change, increasing leader evaluations and decreasing distance on the ideological scale represent the modal categories (in **bold**). However, the increase in leader evaluations is disproportionately higher. Two thirds of the sample reported an increase in PD’s leader evaluation (Bersani vs. Renzi) across waves, while only one third reported a decreasing distance on the ideological scale. In terms of statistical relationship, it is worth noting that only leader evaluations co-vary in a significant manner with partisanship ($r = .19$), while no significant relationship would seem to exist between partisanship and issue proximity differentials (and the same holds also for issue proximity and leader evaluations).

**Table 3.** Partisanship, leader Evaluations and issue proximity across panel waves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel A: PD</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Increase–Decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Δ Partisanship</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td><strong>44.7</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Leader Evaluation</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td><strong>66.3</strong></td>
<td>+53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Issue Proximity</td>
<td><strong>37.1</strong></td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel B: PdL/FI</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>Stable</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Increase–Decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Δ Partisanship</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td><strong>52.9</strong></td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Leader Evaluation</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td><strong>54.3</strong></td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>+4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Issue Proximity</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td><strong>35.8</strong></td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moving to Panel B, which maps the transition from PdL back to Forza Italia, one notes immediately a higher degree of stability (modal category), with decreases/increases canceling each other out. Apparently, evaluations of Berlusconi’s leadership are for the most part stable across the two waves, yet with a comparatively higher proportion of increases vis-à-vis decreases (+5 percent). Quite to the contrary, perceived proximity on the left-right scale would seem to decrease. This time, both variables co-vary in a statistically significant manner with partisanship, yet with a two-fold effect of leader evaluations ($r = .27$) as compared to issue proximity ($r = .14$). Once again, the key covariates report no significant association with each other. In other words, Berlusconi’s slightly revived image would seem to keep FI partisanship from falling due to party’s moving away from voters on the ideological scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PD</th>
<th>PdL/FI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age category (6 cat.)</td>
<td>.04 (.06)</td>
<td>.03 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>.22 (.17)</td>
<td>-.24 (.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education (11 cat.)</td>
<td>.03 (.04)</td>
<td>-.07 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Leader Evaluation</td>
<td>.11 (.03)**</td>
<td>.32 (.05)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ Issue Proximity</td>
<td>.05 (.04)</td>
<td>.16 (.14)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-.68 (.44)</td>
<td>.59 (.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-Squared</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable: Δ Partisanship. Cell entries are OLS unstandardized regression coefficients (standard error in parentheses). ** p < .01, * p < .05

To test the robustness of these conclusions, I estimated two First Difference (FD) models. The FD estimator is intended to wipe out time invariant omitted variables using the repeated observations over time. In other words, estimation takes place by regressing “changes on changes” using OLS (Wooldridge, 2001). To put it more
simply, changes in the extent to which a respondent feels close to a given party (i.e., say that closeness to PD in equals ‘5’ in t₁ and ‘7’ in t₂, the value of the dependent variable for that respondent’s closeness to PD equals to ‘2’) are explained as a function of across-wave changes (Δ) in the thermometer score of that party’s leader and in the perceived distance between the respondent and the party on the left-right scale, controlling for basic sociodemographic variables, as measured in t₁. The results, as presented in Table 4, point in the same direction of the previous analyses, and provide further support for the idea that closeness to contemporary Italian parties is mostly associated to voters’ assessment of party leaders’ personality.

6. A Few Concluding Remarks

The (preliminary) results presented in this paper provide a number of hints on contemporary partisanship in the Italian case. Most of these hints are in line with the theoretical expectations. Closeness to Italian parties appears not anymore linked to voters’ placement within the social structure. It seems rather driven by political forces and, in primis, by voters’ assessment of the personality of the party leader. In this paper, I took advantage of the ITANES data series (1990-2014) and updated Garzia and Viotti’s (2011) analysis of the period until 2008. While the personalization trend appears crystal-clear in the case of Salvini’s LN and Grillo’s M5S, the statistical estimates for PD and PdL/FI look less straightforward. A number of explanations for the decline in the leaders’ coefficient have been advanced (i.e., lack of “newness” on behalf of PD and PdL in 2013, economic crisis and, most notably, widespread unpopularity on behalf of the respective party leaders) and a more compelling panel data analysis has been performed to shed new light on the drivers of change. To this purpose, I made use of a unique panel dataset collected by the University of Siena and ITANES during a short period of massive political change (November-December 2013). Putting exogenous change at the core of the model, I found that liking the new leader better is the key to understand warmer feelings towards the party across time. Indeed, leadership evaluations would seem to matter a lot, not only as a source of attraction for parties who do not "run away" from their supporters (i.e., PD), but also as sort of "personalized balances” for parties who decide to move away (in this case, in opposition) from centrist voters, as it is the case with the re-born FI.
Clearly, leaders cannot be the only answer, and probably not even the foremost one. It is plausible that leader evaluations get colored by political and ideological factors as well. Further research in this domain is explicitly called for, also in the light of the major implications of this “personalization” of partisanship. From an electoral research point of view, the main conclusion is that of interpreting carefully single equation models of voting, insofar as in such context they may understatement the final impact of leaders’ images by misattributing to partisanship part of the effect exerted by leaders through partisanship. From a broader democratic theory perspective, these findings would seem to go against sociological (deterministic) theories of partisan dealignment (Dalton, 1984) and point towards a yet-to-be-developed political theory of party identification that can help accounting for ebbs and flows in aggregate partisanship rates across time.

References list


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