

Changing parties, changing partisans: the personalization of partisan attachments in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands

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Changing Parties, Changing Partisans

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of the deep transformations undergone by West European parties in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall fall on their relationship with the electorate. Attention is devoted in particular to the changing content of individuals' partisan attachments, which we hypothesize to have changed from a mere reflection of previous social and ideological identities to the result of individual attitudes towards parties and partisan objects. The main objective of this analysis is to show the nowadays prominent part played by voters' attitudes towards one of these 'objects' – party leaders – in determining psychological attachments with the parties. We concentrate on the main two cleavage-based parties in Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands in the period between 1990 and the most recent election for which National Election Study data is available. By means of logistic regression analysis, it is shown the constantly declining ability of 'identity' items (e.g., social class, union membership, church attendance, region of residence) to predict individual feelings of partisan attachment, as well as the correspondingly growing part played by voters' attitudes towards issues, performance evaluation, and party leaders – the latter having become nowadays of crucial relevance in each country under analysis.

1 Introduction¹

According to the party government model, parties are the key link between various elements of the political process: they create identities, frame electoral choices, and determine the outputs of government. In this respect, 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 widespread erosion of traditional socio-political cleavages encountered in almost every advanced industrial democracy (Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Dalton, 2000) has resulted in a progressive *individualization* of vote choices. This has involved "a shift away from a style of electoral decision-making based on social group and/or party cues toward a more individualized and inwardly oriented style of political choice", mainly based on "policy preferences, performance judgments, or candidate images" (Dalton, 1996: 346). In turn, this has made necessary for class-mass parties to reshape their appeal in order to extend the electoral basin beyond the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred. This process of transformation, already previewed by Downs (1957) and further detailed by Kirchheimer (1966), found its symbolical culmination in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – a turning point after which parties could not be thought anymore as representing "bodies of particular principle", but rather as "vote maximizing agents without any real ideologies of their own" (Daalder, 2002: 52). As a result, contemporary *catch-all* parties have become de-ideological in nature, highly flexible in their issue programmes, and tend to base increasingly their election profiles on features more engaging to voters – such as the *leadership factor* (Evans and Andersen, 2005; Farrell, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2000).

The increasing focus on the personality of individual leaders is also due to the changing patterns of political communication in contemporary democracies. The emergence of television as main source of political information for a vast majority of the Western publics has been crucial in emphasizing the role of political leaders at the expense of parties, making the latter "more dependent in their communications with voters on the essentially visual and personality-based medium of television" (Mughan, 2000: 129). Personalization has been defined as "the more general, pervasive, and fundamental element in the process of change of electoral campaigns" (Swanson and Mancini, 1996). Television-based campaigning accentuates personality factors at the expense of ideology and programmatic goals. In such context, "leaders may well find themselves better able to influence what the electoral strategy and appeal of their party should be" (Curtice, 2003: 16).

In this article, we will attempt to assess the effects of these transformations on the parties' relationship with the electorate. In particular, our attention will be devoted to the changing nature and content of individuals' feelings of psychological attachment with political parties. In spite of the numerous contestations targeted to the concept at both theoretical and empirical level (Budge *et al.*, 1976; Thomassen, 1976; Budge, 2009; Thomassen and Rosema, 2009; *contra*: Greene and Schickler, 2009), we remain convinced of the enduring importance of partisanship in cross-national research (this conviction being shared with, among others: Richardson, 1991; Holmberg, 1994; Berglund *et al.*, 2005; Schmitt, 2009). 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). In this respect, partisanship is a fundamental indicator of the bond between parties and the electorate (Fiori-

¹ This publication is based on work done during the author's stay as a guest of the EUROLAB at GESIS.

na, 2002: 98), and is thus widely employed as a dimension of party system development (Dalton and Weldon, 2007) and stability (Scarrow, 2010).

There are many routes by which voters may become 'partisan' (Erikson *et al.*, 2002). In its classic formulation set forth in *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.*, 1960) partisanship is conceived 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. Yet the social identity approach represents only one explanation of partisanship: its development as a result of ideological proximity, past performance or favorable leader evaluations represents another plausible explanation (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009: 201).

Our analysis moves from the assumption that, like all political attitudes, partisanship is responsive to the set of alternatives available in a political system at a particular point in time (Crewe, 1976). Previous studies have indeed demonstrated how specific party characteristics contribute to distinctive types of partisanship (Richardson, 1991). Therefore, the erosion of stable sources of political orientation (e.g., social cleavages, ideologies) and the resulting transformation of former class-mass parties in Western democracies lead us to hypothesize that partisan loyalties have shifted accordingly from a mere reflection of previous social and ideological identities (as postulated by the Michigan conception of party identification) to the result of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects (Converse, 1995). In particular, the aim of our analysis is to show the (nowadays prominent) part played by voters' attitudes towards one of these 'objects' – party leaders – in determining psychological attachments with the parties. We base our contention on a number of related occurrences, and most notably the widespread practice of candidate-centered campaigning (Wattenberg, 1991; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Farrell and Webb, 2000), the resulting increased influence of leaders in shaping the appeal of their parties (McAllister, 1996; Curtice, 2003), but also the growing tendency among voters to evaluate politics in *personal* rather than *partisan* terms (Sorauf, 1985; Rahn *et al.*, 1990; Pierce, 1993; Campus, 2000).

The choice of cases under analysis – against which our research hypotheses will be tested – is based on the 'Most Different Systems Design' (Landman, 2008). We have chosen three established parliamentary democracies in Western Europe – Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands – connoted by sharp differences in terms of electoral system, size of party system and structure of political competition. Our attention will be concentrated on the two major cleavage-based parties in each nation, that is, those belonging to the main ideological families (e.g., Christian-democrats and socialists), in the period between 1990 and the most recent national election for which National Election Study data is available². By means of logistic regression analysis, it will be shown the constantly declining ability of 'identity' items (e.g., social class, union membership, church attendance, region of residence) to predict individual feelings of partisan attachment, as well as the correspondingly growing part played by voters' attitudes towards party leaders.

The article proceeds as follows: we first present the relevant literature on partisanship, in order to formulate our research hypotheses (Section 2); these will be tested against the Dutch, German and Italian cases (rationale for the cases chosen in Section 3) at both bivariate and multivariate level (Section 4). Finally, the results of the empirical analysis will be discussed along with their implications for further research (Section 5).

² Presumably, the process we are hypothesizing started way before 1990 due to longer-term trends of modernization and secularization among Western societies. However, we decided to concentrate on the last two decades in virtue of the obvious acceleration ignited to the process of party transformation by the fall of Berlin Wall, as well as for reasons of data availability (the first Italian National Election Study has in fact been conducted in 1990).

2 Two Conceptions of Partisanship: Identity and Attitudinal Approaches

In this study, we will stick to a minimal definition of partisanship, namely, the “tendency of voters to repeatedly vote for the same party” (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009: 5). There are essentially two explanations of this tendency in the literature: the *identity* and *attitudinal* approaches (*ibid.*).

The identity approach describes party identification as “the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment” (Campbell *et al.*, 1960: 121). This sense of ‘we feeling’ can be focused either on primary (e.g., race, religion, social class) or secondary groups (e.g., the parties themselves), and it is mainly product of early socialization. The analytical usefulness of the concept lies in its relative stability and distance from the vote. Party identification is in fact conceived as an *unmoved mover*: that is, 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).

Reciprocal causation, however, can represent a problem in this context. As it has been observed, “[p]arty identification is shaping behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions at the same time as it is shaped by attitudes and perceptions” (*ibid.* 562). Claims of this sort have led to an intrinsically different view of partisanship – simply, a positive/negative disposition toward an attitude object (Converse, 1995). 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). In the 1970s a group of “revisionists” (Fiorina, 2002) openly questioned the non-political definition of party identification set forth by Campbell and colleagues, putting emphasis on the importance of cognitive factors as formative aspects behind individuals’ partisan alignments. A number of studies explored in detail the dynamic relationship between partisan affiliations and short-term attitudes (e.g., performance evaluations, issues and candidates), demonstrating the absence of a clear causal sequence from the former to the latter (Page and Jones, 1979; Fiorina, 1981).

In drawing a sharp distinction between these two approaches, we do not imply that one perspective is correct at the expense of the other. Following Rosema (2006), we rather believe that

“partisanship may be conceptualized in terms of identification as well as evaluation. Which conceptualization one prefers will depend on how one views political parties (as groups to which voters may belong, or as organizations that voters may like or dislike)” (Rosema, 2006: 470).

Like all political attitudes, partisanship is supposedly responsive to the particular set of political alternatives available in the political system (Crewe, 1976). Therefore, the nature and shape of partisan ties *must* be influenced to at least some extent by the specific characteristics of political parties themselves (Richardson, 1991). Old cleavage parties were characterized by a tight link with their respective social milieu and, in this sense, they could be conceived as groups to which partisans ‘belonged’ (Campbell and Valen, 1966; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Thomassen, 1976; Parisi and Pasquino, 1977). However, the process of transformation undergone by Western class-mass parties in the last decades has led these parties to a progressive de-attachment from the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred (Katz and Mair, 1995). According to the original Michigan conception of party identification, favorable attitudes towards partisan objects are caused by long-term loyalties based on group membership. But if it is true (as we expect) that contemporary partisanship is not anymore a consequence of socialization forces, then we can assume that partisanship is *caused* exactly by those

attitudes that the identity approach conceive as *consequence* of previous identifications. Based on this assumption, we hypothesize that the process of party change has transformed the nature of partisanship from a reflection of previous social identities to the product of individual attitudes towards parties and partisan objects.

Among the possible sources of individual attitudes, the literature assigns a crucial place to issue preferences. The standard model of rational decision-making based on issues, as applied to the study of voting behavior, is the spatial model developed by Anthony Downs (1957). Voters and parties are placed on a left-right continuum – a “super-issue which summarizes the programmes of opposing groups” (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976: 244). In turn, ideological/policy proximity between the parties and the voter is responsible for the promotion of positive (or negative) attitudes towards each of the parties (Budge *et al.*, 1976), and eventually determines voters' choices (Dalton, 2008: 198-204).

Another important source of attitudes towards parties is represented by *valence* issues – that is, instances in which there is a wide consensus over what goals are desirable (e.g., corruption-free government, management of the economy and public services), but there is conflict over which party is best at delivering them (Stokes, 1963). Attitudes can derive in this case by either retrospective evaluations of party performance (Fiorina, 1981) or prospective competence assessments (Bellucci, 2006).

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 (Page and Jones, 1979). Already in 1968, V. O. Key anticipated a later, cognitive psychological view of partisanship, hypothesizing that “[l]ike or dislike of a political personality...bring shifts in party identification” (Key, 1968; quoted in Clarke *et al.*, 2004). According to this interpretation, partisanship is moved by individual attitudes toward the party as *personified* by the leader, and therefore feelings of closeness should be brought back to the party “in the form of its leader” (Barisione, 2009).

Indeed, we contend that this interpretation is ever more appropriate in the light of the progressive personalization of politics in Western democracies (McAllister, 2007). 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. Impressionistic evidence of this trend include the substitution of leader images for party symbols during election campaigns (McAllister, 1996), the media's increasing propensity to mention candidates rather than the parties they belong to (Dalton *et al.*, 2000), and the tendency to portray executives in a personalized fashion – these being routinely labeled after the name of their leaders (Bean and Mughan, 1989). In the light of this, it does not seem 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). Empirical evidence shows that this is actually the case: a pervasive tendency among contemporary voters is in fact that of evaluating politics in *personal* rather than *partisan* terms (Rahn *et al.*, 1990; Pierce, 1993; Campus, 2000). On these bases, we hypothesize that favorable attitudes towards the leaders have become a stronger – and by now the strongest – determinant of individual feelings of closeness to parties.

3 Germany, Italy and the Netherlands: Reasons of a Comparison

Our research hypotheses will be tested through a comparative analysis of three established parliamentary democracies in Western Europe: Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. The process of case selection rests on the Most Different Systems Design (Landman, 2008). The three countries are in fact connoted by sharp differences in terms of electoral system (pure proportional in the Netherlands, mixed in Germany, majoritarian – with caveats – in Italy in the period 1993–2005), size of party system (limited multipartism in Germany, extreme multipartism in the Netherlands, structural bipolarism in Italy) and structure of political competition. Verifying our hypotheses in these three nations will boost our confidence in the role of party transformation as the prime mover behind the changing patterns of partisan attachment at the individual level.

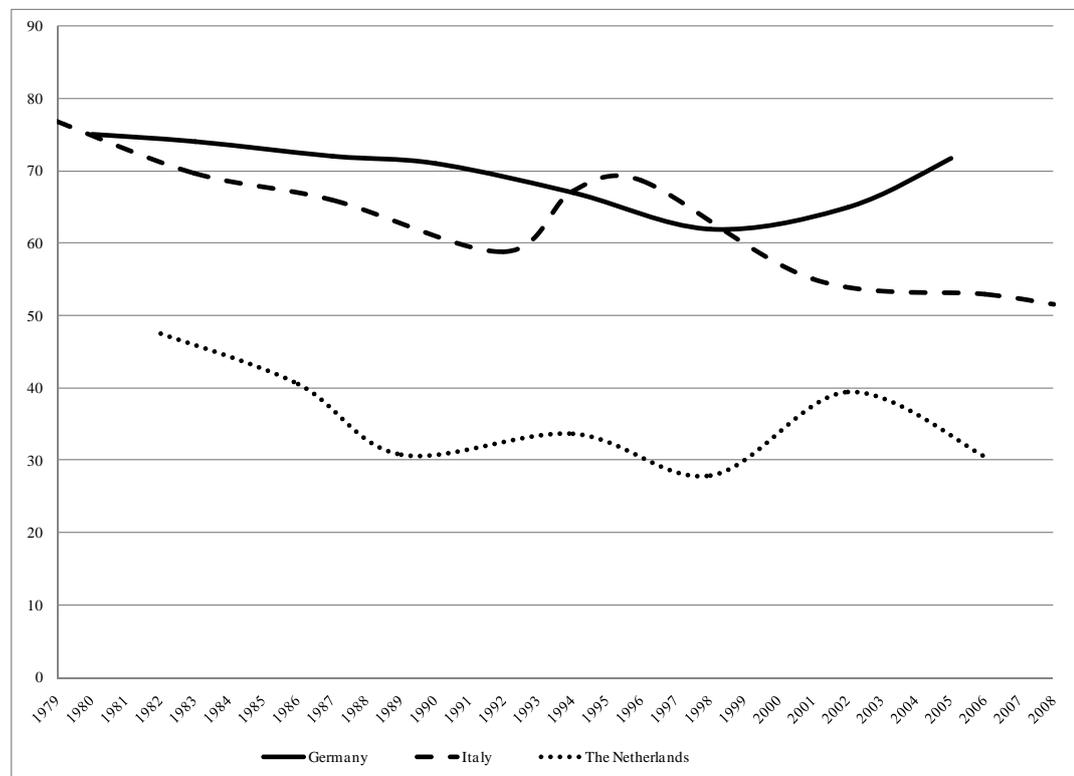
There are strong reasons to believe that our expectations can be by and large fulfilled within the Italian case. In the First Italian Republic (1946–1993), the stability of party identifications was especially accentuated by the tight link between social groups and the main parties of that time (e.g., DC and PCI). In such context, partisanship was regarded 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).

Although the identity approach did provide a suitable explanation of the ties between voters and 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. Italy is in fact the only country among established industrial democracies to have recently experienced the simultaneous dissolution of almost all main parties from an election (e.g., 1992) to another (1994). With the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, the Cold War pattern that had marked Italian politics since the end of WW2 suddenly lost its historical meaning. In such context the old *partitocrazia*, already weakened by an erosion of the stable social cleavages on which it was based and eventually wiped out by Tangentopoli scandals, left the way to a new kind of post-ideological, highly “personalistic” parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2003) – well exemplified by the sudden emergence of Silvio Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia*.

The fall of ideologies, the subsequent disappearance of traditional mass-integration parties from the Italian political scene after Tangentopoli, and the intrinsically catch-all nature of the parties that took their place since the election of 1994, make us doubtful of a reconstruction of mass partisanship based on social and political cleavages. In line with the empirical evidence presented in earlier analyses (see: Venturino, 2000; Garzia, 2009; 2011), we would rather point to the increasingly crucial role played by leader evaluations in determining individuals’ feelings of closeness to the new parties. Notwithstanding the clear lack of solid socio-ideological bases among contemporary Italian parties, these are in fact entities to which substantial parts of the electorate still *feel close to* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of Voters Close to a Party (1979-2008)



Sources: [DE] Mair *et al.*, 2004; German Federal Election Study 2005 [IT] Eurobarometer 1979-1994; Itanes 1996-2008 [NL] Thomassen and Rosema, 2009

Obviously, one should note that such abrupt pattern of party system transformation is definitely uncommon in the Western experience. In the wide majority of established European democracies, political parties did undergo a long, and at times hard, process of adaptation to the new context (e.g., erosion of social cleavages, fall of ideologies, mediatization and personalization of politics) but by no means disappeared. It is for this reason that we decided to compare Italy with the Dutch and German cases. These countries are in fact marked by sharp differences *vis-à-vis* Italy in the developmental trajectory of their party systems (e.g., adaptation rather than change). If our research hypotheses were vindicated also against the Dutch and German cases, this would rule out the uniqueness of the Italian experience and boost our confidence in the role of party transformation as causal determinant of the changing nature of partisan attachments.

The period under analysis begins in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall fall and covers the last two decades. Our interest in this particular time frame relates to (a) the peculiar ways in which personalization have replaced socio-ideological aspects of the political competition and (b) the interesting patterns of aggregate partisanship in each of these countries. Let us briefly review these points in turn.

There are probably few words able to characterize better the politics of the Federal Republic of Germany than *Parteienstaat* and *Kanzelerdemokratie*. The first connotes the crucial role of political parties in the constitutional setting, while the second refers to the dominant figure of the Chancellor in the German system of governance (Saalfeld, 2000). After a long period of balance between the two, the last decades have witnessed a marked decline in the public image of political parties (Arzheimer, 2006) and a correspondingly growing exposure of the Chancellors (as well as that of individual candidates to the chancellorship) at the expense of their parties, especially during electoral campaigns.

Although German campaigns have always been centered on candidates to some extent, it is only in the 1990s that the notion of personalization is, for the first time, discussed at length (Brettschneider and Gabriel, 2002). The charismatic figure of Helmut Kohl has been crucial in this respect, and his successful endurance on the political scene led ultimately his contenders and successors to follow suit. This was especially evident in the 2002 campaign, which large parties focused "almost exclusively" on their chancellor-candidates (Poguntke, 2005). The increasingly central role of the personality features of political leaders on their parties' appeal is further corroborated by analyses of party structures, which testify of an unambiguous adoption of catch-all, leader-centered electoral strategies on the behalf of the major German parties (Gunther and Diamond, 2003).

Contrary to the German and Italian cases, the Netherlands are hardly a case in point with respect to personalization. The Dutch civil society has long been founded on pillars, and virtually all areas of social life, including politics, were organized along the principles of religion and ideology (Andeweg and Irwin, 2003). Accordingly, the voters' relationship with parties was based on their belonging to the pillars, thus leaving little room for leading politicians' personality to affect their political attitudes and behavior (Irwin and van Holsteyn, 1989). However, the erosion of pillars and the resulting deterioration of traditional bonds between parties and voters have led also Dutch parties to reshape their appeal on increasingly volatile voters by highlighting "the qualities of individual politicians", and most notably the "managerial skills of their prime ministerial candidates" (Fiers and Krouwel, 2005: 151). A crucial step towards the personalization of Dutch politics is represented by the 2002 election, which saw the entrance of Pim Fortuyn on the political scene. His flamboyant rhetoric gained him an unprecedented attention in the media (Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2003), in spite of the fact that he was formally an outsider with no party or formal political position to talk about (de Graaf, 2010). Fortuyn can be credited with changing the Dutch political landscape to a substantial extent, and in particular the way in which politics is presented to the public. Nowadays, it is common for Dutch campaigns to be depicted as *horse races* between the major parties' leaders (Fiers and Krouwel, 2005). Accordingly, party structures have eventually converged around a small group of party leaders as key decision-makers within the party (Andeweg, 2000).

Along with the peculiar patterns of personalization in their political systems, our interest in these three countries is also related to the interesting patterns of aggregate partisanship that are observed in the last two decades (see Figure 1). Against an international trend of partisan dealignment (Dalton, 2000), we find signs of substantial stability since the early 1990s in the Netherlands, and even a significant increase in Germany since the 2000s (in 2006, the percentage of German voters declaring to feel close to a party is roughly comparable to that of the late 1970s). The case of Italy is slightly more complex: there is a steady downward movement, began in the mid-1980s because of the growing disaffection with parties, and culminated with the fall of the First Republic. After a peak in 1996, probably due to the widespread enthusiasm with the new political experience, the figure gets progressively down to roughly 50 percent. Although the trend line speaks unequivocally of a constant erosion of partisan ties, we must also note the major restructuration undergone by the Italian party system in both early-1990s and late-2000s – an occurrence that makes us indeed surprised of the substantial hold in the figure relative to aggregate partisanship (in 2008, an Italian out of two keeps declaring to feel close to one of the parties).

It would thus seem that partisanship has remained somewhat valuable to the Dutch, German, and Italian electorates, and especially in the most recent decades. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to the empirical section of our analysis.

4 Data Analysis

In the empirical analysis, we will assess the determinants of individual partisanship with respect to the two major parties belonging to the Christian-democrat and socialist families respectively in each country³. The parties under analysis are thus SPD and CDU for the German case, and PvdA and CDA for the Dutch. The abrupt changes in the Italian party system occurred in the early 1990s have led us to a slightly more difficult process of case selection. Eventually, we decided to base our choice on the criterion of electoral relevance. With respect to the socialist family, we therefore chose the Communist Party (PCI) along with its major heirs (e.g., *Partito Democratico della Sinistra*, *Democratici di Sinistra*, *Partito Democratico*), while on the right-hand of the political spectrum, we picked Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (since 2008: *Popolo della Libertà*) as follower of the Christian Democracy's (DC) electoral tradition.

The dependent variable of our analysis relies on the root question of party identification battery in each survey. One notes that question wording is hardly comparable throughout countries (see Appendix B); however, considerable semantic similarities are found between the ways in which respondents are asked about their attachment to parties ('leaning towards' in Germany, 'feeling closer to' in Italy, 'being an adherent of' in the Netherlands). Furthermore, question wording has been kept constant in each national survey, thus allowing for safe intra-country comparison. According to Dalton (2010), this question sacrifices "the notion of long-term partisan identity for a feeling of closeness to a party", but at the same time taps "affinity to a party separate from the vote, and it can be used in systems with diverse party traditions" (159).

The choice to stick to the *directional component* of partisanship alone (Holmberg, 1994) is based on the very aim of this research – that is, understanding the reason why respondents "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). We 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 independent variables included in the analysis correspond to the indicators that are supposed to tap both social and attitudinal partisanship. As to the former, we include the respondent's frequency of church attendance, subjective social class⁴, region of residence⁵, and trade union membership (variable coding in Appendix C); we also control for standard socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, and educational level). For what concerns the attitudinal dimensions of partisanship, our analysis include 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 '0' to '10'), party leader evaluation (thermometer score on a scale from '0' to '10'), and – when available – performance evaluation (respondent's opinion on the economic performance of the incumbent government, ranging from a value of '0' when very negative to a value of '10' if very positive).

³ We decided to concentrate on (former) class-mass parties alone as the process outlined in this paper (e.g., decline of ideologies and cleavage-based politics, resulting transformations at the party level) can be thought to exert its effects mainly on the relationship between voters and this kind of parties.

⁴ Not available in the German dataset.

⁵ In the case of Italy we created three categories for the Northern, Central and Southern regions respectively, in the light of the traditional dominance of centre-right parties in the North and centre-left parties in the so-called *Red Belt* (Parisi and Pasquino, 1977; Bellucci, 2007). As to the German case, this variable is a dummy coding '0' respondents from the West (including Berlin) and '1' those from the East. With respect to the Netherlands, regional differences in terms of partisan affiliations do not seem strong enough (Andeweg and Irwin, 2003) to justify separate codings.

4.1 Bivariate Analysis

A first hint of the growing correspondence between individual respondents' evaluation of party leaders and their feelings of closeness to parties comes from the point-biserial correlation coefficients⁶ of these two variables as reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Point-Biserial Correlations: Leader Evaluation and Partisanship (1990-2006)

Germany			Italy			The Netherlands		
Year	SPD	CDU	Year	PCI/PDS	DC/FI	year	PvdA	CDA
1990	.456	.525	1990	.350	.350	1994	.236	.248
1994	.414	.559	1996	.454	.389	1998	.204	.359
1998	.422	.409						
Mean 1990s	.431	.498	Mean 1990s	.402	.370	Mean 1990s	.220	.304
2002	.468	.540	2001	.391	.415	2002	.265	.302
2005	.516	.457	2006	.435	.496	2006	.370	.352
Mean 2000s	.492	.499	Mean 2000s	.413	.456	Mean 2000s	.318	.326

Note: All correlation coefficients are significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

At first, we observe that all coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .01$) and positively signed – that is, partisanship is always significantly related to more favorable party leader evaluations. With respect to the magnitude of the coefficients, the table shows a substantial increase throughout time. The pattern is especially clear in the case of Italian centre-right parties, where the value of the correlation coefficients rises monotonically during the period 1990-2006. With regard to centre-left parties, the upwards trend is disturbed by a peak in 1996, in all probabilities due to the extraordinary popularity enjoyed at the time by the Left-Democrats leader Massimo D'Alema (Garzia, 2009: 16). However, if one observes the mean values of the correlation coefficients relative to each decade, the increasing correspondence between partisanship and party leader evaluation emerges more clearly.

To be sure, correlation does not prove causation, and even if we have theoretical reasons – at least, for the cases at hand – to believe that the causal sequence between voters' attitudes toward party leaders and partisanship runs from the former to the latter, we still need to rule out other potential explana-

⁶ The point-biserial correlation coefficient is a special case of Pearson in which one variable (either dependent or independent) is quantitative and the other variable is dichotomous (Howell, 2009).

tions. To this purpose, a multivariate analysis assessing the role of leader evaluations controlling for the effect of all other variables is in order.

4.2 Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis consists in two steps. In the first part, the sources of partisanship will be assessed through a comparison of the relative explanatory power of identity items *vis-à-vis* attitudinal ones. This part is aimed at showing that – consistently with our preliminary hypothesis – partisan loyalties have shifted from a mere reflection of previous social and ideological identities to the result of individual attitudes towards more visible partisan objects⁷. In the second part, we will compare the relative strength of attitudinal items as determinants of alignments with each of the parties under analysis. In this way, we will be able to demonstrate the growing impact of leader evaluations as opposed to other potential sources of attitudes (e.g., issue proximity, performance evaluations).

Twenty-eight different logistic regression analyses have been performed on data from the period 1990-2008. 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. Two blocks of predictors have been subsequently included. The first block includes identity items (church attendance, union membership, social class, and region of residence) and standard socio-demographic controls (gender, age, educational level; coefficients are not shown), while the second block features attitudinal items (issue proximity, performance, and leader evaluation). Logistic regression estimates (unstandardized *b* coefficients) are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

⁷ In our view, the causal role of attitudes as determinants of alignment with these parties could be effectively demonstrated by showing the lack of explanatory power on the behalf of identity items. If attitudes are to be interpreted as consequence of partisanship, this *must* be due to pre-existing social identities. However, a clear lack of explanatory power by identity items – that is, a substantial absence of long-term social ties between parties and partisans – looks us as a strong proof in favor of the independent role of attitudes as drivers of partisan alignments.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Estimates (unstandardized b coefficients) – Italy, 1990-2008

	PCI 1990	PDS 1996	DS 2001	DS 2006	PD 2008	DC 1990	FI 1996	FI 2001	FI 2006	PDL 2008
Church Attendance	-.569 (.091)**	-.343 (.048)**	-.232 (.045)**	-.209 (.057)**	-.091 (.042)*	.535 (.092)**	-.053 (.063)	.080 (.040)*	.070 (.061)	.086 (.043)*
Union Membership	.801 (.243)**	.977 (.144)**	.834 (.146)**	.700 (.194)**	.804 (.290)**	-.241 (.279)	-1.002 (.267)**	-.637 (.180)**	-.255 (.255)	-.657 (.439)
Social Class	-.182 (.097)	-.017 (.052)	-.031 (.049)	-.003 (.059)	n/a	.207 (.099)*	.139 (.067)*	.065 (.045)	.056 (.065)	n/a
Region of Residence	-.324 (.221)	-.817 (.132)**	-.373 (.076)**	-.161 (.092)	-.152 (.075)*	-.298 (.236)	.396 (.190)	-.053 (.067)	.074 (.100)	-.080 (.074)
Controls	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.						
Nagelkerke R ²	.243	.192	.069	.048	.028	.147	.051	.028	.010	.012
Issue Proximity	-.516 (.087)**	-.640 (.066)**	-.916 (.079)**	-.710 (.094)**	-.388 (.057)**	-.566 (.098)**	-.549 (.091)**	-.638 (.060)**	-.585 (.099)**	-.178 (.050)**
Leader Evaluation	.402 (.065)**	.750 (.063)**	.371 (.049)**	.411 (.063)**	.653 (.058)**	.243 (.071)**	.801 (.090)**	.664 (.052)**	.746 (.082)**	.766 (.055)**
Government Eval. (retro)	n/a	n/a	.211 (.045)**	-.102 (.053)	.327 (.037)**	n/a	n/a	-.088 (.038)*	.001 (.059)	-.091 (.041)*
Added Nagelkerke R ²	.253	.400	.444	.406	.456	.203	.457	.469	.538	.442
Nagelkerke R ² (Total)	.496	.592	.513	.454	.484	.350	.508	.497	.548	.454

Note: Dependent variable: Partisanship (dummy). Standard errors in parentheses. ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. Controls include: age, gender, education.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Estimates (unstandardized b coefficients) – Germany, 1990–2005

	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands					Christlich Demokratische Union				
	1990	1994	1998	2002	2005	1990	1994	1998	2002	2005
Church Attendance	-.394 (.067)**	-.251 (.064)**	-.242 (.059)**	-.213 (.036)**	-.158 (.046)**	.381 (.063)**	.314 (.059)**	.474 (.065)**	.460 (.035)**	.334 (.048)**
Union Membership	.694 (.230)**	.727 (.180)**	.664 (.174)**	.775 (.116)**	.530 (.172)**	-.680 (.250)**	-.862 (.204)**	-.309 (.212)	-.723 (.151)**	-.591 (.210)**
West/East	n/a	-.646 (.173)**	-.335 (.152)*	-.564 (.101)**	-.341 (.169)*	n/a	.261 (.147)	-.136 (.155)	-.314 (.110)**	.129 (.164)
Controls	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Nagelkerke R ²	.096	.077	.054	.055	.043	.170	.121	.123	.138	.087
Issue Proximity	-.362 (.065)**	-.216 (.051)**	-.218 (.053)**	-.249 (.036)**	-.447 (.061)**	-.329 (.065)**	-.567 (.066)**	-.319 (.056)**	-.369 (.033)**	-.523 (.055)**
Leader Evaluation	.432 (.051)**	.535 (.048)**	.497 (.043)**	.700 (.033)**	.750 (.052)**	.886 (.100)**	.633 (.062)**	.386 (.040)**	.519 (.030)**	.520 (.043)**
Government Eval. (retro)	-.161 (.056)**	-.228 (.045)**	n/a	n/a	n/a	.351 (.078)**	.299 (.063)**	n/a	n/a	n/a
Added Nagelkerke R ²	.354	.317	.273	.355	.495	.411	.496	.249	.373	.359
Nagelkerke R ² (Total)	.450	.394	.327	.410	.538	.581	.617	.372	.511	.446
Chi-Square	283.195	333.080	276.990	909.197	675.512	402.395	631.067	317.094	1145.925	522.706
Valid N	719	986	1084	2660	1373	722	1061	1088	2613	1373

Note: Dependent variable: Partisanship (dummy). Standard errors in parentheses. ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. Controls include: age, gender, education.

Table 4: Logistic Regression Estimates (unstandardized b coefficients) – The Netherlands, 1994–2006

	Partij van de Arbeid				Christen Democratisch Appèl			
	1994	1998	2002	2006	1994	1998	2002	2006
Church Attendance	-.422 (.088)**	-.464 (.090)**	-.389 (.083)**	-.598 (.130)**	.677 (.066)**	.759 (.067)**	.544 (.053)**	1.712 (.151)**
Union Membership	.977 (.203)**	.973 (.188)**	.709 (.189)**	.322 (.148)*	-.360 (.277)	.005 (.259)	-.043 (.198)	-.114 (.160)
Social Class	-.100 (.104)	-.495 (.102)**	-.387 (.103)**	-.309 (.068)**	.024 (.126)	.176 (.133)	.112 (.112)	.213 (.070)**
Controls	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.	Incl.
Nagelkerke R²	.124	.147	.104	.054	.328	.372	.204	.191
Issue Proximity	-.423 (.074)**	-.438 (.080)**	-.418 (.076)**	-.301 (.053)**	-.351 (.086)**	-.447 (-.115)**	-.253 (.076)**	-.398 (.057)**
Leader Evaluation	.440 (.077)**	.517 (.076)**	.506 (.066)**	.800 (.065)**	.506 (.099)**	.737 (.087)**	.594 (.078)**	.577 (.072)**
Government Eval. (retro)	-.126 (.063)*	.186 (.068)**	.231 (.071)**	-.136 (.024)**	-.308 (.080)**	.010 (.077)	.047 (.050)	.142 (.023)**
Added Nagelkerke R²	.169	.148	.239	.307	.133	.148	.126	.237
Nagelkerke R ² (Total)	.293	.295	.343	.361	.461	.520	.330	.428
Chi-Square	197.237	232.261	259.704	463.933	310.442	374.208	266.265	606.565
Valid N	1264	1570	1459	1920	1254	1336	1408	1924

Note: Dependent variable: Partisanship (dummy). Standard errors in parentheses. ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05. Controls include: age, gender, education.

Moving again from the Italian case, we start with an overall assessment of the predictive power of the various models, as measured by the coefficient of multiple determination (Nagelkerke R²). As shown in Table 2, the sum of identity and attitudinal items explains partisanship in a substantially uniform manner (pseudo-R² ranging between .45 and .59 in the case of centre-left parties, and between .45 and .55 in the case of FI/PdL). Yet the key finding from the table lies in the constantly declining power of identity items to explain individuals' feeling of closeness to parties. The most marked decrease appears with respect to centre-right parties, where the explanatory power of identity items falls below

pseudo- $R^2 = .10$ already in 1996 – that is, as soon as the DC is replaced by Forza Italia. Furthermore, the regression coefficients relative to identity items are almost always insignificant, and we note the very weak part played by church attendance as a statistical predictor of closeness to FI. On the centre-left side of the spectrum, identity items are slower in falling below the .10 threshold – which they eventually do in 2001. However, it is also interesting to note how in 2008 the ability of identity items to predict feelings of closeness to the brand-new Partito Democratico gets to triviality (pseudo- $R^2 = .03$), thus signaling the intrinsically catch-all nature of the new leading actor of Italian centre-left.

The statistical model, as applied to the German case, appears to behave in a slightly more erratic fashion (cumulative pseudo- R^2 ranging between .32 and .54 in the case of SPD, and between .37 and .61 in the case of CDU). Nonetheless, Table 3 shows a monotonic decrease in the predictive power of identity items when the dependent variable is the respondents' closeness to SPD (pseudo- $R^2 < .10$ in the 1990s, and around .05 in the 2000s). In the case of CDU, the identity component denotes a slower decline, but it eventually falls below the .10 threshold in the last time-point for which we have available data (2005).

Consistently with the above discussion, the Netherlands emerge as the country where the identity component plays the comparatively stronger part in shaping feelings of closeness to parties (see Section 3). Table 4 presents the regression estimates of our model as applied to the Dutch case. This seems to perform better when the dependent variable is CDA partisanship (cumulative pseudo- R^2 between .33 and .52) than in the case of PvdA (range between .26 and .36). The former comes forward as the most 'identitarian' party among those under analysis. In the case of CDA, in fact, identity items explain a significant part of the variance in the dependent variable, and especially in 1990s. The 2000s show nonetheless a reduction in the explanatory power of the identity component, which gets to a minimum in 2006 (pseudo- $R^2 < .20$). The case of PvdA is denoted by a weaker role played by identity items throughout our time-series. Most important to our purposes is, however, their progressive decline (pseudo- $R^2 < .20$ in the 1990s and beneath the .10 threshold in the 2000s). Especially interesting is the steady decline in the magnitude of the coefficient relative to union membership, which witnesses the progressive de-attachment of PvdA from the working class in the last two decades.

Based on these empirical evidences, we can assert that the changing nature and content of partisan alignments is a widespread phenomenon in our three democracies. This is constantly connoted by a sharp decline in the ability of identity items to explain partisanship, and by a correspondingly tighter relationship between favorable attitudes towards partisan objects and individual feelings of closeness to a party. In the following step of the analysis, we will attempt to assess the relative power of various attitude forces in determining partisan ties, in order to verify whether – in accordance with our core research hypothesis – attitudes towards the party leader have actually become the strongest statistical predictor of closeness to parties. To our purposes, it is worth noting that coefficients related to attitude items are comparable in magnitude⁸.

Consistently with our expectations, the Italian case emerges as paradigmatic of the crucial role exerted by party leaders in shaping feelings of attachment towards their parties. Moving from the centre-right, we note that in the case of DC the regression coefficient relative to issue proximity is twice as big as that relative to leader evaluations. The entrance of FI as main centre-right actor in Italian politics results, unsurprisingly, in a massive increase in the predictive power of leader evaluations (strongest statistical predictor in each model) at the expense of the issue component. In the case of centre-left parties we find 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

⁸ Both leader evaluations and retrospective government evaluations are scaled on a range from '0' to '10', while the way we operationalized issue proximity (e.g., the distance between the self and the party on a 11-point left-right scale, in absolute value) leads to the same range of possible values.

to an end in correspondence with the 2008 election. To understand this finding, it must be highlighted the preeminent part played by Walter Veltroni in both the foundation of PD and its electoral campaign. The personalization of the political supply (usually a peculiarity of the Italian centre-right) on the behalf of the centre-left represented to some the real innovation of the 2008 campaign (Barisione and Catellani, 2008). Our data seem to demonstrate 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 number of voters and a brand-new party. But most of all, this finding seems to confirm the crucial role of party change as the prime mover behind the progressive personalization of the dynamics of partisan alignment in Italy.

As explained above, we decided to compare Italy with Germany and the Netherlands on the grounds of their widely different patterns of party system development. Therefore, verifying our main research hypotheses also with respect to the latter countries would boost our confidence in the effect of party transformation on the changing nature of partisan attachments outside the (too often quoted) Italian borders of uniqueness. Instead of discussing the results from Germany and the Netherlands separately, we will rather look at the similarities observed in the patterns of partisan alignment with respect to both Dutch and German social-democratic parties, on the one hand, and on the Christian-democratic parties, on the other hand. As to the former, our regression analyses show a clear trend towards personalization, with the coefficient relative to leader evaluations rising almost monotonically at the expense of the issue component (while performance judgments seem to play hardly a role). However, we note that centre-right parties do not conform fully to this trend. In the case of Dutch CDA, the leader component is always stronger than the issue component, but there is no uniform increase in the regression coefficients throughout time. More complicated is the case of German CDU, where we observe a sort of de-personalization trend (the leader component gets progressively smaller as compared to the issue component, and roughly equivalent in 2005). Indeed this represents the only party among those under analysis for which leader evaluations have become, in the last two decades, a *less* important determinant of partisanship. A possible explanation of this finding will be discussed in the next section, where we try to take stock of the evidence collected throughout this analysis and draw some avenues for further research.

5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we hope to have shown the dramatic changes occurred in the last two decades in the origins and content of mass partisanship in Italy, Germany and the Netherlands. Although the relatively few and recent points in time covered in our analysis did not allow to fully assessing the long-term decline of pre-existing social identities as determinants of individual feelings of attachment to parties, we can nonetheless affirm that contemporary partisanship appears (more) strongly related to voters' attitudes towards more visible partisan objects, such as policies and individual leaders. In the light of the evidence collected throughout this analysis, the trend looks more evident on the case of former class-mass parties from the left (e.g., Dutch PvdA, German SPD, and Italian Left-Democrats), but it looks on its way also on the right (e.g., Dutch CDA and German CDU).

As argued at the beginning of this paper, we would tend to impute such change to the process of transformation undergone by former class-mass parties in Western Europe as a response to the progressive erosion of traditional group affiliations in advanced industrial societies. The decline of social cleavages, along with the fall of ideologies, has forced these parties to reshape their appeal in order to extend the electoral basin beyond the socio-ideological cleavages to which they usually referred. Based on the idea that partisanship is responsive to the set of alternatives available in a political system, our analysis has indeed shown that such transformations at the party level are clearly reflected in the dynamics of partisan alignment at the individual level – nowadays a matter of attitudes rather than identity.

With respect to attitudes themselves, we have shown the primacy of leader evaluations as opposed to issue proximity and performance assessments. Based on the most recent literature on political communication (for a review, see: Campus, 2010) we have reasons to believe that technological innovations, and television in particular, have been crucial in this respect. Televised communication accentuates personality factors at the expense of ideology and programmatic goals – the former being at the same time easier to understand for contemporary 'reasoning voters' (Popkin, 1994). Not by chance, our analysis has clearly highlighted the emergence of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (and later, PdL) as paradigm of the changing dynamics of partisan alignment. Yet the strong finding of the analysis is another, and lies in the observation that North-European parties of longer tradition are following the very same path.

Among the parties we analyzed, the only exception to this conclusion is represented by German CDU, where we witnessed a sort of de-personalization trend. However, one should also note that our time-series begin in 1990 – that is, the year in which Helmut Kohl's popularity was at its climax. To understand the declining role of party evaluations as determinants of CDU partisanship in the 2000s, it must be considered the importance of Kohl's figure for his party – as well as for the country he led for 16 years – in the 1990s. His imposing stature has been so far difficult to match for those who followed him (the actual CDU leader, Chancellor Angela Merkel, is an eloquent case in point). Looking at our empirical results with this in mind, we would be inclined to interpret the de-personalization of CDU partisanship not as a disconfirmation of our hypothesis, but rather as a further hint of the crucial importance played today by a popular leader for the successful appeal of his (or her) party.

A note of caution is in order here. The main hypothesis of this study implies a causal relationship between leader evaluations and the development of partisan ties – a causal relationship which is however not directly testable with large-*n* surveys based on structured questionnaires. Nonetheless, this paper has shown quite clearly that attitudes toward leaders and attitudes towards parties (partisanship) are *strongly* related. It also shows that – limitedly to the last two decades – they are *increasingly* so. Future research based on more experimental techniques such as counter-factuals (i.e., van Holsteyn

and Andeweg, 2010) or vignettes (Finch, 1987) will certainly provide more direct evidence for the direction of this causal process.

What are the implications of our findings for cross-national research in electoral politics? Against the common wisdom that sees popular party leaders as a fundamental asset for their parties, the scientific community has been almost unanimous in downplaying the electoral effects of leader images in democratic elections, in virtue of the pre-eminent role played by pre-existing partisan affiliations on voters' choice (King, 2002). The empirical evidence presented in this paper represents, in our opinion, a chance to resolve this tension. In the light of the increasingly crucial role exerted by party leader evaluations on individuals' feelings of attachment to parties, we believe that the electoral effect of an attractive leader needs not to be found in the net gain of votes due to his/her strictly personal appeal, but rather in the improved image in voters' mind of the party he leads and *personifies* (Curtice, 2003; McAllister, 2007; Barisione, 2009). In this sense, leaders can be thought to affect vote choices *through* partisanship. Of course, much more research is needed in order to substantiate this claim. The modest hope of this paper is that of having oriented the discussion on the right track.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Data Sources

Germany

- 1990-8 Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Hermann Schmitt, Bernhard Wessels and Tanja Binder. *The European Voter Dataset*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA3911 Data file.
- 2002 Jurgen Falter, Oscar Gabriel and Hans Rattinger. *Political Attitudes, Political Participation and Voter Conduct in United Germany 2002*. GESIS Cologne, Germany. ZA3861 Data file.
- 2005 Steffen Kühnel, Oskar Niedermayer and Bettina Westle. *Bürger und Parteien in einer veränderten Welt*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Wahlforschung. ZA 4332 Data file.

Italy

- 1990 Arturo Parisi and Hans Schadee. *Italian National Election Study 1990*. Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna.
- 1996 Piergiorgio Corbetta and Arturo Parisi. *Italian National Election Study 1996*. Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna.
- 2001 Mario Caciagli and Piergiorgio Corbetta. *Italian National Election Study 2001*. Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna.
- 2006 Paolo Bellucci and Paolo Segatti. *Italian National Election Study*. Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna.
- 2008 Paolo Bellucci and Paolo Segatti. *Italian National Election Study 2008*. Istituto Cattaneo, Bologna.

The Netherlands

- 1994 Stichting Kiezersonderzoek Nederland. *Nationaal kiezersonderzoek 1994*. Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Steinmetz Archive. P1208 Data file.
- 1998 Kees Aarts, Henk van der Kolk and Marlies Kamp. *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 1998*. Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Steinmetz Archive. P1415 Data file.
- 2002 Galen Irwin, Joop van Holsteyn and Jan den Ridder. *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2002-2003*. Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Steinmetz Archive. P1628 Data file.
- 2006 Kees Aarts, Henk van der Kolk, Martin Rosema and Hans Schmeets. *Dutch Parliamentary Election Study 2006*. Netherlands Institute for Scientific Information Services, Steinmetz Archive.

Appendix B – Party Identification Question Wording

Germany

Many people in the Federal Republic lean toward a particular party for a long time, although they may vote for a different party. How about you? Do you in general lean toward a particular party?

Italy

Is there any political party that you feel closer to than others?

The Netherlands

Many people think of themselves as adherents of a particular party, but there are many other people who do not regard themselves as such. How about you, do you regard yourself as an adherent of a political party or don't you?

Appendix C – Variable Codings

Gender

Male (0), Female (1)

Age

Age in years

Educational Level

[DE&IT] Elementary Sc. (1), Middle Sc. (2), High Sc. (3), University (4)

[NL] Scale from lowest (1) to highest (10)

Church Attendance

Never (1), 2/3 Times a year (2), Once a month (3), 2/3 Times a month (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

[IT] Val d'Aosta, Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Trentino Alto-Adige, Friuli-Venezia-Giulia (1); Emilia-Romagna, Toscana, Marche, Umbria, Lazio, Abruzzo, Molise (0); Campania, Basilicata, Puglia, Calabria, Sicilia, Sardegna (-1)

[DE] West Germany (0), East Germany (1)

Left-Right Self Placement

Scale from 0 ('left') to 10 ('right')

Leader Evaluation

Scale from 0 ('completely negative evaluation') to 10 ('completely positive evaluation')

Retrospective Government Evaluation

Scale from 0 ('really bad') to 10 ('really well')