Personalization of Politics
between Television and the Internet:
Leader Effects in the 2013 Italian Parliamentary Election[*]

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Abstract. Comparative electoral research has proven reluctant in systematically addressing the role played by television exposure as a driver of personalization in voting behaviour. In a similar vein, the relationship between the rise of Internet-based political communication and the personalization trend has been widely under-researched so far. This paper addresses these timely empirical questions through a case study of Italy — a prototypical case for the personalization of politics and its relationship with political communication. The results, showing the dominance of leader effects among voters strongly exposed to television and a somewhat differentiated impact on Internauts, are tested for their robustness across a wide range of model specifications and alternative operationalizations of dependent and independent variables. By looking at leader effects across different audiences, this paper elaborates on the as of now underdeveloped link between electoral research and political communication, and eventually speaks to the broader question of how important is media for the outcome of contemporary democratic elections.

Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of academic studies have concentrated on the increasingly tighter relationship between personality and the functioning of representative democracy, with a particular interest on the process of *personalization of politics* (McAllister, 2007). According to Rahat and Sheafer (2007), 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). Similarly, Karvonen (2010: 4) puts at the core of his personalization hypothesis the notion that "individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities". The growing importance of individuals *vis-à-vis* groups in the political process has been put under scrutiny under multiple perspectives by political scientists. Previous research on the topic can nonetheless be summarized into three major categories, dealing in turn with political institutions (i.e., parties and electoral systems), political communication, and citizens' voting behaviour (*ibid.*). Indeed, the personalization of politics can be conceived as the cumulative effect of the changes occurring in the reciprocal relationships between the main actors of contemporary democratic politics: parties, media, and voters (Garzia, 2014). Institutional analyses have stressed the growing importance of leaders within their own parties' structures (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The increasing centrality of political leaders in contemporary post-bureaucratic parties has been shown to bear strong effects also on patterns of political and electoral competition. Previous research provided relatively convincing evidence that the transformation undergone by political parties in the last decades fostered the role of individual leaders in driving feeling of closeness to the party (Garzia, 2013a) and, eventually, voting behaviour (Lobo, 2008). Also political communication research devoted a strong interest to the process of personalization. Studies of modern electoral campaigns have emphasized the increased visibility of political leaders as well as their crucial role in conveying party messages to the public at large (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). Yet, not much is known about the relationship between changing patterns of political communication and the electoral effect

of party leaders on voting. In particular, the role played by television exposure as a driver of personalization in voting behaviour, as well as the relationship between the rise of Internet-based political communication and the personalization trend have so far been widely under-researched.

This paper addresses these empirical questions through a case study of the Italian parliamentary election of February 2013. As a matter of fact, Italy provides a prototypical case for the study of the personalization of politics and its relationship with political communication (Campus, 2010). Initially unfolded in the early 1990s as a result of party system breakdown and the simultaneous "entrance in the field" of media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, personalization has heavily characterized the last two political decades. In spite of their pivotal role in both party structures (Calise, 2000) and political communication (Mazzoleni, 1996), only a few studies investigated systematically the impact of party leaders on Italians' electoral behaviour (Venturino, 2000; Garzia, 2013b; Bellucci *et al.,* 2015). A pervious longitudinal study found relatively strong evidence of the link between the progressive personalization of party structures and increasing leader effects in voting behaviour (Garzia and Viotti, 2011). To the contrary, the relationship between media change and personalization in voting behaviour has never been systematically measured. Voters might have come to vote increasingly on the basis of personality, but it remains yet unknown to what extent they did so as a result of widespread exposure to televised political information. Within this context, the 2013 election stands as a potentially crucial point. Eventually, the historical dominance of television as main source of political information for the electorate writ large is counterbalanced by the emergence of Internet (Bentivegna and Ceccarini, 2013). This development is paralleled by the massive instant-success of Beppe Grillo's Internet-based *Five Star Movement* at the expense of "traditional" parties. The extent to which these two phenomena relate to each other, however, is currently a matter of debate (Barisione *et al.,* 2014).

By looking at leader effects across different audiences, this paper elaborates on the as of now missing link in electoral research on party leader effects, and eventually speaks to the broader question of how important is media for the outcome of contemporary

democratic elections. The paper is structured as following. The next section reviews the few available works from the international literature dealing with the connection between exposure to old and new media and leader effects on voting. It then moves to an empirical assessment of these relationships in the context of the 2013 Italian parliamentary election. The analysis investigates the importance of leaders in the voting calculus across voters' degrees of television exposure and political activity on the Internet. The results, showing the dominance of leader effects among voters strongly exposed to television and a somewhat differentiated impact on Internauts, are tested for their robustness across a wide range of model specifications and alternative operationalizations of dependent and independent variables. The final section discusses the major implications of the findings and concludes with an agenda for future research in the field.

Personalization of Politics between Television and the Internet

It is no doubt that the changing structure of mass communications in the second half of the twentieth century has been central 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). The tight link between the rise of television and the personalization of politics has been customarily put forward in the existing scholarship on the topic (Druckman, 2003; McAllister, 2007). Television-based political communication accentuates personality factors at the expense of substantive programmatic goals (Sartori, 1989). Because of its power to present images, it is easier for television to communicate political information through physical objects such as candidates and party leaders rather than through more abstract entities like political parties, manifestos or ideologies (Hayes, 2009). By calling attention to some features of the political competition while ignoring others, television news influence "the standards by which governments, presidents, and candidates for public office are judged" (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987: 63). Apart from affecting the way in which candidates are judged, news attention also increases their perceived importance (Miller and Krosnick, 2000). In this sense, the rise of television as chief source of political information at the

expense of newspapers has been deemed largely responsible for the growing relevance of personality evaluations in the voting calculus of citizens across the last decades. Yet, the link between patterns of televised political information and changes in voting behaviour has received only limited attention in the empirical literature so far.

As of today, most research in this field has consisted of single country studies, and focused mainly on the US. In their seminal analysis of the 1980 US presidential election, McLeod *et al.* (1983) show that television reliant voters were those with the highest likelihood among the general voting population to rely on candidate image characteristics while casting their vote. Keeter's (1987) longitudinal analysis of American National Election Study (ANES) data from the period 1952-1980 supports McLeod *et al.*'s findings, and concludes that "television has facilitated and encouraged vote choices based upon the personal qualities of candidates" (Keeter, 1987: 344). Holian and Prysby (2014) further extend the time frame of the analysis up to 2012, and again find strong effects of television exposure on patterns of personalized voting behaviour.

Contrary to the US, European scholarship has been surprisingly reluctant to address this issue until very recently. Yet, the few available studies of European democracies provide relatively strong support in favour of the personalization hypothesis. Mughan's (2000) study of British elections represents the first systematic contribution, showing that increasing use of television for political information was contributing to greater leader effects. While his conclusions find only partial support in Rico's (2014) analysis of three Spanish elections, Takens *et al.*'s (2014) analysis of the Dutch election of 2010 provide more convincing evidence in support of the link between exposure to political information on television and personalization of voting behaviour. So far, only one study by Gidengil (2011) tackled the issue in a comparative perspective – albeit with inconclusive results due to apparent limitations within the available data.

An important deficit in the extant personalization of politics literature lies with its generalized lack of interest for the dramatic changes occurred in the media landscape over the most recent years. There cannot be any doubt that the advent of the Internet has profoundly altered the way information is produced and digested by the wider public at

election time. The Internet's multiple links with the political process have been progressively put under tougher scrutiny by social and political scientists (Chadwick and Howard, 2009). Against this background, however, there is very little received wisdom when it comes to the relationship between Internet usage and the drivers of electoral choice. At first, the growth of the Internet and social media has sparked interest in its impact on increasing political engagement and participation, either directly, e.g., encouraging them to participate, or indirectly, e.g., providing citizens with the necessary information to participate (Norris, 2000). Indeed, consumption of political information on the Internet has been shown to bear a positive impact on broadly-defined patterns of political engagement (for a review, see: Boulianne, 2009) as well as more specific patterns of electoral participation (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Bond *et al.*, 2012).

When it comes to the relationship between exposure to political information on the Internet and individual-level patterns of voting behaviour, the available literature does not provide enough ground for concrete expectations. On the one hand, one notes that the interactive possibilities offered by the Web, and in particular by social media, now allow voters to follow candidates' activity on a daily basis. By the same token, candidates have been granted the chance to bypass the role of parties as political intermediaries and "personalize" their relationship with voters through direct communication (McAllister, 2016). On the other hand, however, it has been shown that "online election news seekers are…more likely to look to policy issues to determine their vote choice" (Gibson and McAllister, 2006: 256). Internet users' stronger propensity to vote based on issues would seem to be paralleled by a weakening impact of personality evaluation. Holian and Prysby (2014) are the first to explore the relationship between Internet usage and the attitudinal factors underlying voters' choice. Their empirical study of 2012 ANES data shows that online news seekers are systematically less likely to base their voting decision on candidates' personality assessments as compared to television viewers. As of today, this study represents the single major contribution to this topic.

The lack of systematic evidence on the relationship between Internet usage and leader effects resonates with a broader – and yet largely unanswered – question. What

features of the Internet are potentially responsible for changes in voting behaviour? European scholarship has so far concentrated on Web 2.0 platforms, with a growing interest on social media like Twitter (Ceron *et al.*, 2014) and online Voting Advice Aplications (VAAs).[1] The existing literature supports the notions that VAAs foster turnout (Garzia *et al.*, 2015) and "prime" issues at the expense of personality evaluations in the individual voting calculus (Walgrave *et al.*, 2008). Besides this emerging strand of scholarship, however, the European case highlights the virtual absence of systematic studies connecting voters' exposure to Internet-based political information and leader effects on voting. On these bases, the exploratory analysis that follows will tackle this research question with no specific expectation and it has to be intended as a sort of hypothesis-building exercise.

Media Exposure and Leader Evaluations

The Italian case represents a crucial case for the mediatization of politics and its links with the processes of party transformation and electoral change. In this respect, the collapse of the old *partitocrazia* in the early 1990s stands as a key point of departure for the wide-ranging political developments that unfolded throughout the last two decades (for an extensive discussion, see: Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). The disappearance of virtually all the parties that populated the centre-right side of the political spectrum since the end of WW2 produced the most appropriate conditions for new competitors to enter the field. In 1994, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi established his own personal party, *Forza Italia*. His entrance in the political scene ignited a severe acceleration to the process of personalization of Italian politics (Campus and Pasquino, 2006). 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

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[1] Voting Advice Applications are increasingly popular websites that help users casting a vote in elections by comparing their policy preferences on major issues with the programmatic stances of political parties and candidates. Successful examples of long-standing VAAs include the Dutch *StemWijzer,* the German *Wahl-O-Mat*, and the Swiss *smartvote.*

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 (Barisione e Catellani, 2008). This party-led development unfolded in parallel with the progressive expansion of television as main source of political information for the Italian electorate. Whereas in 1990 "only" two thirds of the electorate resorted primarily to television for political information, in less than twenty years this proportion went up to reaching almost four voters out of five (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Voters' main source of political information (1990-2013)
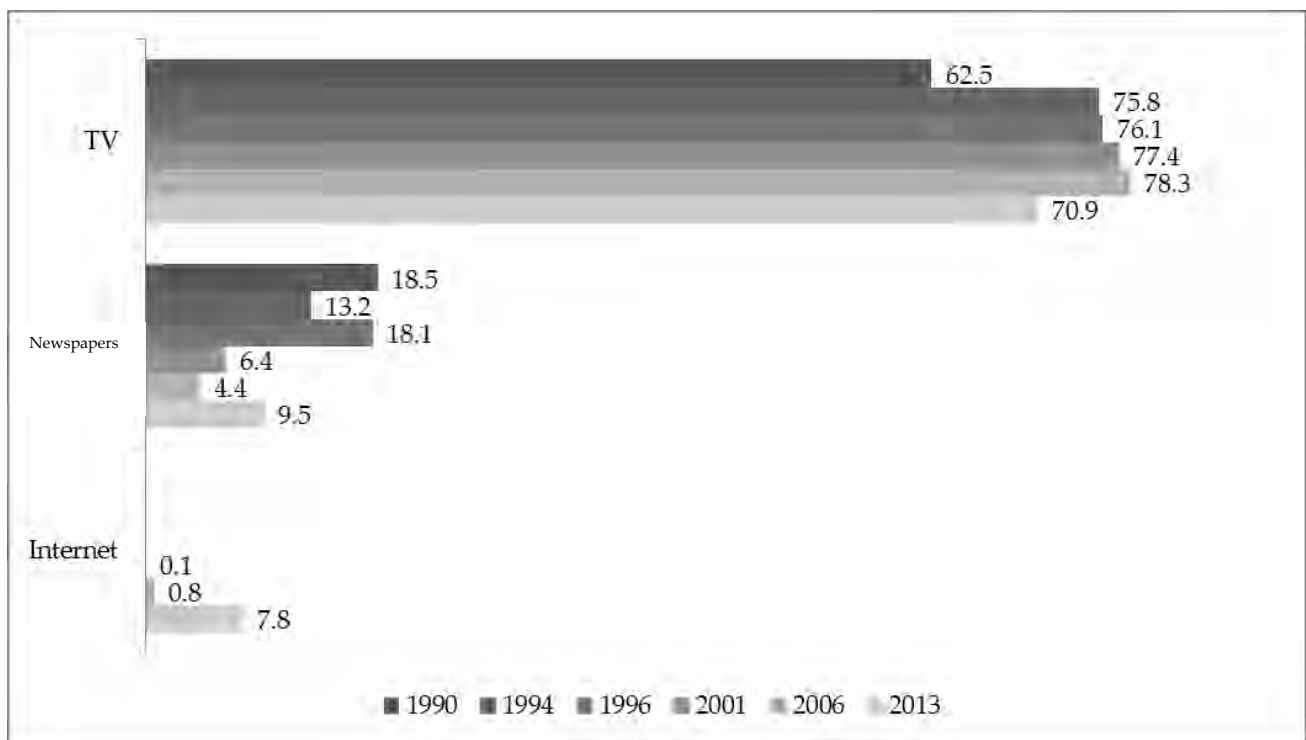
Source: ITANES Series (1990-2013)

The data presented in Table 1 makes a strong case for the relevance of the 2013 Italian election as a case study. For one thing, because it represents the first instance of decline of television (i.e., minus 7 percent). Secondly, and most importantly to the purposes of this paper, because television's decline is paralleled by the entrance of Internet in the game – now representing the major source of political information to almost 8 percent of

eligible voters – the figure being 10 percent across those who did cast a vote (for a better discussion of old and new media diets, see Cremonesi *et al.* 2014). This occurrence relates in fascinating ways to the outcome of an election in which the traditional centre-left and centre-right coalitions obtained less than 60 percent of the valid votes together (as compared to 84 percent in 2008 and 99 percent in 2006) and the most electorally successful newcomer of Italian political history, the Five Star Movement, gained more votes than any other individual party list, reaching up to one valid vote in four (Biorcio, 2013). Although an analysis of the organizational features of Grillo's movement lie beyond the scope of this article, it is worth reminding that – unlike traditional parties – the Five Star Movement originates as a by-product of Grillo's personal blog and still relies to a large extent to the Web as its key organizational resource (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013).

The empirical analysis that follows will make use of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) post-electoral survey. This is a nationally representative multistage sample conducted through face-to-face interviews/CAPI (N=1508). In order to segment voters by their level(s) of media exposure, I rely on objective measures as derived from the ITANES questionnaire. In particular, television exposure is measured in hours per day. Frequency distributions for the entire sample of respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Daily exposure to Television

	%	Cumulative %
Not at all	2.1	2.1
0 to 30 minutes	3.1	5.2
30 minutes to 1 hour	10.9	16.1
1 to 2 hours	27.3	43.4
2 to 3 hours	29.2	72.6
3 to 4 hours	15.0	87.6
4 to 5 hours	6.4	94.0
5 to 6 hours	3.0	97.0
More than 6 hours	2.8	98.9
DK/NA	0.2	100.0

As no similar measure is made available for Internet usage, the analysis will resort to the battery on political activity on the Internet. All respondents that report to have performed at least one among the six political activities featured in the battery are included among the respondents politically active on the Internet. As shown in Table 2, it is interesting to observe that, among all possible political activities on the Web, voters resorted mostly to "watching video content".

Table 2. Patterns of political activity on the Internet

	%
Watched video content about the campaign	17.7
Visited political website	16.2
Visited political social network profile	14.2
Shared content about the campaign	12.2
Participated in online political discussions	8.6
Participated in an event organized online	6.2
Performed (at least) one of the above	*28.7*

On the bases of these frequency distributions, a two-fold typology of informational sources is presented in Table 3. As about one third of the respondents can be considered politically active on the Web, I partitioned the television viewership variable in a way that the high exposure sub-group (i.e., three or more hours per day) equals in size that of politically active on the Internet. This partitioning scheme has the noteworthy advantage of isolating in an almost perfect way the two audiences of interest, with 25 percent of respondents reporting heavy exposure to television and no political activity on the Internet, 23 percent with comparatively lower exposure to television but politically active on the Internet, and only a negligible proportion (around 4 percent) of respondents heavily exposed to television and politically active on the internet at the same time.

Table 3. Television exposure and patterns of political activity on the Internet

TV Exposure Web	Low	High	Total
No	47.9% (722)	23.4% (353)	71.3% (1075)
Yes	24.9% (375)	3.8% (58)	28.7% (433)
Total	72.8% (1097)	27.2% (411)	100% (1508)

Note: Pearon's $r = -.20$ ($p < .001$)

Moving to the measurement of voters' evaluation of leaders, the analysis will rely on politically relevant *personality traits*.[2] A wide body of available works support the idea that the traits used to evaluate politicians are limited in number and tend to load onto a few general categories (Bittner, 2011). The ITANES series conforms to the close-ended trait battery developed in 1980 by the ANES (Kinder *et al.*, 1979). Respondents are thus asked whether they perceive each of the major coalition's leader to be *competent, honest, empathic,* and a *strong leader* (frequency distribution for the three major coalition leaders is presented in Table 4). In order to assess the overall impact of leaders' personality on voters' electoral calculus, their evaluation of coalition leaders will be measured through an additive personality trait index ranging, for each individual respondent, from '0' (leader is credited with no single characteristic) to '1' (leader is credited with all four characteristics).

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[2] The use of personality traits in place of thermometer score evaluations relies on the idea set forth by Fiorina (1981) that the thermometer might also be capturing factors such as retrospective judgments, party influence, issue positions and so on, leading him to conclude that "[n]o one knows what thermometer scores measure" (Fiorina, 1981: 154).

Table 4. Leaders' personality traits and overall score on the additive personality trait index

	Bersani *Centre-Left Coalition*	Berlusconi *Centre-Right Coalition*	Grillo *Five Star Movement*
Leadership	.36	.81	.68
Competence	.73	.61	.40
Honesty	.68	.19	.61
Empathy	.58	.39	.68
Additive Personality Trait Index			
All Respondents	.59	.49	.59
By Level of TV Consumption			
Low	.59	**.47***	.60
High	.59	**.56***	.56
By Political Activity on the Web			
Politically Inactive	.58	.50	**.54***
Politically Active	.61	.47	**.70***

Note: asterisks signal that the t-test of paired means is significant at the .001 level (two-tailed)

According to the data presented in Table 4, the respective coalitions' leaders differ sharply in terms of perceived personality characteristics. Especially noteworthy are the rather low values relative to Berlusconi's honesty, Bersani's leadership strength and Grillo's competence. Most important to the purposes of the analysis, however, is the overall score on the personality trait index, which witnesses both Bersani and Grillo enjoying a substantial advantage *vis-à-vis* the long-term centre-right leader Berlusconi. If broken down by respondents' patterns of media consumption, mean values of the personality trait index provide a few key findings. While respondents' evaluation of centre-left leader Bersani does not seem to differ across levels of television consumption and patterns of political activity on the Internet, both Berlusconi and Grillo seem to enjoy a strong (and statistically significant) competitive advantage across heavy television viewers and political Internauts respectively.

Analysis

The dependent variable of the analysis is vote choice. Due to the central position granted to electoral coalitions by the current Italian electoral law, the analysis will focus on *coalition* rather than *party* choice throughout the analysis. In the light of the election results, which saw the three major coalitions awarded with more than 80 percent of the popular vote,[3] I will model voting as a four-fold choice between Bersani's centre-left coalition, Berlusconi's centre-right coalition, Grillo's Five Star Movement, and minor parties/coalitions. Blank ballot papers (as well as "didn't vote," "don't know," and "no answer" responses) are excluded from the analysis. In turn, this lowers down the number of cases included to N=950.

In order to assess the impact of voters' evaluation of party leaders' personality on their patterns of vote choice, I resort to regression analysis. This allows testing the direct relationship between the two variables while taking into account all other factors potentially influencing voting choice. The comprehensive set of statistical control included in the analysis relies of the *valence politics* model (Clarke *et al.,* 2004) and features respondents' long-term ideological orientations (measured though self-placement on the left-right scale), their retrospective assessment of the state of the economy in the country, and whether the coalition voted for is considered the best at solving the most important issue in the country, plus basic socio-demographic controls, i.e., gender, age, educational level, region of residence and frequency of church attendance (descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Appendix). Table 5 provides a detailed report of the performance of the various predictor variables in two separated analyses. The first one, a binomial logit, is motivated by the idea that voting for an incumbent party versus any of its opposition rivals is a fundamental electoral decision. Accordingly, the analysis pits centre-left voting versus voting for any of the other coalitions. The second analysis, a multinomial logit, provides additional information about factors driving voters' choices by considering voting for the competing coalitions with centre-left voting used as the reference category.

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[3] Bersani's centre-coalition won the majority bonus in the Chamber of Deputies with 29.5 percent of the valid votes, followed by Berlusconi's centre-right coalition with 29.2 percent and Grillo's Five Star Movement with 25.6 percent.

**Table 5.** The determinants of vote choice in the Italian election of 2013

	Centre-Left Coalition (Bersani)	Centre-Right Coalition (Berlusconi)	Five Star Movement (Grillo)
Coalition Leaders			
Pierlugi Bersani	2.76***	-3.11***	-3.27***
	(.44)	(.65)	(.53)
Silvio Berlusconi	-.81	4.01***	.27
	(.43)	(.75)	(.55)
Beppe Grillo	-1.41***	.81	3.85***
	(.38)	(.59)	(.58)
Ideology (Ref.: No L-R Self-Placement)			
Centre-Left	1.28**	-.66	-1.31**
	(.41)	(.80)	(.47)
Centre-Right	-.74	2.62***	.10
	(.47)	(.77)	(.54)
Best Coalition at Most Important Issue			
Italia Bene Comune	1.23***	-1.98*	-1.27**
	(.32)	(.83)	(.41)
Centre-Right Coalition	-1.61**	1.57*	.39
	(.62)	(.73)	(.81)
Movimento 5 Stelle	-2.04***	.11	2.26***
	(.42)	(.83)	(.46)
Other	-.53	-.56	-.36
	(.32)	(.56)	(.43)
Retrospective Economic Evaluations	-.31	.64	.36
	(.84)	(1.19)	(.99)
Gender	-.01	-.46	.14
	(.24)	(.38)	(.29)
Educational Level	.79	-1.59	-.75
	(.51)	(.82)	(.61)

	Centre-Left Coalition (Bersani)	Centre-Right Coalition (Berlusconi)	Five Star Movement (Grillo)
Age (Ref.: 65+)			
18-24	-1.77***	.92	2.36***
	(.50)	(.81)	(.61)
25-34	-1.60***	.69	2.45***
	(.44)	(.68)	(.57)
35-44	-1.10*	.81	1.55**
	(.43)	(.67)	(.58)
45-54	-1.03**	-.24	1.62**
	(.38)	(.60)	(.51)
55-64	-1.11**	.20	1.61**
	(.38)	(.58)	(.53)
Region of Residence (Ref.: South)			
North-West	.37	.07	-.54
	(.34)	(.54)	(.41)
North-East	.69	-1.36*	-.72
	(.43)	(.66)	(.50)
Red Belt	0.70*	-.27	-1.11**
	(.34)	(.56)	(.43)
Center	.17	-.61	-.25
	(.40)	(.68)	(.46)
Church Attendance	-1.41**	1.22	1.10
	(.46)	(.75)	(.57)
Constant	-.64	-2.21*	-1.47
	(.64)	(1.08)	(.82)
Pseudo R-Squared	.48	.50	
Log-likelihood	-247.52	-452.83	
N	704	704	

Note: First column's coefficient are from a binomial logit (centre-left vs. all other coalition voting). Centre-right coalition and Five Star Movement analysis is a multinomial logit with centre-left coalition as the reference category. Other party voting is included in the multinomial logit analysis but coefficients not displayed in table.   *** $p \leq .001$; ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$

The dominance of leader evaluations as drivers of vote choice in the 2013 election is highlighted in Figure 2, where the estimated effect of key variables is summarized by means of predicted probabilities of casting a vote for a given coalition moving from the minimum to the maximum value of the predictor of interest (with all other variables included in the model set at their mean value).

Figure 2. Predicted probability of coalition voting by key independent variables
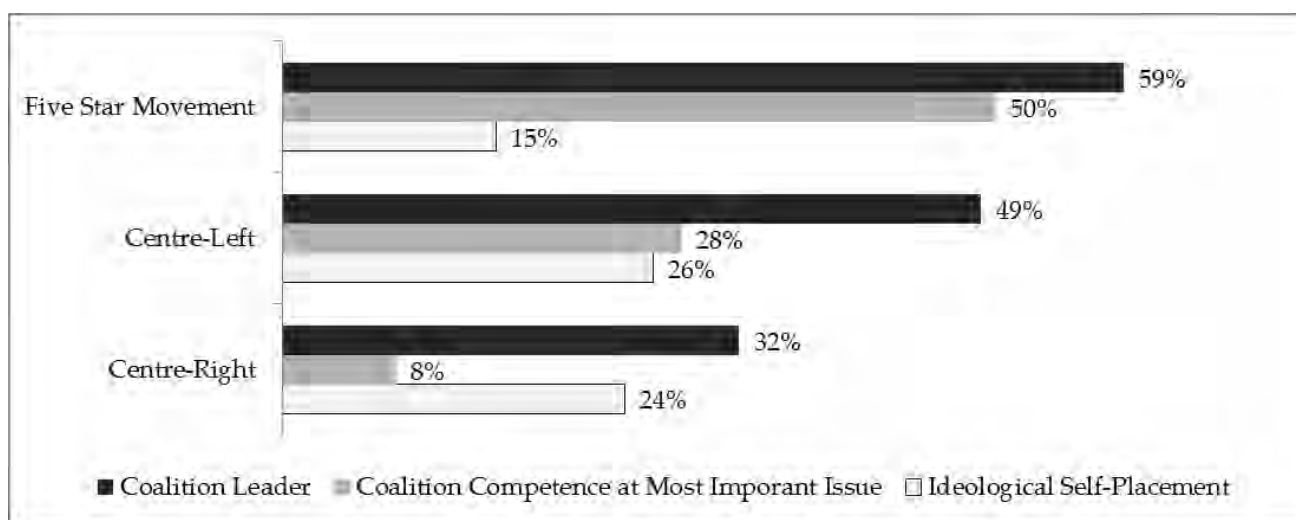

After having assessed the dominance of leaders in the respondents' voting calculus, the analysis now turn to answering the central questions of this study, focusing on the relationship between leader effects and, in turn, patterns of television exposure and political activity on the Internet. To do so, I replicate the analysis presented in Table 5 on split-samples (i.e., low *vs.* high television consumption, politically inactive on the Internet *vs.* politically active on the Internet). As logistic coefficients from different samples are not straightforwardly comparable in magnitude, I only report the changes in predicted probabilities of coalition voting moving from the minimum to the maximum value of each leaders' personality trait index while keeping all other variables in the model set at their means.

Findings from Figure 3 are strongly in line with expectations. The effect of coalition leader evaluations on voting is systematically stronger for those heavily exposed to

television. This is especially the case for voters of Berlusconi's coalition, who appear to rely on their evaluation of the leader twice as much if heavily exposed to television as compared to those reporting comparatively lower patterns of television exposure. This finding comes by and large as no surprise, given the much higher popularity of Berlusconi across heavy TV viewers (see Table 4). Ratios of leader effects across television viewership groups are less spectacular in the cases of Grillo's movement as well as Bersani's coalition, but they witness nonetheless convincingly the stronger importance of leader evaluations for the group of voters more exposed to television.[4]

Figure 3. Predicted probability of coalition voting

by evaluation of the respective leader and level of television exposure
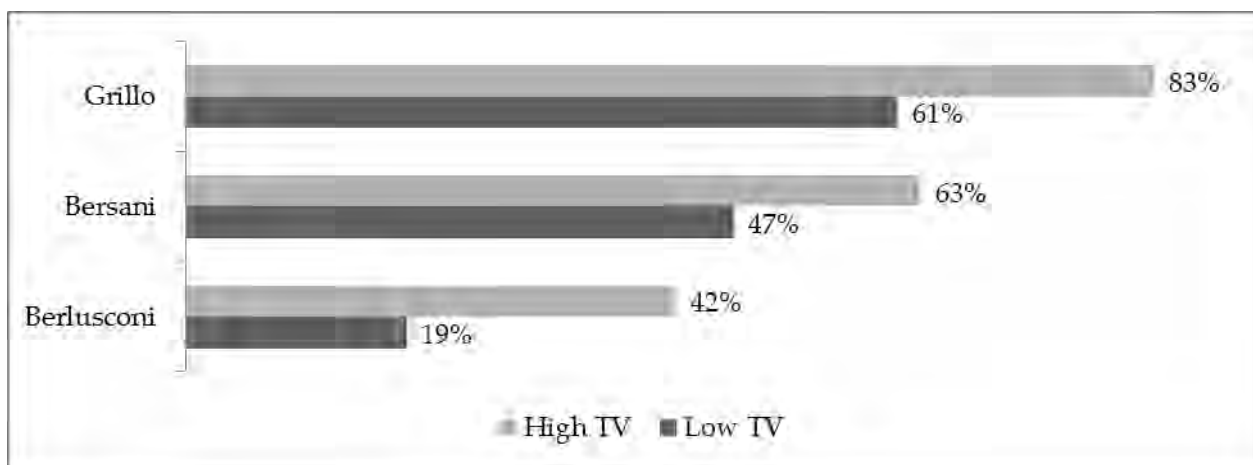
Findings from the Internet analysis are presented Figure 4. In line with the Holian and Prysby's (2014) evidence from the American case, politically active citizens voting for established parties would seem to pay less attention to leaders' personality within their voting calculus. This appears to be especially the case for voters of the centre-right coalition. According to the results stemming from the multinomial regression analysis, coalition leader's evaluation turns even insignificant across the group of politically active

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[4] Previous contributions highlighted that Grillo's popularity, already high among Internauts, grew exponentially among television viewers throughout the 2013 campaign as a result of the progressive *hybridization* of the Italian media system (Barisione *et al.,* 2014),

on the Internet. While this is not the case for centre-left voters, one notes nonetheless that coalition leader Bersani matters roughly twice as much for those *not* active on the Internet. The most interesting finding of this analysis, however, comes from the case of Five Star Movement voters. Here, party leader Grillo would appear to matter *more* for those politically active on the Web.

Figure 4. Predicted probability of coalition voting by evaluation
of the respective leader and patterns of political activity on the Internet
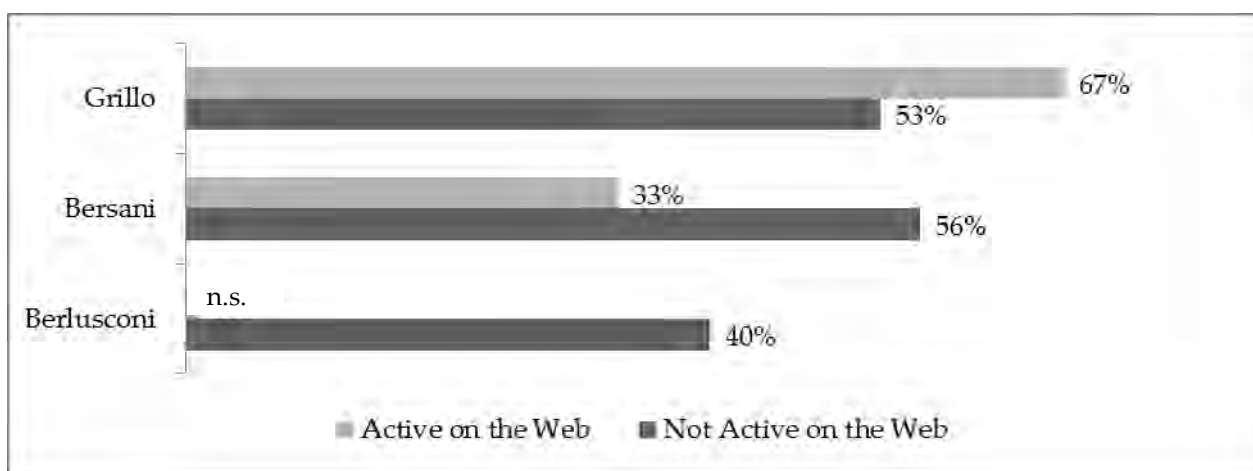
Taken together, these findings suggest a suggestive interpretation by which leader effects do not depend on the main source of information *per sé*. Their magnitude would seem to rather interact with the characteristics of the political offer and their respective interaction with old as well as new media. Leaders of more traditional political formations that rely mostly on television for political communication matter more to those voters heavily exposed to television. In turn, their lack of appeal to political Internauts might explain their smaller importance within their voting calculus, and account in turn for the strong effect of Beppe Grillo on this segment of voters.

Robustness

To test the robustness of these findings to model specification and variable measurement, I performed extensive robustness tests. First, I tested a different operationalization of the

dependent variable with party votes in place of coalition votes (Table A.1 in Appendix). Second, I tested a different measurement of coalition leaders' evaluation by replacing the additive personality trait index with leaders' thermometer scores (Table A.2). Third, I re-run all models with a three-fold segmentation of exposure to television (i.e., low, medium, and high exposure) (Table A.3). Fourth, I tested the robustness of the results against different measurements of political activity on the Internet, by excluding one activity at the time from the index (Table A.4). In all but one instance, the results of the robustness tests confirmed those presented in Figures 3 and 4.[5]

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper looked into a key development of the democratic process in Italy and beyond – the personalization of politics. While previous works tackled the role played by party change in driving the personalization of voting behaviour across time, this contribution focused on the part played by individual exposure to political information on different types of media in conditioning leader effects on voting. The analysis of the determinants of vote choice in the 2013 Italian election confirms the notion that individuals' evaluation of political leaders' personality is a key variable within their voting calculus. As to the relationship between leader effects on voting and media exposure, this paper contributes to the extant literature by supporting the idea that leader effects are somehow incited by heavy exposure to television. Insofar as television is (at least partly) responsible for the personalization of voting behaviour, can the Internet be considered a medium capable of affecting such trend? The answer that can be derived from the empirical results is two-fold, depending on the type of parties for which people cast their vote. Indeed, the leader would seem to matter less to Internauts voting for traditional parties but more to those of them voting for the (largely online-based) Five Star Movement. This intrinsically unsurprising and to some extent obvious conclusion hints nonetheless at a potential political

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[5] When testing the model on party rather than coalition choice, Berlusconi appeared somewhat *less* important to respondents heavily exposed to television. The analysis of tri-partitioned television viewership also showed that Grillo is more important for those in the low-exposure category as compared to the mid-exposure category. Nonetheless, the results also show that he matters more to those in the high-exposure category *vis-à-vis* all other groups.

development of utmost relevance. In a way similar to how Berlusconi gathered personal popularity and electoral influence through television, forcing all his political competitors to surrender to his media logic accordingly, Grillo might be paving the way for traditional parties and their respective leaders to "invade" the online arena. The political communication of current Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has been proved to be a telling example in this respect (Bordignon, 2014). In turn, this supports a fascinating idea by which rather than depersonalizing politics, Internet itself might provide parties and leaders with a new arena to actually foster patterns of political personalization.

Further research in this domain appears urgently needed, also in view of the foreseeable growth of the Internet as the (potentially) most important source of political information for citizens. In answering this question, future research will also be able to address the wide range of tools through which political information is made available by the Internet. If Internet is to be held accountable for changes in patterns of voting behaviour, what are the features to drive this development? On the one hand, the Internet has proven its capability of "bringing the written word back in" as all newspapers become equally available to every Internet user (Morris, 1999). In a similar vein, personality-based dynamics that are proper of traditional media have found in the Web a fertile ground. According to the results presented in this analysis, most of the political activity on the Internet consists in watching video content. While candidates and political leaders' video content is widely present – and increasingly so – on the Internet through social media and YouTube video channels (Gibson and McAllister, 2011), YouTube itself has been shown to have turned from "an innovative source of news and political information to one more hospitable to mediated information produced by media corporations" (May, 2010: 501). At the same time, however, the interactive possibilities of social media have highlighted the possibility for voters to connect horizontally, thus reviving classic theories of social influence and interpersonal intermediation on vote choice (Miller *et al.,* 2015).[6] Finally, Web 2.0 technologies may introduce novel (and yet uncharted) dynamics by offering "more

[6] Bentivegna and Ceccarini (2013) show that the figure for political discussion during the 2013 election campaign was 66% among citizens that used the Internet to get political information as compared to 45% for all others.

detailed information [that] can be customized to a greater extent" (Prior 2005: 579). The comparative assessment of – not necessarily – conflicting hypotheses will help getting towards an as of now lacking systematic theory of Internet effects on voting behaviour. As a point of departure, such a theory might find useful a two-fold conceptualization of Internet's informational features, pitting *old media online* (i.e., newspapers and television broadcasters) against *new media online* (e.g., social media and VAAs) as a way to isolate their potentially different impact on personalization. The theoretical development will certainly benefit from a more comparative focus, with research also taking into account less peculiar party systems (for instance, where television is not by and large "owned" by one of the main political actors and the Internet is not "home" of the organizational structure of another) and contexts (for instance, countries where television is a less powerful source of political information and/or Internet is a more powerful source).

Finally, the results presented in this paper call for explicitly longitudinal analyses able to take into account the intervening role of party transformation in the process of progressive personalization of elections. Thirty years ago, Meyrowitz (1985) made clear the practical impossibility of assessing the impact of old (as well as new) media in isolation with all other (political) variables. While previous works have documented the relationship between the "fourth information revolution" and the transformation of party organizations (Bimber, 2003; Mancini, 2015), the initial results presented here highlight the crucial need to integrate theories from both political communication and party research into a "shared research agenda" (Amoretti and Roncarolo, 2016) for future analyses of electoral change at the individual level.

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APPENDIX. Descriptive statistics of independent variables

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	St. Dev.
Coalition Leaders Trait Index					
Pierluigi Bersani (Centre-Left)	868	0	1	0.63	0.33
Silvio Berlusconi (Centre-Right)	896	0	1	0.48	0.33
Beppe Grillo (Five Star Movement)	746	0	1	0.62	0.36
Ideology					
No Self-Placement	950	0	1	0.09	0.29
Centre-Left	950	0	1	0.58	0.49
Centre-Right	950	0	1	0.33	0.47
Best Coalition at Most Important Issue					
Centre-Left	950	0	1	0.25	0.43
Centre-Right	950	0	1	0.13	0.34
Five Star Movement	950	0	1	0.14	0.35
Other	950	0	1	0.14	0.35
Retrispective Economic Evaluations	950	0	1	0.11	0.15
Age Category					
18-24	950	0	1	0.09	0.29
25-34	950	0	1	0.14	0.35
35-44	950	0	1	0.15	0.35
45-54	950	0	1	0.19	0.39
55-64	950	0	1	0.20	0.40
65+	950	0	1	0.23	0.42
Gender (Female)	950	0	1	0.49	0.50
Educational Level	950	0	1	0.43	0.25
Region of Residence					
North-West	950	0	1	0.27	0.44
North-East	950	0	1	0.13	0.34
Red Belt	950	0	1	0.21	0.40
Center	950	0	1	0.15	0.36
South	950	0	1	0.24	0.43
Frequency of Church Attendance	950	0	1	0.35	0.27

APPENDIX. Detailed estimation procedure for robustness tests

Table A.1. Different operationalization of the dependent variable (party rather than coalition votes)

	Partito Democratico (PD)	Popolo delle Libertá (PdL)	Five Star Movement
Level of TV Exposure			
Low	36%	16%	55%
High	46%	7%	84%
Politically Active on the Web			
Low	46%	36%	48%
High	22%	n.s.	63%

Table A.2. Different operationalization of leader evaluations
(thermometer scores rather than personality trait index)

	Centre-Left Coalition	Centre-Right Coalition	Five Star Movement
Level of TV Exposure			
Low	79%	79%	95%
High	98%	99%	96%
Politically Active on the Web			
Low	89%	86%	94%
High	70%	77%	98%

Table A.3. Three categories of TV viewership (% of respondents in the sample in parentheses)

	Centre-Left Coalition	Centre-Right Coalition	Five Star Movement
Low (43.4%)	39%	58%	63%
Medium (29.2%)	n.s.	23%	42%
High (27.2%)	68%	26%	83%

Table A.4. One-by-one exclusion of items from the measurement of political activity on the Internet

	Centre-Left Coalition		Centre-Right Coalition		Five Star Movement	
	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.
Not Active on the Internet	[55%	57%]	[36%	42%]	[52%	54%]
Active on the Internet	[29%	35%]	[n.s.	n.s.]	[64%	70%]