

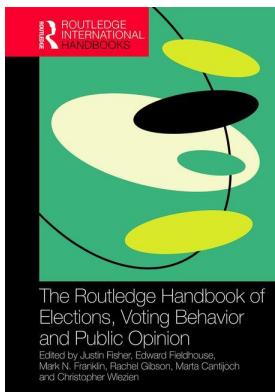
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Justin Fisher, Edward Fieldhouse, Mark N. Franklin, Rachel Gibson, Marta Cantijoch, Christopher Wlezien

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13

TRENDS IN PARTISANSHIP

Oliver Heath

Introduction

Party identification, defined as an enduring commitment or attachment to a particular political party, has for more than half a century been at the heart of research on electoral behavior in many countries around the world. The traditional view is that party identification develops at an early age, largely through the influence of parents, is remarkably stable throughout life, is relatively unaffected by short-term forces, and acts as a central organizing force for other political perceptions and preferences (Campbell et al. 1960).

Although the concept of party identification has been the subject of vigorous debate (see Chapter 12), it is thought to serve a number of important functions that help to integrate citizens with political processes. It serves as a “perceptual screen” that helps voters to organize their political evaluations and judgments. That is, once voters acquire a partisan identity, they tend to view politics from a more partisan perspective. A sense of party identification also performs a mobilizing function. It creates and reinforces a sense of loyalty toward a given political party and thereby encourages individuals to vote for their party. In doing so, party identification helps to incorporate and stabilize social demands and facilitate participation in the electoral system.

Whereas it has long been recognized that partisanship tends to be weak in new democracies; it has also been observed that in many established democracies partisanship has been on the wane. As partisanship has weakened, elections have become less stable and more unpredictable. Voters no longer have a standing decision for which party to vote; and make up their mind who to vote for (or whether to vote at all) late in the campaign. This chapter provides a brief overview of research on these different themes. The first part of the chapter documents the changes that have taken place in partisan attachments over the last 50 years or so in different established democracies. The second part considers a range of different explanations for why partisanship has weakened. Finally, the third part of the chapter considers some of the more notable consequences of partisan dealignment for electoral behavior.

Measuring party identification

Comparative research on partisanship has been hampered by a number of methodological challenges. The idea of party identification means different things in different countries – and so it

is not always possible to compare like with like. Moreover, self-reported levels of party identification are very sensitive to question wording – and even slight changes in how questions are worded (including how they are translated) can have a substantial effect on the number of people who declare an identification (or attachment).

The concept of party identification was first developed in the USA, where voters have to register as supporters of either the Democrats or the Republicans in order to vote in Presidential primaries. Because voters declare themselves as either “Democrats,” “Republicans,” or “Independents” – even if they occasionally vote for other parties – the idea of party identification as something separate from vote choice has a clear intuitive meaning, which is not always so apparent in other countries.

The traditional measure of party identification, developed in the US context, bluntly asks “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Respondents who reply Republican or Democrat are then asked to say how strongly they think of themselves in that way. By and large this question has not been asked in the same way in comparative research; partly because it becomes somewhat cumbersome to ask in multi-party systems, and partly because it is a somewhat leading question, which presupposes that respondents have an identification to declare in the first place (Heath and Johns 2010). A second, more widely used measure of party attachment is “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?” Respondents who answer “yes” are then asked a follow-up question: “What party is that?” Respondents are said to hold a “party attachment” if they answer “yes” to the first question and can then name a valid party.

Trends in partisanship over time

A growing body of research has shown that in many Western democracies the level of partisanship has noticeably declined over the last few decades (Dalton 1984, 2006, 2012; Mair and Biezen 2001; Schmitt 2009). This process is often referred to as partisan dealignment. In one of the first comparative studies on the topic, Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) found a substantial decline in partisan identification between 1976 and 1992 in Western Europe, and in an updated and expanded analysis, Dalton (2012) shows that the trend continues into the 2000s.

Dalton’s (2012) table is reproduced below (Table 13.1). The data come from the National Election Studies of the respective countries. The first column of data in the table shows how many people in each country declared a partisan affiliation at the start of the time period (averaged across the first two time points). Not too much should be read in to differences between countries, as the questions used to measure party attachment vary somewhat between studies. The second column – which is more revealing – shows how much the level of partisanship has changed over time. In all the countries the change has been negative, indicating that the level of partisanship has declined. For example, Dalton (2012: 178) reports that in Sweden 65 percent of the public expressed a partisan attachment in 1968, compared to just 28 percent in 2010. The per annum change of -0.86 indicates that in a typical decade the level of partisanship declined by 8.6 percentage points. Overall, in practically all the countries, the level of partisanship is lower in the 2000s than it was in the 1960s and early 1970s. This apparently common trend has attracted a great deal of attention. As Putnam et al. (2000: 17–18) note, “seldom does such a diverse group of nations reveal so consistent a trend. The only major variation is in the timing of the decline.” An observation echoed by Dalton (2012: 178), who writes “seldom does the public opinion evidence from such a diverse group of nations follow such a consistent trend.”

However, it is also worth noting that there is considerable variation between countries both in terms of the extent of the decline and the speed of the decline (Berglund et al. 2005). For

Table 13.1 Trends in party identification across countries

Country	% with PID	Per annum change	Period	Time points
Australia	92	-0.20	1967–2010	13
Austria	67	-0.56	1969–2009	9
Britain	93	-0.32	1964–2010	12
Canada	90	-0.54	1965–2006	12
Denmark	52	-0.03	1971–2005	11
Finland	57	-0.26	1975–2007	6
France	73	-0.79	1967–2002	6
Germany	78	-0.51	1972–2009	11
Italy	80	-0.78	1975–2008	9
Japan	70	-0.59	1962–2000	12
Netherlands	38	-0.19	1971–2006	11
New Zealand	87	-1.12	1975–2008	12
Norway	66	-0.66	1965–2005	11
Sweden	64	-0.85	1968–2010	14
Switzerland	61	-0.63	1971–2007	10
United States	77	-0.33	1952–2008	15

Source: Reproduced from Dalton (2012: 178). Original source: National Election Studies in each country.

Note

The percentage with a party identification is the average of the percentage expressing a party identification in the first two surveys in each series.

example, whereas partisanship has dramatically declined in Sweden since the 1960s it has barely changed in Denmark. Whereas partisanship has declined in the UK, over the last few decades it has in fact increased in the USA (Bartels 2000). To illustrate some of these divergent trends, Figures 13.1 and 13.2 depict the level of partisanship in the UK and USA over time, using data from their respective National Election Studies. These two countries have been the subject of a great deal of research on partisanship; but also exhibit rather different trends.

The concept of party identification was imported to the UK by Butler and Stokes (1969). Party identification in Britain had a clear class basis – working class people tended to be Labour identifiers and middle class people tended to be Conservative identifiers, and when voters went to the polls they expressed their “tribal loyalties.” However, as early as the 1970s, Crewe et al. (1977) noticed that these party identifications were weakening. Clarke et al. (2004) document that this process of partisan dealignment has been ongoing. As Figure 13.1 shows, in Britain the average strength of party identification has substantially declined. The percentage of the electorate who identified “very strongly” with a political party has fallen from 45 percent in 1964 to 11 percent in 2010. At the same time, the proportion of non-identifiers has increased from 5 percent to 19 percent during the same period.

By contrast, Figure 13.2 shows in the USA the strength of partisanship declined very sharply from the 1960s to the late 1970s, but since then has in fact increased (see also Bartels 2000). During the 1970s, a raft of publications drew attention to the increasing proportion of “independents” and the increasing prevalence of split-ticket voting as indicators of partisan decline (Broder 1971; DeVries and Tarrance 1972). Niemi and Weisberg (1976: 414) went as far as to say that these developments signified “the end of parties.” However, these authors were writing at a particular low point in the history of partisanship in the USA. Since then

Trends in partisanship

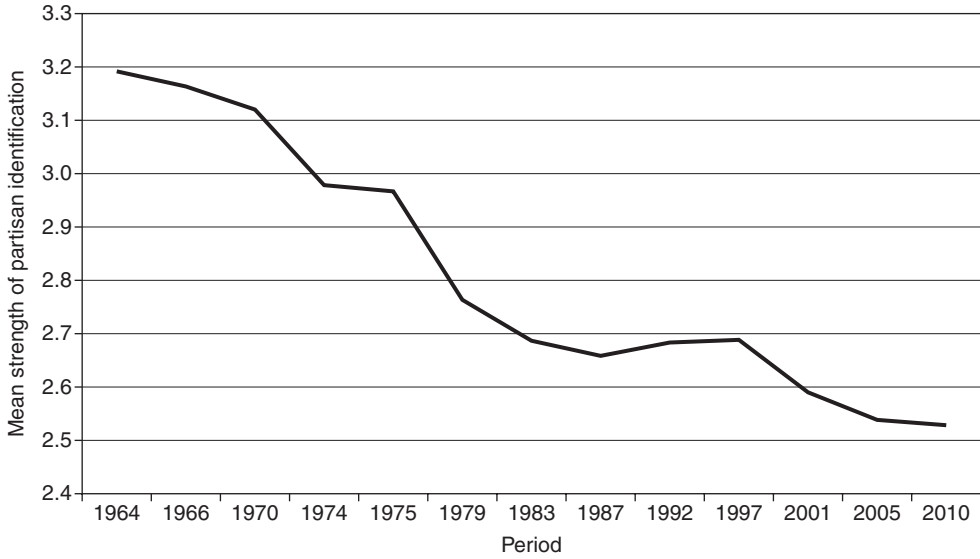


Figure 13.1 Strength of party identification in the UK, 1964–2010

Source: British Election Study, 1964–2010.

Note

Strength of party identification is measured on a 1–4 scale; where 1=no party ID; 2=not very strongly; 3=fairly strongly; 4=very strongly.

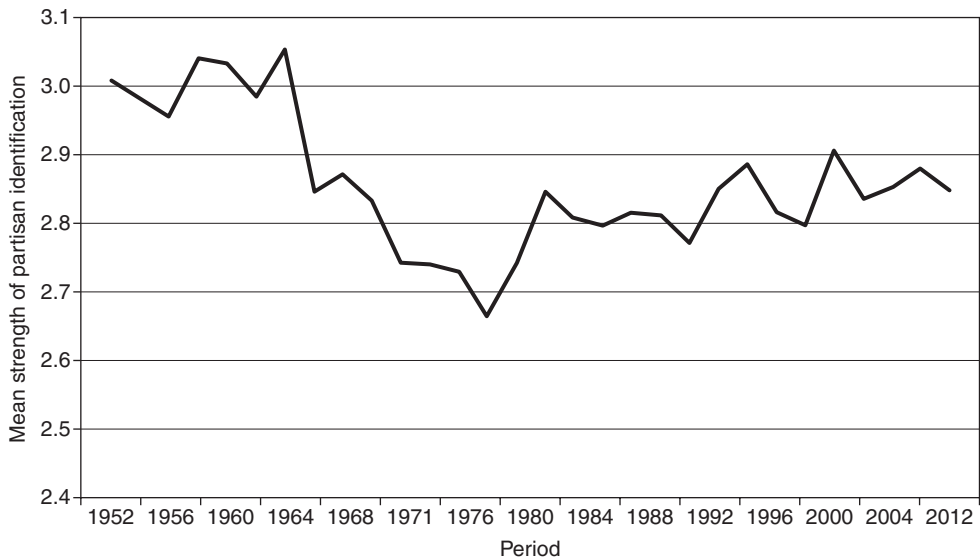


Figure 13.2 Strength of party identification in the USA, 1952–2012

Source: ANES cumulative file.

Note

Strength of party identification is measured on a 1–4 scale; where 1=independent; 2=leaning independent; 3=weak partisan; 4=strong partisan.

party identification has not only increased, but has also become a better predictor of vote choice (Bartels 2000).

As Holmberg (2007) concludes, there is no uniform, secular trend downwards for partisanship in Western democracies, and the pattern differs rather dramatically by country. Although some countries have witnessed a pronounced decline in partisanship others have not. With respect to the USA in particular, Bartels (2000) cautions that the conventional wisdom regarding the “decline of parties” is both exaggerated and outdated. To understand why partisanship declines (or not) we must therefore be sensitive to the different trends that are evident between countries as well as the different trends that are evident within countries, where levels of partisanship can go both up and down.

Explaining partisan dealignment

Why were voters once so willing to name a preferred party, and why – in so many democracies – are they so unwilling to do so in the present? Answers to these simple questions remain a matter of dispute. Broadly speaking, previous research on the decline of partisanship has tended to fall into one of two camps: those that emphasize social changes that have taken place within the electorate, such as the spread of education, and those that emphasize political changes that have taken place within political parties (such as policy convergence or polarization). These two accounts provide very different explanations for why partisanship has declined, and also suggest very different implications for the consequences of this decline (which I discuss in the next section).

Cognitive mobilization

One influential explanation for partisan dealignment argues that changes that have occurred within the electorate, such as rising living standards, the spread of affluence, and, particularly, the expansion of higher education, have led to an electorate that is more sophisticated, more demanding and critical of government activity, less deferential, and more likely to challenge authority than in the past (Norris 1999; Dalton 2002, 2006). This thesis posits that there has been gradual decline in partisanship over time, and that this decline is driven by social change. Citizens now possess the political resources and skills that help them to deal with the complexities of politics without reliance on party cues (Dalton 1984, 2007) and as a consequence people have become less likely to identify with a political party.

According to this perspective, the spread of education in advanced industrial democracies has increased the political sophistication of citizens. At the same time, these countries have also experienced an “information explosion” through the mass media (Holmberg 2007). Because of this “cognitive mobilization” (CM) more voters are now able to deal with the complexities of politics and make their own political decisions (Dalton 1984, 2007). Thus, the functional need for partisan cues to guide voting behavior is declining for a growing number of citizens (Dalton 1984, 2007).

This account draws on the argument made by Shively (1979) that party identification serves a functional role in helping citizens with low levels of political information to make decisions about how to vote. Becoming well-informed bears costs, and these costs are higher for those who are poorly educated and who receive little exposure to information about current events (Albright 2009). If the functional model is correct, then one should expect partisanship to decline as mass publics become better educated and as the mass media become more prevalent.

Although this argument provides a compelling narrative, the evidence to support the narrative is hotly contested. In a series of articles, Dalton charts the growth of what he terms the cognitive partisan and the decline of the ritual partisan. Cognitive partisans are attached to a political party but importantly also possess the cognitive resources (measured in terms of education and political interest) to be involved in politics even when party cues are lacking. By contrast, ritual partisans are attached to a political party but lack cognitive sophistication. Over time, in a number of different countries, the proportion of cognitive partisans within the electorate has increased and the proportion of ritual partisans has decreased. Yet showing this is not quite the same as demonstrating that the spread of education has weakened partisanship. Rather, it shows that partisans are now better educated than they were previously, which – given the spread of education – is hardly a surprise.

However, the theory of a CM argues that citizens are likely to abandon partisan attachments as they become better informed about politics and gain exposure to mass media. A number of comparative studies have directly tested this hypothesis. Berglund et al. (2005) show the decline of party identification in North Europe has in fact been sharper among the less well-educated than it has been among the university educated, the opposite of what CM would suggest. Lupu (2015) shows that partisanship is stronger among the well-educated; Albright (2009) shows that CM actually increases the probability that a respondent expresses an attachment to a specific party, and this positive relationship does not change across cohorts. Similarly, Huber et al. (2005) show that partisan attachments *increase* with cognitive resources.

A number of single-country case studies have also tested the CM hypothesis. Examining partisan dealignment in Germany, Arzheimer (2006: 799) observes that CM can be “quickly ruled out” since the relationship between education and partisanship was not statistically significant during the late 1970s, and in fact became significantly *positive* toward the end of the period under study. Thus, if anything, the so-called “educational revolution” hampered the decline of partisanship. Also in Germany Dassonneville and Dejaeghere (2014) find that, although at the aggregate rising levels of political sophistication have occurred simultaneously with decreasing partisanship, individual level analysis clearly suggests that the least sophisticated are most likely to feel alienated from the party system. Studies in Italy (Poletti 2015) and France (Marthaler 2008) also find results that contradict the CM hypothesis.

This body of work presents something of a challenge to CM. There is little evidence to support the idea that the spread of education has had a direct negative impact on partisanship, and a number of studies suggest that it may have had a positive impact. Moreover, CM does not explain why partisanship has declined in some developed democracies (such as Sweden) but not others (such as Denmark), or why in some circumstances partisanship has increased (such as in the USA).

In order to appreciate the differences between countries – as well as within them – it is necessary to consider the role that the political context plays in shaping partisanship. As previously noted, in many democracies, notably Britain, partisan identity had a strong class component. But in many of these same democracies the impact of class as an electoral cleavage has declined over time. This has led to a decline in the strength of partisanship, particularly among young people, who – since they no longer grow up in such partisan households – are not socialized in the same way into a specific partisan identity (van der Eijk and Franklin 2009: 180). In order to understand the decline of partisanship we must therefore also understand the changing political context to do with the decline of social cleavages, which is discussed in detail in Evans and Northmore-Ball in this volume (see also van der Brug and Franklin in this volume).

Policy polarization

The political context may also have a more direct effect on party identification, which brings us to the second main approach to explaining the decline of party identification that relates to the supply side of what parties offer voters and what parties stand for. The policy polarization thesis contends that the extent to which citizens identify with a political party depends at least in part upon how distinctive the parties are with respect to their policy platforms. If all the parties in a country adopt similar policies, then voters might not care very much which party wins. But if parties adopt very distinctive policies, citizens may also form stronger party attachments. Party polarization may therefore strengthen party brands and clarify voters' choices (Lupu 2015), and presented with a clearer set of choices among parties, citizens may also form stronger party attachments (Lupu 2015).

The idea that party identification is related to the political context is somewhat at odds with the orthodox perspective on party identification as originally developed by the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1960). According to this perspective, party identification is a psychological attachment rooted in early-adult socialization experiences, and is relatively immune from changes in the political context. However, a more revisionist view treats party identification as a "running tally" of retrospective evaluations of party performance (Fiorina 1981). According to this perspective, party identification is supposed to vary with the political-institutional context rather than with the social structure of society (see Huber et al. 2005).

One reason, then, why partisanship may have declined more in some countries rather than others, or declined at certain times, is to do with how parties have changed, rather than how the voters have changed. A number of studies on the United States show that people perceive more policy differences between Democrats and Republicans today than in the 1970s (Wattenberg 1998; Hetherington 2001). The American parties have become more different and distinct in the eyes of the voters, making it easier and more meaningful to identify strongly with one of them. This period of party polarization coincides with a resurgence of mass partisanship since the 1970s (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Bartels 2000; Brewer 2005; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009). By contrast, data from Sweden, where the strength of party identification is falling, show that people over the last 20 years perceive fewer and fewer ideological differences between the parties, especially between the Social Democrats and the largest non-socialist party, the Conservatives (Holmberg 2007).

A number of early comparative studies gave support to this idea. Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) found that the decline in the strength of party identification tended to be related to weakening party polarization, declining ideological conflicts, diminished issue differences, and increases in the number of political parties. Berglund et al.'s (2005) study on six north European countries finds that the more polarized a party system is, the more numerous party identifiers are. They conclude that there is clear evidence that party polarization leads to a higher level of party identification. Lupu's (2015) study of over 30 democracies from across the world supports this view and finds that party polarization correlates with partisanship across time and across countries. Lastly, Huber et al. (2005) find that party attachments increase with greater clarity of party responsibility (a low number of legislative parties).

In sum, although it is clear that partisan attachments have weakened considerably in a number of Western democracies, it is less clear why. Part may be due to the changing media environment, and the volume and tone of information that is now available to citizens in advanced democracies. Part may also be due to how voters have changed. But importantly parties and politicians have also changed. In the USA, parties have become more polarized, whereas in many other democracies they have become more socially and politically similar (Evans and

De Graaf 2013). There is now growing evidence that this social and political similarity has weakened the class basis of party support in many European democracies (Heath 2015; Evans and Tilley 2012; Elff 2009), which historically formed the basis for partisan attachments.

The consequences of partisan dealignment

What impact does partisan dealignment have on the functioning of democracy and the ways in which citizens participate in the political system? Has partisan dealignment led to the emergence of sophisticated and critical citizens who are more likely to hold the government to account for what it has delivered (or failed to deliver)? Or has it led to political alienation and withdrawal from the political process? The answers to these questions have important implications for the long-term health of democracy, and are also a topic of lively debate and controversy.

It is well known that partisanship has a number of behavioral consequences. People with a strong sense of party identification are more likely to vote (Heath 2007), more likely to participate in election campaigns (Finkel and Opp 1991), and more likely to vote consistently for a particular political party (Dalton et al. 2000). By contrast non-partisans are more likely to vote for different parties from one election to the next, and to make a final decision closer to the date of the election (Dalton et al. 2000).

The weakening of partisan attachments therefore has important implications for the functioning of democratic politics. Parties no longer act as such an important source of political information or perceptual screen for many voters, who in turn are likely to be more easily swayed by cues from other sources, such as the media. Perhaps more importantly, (at least some) voters are less tribal, and their sense of loyalty to political parties has gradually given way to a more conditional form of support, based on governments' performance and management of the economy (Sanders et al. 2001; Clarke et al. 2009), although this could be a feature of younger voters whose partisanship increases with age (see van der Brug and Franklin in this volume).

In addition, since non-partisans are more likely to switch their vote between elections – and there are now many more non-partisans than there used to be – elections are more volatile and less predictable. Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) present evidence consistent with this hypothesis, and show that electoral volatility has increased across a wide range of democracies. High levels of partisanship thus reduce electoral volatility and encourage party system stability (see Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). However, it is also possible that electoral volatility could be a source of partisan dealignment. Party identity not only strengthens with age, but also strengthens with the repetition of voting for the same party over successive elections (Butler and Stokes 1969). During periods of high electoral volatility, this repetition is interrupted, which could delay the formation of a strong party identity. In particular, young people who have not yet developed a strong party identification may be more likely to vote for a new party or to change which party they support, which may prevent them from forming strong bonds with any one party in particular.

Lastly, since non-partisans tend to make up their mind about who to vote for later in the campaign, and there are now more non-partisans than there used to be, election campaigns have become more important for helping people decide which party to vote for (Kosmidis and Xezonakis 2010). In the era of strong partisan attachments, election outcomes could be predicted on the basis of prior dispositions, and so campaigns were thought to matter little (Campbell et al. 1960). However, as Dalton and Wattenberg (2000: 48) report, the proportion of people who decide who to vote for during an election campaign has substantially increased in many democracies. For example, according to British Election Study data just 11 percent of voters were undecided about who to vote for at the start of the campaign in 1964; whereas in

2005 approximately 35 percent were undecided. Kosmidis and Xezonakis (2010) show that these undecided voters tend to be particularly sensitive to short-term issues, such as the economy. Whereas previously election campaigns were primarily about mobilizing existing supporters to turn out and vote, now they are also opportunities for persuasion.

This development has led to a subtle shift in the determinants of election outcomes. It has long been recognized that strong partisans are less responsive to short-term factors in making their voting decision (Converse and Dupeux 1962). Building on this insight, Kayser and Wlezien (2011) argue that if partisanship does inure the electorate to short-term shocks, partisan decline should imply a greater responsiveness to such shocks, be they economic or otherwise. Kayser and Wlezien (2011) show that the rising proportion of non-partisans (individuals without an affinity toward a political party) in European electorates means that voters respond more to the economy than in the past. They interpret this as a positive development, which enhances mechanisms of accountability.

Whereas some of these developments sound positive, partisan dealignment may also have a number of less desirable consequences. For example, according to Dassonneville and Dejaeghere (2014), the decline of party identification in Germany represents a form of alienation from the political system in general, and more specifically toward the party system. This withdrawal from the political process is evident in a number of ways. Since partisans tend to be more likely to vote than non-partisans, the increase of non-partisans within the electorate may have led to a decline in turnout (Heath 2007). According to Heath (2007), partisan dealignment in Britain between 1964 and 2005 is responsible for a decline in turnout of almost 7 percentage points.

Moreover, the decline of party attachments may have also made voters more responsive to outsider or niche parties. In recent years, a number of anti-politics parties have gained electoral success, from the 5 Star Movement in Italy to UKIP in the UK. With respect to UKIP in particular, Evans and Mellon (2016) show that the party was particularly successful at attracting the votes of people who *used to be* partisans, but had become disenfranchised with Labour's move to the "Liberal Consensus" on the EU and immigration (which occurred before UKIP became an electoral force).

There is also evidence that non-partisans are more swayed by personality and candidate traits than they are by party labels. On the one hand, this had led to the emergence of "leadership effects" – where voters pay particular attention to the credibility and competence of party leaders. This is often understood within a valence framework (Clarke et al. 2004) that emphasizes the politics of competence and performance. According to Hayes and McAllister (1997: 3), election outcomes are now, more than at any time in the past, determined by voters' assessments of party leaders. The reasoning is that if the number of partisans tends to decline, there is greater room for other factors, especially political leaders, to affect vote choice (Aarts et al. 2013: 5).

But on the other hand non-partisans may also be receptive to charismatic populist leaders too. In democracies where partisanship is strong, elections tend to be relatively stable and predictable. In contrast, in democracies where partisanship is weak, elections often become an arena for charismatic or demagogic leaders to seize power without any real advancement of the public good or long-term policy commitments (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Hicken and Kuhonta 2011). Weak partisanship greatly reduces the quality of representation and the predictability of policies, both of which are necessary for the stable development of a polity (Kitschelt et al. 1999).

Conclusion

Partisanship has weakened in many advanced democracies – though by no means all of them. This finding alone is enough to cast doubt on some of the more popular explanations for

partisan decline. If – as many scholars have argued – modernization undermines partisanship, why then has party identification declined so much in Sweden but not Denmark? And why has partisanship in the USA increased over the last 20 years? And if the spread of education is responsible for declining party attachments, why are party attachments stronger among the well-educated than the lower-educated? Clearly social change can, at best, only be part of the story.

Perhaps then a more fruitful line of inquiry is to consider the role that parties themselves have played in the process of partisan dealignment. When parties provide the electorate with clear choices and there are clear differences between the parties, it is easier for voters to identify with one party over another. As parties in many advanced democracies have become more similar, and converged on the mythical center ground, voters have become less able to distinguish between parties – and as a consequence are less likely to express a partisan attachment. These different accounts have important implications for our understanding of why partisanship has declined, but also have important implications for the potential consequences of this decline.

The modernization approach does not necessarily regard partisan dealignment as a negative development for the functioning of democracy. The rise of cognitive mobilization means that voters now make more informed decisions based on policy positions and economic performance, both of which augur well for strengthening chains of accountability. By contrast, the policy polarization perspective implies that partisan dealignment stems from disillusionment with the mainstream alternatives, and perhaps even alienation from the political process. If the parties all look the same, people do not identify with a party, are less likely to vote, and are perhaps also more responsive to the appeals of outsider or fringe parties and charismatic politicians.

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