

THE ADOPTION OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION ABROAD:

REVIEW AND SUGGESTIONS

BY

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In spite of its theoretical and analytical appeal, the concept of party identification has left many European analysts of voting-especially those not "identified" with the Michigan School-unconvinced of its value. Measurement difficulties have done their share to strengthen the barrier raised against its adoption. No study, however, can claim to have compellingly disproven its significance; nor has any confirmed it, at least not for the German electorate. For assessments of the concept's cross-national utility, see Shively (1972) and Miller (1976).

It is meaningful? In questioning the utility of the party identification concept most European analysts base their opposition on the importance of social, especially class orientations (e.g. Thomassen, 1976: 77-78 and Kaase, 1976: 82-83). The party system and voter alignment in European polities, unlike that of the United States, is said to have evolved out of social cleavages and has been likened to "frozen" landscapes (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The electorates in European societies are segmented into "zuils" (pillars) or "Läger" (camps), to use some native terms, i.e., distinct social milieus with respective organizations as well as ideologies. The political party is

just one of the objects within the horizon of a given milieu. But it is neither the most salient one, nor is the latter irrevocably tied to any specific party. Such a model of voter alignment does not require a partisan tie independent of the attachment to a social milieu. Partisan loyalties, though they may flourish in an electorate of that kind, are closely embedded in class-related affiliations (Campbell and Valen, 1966: 267-268).

These social affiliations, rather than party identification, are said to cement voting patterns over time. This may occasionally require the aggregation of the voting shares of parties with similar social clienteles (Shively, 1972: 1220-1222); witness in most European countries the fairly constant share of the proletarian parties (Socialists and Communists), on one hand, and that of the bourgeois parties, on the other! Whereas the partisan orientations of voters may undergo change, the social orientations remain largely immutable.

While socio-structural determinants may deserve heavy stress in interpreting voting in Europe, it would be highly misleading to imply that party identification in the United States is "class blind" or neutral with regard to social groups. Lazarsfeld's et al. (1948: ch. 3) attempt at capturing partisanship relied solely on social criteria ("index of political predisposition"). Campbell et al. (1960: chs. 12 and 13) pointed to the linkages, however variable, between class and group identification, on one hand, and the party tie, on the other. The social traces

may be weaker than in European polities, and their impact more dependent on the peculiar circumstances of a given election, but they are not negligible in the American electorate.

A caveat of a different sort with respect to party identification in Europe has been voiced by Butler and Stokes (1969: 43), who otherwise are highly supportive of the concept's merits. Their reservation concerns the "prompting" of the partisan attachment through the electoral environment, especially the frequency and complexity of electoral contests. On election day the voter in a European country is typically faced with candidates, or slates of candidates for a single office. He has no way of separately expressing, for example, his Chancellor preference and his preference for a local representative. As a result, he is less likely than his American counterpart to grasp the distinction between voting for a particular candidate and being tied to his party in general. He will be inclined to equate the two preferences, thus making the durable component of his choice difficult to disentangle from the momentary one.

Does it exist? The conceptual unease of many analysts about "party identification" is reinforced by a flow of results suggesting that, e.g. in Germany, this attitude is neither widespread nor stable across time nor distinguishable from voting choice (Kaase, 1976; Radtke, 1972; Schleth and Weede, 1971).

Most discomfoting is the finding reported by Thomassen (1976: 71) about the Dutch electorate, where actual voting choice proved more stable than what was reported as party identification. More sanguine assessments are offered by Zohlnhoefer (1965), Berger (1973), and Falter (1977), as far as Germany is concerned.

What makes it such a difficult task to sort out these varied findings is the fact that different measurements of partisanship are employed, that some studies rely on cross-sectional, others on panel designs with some of the panel studies not maintaining the same measurement instrument. The negative verdicts, in my view, rest on shaky data and design bases. So far no long-term panel employing the same measure throughout all of its waves while tapping the concept of "party identification" has made a convincing case against its existence or significance in the West German electorate. Thomassen's (1976) findings pertaining to the Netherlands pose the only challenge, to my knowledge, of that kind on the European side.

How to measure it? The issue of party identification in Europe has remained unsettled largely because of difficulties in operationalizing and measuring the central concept. This stands in marked contrast to the ease with which this attitude has been ascertained in the American electorate. Depending on seemingly slight deiscrepancies in the wording of the question, the results obtained from German respondents turn out vastly different. Finding the proper translation for "identification" (i.e. "think of yourself as Republican...") has proved an especially vexing problem. When survey respondents in Germany

were queried about whether or not they considered themselves as Anhänger (adherent) of any particular party--without party labels being provided as a cue--less than 30 per cent named a party; but when the question included the party labels, slightly over one half of the respondents answered affirmatively in one instance (Kaase, 1976: 86-87) and two thirds did so in another one (Falter, 1977).

While the suggestion of party cues boosts the overall response figure, the notion of "adherence" still sets a very high hurdle. It appears that "adherence" captures those partisans whose loyalties are confirmed beyond doubt and who would find it immensely difficult, if not impossible, to vote contrary to their attachment. Such a commitment may characterize the "strong" identifiers in the American electorate, but excludes the weak ones. By the same token the question which asks the respondent to name the party "he likes best"--eliciting a positive response from over three fourths of the electorate--aims too low (Zohlnhöfer 1965: 133), most likely including even the weakest "Independents leaning" to one of the parties.

A compromise course was pursued by Berger (1973) whose question explicitly referred to the tie as having to be durable while allowing for the possibility of occasional deviations from the professed allegiance. This "functional equivalence" approach seems best suited to tap--or trap--party identification in a country like Germany, where the literal translation of the American question would confound the formal party membership with the subjective one.

My own work. My analysis, employing the Berger measure, focused on three key aspects of party identification which thus far have eluded a firm assessment in West Germany. One of them is the temporal stability of this attitude. If what passes as party identification in interview situations shifts from time to time clearly something other than durable identification has been ascertained. A second feature of the concept in need of support is its imperturbability in the face of changing voting choices. Perfect harmony between the latter and professed party identification is highly suspect. The third concern of this paper deals with the development of partisan intensity through the life-cycle. Does partisanship harden with the accumulation of electoral experience? The data for the analysis came from a three-wave panel survey conducted in 1972 during a period which featured a federal election (ICPSR study no. 7102). My findings confirmed the concept on all three counts examined: stability, priority to voting choice and dynamic development throughout the life-cycle (replication of the Converse, 1969, model). The complete analysis will appear in Comparative Political Studies (Spring, 1978). In the meantime, a 1976 survey, comparable both in terms of design and phrasing of the party identification question, is available for exploration. Results from these data would be most helpful for checking the findings reported above and moving a step further toward anchoring the party identification concept in foreign waters as well.

The discussion of the cross-national applicability of this

concept might be organized along the following aspects:

1. Does this identification represent an attitude sui generis or a derived one, resulting from prior orientations to one's social class, religious denomination or other relevant groups?
2. To what extent is party identification an adjustment on the voter's part to a peculiar electoral environment not found outside the United States, an economizing (rational) device not needed (functional) abroad?
3. Assuming that some form of durable partisanship exists in European electorates (the high degree of voting stability certainly suggests that it does), how can this be explained without some recourse to "party identification"?
4. How does the bewildering array of alternative measures of partisanship used in studying partisanship abroad compare to the SRC/CPS instrument?
5. Shively (1972) has suggested that with social cleavages losing strength in Europe an era of party identification may be imminent there. If so, this would mean that the European trend would run opposite to the American trend (increasing dealignment).

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