Partisanship and Political Sophistication During and Outside of Election Times: A Longitudinal Analysis Using the German SOEP Survey 1984–2012

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In many established democracies, partisan attachments play a central role in guiding citizens' attitudes as well as their political behaviour. Most importantly, partisanship has an effect on what party citizens vote for on Election Day. In general, highly politically sophisticated citizens are more likely to identify with a party compared to the less politically sophisticated. This article argues that the strength of an individual's partisan attachment varies considerably over time. More specifically, it finds that party attachments are stronger when Election Day is close. The less politically sophisticated in particular benefit from such an effect and develop stronger attachments at election times.

Ever since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) was published, party identification has been considered a central concept in political behaviour research. Studies have convincingly shown that party identification is one of the major determinants of the vote choice (Campbell et al. 1960; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Additionally, scholars have found partisanship to serve as a cognitive shortcut for a multitude of political decisions that citizens have to take (Popkin 1991; Shively 1979; Tversky and Kahneman 1973). As a consequence of this latter role, partisans are found to have more coherent political values, policy attitudes and candidate evaluations than non-partisans (Lavine and Gschwend 2006).

Over the last decades, scholars have noted a general decline of partisan attachments in Western democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Dalton 1984, 2007), but despite this observed decline, party ties remain an important guiding tool for political decisions (Clarke et al. 2009; Lau, Andersen, and Redlawsk 2008; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) and for processing political information (Bartels 2002). Additionally, feelings of closeness to parties still serve as a linkage mechanism between citizens and political parties, ensuring the stability of democratic regimes (Hooghe and Kern 2015). Even when scholars find levels of partisanship to be decreasing, partisanship still plays a central role in the process of making a vote choice and in politics in general. Therefore, it can be considered worrisome that previous research has indicated party identification not to be equally distributed among the electorate. A number of scholars have pointed out the existence of a gap between highly and less politically sophisticated voters: less

politically sophisticated voters possess partisan attachments less often compared to the highly politically sophisticated (Albright 2009; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012; Marthaler 2008).

While the importance of partisanship is commonly accepted, there is considerable disagreement in the scholarly literature on its origins and its alleged stability. In this article, we focus on instability in the strength of partisan attachments and thus not on the direction of partisan attachments. In doing so, we analyse under what conditions partisan attachments are activated (Federico and Hunt 2013; Huckfeldt et al. 1999). We examine differences between election and non-election times more specifically and argue that there are good reasons to assume partisanship to be strengthened at election times.

Previous work has already argued that partisan ties are activated in campaign periods (Campbell 2008; Gelman and King 1993) and Grant and his colleagues (2010) have given empirical evidence for such an activation of partisan ties. They have shown that existing political orientations not only receive more weight, but also are more easily accessible as the campaign unfolds. As far as we know, however, no previous study has investigated the long-term effects of such election and campaign effects on partisan attachments, with an analysis covering multiple election cycles. The long-term character of the panel data thus allows us to examine whether gains in partisan strength at election times are long lasting, or whether they dissipate quickly afterwards. This question is all the more important given the long-term erosion of partisan attachments – as previously observed in Germany as well (Arzheimer 2006; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012). Our analyses shed light on the question whether elections are counterbalancing this structural decline in partisanship.

Investigating the dynamics of partisanship requires the use of panel data. Furthermore, to be able to compare election times to non-election times it is essential that the data cover multiple election cycles. The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) meets these requirements, as the data allow for tracing party identification patterns in Germany over 29 years (1984–2012) including seven federal elections. Even though we expect the hypothesised impact of elections on partisanship to be present in any Western democracy, we focus on the German case only in the current article. The German electoral context is a good case to investigate the causes of partisanship, as scholars have found party identification to be a valid construct in Germany (Arzheimer 2006; Falter, Schoen, and Caballero 2000; Falter 1977). Observing that party identification is fairly stable and that it is different from other forms of party preference such as vote choices, Falter, Schoen, and Caballero (2000) conclude that party identification in Germany does resemble distinctive properties of the traditional concept as proposed by Campbell et al. (1960). The debate on whether party identification is indeed a valid construct is still ongoing, which is why the investigation of party identification dynamics is of utmost importance.

This article is structured as follows. We first give an overview of the literature on partisanship and on its functional value more specifically, which allow us to formulate our hypotheses. Next we present the data, from the German Socio-Economic Panel. We subsequently present the results of our analyses and we end with some conclusions and suggestions for further research.

ENLIGHTENED IN ELECTION TIMES?

Investigating what determined the vote choices of the American electorate in the 1950s, the authors of *The American Voter* suggested that partisanship was of crucial importance. They described party identification, which has since become a central concept in electoral behaviour research, as a voter's psychological association with a political party (Campbell et al. 1960). Party identification is traditionally assumed to be different from and more general than voting behaviour (Kohler 2002). Even if people now and then vote for other parties than the one they identify with, party identification is still thought to be a stable and powerful driving force for voting behaviour (Arzheimer and Schoen 2005; Johnston 2006; Neundorf, Stegmueller, and Scotto 2011).

Early studies on partisanship described party attachments as being acquired through a process of parental socialisation (Campbell et al. 1960; Jennings and Niemi 1981). As a result, partisanship was assumed to be largely stable throughout the life cycle (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009). This presumed stability of acquired partisanship has been questioned, however. Revisionists have argued that party identification is updated by short-term factors such as retrospective evaluations or the candidates running in an election (Achen 2002; Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981). The view that party identification is by no means as stable as one would assume following the traditional argumentation is corroborated by recent empirical work indicating that a substantial number of voters indeed have volatile party attachments (Neundorf, Stegmueller, and Scotto 2011; Schmitt-Beck, Weick, and Christoph 2006).

While most of the debate between traditionalists and revisionists is focused on the question of whether instability in partisanship is a result of measurement error (Arzheimer and Schoen 2005; Green and Palmquist 1994) and therefore framed in methodological terms (Bartels et al. 2011; Green and Yoon 2002), less attention is given to the question of which contextual factors possibly come into play for explaining why and when partisan ties fluctuate. In this article, we focus on over-time variation in whether or not a citizen identifies with a political party. Building on previous research that offers indications that partisanship is 'activated' at election times (Campbell 2008; Grant, Mockabee, and Monson 2010), we argue that party attachments can be strengthened at these times.

This expectation is based on a number of arguments. First, we assume that partisanship is 'needed' especially at election times. This assumption is based on Shively's (1979) functional model of partisanship. In essence, his model implies that citizens can be expected to acquire partisanship when 'they need a way to handle difficult electoral decisions' (Shively 1979, 1039). The functional logic implies that information does not lead to partisanship, but that large amounts of information necessitate the activation of partisanship. At election times, citizens realise that they have to make a political decision, and they are exposed to large amounts of political information. As a consequence, the stronger this feeling of having to decide what party or candidate to vote for, the higher will be the need for partisanship to guide that decision (Shively 1979).

Second, while such campaign effects can be expected to decay rapidly, a rationalisation process can be thought to strengthen party attachments after Election Day.

Dinas (2014) has convincingly shown that casting a vote strengthens voters' partisanship. The reason therefore lies in a psychological process in which voting behaviour serves as a self-reinforcing mechanism for citizens' attitudes. As Dinas (2014, 462) indicates, voters 'consult their own prior behavior as they consider the direction and strength of their partisan identities'. As a result, citizens are expected to report being attached more strongly to a party when they recently cast a vote.

Third, and more generally, elections can temporarily increase enthusiasm about parties and the political system more generally. Previous research had indeed indicated that feelings of political efficacy and political support strengthened at election time (Finkel 1987). There are thus good reasons to assume that parties are evaluated more positively at election time as well, further strengthening party attachments. As a side note, however, it is important to point out that most of the literature on the positive impact of elections on, for example, satisfaction with democracy finds only beneficial effects among those who voted for the winning parties (Blais and Gélineau 2007; Singh, Karakoç, and Blais 2012).

A fourth reason for expecting partisan attachments to be strengthened at election times can be found in Lupu's work on a branding model of partisanship (Lupu 2013, 2015). In brief, for partisan attachments to develop and strengthen, it is essential that voters observe differences between different party brands. As a result, when parties converge, partisan attachments weaken. Building on this argument, partisan attachments can be thought to be strengthened at election times, when media actors as well as politicians – through the information they provide and in campaign rhetoric – aim to highlight disagreement between parties, which should clarify differences between the party brands, and strengthen partisan attachments. For all these reasons, we expect partisan attachments to be strengthened at election times (Hypothesis 1).

In this article, we not only expect partisanship to be strengthened at election times – which would be in line with previous literature – we more importantly argue that the activation of partisan attachments at these times can act to diminish the gap in sophistication between who identifies with a party and who does not.

Identification with a political party is assumed to serve as a cognitive shortcut for 'organizing political information, evaluations and behaviors' (Dalton 2007, 275). Consequently, having a party attachment is of most functional value among the less interested and less politically sophisticated (Dalton 2007, 2013; Shively 1979). In contrast to these theoretical accounts, empirical evidence has indicated that less sophisticated voters are generally less likely to have a party identification than the highly sophisticated (Albright 2009; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012; Marthaler 2008). It seems, therefore, that those who are least in need of cognitive heuristics when thinking about politics are most likely to make use of such a shortcut (Lau, Andersen, and Redlawsk 2008), which can be explained by means of the involvement hypothesis (Ohr, Quandt, and Dülmer 2005, 2009). The reasoning then is that higher political sophistication leads to a higher political involvement, fostering partisan attachments. This argumentation was already brought up by scholars indicating that especially more aware (i.e. more knowledgeable) voters develop stable opinions due to their ability to cue consistent information that is according to their predispositions (Taber and Lodge 2006; Zaller 1992).

Election times, however, might act to alter this general pattern. At election times, voters are much more exposed to political information than in times when no elections take place. In election periods 'only a remote and indifferent citizen could fail to absorb some few meaningful items of information' (Converse 1962, 586). These times are information-rich not only because of higher media coverage (newspaper front pages, TV debates, etc.) but also because of direct contact of parties with their potential voters (letters, information desks, etc.). Furthermore, highly informative periods are not limited to the campaign period only. After the election as well, politicians and political parties tend to dominate the news coverage for a while. Citizens have been found to be responsive to such campaign information (Hillygus and Jackman 2003; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Mitchell 2014). The political information that is prevalent at election times, however, is not equally processed by all voters. As an example, the effect of information is dependent on prior political values and predispositions (Dilliplane 2014; Lavine and Gschwend 2006; Levendusky 2013; Wagner, Tarlov, and Vivyan 2014). Furthermore, differences in voters' level of political sophistication can also be thought to affect how citizens process campaign information. Taber and Lodge (2006) demonstrated differences in information processing between highly and less politically sophisticated citizens. While the sophisticated seek out congruent information, the politically unsophisticated do not show such a prior attitude effect. Likewise, Meffert and Gschwend (2011) have shown that the highly politically sophisticated and highly knowledgeable tend to discount party signals during election campaigns. Additionally, a number of recent studies have shown that knowledge gaps are reduced in information-rich environments (Fraile 2013; Iyengar et al. 2010; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Kuklinski et al. 2001; Wolak 2008). Furthermore, as the political sophisticates are expected to already have stronger party attachments they can be thought to have less space for party attachments to strengthen further, resulting in a ceiling effect. For these reasons, we assume that especially the less sophisticated and least knowledgeable voters will 'benefit' from the wealth of information available at election times. We expect the effect of elections on the strength of partisan attachments to be heterogeneous and hypothesise that the attachments of the politically unsophisticated increase more strongly than the strength of party identification for the highly politically sophisticated (Hypothesis 2).

DATA AND METHODS

Testing these hypotheses empirically requires using appropriate data. Only panel data allow testing 'whether effects of exposure to information flows, are major forces in shaping attitudes' (Zaller 1992, 118). Therefore, we make use of the German Socio-Economic Panel, which – given the time it has already been in the field – can be considered an exceptional longitudinal data set. Party identification was included from the first wave of the data collection onwards, which makes it possible to trace identification patterns in Germany over 29 years (1984–2012) including seven federal elections.

While Shively applied his functional conception of partisanship to the context of the United States, there are reasons to assume partisan attachments to be of functional value in a German context as well. First, the complexity of the electoral system (Bawn 1999) and the need for casting a party vote as well as a candidate vote might render

partisanship a helpful cue guiding the vote choice. Second, Dalton's seminal work on how cognitive mobilisation results in dealignment is based on Shively's notion of partisanship as a functional heuristic. Working on the German case in particular, Dalton (2012, 36) has argued that an increased cognitive mobilisation of the German electorate has produced 'a significant number of citizens who no longer rely on inherited, habitual party cues'. Our argument for expecting increases in partisan strength at election time as well is partly based on such a functionalist model of partisanship.

The SOEP applies a complex sampling design including several refreshment waves. We focus on respondents living in former West German states.[1] East German states were covered by the SOEP immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, we focus here on the dynamics of partisan strength among respondents from former West German states only. The reason therefore is that East Germany basically can be considered a new democracy, where partisan ties were expected to develop slowly after democratisation and can be considered much more variable and dynamic (Dalton 2012). If we wish to generalise from the German context to other settings where partisanship exists and structures voting behaviour, it is important that we focus on analysing the dynamics of partisanship in a context where partisanship is found to be the case. Previous research has offered indications that Western Germany is such a context (Arzheimer 2006; Dalton 2012; Falter, Schoen, and Caballero 2000). In addition, our analyses on the dynamics of partisan strength over time also speak to the literature on dealignment, and it has to be noted that 'the Western trends are the core of the research debate on dealignment' (Dalton, 2014, 136). Finally, it is important to point out that restricting an analysis of partisanship and the dynamics in partisan strength to West Germany only is in line with previous work on the topic (Arzheimer 2006; Dalton 2012, 2014; Neundorf, Smets, and García-Albacete 2013; Neundorf, Stegmueller, and Scotto 2011; Schmitt-Beck, Weick, and Christoph 2006). While it would without any doubt be insightful to compare the dynamics of partisanship in East and West, and the role of elections therein, it falls beyond the scope of the current article to analyse differences and commonalities between established and newer democracies. This leaves us with a sample of $N = 25,111$ respondents and $N = 210,702$ observations respectively. Due to panel attrition and refreshments the panel is unbalanced, with a minimum of one observation and a maximum of 29 observations. On average respondents in the dataset are observed four times.

OPERATIONALISATION

The dependent variable *party identification* was coded as a categorical variable, distinguishing respondents without a party identification (0), those identifying with a party very weakly (1), fairly weakly (2), moderately (3), fairly strongly (4), and very strongly (5).[2]

It is important to clarify what exactly we refer to as party identification and how it is measured, because question wording has strong effects on levels and dynamics of partisanship (Blais et al. 2001). The question included in the SOEP questionnaires asks respondents to indicate whether citizens are generally inclined to a party. The English translation of the question reads as follows: 'Many people in Germany are inclined to a certain political party, although from time to time they vote for another

political party. What about you? Are you inclined – generally speaking – to a particular party?' Subsequently, the direction and strength of partisan attachments is gauged. The question wording thus more closely resembles questions of party closeness (such as those included in the Collaborative Study of Electoral Systems) than the original – American – conceptualisation of partisanship. While this is an important limitation of our analyses, we are restricted by data availability. Previous research has also relied on the SOEP data and this exact question for drawing inferences on trends and dynamics in partisanship (Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012; Kroh 2014; Neundorf, Stegmueller, and Scotto 2011).

In Figure 1 we present the over-time evolution of the extent to which respondents identify with a party. The graph illustrates that at an aggregate level there has been an overall decline of partisanship in West Germany. Interestingly, this decline is not monotonic and one can clearly see a pattern of ups and downs at more or less regular intervals for each of the categories. The vertical lines in the graph represent the occurrence of general elections. In order to get a better sense of potential election effects, it is important to point out that the SOEP fieldwork is always conducted at the beginning of a year, mostly starting in February. In the early studies, five months of fieldwork were planned with a main phase of two months (Infratest 2011a). Since 1994, fieldwork has been extended and lasts about ten months (Infratest 2011b). Details on the timing of the fieldwork can be found in the Appendix (Table A1). For which panel waves we expect to observe increases in the strength of partisanship therefore depends on the timing of the election. The 1987 election took place in January and, as a result, potential election effects could already be captured in the 1987 survey – for which fieldwork started in February. Figure 1 effectively indicates an increase in partisan strength in the 1987 survey wave. The 1990 elections took place in December, the

FIGURE 1
SHARE OF PI IN THE FORMER WEST GERMAN STATES 1984–2012
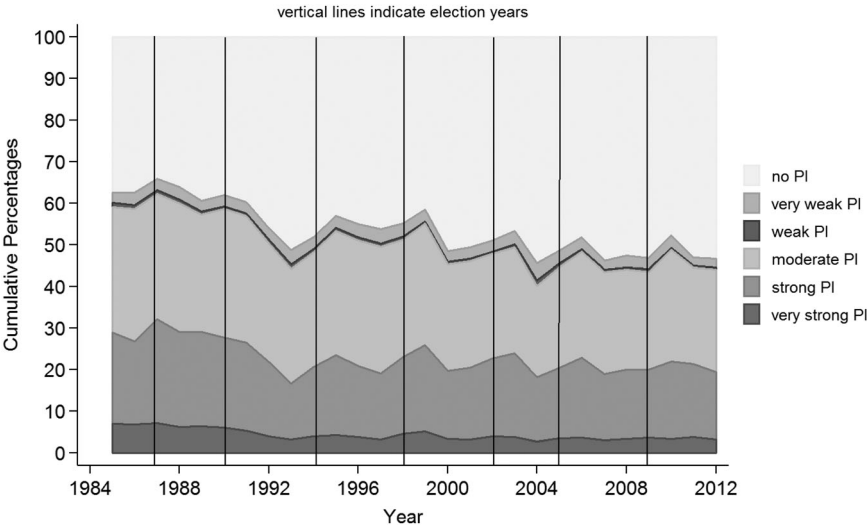
1994 elections in October and all subsequent elections (1998, 2002, 2005 and 2009) took place in September. For all these elections, potential election-related increases in the strength of partisanship is only noticeable in the survey conducted in the following year. Figure 1 indicates an increase in the strength of partisanship in the survey immediately following the election year for all elections since 1994, which is in line with our expectations. The only instance where the data do not conform to the expected pattern is the 1990 election– that is, we do not observe an increase in the strength of partisanship in 1991. Potentially, a process of politicisation in the run-up to the unification of East and West had already strengthened partisan attachments. Taking these data-collection issues into account, increases in partisanship indeed occur mostly at election times. While suggestive, the graph cannot give us information on variation in partisanship at an individual level. To this end, a more complex research design is needed, which is why we make use of longitudinal individual-level analysis.

The main independent variables in our analyses are *election time* and *political sophistication*. Election time is operationalised by means of the time when elections took place. The general elections covered in the SOEP were held on 25 January 1987, 2 December 1990, 16 October 1994, 27 September 1998, 22 September 2002, 18 September 2005, and 27 September 2009.[3] To define the election time, we construct a variable that spans a period of equal length before and after the election. Information becomes more decisive closer to the election date and is afterwards forgotten fairly rapidly (Huber 2013). Thus, the election period covers the relatively short time span from 60 days before the election date to 60 days after the election date. We used other operationalisations of the election period as well (e.g. 90 days before and after), which did not substantively change the results of our analyses. When respondents were interviewed during that period, the variable takes on the value 1 and if the respondent was interviewed in a time without electoral campaigns the variable takes on the value 0.[4] As mentioned above, elections and data collection do not fall on the same date which makes election periods a rather rare event compared to non-election times (3 per cent of the observations fall into election periods).

Luskin (1990, 332) defines political sophistication as 'the extent to which … political cognitions are numerous, cut a wide substantive swath, and are highly organized or "constrained"'. While political knowledge is generally considered to be the best single indicator of political sophistication, political interest, levels of education or political activity are also regularly looked at (Lachat 2007; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012). Given that no measures of political knowledge are available in the dataset, we rely on a number of proxy measures for political sophistication and include levels of education and political interest in our models. Education is measured by distinguishing between respondents with (1) and without (0) a higher education degree. Political interest is measured in four categories from 1, 'none', over 2, 'weak', and 3, 'strong', to 4, 'very strong'. By including these two indicators, we capture the two items which Dalton (2012) claims are essential items of 'cognitive mobilisation' and follow how previous research has operationalised political sophistication in the absence of a more direct measure such as political knowledge (Albright 2009; Dalton 2012; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012; Dassonneville 2014). Both indicators capture different aspects of political sophistication, with education likely to reflect differences in cognitive capacities and political interest

gauging a motivational aspect. Both are hence essential elements of what is generally referred to as political sophistication (Lachat 2007).

To reduce the confounding effects of other determinants of party identification, we include control variables that have been proven to be influential in previous studies on the topic. Most of the important controls refer to social cleavages which still provide a root for partisan attachments in Germany, namely *frequency of church attendance* and *trade union membership*[5] (Elff and Roßteutscher 2011; Elff 2009). For church attendance the variable is not included in every wave, thus we calculated the median of all measures (the frequency of church attendance was measured 15 times between 1984 and 2012). Since trade union membership is less often included (nine times) and dichotomous, we generated a dynamic measure of trade union membership. The variable takes on the value 0 if the respondent is not a member and 1 if the respondent is a member of a trade union. The variable takes on the same value in subsequent waves until the respondent has changed the membership status, and it subsequently takes on the most recent status in waves after the change of status. We also control for gender (1 = female, 0 = male) and the age of the respondent. As the same respondents are followed over time, age and time effects are perfectly collinear. Therefore we additionally model the effect of birth cohorts as well. Cohorts have a ten-year range, with the value label 1 indicating the oldest birth cohort (<1936) and 7 the youngest birth cohort (1986–95). Finally, to control for the decline of partisanship over time that we observed in Figure 1, survey year dummies were included. Descriptive statistics on the independent variables included in the analyses are listed in Table A2 in the Appendix.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Our theoretical arguments all relate to the activation of pre-existing partisan attachments rather than to the development of partisanship. Empirically, we thus model the impact of elections on the strength of partisan attachments, ranging from no attachment to a very strong attachment to a political party. Note that such activation can include shifts from no partisanship to feeling close to a particular party as well, if latent partisan attachments are activated at election times.

The dependent variable is categorical and ordinal; therefore we estimate an ordered logit model.[6] Observations are nested in individuals; therefore we chose a hierarchical model that takes the unobserved individual effect into account (random effects). Given the longitudinal data structure, errors are not independent within subjects and ignoring the random effect would result in biased estimates as well as standard errors.

In order to test our second hypothesis we include interaction terms in the model. Because we cannot straightforwardly interpret coefficients of an interaction term from a regression table, we assess the effects by means of meaningful post-estimations (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2006). We therefore calculated predicted probabilities and present relevant findings graphically by simulating and plotting quantities of interest (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000).

RESULTS

Before including explanatory variables in the model, the null model was estimated (see Model 0 in Table 1). This model offers an indication of how much of the observed

TABLE 1
RESULTS ORDERED LOGIT RANDOM-EFFECTS REGRESSION MODELS

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Election period (1 = yes)		0.62***	0.67***	1.17***	0.77***
		(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.11)	(0.12)
Tertiary degree (1 = yes)			0.20***	0.20***	0.31***
			(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Election period*Tertiary degree				−0.27**	−0.22*
				(0.09)	(0.09)
Political interest			1.28***	1.29***	1.29***
			(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Election period*Political interest				−0.19***	−0.18***
				(0.04)	(0.04)
Church attendance					0.13***
					(0.02)
Trade union membership					0.20***
					(0.03)
Female (1 = yes)					−0.19***
					(0.04)
Cohort (ref.: <1936)					
1936−45					0.07
					(0.07)
1946−55					−0.26***
					(0.07)
1956−65					−0.57***
					(0.06)
1966−75					−0.90***
					(0.07)
1976−85					−1.14***
					(0.08)
1986−95					−1.41***
					(0.16)
Survey year	*Time dummies have been included in Model 4 but are not displayed here*				
Cutpoints					
Cut 1	0.02	0.03	2.98***	2.99***	2.04***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.08)
Cut 2	0.07**	0.09***	3.03***	3.05***	2.09***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.08)
Cut 3	0.28***	0.30***	3.25***	3.27***	2.32***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.08)
Cut 4	2.45***	2.47***	5.53***	5.54***	4.63***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.08)
Cut 5	5.37***	5.39***	8.59***	8.61***	7.73***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.08)
N	16,918	16,918	16,918	16,918	16,918
Observations	159,442	159,442	159,442	159,442	159,442
LogLik	−162260.54	−162071.43	−155965.57	−155948.16	−154099.1
σ_{u^2}	6.41 (0.11)	6.42 (0.11)	4.82 (0.08)	4.82 (0.08)	4.67 (0.08)

$^*p < 0.05$;
$^{**}p < 0.01$;
$^{***}p < 0.001$. Standard errors in parentheses.

variance lies between individuals and how much within individuals. As evident from Table 1, the null model gives an intra-class correlation (ICC) of 0.66, which means that 66 per cent of the variance in partisan strength is between individuals and the rest

(34 per cent) is within individuals. This substantial amount of within-individual variance implies that some people have volatile partisan ties in terms of strength over time, even though differences between individuals are more salient.

We subsequently test our first hypothesis, which states that a citizen's identification with a party is strengthened at election times. The basic model (Model 1 in Table 1) includes only the main effect of election periods on the strength of party identification. In Model 2 the other main effects – education and political interest – have been included. In both models the coefficients tell us that election periods have a positive effect on the strength of partisanship, which is suggestive evidence confirming our first hypothesis.

Calculating predicted probabilities, we find a large difference between party identification at election times compared to non-election times (see Figure 2). When no elections take place the probability for an average citizen to have no identification is 46 per cent (95 per cent CI: 0.45–0.47). During election periods the probability of having no identification decreases to 28 per cent (95 per cent CI: 0.24–0.33). Inversely, the probability of having a party identification, all strength levels combined, is 72 per cent at election times and 54 per cent when there is no election. We can therefore conclude that more citizens identify with a party at election times. Furthermore, we observe that partisan attachments are strengthened at election times – even though this does not occur for all strength levels. As is clear from the predicted probabilities in Figure 2, election times affect the levels 'no identification', 'moderate identification' and 'strong identification' in particular. The probability of having a 'very weak' or 'weak' identification, as well as a 'very strong' identification, hence do not differ significantly between election times and non-election times. It seems that citizens who do not identify with a party when there are no elections do develop a moderate or strong

FIGURE 2
PREDICTED PROBABILITIES (AND 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS) FOR STRENGTH OF PI BY ELECTION PERIOD
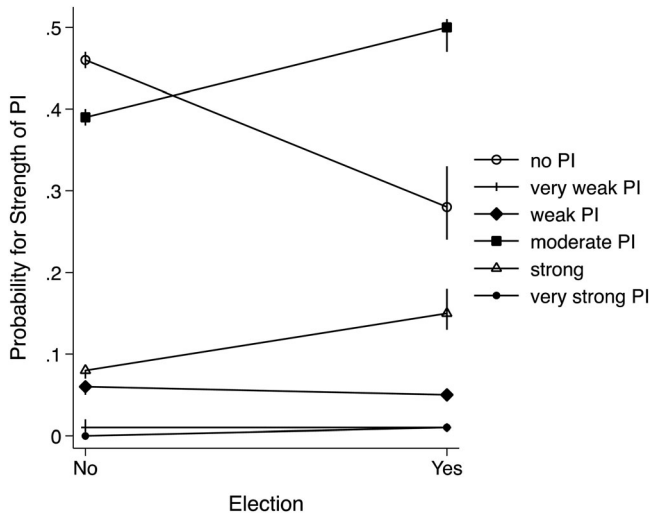
identification at election times rather than a very weak or weak identification. Also citizens who already identify moderately with a party during non-election times do not develop a very strong, but a strong identification at election times.

As is clear from the effects of political interest and education in Model 2, the results furthermore support previous findings of a substantive positive effect of political sophistication on partisanship (Albright 2009; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012; Marthaler 2008). Citizens without a tertiary degree are less likely to identify with a party compared to citizens with a higher education degree. As expected, political interest has a strong positive effect on having a party identification. The more someone is interested in politics, the more likely they are to identify with a party. As an illustration of the size of this effect of political interest, Figure 3 displays predicted probabilities for varying levels of political interest (all other variables held at their means). Citizens who are not interested in politics have an 82 per cent probability of not identifying with a party whereas citizens who are very strongly interested in politics have only a 9 per cent probability of not identifying with a party.

In Model 3 (see Table 1) we additionally test whether the relationship between political sophistication and the strength of partisanship is moderated by elections (Hypothesis 2). We expect that because of the functional value of partisanship, the less politically sophisticated especially would benefit from election times. Hence, we expect the interaction to be negative – i.e. mitigating the effect of political sophistication. The interactions between education and election times go in the hypothesised direction and are statistically significant. For the interaction between political interest and election campaigns as well, we find a significant negative effect and this effect is robust to including more control variables in Model 4 (see Table 1). To illustrate the effect, we simulated a meaningful scenario comparing a less politically sophisticated citizen – i.e. who is less well educated and has no or weak interest in politics – and

FIGURE 3
PREDICTED PROBABILITIES OF PI STRENGTH BY LEVEL OF POLITICAL INTEREST
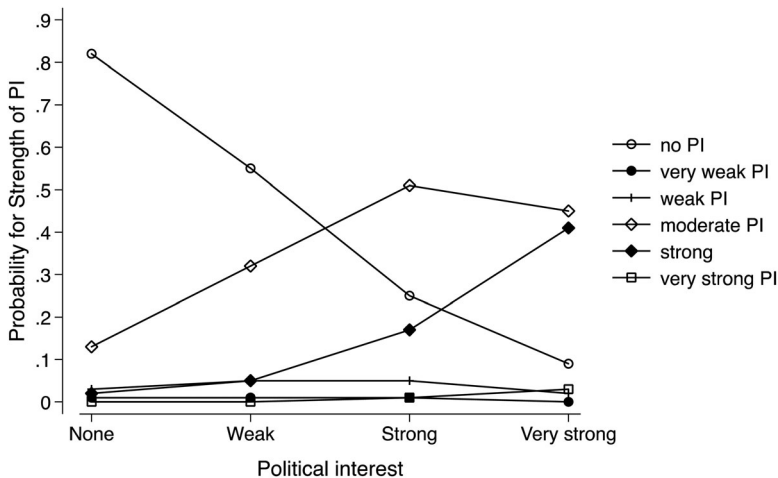
a highly politically sophisticated citizen– i.e. who is highly educated and has a strong or very strong interest in politics.

While we find a substantive and statistically significant difference in partisan strength between election times and non-election times for the less politically sophisticated, we do not find any difference for the highly politically sophisticated (also see Table A3 in the Appendix). In line with what the main effects indicated, not all strength levels are affected by whether or not it is election time. Especially for the contrast between no identification and a moderate identification we find differences between election times and non-election times, at least for lower levels of political sophistication. The largest differences are found to be between no identification and a moderate identification.

Figure 4 illustrates the effect for the probability of having a moderately strong party identification at election times (coloured in black) compared to non-election times (coloured in grey). The predicted probabilities are plotted as density functions of the simulated means (indicated by the vertical line). We find distinct density functions, meaning that for politically less sophisticated citizens there are substantial differences in the probability of having a moderately strong party identification during non-election times compared to election times. When there are no elections, a less well

FIGURE 4
PREDICTED PROBABILITIES FOR A MODERATE PI FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION DURING ELECTION TIMES AND NON-ELECTION TIMES
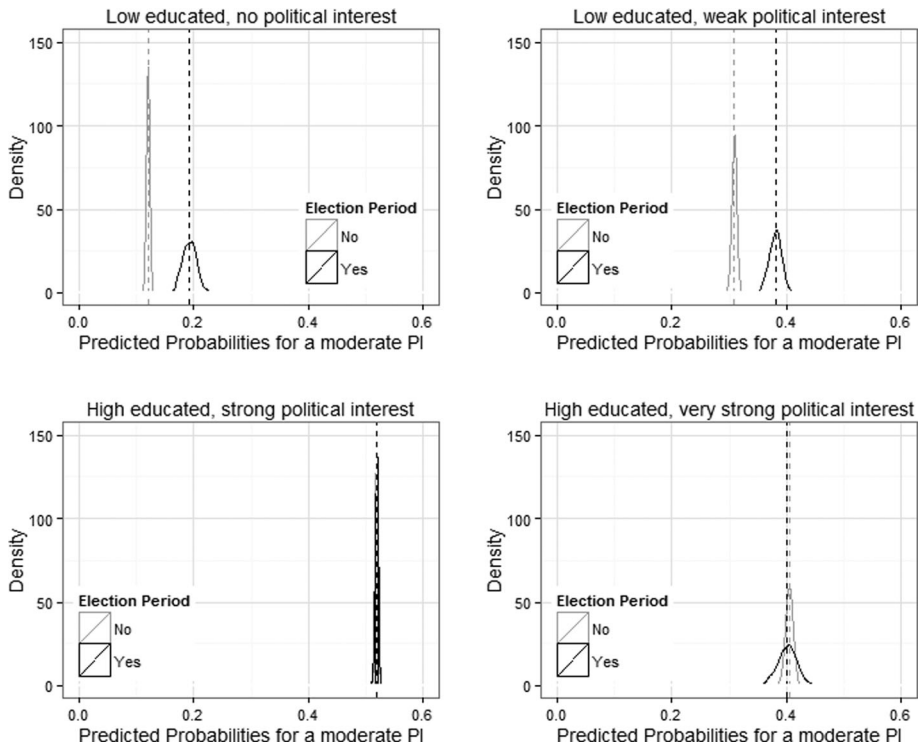
educated citizen with no interest has a 12 per cent probability of identifying moderately with a party. During election periods the probability is higher, namely at 19 per cent. For a less well educated citizen with a weak interest in politics we also find a 7 per cent higher probability of identifying with a party at election times (38 per cent) compared to non-election times (31 per cent). For the highly politically sophisticated, however, the probability of identifying moderately with a party is the same regardless of whether or not it is election time, in fact 41 per cent. Indeed, the highly politically sophisticated are in general more likely to identify with a party – especially to identify with a party strongly – but at election times party identification is neither more likely nor strengthened (see Table A3 in Appendix). One could assume that highly politically sophisticated citizens who strongly identify with a party when no elections take place might identify very strongly with a party at election times, but our results do not offer evidence to support this suggestion.

Our results thus indicate that the partisan attachments of less politically sophisticated voters in particular are strengthened at election times. For the highly politically sophisticated voters, by contrast, we do not find their party identification to be strengthened at election times compared to times where no elections take place. In terms of the functional value of partisanship, we can assume that citizens who are especially in need of cognitive heuristics will develop stronger attachments in a relevant context – that is, during election periods. The gap in partisan strength between the highly and the less politically sophisticated is, indeed, smaller at election times. This effect, it seems, is a direct effect of the different context that elections provide and not a result of the fact that political interest increases at election times – as interest is controlled for in our analyses. Furthermore, unlike what we observe for partisan strength, political interest appears to vary only little over time.[7]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Given the continued relevance of party identification in helping voters to process political information and in making electoral decisions, both a decrease of partisanship over time and a knowledge gap in who identifies with a party and who does not can be reason for concern. We argue, however, that election campaigns can act to decrease the sophistication gap in partisanship. Making use of the SOEP data, covering several elections in Germany over a period of 29 years, we offer evidence of such a process. We find that partisan attachments grow stronger at election times. Additionally, and more importantly, we find the sophistication gap in partisanship to be narrowed at election times. The reason therefore is that the increase in partisanship at election times is situated mostly among the less politically sophisticated. As a result, when the need for partisanship is highest, those who would benefit most from identifying with a party do indeed develop a partisan attachment or identify with a party more strongly.

Our results are in line with previous work, which has quite convincingly demonstrated an over-time erosion of partisan attachments in Germany (Arzheimer 2006; Dalton 2012; Dassonneville, Hooghe, and Vanhoutte 2012). Importantly, however, our results show that this decrease is not temporally monotonous. While the over-time trend is decreasing, we quite systematically observe a temporary boost in the strength of partisan attachments, however, at election times. Such temporary increases

in the strength of partisan attachments, however, are not sufficiently strong to counterbalance the over-time erosion of partisan attachments. This is evident from the fact that the level of the election-time peaks in the strength of partisan attachments depicted in Figure 1 is decreasing over time.

Our study obviously suffers from a number of limitations. First, the analysis is limited to the German context only. Even though previous research has illustrated that Germany is a relevant case for investigating partisanship, future research should clarify whether the patterns that we observe here can be generalised. Second, even though we make use of an exceptionally long dataset covering 29 years, the number of observations for election times is still limited. Third, our analysis is only a start. We showed that citizens' partisan ties change over time and that increases in the strength of attachments coincide with the timing of elections. The assumption is that the information-rich context which election times result in render partisanship and strong party attachments highly valuable. More research is needed, however, to disentangle the causal mechanisms that strengthen the development of partisanship at election times and to determine which of the potential mechanisms referred to effectively strengthens partisan attachments at election times. Future studies should also investigate whether all information is equally important for the activation of partisanship or whether only specific types of information contribute to this development of partisanship at election times.

Overall, our findings are in line with previous research showing that party attachments can by no means be considered stable. Given that 34 per cent of the variation in the sample is variation within individuals it is indeed hard to think of partisanship as an 'unmoved mover', at least in the German context. The results presented here indicate that an important part of this over-time variation in whether or not an individual identifies with a party can be explained by whether or not it is election time. At election times – when most in need of the cue that partisanship provides them with – citizens are more likely to report a partisan attachment. Additionally, it is the less politically sophisticated who benefit most from the boost in partisanship that election times result in.

Substantively, our results provide nuance to negative accounts on the evolution of partisanship over recent decades. First, the decrease in party attachments over time is somewhat compensated for at election times, although the overall trend is still one of decline. Second, the regularly reported gap in partisanship between highly and less politically sophisticated citizens is also narrowed at election times. Election campaigns appear to play an important role exceeding the function of merely providing citizens with information on political parties and politicians. Election times more essentially provide the electorate with what is needed for developing partisanship.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ruth Dassonneville is an assistant professor at the department of political science at Université de Montréal. Her main research interests are voting behaviour, economic voting, election forecasting and longitudinal analyses. Her work has been published in, amongst others, *Electoral Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Party Politics* and *Political Studies*.

Annika Grieb works as a research fellow at the German Centre for Research on Higher Education and Science Studies (DZHW) in Hanover. Her research interests include electoral research and higher education research with a focus on quantitative methods.

NOTES

1. For the analyses we consider only individuals with a personal questionnaire (netto 10 – 19). The data collection was carried out in various modes, namely CAPI, PAPI, and CATI (with and without interviewers). We focused on Sample 'A German West', 'E Refreshment 1998', 'H Refreshment 2006', 'J Refreshment 2011', and 'K Refreshment 2012'.
2. Respondents answering 'don't know' to the question (3.5% of the observations in the sample), were coded as missing.
3. It has been shown that not only general elections affect attitudes, but that also state elections are decisive for political learning (Huber 2013). State level elections are not held at the same day but in different years (http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/de/landtagswahlen/wahltermine/). We controlled for state elections which did not change our results. Also state elections have shown to have a positive effect on partisanship. For the sake of clarity we included only the parsimonious model. Results are available from the authors upon request.
4. Alternatively, we included a continuous election time measure, capturing the length of time to the closest election. Including such a continuous measure instead of the binary election time variable in the models, however, does not lead to substantively different conclusions (results not shown but available from the authors).
5. It is true that religious affiliation and trade union membership heighten not only the likelihood to identify with any party but with a particular party (namely either the Christian Democratic Party CDU, or the Social Democratic Party SPD or the Leftist Party Die LINKE). Even though we do not differentiate between identifications with a particular party it is safe to include these variables as controls in the model.
6. We used the Stata xtologit package. Models are fitted via (marginal) maximum likelihood. The function is calculated by the Gauss-Hermenite quadrature (http://www.stata.com/manuals13/xtxtologit.pdf#xtxtologit).
7. Descriptives for political interest are available from the authors upon request.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1
FIELDWORK OF THE GSOEP BY ELECTION WAVE

Year	Start field work	End field work	Election date
1987	February	July	25 January 1987
1988	January	July	
1990	January	August	2 December 1990
1991	February	September	
1994	January	October	16 October 1994
1995	January	October	
1998	January	October	27 September 1998
1999	January	October	
2002	January	October	22 September 2002
2003	January	October	
2005	February	October	18 September 2005
2006	February	October	
2009	February	October	27 September 2009
2010	February	October	

TABLE A2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Std	N
Strength of party ID	0	5	1.83	1.80	159,442
Election period	0	1	0.03	0.17	159,442
Education	0	1	0.18	0.39	159,442
Political interest	1	4	2.31	0.78	159,442
Church attendance	1	4	1.88	0.96	159,442
Union membership	0	1	0.15	0.36	159,442
Sex (1 = female)	0	1	0.53	0.50	159,442
Birth cohort	1	7	3.20	1.60	159,442
Survey year	1985	2012	1999	8.10	159,442

TABLE A3
PREDICTED PROBABILITIES FOR STRENGTH OF PI FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION IN ELECTION TIMES AND
NON-ELECTION TIMES

Strength of PI	Low level of education no interest		Low level of education weak interest		High level of education strong interest		High level of education very strong interest	
	No election	Elections	No election	Elections	No election	Elections	No election	Elections
Non	0.83	0.73	0.57	0.47	0.21	0.18	0.07	0.07
	0.82−0.84	*0.70−0.76*	*0.56−0.58*	*0.44−0.50*	*0.20−0.22*	*0.16−0.20*	*0.06−0.07*	*0.06−0.08*
Very weak	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0	0
	0.01−0.01	*0.01−0.01*	*0.01−0.01*	*0.01−0.02*	*0.01−0.01*	*0.01−0.01*	*0−0*	*0−0*
Weak	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.06	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02
	0.03−0.03	*0.04−0.04*	*0.05−0.06*	*0.05−0.06*	*0.04−0.04*	*0.03−0.04*	*0.02−0.02*	*0.01−0.02*
Moderate	0.12	0.19	0.31	0.38	0.52	0.52	0.41	0.40
	0.11−0.13	*0.17−0.22*	*0.30−0.32*	*0.36−0.40*	*0.52−0.52*	*0.51−0.52*	*0.39−0.42*	*0.37−0.43*
Strong	0.01	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.21	0.24	0.46	0.47
	0.01−0.02	*0.02−0.03*	*0.05−0.05*	*0.07−0.08*	*0.20−0.22*	*0.22−0.27*	*0.45−0.48*	*0.43−0.51*
Very strong	0	0	0	0	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.05
	0−0	*0−0*	*0−0*	*0−0*	*0.01−0.01*	*0.01−0.02*	*0.04−0.05*	*0.04−0.06*

95% confidence intervals in italic