

If the attachment between voters and parties has weakened, is that because of changed voters or changed parties?

In this essay, I will argue that the attachment between voters and parties has weakened and that this is mainly a result of changes in voters. The changes in voters are the cause of changes in parties which then reinforce the weakening of the ties between voters and parties. I will first show that, empirically, partisanship has decreased since the 1960s. Then, I will argue that class-based voting – in Britain, for instance, the working class for Labour and the middle class for the Conservatives – has declined and that social cleavages have weakened because of economic prosperity. Simultaneously, new social cleavages have emerged based on post-materialist values which reduces the loyalty to traditional parties and gives rise to parties such as the Greens or the AfD in Germany. As a result, and because of improved education, voters have started to act more rational, voting for the parties which maximize their own utility. Then, I will argue that the subsequent changes in political parties are a result of these changes in voters. Parties have converged to the centre to recapture the vote from rational voters. And because of the decline in party membership, parties had to professionalise and increase the emphasis on political leaders to incentivise voters to vote for them. Finally, I will conclude that, therefore, a change in voters has led to a change in parties which reinforces the trend of loosening ties between parties and voters.

Met opmerkingen [MOU1]: More empirical evidence, argument flows very well only minor problems.

This is also how a test essay should be.

Partisanship

Partisanship is a long-term psychological attachment to a political party and is often acquired through socialisation with families, communities and peer groups. Traditionally, political scientists viewed voter choice as primarily determined by party identification, which stayed the same over a voter's lifetime – particularly the scientists who were influenced by the sociological framework and the Michigan School (Campbell et al. 1976). According to the sociological framework, social divisions such as class, religion, ethnicity, and region determined voting behaviour. Political parties represented these groups and voters voted accordingly, leading to predictable and, as Lipset and Rokkan argue (1967), "frozen" election outcomes. Electoral changes were slow and were mainly the result of generational replacement: older voters with established partisan loyalties pass away and are replaced by younger voters with different political preferences.

Met opmerkingen [MOU2]: Much better

However, since the 1960s party identification has declined. Dalton (2000) found in his study of advanced industrial democracies that partisan ties are weakening. In his regression analysis, almost all countries have a negative value which indicates a decline in partisanship. There were only two anomalies: Belgium and Denmark. However, they

Met opmerkingen [MOU3]: More descriptive evidence that it has in fact declined, not only partisanship, there are also other measures (membership, turnout, class voting ...).

can be explained by the fact that they already had a low level of partisanship at the start of the data.

Voters

Since the 1960s, as people achieved greater materialist security, people's concerns moved beyond basic survival to more "postmaterialist" values (Inglehart 2007). Economic prosperity allowed voters to prioritise values such as autonomy, self-expression, and the quality of life as opposed to materialist priorities such as food and income. Because people no longer grew up with hunger and economic insecurity, young people, who had not yet been socialised into staunchly supporting a certain party and had different priorities, replaced the older, more partisan electorate. For instance, in Britain, the Labour party has traditionally been associated with the working class and the Conservative party with the middle class (Clarke et al. 2004b). More recently, however, class-based voting has declined and there are more "working-class Tories and silk-stocking socialists". As a result, partisanship has declined.

These new postmaterialist values also gave rise to new political parties, further reducing traditional partisanship. Voters are mobilised because of new postmaterialist cleavages such as environmentalism, multiculturalism and national identity. The fragmentation of postmaterialist values has led to increased electoral volatility. Dunleavy (2005) argues that the 'dealignment' (the weakening of the attachments between voters and political parties) allowed for the rise of parties such as the Greens or UKIP in the United Kingdom. This shows that the electorate has become more and more fluid, with voters more willing to switch allegiances between elections. Voters are more likely to engage in issue-based voting than maintaining long-standing partisan attachments.

Dalton (2013) argues that voters have also become more educated which allows them to no longer be reliant on party identification as a heuristic. Voters have started to vote more rationally and more in line with, for instance, Downs' spatial model and Stokes' "valence" (factors such as competence and trustworthiness) model (as explained in Clarke et al. 2004a). Voters try to maximize utility by voting for the right party for certain elections rather than just sticking with a single party. Franklin et al. (1992) try to prove this by showing that models based on issue-based voting perform much better than models based on cleavages, especially for young people.

Parties

One could argue that the decline in partisanship is also the result of changes in political parties. Parties have started acting more strategic to capture votes. For example, New Labour under Tony Blair moved towards the centre to capture centrist voters. Evans and

Met opmerkingen [MOU4]: It does not directly explain the reduction of class voting, you should only say that there are now more people who vote for post material values.

Met opmerkingen [MOU5]: Expand on this, why is this the result of this.

You also need more evidence for this

Maybe the working class can become, for instance, more volatile. Who is more likely to switch parties.

Met opmerkingen [MOU6]: Address more of the evidence that voters are really becoming more rational. Franklin is not enough as it is only about issue-based voting.

Tilley (2012) argue that this convergence to the centre rather than economic or educational changes in voters caused the “dealignment”. They track the left-right positions of Labour and the Conservatives and show that there has been a reduction of the ideological gap which aligns closely with the decline in class-based voting. This convergence to the centre reduces the focus on ideology and promotes the weakening of the ties between voters and parties because it reduces the difference between the parties, making it harder for voters to develop strong partisan identities.

Parties have also become more professionalised. Parties have to incentivise their voters by hiring professional marketing teams. This contributes to the loss of strong partisan ties because parties, instead of focussing on long-term ideological engagement, became more electorally driven, shifting policy based on polling rather than maintaining traditional stances. Parties started prioritising swing voters and short-term campaigning instead of long-term loyalty. Parties have also increased the emphasis on party leaders. Voters choose parties based on its leader rather than based on ideology. As a result, elections have become leader-centric battles, meaning that when leaders change, voter attachments also shift (Mair 2013). Clearly, a change in parties has also contributed to the dealignment.

However, I argue that these changes in parties are the result of changes in voters. These changes in parties then further reinforce the dealignment, but the ultimate root of the dealignment is changes in voters.

Firstly, the reason why parties were forced to converge to the centre was simply that voters changed. Because voters were acting more rationally and more in line with Downs spatial model, parties had to act strategically and position themselves near the median voter. Parties adopt centrist policies to appeal to the largest segment of voters. The shift of New Labour under Tony Blair can then be explained as a strategic move to capture more middle-class voters as traditional working-class loyalty declined (Evans and Tilley 2012).

Secondly, increased professionalization was necessary because of reduced party membership and because voters had already gotten weaker ties with parties. As traditional forms of political engagement, such as active membership and strong party loyalty, declined, voters became more detached from the parties they once supported. This shift meant that parties could no longer rely on grassroots mobilization or the deep, long-term loyalty of voters. To recapture these votes and remain competitive, parties had to adopt more media-driven campaign strategies. Professionalized campaigning allowed parties to effectively target specific voter segments, manage electoral messaging, and craft policies that appealed to the broader electorate, rather than relying on traditional forms of political engagement or identity.

Met opmerkingen [MOU7]: Maybe the parties are responding to something else, for instance that the middle class has grown and the working class has shrunk (as Evans and Tilley argue).

Met opmerkingen [MOU8]: Again, maybe they professionalised and as a result they are losing the grassroots and the reason for this was that they needed to professionalise because of the new media landscape.

They even say that themselves, it is a catch-all thing right now.

Finally, the increased emphasis on political leaders can also be explained by more rational voters. The “valence” model of voting suggests that voters also base their decision on their perception of a party’s competence, reliability and trustworthiness. This is, however, very difficult to judge for voters. It becomes easier when they can judge a single person rather than a whole party. Therefore, it is beneficial for parties to emphasise the personality of the party leader and no longer their ideology as much. It is also caused by the rise of media in political campaigning (Clarke et al. 2004b).

In conclusion, the weakening of the attachment between voters and parties is primarily the result of voter changes. The decline in class-based voting, the emergence of postmaterialist values, and the rationalisation of voter behaviour have led to a more fluid electorate. These changes in voter behaviour, in turn, have led to changes in parties. These changes in parties – ideological convergence, professionalisation, and emphasis on party leaders – have further reinforced the trend of dealignment.

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