Do voters still exhibit stable links to established parties in advanced democracies, and if not why not?

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In this essay, I argue that voters still exhibit stable links to established parties in advanced democracies—despite the fact that voters have changed greatly in the past few decades—in a process of *realignment* rather than *dealignment.* Further, the fact that voters have realigned to become partisan has implications for several open questions in political science. I identify two important dichotomies—of materialism/post-materialism and sociological/institutional voting—and show that the realignment of the electorate lead us to the right answer of these dichotomies.

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It's important to point out that whether or not voters still exhibit stable links to established parties in advanced democracies depends on the slice of "voters" we are looking at, as the electorate is not a monolithic whole. Rather, an electorate of voters consists of a bunch of distinct "slices" of age cohorts which possess very different political views. In this essay, I will largely focus on incoming cohorts rather than already-voting cohorts, as scholars like Inglehart (1981) and Tilley (2003) have shown that political views are largely determined during the "critical period" of young adulthood, and change very little over time. Therefore, most electoral change is *intergenerational* rather than intragenerational: the changing composition of incoming and outgoing cohorts makes up the vast majority of electoral change. I argue that forces in our current era lead *new voters* to partisanship or independence, and show that they lead to interesting results in both post-materialism and electoral choice theory.

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What sets this cohort apart from previous ones?

To determine if new voters are more likely to become partisan or independent, it is first important to lay out how new voters differ from previous age cohorts. Very broadly, voters have become more educated and more post-materialist, a continuation of the trends that have been in motion over the past few decades. The rapid expansion of the Internet have also resulted in a profusion of new media sources, which has had a profound effect on the electorate as well.

I show that these changes, among others, have resulted in greater partisan alignment than was predicted by the scholarship.

Realignment v. dealignment

In the 1950s and 60s, voters were very centrist and very predictable. Parties were 'catch-all' parties that absorbed many smaller, fringe interests; the political system had "frozen", as put forward by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). This changed completely in the 70s and 80s, where frozen alignments and strong partisan attachments gave way to large voter volatility: established parties were no longer secure, and new, single-issue parties enjoyed electoral success.

Many scholars rushed to explain this sudden defreezing: the consensus was that traditional lines of cleavage had ceased to become relevant as the makeup of the electorate changed radically. For example, the traditional working-class/middle class cleavage weakened in the 70s and 80s with the rise of the new white-collar worker. In addition, new issues such as sexual freedom, human rights and environmental protection arose that "cross-cut" across

traditional cleavages. For these reasons, voters in the 70s and 80s identified less with traditional, established parties, and chose to vote for new parties that placed a high priority on these shifting cleavages.

Flanagan and Dalton (1984) argued that there were two equally plausible, yet mutually contradictory theories to explain the changing of cleavages. Either it was *realignment*, where parties and their electorates adjust to adopt new cleavage dimensions, or it was *dealignment*, a permanent decrease in the relevance of established parties and partisanship of voters. At the time of writing, both mechanisms seemed plausible. Flanagan and Dalton claimed that "signs of dealignment are clearest in the United States... [there is] a clear decline in these partisan loyalties, a weakening of cross-generational partisan inheritances, and a rise in anti-party sentiment" (p. 18).

Flanagan and Dalton argued that greater education and the rise of the news media would lead to dealignment: I find that the reverse effect occurred due to unexpected effects they did not foresee.

For example one traditional role of a party is to present and package a set of ideological preferences and policy stances and give their voters a "cognitive shortcut". Flanagan and Dalton argued that with increasing education, voters no longer need to take the cognitive shortcut and can evaluate issues on their own merit. If that is the case, then we should see dealignment. But on the other hand, voters may not wish to expend this mental effort despite having the ability to do so, and also education causes people to hold more coherent (i.e. partisan) views. In that case we should see greater partisanship.

The other example is oversight and watchdog roles: traditionally, parties in the Opposition made sure that the incumbent government was responsible and fulfilling its mandate to the people. On the one hand, this role has largely been taken up by the news media. On the other hand, the ubiquity of the Internet, the rise of new media sources, and the nature of algorithmic content means that a voter could get all of his information from similar biased sources, causing an "echo chamber" effect that leads to partisanism.

We know now, moreoever, that realignment was the correct mechanism; established parties simply co-opted new issues and cleavage dimensions to fit the new breed of voters. Levendusky (2012) and other scholars have pointed out the "partisan polarisation" of the electorate, with differing explanations; however, the fact that the electorate *has* polarised and still identifies with traditional political parties is indisputable.

Materialism v. post-materialism: have parties adapted to post-materialist concerns?

There exist two competing explanations for the state of established parties. One is that parties have remained "frozen" still to a great extent, largely reflecting traditional issue dimensions and social cleavages first laid down in the 19th century. The second is that parties constantly change and adapt their policies and stances to best capture the electorate. In particular, one big shift in electoral dynamics has been the shift from materialism to post-materialism (best explained by Maslow's heirarchy of needs): as the electorate gets richer, they prioritise material values less and higher-order values more.

Inglehart (1981) argued that we have seen a shift from materialism to post-materialism as advanced democracies enjoy economic growth, and the electorate has its economic needs met. I show that established parties have successfully positioned themselves on both materialist and post-materialist issues, encouraging younger, post-Materialist cohorts to become partisan.

Inglehart showed that voters with post-Materialist values were more dissatisfied with established parties as they had been very Materialist at the time of writing (1981). It is true that voters will not identify with established parties if the issues they prioritise do not take into account post-Materialist values. Flanagan and Dalton made a similar argument: traditional parties were unwilling to take unambiguous and decisive stances on narrow and cross-cutting issues such as the environment, nuclear power and LGBTQ rights.

If it is the case that parties have not adapted to post-materialist concerns, then cohorts will not care as much about established parties. However, the issue dimensions of the present seem to suggest

that established parties have successfully co-opted post-Materialist concerns. We still have materialist concerns like tariffs and taxes, but also semi-materialist concerns like welfare, healthcare, and post-materialist concerns like abortion, feminism, gay and transgender rights, immigration, freedom of religion and so on, and parties (Democrat v. Republican, Labour v. Conservative) have taken clear and distinct stances on them. This phenomenon is grounded empirically by Levendusky, who shows that the increasing polarisation of political elites results in parties being clearer and more consistent about their stances on issues, and voters then change their ideology to fit their party identification.

Sociological v. institutional: do voters use rational choice or societal cleavages in choosing their partisan identity?

Two competing theories of voter choice give different predictions with regard to whether voters have dealigned or realigned. The sociological mechanism predicts that voters join parties that represent their social class and identity. In contrast, the institutional model predicts that voters vote to maximise their expected utility.

If the sociological mechanism is more relevant and voters use their societal identity to join a party, then this would predict that voters become less attached to any one party as traditional societal cleavages become less relevant, supporting the dealignment hypothesis. On the other hand, if voters vote to maximise their utility, then whether or not voters continue to exhibit partisan behaviour depends on our model of voters' utility. There are several such models: the Downsian proximity model (1957), the directional model Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) and the issue-priorty model by Budge and Farlie (1983).

The traditional proximity model would predict that parties should move toward the center in equilibrium, and does not support the partisan hypothesis. Rabinowitz introduced the *directional model*, where more partisan (extreme) parties are actually advantaged than centrist ones. Such a model would support voters moving towards partisanship,

although the model has been criticised by Westholm (1997) and Lewis and King (1999). Lastly, the issue-priority model is one where parties distinguish themselves by identifying with a set of issues and policies. Depending on which issue is currently the most salient, voters will vote for the party who has identified most strongly with those issues. For example, if inflation is high, voters will vote for parties on the right, and if health services deteriorate, voters will not punish a ruling left-of-center party as they know the incumbent will make that a priority.

As the sociological mechanism was shocked by the sudden "defreezing" of the 1970s, many have claimed that it lacks explanatory power—specifically, that it ceases to be relevant when social groups change or when new and cross-cutting issues arise. Such a characterisation is supported by Clarke and Whiteley (2005), who claims that "sociological models can tell only a limited part of the story of political choice in Britain... The fundamental limitations of sociological models are their inability to deal with information that lacks an obvious social group referent, and their inability to keep pace with the short- and medium-term changes in the variables they purport to explain". While the criticism is by and large fair, it fails to allow the possibility of established parties changing their positions of competition over the medium-to-long term, and in fact this is exactly what has happened as elucidated in Levendusky, where party elites clarify the party position.

Overall, I believe that a combination of the sociological mechanism and the issue-priority model can explain both short- and long-term electoral change.

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In this essay, I have shown that voters still exhibit stable links to established parties despite great changes in the electorate, as parties were able to adapt to these changes. I have shown that the theory of *realignment* rather than *dealignment* better explains intertemporal voter behaviour, and that this helps to answer several open questions. Specifically, I have shown that parties have successfully incorporated post-materialist issues in their party positions, and that both sociological and institutional theories have their place in explaining voter choice.

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