Alignment, realignment and dealignment in multi-party systems : a conceptual and empirical study

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CHAPTER 1

'ALIGNMENT', 'REALIGNMENT' AND 'DEALIGNMENT' IN MULTI-PARTY SYSTEMS – AN INTRODUCTION

"[L]ong before having data which can speak for themselves the fundamental articulation of language and of thinking is obtained logically – by cumulative conceptual refinement and chains of coordinated definitions." (Sartori 1970:1038)

Democratic elections are exciting events for politicians, party activists, journalists and scholars of Political Science. Before an election everyone attempts to forecast its results; immediately after the ballots are counted and the big winner and losers are identified is the time for analysing and making sense of these election results. At this point, special attention is given to explaining electoral changes and particularly to identifying enduring shifts. Whatever the outcome of the election may be, and especially in American politics, "there will be political scientist who will ask: Was there a *realignment*?" (Carmines & Wagner, 2006:67) (italics added). This phrase introduces a core question and idiom that has preoccupied Comparative Politics literature in a broad sense and my research in particular. 'Alignment', 'realignment' and 'dealignment' are concepts that are used to typify major changes in a political system.

The study of realignment originates in the study of the American party system. Key was the first to discuss it in 1955, when he identified what he called a 'critical election'. This is an election, explained Key (1955:4), "in which voters are, at least from impressionistic evidence, unusually deeply concerned, in which the extent of electoral involvement is relatively quite high, and in which *the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of the pre-existing cleavage within the electorate*" (italics added). This kind of election is the peak moment of what later will be termed a *'critical realignment'*, as "the realignment [which commenced at this election] made manifest in the voting in such elections seems to persist for several succeeding

election" (Key, 1955:4). A few years after this publication, Key argued for another model of realignment: the *'secular realignment'*. This was defined as "a movement of the members of a population category from party to party that extends over several presidential elections" (Key, 1959:198-9). *Dealignment* was identified for the first time by Inglehart and Hochstein (1972:345) in their study of party identification in the U.S.A., almost two decades after Key's publications. According to these scholars, a dealignment is characterised by "declining rates of identification with *any* party" (italics in original), which may happen when multidimensional crisis occurs, and this crisis "cuts directly *across* party lines." (Inglehart and Hochstein (1972:345) (italics in original).

While the study of realignment in the American party system "enjoyed its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s" (Mayhew, 2000:449), the study of both phenomena – 'realignment' and 'dealignment' – was taken up in other Western democratic countries slightly later, where it was in vogue in the 1980s and 1990s. Prominent publications on the subject were Dalton, et al. (1984a) *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies- Realignment or Dealignment?*, Crewe and Denver (1985) *Electoral Change in Western Democracies,* Bartolini and Mair (1990) *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilization of European Electorates 1885-1985*, and finally Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) *Parties without Partisans - Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, in which they argued that dealignment is an ongoing process in most Western industrialised countries.[1] Despite this argument, scholarly research that considers both phenomena is still initiated, such as the ECPR workshop on "Electoral Change in the 21st Century: De-Alignment or Realignment?", held in 2010.

The journey of the concepts of 'realignment' and 'dealignment' to new empirical contexts of Western democracies other than the U.S.A. has prompted scholars to re-specify the concepts by giving them new definitions and therefore modify their

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[1] I may also mention Franklin, et al., (1992) *Electoral Change – Responses to Evolving Social and Attitudinal Structures in Western Countries*, but in this book does not include a discussion of 'realignment' or 'dealignment' explicitly.

meanings[2]. According to Adcock and Collier (2001:530), this is part of the conceptualisation stage, wherein scholars or groups of scholars develop or adopt the specific formulation of a concept, which they term 'systematised concept'.

However, with the widespread availability of scholarly research into enduring electoral changes, the concepts of 'realignmnet' and 'dealignment' have been used with different (and even sometimes exclusive) meanings, as Sundquist (1983:4) articulated: "after a quarter century of study, the concept of party realignment is still far from clear. The writers all employ the same term – realignment – but it is difficult to find any two works that give it the same definition." This quote nicely summarises the current state of affairs: both concepts have become vague and ambiguous.

This problem of ambiguity is not confined to the concepts of 'realignment', and 'dealignment'. Other political terms such as 'democracy', 'legitimacy', 'transparency', 'corporatism' and 'terror' are employed by scholars, journalists, politicians and sometimes even the public. The popularity of these political terms does not come without cost: when the terms become generic, they have several meanings, used in multiple political contexts and, in some cases, even in non-political contexts. In other cases, the opposite development occurs: the concepts are ambiguous because they originate outside the scholarly discourse and therefore "carry a backpack of meanings" (Wonka, 2007:44).

Clear and precise concepts are of course important for the progress and existence of any scientific discipline. Wonka (2007:44) warned "scientific discourse based in ambiguous concepts is at least confusing, more likely unproductive and definitely not cumulative." A collective ambiguity, according to Sartori (1984:35), wherein "each scholar ascribes his[/her] own meanings to his key terms […] can be rampant – to the point of destroying a discipline as a cumulative fabric of knowledge."

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[2] In a theoretical discussion of 'concept specification in Political Science Research', Wonka (2007:42) did not employ the word "definition", instead arguing that each term has "[a]ttributes which define a concept's meaning."

1.1 The Unique Nature of this Study

Efforts to clarify the concept of realignment in the context of the American politics were made in both early and more recent research. Sunquist (1973), for example, discussed the diverse definitions of 'realignment' and argued that "one element is common to all stated or implicit definitions. A realignment is a durable change in patterns of political behavior". Mayhew (2000), on the other hand, identified eleven empirical claims regarding realignment (for criticism of this work, see (Carmines & Wagner, 2006).

However, similar conceptual work on both the phenomena in other party systems, such as multi-party systems, is sparse. The present research is motivated by the conviction that there is inadequate conceptual understanding of the phenomena of 'realignment' and 'dealignment' in multi-party systems. It aims to fill this gap by examining empirically both phenomena in eleven European multi-party systems, in order to develop a conceptual understanding.

The approach of this research differs from that of many other studies in the field. It is structured along conceptual lines rather than on an explanation of events or phenomena. This is articulated through its approach, data sources and methodology. The two terms of 'realignment' and 'dealigment' were invented in reaction to the concept of 'alignment', a phenomenon of continuing patterns of party support or a certain immobility in the preference for a party or certain parties. Theoretical and empirical arguments of 'alignment' were developed (at least until the mid 1960s) through two approaches to exploring patterns of electoral behavior – the socio-psychological and the socio-structural structural approach.

These approaches entail the assumption that individual citizens do not necessarily act rationally (as is assumed by the Rational Choice approach), but that there are other mechanisms that "reduce complex problem-solving to more simple judgmental operation" (Carmines & Huckfeldt, 1996:246). In the case of this research, this complex problem-solving is that of the electoral decision of party support. According to the socio-psychological approach, the mechanisms involved are cognitive shortcuts. Scholars of political sociology, on the other hand, have focused on

"understanding the politics of individual citizens within the political and social setting where they are located" (Carmines & Huckfeldt, 1996:246); those who follow the socio-structural approach have particularly emphasised the structures of the society, i.e. its cleavages. According to these scholars, conflicts at the political arena are reflections of "long-standing social and economic divisions within society, and the cleavage structure is thought of in terms of social groups and loyalties of members to their social groups" (Franklin, et al., 1992).

Each of these approaches – socio-psychological and socio-structural approach – has identified different mechanisms involved in the creation of the alignment between voters and political parties. The first approach has emphasised voters' developing identification with a political party, "which is not easily changed" (Campbell, et al., 1960:149). The second approach has argued that the identification of voters with their social segment leads to electoral support of the parties representing these segments.

These different mechanisms have influenced (most of) the definitions developed for 'realignment' and 'dealignment', as well as their indicators and the methods employed for studying them. In this research, I contend that each mechanism is a manifestation of 'alignment' in its own right, rather than a mechanism underlying alignment. I propose a unified approach to studying the phenomena of alignment, and examine whether 'realignment' or 'dealignment' have occurred in two manifestations of alignment: partisan alignment, and voter alignment along a cleavage.

This research is designed as a comparison between "relatively similar" cases, and studies eleven European multi-party systems with electoral systems of proportional representation. It begins in 1950 and covers sixty years, concluding in 2010. As far as methodology and data source(s) go, individual-level data (i.e. survey data) is scarce for some of these cases. In addition, national election surveys have been conducted only since the 1960s or 1970s (or even later) for most of these countries. The unavailability of data for the crucial period of alignment (between the 1950s and the mid 1960s) is a major problem for those investigating this subject (e.g. (Bartolini & Mair, 1990:99; Mair, 1989:13).

I devised several solutions to deal with this insufficiency of data. I conducted a combined analysis of two datasets of individual-level data and aggregate data (i.e. election results). The latter dataset was included to enable me to set the reference line (with regard to the period of 'alignment'), to establish a data source for a period not covered by national survey datasets, and also as the main data source for cases for which national data surveys are not available. This combined dataset is unique, but it also has two main drawbacks. Observations were only available for election years that impact the quality of a sound longitudinal analysis. Secondly, the study of official election results limits the types of analysis that can be performed. To address this limitation, I used indices in major parts of my research. However, this research is also innovative in this respect as all of these indices are modifications of well-known indices: Pederson's Total Volatility and Bartolini and Mair's (1990) Cleavage Salience index.

My methodological innovations for the research of alignment phenomena serve as tools enabling me to answer the main research question of this study: *Are the connections between voters and political parties in the party systems of the Western democratic states still relatively stable and structured, or whether the party system changed? Answering this question will help us to answer the following empirical questions: Has a change occurred? And if so, what kind of transformation is it?*

Answering these questions lays the foundations for a more broad and conceptual understanding of alignment phenomena. This understanding and its associated empirical evidence of electoral behaviour are important, I believe, not only for Political Science students, but also in a wider sense. Firstly, understanding the changing relationship between voters and the political parties is of crucial importance to the political parties themselves. At the end of the day, their primary role is to "articulate and represent the interests existing within a society" (Dalton, 2009:170), and they must win voter support. Secondly, in the modern world "many agree on the purpose of political representation through elections" (Rosema, et al., 2011:12); for this reason, the study of electoral affiliation with elected representatives is one of the key issues at the heart of representative democracy.

1.2 Chapter Outlines

I begin this investigation by presenting the two mechanisms for explaining the phenomenon of alignment – of continuing patterns of party support (Chapter Two). Chapter Three introduces the empirical dispute about the occurrence of realignment and dealignment in Western democratic countries. It then demonstrates that this disagreement has its roots in a conceptual problem: there is no single agreed definition for either realignment or dealignment. On top of that, there is not even an operational definition agreed on by groups of scholars regarding patterns of realignment or dealignment. I identify that the stock of definitions may be separated from each other regarding the appearance of signs of change into realignment or dealignment in both levels of analysis (the electorate and the cleavage), and that they disagree regarding the effects of these phenomena on a third level – the party system structure. Thus, I suggest analysing the phenomena of realignment and dealignment as they are manifested in these three levels, using a semi-modular approach. This enables me to examine two manifestations of alignment and their effects on the party system. In Chapter Four, I present the design of my empirical research. This chapter elaborates on the eleven similar cases of multi-party systems under examination, and the methods and datasets used to examine each of the manifestations of alignment and their effects on the party system structure. Chapter Five is the first empirical chapter; it uses the socio-psychological approach to study the issue of stability and change in partisan alignment. It examines arguments concerning partisan dealignment through assessing trends of partisanship as it is articulated in its two meanings: party identification and stable party support. This analysis shows that evidence of partisan dealignment has appeared in most of the cases studied, while partisan realignment has occurred only in one case, and another case suggests that the electorate is still aligned with the political parties. In Chapter Six, I test voter alignments along the two most salient socio-structural cleavages: class and religion. The chapter demonstrates that in most of the cases, the alignment(s) along the most salience cleavage(s) have eroded. The changes occurred first in the class cleavage and slightly later in the religious cleavage. Chapter Seven examines the issue of alignment regarding the patterns and timing of alignment and re/dealignment in their two manifestations. It demonstrates that patterns of alignment disappeared in all the cases by the mid 1980s and that all cases, except Denmark, have experienced dealignment. The chapter also proves that

the dealignment process is developed in two phases: partial and full. Chapter Eight tests the possible effects of realignment and dealignment on the party system structure. It recommends this test be based on study of the structure of the electoral party system. It demonstrates that during periods of partial or full dealignment, the stable structure of the electoral party system vanishes. Chapter Nine, the final chapter, summarises the findings of the previous chapters, and more importantly, proposes a definition for the process of dealignment in multi-party system and presents the conceptual, methodological and empirical implications of this study.