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

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## **CHAPTER 9**

### **ALIGNMENT, REALIGNMENT AND DEALIGNMENT IN MULTI-PARTY SYSTEMS FROM 1950 TO 2010 – CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

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On 18<sup>th</sup> April 2011, a few days after the official results of the Finnish national election were published, Ilkka Ruostetsaari (a Finnish political analyst) told the AFP news agency that the election outcome was astonishing: "The True Finns' victory, surpassing every poll and every expectation of a drop on election day... plus the total collapse of the Centre – the whole thing is historic," (BBC mobile news Europe, 18 April 2011; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13107620>). No political analyst or poll predicted these developments in the latest national election in Finland, in which an extreme-Right party – the True Finns – succeeded in obtaining almost the same number of votes as the Social Democratic party, with an increase of 15 percent from the previous election. Through this result, the True Finns took the position of one of the established parties, the Centre, and became the third largest party in Finland with 39 seats in the parliament, only three seats less than the Social Democrats and four seats more than the Centre. Yet, from a comparative perspective there is nothing new in this story of unexpected election results and the electoral success of a relatively new party. Similar events have occurred earlier; to name only a few examples: Dutch party the List of Pim Fortuyn (LPF) received 17 percent of the votes when it ran for the first time in a parliamentary election and became the second largest party. Much earlier, in 1973, the Danish Progress party (FP) ran for parliament for the first time and achieved 15.9 percent of the votes, becoming the second largest party.

These instances of earthquake elections stand contrary to the empirical and theoretical arguments of early Political Science literature. Sixty-five years ago, when the study of

political behaviour began<sup>1</sup>, two of the main approaches for studying party support – the social-psychological and the social-structural approaches – argued for the existence of voters’ long-term party allegiance. The two approaches differ in how they explain the mechanism that created this voter alignment. As Chapter Two presented, the socio-psychological approach looks at individual party allegiance, which is created by identification and/or long-term party support. The socio-structural approach argues that the durable connection between voters and parties is created along socio-structural cleavage lines.

Since the 1970s, there has been an empirical dispute in Political Science literature about whether or not the connection between voters and political parties in Western democratic countries has remained relatively stable and structured. Chapter Three outlined this discussion and showed that based on existing research, we cannot come to a definite conclusion as to whether and how the party systems of Western democratic countries have changed since the 1970s, and what shifts, if any, have occurred. Studying this long debate presents us with three different research results. The first suggests that the party systems are still in an alignment. The relationship between voters and parties has hardly changed: voters are still affiliated to political parties in much the same way as they always have been, and the connection between voters and parties is stable.

The other two empirical results argue for the recognition of a change in the patterns of alignment. The social-psychological and the socio-structural approaches, which emphasise ‘alignment’, are also the basis for explaining these new empirical developments.

The second empirical argument influenced by the socio-structural approach suggests that since the 1970s, the connection between voters and parties has been changed by the appearance of a new cleavage, which functions as a basis for a new voter alignment. According to this view, at some point since the 1970s we have witnessed a wide-scale realignment. The third empirical argument suggests that since the 1970s

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<sup>1</sup> According to Carmines and Huckfeldt (1996:223), the birth of the modern era in political behavior research was marked by the publication of Lazarsfeld and his colleagues’ book *The People’s Choice* in 1944.

the party systems of industrialised democracies have been experiencing a process of dealignment: the connection between voters and political parties has diminished but a new or alternative connection has not asserted itself. One of the models for explaining dealignment follows the social-psychological approach, stressing the psychological aspects behind voter behaviour, and holds that cognitive transformation and mobilisation of voters has unravelled their connection with political parties. This model assumes that some of the traditional functions of political parties are no longer needed.

Chapter Three demonstrated that these different results are rooted in a conceptual problem, reflecting what is in part an empirical dispute and in part a conceptual dispute. The conceptual problem is that there is no single agreed operational definition for either realignment or dealignment. These two closely related concepts are used in very different ways by different authors, and are applied at a number of different levels of analysis. Indeed, there are probably too many operational definitions of realignment and too many indicators (which function as operational definitions) associated with dealignment. The operational definitions of realignment and the indicators of dealignment differ from one another at three levels – the electorate, the party system structure, and the cleavage. As far as the electorate is concerned, we see major differences between the treatment of voters as individuals and the treatment of voters as members of various social or ideological groups. The concept of ‘cleavage’ is defined in three different ways – as an electoral distribution, a socio-structural division, and as a major conflict. Finally, the literature of realignment and dealignment is not clear regarding the effect of a change in the third level – the party system structure.

In order to solve this conceptual problem, I suggested examining the question of stability and change of voters-parties ties and its effect on the party system structure using a semi-modular approach, which separately analyses two sorts of alignment manifestation: partisan alignment and voter alignment along a cleavage. This assists us to identify empirically, and to understand both theoretically and conceptually, the development of the processes underlying realignment and dealignment. This study is designed as a comparison between “relatively similar” cases, which examines eleven European multi-party systems between 1950 and 2010.

Chapter Five followed the socio-psychological approach in its attempt to examine the first manifestation of alignment – partisan alignment. It analysed trends of partisanship as articulated in its two meanings: party identification and stable party support. It was necessary to combine these two articulations not only because of the absence of strong evidence for decreasing numbers of party identifiers, but also due to major scholarly critique of the phenomenon of ‘party identification’ in a multi-party system. Trends of long-term party supporters were measured in patterns of party support between two successive elections for the whole electorate (including those who did not participate in the election and those who cast blank or invalid votes). This was achieved by employing two indicators that are based on individual-level data (i.e. the proportion of those reporting support for the same party in two succeeding elections) and aggregate data (its equivalent estimation, the Electoral Total Partisans index (ETP) (for an explanation of this index, see Appendix A). Combining the results of the two manifestations of partisanship, Chapter Five showed that partisanship eroded over time in all the case studies but two (Luxembourg and Denmark). This indicates that a partisan dealignment has occurred. The shift to partisan dealignment happened in two waves. The early and the major wave had already begun in the mid 1960s and ended in the early 1970s, while the second smaller wave began in the early 1980s and concluded in the early 1990s.

Voter alignments along the class and religious cleavages were examined in Chapter Six, which represented the second approach (the socio-structural). It identified that voter alignment along class cleavage was stronger than alignment along the religious cleavage in all the case studies, regardless of religious domination, apart from Germany and the Netherlands. The measurement of cleavage electoral closeness was obtained by employing the Bloc-Weighted Cleavage Salience index (WCS) (for an explanation of this index, see Appendix A). In two other cases – Italy and Luxembourg – alignments along both cleavages were found to be salient at the same level. Denominational difference has little effect on the appearance of erosion of the alignment along the dominant cleavage. In some predominantly Protestant countries, this erosion began in the mid 1960s, while in predominantly Catholic and mixed countries it began in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, in two cases – Italy and Sweden – (one predominantly Catholic the other predominantly Protestant), it

commenced only in the early 1990s. On top of this, Chapter Six revealed that the weakening of the alignment along the class cleavage occurred much earlier than for the religious cleavage, as the latter only began diminishing in the mid 1980s (with the exception of the Netherlands). Evidence of persistence of voter alignment along the class cleavage was found in Denmark, and in Flanders this persistence was evident for the new alignment along the religious cleavage.

The evidence of both manifestations of alignment provides a detailed picture of the phenomenon of alignment and an indication of its durability. Chapter Seven analysed the evidence for stability and change in both manifestations. It identified that the transition from alignment into dealignment or realignment in at least one of its manifestations, occurred during a short period of about twenty years, between the mid 1960s and mid 1980s, in all of the eleven European multi-party systems. In the vast majority of the cases, diminishing of patterns of alignment were identified throughout the mid 1960s and mid 1970s. This substantiates earlier arguments that suggested the alignment between voters and parties in most of the European multi-party systems diminished at some point between the mid 1960s and mid 1970s; e.g. (Dalton, et al., 1984c; Sartori, 1994:50).

This analysis of state transitions into realignment and dealignment has identified that realignment in one of the alignment manifestations only occurs when no change occurs in the other manifestation, which remains in a situation of alignment. This means that only a small portion of the electorate is available to become attached to other parties, and to be involved in realignment along a new cleavage. This is coherent with Stubager (2010a), who found that the realignment of Danish voters along the new cleavage of education has been embodied by small parties.

Examination of these state transitions along the temporal dimension has demonstrated that the dealignment process can begin in either manifestation, and has two phases of development. It starts in one of the manifestations (the partial phase), and then spills over into the other manifestation, at which point the process of dealignment runs wider and deeper and evolves into a full dealignment.

In Chapter Eight, we found that over period of dealignment the electoral party system is no longer stable and durable. On top of this, we saw that there is a difference between a full dealignment and partial dealignment when it comes to their effects on the party system structure. During periods of dealignment at both manifestations – full dealignment – the structure of the electoral party system changes very frequently. However, when the dealignment process occurs in only one of the manifestations – partial dealignment – the shifts of party system structure happen only occasionally.

Based on a typology of party system structure (that uses three criteria: the number of parties, electoral support of the two largest parties, and their identities), Chapter Eight demonstrated that the changes of party system structure following partial or full dealignment may not take effect at the beginning of a dealignment process, but rather may occur later on. These findings validate Lipset and Rokkan's (1967:50) freezing hypothesis, as the erosion of voters-parties ties began in some of the case studies in the mid 1960s, but its effect on the party system structure commenced only in the 1970s, with the exception of the creation of the sub-national party systems in Belgium.

In addition, my analysis has demonstrated that in periods of partial dealignment there is high probability that the competition between the parties will be more fragmented. During a period of full dealignment, on the other hand, the competition between parties does not necessarily become more fragmented, but the party system structure transforms in both directions – both more and less fragmentation is evident.

All in all, we can summarise the development of the process underlying dealignment in a multi-party system as *a process that begins with erosion of the alignment of voters along the main cleavages or with declining levels of partisanship (this is the first phase, in which the process is partial). The process will then progress and become wider and deeper, so that no mechanisms of voter alignment – partisanship or alignments along cleavages – will function (this is the second phase, in which the process becomes a full dealignment). Throughout the two phases of the dealignment process, the structure of the electoral party system will be modified, but the shifts will not necessarily begin immediately. During its partial phase, modifications of party system structure will occur only occasionally and chances are high that the party*



*system structure will become more fragmented. In the second phase of full dealignment, the party system structure will change very frequently, but will not necessarily become more fragmented.*

My empirical analysis and my conceptual contribution to analysis of the dealignment process in multi-party systems emphasises the crucial necessity of studying the phenomena of alignment along two of its manifestations – partisans and along cleavages. In my empirical research, I demonstrated that both realignment and dealignment begin as shifts in either one of the manifestations of alignment. Therefore, a study that does not examine both manifestations of alignment will not examine the whole picture: therefore, it may not be able to pin down electoral transitions or to distinguish between the two phases of the dealignment process.

Sartori (1984:22) reminded us that “[c]lear thinking requires clear language. In turn, a clear language requires that its terms be explicitly defined.” As the concepts of ‘realignment’ and ‘dealignment’ emerged in reaction to the conceptualisation of ‘alignment’, which is a complex phenomenon in itself, I believe that both these terms should be employed only in this context and should not be used in the study of related issues. In addition, as was discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the concepts of ‘alignment’ and ‘realignment’ suffer the problem of homonymy (one word, many meanings), as is evident by the two mechanisms of alignment, and the diverse definitions employed by scholars. A solution for this problem, proposed by Sartori (1984:38), is the use of separate terms. I have demonstrated that realignment and dealignment both commence in one manifestation of alignment, while the other manifestation remains temporarily in a situation of alignment. This finding, along with Sartori’s suggestion, strongly suggests that when one studies either phenomenon (realignment or dealignment), he/she should specify the alignment’s manifestation (for example, partisan dealignment, or voter realignment along a cleavage): the generic terms of ‘realignment’ or ‘dealignment’ should not be used.

My empirical research, however, included only European multi-party system countries. It is recommended that future research apply these conceptual findings to countries with multi-party systems in which the main cleavages are not socio-

structural (for example, Israel), and to countries with different socio-structural cleavage histories (for example, new democracies).

The identification of state transitions from alignment into realignment or dealignment is based in the major part of this research on indices of volatility – the ETP and WCS. Regarding the use of these kind of indices (i.e. those that are based on measurement of electoral volatility) in the study of the effect of the dealignment process (in its partial or full phase) on the party system structure, I have proved that any index based on volatility cannot be employed in the study of electoral party systems, as there is no association between the two. As Evans (2002:160) has previously explained, “[high volatility] is precisely a necessary (though not sufficient) condition of a change in party system type.”

I have demonstrated in this research that during a full dealignment, the party system does not become more fragmented. Earlier research had already showed that the fragmentation level increased mainly in a specific period: the 1980s to 1990s (Best, 2007)<sup>2</sup>, as measured by the index of Effective Number of Parties (ENP) (for an explanation of this index, see Appendix A). Moreover, the same research pointed out that in Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands (if we combine the Christian parties), the ENP level had already raised in the 1950s to 1960s (Best, 2007:25), a period widely assumed to be characterised by stable party systems. These empirical results have revealed the absence of continuously increasing trends of fragmentation during a period of dealignment. This observation, together with scholarly criticism of the application of this index for studying party system change (see Chapter Eight), prove that any index which measures fragmentation (for example, ENP, or Dunleavy and Boucek’s (2003) index of Number of Parties) should not be employed for studying the effect of the dealignment process on the party system structure. It should be noted that my research has only examined cases of (European) multi-party systems. Further research must be done into fragmentation in other types of party systems, for example two-party systems.

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<sup>2</sup> This research examines Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States; between 1950 and 2005.

In this research, I only focused on the two main socio-structural cleavages and did not examine alignment along any alternative new cleavage (such as the Post-Materialist or the globalisation cleavages). However, my findings suggest that realignment may occur when one of the alignment manifestations is effective. This confirms that for the time being, realignment in either alignment manifestation is not evident. If it was evident, increasing volatility rates would be observable “as a result of this repositioning and realigning of established parties” (Kriesi et al., 2008a:13-4) along the new cleavage. This being the case, volatility rates would drop not long after the new alignment appeared. However, I found empirical evidence that almost all the case studies are going through (full) dealignment, with steady high level of volatility.

My empirical research confirms for Political Science researchers and for politicians that most European multi-party systems are currently in a state of disconnection between voters and parties. This has been the case since some point in time between the mid 1960s and mid 1980s and will probably continue for a long time: no signs of realignment have appeared. Therefore, dealignment should not be viewed in a negative light, but rather should be seen as part of what Enyedi (2008:299) called “the process of democratization, when ‘voters begin to choose’.”