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Party Identification: Nothing but the Vote?

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Abstract

In a very influential article on party identification, Jaques Thomassen (1976) rejects the directional component of party identification as meaningless in European party systems, but finds the strength component to be meaningful. Most authors refer to this article when explaining why they concentrate on the strength component and exclude the directional component. However, this position is confusing since it leaves us with a dubious analytic concept. My argument against the conclusion is mainly directed towards the theoretical foundation developed in the sixties. Party identification was considered to be a lifelong property, and the theory had no mechanism to handle changes in party identification. Several authors have objected to this, and claimed that European citizens do have lasting identifications with parties, although nobody has carried out a proper validation of the revised concept. Traditionally, 'independent' voters are left out in the analysis. With reference to realignment theory, I argue that 'independence' should be included in our search for the meaning of party identification. With this approach, it is demonstrated – using Dutch and Norwegian data – that the directional component is closely related to party choice, but the analysis suggests that party identification may be separated from party choice regarding long-term properties. That is an important finding since it ensures that the widely used strength component is indeed a measure for lasting identification and voter alignments.

1 Introduction

Party identification originated in the United States and was used to "characterize the individual's affective orientations to an important group-object in his environment" (Campbell et al. 1960: 121). In the fifties the importance of partisan loyalties was well recognized in electoral studies, while there was some disagreement on how such a phenomenon should be defined and measured. Earlier, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet (1948) at Columbia University invented the Index of Political Predisposition (IPP), but Americans did not feel comfortable about having their political preferences

predicted by social characteristics. Others measured stable partisan orientation by the individual's past voting record, but such an approach was too narrow since it focused mainly on voting behaviour, which says little about the voter's orientations between elections. The Michigan group therefore constructed a concept they labelled 'party identification' to capture the voters' party attachments. Their concept contained two components, one tapping the direction and one tapping the intensity. As the intensity component become stronger as the voters grew older, party identification was regarded as a life-cycle phenomenon. Age was a proxy variable for the underlying causes and represented a measure "of the length of time that the individual has felt some generalized preference for a particular party and has repetitively voted for it" (Converse 1976: 12-13). It was assumed that independent voters gradually develop partisan attitudes as time passes. Consequently, according to the life-cycle hypothesis voters would only strengthen their partisanship as they grew older, never lose it or change it. In this manner, party identification had similarities with religious confession.

Several properties made party identification a key variable for social scientists. It captured the individual's stable attitudes in the long run and made it possible to separate short-term forces active in the campaign from long-term forces. Thus, party identification included the historical dimension that V.O. Key (1959) called for in his article *Secular realignment and the party system*. The main reason for its success, however, was its high correlation with presidential voting. The seven-point scale was the best predictor for voting behaviour ever developed. Although party identification was strongly related to the vote, the variables were distinct phenomena since the vote was also influenced by short-term forces. The empirical correlation was indeed high, but not so high that the variables could not be statistically separated. Another important property was that the intensity component proved to be an excellent predictor for many other forms of political behaviour, for example, political involvement (Campbell et al. 1966) and voting turnout (Converse 1966).

2 The European rejection of the directional component

The success of party identification soon carried the concept overseas, and in the beginning the responses were very positive. Party identification in the United States was compared with multi-party Norway (Campbell & Valen 1961), France (Converse & Dupeux 1966), Britain (Butler & Stokes 1969) and Denmark (Borre & Katz 1973). In general, party identification was lower in Europe than in the US and seemed to travel more with party choice. The most notable difference was found by Campbell and Valen who noticed that party identification was less of a personal trait in Norway, but seemed to be more of

a reflection of the individual's location in the cleavage structure. Despite these differences, all comparisons outside the United States were positive towards party identification, which led to a pervasive acceptance of the concept. The Michigan group had invented a highly useful concept for comparing Western democracies.

Doubts first arose in the late sixties. Kaase (1976) reported that the level of party identification had dropped from 54 per cent in 1967 to 29 per cent only two years later in the Federal Republic of Germany. Such a sharp drop questioned the stability of party identification and whether the concept really measured a stable attitude. Although the stability was fairly low, Kaase did not reject the concept, mainly because of changes in the wording of the question and because the data covered too short a period of time to assess long-term properties. Jaques Thomassen (1976) gave a much more negative judgement on the validity of party identification. He pointed out that few validations of party identification had been carried out outside the United States. What had been done in the field constituted comparisons rather than validations. Therefore, he established a second test on whether party identification really reflected the individual's long-term orientation towards the political world (Kaase did the first). This time the setting was Dutch with data derived from a three-wave panel conducted in 1970, 1971 and 1972. The most crucial findings were that Dutch party identification displayed less stability than party choice. Moreover, the change of party choice was too often accompanied by change of party identification (double-switching), and too many voters changed party identification without changing party choice. Thomassen also claimed strong evidence for party identification not being causally prior to party choice, and concluded that Dutch voters do not have lasting attachments to political parties. The explanation given is that voters in cleaved party systems are attached to a party through the cleavages. According to Thomassen, the presence of cleavages makes the development of psychological attachments like party identification superfluous, which is quite the opposite to Campbell and Valen's conclusion made early in the sixties (see above).

The rejection was rapidly imported into cleaved party systems in general, and only a few scholars continued to treat the directional component as a major concept in European electoral behaviour (Richardson 1991: 752). Several analyses in different countries have maintained that party identification has poor analytical value in multi-party systems, whereas the intensity component is the more valuable (Holmberg 1981; Borre 1984; Listhaug 1988). This may be true, but the position is confusing since it implicitly states that the strength component does measure the intensity of some phenomena other than party identification. To interpret the strength component in a meaningful way, we must be able to show that the directional component is more than a pure reflection of the party choice. The directional component

must differ from party choice regarding long-term properties to make analyses of the strength component meaningful. The purpose of this article is to show that despite the close relationship between party identification and party choice, they do measure different phenomena, even in the Dutch material which made earlier research to reject the concept. To make sure that the result is not applicable to the Netherlands alone, Norwegian data are also taken into consideration.

3 Why the Netherlands and Norway?

The obvious reason for choosing the Netherlands is that I intend to reanalyse the dataset that caused the rejection in the first place, and will add data from a more steady political period. However, apart from the reanalysis argument, there are several reasons for choosing the Dutch and the Norwegian party systems. First, they are both multi-party systems with a multidimensional cleavage structure. These are features which make it very likely that voters could change party identification, because some of the parties are rather close to each other along one or another dimension. Second, both party systems experienced a political upheaval in the late sixties and early seventies, with the emergence of several new parties and important changes in some of the old parties (van der Eijk & Niemöller 1992). Andeweg (1982) shows that the Dutch party system was depillarized at the time, while in Norway the struggle concerning EEC membership cut across the established cleavages (Ringdal & Valen 1998). The situation challenged the political loyalties of a lot of voters in both countries, which makes it very likely that many voters found it necessary to reconsider their party identifications. Such political factors have proved crucial also for the development of party identification in the US (Fiorina 1981; Miller & Shanks 1996). By the late seventies the party systems had settled down, and it is to be expected that the properties of party identification had normalized. In Norway, another upheaval was to follow, again associated with the country's connection to the European Union. This issue also cut across the existing party coalitions and mobilized old cleavages, putting traditional loyalties under stress again. To sum up the argument of choosing these two countries, the Netherlands and Norway represent the most likely cases that party identification reflects nothing but the vote. It is widely accepted that party identification is too unstable to be regarded as a long-term political orientation in multi-party systems, but it is rejected without considering the possibility that most changes of party identification involve independence. In these analyses independence has been excluded; the question now is whether the inclusion of independents yields different results.

3.1 Data

In the Netherlands, panel data on party identification were available from two three-wave panels.¹ The first panel, running from 1970 to 1972, is the one Thomassen applied. The first round of interviews was conducted in connection with the local elections in 1970, while the data gathered in 1971 and 1972 concern the respective general elections. The second panel covers the general elections of 1981, 1982 and 1986. The voters were interviewed three times in 1981, but I will only apply the post-election interview in order to make them correspond with the other datasets. The questions were as follows:

1. *Many people think of themselves as adherents to a particular party, but there are also people who do not think of themselves as an adherent to a political party. Do you think of yourself as an adherent or not as an adherent to a political party?*
2. *To which party?*
3. *Would you call yourself a convinced adherent to this party, or do you not consider yourself to be a convinced adherent?*
4. *Is there one party which you feel more attracted to than other parties?*
5. *Which party is that?*

As we see, party names are not mentioned at all in the Dutch questionnaire whereas they were in Norway (see below). This may deflate the Dutch figures compared to the Norwegian, and thus, I decided to include attracted voters in the Dutch directional component.

From Norway, data from seven two-wave panels covering every general election from 1965 to 1997 were available (due to change of polling institute there was no panel between 1973 and 1977). The advantage of covering a long period is obvious with regards to the long-term properties in question, and we have already noticed that Kaase (1976) hesitated to draw strong conclusions because his data covered a rather short time-span. In the Norwegian election studies the following questions were asked:

1. *Many people think of themselves as adherents to a particular party, while others feels no affiliation with any party. Would you say that in general you think of yourself as a Conservative, a Laborite, an SV-supporter, etc., or don't you consider yourself affiliated with any particular party?*
2. *Do you consider yourself to be a strongly convinced supporter of your party, or are you not particularly convinced?*

The question of identifying leaning partisans was only asked in 1997, and is omitted from the analysis. In 1997 the whole question was replaced because of participation in the CSES-study,² but the introductory question ('1. *Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?* 2. *Which party is that?*')

proved comparable with the directional component from the earlier studies, while the intensity component deviated too much to be included.

4 The critique of the rejection

Samuel Barnes (1990) later questioned the Dutch rejection by pointing out that the political circumstances in the Netherlands were too special in the early seventies to draw general conclusions about lasting party attachments (see also Miller 1976). It is quite natural that citizens reconsider their identification as their old loyalties are challenged by changes in the political system. Andeweg (1982: 170) also expressed his doubts about and called for a replication of the study in more stable years. However, van der Eijk and Niemöller extended the analysis of Dutch party identification and confirmed the rejection: "in the Netherlands questions intended to measure party identification do not tap what has been conceptualized by the Michigan School" (van der Eijk & Niemöller 1983: 332). About twenty years later, Holmberg (1994) questioned Thomassen's conclusion from 1976 with emphasis on the theoretical expectations stated by the Michigan School:

A more plausible conclusion is the opposite – that is, that European voters do indeed have lasting, affective identifications with the parties and that party identification measurements, as well as elections, register this quite well. The circumstance that a fair minority of voters change their vote and party identification at election times does not disprove the theory of lasting party identifications. Instead, it proves that lasting party identifications do not mean impregnable party identifications in political systems where people vote for parties, not for candidates (Holmberg 1994: 100).

The statement is based on several panel studies in five Western countries with emphasis on Sweden, but the empirical evidence does not deviate radically from the Netherlands in the early seventies. In my opinion then, Holmberg could just as well have rejected party identification again. The inducement for turning the conclusion upside down rests mostly on a revision of the original understanding of party identification – "a version that conceptualizes party identification less as a fixture and more as an endogenous variable, amenable to some forms of short-term change" (Holmberg 1994: 100). As Holmberg turned the old rejection upside down, the original rejection was reprinted in *Acta Politica* in 1996. Consequently, party identification was both rejected and accepted with more or less identical empirical figures in two recent contributions. Considering this inconsistency, it is, in my opinion, worth trying to change the empirical approach to the problem, not just the theoretical model. I fully agree that the original Michigan interpretation does not fit with European party identification, while I disagree that we have to reject the

concept as such. I also agree with van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983: 322) that it is not easy to apply the running tally approach in systems with more than two parties. However, the main point of the concept provided by Fiorina and Holmberg is that they promote a concept that can cope with changes. Theoretically, such a revision does not mean that the meaning of party identification varies over time and place as it claims to cover even those times when party identification was thought to be an unconditional life-cycle phenomenon. My intention is to provide an alternative empirical approach to the recursive concept by including the independents.

Traditionally, researchers have omitted independent citizens when analysing turnovers in party identification (Butler & Stokes 1969; Thomassen 1976; Converse & Pierce 1991, Holmberg 1994).³ The exclusion of independents is an unfortunate one, since most changes in the directional component involve independence (see below). Voters do gain and lose partisanship more often than we would expect from the original theory, so omitting independents leads to an overestimation in the stability of party identification. It is my intention to show that party identification is indeed a meaningful concept in European multi-party systems by introducing independence as a part of the turnover-matrix.

5 Party Identification outside the US

There is one crucial difference between Europe and the United States which makes a revision of party identification essential: Americans vote for candidates, while Europeans vote for parties. The argument for using party identification as a predictor for voting preference relied heavily on the American candidate system. Candidates change from election to election, and their political history is unknown to most voters, whereas the parties are the same in every election. This made voters familiar with parties and their positions. From here, one could derive that parties provide a historical dimension to candidates and that parties represent a long-term influence on voting behaviour.

The last point about voting behaviour is highly problematic in European party systems. The relationship between party identification and voting is blurred in these systems because parties are the principal actors in elections. Some voters do not even know the candidate they vote for (Valen & Katz 1964: 140; Martinussen 1973: 97). Consequently, the party is on both sides of the equation in the European setting, leaving little room for other explanatory variables. Statements about the influence of party identification on party choice inevitably come full circle in Europe. Thus, Crewe & Fairlie's sarcasm (1976: 11) was apt: "Even if it is accepted that party identification is not exactly

the same as past regularity or present intention, one must ask how theoretically interesting is the statement that electors vote for the party to which they feel closest?" On the other hand, as far as I can see, explaining party choice by party identification has not been a major question in studies of party identification in European party systems. It is realized that party identification is endogenous to party choice.

Another difference is the possibility of delivering a split-ticket in the US. Voting for several levels at the same time makes it easier to let the vote deviate from the identification. However, I think this has only a minor effect, and the Swedish experience shows that very few voters use the opportunity to split tickets. More important is the presence of cleavages, which has serious consequences for how party identification should be modelled in European party systems. The current material confirms that variations between party identification and party choice are too low for meaningful analysis. The deviations never exceed 20 per cent, which means that the directional component is not applicable either as a predictor or as an explanation for party choice. In a recent contribution, Brynjin and Sanders (1997) prove that such models are incorrectly specified. However, if party identification measures voters' long-term political orientation, it is too easy to reject the whole concept simply because of a high overlap, since the overlap is a natural consequence of properties within the system. Party identification was not entirely designed to explain voting choice; the more important feature was its ability to understand the underlying long-term political orientation in the electorate. If party identification proves to be different from party choice, it is still a valuable variable for electoral research. Crewe and Thomson (1999), for example, study processes of realignment in Britain with the directional component as the dependent variable.

6 Why independence is an important feature of party identification

As mentioned in the introduction, age was the most important explanation for the development of party identification. Party identifiers reinforced their identification as time passed by, while independents gradually developed partisan attitudes as they participated in elections. Party identification was considered a life-cycle phenomenon, and the classic understanding of party identification rests on this life-cycle hypothesis. The underlying consequence of the hypothesis is that party identification is almost irreversible which makes it hard to explain change or weakening in identifications. In *The American Voter* only dramatic events such as the Civil War and the Depression are able to challenge party identification so strongly that voters change loyalty from

one party to another (Campbell et al. 1960). The authors then followed the conception introduced by Key (1955) in the fifties. Key showed that these two events had caused critical realignments among American voters; they had caused huge parts of the electorate to alter party loyalties at the same time and thereby created a new party balance. The Michigan group inferred in 1960 that such events would be able to cause lasting changes to party identifications at the individual level, but in 'steady-state periods' changes in party identification were not likely to occur at all. Later on Key (1959) recognizes secular realignments which evolve over time, for example, caused by social mobility. Secular realignments are not as easily identified as critical realignments, but people obviously change social positions from time to time. Such changes will often have an impact on individual political preferences. For example, can a rise in wages make a worker more inclined to be less positive about high taxes, and gradually make him leave his identification with a socialist party? As time goes by, he maybe develop an identification with a non-socialist party who fights for lower taxes. The same applies to a student from a working-class family: she may experience that the political preferences she learnt at home do not correspond with her new social position, and thus find it necessary to change party identification.

As social mobility has become frequent, such changes must be considered legitimate and it makes it difficult to maintain that party identification is exclusively a life-cycle phenomenon. The life-cycle hypothesis is much too general to cover all kinds of political circumstances. This is one of the main objections in Fiorina's (1981) revision of party identification. As an alternative, he proposes a conditional life-cycle hypothesis:

the parties favor the same sides of various socio-economic cleavages over time, and if citizens find themselves in the same socio-economic circumstances over time, then one would expect most citizens consistently to evaluate one party as preferable to the other, which according to our model will produce a continuously strengthening party ID (Fiorina 1981:91).

Party identification then, is to be considered as a *running tally of retrospective evaluations*, which entails that the identification is not so much directed towards the party as its policy. As long as voters recognize the policies advocated by the party with which they identify, they will maintain their identifications – but only then. If the prerequisites for identification vanish, it is not reasonable to hang on to the identification. Parties occasionally change their policies, as voters sometimes change their political orientations. Both could lead to a negative evaluation causing a change of party identification. Furthermore, Fiorina's revision explicitly links party identification to the cleavage model. The cleavage structure relates more strongly to party identification than to party choice, at least in Norway, where a positive relationship

between cleavages and party identification exists (Berglund 1994: ch. 4). Hence, cleavages turn out to be a foundation rather than an impediment for party identification, a point already noted by Campbell and Valen (1961) and further elaborated by Valen and Katz (1964). The conclusion from these studies was that party identification in Norway was more a reflection of the voter's location in the cleavage structure than a personality trait. From this perspective, it was the depillarization, not the presence of pillars (cleavages), that caused changes in Dutch party identifications in the early seventies.

As a location of the position in the cleavage structure, party identification implies more than affection; it also contains a significant rational component (see Popkin et al. 1976; Pettersen 1981; Richardson 1991). More importantly, regarding the validation of the concept, Fiorina's model explicitly legitimizes the weakening and loss of party identification as responses to political circumstances, whereas the original model only recognized strengthening. The original concept recognized only changes resulting from critical realignments, while the revised concept is also open to changes with their origin in secular realignments. At the same time, the revision does not reject the original features. Party identification can still be adopted during adolescence, and age will still be an important variable. Older people will still be less inclined to change, and even in times when party identification declines at the aggregated level, the age factor remains valid. In my opinion, the main point of the revision is that it enables us to handle the fact that individuals change their party identifications from time to time. Niemi and Jennings (1991) found that Americans also change party identification more than is justified by the theoretical expectations of the sixties. This should apply to Europeans too, without rejecting the concept.

Converse and Pierce (1992) point out that an increase in the number of parties almost automatically raises the fluctuation in party identification, both substantially and technically. The political space is not boundless, and when it is filled up with several parties the fluctuations will increase because the distances between parties necessarily decrease. It is easier to alternate between friendly and politically close parties than between hostile and politically distant parties. Technically, the sheer number of parties will increase the possibility of random fluctuations between parties. Converse and Pierce suggest that transitions should be treated along a continuum where movements between neighbouring parties weigh less than movements between more distant parties. But, as they clearly point out, the task of measuring such a space dimension is not an easy one. However, for the purpose of testing the continuous space assumption they apply voters' self-placement on the left-right scale. The problem is, of course, that many party systems are not unidimensional. In multi-party systems most parties can be ranked in terms of left and right, although it is not *the* relevant scale for all parties or even for

the party system. Analysing turnovers in party identification along the left-right dimension in such a system would be rather fallacious.

Another serious problem is the placement of independents in the political space: Converse and Pierce make it easy for themselves by leaving them out. This certainly leads to a decrease in the number of observations, but worse is the fact that important information is being thrown away, and this fact contributes to a blurring of the nature of party identification. In Norway and the Netherlands, most transitions in party identifications involve independence (see Tables 6a and 6c below), so by excluding independents almost every change in party identification is left out. As a consequence party identification is made more stable than it really is. Besides, there should be no question about the importance of the independent voter nowadays. Petrocik (1974: 35) found that leaning independents show more interest in politics, the current campaign and the outcome of the election than weak partisans. They also had higher scores with respect to political participation, political efficacy and use of mass media in following the campaign. In fact, the expected effects of the intensity component scale were visible only when party was the predominant political stimulus. Later on, Katz (1979) and Weisberg (1980) suggested that independence occurs with different intensities, and thereby claimed that party identification has more than two dimensions, also in the US.

I have no intention of pursuing the last idea here. The important point here from the Katz and Weisberg contributions is that they, together with Petrocik, cast quite a different light on independents by showing that these voters are better off politically than the established description indicates. In the fifties and sixties, there existed a normative bias against independents, and it was believed that a 'good' voter was attached to his party. Later research has shown that this is not necessarily so, and we should take advantage of these findings and realize that independence represents more than absence of party. Independence is also a position where dissatisfied voters can 'rest' before they eventually move over to another party, and it represents the point of departure for new and young voters. To realize these considerations in practice, turnovers in party identification can be decomposed into the five components shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Alternative turnover-matrix for party identification

		T2		
		Stable party	Changed (to) party	(Changed to) independent
T1				
Partisan		1. Stable partisans	2. Renegades	3. Lost partisans
Independent		-	4. New partisans	5. Stable independents

The turnovers in items 1 and 5 both represent stable identifications, the first being voters who retain their party identification and the second being voters who declare themselves independent at both times. Although party identification is a stable attitude for both categories, there are rather different theoretical expectations of them with regard to party choice and other forms of political behaviour. There is no reason to expect a stable vote from the stable independent, as we can expect from the stable partisan.

The remaining positions all involve a change in party identification. According to the life-cycle hypothesis, independent voters are inclined to develop party identifications as they grow older. The founders of party identification expected independent voters to become partisans as they acquired some experience of the political system, and the turnover pattern in item 4 follows the original expectation.⁴ But, as Fiorina points out, party identification must be reversible, and the conditional life-cycle hypothesis legitimates changes that go the other way round. So these turnovers should not be regarded as a violation of the theory either. Dissatisfied voters can be expected to leave their identifications in favour of independence (item 3) or a new party. The last combination, switching party (item 2), was crucial to Thomassen. In order to conclude that party identification was a long-term stable attitude, he maintained that party identification should be more stable than party choice. On the other hand, it is quite reasonable that a dissatisfied voter who finds himself in strong agreement with another party, would change identification from one party to another between elections. Clearly, if party identification really reflects stable political orientations, most voters should not follow such a vacillating pattern over a longer period of time. In times of realignment or political turbulence, however, as occurred in most European party systems in the early seventies, we should expect that more voters will undertake radical changes in their political orientations. Before going into the empirical turnovers, a general picture of the fluctuations in Norwegian and Dutch party identification will illustrate the political climate during the period. The political climate indicates when we should expect that citizens' party identifications have been challenged, i.e., when the conditional life-cycle can show its advantage. Both the directional and the strength component will be shown for both countries.

6.1 The distribution of party identification in Norway 1965-1993

Table 2 indicates that Norwegian party identification has moved through a cyclical pattern. From a rather high level in 1965, the level decreased in the two subsequent elections. The political climate was quite turbulent in those days, with student demonstrations and the EEC struggle, which caused heated

discussions and political turmoil. The question of membership of the EEC cut across traditional cleavages, and split parties as well as traditional coalition partners. Although the referendum took place in 1972, the wounds did not heal until the local elections in 1975, which represented a return to normalcy (Valen 1976). To some degree this was reflected by the shrinkage of strong party identifiers in 1973. The decline was deeper in 1969, but only concerned weak partisans and is explained as a result of unfulfilled expectations regarding the non-socialist government (Valen & Martinussen 1972). Norway definitively departed from the five-party model, and it would have been absurd if party identification had stayed untouched. The identification with the Liberal Party vanished as a consequence of this struggle, while the Labour Party and the Conservative Party lost many identifiers among the EEC-opponents, but recruited new identifiers among the supporters (tables not shown here).

After the return to normalcy, Norwegian party politics experienced a 'Swing to the Right', the Norwegian version of the Thatcher-era in England and the

Table 2 Strength of party identification from 1965 to 1993 in Norway.* Percentages

	1965	1969	1973	1977	1981	1985	1989	1993	1997
Strong	37	36	32	37	38	41	29	28	54
Weak	35	24	30	33	33	28	33	29	
Independent	28	40	38	30	29	31	38	43	46
N (=100 %)	1677	1547	1198	1681	1536	2128	2153	2153	2041

* Source: National Election Studies. Cross-sectional data.

Table 3 Direction of party identification in Norway.* Percentages

	1965	1969	1973	1977	1981	1985	1989	1993	1997
Social Left Party	2	1	3	3	2	4	6	3	4
Labour Party	40	35	31	36	33	30	26	28	23
Liberal Party	6	4	2	2	2	2	1	1	2
Christian Peoples Party	5	4	7	7	6	6	5	4	6
Centre Party	8	8	10	6	4	4	4	7	5
Right Party	11	8	7	15	21	21	16	11	10
Progress Party			1	-	2	1	4	2	4
Independents	28	40	38	30	29	31	38	43	46
N (=100%)	1566	1558	1210	1687	1555	2143	2159	2160	2041

* Source: National Election Studies. Cross-sectional data.

Reagan-era in the United States. During the 'Swing', the Labour and Conservative parties were clear and major enemies, and as Campbell (1966) demonstrated, it is easier to mobilize the common voter during such circumstances. However, the 'Swing to the Right' did not last long, and by 1989 the ripples had more or less settled. By then, the voters had experienced both a Conservative and a Labour government in the preceding period, and seemed to have lost enthusiasm for the governing parties. They protested by voting more to the right or more to the left than ever (Valen, Aardal & Vogt 1990). The disappointment is reflected in a dramatic drop in the proportion of strong identifiers. Certainly a large share of the strong identifiers had become weak partisans, a category which in fact increased from 1985 to 1989. This was a sign of mild frustration combined with loss of enthusiasm rather than a total rejection of one's favourite party. Anyway, there had not been so many independents since the election of 1973, and the low figures indicated serious misfits between voters and the existing parties. The 1993 election had some similarities with the election of 1973, as it fell in the shadow of the struggle over Norwegian membership of the European Union. Once again the issue cut across traditional cleavages and split both parties and party coalitions, and the loyalties of many voters were again on trial. However, probably due to the sharp drop in the preceding election, there was no marked decline of party identifications this time, and aggregate changes were small in the 1993 election. Still, this election represented a further weakening of party identification by the increase in the number of independents, now at the cost of weak partisans. This time, in contrast to the early seventies, the Labour Party did not lose identifiers among the EU-opponents, probably due to a more friendly approach, while the Conservative Party, who paid little attention to the opponents, again suffered loss of identifiers among EU-opponents. In sum, the Norwegian experience indicates that Norwegian voters in general are strongly attached to their parties, but the numbers indicate that the amount of individual realignments are somewhat dependent on socio-political circumstances. Thus, parties should not expect the level of identification to rise automatically as the voters grow older; they must fight to gain and even to maintain the identifications among voters.

6.2 The distribution of party identification in the Netherlands

The Dutch party system underwent greater fragmentation than the Norwegian system in the late sixties. The Christian parties (KVP, ARP, CHU) had polled the majority of the votes throughout the post-war era until 1963, but their support fell dramatically to around 30 per cent in the early seventies. As the big five (KVP, ARP, CHU, PvdA and VVD) declined in elections, a number

of new parties emerged. The number of parties that gained seats in parliament more than doubled from seven in the mid-fifties to 15 in 1971. In this manner and at this time, the old Dutch party system collapsed (Andeweg 1982), and, as in Norway, it would have been strange if party identifications had remained unaffected. By the eighties, the situation had calmed down, and in 1986 only nine parties were represented in parliament (van der Eijk & Niemöller 1992). The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) was formed in 1980 as a result of a merger of the KVP, the ARP and the CHU. Initially, the party had trouble in defining its policies and suffered some losses both in 1981 and 1982, but was successful in 1986 (Lucardie & Napel 1994). However, the electoral success did not cause an increase in the identification with the CDA, which is what we would expect if party identification reflected nothing but the vote. It seems more likely that the CDA had consolidated its position in terms of party identification, as it was the only big party not to be affected by the aggregated decline in the succeeding election. The distribution of the directional and strength components are shown in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4 Strength of party identification in the Netherlands. * Percentages.

	1970	1971	1972	1981	1982	1986
Strong	18	19	25	22	28	23
Weak	27	19	13	16	19	17
Leaner	32	38	38	38	32	40
Independent	23	24	24	25	20	20
N (=100%)	1838	2430	1504	1605	1528	1615

* Source: Dutch National Election Studies. Cross-sectional data.

Table 5 Direction of party identification in the Netherlands. * Percentages.

	1970	1971	1972	1981	1982	1986
Labour (PvdA)	19	21	20	19	26	32
Christian (CDA)	30	28	25	20	21	22
Liberals (VVD)	11	8	12	9	18	14
D66	10	6	2	9	4	3
Others	7	13	17	10	9	8
Independent	23	24	24	33	20	20
N (=100%)	1838	2430	1504	1620	1511	1615

* Source: Dutch National Election Studies. Cross-sectional data.

The decomposition of the party system in the late sixties must somehow have been appreciated by the electorate, inasmuch as 17 per cent claimed to identify with one of the new parties (D66 and others) in the early seventies. D66 started out well with 10 per cent, but soon declined to 2 per cent. However, the party survived and stabilized around 5 per cent during the eighties. The other new parties peaked at 17 per cent in 1972, but stabilized around 10 per cent in subsequent years. As the big five was declining at the polls, it was the Christian parties that lost ground in terms of party identification. From having a core containing more than 30 per cent of the electorate around 1970, the core was reduced to slightly above 20 per cent ten years later. Unfortunately, there are no available figures on this subject before 1970, but bearing in mind the depillarization, the relatively high figures in the early 1970s probably represent a considerable drop. As long as the support for the Christian Party was waning in elections, the continuing decline of identification is reasonable. As voters abandoned religious pillars as their voting guide, perhaps replacing it with another cleavage, it is only natural for these voters to make their political orientations and identifications independent of these pillars. The Labour and the Liberal parties did not experience a similar downward tendency, but fluctuate around 20 and 12 per cent respectively. Compared to Norway, Dutch party identification seems somewhat less stable, but the figures shown support the assertion that party identification is influenced by political circumstances in both countries. In general, the level of party identification increased or remained at a high level in times of political stability and clear governmental alternatives, and decreased or remained low in times of political turbulence and unclear governmental alternatives.

Considering the government alternatives presented to the voter, the Dutch parties have not been clear in telling the voters what government they will get if they vote for a particular party. Since World War II, all Dutch governments have been coalitions which, in most cases, have been negotiated after the elections. Sometimes it has been troublesome to form governments, and the negotiations have dragged on. In 1972, it took more than four months to form a government, in 1977 even longer. It is also worth mentioning that the Christian Democratic Appeal formed part of every government from 1945 to 1994, cooperating either with the Liberals or the Labour Party. The picture of the enemy is not easily perceptible when many parties occasionally collaborate. One stable factor regarding governing alternatives until 1994 was that Labour and the Liberals would never end up in the same coalition. This is quite the opposite to the Norwegian experience, where the government alternatives have been stable and clear, with some exceptions. During the post-war era and up to the struggle over EU membership in 1993, two alternatives were competing for power. Government would either be the Labour Party alone based on a socialist majority, or a coalition of non-socialist parties composed of the

Liberals, the Christian Peoples Party, the Centre Party and the Conservatives. The coalition suffered a severe blow during the struggle over EEC membership in 1972, so in 1973 the Labour party had no competition. However, in 1977 the coalition recovered (without the Liberals) and remained in good shape until 1989. Then, the ghost of the EU haunted the coalition again, but it managed to present itself as an alternative to the Labour party and even got the mandate. Only a year later the coalition split, and in 1993 the Labour Party was again the only alternative. In the 1997 election, the situation became blurred when the non-socialist parties offered at least two alternatives, though none of them were left a chance to win. Shortly, this implies that the elections in 1973 and the ones from 1989 onwards can be classified as decline elections, which in turn implies that we could expect a less stable party identification in panels covering these elections. In the Netherlands, the system was more stable during the eighties compared to the seventies, and we should therefore expect a more stable party identification during the latter elections.

7 The stability of party identification and party choice⁵

Until now, only aggregated changes observed from cross-sectional studies have been taken into account, but the data themselves do not tell us much about the validity of party identification. Nevertheless, they nourish the argument that both the strength and the directional components are to some extent influenced by political climate, which makes it reasonable to treat party identification as a socio-political response rather than a life-long fixture as Holmberg (1994) pointed out. If party identification contains a strong rational component among voters living in a dynamic society, we must accept that changes occur. Social mobility and political events will inevitably lead to secular realignments in the electorate, as the change of the party system represents a challenge to political loyalties. When, as in the Netherlands and Norway, new parties emerge and the old ones change, we can not expect an untouched electorate. On the other hand, if party identification is a stable attitude, as the original theory claimed, people should not jump from one party to another as soon as they feel a little uncomfortable with its policies. One would expect dissatisfaction to be mostly expressed by leaving a party in favour of independence. Defected voters can think things over as independents before they eventually move on to another party. To measure such turnovers, panel data are required. Tables 6a to 6d show the 'whole' picture of Dutch and Norwegian turnovers in party identifications and party choices.

These tables make it clear that party identification is certainly not a fixed property, although most voters hang on to their political affiliations. Norwegian voters do not readily transfer their identification to another party

Table 6a Turnovers in party identification in Norway. Percentages

	1965-69	1969-73	1977-81	1981-85	1985-89	1989-93	1993-97
Stable identifier	50	42	52	56	45	40	39
Stable independent	16	23	15	16	22	27	29
Was independent	11	16	13	12	12	12	13
Became independent	19	13	11	11	16	15	16
Renegade	4	7	8	5	5	6	3
N (=100%)	1287	1197	571	752	824	815	780

Table 6b Turnovers in party choice in Norway. Percentages

	1965-69	1969-73	1977-81	1981-85	1985-89	1989-93	1993-97
Stable vote	74	63	65	66	59	52	52
Abstained at t1	3	4	9	7	8	5	11
Abstained at t2	5	7	6	5	5	10	6
Abstained both times	2	3	4	5	3	4	5
Changed party	16	23	16	17	26	29	26
N (=100%)	1166	1115	575	746	781	787	796

Table 6c Turnovers in party identification in the Netherlands. Percentages

	1970-71	1971-72	1981-82	1982-86
Stable identifier	46	48	51	62
Stable independent	11	11	9	6
Was independent	11	15	22	8
Became independent	17	11	6	11
Renegade	15	15	12	13
N (=100%)	1258	827	1314	664

Table 6d Turnovers in party choice in the Netherlands. Percentages

	1970-71	1971-72	1981-82	1982-86
Stable vote	54	59	68	68
Abstained at t1	13	11	2	4
Abstained at t2	6	3	6	3
Abstained both times	12	6	4	2
Changed party	15	21	20	23
N (=100%)	1176	992	1183	643

between elections, and seem to be even less ready to do so in the nineties than before. Dutch voters are more inclined to replace one affiliation by another within a short time-span, but radical changes are not widespread in the Netherlands either. Strangely enough, the highest partisan stability occurs over the longest time-span; six out of ten voters retained their party identification from 1982 to 1986. This stability follows from the high recruitment of partisans in the preceding period.

The overall pattern in both countries over the period in question was generally one of great stability. Approximately 15 per cent of Dutch voters and 5 per cent of Norwegian voters changed identification from one party to another. Regarding voting behaviour, the pattern is quite similar in the two countries, although the Norwegian voters started to fluctuate more heavily from the late eighties onwards. Increased volatility is not matched by an increase of either renegades or those becoming independents. In this respect, the Norwegian figures on party identification are more regular than the Dutch ones, but the turnover pattern for party identification does not follow the voting volatility, except for stable partisans and stable independents. In Norway, the proportion of stable independents rose while stable partisans decreased each time voting volatility increased. This pattern occurred for the first time in the second panel: stable identifiers decreased from 50 to 42 per cent; stable independents increased from 16 to 23 per cent as voting volatility rose from 16 to 23 per cent. This pattern is repeated in the late eighties. On the other hand, the proportion of renegades is unaffected by the rise of voting volatility. This means that the observed declines occurred because parties failed to recruit new partisans, not because they offended old ones. When the stable partisans and stable independents are added together, a remarkable stability of Norwegian party identification is revealed. Approximately 67 per cent gave the same response to the directional question four years later in all the panels, which implies that declines in party identification occur because independent citizens are more inclined to remain independent.

However, the turnover pattern with respect to party identification and party choice is not as clear in the Netherlands as in Norway. The changes in party choice equal the changes of party identification in the first panel, thereafter changes in party choice increase as changes for party identification decrease. Regarding stability, the figures for party identification are slightly lower than for party choice, but also here a decrease in stable independents is accompanied by an increase of stable partisans. In general, the proportion of stable partisans is about the same in both countries. Furthermore, it is worth noting that as many as 22 per cent became partisans between 1981 and 1982. If party identification reflects nothing but party choice, a sharp increase of renegades would be likely in the subsequent election. Instead, there is a sharp increase of stable partisans, and there is a significant increase in voters who became

independents. The most interesting observation is that the proportion of renegades remains constant while the party choice fluctuates more than ever.

What separates the Dutch and Norwegian voters then, is the willingness to maintain independence and to change identification directly from one party to another. But, even if Dutch voters are quicker than Norwegians to change party identifications, the alternative approach worked out well in both countries. Including independents as a position of party identification, regarding independence as a point of departure and a resting place, demonstrates the dynamics of the concept. At the same time, even if there are substantial changes in party identification, it changes more slowly than party choice. The increased volatility in party choice is not followed by a similar increase in the change of party identification. In that case the argument claiming that party identification is less stable than party choice does not hold. The aggregated results indicate that we are confronting different phenomena, but it is necessary to have a look at their joint distribution to be more certain.

7.1 Travelling together?

The second argument for rejecting the directional component was that Dutch turnovers in party identifications were not as expected. The joint distribution of party identification and party choice revealed too many voters in wrong positions, i.e., double-switching and changing party identification without changing party choice. The interpretation of the high number of double-switchers as observed in the early seventies was that party identification travelled with the vote. Party identification could not resist a change in the party choice, and consequently was nothing more than a reflection of the vote. Later on, it is claimed that double-switching can not disprove that people have developed party identification, as long as it does not occur too often. Tables 7a and 7b give the picture for the whole electorate. The empirical patterns reveal some important characteristics as regards the validity of party identification.

Looking at the whole picture, we find that double-switchers constitute only a small proportion of the electorate. In the Netherlands, they peak at ten per cent and in Norway at six per cent. Against this background it is hard to claim that double-switching is a typical feature for party identifiers in these two systems. The other troublesome position, retaining the party choice while changing the party identification, almost never happens. It was maintained that this combination should occur less frequently than keeping a stable identification while letting the vote vary, which was considered a more theoretical acceptable combination. Both combinations are indeed very rare, nevertheless this criterion is met in every Norwegian panel, except for the first one where they equal each other. In the Netherlands, the criterion is not met in the

Table 7a Joint distribution of turnovers in party identification and party choice in Norway. Percentages

Party identification	Party Choice	1965-69	1969-73	1977-81	1981-85	1985-89	1989-93	1993-97
Stable identifier	Stable	47	39	46	50	39	32	30
	Changed	2	2	2	2	4	5	4
	Abstained	3	4	5	5	4	5	6
Stable independent	Stable	8	8	6	5	7	9	8
	Changed	4	8	3	5	8	12	12
	Abstained	3	5	6	4	4	5	9
Was independent	Stable	8	10	8	7	6	5	7
	Changed	2	4	2	3	4	4	3
	Abstained	1	2	3	3	3	3	3
Became independent	Stable	10	6	6	5	6	5	7
	Changed	5	4	2	4	6	6	5
	Abstained	2	3	3	3	3	4	4
Renegade	Stable	2	1	1	1	1	2	*
	Changed	2	5	6	3	4	4	3
	Abstained	*	1	1	1	1	1	1
N (=100 %)		1136	1096	556	723	770	778	761

Table 7b Joint distributions of turnovers in Party Identification and Party Choice in the Netherlands. Percentages

Party Identification	Party Choice	1970-71	1971-72	1981-82	1982-86
Stable identifier	Stable	39	41	50	57
	Changed	2	2	4	4
	Abstained	8	5	3	3
Stable independent	Stable	2	2	4	2
	Changed	2	2	2	2
	Abstained	7	5	3	2
Was independent	Stable	5	6	9	4
	Changed	2	4	3	3
	Abstained	4	2	2	2
Became independent	Stable	6	5	2	3
	Changed	3	2	3	4
	Abstained	7	3	2	1
Renegade	Stable	3	4	4	2
	Changed	6	10	8	10
	Abstained	5	3	2	1
N (=100 %)		1167	780	1174	641

seventies. Statistically, however, the differences in the seventies are not significant at any level. Therefore, the second argument for rejecting the directional component is not fulfilled either.

The third argument for rejecting the directional component focused on the causal sequence between party identification and party choice. The empirical relationship is too tight to explain (or predict) party choice by party identification, which also makes it impossible to determine the causal relationship between them statistically. There is not enough variation to separate them. The question is whether we can conclude from this that party identification reflects nothing but party choice. I believe not. First, as argued above, the high overlap is due to the nature of party systems that entail voting for parties, not candidates. Party identification should not be applied either to explain or to predict party choice. The number of parties is irrelevant to this argument; even in two party Britain party identification and party choice are too close (Brynin & Saunders 1997).

Second, the current analysis has shown that party identification proves to be more stable than party choice and has demonstrated that the odd combinations found crucial are marginal events. These findings make the rejection of party identification seem an inappropriate conclusion. They travel together because they are influenced by the same underlying causes. Third, the ordering of the questions suggests that party identification is the first one in the causal sequence. The questions about party identification and party choice are normally asked in the same round of interviews, starting with the identification question. This was done in all the surveys applied here, except for the first three Norwegian ones. In 1965, 1969 and 1973, the questions about identification were asked during pre-election interviews, and those concerning party choice during post-election interviews. These early surveys are more convincing regarding the causal sequence, since the questions were put before the act of voting was carried out. Since the patterns in the subsequent studies do not deviate from those in the first studies, it does not seem to matter whether we ask about party identification in pre- or post election studies.

One of the main reasons for developing the concept of party identification was to seize the long-term political orientations that stabilized the vote. Party identifiers have – to a certain degree – committed themselves to repeat their vote in the election. But, as is shown above, some voters are not so happy with their party and change identification from one election to another while some independent voters are very satisfied and have become partisans. Recalculating Tables 8a and 8b, calculating vote stability within different turnover combinations of party identification, reveals a clear ranking of voting behaviour in terms of stability. The stable partisans are most stable, followed by new partisans, lost partisans, stable independents, while renegades have the most unstable vote. Party identification does indeed have a stabilizing effect on

voting behaviour, which is one of its most central features. Again, the Norwegian figures are more in accordance with the general pattern than the Dutch figures, but all figures strongly suggest that party identification does have an impact.

In Norway, it is evident that stable identifiers have recently relaxed the close link between identification and voting that dated from the sixties. On average, as many as 90 per cent of the stable identifiers maintained their vote from the late sixties up to the middle eighties; this declined to 75 per cent in the nineties. Although the variations are still small, they represent an interesting loosening also observed in other countries (Holmberg 1994). The Netherlands panel data actually stop at the time when the Norwegian loosening occurs, but in general, the tables show comparable developments: 90 per cent of the stable identifiers actually vote for the party with which they identify.

8 Conclusion

The concept of party identification as delivered by the Michigan school early in the sixties has been rejected for the European setting by several authors. In these analyses, party identification is considered to be recursive and almost unchangeable throughout an individual life-cycle, unaffected by social and political change. I agree that such a phenomenon does not exist among European voters, but I do not agree that we have to reject the concept as such. Thus, I find the revisions suggested by Fiorina and Holmberg interesting: individual party identification can not be assumed a priori to last for a lifetime. Social and political circumstances certainly have an impact and create secular realignments. Such realignments are rather slow, so voters in transition are not likely to alter identification to another party immediately. As it takes some time to develop identification, I have argued that these voters would regard themselves as independents for a while, until they eventually develop identification with another party. Empirically, most changes in party identification involve independence, and the inclusion of independents makes it clear that party identification is more than a reflection of party choice.

My conclusion then, is that the inclusion of independent voters in party identification turnovers does matter in substantiating the meaningfulness of party identification. The previous findings that “party identification is less stable than vote preference” and “what little evidence exists to the effect that party identification and vote preference can be distinguished can also be explained as unreliability of measurement” (Thomassen 1976: 77) took a different turn when all turnovers were taken into consideration. The current analysis has demonstrated that though the variables are closely interrelated, party identification is more than a reflection of party choice, even among

Dutch voters in the early seventies. Bringing independents into the analysis makes party identification more stable than vote preference and makes it clear that party identification and vote preference are separate phenomena. However, we should never try to explain or predict the vote preference by party identification in cross-sectional studies, because the correlation between them is far too high. In the US this can be done because Americans vote for candidates, not parties. In systems voting for parties, we must reserve party identification for other types of analyses, for example, processes of realignment. The finding that the directional component is more than a reflection of vote is an important one, even if we can not use it to explain vote preference. It is important because it ensures that the widely used strength component does indeed measure strength of party identification, and not the strength of party preference or some other phenomenon.

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Notes

1. The Dutch data utilized in this article are based on ICPSR's Dutch Election Study, 1970-1973, and the Dutch Parliamentary Election Panel Study 1981-1986. The (anonymous) datasets were distributed by The Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD) from The Steinmetz Archive. F. Heunks, M.K. Jennings, W.E. Miller, P.C. Stouthard and J. Thomassen were the Principal Investigators for the first dataset, while C. van der Eijk, G.A. Irwin and B. Niemöller were Principal Investigators for the second. Neither the Principal Investigators/The Steinmetz Archive, nor The Norwegian Social Science Data Services are responsible for analyses/interpretations of data presented here.

2. Comparative Study of Electoral Studies, which is a comparative project originating from the International Committee into Elections and Representative Democracy.

3. Two exceptions are LeDuc (1981) and Barnes (1990).

4. However, following the revised version of party identification, it does not matter whether party identification originated during adolescence or later, or whether the individual has identified with another party before.

5. With stability, I refer to whether the respondents give the same answer at two

time-points. Thus, I do not conduct a statistical test of stability in the strict sense, neither with respect to party identification nor party choice as, for example, van der Eijk & Niemöller (1981) do.

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