

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CONFERENCE ON PARTY IDENTIFICATION

by

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Partisan dealignment has been the dominant force in American mass electoral behavior since the mid 1960s. So familiar to electoral behavior scholars are the twin characteristics of this dealignment that they require only brief mention here: (1) The percentage of the electorate which identifies with a major political party has decreased substantially from the "steady state" levels of the 1950s and early 1960s, with a reciprocal increase in the percentage of Independents. (2) Even among those who have retained a party identification in these times, a decay of party regularity in voting has been noted. These two changes have yielded an electorate of the 1970s which differs significantly from the electorate of the 1950s. Scholars are well aware of these changes. Some of the most exciting current research in electoral behavior is focused on how the changes affect our theories of mass political behavior and of the functioning of the American political system -- both of which made heavy usage of the 1950s and early 1960s as an empirical base.

The current dealignment plays such a crucial role in shaping modern American politics and in forcing reassessment of extant electoral behavior theory that the implications of dealignment for the study of party identification should be a central focus of this Conference on Party Identification. It is entirely fitting that the Conference be concerned with this issue, for it is changes in party identification itself and in its relationship to the vote which signify changes from one electoral period to another.¹

A focus on dealignment brings three research questions to center stage: (1) How can the nature of the dealignment be depicted complete-

ly and precisely? (2) How can the occurrence of dealignment be explained? (3) How can the termination of this period of dealignment and the movement into a new electoral period, when or if it takes place, be gauged? These questions can be generalized to apply far beyond the immediate electoral period. They derive from the questions of how to monitor and explain fundamental changes in electoral behavior, which are the questions any adequate theory of elections must resolve.

The SRC/CPS electoral series is our most precious resource for answering these questions. The approach to electoral behavior embodied in its original design has held up remarkably well in the face of varying electoral conditions. Where the original design seemed inadequate, new approaches, with the appropriate new instruments, have been adopted. Nonetheless, it is clear to me, as one who has been deeply involved in attempting to provide answers to each of these research questions, that neither the old approaches nor the newer ones is sufficient for comprehending electoral behavior in this time of dealignment. There continues to be a need for new instrumentation and even for new design initiatives. The purposes of this memorandum are to suggest some of the directions new measurements and designs might take and, in doing so, to stimulate discussion of these research questions at the Conference so that additional suggestions might be forthcoming.

Research Question One: Depicting Dealignment

New Approaches to the Measurement of Party Attachment. The famous SRC/CPS measure of party identification lies at the core of the depiction of electoral dealignment and other electoral periods. As pointed out in the Andersen-Eulau memorandum, this measure has carried a heavy burden in the past -- under which, it should be noted, it has held up impressively well.

Yet the seven-category index of party identification, standing alone,

has several shortcomings as an indicator of partisan attachments, which are highlighted during a period of electoral change. For one thing, by allowing only three levels of partisan intensity, it surely does not capture the full variation in intensity of party attachments. A measure allowing greater differences in intensity is needed. For another, by seeking only positive identifications with a party (or with independence), the index ignores the role of rejection in the development of one's political identity. Deep-seated hostility to one or another of the parties may be as important as positive identifications for some voters. Clearly both are important. It follows that the location of voters in the "party space" depends upon long-term feelings about all of the parties in that space. A multidimensional measure of partisanship is needed.

A relatively new measure of party feeling in the SRC/CPS studies has, intentionally or not, remedied some of the shortcomings of the index of party identification. Using the thermometer scale methodology, respondents beginning with the 1964 study were asked to indicate their feelings towards Republicans and Democrats. These thermometer measures can register considerable variation in intensity of feeling and may be combined into a measure which reflects feelings about both major parties. They complement the party identification index nicely. Respondents should be asked to rate Independents as well to provide a complete set of these complementary measures.

The current thermometer scales, however, are based on the assumption that parties are best conceptualized as groups of individuals -- e.g., the Democratic party is the collectivity of all Democrats. Parties can be conceptualized alternatively and more familiarly as institutions, with an institutional existence separate from the group membership. In this conception, the Democratic party is more than the sum of all

Democrats. It follows, then, that the thermometer scale technique should be applied also to the parties as institutions, by asking respondents to rate the Democratic party and the Republican party.²

The advantages of the thermometer measures of party attachment are obvious. They do not suffer from the variance restrictions and the one-sidedness of the original party identification index. Not only could they be very useful in validating that original measure, but they should be more sensitive than party identification to changes in partisan feelings from year to year. If such indicators had been available to us since the 1950s, we would probably be in a better position than we are currently to account for the rise in Independents and especially the decline in party regularity among identifiers.

New Approaches to the Measurement of Vote Choice. Depicting dealignment is also made difficult by imprecise measurement of voting choice, a critical ingredient in assessing defections from party regularity. The inaccuracies of self reports of voting choices at the presidential level are well known. What is not so well known is that these inaccuracies have grown as presidential turnout has declined in recent years. Below the presidential level, very little is known about the accuracy of self reports. It seems plausible to suppose that, if anything, there is less accuracy here. Votes in the less salient contests are more likely to have been forgotten by the time the interviewer comes around and respondent "averages" of state and local votes are highly suspect. These errors in vote reports cloud the relationship between party and vote, affecting in ways unknown at present our estimates of the degree of party loyalty. For this reason alone, estimates of voting choice need to be more accurate.

An initial corrective to vote reports should be applied to individual turnout each time by checking public records (where available) to confirm

that the respondent is registered and has voted. This vote validation procedure was executed successfully in the 1964 SRC/CPS election study and merits repetition in future studies.³ Heavier concentration of the post-election interviewing in the immediate aftermath of the election is an additional procedure which might be adopted to reduce inaccurate reports, because it might lessen errors resulting from faded memories. Finally, substantial improvement in estimating vote choices might be achieved by redesigning the way in which vote choice data are collected. The more the interview instruments resemble the actual ballot faced by the respondent, presumably the more likely he or she will be to replicate actual vote choices in the interview situation. Respondents should be presented with a ballot resembling the ballot used in their locale as closely as possible and asked to vote as they did when at the polls. Even the secrecy of the voting booth could be simulated by having respondents fold their ballots and place them in a ballot box. It might also be worthwhile to test the viability of providing respondents with a ballot on or before election day and asking them to fill it in immediately after they have voted and then to return it to the interviewer or the field office.

Research Question Two: Explaining the Current Dealignment

One can identify at least three somewhat overlapping hypotheses which have been advanced to account for the current dealignment of the electorate. The Party Distance Hypothesis locates the causes of dealignment in increased perceptions that neither party promises to do what voters want on important policy issues. The Party Diversity Hypothesis suggests that, as party leaders have become more diverse in their policy stances within the major parties, party has become a less meaningful cue for voters. The Partisan Socialization Hypothesis takes a more distal view of the causes of the dealignment: it finds the underlying sources of the dealignment in

the weak childhood partisan socialization of the youngest members of the contemporary electorate.

The SRC/CPS election studies contain a veritable gold mine of data with which to test these hypotheses. Electoral behavior scholars in search of explanations of dealignment should "mine" these data more creatively and extensively. Yet, as one attempts to account for dealignment using the available data, it becomes obvious that additional measures -- which are sensitive to movement from one electoral period to another -- are required. In this section of the memorandum, I shall suggest some new measures which might be useful in testing these hypotheses about the "causes" of the current dealignment.

The Party Distance Hypothesis. In order to test this hypothesis adequately, data must be gathered on the distances perceived by respondents between themselves and the two parties. Fortunately, such data have been collected for specific policy issues beginning with the 1968 election study, by having respondents place the parties and themselves along a seven-point scale anchored by competing policy alternatives on a number of policy issues. These data may be used to determine the distance between respondent positions and respondents' perceptions of party positions.⁴ If an adequate time series on party distances is to be achieved, continued collection of these data is imperative.

For all of the advantages of these perceived policy distance measures, the requirement that respondents specify rather precise policy positions for each party and themselves may be too stringent for most voters. Rather, it seems more likely that voters' impressions of party distances are general in nature and should not be constrained to achieve an artificial precision. Given this consideration, perhaps a more appropriate way to measure party distances would be to ask respondents to anchor themselves at the zero point on a scale and then to locate the parties in terms of how close they

seem to be to their own positions. This could be accomplished quite easily for specific issues. It could be used also to determine perceived party distances on those problems mentioned in open-ended questioning as most important to the respondent. The advantage of using these problems as inputs to party distance calculations is that they are salient matters to the individual, not issues he or she may never have considered.

The Party Diversity Hypothesis. To test this hypothesis, data must be gathered on mass perceptions of a number of leaders/candidates in each party. The candidate thermometer questions used first in the 1968 election study can provide first tests of this hypothesis. They measure how a respondent "feels" about each candidate. Variations in thermometer ratings for politicians within the same party should serve as an excellent index of perceived intraparty diversity. It seems reasonable to suppose that the more diversity is perceived within the party, the less useful the party label is in guiding the voting behavior of the individual.

A major drawback to the current candidate thermometer measure is that it seems to combine, in an unknown and possibly idiosyncratic way for each respondent, feelings about the candidate as a person and as a politician with identifiable policy stances. The latter is of special interest to students of electoral change, and a candidate thermometer measure which focussed solely on the policy dimension of a candidate's appeal would be better for them. Respondents might be asked, for example, to indicate on the thermometer their feelings about a series of candidates in terms of what the candidates might do if they were elected to office where certain questions of policy were concerned. Similar questions could be asked for general policy and for those problems identified as most important by the respondents themselves.

The Partisan Socialization Hypothesis. The empirical testing of this hypothesis is possible to some extent with careful analysis of the existing data, but it could be significantly furthered by both new instrumentation and design modifications. Several design alternatives are promising. Including pre-voting-age respondents in the CPS sample, if measures more sensitive to electoral change (such as the ones suggested herein) are used, would allow for monitoring of levels of partisan intensity and of party perception in this crucial pre-adult period. Even greater understanding of the transition from pre adult to adult could be achieved with the use of a panel design. Finally, more extensive effort should be directed towards achieving a more representative sampling of the youngest members of the electorate.⁵

A new measure on the "roots" of party identification would be a useful addition also. Respondents could be asked, in an open-ended question format, how they "came to be" Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. Probes could be used to focus the respondent's memory on childhood socialization, particular events, etc. Answers to this question could in turn be coded according to the sources of identification, the level of awareness of sources, and the number of different reinforcing sources. The information gained from this question could be combined with the indirect attempts to discern "roots" (such as questions about the partisanship of parents and when respondents changed their party identifications) to provide a more complete picture of the development of party identifications.

Research Question Three: Gauging Change in Electoral Periods

For movement from one electoral period to another to be recognized as it is occurring, rather than after it has occurred, highly sensitive measures of electoral behavior are required. One of the great strengths of the SRC/CPS election studies has been the repeated measurement (in

some cases for almost a quarter of a century), with sensitive measures, of many important dimensions of electoral behavior. Another great strength has been the adaptability of these studies to the new requirements of electoral change and of changing approaches to the study of electoral behavior. Thus, it is not criticizing the election studies to suggest, with the clearness of view that only hindsight allows, that more sensitive measures of certain aspects of electoral behavior would have been desirable in gauging the changes of the last decade or so.

The suggestions contained in this memorandum are designed largely to make future CPS election studies even more sensitive to changes in electoral behavior. By increasing the variation in partisan intensity, by allowing for comparisons between the two parties, by carefully calibrating respondent-party policy distances, by ascertaining more policy-centered impressions of the candidates, and even by measuring voting choice more accurately, our ability to trace changes over time is improved. If 1980 were (somehow) to be the first year of a realigning electoral period, for example, it seems to me that the measures proposed herein would increase the likelihood that we could identify and account for that change while it was going on. The point is that we must design our empirical studies in anticipation of change if we are to identify and explain change when it appears. This is surely one important lesson we have learned from the 1960s.

This memorandum contains a number of suggestions for changes in measurement and design in the CPS election studies. These suggestions flow out of an immediate interest in dealignment and a more deep-seated concern with mass electoral change, especially from one type of electoral period to another. My interests cut across the entire conference on party identification, bearing to some extent on each of the proposed sessions. They lead to alterations in how party attachments are conceptualized and oper-

ationalized, so that it can be charted more carefully across different election periods. Crossnational studies of party identification can be improved substantially by using a framework which recognizes the behavioral manifestations of different election periods and by using measures which are sensitive to each. (Using a thermometer scale to tap attachments to each party separately, in addition, would seem highly useful in a multi-party system.) The causal position of party identification too promises to be better illuminated through more careful and multiple measurement of party affiliations themselves and a more extensive search for their "sources". All in all, I feel the Conference will benefit from adopting a perspective of party identification which incorporates concern for electoral change.

Footnotes

¹Three basic electoral periods -- dealigning, realigning, and stable alignment -- are identified in my "The Systemic Consequences of Election Types" (Delivered at the 1977 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D. C., September 4, 1977.), 1-6.

²One apparent feature of the current dealignment has been a widening gap between local and national party organizations. Given this, it seems useful to gather thermometer ratings of the two parties at both levels -- i.e., the national Democratic party and "the party around here." The relationship between these two ratings might serve as an additional index of party decay.

³For a discussion of the results of this vote check, see Aage R. Clausen, "Response Validity: A Vote Report," Public Opinion Quarterly, 32 (Winter, 1968-1969), 588-606.

⁴A limited use of the party distance data along these lines may be found in my "Partisan Dealignment in the Postwar South," The American Political Science Review, 71 (June, 1977), 491-494.

⁵The problem of achieving a representative sampling of this age group is discussed in Philip E. Converse, The Dynamics of Party Support (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1976), 47-51.