

Democracy and Mass Partisanship in Advanced Industrial Societies

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One of the most important measures of the nature of democracy is public attachment to political parties. In a recent essay on the state of political parties in America, John Coleman (1996) argues that the key question of partisan politics is whether parties are able to mobilize and integrate the mass public into the democratic process. Parties should not be measured by their organizational activities alone--although these are important measures of party-based politics--but by the goals of this activity.

An important measure of party politics is the public's attachment to political parties. The concept of party identification was first put forward by Angus Campbell and his colleagues (1960), and soon became the foundation to our understanding of voting and citizen political behavior. Partisanship provides structure and meaning for individual belief systems; it provides a perceptual screen that helps individuals organize the complexities of politics. Partisanship is also the ultimate heuristic, because it acts as a reference structure for evaluating new political stimuli--what position does my party take on this issue--and making political choices at election time. Party attachments are also a stimulus for engagement in campaigns and elections. The conceptualization of party identification is arguably one of the most significant developments in public opinion research. Public ties to political parties thus measure both the vitality of party government and provide a context within which parties, candidates and other political actors operate. Campaign rallies, election brochures, and personal contacts by party workers are a means towards an end. The end is developing public support for the party, and legitimacy for a system of party-based democracy.

We begin by reviewing the debate on the changing nature of partisan attachments in advanced industrial democracies. Despite the extensive work that has been carried out on partisanship, scholars remain divided on the extent of partisan decline. Then, we provide the more current and complete

empirical evidence on this question. By expanding the cross-national scope and cross-temporal range of the evidence beyond previous research, we provide a more definitive answer on whether partisanship is generally changing in West European democracies. The analyses also demonstrate that the decline of partisanship has had real and substantial effects on the political behavior of contemporary publics. The results suggest what the nature of an increasingly dealigned electorate may mean for European democracies.

Partisanship and the Dealignment Debate

Given the importance of partisanship in the Political Science literature, the first signs of weakening partisan attachments in the American public came as a surprise to many electoral scholars (Nie et al. 1979; Converse 1976). The decline in U.S. partisanship was often linked to exceptional political crises: the civil rights conflict, Vietnam, and urban unrest. However, a similar trend soon appeared in Britain and other European party systems (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984; Crewe and Denver 1985). One sign of change was a pattern of increasing partisan volatility across elections, and voter choice became less tied to habitual party loyalties. New political parties also appeared on the electoral stage, ranging from Green and New Left parties in the 1980s to New Right parties in the 1990s (Mueller Rommel and Pridham 1991). In addition, evidence from public opinion survey series in several nations began to document weakening party attachments among contemporary publics (e.g., Franklin 1992). If partisanship was the most important political attitude, these attachments seemed to be eroding.

Weakened partisan attachments in a single nation (or a few nations) might be explained by the particular political circumstances of the nation. Declining British partisanship, for instance, was often traced to the economic struggles of the 1970s and the parties' ineffectual response to these challenges. However, if these patterns are replicated across a wide variety of nations, it forces us to examine broader social changes that are influencing a wide range of contemporary democracies. The separate national experiences of weakening party bonds eventually was generalized into a hypothesis of partisan

dealignment in advanced industrial societies (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984). The dealignment thesis held that party ties were generally eroding as a consequence of social and political modernization, and thus most advanced industrial societies should experience a dealignment trend.

The dealignment thesis maintains that this trend has developed because of a combination of individual and systemic factors that are transforming contemporary advanced industrial democracies (see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). For example, increasing educational levels have improved the average citizen's political and cognitive resources, reflected in increased levels of interest in public affairs. With more political information available to a more educated electorate, more people now possess the level of political skills and resources necessary to become self-sufficient in politics (Shiveley 1979; Dalton 1984). Other systemic changes are taking place which diminish the political role of parties within the democratic process. The growth of the mass media and the proliferation of public interests groups impinge on the interest articulation and informational functions of the political parties. There is evidence that the mass media are both replacing parties as sources of political information and possibly diminishing the partisan content of this information.¹ The parties themselves are also changing, adopting new institutional forms and new methods, emphasizing their leaders, and running campaigns that decrease reliance on party members and decrease their direct personal contact with the citizenry. The leaders themselves are now frequently the focal point of election campaigns, rather than the parties they lead (McAllister 1996).

At first, many scholars challenged the dealignment thesis. The critiques were made at two levels. First, there were disagreements about whether measures of party attachments from public opinion surveys document a pattern of decreasing partisanship over time (Zelle 1995; Schmitt 1989). While weakening partisanship was apparent in some nations, such as the United States and Britain, the initial cross-national studies did not conclude that this was a general pattern across European democracies (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Thus in a recent review of the this literature, Thomas Poguntke concludes "the data I have analyzed do not support generalizations about a general decline of parties and the rise of anti-party sentiment in Western democracies" (Poguntke 1996: 338).

Second, scholars such as Bartolini and Mair (1990) questioned whether patterns of voting behavior—such as party volatility and fractionalization—actually signal a pattern of weakening party ties and spreading dealignment. Admittedly, it is difficult over a short period of time to be certain that party bonds are eroding when this trend is intermixed with the normal patterns of partisan change between elections. Partisan change is a regular element of the electoral process, and periods of heightened partisan volatility and fragmentation dot the electoral histories of most democracies. These scholars often were quite vocal in expressing their doubts that partisan ties were systematically changing across the advanced industrial democracies. For example, Peter Mair (1993: 132) claimed that the evidence of weakening party ties is a myth: “The electoral balance now is not substantially different from that 30 years ago, and, in general electorates are not more volatile than once they were. Even in the United States, where the mass of election studies provided the strongest empirical evidence of weakening partisanship, researchers such as Bruce Keith et al. (1992) argued that the rise of independents in the United States represents a mere change in how voters label themselves, without any real behavioral consequences.

To address this debate, this paper examines the current evidence of weakening party ties in the mature democracies in Western Europe. The dealignment thesis implies that we are witnessing a broad and on-going decline in the role of political parties for contemporary publics--not a temporary downturn in public satisfaction with parties, as others have argued. Dealignment also suggests that new forms of democratic politics--such as the expansion of direct democracy, the opening of administrative processes to public input, and the expanding use of the courts by citizen groups --will develop as citizens shift to non-partisan forms of action. The consequences of dealignment are important, if this trend does exist. Examining the evidence of dealignment and considering its consequences is the primary goal of the analyses that follow.

Measuring Changes in Partisanship

Numerous country studies have tracked changes in party attachments over time, and there is an extensive literature on partisanship in most European democracies. The first extensive cross-national attempt to measure trends in partisanship is Hermann Schmitt and Sören Holmberg's research (1995). They tracked partisanship for thirteen European nations and the United States. Their findings support the dealignment thesis, although they offer the following ambiguous conclusion: "If there is an overall tendency in Western European partisanship it is of loosening party bonds. But specific developments, by country and by party, are so varied that any general 'overall' view disguises more than it discloses" (1995: 121).

Schmitt and Holmberg marshal an impressive array of data, which is nevertheless limited in several ways. One limitation is their emphasis on empirical analysis rather than theory testing. The dealignment thesis holds that long-term societal changes have at least partially undermined the political and cognitive need for party identification in advanced industrial democracies. The test of this hypothesis should focus on long-term partisanship data for a set of stable advanced industrial democracies.

Another set of problems is methodological. Schmitt and Holmberg rely on the Eurobarometer (EB) surveys as an exclusive data source for eight nations. The Eurobarometer series only begins in the mid-1970s or later and there have been significant changes in the wording of the partisanship question over time. Schmitt and Holmberg also did not devote sufficient attention to specific national conditions that might interact with dealigning forces. In "new" democracies, party attachments might initially grow until dealigning forces counteract the partisan learning model (Converse 1976).² For example, research on German partisanship stressed the postwar development of party attachments in the immediate postwar decades (Baker et al. 1981); but then the dealigning process eroded these ties (Dalton and Rohrschneider 1990). The same pattern might apply to new party systems such as Spain, Portugal and Greece. Furthermore, the newer democracies display fewer of the advanced industrial characteristics that might encourage dealignment. The most fertile field for uncovering partisan dealignment is in the established party systems that might have described as "frozen" around stable cleavages in the 1960s and 1970s.

Finally, Schmitt and Holmberg are overly cautious in interpreting their own empirical evidence. Of the 21 trend lines they present for the percentage of strong identifiers, 19 are negative. Of the 21 trends for the overall percentage of identifiers, 14 are negative. Admittedly, many of these negative coefficients are not statistically significant, but the number of survey timepoints is often quite small and they do not consider the confounding factors we noted above. Thus, an assessment that “The Trend is Down in Many Countries, *but. . .* [italics added]” (p. 101) appears to be an understatement. A general theory that works 80 percent of the time in a mixed set of test cases seems fairly potent.

This paper expands upon the Schmitt/Holmberg analyses for West European party systems. First, whenever possible we use national election study dataserries because they represent the most valid data source for each nation.³ The national election studies normally have a better sampling procedure, often use in-person interviews, tend to have standardized party identification questions, and their collection is coordinated with the timing of national elections. Second, when only Eurobarometer data are available for an established European democracy, the analyses are extended further into the 1990s. Third, we include several additional European nations beyond the Schmitt/Holmberg list (Austria, Finland, Iceland and Luxembourg), but we do not include the new democracies that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s (Greece, Spain and Portugal) because we feel these new party systems are experiencing different processes of party development as democratization occurs.

Table 1 employs the Schmitt/Holmberg’s methodology of regressing the year of the survey on two measures of partisanship: the trend in the total number of identifiers as well as the trend in strong partisans for the fourteen West European nations with relatively complete long-term data series, plus the United States.⁴ Even though this paper focuses on the European experience, the U.S. case is important to include because it represents one of the prime examples of dealignment in the theoretical literature and this allows us to update Schmitt/Holmberg’s analyses that also included the United States. To our knowledge, this represents the universe of longitudinal data on partisanship for these nations.⁵

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The second column of Table 1 displays the per annum change for the percentage of party identifiers in each nation. Thirteen of the fifteen trends are negative; ten of these coefficients are significant at the .10 level, even though the number of data points is quite small.⁶ For example, the -.37 coefficient for the United States means that the percentage of partisans decreased by about 18 percent over the 48 years from 1952 to 2000 ($-.37 * 48 = 18$). The fourth column displays the time trends for the percentage of strong partisans. All of the strength coefficients are negative, albeit of different magnitude and statistical significance. The decrease in American, British and Swedish partisanship has long been observed in the literature, but now these nations are joined by most other advanced industrial democracies.⁷

The evidence of dealignment shown in Table 1 is stronger than Schmitt and Holmberg's results partially due to the inclusion of four nations that they did not examine, where partisanship is clearly weakening (Austria, Finland, Luxembourg and Iceland). In addition, the passage of additional time has strengthened the dealignment trend in several nations. For example, German partisanship dropped off more clearly in the elections of the 1990s, although initial signs of dealignment could be seen in earlier elections (Dalton and Rohrschneider 1990). The dealignment trend in Britain and Austria also became more evident during the 1990s (Crewe and Thomsen 1999; Plasser et al. 1996). In summary, the consistency of the results is now much stronger than the Schmitt and Holmberg findings.

A discussion of the apparent anomalies also might help us understand the breadth of the dealignment process. Denmark and Belgium display the weakest evidence of dealignment over time. In both nations we may be beginning our research too late in the dealigning process to study earlier periods of more stable partisanship. Strong class-based voting existed in the Danish elections of the 1950s and early 1960s, and these alignments were weakening over time. The second Danish timepoint is the 1973 realigning election (often called the "earthquake election"); since then the Danish parties have worked to recover from the losses in partisans they sustained in this election (Borre and Andersen 1997). Belgian politics also has experienced a period of considerable partisan change linked to the regionalization of the

political system, much of which predates the Eurobarometer series. Thus, in both nations the percentage of partisans at the beginning of the available data series is significantly below most other nations; it is difficult to track further declines in partisanship when the baseline is initially low. Yet, even in these two nations, strength of partisanship declines over time.

Greater skepticism and doubts about political parties seem to be a common development in most European democracies, paralleling the erosion of party ties. For instance, Enmid surveys show that the percentage of Germans who express confidence in the political parties has decreased from 43 percent in 1979 to only 26 percent in 1993 (Rieger 1994: 462). Surveys in both Germany and Austria find that public confidence in political parties rates at the bottom of a list of diverse social and political institutions (IPOS 1995; Plasser and Ulram 1996:35). Similarly, the British public has become significantly less trusting of political parties and politicians (Webb 1996; Curtice and Jowell 1995). There is similar evidence of extensive public dissatisfaction with Norwegian and Swedish political parties (Strom and Svasand 1997; Miller and Listhaug 1990). More generally, in Fall 1997 the Eurobarometer study found that confidence in political parties averaged only 16 percent across the European Union, far below the average confidence levels of fifteen social and political institutions examined in the survey. With such evidence now available, very few, if any, scholars now claim that public support for political parties and the structure of party government is increasing in their own nation.

It is certainly possible that these trends may be reversed in the future, or that partisanship might increase in a recent election survey. As politicians become cognizant of these trends, they may react with policies and activities designed to renew the ties of their former partisans; in other instances, an engaging political leader or an intense political controversy may mobilize partisan attachments. Despite these possible perturbations, we suspect that the general downward trend reflects long-term and enduring characteristics of advanced industrial societies that encourage their continuance.

The Impact of Dealignment on Electoral Behavior

The real test of partisan dealignment must go beyond expressions of party attachment in a public opinion survey to observable behavior in elections. Partisanship provides a standing predisposition that guides voter preferences; barring other information, partisans should vote for “their” party in the belief that the party and its candidates best represent their interests. Survey research repeatedly demonstrates a close relationship between partisanship and voting behavior in most democratic elections. In parliamentary systems the relationship is typically very strong (Holmberg 1994) because of the limited number of elected offices and the high levels of party cohesion. In electoral systems with multiple offices and diverse voting choices, like the United States and Switzerland, partisanship can be of even greater value in guiding a wide variety of voting choices (Wattenberg 1998).

At the aggregate level, strong partisan ties can act as a stabilizing influence on electoral politics. Philip Converse and Georges Dupeux (1962) argued that the potential for voters to be attracted to new parties and demagogic leaders is considerably lessened if citizens identify with one of the established parties. Indeed, American elections generally demonstrate that third party presidential candidates disproportionately draw their support from the ranks of independents, regardless of the candidate’s political ideology. In Britain, support for the Liberals and their successors is disproportionately drawn from voters lacking partisan attachments (Crewe and King 1995). More generally, the existence of widespread partisan ties dampens the impact of short-term political events on election outcomes and limits the potential electoral appeal of new parties and political personalities. Extensive partisanship among the electorate thus works to stabilize party alignments and lessen sudden electoral change.

Aggregate Data Patterns of Volatility

One of the first signs of dealignment should be a weakening of partisan consistency at both the micro and the macro levels. We begin by examining aggregate electoral statistics for the established Western democracies, and then turn to a wide range of available survey data.

The simplest measure of electoral change is the volatility of party vote shares between elections - the average change in party vote shares between adjacent elections.⁹ Previous research found some evidence of growing volatility in party vote shares by the late 1970s (Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984; Crewe and Denver 1985; Pedersen 1979).¹⁰ Figure 1 presents the pattern of aggregate volatility for 18 established advanced industrial democracies over the entire postwar period. In order to best illustrate the trend over time, each data point represents the average volatility score for all elections held in these OECD nations in each year. Volatility scores are standardized by measuring the change from the average volatility in the first two postwar legislative elections for each individual country.

=== Figure 1 goes about here ===

The immediate postwar years were a time of substantial partisan volatility in many nations, largely because of the disruptions produced by the World War II and the reestablishment of many party systems. Inter-election shifts in aggregate party support averaged 9.0 percent for the elections of the 1950s. Most party systems stabilized by the 1960s, and volatility decreased in many nations. Then, toward the end of the 1970s the trend turns slightly upward. By the 1990s, the average inter-election shifts in party support had increased by nearly 10 percent over its postwar baseline. The linear modeling of this trend shows a strong statistically significant trend of increasing volatility over time.¹¹

The overall pattern of increased volatility also appears if we repeat the analyses within each European nation (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 41). Every nation except France displays increased electoral volatility over this timeperiod. In France, the negative trend occurs because the party system of the Fourth Republic was extremely fragmented, and the restructuring of the party system under the Fifth Republic led to decreased volatility. In most nations, however, volatility increased into the 1990s as partisanship began to erode. The average volatility score in the 1990s (12.6 percent) was larger by half than for the 1950s (8.9 percent).

Because partisanship binds voters to their preferred party, dealignment also should free more voters to shift their party support to other contenders. Established parties may fragment, as a more fluid

electorate opens these voters to new appeals. For example, the collapse of the Italian party system both reflected the prior weakening of party ties and further accelerated this development, allowing new parties such as Forza Italia to emerge. The renewed appeal of Haider's Freedom party can also be linked to its successful appeal of free-floating Austrian voters. In the past two decades most democratic party systems have experienced new political challenges from Green parties on the left and nationalist or neo-conservative parties on the right. The rise of new parties across the map of Europe is a consequence of partisan dealignment.

Often, electoral analysts focus on the patterns of a single nation, or the short-term trends in party fortunes. A significant shift in party fortunes, such as the collapse of the Christian Democrats in Italy or the rise of New Left or New Right parties in Europe are normally explained in terms of the idiosyncratic political forces of the nation. In contrast, we have described a pattern that represents a general development of advanced industrial democracies, and this pattern has grown stronger and more apparent since it was first detected. The "frozen" democratic party systems that Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) once observed have become more fluid political environments where new parties are forming and electoral change is increasing over time.

Individual Level Behavior

Aggregate electoral statistics are particularly useful for mapping the broad contours of electoral change because they are available over time for all our nations. Beneath these aggregate statistics, however, the gross shifts in voters between parties can be much greater than the net shift of party vote shares. More precise measures of changes in electoral behavior come from interviewing the voters themselves. Long-term survey data series are less prevalent than electoral statistics, and comparable trends do not exist for all nations, but more than enough data exist to demonstrate the profound changes in individual level behavior that have occurred in most nations.

Party identifiers approach each election with standing predispositions that structure their perceptions of the candidates and issues of the campaign. The “yellow dog” Democrats of American politics and the *Stamwähler* of German elections are illustrations of the habitual loyalties of partisan voters. Research routinely demonstrates that partisans are more likely to support the same party in succeeding elections. Therefore, the weakening of partisan ties should produce a concomitant decline in the partisan consistency of voters from election to election. Table 2 presents the long-term trends for several different measures of individual-level voting consistency from the respective national election studies. The self-reported consistency of voting in adjacent elections is denoted as “switched between elections;” other questions tap an attitudinal willingness to vote for another party (e.g., “thought of voting for other party”).

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Although the degree of change varies across nations, the direction of change is clearly uniform. There is an increasing tendency for voters to report that they shifted their votes between elections, especially in nations where the declines in partisan attachments have been greater. In Sweden, for example, only 7 percent of the electorate said that they changed their vote between the 1956 and 1960 elections, but vote switching grew to 31 percent in the 1998 election (Holmberg 2001). Moreover, attitudinal questions show that the reported willingness of voters to shift votes between elections has increased in every nation for which time-series data are available. For instance, even after the turbulence of the Dutch party system in the late 1960s, only a fifth of the Dutch public in 1971 said they sometimes voted for different parties; in the 1998 election more than two-thirds of the electorate reported such changing preferences.

Some researchers have pointed out the limitations of the type of recall data used in Table 2 to measure votes in adjacent elections (Niemi, Katz and Newman 1980).¹² There is a tendency for survey respondents to overreport consistency in describing their present and past voting patterns, either for conscious or unconscious reasons. Thus, measures of consistency based on recall vote probably

underestimate the true degree of partisan change. Yet this measurement problem should be relatively constant over time, and should not create the systematic effects observed in our time trends.

The evidence on increasing partisan volatility is bolstered by an examination of panel studies that can track the actual consistency of partisanship across time. Figure 2 summarizes the results of these panel comparisons for the United States, Britain and Germany.¹³ Party identification, by definition, should be a relatively stable political orientation, and this is evident in the relatively small number of individuals who switch partisan ties between adjacent elections. At the same time, the size of these switchers is slowly increasing. For instance, between the 1964 and 1966 elections in Britain, only 18 percent of the respondents shifted their partisanship; between the 1992 and 1997 elections this had increased to 31 percent.

== = Figure 2 goes about here == =

Evidence of partisan dealignment also emerges from other aspects of voter choices. In those nations where we have been able to track such split-ticket voting over time, voters are now more likely to divide their ballots among different parties. In the United States, less than a sixth of voters split their ballots between a presidential candidate of one party and a congressional candidate of another in the 1960s. By the 1990s, this had risen to between a quarter and a third of the electorate. Similarly, up until the late 1970s, less than 10 percent of all German voters split their first and second votes.¹⁴ In 1998, 20 percent of West Germans split their two votes between different parties. Similar patterns of increased split-ticket voting are found in Sweden (and Australia, see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 47).

One additional measure of relevant electoral behavior is generally available from national election studies: the timing of one's voting decision. Voters with partisan identities enter election campaigns with standing partisan predispositions; the campaign acts to mobilize these partisan ties. Partisan dealignment implies that fewer voters begin the election cycle with such predispositions, and this makes them more susceptible to the short-term issues and themes of the campaign. If this is correct,

fewer voters will say that they decided how to vote before the campaign, and more will claim that they decided during the campaign, or even on election day itself.

Table 3 tests our expectations about changes in the timing of electoral decisions. The specific question wording varies across the nations, but the overall pattern is unmistakable. These electorates display a consistent pattern of delaying their choice until later stages of the campaign. In Sweden, for example, 18 percent of voters said they made their voting decision during the campaign in 1964; by 1998 the late deciders had increased to 57 percent. There may be specific circumstances in one election or another that affects the voters' uncertainty, such as changes in party leaders across elections or the issues of the campaign. But even allowing for such idiosyncrasies the trend is clear: contemporary voters are less likely to enter elections with standing partisan predispositions.

=== Table 3 goes about here ===

In summary, the evidence in this section illustrates the behavioral manifestations of declining partisan loyalties. The stabilizing and conservatizing force of partisan attachments has generally weakened in advanced industrial democracies, resulting in real and apparent consequences for electoral politics and the patterns of partisan control.

Voting Turnout Rates

Another important consequence of partisanship is the mobilization of citizens to participate in the electoral process. When E.E. Schattschneider (1942: 1) wrote that "political parties created democracy" he was primarily referring to their historical role in expanding citizen participation. In the era prior to the development of parties, voting was typically the purview of just a small percentage of the populace. Political parties both fought for an expansion of suffrage and mobilized the newly enfranchised to go to the polls. Conversely, throughout history when parties have failed to perform their functions, electoral participation has declined. In sum, the saga of electoral participation in advanced industrialized countries

is one in which the state of political parties, and the party system more generally, has played a critical role.

Table 4 compares the average turnout of the voting age population in the first two elections of the 1960s with turnout in the two most recent elections in 16 established OECD-member democracies which do not presently have compulsory voting. With the exception of the United States, the turnout percentages reported here are from elections for the lower house of the national parliament -- for these contests usually decide who will form a government. The American electorate certainly believes that presidential elections are more important, as demonstrated by their higher participation rates in these contests. Thus, an exception to the general rule is made for the U.S. by incorporating presidential turnout. Such an argument could also be made for the semi-presidential systems of France and Finland. However, French citizens could only vote for president directly starting in 1965, and in Finland direct presidential elections did not begin until 1994.

=== Table 4 goes about here ===

The results provide striking support for the conclusion that turnout has declined in established democracies. In all 16 of these countries recent turnout figures have been lower than those of the early 1960s. It is rare within comparative politics to find a trend that is so widely generalizable. The mean change from the 1960s has been a 13.2 percent decline in turnout. To put this in perspective, these democracies currently have a total voting age population of 581 million people. If recent turnout rates in these countries had been identical to those of the 1950s, an additional 52 million people would have voted -- a number that exceeds the entire voting age population of the United Kingdom.

Why has such a widespread trend throughout the world largely escaped notice whereas the American turnout problem has received much attention for decades? The answer is that the decline of turnout in established democracies aside from the U.S. is a fairly recent phenomenon. This can best be demonstrated by combining standardized data from these 16 countries and plotting the year-by-year changes. For each country, the average turnout for the first two elections of the 1950s serves as a baseline

from which to standardize all subsequent turnout figures. For example, if turnout had averaged 70 percent in 1952 and 1956 and then fallen to 63 percent in 1960, the standardized turnout for 1960 would be 0.90. In order to smooth out the trends, a three-year moving average was calculated; therefore, the data point for 1960 actually represents an average of all standardized turnout numbers from 1959 through 1961.

Figure 3 demonstrates that if there was any worldwide trend in turnout from 1960 through 1972 it was an upward one, as would have been expected from the demographic changes outlined above. It is only in the late-1980s that a clear decline in turnout in these countries, taken as a whole, can be seen. As late as 1989 the moving average had only once fallen as low as .95. After 1989, standardized turnout is consistently below the .95 level, and by 1996 had dipped to an all-time low of .84. In other words, turnout in these countries had been within a narrow band from the 1950s to the 1980s; the rapid decline of electoral participation is a phenomenon of the 1990s.

=== Figure 3 goes about here ===

Such a pattern eliminates two possible explanations regarding the make-up of the voting age population. It might be thought that the lowering of the voting age in most established democracies could account for much of this decline by enfranchising young people who are typically the least likely to vote. The decline in turnout in most countries, however, is found to occur substantially after this expansion of the franchise. Similarly, the increase in immigration could have lowered turnout based on the VAP by adding more non-citizens (who are typically ineligible to vote) to the denominator. The fact that turnout in established democracies declined so suddenly is clearly incompatible with such an explanation.

Given that the decline of turnout in established democracies has been a relatively recent phenomenon, one can only speculate as to whether we are witnessing a long-term trend or merely a momentary aberration. Perhaps as new parties and patterns of competition become institutionalized, turnout rates will recover. On the other hand, if turnout decline is indeed due to changes in the *nature* of political parties, then we can expect today's low voting rates to continue, and possibly worsen.

As individual office-seeking organizations, there is unfortunately little reason for parties to be concerned about poor turnout levels. In fact, it is more efficient for a party to win an office with fewer votes. This would be akin to General Motors making just as much money with the sales of fewer cars.

Yet, for the party system as a whole, lower turnout spells trouble just as a decline in overall car sales would for auto manufacturers. In the political world, party leaders are the functional equivalent of CEOs, members of Parliament function as upper-level management, and party members perform essential roles akin to assembly line workers. On the other side of the supply and demand equation, party identifiers are like loyal customers, and those who vote represent the total consumer base for the product. If the CEOs, management, and workers of the auto companies were working more efficiently, but nevertheless selling fewer cars industry analysts would no doubt conclude that the auto business is in dire straits. The fact that voter turnout has declined indicates that there is less of a market for the parties' product and that party systems around the advanced industrialized world have fallen upon hard times.

Conclusion

Just as Schattschneider argued that parties were essential to the democratic process, electoral research has argued that partisanship is essential to the public. Partisanship, or feelings of party identification, provides a framework for evaluating and interpreting political information; partisanship provides a cue for making political choices; and partisanship stimulates involvement in the institutions and processes of representative democracy.

The cumulative evidence of our analyses suggests that dealignment is weakening the partisan ties of contemporary publics, and this is having corresponding effects on patterns of political behavior. We recognize that partisan trends are seldom linear, and specific campaigns may accentuate or attenuate feelings of partisan affiliation. Similarly, a specific election might stimulate political interest or diminish the public's attention to the campaign. Such short term electoral forces also can produce election-specific patterns of volatility. Given these vagaries of electoral politics, the long-term electoral trends described

in these analyses are all the more striking. The unique effects of specific elections appear to be perturbations around long-term trends that are transforming electoral behavior in systematic ways. Moreover, the evidence for such trends generally strengthens if one expands the analyses to include other advanced industrial democracies in North America and the Pacific Rim (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

Fewer voters now come to elections with standing partisan predispositions. Even if they have loyalties to a party, these loyalties are weaker; more voters now make their electoral choices based on the campaign issues and candidates. As a result, electoral volatility is increasing. Much as has been shown for group-based voting cleavages (Franklin et al. 1992), there has been a shift from long-term sources of electoral choice to more short-term influences on the vote. Furthermore, citizens are now less likely to participate in elections.

The implications of our findings for the democratic process remain unclear. Millions of citizens are still voting, even if they are not relying on party cues or early-learned partisanship to the degree they once did. On the one hand, this might encourage the public to judge candidates and parties on their policies and governmental performance—producing a deliberative public that more closely approximates the classic democratic ideal. On the other hand, the lack of longstanding partisan loyalties may also make electorates more vulnerable to manipulation and demagogic appeals (Holmberg 1994: 113-14). Many individuals may find campaigns illuminating, but it is also possible that extraneous events may temporarily cloud serious political debate. The preoccupation with “Jennifer’s ear” in the 1992 British election or the machinations of Perot in the 1992 American presidential election are recent examples of narrow topics at least temporarily overshadowing serious debate about the future of the nation. The attraction of personalistic leaders, including demagogic politicians such as Haider and LePen, may be another consequence of dealigned politics. Partisan dealignment has the potential to yield both positive and negative consequences for electoral politics, depending on how party systems and voters react in this new context.

Dealignment also pushes some citizens away from partisan activity, such as participation in elections. Whereas once parties mobilized “their” voters to participate in elections and cast a ballot at election time, these bonds to a preferred party are now weaker. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argued that as parties shifted away from direct personal-contact activities, such as door-to-door campaigning and campaign rallies, and toward a media-centered campaign, this lessened the opportunities for individual citizens to become involved in party work and other campaign activities. This pattern is developing in most advanced industrial democracies (Farrell and Webb 2000), and thus Rosenstone and Hansen’s conclusion may apply generally to other democracies. As the public is leaving the parties, the parties are abandoning a reliance on the public at-large to carry out some of their key functions.

A possible implication of declining participation in election campaigns is the shift in overall political involvement toward other forms of political action. Whereas elections were once seen as the focal point of political activity, it is often argued that elections are being displaced by unconventional forms of participation, such as petitions, protests and demonstrations (Jennings and van Deth 1989). These new forms of participation have emerged as a result of value change among the young, the rise of new social movements and new issue concerns, and increasing cognitive mobilization within the electorates of the advanced industrialized societies (Dalton 2001; Inglehart 1990). Indeed, there is ample evidence that the incidence of unconventional forms of political protest have increased across the electorates of many established democracies (Inglehart 1997: 312-5).

One of the most interesting questions of contemporary democratic theory and practice is how the established political parties and processes of representative democracy will respond to these developments. There is clear evidence that party leaders and party officials are aware of these developments; indeed, many of their actions have contributed to these trends, as in the changing style of election campaigns. In other ways parties have attempted to isolate themselves from these trends, such as in the development of cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995). But it is more apparent that parties are adapting to these trends, rather than reversing them.

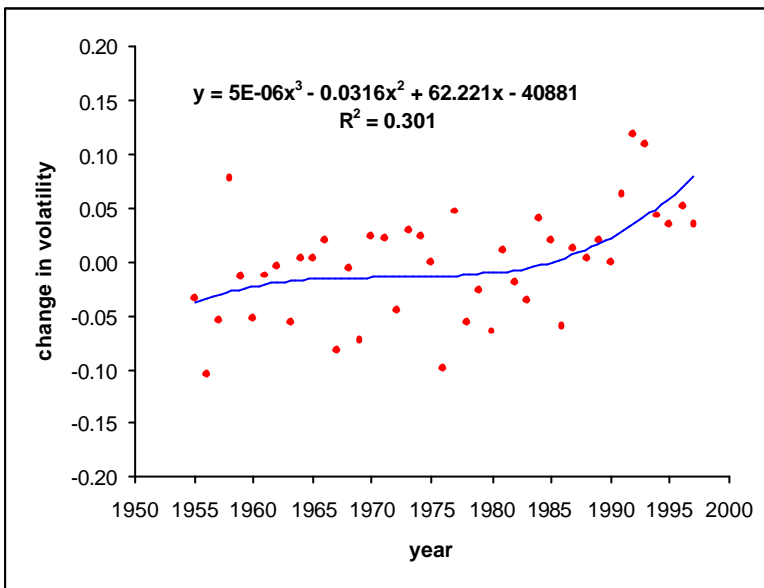
The prospects of these trends for contemporary democracies is uncertain--in part it depends on how the political parties and other elements of the democratic system respond (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: ch. 12). It is clear, however, that these trends are changing democratic politics in a way that Schattschneider and earlier electoral researchers never envisioned.

Table 1. Trends in Party Identification over Time

Nation	% with PID	% Identifiers		% Strong Identifiers		Period	(N Timepoints)
		b	sig.	b	sig.		
Austria	67	-1.120	.00	-.686	.00	1969-99	(10)
Belgium*	50	.039	.85	-.286	.05	1975-96	(21)
Britain	93	-.189	.01	-.929	.00	1964-97	(9)
Denmark	52	.001	.95	-.207	.36	1971-98	(9)
Finland	57	-.293	.49	-.147	.61	1975-91	(4)
France*	59	-.670	.00	-.316	.04	1975-96	(21)
Germany	78	-.572	.00	-.573	.00	1972-98	(8)
Iceland	80	-.750	.08	-.350	.06	1983-95	(4)
Ireland*	61	-1.700	.00	-.807	.00	1978-96	(18)
Italy*	78	-1.300	.00	-.968	.00	1978-96	(18)
Luxembourg*	61	-.580	.02	-.386	.00	1975-96	(21)
Netherlands	38	-.329	.13	-.129	.36	1971-98	(9)
Norway	66	-.220	.34	-.280	.18	1965-93	(8)
Sweden	64	-.733	.00	-.543	.00	1968-98	(11)
United States	77	-.370	.00	-.154	.06	1952-00	(12)

Source: Nations marked with an asterisk (*) are based on the Eurobarometer surveys; other nations are based on the respective National Election Studies. Note: The % with party identification in column one is the average of the percentage expressing an identification in the first two surveys in each series.

Figure 1. Trends in Electoral Volatility in Eighteen Advanced Industrial Democracies, 1950-1997



Source: Mackie and Rose (1991), *Electoral Studies* (1992-1997).

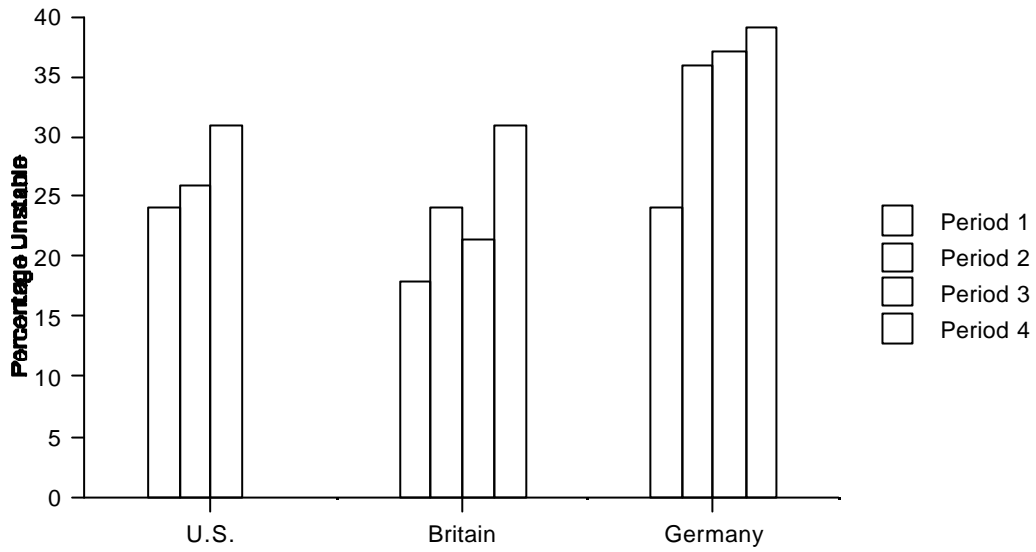
Note: The results are based on all legislative elections for our 18 core advanced industrial democracies, from the second postwar election until 1997. The figure plots the change in volatility from the average of the first two elections within each nation.. The figure pools the national data by year and then plots the best-fit trend line produced by Curve Expert 1.3.

Table 2. Surveybased Measures of Volatility

Nation	Per annum Change Period (N timepoints)	
Austria		
Switch voters	.615	1979-99 (7)
Floating voter	1.597	1979-99 (4)
Britain		
Switched between elections	.114	1964-97 (8)
Switched between election (non-v)	.043	1964-97 (8)
Thought of voting for other party	.159	1964-92 (8)
Denmark		
Switched between elections	.254	1971-98 (7)
Finland		
Considered different party	1.250	1983-91 (3)
Germany		
Switched between elections	.318	1961-98 (10)
Switch voters (KAS surveys)	.764	1980-96 (15)
Italy		
Switched between elections	1.325	1972-96 (5)
Netherlands		
Switched between elections	.194	1971-98 (9)
Sometimes voted for other party	1.319	1971-98 (7)
Norway		
Switched between elections	.616	1969-93 (7)
Sweden		
Switched between elections	.519	1956-98 (14)
Switched during election	.321	1956-98 (13)
Switzerland		
Switched between elections	.464	1971-95 (4)
United States		
Switched between elections	.229	1952-96 (11)
Would vote for different party	.731	1952-96 (8)

Source: Respective national election studies; 1996 U.S. would vote for different party variable is from the Roper Poll. Per annum change is calculated with an unstandardized regression coefficient.

Figure 2. Instability of Partisanship Across Panel Waves



Source: Respective national election studies. The figure entries are the percentage who changed partisanship between panel waves. United States: Period 1 is 1956-60, Period 2 is 1972-76, Period 3 is 1992-1996 (using the two-year panels yielded similar results); Britain: Period 1 is 1964-66, Period 2 is 1966-70, Period 3 is 1974-79, and Period 4 is 1983-87; German data are from pre-post election panels: Period 1 is 1972 panel; Period 2 is 1983 panel, Period 3 is 1987 panel; Period 4 is 1990 panel.

Table 3. Late Timing of Electoral Decision

<u>Nation</u>	<u>Per annum Change Period</u>	<u>(N timepoints)</u>
Austria		
Shortly before	.650	1979-99 (7)
Britain		
During election	.450	1964-97 (9)
Denmark		
During election	-.035	1971-94 (11)
Finland		
Last few days	1.125	1983-91 (3)
Germany		
Last few weeks	.281	1965-94 (7)
Netherlands		
During election	.953	1970-98 (9)
Last days	.636	1971-98 (8)
Norway		
During election	.897	1957-93 (7)
Sweden		
During campaign	1.097	1964-98 (12)
Switzerland		
Shortly before	.496	1971-95 (6)
United States		
Last two weeks	.205	1952-00 (13)

Source: respective national election studies. Per annum change is calculated with an unstandardized regression coefficient.

Table 4 Change in Turnout in Established OECD-Member Democracies Without Compulsory Voting in Recent Years

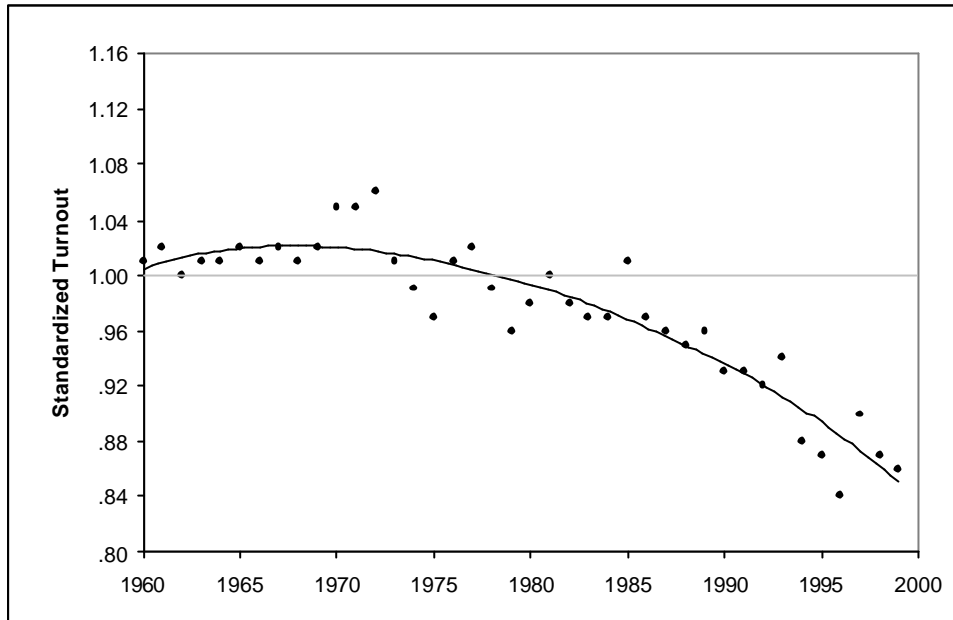
	First Two 1960s Elections	Two Most Recent Elections*	Percentage Change
Switzerland	53.4	35.3	-33.9%
Canada	74.2	54.8	-26.2%
United States	62.4	50.1	-19.7%
Netherlands	90.1	72.7	-19.3%
Finland	85.3	69.3	-18.8%
United Kingdom	74.5	62.4	-16.2%
Austria	90.1	75.7	-16.0%
Japan	70.0	61.2	-12.6%
Germany	83.9	73.8	-12.0%
France	66.0	60.6	-8.2%
New Zealand	83.3	77.1	-7.4%
Norway	81.4	75.7	-7.0%
Italy	94.2	89.1	-5.4%
Denmark	85.4	82.4	-3.5%
Ireland	72.7	70.2	-3.4%
Sweden	81.9	80.7	-1.5%

Notes: Turnout rates are calculated based on the percentage of the voting age population. With the exception of the United States, where presidential elections are used, all elections are for the lower House of the legislature.

The Netherlands practiced compulsory voting in the 1960s, but abolished this requirement after the 1967 election. Italy has long had a compulsory voting law, but it has not been enforced. See http://www.idea.int/voter_turnout/Compulsory_Voting.htm for further information on the practice of compulsory voting around the world.

***As of June 2001.**

Figure 3 Turnout Decline in OECD-Member Countries Without Compulsory Voting in Recent Years



Note: Entries represent a three year moving average of standardized turnout numbers, with the average turnout in the first two elections of the 1950s serving as a baseline for each country.

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Endnotes

This research was supported by a grant to Dalton from the German Marshall Fund of the United States and to Dalton and Wattenberg from the Center for German and European Studies, University of California, Berkeley. We want to thank a number of colleagues for assisting us with the collection of national data series and providing advice on this paper: Clive Bean, Harold Clarke, Olafur Th. Hardarsson, Sören Holmberg, Michael Lewis-Beck, Helmut Prochart, Bradley Richardson, Risto Sänkiäho, Kaare Ström, and Peter Ulram. Mark Gray provided valuable assistance with the empirical data in this paper. Portions of this research also appears in Dalton and Wattenberg (2000).

-
1. Just as the media have assumed an information role, a myriad of special-interest groups and single-issue lobbies have assumed some of the parties' roles in representing public interests. These groups can work with political parties as has been the past pattern of labor, business and other economic interest groups. However, public interest groups and single-issue groups often press their interests without relying on partisan channels.
 2. Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) are sensitive to these points and discuss them in the methodological appendix, but these important issues are not considered within the text of their analyses and do not seem to influence their conclusions.
 3. In practical terms, this means using national election survey data instead of the Eurobarometers for several European nations. The greatest problem in Eurobarometer time series analysis is a change in the party identification question across surveys (e.g., Katz 1985; Schmitt 1989). By using national election studies this problem is minimized, though not completely resolved. Most of the national election studies also have a longer time series than the Eurobarometers. For comparison, we update the Schmitt/Holmberg Eurobarometer results for these nations in footnote 7.
 4. Data for an additional set of advanced industrial democracies (Australia, Canada, Japan and New Zealand) are available in Dalton and Wattenberg (2000). Each of these additional nations also follows a dealignment trend. The nations in Table 1 use different questions to tap partisan attachments, and therefore the statistics in the table should not be used to directly compare the level and rates of change in partisanship across nations.
 - 5.

-
5. There are a series of Swiss national surveys, but the format of the partisanship question changes over time and thus limits comparability (Nabholz 1998; Longchamp 1991). The empirical evidence for France is, perhaps, in greatest dispute. Changes in the format of the partisanship question have produced widely differing results (see Pierce 1995: ch. 3; Haegel 1993). If one attempts to synthesize these conflicting pieces of evidence, it appears that partisanship strengthened during the initial years of the Fifth Republic, and then has eroded over the past two decades. But because of the changes in question wording in the national election surveys, we have used the Eurobarometer data for France.
6. Schmitt and Holmberg follow a common methodology of computing statistical significance based only on the number of survey timepoints. We follow their methodology to be consistent in replicating their analysts. An alternative approach is to pool survey and used the combined samples to estimate whether changes are statistically significant over time (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 62-63). Obviously, such pooled results more easily yield significant trends; when differences between timepoints average 3 or 5 percent this is statistically significant ($p < .05$) with large sample surveys.
7. For comparative purposes, we updated the Eurobarometer results presented in Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) to include 1993-96 timepoints. Below we present the results (unstandardized b) for overall party identification and strong identifiers for the Eurobarometer nations in Table 1 that were based on national election study.
- | <u>Nation</u> | <u>% ID</u> | <u>Strong ID</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Britain (1978-96) | -.583 | .111 |
| Denmark (1976-96) | -.094 | -.093 |
| Germany (1975-96) | -.666 | -.400 |
| Netherlands (1975-96) | .004 | -.358 |
8. The volatility index is calculated as the total percentage point gains for all the parties between the two adjacent elections, divided by 2 (see Pederson 1979).
- 9.
10. Bartolini and Mair (1990) have pointed out that volatility was greater in the interwar period than during the more stable years of the postwar era. While we do not dispute this finding, it does not address our basic question of whether party systems have changed from their postwar patterns. In

addition, we believe that Bartolini and Mair's calculation of "inter-bloc" volatility significantly underestimates the degree of historical and contemporary electoral change.

11.

12. The simple linear regression shows a positive slope over time, and the R squared (.245) is close to the value of the curvilinear model presented in Figure 2.

13.

14. There are considerable difficulties in calculating exactly comparable change statistics using recall data, and the statistics in Table 2 should therefore be considered as approximate trends. Besides the fallibility of voters' memories, various methodological factors affect recall consistency. For instance, some surveys ask for current and present vote in the same survey wave whereas others ask for previous vote in the pre-election survey and current vote in the post-election study. Again, however, these methodological artifacts are unlikely to vary systematically over time and thus produce the general trends we observe.

15.

12. One should not compare the absolute levels across nations because different timelags are involved in each case. For example, the American surveys normally span 2 years; the German panels are pre-post election surveys of a few months duration. We focus on comparisons across panels of relatively equal time duration within each nation. We do this because there is a general pattern for partisan consistency to decrease over longer timeperiods, presumably because more exogenous factors change shift party preferences. Thus, a four-year panel would show greater partisan change than a two-year panel, all else being equal.

13.

14. One distinct feature of the German statistics is that they are based on a large sample of actual ballots analyzed by the election office, and not public opinion survey results. Unfortunately, this practice ended in 1990 because of concerns about voter confidentiality. Schoen (2000) has extended this series using other data sources.

15.