

### 3 Party identification revisited

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#### Introduction

The concept of party identification has been a matter of dispute ever since it was first introduced by a team of US scholars based at the University of Michigan in the 1950s (Belknap and Campbell 1952; Campbell *et al.* 1954, 1960).<sup>1</sup> These debates are wide-ranging but essentially boil down to four major issues. The first relates to the nature of party identification: what is this concept exactly? The second concerns the sources of party identification and its stability: how does it develop? The third is strongly related to both these issues: how should party identification be measured? The fourth and final question relates to applicability of the concept outside the United States: is it useful in parliamentary systems, such as those of Western Europe, or only relevant in the country in which it was developed?

We start this chapter with a brief discussion of the nature of party identification and its measurement. Our eventual focus, however, is the usefulness of the concept in cross-national research. This is an issue that was addressed in *Party Identification and Beyond*, over thirty years ago (Budge *et al.* 1976). One of the present authors participated in this discussion and showed that, in the Netherlands at least, party identification was hardly distinguishable from vote. Indeed, measured party identification was found to be *less* stable than vote choice in the 1970s (Thomassen 1976). This led several authors to speculate that these findings might be due to the 'nature of the times' in the Netherlands rather than the inherent limitations of the concept (Miller 1976; Barnes 1990). Accordingly, we take this opportunity to replicate these earlier analyses with data now spanning a much longer time period than in the original analysis and see if these earlier conclusions still hold.

A key problem with the Michigan approach to partisanship in the Netherlands is that party identification and vote choice are so strongly correlated that they can hardly be distinguished from each other. Why this is the case, is a matter of intense dispute among scholars. Most of the reasons put forward to explain this close association apply not only to the Netherlands but to most countries across Western Europe. In this chapter, therefore, we also use comparative evidence from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems

(CSES) to examine whether it is possible to distinguish between party identification and vote choice in Western European parliamentary systems.

#### The nature of party identification

Party identification was originally defined as 'the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels towards the [party] of his choice' (Campbell *et al.* 1954: 88–9; see also Campbell *et al.* 1960). In these early studies the concept clearly refers to an enduring psychological identification or what others called a 'partisan self-image' (Butler and Stokes 1969). This concept was derived from reference and small group theory, which posited that one's sense of self may include a feeling of personal identity with a secondary group such as a political party (Miller and Shanks 1996: 120). Miller and Shanks provide a description that leaves little room for misunderstanding:

In seeking to describe the nature of party identification without direct reference to politics, it is sometimes helpful to turn to the example of religion as a comparison that is much more than an analogy. Party affiliation, like religious affiliation, often originates within the family, where it is established as a matter of early socialisation into the family norms. In addition to the primary group experience, however, the maturing child has a clear sense of belonging to a larger body of adherents or co-religionists. The sense of self in the religious context is clearly established by the sense of 'We are Roman Catholic', 'I am a Jew', in politics, 'We are Democrats' or 'I am a Republican'.

(1996: 120)

In this description party identification is clearly something that is relatively – if not quite fully – exogenous to the specific short-term policy preferences and evaluations influencing the vote choice. Miller and Shanks (1996) argue that the idea that in the Michigan view party identification, once formed, was unaffected by political experiences is a caricature. Even in the Michigan view party identification could change in the 'long haul'. The conceptualization is, however, closer to the revisionists' caricature of this orthodoxy than to:

The extreme revisionist view [...] that, in contrast, party identification is simply another political attitude, susceptible to influence and change by short-term phenomena, thoroughly endogenous to explanations of electoral behaviour. In this revisionist view party identification is primarily the consequence of the assemblage of issue or policy preferences held by the voter prior to voting.

(Miller and Shanks 1996: 130)

The most influential reconceptualization of the role of party identification in the shaping of the voter's choice between candidates was developed in

Fiorina's study *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (1981). In this book Fiorina introduced the famous metaphor of a 'running tally' of retrospective evaluations. He argued that 'a citizen's ID [party identification] waxes and wanes in accord with his/her perception of societal conditions, political events, and the performance of incumbent officeholders' (Fiorina 1981: 102). In his model party identification is simply:

... the difference between an individual's past political experiences with the two parties, perturbed by a factor,  $y$ , that represents effects not included directly in an individual's political experiences (e.g. parents' ID).

(Fiorina 1981: 89)

Fiorina's formulation constitutes a thorough-going reconceptualization of the concept. If party identification is merely a running tally of retrospective evaluations, then it is hard to see how this results in an enduring psychological identification between self and party (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Butler and Stokes 1969) or between self and fellow partisans of any significance (Green *et al.* 2002). Moreover, the revised concept seems to be more the product of cognition rather than affect. Fiorina's re-conceptualization is, therefore, more rooted in rational choice than reference group theory. This revision has consequences for the measurement of party identification that we discuss in the next section.

Fiorina's quasi-rational choice reconceptualization jeopardizes one of the most powerful analytical methods derived from the original conceptualization of party identification, so-called 'normal vote' analysis (Converse 1966). Party identification, as originally conceptualized, constituted a baseline or a kind of standing predisposition to vote for the candidate of a particular party. Once this is established it is possible to identify and explain deviations from it. Short term factors such as candidate evaluations and the candidates' or parties' stand on specific issues can lead people decide to vote for a different party than the one they identify with. Election outcomes can accordingly be viewed as the product of both the normal vote and deviations from it resulting from short-term forces, such as policy disagreement, differential evaluations of the parties' records, or assessments of candidate characteristics. Clearly, the elegance of this method is brought into question if it turns out that party identification itself is influenced by the very same variables that are supposed to explain deviations from it. The distinction between long-term and short-term factors is blurred. Indeed, it arguably becomes a distinction without a difference.

### The problem of measurement

In the American National Election Studies party identification has traditionally been measured by the following series of questions.

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent or what?

Would you call yourself a strong Republican (Democrat) or a not very strong Republican (Democrat)?

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

Answers to these questions can be used to generate a seven-point scale incorporating strong Democrats, weak Democrats, Independents leaning toward the Democrats, Independents not leaning toward a party, Independents leaning toward the Republicans, weak Republicans, and strong Republicans (see Figure 1.1).

The question 'Do you think of yourself as a Republican' is a fairly straightforward operationalization of the psychological identity, since it refers to an identity ('think of yourself') and twice makes reference to the enduring nature of that identity ('generally speaking' and 'usually') (Converse and Pierce 1985). The follow-up question 'Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?' is, however, somewhat more problematic (cf. Miller 1991). This question does not contain a clear temporal dimension (except, just possibly, by implication from the previous question) and also uses a spatial term ('closer') rather than identity ('think of oneself as'). These limitations have not prevented the authors of other surveys from taking their lead from this second question. Indeed, comparative research often uses the language of 'closeness' in measures of party identification. While this facilitates comparative research on partisanship, the resulting measures appear to speak more to rational choice than social-psychological theories.

It has never been easy to develop a functionally equivalent measure of party identification outside the US, because party systems are generally much more complex. In the US it seems eminently sensible to ask directly about the two major parties (Republican and Democrat), since both history and the plurality electoral system have produced a stable two party system. When there are more than two relevant parties, however, as is the case in almost every other country, this way of thinking becomes problematic. Three-party or indeed multi-party politics makes it increasingly difficult to mention the names of the parties in the question wording. Yet if the parties are not mentioned by name a lower portion report identifies with those unnamed parties (Johnson 1992; Norris 2004). Moreover, one may doubt whether one can in fact measure the sense of 'I am a Republican' without the use of the word 'Republican' or a reference to the Republican Party. This, however, is precisely the problem faced by those who wished to employ the concept of party identification across the Atlantic.

In several European studies a serious attempt was made to develop an alternative valid measurement of the concept. In Dutch election studies, for instance, respondents have been asked:

Many people think of themselves as an adherent to a particular political 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? (To which party?)

Would you call yourself a convinced adherent to this party, or do you not consider yourself to be a convinced adherent?

Is there a party to which you feel more attracted than to other parties? (To which party?)

There have been similar attempts to find functional equivalents of the US party identification battery in several other countries (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995; Weisberg 1999).

One recurring problem is that responses to these questions cannot be transformed into a single ordinal scale, as in the US. This approach is only possible in a two-party system. The straightforward solution for three-party and multi-party systems is to distinguish between two components – direction and strength of identification – and abandon the one-dimensional assumption that underlies the US approach. In the Dutch case, the strength component comprises four categories: 'convinced adherent', 'not convinced adherent', 'attracted' and 'no identification'. The directional component indicates which party voters adhere to irrespective of the strength of identification.

A more fundamental matter is whether affirmative answers to the questions employed in European election studies signify the sense of attachment that those scholars from Michigan defined as party identification. Although the Dutch question does not explicitly include words prompting an extended time horizon, the notion of an adherent appears to differ from malleable evaluations or preferences. An analogy that easily comes to mind when in Dutch speaking of an adherent, apart from religion, is that of feeling attached to one's favourite sports team – in the Netherlands this would most likely involve soccer. Although such an attachment may not be as stable and central to one's self as a religious identification, many would presumably confirm that defining oneself as an adherent (or supporter) of a particular sports team is basically a long-term psychological disposition rather than something 'of the day'.

Furthermore, the notion of thinking of oneself as an adherent to a party seems to link up well with the notion of a 'partisan self-image'. The same cannot be said about the Dutch follow-up question. Being 'attracted' to a party is at best a weaker form of attachment. So if one needs to distinguish between identifiers and non-identifiers, the root question appears to be the appropriate measure. Yet whether this question really captures the psychological sense of identity as meant in the original concept remains a matter of dispute. But it does at least try to catch this basic sense of 'we feeling' (Miller and Shanks 1996).

Other operationalizations of party identification, such as that in *Political Action* (see Barnes 1990) and the CSES, do not capture a sense of identification at all. In the CSES the question wording is:

Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party?

(What party is that?)

Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than the others?

(Which party is that?)

Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?

The use of the word 'usually' in the first question may capture the enduring nature of the attachment, but the whole question is worded in terms of 'closeness' and again appears to be based on the spatial analogy used in proximity models that are rooted in rational choice theory (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Merrill and Grofman 1999). It is unclear why operationalizations of the concept have moved in this direction, but it seems fair to suggest that they are much closer to Fiorina's revisionism than to the original concept. To what extent these differences in question wording lead to different answers, is hard to tell.

#### **Party identification in comparative research: the special case of the Netherlands**

As many European election studies were initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks to the missionary work of scholars from Michigan, the concept of party identification originally was enthusiastically embraced (Campbell and Valen 1961; Butler and Stokes 1969). Yet once European scholars started to analyse the data several became more sceptical (Crewe 1976; Kaase 1976). The largest problems were in the Netherlands, where one of the present authors came to the conclusion that

- 1 Reported party identification is *less* stable than vote choice.
- 2 Any empirical distinction between party identification and vote preference could simply be a result of the unreliability of the measure of the same latent variable.
- 3 Party identification did not appear to be causally prior to vote (Thomassen 1976: 77).

The problems in the Netherlands were so acute that several authors tried to find an explanation. Warren Miller suggested:

Given the dramatic rate of change in depillarisation and deontofessionalisation noted by Thomassen at the end of his paper, and given the fluidity of the Dutch party system at the elite level of organising new parties and joining the electoral contest, it is more than a cliché to suggest that further research should follow. . . . it seems reasonable to expect that the Dutch study may do much to elaborate our understanding of the

special case of group identification that we know as political party identification. It is equally likely that the elaboration will increase our general understanding of Dutch political institutions, their place in the social and economic structure of Dutch society and their points of similarity and dissimilarity with the political institutions of other Western democracies.

(1976: 26–7)

In a similar vein Barnes commented that

The observation of Thomassen (1976) that the vote is more stable than identification fits a period in which the vote often changes before the identification, so that measures at two points in time could easily show stable votes and changing identification. If, as generally assumed, it is easier to change vote than identification, the former should change first. Hence greater change in the latter should represent bringing it into line with the former in a period of realignment, in which some respondents are bringing identifications into line with previous votes while others continue to vote for parties with which they refuse to identify.

(1990: 265)

If these references to realignment have any validity then we should expect the Netherlands to have become more similar to other countries, unless one would argue that Dutch politics is in a permanent state of flux. Thus, in order to test these explanations, we replicate the analyses undertaken in the 1970s with data that now spans a much longer time period. If the realignment thesis with data that now spans a much longer time period. If the realignment thesis accounts for the original findings, we expect to see that (a) the number of voters who identify with a particular party has risen and (b) party identification has become more stable than vote choice. Accordingly we examine both these issues using cross-sectional as well as panel data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies that cover the period from 1971 until 2006.

In the early 1970s only a minority of Dutch voters responded that they thought of themselves as adherents of a party. To facilitate discussion of the data, we will label this sense of attachment as ‘strong identification’. These figures drew much comment at the time because they sharply contrasted with the US findings, where sizeable majorities considered themselves a Democrat or a Republican, as well as several European findings, such as Britain, where around 90 per cent appeared to have a ‘partisan self-image’ (Butler and Stokes 1969: 57). Yet Figure 3.1, which displays responses to the Dutch party identification battery, indicates that in the years that have elapsed levels of party identification have been rather stable, varying only within a narrow range between 30 to 40 per cent. If we also take into consideration those voters who say that they are at least attracted to a particular political party – who we label ‘weak identifiers’ – the pattern is much the same.<sup>2</sup> All in all, therefore, Figure 3.1 provides compelling evidence of three decades of

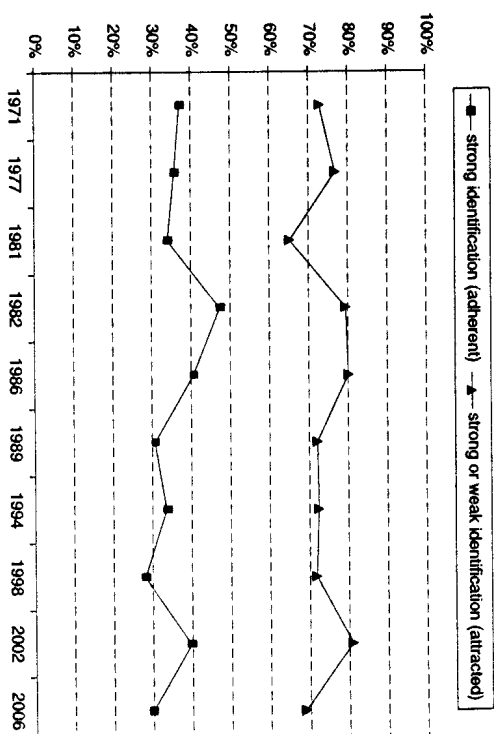


Figure 3.1 Strength of party identification in the Netherlands, 1971–2006.

Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, 1971–2006 (cross-sectional surveys)

trendless fluctuation. Somewhere between 70 and 80 per cent of Dutch electors have expressed some form of attachment to the parties in the last thirty years. These findings may come as a surprise, not only to those who expected the Netherlands to then be undergoing a party realignment but also to those who expect a ‘decline of parties’ (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Both these propositions are simply not supported by the data.

In order to analyse the temporal stability of party identification and vote choice, we now examine four panel surveys that cover the last three decades of the previous century. The key finding from our initial study was that in the early 1970s party identification was *less* stable than vote choice. Table 3.1 shows that this pattern has persisted ever since. In each period, the proportion of voters who changed reported identification while voting for the same party (third row) exceeds the proportion of voters who changed their vote choice while reporting the same identification with the same party (second row). Reported party identification has, it appears, remained *less* stable than vote choice. This implies that, in the Netherlands at least, it makes little sense to view electoral choice as the product of a stable long-term partisan predisposition and short-term election-specific forces.

The next issue concerns the relationship between party identification and vote choice. In our original analysis in the 1970s, more than 90 per cent of party identifiers voted for the same party in pairs of elections. Those people who identified more strongly with a political party, moreover, were even more loyal than this. Table 3.2 shows that this pattern has persisted too. Among voters who strongly identified with a party, that is, those who considered

Table 3.1 Stability of party identification and vote choice in the Netherlands, 1971-98

	1971-2	1981-2	1982-6	1994-8
Stable party identification, stable vote	46	54	64	47
Stable party identification, unstable vote	6	7	7	11
Unstable party identification, stable vote	28	24	11	18
Unstable party identification, unstable vote	20	16	18	24
Total (N)	100 (788)	100 (1040)	100 (581)	100 (741)

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of respondents fitting each category.

Source: Dutch Election Studies 1970-1973, Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies 1981-1986 and 1994-1998 (panel surveys)

Table 3.2 Consistency between party identification and vote preference, controlled for strength of identification, 1971-98

	1971	1972	1981	1982	1986	1994	1998	mean
Strong identifiers (adherent)	0.96	0.93	0.94	0.96	0.95	0.97	0.96	0.95
Weak identifiers (attracted)	0.87	0.86	0.89	0.90	0.92	0.90	0.87	0.89

Note: Entries indicate the proportion of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party; entries for 1981 and 1994 concern pre-election party identification and voting intention; other entries concern post-election party identification and recalled voting behaviour.

Source: Dutch Election Study 1970-1973, Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies 1981-1986 and 1994-1998 (panel surveys)

themselves an adherent, about 95 per cent voted for 'their' party. Among those who said they were not an adherent but felt attracted to a party the corresponding figures are only slightly less: approximately 90 per cent.

Further evidence for the instability of party identification in relation to vote choice in the Netherlands can be obtained by replicating the latter analyses but replacing *current* with *past* identification. In US elections voters' electoral choices are strongly influenced by party identification, though - to be sure - a substantial minority deviate from this predisposition ostensibly as a result of short-term factors. Indeed, in the US past party identification (measured one, two or even four years before) is almost as strongly predictive of vote as current party identification (Miller and Shanks 1996: 496). The findings to date, however, lead to the expectation that in the Netherlands the situation will prove to be somewhat different. This expectation is confirmed handsomely in a direct test. Substituting current party identification with identification at the previous election reduces the proportion who voted in line with their identification (see Table 3.3). Among strong identifiers the mean correct prediction drops from 95 to 84 per cent, while among

Table 3.3 Consistency between vote preference and party identification at the previous election, controlled for strength of identification, 1972-98

	1972	1982	1986	1998	mean
Strong identifiers (adherent)	0.83	0.85	0.85	0.81	0.84
Weak identifiers (attracted)	0.66	0.60	0.68	0.51	0.61

Note: Entries indicate the proportion of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party.

Source: Dutch Election Study 1970-1973, Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies 1981-1986 and 1994-1998 (panel surveys)

weak identifiers the mean drops from 89 to 61 per cent. So, in both groups the number of those whose vote deviates from their party identification trebles.

The final issue to be addressed concerns the causal direction of the relationship between party identification and vote preference. Our original conclusion was that party identification was *not* causally prior to vote choice. The basis for this conclusion was that correlations between past party identification and current vote choice were weaker than correlations between past vote choice and current party identification. The original analyses included panel data on vote choice and party identification for three time points. We are unable to replicate these methods fully, since later surveys were restricted to just two waves. But we can still examine whether the patterns in the party identification-vote correlations across two time points are consistent with our earlier conclusion that party identification is *not* causally prior to vote choice.

If party identification is prior to the vote, as the original theory postulates, party identification at time  $t_1$  can be considered the causal determinant of vote choice at time  $t$ . Hence, this correlation should be relatively strong. If, however, vote choice is prior to party identification, the correlation between vote choice at time  $t_1$  and party identification at time  $t$  should be relatively strong, as these are causally linked. Because our analyses suggest that in the Netherlands party identification is not prior to vote choice, the resulting overall expectation is that in the Netherlands the correlation between party identification at time  $t_1$  and vote choice at time  $t$  (reported in Table 3.3) is not stronger than the correlation between vote choice at time  $t_1$  and party identification at time  $t$ . The latter are reported in Table 3.4.

Because party identification and vote choice mostly travel together, differences between those correlations are by definition somewhat limited. To the extent that they exist, the patterns in 1982 and 1998 suggest that vote preference is the prior variable (coefficients in Table 3.4 are somewhat larger than the corresponding coefficients in Table 3.3). In 1972 and 1986 the differences are in the opposite direction, but smaller, if at all present. Yet the pattern in those years is more consistent with what we should expect on the basis of party identification theory. So with respect to the causal direction the empirical

Table 3.4 Consistency between party identification and vote preference at the previous election, controlled for strength of identification, 1972–98

	1972	1982	1986	1998	mean
Strong identifiers (adherent)	0.82	0.90	0.85	0.84	0.85
Weak identifiers (attracted)	0.62	0.71	0.67	0.58	0.65

Note: Entries indicate the proportion of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party.

Source: Dutch Election Study 1970–1973, Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies 1981–1986 and 1994–1998 (panel surveys)

findings are inconclusive. To the extent that the results reveal any pattern, they support the conclusion that in the Netherlands party identification is not prior to vote choice. This suggests that, in the Netherlands at least, the impact of party identification on vote choice does not conform to the original theory as developed in the US – unless one would pursue the unrealistic argument that in the early 1980s as well as in the late 1990s yet another period of realignment was taking place.

The analyses presented here span a much longer time period and appear to confirm all the earlier conclusions (Thomassen 1976). First, in the Netherlands party identification has been less stable than vote preference. Second, party identification as measured in Dutch election surveys strongly correlates with vote preference. And third, in so far as it is possible to distinguish between the two variables, party identification is not causally prior to vote choice.

The latter finding suggests that party identification as measured in the Netherlands cannot be conceived of as a stable predisposition that is acquired early in life through family socialization and which is resistant to change. Party identification is apparently not based on socialization but on electoral behaviour. This finding links up well with self-perception theory, which posits that individuals ‘deduce’ their attitudes from perceptions of their own behaviour (Bem 1967, 1972). Similarly, voters apparently deduce their party identification (or ‘partisan self-image’) from their voting record. It may be a simple case, as Grofman remarks elsewhere in this volume, that ‘I am what I vote’.

The strong correlation between party identification and vote choice should not obscure the fact that at times both do not coincide. We have previously suggested that such inconsistencies might result from unreliability of measurement (Thomassen 1976). This may partially explain our findings. Yet theoretical reasons for discrepancies between party identification and vote choice cannot be excluded. It is possible that voters identify with a particular political party, but nevertheless prefer to vote for another party. The prime example is strategic voting. Electoral researchers have long neglected the impact of strategic considerations in proportional electoral systems, but

recent studies have shown that in such systems people vote strategically too (Rosema 2006). Small parties in particular suffer from this, as their identifiers are tempted to vote for a larger party that has a better chance of getting into government. This may also explain why vote choice is more stable than party identification in the Netherlands: voters whose party identification shifts between a small and a large party in the same region of the ideological spectrum may in both instances prefer to vote for the same large party.

#### Party identification in a European context: non-existent or analytically useless?

In the previous section we confirmed earlier findings that, in the Netherlands at least, party identification and party vote tend to coincide and, furthermore, to the extent that they do not, reported party identification is less stable than vote choice. Accordingly, ‘normal vote analysis’ is not useful in the Dutch context. There are good reasons for believing that this applies to other Western European countries too.

The reason for this contrasting state of affairs between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ world has been a matter of dispute (Berglund *et al.* 2005). One interpretation is that in the European context party identification does not really exist at all. This maintains that the measurement of party identification reflects little more than party preference at a particular point in time (Brynn and Sanders 1997). Advocates of *functional explanations* insist party identification has never really developed in most European countries because it is less functional to European than US voters (Shively 1979). Party identification is viewed as a cost saving device that provides people with a short cut to all kinds of decisions, including the decision for which party or candidate to vote. It is argued that European voters did not need party identification as a cost saving device, because that function was already fulfilled by people’s group ties to a social class or religion, which in turn were strongly associated with a particular party.

Warren Miller provided an excellent summary of this argument in his contribution to *Party Identification and Beyond*.

Although there is little in the way of direct tests of the proposition, it may well be that one of the differences between the socialising experiences in the United States and in many Western European countries is to be found in the different location of the political party in the social structure of the national society and, therefore, in the social environment of the average citizen. As has been noted by many scholars, the political party in the European context is often derivative of a prior social or economic grouping. Thus, the labour union or the Church may be the historical locus of a political party and at the same time the immediate primary group attachment for the individual. As a consequence, any sense of preference for the group’s party may be derived only from the

primary sense of belonging to the group. If the primary group thereby mediates between the individual and the group's party, any direct sense of identification with party may indeed be severely limited.

(1976: 27)

According to this interpretation party identification simply does not exist in countries where political parties are so strongly embedded in the social structure. It is either a reflection of social identities or their party preference at a particular point in time. This generalization may account for the findings in the Netherlands. The traditional parties were deeply rooted in the social structure of Dutch society. Identification with political parties was for most people indirect. For a Catholic voting for the Catholic party was only natural and part of his or her socialization process. As far as group identification was important in this process, the identification was probably more with the Catholic sub-culture and much less identification with the associated political party *per se* (Thomassen 1976: 78).

However, this sort of functional explanation is not generally accepted. An alternative interpretation of the strong correlation between party identification and vote choice maintains that party identification is not *less* but *more* powerful in Europe than it is in the United States. In European parliamentary systems political parties and not individual politicians are the principal actors mediating between voters and governmental institutions, leaving little leeway for individual candidates to run their own campaign and offering few incentives for voters to deviate from their party preference in favour of a candidate from another party. This is quite different from US politics and presidential elections, in particular, where policy stands and characteristics of the candidates have an influence over and above the party label. In a parliamentary democracy with its indirect election of the head of government a split party identification and the actual vote is less likely. It is quite understandable that European voters' choices seldom deviate from their reported party identification. This does not prove that party identification is not important. On the contrary, it is so important that it dominates all other considerations. Although this interpretation is totally different, it leads to the same conclusion with regard to the analytical utility of the concept of party identification. If there is hardly a difference between party identification and vote choice, the analytical usefulness of the directional component of the concept is quite limited (Holmberg 1994).

Whether the first or second interpretation is valid, in both instances one expects the patterns observed in the Netherlands to be also present in other established parliamentary systems in Western Europe. This can be tested using data drawn from Module 1 of the CSES. This project combines data from a wide range of national election studies and operationalizes partisanship in terms of 'closeness'. A fundamental question here is whether those questions do indeed tap a genuine identification. For the sake of argument, we presume here that they do. We classify voters as identifiers on the basis of

the follow-up question that asked whether they are very close, somewhat close, or not very close to their favourite party. This question was only asked if voters said they were close to a political party or responded that they were a little closer to one of the parties than the others. We assume that voters are identifiers if they are either very close or somewhat close. On the basis of those categories we further distinguish between strong identification and weak identification.<sup>3</sup> If voters say they are closer to one party than another but say they are not very close, we consider them to 'lean' towards that party. We limit our analysis to countries in the data-set that have a relatively long history of continuous democratic politics, as this is a prerequisite for the development of party identification as originally conceptualized. Hence, the young democracies in Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal) and even younger democracies in Eastern Europe are not included. The remaining countries in the CSES dataset are the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, and four Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

In these countries roughly between 40 and 60 per cent of the respondents appeared to identify either strongly or weakly with a political party (Figure 3.2).<sup>4</sup> Because the Dutch findings in the preceding section were based on different question wordings, it is difficult to compare identification in the Netherlands with these additional countries.<sup>5</sup> The key finding is, however, that like in the Netherlands substantial proportions of the electorate identify with a political party, albeit often weakly. This is an important finding because if few voters would identify at all, then the whole concept would become rather meaningless.

At least as interesting as the strength of party identification, is the correlation between party identification and vote choice. The findings indicate that the Netherlands is certainly not unique (Table 3.5). Without exception, in all countries party identification and vote choice were strongly correlated. The overall pattern is strikingly similar to the findings concerning the Netherlands, albeit the correlations are slightly weaker. Among strong identifiers between 84 and 95 per cent voted consistent with their identification, whereas among weak identifiers the corresponding figure varied between 80 and 92 per cent. In Denmark the correlations are even slightly stronger than in the Netherlands. In three other cases, the correlations are only slightly weaker: Sweden, Norway, and Britain. So when it comes to the strong correlation between party identification and vote choice, there seems little reason to speak of the Netherlands as a special case. Several other established democracies in Europe display virtually identical correlations.

### Summary and conclusion: party identification revisited

In this chapter we revisited the debate on the usefulness of the concept of party identification in cross-national research, which started more than thirty years ago. In our earlier work we showed that, at least in the Netherlands, party identification was empirically hardly discernible from the vote, whereas

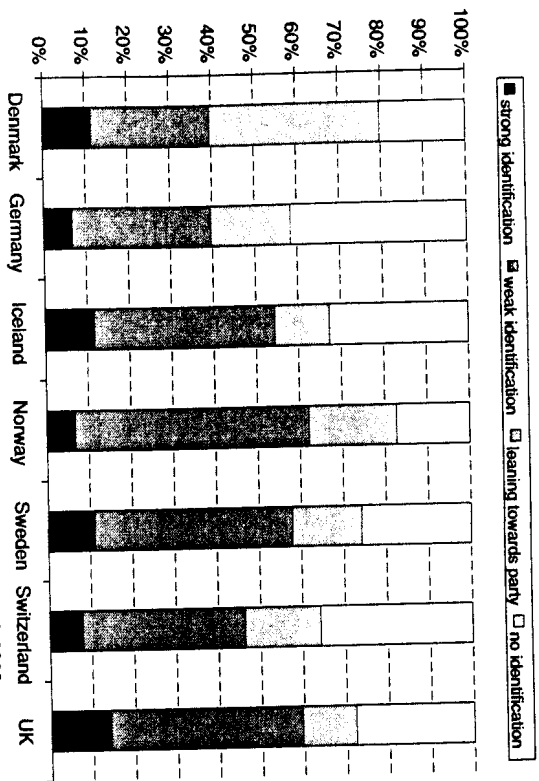


Figure 3.2 Strength of party identification in Western Europe, 1996-2002.  
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module 1)

party identification was less stable than vote choice (Thomassen 1976). As several authors argued that these findings might be due to the nature of the times in the Netherlands, we replicated these analyses with data spanning a much longer period of time than the original analysis. These analyses largely confirm our original findings and suggest that there is no reason to revise our original conclusion. Party identification seems to be less stable than vote choice and there is reason to believe that party identification as measured by the traditional questions is not much more than a reflection of people's current preference. Thus, the usefulness of the concept of party identification in the Netherlands is as doubtful today as it was in the 1970s.

The key problem with the use of party identification in parliamentary systems is that party identification and vote choice are so strongly correlated, that they can hardly be distinguished. Why this is the case, is a matter of dispute. Yet all this does not necessarily mean that party identification has no meaning. One of the interpretations of this strong correlation is that this is due to the institutional context. In a parliamentary system parties are so dominant that there is hardly an incentive for people to deviate from their party identification; this in contrast to the presidential elections in a presidential system, where the personal characteristics of the candidates might create an incentive to deviate from one's identification. This led us to expect that in other European parliamentary systems similar patterns can be observed as in the Netherlands. Our analyses of the CSES data show that this is indeed the case. In several other established democracies in Europe measured party

Table 3.5 Consistency between party identification and vote preference in Western European parliamentary elections, controlling for strength of identification, 1996-2002

	Denmark	Germany	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
Strong identification (N)	0.96 (227)	0.84 (128)	0.89 (180)	0.95 (131)	0.94 (124)	0.90 (145)	0.93 (223)
Weak identification (N)	0.92 (551)	0.80 (639)	0.87 (618)	0.86 (986)	0.89 (497)	0.88 (598)	0.87 (540)

Note: Entries indicate the proportion of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party.

Source: CSES, module 1

identification and vote choice could hardly be distinguished either. The concept is meaningful in the candidate-centred politics of US elections, but not in the party-centred elections in Europe's established parliamentary democracies.

These findings shed another light on the findings in the Netherlands in the 1970s (Thomassen 1976) then suggested by several scholars, who argued that those findings were typical for the situation in the Netherlands in that period (Miller 1976; Barnes 1990). Not only do the analyses presented in this chapter suggest that the particularities of party identification in the Netherlands have persisted, but the cross-national analyses suggest that those particularities apply to several other established parliamentary democracies as well. This is not to say that party identification and the vote always travel together. In the German elections, for example, 16 per cent cast their vote for another party than the one they identified with (see Table 3.5). So there can be elections in which voters deviate from their party identification. But the fact that more often than not the correlation between party identification and vote choice approaches the highest possible value, implies that in general they are 'too close for comfort'.

What are the implications of these findings for electoral research? There are at least two avenues for future research, which we hope will be pursued. First, there is the issue of measurement. Ever since the introduction of the party identification concept in European electoral research, scholars have struggled with finding appropriate question wordings. The questions adopted in the CSES underline the fact that a couple of decades of research have not resolved this issue. It must be doubted whether current measures tap the kind of identification that the concept (as originally defined) refers to. Scholars should recognize that the concept refers to a person's identification or self-image, rather than any other kind of perception or psychological attachment. It is vitally important to develop, test, and apply multiple-item measures that are grounded in social identity theory in the European context (see Greene 2002). The proposition that people identify with a party implies that they think of fellow 'partisans' in terms of 'us', that they feel good if 'their' party does well in an opinion poll or an election, and that they feel personally offended if 'their' party receives criticism (see also Green *et al.* 2002). All such things can, in principle, be measured with appropriately designed questionnaires. Attempting to do this may well prove to be a more fruitful strategy than keep on searching for an appropriate European equivalent of 'I am a Republican'.

The second issue relates to the conceptualization of partisanship. The original conceptualization by Campbell *et al.* (1954, 1960) was grounded in social identity research. The re-conceptualization by the revisionists adopted the same terminology (party *identification*), but presented a very different view on the dynamics of this identification related to rational choice research (Fiorina 1981; Erikson *et al.* 2002). More recently, several scholars have emphasized that partisanship may also be conceptualized in yet another way,

namely in terms of attitudes. The introductory chapter by Bellucci and Bartle in this volume thus contrasts the identity approach with the attitudinal approach. The latter approach has already been found useful in the European context. One of the present authors demonstrated that if partisanship is conceptualized and operationalized in that way (using feeling thermometer scores), partisanship and vote choice can be meaningfully distinguished even in the Netherlands (Rosema 2006). In four parliamentary elections, which were held between 1986 and 2002, up to 14 per cent of the respondents preferred to vote for another party than the party they evaluated most highly. Additional analyses indicated that the discrepancies could partly be attributed to effects of party leaders and strategic considerations concerning the future government coalition. So it may be more fruitful to develop different conceptualizations of partisanship and examine which is most useful in which circumstances, than to debate what the 'true' nature of party identification is.<sup>6</sup> But it must be made clear that what we are talking about is something different than *party identification*. Let us reserve that term for the concept that was developed and has proven very valuable in the US.

## Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Nicosia, Cyprus, 25–30 April 2006, and the ISPP Annual Scientific Meeting, Barcelona, Spain, 12–15 July 2006. We are grateful to participants in both conferences, as well as the editors of this volume, for their valuable comments.
- 2 We adopt the term 'weak identifiers' with some reservations since, as we explain above, responses to this question seem to reflect partisan feelings of a very different order from those suggested by responses to the first question in the Dutch battery.
- 3 Whether being 'somewhat close' can be considered an equivalent of 'identifying with' may be doubted. We nevertheless adopt this interpretation here, because it will make our test of the proposition that party identification and vote choice cannot be meaningfully distinguished a conservative test.
- 4 In Denmark the follow-up question about the degree of closeness was not asked of respondents who said that they were not close to any party, but who did say they were closer to one party than another. We have classified those respondents as leaners.
- 5 Although the Dutch national election study included the CSES module, the original question wording on party identification was maintained in order to safeguard comparability.
- 6 There are also other reasons why in some contexts a different conceptualization and operationalization of partisanship may be considered useful. First, several scholars have found that a substantial proportion of the electorate appears to identify with more than one party (Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983). Neither the concept of party identification nor its measures are well suited to deal with the idea of multiple partisanship – Miller and Shanks (1996: 120) argue that party identification is associated with an 'affirmative exclusivity'. The same can be said about the impact of negative feelings. Several scholars have argued that electoral research should also take into account voters' hostility towards particular parties (Crewe 1976; Maggionto and Pereson 1977; Richardson 1991; Rose and Mishler 1998).