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**Partisanship in Nine Western Democracies:
Causes and Consequences**

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Abstract

This paper argues that variations in partisanship and the partisan vote are determined by ideological conflicts and the style of political competition, the latter being defined chiefly by the electoral system applied. It proceeds in three steps. First, it reviews the conventional modernisation-based and thus essentially sociological explanation of variations in partisanship and the partisan vote and advances a “political” complement to it. Then, it reviews the development of partisanship and the partisan vote in six West European democracies, and in the ‘settler nations’ Australia, Canada, and the US. Third and finally, it puts the “political” explanation of partisanship to an empirical test. The results suggest that the electoral system applied, but also the degree of politicisation of the electorate at a given election determines partisanship and the partisan vote much stronger than socio-political modernisation does.

1. Introduction

Compared to the US, European politics is often characterised as exhibiting much sharper “partisan” contours.¹ During much of the 20th century, political parties were stronger in Europe. Unlike their US counterparts, many of them were based on powerful mass membership organisations. Ideological differences between parties, between party elites as well as between their supporters in the electorate, have been more pronounced in Europe than they were in the US. The coherence and discipline of parties in parliament were much higher in Europe than in the US. One could easily continue this list of items suggesting that politics in Europe was more partisan than abroad (see e.g. Duverger 1954; Sartori 1976; Epstein 1980; Gallagher, Laver and Mair 1995).

Upon this background, it sounds strange that partisanship was an illegitimate child of European electoral research for a while. Inspired by the works of Rokkan (1999) and Downs (1956) European scholars have put more emphasis on sociological and economic explanations of vote choices (e.g. the contributions to Budge, Crewe and Farlie 1976). Partisanship as an independent predictor of voting behaviour was particularly put into question in the Netherlands (cf. Thomassen 1976; van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983) – that is, in a political system which operates general elections under “pure” proportional representation. The scholarly discourse in other countries, after initial irritations which one is tempted to attribute to the methodological and statistical limitations of the time, has been more appreciative. Cases in point here are the British debate (cf. Butler and Stokes 1971 for early doubts and Crewe and Thomson 1999 for a sober recent application), but also the German literature (cf. Kaase 1976 for the early doubts; Arzheimer and Schön 2005 for a validation of the original construct). As it is well known, general elections in Britain are operated under majority vote, while Germany uses a personalised system of proportional representation.

Selective as this picture surely is,² it seems to suggest that the importance of partisanship for the vote, and as a consequence the scholarly appreciation of it could covary with the institutional arrangement and the style of political competition in which general elections are organised. Theoretical assumptions about the political consequences of electoral laws provide good reasons for such an expectation and we will look into those in the following. Before we do that, however, we shall briefly review the conventional wisdom on the driving forces of partisanship and the partisan vote.

2. Socio-Political Modernisation and the Style of Political Competition: Complementary Explanations of Variations in Partisanship and the Partisan Vote

The prevailing view of party decline is based on the assumption that fundamental and enduring processes of social modernisation are transforming the role of political parties in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton 1984). In its latest version, this theory refers to micro-, meso- and macro-level modernisations that affect political parties. Micro-level changes include educational expansion, the spread of political skills and an accompanying functional independence of citizens from political parties, but also to processes of value change and the general erosion of group-based politics. Meso-level changes include the growing importance of mass media for the political information process, the proliferation of special interest groups, and the increasing professionalisation and institutionalisation of intra-party processes. Macro-level changes, finally, refer to the technology of politics such as the role of professional pollsters as well as campaign techniques and candidate selection processes (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000:10-4; Berglund et al. 2005).

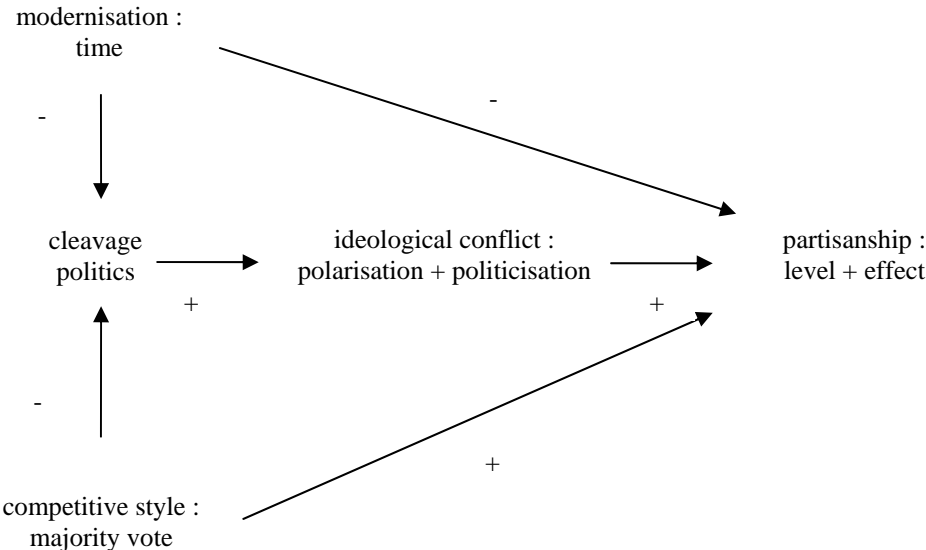
In earlier work, we have argued that those broadly uniform processes of societal change may determine the general direction in which we go. But they cannot account for the diversity of trends in partisanship (Schmitt 1989; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995: 121-3 and *passim*). Partisanship, we proposed, depends at least as much on the political context than on social modernisation. Political context factors that come to mind are mainly the amount of ideological conflict and the degree of politicisation and mobilisation of the citizenry that originates in it. The more ideological conflict there is between parties, the more politicised and mobilised a society will be, and the more partisanship we expect to find.

How much conflict there is between political parties is of course a function of the cleavage structure of a party system. Modernisation theory of partisanship involves that this cleavage base declines and politics becomes less conflictual. But inter-party conflict is not only a result of social divisions. It is also a product of the predominant style of political competition. For peoples' partisan orientations it should therefore make a difference whether politics is a matter of elite "accommodation" in order to reach as broad as possible a "consensus" (Lijphart 1968, 1999) or whether it is essentially an "adversary" enterprise (Finer 1975). This

is where the electoral system comes in: adversary politics are said to be brought about, among other things,³ by majoritarian electoral systems, while the consensual style goes together with proportional representation (see Norris 2004: chapter 3 for a summary of the argument). If partisanship needs conflict to flourish, then it should be depressed by consensual politics that are necessitated by proportional representation. Conversely, an adversarial style of political competition brought about (and indicated by) majoritarian electoral systems should be conducive to partisanship. Note that a presidential regime like the one operative in the US is reinforcing those majoritarian characteristics of adversary politics (Lijphart 1994), and thus should be expected to additionally promote partisanship rather than to depress it.

Taken together, these arguments constitute a theoretical model as is illustrated in Figure 1. Modernisation has negative effects on both the prevalence of cleavage politics and on partisanship. Adversarial politics and thus majority vote has a positive effect on partisanship but a negative effect on the prevalence of cleavage politics (which results from the significantly smaller number of relevant parties in majoritarian systems). Cleavage politics contribute to ideological conflict which, itself, has a positive effect on partisanship. This is the model we will try to test. The next paragraph is about operationalisation and data.

Figure 1
The Arguments



3. Operationalisations, Measurements and Data

The previous graph already gives some hints on how we propose to operationalise and measure these constructs in order to test the model. But before we go on and explain this in more detail we need to be clear about our units of analysis. We speak deliberately of units in the plural, because there is not one unit of analysis throughout. In the stepwise multi-level analysis which we are reporting on the unit of analysis varies between different steps.

The basic unit of analysis is the individual citizen. An example is the level of partisanship in different countries at different times; what we are doing here is calculating the proportion of party identifiers in all citizens. However, there is one level below that basis and one above. The one below the individual citizen is his or her perceptions and evaluations of the relevant parties (choice options) in the respective party system at a particular election. This level is used for the simultaneous analysis of choice options in multi-party systems with stacked data files (cf. van der Eijk and Franklin 1996 and the methodological appendix to this paper). To give a more intuitive example, this technique enables us to calculate one measure – for a whole party system at a particular election – of the importance of cleavage politics for party choice. This already brings us to the level of analysis above the basic unit – to the level of the election. It is at that level that we will test the model sketched out above, by relating aggregate sub-individual and individual and systemic scores to one another. Note in particular that it is at this last level where we can assess the impact of systemic characteristics (like the electoral system applied) on individual-level relationships (like the importance of social location for party choice).

Let us now quickly move on to the question how we operationalise the different concepts that are indicated in Figure 1. Our first measure, *Social Modernisation*, is admittedly the poorest one. We just use the passage of time indicated by the election year as a continuous measure of modernisation: the later an election takes place, the more modernised a polity is. *Cleavage Politics* is operationalised as the proportion of variance explained in party choice by indicators of social-structural location. Unit of analysis is party evaluations rather than individual respondents. On the basis of stacked data-files as explained in the methodological appendix, binary logistic regressions are calculated and Nagelkerke's Pseudo R-square is the final indicator. Note that the politicisation of social conflicts varies from country to country which suggests that social-structural predictors of the vote may vary between countries, but not between elections.⁴ *Competitive Style* is coded as dummy variable, with a value of 1 for elections held under majority rule, and 0 for all other elections.

Ideological Conflict is a concept that we operationalise in three different indicators. One is *Polarisation* indicated by the ideological distance of the two most polar parties in the system. Distance is measured in terms of average left-right (in the case of the US: liberal-conservative) self-locations of party voters.⁵ The different scales used were standardised to a range of 1-10. This procedure follows closely the advice given by Sani and Sartori (1983) with one significant exception: we consider all parties represented in parliament, and not just the "rele-

vant” ones, because we believe that every parliamentary party adds to the ideological flavour of party competition. A second is *Politicisation* as indicated by the ideological distance of the two largest parties in the electorate (as suggested by the parties’ proportion of the valid vote). Distance is measured as in the case of polarisation. A third indicator purportedly measures *Politicisation* as well although we know that there are other factors at work in addition: the level of turnout (as suggested by the proportion of voters in the voting age population).⁶

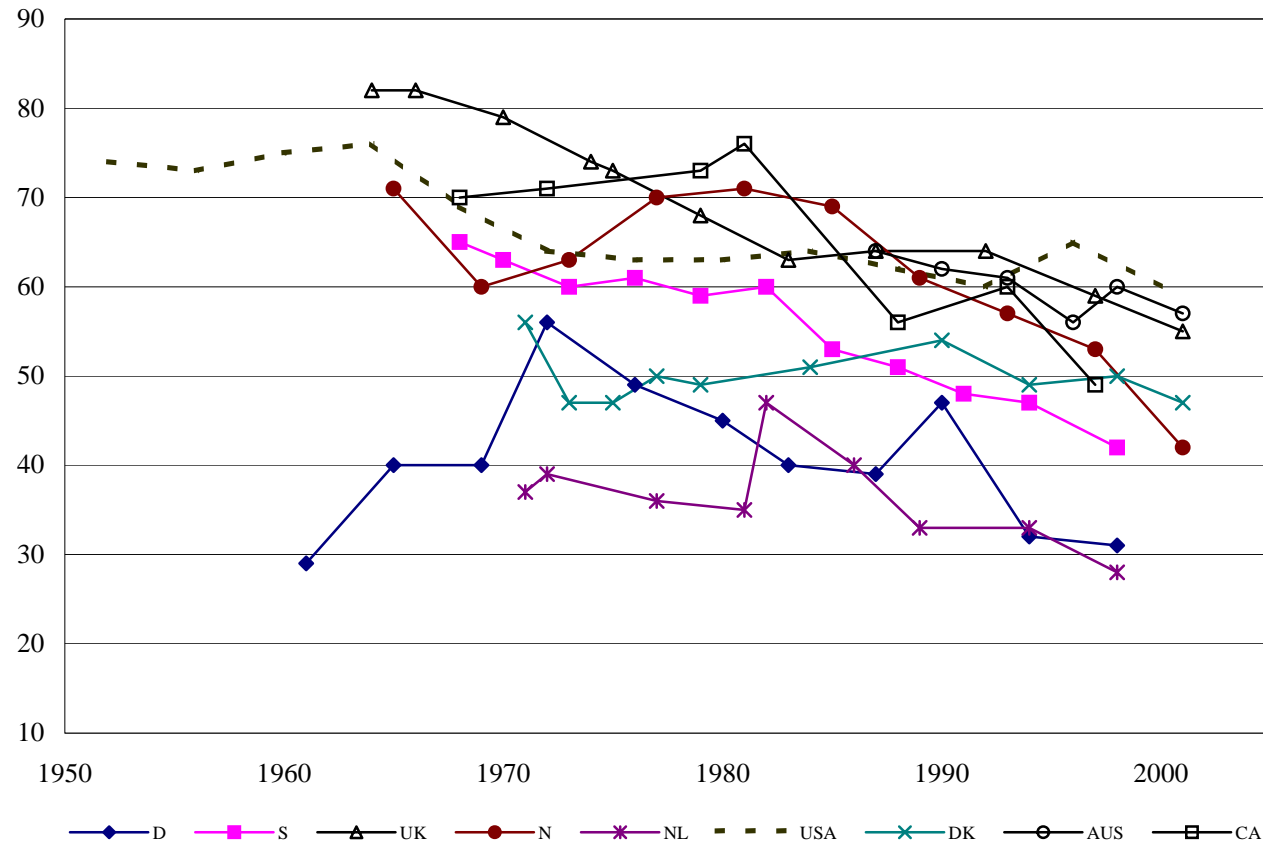
Partisanship, the dependent variable, comes again in more than one version. One indicator is simply the proportion of citizens that declare themselves to be close to, or an adherent of, one of the national parties. This is what we call the *Level Estimate*. Level estimates may be affected by local traditions of measurement, and cross-national variation may – to some unknown degree – be caused by measurement artefacts rather than by meaningful differences. This can not be ruled out even though we take the proportion of partisans in all citizens as our level estimate rather than a finer gradation like e.g. “strong identifiers” which arguably is more susceptible for measurement specifics. We therefore calculate an estimate of the behavioural relevance of partisanship as an additional, second indicator which should be much less affected by the specifics of the measurement instrument. In the funnel of causality of the *American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) partisanship enters the scene after social-structural factors which affect the vote both directly and indirectly through partisanship. The *Effect Estimate* of partisanship is therefore calculated as the increase in explained variance in vote choice when partisanship is added as explanatory factor after social-structural indicators (see Miller and Shanks 1996 for a similar technique). Measurement specifics of the indicator are as described for Cleavage Politics.

The main data base for the micro-level measures is the series of national election studies in the different countries. The European studies were transformed into a comparable format in a co-operative effort of ICORE and its European Voter project. For very few cases (=elections) where national election study data were lacking or insufficient, the present paper uses Euro-barometer information instead. The Australian, Canadian and US data are drawn from the cumulative file of the Political Leaders project. Macro-level information has been added from election statistics as they are available on the web.

3. The Evolution of Partisanship – National Trends in Levels and Effects

We look into national trends first before we move on to cross-national causal analyses. Figure 2 charts the evolution in levels of partisanship over time. Moving from top to bottom, we start with the British case. Britain is one of the few examples with an almost continuous erosion of partisanship. With the exception of a relative stable phase in the 1980s, i.e. during the Thatcher decade, the trend in Britain goes down. Having said that, we hasten to add that this of course is a downturn from a very high starting point and that partisanship in Britain still today is a frequent phenomenon – in 2001, more than one in two British citizens is close to one of the parties.

Figure 2
The Evolution of Levels of Partisanship
in Nine Western Democracies



Source: National Election Studies (post-electoral surveys).

The other three majority vote systems in our sample of countries – Australia, Canada, and the US – rank also very highly. Three in five US citizens in the 2000 election identified with one of the parties. While partisanship declines here as well in the second half of the 20th century, this decline is a very slow and moderate process. Most of what happened in the US happened in 1968 (down from 76 to 69 percent identifiers) and in 1972 (down from 69 to 64 percent). From then on, US partisanship stays somewhere above the 60 percent mark, that is a drop of only 15 percent compared to the beginning of the ANES series in 1952. Note that the proportion of strong identifiers in the US in 2000 is almost as high as it was in 1952 (data not shown). Canadian partisanship as measured by the national election studies was over 70 percent during the seventies, and dropped to somewhere below 60 percent during the eighties, and further to around 50 percent in the late nineties. The Australian trend is short but very steady; it starts in 1987 at 64 percent and ends in 2001 at 57 percent.

It is of course hard to compare levels of partisanship measured with national-specific survey questions, and any conclusion based on such a comparison needs to remain very tentative. Having said this, it is of course suggestive to observe that the data presented here seem to indicate that three of our four majority vote systems started out from very high levels of partisanship (the Australian trend is too short to be included here), and that at the end of the observation period all four of them are again ahead of the PR systems.

In the early studies, Norway and Sweden were among the high scoring countries as well. In both countries, partisanship remained stable – or was recovering again as in the case of Norway from a serious downturn in 1969 – until the early Eighties. From then on it has been declining drastically in both countries, to a more or less identical level estimate at about 40 percent in the latest studies. Among the three Scandinavian countries Denmark is different. It started out with much lower level estimates than Sweden and Norway. These estimates remained more or less stable over the last 3 decades. Of course, the Danish studies documented minor ups and downs over the years, but partisanship remained rather stationary at about fifty percent despite all the changes in the Danish party system.

This leaves us with the Netherlands and Germany. The Netherlands mark almost always the bottom of the distributions. There was a major upsurge in 1982 which constitutes the only exception in an otherwise continuous decline. The Dutch level estimate starts out a little below 40 percent in the early 1970 and arrives at a little less than 30 percent some 30 years

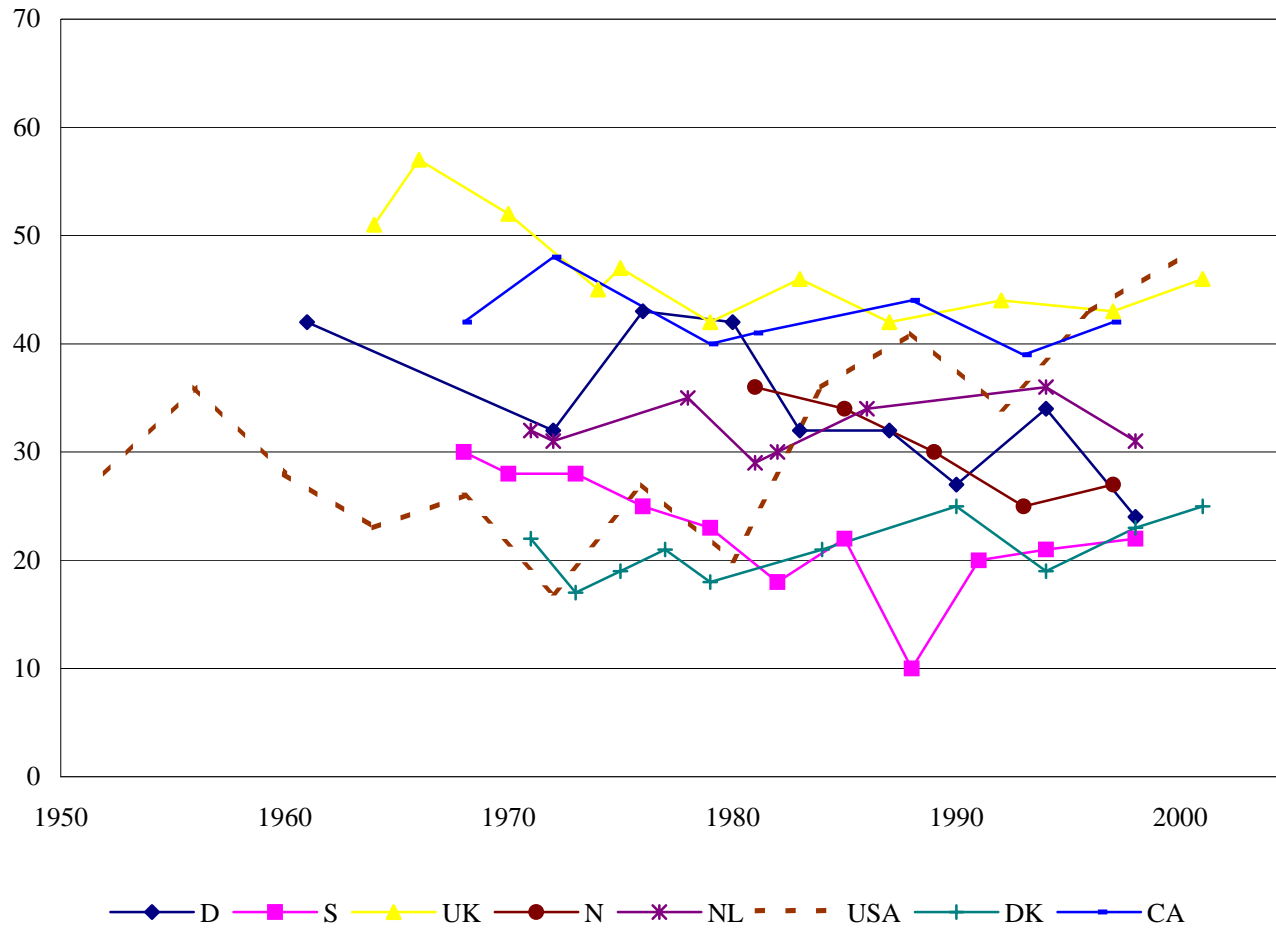
later. The German trend starts out at about thirty percent in 1961, reaches its highest level well above 50 percent in 1972, only to more or less continuously decline thereafter close to the 30 percent mark again – with the major exception of the re-unification election in 1990.⁷

Taken all together, there is indeed compelling evidence of a decline of partisanship. However, this decline is neither uniform, nor is it universal. And even if we at this point refrain from drawing firm conclusions about the order in which the national trend-lines rank from top to bottom, we cannot overlook the strong position of the four majoritarian democracies. It remains to be seen, how these observations hold for the effect estimates.

Looking at effects rather than at levels, a number of observations are unmistakable. One is that the trend lines are closer together: there is less cross-national variation in the effects of partisanship on the vote – shorthand: the partisan vote – than there is in its levels. Another observation is that at the end of our observation period Great Britain, the US and Canada are again ranging very closely together at the top of the distribution. This is not to say that the partisan vote advanced similarly in the three countries. While the British and Canadian trends are rather stable, the trend line for the US is definitely more spectacular – actually the most spectacular of all. Here, partisanship explained some 30 percent in vote choices in the 1950s (after social-structural factors were given a chance to account for their share). This proportion went down to below 20 percent in the 1970s, only to climb up in the Eighties and Nineties to almost 50 percent in the 2000 election. One certainly can not say that nothing happened in America (Figure 3).

In continental Europe, the net effect of partisanship on vote choices is everywhere much smaller than it is in Britain, Canada and the US, at least towards the end of our observation period. The evidence presented in Figure 3 suggests that (a) the partisan vote in Denmark and Sweden, with an R square change of some 20 percent, is very weak indeed and this over two decades now; (b) the explanatory power of partisanship in the Netherlands is somewhat stronger and continuously over the 30 percent mark; that (c) the importance of partisanship for vote choices in Norway has been declining modestly from roughly 35 to 25 percent R square change; and that (d) the situation in Germany is the most erratic and, at the same time, the one with the clearest signs of a decline.

Figure 3
 The Evolution of the Effect of Partisanship on the Vote
 in Eight Western Democracies



Source: National Election Studies (post-electoral surveys).

4. What Moves Partisanship and the Partisan Vote?

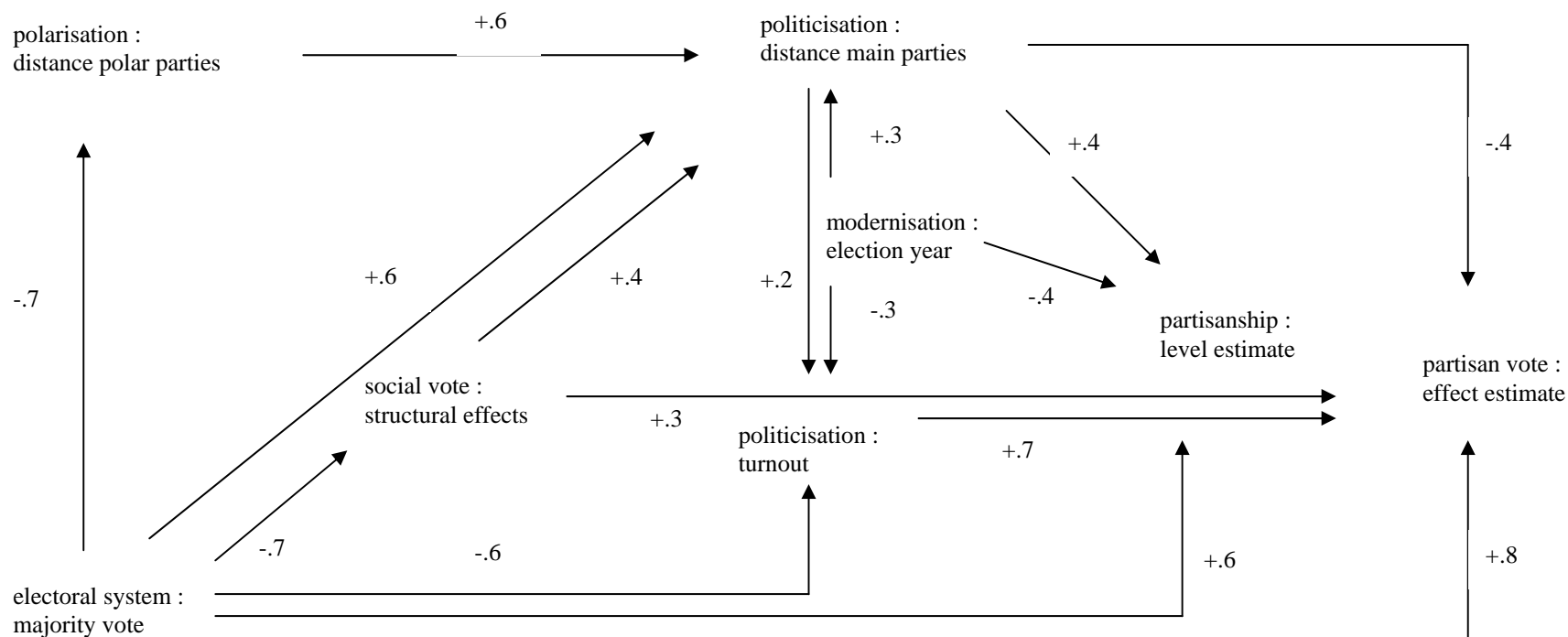
The general structure of the model is depicted in Figure 1, which summarises the basic theoretical expectations. The appropriate tool to test it is a structural equations algorithm. We will use the EQS programme for that purpose. Unit of analysis in this final step is the election. To be more precise, it is the micro-, meso- and macro-level information gathered at the occasion of an election. The number of cases now available for analysis varies from one co-variation of variables to the next between 67 (elections) and 98 (elections). There are still some analyses pending; as more data become available these figures will rise.

Structural equations programmes report different kinds of results some of which are more important than others. The most important question is whether or not the causal structure inherent in the models that are estimated is falsified by the structure of the empirical data. This is reflected in so-called fit indices. Acceptable fit indices reach values close to 1.⁸ Another important piece of information is explained variance, that is the extent to which the variables included in the model together are able to explain variation in the dependent variable(s). A third piece of relevant information is about the causal weight of the individual constructs. This is usually reported in terms of standardized direct and/or total effects. The meaning of standardized effects is similar to that of standardized regression coefficients.⁹

After this somewhat technical interlude, we can now move on to the causal model of partisanship and the partisan vote which we accepted after considerable model fitting (see Figure 4). Fit indices are close to 1 and satisfactory. The proportions of variance explained in the five different dependent variables vary from 81 percent (turnout) to 31 percent (ideological politicisation). With roughly 50 percent explained variance, the model explains substantial measures of variation in both our central indicators – level and effect of partisanship.

When fitted to the empirical information available, the preliminary causal model of partisanship comes out somewhat different than we thought it would. Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 4, we easily recognise that not all of our theoretical expectations were consistent with the data structure. Three constructs stand out in that regard. One is modernisation as indicated by the passage of time. It seems to be far less central for our understanding of partisanship and the partisan vote than we thought it is. We find a moderate negative effect on the level of

Figure 4
What Moves Partisanship and the Partisan Vote



Note: N (=elections) varies between 67 and 98. Structural equations are estimated with EQS. The model fit of the final solution is at NFI=.98; NNFI=1.00; and CFI=1.00. R squares for the six independent variables are : for Partisan Vote .53; for Partisanship .51; for Turnout .79; for Main Party Politicisation .33; for Polarisation .47; and for Social Vote .41. Coefficients shown in the graph are standardized direct effects. Partisanship is the percentage proportion of an electorate at an election that says it is close to one of the parties. Electoral system is coded 1 for majority vote, 0 for PR. Polarisation is the distance in mean left-right self-placements of the voters of the two most polar parties of the system. Politicisation is measured as the distance of mean left-right self-placements of the voters of the two main parties of the system. Turnout is the percentage proportion of voters in the voting age population. Modernisation is measured as the passage of time. ¹⁰Social vote is the proportion of variance in the vote explained by social-structural factors. Partisan vote is the increase in explained variance when party identification is added after the social-structural factors.

partisanship (the later the year the lower the level: -.4); a minor negative effect on politicisation as indicated by turnout (-.3); and a minor positive effect on politicisation as indicated by the ideological distance of the two major parties (+.3). Note that there is no direct effect of modernisation on the partisan vote, which means nothing less than that the impact of partisanship on vote choices does not decrease significantly with time.

Another construct that is far less central than expected is cleavage politics. First, we find no secular trend in the prevalence of cleavage politics as we measure it. Secondly, while the social vote contributes positively to both ideological politicisation and the partisan vote, these effects are of only moderate strength.

The third construct standing out is the style of political competition – adversary politics as indicated by majority vote. The electoral system applied shows strong and plausible effects on virtually all variables in the model (with the exception of modernisation of course). Majority vote depresses – in a rather indirect and mechanically way¹¹ – the prevalence of cleavage politics (-.7), it has a positive effect on politicisation as indicated by the ideological distance between the two major parties (+.6), and an equally substantial negative effect on ideological polarisation (-.7). Majority vote decreases politicisation as indicated by the level of turnout (-.6). And last, but certainly not least in our context, it increases both the level of partisanship (+.6) and its net effect on the vote (+.8) substantially. The style of political competition as indicated by the electoral system applied is the central variable in the model. Following these preliminary findings, one can hardly overestimate the effect of adversary politics on partisanship and the partisan vote.

Compared to this “stylistic” factor, substantial politicisation as indicated by the ideological distance of the two major parties in the system is clearly of only secondary importance. According to our findings, it has a minor positive effect on the level of partisanship (+.2) and a moderate negative effect on the partisan vote (-.4). Note that ideological polarisation has no direct relevance for either of our two indicators of partisanship.

The closer the electoral race in a particular election, the more politicised the electorate, the higher the turnout: following this simple logic (and being well aware of the close correlation between turnout and the electoral system), we considered turnout as a final indicator of politicisation. And this final indicator has indeed a strong independent and positive effect on

the partisan vote (+.7), suggesting that the net effect of partisanship on the vote is the higher, the higher electoral participation is. The level of electoral participation has no effect, however, on the level of partisanship.

5. Short Summary

Partisanship has been portrayed in the literature as a historical relict that vanishes as a function of social modernisation. This paper suggests a different view. It looks at partisanship as a political rather than as a social phenomenon. Doing so, the politicisation of electorates becomes a central explanatory factor. Three different dimensions of politicisation have been distinguished: ideological conflict as indicated by ideological distances of party electorates, political mobilisation as indicated by turnout levels, and the style of political competition as indicated by the electoral system. In an effort to test this view, the databases of nine national election studies were explored in a stepwise multi-level analysis. Based upon this, we find the third dimension of politicisation – the electoral system – to be the most relevant, suggesting that adversarial politics is indeed the main cause of partisanship.

6. Notes

¹ An first draft of this paper was presented at the APSA Annual Conference of 2002.

² The scholarly debates in Australia, Canada and the Scandinavian family of countries with long traditions of election studies in each case have not even been touched upon.

³ Lijphart (e.g. 1994:96) distinguishes eight factors, five of which belong to an “executive – parties dimension” and three others to a “federal - unitary dimension.” While the five in the first dimension can arguably be reduced to the electoral system applied, the three others tap indeed a different dimension. Independently of the electoral system, the multi-tiered systems of government like the ones applied in the member-countries of the European Union, and federalism – think of the different versions of divided government as they may happen in the US, Germany or France –necessitate and contribute to a consensual style of party competition.

⁴ Country-specific sets of predictors were used following the advise of colleagues from the respective national election study. Each predictor was broken down into [n (categories) – 1] dummies. Collinearity statistics were used to eliminate multiple indicators of the same social determinant of vote choices. ADD MORE DETAILS.

⁵ Note that there is an alternative indicator available which derives from content analyses of party manifestos in the framework of the MRG/CMP project (cf. Budge, Klingemann et al. 2001). The advantage of this alternative measure is that it extends to all elections for which we have national election study data while left-right distances of party voters are only available for the studies from the early 1970ies onwards. The drawback of a manifesto-based left-right measure is that it rests much stronger upon assumptions on the “true” meaning of left and right: the analyst defines here what problem emphases in the manifesto contribute to left-right polarisation and politicisation. This is usually done in a manner that ignores the differences that exist in the meaning of left and right between countries, as well as the variations of meaning elements over time, and therefore produces biased estimators of left-right positions. It is on those grounds that the present paper uses left-right self-placements of party voters as an indicator of this party’s position.

⁶ The problem with turnout as an indicator of politicisation is that it is so strongly contaminated by the electoral system applied, and should probably only be used within homogenous classes of electoral systems, or as a deviation from a systemic mean score, etc. These considerations are to be taken up in future drafts of this paper.

⁷ The German instrument was changed in 1972 at the same time when the campaign and re-election of Willy Brandt (“*Willy wählen*”) raised the number of social-democratic partisans dramatically. If we control for the direction of partisanship, we find that Christian-democratic partisans remain stable in both the old and the new measurement, while the upturn is obviously due to the Social-democratic surge in this election. The second extra-ordinary German election is that of 1990, when the public debate about Helmut Kohl’s re-unification strategy obviously raised partisanship in a similar fashion. Note that the 1990 study did not yet include an East German sample of voters as the later studies do; would that have been the case, the 1990 estimate would range some 3 to 5 percent lower.

⁸ Note that even the best fit-indicator cannot prove that the theoretical model is “true”. There might always be another structural equations system with an equal or even better “fit” in the data structure.

⁹ Note that there is a hierarchical order in the importance of these three pieces of information. If the model does not fit the data, one must not trust any result – fit indicators are therefore of utmost important. A model might fit the data without explaining much variance, in which case it is probably not wrong but certainly not very helpful. Explained variance therefore comes second in the hierarchy. Individual effects therefore are important only when a model fits the data, and can explain substantial portions of variance in the data structure.

¹¹ Mechanical in the sense that majoritarianism tends to reduce the number of relevant parties and thereby the likelihood of strong social-structural contours in the electorates of these few large parties.

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