

## **Party identification revisited**

**Jacques Thomassen**

**&**

**Martin Rosema**

University of Twente

Department of Political Science and Research Methods

P.O. Box 219, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

[j.j.a.thomassen@utwente.nl](mailto:j.j.a.thomassen@utwente.nl)

[m.rosema@utwente.nl](mailto:m.rosema@utwente.nl)

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we revisit the debate on the usefulness of the concept of party identification in cross-national research. In our earlier work we showed that, at least in the Netherlands, party identification was empirically hardly discernible from the vote, whereas 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 replicate these analyses with data spanning a longer period of time. The analyses mainly confirm our original findings. Next we show that explaining vote choice on the basis of the concept of party identification appears also problematic in several other parliamentary as well as presidential systems. Therefore, we discuss a possible alternative and apply it to the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election. Findings indicate that partisanship strongly influenced vote choice. This could best be demonstrated if partisanship is conceptualized in terms of party evaluations instead of party identification.

## **1. Introduction**

Ever since its introduction the concept of party identification has been a matter of dispute. The major disputes refer, first, to the nature of party identification and its sources: what is it and how does it develop? Secondly, and strongly related to this, how should party identification be measured? Thirdly, since the early nineteen-seventies the analytical usefulness of the concept of party identification outside the United States, and in particular in the context of the parliamentary systems of Western Europe, has developed into an academic debate of its own.

We start this paper with a short discussion on the nature of party identification and its measurement. Our main focus, however, is the debate about the use of party identification in cross-national research. One of the present authors participated early on in this discussion and showed that, at least in the Netherlands, party identification was empirically hardly discernible from the vote, whereas 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 (Miller 1976; Barnes 1990), we replicate these analyses with data spanning a much longer period of time than the original analysis.

A more general 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 discerned. Why this is the case, is a matter of dispute. One of the interpretations is that this is due to the institutional context. If this interpretation is correct, we should expect that the correlation varies with the institutional context. In section 6 we test to what extent this is the case.

## **2. 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, pp. 88-9; see also Campbell et al. 1960). It clearly refers to a psychological identification. The concept was derived from reference and small group theory positing that one’s sense of self may include a feeling of personal identity with a secondary group such as a political party (Miller & Shanks 1996, p. 120). Miller and Shanks give a description of the nature of party identification that leaves little room for interpretation:

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 socialization 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'. (Miller & Shanks 1996, p. 120)

In this description party identification clearly is a variable relatively exogenous to the more specific short-term attitudes influencing the vote choice. Although Miller and Shanks argue that the idea as if in the original conceptualization of party identification was, once formed, immutable to people's political experiences during their life as an adult, is a caricature, their view is 'closer to the revisionists' caricature of 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 & Shanks 1996, p. 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 introduces the famous metaphor of a *running tally* of retrospective evaluations. He finds that

A citizen's ID waxes and wanes in accord with his/her perception of societal conditions, political events, and the performance of incumbent officeholders' (Fiorina 1981, p. 102). In his model party identification is defined as '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, p. 89)

Fiorina's and later reconceptualizations of party identification have at least two implications. First, it is a reconceptualization indeed. If party identification is a running tally of retrospective evaluations it is hard to maintain that party identification refers to a psychological sense of identity. Cognition rather than affect seems to be the main component of the revised concept. As Fiorina himself observes, the re-conceptualization of party identification is more related to the toolkit of rational choice theory than to psychological reference group theory. This revision is consequential for the discussion about the measurement of party identification.

Secondly, the reconceptualization jeopardises one of the most powerful analytical instruments derived from the original conceptualization of party identification, normal vote analysis (Converse 1966). The analytical potential of the concept of party identification is based on the fact that party identification is correlated with actual vote choice but does not coincide with it. Party identification as originally conceptualized can be considered as a baseline, a kind of standing predisposition to vote for (the candidate of) a particular party. Once this baseline is clearly established, it is possible to define and explain deviations from it. Short term factors such as candidate evaluations and the candidates' or parties' stand on specific issues can make people decide to vote for a different party than the one they identify with. Election outcomes can accordingly be viewed as a combination of a rather stable long-term component (normal vote) and deviations from this baseline that result from short-term forces, e.g. candidate characteristics. The elegance of this model is badly affected if party identification is influenced by the same variables that are supposed to explain deviations from it. The distinction between long-term factors (i.e., party identification) and short-term factors is then non-existent.

### **3. 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?

A seven-point ordinal scale emerges from this series of questions: 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.

The question 'Do you think of yourself as a Republican' can be considered as an operationalization of the psychological identity the concept of party identification refers to. The follow-up question 'Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?' is not (cf. Miller 1991). With its spatial analogy it might have been taken from the toolkit of rational choice theory. As we will see, in comparative research operationalizations of the concept of party identification have moved into the direction of spatial analysis rather than a psychological identification, not only in the follow-up question but already in the main question.

Developing a functionally equivalent measure of party identification in other countries than the US has never been easy. First, in the US it can be justified to take only the two major parties into account. This made it possible to develop the seven-point scale as a single measure of party identification. With more than two relevant parties, as is the case in almost any other country, this is close to impossible. Having more than two parties also makes it increasingly difficult to mention the names of the parties in the question wording. Not mentioning the parties leads to a lower proportion of people spontaneously claiming to identify themselves with a particular political party (Norris 2004).

In several European election studies a serious attempt was made to develop an alternative valid measurement of the original concept. In the Dutch election studies, for instance, people are 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?)

Answers to these questions cannot be transformed into a single ordinal scale, like the original questions. The straightforward solution is to distinguish between direction and strength of identification, thus abandoning the one-dimensional view. In the Dutch case, the strength component comprises four categories: convinced adherent, not convinced adherent, attracted, no identification. The directional component indicates which party voters identify with, irrespective of the strength of identification. Similar attempts to translate the concept of party identification were made in several other countries (Schmitt and Holmberg, 1995; Weisberg, 1999). To what extent this wording really catches the psychological sense of identity as meant in the original concept might be a matter of dispute. But at least it tries to catch this basic feeling.

This is hardly the case in other operationalizations of the concept, like in *Political Action* (see Barnes 1990) and the *Comparative Study of Electoral Systems* (CSES). In the latter study 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?

Here the whole question is worded in terms of ‘closeness’, i.e. in terms of the spatial analogy used in proximity models based on rational choice theory. Although it is hard to find an explicit argument why the operationalization of the concept has moved into this direction, it comes much closer to Fiorina’s revision of the concept than to the original concept. To what extent this difference in question wording leads to different answers, is hard to tell.

#### 4. 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 (Butler & Stokes 1969; Campbell & Valen 1961). However, once European scholars started to analyse their data, several of them became more sceptical (e.g. Kaase 1976; Crewe 1976). The most extreme manifestation of the problem seemed to occur in the Netherlands, where one of the present authors came to the conclusion that

- (a) party identification is less stable than vote choice;
- (b) what little evidence exists to the effect that party identification and vote preference can be distinguished can also be explained as unreliability of measurement;
- (c) there is strong evidence that party identification is not causally prior to vote preference. (Thomassen 1976, p. 77)

As the conclusions with regard to the Netherlands seemed to be more severe than with regard to otherwise comparable European countries, several authors tried to find an explanation for the special case of the Netherlands. Warren Miller (1976) hinted:

Given the dramatic rate of change in depillarization and deconfessionalization noted by Thomassen at the end of his paper, and given the fluidity of the Dutch party system at the elite level of organizing new parties and joining the electoral contest, it is more than a cliché to suggest that further research should follow. With Jennings' earlier work in mind (Jennings, 1972), 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. (Miller 1976, pp. 26-7)

In a similar vein Barnes (1990) commented that

The observation of Thomassen (1976) that the vote is more stable than identification fits a period in which the vote often changes



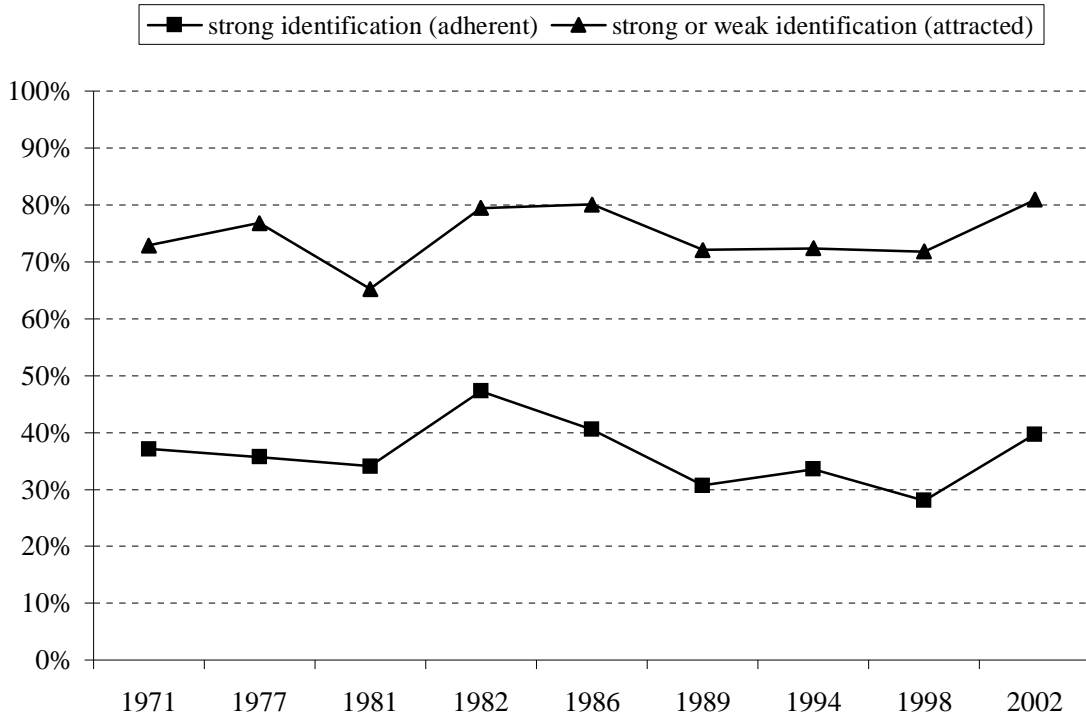
before the identification, so that measures at two points in time could easily show stable votes and changing identification. If, as generally assumed, it is easier to change vote than identification, the former should change first. Hence greater change in the latter should represent bringing it into 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. (Barnes 1990, p. 265)

As far as these references to a period of realignment in the Netherlands have any validity, we should expect the Netherlands to become more similar to the developments in other countries, unless one would argue that Dutch politics is in a permanent state of flux.

In order to test the explanations put forward, we replicate the analyses with data spanning a much longer period of time than the original analysis. If the realignment thesis indeed accounts for the original findings, we expect to see that since the early 1970s (a) the number of voters who identify with a particular party has risen, and (b) party identification has become more stable than vote choice. Below we examine both matters on the basis of cross-sectional as well as panel data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, which cover the period from 1971 until 2002.

In the early 1970s only a minority of Dutch voters affirmatively answered the question whether they thought of themselves as an adherent of a political party (in this paper we label this ‘strong identification’). The figures sharply contrasted with the American findings – sizeable majorities considered themselves a Democrat or a Republican – as well as several European findings. For example, Butler and Stokes (1969, p. 57) found that about 90 per cent of British voters identified with one of the major parties. Figure 1 indicates that the Dutch findings were not a particularity of the time period, as has been suggested. In the next three decades the proportion of voters who showed such identification has been rather stable, and mostly varied between 30 and 40 per cent. If we also take into consideration voters who say that they are at least attracted to a particular political party (in this paper we label this ‘weak identification’), the pattern is the same: trendless fluctuation (between 70 and 80 per cent). Note that these findings may come as a surprise not only to those who expected the Netherlands to then be in the middle of a process of realignment, but also to scholars who in the last decades observed a “decline of parties”. The latter thesis finds no support in these data.

Figure 1: Strength of party identification in the Netherlands, 1971-2002



Source: Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, 1971-2002 (cross-sectional surveys)

In order to analyse the stability of party identification versus the stability of vote choice, we re-examine this issue on the basis of 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 proved less stable than vote choice. Table 1 shows that this pattern has persisted. In each period, the proportion who voters who changed party identification while choosing to vote for the same party (third row) exceeds the proportion of voters who changed their vote choice while identifying with the same party (second row). In brief, in the Netherlands party identification has remained less stable than vote choice. This implies that, at least in the Netherlands, it makes no sense to view electoral choice as the result of short-term election-specific forces acting along with a long-term partisan predisposition.

Table 1: Stability of party identification and vote choice in the Netherlands, 1971-1998

	1971-1972	1981-1982	1982-1986	1994-1998
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 part identification, unstable vote	20	16	18	24
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total	100	100	100	100
(N)	(788)	(1040)	(581)	(741)

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage of respondents fitting each category.

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

The next issue to be re-examined concerns the relationship between party identification and vote choice. In our original analysis, more than 90 per cent of party identifiers preferred to vote for the same party. Furthermore, those who identified more strongly with a political party did so in larger numbers. Table 2 shows that this pattern, too, has persisted. Among voters who strongly identified with a party, that is, those who considered themselves an adherent, usually about 95 per cent preferred to vote accordingly. Among voters who said they were not an adherent but did feel attracted to a party, the corresponding figures are approximately 90 per cent.

Table 2: Consistency between party identification and vote preference, controlled for strength of identification, 1971-1998

	1971	1972	1981	1982	1986	1994	1998	mean
strong identifiers (adherent)	96	93	94	96	95	97	96	95
weak identifiers (attracted)	87	86	89	90	92	90	87	89

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage 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).

Further evidence for the instability of party identification in relation to vote choice in the Netherlands can be obtained by replicating the latter analyses with measures of party identification at the time of the previous elections. In US elections voters' electoral choices are strongly influenced by party identification, albeit a substantial minority deviates from this predisposition because of short-term factors. Interestingly, if vote choice is predicted on the basis of party identification in an earlier stage (varying between a single year and a full four-year election cycle), its predictive power turns out to be virtually identical (Miller and Shanks 1996, p. 496). The above findings lead to the expectation that in the Netherlands the situation is different. A direct test confirms this. Substituting party identification measures of the same election by measures concerning identification at the previous election, strongly decreases the number of voters who voted in line with their identification (see Table 3). Among strong identifiers the mean figure drops from 95 to 84 per cent, while among weak identifiers the mean figure drops from 89 to 61 per cent. So, in both groups the number of voters whose vote deviates from their party identification trebles.

Table 3: Consistency between vote preference and party identification at the previous election, controlled for strength of identification, 1972-1998

	1972	1982	1986	1998	mean
strong identifiers (adherent)	83	85	85	81	84
weak identifiers (attracted)	66	60	68	51	61

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage 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).

The final issue to be re-examined in this section concerns the causal direction of the relationship between party identification and vote preference. Our original conclusion was that party identification is not prior to vote choice. The basis for this conclusion essentially lies in the fact that correlations between party identification and vote choice at a later moment were weaker than correlations between vote choice and party identification at a later moment. This pattern, too, persists if we extend the time frame (see Table 3 and Table 4). Because party identification

and vote choice mostly travelled together, differences between those correlations are by definition limited. But to the extent that they exist, the pattern in 1982 and 1998 suggests that it is more likely that vote preferences determine party identification than the reverse. So, voters did not vote for the parties they identified with, but voters identified with the parties they voted for. In 1972 the pattern is more consistent with what we should expect on the basis of party identification theory, although the differences between the two tables are small.

Table 4: Consistency between party identification and vote preference at the previous election, controlled for strength of identification, 1972-1998

	1972	1982	1986	1998	mean
strong identifiers (adherent)	82	90	85	84	85
weak identifiers (attracted)	62	71	67	58	65

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage 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).

These findings at least partly confirm our earlier conclusions. Firstly, in the Netherlands party identification is less stable than vote preference. Secondly, party identification as measured in Dutch election surveys strongly correlates with vote preference. And thirdly, in as far as both can be distinguished, vote choice often appears to be causally prior to party identification.

The latter finding means that party identification 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 an individual's behaviour. This finding links up well with self-perception theory, which posits that individuals 'deduce' their attitudes from perceptions of their behaviour (Bem 1972). Similarly, voters apparently deduce their party identification (or 'partisan self-image') from their voting record: "If I vote for that party, I must identify with it".

The strong correlation between party identification and vote choice should not obscure the fact that at times both do not coincide. Previously, we suggested that such inconsistencies might well result from unreliability of measurement (Thomassen 1976). Unless one would argue that our measures are perfectly reliable, this at least partially explains the findings. This is not to

say that theoretical reasons for discrepancies between party identification and vote choice can be excluded. It is well possible that voters identify with a particular political party, but nevertheless prefer to vote for another party. The prime example is strategic voting. Small parties in particular may suffer from this, as their identifiers might vote for another attractive party that has a better chance of getting into government, becoming largest, or delivering the prime minister (each could be a reason to vote strategically). This would also explain why vote choice is more stable than party identification: voters whose party identification shifts between a small and a large party in the same region of the political spectrum, may in both instances prefer to vote for the same large party. Another crucial factor is the impact of party leaders. If voters do not always prefer the party leader of the party they identify with, any impact of party leaders would result in inconsistencies between party identification and vote choice.

To the extent that such effects exist, the above findings suggest firstly that these effects are rather limited, and secondly that their joint impact has not changed. However, we also concluded that it is doubtful whether party identification is prior to vote choice. The question is whether this applies to the concept, or only to the measurement employed in our surveys.

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

In the previous section we confirmed earlier findings that at least in the Netherlands party identification and party vote tend to coincide, and to the extent that they do not party identification is less stable than vote choice. Therefore, there is no reason to recall earlier conclusions that one of the most innovative elements of party identification in electoral research, studying the impact of short-term forces on the vote against the baseline of the normal vote, is hardly applicable in the European context. However, why this is the case, has been a matter of dispute in the literature (Berglund et al. 2005).

One interpretation is that in the European context party identification does not really exist. The measurement of party identification reflects not much more than people's party preference at a particular point in time. According to the *functional model of party identification* party identification has never really developed in most European countries because it is less functional to European than US voters (Shively 1979). In this view, party identification is a cost saving device providing people with a short cut to all kinds of decisions, including the decision

for which party or candidate to vote. However, European voters might not have needed party identification as a cost saving device, because that function was already fulfilled by people's ties to a social class or religion, which in turn were strongly associated with a particular political party.

Warren Miller gave 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 socializing 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 groups' 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. (Miller 1976, p. 27)

According to this interpretation party identification simply does not exist in countries where political parties are strongly embedded in the social structure. It is either a reflection of people's social identity or of their party preference at a particular point in time. This is a generalization of the explanation for the odd findings in the Netherlands. The traditional political parties in the Netherlands were deeply rooted in the social structure of Dutch society. The identification with political parties was for most people only indirect. For a Catholic voting for the Catholic party was self-evident 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, p. 78).

However, there is anything but consensus about this interpretation. An alternative interpretation for the strong correlation between party identification and the actual vote choice is 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 in the interaction between voters and governmental institutions, leaving little leeway for individual candidates to run their own campaign for office and offering little incentives for voters to deviate from their party preference in favour of an individual candidate from another party. This is quite different from US politics, in particular in presidential elections, where policy stands and characteristics of the candidates have an important weight in addition to their party background. In a parliamentary democracy with its indirect election of the head of government a split of party identification and the actual vote is less likely. Therefore, it is quite understandable that people's vote choice in Europe seldom deviates from their party identification. However, this does not prove that party identification is not important. Quite 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 people's party identification and their party choice the analytical usefulness of the directional component of the concept is quite limited (Holmberg 1994).

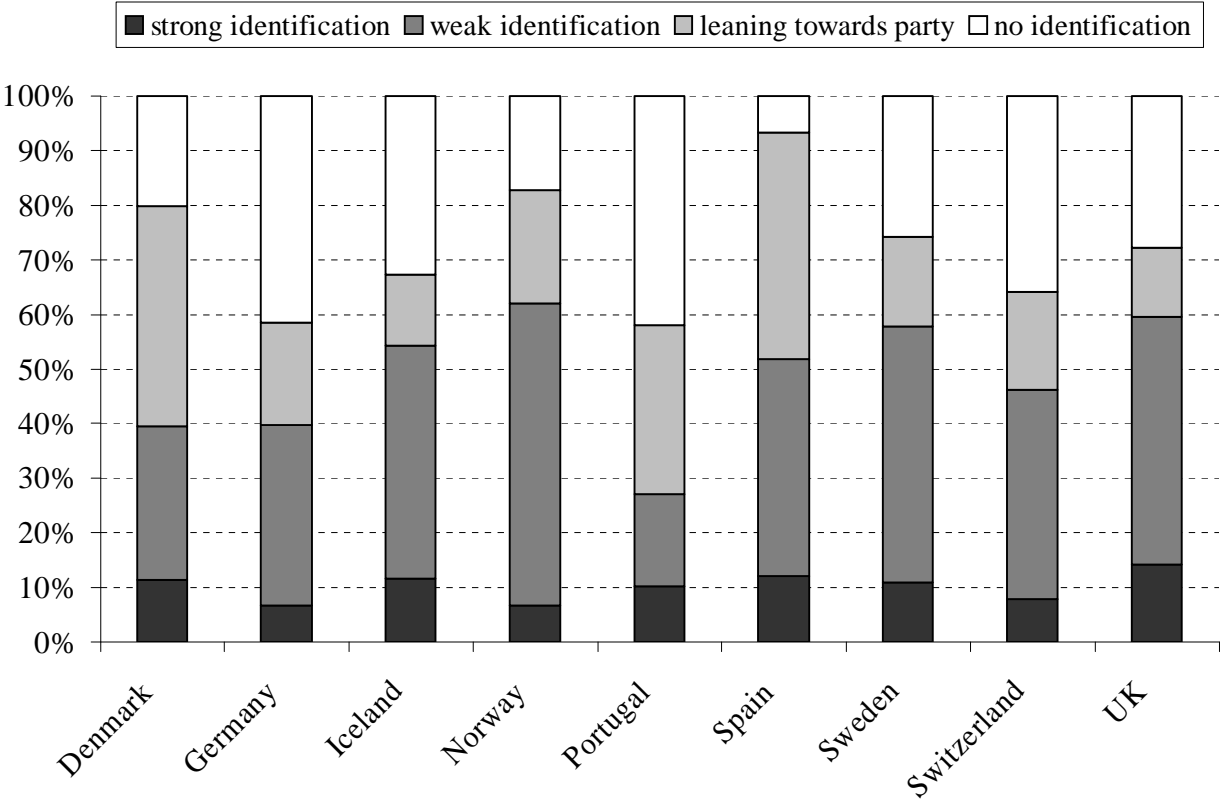
Whether the first or second interpretation is valid, in both instances one expects the patterns observed in the Netherlands to be also present in other established parliamentary systems. Whether they indeed are, can be tested on the basis of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). This study, which combines data from a wide range of national election studies, operationalizes partisanship in terms of closeness (see section 3). A pivotal question is whether those questions indeed tap identification. For the sake of argument, we below presume 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. Note that this question was asked if voters said they were close to a political party, as well as if voters affirmatively answered the question whether they are a little closer to one of the political parties than the others. We consider voters 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. If voters say they are closer to one party than another but say they are not very close, we consider them 'leaning' towards that party.

In most countries between 40 and 60 per cent of the respondents identified either strongly or weakly with a political party (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup> The only exception is Portugal, in which less than 30



per cent did so. A straightforward explanation for this low figure is Portugal’s shorter history of democratic elections, although this would leave one puzzled about the (relatively high) proportion of identifiers in Spain. Because the Dutch findings in the preceding section were based on different question wordings, it is difficult to compare the strength of identification in the Netherlands with findings of other countries in Figure 2.<sup>2</sup> But the key finding is that in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere substantial proportions of the electorate identify with a political party. This is an important prerequisite, because if few voters would identify then the whole concept would become rather meaningless.

Figure 2: Strength of party identification in Western Europe (1996-2002)



Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module 1)

At least as interesting as the strength of party identification, is the correlation between party identification and vote choice. Our findings indicate that the Netherlands is certainly not an exceptional case (Table 5). Without exception, in all Western European countries included in the first CSES module party identification and vote choice were strongly correlated. The overall pattern is strikingly similar to the findings presented above, albeit the correlations are slightly weaker. Among strong identifiers on average 91 per cent voted consistent with their party identification, whereas among weak identifiers the corresponding figure is 87 per cent. In two cases, the correlations are even slightly stronger than in the Netherlands: Denmark and Spain (2000). In three other cases, the correlations are only slightly weaker: Sweden, Norway, and Britain. Therefore, from this perspective there is little reason to speak of the Netherlands as a special case.

Table 5: Consistency between party identification and vote preference in Western European parliamentary elections, controlled for strength of identification

	Denmark	Germany	Iceland	Norway	Portugal	Spain '96
strong identification	96	84	89	95	89	82
(N)	(227)	(128)	(180)	(131)	(116)	(149)
weak identification	92	80	87	86	86	76
(N)	(551)	(639)	(618)	(986)	(188)	(424)

	Spain '00	Sweden	Switzerl.	UK	mean
strong identification	97	94	90	93	91
(N)	(119)	(124)	(145)	(223)	
weak identification	95	89	88	87	87
(N)	(412)	(497)	(598)	(540)	

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party.

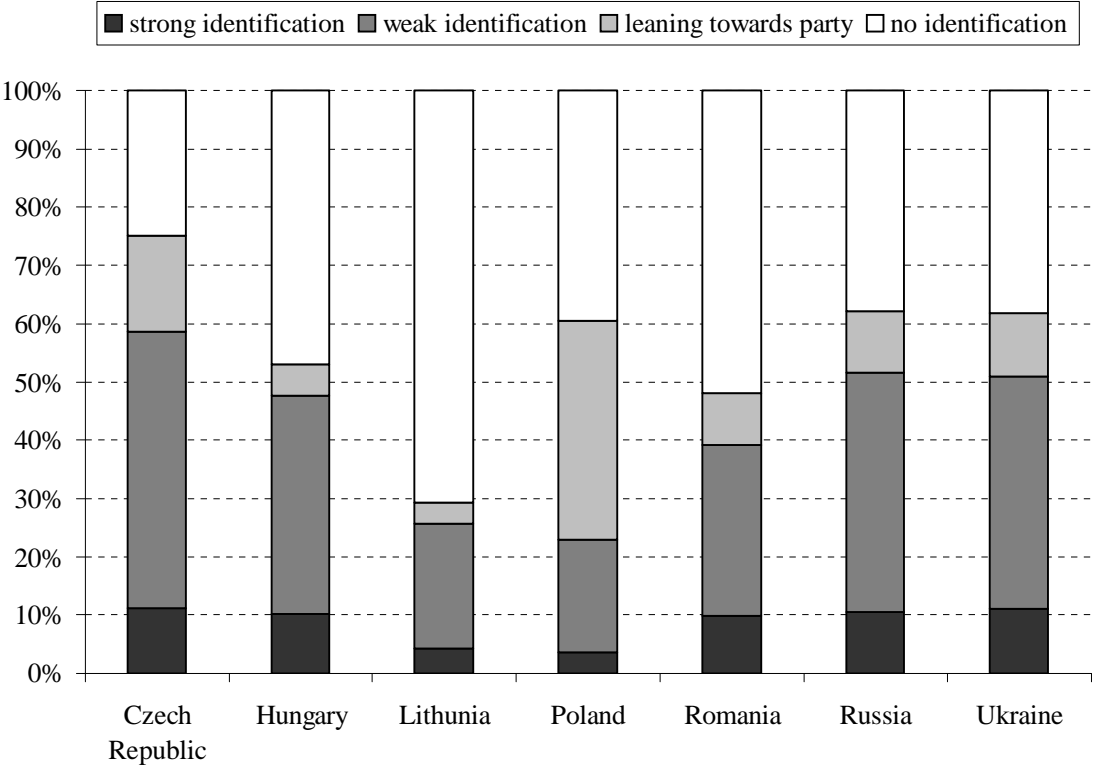
*Source:* CSES, module 1.

Another striking finding is the sizeable difference between the two Spanish elections. Whereas in 1986 more than 20 per cent voted inconsistent with their party identification, four years later only about 5 per cent did. Why this is the case is a matter of speculation. Since in both

elections the same persons were leading the two major parties (Aznar and Gonzalez), it is unlikely that these differences can be attributed to candidate characteristics.

The explanation put forward for the strong correlations between party identification and vote choice in the Netherlands in combination with their causal ordering, may also apply to other Western European countries. Although Lipset and Rokkan (1967) considered the Netherlands as the most typical case of their argument that party systems reflected deeply rooted social divisions, the same applied to other Western European countries. If this is true, then the younger democracies at the Eastern side of the same continent may be considered highly interesting. Their party systems are as recent, if not more recent, than their transition to democracy. It is not likely that those parties in the same way link up to deeply rooted social divisions. Given these circumstances, party identification may well serve the function that it was supposed to fulfil.

Figure 3: Strength of party identification in Eastern Europe (1996-2001)



Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module 1)

However, given their short history of democratic elections, one would expect that fewer voters have developed identification with a political party. This is indeed what can be observed (Figure 3). In the seven Eastern European countries that were included in the CSES, on the whole fewer respondents identified either strongly or weakly with a political party. However, the individual cases do not all tell the same story. In the Czech Republic, for example, the proportion of identifiers was as high as in any Western country listed above. Furthermore, party identification in Hungary, Russia and Ukraine hardly differed from party identification in established democracies like Switzerland, Sweden or Iceland. So either identification with political parties can be developed much quicker than the Michigan scholars originally supposed, or the measures used to operationalize party identification are poorly suited to do their job.

Further analyses reveal that in terms of the correlation between party identification and vote choice, the newly established democracies do not differ much from their older neighbours either. In Eastern European countries the correlation is also very strong (Table 6). In the Czech Republic and Hungary the correlations were even stronger than those reported earlier: virtually all voters (98 per cent) voted in accordance with their strong or weak identification. Although the interpretation of these findings is somewhat speculative, it is important to note that this is exactly what one would expect in new democracies if the causal ordering is like the above analysis of The Netherlands suggested. If citizens identify with a political party because they voted for it, in new democracies we expect to see particularly strong correlations between both concepts. This leads to the conclusion that in these circumstances party identification is not very useful for explaining vote choice, as both concepts can hardly be empirically distinguished. Again, the case of the Netherlands appears not to be as special as some argued.

Table 6: Consistency between party identification and vote preference in Eastern European parliamentary elections, controlled for strength of identification

	Czech R.	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Russia	Ukraine
strong identification	97	98	80	60	93	91
weak identification	98	98	62	57	89	77

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage of respondents who identified with and voted for the same party.

*Source:* CSES, module 1.

## **6. Party identification and vote choice in presidential elections**

If the earlier argument is correct, we should expect higher deviations from party identification in political systems offering voters stronger institutional incentives to vote for (the candidate of) a different party than the one they identify with. We therefore now shift our attention to presidential elections. Even if party identification would be of limited value in parliamentary systems, it may still be useful for explaining vote choice in presidential elections, where supposedly a ‘personal factor’ acts simultaneously with party identification in determining voters’ electoral preference.

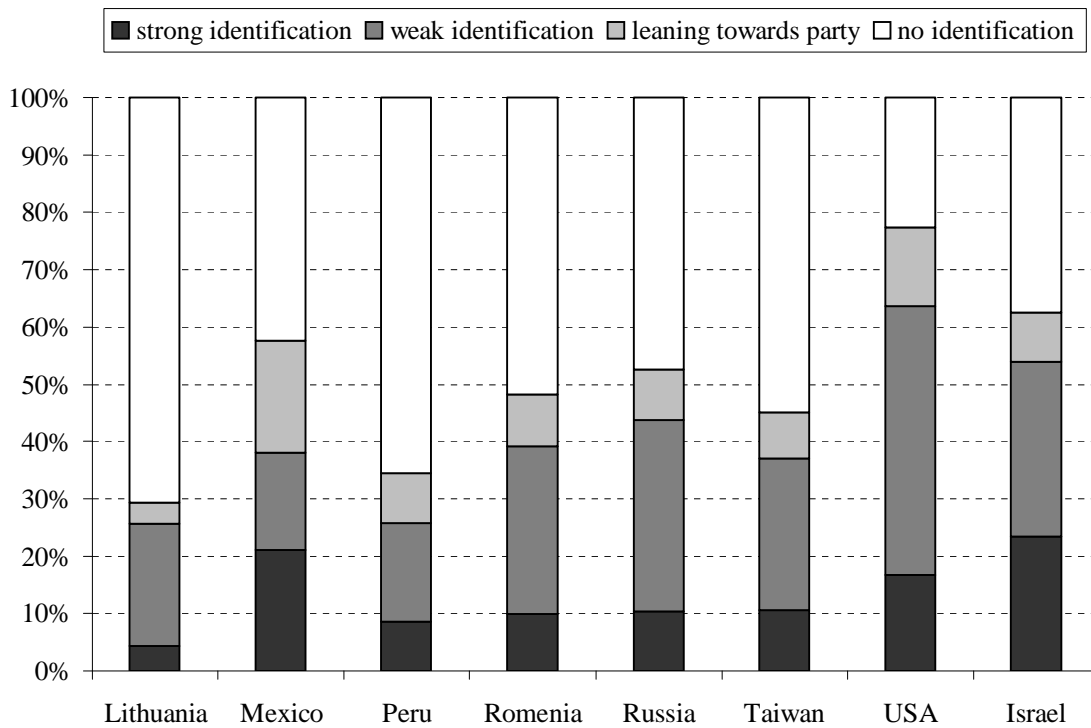
The first module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) contains data about ten presidential elections. In some of these elections analysing the relationship between party identification and vote choice does not make much sense, because party identification cannot have played a crucial role. This concerns elections in which the major candidates were independents (e.g., Adamkus and Paulauskas in Lithuania; Lukashenko in Belarus in 2001), in which the major candidates represented blocks that were formed around a particular candidate for the occasion (e.g., Putin in Russia in 2000), or in which only a few of the major parties took part in the presidential race (e.g., Chile in 1999).

This leaves six presidential elections that are of interest. These are the first ever popular presidential election in Taiwan, which brought victory to incumbent president Lee Tung-hui (1996); the Romanian presidential election between Constantinescu and Ilescu (1996); the US presidential race between Clinton, Dole, and Perot (1996); the Mexican contest between Ochoa, Fox, and Cardenas; and the two presidential elections in Peru between Fujimori and Toledo (2000) and between Toledo, Garcia, Flores and Olivera (2001). Furthermore, another election that is of interest and hence will be focused on, is the Israel election for prime minister between Netanyahu and Peres (1996).

The first question is to what extent voters identified with political parties in those political systems. The key finding is that this varied substantially across these political systems (Figure 4). The United States shows the strongest level of identification, with more than 60 per cent identifying, whereas in Peru and Lithuania less than 30 per cent of the respondents identified with any party. The only other country (apart from the US) in which a majority identified with a political party was Israel (54 per cent). In the four remaining countries about 40 per cent did so.

This means that in most countries the potential impact of party identification on the vote is more limited than in the US, simply because a larger share of the electorate does not identify with any party. On the other hand, identification with a political party occurs frequently enough to justify analysis of its impact on the vote.

Figure 4: Strength of party identification in presidential systems and Israel (1996-2001)



Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module 1)

The obvious next question is how strongly party identification correlated with vote choice among identifiers. We limit our analyses to voters who identified with a party that had a candidate in the presidential or prime ministerial election. In some cases this means that the analysis includes only identifiers of the two major parties (Israel, Romania), whereas in other instances identifiers of up to six parties are included (Peru, 2000). More important, however, is the proportion of respondents that identified with (minor) parties that had no candidate running. In the case of Romania and Israel this concerned almost 40 per cent of the identifiers. The value

of party identification for explaining vote choice is thus severely limited. Sizeable minorities of those who identified with a political party could not decide on that basis, because none of the candidates was from ‘their party’. In the other presidential elections few voters saw themselves in such a situation (less than 10 per cent), so most voters at least *could* vote consistent with their party identification.

Table 7: Consistency between party identification and vote preference in presidential elections and prime ministerial elections, controlled for strength of identification

	Mexico 2000	Peru 2000	Peru 2001	Romani a 1996	Taiwan 1996	USA 1996	Israel 1996
strong identification (N)	91 (316)	45 (58)	92 (117)	96 (68)	91 (109)	99 (232)	99 (129)
weak identification (N)	84 (282)	45 (147)	85 (194)	95 (160)	77 (260)	88 (576)	96 (200)

*Notes:* entries indicate the percentage of voters who identified with and voted for the same party; analyses only include respondents who identified with a party that had a candidate who ran for president; the Israel election concerned the prime minister; other elections concerned the presidency.

*Source:* CSES, module 1.

The general pattern is that the majority preferred to vote for the candidate of the party they identified with (Table 7). The strength of this correlation, however, strongly varied. In Romania and Israel less than 5 per cent of identifiers voted for the candidate of another party. In these cases party identification can hardly be empirically distinguished from vote choice. In the 2000 election in Peru, on the other hand, only a minority voted in accordance with their party identification. This controversial election was notable for a highly personalised campaign and instability of the party system (cf. CSES notes in appendix 1) – two ingredients that diminish the impact of party identification on the vote. In the next Peruvian election (2001) and the election in Taiwan, the corresponding figures varied between 15 and 25 per cent. The United States took an intermediate position: 10 per cent voted for the candidate of another party than their identification. This means that in three out of the seven elections the concept of party identification is not particularly useful for explaining vote choice, because both correlate either

very strongly or very weakly. Four presidential elections showed a pattern that is closer to what one would like to see, at least from the perspective of meaningfully applying party identification in electoral research.

Taken together, the findings of this section suggest that the concept of party identification is more useful in the United States than elsewhere. Except for Israel, in each other country a majority of voters did not identify with any party. Furthermore, in several elections the major candidates were independents (Lithuania) or represented blocks that had been formed for the occasion (Russia). Moreover, in some elections substantial numbers of voters were confronted with a contest in which their party had no candidate running (Chile, Israel, Romania). Another problem is that in some elections citizens who identified with the party of a presidential candidate virtually without exception voted accordingly, which means that party identification and vote choice can hardly be empirically distinguished (Romania, Israel). Finally, in one case the stability of the party system was so low that the impact of party identification was weak (Peru). The United States are the only country that witnessed none of these circumstances, which are problematic if one wishes to develop a model of voting in which the concept of party identification is central.

## **7. An alternative conceptualization of partisanship**

The conclusion that party identification cannot always be meaningfully applied outside the United States, does not mean that elsewhere electoral researchers should neglect voters' attachments with political parties. There are good reasons to include partisanship in models of voting. One reason is that the impact of party leaders and strategic voting can arguably be analysed best if voters' judgements about political parties are included as a baseline. If such factors indeed have impact, there should be discrepancies between partisanship and vote choice. If discrepancies cannot be observed on the basis of common measures of party identification, it makes sense to examine the use of alternative conceptualizations and measurements. Also the observation that party *identification* may well be the result (instead of the cause) of vote choice, points to the need to explore an alternative conceptualization of partisanship.

There are also other reasons why a different conceptualization and operationalization of



partisanship may be considered useful. First, several scholars have found that substantial proportion of the electorate identifies with more than one party (e.g., Van der Eijk and Niemöller 1986). Neither the concept of party identification nor its measures are well suited to deal with multiple partisanship. 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 (Maggiotto and Piereson 1977; Richardson 1991; Rose & Mishler 1998).

Partisanship was originally conceptualized on the basis of the psychological concept of social identity, and consequently was labelled party *identification* (Campbell et al. 1954; 1960). Another psychological concept upon which the conceptualization of partisanship can be based, is that of attitudes (Greene 2002; Rosema in press). Attitude has been a key concept in social psychology. The central element in the definition of an attitude is *evaluation* with a degree of favour or disfavour (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, p. 1). Hence, partisanship that is conceptualized on the basis of this concept may be referred to as party *evaluations* (instead of 'attitudes towards parties'). Party evaluations, then, indicate the extent to which an individual favourably or unfavourably evaluates a particular party, that is, the degree to which a person likes or dislikes a party. By comparing evaluations of competing parties at the individual level, it becomes clear which party a person likes best. This may be referred to as the party *preference*.

One of the present authors demonstrated that if partisanship is conceptualized and operationalized on this basis, even in the Netherlands partisanship and vote choice can be meaningfully distinguished (Rosema in press). 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 positively. Additional analyses indicated that the discrepancies could partly be attributed to effects of party leaders and strategic considerations concerning the future government coalition. Hence it was concluded that in multi-party parliamentary systems like the Netherlands it may be useful to conceptualize partisanship in terms of evaluation instead of identification.

Our conclusion in the previous section that even in presidential and prime-ministerial elections party identification does not always appear to be as useful as in the United States, prompts the question whether conceptualizing partisanship in terms of attitudes is also useful in that context. Below we examine this by focusing on the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election

between incumbent Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who had succeeded the assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, and Benjamin Netanyahu. The latter won with a margin of one per cent. This election is particularly interesting, because it combined two features (see section 6): many voters identified with other parties than those of the two candidates, and the correlation between party identification and vote choice was very strong.

Our analyses are based on the following CSES-question, which links up well with the notion of party evaluations.

I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so. The first party is [party A].

Respondents in Israel were asked to rate five parties, which included Netanyahu's party Likud and Peres' Labour Party.

A first advantage of analysing partisanship in terms of evaluation instead of identification becomes apparent if the directional component of party identification is compared to the extent to which party evaluation measures reveal a preference for a party. The proportion of respondents who identified with either of the two major parties equalled 40 per cent: 24 per cent identified with Likud and 16 per cent identified with Labour. The other voters either identified with another party (26%) or with no party (35%). Because the two latter groups did vote in the prime ministerial election, it is not possible to adequately explain voters' choices in those elections on the basis of their party identification.<sup>3</sup> If partisanship is conceptualized in terms of party evaluations and party preferences, the situation changes. First, 51 per cent rated either Likud or Labour more positively than any other party (in about equal numbers). The others liked another party best (23%) or liked two or more parties equally well (25%), while few respondents were fully indifferent and awarded all parties the same rating (2%). If we focus only on the two major parties, the ratings indicate that 87 per cent of the respondents liked one of the two major parties better than the other (Labour leading with 3 per cent), whereas 13 per cent were indifferent. So conceptualizing partisanship in terms of party evaluations instead of party identification increases the number of respondents for whom vote choice can be meaningfully predicted from 40 to 87 per cent.

The key question, of course, is to what extent vote choice can be accurately predicted on the basis of these alternative measures of partisanship. Our findings indicate that they go a long way. Among voters who preferred either Labour or Likud, 95 per cent voted consistent with their party preference. This correlation is only slightly weaker than that between party identification and vote choice (97 per cent voted consistent).

So far we have distinguished between preferring a party and not preferring, without taking into account the strength of this preference. However, we may expect that the extent to which electoral choices can be accurately predicted on the basis of partisanship depends at least partly on this aspect. Below we therefore distinguish between five preference categories: strong preference for Labour, weak preference for Labour, indifferent, weak preference for Likud, and strong preference for Likud. The cut-off point we have used to distinguish between strong and weak preferences is 4 points or more on the 11-point rating scale (we admit this is an arbitrary choice). Table 8 shows the expected pattern: respondents who strongly preferred either party, voted for its candidate in larger numbers. The table also shows that strength of party preference had little effect on participation: among all voters who preferred either party reported turnout was about 93 per cent. Abstention was more likely, however, among those who were indifferent about both parties (reported turnout was 80 per cent).

Table 8: Consistency between party preference and vote preference in the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election, controlled for strength of party preference

	Peres	Netanyahu	(N)	% voted
strong preference for Labour	98	2	(275)	94
weak preference for Labour	86	14	(133)	93
indifferent	37	63	(84)	80
weak preference for Likud	9	91	(161)	92
strong preference for Likud	2	98	(222)	94

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage of respondents who voted for the candidate; entries in the last column indicate the percentage of respondents who voted at all.

*Source:* CSES, module 1.

Although most respondents voted consistent with their party preference, some discrepancies can be observed. A straightforward explanation (apart from unreliability of measurement), is that these deviations are a consequence of evaluations of the competing candidates. A first prerequisite, then, is that voters do not always like best the candidate of their favourite party. This indeed sometimes happened. Most respondents, however, preferred one party and also preferred that party's candidate (75 per cent). Others preferred one party but were indifferent about both candidates (6 per cent), they were indifferent about both parties but preferred one candidate (7 per cent), or they were indifferent about both parties as well as both candidates (6 per cent). Arguably, the most interesting group consists of the final group: voters who preferred one party, but liked the candidate of the other party best. This applied to 6 per cent of all respondents.

Table 9: Party preference, leader preference, and vote preference in the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election

	voted preferred party	voted preferred leader
party and leader preference consistent	97	97
party preferred, leader indifferent	91	–
party indifferent, leader preferred	–	74
party and leader preference inconsistent	67	33

*Note:* entries indicate the percentage of respondents who voted for the party or leader they preferred.

*Source:* CSES, module 1.

Findings presented in Table 9 indicate that candidate evaluations indeed played a role. If voters also preferred the candidate of their favourite party, they were extremely likely to vote for that party's candidate (97 per cent). If voters were indifferent about both candidates, the likelihood that they voted for the party's candidate was smaller, albeit still large (90 per cent). If voters liked the candidate of the other party better, they were still inclined to stick to their favourite party's candidate but in much smaller numbers (67 per cent). This means that although candidate evaluations played a role, party attachments were the key factor behind vote choice in the prime ministerial election. This can also be seen if we focus on voters who were indifferent

about either both candidates or both parties: these respondents were more likely to vote consistent with their party preference (91 per cent) than with their candidate preference (74 per cent).

These findings lead to two conclusions. First, in the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election vote choice was strongly influenced by party attachments. This is not to say that candidate characteristics did not a a role. Most voters, however, preferred the candidate of their preferred party while others were indifferent. Few found themselves in a situation that they preferred one party but the othe party's candidate. Of those, two out of three cases voted in line with partisanship. A second conclusion, which is more fundamental, is that conceptualizing partisanship in terms of party evaluations is useful when analyzing elections in which a single person is elected in office. The analysis performed concerned a prime ministerial election, but presidential elections can be analysed in the same way. Several of the problems associated with the concept of party identification and its measures, then do not apply.

## **8. Summary and conclusion**

In this paper 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 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 mainly confirm our original findings and therefore there is no reason to revise our original conclusion. Party identification seems to be less stable than party 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 party preference at a particular point in time. Therefore, the usefulness of the concept of party identification in the Netherlands is as doubtful as it was in the 1970s.

A more general 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 discerned. Why this is the case, is a matter of dispute. It 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 form an incentive to deviate from one's party identification.

The number of presidential systems we could use to test this hypothesis was limited. But at least for those countries we came to the conclusion that the concept of party identification seems to be less useful to analyse presidential elections than it is in the United States. The United States has a number of characteristics that make party identification a useful concept, which these other presidential systems do not share. Firstly, a majority identifies with a political party (the only other case is Israel). Secondly, all major parties that voters identify with have a candidate running. And thirdly, the proportion of the electorate that votes in line with their party identification is neither so high that both concepts can hardly be empirically distinguished, nor so low that its predictive value is severely limited. None of the other countries analysed share these characteristics.

Finally, we explored the possibility of conceptualizing and operationalizing partisanship differently, in order to overcome the observed problems of the party identification concept and its measures. In a recent paper we argued that in parliamentary systems like the Netherlands it may be more useful to define partisanship in terms of the psychological concepts of attitudes (Rosema in press). Above we applied the same method to analyse the 1996 Israel prime ministerial election and analysed the impact of *party evaluations*. Whereas only 40 per cent tended towards either Likud or Labour in terms of party identification (including leaners), in terms of party evaluations more than 85 per cent was classified as preferring one party to the other. Moreover, these respondents voted accordingly in large numbers. In brief, partisanship had a very strong influence on the vote (although candidate evaluations had some impact as well). This could be demonstrated well if partisanship is conceptualized (and measured) in terms of party evaluations instead of party identification.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Denmark the follow-up question about the degree of closeness was not asked to 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.

<sup>2</sup> Although the Dutch national election study included the CSES module, the original question wording on party identification was maintained in order to safeguard comparability over time.

<sup>3</sup> Of the respondents who identified with Labour or Likud 95 per cent reported a vote for prime minister. Of the respondents who identified with another party 90 per cent did so, while among non-identifiers the corresponding figure equalled 83 per cent.

Party identification revisited. In B. John & B. Paolo (Eds.), *Political parties and partisanship: Social identity and individual attitudes* (pp. 42–59). London: Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science. Party identification revisited. Jacques Thomassen & Martin Rosema. Workshop 22: Beyond “Party identification and beyond”™. Abstract In this paper we revisit the debate on the usefulness of the concept of party identification in cross-national research. In our earlier work we showed that, at least in the Netherlands, party identification was empirically hardly discernible from the vote, whereas party identification was less stable than vote choice (Thomassen 1976). I argue that party identification exaggerates intra-European differences, in comparison to non-European groups. The Limited Picture of Partisan Politics. Political parties adapt to the landscape in which they evolve. The party adjacent to the minority group cannot adjust itself to fully represent them without ceding competitive voters at the center of the majority. The result is that party identification remains dominated by the incumbent majority, with the minority fitting themselves into their nearest party as best they can.