

# Rapport

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### Party Identification - Up in USA, Down in Sweden

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# Party Identification – Up in USA, Down in Sweden

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## Sammanfattning

Artikeln är en uppdaterad version av ett kapitel *Party Identification – Down But Not Out* i boken *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship*. Graden av partiidentifikation har stärkts påtagligt bland väljare i USA under 2000-talet samtidigt som den har försvagats i Sverige. Förklaringen är politisk, inte sociologisk. Bakomliggande orsak är en ökad politisk polarisering mellan de republikanska och demokratiska partierna i USA, medan väljarna i Sverige uppfattar ett minskande avstånd mellan de regeringsbärande partierna Socialdemokraterna och Moderaterna på den dominerande vänster-högerdimensionen.

## Summary

This article is an updated version of a chapter *Party Identification – Down But Not Out* in the book *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship*. The degree of party identification among US voters has increased substantially during the 2000s while at the same time the strength of party identification has declined in Sweden. The cause is political, not sociological. The explanation is an increased political polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties in USA, and a decreased polarization in Sweden. Swedish voters perceive a diminished distance between the government-forming parties, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives on the dominant left-right political scale in Sweden.

All representative democracies, ever since the beginning in Britain, Sweden, USA, and France in the 18th century, have functioned through political groups that eventually evolved into political parties. That fact has been even more evident during the last century when voting rights have been extended to all adults and elections and competitive multi-party systems have become the defining features of democracy. The importance of parties to representative democracy is like the importance of water to shipping. Without political parties, no representative democracy.

Seen in this light, citizens' preference, attachment or identification with parties, and subsequent willingness to support them at election time, are absolutely essential. If citizens cannot find something attractive in at least one party and turn out to vote, democracy cannot function. However, deeply rooted or long-lasting attachments are not strictly necessary in this context. In theory, a democracy in which all voters continually change preferences from day to day or from election to election, would still function, but in all likelihood, not in practice. Communicative transaction costs would be prohibitive in such a system. A minimum degree of permanence in party appreciation serves as an economizing cue for voters, and contributes to stability of democratic systems. Hence, the importance of party attachments or identifications cannot be exaggerated. It is no coincidence that party identification has been one of the key variables of electoral research ever since the Michigan Four introduced the concept seventy years ago in *The American Voter* (1960).

Since then, or actually since somewhat earlier in the 1950s, the American National Election Studies (ANES) has continued to measure party identification in US elections. Fortunately, they have resisted changing the measuring instrument. The time series going back to 1952 continue to categorize American voters in the same traditional way with a 7-point scale tapping the direction and strength of party identification. Respondents are classified as identifying Democrat, identifying Republican, or Independent. In doing so four levels of identification are distinguished – strong identifiers, weak identifiers, independents leaning toward a party, and pure independents.

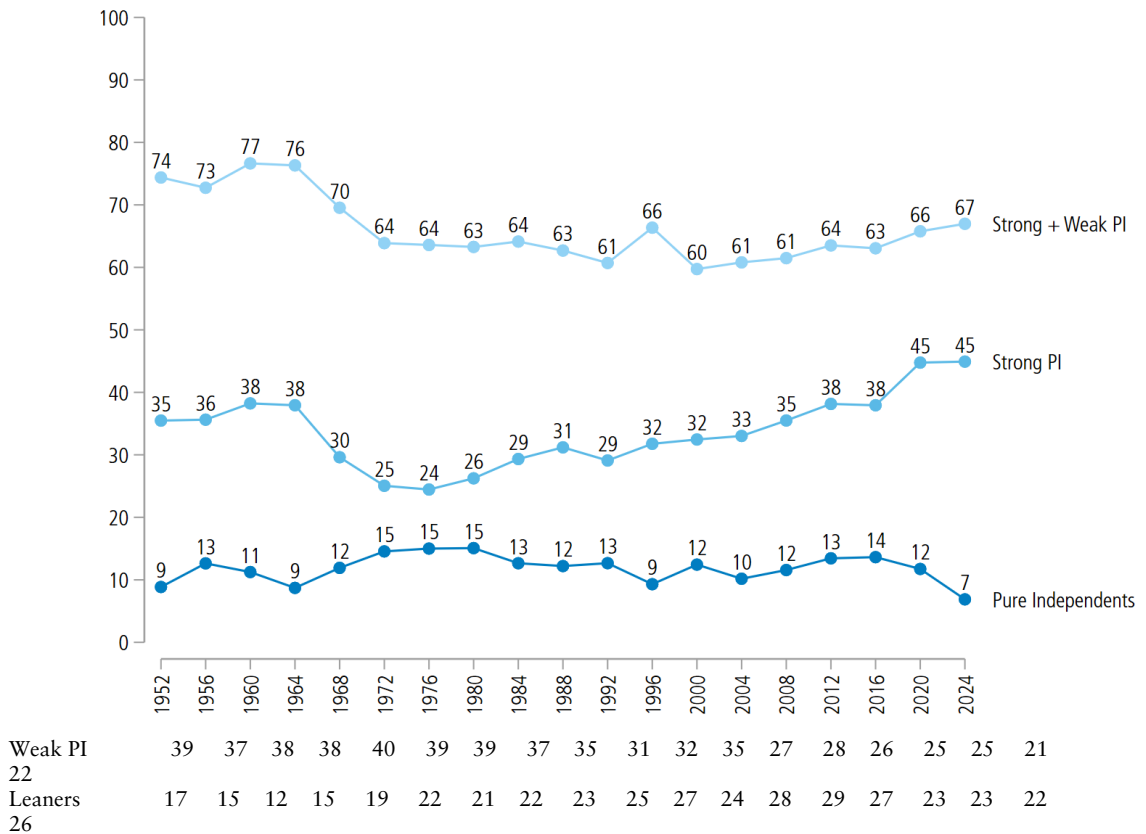
The results in Figure 1 show how the level of party identification has evolved over the past seven decades in America, according to ANES at presidential elections.<sup>1</sup> The outcome may come as a surprise to many pundits in US media who have been talking about the decline of party support and a marked increase of independents in America. Yes, there is some decline in the strength of party identification, and yes, independents have become more common. But we are not witnessing any drastic change. The share of strong and weak identifiers have only modestly decreased from 74 percent in 1952 to 67 percent in 2024, while the proportion of pure independents has increased from 9 to 12 percent in 2020, but again down to 7 percent in 2024. A closer look at the time series indicates that the entire change happened half a century ago, during the 1960s and early 1970s. Since then, the share of independents has not increased, and the combined share of strong and weak identifiers has not decreased. In fact, the most noticeable change is an increase in strong identifiers, from 24 percent in 1976 to 38 percent in 2020 and 2024. Rather than a decline, we see a trend towards stronger party attachment.

The message from ANES is that party identification in America took a downward hit in the years 1964-1976 (the Vietnam war and Watergate). But in the 2010s and now in the 2020s, the level of party identification is almost back to where it was in the 1950s. Present day American party identification is somewhat down, but quite evidently not out (see Figure 1). And the proportion of strong identifiers is higher than ever.

In European countries, with almost as long traditions of measuring party identification as in the United States, results are very different when we compare developments since the mid 1970s. When the strength of party identification has been stable or increased in the United States, it has tended to decrease in Western Europe. That is the case in Britain, Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, and Norway.<sup>2</sup> Other

studies involving larger numbers of countries have reached the same conclusion. Party identification weakened in most industrial democracies in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dalton, 2000; Schmitt & Holmberg, 1995). For example, Dalton found a downward trend in 17 out of 19 countries represented in his study. However, when looking at more recent developments, during the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems that the decline in party identification has slowed down internationally. Önnudóttir and Hardarson, using data from the project the True European Voter (TEV), show in *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship* (RHOPP) that the share of partisan voters is declining in four countries, but is stable or increasing in seven countries.

Figure 1 USA: Strength of Party Identification 1952-2024 (Percent)



Source: American National Election Studies.

Comment: The ANES variable used is a combined variable of the following questions "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as [a Democrat, a Republican / a Republican, a Democrat], an independent, or what?", "Would you call yourself a strong [Democrat / Republican] or a not very strong [Democrat / Republican]?", "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?", and "If you had to choose, are you closer to the Democrats or the Republicans? Or is there no difference at all between them?".

A similar conclusion can be drawn from the results on changing levels of party attachments across the first decades of the 2000s in over twenty countries participating in the CSES project. As revealed in Table 1, degrees of attachment to a party varies dramatically between different democratic systems, from highs around 55-60 percent in countries like France, USA, and New Zealand to lows below 20 percent in Slovenia and Thailand. But when observing the levels of attachments in the early 2000s, it is evident that there is no dominant trend of weakening party attachments. CSES data indicate a decrease in 15 countries, while the level of party attachment increases in another 12 countries. The steepest declines are found in Israel and in three East European countries – Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania. The clearest examples of increasing levels of

party attachments are in newer democracies such as Taiwan and South Korea. The average change in the level of party attachments in the early 2000s across the 27 studied countries is -1,3 percentage points. Thus, still mostly down, but clearly less so than in the last decades of the 1900s.

Table 1 Party Closeness in 27 Countries (Percent)

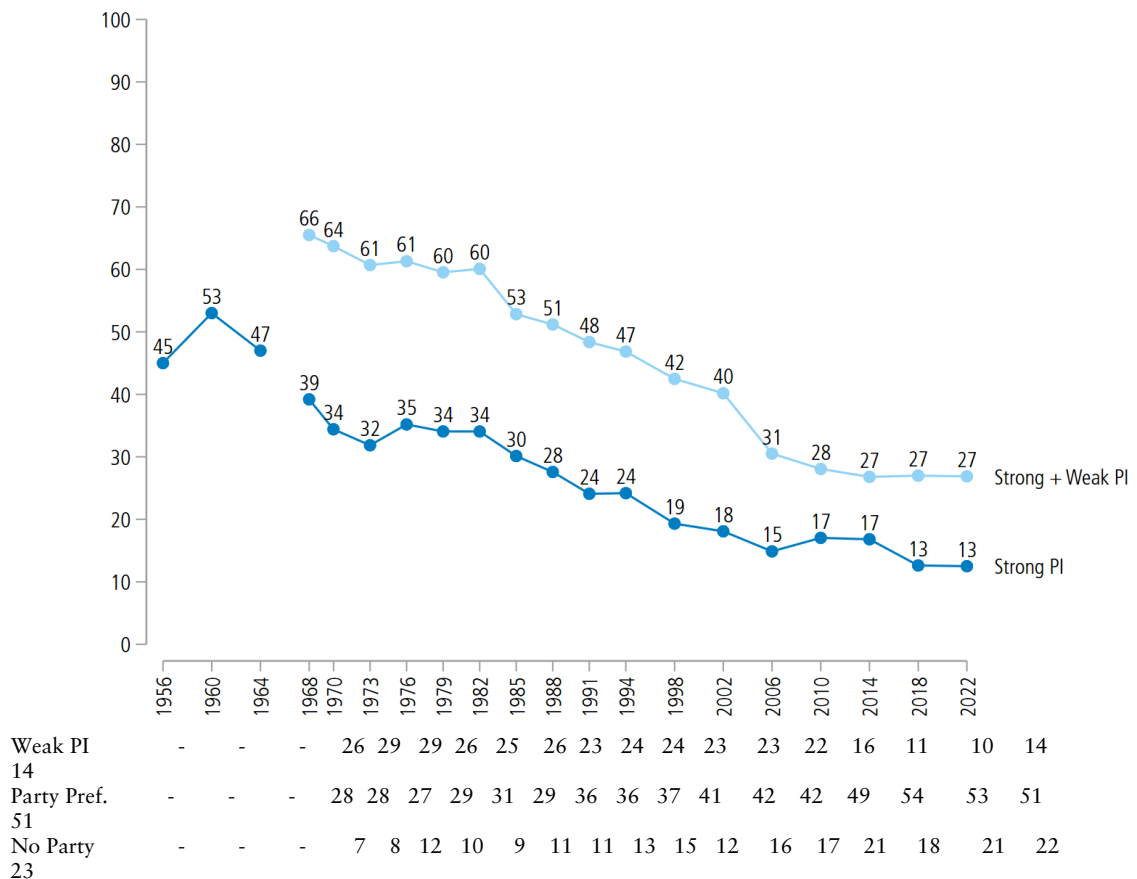
	CSES I 1996-00	CSES II 2000-05	CSES III 2005-10	CSES IV 2011-16	CSES V 2016-	Change
<b>Increase</b>						
S. Korea	23	34	38	46	50	+27
Peru	18	27	39	48	37	+19
Taiwan	33	45	50	55	49	+16
Finland	-	46	54	52	-	+6
France	-	55	70	60	-	+5
Ireland	-	27	31	21	31	+4
Japan	39	50	38	42	-	+3
Philippines	-	15	16	-	18	+3
New Zealand	52	54	45	54	-	+2
USA	54	56	61	60	55	+1
Germany	39	44	49	48	40	+1
Switzerland	37	42	42	37	-	+0
<b>Decrease</b>						
Great Britain	49	35	-	47	-	-2
Canada	51	37	40	48	-	-3
Sweden	53	48	49	52	50	-3
Hungary	36	52	-	-	33	-3
Thailand	-	14	6	11	-	-3
Norway	53	44	52	48	-	-5
Slovenia	20	20	20	14	-	-6
Iceland	51	53	49	44	-	-7
Lithuania	31	-	-	-	24	-7
Portugal	-	48	45	41	-	-7
Chile	21	34	26	-	13	-8
Poland	49	43	50	35	-	-14
Czech Republic	45	58	40	31	-	-14
Romania	45	38	48	27	-	-18
Israel	63	60	44	40	-	-23

**Comment:** The table shows the share answering yes, close to a party in CSES election studies 1996-2018. Weighted results for every country. All respondents are included in the percentage base. The change estimate is computed between the two most time-distant results for every country. Question wording "Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?".

Sweden is one of the countries where the strength of party identification has continued to decline in the 2000s. This trend is even more evident when we look at the traditional measure of party identification, which asks about the *feeling* of party adherence, than when we examine at the CSES results, which are based on a *judgement* question about closeness to a party. In both instances, the level of party support has declined in the last decades, but clearly more so when measured as feeling of party adherence.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on results from the Swedish National Election Study (SNES), where the measurement is based on the traditional ANES style question, Figure 2 show how the level of party identification has changed among Swedish voters since the 1950s. The contrast to the American results could not be starker. In Sweden, strength of party identification has gone down in an almost perfect linear fashion since the 1960s. The combined proportion

of strong and weak identifiers has declined from 66 percent in 1968 to only 27 percent in 2022. The comparable development for only strong identifiers is a decline from 39 to 13 percent. In the United States, the results are drastically different. The share of strong party identifiers has increased from 24 percent in 1976 to 45 percent in 2024.

Figure 2. Sweden: Strength of Party Identification 1956-2022 (Percent)



**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies data.

**Comment:** All results are unweighted. Question wording in 1956-1964 was "Some people are strongly convinced adherents of the party they intend to vote for. Others are not so strongly convinced. Do you yourself belong to the strongly convinced adherents of any party?". Question wording 1968-2022 was "Many see themselves as a supporter of a specific party. But there are also many who do not have such an attitude to any of the parties. Do you usually consider yourself a supporter of a party?", followed by "Which party do you like the best?" and "Some are strongly convinced supporters of their party. Others are not so strongly convinced. Are you one of the strongly convinced supporters of your party?", and finally "Still, is there any party that you consider yourself closer to than any of the other parties?".

It is apparent that political parties have strengthened their position among voters in the U.S., while at the same time their hold has weakened in Sweden. A plausible explanation for this difference is political. The United States has witnessed increasing party polarization during the last thirty-four years, while Sweden has experienced decreased polarization, at least in left-right terms (Oscarsson & Holmberg 2016). When parties differ, it is easier and more meaningful for people to identify. Note that the sociologically inspired modernization theory predicting falling levels of party identification fails to explain the difference between USA and Sweden – unless we propose that America has become less modernized during the last couple of decades (Holmberg, 2007).

### What Moves Party Identification

With hindsight, it is somewhat surprising that the formation of party identification has been such a contentious issue in election research. Scholars have neither agreed on how moveable party identification is nor on what moves party identification. Put simply, two theoretical approaches have been locking horns: one emphasizing political explanations, and the other focusing on sociological or social-psychological causes.

The original claim by Campbell et al. in *The American Voter* was that party identification is a primarily non-political phenomenon formed by early socialization in childhood or in adolescence. Thereafter, not much should move, except at rare moments when realignments could happen. Thus, party identification was seen as an unmoved mover – an exogenous variable impacting politics, but not being impacted by politics.

Critical voices against this apolitical theory have been heard since at least the 1970s. The obvious counter-theory is that you cannot take politics out of party identification. The mover is not unmovable. The volatility in party identification indicates that short term as well as long term political (and economic) factors play a role in forming and changing voters' party identifications. Politics moves party identification. Party identification should therefore be treated as an endogenous movable variable in studies of voting behavior (Fiorina, 1981).

It is neither controversial nor unfair to state that the debate has been won by the critics. Numerous empirical studies during the last forty years have shown that party identification surely is moved by political factors (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001). Furthermore, sociologically inspired explanations have not help up well when tested, particularly when examined outside America.

One example is the modernization theory and the hypothesis of cognitive mobilization (Converse, 1964, 1975; Dalton, 1984). With higher levels of education and more media consumption, modern and more sophisticated citizens are presumed to be less in need of cues and guidance from political parties. Thus, the cost-saving device of party identification is not as useful as before for the more highly educated citizens of today. An empirical test of these claims, presented in the book *The European Voter* (2005:116), concluded: "Taking all evidence together there is little support for the cognitive mobilization hypothesis and thus for the theory of modernization". One piece of this evidence was that among young European voters, it was the least educated, not the most educated who tended to have the lowest levels of party identification. Contrary to the hypothesis, the least sophisticated, not the most sophisticated tended to turn their backs on political parties. Using level of education as an indicator of sophistication and cognitive mobilization is of course a crude simplification. A more straightforward method is to look at people's degrees of political knowledge and how that relates to the strength of party identification.

Doing that for the Swedish case is very revealing. In every election study since the 1980s, when good and broad knowledge measurements were introduced in the SNES questionnaires, the proportion of party identifiers has been markedly higher among politically sophisticated Swedes than among Swedes with poorer levels of political knowledge. For example, in the election study of 2014, among voters with the highest level of political knowledge, the proportion of party identifiers (strong and weak combined) was 35 percent. The comparative result among voters with the lowest knowledge score was 18 percent (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). Knowledge or sophistication is associated with higher levels of party identification, not with lower levels as posited in modernization theory. Apparently, party identification is still useful for the most knowledgeable voters.<sup>4</sup>

Another example of a sociological explanation that has not stood up well to the test of time is the theory that the strength component in party identification changes with voters' age. Converse formulated the idea like this: "Identifications intensify as a function not of age per se, but rather as a function of the length of time that the individual has felt some generalized preference for a particular party and has repetitively voted for



it” (1976:12-13). This aging or life cycle hypothesis has been put to numerous tests over the years – both within and outside America. The results have become more and more reliable as the time series get longer. There are a few tests with outcomes in support of Converse’s life cycle model based on American and Danish data (Borre 1999; Miller & Shanks 1996). But in more cases, data tend to lend support to an alternative hypothesis – the generational model, which states that people’s sentiments primarily are formed in early age and remain fairly stable thereafter (Chapter 13 by Kroh in RHOPP). Studies performed in America (Abramson, 1983), Britain (Crewe & Thomson, 1999), and Sweden (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2004; Westholm, 1991) indicate that voter’s level of party identification remain stable or actually diminish in age cohorts over time.

Cohort analyses require long time series. In the Swedish case, SNES 1968-2022 covers fifty plus years and seventeen elections with comparable party identification measurements, involving some 52 000 respondents born between 1883 to 2004. In Table 2, a cohort analysis is done based on all these data. Fourteen age cohorts are singled out from the oldest where people were born in the 1800s to the youngest with voters born 1992-2004. The results are very clear. In all cohorts, the proportion of voters with party identification (strong and weak identifiers combined) is going down over time. It is neither increasing, as posited by the life cycle model, nor stable as expected in the generational model. The strength of party identification is instead declining in all cohorts. We could talk of a wear out model. As time goes by, Swedish voters of all ages during the last fifty years, have tended to become less identified with the parties they vote for. Partisan ties have become weaker as voters grow older. This is not a very positive sign for the Swedish party system, or for the long term stability of Swedish party-based democracy (Barrling & Holmberg, 2018). To understand what has happened we need to examine political factors. Sociological and social-psychological explanations are not enough.

Explaining the decline in partisanship is no easy task especially since there is no linear or uniform downward trend across most industrial democracies. There are some cases with stable or even increasing levels of party identification (USA) and cases with long term and drastic falls (Sweden). An unsystematic and anecdotal glance at possible relationships between political developments and changes in partisanship across different countries illustrates the importance of political circumstances behind the ups and downs in partisan ties (Holmberg, 1994):

- The increase in the percentage of strong party identifiers in America began in the 1980s, when Reagan and the Republicans started to polarize US politics and party differences became more distinct.
- The sharp turn down in the level of party identification in the late 1980s in democracies like Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands is concurrent with setbacks at the polls for hegemonical Social Democratic parties.
- The increase in partisanship in Germany in 1990 could be seen as an effect of the German unification process.
- The decline in the strength of party identification in Sweden has coincided with the entry of many new parties – the Greens, the Christian Democrats, the New Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats.

The examples indicate that political factors are at play and might be important explanations when degrees of partisanship change in democracies. But, of course, more systematic studies are needed before we can establish the relevance of political circumstances. A comparative study of thirteen European countries by Schmitt and Holmberg (1995) tested four political hypotheses related to partisanship. The first stated that political polarization affects the level of party identification; more polarization leads to more partisanship. The second and third hypotheses postulated that ideological differences and issue conflicts impacted levels of party identification; differences or

conflicts tend to increase voters' partisan ties. The fourth hypothesis claimed that the number of effective parties matter; more parties lead to decreased levels of partisanship. More to choose from lowers intensity in the preference for the chosen party (Schmitt & Holmberg, 1995). The outcomes of the tests were not as solid as one would have wanted. All relationships were weak. But importantly, a majority of the studied countries showed results according to expectations. Between 60-70 percent of the cases ended up as predicted, and in support of the hypotheses.

**Table 2 Cohort Analysis of the Development of Party Identification Among Swedish Voters 1968-2022**

Generation	1968	1970	1973	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018	2022	Difference First-Last Year	Slope Coefficient	Number of Years
1992-2004	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	19	14	-	-	8
1984-1991	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17	20	15	16	18	-	-	16
1976-1983	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	28	25	22	19	18	22	20	-8	-0.31 *	24
1968-1975	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	36	33	28	31	26	20	24	22	21	-16	-0.50 *	34
1960-1967	-	-	-	-	-	42	39	38	33	36	34	34	27	24	26	27	28	-14	-0.39 *	40
1952-1959	-	-	-	44	44	51	43	44	44	42	42	40	30	31	30	32	32	-12	-0.41 *	46
1944-1951	45	49	46	54	55	58	49	47	48	51	50	47	37	34	36	33	35	-10	-0.33 *	54
1936-1943	57	57	53	55	54	54	52	53	53	54	51	47	39	42	38	40	40	-17	-0.36 *	54
1928-1935	64	60	61	61	64	67	61	55	58	62	56	58	41	46	-	-	47	-17	-0.36 *	54
1920-1927	69	66	67	68	66	66	66	66	65	62	58	59	-	-	-	-	-	-10	-0.27 *	34
1912-1919	69	71	68	71	67	71	67	71	63	65	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-4	-0.17	26
1904-1911	75	71	73	75	74	77	68	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-7	-0.12	17
1896-1903	75	74	76	75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
1883-1895	70	74	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2

**Source:** Swedish National Election data.

**Comments:** The results show per cent strong and weak party identifiers combined. The number of persons in each cell is in most cases over one hundred. The slope coefficients are based on regression analyses with percent party identifiers as the dependent variable and election year as the independent variable. Slope values marked with an asterix (\*) are significant on the .01-level. All results are unweighted.

The results are clearer if we concentrate on Sweden – the country with the steepest decline in levels of party identification during the last fifty years. For example, focusing on the polarization hypothesis – and the movement across time of a variable measuring how voters perceive the distance between parties on the left-right scale in comparison to how the level of partisanship has changed – reveals a very strong relationship. The correlation for the period 1979-2014 is a convincing .90. The operational measure for the left-right distance is how voters see the interval between Sweden's at the time two largest parties, the Social Democrats and the Conservatives on the 0 to 10 ideological scale. In 1979 that range were 6.0 units, shrinking to 5.3 in 1998 and to 4.5 in 2014. At the same time the strength of partisanship has declined from 60 percent in 1979 to 42 percent in 1998 and to 27 percent in 2014. An almost linear decline in perceived ideological polarization has gone hand in hand with an equally almost linear downturn in the level of party identification. It is difficult to think of a stronger indication of the importance of political factors in explaining party identification and the change in levels across time. When political polarization between parties goes down, the strength in people's partisan ties follows suite.<sup>5</sup> And, as the American case shows, when polarization increases, voters become more strongly partisan (Hetherington, 2001; Wattenberg, 1998).

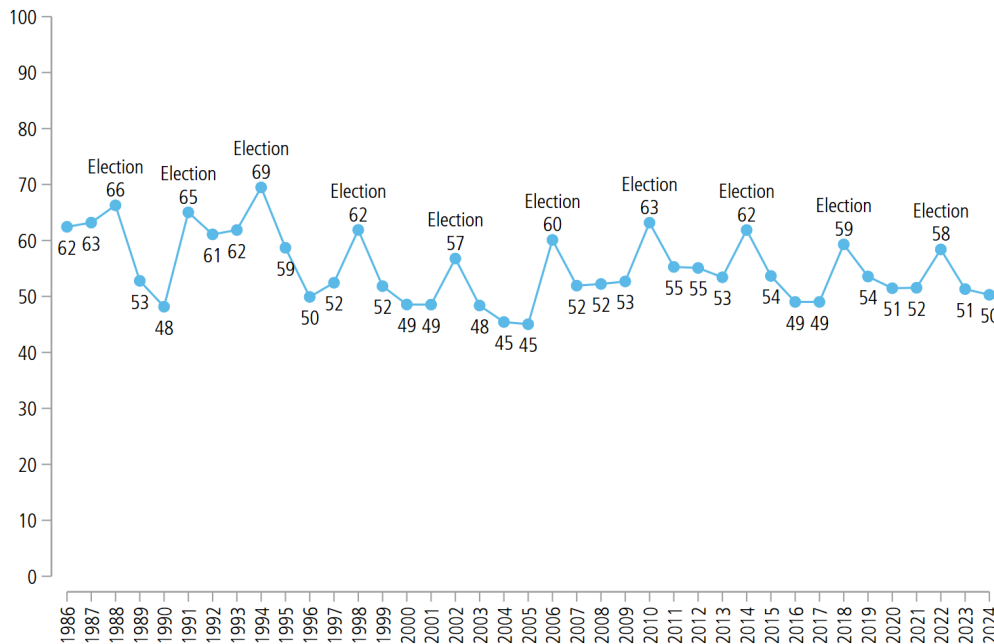
An obvious individual level prerequisite for a possible causal link between people's ideological position and level of partisanship is that the strength of party identification is related to how close – in terms of ideology and issue position – voters are to their chosen parties. Among Swedish voters, a distinct political coloring of this strength component of party identification is clearly present. Citizens who locate themselves close to their preferred party on the left-right scale and who evaluate their party's policies favorably show stronger partisan ties than others (Holmberg, 1992; Holmberg & Gilljam, 1987). The strength of the relationship varies across the parties. Correlations tend to be strongest for Left Party voters together with voters for the Social Democrats and the Conservatives, and markedly lower for voters supporting the “middle” parties, the Liberals and the Center Party. Some correlations reach the .40 level, but the average is much lower, around .12.<sup>6</sup> The size of the correlations is not impressive, but considering the attenuating effect of measurement errors, they are descent and in the direction of the hypothesis. In sum, strength of party identification has a political content among Swedish voters

A good illustration of why the strength of party identification has declined so drastically in Sweden is the fact that fewer and fewer Swedes are ideologically aligned with their preferred party. For every party without exception, the proportion of voters who place themselves and their chosen party at the same position on the left-right scale has declined over the past forty years. The average decline in the proportion of voters perceiving themselves on the same position as their party on the left-right scale is 12 percentage points between 1979 and 2014.

One final piece of evidence that supports our argument is how the strength of party fluctuates between election and non-election years. The pattern reveals a clear electoral cycle. Results from annual studies conducted in Sweden by the SOM Institute show that the proportion of convinced party supporters increases during election years. This has been the case in all Swedish elections since the time series started in the late 1980s (see also note 3). When politics is at the forefront and high on people's attention span, party identification tends to rise. The results in Figure 3 provide a striking illustration of this pattern (Holmberg & Weibull, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

In sum, democratic elections have a positive effect on people's relationship with political parties – identification tends to go up. From a normative standpoint this is important.. Elections strengthen, not weaken, party identification.

Figure 3. Convinced Party Adherents in Sweden 1986-2024 (Percent)



Source: SOM National Surveys.

Comment: Percent respondents of all respondents in the annual SOM Studies who say they are very or somewhat convinced adherents of a political party. All results are unweighted. Question wording "Which party do you like best today?" followed by "Do you consider yourself to be a convinced adherent of that party?"

### What Does Party Identification Move?

That party identification is a mover has never been contested. The Michigan scholars said it first, and since then it has been an established truth that party identification affects people's attitudes and behaviors. To a degree, the directional component of partisanship – which party one identify with – affects political attitudes such as issue positions, policy evaluations, and leader popularity. Party identification creates a kind of perceptual screen which helps voters to organize their political outlook (Brader & Tucker, 2001a, 2001b; Campbell et al., 1960; Sniderman et al., 1991; Chapter 25 in RHOPP by Guntermann). Partisan ties structure people's political world-view.

More concretely, party identification impacts political behavior, most evidently party or candidate choice, but also electoral participation (Bäck & Teorell, 2005; Finkel & Opp, 1991; Chapter 20 in RHOPP by McAllister). Voters tend to vote for the party they identify with. Voters also tend to vote for candidates of the parties they identify with. Furthermore, people without any party identification vote less than people with party ties. The decline in the strength of partisanship in most democracies is one of the factors behind the fall of turnout levels around the world during the last forty-fifty years (Solijonov 2016). Why bother to vote, if you do not find a party to identify with?

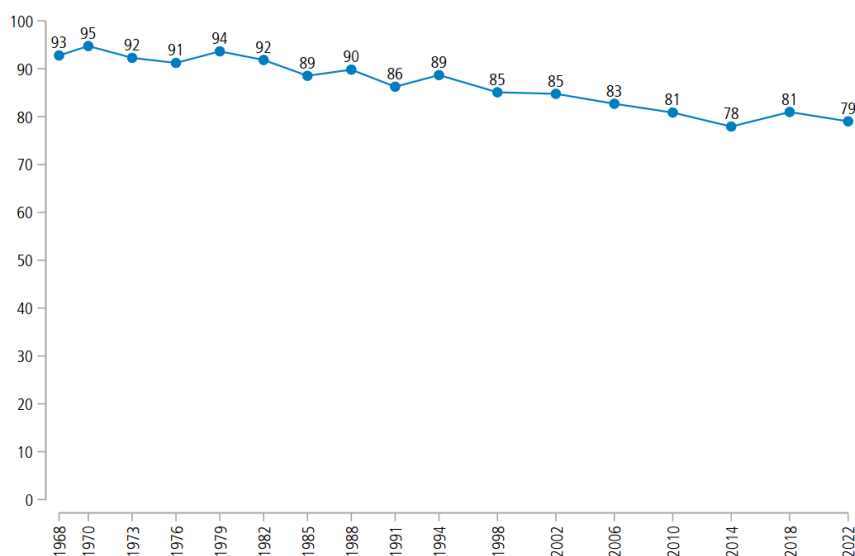
The possibility of reciprocal causation, however, is a problem here. Party identification is shaping political attitudes and behaviors, while at the same time it is shaped by attitudes and behaviors. Thus, party identification is both influenced and an influencer. As a consequence, all estimates of effects of party identification tend to be on the high, exaggerating the impact (Holmberg, 2007). Clever experiments and longer panel studies are needed to better understand how this influence circle functions.

Focusing on the effects of the strength of party identification, Sweden is an especially interesting case since the decline in the intensity of partisanship has been more far-reaching among Swedish voters than among voters in other comparable democracies. A

relevant question is if the downturn in partisanship has affected any of the traditional relationships between the level of party identification and different political behaviours like electoral participation, split ticket voting, tactical voting and party switching. Does the strength of party identification still impact political behaviour like it did fifty or thirty years ago? Theoretically, it is not obvious what to expect. Naturally, when fewer and fewer people have partisan ties, the *importance* of party identification diminishes for all kinds of political behaviours. But what about the *effect* of different degrees of party identification on political behaviours, that is, the difference in behaviour between voters with strong and voters with no party identification. Has that effect stayed about the same or gone up or maybe down? A perhaps natural guess would be to expect that the effect of the strength of party identification goes down at the same time as the level of partisanship declines among voters.

A first indication that the importance of party identification has gone down in Sweden is that fewer people today actually vote for the party they say they identify with. The proportion of loyalists who vote according to their identification has over time diminished with around 15 percentage points (see Figure 4). In the election 1970, 95 percent of Swedes voted for a party they identified with. In the election 2022 the comparable result is 79 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 4. Percent Loyalists Who Vote Their Party Identification in Swedish Parliamentary Elections 1968-2022 (Percent)



**Source:** Swedish National Election data.

**Comment:** Among voters with a strong or weak identification, or a best party the results indicate the proportion voting for their preferred party. All results are unweighted.

Another indicator pointing in the same direction is how volatile the turnover of party identification and party vote has become in election panels. Ideally, long lasting, affective party identification should be more stable across elections than the vote (Thomassen, 1976). Previous studies in most countries including Britain, Canada, USA, and Sweden, but not the Netherlands, have shown that party identification is indeed more stable across time than party vote (Holmberg, 1994; Le Duc, 1981; Visser, 1992; Chapter 17 in RHOPP by Gidengil & Nevitte). However, results from the most recent Swedish elections show that a lot of this stability is gone (see Table 3). In the election panel 1973-1976, 78 percent of voters had the same stable party identification and party vote. The comparable outcome in the panel 2018-2022 is only 51 percent, which is a considerable

decline. Instead, we see increases in the proportion of voters with a stable identification but a variable vote (not troubling for the theory of party identification); but also increases in the proportion of voters with a variable party identification and stable vote (troubling for the theory of party identification).<sup>9</sup> The latter troubling group comprised 4 percent of the voters in the panel 1973-1976 and 15 percent in the panel 2018-2022; not a dramatic increase, but an increase. But, reassuringly, party identification is still more stable than the vote in Swedish election panels.

Table 3 Turnover of Party Identification and Party Vote in Swedish Election Panels (Percent)

	Party Identification / Party Vote				Sum
	Stable/Stable	Stable/Variable	Variable/Stable	Variable/Variable	
1973-1976	78	7	4	11	100
1988-1991	69	10	6	15	100
2010-2014	59	16	12	13	100
2014-2018	55	16	9	20	100
2018-2022	51	28	15	6	100

**Source:** Swedish National Election data.

**Comment:** All respondents indicating a partisan attachment have been classified as party identifiers. The analyses are restricted to voters with a party identification and who voted in the relevant pairs of elections. See Holmberg 1994. All results are unweighted.

Party switching has always been strongly related to the strength of party identification. Voters with an identification change party far less often than voters without any identification. However, over time party switching has become more common, not only among voters without a partisan leaning but also among strong identifiers. In the 1970s, the proportion of party switchers in the election panels was below 10 percent among strong identifiers. In the most recent elections that proportion has increased to around 20 percent. At the same time, the proportion of switchers among people with no party identification has increased from around 35 to around 50 percent (see Table 4). This means that the difference in the tendency to change party between strong identifiers and non-identifiers is roughly the same today as in the 1970s. The effect of party identification on party switching has not diminished. Voters with a strong partisan tie still change party much less often than voters without any party attachment.

Table 4 Strength of Party Identification and Party Change in Elections (Percent)

	Percent Voters Who Changed Party at the Next Election														
Strength of PI at the First Election	73	76	79	82	85	88	91	94	98	02	06	10	14	18	
	76	79	82	85	88	91	94	98	02	06	10	14	18	22	
Strong PI	6	8	9	8	10	11	14	15	15	13	18	19	25	19	
Weak PI	31	20	17	21	22	28	23	27	28	31	31	30	30	23	
Party Pref. Only	33	30	34	35	28	41	44	43	45	54	39	40	42	38	
No PI	43	28	31	41	40	51	55	48	53	69	51	49	46	40	
Diff. Strong-No PI	-37	-20	-22	-33	-30	-40	-41	-33	-38	-56	-33	-30	-21	-21	

**Source:** Swedish National Election data.

**Comment:** The number of respondents in the Two-Election Panels is about 1000. See Petersson 1977, Holmberg & Oscarsson 2004, and Oscarsson (2024). All results are unweighted.

A similar conclusion of an intact effect of the strength of party identification, although the importance has gone down, can be reached when we study split ticket voting and

tactical voting. Strong identifiers split their vote and vote strategically much more seldom than non-identifiers. This pattern is still present in the 2020s, even if strong identifiers like leaners and non-identifiers have increased their split ticket voting as well as their tactical voting. However, the differences in the vote tendencies between strong identifiers and leaners/non-identifiers remain relatively stable and only show a small increase (see Tables 5 and 6). The strength of party identification is still relevant as an explanatory variable behind ticket splitting and tactical voting in Sweden.

Table 5 Strength of Party Identification and Split Ticket Voting in Sweden (Percent)

	Election Year														
Party Identif.	73	76	79	82	85	88	91	94	98	02	06	10	14	18	22
Strong PI	3	3	4	4	5	5	8	8	8	8	11	12	11	17	14
Weak PI	8	8	7	8	13	15	16	16	20	22	16	18	26	22	24
Party Pref.	14	18	18	20	24	24	34	29	33	33	30	27	35	34	33
No PI	20	17	19	29	31	35	41	39	38	46	38	29	41	38	33
Strong-No PI	-17	-14	-15	-25	-26	-30	-33	-31	-30	-38	-27	-17	-30	-21	-19

**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies data.

**Comment:** The split ticket vote is between national parliament elections and local elections. A split vote is scored 1, same party votes are scored 0. The variable for the strength of party identification is scored 3 for strong, 2 for weak, 1 for party preference only, and 0 for no party. All results are unweighted.

Table 6 Strength of Party Identification and Tactical Voting in Sweden (Percent)

	Election Year																
Party Identif.	68	70	73	76	79	82	85	88	91	94	98	02	06	10	14	18	22
Strong PI	2	1	2	2	3	3	3	2	5	3	5	4	4	8	10	8	8
Weak PI	6	4	8	7	6	6	10	9	9	11	11	15	14	18	17	13	15
Party Pref.	16	11	14	18	12	16	17	17	23	16	23	21	23	23	25	23	26
No Party	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Strong-No PI	-14	-10	-12	-16	-9	-13	-14	-15	-18	-13	-18	-17	-19	-15	-15	-15	-18

**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies data.

**Comment:** Tactical voting is defined as *not* voting for your preferred party as determined by the answer to a question about "best party." Only party voters with a party identification or party preference are included in the analysis. A tactical vote is scored 1, votes for a preferred party is scored 0. The variable for the strength of party identification is scored 3 for strong, 2 for weak, and 1 for party preference only. All results are unweighted.

Arguably, the most important correlate of the strength of party identification is electoral participation. People who find a party to identify with, or at least feel close to, have a clear tendency to participate more in elections than non-identifiers. In Sweden, between 95-99 percent of strong party identifiers vote in elections. This is hard validated facts going back all the way to the election in 1968, and not based on respondents own information, but based on validated turnout data from vote records. Among non-identifiers, the comparable turnout levels are between 72 and 87 percent during the elections in 1968-2006 (see Table 7). We obtain the largest differences in turnout from strength in party identification in the 1998 and 2002 elections.



Table 7 Strength of Party Identification and Voter Turnout in Swedish Parliamentary Elections (Percent)

	Election Year																
Party Identif.	68	70	73	76	79	82	85	88	91	94	98	02	06	10	14	18	22
Strong PI	97	96	96	99	97	97	98	95	97	97	97	97	97	97	98	98	98
Weak PI	94	93	94	98	97	95	95	95	93	94	93	91	95	97	95	99	98
Party Pref.	89	88	93	92	94	91	93	88	91	91	88	92	92	93	96	97	97
No PI	82	78	86	87	84	85	85	80	81	82	73	72	83	92	94	95	94
Strong-No PI	15	18	10	12	13	12	13	15	16	15	24	25	14	5	4	3	4

**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies data.

**Comment:** The turnout information is validated against official records on electoral participation. Turn out is scored 1, abstention 0. The variable for party identification is scored 3 for strong, 2 for weak, 1 for party preference only, and 0 for no party. The results for the elections in 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 are affected by an increase in sample loss. Response rates are especially low for the group no party, no turnout. All results are unweighted.

However, the results for the elections 2010-2022 deviate. Turn out among respondents who are non-identifiers suddenly increase. We suspect on good grounds that this has to do with the rather dramatic decline in the response rate in recent SNES election surveys – from 78 percent in 2006 to 56 percent in 2014 and 44 percent in 2022. Non-voters are notoriously underrepresented in all election surveys, and more so when the response rate drops. In the Swedish case, indications are that non-identified non-voters are among the most underrepresented in the most recent election studies. Thus, our conclusion is that the effect of the strength of party identification on turnout is evident for the period 1968-2006. After that, we believe it is still as strong, but now overshadowed by skewed results caused by a lower response rate in the election studies, resulting in too few non-voting non-identifiers among respondents (Oleskog & Hedberg, 2015).

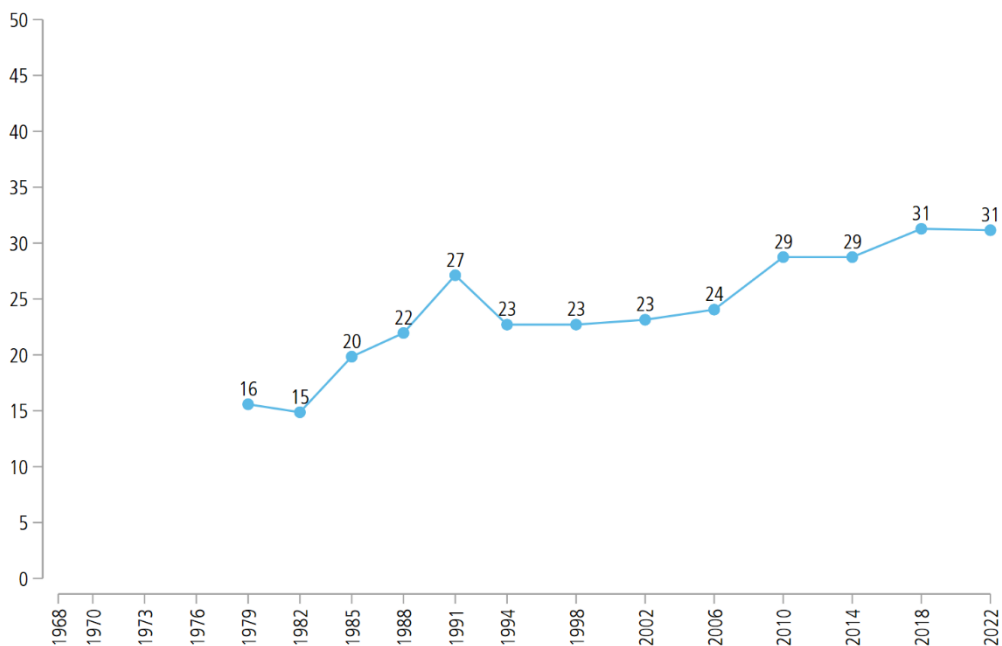
### Multiple Identifications and Negative Identifications

Although the Michigan Four were aware of and mentioned the possibility that voters could have more than one party identification, and that voters also could have negative feelings toward the outparty, not much was done to address the phenomena (Campbell et al., 1960). Focus was on the positive side and on first party preferences. Research priorities have changed very little since then. Most discussion and measurement are still devoted to the traditional positive and singular concept of party identification. However, most is not the same as all. There are some innovative voices raising questions around the possible relevance of broadening research on partisanship to multiple identities and negative identities as well. Rosema and Mayer (Chapter 9) and Bankert (Chapter 7) in RHOPP are two examples. Others are Abramowitz and Webster (2018), Mason (2015), and Caruana et al. (2015) in the United States and Canada, and Rose and Mishler (1998), Van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) and Schmitt (2009) in Europe. The more polarized politics in America, where people increasingly dislike the party they do not identify with (the outparty), has added to the interest in negative identification. In Europe with multi-party systems in most countries, the relevance of possible multiple identifications and negative identifications, especially directed toward pariah parties (Chapter 14 in RHOPP by Widfeldt), have somewhat late become of interest to researchers. See also the increased research field on affective polarization and its relation to negative party identification (Oscarsson et.al. 2021).

We will not analyze these problems in this context, just very shortly highlight the relevance and possibilities using data on the Swedish case. Fortunately, SNES has since 1979 measured party sympathy on a dislike-like scale between -5 to +5. Respondents are asked to place all parties on the scale. This opportunity give us nice data to pin down various kinds of multiple party preferences, including negative sympathizes. Since the scale explicitly includes negative response alternatives (-1 to -5), we can be fairly sure that negative attitudes or identifications are accurately measured.

The share of Swedes who rated more than one party as their most liked on the dislike-like scale was only 16 percent in 1979. Since then, the proportion of voters with multiple first-party preferences has increased markedly, reaching 31 percent in 2022 (see Figure 5). This rise in voters with multiple party preferences is not surprising, as there is a correlation between the strength of party identification and multiple party preferences (.24 in SNES 2018). Voters who rate more than one party as their most liked tend to have weaker party identification.<sup>10</sup> The long-term tendency of left-right depolarization of Swedish politics – at least between the traditional old parties – has made multiple party preferences more frequent and has been one of the factors diminishing the strength of party identification among Swedish voters.

Figure 5 Swedes with Multiple First Party Preferences 1979-2022 (Percent)



**Source:** Swedish National Election Studies data.

**Comment:** Analysis based on party placements on a dislike-like scale between -5 to +5. Results show the proportion of respondents placing more than one party as most liked. All results are unweighted.

Negative feelings for different political parties are also a quite common phenomenon in Sweden. It is perhaps too strong to talk about a negative identification, a negative attitude is perhaps a more appropriate designation (Chapter 9 in RHOPP by Rosema & Mayer). Negative attitudes vary a lot toward different parties. Those positioned toward the ideological extremes, such as the Left Party, the Feminists, and the Sweden Democrats trend to arouse more negative feelings than parties nearer the political center of Swedish politics. Swedes show most negative attitudes toward the populist and nationalist Sweden Democrats and the Green Party.<sup>11</sup> Over time, there have been fluctuations in the degree of negativity that different parties elicit, but no major changes apart from the fact that a larger share of Swedish voters today report having a disliked party, compared to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main reason is the emergence of the Sweden Democrats in the 2000s. The Sweden Democrats is a pariah party of a magnitude that was not present in the 1970s or 1980s. Thus, negative attitudes toward parties, including the Sweden Democrats, cannot be regarded as an important factor behind the long-term decline in the strength of party identification in Sweden. The downward trend in partisanship started long before Sweden Democrats entered parliament in 2010.

But there is an individual level relationship between strength of party identification and negative attitudes toward outparties. Strong identifiers tend to be more negative than weak identifiers or leaners. The differences are not very large, however. Furthermore, studying independent effects of negative attitudes on political behavior after controlling for the strength of party identification, no interesting results are found.<sup>12</sup> Traditional positive party identification is clearly more important for our understanding of political behavior than negative attitudes toward outparties.

### Down But Not Out

Representative democracy is built on competing political parties. These parties, in turn, are ultimately dependent on voter support. One important indicator of such support is party identification – a feeling of closeness and affiliation with a political party. The strength component of party identification is related to many important forms of political behaviors such as voter turnout and party switching. Strong identifiers participate more and change party less, thereby contributing to stability in a democratic system. The decline in the strength of party identification across most established democracies over the past five-six decades is therefore not a positive development. It has made governing less predictable and short-sighted. Recent trends, however, suggest a slowdown, and perhaps even a turn upwards again, in the strength of party identification in some democracies. The factors behind these changes are linked to polarization and the number of effective political parties. The greater the polarization and the fewer parties, the more strength in party identification. In short, politics matter greatly for partisanship.

Developments in USA and Sweden provide clear illustrations. In the American two-party system, the level of party identification is much higher than in multi-party Sweden. Over the past fifty years, the strength of party identification has not diminished in the United States, and strong party identifiers have even become more common. By contrast, in Sweden, both party identification and the share of strong identifiers have declined. Behind this change lies increased polarization between the Democrats and Republicans in United States, and decreased polarization between the established parties in Sweden. Added to this is the fact that, during the same period, the number of parliamentary parties in Sweden has almost multiplied from five to eight.

Partisanship matters greatly for how voters behave and for how democracies function. Too much polarization and too strong party identification could be a problem, just as too little polarization and too weak party identification can be. As always, the ever-elusive *lagom* is best, but difficult to achieve.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This report is an updated version of a chapter *Party Identification – Down But Not Out* in the book *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship* (2020), edited by Henrik Oscarsson and Sören Holmberg.

<sup>2</sup> Denmark is a possible exception. Between early 1970s and the beginning of the 2000s the level of party identification is quite stable among Danish voters (Berglund et al., 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Results in Table 2 show Swedish party attachments going down only 3 percentage points using CSES judgement-oriented question between (1996-2000) and (2016- ). Looking at SNES data and measurements using the Michigan style feeling adherence question, the combined proportion of strong and weak identifiers declines by no less than 15 percentage points between the elections of 1998 and 2022, see Figure 2. The SOM Institute at University of Gothenburg measures party attachment annually since the 1980s employing a question where respondents are asked to tell if they are a very or a somewhat convinced adherent of a party or not. The results reveal a very noticeable electoral cycle in degrees of party identification. Voters tend to be more identified with a party election years compared to non-election years. In the SOM studies, based on a judgement-oriented question, the level of party attachment has as well gone down, most evidently in the late 1990s, less so or not at all in the 2000s. The proportion of convinced party adherents was 63 percent in non-election year 1987, 52 percent in non-election year 1997 and 52 percent in non-election year 2021, a downturn of 11 percentage points. In the election years, the share of convinced party adherents has been higher, 66 percent in 1988, 62 percent in 1998, and 58 percent in 2022, a decrease of 8 percentage points (Holmberg, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> In Sweden, as in many democracies, there are somewhat higher proportions of party identifiers among people with lower levels of education compared to among people with higher education. This is in accordance with the cognitive mobilization hypothesis. However, when we in controlled regression analyses introduce age and political knowledge as explanatory variables, the effect of education becomes non-significant, while at the same time age and knowledge show clear and significant effects. Thus, age and political knowledge – but not education per se – have independent and separate effects on the level of party identification. Older and more knowledgeable voters tend to be most party identified, irrespective of the level of education.

<sup>5</sup> The downward trend in the level of party identification is especially evident among sympathizers with the Social Democrats, less so among Conservative sympathizers. Between 1979 and 2014, the proportion of S-sympathizers with a party identification shrunk from 76 to 40 percent (-36). The comparable result for Conservative sympathizers is 54 and 27 percent (-27). The average result for all Swedes is 56 and 25 percent (-31).

<sup>6</sup> The analysis covers eight Swedish elections between 1985 and 2014. Of 57 party specific correlations 84 percent are positive with an average ( $r$ ) of +.12.

<sup>7</sup> There is a comparable positive electoral cycle in Sweden and Germany, but not in the United States when we study trust in parliament (Holmberg & Weibull, 2019). The extensive negative campaigning in America could be a factor explaining the absence of positive trust enhancing effects of elections in USA.

<sup>8</sup> One factor behind this development is the increased tendency to vote tactically for a party you want to be represented in parliament (and in parliament support a preferred government). And that tactically chosen party does not necessarily have to be your ordinary first preference among

parties (see Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016, Fredén 2016). In recent elections, 16 to 20 percent of Swedish voters vote for a party that they do not consider best.

<sup>9</sup> See Table 3. In the last election panels in Sweden between 2014-2018 and 2018-2022, party identification is still more stable than the vote.

<sup>10</sup> In SNES 2022 among respondents with more than one party as most liked party, the proportion of people without any party preference when asked about best party is 35 percent. The comparable result for respondents with only one most liked party is 15 percent. Among respondents with multiple first party preferences, the proportion of party identifiers (strong and weak combined) is 16 percent, compared to 33 percent among respondents with a single party liked most.

<sup>11</sup> In SNES 2022, respondents are asked to name parties they would *never* vote for. Results reveal that there are three parties topping the never-vote-for list in 2022: Sweden Democrats 48 percent, Left Party 19 percent, and the Greens 22 percent. The other more established parties end up with never-vote-for results in the single digits.

<sup>12</sup> The regression tests have been done on data from SNES 1998, 2006, 2014 and 2018. Effects of the strength of party identification are always significant and larger than the effects of negative attitudes (whose effects are most often not significant). The behaviours we have tested effects on are turn out, split voting and tactical voting. Observe that the tests deal with the strength component of party identification, not the directional component. The variable for negative attitudes builds on the extent to which respondents place different parties on the negative side (-1 to -5) on the dislike-like scale.

<sup>13</sup> *Lagom* is a very unique and useful Swedish word. An approximate English translation could be not too little, not too much – just right.

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**Professor Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson leder Valforskningsprogrammet.**

