The two faces of party identification: Distinguishing remnants of tribal loyalty from conditional support

Party identification remains one of the most potent explanatory variables of vote choice, albeit a highly controversial concept. Since the 1970s, debates have arisen from observations and interpretations of stability and change in party identification, leading to an ongoing stand-off between traditional adherents of a Michigan-style reading of a psychological, long-term attachment and those following Fiorina and his “running-tally” theory who see it as an evaluative, changeable orientation towards parties. Rather than taking sides, this paper challenges the absolutism of both camps by arguing and trying to show empirically that party identification comprises both conceptualizations but, taking into account heterogeneity in the electorate, manifests as attachment and loyalty in some and as relatively short-term, instrumental and evaluative orientation in others.

Party Identification: psychological attachment or evaluative measure?

The original concept of party identification was proposed in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) and provided an apparently sound explanation for the high degree of stability in political attitudes that had earlier emerged as a key finding in the Columbia studies (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, Berelson et al. 1954). Conceptually, party identification was grounded in psychological group theory, identification meaning “the individual’s affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment” (Campbell et al. 1960: 121). This notion of affective political identification has frequently been likened to religious affiliation (Fiorina 1981, Green et al. 2002) or even to supporting a sports team (Dixon 2001). It was understood as a result of early socialization, supported by evidence of close matches between an individual’s party ID and that of his parents. It was further understood to strengthen with age
and to be an attitude that drives voting behaviour but remains more stable over time than party choice. As Green et al. (2002: 26) point out, party identification does not mean “identification with the parties per se but with Democrats and Republicans as social groups”. It is hence understood as a form of belonging, answering a human need for social integration. It may also help to explain why party ID serves as a strong predictor for political trust and satisfaction with democracy, since belonging to a political group helps locating oneself in the political system and making political questions and controversies relevant for oneself and one’s social peer group. It ties in well with more general theories of politics emerging at the same time that maintain that politics is the “socialization of conflict” (Schattschneider 1960) or the conciliation of different interests, arising from a recognition that interests differ and clash and require organization and compromise (Crick 1962). According to Schattschneider, parties play the most crucial role in democratic politics by organizing conflict and hence facilitating political integration of the individual as well as compromise of conflicting social interests. Party ID is then partisanship in a quite literal sense, a strong in-group feeling, emotional attachment, a sense of belonging and loyalty, but at the same time potentially implying outward hostility.

Crucially then, party ID was understood to be conceptually and causally prior to political attitudes relating to short-term processes. When challenging their theoretical and empirical foundations, Fiorina (1981: 86) tries to do the authors of The American Voter justice by pointing out how cautious they remained in formulating their theory of party ID. However, this comes as a mixture of acknowledging the scepticism of the original authors and emphasizing how scant the evidence base for their claims actually was, epitomised by the characterisation of their claim of causal priority of party ID: “acceptance of dogma follows affiliation rather than vice versa”. The challenge was an empirical one: building on early “revisionist” investigations in preceding years, Fiorina seriously questions the alleged stability of party ID over time, instead proposing that individuals update their party ID on the basis of experience with political parties and processes. But he himself remains surprisingly cautious about the relative merits and likely validity of either theory:

“To previous evidence that party ID shapes the interpretation of political events and conditions, we now add equally suggestive evidence that such events and conditions modify party ID. Can we ever sort out the causal links? On purely statistical grounds, the answer is probably no, unless the funds become available for panel studies more ambitious than heretofore
imagined. An alternative option is to construct more complex theories than those previously accepted, to ascertain whether the empirical regularities we now possess can be subsumed under those theories, and to test any new propositions those theories produce. In other words, a purely empirical effort to pin down the ‘real’ place of party ID in a dynamic model of electoral choice is probably chimerical. All we can do is work toward ever-superior models of voting choice. The models must provide the causality, while the data should keep us from going too far astray. (Fiorina 1981: 89)

In the European context, the concept of party ID has also long been used, albeit understood somewhat differently. Party affiliation appears less a matter of early socialization and more related to the social bases of party systems - resulting from class or religious cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Hence, partisanship is understood to be more a reflection of joint group interests and ideology than of psychological attachment. Such attachment may well grow and develop as an epiphenomenon of social conflict. However, while on the one hand the concept of party ID has increasingly subsumed primacy over class or religious voting, with the apparent decline of traditional cleavages since the 1960s, it has undergone a similar, if later, reinterpretation to that proposed by Fiorina in the US context. In particular, the most recent British election studies have promoted, as their key contribution to the field, the notion of valence politics which emphasizes evaluation of government performance and delivery as the key evaluative criteria of vote choice (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009). Fiorina (1981: 17f.) himself incorporated Stokes’ (1963) distinction between positional and valence issues as a key ingredient of a theory of retrospective voting, since in the absence of disagreement over the ends of policies, judgments are made about the means used and governments are rewarded or punished for their performance on key issues. Crucially, a fully-fledged theory of valence politics treats party ID as a key component of the calculus of vote choice: together with evaluations of party leaders, performance on key issues and retrospective judgments about economic development, voters are understood to update (in Fiorina’s running-tally modus) their partisanship continuously, so that at any given point in time a voter’s stated party support is a reflection of his or her cumulative experiences with the parties, in government or opposition. Again, just as with Fiorina, there is no place left for psychological, group-based affiliation. The treatment of party ID as a purely evaluative measure is of major importance,
since only with party ID as a component the valence model can be shown to regularly outperform alternative models of vote choice (Clarke et al. 2009: 163-5).

During the same time, the fight back of the traditionalists gained serious ground with the seminal publication by Green et al. (2002). While Fiorina had based his alternative theory on a challenge of the alleged stability in party ID proposed by the Michigan model, Green et al. built their riposte on a reassessment of how much variability of party ID there really is. They claim that Fiorina and disciples have overestimated rates and scope of change and that party ID has even remained a remarkably stable and crucial factor despite alleged voter dealignment since the 1960s. They also revisit the theoretical understanding of what party ID is and what its roots are and aim to reinvigorate the theory of psychological attachment, in-group identity, the notion of political and social belonging, and the role of such group attachment for integration into the political system.

While Fiorina is still probably right in his assessment that a conclusive empirical judgment about the greater validity of either theory remains elusive, what is striking is the absolutism in both camps. On each side, the proposition is that party ID is either Michigan-style psychological group attachment or a matter of cumulative, running-tally style, experience-based evaluation. The proponents of the former hold that there is too much stability for the latter to hold true, while the proponents of the latter find too much variability for the former to be vindicated. But what if there is stability because there are Michigan-style identifiers, committed, psychologically attached and hence loyal, and variability because there are also running-tally type identifiers, updating their party ID on the basis of new information, experiences and events?

Basically, parties are dealing with two types of supporters – loyal and conditional ones. This makes also sense with regard to how parties act to maximise their electoral returns: it is too simplistic to think that when campaigning they are on the one hand trying to keep their identifiers reassured while trying to attract floating voters on an ad-hoc basis. It is more reasonable to consider long-term as well as short-term strategies: a party that gains momentum, as Labour did under Blair in the 1990s, will not only attract voters as a one-off in an election. Quite a few of those who are won over by how the party currently presents itself will not only vote for them but count themselves as supporter of that party if asked. Such support maybe entirely conditional and context-dependent but it can matter and be sustained beyond the single election. Such a form of party ID is closer to the marketing notion of
identification with a ‘brand’ than with the socio-psychological notion of Michigan-style party identification. But it does also share much with Fiorina’s running-tally concept of party identification. The fact that some newly won-over voters not only acknowledge their choice but also translate this into self-declared support for the party, or identification with the party, implies some level of commitment, albeit much more fickle than that of long-term supporters who have established in-group identity. Blair’s New Labour clearly at the same time lost some of its traditional support from the ‘heartlands’ – and this indicates a further element of change, but one among loyal supporters whose loyalty is also not entirely context-independent but if we are to imagine their allegiance as a running-tally the threshold for change in party ID is much higher.

This is to say that dichotomizing into loyal and conditional supporters does not disregard the fact that all party identification entails some element of commitment as well as some element of conditionality. The two groups are to be thought of as ideal types, with loyal supporters relatively far towards the commitment end and conditional supporters relatively far towards the conditionality end of a hypothetical scale.

The aim of the following analysis is to gain some understanding about what differentiates loyal from conditional support. In that sense, this paper does not add to the debate about how much stability or variation there is in party identification over time or what the place of party ID is in a dynamic model of vote choice. Instead, the purpose is to learn more about the driving forces of partisan loyalty and about the distinctiveness of loyal partisan as opposed to casual or conditional ones.

**Data and findings**

The data we are using are from the internet campaign panel of the British Election study. This panel study was started in 2005 where over 5,000 respondents were asked over three waves (before the official campaign, during the campaign, and after the election). It was then continued with further waves in 2006, 2008 and 2009 before another three waves, with additional respondents was carried out over the 2010 campaign. The data have now been combined into one file with individual respondent data over nine waves, covering the full five-year period between the two elections. In order to distinguish between loyal and conditional party support, we omitted from our analysis those respondents that had not answered the
party ID question throughout the full period and all waves. We have to further restrict our analysis to the final eight waves of the panel study, because during the first wave (pre-campaign) in 2005, a split-sample design was used to test different party ID questions. In order not to lose respondents, or to contaminate our analysis with answers to the alternative party ID question that tends to produce more positive responses, we chose to omit all data from the first wave. In total, 1,569 respondents answered the party ID question throughout the final eight waves. The first task is then to establish a meaningful dividing line between loyal and conditional party supporters. We calculated for each respondent how often they switched between answer categories on the party variable, i.e. either switched allegiance between parties or moved between supporting and not supporting a party. Figure 1 shows the distribution along a scale running from zero switches to the possible maximum of 7 switches (between a total of eight waves). Incredibly, there are indeed nine respondents who switched allegiance, or at least moved in and out of declared party support, at every possible opportunity.

By far, the largest group is located at the far left, never having switched their party ID. Exactly 779 respondents remained unchanged while the remaining 790, i.e. just over 50%, switched at least once. For the remainder of the analysis, the variable needs to be dichotomised to distinguish loyal from conditional party supporters. Such a distinction can never be perfect but the decision is based on theoretical as well as empirical grounds. The clearest dividing line is between those who never switched party allegiance throughout the eight waves and those who switched at least once. This does not mean that the non-switchers are understood as an entirely homogenous group. While many of them may have stuck with their initial choice out of the hypothesized loyalty other may have carried out valence-based evaluations on eight separate occasions and each time come to the same conclusion – namely that one and the same party at each point emerged as the best possible choice for them. We cannot empirically separate those two groups and contend that our dichotomization serves to maximise between-group differences while minimizing within-group variation. The second group, our conditional identifiers, are not necessarily homogenous either, but there are excellent conceptual reasons to dichotomize rather than continuing with a scale or categorical variable. Foremost, the resulting scale of frequency of switching party support is not linear in nature. It is for example conceivable that those having switched twice are more similar to non-switchers than those having switched only once. This is so because singular switchers have definitely
moved away from their initial choice while “repeat switchers” may have briefly strayed but then returned back into the fold.

**Figure 1: Changes in party identification through eight waves, 2005-2010**

![Bar chart showing number of switches in party ID 2005-2010]

Also, we find empirically that the crucial distinction is between non-switchers and switchers (of any frequency). Both with regard to predictability of vote choice in 2005 and 2010 and in terms of attitude consistency over the eight waves on a range of measures (ideological position, party thermometer scores, economic evaluations etc.) non-switchers emerge as a group as always significantly more consistent than the rest, with little (and little systematic) difference emerging between switchers of different switching frequency. As far as conceptual and empirical grounding goes, our dichotomous variable distinguishing loyal from conditional party support appears sound, and as the following analysis shows, those two groups differ significantly in their behaviour, attitudes and social composition.

The first step is to use our distinction between types of party ID to shed some light on a perhaps unsurprising but usually ignored underlying pattern in the role that party ID plays in
explaining vote choice. We know that party ID remains a very strong predictor of vote choice, but distinguishing our two types of identifiers we can show that one type of party ID clearly matters more than the other.

**Figure 2: The impact of two types of party ID on vote choice in 2010**

As Figure 2 shows, our loyal party supporters are much more likely to vote in line with their party ID than conditional supporters are. About 85% of those continuously supporting the same party through all eight waves did say they voted for that party in 2010. In comparison, only about 66% of those waver in their party support over the preceding eight waves were likely to cast their vote in 2010 for the party they said they supported in the post-election survey. This finding holds in a logistic regression that includes valence, proximity, socio-demographic and economic feeling and performance measures as used by Clarke et al. (2009: 166), the results of which are not presented here because our emphasis is on what differentiates the two groups and not what the role of party ID is in models of vote choice. Loyal party support tends to contribute significantly more to explaining vote choice than does conditional support.
Breaking it down along party lines, as presented in Figure 3, we see that the findings holds equally for Labour and Conservative supporters in 2010.

**Figure 3: Comparing Labour and Conservative vote choice across supporter types**

The difference here is in overall conversion rates by party. While each party is more likely to convert loyal support into votes than conditional support, in general the Conservatives can rely much more on support meaning voting for them than Labour. Over 90 percent of loyal supporters turned out for them while only 73 percent of loyal Labour identifiers did, which is incidentally a lower rate than even for conditional Conservative supporters. Conditional Labour supporters were almost as likely not to vote for the party as they were to do so. One might be tempted to interpret this finding as supportive of valence theory, since it is the party on the rise, the current ‘market leader’, the one widely perceived to be more competent and likely to perform in government at that point that exhibits better rates of converting support into votes. However, this interpretation is rejected by the finding that these rates are almost identical for the 2005 election when Labour was still clearly leading on all major valence
measures. It is a difference between the parties and not a contextual effect. Just as we know from previous research that Conservatives are more likely to turn out to vote in general, and that the Conservatives tend to for example benefit from bad weather on Election Day - the party seems to have a more reliable constituent base than Labour, and this appears to hold for loyal as well as conditional support. This interpretation is also borne out by Figures 4a and 4b which primarily report the impact of party loyalty on different measures of political trust and attitudes to the system. Apart from the strong overall finding that loyal identifiers are more trusting, more satisfied and feel a stronger duty to vote, we see that while in general Labour supporters have more positive attitudes towards the political system, Conservatives are ever so slightly more likely to feel a duty to vote. As such the difference maybe minuscule but in comparison with the otherwise clear Labour lead on all other measures it is notable.

**Figure 4a: Supporter loyalty, duty to vote and democratic satisfaction**
Please note that while in Figure 4b low scores indicate higher levels of satisfactions and feeling of a duty to vote, in Figure 4b higher scores indicate higher levels of trust. This is a result of variable coding in the BES dataset.

**Figure 4b: Supporter loyalty and measures of political trust**

While these first few steps of analysis clearly indicate that there are behavioural and attitudinal differences between loyal and conditional supporters (loyalty covaries positively with vote choice, turnout, trust and democratic satisfaction), we want to learn more about what exactly distinguishes these two groups. We do this in two steps: first we look at what makes them tick, secondly at who they are. A first question then is whether loyal supporters are more ideological than conditional supporters. The internet panel does not include traditional left-right scales and hence we have to use self-placement on the tax vs. spend scale as a proxy for ideology. As figure 5 shows, we find little evidence of an ideological basis for supporter loyalty. Loyal Labour supporters are only slightly more left-wing (in terms of preferring higher taxes and more public spending) than conditional supporters, while the
The difference between Conservative supporters is altogether insignificant. Ideology matters for party support in that Conservative supporters are consistently more right wing than Labour supporters but that is almost as true for conditional as for loyal support.

**Figure 5: Supporter loyalty and ideology**

It is interesting to note, though, that given this evidence conditional support is not merely a matter of the attractiveness of a party package, in terms of its leadership, perceived competence and other valence indicators. At least when it comes to not just voting for a party but also developing at least a temporary identification with it, a pre-existing ideological tendency may be required, or at least helps.

Now, if ideological orthodoxy is not what distinguishes loyal from conditional supporters, what is? The answer to this very much helps resurrecting the original, social-psychological conceptualisation of party ID, as in *The American Voter*. It is attachment in the psychological sense, attachment in combination with disassociation from the main opponent, or what could be called a tribal sense of in-group belonging and out-group hostility. In Figure 6 we present a
measure of polarization in feelings towards the two main parties. Bars represent mean party thermometer differential for Labour and the Conservatives. That means that for each respondent we subtracted feelings for the Conservatives from feelings for the Labour party. Hence a score of +10 would indicate a maximum score for Labour and a minimum score for the Conservatives, and -10 would mean the exact opposite. A score of zero means identical scores for both parties, irrespective of what scores are in absolute terms. So this is a relative measure of between-party preference.

**Figure 6: Supporter loyalty and emotional polarization.**

And indeed, here differences between loyal and conditional supporters are strong and significant. Of course, on average anyone who supports Labour also prefers Labour over the Conservatives and vice versa, but this is much stronger for loyal supporters who always like their own party more and dislike the opponent more than conditional supporters do.¹

¹ As an aside, and in line with previous findings about higher conversion rates of support into votes, Conservative identifiers feel more strongly than Labour identifiers do. This is primarily down to a decline
Distances are on average 1.5 points larger for them than for conditional supporters. And also, over the eight waves, we find that loyal supporters expose much less change in their thermometer scores readings for both parties than do conditional supporters. Without wanting to overstress this points, since it remains somewhat unclear to what extent all respondents use this item as a means to express truly emotional attitudes towards parties, the findings hint at the possibility that continuity in one’s party support may result in a development of what can been labelled as ‘tribal’ in-group attachment, consistently paired with congenial out-group hostility (see Berreby 2005, Dixon 2001, Gilliatt 1987, 2002). This interpretation is supported by the fact that differences between loyal and conditional supporters are much less evident when questions are asked about party or leader competence and issue handling ability. Among Labour supporters, loyal ones are still significantly more partisan on all these questions than conditional ones, but less so than on the party like/dislike measure, while differences between loyal and conditional Conservative supporters disappear entirely on all additional items.

Our final step in this analysis aims to reveal some evidence about the social basis of loyal support. The final question to be raised is whether loyal supporters are socially distinct and different from conditional supporters. Again, as with investigating their motivations for support in the previous section, this question cannot be addressed by comparing non-switchers in party ID with switchers per se, but only reveals patterns when controlling for the direction of partisan attachment. That means that we run separate models for loyal identifiers, trying to ascertain how socially distinct loyal Labour supporters are from loyal Conservative supporters, and then contrasting these findings against a model testing the same variables to explain party attachment among conditional supporters. We ran two separate logistic regressions, the first with N=485 respondents who continuously supported either Labour or the Conservatives, and the second with N=259 respondents who declared support for Labour or Conservatives in the post-election survey in 2010 but had wavered at some point(s) across the eight waves from 2005 to 2010. In each model, the dependent variable is identification with the Conservatives as opposed to identification with Labour. Our independent variables include gender, the occupation based class variable (dichotomised into manual vs. non-manual), Income (also dichotomised at the cut-off point of £35,000pa) trade union membership and the ideological measure of self-positioning on tax vs. spend. We tried to in average feelings towards their own party among Labour identifiers. Their hostility towards Tories or “negative party identification” remains uncompromised, though.
avoid contaminating the analysis with variables that are too likely to pose endogeneity of problems, like valence measures or thermometer scales. But we are not aiming at the most comprehensive explanatory model of party identification but rather at learning about the social basis of loyal as opposed to conditional support. And it is difficult to conceive of valence measures affecting the role of class and demographic variables more in one of our models than in the other, we are confident about the validity of our findings which are primarily about contrasts in estimates across the two models.

Table 1 reports results for both models, and clearly shows that loyal party ID is to an extent class-based that conditional party ID is not. Apart from income, all variables in the first model reach significance. Gender is also important, as males are significantly more likely to be loyal Labour than loyal Conservative identifiers. Ideology and trade union membership are the strongest predictors but the occupational class variable also reaches significance.

Table 1: Logistic regression explaining Conservative party identification in 2010

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Loyal Conservative</th>
<th>Conditional Conservative</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.82***</td>
<td>1.60***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual labour</td>
<td>-.52*</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (≤£35,000)</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tax-spend self-placement</td>
<td>-.45***</td>
<td>-.34***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade Union membership</td>
<td>-1.12***</td>
<td>-.78*</td>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>% correctly predicted</th>
<th>Cox &amp; Snell R²</th>
<th>Nagelkerke R²</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>.315</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
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* significant at p ≤ 0.05
**significant at p ≤ 0.01
***significant at p ≤ 0.001

In contrast, only ideology (as already illustrated in Figure 5) and to a lesser extent trade union membership distinguishes conditional Labour from Conservative identifiers. Otherwise, they remain socially indistinguishable. This is also further supported by the higher R squares and the higher percentage of correct predictions for the model predicting loyal support. Loyal support
has a social basis which conditional support seems to be lacking. In that sense, our findings confirm that class, so regularly downplayed by policymakers as well as political scientists these days as a basis of political choice, does matter. But certainly, if one does not distinguish between loyal and conditional support, any impact of class on party identification is likely to vanish, because it is a significant but not the strongest predictor of which party a loyalist supports but it is irrelevant for more casually acquired party allegiances.

References


