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Anchoring the French Voter: Ideology versus Party

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In their pivotal 1986 volume, Converse and Pierce rekindle the debate over whether left-right ideological attachment or party identification serves as the psychological anchor of the French electorate. They argue that, much like Americans, French voters use partisanship to orient themselves to the political landscape. Our study, which employs the data used by Converse and Pierce, draws a different conclusion. We find that ideology, in terms of both scope and strength, clearly exceeds party in its importance for vote choice.

Key's classic observation that voters rely upon a "standing decision" rule remains relevant for students of electoral behavior. Survey research has established that party identification serves as a sort of "standing decision" or "anchor" for the mass American electorate. Whether this partisan effect holds in other Western democracies has been a subject of some controversy. (The debate commenced in earnest with Budge, Crewe, and Farlie 1976.) Perhaps that controversy reaches its peak in the scholarship on the French case. Converse and Pierce (1986), in their impressive volume, suggest most forcefully that party identification anchors French voters in a manner comparable to other Western publics.

However, much other work on France goes against this pro-party identification stance. In their comparative analysis of Western European electorates, Inglehart and Klingemann (1976) concluded that the causal primacy of party identification could give way to that of left-right ideological identification, depending on the culture. They point to France as a prime example of a political culture where ideology, rather than party, should dominate. In her work on political socialization, Percheron (1977) argues strongly that party identification is an irrelevant concept to the French. She goes on to demonstrate that it is left-right ideological commitment, not partisanship, that is passed from parent to child in France. Haegel (1990, 153), bluntly summarizes the current skepticism of French scholarship on the subject, writing that party attachment has never been "*très prégnant*" in France.

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Converse and Pierce, as seasoned students of the French political scene, are certainly aware of the attraction of left-right thinking for the French voter. Indeed, they comment that, at the beginning of their study, they entertained the notion that left-right orientation might actually substitute for party identification. But, what finally emerges is "a definite 'tilt' in the verdict" in favor of partisanship (Converse and Pierce 1986, 141):

Most of the time, in the most compelling tests, it appears as though partisanship is a more efficacious frame of orientation than is the sense of one's own left-right position. . . . What we have never encountered to date is an instance in which left-right orientations clearly and persistently outweigh partisan attachments. (149-50)

They base these conclusions largely on 1967 survey data, drawn from their French National Election Study (FNES, 1967-1969). We disagree with their conclusions. To help resolve the disagreement, we return to this same data set and conduct another analysis. We focus on two research questions. First, in the mass electorate, does the scope of party identification exceed that of left-right identification? Second, in determining vote choice, does the strength of party identification outweigh that of left-right identification? Our reanalysis suggests that, in more than one way, ideology is clearly more important than party for French voters.

SCOPE OF PARTY AND IDEOLOGY

Measuring the party identification of the French voter is not easy. In a typical National Assembly election, there are many parties in competition, some rather newly formed. Moreover, even old parties have a propensity to change names, either in coalition or alone. In the 1967 survey respondents were asked:

"Quel est le parti dont vous vous sentez habituellement le plus proche?"
 ["What is the party you habitually feel closest to?"]

To code the responses to this open-ended question, Converse and Pierce used 21 distinct party designations. Summarizing these responses, they estimate that 59.5% had identification with a political party (Converse and Pierce 1986, 75). Since this percentage is clearly higher (by at least 10 percentage points) than the estimates they report from surveys in the surrounding years, we thought perhaps there was an inadvertent coding bias. Therefore, we recoded the response categories ourselves, trying to make extra sure that only clear party references were allowed into the party identification count. (References to "de Gaulle" were exempted from this stricture.) By our tally, the party identification estimate is revised downward somewhat, to 56.6%.

Measurement of left-right ideology is more straightforward. Following the custom in Western European surveys, respondents were asked to place themselves on an ideological scale running from left to right:

"Et vous-même, si vous aviez à vous placer sur cette échelle, où vous placeriez-vous?"
 ["And yourself, if you placed yourself on this scale, where would you be?"]

Our reestimate of those who were able to select a location on the scale is 77%, essentially the same calculation Converse and Pierce (1986, 127) arrive at.

What do these numbers establish? They show that, by a fairly wide margin, more French voters have a left-right orientation than have a party identification (77.0%–56.6% = about a 20-point difference). Converse and Pierce (1986, 127–29) suggest this difference is exaggerated, since those in the “middle-of-the-road,” at the 50 score, might not have a meaningful ideology. But to us it does not seem conceptually implausible for a self-styled moderate sincerely to select the center of such a scale. Further, one might expect these moderates, as a group, to split their votes about evenly, when confronted with right-left major party choices. This is what happens here, for just over 50% of those at the middle score vote Gaullist on the first-ballot, most of the rest swinging left. More tellingly, the estimated bivariate relationship ($\gamma = .62$) of the full ideology scale to vote (code values given below) does not substantively improve if the suspect middle categories are allowed to exercise any nonmonotonic impact they may have ($\eta = .64$). That is, a moderate ideological stance is as meaningful, in monotonic predictive terms, as more extreme postures. In another criticism of the left-right scale, Converse and Pierce (1986, 129), claim “only about 65 percent understand what these terms mean,” concluding that “the fact of self-location can be a rather superficial datum.” But, party understanding also seems superficial. Converse and Pierce (1986, 55–63) report 97% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the “needless complexity and confusion” of the multiparty system. When prompted to recall party names, the median French voter retrieved only four of the more than 20.

The general extent to which ideological identification exceeds party identification is likely greater than the reported 20 percentage points because of a downward bias in the ideology estimate. As Converse and Pierce (1986, 127) themselves suggest, an item-order effect was probably operating to depress responses on the left-right self-placement scale. This inference gains plausibility, upon noting that a survey the year before, 1966, found fully 90% of the French electorate placed themselves on a left-right scale (Deutsch, London, and Weill 1966). Moreover, this 90% figure is more typical of Fifth Republic survey data (e.g., average = 87%, from 1973, 1978, 1981, 1986 legislative election year Euro-Barometers). If 90% is a more accurate number for ideology, then the percentage difference grows to about 33.

Regardless of the specific foregoing estimates selected, the percentage of French voters who are ideologically identified much exceeds the percentage who are party identified. In our search for what anchors the French electorate, this fact has profound consequences. For an identification variable to act as a psychological anchor orienting voters to the political universe, the object of political attachment—be it a party or an ideology—must be perceived and acknowledged. Without that first step of recognition, a voter remains unmotivated by the variable in question. What we see here is that a large block of the French electorate (43%) has no

psychological link to any party. For that great mass, partisanship moves them not at all. In contrast, 77%, perhaps more, are joined to some ideology and thus able to be influenced by it. This broad ideological base seems by far the surer foundation of French electoral choice.

STRENGTH OF PARTY AND IDEOLOGY

What is the relationship of vote choice to left-right ideology? To party identification? How do they compare in terms of strength? To begin, study the bivariate results. As mentioned earlier, the 1967 National Assembly first-ballot vote intention correlates (γ) with the left-right ideology scale at .62. This estimate is not far from that reported with other Fifth Republic legislative election surveys (Lewis-Beck 1984, 442.) It reflects the strong association between the two variables. Similarly, party identification (see code values below) correlates (γ) at .82 with this first-ballot choice. Thus, we unhesitatingly accept the general implication of the estimate—the tug of party is important, at least among the smaller number who are identifiers. However, the actual magnitude of the association may well be biased upward, due to item-order effects from unusual proximity and context.

In examining the Mass Survey Questionnaire, 1967 (Converse and Pierce 1986, appendix D), one observes that the party identification item (Q. 32) is posed only four questions before the vote items begin (Q. 36). The juxtaposition of party and vote choices might induce a reaction of consistency and, hence, an inflated correlation. Furthermore, from the time the left-right ideology scale is offered (back at Q. 22) to the first vote question, the word “party” is mentioned 19 times, whereas the words “left” or “right” are only mentioned 4 times. This differential emphasis, by giving great salience to party, could make party-vote preferences artificially conform. Of course, such item reactivity may not have occurred. Still, comparable question order and context has induced bias in careful studies of survey methodology (for current references, see Bishop 1990; Lau, Sears, and Jessor 1990). At the least, the hypothesis of an inflated party-vote correlation must be entertained.

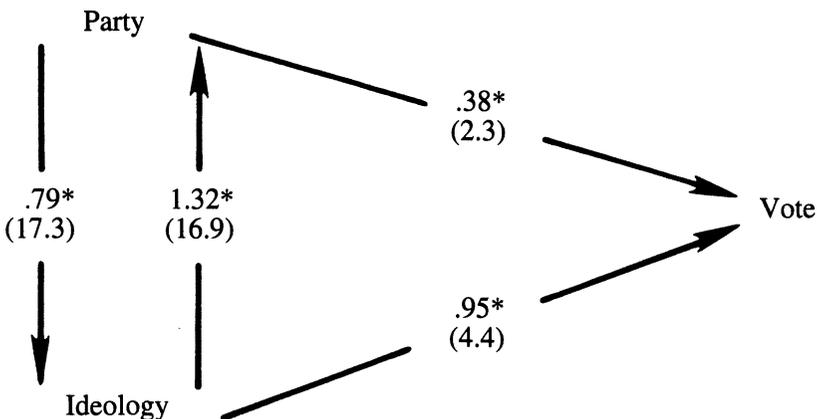
Even assuming that the above correlations are unbiased, we are some distance from addressing the issue of which has a stronger impact on the vote—party or ideology. To treat that subject, we must explore the structural effects of these independent variables, in properly specified and estimated equations. In this situation, the “chicken-and-egg” problem immediately presents itself. Does party “cause” ideology, or vice versa? Perhaps, they each “cause” the other. To answer such a question, we face the usual problems of simultaneous equation modeling, beginning with the establishment of the exogenous versus endogenous status of the variables. For starters, take the party identification variable. Is party identification a stable, ongoing, almost inherited trait, faithfully guiding voters election after election? That is, is it exogenous? Or, is party identification changeable, shifting in response to issues, only loosely orienting the voter? That is, is it endogenous?

If the American experience is any guide, party identification has both an endogenous and an exogenous component. While it acts in some ways as a "standing decision" rule, it also serves as a "running tally" of support on issues (Fiorina 1981, chap. 5). For French voters, it has even been argued that a survey question about party identification merely records a vote intention, rather than a deep psychological attachment (Percheron 1977). Obviously, if either implication is correct, then party identification in the French context is highly endogenous.

Fortunately, in formulating a system of equations to account for the French vote, we do not have to specify party identification as only exogenous or only endogenous. For example, while party shapes ideology, ideology might also shape party. Moreover, both party and ideology would be expected to have an independent effect on vote. This scenario suggests a three-equation nonrecursive system, as partially sketched figure 1.

Estimation of the structural coefficients, on the basis of these 1967 data, should help resolve the question of the relative impact of the two variables on the vote in the French electorate. However, the method cannot be ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression, because of the simultaneous equation bias induced by the reciprocal causation between party and ideology. A remedy comes from the use of instrumental variables, which are exogenous surrogates for the offending endogenous variables in a system. Estimation goes forward in two stages. In the first

FIGURE 1
PATH DIAGRAM OF 1967 LEGISLATIVE VOTE CHOICE



Source: 1976 FNES.

Note: The variables are coded as described with Eqs. 1-3. These instrumental variables estimates (a 2SLS) are on the full Eqs. 1-3; however, the paths from the other variables—class, church, the economy—are not pictured. The values in parentheses, below the coefficients, are t -ratios; * = statistical significance at .05 or better according to these t -ratios. These estimates are based on N from 765 to 1,186, depending on the particular equation estimated.

stage, appropriate instruments are created (in this case, for the endogenous party and ideology variables). In the second stage, these instrumental variables take the place of the original endogenous independent variable measures in the properly specified equations, and least squares applied to yield consistent estimates of the structural parameters. (A full discussion of the construction of the instrumental variables is provided in the footnote.)¹

To develop a properly specified model of the French vote, other independent variables obviously need incorporation, besides party and ideology. The literature suggests at least three fundamental cleavages which cannot be neglected: class, religion, economics (see the classic paper by Michelat and Simon 1977; cf. Lewis-Beck 1985). Thus, to complete our model, we include measures of these variables, yielding the following system of three equations:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Ideology} &= f(\text{Party}^*, \text{Class}, \text{Church}, \text{Econ}) & \text{Eq. 1} \\ \text{Party} &= f(\text{Ideology}^*, \text{Class}, \text{Church}, \text{Econ}) & \text{Eq. 2} \\ \text{Vote} &= f(\text{Party}^*, \text{Ideology}^*, \text{Class}, \text{Church}, \text{Econ}) & \text{Eq. 3} \end{aligned}$$

where

Party = party identification in 1967 (coded into the seven basic categories of Communist/Extreme Left, Federation of the Left/Socialist, Radical Socialist, MRP/Centre Démocrate, UNR/Gaullist, Right, Extreme Right; *Party** = the instrumental variable for *Party*);

¹The instrumental variables approach solves the problem of an endogenous independent variable by finding a good exogenous surrogate for it, e.g., by substituting *Party** for *Party*. To construct an instrument, we employed available variables in the data set that appear exogenous to the system and, at the same time, correlate with the endogenous variables to be substituted for. Effectively, this reduces to key demographic variables and certain general retrospective evaluations. (Our strategy parallels that of Fiorina [1981, Appendix B] in his construction of a party identification instrument, in order to arrive at the effects of party on vote in American survey data.) These available exogenous variables are: *community size, age, religious affiliation, occupation, education, church attendance, income, income satisfaction, satisfaction with income distribution, comparison of the Fourth versus the Fifth Republic, opinion on de Gaulle, and 1965 presidential vote.*

A good instrument, e.g., *Party**, should correlate well with the original, e.g., *Party*. The following four variables essentially do the job of the entire list of 12, in attempting to account statistically for party identification variance—vote 65, opinion on de Gaulle, church attendance, and income distribution. When they are regressed on the 1967 first-ballot vote, the $R^2 = .45$. (Addition of all remaining exogenous variables added less than one point to this fit.) From this equation, the predicted values of *Party*—*Party**—are formed to serve as the instrumental variable in the second-stage least-squares (2SLS) estimation. (One temptation is to apply polytomous logistic regression because the dependent variable is not fully metric. However, given the formulated causal structure, this strategy means the estimation of at least 18 separate logistic equations. Besides being unwieldy, such a bundle of results poses major confusions for interpretation; for a sensitive treatment of these problems, see DeMaris [1992].) With regard to *Ideology*, four variables again manage the basic accounting for the entire list—vote 65, comparison of the Fourth versus the Fifth Republics, church attendance, and income distribution. This regression equation yields an $R^2 = .31$. Similarly, the predicted values of *Ideology*—*Ideology**—serve as the instrumental variable in the second stage.

Each instrument correlates well with the variable for which it “stands-in” (for *Party* and *Ideology*,

Vote = the 1967 National Assembly first-ballot vote (coded into seven basic categories in the manner of *Party*);

Ideology = left-right self-placement rating, transformed to a scale comparable to the seven-point party and vote scales (i.e., after construction of a standard 10-point ideology grouping, the values are multiplied by 7/10);

*Ideology** = the instrumental variable for *Ideology*;

Class = occupation of head of household, scored either blue-collar (0) or white-collar (1);

Church = frequency of church attendance, scored from "at least once a week" (1) to "never" (5);

Econ = satisfaction with the income distribution (a five-point scale judging whether workers are disadvantaged in the distribution of national revenue).

Once the instruments—*Party** and *Ideology**—were obtained, the equations were estimated in a second-stage least squares (2SLS). The results for the coefficients of interest (along with their *t*-ratios) are reported in the path model of figure 1. Since both the *Party* and *Ideology* variables are transformed to a seven-point base metric, comparison of effects is straightforward. The reciprocal causation hypothesis receives strong support. *Party* appears to influence *Ideology*, and *Ideology* appears to influence *Party*. Further, these reciprocal effects are statistically significant. More important for our purposes, however, is the relative magnitude of the effects. The effect of *Ideology* on *Party* ($p = 1.32$) is much larger than the effect of *Party* on *Ideology* ($p = .79$).

Still, these effects, by operating through each other, exercise only indirect effects on the vote. What is more pressing are the direct effects. The direct effects of each on the vote are statistically significant, but the magnitude for *Ideology* ($p = .95$) is much greater than that for *Party* ($p = .38$). The expected impact of a unit change in *Ideology*, then, is over twice that of a comparable change in *Party*. (For the curious, this evaluation sustains itself when standardized coefficients are compared; for *Ideology*, beta weight = .50; for *Party*, beta weight = .27). In this "attempt to establish a 'horse race' between partisanship and left-right locations as competing frames of reference," to use the words of Converse and Pierce (1986, 141), left-right self-placement seems to be a clear winner.

A possible argument against our results has to do with the limitation of the dependent variable to the first-ballot. Under the Fifth Republic (with the exception of 1986), the National Assembly system of elections is single-member district, two ballots (if no candidate obtains an absolute majority on the first, then there is a runoff where a plurality is sufficient to win). Converse and Pierce (1986, chaps.

respectively, $r = .67$, $r = .55$). Overall, they appear to be good instruments. (The exogenous contents of each instrument varies slightly, with *Opinion on de Gaulle* appearing in *Party** only, and *Comparison of Fourth versus the Fifth Republic* appearing in *Ideology** only. Construction of instruments from the exact same exogenous variables for each were tried, but the resulting high collinearity prevented estimation at the second-stage; on this problem, see Berry [1984, 71].)

11–13) contend that, when second-ballot voting is taken into account, partisanship clearly dominates left-right location. Among other things, they combine first- and second-ballot vote choices to form a measure of what Goguel (1968) calls the “decisive ballot.” In constructing this decisive ballot measure, voters’ first-ballot preferences are used when no second ballot was necessary; otherwise their second-ballot preferences were used. Perhaps this vote choice, which actually “decides” the election outcome, is more sensitive to partisan influence than the strict first-ballot dependent variable of Eq. 3. To test this possibility, we estimated (2SLS) that equation again, but this time changing the dependent variable to 1967 “decisive vote” (DV). Here are those results, in full:

$$\begin{aligned}
 DV = & -.54 + .46P^* + .84I^* + .43C - .14R - .11E & \text{Eq. 4} \\
 & (2.5) \quad (2.8) \quad (3.9) \quad (5.0) \quad (3.7) \quad (2.6) \\
 R^2 = & .49 \quad SEE = 1.19 \quad N = 886
 \end{aligned}$$

where

DV = 1967 National Assembly “decisive vote,” as defined in above paragraph;

*P** = Party instrument;

*I** = Ideology instrument;

C = occupation of head of household;

R = church attendance;

E = satisfaction with income distribution, as defined and measured with Eq. 3;

the figures in parentheses are the absolute *t*-ratios;

when $|t| > 2.00$, statistical significance at .05 is implied;

R-square = coefficient of multiple determination;

SEE = the standard error of estimate;

N = the number of cases.

According to these estimates, the cleavages of class, religion, and economics significantly influence the French voter, a finding paralleled in other single-equation models of French legislative election contests (Lewis-Beck 1988, 62). Further, the model gives a good accounting of variance in “decisive vote” choice. These signs encourage us to think that the *Party* and *Ideology* variables are embedded in a well-specified model. When we study the coefficient of the *Party* variable, we observe that the coefficient of *Ideology* continues to loom over it, registering a value almost twice as large. Once again, ideology seems to “win” the race.

CONCLUSION

Ideology, not party, is the premier psychological anchor of the French voter, according to this analysis of the 1967 French National Election Study. In terms of scope, many more voters (at least 20% more), have an ideological identification. In terms of strength, left-right self-placement exerts about twice the pull on the voter that partisanship does. In a general sense, these findings should come as no surprise. Left-center-right ideological cleavages have heavily structured French

political choice as far back as revolutionary times, as statistical studies on early assembly voting patterns have shown (see, for example, Lewis-Beck, Hildreth, and Spitzer 1988).

Of course, these findings are not confirmatory. They are based on only one cross-sectional data set, from 1967. While Converse and Pierce rest their case mainly on the same data base, they provide some analysis of the 1967–1968–1969 panel. We have not done so for, as of this writing, these panel data had not been released by the ICPSR. However, we doubt that future availability of these panel data will do much to resolve any dispute. As Converse and Pierce (1986, 801) themselves acknowledge, “by any reasonable standards” the response rate across the duration of their panel must be considered “precariously low.” Lastly, there has to be a concern about any panel, even a “perfect” one, conducted across the years 1968–1969. In 1968, massive social and political unrest brought the country to the edge of revolution. In 1969, General de Gaulle suddenly left the presidency, after serving in that capacity since the birth of the Fifth Republic. It would be difficult to pick more “unusual” years in the politics of modern France. Certainly, we have to ask if they represent the preferred time period from which to generalize about long-term influences on French voting behavior.

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