

# Parties & Partisanship

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Lecture 8.1



Green



Labour



National



act /

# Today's plan

- Parties — what they are and why they matter for democracy
- Party identification — how citizens form attachments to parties
- Dealignment, negative partisanship & hyper-partisanship

## Notes

- Parties / partisanship connect to many of the topics we have already covered - i.e. most models of vote choice connect to partisanship somehow
- We'll be focusing on party identification in more depth today

# Parties & Democracy

*“Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties.”*

E. E. Schattschneider (1942)

**Notes**

- Almost every functioning democracy has political parties - we tend to forget democracy can (and has) existed without parties
- But they are central to how democracy operates in the modern world

# Why are parties important for democracy?



# Why are parties important for democracy?

## Stabilise democracy

Organised competition  
reduces political  
instability

## Enable participation

Membership,  
volunteering,  
campaigning

## Help voters decide

Party labels act as  
decision shortcuts

### Notes

- Stabilisation: NZ governments changed frequently and unpredictably before parties emerged in the late 19th century — parties provide continuity and accountability
- Participation: formal membership has declined sharply, but parties remain an important organised route into democratic politics beyond voting
- Decision-making: voters use a party's record and reputation to make informed choices without tracking every policy — this "party label as cue" idea connects directly to party identification, covered later in the lecture

# NZ party history

- No formal parties for first 37 years of NZ parliament
- Liberal Party founded ~1890 (later succeeded by United)
- Labour 1916 · National 1936

## Visual History of NZ parties (The Spinoff)

### Notes

- Without parties, early NZ governments were highly unstable — shifting coalitions with no clear accountability to voters
- The Liberal Party was the first mass party (did not have a clear ideology); Labour emerged from the trade union movement; National from a merger of conservative groupings

# Why do parties emerge?



Social  
cleavages

System  
incentives

Voter  
demand

## Notes

- **Social cleavages** — deep societal divisions (class, religion, ethnicity) generate organised political representation. e.g. Labour parties emerged from the working-class cleavage.
- **System incentives** — electoral rules shape party formation. FPP systems often produce two dominant parties (voters avoid "wasting" votes on minor parties). NZ's shift to MMP in 1996 meant parties were integral to the voting system, and multiple parties in parliament.
- **Voter demand** — party labels let voters hold politicians accountable over time. Without them, there is no easy way for voters to form expectations about a politician's future behaviour — voters tend to prefer parties over independents.

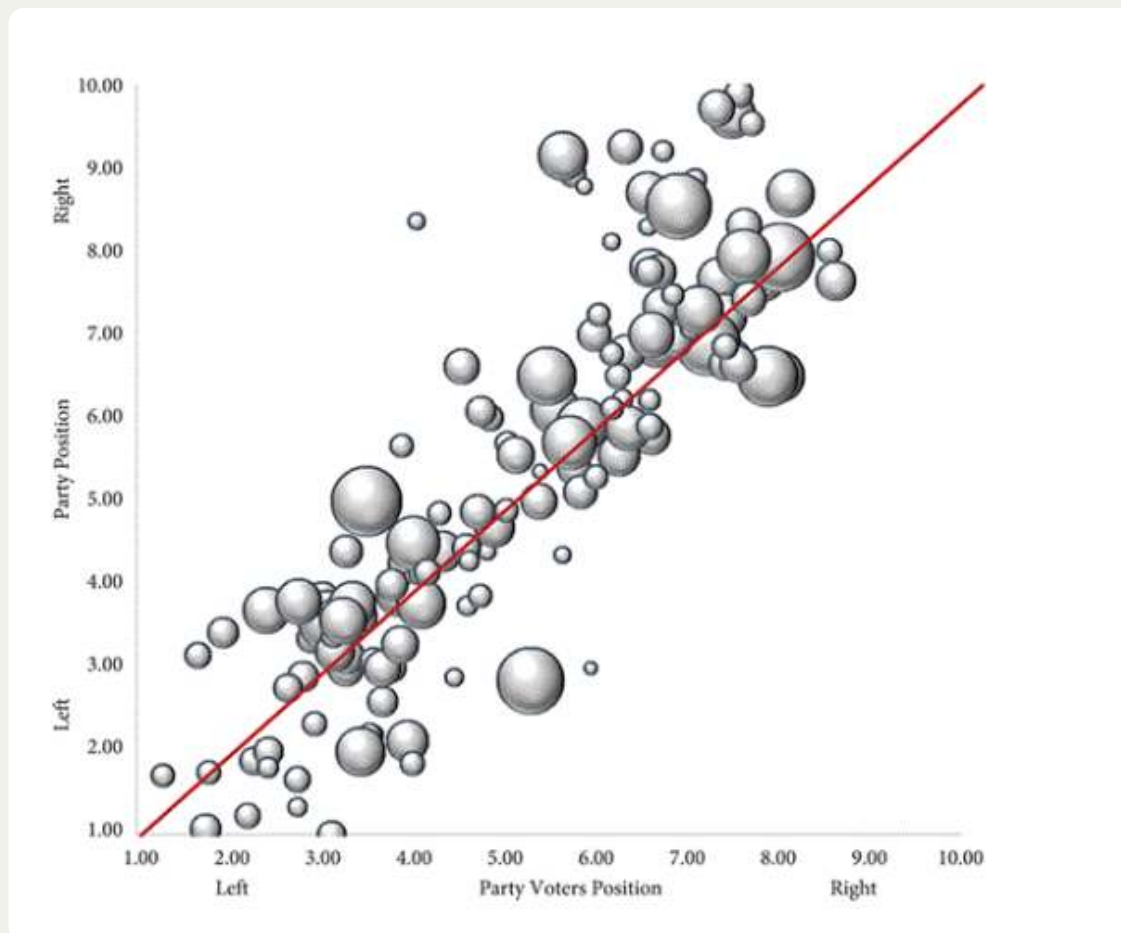
# Key elements of a party

- **Party in parliament** — elected caucus; sets the legislative agenda, holds ministerial posts, chooses the leader
- **Party central office** — management (board, president) and professional staff; strategy, campaigning, communications
- **Party on the ground** — formal members and supporters/volunteers; door-knocking, fundraising, candidate selection

## Notes

- In practice, power has shifted heavily toward the "party in government" face — leaders and their advisers drive strategy, with central office and members playing a more supporting role.
- NZ example: the party leader and their office typically lead campaign strategy; candidate selection is centralised (at least on the party list); local branches have limited policy influence.

# Parties and ideology



(Dalton 2020)

- Parties tend to be oriented ideologically (remember political/vote compass)
- Parties usually easier to place ideologically than the people who support them

## Notes

- Dalton (2020) shows far right parties tend to hold more extreme positions than their supporters
- This is the first clue about why people support parties - i.e. it is not all about ideology/policy positions (at least not for all voters)

# Political parties today

- **Highly professionalised** — centralised leadership, paid consultants
- **Catch-all strategy** — broad appeal over ideology; weakly connected to civil society
- **Volatile party systems** — large swings in vote share, traditional parties collapsing, new parties emerging



NZ Labour Party conference

### Notes

- Modern parties have become professional campaign machines — centralised, state-funded (in some countries), and driven by polling and media strategy rather than member deliberation.
- Electoral volatility has increased markedly across Europe: traditional parties have collapsed while new parties have surged (especially but not entirely on the radical right)
- NZ and the US are relative exceptions: the US two-party system is structurally resistant to new entrants under FPP; NZ introduced MMP in 1996 which increased party diversity, but Labour and National still dominate, and new parties struggle to get a foothold (e.g. TOP)

# UK Party membership trends

## Reported membership of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat<sup>1</sup> parties

1930-2022, in thousands

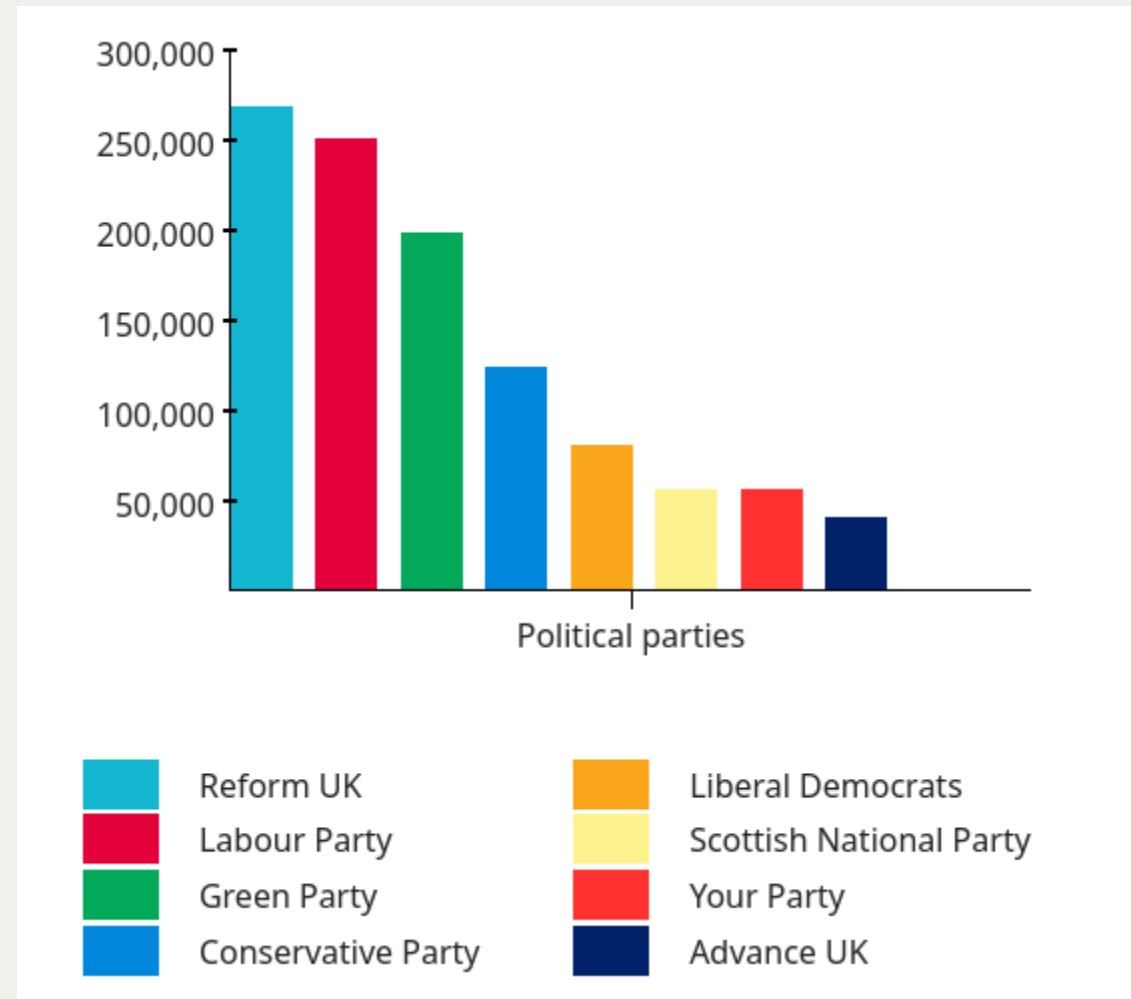


Source: House of Commons Library

### Notes

- The post-war Conservative spike (peaking at ~2.8 million in 1953) was partly due to the Young Conservatives. The YCs were seen as an important social club through the 1950s (although was still an important political force). See: Black (2008), "The Lost World of Young Conservatism"
- The decline from the late 1950s onward partly reflects the collapse of that social function: television, rising prosperity and wider leisure options gave people alternatives.
- The decline is similar to that seen around the world, and is also related to the professionalisation of parties (meaning they did not rely so much on membership financially)

# UK Party membership today

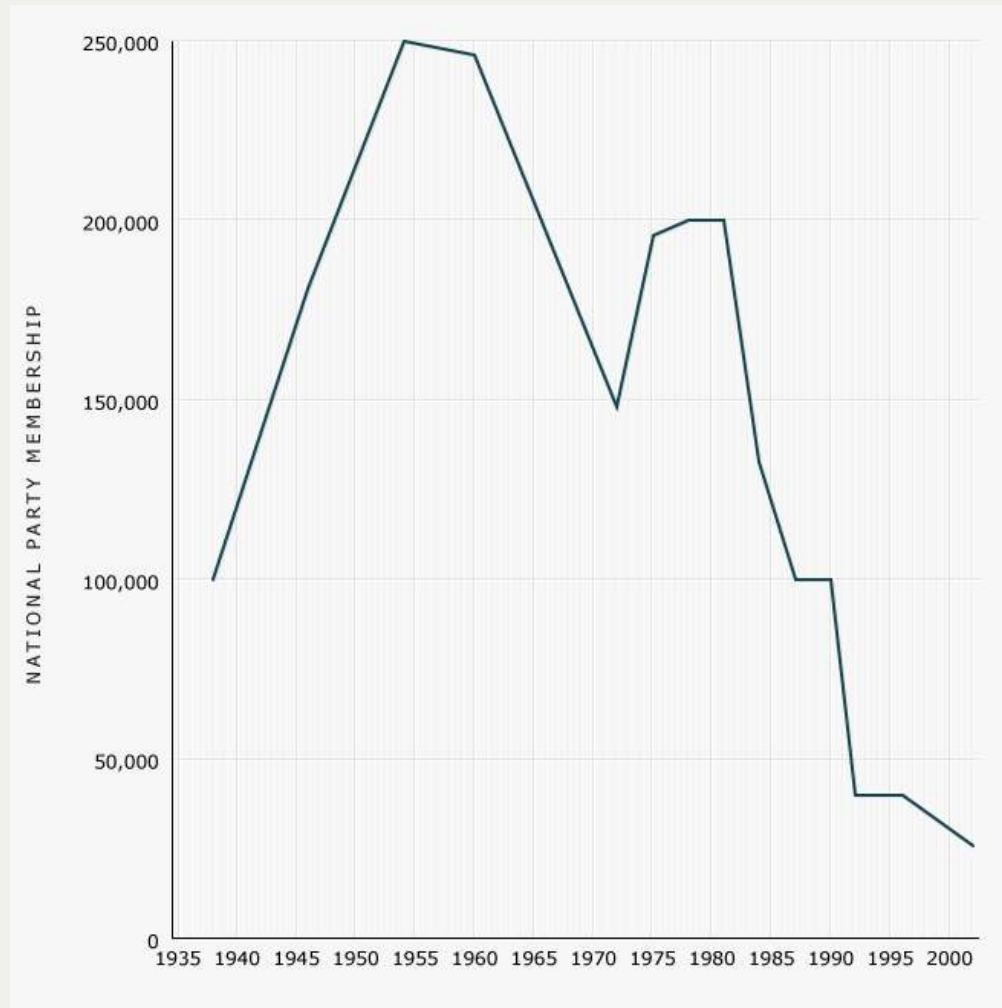


Source: Wikipedia

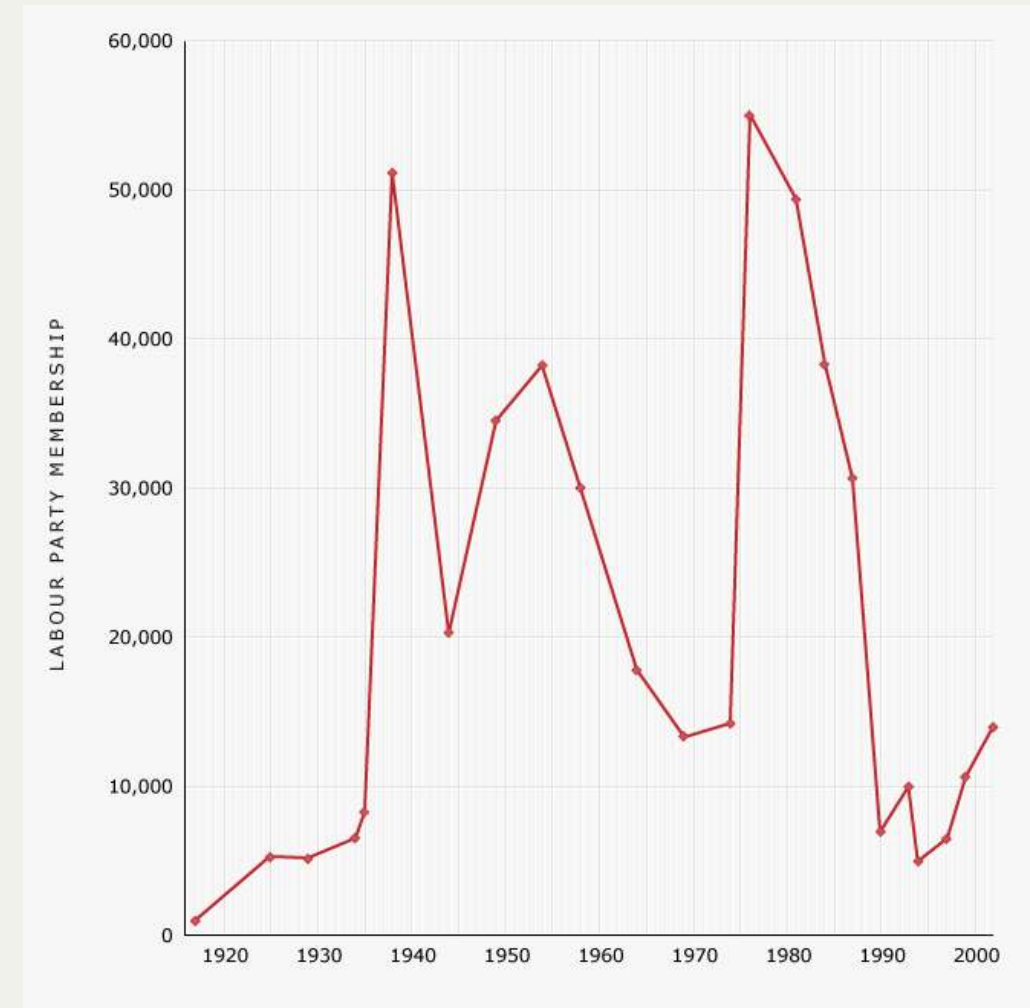
## Notes

- According to this data, Reform now has the largest party membership in the UK (and are also polling higher than any other party)
- Note, this data is sourced from Wikipedia, so take with a grain of salt!

# NZ Party Membership



National



Labour

Source: Te Ara

Notes

- NZ parties had similar decline in membership as other places around the world
- Note: newer data is not available, and Labour/National do not report membership numbers (and are under no obligation to do so). Even the 20thC data shown here may not be completely accurate

# Party Identification



## L8.1: Parties & Partisanship

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### Notes

- Clip from the show "Newsroom", this is set after the 2012 US presidential election, when Republicans had had a bad night (i.e. Obama had won comfortably)
- PID (or "partisanship") is an attachment people feel to a party, whether or not they are a member
- It's generally seen as being more than just liking a party's policies, it's part of someone's identity (as seen in the clip, "I am a Republican")

# Party Identification: Measurement

*Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? [If yes, which one]*

*[If no] Do you usually feel yourself a little closer to one of the parties than the others? [If yes, which one]*

**Notes**

- Standard questions to measure PID. There are often 2 questions, because some people might not closely identify with a party, but do feel a *little* closer to one party than others

# Two theories of Party Identification

## Affective identity

An *emotional bond* with a party — "I am a Republican." Rooted in group loyalties (class, religion) but also a felt attachment to the party itself

Campbell et al. (1960)

## Rational attitude

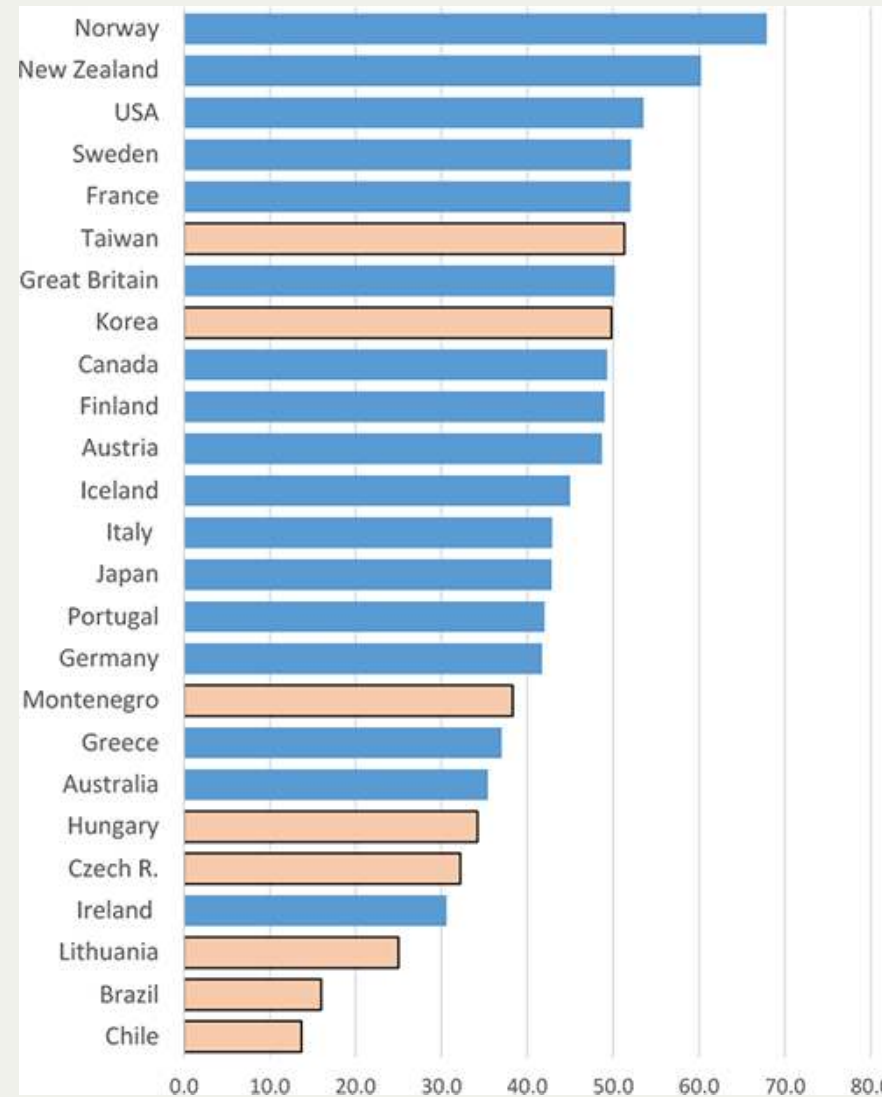
"Which party best represents my views?" PID as an ongoing calculation — updated as parties' positions change

Fiorina (1981)

### Notes

- The affective identity view comes from the Michigan school (Campbell et al., 1960, *The American Voter*) — they saw PID as a psychological identification, like loyalty to a sports team, largely inherited from parents and stable across a lifetime.
- The rational attitude view (associated with Fiorina, 1981) treats PID as a "running tally" of party performance — citizens update their attachment based on what parties actually do in government.
- There are also other theories (e.g. Sociological explanations, which are more about cleavages). As with all theories, none fit reality exactly, what fits well today may not fit well tomorrow (e.g. social cleavages are now less important)

# Party identification around the world

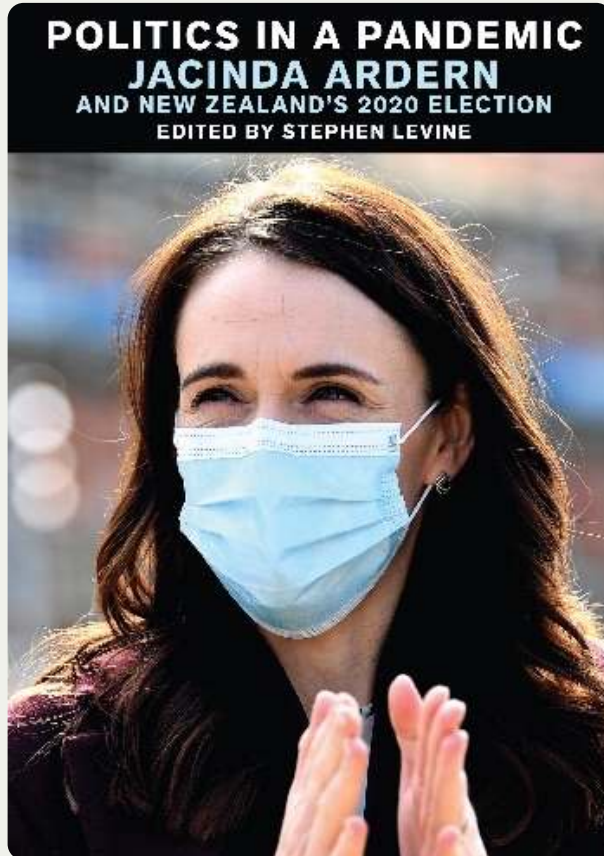


Source: Dalton (2021)

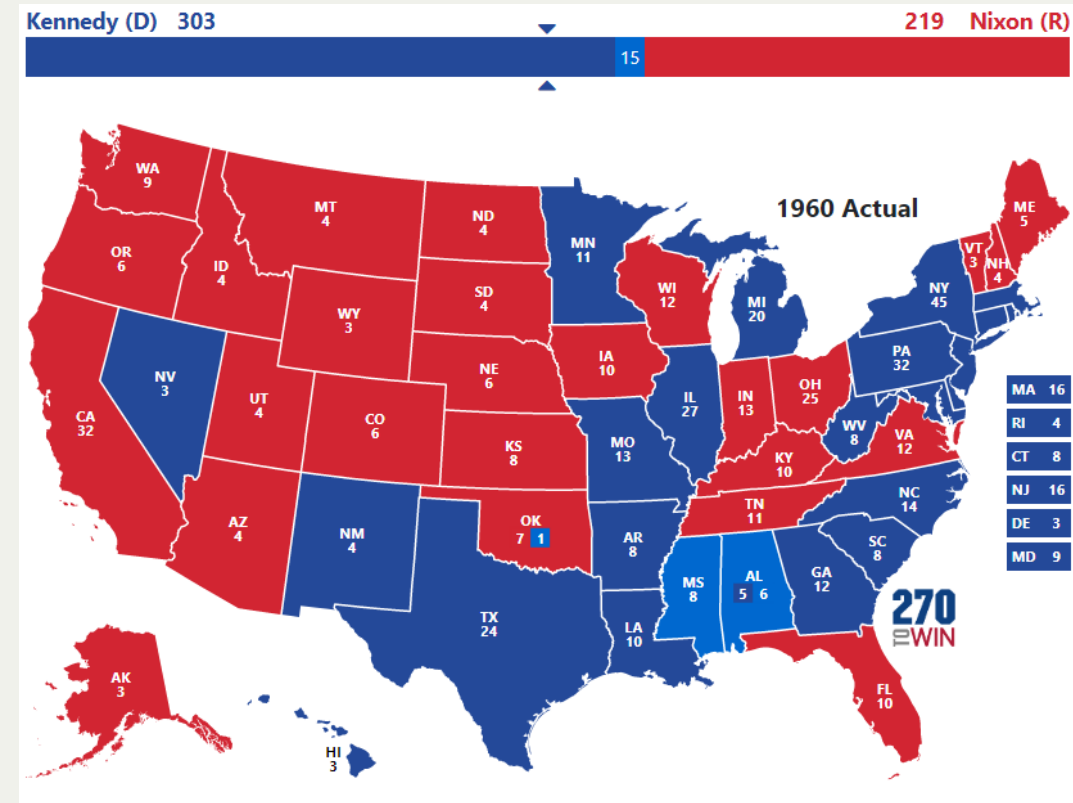
Notes

- Cross-national variation in PID is substantial — the US tends to score high; many European countries score lower, partly reflecting weaker party attachments and more volatile electorates.
- NZ has high attachment, but arguably it is endogenous to party vote (i.e. people tend to identify with the party they most recently voted for)

# PID vote choice & stability



NZ Labour, 2020



US Electoral College, 1960

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Notes

- PID is generally seen as stable over time — more stable than people's issue positions.
- NZ 2020: Labour's partisan base is roughly 25–30% of voters, yet they won ~49% of the vote. The surge came from voters who didn't identify as Labour — attracted by Ardern's pandemic leadership, i.e. people voted for Labour even if they identified with other parties
- US 1960: A very different EC map than we see today. Shows that PID can change en mass over time (even if that change is more about new generations coming through)

# PID: the paradox?

## Hyper-partisanship

Partisans seem to be becoming more strongly supportive and more hostile towards the opposing party

## Decline

Across democracies, fewer people identify strongly with a party — a growing pool of *volatile voters* who respond to short-term factors

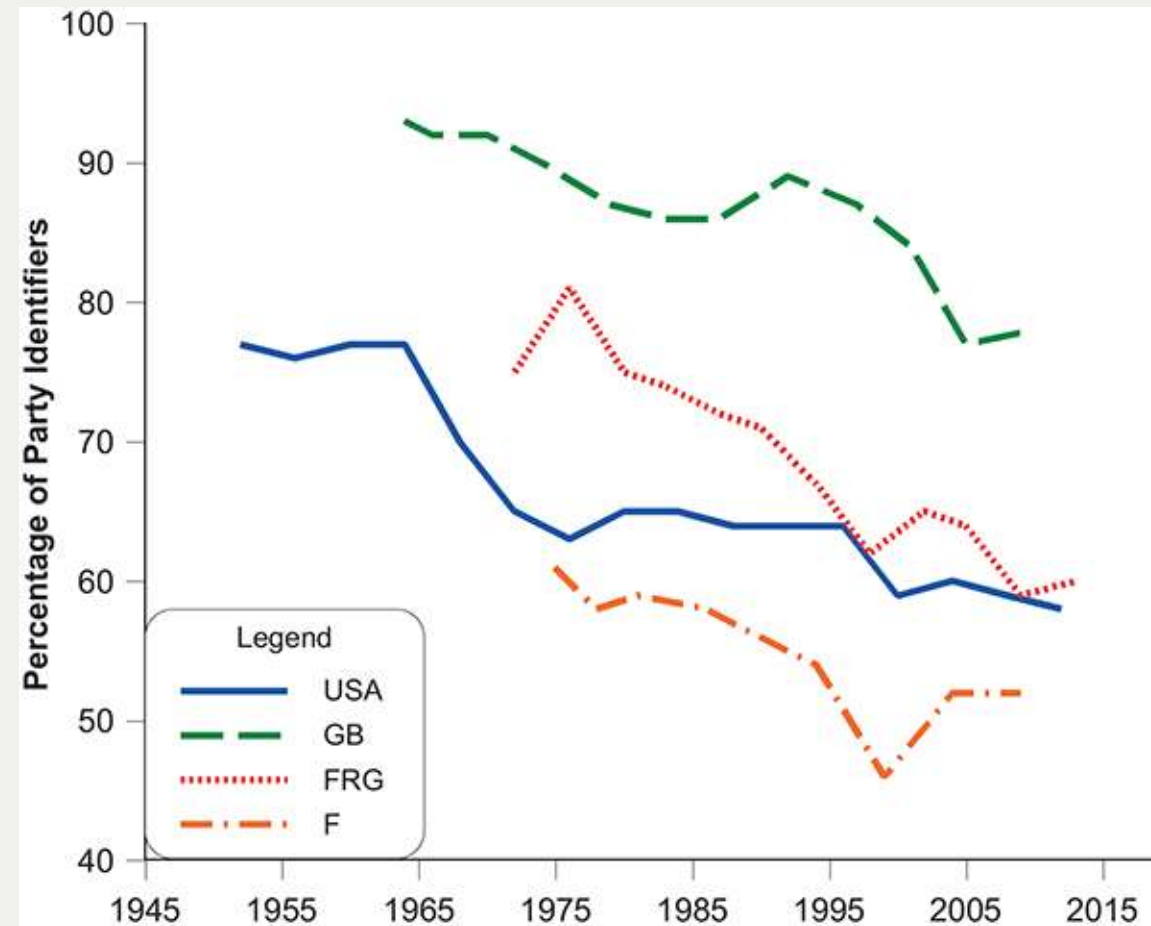
# Partisanship at the extremes

- **Hyper-partisanship:** very strong emotional attachment to a party
- **Negative partisanship:** dislike of the opposing party (not necessarily attachment to the one you identify with)
- Strong emotional attachment linked with cognitive biases (e.g. motivated reasoning)

## Notes

- Negative partisanship seems to be increasing (especially in the US), e.g. many people vote Republican because they hate Democrats (or vice versa), not because they like the party they voted for
- Negative partisanship helps explain why PID can be declining overall while partisan intensity is rising (links to affective polarisation)
- Hyper-partisanship is more clearly happening among elites (and small sections of the public), the rest of the public has weakening attachments to parties
- What appears to be hyper-partisanship can also actually be devotion to a leader (e.g. Trump)

# Dealignment: PID declining



Source: Dalton (2020)

## Notes

- Dalton's data shows a broad decline in party identification across four Western democracies — this is "dealignment": voters becoming less anchored to parties over time.
- Dealignment is distinct from "realignment" (where voters switch en masse from one party to another) — instead, partisan attachments simply weaken across the board.
- The trend is consistent across very different political systems — proportional and majoritarian, two-party and multi-party — suggesting it is driven by broader social changes (rising education, media fragmentation, declining deference to institutions) rather than any single country's circumstances.

# Why is PID declining?

Increasing education

Weakening social  
cleavages

Declining trust in  
institutions

(Not a complete list)

**Notes**

- Dalton (2020) emphasises the "cognitive mobilisation" thesis — rising education levels mean voters can process political information independently, reducing their reliance on party labels as shortcuts.
- As previously discussed, social cleavages are less relevant today than ~60 years ago, meaning the group basis of PID has faded.
- Declining institutional trust is a broader trend — unions, churches, and political parties have all shed members. Voters feel less tied to organisations that once anchored their political identity.
- Fieldhouse et al. (2023) argue the change is generational, i.e. younger voters are less partisan than older voters, and retain low levels of partisanship throughout their lives

# Consequences of dealignment

## Lower turnout

Weak partisans less reliably mobilised;  
harder for parties to get out the vote

## New parties & volatility

Without strong loyalties, voters are  
available for new entrants — driving  
electoral shocks

## More issue voting

Dealigned voters choose based on  
short-term factors — leaders, issues,  
events

## The volatile voter

A growing pool of swing voters who  
drive large electoral swings  
(Fieldhouse et al., 2023)

### Notes

- Fieldhouse et al. (2023) also discuss how dealignment interacts with party system fragmentation (i.e. declining dominance of mainstream parties)
- Dealignment and party system fragmentation partly explain the party system volatility we see in many countries
- It's linked to the "new" (i.e. cultural) issues, and the rise of Green & Radical right parties

# Key Points

- Parties are essential for democracy — they stabilise competition, enable participation, and help voters decide
- Party identification shapes vote choice, but short-term factors can sway voters in single elections
- PID and party membership are declining across democracies — creating a growing pool of volatile voters