Growth trajectories in the strength of party identification: The legacy of autocratic regimes

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A B S T R A C T

While some scholars interpret the frequently documented association between age and the strength of party identification as evidence of accumulated political learning, others stress the importance of critical life stages. Germany's turbulent last century, with its suspensions of democratic processes, provides the unique opportunity to empirically disentangle both effects and to also study the consequences of early experiences of autocratic regimes on later growth rates in partisan strength. Random growth curve models based on multi-cohort panel data emanating from the German Socio-Economic Panel show that the growth trajectory in the strength of party identification largely depends on the number of electoral experiences. Moreover, the analysis documents few differences in growth rates between individuals socialized in democratic versus autocratic regimes.

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1. Introduction

Since the work of Almond (1963), scholars have recognized the importance of civic culture for the success of (emerging) democracies. Democratic rule is defined by the existence not only of certain institutional structures in a society, but also of a participatory political culture. Particularly after waves of democratic transformations, such as the collapse of the communist bloc in the early 1990s and the (still ongoing) Arab spring, public and scientific debates center around the question whether political attitudes in formerly autocratic societies will soon reflect the newly established democratic institutions or whether non-democratic attitudes will continue to prevail in society. One important benchmark for such changes in political attitudes is identification with democratic parties (Campbell et al., 1960; Shively, 1972). The more loyal citizens are to the newly established democratic parties, the lower the impact of exogenous shocks such as economic crises on public support for the democratic system in general.

In his seminal article "Of Time and Partisan Stability," Converse (1969) elaborates the idea that party identification intensifies in strength over the life course, such that every experience of a democratic election reinforces people's existing partisan identity. As a consequence of this individual-level process of cumulative political learning, new democracies increase in stability at an aggregate level with every democratic election. Abramson (1979) and others have questioned this conclusion on empirical grounds, arguing on the basis of more advanced age-period-cohort models and repeated cross-sectional data that much of the reported age effect in the strength of party identification is in fact due to generational differences. Yet other scholars interpret the age gradient in the strength of party identification as reflecting sociological life-cycle differences rather than electoral experiences (Niemi et al., 1985).

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Debates about the age gradient in the strength of party identification are uniquely suited to illustrate the added value of panel data and random growth curve models in the context of APC analysis. First, panel data permit the researcher to relax the simplifying assumption of homogenous age effects that come with repeated cross-sectional data. Instead, panel data allow the researcher to estimate heterogenous growth trajectories in an outcome of interest, for instance, across cohorts but also individuals (Yang, 2007). This article draws on this advantage when studying the effects of different early experiences of democratic and autocratic rule for the growth rate in the strength of party identification. Also, the article considers the age at first contact with a new democratic society as a source of individual differences in growth trajectories of partisan strength. This allows the study to shed light on the question of whether citizens in emerging democracies who were socialized under autocratic rule are able to develop meaningful party identification in the new system, or whether stable political loyalties only emerge in newly established democracies after a gap of one generation (Dalton, 1994).

A second advantage of random growth curve models and multi-cohort panel data compared to APC models based on repeated cross-sectional data lies in the possibility to simultaneously specify multiple temporal processes constituting an age effect. The article illustrates this advantage by studying the extent to which the growth trajectory in the strength of party identification evolves from repeated electoral experiences as suggested by Converse (1969) or by sociological life-cycle differences as suggested by many other scholars (Niemi et al., 1985).

2. Data

The Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) is a longitudinal household survey established in West Germany in 1984. Since the beginning of the study, the SOEP has included a special sample of immigrants to Germany. A sample of East Germans was added in mid-1990 before reunification, when the GDR was still in existence. The ongoing annual survey is extended regularly with refreshment samples, and currently consists of a representative national sample of 24,000 individuals in 12,000 households (Kroh, 2011). The sample analyzed here covers birth cohorts from 1882 to 1992. The earliest 10 percent were born pre-1929 and the latest 10 percent were born post-1980.[1] The median birth cohort is 1957. Age varies between 16 and 102 with a median age of 44.

Strength of party identification –the outcome of interest– has been measured in the SOEP since 1984 on an annual basis using the standard measurement from German political science (Falter et al., 2000). This instrument draws on three consecutive questions: "Many people in Germany lean towards one party in the long term, even if they occasionally vote for another party. Do you lean

towards a particular party?" If respondents answer affirmatively, they are asked "Which party do you lean toward?" and then "And to what extent?".[2] The 4-point scale of partisan strength (ranging from 0 to 3) used in this paper differentiates among respondents who report no party identification, those who lean "very weakly/weakly", "somewhat", and "rather/very strongly" towards one party.[3]

The mean number of measures of partisan strength among SOEP respondents is 8, with a maximum of 27. Since many of the respondents come from recent refreshment samples, this figure underestimates the durability of respondents' participation in the SOEP. If one only considers respondents who entered the SOEP before 1992, the mean number of measures of party identification increases to 13. Considering the entire history of interviews with each individual, 32 percent of the roughly 45,000 respondents analyzed here never report a party identification, 40 percent report a (very) strong leaning at least once in the period under investigation, with the other 28 percent reporting at maximum a weak respectively moderate party identification.

To measure different early experiences of SOEP respondents, the analysis draws on contextual data collected by the political project "Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2010" directed by Monty G. Marshall. These aggregate data are merged with the SOEP survey data at the level of countries and years. More specifically, SOEP respondents receive the annual polity score of their country of residence when they were 17 years old. This is the (East/West) German annual polity score in native Germans, but in persons immigrating to Germany as adults, this is usually the annual polity score of their country of origin.[4] Table 1 reports the mean polity score in ten-year groups of birth cohorts who resided in East Germany in 1989, in West Germany in 1989, and immigrants to Germany. The reported polity score varies between autocracy (−10) and democracy (+10).

The cohorts born before 1910 in Germany were raised in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic, two polities coded as semi-democratic. West Germans in these cohorts are on average slightly older than the East Germans and therefore experienced more of the less democratic Imperial Germany than they did of the more democratic Weimar Republic, which explains the small difference between the East and West German samples. Cohorts born between 1910 and 1919 were socialized in the late Weimar Republic and early Nazi Germany and thus have, on average, a polity score of zero. Cohorts born between 1920 and 1929 were

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[2] Although the prevalence and the meaning of a strong party identification may in principle vary across parties, due to the lack of specific hypotheses, the analysis treats a strong party identification for the Christian Democrats, for instance, in the same way as a strong party identification for the Social Democrats.

[3] To improve balance in the scale, the analysis lumps together sparsely populated answer categories such as weak and very weak leanings.

[4] If, for instance, a respondent grows up in Poland and immigrates to Germany at age 25, then this person receives the polity-score of Poland in the year when the respondent is 17 years of age. For details of the coding of immigrant countries and the year in which they moved to (West) Germany, see also Section 3.1.