

FORS⁺ GUIDES

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Measuring party affiliation

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Abstract:

Party affiliation is a key concept used in many social science surveys. To measure such affiliations, one can either ask about previous, current or future voting behavior, about party identification or about party proximity. Moreover, there are questions that ask about an evaluation of different parties simultaneously. This guide provides an overview of the different concepts to measure party affiliation, shows examples of their use in Swiss surveys and outlines the implications for researchers who have to choose among them.

Keywords: Party affiliation, actual voting behavior, hypothetical voting behavior, party identification, party proximity, party sympathy, propensity to vote

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1. INTRODUCTION

While measuring party affiliation sounds like a straightforward thing to do, there is a variety of ways how to measure this concept in surveys. Generally, the survey measure applied to measure party affiliation depends on the concept researchers actually intend to study. Party affiliation can be used as a measure of previous, current or future voting behavior or – depending on what aspect is important – it can focus on strategic considerations of the vote choice or on the respondent’s psychological attachment to a specific party. For example, the question how respondents can efficiently support their preferred ideological block and the question why sympathizers of the same political party vary in their degree of identification with the party are two completely different research interests requiring each a tailored measure of party affiliation.

Measures of party affiliation either force respondents to choose one specific political party or take into account that many citizens have opinions about several parties (or even all of them). If the latter is the case, respondents are prompted to express their views on a list of parties that are of interest to the researcher. Alternatively, one can also ask respondents about their preference on certain policies or to position themselves on a specific political dimension – e.g. a left-right scale.

Questions about parties are central in pre- or post-election surveys, but many other surveys use measures of party affiliation, too. In social science research, party affiliation is mainly used in two ways. First, it is used as a *dependent variable* to study electoral behavior. Given that parties are central in elections, scholars are eager to learn about the determinants of party affiliation. Second, party affiliation is also used as an *independent variable* to explain individual positions on different political and social issues, attitudes or values. In those cases, party affiliation serves as a proxy for a general political orientation. Thus, the way how party affiliation is measured has consequences for later substantive analysis.

As with many other questions, there is no “right” or “wrong” how to measure party affiliation. The appropriate measure of party affiliation depends very much on what phenomenon researchers want to explain. This guide outlines the key dimensions of how party affiliation can be measured and gives examples of measures used in different political contexts.

2. WAYS TO MEASURE PARTY AFFILIATION

Asking about party affiliation is not the only way to reveal political positions, but it is the most widely used concept to grasp respondents’ political orientations. This is due to the fact that party affiliation is easy to understand for scholars and a wider public alike. Furthermore, it also has a direct connection to everyday politics: political parties are central actors in politics, as they run for elections and they represent citizens in parliament and government.

In the following subchapters, we discuss different measures of party affiliation. Depending on the researcher’s substantial interest, the country’s electoral system and the survey context in general, questions about actual voting behavior, hypothetical voting behavior, party identification or party proximity may be suitable – to a greater or lesser degree.

2.1 ACTUAL VOTING BEHAVIOR

Vote choice is the most important variable of interest in electoral research. Post-election surveys as well as other surveys ask about voting behavior in the most recent national elections. How this question is worded varies greatly and is strongly connected to the electoral system in a given country (cf. Table 1).

Table 1. Examples of different question wordings contingent on electoral system.

Description	Countries (examples)	Wording of question on electoral choice
<i>Party-centered</i>	Spain (<i>Party-list proportional representation</i>)	Which party did you vote for in the last general elections on [date]?
	Greece (<i>Majority bonus system</i>)	Which party did you vote for?
<i>Candidate-centered</i>	United States of America (<i>First-past-the-post</i>)	Who did you vote for?
	France (<i>Two-round system</i>)	Among the following candidates, who did you vote for?
<i>Mixed (elements of party and candidate choice)</i>	Finland (<i>Party-list proportional representation</i>)	The candidate of which party (or political group) did you vote for in these parliamentary elections?
	Ireland (<i>Single transferable vote</i>)	Thinking about how you voted at the General Election on [date], what party or independent candidate did you give your first preference vote to? Thinking again about how you voted at the General Election on [date], can you tell me the name of the candidate you gave your first preference vote to?
	Germany (<i>Mixed-member proportional representation</i>)	In the Bundestag elections, you were able to cast two votes. The first vote for a candidate from your constituency, the second vote for a party. Here is a sample ballot, similar to the one you received for the Bundestag elections. What did you tick on your ballot? Please tell me the code number for your first and your second vote.

Notes. For further information on the survey questions used in this table see: Spanish National Election Study (http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/EN/1_encuestas/TiposEncuestas/EncuestasElectoriales/encuestaselectorales.jsp), Hellenic (Greek) National Election Studies (ELNES) (<https://www.elnes.gr/>), American National Election Studies (ANES) (<https://electionstudies.org/>), French Electoral Study (<https://cdsp.sciences-po.fr/en/ressources-en-ligne/ressource/fr.cdsp.ddi.FES2017/>), Finish National Election Study (FNES) (<https://www.vaalitukimus.fi/en/front-page/>), Irish National Election Study (INES) (<https://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/irishnationalelectionstudy/>), German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) (<https://gles.eu/>)

In electoral systems that are *party-centered* (e.g. Spain or Greece), voters can only vote for one single party. They are typically asked to choose a list among several party lists. In electoral systems that are *candidate-centered* (e.g. USA or France), voters have to choose one candidate among different candidates. Often, the party the candidate stands for is also mentioned. Moreover, there are *mixed* electoral systems that have elements of both a party choice as well as a candidate choice. In Finland, for example, voters can choose candidates within parties, whereas in Ireland, they need to rank the candidates. In other mixed electoral systems like in Germany, voters have two votes, one for the party and one for a candidate in their local constituency. As additional vote choice, voters in presidential systems (e.g. USA) have to decide on a candidate for the presidency and those in systems with two parliamentary chambers (e.g. Switzerland) also elect a candidate for the Upper House at the time of most general national elections across the world.

Survey questions on vote choice typically try to reproduce the actual choice voters have.¹ In *party-centered* electoral systems in which voters choose only one party, the question usually reads: “Which party did you vote for [in the last general elections]?” This simple party question is sometimes also used in systems in which voters in reality choose among candidates, for example in Canada or in the UK. Even though these countries have a first-past-the-post electoral system that is rather candidate-centered like in the USA, they use the simple party question in post-election studies because voters mainly care about the candidate’s party and not so much about the candidate. The simple party question can even be used for both the Lower and the Upper House in bicameral parliamentary systems. This is the case in the Australian Election Study (AES)², for example, in which the question on electoral choice reads the following: “In the Federal election for the House of Representatives on [date], which party did you vote for first in the House of Representatives? Which party did you vote for in the Senate election?”

There are, however, *candidate-centered* systems in which election studies adapt the question on vote choice to the specificity of the electoral system and display the different candidates who actually run for office. The American National Election Studies (ANES) asks “Who did you vote for?” and then displays the actual candidates running for the House of Representatives and the Senate in the specific districts as answer categories. Reproducing the actual choice voters have is most challenging in *mixed* electoral systems because of the coexistence of a party and a candidate choice. In Finland, voters choose candidates within a party and the question that captures vote choice therefore reads: “The candidate of which party (or political group) did you vote for in these parliamentary elections?” For some national election studies, voters are presented with a sample ballot that is similar to the official ballot used in the election. Voters are then asked to reproduce the exact same ballot as they cast in the election. This is the case in the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) for example, in which participants are asked the following: “In the Bundestag elections, you were able to cast two votes. The first vote for a candidate from your constituency, the second vote for a party. Here is a sample ballot, similar to the one you received for the Bundestag elections. What did you tick on your ballot? Please tell me the code number for your first and your second vote.”

¹ For an overview on the questions asked in each country that takes part in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), see documentation on <https://cses.org/data-download/download-data-documentation/>

² For more information on the Australian Election Study (AES), see: <https://australianelectionstudy.org/>

In general, vote choice questions are not limited to election surveys. The Swiss Household Panel³ or the European Social Survey⁴, for instance, also ask about vote choice in previous elections to assess the party affiliation of its participants.

2.2. HYPOTHETICAL VOTING BEHAVIOR

Some political surveys do not (only) ask about past behavior, but (also) about vote intentions. Asking about such a hypothetical voting behavior is typically part – if not the most crucial one – of pre-election polls, i.e. polls that are used for forecasting election results or tracing shifts in party strengths during the campaign period. For pre-election polls, two different formats of questioning hypothetical voting behavior are typically used. Depending on whether the survey pursues rather an academic research interest or is intended to create a news value in the sense of the media logic, either questions about *actual vote intentions* or questions on the *current state of mind regarding party preferences* are relevant measures of hypothetical voting behavior.

In addition, questions about hypothetical vote choice are also frequently asked in *post*-election studies in which they serve to reveal the party preferences of non-voters. In these cases, it is mostly sufficient to simply adapt the question wording for party choice by changing the grammatical mood of the verb from an indicative to conditional form. The Swiss Election Study (Selects)⁵, for instance, applies the following question wording for the hypothetical party choice of non-voters: “Suppose you had participated in the National Council elections: Which party would you have voted for?”

2.2.1. Actual vote intentions

Many academic polls use questions about vote intentions in order to investigate developments in the stability and strength of public opinion across an election campaign. Academic research often focuses on the individual opinion formation processes and try to explain shifts in the public opinion by linking survey results to special events and the changing information context in the election campaign.

The format of asking about actual vote intentions in the upcoming elections was already used by George Gallup in a poll of 1936 (“Which candidate do you prefer for president?”) and by Elmo Roper in the same year (“For whom do you expect to vote next month?”, Crespi, 1988, p. 98). This format is still widely used in pre-election polls mainly in academic surveys. The 2012 ANES US pre-election survey, for example, investigated vote intentions by asking “Who do you think you will vote for?” Similarly, the 2014 Swedish pre-election survey used the formulation “What party do you intend to vote for in the parliamentary elections?” In national election studies, researchers often introduce follow-up questions for respondents who do not intend to participate in the elections and for those who intend to participate but state that they do not know yet what party to vote for. In the Swedish 2014 pre-election survey⁶, the former group of respondents was asked “If you were to vote, what party would you vote for in the parliamentary elections?”, whereas the latter group had to answer the question “Which party are you leaning to vote for?” Further follow-up questions try to reveal the strength or certainty

³ For more information on the Swiss Household Panel, see: <https://forscenter.ch/projects/swiss-household-panel>

⁴ For more information on the European Social Survey, see: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>

⁵ For more information on the Swiss Election Study (Selects), see: <https://www.selects.ch>

⁶ For more information on the Swedish National Election Studies, see: <https://www.gu.se/en/swedish-national-election-studies>

of the stated candidate or party preference. For example, the 2016 US pre-election survey asked “Would you say your preference for this candidate is strong or not strong?” while the 2019 Selects Panel Survey used the following question to account for the certainty of the expressed party preference: “How sure are you that you will vote for this party?”.

2.2.2. Current state of mind regarding party preferences

An alternative way of asking about future voting behavior is to approximate the voting situation and the current state of mind about party preferences. Typically, citizens are asked how they would vote if elections were held today, tomorrow or next Sunday in countries where elections take place on weekends (in German also referred to as “Die Sonntagsfrage”).

This format is typically used by (private) polling companies who aim at predicting – at least approximately – election results and identify the losers and winners of the upcoming election. Questions about vote intentions are not the best approach for polling companies because many people – especially those who are unsure whether to participate in the next elections or are undecided – may struggle to reveal party preferences. For example, a lot of undecided respondents are likely not to answer vote intention questions because they estimate that their preference may still change (Crespi, 1988, p. 98). In order to predict election results, it is however highly important to include all respondents who will participate in national elections, regardless of whether or not they have already made up their minds about who to vote for. Therefore, most polling companies use a question about the current state of mind regarding party preferences. Besides an estimate of how strong and accurate the party preferences are, non-probability surveys on elections (pollsters) also need to find out who the likely voters are to draw conclusions on the voting population (for a discussion see Kennedy et al., 2018; Rogers & Aida, 2014).

Strictly speaking, the question wording used to unveil citizens’ current state of mind about party preferences does not allow for a prediction of future vote shares. These questions only offer a snapshot of the public opinion at the point of the survey. Many survey companies do not name their findings predictions anyway because this would make them vulnerable to criticism should the election result be (too) different from their prediction.⁷

The format of the current state of mind is not only used by (private) polling companies but also by academic surveys, for example in the long-term panels of GLES and Selects. However, the goal of these academic surveys is not predicting vote shares, but tracing individual opinion shifts over time. While vote intention questions function well for short time spans in which the upcoming election is omnipresent (such as during an election campaign), the format of the current state of mind allows researchers to shed light on individuals’ stability of party or candidate preference over a longer period of time including non-election years. For example, the Swiss Household Panel asks participants the following question: “If elections were held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?”

⁷ Nevertheless, the distinction between a snapshot and prediction is not a clear cut one. There are always controversies if election outcomes are different from the last polls prior to elections and large differences raise questions about the accuracy of the polling methods used. The media and the wider public are mostly interested in a prediction, not a snapshot that may be completely unrelated to the election outcome. Further, many polling companies proudly report their last poll results in cases they managed to produce results that are close to the actual election outcome.

Similar to vote intention questions, surveys using the concept of the current state of mind about party preferences also ask follow-up questions to those respondents that did not reveal a party preference in order to figure out if they nevertheless lean towards one or the other party. These questions are often followed by questions about the strength of the expressed party preference to gain estimates that are more precise.

2.3. PARTY IDENTIFICATION

The central idea of party identification is that it (mostly) serves as a strong determinant of party choice in an election. Party identification was originally introduced by a research group from the University of Michigan around Campbell et al. (1954) and has become a key concept to measure party affiliation in electoral politics. According to the Michigan school of electoral behavior, many citizens have a sense of personal attachment towards groups of their choice. Such a personal attachment is called party identification in case the group is a political party. The concept of party identification does not require a formal membership of the political party; the sense of belonging to a group can evolve without such formal ties. Dalton (2016, p.1) stresses that party identification is assumed to have a long-term character and that “partisans tend to repeatedly support their preferred party, even when the candidates and the issues change”. In the original theoretical framework, party identification persists over time because it has a “perceptual screening function” that filters out information that is unfavorable to one’s existing political attitudes and partisan orientation (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 133). The original concept of party identification introduced in the USA was measured using the following question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”⁸ Note that the term “generally speaking” was inserted on purpose to signal that the question is *not* about the current state of mind (see chapter 2.2.2) but about a general, enduring feeling of attachment. A follow-up question then asked if respondents would call themselves a strong Republican (or a strong Democrat) or a not very strong Republican (or Democrat). Independent voters were asked if they think of themselves as closer to the Republican or to the Democratic Party. This procedure allowed to create an overall seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican with Independents being in the middle.

While the original US concept of party identification is powerful, both theoretically and empirically, the one-dimensional measurement itself cannot be used in many other countries. Most countries have party systems with more than two parties which requires a different question format for party identification. Indeed, scholars who studied voting behavior in Europe came up with a different concept that is characterized by “closeness to” rather than “identification with” a political party (Thomassen, 1976). Various question versions exist (Green & Baltes, 2017), nevertheless the standard question used in most countries in post-election surveys nowadays is the one developed by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).⁹ This standard question consists of three parts:

- “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?”¹⁰
- “Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than the others?”

⁸ See, for example, the American National Election Studies’ (ANES) 1956 post-election survey: <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/1956-time-series-study/>

⁹ The CSES questionnaire can be found on this webpage: <https://cses.org/collect-data/>

¹⁰ Here, the term “usually” highlights (just as the term “generally speaking” does, too) the fact that citizens shall think about their general, enduring feeling of attachment to a particular party and *not* about their current state of mind.

- “Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?”

While the first question is asked to every participant of a post-election survey, the second one is only asked to those stating that they do not feel close to any particular party in the first question. Research has shown that – similar to the vote intention questions– a very large number of respondents do reveal their party identification only after the second (follow-up) question (see for the Swiss example Table 4 and Figure 1 in chapter 5). Obviously, the third question comes into play only for respondents that mention a particular party in either the first or the second question.

2.4. PARTY PROXIMITY

Some surveys use the concept of party proximity, which mainly captures the aspect of the *policy representation function* of parties, as to say the idea that parties are a mirror of the views of citizens. This concept does not necessarily need to be disconnected from the elections; such questions are also asked in post-election surveys. For example, the CSES Module 5 includes the following question(s) as a measure of party proximity: “Would you say that any of the parties in [COUNTRY] represent your views reasonably well? [If yes: Which party represents your views best?]”¹¹

However, it is especially useful in some surveys that are disconnected from an electoral cycle in situations where it is problematic to ask about vote intention or about previous voting behavior or party identification. This is, for example, the case when elections are still relatively far away in the future because there is a risk that many voters will say that they do not know about their future voting behavior yet. Similarly, in cases when elections took place several years ago, voters may not recall their past voting behavior. Moreover, questions about actual vote behavior (previous or future) can also be problematic if there is a high volatility in party preferences in a country – which is increasingly the case in many countries. The question about the “current state of mind” regarding party preferences, which asks about party choice if elections were held now (see chapter 2.2.2), may capture other aspects of the vote choice rather than the actual party preference – aspects such as an evaluation of the current party leadership or the government or a more strategic component of vote choice.

3. MEASURING AFFILIATION TO MULTIPLE PARTIES

Some surveys aim at measuring *citizens’ attitudes towards several major parties* and not just a single one. This endeavor takes into account that voters do not evaluate or assess just one single party against all the others (like it is assumed when asking questions about party choice, identification or proximity), but rather have views about several parties simultaneously. Questions that assess several parties often have larger scales, such as 10- or 11-point scales or even 100-point scales like so-called thermometer questions that are frequently used in the USA. Empirically, such measures have the advantage that each voter gives an evaluation about *every* major party and not just a *single* one. The scores for each party can then be used as either dependent or independent variable.

In some ways, such questions are an extension of the party identification concept, but instead of naming one preferred party, respondents can express affection or disaffection towards

¹¹ The CSES Module 5 questionnaire can be found here: <https://cses.org/collect-data/>

several parties. To what extent such questions measure predispositions towards the different parties remains however an open question. Similar to party identification, these predispositions can be relatively stable over time or they merely reflect a feeling towards the party at a specific point in time. Independent from this empirical question, such measures are analytically useful especially in a multi-party context. The following three concepts are frequently used in social science surveys to evaluate (major) political parties separately:

- *Party sympathy scores*: These are questions which ask respondents to rate each party on a *like-dislike* or a *sympathy scale*. The CSES Module 5 questionnaire contains an example of how the party sympathy question can be asked using a *like-dislike scale*: “I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so.” In addition to the scale from 0 to 10, this question hence allows respondents to indicate that they have never heard of the party or that they do not know enough about/how to rate the party. The Selects 2011 Post-Election Survey used the following party sympathy question for which responses were recorded on a *sympathy scale*: “On a scale of 0-10, could you please say how sympathetic you find the following political parties?”
- The *propensity to vote (PTV)* question, originally introduced by van der Eijk et al. (2006), has become widely used in election surveys (van der Eijk et al., 2006). This concept goes beyond party sympathy scores because it captures dimensions that are of rather strategic nature when it comes to party choice. The original proposal was labeled as “electoral utility” and the question used reads as follows: “I shall mention a number of parties. Would you indicate for each party how probable it is that you will ever vote for that party?” The answer scale went from 1 to 10, where 1 was labeled “I will certainly never vote for this party” and 10 was labeled “I will certainly vote for this party at some time”. Selects has used a similar question design, however – as many other studies do – applying an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10. Note that caution is needed when interpreting results from PTV questions: Neither do they capture party choice nor do they reveal true probabilities of voting either. The actual probability of voting is curvilinear meaning that voters who indicate a value of 5 on the 11-points scale do not have a 50% probability to vote for this party but rather a probability that lies below 50%. Nevertheless, PTV questions allow researchers quite well to calculate vote potentials for different parties, and what is more, to draw conclusions about the extent to which parties exploit their potentials (e.g., Green & Baltes, 2017). Furthermore, a recent study shows that substantially more citizens respond to PTV questions than party identification questions and argues that PTV questions are, thus, better suited to provide information about party affiliation (cf. Franklin & Lutz, 2020).
- *Choice sets* is a theoretical concept that is related to PTVs. However instead of an 11-point scale, voters are asked whether they considered voting for the different parties forcing them to a binary choice for each party. In the 2019 Selects Panel Survey, the following question wording was used in order to measure voters' choice sets: “Many can imagine electing more than one party. Have you ever considered electing one of the following parties in the past National Council elections?” Respondents could then give a yes or no answer for each of the listed parties.

4. RESPONSE CATEGORIES FOR QUESTIONS ON PARTY AFFILIATION

In election studies across all different types of electoral systems, an important issue for researchers to think about is which and how many response categories they wish to provide in their questionnaires. Which and how many candidates or parties shall be presented as response categories?

In many democracies with PR electoral systems, a high number of parties run in the election, but some of them are extremely small and do not gain a lot of votes. While all major parties are typically presented as a choice, questionnaire designers limit the number of smaller parties displayed depending on party size and sample size simultaneously. With smaller samples and smaller parties, the latter are only chosen by a handful of respondents which makes it difficult or even impossible to analyze such a party separately and draw statistically sound conclusions about it.¹² In election studies, such smaller parties are often regrouped as “other parties”.

Whether researchers include this “other” category directly into the questionnaire as an answer category or allow for an open answer in which respondents state what other party they had voted for depends on the national context and the predominant research interest. An advantage of the open answer option is that short term changes in the party system and results, that were not foreseeable before the election, can be accounted for. In addition, respondents who vote for minor parties might feel less neglected and more taken seriously if they are given the chance to express their true party choice instead of just ticking the “other party” box. However, open answers go hand in hand with a greater post-survey coding effort.

Candidate-centered as well as mixed electoral systems pose a further challenge in the choice of response categories. Although the candidates are formally relevant, it is often the case that party affiliation matters more to respondents than an individual candidate. In these cases, it may be wise to display all the candidates who run or a combination of candidate name and party label – which means a burden for survey practitioners as they have to customize the survey to each electoral district. Hence, some researchers nevertheless chose to display only parties as response categories.

A second important issue when designing response categories is to think about the order in which parties or candidates are listed. Research has shown that so-called response order effects occur in real elections and in scientific surveys alike, i.e. the choice people make or the distribution of responses to closed-ended survey questions, are influenced by the order of the offered options. For example, candidates who appear first on a list have a higher chance to be elected or chosen as an answer than those who appear later on the same list. These “name-order effects” are more frequent when citizens have little or no information about the candidates, feel ambivalent towards the listed candidates, only possess limited cognitive skills, or devote less effort to the candidate evaluation process (cf. Miller & Krosnick, 1998; Pasek et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2015). There are different ways or strategies of how party or candidate order is defined in surveys. For example, survey practitioners often choose to put the largest party (that is the one with the largest vote share or the most seats won in the last elections) first. Alternatively, parties can be ordered from the political left to right (or vice versa), according to their age or simply in an alphabetical order. If the distribution of answers is likely to suffer

¹² According to statistical conventions, you should have a least 50 respondents for a specific party category if you wish to draw statistical conclusions about these respondents.

from response order effects to a substantial extent, the wisest strategy is to randomize the order of parties and/or candidates.

Another issue is the question how regional parties are presented throughout the questionnaire. Web or telephone surveys, for instance, allow to filter response categories, which gives some flexibility to vary the list of parties displayed according to the parties actually running in an electoral district. In the Swiss federal elections for example, the regional parties “Geneva Citizens’ Movement” and “Ticino League” only run in the cantons of Geneva and Ticino respectively. In the online version of the post-electoral survey, these parties are thus only displayed as answer categories in these two cantons. Furthermore, all other political parties or movements are only displayed for respondents from cantons in which they actually run for office. In this way, the number of wrong answers can be reduced.

5. MEASURING PARTY AFFILIATION IN THE SWISS CONTEXT

Switzerland’s electoral system is an open ballot proportional representation (PR) system that allows for both party and candidate choices. In our schema of electoral systems (cf. table 1), it can therefore be classified as a mixed system. Swiss voters can either cast an unchanged party list, or they can change candidate names on the party list by writing down candidates twice (cumulation), deleting names on the list and/or adding candidates from other party ballots (panache). Because of the fact that the magnitude of electoral districts (=cantons) varies widely from one canton to the other, the proportional element is not equally strong everywhere. The six smallest cantons are allocated only one seat in the National Council (Lower House of the Swiss Parliament).¹³ As a consequence, their electoral system is majoritarian and voters in these cantons vote for candidates, not for parties. While the PR system has a very limited effect on proportional representation in small cantons with only a few representatives in the National Council, in bigger cantons a greater number of parties is represented according to their real electoral strength. Furthermore, Swiss voters can vote for up to two candidates in each canton for the second parliamentary chamber, which is the Council of States. To reflect the specificities of the electoral system across the different cantons, the Swiss Election Study (Selects) uses different question wordings depending on what canton the respondent lives in. Table 2 displays the different question wordings in English.¹⁴

In order to shed light on the question whether a respondent’s vote choice changes or remains stable between two elections, many election studies not only ask about voting behavior in the most recent elections but also in previous elections. In the Selects study 2019, for instance, voters were asked if they had already participated in the previous federal elections in 2015 and – if this was the case – what party they had voted for back then using a similar wording dependent on the canton of residence in 2015.

¹³ The number of representatives in the National Council per canton depends on its population size and ranges from one seat (UR, OW, NW, GL, AR, AI) to 35 seats (ZH).

¹⁴ For the original questions in German, French and Italian, see the questionnaires of the Selects Panel Survey and the Post-Election Survey 2019: <https://forsbase.unil.ch/project/study-public-overview/16968/0/>

Table 2. Selects vote choice questions.

Parliamentary chamber	Cantons	Question wording
National Council	Proportional representation cantons (≥3 seats)	Which party did you vote for in the National Council elections, that is from which party did you vote the most candidates?
	Proportional representation cantons (2 seats)	Which party did you vote for in the National Council elections?
	Majoritarian cantons (1 seat)	Which candidate did you vote for in the National Council elections?
Council of States	Half cantons (1 seat)	Who did you elect to the Council of States?
	Full cantons (2 seats)	Please indicate the first person voted for. Did you elect a second person to the Council of States? If yes, who?

In order to capture vote intentions of likely voters who either already have a clear idea of what party they are going to vote for or are still undecided as well as of likely non-voters, Selects relies on a similar approach, like the international surveys, with a main question plus follow-up questions. Table 3 exemplifies the approach by showing the sequence and exact wording of the survey questions.

A large majority of respondents in pre-election polls are willing to reveal their vote intentions, i.e. their party preferences. In the first wave of the Selects Panel Survey conducted about 5 months before the 2019 federal elections, 76% of the likely voters indicated a party (cf. Table 4) when asked the first vote intention question (cf. table 3). Another 16% expressed a party preference on the follow-up question, which was only asked to undecided likely voters, whereas a mere 8% of all likely voters did not report any party preference at all. For the second wave, that was conducted in the weeks before the elections, the number of people not indicating any party preference was even lower with only 7%, while 82% of the likely voters already revealed their vote intentions after the first question. As the election date gets closer, not only the number of respondents having made a vote decision but also the willingness to

reveal such party preferences rise. However, it is also conceivable that this finding is partly due to the fact that, between wave 1 and wave 2 of the Panel Survey, more people without party preference (compared to those with party preference) lost interest in participating in the study and therefore dropped out of the panel study.

Table 3. Selects 2019 vote intention questions (question wording for Proportional Representation cantons [≥3 seats]).

Group of respondents	Definition	Question wording
Likely voters	Respondents stating that they will probably participate in the elections.	If you go to vote, which party will you vote for, that is from which party will you vote the most candidates?
Undecided likely voters (follow-up question)	Respondents who will probably participate but state that they have not yet decided what party to vote for.	Even if you have not yet decided, which party would you most likely vote for at the moment? That is, from which party would you vote the most candidates?
Likely non-voters	Respondents stating that they will not participate in the elections.	Even if you are unlikely to vote, which party would you most likely vote for? That is, from which party would you vote the most candidates?
Respondents revealing party preference	Respondents who reveal an intention to vote for a specific party	How sure are you that you will [would] vote for this party?

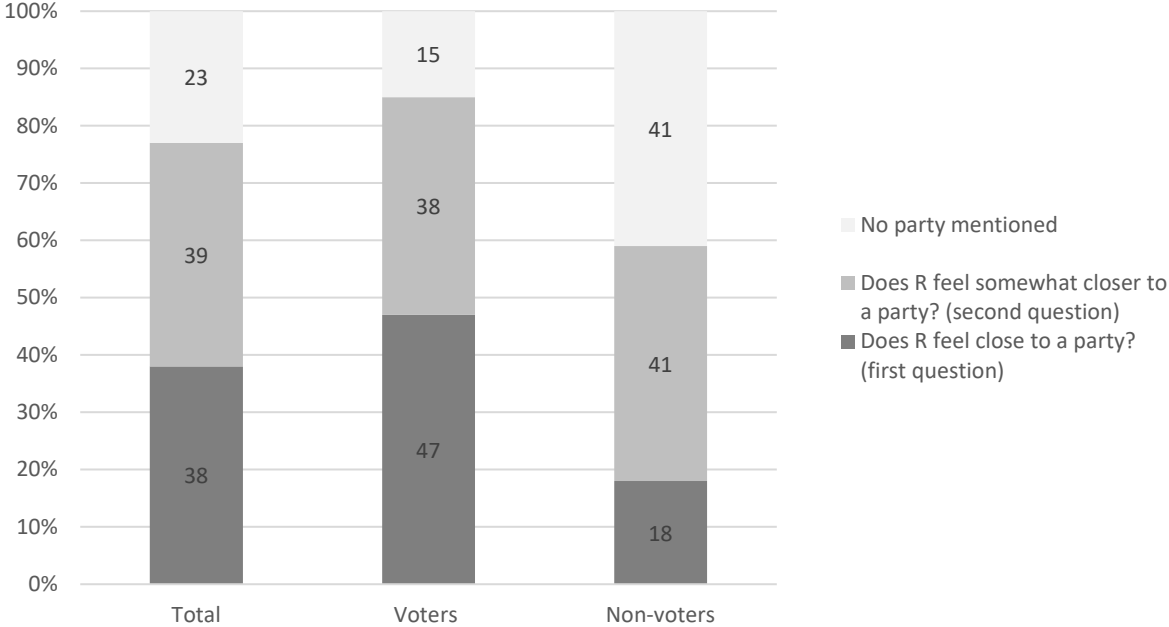
Table 4. Response to different questions on vote intention (Selects Panel Survey 2019).

	Wave 1 (May/June 2019)		Wave 2 (September/October 2019)	
	N	%	N	%
Vote intention (likely voters, after first question)	5833	76	4379	82
Vote intention (undecided likely voters, after follow-up question)	1227	16	614	11
No intention (likely voters)	650	8	362	7
Total (likely voters)	7710	100	5355	100

The CSES question format is also the version used in the Swiss Election Study (Selects), which yielded the results shown in figure 1. Overall, 38% of the respondents said that they feel close to a political party (first question). Almost the same number of respondents (39%) indicated that they feel nevertheless somewhat closer to one of the political parties than the

others (second question) and 23% did not indicate any party. There are, however significant differences between voters and non-voters. Voters indicated much more often (47%) that they feel close to a political party than non-voters (18%) and only 15% of the voters did not indicate any party compared to 41% of the non-voters.

Figure 1. Party identification of voters and non-voters in the 2019 Selects Post-Election Survey.



6. IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVEY PRACTITIONERS

How to use party affiliation questions in surveys and whether to use just one single theoretical concept or several ones, depends on various factors. Most importantly, you need to reflect on what exactly you would like to measure and, furthermore, what sort of analyses you would like to do once the survey data is ready to be used.

Recommendation 1 – The question about actual voting behavior in previous elections is the most obvious question to use in surveys related to elections, because it relates to a real individual behavior in the past. However, question formats need to be adapted to the actual electoral system that is in place in the country of interest. Questions about previous voting behavior become more problematic the further in the past an election took place, because previous behavior may no longer reflect current party preferences.

Recommendation 2 – Commercial pre-election polls typically ask about the current state of mind regarding party preferences, as to say, they use the question about party choice if elections were to take place today (or on next Sunday). The answers to this question allow to model where parties actually stand at a given moment in time, but they should not be mistaken as predictions about the outcome of an upcoming election. For academic surveys, current state of mind questions can be used in long-term panel waves to approximate the Election Day that is still far away in the future. In a panel design that covers a shorter time span (typically the election campaign period) and wishes to draw conclusions about the short-term dynamics and changes in public opinion, asking about actual vote intentions might be more purposeful.

Recommendation 3 – Party identification questions should be used if researchers want to measure the traditional party identification concept, as to say the sense of belonging to a specific political group over (mostly) a long period of time. When being confronted with suchlike questions, many voters implicitly think of group (or party) membership even if it is not a necessary condition for the theoretical concept. Furthermore, party identification questions often serve as a strong predictor of (past and/or future) voting behavior.

Recommendation 4 – If you want to measure party proximity in a more general sense and, especially, if you want to capture the representation aspect of political parties, it may be useful to use a question that asks about what party represents a citizen’s view best. Hence, party proximity questions are more appropriate in this case than party identification questions.

Recommendation 5 – On a general note: For all questions that ask about vote intentions, party identification or party proximity, it is worth adding a second (follow-up) question for those who do not reveal a party preference on the first question. Research has shown that a lot of respondents hesitate to give an answer straightaway, either because they consider it a sensitive question, or they are unsure and opt for a “don’t know” answer.

Recommendation 6 – If respondents shall evaluate not only one party but several parties simultaneously, voting propensity (PTV) questions do not only relate more strongly to the actual vote choice but also include strategic components of the individual party choice. Party sympathy questions, on the other hand, relate mainly to the affective component of party affiliations.

7. FURTHER READINGS AND USEFUL WEB LINKS

An essential read about party affiliations is the Research handbook on political partisanship edited by Oscarsson and Holmberg (2020). Especially, parts 2 (how to measure and secure data on partisanship) and 3 (explanations of the origins and development of partisanship) are extremely useful for researchers and survey practitioners in the field of political science and sociology, as well as for scholars studying elections and electorates, voter trends and contemporary political parties.

In addition, we highly recommend Green and Baltes’ chapter on “Party Identification: Meaning and Measurement” in *The SAGE Handbook of Electoral Behaviour* (2017). It provides a comprehensive overview of historical and theoretical foundations of the concept of party identification. If you would like to go back to the very origins of the party identification concept, the books *The Voter Decides* (Campbell et al., 1954) or *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) are certainly an interesting read.

For specific examples of how questions on party affiliation (actual or hypothetical voting behavior, party identification, party proximity and other concepts such as PTV or party sympathy) are phrased in national election studies, you can simply browse the questionnaires used by the different countries that participate in the five CSES Modules conducted so far on this webpage: <https://cses.org/data-download/download-data-documentation/>

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