Summary

Early electoral research in the United States discovered the most important concept in the study of political behavior: party identification. Party identification is a long-term, affective attachment to one’s preferred political party. Cross-national research has found that these party identities are a potent cue in guiding the attitudes and behavior of the average person. Partisans tend to repeatedly support their preferred party, even when the candidates and the issues change. Party ties mobilize people to vote to support their party, and to work for the party during the campaign. And, given the limited information most people have about complex political issues, party ties provide a cue to what positions one should support. This review describes how the level of partisanship among contemporary publics varies across nations and across time, and how these patterns have significant implications for democracies today.

Keywords: party identification, partisanship, independents, dealignment, elections, political participation, political socialization, voting

Subjects: Groups and Identities, Political Behavior, Political Values, Beliefs, and Ideologies

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Edited the full text for clarity and updating. New research and references added. Older references dropped. Redid the two figures with new data. Added a new section at the end of the essay prior to the conclusion.

Introduction

Many researchers claim that party identification is the most important concept in modern electoral behavior research. Party identification is an early socialized, enduring, affective psychological identification with a specific political party. Some of the first empirical studies of voting behavior in the United States discovered the concept, and it is now incorporated in electoral studies in most democratic nations. Party identification warrants such importance because it structures a person’s view of the political world, provides cues for judging the political candidates and issues, shapes voting choice, influences participation in elections, and promotes stability in electoral systems.
This article discusses the evolution of party identification as a concept in electoral behavior research and provides evidence on the levels of partisanship across nations and across time. What has been learned from past research is described, along with the questions that still remain about the implications of party identification. Last, this evidence is linked to the implications for the working of the democratic process.

The Concept of Party Identification

Angus Campbell and his colleagues (1960) directed the first American national election surveys in the 1950s. As they examined how voters made their choices during an election, they noted that many people began the campaign with their decision already made. People often attributed their votes to long-established family traditions or positions they had held across many elections. Perhaps the most famous example is the saying that used to be applied to voters in the American South: they would vote for anyone, even a yellow dog, if it was a Democrat.

Such partisan loyalties exist as a central part of an individual’s belief system, acting as a political cue for other attitudes and behaviors. Campbell et al. (1960) described these partisan attachments as a sense of party identification: a long-term, affective psychological identification with one’s preferred political party. Social identity theory argues that these partisan ties are similar to identifications with a social class, religious denomination, or other social group. Party attachments are distinct from voting preferences, which explains why some Americans vote for the presidential candidate of one party while expressing loyalty to another party. Indeed, the conceptual independence of voting and party identification gives the latter its significance. Party identification has become a central element in our models of electoral behavior (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020).

Today, the election surveys in virtually every democratic nation contain some form of the party identification question. Its centrality to understanding political behavior generates continuing research on its causes and consequences. In addition, there is increasing evidence that these partisan ties are weakening in most contemporary democracies, which raises questions of what political life will be like if partisanship weakens.

Measuring Levels of Partisanship

One of the contentious issues involving partisanship is how to measure a long-term psychological attachment to a political party. To tap into these identities, Campbell and his colleagues (1960) developed what is now the standard question assessing party identification in the United States: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

If the respondents say they are a Republican or a Democrat, they are asked if they would call themselves a strong Republican or Democrat or a not very strong Republican or Democrat. If they say they are independent, they are asked if they think of themselves as closer to the
Republican or to the Democratic Party. American researchers use this question to create a seven-point party identification scale that runs from being a strong Democrat at one end, an independent close to neither party in the middle, and a strong Republican at the other end.

Cross-national research found that this question was problematic in some party systems because specific elements of the American question did not capture partisanship in multiparty parliamentary systems (Budge et al., 1976). After much debate, researchers developed questions to tap party allegiances that reflect national traditions and party system conventions. The now standard question on partisanship in Germany illustrates one nation’s alternative: “Many people in the Federal Republic lean toward a particular party for a long time, although they may occasionally vote for a different party. How about you: Do you in general lean toward a particular party? Which one?” This question is a functional equivalent to the American question even though the wording is different to reflect conditions in Germany. Other nations adopted their own measure of partisanship. There are predictable variations in the strength of these identities across nations, especially as a function of the longevity and other characteristics of the party system. In most nations, however, many people approach a new election with a predisposition toward a favored party already in place.

Because of these variations in political context and the phrasing of the partisanship question, it is complicated to compare levels of partisanship across nations. The best evidence on the extent of partisanship in a nation comes from the respective national election studies that ask a question suited to national conditions. But this is little help in cross-national comparisons of partisanship if each nation uses a differently worded question. So instead, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) asks another party attachment question: “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? Which party do you feel closest to? Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?” This question exchanges the idea of a long-term partisan identity for the idea of closeness to a party. Closeness should produce a “softer” measure of partisanship, which might change the likelihood of expressing a party attachment separate from immediate vote choice. This question also has been asked in recent U.S. surveys.

Figure 1 displays the percentage that indicated closeness to any party across several established and new democracies (also see Dalton & Weldon, 2007; Lupo, 2015a). There is considerable variation in the level of partisanship across nations, ranging from about two-thirds in Norway and New Zealand to about one-fifth in the nations at the bottom of the figure. Some of this cross-national variation might come from the inevitable differences in how a standard question is translated into each language or the specific events occurring in the nation. Overall, multiple waves of the CSES have found patterns similar to the evidence presented here, although the results for a specific nation might vary across time as a function of the immediate election or political context.
Partisanship in the United States ranks above the average. This is somewhat surprising given the past emphasis on the strong partisanship of Europeans, especially in proportional representation parliamentary systems. However, it may reflect the greater functional value of partisanship in the United States because of the long ballots and multiple choices that voters face. A Briton who casts five to six votes in a 5-year electoral cycle may feel less need (and less value) to psychologically identify with a party compared to an American who casts more than a hundred votes for local, state, and federal offices over this same period.

**Figure 1.** Close to a political party.

*Sources:* Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Module 5 (2016–2021) with additional nations from Module 4 (2011–2016). Dark bars are established democracies; light bars are new third-wave democracies.
The other notable feature of the figure is the contrast between established democracies and the new democracies in the CSES. Four of the five nations with the lowest percentage feeling close to a particular party are from new democracies. Conversely, all five nations with the highest level of party closeness are from established democracies. Moreover, there is convincing evidence that levels of partisanship were even higher in established democracies in the recent past (see the discussion of “Dealignment”). There is also some evidence that the composition and the nature of the party system can affect levels of partisanship (Huber et al., 2005).

Thus, if partisanship is important for cues in guiding the opinions and behaviors of citizens, then the variations in the level of partisanship across nations should have important implications for how the electoral process works in these nations.

Developing Party Ties

Where do party ties come from? Campbell and his colleagues (1960) considered partisanship to be similar to other social identities; it primarily arises from early life learning and the social conditions of the individual. Studies of young children found that many developed partisan ties at a very early age, often during the primary school years (Kroh, 2020). Children learn party loyalties before they can understand what the party labels stand for—a process similar to the development of many other social identities such as religious denomination or class. By adolescence, party leanings—if not loyalties—are often common.

In established democracies, parents play a central role in the socializing of partisan identities. Research that compares the party identifications of parents and their children routinely finds high levels of agreement in stable party systems (Jennings et al., 1979). Parents successfully transmit their partisanship to their children because party loyalties reflect the values of the family unit and are formed when parents are the dominant influence in a child’s life. Children often receive a consistent string of partisan cues as their parents discuss the news of the day or the events in an election. Consequently, it does not take long for a child to figure out his or her parents’ partisan leanings and assume those as their own: This is what my family or “people like me” think about partisan politics. Such family traditions can date back several generations, such as a tradition of voting “Democrat,” “Labor,” or “Social Democratic.”

Similarly, the parents’ social situation provides useful cues on what party is supported by others in one’s church, social class, ethnicity, or region. Adolescents and young adults see which party their friends and coworkers support, which often reinforces their initial party ties. Thus, party identities become enmeshed in a web of other social identities that tend to persist through life. The early life socialization of partisanship is apparent in studies that track party attachments over time. For example, a longitudinal study that spanned one of the most turbulent times in modern American history found that 78% of adults held the same partisan ties in 1965 and 1973 (Jennings & Markus, 1984; also Jennings et al., 2009). Partisanship—like religious affiliation and other social identities—can change during one’s life, but changes are rare.
Indeed, the standard social learning model of partisanship argues that existing party ties tend to strengthen with age—or more precisely with continued experience in supporting one’s preferred party (Converse, 1969). As people routinely support “their” party in election after election, these ties grow stronger over time. For example, the 2020 American National Election Study reported that 61% of Americans under age 30 had a party identification, compared to 74% among those over age 65. The same age pattern appears in most established democracies.

The situation differs in new democracies where people are learning how to participate in elections. In nations such as the new democracies of central-eastern Europe, East Asia, and Africa, the democratic experience is new to both parents and their children. Indeed, parents might struggle to adapt to the new democratic system, especially when the previous system lacked any elections. Consequently, party ties are not based on the family and social traditions that reinforce these identities in established democracies. The political parties running in elections are also new, and changes in the partisan lineup across elections are likely. These factors make it difficult to identify with a party.

The social learning model of partisanship in new democracies thus suggests that party ties are initially weak and should slowly develop over subsequent elections if the party system stabilizes and families and social groups establish firm party loyalties (Converse, 1969; Dalton & Weldon, 2007). This model is consistent with the logic of party identification as a social identity and explains the lower level of partisanship among the new democracies in Figure 1. Furthermore, this implies that new democracies will require a generation or more to develop to levels of partisanship observed in established democracies.

The Effects of Partisanship

The developers of the concept of partisanship emphasized its functional importance for many aspects of political behavior:

> Few factors are of greater importance for our national elections than the lasting attachment of tens of millions of Americans to one of the parties. These loyalties establish a basic division of electoral strength within which the competition of particular campaigns takes place. And they are an important factor in ensuring the stability of the party system itself. . . . The strength and direction of party identification are of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior. 

(Campbell et al., 1960, p. 121)

Such party identifications have major effects on several aspects of citizens’ political behavior.
Partisanship as a Cue-Giver

Politics can be a complicated undertaking for many people. It takes considerable time and effort to follow the details of elections, the policy choices offered by the parties, the veracity of campaign pronouncements, and then make a single party choice. Making a decision can be a daunting task, especially in a parliamentary system with a large number of parties. Party identification first gained prominence as a way to simplify this process by providing a cue or heuristic to guide electoral behavior (Campbell et al., 1960; Fiorina, 2002). Party identification helps to make politics “user friendly.” When the political parties take clear and consistent policy positions, the party label provides an information shortcut on how “people like me” should decide. Once voters decide which party generally represents their interests, this single piece of information can act as a perceptual screen that guides how they view events, issues, and candidates. A policy advocated by one’s party is more likely to meet with favor than one advocated by another party.

Compared to social group cues such as class and religion, party identification is a more valuable heuristic. Party cues are potentially relevant to a broad range of phenomena because parties are so central to democratic politics. Issues and events frequently are presented to the public in partisan terms, as the parties take positions on the issues of the day or react to the statements of other political actors. People vote for parties or party candidates at elections. Governments are managed by partisan teams. So, the early scholarship on partisanship argued that these orientations were the solution to the problem of how citizens could make reasonable decisions without full information on the politics of the day.

There are many examples of how people use partisan cues to fill in voids in their political knowledge. For instance, if you knew Joe Biden supported a new piece of legislation, this would send a signal to Democrats and Republicans about their likely opinions of the proposal. Similarly, party ties shape evaluations of new political candidates because their party generally signals a broad political philosophy. Party cues also shape one’s evaluations of the past and expectations for the future. When one’s party wins office, for example, its partisan supporters are more likely to improve their predictions about the nation’s political and economic future—even before the new government is installed. Many voters view politics through this perceptual screen.

Partisanship and Participation

Party ties also mobilize people to become politically active (McAllister, 2020). Just like loyalty to a sports team, attachment to a political party encourages a person to become active in the political process to support their side. For example, strong partisans were 10% more likely to vote in the 2017 German Bundestag elections, and they were several times more likely to participate in campaign events and twice as likely to try to persuade others on how to vote. In general, strong partisans are more likely to try to influence others, to display campaign materials, to attend a rally, or to give money to a candidate during the campaign. Partisanship functions in a similar way in other established democracies.
The contrasting situation is in new democracies where party ties are initially weak. This may limit the public’s involvement in elections, which might erode the legitimacy and representativeness of political parties. If these new citizens do not turn out at elections to support “their” party, democracy will generally suffer and party ties will take even more time to develop. So parties in new democracies face the challenge of creating a fan base from scratch and to get this group to participate and support electoral democracy.

Partisanship and Voting

Party identifications also structure voting choices (Bartels, 2000; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Partisanship means that a voter has a predisposition to support his or her preferred party. Partisanship has been described as the basis for a “normal vote”—the vote expected when other factors in the election are evenly balanced. If other factors come into play, such as issue positions or candidate images, their influence can be measured by the change in preferences from initial partisan predispositions. For the unsophisticated voter, a long-term partisan loyalty and repeated experience with one’s preferred party provides a clear and low-cost cue for voting. Even for the sophisticated citizen, a candidate’s party affiliation normally signifies a policy program that serves as the basis for reasonable electoral choice.

Generally, there is a very close relationship between party identification and voting in parliamentary elections (Berglund et al., 2005). In the 2017 British House of Commons elections, for example, 85% of partisans voted for their own party. The small number of elected offices in most established democracies and the party-centered nature of parliamentary campaigns tend to narrow the separation between partisanship and vote.

The American voter, in contrast, has to cope with a vast number of candidates seeking a variety of offices at federal, state, and local levels. This encourages Americans to become conscious of a generalized tie to one party. The separation between attitudes and behavior is therefore most noticeable in American elections, especially when voters are asked to make serial choices for federal, state, and local offices. In highly visible and politicized presidential elections, candidate images and issue appeals have the potential to counteract partisan preferences. The success of U.S. presidential candidates from both parties occurs because they attract some defectors from the rival party as well as independents. Similarly, the two-candidate runoff in French presidential elections is decided by the size of the vote the candidates can attract from parties other than their own.

Systemic Effects of Partisanship

The levels of partisanship in a nation can also affect the political system in broader ways. Strong partisan ties can be a stabilizing influence on electoral politics. If most people identify with one of the established parties, then this lessens the potential for voters to be attracted to new parties or demagogic leaders. It is common to find that new political parties—whether on the left or the right—initially draw disproportionate support from people who lack party identities. More generally, widespread partisan ties dampen the impact of short-term political
events on election outcomes and limit the potential electoral appeal of new political personalities. When most people follow their partisan loyalties when they vote, the swing in voting results between elections is moderated. Extensive partisanship among the electorate thus works to stabilize party alignments and lessen electoral change.

In summary, partisanship is the ultimate heuristic because it

- creates a basis of political identity;
- provides cues for evaluating political events, candidates, and issues;
- mobilizes participation in campaigns and election turnout;
- provides cues on voting preferences; and
- stabilizes voting patterns for the individual and the party system.

**Research Controversies**

Because party identification is so central to understanding citizen political behavior, there is continuing research on the nature of partisanship and its correlates.

**Continuity or Change?**

One research controversy focuses on whether party identification actually fits the assumptions of the initial sociopsychological model of electoral behavior. The original formulation of partisanship defined it as an affective psychological identity, which implied it would show relatively high stability through the life span and structure perceptions of the political world to generate this persistence. In contrast, Fiorina’s (1981, 2002) rational choice approach suggested that partisanship can be treated as a “running tally” of accumulated partisan experience. Or in Bayesian terms, people may begin with a prior partisanship based on early life socialization, but then this partisanship is constantly updated by successive experience. If one voter supports a preferred party in an election, then their party identification might strengthen. If another voter defects from party preference, then their party attachments will weaken. This is a much more dynamic view of partisanship.

This approach was a positive step forward in understanding partisanship, but it is not an either/or choice. Repeated panel interviews with the same people demonstrated that partisanship is one of the most stable of political attitudes; it is more resistant to change than major economic or cultural policy positions (Converse & Markus, 1979).

Yet party ties do sometimes change. When people alter their voting preferences in response to new issues, the appeal of candidates, or the performance of parties, this can affect their partisanship. Jennings and Markus (1984) developed a model of partisanship based on dynamic learning where partisanship responds to these stimulants, consistent with Fiorina’s
general argument. Moreover, similar panel studies in other nations demonstrated that there can be substantial instability of party attachments over time (Clarke et al., 2004; Neundorf et al., 2011).

Another perspective on partisan change comes from analyses of what is termed “macropartisanship”; that is, aggregate levels of attachment to specific parties. MacKuen et al. (1989), for example, plotted the ebb and flow in Republican and Democratic party loyalties over time and showed how these shifts can be modeled in terms of shifting political conditions, evaluations of the incumbent government, and other short-term factors. While the strength and sources of these shifts has been debated in other research (Erikson et al., 2002; Green et al., 2002), these analyses demonstrated that aggregate party ties do change in predictable ways.

The issue in question is the relative balance between stability and change, the force needed to produce lasting change in partisan loyalties, and how this varies across different population subgroups. For individual citizens, the stable element of party identity is typically stronger than the forces for change. Thus, changes in party vote shares between elections often come from nonpartisans or new voters who lack strong partisan loyalties.

**Dealignment**

Another current research controversy focuses on potential declines in the percentage of partisans. Because partisanship is so important to our understanding of electoral politics, the decline in the share of the public holding a party identification has generated substantial discussion and debate.

From the 1950s to the early 1960s, the percentage of party identifiers in the United States was a stable 70%–75% of the public, and less than a quarter of the public claimed to be “independents.” The percentage of partisans has generally decreased since the late 1960s (Figure 2). Where once only a quarter of Americans lacked a party identity, in 2016 roughly 40% were independents; this means nonpartisans are a plurality compared to either Republican or Democratic identifiers.
This trend was initially linked to the political struggles and institutional foibles of American politics. The initial decline in partisanship coincided with the conflicts over civil rights reform and the Vietnam War. Then the Watergate controversy and Richard Nixon’s resignation from the presidency started a long period of recurring political scandals. Other scholars pointed to the structure of American political institutions or the increasingly critical media as a source of weakening party attachments.

However, similar declines in partisanship have occurred in other established democracies in Europe, North America, and the Pacific Rim. For example, an almost identical pattern of declining party ties occurred in three European democracies (Figure 2).³ Because of the traditions of the British party system and the format of the British partisanship questionnaire,
fewer Britons claim to be nonpartisans. In the 1964 British Election Study, 93% claimed a standing partisan preference; the share of partisans dropped to 78% in the 2010 election and 81% in 2017. The data for Germany and France show a parallel downward trend.

Long-term election studies for most affluent democracies generally show a shrinking number of partisans or a weakening of the strength of party identities over time (Clarke & Stewart, 1998; Dalton, 2012; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Fiorina, 2002; Garzia et al., 2021; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). There are parallel declines in the number of people who are members of a political party, and favorable opinions of political parties have broadly declined (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Scarrow, 2017). These patterns provide evidence for what Dalton (2012) described as partisan dealignment—a persisting decline in the public’s level of partisanship.

Survey research has generally found that younger generations are less likely to inherit partisan identities from their parents. For example, the American National Election Studies found that nonpartisanship among Americans under age 30 is about 25% higher when compared to youth in the early 1960s. Other affluent democracies also are experiencing lower partisanship among the young. Researchers disagree on the reasons for and implications of these generational findings. However, if fewer young people inherit family partisanship, then the social learning model of party identification implies that they will not achieve the partisan levels of past generations and that dealignment will continue.

Much of the dealignment literature focuses on established democracies, attributing these trends to broad forces of social and political change—such as changing norms of citizenship, increased education, and a more assertive media. But similar forces are at work in many emerging democracies. There is some evidence that partisanship is not developing in many new democracies, as predicted in prior theorizing (Lupo, 2015b; Sheng, 2008). Instead, people are hesitant to develop party allegiances, and some elites react by stressing personality over party. While established democracies are undergoing dealignment, many new democracies are failing to develop party alignments in the first place, which has generated research on this irregular learning process and its consequences.

If partisanship structures the political behavior of the average citizen, as many experts argue, then the broad cross-national evidence of dealignment over the last several decades may be a cause for concern. Significantly fewer people now approach politics with a fixed party loyalty—although many people still have party allegiances. When a plurality of citizens lacks party identities, this has the potential to reshape electoral behavior and the nature of citizen politics in either a positive or negative direction.

Alternatives to the Dealignment Thesis

Several electoral experts have questioned the existence of the dealignment trends in the United States and other democracies (Green et al., 2002; Kaufmann et al., 2008). The most common criticism in the United States is that many survey respondents claim to be independents who “lean” toward a party because it seems fashionable to be independent. But
when one examines their behavior, these leaning independents apparently act like normal partisans in their vote loyalty, turnout, and other characteristics (Green et al., 2002; Weisberg, 1980).

Research also demonstrates that the overall impact of party identification on vote choice in the United States has changed only slightly over time (Bartels, 2000; Green et al., 2002). Similar doubts were initially raised about the dealignment trends in European democracies, even in multiparty systems where voter choices were much greater. The centrality of partisanship is so important that many scholars are skeptical that these ties are really weakening.

With additional research across time and across nations, the evidence of dealignment has mounted. The phenomenon is not linked to the political history of any one nation, such as a rejection of American political parties because of the issue controversies or scandals since the 1960s. And dealignment has occurred in nations without the American tradition of an “independent” voter. Moreover, there are several behavioral manifestations of weakening party ties (Dalton, 2012; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Across most established democracies, fewer voters enter elections with standing party preferences that endure to Election Day, and more voters are deciding later in the campaign based on the events of the election. For example, the Swedish Election Studies found that barely a 10th of the voters switched parties between elections in the 1960s; now over a third are so-called switch-voters. The volatility in electoral results has increased in most established democracies. And because party ties systemically stabilize party systems, the erosion of party ties has been accompanied by the emergence of new political parties of all colors that can capture these floating voters. With weaker party ties, turnout in elections has also generally declined in most nations.

Who Are the New Independents?

Early electoral research showed that independents were largely disengaged from politics and ill-informed on the issues of the day (Campbell et al., 1960). Many people called themselves independent because they were apathetic about politics. These independents seldom voted, and when they did their decisions could often be capricious. More citizens like this would not benefit the democratic process, and this initially fueled experts’ concerns about the negative implications of decreased levels of partisanship. Uninformed independents may become fickle voters and are susceptible to demagogic appeals by political elites who depend on their limited sophistication.

However, the growth of nonpartisans has been among a distinctly different group of citizens. In the United States and most other democracies, the new nonpartisans are disproportionately concentrated among the young and better educated, who follow politics and participate despite lacking party loyalties. These new “apartisans” thus do not act like hidden partisans but participate in elections and make more autonomous choices. For example, the increase in independents in the United States has been concentrated almost
entirely among this new group of apartisans (Dalton, 2012; cf. Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Thus, dealignment has the potential to increase the number of voters who more closely follow the theoretical model of an informed, rational voter.

**Negative Partisanship**

The increasing ideological polarization of many party systems has also led to renewed attention on the concept of negative partisanship (Bankert, 2020). While partisanship originally focused on positive feelings toward one’s preferred party, negative partisanship involves attitudes toward the opposition party or parties.

One conceptual question is the need for precision in defining these negative attitudes. Often it is simply measured by a question of like or dislike of the other parties. This research often finds that negative attitudes toward the parties different from a person’s preference have been increasing, presumably as a function of widening party polarization (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). An alternative view looks for a more robust feeling than dislike of the other party. For instance, even if a voter does not identify with a party, are there parties for which they would never vote (Caruana et al., 2015). This seems closer to the nature of a party identity. And in developing party systems where positive party attachments are still developing, negative partisanship toward certain parties can be a stable influence on voter choice (Samuels & Zucco, 2018). This is sort of like enemies of my enemy are my friends.

The conceptualization, measurement, and consequences of negative partisanship is now a very active area of study. One question is whether negative partisanship has the same identity features as positive partisanship—that is, long-term psychological feelings toward the negative party. Panel surveys and longitudinal studies can address this topic. A second question is whether these sentiments are identities or simply an extension of ideological or policy disagreements. The former should be more enduring while the latter are more changeable. And finally, what are the behavioral consequences of negative partisanship for voting behavior and other aspects of political behavior?

**A Dark Side of Partisanship?**

Lavine et al. (2012) and other scholars have recently renewed questions about the value of party identification as a heuristic for making informed democratic choices. These authors argue that partisanship might act as blinders that shield partisans from discordant information that is necessary for making informed choices. Moreover, a sizable body of cognitive research suggests that when faced with the need to make a decision, many people selectively retrieve information to confirm their initial intuitive judgments or biases, rather than neutrally collecting and evaluating information. This is described as “motivated reasoning” (Haidt, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2000). Campbell et al. (1960) described this as a perceptual screen built on party identities.
Since partisanship is the ultimate political heuristic, some partisans may unquestioningly agree with their party’s positions even when they should disagree in objective terms. For example, when an opinion survey asks a person to explain why they like a party or candidate, the individual may assemble a list of things that confirms their affective party preferences and ignore or discount factors that are inconsistent with their biases (Goren, 2012; Lodge & Taber, 2013). In other words, partisans may “think” backwards politically: if they affectively like a person or party, they then look for political explanations to justify this preference. This happens for both liberals and conservatives (Fischle, 2000). Motivated reasoning may thus lead many people to incorrect choices because the information behind their choice is biased.

This pattern is especially concerning as political polarization has increased in many nations, and “alternative facts” have become common among extremist parties and extremist candidates. The value of heuristics like partisanship depends on the accuracy and honesty of the cue-giver. Blind partisanship might make partisans susceptible to false statements by extremist politicians of their favored party. This is the vulnerability of using partisan heuristics as a basis for making electoral choices.

Thus, the lesson of this research is that the level of partisanship is only part of the explanation of how citizens manage the complexities of politics. Some voters can rely on partisanship as a surrogate, but heuristic voting has it limits. Similarly, some people can function as independents, but this requires the sophistication to make reasonable choices. Both partisanship and skills are factors that should be combined to understand contemporary electorates.

**Conclusion**

Research clearly suggests that if one wants to understand the general political behavior of individuals with a single question in a survey, then the party identification question would be the best one to ask. It provides a conceptual framework for many citizens, shaping their views of politics, influencing their political activity, and systemically affecting the overall party system. Thus, even if levels of partisanship are dropping as a result of dealignment, partisanship provides a touchstone for understanding political behavior.

However, lower levels of partisanship will change the nature of electoral politics. Electoral results will become more volatile, as has occurred in recent decades, because voter choices are becoming more fluid and based on the issues and candidates of the campaign. Fewer and fewer voters will begin each election with their choice already made. With weaker party ties, turnout in elections and participation in campaigns may continue to decline, which is not beneficial to democracy. The emergence of Green or New Left parties in Europe during the 1980s and extreme right parties in the early 21st century is likely linked to a larger number of unattached voters. Flash parties that rapidly emerge on the political stage may be a legitimate expression of public interests, but they can also arise from exploitative political elites or short-term reactions to a dramatic issue or event.
These challenges may be especially important for developing nations. Without the stabilizing presence of party identifiers, party systems may suffer from persisting instability. Moreover, a more fluid public, decoupled from habitual party cues, can also open the door to exploitation and demagoguery by political elites. A less educated public and a less robust civil society may be less resistant to such appeals. The invention of partisanship was a solution to the problem of limited voter sophistication when parties were reliable cue givers. When elites are less reliable cue givers, partisanship may create new challenges for responsible electoral democracy.

Whether these evolving patterns of partisanship and electoral behavior are a boon or a curse for electoral democracy depends on how citizens and political parties respond to these shifts. But contemporary patterns of partisanship are clearly changing from our classic models of the past.

References


Notes

1. This question is presented in Figure 2 for Germany.
2. Australia was not included in the figure because it used a differently worded question.
3. These results differ from Figure 1 because the trends are based on nation-specific measures of partisanship rather than the CSES closeness-to-a-party question.
4. I think the arguments about leaning independents are incorrect. Panel data show that these people are independents who answer the question on leanings with current voting preferences, which makes them seem like partisans because of their consistent leanings and voting. But if their vote preferences change by the next election, so do their leanings (Dalton, 2012).

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