

CHAPTER 6

The Impact of Party Identification

Voting can be seen at one level as due to psychological factors. People's attitudes toward the several elements of political conflict comprise a "field of forces" that helps determine their behavior. As seen in chapter 5, the intensity of these attitudes to a good measure explain voting turnout. Similarly, the consistency of these attitudes helps explain why some people cast straight-ticket votes and others split their votes between the two parties. Furthermore, the partisan direction of these attitudes determines the choices that voters make between the presidential contenders.

An important second-order question is what explains the variability of these attitude factors: why some people like the Democratic candidate and others dislike him, why some people tend to the Republican side on foreign issues and others to the Democratic side, and so on. The partisan attitudes can be seen as intervening variables, linking antecedent factors with behavior. We focus in this chapter on one antecedent psychological factor that is political in nature.

It has long been observed that people are stable in their partisan choices between elections. V. O. Key (1959) describes this stability as a voter's "standing decision" to support a particular party. This stability is evident at the aggregate level, where the correlation of the vote proportion received by the parties between successive elections is usually very high, both at the local and the state levels. This stability at the aggregate level in the face of changes in the candidates and issues from election to election implies that many voters must themselves have stable party attachments.

Survey data directly demonstrates the existence of these party

attachments. When asked, most people can readily classify themselves as Republicans or Democrats, and panel surveys show that these ties are fairly stable over time. These party ties are important to understanding American elections. They set the playing field within which a particular campaign occurs, and they are an important factor in maintaining the stability of the American two-party system..

THE CONCEPT AND MEASUREMENT OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

Party identification in the United States does not involve being politically active in the party or holding formal membership. Nor does it imply voting solely for that party, though attachments to a party strongly influence voting. Instead, party identification is a psychological identification with the party. Most Americans form such an identification with either the Republican or the Democratic Party, and that identification strongly affects their attitudes and voting behavior.

In treating partisanship as a psychological identification, we view identification as the person's affective orientation to the group. We use reference group theory, viewing the group as attracting or repelling the individual. The citizen may develop a stronger or weaker identification with the political party, and that identification can be either positive or negative.

Note that we do not define partisan orientation in terms of voting behavior, since such a definition would miss the essential distinction between an attitude and the behavior it causes. Thus, we do not define a Republican as someone who has always voted Republican, or an Independent as someone who does not consistently vote for the same party. Defining partisan orientation in terms of psychological identification allows us to study when people defect from their usual partisanship by voting for the opposite party.

We measure party identification by asking citizens to classify themselves. Respondents in the National Election Studies have been asked the same sequence of questions since 1952 to determine the direction and strength of their partisanship.¹ Except for a few respondents who lack

1. The question sequence begins by asking everyone, "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?" Those who answer Republican or Democrat are then asked "Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?" Those who declare themselves Independent or decline to answer are instead asked, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?"

The Branching Questions

any involvement in politics, these questions allow us to place people on a partisan continuum from strong Republican to strong Democrat. This continuum allows us to distinguish intensity of partisan attachment, separating strong Republicans and Democrats from weak ones. It also provides a distinction between Independents who lean toward the Republican Party, pure Independents, and Independents who lean toward the Democratic Party.

The resultant party identification scale can be treated in several ways. We can look at the direction and intensity of partisanship together in a seven-point scale, as in table 6.1, where the distribution of party identification from 1952 to 2004 is summarized. We can combine Independents into a single group, leading to five categories, and we can combine strong and weak partisans to obtain a three-point scale that shows only the person's partisan direction. Alternatively, we can fold the seven-point scale at its center, leaving a four-point scale of partisan intensity: strong partisan, weak partisan, leaner, and pure Independent.

The
Independent
Problem

The Independent category should be seen as a composite. Some Independents lack positive attachment to either party. Some are repelled by both parties, instead viewing the idea of being Independent as attractive in its own right. After all, many people have absorbed the norm that one should vote "for the person, not the party," and therefore consider it important to be politically independent.

On the other hand, some people who choose the Independent label have a partisan commitment to one of the parties but feel that a good citizen should be independent. Certainly there are "closet partisans" who always vote for the same party even though they claim independent status. We handle this problem by asking Independents which party they are closer to. In any case, we consider closet partisans to be a methodological problem less severe than the problems that would occur if we measured partisanship by voting behavior.

It is useful to look at the consistency of partisan voting among people having different intensities of partisanship. Table 6.2 shows the proportion of respondents who voted for the same party in 2000 and 2004 in a small panel survey taken across those years. The proportion of people voting for the same party in these two elections differs by 20 percentage points between strong partisans and pure Independents. The three-quarters of pure Independents who voted for the same party in both years may seem to be strong evidence that Independents are really closet partisans, but it is important to remember that the Republican

TABLE 6.1. Party Identification by Year, 1952-2004 (in percentages)

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
Strong Democrat	22	21	20	27	20	15	15	18	17	17	18	18	19	17
Weak Democrat	25	23	25	25	25	26	25	23	20	18	18	19	15	16
Independent Democrat	10	6	6	9	10	11	12	11	11	12	14	14	15	17
Pure Independent	6	9	10	8	11	13	15	13	11	11	12	9	12	10
Independent Republican	7	8	7	6	9	10	10	10	12	13	12	12	13	12
Weak Republican	14	14	14	14	15	13	14	14	15	14	14	15	12	12
Strong Republican	14	15	16	11	10	10	9	9	12	14	11	12	12	16
Apolitical	3	4	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	0
Total	101	100	100	101	101	99	101	100	100	101	100	100	99	100
Number of cases	1,784	1,757	1,911	1,550	1,553	2,694	2,850	1,612	2,236	2,032	2,474	1,710	1,797	1,197

Source: Data from American National Election Studies Web site.

Again - misleading because it does not correct for Turnout + Vote Choice disparities in the

candidate was the same in the two elections so this consistency among pure Independents may simply reflect having a consistent attitude toward George W. Bush.

The party identification figures give a very different picture of partisanship than voting statistics provide. The elections of the last two decades show considerable variance in results, from a moderate Democratic victory in 1992 in an election with a very large third-party vote, a large Democratic victory in 1996, a slight Democratic lead in the popular vote in 2000, and a clear Republican vote victory in 2004. By contrast, table 6.1 shows that the Democratic Party had a fairly steady lead in party identification (strong plus weak categories combined) throughout this period, though with some decline in 2004. (Democratic identifiers have somewhat lower turnout rates than Republican identifiers, so the Democratic lead in partisanship among actual voters was smaller throughout than shown in table 6.1, with the Republicans having a slight edge in partisanship among actual voters in 2004.)

As table 6.1 shows over a broader time frame, the Democrats had a substantial lead in partisanship in the 1950s (though a Republican president was easily being elected and reelected). That Democratic lead was little changed from the 1950s through 1980, at which point it eroded; it changed little from then until 2004. Technically, the similarity of the distribution of partisanship between different years does not necessarily prove that individual party identification was stable. There could instead be a considerable amount of compensating change, but it would be unlikely to have such large stability at the aggregate level if a large portion of the electorate was changing its party ties. It is also important to recognize

TABLE 6.2. Relation of Strength of Party Identification to Partisan Regularity in Voting for President (2000 and 2004) (in percentages)

	Strong Party Identifiers	Weak Party Identifiers	Independents	
			Leaning to a Party	Independents
Voted for same party	<u>95</u>	<u>85</u> ↔ <u>84</u>		75
Voted for different parties	<u>5</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>25</u>
Total	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	254	135	116	24

Source: NES 2000-2002-2004 Full Panel File (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR] Study 4293).

Note: Compares 2000 and 2004 presidential votes of those who voted for a major-party candidate only.

that there was a substantial amount of generational turnover between the first and last elections in table 6.1. Only the youngest cohorts of voters in the 1950s were still voting in the early 2000s. Thus, the stability evident in table 6.1 is actually cross-generational stability.

The most basic point is that nearly all of our survey respondents could answer the party identification questions and can be located on the resultant party identification scale. Political parties in the United States are very loose and decentralized, which suggests that, in principle, people might not link themselves so clearly to the parties. Furthermore, there is always considerable sentiment against political parties, so that the high proportion of respondents who consider themselves closer to one party or the other can be seen as surprising. Regardless of these considerations, party identification is nearly universal among the American electorate.

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND POLITICAL ATTITUDE

Party identification can serve as a source of cues for individuals as they interpret politics. After all, national politics occurs at a level that is remote from most citizens, so people learn about it indirectly, through the media and other sources. Politics can be very complex, so it is important for citizens to be able to use simple cues to interpret what they cannot experience directly.

The political party is a crucial mediating force. It does not have to be invoked directly in order to be effective. For example, the act of a party nominating a candidate for office affects how people will view that candidate. Identifiers with the candidate's party will tend to evaluate that candidate favorably, in political terms and usually in personal characteristics too. At the same time, identifiers with the other party will tend to evaluate that candidate unfavorably, again with respect to both political positions and personal attributes. Many people will learn much about the nominee and use that information in developing an image of the candidate, but even those who are not attentive to politics will usually develop an image based on party identification.

In this way party affects the full set of political attitudes discussed in chapter 4. Figures 6.1 and 6.2 show for 2000 and 2004 the means of each political attitude according to the citizen's party identification. The horizontal axis shows the party identification category, and the vertical height shows how strongly each mean attitude went in the Republican

The partisan lens on attitudes

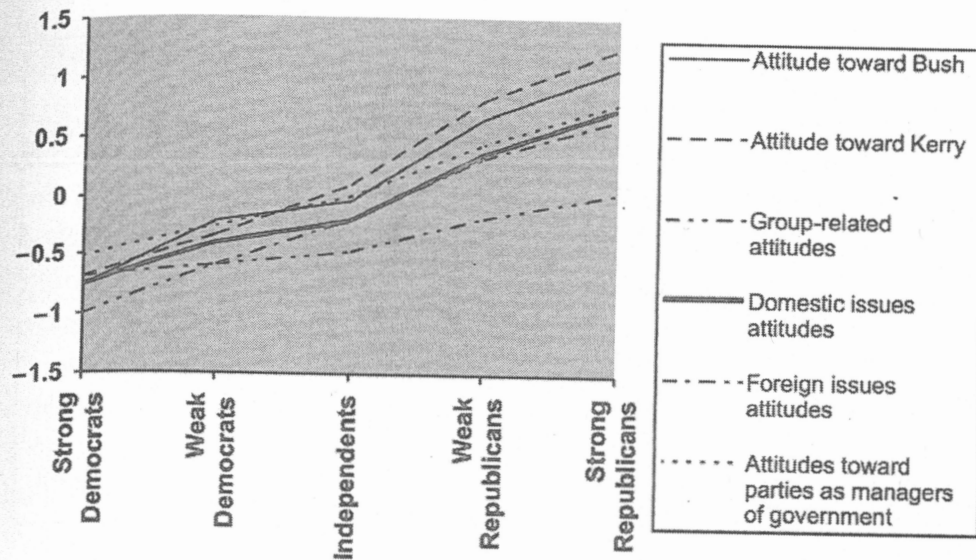


Fig. 6.1. Relation of party identification to partisan evaluations of elements of national politics, 2004

direction. (A positive mean attitude score is pro-Republican, a negative mean attitude score pro-Democratic.²) The pattern is clear and strong: strong Democrats have the least pro-Republican attitude on each partisan factor, and attitudes become more pro-Republican as one moves toward the strong Republican end of the party identification dimension. In both elections, the gradient is less sharp for attitudes on foreign issues than for the other partisan attitudes. This suggests that the public was more uniform in evaluating which party or candidate would better handle foreign and defense affairs, so partisanship did not affect this category as much as it did others. Still, party identification had some effect even on attitudes toward foreign issues, showing how pervasive the effects of partisanship are.

This is not to say that party identification completely determines these political attitudes. The gradients in these figures are not as sharp as

2. The mean of each attitude for each party identification category has been divided by the standard deviation of that attitude for that partisanship category, so that the mean is stated in standardized units. For example, the mean attitude of strong Republicans on Bush in 2004 was 1.50, with a standard deviation of 1.40, so the standardized value is $1.50 \div 1.40 = 1.07$, which is the value graphed in figure 6.1 for strong Republicans as regards the Republican candidate component. This adjustment removes differences in the means that are due to differences in how many references the partisan group makes to the partisan object. (All the partisan attitudes in figures 6.1 and 6.2 have been consistently scored in a pro-Republican direction, so that a positive score on attitude toward the Democratic candidate actually reflects the dislike of that candidate.)

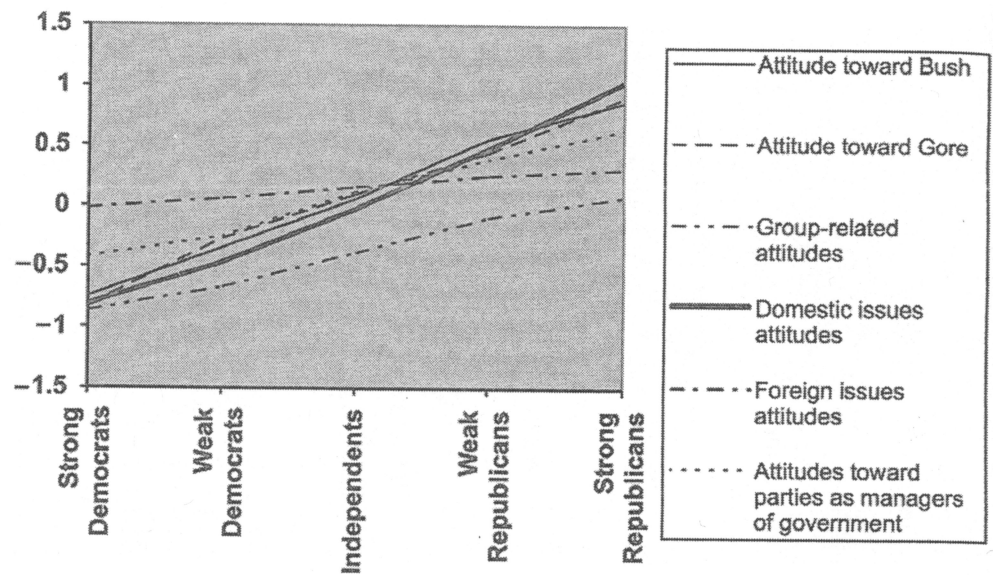


Fig. 6.2. Relation of party identification to partisan evaluations of elements of national politics, 2000

they would be if party identification were the only determinant of these attitudes. Note also that attitudes on some factors can be more favorable to one party throughout the party identification dimension. In particular, people of every partisan persuasion are more pro-Democratic in reference to social groups than the other party attitudes, at least in 2000. (Observe in fig. 6.2 that the mean attitude on the vertical axis, for group-related scores, is always below 0.) Differences such as these must be explained in terms of antecedent factors that operate separately from party identification.

It is also important to emphasize that figures 6.1 and 6.2 do not show the considerable variability of individual respondents within each partisan category. The means cannot convey the variability at the individual level, and this variability cannot be explained by party identification. Other antecedent factors must account for why some strong Democrats, for example, differ from other strong Democrats in evaluating the Democratic presidential nominee.

Partisanship unifies several different attitudes. The six political attitudes are all affected by party identification, giving them a considerable common core. We can examine the strength of a common partisan factor by looking at the intercorrelations among the six attitudes. A single underlying component underlies the six attitudes, accounting for more than a third of the total variance of these attitudes in both election

years.³ Further, each attitude is strongly related to this common partisan component, though foreign affairs was not much affected by it in 2000 (as should be evident from figure 6.1). Overall, the extent to which a common partisan component underlies these different partisan attitudes is quite striking.

Party identification also leads (to internal consistency) in the person's field of partisan attitudes. After all, partisanship serves as a "perceptual screen" that affects how the citizen perceives political objects. The stronger the people's partisan ties, the more they selectively perceive political events and therefore the more likely they are to have consistent partisan attitudes. Correspondingly, we expect Independents to be less likely to have consistent partisan attitudes. This expectation is tested in table 6.3, which examines the consistency of partisan attitudes among strong party identifiers, weak identifiers, Independent leaners, and pure Independents. We counted the number of respondents with consistent attitudes in each of these categories. We also calculated the number of people who would be expected to have consistent attitudes by chance.⁴ We then computed the increase of observed over expected number of people with consistent attitudes. As anticipated, the increase in consistent attitudes is greatest among strong party identifiers. Even

3. The correlations among voters between each attitude and the partisan factor (principal component analysis) are as follows:

	2000	2004
Attitude toward Democratic candidate	.733	.773
Attitude toward Republican candidate	.766	.757
Group-related attitude	.511	.509
Attitude on domestic issues	.659	.591
Attitude on foreign issues	.278	.640
Attitude toward parties as managers of government	.542	.579
Total variance accounted for by the partisan factor	<u>36.5%</u>	<u>42.1%</u>

4. The computation of the expected number of people with consistent attitudes takes several steps. For example, we would see how many strong identifiers had three partisan attitudes, and compute how many of them would be expected to have consistent attitudes. If each attitude were pro-Republican or pro-Democratic by chance, there would be a .50 probability of it favoring the Republicans and .50 probability of it favoring the Democrats. The probability of all three of those identifiers' partisan attitudes being pro-Republican would then be $.5 \times .5 \times .5 = .125$. The probability of all three being pro-Democratic would also be $.5 \times .5 \times .5 = .125$. So the probability that a person with three partisan attitudes would have consistent attitudes would be $.125 + .125 = .25$. If there were 20 strong identifiers with three partisan attitudes, the expected number with consistent attitudes would then be $.25 \times 20 = 5$. For each strength-of-identification category, we used this method to obtain the expected number of people with consistent attitudes among people with two, three, four, five, or six partisan attitudes, and summed those values to obtain the first row of the table.

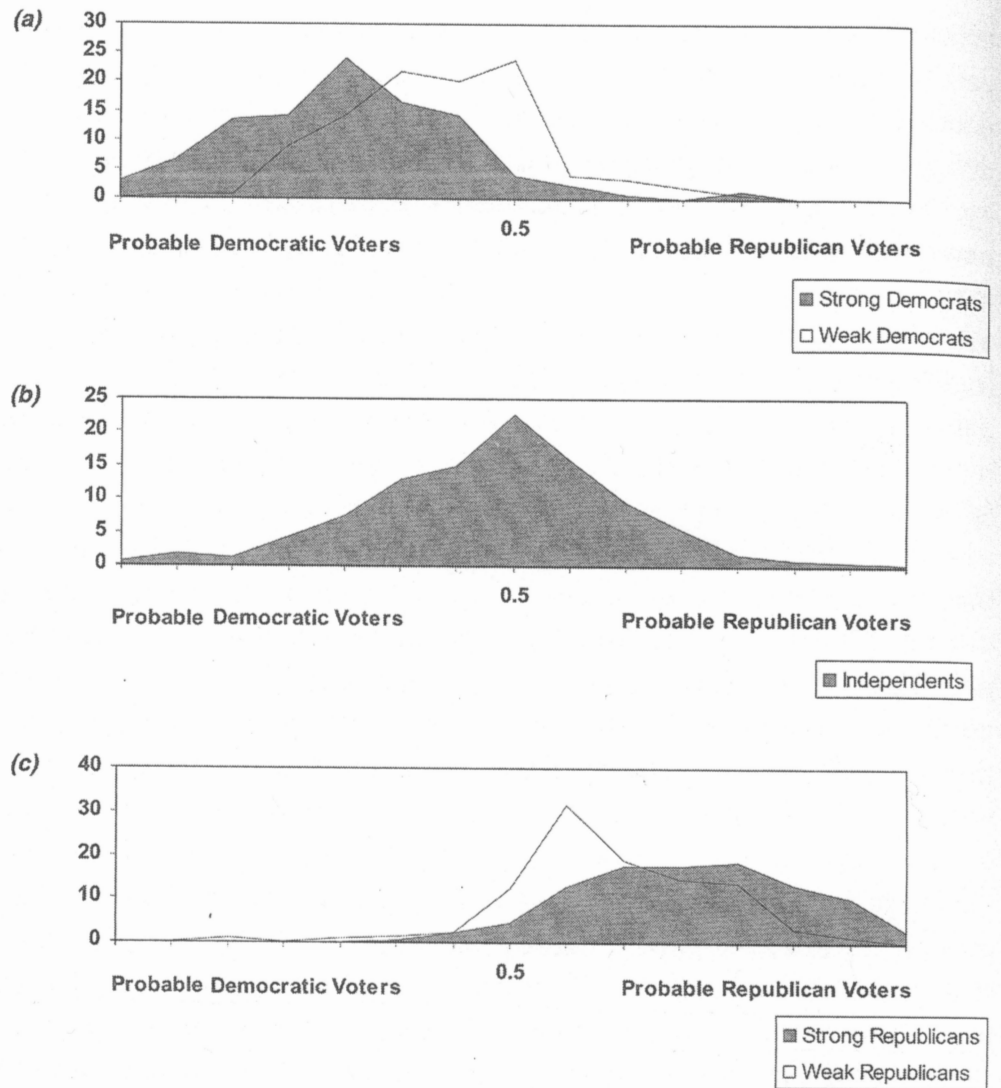


Fig. 6.3. Probable direction of vote by party identification groups, 2004: (a) Democrats, (b) Independents, (c) Republicans.

identification is indirect for most citizens, we expect it to have a substantial effect on behavior.

One way to see the impact of party identification on voting is to return to the multiple regression model introduced in chapter 4. That analysis predicted a person's vote based on his or her values on the six partisan attitudes. Each person's probability of voting Republican can then be determined, ranging from being very unlikely to being nearly certain. To demonstrate the power of party identification in this system, we display in figure 6.3 the predicted probabilities of voting Republican for individuals for different groups of partisans. These are similar to the

probability curves shown in chapter 4, but examined within categories of party identification. As shown in the top graph, virtually all strong Democrats had less than a .5 chance of voting Republican in 2004, as did the great bulk of weak Democrats. Independents were about as likely to vote Republican as Democrat. Most weak Republicans had more than a .5 chance of voting Republican, as did nearly all strong Republicans. The shifts of the curves across the five partisanship categories show the impact of party identification in this model.

Figure 6.3 also serves as a reminder that party identification is not the sole determinant of partisan attitudes. After all, there is considerable dispersion to the probabilities for each of the curves, with some partisans being nearly certain to vote for their party and others having a reasonable chance of defecting to the other party. Party identification cannot explain the spread of these curves around their centers.

This discussion of figure 6.3 suggests that there will be considerable differences in the vote division across partisanship categories, without either party having much of an advantage over the other in defections. Table 6.4 shows that this was the case. In 2004, the Democratic presidential vote percentage ranged from 97 percent among strong Democrats to just 3 percent among strong Republicans. The proportion of weak Democrats who defected to Bush was just slightly higher than the proportion of weak Republicans who defected to Kerry in 2004—and the proportion of defections among weak Democrats in 2000 is indistinguishable from the proportion of defections among weak Republicans that year. Note too that Independents tended to vote Democratic in 2004, while they tended to vote Republican in 2000. However, the other shift that occurred was

TABLE 6.4. Vote by Party Identification, 2000 and 2004 (in percentages)

	Strong Dem.	Weak Dem.	Independent	Weak Rep.	Strong Rep.
2000					
Republican	3	15	54	84	98
Democratic	97	85	46	16	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	233	164	346	128	179
2004					
Republican	3	15	42	90	97
Democratic	97	85	58	10	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Number of cases	140	112	244	116	169

effect

that there were more strong Republicans than strong Democrats among 2004 voters, whereas strong Democrats outnumbered strong Republicans among 2000 voters. The higher Democratic presidential vote among Independents in 2004 was not enough to offset this shift in the partisan composition of the actual voters. The 2000 and 2004 elections were both fairly close. The contrast is with the presidential elections of the 1950s, when the Republican nominee won handily, with the votes of 15 percent of strong Democrats and helped by the vote of more than two-thirds of Independents. These are the types of swings that make the difference between close elections and one-sided victories.

Beyond / Indirect effect?

An important question is whether party identification has effects on voting behavior beyond its effects on the partisan attitudes. We saw in chapter 4 that the vote could be well predicted from the six partisan attitudes, so the question is whether adding partisanship improves predictability. We find that adding party identification to the multiple regression equation produces real improvement in the statistical estimation, for it fits the data better. However, the predictive accuracy does not change.⁵

The partisan polarization of the electorate was considerable enough in the 2000 and 2004 elections that the partisan attitudes can themselves predict the vote with a high level of accuracy; adding party identification to the mix only leads to higher predicted probabilities of partisans voting for their party, which increases the precision of the statistical estimation.

We further expect party identification to have a direct effect on the voting behavior of people who do not have a well-developed set of partisan attitudes. Figure 6.4 shows the distribution of vote probabilities combined for 2000 and 2004. People on the two sides of the distribution have well-developed partisan attitudes that are likely to have a strong motivational effect on their behavior. The people in the center have either relatively undeveloped partisan attitudes or ones without a clear direction. For people with well-developed partisan attitudes, we expect the partisan attitudes to predominate in the rare cases where there is a

Just falls in for weak short-term measures

5. The multiple correlation with the voting choice increases from .74 to .80 in 2000 and from .79 to .84 in 2004 with the addition of party identification to the vote equation, but the proportion of voters correctly classified does not change at all: 89 percent in both equations in 2000 and 92 percent in both in 2004. For comparison, the multiple correlation went from .71 to .73 in 1956 when party identification was put in the vote equation and the proportion of voters correctly predicted went from 86 percent to 88 percent. Thus, the partisan attitudes by themselves were stronger predictors in 2000 and 2004 than were the partisan attitudes and party identification together in 1956. It is important to keep in mind that it is difficult to improve on predictive accuracy this high because of ceiling effects.

incomplete

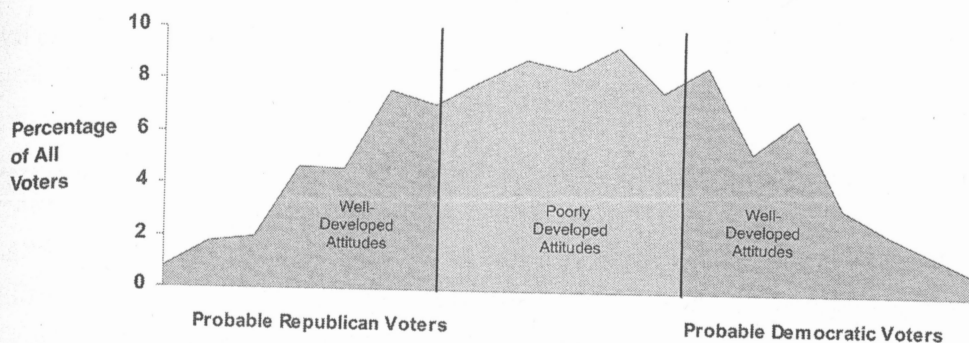


Fig. 6.4. Location of individuals with well-developed attitudes and poorly-developed attitudes within distribution of all respondents, 2004. Included are only those who reported voting for one of the two major-party candidates.

conflict between those attitudes and party identification. For example, Democratic identifiers who favor the Republicans on issues and candidates in a particular election are expected to defect and vote Republican on the basis of their partisan attitudes. However, we expect party identification to have a greater effect for people with poorly developed attitudes. Democratic identifiers whose partisan attitudes are unclear are thus expected to vote Democratic.

It is difficult to test this hypothesis since conflict between voters' partisan attitudes and party identification is rare. Table 6.5 shows that most people with well-developed partisan attitudes vote along with those attitudes when they conflict with their party identification, but we are speaking of only 14 people in 2004. Still, the overwhelming proportion of the partisans voted with their partisanship (table 6.4), as did 92 percent of the few voters (12) who had no partisan attitudes. Thus, the data do give some support for the hypothesis that partisan attitudes predominate when

TABLE 6.5. Relation of Degree of Attitude Development to Direction in Which Conflict of Party Identification and Partisan Evaluations Is Resolved in Voting, 2004 (in percentages)

	Those Who Have Well-Developed Evaluations	Those Who Have Formed No Evaluations at All
Vote agrees with party identification	7	92
Vote fails to agree with party identification	93	8
Total	100	100
Number of cases	14	12

Note: Respondents with poorly developed evaluations are omitted as there are too few (three) to show.

Bogus

those attitudes are in conflict with party identification, though the rarity of such conflict in 2004 limits our ability to confirm the hypothesis. *prevents us from*

PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

A person's party identification is the most important piece of information that we can obtain to help us understand their political attitudes and vote choice. At this point, it is important to examine the relationship between party identification and political involvement, as discussed in chapter 5. The stronger a person's partisan attachment, the greater the person's involvement in politics.

The popular view of political independents is that they are interested in government and politics, pay attention to both sides in a campaign, and then make an informed judgment. This may describe an ideal Independent, but it does not fit the data very well. Independents are instead less interested and involved in politics than are partisans. They have less information about elections and care less about election outcomes. Consider tables 6.6 and 6.7. Independents were less interested in the 2004 election campaign than were strong partisans, and they cared less who

*PID
↓
Interest*

TABLE 6.6. Relation of Strength of Party Identification to Interest in Campaign, 2004 (in percentages)

	Strong Party Identifiers	Weak Party Identifiers	Independents
Very much interested	57	28	36
Somewhat interested	34	53	46
Not much interested	9	19	18
Total	100	100	100
Number of cases	348	296	406

TABLE 6.7. Relation of Strength of Party Identification to Concern over Outcome, 2004 (in percentages)

	Strong Party Identifiers	Weak Party Identifiers	Independents
Care who wins presidential election	98	86	78
Does not care who wins	2	14	22
Total	100	100	100
Number of cases	348	295	401

won the election. Some Independents were interested in the campaign, and many cared about the outcome, but the results overall show that Independents differ from their popular image. These data cannot tell us which direction the causation flows: whether people who are involved in politics are more likely to develop strong partisanship, or if strong partisans are more likely to become interested in politics, but they do show us that the two go hand in hand, with strong partisans being more politically involved while Independents are less involved. The question of which comes first, though, does turn our attention to the development of political partisanship, which is the focus of the next chapter.

COMMENTARY AND CONTROVERSY

Comparisons with Earlier Elections

There are two important differences between these distributions of voting probabilities and those from the 1950s. First, the probability of partisans defecting to the other party is much lower than it was in the 1950s. This fits with claims that voters are more polarized between the parties than they used to be. Back in 1956, there was some chance of strong partisans voting for the other party and a substantial chance of weak partisans doing so (especially weak Democrats), but figure 6.3 shows that was no longer the case in 2004. Second, there is little sign of partisan bias in these figures for 2004. Democrats were more likely to vote Republican in 1956 than Republicans were to vote Democratic, which indicates that there were powerful short-term factors that year working in the Republican direction. By contrast, in 2004 the likelihood of Democrats voting Republican is fairly similar to that of Republicans voting Democrat, showing that short-term partisan factors were in much greater balance in 2004 than in 1956.

↓ Defection

↓ Defection
short-term

Bartels (2000) developed a model to measure the changing importance of party identification in voting from the 1950s through the 1990s. His methodology takes into account both changes in the distribution of partisanship and in its electoral relevance. He finds a declining impact of party identification on the presidential vote in 1964 and 1972 followed by resurgence since then, to the point that partisan voting was 15–20 percent higher in 1996 than in the 1950s. Thus the finding of high importance of party identification in presidential voting is not limited to the 2000 and 2004 elections. As to partisan bias, Bartels's analysis finds Republicans more loyal to their party than Democrats of the same partisan

↓ See Appendix to The American Campaign

strength up through 1988 (with the sole exception of the desertion by Republicans from Barry Goldwater in 1964), but with Democrats being more loyal to their party than Republicans in the 1990s.

Alternative Measures of Partisanship

The question series developed by the University of Michigan researchers in the 1950s has been used to measure party identification by the National Election Studies (NES) ever since then. While some other survey organizations use fully comparable questions (especially the *New York Times*/CBS Poll, which also asks Independents which party they are closer to), many political polling operations use other versions. The most important alternative wording is that in the Gallup Poll: "In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democratic, or an Independent?" The "as of today" wording obtains a shorter-term version of party identification than the "generally speaking" phrase in the NES question (Borrelli, Lockerbie, and Niemi 1987), with a greater tendency for people to answer in terms of how they are voting currently or how they are planning to vote in the next election rather than giving their identification over the years.

Another variant is to ask people how favorable they are to each party separately, having them locate each party on a "feeling thermometer," answering 100 for groups they like a lot and 0 for groups they dislike a lot. The thermometer difference (how much the person likes the Republican Party minus how much that person likes the Democrats) measures the person's partisanship. Since the question series does not ask respondents to think of the long term, this measure is also likely to be more short-term than the NES question series.⁶

Partisanship is sometimes thought of as behavioral instead of attitudinal. A person who registers as a Republican may be considered a Republican. However, many states do not have registration by party. Also, people often do not bother to change their party registration, unless they want to vote in the primary of the other party, so registration may not reflect their current party. Furthermore, voters sometimes register strategically, for example, registering in the other party so as to be able to vote in a close primary election.

Another behavioral measure is a person's voting history: a person who always votes for the same party is classified as a partisan of that

6. See Weisberg 1999 for a comprehensive treatment of alternative measures of partisanship.

party, while a person who sometimes votes for one party and sometimes for the other is an Independent. Political parties often employ this definition of independents, since targeting vote switchers is probably a more successful strategy than targeting people who have always voted for the other party. A variant of this approach is to classify split-ticket voters as independents since they vote for some Republicans and some Democrats at the same election. Most political scientists use an attitudinal measure of partisanship because it allows one to test the effects of attitudes on behavior.

The Nature of Political Independence

One of the most surprising findings of *The American Voter* was that political Independents in the 1950s were uninformed and uninvolved, rather than being the ideal citizens that democratic theory had assumed. Surveys in the late 1960s and early 1970s found a substantial increase in political independence, and this increase was among people who were more informed and involved. That change led to discussion of two types of Independents, with recognition that some are closer to the ideal in democratic theory.

The new Independents of the late 1960s and early 1970s were concentrated among particular demographic groups. One set of new Independents involved southern whites who left the Democratic Party during the civil rights revolution, but were not yet ready to call themselves Republicans. Another set consisted of young people who were dissatisfied with both parties' positions on the Vietnam War. The Watergate scandal of the early 1970s led to further disenchantment with the parties and therefore more Independents. The effects of the civil rights revolution, the Vietnam War, and Watergate were manifest among people who were informed about politics and cared about real political issues. Hence, they could not be considered Independents of *The American Voter* type.

While the developments that led to an increase in Independents are now more than a generation old, the proportion of Independents has remained high. The proportion of the public that calls themselves Independents has stabilized, not growing appreciably since 1972. Since 1988, more people say they are Independents than Democrats, with Republicans coming in third. Many current-day Independents are informed and involved, though there are still many uninformed and uninvolved Independents.

This increase in Independents occurs when one includes "leaners" as

The Myth of The Independent Voter

130 ★ THE AMERICAN VOTER REVISITED

Independents. Leaners are the people who answer "Independent" to the initial party identification question and then answer the follow-up question by saying that they consider themselves closer to one party or the other. However, leaners sometimes vote in a more partisan manner than weak partisans. The resultant lack of monotonicity in the relationship between the seven-point party identification scale and voting behavior is referred to in the literature as an "intransitivity" (Petrocik 1974).

This intransitivity led some researchers to suggest that the "leaners" should be seen as partisans rather than as Independents. After all, if leaners sometimes vote in a more partisan manner than weak partisans, it may be best to combine the two groups (Keith et al. 1992). When leaners are combined with weak partisans, the proportion of real Independents in the American electorate is quite small. The contrary position is that the leaners should be seen as Independents (W. Miller 1991), which makes it look like a substantial portion of the American electorate is Independents. This is how they are treated in political polls that ask people if they are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents without a follow-up question asking Independents if they are closer to one party or the other. One argument supporting this position is that leaners do not turn out to vote at elections at the same high rate that strong and weak partisans vote. Leaners may vote like partisans, but that may be because they answer the follow-up question with the party they are planning to vote for at the next election.

The anomalous nature of Independents also led some scholars to question whether party identification should be considered unidimensional, ranging from strong Democrats at one end to strong Republicans at the opposite end, with Independents in the middle, or whether multiple dimensions underlie partisanship. For one thing, whether or not a person is an Independent could be separate from their position between Democrats and Republicans. For another, people may not see Democrat and Republican partisanship as opposites, but may treat them as just separate entities. Multidimensional partisanship occurs in many multiparty countries, with a left-right dimension to the parties as well as a separate dimension that is religious-secular in some countries. The idea of multidimensional partisanship in the United States was explored in the early 1980s (Weisberg 1980), but the scholarly consensus remains that the unidimensional version fits current politics adequately (Fiorina 1981).

A small detail in *The American Voter's* presentation of party identification was that there are a few respondents who do not relate enough to

the political parties to be able to answer the party identification questions meaningfully. *The American Voter* calls such people “apoliticals.” About 3–4 percent of the National Election Studies samples in the 1950s were apoliticals, mainly blacks who were not permitted to vote in the segregated South. With the passage of voting rights reforms in the early 1960s, the proportion of apoliticals was halved, and now only about 1 percent of the public does not have enough interest in political matters to respond to the party identification questions. Not surprisingly, apoliticals rarely vote, so less than 1 percent of voters were apolitical even in the 1950s.⁷

The Normal Vote

While the party identification distribution among the total National Election Studies sample still favors the Democrats, this advantage is considerably offset by the lower voting rates of Democratic identifiers. People with less education and income vote in lower proportions than people with college education and high income, and people with less education and income tend to be Democratic identifiers rather than Republicans. As a result, the Democratic lead in partisanship is not as large as the party identification percentages in table 6.1 suggest. There is also a difference in defection rates between Democratic and Republican identifiers, with Democrats being slightly more likely to defect and vote for the candidate of the other major party.

Converse (1966a) developed the concept of the “normal vote” to adjust the party identification figures for these differences in turnout and defection rates. He estimated the voting patterns in the 1952–60 period for an election in which short-term forces did not favor either party. For example, he found that strong Democrats living outside the South were turning out to vote at a 79 percent rate, compared to 86 percent for strong Republicans; the difference was even starker in the South. Furthermore, 18 percent of weak Democrats were expected to defect to the Republican candidate in such an election, whereas only 16 percent of weak Republicans were expected to defect to the Democratic candidate. Putting these factors together, Converse came up with an estimate that the normal two-party vote in the United States during the 1952–60 period

7. These figures probably understate the true proportion of apoliticals, in that many homeless people and some people who are not interested enough in politics to agree to participate in an election survey most likely belong in this category. Indeed, the decrease in apoliticals since the 1950s could be partly due to the lower participation rate in the NES surveys.

was approximately 54 percent Democratic. Replication of the normal vote analysis for the 1960s (Miller 1979) still found Democrats turning out to vote at a lower rate and defecting at a higher rate than Republicans, so that the normal two-party vote estimate remained at 54 percent Democratic.

Several researchers have used the normal vote to estimate the effects of particular issues in an election. They take the partisanship distribution of people on either side of an issue and compute the "expected vote" for each side. They then compare the expected vote of people on each side of the issue with their actual vote to gauge the effect of that issue. For example, the normal vote of abortion supporters and opponents can be estimated on the basis of the partisan distribution among each group. The actual vote of supporters and opponents may then be compared with their respective normal votes to determine the effect of abortion on the vote, with abortion having no independent effect on the vote if supporters and opponents voted just as predicted by their partisanship distribution. However, Achen (1979) demonstrated that such estimates are biased since they do not take into account other relevant variables; in technical terms, the prediction equation is not fully "specified." While that problem invalidates the use of the normal vote to estimate the effects of specific issues, it is still a useful concept for considering the partisan balance in the nation.

Minimally, this discussion emphasizes the importance of discounting the apparent Democratic lead in party identification by the tendency of Democrats to vote in lower proportions than Republicans. Table 6.8 shows how the Democratic lead in the actual electorate has diminished since 1952. Regardless of whether Independents who lean toward a party are included, the Democrats had a double-digit lead in partisanship from the first Eisenhower victory in 1952 through the first Reagan victory in 1980, and since that year their lead has been reduced to a single digit. Exit polls confirm that the difference in the proportions of actual voters who say they are Democrats and Republicans has been trivial since 1984.

Theoretical Understanding of Partisanship

The American Voter developed the concept of party identification out of the reference group theory that was popular in social psychology during the 1950s. People identify psychologically with all sorts of groups, and identification with parties was proposed as an example. The Michigan

of the normal

*PLD
Among
Voters*

TABLE 6.8. Democratic Lead in Partisanship among Actual Voters for President, 1952-2004 (in percentages)

	1952	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004
NES partisans only	14	12	15	25	18	12	11	14	8	3	9	8	7	-3
NES including leaners	17	10	14	27	18	12	12	14	4	2	11	9	7	2
Exit polls	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	2	3	4	4	0

Note: — = not applicable.

*Again —
This needs to be corrected for
the actual vote distribution.*

school treated party identification as a short-cut that helps people decide how to vote, especially in low-information contests such as state treasurer or auditor. Modern social psychology would refer to this as a “heuristic,” a problem-solving technique.

This psychological foundation for party identification was considered wanting by rational choice theorists in that it seemed to view party identification as based on early (often childhood) associations with the parties instead of seeing it as being affected by contemporary politics. Fiorina (1981) proposed an important alternative view of party identification from the rational choice perspective, calling it a “running tally” of the person’s reactions to the parties. Persons come to think of themselves as a Republican from events of childhood and early adolescence, but each subsequent political event can move that tally one way or the other. They may think of themselves as a bit less Republican if there is a major scandal under a Republican president, or a bit more Republican if they benefit from tax cuts initiated under a Republican administration. Statisticians would consider this model as an instance of “Bayesian updating,” with the person having a “prior” view that can be modified on the basis of new “data.” It also fits with the “online processing” model in contemporary social psychology, which believes that people keep “online tallies” for their attitudes on some matters rather than retaining in their memory each individual incident that contributes to those attitudes.

Reference group theory is not used much in contemporary social psychology. A more modern version is called “social identity” theory. That theory differentiates between a person’s “in-group” and “out-group,” and it emphasizes that people can easily build up an association with the in-group. Several recent studies of party identification employ this approach (Greene 1999; Weisberg and Hasecke 1999; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), arguing that partisan identity is indeed a psychological attachment akin to religious, ethnic, or class identity rather than based in rational considerations. That is, party identification is based on affect rather than cognition and is part of a person’s self-concept.

Is Party Identification Exogenous?

In presenting the concept of party identification, *The American Voter* portrayed it as highly stable over long periods of time, at both the individual level and the aggregate level. It was depicted as the long-term variable that affected short-term attitudes toward issues and candidates. In this view it was an “unmoved mover”—leading other variables to

See my Macropartisanship paper.

An unmoved mover?

change while itself remaining unchanged. In more technical parlance, this view of party identification makes it “exogenous”—it is not affected by the political variables that it is used to explain. This assessment overstates what *The American Voter* actually said. It clearly allowed that party identification could change as the result of political forces. However, it viewed that change as largely occurring only as part of a major party realignment, not as part of the normal ebb and flow of politics.

Later work has questioned whether party identification is truly an unmoved mover. Analysis by Jackson (1975), Page and Jones (1979), Markus and Converse (1979), and Franklin and Jackson (1983) treated party identification as endogenous. In some of these models it is affected by a person’s positions on issues as well as affecting those positions, and in some models it is affected by a person’s vote. Consider a female Republican, moderate on social issues, who votes Democrat for president one year because of her party’s stand on abortion and then votes Democrat for president the next election because of her party’s stand on gay and lesbian rights. At some point she may begin to consider herself an Independent or even a Democrat because of her position on issues or because she realizes that she is voting Democrat more often than Republican.

Some empirical data also shows that party identification can be variable. In an analysis of tracking polls in the 1984 election, Allsop and Weisberg (1988) found that partisanship varied systematically with political events during the campaign. Brody and Rothenberg (1988) found that change in party identification in the 1980 NES panel survey could be accounted for by short-term factors. The most important research along this line was the MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson (1989) work on “macro-partisanship,” which demonstrates that aggregate partisanship varies and is responsive to views of the national economy as well as to presidential popularity (see also Weisberg and Smith 1991; cf. Abramson and Ostrom 1991). Box-Steffensmeier and Smith’s (1996) sophisticated time-series analysis shows that changes in party identification last several years, not just the several months that MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson’s work implies, but not the several decades that *The American Voter* claimed.

Some other research finds that party identification is indeed stable. Warren Miller, one of the authors of *The American Voter*, argued in 1991 that one should only look at people’s answers to the first party identification question—whether they consider themselves Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. He found answers to that question were very stable during a lengthy period, except for instances of realignment, such

as by white male southerners and by blacks from the 1950s through 1980. *The New American Voter* (Miller and Shanks 1996) similarly views party identification as basically stable. Green and Palmquist (1994) show that change in party identification in several panel surveys was mainly due to random measurement error rather than to real change. The effects of short-term variables on party identification largely disappear when that random measurement error is taken into account (Green and Palmquist 1990). Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002, chap. 5) suggest that party identification is highly stable so long as images of Republicans and Democrats remain intact.

Data clearly show that party identification does shift, but the question is whether those shifts have real meaning or are just short-term blips. Any claim that party identification is an "unmoved mover" is an overstatement, but it would also be a mistake to overstate the magnitude of changes that occur in party identification other than during realigning periods. Political parties need not view party identification as totally stable—they can attempt to move partisanship even during the course of a campaign. However, the parties must recognize that such changes may be reversed by the subsequent flow of political events. Tremendous forces of stability underlie party identification.

Agreed

Social Demographics of Partisanship

What is the partisanship of social groups, and to what extent have they changed their partisanship over the years? Which groups have realigned and which have not, and is the amount of change enough to make us reconsider the stability of partisanship?

The popular press often discusses changes in voting by particular social groups, but this chapter implies that what really matters is whether their party identification changes. The best work on this is Stanley and Niemi's (2006) multivariate analysis of the demographics of party identification. Table 6.9 summarizes some of their results relating mainly to groups that are associated with the Democratic New Deal Coalition. Some change is evident here, especially a growth in Democratic partisanship among blacks and lessening of Democratic partisanship among native southern whites and to a lesser degree among Catholics and arguably Jews. Those changes hold up under statistical controls (see bottom half of table 6.9). Additionally, the development of Democratic partisanship by women is visible when one controls for other demographics.

Yet the overwhelming lesson from table 6.9 is that group partisan-

TABLE 6.9. Net Group Partisanship, 1952–2004 (Democratic minus Republican Identification)

	1952	1964	1976	1988	2000	2004
Dem. – Rep. identification						
African Americans	.40	.66	.67	.57	.59	.60
Catholics	.38	.42	.34	.10	.12	.04
Jewish	.73	.51	.50	.24	.57	.43
Female	.19	.28	.15	.12	.17	.12
Native southern whites	.68	.63	.36	.18	–.07	–.17
Dem. – Rep. identification, controlled						
African Americans	.44	.57	.71	.73	.58	.70
Catholics	.45	.40	.40	.17	.09	.11
Jewish	.80	–.11	.64	.48	.38	.56
Female	–.04	.01	–.02	.09	.14	.36
Native southern whites	.80	.63	.39	.26	–.10	–.08

Source: This table is based on Stanley and Niemi 2004, with 2004 data added from Stanley and Niemi (2006). Results are shown for every 12 years up to the 2000 election and for the 2004 election. Their analysis also controls for union household, regular churchgoer, income, white Protestant fundamentalist, Hispanic, and generation.

ship is highly stable. Blacks have been strongly Democratic since the 1960s. Catholics were strongly Democratic through the 1970s, and have been split more evenly between the parties since. Jews remain predominantly Democrat, though the values for Jews are highly variable because they are based on small numbers of respondents. The largest partisanship changes in the table are for native southern whites, who are no longer strongly Democrat. But even they have not completely reversed their partisanship—they are now only mildly Republican in their net party identification. The role of social groups and the vote will be discussed more fully in chapter 11.