

Conceptual Problems in the Theory and  
Measurement of Party Identification

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Reviews of the assumptions upon which the analytic use of 'party identification' is based and of recent studies of the validity of these assumptions indicate that a new round of theorizing and study is in order. We need to learn which features of this concept satisfy the basal assumptions and how to change our analytic procedures to take account of the features which do not.

In this memorandum I will briefly (1) set out what appear to be the assumptions upon which the concept rests; (2) consider these assumptions in light of the evidence; and (3) raise for discussion procedures for building the firmest possible foundation under 'party identification' as an analytic construct.

Partisanship is said to function for the individual in any or all of the following ways:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) It contributes to the individual's sense of self:

"...an individual's self-identity as a political actor is assumed to emanate from the sense of belonging to the political group."  
(Miller, 1976, p. 22)

- (2) It provides a cost-efficient substitute for other, more expensive, political information and other attitude cues:

"...given a sense of belonging to a political party ...it becomes a relatively simple matter to discover what one or another political leader, who is understood to be representative of one's party, thinks about a new event...(a recognized political leader) may provide a ready cue to guide the political thought and action of the party identifier." (Miller, 1976, p. 23)

- (3) It is a cue to attitude relevant action:

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<sup>1</sup> While this list is cribbed from Warren Miller's succinct statement of "The Nature of Party Identification" (Miller, 1976, pp. 22-24), he is by no means alone in attributing these qualities to partisanship.

"All other things being equal, and particularly in the absence of ambiguous or contrary information, the party loyalist votes, and votes the party line." (Miller, 1976, p. 23)

These three functions appear to require only a 'direction' of identification, i.e., the incorporation into one's typical self-description of the name of a secondary group -- in this case a political party. The functions do not appear to entail a notion of the 'strength' of identification.

The first function argues that, in part, we come to know ourselves by the company we keep. By analogy, consider religious identification: I have a hunch that many more people when describing themselves would use the label "Catholic" rather than "devout Catholic." Jews may modify their nominal identification with the adjectives "orthodox," "conservative," "reform," or "Hasidic"; these however are not indications of the degree of their identification (or of the centrality of Judaism in their life) but the names of relatively distinct sects within a larger religion. Some modifiers will be double-barreled, e.g., "born-again Christian," and, thus, concatenate in one symbol an implied nominal designation (fundamentalist or evangelical Protestant) and an indication of fervor. The point of the analogy is that the name of the group is or is not a part of one's self-description, the identity function of identification is binary.

In its own terms -- "...given a sense of belonging..." -- the second function hinges on the presence or absence of a nominal identification; strength is not mentioned. The statement of the third function is explicit in its ceteris paribus. Its operative term is 'party loyalist' which, if we are to avoid circularity, must mean one who thinks of him/herself as a partisan.

These functions suggest that partisanship is internalized by the individual, that is, that it is learned early and enjoys a high degree of functional autonomy. Partisan self-designation, as a consequence, should be quite stable over time.

The directional component of party identification (as now measured) meets these expectations: The socialization literature offers much evidence of early internalization; the distinction between identification and voting choice suggests functional autonomy. And such panel data as we have indicates that the directional component is stable over time.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that the directional component of partisanship is without conceptual problems. Present measurement technology gives rise to questions of whether (or which) 'partisan independents' are partisan or independent. It is important to be able to settle this question as best we can because as a 'standing decision' the causal priority of party identification is assumed and the effects of short-term electoral forces are measured as deviations from expectations derived from the distribution of partisanship.

Several bodies of data indicate that partisan independents are a heterogeneous lot -- those whose responses place them in this category include true partisans who react positively to the symbol 'independent' and non-partisans who are attracted in the short-run to one of the parties. This group, which amounts to about one-fifth of the electorate, has been arbitrarily aggregated one way or another at the convenience of the analyst or left as separate groups by those willing to work with non-monotonic measures (Petrocik, 1974).

If the heterogeneity hypothesis is correct, it would follow that we know nothing about the 'strength' of identification of the true partisans among the leaners. Just as the self-designation 'reform Jew' gives no information about the respondent's religiosity, knowing that a voter thinks of him/herself as an independent Democrat and that this self-identification is stable and functionally autonomous, gives us no information about the degree of centrality of party in the life of the individual.

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<sup>2</sup> Commentators on my 1977 APSA convention paper (Brody, 1977b) argued that 10-15% change in partisan direction in two years is very high. But since that figure was inflated by the inclusion of 'leaners' as partisans and since compared to other  
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By contrast, under the hypothesis, the non-partisan who feels closer to a given party is giving a strong indication of behavioral intention and with it evidence of strong (albeit, temporary) partisanship.

Plainly, this discussion is based on a rejection of the assumption that the 'strength' of identification, as presently measured, is a stable, functionally autonomous disposition. Miller (1976, p. 21) asserts that "there are...gradations in the strength of attachment to the group, and therefore in the centrality of the group in the individual's life." My reading of the stability of strength responses in the 1956-58-60 panel and in the piece of the 1972-74 panel to which I've had access (Brody, 1977a; Brody, 1977b) leads me to hypothesize that some (sizeable?) portion of the variation of the strength response is attributable to short-term reactions to the candidates and the issues in a given election. To the extent my reading is correct, the strength response does not measure the 'centrality' of party in the individual's life.

Additional evidence for my contention can be seen in the patterns of parental partisanship for 'strong' and 'not strong' (alternatively, 'weak') identifiers. Consider data from Table 7.5 in The Voter Decides (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p. 99). If we ignore the direction of identification and re-percentage across, we find the following distributions for 'strong' and 'not strong' identifiers:<sup>3</sup>

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attitude measures party id. is highly stable, it is reasonable to treat the directional component as stable over time.

<sup>3</sup> Using data from the same table, we observe 'leaners' with a pattern of parental partisanship less 'partisan' than 'weak' identifiers ( $X^2=23.91$ ;  $df=5$ ;  $p<.005$ ) but more 'partisan' than pure independents ( $X^2=12.37$ ;  $df=5$ ;  $p<.05$ ). This is precisely what we would expect given the hypothesized heterogeneity of the 'leaners.' The American Voter (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 147) reports roughly comparable data; unfortunately, the combining of the three kinds of 'independents' will not permit a replication of this analysis.

PATTERN OF PARENTAL PARTISANSHIP

Id. Strength	Both had same id.	Mixed id.	One id. one apol.	Shifting id.	Don't know	Neither voted	N
"Strong"	80.7%	2.6	5.6	4.3	4.7	2.1	534
"Not Strong"	73.2%	3.8	6.2	6.5	7.2	3.1	583

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$$\chi^2 = 9.93; \text{ df}=5; p \approx .07$$


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The somewhat higher level of parental partisanship reported by 'strong' identifiers is not statistically significant; those who recall that their parents agree with each other on their direction of partisanship are nearly as likely to be 'not strong' as 'strong' identifiers.<sup>4</sup>

To recapitulate: As presently indexed the strength response is highly labile, it does not appear to be rooted in the political socialization environment, but rather appears to be an expressed evaluation of the candidates the parties are offering the voter and of their performance in the recent past. In other words, there is little evidence that in the main the strength component measures the 'importance' of the party for the individual (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p. 91).

There appear to be good reasons to wish to distinguish the degree of importance of party in the political life of the citizen. For example, the contrast of party and issue voting when put against the life-cycle hypothesis raises a host

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<sup>4</sup> A review of the evidence on this question presented in The American Voter (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 147) shows that in 1958, in the aggregate, the same lack of relationship of strength and parental partisanship appears. However, these data permit differentiating politically active from inactive homes and that analysis indicates that a suppressor effect is at work. There is a positive relationship between parental partisanship and strength of identification in politically active homes and a negative relationship in politically inactive homes. Whether the same suppressor was at work in 1952 cannot be determined.

of questions about the locus of policy-relevant voting in the society. These questions are worth raising but without the means of estimating how important party is for the voter, we cannot hope to get answers.

To find problems with existing measure is not to suggest new tools, only to indicate the need for them. It is easier to suggest improvements in the measurement of the directional component of partisanship than in the strength component. We need to learn how to distinguish the partisans among the leaners. To do this we might begin with the pattern of parental partisanship but other probes will undoubtedly have to be invented to achieve cost-efficient classification.

The measurement of the strength component will be harder to come by because it is less clear what we want to measure. It would be prudent to proceed initially by spending some time discussing the concept of strength and "centrality" and then explore developments in the assessment of attitude intensities which might be adapted to the task of differentiating among partisans.

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