

The Strengthening of Party Identification:

A Note on Conceptual Clarification

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Party identification has become the foremost concept in our theories of individual vote choice and of systemic electoral behavior. However, as our data base expanded with the march of time as well with historical and cross-national research our understanding of the causes, consequences and the meaning of that concept has been called into question.

As Kristi Andersen has noted, a significant cause of the current controversy surrounding party identification is conceptual. This is certainly true with regards to the one aspect of the controversy that is of most interest to myself; namely the debate over the "strengthening" of party identification. That is, one cause of this debate stems from the usual problems associated with empirical research which can be solved by better questions, larger samples, and panel data. But it is my contention that the major reason for the state of the field is not methodological but conceptual. It is the belief that we have misconceptualized what needs to be explained.

Converse has remarked that party identification has drawn considerable attention not only because of its intrinsic importance but also because it is an "interesting" variable. Interesting in that it is really two variables; a direction variable and what he refers to as a strength variable, and that the dynamics of these two components of party identification are different. The heart of my conceptual criticism is that a party attachment should be thought of as consisting of three components; a direction component, an

acquisition component, and a strength component.

The importance of dividing Converse's strength component into two parts derives from the possibility that the processes regulating the acquisition of a partisan tie may be different from those governing the strength of those attachments. A second, more limited, justification for partitioning Converse's overall strength component is the possibility that while the acquisition and strengthening may be the same in structure the parameters of the two processes may be different. In this case valid parameter estimates would be impossible without considering acquisition and strengthening separately. Therefore we must not approach the data with a conceptual framework that rules out these possibilities by fiat. But the "undifferentiated strength" component concept does rule out these possibilities by conceptual fiat.

The undifferentiated strength component concept has lead theorists to view the "strength" of partisanship as a single phenomenon which is explainable in terms of a single process. Thus the necessary theories of acquisition and strengthening have not been explicitly formulated by the previous research.

Explanation of the strength of party identification at the aggregate level have similarly been affected. In the conceptual language being developed here this research attempted to explain the extent of partisanship which reflects both the proportion of the electorate with party ties and the strength of those ties.

The extent of partisanship is, however, solely derivative and is explained by reference to the appropriate individual level theories of acquisition and strengthening. Quite literally, attempts to explain the extent of partisanship directly, without reference to such theories, are without foundation since the extent of partisanship does not exist except as the summation of those processes.

While explicit theories of acquisition and strengthening have not been explicitly formulated much of the literature contains implicit theories of one or more of these processes. That is, many of the theories or explanations that have been offered for the "strength" of identification at the individual level or for the extent of partisanship are in fact, or at least can be interpreted as, theories of one of these processes. It should be noted that these explanations were usually only partial explanations in that an implicit theory of only one process was suggested nor were their partial nature generally recognized.

It is in the area of testing and data interpretation that the undifferentiated strength component concept has had its most damaging consequences. It has led researchers to equate measures of the extent of partisanship with measures of acquisition and measures of the strength of partisanship with both. As a result implicit theories about one process have been evaluated with data on the extent of partisanship or worse yet on data from the other process. It is conceivable that the two processes or their parameter values are sufficiently different so that the empirical contours of the two

processes and the extent of partisanship may be quite different from each other. Furthermore different researchers have examined the same implicit theory with data derived from different processes or some have used measures of the extent of partisanship while others used data from a single process. Thus erroneous and contradictory conclusions regarding the adequacy of various implicit theories were seemingly an inevitable consequence of the undifferentiated strength component concept. It has also directed the debate into a series of methodological critiques for what but methodological errors could produce divergent findings from the very same data base. As a result theoretical development has been discouraged.

The misinterpretation of data and the theoretical sterility which are consequences of the undifferentiated strength component concept can be illustrated with a brief review of the debate over the validity of Converse's life cycle explanation for the development of party identification.

While Converse has had a decade and a half to elaborate the life cycle model it consists, in essence, of two major processes. One process is concerned with the intergenerational transmission of partisanship. It was proposed that an individual acquired, with a certain probability, his identification from his parents before he entered the electorate.

The second process, which has come to dominate the discussion of his model, regulates the strength of identification. It was

hypothesized that:

Once a person has acquired some embryonic party attachment it is easy for him to discover that most events in the ambiguous world of politics redound to the credit of his chosen party. As his perception of his party virtue gain momentum in this manner, so his loyalty to it strengthens and this fact increases the probability that future events will be interpreted in a fashion that supports his partisan inclination.¹

The very cross-sectional data which revealed that the intensity of identification increased with age and which suggested the reinforcement hypothesis also indicated that the proportion of independents declined with age. Such a decline suggests either an over time variation in the effectiveness of preadult socialization or some process of adult acquisition or both. But neither process was specified by Converse. By failing to take separate notice of the decline of independents with age Converse either implicitly left it in the realm of the unexplained or assumed that it was somehow explainable by the reinforcement process. The former implies a misspecified model in that a process of acquisition has been omitted. The latter is a theoretical impossibility for acquisition can not be explained by a reinforcement process since no identification initially exists to be reinforced.

The dependent variable used by Glenn, Glenn and Hefner, Knoke and Hout and in part by Abramson was the proportion of independents in various cohorts. This is clearly a measure of the acquisition process. However, these authors and Converse felt that such data

¹ Angus Campbell, et.al., The American Voter, p. 165.

was appropriate to test the reinforcement process which is a theory of the strengthening process. To the extent that these authors equated the life cycle model with the reinforcement process, i.e., excluded the acquisition process that the model specified, and to the degree that the dependent variables included information about independents their conclusions about the life cycle model and the reinforcement process are invalid. In fact the reinforcement theory has never been subjected to an appropriate test, even by Converse, for the dependent variables in such "tests" have been either measures of the proportion of independents in a cohort or the extent of partisanship. What is needed is a measure of the change in the strength of party identification over time among those which had an identification at the initial point of observation.

To the extent that recent decline of partisanship among whites and the increased partisanship of blacks is due to changes in the level of partisanship that the incoming cohorts enter the electorate with, these changes do not challenge the reinforcement process. They do challenge, like the cohort studies noted above, the assumption of a constant preadult acquisition process and/or the absence of an adult acquisition process.

Another problem which has hindered research concerns the specific implication of the reinforcement process that supposedly was being tested; namely that the reinforcement process must produce an absolute gain in partisan strength as an individual ages. This implication is true only under ceteris paribus conditions however. For example,

if short term forces are such that an individual defects from his party that partisan experience should not reinforce his identification. If an individual consistently defects from his party over a number of elections his strength of identification should not increase and may even decline over time. This might provide a partial explanation for the recent changes in the strength of partisanship.

The growth of black partisanship during the last decade may have also resulted from the breaching of the legal and extra legal barriers to their political participation since a fundamental part of Converse's reinforcement process is exposure to partisan stimuli through participation. Given the decline in turnout during the first two decades of the century the apparent decline in partisanship noted by Burnham may also, in part, be compatible with the reinforcement process.

The problems noted above can be minimized by developing a properly specified model of the development of party identification. Any serious attempt to explain the extent of partisanship through explaining acquisition and strengthening should at least specify the following items. First, with regards to acquisition: (1) When does it occur -- during childhood or later or both; (2) What agents of socialization are involved and how effective are they; (3) Is the effectiveness of the socialization agents constant across individuals, time and space or do they vary in some systematic way. A similar set of questions face any theory of the strengthening process.

Specifically, we must know the strength of the attachment as the time the individual enters the electorate, whether or not the strength changes over his adult life and if so the rates of change and whether those rates are constant across individual, time and space.