

Memorandum on Future Studies of  
Political Party Identification

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Graham Wallas in Human Nature in Politics (Constable, 1908) made these observations about party identification:

"The origin of any particular party may be due to a deliberate intellectual process. It may be formed, as Burke said, by 'a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.' But when a party has once come into existence its fortunes depend upon facts of human nature of which deliberate thought is only one. It is primarily a name, which, like other names, calls up when it is heard or seen an 'image' that shades imperceptibly into the voluntary realisation of its meaning. As in other cases, emotional reactions can be set up by the name and its automatic mental associations."

What Wallas seemed to assume, and what many others since have also assumed, is that party images serve important functions, both for elites and for individual members of the mass public. At the least, enduring partisan entities with which ordinary citizens can readily identify, serve greatly to reduce the costs of communication and persuasion during election campaigns or in other instances where the demos must become convinced of the relative virtues of various alternatives of leadership or policy. If a reservoir of "automatic mental associations" and favorable "emotional reactions" have been previously set in place, then the task of appealing for mass support becomes greatly simplified. A common partisan frame of reference of elites and masses brings order, continuity and comprehensibility into the process of political competition over scarce resources. Such partisanship allows those who pose the options and articulate the demands to operate much more economically and successfully, therefore.

On the other side of the equation is the function that partisanship ostensibly has for the average person. Wallas stated this function as follows:

"In a modern State there may be ten million or more voters. Every one of them has an equal right to come forward as a candidate and to urge either as candidate or agitator the particular views which he may hold on any possible political question. But to each citizen, living as he does in the infinite stream of things, only a few of his ten million fellow-citizens could exist as separate objects of political thought or feeling, even if each one of them held only one

opinion on one subject without change during his life. Something is required simpler and more permanent, something which can be loved and trusted, and which can be recognized at successive elections as being the same thing that was loved and trusted before; and a party is such a thing."

What the early studies of voting behavior in American presidential elections seemed to demonstrate was that individual partisanship did indeed serve such functions. A great deal of the variance in people's voting choices could be predicted, or explained, by reference to party identification. Thus, apparently both elites and ordinary people made very wide use of such identification within electoral contexts.

Furthermore, subsequent literature has suggested other, related functions that might also be served by the establishment of enduring partisan self-images. For example, partisanship is a possible source of stimulation of various types of political participation and involvement--paying attention to political communications, involvement in political discussions, contributing one's resources to political causes and campaigns, and turning out to vote. Also, party identification has been said to serve as a filter, benchmark or guide for the interpretation of new political phenomena--in perceiving new issues, candidates or events, and in assimilating them into an orderly and comprehensible framework of thought and action. One might also, in this context, conceive of party identification as representing a kind of personal inventory of political experience. Such a summary incorporates the long-term images of self in relation to major contending groups and competing political points of view in one's society. Thus, party identification becomes on this analysis, <sup>a</sup> more or less enduring personality trait--or at least, an essential aspect of one's political self-image. That such identification has these important, varied (but probably overlapping and cumulative) functions must in some part explain its observed high relationships to such things as choices among candidates in elections, evaluations of the performances of presidential incumbents or the taking of stances on major policy issues.

#### Conceptualization

Unfortunately, this kind of explanation of the empirical robustness of party identification, as well as any other explanation, is still waiting to be tested in an adequate fashion. That the distribution of identification predicts (or postdicts) the outcome of elections so well under many circum-

stances has not led, oddly enough, to the next logical step of investigation. This question is: why does party identification do so well? Is it because of its actual service in performing such important functions as those outlined above or are there other things at work of greater causal and explanatory consequence?

Furthermore, to answer this explanatory question, we must first confront a prior descriptive question. This is what does the usual seven-point scale of party identification actually measure? Several issues need to be addressed in this connection: (1) One is simply what does it mean to identify with a party (or not)? In the original SRC/CPS version, identification appeared to be grounded in some kind of reference group theory. We might ask, if this is the way people actually think of what it means to have a partisan self-image? Are they implicitly (or explicitly) calling up a political outlook common to those whom they see to be like themselves? What is the relationship of various group identifications that people have to partisan identification? Is partisanship simply derived from these other social identities or does it have an independent existence and separate development from other identifications? Despite some recognition of this problem in the political socialization literature (eg, Hyman, 1959), no one has yet traced out the causal sequence according to which partisan self-identity becomes established in relation to other forms of social, cultural, economic or political identities--at least in proper longitudinal perspective. (2) Next we should ask what are the psychological building blocks of party identification actually like? In which respects is there cognitive content present in such a self-image--and in which respects are affective, motivational, or evaluational contents the primary forces at work? One possibility might be that party identification serves mainly as a cognitively focused, information-processing device for many people; while others may put much more emphasis upon its deep-seated emotively charged symbols and meanings. For example, if partisanship reflects a set of beliefs about where similar or dissimilar groups of people typically stand on salient issues, then it may be used mainly as a way of establishing an economical path through a set of otherwise confusing new political stimuli. This assumes of course something akin to the kind of model used in rationalistic accounts of voter choice behavior. But if party identification is mainly a focus of emotional bonds and personality characteristics--

as in its reflection of earlier-formed relationships with parents, peers, ingroups or valued others, then our account of its place in a causal nexus would be very different. There is at present a fair degree of ambiguity about what such identification consists of. Thus, we need to formulate new research to probe into what identification with a party carries with it psychologically.

On the cognitive side, such identification may be the "rational" recognition of who is in one's own "political coalition" and why they are there--because of particular group and individual interests, issue positions and relevant personal concerns, and even perhaps a measure of common ideology (in the sense of a comprehensive political belief system). Thus, identification for "cognitivists" may be some summary reflection of a variety of other ideas--some political, some not. Party identification for such persons is an information-processing device, an economizing mechanism (to lower the costs of decision-making) and a functional part of a wider belief and perceptual system. For "affectivists" on the other hand, such cognitive content is at most subsidiary because the major focus is upon how partisan identification serves to express one's feelings about other people--

especially ingroup loyalty or outgroup hostility--and the kinds of deep-seated commitments and ego defenses that grow out of emotional bonds to significant others formed mostly in preadult life.

One might expect that party identification which is primarily "affectivist" would be exhibited in strong commitment and consistent party voting or other behavior. By contrast, a "cognitivist" style of party identification might be more readily apparent in a "leaner" form of (dis)identification. The latter category of persons would generally withhold some of its emotional investment while nevertheless voting very often with those with whom there is a recognition of common political interests. Indeed, these people may be as regular, or consistent as partisans as the "strong identifiers" (ie, as persons who have invested their partisan self-image with considerable emotion and thus motivation to act in a stable partisan fashion). Cognitivists, as they approach each fresh set of electoral circumstances, may be using their identification more as a working hypothesis about where they will end up than as a "standing decision"--in the sense of having previously settled the question. [The recent evidence of Keith, et al., (APSA, 1977) is at

least consistent with such an interpretation]. Weak identifiers, by contrast to the cognitivists, do not weigh new candidates and issues against their self-assessments and earlier acts confirming their identification. Nor do they have the degree of emotional investment that the strong partisans exhibit. Thus, the weak identifiers may lack both the emotional and the intellectual force of the categories to each side of them--which gives rise to nonmonotonic patterns of political behavior of the kind often observed along the index of party identification. (See Keith, et al., 1977).

Now such a possible explanation of what lies beneath the present index of party identification is undoubtedly only a first approximation. What else might be buried there--especially things that might confound such differences as these? Other dimensions are undoubtedly also present.

1. The customary scale probably confounds intensity of commitment (emotional strength) with stability of partisanship (and thus consistency of voting behavior over a series of elections. When someone answers that she is a strong Democrat, she may, lacking a more delimited frame of reference, be thinking in terms of her depth of emotional commitment (intensity) to a party, or the stability of her preference (and thus perhaps of her consistency and certainty of future behavior over various elections and offices), or even perhaps of extremity along some implicit ideological or group-interest dimension. She may thus be saying one or all of these: "By strong I mean that I am deeply committed to this party, that I am consistent in my choices or that I am consonant in my beliefs with the people or principles that most sharply distinguish this party from the other party (or parties).
2. Looking at the meaning of self-declared independence from a party, we may find even more complexity:
  - (a) Some independents may be accepting such a self-definition from the interviewer because they lack any well-defined political point of view whatsoever. They are essentially "no political preference" individuals, and would be so along almost any political dimension that one poses to them--group interests, ideology, issue positions, preferred type of leadership, etc. They are usually the uninvolved, often apathetic independents of The American Voter.
  - (b) A second type of self-declared independent may be one who, while political, is essentially anti-party--one who does not believe in

the inherent virtues of party organization of elections, or perhaps in the present two-party system. In a small-scale 1976 state-wide probability survey of Wisconsin adults, I asked of those who said they were Independents (in response to the usual SRC/CPS question), the following: "What do you mean when you say you are an Independent?" In response, I received the following distribution:

Table 1. The Meaning of Independent, Wisconsin, 1976

<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	
50%	38	Decides on the person <u>rather</u> than the party (anti-party response)
36	27	Pure candidate response (I voted for whom I think is best)
6	5	Decides on the issues
5	4	Means that I can choose from either party
1	1	I make up my own mind
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	My vote doesn't matter
99%	76	Total Independents
	202	Republican, Democrat, No preference, Other party, don't know
	<u>6</u>	Not ascertained
	<u>284</u>	Total respondents

One sees that the most frequent category of Independent is the anti-party category of choosing the best person rather than on the basis of party. As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (Dennis, BJPS, 1975), there seems to be a steadily increasing, significant level of hostility toward the party system on the part of the American public. Some of this more general set of anti-party values becomes reflected in partisan self-images. This level of meaning should therefore be investigated in any future work on this subject. This facet of independence is of general interest because it reflects a declining sense of relevance of partisanship and an implicit aggregate shift to a denial of traditional roles that parties have played in this system. (It may also <sup>help to</sup> explain therefore <sup>the</sup> phenomenon of party decomposition.) Such increasing anti-partyism should also have the effect of lowering aggregate strength of commitment to the parties, and therefore produce more labile self-placements along a scale of intensity of partisanship (see Brody, 1977).

- c. For independent leaners, who are perhaps predominantly cognitivists, acceptance of these anti-party values may serve as a more general rationale for asserting their freedom from prior partisan commitments, their susceptibility to new information, and thus their belief in their own persuasibility in relation to new candidates or salient issues. As one sees from Table 1, however, relatively few define their independence in explicit issue terms. This variety of independent is apt to be marching to the beats of open-mindedness, <sup>and</sup> a willingness to regard other features of the political environment as of greater consequence than parties [and thus behaves in a consistent partisan fashion (only after deliberately weighing the alternatives each time) because the party-provided alternatives happen to be consistent with those of the voters.]
- d. Other possibilities might of course also apply to a few American voters (and perhaps even more so in other countries). For these, independence refers to the greater salience of ideology in defining one's political viewpoint, <sup>the fact</sup> and <sup>that</sup> neither party is perceived to represent the true aims of the good society in left/right terms.

#### Operationalization

Now to sort out these various meanings and sub-dimensions (and thus to begin to see some of the explanations that lie behind them), one must accomplish an essentially different kind of design than the usual ones. Ideally, one needs a series of connected panel studies--short-term, or election-centered (precampaign, campaign, post-election) panel designs of the attitude-change variety (for a recent example, see Dennis and Chaffee, forthcoming); medium-term panels (4-6 year panels with yearly observations)--using perhaps the 14-year-and-older design proposed for the forthcoming American National Election Study; and long-term panels--those following individuals, beginning at a relatively young age, over a 10-20 year period. The last of these provides the greatest leverage in sorting out the set of causal forces in party identification. One can indeed identify not only the relative influence of various socializing events and agencies as socialization occurs--and thus establish causal priority; but one may also begin to see how the various elements of underlying cognitive and affective structure are built up as people develop their partisan (or independent) identities. Unfortunately,

given the general lack of severe early partisan socialization in the U.S. (as one might perhaps find in Great Britain--see Dennis & McCrone, 1970), one needs a relatively long span of years in which to find the points at which party identification, when it is achieved, becomes stabilized.

One would also need at least medium-term panel designs to sort out the causal interplay of candidate orientation, issue orientations, ideology, group identifications and their contributions to partisanship. One may well imagine, for example, that the current debate between proponents of issue-voting vs. those on the side of partisan-voting as the major explanatory paradigm for electoral behavior research would find, in developmental perspective, that both are right (or both are equally misleading). My guess is that one is likely to find some partisan cue-giving and taking on the part of preadults that is not explicitly based upon issue content. Only implicitly--given wider group identifications--is such partisanship focused upon a consideration of the choices of public policy. But at a subsequent stage, this provisional partisanship may either become revised, confirmed, or abandoned once issue concerns and policy thinking make their appearance. At that point partisanship may typically move from affective origins to a broader cognitive basis--or be given up altogether, as wider policy or other concerns displace it. Thus, from that point on, partisanship may have both a different basis in the psychology and social experience of the individual and a different set of functions in voting choice situations. But many people may never reach this stage of psychic integration and thus do not make a transformation of the functions of partisan self-images. They remain the affectivists, the weak identifiers or the rejectors of partisanship.

One also needs to develop a much wider range of psychometric devices for probing the meaning, development and consequences of partisan self-images. Obviously, the scale of intensity (besides being confounded with other dimensions) is inadequately measured relative to, say, psycho-physical scaling (see for example the work of Lodge, et al.). Clearly, one needs at least some cross-validation of such intensity measures as are presently used (strong, weak, leaner; or in some cases, the thermometer). This would give us at least some handle on saying whether voter lability on intensity, such as that found by Brody, is due simply to the crudity of the measures of intensity (and thus their unreliability) or to instability in the individuals measured [either because of a pattern of random response or because of



systematic changes in response to a changing political environment--in short, learning].

We also need to see such identification in relation to other identifications--to develop a parallel set of questions that allow one to relate ideology, candidate identifications, group identifications, issue identifications or other identifications to each other in common terms.

Finally, we need to take advantage of cross-cultural and cross-level work on party identification to sharpen our knowledge of the effects of alternative objects of identification, as well as of alternative wordings of the questions that grow out of different party system experiences. (See Budge, et al.). We should at least begin to sort out more systematically the effects due to different cultural experiences with parties--and thus the relative weight of partisanship compared to other elements of political outlook--from methodological artifacts introduced by differences in wording, context of presentation, or translation. We clearly need in all of these cultural contexts more open-ended questioning on partisanship, more depth interviewing and even perhaps such less frequently used, if well developed techniques as psycho-physical scaling and projective techniques. The present indexing technique, despite its pragmatic qualities, simply obscures what we would now like to know about the causes, nature and consequences of partisanship. We do not need to abandon the present index; but it needs to be greatly expanded both methodologically and substantively.

Party identification remains, as it was in Graham Wallas' day, one of the most intriguing sets of relationships that link individuals to the political systems of democracy. As a research community we have only begun to understand its changing and varied functions, and the processes of cause and effect in which it occupies such a central role.

## References

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