

Party and the American Electorate

John E. Jackson
University of Pa.

As the proportion of the American electorate classifying themselves as independents increases and as voting becomes increasingly less stable with respect to party affiliations, there is increasing speculation, and even concern, about the "partyless" future of the traditionally two-party American political system (Burnham). Earlier views of party identification as the central organizing force in political behavior are being questioned and there now seems to be more speculation than hard empirical evidence about the role played by party identification in the electoral process. Recent studies suggest that party affiliations both influence other components of the electoral process, as has long been believed, and in large part are derived from the issue evaluations of the voter, a less widely accepted idea but one with very substantial implications (Jackson, 1975a and 1975b; Marcus, 1976). Particularly if these latter influences are large and predominant, then the decline of party allegiances is due in large part to parties and party leaders who are no longer addressing the policy needs of the voters, either because of changes in the American electorate or because of misperceptions on the part of candidates and party elites. The proposed research will examine the importance of issues and the behavior of the competing parties in determining voters' party affiliations and the role of party affiliations in determining behavioral components of the electoral process.

The Model of Party Influence and Determination

The model underlying this investigation is presented in Jackson (1975a) and shown in Figure 1. The parts we are particularly interested in here are the linkages from party identification to issue positions, evaluations, and vote intentions, and from evaluations to party identification. It is always difficult to describe a simultaneous set of interactions because of the lack of a causal ordering. However party identification's central role in the model demands that we start with the ways in which party influences other aspects of electoral behavior, and then discuss how party affiliations are formed and how they change.

One component of party influence might be called the "Leadership Effect" because it measures the extent to which the party, by the positions they and their leaders adopt, can influence the issue positions of individual voters. The existence of this influence emanates from the parties' and their candidates' ability to command attention, to dictate the structure of issues and subsequent debate, and even to control information and cues; from people's needs to discriminate among conflicting statements; and from the voters' attachments to one of the parties. Voters may also accept this influence as the quid pro quo in an explicit trade, "If the party adopts my position on certain policies, I will accept their positions on others." The larger this leadership effect, the greater should be the difference in positions adopted by affiliates of each party, other things being equal. For example, the 1964 election study (Jackson, 1975a) indicates that strong Democrats were 0.30 more likely to agree with a statement supporting the role of the federal government in subsidizing medical and hospital care than strong Republicans, controlling for such effects as income and age, suggesting an important party leadership effect on that issue.

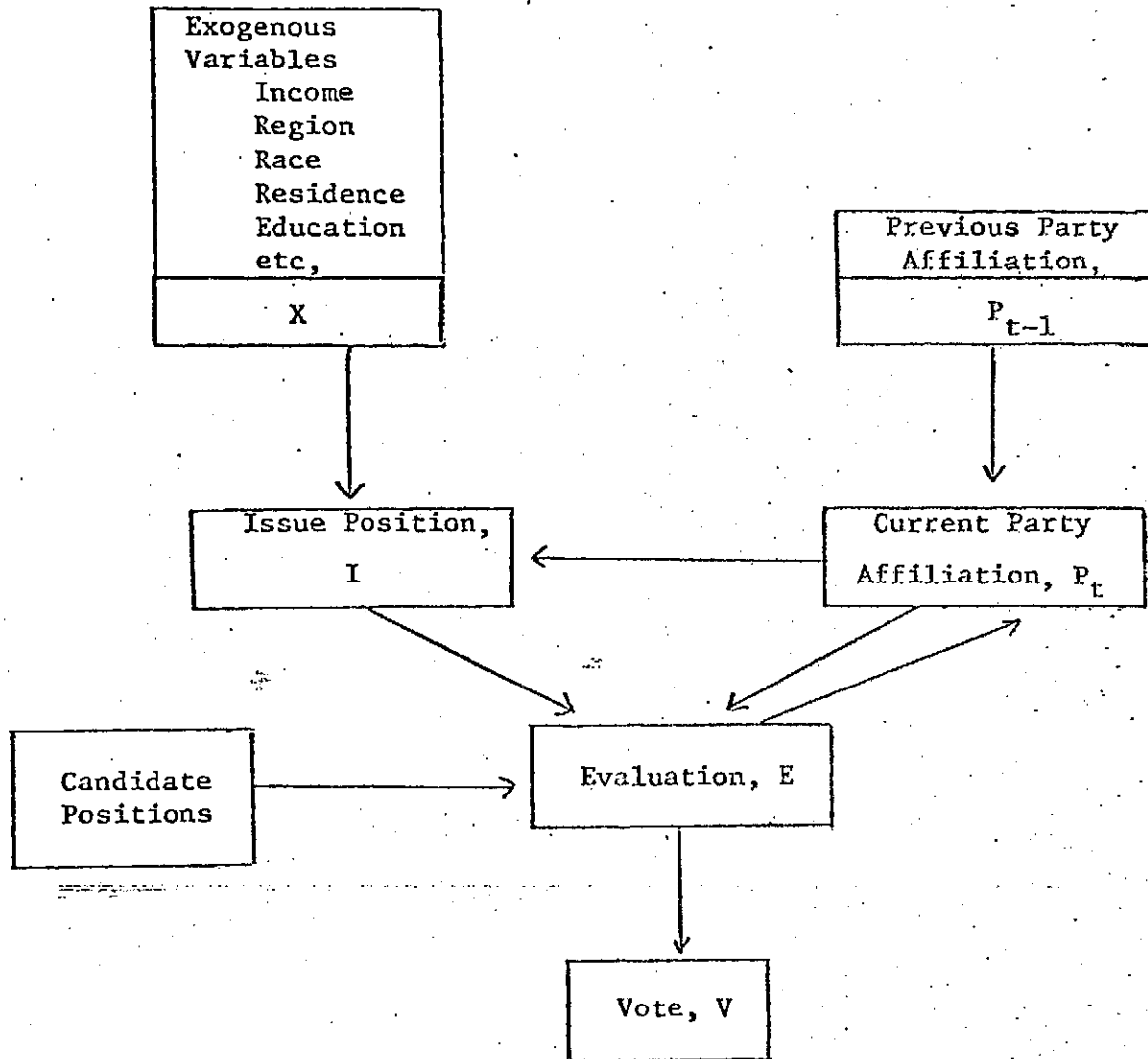


Figure 1

The presence of this leadership effect, if it exists on most issues and over extended periods of time, has important implications for our view of the political party as a central agent in the electoral and public policy process. It means we can, and should, expect to find parties and candidates developing, articulating, and debating public issues and in the process of these debates producing an informed, responsible electorate. It also means that the parties and their elites have a strong responsibility to provide the leadership envisioned and asked for by various political philosophers. If the party platforms and debates are a significant, or even an important, aspect of people's issue positions then the current decline in party affiliations, the decay of the party organizations, and the rise of individual candidacies and personal campaigns is a serious and worrisome development.

To fully examine the extent of this party leadership, the most important questions concern how party influence varies with time, issues, and party behavior. Again, for example, the same 1964 study implies that the leadership effect on foreign policy and civil rights issues, 0.14 and 0.12 respectively, is less than half as large as that for medical care, meaning far less party influence. Are these differences a function of the issue involved? The way the parties are perceived by the voters? Or merely a circumstance of the 1964 election? These are the questions to which this first part of the study is directed.

The simple model explaining voters' issue positions and relating them to party I.D. is shown in equation 1. This equation says that positions

$$(1) \quad I = XB + PC_1 + U_1$$

are a function of the social, economic, and geographic characteristics of the voter, denoted by the vector of exogenous variables X and the person's party identification, P . (This is the simple model estimated in the 1964 study.) The amount of party influence is measured by C_1 , indicating how the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats differ, other things being equal. The hypotheses about how the magnitude of the party influence varies are: (1) The more important an issue is, in the sense of being central to voters' attitude structures, the less influence the parties will have on individual positions, and (2) The more similar the parties' positions are perceived to be, the less influence party will have. These hypotheses imply that C_1 will be smaller for very salient or important issues and for issues where the parties are perceived to have relatively comparable positions. The results of the 1964 study are consistent with these notions, although too few issues were considered to constitute an adequate test. Among issues with the same proportion perceiving a difference in the parties' positions (FEPC, ^{and} aid to education, guaranteed jobs), the party coefficient increased as the percent of the respondents rating that issue as most important decreased (0.02 to 0.15 to 0.21 respectively). Similarly, ^{while} approximately equal numbers of people thought subsidized medical care and foreign aid issues were most important, the number of people seeing no difference in the party positions was twice as large on foreign aid as on medical ^{care} and the party influence was twice as large on the medical care issue.

These results strongly suggest variations in party leadership based on the importance of the issue and the amount of difference in the perceived party position. These aggregate hypotheses, as well as the effect of varying

party positions on a given issue can only be studied by estimating similar equations for these issues over a number of elections. The additional election years, besides providing the additional information needed to examine the hypotheses, will also provide important variations in the underlying structure of the election. We can safely say that the proportion perceiving differences in the party positions has changed over the 1956-1972 period. For example, in 1960 two-thirds of the respondents did not perceive differences in the party positions on foreign policy and civil rights issues, compared to 50% and 30% respectively in 1964. We should then expect party affiliation to be a less important determinant of issue positions in 1960 than in 1964 on these same issues. (Very preliminary analysis is consistent with this prediction.)

These same hypotheses stated at the aggregate level should also be observed at the individual level. For example, partisans who perceive a difference in the parties should be more likely to have different positions, presumably consistent with their party's stand, than those who do not see any difference. Similarly, party affiliation should play a larger role in determining positions on issues which people do not feel are most important, than it does on more salient issues. We can write this extended individual model as,

$$(2) \quad I = XB + (C_{11} + C_{12}S + C_{13}D) \cdot P + U_1$$

where S is a measure of the salience of the issue to each individual respondent and D is the amount of difference perceived in the parties' positions. The effects of issue salience and perceived differences are included in multiplicative form with party identification to be consistent

with the above hypotheses. The estimated effect of party identification on issue positions is now a linear function of salience and party platform differences. Our expectations are that C_{12} is negative, indicating that the influence of party decreases as salience increases, while C_{13} is positive, indicating that the larger the difference in party positions, the greater the difference in issue position of the respective party partisans. The influence of personal social, economic, and demographic characteristics is again represented by the term XB .

The second way in which party affiliation influences the electoral voters process is through the individual spatial evaluations of party and candidate positions, relative to their own preferences. In simple form, as shown in Figure 1, this evaluation equation for a given issue is,

$$(3) \quad E = B_{21} + IC_{21} + PC_{22} + U_2,$$

where I is the individual's issue position, P the party identification, and E is the measure of the relative perceived proximity of the two parties to the voter's preferred position. This equation is a synthesis of two alternative explanations for party and candidate evaluations. The first is a pure spatial model which argues that evaluations are strictly functions of the individual issue positions because candidates and party platforms are unambiguously seen by all people and evaluations are simply a matter of assessing the distance to each parties' position from the individual's position. The second explanation says that parties and candidates are ambiguous and inconsistent in their platforms and positions and/or that voters have poorly defined attitudes and information. In either or both cases, evaluations are largely dominated by party identification, so that

a person's own party is more likely to be preferred, regardless of individual preferences or party positions, the so called "strain to consistency" hypothesis. These two explanations then offer very contrary predictions about the relative size of the two coefficients C_{21} and C_{22} in the evaluation model in equation 3.

Hypotheses about the varying influence of issue positions and party affiliations on evaluations are important and parallel the hypotheses about variations in party influence on the issue positions. The most obvious hypothesis is that the more similar the party positions are, the less important the individual issue position becomes in determining the spatial evaluation. At the extreme, if both parties and candidates advocate or adopt the same positions, voters should be indifferent between them, have no preference, and any variation in the evaluation variable should be simply random noise or error. At the same time, with issues and party platforms being unable to perform the discriminatory task, we may find a greater propensity for the individual to act as if, or to say that, their party is closer to their own position. Or to put in conversely, as the competing parties and candidates become more separated, we should find less perceptual bias or cognitive balancing in forming evaluations and issue positions should play a larger and more important role.

The 1964 study discussed above provides support for this prediction at the aggregate level. On the foreign policy issues, issue positions were less important and party identifications more important in determining evaluations than on domestic and civil rights issues where the parties were more likely to be perceived as having different positions.

We might also include the same saliency hypotheses in the evaluation model as were in the issue model. Presumably the more important an issue

is, the more carefully people may examine the party positions and the more likely they are to make their evaluations on the basis of issue positions. At the same time, the strain towards consistency will be less likely to be resolved by misperceiving the party positions on more important issues. The analyses of the 1964 election do not provide very clear evidence on this hypotheses. Hopefully, by examining the same six or seven issues over three or four elections there will be sufficient variation ⁱⁿ saliences, as well as in party positions, to complete the aggregate analysis.

These extended relationships incorporating the effects on evaluations of relative party position and issue salience can also be tested at the individual level, just as they were in the issue model. This is done by specifying multiplicative terms, as in equation 2. This new model for evaluations is,

$$(4) \quad E = B_{21} + (C_{21} + C_{22}S + C_{23}D)I + (C_{24} + C_{25}S + C_{26}D)P + U_2.$$

The expectations are the C_{22} and C_{23} will be greater than zero, indicating that as saliency and the difference between the party positions increase, issues are more important in determining evaluations. Conversely, C_{25} and C_{26} should be negative indicating that the influence of party identification decreases in these circumstances.

There are additional influences on people's perceptions of the parties' positions, and thus on evaluations. These influences arise from some commonality between candidate and respondent and are associated with the individual candidates in each election. The commonality may cause one candidate or party to be perceived more favorably, or more in line with the individual's own issue position. The most notable such influence is probably in the 1960 presidential election. If such perceptual influences

exist, we should find them among Catholics and Protestants in that election, with Catholics more likely to see Kennedy and the Democrats as closer to their own issue position (and vice-versa for Protestants) because of Kennedy's religious affiliation and the role it played in the election. In other elections, we may find similar biases emanating from regional, racial, or economic similarities between voter and candidate. These hypotheses can be incorporated in the model by including the respondent's religion, region, etc. as an additional explanatory variable in equation 4.

The final influence exerted by party identifications in the model is on the actual vote decision. According to the model, this influence is shared with the evaluations of the party and candidate positions on the various issues. The evaluation variable in this case is an aggregation of the evaluations on the separate issues. Properly done, this aggregation is a weighted sum of the specific evaluations, where the weights are determined by the relative importance of each issue. Both the 1964 study and a recent paper by Marcus (1967) enrich this voting model with the hypothesis that the influence of party affiliation on voting varies with the extent of indifference expressed in the evaluation variable. For example, voters who are indifferent in their evaluations should be more likely to vote their party identification than voters who have a clear issue preference. If we let a value of 0.5 for the evaluation variable indicate complete indifference, we can write the vote equation with this additional hypothesis as,

$$(5) \quad V = B_{31} + C_{31}E + C_{32}P + C_{33}|E - 0.5|P + U_3.$$

According to the hypothesis, C_{33} is negative, indicating that the influence of party affiliation on the vote decreases as evaluations move away from 0.5, i.e. as the voter becomes less indifferent between the parties or candidate

Determinants of Party Identification

The non-recursive structure of our model is completed by describing how voters develop and maintain their party affiliations. The model presented here is that party identifications are a learned phenomena in which adjustments are made over time, based on deviations of current evaluations from past affiliations, and that identifications become more stable the longer they are reinforced by evaluations. This model is shown in equation 6, where

$$(6) \quad P_t = B_{41} + (C_{41} + C_{42}H)E_t + (C_{43} + C_{44}H)P_{t-1} + U_4 \\ = B_{41} + C_1^*E_t + C_3^*P_{t-1} + U_4 = B_{41} + C_1^*(E_t - P_{t-1}) + C_3^{**}P_{t-1} + U_4$$

P_{t-1} is the person's affiliation at some previous election, P_t and E_t are the current affiliation and evaluation, H is the history of past affiliations, for example the number of years the person has identified with the party indicated by P_{t-1} and $C_3^{**} = C_1^* + C_3^*$. The central hypothesis is that current identifications are an adjustment to past identifications, based on the extent to which current evaluations deviate from that past identification. Presumably if E_t agrees with P_{t-1} , then current identification should be the same as the previous identification, implying that C_3^{**} is close to 1. When evaluations differ from past affiliations, the amount of change in affiliation is determined by the magnitude of the coefficients C_1^* and C_3^* . The larger C_1^* and the smaller C_3^* , the larger the change in identification for a given difference between evaluations and past affiliation.

The additional hypothesis in this model is that the amount of change in affiliation for a given evaluation-affiliation difference is a function of how long the person has been identifying with that party. Presumably the longer the length of that identification, the smaller the change. The coefficients C_{42} and C_{44} on the history variable measure this hypothesis. The expectation is that C_{42} is negative while C_{44} is positive.

Estimates of this model of party identification were made with the 1956-1960 American panel and with a synthetic 1960-64 panel (Jackson, 1975) using an age rather than a party history variable. The coefficient estimates were quite similar for both years, and imply an important pattern for the development of party affiliations. As expected, C_{42} was negative while C_{44} was positive. Table 1 shows the estimated evaluation and past party coefficients for different age groups. Among younger voters -- those in the twenties and thirties -- party identifications are quite susceptible to change as a result of changing evaluations. By the time the voter reaches fifty however, identifications are unlikely to change.

Table 1: Estimated Party Affiliation Equation, by Age

Age	Evaluation-- C_1^*	Party-- C_3^*
21	1.10	0.01
30	0.88	0.31
40	0.64	0.54
50	0.40	0.77
60	0.16	1.00

The implications of this model are that party identifications are a learned phenomena, based largely on ones first evaluations on entering the electoral process. This is not to say that young voters do not begin their political life with a preformed view of the political parties emanating from childhood experiences. What the results do suggest however is that this predisposition is very subject to change based on the evaluations made during the first several elections. If these evaluations all lead to a preference for the same party, the result is a party identification which becomes stronger and less susceptible to change in later elections. Party identifications then can become a stabilizing force in the political process, but one derived from past issue preferences and the parties' positions and performance.