

The Character, Role, and Significance of Party Identification:  
A Research Memorandum for the Conference on Party Identification

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Debate over the character, role, and significance of party identification has carried on for some time. Indeed, criticism of the party identification concept along such lines dates back to the time at which it was first introduced in the lexicon of voting research (Miller, 1976). In recent years the pitch of this debate has become more feverish, producing a veritable out-pouring of publications on various points at issue there. Predictably, more confusion appears to have resulted from this heightened state than elucidation. Within such a context, we can only hope that the proposed conference on party identification, to be held at Florida State University in February, 1978, will provide a forum for sorting out some of the more important issues to be considered and attempting some resolution of the problems which give rise to them. As I have been interested in this area of endeavour for over ten years and have devoted most of my own research efforts to the task of delineating fruitful lines of thought along which one might tackle the more tractable problems, I am quite interested in the proposed agenda for the conference and would, of course, like to attend. My comments in this memorandum are directed toward indicating the areas where I believe discussions at the conference would prove fruitful and, as well, the kinds of contributions I could make as a participant. In as much as I feel the description given of the suggested topic contents for the four sessions by the convenors of the conference are quite well chosen, I have set out my comments so as to coincide with these suggested contents.

The problem of conceptualization. Given the nature of the party identification concept, dealings with conceptual problems arising in connection with it necessarily requires that we focus on the individual and social psychology of party affiliation. Party identification, whatever it might represent conceptually, is only one aspect of the psychology of party affiliation; as a beginning point, we need to acknowledge this point and use it as a point of leverage in moving toward resolving some of the conceptual problems that

have been noted in the on-going debate. Indeed, from my own point of view, just as the psychology of party identification is a component in a broader psychology of party affiliation, so the latter is a component in a still broader psychology of partisanship--one which extends beyond partisan behavior connected with political parties to embrace other forms of partisanship in politics which might be thought to emerge independently of the context provided by party competition. Although I regard such a point of view as beyond the immediate scope of the planned conference, it does constitute a perspective that underlies much of what I shall have to say here. Hence, I have indicated it here as a prefatory device through which to inform the reader of my biases and by which my comments can be seen to take on a particular contextual flavor.

At the outset, I think it most important for participants at the conference to broach the general issue of the connection between our conception of party identification as a phenomenon in the psychology of politics and the operational definition we give to it in our attempts to deal with its "measurement". Without gainsaying the importance of the operationally defined party identification variable, it is nonetheless true that our research in this area has not dealt adequately with this matter. For the most part, the abundance of data which have been collected and analyzed over the years in connection with party identification reflect little more than the fact that there is a widespread tendency among respondents in survey settings to be willing to label themselves by reference to party names. To be sure, we have concocted a variety of different theoretical interpretations of this tendency, but we have in no way made an effort to develop operational definitions of party identification which would be adequate to substantiate the theoretical claims made. Instead, we have remained with the initial item content used in The Voter Decides, with only minor modifications of the response categories provided to respondents. It is true that researchers in settings outside North America have experimented with other indicator forms, but these efforts have generally not been carried out in such a fashion as to allow useful methodological evaluations of alternative means of tapping whatever it is that party identification represents in the psychology of party affiliation. The main reasons why this is so are two in number. In the first place, and most importantly, our attempts to measure party identification have in almost no way approached the phenomenon in a fashion that reflects the content and complexity of our theoretical interpretations of it.

Consequently, the operational definition of party identification remains today almost completely independent of the conceptual definitions given to it under different theoretical interpretations. In as much as this is a central problem in the study of party identification, I will discuss it in a more elaborate fashion shortly. The second reason why these attempts to produce alternative operational indicators have been less than fruitful is in part derivative of the first: put simply, they have been too simplistic and crude. In particular, they have not made any attempt to deal even with those aspects of the interview situation which might be regarded as "demand characteristics" and, hence, a possible source of artifactual results (see, for example, the kinds of concerns dealt with in the selections in Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1969). Consequently, we are left with little more than an indication that persons will label themselves with party names if prodded to do so by a questionnaire item which calls for such behavior and provides the pertinent responses in its very content. Indeed, if I am accurate in my assessment here, then it is remarkable that party identification, as it is conventionally measured, has the acknowledgedly strong predictive capacity shown in so many studies.

As I have said, the matter of setting out our operational definition of party identification in a manner which reflects the content and complexity of the conceptual definition we mean it to have is crucial. Here, we need to take note of one further point of considerable importance. It is simply that no concept has any specific, precise meaning apart from the context of the theoretical framework in which it is embedded. In as much as we may adopt different theoretical frameworks in offering alternative interpretations of party identification, the conceptual meaning of the term "party identification" changes in so far as those theoretical frameworks are meaningfully distinct from one another. Thus, if we view party identification within the framework provided by reference group theory, as the principal members of the Michigan SRC group have done, then the concept takes on a different character than it would in Downsian approach or if an attribution theory approach were used. Moreover, each approach offers particular features which should make it possible to "test" the "fit" of that specific way of interpreting party identification phenomena. For example, a standard reference group approach focussed on the normative function (Kelley, in Hyman and Singer, 1968) would predict that a person whose party attachment served

reference group functions would be aware of and could likely cite group norms regarding appropriate behavior expected of persons who identify with a political party in this fashion. Indeed, such a theoretical formulation was put forward very lucidly by the authors of The Voter Decides. Judging from Miller's recent writings (Miller, 1976; Miller and Levitin, 1976, Ch. 2), he still subscribes to that position. However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Johnston, 1975), only a less than fully successful attempt to test such predictions was made in The Voter Decides, and to my knowledge, little further work has been done along such lines in other studies. It should be noted that the simple fact that persons vote consistently with their reported party identification is not a test of this kind of prediction. As an alternative, one might want to emphasize the "comparison function" of reference groups, as defined by Kelley in the same article cited above. If so, we would need to devise ways of obtaining comparative judgments wherein respondents utilize their party identification as a means of evaluating and thereby "locating themselves" perceptually over and against others. Again, to my knowledge, this tack has not been taken up in research on party identifications. And, indeed, it is difficult to see how it could be without broadening our operational definition of party identification to take into account the sense in which it supposedly functions as a "frame of reference" in much broader terms than simply those of self-labelling behavior.

There is an overlap between the reference group perspectives I have just commented on and the kind of neo-Downsian perspective taken by Goldberg (1969) and his former student, Jenson (1971; 1976). Here, group standards, and the rewards or lack thereof of following them, are used to incorporate the party identification notion in a theoretical framework focussed on "rational" choice in voting. Once again, the meaning of the central concept, party identification, is changed somewhat by the change in theoretical viewpoint. However, other kinds of perceptual content are brought into relevance here which yield potential tests of the "fit" of the conception. Such "tests" have not been made, primarily because no data have been collected which would allow such a strategy. Here I must stress that it is perception-based data that are required, although Jenson manages to exploit other kinds of data in ways that offer a partial test of her position (1976).

Yet another theoretical perspective is that offered in The American Voter, which builds an elaborate attitudinally-based model of the character, role, and impact of party identification in terms of the cognitive psychology

underlying the individual voter's conceptualization of his political environment. Once again, the model is far more complex than the capacity of the conventional operational definition to cope with the problem of yielding a means of assessing its "fit". Moreover, as I have previously pointed out (Johnston, 1975), it presumes a knowledge of cognitive processing which it may not be possible to document given our conventional forms of research design. Furthermore, it ascribes a "screening" role to party identification which ignores the wealth of psychological data which indicate that persons already possess a set of "perceptual screening mechanisms" which they use generally in attentional and perceptual processes, quite apart from whether or not they have developed a sense of party identification. In this case, closer attention to the underlying theory of cognitive processing being invoked would yield a different conception of party identification as a psychological construct--and, I might add, one which also differs from those described in connection with previous theoretical frameworks. Nonetheless, in this instance we once again have a framework which should offer particular kinds of predictions about the nature, role, and impact of party identification which could presumably be tested were the conceptual and operational treatments of the variable better coordinated.

Both attribution theory and Bem's self-perception theory offer yet another theoretical perspective which, in the case of these two approaches, merges two lines of study in cognitive social psychology. (Jones, et al., 1971; Bem, 1967). Attribution theory would seemingly predict that persons would tend to explain their behavior (voting for a particular party on a fairly consistent basis) by inferring some kind of disposition (party identification) when there were no external or situational or stimulus-intrinsic causal factors to explain their behavior. Hence, persons who could account for their consistent voting pattern of partisanship by reference to independently established criteria connected with their external environment, or its situational demand characteristics, would not infer an internal dispositional basis for it. Paradoxically, if party identification were a rationalization of one's habitually partisan voting behavior, then such persons should be less likely to report a sense of party identification! Indeed, they might appear as "rational" Independents! (On the basis for these notions, see the Nisbett and Valins selection in Jones, et al., 1971.) To carry the matter further, Bem's self-perception theory would basically portray party identifications as after-the-fact rationalizations for habitual patterns of behavior (voting

consistently for a given party). Several important theoretical and methodological points follow from adopting Bem's viewpoint. First, the direction of the causal relation between readiness to report a party identification and habitually partisan behavior is reversed over and against that asserted in the conventional voting research literature. Second, party identification is seemingly portrayed as a simple belief about one's self which is formed to rationalize one's habitual behavior, thus there is no need to assume that it currently functions as a broader "frame of reference" guiding one's actions. Third, attention is directed toward the possibility that a person's response to the party identification questionnaire item is a demand characteristic of the "psychology" of the interview. That is, a person is asked, on the moment, to report if he ever thinks of himself in party-related terms--sometimes with the "lead-in" indicating that many people do so; in as much as he may not be given to such reflections as a usual pastime, he asks himself "How have I acted in situations calling for a partisan political act?" and responds to the question in a manner consistent with his perceived habitual behavior (see Johnston, 1975, p. 38.).

Each of the theoretical frameworks I have discussed here at some length involve differing conceptualizations of the nature, role, and impact of party identification. They are frameworks focussed on understanding the psychological bases of party identification responses. I think it is very important for participants in the first proposed session to consider the extent to which presumption of such a framework conditions our understanding of party identification responses by shaping our conceptual notion of party identification in particular ways. Hence, I would propose that some part of the discussion at that session be directed toward such matters, possibly in connection with the specific perspectives I have mentioned.

There are several other matters which could be seen pertinent to the first session as well but which seem to be included under the "technical issues" session in the convenors' memorandum. I will mention these here but forestall comment on them until I deal with my suggestions for that session. Among these matters are: the cognitive status of the psychological attachment indicated in the concept, the role of political parties as distal stimuli in forming perceptions and beliefs about parties and one's relation to them, and the question of individual differences among voters with regard to the meaning which their party identification holds for them and the manner in which it functions within their overall psychological response to partisan politics.

The matter of comparative transnational research findings. Many of the concerns that emerge in connection with this topic have their roots in the kinds of issues I have raised in connection with the first topic. I think there are obvious points of continuity extending from the matters I dealt with there to those relevant to this topic. In particular, it may prove useful to discuss the possibility that structural, contextual features in particular political cultures are more conducive to the use of a specific theoretical framework over and against another which proves suitable to some other political culture. Indeed, we may well be facing a situation wherein party identification, conceived both as an independent variable and as a dependent variable, is contextually specific in terms of which theoretical framework proves most suitable to understanding its role in the partisan politics of given nations or cultural settings. This does not mean that its generality as a political phenomenon is limited; we may indeed find that it occurs in a variety of settings as a response to the politics of those places. Since not all of the different theoretical perspectives I have described are necessarily incompatible with one another, we might consider the possibility that they involve a kind of taxonomic nesting which depicts different stages in the development of citizen orientation to party politics as conditioned by the political settings involved and their histories. In any event, I do agree that the kinds of concerns noted in the convenors' memorandum do constitute a set of "pressing tasks" placed before us. In addition, we might also consider problems in this area which are a function of variation in the operational definitions used in different national settings and the degree to which those settings might force such variations on research applications.

The matter of research design considerations. Since the concept of causality is itself analytic, rather than synthetically meaningful, my only suggestion as to how we might improve research designs so as to disentangle cause and effect relations is that we should attempt to design our studies with closer attention to the kinds of causally relevant predictions might derive from the adoption of alternative theoretical frameworks. Since several of these also seem to imply cognition of parties as perceptual stimuli, we need to give more attention to collecting information about those properties of parties and their support bases which might serve as cues in forming images of party norms and the social support which underlies group sanctions for violation of those norms. Moreover, we need to collect data that offer some means of

assessing whether or not parties serve a "comparison function" as reference groups in the formation of a "partisan self-image". Here, the attentional salience of different other groups which might serve the same function in a broader formation of a "self-concept" should be evaluated comparatively with that of parties. In this sense, we need to flesh out and take seriously the elliptical discussion of the "dynamics of mass percepts" presented in The American Voter. And, consequently, we need to plan the design of the series of election studies projected so as to incorporate the collection of more detailed data relevant to these matters.

In my view, the "measurement" aspects of our research design loom very large in such endeavors. We need to consider more sophisticated means of measuring what are obviously complex phenomena which may actually vary in complexity across individuals and social groupings. In this respect, I feel the use of panel designs is almost essential; however, we will not solve our problems simply by the magical device of panel surveys. We need to think about innovative uses of such designs, the suggested idea of including persons aged from 14 to 17 years being one such possibility. (Although I do not really see how this suggestion--lowering the age limit of inclusion--would necessarily help to disentangle the problems indicated in the memorandum.) Another possibility would be to set up some continuing, small-scale "pilot" studies to test out design considerations that may be incorporated into later surveys in the main series of election studies projected. These could be panelled on a quarterly or some similar basis with much smaller sample sizes, yielding more time points for estimation purposes in deciding matters concerned with the response variability of indicators, for example.

As a closing point in this section, I want to add a comment which I included in a similar memorandum regarding the issue voting conference. It is my view that our interests and theoretical concerns in the study of voting behavior have reached a level where they are seriously pressing the limits of conventional survey designs with regard to kinds of data one can or does collect with such designs. I think it is time that we considered making greater use of a design strategy wherein we attempt to incorporate features of experimental design to a greater degree in our survey designs. Use of the features of the different forms of incomplete designs is a case in point, one which I discussed in my other memorandum. In any event, I think this session on research design would benefit from discussing such



matters. Obviously, we would also want to consider how such tactics would affect sampling design considerations, as well.

In as much as many of the points I have raised here could be dealt with better once we have dealt with theoretical and methodological matters to be discussed in the remaining three sessions, I think it would be better to hold the session on research design considerations as the final one in the conference. To my mind, many of the so-called "technical points" more narrowly connected with voting behavior research have design implications that we should want to consider in the research design session; thus, the convenors should consider making this kind of scheduling change.

The matter of more immediately technical issues. As I indicated in closing my discussion of the first topic, there are three "technical" issues which I think we should definitely address. These are foreshadowed in the comments of the convenors' memorandum regarding the fourth session. To these, I would add the matter of the interpretation of the "Independents" category, inclusive of the so-called "leaning Independents" categories; the question of how one deals with multi-party systems, given the conventional unidimensional formulation of party identification used in the U.S. studies; and, the matter of incorporating an "information processing" approach in our attempts to deal with party identification phenomena.

The question of the cognitive status of the psychological attachment involved in party identification is a central one. In particular, there has been a tendency to treat this attachment as primarily affective in character. Converse at one point described party identification as possibly being "pure affect" and Sears treats it and other group-related identifications as being "rather contentless commitments ...." and "based on simple affective conditioning without any transmission of information, ...." (Converse, 1964, p. 240; Sears, 1969, pp. 359, 365). To my knowledge and to that of several psychologists with whom I have consulted over the years, there is no reputable theory or explanation of emotively-based behavior among normal people which postulates the possibility that affect can be directed toward an object without there being some precedent or concurrent cognition of that object. I suggest that, if we do not seem to find the cognitive content associated with party identification responses, it is because we have not made any true attempt to collect data on it. Our measures are so biased toward emphasizing the affective content that it proves almost impossible to disentangle and

describe the informational base upon which that affect relies. It may not be possible to separate affect, cognition, and evaluation in the manner implied by some of the attitude theories upon which we have relied so heavily, at least not in operational terms. Yet, to my recollection, we have never even asked such a question as "What do find distinctive about the Republican Party?", nor have we investigated popular, stereotypical images of the two major parties in any way that treats them as the compound, complexly-organized stimuli they seem obviously to be. We need to give much greater attention to perceptions of the parties and of the kinds of people who support them if we mean to test the "fit" of the differing interpretations I discussed in the first section of this memorandum. Moreover, in as much as studies of social perception and individual judgments indicate quite wide individual differences among people, we need to orient our thinking so as to deal with the problem of individual differences in connection with the nature, role, and impact of party identification phenomena within the psychology of political judgment in partisan situations. All of these matters are intimately related to the initial one: that of assessing what we believe to be the cognitive status of party identification as a psychological phenomenon.

The question of the interpretation of the "Independents" and the "leaning Independents" categories also join in here. We should be able to deal with them so that they are subsumed under the theoretical underpinning we use to understand party identification as it attaches to avowed partisans. I have several ideas on this matter, but space limitations do not allow me to set them out here. The same is true of the point regarding adoption of an information processing approach. It seems that those persons connected with the issue voting and rational choice conference would like to opt for such a theoretical strategy. I made several comments about problems connected with such a choice in my memorandum for their conference; however, in as much as they attempt to move in such a direction, I think we ought to consider doing likewise in our approach to party identification research. At least, we may be able to complement their proposals regarding its operational implementation in terms of the kinds of data to be collected and the methods of doing so. The available theoretical base for the information-processing approach to the study of cognitive processes is very "molecular" in the description it offers of cognitive structure and processing operations, which may make our efforts too laborious given a survey orientation. However, it is my feeling that we may ultimately have to go in this direction, so it should be discussed.

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