PARTY IDENTIFICATION FROM A SYMBOLIC INTERACTION PERSPECTIVE

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A symbolic interaction perspective can greatly increase our understanding of the party identification component of individual political behavior. A respondent's self is conceptualized as a hierarchically-organized set of identities which trigger appropriate behaviors depending upon the salience of a given identity for a particular situation. Party identification is one of many such identies which are more-or-less integrated into the respondent's total self. The acquisition, rentention, and modification of a partisan identity should be viewed as a process similar to that by which other identities are formed, that is, primarily through symbolic interaction with significant social others. Importantly, the symbolic interaction perspective stresses the fluidity of identities--continuous monitoring and adjusting as actors receive feedback from others on how their impression-management efforts are being received--rather than a strict enactment of preconditioned role scripts. The depth of a respondent's commitment to a given identity is contingent upon that identity's place in the organized hierachy of the self. (For a helpful reference on symbolic interaction see Sheldon Stryker, "Developments in 'Two Social Psychologies'", Sociometry 40 (June, 1977): 145-60). In the following pages I list several important aspects of party identification from a symbolic interaction perspective and suggest some way to investigate empirically these aspects.

1. Symbolic content of party identification. The "meaning" of an identity to

respondent derives from an association of a symbol with a variety

of external events. Symbols thus stand for a complex set of

learned associations. As currently measured, party identifica-

tion consisting solely of "Democrat, Independent, Republican"

labels is merely a short-hand summary for a bundle of components

which are complexly and uniquely endowed with meaning by each

respondent (although probably with considerable common content).

We need to determine the concrete elements triggered in a

respondent's mind when s/he states a label.

Examples: Semantic differential techniques are frequently used
to extract the latent meaning dimensions used by respondents
when confronted with a verbal/written symbol. Survey respondents
could be asked to perform a short semantic differential in which
the focal word is the category given in response to the standard
party identification question. If time is available, all three
categories of party identification could be rated in the semantic
differential.

A second operational approach to the symbolic meaning of party
identification is to present selected imagery of parties, asking
respondents to react for example, to descriptions of parties as
"corrupt", "favoring minorities", "war prone", etc. Both of the
suggested measures would help to flesh in the content behind the
global party choice.

2. Multidimensional nature of party identity. The attachment of respondents to the symbols of party identity likely varies along several independent dimensions. Change in party identification is undoubtedly more complex than moving between "strong", "not strong", and "leaning independent" categories now available, which implicitly assumes a unidimensional scale. The classic attitudinal components of cognition, evaluation, and affect provide a start for analysis of the multiple dimensional nature of party identity. For example, a respondent may believe a party to be a highly competent manager of the government but feel little emotional excitement towards the party, while another person may lack any information about the governing activities of a party yet hold a highly negative evaluation of the party.

Examples: For a given party identity chosen by a respondent, a series of items should solicit information about (cognition), beliefs about performance of (evaluation), and emotional responsiveness towards (affect) the various symbolic components of the identity. Time permitting, such responses could be made towards both parties, perhaps using pairwise choices available (e.g., "Which party do you think has more competent candidates?").

Open-ended items could ask respondents to state what makes a "good" and "bad" Republican, Democrat, or Independent, and to evaluate themselves on these criteria. However, this measurement is likely to tap only salient dimensions and obscure the less prominent among the multiple criteria.

3. Interpersonal context of party identity. Symbolic interaction points to the crucial importance of the respondents social milieu in acquisition, rentention, and continual testing of the appropriateness of one's identities. Ideally, we would like independent evidence on the politically-relevant aspects of a respondent's "significant others". On a small scale, such measures might be obtained by asking a subsample of respondents to supply names of significant social others (e.g., co-workers, friends) who could be contacted by mail or phone to supply a small amount of information about their interaction with the respondent, particularly their political identities. Laumann (Bonds of Pluralism. 1973: Wiley) used this technique successfully on respondents' three best friends. An alternative is to collect information about respondents' social networks only from the respondent. Such information may be factually less reliable, but to the extent that behavior depends upon the interpretation of perceived symbolic interaction with significant others, the data may still prove useful (although evaluation of selective perception and distortion must be foregone).

Examples: Respondents should be asked either to nominate their own significant social others or to use a checklist of roles provided by the interviewer. For each other chosen, (or a set number of choices) respondents would report information about that person, emphasizing affectual ties and interactions of a political nature (e.g., frequency and content of political discussions, joint political activity, giving of and trustworthiness of political information, others' party affiliations).

4. Relationship to other relevant identities. The symbolic interaction perspective points to the importance of each identity's position in the organized hierarchy of the self. Party identity cannot be studied as though it were compartmentalized from other identities. The notoriously low salience of politics for most Americans indicates greater personal commitment to alternative identities. But we need to know more about how these alternative identities both suppress and reinforce the political identity, and how the structural relationships among the self's various identities might evolve over time. The classic concepts of "role strain" and "role conflict" (and their counterpart, "role facilitation") may be less useful since the party identity has few overt behavioral concomitants. But to the extent that selection of a party preference reflects a rational choice, knowing how the interests respondents have in other identities are influenced by political considerations will help to draw connections between the various identities people carry around with them.

Example: Respondents could be quizzed about the various nonpolitical identities they hold at their present stage in the life cycle (possibly in conjunction with many of the background items). Salience of identities could be determined by asking their importance or possibly by more complicated procedures tapping frequency of identity enactment. The relationship of the various designated identities to the party identity could be investigated by asking whether holding a given party preference makes a difference in how effectively respondent can enact the former (e.g., "How inportant (or difficult) it is in your job to be a (Democrat/Republican/Independent)?" "How important in your church?" etc.).

5. Situational variation in commitment to an identity. Enactment of an identity varies considerably over time as a function of commitment to the identity and situational conditions which permit or require appropriate behavioral expression. From all we know about most Americans' political life, opportunity (or necessity) to enact the party identity is very infrequent for all but a minority. Still, we need to know about individual variation in exposure to and response to conditions likely to trigger various dimensions of the party identity, either to reinforce the identity or to require modifications. Behavioral feedback onto identities is an important feature of the symbolic interaction perspective; identities can result from behavior as well as cause behavior. Interpersonal contexts (third point above) presumably help call forth identities, but appropriate cues can also come from nonsignificant others, such as party leaders and mass media. The current surveys already tap considerable information about contracts with political organizations and media, but additional data could be collected on how such inputs affect each of the dimensions of the party identity. For example, cognitive components of the party identity may be stimulated more by media messages, while arousal of affective components are primarily a function of interpersonal interaction.

Examples: Stress the respondents' own interpretation of his/her political actions (voting, campaigning, spectatoring) by asking whether s/he sees these acts as contributing to being a "good" Democrat/Independent/Republican, and if so, how?

Variation in salience of the political identity and behavioral enactment sequences can better be studied with a multi-wave panel spanning the campaigining period from primaries to general election.

This brief synopsis of a symbolic interaction approach to party identifi-
cation suggests a number of concrete steps which can be taken to incorporate
insights from the paradigm into the national election studies. The entire agen-
da suggested above (as well as other components or alternative operationaliza-
tions which are not mentioned) need not be implemented to derive some of the
advantages latent in the perspective. Hopefully, this memo will contribute
both to the theoretical refinement of the party identification concept and to
some of the technical issues involved in its operationalization.