

Memorandum for Party Identification Conference

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We are currently engaged in research on the comparability of party identification cross-nationally and hope to have a draft of a paper by the time of the conference. The strategy we have adopted in studying the comparability of party identification is to examine which of the empirical generalizations about party identification in the United States hold in other polities. This of course requires us to first identify the American generalizations and to assess how well they are supported by the available evidence. Two sets of generalizations are identified, the first dealing with internal properties of party identification itself such as the timing of its development, the nature of the transmission process across generations, and its stability and intensification over time. The other set of generalizations might be labeled external because they focus on how party identification relates to other features of the political environment. The foremost generalization here refers to the functions of party identification as a perceptual screen and an organizing framework through which citizens might evaluate and impose order on the elements of politics. In this category would fall the relationship between party identification and vote choice as well as affect for various partisan-related objects such as candidates, party-affiliated groups, and the like.

Survey data sets from eight countries including panel studies from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands are examined. The research proceeds along two lines--a conceptual analysis of what is entailed in the generalization and an empirical analysis. For example, in discussing

the stability of party identification, attention is first given to the conceptualization of stability. Does it include both direction and strength of partisanship? What is the appropriate time frame for assessing stability?

The empirical analysis of stability considers differences in national settings such as the number of party choices and the distinctiveness of the alternatives as possible sources of differing levels of stability.

We hope that our comparative analysis will make a useful contribution to the conference. The agenda laid out in your memo is excellent. Our only modification would be to view the conceptualization, operationalization, and research design modification themes as the core topics with the comparative thrust cutting across and informing the core themes. We have a few specific responses to aspects of your memo.

At the conceptual level, the memo raises some basic questions that must be addressed. To these we would add a more explicit concern with what a party attachment actually signifies. That is, does a Democratic affiliation represent a positive statement about the Democratic party, a rejection of the Republican party, some combination, or what? Is intensity of partisanship a function of negative affect toward the other party? Likewise, more attention must be given to the object of party loyalty; we should know more about what people have in mind when they claim to be a partisan. Here questions about multiple levels of government, the party as embodied in governmental institutions, and the party as embodied in its leaders become relevant.

With respect to research design, if resources permit an extended panel that includes the convention and pre-convention period, all well and good. But more features can be built into the existing pre- and post-election design that would enable one to get some handle on questions of causality, the impact of measurement operations, and the like. For example, one might ask about the impact of measuring partisanship by means of a question that actually cues

respondents to think in terms of Democrat, Independent, and Republican. One can imagine testing alternate question wordings on split samples or pre-post. With respect to causality, a more ambitious effort might be made to conduct the interviews such that time of interview becomes a meaningful variable and the pre-election interviews treatable as a series of cross-sectional surveys.

It certainly makes sense to think of alternate measures for party identification. At the same time, attention should be given to building into our surveys the indicators required to test various explanations about partisan-related phenomena. For example, the meaning of "independent" is central as your memo suggests; does it reflect a rejection of both parties or simply a non-political stance. It would be useful to have direct measures in the survey to address this. Likewise, what does independent leaner mean? To answer this question, we must first have some tentative explanations in mind. Then we might build into the survey some measures that address the various explanations. For example, one possible explanation for independent leaners (who behaviorally seem closer to strong partisans) might refer to social desirability phenomena. Perhaps leaners (who in the aggregate are of higher education) might be more sensitive to the anti-party cues in the environment so that in response to a question about their party preference, they resist admitting to a party loyalty in response to the first part of our two part question. To test this notion, it would be necessary to build into the survey instrument some measures of social desirability effects. The general point is that in order to test many of the explanations for various puzzles and problems associated with party identification, it will be necessary to engage in extensive anticipatory thinking so that the survey instrument constructed includes the needed measures.