Reference Group Influence on Candidate Preference

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October, 1986

Abstract

This paper illustrates reference group influence on candidate preference during the 1976 election. From a review of two early studies of reference group influence on political behavior and two different theoretical approaches for understanding that influence, two relations are identified as cruical: (1) that of the individual to the group, and (2) that of the group to politics. The 1976 CPS/NES survey is the only one which includes sufficient items to measure both of these relationships. A method for balancing conflicting pressures from different reference groups is devised, and when this measure is included in a fully specified model of candidate preference in 1976, it adds 10% to the explained variance after all other variables are in the equation. The results are even more impressive when the 1972-74-76 panel study is employed and most predictor variables, including group identifications, are measured in 1972 or 1974. Group identifications have the most important long-term or distant influence on candidate preference in this regression, now explaining almost 16% of the variance after all other variables have been entered into the equation.

Reference Group Influence on Candidate Preference

Historically one of the most important concepts in sociology and social psychology has been the idea of "reference groups." The concept became so popular that it almost turned into "a magic term to explain anything and everything under the sun" (Sherif, 1967, p. 232). It has of course also been employed (although not nearly so widely) in political science research, most notably in the study of voting behavior (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) and in the study of interest groups (Fireman & Gamson, 1979; Moe, 1980; Olson, 1971; Truman, 1971; Wilson, 1973). Perhaps because the concept was so widely and indiscriminantly applied, it almost disappeared from the study of voting behavior after the mid 1960s. For example, *The Changing American Voter* (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976) barely deals with groups at all, and does not even include the term in its index. However, spurred by new theoretical developments in social psychology and a careful refinement of the meaning and operationalization of important terms, more recently a few brave souls have attempted to reintroduce the group concept to voting behavior research (Conover, 1984, 1985; Conover & Feldman, 1983; Gurin, Gurin, & Miller, 1980; Lau, 1983; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; Miller, Simmons, & Hildreth, 1986). This paper is aimed at furthering this reintroduction. I will try to show how important "group identification" is in determining candidate preference. We ignore the concept at the cost of a good deal of explanation. Before doing that, however, some important background material must be reviewed.

The Reference Group Concept in Political Science

Since at least the time of the New Deal coalition, certain groups in society--labor, blacks, Jews, Catholics--have voted predominantly Democratic while other groups in society--businessmen, Protestants, suburbanites--have voted predominantly Republican (see Campbell, 1979). Such mean differences in group voting behavior do not necessarily reflect reference group influence, of course. People in the various social groups often have similar social backgrounds which could lead them to vote Democratic or Republican for reasons quite apart from their group memberships. And this is the first important point that must be emphasized: *Any study of group-related influence must attempt to measure the individual's attachment to the*

group; it cannot be assumed. Unfortunately, much early political research utilizing the group concept falls into the "demographics only" category. That is, no attempt was made to examine the individual's attachment to the group. This oversight is not committed by the two classic approaches to the study of voting behavior, however, each of which has made important contributions to our understanding of group-related political influence.

The Columbia School

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and their colleagues (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944) analyze the process by which both class and religion (the two strongest aspects of their "Index of Political Predisposition") influenced voting. First they try to show that each *group* influenced political behavior beyond the similar background characteristics of its members by illustrating that those members who feel close to their group (subjectively identify with it, in terms of class; choose their religious group as "among the most import to me" for Catholics) exhibit the group's political persuasion most strongly. That is, Catholics who felt close to their religious group had a greater tendency to vote Democratic (66%) than those who did not feel close to Catholics (55%; Berelson et al., 1954). This is one way to operationalize the individual's attachment to a group.

Then the authors speculate about how these group attachments are translated into partisan predispositions. For class, the authors rely on a self-interest explanation. Given the policies of the two major parties, it is "reasonable" for working class individuals to vote Democratic and the middle class to vote Republican. Note that this approach assumes that all group members are treated as members of this group, and that they all think in the same "reasonable" way.

But what about Catholics? There was no logical connection between Catholicism and either party in 1948. There may have been a connection in the past, but there no longer was. How, then, could one explain the strong tendency for Catholics to vote Democratic? Berelson et al. suggest that two important conditions are necessary:

1. First, there has to be some economic, physical, or social division in society such that "people of unlike characteristics are affected in different ways by a single political policy" (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 74). This issue need not be contemporaneous, but it must discriminate between people on both sides of some economic, physical, or social division. Presumably the overt anti-Catholicism of the Know Nothing wing of the early Republican party drove most Catholic immigrants into the Democratic fold in the mid 19th century.

2. The second necessary condition is some mechanism for the transmission of political differences to succeeding generations (assuming the discrimination does not persist). Here small face-to-face group interaction (typically within families)

> becomes crucial to the analysis, because such groups are the mechanism for the transmission. Organized, long-lasting group-oriented lobbies or political action committees (in today's parlance) would serve the same function as families for insuring the transmission of earlier grievances to new generations. A further requirement is that people spend more time interacting with fellow group members than with other (nongroup) people, else the group's message will be too weak.

Thus the Columbia school's view of reference group influence is based on simple self-interest, when it is currently relevant, and the social transmission of these past interests across generations by small face-to-face groups. This view is consistent with the "social cohesion" model of group influence that will be presented below.

The Michigan Approach

Perhaps the best discussion of reference groups and politics comes, as is often the case, from *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). The authors examine the political influence of four important groups: Catholics, Jews, labor unions, and blacks. Like their Columbia predecessors, Campbell et al. distinguish between *group* influence and non-group factors which tend to be distinct from those encountered by non-members. They do this in two ways. First, they carefully construct control groups matched on a variety of background characteristics to show the distinctiveness of a group's voting behavior attributable strictly to membership in the group. Second, they devise a measure of group identification and show that closely-identified members of a group vote more Democratic then non-identified (i.e., objective) members of the group.[1]

The American Voter goes on to examine another relationship that is crucial in understanding group influence on political behavior (in addition to the relationship of the individual to the group): the relationship of the group to the world of politics. The direction and clarity and very existence of this relationship is too often assumed (as it is by Lazarsfeld and Berelson) but, as with the relationship of the individual to the group, these assumptions will not be true for many group members. Quite simply, *there is no reason for group identification to be reflected in political behavior unless there is some perceived connection between the group and politics.*

Campbell et al. (1960) hypothesize that the greater the "proximity" between the group and

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[1]Their measure of identification comes from responses to two questions: "Would you say you feel pretty close to (e.g., Negroes) in general or that you don't feel much closer to them than you do to other kinds of people?" and "How much interest would you say you have in how (e.g., labor unions) as a whole or getting along in this country?" These same two questions were asked of objective members of each of the four groups under consideration.

the world of politics (and the more this proximity is perceived by its members), the greater the political influence of the group.

1. First, a group's relationship to politics is occasionally quite direct, as when a heated political issue of the day explicitly involves the interests of a group, or when a group member is actually running for office. The latter rarely happens on the presidential level for the non-mainstream groups under consideration here (but see Converse, Campbell, Miller, & Stokes, 1961, for an analysis of the Catholic vote in 1960), but members of these groups do frequently run for lower offices.[2]

2. A second translation of proximity is the clarity of transmission of group norms. Some organized groups will be quite specific in the statement of political preferences and enthusiastic in urging members to act on them. Other groups may not even mention politics at all, or have no media for communicating group political norms. For example, among highly identified union members, almost twice as many (81%) voted for the Democratic candidate when the union's recommendations were quite explicit (in the monthly journals sent to all union members) than when they were very unclear (43%). Only a slight difference occurred for members not identified with their group.

Hence two important relationships have been identified, that of the individual to to group, and that of the group to politics. There has been a great deal of theoretical work concerning the first relationship -- or the idea of "group identification" -- which will be reviewed below. Such is not the case with the second relationship, however, and little more can be said about it. The importance of *both* relationships can only be emphasized again here; later I will demonstrate this importance empirically.

Conceptualizing "Group Identification"

There are two different meanings of "group," reflected in two fairly distinct bodies of research. One definition of group is a "collection of individuals who have relations to one another that make them interdependent to some significant degree" (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). In general, such groups exist over time, and they have some function or purpose for meeting. The crucial aspect of this definition of group is that the members of such groups interact with

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[2]Although the numbers are small, Campbell et al. (1960) show that in races involving a Catholic and non-Catholic, 86% of those Catholics identified with their group, compared to 61% of those not identified with their group, voted for the Catholic candidate.

each other face-to-face as part of being in the group. A family, friends who get together to play bridge every Friday night, the people who make policy for a company or branch of government, are all groups in this first sense of the word.

This definition is what Lewin (1939, 1951) meant by "group," and it has guided most of the classic research in social psychology on groups and group dynamics. This has been called "social cohesion" model of group behavior because the differential cohesiveness of groups was one of the primary variables explored. But there is a second common meaning for "group" which is equally important and which is guiding the more recent work on groups within psychology. This second meaning of group is basically that of a category. Dropped from this second definition is any requirement for face-to-face interaction for some common purpose. The only requirement is that two or more people "share a common definition of themselves or...perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Turner, 1982, p. 15). Common demographic groupings -- blacks, females, the unemployed, the elderly -- are good examples. One could call this the "social identification" model of group behavior (Tajfel, 1972, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is, I believe, a more cogent perspective on reference groups, particularly as they apply to political behavior. Both of these two theories will be discussed in turn.

The Social Cohesion Model of Reference Groups

The very basis of sociology and social psychology is the fact that individuals are influenced by the "actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Allport, 1969, p. 3). On the other hand, individuals are not just a reflection of the people with whom they have come into contact or the groups they are a member of. In fact, people will often take stands or act in a manner quite contrary to the interests or norms of one of their own groups. It was to explain such apparent contradictions in individual behavior that the term "reference group" was introduced. A *"reference group"* is a group in society which an individual "feels close to," "identifies with," and takes as a "frame of reference" for self-definition (Hyman, 1942; Merton, 1949; Newcomb, 1943; Shibutani, 1955). Futhermore, a person may choose a non-membership group as a reference group.[3] Hyman and Singer (1968) have called this last insight the "most significant

[3]A membership group is "one in which a person is recognized by others as belonging" (Newcomb, 1952). Membership groups are nonvolitional in that a person does not choose to belong to a membership group. Membership in such groups is often assigned simply by virtue of birth.

contribution of reference group theory" (p. 7). Although it would seem that one is much more likely to choose a membership group rather than a non-membership group for a reference group, the point is that this need not always be the case. A reference group is a *psychological* or *subjective* identification, *not* an objective categorization.

To the extent that individuals are in multiple membership groups, and to the extent those groups have contradictory norms, then the individuals must necessarily act in accordance with the norms of some groups and act contrary to the norms of other groups. Such "cross pressure" situations are stressful, frequently resulting in psychological or physical withdrawal (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1944). But there is no conflict if the individual only "identifies with" or takes as a referent just one of the relevant membership groups. A person is much more likely to follow the norms of reference groups than of membership groups.

Reference groups serve two important functions: they provide *outcomes* for people, and they provide *information* for people (Festinger, 1954; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kelley, 1952; Thibaut & Strickland, 1956). Groups provide people with positive (and negative) reinforcement -- with friendship, with help, with prestige, with social support, and sometimes with very objective reinforcement like money or rights. To the extent people are motivated to belong to a group, to receive the reinforcements which come from group membership, they will be motivated to conform to the norms of that group in order to maintain (or establish) group membership. Kelley (1952) calls this the *normative function* of reference groups, because people model their beliefs and behaviors after those of the group.

The second function of reference groups is to provide information about the level of one's abilities or the correctness of one's beliefs. Festinger's theory of social comparison (1954) is the most explicit statement of this *comparison function* of reference groups. Starting with the assumption that humans have a basic drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, Festinger goes on to posit and show that when objective, non-social criteria are unavailable for comparison, people will compare their opinions and abilities to those of other people in their reference groups.

What does this all mean? That is, what are the *consequences* of reference group identification? The primary consequence is adoption and maintenance of the attitudinal and behavioral norms of the group, as reinforced by other group members.

The Social Identification Model

The social identification model takes a much more cognitive perspective on reference

groups. It begins with the idea that individuals structure their perceptions of the world in terms of categories. Categorization seems to be an almost innate cognitive ability, and tendency, in humans. Categorizing simplifies and structures a tremendously complex information environment. Once a stimuli has been identified as a member of a general category, the particulars of this specific stimuli can be ignored. The stimuli will be assumed to possess all the characteristics of the category of which it is a member (see Anderson, 1980; Cantor & Mischel, 1977; Taylor, 1981; Taylor & Crocker, 1981). This tendency to categorize becomes important for reference groups through the realization that groups can influence individuals even though the individuals never interact with other members of the group. Merely the perception that one is part of a group (and that other people are *not* part of the group) is sufficient for people to act differentially toward ingroup and outgroup members (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Rabbie & Horwitz, 1969; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Turner, 1975; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979).

The importance of reference groups is that they make up part of an individual's self-concept. Tajfel views self-concept as being made up of two subsystems, personal identity and social identity. Personal identity includes perceptions of one's body, one's competencies, personal tastes, etc. Social identity, which is of more concern to us here, involves the individual's "knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Given this definition, social identity is the "cognitive mechanism which makes group behavior possible" (Turner, 1982, p. 21).

What functions does social identification (through categorization) serve? First, it provides order in the world. Categorizing things in the social world as "me," and "not me," or "us" and "not us" (to put it in a group framework) simplifies reality, thereby simplifying cognitive processing and attentional requirements. If something is "not me" or "not us," it usually can be safely ignored. One need not form elaborate impressions of "not me" things.

The second function which social identification performs is providing a positive self-image. Tajfel assumes that people are motivated to have such a positive self image. Hence they will identify with groups that give them satisfaction, regardless of whether they actually interact face-to-face with any other members of that group.[4]

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[4]Tajfel is too restrictive in his discussion here, for as Levine and Moreland (1983) note, there are motives other than self-enhancement which could lead an individual to identify with a group. For example, people may identify with a group in order to distinguish themselves from disliked others, irrespective of whether they like the distinguishing group.

What happens when one's social identity is prominent? According to Tajfel, there is a tendency to maximize *inter*group differences and to minimize *intra*group difference. This comes from responding to other people as group members, as homogeneous representatives of their group. Research has shown that categorization of others (irrespective of one's own group membership) makes within-category differentiation more difficult than between-category discrimination (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978; Wilder, 1978).

These two processes--high intergroup discrimination and assumed intragroup similarity--are the bases of prejudice (see Hamilton, 1979, for a more complete discussion). But equally important from this point of view, *one "assigns" the prototypic beliefs and behaviors of one's own group to oneself*, without any obvious pressure from others to adopt those beliefs and behaviors (Charters & Newcomb, 1952; Doise, 1969; Shomer & Centers, 1970). This is how identification with large social category groups can result in a greater uniformity of behavior among group members. Notice that no tangible rewards and punishments are invoked, as with Kelley's normative reference groups. One simply "takes on" the normative beliefs and behaviors of a reference group as part of one's social identity, just as one ascribes those same beliefs and behaviors to other members of one's own group (thereby "producing" similarity, which also increases liking; Byrne, 1971) and ascribes other beliefs and behaviors uniformly to outgroup members.

Thus social identities (or reference groups) serve a psychological function for individuals, for they can simplify reality and help define one's self concept. Groups are a cognitive heuristic for dealing with an information environment which is hopelessly complex.

Summary

Two very different approaches to reference group influence have been reviewed. The first is more applicable to small face-to-face groups, the second to large social categories more descriptive of "groups" in politics. I will not pit these two models against each other, for they are chiefly applicable to different types of groups, and they rarely make contradictory predictions. I feel more comfortable with the social identification approach, however, and will rely on it in what is to follow, but readers more familiar with the social cohesion literature can substitute that with little loss in meaning.

Since the 1972 election the CPS/NES surveys have asked a series of questions trying to measure respondent's group identifications. These questions can be used to operationalize the first crucial relationship, that of the individual to a series of different groups. In 1976 (but

unfortunately, not after) the survey also included a series of questions which allow one to operationalize the second crucial relationship, that of each group to politics. In other election years I will try to make do without this second series of questions, but (as will be seen) without great success.

Method

As the literature review indicated, any study of group influence in voting behavior must take two relationships into consideration: (1) the association of the individual to the group, and (2) the association of the group to politics. The term "group identification" captures the first relationship. We must realize, however, that individuals can (and probably will) identify with more that one group, and further that people need not be objective members of a group to identify with it. From Tajfel's point of view, the sum of an individual's group identifications make up the person's social identification.

Group identification is measured in the CPS/NES surveys by a question asking respondents which of a series of groups they feel "close to." In 1972 and 1976 these groups included businessmen, liberals, southerners, poor people, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, young people, whites, blacks, conservatives, women, middle class people, workingmen, farmers, and older people. If respondents chose more than one group from the list they were asked to look at the list again and pick the one group they felt "closest too." If respondents initially said they felt "close" to only one group, that one group was counted as the "closest" group. If respondents did not say they felt close to any group on the list, they were asked if there was any group they felt closer to than those on the list. In 1972 only 16 (of 2191) respondents fell into this category (121 chose no group on the list), which indicates the comprehensiveness of the list of groups offered to respondents.[5]

Multiple group identifications complicate the second important relationship, that of the group to politics. Consider a black business executive making a comfortable living. She may feel that both blacks and women are better served by the Democratice party (and the typical Democratic candidate), but that businessmen and middle class people are better served by the Republican party and Republican candidates. The sum of a person's group identifications and the relationships of all of those groups to politics must be considered before the *direction* and

[5]In both 1972 and 1976 these group identification items were asked in the post-election interview.

strength of any political response can be predicted.

In 1976 (in the pre-election survey) respondents were presented with this same list of 16 groups and asked, first, whether any of these groups would be "better off" with Carter as president rather than with Ford, and then whether these same groups would be better off with Ford as president rather than Carter. By looking at these questions one can calculate (for each of these 16 groups) whether a respondent thinks that group would be better off with Carter, with Ford, or not particularly better off with either candidate.[6]

For the 1976 study these two sets of variables were combined to make a summary measure of group-related influence on the vote. This summary measure was initialized at 0 and increased 1 for every group the respondent felt close to that would be better off with Ford as president, and decreased 1 for every group the respondent felt close to that would be better off with Carter as president. The "closest" group was counted three times (that is, +3 or -3 if that group was perceived to be better off with Ford or Carter as president) to give that single most important group more weight in the calculation of this summary measure.[7] Now one could argue that the "group better off" questions are too evaluative, that they will obviously correlate with the vote because Ford supporters will say most of the groups would be better off with Ford as president, and Carter supporters will say most of the groups would be better off with their candidate as president, quite apart from any attachment to the group. In order to examine this possibility, I also calculated a similar summary variable for groups respondents were objectively a member of but which they did not feel close to (see the Appendix for details of how "objective" group membership was defined). If this second summary variable predicts as well or better than the first (and for most respondents there are more groups not identified with than identified with, which should give this second variable more variance), then the association of the individual to the group is irrelevant, and my measure of the association of the group to politics is not getting at what I want.

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[6]The exact wording of the question was "While all candidates are concerned about the country as a whole, people often feel that a particular candidate is better for some groups than for others. Here is a list of some groups that we find in American society. Read over the list and tell me which groups would be better off with Carter (Ford) as president rather than with Ford (Carter)." A few respondents said that the same group would be better off with both candidates; these logical impossibilities were also placed in the "neither" category.

[7]A weight of 3, rather than 2 or 4 or anything else, is fairly arbitrary. I chose 3 because the average number of groups respondents identified with was between 3 and 4. This finding led me to select a weight of 3 for the closest group, which made a lot of sense at one point although for the life of me I can no longer remember the logic behind my reasoning. A weight of 2 produces essentially the same results; I have not tried other weights.

What can be done for election years (i.e., all but 1976) in which the group better off items were not asked? In order to run a few plays before we give up and punt, I assumed Divine wisdom and universally determined that businessmen, conservatives, middle class people, and southerners were better off with Nixon and Republicans rather than McGovern and Democrats as president in 1972, while blacks, women, liberals, poor people, farmers, young people, and older people were all better off with McGovern rather than Nixon as president. This left Catholics, Jews, Protestants, whites, and workingmen all unassigned, because I could not think of any compelling reason why any of these groups should be better off with either of the two candidates in 1972 as president. Notice that my classification is not based simply on levels of support that group members typically give to Democrats or Republicans (or else Jews certainly would have been in the McGovern group), but rather on my (biased, I'm sure) perceptions of some sort of reality, based more on the constituencies that the candidates were trying to attract. In any case I used my classification in place of the group better off items, and again created two variables, one based on the groups respondents felt close to, the other based on groups respondents were objective members of but did not feel close to.

The major question I want to ask is whether the group identifications examined in the CPS/NES surveys are related to presidential vote. Such a question can only be answered in the context of a fully specified voting model. Hence I constructed a model in which candidate preference is a function of six demographic indicators (sex, race, age, education, income, and region), three or four economic indicators (unemployment in the family, subjective evaluations of one's personal financial situation now relative to a year ago, evaluations of business conditions now relative to a year ago,[8] and in 1976 the impact of the recent recession), party identification (with the categories weak partisans and independent leaners collapsed together), ideology (liberal-conservative self placement), and issue distances to be candidates (absolute difference between self-placement and candidate-placement on a variety of issues). The dependent variable is a difference between the feeling thermometer evaluations of the two major candidates, with a preference for the Republican candidate scored high. All respondents who answered the relevant items were included in the analyses, but the results are virtually identical if only voters are included. I ran each regression four times, once without the two summary measures of group influence, then adding each of them alone, and finally with both of them in

[8]In 1972 these last two questions were only asked of a random half of the respondents. I assigned the remaining respondents the mean scores for these two variables.

the equation. A comparison of the explained variance (R^2) from these various regressions is a good indicator of how important the two group measures are in the prediction of candidate preference.

Results

The results of these analyses are shown in the first two columns of Table 1, for 1972 and 1976, respectively. For simplicity I only report the results of one regression from each year, that including the group influence for those who identify with the group only. Standardized beta weights are shown in the table. The results are much as expected. Party identification, issue distances, and (in 1972 only) ideology have very strong effects; the demographics and economic variables have scattered weak effects, but (when significant) always in the expected direction.

But look at the group variables. In 1972, when I "assigned" a better off classification to all group members, the group variable adds little to the other predictors in the equation, $t = 1.41, p < .16$. Either my assignments were less that Divinely inspired, or any procedure that assumes that all people perceive the *same* relationships between their groups and politics is simply not justified.

The story in 1976 is very different, however. When the perceived relationship of the group to politics was actually gathered from the respondents themselves -- and hence differences in perceptions of how a group is associated with politics were allowed -- this group variable is one of the most important predictors of candidate preference in the equation, $t = 13.74, p < .0001$.

Insert Table 1 about here

To specifiy these models in as conservative a way as possible, I also utilized the 1972-74-76 panel data to predict candidate preference in 1976 using independent variables from 1972 and 1974 whenever possible. So sex, race, age, education, income, region, unempolyment, party identification, and ideology were all measured in 1972; questions about personal financial well-being and business conditions, and approval of Ford's pardon of Nixon, all came from the 1974 survey. Reference group influence and issue distances were calculated as before, using the group better off items and perceptions of the candidates' stands on the issues from the 1976 survey (the only time they were available), but using the respondent's group identifications from 1972 and own issue positions in 1972 to actually create these variables. Of the various

predictors only the impact of the recent recession came exclusively from the 1976 survey.

The results of this analysis are shown in the third column of Table 1. These data are even more dramatic than when all data came from 1976. Now reference group influence is by far the strongest predictor in the equation, $t = 16.03, p < .0001$.

The best way to illustrate the importance of reference group influence is not to report the significance of that individual variable in the regressions but to show how much variance that variable explains beyond the other predictors in the equations. Furthermore, the reference group variable has not been compared to the "non-reference group" influence variable, the one calculated using the group better off items for groups respondents do not identify with. The relevant data are shown in Table 2. Neither group variable contributes much in 1972, as we would expect given previous results. But the reference group variable alone contributes almost 10% of explained variance after all the other variables are in the equation (see row 5 of Table 2). This rises to almost 16% when the independent varibles come from 1972 and 1974. Now the non-reference group variable also contributes substanially to explained variance when it alone is added to the basic regression (row 6 of Table 2). However, this is mostly due to shared variance with the reference group variable. This can be seen in the last two rows of Table 2. The reference group variable explains from 4 - 6.6% of variance in candidate preference in 1976 over all other variables including the non-reference group variable (row 7). This increment is both statistically and substantively significant. But the non-reference variable explains just over 1% of variance beyond all the other variables. That is, the reference group variable explains 3 - 4 times more *unique* variance than does the non-reference group variable. So clearly the group effect found in Table 1 is chiefly a *reference group* effect.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

This paper has illustrated in a simple but dramatic way the importance of reference group influence for candidate preference. In fully specified models the reference group effect adds 10 - 15% to the explained variance. The obviously more precise procedure of allowing respondents to tell us which candidate they think will help a group more is clearly crucial, for when this procedure was used (in 1976) the group effect was strong, but when I was forced into assuming

that all respondents held the same beliefs about which candidate would help a group more (and further, that those beliefs agreed with mine), as was the case in 1972, the group effect was trivial. But it was not thinking that just *any* group would be better off with one candidate or another that was important; it was reference groups, groups respondents felt close to or identified with, that primarily carried the group effect.

The method developed here for operationalizing reference group influence is useful not only because it capitalizes on knowledge of respondents' perceptions of what groups will be helped by which candidate, but also because it accounts for multiple group identifications and the conflicting pressures those multiple identifications might provide. Recall our black business executive who was pushed in one direction by her occupation and socioieconomic class, and in the opposite direction by her race and gender. The method developed here explicity models these cross pressures by taking the algebraic sum of the conflicting influence of all groups (or at least most groups) that respondents feel close to. Hence it is important to inquire about a fairly comprehensive list of groups, in order to account for the influence from all relevant groups. Moreover, the procedure developed here models the differential importance of the various group identifications, at least in that influence from the "closest" or most important group is given more weight than the other groups.

Several theoretical points about the different approaches to reference group influence could also be noted. Of foremost importance is the social identification approach to reference group influence. The contributions of Tajfel and others to this approach have been outlined above, and appropriate references have been provided for anyone wishing to explore the topic more deeply. The most important thing about this approach is that it views group identifications as a largely *symbolic* matter. The influence of small groups whose members are in close face-to-face contact with each other must be much more direct, almost material in nature, compared to the influence of defining one's social identity in terms of the large social categories (or groups) of people most important to politics. Although I would not want to push the distinction too far, the Lewinian small face-to-face group tradition views group influence as more externally (group) controlled, while the social identification approach views the process as a much more internal, subjective one. This approach is consistent with the view that politics for the general public is largely a symbolic matter (e.g., Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980), a view which to me is immanently more sensible than any rational, economic approach to political behavior. The social identification approach places reference group influence firmly in the symbolic tradition.

Further, social identification theory is much better able to explain the influence of group images that are transmitted via the mass media, as is most political information these days. The sources of such images and how they are most successfully transmitted, is an important topic for future research.

Appendix A

This Appendix will report in more detail the operationalization of objective membership in the various groups studied in this paper. Wherever possible I will refer to variable numbers and value codes from the *CPS 1972 American National Election Study* codebooks (Miller, Miller, Brody, Dennis, Kovenock, & Shanks, 1975). The 1976 data were operationalized in exactly the same way, although of course the variable numbers (and occasionally the values) are different.

Objective group membership was defined as follows:

- Businessmen: Employed or retired male with one of the following occupations (v309): accountants (101) public relations (157), manager, official or proprieter (201-299), and salesman (350-390).
- Workingmen: Employed, temporarily laid off, or retired males with any of the following jobs (v309): craftsmen, foremen, or kindred workers (401-473); operatives and kindred workers (501-560); private household workers (650-658), service workers (660-681); laborers (710-730).
- Farmers: Working people who were farmers of farm managers (values 810 - 840 on v309).
- Poor: People with family incomes less than $6,000 (v420).
- Middle Class People: People with family incomes (v420) between $9,000 and $25,000.
- Women: All women (v424).
- Whites: whites (v425).
- Blacks: blacks (v425).
- Young: people age 29 or less (v294).
- Old: people age 61 or older (v294).
- Southerners: people born or raised in the South (v4, v416).
- Catholics, Jews, Protestants: Self proclaimed religious preference (v422).
- Liberals: People who fell in the liberal third of a scale computed by averaging together respondents' positions on 14 different political issues (v172, v178, v184, v190, v196, v202, v208, v214, v232, v238, v621, v629, v670, v678).
- Conservatives: People who fell in the conservative third of that same scale.

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TABLE 1

Reference Group Influence and Candidate Preference in 1972 and 1976

	1972	1976	1976, with IVs from 72 & 74
Sex (Female)	-.027	.035*	.027
Race (Nonwhite)	-.054**	.030	-.000
Age	.012	.001	.048
Education	-.013	.037*	.095***
Income	.021	.023	.038
Region (South)	.077***	.001	.065**
Unemployment	-.021	.000	-.026
Recession Impact	-	-.039*	-.016
Personal Financial Situation (Worse high)	-.034*	-.014	-.019
Business Conditions (worse)	-.015	-.045**	-.040
Disapprove Nixon Pardon	-	-	-.109***
Party Identification (Republican)	.266***	.242***	.189***
Ideology (Conservative)	.124***	.014	.048
Issue Distances (Closer to Republican)	.514***	.373***	.100***
Reference Group Influence	.026	.299***	.474***
R^2	.637	.628	.520
n	1377	1362	800

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Note: Table entries and standardized regression weights.

TABLE 2

Explained Variance Due to Group Variables

R^2 from Equations with:		1972	1976	1976 (IVs from 72 & 74)
Equation 1:	No Group Variables	.636	.530	.362
Equation 2:	Plus Reference Group Variable	.637	.628	.520
Equation 3:	Plus Non-Reference Group Variable	.636	.604	.471
Equation 4:	Plus Both Group Variables	.637	.644	.537
Change in R^2				
Reference Group Effect (Eq. 2 - Eq. 1)		.001	.098	.158
Non-Reference Group Effect (Eq. 3 - Eq. 1)		.000	.074	.109
Reference Group Effect over Non-Reference Group Effect (Eq. 4 - Eq. 3)		.001	.040	.066
Non-Reference Group Effect over Reference Group Effect (Eq. 4 - Eq. 2)		.000	.014	.017