# Social Identity Theory and Party Identification*

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*Objective.* Given that the group aspect of party identification forms a central, yet largely unexplored element of American partisanship, social identity theory presents a compelling social-psychological theory of group belonging through which to reinterpret the contemporary understanding of partisanship. *Methods.* Using a mail survey of 302 randomly selected Franklin County, Ohio residents, levels of social identification with the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and political independents are measured using the Identification with a Psychological Group (IDPG) scale. Scores on the IDPG are used to predict attitudes toward parties and the consistency of partisan behavior. *Results.* Levels of partisan social identity proved to be significant predictors of political party ratings, ideology, and party activities, even when taking traditional measures of partisan strength into account. *Conclusions.* Social identity is a fundamental aspect of partisanship, which, when measured, can lead to superior prediction and understanding of related political attitudes and behaviors.

Since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) first described party identification as a central component of political behavior, the concept has been continually challenged, redefined, and modified. The most contested areas of research on partisanship—the stability, dimensionality, and causal ordering of partisanship—all leave aside the question of the psychological investment in the political party as a group (see Niemi and Weisberg, 1993; Weisberg and Greene, 2003). Yet, the original conception of party identification in *The American Voter* is a precursor of social identity theory years ahead of its time. The authors essentially state that just as people identify with various racial, ethnic, and religious groups, so too do they identify with political parties. Based on extensive experimentation and development, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) is able to build on this foundation and provide a rich theoretical framework for understanding the perceptual patterns of modern partisanship. Consequently, the aim of this study is not to argue for a new group-based conceptualization of partisanship, but rather to build on this often-ignored foundation of party

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identification with contemporary social-psychological theory. In this article, I demonstrate that social identity theory yields important insights into the nature of partisan-related attitudes and partisanship itself.

In short, I argue, (1) an individual's attachment to a political party as a meaningful psychological group is a fundamental aspect of partisanship; (2) this group identification aspect of partisanship was properly addressed as a fundamental aspect of partisanship in *The American Voter*, but has since been largely ignored as scholars have focused on partisanship as an *attitude toward* a political party; (3) substantial developments in social-psychological theory, primarily social identity theory, allow us to return to the group-belonging aspect of partisanship with an improved theoretical framework; (4) social identity theory can help us to better understand the role of partisanship in political attitudes and behavior as well as lead to more complete measures of partisanship.

## Explaining Partisan Attitudes and Behavior with Social Identity

Social identity theory attempts to explain how self-perceived membership in a social group affects social perceptions and attitudes. Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership" (Tajfel, 1978). The theory holds that individuals attempt to maximize differences between the in-group (the group to which one psychologically belongs) and the out-group (psychologically relevant opposition group) and thus perceive greater differences between one's in-group and the relevant out-group than actually exist and show favoritism toward in-group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Importantly, these social identifications are not based on any formal group membership, but rather self-perceived membership in a particular group. Given the informal basis of membership in American political parties, the already apparent perceptual biases discovered in political partisanship, and evidence for social identity in partisanship in social-psychological studies of Great Britain (Kelly, 1988), Scotland (Abrams, 1994), Australia (Duck, Hogg, and Terry, 1995), and American college students (Greene, 1999), social identity theory presents a powerful paradigm through which to examine party identification in the American context.

The study of political partisanship and group identification has a substantial history and extends all the way back to the classic Columbia voting studies (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954), which finds strong relationships between social groups and partisanship. More recently, Stanley and Niemi (1995) have shown the recently attenuated, though still substantial, relationship between various social groups and party identification. Building on the reference group theory basis of the *American Voter*, Wlezien and Miller (1997) and Miller, Wlezien, and Hildreth (1991)

demonstrate that partisanship is substantially influenced by perceptions of the various groups associated with parties. Although these group studies have much to offer, a common feature is that they fail to explicitly consider the group-identification aspect of party membership. Consequently, it makes sense to turn to social identity theory to fully address this area of concern.

So, what should we expect partisanship based on a social identification to look like? Not all that different than the traditional interpretation, as again, Campbell et al. (1960) implicitly describe partisanship as a social identification. Following from the group-differentiation aspect of social identity theory, the group nature of partisanship should naturally create a bipolar partisanship where individuals characterize the political parties into *us* and *them* and exaggerate perceived differences to favor their own group. In social identity theory, bipolar partisan attitudes are a natural psychological outgrowth of self-perceived membership in a political party.

In social identity theory, intergroup differentiation occurs in two primary ways: in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Brewer and Brown, 1998). In-group favoritism simply refers to the tendency for group members to mentally exaggerate and enhance the favorable qualities of the relevant in-group to which they see themselves belonging. Out-group derogation, in contrast, is exaggeration of the negative characteristics of relevant out-groups, thereby also making one's in-group seem superior. The net result of either process is enhanced group differentiation. Interestingly, in-group favoritism and out-group derogation need not co-occur (Brewer and Brown, 1998). Consequently, in the case of partisanship, we may expect either or both processes to be a prime causal factor behind bipolar partisan attitudes.

In addition to an impact on partisan attitudes, we might also expect individuals with stronger partisan social identity to exhibit increased partisan behavioral consistency. A stronger partisan social identity should lead to greater differentiation between the parties, thus making defection from one's preferred party less likely. We might therefore expect that as a person's partisan social identity increases, he or she should be more likely to vote a straight ticket, vote for his or her party's presidential candidate, and vote for his or her party more consistently across elections. Along with behavior at the ballot box, we might also expect higher levels of partisan political participation as social identity increases. Many partisan activities are group activities, for example, attending meetings, rallies, and other forms of volunteering. Certainly the commitment to the party as a group should foster participation in such activities. Furthermore, even in noncommunal activities, for example, contributing money or trying to persuade others how to vote, the increased differentiation between the two parties provides more incentive to work for one's own party.

At least in this cross-sectional design, the above predictions of social identity theory do not look all that different than what we might expect from traditional predictions based on strength of partisanship in the *American Voter* model. What is the advantage then? Explicitly measuring

partisan group identification as an independent concept offers not only enhanced predictive power in political models by finally providing an accurate measurement of this fundamental basis of partisanship, but also allows for a greater understanding of the related roles of partisan group identification and partisan attitudes in explaining political behavior. Social identity theory does, in fact, lead to testable propositions about specific perceptions of in-group and out-group members (e.g., Kelly, 1990) and dynamics in intergroup competition, but these are peripheral to the central concerns of mass behavior. The existence of nontrivial levels of partisan social identification on a proper scale and, more significantly, a clear explanatory impact on major political variables above and beyond that of traditional measures provides facial validity for the social identity approach. As discussed further in the Conclusion, the greatest benefit may come in incorporating social identity measures over time in order to address long-controversial questions about the nature of partisan stability.

## The Dimensionality of Partisanship and the Party Identification Scale

In addition to explaining basic attitudes toward political parties, social identity also offers the potential to explain both partisanship and political independence within a single coherent framework. Weisberg (1980) and others (e.g., Alvarez, 1990; Dennis, 1988) have argued that the traditional seven-point categorization of partisanship forces two separate attitudinal dimensions—partisanship and independence—onto a single bipolar scale. They argue that, to a considerable degree, attitudes toward parties and attitudes toward political independence are separate and distinct. Social identity offers a new perspective on what appears to be two quasi-distinct dimensions of partisanship and independence. Certainly we should expect that many persons will have a clear partisan social identity. However, given the strong civic virtue and social norms placed on political independence in America, it may be that either in addition to, or in place of, a social identification with a political party, some citizens may also socially identify with other political independents. Given the pervasive media treatment of independents as a homogenous entity and the fact that in many states persons can register as "independent," just as they would as a Republican or Democrat, it may not be too implausible for some citizens to conceive of independents as just another political group to which they do or do not belong.

Social identity in combination with a multidimensional view of partisanship in which independence and partisanship occupy quasi-independent dimensions (e.g., Alvarez, 1990; Dennis, 1988) offers a potential explanation for the seemingly incongruous behavior and self-identification of partisan leaners—independents who express a partisan preference. These "leaners" are often just as partisan, if not more so, than

weak partisans, despite identifying themselves as independents (Greene, 2000; Keith et al., 1992; Petrocik, 1974). An independent social identification may exist somewhat independently of a partisan social identification and cause an individual to identify as an independent, yet not prevent the person from behaving in a partisan fashion. In the multi-dimensional perspective, this does not entail that the person has no partisan social identification, but rather that independent social identification may prove more personally relevant in the realm of politics. We might expect that leaners are marked by a greater independent social identification than true partisans and most likely less partisan social identification.

## Data and Methods

The respondents for the study consisted of 302 randomly selected registered voters in Franklin County, Ohio who completed a mail survey in February and March 1998.[1] Although not ideally representative, due to the high levels of respondent motivation necessary in a mail survey, the respondents to the survey proved to be a fairly diverse and heterogeneous group.[2] It is only fair to mention that the strength of social identity and the relationships between variables may be overstated among those so motivated to reply to the survey, yet any such findings should surely be quite suggestive and nonetheless demonstrate the benefits of this theoretical approach. Consequently, the focus here is not on generalizing absolute levels of social identity to the American public, but rather on demonstrating the existence of social identity in partisanship and how it influences one's political attitudes and behaviors in generalizeable patterns.

The key feature of the survey was an assessment of partisan and independent social identification. Social identity was measured using Mael and Tetrick's (1992) Identification with a Psychological Group (IDPG) scale. Brewer and Silver (2000) have found the scale to be widely applicable to a variety of social groups, including political parties. The IDPG scale measures social identity with a designated group through a series of 10

[1]The response rate was 24 percent. This is an admittedly problematic response rate although every effort was made: reward incentives, reminder postcards, and so forth, to encourage response rate following Dillman's (1978) *Total Design Method*.

[2]The median age was 45. Modal education level was a college degree, 29 percent; with considerable minorities having high school, 16 percent; some college, 26 percent; or post-college education, 28 percent. Household income was divided fairly evenly between categories based on $20,000 increments, with $40,000 to $60,000 being the median category. Fifty-three percent of the respondents were female and 89 percent were white. Twenty-nine percent were Democrats, 43 percent Republicans, and 27 percent independents. Franklin County itself is quite representative of the nation as a whole, though a little better educated. Following are several key statistics with the county percentages followed by U.S. percentages: white: 75.5 percent to 75.1 percent; bachelor's degree: 31.8 percent to 24.4 percent; median home value $116,200 to $119,600; persons under 18: 25.1 percent to 25.7 percent; median household income: $42,734 to $41,994.

questions that assess the respondents' perceptions of shared identity and shared experiences with the group (Mael and Tetrick, 1992). The scale consists of the following items.

1. When someone criticizes this group, it feels like a personal insult.
2. I don't act like the typical person of this group (reversed).
3. I'm very interested in what others think about this group.
4. The limitations associated with this group apply to me also.
5. When I talk about this group, I usually say "we" rather than "they."
6. I have a number of qualities typical of members of this group.
7. This group's successes are my successes.
8. If a story in the media criticized this group, I would feel embarrassed.
9. When someone praises this group, it feels like a personal compliment.
10. I act like a person of this group to a great extent.

Respondents completed this scale only for their preferred political party. Additionally, all respondents completed the IDPG scale with "people who call themselves political independents" as the reference group, in order to measure any independent social identification. Respondents indicated how much they agreed with the statements, for example, "This group's successes are my successes," on a scale from 0, strongly disagree, to 3, strongly agree. Two straightforward summary social identification measures were created. For both partisan and independent social identity, respondents received the mean score, from 0 to 3, of their 10 responses to the IDPG scale. Higher scores indicated greater social identity. The Cronbach's alphas for partisan and independent social identity were 0.85 and 0.86, respectively, indicating highly reliable instruments.

The survey included a variety of additional items. The measures emulated standard National Election Study question wordings, modified where necessary for a self-administered questionnaire. These items included attitudinal, behavioral, and demographic measures to better explore aspects of social identity and partisanship. Feeling thermometers assessed overall party evaluations on the standard 0–100 scale. In-party or preferred-party feeling thermometer refers to the score for the party with which the respondent identifies or leans, out-party and nonpreferred-party feeling thermometer refer to the opposition party. Party strength is simply the standard seven-point scale folded in the middle, to range from 0, pure independent, to 3, strong partisan. The ideology measure uses a seven-point scale running from 1, liberal, to 7, conservative, for Republican; and 1, conservative, to 7 liberal, for Democrats. Consequently, higher values indicate greater agreement with the preferred party's ideology. The partisan activity index is a six-point additive scale of how many activities the respondent engaged in: trying to persuade others, displaying campaign paraphernalia, attending rallies, contributing money, voting in the primary, and other campaign work. Over-time party support is based on a question asking how frequently one has voted for the presidential candidate of their

preferred party, ranging from 1, never, to 5, always. Political knowledge is a five-point additive scale indicating the number of factual knowledge items correctly answered. The items, adopted from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), are the job of Al Gore, branch of government responsible for judicial review, percent necessary for a veto override, party in control of Congress, and the more conservative political party. Political interest is measured using a weighted average of a three-category measure of interest in the 1996 presidential campaign and a four-category measure of general interest in government, higher values indicating greater interest.

Measures of demographic data included gender, age, education, income, and race. Gender was a dummy variable coded 0 for males, 1 for females. Age was simply coded as age of respondent in years. Education was measured with a four-point scale ranging from 1, HS diploma, to 4, post-college work. Income was based on a four-category scale of household income in $20,000 increments, with higher values indicating greater income. Race was included using a dummy variable coded 1 for nonwhites and 0 for whites.

## Analyses

### *Social Identity and Political Attitudes*

Since social identity should operate in a psychologically comparable manner for both Democrats and Republicans, they were grouped together throughout the analyses in order to provide a larger *N* and thus greater analytical power. This should not adversely impact the conclusions as Republicans and Democrats had statistically indistinguishable levels of partisan identity and independent identity for every level of partisanship. The most basic analysis is simply the descriptive statistics and frequency distributions of independent and partisan social identifications (Table 1).

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics and Frequency Distribution of Social Identity

| | Partisan Social Identity | Independent Social Identity |
|---|---|---|
| Mean | 1.56 | 0.96 |
| Standard deviation | 0.52 | 0.50 |
| Median | 1.50 | 1.00 |
| Minimum | 0 | 0 |
| Maximum | 3.0 | 2.30 |
| Percent in 0–1.0 range | 13.4 | 52.2 |
| Percent in 1.1–2.0 range | 72.4 | 46.8 |
| Percent in 2.1–3.0 range | 14.2 | 1.0 |
| Number | 246 | 291 |

Across the sample of respondents, partisan social identity presents a nearly classic normal distribution. The results in Table 1 demonstrate a wide distribution of and meaningful variation in partisan social identity across the public. Independent social identification, in contrast, is likely not very meaningful to much of the public. The mean and median responses were both near 1, thus fully half the sample falls in the bottom possible third of independent social identification.

It should not be too surprising that independent social identification scores were so much lower than partisan social identity. Political parties represent real and meaningful groups that any person could potentially readily identify with in a way not true for political independents. Furthermore, except for pure independents (consistently less than 15 percent of the public), the vast majority of Americans still have clear partisan preferences. Nonetheless, half the sample fell in the range of at least moderate independent social identity.

A key test for the role of social identity in partisanship is that as partisan social identity increases, respondents should be more likely to evidence perceptual exaggerations toward both parties. To test these predictions of social identity theory, I ran two regressions using partisan social identity with one's preferred party as a key independent variable. To examine the effects of social identity on in-group favoritism, I used preferred-party feeling thermometer as the dependent variable. Conversely, to assess out-group derogation, the nonpreferred-party feeling thermometer served as the dependent variable.

Not surprisingly, strength of partisan social identity was considerably correlated with partisan strength traditionally measured ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). It is clear, both theoretically and now empirically, that the traditional measure is already to some degree assessing the group belonging involved in partisanship. Nonetheless, in order to convincingly demonstrate that social identity represents a meaningful aspect of partisan perceptions that is not fully measured by the traditional items, partisan strength, measured with the folded seven-point party identification scale, serves as an important control variable. Similarly, ideology serves as a control in response to the competing realistic group conflict perspective (e.g., Sherif, 1966). We should expect conservatives to favor Republicans more and liberals to like Democrats more, regardless of their social identity. A significant coefficient for social identity in the presence of these controls should indicate that the perceptual phenomena evoked by a partisan social identification account for bipolar partisan attitudes above and beyond what can be explained by simple partisan strength and ideology. Although the multidimensional perspective would hold independent and partisan social identification to be largely independent of each other, I included independent social identification to assess whether this orientation might decrease differentiation between the two parties. Demographic controls included education, income, gender, race, and age. Finally, since the sample was more politically interested and

TABLE 2

Social Identity and Political Party Perceptions

| | In-Party FT | Out-Party FT |
|---|---|---|
| Social identity | 8.870** | −2.698 |
| | (2.944) | (10.897) |
| Ideology | 3.298** | −7.500** |
| | (1.106) | (1.185) |
| Independent identity | −6.938** | 0.548 |
| | (2.528) | (2.707) |
| Partisan strength | 4.154* | −1.594 |
| | (1.887) | (2.016) |
| Interest | 1.629 | −5.287 |
| | (5.565) | (5.930) |
| Knowledge | −0.218 | 3.690** |
| | (1.205) | (1.288) |
| Education | −5.723** | 0.983 |
| | (1.274) | (1.361) |
| Income | −1.355 | 0.0171 |
| | (1.072) | (1.149) |
| Gender | −6.304** | 0.514 |
| | (2.384) | (2.545) |
| Minority | 3.804 | −9.175* |
| | (4.256) | (4.533) |
| Age | −0.023 | 0.046 |
| | (0.080) | (0.084) |
| Constant | 69.354** | 57.469 |
| | (10.205) | (10.897) |
| Number | 191 | 192 |
| $R^2$ | 0.346 | 0.252 |

*$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$, one-tailed test.

knowledgeable than the general public, the inclusion of these variables prevented these factors from serving as confounds.

The results of the first regression model clearly bore out the expectations from social identity theory with regard to in-group favoritism (Table 2). Partisan social identity had considerable statistical and substantive significance. The coefficient, 8.87, was significant at the $p = 0.001$ level and indicated that for each one-point move on the 0–3 social identity scale, the feeling thermometer toward one's preferred party increased by nearly nine points. Importantly, this was controlling for partisan strength and ideology, which both proved to be statistically significant as well. In fact, both measured on 0–3 scales, the impact of social identity was significantly greater ($p < 0.01$) and nearly twice that of partisan strength. The social identity tenet of in-group favoritism was clearly borne out within this model. Interestingly, independent social identification had a significant downward impact on in-party favoritism.

The second model examined the impact of social identity on out-group derogation. This model was identical to the previous, except that the dependent variable was the feeling thermometer for the opposition party, rather than one's preferred party. The results here clearly demonstrated that in-group favoritism and out-group derogation need not be reciprocally related (Table 2). Although partisan social identity proved to be a dominant factor in how one perceives one's preferred political party, it did not have a statistically significant impact on how one perceives the opposition party. Interestingly, partisan strength did not significantly impact the dependent variable, either. Ideology was left as the sole political variable driving down ratings of the opposition party. In short, the models in Table 2 demonstrate that partisan social identity in the form of intergroup differentiation is indeed a dominant cause of bipolar partisan attitudes and that this is accomplished predominantly through in-group favoritism. However, one caveat is in order: as pure independents did not have a measured partisan social identity, they were excluded from all these models. This truncates the range of the party strength scale, and may partially account for the lower size of its coefficient, but given the substantial difference in the size of coefficients, the lack of pure independents in the model is unlikely to change the substantive conclusions.

In addition to social identity's effect on party ratings, there is good reason to expect it to influence ideology as well. According to optimal distinctiveness theory, persons try to perceive the in-group as clearly distinct from (and presumably better than) the out-group on key characteristics (Brewer and Brown, 1998). A primary way for partisans with greater social identity to differentiate themselves from members of the other party is to become more ideological. The causal arrow should run from social identity to ideological extremity for the reasons above, whereas there is little theoretical reason to expect that a more liberal (conservative) ideology would imply an increased emotional group identification with the Democratic (Republican) party. The basic psychological mechanisms of a group social identification can likewise also be seen as most likely causally prior to the more considered changes in belief required for ideological change. Thus, a regression model nearly identical to that in Table 2, but with ideology as the dependent variable, confirms the importance of partisan social identity in shaping political ideology (Table 3). Partisan social identity was a statistically and substantively significant predictor of ideological extremity. As with the party thermometer models, partisan strength, although statistically significant as well, had a considerably lesser substantive impact. In this model, and the remaining models in Table 3, independent identity and ideology are excluded, as they both fail to have a strong theoretical rationale for predicting the behavioral variables, and when included fail to provide significant coefficients and attenuate the fit of the model.

TABLE 3

Social Identity, Ideology, and Partisan Political Behavior

| | Ideological Self-Placement | Partisan Activity Index | Over-Time Party Voting |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social identity | 0.418** | 0.751** | 0.281* |
| | (0.163) | (0.189) | (0.169) |
| Partisan strength | 0.192* | −0.119 | 0.232* |
| | (0.109) | (0.126) | (0.113) |
| Interest | 0.320 | 1.746** | 0.314 |
| | (0.329) | (0.382) | (0.343) |
| Knowledge | 0.212** | 0.017 | 0.021 |
| | (0.070) | (0.080) | (0.071) |
| Education | 0.076 | −0.022 | 0.025 |
| | (0.076) | (0.088) | (0.079) |
| Income | −0.002 | 0.087 | 0.009 |
| | (0.065) | (0.075) | (0.067) |
| Gender | −0.140 | 0.058 | −0.133 |
| | (0.146) | (0.169) | (0.152) |
| Minority | −0.156 | 0.312 | 0.267 |
| | (0.257) | (0.299) | (0.265) |
| Age | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.004 |
| | (0.005) | (0.005) | (0.005) |
| Constant | 2.866** | −0.771 | 2.315** |
| | (0.583) | (0.676) | (0.602) |
| Number | 218 | 220 | 215 |
| $R^2$ | 0.189 | 0.218 | 0.093 |

*$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$, one-tailed test.

### *Social Identity and Partisan Political Activity*

Of course, the impact of partisan social identity need not be restricted to an impact on attitudes. To assess the impact of partisan social identification on political behavior, regression models were run on two measures of partisan political behavior. The first was the index of partisan activity. The second measure was voting support for that party across elections. Partisan social identity again served as the key independent variable. As with previous models, partisan intensity and demographics provided controls.

The results from these two models demonstrated that not only does social identity affect political perceptions, but it also affects important partisan behaviors (Table 3). Partisan social identity was statistically and substantively significant in each model. In the case of partisan political activities, a person at the top of the social identity scale would participate in fully three more activities than someone at the bottom. The results from over-time voting are not as strong, but nonetheless statistically significant. As before, these findings persist controlling for partisan strength, thus implicating the group-identity aspect of partisanship as a key element in behavior.

### *Social Identity and the Party Identification Scale*

As hypothesized earlier, a social identity perspective including partisan *and* independent social identifications can potentially bring further understanding to the traditional seven-point party identification scale, especially regarding intransitivities (Greene, 2000; Keith et al., 1992; Petrocik, 1974). To examine the relationship between social identity and the traditional party identification scale, I conducted simple comparisons of means and *t*-tests for the four categories of partisan strength (pure independent, leaner, weak partisan, strong partisan).

The basic comparisons of social identity across different categories of partisanship presented several interesting findings (Table 4). There were two clear transitive patterns in the data: as partisan strength increased, partisan social identity increased; and as partisan strength increased, independent social identity decreased. The sole apparent exception was the independent social identification of pure independents and leaners, but this was not a statistically distinct difference, unlike all the other differences between categories. Social identity, then, is a meaningful part of the standard party identification index, which indeed has the transitive properties we should expect. Additionally, independent identity appears to be a meaningful aspect of political independence. Although independent identity decreases as partisan identity increases along the strength of partisanship scale, independent identity and partisan social identity are not significantly correlated ($r = 0.031$, $p = 0.632$).

## Discussion

On the whole, the findings here clearly indicate that we can learn much by applying social identity theory to American partisanship. Perhaps, most importantly, when we think about what partisanship is, we need to consider

TABLE 4

Social Identity by Strength of Party Identification

| | Social Identity with Preferred Party | Social Identity with Independents |
|---|---|---|
| Pure independent (14) | — | 1.09† |
| Independent leaner (45) | 1.24 | 1.15† |
| Weak partisan (104) | 1.41 | 0.97 |
| Strong partisan (96) | 1.88 | 0.81 |

NOTE: Differences between all items within same column are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, except those denoted by †. Items in parentheses are number of respondents.

not just *attitudes toward*, but *group belonging with*, a political party. Social identity theory provides a compelling theoretical perspective from which to reinterpret the meaning and implications of party identification. I have attempted to demonstrate here that by considering partisan social identification in addition to our standard measure of partisanship, we can not only better understand political perceptions and behaviors, but can model them better as well.

The first series of regression models demonstrated that partisan social identification can substantially explain why most citizens tend to view their own party positively and the other negatively. The traditional strength of one's partisanship and ideological intensity are certainly contributing factors, but as social identity theory predicts, greater social identification leads to a perception of greater differences between the relevant in-group and out-group. Interestingly, in the case of political parties, it appears that intergroup differentiation is caused essentially by in-group favoritism, the heightened preference for one's own party.

Not only does partisan social identity influence political perceptions, it appears to influence partisan behavior as well. As partisan social identity increased, respondents were more likely to engage in partisan-oriented activities, such as attending rallies and wearing buttons, as well as to vote for that party across elections. Thus the group-identity aspect of partisanship likewise contributed to partisan activity above and beyond partisan strength. Social identity theory does not offer clear explanations for why this should be the case. Possible explanations for this relationship are that the perceptual biases cause individuals to behave in a more partisan manner. Additionally, as partisan social identification increases, defection from the party may become more psychologically difficult, if indeed partisan group belonging does contribute to one's self esteem, as is implied by social identity theory.

For the most part, the application of social identity theory does not lead to dramatically new and different predictions of partisan attitudes and behaviors—at least when confined to a cross-sectional study. What it does is add a much richer theoretical structure and a change of emphasis for the understanding of partisan influence. On the theoretical level, social identity theory suggests that by focusing on partisanship explicitly as a group membership, we can better understand individual partisan identifications and how they structure political thought. On an empirical level, the inclusion of partisan social identity scales in addition to traditional measures can clearly bolster our ability to explain and predict political attitudes and behaviors.

Importantly, the insights of social identity on partisanship are not just fodder for students of partisanship; the findings that partisan social identification affects political perceptions and behavior have real consequences for political parties. Tajfel (1978) has shown in the minimal groups paradigm that it takes only the slightest categorization to invoke a group social identity. Consequently, it would seem that political parties need

not go to great lengths to induce social identification in their supporters. Any actions that political parties can take to heighten social identification with the party and to stimulate the use of partisan categories among their rank and file can create a more partisan, more active group of supporters. Existing research suggests that emphasizing group distinctiveness and emphasizing similarity and interdependence of group members should lead to increased group categorization (Brewer and Brown, 1998).

Aldrich and McGinnis (1989) argue that, contrary to Downs's (1957) well-known median voter theorem, the need to attract party activists and their resources gives candidates incentive to diverge from the median voter. Simple ideological proximity aside, though, social identity theory suggests even more compelling reasons for parties to take divergent stands. Following optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer and Brown, 1998), which holds that persons try to perceive their in-groups as clearly distinct from out-groups, political parties have much to gain by focusing on their own distinctiveness. Since in America both parties represent broad cross-sections of the public, the only area in which the parties can truly set themselves apart as distinct is ideology. Even if the majority of voters are moderates, social identity theory suggests that parties may nonetheless benefit from divergent stands if the increased partisan attitudes, partisan consistency, and activities in support of the party among those with meaningful levels of partisan social identity outweigh the costs of losing favor with the median voter. Furthermore, since persons with greater partisan social identity are more likely to both participate in the primaries and to have more extreme ideologies, they likely contribute toward moving the parties away from the political center. Thus social identity theory serves to theoretically augment Aldrich and McGinnis's theory of party positions and supplement, as well, as the related work of Merrill and Grofman (1999) and Alvarez (1998).

The existence of partisan and independent social identifications as separate, uncorrelated identities would seem to support the multidimensional perspective advocated by Weisberg (1980) and Alvarez (1990). Yet with regard to group identity, these two dimensions are far from completely distinct. An independent social identification significantly attenuated the differences that persons perceived between groups, as one would expect if independence were simply the opposite of partisanship. It did this primarily through reducing the favoritism toward one's own party—again, something we should expect in a unidimensional framework. On balance, then, the exploration of group belonging in partisanship and independence suggests the two as quasi-independent dimensions.

The examination of separate partisan and independent social identities yields important insight into the problem of intransitivities in the traditional measure of partisanship (see also Greene, 2000). The patterns for both partisan and independent social identity help to explain why leaners choose to identify as independents. The answer is that in terms of independent social identity, they are independents, no different from pure independents.

Additionally, they have significantly less social identification with their chosen party than do true partisans. Mean values in both the partisan social identification measure and independent social identification measure are transitive across the traditional partisan categories. In the matter of social identity, we see a scale as we would expect with no intransitivities. Furthermore, although the average partisan identity was higher than the average independent identity for leaners, over 60 percent of leaners had an independent identity greater than or equal to their partisan social identity. For weak and strong partisans, in contrast, the figures are 20 percent and 4 percent, respectively. For the most part, leaners seem to identify with both their preferred party *and* other independents. Following self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), leaners may find either the independent or partisan social identity more salient, depending on the particular political cues.

## Future Explorations of Partisanship with Social Identity Theory

Given the considerable group aspect inherent in partisanship, proper understanding and modeling implies that we augment the still essential traditional measure with measures of partisan and independent social identity. The results here are intriguing and suggestive, but are based on an admittedly suboptimal sample. With the low response rate, politically interested citizens are probably overrepresented, which may overstate the impact of social identity. Nonetheless, there are clear and intriguing patterns worthy of further study. Obviously, a more thorough exploration of social identity and partisanship demands a national telephone survey with greater respondent participation. Greene (2002) argues for more precise psychological measures of all aspects of partisanship, including social identity, in order to properly address many of the recurring questions of political behavior.

Given that this study has established a basis for the role of social identification in partisanship, there are a variety of extensions from social identity theory that can be used to further explore politics and partisanship. Self-categorization theory, which states that social identifications will be more or less salient depending on features in one's environment, suggests that partisan social identifications may have a very dynamic aspect well worth exploring. The nature of partisan social identification during an election campaign, during times of political scandal, when a party is a majority or a minority, when parties are more or less polarized, and so forth, are all issues that could further enlighten our understanding of citizen response to the political world.

Additionally, the inclusion of partisan group identity measures in *longitudinal* studies has tremendous potential to address the seemingly endless controversy about the stability and exogeneity/endogeneity of

partisanship (e.g., Niemi and Weisberg, 1993, 2001). If partisanship is ultimately more a group identification than a constellation of related attitudes, this supports the traditional interpretation of stable long-term identification, since a group identity is surely less malleable than attitudes based on dynamic political objects. Assessing the degree to which partisan *attitudes,* as opposed to partisan *group identification,* are responsive to external political stimuli should go a long way toward more definitively settling these debates on partisanship.

Importantly, there are also significant implications beyond the confines of partisanship studies. Kelly's (1990) study of party factions in Britain shows a considerable impact of social identity depending on membership in minority or majority factions. In the American context, then, we might be able to use social identity theory to understand the behavior and attitudes of convention delegates of winning and losing presidential nomination contenders at national conventions. Even the seemingly unrelated topic of media bias offers potential for further exploration from this perspective. In the Australian context, Duck, Hogg, and Terry (1998) suggest that perceptions of media bias are significantly shaped by political in-group identification. Clearly, with the ongoing concerns about perceptions of media bias in this country, similar explorations in the American political context are warranted.

Taken as a whole, the findings discussed here clearly demonstrate that including the social identity element of partisanship, both conceptually and analytically, in research designs has much to offer for our understanding of partisanship and its role in the American political system. In terms of understanding the sources of partisan attitudes, partisan activities, and the party identification index, social identity theory enhances, rather than replaces, traditional conceptualizations and measures of partisanship. Further research that incorporates partisan social identity measures into more representative and comprehensive surveys offers considerable potential for furthering our understanding of how Americans relate to political parties and the political system more broadly.

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